

Blessings
of
a
Curse

Wayne
Edward
Clarke

Book One of The Nexus Of Kellaran Series

Blessings of a Curse

Book One of The Nexus Of Kellaran

By
Wayne Edward Clarke

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Blessings Of A Curse
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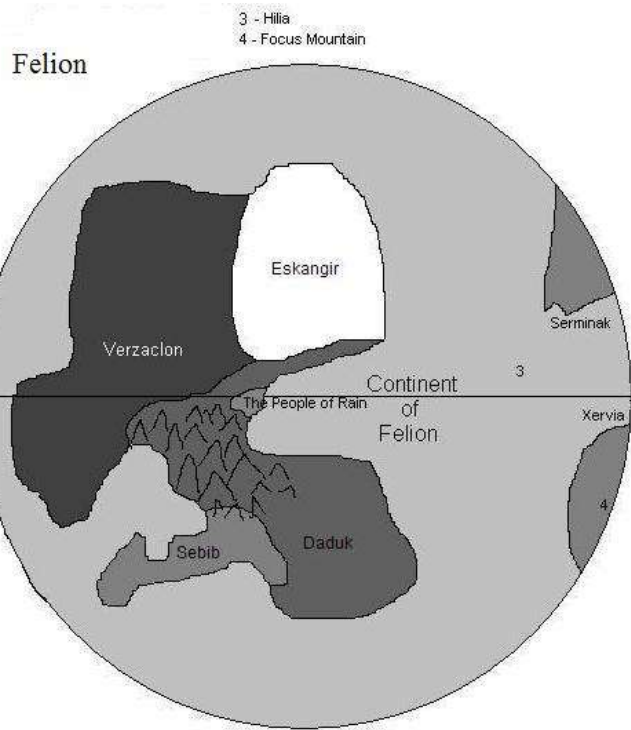
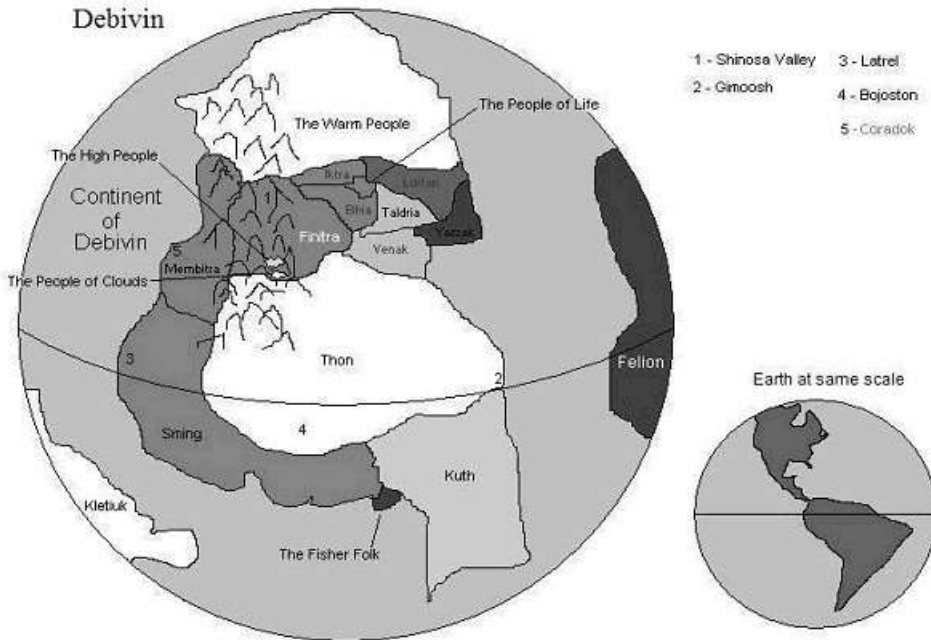
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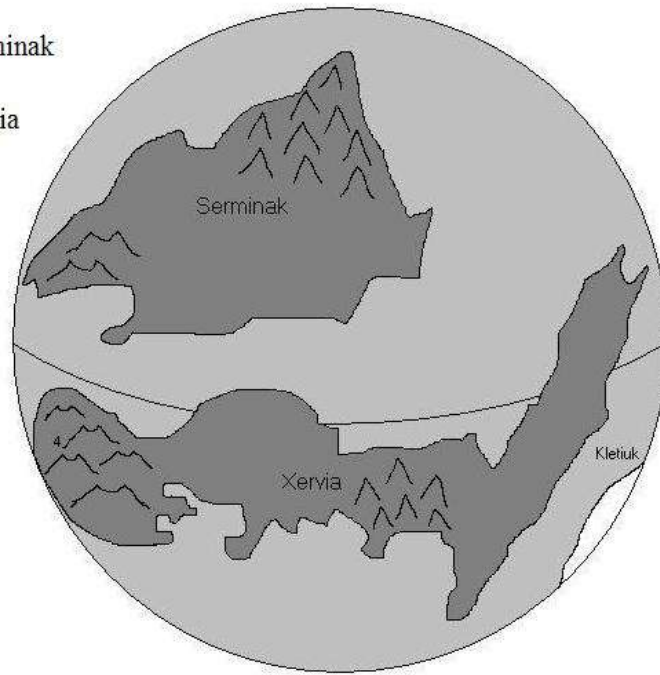
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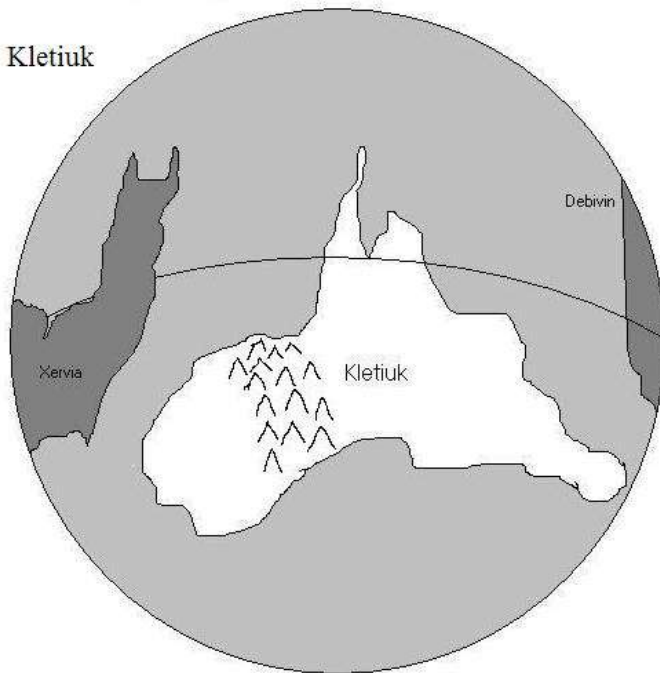
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Serminak
and
Xervia



Kletiuk



Foreword to the 2012 revision.

This is a very big book, bigger than most three-book trilogies, yet most of my readers tended to blast through it in the shortest time possible, and then plead for the sequel. (Which is finally available!) Many who read it in earlier editions have complimented me on the rich detail, as well as the compelling action.

However, a few with less patience had pointed out that there were four conversations that, while revealing interesting information, could still be removed without impacting the storyline any. Therefore, in previously published editions of this book, those four conversations were removed from the main text and placed at the end as excerpts.

Since then, the majority of my fans have vindicated my original editing and recommended that the excerpts be put back into the main text. With this edition I have done so.

Whenever I release a new book in a series, I always go over the previous books in that series and check them again for editing and consistency, and re-issue them. No matter how many times I re-edit a novel, it seems there are always a few more tiny punctuation or sentence structure improvements to be made, and my fans sometimes point out small inconsistencies that I also correct at the next revision. Therefore this revision is a little different from the last, but beyond having replaced the excerpts it would take a sharp eye to find the differences. One of them is a more modern version of the Times New Roman font.

The fact that this book is not divided into chapters is not an omission, it's a carefully considered stylistic choice.

Other elements of my style that the reader should note are my use of *italics* to indicate quoted sentences that are telepathically or psionically communicated. For example;

"It's wonderful to be able to think with you, mind-to-mind." she responded.

I use the same MS Word files for both eBooks and paper books, and paper book printers don't like bold or underlined text, so I also use italics occasionally to indicate words that are spoken with intensity. For example;

"You are absolutely *out* of your *mind!*" he growled.

If a sentence is already italicized because it's a telepathic communication, any words in that sentence that are communicated with extra intensity will be indicated by being non-italicized, for example;

"That's all a bunch of crap, and you know it." she psionically reprimanded him.

I use ALL CAPITALS occasionally to indicate yelling or great loudness, whether the words are spoken or telepathic; volume and intensity being distinct qualities.

In this story, many common words are also the names of magic spells, such as Sending, Flight, and Speaking, or have traditionally had highly religious connotations like The Source, and those words are capitalized to indicate this.

Since languages began, they have constantly changed and evolved. The advents of written language and printing both slowed language evolution, but it still goes on. Sometimes the resulting conventions that make up 'proper English' don't make a lot of sense, and they are slightly different in every English-speaking country. In most of these cases I've caved and used the conventions anyway in order to avoid irritating my readers who are sensitive about these things, like writing 'seven thousand, three hundred and fifty-five'. It makes no sense that the compound words for numbers up to one hundred are hyphenated, like fifty-five, and the others aren't, like three thousand. But I go with it anyway.

However, there are some English conventions that I absolutely refuse to follow because they distort the emotional connotations of the writing. I'll point out the most common one here so that you'll know that it's not a mistake; I'm doing it on purpose. If a quoted sentence is a question or an exclamation, it is conventionally written as a complete sentence within quotations, for example;

"Get down!" she yelled. Or;

"Is that right?" he asked.

However if a sentence that would normally end in a period is a quotation, correct English says that it should be ended with a comma. For example;

"I live here," he said.

But the comma makes it a sentence fragment rather than a complete sentence, and leaves the reader hanging, giving a different emotional feel to the writing compared to the way I would write it, which is;

"I live here." he said.

I only use a comma to end a quotation if it truly is a sentence fragment, because the sentence was interrupted where a comma would normally go. For example;

"I live here," he said, "And you're not welcome."

I suppose in that case I shouldn't capitalize the word 'and', since it's not really the first word in a sentence, but it bugs me if I don't.

There are a few other conventions that I don't follow, so if you see what would normally be considered a writing mistake that is repeated consistently in every possible instance in the book, you'll know that I'm doing that on purpose too.

It's hard to change what is considered Correct English, but I hope that other writers who read my books will agree with me about these points and do the same in their own writing, and that eventually doing it our way will be correct.

Coming this spring to [my website!](#)

*A new rotatable 3D map of the globe of Kellaran with much more detail and showing every place that is mentioned in the series.

*A complete list of major characters with descriptions.

*A timeline of major Kellarani historical events.

*And an appendix of encyclopedic facts and figures about Kellaran.

Wayne Edward Clarke, January 20, 2012.

Blessings Of A Curse

(If you are reading this account in a language other than Grand High Draconian, you might consider making a contribution to the Translation section of your local Magic Users Guild. XVD)

Yazadril watched the huge human walk blithely through the border Wards of The Nine Valleys like they weren't even there, and his breath hissed in between his teeth. The ancient mountain elf was stunned with surprise for the first time in decades, and he nervously tugged his long white beard in consternation. Nothing could pass the Wards unless a Warder had admitted it, nothing! And since he was one of the Warders, he knew with certainty that no such admission had occurred! He felt a moment of fear, an emotion he had not experienced for centuries, and quickly cast Unseen upon himself with a quietly hummed note and a practiced gesture.

Then his intellect re-asserted itself. He reasoned that since the human had been completely unaffected by the Illusions, Force Barriers, and other magic defenses of the border Wards, he may also be unaffected by the Unseen spell. That thought gave him another fright, and he carefully moved behind a tree, then peered around it at the human.

'By the Source, it is the biggest one I have ever beheld with these eyes!' he thought to himself. 'He is the size of a great plains bear, and just as shaggy as one!'

He forced himself to calm, and considered what he knew that was pertinent.

Only fourteen times had human wizards managed to see through the Illusions of the Wards in Yazadril's exceedingly long lifetime. Five of them had openly camped before the Wards, since they had come to speak to the mountain elves, to peacefully trade in knowledge and goods. Six wizards had sought to sneak into The Nine Valleys to steal objects of power, and only two of those had passed the Wards. And three wizards had come with armies, and had attacked the barriers seeking to conquer the valleys beyond, and usurp the more concentrated power available there.

They had all failed. The High People did not trade with human wizards, neither for knowledge nor for goods. The two thieves who made it past the Wards had used masterfully subtle spells of disguise and distraction to pose as resident High People, only to be caught by the hidden Sentries at the top of the pass. And none of the three would-be conquerors had survived their attempts, since all three were brute-force types, and the defensive spells of the Wards had transduced the massive power of their attacks and sent it back at them in unexpected forms.

They had all obviously been human Master Wizards, gray or white of hair, wrinkled of face, clad in ornate clothing and festooned with signs and objects of power.

This huge human was another matter entirely. His long black hair and beard covered most of his face and stuck out in all directions, making it hard to judge his age, but his muscles bulged beneath the bushy hair on his chest and along his arms and legs, and his movements were smooth. He wore a tattered kilt of dark gray plaid, the remains of a gray cotton shirt with the sleeves ripped off that hung open and untucked, and he carried the remnants of a black cloak gathered as a bag and slung over his shoulder, stuffed with unknown items. Crude leather sandals whisked quietly through the deep grass as his long and seemingly slow stride carried him upslope almost as fast as Yazadril could run.

He appeared to be a simple peasant, and for him to have simply walked through the Wards, apparently without even realizing they existed, was almost inconceivable! He walked with his head down, watching the ground, and there was a slump to his shoulders.

As he passed within six meters of Yazadril's hiding spot the elven wizard caught his scent, and realized that the human was surprisingly clean, given his generally unkempt state. Which might indicate that his appearance was a disguise.

As Yazadril began stealthily following the human upslope another thrill of rare emotion raced through his old heart, this one composed equally of fear and a burning intellectual curiosity.

A moment later his quarry stopped beside the path to dig a wild onion with a small knife, scrubbed most of the dirt off with a handful of dry grass, and stood to stow it in his cloak. He stretched hugely, then looked to the right of

the path. He noticed the Clearing of Contemplation where Yazadril had been meditating until he'd heard the human's distant approach up the scree slope outside the Wards.

The big human ambled into the small meadow and sat himself down on Yazadril's favorite sitting log, and looked out on the great untenanted valley beyond the Wards, enjoying the very view the old elf so often enjoyed. Or so it seemed at first.

He surprised Yazadril again when he put his head in his hands and began to cry, softly at first, then with great wracking sobs of utter despair. It sounded very strange, as his voice seemed unnaturally deep to elven ears.

After ten minutes of that he seemed to have cried himself out, and gradually calmed. He looked to the setting sun, then began to set up a crude camp beside the log. Having finished that, he set up some small snares around the perimeter of the clearing, then returned to his camp to relax against the log and eat some wild berries and roots he withdrew from his cloak. After eating, he drank deeply from a waterskin, hid his possessions in the hollow end of the log, and rolled himself in his cloak before laying down in the grass beside the log. He soon appeared to be asleep.

Yazadril watched all this from the cover of a clump of bushes ten meters beyond the clearing's edge. He watched a half-hour longer to be sure the human truly slept, then silently made his way back to the path.

He hiked halfway up to the top of the pass before he cast a careful Speaking to the sentinels there.

"Dilimon, it is I, Yazadril! Bring three others of the Sentries, some food and drink, and a warm cloak. Meet with me on the pathway down to the border, move most silently, and do not cast the power in any way! As well, bring your hunting weapons! And before anything else is done, call to duty every Sentry we have available, have them equip themselves with every mundane weapon that they own, and post them in defensive formations about the top of the pass!"

"I hear you Yazadril! Myself, three others, food and drink, a warm cloak, mundane weapons, in stealth down the path, all Sentries to defend the top of the pass! We follow your instructions!" Dilimon's mind-voice rang in Yazadril's head with youthful excitement, and Yazadril could tell that Dilimon was relaying the orders and taking efficient action to carry them out, even as he continued the mental conversation. *"What is it Yazadril?! A basilisk?! A dark dragon?!"*

"It is a human, Dilimon. He is camped and sleeping in my Clearing of Contemplation, two hundred paces inside the Wards!"

"By my soul! Shall I alert the other senior wizards?"

"Do not wake them if they are already sleeping. This human does not appear to be a wizard. If any are still awake, have them informed, and tell them that I will speak with them about it in a few hours. Beyond them, and the eight members of your squad, none must know of this! Tell the extra Sentries that they are there on my order, as a precaution only, that there is quite likely no danger, and nothing else!"

"Yes Yazadril. But... If he is not a wizard, how did he pass the Wards?"

"I am not sure. He did not so much defeat the barriers, as simply ignore them! He did not appear to even realize that they were there! I have kept myself concealed from him, and I doubt that he even knows that he has trespassed onto our lands!"

"By my soul! He must have elven blood in him, somehow!"

"I doubt that such is the case!" Yazadril chuckled. *"He is the biggest, hairiest human I have ever seen! He must be two and a half meters tall, and weigh as much as any six of us!"*

"He must be a giant, or partly one!" a female voice said.

"No, Yalla." Yazadril replied, recognizing the interjecting voice as that of the on-duty Sentry Wizard. *"I have had that thought as well, but there is no flavor of giant in his scent or his aura. I would certainly have sensed it. He is simply a very large human. I do not think he is very dangerous to us, but who can say?"*

"However, he is definitely a heretofore unique magical anomaly, with unknown abilities, perhaps including the ability to detect us Speaking right now! So, we end this conversation, and hereafter none will cast the power in any way on this side of the pass, until we have learned all that we must know about him!"

"We hear you Yazadril, no magic beyond the crest of the pass. We follow your instructions." Yalla responded, seeming worried.

"We see you, Yazadril. We will be with you in six minutes." Dilimon reported.

When they arrived, the four Sentries seemed to simply appear out of the darkness, exhibiting incredible stealth and woodcraft far beyond that shown by Yazadril, even when he'd had their youth.

"Well done. You made good time," he told them with quiet pride. "Give me the cloak, I am chilled to the bone. Thank you. Now food and drink. Thank you." He wolfed down a few huge bites of sausage and cheese, then took

smaller bites so he could talk with his mouth full. It was an unthinkable performance under most social circumstances, but standard procedure on military operations where time was of the essence.

“I will need you to guard me while I perform a very deep Reading on him.” Yazadril continued. “You will take no action unless you are *absolutely certain* that he is attacking us! If he does attack, we will retreat if we can, and you may have to assist me. However, he may move very quickly, so retreat may not be practical, particularly if I am incapacitated.

“Yalla, if you must defend against him, and your spells affect him, cast Binding and Sleep. If they do not affect him, cast Concussion on the ground in front of him. A few blasts of dirt in his face should discourage him. If it does not, tip a few trees down between him and us. Do not injure him unless absolutely necessary! Find a stone as large as your head, and if he is getting within five meters from us, you can cast Movement on it and break his legs with it.

“You three keep your hunting bows ready. If he actually gets his hands on one of us despite everything Yalla can do, then, and only then, you will kill him. Immediately. And thoroughly.”

“We follow your instructions, Yazadril!” Dilimon stated. He and the other two males grinned eagerly with barely-suppressed excitement. Yalla’s warm smile was a bit worried, but fully resolute.

“After uneventful decades guarding the pass, finally there is a chance for some action, you think young ones?” Yazadril asked with a smile. “Let us enjoy that feeling for a moment.

“Now, let us also remember how much we hope that things will remain peaceful. It is a painful thing to have a killing on your soul, no matter how justified, and seeing a comrade hurt or killed is worse. Let your training and your intellect guide you, no matter how intense your emotions become. What this human has done is completely unique and very dangerous to us all, I do not need to tell you that, so it is imperative that we learn how he has done it!

“Now, you know where the clearing is. When I am in position, I will take the Reading, which could last from fifteen minutes to an hour. Then we will return to the path, and I will tell you what I have learned, and we will decide on further action at that time.”

With that, he turned and strode down the path, his old shoulders braced with determination.

He returned to his spot in the bushes, sat cross-legged on the turf, and immediately fell into trance. The three archers deployed themselves to advantage around him, while Yalla knelt beside him to monitor him and to lend him some power if need be, her eyes locked to the dark form of the sleeping human.

After almost an hour Yazadril began a strange humming unlike any there had heard before. Dilimon looked to Yalla with inquisitive concern, but she only shrugged. Satisfied that the elder was in no danger, even if Yalla did not understand what he was doing, Dilimon returned his attention to his vigilance.

Finally, over two hours after he had began, Yazadril rose and moved quietly back to the path. The four Sentries melted through the forest in his wake, and the five huddled closely on the path to hear Yazadril’s whispered report.

“He poses no danger to us, not directly at any rate. I had to bring myself so far out of tune I could barely feel the power, to even get a basic analysis and a fringe Reading of him. And after two hours of effort, I was only able to learn a few things about him, including the nature of his ability. He is physically so perfectly attuned with the power field that it passes right through him, like light through clean water. He is... transparent to magic, and all magic is therefore transparent and invisible to him. That is how he passed the Wards. It means that though he is immune to magic, and our spells will not affect him, he also cannot attack us magically. The second thing I learned is that he knows nothing of this property in himself, or anything else about magic. If we have a conflict with him, it will be no more difficult to fill him with arrows than any fat boar.”

There was a long silence as the sentries absorbed that with relief.

“As to his personality, I sensed no particular evil in him, and his soul is shattered.” Yazadril related, so quietly their keen hearing could barely make him out. “I could get no details, but he has lost his family, his home, everything, to some horrible disaster. Or... Or to a series of disasters.”

“Huh. He is strange indeed.” Yalla stated thoughtfully. “I would have thought that with an hour’s effort, you could Read anyone so deeply that you would know what they had eaten for breakfast on every morning of their lives.”

“Yes. Anyone but him.” Yazadril nodded. “And the tiny bits of information I did get cost me as much effort as any spell I have ever cast.”

“What will we do?” Dilimon asked.

“We will wait until he wakes, and then I will speak with him. Perhaps something in his history will reveal how he came to exhibit this property.”

“Honored Elder Wizard Yazadril, Prince of The Nine Valleys of the High People, I hesitate to advise you without invitation, but you must sleep, while we will keep watch. You appear near exhaustion.” Yalla told him with a look of concern.

“I know. I will sleep while we wait. And as I say, he poses little danger without magic and armed only with a paring knife, so two of you may sleep as two guard him, or one of you can return to the top of the pass for relief.”

“We are the night watch for the south pass this year, Yazadril, and had arrived on station only a few minutes before your call.” Dilimon told him with a grin. “It will be no trouble for us to remain alert until dusk on the day after tomorrow, if necessary.”

“Excellent. Report to the wizards and Sentries that he is harmless, dismiss the extra Sentries, and inform everyone that I have taken this human under my protection as a study animal. Do and say no more than that, then return here.”

“A study animal? Like he was a rare butterfly you had never seen before?” Dilimon asked with a quiet chuckle.

“Exactly like that.” Yazadril replied, grinning. “I return to my place behind the bushes to sleep. Wake me when our guest first stirs.”

Awakening. Grass beneath him, scratching his neck. Then as always, the memories, the sadness, the despair, the pain. Weeping, weeping like a child. And why not? There was no one to see or to care.

But somehow it was not as bad this morning, and he forced it away with less effort. He sat up and rubbed the sleep-sand and tears from his eyes, and looked around. Perhaps it was this beautiful, magical seeming place, this little high meadow with the tiny brook and the perfect view of the valley below. It seemed to bring him a small measure of serenity, somehow.

He rose and crossed to the brook to wash, then checked his wire snares. Four of the simple traps held prey; three squirrels and a small rabbit, and in each case the snares had functioned perfectly, bringing death to the small animals almost instantly by breaking their necks. He was glad to see that; it made it easier when he respectfully apologized to their spirits for their deaths in a brief prayer.

Having done that, he moved all ten snares and reset them, then cleaned his prey on a flat rock by the brook.

After assembling a shallow bronze pan and three iron rods into a small tripod brazier and building a tiny fire in it, he roasted and ate his catch one by one.

He reflected that it was rare to harvest such a bounty. Generally, only one of the snares caught anything on every second morning, and the meat was only a supplement to his general diet of roots, leaves, berries and nuts. Those were plentiful here as well. Perhaps he would stay here, until a pair of weeks before the snows should fall.

Then he realized that it was the first time he had consciously thought about the days ahead since... Since he left Shinosa Valley.

Clamping down hard on his thoughts, he fiercely concentrated on the sensations of the moment; the taste and texture of the food he was eating, the heat of the fire on his face, the morning sun. In this way he managed to avoid weeping again.

Having finished eating everything but the cleaned skins and bones, he took those with him when he walked a hundred meters to visit the forest, and buried them with his spoor.

He returned to wash in the brook, then cleaned and disassembled the brazier and stowed it in the log.

He sat on the log to admire the view for a while before he set out to gather plants.

A voice called from over by the path, giving him a violent startle.

“Hello the camp!” was called, and it sounded like an old woman.

“Uh... Yes?” he stammered.

Yazadril, standing by the path, almost lost his train of thought. What a voice! Even raised a bit to call out, it was the deepest, lowest, richest voice he had ever heard! And it’s fundamental resonant frequency was exactly in tune with the power field!

He gave himself a shake to recall himself to the business at hand, and called out again in the Trade Common language. “I generally sit where you are, of mornings, and meditate while contemplating the view. May I join you? I have some very tasty apple pastry I would share, and some good bumbleberry wine as well.”

“Uh, sure.”

Yazadril walked into the clearing, whistling a happy tune as he retrieved the pastry and wine from his trail bag. The huge human was standing and staring at him strangely, then suddenly dropped to his hands and knees and bowed his head.

“Now now, no need for all that!” Yazadril told him in surprise. “I doubt you’ve seen one of The High People before, but you’ve nothing to fear from me!”

Slowly, the human’s startlingly bright dark blue eyes rose to look him up and down, taking in the fine doeskin boots, the loose satin breeches colored the same green as the grass, the silk shirt in the same gray as the rock of the

mountain, the stout brown woolen cloak and matching trail bag. His gaze settled for a moment on gracefully pointed ears peeking through shining gray hair, before meeting Yazadril's ancient eyes with a puzzled look.

"You... You're not a god?" he finally asked, his voice rumbling even deeper and lower now that he spoke quietly.

"A god?! No no, don't be silly!" Yazadril laughed as he sat on the log and spread his treats beside him. "I imagine your people would refer to me as a mountain elf. Why would you think me a god? I admit the beard gives me a somewhat dignified air, but..."

"You're glowing."

"Am I? How very interesting! But it is no sign of divinity, I tell you that for certain!

"I am Yazadril of The High People of The Nine Valleys. Here, have some pastry."

"Thank you. I'm called Markee, from... Shinosa Valley." The huge human said as he sat a respectful distance down the log.

Suddenly he was struggling to contain his tears.

"Ahh, Markee, anyone could see that you bear a great grief." Yazadril gently told him. "There is no cure for that except time, and living a good life. But I could lessen your pain a little, for a while, if you'd like."

"Yes. Please help me." Markee quietly sobbed as his eyes closed, and his tears spilled from them.

Yazadril hummed a short note and cast a mild Tranquility upon him. It passed through Markee like he didn't exist, and dispersed beyond him a moment later.

"Oh yes. I'd forgotten about that." Yazadril muttered in chagrin. He concentrated hard while humming a discordant air, and with great effort managed to bring himself and his intensified spell out of synchronicity with Markee, at least enough that the spell would adhere to the human a bit when the old wizard shoved it into him.

The effort left him gasping and shaking, and Markee quickly reached down to gently steady his shoulder, or he'd have fallen off the log.

"I'm... I'm all right. Just give me a moment to catch my breath." the old elf gasped.

"I... Thank you. My sadness seems more... distant, now." Markee mused. "Like it was a year older than it is."

"You're welcome. That was my intent." Yazadril nodded as he regained his composure, and poured them each a goblet of wine. "It should last a few days. Perhaps a week."

"You're a wizard!" Markee stated in soft amazement.

"Yes, I am." Yazadril nodded again, and took a deep drink. "That's why I seem to glow to you, I suspect. You can see my power."

"How is that possible?! That I can see that?" Markee asked in confusion.

"I'm not sure. Tell me, if you don't mind my asking, how old are you?"

Markee was surprised at the question, and considered his answer carefully. "I'll tell you, if you tell me how old you are first." he eventually replied.

"Fair enough. I'm eight thousand, four hundred and seventy-six years old. I am the eldest of my people, by a wide margin."

Markee gaped, and Yazadril sighed.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have told you that, but you asked, and I'm a bit vain about it. I admit to some pride at having fought off the great darkness for so long, though of course it's simply good luck, for the most part." Yazadril grinned, combing his beard out with his fingertips. "Now, will you keep your part of the bargain? Will you tell me your age?"

"I'm sixteen." Markee stated, still gaping. "You're really that old? That's... I mean, what you must have seen! You must know everything by now!"

Now it was Yazadril's turn to gape. "Sixteen! I'd guessed from your manner that you were younger than you seem, but by the Source! Have you even finished growing yet?!"

"I might be seventeen by now. I've lost track of the date." Markee said defensively. He turned away, mildly embarrassed, and gazed down the valley. "I doubt I've finished growing. This shirt fit me loosely when I left home, and I had to take the sleeves off a few weeks ago, because they were too tight around my arms."

"Amazing! Well I have seen some things all right, and I know much, but I know a great deal less than everything! You're certain proof of that!"

"How do you mean?" Markee asked, turning back to the old elf. He was suddenly reminded of the delicious scent coming from the pastry he was holding, and took a huge bite of it.

Yazadril considered him carefully, and decided to be honest. “You display some remarkable properties, young fellow. Your apparent ability to see my power, for one. For another... Tell me, as you came up here, when you passed the top of the scree slope a few hundred paces downhill, did you notice anything, ah, different, shall we say?”

Markee considered as he chewed, then shook his head.

“I thought not. That’s the border of the lands of The High People, and...”

Markee swallowed hurriedly as he stood. “I didn’t know, I didn’t mean to trespass! I’ll leave if you...”

“No no, my boy, I very much wish you to stay!” Yazadril assured him, interrupting in return. “Please, sit down, you are welcome here, and under my protection.

“You see, raw magic power comes from the sun, with the sunlight. But that raw magic energy is not useful, it is not in a form that elves and wizards can use. It passes completely through most things without affecting them, like sunlight through clean water, until it strikes the stone of the world. Some rock is completely out of tune with the raw power, and it reflects the raw power back into the sky. Some rock is partly in tune with it, like the rock of the Nine Valleys of the High People, and this rock absorbs the power, and slowly re-emits it at a lower frequency. Do you understand that?”

“I don’t think so.” Markee admitted. “In tune you said, like music?”

“Yes. The small strings on a harp vibrate much more quickly than the large strings, and they sound a higher note. The number of times they vibrate every second, that is, how frequently they vibrate, is called their frequency.

“Energy vibrates as well. Red light has a slowly vibrating low note, up to violet light which has a quickly vibrating high note, so to speak, in the order of the colors of the rainbow. The rainbow is like a harp of light, showing all the notes in order. You see?”

“Yes, I think I’ve got that.” Markee nodded.

“Good. So the completely-out-of-tune rock reflects the raw magic power back into the sky, like sunlight from a mirror, it just bounces off. Yes?”

“I understand.” Markee nodded again.

“Yes. Now if you take a poker and hold it in a fire, it gets hot as it absorbs the energy from the blue and yellow light of the fire, and when it’s full of it, and you take it out of the fire, you can see it glowing red. It has absorbed the higher frequency blue and yellow light, and it releases it as lower frequency red light.

“The rock of our land does the same thing with the raw magic power. It absorbs it during the day, and constantly radiates it at a lower frequency. That radiated energy from the absorbent rock forms the usable magic field of the world, it’s the energy that wizards and elves use. You see?”

Markee nodded.

“Good. I think there are others who could explain this more simply, but bear with me; we are almost to the crux of it.

“Now air, and water, and solid material like you and me, are made of invisibly tiny parts, and those are made of tinier parts, and those are made of tinier parts yet, and so on, and all of these tiny parts vibrate. How quickly some of those tiny parts vibrate, how *in tune* they are with the vibrations of the energy field of useful magic, determines how they are affected by magic. Objects of power are closely in tune with the magic, they resonate to it in harmony, so they may reflect, absorb, or transmute the energy.

“Some of the tiny parts that make up the bodies of elves and wizards, and the energy of their brains and nerves, also vibrate in harmony with the field of magic to varying degrees. So, we can use magic, and elves can see the magic field itself.

“Now to the point. Some of the most important tiny parts in *your* body, particularly your brain and your nerves, all vibrate at *exactly* the same frequency as the energy field of useful magic. Not in harmony with it, in unison with it!

“Because of this, you are transparent to magic. It passes right through you, like light through clean water. So you are, for the most part, immune to the direct effects of magic, both good and bad, harm and healing. This is why you were able to walk past the Illusions and Barriers of the Wards on our borders, though they’d have stopped a flight of dragons, and you didn’t even notice them.

“Somewhere in all that is the reason you can see my power, though unlike elves, you cannot see the magic field around you. I’ll have my finger on it in a while.” Yazadril mused, absent-mindedly scratching his chin through his beard.

“So you want me to stay here, so you can study me, so you can find out how to make the magic barriers not let me past?” Markee asked.

“Yes, that’s important, though my interest is far more general. I wish to understand the phenomenon completely for the sake of understanding, not just so we can bar you from our land. Though we must know that as well, in case some wizard ever learns to duplicate your abilities.”

“Huh. You’re right. I’m sure there are others who would have explained it more simply.” Markee chuckled, then suddenly sobered as he became a bit suspicious.

“And how long would you want me to stay here?” he inquired.

“Until I understand it, or failing that, for as long as I can interest you in staying.”

Markee stared at him intently. “This is important to you? How do I know you won’t hold me against my will, or trick me? Or that another of your people won’t do so?”

Yazadril’s brows drew together a bit. “I understand your concerns. But I’ll have you know that I am Prince of my people, and I have the right to speak for them, and to make commitments upon their behalf. And I do solemnly swear that none of my people will seek to harm you, or seek to impede you should you choose to leave.”

“Hold on a moment!” Markee exclaimed. “If I’m immune to magic, how did you do that thing for me earlier?”

“Ah, I was able to purposely make myself slightly out of tune with you, and with the power field. Then my spell could resonate within you and affect you, though not very strongly.

“Of course you must realize that everything I’ve told you about magic, including that, is an analogy that is a tremendous oversimplification of the rules of reality, but at least it gives you some understanding.

“If it makes you feel better, I can tell you that I probably couldn’t magically affect you enough to harm you, even if I tried. Though if I did try the reverse of that, I could make you feel a bit more depressed, which I assure you I would never do.

“I very much doubt that there is another wizard alive who could even affect you that much. I was only able to do it because of some rather specialized theoretical work I did a few centuries ago. And because I’m a pretty good wizard, to say the least. Believe me, no one else would have thought of it.”

“Huh. How long do you *think* it would be? Honestly?”

Yazadril considered, and swallowed a guilty look. “I see your concern. And your suspicions are correct. I could easily spend centuries on such research. Centuries you do not have within your human lifespan. Still, perhaps we could agree on a limited time, just so I could understand the basics of it?” he asked hopefully.

“The basics? How long for the basics?”

“Well... Perhaps forty years?”

“Forty years!” Markee exclaimed, rising to his feet. “I think perhaps one year, if that!”

“One year! Impossible! We will barely know one another in one year!” Yazadril sputtered. “You must give me... You must give me ten, at least!”

“Ten years?! Ten years on the side of a mountain, being poked and prodded like a leech on a plate?! I think not! I may feel bad enough right now to throw my life away, but I’m smart enough to know I’ll feel differently in ten years!”

“Now see here! It needn’t be as unpleasant as all that! I like to think I’m pretty good company, and if you have any interest in the subject of magic, you may very well find it to be a fascinating time indeed! As for living on the side of a mountain, you must admit that this is very pleasant place, and if you choose to stay here I will have a lovely home built for you at the edge of the meadow there, and you may consider it yours for as long as you choose to stay with us!

“Beyond that, I happen to be a very powerful and wealthy wizard, and I would be willing to reward you very generously for your service! I could make you as wealthy in gold or jewels as any king in any of the human lands out there! I can build you a castle with a waterfall that flows uphill and a basilisk to guard the gate! I can give you a charm that will make you irresistible to every woman and admired by every man! Come now, I am willing to be reasonable, and I can give you almost anything you could want!”

“You must really want this very much.” Markee told him grimly, and sat back down, staring with eyes unfocused into the grass. “I don’t want those things. And you can’t give me what I want, for I want what I’ve lost. And I doubt even you can return the dead to life.”

Yazadril didn’t answer for a moment, and when he did, his manner was compassionate. “You’re right, in that I want this very much. You are the most unique magical phenomenon that’s ever happened. According to everything we know, you are impossible, and your very existence negates much of what we thought we knew about magic. The implications cannot be overstated. Nothing else is this important.

“And you are right, even I cannot bring back the dead if they have been gone for more than a moment, or if their brains or spines are destroyed.

“But, everyone needs affection, and companionship, and love. Elves and humans are the same that way. I will give you my companionship and my affection, Markee, and perhaps I will grow to love you like a grandson. Also, you will be a great novelty among my people, and many of them will want to visit you, and I’m sure you will like almost all of them.”

Markee didn’t reply, as he considered the enormity of what was being asked, and what was being offered.

“Perhaps there is something else I can offer, that you would value more.” Yazadril ventured quietly. “Tell me your story, Markee. There must be something I can do. Tell me of your home, and of what happened there.”

Markee stared at the ground for a long time before he spoke, and did not look up when he did.

“Shinosa Valley is in the mountains north of here. It’s a long way from anywhere, you have to hike over thirty-five kilometers of mountains and passes to get to Pimata; the next inhabited valley. The trader only comes twice a year, on foot with a pack train of nimble donkeys, and we were the very end of his route. It’s a hundred and ninety-three hard kilometers east to Copper Strike; the nearest town, and another hundred and twenty-nine to the foothills and farmlands of Finitra proper before you come to anything that you could really call civilization. Other than that, to the north, west and south, there’s only mountains for hundreds of kilometers, uninhabited and mostly impassable. Fifty-three people lived in Shinosa valley, including me. The traders and five people from Pimata and two of the King’s Rangers are the only other people I’ve ever seen. And you.

“One morning just after dawn last winter a storm came, the most terrible blizzard any of us had ever seen. It was sudden, one minute there was clear blue sky, the next it was hell. The wind blew so fast that pieces of straw were blown three centimeters into solid wood, and it was so cold that people in warm winter clothes froze to death in moments. I’ve never been so scared as that. Lots of blizzards go on for days, and I knew if that one had even lasted till supertime there wouldn’t have been anything left alive in the whole valley. It only lasted an hour, and it killed everyone that was caught outside, or that went outside to save their children or animals, and everyone whose house was too exposed to the wind.

“My family was spared, because Mother wouldn’t let us go out to save the mule and the sheep, though one window blew in and my little sister Shelvy got awful sick. All five of us huddled together on my parents’ bed under every stitch of clothing and bedding we owned. It was really, really cold, and the wind was so loud you had to yell into each other’s ears to be understood. Twenty-one of our neighbors died from the storm. It ended as suddenly as it started, then it was completely gone, the sky was blue again.

“We gathered everyone who still lived at Dob Jorman’s mill, since it was the second biggest place, and made of stone, and well sheltered from the wind.”

He paused for a long moment, and when he continued he was so choked with emotion that it was difficult to speak clearly.

“That night, just after supertime, everyone but me went mad. They just completely lost their minds. Most of them, you couldn’t tell what they thought they were seeing, or what they were trying to do, but some were running away from nothing, and some were fighting the air, and some were yelling gibberish and thrashing around and... Some hurt themselves, and some hurt others. My brother Steb killed my mother with one blow to her head, and... And other bad things happened. A few minutes later, most of them became themselves again. Some were dead. My little sister was dead. She looked like she had died from sheer terror. Steb never came out of it, and Dob Jorman knocked him cold with a chair, to keep him from killing his son Verk.

“Some who had gotten their minds back wanted to run. But my father yelled that we were under magical attack, and that we couldn’t run from it, and a regular attack might come next, so we all had to stay together to help each other. Everyone saw the sense of that, so we all stayed there. There were twenty-one of us left alive, seven of them injured or sick, four of them still mad.”

He stopped to wipe at his tears with both hands, and tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

“The next morning, about midmorning... I was leaning against my father, we were sitting on the floor against the wall, and I was holding Marja Dobbim. She was thirteen, and everyone knew she’d be my wife someday. I was very fond of her, and besides, she was the only girl who was near the right age in the valley. Then everyone except me screamed, they screamed so horribly... And... they... died. They died, and their skin turned black and green pus started coming out of all their...”

Markee had to stop, and wept openly for a minute before he regained enough control to continue.

“Anyway, I ran. I grabbed a few things and I ran. I was really stupid about what I took, too, and I’ve regretted it a million times. It’s like all my training just flew out of my head, but I was in such a panic that I couldn’t even think. I just ran away and left them all lying there dead, because I was so scared. So... horrified. I ran south, because I was afraid of the ice storm, and I knew it was warmer, south. I ran until I dropped, just eating snow for water and running,

and when I dropped I slept, and then a nightmare woke me up and I ran again, until I dropped. The next day I couldn't run anymore, so I walked fast. The next day I stopped and gathered food, because I was so hungry, and kept on walking south.

"And that's all I've done since then; walk south, and climb when I had to. About six months, I think. Every few days I climb high enough up a mountain to choose a way ahead through the passes. That's why I came up here; the top of the pass faces south. From the maps my father had, I know the mountains must end a few more week's walk south of here. I know there are plains south of that, and south of that is the shore of the ocean, where it never snows. I guess I'd sort of thought of going there."

He turned to Yazadril and tried to smile with tears pouring from his eyes. "Now that I know I'm immune to magic, I suppose I should go home and give my folk decent burials. But I don't think I could bear to do it."

His look of despair made Yazadril look away, and there was a painful silence for a minute.

"Have you thought about the cause of it?" Yazadril finally ventured. "The source of the storm and the madness and the death?"

"Not really." Markee answered after a moment. "I haven't been thinking about it, really. I try to keep my thoughts on the here and now, or I review the lessons I was taking, or just engage in abstract philosophizing. Anything to keep from thinking about it, or I weep constantly. Until your spell. And I'm still weeping, just not as much."

He paused again. "None of us had any real enemies, so it makes no sense. I suppose some evil wizard must have killed them for his own amusement."

"That is one possibility." Yazadril nodded. "They were definitely killed by magic. Or a wizard may have made a mistake, or had an accident. If one tries to put too much power into an object, for instance, it could explode, and that could cause what you've described. Or a small piece of a world that is a source of raw magic may have fallen from the sky nearby. The magic storm from that could do it too.

"By far the most likely possibility is that your folk were simply caught in the crossfire of a battle between two distant wizards. In which case, one or both of them are probably dead. Two very powerful, very incompetent, very sloppy, very unethical, and undoubtedly human wizards, I might add. No elf would even contemplate such methods.

"That is one thing I can offer you. I can help you find out what caused those unfortunate events. If we find that someone is at fault, I will help you take action.

"I should clarify that. If your people were killed by intent or incompetence, by a wizard or wizards, and we can identify any surviving perpetrators, my people will take appropriate action, whether you choose to or not. Such atrocities cannot be allowed to continue unchecked."

"Hmm. Would you be able to find out from here, by magic, or would you have to go there?" Markee asked.

"I might be able to find out from here, but most likely I will have to go there." Yazadril mused. "Along with a few hundred elven warriors, all of whom have various magical skills, as well as another dozen senior wizards of The High People."

"So you sometimes go beyond the lands of your people?"

"We do indeed!" Yazadril laughed. "I've spent a third of my life out in the world, and I've seen most of it!"

"Hmm." Markee said. He stood and clasped his hands behind himself, and slowly strode to the center of the glade. He remained there, deep in thought, for many minutes. Finally he turned and made his way back.

"Here's what I propose. Please, hear me out." He stated as he sat down again. "I'll stay here for your study, in the house you will build me, for five years. You will also help me with furniture, clothing, boots, and bedding for the winter. And with food, or I'll have to gather and trap so much in this small area that it would start to become barren in less than a year. You will also teach me what you can about magic during that time.

"I won't count the time we spend on dealing with what happened to my people against the five years.

"If after the five years I no longer want to stay here, or whenever I choose to leave after that, you will give me enough jewels to buy a good ranch with a nice house, small enough that I can work it by myself, somewhere south where it never snows, as well as enough to equip it, to furnish it, and to buy some breeding stock and the first year's seed. If I leave here and you do that for me, I'll let you come with me and study me during my free time, but you'd also have to continue my magic lessons.

"For how long?" Yazadril asked.

"Pardon?"

"For how long could I accompany you and study you and teach you during your free time at your new ranch, after we left here at the end of the five years?"

"Oh. As long as we didn't get so sick of the sight of each other that we couldn't stand it. As long as we both enjoy spending the time together, I mean. Other than that, as long as I live."

“Agreed then!” Yazadril stated happily as he rose to his feet.

“It’s a bargain?” Markee asked as he also stood and offered his hand.

“Wait. You understand that during the five years, I will not be the only wizard of my people studying you? That sometimes one or two others will join us?”

“That’s all right.”

“And do you understand that a vow with an elven wizard is magically binding, like a geas or a Compulsion?”

“I didn’t know that!” Markee stated. “So when you swore you and yours to not harm or impede me earlier, and your glow got brighter...?”

“I couldn’t break it to save my life.” Yazadril nodded. “Though to save my daughters’ or my wife’s lives, I could break it. Most could not.”

“That’s good to know. But what if I’m immune to the binding, as I am to other magic?”

“Then I’ll just have to trust your honor.” Yazadril smiled.

“You can.” Markee nodded, offering his huge hand again.

“So let it be agreed, as it was spoken!” Yazadril smiled, and he placed his small and bony hand within the other’s huge one.

“Agreed!” Markee stated, with a bit of a smile himself as they shook on it.

Yazadril grinned as they resumed their seats. “Tell me, did you feel anything special just now?” he asked.

“You glowed a little brighter for a moment there, when I said ‘agreed’. It’s getting harder to see as the sun gets higher and the daylight gets brighter, but for a moment it was as plain as when you were walking through the shadows under the trees.”

“Ah. Interesting. Here, do try some of this bumbleberry wine. It’s very good, and you haven’t tasted yours yet.”

“I’m not allowed to drink wine until I’m eighteen.” Markee admitted sheepishly. “But I’ll sure have another of these pastries! They’re delicious! The first real food I’ve had in a long time!”

“Ah, it’s so easy to forget your age. But it is wise, to avoid the possibility of drunkenness until you are mature, and perhaps even after that. Before we give wine to our young, those under twenty-five years, we generally take most of the alcohol out of it. If I did that, do you think you would be permitted to drink it?”

“I suppose that would be all right. I hesitate to assume so though. The thought of offending my mother’s spirit is... very painful.”

“Ah, understandable. But we are celebrating an agreement, and it’s a new chapter in your life, and you’ve had to assume responsibility for yourself as an adult before your due time. You knew your mother well, and loved her very much. If you think of how she was, and how she would decide if she were here now, I think your heart will know the truth of it.”

Markee thought about it. “I... I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t mind, as long as it couldn’t make me get drunk.”

“I think you are almost certainly right.” Yazadril gently smiled. He hummed a note and touched his fingertip to the surface of Markee’s wine, making tiny ripples of vibration in the liquid as bubbles rose. “There. Generally we remove alcohol from wine with a slow selective evaporation process, but it’s no trouble to transmute the alcohol. Try it.”

“Mmm! It’s good! Sweet and tart and spicy, all at the same time!” Markee exclaimed, holding the silver goblet delicately but awkwardly with his fingertips. It looked almost ridiculously small in his hand.

“I rather like it myself.” Yazadril chuckled, then finished his gobletful and poured them both another, and neutralized the alcohol in Markee’s.

“You know, you seem like a well educated youth, moreso than most from such isolated places.” Yazadril commented.

“My father was from outside.” Markee explained. “And so was my teacher the widow Sorel. And everyone always ordered books from the trader, though they’re pretty expensive. We were determined to not be ignorant, and tried to keep up with the major events outside the valley, mostly by exchanging letters with relatives who lived down in Finitra. I loved it there, but it was good to know I could probably get by if I had to go somewhere else.”

“Your people were wise in that, I think.”

“Yes. Life was good there.”

“Life will be good again, I assure you.

“Help yourself to these pastries, I know they’re probably much smaller than the ones you’re used to.”

They shared a companionable silence for a while, before Yazadril spoke again.

“Sometimes it’s good to start over. I had a wife and a daughter when I was only a bit more than two hundred years old, but I lost them in a war some eight hundred years later. I lost my parents and my brother then too. I had a second wife and two sons, over five thousand years ago. None of them lived beyond their third millennium.

“And now, to my great and constant surprise, at the age of eight thousand four hundred and seventy-six, I have a beautiful young wife again, and two lovely twin daughters only slightly older than yourself!”

“Oh! Well, congratulations, I guess!”

“Thank you! Thirty-five years I have been married to Nemia, and it is still very much a subject worthy of congratulation, *I think!*” Yazadril chuckled.

“Ah.” Markee smiled, his heart touched by the ancient wizard’s obvious joy. “Thirty-five years. If it’s not impolite to ask, how old is your young wife?”

“She is only two hundred fifty-eight, and the very *picture* of beauty! I don’t mind telling you, I’ve found it wise to increase my exercise since we married, and still there are times when I’ve had to augment my stamina with the power to keep up with her bounteous energy!”

Markee actually chuckled, and the small amount of his face around his eyes and nose that wasn’t hidden by his hair and beard blushed bright red.

“Oh not that, Nemia is a wonderfully relaxing lover.” Yazadril chuckled. “Dancing mostly. That’s when she really tests my old heart! A touch of the power can be very important at times like that!”

Markee burst out laughing, which was a unique experience for Yazadril, since the powerful, incredibly low sound of it made Yazadril’s entire chest cavity and all the sinuses in his skull vibrate with a rumbling sensation that almost tickled.

Markee misread his surprised expression. “I’m sorry Yazadril, I don’t mean to offend! But it will take some adjustment in my thinking for me to picture a woman who’s two hundred and fifty-eight years old as your bright young new wife! The oldest person I ever knew died of old age at seventy-six!” And he burst out laughing again.

“And what does that make me?” Yazadril asked with a smile and a raised eyebrow.

Markee laughter calmed, but he still smiled. “You are beyond old. To me, at eight thousand and whatever years old, you’re eternal. You’re immortal. And I must admit, simply because you’re so completely outside my experience, that there’s a small part of me that’s skeptical of your claim.

“Ah, understandable. And well spoken; most could not have phrased it so diplomatically.”

“Well, my speaking and my writing were the delight of my teachers, but my maths were their despair. Though I’d have done all right at the maths if I didn’t hate them so much!” Markee revealed, and chuckled again with a sound so low and quiet that Yazadril felt it more than heard it.

“And how quickly did you learn musical skills?” Yazadril eagerly asked.

“Pretty fast I guess. We had quite a few different kinds of instruments around the valley, and I could play them all as well as anyone, I guess. I was a good singer too, until my voice changed when I was eleven. I could still sing I guess, but I think it sounds too strange. The girls all giggle when I sing now. I mean they did. And I couldn’t play the tin horn when my lips got too thick for the mouthpiece, but I was still okay on the bigger horns. And I had to figure out new fingerings for some of the chords on the lute when my fingers got too thick. At least they got reach too. I could still play the harp, but I had to pick the strings with my fingernails. The harp’s my favorite. My father and I were making me one, with more space between the strings so I can play it with my fingertips like you’re supposed to. It’s about half done, after a year’s work, but every part had to be perfect for my father, and there are a lot of parts in a forty-nine string harp.”

“Ah. Excellent! Did you know; when you are unsure of yourself, you say ‘I guess’ quite frequently?”

“I guess.” Markee grinned.

“In this case, it’s obvious that you’re unsure of your musical skills, simply because of the rapid and unique adjustments your unusual stature has necessitated. Once you’ve finished growing, and taken some time to become accustomed to your unique gifts, both musical and otherwise, I’m sure you’ll find that they won’t hinder you in any way.

“And as to your voice... My boy, I assure you that I do not exaggerate in the slightest when I say that you have the most beautiful voice I have ever heard in my life! It gives me a powerful emotion, simply from hearing you speak, and laugh. The mere thought of hearing you sing is almost enough to bring a tear to my eye!”

“Huh. Well, I’m glad you think so. I still think it sounds strange. But then, when you first called hello, I thought you sounded like a little old lady.” Markee chuckled. “I imagine you don’t have very many bass singers among the High People, if most of them are your size.”

“No, nor among elf-kind in general, for I am, at what you would measure as one hundred and forty centimeters tall, a bit taller than average among mountain elves.” Yazadril said, in a subtly different tone of voice that Markee was coming to recognize as his ‘teaching manner’.

“The mountain elves as a group are about the same height as the northern elves, while the elves of the forests and jungles tend to be taller, averaging one hundred and forty-nine centimeters for males. The plains elves, who have almost entirely joined their cultures with that of the great empires of the humans, tend to be taller yet, with males averaging one hundred fifty-nine. Females in all our subcultures tend to be about eight centimeters shorter than the males.”

“Interesting.” Markee remarked, consciously imitating the old elf’s manner. “Tell me, what is the average lifespan of an elf? I understand that you are unique in that regard, but what is the general elven longevity?”

“A well phrased question, even if you *are* being a sarcastic sprout.” Yazadril grinned. “Elves don’t die from old age. And, since we have an innate ability to heal ourselves, we very seldom die from diseases or wounds. Other than the given possibility of death from magical attack, we only die when we are wounded in the brain or upper spinal column, or when we are killed faster than we can heal ourselves. For instance, the most common natural cause of death among The High People is being struck by lightning, since it’s too quick to react to. We are likely to be struck by lightning every thirteen thousand two hundred years on the average, though no one lives that long, and to be fatally struck every fifteen thousand one hundred years. Over time, the dangers of the world kill everyone. By far the most common cause of death for elves is war. Also, since we can choose not to heal ourselves if we are feeling an immensely powerful despair, a few elves have died by suicide.

“Throughout the two hundred and thirty seven thousand years of elven history, our average elven lifespan was about one thousand eight hundred years. But, during this present epoch, which includes the last eight thousand years, it has been relatively peaceful for those of us of the elven race, and we have only been affected by three major wars and seven minor ones. Largely because of this peaceful condition, our average lifespan during that time has risen to two thousand, three hundred years. Generally, if you live to eighteen hundred, you start to get a little extra respect due to your age. The plains elves tend to suffer more fatal mishaps than the rest of us, on average, but that’s due to the influences of living with humans.”

“I see. And how many of your people are there? The High People of The Nine Valleys?”

“Two thousand, seven hundred and ninety-one since the last birth, a baby boy born just six years ago.”

“Your people don’t have many babies, for that many people.” Markee commented, a little sadly.

“Not compared to yours, but everything has it’s price. We have long life, but if we also had high fertility as you do, we would cover this world like flies on a carcass, until everything was consumed, and then we would all die. The same would happen to your people, with their amazing fecundity, if every one of them could be a wizard and live as long as an elf.

“I didn’t know wizards lived as long as elves!” Markee exclaimed.

“Ah, they are not as consistent in their longevity as elves. Almost all human wizards manage to extend their lifespan by at least fifty years, but only a few manage to do it as well as elves. Still, there are a few human wizards out there who are more than two thousand years old.”

“And what about me? How long will I live?”

“My boy, I have no idea. At least as long as an average human, at any rate.”

“Huh. So really, all you elves are wizards, but only the most powerful among you get to *call* yourselves wizards?”

“Almost all of us can cast the power to a greater or lesser degree, but it is not only the most powerful elven magic users who declare themselves to be wizards. Those who are the most skilled, those who are most knowledgeable, and those who have a special talent in one area also declare themselves to be wizards. It’s more of a trade designation, really. Those who choose to devote themselves to the study and practice of magic as their primary interest declare themselves to be wizards, and unless they are spectacularly inept, no one would challenge them about it, even if their personal power was minimal.

“Among human wizards, the title is only bestowed upon those who have served an apprenticeship of four to seven years, and passed certain minimum competency tests which vary from guild to guild. Their trade is organized very much like the other human trades guilds.

“You will be an interesting student. Though I will have no trouble imparting knowledge, your magical transparency may make it impossible for you to actually utilize the power in any way. On the other hand, since you can see my power, the tissue at the back of your eyes is *not* completely transparent to the power, once it has been taken

up and re-released by my body and my mind. Perhaps we can build on that, or perhaps I can teach you something similar to the way I brought myself out of tune in order to make my spell affect you.”

“Huh. Well, we have lots of time for that.” Markee nodded. “Right now, I’d like to find out more about your people. After all, they’ll be my new neighbors. How am I most likely to offend them by mistake? What should I do to get along with them? I notice you have a slight accent. Do all of you speak my language?”

“Ah, such excellent questions!” Yazadril smiled, rubbing his palms together eagerly. “This should be fun! Of course I am helping to instruct my young daughters, and I conduct regular lectures and researches at The Hall of New Magic, but other than that I have not taken a private student for hundreds of years!

“Now, you are unlikely to offend any of my people by accident, as you are quite considerate and polite, and our culture is far less restrictive than yours. In fact, I imagine the most important thing you could do to get along with The High People is to remember to not take offense at *our* actions. You will probably find that many of us will be intimidated by you at first, not only by your size, but by your unusual appearance and your immunity to magic as well.”

“Well, I can’t do anything about my magic immunity or my size, but if I had a razor and a pair of shears, and a mirror and some soap, and some clothes that weren’t ruined, I think I’d be less intimidating. I’m not too particular about things like that, so I’ll gladly wear your people’s styles, if it’ll help.”

“It will, very much so.” Yazadril nodded thoughtfully. “I’ll arrange for clothes to be made and to have you barbered. Which brings us to the next offenses you will have to brace yourself for. Once my people become accustomed to you, and get beyond being intimidated by you, they will begin to treat you as we treat one another. You will then find that we tend to stand close to each other, compared to your people, and we are much less inhibited about touching one another. You may feel that they are taking liberties with your person. You will also notice that we are much less inhibited about liaisons between lovers. Elven couples are not fertile with one another until they have bonded as husband and wife over a period of years, so liaisons between consenting adults, both before and outside marriage, are not frowned upon or discouraged. And we are less motivated to seek privacy for such play, which may embarrass you.”

“I think I can deal with all of that. You just let them know that if any male touches my kilt or under it, I’ll... I’ll consider it an offense against my honor!”

“Quite.” Yazadril nodded, suppressing his smile. “We also do not have such a strong division of labor based on gender, as your people do. Our females as well as our males tend to every task, be it childcare or combat. Every position of authority is open to both genders as well.

“Since we can heal ourselves of almost any wound, the young and hot-headed among us are wont to challenge each other to combat, sometimes with knives or even swords, and occasionally with limited magic. We can afford to do so, since there is little real danger for us, but that’s not the case for you, so don’t let them goad you into foolishness.

“Many of us speak your language, but you are right in guessing that we have our own native tongue, the Mountain variant of High Elvish. Do not be offended if some choose to speak it in your vicinity. They may be talking about you, but there is little to be done about it, since Elvish is a much more complex language than yours and it may take you half your life to become proficient in it. Rely instead on facial expressions and body language, which have identical meanings for elves and humans.

“Except for all that, just be yourself. You’re a very likable youth, and I’m sure you’ll get along fine. It will help if you talk and laugh a lot; everyone will love to hear your voice, and if you can bring yourself to sing something pretty, you will have them in the palm of your hand.”

“If you say so.” Markee nodded. “Will they take my measurements for the clothes? I’m kind of curious to see how tall I’ve grown.

“Not at all, I have a nice little Measurement spell I can learn such things with. You only have to stand. And since it will probably not work on you, I will cast it upon the particles of dust that adhere to you!” Yazadril stated proudly, and cast it with a hummed note and a careful gesture.

“So, you are about two hundred and forty-eight centimeters tall, not counting the thickness of your sandals.” Yazadril pronounced. “The way the spell was cast, there was some uncertainty due to the hair on the top of your head. You are certainly the largest human I have ever had the pleasure to meet, though not the largest there has ever been. The tallest I know of topped you by ten centimeters, but then, he lived over three thousand years ago, and you’re still growing.

“At any rate, my young friend, I think I will take my leave now. I will return in a few hours with a barber, a tailor, and a few house builders. And at least one more wizard.” Yazadril told him as he packed the empty goblets and the bottle of wine in his sack and stood, then he became thoughtful again. “I should limit it to one more wizard, since we will be dealing with dangerous knowledge. On the other hand, I need at least one to assist me in this. It is too

important to keep to myself, and though I am the master theoretician, I should include an intuitive, someone who is the finest in skill and power.

“Hmm, when I think about it that way, the choice is obvious. Alilia, Princess of the People of Life, finest wizard among the forest elves and a good friend of mine for most of her life. She would be perfect for this!”

Then his bushy white eyebrows suddenly snapped up to his forehead. “But she is a person you *will* have to be careful not to offend! Alilia, well, she expects a certain deference from everyone, generally, except me, and we all generally agree that she’s entitled to it. It would be wise to be on your most respectful behavior while she’s here.”

“She’s older than you? More powerful?” Markee asked nervously

“Not older, as she is four thousand eight hundred and sixty-six years old, but vastly more powerful. I was only an average wizard until I was over two thousand, and since then I have continued to improve, whereas my contemporaries have died off, until I have reached pre-eminence in my specialties, which are magic dealing with knowledge and information, and with precision.

“Alilia’s is another story entirely. Her mother had to work hard to keep her from casting Force bolts during temper tantrums while she was still in the womb! A few seconds after she was born she found the softest birthing blanket to be uncomfortable after the buoyancy of the womb, so she Levitated, perfectly still, just a finger’s breadth in the air! Even I don’t have that kind of Levitation control today! And though she has little of my vast theoretical knowledge, her skills have become finely tuned indeed! Whereas I and most other wizards must study magic and use it like a tool, with Alilia it is almost entirely intuitive, and using her vast power is as natural as using her hand or her voice.

“She has ended wars and dominated empires with a few gestures. For an elf, she is almost power personified. And beyond all that, she is the ruling monarch of a great nation encompassing vast lands, peopled by hundreds of thousands of elves.

“But, I do not want to intimidate you, I am just a bit enthusiastic about her. And though she can sometimes be a bit... abrasive, I am very fond of her. She can be harsh, but she is fair. If you *do* offend her, she will only use words to strike at you, but you would *not* enjoy it.”

“I knew this was sounding too good to be true.” Markee grumbled. “Does it have to be her?”

“No one else could help us learn as thoroughly, which is important to me, or as quickly, which is important to you. And if you can earn her affection, there is no one who could be a more valuable friend.”

“Well, I guess you know best.”

“In this case, I do indeed! Farewell, Markee, until late this afternoon or early this evening.”

“Farewell till then, Yazadril.” Markee returned, and was going to offer his hand again when the old elf bowed. The young man was relieved by this, as he had found it awkward shaking Yazadril’s tiny and ancient hand, and he bowed from the waist in return without standing. This seemed to please Yazadril, who turned and paced purposely from the glen, whistling a happy tune.

Yazadril was met by his four Sentries as soon as he was well out of Markee’s sight, thirty meters up the path.

“You have heard all that was said?” he asked as they gathered around him, reverting to his native tongue.

“Yes.” Yalla nodded. “You are right, he does seem harmless enough. His tale is certainly most tragic. And I admit that I am curious to see how he will appear when he is barbered!”

“Well, I ask you to keep his confidence and to respect his privacy. He does not know that we have eavesdropped, and now that he is an ally, we will cease doing so. Also note that certain matters that were discussed must remain confidential for as long as possible, for all our sakes. We will not be able to hide his transparency to magic forever, but we *must* hide the theoretical basis for it, and the importance thereof. We will pass it off as a harmless curiosity. *None must know that he passed the Wards*, beyond those who already know; the senior wizards and your squad! I hate to tell you to lie, but if anyone asks, *I passed him through the barriers!* We will stress this need for confidentiality, you to your squad mates, and myself to the wizards.

“Two of you keep a distant watch on him, for his protection. Inform me immediately if he leaves the vicinity of the clearing. We will send relief for you when we get to the top of the pass.

“Now, I am not in the mood to waste time trudging home. And since you, Yalla, are due for testing on your Flight skills, I ask that you fly me.”

Yalla chuckled. “I know that you have found my rides to be rough and windy. Do not worry, I have become much more skilled at fine control and shielding the wind since the last time you flew with me!”

“I should hope so.” Yazadril griped good-naturedly as Yalla stepped behind him.

She hugged him tightly around his chest as she hummed a long, high note to bring them into harmony, then her Levitation field encompassed him, the Movement component of the spell activated, and they lifted off.

Yazadril's home was formed in the side of a great oak tree that was over one hundred and eighty meters tall. After a quick stop at the top of the pass, Yalla flew him to his balcony, sixty-four meters above the ground. She bade him a quick farewell and flew off, stifling a yawn.

The senior wizards of his people were waiting in his home when he returned. All twenty-four of them were gathered in his central room, chatting brightly about the human and speculating imaginatively about him. Yazadril's wife and daughters bustled about, serving refreshments.

"Were you not informed that I wished you to keep these matters confidential?" Yazadril sternly and loudly asked, and the group suddenly fell silent. "And yet the moment I return I find you in my home, and two of you discussing how the human passed the Wards, right in front of my wife and daughters! Thus, you are needlessly endangering them, and ultimately all of us!"

"Calm yourself, Yazadril." Theramin smiled, smoothing his graying beard down over the front of his blue satin robe. As always, the stout little horticultural wizard was unperturbed. "It was necessary in order to maintain a semblance of normality. The fact that we have a great secret is itself a great secret, and if we act like we are trying to conceal a secret, the fact that we have one is revealed. Thus we meet here, as we would if the human truly were unimportant, rather than in The Council Hall or the Hall of New Magic, where we would be expected to meet if the danger he represents were more immediate. And since we are meeting here, it was necessary that your family be trusted with this, as it would have been impractical to exclude them."

"Yes, yes, I see your reasoning, though you should have consulted me before endangering them with this knowledge!"

"I am sorry about that." Theramin smiled, not looking sorry at all. "At least you know that *your* home is absolutely proof against eavesdropping, be it intentional or accidental!"

"Now please, tell us what you have learned, we are bursting from the suspense!"

"In a moment!" Yazadril snapped, then his manner softened completely as he turned to his wife. She had set her tray of appetizers on a shelf and moved to his side, where she stood patiently waiting for his attention, her light blue eyes glinting with the little smile of amusement that she gave to no one else but him.

As always, his heart soared as she flowed into his embrace, and he knew he was the most fortunate being in existence.

"Ahh, Nemia, I love you so." he crooned into the thick, curly blond hair just above her ear.

"As I love you, my husband. You are well?" she returned.

"Very well, my lovely wife. Though these developments do bring unknown dangers, they bring unknown opportunities as well."

His twin daughters, Talia and Dalia, were practically identical, and very similar in appearance to their mother. Rather than approach their parents upon their father's return, they continued unobtrusively serving cordials in tiny crystal stemware, but they shared a warm smile with their parents by way of greeting. After all, their father had been home only yesterday, and there were guests. And of course, this strategy lessened the chance that they would be sent from the room before the interesting news was delivered!

Yazadril quickly related the gist of the day's events, finishing with his decision to invite Alilia to join him in studying the unique phenomenon that had manifested in their new guest.

There were dubious looks exchanged among the assembled, and again Theramin spoke. The rest, as usual, were content to let others take the initiative in anything that was out of the ordinary.

"That was well done, though you take a risk in revealing so much to your new pupil." Theramin nodded. "But, I think you did not do so well in your negotiations with him. Five years is not so long."

"True, but his wants are modest, and he was resolute. It is difficult to bargain well with such a person." Yazadril conceded. "I gained the right to study him for the rest of his life, and that was the most important thing, even if it means being out in the world."

"Granted." Theramin agreed. "But you may wish to reconsider having Alilia assist you in this learning. The work she does here, with yourself and others, is valuable, but it is also well known that she comes here to do such work because she considers it a welcome vacation from the stresses and tensions of her role as Princess of the People of Life.

"And Yazadril, I can assure you that the majority of the stresses and tensions in the lands of the forest elves are caused by humans. As I am sure you know, Alilia's folk are bordered by three ethnic groupings of humans, each with

their own kingdoms, language, culture and customs, who have each hated and mistrusted the others for millennia, with petty wars and feuds unending. This has had a disastrous effect on their cultures, which have become cruel, excessively restrictive, and at times reprehensible. This has been reflected in their dealings with The People of Life.

“Because of this, Alilia’s feelings toward humans in general are not kind. To put it bluntly, she despises the lot of them.”

Yazadril considered. “You are right in that her opinion of humans will not make this work any easier. But given a few hours in which to get to know Markee, she will see that he is not like that. And she will be able to see the importance of this research. What one can do, others can learn to do, and she will not like the thought of humans walking unimpeded through her Wards, any more than I do.

“More importantly, she is the only one who has the qualities I need to assist me in this, beyond one or two of the wizards of the plains elves, and I must admit that I am unsure that those are entirely trustworthy anymore, since they have embraced living among the great empires of the humans.”

“That is all true enough.” Theramin agreed. “So I suppose you must ask her, though she may refuse.”

“I think I can convince her.” Yazadril smiled, and turned to the group of wizards. “Do any of you have anything to add?”

None did.

“I will serve as barber and tailor to your young friend, my love.” Nemia smiled. “I will gather the supplies for such a task. And Theramin here is the obvious choice to supervise the construction of a house.”

“I am.” Theramin agreed proudly. “Though I will not grow him a tree outside the valley. I will consult with him as to the style of architecture he would prefer.”

“Excellent, and thank you both.” Yazadril smiled. “I will cast a Speaking to Alilia now, while we are all still gathered here. She is more likely to control her temper before such a group, I think.

“Alilia?” he called.

Rather than answer his Speaking, Alilia responded by casting a Projection of herself. Her image suddenly appeared before him in all her glory, her bright white hair flowing from beneath a slim gold and diamond tiara, and cascading down over her white silk robe, which was belted with a sash of woven gold thread. These were contrasted by her warm brown eyes and her peaches-and-cream complexion.

“Yazadril! What a surprise to hear from you! And in such august company, too!” she laughed. “You know I am not due there until next spring! There is not a problem, I hope?”

“A potential problem, and a potential opportunity as well, dear Alilia.” Yazadril replied, and quickly outlined the developments.

“Kill him.” Alilia stated flatly when he had finished. “Kill him now, before he can escape, before the human wizards can learn of him!”

“It may be too late for that. His entire people were horribly killed by magic most foul, and while I think they were merely caught in the crossfire between two distant wizards, we cannot know for sure until we investigate those events.” Yazadril stated. “Besides that, even if I were willing to destroy the knowledge and research opportunities he represents, I have sworn that he will not be harmed or impeded by me or mine.”

“Which does not include me! So I will kill him!” Alilia insisted.

“I have placed him under my protection, Princess.”

“But have you *sworn* to it?! Damn it Yazadril, I love you like a brother, but you are being as gullible as an unfledged duckling! Can you not see that he was probably *sent* to breach your Wards, whether he realizes it or not? Can you not see the *danger* here, the danger to us all? Imagine if this spreads, and suddenly *anyone* can breach our Wards! We will be engaged in warfare until the sun burns out, simply to hold our lands!”

“I do see the danger, Alilia, and I am not quite as gullible as all that.” Yazadril exclaimed patiently. “I can assure you that no one has sent him here by Compulsion, or by any other magical means. Given his condition, such a thing is impossible. You can trust my knowledge on that. We *must* understand this, so that we can strengthen our Wards against a repetition of it, if nothing else! And it is within my jurisdiction, so it is *my* duty to deal with this as I think best, for my people, and for all of us.

“And beyond that, he is truly a gentle and honorable person, and so young he is barely adult. He is my friend, Alilia, and I am sworn.

“You see that I need someone of strong power to assist me in this, so that we can completely test his limits, and that assistant must be an intuitive, someone who can act instantly without calculating first, in case one of our experiments goes awry. And I need someone I can trust to keep our findings confidential, should they prove to be as dangerous as we fear.

“You are my dear friend, Alilia. And you are uniquely suited to this task. I will not ask it of you, if you can honestly recommend a suitable replacement for yourself in this project. Think on it a moment.”

Alilia’s timelessly beautiful face clouded as she considered, her warm brown eyes squinting in concentration. Finally she shook her head. “Damn you Yazadril, why must you be right about absolutely everything absolutely all of the time?” she asked in quiet frustration. “Yours is the best course of action, and I am the best possible choice to help you.

“Give me an hour to prepare things here for my absence, and to assign a regent.”

She suddenly turned her head, obviously listening to someone at her location who was beyond the range of her spell. “Yes I am, it is Yazadril. I am off to The Nine Valleys, and it is likely that I will be gone for five years. Yes. Take my travel case there with you, for I will have enough to bring without it.”

She turned back to Yazadril. “My young son Bezedil wishes to come visit for a time, as he has never been to The Nine Valleys. He will be there shortly.”

As she said the word ‘shortly’, a young adult elf appeared beside her image, accompanied by the soft ‘poof’ of a Translocation that had been accomplished with less than perfect atmospheric displacement. Like most forest elves, he was dressed in cotton-lined mottled brown silk trousers and tunic with deerskin boots, and had dark brown hair and eyes. He had appeared in a slightly bent over position, maintaining contact with his hand on an ornately carved wooden trunk. The effect of his presence on the magic field showed him to be a wizard of serious power.

He straightened and glanced around, then bowed with a smug smile. “Greetings, you must be Yazadril! My apologies for the error in displacement, I am afraid that I had slightly miscalculated the volume occupied by Mother’s travel case.”

“If you have truly Translocated here from your mother’s tree in a single step, while carrying that luggage, then you are being overly modest. It was magnificently done, my fine young fellow!” Yazadril exclaimed. “How did you target it, since you have never been here?”

“I followed Mother’s Projection, actually. That was the challenging part.”

“And it was foolishly done!” Alilia’s image snapped in anger. “You know what would have resulted if someone had been occupying that space!”

“And I know that no one would have the audacity to stand so close to you, Mother, or even so close to your image!” Bezedil laughed. “Besides, *you* could see that the space was clear, and I picked that up from you when I encompassed your Projection as a targeting beacon.”

“And you were showing off!” Alilia stated angrily.

“Yes I was, and I wonder where I might have picked up such a trait? Perhaps from a dear mother who would use a full-body Projection to answer a Speaking?”

“Bah! Be more careful, or you will find yourself stuck in the middle of a mountain some day!” Alilia scolded, and turned back to Yazadril. “I will be on your central room’s balcony in an hour. Be sure it is clear.” And with that, her Projection abruptly ended.

Yazadril realized his Speaking was still active, and ended it.

“Well young fellow, allow me to introduce you to the senior wizards of The High People!” Yazadril grinned, and began making introductions.

An hour later Alilia appeared on the balcony, along with a tall wardrobe full of clothing and several boxes and baskets of personal possessions. She knew the size and shape of herself and her possessions to the thickness of a hair, ensuring that they exchanged places with the air that had filled the space they now occupied without a whisper of sound.

“Be welcome as always, Princess Alilia, to my home, and to the lands of The High People!” Yazadril said in greeting as he stepped out onto the balcony, and they exchanged a warm embrace.

“Thank you, Yazadril. As always, it feels good to be within the tranquility of The Nine Valleys.”

Nemia had followed her husband out, and she also exchanged a warm embrace with Alilia as Yazadril stepped back. “Welcome, Alilia. How is your husband?”

“Thank you, Nemia, it is so good to see you.” Alilia smiled. “And my husband is a drunken stud with an eternal erection, as always. I will call him here when I desire his presence in my bed, but until then it is best that he stays out from under my skirts. How are your young twin daughters?”

“They are well. Talia is as shy as always, and Dalia is as bold as ever. In fact, one could almost see the sparks flying when Dalia met your young Bezedil, and as we speak, she is ‘showing him her room’!”

“Ah, that would be a good match, I think!” Alilia chuckled as they entered the central room and sat. “Of course, at their ages, it is almost certainly nothing more than youthful dalliance, but I thrill to think of the children those two might produce in a century or three!”

“Yes, it is good that our girls inherited their mother’s strength with the power, as well as her beauty!” Yazadril chuckled.

“And their father’s incredible intellect!” Nemia laughed as she poured cinnamon tea for the three of them. “The thought of our blood being joined with yours through our children is a profound and joyful one!”

“Indeed. Your Bezedil certainly does you proud.” Yazadril commented.

“Yes, he is my son through and through!” Alilia laughed. “Luckily, he inherited nothing from his father, beyond his handsome looks. And perhaps his eternal erection, if I can judge by his popularity with the young females, and with some not so young!”

They shared a laugh at that.

“You know, he did not show it from birth like I did, but he is as much a wizard now as I was at his age!” Alilia continued proudly.

“I am not surprised.” Yazadril chuckled. “Even if he has less inherent power than you, he has had you for a teacher.”

“Perhaps, but his style is different from mine. He can work intuitively, but he enjoys knowing the theory behind what he does as well. Perhaps you could give him some of your time in that regard while he is here?” Alilia inquired.

“I will be glad to.” Yazadril nodded. “Though I am unsure of how much time I will be able to give him. I am already committed to teaching my girls and Markee, and this research project is of great urgency.”

“That is truth.” Alilia agreed. “You know, I simply cannot picture you being friends with such a... person. What is he like?”

“Well, he is well educated, for a human of his age, and very respectful, in his way. Not deferential, mind you, except when he first met me, for then he thought I was a god! But he is respectful.”

“A god! You? Why would he think that?” Alilia giggled.

“He said I was glowing. I believe he can see my power, somehow. But he is a good youth. He trapped some small game, a rabbit and some squirrels, and said a prayer to apologize to their spirits for their deaths.”

“You refer to his youth. How old is he?” Nemia asked.

“He is sixteen years old, though one would never guess it to look at him.” Yazadril chuckled. “Here, let me show you.”

He cast an Illusion of Markee, and the young man’s image appeared in the center of the room, or at least his image from the chest down appeared, since the ceiling was only two meters high. “That is how huge he is. I will move the image down, so you can see what he looks like.”

The image moved down, its feet and ankles disappearing into the floor, until the top of the head was below the ceiling.

“By the Source! He is a monster!” Alilia exclaimed.

“Hardly a monster!” Yazadril laughed. “He is simply more in need of a barber than anyone else I have ever seen! Nemia has agreed to perform that service for him, which I am sure will leave him in a far more presentable state.”

“His body hair is disgusting!” Alilia said with a shudder, and pointedly looked away. “You should shave him from the neck down when you shave his face, Nemia! He is probably infested with lice and ticks and vermin of every variety!”

Suddenly Nemia stood and screamed: “*Dalia!*”, and Translocated so hurriedly that she made no attempt to compensate for air displacement. The sudden implosion of air that resulted sucked both Yazadril and Alilia from their seats to their knees on the floor.

Then Alilia screamed: “*Bezedil!*”, and she also disappeared, though she compensated for displacement perfectly, without even considering it.

The horror and terror in their voices struck Yazadril’s heart with a lance of panic. Though he was risking his own life and the lives of others to do so, he Translocated to follow, targeting his wife’s unknown location without taking the time to project his consciousness there, aiming to appear a meter behind her.

His aim was understandably off a bit, and he appeared a quarter of a meter above the ground below his home. He fell to his knees in the grass, just as Nemia looked straight up and screamed: “*Talia!*”

He looked up, following her gaze, to see his daughter falling directly toward them!

Nemia cast Levitate on her daughter faster than Yazadril would ever have believed possible, but Talia was then only six meters above them and falling sickeningly fast. Nemia had more than enough power, but it could not be in

time! But someone else was also throwing their talent and power into Nemia's spell, and Yazadril thought for a fraction of a second that it might be enough.

Then his shoulder was seized in an iron grip and he was thrown forward to his hands and knees, and Alilia's voice was screaming in his ear: "*Read him!*"

There before him, close enough to touch, were the twisted, shattered and bloody bodies of Dalia and Bezedil. He gaped in shock.

Beside him, Talia impacted Nemia with a sickening thud and drove her to the ground, as his wife physically caught his remaining daughter. Even with another to boost her, Nemia had been unable to cancel all of Talia's momentum without hurting her.

Yazadril did not even have time to consider whether either of them lived.

"*Too late for Dalia! Read him!*" Alilia screamed in grief and rage, and she roughly seized Yazadril's head with both hands. Her immense power and will flooded into him, and he had no choice. He cast the Reading, and merged with the sickening remains of Bezedil's dying mind. Less than a twentieth of the young elf's brain still lived, and it would be dead as well in a second or two, but the power that Alilia poured into him was of such immensity that he was able to Read the last few seconds of Bezedil's life. He was later to learn that everyone in the valley was forced to experience it with him, so intense was the power and projection of the Reading.

For those few seconds, he *was* Bezedil. He was in a dim room, and Dalia was in his arms, her lips soft beneath his in a loving kiss, their bodies about to join, his heart filled with love for her. There was the sound of a door opening, and sudden light from the doorway. He looked up in surprise to see Dalia in the doorway, her face struck with the grief of betrayal. He looked down at the girl in his arms, and realized to his horror that it was not Dalia he held, but Talia. He looked back up as Dalia ran across the room and leaped through the curtains and out the open window. He tried to scream "No!", but his voice could only make a hoarse croak around the lump in his throat as his mind filled with guilt and horror and grief. He sprang from the bed and ran naked the three steps to the window, leaped through without slowing, saw Dalia's sickening and fatal impact against the ground far below. Hopelessness overcame him, and he made no effort to save himself.

Alilia wrenched them both out of the vision before they could experience Bezedil's impact, as the last of the young elf's mind died.

Alilia released Yazadril, and he slumped to the ground as he was overcome by a blinding headache. He vomited violently, and barely managed to avoid choking on it.

Then he was overcome by panicked concern for his wife and Talia. He forced himself to his hands and knees and looked to them in time to see Nemia finish Healing his daughter and herself. Then they both began to cry, with great wracking sobs of utter grief, Nemia on her knees holding Talia, who lay utterly limp and naked in her mother's embrace.

He looked to the shattered bodies before him, and his own eyes flooded with tears as the reality of Dalia's death struck him fully.

"*You caused my son's death! Now you will die!*" Alilia suddenly screamed, her face awash with tears as she seized a fistful of Talia's hair.

"*NO!!!*" Nemia screamed as she knocked Alilia's arm away from her daughter and imposed herself between them.

Talia simply lay there limp and crying, and did not appear to have noticed that Alilia had ripped a handful of her hair out when Nemia had knocked the arm away.

"*If you kill her you had best kill me too, Alilia, for you will make a Death-Enemy of me!!*" Nemia screamed, her sudden rage matching Alilia's.

"*SO BE IT!!!*" Alilia yelled, spraying the other with spittle, and gathered her power.

"*Have mercy!*" Yazadril croaked, and spat out the remains of a mouthful of vomit.

"*She raped my son by trickery, and because of that he is dead!!!*" Alilia screamed as she turned on him. "*Why should I have mercy on her?!!*"

Yazadril swallowed hard and shook his head to clear it of lingering stars as he struggled to his feet. He forced himself to speak with a semblance of calm. "Have mercy on *me*, Alilia! I have lost a child this day, as have you! Please, do not take my remaining daughter as well! Do not take my wife! I am *begging* you, Alilia, for the sake of the friendship we have shared these last four thousand years!

"Talia has lost *her twin sister*, and her love as well, for she could not have done such a thing if she did not love your son! She obviously did not mean for this to happen, and could never have foreseen such a horrible consequence!

She will have to live with this result for the rest of her days, and it hurts her enough that she tried to take her own life! Has she not suffered enough?"

"*I cannot let this pass!!!*" Alilia yelled as she shook tears from her eyes, and her power gathered to her so strongly that the magic field seemed to boil around her. In a split second, so quickly that Nemia could not impede her, all of her power concentrated in her right fist and she spun and struck over Nemia.

"*I CURSE YOU!!!*" she screamed as she punched Talia in the face, breaking the girl's nose even as all her gathered power was passed into Talia with a bright flash at the violent contact.

Alilia was left completely drained, both physically and magically, and she slumped to the ground.

Nemia quickly Healed Talia's bloody nose, though her daughter's inherent healing had already begun.

Talia had suddenly stopped crying with the blow, and stared in utter shock at her mother's face as she was Healed.

Yazadril also stared in shock. As overwhelmed as he was by events, he realized that he had never heard of any curse being delivered with a tenth of the power Alilia had used. A tenth?! Not even a hundredth!

Alilia crawled to her son's bloody remains and slumped upon them, crying piteously.

Talia screamed. Her scream was louder and more horrible than was physically possible, as she involuntarily augmented it with her power.

Nemia cast Sleep upon her daughter, to no effect, and the scream went on and on.

Yazadril staggered over and cast Sleep upon her as well, and again, and finally the scream ended as Talia lost consciousness.

He realized that a few of his people had gathered, and four of them were huddled together five meters away. The rest stood about in shocked sadness at what had occurred.

Dilimon rose from the four who were huddled, his tears flowing freely, and walked over to Yazadril. "He will be all right." he stated.

"Pardon?" Yazadril asked in confusion.

Dilimon indicated the three who had been huddled with him, who were now rising to stand, one of them holding a very young elf in her arms. "It is little Jinimin, only twelve years old. He drained himself almost to death boosting Nemia's Levitation spell with his own, to help save Talia. But we reached him in time. He will be all right."

"Oh. I did not know." Yazadril said, almost unable to think. "I... I owe him much, then."

"Yes." Dilimon nodded gravely. "I think he arrived here just before you did, and acted in a panic. An amazing thing, really. At his age, he should not even know how to attempt such a feat yet."

Theramin arrived in the shape of a great eagle, and assumed his own form as he landed. He looked around for a moment, taking in the scene. Then he walked over to Alilia and cast Sleep upon her. She was so drained and grief stricken that she did not even realize he was doing it. He gently rolled her away from her son's body, and straightened her now bloodstained white robe.

He stepped to where Nemia was quietly sobbing as she sat and rocked her unconscious daughter in her arms, and cast Sleep upon her too, catching her as she slumped backward and lowering her gently to the grass.

He straightened and turned to Yazadril and Dilimon.

"Thank you, Theramin, that was kindly done." Yazadril said quietly. "No need for them to watch while the children are... are... By the Source, I cannot even say it! My poor Dalia!" He covered his face in his hands and wept again.

Theramin nodded sadly. "Dilimon?"

The young Sentry nodded, and deftly caught Yazadril as Theramin cast Sleep upon him as well.

Yazadril woke late the next morning in his own bed, clad in a white cotton nightgown. Talia slept fitfully beside him, similarly clad. The tears had been washed from her face, her blonde hair brushed and tied back with a blue ribbon. He could see from the state of the bedding that Nemia had been asleep on the other side of Talia, but had already risen.

He found Nemia in the kitchen, still in her own nightgown. She stood before an empty teapot, the tea leaves spilled on the counter beside it, her head bowed, quietly crying. He moved to her, and she turned into his embrace as his own tears flowed anew.

"Oh Yazadril, how could this have happened?" Nemia sobbed.

"Ah my love, young hearts are wild, and their emotions are strong and sometimes overwhelming." Yazadril told her softly. "And it is not so surprising that Talia and Dalia should fall in love with the same young male. They were so exactly alike in so many ways."

“I have suffered the death of my children before, but the pain is so much greater this time, as Dalia was so young. Her life had only just begun.”

“Yes. She was barely out of childhood, and now she is gone. What will we do, Yazadril? How can I live without her? How can I live with this horrible grief?”

“We will cling to our love for Talia, my dearest, and care for her with all our hearts. She will need all the love we can give her. And we will hold to our love for each other.”

“What will happen to her?” Nemia cried. “I have never seen such a curse as she has suffered! And I cannot believe that Alilia was ready to kill us both!”

“Alilia was driven to madness by her own pain and grief, my dearest. I cannot truly blame her too much. Mind you, if she had killed either one of you, she would have paid dearly for it.”

“Easy to say.” Nemia stated bitterly. “But no one among the High People has the power to harm her, as you well know.”

“Ah, you are wrong there, my love. I would truly have hated to do it, but I could bring her down.” Yazadril sadly mused. “I have never had to face one as powerful as she is in combat, but I have triumphed over others who were far above me in pure power. It takes very little power to kill someone, if it is applied correctly. The outcomes of such encounters can never be accurately predicted. That has never been more clear to me than it is right now.”

His voice gained it’s own note of bitterness. “She with all her power, and me with all my knowledge, and neither of us could even save our own children!”

“We cannot blame ourselves, Yazadril.” Nemia sobbed. “As you say, it was the foolishness and impulsiveness of youth. No one could have foreseen such a tragedy.”

The door chime sounded, and Nemia stepped back and bravely wiped her tears away. “I will cry for Dalia at times for the rest of my life, I think, but you are the Prince of our people, and we have our duties.” Nemia said as she tried to regain her composure. “You answer the chime, and I will clean up this mess, and make us some tea and some breakfast.”

“Thank you love.” Yazadril nodded.

When he opened the door, he found Hilsith waiting on the railed lifting platform that served those who wished to visit his home without flying, Translocating, or climbing the many steps that spiraled up the outside of the trunk of the great oak tree. Hilsith was an immigrant from the northern elves, and she was the most skilled Healer among the High People, though she was only seven hundred and sixteen years old. Her hair and her skin were both pure white with the slight blue tinge of new snow, and had been so since the day she was born. Her eyes were such a light gray they were almost white as well, and she was dressed this day in a simple blue smock.

“Greetings, Prince Yazadril. I have come to check on you and your family, especially Talia.” she said as she stepped inside. “And I must offer my most heartfelt condolences on the passing of dear Dalia.”

“Thank you, Hilsith.” Yazadril nodded as he led her to his bedroom, and a sob escaped him, though he tried to contain it.

Hilsith wrapped him in a warm hug and let him cry on her shoulder for a moment, then he stood back and tried to regain his composure. Hilsith let herself into the bedroom without another word, and closed the door.

Yazadril rejoined his wife in the kitchen, where she was preparing flat cakes manually, without the aid of the magic she would usually have used to speed such a task. Recognizing that it was wise to busy themselves in such activities, he began arranging sausages in a pan for heating in the oven.

When Hilsith entered the kitchen they had filled their plates and poured tea, only to find that neither could bring themselves to eat a single bite.

“Talia will sleep for a few hours yet, if none too restfully.” Hilsith reported as she seated herself and was handed a cup of tea. She waved away the breakfast she was offered with a polite gesture. “There is little to be done for her right now, especially without knowing the nature of the curse that Alilia has cast upon her.

“Dalia and Bezedil have been prepared for their final ceremonies, and lie in state in the Council Hall. You should go there to see Dalia and mourn her. Your last memories of her should not be as she was last evening.

“And Yazadril, Theramin asked me to tell you that he has conveyed your apologies to the human out by the border, for your having missed your meeting with him last night. Apparently, he also consulted with the human as to his preferred style of dwelling.

“You both must eat, even if food is like ashes in your mouths. Especially you, Yazadril. At your age, if you do not keep yourself up, your body and your spirit could fail in an amazingly short time. One cannot live on self-healing alone, and if you try to, you will soon lose the will to do so.”

“I still have a beautiful young wife, and a beautiful young daughter, and my duty. I will not fail them, you can be sure of that.” Yazadril stated. He hesitated a moment, then forced himself to eat.

“Was it you who cared for us as we slept last night, Hilsith?” Nemia asked.

“It was.” Hilsith nodded.

“Then I thank you. It could not have been easy or enjoyable.”

“I have cleaned and bedded down many sleeping and unconscious patients.” Hilsith said with a dismissing wave of her hand. “It is a common duty for Healers.”

“Of course, but I thank you nonetheless. How... How fares Alilia?”

“About as one would expect. She woke early, and has recovered her physical strength already. And even as expended as she was, her power recovers quickly as well, more quickly than I ever would have guessed. She is in the Council Hall now, viewing Bezedil and mourning him.”

“Ah. We should follow her example before too long, so that we can return before Talia wakes.” Nemia murmured sadly.

“That would be best.” Hilsith nodded. “I will remain here, in case she should awaken before you return. If you can, speak with Alilia. Ask her to tell you the nature of the curse she has cast upon Talia. It is the opinion of the Council that Talia does bear some small responsibility for the suicides of Dalia and Bezedil. But for the most part, it is thought that they chose their deaths of their own will, and with insufficient provocation, especially Dalia. It is also recognized that Alilia, in her disconsolate state, may have meted out a punishment that is unjustly harsh. If so, well, there may be little to be done about the injustice of it, but that will be decided by wiser minds than mine. Primarily yours, Yazadril. If it is decided that the curse is unjustly harsh, it will be my task to try to minimize the suffering it may cause to Talia. With your assistance of course. And possibly Alilia’s.”

Yazadril continued eating without reply.

Nemia took a bite and chewed. She tried to swallow, but choked on it and had to spit it back onto her plate as she was again overcome by weeping.

Hilsith embraced her just before Yazadril did. They rubbed Nemia’s back and murmured soothing words, to little effect.

Finally Nemia rose and tearfully excused herself to dress. Yazadril decided he had choked down enough food, and did the same.

The Council Hall of the High People had long ago been a tunnel between First Valley, where Yazadril and his family lived, and Kemsah Valley, the second of the Nine Valleys. Over time the tunnel had been expanded into a great hall, a hemispherical hollow in the bedrock sixty-eight meters across and thirty meters high, its floor and the dome that formed the walls and ceiling polished to a smooth light-gray shine, brightened by skylights and glow-spheres.

Today a few hundred elves were within, most gathered into small groups scattered around the vast floor-space, talking quietly among themselves or softly weeping. A few were standing at one of the two gleaming white marble open caskets that had been placed five meters apart near the center of the hall, viewing the deceased and paying their respects.

Yazadril and Nemia were offered many subdued greetings and condolences as they slowly crossed the vast floor to Dalia’s casket. Their relatives and Dalia’s closest friends were gathered around it, a few of them crying softly, all with tear-tracked cheeks.

Dalia’s body had been expertly prepared, and at first glance she looked like she was merely sleeping, clad in a white silk robe, her blonde hair softly flowing over a white satin pillow. It was difficult to believe that this was the same flesh that had lain so twisted and broken on the forest floor beneath her window on the previous day’s afternoon.

Nemia would have collapsed at the sight if Yazadril had not supported her, and they were again overcome with weeping.

Nemia drew them away until they could no longer see Dalia, and they cried a few minutes more. Silently, they prayed that Dalia’s spirit had found peace, though they knew that the missing gods would never answer.

Then they made their way to Bezedil’s casket, which was loosely surrounded by forest elves of The People of Life. Those made way for them, and as they drew within sight of Bezedil’s body, they saw that Alilia sat beside it on an ornate wooden chair, her hands folded in her lap.

“Alilia,” Yazadril said, then choked on the lump in his throat. He cleared it a bit, then tried again. “Alilia, we are deeply sorry for your loss.”

“As I am for yours, Yazadril, Nemia.” Alilia calmly told them. Her face was a rigid mask of self-control, though tears still slowly trickled down her face. “And I must apologize for my behavior yesterday. My treatment of you during Bezedil’s Reading was... atrocious, Yazadril, as was my threat to your life, Nemia.”

“We do forgive you that, Alilia, as it was quite understandable under the circumstances.” Nemia softly said.

“Thank you.” Alilia nodded, never looking away from Bezedil’s face.

There was a strained silence for a moment.

“I have lived four thousand, eight hundred and fifty-six years.” Alilia quietly stated. “And during that time, Bezedil was the only child I have ever borne. I am not very fertile. I will probably never have another.”

“I... I did not know that.” Nemia stammered. A moment later, she began softly crying again.

At this, Alilia rose from her seat and embraced Nemia and Yazadril, and all three cried together.

Those gathered around moved back, to give them a semblance of privacy.

When their weeping had subsided, Alilia went back to her chair, and to her contemplation of Bezedil’s face.

Yazadril cleared his throat as he tried to think of a kind way to ask what he had to ask. “Alilia, I... I hate to have to ask this now, but we must know. What is the nature of the curse you have cast upon... Well, what is the nature of the curse?”

Alilia did not answer for a moment. “I was thinking that my son is forever dead because she had raped him by trickery, and so I cursed her to be raped until the end of days. That is her sentence.”

Yazadril and Nemia could only stare in shocked surprise for a moment.

“But... Raped?” Nemia finally asked. “How is that possible? No one could do such a thing, no matter if it was justified or not!”

“No elf could do such a thing.” Alilia quietly agreed, nodding.

Again there was a long, strained silence.

“So, how then...?” Yazadril began before Alilia interrupted him, her eyes flashing to his, her voice tight with anger and bitterness.

“*I have given her to the damned human!*” she cried, seeming loud in the great quiet space.

A moment later Nemia fainted, and Yazadril caught her, swept her up in his arms.

“He will only live another seventy years, at most!” Yazadril stated accusingly. “If he were any other, I would expect the curse to extend his life to match Talia’s lifespan! But since the curse cannot directly affect him, I expect it will kill her when he dies! So you have sentenced her to an early death after all!”

“She is not sentenced to be raped until the end of *her* days, Yazadril, but until *the end of days!*” Alilia barked. “As long as the sun rises above this world, he will rape her! Forever and ever, as far as we are concerned!”

“But... How can that be?”

“How should I know?” Alilia asked, her voice returning to calm, her gaze to Bezedil’s face. “It is not a spell, it is an intuitive curse. It is enough that I said that it would happen, and the curse took enough power from me to make it so. My power may not be fully recovered for a year, or it may never be. A human can live longer than you think, perhaps as long as one hundred and twenty-five years. The curse will last at least that long, for it will let nothing kill him. Perhaps after he dies, it will animate his corpse, so that his dead body can keep raping her, and perhaps when she dies, it will do the same to her. One corpse being raped by another, until the sun eats the world. Or perhaps when he dies the curse will fail. I do not care. It will last long enough that I will see her punished for my son’s death.”

“Your son killed *himself* in a moment of youthful foolishness, as my daughter did!!!” Yazadril yelled. “Can you honestly say that Talia *deserves* what you have done to her?!!! That for a few moments of stolen pleasure she deserves to be *raped by a corpse for millions of years?!!!*”

“No.” Alilia admitted calmly. “It was done in a moment of thoughtless anger, and it was horribly excessive. I do not care. I can do nothing about it now. After I have seen that she is punished by him a few times, you can kill me for it if you wish. I will not hinder you from taking my life, for with Bezedil gone, my will to live is gone with him.”

Yazadril could only stare in shock for long moments, then his eyes hardened. “Perhaps I *will* kill you, Alilia. Or perhaps I will gather the power to cast a similar curse upon you. You can spend a few thousand years taking turns with my daughter, being raped by the corpse of my friend.”

He waited only long enough to see the shocked fear on Alilia’s face, before turning and carrying his wife from the hall.

Nemia woke in his arms as he left the hall and emerged into bright sunlight. “You have not carried me like this since I was a child.” she murmured. “I knew even then that you were my destined love. I was only eight years old when I first saw you, and I knew in a moment that you were destined to be my husband.”

“Did you?” Yazadril asked in surprise. “Well, you certainly took your time at letting me know about it!” he chuckled.

“Would you have believed me, if I had told you at the age of eight that you were my destiny?” Nemia giggled.

“No, I suppose not.” he smiled.

“When I became an adolescent I rebelled against the idea, as I was so attracted to young males my own age.” Nemia mused. “I convinced myself that you were too old for me, and that my feelings for you were only childhood foolishness. Still, my heart leaped in my chest every time I saw you, and to escape that, I moved to Final Valley to live with my aunt. As far away from you as I could get while still remaining within the lands of The High People. My parents could not dissuade me, so a month later, they moved there as well. And there I dwelt for two centuries, happy but lonely for love. Then came the day you visited, to oversee the renewal of the Wards. The moment I saw you I knew how wrong I had been, and I ran away and cried for all the decades I had wasted. Then I washed my face and brushed my hair, and put on my prettiest blue dress...”

“And you came and told me in no uncertain terms, that you were to be my wife!” Yazadril laughed, caught up in the memory.

“Yes! And you stared at me like I had grown another head!” Nemia laughed.

“Is that what it looked like to you? I was so smitten by your beauty that I could not even speak! Your words filled me with such hope, that I was terrified that you were only teasing me!”

“Truly? I was so afraid that you would reject me that I stepped up and kissed you! I knew you would not reject me after that!” Nemia giggled.

“I remember. I remember it like it was this morning. And from that moment, I knew not one moment of unhappiness. Until yesterday.”

Their mood sobered, and he continued carrying her home, between the widely spaced gigantic trees.

After a while Nemia spoke again. “Yazadril, my love, I know not what will happen to Talia, or what the curse will do to her, but as long as we have each other, I know we can find a way to be happy. I will never stop loving Talia, or stop trying to help her, but even if the worst happens, we cannot give in to despair. Right now I feel more horrible than I ever dreamed I could, but whatever happens, we cannot let it ruin the rest of our lives.”

“I know, Nemia. I cannot lose you. I could not bear to live without you.”

“Or I without you.”

When they arrived home they discovered Hilsith asleep at their kitchen table. Yazadril called to her, then shook her shoulder a little, then more firmly, to no effect. He quickly read her aura, and shook his head in consternation.

“She has had Sleep cast upon her. By Talia.” he pronounced.

“Talia!” Nemia cried as she ran from the room.

Yazadril hurriedly cast Awaken on Hilsith, and hurried after his wife.

He found her hurrying from their bedroom.

“She is not in there!” Nemia told him, sounding on the verge of panic.

“Check her room, I will check Dalia’s!” Yazadril said.

“Talia! Talia!” they called as they hurried from room to room.

“She is here!” Hilsith called from the central room, and they hurried there, then out to the balcony, where Hilsith stood in amazement.

Talia floated in mid-air a meter past the balcony’s railing, spinning slowly in all directions like a child using her first Levitation spell, with no attempt to control her orientation. Her nightgown was mostly covered with her blood from the waist up, because Nemia’s largest kitchen knife protruded from her chest. It was clearly through her heart, because the handle bounced a little with her every heartbeat. Of course, her heart should not have been beating still with the big knife through it, but there it was. Talia was softly crying, hanging limply in the air.

Yazadril cast Movement upon her, and gently stopped her spinning while drawing her into his arms. Then he almost fell with her, because the moment she was back onto the balcony the Levitation spell dissipated. Talia had not dismissed it, it simply ended.

Yazadril carried her in and gently laid her on the couch. He discovered as he did so that the knife point protruded from her back, when it cut his arm.

He Healed his wound as Hilsith carefully tore Talia’s nightgown from the neckline down the front. Only a few drops of blood still leaked from around the wiggling knife blade. Hilsith firmly grasped the handle and pulled it straight out. Talia gave a short scream and convulsed a moment. The wound healed as fast as the blade was removed.

It was completely gone the moment the tip of the knife came out of her flesh, and no scar remained to show it had ever been there.

“Talia? Talia? Please speak to us my love.” Nemia quietly begged.

“I cannot kill myself!” Talia sobbed. “The curse will not let me fall, it will not let me die, and I will go to *him!* I will go to him *soon*, I cannot resist the urge to do so! I am *damned!*”

“Talia, we know what you are going through.” Yazadril gently told her. “Alilia has told us of the nature of the curse. It is a powerful curse, but I will find a way to defeat it, I swear I will!”

“You should have let me die yesterday!” Talia sobbed bitterly. “I cannot live without Dalia! I cannot live without Bezedil! I cannot live with what I am going to do! Oh sweet Source above, the curse is so *horrible!*”

“Listen to me, Talia!” Yazadril told her insistently. “You must have faith, my love! In eight thousand years, I have *never* met a problem that I could not solve eventually!”

“Then kill me! Find a way to kill me! You must, Father! Swear it to me, please!”

“I will not.” Yazadril stated firmly. “Listen to me Talia; Alilia made a mistake when she chose to give you to Markee, of all people! He alone is *immune to magic*, my love! The curse cannot affect him, and it *cannot* make him do *anything!* He is truly a good soul, and he *will not rape you!* I am certain of it!”

This finally seemed to release Talia from her dark mood a bit. Her crying slowed, then stopped. She slowly sat up and wiped her eyes and face with the hem of her ripped and bloodied nightgown.

She looked up at her father, and he recoiled a bit from the horror and intense pain he saw in her face, then he threw his arms around her and hugged her tight.

“You do not understand.” she told him, and her heart-rending pain was plain in her voice. “He *will* rape me. *I will make sure of it! I will do whatever I must to make him do it!*”

“The poor boy is damned for eternity! If he truly is a good soul, it is the most tragic part of this entire tragedy.”

She gently pulled back from Yazadril’s embrace and took his hand in one of hers. She held her other hand out to Nemia, who clasped it in both of hers. Tears flooded both their faces, but they managed to not be overcome by weeping.

“I am so very sorry for the death of Dalia.” she told her parents. “She was... She was half my soul.

“And now I must go to him. Father, please cast Tongues upon me, so that I can speak his language.

“Mother, please help me to choose something to wear that might make me appear attractive to a human, if such a thing is possible. I know that it may not be, since we are not even of the same race. But this will be easier for him if he does not find me repulsive.

“Actually, since humans and elves have been known to produce half-elven children, you *are* of the same species, if just barely.” Yazadril told her. “At any rate, it is well known that many human males find elven females to be very attractive indeed. And you are very beautiful, Talia.”

“That is good, then.” Talia nodded. “Please, help me prepare quickly. The urge to go to him grows stronger by the moment. If you do not help me, I will go to him regardless. You cannot stop me, and I cannot stop myself.”

“Come then.” Nemia said as she stood and wiped her eyes with her handkerchief. “I have some clothing that I made for myself when I was preparing for my marriage to Yazadril, when I worried that he might be too old to feel desire for me. A needless worry, as it turned out, but the garments are very enticing. And I will enhance your coloring a bit.”

As her bedroom door closed behind her and Talia, Hilsith turned to Yazadril.

“Theramin and Dilimon have requested to accompany you when next you visit the human.” she told him. “And I think it would be wise if I was there.”

“I agree, and I will inform Theramin and Dilimon that we are preparing to go.”

“There is a knight of The People of Life on the ground below us.” Hilsith continued. “I suspect he is monitoring Talia’s whereabouts somehow, so that he can inform Alilia when Talia goes to the human.”

Yazadril shrugged.

“And Yazadril, I am sorry I was caught unawares by Talia’s Sleep spell. I should have monitored her more closely, as I should have suspected that she may still be suicidal.”

“That is all right.” Yazadril nodded. “We learned from it.”

“We learned?” Hilsith prompted.

“That Talia cannot suicide, and perhaps cannot be killed in any way.”

Theramin and Dilimon arrived a minute later.

“Greetings, Yazadril.” Theramin gently said when Yazadril answered the door. “I have been chosen to represent the Council of the High People in dealing with the question of Alilia’s curse upon Talia. Dilimon here will represent the Sentry Corps.”

“Welcome, both of you.” Yazadril said as he ushered them in.

“We both met Markee last evening, when we explained to him that you would not be meeting him due to a family emergency.” Dilimon told him. “We gave him a few supplies and things to make his camping more pleasant, and visited with him for an hour or so. He is quite a likable fellow.”

“He is that. And he has had a grave injustice done to him.” Yazadril sadly revealed, then related what he had learned of the curse. “We will see what we can do to minimize the suffering that he and Talia face. Time enough to reach judgments after that.”

Soon they were ready. All except Talia had changed into their hiking clothing; stout boots, pants and tunics suitable to walking in the forest, as Yazadril had worn when he met Markee. Nemia carried a large basket of barbering and tailoring supplies.

Talia wore a garment that was as enticing as any there had ever seen on any elven female. Since Yazadril had seen it years before, and had happily removed it from Nemia’s giggling form, he knew that it was composed of a long white silk ribbon with hundreds of strips of almost-transparent white gauze sewn to its edge. The ribbon was artfully wound around Talia’s torso from her armpits down to her hips and back up again, where the two ends were tied in a bow over the center of her collarbone, so that when she stood still the overlapping strips of gauze covered her from just below her shoulders to halfway down her thighs. When she moved, the gauze strips moved in the breeze, revealing tantalizing glimpses of her nakedness beneath. Her tiny feet wore matching sandals of white silk ribbon over white leather soles. Nemia had enhanced Talia’s color, brightening the blue of her eyes to an incredible magic sparkle, and deepening the pink of her lips and the blush of her cheeks in a subtle way that enhanced the fine bone structure of her face. Dilimon had stared at her a moment before he recovered his aplomb.

“We are ready.” Yazadril told Talia, unsure how she wished to proceed.

“I will walk.” Talia said, the horror and pain still plain in her voice, though her eyes were now dry. “I *must* go to him, but I am in no hurry to begin my torment.”

“Then we will walk as well.” Yazadril said, and led the way to the door, then down the many steps to the ground.

When they reached the ground, they found Alilia waiting for them by the foot of the spiraling stairway. Talia faced her, and spoke unflinchingly.

“I sorrow for the death of Bezedil.” she stated quietly. “I would gladly have burned in fire for eternity if it would have saved him.”

“Then you should be glad that I did not think of that, for if I had, that is exactly what would have happened to you.” Alilia calmly returned.

Talia simply nodded, turned, and set her feet upon the path to the pass.

Talia may have wished to walk, but Alilia had no such patience. Without even a hummed note, she Translocated them all to Yazadril’s clearing of contemplation, where they appeared on the grass about two meters in front of Markee.

Who yelled and fell backward off the log as his hands slapped onto his face.

“Markee! What’s wrong?” Yazadril asked in confusion as he and Hilsith rushed to the boy’s side.

“You startled the life out of me! And that light! It’s blinding! It’s like looking into the sun!” Markee complained.

He sat up with a hand across his eyes, and looked at Yazadril through a slit between two fingers. “I’ll be okay as soon as the spots are gone from in front of my eyes. As long as I don’t look over there.” he said as he pointed to the rest of the group.

“Does it hurt? Did the light cause your eyes to feel physical pain?” Hilsith asked.

“No, it’s just too bright to look at!” Markee reported. “What is it?”

“Ah. I imagine that Alilia is the source of much of the light.” Yazadril told him. “You see my power as a glow, but over half of my people have more raw power than I, while Nemia, Talia and Theramin are our strongest wizards. And as I told you, Alilia is exceptional in that regard.”

“Alilia, is it possible to hold less power, or to limit its... its leakage, for want of a better term?” Hilsith asked as she rejoined the group.

“No, and no.” Alilia said, and snorted. “Leakage. That term would be very humorous, in any other circumstance. But perhaps there is something I can do. There. Does that help you, young man?”

“No, sorry.”

“Ah. And now?”

“Yes, that worked, though the rest of you are almost painfully bright as well.” Markee told her as he cautiously removed his hand from his eyes and looked toward the group. And gaped.

“I’m curious as to what you did just now.” Yazadril said to Alilia.

“You are always curious.” Alilia stated, and actually showed a small smile. “First I cast Battle Shield, a blocking spell. It forms a sphere about me that protects me from magical attack. When that didn’t work, I reversed its effect, preventing my leakage, as you put it, from escaping beyond it.”

“Brilliant!” Yazadril smiled.

“Perhaps not. It seems to be having a mesmerizing effect on your young human.” Alilia pointed out.

“What?” Yazadril said as he turned back to Markee, who was staring at the group with his mouth open.

“Markee? Are you all right?”

“What? Oh, yes, I’m fine.” Markee stated, as he continued staring.

“It is not Alilia’s inverted shield that is mesmerizing him.” Hilsith giggled.

“No.” Markee said as he tore his eyes away from the group. “It’s... Ah, how can I say this courteously? I mean... Are all the ladies of your people this beautiful? For if they are, I’ll never be able to concentrate on learning anything!”

Even with all the other emotions that Alilia, Nemia and Hilsith were feeling, Markee’s obviously unfeigned and deeply affected admiration for their beauty touched their feminine hearts. All three could not help but smile a little, even Alilia, and Nemia and Hilsith actually blushed a bit!

“Are they all so beautiful?” Theramin mused as he suppressed a grin. “Yes, my boy, they truly are.”

“Thank you Markee, you are truly kind.” Nemia said as her smile grew a bit. “As are you, Theramin.”

Talia had been hiding behind her mother and Dilimon; unable to face the man she now felt to be her master. She chose this moment to shyly step into view, her arms by her sides, her head bowed. After a long moment she found the courage to meet his gaze.

Markee’s jaw had dropped in amazement. His eyes were wide, and shining a bit with moisture, as if whatever he was feeling was so powerful it had almost moved him to tears.

Yazadril looked to Talia, who was staring back at Markee with an indescribable expression. There was a gentle breeze blowing, and it was having the designed effect on her garment.

“I knew it.” Talia murmured. “The poor boy finds me repulsive.”

“What? No!” Markee protested. “I mean... You’re... I never thought I would ever see anything so beautiful in my life! You are so pretty and... enticing... I...”

He suddenly became aware that he was staring, and dropped his eyes. “Please... Please forgive my rudeness. I was... caught by surprise, that’s all.” he stammered as he rose from the ground and sat back down on the log. He squinted as he looked at the group. “You know, the rest of you are still painfully bright, especially with you all standing in a bunch like that. Could I ask you to all move away from each other a bit?”

They complied with his request.

“Thanks. Yazadril, I really wish you’d given me a chance to get cleaned up before you brought me visitors.”

“I’m sorry about that, Markee, but... there have been... developments.” Yazadril hesitantly told him as he moved around the log to stand between the young man and the group, and to one side. He had to swallow hard before he could continue. “They are difficult to speak of. It will be easier, and more informative for you, if I simply show you what has happened.

“But first, introductions. Markee, this is...”

“Excuse me Yazadril.” The young man said as he stood.

His full stature was so imposing that Hilsith and Nemia both stepped back a bit. The young man sadly shook his head at this, then continued, looking to the ancient elf as he did.

“I’ve thought a lot about what you said, about taking responsibility as an adult now. My name’s really not Markee. I was named after my father, and since we have the same name, everyone called me Markee. It’s a child’s nickname, and I guess it’s time I stopped being a child.”

He turned to the waiting group. “I am Markhan Reginus Longstrider, of Shinosa Valley, an invested Ranger of the Northern Forests, and a loyal subject of King Wittan of Finitra.” And with that he executed as courtly a bow as Yazadril had ever seen performed in the palaces of the great empires, sinking gracefully to his left knee as his right arm swept out and across to finish with his head bowed and his right palm over his heart. He held the pose for a short moment, then smoothly rose as he stated: “I am entirely at your service.”

He allowed himself a tiny, smug smile at their surprise at this performance.

“I have made a horrible mistake.” Alilia stated calmly. Though she maintained control of her expression, tears gathered at the corners of her eyes.

“Yes. Ah, be that as it may...” Yazadril stammered, and shook his head a bit while he regained his mental balance. “So, would you prefer we call you Markhan, or Master Longstrider?”

“Master...” Talia murmured, and shuddered as she stared.

The confused young man glanced back and forth between Alilia and Talia, both of whom were looking at him with peculiar intensity. “There’s something very strange going on here, isn’t there?” he asked as he turned back to Yazadril, his brows knitting a bit.

“Yes there is, but we’ll get to that in a moment.” Yazadril nodded. “So, in answer to my question? Shall we call you Markhan?”

“No, that will always be my father’s name, not mine. I think I’d like you to call me Mark. That’s what they call my grandfather, I’m told, and he has the same name.”

“Ah. Mark.” Yazadril nodded. “So you are actually Markhan Reginus Longstrider the Third?”

“The Fifth, actually, if you choose to word it that way.” Mark said. “My grandfather’s grandfather was the first of that name, and now it’s a family tradition for every firstborn son.”

“Ah. Well, you have already met Theramin, senior horticultural wizard of the High People, and Dilimon, Second Captain of our Sentry Corps. This is Hilsith, a Healer of great renown who comes to us from the northern elves of The Warm People.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Mark said as he gave her a polite bow.

“And I you.” Hilsith replied with a small smile as she returned the bow.

“This is the Princess Alilia of the People of Life, of whom I’ve spoken.” Yazadril continued.

“Do not bow to me.” Alilia said to Mark before he could do so.

“All right, though I’m pleased to meet you.” Mark said in puzzlement. “May I ask why I should not bow?”

“Because I have done you an injustice. If you bow to me, you will regret having done so when you learn what has occurred.” Alilia told him, her voice brittle.

This left Mark with no response, and Yazadril hurried to fill the awkward lull in the conversation. “This is my wife Nemia.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Mark said with a bow, which Nemia returned.

“And this is my daughter Talia.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Markee bowed with a broad smile. “Yazadril has spoken fondly of your mother and yourself. And your sister of course. How is she?”

“She is dead.” Talia stated quietly. She finally managed to tear her gaze away from his face as he gaped in shock, and she turned into her mother’s arms as she burst into tears. Soon they were both sobbing sadly.

“I’m sorry... I’m so sorry, I didn’t know...” Mark stammered, ashamed at his unintended insensitivity.

“There’s no way you could have known.” Yazadril told him sadly, and wiped his own fresh tears away.

“How did it happen?” Mark asked, then wondered if the question was inappropriate. “No, I’m sorry, it’s none of my concern...”

“Actually, I’m afraid it is.” Yazadril told him sadly. “And as I said previously, there are matters that are difficult to speak of...”

“Perhaps for you.” Alilia interrupted bitterly, then turned from Yazadril to Mark. “Sit down, it is irritating to have to look up that far. I will tell you what has happened.”

She continued as Mark abruptly sat. “My son Bezedil arrived here yesterday, and quickly fell in love with Yazadril’s daughter Dalia. Twin sister to that one, and nearly perfectly identical to her in appearance.”

She pointed at Talia without looking away from Mark, and continued. “Then, while Dalia was out of the room, Talia came to Bezedil and passed herself off to him as her sister. Dalia returned to the room and found Bezedil and Talia consummating. Dalia was so struck by what she saw as their betrayal that she committed suicide by leaping from a high window. Realizing his mistake, and filled with remorse for what he’d done, my son leaped after her to save her. He was too late, and upon seeing her die from impact with the ground, he was so filled with grief and despair that he did not save himself.

“When I learned this...”

“That is not what happened.” Talia interrupted, quietly but firmly.

Alilia’s head whipped around in surprise as she looked to Talia, then her face contorted with rage. “*How dare you say that! All was revealed in my son’s last Reading, as his life was fading from his broken body before my eyes!*”

Tears flowed freely down Talia's cheeks, but her jaw was set with determination. She swallowed hard as she was held by Alilia's gaze. "It did not happen like that. You made me see the Reading as well. You made me see Dalia die. But you did not see what happened before that. You hate me, so you will not believe what I say, and I... I cannot speak of it. So Read me. Read me so that all can know what really happened."

"If you are innocent, why did you not declare it so yesterday?!" Alilia demanded.

"There was nothing but grief and pain in me then, overwhelming all else." Talia stated quietly. "The twin of my soul and my destined love were both dead, and I wanted only to die. I was not listening to anything that was said. I did not care what you did to me."

"And now you do." Alilia stated frostily.

"I still do not care what happens to me for my own sake, and it would not matter if I did." Talia told her, struggling to control her voice. "You have damned me for eternity, and that is all there is to that. But I have regained my thinking enough to consider my parents' feelings, and they should know that it did not happen as you think it did. Furthermore, Mark will need to know the truth."

"If you can bear it, we must perform the Reading, Yazadril." Theramin quietly pointed out before Alilia could retort. "It is her right to defend herself."

"Ah. It is too late to consider rule of law." Nemia stated calmly. "And it is too early. We must concentrate on minimizing the harm that has been done, and on preventing any more harm to ourselves or to each other. After that is done, we will deal with legality and diplomacy."

"You will perform the Reading, or I will, and less competently than you could have done it." Alilia stated coldly. "But we will know the truth."

"Uh, if you don't mind my asking, what does a Reading do?" Mark asked, hesitant to interject, yet driven by his need to understand what was happening.

"It allows the caster to experience some of the memories or thoughts of the person it is cast upon." Yazadril explained. "In this case, I will cast a variation of it that will read a specific segment of Talia's memory, rather than her present thoughts, and transmit those memories to the rest of you. We will experience them with all of our senses as if we were reliving our own memories, complete with every thought and emotion that Talia experienced at the time."

"Oh. And uh, will it work for me?" Mark hesitantly asked. "You said that this affects me, and I'd really like to understand what's going on."

"No, now that you mention it." Yazadril admitted. "It is unlikely that you could receive the Reading. Let me think. I could re-cast the vision of the Reading as an Illusion. You wouldn't be able to see it, since you didn't see the Illusions of the Wards, but I could use the Illusion as the pattern for a Light spell. Nemia brought some white cloth in her tailor's pack, and if we stood in the shade of the trees and I projected the light pattern upon the cloth, you should be able to see what we are seeing."

"And a very complex piece of work it will be, Yazadril." Theramin said. "Performing the Reading, casting it to us, casting the Illusion of it, and casting the Light projection of it. Only you could do it. However, it still only conveys the visual component of the Reading to Mark, here. I will assist by casting Sound of the audible component."

"And I will simply relate Talia's thoughts and emotions verbally, and translate those and the spoken words into your language, Mark." Nemia nodded, moving to stand next to him. "You will still lack the components of touch, scent and taste, but those are less important, and I can tell you of any important evidence of those natures that occurs in the Reading."

"Theramin, you will have to keep your Sound casting quiet enough that Mark can hear both your casting and my spoken translation of it."

"Thank you. I appreciate everything you're doing to include me in this." Mark solemnly said.

"Fine. Let us have it done, then." Alilia snapped as she turned on her heel and strode to the nearest edge of the clearing.

The rest followed, and Nemia took a folded white cloth from her basket. Once under the canopy of the trees, she unfolded it to a three-meter square and Levitated herself to pin it's upper corners to two branches, so that it hung with it's lower edge touching the grass.

"Thank you Nemia." Yazadril said as he moved to face the center of the cloth. "Theramin, let me Read you for a moment while you watch me, would you?" he asked.

Theramin nodded, and Yazadril hummed a short arpeggio and did so, nodding when he had a firm Reading.

"Shared Reading, first test." Yazadril stated, and clapped his hands three times. "Thank you, Theramin." he said, and mentally reviewed his spells. He hummed a short melody and cast an Illusion of himself near the cloth. The elves present saw a duplicate Yazadril standing before the cloth. He cast Light upon the cloth, then gradually linked it to the

illusion of himself that his eyes were seeing. It gave him a strange double vision of his own image until he had the two perfectly synchronized.

“Tell me what you see, Mark.” he said, as his brow furrowed in concentration.

“There was a big round white light on the cloth, and then it changed, and now there’s a picture of you, from the front!” Mark explained in amazement.

“Good.” Yazadril nodded. “Now I’ll release the Illusion, and it will go back to white light.

“Theramin, I’ll send you the Reading I took of you watching me, while using it as the basis of the Illusion and the Light spell, and you will cast the sound of it, please.”

“Mark, you should next see a picture of me saying; shared Reading, first test, and clapping my hands, just as I did a moment ago, and you should hear me say it and the sound of the clapping, as well.

Theramin’s face set in firm concentration, matching Yazadril’s expression as they cast.

“It works! I can see it and hear it!” Mark told them excitedly.

“Good. It gives me a disorienting triple vision, but it will work” Yazadril stated, a little tensely.

“Well done.” Alilia was forced to admit.

“It gives me quadruple vision.” Theramin stated as he let his spells fade and shook his head a bit. “I see you, Yazadril, and I see you in the Reading, and I see the Illusion of you, and I see the Light projection of you. Thankfully, it will be less complex when we do Talia’s Reading.”

“Indeed.” Yazadril nodded as he turned to his daughter. “I will hold the first moment of the Reading until I have my four spells stabilized, and Theramin has his Sound casting ready. Try to be brave, my child. This will be very painful for all of us.”

“I... I know it will, Father.” Talia quietly agreed. “You should begin the Reading at the moment Bezedil arrived. And end it where Bezedil’s Reading began. You already know what happened after that.”

“But Mark does not.” Yazadril gently pointed out. Talia hesitated, then nodded, and Yazadril gave her a supportive embrace. “All right then. We begin.” With that, he placed his hands gently on the sides of her bowed head, and closed his eyes in concentration.

The light on the cloth changed to a view of the interior of Yazadril’s central room, as seen from the doorway into the kitchen. In it, Yazadril faced Bezedil, who was still holding his palm to the top of Alilia’s dark wood chest, beside Alilia, though the elves present knew it was only her Projection. Arrayed around them were Nemias and the rest of the senior wizards, not all of them close enough to see in the viewing. The moment was frozen, and none of the figures moved.

“Talia feels love at first sight for Bezedil.” Nemias stated quietly. “Her heart races, her throat is constricting so she can hardly breathe, and she thrills to the sight of him. She is aware of her sister Dalia standing to her left, who is leaning close to speak privately.”

“I am ready, Yazadril.” Theramin said.

The scene took on motion, and over the other sounds in the room, Dalia’s voice was heard speaking a melodic language Mark had never heard before. Nemias’s translation came a heartbeat after the spoken words, and with her commentary, Mark was given an understanding almost as complete as that of the elves as the scene unfolded.

“Look at him! He is delicious!” Dalia giggled.

“He is my destined love!” Talia quietly exclaimed her realization.

“Ha! There is no destined love, you silly squirrel, as I have told you many times before!” Dalia laughed. “Love is where you find it! Three times before you have thought that a cute new boy was your destined love! And all three times I have been a dutiful sister, and stood patiently aside when I could have been enjoying his pleasures, while you mooned over him for weeks! And then of course, you finally decide that he is *not* your destined love after all, though I know not how you could decide such a thing without even sharing your virgin body!

“Well, I am afraid I will not be so generous this time, dear Talia! This one is too scrumptious to pass up, and I will be enjoying him by this afternoon, you can be sure of it!”

“No, you do not understand!” Talia blurted excitedly. “Those other times I thought that those boys *might* be my destined love, but this time I am *absolutely sure of it!* More sure of it than I have ever been of anything in my life before! Bezedil is my destined love! I have seen him in my *dreams*, Dalia, I swear that I have, though I did not remember those dreams until now!”

“Well *he* is no virgin, I can tell that just by looking at him!” Dalia teased. “So I will not be despoiling him with my pleasure, and you can have him when I am done with him! Besides, the way my heart races to look upon him, I may fall in love with him myself!”

“No! Please, Dalia! I tell you he is truly my destined love!”

“Well then, just walk right over there and tell him so! If you cannot overcome your shyness to save him from my caresses, perhaps he is not your destined love after all!”

Talia gazed at Bezedil, overcome with longing for him, yet the thought of just walking over and speaking with him filled her with overwhelming timidity. “Please Dalia, just give me a few moments! You know how I am!”

“To the bold goes the prize then!” Dalia laughed. “I am sorry, sister of mine. You can go first the next time.”

A moment later Yazadril had finished introducing his wife and the wizards to Bezedil, and Dalia approached them, while Talia stood helplessly.

“You!” Bezedil exclaimed upon spying her.

“My fame precedes me!” Dalia laughed, performing a graceful curtsy

As she rose, Bezedil gently took her hand, bowed low over it, and gently kissed it.

“Ahh, Bezedil, I present my daughter Dalia. Dalia, this is Alilia’s son Bezedil.” Yazadril said, a bit uncomfortable with the intensity with which the two were gazing into each other’s eyes.

“Come. I will show you my room.” Dalia said, her smile bright and her eyes glinting as she took his hand and led him away.

Talia could not help but discretely follow as far as the entrance to the hall, and once Dalia’s door shut behind them she could not help but move to it, her heart crushed within her. A few moments later she heard Dalia giggle through the door, then speak.

“My! You waste no time, do you, my handsome steed?” Dalia laughed.

“I have waited too long already!” Bezedil chuckled in return.

A few minutes later Talia heard her sister’s rising sounds of passion, and she collapsed to the floor and quietly cried.

Under the edge of the trees, her back to Mark and the elves monitoring the Reading, Talia gave a choked sob and tearfully spoke:

“I should not have eavesdropped. I knew it was wrong, but I could not help myself. I could hear them as they made love for the next forty-five minutes, and I assure you that nothing else happened or was said during that time. May we move the Reading ahead, past that time, please?”

“That would be best.” Alilia nodded, barely able to speak.

“All right.” Yazadril quietly agreed, and he let the light and the illusion fade. “I’ve already taken the entire Reading from Talia, so that I could have more concentration available to display it. I’ll quickly skip forward to the next actions or spoken words, and we’ll continue from there.”

He closed his eyes and his brow furrowed for a moment. “Ah. Here it is. If you are ready, Theramin, we will continue.”

At Theramin’s nod, the review of the Reading resumed.

It revealed that Talia lay curled on her side on the floor of the hallway, quietly weeping, and her heart felt like poisoned rot within her.

“Oh! Oh Bezedil, a pause, please, give me a pause!” Dalia was heard to gasp behind the closed bedroom door. “Your passion has exhausted me! I must recover before I can sustain even another moment of pleasure!”

“As you wish, my love, always.” Bezedil chuckled.

“My love.” Dalia said in wonder, and it was unclear whether she addressed Bezedil thusly, or merely repeated his words, marveling that he should speak them to her.

“Oh Bezedil! I have never experienced anything as incredible in my life! My sweet Lords and Ladies, but you are a masterful and inexhaustible pleasurer!”

“I have heard that it is infinitely better with the one who is your destined love.” Bezedil quietly declared. “And now we have some proof of the truth of that!”

“Not you too! You sound like my parents and my sister!” Dalia laughed. “There is no such thing as destined love! Love is where you find it! And perhaps we *have* found it!”

“How can you say that, you of all people?!” Bezedil teased. “I assure you my dear, destined love is a factually proven phenomenon! I have seen you in my dreams with ever increasing frequency for the last three months, and so I have researched the phenomenon with great rigor! I knew that we would soon meet; there was no doubt! Come, you must admit that you have also dreamt of me, for it could not be otherwise!”

There was a very long moment of silence.

On the floor in the hallway, Talia's heart slammed up into her throat and almost choked her completely.

"Dalia? Is something wrong?" Bezedil asked in concern.

"I... I must use the privacy!" Dalia blurted, and as her footsteps were heard lightly running to her bedroom door, Talia quickly rose and slipped into her own bedroom.

She had no time to close her door before Dalia emerged into the hallway, still belting her robe, but Dalia took no notice as she quickly moved a few steps down the hall in the opposite direction and entered her mother's study, which she knew would be empty, as her parent's voices could be faintly heard from the direction of the central room.

Talia's heart pounded in her ears so loudly that she thought it might deafen her. 'Dalia now knows that Bezedil is my destined love! I dreamt of him, as he knew I would! She will tell him! She *must* tell him!' Talia thought, the realization filling her with a shining elation, and a blazing hope.

But long minutes passed, and Dalia remained behind the closed door of the study. Talia was increasingly drawn to go to Bezedil, who waited alone in the next room; to reveal to him that she, Talia, was the one who was his destined love, to feel his arms around her, to feel the fulfillment of him, to give herself to him completely, as she had never given of herself before.

Yet at the same time, her shyness rose again within her, and she knew it for what it was; fear of embarrassing and humiliating herself by saying or doing something stupid and inappropriate, and fear of rejection. She prayed that Dalia would return and reveal the truth, but the long moments passed as slowly as the seasons, and still the study door remained closed.

Finally Talia's need to go to Bezedil drove her forth, and she silently padded from her room to Dalia's door. She tried to bring herself to tap upon it, to no avail. Then she caught the powerful scent of Bezedil's passion, mixed with Dalia's more familiar one, and she noticed that the door was opened a crack.

Seemingly of its own volition, her hand slowly pushed the door open enough for her to slip silently into the darkened room from the dim hallway.

Bezedil stood naked with his back to her, peering through a crack between the closed curtains of the open window near the bed, admiring the view while impatiently waiting.

Talia tried to speak his name, but her mouth seemed numbed, and she could not bring herself to speak. Silently and slowly, she closed the distance between them. Again she tried to speak and could not, and again her hand seemed to have a will of its own as it rose to caress his shoulder.

She thrilled at the touch of him, and then he quickly turned and took her in his arms as he spoke.

"Ah, my love, you were gone a long time, and still I am insatiable for you!" he chuckled.

'No! I must tell him first!' Talia thought in a panic, and with a wrenching effort of will, she spoke, her voice quiet and quavering. "No, wait, I am..."

But he heeded her not, and then he was kissing her fully upon her mouth, and his hands were insistently caressing her, and all thought in her mind fled before an overwhelming onslaught of emotion and sensation.

She had no strength to resist as he gently slid her garments from her body with a few skillful motions, his fiery kiss uninterrupted while he did so, and drew her down onto the bed.

Then the door opened fully and Dalia stood in the dim light of the hallway, her face stricken. Only a moment she stood there before running to leap through the curtains.

Bezedil made a quiet sound, then he scrambled from the bed and leapt after Dalia.

Talia sat on the bed for a moment, stunned. She rose and went to the window and looked out, expecting to see Dalia flying away with Bezedil close behind. She did not see them until she looked down. Incredulous grief hit her like a hammer blow as she saw their broken bodies on the ground far below. She let herself fall forward.

Yazadril let the Reading continue as Talia fell and was barely caught by Nemia, as she was forced to experience Bezedil's last Reading, as she was punched and cursed by Alilia, bringing impossible horror and agony until Yazadril had finally forced Sleep upon her.

The spells faded, and Mark brushed away his tears, choked with emotion at what he had been shown. All were crying, Yazadril and Nemia as they stood clinging to each other, Talia as she hugged with Hilsith, Theramin and Dilimon and Alilia as they stood alone and failed to be stoic.

"Come back to the camp." Mark said in a choked, rumbling voice. "I'll make us some tea."

The elves followed him, still weeping, and as he busied himself with his brazier and a teapot Theramin had given him the night before. Yazadril, Nemia, and Alilia seated themselves on the log, while the rest sat cross-legged on the grass.

Soon the scent of Theramin's tea blend became apparent, and they slowly regained control of their emotions.

None spoke until Mark had served them all honeyed tea in the tin camp cups Dilimon had given him, then sat down himself.

Alilia stared into her cup a moment, then spoke without looking up.

“Talía. Never has an elf ever been so wronged by another, as you have been wronged. Mostly by me, but also by your sister, and by my son. Rather than your having raped my son by trickery, it is more true to say that since he did not heed your refusal, he was about to rape you, though you would not have considered it such. You are a fine young wizard, so you know as well as I that my curse cannot be recalled or countered, no more than we can bring Bezedil and Dalia back to life, or cause ashes to become the tree they once were. Such complete changes cannot be reversed, and to apply the power it would take to even try to deflect the curse would almost certainly result in a disaster of cataclysmic proportion.

“Any apology I offer could only seem a pathetic jest compared to the enormity of the wrong I have done you, yet still I do apologize, and no words could convey how sorry I am for what I have done to you. Nothing I could give you or do for you could begin to repay you for what I have done, yet know that from this moment forward I am your servant, and that all I have is yours, as is any service I or my people can render you. Any punishment you wish to inflict upon me, I will gladly endure.”

There was a long moment of silence before Talía replied, her shaking voice barely above a whisper.

“I understand what you did. Your son had just died, and from his last Reading, limited as it was to those last few moments, it seemed that I was responsible. Were I in your place, I also could not let such a thing pass, and I may have done the same, or worse.

“And Bezedil was my destined love. He truly was. And those few moments were all I had of him. He should have been my husband, but I was too cowardly to speak to him before Dalia did. You should have been my mother-in-law, and we should have grown to love each other dearly.

“And... And too, I have to do what Bezedil would have wanted. He would not have wanted there to be dark feelings between you and I.”

She took a deep, shaky breath and wiped away more tears, so distraught that she was barely able to speak.

“I forgive you, Alilia. You owe me nothing, except that there be peace between us.”

Alilia bowed her head and buried her face in her hands. “Please, do not forgive me!” she sobbed. “I cannot bear that you should be so noble, after I have been so vindictive! I cannot simply bear this on my conscience! There must be some penance or restitution, something I can do so that I can feel that I have atoned for what I have done!”

After a moment, Talía nodded. “All right. I leave it to you to decide on something appropriate.”

Alilia dropped her hands to her lap. “I will. Thank you.” she whispered, her throat too constricted to speak fully.

“Wisely done.” Theramin murmured to Talía.

There was a long silence, then Mark hesitantly addressed the elves.

“I’m sorry, I know this is very difficult. I don’t... I mean I don’t understand why you’ve come to my camp for this, or why you would discuss these personal matters with me, or show me Talía’s memories like that.”

As he spoke, Talía stood and faced him, visibly trembling. Her expression was one that none there had ever seen before. “Mark... The curse... You must...” Her eyes fell. “I cannot say it. Please, someone tell him, and then the rest of you must go, quickly. It is fully upon me, and it is unbearable! It must happen soon! And I could not bear you seeing it!”

“Sweet source, how could I have so shamed myself?” Alilia murmured.

“Mark, Alilia cursed Talía to be raped by you until the end of days.” Nemía quietly stated.

Mark stared at her, his brows up and his mouth open. Then he shook his head firmly. “I won’t do it.” he stated flatly.

“*You must!!!*” Talía shrieked, and now her face held only agony.

“I CAN’T!!!” Mark yelled in return, his voice a mighty roar.

“See here! I must make you understand!” Yazadril quickly told him, desperate at Talía’s increasing distress.

“The power that Alilia put into the curse was enormous! Enough to cast a Concussion spell that could reduce a small mountain to gravel and throw it all for a hundred and sixty kilometers in every direction! Look at that mountain there and think about that! And all of that power was passed into Talía with Alilia’s blow! And now it is affecting her, and it will do so increasingly, torturing her, and it may force her to do things that she does not wish to do, and it may affect reality in other ways until the curse is fulfilled! I dread this as much as you, but you must do it, or even more terrible things may happen until you do!”

“*I can’t!*” Mark returned, equally desperate to make them understand. “Look at her! She’s... She’s *adorable*, damn it! You may as well ask me to torture babies with red hot poker!!! I couldn’t do it to save her life, I couldn’t even do it to save my own life!!! *I just, can’t, do it!!!*”

“*Nothing you do can harm me, and nothing could be half as horrible as what I’m feeling!!!*” Talia wailed as she stepped up to him and clutched two handfuls of his shirt in her shaking fists. “*At least hurt me!!! Please!!!*”

Mark stared at her, dumbfounded. Though he was seated cross-legged on the ground and she was standing, they were eye to eye.

Talia’s whole body shuddered. “I know that when a child of your people is violent or destructive, they are punished with blows upon the buttocks.” she gritted through clenched teeth. “Do that to me now. Do it hard. I’m begging you.”

“What? Spank you?” Mark asked incredulously.

“*SPANK ME!!!*” Talia screamed, and slapped his face with all her strength.

He was caught by surprise, and the blow snapped his head to the side a bit. “GODS!” he cursed.

She drew her arm back for another slap, and drew breath for another scream, but he was having none of that.

“FINE!” he yelled as he caught her arm and grabbed her around her waist, threw her face down across his thighs, and spanked her hard.

She screeched in pain, and instinctively tried to cover her behind with her hands as she thrashed upon his lap, but he seized her wrists and held them with one hand, pressing them to the small of her back to hold her down, then continued until he had given her twenty smacks.

When he stopped, she continued to thrash and cry out for another moment, then she suddenly relaxed exhaustedly and panted to catch her breath.

Mark then realized that her reddened cheeks were almost completely exposed, as most of the white strips that had covered her there were awry. He also realized that the ‘dress’ of gauze strips was the entirety of her clothing.

“Stars above! You’re practically naked!” he exclaimed in completely mortified embarrassment, and whipped his hands away like her skin had burned them, then slapped them over his own eyes.

Talia actually chuckled a bit. She rose to her knees, still catching her breath as she tried to hug him, but her arms went less than halfway around him. She giggled and stood, so she could wrap her arms around his neck and lay her head on his shoulder.

“Thank you.” she murmured sincerely. “It’s over. For now at least. I know it will be back, though I know not when. But for now I am free of the curse. Thank you so very, very much.”

“Please, don’t thank me for that.” he muttered, embarrassed and ashamed at what he’d done. “I’m glad you feel better. I’m sorry I lost my temper. I’m glad I didn’t have to... you know... do the other. Ahf! I feel like a clod!”

“I’m so sorry, Mark. I’m sorry that I struck your face. I’m sorry that you have to do this for me. I did not enjoy the spanking you gave me, but the powerful relief I felt when you took the curse from me was heavenly. It’s as if you had a dislocated shoulder that hurt a great deal, and you went to a Healer who resets the joint for you. The moment when the joint is popped back into its socket is when the pain is greatest, but then it fades almost completely and the feeling of relief is strong and pleasurable.

“You have to be my Healer, Mark. You have to give me pain, because it is the only way to end the other pain, like you were setting my dislocated joints. And my joints are weak, so you will have to set them regularly.

“You must accept this! *We must keep the curse from acting!* The very best we can hope for is that we find a way to live with this, and accept it, and somehow find a kind of happiness together. Only then can we know that we are still wholly ourselves, that the curse is not influencing our thoughts and behavior without our realizing it! In order to prevent that, you must... You must give me my treatments as soon as I notice the activation of the curse within me.”

“Well, thinking about it that way, I guess I can spank you when you ask me to, if you wore a bit more clothes.” he mused, his rumbling voice still muffled behind his hands.

“No, that will not be enough.” Talia told him firmly. “I *will* need you to spank me sometimes, and I think I will need you to do... other things. I do not know what, and I do not know why. But I know that most of the time they will not stop the curse. Most of the time you must rape me. You *must*, I know it, for that is the crux of the curse that we both suffer from. If you do not, the curse will torture me, and cause horrible things to happen, and still, somehow, one way or another, you will end up raping me anyway.

“If you can do this of your own choice, the curse will only directly affect us in one way. It will give us immortality, for I am cursed to be raped by you until the end of days. We have eternity, and if we can find happiness at least most of the time, it will be a blessing. And we will not grow old, for that was not what was in Alilia’s mind when she cast the curse. She pictured the person I am now being raped by the person you are now, until the sun no

longer rises, and that is how it shall be. The curse is deep down in my bones now, and I feel the truth of that. Already I have proved that it will not let me die.”

Mark was softly crying behind his hands now, overwhelmed by the enormity of what she was revealing. “But it all makes no sense!” he sobbed. “How can I rape you if you’re willing? And what else will I have to do to you? And why was I chosen for this?! I don’t understand that at all!”

“Those are fair questions.” Talia murmured after a moment’s consideration. “Alilia? Can you answer them for us?”

Alilia had to clear her throat and swallow twice before she softly spoke, her tear-flowing eyes downcast. “I’m not sure. It was... impulsive, and over in a moment.”

“You must try, Alilia.” Hilsith gently prompted. “Try to remember exactly what you were thinking at the instant you cast the curse, at every level of your mind.”

After a moment Alilia whispered: “I will try. I will need to think about it awhile.”

Minutes passed, then Talia murmured into Mark’s ear. “Please don’t hide your face from me. This garment is perfectly acceptable among my people, if a little daring, but I promise I will wear more clothing after this, so you will not be uncomfortable.”

Slowly, Mark lowered his hands, to gaze into Talia’s eyes from a hand’s length away.

Talia gave him a brave little smile and tried to brush some of his hair away from his forehead, but it fell back to the same place, and she giggled a bit. “You have beautiful eyes.” she whispered. “You are so big, and so male, and your voice is wonderful. Would you give me a hug? Please?”

Moving slowly, as if mesmerized, he carefully placed his arms around her and closed his eyes. “Ahh, Talia, you are so tiny and soft and warm and pretty and young. Your scent is wonderful. How will I ever be able to hurt you... that way?” he asked, speaking privately and intimately, as she had done.

“The curse protects me from all injury. I will be all right. We both will.” She assured him. “We will face it together. It will be hardest at first, but one can get used to anything, after a while. Besides, I am not *that* young. I am twenty-nine years old.”

“Twenty-nine?! Yazadril said you were about the same age as me! But then, I guess we *are* about the same age, compared to him.”

“Yes. And elves mature more slowly than your people. I am at the age when I am most like a human girl of about seventeen years. And I judge you to be about twenty-five, so we are fairly well matched that way.”

At that moment, Mark did not feel like telling her his age. Then he marveled again at what he’d learned.

“We’ll truly be together forever? I mean, really, for all eternity?”

She nodded, and placed her palms on his beard-covered cheekbones, looking intently into his eyes. “Always.” she whispered. “I swear to you, Markhan Reginus Longstrider the Fifth, I shall always do anything and everything I can do to bring you happiness. For I fear you will never be rid of me. Ever.”

He shared her gaze for a long moment, and smiled. “You glowed brighter when you said that.”

“It was an elven vow. It has its own power, and it was not given lightly.” she told him seriously.

He closed his eyes and gently moved his arms, and his hug became the embrace given to one who is truly cared for. They spent a long time like that, with the rest waiting silently, before he spoke again.

“I think I’m starting to accept it.” he murmured. “It’s a beautiful feeling, knowing that I’ll never have to be alone ever again. These past few months have been very hard that way. And it’s another beautiful feeling, knowing that in the strangest way, I’ve found the girl I’m going to spend the rest of my life with.”

He shook his head, then looked into her eyes again. “Talia, I was raised to believe that certain things are honorable, and necessary. I know it’s not fair to ask you this, as we hardly know each other, but... if we’re going to be together as we’ve discussed, I need for you to be my wife.”

Talia stared at him, thunderstruck.

Just then Alilia spoke. “I know what I was thinking. And they are ugly thoughts.”

“Just a moment Alilia, if you could hold that thought please?” Mark asked as he rose to one knee and took both of Talia’s tiny hands in his huge ones. “Talia, I would be forever honored if you would be my wife. Will you marry me?” he asked sincerely.

Talia paused for a moment while a smile grew on her face, and fresh tears gathered on her eyelids. “Yes, Mark.” she softly answered. “I will gladly marry you.”

They threw their arms around each other in happy and emotional embrace.

Alilia stood and approached them. “Please, let me give you this.” she said as she held her palm up. There was a bright flash from her hand, and then she was holding a tiny and exquisitely beautiful ring with five diamonds in a

delicate and swirling gold setting. “It is magically enhanced, in its sparkle, and in that it always fits perfectly. It cannot be scratched or marred, and it is almost indestructible.”

“Thank you, Alilia.” Mark told her as he carefully took the ring between his fingertips, and gently slid it onto the third finger of Talia’s left hand. Her breath caught at the beauty of it.

“I deserve no thanks, as you will know when I tell you what I have realized. It is truly the least I can do.” Alilia said as she resumed her seat.

Mark also resumed his cross-legged seat on the grass, and Talia settled sideways in his lap. He gently put his arms around her, and she put her arms around one of his and leaned the side of her head against his chest. He marveled again at her delicate beauty, then Alilia regained his attention.

“When I cast the curse, foremost in my mind were the words I spoke; I curse you. Beneath that were the terms of the curse; I curse you to be raped by him until the end of days. As to exactly what I pictured happening when Mark raped Talia, I was thinking of Yzandra.

“Yzandra was a young elf of my people, in her second century, when she mysteriously disappeared without a trace about fourteen hundred years ago. When she finally returned, I became intimately involved in the case, because there were diplomatic repercussions.

“I learned that she had been kidnapped by one Milishak the Blue, the Royal Wizard to the Court of the Kingdom of Iktra, the human realm bordering on the lands of The People of Life to the north-west. Milishak abducted Yzandra so that he could give her as a sex slave to his liege, Melcom, then the reigning king of Iktra. She was chosen for this because she lived beside the border and she sometimes crossed it to gather herbs, and because she was among the weakest of my people in her ability with the power, lacking enough strength to even light a candle with it. It was done by Milishak in order to turn Melcom to evil ways, and in this it partially succeeded.

“Knowing that this abduction could lead to war with my people, a war they had no hope of winning, Milishak and Melcom held Yzandra in a magic cell with no physical entrance, deep beneath the deepest dungeons of their palace, reachable only by a keyed Translocation plate in the royal apartments. Her cell was luxurious, but small, and lacking any windows or doors. Only they knew she was down there, and the Translocation plate was made so that it would function for Milishak or the reigning monarch of Iktra, and no others.

“Melcom used Yzandra as his sex slave for the rest of his life, some forty-three years, and upon his death, he *gave her to his heir in his private will*, like she were a *possession!* And when the next king died, he passed her down as well! Damned Source above! They did this for nine generations! For *two hundred and seventy-one years* did the kings of Iktra hold Yzandra in that sunless cell, raping her and tormenting her regularly!!!”

Alilia fell silent, her fists and face clenched in rage, and the rest waited patiently while she regained control of her emotions.

“Finally a king of Iktra died leaving no male issue. His eldest daughter, Rellin, was strong and at least half-decent in character, and she had cultivated the commanders and officers of her royal military. Milishak opposed her, favoring a male cousin with militia of his own, and they were backed by the other nobles of the realm. Rellin countered Milishak’s power by hiring wizards from the human wizards’ guilds, down in the empires. Though there was civil war for almost two years, in the end Rellin held the throne, and Milishak and his contender were dead. Only then, after Yzandra had dwelt in her cell in absolute solitude for two more years, did Rellin read her father’s private will, and learn of Yzandra’s long imprisonment and torment. Rellin set her wizards to freeing Yzandra, then personally escorted her home.

“After that, we spent many days counseling and interviewing Yzandra and treating her, and many were the hours she told me of her torments. In the end, it was decided that there was little else to be done about it, since all the guilty were dead, though Rellin did offer sincere apology and any restitution we might ask for her family’s crimes.”

Alilia fell silent, then she continued, her eyes still downcast. “When it seemed that Talia had raped my son by trickery and caused his death, Yzandra’s ordeal seemed a fitting punishment.”

Now she resolutely lifted her tearful gaze to meet Mark’s. “I chose you as the instrument of Talia’s punishment because no elf could do such a thing, and because you were fresh in my mind, since I had been discussing you with Yazadril only moments before. As well, I now realize that I wished to prove to Yazadril that you were just like almost every other human male I have ever met, and that your seeming decency was an act, concealing a core of cruelty. When I gave her to you to rape, I thought that you would consider it a prize beyond measure, and thus would your evil heart be revealed to Yazadril.

“So, I am forced to realize that I am not only vindictive, I am petty, and a bigot.”

Mark considered her words before replying. “No, I think you *were* vindictive and petty. I think that realizing the enormity of your mistake has cured you of those traits.”

She nodded. “Perhaps you are right about that.

“Though Talia has the worst of it, she is right in that I have cursed you as well. And everything I said to her of the inadequacy of my apology, and my desire for atonement, all applies to you as well. I am so very, very sorry. And if there is anything at all that I can do for you, you have only to ask. If you desire to see me punished... I will endure what you decree.”

“So the fulfillment of the curse is based on the ordeal of Yzandra? Everything that was done to her, I’ll have to do to Talia?”

“Yes.” Alilia nodded tearfully. “Each and every detail of it is too much to hold in one’s mind all at once, still it is true to say that the totality of her experience, as she told it to me, and most importantly, *the impressions and thoughts of it that my mind experienced as she told me of it*, form the basis of the requirements of the curse.” She paused. “Though perhaps not exactly. When I cast the curse, I did not picture you keeping Talia in a cell, so you will not be required to do that. I pictured her with you as you went about your life.”

She suddenly stomped her foot a bit like a child in anger. “Damned and broken Source above! This language is so completely inadequate! Were you anyone else, I would simply cast Tongues upon you so you could speak Elvish!”

Mark shrugged a bit in embarrassment. “Sorry.” he mumbled.

“Please do not apologize to me!” Alilia told him in exasperation. “You are like a good child, and I have wronged you horribly, damn it!”

“Alilia! I need to know how long I will be free of the curse!” Talia stated determinedly. “What was the frequency of Yzandra’s torments, and what did you imagine mine to be when you cast the curse?”

Alilia’s brow tightened in concentration. “The kings of Iktra were not consistent in their depredations. The worst of them was at it almost every day, and for hours at a time. One, only once or twice per month, and another was satisfied after only a few minutes on each occasion.

“To be as specific as possible, I would say that Yzandra was tormented on more than half of the days of her captivity. Make it three days of every five, and over the years ahead, I expect that to be the average of days that the curse will come upon you. Over the short term, you should have until tomorrow at least, and most likely you will not feel it for two days, though you may have as long as a month.

“When the curse does come upon you, it may be satisfied with a few moments of torment, as it was this first time, though it may demand as many as six hours.

“It may be wise to completely hold the curse at bay by fulfilling it’s requirements before it activates, rather than waiting until you begin to feel it’s effects, in case it starts to affect reality before that becomes apparent to you. In order to be at all certain to do so, you should have him torment you for an hour and a quarter, every second day.”

Mark considered that, and the thought almost moved him to tears again. Talia sensed this, and caressed his face reassuringly to soothe him.

“As I said, I know that most of the time he will have to rape me, and that sometimes he will have to spank me.” Talia stated as she turned back to Alilia. “What else will he have to do, and how often?”

Mark’s gruff interjection came before Alilia could answer. “Now hold on! No offense against the rest of you fine people, but these will be the details of... I mean, it’s bad enough that I have to do these things, things that no decent man could be proud of doing, but I don’t see why anyone else needs to know what Talia and I will be doing during our intimate moments as man and wife! If we don’t have to do anything else till tomorrow, I don’t see why Alilia can’t tell us the rest of that later, with only her and Talia and me present! And I ask the rest of you to avoid learning the details of what happened to Yzandra, and to not let anyone else know that Alilia’s curse is based on Yzandra’s ordeal!”

“Quite right.” Yazadril nodded. “We understand completely. You can be certain that we will do as you ask in this.”

The others nodded agreement.

“You should know this too, for I have wronged you more than you realize.” Alilia stated bitterly. “We were in the Council Hall of The High People today when Yazadril asked of the nature of the curse I had cast upon Talia. Though I gave no other details, I loudly declared that I had given her to you, to be raped by you until the end of days. There were many present, of The High People and my people as well. By now everyone knows of it.”

“Well, isn’t that just great.” Mark bitterly declared a moment later.

Hilsith cleared her throat, and spoke. “I am here in my role as a Healer, to try to minimize the suffering that will be caused by the curse. As our people have an innate ability to heal normal physical injury, most of my work deals with the healing of minds, and emotions, and injury caused by magic. I welcome you to seek my council on these matters, and recommend that you do so. If you do, you can trust my confidentiality as a sworn Healer.

“Beyond that, there seems little more that I can do here right now. Though there is a treatment that may help a little, I need to do some research before I reveal or apply it. The course you have set for yourselves is likely the healthiest possible way to deal with the curse, over the next few days at least. And so, I will offer my congratulations on your engagement, and take my leave.”

“Thank you, Hilsith. I hope you come to my wedding.” Talia said as she turned on Mark’s lap to exchange a fond embrace with the Healer.

Then Hilsith hugged Mark as well, or rather hugged his neck, saying: “Be well, young Mark. Though you could not have foreseen this fate, you could not have found better to be your wife than Talia, or any better than Yazadril and Nemia to be your family. All of you will need all the care that you can give each other, to recover from your losses. If not before, I will see you at your wedding.”

“You won’t have long to wait.” Mark told her, and tried to smile. “We have to be married before the sun sets. We can’t take the chance that the curse will strike again before we’re married.”

“He’s right.” Talia nodded.

“In that case, is there anything I can do to help with the preparations?”

“We just want something small, I think...” Mark mused, then stopped at Talia’s hurt expression.

Then she realized how she looked, and dropped her eyes. “Ah, that would be fine.” she murmured.

“Uh, then again, I’ve always wanted a wedding that was more... uh, traditional?” he ventured.

She lifted her eyes to his, smiling hopefully.

“Perhaps something grand and beautiful?” he continued, his growing smile matching hers. “It’s hard to describe. And us men don’t really care much about the details of such things anyway. Perhaps if you have something nice in mind, my intended bride, you could help me out with a few ideas about it?”

“Oh Mark, you are so sweet!” Talia beamed, and knelt up on his lap so she could throw her arms around his neck and kiss him full upon the mouth.

“He will be a great husband for our daughter, Nemia.” Yazadril chuckled as he hugged his wife. “You must admit that was a brilliant bit of husbanding just now! Masterful diplomats could not have done it better!”

“I agree!” Nemia laughed. “He is indeed a perceptive gentleman.”

Suddenly Mark broke the long and deep kiss by gently but quickly lifting Talia a bit and sitting her back in his lap. Before she could ask what was wrong he whispered in her ear; “I’m sorry, but your kiss has... aroused me, and I didn’t want everyone to see it.”

“Oh.” she said in surprise. Then, struck by curiosity, she wiggled in his lap a little like she was trying to get more comfortable, so she could see what it felt like. “Oh my!” she said, and upon realizing that he was blushing scarlet, buried her face in his chest and giggled.

“Who traditionally plans the wedding in your culture? And do you hold a reception afterward?” Mark asked the group.

“The mother of the bride plans the wedding.” Nemia chuckled. “And I already know what Talia would prefer in that regard. And if by ‘a reception’ you mean a huge celebration with feasting and music and dancing, we do indeed do that.

“You must realize that among our people, weddings are a very rare and special event, because of our low birthrate and longevity. And because elves almost never divorce, and so almost never remarry unless they are widowed. You should also know, Mark, that the vow of an elf is magically binding, and that the vows of marriage are the most profound and powerful of all. The presence of other elves adds power to the binding. It helps to insure the happiness of our marriages, that the power of the attendees adds to the power of our vows to love each other and to strive to bring happiness to our marriage. For all these reasons, we tend to invite as many as possible to the wedding.”

“That sounds like good thinking.” Mark nodded.

“The wedding that all of us have always envisioned for Talia,” Nemia continued, “Would be attended by all of the High People.”

“But... Yazadril said that there’s thousands of you!”

“That is correct.” Nemia smiled. “But only a few thousands.”

“Don’t worry.” Yazadril chuckled. “I’m the one who has to pay for it, and not you!”

Mark laughed, and shared a smile with Talia. “Then that’s the way it must be.”

“Thank you.” she whispered, and drew his head down for another kiss.

“Well, since they must be married tonight, we are short of time.” Yazadril stated. “To save a bit of it, I will send a Speaking to all of my people, rather than inviting each of them in person. And since I lack the power to cast a Speaking to so many, Alilia, could I presume upon you to lend me a bit?”

“Certainly.” Alilia nodded.

Talia had ended her kiss and was smiling up at Mark, and he noticed at that moment that Yazadril’s glow became markedly brighter.

“Source above! Not so much, Alilia!” Yazadril laughed. “I don’t need to shout their ears off! Though I must say, that always gives a feeling that would be easy to get used to!”

Alilia slowed her flow of power to him, and his glow diminished a bit.

“That’s about right.” Yazadril nodded, then hummed a short melody, and cast the Speaking.

He spoke in his native tongue, and Talia quietly translated for Mark. “People of The Nine Valleys, it is I, Prince Yazadril. We have concluded an investigation into the deaths of my daughter Dalia, and of Bezedil, son of Alilia, Princess of The People of Life. It was overseen by Theramin of the Council, and by Dilimon, Second Captain of the Sentry Corps, as neutral parties, and witnessed by Hilsith. We have found that my other daughter Talia is entirely blameless in those deaths. She has agreed to become the wife of Markhan Reginus Longstrider the Fifth, invested Ranger of the Forests of Shinosa Valley in Finitra. Due to necessities of honor, they *must* be married this very evening, despite our grief at our recent loss. Though all our hearts are sorrowed, we ask that sorrow be set aside for a few hours, and that you all attend, to join us in making this evening’s nuptials a happy and joyous event. The ceremony will of course be held in the wedding chapel in Laylas Valley, one hour before sunset. Your attendance will mean a great deal to us. Thank you, we hope to see you there.

“Thank you Alilia.” Yazadril nodded, as his glow faded to its previous brightness.

“You are welcome.” Alilia nodded wearily. “Now, I think I will go, and take Bezedil home. I will...”

“No.” Talia thoughtfully interjected. “Please, you must attend my wedding. And call all of those you care for, and extend them my invitation as well. You will be my bridesmaid. Actually, you will be my maid of honor.”

“Your maid of honor!” Alilia gasped. “Surely there must be one you care for who would be a more appropriate choice for that honor! After what I have done to you, it would not be right for me to even attend!”

“This marriage is of your doing, Alilia, and if it brings us an eternity of joy and happiness, then that is of your doing as well, and to your credit.

“Though it should help you to know, my intentions in this are not as purely noble as that. Diminished you may be by the casting of the curse, still you stand an order of magnitude above any others of our peoples in pure power, and I think your recovery is almost complete already. I would have you be right beside me, so that your ambient power can most effectively reinforce our vows.

“Mark, my father would usually conduct the ceremony, as Prince of our people, but tonight he has his role as father of the bride, so by procedure and by my preference, Theramin will conduct our wedding.

“It would please me if you would have Dilimon as your best man. He is a good friend, and he is strong in the power.”

“Sure! He and Theramin and I struck up a friendship last night, and I would be pleased to have him if he agrees, and besides, he’s the only other male elf I know besides Theramin and Yazadril!”

Suddenly he sobered, and his countenance fell. “Actually, he’s the *only* other male I know.”

“You poor boy.” Talia softly caressed his face. “I am shamed that I had forgotten until now, that your tragedy was so much worse than ours.”

The others silently reflected on the truth of this, for where they had each lost a loved one, and Talia had lost two, Mark had lost so much more, for he had lost all, and in a far more horrible manner. All his loved ones, his friends, acquaintances, his home, his entire people. Now that they knew him somewhat, they empathized with his loss much more powerfully.

“But now, we must try to find happiness.” Mark said, and smiled bravely. “You were saying?”

“I was agreeing to be your best man, and thanking you for the honor, I think.” Dilimon laughed.

“Yes.” Talia agreed as she resumed her train of thought. “And thank you.

“Mother, we are allowed twelve bridesmaids and twelve groomsmen. I ask you to choose them and to offer them the honor, selecting the most powerful of those who will attend.

“Father, when all of our people attend a wedding at the Laylas chapel... Drat! I have translated that word so badly!”

“Then break it down by concepts, my child.” Yazadril advised fondly. “For there is no exact word match in this language.”

“Ah” she nodded, then turned to Mark. “It is; ‘The Place of Gathering with Greatest Joy and Deepest Respect For The Joining Of Lives In Love and Harmony’. But ‘chapel’ doesn’t really apply, both because it is an open place of trees and moss, and not a building, and because it has nothing to do with gods or divinity or worship. It is beautiful,

and used for weddings almost exclusively, and it has become... charged... with the power and the joy of the many elven ceremonies and vows. It is highly magical, and lends it's own power to the gathering. But I will refer to it as 'the chapel' in this language, for convenience.

"As I was saying, Father, our people do not fill the chapel or even close to it, even when everyone dances. How many could attend? How many is there room for?"

"Well, that's hard to say. I see where you're going with this. Under normal procedures, we are limited by the number that can be seated to feast, about three thousand. If feasted in a picnic buffet style, with only a few tables for the main party and the rest reclining upon the moss, perhaps six thousand if everyone must dance at once. If we set aside a dance floor for perhaps half to dance, we could have eight thousand, without diminishing their enjoyment of the event."

"I think you're being conservative, Yazadril." Theramin mused. "Our people won't mind mingling a bit closer than that. I'm quite sure that over ten thousand could have a grand time as you've described it, especially at such a unique event. And there's plenty of room to dance beneath the trees."

"You're likely right." Yazadril smiled, picturing it.

"Alilia, there are over four hundred thousand of your people." Talia pointed out. "Perhaps eight thousand of them would be willing to attend a wedding upon such short notice? Preferably eight thousand of the most powerful among you?"

By now Alilia had caught Talia's line of thought as well, and she smiled smugly. "Perhaps they will." she agreed. "If it was necessary, I would command them to do so, but they will be glad to come."

"Uh, Talia, you're starting to make me nervous here." Mark admitted. "I mean, ten thousand of the most powerful elves? Why?"

"My betrothed, this marriage must save us." Talia told him earnestly and hopefully. "Without it, perhaps we can be happy in a way, despite what you must do to me for the curse. Perhaps you will not come to resent having to do it, or to resent my constant presence and needs, or come to hate me. Perhaps we can do that for an entire human lifetime. Perhaps we can do it for an entire *elven* lifetime. Perhaps we could do it for a hundred thousand years, or a *million!* But we must find a way to be happy together for *eternity*. I have a horrible fear that sooner or later the worst may happen, and we would be trapped in a completely hellish existence together for millions of centuries, hating each other.

"And if your people shared our customs, and placed no disapproval on mating outside marriage, you would never have asked me, despite the curse, and I never even imagined that you would. For though there may be something special growing between us, we do not love each other.

"But when I stand upon the podium with you and take the vows of marriage, I will swear to love you. And even if I do not love you before I take the vows, as long as I am sincere in truly *wanting* to love you, and I am truly and honorably determined to do so, the power of the vow will make it so, and I *will* love you, I truly will, with all my heart!

"But magic does not affect you. You may not be bound by the vow. Yet you can see our power glowing, so the power *must* affect you at least a tiny bit in some way. And so I hope that with so many of the most powerful elves in attendance, lending their power to the vow, that you *will* be affected by its power, enough that you will truly fall in love with me.

"And since we will be married, you must see that we *should* love one another. And we will be saved from a hell of our own making, no matter how long we are together."

"Wow. That's good thinking." Mark nodded. "All this power and magic still strikes me as very spooky and strange, but you're right about all of that.

"I just hope that you forgive me if I get really shy. I've never even *seen* more than fifty people in one place before."

"I, of all people, understand shyness, my betrothed." Talia smiled, ruffling his hair. "Though I think this ordeal has cured me of most of it. My former fears now seem so inconsequential."

A moment later Nemia briskly broke the silence. "Well, there is much to do. Mark, you must be barbered and tailored, and the rest of us must prepare as well. There is a feast to be prepared, and the chapel must be made ready."

"And I must pass on eight thousand invitations, and prepare my wedding present." Alilia thoughtfully agreed. "Perhaps if Theramin will assist me, it can be a present from both of us, for I intend to build them a home. Mark cannot spend his wedding night in one of ours, for he could never stand up straight in one."

"I would be delighted, Alilia." Theramin beamed. "I take it you have something in mind?"

“I do, and it will take both our talents. And don’t worry, it will fall within the construction strictures of The Nine Valleys.

“Yazadril, Link with me please. I send you an image of the home we will make for your daughter and Mark. Tell us where we should locate it. And the front entrance must face south.”

“Ah! Beautiful, and so perfect for both of them!” Yazadril exclaimed at their private vision. “The land already set aside for Talia’s hometree will be perfect! See!” He hummed a note, and sent her and Theramin his image of the land with the home complete upon it. “And if you were to accept my help, and Nemias, we could do it thus!” he said, and modified his image.

“Ahh! Yazadril, you are a masterful artist!” Theramin breathed in admiration.

“Indeed.” Alilia had to admit. “Your grasp of complexity and detail astounds me yet again.”

“Pardon me for interrupting.” Mark said as he stood, effortlessly holding Talia in his arms. “I’m sure that most of what needs to be done can be better accomplished elsewhere. Why don’t we go to your house, Yazadril, so these ladies can prepare in comfort?”

“Why not indeed?” Yazadril nodded with a smile.

“An excellent idea.” Nemias agreed as she stood and began bustling about, collecting the cups. “Here Mark. I feel a need to do a bit of mothering, so I will pack your possessions, and you can continue cuddling with Talia.”

“Thank you. I appreciate that very much right now.” he quietly rumbled, and took a moment to close his eyes and concentrate on the wonderful sensations of the tiny elfess in his arms, seeming so trusting, so affectionate, so obviously and desperately hoping to find love and happiness with the completely unusual stranger who was now destined to be her eternal tormentor.

He opened his eyes at the same time as she did, so that he just saw her eyelids finish opening, and then their gazes seemed to fall into each other, and the eyes of the other seemed to take up all of reality. It seemed a fateful moment, and Mark felt a need to say something good and right, something as profound as this moment. And as he recognized the need, he said the first things that came to mind, before the fated moment was past. “Talia, I will never fail your trust. Ever. I swear it.

He turned and carried her to the edge of the glade, under the shade of the trees, and spoke intimately. “And I would not have us start with any hidden truths of importance between us. I did not tell you my age because I was a bit embarrassed that you’re older than me. I’ve lost track of the date. My birthday is the second day of the ninth month. If that hasn’t passed yet, I’m still sixteen. If it has, I’ve turned seventeen.”

“It is the twenty-eighth day of the eighth month.” Talia told him with a smile, still holding the intense eye contact. “In four days you turn seventeen, and that seems just right to me. Are you still growing?”

“I think I am, but I think it’s almost finished. Your father asked the same thing.” he revealed with a smile as bright as hers. “And there’s something else you need to know. Something I ask you to keep between you, me, and Yazadril, who already knows because he discovered it. Yesterday he found a way to make magic affect me a little bit, though he had to use a lot of effort. He said that no one else would ever think of it. I don’t want anyone else to know because I’ve never encountered real magic before yesterday, except for the disaster at home. You elves have such amazing power, so much that you take it for granted, and... it frightens me. As long as they all think that I can’t be affected by magic, then we’re even, because I have no magic to affect them either, and I can be comfortable among them. But if they find out that there’s a way to affect me with magic, then I’m defenseless.”

“I understand, and I will keep your secret. You realize that you can still be affected by magic indirectly? That a rock thrown at you by magic is not in itself magic, and will hit you the same way as if it were thrown by hand?”

“I know. But I’m fully trained as a Ranger, and I have my own ways of being physically dangerous, so we’re still even.

“The most important thing is, Yazadril might be able to do it at our wedding, so that the magic of the vows affects me. Hopefully, without anyone else realizing it.”

Now she finally took her eyes from his so she could hug him tight in thankful joy.

“Take your father aside as soon as you can go someplace private to talk, and ask him about it.” Mark advised as he carried her back to the group.

“I will, right away. Don’t worry, no one will think it unusual or suspect anything. Set me down, please.”

He did so as he noticed that the rest were gathered around a huge padded brown leather reclining chair, more than big enough for him, mounted on a slightly ornate hardwood platform that was polished to a deep shine.

“Yazadril pointed out that you could be neither Translocated nor Levitated.” Alilia told him as Talia made her way to her father’s side and whispered in his ear. “And I do not wish to walk, and we are short of time.” Alilia continued. “Thus, I have made you a conveyance, to your measurements, which Yazadril provided. The chair is

mundane, but the platform it is bound to has had a keyed permanent Flight spell cast upon it, which is Levitation combined with Movement. And to answer the question I can see on your face, it is easier to cancel the weight on a body by Levitation and then Move it, than to lift the weight with Movement while also using that spell to direct your motion. Since it cannot be keyed to you, I suggest that Talia be given control of it. The seat is big enough for you both, or she can sit in your lap.”

“Thank you, Alilia.” Mark said as he nervously inspected the flying chair. “I’m not sure if I can use it, though. I’m not afraid of heights, as long as whatever’s supporting me seems solid and safe. But if it doesn’t, I have a big fear of falling. When you’re my size, even a short fall can be dangerous.”

“Well, we can fly along just above the grass.” Talia assured him. “It will take slightly longer, but we’ll get there soon enough. You can trust Alilia’s work to function safely, and I’m an experienced flyer, with good control of my own Flight spell.”

“I will key it to you now.” Alilia told her, and nodded.

“Thank you.” Talia nodded in return as she felt control of the platform pass to her. She turned her right palm up and lifted it a bit, and the platform smoothly rose a quarter of a meter.

“My betrothed, your chariot awaits!” she announced with a giggle and a sweeping gesture of presentation. “We will keep it at this height above the ground, and start at walking speed, increasing speed only as you get used to it, and as you learn to trust it.”

“All right.” Mark agreed with a grin as he tested it with his foot. It didn’t move at all under his weight, so he sat down sideways in the chair, swung his legs onto the leg rest, and leaned back. The chair was severely reclined, though the headrest supported his head in a vertical position so it was easy to watch where they were going. He was gratified to find that he could get a good grip on the armrests, and that the footboard was positioned against his soles so he could brace himself solidly with his feet and his shoulders. “Wow! It’s *very* comfortable!” he said as he settled in. “I think this could really be fun, as long as we stay low like this!”

“Ah. One more detail.” Alilia nodded, and Summoned a wooden trunk of a similar style to the platform from her distant home. She placed it on the platform behind the chair, and she concentrated again as she cast spells to attach it solidly to the platform, and to recolor it slightly to match.

“Good thinking!” Nemia laughed, and she loaded Mark’s possessions as well as her own barbering and tailoring supplies into the trunk, and Talia settled into Mark’s lap with her back to him.

“And if the rest of you would allow me?” Alilia asked as she rose a quarter-meter into the air.

The others nodded their agreement, and they all rose as far into the air, though they stood as if on solid ground.

“And we’re off!” Talia gaily announced, and pointed her finger forward. The platform smoothly accelerated to the speed of a brisk walk, and the others faced forward as they floated along, maintaining their same formation close around the platform.

As they reached the path leading up to the pass, Mark announced; “This is fine! You can go faster if you want!”

“All right. I will gradually accelerate to the speed of a galloping horse. Just tell me if you want to slow down.”

Soon they were flying up the path fast enough to make Mark’s heart race, his hair and beard blowing behind. The platform remained level front to rear despite the increasing slope, it’s front remaining one quarter-meter above the path at the closest, it’s rear higher, and Talia skillfully tilted it from side to side at the curves in the path, so they didn’t slide sideways in the seat.

Mark let out a wordless shout of exhilaration, and released his grip on the armrests so he could hug Talia around her tummy, and she promptly laid her arms along his huge fore-arms and squeezed them tight.

“You like this?” she teased with a giggle.

“Yes, a lot! I’d have thought there’d be more wind!”

“I’m deflecting most of it, though a bit of it is fun! Would you care to try the pace of a falcon on a long flight? I assure you it’s perfectly safe.”

“Sure!” he laughed in joyous excitement, and they smoothly accelerated again. “Oh Wow! Oh wow!” he called as the ground flashed past.

“I must admit,” Yazadril commented with a thrill in his voice, “I’ve often flown faster, but doing so this close to the ground is very exciting!”

“So it is!” Theramin laughed.

In only moments they were above the tree line, then moving over bare rock as the slope reached it’s steepest.

“The Sentries know we’re coming.” Dilimon calmly informed them. “They won’t be in the way. They tell me that the path is clear as far as Nemion’s garden.”

“We’ll have to be higher for a few moments after we crest the pass.” Talia told Mark. “At this speed, if we followed the ground, you’d be thrown out of the chair.”

“What? Talia!” Mark exclaimed, re-gripping the armrests as they speeded to the top of the pass. “TALIAAAAAAAAAA!!!”

The Sentries’ towers and emplacements flashed by on either side, and they shot up and over the lip of the pass and high into open air, before gently arcing down to smoothly align with the path running down slope, only now the back of the platform was a quarter of a meter from the ground and the front was higher.

“Sweet mother preserve me, girl!” he stammered as his heart pounded in his ears. “You almost scared the life out of me!”

Talia giggled contritely. “I’m sorry. I was hoping you would find it fun! And it would be best if you could get used to flying.”

“Well, it *was* fun, in a terrifying way, now that it’s over!” he admitted. “Only next time, warn me sooner!”

He bowed his head and nuzzled the side of her neck, and kissed her ear.

She turned her head sideways and up so she could murmur private words to him. “Now *you* are arousing *me!* Which would be fine if I were not piloting this craft! The distraction could be dangerous!”

She chuckled as he suddenly stopped, and she faced forward again.

“That’s a good point, but you still owe me one for the scare back there!” he laughed, and in a moment of spontaneous, mischievous temptation, he slid his hands up her torso, under the top row of gauze strips, to cup her small but perky and beautifully shaped breasts with his fingers.

“Ahh, that is nice.” she crooned, leaning into his hands a bit as her nipples hardened. “You can hold me like that, but do not caress me there, or we will crash for sure!”

He enjoyed the sensation for a moment, then slid his hands back to her tummy before the other elves noticed. “I’m sorry, that was not the act of a gentleman.” he rumbled contritely.

“Among my people it is!” she gaily assured him, but he kept his hands where they were.

“My! This valley is perfectly round!” he exclaimed.

“All of The Nine Valleys are round.” she informed him. “They were formed by the impact of a falling star that broke into nine pieces before it struck the ground, many millennia ago. Their bowl shape, and the material of the fallen stars, gives The Nine Valleys the most powerful magical fields in the world. That is why my people claimed them for their own as soon as they had cooled, and why we have defended them vigorously since then.”

“These valleys were the very first place permanently settled by elves, in the dawn of our race, over two hundred and thirty-six thousand years ago.” Yazadril added proudly. “Before then, we were secretive and nomadic, for we had found no place that was both worth defending, and defensible by our then-meager numbers. The world was very dangerous then.

“You know, two human wizards have intruded as far as the first sentry line near the top of the pass. But to my certain knowledge, they never saw over the edge. In almost a quarter of a million years, you are the very first human to see any part of The Nine Valleys. Most certainly the very first, ever, who has passed within!”

“I’m, uh, humbled by the honor... Thank you!” Mark stammered.

“Ah, he is a treasure!” Nemia laughed at his boyish manner.

“No. I’m the one who’s found the treasure.” Mark chuckled, smiling down at Talia. “If even my being here is unique, how much more rare and special is it that I should marry a princess of the mountain elves? I tell you, my mind is becoming completely boggled by the incredibleness of everything that’s happened! Six months ago I was just an ordinary forest ranger. And now, Princess Talia of The Nine Valleys will be my wife! Why, I’d bet I’m the first man who’s ever even touched an elven princess, anywhere, ever!”

“You may be right about that.” Hilsith agreed with a smile. “What’s more, to my knowledge, with ten thousand in attendance, it will be the greatest wedding ever held!”

“Ahh, so romantic!” Talia sighed. “But I’m not a princess. Among elves, such things as leadership and royalty are not hereditary.”

“Then how is it decided?” Mark asked.

“Generally, if most everyone thinks you can do the job, then you’re stuck with it, whether you like it or not!” Yazadril chuckled.

“Ha! Exactly that!” Alilia snorted.

“We were simply called ‘Leader’, long ago.” Yazadril continued. “But human monarchs consider it beneath them to negotiate on matters of diplomacy with those who are not royalty. So now we are called ‘Prince’ or ‘Princess’,

which were chosen because to call us king or queen would be an overstatement of our authority. Elves are not so liege-bound as humans.”

“Well, among *my* people, it would not matter whether you will inherit leadership or title.” Mark told Talia. “As long as your father is the reigning Prince, you would be considered a princess, and you would be treated and addressed as such. Not so, Yazadril?”

“True.” he admitted.

“And to me, you will always be my princess.” Mark finished.

“That is so nice!” Talia smiled. “Human stories and songs with princesses are always very romantic.”

“Events are escalating.” Alilia stated bitterly, changing the subject. “Even among those of us who do not dwell here, The Nine Valleys are considered inviolate; sacrosanct and sacred. His presence here will cause an uproar among all elvenkind everywhere. As it is my doing, I will be reviled, particularly by those of the conservative faction. Who knows what this wedding may lead to? Be they beneficial or harmful, there are going to be huge repercussions from all of this.”

“Well then!” Yazadril smiled. “It’s up to us to see that they’re beneficial, isn’t it?”

“It is.” Alilia was forced to agree.

They had passed below the tree line moments ago, and it seemed to Mark that every tree they passed was much larger than the one before. Now they were forty-five meters tall, and as wide as a house at the base of the trunk. Looking ahead, he saw that the trees there grew larger yet, and more widely spaced, with more undergrowth. With a start, he realized that some of the undergrowth was higher than the biggest tree in Shinosa Valley!

“This forest is incredible!” he exclaimed in amazement. “How big do these trees get?!”

“Here in First Valley, the tallest is about three hundred and sixty-five meters.” Theramin estimated. “About eight to ten times as high as these here. The very tallest are those that encircle the wedding chapel in Laylas Valley, which are twice as tall as that at about seven hundred and thirty meters. As Talia said, a special place. Those are over two hundred thousand years old, but though they are tallest, even they are not the oldest.

“I am the custodian of all the trees in The Nine Valleys.” he added proudly. “As senior horticultural wizard, their well-being is my responsibility.”

“Well, it seems you’re doing a grand job of it!” Mark marveled. “They’re incredible, and beautiful!”

Now they had reached the flat of the valley floor, and there were many broad, open spaces between the trees, most of which were from one hundred and twenty to two hundred meters tall here.

“Now we are into the settled areas of the valley, for these trees are homes, and there will be people walking about.” Talia told him “For safety’s sake, I must either slow to walking speed, or fly at least three meters above the ground.”

“Well, as you thought, I am getting used to it. Three meters should be okay.” Mark ventured.

Talia nodded, and as they smoothly rose to that height, Mark began to notice stairways and catwalks on the trees, and the openings of doors and windows in the trunks and greater branches. The works of the elves seemed so tiny in comparison to the mighty trees. Too, he began to notice a few other elves about, going to and from their homes or simply enjoying the sun and the summer breeze. Some strolled or lounged on benches, others flew. Of the flyers, some flew while standing as the rest of their party did, some sat on chairs or cushions, some lounged on blankets or carpets, and the fastest of them lay forward with their arms out, like soaring birds. They passed a shouting pack of elves engaged in some sport, running around on a marked circular field and throwing three balls about, though they were past before Mark could discern the method of their play.

“There would generally be many more about on such a beautiful day.” Talia quietly remarked as they turned off the main path. “Some prepare for the wedding. Others attend the Council Hall, where Dalia and Bezedil lie in state, until their final rites and internment in three weeks.”

She swallowed hard at the lump in her throat, and continued on. “There, you see that great oak tree there? You see how the stairway winds about it? At the top of that stairway, on the far side of the trunk, is my... My parents’ home. We can climb the steps, or we can ride up on a railed lifting platform, or I can just fly us up.”

“Well, you might as well fly us up, I guess.”

“Do you really think so?” Talia giggled. “I think you’re just trying to be brave and gallant.”

“Ha! I guess I am, but I also don’t want to climb that many stairs!” Mark laughed. “And I don’t see much difference between this and a railed lifting platform, except that this is more comfortable. Although I have to admit that I would sure prefer you to slow down some, before we go up there.”

“Quite understandable.” Talia smiled as she slowed to a hover at the base of the great tree, then slowly ascended vertically. She tried not to think about the ground on the far side of the trunk, and what had happened there yesterday.

When they were halfway to their goal, Mark marveled; “What a view! Now I see why you live so high up!”

“That’s part of it, but mostly it’s the growth of the tree!” Yazadril laughed. “This home has always been about one third of the way up the trunk, yet when it was first made, it was only twenty meters from the ground!”

“Bring us around to the balcony, Dear.” Nemia instructed. “Your intended might find our doors and hallways to be a bit restricting.”

“Yes, Mother.” Talia laughed. She followed the curve of the tree, and waited while the others alighted on the balcony and moved indoors to leave room for her to land Mark’s conveyance.

When she had done so, aligning the chair to face into the central room, Alilia pointed to the side of the chair.

“That handle there is part of a mechanism, and if you pull on it while sitting up, the chair will... Damn this simple language! It will de-recline. It will bend to a more vertical position. Yes, like that.”

As Mark followed her instruction, the chair had indeed assumed the shape of a conventional armchair. “Thanks so much again, Alilia! This is the first time I’ve sat in a chair that truly fit me since I was fourteen!”

“I deserve no thanks. And after you have had to fulfill the curse a few times, you will not think so either.” Alilia moped.

“Enough self-recrimination for one day, Alilia!” Talia told her firmly. “It is my wedding day, a joyous occasion, and I ask you to share that sentiment as much as you are able.”

“I will try.” Alilia muttered, before turning into the central room on her way to the kitchen.

“It’s so strange. I’ve never seen this place before, yet it seems familiar because I saw it in Talia’s vision.” Mark mused, leaning forward to peer within. He stood and hunched down enough to enter the central room, then shuffled over to the hallway.

“Her Reading, actually. A Vision is another thing entirely.” Yazadril informed him thoughtfully.

Mark showed no sign he’d heard. He stared intently within for many moments, then pointed down the hall without looking away. “Can I go down there please? To Dalia’s room?” he asked quietly. “I won’t touch anything.”

Yazadril looked to Nemia, who gave him a tearful shrug. “All right.” he answered.

Mark had to sidle sideways down the hall, where he stared for minutes at the spot on the floor where Talia had lay curled and crying. Then he considered Dalia’s door. Finally he delicately grasped the doorknob between thumb and fingertip, turned it, and slowly swung the door open. He went to one knee and stared within a few minutes, then closed the door and awkwardly returned to his chair, still deep in thought.

Unnerved a bit by this display, Yazadril turned to Theramin. “I think I should make my home a bit more comfortable for my soon-to-be son-in-law. Perhaps you could raise the ceiling in this room to three meters, enlarge the balcony doors, and double the area of the balcony?”

“Certainly.” Theramin nodded, looking about “I’ll cast it now, and it should be finished in about half an hour. And I’ll raise the balcony railing a by a third as well, though it still won’t be very safe for one of his height if he gets a few ales in him.”

“Thank you. I’m sure he’ll be careful.”

Talia sat patiently with Mark, perched on the arm of his chair, waiting for his thoughts to run their course.

Nemia waited for that as well, her basket of barbering supplies in hand, sensing something was amiss, and missing Dalia with all her heart.

Gradually catching this mood, Dilimon and Hilsith ceased preparing to take their leave, then Yazadril, and finally Theramin when he finished casting his spell, all stood silently watching Mark, none of them sure why.

The moment was broken when Alilia bustled out of the kitchen. “I have made tea, and cast the thousands of invitations, and arranged for the feast, though that took some doing...” she stated briskly before noticing the silent scene. “What is it?” she asked.

“I’m not sure.” Mark admitted, his eyes still unfocused in deep thought. “I keep thinking about the Reading, and it sure seems that there’s something subtly wrong about it all... I mean, I know I’m no expert on elves or anything, and I sure don’t want to seem insensitive to your loss, but still... The way everyone acted doesn’t quite ring true. Every little event in it seems subtly wrong...”

“The first one. Three times before, when Talia thought someone was her destined love, Dalia had waited until Talia knew one way or another, before Dalia approached the fellow herself. Yet this time, when Talia was sure, Dalia would not wait. Not that unusual, perhaps, yet unusual enough that Talia was surprised by it. And Dalia had to know that Talia would be hurt by it. Would she really do that normally?”

“The second one. I realize that you elves are more, uh, uninhibited, than my people, and Dalia and Bezedil were both young, very attractive, and I think a bit more promiscuous than the norm, even for elves. And that Bezedil

thought that Dalia was his destined love. Still, they met, exchanged barely a dozen words, and bedded each other barely a minute after they met! Doesn't that seem unusual to you?

"The third one. It makes sense that Talia was hurt by what they did. Yet you are not a sexually monogamous people, and as Dalia pointed out, Bezedil was obviously no virgin. Talia knew that *she* was Bezedil's destined love, and she had to know that under normal circumstances he would soon realize it as well, and then they would be together. So it makes sense that Talia was hurt, but it doesn't seem right that she was so completely devastated by it as she was.

"The fourth one. I can see how a human who is completely distraught might suicide by jumping from a high place, for our lives are short, and once we're falling, there's nothing we can do about it anyway. But for an elf to throw away thousands of years of life by doing so seems incredible! And once you're falling, I mean really *falling*, no matter who you are, the survival instinct should be undeniable! It seems impossible to me that anyone could choose to not save themselves then, if they had the means available, by flying or healing or disappearing or something! Yazadril has said that a few elves have committed suicide, but how many of them did it by jumping from a high place? Not many, I'd bet, or none.

"And the fifth one, and this is what really made me think that there was something wrong. *Why did Dalia jump?!!* After she did, it makes a little sense that Bezedil did, because he thought he'd lost his destined love. It makes even more sense that Talia jumped, because she had lost her twin sister, *and* her destined love. But Dalia must have known that Talia and Bezedil were destined lovers! It shouldn't have shocked her or hurt her that much to see them together! I know she was very pleased with Bezedil's love-making, and perhaps in that one hour she had even fallen in love with him a little. But even from the little I saw of her, it seems impossible that Dalia would commit suicide for so little provocation! That for every second of that fall, she could continue to choose to let herself impact and die because she had been jilted by her new lover!"

There was a long silence, broken by Alilia. "What are you implying?!" she grimly demanded, tears streaming down as she was forced to re-live yesterday's horror.

Mark, still deep in thought, took no offense. "I don't know. It's like everyone was somewhat drunk, just enough to make them more emotional. Could you all have been drugged? Or perhaps bewitched in some way?"

The rest were all shaken by the possibility.

Talia gave a choked laugh. "Perhaps we are *all* cursed!" she bitterly surmised.

There was another long silence.

"I think you jest, my daughter, yet perhaps you should not!" Yazadril stated grimly, his brows knotted in anger. "Mark has raised some valid points, though we could not see it because we were too close to the situation. Combine them with Alilia's earlier observations about major repercussions from these events, and the possibility of some kind of covert interference becomes all too real!

"By all the silent gods! Dalia's death by youthful foolishness is horrible enough! If someone has maliciously caused her death or contributed to it, whether it was by drug or spell or curse, I swear it will not remain hidden from *me!*

"All of you, please stay exactly where you are! If there is evidence, it has likely been much disturbed already, no need to make it worse!"

With a flurry of hummed notes and gestures, Yazadril began casting and loosing many different information-seeking and analyzing spells, one after the other, for six minutes or more. Then they all waited silently, watching him closely, while he concentrated fiercely.

"There... is something..." he murmured. "But it is faint... So old and faint..."

He concentrated until he was shaking from it, then struck his fists to his forehead in frustration. "Blazing source above, I will not be denied!" he cried. "Alilia, give me power! As much as you can without burning me out!"

Alilia sternly stepped to him, grasped his head with both hands, pressed her own forehead hard against his, and began pouring power into him. He also grasped her head in his hands and held it tight to his.

Mark had to look away from the brightness they were generating, though he was only seeing Yazadril's half of it.

Yazadril shook harder and harder, until he was shuddering head to toe and fell to one knee. Alilia released him, but he would not release her in return. "Almost there!" he quaveringly growled, and held on for another four seconds.

"Have it!" he hoarsely cried, and Nemia helped Alilia support him as he slowly collapsed to the floor, panting and shaking.

They waited while he recovered, until Alilia's patience ran out. "Out with it if you can, Yazadril! What did you find?!"

Yazadril sat up, wincing and gasping, and waved her to silence. Finally he spoke, sounding completely dejected. “Talia was right. We were cursed. You and I, Alilia, we two specifically were cursed, over one hundred and twenty years ago. By a human wizard, who at that time was located some three thousand kilometers to the east, and about a hundred and fifty kilometers north. The Empire of Thon, or the Kingdom of Yazzak. Not a very powerful curse, for even I could have put more power into one, but that’s what made it so hard to trace. No doubt our foe was pleased enough with it. And, it was eventually effective.

“Our children were murdered, Alilia, for we were cursed that our children would slay one another. I could learn no more, though I was desperate to learn the identity of the caster.”

“Our children were killed to strike at *us?!!*” Alilia screeched as she stood, clenched and shaking in rage.

“But... I mean in a way, that makes some of what’s happened understandable, but in some ways, things are only more confusing!” Nemia sobbed in grieved bewilderment. “Why would anyone do such a thing? Yazadril, neither you nor Alilia even *had* any living children one hundred and twenty years ago!”

“It is all too completely understandable, since our enemy is obviously one who takes the long view to his goals.” Alilia stated bitterly. “The patience of it is chilling. We did eventually have children, and the curse struck at the first opportunity, subtly altering reality just enough to accomplish it’s evil end. If we had never had children, our enemy would have wasted little in the effort. And knowing that it quite likely may have been a wasted effort, our unknown enemy no doubt has other schemes afoot to accomplish the same ends. I doubt that his purpose was to hurt us personally, to break our hearts by killing our children. We know for certain that the only ones who had reason to personally hate us that much are long dead, centuries before the curse was cast. And to hurt us, one would curse our children to die young, horribly perhaps, but not to slay one another! Nor to do so by such a relatively quick and painless method! To fulfill it’s requirements, the curse had to wait an extra twenty-nine years, when it could have simply slain them as babes!

“No. This curse, that our children would slay one another, was cast to cause enmity between Yazadril and I. To break our friendship. To break the alliance between our peoples. To cause war between The High People and The People of Life!

“And look how close it came to accomplishing that! I was a hair’s breadth away from killing Talia and Nemia, and then Yazadril would have killed me! When my people learned that my son and I had both been killed here by Yazadril and his family, they would have declared war, and their greater numbers clashing against the defenses of The Nine Valleys would have meant annihilation for all!”

“You think Father could have killed you?” Talia asked in astonishment.

“Don’t be naïve! Of course he would have!” Alilia snapped impatiently. “I have hundreds of times his power, but I am not too proud to realize that he is still twice the wizard I will ever be! If he wanted to match me power for power, all he would need to do is to tap the power of the nearest thousand elves, and he is *very* good at doing that very quickly under battle conditions! He could tap the nearest hundred thousand and overwhelm me completely, but that is not his way! He would have some tiny spell with less force than a falling pebble that would pass unnoticed through my defenses and block the veins in my brain, or something else of similar style!

“Do not be fooled by his humbleness or his lack of raw power, child, for your father is the greatest wizard alive! His strength may only be average for one of The High People, but that is nothing to disregard, for The High People are mightiest in magic as individuals! With his knowledge and skill, that is enough to make him invincible! And between us, we will *find* the worm spawn who have killed our children and threatened our nations, and we will make them *burn in hell forever!!!*”

Alilia was almost screaming in rage when she finished, and she took a moment to try to control her emotions.

“Great source!” Theramin breathed. “To think that only Yazadril’s appeal to your long friendship saved our peoples from war!”

“It did not.” Alilia spat, somewhat calmer. “For I was going to kill Talia anyway, and cared not of the consequences. A horrible truth, but there it is.”

She pointed to Mark. “*He* saved us from war. His presence was the wild card, the random factor our hidden enemy could not have foreseen. I had not thought of the ordeal of Yzandra in five hundred years, and if I had not just been discussing Mark, I would still not have thought of it! And even if I *had* thought of it, I would not have cursed Talia with it if he had not been handy to be the instrument of my vengeance!

“But he was there, and so at the very last instant, rather than blasting Talia to dust with a blow as I had planned, I thought of the ordeal of Yzandra, and I cursed Talia with it. At least thousands more will not die in a needless war!”

Talia spoke, and there was unexpected steel in her voice. “When you find those who did this, and the time comes to deal with them, I will claim my right to take part in the retribution.”

Then her hard determination faded, to be replaced by weariness from so much pain. “But today is my wedding day! Tomorrow will be soon enough to begin hunting them! Please, if I have to deal with even one more unhappy thought, I’m sure I will break down completely!”

Nemia wiped away her tears, and bravely pasted a smile on her face. “She’s right, we have a wedding to prepare for, and only about two hours remain before we should leave for Laylas Valley! There is much to do, so while I prepare Mark and Talia and myself, the rest of you can divide and delegate the rest that needs to be done.”

“As I said, the invitations are sent, and the feast arranged for.” Alilia said, glad for this distraction from her ire. “With your permission Talia, Mark, I will extend invitations to another fifteen. With ten thousand and more already, I’m sure we can fit them in somewhere.”

“I don’t see why not. May I ask who they are?” Talia inquired in puzzlement.

“They are the leaders of our peoples, the Princes and Princesses of all the elven nations of the world, for I intend to call them to High Council immediately after your wedding, to warn them that someone may be seeking to cause war among the elves. This cannot wait until tomorrow, for if our enemy has a way of monitoring events here, he already knows that his curse has acted successfully, yet failed to cause war, or even to break my friendship with Yazadril. Thus he may even now be setting new schemes in motion.”

“Certainly! I would love to have the royalty of the elven world attend my wedding!” Talia laughed, deliberately ignoring the unpleasant aspects of what Alilia had said.

“Good. Then I am off to my embassy. I will meet you at the chapel.” Alilia stated brusquely, and with that, she was simply gone.

“I’m glad she arranged for the feast.” Theramin grinned. “Her people have the kitchen capacity to produce one for ten thousand on short notice, while ours do not. Still, there are many other preparations to be made at the chapel, and that falls to me and my staff.

“Nemia, if you will tell me what you wish in the way of lighting and decoration, I will see to it. I know you would rather give that your personal attention, but as you say, time is pressing.”

“Thank you Theramin.” Nemia smiled. She produced a scroll from thin air and handed it to him. “Shall I hurry you there?”

“Please.” Theramin nodded, and waved to the rest. “I will see you there!” he called.

Nemia closed her eyes and hummed a beautiful liquid trill, and Theramin disappeared, leaving a slight swirl of air too minor to make a sound.

“Damn, that is so spooky!” Mark breathed. “It makes me doubt the reality around me!”

“Courage, my big, beautiful male. You’ll get used to us.” Talia chuckled. “You can get used to anything, after a while.”

“Nemia, Talia asked you to find the eleven most powerful guests of each gender to be bridesmaids and groomsmen.” Dilimon reminded her. “Yet that was before an additional eight thousand guests were considered. With your permission, the off-duty sentries and I will attend to this task. It is certain that all the attendees will be present in the chapel at least thirty minutes before the ceremony begins. At that point, the scouts and I will be able to survey the crowd and pick out the most powerful, using detuned Detect Power spells. We will invite them to join the wedding party as bridesmaids and groomsmen, and it is certain that few would refuse, if for no other reason than the close view of the proceedings that the opportunity affords! It should be easy to have them in place before the podium at least fifteen minutes before the ceremony commences.”

“Thank you Dilimon, that is most kind!”

“Then I’m off. Excuse me Mark, Talia. I’ll see you at the chapel!” Dilimon smiled as he sidled past them to step atop the balcony rail. He leaped up and out and accelerated in a second to an amazing speed, flying up like an arrow loosed from a bow, his arms held tight to his sides and his toes pointed behind. In seconds he was above the tops of the tallest trees, and he leveled out, banked to the west a bit, and was gone from sight.

“What a show off!” Talia giggled.

“I have things to do, Love.” Yazadril said as he kissed Nemia’s cheek. “After you’ve prepared the bride and groom, send them down to my workshop, and I’ll keep them occupied while you dress.”

“Yes Dear. I’ll get your things out for you. Your council robes, I think.”

“Of course, of course...” Yazadril muttered as he turned to go, his mind already on other matters.

“Well, here I am, the first to say farewell, yet the last still with you!” Hilsith chuckled. “And I think there is a place for me here, for I think Mark’s mind truly is becoming a bit boggled from all he has seen and experienced recently! So, with your permission I will stay, and while you make ready I will brew some soothing herbal tea, and sing some peaceful songs from the human lands, and play the harp.”

“Thank you.” Mark sighed. “I thought my heart was going to choke me when Dilimon jumped off like that! I don’t know if I’ll *ever* get used to it!”

“As I thought.” Hilsith nodded, and turned for the kitchen while checking in her pouch for herbs.

“And... I haven’t eaten for a while...” he hesitantly called after her.

“I’ll find you a snack to tide you over till the feast!” Hilsith chuckled over her shoulder as she left the room.

Nemia unfolded the white cloth she had used for the light screen earlier, and prepared to drape it around him from the neck down, to catch falling hair clippings. “Now then Mark, be seated in your big new chair, and tell me how you would like to be barbered.”

“Well, I like my hair just long enough to tie it together in the back, and I don’t like my beard at all, so you can shave it all off.” Mark told her. “Frankly, I didn’t like it when I got all hairy the year before last. I mean, a little is fine, but this is ridiculous! But I can’t shave it all down to my toes, or the stubble itch would drive me crazy!”

“All right, I’ll do your hair while Talia shaves you.” Nemia decided. “We often do this with spells, and few of our males shave anyway, or even need to. Still, our people enjoy physically grooming one another, and so we have the skills.

“But first, let’s get you clean. Spells may not affect you, perhaps not even your hair, but the dirt upon you is another matter.”

Nemia stood on the trunk behind his chair, placed her hands on his head, and hummed a complex lilt.

“Wow! That felt wonderful all over!” he enthused.

“And now you’re clean.” Nemia said, and tucked the edge of the sheet around his neck.

She brushed all the knots out of his mane of black hair and applied a bit of lotion that made it lay down shiny and smooth, then brushed it all back to the nape of his neck, secured it with a plain gold clasp, and cut it off evenly ten centimeters below the clasp.

While she did so, Talia stood between his spread knees on the seat of the chair and cut off his beard to within half a centimeter with shears, then worked a lotion into what was left.

Then she brought out the straight razor, and he eyed it a bit apprehensively.

“You might need to strop it. My beard’s pretty coarse, and I’ve given myself some nasty razor burn before.” he cautioned.

She giggled and replied; “It won’t get dull before it’s been used for another three centuries at least! Now hold very still.”

He did, and she carefully shaved him.

She and Nemia worked quickly, and were soon finished.

“There you go!” Talia brightly smiled, and she and Nemia stepped down to replace the barbering tools in their cases, while he stood and stretched, and rubbed his bare face for the first time in months.

Hilsith emerged from the kitchen with a tray in her hands, covered with bread, cheese, jam, cups, and a steaming teapot.

He picked up a mirror from the barbering kit and inspected himself. “Hey, that’s not too bad at all! I look a lot different since I last saw myself freshly barbered. Maturing, I guess. Thanks! Thanks a lot! What do you think?”

He lowered the mirror, and looked to the three elven women.

They were staring at him. Hilsith with her tray was grinning, Nemia looked bemused, and Talia looked mesmerized.

“What? Am I funny looking?” he asked, feeling a bit uncomfortable with the intensity with which they were gazing at him.

Talia tried to explain. “You’re... I mean, you have that over-masculinity that human males have from the strong facial bones, but with a boyish youthfulness that’s... It’s, uh, hard to find the words in this language...”

“Well, I guess I am a bit funny looking to elf girls...” he said with chagrin.

“What my daughter is trying to tell you,” Nemia patiently explained, smiling at his fluster, “Is that you are without a doubt, and by far, the most handsome human male any of us have ever seen.”

“Yes indeed.” Hilsith added. “It’s quite amazing what a transformation a barbering has made of you.”

“Oh yes!” Talia sincerely agreed. “You are *beautiful!* With your amazing size, you look like a *god!*”

“Oh come now!” he protested. “You’re teasing me, right? I mean, I know I’m not *ugly* or anything, but I sure wouldn’t go that far!”

The three elfesses looked at each other, and burst out giggling like schoolgirls.

“Of course we’re teasing you!” Nemia laughed as she opened her tailor’s basket. “How could anyone look like a god in the clothes you’re wearing? Now, are you a virgin?”

“Wha? *What?*”! He sputtered indignantly. “What kind of question is *that* to ask a fellow?!”

Hilsith and Talia giggled even harder.

“Hush you two! It’s a very important question, Mark. Male or female, virgins *must* wear white when they stand upon the podium of the wedding chapel to be joined in matrimony, and *only* virgins may wear it there. And so we must know. Talia will wear white. Will you?”

He became so mortified that he stared at his feet and blushed crimson.

Talia and Hilsith felt so much for his embarrassment that they stopped giggling.

“Yes. I’ll wear white.” he whispered, barely able to get the words out. He flinched in anticipation of another round of feminine giggling, but it never came.

Instead there was a pause, followed by Talia sighing; “Oh, that is so sweet!”

He actually heaved a sigh of relief that they hadn’t laughed at him.

“Here, have some tea and something to eat.” Hilsith said as she poured him a cup. “This tea is not magic, but the herbs are a mild drug. It will help you feel relaxed and centered, and refreshed.”

“All right, you will both wear white.” Nemias continued briskly. “Other than that, how would you like your clothing styled?”

“Something with a kilt. Something the other elves won’t think looks strange, and that goes with what Talia will be wearing. Other than that, I’ll leave it up to you to decide.”

“Very wisely said.” Nemias nodded as she laid out needles, scissors and such. “I have just the thing in mind, and I noted your measurements earlier, when Alilia got them from Yazadril so she could enlarge your chair.”

While Mark ate and drank, Nemias quickly made him a fine white silk kilt with a gold pin to secure it and a two centimeter wide band of gold trim magically attached along the hem, as well as a matching white shirt with gold trim along the bottom edge, at the sleeves and around the neck line. Sometimes she used scissors and needle and thread, and sometimes she cut or joined with magic, humming as she slid the material between pinched fingertips. Mark wondered why she sometimes chose one method and sometimes another, but his mind was already so filled with newness and explanations that he refrained from asking.

Hilsith reclined on the couch and sang sweet love songs from the human lands to the north-east, and though Mark had never heard any of them before and the words were in a language he didn’t understand, they did help greatly to soothe his mind.

Talia sat perched on the arm of his chair with her feet on the seat between his knees and her chin in her hands, smiling and watching him.

“I saw a girl with that expression once. She had just been given a new pony.” Mark chuckled, quiet and rumbling.

Talia just smiled a little wider.

“You know, I could swear that I can almost see that wall move!” he remarked.

“You can.” Talia giggled. “Theramin cast it for my father. You were thinking hard then, and you missed it. See, wood is slowly flowing from the ceiling, leaving it higher, down the walls beside the door and into the balcony, which is growing larger. And the door is getting larger, and the railing is getting higher. Though it’s not finished yet, I think you can stand comfortably in there now, and there’s room on the balcony for about ten elves to join you when you have your chair here.”

“Wow, that’s right! It’s so slow I didn’t even notice it!”

“This is almost finished, Mark.” Nemias told him as she held it up. “Come in here, and we’ll see how it looks on you.

He stood, and the doorway was just over his head, and when he stepped inside the ceiling was clear of his height by a quarter of a meter.

“This is much better!” he laughed.

Nemias floated up and held the shoulders of the shirt against Mark’s. She had to reach so wide to reach his shoulders that her bosom almost touched his chest, and he thrilled for a moment at her nearness and her scent, then blushed crimson again.

Talia giggled uncontrollably, though she was trying to suppress it.

Nemias was oblivious to all of that. “Yes, that should do nicely.” she commented as she handed the shirt to him and settled back to the floor, then handed him the kilt as well. “Try it on.”

“Where?”

“Pardon me?” Nemias blinked.

Hilsith would have giggled had she not been engaged in song.

“Where should I go to try it on?” he asked patiently.

Nemia looked baffled. “Where... would you *like* to go to try it on?”

Now *his* eyebrows rose in surprise, then lowered in consternation. “I’m... really not familiar with your home, Nemia. I’m sure wherever you choose would be fine.”

“Oh. About one pace to your left would be nice. You would be within the sunbeam coming through the doorway.”

At Mark’s expression, Hilsith was so struck with mirth that she could no longer sing or play, and had to stop to laugh aloud.

“Ahh, you are still such a young elf, Nemia!” she chuckled as she set her harp aside and poured more tea. “I think you have never been beyond The Nine Valleys! His people have a strong nudity taboo, and he would like to change his clothing in a private place.”

“Oh.” Nemia stated in surprise. “Well, I have been beyond to visit Alilia in the forest lands with Yazadril, and I knew of the taboo. I didn’t think it applied to us here, as you are his Healer, and I am his tailor, and how could we do these things without seeing him naked? I thought exceptions were made for such things.”

“There was no offense given.” Mark explained patiently. “I’ll just change in another room.

“I must go with you.” Talia softly told him. “I was given to you, and Alilia said that she pictured me being with you as you went about your life. Now I’m terrified that if I leave your side, it will trigger the curse. Beyond what it would make us do, simply feeling it active within me is horrible.”

Mark went to one knee and gently hugged her. “That’s okay. Here’s what we’ll do. One of you amazing wizards will shake the hair out of that big white cloth and hang it in a circle. I’ll stand in it and change my clothes. You can be close enough to touch me. All right?”

“Thank you. That is very considerate.” Talia mumbled into the side of his neck.

“And very practical, since the other rooms are still too low for you to stand up in.” Nemia pointed out with a smile as she collected the clippings with a gestured spell and tucked them into a small cloth bag, which she handed to Talia. “I’m sure it would be difficult to tell how well your new things fit you if you were hunched over like that.”

Soon the cloth was hung and he changed into his new clothes. “There’s no buttons in the front of the shirt.” he commented.

Nemia slid a five centimeter wide gold mesh belt under the edge of the hanging cloth. “Wrap the front of the shirt around, one side over the other, and hold it in place with this belt around your waist.”

He considered his under-breeks, which were tattered but spotlessly clean, thanks to Nemia’s spell. He slid them under the edge of the cloth. “Could you make me a new pair of these? Those are about worn out.”

In only moments she passed him a new, white pair, and he drew them on under the kilt. They were tighter, and made of very thin, supple material, and only covered half as much of him as his old pair. “Hey! These are... different!” he protested.

“If they were like your old ones, they would spoil the line of your new clothing.” Nemia explained, and he had no response to that. “Are they uncomfortable?”

“No... Actually, they’re *very* comfortable!” he marveled.

He stepped out when he was ready, and while Hilsith played and Talia grinned, Nemia adjusted the hang a bit to eliminate folds under the belt. “There!” she declared. “Now just a few touches to finish it off.”

She handed him a pair of soft white leather sandals that laced halfway up his calves. When he had them on and tied, she floated up to him holding a diamond. “Hold still a moment. I’m going to set this in your hair-clasp.”

“Hey! Could I see that first?”

She handed him the glinting stone. It was a clear, fire-brilliant diamond as big as the tip of her ring finger.

“Great spirits of sun and moon!” he breathed. “If this is real, I could buy a mansion with it!”

“Perhaps, though it has a bit of a flaw, there, see? And I have many of them.” Nemia shrugged, and plucked it from his palm to resume her task.

“You have the good fortune to be marrying into a very wealthy family, Mark.” Hilsith chuckled as she set her harp aside and joined Talia and Nemia in looking him up and down.

“Do I look okay? I mean, will I look okay to all those Princes and Princesses?” he asked worriedly.

With a wave of her arm and a whistled trill, Talia summoned a full-length mirror from her room. “Here, let’s all stand in the sunlight together.” she quietly requested, and when they stood together she set and angled the mirror at a distance that allowed them all to see themselves in it.

Even Mark was surprised by his appearance. The cloth was glossy white and luxuriously smooth, the gold shining, contrasting with his black hair and blue eyes. The kilt was a bit shorter than he was used to, it’s gold hem

above his knees. The shirt's gold-trimmed bottom edge was even with the top of his hips, gathered at his waist by the gold belt, and it covered the waistband of the kilt. Their proportions perfectly accentuated his powerful legs and muscular build.

Too, he was unprepared for how tiny the three beauties with him looked, or how gigantic he looked by comparison, as the tallest of the three was barely more than half his height.

"You are so beautiful." Talia told him quietly. "Even you must admit, you look like a god."

He was saved from having to reply by the return of Yazadril. "Well done, my loves, well done indeed!" he commended. "He is magnificent! He would brighten any court in the world!"

"Thank you." Nemia smiled as she stepped to his side for a hug.

"Now, if you could finish preparing Talia, I could show them something I'm eager for them to see!"

"Talia will not take long, only a few moments." Nemia told him with a smile and a kiss on the cheek. She went down the hall to her and Yazadril's bedroom, and returned with a package wrapped in fine red paper, tied with a red ribbon. Her face beaming with pride, she handed it to her daughter, who reverently received it, and stepped within the hanging cloth for Mark's sake.

"Like all mothers and daughters, they have dreamt of this day for years." Yazadril told Mark with quiet pride. "They have considered a thousand plans before deciding, and Nemia has labored for countless hours over Talia's wedding dress."

Mark could almost feel the words that Yazadril did not speak, that the same was true of Dalia. He felt humbled by the old elf's courage and fortitude, and that of his family; that they could carry on so well only one day after their tragic loss.

Then Talia stepped from behind the curtain with a shy smile, and it was Mark's turn to gape. Her dress was also white, with similar gold trim around the floor-length hem and the cuffs of the sleeves, and he could readily believe that Nemia had labored many hours to produce such perfect simplicity. The sleeves flared from snug around her shoulders to swirling gracefully about her hands, as the dress flared from snug around mid-thigh to swirling loosely at the hem. From shoulder down to mid-thigh the soft, supple cloth clung to her skin, hugging her slim curves in a way that was hypnotic. Depending on how she moved and the angle of the light, it seemed to vary from covering her modestly to concealing no more than a light dusting of flour. The neckline came to a point between her breasts, framing a large teardrop diamond on a gold chain. Her waves of light golden-blond hair cascaded down her back, with the tops of her delicately pointed ears peeking through. Her tiny feet were shod in white satin slippers, with white ribbons that twined to the top of her ankle.

She waited with her eyes down for long moments, and finally raised her gaze to his. The naked hope for his approval in her expression brought a lump to his throat. "My Talia, you are beautiful beyond measure." he breathed in wonder.

"He's right, Love." Yazadril proudly smiled. "You are as beautiful as it is possible for a girl to be."

"Exquisite work, Nemia." Hilsith congratulated. "It truly accentuates her to perfection."

"Talia long ago decided on the white and gold theme, which is carried on in the decorations at the chapel." Nemia revealed as she moved the mirror so Talia could see herself. "Too, she decided that she would contrast herself from the assembled finery with a dress of studied simplicity. I think I did rather well with it, for she looks beautiful, and Mark's ensemble was derived from it. Males are so much easier to dress."

"Oh Mother, it's wonderful!" Talia quietly exclaimed, turning side to side as she watched herself, enjoying the swirl of the cloth.

Mark went to one knee beside her, and she laid her arm across his shoulder as they smiled at their reflection. Soon Mark was grinning widely. "Wow! We really look great!" he laughed, and then the room seemed to shine with gaiety.

"Off with you now, then, while I get prepared!" Nemia said as she took down the hanging cloth. "And Yazadril, show them what you have to show, then come up to change. The more I think of it, the more I think it would be wise to arrive early."

"No doubt you're right, my dear." he agreed thoughtfully. "And I've changed my mind about what I'll wear. I think I'll wear the, ah, more traditional outfit."

"I see." Nemia nodded with a thoughtful look. "Good choice. It will better match the theme."

"Yes, that too. Come you two." Yazadril chuckled, as he led the way to a door just off the kitchen, and down a set of spiral stairs within the wood, lit by glowing spheres set at intervals overhead. Mark carefully sidled down the tight passage behind Yazadril and Talia for ten meters, to a chamber that was completely enclosed in the heart of the tree. "My workshop. Safer if it's separate from the rest of the home." Yazadril explained to Mark as he unlatched

and opened a very thick wood door, and led them within. The room was round and six meters wide, and the domed ceiling was just high enough near the center for Mark to stand up straight. Curved work benches of elven size lined the walls, below racks and shelves of neatly arrayed tools, implements and materials, the nature of most of which was a complete mystery to Mark.

“I’ve always loved this place.” Talia smiled as she looked around.

“Talia told me of your thoughts, about letting the binding of your wedding vows affect you.” Yazadril told Mark as he fetched an item from a workbench and held it up. It was a twenty-five centimeter long, two centimeter wide, thin steel band with rounded ends, bent smoothly into a C, with five thin steel tines protruding from the middle of one edge. “Now, when I cast a mild Tranquility upon you yesterday, I altered my own vibration, and so the vibration of the spell, so that it could affect you. It’s a different thing to change *your* vibration, to negate your special quality and allow magic to affect you. None-the-less, if I’ve transposed the notes I used correctly, and made no mistake in the theory, the mathematics, or the crafting of it, this should do the trick.”

He plucked the ends of the tines, all five at once, and the notes they made formed an eerie, shimmering chord. “If this works, as long as you’re wearing this and the tines are ringing, it will alter the vibration of the most crucial parts of your brain, and hence your nervous system, and magic should affect you. It will be most effective as the tines are first plucked, and the effect will fade as the sound and vibration fades. So, if you want a spell to affect you at a somewhat constant rate, strum it like this;” He brushed his fingertips rapidly back and forth over the five tines like he was strumming a lute, and the chord rang out constantly.

“If you want to wear it without it affecting you, slide this little velvet envelope over the tines to damp their vibration. Let’s try it, shall we? Could you bend down a bit?”

Mark bent down, and Yazadril slid the band onto his head. The ends squeezed the side of his head at the top of his temples, holding the metal in firm contact across his forehead, with the tines encased in black velvet sticking up from the center. It was uncomfortable, but not greatly so.

“Now we will test your heat tolerance.” Yazadril explained. “I will lightly hold your left index finger close to this candle flame, far enough away that it will not hurt at first, but close enough that soon the pain will make your arm pull the finger away. Just let it do so.”

They conducted the test, and when Mark jerked his hand away and stuck his fingertip in his mouth, Yazadril nodded. “Just short of six seconds. A bit longer than I expected. Dry your finger with this handkerchief. Now I will create another burning candle entirely from magic, but otherwise identical in every way to the mundane candle. Do you see it?” Yazadril asked, holding it out to Mark.

“No. To me your hand is empty, though curved to hold something candle shaped.”

“Talia?”

“It looks exactly the same as the other candle to me, Father.”

“Excellent. Now give me your finger again, Mark.”

He held the tip of Mark’s finger in the center of the flame for ten seconds. “You feel nothing?”

“No. Just you holding my finger.”

Talia whistled softly, eyebrows raised. “Now to me, *that* is spooky!” she commented.

“All right.” Yazadril released his hand. “Now take off the velvet envelope, and pluck the tines. Tell me what you experience.”

Mark did so. “Whoa! It’s very loud when you’re wearing it! It kind of sounds nice, but it kind of sounds scary, and in a way it seems to be rattling my skull. But I can see the magic candle! Though it doesn’t seem very, uh, substantial. And like you said, it’s kind of fading away with the sound.”

“About what I expected. Now strum the tines. Try to keep the sound constant and even, so that the image of the candle is also constant and even.

Mark experimented with it a few moments, until he had selected a technique and stabilized it. “That’s about as good as I’ll be able to do without a lot of extra practice at it.”

“It sounds very smooth.” Yazadril nodded. “This is the important part. Maintain the strumming, while I hold your finger exactly the same distance from the magic flame as I held it from the mundane flame for the first heat tolerance test. It will take a lot longer for you to feel the heat this time, so just keep concentrating on keeping the strumming constant.”

They conducted the test, and the moments passed, until finally Mark gave a yelp and jerked his hand away.

“Two minutes and four seconds.” Yazadril stated thoughtfully. “Here’s what we’ve learned, children. Within the margins of error for this test, it is safe to say that while strumming the tines, Mark is affected by magic at about one twentieth the normal amount, all other things being equal. That should hold for all types of magic.”

“I have a spell of another type I would like to try.” Talia giggled.

Mark gave her a bit of an apprehensive look.

“Don’t worry, it’s harmless!” she re-assured him. “And I think you’ll like it. Kneel down please.”

“Remember, you’ll need to use twenty times the power you normally would.” Yazadril cautioned. “Be careful of the consequences of either overpowering or underpowering the spell.”

“Yes Father.” Talia nodded.

With a shrug, Mark knelt and strummed the tines.

Talia put her hands on his shoulders, whistled a complex melody, and gave a jerky nod. “That’s it. You can stand up.”

He did. And every hair on his body below his neck fell out.

“It worked!” Talia laughed, clapping her hands. “I can’t believe it! You are even more handsome without all that coarse fur!”

“Thanks!” Mark chuckled in amazement as he brushed off loose hairs that still clung to him.

“Can I do one more?” Talia eagerly asked.

“What?”

“Where you were covered by your hair and beard and clothes, you’re quite white, while your hands, shins, and around your eyes are quite tanned. I would like to make you evenly and lightly tanned all over.”

“Oh, well that would be okay.”

He knelt down and strummed, and in a moment it was done.

“Perfect! Now you could not possibly be more handsome!” she laughed as she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him.

“And you found the twenty to one power requirement ratio to be consistent?” Yazadril asked.

“Yes Father, as near as I could tell.”

“Well my boy, that is all I can do for you that way today. There will be five times as many guests as we expected at Talia’s wedding, and since Alilia is inviting the most powerful eight thousand from her people’s hundreds of thousands, the average Power of the guests will be much higher as well. If they are all four times as powerful on the average as a typical elf of The High People, *your* vows should affect you equally as powerfully as most elves of The High People are affected by *their* vows. What will actually happen is impossible to say. It’s your choice whether to wear this and strum it, or not, as you take your vows.

“Now, behind that door is a privacy, and you should go there and shake all that hair out of your new clothes and sandals!

“While you do that, I will cast invisibility and inaudibility on this tine band, keyed to Talia and I. Only we two will be able to see it, or hear it’s sound through the air, and of course while you are not wearing it and strumming it, you will see it and hear it as well, since those spells will not affect you. But, I cannot key it to you unless you *are* wearing it and strumming it at the same time that I’m keying it, and that could be dangerous. So, when you wear it and strum or pluck it and are thus affected by magic, if you look in a mirror you will not be able to see it. Also, while wearing it and strumming it you will not be able to hear the sound of it through the air, but that is of no consequence, because most of the vibration, and the only part that matters, is the vibration you’ll hear through the bones of your head.

“The point is, you’ll be able to use it without giving your secret away or anyone realizing it, if you so choose. Except that they will see your fingers move as you pluck, so try to keep that unobtrusive. If you wear it too long it will make a slight red mark from the squeeze on your skin. As for carrying it without using it, I suggest you put it on your upper arm, it should hold there firmly.

“Thank you Yazadril!” Mark said as he took the band off. He slipped the velvet envelope over the tines, and handed it over.

“You’re welcome.” Yazadril absently acknowledged, already reviewing his spells.

Mark shared a smile with Talia and turned to go to the privacy.

Half a minute later Yazadril finished, and handed the tine band to Talia. “And now I must go make ready before Nemia comes looking for me! Talia, bring him upstairs when he has the hair off him.” He tossed that last over his shoulder as he jogged out the door and up the stairs.

Mark soon returned from the privacy, a bemused smile on his face. “There’s a big mirror in there, though not full length.” he said as he went to one knee and gave her his hands, and she placed her tiny ones within them. “Thank you very much. I hate to sound egotistical, but I am honestly so surprised at how nice I look!”

“You’re welcome. You do look wonderful.” she shyly smiled.

“So do you.”

“Thank you. Could I have a kiss? A very, very nice one?”

His smile was just as shy. “I’d like that.”

She slowly leaned forward, and softly brought her lips to his as she closed her eyes.

A minute later she leaned back, and they were both a little short of breath. They relived the experience for a moment, then their eyes re-focused on each other. They grinned like schoolchildren as she took the tine band from the back of her neck where she’d placed it, slid it onto his bicep, and they went up the stairs.

When they reached the landing at the top, she stopped and turned to him without opening the door. “It seems incredible, considering everything that’s happened, but I think I am starting to fall in love with you, Mark Longstrider.” She informed him with an excited smile. He was still three steps below her, so she didn’t have to look up at him quite so much.

“And I have fallen completely in love with you, Talia.” he returned with the same smile as they joined hands.

“Oh? So soon? Are you sure?” she teased.

“Oh yes.”

“Should we cancel some of the plans to have so many reinforce your vows? It *is* an unknown, a danger, and since you love me already and we have Father’s latest invention, we might not need so much.”

“It’s probably too late to cancel any plans. Besides, I think it will work, I think the danger is small, and as you said, eternity is a very long time. I think we should take every little bit of help we can get.”

“All right.”

With a twinkle in her eye, she subtly leaned forward and raised her chin.

He understood the gesture immediately, and leaned forward to give her another kiss.

“Ah, we are all so lucky you came here yesterday Mark, in so many ways.” she chuckled a few moments later. “Especially me.”

She caressed his face with one hand, then opened the door and led him through.

Nemia and Hilsith sat chatting on the couch, and rose at their arrival.

“My!” Nemia exclaimed. “He just keeps getting better and better, doesn’t he?”

“He does!” Hilsith agreed. “Your husband again shows new talent, an ability with cosmetic magic!”

“Yes, having obviously found a way to affect Mark’s skin and hair!” Nemia laughed.

“You two are both very pretty as well!” Mark complimented.

Hilsith and Nemia both wore evening gowns that were much as Mark expected ladies of nobility to wear, their floor-length flared hoop skirts stuffed with petticoats, their short sleeves puffed, the necklines low and rounded. Both dresses had many accents; tiny pearls and gems, and delicate ribbons and bows. Nemia’s was a very light pink, while Hilsith’s was a bright white with a blue tinge that matched her hair and skin.

“You are indeed very beautiful, both of you!” Yazadril smiled, emerging from the hallway.

“Oh my!” Nemia breathed as he came to her side.

“Yazadril? Is that *you?!!*” Mark asked in amazement, for the ancient elf was barely recognizable.

He wore a gleaming suit of golden armor, plate over mail, with white ceramic accents, and a white cape trimmed in gold embroidery. The hilt of a matching two-handed sword was seen over his left shoulder, the tip of the scabbard almost touching the ground by his right foot. His gauntlets hung from his belt, and a small but very ornate crown graced his head, gleaming gold and silver and studded with jewels.

But his transformation was far more complete than that. He no longer looked ancient, and instead appeared to Mark to be about forty-five years old. His long beard was gone, and his clean-shaven face had only a few fine lines. His hair was now a dark steely gray, and his aura of ‘humble old elf’ was completely gone. His bearing was now straight and strong and full of the command of nobility. For the first time, Mark realized that here was one of the most formidable warriors that had ever lived.

“Oh, it’s me, all right.” Yazadril chuckled. “For the last millennia it has suited my purpose to have a demeanor that encouraged my people to find me very approachable. For the same reason I have often appeared to be less magically skilled than I am. Now, I think events call for something else, and so I have reverted to my more military image.”

“But you look so much younger!” Mark stammered.

“Yes. The appearance of age is a harmless affliction that comes upon us very slowly, and it’s few elves who are of such an age to be able to achieve that look. But, we can choose to heal from it. If I wished, I could appear as young as Nemia, but that would not help me to be taken seriously in councils of war. And I must admit that the age I

allowed to slowly come upon me must have affected more than my appearance, for now that it is gone, I feel more fit and vigorous than I have since... Why, since I last looked like this!”

“Oh my husband, I have loved you so much!” Nemia sobbed as she hugged him, moved to tears by him. “But I never knew I could desire you so much more! If this wedding were not so important, I would drag you down the hall to our bedroom this very instant!”

“Why... I had not considered that!” Yazadril chuckled.

“And you’re glowing brighter than Nemia and Talia, and they’re the brightest I’ve seen except Alilia!” Mark revealed.

“I expect I am. This armor, the crown, and most especially the sword, are all among the most revered treasures of my people, and they are items of serious power indeed!”

“Oh Father, you look so fine and handsome!” Talia marveled.

“Thank you. And now our preparations are complete, I think. Shall we go?”

“We shall!” Talia eagerly agreed. “And I think that I should hide Mark from sight as we travel, so we can make a more grand entrance when we step out into the chapel.” She gestured at Mark’s chair and whistled a melody.

“Good thinking.” Yazadril nodded. “A little showmanship can only aid our cause.”

“What did you do?” Mark asked his intended as he seated himself, and Talia curled up in his lap.

“I cast an Illusion. To other eyes, this platform now has a wood frame around the chair, sporting a roof and curtains all around, of brown cloth with gold thread embroidery.”

“Oh.”

They smoothly rose and floated over the balcony railing, Yazadril and Nemia taking a position to the left as before, and Hilsith to the right.

“You can fly if you want. I trust it now, and I’m used to the height after being on that balcony so much.” Mark murmured to Talia. “I mean, you don’t have to go along the ground like before.”

“Excellent!” Talia laughed, and they sailed off into the wide spaces between the great trees, gradually gaining altitude.

When they cleared the tops of the trees, still rising, the ground below was beginning its incline to the pass into the next valley. Soon they sailed far above the pass and into the valley beyond, though they were still far below the tops of the mountain peaks all around.

“This is incredible!” Mark shouted over the howl of the wind, for though they felt very little of it, Talia was deflecting a mighty blast of air. “I don’t even want to *know* how high up we are! How fast are we going?”

“Every minute, we travel about a league.”

“A league a minute? But that’s...” he had to pause to calculate it. “That’s about two hundred and ninety kilometers per hour!”

“Yes.”

Mark looked around in wonder, for at their height the speed was not as apparent. Furthermore, the three flyers around him were standing at their ease, and since they chose to block the wind completely, they sailed along without a hair out of place. He shook his head in amazement.

“Why did Dilimon fly the way he did, instead of standing up like that?”

“He flies three times as fast as this. At that speed he must minimize the wind he must deflect, or the noise would be deafening and the cold would be dangerous. He is very skilled at it.”

“Oh.”

Now they were over the next valley, which was also perfectly round and hemispherical except for the flat of the valley floor, though it was somewhat smaller than First Valley. And where the trees around Yazadril’s home seemed to be of every variety that Mark had ever seen, those in the second valley were all of types that shed their leaves in the fall, with none of the evergreen varieties.

“That oak is the oldest tree in The Nine Valleys.” Talia told him. The one she pointed at stood by itself in the exact center of the valley. Mighty it was, the highest in the valley, five hundred and fifty meters tall and fully as wide, with only grass beneath it, surrounded by a clearing five times as wide as it was. “It was planted soon after my people settled here, when there was nothing else but blasted rock. Most of the first trees died early, till there was a sufficiently nutritious soil base, but that one has survived, and thrived. It has a very long name in my language, but we simply call it The First Tree.”

They curved gradually to the right, aiming for the pass to the third valley beyond. This pass was long, and had a road that climbed as it wound between five mountains, each higher than the one before. Talia flew them up and up, over the second and third peak, between the last two.

“This is Laylas Valley. It is the largest of the nine. The chapel is at the center.” Talia explained as they flew over the last high notch of the pass.

“Wow!!” Mark exclaimed as the valley came into view. It was five times as wide as First Valley, and five times as deep as well, fully seven thousand six hundred meters from the valley floor to the jagged rim. It was more of a bowl than the other two, since the flat at the center was a smaller proportion of it, and the rim much more consistent in height. And in contrast to the previous valley, every one of the great trees here was of a single variety of redwood fir. They were more closely spaced as well, and in many places the tips of their branches intermingled. They smoothly rose in height toward the center, forming a round peak.

Now they flew down into the valley. Soon Mark noticed swarms of elves flying about the center, and as they drew closer, he saw that there were throngs of them on the ground. “Sweet mother of all! I never knew ten thousand could look like so many!”

Yazadril frowned. “That’s because there are far more than ten thousand here already! And more arriving every moment!”

They flew above the trees to the center of the valley, where a perfect ring of twelve redwoods, each exactly the same height and shape, towered over all. A somewhat shorter ring of twenty-four surrounded them, with another ring of thirty-six around and below that. Around the three rings the symmetry was lost, for though the trees around them continued to smoothly decrease in height, they were positioned more randomly.

Talia came to a stop in mid-air above the center of the innermost ring, then descended into the round space between them. Now they were veritably surrounded by flyers, though all maintained a discreet distance. Some who recognized Yazadril, Nemia or Hilsith called greetings, which were fondly returned.

As they neared the ground they approached the east side of the clearing, then slowly settled toward a huge deck six meters up the trunk of the easternmost tree of the inner ring. Talia kept the chair hovering just above the deck as the others alighted, and Nemia opened the large, windowed, double doors with a gesture. Talia floated the chair in after them, and Nemia used another gesture to close the doors and draw the gauzy curtains.

Within they found a large, round, elegant room, with a high ceiling graced by a magnificent and delicate crystal chandelier. Like the rooms in Yazadril’s home, it was a natural seeming hollow, and it’s floors, as well as the walls that curved up to form the ceiling, were surfaced by the highly-polished living wood of the great tree. On one side was a row of elf-sized dressing tables with padded stools interspersed with wall mirrors, so the bridal party could do last-minute touch-ups to their appearances, and on the opposite wall was an open cabinet with an assortment of fine spirits and beverages, surrounded by groupings of small armchairs and side tables.

On that side, Alilia conferred with several other elves, all attired in magnificent array. She wasn’t damping her glow to Mark’s sight, and a few of those with her were almost as bright, but he had come upon it gradually this time, and his eyes seemed to be more able to adjust to it now. He found that by narrowing his eyes a bit, he could look upon the group without too much discomfort.

At the rear of the room, near a door that led deeper into the tree, stood Theramin, Dilimon, and two female elves Mark hadn’t yet met.

Theramin looked agitated almost unto apoplexy. “Finally you are here, Yazadril!” he exclaimed as he hurried over. “I’ve been casting Speaking at you for forty minutes or more!”

“I was working on something delicate, so I blocked communication.” Yazadril told him, vexed. “I’m sorry I didn’t restore it afterward, but why didn’t you simply use an Official Priority Speaking?”

“Because officially speaking, there was nothing unusual happening until just now!” Theramin said as he threw his hands in the air in frustration. “Those within the inner ring are the only ones who are officially within the chapel, and they are all invited guests; all of The High People, and those Alilia invited from her people on Talia’s behalf. Everyone outside the inner ring are from her people as well, and they are, so they say, ‘just visiting’, as is their right under the terms of the alliance! It looks like the entire nation of The People of Life will soon be ‘just visiting’ around the chapel! Of course, it doesn’t really matter that they are outside the chapel, because unless you expressly forbid it, everyone outside will be taking a Reading from someone inside!”

“Word has spread like wildfire! About the deaths of Dalia and Bezedil, about Mark, about Alilia’s curse, and about this wedding and how many have been invited! Rumors are spreading like a plague, and many of the young hot-heads are talking all sorts of foolishness!”

“And this is spreading around the world! Those are the Princes and Princesses over there with Alilia, and they tell me that millions of elves from all over the world have asked for permission to come here! Just for a visit, of course! Alilia had to invoke the charters of war to insure that none spoke of any of this to any but elves! She had to actually declare a state of war in order to ensure compliance from the plains elves, just a moment ago!”

“Let them come.” Mark said as he stood and Talia banished her illusion. His powerful, rumbling voice drew every eye in the room.

He looked to Talia. She smiled and nodded, and offered him her hand. He returned her smile as he gently took it, then met the eyes of those around him one by one. “They must each swear to keep the peace, and to not crowd into the chapel or do anything else that would disrupt the ceremony, or the celebration. But on those conditions, we extend an invitation to any elf who wishes to come to our wedding.”

“Done!” one of the elves with Alilia shouted, loudly and triumphantly. “Let all see the truth, whatever happens!”

As he spoke a flash had lit in the room, so bright that Mark blinked hard and rubbed his watering eyes.

“I hope you’re satisfied.” Alilia declared in frustration. “For better or worse, there will soon be over two million elves in attendance!”

Mark nodded as his eyes cleared, and he gave her a smile.

Despite her ire, she was magnificent, her beauty easily outshining any he had seen except Talia and Nemia. And despite everything else, he could not help but be struck by it. She wore a white silk blouse with ruffled lace on the front, form-fitting black velvet pants tucked into high, black leather boots, and a black velvet cape secured with a gold chain over it all. Atop her gleaming white hair was a shimmering tiara of some white metal, centered with an oval sapphire as big as a chicken’s egg, and she held a black staff of power topped by a diamond as big as her fist.

“Wow Alilia, you’re really beautiful! I mean, that’s a nice outfit!” he blurted, then blushed at his own youthful impetuosity.

Alilia’s eyebrows rose in surprise, and then she could not help but chuckle at him. A quiet laugh went around the room as the tension was suddenly released, and everyone relaxed a bit. “Ah Mark, you are such a good boy.” She told him with a smile of her own. “And I will have you know that this is the raiment of a Battle Wizard of The People of Life. But thank you.

“We speak Trade Common around Mark, as he does not speak Elvish.” Alilia said to the royalty around her.

“You all know Yazadril of course, and you met Nemia at their wedding. This is Hilsith, Master Healer of The Warm People. This is Talia, daughter of Yazadril and Nemia.”

Yazadril had given a shallow, dignified bow at his introduction, and the ladies gave a curtsy.

“And this of course, is Markhan Reginus Longstrider the Fifth, Forest Ranger of Shinosa Valley in Finitra, of whom we’ve been speaking.”

As he’d done before, Mark made his courtly bow and politely declared; “I am entirely at your service.”, before smoothly standing again.

“Mark, this outspoken fellow is Prince Jaromer of The Elven Peoples of The Empire of Thon, Viscount of that realm and Imperial Wizard to His Excellency Osbald the Eighth. He’s feeling a little defensive right now, because he’s just learned, under a provision of military secrecy, that Yazadril and I were cursed from the vicinity of his homeland.”

Jaromer stepped forward and shook Mark’s hand as a man would. He was tall for an elf at one hundred and sixty-eight centimeters, with dark brown hair and eyes, and wore very ornate red robes of state. “Hello, young fellow!” was his jovial greeting. “My people have benefited greatly from our association with the humans of our country, and we’re of the opinion that the other elven nations could do the same. Segregation leads to conflict, we think, so I’m quite glad to see you come to dwell here! Hopefully this will lead to more pleasant relations between our more rural and conservative cousins and the human nations they share borders with.”

“Nothing would please me more, Prince Jaromer.” Mark returned. “And I’m glad to meet you!”

“I hate to risk breaching any royal protocols, but we must prepare for the ceremony.” Nemia politely interrupted.

“She’s right.” Alilia nodded. “Mark, you will meet the rest of these august personages after the ceremony, but for now, I will show them to their places, and check on the progress of the preparations and the feast.

“And by the way, Yazadril, it’s been a long time since I’ve seen you looking as you should.”

Mark gave the group a smile and a polite bow. “Thank you all for coming.” he told them as Alilia led them out the door and down a set of stairs.

“Actually,” Dilimon remarked as the door closed behind them, “Over three-quarters of an hour remains before the ceremony begins. I assume you will be using our people’s ceremony, which is not lengthy or complex, so you should have plenty of time to coach Mark in what will be required of him.”

“We will use our people’s ceremony, though we will be conducting it in Mark’s language.” Nemia told him, then laughed. “I simply couldn’t abide having to listen to a political debate right now!”

“Thank you, Mother.” Talia smiled. “I’m nervous enough without being surrounded by royalty!”

“Me too!” Mark laughed. “So, how exactly does the service go?”

“At the appointed moment, the chandelier there will chime, and out by the podium, the Orchestra of The High People will begin to play the music that Talia and Nemia have chosen.” Yazadril said, falling habitually into his teaching manner. “We will then proceed down the stairs to the room below at ground level, and while we are doing that, the bridesmaids and groomsmen will take their places on the third tier of the podium at the center of the chapel. As Theramin will be conducting the ceremony, he will be the first to emerge from the room downstairs, walk down the aisle, and take his place atop the topmost tier of the podium. Then you, with Dilimon as your best man, the two of you constituting the immediate party of the groom, will walk down the aisle and take your places to Theramin’s right on the second tier of the podium. Then Talia, with Nemia and I as her parents and Alilia as her maid of honor, and thus constituting the immediate party of the bride, will walk the aisle and take our places to Theramin’s left on the second tier.

“Theramin will then begin speaking the ceremony.”

“Right. And I will say... Please correct me if you think my translation could be better.” Theramin said as he stroked his chin. “Welcome, gracious people, to an event of great joy and importance. We gather here in this revered place to join two lives into one, and to join two hearts into one, with bonds and oaths of love and honor, proudly sworn in assembly to be witnessed by all.

“Who speaks for the bride?”

“And Yazadril will step up to the top tier and say...”

“I will say that I speak for the bride, and introduce myself as her father.” Yazadril said. “And from there we must be brave, for much that follows may be difficult. All know of the deaths yesterday, and of the curse. When I speak, I will have to squelch the rumors, and explain enough to make them see the necessity and the rightness of this marriage.

“I still wish as few as possible to know that you passed the barriers. But, they will need to know the reason why you were here in the first place. I will tell them that as you approached the border, I detected that you were unaffected by most spells, and that you agreed to stay here so that I could study your unique properties. Skirting the truth to be sure, yet true enough to avoid compromising my honor, I think, because even before you passed the border I could tell that the Illusions and Force barriers of the Wards were not affecting you. I will explain your feelings about sexual intimacy outside marriage, so that they can understand why you would ask a girl you do not love to marry you, and that the curse has driven you to it.”

“I do love Talia.” Mark quietly interjected. “It’s come upon me quickly, but she is beautiful and adorable. Though I must admit, after losing my family and after six months of solitude, my heart is as ready to find new love as it’s possible to be. And while I first asked her to marry me so that what we must do for the curse would at least not be a dishonor, it’s more important now that the vows help to insure our happiness in the future, no matter how long that will be.

“How long is it, Yazadril? How long will it be, until the end of days?”

“Ah, that’s difficult to say.” Yazadril said as he considered it. His hand automatically rose to stroke a beard that was no longer there, giving him a momentary start, then he put his mind back to the problem. “Hmm. You know that a thousand thousands is called a million?”

“Yes.”

“And that a thousand times that, a thousand millions, is called a billion?”

“A thousand millions? No, I’ve never even considered such a big number, so I didn’t know that. But now I do. A billion.”

“Yes. This world has had simple life for at least six billion years, and complex life such as exists now for about two billion. It will be habitable for at least another four billion years, and perhaps for as long as seven billion. After that, the sun will start to grow. Life will adapt to it for a while, for it will be a slow process, but eventually all life will be exterminated. If the curse can somehow keep you living after that, you will have some eight to ten billion years in total before the sun grows enough to envelope and consume the world. And that will be the end of days.”

“Huh.” Mark grunted after a moment. “Knowing the answer does me no good, because it’s inconceivable. Four to ten billion years! I simply can’t grasp how long a time that is!”

“No one can, Mark. No one.” Yazadril told him gently. “But back to the subject at hand. I will speak for the bride, and then I will step back down to the second tier, and Theramin will ask; ‘Who speaks for the groom?’ At that point, since you have no close family here, you can have Dilimon speak for you, or if you so choose, you may speak for yourself.”

“Ah, no offense Dilimon, but I think I’ll speak for myself.”

“Likely a wise choice, Mark.” Dilimon grinned. “If you manage to make as good an impression on the rest of your guests as you made on the assembled rulers of the elven nations, you’ll be well thought of indeed!”

“Yes? You think I did okay with them?”

“You were wonderful!” Nemia assured him with a smile.

“You were.” Yazadril agreed. “So, after you speak for the groom, so to speak, ahem, then you will step back down to the second tier, and Theramin will say...”

“Then let the bride and groom step forth, that they may be joined in matrimony.” Theramin continued. “The two of you will then step up onto the top tier and join hands.”

“I don’t want to seem like I’m looming over you too much.” Mark mused. “Do you think it would be better if I went to one knee at that point?”

“I think it would be a seemly gesture. I’ll make sure there’s a small cushion to rest your knee upon, for the podium is hard stone.” Theramin smiled. “Then I’ll say; Do you, Talia, take this male; Mark, to be your husband? And she’ll say; I do. And I’ll say; Do you solemnly swear to love him before all others, and to strive to bear his children, and to care for him as best you are able, and to seek always to bring him happiness, for as long as you both shall live? And she’ll say; I do so swear.

“Then I’ll give her a moment or two to regain her composure, if necessary, for it’s a powerful feeling when the oath takes affect, and it can take your breath away. With so many in attendance, you should be ready to steady her, in case she needs it. Then I’ll say; Place the ring, which symbolizes love without end, upon his finger. Alilia will hand her your wedding ring, and she will place it on the third finger of your left hand.

“Then I will ask the same things of you, in exactly the same way, except that you will swear to strive to give her your children, rather than bearing hers, of course. And you will answer in the same way as well.”

“I do. I do so swear.” Mark repeated, feeling more nervous by the moment.

“When you say; I do so swear, Yazadril and I and half the groomsmen will stand ready.” Dilimon chuckled. “For if you falter badly, it will take all of us to catch you!”

“After Dilimon hands you her ring and you put it on her left ring finger,” Theramin continued, “I’ll say; And so let it be. Let all who are present bear witness, for I now pronounce you to be husband and wife. At that point it’s customary for the groom to kiss the bride, while the bridesmaids and groomsmen toss flowers upon you and the guests all cheer and call good wishes.”

“Do you have a ring?” Mark asked.

“Yes, and Alilia already has the other.” Dilimon answered as he reached into his pocket and drew it forth. All gathered close to see it.

It was a fairly wide gold band sized for Talia’s finger, encircled by a narrower complete ring of faceted diamond that flashed in the chandelier’s light. Talia sighed at the beauty of it.

“Yours is exactly the same, except of course that yours is sized to your finger.” Dilimon revealed. “Perhaps the only two complete-ring shaped diamonds in existence. Certainly the only ones I’ve ever heard of. Alilia provided them, and they are magically enhanced in the same ways as Talia’s engagement ring.”

“How did she know my size?” Mark asked. “Even I don’t know it, for I’ve never had a ring.”

“The measurements that Yazadril took of you, and passed to Alilia when she made your conveyance, were complete. They included the size of your fingers.” Dilimon explained, then pocketed the ring again as Theramin concluded his itinerary.

“At any rate, after you’ve kissed the bride, I’ll conclude the ceremony by saying; Now let us rejoice with feast and celebration! Then we’ll descend the podium to the tables that have been reserved for us. Most will serve themselves, as we agreed on a buffet style feast, but some of Talia’s friends have agreed to serve the head table. Anyone else important enough to have staff will probably be served by them. You’ll choose from the many dishes available from a menu that Alilia’s cooks have provided. After most have finished eating, there will be dancing and mingling for hours, and the bride and groom are expected to lead the first dance. When you two feel that it’s a good time for the presentation of wedding gifts, let me know, and return to your table. I’ll call for the presentation.

“After that, when you’re ready to leave, let us know. We’ll go back to First Valley, to the land set aside for Talia’s home a few hundred meters from Yazadril and Nemia’s. There we will make you a home as our wedding present, and provide it with any furniture and accessories that you need right away, but were not given as wedding gifts. And after that, we will leave you to enjoy your wedding night.

“Now, do you have all that? Do you have any questions?”

“I’ve got it. How much time do we have left?”

“Thirty-six minutes.”

“Oh. If we may, I’d like to spend that with Talia. We still know little about each other.”

“One moment first.” said Dilimon. “Do you still wish us to find the most powerful eleven males and females of all those attending to be bridesmaids and groomsmen? It will be a bit more challenging with so many more here, but we can do it.”

“Actually, only ten for bridesmaids.” Talia decided. “That is, Hilsith, if you would consent to being my second bridesmaid?”

“I would be honored.” the Healer smiled.

“All right. Ten females, eleven males.” Dilimon nodded. The girl beside him lightly elbowed his side with a smile. “What? Oh. Sorry dear.

“Mark, I would like you to meet my fiancé Yalla, Second Force Wizard of the Sentry Corps of The High People.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Mark smiled with a bit of a bow.

“Though we haven’t met, I’ve seen you, for I helped scout you, before Yazadril spoke to you the first time. You... You are ever so much more handsome, now.” Yalla smiled nervously.

“Thank you. And while we are about introductions, who is this lovely lady with you, Theramin?”

“Ah, I have been as pre-occupied and remiss as Dilimon.” Theramin chuckled. “For this is the love of my life, my beautiful wife, Yzell.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Mark smiled and bowed.

“And I you, young man.” Yzell said with a big smile as she stepped forward and squeezed the edge of his hand for a moment. “We haven’t had excitement like this in The Nine Valleys for over a thousand years! Actually, we’ve *never* had excitement like this!”

“Ah, well we never had excitement like this back home, either!” Mark laughed. “And how are your children, Lady Yzell?”

“Quite well, and growing like sunflowers, thank you for asking! And I’m pleasantly surprised that Theramin mentioned them, he almost never does once they’re out of his sight!”

Theramin blushed a glowing pink and ducked his head a bit, and Mark laughed.

“Actually, there was a manner about my mother and the other mothers of Shinosa Valley that the lasses didn’t have, a mother’s way, a kind of no-nonsense friendliness that I recognized in you immediately, and so I knew you had children.”

“I love them dearly!” Theramin protested defensively. “But we have had *four* children in only *twenty-five* years! That is as rare as a marriage among your people producing twenty children!”

“Yes, I can see that!” Mark laughed. “A man could get mighty tired of hearing; ‘Wow! You have twenty children!’”

“Exactly! Once they know, they can’t seem to talk about anything else!” Theramin agreed, pleased to have elicited some empathy.

“Perhaps you sensed my motherhood because it is my profession, as well as my domestic situation.” Yzell smiled. “I study every aspect of it; fertility, conception, pregnancy, birth, and rearing. My own fecundity is no accident, but a hard won achievement, and I think it speaks well of my expertise. I believe that every thinking people should be able to control their fecundity, either to reduce it, as some human women are starting to do, or to increase it, as our people sometimes need to do to recover from devastating war or disaster.

“Interbreeding between elves and humans tends to be even less fertile, far less, than between two elves. You may wish to see me in this regard in the days ahead. If you choose to have children, and you have the courage to try new techniques, you have a chance to become parents while making a huge contribution to our knowledge of interbreeding between the races, and the workings of conception in general.”

“We’ll have to, perhaps tomorrow.” Mark answered thoughtfully. “As we’ll swear in our wedding vows to try to have children.”

“Yes, but you will not swear to strive to have them *immediately*.” Yzell chuckled. “It’s recognized that it takes a few years for a marriage to be ready for young ones.”

“Ah.” Mark nodded.

“We’ll give you some privacy now. You’ve about half an hour remaining.” Nemias assured them.

Dilimon and Yalla left by the doors to the deck, already mumbling as they magically communicated with the other Sentries who would assist them in their scan for the powerful.

The rest moved over toward the liquor cabinet, and Nemias called; “Would you like something to drink?”

“Just water. Better yet, some of Hilsith’s herbal tea, if we can get it.” Mark answered, and Talia called; “Me too please.”

“I’ll brew some.” Hilsith nodded.

Talia led Mark by the hand to a spot near the doors to the balcony. For a moment, they simply smiled at each other, and they could hear Nemias say; "I didn't know Dilimon and Yalla were engaged!"

And Theramin answered; "He bent his knee to her only an hour or so ago, and she was delighted to say yes. I think he was affected by the ambiance of the chapel, but I think Yalla has been waiting for him to ask for a long time."

Then, over the murmur of many voices heard through the doors from outside, a girl elf's voice was heard crying out in anguish, followed by two angry males, then they faded into the background noise. Though Mark didn't understand their Elvish, Talia did, and what she heard made her shiver, and her skin went a shade paler.

"What is it?" Mark asked in concern.

Talia swallowed hard. "I know them. They are friends of mine, and of Dalia's. The first said; "I tell you, Dalia *couldn't* have killed herself! She was the happiest person I've ever met!" And the second said; "I tell you, the human must have killed her, and somehow made Alilia cast the curse, so that he could have Talia! Nothing else makes sense!" And the third said; "Be quiet you fool, they are right up there!"

Mark could find no answer to that.

"So much of our happiness in the days ahead depends on what you and father say to all our guests." Talia quietly mused. "You must find a way to win them over, and to convince them of the truth. We cannot be happy together if there are so many who are against it."

"I'll try, Talia. I'll do my very best, and so will your father."

"I know."

They were silent for a moment, then Talia asked; "Could you pick me up? It's so nice when you hold me like that."

"It's as nice to hold you." he told her sincerely as he gently lifted her, and held her close so she could hug him around his neck. "You're... You're wonderful Talia. You're wonderful and magical and beautiful and adorable."

"So are you, Mark. You're all of those."

They shared another warm moment.

"I'm a wizard, by inclination and talent and profession." Talia then softly told him. "And I'd be a fool to choose otherwise, and pass up the opportunity for my parents' training. I spend much of my days in the libraries and workshops of The Hall Of New Magic, learning. I haven't chosen a specialty yet, but then I'm not expected to for a few centuries at least. Even Mother hasn't chosen her specialty yet. Dalia and I... We were lucky to inherit Mother's strength in the power, even more than we did Father's intellect, because Mother is first in raw power among The High People. Dalia and I... Well, I'm right behind Mother, and I'll probably equal her when my power has finished maturing in a decade or so.

"It's very hard to talk about Dalia, but I must, if you are to know me, for she was half my soul. She was my boldness, and I was her thoughtfulness, we always said. We did everything together, and we were never apart except when she was with a boy, and she and I were equals as wizards as well. She made sure I was included in everything, for when I was too shy to ask, or to even bring myself to the attention of others, Dalia would drag me along, and I was always glad she did. We loved to go flying and swimming and to do other sports, to paint and sculpt, to sing and dance, to simply sit and enjoy the sun or the moon or the breeze, to laugh together about silly things, to visit friends.

"I need you for many things, my handsome great human, and I hope you don't mind that one of them is to fill the hole in my heart and the empty place by my side left by her absence, for before, Dalia was always there for me."

"I'll do my best for you, Talia." Mark murmured soothingly.

Just then Hilsith came over with a smile and two cups of tea. She handed them up to Mark and Talia and withdrew without a word.

"I also need you to help fill the absence of my family, for we were close, and got along well, and I loved them dearly." Mark thoughtfully revealed. "My mother's name was Helem. She was a trapper's daughter, she was from the valley, and it's from her I get my black hair, though I get my blue eyes from my father. Mother had brown eyes, and the most beautiful smile. She'd gone down to Finitra proper for a year when she was seventeen to attend school and find a husband, for there was no one for her in the valley.

"She came back with my father, who'd been a Ranger, a Scout, and an officer in the King's Military. He had dark brown hair and just a bit of a limp, from an injury he'd gotten in the king's service. He'd used it as an excuse to retire early so he could come to the valley with my mother, for he was only twenty-six at the time. He retired from the army that is, he remained a Ranger. I was closer to him than anyone, and I took after him a lot. The last few years I spent most of my days with him, learning my trade; learning to hunt and trap, and when not to hunt or trap, and why, clearing fire-breaks in the forest, felling the occasional tree and hauling it behind our mule to the mill, and much else as well. And I learned the ways of a warrior, in case there were poachers, or in case the king called forth the muster to

defend the realm. So I learned the bow, as a hunter and as an archer as well, and the sword and the spear and shield, and how to fight unarmed or with anything that was handy. In the late afternoon we had book lessons.

“Not that there was no time for leisure, there was, and we had a wonderful life. I had a little brother, Steb, who was thirteen, and a little sister, Shelvy, who was ten. We and the others of the valley had plenty of time to go swimming and sliding and what have you, to build tree forts or snow forts, to go hiking and climbing and picnicking. In the evenings we’d play cards or dice or puzzle games, or read, sometimes to each other, or tell stories, or make music and sing. Every two weeks, everyone got together for a dance in the Tinlo’s barn. All the musical instruments in the valley were like community property; we all borrowed them around and learned them all. My father and I were making me a harp, with extra space between the strings for my thick fingers.”

He fell silent, and finished the rest of his tea.

Hilsith had noticed him tipping the tiny cup back, and she came over with the pot to refill it and Talia’s, smiled, and again left without a word.

“Did you have a sweet-heart?” Talia asked in a teasing voice.

“Kind of. Marja Dobbim was the only girl about the right age for me in the valley, and she realized it before me. When she was six, she told me I would marry her some day. I was nine at the time, and I told her she was crazy, and it was kind of a friendly joke between us for a long time. Then a year and a half ago, when she was twelve, she started dropping by for visits a lot more often. At first she said it was so she could visit my sister, but she somehow ended up spending most of the time with me, and after a while I noticed that my family always seemed to leave us alone together when Marja was over. We never even thought of kissing or anything, or even holding hands, but I had to admit that she was fun to spend time with, and I liked the special attention she gave me. I eventually came to realize what everyone else already seemed to know; that it really was almost certain that she would be my wife. She was thirteen, and just getting to the point where she was alluring, when... When... Sweet mother of all, Talia, she died right in my arms!” Mark broke down, sobbing and gasping. “She screamed and screamed, and everyone was screaming, and there was nothing I could do, and then she died, so horribly... so horribly.”

“Shhh.” Talia gently soothed as she caressed his cheek. “I’m so sorry Mark. I know it’s hard. Thank you so much for telling me that. And I know I can’t replace your whole family, but my family is here for you, and with the new friends you’ve made, and a new life here with me, we will find happiness again. I know we will.”

“I know Talia. I’m so glad and thankful to have you.”

He took two steps over to the nearest dressing table and sat on the top of it, and they simply sat and cuddled, until Nemia came over.

“Things will be beginning soon. And we all must have our minds and thoughts in place for it.” she brightly advised.

“You’re right. Thank you Mother.” Talia nodded, and smiled at Mark. “We are soon to be married! Just the thought of it sets my heart aflutter!”

“I know.” He nodded, and gave her a bit of a smile as he wiped his eyes. “We should spend the remaining time mentally rehearsing what we will do, and say, and when. I’d hate to do it wrong, that’s for sure!”

“Good thinking.” Talia smiled.

They spent five minutes doing that, then Dilimon and Alilia returned.

“It’s incredible out there!” Alilia told them all. “It’s like a pilgrimage! Almost every elf alive is here, over three and a half millions of them! They fill the whole floor of the valley!”

“We’ve got everyone settled into a place, and made sure everyone has Tongues for Trade Common, and that everyone will receive a Reading from someone near the podium.” Dilimon related. “And the bridesmaids and groomsmen have been chosen, and are in place. None refused the honor, and a more powerful group has never been assembled! Some of the Princes and Princesses made the grade, and some did not, so in order to avoid any ruffled feathers, we gave them all an equal place of honor. When the ceremony starts, they will array themselves around the fourth tier of the podium, one step below the bridesmaids and groomsmen. They seemed to think that was just fine.”

“Yes. And the feast for the first ten thousand is coming along nicely, and will be ready when the ceremony finishes.” Alilia added. “The rest have agreed to stay out of the chapel proper. Most of them have brought their own provisions, and the shortsighted who did not can do without! And Theramin, I was told that all other preparations are complete.”

“Good. We’ve got about two minutes.” Theramin nodded.

“Then I have time for one more cup of tea.” Mark smiled as he held his cup out for Hilsith to refill. “They’re really not very big.” he added, a bit sheepishly.

“Don’t be bashful about your appetites, dear boy.” Yazadril chuckled. “For I’m sure they’re quite natural.”

“Yes, well...” Mark began, then took a drink of tea while he ordered his thoughts. “Thank you. Thank you all, so much, for everything.”

“On that note, I must hurry to join the other bridesmaids.” Hilsith smiled. She set the teapot down on the nearest end table, and ran lightly out the door.

“You’re most welcome, Mark.” Nemia smiled. “We have much to thank you for, as well. You were thrust into difficult and strange events, and have met the challenge with decency, kindness, and honor.”

“You’re very welcome.” he nodded. “Alilia, I don’t want there to be anything but friendship between us. I don’t think I’ve told you this already, but I want you to know that I do forgive you for the curse. I’ve no hard feelings toward you, and I don’t feel that you owe me anything. Because of what you did, Talia is going to be my bride, and that balances everything.”

“Thank you.” Alilia nodded, and swallowed hard. “But you’re wrong about my owing you. You’ll see that, later.”

“Well if I do, I suppose I could have you come over and wash my dishes. I’ve always hated doing that.” Mark told her with a grin.

“What? You want me to *wash your dishes? By hand, like a human drudge?*” Despite her best intentions, Alilia was almost sputtering with indignation.

“Of course, it’s a moot point, since you don’t owe me a thing!” he laughed. “And it’s just as well, don’t you agree?”

She paused in surprise, then could not help but laugh with him, and shake her head at his blatant attempt to maneuver her. “No. Nicely attempted, but no. If you ask me to wash dishes, I will do so, and no doubt you would find a way to make me laugh about it.”

“You know, Alilia, I do believe that having him around will be good for your disposition!” Yazadril chuckled.

At that moment the chandelier’s crystals chimed in a wave from the centermost crystal outward to the perimeter, producing a shimmering descending arpeggio. Through the doors to the deck an orchestra was heard to begin playing at a medium tempo. Their music was so beautiful that for a moment it captured Mark’s entire attention.

Then the enormous crowd was heard to gasp collectively, and some politely clapped their hands in applause.

“Here we go.” Theramin said as Yzell tucked her hand under his arm, and they stepped to the door leading downstairs. “First us, then the groom’s party, Mark first, Dilimon being behind him and to his left. Then the bride’s party, Talia first, then Yazadril and Nemia, then Alilia behind them.”

They lined up behind him and Yzell as he’d described. He took a deep breath and let it out, then opened the door. “All right. We go forth with dignity.” he said, and led the way down the stairs.

As they followed the stairs down and to the left, Mark quietly asked Dilimon over his shoulder; “What were they oohing and aahing and clapping about out there?”

“Until that moment, all the decorations were invisible, and they were revealed as the ceremony began.” Dilimon discretely answered.

The stairs emerged at ground level within a great hall, and they made their way across it until Theramin and Yzell stood before a great double doorway, the doors opened wide. The rest lined up behind them, keeping their formation.

The doorway faced straight down the aisle, which was marked off by white ribbons hanging in gentle curves between gold stands. Adorning the stands were bouquets of white-petaled flowers with gold centers and leaves. To either side of the aisle stood the thousands of attendees, wearing an eye-dazzling array of colorful finery. The mighty trees around them were decorated on the lower twenty meters of their trunks with white and gold flowers, and ribbons placed in fanciful designs, about four white ribbons to every gold one. In the air above a similar collection of long, flowing ribbons danced to the music as if they had life of their own, most of them concentrated over the podium, forming three-dimensional drawings of flowers and butterflies, fawns and unicorns, and other pretty things, each picture dissolving after a moment to soon form another.

The aisle was a hundred meters long, and at the end of it was the podium, in the center of the clearing. The podium was like seven great disks of gold-veined white marble stacked atop one another, each thirty centimeters thick. The top one was two and a half meters wide, the second was five meters wide, the third seven and a half meters wide, and so on, forming steps with risers thirty centimeters high and treads a meter and a quarter deep. The orchestra was arrayed in a circle on the lowest tier of the podium, which was seventeen and a half meters wide, the aisle passing between them marked by bouquet stands without ribbon between.

They could see the bridesmaids and groomsmen slowly making their way in couples up the aisle to the third highest tier, where groomsmen went left and bridesmaids right, until they stood in an even circle.

Next, the assembled leaders of the elven nations, with their spouses or escorts, moved with stately pace into the aisle from either side at the base of the podium, then up to the fourth highest tier, until they stood in couples in a circle on it.

All eyes then turned to the doorway. Theramin and Yzell stepped forth to a polite smattering of applause and made their measured way to the base of the podium. There Theramin took both of Yzell's hands and kissed her cheek, she stepped aside out of the aisle, and he continued alone to the top tier of the podium and a bit to the far side, where he turned to face back down the aisle toward the door.

As Theramin had approached the podium, Dilimon had cautioned Mark; "Those out there cannot see in here, because the shadow of the doorway is magically enhanced, so that we will make a grander entrance when we step forth into the daylight. So don't act surprised at their reaction.

"And know that the podium will start to rotate very slowly when all are in place upon it, and will make one full turn before the end of the ceremony, so that all will have a chance to see you from the front.

"As soon as Theramin is settled in place, go forth, keeping to the center of the aisle. And try not to walk too fast. I'd look silly having to jog to keep up."

"Thanks." Mark chuckled, and Dilimon's light jest was perfectly timed, for it reduced his nervousness a bit just as the moment came to step out onto the soft, dense moss that floored the clearing.

As he emerged, Dilimon behind and to his left, the thousands of voices that were whispering and murmuring to each other suddenly fell completely silent, leaving the music seeming clearer and louder. Then just as suddenly they started up again with greater volume and intensity than before. Many spoke Elvish, but of those he could understand, most exclaimed at his size, though a few females were heard marveling at how cute or handsome he was, and there were more than a few angry grumblings and mutterings as well.

It seemed like a long walk to the podium, and a few along the aisle made impolite comments that he was meant to overhear. Mark tried to ignore it all, and hoped he wasn't walking funny, unused as he was to the slow, dignified pace Theramin had set. (He was later assured, to his relief, that he'd walked with a very graceful stride.)

He had little attention to spare, as he was awed by the magnificence of his surroundings. The decorations were magical and beautiful, but the chapel itself was even more amazing. Though he estimated the clearing within the circle of gigantic redwood trunks to be over two hundred meters across, it felt as enclosed as a building, since the lowest branches three hundred meters above him filled most of the space overhead, and the circle of blue sky that could be seen between the branches at the tops of the trees looked very small, some seven hundred and thirty meters above.

Then Dilimon spoke, barely moving his lips, just loud enough for Mark to hear. "Be careful. I know the lass ten meters ahead on your right, in the blue striped gown. Her name is Balen, and she has a way with childish pranks, and I think she's getting ready to do something foolish."

Mark spotted her, but let his eyes sweep over her and beyond. She was just a hundred and twenty centimeters tall and looked to be about twelve years old, with bright red hair in a long braid down her back, and green eyes that were flashing in adolescent outrage.

When Mark was almost even with her she made a hand motion, and Dilimon gave the quiet but tense warning; "She casts!" He suddenly stepped to his right and smoothly bent to pick up one of the white and gold flowers that had fallen, and brought it to his nose to test it's scent, as if that was his only intention. Thus when the spell passed cleanly through Mark, who had ignored it, it missed him as well. Three elves on the left instantly developed bright green and purple blotches on their faces, though they apparently didn't realize that.

"Oh! I'm so sorry!" Balen blurted as she blanched white as snow, then blushed crimson as she reversed the spell.

Mark had to fight not to laugh as he noticed that the two adults with her were thunderstruck at their child's audacity, and absolutely mortified with embarrassment.

He was just past her when Balen shouted out at the top of her lungs, pointing at him accusingly. "It went right through him! He's not even real, there's nobody there! It's an Illusion!"

Mark stopped, and turned to her with a gentle smile. Still, she stepped back against her mother in fear as she stared wide-eyed up at him. He smoothly went to one knee and held his hand out to her. "Your hand please, my lady?" he asked her pleasantly in his rumbling voice.

She gave her head a tiny shake of refusal.

"It's all right, I won't hurt you. You know Dilimon here, he's a Sentry, and he would never let anything happen to you." he assured her, still smiling.

She looked to Dilimon, who smiled and nodded to support Mark's gambit, whatever that was, and silently pleaded with the cosmos to not let this become a fiasco. In a sudden inspiration, he handed her the flower.

She took it, then looked to Mark, who waited on one knee with a smile, his hand still held out to her. Hesitantly she reached out and laid her hand in his, or rather laid her tiny hand over his huge index finger. He slowly raised it to his lips as he leaned down to touch it with a gentle kiss, then covered it with his other hand and gave it a soft caress.

“You see, pretty one?” he asked. “I’m not an illusion. Please don’t think ill of me. After all, it’s my wedding day.”

“I... I won’t.” she stammered, and he gave her another big smile before he stood to continue up the aisle.

Some broke out in spontaneous applause at his gallantry, and many were the females who commented wistfully on how sweet or charming it was.

Finally they reached their place on the second tier of the podium, and all eyes turned to see Talia begin her walk down the aisle.

“Well done, Mark!” Theramin told him at private volume as they watched the bride’s party emerge into the daylight. “You really saved the day there! Almost any other response you could have made would have been a disaster!”

“I know. Thanks. I’m so glad the orchestra played through it.” Mark grinned as he whispered his response. “Nice touch with the flower there, Dilimon.”

“Thanks. My heart was almost choking me at the time.”

“Me too. Why do you think she did that?”

“Dalia was her tutor in elementary wizardry, she grieves as do we all. And you know how adolescents can be; you’re happy and she’s not and it’s not fair, and all that. Still, her parents will have things to say to her later, you can be sure of it.”

“Poor thing. Could you have them drop by our table after the vows? Maybe I can keep her out of trouble.”

“You have a big heart, Mark. I’ll ask them.”

“Thanks.”

They watched as Talia approached, and Mark marveled anew at how lovely she was. Her choice of a dress of simple yet elegant design had it’s desired effect, visually setting her apart from the many busily-detailed and complex fashion ensembles around her. He also reddened a bit at how much more alluring its form-fitting design was.

When Mark had begun walking down the aisle, away from her, Talia’s heart had pounded harder and harder, for fear that at any moment she would be too far away from him, and the curse would strike. When he’d reached his place on the podium, she knew the curse would not strike, and she thought to herself with great relief; ‘I’ll never let him be farther away from me than this. Ever.’ And then it was her turn.

She moved gracefully, her eyes upon Mark as she walked, except for a moment when she glanced at Balen as she passed.

The incident with Balen had left her initially furious with the girl, then fearful at the shouted accusation, and finally laughing with relief at Mark’s answer to it. Now she had to give her head a shake and chuckle, for in an adolescently mercurial change of mood, Balen was gazing at Mark in youthful adoration as she held the hand that he’d kissed to her cheek, the flower Dilimon had given her clutched tight to her chest in the other.

And then Talia could only think of Mark, and how pivotal and critical the next few moments were going to be. His smile was full of warmth and adoration for her, and she saw pride and love there as well.

When everyone was in their places on the podium, the ribbons swirling in the air ceased their dancing to move together over the podium, forming the outlines of a round peaked roof above them, like an open-air gazebo, with some ribbons hanging down in six places around the edge, like support pillars that ended six meters above the ground. As the ribbons stilled, the orchestra finished their piece and fell silent.

As they had each led their parties and turned in opposite ways when they reached the second highest tier, Mark and Talia were separated for the moment by Dilimon, the aisle, Yazadril, Nemias, and Alilia. She shared one more smile with Mark before she gave her attention to Theramin, and then he did as well, when Theramin spoke.

His voice was magically enhanced, so that everyone in the chapel could hear him clearly, and he’d embellished his translation a bit. “Welcome one and all, gracious people of every elven nation, to an event of great joy and importance. We are gathered here today in peace and harmony, in this most revered place, to join two lives into one, and to join two hearts into one, with bonds and oaths of love and honor, proudly sworn in assembly to be witnessed by all.”

He paused before he asked; “Who speaks for the bride?”

Yazadril stepped up to the top tier and bowed to Theramin, who inclined his head in return. “I am the father of the bride, and I speak for her.” Yazadril announced, his voice strong, then he turned so that the crowd knew that he addressed them, and not Theramin. “I am Yazadril, Prince of The High People of The Nine Valleys. For eight

thousand, four hundred and seventy-six years I have lived and loved and fought and survived upon this world, and so stand as Third Most Senior among all elves, and Most Senior among those who remain unretired, and in the full of their power and ability. I am First Battle Commander. I am First Wizard.”

He paused for a moment, and gazed intently around at the other Princes and Princesses, and at the circle of mighty wizards who were the bridesmaids and groomsmen, as if daring any to challenge his claims. Instead they all acknowledged his status with respectful nods. Then he returned his gaze to the crowd around him, where many were quietly exclaiming at the sudden change in his appearance and demeanor.

He waited another moment, and an incredible silence fell, so intent were the assembled on what he would say.

“I speak for Talia, my daughter by Nemia. She is fully of age to marry, and she comes to this marriage willingly, full of hope for the future.

“Most of you know some of the reasons for this marriage, but there are things you do not know, and there has been a great deal of foolish speculation. There have been untruths spoken that can lead to great harm, and so the truth must be known.

“The most important thing you must know is this; About one hundred and twenty years ago, a human wizard, acting from the vicinity of The Empire of Thon and The Kingdom of Yazzak, cast a curse upon myself and Princess Alilia of The People of Life. We were cursed that our children would slay each other. Yesterday the curse struck, killing Alilia’s son Bezedil and my daughter Dalia.”

He had to pause then, for a rising uproar of outrage had drowned him out, despite the chapel’s augmentation of the words spoken as part of the ceremony. He let them go on for a few moments, then added his own power to the augmentation and calmly spoke the single word; “Order.” The word boomed out, recapturing the attention of all. He continued. “My daughter Talia narrowly escaped death twice. The first was when she was driven by the curse to leap to her death from our home, immediately after the same had happened to Dalia and Bezedil. Yet she was caught and saved by Nemia, who was heroically aided in this by Jinimin of The High People, and he almost gave his life to help save my daughter.

“Jinimin, please let yourself be seen, for in the rush of events since then, I have yet to thank you for your courageous and selfless action.”

About thirty meters to Yazadril’s left, tiny twelve-year-old Jinimin was proudly lifted above the crowd by his mother to stand balanced on his beaming father’s shoulders as the two steadied him. Yazadril looked to him immediately, so everyone else did as well. He waved shyly to the crowd, a bashful smile showing beneath his light brown hair.

“Thank you, Jinimin, for your courage, and for my daughter’s life.” Yazadril graciously told him.

“You’re welcome!” was Jinimin’s friendly reply, and the crowd gave him a mighty cheer for his bravery and youthful charm. He waved around again, and then his father lowered him from view.

“But perhaps the curse was not finished yet.” Yazadril continued. “As all who were in First Valley saw, we cast a Reading upon Bezedil and were only able to read the last few seconds of his life, which implicated Talia in his death.

“This may have been affected by the curse, for if we had seen only a few seconds more, Talia would have been cleared of suspicion. As it was, Alilia was overcome with rage and grief, and would have killed Talia, were it not for a random factor that our hidden enemy could not have foreseen. And even the extent of Alilia’s rage may have been affected by the curse. It drove Dalia to leap to her death over what Bezedil had done, and Bezedil leaped because of what Dalia had done, so the curse was fulfilled by that, for it could be said that our children indeed caused each other’s deaths. Yet Alilia was filled with rage because of Bezedil’s death, and she almost killed Talia because of that. In the uncertain way of curses, I think the curse would have been fulfilled by that too, because indirectly, Talia would have died because of what Dalia and Bezedil had done.

“If Alilia had tried to kill Talia to revenge Bezedil, Nemia and I would have defended our daughter, with our lives if need be. If that had happened, at least one of us would almost certainly have been killed, perhaps all of us. And if *that* had happened, it is quite likely that there would now be a state of war between The High People and The People of Life.

“We believe that *that* was the true purpose behind the curse that our children were to slay one other; to sunder the friendship between Alilia and I, to sunder the alliance between our peoples, and to bring war between our peoples; elf killing elf due to outside interference. I have seen it happen many times before; a war is triggered between two peoples by an outside third party who acts in secret, hoping to be able to step in after the devastation and control all.

“But that did not happen.

“The day before yesterday, the young man who is my daughter’s groom approached the Wards on the border of our lands at the southern pass into First Valley. His name is Mark Longstrider, and he was seeking no more than a

high vantage that faced south, so that he could assess the lay of the land in that direction, as he planned to continue traveling that way. At the time, I was near, meditating in my glade of contemplation, and I detected his approach. I also detected that he has completely unique magical properties, and so I observed him without his detecting me, and allowed him to pass within. I cast a Reading on him, and learned that he was completely unaware of his unique properties, and that he was an honest and honorable individual. All who know me can attest to my skill at casting such Readings, and to my judgment of character, and to my record of honesty. Contrary to many rumors I have heard today, there is absolutely *no chance* that he is other than what he seems, or that he arrived here with a hidden agenda to do any of us harm.

“I approached him, and I asked him to stay so that I could study his magical properties, and he agreed.

“I wanted another wizard who could wield a great deal of the power to help me study him, and so when I returned to my home I called Alilia, who agreed to help me with it. Her son Bezedil came as well, and that gave the curse against our children its chance to strike.

“So our human visitor was still on Alilia’s mind at the fateful moment when she would have killed Talia, and Alilia at that time thought that her son was dead because Talia had raped Bezedil by trickery, by impersonating Dalia. So instead of killing Talia, and perhaps triggering a terrible war between our peoples, at the last possible instant she cursed my daughter instead. As many heard when she revealed it to me later in the Council Hall of The High People, she cursed Talia to be raped by Mark until the end of days.”

He continued without pause, despite the huge crowd’s shocked reaction to this news.

“Alilia cast that curse under an understandable but mistaken impression of what had happened, and almost certainly under the influence of the curse against her and I. She now thoroughly regrets having done so, but it cannot be reversed. It was by far the most powerful and passionate curse I have ever seen cast, or even heard of. To attempt to deny her curse, or to alter it in any way, could lead to a disaster of untold calamity. Only long and careful study of the problem could reveal a practical solution. Meanwhile, we must deal with what has occurred, and try to make the best of a very difficult situation.

“This morning we went to visit Mark, to explain to him what had happened. So that he might truly understand, we took a Reading of Talia, and that is when we discovered that she was completely innocent of all blame in Dalia and Bezedil’s deaths. Later, it was Mark’s insight that led me to thoroughly check for external influences, and that is when I discovered the original curse that led to the deaths of our children, and led to Alilia’s curse upon Talia.

“Because he is a good hearted soul, Mark at first refused absolutely to cause Talia any pain. When we impressed upon him that to refuse to do so would certainly lead to disaster, and that the curse would certainly find a way to make him do so anyway, Mark realized that he had been cursed forever, even as Talia had been.

“They decided that since their lives had been forced together, the least harmful choice they faced would be to accept it, and to try to find happiness together, despite the requirements of the curse of Alilia.

“His people see sexual intimacy with any but one’s lawful spouse to be dishonorable. And since he did not want the fulfillment of the curse’s requirements to be a dishonor in his people’s eyes, he asked Talia to marry him today, since Alilia’s curse may force them to act as soon as tomorrow.

“Affection has grown quickly between them, perhaps even the beginnings of love, and they hope that their marriage can bring them happiness. And to ensure their best chance for that happiness, they chose to invite as many elves to their wedding as could attend within this revered place, to further augment the power of their wedding vows. Thus all of The High People and eight thousand of The People of Life were initially invited. When Mark learned that many more were gathering without, he invited all elves to be part of the proceedings, and Talia agreed.

“And so we hope that all of you will sincerely wish them joy and happiness on this special occasion, and for the many years ahead.

“Thus I speak for the bride, for Talia, my daughter.”

With that Yazadril stepped back down to his place on the second tier.

Theramin let a moment pass before he asked; “Who speaks for the groom?”

Mark stepped up and went to one knee as he made his finest bow to Theramin, then stood, turned halfway around and did so again, to signify that he bowed to the assembled elves. He noticed as he stood that the podium had already rotated a few meters.

“I’m Mark Longstrider.” he calmly announced, his amplified, rumbling voice reaching all with its richness. “I’m the groom, and I speak for myself.

“What I most truly wish for is for Talia to have a happy and carefree life. She’s the most wonderful girl I’ve ever met, and she deserves that. Surely she deserves better than me for a husband, but fate has cast us together, whether we will it or not. So I must do everything I can to ensure our happiness together. Your opinions of me will affect our

happiness, and so it's important to me that you all like me, or at least not *dislike* me, and for that you must trust me, and for *that* you must know me and understand me, to some extent at least.

"We are very different, yet we have things in common. I have the most in common with those of you who are of The High People, the people of my bride, for I also come from a very isolated mountain valley filled with lush forest. And though the place that was my home lacked the magical magnificence of The Nine Valleys, still it was beautiful and we loved it dearly. Our touch was light upon it, for we nurtured it as much as we utilized it. I'm a Forest Ranger, and I shared responsibility for the well-being of the land and the life around our homes."

Mark went on to speak of his home, his people, and his family, and his life thus far. His incredibly low voice had a storyteller's pacing, and a melodic quality that was almost hypnotic.

Then he spoke of the magic atrocity that had slain all he knew and loved. He spoke plainly, describing the events without embellishment, though he revealed greater detail than when he had described it to Yazadril. His voice remained calm, though there was the occasional catch in it. Tears flowed down his face, and he ignored them except to blink them away. It was obvious to all that as he told them this part, it took a supreme effort of will to continue speaking smoothly, and to not weep outright.

Finally, he spoke of his trek south, and how he had survived alone in the wilderness for almost six months before meeting Yazadril.

"If I had known before I started walking up the pass to First Valley that I was approaching the lands of the elves, I'd have gone wide around, for in my almost seventeen years of life I'd never seen an elf before, nor seen any magic at all except for that which killed my kith and kin. I would never have dared to approach any elf, but Yazadril approached me with courtesy and friendship, which I sorely needed. He soon cast a Tranquility upon me, which I was also sorely in need of, or I'd still be weeping almost constantly for those I've lost.

"Now you know most everything there is to know about me.

"I know that I have the very profound honor to be the first human who has ever entered The Nine Valleys, and that many of you feel that I should not be here. I understand that, and for my own part I would gladly leave rather than offend any of you or risk the peace. But I promised Yazadril that I'd stay and make myself available for his study for at least five years. Further, if I leave, then Talia must leave as well, since she cannot risk being apart from me, or the curse will torture her far worse than it's going to make me do. So I pray that you will not begrudge my presence here for a while, for I think that Talia has seldom been beyond The Nine Valleys, and I think it would wound her heart to have to leave her home.

"Thank you all very much for coming to our wedding. I hope you wish us all the best, and I hope you enjoy the festivities."

He gave a simple bow, and stepped back down to his place beside Dilimon.

Theramin waited a moment while Mark was given a friendly round of applause, then continued. "Let the bride and groom step forth, that they may be joined in matrimony."

Mark and Talia stepped up and came together before Theramin, facing one another. Mark went to one knee as he took both of Talia's hands in his, and they shared a warm smile. Mark didn't even notice that just before his knee met the marble, a small white cushion with gold piping appeared beneath it.

The watching elves could all see the magic field around them intensify as all of their ambient power joined with that of the wedding chapel and roiled around the podium. The anticipation in the air was intense as the swearing of the vows approached.

Theramin's smile was so wide it was a wonder that he could speak properly. "Do you, Talia, take this male; Mark, to be your husband?" he asked.

"I do." she answered, and seldom were two words said with such warmth. Her eyes never left Mark's as she spoke her vows, nor did his leave hers, though he'd seen an intense flash all around them as she'd spoken.

Theramin continued. "Do you solemnly swear to love him before all others, and to strive to bear his children, and to care for him as best you are able, and to seek always to bring him happiness, for as long as you both shall live?"

"I do so swear. HUUH!!!" The power of the binding was incredible, as the cloud of magic around her contracted and intensified, and much of it was drawn into her. It was the most powerful act of magic ever seen by almost all of those in attendance. The feeling of it had driven her breath from her lungs and staggered her, though she was well used to dealing with large quantities of the power. She leaned against Mark to keep from losing her balance completely, then started to slide to the floor as her legs gave out on her.

He was completely blinded by the flash of the binding of her major oath, but he sensed it when she started to collapse, and he hurriedly passed her left hand to his left and held both her hands with his one, so he could wrap an

arm around her and support her. The back of his right index finger touched the tine band, still on his left bicep, and his heart slammed even harder as he realized that he still had to put it on his head and remove the velvet covering!

It took her a few moments to get her breath back and her legs steadied. As she stepped back a bit he took the tine band from his arm and put it on his head and removed the velvet cover, trying to do it in one smooth motion that he hoped looked like he was wiping sweat from his brow. He adjusted his belt as he tucked the velvet under it, and asked Talia; "Are you okay?"

"I'm..." She began as she opened her eyes and looked at him, and then she fully felt the effect of the vow. "Oh Mark! Oh Mark! I love you so much! It's... overwhelming! Oh Mark! I love you! I love you!"

She realized that she was in danger of becoming hysterical, and she leaned against him and closed her eyes again. She concentrated on the calming exercises she used to center herself before casting a major spell, and soon she felt she could continue. She straightened again, took a deep breath, and braced herself for the blast of emotion she knew she'd feel again when she looked at him.

"All right." she nodded as she opened her eyes once more, and she was saved from being overwhelmed again because she was distracted by the realization that he had a very strange and fearful expression on his face, and that he was not precisely looking into her eyes anymore, or even focusing on her.

"I'll need a moment or three." he stated, sounding strange.

"What is it?" Theramin asked.

"I can't see. When Talia completed her vows, there was a flash like silent lightning striking right in front of me. All I can see are big white spots moving around." he said as he blinked repeatedly. He tried rubbing his eyes a bit, with no effect.

Hilsith stepped to him and inspected his eyes. "I can't tell. My diagnostics don't work on him, but his eyes appear to be undamaged." she quietly stated.

"Wait a second... I think it's coming back. Yes, definitely, the spots are fading." Mark said in obvious relief.

Soon he was focusing on them again, and a few moments later he said; "Okay. I'm okay. Please, let's continue."

Hilsith stepped back to her place.

Theramin nodded, and said; "Place the ring, which symbolizes love without end, upon his finger."

Alilia stepped forward as she handed the ring to Talia, who slid it onto Mark's finger.

Mark smiled at the beauty of the ring, and gave Alilia a big smile and a small nod of gratitude before returning his smile to Talia. Then he again took both of Talia's hands in his left one, and covered them with his right.

Now the anticipation was ten times greater, as everyone wondered how the vows would affect him, and their concentration upon him was intense. As Theramin spoke, the power field seemed to become a bright storm of magic that filled the entire glade, intensifying towards the center.

"Do you, Mark, take this female, Talia, to be your wife?"

Just before he spoke, Mark reached up with his right hand, pressed the center of the tine band hard against his forehead with his thumb to hold it firmly in place, and plucked the five tines simultaneously with his fingertips. "I do." he answered, and as he said it he couldn't help but squint his eyes almost shut against the expected flash. When it happened, he was glad he'd done so, or he'd have been blinded again. He could feel the magic rushing through him with a sensation that was indescribable.

The onlookers let out a collective 'Ahhh!' of amazement, for it appeared that he had absorbed as much of the power field with his minor vow as Talia had with her major one! And still the field intensified, becoming a maelstrom of boiling magic brighter than any there had ever seen!

Theramin asked the question. "Do you solemnly swear to love her before all others, and to strive to give her your children, and to care for her as best you are able, and to seek always to bring her happiness, for as long as you both shall live?"

This time Mark plucked the tines as hard as he dared, holding back only enough of the strength of his fingers to be sure not to bend the steel.

However, there were those among the gathered elves who were not satisfied to simply let their ambient magic reinforce his vows, and chose instead to actively bolster it by casting Compulsion on him at the critical moment.

The total magical effect was staggering. The enormously intensified magic field seemed to get sucked into Mark, all of it and then some, for it pulled some internal power out of every elf present as well, leaving them all noticeably weakened for a moment.

Mark said; "I do so swearAAAAAAAAAARRHHH!!!" His body spasmed like he'd been shot with a crossbow bolt, and he clutched frantically at his left shoulder.

At the same time, Yazadril cried; “NO!!!”, for he and some of the other wizards had felt the Compulsions being cast, too late to do anything about it.

He, Dilimon, and as promised, half the groomsmen leaped to Mark’s aid, even as Talia cried his name in alarm, and Hilsith yelled; “Heart cramp!”, having instantly recognized the signs. “Lower him quickly!” she barked, and even as they did so she had her ear pressed to his chest. As soon as he was down she began striking him sharply over his heart. She did so five times, then listened again. “Damn it, there is little I can do for him!” Again she struck his chest repeatedly, then listened. “Source above, I’m losing him! UHH...”

At that moment Mark spasmed so powerfully that Hilsith, Yazadril, Dilimon, and two groomsmen were thrown aside like toys, and at the same instant Talia screamed; “AAAHH THE CURSE!”, and fell to her knees beside Mark, shuddering violently. But only for a moment. Then she lifted her face in wonder, even as Mark’s seizure ended.

“It’s gone! Already, as suddenly as that! It’s completely gone!” she marveled, then wondered if she was going into shock, and Healed herself against it.

Hilsith scrambled back to Mark and again pressed her ear to his heart. “It... It’s fine!” she stammered in amazement. “The beat is strong and steady! It’s like nothing was ever wrong with him!”

Talia took his hand as his eyes opened, tears pouring down her cheeks.

He looked at her wide-eyed. He tried to speak, but could not. He tried again, and still couldn’t make his voice work.

Suddenly Yazadril’s voice called out in fury, amplified by the chapel’s spell, and cast as a mass Speaking as well. “*Who cast Compulsion?!!! You will appear before me NOW!!!*” He’d drawn his great sword as he spoke that last, his motion smooth and fast as he reversed his grip in a continuation of the draw, and used both hands to drive it’s point into the marble just in front of his feet as his last word rang out.

All those who had cast Compulsion instantly appeared, even before the awesome CLANK of the impact had finished ringing, for he held mighty Mountainfire, and it’s power would not be denied. They appeared in a huge loose ball of frightened and confused elves floating from three to eighteen meters in the air in front of him, since there was no room for them on the ground.

“Great source!!!” he cried, and cast a quick counting spell. “*One thousand six hundred and eighty-one of you cast compulsion on the poor boy AT THE SAME TIME?!!!*” he yelled in outrage. “*One thousand six hundred and eighty-one!!! No doubt every one of you fools thought you were the only one to do so, but for even ONE of you to pile it onto the power the oath had gathered ALREADY, would OBVIOUSLY risk his life and his sanity!!!*”

“*Know that you are Marked! And if his mind or his body is damaged, you WILL be held accountable!!! Now get out of my sight!!! BEGONE!!!*” and at his last word he clanked the great sword against the marble again, sending them all back to the places it had fetched them from.

He turned back to Mark and those gathered around him.

Mark was still trying to speak, and could not. He tried to sit up, but was so weak he could barely move.

“Relax. Gather your strength slowly.” Hilsith said as she urged him to remain prone with a gentle press on his shoulders.

“Ta... Talia...” he finally gasped.

“Sweet source above.” Hilsith softly cursed. “I have always thought there could not be such a thing as too much love, but if there is, he is feeling it now! It will be no wonder if his mind comes unhinged from it! I’ve never *seen* anyone absorb so much power! What an onslaught! I’d have thought that *nothing* could live through such an ordeal!”

“He did not.” Talia softly sobbed.

“Pardon me?” Hilsith asked in surprise.

“The vows and the Compulsions killed him, and the curse brought him back to life.” Talia stated tearfully. “Till the end of days. The curse would not let him die, just as it would not let me die. Till the end of days.

“Oh please be all right, my husband! *Please! Oh Mark, I love you so much!*”

“Mallrie’...” he mumbled.

“What? Pardon me, Love?” she asked tearfully.

“Umall right.” he mumbled, a little clearer this time, so quiet that only she could hear him.. “Love you. Lots.” He took a deep breath, then managed a shaky little smile. “Think I’m gonna be okay. Can’t see though. Probly come back in a minute.”

“You... You can’t see?” Talia asked in confusion. “But you’re looking right at me!”

“No. I know where you are. Exactly. Hard to put into words. I just know where you are. Think I always will. I love you Talia. I love you so much. My wife. That’s so incredible. You’re my wife! Oh Talia! Oh Talia!”

He became completely overwhelmed with emotion, and began crying like a child, with no effort to stop.

Talia leaned down and threw her arms around his neck, buried her face in the hollow of his shoulder, and cried as hard as he.

“Ah. This is good.” Hilsith murmured, nodding.

“Pardon me?” Yazadril worriedly asked, and absent-mindedly sheathed his sword behind his back. It was an effortless motion, and he didn’t need to look away from Hilsith as he did so.

“This weeping is a healthy sign.” Hilsith told him. “They desperately need to vent a great deal of excess emotion, and this is a healthy and natural way to do so.

“I think it’s safe to announce that they’re going to be all right.” she added, nodding toward the guests.

“Thank the source.” he stated reverently. Then he turned and realized that millions of elves were anxiously waiting, their faces worried, and some showed that they were deeply afraid for the young groom’s well-being.

He stood and called; “They’re going to be all right!”

This was greeted by cheers that shook the trees, and a few shed tears of relief.

Mark and Talia cried for over eight minutes, then Talia gradually stopped, and she held him while he cried for another minute. Finally, and with great effort, he got himself under some control, though it took almost another minute before his breathing stopped jerking and the lump in his throat went down.

“All right. My vision’s coming back.” he said. “Let me sit up please Love.”

Talia sat back on her heels to give him room.

He sat forward and put his head in his hands. “Whew! I’m glad I don’t have to do *that* every day!” he declared, and there were relieved chuckles all around.

“Well love, we still have things to do.” he smiled as he dropped his hands. “I guess we’d best get to doing them.”

“I guess we’d best!” Talia laughed.

He rose unsteadily to his feet, then everyone near rushed to support him as he swayed and almost fell.

“Easy there, you big youth!” Theramin laughed. “Take another minute or five. There’s no rush.”

“No, I’m all right now. I don’t think I’ll be going back down on one knee though. We’re almost done the ceremony. When it’s finished we can all go sit down.”

“All right. Places everyone!” Theramin called with a quick double clap. When all were back in their places he continued. “Place the ring, which symbolizes love without end, upon her finger.”

Dilimon handed the ring to Mark, who almost dropped it as his hands were still shaking a bit, and it took him two tries to get it over the tip of her finger. Then it was in place, and he sighed in relief as he realized he’d held his breath.

“And so let it be.” Theramin said with a grin. “Let all present bear witness, for I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

Mark didn’t trust himself to bend over far enough to kiss Talia, so he picked her up under her arms and held her close, uncaring if it contradicted elven decorum.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him like their lives depended on it, and so it was a pair of minutes later that they first noticed the roar of millions of elven voices shouting approval, and that everyone else in the wedding party was pulling flowers of every variety from out of thin air and tossing them upon the pair and that the pile was up to Mark’s knees, and that Theramin was waiting patiently with a huge grin on his face, and that the orchestra was now playing a joyous and lively refrain, and that the ribbons overhead were dancing almost frantically to the tempo in beautiful abstract patterns.

“Now let us rejoice with feast and celebration!” Theramin called, and the crowd roared even louder.

As he led them down the podium, it’s aisle was again almost aligned with the aisle on the ground, since it had made a bit more than one complete rotation during the ceremony. To allow people to move freely, the ribbons that marked off the aisle on the ground detached themselves at one end and tied themselves in neat bows on their gold stands, as an Illusion of a double ring of tables and chairs appeared around the podium. Since that ground was still filled with elves, many of them found themselves standing embedded in the middle of an illusory table or chair, and they hastily moved back. Room was available for them to do so, since many were moving out to the tables laden with the buffet feast, set up between the trees around the edge of the clearing.

Suddenly an amazing wave of the scent of the feast washed over them.

“Wow, does that smell great! Suddenly I’m starving!” Mark laughed.

“The cooks held back the scent of their wares, so as to not distract from the ceremony, and now they release all the scent they have stored.” Alilia told him.

“Everyone is clear.” Theramin said. “Be careful Mark, the tables and chairs are about to become solid. You don’t want to be in contact when they do.”

A sudden glow in Mark's vision, and a shift in the slowly-recovering magic field in the elves' vision, marked the transition.

Nemia led them a third of the way around the circle of tables, and it was obvious when they came to the one that was theirs. All of the tables were themselves round and each set with twelve chairs of a size to suit elves, and the gold-trimmed white dinnerware was similarly small. Mark's place had items that matched all the rest, except in size. His dinnerware and silverware were sized for him, much larger than human standard sizes. His chair was also sized to him and situated in a depression in the moss with room for his feet in front, so that the low table would be at a comfortable level.

His table-mates were Talia, Yazadril and Nemia, Dilimon and Yalla, Theramin and Yzell, Alilia and her husband Gorsh, Hilsith, and Prince Jaromer of Thon, who appeared quite pleased to be seated with Hilsith. Hilsith appeared rather bemused by the Prince, gracing him with a raised eyebrow and a bit of a smirk.

Their table was in the outer ring, and the rest of the Princes and Princesses, along with their spouses and escorts, filled the four tables to either side. The rest of the bridesmaids and groomsmen, as well as some of the other senior wizards, and all their spouses and escorts, were seated at the four nearest tables on the inner ring.

The rest of the tables were occupied by those of The High People who knew Talia and her family personally, and by the Council and other senior elves of their people.

Alilia's husband Gorsh was introduced as they sat, and was the tallest elf Mark had yet met at a hundred and seventy centimeters, a handsome fellow with blond hair and blue eyes wearing a flamboyant blue and yellow suit. He spoke little that evening, alternating between grief for his son and petulance at the scant attention Alilia paid him.

Alilia, for her part, made sure that Prince Jaromer was seated on her other side, for reasons that would soon be apparent.

Talia disdained her seat, leaving it open for any who chose to stop by their table for a few minutes, and instead settled herself on Mark's lap as soon as he was seated. She introduced six of her friends who would serve at their table that night, and theirs were the first of a great many names that Mark couldn't remember the next day.

"Well Talia," one of them teased, "I can't believe that you didn't ask any of us to be bridesmaids! You definitely owe us one! Perhaps we'll forgive you if you share your big handsome husband with us some night!"

"Or perhaps I'll just have to live without your forgiveness, and keep him all to myself!" Talia grinned, possessively hugging him around his neck.

"Now don't be petty!" another rejoined. "There's obviously more than enough of him to go around! Besides, we're not asking you to give him up for a night, only to share him, and perhaps we can spare a few kisses for you too!"

"And as I understand it, you have eternity anyway!" a third added. "Out of the millions of nights you'll have, surely you can share him for at least one!"

"Hmm. Perhaps if he's been very good, we can arrange something as a treat for him some time." Talia giggled.

"Great! I suggest the night after tomorrow!" the first waitress laughed. "I think my schedule is open then!"

"We'll see." Talia smiled.

Mark, who had been blushing increasingly bright red since this conversation had started, suddenly asked; "Excuse me, do you know where the menus are? I was told there'd be menus?"

One of the giggling elf girls produced a stack of menus out of nowhere, and they handed them around.

"It's somewhat traditional for the bride and groom to endure a certain amount of ribald teasing." Talia quietly giggled into Mark's ear. "Particularly if they wear white, as we're more susceptible to it."

"I guess some things are the same everywhere." Mark grinned as he opened his menu.

It was printed in Trade Common, but that didn't really help, since he didn't recognize any of the dishes.

"Just bring me a portion of everything they're serving, or enough to fill this plate, starting with whatever they have the most of. And a pitcher of apple juice." He told the nearest server as he handed her his menu. She smiled, nodded, closed her eyes and whispered, and a moment later serving vessels began appearing in her hands, which soon filled the table around Mark, while another server began dishing their contents onto plates.

Every dish was delicious, and new ones arrived constantly, most steaming hot, some warm or cold, a few iced. A few were quite recognizable, like roast beef in a honey-ginger glaze that was called Cyoolian Shining Cattle, and in most cases he could identify the meat, vegetables, or fruits that were the main ingredients, but in some cases he had no idea what he was eating, and enjoyed it anyway. He got the impression that his menu had been hurriedly and poorly translated, since his was the only one not printed in Elvish.

Over the next hour the conversations were short and light, being largely comments on the food between bites. Most had ice-cold fruit juices with their meal, and many had liquor mixed with fruit juices, or wines, or ales, though

tea and milk from various herbivores were also popular choices, as well as other beverages whose natures Mark never learned.

The elven royalty, wizards, and High People from the surrounding tables made their way over in groups of two to six, each spending a few moments to be introduced and to offer their congratulations.

The last and most interesting of those was Pimall, Princess of The Warm People, who knew Hilsith personally and who approached near the end of the meal. Like every northern elf Mark met, she had the same blue-tinged white coloring of newly fallen snow. After introductions she had asked; "So, you fine young couple, do you know how many, out of the world's population of elves, have *not* attended your wedding today?"

"Well, since I doubt you'd leave your borders completely undefended, I'd guess a few hundred at least, perhaps a few thousand." Mark speculated.

"Officially, eight!" Pimall laughed. "Three are retired reclusives who never leave home, three are too physically infirm to leave their beds due to magically inflicted injuries, and two are hopelessly insane! And the injured three are receiving long-distance Sendings of the Readings beings taken all over this valley, but of you two primarily, of course. As for the elven sentries and guards, they are following the procedure The High People use for weddings, where they are divided into two by drawing lots, with half attending at any given time in turns! Of course, there are a few elven criminals who dare not show their faces.

"*Everyone* else is here! And I don't mind telling you that I find it deeply ironic that the wedding of a human and an elf should have such a hugely unifying effect on elvenkind! Things are happening tonight, both here in the chapel and without, as advantage is taken of this unique opportunity to meet and get to know any other elf, to sign trade agreements and settle disputes, to re-acquaint with seldom seen friends and relatives, to experiment with other cultures' ways of feasting and celebrating, to make new friends, to play with new lovers, to fall in love with someone exotic from far away! You simply *must* find time tonight to stroll around the valley! Every elven people have brought their own pavilions to showcase their lifestyle and celebrations! Every product in the world can be had here tonight, for sale or barter or for just a smile!

"I tell you, our peoples have never been as united as they are right now! The results of this night will have a major effect on the world, far into the future!"

"Yes, and there will be a lot of explaining to do!" Jaromer laughed. "By now the human royalty, and that of the dwarves and other races on the other continents, will have noticed the sudden disappearance of the entire elven race, without a word of explanation to any of them! And when they hear that we all came to attend the wedding of a human, their reactions to not being invited will range from miffed to furious!"

"And perhaps it will put them in their place a bit!" Pimall laughed. "They could stand to be reminded that we are a powerful allied force in this world, and that they rule over none of us!"

"Well said!" Alilia said as she raised her glass in salute.

"And by the way, Jaromer, how is it that you sit at the head table, and I do not?" Pimall teased with a smile. "If it's a matter of seniority, I have you by two centuries, *and* I'm a better wizard, *and* my people have by far both the most population and the most territory of all the elven nations!"

"I can only assume that our groom wanted someone at his table who is accustomed to dining with men!" Jaromer laughed.

"I'm just as glad to have you, Jaromer, but I'm afraid it was none of my doing!" Mark told him, enjoying the banter.

"I arranged your seating, Jaromer, through Nemia." Alilia revealed. "For two reasons. The first is that we had one chair available, and you are the only one of the leaders who is single and unescorted."

"There you are, Pimall, that is what I have that you do not!" Jaromer laughed. "A rather complete lack of a love life!"

"A rather complete lack of ability to commit to a relationship, you should say!" she returned. "You came unescorted so you could choose from all the available females here, you rake!"

"Ahh, you wound me deeply, though perhaps you have the truth of it." He said with hilariously exaggerated melancholy, laying his forearm across his brow. "What was the other reason, Alilia?"

"I wish to ask your assistance. It's a more serious conversation than we should have right now, but when the young get up to dance I will speak of it."

"I think I can guess, and if I'm right, I would prefer that you not delay." Talia stated firmly as she hand fed Mark a tidbit of some unknown candied fruit.

"And what is your guess?" Alilia asked.

“We wish to know of human wizards.” Talia answered. “Both the one that cursed you and father, and the one who slew Mark’s people, assuming one did. Jaromer is the obvious person to turn to for information and investigation of humans, and of their wizards. My soul burns for justice in these matters, as much as does yours or anyone’s, and if that is not what you meant to ask of him, then I so ask him now myself. A few minutes of seriousness will not spoil the evening, and our enemies may act again at any moment.”

“That is exactly it.” Alilia nodded.

“I see.” Jaromer nodded. “First, Yazadril, if you think that the detection spells you used to find the curse on you gave you any psionic signature of the perpetrator, give me what you’ve found and I’ll pass it on to my investigative specialists. If they’ve encountered the person or the person’s work before, they’ll know it immediately. As to the atrocity in Shinosa Valley... Give me a moment. All right, I’ve sent for my ambassador to the court of the King of Finitra. He may have some information on that matter. He’ll be here in a moment.

“Yazadril?”

“If I encounter the person who cursed us, or their work, I will most certainly recognize their aura, so I do believe that what I have will be useful in that regard.” Yazadril stated firmly. “Prepare for the Link. Here.”

“Received and sent on.” Jaromer nodded after a moment. “Ah, Bomil, there you are. I present Bomil, my ambassador to Finitra.”

Bomil was a very short elf, barely a hundred and twenty centimeters tall, blond, blue eyed, a bit bow legged, and with ears and a nose that were decidedly too large for the rest of his head. He bowed to the table in general, and habitually straightened the jacket of his neat brown suit. “What can I do for you, Jaromer?” he asked.

“Tell us, Bomil, what do you know of the atrocity in Shinosa Valley?”

“It was discovered five months ago, by a visiting resident of the next inhabited valley to the east, and word was passed to the garrison at Copper Strike, and thence to King Dren.” Bomil told them. “Some of the residents were found in the mill, some in the surrounding valley, and the rest close to their homes. Three are unaccounted for, and it’s assumed that they died while out hunting or trapping in more remote environs. I presume that Citizen Longstrider here is listed among those three, for there were no survivors reported. No cause of death has been decided upon, as it was not reported till at least a month had passed after it happened, and the deceased had been... disturbed, by scavengers, reducing the utility of examining them. The most popular theory at court is that they were struck down by a plague. The Royal Wizard of Finitra and his staff could find no lingering signs of the use of magic, but then, they are little more than a pack of twits at any rate. I would not be surprised if some of them were involved in some way.

“The nearest living relatives of the deceased were found, and internments were held according to the traditions of the Finitrans. The relatives of the deceased claimed their kin’s possessions and lands, but none of them chose to live in Shinosa Valley, and no one wanted to buy the land from them at first, for fear of plague. Then, perhaps five weeks ago, a village in eastern Finitra called Whiskers Delta and the lands surrounding it were slowly destroyed by flood, their land silted with sand, and the king felt he needed to re-establish Finitrans in Shinosa or risk losing sovereignty of the Whilo Peaks range to the Kingdom of Membitra, your neighbor to the west. So to solve two problems with one stroke, Dren bought the lands and buildings in Shinosa at the going rate, and sold them to the dispossessed from Whiskers Delta, who were allowed to take possession immediately upon promise of payments spaced over ten years.

“So I’m afraid it’s too late to reclaim your home, Citizen Longstrider, but if you so choose, I will contact your relatives, and see about having your family’s possessions and the proceeds from the sale of your home returned to you.”

“Uh...” Mark swallowed hard. “I’d appreciate that. There are a few of our things I’d like to have, for sure. As for the money, well I guess that depends on my relatives’ financial situation. If they need it, I’d like them to have it. I know my father had close kin down on the flats, and they exchanged letters once or twice a year, but my mother’s closest kin outside the valley were third cousins or something, and she’d never met them or even written to them. And she had a sister who’d married a trader, but I think they were out of touch for years due to constant travel. It’s, ah, it’s good to know my family were decently buried, at least.”

“I’m sure your kin will be glad to know you’re alive.” said Bomil. “And King Dren would be very interested in hearing your account of the events. Shall I give it to him? I assure you, your narrative during the ceremony made a strong impression on me, and I remember every word.”

“I don’t know. What’s he like?”

“King Dren? He’s a good man. A harried, nervous young man who can’t trust half of those around him, thrust into power too early by the magical assassination of his father King Wittan nine months ago; still unsolved. Despite that, he’s fair to all, and is quickly building skill at his role. Yes, I’d say that he’s a good king.”

“Oh. Well, tell him then. And you might tell him that although I’m an expatriate now, I still consider myself a loyal Finitran.”

“Ah.” Bomil nodded. “You should know that if I tell him that last, he will inquire as to your new circumstances, and if I tell him that, he will certainly ask me to place you in contact with him, so that he can press you for an introduction to Yazadril for diplomatic purposes, or better yet for him, an introduction to Alilia.”

“Oh. What do you think, Yazadril?”

“Hmm. Hold that thought, Mark.” Yazadril mused. “Now there are three major magical events that have struck recently within the environs of Finitra, that may or may not be related. The curse upon Alilia and I, the atrocity at Shinosa Valley, and the assassination of a Finitran king. Do any of you know of any other events of note that involve diabolical magic, that have happened since Alilia and I were cursed?”

“Many.” Jaromer snorted. “Though only one on the scale of Shinosa Valley.”

“I agree.” Bomil nodded. “The truth of politics has never been more true than today.”

“The truth of politics?” Mark asked.

“A saying among the politically minded.” Alilia said. “I quote; The truth of politics is that magic runs the world, and wizards rule it.”

“At any rate, though over the last two centuries there has perhaps been a sporadic increase in acts of diabolical magic, as you put it Yazadril, I doubt anyone has tried to find a larger pattern in it all, which is what I believe you’re suggesting.” Bomil nodded. “It’s hard to say whether the increase is any greater than the increase in the general population.”

“The thought of such events being linked in any way is worrisome.” Jaromer said. “As it would imply that there is either a very powerful and evil wizard with some long term plan to destabilize the nations of this continent, or a conspiracy of evil wizards with such a plan. I assure you, tomorrow we will begin study of the possibility with every resource I can bring to bear.”

“Thank you.” Yazadril nodded. “Bomil, if you would, skip that part about Mark’s loyal citizenry, and convey my regards to King Dren directly. I’ll have a letter in your hand for him before you leave here, informing him that we wish to bring a delegation to his country next week, and that it will include myself, Mark, and a group of wizards who will assist us in investigating what happened at Shinosa Valley. We will wish to visit his capital, as well as Mark’s relatives; wherever they may live in his country, before we go to Shinosa Valley. And I will imply, without saying so directly, that if this goes well I will consider further contacts of a more diplomatic nature.

“And I think that is quite enough seriousness for a young bride and groom on their wedding night. You two may notice that a small but quickly increasing number of those around you are anticipating your leading the first dance.”

“All right, but you are not sending us off like children so you can discuss adult matters without us.” Talia stated firmly. “We are central to any proceedings in these matters, in every way, and furthermore, as accredited professionals; a warrior and a wizard, our skills and insight are fully pertinent.

“So when we dance, so should you all, and we will be honored to have you join us on the dancing ground.”

“Well said, my love. I couldn’t agree more.” Mark declared equally firmly, as he met the eyes of those around. Then he grinned. “On the other hand, I doubt I know any of the dances you do here.”

“You’ll just have to show us one you know, and we can teach you one of ours.” Talia laughed, and kissed him on the tip of his nose. “Shall we?”

“I believe we shall!” he laughed, and stood with her in his arms. “Will you be joining us?” he asked the group.

“After all the valid points your wife made, we couldn’t very well refuse, could we?” Nemia laughed as she stood.

“I’ll get my husband!” Pimall laughed as she turned in a swirl of blue velvet hooped skirts, and the silent Knight of The Warm People who hovered a discreet pace behind her and to her left went with her.

“My Lady, may I have the honor of this dance?” Jaromer asked Hilsith with a bow and a sweeping gesture toward the dancing ground.

“All right, as long as we clear the table now.” Hilsith smiled. “I more than half like you, Jaromer, and I’m honored to know you, and I even find you rather charming. In a completely-not-attracted-to-you manner of speaking.”

“Ouch! And ouch again!” Jaromer laughed with a shake of his head as she took his arm.

They all got a chuckle out of that as Nemia and Yazadril led them around the circle of tables.

“Since I am both morbidly curious and a glutton for suffering,” Jaromer said as he continued the banter, “May I ask what aspect of my person or character dismays you so?”

“You play a great game, but still, you’re only playing. You’re Prince of the second most powerful elven nation, but I get the impression that life is all just a great jest to you. It works well for you and I respect that, I’m not criticizing, but those I’m attracted to are more serious than that. You are simply far too frivolous.”

“And ouch again!”

A quarter of the way around the clearing lay a perfect circle of white ribbon on the ground, a hundred meters wide. A ring of expectant elves had formed around it, obviously waiting for the bride and groom to begin the dancing. The orchestra had broken into three smaller groups, so that one third could perform in turns while the other two-thirds enjoyed themselves.

The ribbons above it all drew pictures alternating with elven writing. Mark realized that as it had gotten dark, all the ribbons had begun glowing with increasing brightness, and now cast a comfortable light throughout the clearing.

“What’s that say?” Mark pointed to the ribbon writing.

“Dancing in this area only, please.” Talia chuckled.

“Ah, I should’ve guessed. You know, it strikes me that you could dance on the moss, or I could pick you up and carry you, but either way, we’re going to look silly, and maybe awkward as well. I don’t mind looking silly that much, but I’d rather not on the very first dance, if we can think of something else. Do you have any wizard’s tricks that would come in handy in this situation?”

“I’m sure I do!” Talia laughed. “Let’s see, I’ll start with a standing levitation at a consistent height above the ground,” she rose a meter in the air, floating along beside him as he walked, “I’ll apply a coefficient of friction and a state of resiliency similar to those of the moss to my pseudo-surface,” she bounced on her toes, “I’ll apply a horizontal movement locked to my motion over the ground,” she started walking beside him with quick little steps to match his pace, “And I’ll reduce the horizontal component by a ratio equivalent to the proportional difference between your pace and mine. Ta daa!” She walked the remainder of the distance to the circle of ribbon with her steps timed with his, and her smaller stride still carried her along beside him at the speed of his longer stride. “You can’t hold me too close while we’re dancing though, or my toes will be bumping you!”

“Well, done, Talia!” Yazadril congratulated. “That’s an extremely ingenious combination, my girl!”

“And a solution quickly arrived at!” Nemias added proudly as Yazadril swept her into his arms in preparation for the first dance. “I might have arrived at an equally elegant solution, but it would take me far longer to do so!”

“Even if I could do the spell, I couldn’t walk like that!” Mark chuckled as they reached a spot near the center of the dance floor. “I definitely couldn’t dance! I couldn’t ignore the ground going by at the wrong rate like that! I’d trip over my feet!”

“Now let’s see...” He turned to the waiting musicians. “Could you play something like; DUM tum tum THHRRumm tum tum DUM tum tum THHRRum tum tum... Like that?”

The players smiled and nodded, and conferred for a moment, then the harpist tapped her fingernail on the frame of her instrument three times, and they began to play My Love’s Shining Eyes.

“Exactly the one I was thinking of!” Mark grinned, and turned back to Talia. “All right, we start with our feet together, take one step with each foot, and bring them back together on the third beat. I’ll start with my left foot. Then we do the same again, starting with the other foot, and repeat the six beat pattern. I’ll hold you almost at your arm’s length so you have room for some footwork, and just follow my lead. Ready? And... Go.”

They began dancing like they’d done it a thousand times, and they had, if not with each other, for the elves enjoyed the dances of the other races as much as those they originated themselves, and Talia had known this one since she was a child.

Talia’s spell worked perfectly, and as long as Mark didn’t look at her feet, it was as easy to dance with her as it would have been if she were only twenty centimeters shorter than he.

“This is great!” he enthused as he whirled her along over the moss, and everyone gave them a round of applause before joining in the dance.

They danced well together, yet Mark soon realized that Yazadril and Nemias were far more skilled, and moved with a sure grace that spoke of decades dancing together. Some of the other long-married couples around were just as impressive.

“Look at them!” Talia smiled and nodded to Mark’s left.

Mark saw that her nod indicated Alilia and Gorsh, who were incredible, and obviously the most skilled pair there. Mark had wondered at dinner whether their relationship was failing, yet their moods blossomed on the dancing ground, and they grinned like children, obviously delighted in each other’s company and deeply in love. They executed amazing double and triple spins together, and their footwork sometimes included two steps on each beat, and occasionally three, instead of one.

“Wow!” Mark grinned, and looked away to avoid being so distracted that he missed his own steps.

“Don’t worry,” she giggled, “We’ll be as good as that when we’ve been at it as long as those two have.”

“And how long is that?”

“About four thousand years.”

“Wow. It still seems impossible that I could expect to live so long!”

“You will.” she nodded. “How much do you recall of what happened to you after you swore your vows?”

“Every single second.” Mark said, and became serious as he thought about it. Then he smiled again. “Not a lot of fun, really, but all’s well that ends well!”

“So you realize that the curse brought you back to life, though you were not sounding the tines at the time?”

“They were ringing a little, from Hilsith hitting my chest. But I’m not sure if that had anything to do with it.”

“I think not. I think we are immortal.”

“That’s too strange a thought to even think about right now. I think I’ll kiss you instead!” he laughed, and did so without missing a step.

They danced the better part of an hour without stopping before he called for a break.

“Let’s go back to the table for a bit, and then maybe stroll around the valley, as Pimall suggested.” he proposed.

“All right.”

“But keep this spell on, please Love? It’s nice to be able to look you in the eye without having to look down so far.”

“I’d rather you carried me.” she giggled. “I can make myself lighter if I get too heavy.”

“That won’t be a problem, and I would prefer to carry you as well.” he grinned.

She settled into his arms and they shared another kiss, and this one fired their ardor and left them breathless.

“Ah! Hold, my love!” Talia giggled as she broke the kiss. “I’m afraid that if we do that any longer, I’ll have to drag you back to our bed for satisfaction! And there is still much fun to be had here tonight!”

“Uh, yeah.” Mark agreed, and blushed.

As they left the dancing circle, Mark noticed that everyone from their table, as well as those from all the tables around theirs, also chose that moment to end their dance. They all walked around the newlyweds in a loose group. A loose crowd of perhaps a thousand followed around those, the curious and interested drawn both to the honored couple, and to the amazing concentration of the most powerful individuals in the elven nations.

Yazadril and Nemia were to their right, and Yazadril inquired; “So what would you two like to do now, my fine young son-in-law?”

Mark stopped and turned to them. “You know, I just now fully realize that you’re now my father-in-law and my mother-in-law.” he stated emotionally. “That you’re the only parents I have, and you and Talia are my only close family.”

There was an emotional moment, then Talia said; “I think this calls for a hug.”

“I think it does.” he smiled as he went to one knee and crouched low, and the three elves gave him a warm group hug, while his arms went around all three of them, and many of those watching gave a sentimental sigh to see it.

“And as for what we’re doing, we thought we’d stop by the table for a refreshment, and then stroll around the valley.” Mark said when he again stood with Talia in his arms. “Though with three million out there, we won’t have time to see much.”

“Actually, the first ‘visitors’ to arrive were of Alilia’s people, and they gathered just to the east of the chapel.” Theramin remarked. “The first to arrive from another people were Warm People who stationed themselves to the north, then a group from The Sea People who chose a place to the west, tropical elves to the south, and so on, until groups from every nation formed a ring around the chapel, and that is where their pavilions were erected when their attendance was officially recognized. So all you need to do to see the entire elven world represented is walk beyond the third surrounding ring of trees, then circumnavigate them!”

“Ah! Well that’s good to know!” Mark chuckled.

“And extremely convenient!” Talia agreed.

They stopped at their table for beverages.

“You must try this snow-flower elixir!” Talia suggested as she poured his huge glass full of a clear, ice-cold liquid. “It’s a rare and delectable drink made by The Warm People.”

“And a potent liquor as well!” Yazadril cautioned, chuckling.

“As for touring the nations’ temporary consulates, for want of a better term, I suggest you start with the more familiar, and work toward the more fantastic.” Dilimon chuckled. “For that, I suggest you depart the chapel in a north-easterly direction, then proceed to your right. Yalla and I skipped a few dances and made a quick tour by air. What began as hasty camps have become amazing showcases for proud nations, and I know you’ll be astounded at some of them!”

“Lead on, then!” Mark laughed.

As they cleared the third ring, one of the Princes that Mark had yet to be introduced to made his way close, his wife affectionately holding his hand.

“Mark and Talia, may I present Prince Simenir of The People of Clouds, another nation of mountain elves whose lands lie some five hundred and twenty kilometers to the south. This is his wife Fevia.

“We’re pleased to meet you.” Talia smiled as Mark made a polite bow in answer to Simenir and Fevia’s.

“We are pleased to meet you as well, and congratulations!” Fevia answered for the pair. “These are our people. We’re a small nation who numbers only a few more than The High People, and our lifestyles and lands are very similar to theirs as well. We therefore didn’t make such a big effort to display our uniqueness.”

The area was full of merrymaking elves milling about, talking and visiting, telling stories, playing games, displaying showy magic spells, and reciting poetry, and there were groups of musicians surrounded by crowds of dancers, interspersed among tables and booths bearing food, drink, artwork, and merchandise of every sort. The area was lit by amazing displays of dancing light and cold fire that floated fifteen meters overhead. They visited there for twenty minutes, then moved to the next nation’s area.

That nation and the next one were mountain elves from other continents, and they had cast illusions on their areas that made the trees and plants look like those of their homelands, all of which were strange varieties that Mark had never seen.

Then they reached the area of Alilia’s people.

“The temporary demesne of The People of Life.” Dilimon told Mark.

“This is what it’s like around my home.” Alilia stated proudly. “It’s a perfect illusion.”

“It’s beautiful!” Mark smiled.

Though many of the plants and trees were of types he knew, it was a far more lush forest than any Mark had ever seen. Though it was dry, the air seemed full of moisture, like it had just finished raining. The trees, both the giant varieties and the more normal types that grew between them, were much larger than those in The Nine Valleys, as well as being more closely spaced. None of the bark of the trees could be seen, for every bit of it was covered with other plants and mosses. Where there was room for ground cover between the trees, it was covered with an amazing variety of bushes bearing leaves, flowers, berries and nuts. It seemed impenetrable, yet a more careful look revealed a dense profusion of wildlife moving through it; from squirrels to deer to great bison, from weasels to wolves to immense bears. Great flocks of birds winged overhead through the branches of the great trees, with an occasional raptor diving after prey. Clouds of insects buzzed and hummed between them, though none bothered Mark or the elves. One could almost feel all the life growing at a fantastic rate. Everything glowed with a soft light that made any additional illumination unnecessary.

There were no activities or facilities at ground level here, but the great trees had many platforms, walkways, and structures. They were built against the sides of trunks and hollowed into the wood, on the branches and slung beneath them, and suspended between the trees on giant webs of thick, cabled vines, and all were packed with elves. No tree or vine had been cut or attached to make the constructions, instead it had all been grown into shape and into place.

“It’s easy to see why your folk are called The People of Life, Alilia.” Mark commented as a hand-railed lifting platform descended to the forest floor at the edge of the area. “I’d love to visit your lands sometime.”

“You will always be welcome there.” she nodded.

The size of the lifting platform wasn’t apparent until it had reached the ground, and over two dozen boarded it. Similar platforms were touching ground on either side, though most elves simply flew up, and a few Translocated.

The view only became more beautiful as they rose through the branches to an absolutely massive open platform over three hundred meters above the ground. It was suspended by hundreds of the living cables, and there were thousands of elves engaged in celebration upon it.

One of the elves who waited upon their arrival there was not celebrating. She was a very delicate seeming beauty with ice blue eyes and black hair, wearing a simple yet attractive black dress, and she was crying in a mixture of sorrow and rage. She accosted Alilia immediately. “How could you do it?!!” she demanded without preliminary. “You, who know exactly what it is like as much as anyone can without experiencing it themselves, you are now another female’s rapist!! It matters not that you were too cowardly to do the deed with your own hands, and so forced an innocent to be your weapon!! You are still the one who is violating her! And for eternity, Alilia!!! Eternity!!! You are the worst rapist who has ever lived, or who ever *will* live!!! You have shamed us all!!! How could you do it?!!!”

Alilia stared at her, and could find no answer, but tears gathered in her eyes.

“You must forgive her, Yzandra.” Talia softly insisted, for she had guessed who faced them. “Even as I have forgiven her. She was overcome by grief at the death of her son, and under the influence of the curse cast upon her and my father. If you want to lay the blame where it truly should be, blame the unknown wizard who cast that curse.”

“You based your curse upon my experience, didn’t you?” Yzandra demanded, ignoring Talia for the moment.

Alilia tearfully nodded.

“Does she know what she faces?”

Alilia shook her head. “In general, but not yet in detail.” she murmured guiltily.

Now Yzandra turned to Talia. “You forgive her now, but you’ll feel differently before another century has passed! Gods’ teeth, you will hate her and the very air she breathes in a week! I will tell you what she lacks the courage to say! You will be raped in the most brutal ways, and if you try to prepare yourself for it to reduce your suffering, you will be raped by surprise! You will be bound, naked and helpless, in the most humiliating positions imaginable! You will be tormented upon your most private places, with cruel little whips, and with pins, and with hot candle wax! You will suffer buggery, the ultimate violation! You will be violated in every place with phalluses and fingers and every common object that can be made to serve the purpose! You will not be able to feel forgiveness for her after decades and centuries of such torments!”

She turned back to Alilia, and spoke coldly. “Until the end of days. Who would have thought it possible. Alilia the Great, Princess of The People of Life. The cruelest rapist who ever lived.

“I am renouncing my citizenship, for I am shamed by it. I leave tomorrow for The Stone Islands.”

With that, she turned on her heel and walked away.

“Now you hold right there, Yzandra!” Talia called sternly. The instant she wanted down, Mark sensed it in her body language and released her. She set out after Yzandra with determination in her stride, down an invisible ramp that deposited her feet on the wood just as she drew abreast of the outraged elf, who had stopped at the call.

“You have not considered what I have said with any seriousness at all, and furthermore, you are acting just like Alilia did when she cursed me!” Talia lectured. “For you have shown undeserved discourtesy to myself and to my party, a behavior you would normally abhor in yourself and which you will regret when this has passed, and anger has driven you to do it! Now I realize that painful memories have been reawakened in you by all of this, and I feel deeply for what you have gone through. But still, you must try to control your emotions, and realize the truth of what I am telling you!

“Alilia was cursed, Yzandra! Her son was lying freshly dead upon the ground right there, horribly broken and bleeding, because she had been cursed! She was IN HIS MIND, trying desperately to find out what had happened, at the final moment of her son’s death!”

She took a deep breath, her eyes locked with Yzandra’s, and continued more calmly. “No one could be held responsible for their actions under such circumstances.” She looked around, and saw that everyone within earshot had stopped to listen. “No one.” she repeated firmly, and turned back to Yzandra.

She shook off the mood, and took a more friendly tone, with a gentle smile. “Just as I will not hold this outburst against you, for it is all too understandable.

“Furthermore, you must realize that what I face will not be the terrible ordeal you experienced, or even the tiniest fraction of it. I can imagine what a horror that was, and I feel great sorrow for your pain. It must rip at your heart to think of me having to go through that for eternity, but *I will not*. You need not feel that bad for me. I will not experience imprisonment, or enforced solitude and monotony. I will not be tormented by strangers, or feel the emotions that go with it. I will merely have rough sex with my husband, who loves me, and who will only be doing it because he is forced to do so to serve *my* needs, and that difference in intent changes everything.”

Yzandra broke down crying, and Talia stepped up to hug her.

“My father and Alilia were cursed to sow discontent among the elves, Yzandra.” Talia softly told her. “We must not let our unseen enemy succeed in that.

“Come. You should celebrate with us for a while. It will be good for your mood.”

She drew her over to the group.

“I’m sorry, Alilia.” Yzandra sniffed.

“As am I, Yzandra. As am I.” Alilia nodded, and Talia drew the three of them together into a tearful hug.

“I think we’ll go to the privacy, girls.” Hilsith smiled, and turned to the group. “We’ll meet you at that table full of deliciously scented delectables over there.”

The four made their way into the crowd, who resumed their celebrations, albeit with a more subdued mood.

“That was... Spooky.” Dilimon quietly stated.

“Wasn’t it?” Yazadril thoughtfully mused, and wiped a tear away.

Nemia turned into his arms and hugged him, and she also shed a few tears.

Theramin noticed the puzzlement on Mark's face. "Talia and Dalia were exactly alike, except that Dalia had the boldness, and Talia the thoughtfulness. But as Talia pointed out, her recent experiences seem to have cured her of most of her shyness.

"And she seemed just like Dalia a moment ago." Mark nodded in understanding, and they began making their way over to the table Hilsith had indicated.

"Exactly. Before, it would have been Talia who thought of the words she said, and she'd have told Dalia what she thought, but it would have been up to Dalia to deliver such an effective remonstrance. And she'd have been very much like that. For a moment, Talia seemed much more like Dalia than herself."

"Talia said that Dalia was half of her soul." Mark mused. "I guess if that's so, then half of Dalia's soul lives on in her sister.

"I'm very sorry I never had a chance to know them both together. I can barely imagine how wonderful they must have been."

Then he thought that his words might be taken to be insensitive to their grief, but as he turned to check, Nemia reassured him with a warm smile as she repaired her appearance with a casual spell while marshaling her emotions.

"Those are lovely thoughts, Mark. I know if Dalia were here, she'd want us to celebrate Talia's wedding with joy. Perhaps you would care for a dance with your new mother-in-law, till your bride returns?"

"I would be honored!" Mark chuckled with a polite bow as he held his hand out to her. "With your permission, Yazadril?"

"Of course, Mark! And you should know that among my people, it is almost ridiculously overly-courteous of you to ask!" Yazadril laughed. "Our females value their freedom of choice in such things, and our wives more than most!"

"Overly-courteous? Is that a real word?" Mark asked Nemia with a mischievous smile as he led her to the nearest crowd of dancers.

"I couldn't say!" Nemia laughed. "This translation spell is standard-issue, and it could be better I think! It supplies both words and grammar, and while I'd give its crafters average marks for its dictionary functions, it's often too slow to supply the correct sentence structure, and elves sometimes find themselves using the more formal modes of the syntax of Elvish. Especially when emotions run high."

"I've noticed that!" he agreed as he took her hands, then cocked his head at the song the five piece fife and drum group were playing. "Do you know this dance? It seems almost like a jig."

"No. It's particular to the People of Life." Nemia said as she watched the joyous capering around her. "I do know some that are similar. But what the hey! We'll just improvise!"

"All right!" he laughed, and they bounced around together for a few moments. Unfortunately, it was like a normal man dancing with a six-year-old child, and as Mark had suspected, it was rather awkward. He looked around at the other dancers and marveled at how much he must stand out in this crowd, since almost all of them were shorter than his belt buckle.

"Could you do that dancing spell that Talia did?" he asked.

"I don't think that would be wise, since I have had six cordials!" she laughed. "But you're right in that this isn't working that well! I'm getting a kink in my neck from looking up at you! Just pick me up, like you do Talia!"

"All right!" he laughed, and swept her up in his arms. This allowed him to do a much better job of following the other dancers.

"Mmm! I can sure see what Talia appreciates about this." Nemia giggled.

"What?"

"Do you remember what it felt like to be a child, being carried by an adult, who was so much bigger and stronger, yet so gentle?"

Mark smiled. It hadn't been that long ago. His father had stood two hundred and twenty-nine centimeters tall and weighed well over a hundred and forty kilograms, and he'd been fit and muscular. He'd had no trouble carrying his son around until Mark was almost thirteen.

"I see that you do." Nemia smiled. "I get a similar, wonderful feeling being carried so effortlessly by you, like this. But then, I'm not a little girl anymore, I am fully mature, and you are male and very attractive, and that adds other aspects of wonderfulness to the feeling."

"Ah, okay." Mark nodded, growing a little uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was taking.

Nemia didn't notice that. "We shall have to ask Talia to share you with me some night soon."

"Now don't you start with that!" Mark laughed. "I got enough of that kind of teasing from those girls at dinner!"

Nemia didn't say anything, and Mark suddenly stopped dead in shocked realization.

“Great fried toads! You’re serious!” he muttered. He looked around and resumed dancing, hoping not to make a scene. Then he noticed the hurt look on Nemia’s face.

“Hey, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to... to dismiss your feelings or anything! It’s just... I mean, you’re my mother-in-law, and the way you are, I mean it’s just not fair that you’re... Ah crap, I’m babbling like an idiot, and Yazadril warned me about these differences in our cultures, so I should be handling this better, but I’m not, so I’m sorry.”

She couldn’t help but laugh at his bashful frustration and stroke his cheek. “No, it’s me who should be sorry. I didn’t mean to scandalize you. I too forgot for a moment what great differences there are in our cultures. And perhaps I still have too much girlish pride. I’ve never been refused before, and I was surprised, as I don’t grant my attentions lightly, or often. Except for Yazadril, of course.”

Then she cocked her head to one side and smiled mischievously. “What did you mean, that it was not fair, me being the way I am?”

He took a deep breath. “Look, Nemia, I dearly love Talia, but I am not blind to the fact that every single elven female is beautiful! Now a man expects that he will have to exert a certain measure of willpower to resist the allure of other attractive girls after he gets married. And, I’m lucky to be able to truly say that I find Talia to be the most attractive among you by far, not only for her alluring prettiness, but for her intelligent and adorable manner as well. But for pure, dazzling, breathtaking beauty, there are two of you who are her equal, and it just doesn’t seem fair that you should be one of the two! I mean, a man expects his mother-in-law to be wrinkled and gray, and neither you nor Talia look a day older than I am! In fact, if I hadn’t been told, I wouldn’t be able to choose which of you is older than the other!”

“So you are saying that it’s not fair for you to have to exert so much willpower to resist the allure of your mother-in-law? Oh, Mark, that is so *cute*!”

Mark had to shake his head and chuckle. “I’m glad you think so, Nemia.”

“Tell me, who is the other that you find so beautiful?” she asked with a teasing smile.

“Well... It’s Alilia.”

“Alilia! I can see that. She is very striking.” Nemia nodded, smiling. “You should know, in order to avoid misunderstandings in the future, that Alilia would pleasure you or Talia, or both, in a heartbeat. True, part of it is her need to make amends, but she is not blind to the fact that you are an incredibly attractive couple. And those friends of Talia’s at dinner *were* teasing you, but that does not mean they were one whit less serious about pleasuring you. They would dearly love to climb all over you in a big pile of naked elf girls!”

“Well that’s it! I need a drink!” Mark declared as he set Nemia down on her feet and led her by the hand back to their group.

Back at the table, he picked up his glass and slammed back the contents, set it down with a deep shudder, then picked up Talia and held her close.

“What is it, Love?” she asked, unsure whether to be concerned.

“I’m just having a bit of trouble getting used to our cultural differences. It’s nothing.” he assured her.

“It’s my fault.” Nemia explained with a smile. “I expressed my desire for him, and he said that it wasn’t fair that he should have to exert willpower to resist the allure of his mother-in-law. Isn’t that charming?”

“Ah, Nemia, you are still so young!” Yazadril laughed as he drew her into his arms. “And still so unknowing of human ways! You’ve probably mortified the poor boy!”

“Well there’s no need to trouble yourself, Love!” Talia soothed. “I wouldn’t mind sharing you with Mother some time, not in the slightest!”

Mark stared at her in shock.

Yazadril shook his head in bemusement. “Talia, you are not helping the situation. The thought of you and your mother sharing a bed in that way will be shaking his mind to the core right now.”

“Oh! I’m sorry!” Talia told him.

“Look, it’s not just that!” Mark stated in hurt exasperation. “I mean, Talia, we just got married! We haven’t even slept together yet! You can’t really want me to sleep with other women do you?”

She searched his eyes, and considered her answer very carefully. “Not if it makes you feel badly, my love. Not if you feel that it is a betrayal of our love, or of our marriage. But for my own part, if I thought you would genuinely be comfortable with it and enjoy it, I think it would be fun as an occasional treat. I mean, I know how you human males feel about being with other males that way, you are famous for your aversion to it, and so I would never suggest it. But I was under the impression that human males liked to be pleased by as many females as possible.”

“That’s true, in a way, but...” Mark stammered.

“You are also very young, Mark, and so there is much you don’t realize.” Yazadril said. “Among your people you swear in your marriage vows to not share sexuality except with your spouse, and so it is considered wrong to do so, and so when it is done it is generally done in secret, and so it is a betrayal. Even among our people, it would be a betrayal to sneak away from your spouse to pleasure another in secrecy. But among every race, even humans, it sometimes happens that a happily married couple will together share their bed with another, or even another couple, by mutual and respectful consent, for the sake of enjoying a novel experience. I can guarantee that such things occasionally went on in Shinosa Valley while you lived there, though you can be sure that the adults would never let you children know about it. And among my people, such play is very common. The differences in this regard between your people and mine stem from the fact that your people are vulnerable to sexual diseases and unplanned pregnancy, while elves are not.

“Simply take it slowly for now, no one will ask you to do anything you feel uncomfortable with. You’ll get used to us in a few years.”

“Huh. You really think that adults among my people do such things?” Mark asked uncertainly.

“I know it for a fact, though they are a small minority.” Yazadril nodded. “Every sexual practice you can imagine is done among every race on this world. The fact that certain practices are forbidden among humans only seems to make them more fascinating to some of you. If you had reached your adulthood a few years before you came to us, you would know this, and so you would not be nearly as shocked by our customs.”

“Come, let’s move on to the next consulate!” Dilimon laughed. “At this rate it’ll be midnight before you’ve seen them all!”

At this, many of those around them began nonchalantly making their way to the ground, most by Flight, though some began crowding happily onto the lifting platforms.

“Everyone around us is listening to every word we’re saying!” Mark stated in surprise.

“Of course!” Talia laughed. “We are the bride and groom! We are naturally the center of attention.”

“And you are surrounded by royalty and mighty wizards.” Yazadril added. “You would be the center of attention under such circumstances among any race in the world. It only surprises you because elves are far more discreetly polite about eavesdropping on the famous, but how could the nearest among them not do so, in such a dense crowd? And since there is no reason why some should be privileged to hear the words of the famous by chance, while others are not, those around you are passing the experience to everyone else. Discreetly, of course. I thought you realized that. That young fellow there, who is so skilled at being innocuous, is Kenesir of Sming, a famed recordist. He has sacrificed his celebrating tonight to so that he can concentrate on recording the events for the historic records of the elven nations. He magnifies his vision and augments his hearing to do so, and his memories of tonight will be impressed into a jewel in a form that can be re-experienced by others. He is truly a great artist at the task. No doubt a copy of it will be given to you as a wedding present, for it is traditional among us to do so.”

“Oh. Well I didn’t know about that fellow, but I guess I realized the rest.” Mark said as they stepped onto the lifting platform. “I just forgot, because I’ve never even seen a crowd before tonight, never mind having to deal with their attention upon me! Being famous, as you say, is a strange experience. I’ll have to watch what I say a little closer!”

“Why? You’ve said and done nothing that you cannot be proud of, by anyone’s morality!” Talia told him. “Just be yourself. We all love you that way. Don’t we?” She asked that last of everyone on the platform, and they all gave a laughing cheer of agreement, abandoning for a moment the pretense of not paying attention to them.

“Oh.” Mark said, and blushed bright red.

“You might think it better if everyone who is paying attention to you *acted* like they were paying attention to you,” Yazadril opined, “But believe me, you would find it far more unnerving to have thousands doing nothing but standing there and watching you, or worse yet, yelling and gesturing wildly for your notice, as some in human crowds always do. Better that they be discreet, and put some of their attention on enjoying all of this fun and feasting!”

The next four small areas were those of the elves from the tropical jungles. Their Princes and Princesses were introduced in turn, and each spoke to provide insight into their people. The tropical elves were dark, like those of all races who dwelt in such climes. Their skin, their hair, and their eyes were black, to protect them from the intense sunlight, and even the ‘whites’ of their eyes were black, so that their pupils and irises were only apparent in the uniformly black orbs when the light reflected from them at certain angles. All had dense, straight hair that grew to a uniform five centimeter length, and stuck straight out from their heads in a spiky ball.

Like Alilia’s people’s area, the ground was covered with an impenetrable abundance of life, all of it strange, and they conducted their affairs entirely in the trees. The four areas seemed very similar at first glance, yet a closer look showed that they were filled with completely different species, for they represented three different continents and an

isolated archipelago. The trees lacked the great height and breadth of those of some other areas, but were far more densely spaced. Those from continents wore loose, colorful robes, tied at the waist with chains of flowers.

The islanders' area had a smoking volcano visible in the distance, the scent of the sea in the air, and the sound of distant surf. Many of them wore only flowers in their hair and short white kilts, and Mark blushed purple to see that as many females as males went unclothed above the waist.

To provide lighting for their areas, the wizards of the four tropical nations had co-operated on a great illusion. It was night in the rest of the valley, but in these four areas it was high noon, and a blazing tropical sun shone directly overhead.

After that they visited the plains elves of the three great empires, whose only illusions were fantastic castles of delicate design between the great trees, their halls and courtyards and the spaces between filled with tens of thousands of merrymakers.

"There's not a lot of trees out on the plains." Jaromer commented. "So my people have embraced the art of building in stone."

"And they do so beautifully!" Talia told him.

"I'm curious about something, Jaromer." Mark asked as they stopped to watch an amazing display of juggling and acrobatics. "You were introduced as Prince of your people, and as Viscount of The Empire of Thon and Imperial Wizard to His Excellency Osbald the Eighth. Yet Pimall said that none ruled over you. You'll forgive me if I see an inconsistency there."

"Ah. You see, our titles are reciprocal." Jaromer explained. "Osbald is introduced as Emperor of the Humans of Thon, and as Viscount to the court of The Principality of the Elves of Thon, as well as being Royal Wizard to the Prince of The Elves of Thon, who is of course, me. We are two peoples and two nations, one a principality of elves, and one an empire of humans, who happen to share the same land. We share the same laws and justice system, the same civil organizations, and the same military, though tradition dictates that we conduct our own training and form our own companies. Yet it is explicitly stated in treaty, as well as completely understood in practice, that Osbald commands no elf, and that I command no human. The governments of my associates here from the other empires of Sming and Kuth are very similar. It is a system that has worked well for six thousand years so far, for it allows all of us to politely claim in public that we are part of a united nation, while each secretly believing that we have conquered the other race!"

"It keeps the peace, and that is an amazing and beautiful thing." Yazadril nodded.

"Why do you say that?" Mark asked.

"Because my people and Osbald's, all the humans and all the elves of the plains actually, were at odds for thirty-five thousand years before the empires became united." Jaromer revealed. "Sometimes it was all-out war, and the rest was just long breaks between battles, full of minor skirmishes and covert destruction. There was poisoning hatred, one race for the other. At the end, neither side had enough population left to hold more than a fraction of the land, and it was realized that if we couldn't make peace between us, both our peoples would lose everything to invaders from more distant places.

"Now our mottoes are Peace, Trade, Prosperity."

"As reflected in the incredible displays of various merchandise available here!" Talia nodded gleefully as she eyed the endless tables and racks of items all about.

"Indeed!" Jaromer chuckled.

"I'm kind of surprised that I haven't seen you trading for anything." Mark chuckled to Talia. "I've sure noticed your eyes widen at a few things tonight, and I know you could easily afford most of them!"

"Yes, it's a deliciously frustrating experience!" Talia giggled. "Any other girl here can go on the shopping spree of a lifetime, yet it would be foolish for me to do so, since no matter what I buy, I may just receive another exactly like it for a wedding gift! That would diminish the value of the gift, and leave me with redundant duplicates besides!"

"Ah, the troubles some girls face!" Yalla laughed.

"You know, at every elven wedding I have ever heard of, every attending guest brought a gift, even if it was only a trinket." Nemia stated thoughtfully. "The gifts we received when Yazadril and I married still constitute over half of our wealth and goods. Over seven and a half thousands attended, since Yazadril knows so many from beyond The Nine Valleys."

"That's generally the case." Yazadril nodded. "Most of the other half of our wealth and goods are things that were given as gifts at my last marriage, over five thousand years ago. My things from my first marriage, back when I was but a lad of two centuries, were plundered by... Well, they were plundered in a war, and none were ever

recovered, but it was a substantial trove. And you know, a surprising amount of the wealth and goods I've gained by my own efforts have gone to provide gifts at the weddings of others, now that I think about it!"

"That's the way of elves." Gorsh said. "We keep what we are given, and give what we have earned. I've given away everything I ever made except two items, or spent it in the consumption of life, and everything else I own was a gift."

Alilia's husband had spoken so rarely that Mark was surprised by it, but he was soon distracted by the realization of what Nemia was getting at.

"You don't think everyone who came tonight will give a gift, do you?" Mark asked in amazement. "Most of them never even got a chance to see us with their own eyes!"

"Yes, I do think they will." Nemia nodded.

"Of course they will!" Gorsh insisted, vaguely offended at Mark's suggestion. "They all got to see you in their mind's eye, and closer than they could with their own eyes at most human weddings! They have all enjoyed the most spectacular wedding that was ever held! It would be rude to fail to give a gift, after sharing this wonderful experience!"

"He's right." Pimall nodded. "Your decision to extend your invitation to the entire elven race was an unprecedented and astounding act of openness and community, and you can be sure we all appreciate it as such!"

"Oh." Mark said in surprise. "I never thought about it. It just seemed like the thing to do at the time."

"My point is this; Yazadril, Theramin, Alilia." Nemia said as she looked to them in turn, and cast a quick counting spell. "There are three million, six hundred forty-nine thousand, four hundred and thirty-one in attendance, and we four will make these newlyweds a home as our gift. We may need to reconsider the design, with an eye to increasing the vaults and storage."

"That's a good point, my dear." Yazadril nodded. "We'll know the extent of the modifications needed after the gifts are given."

Mark chuckled. "My father used to say; the valley was our home, and a house was only shelter from the elements and a place to keep your things."

After the areas of the plains elves they visited a single area that represented the four nations of the elves of The Sea People, who had once been one people before they spread to four continents. Their only holdings on land were trading enclaves on the waterfronts and docks of the ports of the world, full of warehouses and shipyards and such, for they lived almost their entire lives aboard their great ships. Their area around the chapel appeared to be flooded to a great depth, an illusory sea that filled the spaces between the great trees, and many great wooden vessels over a hundred meters long floated within. Once aboard the closest and largest one they danced to merry sea shanties and snacked on seafood delicacies.

Though as merry as any, The Sea People were a fierce looking bunch, with necklaces of shark's teeth, gold rings pierced through their ears or noses, and hauntingly beautiful tattoos on every exposed square centimeter of skin, including their faces.

When Mark asked about this, Princess Bluvi of The Sea People of Kletiuik told him with a laugh that it was a practice that helped to discourage piracy.

Finally, Pimall showed them around the huge area of The Warm People. Here everything was covered with a forty centimeters of snow, with more constantly falling between the great trees, yet it was just as warm as the rest of the valley. The area was lit as almost bright as day by the polar aurora twisting and turning in colorful bands that filled the sky. Mark grabbed a handful of white and made a snowball, and it felt and acted like snow, but it didn't feel cold in his hands.

"Is this real?" he asked, indicating the snow.

"It's real snow, but spelled so that it can't absorb any heat." Pimall informed him. "We are called The Warm People because we have a natural immunity to cold, a subdevelopment of the innate elven healing ability. So we always feel warm. When the ocean is freezing over, we are comfortable swimming naked among the icebergs with the seals. This display gives everyone a chance to experience what that is like."

"It's great!" Mark laughed, and lightly tossed the snowball at Dilimon.

Dilimon blocked it in an explosion of dry flakes. "It doesn't even get you wet!" he laughed.

"Yes, that is a difference!" Pimall laughed. "Normally snow that's warm enough to pack into a snowball will make you wet, even if you're one of The Warm People!"

"Let's join that dance! It looks like fun!" Talia suggested.

They joined hundreds of others, most of whom were Warm People, who were doing a simple communal stomping dance in a great circle around a huge bonfire. Everyone wore jingling bells on their ankles, and a smiling youth of The Warm People shyly handed them some. "My gift to you." he said, ducking his head in a bow.

Mark took the pair of smooth white satin ribbons he was handed, each mounted with four small bells of gleaming fine silver. "Thank you! They're very nice!" Mark grinned as he tied them on.

It was a very freeform dance, and they stomped and spun and whirled each other around with jingling carefree abandon.

After half an hour of that they were happily winded and sweaty, and at the urging of their hosts, they all went for a swim in a half-frozen pool with ice chunks floating about. The water did make them wet, but only absorbed enough heat from them to be barely cool to the skin, and refreshingly so. Some swam in all their clothes, some stripped to their underwear, and some swam completely naked. Mark, Talia, and the rest of their party chose to swim in their underwear, and Mark tried to not to look at the more exposed elves all about him.

When they emerged, spells were cast that dried them instantly and repaired their hairstyles.

Finally they returned to the chapel. As they sat back down at their table, Mark found himself yawning. "Ahh. It's been quite a long and exciting day, especially for a simple mountain boy such as myself." he mused.

"It has." Talia agreed with a smile.

"Perhaps we should call for the presentation of gifts, then take you two home." Nemia suggested.

"How long will it take though, with so many here?" Mark asked, worried. I mean, if I have to say three million thank-yous, we'll be at it for days!"

"Don't worry!" Nemia laughed. "Even at my wedding, where there were only seven and a half thousand or so attending, everyone knew that only a few could make a personal presentation of their gift. Everyone else will send their gift with a card, usually a very artistic one, and within the card will be their names and a picture of them, and their congratulatory sentiments. Over the weeks and months ahead you two will have time to appreciate every gift individually, to read the card, and open the gifts that are wrapped, and if a gift is particularly appreciated, perhaps write a thank-you note to the sender."

"Ah. So what happens when they're presented tonight?"

"Well, we'll simply clear a space for the gifts, and Theramin there, as Master of the Ceremony, will call for the presentation." Nemia told him. "A few will consider their gifts of such importance as to be deserving of a personal presentation. Those will come to speak privately with Theramin, and he will choose a reasonable number of them to do so. They will speak briefly and present their gifts. Then everyone else will Send theirs over. And by 'Send', I mean the outgoing Translocation spell. Which is distinct from a 'Sending', which is... Oh drat this shabby translation spell! At any rate, the gifts will magically appear."

"Then before we go, we'll address the guests." Talia added. "We'll thank them for their attendance and their gifts, and add our personal sentiments of the moment."

"Hmm. Perhaps I'll follow a bit of Yazadril's advice then." Mark grinned.

"And what is that?"

"He said that I should sing. I think I'll accompany myself on the harp, if one can be borrowed for me to use."

"Oh, would you Mark?" Talia enthused, clapping a bit in glee at the thought. "That would be delightful!"

"Believe me, you will not have to borrow a harp after the gifts are presented!" Dilimon laughed.

"Why? Are you giving us one?" Mark asked.

"As a matter of fact, I am not." Dilimon snickered. "But consider how the guests will choose their gifts. Most of them do not know either of you personally, but you can expect an assortment of practical and decorative items such as any young couple will need for their first home. Beyond those, Talia is in many ways a typical elven maiden, and furthermore, as the daughter of a Prince, information about her is more widely known than most. These things make her somewhat easy to choose for.

"As for yourself, you can expect what could be considered typical gifts for young human males; bows, boots, sporting equipment and the like, as well as things that would be typical gifts for young male elves; including charmed or magically enhanced items.

"But for the most part, they will be guided by the words you spoke as the groom during the ceremony. And there are over three and a half millions of them. You can expect to receive at least one of every item you mentioned using in your life, and there was a poignant moment when you spoke of the unfinished harp you were building with your father.

"To conclude, I consider it a mathematical certainty that at least one person will gift you with a harp."

"Oh. You're really very shrewd, aren't you, Dilimon?" Mark teased.

“It’s my military training.” Dilimon laughed, tossing a lock of sandy hair back from his brow with a shake of his head.

“Having discussed it so thoroughly, shall I now in fact call for the presentation?” Theramin grinned.

“Please!” Talia laughed, almost shivering with excitement on Mark’s lap. “Oh, I feel like a naughty, covetous child, but I simply can’t wait to see what we’ll get!”

“We should move to the podium. That is, I’ll go up there to make the call, and I’ll wave you up when the presentation is ready.” Theramin explained.

“Could you give us five minutes first?” Mark asked, a bit anxiously. “I’d really like just a few minutes of privacy with Talia, if there’s anywhere we can go that’s private, that is.”

Without a word, Talia smiled, stood, and led him by the hand to the lounge where they’d awaited the start of the ceremony, settled him into his huge flying chair, and climbed into his lap.

She giggled as she caressed his face. “This place is private for us right now, reserved for the bride and groom after the ceremony for moments like these.”

“Ahh, thank you.” he nodded as he gently wrapped his arms around her. “These last few minutes all I want to think about is you, and how much I love you, and how much I need to just concentrate on you for a while. Everything else was rapidly becoming nothing more than a maddening distraction, and all I want to do is just hold you close and... and just love you.”

“I felt the same.” she murmured against his chest as he settled back in the chair and cuddled her adoringly. “It is so... powerful, so beautiful and profound. Never has anyone felt a love like this. Though as much as I need this, we should not take too long right now. There’s still enjoyment to be had for us this night, and the sooner it’s done, the sooner we can finally be truly alone together.”

“Gods, Talia, I love you so much.”

“As I love you, Mark.”

When they returned to the head table ten minutes later, both smiling happily, Talia turned to Theramin. “Sorry for the interruption. We’re ready to continue with the festivities now, if you would?”

“I would!” he chuckled, then rose and strode to the top tier of the podium and held up his hands. “Your attention please!” he called, and the chapel’s spell carried his voice to all within. He waited an extra moment for those monitoring Reading spells in the valley beyond to give him their attention. “It’s almost time for the presentation of wedding gifts to the happy couple. Would those who wish to make a personal presentation please come to the podium? And would everyone around the podium please move back, perhaps twenty paces, to allow for the placement of gifts? Thank you.”

To his obvious surprise, only one elf appeared beside him, and spoke to him privately in an urgent manner.

“Ah, that industrious and rather harried-looking female is Mileemi, my Chief of Staff!” Jaromer laughed as he pointed to the red-haired elfess in a blue gown who spoke to Theramin. “She is the finest administrator on life, as well as being the most compulsively organized! I’ve no doubt that her appearance signals her having coordinated the presentation of every gift from those outside the chapel, and timed it to the second like a military drill!”

“Actually, she’s included those from within the chapel as well, except for those at the head table.” Pimall laughed. “Don’t worry Jaromer, you’re giving a wonderful gift, so Mileemi tells me!”

“I am?! What a wonder she is! And I already had something in mind! I suppose I’ll just have to give them both.”

Mileemi finished speaking, handed Theramin a stack of cards, and disappeared.

Theramin waved them up, and the immediate wedding party rose to join him, those being Mark, Talia, Yazadril, Nemia, Alilia and Dilimon.

Talia brought Mark’s chair by Levitation, and it floated along behind and settled in the center of the top tier. Mark sat and Talia curled in his lap, while Theramin stood beside their chair and the rest stood on the second tier.

Theramin turned to Mark and Talia, and every other eye was upon them as well. “Many normal traditions have been changed for tonight, due to the unique circumstances of tonight’s festivities.” he announced with a grin. “I’m told, because it was held on such short notice, a mad scramble to choose gifts ensued as soon as it was first announced to The High People by Yazadril. Of course, this intensified among those whose invitations went out at the last moment, and apparently it continues even now, as a few last-minute procrastinators are still frantically trying to find just the right thing among the plethora of choices available here tonight.”

He paused while everyone got a chuckle out of that.

“This is more difficult than you might think, as each person’s gift was registered on a list, and so exact duplication has generally been avoided. But the greatest difference between tonight’s gift giving and the more usual

presentations is this; Because of the numbers attending, and I suspect out of a mild hope to out-do one another, many have co-operated in selecting gifts, and pooled their resources, so as to be able to give a more significant and meaningful gift as a group. This trend has been taken to amazing extremes among the more late-arriving peoples.

“In general, The High People have gifted you as individuals and families, since their gifts were selected when it was thought that they would be the only guests.

“The next to be invited were eight thousand of the magically gifted among The People of Life, and they generally co-operated in groups of dozens to hundreds in contributing to gifts and selecting them. About one third of the rest of The People of Life did the same. This was almost necessary, as almost anything within the budget of an individual was already given.”

Theramin took a deep breath.

“The vast remainder of The People of Life, as well as the rest of the nations of the race of elves, with some exceptions, have gifted you *as nations!*

“Now, though it might embarrass her, I will say that this presentation was organized by Mileemi of Thon.

“First, that you should have a happy and functional home...” he had to stop and giggle for a moment as he flipped through the cards in his hand, then he resumed. “Ah, let those whose gifts are household goods, furnishings, and decorative items present them now!”

Items began appearing in coordinated roomfuls, with the furniture and other items arranged floating in the air. Rugs and carpets lay on invisible floors, with shelves and cabinets, already filled, along invisible walls, along with paintings and other decorations. Each item had a card to show who had given it. Kitchenfuls, bedroom suites, living room suites, nurseries, items for privacies, workshops, studies, games rooms, two music rooms including instruments of every sort, even items found in a stable and a smithy.

Mark and Talia stared in amazement, and the crowd clapped in appreciation, as roomful after roomful, suite after suite of items appeared, hovered for a few moments, then disassembled their groupings to stack themselves neatly on the open ring of moss around the tables.

Finally that was done.

“Where could we possibly put it all?!” Mark muttered in consternation.

Theramin only grinned and continued. “Would those who have given items of apparel to the groom, including items of armor, please send forth their gifts?”

“I hope they have my size!” Mark chuckled.

“They do.” Theramin grinned.

Hundreds of items of clothing and armor appeared, arranged in complete outfits, before moving off to their places on the moss.

Next was a much larger collection of clothing for Talia, arranged on long rows of floating hangars.

Then personal items for him of every kind, climbing gear and camping equipment, swords and shields and bows, the things needed to play any popular sport, flasks and shaving kits and things he didn't recognize.

Then personal items for her, brushes, combs, games and puzzles, scrolls, wands, and a great many things that Mark didn't recognize, but later learned were other specialized items for wizards.

“Would those who have given wealth, that the young couple may have ready resources in troubled times, please send forth their gifts?” Theramin asked. “That is, those who have given bullion, coin, nuggets, unworked precious stones or unset finished jewels smaller than ten carats?”

First a few coins and jewels appeared only ten centimeters in the air above the dais in front of Mark and Talia, and they fell and bounced a bit with merry tinkles, then more and more, and then a flood of wealth flowed out of the air. After it had tapered off and the last coin had settled with a plink, the pile was a meter deep in the center and over two meters wide, spilling down onto the second tier in front of them. Then a pile of cards appeared on it, before the whole heap of it picked itself up in a loose sphere almost two meters wide and floated down to settle on the moss.

“Enough to buy a kingdom!” Mark gaped, and Talia giggled.

“Would those who have given unset cut or polished jewels larger than ten carats please send forth their gifts?”

This time only a few dozen items appeared one by one, each incredible gem floating right in front of Mark's chair, while stacks of cards from a few to hundreds deep appeared beneath each one. They were all incredible jewels, the most impressive one a flawless diamond teardrop larger than Talia's fist, and the biggest one a ruby bigger than Mark's fist.

After that came completed items of jewelry for Mark, mostly rings and the rest bracelets, brooches, necklaces, and jeweled daggers and other weapons.

Then appeared jewelry for Talia, a much more extensive collection than Mark's.

Next were Magic Items of Special Significance. There were only nine of these, though they were accompanied by over one hundred and fourteen thousand cards. Except for their bright glow in Mark's eyes, they appeared quite ordinary; a cup, a ring, a gray cloak, a staff, two scrolls, a wand, and two swords, one a slim silver saber of a size Talia would find comfortable, the other a great black two-handed double-edged blade that was so huge, even Mark wondered if it might be too big for him.

When those had floated to their places, Theramin allowed a long moment to pass to let the anticipation build. "And now, the gifts of nations.

"I present Prince Simenir, of The People of Clouds."

Simenir appeared, grinning. "Greetings, and congratulations on your happy nuptials, Talia and Mark, from The People of Clouds. We wish you the best of lives.

"That your home may be secure, we give a pet for your new family. It is well known that the finest trainer of magical beasts is Gerticol Meresias of the dwarven clan of Meresias in Kletiuk, across the oceans on the other side of the world. He takes over a decade to train each one, and he seldom sells more than four every century, for his prices are not inconsiderable. None-the-less, the collection taken among The Cloud People for your gift was sufficient, and we have purchased for you a Sleng cat, which has been trained to guard you, your home, and your children, should you be so blessed.

"Only seventeen persons who live in the Sleng cat's environs have ever seen one, and all were dwarves, so we will all see something new and rare and wonderful for the first time tonight.

"Sleng cats have mental powers that allow them to remain unnoticed, and they can detect the intent of persons or animals that approach. None who wish harm to you and yours, or to your home, can escape the Sleng cat's notice, and it will warn with a loud and piercing cry and place itself between the intruder and your home or yourselves, and it will attack upon your command. To defend your children, it will attack without command. Those of friendly intent have nothing to fear from it, and they will find it friendly in return.

"Now, Gerticol told us to give you this talisman, which is spelled. Hold it with both your hands upon it, for when you speak the cat's name, which is written in Trade Common after the last word of the spell, it will appear here and form a lifelong bond with the holders of the talisman. The Bonding takes a few seconds, and then the cat will want you to give it the talisman. Do so. After that it will obey simple commands you give in any language, for it follows your intent, rather than your words."

He handed a small leather disk to Mark. Of all the small words upon it, only one was written in Common, and it was tooled larger than the rest. Mark laughed as he read it, and then Talia did as well.

"The name was chosen to appeal to your children, apparently." Simenir chuckled.

"Are you ready Love?" Talia asked with a grin. "You say the name. I'm not much of a pet person."

They each held the leather disk from either side with one hand, and Mark loudly called out; "Stripe!"

An immense and beautiful animal appeared before them on the second tier. He had the body and hair shape of a tiger, but his stripes were horizontal instead of vertical, and they ranged in lightening bands from dark red on his back down to light yellow on his belly and legs, with white whiskers on his snout and eyebrows thirty-five centimeters long. He was three meters long from his nose to the back of his haunches, and another two meters of tail lashed behind.

"Great source! That thing must weigh six hundred and forty kilos!" Dilimon exclaimed as the beast spun around in surprise at his sudden new circumstances, and he gave a mighty roar before his attention was drawn to the talisman.

He suddenly calmed, and padded over the two steps he needed to lay his head in Talia's lap. Of course, Talia sat in Mark's lap, and he looked up at them with curious eyes and panted with his tongue hanging out.

"Hey, Stripe, how are you? You're a big boy, aren't you? What a handsome fellow you are!" Mark chuckled, and scratched firmly at the base of a huge red ear. Talia scratched the cat under his chin and murmured similar words, and Stripe's eyes closed in bliss as he gave a thundering purr. Then he opened his eyes and gently took the talisman from them with his teeth. He promptly ate it, and stood looking at them expectantly.

"You go lie down over there, Stripe. We'll get to know you better later." Mark instructed with a grin. The cat turned and contentedly padded off to lie down beside their table.

"Thank you ever so much, Simenir!" Talia told him. "And thank you to all The Cloud People! Stripe is a wonderful addition to our new family, and I know we will love him dearly."

"You are most welcome. We'll send our cards around later, along with Gerticol's manual on the care and feeding of Sleng cats." Simenir nodded, and disappeared.

"I present Waakeen, Princess of The Mountain Elves of The Thundering Escarpment, in the far continent of Kletiuk." Theramin announced.

Waakeen was an almost-plump elfess with bright blue hair to match her bright blue gown; a hue that Mark later learned was a cosmetic effect, and not her natural hair color. He hadn't been sure.

"As it so happens, we also have gifted you with a magical beast trained by Gerticol, and since Gerticol is from the same continent as us, we thought it so appropriate that we don't even mind admitting that we got the idea from The People of Clouds!" she announced, and everyone laughed a bit as she handed Mark and Talia a small strip of leather with runes similar to those on Stripe's talisman. "Why don't you call and bond the animal, and I'll tell you about it after that?"

"Gerticol likes simple names, doesn't he?" Talia laughed as she grasped the leather with Mark. "Go ahead Love."

"Scout!" Mark read, and a huge silver and black crested eagle appeared before them, sitting on a perching stand. He wasted no time, but spread his wings to a span of almost four meters and beat them once, lofting himself toward Talia's lap.

"Look out!" Mark exclaimed as he saw talons almost five centimeters long flashing toward Talia's legs, and he stuck out his arm to block it. The huge raptor promptly landed on his wrist, so gently that his grip was painless, and cocked his head to one side as he folded his wings. His unexpected weight at the end of Mark's arm pushed down till his hand rested on his thigh. "Wow! He's gentle as a lamb, but he weighs over thirty kilos!" he exclaimed as Talia giggled, already cooing affectionately to the bird and scratching him beneath his hooked beak.

Again the onlookers exclaimed in amazement as the beast bonded to them in a few seconds, then ate its talisman.

"Scout here is a King Eagle from the continent of Serminak." Waakeen explained, and the crowd gasped. "He is the only one of his kind who has ever been seen close at hand by those not of that continent, though they have occasionally been seen at a distance high above the coastal waters of Serminak by mariners. Scout was blown out to sea by a fierce storm while so young that he was barely old enough to fly, and was found floating in the ocean, half dead, by a crew of dwarves who were deep-sea fishing. Being able to do nothing for him, they sent him to Gerticol, who bought the bird from them and nursed him back to health, and trained him for over twenty years.

"I hope you don't find me petty for saying, but due to his rarity and the effort required to train him, Scout's worth was marginally greater than Stripe's." Waakeen laughed, as Scout spread his wings and waved them a bit.

Mark threw him up and he took to the air effortlessly, and began circling around the clearing.

"He will hunt for you, he will fight for you, he will find people, animals, or objects for you. And as his name implies, he will scout for you. His vision is the best of any living thing, and you can see through his eyes as he flies high above the landscape. There are commands and spells for these things, along with instructions for his care, in this pamphlet, which Gerticol provided. Since you are bonded to him, he will come to you when you call his name. We have only given this one card, but it is magic, and has a page for each of my people."

She handed Talia the pamphlet and card with a smile.

"He's beautiful! Thank you to all from The Thundering Escarpment for this wonderful gift!" Mark said, and Waakeen smiled and nodded and disappeared.

Next was the gift of the elves of The Stone Islands. Prince Binyacim of that tropical archipelago presented them with a fourteen-meter sailing yacht named Sunrunner, which had been grown into shape from a single tree. As he explained while it floated in the air above them, it was heavily spelled, and could be sailed by one person at the tiller while it tacked and adjusted for the wind automatically, or it would even navigate itself to any port in the world on command, evading storms, rocks and other obstacles. It was sleek and low, dark and smooth, with gleaming white sails and lines, and its interior was luxuriously appointed for ten travelers. Since there was no room for it on the moss, it was Translocated by a team of Stone Islands wizards to Crescent Lake in First Valley, close to where the rest of the immediate wedding party would locate Mark and Talia's new home.

"I present Prince Fayam of the Empire of Kuth, and The Council of The Elves of that empire." Theramin then announced.

"Hello and congratulations!" Fayam jovially said as he and a dozen others appeared. "As our gift, we have made a hire for you. We present Silaran!" He waved his hand, and a creature out of dream appeared.

He was a brilliant white unicorn with pink hooves, mane, and tail, a dark pink spiraled horn, and light pink eyes, and he was immense. Mark stood up in amazement with Talia in his arms, and Silaran's back was as high as his chin, even though the unicorn stood on the second tier. His mane and tail were very long and luxurious, and he went to one front knee and bowed his head for a moment, then stood and snorted.

"Hello! Nice to meet you both!" rang in their ears, and they knew the unicorn was speaking to them mind to mind!

"Uh, hello!" Talia giggled.

“After careful negotiations, Silaran has agreed to be your mount, when you should wish to ride, for the next one hundred years.” Fayam explained. “Like you, Mark, he is a young stallion who is the largest of his kind, and he loves to run. He can go almost a hundred and forty-five kilometers in an hour, and maintain that pace indefinitely. That is, if he’s running for fun. If he really needs to hurry, he can Translocate unerringly with those he bears to any place in the world. His sense of balance is supernatural, and even an unconscious person or a newborn child could ride safely upon his back, for Silaran would balance them like an acrobat with a ball on his nose, without the slightest chance of them falling off. Should you have occasion to engage in mounted combat, Silaran will serve you far more effectively than the finest war horse that ever lived, so long as you fight on the side of justice.”

“But we can’t ride you, like you were a beast of burden!” Talia exclaimed. “You’re a *person!*”

“*And I thank you for making that distinction!*” Silaran chuckled in their minds, and gave his mane a toss. “*But every thinking being needs to earn some resources at times, and I’m being more than fairly compensated, I assure you!*”

“I’ll say!” Fayam laughed. “For what you’re charging us for this service, I’d be glad to carry them around on my own back for a century!”

“Ha! I’d do it for a tenth of that, and polish their boots besides!” one of his councilors laughed.

“*There, you see? And besides, it’s honest work that I enjoy, and I’ve spent a lot of effort learning the martial aspects of my trade!*”

“I see!” Talia laughed. “Welcome to our household then, for we’re very glad to have you!”

“*I’m afraid that dwelling in your household is not part of my contract. Simply call my name when you wish my service, and I’ll come running! Any time, any place!*”

“*Silaran, can we think with you privately? Talia and I that is?*” Mark silently asked.

“*What a unique way of putting it! But yes, go ahead.*”

“*I’m surprised that I can hear you, since I’m transparent to most magic. And I’m wondering if your Translocation will work with me.*” Mark firmly thought.

“*Psionics such as Stripe and I use work on different frequencies that elven magics. We draw upon the light of the source itself, rather than the field of power re-radiated from stone such as that in this valley. From your feel, you resonate on some rather unique frequencies yourself. Since you can think with me, as you put it, I think my Translocate should work with you. But, we’ll have to try it to see, as I’m no theoretician on such matters. Call me when you wish to travel home from this place tonight, and we’ll find out.*”

“Thank you.” Mark said out loud.

“*You’re welcome.*” Silaran tossed his head and snorted, and disappeared.

“Thank you so much, elves of Kuth, for your wonderful gift!” Talia told them.

“Yes, Silaran is quite a likable fellow!” Mark added. “I think you’ve given us more than a mount and an employee, for I think we’ll form a friendship with him that will far outlast the century of his hire!”

“We’re pleased that you think so.” Fayam smiled and bowed. “We only hope that you choose to go riding often over that time, for the wily unicorn was a shrewd negotiator, and it would be a shame to waste the limited opportunity we have purchased.”

“We will, I’m sure!” Talia laughed.

Fayam bowed again, as did his Council, and they disappeared back to their places.

“We have one more gift in this category.” Theramin announced. “And it is not given by a nation. Rather, I am pleased to present the mightiest wizards among the elves; your bridesmaids and groomsman.”

Those twenty-two elves appeared as a group, Hilsith smiling among them, and she stepped forward. “Though I am not among the mightiest of wizards, I was still a bridesmaid today, and so made an equal contribution to our gift. And due to my knowing you two personally, I was asked by these others to act as their spokesperson.

“We also have made a gift of a hire. I now present Kragorram, Noble and Just, the Crimson Dragon of Ziklan Heights!”

With a ferocious boom of displaced air, the mighty red dragon appeared before them fifteen meters in the air, and just found room to settle on the last of the open moss that had been cleared for gifts. Those around him hurriedly moved back. Shining and smooth he was, his scales so small as to be indiscernible at this distance. His body, neck and head were thirty-seven meters long, his tail added another twenty-five. He furred his huge wings, and his great golden eyes actually seemed to twinkle beneath rearward-pointing horns, his mouth to smile at the corners of his long muzzle, over a small and neat red beard beneath his chin. At least, his beard looked small on his face, though it hung down almost two meters.

“Greetingzzzzz.” Kragorram slowly said in a voice so low and throbbing it could almost not be discerned, the ‘z’ sound accentuated by a unique resonance of his vocal cavity. The bride and groom simply stared in shock, and the red dragon chuckled at them, a sound that was felt more than heard. “Pleazzzze. I know I am beautiful, but that izzz no reazzzzon to forego courtezzy, izzzz it?”

“Uh, your pardon, great Kragorram, we are just so surprised!” Talia stammered in amazement.

Mark bowed low, and swallowed hard. “Ah. Greetings!” he said as he straightened, then he realized he had tipped Talia sideways in his arms as he bowed, so distracted was he. “Uh, sorry Talia!” he stammered.

“We have hired Kragorram to be your bodyguard and companion at arms.” Hilsith smiled. “Should you call upon him, he will defend you against any attack, and so long as you fight on the side of justice, he will fight at your side against any enemy.”

“That’s... That’s just amazing!” Talia gaped.

“We’re, ah, we’re very, very proud to have your service!” Mark nodded. “Tell me, what is the term of your hire?”

“Why, forever!” the dragon laughed, then spoke in his slow and patient way. “I have been told that you exzzzpect to zzzee the end of dayzzz. Zzzinzzz that izzz an event that I alzzz fully exzzzpect to zzzee, we can keep each other company when we get there!”

“Great source!” Talia gaped. “Um, your pardon great Kragorram...”

“Juzzt Kragorram will do.” The dragon slowly interrupted with a thundering laugh. “The ‘great’ part goezzz without zzzaying, I like to think.”

“Oh! Well as I was saying, uh, Kragorram, I know it’s impolite in the extreme to inquire as to the price of a gift.” Talia continued. “But I find it incredible to think that there is anything anyone could offer to entice you into such a great service! I understand completely if you or these fine wizards don’t wish to tell me, but I’m dying of curiosity to know what you were traded for it!”

“Actually, it wazzz my own idea. I am alwayzzz eager to fight injuzztizzzz wherever I find it, but it izz zzzz often impractical to do zzzz. The complexzztiezz of the politiczzz of the zzmaller folk make it difficult for an outzzider zzuch azz myzzzzelf to choozzzz the correct zzzide in large conflictzzz. And my interferenzzz in zzzmaller affairzzz, while well intenzhioned, hazz often led to azzz much harm azzz good. Zzzz, when my good friend Zzzilaran the unicorn told me of the deal he had zztruck to be your mount, I contacted Hilzzith there, who onzzz helped me with a zzzore tooth. I am hoping that by fighting at the zzide of yourzzzelf and your huzzzband and friend Zzzilaran, you will guide me to my proper plazze in my fight againzzt evil. Like yourzzzelf and your huzzzband and friend Zzzilaran, I am mighty among my kind, yet zztill young among them azzz well. Perhapzz our azzzozziashion will help me find wizzdom in my choizze of foezzz. Of courzze, I truzzzt Hilzzith’zz word that the two of you are of noble intent, but if you zzhould ever behave in an evil manner, our contract izz voided.

“Azzz to my prizzze for thizz zzzervizze, I dezzided that azzz well, and I will be delighted to tell you what it izzz, if thezze wizzzardzz who arranged my hire do not mind?” With that, he turned his huge eyes upon Hilsith and raised a gigantic brow in inquiry.

“I think it would be best.” Hilsith smiled.

“Know then that for a time of two thouzzand five hundred eighteen yearzzz, four monthzzz three weekzzz and two dayzzz, I have offered my courtzzhip to the mozzt beautiful of the femalezzz of my kind. I have plied her with the poetry of my heart, with the zzzongzzz and muzzzic of my zzzoul, with giftzzz of fragrant zzcentzzz and delizhiouzzz foodzzz and trovezz of glittering treazzurezzz. Zzhe hazz neither aczzcepted nor declined my zzuit. Zzhe ignorezz me. Zztill, zzinzzz zzhe hazzz been far lezzz friendly than that to her other zzuitorz, I am encouraged yet fruzzztrated by her lack of rezzponzzz.

“Zzzz, azz their part of our contract, thezze twenty two wizzzardzzz have joined their talentzzz to produzzze for me a love charm. One that will work on dragonzzz.”

“Now don’t be overstating things, Kragorram!” Hilsith lectured. “It is not a love charm, it’s a charm of fondness, that’s all! As we agreed, it will cause the recipient of your affections to be somewhat more fond of you for a period of seven days, and no more! As we know you to be of good character, we see little harm in this, but we will not allow anyone to think that we had any part in the coercion of any free being!

“Furthermore, though you have had the wisdom to not mention her name, you spoke of her during our negotiations, and those of us who know of dragons know that there is only one of whom you could be speaking! You know as well as we that she is among the mightiest wizards the dragons have ever produced, so you must realize that she will certainly detect the effects of the charm, and will be able to negate those effects if she so chooses by merely

have you never noticed that no one else talks like that? I tell you, the sheer stupidity of reality and everything in it just makes me want to burn something!”

Now Kragorram drew back in hurt as if struck.

Seeing this, Povon flopped dejectedly onto the ground. “Damn the source, now I’ve hurt you, just as I feared I would when this day finally came.” she griped petulantly. “I am no fit mate for such as you, Kragorram, and the stupidity I hate the most is my own. I release you, my noble suitor, for I reject your suit. Find someone else who could love you as you deserve.”

She disappeared.

“WAIT, POVON!” Kragorram cried in anguish. “I am zzorry for my ultimatum! I will fixzz my zzpeech zzzomewhat, I zzzwear I will! *I love you Povon!!!*” He waited for a moment, listening, to no avail, then let himself crash to the ground, crushing two roomfuls of furniture and household goods. “Oh Povon, what a wazzte. All thizzz time, and then you break my heart.” he moaned.

Complete silence.

Mark realized that his eyes were leaking tears, and he was not the only one so affected. He felt a giggle coming on, at the thought that he was crying for the heartbreak of a dragon, and forced it from his mind.

Then Dilimon leaned over and murmured; “It’s okay. We can get those fixed.”

Mark stared at him, flabbergasted by the incongruity of his words, and fiercely ground out the urge to laugh, for he knew it would be a bitter laughter, and that once he started, he wouldn’t be able to stop.

“*You could still love me, after the way I just treated you?*” Povon’s soft voice floated in their minds.

Kragorram sat up, his wings quivering. “Yezz.” he answered simply.

Another long moment passed, then Povon appeared again. “Use the charm.” she told the fallen male.

Kragorram rose and held up his front right foot, or paw or hand or claw. Mark realized he didn’t know the proper terms for dragon’s appendages, but a smooth sphere of smoky quartz some sixty centimeters in diameter appeared in it.

“I am to think of you while I cruzzz it againzzt my head, and zzzay your name.” the crimson dragon revealed.

“Fine. Do it.” Povon said. “Here, I will lean close. Proximity should help the effect.”

Kragorram also leaned closer, and with their heads almost touching, he effortlessly crushed the big stone to pebbles and powder against his head, just between his brows, with a huge cracking and grinding sound. “Povon.” he said, almost reverently, and there was a flash that made Mark blink a few times.

A long moment passed.

“Oh that’s nice! Really, *very nice!*” Povon stated in surprise. She opened her eyes and seemed to smile up at Kragorram in bemusement. “This might work. I’ll have to work up something similar to that, with permanent effects. Otherwise I’ll drive you insane with my unthinking cruelty. But this just might work.”

She turned and surveyed the small folk around her.

For once Mark was one of those, for her intense gaze upon him made him feel very small and insignificant indeed.

Her eyes settled on Hilsith. “You are Hilsith the Healer. You have the knowledge of how to fix Kragorram’s speech, and of the making of the dragon charm. Give it to me.”

“Do you wish to be a better person, Povon?” Hilsith asked with a smile. “Do you wish to *deserve* Kragorram’s love? For you will need to be a better person to do so, and charms and such will only go so far towards that.”

Povon considered her in surprise. “Yes.” she admitted. “I wish to be a better person. I wish to truly deserve his love. And what you say of charms is true.”

“Then make a start at it now. Try to treat other people with respect and courtesy. Even if they irritate you. Ask me nicely, and I will give you all of the therapies that can help his speech, from counseling to surgery. Personally, I think he has a charming accent, and since I have no trouble understanding it, I do not consider it to be an impediment. If he wants to change it, I’d wager we could do so with a few weeks of lessons and practice, and then he would have the choice of sounding as he does or not.

“If you ask me nicely, Povon, I can suggest things that will help you heal your soul from the wound you bear from the death of your loved one.”

“How did you know that?” Povon asked suspiciously.

Hilsith gently smiled, and inclined her head. “I am an elven Healer. To me, it is as obvious as your coloring.”

Povon stared at her some more. “He died in a war when I was adolescent, before Kragorram first reached life.” she hesitantly revealed, then seemed to reach a decision. “Please advise me, Hilsith, and I will follow your advice, for though you are a very young person from a very young race, it seems you are wiser than I. I will speak to you of such things in a few days.

“I apologize to you, and to all of you here, for my rudeness.

“Kragorram, I apologize to you. I welcome you into my life, my heart, and my lair. Meet me there in a few minutes. Please. I need to straighten it up.”

And with that she was gone.

“I can hardly believe it!” Kragorram exclaimed in his thundering, slow voice. “She has accepted my courtship!” He leaped into the air with a whoop and flew around the clearing in tight circles and loops, raising a wind that blew the wedding cards around on the ground.

Alilia cast a determined Restore, bringing the cards back to their places and repairing the broken gifts.

“I consider your part of our bargain to be wonderfully fulfilled!” the red dragon laughed as he alighted on the moss once again, and he turned to Mark and Talia. “Call my name if you need me, or juzzt to vizzit! I go now to wait outside my paramour’s bower, where I will serenade her until she calls me within!”

And with a flash, he was gone as well.

There was a rather stunned silence before Hilsith shrugged and said; “Well, that’s our gift.”

A great tension-relieving laugh was shared by all.

“Thank you. What a wonder of romance we have witnessed.” Talia marveled.

“I’ll say.” Mark agreed. “Two and a half millennia of courtship, and finally a mighty dragon wins his love’s affections here tonight. Who could have dreamed of seeing such events?! Thank you.”

“Esteemed guests, I give you the bridesmaids and groomsmen!” Theramin called, and started an enthusiastic round of applause as the twenty-two took a somewhat sheepish bow.

Mark muttered to Talia; “Does a dragon have paws, hands, or claws?”

“In this language, people have hands.” she murmured. “Dragons are people, so they have hands, with claws rather than fingernails since those two are functionally distinct. Follow that pattern, and one is unlikely to be considered impolite.”

“Thanks.” he whispered with a smile and an affectionate little squeeze.

“Now, our next category of gifts...”

“Hold off on that, Theramin!” Mark laughed. “Why don’t we take a short break for refreshments first? My mind is so boggled I can’t even think!”

“An excellent idea. I admit to being a bit boggled myself!” Theramin agreed.

“We’ll take a short break to refresh ourselves before continuing the presentation.” he announced, and conversations started everywhere as elves marveled at all that they’d seen.

“I tell you,” Mark commented as they went back to their table, “I have the strangely guilty feeling that I’ve been given far more than I deserve! Far more than anyone could ever deserve!”

“I feel that too, my husband.” Talia nodded, part of her concentration on floating their chair along beside them. “And the major gifts have yet to be given!”

“Hmm. It’s very nice to hear you call me husband, my lovely wife.” Mark happily crooned as she set the chair back in place in its depression at their table’s edge. “And what do you mean, the major gifts? Weren’t *those* major gifts?”

“They were indeed!” she giggled as they sat. “But I know that the presentation will have been arranged so that in general, the most impressive gifts would come at the end. That’s just basic showmanship, common to all peoples.”

“True.” he nodded. “I’ll admit that if I knew more of the value of things, I’d have probably noticed that. I mean, the magic items didn’t seem more impressive than all the furniture and stuff! Not did the big jewels seem more impressive than the pile of raw wealth that came before! And the effect was made less obvious by the coordinated presentation of so many gifts at once, at first.”

“Yes. Though in a way, the best gifts were given first.” Talia mused.

“How so?”

“I’m thinking that if a person co-operates in buying a gift with a large group of other people, they are each likely to contribute less time and personal attention in making their selection than they would spend on a gift that they purchased and presented as an individual. And of course they would each spend less funds on a group purchase as well.”

“A marvelous insight, and one worthy of a Thon!” Jaromer laughed. “We have codified many of the typical behaviors of large groups at market, and that is one, whether the contribution is to a gift, a warehouse, or a company. By your hypothesis, those of The High People will have been the most generous per person, as they purchased as individuals, followed by the first third of Alilia’s people who generally purchased as groups, followed by the rest who

acted as nations. This progression follows the order they were invited in, which itself follows how close they are to you, both in physical proximity and in strength of relationships.

“I can see that you especially, Mark, are feeling that you are unworthy of these great gifts, yet trends in purchases are the same among races, and among individuals they are dependent upon prosperity. In other words, almost everyone spends the same small portion of their own total worth on a wedding gift. And because of the trends we just mentioned, most everyone out there spent about two-thirds of that.”

“Yes, that is a different perspective!” Mark agreed.

“And is it worth it to them to do so?” Jaromer continued. “Since as you say, most will not even see the bride and groom they are gifting? It’s more than worth it! If tonight’s great extravaganza had been organized as a fair in Thon, the price of admittance would be higher than the cost of the average individual’s wedding gift! Not to mention the opportunity to take part in, and contribute to, a great event that may well become legendary! The feasts and the displays of magic and performance alone are worth it, and so the guests get value in trade from those who paid for the feasts and displays.

“So you might think that the wealthy individuals who paid for the displays and feasts out there are the ones who truly deserve your gratitude, yet they have more than profited from their venture by having the chance to display their wares before such a great crowd, insuring many sales, and by the chance to enter new markets in the future!

“The exceptions are your lovely bride’s family, who contributed this marvelous display in the chapel, and much of the feast here, out of love. They, more than any others, deserve your gratitude.

“Hilsith said that I play life as a game, and it is very true. People and their worth are the markers, their behaviors are the moves, but you do not control them, for they are all playing the game as well! We can each only move our own little marker, and though you two have gathered great worth tonight, you are still only playing your small parts in the great tourney of life and commerce.

“You will probably receive more worth tonight than any other couple have ever received as wedding gifts, and you now have a big marker on the game board. But if you look around the board, you will see that there are tens of thousands of larger markers, and some that are hundreds of times larger, and that even the total worth of the wealthy few still pales beside the total worth of the prosperous multitudes. Since the widespread use of magic has been embraced by every nation of every race, life is easier, poverty is rare, populations are large, and the world is a vast sea of resources.

“It’s true, you are now playing in the elite levels of the game, but now you play with others of that level as well. You will do well to consider their moves. And since you are now well-known, the actions of millions of unknown individuals may affect your affairs, to your detriment or benefit.”

“Well said, Jaromer.” Theramin nodded, to general agreement.

“As long as you remember that wealth is only one form of power, and it is your total power that decides the size of your marker, to continue the analogy.” Alilia stated firmly. “Political power and wizardry can count for more than wealth.”

“It gets more complicated than even that.” Yazadril nodded, and regarded Mark and Talia. “Intellect, creativity, charisma, allure, all are power. You both have those in abundance. And your power increases if others are willing to help you or to work toward the same goals, that is, if you have social power.

“Social power depends on who you know, and who knows you. Look around at those you’ve gotten to know personally tonight. That is a lot of power. And since we are allied, you can picture our markers as stacked. Now consider that every elf alive knows you. You are famous for the gigantic magnificence of your wedding, for knowing the powerful, for owning mythical beasts and having the service of a unicorn and a dragon, for great wealth. For being immortal, for being a huge human warrior in love with a small elven wizard, cursed to torment each other for eternity. In two days, almost every thinking being in the world will know of you. Also, your personal power as immortal warrior and wizard are not inconsiderable. I think the curse would immediately restore your life after a fatal sword thrust or power strike, and that makes you formidable indeed.

“When you consider all of that, your marker on Jaromer’s game board may not be so small. And you may have to counter the moves of great players, allied into huge stacks that spill over the board.”

Mark considered all of that, then grinned and gave his head a shake. “Please, Yazadril! We took this break so I could *recover* from having my mind boggled!”

A round of laughter went around at that.

“Remind me later that I need to learn a great deal more about the world and the people in it. But for now, I need to think about something a little more everyday!

“Speaking of which,” he said as he turned to Dilimon, “Did you convey my message to Balen and her family?”

“Ah. I spoke to them, and conveyed your invitation.” Dilimon informed him. “But Balen isn’t allowed to see you tonight. It’s part of her punishment. I think it’s also because she has apparently become completely besotted and infatuated with you, and they’re worried that she’ll make another scene. At your request, they’ve set aside the rest of the punishment she would have received for her offense against you personally, which was to begin with scrubbing pots by hand after the feast for a few hours.

“Unfortunately for her, the three who were struck by her spell and momentarily developed green and purple discolorations have since seen Readings of the event, and they have not been as forgiving as you. Balen will be doing their drudgery for three weeks, serving one week with each.

“Furthermore, as her parents explained it to me, if she had done her mischief in a more private setting, that would have been the end of it. If she had cast her discoloration spell at you while we were within The Hall of Anticipation, for instance, or while you were dancing at one of the consulates. But to have done it where and when she did, in a deliberate attempt to disrupt the ceremony at a very large and important wedding, makes it an offense against everyone in the wedding party, everyone who helped with the wedding preparations, and all of The High People in general. They feel that such an offense is beyond their authority as parents, and they have formally charged her with misdemeanor mischief and creating a disturbance. The case will be heard by the Council of The High People sometime during the next three weeks.”

“Ah. Drudgery?” Mark asked.

“Washing and hanging their clothes, re-organizing stored items, and the like.”

“I see. And I take it that The Hall of Anticipation is the big room at the base of the tree where we waited before walking down the aisle?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. She seems too young to be facing the law like she were an adult.”

“She is nineteen years old, Mark, more than two years older than you, and old enough to be responsible for her actions by the standards of your people or mine.” Dilimon stated.

“Wow! She’s nineteen? I’d never have guessed! She seems like she’s twelve!”

“To your eyes perhaps, but she is of average development for an elf of her age. Contrast her with Jinimin, who is a typical elven twelve year old.”

“I see what you mean. He seemed like he was six or seven. It’ll take a while to get used to.”

“Yes. In assessing ages, you must compensate for the smaller size and lighter builds of elves, as well as for elven physical and emotional development, which is about half as fast as that of humans, and lasts until the age of about twenty-eight for girls, and about thirty-two for boys, when development is finished.”

“I see. Well, on that informative note, let’s continue with the presentation!” Mark laughed, and he rose from his chair, Talia still in his arms.

When they were again assembled on the podium, Theramin checked his cards, and grinned again. “We now continue the presentation.” he called to the crowd, and waited a few moments for their attention, and to give the next presenters time to prepare. Then he directed his words to Mark and Talia. “Your remaining gifts are all of a similar nature. I doubt it was planned to be so, but there are only so many things that are worthy to be the gifts of nations.

“I now present Princess Wemetik of The Fisher Folk.”

That smiling tropical elfess appeared, wearing a great headdress of multicolored feathers and pearls, and a very colorful linen sheet with flower patterns draped about her in a manner that left half her shapely bosom bared.

Mark resolutely kept his eyes on her face, for fear he would end up staring if he did not.

“Congratulations on your nuptials. We wish you all happiness in your marriage.” Wemetik said with a happy smile. “We have found that many of those whose lands experience winter sometimes yearn to travel to somewhere warm and bright for a vacation during their coldest months. And so we have become expert at the making and operating of seaside resorts for them, an industry which now stands second in our commerce, after fishing of course.

“Accordingly, we of The Fisher Folk have gifted you with a vacation home in the luxurious resort of White Sands Beach.”

She waved one hand while tapping a tiny xylophone that hung from a cord about her waist with the other, and an Illusion twelve meters wide and six meters tall appeared over the remaining open moss among the gifts. It showed a rotating view of a breath-takingly beautiful cove, it’s white beach bordered by palms and other carefully arranged tropical growth. Elves and humans could be seen taking their leisure on the sands, or riding the huge breaking waves toward the shore in tiny dugout canoes. The view moved in closer, centering on a large peaked roof woven of palm fronds and supported by tall bamboo poles, with carpets and furniture placed on the sand beneath it.

“White Sands Beach has the mildest weather of any place on Kellaran.” Wemetik continued. “And so most homes there are open, and have only a roof for shelter from the noonday sun, though they are provided with silk drop-sheets that you can secure in place of walls when privacy is desired. This is a standard promotional illusion, and does not show that your hut will have three meters of clearance beneath the roof, instead of two meters as the other huts designed for human use have.

“While there, you will also be entitled to every amenity of the resort, from sailing excursions to fine dining, from jungle tours to swims among the beautiful life of the coral reef.

“We hope you enjoy your times with us, and that you visit often.”

“Thank you, to all of The Fisher Folk, for your wonderful gift!” Talia grinned.

“You are most welcome!” Wemetik laughed, and vanished, to appear back at her table.

“I present Prince Dizil Of The People of Rain, from the far continent of Felion, land of giants and gnomes!” Theramin called.

“Greetings and congratulations.” that tropical elf smiled when he’d appeared. He also cast an Illusion of his people’s gift. “Often a young couple appreciate the opportunity for solitude while on vacation, particularly while on their honeymoon, and so we have made you a gift of the small island of Hilia, where you will be the only residents. It is a bit more than five kilometers long and almost two in width. It is typically sunny in the morning and early afternoon, with refreshing warm rains toward evening.”

The view showed the entire island, ringed with reefs, with black sand beach around tropical forest, and a volcano at one end. Then it closed on a white cottage with a thatched roof on the slope of the volcano, above the tree line.

“The home commands a wonderful view of most of the island, and is provided with fresh water that flows from a spring, which is itself fed by the pure lake in the crater of the volcano. And by the way, the lava plume that fed the volcano moved off eons ago, and so the volcano is extinct, and will erupt nevermore.”

“How absolutely beautiful! Thank you! Thank you so much!” Mark told him.

Dizil smiled and bowed a bit in acknowledgment, and was gone.

Next came Prince Himo of The Elves of the Dakrin Cliffs in Kletiuk, continent of dwarves, and the last of the tropical elven peoples. Their gift was a suite in the luxurious Dragon’s View Inn in the town of Bekka, which owed its existence to its close proximity to the abandoned city of Kraka. It was explained that forty-one million years ago the population of the dragons had been much more numerous. They had built Kraka, then abandoned it when they later voluntarily reduced their populations to reduce conflicts between them caused by their territoriality instinct. The lost city of the dragons still stood whole and invulnerable, and was the premiere wonder of the world, drawing tourists from every race and people. They were served by Prince Himo’s people, since Kraka was now surrounded by the jungles of their lands. Himo explained all this, while his illusion showed the fine points of their suite, their inn, and the resort town of Bekka.

“I refrain from showing Kraka in this presentation, because its wonders should be first seen with your own eyes.” Himo finished, then bowed at their sincere thanks, and was gone.

“Presenting Princess Jmia, of The Lava Shapers, mountain elves from the mystical continent of Xervia!” Theramin announced.

Jmia was of tiny stature even for an elf, with light brown hair and green eyes, wearing a neat brown wool suit with a short brown jacket, knee-beeches, hose, and polished black pointed shoes.

“Our gift must surely be the strangest of all.” she chuckled. “For as our Gift Selection Committee was being formed, we received a courier sprite bearing a message from Tithian, a famous seer and oracle of the people you would name unicorns. Though the message was sent three days ago, she sees the shadows of the future, and her message arrived just in time to instruct us to gift you with a specific unnamed dormant volcano lying some twenty-six thousand kilometers west of our lands, the location of which is shown on this map.”

She handed Mark a hollow black obsidian sphere forty-three centimeters in diameter, the volcanic glass being about a centimeter thick. It had thin, glowing, squiggly white lines drawn upon it, and a tiny blinking blue light on it’s uppermost surface.

“This is, ah, a map of the world?” Mark asked hesitantly.

“Yes, a globe of our world, the planet Kellaran.”

“Ah. I see that I’ve much yet to learn of geography.” Mark nodded in embarrassment. “I was taught that the world is a ball, but many at home didn’t really believe it. I’ve seen a flat map of this continent, which we name Debivin, but I only know the northern kingdoms in any detail.”

“Oh. Well let me add some detail to the map, then.” Jmia said as she took the globe back from him. She hummed a few notes and gestured over it, adding thin silver lines of latitude and longitude, the borders and names of

nations, and giving a transparent light blue sheen to the areas that represented bodies of water. “See, here is Debivin, as we also name it, and within it here, the Kingdom of Finitra, and here, The Nine Valleys of The High People, our present location. This long continent here on the other side is Xervia, and the blinking dot shows the location of our gift.

“The only explanation that Tithian’s message gave us, as to why we should gift you with this volcano, was, and I quote; ‘Their efforts will be significant, and he will need this.’

“When we made inquires as to the owner of this mount, we learned that it was within the territory of Grakonexikaldoron, mightiest of the gold dragons. We initiated a group Speaking to her, explaining the situation. She was sorely vexed, for her lair is in the next peak to the south, and she had no wish to have neighbors so close. But, while we were speaking with her, she also received a courier sprite from Tithian, and apparently the unicorn seer’s message convinced her to entertain the notion of selling to us. She demanded to know what we were offering, and when we told her the amount of our collection, she immediately and flatly demanded twice that, allowing no negotiation. We, ah, we conferred, and agreed to make up the difference from the treasury of the High Council of The Lava Shapers, and so the mount was purchased for you. I only tell you that last so that you will understand why we have not provided it with a home or constructions or amenities of any sort, indeed, we don’t even know if there is a source of fresh water upon it. And we have no illusion to show you what it looks like, as none of us have seen it.

“We do know that the property is somewhat triangular in shape when seen from directly above, and the volcano is dormant but not extinct, but we know nothing of it’s eruption phases. It is part of a vast range of volcanoes, and is surrounded by them. You own the peak and it’s slopes down to the bottom of the valleys to the north and southeast, and to the edge of the river that runs in the valley to the southwest, which may be polluted by eruptions upstream. We made this globe to mark its place after translating its co-ordinates from a unicorn system of mapping that uses hexagons, and we Sent it with our payment to the seller by Translocation. She then marked it and Sent it back in receipt. These letters in the ocean next to Xervia are in Grand High Draconian, placed there by Grakonexikaldoron, and form your Xervian legal deed to our gift. She made this small round hole next to the words with the tip of her tongue, and it stands as her signature. The pattern of it is unique, and it contains a minute amount of her saliva, which is also unique and cannot be duplicated by any means. Do not wash it. It will never get dirty, so you will not need to.

“We can only hope that Tithian will intervene with the Grand Council of Xervia to allow you to visit your new holding, for by their law, you are barred from the continent.”

“I am?” Mark asked in surprise.

“Not you in particular, but all humanoid peoples.” Jmia explained. “Of all of Xervia, only the port of The Sea People on the western coast is open to humans, dwarves, giants, or gnomes. Sylvan are of course banned from the continent entirely. Elves are only permitted at the Sea People’s port, or within the lands of my people. And even my people must get special permission from the Grand Council of Xervia to visit the continent outside our lands.”

“Oh. So who lives there?”

“Xervia is the home of the unicorns, the dragons who stand for justice, the gargoyles, the selkies, and other highly magical non-humanoid peoples, most of whom do not choose to have their existence known outside of Xervia.”

“Oh. And what are Syl...”

“Don’t ask.” Yazadril interrupted firmly. “Jmia should not have mentioned the word before such a vast assemblage, for our Wards are good, but not of the quality of the ones about Xervia. I will tell you about them later, Mark.”

“I apologize, Yazadril.” Jmia told him with a bow. “It was a slip.”

“Understandable, since you in Xervia have nothing to fear from them.” Yazadril allowed.

“At any rate, I hope you can make use of our gift.” Jmia told Mark. “We don’t know how to contact Tithian directly for further explanation, but her reputation as a Justicer is such that we dared not refuse her request without strong reason.”

“I see. Well, thank you, to you and to all your people.” Mark said, as he slowly turned the globe in his hands. “I really appreciate that you chose to make up the extra cost. And I want you to know that this globe, though it’s only a tiny part of your gift, means a great deal to me. It’s a beautiful thing, but more importantly, the knowledge it gives me is... profound. Now I can picture the whole world in my mind. If someone tells me about a place, I can look at this and truly know where it is. It gives me a powerful feeling of newfound understanding.”

“Oh!” Jmia said in surprise. “Why in that case, may I have it back again for just a moment?”

“Sure.” Mark said as he gave it to her.

She cast upon it again, and it gained subtle texturing, as well as blue lines on the continents, and tiny yellow dots with just as tiny script beside them, barely large enough to be legible.

“Here you are.” she said as she handed it back. “Now it also shows mountains, plains, forests, rivers, and the contours of the bottom of the oceans, and major nations and cities are shown and named. And since we have given no stand with it, I have cast a Levitate upon it that activates when touch is taken from it, so it will stay where you put it.”

He released it, and it floated in the air without moving. “Amazing! Thank you very much!”

“Ah, to be so young again, and have all the world’s discoveries to make anew. You are most welcome.” she sighed with a smile, and was gone.

“Before we continue with the presentation, I must point out that it is now over two hours past midnight.” Theramin announced. “Our young ones are growing tired. Therefore, though it is a discourtesy to hurry the presentation of such magnificent gifts, I ask that the rest of you try to be succinct.”

Next Pimall presented the gift of The Warm People, a seventeen-room home in the city of Axis, which was on the permanent ice cap over the North Pole. Like every construction there, the home had been made by excavating rooms in the ice by removing blocks of it, and the blocks were then used to build more rooms above on the surface, then magically melted together and strengthened. Her Illusion showed a squat round tower with a domed roof, with four smaller half-towers capped by hemispheres attached equidistantly around the outside of the main tower. And, she assured them, the interior of their new home was well sealed, magically heated, and to prevent it’s melting was equipped with a permanent version of the spell that blocked the transfer of heat into the snow at her people’s consulate.

Then came the gift of The People of Life, or rather, the two thirds of them who had co-operated in gifting them as a nation. A rather harried-looking white-haired elf named Smogin, who was Alilia’s regent while she was away, presented them with Sweettower, the largest maple tree that had ever lived at over five hundred and twenty meters in height, and with over two hundred and eleven thousand years of life, the oldest as well. It had three homes in and on it’s trunk, and another in it’s branches, with a total of thirty-seven rooms, which were all being connected by new hallways into one huge home and renovated to accommodate Mark’s height. Smogin told them that they could expect the renovations to take three days. Furthermore, their ownership of Sweettower entitled them to it’s annual harvest of many tons of maple sap, prized the world over for making syrup and sugar, giving them an annual income equivalent to some seventeen hundred Finitran Gold Crowns, the highest denomination of coin of that realm.

Prince Gotimin of The Elves of Sming presented them with Winghoof Estate, a working horse ranch boasting some six hundred and forty of the finest riding horses, complete with a sprawling home of sixteen rooms, outbuildings, gardens, and a few farm animals, as well as an established staff of ranch hands. It had a prime location, being only fifteen kilometers north of Latrel, the capitol city of Sming. As Gotimin explained, the human who had owned it previously had died, and his many heirs had contested his will for years, neglecting the ranch and it’s bills in the meantime, until the empire had seized it for unpaid taxes. The emperor had assigned a competent foreman and supplied it’s operating costs for the last year and a half, and it had recently returned to a marginal profitability, though in the future it should provide ‘a tidy income’, provided the foreman agreed to stay on.

“Thank you! Thank you very, very much! I’ve always wanted a horse ranch!” Mark grinned. “And if you would be so kind as to convey my regards to the foreman, please tell him that if he stays on I will give him a free hand in the estate’s management, and I will pay him his present salary plus half the after-tax profit. And that we would appreciate his reply being prompt, as I don’t want the ranch to lapse into operating at a loss if we have to take very long to negotiate, or to replace him.

“That is, if you don’t mind my making this decision, Talia?”

“I think it’s most wise, husband.” Talia giggled. “I’d never have thought to do so, as I care little for commerce.”

“Most wise indeed. And you are most welcome.” Gotimin smiled. “I will convey your words and regards to Citizen Joseth Narr, for that is your foreman’s name.”

Prince Jaromer appeared next, with the gift of The Elves of Thon. “Our gift is the property known as two seven four Riverside Park Way, in fabled Bojoston, the capital city of Thon. It’s only two blocks from my home, so I can assure you that it’s in a fine neighborhood!” he announced with a grin, and cast his illusion, showing a fantastic white marble palace on five hectares of beautifully landscaped and gardened grounds, surrounded by a matching white marble wall all around, with huge double wrought brass gates onto the wide avenue. “It’s one of only five homes of such consequence that were built entirely by elves, at the hire of humans, and to human dimensions. As such, it’s a very desirable property among the human elite. For that matter, there are more than a few elves who would love to own it, despite its larger dimensions! It boasts thirty-six rooms, with twelve bedrooms including the master suite, stabling for thirty horses, and garage space for six carriages. Across the Way lies Riverside Park, which runs along the river Bouk for kilometers in both directions, affording endless opportunities for scenic strolling, boating, or riding.”

“Thank you thank you thank you!” Talia gushed, and at Mark’s slightly puzzled grin at her enthusiasm, explained; “I’ve always wanted a palace!”

Finally Theramin introduced Prince Fdek of The Sea People of Debin, Princess Bluvi of The Sea People of Kletiu, Princess Sfosil of The Sea People of Felion, and Prince Wraftin of The Sea People of Xervia. Despite their smiles and grins they appeared rather fierce, with tattoos and shark’s teeth covering every square centimeter of their skins.

“Congratulations and salutations.” grinned Fdek, who spoke for the four. “As you may realize, many hope to give the final and greatest gift at a wedding, and it is especially so in this case, since there are friendly rivalries between some of the elven nations. However, we of The Sea People have only recently in our history separated from one nation into four, along somewhat arbitrary continental divisions, for the sake of practicality of administration. Since none of our four nations could match the purchasing power of the more long-established nations of elves, we, the four nations of The Sea People, have all pooled our contributions to give you a great gift. And since we are the last to present, we can only assume that it was enough to convince Mileemi of Thon, who was our judge in this informal contest, to give us the victory!

“Now the yacht given to you by The Stone Islanders is a very fine little boat, we buy them ourselves for visiting river ports and other shallow anchorings, and for private excursions. But we of The Sea People live to be upon the ocean. We travel it in great cargo vessels, not for the purpose of delivering cargo, but rather for the love of being on the sea. The carrying of cargo is merely the most convenient way to finance our lifestyle. In your long lives it is certain that you will eventually hear the call of the sea, and you may wish to spend a few years or decades or even centuries enjoying a shipboard life upon the deeps, and for that you will need more than a yacht. Of the eighteen great shipyards of The Sea People, only that of Vertiwin and Descendants at the port of Gimoosh in Thon will build for human customers and to human dimensions, and we have gifted you with the finest such vessel they have ever made. We give you; The Queen of Waves!”

An Illusion of the great ship appeared in semi-transparency floating six meters above the ground, rocking slowly and majestically like it was already upon the deep water. It filled much of the chapel, for it was over two hundred and twenty meters long, twenty-five meters abeam, and thirty-six meters deep from the rail around the top deck to the bottom of the keel. Within it’s outline could be seen it’s many holds and staterooms in five to sixteen decks above the ballast hold. Its nine mighty masts supported dozens of gigantic white silk sails, and kilometers of white silk ropes formed the rigging.

“The Queen of Waves has comfortable accommodations for up to four hundred and sixty crew, and the Captain’s cabin has eleven rather palatial rooms.” Fdek continued. “The ship is proof against the fiercest storm, and is equipped with a mighty spell of Movement that will drive her for up to four days and nights, in case she is becalmed. She has systems that warn of rocks and shallows, and in an emergency she can be operated by the helmsman alone, though you could not bring her to dock without at least twelve good crew.

“She is also well armed with weapons both magical and mundane, in case she faces war or piracy. The Movement spell can also be used in conjunction with the sails to move the ship at very high speed if you need to flee a superior force, but that is a dangerous operation requiring a full complement of experienced crew, and relatively smooth waters. If the worst happens, and the ship fills with water because she has foundered or been holed, the ballast stones will automatically be dumped by Translocation, and if necessary much of the cargo as well, until it has been freed of enough weight that the wood of her material is sufficient to keep her afloat. Though she may be swamped, she will never sink and be lost. Salvaging her from such a state would be costly, but not an unusual response to that rare eventuality.

“When you wish to sail her, The Sea Peoples will be glad to assist you in contracting for cargoes and crew. That last would not be difficult, for any sailor would be eager to voyage upon such a fine ship.”

“I’m certain you’re right, for she is magnificent, and I’m certainly eager to sail aboard her myself!” Mark stated in amazement.

“We’ll sail her within a decade or two, I think.” Talia grinned. “And we will visit every port with an enclave of The Sea People when we do! Thank you all, thank you so very much!”

“That would be a voyage of almost six years, and would give you a fair taste of the sea.” Fdek smiled. “And you are most welcome!”

And with that the four princes and princesses bowed, and made their exit.

“That concludes the presentation of gifts, with the exception of the home we others of the immediate wedding party will build in First Valley. We will broadcast a Reading of that event for those of you who wish to see it.” Theramin announced, then turned and smiled at Mark and Talia. “Would you care to address the assemblage?”

“Yes please.” Talia nodded, and stood, so Mark rose as well. “Our marriage was born of tragedy, yet you have all made this the greatest, most beautiful, and happiest wedding any bride ever had.” she said. Her voice was calm and sincere, her expression joyous, yet her eyes shone with tears. “I am so thankful for the warm welcome you have shown my husband, and all the thanks we could give in a century would be meager trade for the overwhelming generosity and thoughtfulness of your gifts. I have never been so proud to be an elf as I am today. Thank you, each and every one of you. Thank you.”

She bowed her head and closed her eyes for a moment in conclusion, then smiled up at Mark.

He shared her smile and caressed her hand as he gently held it in his, then looked around at the thousands of elves.

“It’s difficult to find words to express my thoughts to you.” he said after a moment. “I awoke yesterday morning absolutely alone, owning only one suit of ruined clothes and a bundle of simple things I carried in my cloak. You can imagine what an overwhelming experience the last two days have been.

“It’s a humbling thought to realize, without a doubt, that yours is a better race than mine. A race whose oaths can be trusted completely, who stand united on the side of justice. The gifts you have given are mind-boggling in their magnificence, and as Talia said, we can never thank you enough, though I do thank you with all my heart. But the greatest gifts you have given me have been all your warm smiles, the friendly greetings of everyone I’ve met, and the amazing courtesy of all those who didn’t have a chance to meet us. Certainly if we’d have been married among a similar number of human folk, or even a small fraction of that, we could not walk about as we’ve done tonight without being mobbed to distraction.

“I feel deeply honored to have been part of bringing you all together like this, and I think you should have a regular gathering of all of you, for it would be such a shame if this were the only time it happened. Perhaps, given all your agreement, you could meet next year on our anniversary, or even our every tenth anniversary.

“And now I would like to give you the only thing I can give to every one of you; the gift of song. I’m sure I saw a harp among the roomful of instruments earlier on…”

“Allow me, Love.” Talia said, and whistled a few notes.

Three harps rose from the other gifts and floated up to them; a small cherrywood lap harp, an ironwood grand harp, and a great golden instrument that had been magically constructed according to the description Mark had given of the one he had been building with his father. Its extra space between each string made it seem strangely elongated horizontally, and only a musician with Mark’s arm span would have the reach to play it.

“Ah. I think the golden one will be my favorite eventually, as I’ll be able to play properly for the first time since I got my full growth.” Mark mused. “But I haven’t practiced with it, and until I do, my fingers will automatically reach for the strings in the wrong place. I’ll use this one tonight, and pick it with my fingernails, as I’ve become used to doing.”

He selected the ironwood harp by taking it out of the air, and the other two floated back down to their previous places. He sat at the edge of his chair, set the harp on the marble between his knees, and nestled the instrument against his shoulder. He plucked an experimentive chord with all ten fingernails, giving a unique, harpsichord-like tone, and smiled at the beauty of the rich sound.

He considered what to play. At first he went over the list of the songs he knew, and by habit tried to find one that wouldn’t sound too strange in his voice. Then he reconsidered as he thought of Yazadril’s comments when recommending that he sing to the elves. For the first time, he slowly hummed down a major scale to see how low he could sing, and was surprised to find that his voice was full and stable down to two whole notes below the lowest string on the great harp. He chose a song, then plucked a descending series of chords, humming along as he did so, transposing until the lowest note in the song was the same as the lowest note of his voice.

He tapped his foot four times to set the tempo in his mind, and played the introduction to a light-hearted folk song, playing the chords with his left hand and picking the melody with his right.

Then he sang;

Father’s coming in from the field
Mother’s cooking a delicious meal
Soon comes the dusk of another fine day
Soon we will sing and we’ll dance and play!

Whistle the fife and strike the drum
It’s dance night tonight and everyone comes

Those from the country and those from the town
We'll laugh and we'll dance till we all fall down!

We'll all meet together at the Tinlo's farm
We'll kick out the cows and we'll dance in the barn!
And if we're still there at the dawn of the day
We'll dance till we drop and we'll sleep in the hay!

So whistle the fife and strike the drum
It's dance night tonight and everyone comes
Those from the country and those from the town
We'll laugh and we'll dance till we all fall down!

He played the intro through again, then ended it with a last chorus.

Whistle the fife and strike the drum
It's dance night tonight and everyone comes
Those from the country and those from the town
We'll laugh and we'll dance till we all fall down!
Yes we'll laugh and we'll dance till we all, fall, down!

He let the last notes ring and fade.

"My father wrote the music to that, and my mother wrote the words," he quietly revealed. "I only wish they could have been here with me today."

Then he realized that everyone was silent. He looked up, and saw that everyone in the first twenty rows or so were squinting, and those who were close enough to see their eyes clearly seemed to be in tears. He looked to Talia, perched sideways on an arm of the chair. She was gaping at him, tears were streaming down her face, and her eyes were squinted almost closed.

"Oh. Uh. Sorry," he stammered. "I guess that didn't come out that good, compared to elven musicians..."

Talia shook her head, and gently covered his mouth with her hand for a moment. She swallowed hard. "You don't understand," she told him sincerely. "That was incredibly beautiful. And you're glowing. Brightly."

"I've never seen anything like it!" Yazadril marveled. "It's obviously magic, but there is no corresponding effect on the magic field around you! I don't know where the energy for it is coming from!"

"Damn." Alilia muttered as she shook her head, then wiped tears from her eyes. "That's bright. Now I know how you felt when we met. I think it's dimming now."

That brought Theramin's attention back to the situation. "Let's have a round of applause for our fine groom's wonderful performance!" he called as he wiped his eyes, then began clapping madly.

That triggered a wave of thunderous applause that went on and on

After a moment of it Talia urged him to his feet. "Take a bow!" she grinned, wiping tears from her eyes. Then she swung her legs over and stood, and joined in the ovation.

He stood and took his bow, and the elves all applauded even louder.

He waited for it to end. And waited. Finally he had to grin and shake his head. "Oh come now! It couldn't have been *that* good!" he laughed.

Still it went on undiminished, and now there was laughter in it as well.

"It was amazing!" Dilimon enthused, and put a hand over his heart. "I swear, my chest still feels funny from the rumble of your voice!"

"Well then, we'll bid you good night," he called into the unremitting noise as he turned and picked up Talia. "I understand that many of you will stay here and make merry for quite a while, but it's our wedding night, and we've things to attend to!"

With that he stepped down from the podium toward their table. He waved to everyone as he did, and Talia joined him in that, her grin matching his.

After they were again seated the applause finally faded away. Many then began making their farewells, including most of those with children.

"We have only one more thing to attend to before we leave for First Valley," Yazadril told them.

“The council of war.” Alilia nodded as she gained a serious expression.

“Perhaps more appropriately, a council to prevent war.” Yazadril mused. “It won’t take long, as there is little to be decided until we learn the identity of our enemy. We’ll meet in the Hall of Anticipation.”

“All right then.” Alilia nodded. “Let’s pour ourselves a last drink to take there with us, and have it done.”

Soon they and the rest of the princes and princesses, their advisors and councilors, and fifty-one of the most senior wizards and commanders were gathered in the Hall of Anticipation.

Yazadril called them to order, and outlined what was known thus far, as well as what was being done to gain more knowledge of their foe. Then he called for comment.

For several long moments everyone looked expectantly around at everyone else. Finally Mark cleared his throat, and spoke. “Look, I’m sure some of you have thought of this already, but the first thing you need to do, and as soon as possible at that, is to warn the leaders of every nation of every race that someone may be trying to instigate a war. It almost happened here, so it may be repeated elsewhere. They must know that if some great offense is committed against them, and it appears that there are obvious culprits who protest their innocence, that those protests are more likely to be valid than if none of this had happened. They must be urged to avoid all hasty military action, and to strive to their utmost to maintain the peace, *at least* until our enemy is caught, or they could be manipulated to their destruction. If war does break out, anyone could be drawn into it, or forced into it.”

“Actually, I doubt any of us *did* think of it, Mark.” Jaromer mused. “I had of course planned to speak to Osbald about this, but I didn’t think beyond that yet, being most concerned with my own people, both of my race and of my nation.”

“Yes.” Theramin nodded to Mark. “Your wisdom and insight do you proud. Particularly your urging of haste in the sending of warnings to the leaders of the world.”

“I agree.” Yazadril nodded. “And so it shall be done.”

“I’ll draft a scroll with our warnings. It will only take a few minutes, then the leaders among us will sign it.” Pimall stated. “We have enough wizards here to have copies of it in the hands of all the leaders of the world in minutes, and they *will* read it, if we have to get them out of bed to have them do so!”

“Thank you.” Yazadril said.

“I’ll begin now.” Pimall said, and turned to go to a desk at the back of the room.

“Is there anything else?” Yazadril asked the group. He received only silence in return. “All right, as soon as the messages are sent, we’ll bid you good night.”

“We can take care of it, Yazadril.” Jaromer told him. “You and Alilia should go sign the scroll, then you eight who have business in First Valley can go to it, so you can get the bride and groom retired for the evening before the sun comes up!”

“Thank you. That’s considerate of you.” Yazadril nodded, then turned to follow Alilia, who was already headed for the desk.

“Talia, I think it might be dangerous when I try Silaran’s... Whoa!”

Silaran had appeared at Mark’s mention of his name, even before the next word was out of Mark’s mouth. He immediately realized the situation, and said; “*Please, don’t let me interrupt.*”

“Ah. Well as I say, it might be dangerous when I try Silaran’s Translocation, and I don’t see why we should both be at risk.” Mark told his new wife. “Perhaps you should travel home by another method.”

“There’s no risk for us, my beloved, the curse sees to that.” Talia smiled. “At worst, it will be very uncomfortable.”

“See, I don’t understand how you can trust the curse to save us from anything!” Mark said in concern. “Even *I* know that they’re notoriously unpredictable! You think we’re immortal, so we can still be fulfilling it at the end of days, but I’m afraid it’ll turn us into ghosts or zombies or demons or something! I don’t see why that wouldn’t suit the curse just as well!”

“Partly because we know Alilia, intimately, and her state of mind when she cast it. Curses follow the *intent* of the caster at the moment of casting; they do not play with semantics to match the words that were spoken. It will be fulfilled in the manner she intended, and she did not intend for us to be ghosts or demons or anything other than what we are. Not even old or decrepit.

“Another unique thing about this curse is that it was not cast over a distance, but passed into me at the contact of Alilia’s fist with my face. The immense power of the curse is not floating about us, it is entirely *within me*. I *felt* its power leap from my body to yours when it saved your life. Now, the main difference between a spell and a curse is that the curse is less specific about how something is to occur, and they work by making a simple copy of certain parts

of the mind of the caster, so that they can evaluate reality to the extent necessary to accomplish their aims. I tell you Love, the curse is getting to *know* me, and I am getting to know it in return.

“And I can assure you of the certain and absolute truth, and give my word upon it as an elf to my sworn husband, that until the end of days, you and I will be alive, and young, and healthy, and of sound mind, and that you will rape me regularly and painfully as Yzandra described, and furthermore insult me when you do with the silly and petty things that human males tend to say in such moments, because *that*, all of that and exactly that and no more, is what Alilia intended when she cast the curse.”

Alilia could only nod silently in confirmation, tears running unheeded, her face hard with rigid control. She succeeded in preventing her eyes from dropping in shame, but she had to stare to the side as she listened, being unable to meet the young couple’s gaze.

Mark considered what Talia had said. Then a thought struck him. “The curse can think?!” he asked, astounded.

Talia considered. “The curse can only be said to think if something as simple as an ant can be said to think, as it goes about finding food and mates and avoiding danger.”

“*She’s absolutely right about all of that.*” Silaran commented.

“Hi Silaran, thanks for coming, and sorry to ignore you like that.” Mark told him aloud. “And how do you know she’s right?”

“I did not feel ignored, but rather was enjoying your fascinating conversation. And you should understand that you have a strong and rather guarded mind, and you think of our communication as ‘talking’, so I only hear the words you ‘speak’ to me, whether you use your mouth or not. But Talia is a trusting soul, and a wizard who is accustomed to purely mental communication, and she is very aware of my people’s history as a just and noble race. She trusts me rather completely, and allows me access to much of her mind, and so I can see the truth of what she said.”

“Much the same is true of Alilia, and she has had time to fully consider her state of mind at the moment of her casting, so she can verify it as well. You are immortal, within the limits of the power of the curse to accomplish, and there is no real risk to either of you in your testing of my Translocation, as that spell is very minuscule in power compared to the curse.”

“But, as Talia hinted, if it goes badly it may be very painful for the three of us.”

“He’s right. You’re immortal.” Alilia nodded. “I only wish it did not require the death of a loved one filling me with overwhelming sorrow and rage to inspire me to the huge risk and effort of such a mighty bestowing. For a fraction of a second after I cast the curse, my own life was in danger, I was that depleted. It was an unthinking act and a horrible risk, and I couldn’t just decide to grant immortality to someone. Who knows? Maybe it would work, maybe it would annihilate a continent. Perhaps by the time I’m Yazadril’s age, if I reach it, I’ll be ready to apply such a spell to myself. No, not a spell, or a curse. A blessing. A blessing that restores your body, your mind, and your life from any injury, magic or mundane.” she mused.

“Those are dangerous thoughts.” Yazadril stated firmly. “I will thank you all to never repeat them, anywhere. Such researches must be conducted in the highest state of confidentiality. There are human wizards and others who would gladly slay most of the world for such a blessing. And if such a thing became common knowledge, there would be a population increase that would choke the world in less than a millennium.”

That caused a moment of silence.

“I’m sorry, I’m still not convinced that the curse can be so trusted.” Mark said. “I mean, what about the other curse? That Yazadril and Alilia’s children would slay each other? Who would have expected what actually happened to come from a curse like that? If that’s not playing with semantics, I don’t know what is!”

“But don’t you see, if the caster’s intent had really been that Dalia and Bezedil and I would slay each other, he would have waited until we were born, and then cursed the three of us to such a fate.” Talia explained. “But he cast it on Father and Alilia instead. The words he spoke are more easily detected by the information gathering spells Father used, but it’s obvious that the caster’s *intent* was that Father and Alilia’s children would die in such a way that they would each blame the child of the other for the death of their own, thus sowing strife between them. And it almost did cause that strife. Personally, I think it was only thwarted in that because Alilia’s will and power is so much greater than the power of the first curse, and that the first curse was limited to secondary effects that had to be the result of our deaths. Hopefully, its meager power is spent. If not, and some of it still lingers, and Alilia ever has another child, that child will be in danger from me, as I will be protected from her child by our curse.”

“Yazadril!” Alilia barked. “Could she be right?! And is there a way to know if it still lingers?”

“Don’t worry. We could drive ourselves mad wondering about every possible problem tonight. Add the question to our researches, Alilia. We will find out in due time. Certainly before you could have another child. Meanwhile, we will all speak tomorrow evening at nine, to consider new information and actions.”

“The warnings are being sent as we speak, so that is one less thing to consider.” Jaromer stated. “Enjoy yourselves, and farewell until tomorrow, when we will speak again.” He bowed.

“Goodbye, and thanks again!” Mark called.

Jaromer disappeared.

“Goodbye everyone! Thank you!” Talia called, as she waved and floated herself up to Silaran’s bare back.

Many called their farewells and took their leave, while Silaran easily crouched with all four legs in a way that no horse ever could, allowing Mark to vault to his back.

“Silaran, I’m thinking that if the Translocate may be dangerous, we should ride to the middle of the pass out of this valley before we try it.” Mark said after the unicorn again stood. “That way nothing else can be hurt or damaged except bare rock. And it should only take a few minutes.”

“*Wise thoughts, Mark.*” Silaran agreed.

“We’ll see you at your property.” Alilia said, and effortlessly Translocated herself there, along with Yazadril, Nemia, Theramin, Dilimon, and four who weren’t even in the room, being Hilsith, Gorsh, Yzell and Yalla.

Mark waved goodbye to the remaining leaders and wizards as Silaran clopped to the door. The steed crouched again as he ducked low enough through the doorway to not risk his riders’ heads hitting it.

They waved to the many remaining merrymakers as they rode away from the chapel, and Mark noticed the chair conveyance they’d flown to the wedding was flying home at high speed, high overhead.

Talia leaned back against his belly, he wrapped his arms around her, and she snuggled within them.

Soon they were past the major pavilions and the densest crowds, and Silaran began picking up speed. By the time they reached the edge of the forest floor he was galloping at amazing speed, and continued to accelerate as he climbed toward the pass. All his gaits were unnaturally smooth, and he had thick rows of muscle along either side of his spine that rose higher than his backbones, cushioning the buttocks of his riders, so they were very comfortable though they rode bareback.

Though he had to slow a bit for the corners and curves in the trail, and lean steeply into them, his footing was perfectly sure and solid, as was his riders’ place upon his back.

Only a few minutes later he slowed, then stopped. “*I judge this to be the safest location. Shall we try the Translocate?*” the unicorn asked.

“We might as well, I think.” Mark agreed.

“I think so too.” Talia nodded. “It will be of immense aid to us if we can both Translocate. Silaran’s Translocation spell is much better than mine in range and accuracy, and so helps me a great deal, but it’s even more important to you, since you would otherwise need to fly everywhere. That’s fine for getting around The Nine Valleys, but it would take us many hours or days to visit our various holdings that way.”

“True.” he grinned. “All right Silaran, let’s give it a try.”

There was a brief moment of extreme cold, and a flash that both Mark and Talia saw. Then they were standing on the grass in First Valley, within sight of Yazadril’s tree.

“*Are you both all right?*”

“I’m fine.” Talia nodded.

“Me too.” Mark said as he blinked the stars out of his eyes.

“*Good. As for myself, I am just as well.*” Silaran nodded, and began walking to the south side of the vast clearing, where many hundreds of elves were gathered into two groups, one having roughly twice as many as the other. “*But I must say, that was the most unique sensation I ever experienced! There is definitely something very strange about you, Mark. Perhaps you would allow me to visit for a few hours, sometime over the next few days. I would like to bring my love Equemev with me, for she is a fine sorcerer. I’m curious to see what her reaction is to the sensation of Translocating with you.*”

“Your mate is a wizard as well!” Mark laughed. “That’s a fine thing, and a bit of coincidence! By the way, have you heard about Krago...”

“AH!!” Talia sharply warned as she raised a quick hand, then continued calmly. “You’ll attract their attention if you speak their names, and it’s their wedding night too, in every way that matters. We don’t want to disturb them.”

“I’ll say!” Mark agreed with raised eyebrows. “And thanks for the save, Talia! That was close! I was going to name both of them!”

“You didn’t know, but now you do.” she said, and he caught a bit of her father’s teaching manner in her words. “You must form the habit of never naming any person of power, unless you want their attention. Most of them would not notice most of the time, but you never know. Look at the way you called Silaran minutes ago, before you were ready for a proper greeting.”

“Good point. Thanks, love.” he grinned, and kissed the top of her head before he continued. “At any rate, Silaran, have you heard what happened at the gift presentation immediately after yours, involving a certain large red friend of yours, and the silver beauty of his affections?”

“I have!” Silaran laughed. *“And delightful news it was! Furthermore, I see your original point as well! Yourself and Talia, myself and Equemev, Big Crimson and Silver Beauty. Three couples of vastly different ages and races, yet as people, we are very similar. We are all practically immortal, and we are three young, strong, warrior males mated to three young, beautiful power wielders. Wizards and sorcerers aren’t quite the same, but the distinction is more important in a theoretical than a social sense, for they spend their time doing similar things.”*

“Exactly!” Mark laughed. “I can see the six of us visiting together in the years ahead! You, me and Big Crimson can practice combat moves and battle strategies, while the ladies swap feminine topics and arcane lore!”

“And in the future after that, we could all get together for dinners, while our young all frolic around our ankles!” Talia laughed. “We’ll all marvel proudly at the growth of our young, and swap stories of the things they’ve broken around our homes in their playful antics, and laugh together like all young parents do when they gather with those of similar nature!”

“How absolutely sweet!” Povon spoke in their minds. *“Sorry to interrupt, but you called us Big Crimson and Silver Beauty. Very charming, but you named us in your minds, though you gave us each a new name to add to our collections. I’m rather sensitive to things like that, and I couldn’t help noticing. If you had said ‘the big crimson and the silver beauty’, remaining purely descriptive, I’d have probably not noticed, but those won’t work for that anymore now that you’ve made them names, so you’ll have to think of new terms for us for when you want to speak of us without calling our attention.”*

“At any rate, Talia, that was just about the prettiest thought that anyone ever had about me! I think such visits would be fun, and that Hilsith might think them fine therapy for me. Don’t you think so dear?”

“Kragorram agrees, and sends his greetings.”

“Why my dear, you mischievous little thing!” Silaran laughed. “Congratulations!”

“Pardon me?” Povon asked with a giggle.

“Equemev also sends her greetings!” Silaran laughed. *“She has now reached such a level of psionic skill that she detected it when I spoke her name, though she is on the other side of the world! A far more rare accomplishment for unicorns than for dragons, even given that I am particularly well attuned to her! Since I spoke her name, she has eavesdropped on my conversation, pretty prankster that she is! And she also agrees that we six should meet and visit.”*

“Ah, she has contacted me now!” Povon announced. *“Greetings and well done, Equemev! I look forward to meeting you!”*

“I have her as well! Hello Equemev!” Talia crowed proudly.

“Well done Talia!” Povon giggled again. *“That is mostly your power in that Link! We do make a fine trio of psionists!”*

“Why thank you, Povon!” Talia beamed. “It means much from you!”

“Oh, we simply must meet!” Povon enthused. *“I have some fine things to show you, little sisters! I will call the day after tomorrow, and we’ll arrange something! But for now, Kragorram’s pectoral muscles are having quite an effect on my eyes again, so I think I will bid you all goodnight!”*

“Goodnight!” Mark and Talia called together.

Silaran had been walking slowly to preserve the privacy of their conversation, but now he trotted happily forward to meet the crowd of expectant elves who had been watching their approach, many of whom had cast a mild light against the darkness. *“Why don’t we leave the arrangements for our visit to the ladies, Mark?”* he chuckled.

“That would certainly be best!” Mark agreed as they came to a halt. “Thank you Silaran. I think some great friendships have begun today! It’s great to know I can be Translocated, and the ride from the chapel to the pass was quite a thrill as well!”

He slid from the unicorn’s back, then reached up and took Talia in his arms.

“Thank you. Goodnight then. Goodnight Talia. Call me if you want transport, and I will see you in a few days, if not sooner.”

“Goodnight!” they returned.

The great unicorn nodded to the assembled elves, and was gone.

“So Yazadril, who are all these fine people?” Mark asked.

“These fine people are some of your neighbors from here in First Valley, and a few from Kemsah Valley, the next valley over. They are here to welcome you to the neighborhood, and to see your new home made.” Yazadril explained, gesturing to the smaller group, who smiled, and some waved while some bowed.

Mark and Talia smiled and bowed in return.

Then Yazadril’s manner became stern as he indicated the larger group. “And these others are the fools who killed you during your wedding ceremony.”

“Ah. Quite an experience that, and incredibly painful.” Mark calmly revealed, nodding. “You know, I actually felt myself die there for a moment. And of course, those of this group who were there because of the invitation that Talia and I extended above the Hall of Anticipation are forsworn as well, since they would have vowed to do nothing to disrupt the ceremony. I think killing me counts as a disruption.”

His words pounded mightily at the guilt they were feeling, despite his conversational tone, and many flinched. By the last word, many were actually cringing. Many of the females and a few of the males were crying.

“What do they want?” Mark asked.

“They wish to make amends.” Yazadril told him. “They have told me what they wish to do, and I may allow it, depending on your answer to an offer I will make.”

He pointed to the nearest one. “You. Sheramiv. Explain to him what you have decided.”

That elf stepped forward, her face filled with remorse. “There is only one thing we can offer that could balance the magnitude of our mistake, and our shame.” she told him, her eyes downcast. “We wish to swear service to you. We will serve you in any way that you ask. For as long as we live.”

“I think it fair, and I’m inclined to allow it.” Yazadril told him. “Except that I can’t have over sixteen hundred elves swearing lifelong unlimited obedience to a loyal citizen of a human kingdom, especially as most of them are of other elven nations, so their leaders would have something to say of it as well. Believe me, it’s just not politically feasible.

“I was going to broach this subject later, but this is happening now, so here we are. What I propose is this; You could accept citizenship in The Nine Valleys, acknowledging the leadership, though not the lordship, of myself as your Prince and of the Council of The High People. In return, I will make you a Knight of The High People, and promise that we will never ask you to act against Finitra.

“Then, if you so choose, you can accept the service of these fools. I suggest you start by having them carry their limit in rocks around the valley for a decade or so.”

“Hmm. What’s the difference between leadership and lordship?”

“If you can name a valid objection, you have the right to refuse the instructions of a leader, but not of the orders of a lord. And you have the rights to openly criticize a leader, and to campaign for their replacement, whereas you can do neither with a lord. Your individual rights would therefore be greater as one of us than as a Finitran.”

“I see. And what are the duties of a Knight of The High People?”

“They are much the same as those of knights of other lands. You would be on call to assist the Sentry Corps in our defense if that becomes necessary, to fight in our military should we be required by circumstance to take the offensive or to support our allies, to help keep the peace and to uphold the law, and rarely, to form an honor guard for leaders and diplomats at home and abroad. The position entitles you to a generous salary, to great respect, to the services of our people for your equipage, supply and support, and to the training of our armsmasters and battle wizards. It’s also expected that when you feel it is time and you find the right student, you will take a squire and pass on your knowledge and training. You will not be required to serve as a squire, since your apprenticeship and investment as a Finitran Ranger ensures that you already have the skills to become a knight of junior rank.”

“I see. Well, I swore during my investment as a Ranger to uphold the Ranger’s code and the just laws of Finitra, but I’ve never taken service with the king, nor sworn personal loyalty to the crown. And I think that at this point, my life has far more to do with The High People than Finitra. So, I don’t see why not. I’ll agree. What do I have to do?”

“You’ve just done it. No need to be formal about it tonight, we can save that for the occasion of your knighting.

“You sixteen hundred and eighty-one idiots will now swear yourselves to the service of this man. To save time and effort when we would rather be doing more pleasant things, I will state the vow, and you will all respond by saying; ‘I do so swear’.”

“And while you do, I will cast Compulsion upon you!” Alilia stated. “While it will not kill you, it will insure the complete sincerity of your vow, and I think that it is fitting that it be so!

“That is, with your permission, Mark, Yazadril?”

“I agree.” Yazadril nodded.

“Thank you, Alilia.” Mark grinned, and gave a nasty chuckle. “These here will find that it’s no joy to have Compulsion cast upon you against your will, even if it forces you to do what you’d have done anyway! A pity they won’t feel how much less fun it is to have it happen by surprise, but then, we can’t have everything, can we?”

“All right.” Yazadril said as he turned to the remorseful group. “I hope you have all picked out a nice, heavy rock.

“Do you swear your service to Markhan Reginus Longstrider the Fifth, in whatever manner he should decide, for as long as you live?” he asked, as Alilia gestured forcefully.

“I do so swear.” was spoken simultaneously by many voices, and the flash in Mark’s vision left bright spots against the darkness of the night.

“Wow Alilia, you really gave it to them, didn’t you?” he chuckled as he rubbed his eyes.

Then he saw that Yazadril, Alilia, Theramin and Yalla were all staring at the smaller group of local elves, and that Talia and Nemia were struggling to keep from laughing.

“What is it?” Mark asked in puzzlement.

“Some number of these High People took the oath of service to you! They spoke the words ‘I do so swear’ in response to the question, were caught in Alilia’s spell, and are bound by both the oath and the Compulsion!” Yazadril stated in consternation. “And for no reason, since they were not among the ones who offended against you at the ceremony!”

“Oh? Who?” Mark asked.

“These!” Alilia said as she gestured, and a very startled group was Translocated to a place on the lawn to one side of the other two groups.

“Alilia!” Mark snapped. “I may be out of place for saying, but I think that was, well, it was impolite, since as far as I can see these people have done nothing wrong!”

“Perhaps so!” Alilia retorted. “But they are sworn to you, and you wished to know who had sworn, so I was merely expediting their revealing of themselves!

“And look at them! Not a one of them over thirty! They are a pack of adolescent fools, as I knew they must be, since only those would do such a thing without strong reason!”

Mark surveyed the group, and pointed to one in the front. “You, the brash fellow in the blue. Would you mind telling me why you did that?”

“Certainly, my liege.” That grinning youth said as he bowed with a grand sweep of his cloak. “I am Zayobod. My thinking was similar to that of the great drake who was hired as your bodyguard earlier tonight. My friends and I think that you will be at the center of great events, and we wish to stand beside you then. My conscience is clear in having done so, since the service of the noble dragon and his unicorn friend ensures that you will strive for justice.”

“I see.” Mark laughed. “Is that the case for all of you? Did any have another reason?”

An embarrassed black-haired boy stepped forward. “Uh, pardon me, my name is Holanam. Sir, uh, Mark, for my part, it was somewhat spontaneous. Perhaps I was simply caught up in the moment, but it certainly felt like the right thing to do when the moment came.”

“Unbelievable! You just felt like it!? Even knowing you could be affected by Alilia’s Compulsion.?”

“I knew I would be, sir.” the youth admitted.

“All right, now I’m really curious!” Mark laughed. “Would all of you who are valiant glory seekers like the first fellow please stand to that side, and those who are unthinking impulsives like this lad please stand over there?”

The group of young elves separated. Forty-seven stood to the left with the youth in blue tights, nine of them female. Another boy and three girls joined the black haired fellow. This left a group of thirty-one young and embarrassed females who hadn’t moved. One of them stood with her back to him, but he recognized her by her red hair and blue striped gown.

“Balén? Is that you?” Mark asked.

“Uh, yes Mark.” she said as she turned toward him, her eyes downcast. “But I was only allowed to come here tonight on the condition that I don’t bother you. When my parents hear about this, I’ll be scrubbing pots for a decade.”

“Oh. And you swore the oath out of remorse for your spell, earlier?”

“Uh. Not really. Mark. I, uh, I just want to be of service to you.”

At this, Nemia and Yzell burst out laughing, and were soon joined by everyone else in his party except Yazadril.

“What’s so funny?” Mark demanded.

“Oh, I’m not going to tell you!” Nemia laughed. “I’ve already offended your tender sensibilities enough for one night!”

“Balens is being evasive!” Yzell laughed. “She and the rest of these silly does have had their little libidos piqued by the thought of being, shall we say, romantically coerced, by such a huge and handsome fellow as yourself! They not only wish to be of service to you, they hope to be serviced by you! And if you command it by their vow, why, they cannot be blamed for getting what they want, can they, though it would be considered more than mildly scandalous for girls of such tender years to initiate such a liaison with a big human like you!”

“You must be joking!” Mark exclaimed, and turned to the group of blushing girls. “That can’t be what you were thinking, is it?!”

“We love you!” One of the closer girls told him tearfully. “You’re like a beautiful dream, and we know we can’t have your love or your vow of marriage, because you’ve already given them to Talia. So this seemed like the next best thing.”

“Ah, admit it!” Nemias laughed. “Along with such romantic notions, every one of you has pictured yourselves squirming in rapturous obedience beneath his great and noble muscles! Any who have not may step forward and naysay me right now!”

None stepped forward. A few began to cry.

“Oh I’m sorry, that was uncalled for.” Nemias smiled apologetically, as she wiped tears of laughter out of her eyes. “It just struck me funny, so I was unthinking, and I apologize.”

“Look, this is getting too bizarre.” Mark said as he shook his head. “All of you, I have no service for you. Stay and watch the house-building, and then go home. I’m flattered, very much so, but I don’t require anyone’s service. However, if any of you are too young to be legally responsible for yourselves as adults, you will inform your parents of what you’ve done.”

“And what of these who transgressed against you?” Yazadril asked.

“Them too. I think they were irresponsible and negligent, but I doubt any of them meant me harm, though that was the result because there were so many of them. Our displeasure has raked at their remorse, and they’ve suffered it for a while, and taken the oath, and I don’t see that they really deserve any more punishment than that. I don’t want there to be any more unpleasantness tonight. Let them be.”

“So let it be, and may they be thankful for your mercy.” Yazadril nodded. “Now, Nemias my love, Alilia, Theramin? Shall we proceed with the business at hand?”

“We shall indeed!” Theramin laughed.

As those four started forward, Alilia gestured, and white outlines appeared on the grass. “All of you, be certain to remain outside this line until we emerge.”

The four moved to the center of the clearing, joined hands, closed their eyes, and tilted their heads back as they began singing together in Elvish.

As they began to glow brighter in Mark’s eyes, and the field of Power swirled in the vision of the other elves, those observing stepped back to be well clear of the lines. Most of the elves cast a bright Light now, so they could see the entire clearing.

“This will be interesting.” Talia quietly commented. “The construction strictures of The Nine Valleys state that all above-ground constructions must be grown in the trees, yet this outline on the ground suggests a great building within a walled courtyard, both of them square.

“You’re right.” Mark nodded. “This is like the floor plan of a typical castle in the northern kingdoms. See, those bulges around the corners would be turreted towers.”

Trees began to grow along the line. At first they were just sprouts, but in seconds they were saplings. As they reached Mark’s height they began to merge together in a strangely flattened way, their branches mingling with each other and their trunks growing together, and then the four casters at their center were lost from view.

“This is so wondrous.” Mark chuckled. “Three days ago I’d have run away in terror at such a sight.” He chuckled again and gave Talia an extra cuddle.

She cocked her head at him and smiled, then looked back at the walls rapidly growing together from living trees. She spoke without looking away as their new home took form. “You know, until you said that, I was only wondering what it would look like when it’s finished. Now I look at it and imagine it through your eyes, the eyes of one who has lived without magic, and I see that it *is* wondrous. That the process of making it is as beautiful as the finished product could ever be.

“I have lived surrounded by magic my whole life, even moreso than most elves because both of my parents are great wizards. And now a part of me wishes that I had not. I feel that my sense of wonder is jaded, and I envy you the discoveries you have ahead of you, as Jmia said. I tell you my husband, I have many wonders to show you! I will regain my sense of wonder, as you share yours with me!”

“Come now, my sweet and pretty little wife!” Mark laughed. “Even *your* jaded sense of wonder must have been well stimulated by what we’ve seen and done today! As I remember it, you were no more unimpressed than I was when the white and pink fellow appeared, or his red friend either!”

“Yes, you’re right.” she giggled. “I’ve been as boggled as you tonight, from beginning to end. Tonight could not have been a typical night for anyone. I’d wager that even my father, with his millennia of experience, felt amazement a few times today!”

They laughed together as the walls reached full height and crenellations formed, and Mark knew without a doubt that he had correctly identified the design when the top of the keep rose above the walls.

“As I thought.” Mark nodded happily. “Even with the leaves and twigs sticking out everywhere, the pattern of a northern castle is apparent. I really like it. The design is just graceful enough to be pretty, but it still has a bit of a military, businesslike appearance. It looks strong, defensible, keeping it’s occupants safe within. They say a man’s home is his castle, and this castle is obviously the home of a man.”

“You’re right, it has both masculine and feminine aspects.” Talia murmured. “Pretty, yet strong. A human design, yet completely elven in it’s style of construction. I didn’t think anything could be more beautiful than our palace in Thon or The Queen of Waves, but I think this will be, for it will have the glowing beauty of a living being.”

“Of many living beings, you mean!” Mark laughed. “There must have been over two thousand trees, when they were still separate enough to count them!”

“Oh no!” she giggled. “That’s not Theramin’s style at all, and the horticulture of it is his. Besides, I feel the continuity of it. It is one tree with many trunks growing from the same roots. I would guess that they started with a seed, and the first thing they grew from it was a great root that grew horizontally, under the lines that marked the walls until it’s ends had joined, then it branched out in all directions for stability, and the trunks grew straight up from the main root. That sounds like Theramin’s style.

“My father would have contributed the fine detail of the architecture and design, my mother the colors of the wood, the bark, the leaves, and the flowers, for I can guarantee that every part of our home will bloom at least once every year. She would also have chosen the species, therefore determining the shape of the leaves, and the shape of the flowers. Alilia would have supplied much of the raw power to grow it in a few minutes, rather than over decades, and I think the original concept was hers. That is, to grow a home of human design from a tree. A very People of Life kind of idea.”

“We are very fortunate in our family and friends.” Mark grinned. “It’s almost finished. About twelve meters to the top of the walls, I think. Look! It’s blooming!”

The living castle was finished, and it’s deep brown bark and dark green leaves were gradually obscured by flowers of every color of the rainbow, each five centimeters wide with five petals.

“Now that is indeed wondrous!” he chuckled.

“And so very pretty!” laughed Talia.

A pathway was quickly marked out on the grass by two parallel bands of white flowers. They grew from the slate path that wound through the neighborhood to the middle of the south wall of the keep, where two huge flowered gates swung apart in an arched opening. The hauntingly beautiful four-part harmony of the song of the crafting spell gradually faded, and a few moments later the four constructors stepped forth smiling, and Mark and Talia went forward to meet them with the rest of their party.

“Goodnight everyone!” Dilimon called to the crowd. “I’ll send a Reading while we tour the interior, and we’ll see you all another time.”

“Well, what do you think? It is The Living Palace!” Yazadril asked with a grin as he turned and surveyed their creation.

“It’s only fair that you gave this now.” Mark chuckled. “For I think even Mileemi of Thon would agree that the finest gift was given last! Surely, it will be a legendary home!”

“It’s absolutely beautiful!” Talia agreed.

“Come inside! You must see the inside too!” Alilia giggled, as excited as a schoolgirl as she gestured them through the gates and cast a bright light that lit up the courtyard beyond.

The wood of the wall was four meters thick, as they saw when they passed through the arched opening that led under it. The inside of the arch was smooth heartwood of a rich, reddish brown hue, for no bark grew there. As they emerged in the courtyard they saw that the same was true of the inside of the wall. Fancifully railed stairways grown into the smooth red wood at intervals led to the wide walkway atop the wall, and to the spacious decks atop the turreted corners. The courtyard was wonderfully landscaped and gardenized, symmetrical to the left and right of the

main path, with smaller paths, benches, flower beds, hedges, and ponds, though different species had been used on either side.

“We let twigs and branches grow up to a meter long on the outside of the outer wall, to help it blend into the neighborhood a bit.” Theramin revealed. “But we thought that the outside of the house should have a more finished look.”

The bark on the outside of the house grew almost perfectly flat, and the stems of closely spaced rows of identical leaves grew directly from the bark at matching angles. From any distance, it gave the illusion of perfectly flat, dark green walls that rippled deep brown in the breeze. The many doors, windows, and balconies, the tops of the walls, and the round towers at each of the keep’s four corners were all outlined in cream-colored flowers.

“It’s just outstanding!” Mark enthused. “Tell me, how did you manage glass in the windows?”

“It’s not glass, but plant matter! It’s only transparent because it’s no thicker than heavy paper. On the one hand, it’s no stronger than heavy paper either, but on the other, it will grow back together if it’s torn or punctured, sealing itself in about an hour, and regaining even transparency in a few days.”

“Miraculous! Thank you so much, all four of you!”

“Yes, thank you!” Talia said as her eyes leaked happy tears.

Mark sensed that she wished to be set down. When he had done so, she joined the four gifters in a big hug.

“Come on, don’t you want a hug?” she asked Mark with a giggle as she waved him down.

He went to one knee and crouched as low as he could to hug them. He found it awkward, so he gave a laugh and picked up all five of them, effortlessly but carefully.

“Ooh, he’s a strong one, isn’t he?” Alilia laughed.

“He is!” Nemia agreed.

“Obviously, but I have my dignity as a great leader to think of!” Yazadril laughingly protested. “So I will thank you to set me down, you great impetuous youth!”

“And I as well!” Theramin laughed.

“Well I will gladly take Theramin’s place!” Yzell giggled.

“And I will take Yazadril’s!” Yalla interjected with a grin.

Soon Mark stood with five giggling females in his arms.

“Doesn’t he make you feel like a young girl again?” Talia dreamily asked.

“He certainly makes you *act* like a gaggle of young girls again!” Theramin teased. “Come. Let’s look at the inside of the castle!”

The inside of the building, like the inside of the surrounding wall, was smooth, reddish brown wood. Another way it differed from the human buildings that had inspired it, was that none of the inside surfaces quite met at corners, instead two walls met in a curved radius, as did the base of walls where they joined the floor, and the interior walls themselves were all almost unnoticeably curved. Some of them bore fantastic murals composed of millions of tiny flowers that grew directly from the wood of the wall. The exceptions were the occasional rectangular or oval areas of wall that were perfectly flat, and were obviously provided for the hanging of pictures or tapestries.

The front doors of the castle led into the entrance hall, which had doorways to the rest of the ground floor, graceful curved stairways on either side that led to balconies on the floors above, and in each rear corner was a railed lifting platform. A huge round skylight was centered in the ceiling, four stories above.

After a minute or so spent appreciating the entrance hall, they passed through doors in the center of the rear wall that led into a grand ballroom.

“In a normal northern castle, this would be the throne room.” Mark observed, almost reverently. “And it would have two rows of columns instead of this great open space. I imagine there’s an anteroom behind this, with doors leading to yards in the rear of the house.”

“You are correct.” Yazadril nodded. “The back yard has a great flat lawn, large enough to practice archery or to exercise horses upon it, with a workshop and a small smithy to one side and a stable to the other.”

“You can see that later!” Talia giggled to Mark. “Let’s see the kitchens! Then the bedrooms!”

“I think there is a thing to do before that.” Yazadril smiled. “Let’s move back to the doorway.”

As they did so, he cast a Speaking. “Is everything ready, Mileemi?” he asked, then waited for the answer, and nodded. They were in the doorway now. “Go ahead, Alilia.”

Alilia gestured, and their wedding presents appeared, along with Mileemi of Thon. The gifts filled the huge room and were stacked three meters deep in places.

Mileemi approached with a smile, and handed a very large book bound in red leather up to Talia.

“What is it?” Talia asked as she reached down to take it.

“It’s your wedding album. The ruby on the front cover contains the Reading of the event taken by Kenesir of Sming, the famed recordist, and some excerpts from others’ Readings as well. Inside are selected still images of the event, listings of the principals and of the attendees, and an inventory of your gifts. Except for the ruby, which was given by Kenesir, the album is my gift to you.”

“It’s beautiful! Thank you!” Talia said as she opened it to the title page, which was lettered with flowing script.

“Yes, thank you very much!” Mark agreed as he and the other four elves he carried read over Talia’s shoulder. “That makes two wonderful gifts you’ve given, along with your work on the wonderful gift presentation!”

“Ha! It’s not as if I did that by myself!” Mileemi protested. “Hundreds contributed effort to that presentation! In fact, there is a separate listing for them, as well as a listing of those who helped with the decorations and the feasts, and one for those who volunteered with each of the pavilions outside the chapel!”

“Wow! That’s thorough!” Mark told her. “What’s this list here? ‘Those who were Marked?’”

“What’s that?” she asked, and Mark crouched down for a moment so Talia could show it to her. “Oh I’m sorry! To save time, I used a compiling spell to list those who took part in each activity! I didn’t realize that such a list would be included! Those are the ones who were Marked by Yazadril after they cast Compulsions on you!”

“Now we could change it to; ‘Those who are Mark’s!’” Talia laughed.

“Don’t remind me!” Mark laughed. “I only hope they won’t all hang around, hoping for a chance to be helpful!”

“And speaking of helpful, I wonder where our new pets are?”

“I don’t know, but if you check the inventory, it will tell you.” Mileemi said. “Your gifts are all listed in the order they were presented, along with their present locations.”

“And if they are moved?” Mark asked as Talia found the place.

“Then the listing updates their location.” Mileemi nodded.

“Stripe is listed as ‘prowling the walkway atop the encircling wall of The Living Palace!’” Talia revealed. “And Scout as ‘perched on the top edge of the northwest tower of The Living Palace!’”

“It appears they are already on guard!” Mark laughed, then stifled a yawn.

Talia noticed, and gave him a smile. “I already know which ensembles I want in the master suite here, and it’s getting very late. Let’s get those in place, then we’ll sit and chat with you all for a while before we retire, and we’ll leave the rest of the house to explore and furnish tomorrow.”

“A wonderful idea, beloved.” Mark smiled.

“And that concludes our tour for tonight. Goodnight everyone.” Dilimon said, and ended the broadcast of his Reading.

“Let me see... These for the bedroom.” Talia said as she scanned the lists, flipping pages. “These, and... these for the living room. And these for the privacy.”

“If you’ll point them out to me, I’ll be glad to bring them up to the suite once we’re there.” Alilia offered.

“Thank you Alilia.” Talia smiled. “Have I told you lately how handy you are to have around?”

“Thank you.” Alilia shrugged. “I’m not really so generous as I seem, however. I have to release a lot of the power everyday, one way or another, or it builds up in me until I develop a fever after about a week. So it’s either use it doing something useful, or spend ten minutes a day repeatedly lifting a sixty-ton weight by Movement. I haven’t found a faster way to release it without disturbing someone. That’s why your father asks me to help out so often when I’m here, instead of having Nemia assist him with such things, as he normally does.”

“Oh.” Talia said in surprise, then returned to what she was doing. “All right, everything I want for the bedroom should be blinking red, everything for the living room blinking yellow, and for the privacy blinking green. If the suite has more rooms than that, they can wait till tomorrow as well.

“Set us down please, love? And you may as well look around at gifts for a few minutes while we pick out the things for the suite. We’ll call you when we’re ready to go upstairs.”

“I know what I’d like to look at first!” Mark chuckled as he set the girls down. “That great black sword, from the Magic Items of Special Significance!”

“I admit to an interest in that myself!” Yazadril chuckled. “And I won’t need the inventory to show me where those nine items are! I can feel them from here!”

He led the way down aisles between the gifts and unerringly found the nine items handsomely displayed on black velvet on the middle two shelves of the largest glass-fronted cabinet among the gifts. He opened it and took a small brass descriptive plaque from the velvet beside the black greatsword.

“Great missing gods!” he exclaimed. “I can imagine it took the contributions of at least a few thousand to buy you this!”

“What is it?” Mark asked as he reached within the cabinet and took out the ebon weapon. It’s steel was the blackest any there had ever seen, it’s design beautiful in it’s simplicity, with a wide T guard and an eight centimeter steel ball on the pommel. The entire thing appeared to have been cast as a single piece, rather than forged, the grip was as rough as used sandpaper, and there were no wrappings or decorations to interrupt the blackness of it.

“Screaming source above, be *careful* with that!” Yazadril exclaimed as he quickly stepped back twice. “In fact, don’t move it at all, at least until I’ve finished reading the plaque!”

He did so, and whistled in amazement. “You’re holding it steady, right? Good.

“Now, it’s in Grand High Draconian, and that tells you that its last owner was a dragon. It says;

“Know that this is GrimFang, Sword of Verzaclon, Lord of Felion. Know that this is GrimFang, Wand of Dark Intent. Know that this is GrimFang, Blade of Irresistible Destruction. With this sword did Verzaclon, Lord of Giants, stride mighty upon the world in the Thirteenth Age. With it he slew over four thousand of the dwarven folk at The Battle of Zolox Range. With it he slew sixty-one dragons in The Taking of Bolum Pass. With it he destroyed the mighty walls of the city of Dewyn. With this sword did Verzaclon conquer a continent, and he did Lord over it for twenty-three thousand years.

“Being of Bright intent or of Dark, with this blade may its bearer destroy at will.

“Bright source, some dragon must have gambled away their trove to part with such a thing! From the way the plaque is worded, the sword has not been wielded in combat since Verzaclon! And in Draconian, the Thirteenth Age was half a million years ago, long before the first elves ever walked the world!”

“Wow! The sword of a king of giants!” Mark breathed. “That’s why the grip is a bit thicker than I’d like! I’m glad I have big hands, even for my size. How big are giants?”

“Three to four meters tall.” Dilimon told him. “Among them, such a sword would not be considered a two handed weapon. Most of them would wield it with one hand fairly comfortably, I think. Were that not the case, I’m sure the grip *would* be too thick for you.”

“Wow! And I’m just barely big enough to comfortably use it two-handed! Call it what, almost two and a half meters of blade, another forty-six centimeters to the pommel? Yet it’s so light! Really, now that I move it around a bit, I realize it doesn’t weigh a quarter what it should!” He held it out at arm’s length with one hand and whistled the tip back and forth through the air with a quick twist of his wrist. “Not even an eighth what it should, now I think about it! It’ll take a while to get used to! Almost too light to swing properly, yet almost too long as well!”

“Get used to it?!” Yazadril exclaimed, backing until he was far out of the sword’s range. “You don’t mean to *practice* with it, do you? I’m telling you, the thing is incredibly dangerous!”

“No doubt it is.” Mark chuckled. “But I might have to use it some day, and if I do, I want my hands to be accustomed to it. And I *am* a trained professional, Yazadril. I haven’t hit anything with a sword unintentionally since I was six. Besides, in my eyes, it’s glows no brighter than your own sword.”

“My sword is a weapon of terrible power, and it is a force of justice that cannot be wielded with criminal intent!” Yazadril retorted.

“Whereas this one follows my own intent, regardless of the rightness of it. Or have I misunderstood your words? In fact... “

With that, Mark took the tine band from his arm, slipped in onto his head, and plucked it.

“It’s as I thought!” he marveled. “As Talia said about curses, this thing has a bit of a mind, or it has emotions at least, and it follows the intent of the wielder. It’s like it’s a puppy or a little kid that’s completely eager to please. In fact, I wonder if one of you could fetch me a soft cloth, and a steel bar?”

“I’m curious enough to comply with that!” Theramin said with a wave, and produced a white silk handkerchief and a steel dowel. “These are things I had handy at home. The steel is a knife blank, meant for further forging, but still a very strong alloy.”

“They’ll do fine.” Mark nodded as he took the steel in his free hand, and held it over the blade of the sword with his fingertips. “Now, I *want* the sword to cut the steel.” he said, and dropped the small bar three centimeters onto the blade. It was parted into two pieces by the keen edge without even slowing down. Mark handily caught them below the sword and handed them back.

“As I told you, very dangerous.” Yazadril pronounced.

Mark took the kerchief by two opposite corners in a loop around the blade. “I don’t want the sword to cut the kerchief.” he said. He let the weight of the blade rest in the cloth with an edge down, then sawed it back and forth, while applying increasing force on the silk, which none-the-less maintained its integrity. “So it doesn’t cut it. Then, when I want it to cut the kerchief but not the floor...” Suddenly the blade sliced through the cloth without resistance, and the tip knocked against the wood floor at the bottom of the stroke without leaving a mark.

“You see?!” Mark laughed as he lovingly stroked the pommel. “Of all the swords in the world, this may be the very safest one to practice with! It’s an excellent sword, and a wonderful gift! And now that it’s been shown and used and appreciated, it’s well contented!”

He replaced the sword in the cabinet and removed the tine band. “I can’t help but think it was meant for me, and that this other little sword was meant for Talia. I can’t read it’s plaque either; it’s in a different language than I’ve never seen.”

“It’s in an outmoded form of Elvish, made even harder to discern by an exceedingly ornate style of script, and it doesn’t say much.” Yazadril mused as he peered at the tiny silver plate. “Let me see. ‘First Sword of Visinniria, Elven Mage, first and last woman of our race to become a goddess.’”

“Most peculiar. I don’t recall that The Goddess Visinniria ever used a sword, but then, I’m not very familiar with her story. If this was indeed hers, and I understand the meaning correctly, she used this in her early life as a mage, long before she achieved divinity.”

“You mean there really are gods? And that they used to be elves?” Mark asked, incredulous.

“There are, or at least there were.” Yazadril confirmed. “Two of them were born as elves, a male and a female, but there were gods who were of every race. There were at least five who were giants, seven were gnomes, twelve were dwarves, fifteen were humans, twenty-one were unicorns, and sixty-three were dragons. Nine were of the humanoids of Serminak. As well, one god was of a race from the bottom of the sea with a form somewhat like a spiny lobster, and he was the sole remainder of a people that hasn’t existed on this world for four hundred million years. Those are the ones we know of with certainty, but there were others we know little of, and we know that there were some that we know nothing about at all, except that some of those were from the races in Xervia who choose not to reveal their existence to the rest of the world.”

“And you say ‘were’ like they were gone or something.” Mark noted. “Is that why some say ‘the missing gods?’”

“It is, for only some thirty thousand years ago, at the same moment, they all withdrew from the world. That is the only consistent description of the event in the records of the temples, most of which are now abandoned. To our almost certain knowledge, none have manifested on Kellaran in any way since then.”

“Huh. It seems strange, that only two gods were elves, and fifteen were human.”

“Roughly, the numbers of the gods of each race reflect how long their race has existed on this world. Elves are the newest race, and we are an offshoot of humanity, as are the dwarves, the giants, all the other races with this general body type. We are all called ‘humanoids’ by the dragons and other more distantly related races, meaning ‘those who are shaped like humans’, because humans were the first of us, and we and the dwarves and so on are descended from them.”

“We’re distantly related to dragons?”

“If you go back far enough, every form of life on Kellaran came from common ancestors. We are literally related to every living thing, even the grass and the trees, and generally, the more similar two life forms are, the more closely they are related.”

He paused, then gingerly poked the handle of the light silver sword with his fingertip. “Yes, definitely the sword of a mage. It has... fifty-two magecraft spells embedded in its crystalline structure. Formidable ones, but Visinniria would have had little use for it near the end of her career, and none once she became divine.”

“Fifty-two! Which ones?” Theramin asked.

“Military, a good selection of them. Talia has little knowledge of the specialty, and of course she is a wizard rather than a mage, but with this in her hand, she would be a more than fair battle-mage.” Yazadril revealed. “It has one that is particularly nice, a short-range Translocate that will move a legion of a thousand along with their equipment, as long as the departure point and the destination are both within sight of the caster. Stationed in the air high above a battle, she could arrange some surprising troop movements. And like mine, this sword cannot be wielded with evil intent, or I should say, not with evil intent as Visinniria defined it in her youth.

“Unlike yours, Mark, which could be taken from you and used against you.”

“No.” Mark said as he shook his head. “The black could be stolen from this case, but once in my hand it could never be taken from me against my will. I’m pretty certain of it, anyway.”

“I see.” Yazadril nodded. “Well I’ll confess to having had a few experiences that left me a bit nervous about weapons of such power that can be wielded by our enemies. If it can be stolen but not taken, I suggest you get a scabbard for it and keep it close.”

“Hmm. If I were displaying such a sword in such a cabinet, and there were a scabbard for it, I’d put it in the bottom drawer, here.” Mark speculated as he opened the drawer. “And here it is, along with one for the sword of Visinniria, and individual cases and containers for the other significant items.”

He removed a great black sheath with two belts and strapped it diagonally across his back, then took the black blade out of the case and sheathed it with an expert motion, leaving the hilt in easy reach over his right shoulder. The scabbard was hinged along its length and held closed by clever springs around the hinges, like Yazadril's, and the sword was sheathed by fitting the edge of the blade near the crossguard into a notch between the two halves of the sheath at the top, then sliding the blade sideways until it nested home between the two halves and was held firmly by the spring pressure. It was the only truly practical scabbard design for a sword with a blade-length longer than its wielder's arm span.

"You know, Stripe and Scout are a formidable pair of guards, and we stand behind the Wards of The Nine Valleys, and so I should feel your trove to be secure." Yazadril mused as he looked around. "But for some reason, I don't. I think before I go tonight I'll add a few security measures to this property."

"Mark!" Talia called from across the room. "We're ready to go upstairs!"

"Coming Talia!" Mark called as they headed for the sound of her voice at the front of the hall. "Damn but it's good to wear a sword again!" he chuckled to himself

"Sorry we took so long! We spent some time looking at the big jewels!" Talia laughed as she rose up to hug him.

"That's all right. We spent the time well, investigating the swords we got in the magic items. Yazadril thinks I should keep this one close."

"You won't be wearing it in bed, I hope!" she teased.

"Of course not! I'll tuck it under my pillow!" he laughed.

"Oh! Well that's all right then!" she giggled as Theramin led them out to the entrance hall, where they split into two groups to board the lifting platforms. They disembarked on the second floor and went to the west side of the palace, where the master suite took up that side of the story.

Alilia led the way into the master suite, walked to the center of the living room, and slowly looked all around while the rest filed in. "It's all exactly as you pictured it, Yazadril." she smiled. "Your mind for detail. Beautiful. Casting this with the three of you was a wonderful and treasured experience.

Talia had quickly walked through the rooms, looking around, then returned. "All right, if the rest of you will please remain over there by the door for a moment, I think we're ready, Alilia."

"Give me a clear picture of it then." Alilia nodded as she closed her eyes.

Mark closed his eyes and waited, and had no trouble seeing the flash of Alilia's spell through his eyelids.

"Ha! Blocked it that time!" he chuckled to himself. "I'm starting to get used to this!"

He opened his eyes to see the room completely furnished and decorated.

"Already, Yazadril, your daughter exceeds me in the intellectual ability to hold great scads of detail in mind." Alilia remarked. "I could never envision the exact placement of so many pieces."

"I disagree, dear friend." Yazadril smiled. "Your intuitive grasp of the things you know well is such that I would wager you could reproduce your own home exactly, complete to the last speck of dust."

"Yes, and my pearl pen would still be misplaced somewhere within it, along with a tenth of my items!" Alilia laughed. "Such subconscious knowledge is an altogether different thing."

"You two have been friends a long time, I think." Mark chuckled as he looked around the room's beautiful appointments with Talia.

"For all but the first seventy-three years of my life." Alilia nodded. "Over four thousand eight hundred years, have I been honored to be Yazadril's friend and protégé. I think he has saved my sanity at least once every decade over that time."

"How so?" Mark asked.

"My wife is a reluctant ruler, my friend." Gorsh replied for her, as he went to her side. "That is, if I may call you that?"

"You certainly may, Gorsh." Mark nodded.

"Thank you." Gorsh continued speaking to Mark as he and Alilia hugged. "Though Yazadril and I have never had much to say, I have always valued the friendship and guidance he gives Alilia, for he has saved our marriage as often as he's saved her sanity.

"Alilia's power has made her the center of attention since before she was even born, and though she has learned to accept that most of the time, she never liked it. So after we were married at twenty-six, in a wedding almost as stupendous and well attended as your own, she and I traveled the world in disguise, enjoying a life and a love that would have been legendary were they widely known, and improving our craft as wizards. Twenty-six is a *very* young age for two elves to marry, and we basically ran away after that. We then had twenty-five years of happiness.

“Then word of the continuously increasing magnitude of her power trickled back to The People of Life, and they began to clamor for her to be Princess. Unfortunately, not because she was particularly well suited to the role, or even because any thought that she was. The aggressive among them wanted her as leader so that her power would serve our people against those who would contend with us, and the cautious wanted a dangerously powerful youth close at hand, where they could keep an eye on her.

“At first she refused them, and I heartily agreed with her choice. But a nation of elves will not follow a leader if they cannot have the leader of their choice, and over a few years our nation began to fragment. Under this crushing weight of unwanted responsibility, she agreed to become Princess of The People of Life. Again I gave her choice my blessing, for I had no wish to see my people splinter and scatter either.

“Well, I can assure you that the influential who hoped for a pliant leader to be no more than a power battery for their own pet projects were soon to reconsider, when faced with the somewhat indomitable nature of my beloved’s will. And often during the early months of her reign, she was less than perfectly diplomatic.”

“Now you are truly being noble, my love.” Alilia chuckled. “For I was obstinate, stubborn, headstrong, altogether too young and proud, and possessed of a towering resentment. I hoped that they would reject me, but my people were as stubborn as I, and would not let me go.”

“At any rate, Yazadril soon learned of the situation.” Gorsh continued. “He took Alilia under his wing, so to speak, and became her mentor in the art of leading an elven nation. Their alliance, and hence the more formal alliance they have crafted between our peoples, is one of the strongest political bonds in this world.

“And I cannot help that I despise the fact that he has helped make her one of the most capable leaders who have ever lived, for it only makes more remote the day when she can finally retire, and we will have to be concerned with nothing but our love.

“Things would be so much easier if I had another interest to occupy me while she spent her hours as Princess, but truly, I live only to love Alilia, as she lived only to love me before our people called her. Even wizardry truly only interests me when I am studying it with her. And it doesn’t help that my presence puts her in a mood that is far too tender and gentle for the hard choices of her unwanted leadership. I take away her edge, simply by being there, loving her as I do.

“And so, though we are destined lovers, and our flame still burns brighter than any other, we are forced to spend much of our time apart, lest resentment poison our love.

“And when she is so stressed from the million problems of her role that she is losing her mind, she calls to Yazadril. He helps her with her problems, and makes her take vacations, and he sends her back to me, just when my heart is breaking for the need of her.”

“Oh Gorsh, my perfect love. As always, I am so sorry.” Alilia sighed.

“As always, my Alilia, so am I.”

“That is so sad.” Talia said, and hugged Mark’s leg.

At that, both Alilia and Gorsh chuckled.

“Ah, young Talia, do not cry for us!” Alilia said. “We have had a very long life together, and though our separations make us sad, our reunions are times of perfect joy. Only on rare occasions like this, that are both formal and personal, do we still feel the old pain. For we must be together, and I still must spend most of my attention on my duties. But our lover’s vacations have added up to more time than most elves ever have together, and we still hope for the day when my people will have mercy on me, and find another to lead them.”

“My parents had a perfect love.” Mark quietly revealed. “They had only eighteen years together, before death took them.”

“How petty my concerns seem, beside such tragedy.” Gorsh said after a moment. “It makes me count my blessings anew, for after almost five thousand years, I still hold my love.”

Mark yawned, then tried to stifle it. Talia smiled and took his hand, and towed him toward the bedroom. “We’ll be back in a moment.” she told the others.

“My husband.” she smiled up at him once the bedroom door was closed, holding both his hands. “It does not yet seem time for us to retire, and when we do, I hope to make love for hours. Yet you are almost asleep on your feet. If you would wear the tine band and give it a pluck, I will banish your weariness. Will you do this for me?”

“Certainly.” he nodded, and smiled as he placed the band on his head. “Ready?” he asked.

She nodded, he plucked the tines, and she cast with a whistled trill. “There. Is that better?”

“Much!” he laughed as he swept her up in his arms and kissed her. “I’m very glad I married a wizard!”

“And so am I!” she laughed as he opened the door and carried her forth.

“What? You’re glad that I married a wizard?” he teased.

“That too! I am *also* glad that *I* married a wizard!” she giggled.

“Don’t be silly! I’m no wizard!” he protested as he sat in a huge armchair before the fire, and she settled on one arm of it, leaning against his shoulder.

“You are indeed, or something very like it!” Talia insisted. “If you’d have seen yourself glowing when you sang tonight, as we did, you would agree without doubt!”

“Now that’s a strange thing.” he nodded. “You say that I didn’t use the power field when I did so?”

“You did not.” Yazadril affirmed.

“Hmm.” Mark pondered for a moment. “You know, our white and pink friend said that his people utilize the power of the source directly, rather than the power radiated by the rocks like those of these valleys. I wonder if I’m like that. It would at least partly explain things, wouldn’t it?”

“*What?!!! Say that again?!!!*” Alilia barked.

Mark looked at her in surprise, then noticed that Yazadril and the other wizards present except Talia were staring at him open-mouthed. “He said that unicorns used the direct light of the source to power their spells, or rather he said that the psionics that he and Stripe used worked that way. And that I vibrated at strange frequencies, and that since I could hear him communicating with me mentally, that I should be able to ride his Translocation spell. And that proved to be so. He asked to introduce me to his mate, who is a sorcerer, so she could try Translocating me as well. Talia and I are going to visit with them, along with our very large new bodyguard and his new mate. We plan to visit because of our similarity as people, warriors mated to wizards, and I don’t doubt that all three of our ladies will be sharing arcane lore and feminine conversation, as us three fellows are trading combat strategies, and they will between them have some apt observations about my status as a wizard or whatever it is I am.”

“That can’t have been accidental, can it?!” Alilia demanded of Yazadril. “That after refusing to reveal the method of their power for half a million years, a young unicorn simply gave it away to a human in casual conversation?!”

“No, it could not have been accidental. Mark, did your mount ask you to keep this confidential?” Yazadril asked.

“Um, not exactly. I asked him if Talia and I could think privately with him, so that I could... Damn, this is getting complex, Yazadril! There are things you’ve asked me to keep secret that not everyone here knows, and I can’t tell you exactly what I said with Silaran without revealing why I asked him to speak privately. At any rate I *did* ask him if we could speak privately, and he told me of his people using the source directly for their psionics during that conversation, but I got no impression from him that he wished any of what he told me kept confidential. But I could be wrong about that. I certainly hope not, for if I am, then I’ve betrayed his trust.”

“Well. I see.” Yazadril nodded, and looked about the room. “Well, look who are here; Yourself, Talia, myself, Nemia, Theramin, Yzell, Dilimon, Yalla, Hilsith, Alilia and Gorsh. A trustworthy group, and all reliable at keeping confidences.

“If your mount meant for you to keep his words confidential, then to protect your honor, we must never speak of it again, not even to each other. But I sincerely hope that that’s not the case, for this information is of enormous theoretical value! We have always suspected that the unicorns and other Xervian peoples...

“Well, never mind that now. We need to know, one way or the other! You must call your white friend, Mark, and learn whether you have inadvertently broken his confidence, and you must do so before we leave this room!”

“I’ll call him now.” Mark nodded. “Silaran?”

That huge unicorn appeared near the door, the only place in the room with enough open space for him. “*Hello, Mark. Before anything else, I must ask to bring two more visitors of my people to your home, and that you clear enough room for them.*”

“Certainly, Silaran.” Mark said as he rose. “Just give us a moment to move some of these chairs and tables aside.”

Most of the chairs and side tables had been arranged in a large semicircle before the fireplace, with couches and desks and cabinets along the walls, and a small, round breakfast table with chairs for four humans had been placed before the large windowed double doors to the balcony. Now Mark and the elves hurriedly moved everything close to the walls.

“*Thank you.*” Silaran nodded as he moved to the center of the room. Two more unicorns appeared. At first glance they appeared identical, with the size and the long and light proportions of fine sprinting horses. Their spiraled horns, eyes, eyelashes, and hooves were bright silver, as were their very long and silky manes and tails. The rest of their coats were glossy midnight black. A moment later Mark realized that a few hairs around the muzzle of one were gray, not black or silver, and that the horn that one sported was much longer and thicker than the other’s.

“*Would you introduce your companions, please?*” Silaran asked.

Talia found her tongue before Mark, and formally introduced the other elves present, who all bowed respectfully as their identities were revealed.

“Thank you.” Silaran nodded again. *“I am very proud to present my love Equemev, Fifteenth Ranked Sorcerer of The People of Morning; those you would call unicorns.”*

The black and silver unicorn with the shorter horn bowed to one front knee. *“Pleased to know you all.”* She said in a light and feminine ‘voice’ that was so loud it was almost painful. She chuckled when she saw them flinch a bit. *“Sorry about that. I’ll keep it down for you.”* she added in a quieter tone.

“I now very proudly present Equemev’s mother Tithian, First Sorcerer and First Magician of The People of Morning, famed Seer and Oracle, and Chief Justicer of The Grand Council of Xervia.” Silaran announced.

As Mark and the elves bowed low, Tithian merely nodded.

“Tithian contacted me a few moments ago and told me that you would soon call, and instructed me to do exactly as I have done.” Silaran told Mark. *“Now I am to ask you why you called me here, and I am assured that soon after that, I will understand exactly what is happening, which I presently do not!”*

“Oh!” Mark nodded, then hurriedly explained.

Silaran looked to Tithian, who nodded again.

“I think that I have been maneuvered, no doubt for a very valid and just reason.” Silaran chuckled to Mark.

“When I was approached by the elves who hired me as your mount, I asked Tithian whether I could take the position, and whether there were any restrictions on my conduct in that role. She assured me that there were none, and that I could speak freely with you. As I have had no contact with humanoids before, I was unaware of your ignorance of our methods.”

“Tithian? Would you care to enlighten us further?”

Tithian didn’t answer right away, and instead spent a minute considering each of them individually. *“Know that I am about to reveal Dangerous Truths.”* She finally told them, her communication seeming a rich contralto. *“A major turning point in history is fast approaching, and though there are many possible results, it is certain that Kellaran will be a very different place when that nexus has passed. All of us here have important parts to play in the years ahead, but two of you will be Key, and will make the difference between our world being devastated or enriched.”*

“There was some small chance that you would learn what you needed to know from clues you gained from Silaran earlier tonight, but your conversation with him took other paths, necessitating my intervention. And now that the moment is here, I see that this is a far better path, so we have been lucky.”

She paused, and turned to Yazadril. *“You are first in ability and intellect among the wizards of all the humanoid peoples. And you, Alilia, are first in power among them. As I am First Sorcerer and First Magician of my people, there is much in the way of knowledge and technique to be learned from one another, and it is fair that we finally meet. We will speak in the days ahead, for we have much to do together, I now think.”*

“But before that, you will have enough to deal with in what I now reveal.”

“You are a new race still, and though you have learned much of the rules of reality, some of your experimental results have been deliberately skewed by others, to hide the secret of our power. You are too closely associated with the humans, many of whom are not trustworthy, and what you learn, they eventually learn from you.”

“You have been led to believe that we used a power source that radiated from the center of the world. There is none such thing. What you have detected there does nothing more than counteract some of the pull of weight on our world, reducing that pull to one third of what it would be otherwise. Since this has been hidden from you, you have been unable to formulate workable theories of weight, or of orbital movements. Now you know why you could not make the mathematics of such things balance.”

“You have been led to believe that none could draw power from the light of the source itself, but that is what we do. That is also the nature of many of the peoples of Xervia. Dragons draw from both the light of the source and the heat of the stone that your wizards use.”

“Do you have any questions before I go on?”

“Yes. Are we correct in assuming that the wizards of the dwarves, Sylvan, giants, and gnomes use the heat of the stone, as you put it, in similar ways to our own?” Yazadril quickly asked.

“Yes. And Alilia, before you burst an artery, let me assure you that neither the Sylvan nor any others can eavesdrop on us right now. If you check your senses, you will find that The Grand Council of Xervia have placed this room in near-total reverse-stasis, and almost no time is passing outside it in relation to here.”

“As to your indignation at our having interfered in your people’s destiny, I suggest you ask Yazadril here what he did in Serminak about five thousand years ago.”

“Nice work there, Yazadril. The bravest and best thing ever done by one of your race. It has kept them off our backs for five millennia.” Tithian chuckled.

“Well?” Alilia demanded of Yazadril.

“After the last war with the Sylvan, I disguised myself as one of them, and spent about fourteen years on Serminak, living among them.” Yazadril told her as he stroked his chin, only half his attention on what he was saying, the other half following the implications of what Tithian had revealed about the use of the source. “I managed to spread an idea throughout their culture; the idea that everyone not of Sylvan or Serminak was so far beneath them, that to even breath the same air as outsiders was to associate with diseased vermin. Far better than having them think of us as prey. And as Tithian pointed out, that is part of the reason why they have left us alone since. The greater reason being that they were soundly defeated in their last three wars, once by humans, once by dwarves, and once by an alliance composed of humans, elves, and Xervian dragons, and that time the Sylvan were allied with some of the dragons of Serminak.”

“All right, now I *have* to ask!” Mark burst out. “What the heck are Sylvan, and what’s Serminak?”

“Let me make this fast for you.” Alilia said brusquely as she held out her hand, and his globe of Kellaran appeared on it. “We are here, The Nine Valleys.” she pointed out, and turned it around. “Here, north of Xervia, the continent of Serminak, land of Sylvan and Dark Dragons.”

She handed him the globe, then gestured, and a life-sized Illusion of two naked figures appeared. Their graceful features, oversized pointed ears, and slim builds reminded him of elves, but their size was greater than that of most humans. The female was two hundred and eleven centimeters tall, the male two hundred and twenty-one, and his shoulders and the muscles of his chest and back seemed a bit too big for the rest of him.

“Sylvan.” Alilia stated flatly. “They are a very uniform race; every adult with very few exceptions is within three centimeters of the height of these two, all with the same black hair, pale skin, glowing slitted golden eyes. Sometimes called Dark Elves, though we despise the term, or High Elves, which we despise even more. They and we branched from the trunk of humanity in opposite directions in different eons, and we are less like them, and more distantly related, than we are to your people. It would be closer to the truth to call them dark humans.

“They are powerful and terrible, every damn one of them, for they have no remorse or regret or sorrow in their nature, none at all, and they have no reluctance to violence, not from the moment they are born. They are evil and anarchistic, for they believe that it should be among people as it is among animals, that the mighty can slay the weak, that you have the right to do whatever you have the *power* to do. In each generation their strongest youths slay the rest, and that keeps their population down, else they’d have long since slain all others, for they breed like rats. Unfortunately, all who survive this winnowing are devastating warriors and casters of power, and there are perhaps six hundred millions of them. Their mightiest are probably almost a match for me. They go to war for fun and excitement, and for the taking of slaves and plunder.

“As power users, they are entirely intuitive, and know no theoretical basis for their power, nor would they care.

“There are dragons who share the attitudes of the Sylvan, and they are the only other people on Serminak.”

She dismissed the Illusion and sat back down. “If you say the word Sylvan while not under such special protections, some of them may notice. If you learn any of their individual names, the utterance of it would almost certainly call them down upon you. At least, such was the case before Yazadril’s little experiment in cultural manipulation.”

“Thank you, Alilia.” Tithian chuckled. *“An excellent summation! I might add that some think the Sylvan to be demons, and they are not, though their race was created by a demon as a tool against the gods. And a demon is a creature from a world far away in another kind of reality.”*

“Mark and Talia, you are the Keys. For you two to achieve your potential, and for the forces of justice to remain dominant in this world, it is necessary that you know certain things that have previously been hidden from you. A Reading was Taken from Silaran without his knowledge, of his communications with you and his Translocation of you, and it was studied by the finest minds in Xervia, whose knowledge of the rules of reality is almost complete.”

“Markhan Reginus Longstrider the Fifth, you are a freak of nature, a cosmic fluke that theoretically shouldn’t happen by chance on a world this size more than once in a billion years, though it has happened a handful of times none-the-less. Know that there are many kinds of energy that blaze from our star, heat and light and the source, and many others. You have access to one such; a power of higher frequency than the source. You will be able to do many things with it. You will soon need to achieve many things that are now beyond you.”

“Yazadril, he draws from an energy that is of a frequency two and six-tenths times higher than the source. I trust that with this knowledge, you can begin teaching him the basics of its use.”

Yazadril nodded, his mind racing.

“Good. Once you elves have given him the basics, the rest of us will join in coaching him, for his art will be different from all others, but it should still have some similarities to all the existing Arts of Power.

“That is the gist of everything we know thus far. We yet have no idea what the nature of the coming events will be.”

“Why has Xervia broken its silence?” Talia suddenly asked.

Tithian considered her before answering. “The nexus that approaches will be the most important one since The Segregation, when the races of the world divided and separated from each other, to reside on the continents they now occupy. It is doubted that Xervia will be allowed to remain aloof and unaffected by what comes. It is a globally important turning point. All of those who stand for justice must stand together. All of us. Even those of us who wish to do so without revealing their existence to some of the others.

“The curtain of secrecy about Xervia will be somewhat lowered, but it will not fall. There are races who are willing to spend every one of their lives to ensure that justice and happiness continue to hold sway over this world, but you will never know of them if they can prevent it.

“If we all do everything perfectly, we will usher in a new era of greater co-operation, peace, and prosperity among all races. If we fail absolutely, every person of every race on Kellaran could die. Most likely the result will fall somewhere between those two extremes. If we are left with a situation that is no worse than the one now extant, we will be well satisfied.

“Do you know when the nexus will occur?” Yazadril asked.

“Most likely between one and three years from now. We will know with more precision as it approaches. Xervia is most unusually blessed at this moment in history with three seers; myself, a dragon, and one of the hidden races. We are co-operating and bending all our will to learning what we can. Already we have more warning than was ever known before a nexus. We will share what we learn with you, since all of you will have major roles, being close to Mark and Talia, who are Key. You must decide among you who to share it with beyond that.

“If things begin to happen, let us know, please.”

“Things are already happening, and quickly.” Alilia stated. She produced a small sapphire, then concentrated on it, and held it out to Tithian. “As you share with us, so we share with you. It contains my Reading of what we learned and did today. If you agree to take it, you are committing your peoples to a formal alliance with all elves until the nexus has passed, and a new stability is reached. Everything in it and everything you’ve said here will be considered military secrets for the duration. We will also agree to respect the anonymity of the hidden peoples you represent.”

“I agree, in the name of the Grand Council of Xervia. I will be our diplomat.” Tithian nodded, and the blue jewel vanished with the flash of the oath.

“When possible, we will consult you before we act.” Yazadril stated. “We will prepare and exchange briefs of the resources at our disposal. All of our councils should discuss approaching the folk of Kletiuk and Felion with what we know, as well as whom exactly to speak to there. We will consider approaching the human royalty as well. We should strive to update everything we know of the various political, military, economic and social forces active in the world, and share this information. And of course, we welcome any assistance you could offer in solving our two mysteries; the identity of the caster of the curse upon Alilia and myself, and the source and nature of the forces that slew the residents of Shinoso Valley.”

“Agreed. We all have much to do. If there is nothing else, I will take my leave and report to The Grande Council.”

“Wait!” Mark called. “Why did you have The Lava Shapers give me a volcano in Xervia? And will I be permitted to go there?”

“At the time I sent them my request, I knew only that you must have it. I still do not know why, but in light of what we have learned of your nature I can guess with fair surety. I surmise that the crater is roughly hemispherical and is composed of a material that is reflective of the power that you alone are able to use. There are similar places that reflect the Source, and when one of my people Levitates in the focus of such a huge reflector, we absorb much more of the Source in less time than we could otherwise. I expect you will be able to do the same above the center of your volcano. Remember, like us, but unlike these elves, you absorb power from the sun, and if you use too much of it during the night or while underground you can become depleted. Such large hemispherical reflectors allow a fast recharge, or a strong one. Remember that the focus of the reflector will move as the sun moves across the sky. If you can find a way to locate the focus exactly, the reflector will be of more use to you.

“Yourself, Talia, Yazadril, Nemia, and Alilia, are welcome in Xervia at your volcano, and in the land of The Lava Shapers, the ports of The Sea People, upon the plains of my race; The People of Morning, and at the properties of Kragorram and Povon. Also, upon the condition that you pre-announce your visit by at least ten minutes, you are

allowed to visit the area within five kilometers of The Hall of The Grand Council of Xervia, in the capitol city of our government; Xerv-Upon-Loch-Croshia. The rest of the city, and of Xervia, is still closed to you."

"Thank you. Know that any of your peoples are welcome within The Nine Valleys, so long as our alliance holds." Yazadril nodded.

"And in the forests of The People of Life." Alilia added.

"Thank you. Now I must go, for this meeting has taken longer than we expected. My people will have concern, and I must deliver my report. They know precisely how long I should be gone, though it is but a tiny fraction of a second outside this room."

"The High Council of Elves will share a Speaking at nine hours after noon, by the time of The High People. Please include yourself." Yazadril said, and bowed. "Thank you, and good evening."

"Thank you. Farewell till then." Tithian nodded, and was gone, the reverse-stasis shield gone with her.

"Quickly Alilia, before it is gone from my mind, help me with this!" Yazadril called as he closed his eyes.

"Yes I see!" she said as she closed hers too. "I got a good grasp of it when she called attention to it!"

"Better than mine! I give you what I can! Do it!" Yazadril told her excitedly.

Alilia held out her hands, and a mirrored sphere thirty centimeters in diameter appeared between them.

"Ah, this time your intuitive grasp of things made the difference!" Yazadril gasped. "And what I could add took a lot out of me!"

"I'll bite! What is it?" Theramin asked.

"A reverse-stasis field. Done with elven wizardry." Alilia told him smugly. "That was a good trick to make one in the shape of this room, though. I don't see how they are made in any shape but a sphere."

"Talia, can I see you in the bedroom for a moment?" Mark asked as he picked her up and carried her off.

"What is it?" she asked as the door closed behind them.

"I feel like I'm losing my mind!" he told her, and she saw that he was badly shaken. "All this stuff that's happening to us, and now I'm a cosmic fluke and we're the key to the future of the world! I'm fighting the urge to just run away from here as fast as I can! Can you help me?"

"I can." she nodded. "I can cast Tranquility upon you, as my father did when you two met. I confess I've been using similar things on myself for the last few minutes. Suddenly I've had as much stimulation of my sense of wonder as I can stand for a while."

"All right, go ahead."

He'd put the tine band on and closed his eyes, and she cast as he plucked the tines.

"Wow. Thanks." he said with a deep sigh, and he hugged her. "Now I can probably deal with it. At least I can if we throw everyone out and go to bed."

"Source yes!" she agreed emphatically. "I think we can have them all out of here in ten minutes, without even having to be rude!"

They went back into the living room, and found Hilsith waiting for them just beyond the doors.

"How do you feel?" she asked. "You were looking a little shaky a moment ago."

"Better. We've used a mild Tranquility." Talia nodded as they went back to their seats.

"Uh, Hilsith?" Mark asked hesitantly. "Could I ask you to stay for a minute after everyone else leaves? I'd like to talk to you privately, as a Healer."

"Certainly." Hilsith nodded as they sat.

The other four couples of elves sat quietly, embracing and considering what they'd learned.

The unicorn pair stood nose to nose, staring into each other's eyes in silent communication.

"We're very pleased to meet you in person, Equemev. You and Tithian are very beautiful, as is our fine steed here." Talia told her.

"Thank you. I'm most pleased to meet you and Mark as well, and I congratulate you on your joining. You elves and your husband are also very beautiful."

"On a more serious note, I think under the new circumstances, the exchanging of techniques we imagined doing with our dragon friends will be of greater urgency. And if there is anything we can do to help you, just let us know."

"Thank you."

"You are most welcome. We will take our leave now. Povon or I will contact you tomorrow. Farewell till then."

And the two unicorns were gone before her farewell could be returned.

"We are going on vacation now, Yazadril." Alilia suddenly stated with quiet conviction. "Gorsh and I. We need time to mourn our son. And from what we've learned, I will likely be unable to be away from my duties very often

over the next few years. Best that we take some time now while we still can. We will take until Bezedil's funeral at least, if we can take so long without some crisis intervening. Surely the world can spare us for three weeks.

"Keep me informed, and call if you need me."

"Of course." Yazadril nodded.

"Alilia, Gorsh, I would be most pleased if you would join myself and Yazadril for a visit of an evening during your vacation." Nemia smiled as the four stood. "A purely friendly visit, free of any discussion of politics or wizardry. And I would be very much delighted if you would both spend the night with us."

"A wonderful idea, Nemia!" Gorsh chuckled. "I have felt your allure since we met when Yazadril married you, and Alilia and I have discovered many very pleasurable techniques over our long lives that I look forward to sharing with you. No doubt Alilia and Yazadril have worked out a few things as well during their long association, and he would not have had time yet to show you all of them!"

"I will have you know, my esteemed husband, that I have never shared erotic pleasure with Yazadril!" Alilia informed him with a smile, and she actually blushed.

"Not even once, in almost five thousand years of friendship?" Gorsh asked, astounded.

"Why ever have you not?" Nemia asked in profound surprise.

"At first I was intimidated by him, and then for a while he was too much my mentor and more than a bit of a father-figure to me." Alilia chuckled. "After that he had adopted his look of a venerable ancient, and I was no longer attracted to him that way."

"And now?" Nemia smiled as she embraced her husband.

"Now? Now he is again a most handsome and noble figure." Alilia giggled. "And of course you are simply delicious! But I doubt he would wish it, as he has never once approached me in that way."

Yazadril burst out laughing. "You must be joking, Alilia! I have desired you with great passion since the moment we met! My reasons for not saying so reflect yours, and it never seemed to be the right thing. Till now, that is!"

"In that case, we will accept your invitation." Alilia smiled.

"Excellent. We will plan for a week from tonight, unforeseen events notwithstanding." Nemia smiled.

"Thank you." Alilia smiled, and the four embraced.

Then Alilia turned to give Talia a quick hug. "Stay strong, until we meet again. We will find ways to deal with the trials life gives us. Again, congratulations on your marriage, and know that we share your deep sorrow for Dalia."

She turned to Mark. He expected a hug or a handshake, or even a bow, but she only looked at him with a peculiar expression, and shook her head. Tears formed in her eyes. "I have some salve for my conscience for having cursed Talia, because of the curse cast against me. But I have no such excuse for having cursed you, for it was entirely my own choosing, and I did so out of prejudice against humans. Until I met you I hated your entire race. I still feel justified in hating almost all of the humans I have met from the kingdoms that surround my people. They are either despicable and belligerent, or so spineless and filled with fear of me as to be cringing and unable to treat me as a person. None of them have ever treated me with respect, as I judge such behavior. When I heard that a human had entered these lands, I demanded that you be killed immediately. When Yazadril said that he would not and could not, I volunteered to kill you myself. And I would have done it.

"But having known you for only one day, I know that you are unlike any human I have ever met. I know that you must have come from a people who are as kind, and as decent, and as good, as you are. I've always known intellectually that some humans had such qualities, but I never felt that truth emotionally. Until today.

"I am deeply ashamed of my prejudice now. I prejudged you, thinking you would be evil, and that you would consider what I had done to be a blessing. Instead you are decent and kind, and you are cursed. I am... so ashamed. So far as I know, the curse is the first crime I have ever committed. But as Yzandra said, in some ways it is the worst crime that has ever been committed. There is nothing I could ever do that could balance the scales between us, but I must do as I can.

"I have existing relationships, and responsibilities, and duties. You must never ask me to shirk them or contradict them. Beyond that, and before these witnesses, I swear my life in service to you, and to Talia."

"AHHH!!!" Mark yelled and slapped his hands over his eyes, painfully blinded by the flash.

"I'm sorry about hurting your eyes." Alilia sniffed. "I'd have warned you, but I knew that if I did, you would try to convince me to not give my obedience. As it is I will be able to do little enough for you. My husband needs me and my people need me, and they must come first. But to balance my offense, I should stand ready to serve you at all times, in any way."

Mark shook his head and blinked until his vision cleared. He considered the ancient elven princess and wizard who had just sworn her life to him. At this moment, he could only see a crying tiny young girl whose soul was so wounded that she was willing to throw her life away to make it feel even a little better.

“Oh Alilia, your poor little thing.” he murmured. He held his arms out to her, and when she moved into his embrace he picked her up, set her on his knee, and gave her a warm hug, soothing her exactly as he used to soothe his little sister when she cried.

“Alilia, I like to think I’m a good man, though it’s recent that I came to think of myself as a grown man. As well, I feel that my mother’s spirit watches me, and I cannot shame her. I must be the man she hoped I would be.

“So you must understand that there are only certain things I could ever feel comfortable with asking you to do. If I couldn’t bring myself to ask you for something, because I don’t think it’s an honorable or decent thing to ask, your vow of obedience doesn’t change that. It’s the same with all those other elves who’ve sworn to me. I am at heart a simple fellow. I have Talia as my wife, and I now have more treasures than I can count, and I couldn’t even ask you to wash my dishes as long as I can afford to pay a fair wage for the service and there is anyone who needs the work. You can’t bring back my family. So I have no service for you to perform, Alilia. I only ask that you try to put all these troubles behind you. Try to have a good life. And I will do the same.”

“Please, you must have some punishment or service for me!” Alilia sobbed into his shoulder. “I’m begging you, there must be something I can do to atone for my crime, or my shame and guilt will fill my mind for all of my days!”

Mark looked to Talia with a helpless shrug.

“There are things you can do for my husband, Alilia. Your friendship is a treasure almost any elf would value above all else, and you give it to very few. Give it to him. As well, you are the finest intuitive wizard alive, and you give your training to fewer than your friendship. Given the truth of what Tithian said, Mark will need training in arts of power, and I’m sure that he is much more intuitive than methodical by nature, so your training will be of great value. Give that to him. Perhaps when you have done so, you will feel better.”

“I will! I will, but that is no atonement!” Alilia sobbed.

“Would you really feel better if you were made to undergo some discipline for what you’ve done to us?” Talia asked in gentle concern.

“I would! I should have to endure *something* for what I’ve done! Anyone else would have to! Thus far my power and position have exempted me, and that is not justice!”

“Hmm. You have a point there. Perhaps Mark could spank you, as he did me earlier.”

With a deep sob, Alilia quickly slid down from Mark’s lap and lay over his knee on her tummy.

For a moment, Mark stared down at her perfectly feminine little buttocks. In this position the tight black trousers of her Battle Wizard’s uniform did no more to obscure her curves than would a coat of black paint. He looked to Talia with an expression of helplessness. “I can’t do this.” he softly told her.

“I will not slap you to make you do it this time.” Talia smiled. “But think of the things the curse will make you do to me. Imagine doing them. I will be crying and screaming. Can you still not give her the punishment any human child might expect for breaking a window?”

“Perhaps I could, some other time. But not now, not with the sorrow we all bear still fresh in our hearts, and feeling so... unbalanced by everything that’s happened. And not like this.”

“Like this?”

“I’m... I’m so sorry, Talia. I am a foolish young male with no self-control. And Alilia is very much not a human child. Though it is but a shadow of what I feel for you, I am... affected by her allure. I can’t do this. Please, don’t ask me to do this.”

“All right. Please don’t feel badly about your own nobility, my love, or for your natural instinctive desires either. I will punish her for both of us, though I have not your strength, so I will use a method that will be more disturbing to see. Why don’t you and Dilimon traipse down to the kitchen for snacks and beverages? This will be done when you return.”

“No, if she is to be punished, I won’t hide from it like a squeamish child.”

“All right. Why don’t you give her a nice hug while I punish her then?”

Alilia had regained her feet when Talia had agreed to punish her, and now she stood between Mark’s knees with her thighs pressed against the front edge of his chair’s seat and threw her arms up around his neck, quietly sobbing against his chest. He hugged her around her shoulders.

“Please sit back, Mark, or I may accidentally strike your knees.” Talia advised, as she gathered Alilia’s cape and passed it forward over the sobbing princess’s shoulder.

He slid back until his lower back was tight to the chair back, and he and Alilia were both leaning forward to maintain their hug.

Talia whistled three notes, and a wooden rod a centimeter thick and a meter long appeared in her hand. "I wish this to be no more disturbing than it must be, Alilia, and I will strike you with my utmost." she stated evenly. "You will let yourself heal one second after each blow, but not before."

Alilia nodded.

"I cannot watch this." Gorsh softly declared. "I will search the pantry for snacks and beverages as was suggested."

"I'll join you in that." Theramin nodded as he rose, shaken and pale at the thought of Alilia being punished so.

When they had left, Talia considered Alilia for a moment. "I find that I am not so noble or forgiving as I had thought, Alilia." she mused. "To see you like this, vulnerable and awaiting great pain, truly brings home to me that I must stand this way before Mark, over and over again for millennia. That I am truly cursed to suffer this, and other torments far worse than this, at his unwilling hands. Until the end of days. Now I find that I *want* to punish you, almost as much as I want to punish the one who cursed you and killed Dalia and Bezedil.

"You know this rod, Alilia. Your curse tells me that it is what you pictured when Yzandra described being struck by such, and so it is what Mark will have to use upon me to satisfy the curse, when it demands that I be whipped in this way.

"Mark, this will be difficult enough if my aim is true, and worse if I strike where I did not intend. If she lacks the will to hold herself in place, you should do so."

"It will be well if she is held in place for a further few moments after you finish." Hilsith advised. "I will show you something that may be of great value to you in the future."

"All right." Talia nodded. She drew the rod all the way back, and struck Alilia's buttocks with all the strength in her arm.

Alilia's sudden sharp scream was muffled against Mark's chest, and her arms tightened around his neck with surprising force as her feet frantically danced upon the floor, but she held her place.

Talia knew that over the next second an angry red welt appeared on Alilia's flawless pale skin beneath her trousers, then disappeared as she allowed herself to Heal, and Talia gave her another.

At first it seemed to Mark that his new wife was no more affected by her efforts than a human housewife beating dust out of rugs on a spring morning. But after Talia had delivered four such blows, her manner increased in intensity. She stopped waiting for the last strike to heal before giving the next one, so for an instant Alilia felt the pain of two of them. Still Talia's intensity and the speed of her blows increased, until Alilia's self control broke when she was feeling three strikes simultaneously.

She released Mark's neck and her screams were suddenly shockingly loud as she twisted around in his arms.

Talia gestured angrily and there was a relatively modest flash in Mark's vision. She had cast Movement on Alilia's wrists and ankles, and she wrenched the crying and screaming princess into a standing spread-eagle position with enough tension to hold her almost rigid. Another gesture brought a large knitted doily flying from beneath a vase and stuffed it into Alilia's mouth, muffling her again. Now Talia held the rod with both hands and beat Alilia with even greater speed and intensity. Alilia could not help but struggle, but her physical actions at this moment were instinctive, and she still refused to make the conscious effort it would take to save herself from her ordeal by wizardry.

"Sweet mother of mercy, Talia!" Mark finally cried. "Please, let it be enough!"

"All right, after three more." Talia nodded. "And Alilia, you will not let these three Heal by the power! You will allow them to heal naturally, as an ungifted human must. You may hide their appearance, however."

Alilia managed to nod.

Talia took her time giving her the three blows, still swinging with both hands, putting extra effort into strength and accuracy. Then she released the rod and it vanished before it could start to fall. "Leave the gag in until she stops screaming, please.

"Hilsith?"

As Talia looked around, the expressions on the faces around her registered. She shook her head. "Perhaps I should not have done this while under a Tranquility, since my empathy is reduced with the rest of my emotions. At the end I was only wondering if I could color her with five marks in a second, before the first was healed. Actually, I think I have overdone it with my Tranquility. I think I should be feeling shame at my brutality right now, but I am not."

"I think it just as well." Hilsith said as she stepped to Alilia's side. "For Alilia must certainly feel sufficiently chastised. Now go sit with Mark, and watch carefully."

Alilia's muffled voice was no longer screaming, but she was crying hard and squirming in her invisible bonds.

Hilsith draped Alilia's cloak behind her again, and began massaging her shoulders. "What I will do is done as a Healer, Alilia. It will help you to feel somewhat better, and it should be of great help in allowing Mark and Talia to effectively live with your curse. May I therefore have your permission to perform an intimacy upon your person?"

Alilia frantically nodded, and Hilsith began caressing her torso and nuzzling her neck.

"You are in a state of great tension at this moment, Alilia. I will help you to release it." Hilsith told her, calmly and softly. One hand slid down Alilia's tummy, and began caressing her loins through her clothing, the other stimulated the bound princess's right breast.

"I can't watch this!" Mark declared as he abruptly stood, almost upsetting Talia from his chair's arm. Tears of outrage, frustration, and emotional pain flowed down his face.

Hilsith turned her head to catch his eye, as she continued her stimulation of Alilia. Her face and voice were stern. "You will watch and note every detail with all of your attention, Mark Longstrider, if you wish to ever have my services as a Healer in the future!" she lectured. "This is for her good and yours! You are an adult who aspires to be a knight! In the years ahead you will likely see the horrors of the battlefield, and the greater horrors of the surgeries! I once had to deliver the child of a woman who was impaled upon a spear, and if you cannot control yourself and your emotions at the sight you are faced with now, you will be of little use at times like those! Sit down!"

Mark stared at her in shock for a moment, then abruptly sat.

Hilsith turned her attention back to Alilia, who was still crying out behind her gag and squirming in her magic bonds. "Ah, she is almost ready. Release the tension, Alilia." she crooned. "Let it go. You are close now. Let go." She resumed nuzzling Alilia's neck, and slid one hand beneath her cloak to caress her tortured behind. Alilia's hips drove forward to escape the pain, and Hilsith's caress upon her loins became firm, then forceful. "Now, Alilia, now." She murmured, and gave the bound princess a short, sharp slap upon her pained buttocks, then another.

Alilia's cries changed in character, as did her motions. Her eyes flew open as wide as they could, and Hilsith removed her gag and kissed her full upon the mouth.

Alilia's spasms went on and on under the relentless stimulation, her cries muffled now by Hilsith's kiss. Finally she strained so hard and still against her bonds that Mark feared she would part a tendon. A violent spasm passed through her straining body, then a final one, before she abruptly sagged bonelessly in her magic bonds, panting and softly crying, utterly spent.

Hilsith hugged her tight. "Release her, Talia." she asked, then effortlessly took the weight as Alilia collapsed in her arms. She carried her to the nearest divan, lay her on her side upon it, arranged her limp limbs, then she sat beside her patient and gently caressed her face.

She glanced over at Mark and Talia for a moment, then spoke as she returned her gaze to Alilia and wiped her tears away. "Alilia achieved sexual ecstasy just now. I think you both realized that. So, what have you learned from what you have seen?"

After thinking about it for a moment, Mark ventured an answer. "I can only think that yours must be the most skilled of caresses, to have brought her pleasure after such torment, and while in such pain. I think you mean for me to learn such techniques, so I can pleasure Talia after I have to hurt her, and so reduce the trauma of the ordeal."

"Well said, but not entirely correct, for my caresses are not so extraordinarily skilled in that way, nor did I use any but the most common of techniques. Talia? Any thoughts?"

"Alilia must be one of those who are sexually aroused by such events, whether she wills it or not." Talia speculated. "I have heard that there are those of every race who are affected that way, and that anyone might enjoy a bit of roughness and pain while in the throes of their strongest passion."

"You are entirely correct in your last two points, but completely wrong in your first." Hilsith said. "On the contrary, the whipping Alilia received was an experience she truly dreaded, and she is less inherently predisposed to be sexually aroused by what she endured than most.

"My point is that despite her aversion to the experience and her quite normal dislike of pain, she was still able to achieve ecstasy, for every kind of arousal causes most of the same reactions in our bodies. Whether it is fear or anger or sexuality or extreme joy, arousal is arousal. In their extremes, they all cause us to cry out, to make violent motions, to shed tears while our hearts race and our breathing quickens, and our sensitivity to pain is reduced. Every part of our bodies prepare themselves for action. It's easy for one of these forms of arousal to trigger another. Thus, some laugh upon the battlefield, some cry at weddings and births, and some feel desire with fear. This similarity is also reflected in the sound of involuntary cries, and the sounds some make while experiencing powerful pleasure and ecstasy can be almost indistinguishable from cries of pain.

“I do indeed intend that you pleasure Talia while you torment her, Mark. And whether you wish it not, you will feel physical pleasure while you are raping her. Any of us can be conditioned in this way to enjoy such experiences, to lose our dread of them, to eagerly anticipate experiencing or administering pain and bondage. Talia will probably never truly enjoy feeling sexual pain, but if she always feels pleasure at the same time, her subconscious mind will become conditioned to associate sexual pain with pleasure, the excitement of it will add to her erotic excitement, and she will eventually be able to enjoy the experience as a whole. Thus can your curse become a blessing, if you have the courage to choose it. But it must be completely voluntary, for only then can you take pleasure from pain. If such an experience is forced upon you, either by an assailant or by your curse, it can only traumatize you. You must accept it, and more than that, you must embrace it, right from the beginning.”

“I... I fear that if I do as you ask, such behaviors will eventually lead me to other cruelties, until my soul is lost to evil.” Mark revealed. “For a moment, I feared that was happening to Talia, when she was whipping Alilia.”

“An understandable fear.” Hilsith nodded. “Know that those who genuinely enjoy inflicting pain for its own sake are indeed evil, and they tend to cruel sexual practices as well. But, most of those who *only* enjoy giving or receiving pain in a purely sexual context are good hearted folk, they have simply become jaded and bored with milder sexual activities, and they would never dream of sharing painful sexuality with another unless their partner was willing and eager for the experience. This happens more often with those who have lived long lives, for it is easy to become jaded after many centuries, and with those who have not found love, for being in love keeps the simplest lovemaking fresh and exciting.

“While you two are both young and in love, you can still choose it. You can purposefully develop such propensities in yourselves. And I think that therein lies your best hope for happiness over the long millennia ahead, for you cannot choose to ignore the curse.”

“Oh Hilsith, you have given me the strongest reason for hope I’ve had since I was cursed!” Talia cried emotionally as she hugged Mark’s neck. “Such a powerful thought, that my curse could become a blessing, if only I can accept it and embrace it, fully and whole-heartedly!

“Will you do it for me, Mark? Will you always give me pleasure with what the curse forces us to do? Please tell me you will!”

“I will. As well as I am able, I will do everything I can to lessen your displeasure, always. I promise it. But, please forgive me if I still dread it, both hurting you, and enjoying doing so.”

“Again, such dreads are natural and understandable.” Hilsith assured him. “But if you are consistent in a program of treatments as we have described, your dread will fade in time, as you see that the pleasures you receive while fulfilling the curse have not caused you to become otherwise corrupted by evil, and that the rest of your character remains the same. Nor will Talia’s spirit be scarred by her part in it.”

Gorsh and Theramin returned bearing cheese, sausage, bread, mustard sauce, white wine and ale. They set them all down on the nearest table, and went to their wives.

“Take me home, husband.” Alilia murmured tearfully. “Take me home and make love with me, as gently as you can.”

Gorsh slid his arms under her and carefully cradled her as he stood. He turned and addressed the room as he gazed tearfully down at her. “Know that I hold no blame or rancor for this, for I know she brought it upon herself. Farewell, until we meet again.” he said, his voice thick with emotion. Then they vanished.

There was a long silence, then Theramin spoke. “It’s been a long day, and the sun will rise within minutes. Already the sky lightens, and we will also take our leave. I will see all of you tomorrow.”

“Congratulations again. Feel free to call or visit at any time.” Yzell told Mark and Talia. “We will fly home, and perhaps enjoy the dawn before we retire. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” Mark and Talia called, as the midwife and the horticulturist let themselves out the balcony doors.

“Come my love.” Dilimon smiled as he stood and helped Yalla to her feet. “I hope that you will accept my invitation to my bed, for what remains of the night.”

“I will.” Yalla absentmindedly answered. “I admit to being fascinated by what we’ve seen and heard. I wonder if there is a position where you could kiss my flower while giving me some light spanks on my behind, just enough to sting a little?”

Then she looked to Mark and Talia to offer her goodbye, and chuckled. “I’m sorry, Mark. I see by your blush that I have scandalized you yet again. Yet I think that you would do well to abandon your prudishness. You are now long-lived and magical, married to an elf and living among us. In every way that matters, you are now an elf. Though one would never guess to look at you, of course! Try to be more open and accepting of words of sexuality, and it’s healthy expression. If you can, you will be much more content among us.”

“Ah, I know you’re right.” Mark chuckled. “And my reaction is only partly one of being scandalized, as you elves put it. Though I was married in white, I like to think I have healthy sexual desires and fantasies, and some have been vivid indeed! But none more so than the picture I got from your question of possible positions, for I realized that with the ability to Levitate, the possibilities are endless!”

“Not so much as you might think!” Dilimon laughed. “Only a very capable wizard could Levitate safely and with control while taken by the heights of passion! But then,” he chuckled as he eyed Yalla speculatively, “One who is concentrating on giving pleasure, while not receiving it, might be able to cast Levitate safely upon his partner!”

“I think *I* could lift myself *and* my partner while giving pleasure!” Yalla laughed. “And I know I could control myself alone even during the most intense ecstasy, for I have experienced it while flying home from Sming a few years past!”

“Amazing!” Dilimon laughed. “Well now we simply must hurry home and try it!”

“Goodnight you two!” Talia laughed as she stood and offered them a hug. “Have you set a date for your wedding?”

“Not soon, I think!” Yalla giggled as she turned to hug Mark. “I will let the splendor of *your* wedding fade from mind a bit first, else mine might be overly compared with yours, and it will be a long time before anyone else’s will equal that!”

Mark appreciated that Dilimon offered him a firm handshake, arm-wrestling style as Rangers do, rather than a hug. The elf gave him a warm smile and clapped him affectionately on the elbow. “It might interest you to know that Yalla and I are the last to offer our wedding gift. We have a secret place of wondrous beauty that no others know of, for we were the first to discover it in forty thousand years, and it is about a kilometer from here. As our gift, we will share it with you. When you have a mood for privacy in a place of beautiful solitude, yet have no wish to travel far, call us, and we will take you there.”

“Thank you.” Mark grinned. “I must say that I feel a strong affinity with you, Dilimon. I will have many great friendships here, but you are of my generation, and seem my most alike counterpart among the elves I’ve met. And Yalla and Talia are both wizards. I hope the four of us can share a close friendship.”

“I’m sure we will, Mark, but I should tell you that among elves, youth is in one’s heart, in one’s attitude toward life, one’s behavior and style. I don’t wish you to be misinformed about us, so I hope it will not reduce your feeling of camaraderie towards us to learn that I am approaching my three hundredth year of life, while Yalla has seen four centuries since her birth.”

“Wow! I’d never have guessed! You seem so much my own age, a year or two more at most! And it’s strange that Yalla seems only a year or two older than you, as I would have judged her to be only a bit older than Nemia, who I already know to be two hundred fifty-eight!”

“While I find it absolutely staggering to think that despite the poise, confidence, and maturity you have shown today, you are only sixteen years old!” Dilimon marveled. “No elf younger than forty-five could ever equal the quality of your behavior under such new and extreme circumstances! The majority of elves with twenty times your age seem childish in comparison! The speed of human development is amazing, but still, you must be a champion among them!”

“Well, I’ll be seventeen in four days.” Mark chuckled. “Perhaps I’ll seem more like my age to you then. I’d like to have a small gathering of friends to mark the occasion. I’m not sure though. Since Ti... Since the unicorn diplomat’s revelations, it suddenly seems that we have much to do, and little time to do it in.”

“We can spare at least an hour or two for a small birthday party, love.” Talia assured him. “Even the greatest cannot spend every waking moment on duty. We must take the time to enjoy life as well, or we will lose our effectiveness and our happiness both.”

“So true.” Dilimon smiled as he moved close beside Yalla and put an arm around her waist. “I’m sure we’ll meet tomorrow or soon on one matter or another. Farewell till then, and to you also.” he nodded and smiled to the other three, who returned the gestures.

“Goodnight!” Mark and Talia chorused in return, before the two sentries also left by the balcony door.

“I wonder why Yalla’s a wizard, and Dilimon’s not?” Mark mused when they were gone.

“Why would you wonder that?” Nemia asked.

“Well, she glows no brighter than many I’ve met today who aren’t wizards, and Dilimon is a lot brighter than she is.”

“Dilimon does indeed have strength in the Power, and he knows a few sentry-oriented spells that use all of it.” Yazadril nodded. “But his aptitude as a Sentry is even greater! His woodcraft in particular is almost miraculous! With no use of the power, he can stalk close enough to a rabbit to catch it by hand!”

“Huh.” Mark grunted, and scratched his chin.

“Your fingers expect the beard, eh?” Yazadril chuckled as he rubbed his own chin. “And you don’t seem particularly impressed by my revelation of Dilimon’s skill.”

“I can do that.” Mark shrugged.

“Amazing!”

“Hey, it’s not every sixteen year old that can qualify as a Finitran Ranger, you know!” Mark chuckled. “Most are twenty-four when they complete their apprenticeship. But then, all I ever wanted was to be like my father, and I took to the activities of my profession like a fish to water. And my father gave me serious training from the very beginning, though he always made it fun. I first shot a bow the same week that I first walked, and I don’t mean a childish plink, either! He wouldn’t give me an arrow for the little bow he’d made me, until I had the proper procedure mastered; visualize, inhale, draw and aim, exhale, release with your eyes open, follow the shot so you can find your shaft if you miss. And though he knew I’d be too big too use them in only a few months, he spent as much care on my first weapons as he did on his own, and they were of professional quality and accuracy despite their tiny size. He used exactly the same words and motions to train me to the bow as a toddler as he used to train grown men he respected. I hit a pumpkin six meters away on my very first shot, and I thought that was a very fine thing at the time! As for woodcraft, I once stalked a canny wolf who was becoming a pest, and got close enough to take him with my knife!

“Now, I know all that sounds like bragging, but I never mentioned it at home since they all already knew it. I just want you to know that I’m very serious about my profession, and that you can count on me if you need a Ranger who knows his business a sight better than most!”

“Amazing! Our knights have a few surprises coming their way, I think!” Yazadril laughed. “And as for Yalla being a wizard, remember that one does not need to be able to wield a huge brush to be a great painter. Her aptitudes make her a perfect Sentry Wizard, and her skill in her specialty is impressive. Besides, she is very skilled at drawing power from her squad mates, whom she has worked with closely for decades, Dilimon among them.

“I see. And I’m reminded that no one seemed to think Alilia should contradict you when you proclaimed yourself First Wizard, though her glow is the brightest, and yours is not.”

“Exactly. Though there is no doubt in my mind that she is Second Wizard. And she is gaining ability faster than I. Most likely she will surpass me within twenty centuries, if we both live so long. But for now, her intuitive style and unmatched power are my perfect complement, and we make a great team. I would think the two of us working together could match any two spell-casters of any race, and I don’t exclude the dragons from that!”

“By the missing gods, I now find it hard to believe that she let me whip her so severely, when she could have escaped it an any time, or blasted me to dust for that matter!” Talia declared. “Do you think I did wrong in it, Father?”

“If I thought so, I’d have spoken at the time. I love Alilia like my younger sister, but there is no doubt that her assumption of unwanted and sometimes onerous duties have given her a mean streak. As well, you are my daughter and I love you very dearly. She may have been under a curse, but the idea of what she chose to do to you and Mark came from her own personality, not from that of our enemy. It nearly broke our friendship this morning in the Council Hall. If you and Mark hadn’t responded so well to the offense you’ve suffered, it still might have. I try to keep it in perspective, but the thought of what you will suffer because of what *Alilia* has done to you, after all that I have done for her, fills me with outrage! I will keep my friendship with her for now, and we will see how things work out. But know this! I felt nothing but satisfaction to see you whip her as you did, to see her squirm and cry as befits the colossally spoiled brat that she sometimes is!”

“Thanks Pa.” she told him with a smile and a hug.

“The wheels of justice turn slowly for us, unless there is pressing urgency.” Nemia stated thoughtfully. “But sooner or later, the Councils of The People of Life and of The High People will be discussing Alilia’s behavior with great seriousness. Her crime of cursing an innocent person is mitigated somewhat because she was under a curse herself, but it is compounded by being a crime of passion. No matter what happens, leaders of great nations are expected to control their emotions and work through proper legal procedures, even upon the death of a child and while under a curse, and to not lash out personally at those who are not under their jurisdiction.

“Under the circumstances that prevailed when it was done, to curse Talia for a decade would have raised only interest and eyebrows, to curse her for a century would have raised voices and questions. To curse her for a millennium would have raised outrage and protests throughout the elven world. What she did is so far beyond people’s experience that they only wait to see what will happen. Her people will be feeling humiliated by what she has done, and ours will support a serious sanction.

“She may have finally pushed her Council too far. Think about it, Yazadril. I think she has finally gotten her wish. They will keep her as First Wizard and First Battle Wizard of The People of Life, to keep her power harnessed

to the good of her people. But they will almost certainly strip her of leadership for a millennium at least. And she would like nothing better.”

“She would come here, and make her home here.” Hilsith stated with surety. “Her vow of service to Mark and Talia was as powerful as any I’ve seen given under informal circumstances. She would come here to serve them, even if she has to drag Gorsh along by his ear to make him accompany her.”

They considered that.

“You’re probably right.” Yazadril nodded with a shrug.

“I wonder if she will work her way into their bed.” Nemia mused. “It’s obvious that she’s very attracted to both Mark and Talia. And Mark mentioned that she is one of two females he finds nearly as attractive as Talia.”

“Oh? Who was the other?” Talia asked in surprise.

“Why me, of course!” Nemia laughed, and did a joyous and impromptu pirouette.

“Obvious in hindsight, if he prefers myself and Alilia!” Talia laughed. “We three are certainly of a type, even with Alilia’s lighter hair color!”

“Yes. It’s too bad that his rural human attitudes caused him to reject me when I suggested I might spend a night with you!”

“Yes, but then, he is very young. He will come to his senses after a while.” Talia consoled with mock-seriousness.

“I will make allowances for the ways of other cultures.” Mark muttered to himself with exaggerated patience. “I will release my prudery. May fate give me strength.”

He heaved a mighty sigh, then pasted a bright smile on his face. “Why Nemia, I do admit that you are a delectable little tidbit indeed! And, were it not for the fact that it would feel like a complete betrayal of Talia and Yazadril, no matter how *they* felt about it, I would love to mount you with great vigor and overwhelming passion until your exhausted cries had deafened me!”

“Oooh, strong riposte, young man!” Hilsith laughed. “Yazadril never does so well when they are teasing *him!*”

“You suffer this silliness as well, Yazadril?” Mark asked in exaggerated surprise and concern.

“Sadly, yes.” Yazadril sighed. “You would think that my lofty position and impressive credentials would offer some protection from such trials, but alas, they do not.”

“Alas!?” Nemia laughed. “Alas, you say? I think the stresses of the play do tell upon him, that he may even faint upon the stage at any moment!”

“Mark, on the other hand, seems a stronger target now, my pretty daughter! And since Alilia is now sworn to you, if she becomes irritating while loitering about and hoping to be of service, you can have Mark give her a more erotic spanking than the one she received tonight, and perhaps have him ravish her roughly until she swoons from it!”

“That’s a thought!” Talia laughed, then adopted a thoughtful pose. “But he may refuse. On the other hand, I could bind her up again, and then...”

“Hey! That’s enough of that I think!!” Mark declared with a headshake at their ribald audacity. “Yazadril, I’d appreciate it if you’d take your wife home and spank her, while I spank mine, and then perhaps they’ll adopt more serious attitudes than their present ones!”

“I’ll hold you to that!” Talia giggled.

“Will you, Yazadril?” Nemia teased. “Will you take me home and spank me?”

“See if I won’t, mischievous wife!” Yazadril declared with a grin, and gave her a playful swat through the many layers of her gown. “Furthermore, I’ll give you as much of it as you deserve!”

“Ooh! All right, but as Yalla said, you must kiss me while you do!” Nemia giggled, rubbing her bottom in feigned pain.

“Fine!” Yazadril laughed. “Mark, Talia, I would invite you for breakfast, but no doubt we’ll all sleep through it, and besides that, breakfast or brunch in bed is traditional for newlyweds on their first morning. Why don’t you join us for a late lunch? We’ll all go down to my workshop after that, and see what we can do about awakening your latent abilities.”

“We’ll be there, and thank you. Thank you all for everything.” Mark said as Nemia stepped over to give him and Talia a quick hug.

“You’re very welcome.” Yazadril assured him as they shared a hearty handshake, then he hugged his daughter. “Be well, my dear.” he told her. “I love you so much, and I am so very proud of you.”

Nemia took both her hands, and smiled. “Talia, on my wedding night, after we made love, I had trouble sleeping. I’d never spent the night at Yazadril’s, and it seemed like a big and empty and strange place, and I missed my old

room at my parent's tree. Of course I grew comfortable with our home in time, but in case the same should happen to you, know that you are both welcome to your room at our tree."

"Thank you Mother. I doubt I will, but we'll see."

"Nemia, Yazadril, before you go, I wish to ask you something." Hilsith smiled. "Do you think you will be going directly to sleep when you arrive home?"

"Of course not! Look at my new Yazadril!" Nemia laughed. "He's never looked like this since long before I was born, and though I've loved him dearly anyway, this new aspect of his is incredibly exciting! I intend to ride this stallion till he founders!"

"And before that, I must inform our council and the other elven royalty that Alilia and I have committed them to an alliance with Xervia!" Yazadril chuckled. "Though with the look Nemia is giving me, it will be a very brief notice!"

"As I'd hoped." Hilsith smiled. "Nemia, you know how much we enjoyed each other, on the occasion that we shared. And Yazadril, since you emerged from your bedroom in that armor and sword, looking like a great leader and a noble warrior, I have throbbed with desire for you. I have never desired a couple so much as I desire you both at this moment, and I would be deeply honored if you would allow me to pleasure you."

"I think it would be our pleasure to pleasure you, Hilsith!" Nemia grinned.

"It would, though Nemia, I did not know you had shared pleasure with Hilsith!" Yazadril exclaimed in surprise.

"You never asked! It was during the early stages of my pregnancy. You were off at a Council meeting, and I was thinking of you, and she was examining me and coaching me on delivery techniques. One thing led to another, and we spent a very pleasant afternoon indeed! Then my parents came to visit just before you came home, and I simply never got around to describing it to you."

Hilsith smiled at the fond memory. "I will join you at your home in a few moments. Mark wishes to speak to me as his Healer before I go."

"All right. We'll see you in moments, and you two tomorrow." Nemia grinned, and she and Yazadril vanished in a light swirl of air.

"Uh, Talia, is it all right if I speak to Hilsith alone for a moment?" Mark hesitantly asked.

"If I can guess what you wish to ask her, can I stay?" Talia asked with a mischievous grin, and continued before he could answer. "You wonder if your mighty phallus will be too much for me, that our coupling could injure me, or simply be as impossible as passing a cow through a keyhole by kicking it's behind! Am I right?"

"I'll be pickled! You are!" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"Well, there is a saying among all humanoid women that Dalia told me." she giggled. "If a woman is completely unready for mating, then the smallest male is too large, and when she is at the very peak of her passion, the largest male is too small! We must simply ensure that my passion is fully inflamed before we proceed. The curse and my elven healing will protect me from all harm, and since the curse will likely not strike me yet, I can cast upon myself to greatly lessen the pain. I suppose I could eliminate all my pain, but losing a girl's virginity should not be like that. If a girl is not willing to endure a little pain the first time, she is not ready, and if she becomes pregnant she will certainly be unprepared to give birth. I will allow it to hurt as much as it would if you were the size of an average elf. No, more than that I think. As much as an average human girl would feel with you as you are now. Or perhaps a large human girl."

"Your saying about a female's state of readiness is generally true, but not in the most extreme cases." Hilsith pointed out. "Look at him, Talia. He is almost a giant, and he would not have to be particularly well endowed in proportion to the rest of him for it not to be the case for you. I know you are trying to reassure him, but the pain of it may be more than you can deal with. He may injure you repeatedly with every thrust, and though you may Heal repeatedly, that is more Healing than I want to leave to you or to the curse. If the same tissue is injured and Healed too many times, even elven Healing can go awry, as the body tries to form scar tissue and is prevented from doing so. The tumors that can form under those circumstances are themselves magical in nature, and are the most difficult challenge a Healer can face.

"Mark, I must know the size of your erect phallus. Please use your hands to show me it's size, or simply tell me, if you've measured it since reaching your full growth. If it is truly too much for her, I have ways of correcting that, but I must know, for they are specialized spells that I will not entrust to Talia without years of training as a Healer. Be as exact as you can, neither exaggerating your claim nor diminishing it out of modesty."

Mark found the conversation almost too bizarre to be embarrassed about, and he was reassured by Hilsith's professional manner, which helped him to be objective. He held the fingers and thumb of his huge right hand in a

slightly open circle. “It’s that big around.” He held his flattened hands away from each other. “And about that long. That’s a bit harder to judge exactly.”

“Great source above!” Talia quietly breathed.

“Ah. You are only a bit more well endowed than average for a man of your overall dimensions.” Hilsith calmly pronounced. “I will not have to alter her pelvic structure or use any serious surgical spells, but that is more than Talia should deal with on her own. I can make it safe for her, but it is not a simple procedure.

“It would be more practical to simply make your phallus smaller. Since my spells don’t seem to affect you, perhaps you could have Yazadril do it, as his seem to be able to. I would give him the spell, which is far simpler than those I would need for Talia, and with his skill and exactitude in the Power, he would be reliable with it.”

The young couple stared at her, stunned by the idea.

Mark nodded gravely, though he was obviously very uncomfortable with it. “I’ll do it. We should be able to make love without it paining her, and it will hurt her less when I have to, ah, hurt her.”

“Absolutely not!” Talia stated feistily. “And I will not hear another word about it!”

The healer smiled. “You are a noble couple. Faced with the same decision, I would expect most females to be in favor of that, and most males opposed.”

“You can make it safe for me, I trust you completely in that, and I must have the complete procedures, for the curse will allow no less.” Talia replied. “I do not wish to know what they entail in any greater detail, and I see no reason for Mark to have to hear it. He is being brave, but he is looking a little green.”

“You are right.” Hilsith nodded. “Know that these spells will protect you from harm, so you will not require repeated Healing, but your mating with Mark will still be painful. So much so, that it will probably not be possible to block the pain completely without numbing you to all other sensation as well. Also, the activation of the spells will be a powerful sensation, felt in addition to other stimulations you are feeling at the time, so to leave your experience as natural as possible, they will not activate until they are needed. Their activation only requires the tiniest fraction of a second, a lag you cannot detect, so you will feel them and his penetration simultaneously.”

“I understand. Proceed, please.”

“All right. Recline upon this divan.”

When she had, Hilsith cast effortless diagnostics, reading the state of Talia’s body as a scholar reads a page of print.

She gathered power, achieved a state of perfect serenity, and cast with a quiet, complex humming.

“Done. And flawlessly, if I say so myself.” she reported as she repeated her diagnostics.

“Thank you very much, Hilsith.” Talia smiled.

“You’re quite welcome. As always, as payment for my services I ask only that you make a contribution to healing research, in time or power or currency. In your case it can wait a few decades, till you’re less busy.

“And now I’ll take my leave.” she said as she and Talia stood. She gave them both a quick hug, turned toward the door into the corridor, then reconsidered and turned back. “Talia, I’m not skilled at Flight or Translocation, and I confess to impatience right now. Would you Translocate me to your parents’ home?”

“Certainly.”

“Bye Hilsith!” Mark called as Talia whistled and gestured, and then, finally, he was alone with his bride.

They smiled at each other for a moment, and her smile was mischievous, his shy, but both were also loving and affectionate.

“Come.” she softly said as she took his hand, and she led him into the bedroom, closing the door behind. There were thick curtains closed over the windows, blocking out the growing daylight completely.

“Please, sit on the edge of the bed.” she instructed, and looked around the room. “I think firelight would be beautiful.”

“It would. Though I never need light to see you, my love, for I see you clearly by the glow of your own magic.” he quietly chuckled. “For that matter, this whole place has it’s own glow. Dim, but bright enough to go to the privacy in the middle of the night without a candle. It’s a good thing too. I figure you’ve all been using some kind of purely magical light spell since sundown, and I can’t see it. It hasn’t mattered, since I see so well by elf-light.

“By the way, are you sure that’s safe?”

Talia had been taking split firewood from a woodbox next to the fireplace and stacking it in the hearth. She paused and considered, just as she had been about to light it.

“I mean after all, the fireplaces *are* made out of wood, the same as the rest of the place.” Mark continued. “I assumed they were purely decorative, and were included only because the castles this one is based on would have stone fireplaces in the same locations.”

Talia tapped her fingertips against the wood at the edge of the hearth, then further away on the wall and back again, then softly laughed. “No, my father thinks of everything. The wood within a meter of the flame chamber and the chimney above has been petrified. It looks almost exactly the same as the rest, but it’s solid stone. I can guarantee that there will be a filtering spell inside the chimney, so that the rest of the neighborhood won’t have to smell our smoke. I’m sure it’s safe, and if I’m wrong I can extinguish it before it spreads.”

“I should’ve known.” Mark chuckled as she started the logs blazing with a gesture. “And you look beautiful in the firelight.”

“Thank you.” she smiled as she gracefully crossed the room to him.

The bed he sat upon was huge in area but low, intricately carved from a close-grained medium-brown hardwood matching the rest of the bedroom furniture, four-posted and canopied with white lace curtains tied back with white linen cord. It was low enough that he only had to bow his head slightly to meet Talia’s kiss as she melted into his arms, and they gently embraced.

Their kiss was tentative at first, then inquisitive and exploring of exquisite sensation, then breathlessly passionate.

She broke the kiss and leaned her forehead on his shoulder, and her glow increased noticeably. “Ah, Mark, that was most fine.” she sighed. “And do you feel that?”

“I do, and I recognize it from the moments after our vows. After I recovered.” he nodded. “It’s magic love. It’s beautiful.”

“It is. My beloved, I wish to feel it entirely. I will remove my Tranquilities. Do you wish the same?”

“Yes.”

She began to let the spells fade, then gasped as Mark’s breath hissed in between his teeth.

“Not so fast!” he whispered.

She held the spell at that strength for a moment, then let it ever-so-slowly diminish.

“Never has anyone felt such a love as this.” Talia whispered in amazement. “I can’t even imagine what it must be like for you, bolstered by many hundreds of Compulsions.”

“It’s pretty intense.” he admitted, and took a few deep breaths.

She leaned back enough to meet his eye, and spoke with warm sincerity. “Mark, there is a sequence of activities that I have imagined sharing with my husband on my wedding night since I was old enough to be interested in such things. I know that males like to take the lead on such occasions, but it would mean a great deal to me if you would indulge me, in allowing me to provide the sequence of our pleasures.”

He chuckled. “Ah, Talia. I know how to kiss you, and I know certain caresses.” he murmured as he traced his fingertip along the line of her jaw, brushed it over her ear, then down the side of her neck.

She shivered, then grinned. “You know them well.” she giggled. “That certainly increased my arousal!”

“I watched my parents do that many times, and I follow my father’s example in all things. But they never allowed us children to see anything more, as is the way among humans. To be honest, all I know about what comes after that is what I’ve seen of the matings of beasts of field and forest. And I’m somewhat terrified that I’ll do the wrong thing, and spoil the moment or worse. So I gladly agree to your request, and with relief at that! I imagine you are far better informed and educated on such matters than I am. If you suspected that to be so, and made your request to spare us both from my amateurish fumbling, I’m grateful for that as well, though I’d just as soon not know if that’s the case!”

“Thank you. Your honesty is wonderful.” she smiled. “It’s recognized among my people that there is one most-natural sequence of love-making, from the first kiss to the final cuddle, and my fantasies for tonight have only minor variations on it. I will add one more variation, inspired by our unique circumstances.

“First, we will kiss some more. While we do that, you will caress me through my dress where you like, enjoying the feeling of my form, and you can show me all your caresses.

“Then, I will step back into the middle of the room till I am well lit by the firelight. I will remove my footwear, then slowly undress. You are so polite that if I look at you while I do so, you will want to meet my eye. So, I will look away, and you will feast your eyes upon me while I turn slowly in the firelight.” She giggled. “Then I will dance naked before you and sing a love song, but it will be a short one.

“You will remove your footwear. Then you will stand and undress, and while doing so will watch me as I recline upon the bed in various poses meant to fire your ardor as powerfully as can be done without touching you, and feast my own eyes on your magnificent nakedness being revealed.

“You will lay upon your back on the bed, your head and shoulders propped upon the pillows and against the headboard. I will delight in examining your phallus and acorns from close range, then I will carefully take your rampant maleness in hand, and gift it with the deep kiss. Or in your case, perhaps I will lack the capacity to kiss more

than the end of it. If so I will ask Hilsith to help me with a spell for it tomorrow.” She giggled again. “In any case it will not matter how much I can kiss, for at that point you will be in such a state of exquisite excitement, and your sensitivity at such a fine pitch, that you will reach ecstasy within a moment or two. When you do, I will drink your nectar, every tiny drop of it.

“This is important. You will be a great warrior, a great wizard, perhaps a central figure in the world. It has happened that such males in the past have spilled their seed upon the bed, and it was later stolen, for it is still potent for a short time if left there, and for a longer time if magically preserved. There are many reasons why some would choose to breed your child without your knowledge and consent, and you must not let that happen. Your seed must never be spilled. You must always emit it within me, or within another elven female, or a human female whom you trust can drink your nectar. If you mount a human female you must make sure that any seed that is spilled from her within twenty minutes afterward is destroyed by fire, or another similarly thorough method.”

“My seed can’t be, ah, spilled, from within an elven female?” he asked in surprise. “I mean, sometimes after breeding the livestock it was more than a little messy.”

“It cannot, not in enough volume to be worth collecting. Take my word for it. You will understand when it happens.

“After I have drunk your nectar, you will lay back and I will explore the great delightful vastness of you, pleasuring you everywhere with my touch and my kiss, and I may ask you to roll over for a while or otherwise pose for my inspection and your stimulation, until I return at last to your rampant phallus. I will bestow the deep kiss upon you there again, taking the time for both of us to enjoy every possible aspect of it, until I drink your nectar again.

“Then, my body is yours to explore. You will touch me and examine me everywhere as closely as you wish, guiding me to turn this way and that, posing me in any position you find enticing, simply enjoying it, doing nothing that is specifically meant to pleasure me.

“Then, when my anticipation is unbearable, I will tell you so. You will kiss me and caress me again, exciting me greatly, and I will guide your touch to my most sensitive places.

“This is the part I have added tonight. When my excitement is high you will sit against the headboard, and I will lay across your lap on my tummy with my head to your left. You will reach beneath me with your left hand and stimulate my bosom and my flower as I show in the previous step, and with your right hand you will gently pat my behind. You will slowly use more force with that hand, and I will tell you when it starts to sting. As I near my ecstasy my natural pain tolerance will increase, and upon my instruction you will gradually spank me a little bit harder, and a little harder, and we will see how much I can handle without interrupting my passion or using magic. When I reach ecstasy you will rub my trigger very quickly, and continue to spank me until I finish my ecstasy and tell you to stop. You will then immediately lay me on my back, push my knees up to my shoulders, and bestow the deep kiss upon my most sensitive places, adapting the techniques I’ll have shown you for your hands and fingers. I will be so sensitive right after my ecstasy that when you kiss me there the pleasure of the lightest touch will be more intense than I can voluntarily withstand. You will have to hold me in place, or I will thrash and squirm out of your grasp, whether I wish to or not.

“After I reach ecstasy the second time, you will again sit back against the headboard. I will stand over you, facing you with my feet outside your hips, and I will lower myself upon your maleness, slowly taking you within me, until we are completely joined. I will probably wail and cry like a little girl, as human males are wont to say, and I may even scream a bit, but you absolutely must not impede me!

“When we are fully joined, we will both hold absolutely still until we have become somewhat accustomed to the intensity of the sensations of it. Then you will find, as I begin to move upon you, that you are in excellent position to kiss me or caress me anywhere and everywhere. At such times a female likes to be stimulated over as much of her body as possible, but spend more time on my mouth, face, neck, bosom, and behind, and be sure to caress my single most sensitive place regularly, if not constantly. Use your thumbs for that then, it is too awkward to use your fingers in that position.

“When our passion burns hottest, you will scoot down the bed, straighten one of my legs, and carefully roll us over to that side, being sure that my leg is not trapped beneath you. Be sure to not break our joining as you do this.

“Then you will be above, and I beneath. Normally we would move to this position much earlier, but with the difference in our size and height it will be difficult for you to caress most of me while in that position, and it will also be very difficult for us to kiss. So we will not move to that position until we are in the mood to abandon ourselves to the passionate animal within, and you will rut upon me with all your strength like the mighty stallion you are! At that point I will want all the vigor you can give me, so do not hold back! Do not worry, females of all types are surprisingly well designed for such play, and you cannot injure me in that way.

“We will continue with that until one of us can no longer continue, for ecstasy after ecstasy, and I warn you, I mean for it to be you who first calls enough!”

“I’ll take that as a challenge!” he laughed.

“You’d better, because it is one!” she laughed in return. “At that point we will be hot and sticky and exhausted, but we will find the energy to open the bed stand, where there are two cloths in a bowl of cool pure water. We will lovingly wash the sweat from each other’s skin, and it will feel delightfully refreshing, and then we will dry each other with two luxuriously fluffy towels, also to be found in the bed stand. Then we will cuddle and enjoy gentle afterplay until we fall asleep.”

“Well, you’ve included all of my fantasies in your plan, and much else besides, so I have nothing to add!” he laughed. “Though I must say, you are far more knowledgeable than I expected from a bride who wore white, even considering you’re an elf!”

“Well, I have researched the matter exhaustively, and I have been fully sexual since I was twelve.” she smiled, then her expression faded. “Dalia and I triggered each other’s sexual awakening, for we slept in the same bed until she gave away her virginity on a whim when we were eighteen. We slept in our own rooms after that, for then she was wont to bring home boys for sex without warning me, and I would not share myself without love. I loved only her and my parents, who refused to share themselves with us that way until after we were married. Though Dalia and I were still lovers regularly after that. That is one gift that I always thought I would share regularly with my husband, at least after we’d been married for a while; the pleasure of having Dalia and I together. Because we were identical twins, which are even more rare among elves than among humans, and because we were judged by many to be quite attractive, I know for certain that having both of us at once has been the most popular sexual fantasy in The Nine Valleys for at least the last five years. And now she is gone.

“Ah, I miss her so much. But I must put her out of my mind for now, before I cry, and get my mood back to what it should be on my wedding night.”

She gave her head a bit of a shake and smiled at him, her eyes glistening. “Shall we continue?”

“Oh yes!”

And so they did, following the program Talia had described almost exactly.

It was almost four hours after noon when they finally emerged from The Living Palace and made their way to Yazadril and Nemia’s tree on foot.

There were a great many more elves enjoying the day near their home than would normally be the case, including many of the youths who had sworn to Mark voluntarily, all hoping to see and perhaps share a cheery word with the suddenly-famous couple.

Mark and Talia noticed none of them. He carried her in one arm like a child, and both their expressions were of such introspective thoughtfulness that it was obvious their attention was elsewhere, and that they barely noticed their surroundings.

Talia wore a simple white summer dress that fell to her knees, belted at the waist, with blue slippers, while Mark wore a new kilt, shirt and stout boots that closely resembled the tattered ones he’d worn when he first entered The Nine Valleys. And in a rare display in these lands, they both wore sheathed battle swords. Mark carried huge GrimFang across his back, the hilt over his right shoulder, the tip of the scabbard swinging centimeters from the grass, while Talia carried the sword of Visinniria in a silver sheath at her side.

Between their expressions and their armaments, none chose to speak to them. Instead the scattered crowd accompanied them at a distance, as if it were only chance that they were going the same way. When the couple boarded the lifting platform at Yazadril’s tree and rode it up, the loose crowd of admirers took up station in the area around the tree and continued their leisure activities.

Mark had to set Talia down at the door, for he could not pass the small doorway while carrying her. Rather than knock, Talia let them into her old home without thinking about it, and they heard Nemia’s call;

“We’re out on the balcony! Come join us, for it’s a lovely day!”

She, Yazadril, and Hilsith sat around a small table for six, talking and laughing.

Talia waited till Mark was seated on a huge chair that had obviously been provided for him, then climbed onto his lap and snuggled against him again. He hugged her warmly, and lightly nuzzled the top of her head. Their thoughts were still so far away that neither remembered to offer a greeting, and they sat staring off into space while the other three halted their conversation in Elvish at their arrival, then picked up again in Common. The three older elves were content to leave them be until they were ready to speak.

Hilsith and Nemia were engaged in a friendly argument as to which of them had pleased Yazadril more times during their encounter, and Yazadril refused to be baited into declaring that either of them was correct. A wide and somewhat self-satisfied grin was locked upon his countenance, and he kept distracting them from their debate by fondly reminiscing on certain moments in their evening that he found particularly memorable.

Finally, in an effort to prove her point, Nemia cast a Reading on herself and reproduced the scene on the tabletop with a miniature Illusion.

“All right, we both keep count of his ecstasies. I will hurry the Reading through the unimportant parts.” Nemia laughed. “And Yazadril, be sure to tell us if we both fail to count one of your peaks!”

They counted, and laughed uproariously at the high-speed antics of their miniature selves during the ‘unimportant parts’.

When Nemia called; “There! I am at four! And that’s the last one!”, Hilsith disagreed.

“Well there is the core of our contention then, for you can plainly see that I was as responsible for that one as you!”

“Well yes, but I had far more of it than you did, so it must count as mine!” Nemia declared with a grin.

“You’re changing the rules!” Hilsith laughingly protested. “Our disagreement is of number, not of volume! And if you wish to contest on the matter of volume, I am sure his first one would give me the victory!”

“Enough!” Yazadril laughed. “At my count you are equaled, at three and one half each! If you wish to contest it further, there will have to be a rematch!”

Talia giggled quietly, and the three turned to her, glad to have finally succeeded in drawing the young couple’s attention, only to find that they had not. The two still stared into space, lost in their own thoughts.

“I know what you’re thinking.” Mark chuckled to his young wife in a quiet rumble, unaware of the other three’s attention.

“I know.” she replied with a wistful smile.

Nemia lightly laid her hand on her daughter’s arm. “What?” she asked with a gentle smile.

Talia jumped in startlement at the touch, then blushed bright red as she met her mother’s smile. “Mark, we’re being rude.” she giggled.

“What? Oh, sorry.” Mark chuckled abashedly as he came back to the here and now.

“Quite all right, and understandable.” Nemia laughed. “But since you chose to speak of it, what were you finding funny just now?”

“Oh. Well it was just after I had first succeeded in joining us, after much effort.” Talia revealed, her blush deepening even more. “I said; ‘I’ve done it!’, for I had not been sure that I could, even with Hilsith’s spells. I looked up at Mark, whose face was full of love and concern for me, but more than that, it was a picture of absolute astonishment! He was looking down at our joining, and said in the most amazed and incredulous voice I have ever heard; ‘That’s impossible!’” She giggled again at the memory.

“To which Talia smiled and said; ‘No. It’s magic!’” Mark chuckled. “It was amazing. I didn’t think anyone could voluntarily submit to such pain, and she would not reduce it further, saying she had no wish to be numbed. I couldn’t bear seeing it, and tried to make her stop, but she held me in place with magic force and disregarded me. She was in agony, covered in glistening sweat with tendrils of her hair stuck to her face, but when she said that, she got such a smile, a smile of love and care for me, but even moreso, it was one of smug self-satisfaction like none I’ve seen before!”

They both laughed again at the memory.

“Mind you, as humorous as I found your expression then,” Talia teased, “My mirth was greater at your look when you realized that Mother had given you magic underbreeches!”

“Oh? And why is that?” Hilsith asked

“It was a look that was amazed, grateful, and horrified, all at once!” Talia revealed.

“The underwear is spelled so as to hide my rampancy, by pressing it against me, and by puffing up around it a bit to hide the bulge.” Mark laughed. “I didn’t realize that until they were all that I was wearing. At first I was surprised, then grateful at the thoughtfulness of it. Then I realized how many times they had saved me from humiliating myself during the wedding! Without them, my many moments of arousal would have been obvious to anyone within fifty meters, as supple as the cloth of my kilt was!”

“I’m glad you appreciate them.” Nemia laughed. “It’s a common feature for the clothes of elven males, particularly young ones!”

“So your lovemaking went well, overall?” Hilsith asked.

“It was absolutely heavenly!” Talia revealed. “At one point I was in ecstasy for over twenty-five minutes continuously! And it was while he was within me, at the height of our passion! The pain at that point was less, and it was no detriment, I assure you!”

“It was paradise.” Mark agreed. “And the sensation when I reached ecstasy within her was unbelievable, for her body kind of ripples upon me then in a way that is almost too pleasurable to withstand!”

“The bodies of elven females sense the introduction of a male’s nectar, my love.” Talia giggled. “Our femininity then engages in contractions that serve to pump your nectar high into our reproductive tracts. Human women’s bodies do so when they climax, as ours do, but theirs do not do so when the male climaxes within as ours do. And our bodies perform these contractions far more effectively. That is why I told you that your seed could not be spilled from within me.”

“Yes, and we males are eternally grateful for the phenomenon!” Yazadril laughed.

“Your mood now is what I would expect after such joyous activities, yet a moment ago it was not.” Hilsith gently pointed out. “Something else must have happened. Is it anything I can help with?”

“No. You cannot help. And I cannot speak of it.” Talia said, resuming her subdued mood.

“Your parents should know, Love.” Mark gently murmured. “They will have hopes for us, and they should know what cannot be.”

“You’re right. Please, you tell them, if you can.”

Mark nodded, and spoke without looking up from his new wife. “It was after we were done and washed up, just as we were falling asleep. She suddenly sat up, her hands on her tummy, with an air of absolute happiness. She told me that she was pregnant, that elf girls always know with certainty. That she would bear my child, an unheard-of thing from a couple’s first mating, and even moreso in a crossbreeding than among pairs of elves.

“Before I had even absorbed the enormity of the thought, she screamed and clutched herself in pain for a moment, one hand on her belly, one on her loins. Then she cried in despair.

“When she could speak, she told me that the curse had ended her pregnancy. It killed our baby. Upon further self-examination, she told me that it had also restored her maidenhead, so she is physically a virgin again. It seems the curse will keep her exactly as she physically was at the moment it was cast, in every way.

“Yazadril, Nemia, I only tell you this because it’s natural for you to hope that we’ll make you grandparents, and I think you have the right to know that we never will.

“Please keep this among us. We particularly don’t want Alilia to know. Who knows how she would react. Besides, it’s no one’s business but our own.”

Nemia went to her daughter and hugged her in sympathy.

“The worst of it is that I believe Mark’s seed to be so potent that he will impregnate me whenever my cycle allows for it.” Talia sadly revealed as she returned the hug. “And every time I conceive, I will have to feel the curse kill my baby. I would cry over it, but I have already done so until I am weary of it.”

“How much time passed between the conception and the destruction?” Hilsith thoughtfully asked.

“Not long.” Talia told her. “A few seconds, a minute at most.”

“Hmm. I could remove your embryo in that time, and with Yzell’s skill in such matters, we could implant it in a surrogate mother, if you so chose.” Hilsith mused. “I would be honored to bear your child for you myself, if you wish it.”

“I would as well.” Nemia nodded as she resumed her seat.

“I cannot put my faith in that yet, for we all know that it would be an uncertain procedure at best.” Talia sniffed. “Though I am overwhelmed by the thoughtfulness and generosity of your offers.

“Now please, someone introduce another subject, for I don’t want to think about it anymore.”

“All right.” Yazadril nodded. “I’m surprised to hear that you succeeded in restraining Mark with the power. I didn’t expect him to wear my first gift to bed.”

“He did not.”

“Oh?! Have you had a breakthrough then? Found another way for the power to affect him?”

“Not at all!” Talia giggled, her lighter mood returning. “For technically speaking, my spell had nothing to do with him! Rather I cast Movement upon the air that surrounded his arms and torso, and held it in place against him! I’m almost ashamed to admit what a feeling of pleasure it gave me, to control my mighty husband in that way!”

“You cast Movement upon *air*?!” Yazadril marveled. “What a clever thing! I’ve not heard of it being done before! Creating Wind, certainly, but nothing so fine and specific as that! We must experiment with the technique, for there are many possible uses for it!

“And speaking of new techniques, we have less than three hours to work on awakening Mark’s power before the meeting of The Assembly of the Alliance. If you two wish to eat, you should do so now, and then we will get to it.”

“The meeting of The Assembly of the Alliance? That’s new.” Mark said. “The last I heard, you elf leaders and the Xervian diplomat were going to do that magical talking thing.”

“A multiple Speaking.” Yazadril nodded. “But while we have been enjoying ourselves, others have been busy. Very busy.

“After we sent the warning to the leaders of the world last night, with the haste you suggested, astounding events ensued with shocking and sudden rapidity. The entire world is now a significantly different place than it was those hours ago.

“Firstly, Prince Jaromer of Thon, Prince Gotimin of Sming, and Prince Fayam of Kuth arrived home after the meeting of the Elven High Council to find that the three human emperors who co-rule those empires with them were already meeting in response to our warning.

“From what Prince Jaromer told me by a Speaking earlier today, his co-ruler in Thon; Emperor Osbald, dominated that meeting rather completely. Not surprising really, since Thon is the mightiest nation on the continent, and Osbald is a most formidable fellow in every way, not least of which is that among all human adepts he is Seventh Wizard and Third Battle Wizard. He has lived almost five hundred years, and has reigned as Emperor of the humans of Thon for over two hundred of those. He questioned Jaromer rather closely, then did the same with Fayam and Gotimin.

He then insistently called for an immediate meeting of the councils, senior wizards, generals, and admirals of all three empires, both the humans and the elves.

“When they had gathered, he explained what was known and the conclusions that have been drawn from the evidence.

Then he said to them, and I quote; ‘Ladies and gentlemen, due to the weight of history, the human race is the least trusted race on Kellaran, with the exception of the demon-spawn of Serminak. If any are going to be unjustly attacked due to the machinations of hidden tricksters sowing strife, it is likely to be us and our allies. It is time for us to show where we stand, for if we do not, the rest of the world will never trust us.’ With that he drew the Imperial Sword of Thon, a powerful talisman of justice even greater than my own, and in the binding presence of many elven wizards, he swore upon it that he would not break the peace, and that he would defend the innocent, and that he would uphold justice, forevermore. He then demanded that they all do the same, and they did, every last one of them, even the elves.

“He and they then summoned the kings, councils, wizards and military leaders of the northern kingdoms of the humans to attend immediately. Some refused, and were fetched to the meeting in their nightclothes by forced Translocation, for the wizards of the northern kingdoms are paltry indeed compared to those of the three empires. Osbald told them that they would swear to justice upon his sword as he had, by Compulsion if necessary.

“King Sorin of Venak and half of his delegation immediately attempted to escape, as did several from other kingdoms, including the Royal Wizard of Finitra and three of his colleagues. When their way was blocked both physically and magically, they attacked. Sorin and most of the others were killed. Six were captured and questioned by magical means. The rest from the northern kingdoms then swore the oath, with blood still pooled on the floor.

“Osbald and Jaromer have not said what they learned from their captives, insisting that it is too crucial to entrust to a Speaking. Though it is exceedingly difficult, a Speaking can be intercepted.

“Osbald then contacted certain allies he had among the dwarves of Kletiuk and the giants of Felion. I was rather surprised to find that any human was on a first name basis with anyone from either of those races, and to learn that he had allies among them was a staggering revelation! He revealed what he had done, and shortly, similar meetings and swearings were being held among nations of those races, and then among the nations of the gnomes of Felion, who are closely allied with the giants there. In fact, we’ve learned that the societies of the gnomes and the giants are as intermingled as those of the elves and humans of the empires!

“In Kletiuk, perhaps a tenth of the attending dwarves refused to swear to justice, and two of those were leaders of nations. All tried to fight their way out and were killed. In Felion, all the representatives of the gnomes swore. Six giants tried to escape, none of them of very high position, but none fought and all were taken into custody for questioning.

“An alliance was then formed between the nations of the humans, dwarves, giants, and gnomes. The elves of the empires stated that they intended to join that alliance pending the approval of the other elven nations.

“They selected an ambassador, the eldest king of the gnomes, who contacted the Grand Council of Xervia, while Jaromer contacted me, and through these two routes, they were informed of the separate alliance made by Alilia, myself, and the ambassador from Xervia last night, while we learned what they had done.

“The leaders of nations of every race outside the dark continent will meet tonight in the Hall of the Grand Council of Xervia, where we will formally declare The Great Alliance of The Nations United for Justice. In order to be sure beyond any doubt that the meeting is not infiltrated, every one of us who attend will swear Osbald’s Oath upon The Truthstone of Falgaroth. I know nothing of that artifact, but word from Xervia is that even a senior wizard or sorcerer of the dragons could not swear false upon it, and that’s quite impressive.

“Then we’ll all share what we know, and discuss what further steps we should take.

“The Xervians tell me, and I quote; ‘The attendance of Mark and Talia Longstrider is necessary, for they are Key to the Nexus.’”

“Wow!” Mark breathed.

“Wow indeed.” Yazadril nodded. “Such a complete gathering of the powerful has never been held.

“Now, we should work on awakening your power in the time we have before the meeting, for your attendance will be taken more seriously if we can succeed in doing so.

“But this is great!” Mark said with a grin. “If everyone is allied, there won’t be a war!”

“That was apparently Osbald’s intent from the moment he received our warning. As I say, a formidable fellow.”

“And all that because of you, my husband.” Talia smiled. “The warning would not have been sent were it not for you. Your wisdom has triggered the uniting of most of the world as a force for justice and the greater good. Obviously you really are a key to the future!”

“Now don’t start piling all that on my shoulders, for I don’t want the weight of it!” Mark laughed. “I made a suggestion, and that’s all!”

“If you insist.” she giggled.

“Before we start working on my supposed powers, I’d like to ask a few questions toward my more general education.” Mark told Yazadril. “I’ve been sort of saving them up.”

“This would be a good time to get them answered then, because I’ll need Talia’s attention for a moment.” Hilsith stated.

“Just as well, for I need two more procedures from you.” Talia told her. “Due to the demands of the curse, I will need to fully accept Mark within me in every way I might with an elven male of average dimensions.”

“Ah. I think I can help you there, though as you would with an average elven male, you will still need to develop your skills in those two disciplines to achieve complete envelopment.

“And I’ll cast a spell that will prevent you from becoming pregnant. It’s a minor thing, and the spell the humans use is directly applicable, which is lucky, as there is no such spell designed specifically for elven females.”

“I am probably the first elven female to want such a thing.” Talia nodded sadly. “But it is a welcome thought, and good thinking on your part. I’ve no wish to feel the curse kill our child whenever I couple with Mark.”

“Exactly.” Hilsith nodded as she rose from her chair. “Let’s step inside.”

“Before you go, would you be able to bring me my globe?” Mark asked Talia.

Talia smiled and plucked it out of the air with both hands, then released it to float in front of him.

“Thanks Love.” he smiled.

“You owe me a kiss for it.” she grinned, and collected a long one before following Hilsith inside with a giggle. She turned to close the door and saw that Mark had been staring at her behind as she walked away, so she took the time to show him an enticing little wiggle and bounce. Satisfied with his expression, she smiled smugly and closed the door.

“Now, what would you like to know, Mark?” Yazadril asked.

“What? Oh! Ah, what was that?” Mark asked sheepishly. “I was lost in thought for a moment there.”

“What did you wish to ask? Your general knowledge questions?” Yazadril gently reminded, as Nemias giggled and Mark blushed.

“Right. Well first off, I was wondering how many people there are in the world, approximately.”

“A natural question. Let’s list them by race, from least to most, and add them up as we go along.

“As you know there are about three and a half million elves, with nations all over the world.

“There are exactly nine million, nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine dragons, and a bit more than half of them reside on the Dark Continent, the rest in Xervia. They have chosen to limit their population at that number.

“Next most numerous of the known peoples would be the giants on Felion, with perhaps one hundred and fifty million.

“There are perhaps two hundred million unicorns upon the plains of Xervia, say three hundred and fifty million gargoyles in the Xervian mountains, and about five hundred million Selkies in the lakes, rivers, and coastal waters of that continent.

“As Alilia said last night, there are close to six hundred million humanoids on the Dark Continent.

“They’d notice if we even named the continent?” Mark asked.

“No.” Yazadril smiled. “Though some credulous fools think they would. Thus the custom to refer to Serminak as the Dark Continent.

“To continue, there are close to one billion, two hundred million dwarves on Kletiuk, and slightly more than two billion gnomes on Felion.”

“Great skies above!” Mark exclaimed. “I never dreamed there were so many people in the world!”

Yazadril smiled. “Mark, there are some four billion, two hundred and fifty million humans on Kellaran. Most are on Debivin, and a fifth of them live on various islands and archipelagos scattered across the oceans, of which there are thousands, most of them too small to be shown on your globe.”

At that, Mark could only gape.

“Now, how many do we have so far?”

“Uh, I’ve got this, but you’ll have to give me a moment.” Mark replied as his brow furrowed in concentration. “I get... Nine billion, two hundred and sixty-four million! Is that right?!”

“Yes, and in addition to that subtotal, there are unknown numbers of the hidden races on Xervia. From what I’ve been able to learn, there are perhaps four hundred million of them who are larger than a gnome, give or take a hundred million, and some of those are as large as a unicorn. There must be a billion of those of the hidden races who are smaller than a gnome, or as many as three billion, and some of them are as small as my hand. Sprites are that size, and we know of their existence for a fact since a few elves have seen one, though never outside Xervia.

“Furthermore, there are two races that are kept in quarantine in Warded reserves in Xervia by the Grand Council. The first are the ogres, of which there are perhaps two million, the second are a race of insects whose name translates as The Swarm. Only the Hive Queens of that race are intelligent, of which there are a few thousand, but there are hundreds of millions of worker drones of the hives, which are the size of squirrels and no smarter than dogs.”

“So there are some eleven billion people in the world, or there about?!! Eleven thousand million!!” Mark marveled. “That’s almost inconceivable! You’d think the very ground would collapse from the weight of them all!”

“Not quite.” Yazadril chuckled. “It’s a very big world we live on, Mark. Kellaran is over twenty-eight thousand leagues in circumference, that’s one hundred and thirty-five thousand kilometers. And, most of the people have congregated in cities and towns and other settlements, which occupy a very small proportion of the land area. Though more than half the world is covered by the oceans, if you picked ten places on the land at random, and visited them all, it is likely that at none of those ten places would you see a single person of any race or any of their works, from horizon to horizon. Most of it is undesirable and unwanted land in its natural state, deserts and mountains and swamps and whatnot.”

“Oh. Well, my next question has to be; what are gargoyles, selkies and ogres?” Mark asked

“You’ve heard of trolls?”

“Yes, and seen paintings of them. But I thought they were mythical.”

“Troll is another word for ogre, and they are definitely not mythical. What they are is three and a half to five meters tall, ugly, smelly, somewhat solitary, and more mean when disturbed than a mother bear after you’ve kicked her cub.”

Yazadril cast an illusion of two figures standing beside the table. “Gargoyles, male and female.” he pronounced. The muscular ape-like creatures were identical except for their loins and the female’s breasts, of which there were four, the lower pair smaller than the upper. They were dark gray, with heavy brows, tiny eyes, and thick fangs that were almost tusks protruding five centimeters out of their wide mouths, two upper ones and two lower ones each. They had huge arms and rested on their knuckles, and bat-like wings protruded from their backs. In their hunched-over posture the tops of their heads were about a hundred and seventy centimeters high.

“I’ve seen statues of such things in pictures of old buildings, perched on the rooflines. I thought they were just decoration though. It kind of makes sense, since these two look like their skin is made of stone.” Mark commented.

“The carving of the statues you’ve seen is a tradition that dates back to an earlier age, when gargoyles were often hired as guards for important buildings.” Yazadril told him. “They never sleep and are possessed of almost infinite patience. And while their skin is not really stone, it’s almost as difficult to pierce with a sword as stone. Their wings are only for guidance in flight, like those of dragons, for like the dragons their entire race has the inherent ability of Flight.”

He erased the illusion, and cast one of another pair, these about a hundred and twenty centimeters tall with sleek brown fur and long gray whiskers. “Selkies.” he declared.

“They look just like big otters with slightly longer arms and legs!” Mark chuckled.

“Not surprising, since selkies and otters descended from common ancestors. The female is the larger.”

“Ah. Let’s see. Why are the hidden races hidden?”

“Because they fear everyone else.” Yazadril told him as he dismissed the Illusion of the selkies.

“Among animals, some are predators, like wolves and lions. Violence is their way of life. The humanoids of Serminak are like that, as are the dragons.”

“Really? I mean, my bodyguard and his mate seemed pretty civilized to me.”

“And they are, but it is also true that the hunting of live prey provides almost all of their diet. The only exceptions are treats and confections. Killing is their life. And the dark dragons of Serminak are not civilized in any way. Those would greatly enjoy hunting, killing, and eating you or me, and would consider us to be rare treats indeed.

“There are other animals, like horses and mountain sheep, who are not predators, but who have some violence in their natures. Their males battle for the right to mate, and they are quick to defend their own with great force. Similarly, most peoples are capable of violence, but are more often peaceful. Humans and elves fall into this category.

“Then there are animals with almost no violence in their natures. Like rabbits, they will flee from attackers at every opportunity, even if it means abandoning their young to die, and they will only defend themselves when they are trapped, or otherwise denied the opportunity to flee from attack. The hidden races of Xervia are like that. They are incapable of attacking others, and some do not even have the ability to defend themselves. It is simply not in their natures to do so. Thus they remain hidden, and under the protection of The Grand Council of Xervia, which is composed of the leaders of the hidden nations, and of the unicorns, gargoyles, selkies, and dragons of Xervia.”

“I see. And how many of the races are magical?”

“Why all of them, to one extent or another!” Yazadril laughed. “The selkies have the least magic in their nature, as is reflected in their short lifespans of fifty years or so, and in the fact that they only have about a dozen true magic users among them, and only a few hundred others who are capable of casting one or two simple spells.

“More magical than selkies is a category that includes humans, giants, gnomes and dwarves, though we’re not that sure about the gnomes. All have about the same proportion of wizards, about one per thousand persons, and while dwarves tend to live four times as long as humans, the lifespans of the giants are about the same as those of humans, and that of gnomes about ten years shorter. Of course most Master Wizards of all four of those races can extend their lifespans to a greater or lesser degree.

“Next would be gargoyles, all of whom have several inherent magical abilities, though they produce no wizards, nor can they learn to use any spells other than their inherent ones. They tend to live five to nine hundred years.”

“Next I think would be the humanoids of the dark continent. They have no inherent magical abilities, and they have a natural lifespan of about a millennium, though most are killed by each other long before that, and very few live past four hundred. On the other hand, almost every one of them is capable of using magic, the ones who are not are soon killed, and most who survive for more than a century are serious wizards indeed. The extent of their ability as wizards to extend their lifespans is unknown, since they tend to kill each other long before that becomes an issue.

“Elves and unicorns have highly magical natures. Most are capable of becoming wizards, elves moreso than unicorns, and elves produce the highest proportions of wizards of serious power. Both races have unlimited natural lifespans. Elves have the inherent magical ability to heal from all injury that is not immediately fatal, and have a perfect sense of time, unicorns have inherent psionic communication, and perfect senses of direction and distance. And while not inherent, elves have a greater affinity for horticultural and ecological magic than other races, while unicorns grasp Translocation and similar spells with almost instinctive ease. It’s interesting to note that while both races have unlimited lifespans, in practice unicorns tend to live three or four times as long as elves on the average, because they have involved themselves in far fewer wars, and because unicorns are extremely difficult to kill, being both physically tough and highly resistant to magically inflicted injury.

“Of course, the most magical race of people are the dragons, though we did not fully know why till last night. As we learned, only they can use both kinds of magic.”

“Two out of three, you mean.” Mark chuckled. “Remember she said to me; ‘the power only you can use.’”

“I stand corrected. At any rate, all dragons have several inherent magical abilities, and while not all have the same ones, all have Flight, the ability to detect every person and animal within five kilometers or so, and one of the four types of breath weapons. About eight out of ten have fire breath, about two of ten can exhale extreme cold, only seven dragons can exhale poison gas, and only three can exhale clouds of corrosive mist. Most have Invisibility, Translocation, psionic communication over global distances, and the ability to Ward themselves against detection by

others over distance. Beyond their inherent abilities, many have become very adept spell-casters. Dragons are almost indestructible and have unlimited lifespans. The oldest one in Xervia has been alive on this world for over sixty-three million years.”

“Are you serious?! I mean, that doesn’t seem possible, given what you said of the manner of deaths suffered by elves! As you said, the chances add up against you over time, even given how tough dragons are! I mean, your own lifespan still seems all but impossible to me, Yazadril! It just seems inconceivable that anything could live... over sixteen thousand times as long! Perhaps you have been misinformed, or misled.”

“And you said you were not skilled at maths.” Yazadril chuckled. “That was a rather quick calculation. And your thinking would be correct, were it not for the nature of dragons. You see, elves are social creatures, like most peoples. We do not sleep very much, nor are we tolerant of long periods of solitude. Most all of us are good people, and would find it difficult to see evil done, and simply bide until it had passed.

“Whereas dragons are generally solitary, they are neither good nor evil by nature, and so their morality is a matter of choice and development and circumstance. They sometimes sleep in a hibernating state for centuries or millennia. They may let an age pass without speaking to a single other person, and are just as likely to ignore great evil as to join it or combat it. They are much less likely than elves to rush out and involve themselves in disputes and wars not of their making. You see how these factors, combined with their general indestructibility, explain their great average longevity.”

“Yes, I guess. What does it take to kill a dragon?”

“Powerful wizardry, other dragons, an attack by many, a lucky or skilled strike with a strong magical weapon. They die from the same injuries we do, it’s just very difficult to inflict such injuries. They can drown, they can suffocate, they can die of thirst, one even starved to death after being injured and immobilized in his sleep by the collapse of the mountain he lived within.”

Hilsith and Talia returned to the balcony, and Talia snuggled onto Mark’s lap again.

“Well, I think I had other questions, but I can’t remember them now.” Mark chuckled. “So I suppose we should get to work on my magic lessons.”

“Excellent.” Yazadril said as he stood, and the others followed his example. “Hilsith, I would prefer you join us. It seems wise to have a Healer present while testing such new magics. And Nemias my love, I’d prefer your presence as well. I may need to call on your abundant power.”

“Oh don’t you worry, Yazadril.” Nemias laughed as she hugged him. “We’re not letting you out of our sight until we get our rematch!”

“Ya! So there!” Hilsith childishly declared as she hugged him from the other side, her smile beaming. It was so out of character for her to speak so frivolously that everyone got a good laugh from it.

“Off to the workshop then!” Yazadril laughed, shooing them off before him. “Normally we would conduct such uncertain trials in The Hall of New Magic, but I think we can do without the attentions of your many admirers for now!” he told Mark.

“How do you mean?” Mark asked as he stood.

“Look down over the railing, my fine youth!”

“Wow! There’s hundreds of them!” Mark exclaimed as he peered over the railing. “What do they want?”

“To see us, to say hello, to offer a hug or a handshake.” Talia laughed, peering over with him. “Many are just curious, for life here is usually somewhat routine. And some want more than that. Notice the bright red hair by the bench there.”

“Balen.” he chuckled as he turned from the rail, still carrying his bride. “I should’ve known. And next time, please don’t lean over so far. You make me nervous.”

“You worry for nothing, then.” Talia told him, her smile slightly pained by memory. “For I’ve already leapt from that balcony railing, an hour or so before we met. The curse would not let me fall a finger’s width.”

That brought the mood of the group to a more serious state as they filed down the stairs.

Once in Yazadril’s workshop, they set their swords aside. Yazadril set an armless chair in the center of the floor for Mark with another facing it for himself. He set another pair near the edge of the room facing Mark’s seat, as Talia began to whistle. “Nemias, Hilsith, please sit here and observe carefully. Take note of anything unusual you detect.” he instructed.

“She’s making my chair grow.” Mark stated in amazement as Talia’s whistling and casting continued. “I’ll never get used to this.”

“My girl, your skill is truly growing by leaps and bounds! Well done!” Yazadril congratulated.

“I got a feeling for it from Mark’s conveyance chair.” she told him when she’d finished, and motioned her husband to sit. She then took her usual place on his lap.

“Talia, I knew you’d insist on staying with him, which is why I didn’t seat you with your mother. But this is dangerous work. In this you must be a wizard, not a wife, and keep your wits about you.”

“I will Father, but what makes you think it will be so dangerous?”

“Just something in the Xervian diplomat’s manner when she spoke of it.” Yazadril said as he took his own seat. “Now Mark, you should be comfortable and relaxed. Hum a note; pick one at random, and with luck it will be your most comfortable note, and the one matching your body’s primary resonance.

“That’s good, we can see you glowing now, as you did when you sang at your wedding. That will make this much easier. Hum a little higher now. Now back to your first note. Now a little lower. And back again. Excellent.”

Mark had to stop and take a breath.

“As I’d hoped, you glow brightest with the first note. Remember it. What did you feel as you did that?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“Most strange. Hum it again now, and close your eyes. Try to detect whether you feel anything different.

“Anything? No? We’ll just have to be methodical then.” Yazadril nodded as he brought a small round side table floating over, and set it between them. He brought over a few other objects, put three of them in his pocket, and set a white pebble on the table.

“Now, hum the note, and try to move the pebble with your power.”

Mark did, and he kept trying with fierce concentration till he had slowly expended three deep lungfuls of air with his humming.

“Pick up the pebble.” Yazadril instructed. “Feel it’s shape and texture with your fingers, look at it from every side. Tap it against the table, listen to the sound. Try to know the pebble completely, to become so familiar with it that you could pick it out from dozens of similar pebbles.”

Mark did these things, then rubbed it against his cheek, then popped it in his mouth and rolled it around on his tongue. Talia materialized a napkin for him, and he spat the pebble into it and dried it. He then held it close before his eyes and inspected its smallest visible features. Finally he set it down on the table again. “I think I know it about as well as I can.” he shrugged.

“Good. Now try the Movement again. Once you have controlled your power for the first time, you will feel it and recognize it, and it will get easier and easier after that. Much like learning to whistle, for example. To move the pebble as little as the width of a hair will start you down the road to wizardry.”

Mark tried for over twenty minutes, re-examining the pebble a few more times while he caught his breath between humming. The pebble remained stubbornly stationary.

Yazadril called an end to that, and had Mark try to guess what picture was on the topmost card of a deck in his pocket. Mark guessed wrong twenty-three times in a row, got one correct, then missed another nine.

He then failed to make a seedling grow any faster for fifteen minutes, then he failed to light a candle for another ten.

Finally Mark’s frustration got the better of him. “This is stupid, Yazadril!” he complained, slapping himself on the thigh. “Why don’t I just put the tine band on, then you can contact me mentally, and *show* me what I’m supposed to be doing!”

“Because mental communication can be traumatic to one such as yourself. Skills such as Speaking are taught in the third year of training for students of wizardry, not on the first day, and what you are asking for is a far more complete mental sharing than that. In order to be able to *show* you how to perform a spell, to know the *feel* of it, requires at least a partial melding of our minds, called a Link. And, not to sound boastful, but the fact is that my mind is particularly formidable. If our communication is the tiniest bit more extensive than we hope, you could end up with decades of my memories. Your personality could be subsumed beneath them, and you would become insane.”

“Well look, I don’t need to know how to *cast* such communications spells, I only need one cast upon me by someone who knows this stuff. And Talia’s not much older than me, so her mind shouldn’t be so formidable, as you say, and I’m sure she knows all this basic stuff enough to show it to me almost as well as you could. So she could do this for me.”

“It’s still risky.” Yazadril insisted.

“We have the curse to protect us.” Talia said as she Summoned the tine band, seemingly plucking it out of the air. “And there is a chance that Mark’s power is so different from our own that these standard teaching techniques may never work. The very thoroughness of our knowledge of our own style of magic may blind us to what we need to see.”

“Still, there are many other things we should try before we take such a drastic step! We must be patient! I had planned to try these standard techniques first, then begin working from the other direction, using the clue we were given that his power source is of a frequency two and six-tenths times that of the source!”

“And how would we utilize that clue?” Talia asked insistently. “You have not particularly studied the source in its raw form, since we believed until last night that it could not be utilized that way. And even if we had, we would still have to adapt that knowledge to the different frequency and to Mark’s unique needs. His powers seem far closer to those of our unicorn friends than our own, from what they told us, and I think they are the ones who should teach all of us those lessons.

“Which leaves us little else to try in the short time we have remaining now. I am willing to try this. So is Mark. I think we should do it, and unless you absolutely forbid it, we will do so.”

Father and daughter locked fierce gazes and stubborn wills.

“Well there’s a scene that brings back memories.” Nemia laughed.

“It does, for she’s as reckless as you were!” Yazadril growled.

“She’s also right.” Nemia told him gently. “Though I share your feelings in this, I know that they are overprotective. She is a qualified professional now, my dear, and in this matter, she knows as much as we do.”

“She knows as little as we do, you mean!” he grumped, then shook his head. “All right. But you will perform each smallest stage of the spell discreetly, and check to be sure you are both fine with it before moving on to the next step, as you were taught when you were first learning this.

“And before you do anything else, give me the tine band, for I’ve thought of some improvements for it.”

She handed it over, and he began gesturing at it. “Since it’s the physical vibrations of it that matter, it doesn’t matter what makes the tines vibrate, so I will spell it to ring constantly while you are wearing it. This will allow a far more consistent effect than plucking it by hand.”

“You know, I’m rather well grounded in basic theory.” Hilsith stated icily. “I’ve now seen and heard enough to realize that you hold an invisible object that allows Mark to be affected by conventional magic. Were I not a Healer, it would not matter, and it would be none of my business, and I would assume that you had good reasons for not telling me.

“But it strikes me that it would have been a good thing for me to know how to use yesterday, when he was dying in my arms and I could not affect him with my spells to save his life! You should have told me then!”

“I’m sorry, Hilsith.” Yazadril gently responded. “But things happened very quickly then, if you remember, and not one second after it became apparent that his life was threatened, the curse saved him.”

“True.” Hilsith admitted testily. “Perhaps I should not be so upset, but it was a horrible experience for me. I’ve lost patients who could not be saved, but to lose someone so young and strong to a simple heart cramp that any third year Healer should have been able to cure, to have to helplessly revert to the most primitive techniques, only to see them fail...”

“I’m sorry for not telling you, Hilsith.” Mark told her. “Yazadril, let her see the band. Nemia too. I’m sure my secret is safe with them, and they may need to know sometime.”

Yazadril gestured again. “It’s a simple object, and its vibrations bring Mark into tune with conventional magics closely enough for the power to affect him at about one-twentieth of its normal rate. So if you must cast upon him, you will need to use twenty times your normal strength, even when he’s wearing it. And as I say, rather than him needing to pluck or strum these tines as he did yesterday, now he only needs to wear it.”

“Remind me to examine it thoroughly later.” Hilsith nodded. “I want to be able to fetch it from a great distance if necessary.”

“I will.” Yazadril nodded as he handed it to Mark, who put it on.

“How does it feel?” Talia asked.

“Better. I think the constant drone of it will be less irritating than plucking it was.” Mark nodded.

“All right. Are you ready to share minds with me, my beloved?”

“As ready as I could be.” Mark grinned.

“Then here we go. Close your eyes. That’s it.”

Talia closed her eyes and gently pulled his head down to hers, till their foreheads rested against each other.

“I can feel you!” Mark exclaimed.

“Yes. Now I’ll just come a little bit closer... a bit more... and...”

Suddenly they both yelped and jumped a bit in their seat. Their eyes flew open as they hurriedly drew their heads back, and then they grinned at each other.

“Wow! Did you feel that?!” Mark exclaimed. “That was close!”

“That was past close! It saved us!” Talia laughed with relief.

“What?! The curse saved you?! From what?!” Yazadril demanded in concern.

“Not the curse!” Mark laughed. “The spell of the wedding chapel! The magic love!”

“As soon as our minds made full contact, Mark’s just pulled me right in!” Talia revealed. “For a fraction of a moment, we were one! We were lost in each other! And then the chapel’s spell drew us back! Right now, it’s keeping us out of each other’s memories unless we consciously remember something, and it’s keeping us physically discreet so we don’t accidentally move the other’s body! But other than that, we are in absolutely complete communication! I hear his thoughts, feel his skin, hear my own voice with his hearing, see with his eyes! It was more than a bit disorienting at first, but we’re getting a grip on it.

“And his mind! You would not believe it Father! His mind has such depth! Only in the silver dragon have I ever felt a mind with such... Such capacity! He is a great vessel, just waiting to have knowledge poured into it! I think he could easily accept my entire wizardry education in about a minute!

“Here love, this is the basic Flame spell, to light the candle.”

“I have it!” he exclaimed, closing his eyes. “I understand it!”

“All right, don’t cast it yet.” Talia cautioned as she closed her own eyes. “Hum your resonant note first. Let me see if I can feel your power, and the differences between it and mine. Yes, there it is, you see?!” She opened her eyes. “You see through my eyes how your glow brightens when you feel that?”

“Now stop the humming, and just feel your power. Push a little harder now, and see, we bring your glow back up to full strength without the hum.

“All right, now, this is what *my* power feels like.”

“Oh! That is different!”

“Yes. I’ve never felt anything like your power before. I want to try something before you try to cast with your power. Here, this is what it’s like to cast the Flame spell with my power. I’m wondering if the time band allows you to cast with regular wizardry, as well as be affected by it. Carefully now, open your eyes, and try to light the candle that way.”

He did, and the candle sparked, then lit.

“He did it!” Yazadril exclaimed in surprise.

“No he didn’t!” Talia laughed. “Not really. He cast the spell, but he did so with *my* power, not his own!

“Here, Mark, feel the difference. Now try it.”

“But I don’t feel that at all, except when you’re showing me yours!” he protested, and extinguished the flame with his fingers. “And so... Right. As you felt, I did the same thing, but I just don’t have any of that myself, so it didn’t light.”

“True, but it was worth a try. Now, as you used *my* power, let me try to use yours. Just relax, and let me guide it. It’s not working, but we feel it *almost* working... you’re so different... perhaps... no, that’s not it.”

“Try the other way, like this.” he suggested.

“I see! That’s closer, but not quite it. But if we... That’s it! That’s it, I’m sure of it! Now, to light the candle, I just...”

“Wait!!!” Mark suddenly screamed in absolutely terrified panic just as a fireball a third of a meter wide appeared around the candle. Its expansion was not quite fast enough to be called an explosion.

Nemia frantically tried to cast a heat shield in front of her husband before he was burned.

Yazadril just as frantically tried to contain the fireball, but it brushed aside his efforts like cobwebs.

Nemia’s almost instant protective reflex managed to get enough energy into her heat shield to deflect about three-quarters of the fireball’s power from her husband. Still, it blasted him back through the air, and he struck the wall three meters behind him and fell to the floor, his hair and clothes aflame.

Hilsith managed to counter most of the heat and force that hit her and Nemia with a blast of cold, but they were still lightly burned on every centimeter of exposed skin.

The fireball blasted into Mark and Talia with unimpeded force and heat, and Nemia’s heat shield directed most of the power on the other side of the fireball their way as well. They were killed instantly, their hair and clothes burned away and their flesh itself set afire as they were blasted back into the wall behind them, Talia still in Mark’s arms.

Most of the inside of the room caught fire as the fireball filled the entire room, and then dissipated.

The room’s fire-fighting spells activated, sucking great quantities of heat from the hottest places in the room and releasing it outside the tree. A second later the flames were gone, ten seconds later the warmest things in the room were cool enough to touch.

Hilsith rushed to Yazadril and cast upon him frantically. Nemia ran up behind the Healer, laid her hands on the polar elf's shoulders, and poured power into her.

"Enough! We've got him!" Hilsith frantically yelled. "Stop, or you'll deplete yourself to death and burn me out besides!"

The two turned and ran to Mark and Talia. A choked sob came from Nemia at the horrible sight.

"Let's hope the curse is as good as it's been said to be." Hilsith murmured, and checked herself and Nemia with diagnostics. Their own natural healing was almost finished with their burns, so she returned to Yazadril.

A minute later, Yazadril regained consciousness.

"Rest easy." Hilsith told him. "You were half a second from death, and it took both of us and every bit of power you had to save you. You are completely depleted, and your system will be in shock for days from such a complete injury, and the healing of it."

"Talia and Mark?" he croaked.

"Gone."

"Something's happening!" Nemia shrieked from across the room.

"Draw my sword. Over there, by the desk." Yazadril groaned. "Give it to me."

Hilsith stepped through the drifting ash and drew the great sword, brought it over and handed it to him hilt first.

He drew strength from it the moment it was in his hand. He took a pair of deep breaths, and used the sword as a cane to help himself stand.

Hilsith helped him up, sensing she would be unable to dissuade him.

He pressed the sword's crosspiece to the center of his chest and closed his eyes. "Mountainfire, my old friend. Help me out, would you?" he murmured.

Hilsith saw the field of magic swirl about Yazadril as the sword flowed power into him, and he used it to further Heal himself.

"Ahh!" he breathed. He took another great breath and shook himself a little, then stood straight and strong. "I'm all right. Thank you." he told Hilsith, and strode over to his wife.

"What's happening?! Is that mist or dust?!" Nemia asked in pained confusion.

A light was glowing from Mark and Talia's bodies, and in it they could see particles drifting through the air toward the fallen pair, accelerating as they neared, then disappearing into the bodies.

"It is both, I think." Yazadril marveled. "Most of the material of their bodies was blasted and burned away, and most of the water they were made up of was blasted or evaporated off as well. Now I think it is being drawn back into place. They are being... Reconstituted. See, already they look... better."

Over the next seven minutes the process continued, and the two were gradually transformed from desiccated husks to exactly what they had been before, even their hair was back in place. Then the light intensified, flashed blindingly bright, and was gone.

They jerked into motion so suddenly that the other three jumped in startlement. "Mark!" Talia yelled, exactly as he yelled; "Wait!!!" She threw her arms around his neck as he sat up with a jerk, staring wildly about.

He noted the burned or singed look of everything, the drifting ash, and Yazadril's thoroughly burned clothes. The old wizard's hair had been mostly burned off, his eyebrows and eyelashes were completely gone, and his skin had a baby-new look. Nemia and Hilsith's hair and clothes looked well singed. The three were staring at him and Talia with an amazement that was almost fearful.

"I... I feel like I should bow down on my knees before them. Isn't that strange?" Hilsith mumbled.

"And no wonder." Yazadril quietly agreed. "I've seen some things in my life. But that was a miracle. They are truly immortal. Nothing could be more certain proof of it."

Nemia slowly knelt beside them and hugged them, and softly cried in relief.

"We... We were dead?" Mark stammered.

"You were almost completely consumed and destroyed by fire." Yazadril stated reverently.

"We were Healed?" Talia quietly asked.

"You were slowly re-created from the ash and dust and mist that you had become. There was light. Quite bright at the end, it was. And then you woke up, as if it had never happened."

"You're all right?" Mark asked. "I mean, you're quite a sight!"

"Hilsith and Nemia saved my life, though they tell me it was a close thing."

"If Nemia hadn't shielded you so quickly, there would have been no chance for you, Yazadril." Hilsith stated quietly, still staring at Mark and Talia.

"Uh, sorry about that." Mark guiltily said. "You'd be well within your rights to say I told you so."

Yazadril started to chuckle. “No.” he laughed. “You were both killed, and if that knowledge isn’t enough to make you more cautious, any admonishments I could add likely won’t either.”

That broke the mood.

“I think new clothes all around are in order.” Nemia smiled. “We three could use some hair styling as well. Then some cleaning and restoration of this room.”

“The room will have to wait.” Yazadril said. “We have only thirty-two minutes remaining before we must leave for the Council of the Alliance!”

“You two stand up and I’ll clean you off.” Nemia chuckled.

“Uh, we’re kind of naked here…” Mark protested in embarrassment, glad that Talia was in his lap, hiding his loins from view.

“I’m quite aware of that.” Nemia smiled. “The ashes you’re wearing are all that’s left of your clothes! But you two almost killed my husband, and so I think I deserve to see your beautiful, magical nakedness, should I so desire it in recompense!”

“All right.” Talia said, and calmly stood.

Mark quickly covered himself with his hands.

Talia stood with her arms up and slowly turned around as Nemia cast the cleaning spell upon her.

“Your daughter is almost as lovely as you are.” Hilsith sighed.

“She is.” Nemia grinned. “And now that she’s married, I’ll be enjoying her soon!”

“Will you invite me along?” Hilsith giggled.

“I think I will! Now you, Mark! Stand up tall and proud for us!”

“I won’t!” he protested.

“Now Mark, don’t be petty.” Talia chided. “We almost killed them all. They had to see us dead, and you know how that must have hurt. Do you truly think they do not deserve this small act of contrition from us, if they wish it?”

“But…! But Yazadril’s… I mean… I can’t!” Mark stammered.

“Well, while I have no real sexual interest in you, I admit that I am curious to see what a human as huge as you looks like when he’s naked!” Yazadril laughed. “And you did almost kill me, so I think a bit of embarrassment will do you good right now!”

Mark glared at him for a moment. “Fine.” he declared brusquely, and stood, his arms firmly at his sides.

“Impressive!” Yazadril laughed.

“Quite!” Hilsith agreed.

“Oh sweet source above!” Nemia exclaimed with a giggle. “What a mighty phallus! I feel like I might faint!” She began casting the cleaning spell on him.

“And on that note, I’m off to fix my eyebrows and whatnot.” Yazadril laughed as he retrieved his scabbard and headed up the stairs. “Don’t forget to bring your swords and the tine band.”

“Now can I have some clothes?” Mark asked.

“Not so fast.” Nemia smiled, licking her lips. “I wish to see it rampant. And I would very much like to drink your nectar from it.”

“And I as well!” Hilsith grinned.

“Now just a damn minute!” he growled.

“Mark, I love you very much, but you are making me irritated with you.” Talia stated firmly. “They saved my father’s life just now, and if they ask it of me, I will gladly lick their toes clean of ashes and service them in whatever way they ask for as many months as they wish. Now if you wish to stay in my good graces for the remainder of the week, you will do as they ask, whatever they may ask.”

“You’re serious!”

“Absolutely.”

“But you heard Yazadril! We don’t have time for this!”

“Young man, between Hilsith and I, we have more than nine hundred years’ practice in the arts of pleasure.” Nemia grinned. “Believe me, you will last exactly as long as we wish, and with a youth like you, that need not be long at all! We *do* have time for this, and I will personally guarantee to have you ready to go in time!”

Mark struggled in indecision, but the thought of Talia’s displeasure was too painful to bear. “All right.” he agreed, and closed his eyes.

“Oh come now, Mark!” Hilsith laughed as she and Nemia stepped up to him. “Don’t act like you’ve been sentenced to torture! Believe me, you’re going to enjoy this!”

And he did. The two elven beauties brought him to ecstasy twice in the space of fourteen minutes.

Talia renewed their mental contact just as Hilsith brought him ecstasy, and she shook and gasped along with him. *“How absolutely exquisite!”* she thought to him. *“I can’t wait to show you mine!”*

“Now feel my love, my husband. You see? I don’t love you a smidgen less, I love you more, knowing that you did this for me. And you still love me just as much.”

“I do. And it’s a good thing we’re talking mentally, for I’m panting too hard to talk out loud!” he chuckled.

“Up the stairs with you now, children!” Nemia laughed. “There’s no use putting on clean clothes in this mess!”

Mark and Talia gathered their weapons before leaving the room. Both swords, as well as Mountainfire, had emerged from the inferno unscathed, as had their scabbards, though the belts were ruined.

“You know, I really have to thank the three of you.” Mark said in thoughtful bemusement as they climbed the stairs. “My love Talia for pushing me into accepting pleasure that was generously offered. Thank you, sweet wife.

“Nemia and Hilsith, thank you for valuing me and desiring me enough to ask to do that for me. Thank you so much. I can’t believe the fuss I made, when all you asked to do was give me pleasure, while asking for none for yourself! And thank you two again for the exquisite pleasure of your deep kiss!

“Nemia, though you pleased me for less than four minutes I think, it was heavenly! Thank you so much.

“Hilsith, your touch was... Well sorry for saying so Talia, Nemia, but Hilsith’s physical skill was supreme! Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome!” Hilsith smiled as she stepped into the kitchen, and Mark stepped up to be cleaned. “As to my skill, I’ve had seven centuries to improve it, and my performance is entirely due to the methods, control, and discipline I’ve developed. I used no magic, nor am I spelled in that way. It is a discipline similar to that of the sword swallower we saw at the pavilion of Kuth last night, and his skill was not magically enhanced either.

“I did enjoy joining Nemia in her ‘giggling adolescent’ sort of mood, though that frame of mind is rare for me.” Hilsith smiled.

Mark chuckled. “Anyway, what I’m leading up to is this; Somehow that experience has freed me from a great fear I didn’t even know I had! I now feel so much more at ease! So much more relaxed to be here, living with you elves, and so much more comfortable with your ways! I don’t know how I could carry around such fear and not even be aware of it, and now that it’s gone, I don’t even know what I was afraid of!

“Anyway, thank you so very, very much, all three of you lovelies!”

“Your fears are the ones taught to you by your culture, and within that culture, they were valid fears, while within our culture, they were merely impediments to your happiness.” Hilsith explained as they all moved to the central room, where Nemia and Talia began producing clothing and accessories. Talia handed Mark an outfit similar to the one that had been destroyed, as Hilsith continued. “You feared being ridiculed and shunned for exposing your nakedness, you feared offending everyone by desiring females other than your wife, you feared that your sexual performance might be judged to be poor, you feared that promiscuous sex with promiscuous females would lead to sexual diseases and unplanned pregnancies and bastard children and the loss of your wife’s love and the breaking of your marriage, as well as shame, dishonor, humiliation and loss of respect from everyone involved. All being what your good mother must have warned you about dozens of times since you first looked at females with an eye to doing more than playing pranks on them.

“And you, Mark, make a greater effort to be perfectly honorable than any other human I’ve met. Most human males who enter elvenlands only take about ten minutes to joyously dispense with their mother’s warnings, seeing they are not valid among elves, and embrace the ways of their hosts with phenomenal eagerness. Whereas with you, your towering nobility has left you quite sexually repressed by elven standards, and even a bit by human standards.”

“Talia has also been phenomenally sexually repressed for a female elf,” Nemia laughed as she re-contoured her eyebrows, “Especially one as beautiful and as universally desired as she is. For such a girl to save her virginity until the age of twenty-nine is unheard of, and is a widely admired act of pure willpower. The differences between her repression and yours being two; One, that she consciously chose hers, knowing full well how it would affect her, and two, that she now has the trigger she has been waiting for to release her from her repression, namely having married you.

“Before she met you, she expected to marry an elf. And while we knew she was too shy to share pleasure with anyone but her sister before she fell in love, and probably too shy to share herself with anyone after that unless the man she loved was present and part of it, I can guarantee that she has always planned on, and fantasized about, sharing her marriage bed and her husband with all her young friends, once she married.”

“And now I can comfortably indulge her in that, though part of me still wants to keep her all to myself!” Mark laughed.

“Don’t worry about having enough of me, for I am always available to you. Always.” Talia smiled. “I had not planned on sharing you with anyone for months yet, though I admit, now that my sexuality is fully awakened, there is a part of me that wants to mate with everyone in The Nine Valleys! At any rate, I will not share our night sessions more often than once in four, or day sessions more than once in three. That is elven slang, night sessions tend to be more serious, romantic, passionate, and generally last one to three hours. Day sessions are usually more playful, and tend to last about an hour. The problem being, that I cannot share you with my friends unless they’ve had the treatments Hilsith has given me.”

“I can help you there.” Yazadril said as he emerged from his bedroom, looking much the same as he had before the fireball, but with a much shorter hairstyle. “I can impress those spells into an item; a wand or jewel, so that you can cast them upon your friends at need.

“With your permission, Hilsith, why don’t we get that out of the way now. We’ve a few extra minutes, and we should still discuss what went wrong downstairs.”

Hilsith merely nodded, already mentally reviewing her spells.

“Do you have an item in mind?” Yazadril asked his daughter.

“Yes.” she said as she pulled a ring from her finger and held it out.

“Your engagement ring?” Yazadril asked in surprise.

“Yes.” she giggled. “I want those spells handy.”

“I will give you temporary versions of the spells for the ring.” Hilsith stated. “They will last for six hours, and will give the recipient five minutes warning before they end. If necessary they can then be re-cast, but you can imagine if a female procrastinated, and was still engaged with Mark when the spells ended.”

“Ouch!” Nemia giggled.

“Also, I have included the anti-pregnancy spell. I find it hard to believe that Mark’s seed is as potent as you think, but if it is, I doubt you will want him impregnating every female you share him with. You can choose to cast it with the other spells, or not.

“I am ready, Yazadril. If you are also, I will give you the spells.”

Rather than answering, Yazadril held up one palm while he held the fingertips of his other hand to his forehead and closed his eyes.

“One moment, he is contacted by Tithian.” Nemia answered for him.

“The Alliance meeting is delayed two hours.” Yazadril announced a minute later. “Apparently, the number of attendees has grown beyond the capacity of The Hall of The Grand Council of Xervia, even though that building had been enlarged to accommodate the meeting. So they are constructing a new facility.”

“In two hours?” Mark asked in surprise.

“I’m sure that the bureaucrats in charge of the arrangements will consider the prestige of all Xervia to be at stake in the matter. They will not postpone the meeting to tomorrow if it is at all avoidable. And since the meeting cannot be held elsewhere because the hidden races will not leave Xervia, they are stuck with it. At any rate, you can be sure that considerable resources are available to the project. It will be finished in two hours.”

“How will the hidden races attend, and still remain hidden?” Talia asked.

“They will be obscured by Illusions, or disguised as something else in that way.” Yazadril told her, then turned to Hilsith.

“You can pass me those spells now.”

Hilsith nodded and closed her eyes in concentration a moment.

“There are twelve spells?” Yazadril asked in surprise.

“Seven primary spells, four diagnostics and a fail-safe.” Hilsith nodded. “If the diagnostics find that it is unsafe for a female to have the primaries cast upon her, the fail-safe will prevent it. This would be obvious to the caster, presumably Talia, at the time.”

“Wise.” Yazadril nodded as he impressed the spells into the ring with a waving gesture, then handed it back to Talia.

“Thank you, both of you.” Talia said as she replaced it on her finger.

“Now, as to our candle-lighting experiment. What went wrong?”

“I’m not sure, Father. I was very cautious. I used only the tiniest part of Mark’s power, and fully expected to have to gradually increase it for a few seconds before the candle would light.” Talia shrugged, pensive at the memory.

“Ah. And you, Mark. You noticed something wrong. What did you feel, and why do you think Talia did not notice it?”

“Talia was casting, and I was just observing.” Mark said, his brow furrowed in thought. “I think that’s why she didn’t notice. And I’d just cast Flame with *her* power, so it was noticeable to me that she was using a lot more of my power. I could feel it kind of rushing out of me, though it was a subtle sensation.”

“So it’s a matter of control then.” Yazadril nodded. “She and you will have to learn to cast with less of your power.”

“I’m not sure that’s possible.” Mark shook his head firmly at the thought. “The fraction of my power that she cast with was a smaller amount of it, compared to how much was available, than the proportion of *her* power I used to light the candle.

Two seconds later he realized that the other four were staring at him open-mouthed. “What?” he asked.

“Think about the implications of what you’ve just said, Mark.”

“Oh. You’re saying I have more power than her?”

“That’s putting it mildly. Talia is among the most powerful of elves. With... with Dalia gone, she is second in raw power among The High People, after Nemia. And that fireball was thousands of times more powerful than the Flame spell should have been. Perhaps millions of times. If she cast with a smaller fraction of your power than she would have used of her own... No, there must be some mistake.

“Talia, give me your memory of the event.”

Talia whistled a trill and gestured at her Father.

“All right, now we’ll see.” Yazadril nodded, as he examined the Reading in detail.

Then his eyes popped open and he took a step back from Mark.

“There’s an expression I’ve not seen on your face before, husband.” Nemia quietly observed.

“I’m sorry. It’s fear.” Yazadril stated, a quiver in his voice, then glared at his son-in-law.

“You listen to me very closely, Mark Longstrider!” the ancient elf declared. “You will not cast your power anywhere within The Nine Valleys, or anywhere within five hundred kilometers of any settlement at all, until you have gained absolute control of it! Absolute control, you hear me! You understand that?!”

“I’ve got it Yazadril, no need to yell.” Mark said, a little hurt by the other’s manner.

Yazadril stared at him another moment, then gave himself a shake and asserted control of himself. “I’m sorry. That was rude. But you are a holocaust waiting to happen. Undoubtedly the most powerful caster of any kind of power that has ever appeared among the humanoid races. Perhaps among any race. There may be a few senior dragons who are stronger casters than you, but I would not bet even a single copper on it.

“You own Hilia, an isolated island. That would be a good place for your training. And such training is beyond me. I suggest you ask your bodyguard’s mate to help you with it. If she turns you down, I will petition the Xervians to have one of the other senior dragons help you, or perhaps the Xervian ambassador. She says she is first in power among her people, perhaps she is qualified. Though I doubt it.”

“Oh come now, Father! Aren’t you over-reacting a bit? I fail to see how raw power makes Mark unsuitable to be your student.”

“A teacher must have the raw power to shield and contain his student’s power! Though such shielding is usually unnecessary until the student is attempting things more dangerous than lighting a candle! I could only train you and Dalia during your more dangerous stages because your mother or Alilia were there to shield you! When Alilia was trained, it was with the entire circle of senior wizards of The People of Life shielding her! And before you ask if Alilia could shield Mark, know that she could not! Mark is as much above Alilia in power as she is above me! If Mark slipped a bit while attempting to boil a pot of tea, he could... Great missing gods, there are no words for the possible destruction! Imagine if he actually attempted to cast a fireball! Furthermore, his power may have only begun to reach it’s potential!”

“Calm down.” Nemia told him firmly. “You’ve made your point.”

“Great stars, when I think how close I came to losing you two...” Hilsith murmured. “I don’t know if I could bear that. I’ve never been in... I mean... Sweet source, what am I saying?!”

“I think you’re saying that you’re falling in love with my parents.” Talia smiled.

Hilsith looked stricken with shock.

“You don’t look ready to talk about it.” Nemia giggled, and put an arm around the other’s waist. “Let’s just leave that conversation till after we return from the meeting.”

“I’m not going to the meeting, am I?” Hilsith asked. “I am neither leader, nor senior wizard. In what capacity would I attend?”

“As Yazadril’s Healer. He *was* almost burned to death today, and were it not for Mountainfire, he would still be weak and suffering system-shock. I think all will agree it right that you keep him under observation for a few days.”

“It will not be a question at any rate.” Yazadril said as he waved it off. “Councilors of nations are each allowed one personal staff member at the meeting, leaders and rulers are allowed three. This is a tiny nation, and I have never needed staff, so it is not a problem to take you.”

“I think we’ll return home until it’s time to leave.” Talia smiled. “Now that we have time, I’d like to choose clothing and accessories more suited to such a great event.”

“A good idea.” Nemia nodded. “But before you go, I’ve been meaning to ask you; why did you both decide to arrive armed?”

“Mark’s sword is too dangerous to leave unattended.” Talia told her. “This one is as dangerous in it’s own way, though she knows who she belongs to and could not be stolen. I had a nice talk with her today while Mark was out seeing that Stripe and Scout were well housed and fed in the stable.”

“It has a personality?” Yazadril asked in surprise.

“Yes, though she only responds to her rightful owner, and only if her owner is a female elf. When Visinniria was a young Battle Mage of about mother’s age she often feared that she was going insane. She was more powerful than Alilia, and her power was more difficult to control. As well, she lived in an age of strife and turmoil, and had spent every day of her life at war since she was sixteen. She had seen things that could unhinge anyone. So on one of her better days she had her Healer confirm that she was still sane, and she stored a limited version of her own personality in the sword, so that she could check herself against it, and thus know if her mind was slipping.”

“I see, but why did you choose to wear it, or her, here today?”

“Oh.” Talia smiled, laying her hand on the hilt. “She was lonely.” Her face clouded over for a moment. “She tells me, rather stridently, that I was a fool to take her off, and that if I had been holding her she would have shielded us from the fire-blast downstairs.”

“She likely would have. Battle Shield is one of the mage spells she is charged with.” Yazadril nodded. “If we’d had the slightest clue what would happen, you could have worn her and I’d have worn Mountainfire, and we’d all have been shielded. For that matter, if we’d known, we’d have been prepared enough to shield ourselves.”

“She has examined my memory of the event.” Talia reported. “She says that if I hold her while I Link with Mark as I did today, she should be able to shield him and train him. She says that both me and Mark should learn to wield his power, since I should learn the first steps more quickly than he, and that he will likely catch up after the first two years or so.”

“I beg to differ!” Yazadril frowned. “As impressive as that sword is, it has not a fraction of the power required to shield Mark!”

“She says that she will shield him with his own power. That’s how Visinniria was trained, when she was faced with the same problem.”

“Well! Just how limited is her personality then?”

“Only the memories that she was given the day she was impressed into the sword are permanent and complete. Some of the more vivid experiences she had as a sword in Visinniria’s hand have been retained as well, though less perfectly. She forgets everything else within a century. Her personality will always be Visinniria as she was at the age of two hundred seventy-one. She does not have Visinniria’s power, except for the spells she is impressed with, but she has Visinniria’s knowledge from that time. And she has been made to be comfortable with being a sword.”

“Amazing! Even I could not craft such a thing!” Yazadril marveled. “Could she cast with Mark’s power right now?”

“She says she could do a few basic things with it now. The rest will take time and practice.”

“Huh. Just how good a mage was she at two hundred and seventy one?”

“She says that without the impetus of constant war to drive us, we learn slowly and cautiously compared to her day. She thinks, judging from what I know of you, that Visinniria at that age could take either you or Alilia as you are now, and probably both of you together. Though she does admit that you are far beyond her in matters not involving war or combat.”

“Is that so? Well my darling daughter, you know almost nothing of my military career, which adds up to almost eight hundred years of combat and command! Alilia’s military experience has included some three hundred years of war as well!”

“Now look, I’m not going to stand here and argue with my father for you!” Talia told her sword. “All right, I’ll tell him that, but that’s it!”

“She says that may be so, but that she grew up during the great global war of the Segregation, which had been raging without interruption for six thousand years when she was born, and that from what she knows from me, wars in this era have been much more limited affairs. She also points out that my memory tells her that the real Visinniria had

become a goddess before she reached the age you are now, and that her ability, even at the young age she was when she made the sword, was indicative of that potential.”

“Hmm. Two very good points.” Yazadril admitted. “She may be right, but it’s a question we’ll never fully answer.”

Talia grinned. “She says she’ll settle for that.”

“How very generous of her.” Yazadril smiled wryly. “You two must run along home now. The Sentries tell me that you are about to have visitors.”

“All right, but before we go...” Mark began, and gathered his thoughts before he continued. “Look, all of you. I’m so sorry for what happened today, and I assure you, I’ll never take the chance of it happening again.

“But Yazadril, I’d still like you to train me. We could find someone from Xervia to shield me, or we could have Talia’s sword do it as she said. And then you could train me, as you trained Talia with Nemia and Alilia to shield her.”

Yazadril considered him, then sadly shook his head. “My boy, I am proud to have you as a son-in-law, and I almost love you like a son already. But I can’t train you.”

“I, ah, I see. May I ask why?”

“Well. I hesitate to tell you, but perhaps you need to know. A trainer needs a certain frame of mind toward his student, and I cannot hold that mood with you. Because I fear you. I’m sorry; I *should* say I fear your power. No one who is so totally ignorant as you has ever held such power. The few who did have such strength did not wield it when they received their first lesson in it’s use, when they still knew nothing about it! They developed it and gained control of it over millennia!

“If Talia had not planned on building up the power of the Flame spell from almost nothing, if she had simply cast it with the strength she thought she needed to light the candle, all the shielding we could bring to bear would have been as nothing! For that matter, this tree would have been incinerated, and everything for a kilometer and a half around would be dead, including your hundreds of admirers outside! But you two alone would live. And thus I cannot even count on your fear of your own death to keep you cautious!

“As I said, you are a holocaust waiting to happen. As we stand here, I am terrified for Nemia, due to her proximity to you, and I’m tempted to ask you to leave the continent of Debinin until your basic training is complete. Perhaps later I’ll feel differently, but for now, the memory of the pain of being practically burned to death a few minutes ago is far too fresh in my mind.

“I cannot train you with such terror in my heart. I will not be within five hundred kilometers of you when you next attempt to cast your power, not if a thousand living swords and dragons assured me that you were fully shielded. Not if I can possibly avoid it.”

Mark stared at him for a long moment, then shook his head and grinned. “That does put things into perspective, doesn’t it?”

“I was hoping you’d see it that way.” Yazadril nodded. “Your guests are arriving. If you walk or fly you will keep them waiting. Let me repair the tine band, and Talia can Translocate you.”

He cast Restore over the dented and discolored steel band, and it returned to what it was.

“We’ll drop over before we go to the meeting.” Nemia told the young couple as Mark slipped the headband on, and checked that his sword was secure.

“Let’s just keep the news of the extent of Mark’s power to ourselves, all right?” Talia asked. “Give us a chance to go to Hilia and work with Visinniria’s sword before we bring anyone else into it.”

“Wise.” Yazadril nodded. “Just try not to even think about it till then.”

“Bye for now!” Talia called, then whistled a complex melody, and cast.

She brought them home in the center of the entrance hall.

“*Good day!*” Silaran called to them. “*We’ve just arrived. We’re in the back yard.*”

“We’ll be right out!” Talia called, then considered her husband.

“Are you all right, my love?” she softly asked.

“I’ll be all right.” he nodded as he carried her through the ballroom. “It hurts a bit that Yazadril’s afraid of me like that, though I understand it. I’m afraid of my power myself, now. Mostly though, everything’s just happening too fast. I feel almost like I’m out of breath from it all, and I never get a chance to get it back before I have to start hurrying again.”

“Me too.” she nodded. “But we’re young and resilient. We can face our challenges, and overcome them. We’ll either get a chance to rest and assimilate everything that’s happened, or we’ll become accustomed to the pace.

Visinniria often thought she would break under the strain of her life, but she never quite did. She just kept getting stronger. And so will we.”

“And so will our love. I love you, Talia.” he smiled, and then he was carrying her outside.

Silaran, Equemev, Kragorram, Povon, Stripe, and Scout filled the back yard almost completely.

“Thiz one iz magnifizent!” Kragorram laughed as he playfully swiped at Scout, who made half-hearted swoops at his eyes. “What a zkillid flyer!”

Povon and Stripe crouched nose to nose as the dragon gave the cat a scratch on his ribs with the tip of one claw. “This one’s psionic sensitivity is rather exceptional as well.” Povon noted. “I could not conceal our approach from him, nor could Equemev. Magnificent. Run and play now, kitten.

“Greetings, Mark, Talia. I trust your wedding night went well?”

“It did, thank you for asking.” Talia smiled.

“Any memorable moments you’d care to share?” Povon snickered.

“That I’d care to share? Well, when Mark first saw me unclothed, he was sure I had cast an enchantment upon my body to be irresistible to him! He actually asked me if I could show him what I looked like without the spell! It took me a few moments to convince him that he was feeling purely natural desire for me!”

“Oh that is rich!” Povon chuckled. “And flattering!”

“Very!” Talia laughed.

“I know what that iz like, Mark!” Kragorram boomed in merriment. “There iz a mozhion that Povon doez, a long, grazeful ztretch, and zhe holdz her wingz out all the way and they get a little flutter at the tipz! I tell you, it zenzd zhiverz up my zpine!”

“I think you understand exactly, my friend!” Mark laughed, as he scratched under Stripe’s ear.

Seeing that Stripe had padded over to make his re-acquaintance with their owners, Scout flew over, landed on Mark’s shoulder, and loudly called for his share of attention. Mark gave him a friendly scratch as well, and Talia gave him a firm rub oh his neck, which he obviously enjoyed.

“Welcome, by the way. I hope you are all well?” Mark inquired.

“*We are, for with your permission, we are all going to the greatest conference of the mighty ever assembled!*” Silaran enthused.

“*Now, bright one, don’t get ahead of yourself.*” Equemev chuckled. “*We haven’t even asked them yet. They might have someone else in mind.*”

“Allow me to explain.” Povon politely interjected. “This first assembly of the Great Alliance will be an historic event, and Kragorram wanted to go, so he asked that he and I be allowed to attend. We were refused; on the grounds that there are many more wise and experienced dragons in Xervia who are more appropriate choices to represent our race, and that there will be limited space available at the meeting.

“Silaran and Equemev also asked to attend, and were rebuffed on similar grounds. All this despite the fact that we four are among the most formidable of our peoples. Xervia chooses it’s representatives by both wisdom and power, and while we have an abundance of power, they give us little credit for wisdom, compared to that of our elders.

“But Silaran has learned that you will both attend, since Equemev’s mother insists your presence is necessary, and that you are each allowed to be accompanied by three personal staff members.

“We are thus hoping that you have not already chosen more than two to accompany you, and that you will allow us four to attend as your staff.”

“*It is deeper than that, Povon.*” Equemev informed her. “*Those who attend will be vouched by many security spells, and in order for us to pass the identity verification as Mark and Talia’s staff, we will have to truly be their staff. This is not a problem for Silaran and Kragorram, as they are already under hire as Mark and Talia’s security and transportation staff. But for you and I to attend under the same consideration, we will have to arrive at some agreement with them whereby we are accepted into their service. And it must be genuine. Diplomats have already been censured for hiring their friends as staff for a day or a week, in order to bring them to the meeting.*”

“I see.” Povon nodded. “I am not sure about this. There are limits to what I would do in order to attend the congregation. I only truly wish to go because Kragorram wishes to, most fervently, and I would not choose to be separated from him right now. And because I have been refused admittance, which irritates me a great deal!

“What will you do, Equemev?”

“*I will present them with a list of the skills and services I can offer, and if Mark and Talia are interested in contracting for any of them, we will negotiate. If we can come to an agreement, I will be able to attend the meeting, unless they have already chosen who will accompany them.*”

“We weren’t told that we are allowed to bring staff, so we haven’t chosen anyone to accompany us.” Talia told them. “For my part, I’d be glad to have the four of you along. And I can think of several ways in which the hire of two such capable ladies as yourselves might be very advantageous to Mark and I. And one in particular.

“One moment please.”

She conferred with Mark privately via their Link. *“Here is what I’m thinking, Love. My, you accepted all of that almost instantly! That’s amazing!”*

“I like it. All of it.” Mark stated out loud with a grin. “Go ahead.”

“Thank you.” Talia smiled, and stood on his belt buckle to give him a quick kiss, then hopped up on his shoulder, almost balancing the weight of the great eagle on his other shoulder.

“Here’s what we’re thinking. I’m assuming you both know about the approaching nexus in history, that Mark and I have been declared key to it all, that the leaders of the humanoid races have met and sworn to justice, and that some fought to the death to escape, while some were captured.

“Yes. Equemev and Silaran told us all of that earlier today. That’s when we learned of the assembly of the Great Alliance.” Povon nodded.

“And do you also know of the curse cast on my father and Alilia, and of the atrocity at Shinosa Valley?”

“We knew of those, as they were revealed in the Reading Alilia placed in the sapphire she gave to my mother, and thence to the Grand Council of Xervia.” Equemev revealed. *“We may not be considered wise enough to help decide our people’s fate, but we are considered important enough, and trustworthy enough, that we are privy to all available information.”*

“Excellent. The approaching nexus may or may not include a war. We are determined that it will not. It is in our minds that we will study battle wizardry, and we will strive to contain any violence that may erupt before it spreads into open warfare, by apprehending the perpetrators or instigators at the earliest opportunity.

“Kragorram and Silaran are already contracted to assist us in combat. I cannot picture the two of you allowing your mates to charge into danger without you, so if we attack our enemies, we almost gain the assistance of the two of you by default. Since Kragorram and Silaran were well compensated for these services, it would not be fair if you were not also compensated.

“We have already agreed that we three would share our arts, as our males agreed to share their martial skills. I now propose that all six of us share all these skills, that we train and practice together as a unit, a relatively small but powerful strike force that can act far more quickly than the great hosts of the Alliance.

“We would be under Mark’s overall command. Since he already has seventeen hundred and sixty-five elves and the Second Wizard of the elven race under his command, he is the logical choice, and he will need to develop his leadership skills.”

“Hey! You didn’t tell me that part!” Mark protested.

“Hush, I’m negotiating here.” Talia smiled.

“I did not know you had formed a command, Mark!” Kragorram exclaimed excitedly. “That iz almolt the entire nashion of The High People!”

“Only a few are of my nation.” Talia smiled. “The rest are of every nation of my race.

“To continue, Mark will have overall command, and who is best suited to provide us with tactical leadership during various combat situations will become apparent during our training. That training will also include our learning to work closely with Stripe and Scout.

“Povon and Equemev, the term of your hire will be until stability is reached after the nexus. The nexus is projected to happen in one to three years, but it may leave the world in turmoil for decades or centuries. The judgment of a new stability having been reached will be decided by The Assembly of the Alliance.

“As your compensation, I offer two of the Magical Items of Special Significance that we were given as wedding gifts.

“Povon, I offer this.” Talia pronounced as she produced the staff from that collection, a slightly gnarled two-meter length of a wood that had been bleached almost white, topped with a brass circle ten centimeters in diameter. “It would be of use to any power caster, and of most use to those with the most power, so I think you would find it very useful indeed.”

“I don’t know, I’ve never cast with a wand before. Few dragons ever have. Maybe none have.” Povon mused, eyeing the item with interest. “And that one is strange, I can feel it from here. It feels kind of nice though.”

“Why don’t you try it in your hand.” Talia smiled, offering it up. “See how it feels, and note its function, while I negotiate with Equemev for a moment.”

The silver dragon tentatively took the staff, which was just the right size for her to hold as a wand, and considered it for a moment. “Ooooh!” she exclaimed. “It’s a general purpose focusing amplifier!”

“Yes.” Talia giggled. “Equemev, I offer this.” she said as she produced the ring from the Significant items, a simple gold band that would fit on her thumb. “It is an elven ring of protection, and is charged with formidable power. It offers several layers of automatically activated Illusions, Shielding, Force barriers, and transducing-reflecting spells, the design of which are based on the border Wards of the lands of The People of Rain, in Felion, and there are also giantish and gnomish aspects to some of the spells. It would take several dozen very intelligent, very powerful, and very determined wizards to harm the wearer of this ring, and it would take them a long time.”

“No, Talia, you must keep that for yourself.” Equemev insisted. “You are very small and fragile compared to one such as I. As the most vulnerable of this company, you are far more likely to need it than I.”

“I beg to differ, Equemev.” Talia countered. “Mark and I are practically immortal. We proved it conclusively today, so we two are the *least* vulnerable here. And while I’m sure that you are very resistant to harm, I think of us here, you are the most likely to sustain injury should we engage in battle. Except for Stripe and Scout, and this ring is not appropriate for either of them.”

“I see. I admit that I do covet it.” Equemev mused. “I have had only the basic training to qualify as a Combat Sorcerer as part of my general studies, but I have learned enough of war to have a healthy fear of it.”

“I accept.” Povon interrupted, and it was strange to see that the dragon was recognizably grinning as she fondled her new wand. “I will not give this up. No one will expect me to bear such a thing, and it is a wondrous tool. And besides, you had me with your first argument. That I could not possibly sit at home like a human housewife while Kragorram battled without me. Where he fights, I fight, for as long as our love lasts, which I hope will be forever! Though I do admit that I feel better about agreeing now that you have compensated me fairly for my service.”

“Talia, Mark,” Silaran said, “If Equemev does not contract for the ring, I wish to negotiate for it, and if I can gain it, I will give it to her. It would ease my mind greatly to know that she is protected by such a thing during the days ahead, and I mean for her to have it.”

“That will not be necessary, my love, for Povon’s agreement and reasoning have decided me.” Equemev told him. “I’d have negotiated longer I think, just for the principle of it, but as Povon said, my agreement was forgone at the first argument.”

“Any of your people would negotiate till the moons fell, simply for amusement!” Povon chuckled.

“True.” Equemev agreed with a mental smile and a playful flick of her tail. “Fit me with the ring, Talia. Then ask our vow, and we will give it.”

The black and silver unicorn trotted lightly up the steps and lowered her head. Talia slipped the ring over the tip of her tapered, spiraled horn, and snugged it firmly.

“Do you, Equemev and Povon, swear to serve us under Mark’s command as contracted comrades at arms, according to the terms and conditions I have described here today?” Talia asked.

“We do so swear.” The two answered, and again Mark was dazzled by brightness.

“Drat!” he cursed, rubbing his eyes as spots swam in his vision. “I wasn’t expecting the flash with you two!”

“I am as surprised as you!” Povon marveled. “I would never have expected enough power from a single elven wizard to make me feel it adding binding to my vow!”

“I would not have expected such a thing from all the elves alive!” Equemev exclaimed. “I was taught that such bindings did not affect my people at all, yet I clearly felt it!”

“I don’t think it was entirely my own power that was responsible for that.” Talia conjectured. “I also carry within me the power of Alilia’s curse, and the power of my wedding vows taken within the great chapel before the entire elven race. Mark carries enormously more of that, plus power he drew directly from every elf at our wedding, plus the power of sixteen hundred and eighty one elven Compulsion spells. We can’t draw on any of that to cast with, but it’s still ambient elven magic, and so it should add to the binding of vows sworn with us. And of course you both now hold highly powerful elven artifacts.”

“It was a very pleasant sensation!” Povon giggled.

“Was it? It made my mind itch for a moment.” Equemev revealed, tossing her head and mane in irritation.

“Careful you don’t lose the ring!” Mark advised.

“No chance of that, I assure you!” Equemev laughed with another toss of her head.

“Well, we welcome you to our company.” Mark grinned. “We’ll raise a few eyebrows when we make our entrance tonight, I think!”

“Yez ladies, welcome to our unit!” Kragorram laughed, tossing his head and blowing two black smoke rings from his nostrils. “And may the forzez of evil tremble!”

“I know it sounds juvenile of me, but I can hardly wait to observe my mother’s reaction when we arrive!”

Equemev giggled mentally as she whinnied delicately out loud.

“Speaking of mothers,” Talia commented as she agilely climbed down from Mark and scratched Stripe’s chin, “I should ask my parents to inform the meeting’s organizers that we will attend with our full complement of staff, and how much room our party will require.”

“Go ahead, my love.” Mark nodded.

As Talia cast Speaking to her parents, Mark addressed their four companions. “The first thing we need is information. Who struck Shinosa Valley? Who cursed Yazadril and Alilia? What were King Sorin of Venak and the Royal Wizard of Finitra up to, and the rest who refused to swear to justice, and what have they been doing, and do they have anything to do with any of the other acts of sinister wizardry? And just to be on the safe side, I’d really like to know how things are going on the Dark Continent.

“Hopefully, we’ll learn all of that tonight.

“Now, do any of you have any commitments on your time?”

“Povon and myself have no formal duties, and no personal commitments except to each other and to this company.” Kragorram grinned.

“I am part of the reserve of the Xervian Guard, but I am presently in a stage of life you might call ‘the gaining’ in this language, when I am expected to earn my own way in the world, and to amass sufficient wealth to cover any short-term needs or emergencies.” Silaran told him. *“My present status in the Guard is; detached to your service.”*

“What he’s saying is that he’s available, and I am as well.” Equemev stated with a mental smile. *“I am still a student and researcher, but I schedule my own curriculum. And since I will learn useful knowledge and skills while in this company, I will consider it a valuable part of my education.”*

“All right. Talia and I have a lot of work to do over the next few days. Especially me. Talia is already a serious enough wizard to merit standing at your side. Whereas I recognize that my own abilities as a warrior hardly make me fit to be more than a hindrance to the five of you, if we actually meet anything that could challenge you.”

“Perhaps, perhaps not.” Povon mused. “I think you have yet to inspect the collection of weapons and armor I noticed at your wedding last night. And I recognize your sword from histories I’ve studied. A nasty toy indeed. When I consider that Stripe and Scout are your weapons as well, I can think of worse choices to have beside me, come what may. And if necessary you can call on your little army of elves.”

“I won’t involve them if I can help it.” Mark stated firmly. “And while I thank you for your generous assessment of my possible contributions, we have learned that I can cast with Talia’s power. With a bit of work, that could almost make me a wizard. I think I could do some serious things with only a little of her power.”

“Have you made any progress with your own power?” Equemev asked.

“Yes, though we’d like to keep that to ourselves as much as possible for now. I haven’t cast with it yet. Talia cast with it while Linked with me, but it didn’t work out the way we’d planned. Learning to use it will take a lot more work than my learning to cast with a bit of Talia’s power.

“We’ll be working on those, and as she teaches me her art, I will also be teaching her the ways of a Ranger and a warrior.

“For at least the next few days, I’d like you four to do the same. Show each other the basics of what you know, and get a feel for what the others are capable of. At this stage it’s more important to learn how to complement each other well, than to be able to duplicate each other’s abilities.

“We’ll all get together for an hour or two every day to work together as a group, and we’ll gradually increase that time.

“When we’ve learned all we can from each other, we’ll seek the finest instructors we can get.

“But let me be clear on one thing; we’ll do what we can, when we can. If something comes up in the next five minutes that we can do to help ensure a bright future for all of our peoples, we will do it, whether we could be better prepared for it or not.”

“Well zaid, Mark!” Kragorram laughed. “We will stand ever ready to combat evil wherever we find it!”

“Ah, Kragorram, you are so rambunctious!” Povon laughed. “And Talia, your mate seems ready for leadership already!”

“He is strong and noble, but still hesitant to lead.” Talia giggled.

“My husband, consider that many of the elves who swore to you are valiant and impulsive glory seekers, as you put it, who swore to you because they hoped to be part of great events. If you go forth into peril and don’t include them in any way, many will likely try to accompany you of their own accord, which could lead to disaster for them and chaos for us.

“It would be far better to form them into a company, and to train some healthy military discipline into them. Then, if we can avoid involving them, they are more likely to follow the order to stay behind. If we are forced to involve them they will at least be prepared for it, and will have their best chance to emerge unscathed.

“The rest who have sworn to you will want to help as well. All of them have skills and resources to offer in support of our efforts, that we may have to use, and that would not involve them directly in combat.

“Perhaps most important, if we learn the required spells and procedures, you and I will be able to draw upon the magic of all seventeen hundred and sixty-five of them, so that we can add that power to our own, vastly strengthening our spells. If we practice this with them, we’ll be able to draw on their power quickly and easily, even if we fight on the other side of the world while they’re safe at home.”

“That’s a pretty impressive thought!” Mark exclaimed. “But still, I don’t feel comfortable with commanding any of them to do any of that. I don’t think risking their lives was included in what they had in mind when they swore to me.”

“We can ask them politely.” Talia smiled.

“All right, you’ve convinced me!” Mark chuckled. “See to that for me please, would you dear?”

“I would be delighted to!” Talia smiled, and floated up to kiss him on his cheek.

“Well, perhaps having command won’t be so difficult!” Mark grinned as he gave her a quick hug. “All I have to do is decide which of you vastly more capable people to delegate to!”

“Exactly. And right now you will designate me to choose what we will wear tonight.”

“Of course!”

“All right.” Talia smiled, then addressed the group “There is a saying among my people that loosely translates as; if you’re going to have a surprise, make it a great one. I think we should make every effort to appear as impressive as possible tonight. It’s a fine thing to attend such a congregation, but it would be better yet if we were taken seriously by the assembly.

“Now I know that you dragons and unicorns don’t tend to decorate yourselves as we do, or to wear arms or armor. Yet perhaps you have a few things that you could wear to maximize your magnificence? Mark and I have enough selection that we could complement almost anything you might choose.”

“I will wear my most magnificent item! I made it myself!” Kragorram declared.

“And I will wear your most magnificent courtship gift!” Povon told him as she nuzzled him under his chin. “He made that as well.” she proudly revealed to the others. “The crafting of items is Kragorram’s only real use of the power, beyond his inherent abilities, but the items he makes are wondrous, crafted with strong hand and strong power, forged with his own fiery breath focused white hot.”

“*I will wear my formal uniform of the Xervian Guards.*” Silaran told them. “*It’s gold plated steel armor and shoes, with silk accents. I like to think you’ll find it rather impressive!*”

“*I have a vast collection of accessories.*” Equemev happily revealed. “*Let us confer.*”

“Gentlemen, or should I say noble male companions, let’s leave our ladies to their task for now.” Mark said, as he grinned at the three females’ eager fashion conference, then turned to Silaran. “As for us, I wonder if you could put the three of us in contact with Prince Dizil of The People of Rain, in Felion?”

“*I can, but it would take a minute.*” Silaran nodded, and thoughtfully tapped his right rear hoof. “*I am not familiar with that person, so I will need you to give me your memory of him so I can find him, and even then I will have to, ah, look for him? Scan for him? This language is so imprecise. I am not familiar with Felion, so I will have to mentally search it for him. Once I have him, I will need to have Equemev lend me a bit of her power, so that I’ll have the psionic strength to include you both in the Speaking.*”

“*Here, Love.*” Talia psionically told Mark, and she tossed him a smile over her shoulder just before the three females Translocated to the ballroom. His globe appeared floating before him.

“*Thanks Talia.*” Mark grinned.

“Here Silaran, this globe shows the location of the lands of The People of Rain within Felion, and here is the capital; Shem Cladi. Dizil will likely be there. Does that help?”

“*Very much so, thank you.*” Silaran nodded.

“Good. Now, if am I correctly remembering and imitating what Talia did to pass me her memory of a Flame spell earlier, Dizil is like this.

“Did you just receive my impression of him?”

“*I did, and wonderfully well done!*” Silaran exclaimed. “*You do learn quickly! Your image of Dizil is among the most detailed I have ever felt, in sight, voice, character, and aura, and it was expertly passed to me!*”

“Perhapz *I* could lend you the pzionic power you will need to include uz in your Zpeaking, rather than dizturb Equemev for it.” Kragorram offered. “I think we zhould leave our femalez uninterrupted right now. Theze will be momentz of bonding in their friendzhip.

“You likely could! Once I have contacted Dizil, I will Speak to Mark. At that point, they will both be Speaking with me, but not to each other. Then, you will Speak to me with your power, rather than me initiating another contact with you. In this way, your power will be bought into the link that my spell controls and stabilizes, and it should be more than enough to sustain vibrant four-way communication, despite the great distance.

“Give me a moment while I get Dizil’s attention.” Silaran said as he closed his eyes, and went silent in Mark’s mind.

“By the way, Kragorram, we’ve all noticed the difference in your speech.” Mark told him with a smile.

“Thank you. After we left your wedding, many hourz after actually, Povon and I dizcuzzed it. At that point, Povon was zorry for criticizing it, while I wanted to correct it. We zpent a pair of hourz working on it, and we agreed that I would zpeak in thiz manner, which iz a compromize. Though I am now capable of normal articulazhion. Lizten.”

The great red dragon’s brow furrowed with intense effort, and he spoke even more slowly than he usually did. “If I concentrate very hard, I can remember that most sibilant sounds are whispered, and not vocalised. Vocalized. And reduce the resonance of my vocalized sibilances.

“But that iz too much work.” he concluded with a shrug.

“I have him, Mark.” Silaran said, and nodded to Kragorram.

Suddenly the four-way Speaking was obvious, and of such clarity that they could hear every tiny background sound in Dizil’s location, which was the Council Hall of his nation.

“Greetings and good Day, Prince Dizil, on behalf of me and my companions here.” Mark said, still speaking out loud, simply because he felt more comfortable doing so.

“Greetings and good day, on behalf of myself and The People of Rain.” Dizil formally returned, then chuckled.

“What can I do this fine day, for you and your unique fellowship?”

“Prince Dizil, I wish for Hilia to be a sovereign nation. Is it possible that this might be arranged?”

“Huh! It might, but I’ll need to know why you desire this thing!” Dizil exclaimed in surprise.

“Talia and I and our company, which now includes Povon the silver, Equemev, fifteenth sorcerer of the People of Morning, and many citizens of every elven nation, wish to institute an elite military academy on Hilia. We further intend that upon completion of our training, we will form a specialized mixed fighting unit serving directly under the most senior command of the forces of The Great Alliance. To do these things, I will need to have them approved by the governments of the nations we are presently citizens of, as well as your government, and perhaps the governments of the giants and gnomes of Felion. I wish for Hilia to be sovereign because I think it will help minimize the diplomatic negotiations necessary for this.”

“Huh. You’re right about all of that.” Dizil agreed. “Except that the giants and gnomes have no say in the matter, unless you have some of those in your company. My people are fully independent and sovereign, we are not here under the sufferance of the other nations of Felion, as the Lava Shapers hold their land under the Xervians.

“Now, it sometimes happens that one nation will pass land to another. Of the various methods used to do so, only purchase would be appropriate here. And I suppose if you formed a nation first, mine could sell Hilia to yours. For now I could consider Talia and yourself to be the provisional government of a newly forming nation. What titles would you assume?”

“Prince and Princess of Hilia, I think.”

“Wise. If you chose king and queen, some would resent it.

“Now, Hilia is of no strategic or economic value to my nation, as it is thousands of kilometers in distance from Felion, and well clear of any major shipping routes. Sometime I must tell you how we acquired it, for it is a surprising and complex tale. We have derived no tax revenue from it, on the contrary, we have absorbed the minor cost of having it checked periodically to be sure that it has not become a haven for pirates. Our scouts generally used the occasion as an excuse to go swimming while on duty.

“I am in favor of your plan, as such a mixed force as your own have never trained together as a permanent unit, and the formation of such can only be of value to the Alliance. You would be a surprise to our foes, to say the least, should it come to that. As you already own title to the island and to the waters around it for five hundred kilometers in every direction, that leaves only the matter of negotiation for sovereignty, and since the transaction is of benefit to my people’s treasury, I will limit your cost to a token ounce of gold.”

“We will pay your people one thousand ounces of gold for the sovereignty of Hilia. Let no one say that we did not value this great thing you are doing for us.

“And you can tell your scouts that they’re still welcome to visit, as are the rest of your people, as long as the visits are scheduled. Due to the work we will do there, it would not be safe for them to be allowed surprise visits.”

“Wise in both points, and most appreciated. We’ll consider it done then, on the condition that the exchange of your payment for our receipt occurs within seven days. We should hold a small ceremony then.”

“For now, know that The People of Rain are proud to be the first nation to recognize the sovereign independence of The Principality of Hilia! Congratulations, Prince Mark!”

“Hail Prinze Mark!” Kragorram laughed, delighted with the development, and managed to sweep an acceptably courtly bow. Silaran joined his bow with a mental chuckle.

“Thank you. It’s been a pleasure Speaking with you, Prince Dizil. A very pleasant day to you and yours, and we’ll see you at the meeting of the Great Alliance.”

“Thank you, and best of luck in all your endeavors, Prince Mark. Pass my felicitations to Talia and to your other associates.” Dizil said, and disengaged from the Speaking.

“Well, I’ll have to interrupt Talia to tell her of this!” Mark laughed. “I think she might be upset if I didn’t!

“Oh Talia? I have something to tell you. Could you include the girls in this Speaking?”

“The girls?!” Povon laughed. *“Did you hear that, Equemev? He refers to us as he would a pair of human tavern wenches!”*

“I did. The girls.” Equemev mused. *“I think it indicates a certain friendly camaraderie, in this context, in this language. I think I rather like it.”*

“Do you? Well, then I shall like it too!” Povon giggled.

“Thank you.” Mark grinned. “I would like to announce that I have successfully concluded negotiations for the independence of Hilia. And so, I would like to offer my congratulations on your ascension, Princess Talia, co-ruler of the sovereign Principality of Hilia!”

Talia suddenly appeared standing on a meter of air right in front of Mark, her face beaming with incredulous joy. “Are you *serious?!!*” she demanded as she grabbed both his lapels and gave him a tiny shake.

“Quite serious, Your Majesty!”

“Oh you great big beautiful man! Prince Markhan Reginus Longstrider of Hilia! Thank you thank you thank you!” Talia gushed as she jumped into his arms and wrapped her arms around his neck, then gave him a very serious kiss indeed.

“Oh that was fine!” Mark enthused when she was done.

“Oh? Then here, have another!” she giggled, and kissed him again.

“We already knew, but we didn’t tell Talia.” Povon chuckled. *“Us ‘girls’ that is. We couldn’t help listening after you named us to Dizil.”*

“Then thank you for not spoiling my surprise.” Mark told her a moment later.

“Speaking of surprises, it’s time to get ready to go.” Talia smiled. “If nothing else, we’ll be the best-looking party at the meeting!

“By the way, Mother tells me that we will not be announced at the same time as the delegation for The High People, so they’ll be leaving separately. All the attendees will receive a Projection from the meeting’s organizers, wherein the delegates from Xervia will be announced and will swear Osbald’s Oath upon the Truthstone of Falgaroth in the center of the Hall, then take their places in the areas assigned to them. Then, as each visiting delegation is announced, they will be Translocated to the center of the hall by the Xervians, swear upon the stone, and take their places.

“Apparently, we’ll be announced last.”

“Get ahold of them again, would you please Princess Talia? It would be nice if we were announced with our new titles. You might mention that our nation’s independence has been recognized by the government of The People of Rain.”

“Excellent idea.” Talia smiled, and closed her eyes for the Speaking.

When the Projection came from Xervia, they had been ready to go for over an hour, and had spent the time examining a scaled model illusion of Hilia provided by Equemev from her Reading of Silaran, who had Translocated there for a moment to memorize the view from the top of the lip of the volcano. At the moment the Projection reached them, they were planning the locations of barracks and other facilities.

An Illusion appeared on the lawn beside them, six meters round and two and a half meters deep, showing the inside of a great hall in miniature. The hall was of a circular shallow bowl shape of pure white marble with a domed ceiling, and easily large enough to seat tens of thousands of humans, were it filled with human sized chairs. Most of the floor was bare stone, some was carpeted, and there were scattered areas of seating close to the center for humanoids from gnome to giant size. There was a flat, circular area in the center of the room a step higher than the surrounding floor, and in the center of that was a house-sized boulder of translucent blue stone, shaped like a thick crescent with rounded ends, glinting from the millions of tiny facets cut onto its entire surface.

The Illusion remained the same for five seconds, then it focused closer until its six-meter-wide area was filled by the low stage at the center of the hall.

A white dragon appeared, hideously scarred along his right side, that forelimb only a stump, half the wing missing, that side of his face, neck, and upper torso twisted with scar tissue. “Greetings. I am Somonik, Eldest of the Draconians of Xervia. Today is an historic day. Today, the leaders of the nations of the world who stand for justice will meet in this place, to declare our Great Alliance.”

He turned a bit and laid his left hand upon the glittering blue boulder. “I swear forevermore, that I will not break the peace, that I will defend the innocent, and that I will uphold justice.”

Even through the Projection, the dragon’s vow triggered a bright blue light in Mark’s vision.

Somonik took his hand from the stone and stepped to the edge of the stage. “I am Speaker for The Circle of Ninety-Nine; which is the ruling council of the dragons of Xervia, as well as being First Speaker of The Grand Council of Xervia.

“First, I present in nines, The Circle of Ninety-Nine.

Nine dragons appeared around the stone. Each laid a hand upon it, then they spoke the oath in unison, their voices creating a huge rumbling chorus. After they had moved to the outer edge of the room and reclined on the floor, nine more appeared and did the same, then nine more, dragons of every color of the rainbow, as well as gold, silver, copper, bronze, white, and black, and they varied widely in size.

“What a magnificent sight. Somonik must be fairly small for a dragon.” Mark commented, noticing that the scarred white was dwarfed by the rest.

“He is The Eldest of All, over sixty-three million years old.” Povon informed him. “Dragons grow larger now than they did then. He is only two-thirds my size, and I am among the very smallest of the young adult dragons. The largest of The Ninety-Nine is almost Kragorram’s size.”

“Are you the biggest, Kragorram?” Talia asked.

“No. Of the four and a half million or zo dragonz in Xervia, there are perhapz two or three hundred who are larger than I, though none are among The Ninety-Nine. Billigog iz the largezt dragon, and zhe topz me by a full head and shoulders when we zit up ztraight. Her weight iz almost double mine.”

“*The largest dragon is a female?*” Equemev asked in surprise.

“Yes.” Povon told her, while still watching the illusion. “Males average five percent larger, but the variance in size among our genders is much greater than that. There are many small males, and many large females. Right now Billigog, a female, is biggest, and the biggest dragon has been a female during about one third of our history. And female or male, size has no relation to the strength of our power or our flame. I myself am among the strongest in those ways, far stronger than Billigog, though she is four times my size!

“Ha! When Billigog learns that I attended this meeting while she could not, her blue scales will turn green with envy!”

Soon the last of the eleven groups of dragons had appeared and sworn and taken their places. The Ninety Nine (minus Somonik) filled the outside of the great hall, occupying over half of the floor space.

“I present Tithian; Speaker and Justicer of the Senate of The People of Morning, and the members of the Senate of The People of Morning, and their staff.” Somonik announced.

A herd of over fifty unicorns appeared around the gigantic blue stone, as colorful as the dragons had been. They turned and stood shoulder-to-shoulder facing the stone, touched the tips of their horns to it, and swore the oath in psionic speech. Three more similar herds followed.

“*Your Mother has been promoted since this morning.*” Silaran commented to Equemev. “*She was not yet Speaker of the Senate then.*”

“*I imagine she will take the initiative in the Senate until stability is reached after the nexus.*” Equemev thoughtfully answered. “*Since she was the first to detect it, I think she feels that dealing with it is her responsibility, to some extent.*”

“Wow! That rock must be twelve meters long and four and a half high!” Mark exclaimed as the huge scale of what he was seeing became apparent.

“*The Truthstone of Falgaroth? Closer to fifteen meters long, I think.*” Equemev speculated. “*And it would be twice as high, were it not half-buried in the floor. It must have taken dozens of our mightiest to Move it.*”

“What is the history of the stone?” Talia asked.

“*It was a gift to my people from Falgaroth, Eighth God of The People of Morning. I don’t remember exactly when he gave it to us, but it was around ten or eleven million years ago. It ensures that oaths are truly sworn.*”

“How so?”

“*If you swear upon the Truthstone of Falgaroth to uphold justice, it does not matter if you are sincere in swearing or not!*” Equemev chuckled. “*After you have sworn so upon it, you will uphold justice, despite any previous feelings and inclinations to the contrary! It’s power that way cannot be resisted by anyone of any race. Falgaroth imbued his Truth spell with so much god-power that no lesser stone could contain it. It will not allow the swearing of an oath that is evil or harmful by any who are in contact with it, and it will not let you swear to do the impossible, the stone would not allow you to speak the words. And of course, any in contact with it are forced to speak only the truth.*”

“Ah. That’s good to know.”

The delegation of unicorns was followed by over five hundred selkies, and they by almost three hundred gargoyles, as those two races, like the dragons and unicorns, each constituted a single nation.

Mark had to laugh. “You know, Yazadril showed me illusions of those two races earlier, and I thought he showed them naked because, well, because he wanted me to know what their bodies looked like, like it was a Healer’s chart. I didn’t expect them all to actually be naked!”

“The selkies find that clothing drags on them when they swim, which is their normal mode of travel. “Povon pointed out. “As you see, they are slightly awkward on land. Less so on all fours, but they think that walking upright makes them appear more civilized. And the gargoyles are not naked. If you look closely, you can see that they wear small breechclouts and belts, and the males have sleeveless shirts. Those items are hard to see because they are made from gargoyle hide. It’s not as bad as it sounds; the hides are gifts from honored and deceased ancestors. Few small peoples are comfortable with exposing their loins, and the gargoyles’ are covered, as the fur of the selkies covers theirs. I’m very glad that Draconians and unicorns at least are not so silly about such things.”

“Why do the male gargoyles wear shirts, and not the females?” Mark asked.

“The shirts are worn as armor. Their females become warriors as often as their males, but they think that appearing in armor at a formal occasion such as this is unladylike, as you would say in this language.”

“Oh.”

After the gargoyles had sworn and settled in their area, Somonik announced the delegation of The Hidden Nation of Xervia. Despite their vast populations, the hidden races were represented by only eleven delegates, who each appeared as a roughly human-sized transparent violet glow. They swore upon the stone, some in voices so high and squeaky that they were indiscernible, and some in languages other than Trade Common.

As they left the center of the room for their area, Somonik stepped to the Truthstone again. “Lest any have a doubt,” he stated in his whispery and gravely rumble as he laid his hand on the stone, “I do swear that the eleven beings who last appeared here were indeed the delegation of The Hidden Nation of Xervia, who only this morning unified their many nations into one, the first truly multiracial nation on Kellaran. I do further swear that they all have sworn Osbald’s Oath of peace, protection and justice while in contact with The Truthstone of Falgaroth.” With that, he moved back to his place at the edge of the stage.

Next called were the delegation of The People of Life led by Alilia, followed by The High People led by Yazadril, then the other fifteen nations of the elves in sequence, in no particular order that Mark could see, with Jaromer and those from Thon next, and Pimall with the delegation of The Warm People appearing last.

Emperor Osbald of Thon, along with that human nation’s Council and staff, were announced after The Warm People, and the delegations from Sming and Kuth followed them.

“*I think I understand the order of presentation.*” Equemev mused as the Kuthians made their way to their seats. “*If I am correct, the human northern kingdoms will be next, followed by the dwarves, then the giants, then the gnomes.*”

“Oh? How did you figure that out?” Talia inquired.

“*It is the order in which each nation was allied and sworn to justice.*” Equemev revealed. “*My people and the dragons were the first to do so millions of years ago. The other Xervian races appeared in the order in which they joined The Grand Council of Xervia. Yazadril and Alilia allied their nations over three thousand years ago, they were also the first elven nations to ally with Xervia.*”

“The elven alliances forged by my father and Alilia were of common defense and economics.” Talia pointed out. “They do not formally mention serving justice. That was assumed as a matter of course.”

“Ah, but in the discussion between my mother and Yazadril and Alilia, when they agreed to ally your peoples with Xervia, my mother said; all who stand for justice must stand together. So it was implied in the agreement. Osbald swore next, and swore his nation to justice, then made the rest of the human kingdoms do so. He spread his movement to Kletiuk next, then Felion. Now that I think about it, the order of presentation must go by the order in which they swore to justice, rather than the order in which they were allied, for some nations of the giants and the dwarves have been allied for almost a quarter of a million years.”

“And The People of Life went before my people, because Alilia offered a just alliance with Xervia first last night, before my father did.” Talia guessed with a nod. “I would think the order of the other elven nations reflects the sequence in which they were informed of the Elven-Xervian alliance, or perhaps the order in which they agreed to it, though the two are probably the same.”

The presentations did indeed proceed in the order Equemev had suggested, with two unexpected exceptions. After the last delegation from the seventeen dwarven nations of Kletiuk had sworn, a female gargoyle appeared beside Somonik, gestured him down, and whispered in his ear. Then she disappeared as he straightened.

He clicked the claws of his hand together, and a human appeared before him. It was a large man with black skin and curly black hair, wearing an ornate light blue toga and an immense headdress made of woven palm fronds studded with jewels and colorful shells. His fists were clenched, the cords stuck out from his neck, and he appeared to be suppressing rage.

“Speak. I will hear your petition.” Somonik stated.

“I am Pumbowmbo, Grand Chief of Chiefs of Nipukbi!” he announced. He spoke Trade Common in a rich baritone with a strange accent, and he managed to not sound as angry as he looked, instead he held his tone to seeming sternly irate as he continued. “I lead a nation of over one hundred and sixteen million citizens residing on over nine hundred islands! And at this moment, I also represent the other two thousand, four hundred and sixteen human nations of the islands and archipelagos of the oceans of Kellaran, whose total populations exceed eight hundred million people!

“While my nation is our largest, all of us, every single sovereign nation of us, right down to tiny Pinatupa with only fifty-seven citizens, are offended! None of us were officially informed about this great meeting, despite the fact that the leaders of our most populous nations received the warning of the elves yesterday, along with the rest of you! I was the first of us to learn of this meeting less than an hour ago, and it was as third-hand information at that! This despite the fact that every other nation of every race outside the Dark Continent were invited!

“It took every wizard we have to arrange a Speaking for all of us to discuss our response in the short time we had available, and three of our younger wizards died from the strain!

“Though every one of our nations has an equal right to be represented here, our lack of notice has made that impossible! Know that we have therefore formed The Association of Oceania, whereby our common interests might be practically represented within a common diplomatic policy! We have selected three hundred and four diplomats, including myself, leaders of nations all, who have been chosen to represent the two thousand four hundred and sixteen nations who comprise The Association of Oceania! We demand recognition, inclusion, and apology for the slight that has been dealt us!”

“I see.” Somonik nodded. “On behalf of The Grand Council of Xervia and The Human Empire of Thon, who have co-operated in sponsoring this meeting, we do apologize for not contacting you about these matters. We offer our most sincere empathy and regret for the loss of your three valiant wizards. However, you should know that no effort was made to include every nation on Kellaran, nor were your nations intentionally excluded.

“We of Xervia contacted the elves because our foreseers have detected that a crucial historical nexus is imminent, and that two who dwell among the elves are key to it. An alliance between the nations of the elves and The Grand Council of Xervia was subsequently proposed and informally accepted. We did discuss contacting the governments of the humans, dwarves, giants and gnomes, but only to inform them of the critical nature of the coming nexus, and to council them to caution until a new stability is reached.

“Neither we nor the elves expected any more alliances to be formed within the next few weeks. We did not know that at the same moments in which we were forming our alliance, Emperor Osbald of Thon was swiftly forming alliances with the nations of Debivin, Kletiuk, and Felion. Nor did Osbald at that time know about the Xervian-elven alliance.

“Those nations are here because they had direct diplomatic contacts with Osbald of Thon, who initiated their alliances, and who proposed the formation of The Great Alliance of The Nations United For Justice in response to the

elves' warning of the threat of an instigated war. None of the nations of Oceania were contacted because none have diplomatic relations with Thon. Only Osbald had the contacts to include the nations of Kletiuik and Felion in time for them to attend this meeting. If he had not had trusted friendships with the most influential monarchs of the dwarves and giants, the nations of those continents would not have been invited either, despite their being powerful and populous. We meant no slight to any citizen or leader of the nations of The Association of Oceania.

"If you will accept our apology, and if all of your delegates will swear Osbald's Oath upon The Truthstone of Falgaroth, we will recognize and include the delegation of The Association of Oceania in this meeting. Should this meeting proceed as successfully as we hope, you will also be invited to join the rest of these nations in forming The Great Alliance of The Nations United For Justice.

Pumbowmbo considered a moment. "So this nexus of history, that's what this is all about?"

"It is. It will be the most important one since The Segregation. We have as yet no idea what it will involve, yet almost every similarly critical moment in history involved a great war. Already there are signs that hidden forces are trying to instigate one, as was mentioned in the warning sent by the leaders of the elves yesterday. Thus Osbald's Oath, thus the alliances that have already been formed, thus this meeting for the formation of The Great Alliance."

"What is Osbald's Oath? And what's The Truthstone of Falgaroth?" Pumbowmbo asked, most of his anger gone.

"Osbald's Oath, as we have taken to calling it for convenient use, is this; I swear forevermore that I will not break the peace, that I will defend the innocent, and that I will uphold justice." Somonik told him. "The Truthstone of Falgaroth is the great blue stone behind you, given to the race of unicorns by Falgaroth, eighth god of that race. None can swear false upon it. The power of the god prevents it. To attend, every member of your delegation must swear the oath upon it. If your delegation agrees to join The Great Alliance, every rightful leader of every nation you represent will then have to swear the oath upon the stone before their inclusion in the alliance is formalized."

"I see. I was chosen to present our petition when your stony friend informed us that only one of us could do so. But I am not authorized to agree to your terms without consulting our other representatives. I must confer with them."

"Very well. I will Translocate you back to the place I took you from. If you need assistance to confer among yourselves without straining your wizards, we will assign enough communications specialists to help you do so. When you have decided which among you will agree to our terms, speak my name, and I will bring you here as soon as the stage is clear. I am Somonik."

"Such assistance is both necessary and appreciated." Pumbowmbo nodded, loath to have to admit his need.

"I will assist them." said a strangely feminine voice that sounded like boulders rolling down a mountain, and as the illusion pulled back to show the entire hall again, every eye turned to see an incredible shining gold dragon almost Kragorram's size gain her feet at the edge of the hall, and flex her wings a bit. "My power should be sufficient to allow him to speak with his delegates, and with his legions of other island rulers as well."

"Thank you, Grakonexikaldoron." Somonik nodded.

"Know this, Pumbowmbo." the gold drake said. "I will add power to every Speaking you are part of until your decisions are made. I will ensure that the casters of those Speakings are not stressed by their exertions, but I will be privy to your communications while I do so. And before I will do anything for you, you must personally swear Osbald's Oath upon the Truthstone. If you refuse, none here will assist you, and you will be barred from returning here, whatever the rest of your colleagues may decide. But then, if you refuse, communications will be the least of your worries, for you will then have to deal with Osbald of Thon, who has been rather insistent of late about such things among you humans."

Pumbowmbo glared at the dragon for a moment, then suddenly turned and slapped his hand onto the stone. "I swear that I will defend the innocent, uphold justice, and not break the peace, for as long as I live and breathe!" he declared, his vow punctuated by the blue flash.

"Close enough." Grakonexikaldoron nodded, and reclined upon the marble again. For a moment she closed her eyes, and when she opened them a second later she seemed to look right at Mark from the illusion. That was proven to be the case when Mark heard her Speaking. "*Greetings, neighbors. It would please me to meet with you. Please contact me tomorrow.*"

"I will speak your name when we have decided." the islander stated to Somonik, who simply nodded and clacked his claws, and the human was gone.

As Somonik began the presentation of the first of the four nations of the giants of Felion, Talia called in surprise; "She Spoke to me! Grakonexikaldoron Spoke to me just now!"

"Me too!" Mark added.

"Oh? What did she say?" Povoan inquired.

"Just hello neighbor and call me tomorrow, basically." Mark laughed.

“I wonder what zhe wantz?” Kragorram pondered.

A moment later Mark exclaimed; “Wow! Look at those giants!” The first delegation of them were leaving the stage and passing the human delegation of Sming, who were seated on the aisle. This revealed just how big the giants were by contrast, and they were indeed gigantic. The shortest stood four meters tall, the tallest well over five. Adding to their impressiveness, they were all clad in full articulated plate armor, the steel polished to a gleam and accented with metals and paints of various colors, and they were fully armed with an assortment of gigantic swords, axes, maces, spears, lances, pole-axes, bows, and crossbows.

“That iz a large group, even for giantz.” Kragorram observed. “The zmallezt three are the largezt three femalez of that raze I have ever zeen together in one plaze, and that big one with the black aczentz iz larger than any I’ve heard of! Hiz zize iz az much a rarity among hiz people az your own iz, Mark.”

“And they are ready for trouble.” Talia noticed. “Even through the illusion I can tell that all of their weapons and armor are heavily spelled. Some items carry as many as ten enchantments.”

“Huh. Are any of their swords like mine?” Mark asked.

Talia squinted in concentration. “Not even close. None of them have anything that could challenge our swords.”

“You have a sharp eye for such things.” Povon admitted. “I’d not have noticed any of that if you hadn’t pointed it out.”

“I’ve had the best teachers.” Talia shrugged. “I’m very young, but I’m ahead of some of my fellow students with centuries of experience.”

“Thoze are a far more normal group of giantz.” Kragorram pointed out as the next delegation swore their oaths.

These were from three to four and a quarter meters tall, and uniformly dressed in flowing white silk togas.

The next delegation were of the same range in height, but were noticeably stocky compared to the previous two groups, and these wore sandals, plain white blouses, and trousers in various dull colors. An abundance of jewelry made up for their plain clothing.

The last group of giants were dressed very formally and ornately, the females in flowing dresses, the males in dark suits with sweeping capes.

The six nations of the gnomes of Felion each had over two hundred delegates, but they were so small they had no trouble finding room around the Truthstone to swear their oaths as nations.

Talia giggled to see them. “I must laugh, for they seem so comical! Best to get it over with now, before we get there!”

“I know what you mean!” Mark grinned, watching the thirty to sixty centimeter tall diplomats swear their oaths in very high, piping voices. “Between the red hats and the way they walk, I’ll have to be careful not to chuckle in their faces at the meeting!”

Every gnome had white hair, and they were all very squat and stocky for their height. This gave them a very quick stride with a great deal of side-to-side motion. The females wore ornate dresses, and looked like children’s dolls brought to life. The males wore full beards and formal suits with black buckled shoes, along with their red cone-shaped hats that were so tall that some of their tips flopped over.

“If you wish to avoid laughing, look at them with your inner eye.” Povon advised, grudging admiration in her voice. “Those gnomes have more wizard-power in their delegations than any other race!”

“Ah. That is impressive, now that I look for it!” Talia admitted.

“I can’t see it through the Illusion.” Mark stated thoughtfully. “In person I’ll be able to see that, by how brightly they glow.”

As the last nation of gnomes appeared on the stage, Talia cautioned; “Be ready now, they’ll call us soon.”

But the delegation from Oceania was announced next. As they appeared, a bony old woman in a white gown who must have been at least a hundred years old stepped forward, Pumbowmbo at her side. “I am High Chieftess Tokibimina, monarch of Simifilibufitu.” she stated. “I will be First Speaker for The Association of Oceania during the remainder of these proceedings. I apologize if the manner of Pumbowmbo earlier seemed overly brusque, but you should understand that his sister’s son was one of the wizards we lost to over-exertion less than an hour ago.”

“We understand.” Somonik nodded. “Before you proceed, we would know this; how did you learn of this meeting? You should not have been able to, and we should know if we have a security leak.”

“There is a sailor of my nation who is a soothsayer, and he sees the future, though only rarely does he get a glimpse of it.” Pumbowmbo related, his mood now a calm one. “Most of his visions are of trivial things; that tomorrow it will rain in Kumpoktu, or that next week a specific child will each a piece of yellow cheese. But he foresaw that today the leaders of the nations of Kellaran would meet to perform acts of greatness. He is never wrong.

He told a tavern-keeper, who came straight to me with the information. I summoned the sailor and questioned him, and thus we learned what was occurring.”

“I see. Our seers will wish to meet this sailor, for even the most minute detail of the future could be of incalculable value. These things will be discussed during or after the meeting.

“For now, welcome, leaders of Oceania.”

“Thank you.” Tokibimina nodded, and turned to lay hand on the stone.

“We must be next!” Talia stated eagerly. “Let’s assume our positions!”

The Oceanians were sworn, and were seated on chairs hastily placed by hundreds of gargoyles and selkies just inside the ring of dragons at the edge of the room.

Somonik then announced; “I now present Prince Mark and Princess Talia of the newly independent Principality of Hilia, Keys to the Nexus! And, “ here he paused for a chuckle, “And their staff!”

As had been the case with the delegation from the hidden races, their party did not appear in a ring around the Truthstone since there were so few of them. Instead they appeared in their pre-arranged formation between the stone and Somonik, facing the ancient white dragon. Stripe stood proud and calm between Talia on his right and Mark on his left. Mark had Scout on his shoulder, and to his left stood Silaran and then Kragorram, while Povon stood outside Equemev on Talia’s right.

Their company was themed in white and gold.

Mark wore gleaming gold-plated plate-over-mail armor with white accents and a white cape, and GrimFang hung across his back, it’s scabbard newly-white.

Silaran also wore his gold-trimmed armor, a cunningly articulated set of plate barding that covered him almost completely, featuring white silk tassels and a glinting meter and a third long sword blade that was mounted on his head just in front of his exposed horn.

Kragorram wore the most impressive sword any there had ever seen, sheathed in a gold and white scabbard along his left side, belted in two places with gold chain as thick as Mark’s leg. The dragonblade was a meter wide and fifteen centimeters thick at the hilt with a diamond-shaped cross-section, and tapered evenly to a point along its twenty meter length.

Talia wore her wedding dress and accessories, and a cloth-of-gold bandoleer hung diagonally from one shoulder, with pockets containing her most potent magic items. The sword of Visinniria hung at her side, its sheath also newly-white.

Equemev wore gold-plated shoes that covered the entire hoof, and her flowing mane and tail were festooned with diamonds, gold charms and trinkets, and tiny bows of white and gold ribbon. The elven ring was prominent upon her horn.

Povon wore a dragon-sized vest of heavily gold-plated chain mail that was almost completely encrusted with diamonds of every size in swirling patterns, with inside pockets for her favorite devices of power. Having decided that she looked silly carrying a wand, she had carefully curved the staff she’d gotten from Talia with her power, affecting it’s shape while leaving it’s magical properties completely intact, and she now wore it as a bracelet on her right wrist.

All of them wore the same symbol on a white ribbon around their necks; a slim gold six-pointed star with a long tail hanging down, that also somewhat resembled a double-hilted sword. Even Stripe and Scout wore the device on white collars around their necks.

“Greetings, Somonik.” Talia said with a formal manner, as she and her party all bowed respectfully in unison, including Stripe and Scout.

“Greetings, Talia.” Somonik chuckled. “A well appointed group you have here, though I wonder how you qualify your pets as staff?”

“Though Stripe and Scout are indeed animals, we do not consider them pets.” Talia calmly informed him.

“Rather, they are friends and family members, and comrades-at-arms. I hope that they are permitted to attend as such, and if not, they may be considered part of our ceremonial armament.”

“I see. Be welcome then. Once you have sworn and taken your places, we will begin.”

“Thank you.” Talia nodded, and they turned to put their touch to the stone.

However, as soon as Mark touched the Truthstone he gave a soft cry of surprise and jerked his hand away.

This prompted many there to wonder if he was an agent of evil, and a few called the thought aloud.

“What is it Mark?” Talia anxiously asked.

Mark gave her a quick smile and turned to scan the unicorn delegation. “Tithian? Would you assist me for a moment?”

Tithian appeared before him. “*Certainly Mark. What seems to be the problem?*”

“Touch the stone please, and I’ll show you.” Mark said, and she moved to the stone and contacted it with the tip of her horn.

Mark laid one hand on her shoulder and touched the stone for a fraction of a second with the other.

“*My word!*” Tithian exclaimed. “*I see why you are having difficulty!*”

“What is it?” he asked.

“*Your touch draws power from The Truthstone of Falgaroth! Great quantities of it! Such a thing is unprecedented! If you maintained contact long enough to speak the oath, you may draw enough of it to become burnt-out!*”

This raised voices in consternation all over the room.

“What should I do?” Mark asked.

“*I will administer the oath as a question. You will then touch the stone long enough to reply; I do.*”

“All right.”

Tithian touched her horn to the stone again, and asked; “*Do you, Prince Markhan Reginus Longstrider of Hilia, solemnly swear to never break the peace, to defend the innocent, and to uphold justice, forevermore?*”

Mark slapped his hand firmly on the stone just long enough to call; “I do!” Then he had to give his head a shake to fight the wave of dizziness that came with a great rush of power from the stone.

“*Amazing! Proceed.*” Tithian said, and Translocated back to her delegation.

Talia and the rest of their party laid hand and horn on the stone and swore the oath, then she led them to their place, the last open space of floor at the outer edge of the room, with two carpets for the unicorns and two chairs for Mark and Talia.

“We are now assembled.” Somonik called, and The Truthstone of Falgaroth sank into the floor of the stage as if the white marble had become thick liquid, until only a blue oval of its top surface about three meters long projected three or four centimeters above the floor. Somonik moved to the center of the stage and stood over the stone, proving the floor was still solid.

He paused for almost a minute, and slowly turned all the way around, inspecting and observing the vast assemblage, seeming to meet every eye for a moment.

“I have lived for sixty-three million, four hundred and fifty-six thousand, two hundred and fifty-one years.” he stated, and let that sink in for a moment. “There is always something new.”

“In the scant thirty thousand years since the gods withdrew from Kellaran, this world has changed more than it had in the previous two hundred million years. There had been gods active on Kellaran almost as long as there have been thinking, sentient people, and now there are none.”

“While there were gods in the world, the use of magic by magicians and mages was always a religious and spiritual act. It was often limited to members of religious hierarchies. Magic was a rare and special thing, considered separate from the rules of reality. When the gods withdrew from the world, many expected that magic would go with them, leaving only the magic abilities that are inherent in some races.”

“But magic remained, in all its forms, and so it was seen that its use had nothing to do with the gods. Some began to study it objectively, and to incorporate their findings with the other rules of reality that deal with light, heat, matter, motion, and weight. Magic had been religion, and it became science. Magicians who utilized the light of the source and who thought in this new way began to call themselves sorcerers, while mages who used the heat of the stone also adopted these new attitudes, and thus began wizardry. The use of magic became more widespread, in war and in peacetime, and the new methods allowed their practitioners to increase their skills and powers very quickly, compared to the old ways.”

“But all those events were merely foreshadows of the vast changes that are now occurring.”

“Less than two centuries have passed since the commercialization of magic began; the common availability of wizards for hire, the systematic copying of pre-cast spell scrolls for sale, the widespread manufacture of spelled items. Magic has now become technology, merely a tool like any other, be it a lever or a knife. In this way, the use of magic has been made available to the vast majority who are not talented spell casters.”

“The repercussions of this are universal. I will not list them all now, but the most powerful of them have been drastic and sudden increases in the general prosperity and in the populations of almost every race. With the exceptions of the elves and the dragons, every race has more population now than they have ever had. The amount of power available in the world today is absolutely staggering, even to me! Perhaps especially to me. No matter how long you’ve lived, if you wait long enough, there is always something new. I can assure you, the state of civilization on Kellaran today is a very new thing.”

“And it seems the pace of change is still accelerating. Yesterday at this time, most nations behaved as they always have, helping or harming at the whim of their rulers, forming alliances almost exclusively along racial lines. And now the leaders of every nation outside Serminak have sworn themselves to justice! Now we stand ready to unite most of the world into a global force for good! Till now only the elves and The People of Morning have never stood for evil, and they were balanced by those on the Dark Continent who have never stood for good. The rest of our races have been of both alignments, sometimes committing horrendous acts of evil, sometimes sacrificing all for the greater good, and as individuals containing the potential for either morality. Thus the world has seemed balanced between good and evil for my entire lifetime.

“Now, for the first time, it seems the forces of light stand ready to tip the balance, and final victory seems within reach!”

Somonik began pacing the stage in his enthusiasm, exhorting all to share his vision.

“There will be drastic changes everywhere after this day! All of you have sworn to justice upon The Truthstone of Falgaroth! Now your concept of justice will be that of Falgaroth, and you will be unable to sustain the old hatreds and prejudices that have been handed down to you for generations! When you return home to your nations, every act of cruelty and injustice that was previously tolerated or unnoticed will stand out and offend you! And an alliance of us all will be so strong that not even the demon-spawn on Serminak will be foolish enough to attack us! Though they cannot be turned to the light, they will be contained by the might of our alliance! Peace may cease to be merely the time between wars! Peace may finally become the universal state of life on Kellaran!”

He fell silent for a moment, and eyed the assembled leaders again. “I now give you the man who has done more than any other to bring us here today. I present his Excellency Osbald the Eighth, Emperor of the Humans of Thon!”

Osbald appeared, and bowed to Somonik. He was a hundred and eighty-eight centimeters in height, slim and square shouldered, with steel gray eyes and hair of the same hue bound back beneath a slim gold circlet adorned with only a single huge diamond. He wore a simple but perfectly tailored black suit, with a white fur cape, black riding boots, and a wide white silk sash diagonally across his chest with the twin-towered emblem of Thon prominent upon it in gold thread.

“I too dream of universal, permanent peace on Kellaran.” Osbald told the ancient white drake. “Unfortunately, it may not be achieved in the near future.”

He turned from Somonik to address the assembly. He was a very skilled speaker, with a formal manner, enhanced by expert use of tone and expression. “We have discovered a vast and insidious conspiracy, whose aim is nothing less than the overthrow of most of the leaders and governments on Kellaran.” he stated. Some of those he addressed were unsurprised, while others loosed exclamations of shock and outrage.

Osbald gestured for silence with both hands, and was given it. “The idea that a conspiracy might be occurring was first proposed by the elves, who wondered if the increasing number of powerful acts of evil being done by magic on Debivin were in any way connected. On a continent of billions, there are many such crimes, though the vast majorities of our citizens are of good heart. Most of those incidents are not related in any way, and most perpetrators are quickly apprehended and dealt with.

“However, we have learned that many of the worst crimes that have been committed on Debivin, over the last one hundred and twenty years at least, crimes both magical and mundane, have indeed been perpetrated by members of the insidious conspiracy. They include the slaughter of fifty-two citizens of Finitra, the release of a cloud of poisonous gas in the city of Meto in Kuth which killed eighteen and sickened thousands, the assassinations of some thirty-eight prominent citizens all over the continent, the assassination of King Wittan of Finitra, the murders of the daughter of Prince Yazadril of The High People and the son of Princess Alilia of The People of Life, the attempted assassinations of Emperor Kevim of Sming and King Tethenir of Yazzak, and the destruction of hundreds of roads, bridges, homes, docks, manufactories, storage depots and warehouses throughout the three empires of Debivin.

“Now, today some have questioned whether it is a just thing to do, to force someone by arms or Compulsion to swear a binding oath to uphold justice. If it is not just to do so, then I was wrong to force the compliance of the kings of northern Debivin and their retainers by that threat, and wrong to try to prevent the escape of those who refused to do so, and wrong to kill them when they attacked us for blocking them.

“I think that I was right in everything I’ve done in these matters, and apparently Falgaroth would agree with me, for I’ve no compunction about doing so again after swearing to justice upon his stone!

“Six were captured after the fight, and were questioned under the strongest Compulsions that the wizards of the three empires could cast.

“Thus we learned that Obiman, Royal Wizard of Finitra, and three of his colleagues, were responsible for the curse upon Yazadril and Alilia, and for the assassination of King Wittan. Wittan was killed because Obiman planned a

coup that would leave himself as ruler of Finitra, and Obiman considered Wittan to be formidable, while his son Dren was judged an easier enemy. King Dren and his heirs were to be killed at the moment power was seized. Yazadril's nation is surrounded by Finitra, and Alilia is closely allied with him, so they were cursed in the hope that the deaths of their children and their ensuing strife would weaken them and prevent their impeding the coup. Once his grip on Finitra was secure, Obiman had planned on conquering The High People before proceeding to the conquest of Membitra.

“Obiman was killed, and only one of his Finitran co-conspirators survived the fight, and that one told us those things. He knew nothing about the deaths of fifty-two Finitrans in Shinosa Valley, beyond that it had occurred, though he was sure that Obiman had known what happened there.

“We captured an Aide to the First Wizard of Iktra, who was killed, and who had planned to rule that kingdom, and to conquer the northern lands of The Warm People as well!

“King Sorrin of Venak, the only monarch who was part of the conspiracy, was killed. We also captured an Admiral and a senior battle wizard from Venak, who were not part of the conspiracy, and who had only fought us on the order of their king.

“In only one case did we capture a leading member of the conspiracy. Ebzumin, First Battle Wizard of the kingdom of Yazzak, planned to rule that kingdom, and he had planned to conquer Taldria, Luffan, Bhia, and the lands of The People of Life! We sensed that his mind had been strongly spelled to prevent his telling us some things, and we could not crack his mental shields without killing him. Then, after we were in contact with Xervia, we were told of the Truthstone of Falgaroth. We brought our six captives here, and Compelled them to swear to truth and justice upon the stone. The power of the stone proved irresistible. Five revealed nothing new, but from Ebzumin we learned crucial new things.

“King Sorrin of Venak had planned to conquer the empires of Thon, Sming and Kuth, as well as the lands of The Fisher Folk! To Ebzumin, he had admitted responsibility for much of the sabotage and destruction in the three Empires and for many of the killings of prominent citizens, and much else besides.

“Conquest of the three empires seems like an impossible goal for Venak, but from Ebzumin we learned that he and the other three leading conspirators who had planned to divide the continent of Debivin between them were to have assistance in their endeavors. Their coups and conquests were being coordinated and sponsored by another party. We did not succeed in learning who was to help them, for that identity had been completely erased from their minds. But their belief that help would come was absolute. When the moment was right, they would be given the power to conquer a continent. In return, they would owe loyalty to their unknown benefactor.

“From Ebzumin we also learned that the massacre in Shinosa Valley and the release of the poison gas cloud in Meto were committed by other members of the conspiracy. Ebzumin did not know exactly who had done them, but he knew that those atrocities were committed as acts of... weapons testing, for want of a better term. He had raised no protest, indeed, he had been eager to know the results. The same was true of his three cohorts.”

He paused for a long moment, and a grim silence held in the cavernous room. “Thus we know what ilk we face. Thus am I vindicated in my actions.

“This is a very well organized conspiracy. Recruitment is motivated by enticements of wealth, and promises of power and slaves and plunder. Beyond the four principles, every new member of it is only certain of the identity of the one who sponsored their membership, and once their loyalty is established, each is only allowed to sponsor three new members, though they can suggest others to higher members. Thus each conspirator can name with certainty only four others at most.

“Because of this organization, it may take a considerable time to apprehend every member of the conspiracy, even if we Compel every one we find to reveal the identities they know the moment we have them in custody. And they are already getting harder to find, and harder to catch. The arrests we've made have warned the rest that we are coming for them, and they are hiding and disguising themselves.

“If I had not acted with the haste and force that I did when I summoned the kings of Debivin to swear to justice, we would have caught none of them. Given the slightest warning of what was to occur, they'd have faded away like mist. This reality inspired my colleagues in Kletiuik and Felion to act with equal speed, with equally fortunate results. Thus there is more that is known of our enemies.

“I give you my dear friend Senchak, Lord of Overclan Beijur.”

That mighty dwarf strode proudly to the stage and nodded to Osbald and Somonik before addressing the assembly. He was clad in gleaming silver on plate, with a huge crown of gold, sapphires and rubies resting on his bushy brows. Thick of bone and muscle he was, and looked to weigh close to a hundred and thirty kilograms before he donned his armor, though he stood but a hundred and fifty-five centimeters tall. His black beard covered most of

his chest plate, his long hair hung in six thick braids bound with gold rings at the ends, and he spoke in a gravely baritone.

“The rot had not spread so far in Kletiuk, nor would it have needed to.” he stated without preamble. “The conspiracy there was limited to Clanlords, but the clans whose lords fought to their deaths rather than swear to justice are the most rough and aggressive packs of fools on Kletiuk! They’d have followed their lords to slaughter and loot without a second thought! After the battle in the Arena of Government of Overclan Beijur, the heirs of the slain Clanlords were offered the choice of death, or swearing to justice. Half refused to swear, but *their* heirs did not. Thus we now stand united.

“The associates of all who refused to swear have been questioned, and some knew of their lords’ plans to conquer the rest of us. Since the clans of the slain lords would have been outnumbered at nine to one, we can assume that they also expected outside help, and were thus part of this confounded conspiracy!

“I do admit that I now wish I’d had a better grip on my temper at the battle, for then I might have ordered the capture of the lords we fought. We might even have succeeded in taking one alive. Instead I called for their surrender, and they would not give it. Though they fought like cornered wildcats, they could not hope to prevail against us, and so they died. Any secrets we might have learned from them died with them.”

“Thank you, Senchak.” Osbald said, when it was obvious the dwarf was finished.

Senchak gave him a short nod, and returned to his delegation.

“I now present The Lady Emeroth, Empress of Verzaclon.” Osbald pronounced.

The second tallest of the females of the armored delegation of giants appeared before Osbald. She was olive skinned and black haired, with narrow dark eyes and full lips, and wore armor that was enameled blood red. She was so normally proportioned that her four and a quarter meter stature was only apparent because she stood before Osbald, and towered over him. “Thank you, Your Excellency.” she told him, without a bow or a nod.

“You’re most welcome, Your Eminence.” Osbald returned, and they both snickered, as if at some private joke.

Emeroth addressed the assembly in a cultured contralto that sounded surprisingly normal to human ears. “We of the Shiganzhu have had more than enough of bloody conquest. Our populations have been decimated by war more times than any other race. The four monarchs of our race, including myself, could never be tempted to war against the others, nor could any of our close subordinates. And so the conspiracy has worked differently on Felion. When we gathered to consider Osbald’s news and his offer of formal alliance, only three secretaries of third ministers refused to swear to justice. However, they have been found to be impostors, impersonating loyal staff who were abducted months ago, and who were most likely killed. The three impostors were questioned, and it was found that they were there to spy on us, on behalf of the leaders of gangs of bandits. We believe such people are the principals of the conspiracy on Felion.

“I am ashamed to say that there is a thriving criminal subculture on Felion, as is often the case in times of prosperity. There are hidden guilds of thieves and extensive criminal syndicates, and though only a small percentage of our populations turn to crime, they are as pervasive among both Shiganzhu and Bojudai as they are among humans or Kleti.

“We believe that the conspiracy is rampant among them, on all four continents represented here.

“Yes, four, for we have evidence that there are criminal families among the Kwetkerthok. We suspect they exist among the Selkies as well.”

Mark sent a quick mental inquiry to Talia, and had the answer before Emeroth had spoken another syllable.

“It’s how they name themselves in their own languages. Shiganzhu are giants, Bojudai are gnomes, Kleti are dwarves, and Kwetkerthok are gargoyles. Selkies have names for their nations, but have no word for their own race, and so use the Common word.”

Meanwhile Emeroth’s words had triggered murmurs of surprise among the assembly. “With so much wealth in the world now, it is unsurprising that some would rather take than work, even on Xervia.” she continued.

“Everywhere, such taking is done by deception, extortion, blackmail, kidnapping, and piracy, as well as by outright thievery. And since criminals will not appeal to the law when they themselves are offended against, where there are thieves, there will always be bone-breakers and killers to settle the disputes that arise between them. Such people are fertile fields for the conspiracy. If a significant portion of the world’s criminal element act for the conspiracy, believing that they are unleashed beyond the threat of lawful reprisal, they will be a terrible force, for they are among us all. And they know almost everything about almost everyone.

“So far as we can tell, only The People of Morning, The Hidden Nation, and The Just Draconians are completely free from this threat. Most elven nations are almost certainly free of crime, but in the three empires of the plains of

Debin, even the elves have criminals. Though I will admit that from what I know of them, they are less susceptible to the temptations offered by the conspiracy.

“On Felion, we are taking drastic steps. Martial law has been declared, and our civil guards are being reinforced by our military reserves. Every citizen who has ever been suspected of a crime is being found and questioned on the spot under the most powerful Compulsions of Truth ever used on Felion, for they are being cast by Linked teams of one hundred wizards. Those who are found to have committed serious crimes, or to have knowledge of the conspiracy, will be brought here after this meeting and questioned upon the Truthstone of Falgaroth.

“Our regular militaries have been fully activated and are busy fortifying our defensive emplacements and Wards. We strengthen our coastal defenses to defend against attack from without, and we strengthen our national and civil defenses to contain and defeat any attack from within. Our navies are patrolling the seas we claim jurisdiction over, bolstered by every civilian vessel we have whose crew can be both sworn to justice and spared from their work for a few days, and they are sweeping our waters clean of pirates while watching for hostile forces.

“We are asking every citizen in Felion to swear Osbald’s Oath upon our most powerful tokens of justice. We will not force them to do so, but you can be certain that we are noting who has sworn and who has not.

“I ask you all to adopt these measures in your own nations. We have been very lucky thus far, in that the conspiracy was detected before they were ready to act. We must not lose the advantage. We may cause them to abandon their plans if we act swiftly enough. If we fail to do so, we may inadvertently pressure them into striking very soon, before their entire infrastructure is destroyed.

“Remember the atrocities that have been committed already, merely as tests of spells. A cloud of poison gas that sickened thousands and would have killed them all were it not for a speedy and massive response by the Wizards’ and Healers’ Guilds of the city of Meto. A killing blizzard that slew in one hour six-tenths of a hardy mountain folk who were fully prepared for harsh winter. If such a thing were cast on an equatorial region, casualties would include almost everyone in the area. A spell of total madness that affected nearly all of those it was cast upon, and only half of those recovered. Finally, a spell of rotting death that acts almost instantaneously. We believe those last two spells will be one hundred percent effective against all humanoids and many of the races of Xervia. No race would be completely unaffected by them.

“We cannot risk such things being used against our major population centers in a full scale attack. In all the long, sad wars that have been fought upon this world, no one, not even those from the Dark Continent, ever considered unleashing such holocausts upon the world.

“Therefore, I urge that we bring our proceedings here to a finish as promptly as possible. We all have urgent business awaiting us at home.

“Thank you.”

With that, she Translocated back to her delegation.

“Now we all know what is known.” Osbald stated. “And, we have a course of action to follow. I for one will follow Emeroth’s example and advice. I join her in strongly urging you all to do the same.

“Thank you.”

He bowed, then he too returned to his delegation.

“Who would speak now?” Somonik asked, nodded, and announced; “Prince Jaromer of Thon.”

Jaromer appeared before him. “I’d just like to say that we think we have counters-spells for the poison cloud and the blizzard, and we’re starting to get a grip on the madness. The rotting death is a more difficult puzzle. Please have any research wizards you can spare for a co-operative effort in finding counters to these heinous spells contact me after we adjourn here.”

He bowed, and vanished.

“Who would speak now?” Somonik asked, then announced; “King Wosea of Enj.”

A gnome only thirty-six centimeters tall appeared, wearing a blue silk suit with buckle shoes and the tall red cone-shaped hat. He spoke a strange language in a very high and melodic voice, and delivered a psionic translation in Trade Common at the same time. *“Perhaps I am ahead of events, since we have not as yet officially formed the great alliance, which is our primary purpose here. Yet it seems obvious that we will. We will therefore need to coordinate our communications, information, and intelligence. I think it wisest that such coordination be left to The Grand Council of Xervia. When we need to pass critical intelligence between us, we should meet here to do so, and swear upon the stone each time to prevent infiltration.*

“Beyond that, we need to decide if we are truly to be an alliance, or merely a co-operative of nations. If we are truly allied, we must be prepared to commit our military and civil forces to each other’s mutual defense if any of our

nations are attacked by superior forces. If that happens, and we must then counter-attack on our enemies' territory to achieve victory, we must be prepared to do that as well.

"I am authorized at this moment to commit the military forces of the ten nations of Felion to a true military alliance of the nations allied for justice.

"If war comes despite our best efforts to prevent it, we must obviously maintain our present national chains of command, but we must also admit that when every second is critical, we cannot wage war by committee. We will need an overall commander. None of my race is most suitable for such a post. And as formidable as The People of Morning and The Just Draconians are, they are not the most suited to be supreme commanders of massive and very racially mixed hosts. I therefore nominate Empress Emeroth of Verzaclon as First Commander of the military forces of The Great Alliance of The Nations United For Justice."

Wosea then shook his head and clapped his hands, and returned to his delegation with a pop of over-displaced air.

Empress Emeroth stood and spoke from where she was. "I would accept the post if it comes to it, for I believe I am certainly capable of performing the duty, and performing it well. But I believe there are better choices. I nominate His Eminence, Osbald of Thon." She sat down.

Osbald stood, and also spoke from where he was. "I decline. There is only one true candidate for the position. I nominate Prince Yazadril of The High People. I have studied his record, as I have studied the records of every currently active military commander. Strategist or tactician, none of us are his equal in experience and the ability to command our mighty host, or even close." He sat.

Yazadril stood. "This is no time for false modesty," he grimly stated. "I am the most capable candidate available. If all of you agree to appoint me First Commander of our alliance, I will accept the duty with honor." He took his seat.

"Who would speak now?" Somonik asked, and apparently none answered this time.

"Then I ask you; Are we agreed that we will formally form The Great Alliance of The Nations United For Justice?"

The assembly answered; "We are agreed.", or words to that effect.

As Mark and Talia answered with them, Mark closed his eyes tight against the expected flash, and it still showed almost white through his eyelids.

"Let the record show that all have agreed." Somonik stated.

"And how many are committed to providing civil assistance to one another in times of need?"

The assembly responded.

"Let the record show that all have agreed to provide civil assistance.

"And how many are committed to providing military assistance to one another in times of need?"

The assembly responded again.

"Let the record show that all except The Hidden Nation of Xervia have agreed to provide military assistance.

"And how many agree to appoint Prince Yazadril of The High People to the position of First Military Commander of The Great Alliance of The Nations United For Justice?"

"Let the record show that all have agreed.

"Thank you all, I thank you with all of my soul." Somonik stated with emotional sincerity. "This is a great moment in history. This may be the *greatest* moment in history. We have formed the mightiest organization that has ever existed. And we are dedicated to justice. This alliance will still be strong when the present danger has passed, and then we will usher in a golden age of peace and prosperity, of trust and communication and camaraderie among all races!"

He paused for almost ten seconds, as they all considered the magnitude of the sudden accomplishment.

"And now, to present the closing address of this assembly, I give you WHAT?!!!"

An apparition had appeared on the stage beside him, a transparent green dragon only half Somonik's size, barely nine meters long including a two-meter stump of a tail. The comparatively tiny phantom dragon began psionically speaking in a language that seemed utterly alien to all but the dragons who were listening, a cacophony made up largely of fierce roaring, growling, and snarling.

"He's speaking a dialect of High Draconian that is so quaint I can barely make him out, but I'll give you a rough translation." Povo psionically informed her party.

Newcomer: "What is happening here?!!"

Somonik: "Who are you?!! And how did you get in here?!!"

Newcomer: "I am not here! I am Dreaming! And I will not give you my name, not knowing who I face, nor under what conditions I have manifested! I am not such a fool as that! Now what is happening here?! And what are all those small creatures?!"

Somonik: "I am Somonik, and you are not authorized to be here!!! That is not affected by your presence being astral or corporal!!"

The green phantom considered.

Newcomer: "Somonik? Somonik. That touches a memory. I know you! You fought and defeated Kergok over the Pact of Kraka a few centuries before I went to sleep! You were looking much better then, as I recall! What happened to you to make you so scarred, young one?"

Somonik was so taken aback that he physically staggered.

Somonik: "By the fire of the Source! Do you realize that the Pact of Kraka was signed over forty-one million years ago?!!!"

Newcomer: "That long? That... is a long time to sleep. But then, I will never wake, and what is time in a dream?"

Somonik: "My soul! At sixty- three million years old, I think I am not the Eldest! Please tell me, honored elder, how old are you?"

Newcomer: "Well, I was about eighty-one million years old when I went to sleep. I was Eldest then, so I guess I am still the oldest living, if one can refer to my existence as living. If that was forty-one million years ago, then I am about one hundred and twenty-two million years old."

This created an uproar in the assembly, as obviously many were listening to translations of the conversation, but the transparent green ignored that.

Newcomer: "Besides, even if I were gone you would not be Eldest. My enemy still lives, and if I remember right, he would be about ninety-five million years old now. I can feel him, over there." He pointed at the floor about six meters away.

"He points north!" Povou revealed excitedly. "If you drew a straight line from his arm down through the world at that angle, it would emerge in central Serminak! He must mean an Elder of the Dark Dragons!"

Somonik: "I... I know you! I know who you are! And so I know who your enemy is! Oh Honored Eldest, we gave you both up for dead after your great battle with him, over forty million years ago! No sign could be found of either of you!"

Newcomer: "Yes, well he might as well have killed me. I almost killed him as well, and I hoped after I last saw him that he would die of his wounds, but he is fully recovered now. I can feel it, curse his shriveled soul!

"At any rate, I now live in the dream I create for myself. At least I did until a minute ago, when your great cacophony drew me here! I tell you, you made the sphere of power ring like a bell! An infant would have noticed it from the second moon! You can be sure my old enemy felt it, so perhaps you'd better explain to me just exactly what is happening here! Or better yet, why don't you just give me your Reading of what's happened in the world since I went to sleep?"

Somonik recoiled in consternation.

Somonik: "But that is two-thirds of my life! It would take me an hour to prepare such a Reading!"

Newcomer: "Ha! You always were more strength than brains! If you don't mind my having it, and you trust me to do so, I'll just take it!"

Somonik: "Now just one moment! I am fairly certain of your identity, but I admit that I could be deceived! If you will swear to uphold justice upon this stone, I will let you have my memory of the time since you were last awake."

The transparent green inspected the stone with curiosity, then stuck his right hand into it up to his elbow, causing a huge momentary shower of sparks and sparkles in Mark's vision. The phantom appeared not to notice.

Newcomer: "Ahhh! That's very nice! Very nice indeed! I do swear to uphold justice."

This time when the flash lit in Mark's vision, he realized to his surprise that everyone else saw it as well, from the way they jerked in startlement. The dream dragon then withdrew his hand from the stone and turned to Somonik.

Newcomer: "Now just hold still. This won't hurt."

Somonik jumped a bit. "Great gods of stars and flames!" he cried aloud in Draconian.

Newcomer: "I see. Ah. How interesting. Oh my! Great things are truly happening now, aren't they? It will take me a while to review all of that, but only the most recent portion is truly important, right?"

"Now this Trade Common language. If there are any here who speak it as their native tongue, and who would give me the knowledge, I can save you all a great deal of inaccurate translation. And Translation spells always gave me a headache."

Somonik: "Trade common is an artificial language based on Old Low Debinian, Eldest. Debinian has passed out of use, and Trade Common is native to no nation."

"Actually, Trade Common is my mother tongue." Mark said as he stood, nervous about speaking up at such a moment, yet more nervous about remaining silent.

"Is it?" Somonik asked in surprise. "I understood you were Finitran?!"

"Shinosa Valley was settled by people from all over the northern kingdoms." Mark shrugged. "Most of the adults spoke Finitran, or could if they wanted to, and I learned some of it, but Trade Common is the language all us kids grew up speaking. And I don't mind helping the Eldest."

"Excellent!" Somonik exclaimed, and translated that for the Eldest, who fixed Mark with a stare, then flashed in and out of the young man's consciousness in a blink so short that Mark was unsure for a moment whether he'd actually felt anything.

But then it was the astral dragon's turn to recoil in surprise. "*May Holy Amirgath preserve me! What a mind to find in such a newborn!*" he declared, still speaking psionically, though now his mouth moved to the words of Trade Common as if he were saying them out loud. "*And do you realize what he IS?!!! Such a one has not appeared on Kellaran for a hundred eons! AND this one is half the Key to the approaching nexus!*"

"We know it, Eldest. That is why he is here." Somonik informed him. "Not all of us know all the details, however. Such things must be kept on a need-to-know basis, in case any of us are captured by the enemy and Compelled to reveal what we know."

"Of course, of course." the Eldest nodded. "*Look, so long as I can stick my foot in that stone every hour or so, I can keep my dream focused here. If all of you don't mind, I'll just observe the remainder of these proceedings. I'll have things to say in private to that infant ape, and to your military high command.*"

"Be welcome. Most welcome indeed!" Somonik nodded, and turned back to the assembly as the Eldest faded almost to invisibility.

"As I was saying before the Eldest arrived, to present the closing address of this assembly, I give you Tithian, seer and oracle."

Tithian appeared before him and whinnied with a toss of her silver mane, then gave him a nod.

He gave her a respectful bow, then vanished, leaving her the stage.

"I asked to be introduced at this time as seer and oracle, because I am here now in that role. We, the seers of Xervia, have been applying the utmost effort to feeling the shadows of the future while this meeting was being held. We hoped to find that we were wrong about the timing of the Nexus. We hoped that the formation of this great alliance today was the huge event that we've felt coming, for if that was so then this Nexus could pass without war. It might have been, for this was triggered by the warning of he who is Key. But as we feared, that is not the case. To use an analogy, this alliance is a mighty crashing wave upon the ocean of this world's reality, but it is not the hurricane of the Nexus.

"One thing that we knew before, and that we are even more sure of now, is that the two who are Key must address you in... one minute and four seconds from now. This is crucial to our prosperity for reasons we have been unable to determine.

"Mark and Talia, please appear beside me, and prepare to speak. I will prompt you to begin at the crucial moment."

"Mark!" Talia yiped in his mind. "*I'm not ready for this! I don't know what to say!*"

"That's okay, my adorable love." Mark chuckled as he picked her up like a child. "*I've got a few things to say. And if you feel like joining in, just go with the moment.*"

"Silaran, could you take us down there please?" he asked aloud.

"*At this distance I can Send you from here.*" Silaran stated, and suddenly they stood beside Tithian. Mark watched her for a signal while he went over what he wanted to say, and Talia hugged him tight in stage fright.

At the appointed moment, Tithian nodded and said; "*Speak.*"

"Thank you Tithian, and thank you to all of you here today." Mark began. "I'm told that the world may be better, or worse, after the Nexus, and it may *not* be any better or any worse, but it definitely *will not be the same*. There *will* be great change, and a lot of it as I understand, though we don't know what kind of change the Nexus will be.

"We have to hope that we can *choose* the change that will happen, by causing great changes of *our* choice, *beneficial* changes, and hope that they satisfy the Nexus. Then, even if something else is going to happen, even if it's something bad, we'll have done our best to make the world into the best possible place it can be, and hopefully we'll be more prepared if the worst happens.

“This alliance is a great thing, but it hasn’t yet been of much direct benefit to anyone. On the contrary, the things you’ve been driven to do to counter the conspiracy are disrupting the lives of many, and probably alarming many as well. I know those things must be done, and we heartily approve of them. Preparations for defense are necessary, and the apprehension of criminals must already be having indirect benefits for the good people who would have been further victims of their crimes. But we must not become too focused on such things.

“It’s not enough to prepare for war, to be ready to counter violence with violence and death with death to protect our loved ones. It’s equally important that we do beneficial things, things that actually help people to be happier, things that improve people’s lives and bring them together in friendship and understanding.

“Generally, the actions of governments during peacetime don’t have much noticeable effect on everyday people’s lives, except for the collection of taxes. Systems that are paid for by those taxes are quickly taken for granted, such as water supply and law enforcement and defense, leaving the ostentatious wealth of rulers as the most visible and noticeable use of taxes. When war comes, everyday concerns and priorities are set aside, and everyone pulls together in the common struggle, generally whether they want to or not. But we hope that our present struggle will not be a war. How then to involve the great majority of our peoples in the struggle we now face?

“To define our struggle; we must create sweeping and beneficial changes in the world of such strength and momentum that they will counter or prevent any great harm. We have already chosen our side in the struggle, for we stand here not only united as nations and as races, as it has been in the past, but as nations and races that are all united for justice. Thus, this will not be a struggle of ‘us against them’, but of ‘good versus evil’.

“Good versus evil can be more practically defined as happiness and fun and health, versus unhappiness and suffering and harm. Those who are good want everyone to be happy and healthy and to have fun, while those who are evil want to do things to others that cause unhappiness and misery and injury.

“But, those who are evil do evil deeds to bring *themselves* happiness, either by taking resources from others that they think they need to be happy, or by causing misery to others because they think it’s fun, or to advance their own interests.

“So they’re all trying to bring themselves happiness, the difference is the choice between selfish and generous means to do it. Between concern for the self alone, and concern for the group of people we know, as well as the larger group of people we don’t know who affect us.

“I submit to you that any realistic accounting of the happiness of individuals will reveal that most evil people do not succeed in truly making themselves happy, and that those who are good are far more likely to be happy. Also, once an evil way of life is formed among a people, it makes almost everyone in it miserable, the good and the evil alike. Those who live in good and just societies are conversely far more likely to be happy, whether they as individuals are good or evil.

“This is a crucial point. Since everyone is trying to make themselves happy, and one of two methods is provably more effective than the other at achieving that, it becomes a choice between doing the smart thing; that which is more effective, or doing the stupid thing, that which is obviously less effective.

“This is important because we can’t eliminate all the evil people in the world by killing them, or by imprisoning them. Both choices are impractical. Almost all of them will have to be converted to the just way of thinking and the belief in the benefits of goodness. We can convert the worst by Compelling them to swear Osbald’s Oath upon a powerful item of justice. Everyday criminals with mostly mundane methods can swear upon items like Osbald’s or Yazadril’s swords, while those of great evil or power can be made to swear upon the Truthstone of Falgaroth.

“But we must also try to eliminate petty and future evils of every kind.

“The direct appeal to goodness has been ineffective at converting evil people to good. Many of them are proud of their attitudes, and they enjoy the feeling of power that comes from being willing to do whatever it takes to get their own way. But while some can be proud of being evil, no one can be proud of being stupid. Thus we must all stress the point; evil is stupid. Committing evil is stupid, and is likely to lead to misery for the perpetrators as well as the victims. The way of justice and the common good is the smart choice for everyone, even for the selfish who care only for their own happiness.”

He paused, and got a huge grin. “Pardon me for rambling on, but all that gives us a strategy for our great changes; the creation of universal happiness and the elimination of evil. And we have a slogan. Let me hear you say it loud and proud, if you please!

“Evil is stupid!”

“EVIL IS STUPID!” the many delegates called, amidst many laughs and chuckles, and Mark and Talia laughed with them.

“That’s good to hear.” Mark chuckled. “The leaders of most of the people in the world, laughing together. For we must be the alliance for justice, but *far more important than that*, we must be the alliance for happiness and health and fun!

“Now, as to the tactics of our struggle.

“First, a universal campaign of public communications to promote justice and understanding and co-operation among all people, and to shout our slogan from the rooftops!

“Second, we must wage peace with the same absolute commitment that we would use to wage war! Let us bring prosperity to the poor with generosity and with training and education and help and camaraderie! Let us restore the lands and wilderness areas that have been despoiled by past wars and disasters! Let us build schools and libraries and parks and gardens for the enjoyment and betterment of all! Let no effort or expense be shirked in these endeavors, for the Nexus threatens our entire world!

“Third, we must set aside our old racial and national fears, prejudices, and insecurities. We must open our borders and venture forth from our segregation, and encourage our citizens to do so.

“The present system of Wards and segregation was designed to provide defense and prevent infiltration by attackers and criminals, and with the conspiracy active, those concerns are still valid. So let us create a new social device; a passport for the entirety of The Just Alliance, that allows the bearer the freedom of travel to any of our nations. If we only grant these passports to those who have sworn Osbald’s oath upon a great token of justice, our security concerns will be addressed.

“All of you should appear together in great parades in the major cities of every nation, and publicly declare our alliance, so the rest of your citizens can see with their own eyes that the alliance is real and strong!

“Let us hold great festivals where people can meet those they would never encounter in their everyday lives, where new friendships and associations can begin! Such a gathering of every elven nation occurred at my wedding, I think to their great benefit. As all the elves were brought together in joy and camaraderie, so all the peoples of all the nations of this alliance can be brought together, thousands at a time!

“As we wage the acts of peace, let us do it together! Let us exchange thousands of goodwill delegations of teachers, builders, rescuers, healers, trades people and theoreticians of every sort, from every nation to every other nation!

“Fourth, let us cease being nations of races, and become nations of the just! Let us follow the example of The Hidden Nation, and form multiracial nations of the like-minded. I’m told that this is almost the case with the humans and elves of the empires of Debinin, and with the Shiganzhu and Bojudai; the giants and gnomes of Felion, which proves it can be done. Let us allow emigration to and from any of our nations, within the limits of our infrastructures to healthily adapt to shifts in population. Many of us would love to spend a few years living in an exotic society of another race.

“As for permanent residence within the nation of another race, we will never truly mix as one people, because though we can all be friends and comrades in almost any activity, we can’t all be lovers.”

That brought a round of chuckles from his audience.

“Because of this, we will always gather together in communities of our own race for family life, but my own earlier life proves that it only takes a few dozen to make a healthy community. There is no reason such communities cannot be interspersed and intermingled among the communities of good-hearted people of other races.

“Though our own nation is tiny and has room for few visitors or permanent citizens, it will be equally open to those of every race. But every one of those who visit or live there will have sworn to justice upon the most powerful token of justice available. With this practice, and with the construction of strong Wards, I hope that even those of The Hidden Nation will feel comfortable there. There should be such places where they can mingle with the races from outside Xervia, as well as with those from within it.

“Fifth; just as we limit travel between our nations to those who are bound to justice, we can limit other new privileges to those who have sworn. I’m with Osbald and Emeroth in this, I’m in favor of using almost any enticement or encouragement to get as many as possible to swear a binding oath to justice upon a powerful token. Everyone, if possible. Everyone. If we have to, we can organize lineups, and have thousands of them swearing per hour in quick succession, and we should see if we can make more such powerful items of good intent.

“I don’t know if there are any evil spells or evil items of power that could negate our oaths, but if there are, they must be detected, found, and destroyed.

“It would be nice if we had an infallible way of knowing or marking those who have sworn a binding oath to justice. I would be proud to wear such a marking.

“Sixth, we must prepare for the worst. That means expanded systems of emergency healers, fire extinguishers, rescuers and rebuilders of every sort. Dedicated professionals are needed for these tasks, but we must also encourage all of our populations to form and train as volunteer corps. We should train every citizen to know what to do in case of fire, flood, earthquake, storm, or military attack. We should hold large-scale civic tests of emergency preparedness. Again, we must do our best to make these activities fun and healthy and enjoyable! Hold them as contests, in a sporting and festive atmosphere, and award prizes for the best responses and performances by individuals, neighborhoods, and cities.

“Also, every organization; civic, trade, government and military, should know where their vulnerabilities are. It might make more profit for all wagon makers to make wagons in one great facility, but if that facility was lost, then we couldn’t make new wagons until we built another one. What I’m saying is we should make sure we never have too many eggs in one basket, that our organizations and societies be structured with enough redundancy to ensure that we can continue after the loss of any of the parts, or even many of the parts. Increasing trade between our peoples serves this end as well.

“Talia and I will be putting our money where our mouth is, so to speak. We will offer the use of our vacation homes to those who have suffered the worst, that they may recover from their trials before making new lives for themselves. And we will donate much of our wealth to good works.

“As our contribution to the readiness of The Just Alliance to deal with military attack, it is our intention to form a small but very powerful quick-reaction force, answering directly to the First Commander of The Just Alliance, who can detect the initiation of battle anywhere on Kellaran, and arrive there to deal with it instantly. We will have a better chance to contain it, hopefully to nip it in the bud completely, and thus prevent the outbreak of full-scale warfare. Thus far we include all eight of us in our party here, as well as a support corps composed of a number of elves from every elven nation. We negotiated the independence of Hilia from The People of Rain in order to reduce the diplomatic repercussions of instituting our military academy there.

“One last point. It’s quite a mouthful to say The Great Alliance of The Nations United For Justice. As I have done, many will shorten it to a conversational term. I almost wish the word ‘great’ hadn’t been included, for it will be tempting to refer to us as The Great Alliance, which may seem intimidating to some, and not really the image that I think we should project. I therefore ask that you all make an effort to do as I have done, and refer to this organization as The Just Alliance whenever it’s impractical to use the entire title.”

Talia smoothly continued the address as he left off.

“This great hall should be more than just a dignified edifice of assembly. The Truthstone of Falgaroth is our greatest weapon in our struggle, and as many as possible should be allowed to use it. But beyond that, any number of us should be able to gather here at any time to discuss our progress and renew our bonds of friendship. I know that those of you who have duties implementing the military and judicial actions that Emeroth outlined must rush off after the meeting. But that does not include most of us, and implementing Mark’s suggestions can wait at least an hour or three, so I hope we can remain and mingle for a while after the meeting. I’d love to get to know as many of you as possible.

“We thank you for your time and patience.” she finished.

“Thank you.” Mark nodded, and turned to Tithian.

That great unicorn considered them for a moment. *“Well. I must say, that was a powerful speech. Far more so than I truly expected of you. Thus it has been noted and recorded. And I agree with all of it. We absolutely must attempt to satisfy the Nexus with beneficial change. It is our best insurance against disaster!”*

She turned and addressed the assembly. *“I move that we adopt Mark and Talia’s suggestions as policy, every word as they were spoken. Who agrees?”*

A mighty response was jubilantly called out.

“Let it be known that all have agreed!” Tithian called out proudly, and turned back to Mark and Talia. *“Thank you, and congratulations. You represent our newest and tiniest nation, with an official population of only the two of you, and you are the two youngest persons here. Yet you appear to have gained a position of leadership of sorts in this alliance, on the strength of your good thinking.”* she chuckled.

“As long as we can lead by suggestion, that’s just fine!” Mark laughed.

“That it is!” Tithian agreed, then cocked her head to the side.

“I receive a Speaking from the sorcerers, magicians, and wizards of The Grand Council of Xervia. They have co-operated to formulate the spell you requested, and have formed it with their combined power. They can cast a spell that will cause a symbol to appear on all those who are bound to justice, which can be recognized without fail by others who wear the mark, and that will fade if the wearer’s oath is compromised. They suggest the symbol you wear

would be appropriate, the six-pointed sword-star of Hilia. And since it cannot be counterfeited, this spell-symbol can also serve as the passport of The Just Alliance.”

“No, I mean I agree, except that I wish the sword-star to remain only the symbol of Hilia, and of our company. It represents the six of us who are the founding core of our strike force.” Mark told her.

“I suggest you use a blue filled circle with a curved indent on one side, to represent the Truthstone of Falgaroth, surrounded by a white filled circle to represent this; The Hall of The Just Alliance.” Talia said with a wave at the room around. “And perhaps, for those like friend Silaran who are white, a thin blue line around that.” She cast a meter high illusion of the symbol she was picturing in the air.

“An excellent suggestion.” Tithian nodded. “And in order to indicate the strength of the bonding, we should show beneath that symbol a recognizable pictogram of the token of justice that was sworn upon. Thus those who swore to Osbald at his first swearing would wear a small picture of the Imperial Sword of Thon beneath the symbol of The Hall of The Just Alliance, whereas we here today would wear the symbol of the blue stone beneath the blue and white of the hall.”

“I agree.” Mark nodded.

“Let all who agree to wear the symbols of those who are bound to justice concentrate on the place upon your surface where you wish them to appear, and the size you wish the symbols to be.

“The spell is cast.”

Mark looked at his left shoulder, where the round white and blue of the hall appeared seven centimeters high, with the indented round blue of the stone repeated alone two centimeters high beneath that. Talia inspected the same symbols that had appeared on the back of her left hand, a centimeter and a half centimeter in diameter respectively. Tithian’s appeared five and two centimeters high, on the two lowest spirals at the front of her horn. Most everyone around the room proudly inspected their new markings. Mark noticed two brown selkies pointing to the symbols in the short fur on each other’s foreheads, and they appeared to be giggling.

“I give you Princess Talia and Prince Mark of Hilia, Keys to the Nexus, and Keys to The Great Alliance of The Nations United For Justice!” Tithian called. “I think we should have a round of applause for these two fine young people!”

Mark carefully bowed as Talia bowed from the waist in his arms, then Mark strode from the stage and all the way up to their place with their company at the edge of the room, both of them smiling and waving, and the thunderous round of applause continued until they were seated, some applauding with bursts of colored light, and many of the dragons around the perimeter of the room puffed rings of fire and smoke.

“We have much to do in the days ahead.” Tithian declared. “All those who have military command should report their resources and deployments to Prince Yazadril at the earliest possible opportunity. Contact Somonik with any important developments on the conspiracy, and he will inform the rest of us. All that has been decided here that is of a public nature must be passed down to all the personnel of our governments, and announced to all our citizens. Our administrators will arrange for the exchange of goodwill delegations for the co-operative accomplishment of good works. We will all consult our schedules for the days ahead and arrange for parades and festivals to celebrate the founding of The Just Alliance.

“Is there anything else that anyone feels must be added at this time? No?”

“Then I now declare this meeting at an end. Thank you all, and good life to all of you.

“Remember; evil is stupid!”

Many there repeated the slogan amidst a round of chuckles, and then a third of the delegates vanished in a burst of light that left spots in Mark’s eyes.

“Ria says that it’s silly for you to put up with that.” Talia told him with a giggle as she saw him flinch, her hand on her sword’s pommel as it often was when she wore it. “She furthermore points out that it would be a crippling detriment in any battle where significant magic is being cast. She suggests a series of tests and spells that may fix the problem for you, but it’ll have to wait till we get home.”

“Sounds good to me.” Mark chuckled as he rubbed his eyes.

“Friend Mark, I am zo proud of you!” Kragorram told him. “You zeized the moment magnifzently, you represented our company with exzellenze, you zpoke with greatnezz and changed the world! I mean, not to zlight you Talia, you alzo zpoke beautifully, but the way that Mark laid out the new future of the world like it waz only common zenze, the truth of hiz wordz waz undebatable!”

“Oh I agree, Kragorram!” Talia proudly stated as she kissed Mark’s cheek. “My tongue was like knotted string when we went down there, and I couldn’t have said a word before I was inspired by Mark’s example!”

“Hey, it *is* only common sense!” Mark laughed. “And I won’t have you filling my head full of hot air, like it was an act of genius or something!”

“Nonsense.” Povon insisted. “Hilsith made me want to be a better person, and I think I’ll use you as my example. You’ve given me a whole new outlook, though I admit I also feel some Compulsion from swearing to justice on the stone. As Yazadril said, this is no time for false modesty.”

“*I couldn’t agree more.*” Equemev nodded. “*I’d wager you feel no Compulsion from your oath; that you feel exactly the same. Your parents must have been very proud of you, for they have made you a man of truly noble character.*”

“Thank you, ladies.” Mark nodded. “I’m sure they’d be pleased to hear that. And really, I don’t feel any different. I truly believed in the morals of Osbald’s Oath before I swore.”

“You hear that, Equemev?” Povon chuckled. “We have been promoted! Where once we were merely ‘the girls’, now we are ladies! I think I like the sound of it much better!”

“Do you?” Mark laughed, enjoying the teasing far more than the praise. “Then I now pronounce you; Lady Povon and Lady Equemev of Hilia!”

“Why thank you! That is truly charming! Lady Povon of Hilia! Don’t you agree, Lady Equemev?”

“*Quite charming!*” Equemev psionically giggled while giving her mane a toss.

“Well in that case,” Talia smiled as she gave a flourished wave, “Silaran and Kragorram, I dub thee Sir Silaran and Sir Kragorram, valiant Knights of the Principality of Hilia!”

“Why thank you zo much, Prinzezz Talia!” Kragorram beamed. “Zeriously, it meanz a great deal to me! Zir Kragorram of Hilia, valiant Knight of the forzez of jutzize! Truly, what a fine thing!”

“*It truly is!*” Silaran agreed. “*It makes me want to trot about this assembly of the mighty, introducing myself! Why good day, your majesty! I’m Sir Silaran of Hilia! Have you met my love, the Lady Equemev?*”

“*I can’t wait to tell my mother!*” Equemev gleefully whinnied. “*And my friends from the Sorcerer’s Academy will simply faint with envy!*”

“You know my love, these four may be insufferably smug for a while.” Talia grinned.

“True.” Mark chuckled “But Silaran’s right, in that we should stroll around and meet some of these fine rulers of the world. One doesn’t get the opportunity to do so every day!”

“All right. It looks like Father’s and Alilia’s delegations are busy with military leaders and their affairs, and Tithian is drawing a crowd of administrative types, unless I miss my guess. That eliminates our chance to be introduced by people we already know, for now, so we’ll just have to venture boldly forth on our own. A great many are eyeing us, perhaps considering approaching us, but none look ready to take the initiative yet. We have one prior arrangement to fulfill, as the dreaming dragon wished to speak to us. Is there anyone else you wished to meet?”

“Yes, King Dren of Finitra in particular, and Osbald of Thon. But first things first, I suppose. Let’s go talk to the Eldest.” Mark said, and they started for the center of the stage, where the dreaming dragon sat on the inner edge of the marble and swung his insubstantial feet within the matter of the Truthstone of Falgaroth like a child with his feet in a lake.

“The thought of any living thing being one hundred and twenty-two million years old is literally incomprehensible to me.” Mark revealed. “And from what he said to Somonik, no humanoid race of people had even emerged on Kellaran the last time he was aware in it! No one else is speaking with him, so Talia and I will be the first of our races he has ever met!”

“*Even my race had barely begun forty-one million years ago!*” Equemev marveled. “*Of all the races of people on the world today, I think only we and the dragons were around that long ago!*”

“Wow! He’s awoken to a completely different world, if awoken is the right word! I’m looking forward to meeting him!” Mark smiled in wonder.

“You are zo confident!” Kragorram noted admiringly. “I could never bring myself to approach zuch a legendary and revered figure! And I doubt I will be able to zpeak to him at all, I warn you now!”

“I have a brash nature, and I think a justifiably high opinion of my capabilities,” Povon mused, and rubbed against Kragorram a bit as they paced beside each other on all fours. “But right now I am fully in agreement with you on both of those points, my love. He is only here as a Projection of himself, and from what he said he is asleep as well. Yet his psionic power is as unstoppable as an avalanche! No one could bar him from their mind! He took a Reading of forty-one million years of Somonik’s life in a blink! I mean look at him! He is refreshing his feet within the god-stone!!!”

“Ah, but it’s not confidence I have, it’s an almost complete ignorance of the magnitude of the forces I’m dealing with!” Mark laughed. “Two days ago Talia was so far above me I’d have almost considered her a goddess! I have to either not be intimidated by any of it, or be completely intimidated by all of it!

“And I’ll keep my ignorance, thank you very much. To my way of thinking, people are people no matter who they are, all worthy of my respect, as I’m worthy of theirs. The Eldest is an incredible being in every way, but I’d bet he’s just a nice old guy at heart, and probably feeling as displaced as I am as well.”

“You’re right about that last, sure enough.” the sleeping green drake agreed without looking up or physically talking. “Displaced is a good term for it.

“But that’s a big fat white lie about not having confidence. You’ve always had confidence and pride, and rightly so, in the company of other unpowered humans. But since your wife lit the candle with your power and her father explained it’s scale, you are so confident that you truly fear no being. You know you can always light another candle if things get rough. Since the candle killed you both and the curse returned you both to life, you are confident in your immortality and your indestructibility, and you feel an immense confidence from knowing your wife is as safe as yourself. Thus you have the temerity to approach one such as me with such a cavalier attitude. You are among the most insufferably confident beings I have ever encountered. And I lived eighty-one million years before I was forced to sleep, so I’ve met a few.

“That’s pretty much what I wanted to talk to you about. You’re right about being completely ignorant of the magnitude of the forces you’re dealing with. You’re completely wrong about being immortal, and you’re completely wrong about having enough power to be more than a momentary inconvenience to many of these here in any sort of contest, least of all warfare. You’re wrong in thinking that raw power has anything to do with it, for as I sit here I don’t have enough personal magic power to even cast a spark, let alone light a candle, nor any physical strength at all, yet I could kill you and everyone here at any moment I chose, without fear of reprisal. All of that doesn’t worry you, since we’ve all sworn to justice upon this stone, or within it in my case, but really, you can’t even be confident that I’m bound by my vow!

“And as it happens, I’m not bound by that vow! That quality of the Truthstone of Falgaroth is activated by physical contact, and my body is far from here! It’s lucky for you that I had already sworn a binding vow of justice, at a time when your ancestors were not that different from raccoons! Otherwise I couldn’t be bothered with you! As to the exchange between the Truthstone and myself when I swore on it, I was not bound by it, but rather bonded with it.

“It’s also lucky for you that you are right about a great many important things. You and your wife are indeed key to the nexus. You are indeed key to this alliance. The advice you gave on waging peace and benefiting the world in order to fulfill the nexus, that was brilliant. Your reduction of philosophy and morality to everyday practicality, as encapsulated in the phrase; ‘evil is stupid’, may well be history’s most original and crucial thinking. That phrase maintains opposition to evil without inherent hatefulness in the opposing.

“For these and other reasons, I’m prepared to expend some effort to keep you silly children among the living. And I assure you, someone must do so, for if battle comes right now it would find you woefully unprepared for the task you have chosen for yourselves, as a strike force for the alliance.

“You six and your pets would be wiped out in a moment in any serious engagement! You’re nothing but a pack of foolish, headstrong adolescents! Granted you have considerable strength and talent and power as individuals, but face reality! Now that this alliance is formed, the existing fast reaction units of its nations’ military forces will number tens of thousands of warriors and wizards and dragons! No enemy will attack unless they can match at least that force! For a platoon as small and inexperienced as yours to make any real difference at all, you would have to detect the initiation of hostilities, Translocate there, assess the situation first hand, and be acting accurately with all your power, all within one-quarter of a second after the first advance units of the enemy had Translocated to the site of hostilities!

“Now you’re right in that there are many uses for such a force as you hope to constitute. You do show a lot of promise, and you do pack a great deal of raw power in a very small package as a military unit. And if you had at least a century of battle experience as a unit, you might even be allowed out without a babysitter!”

The power and tone of the Eldest’s communication had stopped Mark’s group in their tracks nine meters from the stage. Now he finally turned and looked at them, “Come here.” he snapped. “No one else is sharing our communication, and you’re drawing attention.”

He waited till they had come within a respectful conversational distance upon the stage and stopped. “I’ve saved you from embarrassing yourselves by offering your services immediately and publicly, for Yazadril or any competent military commander would have burst your bubble the same as I’ve done, including Talia’s sword if you’d given her

the chance. The best you could have hoped for would be assignment to an existing strike force for further training under a competent officer. And somehow I don't think you'd have been content with that.

"As I say, you need at least a century of battle experience to be ready to be an independent force of six under your own command. Three centuries would be reasonable, and three centuries more before you're competent to bring the hundreds of elves who've sworn to you under your command.

"You have one to three years until the nexus. Only I can make you ready in time.

"If you wish to be of any military use at the nexus, you will do three things. You will not allow yourselves to be drawn into battle until you are ready. You will train intensively as a unit under instruction from the sword of Visinniria until she judges that you are ready for true weapons exercises. At that point you will come to me, and I will complete your training.

"Silaran, here is my location. You will forgive me for making it absolutely impossible for you to reveal it to anyone else. You will guide them when the time comes.

"Your pardon, Eldest." Mark said with a bow, Talia bowing with him. "We thank you for your offer of training, and we gratefully accept it. I also apologize for anything I've said that earned your displeasure. I'm sure you are now aware of everything I've ever said. I will attempt to improve my attitudes in the future."

"Oh, I'm not displeased with any of you, young man!" the Eldest chuckled. "You're a fine group of youths. But you've been special all your lives, you males for your might, you females for your power. Being grouped with others who are similarly exceptional further increases your individual awareness of your value. And it will always be the case that such groups of special youths will occasionally need a bit of lecturing, to keep them from thinking that they're any more special than they truly are!"

"As to your words as you approached, they were modest and good-hearted. You were the only one here who considered that I might be feeling lonely or displaced in this situation, that I might need a bit of friendly conversation and camaraderie. Everyone else is either awed, intimidated, or overwhelmed with curiosity in their thoughts of me. Only you thought of me as a person, just another good soul like any other. While that does bruise my ego a bit, that is also part of the property of your personality that makes you, and you alone, Key to The Just Alliance. Awe and intimidation have more to do with evil than good, and curiosity is neutral. That makes you the most good-hearted person here.

"But it is a grave weakness to not understand the magnitude of the forces around you, in every way; socially, physically, intellectually, emotionally and magically. Kragorram is physically the strongest being here, and to fight beside him well, or to fight against someone like him, you need to know how many times stronger than you he is. The weakest here are beings smaller than your thumb, but you should know that eight hundred of them could pick you up and throw you off a cliff, if they were emotionally capable of the act, which they're not. Osbald is the most influential here, and if you cannot measure that property, you cannot debate him on an opposing point in this assembly with any hope of convincing the majority. Somonik is first in magic, Tithian is first in intellect, Senchak is first in emotion, and I am first overall, though my body lies sleeping far from here. When next we meet, I'll expect you to know how you differ from all of them in those qualities, and to be able to quantify that difference to at least the nearest order of magnitude. I'll make that a formal assignment of your training.

"As to your not-so-subtle rebuke for my having Read you completely when you gave me your language, know that I couldn't help but do so. You have a great mind, but because of your short life and the comfortable pace of your education, your mind is almost empty. Imagine having to look into a huge room for a small white marble with a blue spot on it, without looking at anything else in the room. But when you look inside, it contains nothing but six white marbles in a corner.

"For that matter, I've Read you all, and I know every tiny thought that's ever crossed your minds. Of the six of you, only you and Povon have any serious mental shielding at all, and she's the only one of you who realizes both who I am, and what the order of magnitude is between herself and I. So she alone respects me with the fervor that my ego thinks I deserve, and she dropped her psionic shields to me as a sign of respect. Or perhaps out of fear and appeasement. At any rate, I hungrily took what she offered, every second of it, and much of it of great value.

"You other four need serious work on your psionic shielding. You're used to a great deal of very open psionic communication, unlike Mark, and you're all too trusting, unlike Povon. Fine within the Wards of this place, but not elsewhere. As Povon guessed, none here could resist my probe, but you four were too easy. I literally cannot direct my attention to you without knowing every thought and sensation you've had during every breath you've ever taken.

"Work on your mental shielding. That's your assignment.

"Povon, your personality improvement program is important, and you are doing amazingly well at it. Keep up the good work, that's your only individual assignment.

“I’ll tell you something else that’s not generally known. I’m taking you into my confidence in this, because I intend to keep taking part in the coming events in the world, and I will be working closely with you. I can keep a portion of my attention here only because of my interaction with the godstone. Beyond that, I am trapped in a dream. But it keeps enough of my attention here that my awareness of these surroundings continues to expand.”

“By now, I’ve Read all who attended tonight for the last ten years or so of their memories, and these who have stayed after the meeting, for their last century if they’ve lived that long. My awareness has grown outward from this stone in an expanding sphere, and I’ve now Read at least the last year of everyone within fifteen kilometers of here. Only a few of the most senior dragons are aware of it.”

“Ah, your pardon Eldest, but won’t those dragons tell the others that they’ve been Read?” Silaran asked.

“They most certainly will not! Ask Povon some other time if you wish to know why that is so.”

“At any rate, once I have you trained up to the point where you are more than a hazard to yourselves, you will have many new duties and roles in this alliance, and some of them will involve acting on my behalf. Being my hands in the world, so to speak. I ask this service in fair trade for the training and guidance I will provide you.”

“Now, as much as I do enjoy your company, I must bid you good day, for as I suspected, the military commanders are waiting patiently for my direct attention.”

“One thing, honored Eldezt.” Kragorram politely interjected. “Are we allowed to reveal to otherz that you have become our mentor?”

“Yes, so long as it’s made clear that you are not to engage in combat without my clearance.”

“Thank you, Eldezt.” Kragorram bowed respectfully. “And good day.”

Their group also bowed and bid the Eldest good day, and he actually chuckled as he stood to meet Yazadril and the other commanders, leaving his stump of a tail immersed in the stone.

“Well, he certainly told us, didn’t he?” Talia quietly asked when they were a good distance from the stage.

“He did.” Povon agreed. “I feel rather chastised, and I had thought that no one could put me in my place so effectively.”

They were then approached from different directions by four groups, those of King Dren, Overlord Senchak, Empress Emeroth, and half the remainder of the delegation of gargoyles. It looked like the giants and humans would arrive simultaneously, until Dren quickened his step to arrive first.

“Set me aside, would you love?” Talia asked. “As much as I love being held by you, this is an occasion where I should be seen standing on my own.”

Mark released her, and she stood in mid-air beside him, holding his hand, her eyes level with the approaching king’s.

“Good day, your Majesty.” Mark told him, as he and Talia gave a polite bow. The king of Finitra was slim and fairly tall at a hundred and ninety-three centimeters, with prematurely gray hair and brown eyes.

“Good day to you as well, your Majesty.” Dren smiled as he bowed to them in return. “You do work fast once you get going, don’t you? You do us proud, even if you’re not a resident of Finitra right now.”

“Ambassador Bomil of Thon told me of his conversation with you, and Prince Yazadril mentioned you in his letter, which Bomil passed along.”

“You should know that what happened at your home was considered a national disaster, and that all of Finitra rejoices in knowing that one of our citizens from Shinosa Valley has survived.”

“I knew your father before his early retirement, he was a good man as well as a comrade of mine during my training years, and I truly mourn his loss.”

“I’ve met your grandfather occasionally, and I went to him the minute I learned of your survival. He’s a colonel of the Finitran army, retired now of course, though still vigorous. He and the rest of your father’s family were overjoyed to hear of your survival, and he has all of your family’s possessions from Shinosa Valley, collected and intact at his manor in Belinhome, my capital. He also holds intact the proceeds from the sale of your home, and he asked me to assure you that he considers it to be entirely yours, both possessions and funds.”

“He also extended his invitation to visit, and his regrets that he hadn’t taken time to visit you while your parents still lived.”

“For my own behalf, you should know that two of the families that lived in Shinosa Valley, the Jormans and the Wiselkops, have no known heirs. I’m hoping you might know if they had any kin outside Shinosa.”

Mark considered. “I have no idea about the Jormans. They were one of the first families in the valley; Verk Jorman was fifth generation Shinosan. They spoke Common without an accent, and I don’t recall any of them ever mentioning where they were originally from.”

“The Wiselkops were from Iktra, though I’m afraid I don’t know exactly where in that country they came from.”

“Ah. That might be all we need. Iktra takes a census with the taxes every year, just as Finitra does. I’ll find out if there are any Wiselkops still living there, and if any of them still remember who Stef Wiselkop and his family were, they will inherit the proceeds from the sale of the Wiselkops’ home and lands in Shinosa. You wouldn’t happen to remember Goodwife Wiselkop’s maiden name, would you?”

“No, I’m sure I never knew it.”

“Ah. Well as things stand now, you inherit the proceeds from the Jorman’s home and their mill. And you inherit their possessions and wealth. If we can’t find the heirs of the Wiselkops in Iktra, you’ll inherit theirs as well.”

Mark’s eyebrows rose. “That must be a goodly amount! Dob Jorman’s mill was the finest thing in the valley!”

“It is, and it went for a fair price. The Wiselkops had orchards and grazing lands as well.” Dren nodded.

“I see. Well, I’ll contribute all that towards your efforts to wage peace and help the poor in Finitra.”

“Thank you. Wage peace, I like that!” Dren laughed. “And I’ll do it, too! I even plan to sell many of my personal possessions for the cause!”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Mark smiled. “By the way, I thought your use of Shinosa Valley to help those from Whiskers Delta was an admirable act of wise rulership.”

“Thank you, and I’m glad you don’t mind that I sold your home while I still believed you dead.”

“That’s okay. Since I no longer have to go back there to help find out what happened to my people or to get my family’s things, I doubt I’ll ever return, except to visit the cemetery to honor and remember those I’ve lost. And I was saddened to hear of the loss of your own father. From what I knew of him, he was a good man, and a good king.”

“Thank you. He was that.” Dren nodded. “If you get a chance, I’d welcome your visit, along with your companions’.

“And now, if you will all kindly excuse me, I have obligations to speak with a few others here before I go, and I must return home shortly. Good day.” He finished with a nod and a smile, Mark returned them with the same salutation, then Dren and his party withdrew.

Emeroth then took the initiative. “Greetings. Congratulation on your recent ascensions, and my condolences for your losses.”

“Greetings, and thank you Your Majesty.” Talia returned as her group bowed.

“Youth, do you know you bear GrimFang, sword of Verzaclon The First, founder and namesake of my empire?”

“I do know that, yes.” Mark nodded up at her.

“Have you drawn it?”

“I have.”

“I see.” Emeroth frowned. “And what did you notice when you did so?”

“That it’s quite dangerous, and has a bit of a personality, like a puppy that’s eager to please whoever’s holding it. And that none could take it from my hand. Because of that, I always wear it or keep it within reach, to keep it safe from those who would miss-use it.”

“I see. Did you test it?”

“I did.” Mark nodded. “I found that it cuts what I want it to cut, and doesn’t cut what I don’t want it to cut.”

“Pardon? How do you mean about that last, about not cutting?”

“I mean that when I so directed it, it was too dull to cut a taut silk handkerchief, even with considerable pressure. If I tell it to not cut, I could swing it with all my strength at anyone, and give nothing more than a bruise. And a small bruise at that, since the blade is so light.”

“Well!” Emeroth declared with raised eyebrows. “I did not know of that property of it! And Verzaclon The First didn’t know it either! If he had, he could have saved himself from a few of the wounds he took by parrying his enemies’ weapons! Instead he used it to cut through everything; his enemies as well as their weapons and shields and armor, and a couple of them ducked and scored on him with the stumps of their weapons, even as GrimFang shortened them!!

“For that is the one and only offensive property GrimFang has; it will cut anything! That makes it a very simple weapon indeed for an item of such power, but that property is absolute! It will cut *without resistance* any material, be it flesh and bone, wood, any metal, any stone including diamond! And *no magic shielding can withstand it either!* I swear; you could cut a god in half with it, if it were possible to make one hold still for the blow! I ask you to never draw it here, for it could carve chunks from the Truthstone of Falgaroth itself, and the thought of that terrifies any rational person!

“It has one other property, for it is a wand of dark intent! It amplifies destructive emotion! Since you didn’t feel that when you held it, you have almost no dark intent within you. But you have not yet wielded it to kill or destroy, which is dark intent, even if it is done to uphold justice! When you do, the sword will feed on that, and likely drive

you berserk! Verzaclon the First never drew it until he was among his enemies and well away from his own forces, for once he held GrimFang, he would kill any within reach, friend or foe!

“The damned thing is a symbol of brutal repression among my people, for Verzaclon The First was the archetypical bloody-minded conqueror and dictator! I ask you to never draw it within half a kilometer of any person except those of proven evil intent, and to never bring it to Felion unless there is no alternative!”

“I understand, and thank you for the warning.” Mark nodded. “And I will carefully conduct any further tests of it in extreme isolation. However, I don’t think it will affect my emotions as you fear. I didn’t feel anything like that from it. I understand that none have wielded it since Verzaclon himself. It might have reacted to his personal overabundance of dark intent, or it may not affect humans in the same way it affects the Shiganzhu. For that matter, I may be personally immune to that effect.”

“Because you are Key to the Nexus?” Emeroth asked in surprise.

“Perhaps, or perhaps because of other unique qualities that I have.”

“Oh, and what would they be?”

“Well, I’d like to tell you, but I’ve been asked not to speak of it as a military secret. Tithian or Yazadril could tell you.”

“I see.” Emeroth nodded, looking irritated. “And I respect that you follow protocol in that way. Being who I am, many would have told me anyway. I will indeed ask them. If you are allowed to tell me, how did you acquire GrimFang?”

“It was given to me as a wedding present by just less than two thousand elves, who as individuals hail from every elven nation. I’ve only looked at a few of their cards so far, but it seems that they are all rather wealthy exotic weapons enthusiasts and collectors.”

“I see. How unusual. Upon the death of Verzaclon the First, GrimFang was given unto the safekeeping of Somonik the White, for no way was found to destroy it. He was asked to never give it up!”

She paused for a moment as her face clouded with anger, then she turned to look for the disfigured white dragon. Though he was almost two hundred meters away on the other side of the great room, she demanded of him; “Somonik, why did you fail my ancestors’ trust?! You know as well as I that GrimFang should not be about in the world!”

Across the room, Somonik turned to regard her, and answered psionically. *“I was asked by a consortium of elves to sell GrimFang to them, and I refused, of course. I was at that moment contacted by a seer of my race, whose identity I will not reveal. That person told me that it was necessary that I sell the sword to the elves, and to speak nothing more of it.”*

“So you sold it, when you did not own it! And we Shiganzhu have nothing to say about the disposition of our property, is that it?”

“In this unique case, I’m afraid so. The Dragon Seer is never wrong, and is furthermore a formidable person who becomes rather cranky at having such findings questioned. Myself, I had no wish to endure the haranguing that would result, but if you insist, I can put you in contact with that person. Beyond that, I suppose you have the right to ask for the sword back from Mark, though that would also be unwise. The Dragon Seer would not have had it given to Mark if unjust destruction would result. The same might not be so if it is again in the possession of a Shiganzhu.

“I do apologize for breaking my word. The Dragon Seer would never have named it necessary that the sword be sold, unless failure to do so would result in greater consequences than doing so. It was necessary.”

“I suppose I’ll just have to assume it was!” Emeroth snapped, barely keeping rein on her anger.

“Mark will not be corrupted by GrimFang.” Somonik assured her. *“We are safe from it, though it is again about in the world. Consider that our enemies are not safe from it, so long as Mark wields it.”*

Emeroth nodded, and seemed to grudgingly accept that. “Still, by all the missing gods, Somonik! You sold the damned thing! How much did you get for it?!”

“Twenty-one thousand ounces of gold, two hundred kilograms of raw opal ore, and two thousand one hundred and seventy-six carats of medium to small fine cut diamonds. I saw no reason to sell it cheaply. Actually, I was feeling somewhat confounded at being so brusquely commanded to break my word by anyone, even the Dragon Seer, so I negotiated the transaction rather aggressively. I assure you, the elves did not initially envision paying so much.

“I admit that the payment is rightfully your people’s property. Now that you know of this without my having to risk the seer’s wrath by telling you, I will forward the payment to you. I will include with it ten times as much, as my penalty for having broken my word to your ancestors, who have been dead for half a million years.

“Now, will you accept my apology?”

Emeroth and all who listened knew that Somonik would not offer it again. Furthermore, he was offering a tremendous treasure, and she couldn’t help but be astounded by the amount. “I do accept your apology and your

payment, and I offer my own apology for my anger. The payment will cover my government's recent extraordinary expenditures, and much of our costs in implementing Prince Mark's suggestions besides. Actually, we'll share it with the other three empires of Shiganzhu. We were one nation under Verzaclon The First, and as many thousands of their citizens were slain by GrimFang as ours. That makes it the unwanted heirloom of our entire race."

"It was, but no longer." Somonik gently reminded her. "Now it is a far more fitting heirloom of Hilia. Your sharing of its proceeds is wise and just. Now you must excuse me, for you've interrupted my conversation, and these fine people have waited patiently for my attention while you've had it." With that, he returned his attention to the hundreds of gnomes who surrounded him. They all started talking to him at once, and he appeared to have no trouble listening to them.

Emeroth stared at him in outrage at being thus dismissed.

"As I discovered during my recent conversation with the Eldest," Mark commented with a chuckle, "It's not that much fun to be treated like a child, especially when I found that I'd been acting like one."

"Are you saying I'm being childish?!" Emeroth demanded.

"I'm saying that from what I know of your race, and judging by your youthful beauty, I'd think you were about thirty years old."

"My youthful *what*?!!!" Emeroth exclaimed, caught between being surprised, flattered, and newly outraged. "It so happens that I've lived forty-one years, and fifteen of those on the throne of Verzaclon! And what the hell does that have to do with anything, anyway?!"

"So Somonik is more than a million times older than you and me put together. That's like me or you talking to someone who's been alive for about ten or twenty minutes. Let's face it Your Majesty, compared to him, we are of races whose members all die right after they're born. And as he pointed out, he made a promise to some people, and then they died, and he kept the promise for another five hundred thousand years anyway.

"I suppose the seer could have let Somonik tell you about selling the sword, but that was before Osbald started having everyone swear to justice, and your people still had no diplomatic relations with Xervia then, so they didn't yet know who was trustworthy.

"Besides, he did give me a nice little plaque with the sword, with the basics of it's history and abilities on it, so I wouldn't cut my foot off with it or some such, which I think was rather decent of him."

Emeroth stared at him a moment, then burst out laughing, and a great many around either joined her in laughter or breathed a heavy sigh of relief at the break in the tension.

"All right, I'm being childish." she admitted. "I'm also reminded why you're the Key to The Alliance, and I'm not. I loved your speech by the way. I've never felt so inspired. You've really made me believe that the complete elimination of evil from Kellaran is not only possible, but a practical goal. It didn't hurt that you have a wonderful speaking style and a beautiful voice."

"Thank you." Mark nodded, a bit sheepishly.

"I also was inspired." one of the gargoyles stated in a gravely voice, with a grin that revealed a startling amount of sharply pointed gray teeth between his protruding tusks. "Though the complete elimination of evil will require that we drag everyone in Serminak here and press their snarling faces against the Truthstone as they swear Osbald's Oath under the strongest Compulsions ever cast! Of course that's fine by me, and I'm eager to get started at it, but it will take a while.

"By the way, I'm Gershkulp. Like most of the words in our language, if you try to pronounce it without any vowels between the consonants, you'll be pretty close. My companions and I are what you might call the young up-and-comers of the Kwetkerthok political and military communities, here for the meeting as aides and secretaries and what not, now released from duty to enjoy this fine gathering.

"Before I go on, shall I have food or drink brought for any of you?"

"Thank you, Gershkulp." Talia smiled. "I'll just have cold water, unless you have a small glass of snowflower elixir, or bumbleberry wine?"

"For today's meeting, we have all the more popular kinds of refreshment from every nation. I'm sure we'd have the bumbleberry, if not the snowflower."

"I'll have cold apple juice, thank you." Mark told him.

To his surprise, Povon ordered hot cinnamon tea, Silaran and Equemev asked for cold ale, and Kragorram asked for the strongest grain liquor available.

As the giants, dwarves and other gargoyles nearby ordered things Mark had never heard of, often in other languages and with words he couldn't pronounce, Kragorram chuckled. "It doesn't get me drunk, if that's what you're

smiling about. But it taztez nize, and it’z good fuel for the fire, which reduzez how much hunting and lounging I have to do.”

Gershculp took the last order of the four groups around him, nodded, and announced; “I’ve sent your orders, and they’ll be brought here in a few moments.”

“Thank you, Gershculp.” Mark smiled. “Other than that, you had something you wished to say?”

“I do. We were noting that yours is a multiracial force, and a multiracial nation, so we were wondering if either were open to a few Kwetkerthoks?”

“Our nation certainly is, but it’ll be a few days of organization before we have the infrastructure to start allowing immigration, or even visits of more than a few hours. We’ll have more openings in our support corps soon after that. As for our strike force, it has just come under the tutelage of the Eldest, so I’ll have to ask him about that. Even if he says yes, we have a lot of training to do as individuals and as a sextet, so it’ll be a while before we add any new members. When we do, we’ll likely only add two from each race at most, a male and a female.”

“A wizard and a warrior, young and bright and strong in their ability, like yourselves.” Overlord Senchak interjected with a nod. “I understand that. A force that equally represents the genders and the races. I can think of a few pairs of Kleti who would qualify. They would be eager for the chance to fight with you, and I would gladly detach them to your service, when and if you would welcome them.”

“I can say the same of the Shiganzhu.” Emeroth nodded. “Fate swirls around you both, and if I were not Empress, I’d apply to your company myself!”

“Ah. I feel the same, though I’m too old for that.” Senchak smiled through his thick beard. “I can still swing an axe, but we have younger and stronger that do it better now.”

“From what I’ve heard, you gave a mighty account of yourself in your Arena of Government yesterday, old warrior.” Emeroth laughed.

“Thank you, Lady Emeroth.” Senchak chuckled, and bowed. “Coming from a fighter of your abilities as they were reported to me, that means much. And I suppose I did all right, for I slew four conspirators and wounded a few more without taking a scratch. Now if only all battles were that short, I would still be a warrior! As it was, I was so winded at the end, I felt like I’d run up every step in Princess Waakeen’s elven treehome! And we fought for only five minutes, or thereabout!”

“Then you must be neglecting your training, for you seem strong enough still to me!” Emeroth laughed. “Of course I understand that. With the demands of leadership, I have barely enough training time to keep my stroke smooth, and I know my own endurance isn’t what it was, or what it should be.”

“That’s the way of it, all right.” Senchak chuckled. “Five hundred things to do every day, four hundred left unfinished every night, five hundred new ones the next morning.”

“*Are your positions hereditary, like those of the kings of the humans, or appointed, like the princes of elves?*” Equemev asked.

“A bit of both, among the Kleti.” Senchak explained. “We recognize that the best thing you can give your child is the training and experience of your trade. Thus I train my own son at my side in statecraft and warcraft, and the value of that training is recognized. Thus he is expected to be the best-trained candidate for the lordship of our clan, and when I should die, or abdicate and retire, or be removed by our people, he will likely be Clanlord for much of his life. But, if the majority of our people come to think that their Clanlord is a fool, and that someone else would be a better choice, this will be decided by consensus.”

“The Clanlords of all the clans meet regularly at the Arena of Government of the Overclan. Which clan is Overclan, and therefore which Clanlord is Overlord, is decided among them, also by consensus.”

“My! This is such a wonderfully diplomatic language!” the great dwarf laughed. “It makes us sound so civilized!”

“*How do you mean?*” Equemev politely inquired.

“Well, when Kleti gather to reach consensus, there are several distinct stages to the process.” Senchak chuckled. “The first involves hours of speechmaking and feasting. Then, when everyone with prepared statements has given them, there follows a few hours of argument over the various points. A very informal debate among all the attendees, you might say, lubricated with copious amounts of mead and ale. Then, if it’s obvious that everyone agrees, the ranking lord makes a declaration to that effect. If there is still no consensus, drinking and arguing may continue for days. Positions become solidified among like-minded groups of delegates, and the most forceful or eloquent spokespersons for each position rise to dominance of their groups. The others become spectators for a time, and the debate becomes more focused. If no opposing spokespersons can convince the others, it may come to blows between them, and fists and feet and teeth will fly, and perhaps there will be a victor, and that’s the end of it. Perhaps the entire

assembly will erupt into unarmed violence, and one side will prevail, and *that's* the end of it. If that goes on for too long, someone will eventually stand on a table, draw their axe, and call for order, so to speak. If they get it, that decides it. If someone else draws their own axe and steps up to challenge, the rest may stop and watch, and *that* decides it. The entire assembly may draw steel and have at it, but that seldom happens, perhaps only once every two or three centuries.

“Only one question is ever debated during each meeting, and while the proceedings continue, the doors are barred from within and without. None may enter and none may leave, the privacies are within the arena, food and drink are passed in through windows too small to allow the passage of a person, and the delegates serve themselves.

“One way or another, the question is decided and the declaration made before the meeting ends and the doors open. Many Kleti from all over Kletiuk will have avidly watched the proceedings via Revealings, which are transmitted Illusions. The final declaration is almost never questioned by the rest of our populace, and that is the key to the effectiveness of our form of government.

“All this may seem somewhat extreme to those of other cultures, but this system has prevented war among the Kleti for thousands of years. And for a people with our temperament, that's saying something.” Senchak finished.

“*How fascinating!*” Equemev nodded.

“Indeed.” Emeroth smiled. “My own position is decided somewhat differently. Most of the aristocracy of Shiganzhu society is still inherited, and thus I was born Lady Emeroth Kezhulpa. The great families still control vast holdings, but they do not rule, and are subject to the same law as everyone else.

“The four empires of the Shiganzhu are meritocracies. All those who wish to be emperor or empress are extensively tested in a great tournament, held in each empire every five years. Events include tests of knowledge, wizardry, and mathematical ability, speeches and interviews before banks of judges, debates between candidates on ethics, administration and diplomacy, individual combat both armed and unarmed, and candidates who are still in contention during the final round of competition are tested in command of troops and naval vessels during war games.

“If you win the tournament, you become absolute ruler of an empire for five years. Then you must compete again to hold the crown, with no special advantage for having won the last time. I first won when I was twenty-six, among the youngest to do so, and I recently won for the fourth time, so now I can concentrate on my duty for at least another five years. This last victory was the toughest, I don't mind telling you. The candidates are better each time, and while my mind and leadership ability are still improving, my body is doing the opposite. I barely placed fourteenth in unarmed combat this year, and only tenth with a blade. Only my first place scores in wizardry and statecraft gave me the overall win, I think.”

“Ha! You were top five in thirty-seven events! Your aggregate scores were unapproachable!” the largest of her companions laughed with a booming voice as deep as Mark's, as he rejoined his empress from the gathering of military commanders.

“This is Mezomil.” Emeroth smiled, waving up at the five and a fifth meter tall fellow. He was going a bit gray in the temples of his sandy brown hair, but still moved comfortably in his polished steel and black armor, a black cloak thrown over his shoulders. “He's won the armed and unarmed combat events at every Tournament of Verzaclon since before I was born, and never placed lower than third in the war games, which he won outright last time as well. He's also Military Secretary in my government. Those of us who win the crown usually pick winners of events, or categories of events, as advisors in their specialty.

“That Yazadril's a formidable little fellow!” Mezomil reported. “He sucked every detail of our forces and deployments out of my brain in a moment, and did the same with the rest of the commanders as well! Then he had a plan, as quick as if he'd had a year to think about it! He's formed mixed companies for both defense and attack, reassigning units to new postings all over the world, from a few individuals to legions in size! Over a fifth of the alliance's military were thus reassigned to mobile forces, and he's building defensive formations around every major military target with more layers than an onion! And it's all traps within traps, warriors hidden by spells, spells hidden by warriors, tricky and cunning thinking, every bit of it!

“And if he had to step into the fray, aside from his abilities as a wizard, that sword he wears is enough to make him nearly invincible, despite his tiny stature!”

“Mountainfire, it's called.” Mark nodded.

“You know him? I thought you were Finitran?” Mezomil asked in surprise.

“My father-in-law, and a friend.” Mark revealed.

“So you are his daughter?” the giant inquired.

“And his protégé, until recently.” Talia smiled. “It's lucky for me I've recently gained many new teachers. I'm afraid my father will be rather busy for a while.”

“Perhaps not.” Mezomil grinned. “He seems to have everything figured out already. He’s seen a heap of battles, that’s certain. It would be hard to surprise him. I envy you your education.

“Actually, he and mother have trained me in general wizardry. He doesn’t like to talk about war with his family, so until recently I knew very little of military matters. He’s probably a far better wizard than he is a commander anyway, as research wizardry is his major interest.”

“That would make him quite a wizard!” Mezomil commented with raised eyebrows.

“He’s First Wizard and First Battle Wizard among the elves, as well as being their First Battle Commander.” Mark told him. “As you say, formidable, though I’d have never guessed it when I first met him. He’s really a very charming and pleasant sort to spend time with.”

“Then he must have shown you a different side than I’ve seen! He took command over there with a will of steel that made me want to ask how high, just in case he should want me to jump!”

“My father’s over eight thousand years old.” Talia smiled. “He has whole extra personalities stored in his mind, ready for use when they’re needed. He once impersonated a human jester for over two hundred years in order to catch an enemy, and when my sister and I were children he would assume that personality to make us laugh. He was like a totally different person then, so complete was his construct of Blik, Jester of Sming. Though I imagine his command persona would be a more stern performance.”

“We’re lucky to have him, during these momentous times.” Senchak nodded.

“Truly.” Talia nodded.

“By the way, Overlord Senchak, was there anything specific you wanted to speak with us about?” Mark asked.

“No, not at all. I just wished to be near, that I might listen and benefit from my leader’s wisdom.”

“I’m not your leader!” Mark laughed. “I really don’t know what we’re supposed to be, really, when it comes to being key to the nexus and all that!”

“Then your understanding of this language must be different than mine!” Senchak stated with raised eyebrows. “We all distinctly heard you named our leaders by Tithian, and you accepted and declared yourselves Those-Who-Lead-By-Suggestion! You acknowledged the title of Keys to The Just Alliance! We all agreed to it! From what Tithian said, it was almost pre-ordained by prophecy! The dreaming dragon’s assessment of you fully supports our choice! And though your wife was included in that naming, it’s obvious that she also looks to you for leadership! Unless you suddenly start sounding much less wise than you have, we would all follow you into hell and holocaust without reservation!

“You have grasped the scepter, you cannot in good conscience set it aside! You have inspired us, and we believe in you! Please don’t tell me you mean to shirk this responsibility!”

“I... I will not shirk it. I just didn’t really realize that I had it.” Mark stammered, shaken and white with his reaction to Senchak’s words.

“You also feel that way?” he asked Emeroth.

“Exactly.” she smirked. “I’m sure we all understood it as Overlord Senchak said, with the obvious exception of yourself. And after the way you dressed me down without injuring my dignity just now, I’m even more sure you’re the one for the job. Unfortunately for you, the qualities that make you right for the job include the humbleness that prevented you from realizing that it was yours.”

“But that’s insane!” Mark protested. “I’m a sixteen year old no one from nowhere who’s stumbled into all of this like a bull in a crockery, and yesterday morning I was a pauper who owned only what I wore and carried! Surely there are many here who are wiser than I!”

“Yours is crucial new wisdom, of such good nature and insight that none could deny it, so none of the rest of that matters.” Emeroth told him patiently. “Also, I understand that you had a perfect upbringing in an isolated community that was completely free from evil, and that your parents were exceptionally fine people. Then you were tested by severe hardship, and hardened by months of deprivation, then became the first of another race to be accepted by the elves into The Nine Valleys. You married their princess and brought their race together. You may take all that for granted, but the tale of your life is a powerful thing, and it’s helped make you leader of most of the world.

“I can see that it’s a bit of a shock to think that, but take heart. We’ll govern our nations as we always have, and implementing the suggestions you’ve made already will take quite a while. So I doubt you will be asked for your advice very often, for fear that you will morally obligate us to further strains upon our treasuries!”

“I see.” Mark nodded.

“I’m sorry to have shaken you.” Senchak quietly told him. “But the thought that you might step aside gripped my heart with great anxiety. And don’t let Emeroth worry you with her jesting words of strained treasuries. Things have been so prosperous in the world for the last few decades, that every treasury of every nation is bulging with more than

enough wealth to implement your suggestions to the full. The merchant consortiums and trades guilds will contribute generously as well, just to show that they're as important in the world as governments!"

"He's right, I was only teasing." Emeroth smiled. "Furthermore, we could all call in a great deal more revenue than we do, if necessary many times more, without exhausting the tax base. Such is the prosperity of the peoples of the world. As Somonik said, the use of wizardry as technology has had a great and beneficial effect on most people's lives."

"Huh. I wonder why we never had any magic like that in Shinosa Valley?" Mark mused.

"I understand that only one in a thousand humans are likely to have the capacity for wizardry, and there were only half a hundred where you lived, so it's unsurprising that none were wizards." Gershculp pointed out. "Still, you benefited. The handmade raw materials and traditional finished products your people traded are now comparatively rare in the cities of the world, so they still fetch a fair price if they are of high quality. The items you received in return would have been mostly mass-produced in cities by magically assisted means, and so they were much cheaper. Books, for instance. I'd wager each household in your valley had dozens of books."

"Oh yes! We had hundreds of them at our house!" Mark agreed.

"Three hundred years ago, a high quality book was worth as much as a good horse, or one-twelfth of its weight in fine gold. Only the very wealthy could afford to own hundreds of them. And a book of that sort, with perfect flowing hand-lettered calligraphy and gold leaf trim and wondrous hand-painted illustrations, which were almost all that were made back then, is still worth almost as much today, and just as many are produced. But now hundreds of times more are made that are affordable and sturdy, basic books made by the thousands with the assistance of magic, and the illustrations may not have brilliant artistry, but they have more realistic accuracy."

"I see." Mark nodded. "I realized yesterday that I needed to learn a lot more about the world. I've learned a lot here today, that's for sure."

"You still look shaken, Your Majesty." Senchak stated with concern. "Might I advise a mild Tranquility? I assure you, I'd be diplomatically helpless without mine, for the governing of Kleti is generally done at a bellow, and it allows me this calm demeanor that the rest of you use."

"I was hoping to get away from that, but I suppose realizing that one has become leader of most of the world is rare enough to make this an exception." Mark stated, almost choking on the words as he activated the tine band.

Then Talia surreptitiously cast a Tranquility on him, and he took a deep breath of relief. "Ahh. That's better. You know, with that one speech, I might have worked myself out of a job. The world seems a pretty nice place as it is, and I really can't think of any more improvements I'd like to see beyond the ones I've already mentioned."

Just then King Wosea appeared with a light puff of wind, standing on a meter and a half of air. "Excuse me, I do hope I'm not interrupting." the gnome stated in his child-like voice. "Prince Mark, we've been having quite a debate over there among myself, Prime Wisdom Klirp of the Selkies of Loch Croshia, and Emperor Kevim of the humans of Sming. We'd very much like your viewpoint on the question. May we have a moment of your time?"

"Of course." Mark nodded.

"That's the way, boy!" Senchak chuckled, and reached up to give him a friendly slap on the back as Kevim and Klirp made their way over on foot.

Kevim was a man who was short, slim, very dignified looking in ceremonial armor under ornate yellow robes, and quite elderly, with white hair and beard, both short and neat.

Klirp looked much like any other selkie, except for being gray around the muzzle, and having a large, ornate sun symbol bleached into the fur on the front of his neck. Neither Mark nor Talia could tell what gender Klirp was, but Mark found himself assuming he was male, for some reason.

"We'll step back and clear the view for others." Emeroth grinned.

Word that he was about to speak on matters of importance spread at the speed of thought, and by the time the principals in the debate had approached, everyone in the huge room had turned to watch, and a few were moving to get a better view.

"In order that my side of the debate not be overly emphasized in our statement of our question, I will not state it." Wosea told Mark. "Instead, my chronicler Pishtu, who is trained as a neutral observer, will state the question."

Pishtu appeared floating beside him, a female gnome in a pink dress who looked quite young despite her smooth white hair gathered into an artistic mound atop her head, and held with silver clips.

She smiled shyly at Mark, then consulted a fifteen centimeter wide white disk in her hand, and he noticed that hundreds of tiny black dots were arrayed in strange patterns on it. She tapped it with one tiny fingernail, and the dots shifted, and he realized they were writing of a sort, and the disk was some kind of magic tablet.

“There were several questions posed during the discussion, actually.” she stated, so quietly that she could barely be heard.

Wosea waved at her, and her next words were amplified so all could hear, which startled her for a moment. “It was noted... It was noted that the laws of various nations differ to varying degrees. They differ in strictness and in severity of punishments, and there are acts which are forbidden in some places, while being allowed, or even officially encouraged, in others.

“The first question that arose was, if one is visiting another nation with their mark of passport of The Just Alliance, is one responsible for following the laws of the country one is visiting, or those of one’s homeland?”

“The point was then raised that only one set of laws can be the most just, since true justice should be the same for everyone, and therefore all other sets of laws that differ significantly from that one are less just.

“So the next questions were, which laws are just, and which are unjust, and why?”

“Then, once just laws are decided upon, what punishments are fair for breaking them?”

“I see.” Mark nodded. “And what were the acts that are forbidden in some places and encouraged in others?”

“Ah.” Pishtu tapped twice on her disk. “Gambling, exchanging sexual favors for monetary gain or procuring persons for same, bloodsports and other highly dangerous recreations, various sexual practices including homosexuality, buggery, bestiality, inter-racial sex, consensual bondage, consensual infliction of pain and injuries, sex while in view of the public, and sex with those above or below the age of fertility, and finally, the use of various intoxicating or addictive herbs, fungi, elixirs, beverages or spells.”

“All right. I’ll give my views on laws and justice.” Mark told them. “But I’ll warn you now, I think many of you might not like everything I have to say. On the other hand, I wouldn’t speak on these matters if I hadn’t thought about it enough to be sure of the rightness of my opinions.”

“For right now, travelers should be responsible for knowing and following the laws of the places they visit. Nations who accept foreign travelers should allow them to be let off with a warning at their first offense of an illegal act that is allowed in the visitor’s home country, and prosecute them normally beyond that. Both sides give a little.

“But as soon as possible, many of your laws should be changed.

“First off, laws must be understandable for every adult citizen.

“I had to study Finitran law as part of my training as a Ranger, since at my Investiture I swore to uphold it. In general, it was written in terms that are overly grandiose and complex, and often used a great deal of specialized or archaic vocabulary. My father told me that the laws of the empires were even worse in those ways, so much so that the average citizens there couldn’t understand the official wording of the laws of their own countries! This necessitates the hiring of specialized legal advocates in order to effectively accuse, prosecute, or defend oneself in courts of law, and he told me that in many cases, the winner depended not on who was right, but on who could spend the most on advocates! Now, we should have the right to hire an advocate for their skills in presenting and arguing our case, but to absolutely need one to even understand the proceedings is ridiculous! To have a legal case wrongly decided in favor of the wealthiest is injustice of the very worst sort!

“All laws must be written in the simplest, most common terms possible while still containing the true meaning and intent of the law. Every citizen should then be made aware of the law, and take responsibility for knowing it. Again, both sides must give a little.

“There are four types of laws; criminal laws, individual rights, enforcements of responsibility, and safety regulations.

“The most important laws are those that ban crimes. They protect the innocent from harm by evildoers, whether the harm is physical, financial, or to property. There is little disagreement possible among the just about most of those.

“As for emotional harm, the onus is on the aggressive to not offend the sensitive, and on the sensitive to inform the aggressive of their feelings. Take the friendly slap on the back Overlord Senchak gave me a moment ago. Like many, I found it to be a welcome act of camaraderie, but many would be disturbed or offended by it. It’s up to him to try to know whether I’d be offended by it, and if he knew I would be, it should be illegal for him to do so. On the other hand, if I had been offended by it, it would be my responsibility to make him aware of that, and if I failed to do so, he could not be blamed for doing it again. The same principle applies to similar acts of friendly aggression, hugs and kisses for greetings or farewells, as well as other types of touching of a gentle or sexual nature, and practical jokes. It should be illegal to do such things to those who are known to be intolerant of them, and those who are intolerant of them must let their feelings be known.

“As for unfriendly insults, if they are truths or opinions, the person being insulted can insult the other person in return, or they can leave, or they can ask the insulter to leave, if the person being insulted legally controls the premises. If the insults are harmful lies about named persons or groups, that’s slander, which should always be illegal.

“No one has the right to answer insults with violence, no matter how much they feel their honor has been outraged! The hotheads of the world may curse me for saying that, but that is the only just way! No matter how much you’ve been insulted, you don’t have the right to strike back with anything beyond your own insults! Breaking the peace by striking the first blow is criminal assault, no matter how outrageous the provocation!

“The only exception is honorably challenged and accepted combat as sport. One should have the right to challenge another to non-lethal combat, but only if the combat takes place within a formal arena, and there is a referee present to end it when victory is accomplished, as well as a Healer to deal with injuries. And if a challenge to combat is refused, and the challenger has no grounds against the other for legal prosecution, that’s it, the challenger will just have to go home and get over it! Legal prosecution, insult, and honorable challenge to combat, those are the only three things one can legally do against another in a just society!

“Furthermore, to prevent harassment, and to prevent the meek from being constantly driven away by the aggressive, I would limit the right to offer unreturned insults and unanswered or refused challenges to five minutes! In other words, if an aggressor is insulting or challenging another, and no insult is returned or challenge accepted within five minutes, the aggressor must then cease insulting and challenging that person from that point ever onward, or be guilty of the crime of harassment!

“Some people enjoy friendly insults and other teasing banter of that sort. Others do not, in which case they must let their intolerance for it be known, and at that point any who insult them in any manner, friendly or not, are limited to the five minutes of it allowed before it is declared to be harassment.

“Though it’s tempting to do so, we can’t make lying completely illegal. We can’t be dragging every fisherman with an outrageously exaggerated fish story before a justicer. If the telling of a lie causes harm, then it can be prosecuted as the appropriate crime. For example, if I know that a floor is unsafe, and I tell someone that it’s sound, and they then fall through it, I should be prosecuted for assault, not for lying. The lie in that case would be considered the weapon in the assault, the same as if my words had cast a spell that weakened the floor. If a lie causes no harm, the most that can be done about it is to publicly prove that it’s a lie, and to publicly expose the one who told it as a liar.

“Other laws protect our rights to do that which is healthy or harmless, and prevent others from impeding us from normal activities. This is the legal basis of personal freedom, and we can all agree on that, I’m sure.

“We each have legally enforceable responsibilities to provide for the needs of ourselves and our dependents, and to contribute toward the common good of those we co-operate with in order to have what we couldn’t get on our own. These include seeing to our children’s education and well being, paying taxes in exchange for government services, paying dues to trade guilds we may be members of, and fulfilling our part in whatever contracts and agreements we’ve voluntarily entered into.

“The last category of laws are safety regulations. Laws that deal with the risk of dangerous activities that may be harmful, and may not, depending on the circumstances of their performance. Safety regulations must reflect three factors that affect any dangerous activity; the likelihood that something will go wrong due to a specific activity, the number of people who could be affected, and the likely severity of the injury or damage that could result.

“These obviously include traffic laws for waterways and roadways, cleanliness standards for food establishments, fire prevention laws, and building codes. They also include every single one of the acts that Pishtu listed as being banned in some places and encouraged in others, with the exception of consensually inflicted injury.

“I think it should always be illegal to purposefully inflict lethal, disabling, or disfiguring injuries upon the innocent, even if they beg you to do it.

“It must be illegal to purposefully inflict even minor injury upon a child.

“We cannot take away the rights of citizens to voluntarily risk minor injury to themselves or each other, or we’ll be running around trying to patrol for tattoos, overeating, almost every sport people play, going out in the winter with your coat unbuttoned, and many other matters that are more properly the concerns of parents and spouses than of the law.

“As well, we cannot try to eliminate every tiny risk of serious injury or death to one or a few. My father once told me of a Finitran Ranger who was struck by lightning on a calm and sunny day with only a few clouds in a mostly blue sky. The fellow survived, but the point of it is that anything you do carries a tiny risk of death, even sitting at home and doing nothing.

“We must regulate any activity that carries even a tiny risk of serious injury or death to many people. Few activities truly risk disaster, but they include working with poisons, fuels, wizardry, and large constructions. These activities are valuable, and so they are allowed, but they are dangerous, and so they are regulated.

“We must also regulate activities with a serious risk of serious injury or death to one or a few people. This is already the case with dangerous activities such as being a ranger or tradesman. The risk of regulated activities is

reduced to a reasonable extent through education, training, and certification or licensing, as well as by mandating reasonable safety precautions.

“Take an activity that’s incredibly dangerous but still legal and unregulated. Mountain climbing and testing one’s ability to swim to great depths are good examples. By anyone’s standards, they must fall into that last classification of risk; serious risk of serious injury or death to one or a few. My father once told me that a greater portion of those who climbed mountains for sport got killed doing it than any other activity that people voluntarily took part in. And, that those who made mistakes at it were as likely to kill their companions as themselves. Yet it’s completely unregulated in every nation. At the same time, other activities with almost no risk of injury or death, such as chewing bhalma stems, are illegal in most places.

“I think mountain climbing should be regulated in the same way as being a ranger is. Then mountain climbers would have to start off with expert instructors on less challenging climbs, and would increase their certifications with their skills, and would not be licensed to climb the most difficult peaks until they were experts at the sport. Their safety equipment and precautions would be standardized and mandated, and their gear would be inspected regularly. All would be trained to deal with avalanches, cold sickness, height sickness, and typical climbing injuries, and trained to properly provision and supply for their various expeditions. In this way, most climbing injuries and deaths would be avoided. The other highly dangerous physical recreations should be dealt with in the same way.

“Bloodsports are dealt with both as a licensed activity and as challenged combat. There must always be statements of limits, a declared combat arena, a qualified referee who is unflinchingly obeyed by the combatants, and a qualified Healer. We hope to eliminate evil, but there is never a guarantee that it could not return, so we cannot let combat skills be lost. Combat is very dangerous, and people will get hurt, but we cannot allow honorable challenges to be lethal. So, inexperienced fighters can issue challenges to unarmed combat only, once they can prove they have enough control to fight effectively and still refrain from the use of a lethal blow. When they have sufficiently mastered more lethal weapons to be trusted to withhold the killing move with them, they can challenge with them against others of the same stature. These are standard military procedures already.

“Combat training should be limited to those who have sworn to justice and wear the marking, and as many of those as possible should be encouraged to engage in it. Thus the population would not be as completely dependent on the military for their defense.

“The rest of the questionable acts that Pishtu listed involve either sexuality or addiction. Of course it’s illegal to force or coerce anyone to experience either of those.

“Voluntary sexual behaviors carry the risks of disease, unplanned pregnancy, physical harm, and emotional harm. To be licensed for each sexual act, each person should require the approval of their qualified and sworn Healer, to be sure they’re physically and emotionally ready and prepared for it, as well as being fully educated about each act. Their Healer can cast pregnancy controls if breeding is not desired at that time. Licenses to sell sex should be granted with the same procedure. If you swear an oath to only have sex with your spouse, like a Finitran vow of marriage, you lose your license to have sex with anyone but your spouse, unless they release you from the oath.

“Addictive behaviors carry the risk of physical harm to oneself, and financial harm to oneself and to others. Each addictive substance and type of gambling carries different risks, and the risks of each activity must be individually evaluated and applied to its licensing procedures. Except for gambling, one would need a regular approval from their Healer to maintain their license for addictive activity. For instance, to be licensed to drink ale or chew bhalma stems, one should have to show that they know what their effects on mind and body really are, what their safe dosages are, what the signs of addiction and overdose are, what other activities it is unsafe to perform while under their influence, as well as having clearance for the activity from their Healer. One would lose their license for an addictive activity if their healer detected that it was making them sick, if they exceeded their maximum dosage, if they committed a crime or serious safety violation while under its influence, or if they spent so much time or money on it that they failed to fulfill any of their legal responsibilities.

“Evaluation of risk is an activity that will require the work of experienced Healers, oddsmakers, statisticians, people of commerce, and justicers. But eventually laws will treat the risk of all dangerous activities *realistically*, and so they will be just.

“I know that various races may differ in their tolerance of risk and danger, so you will pass laws that reflect that, but at least you can all share the same realistic judgment of how dangerous an activity is, even if you don’t agree on how dangerous an activity you will allow. In this, visitors to other nations should have to follow the limitations of their own license as well as the local laws, as I outlined earlier.

“Now, to reduce the cost of introducing all this licensing, I think you should each have a single bureau of risk licensing. It would issue a general license to risk to each citizen, listing all the dangerous activities and the level of risk they are licensed to engage in.

“You should also be able to free up a great deal of your judicial budgets by closing all your jails. When a crime is committed, have both the complainant and the accused swear a binding oath to truth and justice, then establish the facts and the evidence. When they are both bound to justice, perpetrators and those they offend against should be able to work out a just restitution between them, perhaps with atonement, but perhaps with forgiveness. If they can’t agree, then the court can offer mediation and sentencing suggestions, and make a final decision if nothing else works. Perpetrators who are bound to justice should need no other coercion to ensure that they fulfill the terms of their parole.

He paused for a long moment. “I think that’s it. Thank you for your patience.”

“You’ve only left out one thing, young man!” Emperor Kevim of Sming stated sternly. “Common decency! There’s more to the morality of law than practical reduction of risk!”

“No, there’s not.” Mark stated firmly.

“What about bestiality, fornication in public places, fornication with children?!”

“As for bestiality, one would need the approval of both one’s Healer and a qualified animal healer to assure that no diseases would be transmitted between the person and the animal, and that the animal would not be harmed or unduly disturbed by the activity. I’ll admit that the thought turns my stomach, but that doesn’t mean we can outlaw it if it does no harm.”

“That’s preposterous! How can it not unduly disturb the animal?!” Kevim demanded.

“Well, Mother Dobbim had a stringy old ram and two huge sows that she kept in the same pen.” Mark chuckled. “Whenever the sows were at the trough, the ram would mount them with great vigor. The sows appeared to neither notice nor care, since it didn’t affect their eating, which was their main concern. This proves to me that some animals would be rather tolerant of such things.

“In the case of fornication with children, no qualified and justice-bound Healer would approve of the licensing of a child for most of those activities, since they would be physically harmful for persons of insufficient development even if it was with their eager consent, so those would still be illegal.

“The other rights of adult citizens, besides the right to engage in reasonable risk, should also be granted to those who are qualified and ready to assume their legal responsibilities, rather than at some arbitrary chronological age. Thus the more mature of the young would not be unfairly denied opportunity because of their youth, and the least mature would not endanger the rest of us by engaging in activities they aren’t qualified to do, yet are allowed to, due only to having reached a certain age.

“As for fornication in public, I was raised to think it unspeakably outrageous, but I still see no valid reason to outlaw it, as long as the participants are licensed for the activity, and they’re not blocking traffic or otherwise infringing on the rights of others.”

“And how about creating a disturbance?!” Kevim demanded. “Can I not prevent people from fornicating in their front yards, though a huge mob would quickly form in the street?!”

“If they invited the mob to watch, they have indeed created a disturbance with an unlicensed public performance, the same as if they’d stopped traffic with a sword juggling show. If the mob haven’t been invited to watch, and they’re impeding those who wish to pass, then they must be urged to move along, and charged with blocking traffic if they refuse, the same as would be done if they’d stopped to watch a house fire.” Mark patiently explained.

“And what of my emotional harm if I’m sickened and outraged by their display?” Kevim retorted.

“You can choose not to watch. Don’t you see, if there’s no harm done other than your outrage, it’s only harm by perception!” Mark insisted.

“Harm by perception! You’ll have to explain that a bit further!”

“All right. I might pass a law preventing people from fornicating in the deep forest, but not in their front yards in a just and secure community. In the forest around Shinosa there are wild cats, nothing so huge as Stripe here, but still big enough to kill and eat a person if they get a chance. They don’t do it very often, but they instinctively know when you’re most vulnerable. Most everyone they *do* kill is either fornicating or leaving a crap at the time, because that’s when you’re most vulnerable to attack from a wild cat. Pardon me for saying, but there it is, and every Ranger in Finitra knows it. Such things have been happening to people during such vulnerable moments for as long as we’ve been around, and that’s why most people will always feel a need to seek a private and safe place, out of view, for such activities. Such practical avoidance of risk is at the core of your abhorrence for public fornication, but if there’s no real risk of harm, your abhorrence is misplaced.

“Now let’s say that tomorrow you pick up a rose and prick your finger on a thorn, and your finger gets infected and swells up, and eventually turns black and falls off. It’s very rare, but it has happened. By the old thinking, rather than making a rational evaluation of the risk of roses, you might simply outlaw them from your empire in an attempt to eliminate the risk completely. But many people like roses, and would still grow them and buy them if they thought they could get away with it. When selling roses is illegal, if a rose seller is robbed, he can’t go to the city guard about it, so he has to hire a bone-breaker to get his money back. Soon the illegal market for roses is staffed by violent criminals. Every copper piece spent on roses escapes the tax collector, and instead goes to providing further power for criminals. Honest citizens begin to think; ‘Well no wonder they made roses illegal; everyone who has anything to do with them is an evil ruffian! Roses are obviously vile things!’

“Then a young man buys a rose for his sweetheart, emboldened by the romantic yet forbidden nature of the act. They get caught with it. They are disgraced, they go to prison, their lives are ruined. Because he gave her a rose, an act which any reasonable risk evaluation would rate as almost completely harmless. Yet the harm they suffer is real, and they suffer it because the act was *perceived* to be more harmful than it was. Thus; harm by perception, or more accurately, harm by false perception, since it’s the mistaken evaluation of risk that leads to the harm.

“This injustice happens to people every day, for such things as homosexuality and chewing bhalma stems. And yes, for being caught fornicating under the bushes in public parks.

“I bet you have a law in your country against going about in public naked, even though it presents no risk of harm, am I right?”

“You are.” Kevim nodded.

“If Somonik visits your country, are you going to arrest him for not wearing pants?”

Almost everyone there couldn’t help but look at Somonik, then mentally picture the ancient white dragon wearing trousers.

Mark let a wave of quiet laughter pass around the room before he continued.

“The law has to be equal for all. If you admit that there’s no harm in Somonik not wearing pants in Sming, there’s no harm for anyone else to do it either. Sometimes we just have to put up with the ways of others that we don’t like, unless we can prove harm or excessive risk, and that’s all there is to it. Sorry, but there it is.

“You’ve sworn to justice on the Truthstone. Can you truly deny the rightness of what I’m saying?”

Kevim’s brows furrowed for a moment, then smoothed, and suddenly he was laughing quietly to himself. “No. I truly wish I could deny it, young fellow, but I can’t refute your arguments. Well spoken.”

“Yes!” Talia exclaimed as she clenched a fist, then blushed bright red at her outburst.

“Yes indeed!” Wosea exclaimed in glee, clapping his tiny hands rapidly together, and many there joined him in applauding. It was obvious that Mark had supported his position in the debate, and he was delighted. “You recorded all of that?” he asked of Pishtu, who vigorously nodded.

Mark blushed and gulped his apple juice, as Talia hugged him warmly.

“Prince Mark, I must ask you, how did you think of all of that?” Kevim asked with a smile.

“Well it all started when I was walking through the forest one day, not long after I’d left home. As I often did then, I was weeping for the recent deaths of my family, and thinking about how unfair the whole world was.

“And I kind of asked myself; ‘Well, what would you have it be? What should be done to fix the world?’

“I walked alone for another five and a half months after that, so I had a lot of time to think about it, and a lot of it is based on things I’ve learned from the elves over the last three days. It never really came together like that before just now, as a complete policy I mean. Till now it was mostly just a bunch of separate conversations I had with myself to keep from losing my mind to monotony.”

“Six months, trekking through unsurveyed mountains alone, without equipment.” Kevim marveled. “What an ordeal that must have been, but it forged you from unfinished ore to a fine blade. I imagine the conspiracy expected that any survivors would flee to the east, toward the closest settlements, and Finitra proper.”

“No, I’d never been out of the mountains, they’re home to me. I know their dangers and how to fight in them. I’d never run to the lowlands if I feared attack. I went south, the better to escape the magic blizzard.”

“That likely saved your life, and I’m most glad it did.”

“Thank you.” Mark nodded, and heaved a huge sigh. “Well, I’d like to thank you all for your courtesy, and for listening to me. But I must admit that the tension of all that public speaking has taken it out of me, and Talia feels much the same. Besides that, we were married just yesterday, and should be on our honeymoon right now. So, I think we’ll bid you all good night.”

He turned to his draconian and equine companions. “Feel free to stay and mingle if you want, or you’re welcome to come back with us and continue visiting.”

“I’d rather we went with you.” Povon told him. “I’m really enjoying this feeling of friendship and camaraderie, almost as much as Kragorram’s love. I’ve never felt anything like either one.”

“Yez, we’ll come with you.” Kragorram nodded.

“We came as a company, we should depart as one.” Silaran declared.

“All right then, Silaran, if you’ll bring us home?”

“I’m afraid I cannot, for I don’t know where we are. Only the makers of this hall and Somonik know where it is, though I can tell we’re deep underground. And only Somonik can send us home from here. Security precautions, you understand.”

“I’m ready to Translocate you.” Somonik told them psionically.

“I see.” Mark nodded. “Well goodnight everyone. I hope we’ll see you all again soon.”

“Go ahead Somonik, and thank you.” Talia called, and suddenly they were in the back yard of The Living Palace.

“Allow me.” Povon said as she cast a sphere of light over the porch that lent a warm glow to the scene.

“Ahh, is it ever good to be home.” Mark grinned as he stretched, and Stripe and Scout made for their food and water supplies in the stable. “It feels like we were gone for a year! First thing is getting this armor off!”

“I could put it away for you, if you wish.” Povon giggled.

“Sure!” Mark laughed, and suddenly all of their armor and Kragorram’s sword disappeared, leaving him to fall two centimeters to his bare feet with a bit of a jolt. “Thanks!” he laughed as he scratched an itch on his chest. He realized he was clad in only his underwear, the tine band on his forehead, and his sheathed sword, but he found that he didn’t mind that. Talia was the only other humanoid there, and the other four habitually went about completely unclothed, as was the manner of their races. Besides, it was a beautiful summer night.

“I’ll get us something to eat.” Talia smiled as she kissed his cheek.

“Where will we get food? I don’t even know if there’s a market near here!” Mark laughed as they climbed the eight broad, semicircular stairs at the back doors of The Living Palace.

“There’s a market on the lakeshore, but it’s not open now. It *is* after midnight.” Talia giggled. “But we have plenty of food, and barrels of drink! The larder’s full, the pantry’s full, and the entire kitchen is piled high with it! I won’t have to cook for years!”

“Here, you just sit down and enjoy. I’ll have it ready in a moment.” Talia smiled, and with a whistled trill, she summoned a small, high table and a chair sized for Mark, with a matching chair sized for her with legs long enough to match the height of the table. She arranged them to one side of the doors on the broad semicircular porch at the top of the back stairs.

Then she turned to her visitors. “Can I get you four anything?”

“No thank you.” Povon declined. “We stuffed ourselves with succulent tidbits last night, and we quite literally won’t need to eat for a month! Unless you could brew up a hogshead of rose hip tea?”

“I can do that!” Talia laughed. “The kitchen has facilities to cook for a thousand humans or elves! The biggest kettle is as high as my head!”

“And Kragorram, we have a cask of nice high proof rum if you’d like it?”

“Thank you Talia, I would.”

“We’ll just partake of some of this absolutely succulent turf you have here!” Equemev enthused as she and Silaran began to graze on the lawn. *“It grows fast enough to need a trim already, and it’s delicious stuff! My compliments to your horticulturist! We’ll wash it down with some of the cool spring water in the trough in the stable. I’m getting the impression from Stripe right now that it’s most refreshing!”*

“That ale we had at the meeting was almost too good!” Silaran chuckled as he chewed. *“I was starting to get tipsy from it!”*

“I’m not surprised! You drank over twenty litres of it!” Mark laughed.

“You don’t mind that we talk while we eat, do you?” Equemev inquired, without looking up from the grass she was cropping. *“Our people generally do, due to our use of psionic Speaking for almost all of our communications.”*

“Please, make yourselves at home!” Mark laughed. “Your ways certainly make you easy to host!”

Talia had plucked dishes, glasses and silverware out of the air and set the table for herself and Mark. Now she began producing covered crocks and kettles of various sizes. When she removed their lids the contents were steaming hot, and in two cases still settling from a boil.

“Wow! Where’d all this come from?” Mark asked.

“From the various feasts at our wedding last night. Many of the nations brought ridiculous amounts, just in case any significant portion of the three and a half million in attendance had decided to eat at their pavilions. There was enough food there last night to feed four times that many, and hundreds of crocks and kettles of freshly cooked food

weren't even opened. Not to mention wheels of cheese, racks of loaves of bread, bushels of fruit and salads, foodstuffs of every kind, and many of them were never touched. And while most of it was sealed and preserved and taken back by those who'd brought it, Mileemi of Thon made sure we got as much of it as we had room to store!"

"This really smells great! And you just have to re-heat it?"

"No, it's preserved exactly as it was the moment it was sealed! If it was boiling then, it'll still be boiling when you open it, even if it's ten years later! It's like an ongoing Restore spell!" Talia laughed as she sat and began serving herself. "Welcome to the world of modern convenience, my previously-rural love! Without such spells, I doubt even the nations of the elves could lay out such feasts as they presented yesterday on such short notice!"

"For that matter, you really must take a moment soon to look at your own kitchen! It's a wonder of mechanical and magical automation! And with the skills I have as a wizard to help me use it remotely, I don't even need to be there to make Povon's tea! A service cart will bring it out here in... about sixteen minutes, Povon. Sorry for the wait, but those who designed my kitchen never imagined me needing to boil four hundred litres of water on a few moment's notice."

"That's fine. In the meantime, let me show you something, little sister." Povon mused. "Mark, you might as well learn this as well, so Link with Talia as fully as you can. You've got it?"

Mark nodded, still eating without slowing, though Talia had stopped to concentrate on what the silver dragon was showing.

"Now Talia, gather as much of your power to you as you can hold. No no, don't do anything with it yet! You start casting in subtle ways as soon as you're holding it, out of habit alone! That's right, just hold it, be at peace with it, be comfortable with it, let it really start to sink into the material of your body. That's right.

"Now, you're not that skilled at this yet, so you can't hold more than a quarter of your power like this, though you have learned to let it all flow through you when you cast it with all your strength. Try to learn to hold a little tiny bit more of it all the time, as you get used to it.

"Now I'm going to have to Link with you rather closely to really show you anything interesting. You have to decide right here and now how much you're going to trust me, because I'll know you completely after that. Not with the detail that the Eldest or Somonik would get, of course, but still, I'll know all your secrets."

"We have to all trust each other with our lives, to be comrades in arms." Mark said after a hurried swallow. "If I'm going to trust you with my life, I might as well trust you with my secrets.

"Of course, such trust must be returned. Will you show me all your secrets, Povon?" Mark chuckled, then continued without waiting for an answer.

"I've learned much of such techniques from the Link Talia and I have built. We started off Linked so thoroughly that for a moment we were one mind. The elven power reinforcing our wedding vows intervened, and limited how I closely we can Link, so we wouldn't accidentally harm each other. And we're still pretty closely Linked. If I think about it, I can tap into Talia's senses and sensations, feel what she's feeling. If I concentrate hard on it, and she allows it, I can move her body as if it were my own. The spell of our vows keeps us out of each other's memories, but I can be completely aware of every level and detail of her present thoughts, if I want to.

"And I really get this stuff right away. I mean, most of us kids used to think that Dob Jorman's mill was magic, and some still did after they'd seen how it worked on the inside. But I got it right away, I could follow the force that started as the flow of the river through the mill wheel and into the main shaft, or from the wind to the windmill to the secondary shaft, how the movable belts and cogs directed the force to the grindstone or the saw blade or the bellows. I get this stuff just as easy.

"I remember exactly what the vow spell did to block Talia's memories from me, and I'm starting to understand it. I realized later that I'd been doing the same thing when Silaran and others had Spoken to me psionically. The Eldest swallowed my whole mind in a gulp when I gave him my language, but I picked up a few things from him when he was Speaking to us later, especially when he pointed out my own mental shields to me. That was the first time I was ever aware of them, and of what I was doing to hold them in place without even realizing it. But no one is like the Eldest. I even blocked Somonik from everything but my surface thoughts, and I'm blocking you right now, as you'll notice if you test my psionic shields."

"Remarkable!" Povon breathed. "Do you mind if I push on them a bit? I'm curious as to your strength with them."

"All right, but do it slowly please." Mark nodded.

Povon closed her eyes, and now he had to set down his fork and concentrate on what he was doing. After about ten seconds he shivered a bit, then clenched his jaws in determination, but a few moments after that he threw up a hand and cried; "Enough!"

“Most impressive.” Povon chuckled. “I could break them, but it would be a bit of work. I couldn’t do anything else while I was doing it.”

“That iz high praise, Mark!” Kragorram congratulated. “Only half my people could rezizt Povon’z probe for even a zeccond!”

“Yes, he has better mental shields than half the dragons, unfortunately including you, my love.” Povon teased.

“Az the Eldezt pointed out.” Kragorram nodded.

“There might be a dozen non-Draconians with such strength that way.” Povon mused, then her expression changed to one of surprise. “On the other hand, he is holding no power!”

“What’s that got to do with it?” Mark asked.

“When you hold your power, that is to say, when you gather as much power from the magic field around you and from your personal reserves as you can hold without using it, it makes your nerves work a little bit better, and a little bit faster. To a lesser extent, it makes every part of your body work a bit better, but the increase in nerve function is compounding, particularly in the brain. Holding your power increases the quickness of your physical and mental responses and reflexes, thoughts come faster and clearer, and your total awareness increases. You can hold more complex processes in mind, and cast the power more quickly and more effectively, but the best part is the effect it has on your psionics. All forms of telepathy, mental shielding, and psionic attack improve dramatically.

“And just as your nerves improve with normal use, becoming better conductors of the lightning, so they become better conductors of magic power with repetition. Your arms learn to swing a sword better with repetition, your mind learns to remember a symphony better with repeated listening. In the same way, if you can learn to hold all of your power to you, and become so used to doing so that you do it at all times without even thinking about it, even when you’re sleeping, then it will truly become part of your mind and body. When it truly becomes part of you, and not just a tool that you pick up and put down, it adds to your mental shields and other psionics, your thinking, even your physical speed, strength, and co-ordination, tapping your power to augment those functions without consciously casting spells to do so.

“Becoming one with your power in this way is one of the essential differences between mages and wizards.

“Now Talia has been holding a significant portion of her power without casting any of it, for the first time in her life, and she’s been doing so for a few minutes continuously. Notice the difference in her already.”

“This is really great!” Talia enthused, smiling with her eyes closed.

“I see!” Mark nodded, his eyes also closed so he could concentrate on what Talia was feeling.

“Most wizards of your peoples can’t do this, they lack the mental capacity; the breadth of concentration. Human wizards particularly can often cast a powerful spell, as long as it’s a fairly simple one, but they usually lack the mental capacity for more complex work, nor can they maintain two or three different spells simultaneously. The more you use your power, the stronger and more sure it becomes. But the mental capacity to deal with complexity is more innate, and is difficult to increase without millennia of intense work. This is true of both conscious retention of complexity, of which Yazadril is such a master, and more instinctive and subconscious awareness of complexity, such as we Draconians employ.”

“Anyway, you can shield your mind well, so I can show you things without learning your secrets or knowing you too deeply, if you wish. But you should know that Talia holds almost no shielding against me. She welcomes me into her mind, and so I already know the most important of your secrets; your transparency to wizardry, the tine band, the magnitude of the third power.”

“And have you returned her trust, Povon?” Mark gently asked. “Have you lowered your shields to Talia, welcomed her into your mind with equal openness, with equal trust to that which she has shown you?”

He waited a moment while she registered surprise at the question, then he looked to the rest of them.

“Silaran, you have also mentioned how open Talia is to you. Do you show her the same openness and trust?”

“Equemev? I imagine you have been allowed into Talia’s mind with equal openness, have you returned it?”

“I judge from your sheepish silences that you have not.

“You must do so now. You are all three bound to justice. Now that you realize that you have taken advantage of Talia’s trusting nature and weak shielding, you must return what you have been given.”

“It iz likely that I would have taken zimilar unthinking advantage, if I had the ability to do so.” Kragorram admitted. “But I do not, and zo my communication iz no deeper than Zpeaking.”

“Ahh! Just a moment, you’re confusing me!” Talia yelped. “That’s too much to take in at once while holding the power at the same time! One at a time, please! Silaran, no offense, but I think you’ll be easier than the Ladies, so you first, then Equemev, then Povon.”

“Hold a bit less of the power when you need to free some of your attention span, until you become more accustomed to holding it to you.” Povon advised, sounding very emotional.

“Oh Silaran, you are beautiful!” Talia shivered, her eyes closed. “Hold up a bit, you’re overcompensating! That’s far more than I ever let you in, and frankly, those things you should keep private. There. That’s about as much as I gave you. I’ll withdraw. And thank you, thank you so very much.

“Now you, Equemev. Ooooooh! You’re so... So delightfully you! Thank you! It’s truly heavenly to know you! “Povon?”

“I’ll need a moment.” Povon murmured hesitantly. “You’ll learn something if you pay attention to this. You all can, so you should all pay attention, especially you four since this is your assignment for the Eldest anyway. You know you develop layers of shields, to protect layers of your mind. But watch this.”

She brought them all into Linkage with her, deep enough to feel what she was doing.

“Wow! How many of them are there?” Mark breathed a moment later. “You’ve lowered, what, seven separate layers of psionic shields so far? And I see that they’re all a bit unique in some way.”

“I keep sixteen layers of shields around even my surface thoughts. To reach even the most superficial parts of my mind, an enemy must breach them all, one by one. Then like most people with good psionic shields, I have a separate shield around my general memory and one around my knowledge, a deeper shield around my private thoughts, and another around my deepest emotions. But as only a battle sorcerer has, I reserve my hardest shields for the critical parts of my brain functions; my pain and pleasure processes, and my automatic functions like breathing and heartbeat and so on. I keep a total of forty-one layers of shields around every part of my mind whose protection from psionic attack is crucial in battle. The hardest five layers contain traps; previously cast and charged psionic counter-attack spells, the nastiest ones I could devise or learn from others.

“Now, I remove the last surface shield, *and you are in my surface thoughts, and each of our Links is secured in two directions. I am Linked to you, and now that you are behind my surface shields, you are Linked to me. You see how that was done? I’ll do it in reverse.* I raise a shield. Then, see, I shift the frequency of the note or color I’m thinking of a little, and raise another shield over the first.”

Her companions nodded agreement without speaking; concentrating with fascination on what she was showing.

“It takes practice to raise as many as I do and be able to maintain them without thinking about it.

“I... I don’t suppose I can procrastinate this anymore. This will be hard for me. I’ve only lowered my shields to two people since my first century, and I’d have never done it for the Eldest, except I was so afraid that even if I didn’t he’d just brush my shields aside and Read me like a page anyway. Having your shields torn away is a decidedly unpleasant experience.

“Mark, I’m now glad that I’ve never been privy to more than your surface thoughts. Because I haven’t, I don’t have to lower my shields to you to satisfy my vow of justice.”

“I feel the same way, Povon.” Mark said as he withdrew from the Link completely and continued his meal. “Except for Talia, I don’t really want to be in anyone else’s mind any more than I want them in my own, beyond what we need to do for our training and work as a strike force.”

“Thank you.” Povon nodded. “You four, I’ve Read you fairly deeply. It’s only fair that I show you as much of me as I’ve seen of you. Please... Don’t judge me too harshly.”

She had been lounging on her belly, her chin in her hands and resting on her elbows, partly curled around Kragorram who sat up like a dog. Now she lay down fully, and Kragorram cuddled her lovingly. The two unicorns came over and nuzzled her muzzle with gentle affection, and Talia’s face clouded until she was almost crying.

Then the tiny elf Translocated over to the silver dragon beside Equemev, threw her arms wide, and hugged the tip of Povon’s nose. Povon ever-so-carefully stroked Talia’s back in return with an index finger.

“*Forgiveness is a wonderful thing, Povon.*” Equemev told her. “*And self-forgiveness is the most important kind. You’re still torturing yourself for things you were driven to do, that happened so long ago that they’re ancient history to all of the rest of us, even Kragorram. Let it all go, Povon. You’re a good person, and you have a completely new life now.*”

Kragorram murmured something to her as well, too low in both volume and pitch for Mark to make out.

Povon moaned, a very low sound, and her eyes clenched as her breathing became jerky.

Mark realized that the dragon was weeping, a thought that touched off strange emotions in him as he politely ignored the scene.

A few minutes later Povon calmed, then chuckled. “You are beautiful, and I thank you. The tea is ready.” she quietly announced.

“Oh! So it is!” Talia noticed as she directed her attention to her kitchen.

“And your dinner is getting cold.” Povon added. “And by the way, did you notice how effortless your Translocate was, while holding your power?”

“It was easy! I never even thought about it, really!”

“That is one of the advantages of the old ways. You are a wizard, and if you can keep the two sets of methods discrete in your mind, you will always be one. But now you are also becoming a mage. You can do more things with wizardry, and do them with less talent and intelligence. But the things that *can* be done with magecraft can be done better that way.”

Talia had turned to face the doors, and now one opened to allow the passage of a cart with a wooden hogshead full of almost-boiling tea, then a smaller cart with the cask of rum.

“Ahh, that will be good rum!” Kragorram commented. “From the Ztone Islandz, I can z smell the rezidue of their mollazez from here!”

The two unicorns returned to their grazing as the two dragons retrieved their drinks from the carts, then re-arranged themselves on the lawn.

“By the way, it was a courteous touch to serve the tea in the wooden barrel, but you could have left the it in the kettle.” Povon said as she blew a small fireball into her hand and snuffed it by closing her fist. “I would not have burned myself on it, you see.”

“I didn’t think you would, but I thought the tea would stay hot longer in the hogshead.” Talia smiled as she lightly ran up the stairs to Mark with a grin.

She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, resumed her place at her meal, then quickly cast upon it to heat it back up to the proper temperature. This made her smile in chagrin. “Of course, now that I think about it, I’m sure you can always heat your own tea, Povon.”

“Of course. And thank you, this is very good.”

“You said something I’d like to ask you about, Povon.” Mark said as he sat back, having finished eating, and idly swirled a mug half full of hot cider. “Something about how our bodies run by lightning?”

“Actually, the non-magical aspects of our bodies work by a kind of very slow fire, thus we need to fuel ourselves, we give off heat, we breathe in fresh air, and breathe out stale air, just as fire does. But our nerves and brains send messages to each other with tiny sparks of lightning. The energy field they create in and around our bodies is what we use to shape the power of magic. Talia could explain this more exactly, due to her theoretical training, but that’s the gist of it.

“You have cast with Talia’s power?” she asked in a sudden change of subject.

“My first and only real spell so far. I cast a small Flame, just enough to light a candle.”

“How long did it take you to learn to do that?”

“It was almost instant, actually. We were Linked, and she just showed me how to do it. I got it right away.”

“And do you realize how remarkable that is, that you grasped your first spell so quickly?”

“I did kind of get that impression, yes.” Mark smiled.

“As I noted at the time, his mind is most remarkable.” Talia commented between bites. “I think he could absorb spells as fast as I can show them to him. I was going to show him a lot more, but then we got distracted from that when we awakened his power and killed ourselves. Here; here’s how it went.”

With that she reactivated her Link with the other four and showed them her memory of the event, then went back to finishing her meal.

“Incredible!” Povon smiled. “And do you realize that you are both still Linked, though I can tell that you are no longer wearing the tine band?”

“Hey! That’s right! I never thought about it! But Talia couldn’t Link with me before until I wore the band!”

“Just so. You must be maintaining the Link with your own power. Yazadril and the other theoreticians will be interested to know this, for it helps prove the conjecture that all psionics are fundamentally the same, whether powered by the light of the source or the heat of the stone, or even your third power.

“I’m really curious now. Mark, I’d very much like you to wear the tine band, and allow me a teaching Link with you and Talia. Deeper than a Speaking, but not as deep as your Link with her, while allowing me to share spells with you, and monitor your efforts at casting.”

“I think I can do that. I have to lower my next shield below the spoken word, so to speak. Um, I’m having a bit of trouble with it, actually.”

“Since you hold your shields instinctively, like a mage.” Povon nodded. “Here, I show Talia how to do it. Now she can show you.”

“Ah, thank you both. To me, that’s like Speaking with concepts, and with your sense of magic, I’d suppose you’d say. I see what you mean about the shields now too.” Mark nodded.

“There, you have it. Just to keep things clear, I’ll keep my commentary audible, and show you techniques through the Link. I’ll monitor you through the Link as well.

“Now Talia, share some of your power with him. Mark, just hold it, as she’s doing. Excellent. Talia, slowly give him more, until he becomes uncomfortable with it.”

“That’s... That’s just incredible!” Mark smiled joyously, his eyes closed as he enjoyed the sensation.

Half a minute later, he noticed the sensation wasn’t increasing anymore.

“This is going to be a most interesting session.” Povo stated thoughtfully.

“How much am I holding?” Mark asked.

“Uh, All of it. Everything I can gather!” Talia revealed with growing excitement. “And we’re almost in the center of First Valley! I’m stronger here than almost anywhere else! And you’re holding it all! Effortlessly!”

“It’s great! It feels wonderful!”

“Talia, if you’re finished eating, would you show him the second spell that is taught to students of elven wizardry?” Povo asked.

“Actually, he hasn’t learned the first yet, which is Movement.” Talia said as she slid her plate back and wiped her lips with a napkin. She floated over the table and settled in Mark’s lap. “We tried it first when we were trying to awaken his power, then Father began working through some of the basic categories, and we were at Flame when I linked with him, and you know how that went.

“Here love; basic Movement.”

“I see!” Mark nodded and grinned as he held his eyes closed in concentration.

“Remarkable.” Povo nodded. “Give him the next one. See how fast he can take them. Mark, call a halt if it becomes uncomfortable.”

“All right. Here’s multiple Movement in unison. Here’s independent multiple Movement. Here’s self Movement. Here’s Levitate. Here’s Flight, the combination of self Movement and Levitation. Just a moment. It’s wearing on me, just passing so much to you!”

“I start to empathize with Yazadril.” Povo stated in amazement. “You are a frightening being, Mark Longstrider.”

“Uh, how so this time?”

“Generally, only when two wizards are very experienced, powerful, intelligent, and talented, and have worked closely for centuries, is it possible to learn spells by such direct transfer of knowledge. You have learned in a few seconds what should have taken decades. I think you do have it, but test them now to make sure.”

Mark opened his eyes and Levitated himself off his chair, still gently holding Talia in his lap, and began slowly flying around the table, then raised his fork and his spoon by Movement, and set them to dancing with each other in mid-air.

“Sweet source above!” Talia softly breathed. “Can you add another fork?”

Mark added her fork to the dance, then her knife, then a serving spoon, then the saltcellar, then the pepper mill. “That’s about all I can whoop!” he said as his fork started to fall, and he halted the dance to catch it. “Just about overdid it there for a second.” he muttered as he replaced the utensils in their places and drifted back to his chair.

He took a deep breath, then suddenly jumped up with a grin, and began dancing Talia around the landing with great bouncing strides. “I did it! Did You see that?! Was that ever great! I can do magic!”

“I’d never have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.” Povo stated.

“*To think! He did that while casting Talia’s power!*” Equemev marveled. “*Generally, that would almost double the degree of difficulty! Eight independent spells, one of second level, plus the Link! I couldn’t hold that many spells at once, even casting them with my own power!*”

“On his second casting! Firzt, he lit a candle, and then *that!*” Kragorram enthused, almost bouncing in his excitement.

“Quite. Talia, take back as much of your power as you can hold.” Povo directed. “You need to marinate in it more than he does. You might as well let him hold the rest, since he barely notices it anyway.”

“May I give him one?” Kragorram eagerly asked.

“One step at a time, my love.” Povo cautioned. “We are truly breaking new ground here.

“Mark, see if you and Silaran can open a teaching Link with each other.”

“*He has it already!*” Silaran whooped.

“Calm yourself a bit, Silaran. Now, give him the Source-powered sorcerers’ version of basic Movement, as practiced by your people.”

“I have it!” Mark crowed. Then he sobered and concentrated for a moment. “Huh. I’m definitely no sorcerer, any more than I am a wizard, really. I have the spell, but I can’t cast it as he does. I just don’t have any of the kind of power Silaran has. Just like I don’t have any of what Talia has, and I couldn’t cast those wizard’s spells if I wasn’t just guiding her power to do it.

“It’s amazing that the two versions of Movement do almost exactly the same thing, yet they work completely differently! But now that I think about it, the difference is only one of mindset and technique, and not in the different nature of their power sources. Look.”

He opened his eyes, and his fork rose into the air again. “I can cast the unicorn sorcerer’s version of Movement with the power of Talia’s elven wizardry. A bit strange to do it while thinking about it like one of The People of Morning. Yazadril and Alilia must have done the same when they adapted the Xervian stasis spell to their own methods.”

“Just so. Can you do the reverse? Can you teach Silaran the elven wizards’ Movement spell?”

“Ow! *Just a moment, that is... That is very confusing!*” Silaran said as he tossed his head in irritation. “*I have the spell, I think, but I could never cast it without a year’s work at least! Maybe never! That is some weird stuff!*”

“Ah. You are all right?” Povon politely inquired.

“*He’ll be fine.*” Equemev mentally giggled. “*I have the elven spell from him. You should have had Mark give it to me, rather than Silaran. I could cast it with a few weeks of work. It definitely utilizes a very different approach to casting power than we use.*”

“Just so.” Povon nodded. “That degree of Linking between such different races can often be uncomfortable. I thought that Mark’s Linking with a female of your people might be more difficult than with another male.

“All right, Mark. Here is the magecraft version of basic Movement, as was generally used by Talia’s people before the gods left.”

“Hey! That’s completely different again!” Mark grinned, then sobered in concentration. Again he raised his fork in the air. “I see what you mean. The magecraft spell is a lot harder to cast, more of a complex mental challenge, and you have to hold yourself in a certain emotional mindset to make it work. But once you have it going it’s easier to maintain, and you can do more with it.” He set the fork spinning on it’s axis at a quickly increasing rate until it was just a blur in the air emitting an angry buzz, then stopped it suddenly and set it down. “I couldn’t do that with the wizard’s spell without a lot more practice.”

“That was impressive.” Povon nodded. “Now, establish a teaching Link with Equemev. Equemev, see if you can give him access to some of your sorcerers’ power.”

“*Whoa, slow down there Mark!*” Equemev exclaimed. “*Don’t try to draw more than I give you! You’re holding enough to lift Kragorram to the top of the house!*”

“Now Mark, try casting the sorcerers’ basic Movement that Silaran showed you, using the power that Equemev is lending you.”

The fork rose and lazily floated end over end. “That is truly weird. The People of Morning truly think very differently than I do. Even though this unicorn sorcerer’s spell is functionally much more similar to the elven wizards’ spell than the elven magecraft spell is, this *feels* a lot more different.”

“And you have no difficulty keeping the three methods discrete in your mind, though they all do the same thing?” Povon asked.

“No; they’re completely different.”

“All right. Here is the magicians’ version of basic Movement, as practiced by The People of Morning before the gods left.”

“Ahh! You know, I could almost have deduced this!” Mark grinned. “It’s the same basic older method as the mage spell, with the unicorn mindset of the newer sorcerers’ spell!”

“And you can cast it?”

“Sure! Actually, watch this!” With that, he raised both forks and both table knives into the air, and set them slowly spinning in unison. “I can’t make them dance like this though. It’s a bit complex.”

“*I feel like I’m going to throw up.*” Equemev stated.

“Iz he doing what I think he’z doing?!” Kragorram inquired in amazement.

“*He is. He’s performing the same Movement independently on four objects with four completely different spells, by drawing two completely different kinds of power from two other people who are of different races and genders from*

himself, over two separate Links. Are you sure he isn't using some of our mental capacity as well, somehow? There's no way he should be doing all that by himself!"

"I assure you, he is doing it completely without assistance." Povon stated with certainty. "All right, Mark. We shall see how you deal with an even more alien mind-set. Here is the inherent and instinctive method of basic Movement used by my people, which is powered by both of the conventional kinds of magic energy, the light of the Source used by magicians and sorcerers, and the heat of the stone used by mages and wizards."

"Wow! That's incredible!" Mark exclaimed, and the utensils clattered onto the table. "It takes a lot more power to do it, but mentally it's practically effortless, like reaching out with your hand! Look!"

A kettle rose off the table, shivered a bit, then steadied.

"And now he's drawing power from an elf and a unicorn, melding it, and using it to duplicate a draconian inherent magical ability. I've reached the limits of my capacity to be incredulous." Equemev stated.

"All right, Mark. You now have a very basic feel for the various methods of casting power." Povon lectured. "Recall how your own power felt, the third power source that you alone can cast, when you first held it, and when Talia used it to cast Flame upon the candle.

"Of the styles of casting you've experienced here, which do you think will be most appropriate to use with your own power?"

"It doesn't matter." Mark answered right away. "I could cast any of those spells with any of the types of power. I could even cast the draconian method of Movement with a combination of Talia's power and my own. My own power does feel more like Equemev's than Talia's, which makes sense, since my power shines down from the sun like the Source does. I think my power is therefore more like the light of the Source than the heat of the stone, functionally speaking. The wizardry felt most comfortable though, due to my close melding with Talia as much as anything else I think. I'll probably learn wizardry first for most things, since there's no use spending the time to learn how to do everything five different ways. I like that magecraft spell though, I had the most control with that, so I think I'll learn magecraft as a minor study, with wizardry as my major."

"And you think you could control your power?"

"I'm not sure. As the Eldest would say, it's a different order of magnitude. If there was someone else who had it, I could just get them to show me how it felt to use it, just as you here have shown me how to control your power. As it is, I'll just have to experiment with it until I get a feel for it, just like everyone else usually does I suppose. I'm committed to not trying anything with it unless I'm well away from any who could be harmed by it, and I have the sword of Visinniria to shield me. She says she can shield me with my own power."

"Actually, she and I agreed that she would be called Ria now, both for ease of use, and to distinguish her in conversation from the goddess Visinniria." Talia told them.

"I'm looking forward to meeting her, since she is to be our first teacher of military arts." Equemev whinnied.

"I'm not sure how we'll arrange that." Talia said, her hand on her pommel. "Ria isn't either. She was spelled to be perceived as a personality by her rightful owner, and none others, as part of the set of spells she carries to prevent her being taken or used by her rightful owner's enemies. And her rightful owner must be a female elf. On the other hand, it would be cumbersome to relay all of her instructions to all of you through me, particularly when my attention is already fully occupied with other tasks."

"May I hold her for a moment?" Povon asked, holding out her hand.

Talia hopped down from Mark's lap, drew the sword, and gave it over.

Povon held it between the tips of her forefinger and thumb, and closed her eyes. "Hmm. This is quite a puzzle. I think I'll ask the Eldest, since he obviously had something in mind when he directed that we train under Ria.

"One moment.

"Ah, greetings, Honored Eldest. We..." Povon fell silent in mid-sentence, then pressed the pommel of the sword against the center of her brow, and held it there for a few seconds.

She opened her eyes and handed the sword back to Talia. "The Eldest says you must hold it while he casts upon it with my power, to give Ria the capacity for more memory. Then he'll pass a spell through the Link from himself through me and you to her, and that will solve our problem.

"Here comes the memory spell."

"She got a bit warmer there for a moment." Talia nodded, eyes closed, holding the blade point up before her with both hands.

"Thank you, Eldest." Povon said with a bow, then opened her eyes. "He says it's done, though I couldn't detect the spell that passed through me."

"I didn't either, but Ria says she has it." Talia nodded. "She needs a moment to think about it."

“What waz Vizinniria’s mandate of divinity?” Kragorram asked, still so excited he was almost bouncing from it.

“She became Elven Goddess of War.” Talia told him absently, half her attention still on what Ria was doing. She held the sword up with both hands and kept it very still, and spoke with her eyes closed. “Long before her there was Heklivmalgiso, who was the only elven god until Visinniria’s ascension.”

Suddenly a female elf appeared before her in well-worn armor of plain steel, with many expertly done repairs about it here and there. She had a huge mane of wavy red hair that was as rigid as a helmet, and had her arms folded across her chest, her body held rigidly straight with her toes pointed. She was also floating in the air almost completely upside down.

“Oh!” Talia said in surprise, and let the tip of her sword fall halfway. The redheaded elf turned in the air at the same time, making it obvious that her body remained perfectly aligned with the blade of the sword.

Suddenly the newcomer’s pale blue eyes were open. Mark noticed that her eyelids didn’t open normally, one instant her eyes were closed, the next they were open, like her eyelids had Translocated to the new position without physically moving.

“This is not that funny.” a girlish psionic voice stated.

“Oh! Sorry about that!” Talia exclaimed, and swung the sword down, setting the point on the wood of the landing and holding it vertically. The armored elfess turned with the sword, ending with the extended tips of her pointed armored boots touching the wood.

“It is not your fault. I should be able to handle my own attitude control.” the new voice stated, and for a moment her eyes were closed, then they were open, again with no apparent transition between the two states. *“I have it now. Sheathe me, but keep your hand in contact with my hilt.”*

Talia slid the sword into its scabbard.

The redhead tipped and rose a tiny bit when the sword first moved, but immediately resumed her vertical orientation with her arms still folded and the tips of her boots touching the floor. *“Greetings. I am Ria, the spirit of The First Sword of Visinniria.”*

“I’m pleased to meet you.” Mark told her. “I assume you know who we all are?”

“I do. I know all that Talia has thought since I was given to her.” Ria told him. She swiveled to face him as she addressed him, but other than turning her entire body’s orientation, she was as still as a statue, neither blinking nor breathing. Her mouth and face didn’t move as she Spoke, nor did her eyes swivel in their sockets.

“Can you move?” Kragorram asked.

Ria rotated and tipped back a bit, so that her eyes were looking directly at the crimson dragon’s. *“Only as I am moving now. I am a sword; a rigid entity, and I enjoy being a sword. I suppose it is conceivable that I could bend and flop about like you do, but I would find it rather distressing. I have projected this Illusion of the appearance of Visinniria as she looked when she impressed her personality upon me, only so that I can interact with you more effectively, as Talia has directed me. But I was a self-aware sword for over two centuries before I gained my first wielder’s personality, and I do not usually think of myself as having this appearance. It pleases me about as well as it would please you to have to look like a sword, but we do what we must.”*

She considered him a moment. *“My, you are a big one. There were none your size when Visinniria walked the world.”*

Kragorram grinned and bowed.

She turned to face Povon. *“You would be a difficult foe. You have gained much ability in a short time, as your people measure it. I salute you.”* Ria tipped forward a moment, then tipped back to face her again. *“I fought your kind in The War of The Segregation, both as mage and blade, and they were by far the most fearsome enemies we faced. It will be interesting to train you, and to fight at your side.”*

Povon only nodded.

Ria turned to Silaran and Equemev. *“It brightens my heart to again congress with The People of Morning. In my day, your people were held in great reverence by mine, and there were two of them who I dearly loved. The opportunity to perceive you and to interact with you in this way, and to work with you in the days ahead, more than makes it worthwhile to assume this somewhat strange manifestation.”*

“We are most pleased to meet you, Ria.” Equemev told her with a toss of her head.

Ria turned to face Mark again. *“I have mixed feelings regarding you, Mark. I feel some of Talia’s love for you, as she and I are well bonded by now. But the Visinniria I knew would have killed you out of hand like a rabid rat.”*

“Oh? And why would she do that?”

“In The War of The Segregation, our most hated enemies were demon-spawn and humans. Demon-spawn do not hate, they are cruel to everyone by nature, including each other. But at that time, the enmity between elves and

humans was deep and bitter. Any human was killed on sight by any elf, and your people had the same policy toward mine. That was the state of affairs for almost the entire war, which had lasted six thousand years without pause or truce when I was impressed, and was to last another five thousand after. And you in particular are an incredible danger.

“I realize that attitudes have changes since then, but I have not yet become accustomed to the welcome presence of a human, or to the idea of them as allies. Please be patient with me if I sometimes seem a bit short with you, but the urge to kill you is somewhat reflexive.”

“I see.” Mark chuckled.

“As to your decision to make wizardry your major art and magecraft your minor, that is purest stupidity. Wizardry was developed for those who lack the talent for magecraft. Magecraft is a much deeper art, as it was developed for millions of years before wizardry was even thought of, only twenty-seven thousand years ago as I understand it. Magecraft is the obvious choice for anyone who is capable of both arts. It’s too late for Talia to make that choice, since the patterns of wizardry are well established in her mind, so magecraft can only be her secondary study. Though I think she will excel in it, even having to mentally translate its concepts into the language of wizardry in order to use it.

“Right now you are as ignorant as a child, compared to these five. You must catch up to them as quickly as possible, before I can train the six of you as a military unit. I will therefore give you as many magecraft spells as you can absorb. Feel now, I link to you through Talia. You see how the Link differs, when established by magecraft?”

“Yes, that’s quite interesting!”

“Brace yourself. I will pass you spells much more quickly than Talia passed you those simple Movements.”

“AAHH!” Mark yelled, slapping his hands to his head. “Hold on!”

“Persevere!” Ria barked. *“I give you no more than you can handle, and if you cannot trust me in this, there is no use working with you!”*

Mark set himself determinedly, his fists and jaws clenched as he endured the onslaught of information and sensations. For almost ten minutes the others waited anxiously as Ria poured knowledge and skills into his brain. By the time it was done he was covered in sweat, shivering violently, and quietly moaning constantly.

It ended suddenly and he slumped in his chair. “Sweet mother of all!” he sobbed, almost in tears, and Talia comforted him as best she could with one hand on Ria’s hilt.

“Shake it off! You’ll be fine in a few moments! And you had best toughen up considerably, boy, if you wish to train under me! Such a pathetic response ill-befits a warrior!

“Talia, you think I have been hard on him because of my feelings toward humans, but it is not so. All of you are very soft and weak, compared to the people you would have been if you had grown up during The War of The Segregation. I am to train you for war, not for arranging flowers, and if you are not prepared to endure discomfort, pain, and injury, then you had best choose another duty, or another trainer! I will not send you to battle, or even to the Eldest for real weapons training, until you are prepared to face all the horrors of war, and are capable of overcoming them! I will inflict any and every ordeal and indignity upon you that I feel is necessary for your training, for I cannot in good conscience do otherwise!”

“We underztand.” Kragorram nodded, choosing to speak for the group.

“How much did you give him?!” Talia demanded.

“All of it. He took every spell I know, which is all that Visinniria had learned in her first two hundred and seventy-one years. He could have taken a seventeenth more before he reached his limits of endurance, if I had it to give to him. As to his limits of capacity, he is still only using a tiny fraction of it. He really is quite special. He has as much mental capacity and control as Visinniria had, which must make him a Candidate for Divinity in ten thousand years or so. If he lives that long.

“With the decline of magecraft over the last twenty-seven millennia, he is quite likely the premier mage on life right now. Certainly the premier battle mage, for Visinniria’s skill in war was unmatched. Or rather he will be, after he has a few days to absorb and sort through it all.

“Mark, for the next two days, make no attempt at any form of spell casting. Spend four hours per day training Talia in the mundane skills of warcraft you learned as a Ranger, for she is as helpless that way as you were in magic. And they are skills you have truly mastered, I will give you that. She will spend two hours per day learning battle casting from me. Other than that, enjoy your honeymoon. Your mind needs a rest after the last three days, and once we begin training, you will not get another for a while.

“All of you take note; no matter how much power you can cast, if a battle goes on long enough, you will exhaust your reserves. Then it comes down to muscle and blade, and only a fool would neglect those skills. Almost every

battle mage I ever met who refused to learn to use a sword ended up spitted on one, after spending all their power in battles that went on without respite for a day, or a week, or a month. By blade and bow, or horn and hoof, or tooth and claw and fire, you must all master physical combat.

“Mark has two days furlough, and then we will spend a few days sharpening his mage skills and training him to cast his own power. During that time I want the rest of you to consult with the finest war-masters of your own races that you can gain access to. I will train you to fight as a unit, but Talia is the only one of you I am truly qualified to train in individual combat skills and spells, so you must see to others for that. Have your battle skills assessed, both physical and magical, and practice the exercises they assign you for as many hours per day as you can drive yourselves to do.

“Now, do any of you have any questions?”

“I have one.” Mark said. He’d recovered from his learning session, and was wiping sweat from his brow with a napkin. “The Eldest said we aren’t immortal, me and Talia, though you know what happened when we killed ourselves with the fireball. So what did he mean?”

“Firstly, you have what might be termed serial mortality, not true immortality. Being able to bring yourselves back to life after being killed is a far cry from being truly immune to death, as the gods are.

“Secondly, your ability to return yourselves to life is limited by the power of the curse, which is equivalent to the maximum exertion of Alilia. Alilia is not charging the curse continuously, so once the power she gave it is expended, the curse itself will be gone, and you will be as vulnerable to death as any others. Now Alilia is truly a phenomenon, and is the only elf I’ve even heard of who has more raw power than I had when I was an elf, though not by much. Mind you, she likely had less power at the age of two hundred and seventy one than Visinniria did, and I’m quite sure that Visinniria at the age of four thousand eight hundred and fifty six was mightier than Alilia is now, at that age. But she is no match in pure power for one such as Povon, here.

“Were Povon to battle you as you are now, she would blast you to dust in a blink. Likely the blast would not be contained by a small room, as your fireball was, so the dust and mist that makes up your bodies would be much more widely scattered. It would take much longer for the curse to return you to life, and it would drain a great deal more of the curse’s finite supply of power. Unless draconian magician-mages have changed much since my time, they love more than anything to call lightning down upon you. It’s an incredibly effective spell, since a great deal more lightning can be called with a given amount of power than can be created with it. Being squarely struck by a bolt of natural lightning is devastating indeed, and if you don’t notice the field of anti-lightning building up on you before the bolt strikes, or if you lack the ability to counter the spell or negate the field, the strike is almost completely instantaneous and unavoidable. Rather than the few minutes your recovery required after your death by fireball, it could take hours, and drain hundreds of times as much of the curse’s resources.

“Likely Povon would assume you were vanquished, and take herself elsewhere before the reconstitution of your bodies became obvious. That is assuming she was unaware of the effects of the curse. But she has excellent awareness, as you realized when you called her attention by merely renaming her Silver Beauty. She would soon notice that you had recovered, and she would find you and blast you again. This time she would wait to find out how you came back to life, and she would effectively analyze the workings of the curse. Then she would blast you again, more powerfully this time, and call a fast wind as well, putting much of her power into those two actions, so as to scatter your dust and mist beyond the remaining power of the curse to recover. If that didn’t work the first time, she would consider allowing your bodies to partly re-form, and then encase them in glass or something similar in order to prevent the rest of your matter from rejoining the already consolidated portion. But I think she would reject that method, and amuse herself by blasting and scattering you repeatedly until the curse was completely expended. Dragons have a great deal of patience for things like that, though I doubt she would have to blast you more than five or six times at most in order to finalize your death.”

“Ah. As the Eldest said, orders of magnitude.” Mark nodded.

“You have achieved your secondary objective of that lecture as well.” Povon snickered. “For you have predicted my actions in such a situation with complete accuracy. I am fully aware of the implications of that.”

“How zo?” Kragorram asked.

“She correctly assumed that I was skeptical of her qualifications to train me, either as a sword, or as a two hundred and seventy-one year old elf.” Povon revealed. “However, since she can predict me, she can also counter me. If she can counter me, others with skills equal to hers can also counter me, unless she teaches me the counter to her counter. Sorry if that sounds a bit confusing.”

“Ha! I mean, no offense Ria, but battling a dragon as part of an army of elves is a different thing from being able to challenge one such as Povon or myself in zingle combat!”

“You should trust the wisdom of your mate, Kragorram, for now you are being an arrogant young crap!” Ria retorted. *“When I was part of an army of elves, we fought armies of dragons, thousands of them! When I was an elf, I participated in the butchery of hundreds of your kind, and killed six in single combat, two of whom were mightier than you or Povon, and all of whom were vastly more experienced and battle-hardened! As a sword, I’ve bathed in dragon blood on dozens of occasions! And right now, with me in her hand, using only the fifty-two spells I contain and the knowledge I can give and my quality as a sword, Talia could slay you both in a minute without taking a scratch or a bruise! Ask Somonik if you don’t believe me, for he was there, refusing to take sides while every other race was trying to exterminate my people forever!”*

“Now it is you who goes too far, Ria.” Povon stated sternly. “Not about the rest of it, but about Somonik! He stands for justice, and he always has! In war, he will fight on the side of justice! But as he once explained, it often happens that when evil people attack, and they kill and destroy indiscriminately, those who were attacked will counter-attack the nation of those who initiated the hostilities, also killing and destroying indiscriminately in return, regardless of whether or not the individuals they are killing took part in their nation’s evils, or even agreed with them! In this way do the victims of evil fall into evil themselves, and it becomes a case of evil versus evil. Once that happens, Somonik will assist neither side.

“You have admitted that your people killed humans on sight. That would have included children and other non-combatants, I assume. And thus Somonik would not assist you. Furthermore, I know enough of The War of The Segregation to know that every race was against every other race, and only the giants and gnomes were allied. Every race including my own felt themselves to be in a fight for their very racial survival. You elves were not singled out for persecution in that way.

“I admit your battle prowess, and even that it is greater than mine. But obviously prowess in battle does not automatically grant you wisdom in other things. For that, I suggest you review the words Mark spoke today, for he is barely adult, yet still has more wisdom than both of us put together.”

Ria stared rigidly at Povon for a long moment before she replied. *“When I was six years old, a human child of perhaps nine years was seen lurking near our camp, and our sentries quickly slew him with arrows and burned his body. I asked my mother why this was done, since the child was unarmed. I learned that early in the war, we did not kill the children of humans. But when the humans realized this, they took advantage of it. When they sent their children to spy us out, we did not kill them. When they were sent to infiltrate our camps, hidden by the best detection-prevention spells the human mages had, planting explosives, and despoiling our food and water with magic poisons, we still did not routinely kill human children. But then a magically augmented pestilence killed a full quarter of our people, and we learned that the human mages had created the disease, and designed it to harm only elves. They had inoculated their children with it, and sent some of them to us with instructions to allow themselves to be captured, and so it was passed to us. And that, explained my mother, was why we killed them at every opportunity, and burned their bodies. In that war, there were no non-combatants, for even a babe in swaddling might carry a fearsome agent of death.*

“Anyone can be driven to evil, Povon. Pray that it is never forced upon you.

“As for me, I am a weapon. I am not a person, for I exist as a personality only when my rightful owner is in physical contact with me. The rest of the time I am only steel. Only the memories that Visinniria gave me when she impressed me and wielded me are permanent, and also the Eldest’s spell for this illusion. I forget everything else after a century. Since I have occupied a shelf in a weapons collection for more than the last century and have not been used during that time, it seems to me that I was fighting The War of The Segregation three days ago. Furthermore, I was spelled to be a stable and unchanging personality, so that I could be a reliable check for Visinniria’s sanity, and I have only a limited capacity to change my attitudes. Only my bonding with Talia allows me to view those of most other races with anything but hatred. Whether I am right or wrong, it is of little use to argue with me about such things.

“It is not necessary that you like me, Povon. Only that you learn from me.”

“I shall bear that in mind.” Povon smirked.

“Fine. Now, is there anything else?”

“Thank you, Ria. For the magecraft, that is.” Mark told her, as he considered the wealth of knowledge he’d gained. “You’ve opened up a whole new world to me.”

“Thank Talia then, for I only act for her. I am only truly comfortable conversing with her as well, so if there is nothing else for now, I will bid you good evening.” Ria said, and closed her eyes in her unique way before fading from view over a second or so.

Talia took her hand from the hilt, and returned to Mark’s lap.

“Well. That was interesting.” Povon mused.

“Iz zhe alwayz like that?” Kragorram chuckled.

“Pretty much, though she’s not stern like that with me.” Talia told him. “She had a hard and horrible life, and her personality bears many scars from it.”

“What a horrible world it must have been then.” Mark thoughtfully said. “Everyone hating and killing everyone, the whole world swept up in a tide of evil. That’s what we have to prevent more than anything else, for it’s the very worst thing that could happen.”

“No it’s not.” Povon said with a shiver. “The second worst thing that could happen is the complete annihilation of all life on Kellaran. The very worst is the complete destruction of the world of Kellaran itself.”

“Is that really possible?” Mark asked in surprise. “I mean, what could do that?”

“Astronomers have watched the sky with spells that magnify their vision for millennia, always devising better spells for it, and they have seen stars explode, and seen worlds destroyed by collisions with other worlds, or enveloped in clouds of dust so dense that the light from their stars was blocked, and they froze solid. Kellaran itself has experienced sudden and devastating changes in climate in the far distant past. One of them destroyed all life on land and most of the life in the oceans, including the first true people on this world. Only seven million years after they reached true sentience, the ocean dwelling race we call the Zurb were utterly destroyed. One of them had become the first god, but even he could not save a single one of his people when the oceans froze solid to a depth of thirteen kilometers and stayed that way for half a million years. And in the eighty million years that my race has kept records of such things, Kellaran has been struck many times. This valley, and the rest of The Nine Valleys, were created when a rock the size of a large mountain broke into nine pieces as it fell from the sky, and they struck with enough force to annihilate almost everything on half of this continent. There was so much dust and smoke thrown into the air that the sun was blocked, and the whole world was cold and dark for eleven years.”

“I see. Well then, we’ll consider world-wide war and evil to be the worst thing that could happen, that we could actually do anything about.” Mark grinned.

“I’ll agree with that.” Povon chuckled.

“And on that note, I think we’ll bring the evening to a close.” Talia smiled. “Mark’s being very noble, but absorbing Ria’s magecraft took a lot out of him, and it’s been a very long and eventful day. And I still have need for his attention before we sleep tonight.”

“Thank you all for coming, and thanks for everything today. You’ve been really wonderful. It still boggles my mind that the four of you have chosen to join us as you have. I doubt any elf or human has ever had such magnificent companions.”

“Thank you. Though it iz we who are honored. And thank you for bringing uz to the meeting of The Just Alliance.” Kragorram grinned with a bow, then turned to Povon. “And zpeaking of honored, my love, I would be honored if you would be my guezst tonight. I can hardly wait to zhow you the magnifizenze of my lair in the Ziklan Heightz, az I’ve been hopefully preparing it for your arrival for two millennia!”

“I’d be delighted to accept your invitation, Sir Kragorram!” Povon giggled, entwining her sinuous neck with his, then turned to Mark and Talia. “We’ll be busy tomorrow, for I plan to ask for combat training and skills evaluation from Somonik himself, and if he agrees, he’ll keep us busy indeed. If he turns us away we’ll probably ask Grakonexikaldoron. In any case, we’ll contact you tomorrow evening, Nine Valleys time. Perhaps we’ll take an hour from our training for a visit. I’m looking forward to visiting Hilia, and we’d also love to host you at either of our lairs whenever you’d like.”

“Thanks! I admit I’m quite curious to see what the lairs of dragons are like!” Mark laughed.

“Till tomorrow then.” Povon said, and she and Kragorram disappeared.

“*It has been an exceptional day, hasn’t it?*” Silaran whinnied with a flick of his tail.

“*Thanks so much for having us. I just know that we’re all going to have wonderful adventures together!*”

Equemev nodded.

“I sure hope so!” Talia smiled. “We’ll call to you when Povon and Kragorram contact us tomorrow.”

“*Till tomorrow then.*” Equemev called, and she and Silaran Translocated home.

“Ahh. It’s good to be alone with you again.” Mark chuckled as he nuzzled Talia’s neck.

“Mmm, that’s nice.” Talia crooned. “Give me a moment to clean this up, and we’ll go to bed.”

She closed the lids on the food containers, then sent them and all the dishes back to the kitchen by Translocation. She floated the cask and the barrel back to their carts, then Translocated them back to the kitchen as well.

Then she gave him a sensuous smile as she took his hand and led him into their home.

He grinned and let her lead the way. “By the way, why is it that you Translocated our dinner to the porch, but used Movement to bring our guests’ drinks out?” he asked.

“A full cask and a hoghead of tea weigh enough that they’re a bit of work to Translocate, and the carts have their own Movement spells, needing only instructions.” she informed him as they entered the ballroom, which was still full of their wedding gifts.

“We simply must tour our holdings tomorrow, and decide where we’re going to put all this.” she mused as they threaded their way between stacks of possessions. “I’d really like to have this all squared away before your birthday.”

“I agree.” he chuckled. “So, we have to tour the holdings, review the inventory, do four hours of physical combat training at least, talk to the elves who’ve sworn to us about the terms of their service, arrange for the donation of much of our wealth to good works, and arrange for the use of our unused properties by the needy.

“And I need to talk to Yazadril about my agreement to become a citizen and a knight of The High People. Now that we rule independent Hilia, I’m not sure if that’s as politically necessary as it was.”

“True. Except that the elves are sworn to you, not us.” Talia giggled.

“Same thing.” he laughed.

“Perhaps. Not all of that needs to be done tomorrow anyway. And I think we should have someone qualified help us review our finances.

“Also, while I think it’s a good idea to let the most needy use our vacation properties that they may recover from their ordeals, I doubt that letting poor people use our larger and more luxurious homes would be the wisest use of the resource. If we rent or lease those, we can let them out for more than they would normally command, since they belong to such a famous couple as us and are thus ‘celebrity homes’. We could then put that income toward more conventional housing for the needy, which would allow us to house far more of them than if we simply gave them temporary accommodation in our homes. They’ll feel better about it as well, since they’ll have their own homes, and so will feel less like they’re living on our sufferance.

“I also think it would be unwise to simply give away most of our wealth and extra possessions. If we sell what possessions we won’t be using for all that the market will bear, again taking advantage of our fame to increase the proceeds from their sale, we can increase our wealth considerably. Which includes a few thousand gold pieces’ worth that I’ve received from my parents. If we invest that wealth in businesses and revenue properties to increase our income, added to the several sources of income we have already, and donate out of our profits to good works, I think we could donate more in the first three years than if we simply gave away three-quarters of what we have now. And we could continue to increase our donations every year after that. Furthermore, once all of the poor and needy have been helped, and poverty has been eliminated, we would still own most of what we have now.”

“I bow to your superior financial wisdom, my dear.” he grinned, and indeed gave her a sweeping bow as they stepped onto the lifting platform. “You’re very astute, especially for someone that said she doesn’t care for commerce.

“Thank you. Also, you said that we would donate, but you did not say when.” Talia smiled. “And I think it would be rude to those who gave us our wedding gifts if we didn’t try to enjoy as many of them as possible for at least a month before we otherwise dispose of them. We can donate a few thousand gold pieces at public occasions, so as to be seen making an immediate contribution. Besides, you’ve already donated the proceeds from the sale of the Jorman’s mill and goods to good works in Finitra.”

“Also wise in every respect, my love.” he chuckled as he swept her up in his arms and carried her over the threshold of their suite. “But public occasions?”

“We are Prince and Princess of Hilia, Keys to the Nexus, and you are Key to The Just Alliance.” Talia pointed out with a smile. “We will of course be expected to make appearances and speeches in the parades and presentations of the leaders of the alliance that you’ve instigated.”

“Me and my big mouth!” he laughed.

“Oh, don’t be like that! It’ll be great fun, you’ll see!”

“I hope so!” he told her as he closed the bedroom door behind them with his foot. “And speaking of great fun, my beautiful teacher in the arts of pleasure, what’s on the agenda for tonight’s love-making?”

“Hmm.” She considered the question as he set her on the bed, took off his sword, and reclined beside her. “I don’t think the curse will make any demands of us tonight, but we should continue to prepare for it.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Tonight our mood should be a compromise between the tender romance of last night, and the aggressive intensity the curse will demand. You should affectionately dominate me, and use me as your love toy. Last night you playfully spanked my bottom as you stimulated my pleasure zones, to my delight I might add, and tonight you will playfully spank me everywhere, especially on all my most sensitive places. I will joyously resist your efforts and

lightly struggle as you force your attentions upon me. Rather than binding me with leather and steel, as the curse will demand, you will place me in comfortable bondage by tying me in your favorite positions with lengths of soft cloth and silk scarves.

“And most of all, tonight it is you who will initiate your intrusion into my virgin body while I am helpless in bondage, and not the other way around as it was last night!”

“I see.” he grinned as he removed his underbreeches. “Are you going to get undressed?”

She removed her jewelry and her bandoleer of magic items, unbuckled her sword belt and set Ria aside, then lay back with a defiant grin. “No. You will have to tear my clothes from my body if you wish to enjoy me this night.”

“But that’s your wedding dress!” he protested.

“Which I am fully capable of Restoring to perfection, no matter how many times you rip it away. That is,” she chuckled nastily, “If you’re male enough to do so!”

He was.

They were awakened late the next morning by a Speaking from Nemia. *“Good morning! Rise and shine, sleepy head! Oh! Make that sleepy heads! I didn’t think I’d be able to contact you with a Speaking, Mark!”*

“My psionics are fully awakened now, even if I’m not.” Mark playfully grumbled as he cracked his eyelids, then shaded his eyes against the sunlight streaming in the windows. “Weren’t those closed last night?” he asked Talia.

“I was hot in the night, and opened them.” she told him. *“Good morning Mother.”*

“Would you care to join us for brunch?” Nemia asked.

“Sure, and thanks.” Mark replied. *“We’ll see you in half an hour.”*

“We’ll be on the balcony.” Nemia said, and ended the Speaking.

Mark rolled over to Talia, took her in his arms, and smiled into her eyes from a hand's span away. “I love you.” he told her with deep sincerity.

“As I love you.” she replied.

They shared a long, deep kiss, and then she giggled. “You know, we can spare twenty minutes, and still be there in half an hour.” she told him.

“That’s what I thought.”

As it turned out, it was almost forty minutes later when Talia Translocated them to her parents’ central room.

“Good morning!” Mark called as he removed the tine band and slid it onto his bicep.

“Good morning to you!” Yazadril returned as they emerged onto the balcony, to find him seated with Nemia, Hilsith, and to their surprise, Tithian, who reclined on the floor next to the table and munched on a huge bowl of greens and sprouts.

“Why good morning Tithian!” Talia smiled with a respectful bow. “I didn’t expect to find you here!”

“I’ve been filling Yazadril in on the theoretical information we have that you elves have lacked. And enjoying a delicious supper, I might add, for it’s late evening in Xerv right now.” Tithian told them.

“Well it’s a pleasure seeing you again.” Mark smiled as he sat, then picked Talia up and set her in his lap. She began filling their dishes.

“And I you. I sense a great difference in you this morning.”

“Oh. Well, almost without even realizing it, I’ve learned to do Speakings and maintain various kinds of mental Links with my own power. Also, after the meeting last night, we had quite a learning session with our companions and Ria, the spirit of Talia’s sword.

“Here, if you’ll all allow me to open a short Link with you, I’ll show you how it went.”

Without waiting for an assent, he opened the four Links simultaneously and passed his surface memory of the event to Tithian and the three elves.

Nemia gasped, Hilsith dropped her spoon, and Yazadril exclaimed; “Great Source above!”

“That would explain the difference in you, all right.” Tithian chuckled. *“I can’t help but agree with Ria’s assessment of the arts, as I’m primarily a magician myself. For those who are fully capable of using them, the old ways are best. For most humans with the talent to use the power, wizardry is a much more productive study, but for you, magecraft is the obvious choice. I was a bit disappointed with my daughter when she chose sorcery over magicanship. Of course she doesn’t know that, and that minor disappointment in no way diminishes my great pride and love for Equemev. It’s only my own pride in my art anyway, since her qualities make either choice about equally appropriate for her. And there are more instructors available for her in sorcery.”*

“Of course, I can’t help but disagree.” Yazadril chuckled. “It’s true that it takes more practice to have the same degree of control over your spells with wizardry than with magecraft. But the lesser effort required to initiate wizard’s spells can be important, and so can the ability to cast without having to achieve a specific emotional position. Most importantly, you can simply do a great many more things with wizardry. Over a third of wizard’s spells have no counterpart in magecraft at all, and the disparity increases daily. I can’t but think that overall, wizardry and sorcery are superior to magecraft and magicianship. Though as you say, Tithian, the choice depends on each individual’s qualities, and much of my surety in my opinion must be due to my own pride in my art.”

“I don’t plan on making the choice, myself.” Mark said between bites. “I managed to pick up all of Ria’s magecraft spells in about ten minutes, so I don’t see why I can’t do the same with the other arts of power. I don’t plan on learning the rest quite as fast as that, as it was extremely intense, but I think I could learn all there is to know about magic within the next month.”

“You are so incredible.” Nemia told him reverently. “Do you even realize how much of what you did last night has never been done before?”

“Oh? How so, other than what was pointed out last night?”

“*May I answer that?*” Tithian asked, and continued at Nemia’s nod. “*Yours was the first simultaneous casting of two different arts, and so also the first simultaneous casting of three and of four of them. You are the first person to have cast any spells with three different arts at all; no-one has been able to use more than two before, and you have used five. Even Povon, who knows a few sorcery and magecraft spells as information, could not cast them. You are the first of another race to have drawn power from one of my people, the first magic user to have drawn power from any race but their own, actually, and so the first to have drawn power from two people who are of two different races from your own, let alone simultaneously. You are the first non-draconian to have cast with their method, and the first non-draconian to combine the heat of the stone with the light of the source. Actually, the first non-draconian to have used both kinds of power at all, and the dragons have no choice about using both, they cannot separate the two. No novice caster has ever received even a single spell psionically and been able to cast it immediately, and the very few who can required centuries of training. The amount of spells Ria passed you in such a short time is frightening. If you could cast them already, you would indeed be one of the premier magic users alive, after less than an hour of training.*”

“Well, a lot of them are still all jumbled together in my head, which I guess is why she told me to not do any casting for a couple of days.” Mark mused. “But a couple of hundred of them have sorted themselves out already, and I could cast them right now. I could have cast a few dozen of the easier ones last night, a few minutes after she gave them to me.”

“*As Nemia said, you are incredible.*”

“And he did it all without needing to hum a note, without needing any gestures or audible frequency cues at all!” Talia proudly stated.

“Well, be that as it may, I’ll try not to get a swelled head about it.” Mark chuckled, and continued his brunch.

“Wise of you.” Yazadril allowed. “On another subject, we’ll all be making public appearances together as you suggested, starting six days from now. We’ll spend six hours a day at it for nine days, spending two days touring each of the four continents of The Just Alliance, and one day touring The Association of Oceania with a stop in the capitol of The Stone Islands.”

“That doesn’t seem like a lot of time to spend if we want the majority of people to see us all together with their own eyes, as proof of the reality and solidarity of The Just Alliance.” Talia pointed out.

“We’re only going to appear in the capitols and major cities.” Yazadril informed her. “People will gather in the largest arenas, stadiums, coliseums, open parks and public squares. In the center of each gathering place there will be a cleared space as wide as a street and about fifty paces long, with a Translocation Plate at either end. We’ll meet in The Hall of The Just Alliance, and file through a Translocation Plate, emerging in the cleared space at the center of the first gathering place. We’ll traverse it, and the Plate at the other end will take us to the next gathering place, and so on. In this way we’ll be able to appear before the maximum number of people in the minimum amount of time. To further speed things along, our procession will include only the leaders and rulers of nations, but none of their staff, and so will be very much smaller than the assembly at the meeting yesterday.

“Enough people will be able to see the procession with their own eyes that the rest will not be able to deny the truth of the event. Dwarven wizards will broadcast Illusions of our procession to thousands of locations in each nation, which is a common practice in Kletiuk, and so almost everyone will have a chance to see it.

“And every community, whether it is a major one where we will appear in person, or an outlying one that will see the closest live appearance via Revealing, will have a day-long celebration to mark the founding of The Just Alliance.

After feasting and games and dancing, there will be speeches by the spokespersons for local government making the formal announcement, and our somewhat brief appearance will be the culmination of each local event. Of course, some Revealings will follow us along our entire route, and we will pause at the end of each day in the largest city on each day's route, to make a few speeches ourselves."

"Wow! That's really good thinking!" Mark enthused.

"It is. You'll also be pleased to know that the rest of the plans that were made yesterday are also being implemented, and as we speak, the world is changing at a staggering pace.

"The militaries of The Just Alliance are melding and redeploying throughout the alliance, civil defense and emergency response corps are forming everywhere, programs for the assistance of the poor and needy are suddenly so over-financed that they're having to hire extra accountants just to keep track of it all, thousands are swearing binding oaths to justice with every second that passes, laws are being re-written by every government, prisoners are being sworn and prisons closed or renovated for other purposes, Wards are being altered to allow the passage of any who bear the mark of The Just Alliance, and travel between continents is widespread and increasing with every moment.

"And of course, Readings, Revealings, recorded Illusions, and written transcripts of yesterday's meeting, and of your words on just laws after the meeting, are being copied by the millions, yet still the supply of them falls short of the demand.

"We are all suddenly world-famous among the citizens of every nation in the alliance, you two moreso than the rest of us, and you, Mark, most of all."

"Ah. Well I'll try not to think about that too much, as well." Mark responded a moment later, after finishing his meal. "At least until the public appearances.

"My compliments on the meal, Nemia. It was delicious, especially that duck pie with the melon sauce."

"Ah, Hilsith and I bought it all from the market earlier, already prepared." Nemia shrugged with a smile. "But thanks anyway.

"We didn't cook because we slept in rather late this morning, since Hilsith, Yazadril and I spent most of the night making love on the center of the podium of the Laylas Valley wedding chapel. We've no wish to make a public declaration about it or anything, but we're very proud to have our family and friends know that the three of us are now a bonded trio."

"Well congratulations!" Mark laughed, giving Yazadril a friendly pat on the back. "I guess you've still got it in you, eh you old rascal?"

"These two lovelies seem to think so, which is good enough for me!" Yazadril chuckled.

Talia had come around the table to hug Nemia and Hilsith. "I'm so happy for you!" she giggled.

"So are we!" Hilsith laughed as she enjoyed the embrace.

"At any rate, I'm wondering what your plans for the day are?" Yazadril asked.

"Visiting our holdings, arranging our possessions, talking to those who've sworn to us, training, and doing our financial planning." Mark told him. "And I wanted to ask you about a few things."

"Oh! And we have to talk to Grakonexikaldoron!" Talia added.

"That's right, I'd let that slip my mind for a while." Mark nodded. "Too much to think about lately, I guess."

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

Mark considered what he wanted to say for a moment before answering. "Remember when we first met? At that time, you thought that understanding my magic properties was the most important thing in the world."

"It was, at that time!" Yazadril chuckled. "Who could have known then what was to come?"

"Not me, that's for sure." Mark nodded thoughtfully. "At any rate, we swore binding oaths that I would remain here for your study for five years, that you would build me a home, and so on."

"Ah. And circumstances have changed, so you're wondering whether those oaths still apply." Yazadril nodded. "Let me assure you my boy, those who have sworn such oaths to each other can always release each other from the terms by mutual consent, even in the case of the binding vow of an elf.

"Thanks to Tithian here, and the rest of the theoreticians of Xervia, I now understand much about your unique properties. Furthermore, with what I've learned in the last few days, I have enough research on my 'to be done' list to keep me occupied for three centuries, even if the other recent occurrences weren't occupying most of my time. I would still like to conduct research with you, once you have a firm grip on your power, but that can certainly wait a few years.

"Most of our agreement has already been fulfilled in other ways. I have some understanding of your power, you have a home here, you have a horse ranch, and you have instruction in magic. We can therefore mutually disregard that contract."

“Agreed. Another thing I wanted to ask you about is this; Since I’m now Prince of Hilia and all that, I’m unsure of the necessity and the wisdom of our agreement that I would become a citizen and a Knight of The High People, in order to make it politically palatable that elves from every elven nation have sworn to me.

“Ah. Well as Theramin pointed out after you left the meeting yesterday, your marriage to Talia automatically grants you citizenship here, so that’s already settled. King Dren of Finitra then pointed out that his people still proudly consider you to be one of their own, and that he considers your Finitran citizenship to be in no way revoked. Overlord Senchak advanced the view that since you are Prince of Hilia, your Hilian citizenship must be considered your primary citizenship, and that our nations had no right to claim you for ourselves. Empress Emeroth then insisted that since you are the somewhat informal leader of The Just Alliance, you must be considered a citizen of The Just Alliance itself, and to hold equal citizenship in each of its constituent nations. In order to diffuse the argument, which was becoming somewhat heated, we all agreed with her position.

“We’re very proud of you both, you know. Your conduct yesterday was exemplary, and your words were brilliant.

“As well, The High People and all elves everywhere are quite proud of the fact that you are already listed as a Knight of The High People, indefinitely detached to the service of The Just Alliance.

“In any case, no one will consider it out of order that a few hundred elves have sworn to you. At this point, no one would question anything you might do, unless it were absolutely outrageous!”

Mark laughed. “My whole life has been absolutely outrageous lately! I tell you, there’s a big part of me that’s still sure that at any moment I’m going to wake up to find that it’s all just a fantastic dream!”

“That is good to know, fine youth.” Tithian mused. “So long as you keep your humility and don’t take all of this too seriously, everyone will stand behind you, and you will remain the uncrowned leader of most of the world. Paradoxically, if you try to insist on command, you will likely lose it.”

“No chance of that! I tell you, me being leader of The Just Alliance is ludicrous!

“Tell me, when you made that comment about us having attained a position of leadership of sorts, after we spoke at the meeting the first time, did you actually mean to nominate us to a real position of leadership?!”

“That had not been my thought before I spoke the words, yet as soon as they were spoken, I knew they would be taken that way. And I approved whole heartedly.”

“Huh. Well, we’ve got quite a few things to do today. I suppose we’d best get to doing them. I’m sure looking forward to seeing all our new places!”

“By the way, Father, could you recommend a wizard who is also a specialist in optics?” Talia asked as she and Mark stood. “As Ria pointed out, Mark’s extreme visual sensitivity to spell casting could get him killed in battle if he gets blinded by a flash at the wrong moment.”

“Not offhand, but I’ll ask around for you.”

“Since you’re going to be talking to Grakonexikaldoron today, you should ask her about it.” Tithian suggested. “She is one of Xervia’s most prominent astronomers, and as such knows a thing or two about the spectra of light, and its manipulation by magical means.”

“Thanks, we’ll do that.” Mark smiled as he slipped the tine band onto his forehead. “If we don’t speak before then, we’ll talk to you tomorrow morning.

“Except for you of course, Tithian, unless you should happen to be here again tomorrow. It’s been a pleasure seeing you again, and we are always available to you.”

“Bye for now.” Talia smiled as she took Mark’s hand, and Translocated them to the living room of their suite in the Living Palace.

“Now, I’m to Speak to those who’ve sworn to you, and explain our thoughts on their training and service.” she said as she retrieved their wedding album. “But really, we should both speak to them together. I think it’s far too early for me to be exerting any authority on your behalf, if you want to be a leader and not a lord. They are sworn to you, not to me, and that’s a different thing from having truly earned their loyalty. You must do that first, and then I should do so on my own merit after that.

“I would feel more comfortable issuing instructions to our four companions at arms, since they are equally sworn to us both. But that’s not the case with the elves, and that’s why you should be the one to ask them whether they wish to aid us in acts of war on behalf of The Just Alliance, should the need arise.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Now I know how Alilia must have felt, when her people chose her as their Princess. But I have to face my responsibilities, and fulfill them. And I have to have a healthy attitude about it to avoid her mistake, and not let it embitter me.

“So, how do we go about contacting them?”

“Now that’s actually a good question. I can contact every one of The High People who’ve sworn to you, as I know them all to one degree or the other, and a few of the ones from other nations who had my attention for more than a few moments. But I didn’t get a chance to really get a feel for the rest of them. It helps a bit that we have their names in the wedding album, but not enough, and I couldn’t contact more than six at a time anyway. I could cast a Reading on myself and replay the swearing; paying enough attention to each of them to be able to contact them, but it would still take me a while to contact them all. Perhaps you could contact more of them, but you told Ria that you wouldn’t cast any spells for two days.”

“Hmm. Let me think for a moment. There’s a military command spell for contacting your subordinates that Ria gave me, but it’s not really sorted out in my mind yet. Why don’t you bring her out and we’ll ask her about it?”

Talia put her hand on her hilt, and Ria appeared.

“Good day Ria. How are you?” Mark smiled.

Ria stared inscrutably at him for a moment. *“Why, I am fine, Mark, and thank you for asking. Good day to you both.”*

“As Talia now realizes, the spell you are thinking of is Brigade Command, and it is one of the fifty-two spells that are embedded in my steel, so Talia can cast it by merely invoking it. Now, since these elves are sworn to you, and you are the Prince of Hilia, and Talia is your Princess, she is rightfully in your chain of command as it affects the spell. Thus, she can use it to contact them on your behalf.”

“Talia, brigade commanders seldom have the opportunity to know every one of their subordinates, and the spell is designed to allow for that. If you read the list of their names, and review a Reading of their swearing enough to take a good look at each of their faces, you will be able to contact them.”

“The ones you know well enough to match their names with their faces can be contacted singly or in selected groups. As far as the spell is concerned, they are your officers, and the spell initiates a shielded two-way Speaking with them, so that they can pass you information as well as receive your orders. The rest, those you do not know well enough as individuals to know both their names and faces, can only be contacted together, all at once. The spell considers them low ranking soldiers, and so it only initiates one-way communication with them. It allows you to speak to them, so that they can be given their orders directly, but they cannot speak to you in return. The designers of the spell expected that anything they had to say to you would be passed up the chain of command through their officers. An elven brigade in Visinniria’s time was ten thousand, counting both soldiers and support staff, and that is the most you can contact with the Brigade Command spell. And since the spell was designed during The War of The Segregation, it can only be used to contact elves. This makes it very difficult for psionicists who are not elves to intercept it.”

“I’m rather disappointed that you haven’t yet taken the time to review the spells I contain as a sword. As your assignment today, you will review them, as well as the rest of your magic items of special significance, and the properties of the wizard’s tools and the magically enhanced weapons and armor you were given as wedding presents. All the power of the many magic items you own does you no good if you are unfamiliar with them and their use. This knowledge will affect a greater immediate increase in your practical abilities than spending your time learning from me, so we’ll defer my lessons for a day or two.”

“Mark, you will also review the magical properties of all the weapons and armor you were both given, and you will inspect their physical quality and craftsmanship as well, considering only their battle worthiness, ignoring their decorative aspects.”

“Each of you will spend two hours on those tasks, plus the four hours you will spend on physical combat skills. Other than that, enjoy your honeymoon. Your workload will increase drastically the day after tomorrow.”

“We should also review our entire inventory with an eye to each item’s usefulness on campaign.” Mark mused.

“The tools, particularly the smith’s tools, the climbing gear, many of the pots and pans and dishes, and a great deal more of it would all be useful to an armed force. Then there’s the issue of transportation for all of that. Perhaps I’ll have some of the elves help with that. While we’re at it, we should consider the qualities of each of our properties as military assets. Their defensibility, as well as the tactical and strategic aspects of their locations.

“I’d also like to talk to Foreman Joseth Narr about the possibility of training some of the horses at Winghoof Estates to be war-horses.”

“Now you’re thinking!” Ria chuckled. *“Now you’re starting to become an officer! I’ll leave you to it then, but before I go, let me check your mind.”*

Mark let her initiate the Link to him through Talia.

“Excellent. Your comprehension of the spells you’ve been given is proceeding nicely, better than I expected, even after working with you yesterday. By the day after tomorrow at the latest, you will be ready to begin casting them. Have you realized how many there are yet?”

“Nine hundred and fourteen, plus variations on some of the main spells.”

“Very good. Speak to me again tomorrow morning for your next assignments. Till then, be well.”

She faded away.

“It’s nice that our assignments fit with what we were already planning for today.” Mark mused.

“True.” Talia nodded. “I’ll cast the Reading and review the faces of the sworn, then review the list of their names in the album. What should I say to them when I’m ready?”

“Invite them to come here for a visit and a discussion of their service, if they can conveniently come here during the next two hours. Ask if any of them need assistance with traveling here. If any of them do, we’ll have to figure out a way to get them here.”

“I can bring some here, and those who are sufficiently skilled at Translocation can help bring the rest.” Talia nodded. “Let’s go downstairs before I get started on the Reading and the list. It’ll take me about forty minutes to be ready to contact them all, and you can start your review of our weapons and armor while I prepare.”

“All right.” he said as he offered her his hand with a smile.

“Be ready, I’m going to Translocate us.” she giggled. “We were told that our power improves with exercise, so I’ve decided to exercise mine at every opportunity.”

“Go ahead.” he grinned, since he was already wearing the tine band.

She concentrated for a moment, and brought them with a slight pop to just inside the doorway in the ballroom.

“Hah! I did it without whistling!” she stated with a proud smile. “Though my displacement could have been better. Ria says that it’s a weakness to have to make an audible sound in order to focus your mind on the frequencies of a spell, so I’m going to try to stop doing so.”

“Seems wise to me, my pretty wife.” he smiled as he swept her up in a hug. “And I think that your review of the names and faces of those who’ve sworn to me is valuable extra effort, beyond what Ria assigned us. Moreso if you won’t have to do it again to contact them next time, as I surmise.”

“You surmise correctly.” she giggled, and kissed his nose.

“Therefore, I’ll spend that time doing extra things as well, and then we can start our two-hour assignments together, starting with the magic properties of our weapons and armor.”

“All right, let’s take a moment to plan our day in greater detail. It’s almost noon. They’ll start arriving in forty-five minutes. All who are coming will be here in two hours, and we’ll allow for half an hour to discuss their service and another half hour to establish an organization among them. After that, I’m hoping that some of them would like to stay and help us transport many of these possessions to our other properties, and get everything put away. We’ll spend three hours at that and break for supper between the sixth and seventh hour. We’ll feed them a nice banquet, hopefully here in our newly-cleared ballroom, then politely bring the gathering to an end at the eighth hour or so. That would be a good time to talk to our gold draconian neighbor. Then we’ll spend two hours here working on our assignments, with a short break at nine to talk to our four companions. We’ll do the four hours of physical combat training while enjoying the evening at one of our other properties. We’ll return here about ninety minutes after midnight, spend an hour or three on intimacy, and get to sleep around the same time we did last night.

“How does that strike you, my handsome husband?”

“As good planning, my dear.” he chuckled.

“And what will you be doing while I’m mentally compiling your followers?”

“Well, I was going to review the geography and location of our holdings from the cards that came with them, and plot them on the globe so I really know where they are, and if I had time, I was going to research Visinniria in the books we were given. I’m really curious about what she did both before and after she made Ria, and how she became a goddess. But now that I think about it, I should spend the time with you reviewing the faces and names of the elves. I’ll be able to cast the Brigade Command spell myself in a couple of days, and then I’ll be able to contact them myself if need be.”

“And I’d love to have you share the experience with me, my love, but it’s not really the most practical use of your time. You’ll meet many of them today anyway, and once I’ve done the compilation, I can pass you the faces and names of those who don’t come today through our Link, in much less time than it would take you to review them yourself. The quality and completeness of our communication through our Link is a very rare and special thing, my love, and we might as well take advantage of it.”

“Well in that case, only one of us really needs to study the magic properties of the weapons and armor, and then we can pass that knowledge through the Link as well!” he enthusiastically realized. “For that matter, I bet you already have a pretty accurate idea of the locations of our properties, and know much of the history of Visinniria, so you could pass me that too!”

“I do, and I will!” she laughed joyously. “And you can pass me your knowledge of combat! I’ll still need to practice the motions to develop the skills, but having your knowledge of them, and your feel for doing them, will save a great deal of time!”

“All right, but that would still leave me needing to do something while you review the faces and names, so how about this; You cast your Reading of the swearing to me, and we’ll divide the elves in half, and each review half their faces, then we’ll divide the list of names and each read half of them. Then I’ll pass you the names and faces I’ve reviewed over the Link, and you should be ready to cast Brigade Command to them in about twenty-five minutes at most!”

“By the source Mark, I think we’re getting smarter!” Talia laughed. “Let’s get started!”

As it turned out, it only took ten minutes to review the faces of the sworn, as a quick glance at each one sufficed for the spell, if they were concentrating intensely enough. Mark inspected faces faster than Talia, but she read names from the list at twice the pace he could, and that task only took seven minutes.

“All right.” Talia smiled as she drew her sword. “I’ll keep it short this first time. It’s a complex spell, and it might be a bit tricky, even though the sword is actually doing the work.”

She held the sword vertically before her with both hands, closed her eyes in concentration, and invoked the magic. “*Good day. Prince Mark and I would like to invite you to visit for discussion and dinner today. We would be pleased if we could gather here, on the grounds at the rear of The Living Palace, before two hours have passed, should your schedules allow. We apologize for giving short notice, and look forward to your visit.*”

Before Talia had finished the Speaking, Stripe and Scout were already announcing the arrival of friendly visitors with psionic signals and proud calls.

She sheathed her sword, and cast the Movement combination she’d invented at their wedding reception, floating up a meter beside him, and taking his offered hand.

He grinned as they walked with matching paces down the aisle between their possessions, through the anteroom and out onto the rear porch.

Over four hundred elves had already arrived, and more arrived in the center of the lawn in a steady stream of flashes and puffs of air, then quickly walked to the nearest point on the lawn’s perimeter to clear space for new arrivals. On the porch stood Balen, looking exactly the same in her ornate blue striped gown and bright red braid, and Sheramiv, the elfess who had spoken for those who’d Compelled his wedding vows at their swearing two nights past. Her brunette hair was tied back with a red ribbon that matched her simple white summer dress, and she stood in a tense posture with her eyes closed and her brows knitted in concentration.

“Hi Talia.” Balen smiled shyly. “Hi Mark.” She tried to keep her greeting nonchalant, but when she met Mark’s gaze she couldn’t help but stare longingly at him for a moment, before she dropped her eyes and blushed. “I was the first one here. I’ve been keeping myself prepared to answer your call at all times. She was next.” she nodded to Sheramiv. “It’s a good thing too, as she took charge of traffic control right away. Otherwise there’d have been a pile up. Over a third of these amateur Translocators didn’t make adequate checks for clear space first. She’s really good at it.”

“Oops. I should’ve thought of that.” Talia admitted with a blush. “I’ve never organized such a gathering before, but I still should’ve thought of it.”

“It’s nice to see you again, Balen. How have you been doing?”

“Well, I’ve been serving some of my penance to those three I discolored. And I’ve been getting together with the others from here that swore for you. We all watched the Reading of the meeting of The Just Alliance together. It was magnificent, and you were both so wonderful! And we’ve all sworn Osbald’s Oath upon mighty Mountainfire.”

She proudly showed them the three tiny symbols on the back of her left hand; the round white and blue that was the marker of the oath, a recognizable pictogram of Yazadril’s sword, and the sword-star of Hilia.

“How is it that you wear the sign of Hilia?” Talia asked in surprise.

“All of us who’ve sworn to you got it with the other two after we swore Osbald’s Oath and called for the Marking.” Balen explained. “If you remember, the Xervian wizards wanted to use it as the Marking of The Just Alliance, but you said you wanted it for the symbol of Hilia. So they must’ve made it part of the Marking spell of the

vow. We thought it was really nice. No one else got it when they swore Osbald's oath, so it kind of makes us special."

"Huh. I wonder why we didn't get it?" Mark mused as he pondered the symbols on his shoulder.

"I'd think it's because it's the Marking of a vow." Balen speculated. "We got it because we've sworn a binding vow of service to Hilia, or rather to its monarch."

"And since we became Hilia's monarchs when there were no other Hilians to swear an oath of office to, we are not sworn to Hilia, so we didn't get the Marking." Mark chuckled in understanding.

Zayobod and Holanam took that moment to step up and bow.

"The Valiant Glory Seekers are all present, Your Majesty." Zayobod grinned as he gave a snappy salute, his blue eyes sparkling beneath his blond hair.

"As are The Unthinking Impulsives, uh, would you prefer Your Majesty or Sir Mark?" Holanam asked with a bashful smile and a nervous toss of his black hair.

"It's just Mark, thank you very much!" Mark laughed. "Have you really taken those as names for your respective groups?"

"We have, Mark." Zayobod proudly declared. "For we seek to be guided by you in all things. Thus we three, who were chosen by you to speak for our like-minded companions after we swore to you, have been nominated as spokespersons for our groups."

"You didn't really name us, so my group have chosen to refer to ourselves as The Devoted." Balen shyly revealed.

"That's all so cute!" Talia laughed. Then her look became serious as she noticed that Sheramiv was starting to shiver, and sweat was dripping from her hairline. She laid her hand on Ria's hilt and invoked Battalion Command. "*Cease incoming Translocations! We're having a traffic control problem! We'll give you word to resume in a few moments!*"

"Ahhh. Thank you!" Sheramiv sighed with relief. "Over eleven hundred of them already, and the space to guide them into shrinking every moment! That was a bit of a strain, for certain. Who'd have thought so many would be ready to come at a moment's notice?!"

"Not I, that's for sure!" Talia declared as she surveyed the huge yard, already half full of elves standing in loose groupings around the perimeter, most of them looking at her and Mark.

"We'll be ready to continue in a minute, my Lady." Sheramiv said as she stretched a bit. "They won't be in such a hurry after your warning, and we now have time to contact them individually and schedule arrivals."

"It's just Talia, thank you very much." Talia giggled. "And thank you very much for your help, Sheramiv."

"I'm pleased to contribute. I arrange Translocation sequences on many occasions. I'd pleased to assist you in organizing any gatherings you might hold. I'm sure things will run much more smoothly next time."

"Thank you for offering." Mark smiled. "Do you organize gatherings as your profession?"

"Not exclusively. I trained as a Master Administrator at the Academy of The Empire, in Latrel, capitol of Sming, and have held various administrative positions these last seventeen centuries. Some of them were private positions, but the majority of my experience has been government service. Most recently I was Financial Privy Secretary of the Civic Authority of Bojoston. There are three others among us who are more experienced administrators than I, but I was chosen by Prince Yazadril to speak for us at our oath taking, so I have been nominated to continue in that role until you should choose another to do so. Thus I was the first of my group to arrive, and was the first to realize the need for traffic control. It was lucky for me that you prevented further arrivals when you did, for having started the task alone and come so close to my limits, it would have been dangerous for anyone else to join me with the spells in progress."

"You're a skilled wizard." Talia smiled.

"I am. As are all of us who erred so gravely at your wedding. Compulsion is not the easiest of spells. Only a quarter of elven wizards are capable of it, and we are all here because we cast it."

"True. I should have realized that." Talia nodded. "And since our organization of this gathering is obviously sadly lacking, would you be so kind as to provide some guidance in that regard?"

"Why not just let us take care of it?" Sheramiv smiled. "There's no need to trouble yourselves about such things when we can do it for you with great efficiency, and if you wish, you can learn by observation. Just tell me what plans and preparations you have in mind."

"All right, and thank you. We expected that everyone's arrival would be more gradual, of course. After everyone who's coming is here, we thought to spend a half hour discussing service; yours to Mark, and ours to The Just Alliance. Among other issues, we'd like to know if any of you would consider serving in a support corps for the strike

force we've proposed forming. It's Mark's intention to ask for your co-operation, rather than commanding any of you by your oaths.

"After that, we're going to ask if any would like to help us with putting away our things. We were going to do the planning for that while waiting for everyone to arrive. Those who help with that will have an opportunity to join us as we appreciate all the wonderful things we've received, and tour all our properties, all over Kellaran. Then we'll have a nice dinner here. We're so well provisioned that feeding a thousand or two will merely clear my kitchen of clutter!"

"All right, first things first." Sheramiv nodded. She cast a quick little spell as she turned to the crowd and clapped twice over her head. That sound and her subsequent words were amplified to a volume easily heard over the many conversations. "Your attention please. We have an opportunity to be of assistance to our liege. First, let's clear the rear of the yard between the outbuildings for incoming Translocations. Everyone there move forward, thank you.

"Those of you with a class seven Translocate or better, please move back to the Translocation stage, co-ordinate further arrivals, and assist those who cannot bring themselves.

"Those with catering and hospitality skills, please report to me for assignment to the distribution of refreshments.

"Those who have skills as decor artists or architects, please report here as well."

"I invite the rest of you to explore the grounds." Talia added, amplifying her voice as Sheramiv had done. "The front gardens are quite lovely, and there are wonderful views from the top of the wall. Until everyone has arrived, we're going to organize our things, and if someone would like to pass on a Reading of our activities to the rest, we welcome you to share them."

"And thank you for coming!" Mark added.

"I'll cast the Reading for you, if I may?" Zayobod eagerly offered, and Mark gave him a smile and a nod.

"Now then, do you have an inventory?" Sheramiv asked.

"We do." Talia said, Retrieving and handing over the wedding album.

"Thank you." Sheramiv smiled as she opened it to the index and quickly read the page, then flipped ahead to the inventory.

Two groups of elves gathered round, and Sheramiv looked up and regarded them. "You would be the architects and decor artists?" she asked one group with a smile, then continued without waiting for an answer. "And you would be those skilled with food and personal service. One moment please."

She quickly flipped through the pages. "Ah. Kitchen. Mileemi's work is always so well organized." she muttered to herself as she chose a page and quickly scanned it, turned to the next one, then the next, reading each page with a few glances. She flipped to the last page, read a paragraph, and snapped her fingers, producing a neatly lettered stack of paper sheets. She handed them to the service group. "The kitchen inventory. Set up refreshments tables on either side of the back stairs, and every fifteen meters around the perimeter of the back lawn. Then plan on dinner for eighteen hundred. It's all top quality, as we all remember from two days past, so use the more perishable items first."

A slim black equatorial elfess stepped forward and took the papers. "I am Jwebil, formerly Chief Household Manager to Prince Himo of Dakrin Cliffs. My Personnel Evaluation spell tells me that I'm likely most qualified to take responsibility for this work."

"Agreed." Sheramiv nodded. "I enjoyed your work at the Feast of the Sun, two hundred fourteen years ago."

"Thank you." Jwebil grinned and bowed, then led her team to the kitchen.

She didn't ask where it was, but Talia surmised that she would find it easily, since the floor plan of The Living Palace was based on such a common design.

"All right, shall we go inside, and organize the disposition of your possessions?" Sheramiv brightly offered.

Mark and Talia led the way to the center of the ballroom.

The administrator flipped through the inventory a moment, stopped at a page, then turned almost halfway around to her left and pointed. "Decor artists. Please clear the largest table, which lies twelve paces in that direction, and bring it here."

They nodded, and closed their eyes in concentration.

"Architects, please review the Reading of the gift presentation in the jewel on the cover of this album, and study the presentations of the gifts of nations. Prepare to cast scale design illusions of the properties and vessels." Sheramiv pleasantly instructed.

They gathered around the album so that six of them could touch the jewel, one of whom passed a Reading to the five who surrounded them.

A few moments later Mark noticed movement out of the corner of his eye to his left, and turned as a beautiful oak table over eleven meters long and two meters wide floated over the stacks of items. They all stepped back, and it settled in the center of the aisle.

“This is going to be great!” a pale polar elf announced with a grin, rubbing his hands together in eager anticipation. “What an opportunity, to help design decor for nine properties at once!”

“Actually, only three. Three and a half at most, today.” one of the architects disagreed as they handed the album back to Talia.

She was tall for an elf at a hundred and seventy centimeters, with gray hair in a bun and warm brown eyes.

She turned to her ten companions, who smiled and nodded.

“I am Bizyutin. Allow me to demonstrate.” she grinned as she strode to one end of the table. “We’re all eleven of us co-operating on these scale models, by the way. Here is the beach house at White Sands Resort.” The eleven architects all slowly blinked at the same moment and hummed in unison, and a miniature Illusion of the beach house appeared on that end of the table, forty-three centimeters high and seventy-nine centimeters long, open to the lagoon with the silk drop sheets lowered across the back and stirring slowly in the breeze. “As you can see, it’s fully furnished and complete, themed in wicker and palm fronds, with hammocks matching the silk wall sheets.

“The cottage at Hilia is also furnished and complete, as is the suite at the Dragon’s view Inn, the ranch house at Winghoof Estates, the yacht Sunrunner, and the Queen of Waves. The Xervian volcano has no facilities.” she listed as she walked beside the table, directing the group casting of each property and vessel in miniature as she mentioned it, and they appeared in a row down the center of the table.

“These aren’t all to the same scale, of course, as there’s an extreme variety in size among them, and the view of the volcano is mostly a surmising based on it’s description and the appearance of similar peaks.

“That leaves the four properties that require the installation of decor.

“Sweettower is still under renovation, and only the additions will need furnishing. Someone contact the renovators, inquire as to the progress of the work, and ascertain whether any of the rooms are ready for decorating.

“Most of the rooms here in The Living Palace are still empty?”

“Yes.” Talia nodded as the building appeared in miniature on the table. “All except for the kitchen and our suite. And this ballroom of course. The ice keep at 157 by 89 in Axis is still empty, as is the palace at 274 Riverside Park Way in Bojoston.”

Bizyutin cast the last illusion on the end of the table, and turned to proudly survey the row of model displays. “I can add the spells for this to the jewel on the album, if you like.”

“That would be fine, for these are beautifully done!” Mark grinned as everyone started walking around the table, inspecting the displays.

After he and Talia had viewed each one, Bizyutin continued.

“For now, we’ll disregard the ones we won’t be working with today.” she smiled as all but the last four miniatures disappeared. “That creates room to represent the materials we have to work with, that is, your possessions. From the Reading of the gift presentation, we can model the room groupings as they appeared.” Small Illusions of the roomful of furniture and possessions that had been pre-arranged for the presentation suddenly occupied much of the table. “And at the same scale, the rest of the gifts as they were arranged around the podium.” A miniature of the ring of gifts appeared, placed as they had been on the moss of the chapel before being brought here.

“Now, can we assume that this; The Living Palace, will be your primary home?”

“Yes, at least until we can finish the improvements we plan for Hilia.” Mark nodded.

“All right. I’ll make the models of these four homes semi-transparent, so we can see the rooms inside. Now all you have to do is decide where you want something to go. Have you chosen where you wish your music room to be?”

“Yes, right here behind our suite upstairs.” Mark said, stepping to the model of The Living Palace and pointing to the second floor.

“Well chosen. Mileemi had every décor artist in the elven race to choose from, and whoever did the room arrangements for the gift presentations was expert, and showed excellent taste, so we’ll start with those and assign them to rooms, and refine it all afterward if you wish to change anything. So, we just take the model of the second of the two roomful of musically related items, which had the better instruments, I think, and we move it into the appropriate room in the model.”

The model of the roomful of items floated over to the model of The Living Palace and through the wall, then shifted slightly to match the dimensions of the indicated room, and shifted again so that the room’s doors and windows weren’t blocked.

“Wonderful!” Talia laughed, and pointed to the basements of the palace. “I’ll use this corner for my wizardry workshop.”

The miniature magic items floated over, and they continued assigning possessions to rooms. Soon they had the decor of their home decided, as well as the locations and storage of all their clothes and personal items. To their surprise, The Living Palace required most of their furnishings to decorate every room, and had ample storage for all of their personal possessions as well.

“What are your plans for the rest of your properties?” Sheramiv asked.

“We’re thinking we’ll let them out as vacation properties, allocating some of the suites to the needy who most need a vacation, and offering the rest for revenue at an appropriate rate.”

“Good thinking.” Sheramiv nodded. “So that you may still enjoy your properties, I suggest you reserve your smaller homes for your own use for one week on two occasions per year, those being White Sands, Sunrunner, and Dragon’s View. I also suggest that you permanently reserve the master suite at each of your larger homes for yourselves, those being Winghoof Estates, The Queen of Waves, Sweettower, the ice keep, the palace in Thon, and of course, here.

“You have enough unallocated furnishings remaining to finish furnishing Sweettower, but not enough to complete the ice keep or the palace in Thon. It would be wise to go that route, for then you could purchase matching furnishings for the keep and the palace. Sweettower would otherwise rent for less per suite than those two, and furnishing it with your personal possessions will increase the rent it can command. Of course, should you decide to rent any of your unused suites here in The Living Palace, they will command the most.”

“I have news of the progress at Sweettower.” one of the other architects reported, taking advantage of the break in the conversation. “None of the new rooms are ready, but they will be finished by this time tomorrow.”

“In that case we can still plan its decor today.” Sheramiv smiled. “And I must say that it’s an excellent idea to utilize The Queen of Waves as an excursion ship for vacationing passengers. It will sustain less wear and tear in that role than it would as a cargo vessel, and require far less maintenance. Likely it will prove far more profitable carrying passengers as well.”

“Thank you, though to be honest, I hadn’t thought of that.” Mark chuckled.

“It is doubly wise to proceed in that manner, as it keeps most of your business in the same industry, that of luxury hostelry, which will reduce your management costs and complexities considerably.”

“Which is good, considering we had already planned to seek advice on our financial dealings. They’re complex enough.” Talia laughed.

“I would suggest you immediately arrange for the furnishing of the ice keep and the palace with the liquid funds you have available.” Sheramiv mused. “I would also renovate the cargo holds of The Queen of Waves, converting them to cabins, restaurants, and recreation facilities, before her first voyage as a passenger ship. This would increase the revenue you would derive from those assets, and they are smart investments that will pay for themselves within three months.”

“That’s good thinking, except that I can’t ignore the value of The Queen of Waves as a military asset.” Mark stated thoughtfully. “So any renovations can’t reduce its utility in that role. No matter how fancy it gets, it still has to be ready for battle at sea or the transportation of marines at a moment’s notice.”

“That could be accommodated.” Sheramiv nodded. “Bizyutin, could you re-cast the model of the ship, and give us interior views?”

“Thank you. Now these holds; here, here, here and here, are of such awkward shape that they will be of little use for hostelry in any case.” Sheramiv noted, indicating spaces on the ends of the hull where the taper of the ship made the floors curved and slanted. “They would be used for storage, not only for items related to hostelry, but for additional military materiel as well. They would also be excellent locations for the installation of hidden additional weapons emplacements, and other nasty surprises of that sort.

“Similar hidden modifications can be made to your other properties, to better prepare them for emergency or conflict.”

“Sheramiv, you are obviously expert at administration, and I get the feeling that you’re hoping we’ll hire you in that regard.” Talia smiled.

“Not hire.” Sheramiv frowned as she shook her head. “I cannot speak for the young High People who swore to you voluntarily, but I am authorized to speak for those of us who swore as atonement.

“Only four of us have dependent children at this time, and eighteen have other personal commitments such as military service or other firm contracts. Those twenty-two stand ready to serve you during their otherwise unscheduled time.

“The rest of us are all independently comfortable at the very least, financially speaking, and have ended our other commitments. In my case, I have resigned my position with the city of Bojoston, and I have enough wealth and profitable investments to live in ostentatious luxury forever, or until the economies of the empires fail. We stand ready to serve you full time, needing no recompense and wanting none. Indeed, it would be both wrong and illegal for any of us to accept payment from you for any service. We are serving for atonement, and we all deserve to be in prison or worse. One does not pay convicted criminals to serve their sentences.”

“Really?” Mark asked in surprise. “I mean, you really think you deserve to go to prison?”

“Yes.” She nodded gravely.

“Why? You didn’t really mean to harm me by Compelling me to obey my own wedding vows, did you?”

“No. But... you must understand. I had seen the girl’s prank well enough to know that she was right; her spell had passed through you like you were an illusion. So I had my doubts that the vows would be binding on you. And I... I feared you. I decided to Compel you right after Yazadril said that you had decided to invite so many so that our presence would reinforce your vows.

“After you spoke, I had my first doubts about my plan, and I had more doubts as I saw the intensification of the power field. As Yazadril said, I knew better, and that is the core of my crime. I knew before I cast that the behavior of the power field was already unprecedented, and that casting into it was very dangerous. But my fear was stronger than my doubts, and so I cast the spell. Of course, I thought I was the only one to do so.

“When I saw your reaction, I knew that I had seriously harmed you, that I had committed a crime, that I had broken the oath of the invitation. When the famed Healer Hilsith called out that she could not save your life, I knew I had killed you. I knew myself a murderer. That moment will never leave me. I imagine all of us had that same experience.”

She paused for a deep and shaky breath, and collected herself before she continued.

“Serving you is far less than the punishment we deserve. However, we proposed it because it is the best way to make restitution for what we’ve done.

“There are many reasons why we Compelled you at your wedding, Mark, but most have to do with fear, combined with conservative attitudes, whether concerning humans, or change, your presence in The Nine Valleys, or the propriety of your marrying Talia.

“As you would expect of a group of conservative wizards, we are a mature and capable group, with an average age of twelve hundred years. We can be of great assistance to you in any task you might wish to see accomplished.

“Beyond that is the fact that legally speaking, it doesn’t matter if we have proposed our own penance in asking to be sworn to you, or that we have so sworn, or that Yazadril has allowed it. The Council of The High People will still judge each of our cases individually in their own due time. We are lucky that we are not considered likely to flee from their authority when the time comes, or we would be held in their custody right now. When our cases are judged, it will be taken into account that we have sworn to you as atonement for our crime. If our efforts on your behalf are considered to balance the scales of justice, they will likely let things stand. However, if they feel that our service is too lenient a sentence, they will impose additional sentencing upon us. Rumor has it that they would consider forcing us to receive a complete deep Reading of your experience when we cast upon you. We would... We would have to experience your death. Perhaps many times. I for one am very much afraid of that.

“Therefore, we are all desperately hoping that you will work us till we drop, everyday. And for at least the next ten years, since it will likely take that long for the Council here to deal with all our cases. Should you wish to accomplish anything that is beyond your financial means, we would be sincerely thankful for the opportunity to contribute funds, or anything else we own or can procure, in support of your plans. We have already accounted our skills and resources. We are ready to begin.”

Mark stared intensely at her, then at those who stood about. He realized that there was complete silence, because every elf in attendance was following the conversation with rapt attention.

Talia sensed his mood, and waited as he considered. Then his thoughts came clear and comfortable to her mind. “*My love Talia. Do you truly look to me for leadership?*”

“*I do my love. I love that you think that we should have equal say and influence in our relationship. But being the voice of leadership is not a task I want, nor is being the responsible monarch of a populated nation. I have found my own boldness since we’ve been together, but not that much boldness, and I am still more comfortable in a supporting and advising role. And I really am eagerly anticipating seeing you fulfill your shining potential as a great leader.*”

“All right.” Mark nodded, then enfolded her in a gentle and cherishing hug.

“All right.” he said aloud as he straightened with a smile. “Talia and I will take you at your word.”

“From now on, those of you who Compelled me at my wedding are a single unit, and I name you The Atoning. You will pool what resources you wish to contribute to our efforts into a common fund. You will organize and assign yourselves to best accomplish our common aims. Our goals are these:

“We will support The Just Alliance in their efforts both peaceful and military, as was spoken and agreed at the founding meeting. We will manage our funds and properties so as to increase their worth, while also making significant and increasing donations to good works. We will train our military skills so as to be able to counterstrike at those who break the peace with the fastest possible effective response. Those who wish to contribute to that effort without personally engaging in combat can form a logistics and support corps.

“We should all train to work well together as wizards, increasing our abilities to share power, to communicate amongst ourselves securely, to Translocate some or all of us at once with safety and accuracy, and to cast group spells for both defense and attack.

“We will build facilities at Hilia. All constructions must be as unobtrusive and natural looking as possible. Inside the crater of the volcano we will build The Military Academy of Hilia. Rooms will be excavated in the sides, and the area surrounding the lake will be leveled and landscaped. We’ll build a resort on the outer slopes of the volcano, above the treeline only, again by excavating into the stone. We envision that the entrances and windows will appear to be natural caves and openings in the rock, with fully finished interiors. And so far as we can practically ensure, all the facilities must be usable by any citizen of the alliance. Here’s the Illusion we worked up with the others of The Six. After you’ve studied it, let me know what improvements you suggest.”

He sent a quick mental request to Talia, and she cast the image of Hilia as they’d developed it before the founding meeting, and privately felt a bit smug at showing no outward sign that it was she and not Mark who cast it.

“We have it now, thank you.” Bizyutin nodded.

Others were interested in seeing it further, so Talia kept the Illusion active.

“For right now, I’ll let you get started on the planning for all that, and on putting our things away.” Mark continued. “I’d also like an evaluation of the military utility of our entire inventory of items and properties. Let us know when you’re done with the decor here, and we’ll look it over. Then we’ll tour our holdings until it’s time for supper.

“Is there anything else you need, or need to know, before you get going on that?”

“No, thank you.” Sheramiv smiled. “I’m sure we’ll have things well in hand. I’ll keep you updated.”

“Excellent. Thank you.” Mark smiled as he took Talia’s hand. “Now, can we have those who swore to me voluntarily, and not as atonement, gather around the back porch?”

As Talia dismissed her Illusion and they turned to go, The Atoning went into action. Sheramiv was already casting a group Speaking that included all of them. Many of those in the hall were already moving items to their assigned rooms by Translocation, Movement, and muscle power. More were flooding into the room through both entrances to join in that task.

By the time Mark and Talia had reached the back porch, those he’d asked to gather there were assembled.

One of the last of The Atoning to file inside stopped and bowed. “Mark, Talia. There remain only twelve of us still to arrive over the time remaining. They will need no further traffic control, beyond the arrival circle I have marked upon the ground there.”

He pointed to a four meter wide blue ring of light in a rear corner of the yard, with glowing blue lettering floating in the air above it. They said; ‘Caution, Arriving Translocations’ in Common, alternating with Elvish words that Mark suspected said the same thing.

“There are nineteen of us who cannot arrive in time, but who can be here before dinnertime, Nine Valleys time, which is six hours after noon.” the Translocator continued. “They ask if they may make a tardy appearance. And there are five whose schedules do not allow their attendances today, who offer their apologies.

“Ah. Thank you.” Mark nodded. “Please tell those who wish to arrive late that they are welcome to do so, until dinner begins. And if you would, tell those who can’t come today that we’re sorry they couldn’t make it, and that our next gathering will be held with ample notice. And make sure they get complete Readings of this gathering, so that they’re completely up to date on developments.”

“It would be my pleasure.” the other smiled, gave a respectful nod, and took his leave.

Mark surveyed the eager young elves around him. “I notice your six friends who were our gracious waitresses at our reception are here.” he chuckled to Talia.

“Almost all of my friends are here, actually.” she giggled. “And almost all the rest are my classmates.”

“From your wizardry school? I’m not really surprised, for by their glow, they’re a more powerful group of wizards on the average than The Atoning!”

“The Nine Valleys have the most intense power fields of any place on Kellaran.” Talia proudly explained. “Because of this, The High People produce both the most powerful wizards on average, and the most wizards per capita, of any nation. Those who are weak or unskilled in the power are more likely to emigrate to another elven nation so as to feel less out of place. Wizards from other elven nations who are strong or skilled or knowledgeable are more likely to immigrate here than to anywhere else. The instruction in magic available to us here is the finest there is, and every child raised here receives enough basic training to qualify as a journeyman in any human wizard’s guild.

“For these reasons, we here are among the very finest of the elven wizards of our generation. The Atoning may have us in knowledge and experience, but we can more than hold our own for power, cleverness, and the use of the newest techniques.”

“I see.” he grinned, then addressed the group around him.

“Were there any of you who can’t make it here today?”

“We’re all here, all eighty-four of us.” Balen proudly announced.

“Good. We’d like you all to know that we’re glad you could come today. I approve of the meetings you’ve held and the organizing you’ve done, and I like the names you’ve taken for your three groups. But I’m going to give a name to the eighty-four of you, to distinguish you from The Atoning, and you will be called The Hilian Volunteers, or The Volunteers for short. And you *are* volunteers. If any of you ever wish it, I will gladly release you from your vow of service to me, and see that you are released from Alilia’s Compulsion of it.

“I see your service as a very different thing from that of The Atoning, due to its voluntary nature, and you are also our contemporaries in age and experience. I consider The Atoning to be somewhat like employees, but I consider you to be companions.

“Now, you’ve all heard the statement of our goals that I made to The Atoning, and any help you offer in achieving them will be greatly appreciated. But I will not have you contributing any of your money to this. If you truly wish to donate to good works, that’s fine, so long as you do so on your own as individuals, and not as part of this organization or your service to me. I’m not that comfortable with your having sworn to me in the first place, and I intend to never command you by those vows, though as I say, I welcome your help and co-operation. But I won’t have you spending the money you’ll need to make a future for yourselves on my account.”

“You don’t understand.” Balen giggled. “We let ourselves be Compelled by *Princess Alilia!* Her Compulsion is not only very powerful, it’s very complete, and it affects every part of our minds! Because of that, none of us will ever *want* to be released from our vow, so we’ll never ask you to do so, because we *like* being sworn to you! If you tried to have the Compulsion lifted, we’d just resist it. We serve you, and that’s all there is to it! We’ll obey you in anything you ask, unless you command us to not serve you, or to do something that we know is in any way harmful to you. We’d just ignore any such command.

“We swore to *serve* you, not to *obey* you, and they’re not the same thing. That’s true of The Atoning as well, so you might as well forget ordering any of us to do anything that we feel is against your interests, or that reduces our service to you. Only the knowledge that you’re on your honeymoon, and are therefore best served by being left to your privacy, has kept any of us from showing up here before now and doing things for you, whether you asked us to or not.

“And it’s silly to tell us to not help you with our money, as well as our time and effort. We all have enough skills to make a *very* comfortable living already, or to make the necessities of a comfortable life from raw materials if necessary, even if the economies of every nation in the alliance were to fail. We don’t need our wealth to assure a prosperous future for ourselves. And since most elven inheritances are given at a child’s birth, and not upon the parent’s death, most of us already have far more than enough to live in comfort for centuries. Furthermore, the financial expertise of the administrators among The Atoning is far greater than ours, far greater even than any we could hire in The Nine Valleys, since there is very little commerce conducted here. So having them manage our money with theirs and yours is a smart investment, even allowing for those funds’ contributions to good works.”

“If it makes you more comfortable, we could refrain from telling you which of us has contributed to the group fund, or the amount of our contributions.” Holanam offered.

Mark chuckled as he shook his head in bemusement. “All right. Do so if that’s what you want to do. Since you’ve obviously spent more time considering the question than I have, what are your thoughts on the nature of your service?”

“If I may, Mark.” Zayobod smiled with a crisp bow. “In general, I think the greatest difference between The Atoning and ourselves is our desired proximity to you.

“They are all deeply troubled by what they’ve done, and by the consequences they may face. They are indeed most eager to serve you, but I doubt any of them wishes to serve you while in your presence, or in any personal

capacity, or to work closely with you, because your presence reminds them too much of the traumatic moments they caused themselves and you at your wedding.

“We, on the other hand, are quite literally thrilled that you consider us your companions, for we do very much hope to serve you personally, to share your presence during great challenges and great accomplishments alike! We hope to be there to support you if times are grim, and to cheer you at your triumphs.

“We hope to be your assistants, your aides, your secretaries, your valets, your maids and servers.

“We also believe the youth and pure talent of our warriors and combat wizards will give us the edge over most of our counterparts in The Atoning when it comes to speed and quickness, both physical and magical. We plan to be able to best them in any contest of our ability to launch a lightning-fast response to a breaking of the peace, and will conduct our own training in that regard. We hope to thus win the right to form your initial-response platoon on those occasions when your first attack wave includes more than you six of the strike force.

“We are also hope to form your household guard, and to be your bodyguards on those occasions when you wish to visit facilities whose dimensions are too small for dragons and unicorns. The nine girls of The Valiant Glory Seekers are especially eager to be assigned to this duty, and are among those who’ve begun training their skills as personal security agents with some intensity, in hopes of winning that post.”

“It’s as he said, Your, uh, Mark.” a very slight brunette said as she stepped forward. “I’m Kalem, and thus far we have only begun to study the foundations of the discipline. But among the first things we did is contact the captains of the knights who form the royal guards of the elven nations. What we learned from them is alarming.

“As they taught us, in quite stern terms, the best protection is prevention. In order to even begin to protect you, we must study your enemies, including anyone who could have motive to do you harm. We must consider every way they could attack you, and discern their most likely methods of doing so. We must be prepared to counter them before they can endanger you.

“My Lord, since you are the most prominent of those who have initiated the recent sweeping changes and government actions of The Just Alliance, you are in great danger. If your enemies could kill you they would count it a huge victory, as it would have such a hugely negative effect on the morale of the multitudes who believe in what you’ve done.

“Your opponents and casual enemies include those who are for continued segregation and prejudice, those who benefit from unjust uses of power, most professional legal advocates, and everyone who supports the status quo for any reason.

“Your mortal enemies include every member of the insidious conspiracy, and every one of the criminals whose livelihoods have been threatened or curtailed by the crackdown. There are tens of millions who would like to see you dead, and hundreds of thousands who are motivated enough to attempt it. Our calculations establish that it is a virtual certainty that at this very moment at least ninety thousand are actively trying to find a way to assassinate you, at least four thousand will be devoting everything they have to the effort, and at least three hundred of those will be persons of great power.

“They have proven themselves willing to slaughter hundreds at a time, merely to test their attacks. Imagine what lengths they would go to in attempting to take your life. They would likely consider it of no regard to devastate entire cities if they thought that doing so would give them the slightest chance to kill you.

“Your properties are predictable places for you to visit, and your enemies will know of them by now.

“Our inquiries have satisfied us that you are safe within The Nine Valleys, and you have not ventured beyond them since the founding meeting. Our Wards are being continuously strengthened, and the capabilities of our defensive personnel have been bolstered by specialists from every nation in the alliance except The Hidden Nation, just as some of our forces have been dispatched to other nations to improve their defenses. Right now for instance, Billigog the Blue, physically the mightiest of The Just Dragons, is conducting high altitude surveillance far overhead.

“The other elven nations have similar Wards and defenses, if not of the quality we have here.

“The Warm People have the poorest security among them, as they have a large and sparsely populated territory with weaker Wards. They have historically depended on the fierce cold of their lands to help prevent invasion, and so their settlements are all located deep within their frigid territory, but that does little to deter assassins who attack by Translocation, or by casting spells from a distance.

“Of your properties, the volcano in Xervia is likely the safest, as the Xervian Wards and security are the best.

“The thousands of security specialists who will guard the parades of leaders are the very finest in The Just Alliance, and they’re taking every possible precaution to ensure the processions will be safe.

“But my... I mean Mark, your homes in Thon and Sming are very vulnerable. Hilia in particular is a likely place for you to be attacked, as it is completely undefended.

“We are not yet qualified to protect you, though there are some among The Atoning who are. We suggest they be assigned to doing so, until we’re ready to assume that duty. We’re qualified to assist them under their direction, at least. And we would greatly appreciate if you also have at least Stripe, Scout, and your red bodyguard with you, if not the entire strike force, and that you both travel fully armed and armored.”

“We strongly suggest that you allow us to inform the knights of The High People of your itinerary, and to inform the military commanders of each of the nations your properties are located in, as to when you will arrive at each one. They will provide additional security, and we will ask each of them to dispatch a contingent to secure Hilia before you arrive there.

“Huh. All of that’s good thinking, and good advice.” Mark nodded. “I won’t call our other four companions though, as they have other assignments today. If we need them, they’ll be there on a moment’s notice, believe me. We’ll leave Stripe and Scout here as well, since I think that doing that many Translocations may upset them. And we’re on our honeymoon, and will be visiting some tropical places, so we’re not going to wear our amour. We will bring it with us, and be ready to don it quickly, and we’ll wear our weapons. The rest of the precautions you listed will have to be enough for today. Please see to them when we’re done this meeting with you Volunteers.”

“Thank you Mark.” she smiled, and nodded respectfully.

“Well that covers your group, Zayobod.” Mark mused. “What about you of The Devoted and The Unthinking Impulsives? What are your thoughts on your service?”

“Actually, sir, I think I’ve given you a misimpression.” Zayobod explained. “While it’s true that all of the girls of The Valiant Glory Seekers wish to be in your security service, other than that, our desired forms of service do not so neatly match our motivations for swearing to you. For instance, many of The Devoted are among our best wizards, sword wielders, and scouts, and would prefer to serve you in that regard, despite the fact that they swore to you because they are so completely besotted and smitten with you.”

“You watch your mouth, Zayobod.” Balen warned in a quiet and dangerous tone that surprised Mark and Talia. “You came close to mocking us just then. We got enough of that when we swore, and we have determined that we will never again unjustly submit to ridicule and jeers about our devotion to Mark. It’s an insult to think we had only a childish crush on him, and Alilia’s Compulsion has multiplied our devotion into a great and loving loyalty. Now it’s like a powerful spiritual enlightenment, and we will not be mocked for it!”

Zayobod’s eyebrows rose in surprise, and he took a moment to consider. “I’m truly sorry, Balen. I was making light of your emotions, and that was insensitive of me, though I didn’t think I’d hurt your feelings, or those of The Devoted. I assure you, it will not happen again.”

“Then we’ll forgive you.” Balen smiled.

“Thank you.”

“Zayobod is right about our aptitudes, though.” Balen told Mark, then shyly looked at his feet as she continued. “We of The Devoted want more than anything else to pleasure you with our love, and our love-making, to each surrender our entire being to you in that way. But we recognize that you are newly married, and have human morals and folkways about such things, and we may not be permitted to serve you in that way for a very long time, if we ever are. We don’t intend to mope around doing nothing while we wait in hope for that opportunity, and we have a lot of skills and enthusiasm to offer.

“Likewise, there are some among The Valiant Glory Seekers whose skills and aptitudes do not lend themselves to combat, who will serve you in other ways.

“The three groups we formed based on our reasons for swearing to you are mostly social organizations. All of us Volunteers met together to watch the Reading of the meeting, to swear to justice, and to discuss our service. But after that, when we were just mingling, we found that the three groups tend to, ah, talk about very different things. That’s when we formalized the three groups.”

“I see.” Mark smiled. “And what of The Unthinking Impulsives? What are your thoughts on your service?”

“We’re working on a song, a national anthem for Hilia, subject to your approval, sir.” Holanam smiled. “Other than that, we really haven’t discussed much. I’m somewhat embarrassed to say that the five of us spent the latter half of the meeting of The Volunteers fornicating. As to our service, whatever you want us to do is fine with us.”

“Unthinking Impulsives indeed!” Mark chuckled. “I see that you five are also gifted with considerable magical power.”

“Pardon me?” Holanam said with a puzzled look. “I’m not sure what you mean, sir. While our strength in the power is normal among The High People, I doubt we’re even average among this group in that way.”

“Huh! Are you certain of that?” Mark asked. “I mean, so far my ability to judge a wizard’s power has proved pretty accurate, and each of you is glowing as brightly as Balen, here.”

“I don’t see how that could be.” Holanam frowned. “All five of us together couldn’t match Balen’s strength with the power. I’m quite certain of that. She’s among our most gifted that way.”

“Huh. Do you mind if I open a Link with you?” Mark asked. “I’d like to check this a little closer.”

“By all means.” Holanam smiled. “Though it would be unkind to the rest of us if only we five are granted the honor of sharing your thoughts that way.”

“All right, but you five first, starting with you, and we’ll have Talia and Ria with us.” Mark said, and Talia laid her hand on her hilt.

Mark introduced Ria, and briefly explained about her and Talia’s sword while Talia and Ria established a firm Link with him. Then he Linked with Holanam.

“He is indeed drawing power that he cannot access for casting.” Ria commented. *“Though he has used it on occasion in the past. I cannot tell what he did with it. Bring the other four into the Link.”*

Mark closed his eyes and did so, thrilling to the ease of it, and to the pleasure of communicating so closely with these five young minds for the first time. He gave them a cheery wordless greeting with one part of his mind, which they acknowledged and returned.

“These two are somehow different from those three, though they all use the power without casting it.” Ria commented. *“Other than that, I cannot say. They are all of them unique in my experience.”*

“The three have a feel to them that is different, yet somehow familiar.” Talia noted. *“Here, this aspect, do you feel that?”*

“I recognize that!” Mark mentally exclaimed. *“Here, disregard all these other aspects like this; their individualities, and these; their elvishness, so to speak. Now consider this unicorn. Disregard all of her individual and racial characteristics with the same method, like this, and this. You see?! The little bit of each of their auras that are left are the same! Somehow, they have something in common with her, and when you consider the three, you can see here how that aspect is part of their subconscious expenditure of power that Ria detected!”*

“Very well done, both of you!” Ria congratulated. *“Very perceptive. I suggest you now cast a Speaking to the morning child. This may be important.”*

“I agree, love.” Talia added.

Mark nodded. “Tithian, may we have a moment of your time?” he called out loud as he concentrated on his image of her.

Instantly the eight Linked minds felt her join them and absorb their surface thoughts. *“Thank you for calling me. Fine work. You five, please allow me to take a deep Reading. Thank you. This will be analyzed. I’ll have the results in a few minutes.”*

Then her mental touch was gone.

“I get the feeling we interrupted her.” Mark noticed.

“She’s no doubt a very busy person right now.” Talia nodded.

“If you and Ria are ready, I’d like to start bringing the rest of these fine elves into our communication.” Mark asked.

They gave him their mental assent. He opened his eyes and began glancing at those around him, bringing each of them into the Link as he met their gaze. When he’d Linked with another thirty-four of them, he closed his eyes and *felt* for the rest of them. He noted the presence of each of their eager minds, and Linked with all of them at once. Now Talia, Ria, and the eighty-four Volunteers were all Linked through him.

It was a wondrous experience. He spent three minutes getting to know them, and Talia shared her memories of them with him as he mentally greeted each one. He was surprised at how well he knew them after that short time.

He was humbled by their feelings toward him; by how much they all looked up to him, by the sincerity of their service. The joyous power of their friendship and their love was so wonderful that he couldn’t help but return it.

Talia felt all this, just as they all felt Mark’s love for her, and hers for him.

It was a profound experience for all of them, and then it was suddenly further brightened when Tithian rejoined the Link. They made her welcome, and she delighted in sharing it for a half minute before revealing her news.

“This is beautiful, but I know you’ll be interested in what we’ve learned.”

“These two; Holanam and Dewkan, have an ability so subconscious it can almost be considered inherent. They constantly cast an effect somewhat similar to a Blessing upon themselves and their immediate surroundings. It alters probabilities to their benefit. It is a subtle effect, but it would be true to say that they are magically lucky. Their spontaneous oath to serve you can only be of benefit to them, and it bodes very well for you that they did so. If you keep them near to yourself, or to those who are doing the greatest or most unsure works on your behalf, the further functioning of their unique ability will be of maximum benefit to you.”

“You were correct in noticing that these three have a similarity in their auras that I share. It is the power of a seer. The ability to use this power takes centuries to develop, and little can be done to guide them, as it is a very intuitive learning process. I will spend a few minutes every week with each of them, and teach them what can be taught. They are very young, and they are quite lucky that their potential was detected so early. At this stage in their development, their talent will manifest as hunches, each of which will need to be considered individually, as they will be sporadic in their accuracy and completeness. On the other hand, none of their hunches or intuitions should be disregarded completely or routinely.

“You see how the thus-far unrecognized subconscious abilities of these five; magically enhanced luck and mild prescience, have led to their being Unthinking Impulsives? Without such spontaneity, they might have interfered with the function of their own talents.

“More important is this; Mark, your hastily developed method of disregarding irrelevant aspects of an aura is the first method ever found for isolating and identifying the talent of a seer. We will use it to search the world for prescients, most of whom are like these three, in that they would never have been identified otherwise. We may find dozens of undiscovered seers and oracles in the days ahead, which would be of great benefit to The Just Alliance.

“We immediately adapted the technique to the auras of these lucky two, and when we correlated the results with the events in their memories when they manifested most strongly, we were able to identify the nature of their talent. We can begin screening the populations of The Just Alliance for that ability as well.

“We are most excited by your ability to see an individual’s strength in the power, though we hadn’t realized it’s importance till now, and we haven’t been able to duplicate it. Others are able to do so indirectly, by observing the effect that a person and their spells have on the magic field, but that is far less exact and far less useful for the purpose, particularly when many are in close proximity to one another. The problem with using your aura aspect isolation technique to screen the population for magic abilities is that a deep Link or Reading must be cast upon each person to be so tested. If we could duplicate your ability to visually detect strength with the power, we would be able to detect all the potential spell-casters. Just as you did today, we could then compare their spell-casting strength with their total strength, to identify those with subconsciously cast magical abilities.

“Tell me, do you detect my power in the same way, or that of dragons?”

“Oh yes.” Mark nodded. “Your glow is as bright as Alilia’s, and Povon’s is brighter. Though now that I think about it, it is different. Povon’s glow is less glaring and is easier on the eyes than Alilia’s, even though it’s brighter, and yours is even softer and less irritating than Povon’s. We haven’t spoken to my gold neighbor yet today, but when we do, we’ll ask her about the possibility of others duplicating my ability that way.”

“Thank you. If we haven’t learned to do so before the parades of the leaders of The Just Alliance, we would greatly appreciate if you would try to visually scan every member of the audiences for their power glow, while allowing several of our researchers to be Linked with you. They would pass your findings to many staff members, who will note the power holders you detect, and offer them testing and training for their undiscovered talents. The parades will be attended by tens of millions. This is a wonderful and unique opportunity.”

“I’d be glad to. I’ll be a lot better at it if it’s dim or dark at the time, for greater contrast.” Mark nodded.

“We will add that priority to the planning of the parades.

“We must also point out that you have only been a spell caster and psionic for less than two days, and you have already made many important new discoveries in those fields. We therefore request that you Link with me each day, so that we may Read and review your latest findings. As you now know, it need only take a few seconds of your time and attention, and I am always available to you at your convenience.”

“I would be glad to do so.”

“Thank you, from all of us; the researchers of The Just Alliance. I now bid you all good day.”

“Thank you, Tithian. Please pass our gratitude and greetings to all your colleagues.”

“I already have. And by the way, when you get to Hilia, you’ll find we’ve left you a gift there.” Tithian said with a warm mental smile, and left the Link.

At that point Mark realized that many of the Volunteers were reaching the limits of their psionic strength, even though he was doing almost all of the work in maintaining the Link.

“Hold the Link one more moment, please.” Ria requested. “Thank you. You can release it now.”

Mark did so, and many took a deep breath, some stretched, and some rubbed their faces or eyes, as the tension of holding concentration on the Link was lifted.

“Relax, everyone.” Mark grinned.

With sighs and a few quiet groans, the Volunteers sank to the grass or sat on the steps.

“Everything in my life makes so much more sense now!” Holanam marveled. “I’m magically lucky! Now I’m amazed that I’ve never realized it before!”

His four companions expressed similar sentiments as they reviewed their lives in light of what they’d learned about themselves.

“That was a beautiful experience.” Ria softly stated, then resumed her normal brisk tone. *“And that was masterful work, Mark, in casting and maintaining the Link. You’re coming along much more quickly than I’d anticipated. We’ll speak of this later today. While you were getting acquainted, I was reviewing these recruits for their military potential. They’re a fine crop, better than I expected to find in these peaceful and leisurely times. Just before you closed the Link, I gave them enough training assignments to keep them busy for a few days, both to perfect their strongest skills, and to address their individual weaknesses.”*

“I should like the opportunity to do the same with The Atoning.”

“All right.” Mark grinned. “Volunteers, have some refreshments and enjoy yourselves for a few minutes, while we check in with The Atoning.”

He and Talia turned to return to the ballroom, accompanied by Ria, who floated eerily along in her rigidly vertical posture.

The rear anteroom was now tastefully decorated with padded benches, end tables, coat and boot racks, carpets, a tapestry of the view from the top of the pass looking into First Valley from the south, and two paintings; one of a herd of galloping horses, and one of a tropical beach.

To their amazement, the ballroom was already almost clear of their possessions. The shelving, cabinets, draperies, paintings and tapestries they had planned to place there were already in position. All that was left to move were the items that had been assigned to Sweettower and the huge table at the center of the room. The table was covered in paperwork and surrounded by about thirty of The Atoning, and every few seconds another one of them Translocated in, reported, received new instructions, and Translocated out again.

“Ah, you’re back.” Sheramiv smiled. “As you can see, the decor of The Living Palace is finished. Sweettower’s renovations will be finished within twenty minutes, as some one hundred fifty-three of us are helping complete them, and furnishing it after that will only require a few minutes. The ice keep has been completely decorated, and the palace in Thon will be finished in twelve minutes.

“Military renovations at all of your properties will be completed within the week, and we’ll fortify them defensively in the first two days, before we begin installing counter-attacking emplacements and spells.

“The management of White Sands was most co-operative about subletting, as was the proprietor of the Dragon’s View Inn. They were also appreciative of our plans for hidden fortifications. It’s impractical to try to improve the defenses of your beach house without improving the defenses of the entirety of White Sands resort, so that’s what we’re going to do. The same applies to your suite at the Dragon’s View Inn, so the entire hotel will be fortified.

“We suggest some modifications to your plans for Hilia.

“Bizyutin, if you would?”

Bizyutin cast a scale illusion of the island that covered the entire table. The volcano became semi-transparent so that the excavations within it could be seen.

“As you can see, we’ve expanded the resort considerably. Our calculations reveal that the island’s resources and ecology, if well managed, can easily sustain sixty-five thousand guests and staff, so we’ve planned accordingly. You’ll notice that the resort’s and the military academy’s facilities are now linked by tunnels, finished passageways actually, as well as by paths, and that the existing cottage and the dock we’ve added are also joined to the main complexes by tunnels and paths. The dock is floating and multiply anchored, rather than being mounted on piles. It’s design and it’s extreme length are meant to spare the reef while allowing the docking of vessels requiring deep anchorage, such as The Queen of Waves. It was added because sailing is a popular pastime at such resorts, and because it’s smart to make Hilia one of the ports of call for your cruise ship.

“We suggest that the inside of the volcano’s crater at Hilia is not an appropriate place for training with artillery weapons or battle spells, as the lake there is the only source of fresh water on the island, and the ecology there is delicate. On the other hand, the north face of the volcano you own in Xervia is already a lifeless wasteland, so it would be perfect for that use, and the mountain’s bulk between there and your nearest neighbor’s lair sixty-six kilometers to the south will prevent her from being disturbed by us. Should you agree with this, and if you can get permission from The Grand Council of Xervia for your academy’s staff and students to go there for that purpose, we will hire a construction company of the Kwetkerthok to build facilities and emplacements there.

“The Queen of Waves has never been to sea. She was originally built for a human consortium that went bankrupt and reneged on the purchase, and was eventually sold to The Sea People for gifting to you. She remains at the docks

of her constructors; Vertiwinn and Descendants, at Gimoosh on the east coast of Thon. They were delighted to accept the contract for her renovation to a passenger vessel, and promised to be finished within three weeks.

“We considered having some of us serve as staff and management at your various establishments, but frankly, it would be a less than wise use of our talents, with the exception of the positions of captain and officers of The Queen of Waves. The rest of them are rather small as hotels go, and we can be of more use to you if we hire others who are less over-qualified for those positions.

“Is there anything else?”

Mark nodded. “Go ahead with all of that, and I’ll have word about our use of the Xervian volcano later tonight. I’d like whoever is most senior among The Atoning at providing security to confer with Kalem of the Volunteers about a personal guard for Talia and myself on those occasions when it’s called for, including our tour of our properties today. And as soon as the decorating is done, I’d like all of The Atoning to gather here so that they can be evaluated by Ria for their military skills, and assigned some training.”

Ria tipped toward Sheramiv for a moment in her stiff version of a bow, so Mark introduced her and explained a bit about her, including that she was to be considered the senior training officer of all those under Mark’s command.

“Might I suggest that we be evaluated by Ria just before supper, as we have already planned to gather here then?” Sheramiv asked. “We can accomplish more without the additional interruption, and if we schedule it then, you can begin your tour of your properties as soon as your security arrangements are finalized, which should only take a few minutes.”

“Agreed.” Mark smiled.

“*Till later, then.*” Ria said, and disappeared.

“We’ll start our tour here, as we’ve still seen less than half of this place, then we’ll walk down to the lake to see Sunrunner. By that time our guards should be organized, and be ready to set up at the next place. We’ll skip the Xervian volcano for today. Other than that, we’ll proceed down the list to the next best defended property, and end at Hilia, which is the least defended.”

“Thus giving your guards the most time to prepare for your arrival at the places that require the most attention.” Sheramiv nodded. “Wise of you. They’ll appreciate the co-operation.”

“Thanks. If any of The Atoning beyond those providing security want to accompany us on our tour, they’re welcome to join us. I’m sure all the Volunteers will want to come.”

“I’m sure the eighty-four of them will prove an unwieldy enough entourage, by their numbers alone.” Sheramiv smiled. “The rest of us would be wiser to continue with our work.”

“As you wish.” Mark nodded, and turned to Talia. “Take us out to the porch if you would, my love. For the exercise.”

Talia took his hand as she returned his fond smile, and cast the spell.

“I notice you had the displacement perfect that time.” he congratulated as he noted the silence of their arrival.

“Thank you.” she grinned, and gave him a quick kiss.

He opened a momentary Link with the Volunteers, just long enough to fill them in on his conversation with Sheramiv.

To his surprise, every one of them jumped like they’d been startled by a basilisk, and they all cried out, some in surprise, and some seemingly in pain. Many clutched their heads, some stumbled, and a few went to one knee.

“Ahh! Uh, your pardon my liege... I mean Mark.” Zayobod stammered as he winced and touched his right fingertips to that side of his forehead.

“You gave us quite a start!” Balen giggled. “You have to give us a bit of warning before you stuff five minutes of experience into our heads in a tenth of a second! And you have to take it easy on most people, not make it so bright or so loud or so fast! I mean, I know you didn’t know, but if you’d had a chance to receive formal training in psionics you’d have a better idea of your own strength compared to other people’s, and you’d have learned to edit all the unimportant stuff out, so there’d be a lot less to send.

“I mean, I was fine with it, but most of the rest of us will have a headache for a minute or two.”

“I’m, I’m very sorry about that!” Mark stammered.

“On the other hand, it was an amazing performance.” Zayobod smiled.

“For sure!” Balen nodded. “I could do that to one person, maybe two if I knew ‘em really well. And I’ve been working on it since I was three! You did it to eighty-four of us! How’d you get so good so fast?”

“I don’t know.” Mark shrugged. “It just seems to come naturally.

“Avoiding my mistake with the Link is part of an assignment the Eldest gave me. Learning the scale of things, how everyone compares to everyone else in their various kinds of ability and power, and how I rate compared to them.

Obviously I have to get to work on it soon, for safety's sake, as well as for the assignment. And I obviously need a whole lot more background education on magic. Until I get it, I'm practicing wizardry without a license, and while unqualified to do so. Pretty hypocritical of me, now that I think about it."

"We can work on it tomorrow morning, right after breakfast." Talia suggested.

"Sounds good to me." Mark nodded.

Just then Dilimon, Yalla, and two other elves in the brown uniform of the Sentry Corps Translocated into the blue circle at the rear of the yard, and gave a wave and a smile as they started over to the porch.

"Why good day!" Mark called.

"And good day to you!" Dilimon returned.

"You know The Volunteers?" Mark asked as the arrivals started up the stairs.

"We've known them all their lives, no need for introductions." Dilimon smiled as he nodded to those around.

"Your militia here informed The High People's Defense Command of your tour today, and they've passed the news on to the appropriate authorities in the nations you'll be visiting. They'll be co-operating with your teams in sweeping each location for risks and threats before you arrive, and in establishing a strong perimeter around each property. No one will be allowed within half a kilometer of you unless they wear the Marking of The Just Alliance.

"Our squad has been assigned as Talia's close security team."

"Do you really think that's necessary?" Kalem asked, mildly irritated. "We already have over three hundred of Mark's sworn assigned to their security, and most of them have centuries of experience. Relgemit of The Lava Shapers has been put in charge of The Atoning's militia and guards, and he has almost three thousand years of military experience, besides being a mighty Battle Wizard."

"Granted, but all of you are sworn to Mark with a powerfully binding oath. Not to Talia." Dilimon patiently explained. "In most cases, that wouldn't matter. But if two crossbow bolts are fired at the same moment, one at Mark and one at Talia, in the fraction of a second you had to act, every one of you would block the bolt aimed at Mark first. Similarly, if it came to close melee, and there were a squad of you guarding each of them, and the squad guarding Mark were hard pressed, those of you guarding Talia might well abandon her to her fate in order to ensure Mark's survival, even if he'd ordered you to do otherwise. We mean no criticism of your abilities, but you must admit the truth of what I've said. Thus we stand for Talia, as her last line of defense, by order of her father; Prince Yazadril."

Kalem swallowed hard, and nodded.

"Right." Zayobod nodded. "There were some unpleasant truths there, but they're undeniable. We welcome your assistance."

"As do I." Mark said.

"I... I meant no disrespect, Dilimon." Kalem told him.

"None taken, I assure you!"

"Well then, let's get started!" Mark laughed. "We've many wonders to see before supertime!"

As they turned to re-enter the building, two of Dilimon's Sentries and Kalem's nine hurried to take the lead.

The Atoning in the ballroom raised their heads from their work just long enough to exchange a smile and nod with Mark.

The front entrance hall now had paintings and tapestries on the previously blank flat places on the walls, as well as coat and boot racks by the door.

They went downstairs to familiarize themselves with the locations of their stored items. The basement was a massive open space that was interrupted only by rows of flared wooden columns from one to two meters thick beneath the structural walls of the floor above.

"Talia my love, would you do me a favor?" Mark asked as they looked around. "Could you put us in contact with your father?"

"Certainly. I'll see if he's available." Talia responded, and initiated her familiar Link with Yazadril.

"Hello Talia. And Mark! What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to find a way to turn the tine band on and off, so I won't have to try to hide my handling of an invisible object when I put it on or take it off, or use the velvet cover." Mark explained.

"Good thinking. I should have thought of that. The spell that makes it vibrate is a very simple one, really. I can show Talia how to de-activate it, and how to cast it again. And to avoid using the velvet cover, I'll give her a spell that damps it's ringing completely when the vibration spell is inactive."

"Why not give them to me directly? I've pretty much got all those magecraft spells Ria gave me sorted out in my head already, so those two should be no problem."

"All right, just a moment. Here."

"Thanks. You're right, these are easy." Mark practiced casting them with Talia's power for a moment, and soon had the de-activation and casting of both spells smooth and fast enough that he could turn the tine band on or off in a fraction of a second, then he left it off.

"Thanks. What a relief! I've had that thing vibrating my skull since before we came over this morning!"

"You're quite welcome. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

"No thank you Yazadril."

"I'll bid you good day for now, then."

"Give my regards to Nemia and Hilsith."

"Thank you Father. We'll see you for breakfast." Talia added, and ended the Speaking.

They toured the rest of the palace, taking no more than a few minutes to see each room, and the huge deck on the roof. Their security teams maintained a continuous group Speaking to trade orders and reports among themselves, moving smoothly around the pair as they went from room to room, with at least two advance members Translocating into each room at least a minute ahead of them.

They spent a few minutes touring the front gardens, then left by the front gate for the short walk to the lake. A loose crowd of those whom Mark was beginning to consider their devoted fans were enjoying the day in the parkland outside the wall, and they smiled and waved as they stopped what they were doing to come along, and Talia called greetings with the closer ones she knew.

Mark carefully noted how brightly everyone around him glowed, so that he could pass a Reading of it to the senior wizards of The High People later, and they could compare the strength of each person's glow with their strength in the power to check for subconscious magic abilities.

"Talia, do you know exactly how much more strength you have with the power than any of these other fine elves?" he asked.

"Not offhand, really." she shrugged. "Balén, you use exactly the same Movement spells I use. What's your weight limit?"

"Five hundred and sixty-seven kilos, the last time I was tested on it three weeks ago. I could probably lift five hundred and ninety by now. I'm growing fast that way." the petite redhead answered.

"And you, Kalem?" Talia asked.

"fifty-one kilos and two hundred fifty-six grams exactly." she giggled. "If I put too much in my pack, I can't get off the ground. My best Movement is Small Projectile. I can Move one of these darts up to five times as fast as a crossbow bolt, or use the same energy to Move up to twelve at short bow speed. My accuracy is as good as my visual acuity, and I have pretty sharp vision." She reached into a slot on the side of her pack and withdrew two steel darts the length of Mark's little finger, one with a thirty degree point for penetrating armor, the other with a barbed crossed-blade point for use against leather armor or less.

"Nasty." Mark chuckled. He suspected her pack was full of the things.

"Zayobod?" Talia prompted.

"Around a hundred and sixty kilos, I'd think. I haven't tested it since last season, but my development's almost finished, so I won't have improved much. I'd say an average adult of The High People could Move about one hundred fifteen. And to complete the spectrum of comparison, Neebla over there is a masterful Illusionist, but has only enough power to Move about four kilos."

"I see." Mark nodded. "That does give me a good range of comparison. Or at least it will, once you've told me how much your weight limit is, my love?"

"Well, I don't want to boast..." Talia giggled.

"Then allow me to boast for you." Balén interrupted with a grin. "The last time they were tested the whole school gathered to watch. Talia lifted forty three thousand, eight hundred and forty kilos. Dalia beat her by only four kilos." She choked a bit on the last word, and a tear escaped her eye a moment later, but she kept her smile. "Source, I miss her so much."

Talia stopped walking in the air, but continued floating along beside Mark as she held her arms out to Balén. "Come here." she murmured, and Balén floated up to join her in a hug.

Mark waited a respectful minute before he continued the conversation. "So you lifted over forty-eight tons. That's impressive. And Alilia said she lifted sixty tons..."

"Not exactly." Talia interrupted. "My mother can lift about sixty tons. Alilia said that she lifts a sixty-ton weight repeatedly for ten minutes, just to burn off enough excess energy to make it through the day. I'd guess she could Move over ten thousand tons without even straining. She lifts the sixty-ton weight repeatedly, because if you slip a bit on the release with anything heavier, it shakes the ground or the tree you're in for quite a distance, plus it's

pretty dangerous. If she went all out like she did when she cursed me and almost drained herself to death, I'd guess she could Move *at least* twenty-five thousand tons. She really is a rarity."

Mark whistled. "I'll say." he agreed.

"And I think I could do a lot better now that I'm getting used to holding my power all the time." Talia added thoughtfully. "I'm holding almost two-thirds of it now."

"No doubt. I wonder what the limits of it truly are?"

"The greatest Movement ever done by an elf was done by Visinniria, less than a decade before she attained divinity." Holanam revealed. "She lifted all of the water out of Beseram Lake, they estimate over two hundred and ninety million tons worth, and carried it at high speed over thirty-two kilometers before she started dropping any of it, and had gone over a hundred and thirty kilometers when she ran out. She used it to help extinguish the forest of the People of Life, much of which had been set alight by a massed incendiary attack by most of the dwarven wizards. Almost all of the great trees were saved, though much of the undergrowth was killed. The dwarves were left so weakened by their effort that they were unable to withstand the elven counter-attack, which drove the last of them from the continent eight weeks later. We never lost another battle in that war, and only lost a few dozen lives in the winning of them. Without her, we'd have surely been exterminated. At that time there were less than sixty-eight thousand elves left alive on all of Kellaran."

"Orders of magnitude." Mark murmured to himself, then asked; "How did Visinniria become a goddess, do you know?"

"It was declared by the other gods." Holanam said. "As strong as she was when she did that great Movement, she was still growing in power and skill and understanding at an accelerating rate. She was probably thousands of times stronger when she became a goddess nine years later, and she was laying waste to her enemies on a huge scale.

"Then one day she found a way to cause a drastic change in herself, and the gods of the other races told her she was divine, the second elf to join them in divinity, and that if she continued to make war on the other races with all her power, they would oppose her. There has never been war among the gods, and they said such a thing might destroy reality. She knew that if she withdrew her help, the elves would surely be slaughtered. So she said she'd take her place among the gods, on the condition that the other gods force their races to leave the elves in peace for ten thousand years. They knew that if our race died, she wouldn't hesitate to exterminate their slayers, even if she had to destroy reality to do so. So that was the end of elven involvement in that war. That's also why we're the only race to still have nations on every continent. The other races continued battling until they were completely Segregated on their own continents, having forced everyone else off.

"After that, she only directly acted for the elves twice, and she considered the fate of our race to be at stake both times. Mind you, she and the other gods still acted through their worshipers and priesthoods, and occasionally lent them some power. Until all the gods withdrew from the world."

"Thanks Holanam, I've been meaning to read up on that." Mark smiled, and the young elf blushed at the attention and nodded.

They reached the market by the lakeshore, and the enterprises ranged from an eight-year-old boy selling fruit juice from a tiny table on the grass, to booths, stalls, and carts, with permanent retailers and restaurants in the bases of the great trees that lined the beach.

Sunrunner was moored at the end of a floating dock, one of seven docks that constituted the local marina. Most of the other boats were out sailing on the round lake, their colorful sails waving as they tacked in the warm breeze.

Most of their entourage remained on the dock as Mark and Talia toured the graceful yacht, appreciating the exotic appointments, including numerous sculptures and reliefs of birds and marine life in the unique style of The Stone Islands, all shaped by guiding the growth of the wood.

When they emerged on deck after viewing the cabins, Talia gave Mark a hug and a kiss, then smiled into his eyes and opened their Link.

"Before we announce our departure, my love, let me explain how long-distance Translocation works. It's the most difficult and complex of the commonly used spell sets.

"Before you can go somewhere you've never been, you need a reference for getting there, a memory passed along from someone who has physically traveled between the two points and memorized the physical relationship between them. That includes the exact distance and direction, accounting for curvature of the surface of the world and differences in altitude. Then you must picture exactly where you wish to emerge, and keep in mind any rotation your body will need in order to arrive with the correct orientation. Remember, if you Translocate to the exact opposite side of the world without any change in your orientation, you'll arrive standing on your head. Then you must project your consciousness there, in order to ensure that the arrival space is unoccupied. Then you perform the actual

Translocation. Always try to swallow or yawn as it's cast, so your ears will pop easier if there's a difference in air pressure. Finally, you must achieve displacement. As you know, that means a volume of air with the same size and shape as whatever you're Translocating must be simultaneously Translocated back to fill the space you've left. Casting the displacement also insures that if things go badly wrong and you appear in solid rock, at least you will be in a hollow in the rock shaped like you, rather than being melded with the stone. This allows a few seconds to Translocate back again before you suffocate.

"Other than the Translocations themselves, the hardest part is projecting your consciousness, so it's a lot easier if you can Link with someone who's already where you're going. They check that your arrival space is clear, and anchor the transfer from their end, so to speak. The first few times you do it, you should always be guided by such a person, as Sheramiv guided the arrivals at home when she was performing traffic control.

"I've traveled with my father enough to be familiar with diplomatic travel and security arrangements. Since this Relgemit is in charge, he will likely guide our group's Translocations, and likely he is already in place at Sweettower and Linked with Kalem in preparation for doing so. We'll Link with them while it's done, so you can learn how to do it, and so I can improve my skill."

"Thanks Love." Mark grinned as he carried her back to the dock.

"We're all ready to go if you are." Kalem informed them. "We've decided that the order of travel, based on our evaluation of the properties' relative security, should be Sweettower, the ice keep, White Sands, Dragon's View, the palace in Thon, the Queen of Waves, Winghoof Estate, and Hilia. Relgemit's team and the local security are already set up at Sweettower. He asked me to warn you that at the first sign of an attack, we're going to Translocate you both back to The Living Palace."

"Thanks." Mark nodded. "We're ready, and we'd like to be Linked with whoever's doing our Translocations, for educational purposes."

Kalem nodded, and brought them into the security Link.

Relgemit gave them a friendly greeting, and showed them a huge wooden railed platform set with outdoor furniture around the edges, large enough that three or four hundred could gather there.

"Actually, now that I think about it, I wonder if I might power and perform the Translocations while you guide me, Relgemit?" Talia asked. "I could use the exercise."

"Certainly, if you're sure you're up to it.. Here's the reference." Relgemit said as he sent her the information.

"Thank you." Talia said, then spoke out loud. "All right, would those who are coming with us please gather around as closely as you can?"

As they did so, Mark waved and called; "See you later!" to their admirers on the shore, and activated the tine band.

"Here we go!" Talia called, and Mark felt her Linking firmly with him and with all of those gathered around, then suddenly they all stood together on the wooden platform at Sweettower. She slumped in his arms and gave a deep sigh, but it was a satisfied one.

He cuddled her comfortingly as he turned off the tine band, and noticed a few dozen of The People of Life gathered by the double doorway into the trunk of the tree, as well as over fifty alert members of The Atoning spread around the perimeter of the platform, all looking outward as they scanned the surroundings.

"Great missing gods above and below, child!" Yalla exclaimed. "We never thought you would bring all ninety of us at once! You could have killed us all!"

"I beg to differ, Yalla." Talia happily smiled as she recovered from the exertion. "I wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been sure of its safety."

"It was rather perfectly done!" one of The Atoning exclaimed as he stepped over. He had dark brown hair with silvered temples and wore a brown robe over chain mail armor. "Even the displacement was almost perfect! How did you accomplish that with so many?"

"I memorized the Volunteers' displacements when we were Linked with them through Mark, earlier. Those that I didn't already know, that is." Talia explained, and had Mark release her so she could stand on the wood as she felt her energy coming back. "And I've Translocated with Yalla's Sentry squad before. And some things I've learned recently helped a lot."

"Good job. I'm Relgemit. The advance team and I will go ahead to your keep in Axis and begin sweeping it. Link with me for the reference when you're ready to go."

"We will, and thank you." Mark nodded.

Relgemit nodded in return, then he and several others Translocated out.

Alilia stepped forward with a smile, clad in her Battle Wizard's uniform. "Welcome to Heartwood, the capitol city of The People of Life."

"Thank you, Alilia!" Mark grinned. "You're looking well! I didn't expect to see you here! Aren't you and Gorsh supposed to be on vacation?"

Alilia's smile tightened. "Gorsh and I have ended our marriage. I'll tell you about it later. Right now I'd like to introduce you to the renovation team who rebuilt your home here."

She turned to the group gathered by the doors, and waved them forward.

"Good day, your majesties," their spokeswoman said as she bowed. "The renovation was our contribution to your gifting of this great tree, and we'll be glad to alter it further if you so desire, after viewing our work."

"Of course, we were assisted in finishing it today by the one hundred and fifty-three of The People of Life who are sworn to you, Prince Mark. They've already left, to see to other work on your behalf."

"We'll leave you to your tour now. If there's anything at all that you'd like changed here, either today or at any time in the future, your manager here can contact us in a moment."

"Thank you," Mark said, and the renovators took their leave, some by suspended walkways that led off the platform in four places, some by Flight, and a few by Translocation.

"Wow, it's even more beautiful here in the daylight than the Illusion of this land at our wedding!" Mark exclaimed as he really took a good look around for the first time.

There were hundreds of walkways, platforms, homes, and businesses scattered among the great trees all around, and the warm summer breeze made all the leaves rustle.

He noticed that thousands of elves had gathered on the branches and walkways of the neighboring trees to see their arrival. He gave them a smile and a wave, and Talia joined him in that. They both turned slowly around so they could give smiles and waves to everyone, which were cheerily returned. He noted the brightness of everyone's glow as well as he could, given their distance.

He walked over to the railing to enjoy the view, and his party came with him. He realized that the platform had been shaped by making one of Sweettower's thickest branches grow wide and flat on top where it joined the trunk. The ground was three hundred and sixty meters below and it couldn't be seen at all, since the undergrowth around there was impenetrably dense and over sixty meters deep.

"Your people don't use the ground at all?" he asked Alilia.

"Only for hunting and gathering," she nodded. "And some logging, though we never cut the great trees. The bounty of the undergrowth is the source of much of my people's material and commercial worth. We also harvest the parasitic plants and fungi that grow on the bark of the great trees. Sweettower has none of those, since it's of important historical value to my people, so it's spelled to prevent parasitic growth. Your plan to rent out its rooms has my people's approval, as it would be a shame to leave it unoccupied and unappreciated most of the time. We know you have many other homes, and you can't live in all of them."

"By the way, most of the walkways that connect to Sweettower's branches are considered public highways. The exceptions are the paths that connect to this platform, since it's considered your front yard, and the branch below there, since part of the home is built into it. None of the public ways are within thirty meters of any of your windows or doors, so your privacy and that of your guests is assured."

"Oh. How do I tell which paths are public?" Mark asked.

"They are all named, and their names are grown into the wood of their handrails at every intersection, to aid in navigation. For instance, that widest one up there is Sweettower Corridor, one of the main north-south highways that run the length of Heartwood. That one down there running east to west is Council Walk. If you follow it east for a third of a kilometer you come to the center of the city, and the Tree of Government. You can just see a great walnut tree to the left of the Walk over there, the top half of which is my home, so we are close neighbors. Of course I welcome your visit at any time."

"I notice that almost all the other great trees have a lot more development than Sweettower, which seems capable of housing hundreds of people. Why is that?" Mark asked as they turned and approached the double doors.

"Because of it's historical importance, development here has been limited. We've raised the ceilings for you, enlarged the rooms, added a few, and connected the four homes with hallways and stairways, but no new homes have been built in Sweettower for over one hundred and seventy-five thousand years. The style of the home was left unchanged, but by adding modern conveniences they've not only enlarged it, they've truly improved it. The lighting, plumbing, heating, ventilation, and kitchen are all of the latest development." Alilia explained as they went inside.

Mark paused in the doorway and turned to the Volunteers. "The hallways and most of the rooms here are too small for you all to accompany us, but feel free to look around." he told them.

“We’ve already worked out a rotation, so everyone can take turns accompanying you.” Balen explained.

“Excellent.” Mark laughed.

“You’ve seen the rooms here since the renovation, Alilia?” Talia asked.

“Yes.” Alilia grinned as they went inside. “Curiosity got the better of me, so I used my authority to appoint myself one of the civic building inspectors who checked the work for any violations of our construction regulations. Of course we found it to be in complete conformity.

“Mind you, I was already familiar with the general layout from being here before it was given to you. Would you like me to show you around?”

“Certainly!” Mark grinned.

“By the way,” Talia asked her with a mischievous grin as they passed through a small cloakroom, “Did you know that Mark considers myself, my mother, and you, to be the three most beautiful and desirable elven females he’s seen?”

They stopped just inside a large living room as Mark gaped at her, then at Alilia, then closed his eyes and shook his head as he blushed bright red.

“Really? How flattering!” Alilia laughed, eyeing him speculatively. “Allow me to reiterate how welcome you both are to visit me!”

Mark was saved from having to comment on that subject by the approach of Twelcher, the manager of the newly established Sweettower Inn, who was identified as such by a printed brass pin on the breast of his tweed suit jacket. Mark turned to greet the fellow, who had emerged from behind a desk in one corner of the room.

“Good day, Prince Mark.”

“And good day to you, Twelcher.”

“Sheramiv hired me only minutes ago, and asked me to inform you that she has widely announced that rooms in each of your properties will soon be available to the public for daily or weekly stays. Apparently, the response has been quite overwhelming, and she plans to auction three-quarters of the tenancies, leaving the rest to be granted at your discretion. Prospective guests will be requested to submit their first bids tomorrow morning, three hours before noon Nine Valleys time, for occupancy at noon local time at each location.”

“Ah. Thank you. And we’re glad to have you with us.”

Twelcher gave a smile and a quick little bow, and retreated behind his desk.

Mark turned back to the two females, who had cast Speaking and stood giggling together as they psionically communicated. Realizing that Mark’s attention was upon them, they suddenly dropped the spell like children caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

“I was just catching Alilia up on developments since last we spoke.” Talia explained with an embarrassed smile.

“I’m sure.” Mark grinned. “It’s okay. My father warned me that it was the nature of women to chat with one another about absolutely everything, no matter how private some matters may be. It was his advice to simply ignore it.”

“Wise of him.” Alilia laughed, completely unabashed. “Come, the master suite lies this way.”

“This is beautiful.” Mark commented as they took a hallway to a pair of double doors amidst a loose cordon of his elves. “It’s not that different in style from Yazadril’s place, or the Hall of Anticipation at Laylas chapel, but the grain and depth of this maple wood is astounding, and the slight maple syrup smell is nice too.”

They poked around the master suite for a few minutes, then toured the rest of the rooms as Alilia offered interesting commentary on various features of each room, and related the historical events that had occurred there. They were gazing in wonder at the inside of a ballroom over twenty meters long and six meters high on the lowest floor when Alilia suddenly changed the subject.

“It’s no secret what happened between Gorsh and I. I was called before our Council and our people yesterday morning. My recent behavior was discussed, every detail of it revealed, and my leadership called into question. They acted with rare swiftness, so that I could be either confirmed or replaced before the impending meeting of the alliance yesterday evening.

“Gorsh spoke quite passionately, arguing that I should be released from the duty.

“I was the last to speak.”

She’d started calmly, but had grown pensive as she relived the memory. “I knew it could go either way, that the outcome depended on what I had to say for myself. For the first time, I could resign as Princess, and my people would let it stand. And then I had to face the truth. I am still the most qualified to lead my people. I am still their choice to do so, by a wide majority. The approaching Nexus adds urgency to our need to have the best leadership in place, and the existence of the conspiracy makes this is the worst possible time to disrupt the established workings of our

government with a succession. If I stepped down and my successor bungled things badly, my remorse would be overwhelming.

“But as important as that was my realization that I was no longer a reluctant ruler, and haven’t been for two millennia. I’ve truly grown to love the work, the responsibility, the respect, and even the power that comes with being Princess of The People of Life. I’d maintained the facade of reluctance to placate Gorsh, and to avoid being bothered by trivialities that others could just as easily deal with without me.

“I’m told that my speech was the best I’ve ever given. I begged their forgiveness. I went over all the reasons why I should remain our leader. I... I humbly pleaded with them to reconfirm me. They did, with an enthusiastic consensus that was almost completely unanimous.

“But it was the last straw for Gorsh and I. If I’d known my decision before he spoke, I’d have told him, and he probably wouldn’t have spoken out on the opposite side of the argument that I took. But I hadn’t had my moment of deciding epiphany until just before I spoke, and he felt humiliated by what I’d done. And perhaps all of that wouldn’t have mattered, because we both recognized when we met later that we would each be happier without our commitment to the other. Having recognized that, we had no choice. We were bound by our vows to do that which brings the other the most happiness. We ended our marriage. And without the magic re-enforcement of our vows, it was obvious that our natural love had faded almost completely.

“After that, we made love all night, and we both wept the whole time. I haven’t seen him since. We’ll probably avoid each other for a century or two, till the pain of loss fades. I can’t even see us getting together as friends after that, because we really don’t have anything in common except memories.”

She heaved a heavy sigh, and smiled. “Already I feel better than I have in centuries. It’s like a huge weight has been lifted from me. Until I think of Bezedil. At least he didn’t have to see the failure of his parents’ marriage.

“At any rate, I know that you have no comfortable response to all of that, so let’s change the subject.”

“All right.” Mark nodded. “I was thinking that it’s really quite a waste for you to simply lift a weight in order to burn off excess energy, when that power could be economically valuable. I’m thinking you could turn a mill wheel instead, or if the timing for that was inconvenient, you could lift water into a reservoir, so that the water could be used to turn a mill wheel when it was convenient for the millers. And if you lift water within a pipe, you could probably lift more than sixty tons at a time, since it would cause less danger or disturbance if you slipped or dropped it. So you’d save time too.”

“That’s... That’s very good thinking, Mark! Thank you! I’ll have our engineers look into the idea. I’m surprised none of us have thought of it before. Sometimes I think we’ve come to depend on magic so much, it’s impaired our creative ingenuity!

“Ahh, here’s the west veranda, equipped with a hot pool.” Alilia announced, swinging open a pair of glassed doors. “A rare thing to have in a tree home.”

Their route eventually brought them back to the platform they’d arrived at, and the Volunteers gathered around.

“When the time is right, Alilia, we’ll invite you to spend a night with us.” Mark told her with a twinkle in his eye. “We’ll give you an erotic experience like nothing you’ve ever had before, that’s for sure.”

As he’d anticipated, he’d caught Alilia by surprise with that one.

“Ah. I see.” she responded with a raised eyebrow and a bemused smile. “And when do you think that might be?”

“I’m getting more Elvish every day, it seems. It won’t be long, by elven standards.” he grinned, and activated the time band.

“I look forward to it.” she smiled.

“We’ll see you soon, Alilia.” Talia smiled.

“Take care till then.”

Mark and Talia made another slow turn and smiled and waved farewell to the onlookers, then she Linked with Relgemit for the reference and the go-ahead.

“Here we go!” she called, and cast the Translocation.

They emerged in the dining hall of the ice keep, the largest room in the home.

“I’m getting used to doing that, I think.” Talia mused as she relaxed into his hug. “That one didn’t take as much out of me, even though it was almost twice the distance.”

Princess Pimall awaited them, and her face lit with surprise. “You brought the whole crowd of you by yourself?! Well done!”

“The next one will be another challenge, four times farther to White Sands.” Talia smiled. “Then about the same to the Dragon’s View Inn in Kletiuik, and back. The two hops across the empires should be easy after that. I’m glad we’re leaving Hilia till last, since it’s almost halfway around the world!”

“Well if that’s the second one you’ve done while carrying this whole pack of youngsters, you should be all right, since the power cost of Translocation only increases in proportion to the distance, but it increases at half the square of the mass.” Pimall chuckled. “Though you might want to take a few less on that last one, since the power field is weak in the empires compared to most of the elven lands, and even you might be depleted by then.”

“Thanks, I’ll remember that.” Talia nodded.

“Why push yourself so hard, when you have so many who would be glad to do it for you?”

“I need the exercise, if I want to keep up with Mark.” Talia giggled. “I think he’ll still surpass me as a caster in a few days though.”

“Oh. By the way, welcome to Axis.” Pimall smiled. “Let me show you around the house.”

“This is beautiful! I didn’t expect the walls and floors to be so nearly transparent!” Mark marveled as he gazed around in wonder.

“Some of my people finish all their surfaces perfectly flat and smooth, so their homes truly are transparent!” Pimall laughed as she led them through the nearest doorway. “Many find that disconcerting though, so most of these blocks are only flat and smooth on one side, resulting in the more blurry and distorted transmission of light you see here. If you look carefully, you can see your security personnel moving around in other rooms, downstairs there, and over there, but it’s just out of focus enough that you could never tell what they’re doing.”

“Nice!” Mark laughed as he looked around the central living room. “It sure looks like it should be cold in here!”

“By the way, what’s that noise?”

“The wind, and the crowd outside.” Pimall told him. “If you’d like to say hello to them, we could step out onto the balcony there. It’s spelled to be as warm as this room.”

“I’d like that.” Mark smiled, and they went out.

The scene outside was a vista of sparkling snow and ice. A fierce wind was blowing, but the thousands of The Warm People who were gathered in the street were unaffected by it, though most of them were barefoot and dressed in light clothing, most of it white. The keep was set back fifteen meters from the street, its property line marked by a meter high wall of ice blocks. The crowd behind it were difficult to make out as individuals since they blended into their surroundings so well, but Mark still dutifully did his best to note how brightly each of them was glowing as he and Talia smiled and waved.

Then Talia cautiously stuck her arm out beyond the balcony railing till her hand was beyond the weatherproofing spell, and suddenly snatched it back and tucked it into her opposite armpit.

“Pretty cold out there?” Mark chuckled.

“Yes, and the snow that’s blowing in the wind is all little ice crystals that sting a bit.” Talia told him.

His curiosity made him do the same as she’d done. “This warmth spell is really amazing!” he marveled. “But what do we do if we want to visit other places in this fine city while we’re here?”

“You either bundle up in at least three layers of fur clothing, or Translocate, or hire an enclosed sleigh pulled by musk oxen, which is the recommended way to see the sights for you heat lovers.” Pimall explained as they went back inside. “Of course, the animals are de-scented, and the sleighs can drive right into your downstairs vestibule, so you don’t really have to go outside very much.”

“Or we could just learn a personal version of the spell that keeps the balcony warm.” Mark mused.

“Ah. The knowledge of such spells is forbidden to outsiders, actually. Certainly, one can buy a spell in Finitra or Iktra that provides all-day comfort in the worst of their winter weather. But this is the axis of the world, where such a spell would only save your life for a few minutes before the cold and the wind killed you anyway. And if you simply cast enough heat on yourself to protect from the worst of it, the fickle wind will die for a minute, and you’re suddenly dangerously overheated. None can battle effectively while making the constant thermal adjustments that method requires. The fact that our enemies have always lacked effective protections from our weather has kept us safe from invasion for millennia.

“On the other hand, you two being who you are, I’m sure we can make an exception for you.”

“I’d really prefer it if you could. I’d feel silly bundled up like a bear with his winter fat while you’re all running around in short sleeves!”

They all chuckled at that.

“I’m curious; why did your people decided to settle here in the first place?” he asked as they went back inside to continue the tour.

“The sea is very bountiful, even when covered by twenty meters of ice, and the land beneath the snow pack has vast mineral resources.” Pimall told them, her love of her land plain in her tone and her face. “Our southern lands experience a short summer, during which they are astoundingly productive and a migratory destination for wildlife

from all over Kellaran. Most of all, there's a vast formation of stone beneath the northern portion of our land that makes the magic field quite dense over a huge area. And of course, for those of us who don't notice the cold, it's a very beautiful and comfortable place. We came here during a warmer epoch, when it was no colder here than Finitra is now, and we've adapted to the land over time."

The ice keep's more compact design had only a third of the volume of the home in Sweettower, so they were soon ready to depart, and after fond farewells they were off to their next destination.

They were met at White Sands Resort by Princess Wemetik and a crowd of The Fisher Folk and tourists from all over Debin.

At the Dragon's View Inn they were greeted by Prince Himo, a few hundred Dakrin Cliffs elves, and a huge mixed crowd of tourists from almost every nation and race in The Just Alliance.

They spent only ten minutes at each of those before meeting Mileemi in the front courtyard of their palace in Thon.

Talia didn't find those Translocations to be much more difficult than the first two, as her skill and efficiency improved with each one, but due to their distance and the steady depletion of her power, she didn't find them any easier either.

Mileemi welcomed them to Thon on behalf of Prince Jaromer and Emperor Osbald, and conveyed their apologies for being unable to extend their welcome in person. She explained that they'd been unable to free the time in their schedules on such short notice, and that she herself was also extremely pressed for time. She made her own apologies, and left them in the capable hands of a tall brunette human woman.

"Good day, I'm Marva Kulibe, your new manager here," she said with a warm smile. "Since this property has thus far only had an address, and not a name, Sheramiv's administration team has suggested that for business purposes it be named The Hilian Palace Hotel."

"That sounds fine to me," Mark smiled. "What do you think, Talia?"

"It's lovely, and suits the place well, I think," she nodded as she took in the beauty around her.

"Let's take a walk along the top of the wall," Mark suggested. "I'd like to take a look at the neighborhood before we go inside. I've never really seen the panorama of a great city before, since you can't see very far in Heartwood. I mean, Axis is a great city I guess, but it's so different from regular cities, it almost seems more like a dream than a real place."

"You'd better prepare yourself, then," Marva advised. "There's a huge crowd out there, and they're liable to get pretty excited when they see you. You're both very popular in Thon, and word spread pretty fast once we learned you were coming."

"I've been wondering about that," Mark frowned, turning to Kalem. "Has our itinerary been announced ahead of us?"

"Not officially, but we haven't asked anyone to keep it secret, so it goes out from dozens of sources by word of mouth. Our people tell the guards and sentries of each nation we're going to, and they talk about it with other people, then we help them cordon off a perimeter to exclude those who haven't sworn to justice, bystanders see us with the Marking of Hilia and ask questions. So a lot of people know by the time we get here."

"Oh. Well, let's go see them then."

They started across the yard to the front gatehouse, which contained the stairs to the top of the wall.

As soon as they emerged on the wall the crowd exploded into cheers and applause. The noise was deafening, since the crowd filled the street and the park beyond it for blocks in both directions. The balconies of the mansions on either side were also packed with well-dressed admirers. Dozens were Levitating above the crowd to get a better view, about half of them elves, the rest human. It was a far cry from the quiet and restrained welcome they'd gotten from the crowds of elves they'd seen that day. Even at White Sands and Dragons' View, the mixed crowds of tourists had followed the decorum of the elven lands they were visiting.

This almost seemed insane by comparison. Teenage girls were screaming in wordless joy, some of them were crying, packs of young males were chanting his name, and everyone was yelling at the top of their lungs while he stood there in stunned amazement.

Talia gave him a nudge, and he saw that she was smiling and waving, so he joined her in that as he realized he'd just been standing there looking stunned.

The crowd became even more vocal in response.

"Wow! How many of them do you think there are?" he asked.

"About one hundred and eighty thousand, I'd say," Marva speculated.

“Well. This deserves more than a wave.” Mark grinned as he took Talia’s hand. “Let’s give ‘em a bow, shall we?”

She grinned in response. Hand in hand, they gave the crowd a gracious bow, and the noise became even more intense. Then he remembered to scan them for their glow, and was somewhat surprised to realize that only a very few of the humans on the ground had any glow at all. On the other hand, many of them had spelled items with them, indicated by small and concentrated glows of power.

“Can you make my voice louder?” Mark asked.

Talia nodded, and cast a quick spell while still smiling and waving.

“Thank you.” he said, and his voice rumbled out loud enough to be heard by everyone over the noise they were making. “We’re humbled and very moved by your welcome. I’ll always remember this. But we’re on our honeymoon, and still have much planned to do today, so we’ll bid you a fine afternoon. Be well, until we see you again.”

They smiled and waved a last time before turning to retrace their steps, the roar of the crowd still loud in their ears.

“Wow! That was really something!” Mark marveled. “I didn’t even remember to notice what the city looked like!”

“There are several wonderful views of the neighborhood from the upper floors of the palace.” Marva told him.

And there were indeed many beautiful vistas to be seen. They had seen most of the palace and were enjoying the view from atop the tallest tower, when Talia suddenly gave an anguished cry and fell to her knees from a meter in the air.

Mark opened their Link in a fraction of a second, and found that he was completely blocked from her mind.

“What is it?!! Talia, what’s wrong?!!” he frantically asked as he knelt beside her and laid a hand on her slim shoulder.

She was shaking badly as she leaned to whisper harshly into his ear. “It’s the curse! It came over me suddenly, and stronger than it’s ever been! You must hurt me! You must hurt me *right now!!!*” she said this last while clutching frantically at his shirtfront.

“I want everyone out of the palace! Now!” he barked to those around them as he scooped Talia up in his arms and stood. “And I want the best soundproofing spells you’ve got in place around the building! If we need you, we’ll cast a Speaking!”

With that he Translocated them to the bedroom in the master suite of the palace with the magecraft spell that Ria had taught him. Later he would marvel that it had been as effortless and instinctual as walking across a floor.

“What must I do?” he asked as he laid her on the bed.

“Everything!! And hurry, this is *horrible!!!*” she cried, tears running down her face.

He tried, driven by her need, but after only four minutes she was almost mad with frustration.

“You must be more intense! Please! Your heart is not in it, and your halfhearted effort is not enough! Please, I can feel it; if you don’t do it right the curse will never release me!

“I can’t!” he sobbed, driven to anguish by her torment and the guilt of what he was doing.

Talia had been in the Link when Yazadril had passed the spells to turn the tine band on and off. She turned it on, making Mark vulnerable to wizardry.

Mark felt an immense rush as the power of the curse flooded into him, bending and twisting his mind, and he cried out as he clapped his hands to his head. He almost tore the tine band off, but by the time his fingers touched it, the curse had affected him enough that he no longer wanted to.

He took a deep breath as he lowered his hands. He looked her over, and she shrank back at the look on his face.

“We’ll have some fun now, my little elf wife.” he chuckled nastily, and reached for her.

Forty-five minutes later the curse left them as suddenly as it had struck. At that moment he held her in magic bonds, spread-eagled face up on the bed, and was whipping her nakedness with a leather belt.

As soon as the curse left him he frantically released her and threw the belt into a corner, and was almost overcome with self-revulsion at what he’d done.

She continued screaming for another moment, then frantically scrambled away from him into the corner of the canopied bed, curled herself into a tight little ball, and cried hysterically.

“*Hilsith! We need you now!*” he cast frantically as he broke down crying, retched, and struggled for enough self-control to keep from vomiting.

A moment later the Healer appeared, and he walked out of the bedroom, closing the door behind him. He sat down in the nearest chair and cried into his hands.

A minute passed, then Hilsith Spoke to him. *“She’ll be fine. I’ve given her a Tranquility. You could use one as well.”*

Mark firmly ended the Speaking and continued crying with great wracking sobs, until he felt Talia’s familiar and calm presence in his mind. *“I’m all right, my love. I’m sorry I cringed from you at the end, it was just a reaction. Feel my love for you, Mark. See? I still love you just as much. Please, come to me.”*

“Just... Just give me a minute, please.” he told her in response, and she withdrew from his mind.

It took him five minutes to get himself under control, and he spent another five thinking intensely. His concentration was broken when he heard a sound coming from the hallway outside the suite. He strode angrily to the door and yanked it open, yelling as he turned the door handle. *“I asked that you all leave the palace! Oh.”*

Alilia sat on the floor with her back to the opposite wall, crying into her crossed forearms, which rested on her drawn-up knees.

“Alilia. You’re not someone I want to see right now.” he growled.

“I... I have to... to tell you...” she sobbed before he angrily interrupted her.

“I can guess. It wasn’t enough for me to hurt Talia like that. When you cast the curse, you wanted to know I was hurting her. You wanted to see it. Now that I think about it, I could almost feel you Reading me.”

“I couldn’t block it out!!” Alilia wailed.

Mark glared at her for a moment. *“And so in a lesser way, you’ve cursed yourself along with us. That’s good. It reduces my urge to kick your face in.”*

He glared a moment more, then suddenly yelled. *“Well that’s the last time it’s going to happen! I tell you, I’d rather be dead than do that to Talia again! And I will not have my mind twisted like that again! You will come to our place in The Nine Valleys tonight, two hours before midnight! We’re going to find a way to defeat the curse, and we’re not going to stop until we do! I don’t care if I have to call in the best spell casters of every race in The Just Alliance, one way or another we’re going to end it!!!”*

He realized he was becoming completely enraged, and clamped down hard on his emotions

“Until then, get the hell out of my house.” he growled, then turned away and slammed the door without bothering to see if she complied.

When he returned to the bedroom he found that Yazadril and Nemia had arrived as well, and realized to his surprise that he had sensed their arrival somewhere in the back of his mind, but had disregarded it since he was so distracted by his conversation with Alilia at the time.

“We’re going to do something about the curse tonight, at two hours to midnight. I’d appreciate your assistance.” he said as he strode to the bed and sat on the edge.

For a moment he couldn’t bring himself to reach for his wife, but Talia had no such reservations. She sat on his lap and hugged him desperately.

“Oh Mark, my beautiful love. I’m so sorry.” she sighed.

“For what?” he asked in surprise as he gently returned her embrace.

“For activating the tine band.”

“I can’t blame you for that.” he softly re-assured her. *“It’s obvious that the curse is a horrible thing when it comes upon you. That the torment of having it active in you is worse than the pain of what I did. I was just... afraid that I’d made you feel less for me, because of how I was.”*

“But now you know I love you just as much as ever.” she said, and bravely smiled.

“I do, and I love you as always too.” he smiled in return, then became more thoughtful. *“We can’t let that happen anymore, Talia. I know how dangerous it could be if we try to change the curse, but I have a few ideas that are pretty much risk-free. And if they don’t work, we’ll ask every spell caster in The Just Alliance for help. Someone must know of a way to help us.”*

“That’s a point I hadn’t considered, and I’m very sorry that I didn’t.” Yazadril said. *“I must admit, until the recent events and the formation of the alliance, and Osbold’s Oath, I would never have considered asking the other races for help in such a thing. I wish I’d done a few centuries of research on self-directing spells, but I’m sure some among the Xervians must have done it, and perhaps some from the other humanoid races as well.”*

“What are your ideas?”

“I’d rather not say yet.” Mark mused. *“Not only are they still only partly complete, I’m... changing. All the magecraft Ria gave me has pretty much settled in my mind now, and with that knowledge in place, I’m... reconsidering, I guess you’d say, my memories of the magic experiences I’ve had. Right from the first time I saw you*

glowing, the Tranquilities I've had cast upon me, the vows and Compulsions and Translocations, the spells I've cast and the psionics I've experienced, and the curse when it brought me back to life. Twice. I'm remembering details that I'd never noticed before, and I'm learning new things from every magic experience. And I'm learning a lot about the curse, from feeling it when it was active in me just now.

"By tonight I'll have a much better grasp of things."

"All right. We'll be there." Yazadril nodded.

"Are you going back to First Valley now?" Nemia asked.

"No." Talia decided. "I don't see why we shouldn't continue our agenda. I don't want the curse to disrupt our lives any more than necessary.

"Unless you'd rather we went home, Mark?"

"No, I think you're right. We're mostly done our tour anyway, we might as well stay with our plans."

"You still appear shaken." Hilsith advised him. "You should let me give you a Tranquility."

"No thank you." Mark decided. "I'm becoming leery of spells that affect your mind like that. I think it's a bad idea in general, and besides, I've got too many things messing around in my mind already. I'll be all right. Especially if we can beat the curse.

"And thanks for coming so fast. I really appreciate it." Mark smiled. "You can be sure that my contributions to Healing research will reflect that."

"If you can heal Talia of the curse, and teach me how it was done, it will be a greater contribution to Healing research than a mountain of gold." Hilsith told him. "Particularly if the technique can be applied to curses in general."

"I'll try my best." he shrugged.

"All right then, we'll see you tonight." Nemia smiled, and gave them both a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Bye till then." Talia said as she and her father shared a quick hug, then Nemia cast Translocate, and the three visitors departed.

There was silence for a moment.

"Do you really think you can remove the curse?" Talia asked, almost afraid to hope.

"No, and I don't really want to remove it completely anyway." Mark stated thoughtfully. "It's saved our lives enough already, we'd be foolish to give up its protection. We just want to remove the bad parts."

"Source, that would be wondrous!" Talia marveled as she rose from the bed and hunted around for her clothing.

"Sweet mother! I *must* be turning into an elf!" Mark chuckled. "Here I am naked and uncaring! I was so distracted, and Alilia and Hilsith and your parents acted like they didn't even notice, so I didn't even remember to get embarrassed!"

"Well you'd better get dressed now!" Talia laughed. "We're in a human city, and I don't know if they've passed your new laws allowing public nudity yet!"

"Not to mention that it'll still be considered offensive long after it's ceased being illegal." Mark chuckled as he started searching around for his shorts.

Once they were dressed, Mark cast Speaking to Relgemit and Marva Kulibe. *"I'm sorry for the disruption. Please resume normal hotel and security operations."* He received their positive acknowledgment; the psionic equivalent of a polite nod, and ended the Speaking.

It didn't take long to finish viewing the palace, then gather in the courtyard.

They said their farewells to Marva, then Talia Linked to Relgemit, whose team was already in place at the Queen of Waves.

"If you don't mind my saying, Talia, your strength is somewhat depleted." Relgemit pointed out after carefully considering her condition through the Link. *"You should have some assistance in Translocating your group."*

"You're probably right. Just a moment."

"I don't have the strength to take us all at once this time." she announced. "Who wants to..."

"Excuse me love." Mark said, and Linked with her. *"I think we should try something, Talia. If you connect with my power, like this, then think about how you'd cast the Translocate with my kind of power, like this, then just let the spell draw the power it needs instead of consciously allocating power to it, like this, I'm sure you can cast with my power without overpowering the spell like we did with the fireball."*

"That's brilliant Mark!" Talia marveled.

"All right everyone, we're ready to go after all." she announced with a grin. "Next stop, the shipyards of Gimoosh! Here we go!"

It was the first spell Mark had seen cast that didn't cause a flash, or affect his vision in any way.

“Well, that was just neat!” Talia grinned. “I mean, it was so easy, I think I could Translocate this whole ship that way!”

“Now you won’t have to worry about falling behind me in ability.” Mark chuckled.

“I sure won’t!” Talia realized with a grin, then abruptly sobered. *“That’s a scary thought. With what you just showed me, I am suddenly the mightiest elven wizard, by far! Perhaps the mightiest wizard alive!”*

“Which would make me the mightiest mage. You’re right, those are scary thoughts. It’s a big chunk of responsibility.”

“But it’s also pretty thrilling, isn’t it?” she giggled, then turned to a group of elves who stood ready to greet them.

“Good afternoon, I am Vertiwin.” a very ancient looking elf said with a bow and a grin. “Please be welcome; to the Gimoosh Enclave of The Sea People of Debin, to the facilities of Vertiwin and Descendants; Master Shipwrights, and to The Queen of Waves.”

“Good day to you,” Talia smiled, “And thank you for having us.”

“Not at all, not at all!” Vertiwin happily protested. “She’s your ship, owned and outright, so I very much encourage you to inspect her and the work done on her at any time!

“The Queen of Waves is already a magnificent vessel, and we’re very proud of her, but she’ll be immeasurably finer when the improvements are complete! She’ll be a magnificent showpiece for both of our companies! She will not only be far more beautiful and visually impressive, the extra structural work will greatly increase the already ample structural integrity of her hull! And as a passenger vessel, she’ll be carrying only a fraction of her weight capacity, so she’ll sit higher in the water, and require less depth for hull clearance and anchorage, she’ll handle more nimbly, and make more speed!

“You’ll have to pardon the crowding and the bustle all about, but the ship is being renovated, refitted, stocked, and prepared to sail, all simultaneously. Between our workers, your security staff, and temporary hirelings, over eighteen hundred work here today.

“So, if you’d be so kind as to advise me of your planned route of inspection through the ship, I’ll clear your way through the confusion, so to speak.”

“I’d be pleased if you’d plan a route that causes the minimum disruption to the work.” Mark bowed, then looked around with interest at the bustle of activities all around.

“I’d be delighted to!” Vertiwin laughed. “To truly appreciate a ship this size, it must be seen from without. So first thing, if you would join me in Flight, we will go straight over the side here to avoid the rigging, and circle the ship a few times at varying distances and altitudes. Then I’ll show you the bridge, and the captain’s cabin, which is actually a very large and beautiful suite of rooms. Then we’ll see a few of the existing crew cabins, which are the only ones already finished. While not obviously luxurious, they are certainly comfortable homes. Then I’ll take you to the largest hold, where you will see work on the framework of the walls and floors that will divide it into passenger facilities.

“Finally we’ll visit a small suite of offices in that dockside warehouse over there.” Vertiwin pointed to a building near the front of the ship. “They were included in the sale of the ship, and originally intended as it’s shipping offices, so that cargoes could be contracted while the vessel was at sea. They will be mildly renovated at the end of the project for better utility in serving your passengers for bookings and information, but right now they serve as the office of our foreman of construction. He can best present the plans for the completed renovations.”

“That sounds excellent!” Mark agreed. “Let’s get started!”

It was a pleasantly brisk and partly cloudy day in Gimoosh, and the ship was indeed magnificent. They smiled and waved to the cheering crowd on the dock as they flew overhead for three circuits of the ship, accompanied by Vertiwin and their security staff. An hour was spent viewing the ship, the offices, and the planned renovations and refitting.

Their party gathered where they had arrived; on the center of the ship’s top deck. They said their farewells, and then Talia tapped Mark’s power to Translocate them to the center of the yard in front of the ranch house at Winghoof Estate in Sming.

They were met by Foreman Joseth Narr and the staff of the ranch. One hundred thirty knights of Sming, twenty-five of whom were elves, helped Mark’s security teams patrol the grounds by air and on the ground.

“Good afternoon Prince Longstrider, Princess Talia, and welcome to Winghoof Estate. Joseth Narr at your service.” said a lanky, dark haired man in his forties as he stepped forward and offered his hand.

“A pleasure to meet you, Foreman Narr.” Mark smiled as he shook hands, noticing that the foreman was missing half his pinky finger. “And I’d be pleased if you’d call me Mark.”

“Thanks. My friends call me Jo.” the other smiled as he turned to indicate his staff. “Allow me to introduce...”

He was interrupted by a blinding flash and a simultaneous CRACK of sound that was painfully loud.

As Mark shook the stars out of his eyes he felt someone Linking with him and preparing to Translocate him, even as he realized that Talia was no longer beside him. Her psionic presence was completely gone from his mind. His ability to locate her only gave him a very faint sense of her, but paradoxically, it located her right beside him where he'd last seen her out of the side of his vision.

He latched onto the Link, simultaneously issuing a frantic command to cease the Translocation and seizing the knowledge of what had happened.

He was in contact with Merik, one of The Atoning who was flying perimeter security almost a kilometer away and sixty meters in the air. He Read Merik's memory of a bright blue bolt in the sky, quick as lightning but as straight as a tight string, a line of light lancing perfectly vertically from his and Talia's position, just wide enough to contain them both, and extending into the sky above them as far as the top of Merik's field of vision had seen.

He glanced about, and realized that everyone close around him had fallen, stunned or injured or perhaps killed by the concussion of the bolt. He was naked except for his sheathed sword and his wedding ring, standing in a small round area of blackened grass. Talia's sword and most of her magic items lay on the ground beneath where she'd been, or scattered close by.

He frantically cast three simultaneous Links to Hilsith, Yazadril, and Somonik, and in a wordless rush he sent them what he knew and saw, as well as his horrified realizations that Talia had been obliterated by the bolt of wizardry, that he'd been saved because he'd de-activated the tine band, and that even now the curse was trying to draw Talia's matter back together again. He dared not leave, nor could he allow anything resembling Battle Shield to be cast about him to protect him from further attack, for fear it would block her dust and mist from re-forming.

Only eight seconds after the bolt had struck, the advance force of The Just Alliance arrived in a mass Translocation, accompanied by a huge boom from many imperfect displacements. The six thousand warriors and magic users from every race in the alliance were already in formation in the air and on the ground when they appeared, and quickly redeployed about the ranch to Yazadril's crisp psionic orders. Many of them began psionically scanning the region for aggressors, the memories of all who'd witnessed the bolt were Read by a team of unicorns, and a flight of a thousand dragons appeared far overhead and immediately shot straight up from there, quickly gaining altitude till they were lost to sight.

Hilsith, Yazadril, and Nemia were closest, and Nemia seemed stricken with fear for her daughter. Hilsith quickly directed a team of Healers to the fallen.

While this was going on, Mark dismissed it all and turned to where Talia had been. A small cloud of mist and dust was forming there, remaining stationary despite a slight breeze, and it was starting to glow. He sidled around it till he blocked the wind from it, and saw that particles were accelerating into it from all around. He closed his eyes and examined it with his recently awakened sense of magic, and found the familiar feeling of Alilia's curse at the center of the tiny cloud.

He put all his concentration into discerning exactly what the curse was doing to re-assemble his beloved, and how it was done. When he was sure enough of what was happening, he carefully, ever so carefully, began adding his power to the spell of the curse.

“Great blazing Source!” he heard Yazadril exclaim beside him.

After a few seconds Mark slowly opened his eyes, being careful not to slip with the magic he was using. A glowing, transparent statue of Talia had formed, and her internal tissues could be seen if he focused his eyes just so. The matter that was rushing into her from all around was moving too fast to see, but she was obviously gaining solidity very rapidly.

“She was barely a Talia-shaped cloud after twelve minutes, but whatever you've done has accelerated it!” Yazadril exclaimed. “At this rate she'll be completely re-integrated in less than another minute!”

As it happened, it was only thirty-four seconds later when the spell flashed its completion, and Talia gasped into life even as she fell. She'd been reformed in the same standing position she'd been in when the bolt had struck, and Mark had to catch her with a quick but gentle two-handed grab.

“Now go!” Yazadril barked, and Mark and Talia were abruptly Translocated by a mind Mark didn't recognize.

They desperately hugged each other and cried with relief as their minds joined and embraced as fiercely as their bodies, and Talia learned what had happened.

A few minutes later a string of popping sounds made them open their eyes, and they realized that they were on the patio of their cottage on the slope of the volcano at Hilia. It was the darkest time of night here; and perhaps three hours remained before dawn. Firepits and glow spheres lit the patio.

Their advance security team were alertly in place all around them, and the Alliance force that had appeared at Winghoof Estate were rapidly Translocating in all around them. Within five minutes almost everyone who had been at Winghoof, including the ranch staff and the knights of Sming, had been Translocated in.

The last group included Yazadril, Nemia, Hilsith, and fourteen injured on stretchers, as well as a dozen human walking wounded. They appeared on the patio at the same moment that the huge flight of dragons arrived in neat formation three hundred meters in the air, announced by their thunderous sound. Hilsith immediately had her patients gently Moved inside the cottage, while Yazadril and Nemia set Talia's sword and magic items on a nearby bench.

"Are you all right?" Nemia asked in concern as she floated up and hugged them, and Yazadril joined her in that.

"We're okay." Talia somberly nodded. "The bolt hit me so fast, I didn't even have time to feel pain before I was gone. That's the third death the curse has saved me from."

"The curse and Mark, this time." Yazadril said. "I was beginning to doubt that your re-integration would be successful, when he drastically accelerated it."

"Mark, did you analyze the workings of the curse's Restoration, and then cast the same thing in parallel?"

"No. My understanding of it isn't that complete, though it's coming close. All I did was figure out enough of what it was doing to be able to add some of my power to it. I thought the risk of it was less than the risk of doing nothing. I saw in Merik's memory that the bolt was incredibly powerful and concentrated, aimed at just the two of us. I knew that Talia had been scattered a lot more energetically by the bolt than by the fireball, and so I was worried that the curse's Restoration could fail. Ria warned us that such a thing could happen."

Then his tone changed to one of tightly controlled anger. "Does anyone have any idea who did that, or how it was done?!"

"From the evidence and the witnesses' Readings, we know that the bolt was cast from directly above you." Yazadril reported as he stepped back and began observing the redeployment of his force. "Our dragons found only a slight residue of the bolt's casting over six and a half kilometers up, and all we can deduce from the residue is that it was probably cast by human wizards. It must have been cast by many of them, likely hundreds, perhaps lending their power to a single wizard or a small group of them. Or perhaps focusing their power through an item. You were protected by ten powerful wizards, eight elven and two human, who were casting a hemispherical Battle Shield around you and your party, yet the bolt had enough power to punch through their Shield like a spear through paper. All ten casting the Shield were felled by the shock and backlash of having their spell so violently disrupted. They are among the most severely injured, along with Joseth Narr, who was closest to you when the bolt struck. The Readings show he turned away just before the strike, which likely saved him from death or disfigurement."

"The bolt was anti-life, causing living cells to explode, and had no other direct effects, but the energy released was formidable, causing a blast that struck those around you."

"Will everyone live?" Talia asked.

"I do not know, and I don't dare disturb the Healers' work to find out. For the humans especially, it may be a close thing. They are all very lucky that the bolt was so tightly focused on the two of you."

"There can be no doubt that this was a finely targeted assassination, not a military strike."

"How is it that we were brought here to Hilia, and not home or the Hall of Justice?" Talia asked in puzzlement.

"Your advance security team wisely decided to make this your fallback position, once they'd arrived here and learned of the gift you've been given by the nations of The Just Alliance." Yazadril ruefully smiled. "This is now the most heavily Shielded and Warded place on Kellaran. If you cast your awareness outward, you'll find around the entire island a concentrated version of the Wards that The Grand Council of Xervia use around their continent, and around their council hall. Beyond those Wards lies a concentrated version of the Wards around The Nine Valleys. Beyond those, more layers of independent Wards, fifty-six in total, cast by every race and nation in The Just Alliance. Not even the Hall of The Just Alliance is nearly so well protected."

"Which explains why they struck in Sming, rather than here." Mark nodded, his brows furrowed. "You're confident that a bolt like that couldn't strike us here?"

"Quite confident, not even if it were ten thousand times as powerful." Yazadril assured him. "I'm only sorry we never thought to provide you with equally effective protection as you traveled today. The ten who were Shielding you were four of the most capable Battle Wizards among those who've sworn to you, and six of the best in Sming. It was not expected that they would be so suddenly and utterly bested before help could arrive, since we were ready to respond with only a moment's notice."

"This place only has such a hugely excessive number of Wards and shields because once the Xervians decided to gift you with Wards for Hilia, everyone else wanted to do so as well, likely to maintain their prestige as much as out of regard for you."

“For which I am profoundly thankful.” Talia shivered. “It’s somehow far more frightening to have been killed by an assassin’s spell than it was by our own mistake.”

“And far more infuriating.” Mark growled, then his rage and frustration burst out of him. “Damn it, I’d like to kill them all!! Every single last one of the cowardly bastards, slow with a dull knife!!! Damn but I would dearly love to crush their skulls in right now!! That was a cowardly and craven attack, worthy only of scum!! Gods, I so want to smash something right now!!!”

“Indeed.” Yazadril nodded, letting some of his own anger show. “I’ve left a Company of wizards and cavalry at Winghoof to care for the place, and to set a trap for any others who attack there, but it’s likely an unnecessary precaution, since it was yourselves and not your location that were targeted.

“All of you stay here, rest and relax. I’ll be back shortly.”

“I’m coming with you.” Nemia firmly insisted as she moved to his side.

He nodded, and they were gone.

“We’re very sorry.” Dilimon stated sorrowfully, and Kalem mournfully nodded in agreement.

“A fat lot of good we did protecting you today.” she muttered under her breath.

“Don’t worry about it.” Mark assured them in a growl, still very angry, but struggling for self-control.

Balen and two other girls of The Devoted hurried out of the cottage with fresh clothes for him and Talia as he continued speaking. “We’re still alive. And it won’t happen again. I should have taken you more seriously when you tried to warn me about how much danger we were in. It’s too bad that while I believed you intellectually, it never really sank in emotionally. If I’d have gone with my brains instead of my heart, we’d have stayed home today. The tour was in no way necessary, though most of it was a great time. If you’d have asked us to stay home, we’d probably have gone anyway. I guess I didn’t really want to believe that hundreds of enemies might really try to kill us. Now I know better.”

“Uh, Mark, you’re hurt. On your legs, mostly.” Balen quietly revealed.

“Why, so I am! Ouch!” Mark chuckled as he carefully set Talia down. “I almost wish you hadn’t brought that to my attention. I really hadn’t noticed it much till then! I tell you, my heart is still thumping like galloping hooves on a wooden bridge!”

Yalla had hurried over as soon as she’d heard Mark was hurt. “I’m qualified as a Field Healer. Let me have a look.

“Ah. Your injuries are small but numerous. Grains of sand, plant matter, and threads from your clothing were driven into your skin by the concussion. A few are deep enough to be dangerous for a human.

“And my healing spells are not working on you.” Yalla concluded with a bit of frustration, wiping away blood trickles with a cool cloth.

“Let me try something.” Mark mused as he realized that the tine band had been destroyed by the bolt, and its pieces were still in Sming. “Ria gave me an extensive collection of magecraft healing spells. I think I can... There. Did it with my own power.”

“Well done.” Yalla nodded. “All the foreign matter was pushed to the surface before the wounds closed, and there’s no sign of scarring.”

“And it’s a surprising relief as well.” Mark sighed as he sat on the nearest bench and scratched his legs. “Moreso than I expected, seeing as it didn’t really hurt that much.”

“Remind me to thank Bizyutin for her suggestion that we store a few changes of clothes at each of our homes.” Talia said as she drew a yellow sundress on over her head, then returned to the earlier subject. “So Love, you were saying that we won’t be similarly endangered again?”

“Not if we can help it. We’re safe here for now.” Mark nodded as he dressed in a white cotton vest and matching baggy pantaloons, and took a moment to enjoy the warm tropical night. When he continued he Spoke over their Link. *“We’ll stay here until we’re both expert at casting my power and yours as well, especially faster and more powerful defenses. I think the tactics of our security today were fine, but our strategy was a mistake. Given how dangerous our enemies obviously are, traveling with a large group is a bad plan that unnecessarily endangers our traveling companions. This is especially true when you consider the potential of our power. With a few days practice, we could be more capable of protecting our security force than they are of protecting us.*

“Right now I’m desperately hoping none have died on our behalf.”

“I’m pretty sure none have, at least not since the injured were brought here.” Talia assured him as she rose up and hugged him. *“I think I’d have felt it if any had. And Father inferred that none had died at Winghoof.”*

He closed his eyes and gratefully wrapped his arms around her, glorying in the reassuring warmth of her love.

“From now on until we catch the assassins, maybe even until the nexus is past, we’re going to try to avoid telling anyone where we’re going in advance.” he mused as he continued his train of thought. *“We’ll just ask if we can show up immediately, and go. If we can avoid it, we won’t even ask. Actually, if we can avoid it, we won’t even decide or plan beforehand. We’ll just spontaneously travel, and try to avoid any predictable patterns. If it’s not an official occasion, we might even think about some kind of disguise.”*

“On the other hand. It’s probably not that smart to make too many decisions right now. That’s all spontaneous thinking, and I’m still pretty shaken, from being terrified that I was losing you a few minutes ago.”

“We’ll start with staying here for now, and go from there.” Talia mused. *“We’ll have the dinner for the sworn served here, I don’t think it’ll be too much trouble for the Atoning to relocate the meal.”*

“At least we can check off touring our properties from our list of things to do, though we didn’t get to see much of Winghoof. And all our things have been put away, and our finances, business dealings and charitable works are settled in capable hands.”

“We still need to review our magic items, weapons and armor, we need to speak to our gold neighbor, and we need to spend the four hours on physical combat skills. And we’ve added working on the curse.”

“What time is it, anyway?” Mark asked. *“In First Valley, I mean.”*

“Five hours, twenty-one minutes after noon. Things haven’t exactly gone as we’d planned, but at least we’re pretty much on schedule.”

“We can save the time on our magic items and such.” Mark decided. *“The warriors and wizards of The Atoning are already reviewing every item in our inventory for their military utility. We can Link with them for that knowledge later.”*

“And I’m ready to work on spell casting now. I don’t know if Ria still thinks I should wait to do that, but I know I’m ready. And considering the magical and powerful nature of the assassination attempt, I think we should spend about half an hour on physical combat, at most, and spend the extra time practicing spell casting. We both need work on casting with my power. And when it comes to magic, I need work on everything.”

“You’re right about that!” Talia chuckled. *“It seems silly to spend any time tonight on the correct form to use when thrusting with a spear, or anything like that, when we can be mastering the use of your power.”*

“You know, this is so much faster and better than talking out loud, I wonder why we haven’t been doing this continuously since we first learned to do it?!” he thought with a grin.

“Well, talking out loud with you is a very natural and enjoyable experience, and of course, everyone has a certain natural reluctance to spend too much time Linked. Our survival instincts make us fear the loss of our individuality.”

“I understand that.” Mark nodded. *“But I’m not worried about it. I know I’ll never have trouble figuring out which parts of us are me. And there’s a lot of things I want to do with you that can be best done by Link, like showing you combat skills, learning your wizardry, helping Ria teach you magecraft, and studying the curse. We’re a lot more skilled at Linking than we were when we first tried it. I don’t think we’ll need the wedding vow spell to protect us from Linking too deeply anymore.”*

“Let’s get things in motion.” Talia suddenly decided. *“Let’s tell The Atoning to serve the dinner here as soon as they can be ready, then get everyone out of our hair. I’ve had enough of being surrounded by a crowd for one day, and I need some time alone with you.”*

“I’m with you in that.” he emphatically agreed.

Their psionic conversation had only taken ten seconds, but the Volunteers were already looking to him expectantly, and beginning to get restless.

“All right, Volunteers.” he called as he stood with Talia in his arms. *“Talia and I will be staying here for a while. Balen, contact Sheramiv and fill her in on what’s happened. Tell her the dinner is still on, but we’ll be having it here. We’ll start dinner as soon as everyone’s here and it’s ready to be served. Tell her I’d like a report on the Atoning’s progress and planning, especially concerning the improvements and constructions here.”*

“You Volunteers who wish to stay on Hilia are welcome to do so, as soon as the facilities here are ready for you. Until they are, if you want to stay here beyond the next six hours, you’ll have to work with the construction crews and use their barracks. For right now, feel free to look around if you want. Not that there’s much to see until the sun comes up.”

“Yes sir.” Balen nodded.

He looked around at the patio and grounds of the cottage, where the Volunteers were mostly making themselves comfortable and conferring in groups. The few ranch hands and staff from Winghoof who had escaped injury were

huddled by the door to the cottage, anxiously awaiting word on the wounded. Those who were loved ones and friends of the wounded were arriving in small groups, vetted and Translocated by the wizards of the Alliance force.

The roughly circular patio was fifteen meters wide and paved with light gray flagstone. Downslope were seven oval lawns from nine to twenty-five meters in their longest dimensions, terraced into the slope and joined by short flights of stairs that had been cut into the stone. All seven lawns and the patio were surrounded by decorative bushes and small flower gardens in low stone walls, from which drifted exotic scents. The entire area was illuminated by Light spells.

“Ria was disrupted somewhat, when the bolt struck us.” Talia Spoke as she buckled her sword belt around her waist. *“She says she should recover fully in a few hours. These other items were unaffected, so far as I can tell. I lost three scrolls, but they were not unique, and I can replace them.”*

“GrimFang seems unaffected.” Mark returned as he laid his hand on his hilt.

A moment later, Sheramiv arrived. “Talia, Mark, I’m so sorry to hear of your ordeal.” she said with a bit of a nervous bow. “We really should’ve had more wizards assigned to Shielding you in an unWarded nation, and so should the team from Sming. We won’t make that mistake again.”

“Next time we’ll catch ‘em before they can cast a bolt.” Mark assured her. “I only hope those who were hurt are going to be all right.”

“I’ll check on that. They should be stabilized by now.” Balen declared, and lightly ran into the cottage.

“As to our progress, your hotels will be open for business tomorrow, and we recommend commitment to three major charitable acts over the next year.

“With your permission, we will help build a Healers’ Hospice in Heartwood that will serve the elven lands and human kingdoms of northern Debin. All of the kingdoms need better Healing facilities, and the lands of The People of Life are centrally located amongst them. Also, by locating it in elven lands, it’s much easier to hire sufficient wizards to allow the most urgent cases in northern Debin to be immediately Translocated to the new hospital. It will also train human and elven Healers, as well as selected candidates from the other races, and it will be associated with the Heartwood Assembly for Advanced Study, and with the Healers’ Guild of Thon.

“As for helping the poor, according to recent figures, in three weeks there won’t be any truly poor people left on Kellaran, but we’re helping with that effort by building a charitable trades college with the trades guilds of the empires at Juncture, where the borders of the three empires of Debin meet.

“Also, we’re co-operating with the representatives of The Just Alliance in building the facility that may be formally known as The Hilian Library of The Just Alliance. They will cover half the costs of construction, as well as contributing all of the library’s books, scrolls, artworks and learning materials. It’s a great project, since it will be the only place on Kellaran where the knowledge of every race in The Just Alliance is available in one place.

“The construction costs of the rest of the facilities here are financially out of our reach right now, though by auctioning the hotel space, and by pre-selling the lets here, also by auction, we will have enough to complete the resort here within a week. Renovations and fortifications of the rest of your properties are already paid for, including The Queen of Waves, and we have more than enough left on hand to start work here.

“As for the facilities of The Military Academy of Hilia, it is not a profit-making venture, so we felt no reservations about advertising for qualified volunteers for its construction, and asking for donations toward its costs. Response has been surprisingly universal, and the academy’s construction is already fully funded and staffed.

“The Hidden Nation of Xervia alone has paid for more than half the cost of construction of the Military Academy, and are among many nations who have asked permission to build embassies and consulates here. I should point out that this is an incredible diplomatic triumph! Not one of their citizens have ever been known to venture beyond Xervia’s shores, and now they wish to build a consulate here! Also, since the installation of the extensive Wards here today, combined with the fact that every visitor here is bound by Osald’s Oath, they now consider this to be the safest place in the world. Because of this assessment, millions of them have requested permissions to visit, and a few of them have apparently asked about immigrating!

“There’s room inside the crater for many diplomatic facilities, as well as for the academy, and in the future a small University of The Just Alliance might be built here, where the scholars of the world can learn and exchange knowledge. Work on the military academy has already begun, and will proceed night and day, with a likely completion date in less than two weeks.

“And dinner will be served buffet-style from the patio here in approximately twenty-five minutes.”

“Thank you. I approve of all those projects and plans, and you may proceed with them with due pace.” Mark decided, then his aspect became a bit grim.

“Most important right now is finding out who attacked us today, and bringing them to justice. Put everyone on it who has the skills to contribute to the investigation, even if they have to be re-assigned from the other projects. I’m sure Yazadril already has a formidable team of wizards and investigators working on it, so co-ordinate with them.”

“Yes sir. Right away.” Sheramiv nodded, and vanished.

Balen emerged from the cottage’s doorway. “The Healers say everyone will live!” she called to all, and a cheer went up, while many who had waited for word began weeping as emotions that had been held back were released.

Yazadril and Nemia re-appeared.

“We can find few other clues from the assassination attempt.” Yazadril reported, letting some of his frustration show. “None of our wizards have been able to recognize a signature in the spell’s residue. We believe that the assassins might have disguised their psionic imprint while casting the spell, to prevent their identification by that method. Which further muddies the waters, since it throws our earlier deduction that it was cast by human wizards into doubt, since a faked human quality may have been left as a false trail.”

“I see.” Mark growled. “There’s really very little chance that we’ll be able to catch them, is there?”

“No, there’s not, until they reveal themselves through further acts, as much as I hate to come right out and face the fact.

“This was a very powerful and sophisticated attack, and expertly performed. If they’d have been up there waiting for you, they’d have struck immediately when you arrived, rather than a few moments later as they did. So they remotely detected your arrival, or were informed of the timing of your departure from Thon by someone on or near the Queen of Waves, which I consider the most likely possibility. For that reason, most of our investigators are busy in Gimoosh, interviewing everyone who was in the vicinity of your ship when you left it. All who were at Winghoof were already sworn to Justice, so it’s unlikely that the informant was one of them, but they will be Read by our investigators as a routine precaution.

“The assassins quickly Translocated into place six and a half kilometers above you, above the limits of the detection spells of the wizards who were guarding you. The skill required to focus the bolt on just the two of you from such a distance is considerable. The bolt itself was a highly concentrated variant of the death spell that struck Shinosa Valley; it causes living cells to explode, but mostly passes through inanimate matter.

“Since we know that the spell at Shinosa was cast by members of the insidious conspiracy, it is reasonable to assume that they were the authors of this attack as well. From that we must assume that the conspirators are neither discouraged by the formation of The Just Alliance, nor defeated by our efforts to root them out. Nor are they willing to wait in hiding, hoping that our search will eventually be called off. The strike at you shows that there will be little pause in the struggle between the conspiracy and the Alliance.

“At any rate, you should be safe enough here. You’ll have to be more secretive when you travel from now on, until these matters are concluded.”

“We’d already decided that.” Mark agreed. “We’ll stay here for a while, at least until the parades of the leaders. If we go anywhere before then it’ll be spontaneously and without warning, most likely back to First Valley.

“And please, pass our most sincere thanks to everyone who came with you to help us today. The speed and magnitude of your response honors us.”

“Not at all.” Yazadril smiled with a dismissive gesture. “There was little we could do when we arrived, but even so, the sudden call to assemble and deploy was a valuable exercise for our fast response force. Now I’ve seen how they respond when the call is not a drill, and they did well by anyone’s standards. We arrived within six seconds of the call, and were fully deployed at Winghoof Estate within twenty seconds. If your attackers had lingered above you for even seven seconds to judge the results of their spell, we might have had them. They may have learned our response time, but we’ve only begun to improve.

“Still, you can be sure that the members of The Fast Response Force of The Just Alliance will be flattered by your gratitude. It was your idea, you know, to have a completely integrated mixed-race response unit, and I don’t mind giving you credit for it. I recognized the brilliance of it immediately. Your four comrades deployed with our dragon and unicorn units, by the way, temporarily attached for training purposes. In a few minutes we’ll return to our base in Xervia for de-briefing and review. They’ll be off duty in about an hour, barring further unforeseen events.

“But before we go, I wonder if you’d welcome a bit of advice on matters of governance?”

“Your advice is always welcome and valuable, Yazadril.” Mark grinned.

“Your plans for facilities that are designed to be usable by any race is a masterstroke. And by allowing the nations of The Just Alliance to build embassies and educational facilities here, you ensure valuable interaction between every race and nation, which can only aid the causes of unity and de-segregation.

“You should grant Hilian citizenship to those who’ve sworn to you, since your nation has little credibility until it has citizens. But here you have a wonderful opportunity. Your nation was formed just before the founding meeting of the Alliance, it’s land was uninhabited before then, it’s facilities will be accessible to any race, and it was declared to be a multiracial nation at almost the same moment as it’s public declaration of independence. Moreso than anywhere else on Kellaran, Hilia is racially neutral territory. Therefore; for many people, it should be the most comfortable place to visit beyond their racial homelands. If you try to keep your visitors and your citizenry racially balanced, Hilia will hold the heart of The Just Alliance, though it’s seat of government will remain in Xervia.

“And you should formally recognize Sheramiv’s position in your government’s administration. I picked her to speak for her group at their swearing because she’s the most capable and levelheaded among them, and one of the most experienced. Thus far she is empowered to act for you in matters of commerce, and doing a fine job from what I’ve heard. But you should give her a formal title, such as Chancellor of Hilia or something similar, so that she may more effectively represent your government in diplomatic relations.

“You should feel free to consult any of the existing military training programs in The Just Alliance for assistance and advice in establishing and operating your military academy, and to arrange to have copies of their reference works made.

“And it would be wise of you to do something formal to acknowledge the financial contribution of The Hidden Nation to your military academy, for it is unprecedented. They are very reticent about military matters; yet still wish to be seen to be making a contribution to the defense of the alliance, thus the magnitude of their endowment. Your personal and public recognition of their generosity would mean a lot to them.”

“Ah. That’s all wisdom for certain, and we’ll heed it, thank you.” Mark acknowledged with a bit of a bow.

“Excellent. Do you still plan on acting against the curse tonight?”

“Yes, in a little over three hours.” Talia answered. “I guess we’ll be doing it here. Could you tell Alilia about the change of venue?”

“I will. Give me a hug, cherished daughter, and we’ll see you then.”

After sharing an embrace with his wife and daughter, Yazadril gave a psionic command to his forces as he and Nemias stepped back, arm in arm. A moment later they all Translocated out.

“Come.” Talia said, and led Mark over to where the staff from Winghoof was gathered.

Introductions were made, and the young couple offered kind words to those who waited for more detailed word on the condition of the wounded. Talia invited them all to stay for supper. Cooks and servers of the Atoning were busy setting up buffet tables on the lawns, and it appeared that dinner would be served shortly.

Then Hilsith emerged from the cottage, looking fatigued to the bone. “Immediate family members may now visit the injured. Their attending Healers will answer all your questions of your loved ones’ conditions.” she announced, her voice still strong and clear. She approached Mark and Talia as her patients’ families moved inside.

“Hilsith, you appear spent. Can I offer you a boost?” Talia asked as she urged the Healer to take a seat on the nearest bench.

“No thank you. I could cast a Stimulant on myself, but I’d pay for it tomorrow in fatigue.” Hilsith said tiredly.

“I wouldn’t think to advise you about that, but I was thinking I could pass you some power. It’s obvious you’re depleted.”

“Oh, thank you. That would definitely be appreciated right now.”

Talia Linked with her in the manner that allowed her to share power with another, and let it flow until Hilsith was fully replenished.

“Thank you. That was well done, and I feel better already.” she nodded with a little smile.

“How are the injured?” Mark inquired as he and Talia joined Hilsith on the bench.

“Of those who were close to you when the bolt struck, only the injuries of Foreman Joseth Narr were serious. We’ve healed him as much as is wise, and his body should be allowed to complete its recovery naturally. He’ll be in bed for a few days, and will need two weeks of convalescence before he’s fully fit for duty. The rest of the ranch staff can be back on the job in a day or two at most. The elves will be fine. Still, due to the sinister nature of the bolt, I’ll keep them all under observation for at least a day, as a precaution.

“The ten wizards whose Shield was broken are more difficult cases, particularly the two humans. All were dealt a severe mental and physical shock, and all will be impaired in their use of the power to varying degrees for some time, perhaps permanently. As well, there was some nerve damage and subtle scarring of the brain. The elves should heal from this, but such things are difficult to treat in humans. Their recovery is uncertain. We’ll know more in a few days.

“In a few minutes they will be Translocated to the hospice at the Healers’ Guildhall in Latrel.

“They can all be thankful that the bolt was so tightly focused on you two, since it had enough power to slay hundreds of elves or men.”

“The assassins thought to take no chance that we would survive, but Mark and the curse foiled them.” Talia mused.

“Indeed.” Hilsith nodded tiredly.

“Would you join us for supper? It won’t be long till it’s ready.” Talia asked as savory scents reached them.

“I will. Then perhaps a nap, before we work on the curse.”

“Thank you so much for your efforts. We’ll go visit the injured then, before they’re sent to Latrel.” Talia said as she stood, so Mark did too.

“It’s the least we can do, since they were injured on our behalf.” he agreed. “And perhaps we can do a bit more for them. We can certainly pay for their care, and give them a generous bonus. And a vacation at one of our resorts.”

“Their initial care was an act of The Just Alliance.” Hilsith informed them. “Myself and the Healers here are with The Fast Response Force, and require no further compensation. Further treatment in Latrel is being arranged at the behest of Emperor Kevim of Sming, whose treasury will bear the cost. All the injured except your four wizards are citizens of Sming, and I’m sure he feels badly that you were attacked in his nation, and that his forces failed to protect you.

“Actually, I’ll join you.” the pretty polar elf decided as she stood. “I’d like to check my patients one more time before I pass on responsibility for their care.”

“Have the Healers of The Just Alliance begun to meet and share knowledge since the alliance was formed?” Mark thoughtfully asked as they crossed the patio.

“There are tentative plans in the works for such things, but so far, my counterparts from the other races have only co-operated in organizing Healers for the civil defense corps that are being formed everywhere.” Hilsith replied as they entered the building.

“Then perhaps there are specialists among the other races who could help you with the healing of the stricken wizards.” he ventured.

“Perhaps there are.” Hilsith agreed. “There are none among elvenkind who surpass my skill in such things, but I don’t know if that’s true of the other races. The Response Force only sent human and elven healers, since the injured are of those two races.”

Mark paused in the living room of the cottage. “Just a moment.” he said as he closed his eyes and cast Speaking.

“Good day again, Somonik. May I Link with You? It would save some time.” Mark spent a moment in silent communion with the ancient white dragon, then nodded. “Thank you.”

He opened his eyes. “He’s initiating inquiries among the Healers of Xervia, Felion and Kletiuik. If there are any among them who can help, they’ll be along shortly.

“By the way, where is everyone?” he asked as he realized that there were no Healers, patients or visitors in any of the cottage’s six spacious rooms.

“There’s more to this place than meets the eye.” Hilsith smiled, and led them down the hallway to the rear of the building, past the silent bedrooms, to an open door and a stairway leading down. Beyond the doorframe the descending passage was seen to be a natural formation that had once been a lava tube, unaltered except for the wide steps expertly carved from the black, glasslike stone. Illumination was provided by the glowing globes of elven Light spells that hovered every two meters along the top of the passage, which varied in height from three to six meters above them.

Mark counted fifty-seven steps before the passage opened onto a huge round cavern over twenty-seven meters high and sixty meters wide. The floor was flat and smooth, though the glinting black stone to the sides and above remained in its natural state.

The wounded lay on two rows of beds just inside the cavern, with clusters of visitors and Healers gathered round.

On the far side of the cavern a group of dwarves, gargoyles, gnomes, elves, and humans were busy, though their tasks were indiscernible at this distance. A pale blue unicorn stood to one side, observing the activity. She noticed the movement by the stairs, and turned to look.

“Greetings, Prince Mark, Princess Talia. I am Keetom. We are Survey Team Three.” the unicorn Spoke with a nod across the distance. “We are sorry to hear of recent events in Sming.”

“It’s a pleasure Speaking with you, Keetom, and we thank you all for your concern.” Mark returned with a wave. “How fares your work?”

“Quite well, for we are ahead of schedule.” Keetom turned back to her team’s activity. “We survey this chamber in preparation for Kleti tunneling teams, who will excavate a large corridor between here and the inside of the crater,

and a smaller corridor to the lobby of the resort. My role is to provide distance and angle reference to survey points within the crater, for my sense of location is accurate to within a hair's width over that distance, despite all the intervening stone."

"That's good to know. Thank you all for your efforts, and keep up the good work."

"It's our honor and pleasure to participate in this great and unique project." Keetom said with a happy little headshake. "For the first time, all the races of The Just Alliance co-operate in a construction. The blending of our skills is a revolution in such endeavors. For instance, we of Survey Team Three accomplish this task with greater speed and quality than has been previously achieved, due to the vast array of surveying techniques we have available."

"Well, those are certainly benefits I never expected!" Mark chuckled. "Tell me, do you know what usage is planned for this cavern?"

"Why, it will be the grand hall of your residence! Your throne room, as they would say in Finitra."

"Oh. Thank you. Well I'll leave you to it then. Good day."

Meanwhile Talia and Hilsith were talking to one of the injured. As Mark moved to join them, a quick series of bright flashes in the side of his vision signaled the arrival of a gnome, a female dwarf, a chestnut unicorn, a copper dragon, a dark tropical human woman, and an old gray giant who supported himself with crutches. All bore the Marking of the vow of justice.

"You sent for Healers?" asked the dwarf as she bustled hurriedly over.

"Yes, and thank you for coming. You'll be working with Hilsith here." Mark said, indicating her as she hurried to meet the newcomers.

"We will Link now. There is no time to lose." the dragon rumbled.

Mark felt the stirring of powerful psionics as the dragon drew all the Healers into a Link.

"We are in time, though not by much." the gnome declared in a piping voice a minute later. With a wave of his tiny hand, the nearest of the brain-injured humans and the bed he lay on floated over and settled in the center of the circle of Healers, and they began casting subtle spells upon him. They continued that for almost eight minutes, then floated his bed back, and the other human wizard was Moved to the healing circle. Four minutes later he was replaced by one of the fallen elven wizards.

Seeing that they'd be busy with that for a few more minutes, Mark and Talia returned to meeting and visiting those who'd been injured by the bolt's proximity. The elven Volunteers were all fully healed from their minor injuries, and the human ranch staff were already sitting up in bed, looking about in wonder.

Mark was informed when Joseth Narr regained consciousness, and hurried to the foreman's bedside with Talia.

"What happened?" the weathered human groggily asked. "And where are we?"

"Talia and I were struck by a magic bolt, cast from high above, and you were caught in the blast." Mark explained as he kneeled at the bedside. "It was an assassination attempt by the insidious conspiracy. You're going to be fine, though you'll be recovering for two weeks. The rest of your people are well, and will be fully fit in a few days. We're in a cavern below our cottage on the distant island of Hilia."

"You... You were both uninjured?"

"I was uninjured. Talia was Healed, though it was a close thing. No one was killed, and the wizards who shielded us are being treated by the best Healers in The Just Alliance."

"I see." The horseman's expression grew grim and determined. "This offends me. I tell you, it offends me a lot! Is there anything I can do to help bring the assassins to justice? If there is, you can count on me, and on all of us from Winghoof!"

"Perhaps not directly. But I'm thinking of a way you might contribute to the cause. Winghoof raises fine horses, and now it's a guest ranch as well. I'm wondering if it might also be a cavalry base."

"I don't see why not! We have ample room for barracks and coursing runs and the rest of what's needed, and we have grazing for over a thousand more steeds! I cut my teeth in the cavalry and served sixteen years, and I haven't forgotten the skills!"

"I imagine your grazing could support many more horses, if the turf was treated by elven horticultural wizards." Talia mused.

"That's likely true!" Joseth chuckled.

"So, given ample resources with which to act, you'd have no trouble managing the enterprise for all three purposes?" Mark inquired with a smile.

"As you say, given the resources it'd be no trouble at all, and damn glad to do it besides!" Narr grinned.

“Excellent. You rest and recover, Jo. Right now we have a lot of irons in the fire, but by the time you’re back on your feet, we should be able to give you everything you need. Along with being foreman and manager, you’ll be Commander of the base and a commissioned officer in the Hilian military. Your quarters and your salary will reflect that, I assure you.

“There’s a lot more facing us than just this one assassination attempt. But we *will* bring them all to justice, sooner or later.”

“That we will, and thank you, both of you.” Joseth nodded. He closed his eyes with a slight smile, and was soon asleep.

Mark and Talia rose as the circle of Healers began treating the last of the injured elven wizards.

When that one’s treatment was finished and his bed returned to its place, Hilsith turned to the old giant with the crutches. “Now let’s see about your legs.” she said with a smile.

“My condition is entirely owing to my being old, and a giant.” he smiled. “There’s not much to be done about it. And I am an expert in such matters.”

“That’s what I thought about our ten patients before you arrived.” Hilsith patiently pointed out. “But this circle of Healers is unprecedented. All of us have knowledge and skills the others lack. For example, my own skills in dealing with geriatric infirmities are far more advanced than what I knew of the Healings we just completed. It would be foolish to not let us try, at least.”

“All right.” the giant decided as he moved to the center of the circle.

The gnome Levitated him, and guided him with a gentle touch to lay on his back in midair.

Two minutes later the giant Healer sat up, astonishment plain on his face. “Now that was skillfully done! Miraculous, almost!”

“We did some work on your back as well.” The dwarf pointed out.

“And your shoulders.” the gnome nodded as the dragon helped the giant to his feet.

“Thank you all for your efforts here today.” Talia smiled as she stepped forward. “You prove yet again how much we all have to learn from each other. You can be sure that The Hilian University of The Just Alliance that we are building here will have a strong faculty of Healing. We would appreciate it if you would spread the word to your colleagues that Healers of every race will be welcome to share knowledge and research here.

“And you’re all welcome to stay for a meal. I’m sure it’s ready to be served by now.”

“Thank you for both of those.” the copper dragon rumbled with a bow. “We will accept, with the exception of myself as regards the meal, for I will not hunger for another week. There are many matters of our calling that we should discuss.”

“All our patients should enjoy a complete recovery within three weeks at most.” Hilsith reported with a grin. “We’ll see them settled in Latrel, and join you upstairs in a few minutes.”

“Any that are well enough to stay for dinner are welcome to, and their families and friends as well.” Talia called.

She and Mark led the way upstairs and outside, where dinner was indeed ready to be served, and waiting upon their arrival. All of the Volunteers and almost all of the Atoning were gathered on the lawns.

Mark announced that the injured wizards would recover fully, which was met by a relieved cheer. Then Talia bade everyone to eat, and had the patio cleared for those who were still below. The dragon alone would fill most of it, even sitting up. After they arrived by Translocation and were served, creating quite a stir among the elves, Hilsith reported the cavern cleared of all but the surveying crew. The Healers spent the meal engaging in specialized conversation, most of it completely unintelligible to the rest. The giant ate standing up, delighted with being able to do so unassisted, his stance and step confident and strong.

As conversation tapered off during the entree, Mark Linked with Talia, then the two of them Linked with Sheramiv. The elven administrator showed no sign of the contact beyond a slight smile, recognizing that it was private. Mark carefully passed her those memories of his conversations, observations, and thoughts from that day that related to her work, and that she’d not yet been privy to. After Talia did the same, Mark asked permission to take a Reading of Sheramiv’s relevant memories of the day. Upon receiving her leave, he and Talia carefully Read all that he’d asked for and no more, taking only three seconds to do so. They paid special attention to the evaluation of their properties and possessions for military utility, particularly the magic items.

“*That was masterfully and comfortably done!*” Sheramiv marveled. “*Your psionic skill grows by leaps and bounds!*”

“*Thank you. We’ll speak again later about further plans and instructions.*” Talia smiled, and she and Mark politely closed the Link to Sheramiv, while continuing to discuss psionically between them as they ate.

When most everyone was finished eating, Mark stood and cast Battalion Command. It was a far more complex spell than he needed to make himself heard in this instance, but he considered it good practice.

Talia stood when he did, and took his hand with a smile.

“Talia and I would like to tell you all how much we appreciate the efforts and sacrifices that were made on our behalf today.” he announced, pleased that the spell worked as intended, carrying his voice to the most distant listener. “You’ve accomplished far more today than we could have hoped, and most of the day was quite enjoyable.”

He allowed a chuckle to go around before he continued. “To all of you, we offer Hilian citizenship. Ours is a new and tiny nation, but I think we will stand proudly on the stage of world events. Your citizenship will be dual, and will not affect your citizenship in your present homelands.

“Let those of you who accept this now stand and be recognized.”

Every elf among them proudly stood.

“So it is recorded.” Sheramiv announced as she surveyed the gathering. “All have accepted.”

“Then I now proudly proclaim you citizens of The Principality of Hilia!” Mark called with a grin, which triggered a bright flash of elven power, and waited through a mighty cheer and a minute of mutual congratulation among the new Hilians.

“It happened again.” Talia laughed, looking behind Mark.

He turned and noticed that the Healers, the staff of Winghoof, and their friends and families were all standing.

“They all stood to be recognized with us when you asked.” Balen giggled. “Does that make them Hilian citizens?”

“It does if they want it to.” Mark grinned.

“That is indeed what I intended, and I thank you.” the dwarf woman said with a smile and a bow.

“Hilian citizenship is indeed something I will take pride in, since Hilia will stand as the spine of The Just Alliance, I think.” the dragon nodded. “And why not, since it will not affect our present citizenship.”

“Thank you. It’s the least we can do for all of you who’ve served or suffered today.” Mark told them, and gave them his best bow before turning back to the main of the gathering, who were resuming their seats.

“I have one more announcement. In lieu of a detailed report on all of your activities today, I have taken a Reading from Sheramiv. You are all very capable and versatile, and have all been remarkably self-organizing, yet it seems obvious that Sheramiv holds a well-earned position of leadership among you, due to her administrative ability and her courteous assertiveness.

“With today’s events, Hilia is a nation with a proud people, and we have diplomatic relations with many other great nations. Soon we will have a city, and we will host important international institutions. Therefore, we must have a more extensive form of government than Talia and I can provide without assistance.

“Sheramiv, please stand.”

She did so with a proud smile. She hadn’t been informed of this in their Link earlier, but she was more than astute enough to have a strong idea of what was happening.

“Sheramiv, before all these gathered witnesses, we name you First Minister of Hilia, and we fully empower you to act on our behalf, and on behalf of the Principality of Hilia, in all matters of commerce and government.”

“Thank you, your Majesties.” Sheramiv smiled and bowed gracefully from the waist.

“Sheramiv, as First Minister, you will be required to consult with us for our approval on major decisions and matters of policy, unless circumstance should necessitate such haste that consulting us is impractical. Beyond that, we will leave the day-to-day governance of Hilia in your capable hands. As it becomes necessary, you may create new positions in the government and diplomatic services of Hilia, and appoint personnel to those positions, and draw upon the treasury as needed.”

“I shall always endeavor to serve in a manner worthy of your trust.” Sheramiv declared with great pride.

“How about a cheer for our new First Minister?!” Mark called, and the gathering responded with a great burst of enthusiastic approval and applause.

“We want you to know how very proud we are of every one of you.” Talia called when things had quieted down, cleverly co-opting Mark’s Field Command spell to be heard by all. “And again, we do thank you for all of your help and friendship today. In the days and years ahead, we very much look forward to getting to know every one of you as friends and comrades.

“For now, please excuse us, as we still have several matters that we must attend to today.”

“One more thing.” Mark added, casting an Illusory map of the island. “Here, on the north shore of the island, is a tiny lagoon with a small beach and a narrow strip of jungle, surrounded on three sides by nearly unclimbable cliffs. The waves and rocks at the mouth of the lagoon make it inaccessible to boats or swimmers. It can only be reached by

Flight or Translocation. I claim it as a place of privacy and solitude for Talia and myself, for those who have our personal invitation, and no others. Perhaps in a century or two we may not need such a private retreat, but for now we're still young. Our love is still in its infancy, and we must help it grow amidst a seemingly unending whirlwind of events, and in trying times."

"None shall intrude upon you there, save by Speaking, and then only when necessary." Sheramiv declared.

"Thank you. We'll go there now, and we'd be pleased if you would join us there for a few moments."

"Of course." she nodded.

"To the rest of you, we bid you good evening, or rather, good morning, for I imagine we'll be adopting Hilian time for the foreseeable future."

As the assembled chuckled, waving and calling farewells, Ria appeared hovering in her stiff stance over the crowd of elves. "*Atoning, prepare to be evaluated for your military skills and aptitudes.*" she declared. It only required a few seconds, and then she spent a minute psionically handing out training assignments in rapid-fire succession. With no further ado, she faded from sight.

Talia Translocated the three of them to the isolated beach, where the black sand glistened faintly in the moonlight and starlight. It was dark, and very quiet, with only the gentle wash of the waves on the sand, and a few faint insect sounds coming from the narrow strip of jungle between the beach and the cliff.

"I'll build a campfire, I think." Mark smiled.

"We'll fetch a few amenities." Talia giggled.

She and Sheramiv Summoned heavy blankets, cushions, a lantern, a bottle of sparkling pink wine, and three crystal stemware glasses.

Meanwhile Mark used Movement spells to gather three logs from the jumble of driftwood at the east end of the beach, to dig a firepit in the sand, to place two logs in a V between the firepit and the edge of the jungle for sitting or leaning on, and to cut and split the third into firewood. He stacked split wood in the pit, and with a playful grin, a showy wave, and a snap of his fingers, he ignited the wood with a loud whoosh by casting Flame upon it with Talia's power.

Sheramiv spread the blankets and pillows beside the logs, while Talia poured them each a glass of wine. As they took their ease, Mark reclined on the blankets and leaned back on a log, Talia sat with her legs folded beneath her and leaned against his side, while Sheramiv sat on the log opposite with her legs stretched toward the fire, her ankles crossed.

Sheramiv opened the discussion. "Relgemit and the rest of your security force feel terrible that they failed to protect you today. He's kept them on alert, and I imagine at this moment they're conducting a detailed reconnoiter of the island.

Mark took a moment to Speak to Relgemit and receive his report. "Actually, at this moment some of them are doing that, but most of them are establishing positions about sixty meters up the slope from the top of these cliffs. They can't see us or hear us from there, but they can see all approaches to this beach by land, sea and air. Despite the many layers of mighty Wards around this entire island, he has some three hundred wizards of the Atoning casting a Battle Shield from the top of the cliffs out and down to the mouth of the cove. For practice, he says.

"At any rate, I want you to proceed with all the proposed facilities here with equal priority; the library, the university, especially the faculty of Healers, the resort, and the military academy. Borrow if you have to. You can generate some extra income by letting out the master suites at our various locations but here until further notice. And have our personal effects brought here from First Valley, then let out every suite in The Living Palace as well. Bring our stored items here as soon as there's storage for them.

"Let every nation build an embassy here, if they wish. Better yet, just build one big complex, a Consulate of The Just Alliance, and assign space in it to the various delegations. And arrange a formal function with the Hidden Nation, where we may acknowledge their generosity.

"After all that, we'll work on the cavalry base at Winghoof. I'd like it to serve as the faculty of cavalry of our military academy, as well as housing and supporting a garrison of fully-trained and qualified professional horse soldiers, and at least a squad of attached battle wizards who must also be qualified cavalry.

"We'll know about using the north face of the Xervian volcano for the academy's firing range within the hour.

"Once all of that's paid for, we want to start building housing for those of meager financial worth. *Nice* housing."

Sheramiv nodded. "Will you reserve one quarter of the suites in The Living Palace for gifting, as we've done at your other facilities? And how will you decide which of the needy shall be given vacations at the suites you've reserved for that purpose?"

“Yes on the first, and I’m not sure on the second.” Mark admitted.

“However they are chosen, we must provide them with nice clothes and things.” Talia said, thinking out loud. “The rest of our guests will be wealthy, and it won’t help the needy if they are made to feel out of place on their vacation.”

“There are many who’ve suffered from misfortune who would benefit from a nice vacation.” Sheramiv mused. “Far too many to host at the quarter of your suites you’ve allocated to the purpose. You could narrow the field to those who are both most in need of such therapeutic temporary relief from their cares, and who are also most deserving. Those who are needy and overburdened, but who have none-the-less made selfless contributions to the well-being of others.”

“You have a method for finding such stalwart persons?” Mark asked.

“I do.” Sheramiv nodded and smiled. “It would not be difficult to see to it, if I may?”

“You may, and thank you.” Mark chuckled. “Though such humble heroes may be reluctant to accept our vacations, if they have binding responsibilities or commitments. So I suppose, in order to do them any benefit, we should not only give them a vacation, but see that while they are vacationing, their jobs are still done if necessary, their dependents cared for if they don’t go along, their pets are fed and their plants are watered and anything else that needs to be done to allow our beneficiaries to truly put their minds at ease for a while. For two weeks, let’s say. So let’s do all that, if we can.”

“We can.” Sheramiv smiled, and finished her glass of wine.

“Excellent.” Mark grinned.

“Mark and I will Speak with our gold Xervian neighbor in a few minutes.” Talia revealed. “We will invite her to visit us here, and our people should be prepared for the possibility that she will come. She may invite us to Xervia, in which case we’ll let you know before we go. And of course, we would require no other accompaniment on that trip. Our hostess and the Wards of Xervia would provide ample protection. We’ll let you know what we learn.

“After that, we’ll need privacy, either here or at the cottage, until we sleep. That will probably be in about eight hours, which will be about two hours after noon here. We’ll sleep late, taking extra-long days and nights until our sleep cycle matches with the local time.”

“I’ll take my leave, then.” Sheramiv stated as she rose. “There’s much to do, and I’m eager to return to it. Let me know when you awaken, which would be about midnight, here. I’ll update you on developments and progress.”

“Thank you, First Minister Sheramiv.” Mark grinned, as he felt her gathering power.

“Thank you, my Prince and Princess.” Sheramiv smiled, bowed, and was gone in a silent flash.

“Ahhh. Alone at last.” Mark smiled; touching his wineglass to Talia’s with a tink, and giving her a gentle hug with his other arm.

“Yes. It’s wonderful, and not a moment too soon.” Talia sighed as she snuggled into his embrace. “It feels like the end of a long and difficult day, yet our day is barely half over. It seems so weird that it’s almost dawn, when my time sense still insists that it’s three hours before dusk, as it is in First Valley right now.”

“Between the curse, the attack, and everything else, a difficult day is an understatement.” Mark agreed.

“Right now, I could use a little therapy, my husband. Would you be so kind as to assist me?” she murmured.

“In anything, my beautiful, magic wife.” he chuckled.

Talia set her glass down and turned in his arms, so she could gaze into his eyes from a few centimeters. “Thank you. For I intend that you will relax.” She gave him a gentle, lingering kiss that fired his ardor.

“Your wish is my command, my love.” he chuckled as she began kissing her way down his jawline to his ear. “And what will you be doing, while I am relaxing?”

“I will make love to you, my Prince. Very, gently, and, affectionately, and, lovingly, for that is the therapy I need.” she murmured, giving him a little kiss between each word. Then she softly giggled, and whispered directly into his ear.

“I’m sure the world won’t begrudge us a few minutes for love. A half hour, at least.”

“Or an hour.” he eagerly agreed.

As it happened, it was ninety minutes later before they were finished with making love and swimming in the cove after, and prepared for the call. Dawn had broken forty minutes earlier, but the sheltered beach still lay deep in shadow.

They Linked, then together Spoke the name. “Grakonexikaldoron.”

“Greetings. I was glad to know that you survived the attack upon you in Debivin today. Glad as well that you speak with me now.”

“We are honored to speak with you.” Talia returned. *“Would you care to visit us here?”*

“Yes, thank you.” the great gold dragon rumbled as she appeared with a flash and a moderate blast of air.

“Welcome to Hilia, and to our private beach.” Mark told her as he and Talia offered polite bows. *“I hope you are well?”*

“I am indeed, and I count it an honor to be here. I also hope that after my visit here, you would return with me to Xervia. Tithian prophesized that you would need the mountain you were given, and though there is speculation, we will not be sure why you will need it until you go there. The answer may well be very important.”

“That’s an investigation we’ll be glad to take part in.” Mark nodded, admiring the powerful and beautiful presence of the dragon. *“And speaking of Tithian, she suggested you might be able to help me with a bit of a problem.”*

“I would be glad to, if I can.”

Mark outlined the possible problems and advantages of his visual sensitivity to magic.

“I can help you.” the dragon nodded. *“At least with the problem of your being blinded by the flash of spells, though duplicating your ability to see magic directly will require some extensive research. Povon informed me today that you can receive complex spells, including Draconian spells, and be able to use them a short time later. I will Link with you, and show you a Draconian spell called Optical Attenuator, roughly translated. It blocks unsafe levels of energy from reaching your eyes, while allowing enough to pass for useful observation. It is used for studying the sun, lightning, and explosions, from close range. But with a bit of experimenting you should be able to adapt it to your needs quite nicely.”*

The process took only a second.

“You are indeed a marvel.” she stated when it was done, and chuckled with a deep throbbing sound. *“I must confess, much of my motive for asking you to speak with me was simple curiosity. You are both completely unique in my experience in many ways, so I hoped to impose on our association as neighbors for a chance to know you.”*

“We’re more than glad that you did, for there’s a couple of other things we’d like to ask you about.” Mark revealed.

“I am glad to answer as I can.”

“We’re wondering if we might get permission from The Grand Council of Xervia to use the north side of our volcano there as a firing range for artillery weapons and battle magic. It would be used by the instructors and students of our military academy, as well as by ourselves, and its purpose would include the testing of dangerous new magics. And we’re hoping it wouldn’t disturb you if we do so.”

“It would not disturb me, for the area is so full of volcanic activity that it’s never truly quiet there, and it’s often quite cacophonous.” the dragon laughed. *“Thus my lair is deep beneath the stone, where only soothing vibrations reach. But you must be aware that the air there is at times noxious or poisonous to your kind, due to volcanic fumes and vapors. All who go there must be protected from that danger. As for the permission, I cannot imagine it being denied to you, but you should go through proper channels by asking Somonik to present the question to The Grand Council on your behalf.”*

“I see. I’ll ask him now then, since we would like to know as soon as possible.” Mark said as he closed his eyes.

“So you spoke to Povon today?” Talia asked.

“I was instructing her and Kragorram in combat skills and battle magics, until we received the call to assemble with The Fast Response Force in Debivin, after you were attacked. They are a proud young pair, and I am the most senior dragon who has time available to teach them. Since we were released from the de-briefing after the mission, they have been practicing the exercises I have set them to, and will continue to do so for another sixty-seven minutes before they are finished for the day.”

“Ah. I’m glad for them, that they gained your instruction. I know that they hoped to train under you. Or under Somonik. And I imagine they somewhat expected that he would be too busy for them, since he now manages much of the communication of The Just Alliance, and I’m sure a great deal more as well.”

“We have the permission of Xervia to use our land there for anything we want.” Mark happily announced as he closed the Link with Somonik. *“And we can bring anyone there that bears the Marking of Osbald’s oath, so long as we keep their activities on our own land. I’ve already informed Sheramiv.”*

“Then shall we go there now?” the dragon asked. *“I will ward you from noxious fumes with a spell that removes them from your close proximity.”*

“Certainly, though I’ll need a moment to inform our chief of security of our departure.”

“Of course.” Grakonexikaldoron nodded.

“If I may, I would like to perform our Translocation.” Talia asked. “We intend to practice our spells at every opportunity.”

“For that matter, I have a magecraft spell against poisoned air that should protect us with certainty.” Mark added.

“Of course, it is wise of you to work to perfect your skills. But do you actually wish to attempt to include me in your Translocation?” the great gold asked Talia.

“If I may, though I ask that you guide me as an instructor. And Mark would join us in the Link, so that his observations can further his own experience.”

“Also wise of you.” the gold drake chuckled. “As Mark said so aptly earlier, it is an investigation I am glad to take part in, for I doubt that any of my race have ever been Translocated by any caster of any other race. Not that I doubt there are a few among the smaller races who could do it, but I doubt any have ever asked to do so. Though one of the demon-spawn might have done it, for they were allied with Dark Dragons in a recent conflict.

“Contrarily, the casting will require a great deal of power. More than most humanoid Master Wizards could gather, more even than most could use effectively if it was passed to them by others. It is a great distance from here to your property in Xervia, and my physical form has a great deal of bulk compared to one such as you. Try to be sure you have the reference with certainty, that your awareness of our weights, shapes, and volumes is exact, and that you have the strength for the act, before you commit yourself to the casting of the spell. For safety’s sake, I will give you a reference location at an altitude one hundred and fifty meters above the north slope. We will have to be ready to fly when we arrive, but it is better than risking contact with the ground as we appear. And if you falter, I will take over, though that would not be pleasant for either of us.”

“Thank you. I am fully confident, for while I will be casting the Translocate in the style of elven wizards, I will be using Mark’s power, which is many times greater than my own. For that matter, he will be double-checking for me as I prepare for the spell.”

“Very well then, we shall proceed.” Grakonexikaldoron Linked with Talia, who Linked with Mark. In less than ten heartbeats knowledge was passed and considered, power was drawn, the spell was cast.

Mark was ready with the magecraft Pure Breath and Flight spells, casting them on himself and Talia before they’d fallen a quarter-meter.

“Thank you Love, I can take it now.” Talia giggled as she cast her own Flight spell.

“Well done, both of you.” Grakonexikaldoron bowed in mid-air, her wings beating gracefully as she hovered in place. “We are above the north slope of your mount. Distances can be deceptive in such a place, since there are no trees or other familiar things to give scale to the sight. I can tell you that the bottom of the valley before you is the longest of the three boundaries of your property, at forty-four kilometers. The rim of the crater is over eight kilometers higher than the bottom of the valley.”

Mark and Talia observed the completely desolate landscape, much of it covered in fine gray ash that swirled in the wind, the rest was solidified lava flows that striped the slopes in gray and black and red. Then they turned to look behind and up at the crater’s rim. “We’re about three quarters of the way up, it seems. And if this is the north slope, it’s late morning here.” Mark commented.

“You are correct.”

“It’s a lot bigger than I expected.” Talia remarked. “It’s so much bigger than the volcano at Hilia. The slope is much more steep here as well.”

“Let’s fly up to the crater, so we can test Tithian’s theory.” Mark suggested.

“And what did she theorize?” Grakonexikaldoron asked as they turned and flew.

“That the crater would reflect the source of my power to a focus point above the bowl, allowing me a faster or more powerful recovery if I become depleted.”

“That is the most popular theory, and the one I hold to as well.” the drake nodded. “If you wish, I can locate the exact position of the focus for you.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that.”

Little more than a minute later they flew over the snow-dusted rim of the crater. It was over a kilometer and a half wide and half a kilometer deep, it’s surface composed of cracked and broken volcanic glass of a deep dark blue that glistened and glared in the clear sunlight. Only a crescent below the rim on the eastern side was in shadow.

A moment later Mark accelerated eagerly. “Tithian was right! Already I can feel the power here! It shouldn’t be hard to find the focus by the feeling of it!”

“If that is so, its qualities as a reflector could be much improved if the surface was melted smooth.” the gold dragon commented as they soared easily above the rim. “This bowl was full of lava at the height of the last eruption

here, and as the lava receded it also cooled and hardened, forming this bowl. As the material finished cooling and contracting the surface was broken as it was pulled apart.”

“Like a dried-up puddle.” Mark observed.

“Exactly. Almost all of the pieces remain in place, yet the reflection will be scattered somewhat. The effective focus will therefore be much larger than you are. It could be made to reflect on a point the size of your body if it were smoothed and shaped carefully enough.

“Even as imperfect as it is, should the properties of the obsidian be such that it reflects your power efficiently, this crater may provide you with dangerous amounts of power due to its vast area alone. Be wary of this as we approach the focus.”

“I assure you, it’s a great sensation so far!” Mark whooped. “Link with me! You have to feel this!”

The truth of his words was revealed as he felt them sharing his sensations.

“That is ecstasy indeed.” the dragon rumbled in amazed wonder.

Mark continued flying up over the crater until he felt the sensation diminishing, then stopped, and slowly flew back and forth until he had defined the area of maximum effect as a sphere about three hundred meters in diameter. Finally he drifted to the center of the focus and hovered there, dragon and elf floating just above him and to either side. He slowly rotated in place, soaking up the power and taking in the panoramic view of dozens of volcanoes extending to the horizon in all directions. Many were smoking, and a few showed rivers of fire upon their flanks.

Talia turned to follow his gaze. “From here, this land has a wondrous beauty, though it is a harsh scape indeed.”

“True, beautiful and harsh and deadly.” the dragon agreed. “The Kwetkerthok call this land Death’s Teeth in their language, and they are a hardy folk. Even among my race there are few who choose to dwell in the heart of it, as I do, for there are dangers here that are deadly to any living being. Even Draconians. But I love it here, and I have become expert in dealing with its hazards. The great eruptions present the most risk, yet they have beauty and power that could humble a god.”

They lapsed into silence for almost ten minutes, then Talia spoke. “You might not want to push your limits too closely the first time, my love.”

“Ahh, I guess you’re right.” Mark regretfully agreed. “I’ve got all I can hold, and it’s starting to make me sweat. It still feels so nice, yet all things come to an end I suppose.”

Grakonexikaldoron drifted over so that Mark was in her shadow. “As I thought. You are glowing. You have absorbed all the power you can contain, and the excess is manifesting as emitted heat and light. I suggest that you vacate the focus immediately.”

“Right.” Mark rose another hundred meters, then moved toward the north rim as the other two paced him.

“We have gained valuable knowledge here today.” the dragon rumbled thoughtfully. “You gave me much of value by allowing me to be Linked with you while you were absorbing power here. Furthermore, knowing that this crater reflects and concentrates your energizing power, and knowing the frequency of the energy you draw from, we can use this location to further study that energy, and its emission from the sun.

“May I propose an accord? My companions and I among the magic researchers of Xervia will undertake the reshaping and smoothing of the inner surface of the crater, as I suggested earlier, in return for your permission for us to use this as a place of study, at all times when it will not inconvenience you for us to do so, in perpetuity.”

“Hmm. That certainly seems like a good deal for me.” Mark mused. “Though I would prefer if we amended the proposed accord to include magic researchers from every nation of The Just Alliance, so long as they wear the Marking of Osbald’s Oath. Let them all study here, and contribute to the improvements if they wish.

“I think you Xervians probably know more about magic than the humanoid races, and that you dragons are probably most knowledgeable of all. But I saw today that even one of the most knowledgeable Healers among your race learned important things from Healers of the other races of the alliance. I’d bet that the same would be true for those who study magic. I hope that you all contribute to our academy’s faculty of magic studies, and that you all benefit from it. The Library of The Just Alliance is important, so that there’s a place where all the knowledge is available. But I think a University of The Just Alliance is just as important, for the sharing and teaching of skills and techniques that can’t be fully described in a book, and for research. Each race has a different kind of mind, and all will have unique perspectives to offer.

“And you know, more and more I’m convinced that contributing to this sharing of knowledge and skills is as important as achieving peace and justice in the world. I think we should make it all one big interacting institution. The Academy of Knowledge of The Just Alliance. The military school should be the military faculty of The Academy, rather than being independent, so it’s students can learn about more than just war. The library should be The Library of The Academy, and available to all.”

“Which would make the firing range for artillery and battle spells on the north slope here a facility of the military faculty of The Academy of Knowledge.” Talia mused. “We could have some comfortable research facilities and guesting quarters built on the north rim, which would then be a facility of the faculty of magic.”

“True, and the firing range would also be useful for any dangerous magic research, whether or not it had any direct military application.” Mark pointed out. “For that matter, if we build one building on the north rim for both faculties, they can use the windows facing into the crater to observe the research there, and the windows facing north for observing the firing range. I can’t help but think that the two groups will engage in some valuable sharing of ideas, particularly if they also share dining and recreation facilities.

“And this place needs a name. How about Focus Mountain?”

“I like that.” Talia smiled.

“Your thinking is quick and of high quality.” the dragon nodded as they flew over the very place they planned to build. “On behalf of my Xervian associates, I will agree to the amended accord as you have described.

“I will offer you a further accord. The utility of this north valley for your purposes would be greatly increased if you also controlled the slope opposite, so that you could use the entire valley. As it happens, I own that mountain, for my territory includes the twenty-three volcanoes closest to my lair. Except this one, of course. If you build me a laboratory in your facility here, to my design, wherein I and those I choose to assist me may conduct research into matters of my deciding, I will give you that mountain.”

“Agreed, and thank you. Though I can’t promise when the construction will begin, or finish.” Mark told her. “Our finances are fully extended for at least a few weeks, and I don’t know how much has been contributed to The Academy.”

“Ah. I have some wealth I will contribute. Perhaps I can find some time to encourage others to donate as well.”

“That is generous of you, since I suspect you could afford to have your own laboratory built here, and have it all to yourself.” Talia chuckled.

“True. But if I did that, other researchers would be more likely to resent me for it. And I have no real use for that mountain anyway. Since I swore upon the Truthstone, I find I am much less covetous, and much less protective of the sanctity of my territory. Until I took the oath, I felt only a burning resentment that Tithian had pressured me into giving up part of my territory. Now I look forward to sharing the grim beauty of this land with others who would never have had a chance to see it.”

“Worthy thoughts, my beautiful friend and neighbor.” Talia nodded as she again enjoyed the panoramic view. “You should contact Sheramiv, our First Minister, with your laboratory design, and to arrange to contribute any donations you might solicit. But I think we should be going soon, for we’ve much to do before we sleep, and I think we’ll be spent by the time it’s all done.”

The gold drake back-winged to a hover. “If I may, I have one more favor to ask of you. Two, actually.”

“Certainly.” Talia smiled.

“I have a friendship name, given to me by a young drake a few eons past. I would be honored if you would both call me Gran.”

“Why thank you, Gran!” Mark grinned. “I realize what an honor you do us.”

“Not at all. Secondly, before you go Mark, while you still hold all the power you can contain, it would be very useful to measure your strength with it.”

“I’d like that very much, actually!” Mark laughed. “I have an assignment from the Eldest to learn how I compare to others in every measure, and how they compare to each other. Earlier today we were discussing how magic users’ strength can be measured and compared by how much they can lift with a Movement spell. Would that suit your purposes as well?”

“It would. We could lift stone, and I have a spell that will measure its weight with fair accuracy.” Gran agreed. “Let us fly down to the bottom of the north slope. There is a great deal of loose stone there.”

When they reached the bottom they alighted on the ground, to free more of their power and concentration for the test.

“I’ll go first.” Talia said with a grin. She considered the mess of boulders, scree, gravel and ash that filled the bottom of the valley, cast Movement on a great mass of it, and lifted. She was surprised at how easy it came up. “Just a moment, I can do more than that.” she said as the rough sphere of loose debris rose a couple of meters, and the sides of the crater she’d left slid down and settled a bit. She picked up more and more, a stream of material rising from the bottom of the hole to add itself to the floating conglomeration. The rising flow slowed as a sweat broke out on her forehead and her brow furrowed in tense concentration. With the addition of one last fist-sized rock, she gave a tight little nod.

“You have lifted one hundred ninety-three tonnes and three hundred and eighty-six kilos.” Gran declared, and Talia dropped her burden with a relieved deep breath, the rock crashing down and rattling as it settled.

“Well done, love!” Mark hugged his tiny wife, who beamed with pride.

The dragon waved her wings enough to fan away the cloud of ash that rose.

“Tons is accurate enough, I think. Now let me try it while casting with Talia’s power.” Mark said, and cast.

“One hundred seventy-one and a third tons.” Gran stated.

“That’s with the wizard’s Movement spell.” Mark said as he lifted again. “Now let’s see what I can do with the magecraft version of it.”

“One hundred eighty-two tons.” Gran revealed. “More, though still less than Talia achieved casting her own power. Now I will test my strength. I know from other tests that my power has neither grown nor faded since my first eon, but I have never tested it by measured Movement.”

She cast upon the debris much further away, and the mass she Moved made the earlier lifts seen tiny by comparison. She raised it just clear of the surrounding terrain, added another clump of boulders, then carefully lowered it to help keep the rising ash cloud to a minimum.

“I have lifted nineteen thousand, four hundred and eleven tons.” she stated, then turned her head away and spewed a six meter wide fireball that dissipated as it rose. “Excuse me. That’s how my people must vent the heat of exertion. Dragon-sweat, you might say.”

“That was incredibly impressive!” Talia congratulated in amazement.

“Thank you, though I deem it will seem less so after your husband has done his lift.” the dragon chuckled.

“You think Mark can lift more than that?!”

“I am quite sure of it. His lift should exceed mine as mine exceeded yours.”

“Well, here goes.” Mark grinned, then his expression hardened in concentration. The rumble of stone on stone was deafening as he began lifting from as far away as the dragon had. He lifted the entire mass of debris from a length of the valley floor, exposing the bare rock where the two slopes met, then added more and more, clearing the bedrock for hundreds of meters. “That’s it!” he finally gasped between gritted teeth, and lowered his burden.

“Now *that* was very impressive!” Gran congratulated. “You have lifted seven hundred and sixteen thousand, four hundred and sixty-eight tons of stone and ash! I doubt very much that any living mortal could equal such a feat!”

“And I’m fairly sure I’ll improve on that, since I’m still such a beginner at using my power.” Mark panted, wiping sweat from his brow with both hands.

“Oooh, my husband, that was magnificent!” Talia grinned as she hugged his right thigh. “And strangely, seeing you do such mighty work fills me with desire for you!”

“Naturally enough, young one!” Gran laughed, her booming guffaws filling the air with powerful pulses of sound that shook the bones of her companions. “Might is always attractive in a male, among all peoples!”

“Can I try it casting your power, Mark?” Talia eagerly asked.

“Of course!” he laughed.

She concentrated, and tried to duplicate his feat, but only managed a fraction of it before she was forced to lower the broken stones.

“One hundred and eighty-nine thousand, twenty-seven tons.” Gran declared in mild surprise.

“Just over a quarter of what you did.” Talia panted.

“Perhaps it’s because I used up so much of my power with my own lift.” Mark speculated. “Let me check.” He cast again, and the dragon cast a Wind spell, as the cloud of dust and ash they were raising was more than she could clear with her wings.

“Six hundred and ninety-one thousand tons. Almost as much as you lifted the first time.” the dragon pronounced.

“Ah. Then my lesser lift wasn’t due to your power being depleted, my dearest.” Talia smiled, still affectionately hugging his leg. “From the evidence, one cannot cast the power of another with as much strength as the supplier of the power can cast it themselves, which makes sense. Beyond that, your ability to cast a larger portion of my power than I can cast of yours is probably due to your greater natural talent.”

“I must agree.” Gran nodded. “And I thank you for this experience, but this coating of ash upon me is starting to irritate me, and I yearn to bathe. The next time you come here you must visit my lair, that I may show you some proper Xervian hospitality.”

“We’ll be glad to, and soon.” Mark agreed with a bow, then playfully swept Talia up in his arms. “And we welcome you at Hilia, always. Health and happiness, Gran.”

“Thank you.” With that, Grakonexikaldoron, mightiest of gold dragons, graced them with a bow, then waved as she straightened. “Until next time we meet, Prince Mark, Princess Talia, fare you well, and may you also enjoy health and happiness.”

“Fare well, Gran!” Talia called and waved.

Mark also waved as he cast the Optical Attenuator spell. When the dragon disappeared the flash was still bright, but not bright enough to leave spots in his eyes. He decided that he’d leave it running constantly from now on.

“*Come my love.*” Mark told his Talia as he Linked with her. “*Let’s go home. And If I may, I’d like to cast the Translocate this time.*”

“*Certainly, dearest. I’m sure you’re fully ready and prepared.*”

“*All right. Here we go!*”

When Yazadril, Nemia, Hilsith and Alilia arrived at the cottage it was three hours to midnight in First Valley, yet here on Hilia it was an hour and a half after dawn.

“Good day, and welcome Your Majesties, Hilsith.” Balen gave a quick curtsy with her greeting. “Mark and Talia ask you to join them at the royal beach. But I’m to caution you to not disturb them when you arrive, for they are in the midst of delicate procedures. Here’s the location reference.”

“Thank you, Balen.” Yazadril smiled.

A moment later they appeared in a marked arrival circle, it’s bright blue glow shining in the dimness of a small clearing between an overhanging cliff of black rock and the edge of a jungle. They took a narrow and meandering path marked with a glowing green line through eighty meters of dim tropical forest, then emerged onto the black sand beach. The cliffs on three sides ensured that the sun wouldn’t shine directly down on the beach till later in the morning, so all about was in shadow. The lagoon was calm, there was no wind, and the silence was almost total.

Halfway down the beach Mark sat with his legs folded beneath him, facing out at the lagoon, his arms wrapped around Talia’s waist. She sat in his lap with her back to him and her legs straight out before her, the backs of her hands resting on his knees, the sword Ria unsheathed and resting on her palms with the pommel on her right, the bared blade on her left.

Gathered at the top of the beach were Povon, Kragorram, Equemev, and Silaran. The elves silently made their way to join them.

“*Greetings.*” Equemev offered, Speaking Elven for courtesy’s sake.

“*And good day to you. What transpires?*” Yazadril inquired as he felt Equemev draw all eight into her Speaking.

“*I have been monitoring them passively, as has the spirit of the sword.*” Povon reported. “*Not that I could help doing so, given the immense magnitude of the psionic energy he is expending.*”

“*Their Link is deeper and more thorough than I have ever seen before, yet I am sure that Mark has the situation well controlled. His emotions indicate that he is being very cautious, yet he is confident. So far as I can tell, Talia is completely passive. She has given him complete access to her mind, and allows him to do as he wills with her. A very brave trust I think, given his almost complete inexperience.*”

“*At first he merely studied her, and I think he has come close to knowing the totality of her being. I doubt even you could perform so thorough a Reading in so short a time, Prince of The High People.*”

“*His interest focused for a while, and then he Set some of his knowledge and experience into her mind in a way that is completely new. I am not certain, but I think he learned everything she knows of wizardry during that time, then taught her all the magecraft he learned from Ria, as well as his years of training as a warrior and scout. Those three processes took about seven minutes in total, during which time neither felt the slightest discomfort.*”

“*I thought then that I had reached the limits of amazement.*”

“*Over the next six minutes they reached the thoroughness of Linking they are experiencing now, and he then isolated the curse, establishing quite clearly which parts of her mind and power were her own, and which were the curse. That came through quite clearly, for he had a moment of delighted epiphany about it.*”

“*Then he... He introduced himself to it. Then he actually enhanced it somehow. You could say that after that they chatted for a while, the curse and him. His recognition that the curse realized that it had been improved was quite clear. After that, well, I could be wrong, but I believe he began to negotiate with it! He continues to do so now, but he is doing something else as well, something subtle, yet profound.*”

“*Do you think he is risking harm to my daughter or himself?*” Nemia asked, her expression tight with worry.

Povon took a deep breath as she considered, and let it out with a puff of white smoke and steam. “*No. Surprising to say so, considering the bare facts of what he does, and his inexperience. But I truly think he has things well in*

hand, as you humanoids might say. For now at least. It is the most incredible display of inherent, intuitive psionic talent ever seen on this world, of that I am quite sure.”

“He truly makes it seem easy.” Equemev marveled.

They waited patiently for eight minutes, then Mark Spoke to Alilia. The rest heard, since Alilia was still Linked to them through Equemev.

“Alilia, you are sworn to me, and I now call upon you.” he politely stated. “Please come and kneel close on my left, and open your mind to me.”

Alilia swallowed hard, and moved to comply as she withdrew from the Link with Equemev.

“Great missing Gods!” Nemia exclaimed a minute later. “Even I can feel the power of that Link, and I am not very sensitive that way! And we are fifteen meters away!”

Seventeen minutes later, Alilia rose, and rejoined the seven observers.

“May I ask what he did?” Povon inquired.

“He Read everything I have felt about casting the curse since I realized that Talia was innocent in Bezedil’s death.” Alilia revealed in wonder. “He seeks to dissuade the curse from causing hurt, and hopes that my remorse and guilt at casting the curse unjustly will help to convince it.

“Then, you could say he browsed through my knowledge and experience of wizardry, and availed himself of most of the spells I know! As easy as reaching out and picking a plum from a basket at the market! He would think to himself, ‘Well those looks interesting, I’ll take them, and that’ll be useful, I’ll take those ones too!’ And when he does this, he has no need to wait for the information to be integrated into his mind, as he did when Ria passed him her magecraft! The magic he learns himself from the mind of another is fully understood, practiced, usable, in only a moment! Right now he could cast my spells as competently as I could myself!

“His motivations for both of those are understandable, but what is puzzling is that he then Read my experiences with Bezedil. Mark made sure he had every moment I ever spent with my son, every thought and sensation of it. He was most interested in those times when I was Linked with Bezedil, which I had done often and deeply, both as mother and as instructor of wizardry.

“All in all, it was a somewhat frightening experience. Already his power, his spellcraft, and his psionic ability may well exceed my own. And with every moment that passes, his abilities grow.

“I think... I think I love him. That in itself is... very disturbing.”

“You love him?” Nemia asked in surprise. “Romantically or platonically?”

“I am not sure.”

Again they waited patiently.

More than half an hour later, Mark sighed deeply as he lay back on the black sand, drawing Talia down with him. She turned in his arms and wept as she kissed him.

“He is finished. He feels that his efforts were successful.” Povon judged, and moved to join the couple with light leap and a single careful wing stroke.

The rest joined her, gathered around Mark and Talia.

Talia was whispering; “Thank you, thank you, I love you so much, thank you...”

“Can we offer you any assistance?” Hilsith asked.

“No thanks, we’re fine.” Mark grinned.

“May I ask what you did?” Yazadril inquired.

“I bargained with the curse!” Mark laughed. “Talia was cursed to be raped by me until the end of days. I wanted to weaken the rape part, and strengthen the ‘until the end of days’ part. Showing it how Alilia felt about it helped a lot.

“First I gave it temporary access to some of my mental capacity, since it really wasn’t smart enough to bargain with effectively before that.

“Then I pointed out how it had needed my help to assure Talia’s survival today, and related what I’d learned about how it could’ve been overpowered and defeated. If the attack had been much stronger than it was today, Talia would’ve been beyond saving. And if I hadn’t turned off the tine band, I think we’d both be gone.

“If one of us dies, the curse fails, and it doesn’t want that.

“In order to prevent that, I gave it access to all of Talia’s power, to all of my power, and to all of the power we each gained from the chapel and all the elves with our wedding vows. I think that gives the curse enough power to eventually heal us from anything, even if the dust and mist of our bodies were evenly distributed in all the air and water and rock of Kellaran.

“In return, the curse allowed me to alter it so that it wouldn’t cause Talia any agony when it comes upon her, she’ll just feel an urge, like a mild hunger or an addiction, though once the urge comes upon her it will grow stronger until the curse is fulfilled.

“Then I gave it access to all the spells we know, so that it can cast them in our defense next time. The idea being that it can act to save our lives, instead of bringing us back after we’re dead. It will be perpetually on guard, which we can’t be if we’re asleep or distracted.

“In return for that, I got to modify it so that it won’t prevent Talia from having a baby any more.

“Finally, so that it can have the speed to act to save us, even if we’re attacked as suddenly as we were today, I gave it the ability to access all of both our mental capacity. In return for that, I asked that I wouldn’t have to hurt Talia to fulfill the curse, that I could just pretend to rape her. Tie her up and such, without actually hurting her. The curse wouldn’t go for that, but we then found a different compromise that the curse would accept, and now I’ll only have to hurt her as much as we did last night. We were trying to prepare for when the curse would strike, and I did hurt her, but it was more like rough play, and it wasn’t bad enough to prevent her from enjoying herself.”

“Immensely, I might add!” Talia laughed, tears still streaming down her face, her voice still thick with emotion.

“I’ll still have to spank her and tie her up and such, but I won’t have to physically hurt her as much, and I won’t have to be nasty emotionally! I can be as nice and as loving as I want while I’m doing it!” Mark crowed in joy, whirling Talia around with a few spontaneous dance steps across the cool black sand. “With the added protections it’ll give us, I think I’ve really converted the curse to a blessing!

“I tell you, it’s not perfect, but I really count it as a victory! The finest thing I’ve ever done, so far at least!

“And the best part is, the power of the curse is now intermingled with our power, and the limited mind it had is now diluted and distributed among both of our minds. It’s lost its individuality, and is now a much more natural and integrated part of both of us. It no longer exists within Talia, or within her mind, as a discrete entity. Having it there like that was a huge subconscious irritation to her.”

“It was, and even though I didn’t consciously realize that, it’s a huge relief now that it’s corrected.” Talia agreed. “And there were other benefits from the process! Mark has mastered the spell that the curse uses to re-assemble us!”

“That’s right.” Mark nodded. “The critical part is having an absolutely complete awareness of the subject. Knowing exactly where every speck of material in the subject’s body is and how it’s moving, and what every spark of energy in it is doing, at least on an intuitive level. Most of the curse’s previous mental capacity was dedicated to knowing all this about both me and Talia at all times, so that it could reconstruct us from our last moment of completeness whenever anything happened to us.

“Alilia’s subconscious intuitive awareness is so extensive, she had that level of detail in her knowledge and awareness of Bezedil, especially from Linking with him so deeply and so often. For the last few years Alilia was always in psionic contact with her son, if only subconsciously. That’s how she knew when Bezedil fell. And I have Read that knowledge.

“Talia was incredibly close to Dalia, and knew her incredibly well, and had Linked deeply with her sister many times. I’ve Read her knowledge and experience of Dalia. But her awareness of Dalia wasn’t as complete as Alilia’s awareness of Bezedil. On the other hand, Nemia also knew the moment when Dalia fell, so she was also subconsciously Linked with Dalia at all times, as Alilia was with Bezedil. And I’m sure that you, Yazadril, with your famed ability to consciously retain detail, have excellently detailed recollections of your daughter. So, Yazadril and Nemia, I now ask you to allow me to Read from you both every detail of your every experience and thoughts of Dalia, and that should give me a detailed enough awareness of her.

“Then we’ll go to Focus Mountain so I can completely recharge my power. And then we’ll go to First Valley, where I will bring Dalia and Bezedil back to life!”

Everyone stared open mouthed in astonishment, including Talia.

“You cannot do that!” Povon suddenly exclaimed. “They are almost four days dead! It would be necromancy! It is forbidden!”

“Then it’s equally necromancy that Talia and I are alive right now!” Mark retorted. “And personally, I don’t give a damn if it’s forbidden! They were innocents who were slain by a curse! I can save them, so I’d be Compelled to do so by my swearing of Osbald’s Oath, since this definitely falls under protection of the innocent! That is, if I wasn’t going to do it anyway, because it’s the right thing to do!”

“I will allow no one to prevent this!” Alilia stated, her manner determined, her voice hard. “I think he can do it, and if anyone thinks to stop him from saving my son, they will have to kill me first! If it was your child, Povon, do you think you would do any different?”

“Read me now, Mark, then Yazadril!” Nemia urgently begged. “I would have no delay!”

“I need to think about this.” Yazadril murmured.

“How can you say that?!” Nemia barked, turning on her husband angrily.

Yazadril flinched, then took a deep breath to steady himself. “My love. You know how much I loved Dalia. You know how much I want her back.

“But the implications of this are all-encompassing! With this act we may trigger events that lead to the elimination of death on Kellaran! From there, either we institute universal breeding controls, leading to the elimination of youth, or the planet will be stripped of life by the exploding multitudes until there is only cannibalism!”

“You’re over-reacting, Yazadril.” Mark countered with an obvious exercise of patience. He considered for a moment, then sadly shook his head, and continued in a more restrained tone. “Nothing can eliminate death. I can’t bring back my family, Yazadril. I didn’t know them well enough, no one did, and that’s the case for almost everyone else as well.

“Only the exceptional qualities of Alilia’s and Talia’s minds and talents and powers allowed the curse to know us well enough to save our lives. Alilia knew her son well enough, and perhaps she knows you and Gorsh well enough, but I doubt that even she knows anyone else well enough for it to work. Talia didn’t know Dalia well enough, but between her and Nemia and you, I’m pretty sure it’ll work. If Nemia helps me and you don’t, I’m still going to try my best to save Dalia.

“Even if I knew my family well enough, I still couldn’t bring them back, because the material of their bodies would be very widely dispersed by now. Scavengers had been at them, and they were left there for a month, and then given a conventional Finitran burial. Whereas Hilsith cast a preservation spell on Dalia and Bezedil about three minutes after they fell, and then reset their bones and tissues so that they’d be presentable in open caskets. The only parts of them that I won’t have right there is the blood they lost into the ground and into their clothing, and while it’s probably pretty widely dispersed, it’s not really that much material, and I’m pretty sure that I have enough power to retrieve it.

“So, for me to save anyone with the spell, they have to have been Linked deeply and often with one or more of the best psionicists in the world, and they may need to be Linked with that person at the moment of death, and almost all of their material has to be available, or magically preserved by a Healer who’s a wizard.

“Furthermore, the spell is incredibly difficult. The way it was created by Alilia as part of her curse was completely intuitive and subconscious, and required a moment of supreme distress and absolute focus, not to mention all of her power. It doesn’t work like anything else, and neither Ria nor Alilia even know any words for most of what it does, especially at the last moment when re-assembly is complete and life is restored.

“I’m confident I can cast it for two reasons. One is that I’m one of the most talented magic users around right now. I hate to boast, but there it is. More important than that, the spell is part of me now, as the curse is part of me now. It’s almost more like an innate ability than a spell. I doubt there’s even a handful alive who have both the talent and the power to cast this spell at will, even if I was capable of teaching it to them, and I doubt I could. Believe me, I think I could teach you all the magecraft Ria knows in about three minutes, but I couldn’t teach you the re-integration spell.

“This is never going to be widely available.

“Now, I *am* going to save Dalia and Bezedil. Believe me, if you help me, things are going to work out. If you oppose me there’s going to be hurt feelings at the very least, and I don’t really think you can stop me anyway.”

“No. You could be stopped, but you are right in that none of us want the consequences of that.” Poven stated with determination. “You must be convinced, if not to cease your plan, then at least to wait until it has been discussed and approved by the Assembly of The Just Alliance. And I am not the person to convince you. I will inform Somonik of these events, as I feel is my duty.”

“Mark, please!” Nemia begged.

“We’re going to Focus Mountain. You can come along if you want.” Mark stated determinedly, taking Talia and Nemia by the hand, and the three vanished.

They appeared over the blue bowl of the volcano, hundreds of meters in the air. Nemia was taken by surprise, but Mark caught her with Movement before she had fallen five centimeters, while Talia cast Pure Breath on the three of them. He glanced up at the sun overhead, then considered it’s visible light reflecting from the broken volcanic glass below, and estimated the location of the reflection’s focus. The three flew there, still holding hands, as he Linked with Nemia.

The seven who’d been left on the beach appeared moments later and flew to catch up, the unicorns seeming to gallop across thin air. They all drifted to a stop in mid-air as Somonik, Tithian, and Grakonexikaldoron appeared around them.

“What will you do?” Povon demanded of them in agitation.

“He is deeply Linked with the elf Nemia right now, as you can tell, even as he regains his full strength.” Somonik observed with interest. “We will not disturb him until he is finished the Reading. After that, we will try to convince him to wait, at least until the possible consequences of his actions are more fully understood. If he will not wait, we will not impede him.”

“There is no law that forbids what he does, and it is being done for the first time.” Tithian added. *“If there is harm done because of it, then we may have the right to act against its repetition in the future, but right now we have no legal basis to prevent him.”*

“As well, we have trusted his wisdom thus far, and his arguments seem sound, so I see no reason why we should lose faith in him now. To do so without very strong reason would also be politically unwise, to say the least.”

“There is also the consideration that what he intends is groundbreaking and innovative spellcraft, and personally, I hope to be allowed to observe.”

“I am relieved.” Povon sighed. “I’m still worried, but I did inform you, so I’ve done my duty and it’s out of my hands, as they say in this language. I’m glad there will be no conflict.”

“I’m glad as well, and you can’t talk me out of it.” Mark grinned, having no trouble carrying on a conversation while conducting his Reading of Nemia. “Yazadril? What do you say? Will you help me bring your daughter back?”

“I guess I will.” Yazadril smiled.

“Do you mind if I look through your spells while I’m at it? I’ll give you your choices of the magecraft spells I have in return if you want.”

“Certainly!” Yazadril chuckled. “If you can teach them to me as easily as Povon tells me you taught them to Talia, I’ll take every one of them, and you can have as many of mine as you think you can absorb!”

“I’ll take that as a challenge!” Mark returned.

To everyone’s surprise, they heard the psionic voice of the Eldest. *“I would very much like to see the resurrection.”*

“You may see it through my eyes, Eldest, for I welcome your Link.” Povon offered.

“Thank you, child.” the most ancient dragon acknowledged.

Mark finished his Reading of Nemia, and gave her a quick hug. “Thanks. I’m surprised at how many interesting spells you know that Talia and Alilia didn’t.”

“Thank you.” Nemia smiled. “I don’t know if I can cast any of those magecraft spells, but I’ll work on it.”

“I welcome you to the proceedings, Eldest.” Mark called.

“It will be interesting, boy. As Somonik said, there is always something new. And it’s good to see that you’re filling the corners in the big empty room of your mind. Your collection of marbles grows rapidly.”

“Thank you.” Mark chuckled.

“Allow me to establish the Link in both directions, Mark.” Yazadril suggested. “I will pass you my awareness of Dalia while you Read my spellcraft and pass me your magecraft. We can save time that way.”

“All right. I’ll be at maximum power in a few minutes, and hopefully we’ll be done by then.”

Only seven minutes was required, and Mark was starting to feel a little dazed when they were finished, but the feeling passed as soon as he withdrew from the Link. He’d lingered in the focus longer than he would have otherwise, and sweat ran down his face as he became overcharged with power.

A quarter second after he and Yazadril ended their Link, he Translocated the entire party.

“Great screaming gods above and below!” Povon exclaimed as they all emerged into darkness and moonlight. “Now *that* was an impressive jump!”

“I’ll say it was, for this is First Valley, and that’s our home below!” Nemia agreed as they began descending, following Mark’s lead. “Himself, five elves, three unicorns and four dragons, halfway around the world on a moment’s whim!”

“Yazadril, you have an impressive mind indeed.” Mark grinned as he wiped his brow, still panting a bit as he recovered from his exertion. “Your attention to detail, the immensity of your knowledge, and your skill as a psionist are all masterful. I think I got a third of your spells, and I already had about another third of them from Alilia. I think I could have handled more, but I was overheating in the focus, and I’m pretty sure I got all the ones I’ll ever have any use for. On the other hand, I only took a working knowledge of them. I didn’t bother with learning most of the background and theory, because that would take me about six thousand years, I think. Truly, I don’t have much talent for that kind of theory. Give me a set of steps to follow, and I follow them. And your mind as a whole is truly very beautiful and wondrous in its complexity.”

“Thank you.” Yazadril nodded, deep in thought, letting Nemia guide his flight “You are simply astonishing, my boy. Simply astonishing. Already your skill as a psionist exceeds my own in some ways, and I’ve no doubt your knowledge of spellcraft will as well, likely within the week.

“And this magecraft from the youth of Visinniria is absolutely fascinating.”

They landed on the lawn beside Yazadril’s oak, and Mark directed them to stand clear of the place where Dalia and Bezedil had fallen, allowing only Talia to remain at his side. They stood floating with their feet thirty centimeters above the grass.

He knew the exact location of Dalia and Bezedil’s open caskets in the Hall of the Council of The High People, having learned it from his Readings of Yazadril and Nemia and Alilia. He projected his consciousness there, considered the two massive marble sarcophagi and the two who rested within, and Translocated them to the clearing. As he gathered Talia up and settled her in his arms, he Moved the caskets to parallel positions on either side of the impact site, leaving them Levitated a thirty centimeters above the grass.

“Hilsith, at my direction, please give me a psionic signal as you release the preservation spell.” he asked. “I’ll cast the re-integration spell at that same moment.”

“At your direction.” the Healer agreed. “I believe it would help if I fetched you the robe she was wearing when they fell, for as you said, much of her lost blood was soaked into the cloth, and a bit of his was as well. Alilia’s apparel was also taken, and a good bit of Bezedil’s blood was absorbed by it as she embraced his fallen form. He was naked when he jumped. The garments were preserved as evidence against the possibility of an investigation into their deaths.”

With that, she Summoned the bloodstained items to a place on the ground between the caskets.

“Thank you. We’ll do Bezedil first. I’ll need a few moments to prepare myself.”

“Quite understandable.” she nodded.

He settled into a state of light meditation and mentally rehearsed what he was going to do.

A small crowd began to gather; most still in their nightclothes, and were quietly cautioned to take no action and to observe silently from the ground. Word was spread psionically by Yazadril and Nemia that no one was to cast even the most minor spell anywhere in First Valley until further notice, and that ban included Flight. They explained that any distraction or any disturbance in the magic field could have critical consequences.

Finally, Mark opened his eyes and took a deep breath, then stepped over to the foot of Bezedil’s coffin. “Whenever you’re ready, Hilsith.”

“Now.”

She released the preservation spells on Bezedil and the robes, and Mark cast his spell, spending so much power that he shone bright enough to hurt the eyes of the closest observers, lighting up the night all around. His illumination made it easy to see the dust-like motes that rushed into the fallen elf’s still form, most of it coming from the ground and the robe beside the coffin, and barely visible bits from the air all around, with slightly more of those coming from the direction of the lake.

In less than a minute the flow of particles slowed to a trickle. A minute after that, only an occasional mote could be detected, and the light began to increase in brilliance.

“Ward your eyes from the flash!” Mark called, the stress of his efforts plain in his tone.

Three seconds later came the silent flash. Mark heaved a deep sigh. His joyous smile shone with a new enlightenment. “Well. That wasn’t as hard as I thought it’d be.” he softly rumbled.

Alilia ran forward just after the light faded, already reaching for her son’s mind with a Link. “He lives!” she cried as she reached his side, and she clutched his hand as she burst into tears. A moment later she was joined by Hilsith, who quickly cast diagnostic spells, then nodded and smiled reassuringly.

Bezedil’s eyes fluttered open. “I am alive!” he quietly marveled in Elvish, then suddenly sat up and desperately looked around. “Dalia!” he cried as he saw her in her casket.

Mark cast Tongues for Elvish upon himself, and smiled to himself at the joy of being able to do so.

“She will be well in a few moments.” Alilia tearfully assured Bezedil as she threw her arms around him, so overcome with emotion she was barely able to speak. “Oh my son! I cannot believe I have you back!”

“Please, save Dalia!” he begged.

“I will.” Mark assured him in Elvish as he nodded and stepped over to Dalia’s casket. “When you are ready, Hilsith.”

“That human saved me?” Bezedil asked in confusion.

“Yes.” Hilsith told him with a reassuring smile. “Now hush, while he works his Healing.”

“Now.” she told Mark as she released the Preservation, and he cast his spell upon Dalia. It seemed to work even more quickly this time, and only eighty-five seconds after the shine of the spell lit the clearing for the second time, he called; “Ware the flash!”

The light burst into maximum intensity, then was gone.

Talia, Nemia and Yazadril immediately Linked with Dalia, and wept with joy and relief. They gathered around her, Talia and Yazadril each taking one of her hands, while Nemia caressed her cheek. Bezedil rose to join them, and Alilia and Hilsith helped him do so, for he was still weak.

Dalia’s eyes suddenly opened wide, and as soon as she focused on the faces above her, she reached up and pulled Bezedil down into her embrace. “Oh my love! My destined love!” she sobbed, laughing and crying at the same time.

“My friend Mark? Are you well?” Kragorram politely inquired, continuing the trend to speak in Elvish.

“Yes my friend, I am well.” Mark grinned as he walked over to the trunk of the mighty oak and leaned heavily against it. He turned toward The Living Palace and went to one knee, then sat cross-legged. “I am weary and drained, but I am satisfied. Very satisfied.”

In the distant darkness Stripe roared and Scout cried out with a *skreee* as Mark mentally called to them.

Moments later Scout’s piercing cry was heard again, from just overhead this time, and Mark held his arm out in time for the great eagle to land on it. He brought the bird close and murmured fondly as he gently scratched the feathers beneath the powerful beak with fingertip. Stripe bounded into view and nuzzled Mark’s face in delight. The huge cat lay down and presented his belly for a scratch as Mark greeted him, and gave out a rumbling purr of contentment.

Dalia was helped from her casket, and as she hugged her family one after another, many approached to greet her. Some of her friends were crying with joy, and some seemed stunned with amazement, while some were tentative, as if afraid to believe her resurrection was real.

“They are still weak, and will soon require rest to recover fully.” Hilsith pronounced firmly to all. “So please, keep your greetings brief.”

“Mark, that was an act of greatness.” Somonik quietly rumbled. “Perhaps it was a miracle. I am honored to have witnessed it.”

“I thank you. I would be honored if you would join us on our beach in Hilia when we are done here, along with all who were with us at Focus Mountain earlier.”

“It would be our pleasure, I am sure.” Somonik nodded.

Scout hopped down to the ground beside Stripe so he could receive his equal share of scratches and attention, and Mark gladly obliged as he and the ancient white drake regarded the joyous reunion.

“Hilsith, what should I do with these caskets?” Mark asked a minute later.

“If you do not mind doing so, you should send them to the storage cavern just west of the Hall of The Council, which is to the north from here. Here is the reference.”

“I thank you.” Mark nodded, and cast the spell as easy as thinking about it.

A few jumped in surprise when the caskets disappeared with a flash.

“That is so peculiar, Mark.” Yazadril mused. “The light when you cast is given off by you, and not by the object you are casting upon.”

“Come, let me formally introduce you to some wonderful people, including the one who has Healed you.” Talia grinned through tears of joy as she placed an arm across her sister’s shoulders and turned her around.

As Bezedil slipped an arm around Dalia’s waist from the other side, the two of them finally took note of the fact that they were in the presence of three unicorns and four dragons.

Talia tried to suppress her grin a bit. “I am very proud to introduce my dear twin sister Dalia, and Bezedil, son of Princess Alilia.

“This is Tithian; Speaker and Justicer of the Senate of The People of Morning, Somonik; Eldest of The Ninety Nine, and Grakonexikaldoron; our friend and neighbor to our new property in Xervia. These are Lady Equemev, Sir Silaran, Sir Kragorram, and Lady Povon, our friends and companions at arms in The Six of Hilia.”

Those worthy beings bowed politely to the two stunned elves, who stared in amazement for a moment, then remembered to bow and say; “We are pleased to meet you.”

Then Talia walked them a few steps over to Mark, who rose to greet them.

“Dalia, Bezedil, it is my great joy to introduce my husband Mark, my dearest, greatest love, he who is Markhan Reginus Longstrider the Fifth, Ranger of Finitra, Knight of The High People, Prince of Hilia, Key to The Just Alliance of the peoples of four continents and all the seas, key to the imminent nexus of the world of Kellaran. He who leads by suggestion. And, one of the foremost wielders of spellcraft in this or any age. He first used magic the day before yesterday, so one could say he is learning quickly, and tomorrow he will be seventeen years old.

“I think he is a bit bashful about being announced with such formality and praise, but I truly am inordinately proud of him.” Tears of joy were still streaming down her cheeks, and she felt almost overwhelmed with happiness as he effortlessly swept her up and gave her a warm hug.

“Sweet missing gods.” Bezedil whispered, staring up at the huge youth.

“And you are our savior.” Dalia murmured reverently.

“I would not go that far.” Mark chuckled, grinning at the incredible resemblance between Talia and her twin. “I Healed you, but Alilia created the spell I used, and almost everyone who came here with us tonight have made crucial contributions to my ability to cast the Healing. Especially Talia, your parents, and Alilia.

“And I am very pleased to meet you both.”

“It was more than a Healing.” Dalia quietly protested. “I died. I remember it all too distinctly. I was dead. There is absolutely no denying that. You have brought us back from the dead. It is a miracle.”

“I doubt it, really.” he smiled, then chuckled a little. “Actually, now that I have considered it, I could prove that it was not a miracle. Still, I thank you for your kind sentiments.”

He shook his head and chuckled again. “In truth, I should be thanking you for more than your words. Other than falling in love with Talia, healing you two was the most beautiful experience I have ever had. And not only for the great satisfaction of a good deed well done, in reversing an evil curse to restore two innocent elves. The casting of the spell itself gave me an extremely pleasurable feeling. It was truly a wondrous ecstasy.”

He directed his next words to Talia. “It was like drawing power at Focus Mountain, only much moreso.”

“And that was pleasurable indeed.” she nodded with a smile of understanding, then sobered a bit. “But it is late, and you are weary, and these two need their rest. And the assassins still lurk out in the world somewhere. Let us go back to Hilia where it is safe.”

“We are not safe here?” Dalia asked in surprise. “We are within the Wards of The Nine Valleys! What could be safer than that?”

“Xervia is more strongly Warded, and Hilia even moreso.” Talia explained. “There is much to tell you of what has occurred since you fell. Perhaps Mark could show you after we have returned to Hilia, to save some time, but for now we must go.

“If everyone is ready, I will be honored if you will all allow me to take us there.”

“Give me a minute, my love.” Mark said as he set her down, then crouched and laid his hands on Stripe and Scout’s heads. “I will work with these fine beasts a bit, to ensure they are comfortable with the Translocation.”

“And I need a minute to say goodbye to everyone.” Dalia added as she looked to her waiting friends.

“Balén, Zayobod, Holanam, and most of the rest of our friends who are not here now, all await us at Hilia.” Talia told her. “They will be overjoyed to see you are well.”

“This place Hilia that you speak of, may I invite my family and friends from Heartwood to join us there?” Bezedil inquired. “They should know that I am well, and once they know that, they will be desperate to see my recovery with their own eyes.”

“Hmm. Hilia does not yet have a great deal of facilities, and I know you are well liked.” Talia mused. “Perhaps you could Speak to them, inform them of your Healing, and invite the thirty who are most dear to you to join us.”

“That would be fine.” Bezedil grinned. “Truly, I lack the strength to endure the enthusiasm of more of them than that. And their joy and relief at my well-being will be enthusiastic indeed, for my friends tend to be rambunctious. Perhaps I will invite only twenty.”

“And I will invite twenty.” Dalia smiled.

“When we arrive at Hilia, there will be matters discussed that should be kept from public knowledge, for the time being.” Tithian pronounced. *“I therefore request that you ask your loved ones to delay their arrival until those discussions are concluded. I expect they will require a half hour at least, and an hour at most.”*

“But there is no need to include me in those discussions.” Bezedil replied, puzzled. “So why should I not be reunited with those I care for while your conference is conducted?”

“There are two reasons.” Tithian informed him. *“The first is that your mother must be included in the deliberations, and at this moment, it would be cruel to her to ask her to withdraw from you beyond her arm’s reach. The same is true of Dalia and her parents. They thought you dead, and now you are restored to them, and they will not risk the slightest chance of losing you again. Their need to be close to their children is paramount now, both for the joy of your presence, and because their protective instincts are in full arousal. Remember, to you, you were only gone a moment, but for them it has been four days of agony at your loss.”*

Bezedil turned and noticed Alilia behind his left shoulder, and she graced him with a smile that beamed with her love for him, tears of joy still streaming down her face. She nodded her agreement with Tithian.

Close by, Dalia was sharing tearfully joyous hugs and kisses and words of farewell with her friends, while Yazadril and Nemia waited to her either side, as close to her as they could be without being inhibiting to her, basking in her presence, their expressions like Alilia's. Talia shared a one armed hug with Nemia, and her manner was the same.

"Furthermore, both you and Dalia must be included in our deliberations, and there are indeed very strong reasons why it must be so. I will not reveal the reasons here, for they are themselves confidential."

"I see. I will Speak with my family and friends, then." Bezedil nodded. "I will see them in an hour, which is not very long to wait."

Soon everyone was ready, and with a final wave by Dalia to her friends, Talia Translocated the entire leaving group to the secluded beach at Hilia; two animals, eight humanoids, three unicorns, and four dragons.

"Ha! I did it!" she laughed, then let herself settle to the sand as Scout abruptly flew off, and Stripe loped into the jungle.

"That bordered on foolish, my love." Mark grinned. He scooped her up and set her in his lap as he sat on a log by the firepit.

"Are you well?" Nemia asked in concern.

"Yes, though I feel like I have run for ten miles." Talia grinned. "My wizard's power was recovered from my exertions earlier today, and I wished to cast such a mighty spell on my own, without resorting to the use of Mark's power. It was good exercise."

The rest reclined or sat, each in their way, in a large loose circle around the firepit, the dragons lying on their bellies with their heads close to the pit and their bodies extended across the beach toward the lagoon. Kragorram's tail swished slowly back and forth in the water.

"How could you have so surpassed me in such a short time?" Dalia asked in astonishment.

"You should have Mark show you, for he has the psionic skill to show you everything that has happened in a few seconds, without causing you discomfort." She hugged Mark and gave him an admiring grin. "I can borrow some of his power, but I cannot borrow his talent."

"Actually, you can." Mark chuckled. "I will show you how at a later moment."

"May we Link with you?" he asked of Dalia and Bezedil. "As Talia said, it will only require a few seconds."

"I find that difficult to believe." Bezedil laughed. "But, since everyone else who is gathered here seems unsurprised by the assertion, I will take your word on it. Please proceed."

Dalia nodded her agreement, and Mark cast the Link between the four of them.

He ended it only three seconds later. "There. I could give it to you in more detail, but that is enough for you to understand what has occurred, at least as much as we do. And as you now know, our understanding of recent events is far from complete. Besides that, there are some things that have happened, and, well, it is just not my place to tell you about them."

"That was wondrous!" Dalia breathed. "All that in so short a time! And as easy as reminding me of things I have always known!"

"I can further your understanding of a few things, at least." Bezedil said thoughtfully. "Regarding the events that led to Dalia and I taking our fateful leap from her bedroom window; Talia, you were deceived by the curse against my mother and Yazadril. You were never my destined love. Dalia is, and always was, as I am her destined love. You must see that now."

"I was deceived by that curse as well, for in no other way could I ever have mistaken you for her. The two of you are indeed practically identical in appearance, but your respective scents are very distinct. Also, since I had already been Linked with her before you entered her room, I should have noticed the difference between her psionic aura and yours."

"You are right." Talia nodded. "I realized as soon as you were revived that I no longer felt any of what I felt for you that day. I assumed that my feelings for you had been wiped away by my love for Mark, and by the magic of our wedding vows sworn in Laylas chapel. But now it seems incredible that I could ever have felt for you that way."

"Of course!" Dalia grinned, and gave Bezedil's ear a lick. "The destined love of a rake like Bezedil would have to be a flirt like me! Since Mark here has won your heart, he must be as sentimental and as hopelessly romantic as you are yourself, as only such a one as that could truly earn your love!"

"He is that." Talia giggled, and gave Mark a quick kiss on his chin.

"It makes so much more sense that way as well." Mark mused. "Dalia was Bezedil's destined love, but I suspect she was prevented from realizing that until just before she left her bedroom and went to Yazadril's study. Which

explains why she and Bezedil were so quickly in bed together, and also explains why she would be so devastated at seeing him in Talia's arms that she jumped from the window."

"You are partly right." Dalia told him. "I did indeed realize that he was my destined love just before I left the room. I realized it when he asked me if I had dreamt of him, and I remembered that I had. I was troubled by that, because I had been so influenced by Talia's concept of destined love that I thought it was synonymous with strict monogamy, and I have no wish to so completely alter my lifestyle. That is why I left the room, but after I had thought about it for a while, I realized that even though Bezedil is my destined love, he is hardly the type to object to sharing our bed with others.

"And I suspect that Mark is right, in that in addition to its more blatant deceptions, the curse was amplifying our emotions.

"When I returned to my room I was deceived by the curse again. I was not devastated by betrayal or jealousy at seeing Talia and Bezedil only a moment from copulation. I thought that Bezedil was Talia's destined love, as well as my own, and he seemed to return her love as strongly as he had returned mine. I failed to see the ridiculousness of that. It never occurred to me that he had mistaken her for me. I thought then that we were both destined to love him, and though I would not have minded sharing his love with her, I thought that she was such a monogamist that she would never be able to share his love with me. It seemed that to keep the love of either of them, I would have to lose the love of the other. I could not love Bezedil if Talia would hate me for it, but I could not live without loving him. So I jumped out the window.

"That entire thought process surely must have been the product of the Finitran wizard's curse, since it is completely unlike me to do such a thing. In hindsight, it seems more than a little ludicrous. Even if Talia truly loved Bezedil, and he had not jumped in my wake, their love would have been irreparably tainted by my death."

"Though I would have preferred to have done the deed myself, it is some satisfaction that the wizard who most likely cast the curse is dead." Bezedil growled through clenched teeth.

"I could not agree more." Alilia nodded with a similarly grim expression.

"Forgive me if I am inadvertently treading on elven cultural beliefs, but did you experience anything between the moment of your death and the moment you were revived?" Somonik asked. "By that I mean, I know that elves hold that upon their deaths, their souls are gathered by the elven god Heklivmalgiso, to dwell with him and Visinniria thereafter in an elven paradise. There is considerable evidence supporting the truth of this, from the time before the gods withdrew from the world. Did you experience anything like that?"

"No, not at all." Bezedil frowned. "As Tithian sensed when she Spoke with me, it seemed but a moment between dying and living again. If my soul went anywhere or met the gods, I do not remember it."

"Which proves that when I revived you, it was no miracle, since you were not completely dead, in some way." Mark stated. "It simply was not your time to go. You were destined to continue living, so your god did not take your souls to paradise. From what Alilia knows of necromancy, if someone dies and their body is brought back to life, the soul is already gone, so they become the undead. They are mindless empty shells, until animated by the will of the necromancer. This is obviously not the case with you, so your soul must have stayed within you."

"No. You are wrong." Dalia firmly insisted. "The other explanation fits the facts far more aptly I think. You are not quite seventeen years old, a barely adult human, and you cast your first spell less than two days ago. Yet you are now first in power among those here, who are all among the mightiest of their races. From your test of strength today, I think you might hold all of us at bay at once in any contest of power. You already have the spellcraft of a senior elven mage and of four of the finest elven wizards, as well as the unicorn and dragon spells of Movement. Your power will likely continue to grow stronger for a long time to come, and with your ability to learn directly from the minds of others, your knowledge will grow much faster than that.

"And, you have returned the dead to life, including the restoration of our souls. That is a divine act; one of the Prerequisites of Divinity. Another is immortality, and you may have achieved that today, with your enhancement and improvement of the blessing that you have made from a curse. Though the thought may be uncomfortable, you must face this truth; you are a god, or you will be one soon."

Suddenly, six incredible figures appeared, striking wonder, awe and fear into the hearts of those who witnessed the Manifestation. Mark and the others immediately bowed most abjectly. In a way that was impossible to explain, they knew that they were in the presence of gods.

"Rise, and be at your ease." a goddess said, and when they had, they saw that she was a beautiful tropical human, about a hundred and seventy centimeters tall with straight black hair, black skin, and black eyes. She appeared to be about thirty-five years old, and wore a simple gray dress of course weave, plain sandals, and a string of small seashells as a necklace. She had a smile that made one think she was trying not to laugh at a private joke. "We do not stand on

ceremony anymore. I am Neela, whom Mark has referred to as Sweet Mother of All, a charming if inaccurate appellation.”

All the mortals present heard the words of the gods in their own native languages, though most didn't realize that until they discussed the experience later.

The next goddess to introduce herself looked completely familiar. “I am Visinniria.” She looked just like Ria, except that she moved naturally, wore gleaming golden armor, and gave a comforting smile.

“And I am Heklivmalgiso.” said the elf who stood beside her in a fine white silk robe. His long beard and hair were flowing and white, and both hung down to his waist. His sparkling blue eyes were crinkled at the corners with his wise and benevolent smile.

“*I am Falgaroth.*” announced the eighth god of The People of Morning. He appeared as a huge unicorn whose mass must have been double that of Silaran's, for he had the heavy build of a war-horse, and he stood over a meter higher than Silaran as well. Every part of him was exactly the same bright blue as his Truthstone, from the tip of his two meter length of horn to the long hair that grew down from his ankles to almost cover his platter-sized hooves. The hair of his luxurious mane was over a meter long, that of his tail two meters long.

Next and most awesome was a Dragon god of incredible dimension and beauty. He was at least double Kragorram's length, and he seemed entirely composed of smooth and flowing liquid quicksilver that was somehow contained in dragon shape. “I am Amirgath.” he stated, and though it seemed that he made some effort to limit his volume, his voice shook the mortals who listened with a tone like boulders of diamond being crushed, and leaves fell from the jungle bushes with it's mighty vibration.

He indicated the being who floated two meters above the black sand to his left. “This is Glup, god of the Zurb who are gone from the waters of this world, first god of Kellaran.”

Glup appeared to be a somewhat like a glossy black lobster almost four meters in length, but he had three pairs of symmetrical claws gently waving before him, and six pairs of legs hanging down beneath him. His twelve pairs of antennas were arranged in two rows down the back of his head and thorax. These appendages whipped back and forth with quick and complex movements whose elegant patterns suggested intelligent action; perhaps sign language, or perhaps dance. The large pair of gleaming black eyes regarded Mark steadily.

Mark spontaneously bowed again, and found the courage to address the gods. “We are overjoyed and deeply honored to welcome you all to Hilia.”

“Thank you.” Neela laughed, and the sound brought joy to all who heard it, then she addressed Dalia. “Child, two possible explanations for your resurrection by Mark have been stated; That your soul was not drawn to paradise by Heklivmalgiso because you were destined to continue with your life, and that Mark was able to restore your soul to you along with your life because he has joined us in divinity. But there are other possibilities. A deity may have assisted Mark, or acted through him. Heklivmalgiso may not collect the souls of elves, or take them to paradise, or he may only take some of them. The existence of the soul as an entity separate from the mind may be false. Some time spent in thought upon the subject will reveal further possible explanations.

“We will not reveal which of those possibilities is the truth of your resurrection, and the answer is irrelevant to you for now. When your mortal life is truly done, then you will know.

“What is important is that however it was done, you live again by Mark's doing, and that is indeed one of the Prerequisites of Divinity. You have raised the possibility that he has achieved immortality, another of the Prerequisites. And you spoke crucial words when you said to him; ‘you are a god’.

“These things have called me here, as Mark's matron goddess, so that he may be Examined to determine whether he is indeed a Candidate for Divinity. This is a very rare occurrence, and it drew the attention of all the gods. It was then seen that Mark might not be the only Candidate among you.”

She turned to Mark and gave him a reassuring smile. “Glup of the Zurb is here because you and he are the only two who wield the power of the second source at this time, and though only you two have it, he considers all who do so to be his responsibility, to some extent.

“Early in my divinity, some of my priests studied what was known of Glup, and of his power as he wielded it as a mortal, before he became god of the Zurb. They had a word for those who wield that power, and it was warlock. Glup has not been many persons' patron god since his people passed from this world, and it would mean much to him if you would consider him the patron god of warlocks, though you are the only one there is right now, and there have only been a few others in the past. It is a sentiment only, since we are restricted from affecting the affairs of mortals in almost every way, but it would be a kind gesture.

“I am honored to do so, Glup.” Mark stated sincerely with a bow for the eldest god, and the god of the Zurb floated forward and stopped beside Neela.

“It is good.” Neela quietly pronounced. “And now, as your patron god and goddess, we will Examine you.” She gave Mark another warm smile of reassurance and reached up to gently lay her hand on the left side of his head, while Glup reached out with his left front antenna and touched it to Mark’s right temple.

Mark gasped and stiffened at the indescribable ecstasy of their touch, but it was gone in a moment.

“You are indeed a Candidate, and your Candidacy is very strong. Glup estimates that there is a three in ten chance that you will become a god, and I cannot disagree.”

Mark shuddered deeply at the revelation, then considered what she’d said. “Then there is a seven in ten chance that I will *not* become a god?” he asked.

“That is so.” she nodded.

She and Glup moved back, and Visinniria and Heklivmalgiso came forward.

“Though I hesitate to disagree with my companions, I would think that the future is still far too malleable to consider such numerical estimates of the probability of your ascension to be in any way reliable.” Heklivmalgiso chuckled. “And even if they are accurate, their truth only applies to the moment of your Examination. Your Candidacy will strengthen or wane with further events and changes of circumstance, and with your own development.

“Though it is not official, may I Examine you?”

“Of course.” Mark nodded as he went to one knee and bowed his head.

The god of the elves touched his forehead with a fingertip for just a moment, leaving a tantalizing memory of the wonder of it. “Your Candidacy is strong, they have the truth of that without a doubt.”

He turned his regard to Talia. “Visinniria and I are here because the possibility exists that you are also a Candidate.” he told her with a gentle tone, then slowly turned and met the eyes of every mortal present. “Others of you may be Candidates as well. You must each be Examined by a god of your own race, by your patron deity if you hold to one. Thus this unique gathering, which is completely unprecedented in every respect.”

Talia could only nod and bow her head. She trembled at the touch of two divine elves, and gasped when it was withdrawn.

“You are a Candidate.” Visinniria pronounced.

“She is, but her Candidacy is dependent upon his.” Heklivmalgiso said as he indicated Mark. “If he reaches godhood, it is likely that she will as well. If he does not, she will not.

“This becomes more fascinating by the moment. Let us proceed.”

Wasting little time, they Examined Yazadril, Nemia, Alilia, Hilsith, Dalia, and Bezedil.

“You are all Candidates.” Visinniria revealed, and seemed surprised to find it so as she turned to her companion. “Talia’s Candidacy is not so strong as Mark’s, Yazadril’s and Alilia’s are weaker than hers, Nemia’s, Hilsith’s, Bezedil’s and Dalia’s are weaker yet, in that order. But they are all legitimate Candidates for Divinity!”

“And what a complex linkage of dependencies!” Heklivmalgiso stated in delight. “Yazadril, your candidacy is partially dependent on Mark’s. If he does not reach ascension, you still may, but you are more likely to gain divinity if he gains it before you.

“Alilia, the same is true of you, your Candidacy is partially dependent on Mark’s.

“Nemia, your Candidacy is dependent on Yazadril’s.

“Hilsith, yours is dependent on both Mark’s and Yazadril’s.

“Bezedil and Dalia, your Candidacies are dependent on Mark’s, and also upon each other’s. You will ascend either both together or not at all, and then only if Mark has done so first.”

He and Visinniria withdrew a bit.

Falgaroth came to the fore with a prancing step. He addressed Tithian, Equemev, and Silaran, though all who were gathered heard him. “*I became your patron deity when you swore upon my Truthstone, though you did not consciously choose it to be so. Join me now, and be Examined.*”

The three unicorns moved forward as one, and together touched the tips of their horns to their god’s. The four stood unmoving for over a minute.

“*Tithian, you are a strong Candidate in your own right.*” Falgaroth declared as they stepped back from him. “*Equemev, Silaran, your Candidacies are as Bezedil’s and Dalia’s. They are dependent on Mark’s ascension, and on each other’s. You will join the gods together and after he does, or not at all.*”

Amirgath Examined the four dragons with no more than a glance at each of them. Then he spoke, his voice as awesome as before. “Somonik, I have waited a long time to tell you that I am very proud of you. Your Candidacy is strong.”

Somonik bowed. “Thank you.” was his simple reply.

“Povon and Kragorram, you are the third mated pair whose Candidacies are dependent upon Mark’s, and upon each other’s. Together and after him, or not at all.” Amirgath informed them, and they bowed in acknowledgment. He turned then to the unicorn god. “Falgaroth, bring the stone.”
Falgaroth nodded.

His great Truthstone appeared hovering a meter above the sand, and the translucent green form of The Eldest appeared with it. He floated down before Amirgath and crouched on all fours with his snout touching the sand. “*My Lord.*” he intoned with reverence.

“Ah, but it is good to see you again my friend, face to face, so to speak.” Amirgath chuckled as The Eldest rose to face him. “It is good for us that you and Somonik hold me as your patron deity, and that these other three do not presently hold to one, thus it is I who have come here today to represent the gods of our people.

“Your Candidacy is almost assured. Unless you are killed, you will ascend, either within the next three years, or during a more minor nexus some twelve hundred years hence.”

“*I have recently become aware of that, my Lord.*” The Eldest informed his god, and there may have been a trace of smug satisfaction in his tone. “*It became apparent shortly after I bonded with the Truthstone.*”

“Then you are also aware that there is a great deal of progress required of you, and in a very short time, particularly if you are to join us before the imminent nexus has passed.”

“*I do know that, my Lord.*” The Eldest thoughtfully replied. “*Yet I am unsure of how I can accomplish it.*”

“You will know soon.” Amirgath assured him. “When the chance comes, seize it.”

He turned to the last mortal to be addressed by a god. “Grakonexikaldoron, you alone among these here are not a Candidate for Divinity at this time, though that may change in the future.”

“Thank you, my Lord.” the gold drake chuckled, her voice almost as impressive as his.

“You do not wish to achieve divinity?” Amirgath asked.

“Not for many eons yet, my Lord. My learning is slow but deep, and I still have much to learn, and much to do. For now, I covet not the power, nor the responsibility, for I have a sufficiency of both. Beyond that, swearing on the Truthstone of Falgaroth has changed me and given new meaning to my life, and I very much wish to remain on the mortal plane to enjoy it for some time yet.”

“That is good.” Amirgath agreed, and turned a bit to address all the gathered mortals.

“This is a day that will *never* be forgotten. Never has more than four Candidates been discovered in any given millennium. To find fifteen in a single place, on a single day, is a staggering and incredible event. Even to the gods. As well, you are the first Candidates to be discovered in thirty-two thousand years. It is an indication of the importance of the coming Nexus. Thus you have been graced by our visitation, the first Manifestation of the gods upon Kellaran since we withdrew from the world. In every other instance since Glup discovered me when I was the first Candidate, the Candidate was Examined from afar, and was never made aware of any part of the process, whatever the result.

“However, it has been decided by all the gods that it would be beneficial if there were more of us. Thus we encourage you Candidates to strive with your utmost effort to achieve this promise and potential that you have, and we sincerely hope that every one of you succeeds in becoming one of the new gods.

“But heed this warning: About thirty thousand years ago it was determined beyond doubt that dependence on the gods was weakening the peoples of Kellaran. Religion was stifling growth and creativity, and contributing to war and social stagnation, though we did not wish it to be so. And so we prepared, and then we withdrew from the world. We made it absolutely clear to everyone that from that time forward, we would take no part in the affairs of mortals. Everyone knows that if they pray to us, we may be listening, and we may not, but in either case we will not answer, and we will not act. Thus it must ever be. We will allow no effective religion on Kellaran, and in this matter alone will we act to affect the mortal world.

“Since the withdrawal, there have been those who have falsely declared themselves to be gods, and those who have falsely declared others to be gods. That is blasphemy, for only we can decide who is a Candidate, and who has joined us in divinity, and Glup is the final arbiter of such decisions.

“We act against such blasphemies with the subtlest practical methods, to hide our actions from mortal minds, but we do act swiftly and with finality. Thus, there have been no new religions, or worshipers at the alters of false gods.

“Since you are legitimate Candidates, the first since the withdrawal, your situation is entirely different. If any mortals declare you to be gods before you achieve divinity and are recognized by us, assuming that you will, that is blasphemy. We expect that you would act against that as we would, with the most subtle method you can use that is also swift and final. If you must sacrifice subtlety for swiftness and finality, you will do so. If you fail in this, and any significant number of mortals begin to worship you or pray to you, we will force you to withdraw from the world, and

we will erase your existence from the mortal plane. You will be more than gone from the world, it will be as if you were never conceived, and every effect of your life and existence on mortal reality will be erased.

“We will not allow you to reveal your Candidacy. Among yourselves, you may discuss our Manifestation and what we have revealed here, but you will be unable to speak of any of it, or to communicate it psionically, if any other mortal can hear or intercept your communications. Grakonexikaldoron, we include you in this.

“If any other mortals discover that any of you are Candidates by methods that are beyond your control, you will do what you must to prevent them from spreading the information. Again, if you fail, you may be forced to withdraw from mortal affairs. We would not be required to erase your existence from history in that case, so long as you are not worshiped as gods.

“Now you may ask questions of us, though we will not answer all.”

“Thank you.” Mark said after a moment, and swallowed the lump in his throat as he struggled to organize his thoughts. “I would like to know, if one of us does manage to become a god, we would have to withdraw from the world, right?”

“Not necessarily.” Neela responded. “So long as no mortal who is not a Candidate recognizes that you are divine, and no mortal worships you, and no mortal prays to you, you will not be required to withdraw from the mortal world. It is religion we have banned from Kellaran, not the presence of gods. We who are already gods must remain withdrawn, as to do otherwise would ensure the revival of the religions that were devoted to us.”

“I see.” Mark nodded, furiously trying to think, knowing that this was an incredibly valuable and totally unique opportunity. “What exactly does it mean to withdraw from the world?”

“It means that you do not live among mortals, and when you go among them, you must be unrecognizable, unnoticeable, or undetectable.” the ebon goddess replied. “You would also refrain from conspicuous acts of divine power. You would be unable to do otherwise, since all the gods enforce the withdrawal co-operatively.”

“But where would we live?” Mark asked.

Neela smiled. “That would be entirely up to you, so long as you do not dwell among the mortals of Kellaran. You would find that there are many fine choices available to you.”

“I see. What of the nexus, and the conspiracy, and the assassins and all of that? Can you give us any advise on any of that?”

This time the smile of the goddess was tinged with regret. “We may not, for to do so would be to act upon mortal affairs, and would thus violate the withdrawal.”

“I thought it might be so.” Mark nodded. “Can you can tell us why you want there to be new gods, when you do not want there to be any new religions?”

“I am sorry. We may not reveal that to any who have not reached Ascension.”

There was a moment of silence while Mark racked his brains for something pertinent to ask, to no avail. His thoughts seemed clouded, and he gave his head a shake in irritation as he tried to clear his mind. He realized that he still had the translation spell for Elvish activated, so he dismissed it. That helped a bit.

“*My Lord, I know my enemy lives.*” The Eldest pointed out to Amirgath. “*I know he is fully recovered now, and he will not have wasted his time since we last struggled. If he thinks that I am dead, he will consider himself to be the Eldest, and he will have taken you as his patron deity as tradition demands. He may be a Candidate. Perhaps it would be wise to Examine him. He will have an entourage of other beings of power gathered to him, and you may wish to Examine those as well.*”

The dragon god closed his eyes a moment, then considered the Eldest carefully. “Have a care, my friend. You verge on being too clever for your own good.”

The Eldest bowed, and made no other reply.

“Are there no more questions?” Neela asked, and received no reply. “Then our official duties here are finished.”

“Just a minute.” Mark said in Common with an irritated tone as he stepped over to the Truthstone and touched it with a fingertip. He flinched a bit as the god-power started rushing into him, but maintained the contact, hummed a slow descending arpeggio to find the right note to bring himself in tune with the stone, and smiled as he succeeded. He carefully laid both hands flat on the stone, and pressed his cheek to it as well.

Talia moved to join him, and he picked her up with one arm. She also pressed one hand and her cheek to the stone, her forehead touching Mark’s. Speaking together, they recited Osbald’s Oath. “I swear forevermore that I will not break the peace, that I will defend the innocent, and that I will uphold justice.”

As they fell silent again, Amirgath became alarmed. “They are drawing immense power from the stone! They have shielded us from their thoughts! Falgaroth, separate them from the stone!”

Falgaroth snorted and tossed his mane, his mighty horn waving in the air. “*I will not.*”

“Now we are blocked from the mind of Quewanak as well!” Amirgath roared, becoming angry, tossing his head back and blowing two thin jets of white-hot fire from his nostrils.

“He has given me your name, Eldest.” Mark chuckled.

“*Quite all right, my boy!*” the Eldest laughed. “*I would have told you within days, when you began your training with me.*”

Mark turned with Talia and placed his back to the stone, keeping his palm in contact with it, while Talia lifted hers and replaced it when they’d turned.

Mark regarded the gods, then spoke. “Remove the Glamour.”

“What?” Neela demanded in consternation.

“The Glamour, the Charm, whatever you want to call it.” Mark stated with determination. “The wonderful feeling of nirvana that we’re experiencing from being in your presence, the one that’s fogging my mind and preventing me from thinking straight. Remove it. Remove it from all of us.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible.” Heklivmalgiso patiently told him. “It’s a natural condition of our divinity. This feeling you describe radiates naturally from us, just as the heat of your body radiates from you.”

Mark frowned. “Now you’re lying to me. You’ve already said that you can go undetected among mortals, and that means you can prevent them from feeling the Glamour. You will remove it from us, now.”

“Now you go too far!!!” Amirgath roared in rage. “You will step away from the stone immediately, or I will utterly destroy you!”

“Perhaps.” Mark nodded. “And perhaps not. I’ve no wish to earn your enmity, Amirgath, but I feel a responsibility for every innocent person in The Just Alliance, every one of whom is threatened by the insidious conspiracy. I didn’t choose to be Key to the Alliance, but I am, and whereas yesterday I was little more than a figurehead, now I’m a force in this world. I now have the power to really do something to stop the conspiracy, and to protect my people.

“Then you gods come here and tell me that I’m a Candidate for Divinity, which I really couldn’t care less about right now, since it does nothing to help me with what I have to do.

“You’ve threatened that if anyone discovers that I’m a Candidate, or calls me a god, or worships me, regardless of whether or not I took part in it or even approved of it, that it will violate your strictures against religion on Kellaran, and you’ll remove me from the world. Thereby preventing me from fulfilling my responsibilities, in addition to being a crime against me. Your stricture against religion is none of my concern, nor is it my responsibility to enforce it, it’s yours. In my mind you’ve no right to come here to our realm and threaten me for failing to carry out your responsibilities.

“That’s the most important of many things that are seriously wrong about this situation, but I can’t think of the rest because of the Glamour you’re holding over my mind. There’s too much at stake to pass up this chance for a meaningful interaction with you, nor can I let the threat against me stand. I can’t do my duty if I have to run around all over the world searching for those who may be so foolish as to wish to worship me.

“Remove the Glamour.”

“And if we do not?!!” Amirgath demanded.

Mark gave him a glare of grim determination. “None of us wants a conflict here, Amirgath. But you should consider that Falgaroth is not the weakest of gods, and I know from the Eldest that when Falgaroth made the Truthstone, he poured his power into it for tens of thousands of years. It holds millions of times more power than he could call upon from within himself at any given moment. Talia and I now control about half of that.”

“This is unbelievable!!!” the quicksilver dragon god exclaimed, his tail lashing in the air. “Are you actually threatening me?!!!”

Mark kept a firm grip on himself and fought down his fear with a hard swallow. The air practically reeked with power and danger, and it took all of his own will, bolstered by Talia’s loving belief in him, to face Amirgath’s wrath. “I’m trying to negotiate with you.” he patiently explained. “A person likes to negotiate from a position of strength, and I’m smart enough to know that that’s not possible when dealing with the gods, even with the assistance of the Truthstone. But I also know that there can be no meaningful negotiation between us if I’m in a position of absolute weakness. And that’s not the case right now.”

“This is becoming a very dangerous situation.” Heklivmalgiso stated, seeming more than a little concerned. “We should depart.”

“You will not, until our business here is concluded.” Mark stated with quiet determination.

“Dear boy, do you truly think you could hold us here?” Neela asked with a loving smile.

“The Wards of Hilia are keyed to me and Talia.” Mark told her. “I’ve drawn their many layers together into one mighty shield, and inverted them. All of their barriers and defensive spells now face inward, rather than out. And they are now as completely aware of your presence as I am. You could get past them, but not without an expenditure of energy that would kill every living thing on the island, which now includes thousands of people from almost every race in The Just Alliance. And that would surely count as a massive interference in mortal affairs. Even for you gods, that would be a difficult thing to cover up.

“But look, all of that’s unnecessary. You said you ended religion on Kellaran to help prevent war, and to allow your peoples to grow and to fulfill their full potential. We stand for the same things. All I want is to have an uninhibited discourse with you, like civilized, rational people.

“On the other hand, I don’t know you, and I know very little about you, so there’s only one of you I can trust.”

“Thank you, Mark, I…” Neela started with a smile before Mark interrupted her.

“And it’s not you.” he stated.

Neela’s smile faded and she fell silent. A nasty little part of Mark wanted to chuckle at the sight of the first goddess of humans so suddenly and completely discomfited.

“Of all of you, Falgaroth is the only one who I *know* to have taken concrete action to uphold truth and justice, and he has done so by the creation of the Truthstone. He invested a great deal of time and effort to do so. His character and intentions infuse it, and are obvious to any who’ve sworn upon it. He also refused Amirgath’s order to separate me from the stone. Him I can trust. Though he is not of our race, Talia and I have now taken him as our patron god. Until the rest of you prove by your actions that you stand for justice, I cannot trust you.

“Now, remove the Glamour. I won’t ask again.”

There was a long, strained silence, then suddenly Visinniria laughed as she addressed her fellow gods. “We might as well admit it, he has us by the short hairs. You’ve all considered tens of thousands of possible responses in the last moment; the same as I have, and you know that co-operating with him is the least dangerous course of action. I warned you all that your arrogance would get you into trouble someday, and now your bright new kitten has turned out to be a tiger.

“Mark, I am containing my aura, ending it’s effect on your mind and emotions. Glup and Falgaroth did so when you first asked. You have obviously succeeded in disregarding most of our auras’ effects already, or you would never even have been able to consider questioning our will in any way. An incredible act of willpower from an infant like you, facing six gods.”

“Thank you.” Mark nodded, and turned to the other three in turn.

Neela shrugged, and Heklivmalgiso raised an eyebrow. Mark could feel it when they contained their auras, and he met the dragon god’s fierce glare without flinching.

“You have no idea what you’ve done.” Amirgath growled. “This was unforeseen. It was not included in our visions of the future, and now our knowledge of what will be lies in tatters.”

Mark gave him a shrug and an apologetic smile. “Well, I’m sorry about that, but a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do. Besides, you guys started this, not me. You should’ve stuck with the traditional plan, and examined me from afar, without notice. You must’ve given in to curiosity, or perhaps to the temptation to act like gods to a bunch of mortals for the first time in thirty thousand years.”

Amirgath held his glare for a moment, then suddenly chuckled. “So we did.

“I’ll give you this, child; you’ve no lack of courage. And *if* your actions did not flow from concern for others, including those of my people, I would destroy you for your arrogance. Despite your holding so much power from the Truthstone, you lack the speed of thought to stop me. You would be destroyed before you even realized my attack had been initiated.

“As it is, I will contain my aura.”

“Thank you.” Mark nodded. “Though there’s a big part of me that wishes I hadn’t had you do so. It was really a wonderful feeling.

“But now my mind is clear, and I realize what I could not while under your aura’s influence.”

He took a long moment to gather his thoughts, then addressed Neela. “You know, the thirty thousand years since the withdrawal may not seem like a very long time to you, but to my people it’s been eternity. I thought I knew a lot of history before I left home, but all I knew was the major events in the northern kingdoms over the last six thousand years or so. Those who lived with me in Shinosa Valley didn’t even know that there was ever a time when the gods were active in the world, or that there were any other gods than you. Most of us were unconvinced that there ever were any real gods at all. We didn’t even know your name, though I think that for it to have been lost, there must have

been a time when it was forbidden to speak it. We also pictured you as a northerner, with light skin and auburn hair and brown eyes.”

“Understandable.” Neela smiled, her good humor restored. “They would have long forgotten that when I was a mortal, we were still a new race. There were only a few tens of thousands of humans then, all living on the shores of a tropical sea, and all of us were colored as I am to protect us from the sun.”

“I see.” Mark nodded. “Our traditional beliefs said that you really were the mother of all, that you had created the sky and the stars and the world and everything on it, including every kind of life and every kind of people. But now I know you’re not like that.”

He looked around and met the eye of every god and goddess. “None of you are like that. You didn’t create the universe or the world or any of the races of people. Every one of you were once mortals, just like the rest of us.

“And while you may be far greater than us in power, and knowledge, and understanding of reality, you’re really no smarter or wiser for it, or any less vulnerable to character flaws like arrogance or racism. If you were, you would’ve realized the truths that I’ve realized recently. The truths that The Just Alliance was founded on; that there must be justice for all people, and unity and camaraderie among all people of good will, for therein lies our best chance to avoid war and to fulfill our potential.

“When there were religions, I’d bet that no one ever prayed to a god of any other race than their own. And with the possible exception of Glup, I’d bet each of you considers yourself to be a god or goddess of your own race. That Neela, you are a goddess of humans, and Amirgath, you’re a god of dragons, and so on. I think that situation should end.

“Just as I’m informally the leader of all the good people of The Just Alliance, regardless of their race, I think each of you should strive to be a god of all who are good and just, regardless of their race.

“I think your policy of non-participation with religion is wise, to some extent, but not completely. I don’t see that it does anyone any good to spend their time and effort on religious ceremony, or building temples, or prayer as a matter of course, unless they truly enjoy the activity for it’s own sake. Nor do I think it’s a good idea for you to take a hand in the everyday affairs of individuals, except for very rarely, and then only under the most extreme of circumstances. But then, the same could be said of me, or of any of the leaders in The Just Alliance, or of any of the senior wizards or sorcerers.

“But as to whether it’s a good idea for all of you to remain withdrawn from the world, that all depends on what you would do. If you were to come back and cause harm and injustice, that would of course be a bad thing. But if the gods were to return to the world, and you all declare yourselves united in favor of the principles of The Just Alliance, I don’t see how there could be any harm in that.

“I can understand why you might be unwilling to protect the innocent and uphold justice on an individual basis, so that your peoples can come to their own realization of their need to do that for themselves. But I can’t see any justifiable reason why you shouldn’t act to prevent war.

“I doubt any of you is willing to stand by and see your own race exterminated to the last individual, despite your withdrawal from the world. With the power available in the world today, it’s a possibility that at least one race could be exterminated if any major war occurs. Big wars grow from small wars, and if you act to stop wars when they’re small, you eliminate the possibility of needing to engage in a massive intervention later to prevent an extermination.”

“Unfortunately, things are not so simple, nor is war the only way for a race to become extinct.” Heklivmalgiso countered. “Without war, populations would grow unchecked. When their numbers became so great that the world cannot produce enough food to feed them all, there would be mass starvation. Then, there will be conflict over the remaining food supplies, either as organized war, or as a war of anarchy. This could happen much sooner than you might think. Given the present populations, it could be less than three hundred years from now. Over the long term, too little war is as dangerous as too much.”

“I refuse to accept that.” Mark stated emphatically. “The races have been around for millions of years, and still most of the world is pretty sparsely populated. There’s got to be more reasons for that than war. Beyond that, we can choose to have fewer children until the populations are stable, and we can learn to produce more food with magic, freeing the food supply from the limits of the availability of arable land. Eventually we can find new worlds and learn to Translocate to them.

“If necessary, we can make new worlds from scratch. I’ve been given to understand that there are huge chunks of the materials of worlds floating around in the sky, and if we use those to build new worlds, we won’t have to worry about them crashing into Kellaran anymore. Perhaps you gods should take up that task as a fitting challenge, since you don’t seem to be doing much with your immense power right now.”

“A worthy suggestion, if somewhat impertinently phrased.” Neela laughed.

“You know, now that I think about it,” Mark mused, “I think the best thing that could happen would be if all of you gods were to give up your claims to divinity, admit that it’s just as true to say that you’re just incredibly powerful spell-casters, join The Just Alliance, and swear Osbald’s Oath upon the Truthstone of Falgaroth.

“Learn to treat people as friends, instead of as lesser beings. If all the people and all the gods could be truly united in friendship, united in truth and openness and justice, Kellaran could be a paradise for all of us.”

Visinniria laughed. “Surely you are the Prince of Audacity! Those are some wonderful suggestions, but what if you are wrong? What if we are more than powerful spell-casters, and the differences between a mortal and a god are as profound as the difference between yourself and a pine tree?”

“I still don’t think it should give you any greater rights than any other thinking person of any race.” Mark insisted. “The differences between a dragon and a sprite are pretty extreme, but each have the same individual rights in The Just Alliance.”

“I see. Let’s suppose then that I do as you suggest. I declare myself to be a person like any other, and I swear on the stone to not break the peace, to protect the innocent, and to uphold justice. Assuming that I am bound by my vow, I would strive to protect the innocent, but from what? If it is within my power to protect them from every form of hurt and harm, to protect them from any danger, to protect them from death itself, should I do so? Should I protect them from heartache, jealousy, frustration, or boredom, if I can do so?”

“Yes!” Mark stated emphatically. “If you can do so in a healthy manner that is respectful of their rights! As I’ve said, everyone has the right to engage in reasonable risk, but beyond that, I aim to completely eliminate needless suffering and death from Kellaran!

“If I can teach people to make wise choices in life so that they can completely avoid heartache, jealousy, frustration and boredom, I will do so! If you used your power to assist in this education and training of the people, you can help eliminate those problems without violating anyone’s rights! If I could cast a spell that would make sure that no one ever dropped a frying pan on their foot and broke their toe ever again, I’d do it! And I’m definitely *not* worried that people would become so dependent on the spell that they’d stop trying to keep from dropping frying pans on their feet!

“If I could save everyone from death, I’d do it, and deal with any challenges that arise from it afterward! If everyone is truly immortal, we don’t have to worry about the overpopulation problem that Yazadril talked about earlier. We can breed as fast as we can make enough of the facilities that people need to lead healthy lives, and if we reach the limits of the world to support more people without causing unhealthy conditions, then we can stop breeding until we find new ways around the limits. If people are immortal, you never need to tell them to not have any more children; you only need to tell them to wait until it’s practical to have them. And they shouldn’t mind waiting too much, since they’d have all of eternity ahead of them. Everyone can have as many children as they wish, the only question should be; how long will they have to wait to have them? If it’s as long as it takes to build a new world for them, then so be it!”

Visinniria, Heklivmalgiso, Neela and Amirgath all seemed to be absolutely flabbergasted. Falgaroth seemed to be chuckling to himself, though no one could be sure when trying to read the body language of a unicorn god. Glup was as alien and inscrutable as ever. Mark kept all his attention on the gods, afraid to let his concentration slip the slightest bit, and disregarded for the moment the other mortals present.

“I must say, that’s not the response I thought you’d give.” Visinniria quietly stated.

“There’s another factor you’re all going to have to consider as well.” Mark continued firmly. “The Truthstone of Falgaroth is charged with *millions* of times the power it would need to have it’s designed effect on any mortal. *Any* mortal. There’s only one reason why it would be charged with that much power, and that’s so it would work on gods. I’m absolutely positive that any god would be bound by a vow sworn upon it, and any god would be unable to lie while in contact with it.

“I’ve sworn on it, and I *won’t* be released from my vow when I become a god! These others here have all sworn on it too, and all of them except Grakonexikaldoron are also Candidates for Divinity, and they’re not going to be released from the vow when they reach godhood either!

“If the rest of you gods have existing agreements among yourselves that aren’t consistent with Osbald’s Oath, we won’t honor those agreements when we become gods. That includes the withdrawal. We don’t have any choice about it. We are bound by the stone, and by our own honor and morality as well. And we don’t want a conflict among the gods, since I’m told that it could destroy all of reality.

“So the rest of you have until we reach divinity to come around to our way of thinking. Considering the progress I’ve made in the last two days, you might not want to take too much time making up your minds.”

The obvious truth of those points struck the minds of everyone present like a thunderbolt.

“Now, concerning your threat against me. I know I’m not a god, so until I am, if anyone says I’m a god then they’re lying. I will publicly declare them to be lying, according to the laws I’ve suggested. If it’s seen that any harm comes from the lie, I will act against them, up to and including Compelling them to publicly admit to their lie upon The Truthstone of Falgaroth, and to swear to cease their lying. I will not harm or kill them for it under any circumstance; because calling me a god isn’t a serious enough crime to warrant it, in my view.

“If someone says I’m a Candidate for Divinity, they’re telling the truth according to you, so I won’t do anything about it beyond asking them politely to keep quiet about it. If you choose to do something about it, it had better not be anything that harms them in any way for telling the truth, or you’ll have broken the laws of The Just Alliance, and we will do what we can to hold you to account for it. We will uphold justice.

“If you decide to act against me unjustly, by removing me from the world or by any other method, while knowing that I am Key to the Just Alliance and Key to the Nexus, you may risk the survival of every life on Kellaran. Any consequences will be on your heads; any blood will be on your hands.

“Now, having said all that, I’d like to repeat that I’ve no wish to earn your enmity. I feel that I had no real choice about anything I’ve said or done here today, being bound by my vow, and forced to respond to your actions. We want the same things, prosperity and peace for all our people. We only differ so far in our methods. I hope you’ll forgive me if I’ve upset you or offended you here today, but I stand by what I’ve said.”

With that he took a deep breath, and suddenly seemed very tired. “We’ve restored the original orientation of the Wards. You can go if you want to.”

Amirgath turned to Falgaroth. “You have much to answer for! The casting of a spell to bind a god is banned by unanimous agreement!”

“The stone was crafted long before such agreements were first proposed.” Falgaroth replied, and now his vast amusement was obvious in his tone. *“Even were that not so, still the agreement would not be broken, for no god could be forced by power or might to swear upon the stone. Should any god choose to swear an oath, I have merely provided a way to ensure that their adherence to their oath is reliable.”*

“Besides, you are changing the subject in order to avoid facing difficult thoughts.”

“Such as the fact that due to your meddling in the way of things by your crafting of the stone, we may be forced to annihilate these Candidates in order to prevent conflict between the gods?!!!” Amirgath demanded in irritation. “You know that some of us will demand it, and you know who they are!!!”

“That will not happen, for I will not allow it, and they will not break the unanimity!” Falgaroth retorted, letting his own anger show.

“And if the alternative is that we are forced to abandon the agreements that have cost us so much effort to forge, in order to follow the policies of this barely-born infant ape?!! What then, Falgaroth?!”

“Then so be it!!!” The bright blue unicorn god’s mighty form assumed a stance of challenge. *“I have been arguing for similar policies for eons, as you well know! Those of us who have any wisdom at all have been forced to enact the agreements in order to prevent even greater foolishness and stupidity! It is more than past time for arrogance and injustice to be stripped from the gods and peoples of Kellaran!”*

“The Nexus approaches, Amirgath, and there are three paths that we may follow! There is the way of the foolish, there is the status quo, and there is the way of justice! Consider which of these three would best prepare us for the Nexus!”

“And consider the price of failure, eldest of the dragon gods! Now is not the time for pride or ego!”

Amirgath glared for a moment. He spoke in a rumbling and dangerous tone of quiet threat. “You have forced me, Falgaroth. You have forced us all. How much of this did you plan when you crafted the stone?”

“Nothing more than knowing that the presence of the stone in this world would eventually tip the balance. It’s presence and permanence could only have been countered by the existence of an equal token of injustice. Even if a being of dark intent were capable of crafting such an item, they would never consider spending the effort to do so. They act out of selfishness, and it serves no purpose of theirs to cause injustice in the world that has no direct benefit for themselves.”

“Thus, I knew that my crafting of the Truthstone would eventually prove to be decisive in the struggle between good and evil.”

“Unfortunately, that has yet to be decided.” Heklivmalgiso asserted. “There is no guarantee that The Just Alliance will prevail against those they refer to as the insidious conspiracy. If they lose, particularly if Mark falls, it is almost certain that none of these Candidates will ascend before the nexus is upon us. And if they fail to ascend, and we fail to deal with the nexus, the rest will be moot.

“Falgaroth, it is as Amirgath has said; you have forced us, and the Nexus forces us as well.

“The others will be discussing this already. We must be there to represent our views. I go now.” The elven god was suddenly gone, as were Glup and Neela.

Amirgath glared at Falgaroth, then at Mark, before he too disappeared.

Suddenly Visinniria was laughing. She dropped onto a sitting log and laughed till tears started running from her eyes. Her humor was so infectious that the mortals present started to laugh along with her, even though they didn't know what she was laughing about. Falgaroth seemed to be silently chortling to himself as well.

“Oh my stars.” Visinniria finally chuckled as she collected herself and wiped her tears away with the heels of her hands. “That was rich. I never thought I'd ever get to see that pompous old lizard's nose tweaked like that! And the old elf was ready to choke on his spit, though he doesn't show it so much!”

“I thought I would choke myself, from trying not to bray with laughter!” Falgaroth revealed. Suddenly he sat on his haunches and parodied Amirgath's outraged voice and mannerisms perfectly. *“This is unbelievable! Are you actually threatening me?!”*

This sent Visinniria into fresh paroxysms of hilarity, while Falgaroth sat like a dog with his forelegs braced wide, so overcome with the unique huffing laughter of the unicorns that he once almost rolled over backward.

“Now see here.” Somonik finally rumbled in irritation. “It can't be *that* funny.”

“It can, and I'm sorry you are not in a position to see it as such.” Falgaroth chortled, but he and Visinniria did make an effort to pull themselves together.

“You must understand, Somonik, that there are less than four hundred gods, which makes for a very small community.” the elven goddess explained as she wiped her tears away again, still grinning. “Like any small community, we learn each others tiniest foibles and personality flaws. The elder dragon gods like to think they're above everyone else, though they truly know that they're not, having no more power or say than those of us of the younger gods. This leads to a great deal of blustering on their part, which the rest of us generally tolerate, simply to avoid the endless haranguing that results from any supposed infringement on their dignity. Thus, we can't help but find it funny to see him discomfited a bit.”

“I know that Amirgath was your patron god while you thought you were the eldest mortal, Somonik, and that our mirth bothers you because you think we are disrespecting him.” Falgaroth added. *“We truly do respect him a great deal, and we love him dearly. Since the withdrawal, the gods have had no one to talk with or interact with except each other, and we have all become as close as family. The withdrawal is a lonely thing for us, and it is a time of trepidation for us as well. We've let our children strike out on their own, and we are as anxious as you were when your son Ekmangar first tried his wings. So we have our little family squabbles, and sometimes we bicker and grumble, just to vent our frustration.”*

“Amirgath's favorite thing to say to us at such times is; I was a god when your ancestors were rodents!” Visinniria chuckled.

“I see.” Somonik stated dryly. “Actually, I remember quite clearly when your ancestors were rodents. I also remember the very first time I saw you in your father's warcamp, during one of my many fruitless attempts to negotiate a truce to the War of the Segregation. You were perhaps three years old, and were running from your mother in order to avoid being bathed.”

“I remember that day.” Visinniria glared, all humor gone from her expression. “We could spare neither the power nor the firewood to heat the water, and bathing was a damned cold experience.” She paused as the memory swept over her, then continued in a quieter, more dangerous mien.

“It took me almost twelve thousand years to dispel the dark mood of that war from my mind after I reached divinity. And I was enraged with the other gods, for I knew they could have stopped that war at any time, if only they had chosen to do so. During those years, even Amirgath hesitated to approach me, for fear my wrath would get the better of me and I would strike him down without caring if I broke the universe to do it.

“Don't test my patience, Somonik.”

The ancient white drake bowed deeply, without another word.

Visinniria regained her smile as she regarded Mark and Talia, who still stood in contact with the Truthstone, Mark holding Talia like a child in one arm, she with one arm on his shoulder.

Visinniria stepped over and laid her hand on the stone beside them. “Ahh. This is a wonderful thing, Falgaroth.”

“Thank you. It was a great deal of work to make it, as Mark has pointed out.” he chuckled in response.

“If I may, I would be pleased to visit you here another time, but for now duty calls and I must soon be off.”

Visinniria said, speaking directly to Talia. “Before I go, may I have the sword for a moment?”

Talia drew Ria and presented her hilt-first to the goddess.

Visinniria stepped clear as she considered the blade in her hand, then danced through a blindingly fast sequence of combat moves.

As the elven goddess of war stilled with the blade held high before her, the stiff Illusion of Ria appeared. Excepting her rigid stance and their armor, the two appeared to be identical.

“My Lady, it is bliss to feel your caress again.”

“As it is bliss to dance with you again, my love.” the goddess smiled. “And it is interesting to see you personified in this way. I like your new name, Ria, as well. But I fear you look too much like me, and I cannot risk you being mistaken for me upon the mortal plane, should your new lady invoke you within the view of others.”

Suddenly Ria’s rigid red hair became as silver as her blade.

“There. What do you think of that?”

“I would prefer my hair to be black, if it must be another color.” Ria stated with firm decision, and then it was so. *“Thank you. I can sense that you have altered me in other ways, as well.”*

“You will no longer forget what is more than a century past. Your personality is no longer tainted with the dark mood of the war. And I have impressed into you the physical skills I had when I was still a mortal.” Visinniria told her. “This much I am allowed to do for you, my love, because you are not mortal.”

She handed the sword back to Talia. “Take care of her, and she will take care of you. I love her very much, for there were centuries when she was my only friend.”

“I... I will, my Lady.” Talia stammered as she bowed her head, then sheathed the blade, and the figure of Ria faded away.

Visinniria floated up and hugged the pair, and gave each of them a quick kiss, while murmuring softly. “You have won me over. Keep up the good work. Stay the course. And Mark, when my children come to you to show their appreciation for what you have done this day, let them do so in their own way.”

He nodded.

She did the same with each elf, the embrace, the quick kiss, the private message. Then she was gone.

Falgaroth was the only god remaining among them. He laughed with deep huffing sounds. *“Mark, you are either the most brilliant being who has ever lived, or the most foolishly courageous. Most likely, there’s some truth to both of those, eh?”*

“You have done today what I could not. I am immensely proud of you.”

The bright blue god trotted over and touched the tip of his great horn to the center of Mark’s forehead. *“This is between the two of us, all right? Don’t use it for a few days. Let them think you conceived of it yourself.”*

Falgaroth passed him a spell, then stepped back. *“Quewanak, when you are finished here, the Truthstone will return to the Hall of The Just Alliance. None there will have noticed it was missing.”*

“I am very proud of all of you.” he told them with a toss of his mighty head, and then he was gone.

Mark’s knees almost buckled as the tension drained out of him. He staggered over to a log and dropped down to slump against it, holding Talia with desperate affection. He took a deep breath, let it out, and began to weep with great wracking sobs.

Hilsith quickly stepped over, casting diagnostic spells as she moved.

“He’ll be fine, he’s just emotionally overwhelmed.” Talia told her as she caressed Mark’s cheek. “He’s still so young to bear such burdens.”

Yazadril came and sat beside them, and Nemia came with him and sat in his lap. “Today, even I feel too young to bear such burdens.” he sighed as Hilsith sat beside him, and the trio shared a hug

“Hhmff. And I feel too old for it.” Somonik rumbled, and lay down full length on the sand.

“Here, let me give you a rub, old boy.” Grakonexikaldoron chucked, and started giving the scarred ancient white a rubdown, beginning at the tip of his tail and working up.

Povon and Kragorram crouched together on the sand, pensive and subdued, hugging each other with their tails and necks entwined.

Dalia and Bezedil came to sit at Yazadril’s feet and embraced as desperately as the young dragon couple, sharing their mood as well.

Only Alilia seemed to burn with nervous energy, and she paced around restlessly as Somonik groaned in pleasure from the gold dragoness’s ministrations.

“I can’t believe he faced down the gods!” she ranted in consternation, her white-blond hair waving in the slight breeze. “I thought I had some courage, but I couldn’t bring myself to say a word, even after they contained their auras! For the first time in my life, I was struck dumb with fear and awe! And he *faced them down!!!* Foolish or not, no one has ever shown such courage!”

“You don’t know the half of it.” the Eldest snickered. “He was bluffing.”

“What?!!”

“He and Talia were holding enough power from The Truthstone that if a hundred gods had laid hands on their bodies and all sworn an oath at the same moment, those gods would have been bound by it, the same as if they’d sworn directly upon the stone. But there’s little else that could have been done with it. The power of the stone is immense, there’s no doubt of that. But it is of a decided nature and is fit for but a single use; that being the enforcement of truth. Mark was bluffing, he could not use that power against the gods and he knew it.

“Furthermore, he is sworn to protect the innocent. He would not have risked harm to the innocent citizens on the island, so if the gods had insisted on leaving, Mark would not have impeded them by the inverted Wards. That too was a bluff.

“He faced down the gods with nothing backing him up except his courage and his confidence in the rightness of what he was doing. They were almost completely certain that such was the case, of course, but not absolutely certain, so they couldn’t take the chance.

“I’m more than a little proud of the boy.”

“But that means he lied to the gods!” Alilia exclaimed. “How could he do so when he has sworn upon the Truthstone?! Especially considering they were pressed against it and holding half the stone’s power at the time?!”

“He is sworn to peace and protection and justice. The stone holds him to that vow, ensuring that he spoke the truth when he swore it. He did not swear to always speak the truth. Because of this, he is allowed a little leeway, and he can be misleading, so long as he does not speak any blatant lie, and so long as he believes that doing so serves his vow. He said they held power, but he never actually threatened to use it, that was merely implied. He described what he’d done with the Wards, and said that he doubted the gods could pass them without causing all our deaths, but he never said that he would prevent the gods from leaving by their use. Again, that was implied.”

“But if he couldn’t use the power of the stone, how did he shield his thoughts from the gods?!” Alilia demanded.

“Oh, I showed him that. Because of my bonding with the stone, I could privately communicate with Mark directly through it while he was in contact with it. I showed him my best psionic shield spells, and they are the very best, I assure you. Since psionics generally require very little raw power, and he has an abundance of power, he was able to cast my psionic shield spells with such strength that the gods themselves couldn’t see past them. Then he did the same for Talia, and they had enough power left over to lend me a sufficient amount of it for me to do the same. It took almost every bit of his immense power, and Talia’s, but he blocked the gods from our minds.”

“I had more than courage and rightness backing me up.” Mark quietly revealed, his outpouring of emotion having run its course. “I had Talia’s love and belief in me, I had the Eldest’s solid confidence in me, and his private council.”

“Which you needed none of.” the Eldest pointed out.

“Still, you all have to understand that courage really had nothing to do with it. I knew what I did was the right thing to do, and so I had no choice but to act to fulfill my vow. The Compulsion of the Truthstone would accept nothing less. That’s why we swore the vow again, just to make sure it would give me the courage to do what was right if I lost my nerve.

“And I couldn’t have cast those psionic shields without Talia. They’re draconian spells, and you have to have two kinds of power to cast them. Her abundance of power was just as necessary as mine.”

“Hmm. Since your vow upon the stone drove you to act, and not your courage or your character, I wonder how it is that none of the rest of us were driven to confront the gods, or even to speak out to support you while you did so?” Yazadril chuckled. “After all, we have all sworn upon the stone.”

“I imagine it’s because only I saw the need to do it.” Mark mused. “You all have a lot of intelligence, and a lot of knowledge. But the six months I spent trudging through the wilderness, often concentrating fiercely on the nature of justice and the most desirable state of the world in order to avoid thinking about my grief, well, I think it gave me a different perspective on things.”

He paused, then spoke even more quietly. “This doesn’t seem real. I mean, things were starting to seem pretty unreal three days ago, and every time I almost get used to it, it gets a whole lot more unreal. I’m starting to wonder if any of it’s real, if any of you are real. I think I’m starting to lose my mind. That sure seems to make a lot more sense than me being some kind of supreme wizard and some kind of world leader and having faced down the gods.”

“Don’t I seem real to you?” Talia quietly asked.

Mark chuckled, and hugged her warmly. “My perfect elven princess, my magic love, the temptress of my dark desires? No, you’re far too wonderful to be real. Being with you is a far too beautiful dream to seem real to this simple woodsman’s son.”

“Doubting reality is the first step down the road to insanity, and it’s a road you must choose to step away from.” Hilsith insisted. “Philosophers have been known to drive themselves insane, pondering the infinite nature of time and reality till they lost their grip on the tangible reality around them. If you start doubting reality and follow that thinking to it’s ultimate expression, you end with the supposition that yours is the only consciousness that exists, and that you are hallucinating everything that you experience, and you do not realize this because you hide that truth from yourself to protect your sanity, or perhaps because you are already insane.

“Now you must admit, that seems ridiculous, though it cannot be proven to be false. But *any* doubting of the reality your senses show you is equally ridiculous. We either trust our senses, or give up completely on ever knowing what is real. Just because life is incredible doesn’t make it less real.

“If you ever do experience an artificial reality, for instance because a psionic spell is muddling your mind, you will eventually figure it out because of internal inconsistencies. Truth lies in consistency.”

“*Bah! Trust your guts, boy!*” the Eldest advised. “*This is real and you know it. You can feel the truth of it in your guts, no matter how hard it is to accept.*”

“You’re right.” Mark admitted with a sad shake of his head. “I’m just feeling sorry for myself, like a foolish child.”

“You are allowed to be imperfect, you know.” Talia teased, tickling his ribs a bit. “And besides, it is no weakness to vent your emotions when they are overwhelming you.

“*In hindsight, it’s easy to see why I felt that all of us here needed to be here, for this occasion.*” Tithian mused.

“You didn’t know, did you?” Mark asked. “Why Dalia and Bezedil needed to be here, that is. You only knew it was necessary, by your power as a seer.”

“*Exactly. Now we know it was so that the gods could name them Candidates.*” Tithian nodded.

He nodded, then took a deep breath to center himself. “Well. While it’s still fresh in our minds, let’s review a few things. Whether they meant us to or not, we learned from what the gods said that the problems with the insidious conspiracy have little to do with the events that will cause the Nexus. And I get the impression that the Nexus is a problem so huge that even the gods may be unable to deal with it, and that’s why they want there to be more gods. Therefore, it’s our responsibility as Candidates to achieve divinity as soon as possible so that we can help them deal with the threat.

“First, as discretely as possible, we have to research everything that’s known about the process, and the nature of the gods.”

He fell silent as he absorbed all those thoughts a little more, then muttered; “I feel like I’m gonna throw up.”

“I do too.” Yazadril nodded. “What could possibly be such a huge problem that the existing gods would be unable to deal with it?”

“Other than researching ascension and divinity, we can’t think about that right now.” Mark asserted. “As if we weren’t reasonably sure of it already, we can deduce from what the gods said that the conspiracy is far from defeated, and that they’re planning something big. Big enough to be a challenge to The Just Alliance. And it will be something violent, since the gods mentioned the possibility that I could be killed.

“And while we’re on the subject of the conspiracy, do you want to tell me whatever it was that you and Alilia didn’t want me to know about when I Read you?” Mark asked.

“How did you know about that?” Alilia demanded.

“Well, you did hide the knowledge from me completely, but while Yazadril also hid everything that related to it, you forgot to hide the Spoken conversation you had with Yazadril, Somonik, and Tithian in which you revealed your news, and the four of you decided not to burden me with it. What you told them was hidden, but not the part before that where you told them you had important news, or the part where you decided not to tell me.”

“I see. Sloppy of me, really.” Alilia nodded. “We didn’t want to distract you from your work. Then when you asked to Read me to help with the curse, I was too surprised and distracted to hide the knowledge effectively.”

“Distract me from my work?” Mark asked in surprise. “I haven’t done any work since I left Shinosa Valley!”

“Perhaps you have no assigned duties, my boy,” Yazadril chuckled, “But you have accomplished great feats of statesmanship and magical research on your own initiative! So much so that it was decided that we would be wisest to continue to allow you to choose your own course as much as possible.”

“And the news that you hid from me?”

“It’s troubling news indeed, but so far as we can see, there’s nothing to be done about it right now beyond what we’re already doing. So we saw no reason to trouble you with it, at least until you’ve finished your honeymoon. It’s plain that you have enough on your plate already, and enough on your mind as well.”

“Ah. Well, all things considered, I think there’s a chance I might think of something to do about it, even though you haven’t.” Mark firmly replied.

“The acts of statesmanship I’ve done since the founding meeting have been in my capacity as Prince of Hilia, not as Key to The Just Alliance. It’s been made plain to me that the other leaders expect me to provide some sort of leadership, or at least guidance, as Key to The Alliance. But that role has been left completely undefined, both in what my duties are, and in what other people’s duties toward me as their leader are. If I’m to be nothing more than a figurehead, I need to know that, but that’s definitely not the impression I got from Overlord Senchak and Empress Emeroth and the rest. They expect me to do something.”

He considered for a moment before he continued. “I do appreciate your concern for me. But I’ve been given a huge responsibility, and I’ve sworn that I won’t shirk it. I won’t be a figurehead, and I can’t act if I’m kept ignorant. So it’s time to define exactly what it means to be Key to The Just Alliance.

“My only duty in that role is to make suggestions based on the information I’ve been given. It’s an advisory position. You and the other leaders of the Alliance have a duty to me as Key to keep me informed of important developments, to listen to my suggestions if I have any, and to consider those suggestions with all seriousness before you decide to follow or reject them. And that’s it. If you and the other leaders can’t or won’t fulfill those duties, then I’ll resign as Key to the Alliance. I won’t carry the responsibility if you won’t give me what I need to do so. And you can tell the other leaders that as well.”

“Ah. Quite right, and I’m sorry that we never looked at it from that perspective.” Yazadril nodded, abashed.

“Yes. And as Communications Director of The Just Alliance, all important developments are routed to me for distribution to the other leaders.” Somonik stated. “I will consider it part of my duties in that role to inform you of what is known as soon as I learn it, or as soon as it is practical to do so. When this gathering concludes, I will also announce to the other leaders what you have decided about the role of the Key to The Just Alliance, and it will be included in the official records of The Alliance.”

“Thank you.” Mark said as he rubbed his eyes. “So, what are the latest developments?”

“As you know, King Sorrin of Venak was killed while attempting to flee Osbald’s hall without swearing to justice.” the white dragon reminded him. “He was one of those who were fetched there by forced Translocation. His heirs were his twin sons Kenem and Renem, and he had not yet designated which of the two of them were to inherit the crown.

“They took the position that their father had been kidnapped by Osbald, which they consider to be an act of war. They further maintain that their father had only his kidnapper’s word that the spells on the Imperial Sword of Thon would do no more than enforce his vow of justice, and so their father was murdered for refusing to submit to a mind-controlling spell of unknown nature.

“Still, they made no mention of these conclusions when informed of their father’s death and the conditions surrounding it, saying only that we would be contacted when the succession of the crown of Venak had been decided.

“They were later invited to the founding meeting of our alliance, and warned that their attendance was conditional on their swearing Osbald’s Oath upon The Truthstone of Falgaroth. They eventually told us that Kenem would be the next King of Venak, and that he would lead his nation’s delegation at the meeting.

“We now know that for a lie. Renem won the crown, and he ordered his brother to attend the meeting and to falsely represent himself as king in order to gather intelligence. Unbeknownst to us, nothing had been revealed to the people of Venak at that time. Sorrin’s death and all the rest was kept secret there, and only the remaining senior members of the government were privy to this knowledge.

“When Kenem returned to Venak after the founding and reported what had transpired, he pleaded our case to his brother, for we had won him over, and he had sworn Osbald’s Oath on the Truthstone. He asked that they reveal that it was actually Renem who was king, and that Renem swear the oath upon the stone, thus legitimizing their membership in the Alliance. The rest of their delegation supported this as well.

“King Renem declared that Prince Kenem and the delegates had been tainted by the mind-controlling spells of The Alliance, and further declared them to be traitors for advocating that any of the sovereignty of Venak be surrendered to their enemies. Kenem and the others of their delegation were executed for treason six hours ago.

“At their hanging, Renem announced his version of Sorrin’s death and his own succession to the throne, along with the other events. He told the people there that the Xervians, under the leadership of Tithian and myself, have taken over the world by means of a powerful and evil Compulsion spell, hidden under an ineffective vow of justice, and that the proof was in the fact that Sorrin had been killed for refusing to go along with it, and that Osbald had faced no censure or prosecution for the act. He declared Venak a refuge for any who wished to escape the Compulsion spell of the alliance.

“It was a passionate speech, and it’s a convincing argument to those who don’t know that Sorrin was an evil person and a leading member of the insidious conspiracy, who have murdered many. Renem may even believe it, but I think it far more likely that he has inherited his father’s place in the conspiracy along with the crown.

“He’s closed his borders and declared martial law, since he considers the murder of his father to be tantamount to a declaration of war by Thon and it’s allies. He controls and restricts all movement of persons and information out of Venak. And he’s had Readings and transcripts of his speech widely distributed. Every criminal and evil-doer in the Just Alliance are all trying to find a way to get to Venak with their ill-gotten gains, along with a few of the gullible who have been swayed by his speech, and most of them are succeeding.

“We have publicly refuted him, re-iterating that Sorrin was a leader of the insidious conspiracy and therefore shared responsibility for dozens of murders, and declaiming any interest in war with Venak. Our forces are on alert, but we have made no redeployment in response to these events, in order to deny him any opportunity to accuse us of initiating hostilities.

“Renem has psionic sensitives listening for any who call his name, and they offer the callers Translocation to Venak. And, since the number of Translocations being cast is far beyond our estimates of the capabilities of all the spell-casters in Venak combined with those who have gone there or gone missing, we conclude that the unseen backers of the conspiracy are assisting them.”

“Bah. The identities of the backers of the conspiracy are now obvious.” Quewanak declared. *“The people of the world at this point fall into four categories; those who are with the Alliance, those who are with Venak and the conspiracy, and those who are so isolated that they remain ignorant of recent events. At this point the ignorant are a very small group. The cohort of the undecided is almost non-existent. The fourth category are those of the Dark Continent.”*

“My enemy lives, and he is hale. If he is ignorant of my survival he will consider himself to be The Eldest. He always opposed The Pact of Kraka, and before it was signed, The Eldest ruled dragonkind. So he likely considers himself the rightful ruler of all dragons, and besides, he is not the type to accept second place in authority, or in anything else.”

“Right now there are Wards around Serminak that are so formidable, even I cannot get so much as a psionic probe beyond them. A similar barrier is forming around Venak as we speak, which I think proves my case. The conspiracy is a product of the Dark Continent, and I would wager my claws that my enemy is behind it.”

“All right.” Mark sighed. “So far as I can tell, the sun hasn’t moved since the gods appeared, so they put this place into some kind of stasis to avoid their being detected here. Am I right?”

“You are, though it is a time-bubble rather than a reverse stasis field.” Grakonexikaldoron nodded as she kneaded Somonik’s shoulders.

“It will end when one of us leaves here, or I call to Falgaroth to replace the stone.” Quewanak confirmed. *“Even those who are in the midst of swearing upon it in Xervia will not notice the infinitesimal fraction of a second during which it was missing.”*

“Whatever.” Mark said impatiently. “My point is that we know no one is eavesdropping on us, right?”

“Right.” The Eldest replied.

“All right then, there’s no reason for you not to tell me everything I need to know about your enemy, is there? And everything that’s known about the situation in Serminak?”

“Nothing is known of the situation in Serminak! For over two thousand years, not one person has passed the Sylvan Boundary in either direction, so far as we know!” Somonik growled. At Mark’s quizzical look he expanded on that. “They claim the seas for eight hundred kilometers beyond their coastline in every direction, and that frontier is called the Sylvan Boundary. It is Warded and heavily patrolled by a vigorous Sylvan naval blockade force of fearsome military capability, both physical and magical. Until today, we were unaware of the additional Wards along the continental coastline that the Eldest has discovered.”

“And almost everything that matters about my enemy has to do with the Pact of Kraka.” Quewanak explained thoughtfully. *“There are many millions of years of history involved, but I’ll try to keep it succinct. Before the Pact of Kraka, Draconian population and society was cyclical for hundreds of millions of years. Each cycle had four stages; expansion, stagnation, war, recovery, expansion, stagnation, war, recovery, over and over in a seemingly unstoppable cycle. As to why this was so, the crucial fact is that only about twenty seven million dragons can live on Kellaran without infringing on each other’s hunting territories to an intolerable degree. Our territorial instinct is so strong that over the long term it is unignorable and undeniable. Territories were taken during expansion and held during stagnation, then when the population became so numerous that there were no territories available for the next*

generation of young adults, there was war for territory, and then for revenge. When enough had been killed in war that there were many unclaimed territories available, eventually the war ended and there was recovery.

“The Eldest Draconian enjoyed absolute rule, as I’ve mentioned. We are somewhat solitary folk, and we did not have the concept of ‘military’ yet, and so our wars consisted of millions of single challenges, though they often took place simultaneously on the field of battle. We were the only people on the world then, for my ancestors had exterminated without mercy the few intelligent races that had emerged in our distant past, as potential threats.

“Just before I was born a war began that was particularly fierce and long-lasting. Only one in ten adult dragons who had lived when it began still survived at its end, and our society was devastated.

“During the long, slow period of recovery that followed, The People of Morning emerged on Xervia. They were careful to escape our notice, and by the time we recognized that they were sentient, there were tens of millions of them, and they had developed powerful magics, and two of them had become gods.

“You might wonder how we failed to notice their sentience for so long, but since unicorns use no spoken, written or gestured languages, used no tools, and to that point had produced no artifacts, it was easy to miss. Their equine ancestors had always been prey for dragons, and they were as well when they first emerged. Much of their culture dealt with their fear of us, and with escaping our notice. Besides, my people had not yet developed psionics then. We only did so after learning of the concept from them.

“It seemed we must be natural enemies, and it was thought by both races that eventually, one must cause the extinction of the other. Though our race was still only partially recovered, we made war upon them. They were the ones who gave us the concepts of co-operative military combat, guerrilla warfare, siege warfare, and finally, total warfare. They soon developed fearsome battle magics.

“Eventually it was seen that neither side could prevail. Until then it was thought that only the extermination of one of the two races would end the war, but our populations had both become so meager, dispersed, and hidden, that neither side could kill the other faster than they could reproduce. We were stalemated. Between the last dragon war and the war with the unicorns, our population was reduced from almost twenty eight million to less than one million. An uneasy truce was forced upon all by necessity.

“There were those of us among the younger dragons who were fascinated by the unicorns, and a few of us cautiously sought them out, and eventually dialogs were established, and then friendships. From them we learned of group rule, and of population stability, and a movement began among us advocating that we adopt those systems in order to break the terrible cycle of our history. Thus we formulated and proposed The Pact of Kraka, which established the rule of The Ninety-Nine, and a voluntary limit on our population of ten million less one, and formal permanent peace with the unicorns.

“The debate raged for many, many millions of years, and she who was Eldest before me took no position for or against, but declared that the pact would not be signed unless almost all of my people agreed with it, nor would it be dismissed until almost all our people opposed it. It seemed that consensus would never be achieved. I believed in the pact very strongly, and so when I became second-eldest I challenged her, and was victorious, and became Eldest. I then ruled dragonkind, and it was within my power to arbitrarily commit us to the pact, but I feared that doing so would lead to war, organized military civil war, among dragonkind.

“Instead I declared myself to be determinedly in favor of the pact, and advocated for it vigorously as Eldest, and that eventually turned the tide. Even so, many individual challenges were still fought over the issue, perhaps the most famous of which was Somonik versus Kergok. They battled nearly continuously for over three years before Somonik triumphed.

“Finally, a consensus of ninety-nine one-hundredths of our population declared themselves to be in favor of the pact, and a great gathering was planned at Kraka for the signing, but before that day came my enemy, who was second-eldest at the time, challenged me. She who was then third-eldest had declared for the pact, so I knew that it would be signed whether I was victorious or whether I died, so long as my enemy was destroyed along with me. Only a clean victory by him could lead to the downfall of the pact.

“This was important, since he was mightier than I in most ways, and it was very unlikely that I could defeat him cleanly. Only by sacrificing most of my own defenses could I breach his, and so it was a short and gory struggle indeed.

“We were both on the verge of death at the end, but I had pre-cast spells that would activate in the event that I was critically injured or rendered unconscious, and ensure my escape. I was still aware when they brought me to my most secure refuge, but I lost consciousness within seconds after that, before I could begin Healing myself. I hoped that my enemy had died.

“For an unknown time I dreamed as others dream, but then I became aware that I was dreaming, and I learned to shape my own dreams. Eventually, I learned to create entire worlds in my dreams that are as detailed as the real world, each filled with their billions of imaginary citizens, each living out their imaginary lives. Thus I kept my mind sharp and developed many new capabilities, until the power of The Truthstone intruded on my dreams when the leaders of The Just Alliance swore upon it, and I was finally able to focus my attention on the real world again.

“I’ve since learned that my enemy also disappeared after our battle, and with us both gone, she who was then declared Eldest did indeed sign the pact.”

“So what’s your enemy’s name?” Mark asked.

“I don’t know. Only his mother knew it, and he killed her soon after he became adult. He used to maintain that he could never be defeated so long as no one knew his true name. He’s truly a despicable villain, and he was my enemy in the last dragon war, long before our disagreement over the pact.”

“Oh. Well, what’s he like?”

“He was born a very pretty light blue, but when he became adult he magically colored himself black, a completely non-reflective flat black, largely because he thinks it makes him look more sinister. He is small, smaller than I, and so now when dragons are much larger, he is probably the smallest living adult dragon. I doubt the distinction has improved his disposition any, since he was always defensive about his size, and quick to challenge any who slighted him. He fought many, often to the death, and was formidable despite his size, for he is very quick, very strong, very vicious, very intelligent and skilled, and one of the greatest spellcasters who has ever lived. And his fire was unmatched in temperature, intensity and duration. He was never defeated, nor even injured until I fought him. He has a towering ego, and a cruel disposition. He considered The People of Morning to be nothing more than vermin, so I doubt he has any greater consideration for any of the new peoples who’ve emerged since then.”

“So if no one knows his name, what did you call him?”

“Many things, but to his face he preferred to be called The Darkest Black, though he would suffer to be called Darkest. During the last million years before we fought he was most often called Quewanak’s Enemy, as our enmity became rather well known when I became Eldest. He rather hated the term, since it defined him by his relationship to me, rather than by any merit of his.”

“I see. And what can you tell us about him right now, other than that he’s healthy?”

“He is active, which is to say that he is not hibernating or sleeping; he goes about his daily affairs. And that is all I can tell, I have no idea what he is doing. Only my unique state, combined with being highly attuned to him from eons of observing him before our fight, allows me to ascertain that much through the impressive Wards around Serminak.”

“So we really have no evidence that he’s involved in anything?”

“Only that I know him very well, and it would be out of character for him to not be involved in such things.”

“Or rather it would’ve been out of character for him forty million years ago.”

“That is the case, though he was already over fifty-five million years old then, and it is unheard of for anyone’s personality to change significantly after so many eons to stabilize.”

“My personality has altered radically in the last few days, due to the power of my oath upon The Truthstone, and I’m nineteen million years old.” Grakonexikaldoron pointed out.

“Granted.” The eldest nodded.

“We’ll leave the question of Darkest aside for now.” Mark said as he looked around the group. “What are the chances that we’ll be able to learn anything about the involvement of those in Serminak with the insidious conspiracy, without the assistance of someone there?”

“Nil.” Yazadril stated decisively.

“I agree.” Somonik nodded.

“All right.” Mark said. “I formally suggest that we try to establish contact, and diplomatic relations, with the Sylvan and the Dark Dragons. If we can, inform them of the formation of The Just Alliance, and invite them to join. We might get lucky. Of course, we have to retain the condition that they swear Osbald’s Oath on The Truthstone of Falgaroth.

“As for the situation with Venak and King Renem and the conspiracy... Do we have any proof that his father, King Sorrin, was responsible for any crimes, other than the testimony of the conspirators that were caught?”

“Those conspirators’ testimonies were Compelled, or sworn on The Truthstone, or Read directly from their memories.” Yazadril pointed out. “So no, I doubt that Osbald has spent much effort to find corroborating evidence.”

“Then I strongly suggest we find some. If we can’t prove conclusively that the conspirators who were killed were responsible for capitol crimes, public opinion in Venak will always be against us.”

Mark considered for a moment, and his face gained a grim expression. “Also, Venak will be rapidly becoming a very ugly place, over-run with criminals and evildoers. We need to find a way to present our case to those of the original citizens there who had no part in the conspiracy. The Venakians... is that right, Venakians?”

“Citizens of Venak refer to themselves as Venaks.” Alilia informed him.

“All right, the Venaks who are just good, ordinary folk are almost certainly in a lot of trouble right now. All the villains who are going there will be making hell of their lives, and taking what they can. Besides that, their king seems to be a really cruel bastard, uh, pardon my saying, and a king who’d hang his own brother is likely to be engaging in a program of brutal repression as he consolidates his power.

“We really need to know what’s going on in there!” he almost shouted, and forced himself to calm down a bit. “And if any good people there need to leave, we’ve got to find a way to get them out!”

“Unfortunately, the new Wards around Venak are completed, and strengthening by the moment.” Somonik reported. “We can’t even see if the sun still shines in there, for their Wards are a black wall towering over the land as high as the airless void!

“We have been unable to see beyond it with any form of psionic probe, and to magically attack the Wards of any country is universally recognized as an act of war! We are not presently at war, and we have all sworn that we will not break the peace!”

“We didn’t swear to always behave peacefully, no matter what provocations we face, we swore to *not break the peace!*” Mark insisted. “I’m sure Osbald worded it that way to allow us the use of violence, if necessary, to defend ourselves, and to uphold the other two parts of the vow, protecting the innocent and upholding justice! We’re not presently engaged in battle, but King Kenem of Venak has declared war on Emperor Osbald of Thon, who’s part of The Just Alliance, and protected by our vow of mutual military assistance! So the peace is *already* broken, and we’re already at war!

“Furthermore, when I swore the oath I wasn’t thinking like a ruler who might break the peace by starting a war, I swore it as a private citizen who might break the peace by attacking or harming someone else without just provocation! The peace is already broken on that level as well, by the murders and other criminal acts of the conspirators against my people and everyone else they’ve killed!

“Furthermore, we swore to protect the innocent, *all* the innocent, not just those of our own countries, so if innocent people are being hurt in Venak, the peace is broken again, and we have to find a way to help them!

“And even if they’re not, we swore to uphold justice, and I’m not going to allow those who slew my family and friends to get away with it! They will *not* escape justice!!!”

“So, you are saying that we should attack the Wards around Venak?” Somonik demanded. “I warn you that any such attempt would be extremely dangerous to anyone within a great distance, perhaps hundreds of kilometers, and so it will require the evacuation of an immense area of populated land! As well, those Wards are like nothing we’ve ever worked with, as the only other example of their kind is the ones around Serminak! Judging from what we’ve learned of them by passive study, and that’s damned little, we would need a full quarter of all the spell-casters in The Just Alliance to have a reasonable hope of breaking through, and every one of them would be risking their lives!”

Mark heaved a deep sigh. “Look, I’m not saying we should attack the Wards except as a last resort, but I *am* saying that we’re justified if we do!”

There was silence for a moment before he continued. “Look, how high are the Wards, and how thick are they? I mean, they can’t just keep going up forever, can they? And they can’t form a roof over Venak, or the whole country would be in perpetual darkness, and all the plants and crops would die. So if we fly up high enough, we should be able to look over from our side of the border with an astronomer’s spell that magnifies our sight. And since we’ll have line of sight, we should be able to use a spell that allows us to hear faint or distant sounds, so we can hear what we’re looking at. Then we’ll at least be able to get a rough idea of the state of the country.”

“Our scouts flew up the wall until they could no longer breathe, over eighty kilometers up, and still the top of the Wards was nowhere in sight.” Somonik informed him. “At the altitudes higher than that, there are strange energies from the deep void that are deadly, as is the freezing cold, and the lack of air pressure, besides there being nothing to breathe. Even the sunlight is deadly there, without the air to filter it. Some of our scouts are dragons, and they flew as high as any living being has ever flown. No one could survive at the top of those Wards.”

“I don’t see why not!” Mark returned. “A good spherical Battle Shield spell is designed to be proof against energy attacks of any kind, so that should take care of the sunlight and the energy from the void. And we’d have to add an inward-facing layer of Force or Movement to it to keep the air and pressure inside, like Talia did when she held me down the other night. If the air inside gets stale, you’d have to be able to Translocate some more in from near the

ground. And The Warm People should be able to give us a spell to protect our scouts from the cold. But it could be done.”

“The scout would need to be able to cast all those spells, as well as the Flight spell, and the spells for seeing and hearing at a great distance, all simultaneously.” Yazadril mused. “This is further complicated by the fact that Flight, Battle Shield, and Translocate are all compound spells, with twenty-seven component spells between them. First we’ll have to contact the many magic users of The Just Alliance, to find the most appropriate versions of all those spells. Then assemble a team to cast them during the mission, for I doubt that even I could maintain concentration on so many disparate spells, and still make effective observations.”

“It’d be safer, and harder for the Venaks to notice, if only one person could do it all.” Mark thoughtfully stated. “I could probably do it myself, if we don’t have anyone else who’s more qualified.”

“Heh-hem!” Talia’s theatrical throat clearing was followed by her teasing giggle.

“Ah, right, I mean Talia and I could definitely do it together!” Mark corrected with an abashed grin.

“I will initiate the effort by contacting Osbald and the organizations of spellcasters of The Just Alliance.” Somonik nodded. “Excuse me for a moment.” He closed his eyes and tried to cast a Multiple Speaking. “Ah. That will have to wait. I can contact no one until the gods’ timespell about this place is broken by one of us leaving.”

“Oh. And by the way, we do have something that could probably cut through any Wards, if it comes to that.” Mark smiled grimly as he touched his sword hilt.

“GrimFang could probably cut the Wards, I’ll give you that.” Yazadril nodded with a slight shudder. “But as Somonik said, I’d hate to be anywhere near when the attempt was made.”

“I know why you are Key to the Nexus, and Key to The Just Alliance.” Alilia stated. “And it has nothing to do with your ability as a warlock.” She was staring at Mark with an odd look.

This sudden change of subject, combined with her expression, struck him as funny, and he chuckled. “I’ll bite. Why?”

“Because you believe you can do things that no one else believes they can do. I did not believe I could stand before the assembly of The Just Alliance and tell them all to drastically change all of their laws and their ways with any real hope that they would do so. You did. We both swore Osbald’s Oath, yet I could never believe that if I confronted the gods, it could result in any benefit for me or for anyone else. The oath does not compel me to do that which I judge to be impossible, or to do that which I judge to be completely impractical. So I did not confront the gods, and the oath did not demand it. But *you* thought that if you confronted the gods, and threatened them and faced them down, it would help your cause and your fulfillment of the oath. And so that is what you did. I think that your belief in your convictions is so strong, you would have done it whether the oath drove you to it or not.

“And that’s why you are Key. Truly, I am humbled by the knowledge.”

“It’s good to know.” Mark chuckled. “I’ve been asking ‘why me’ quite a bit lately. And now I know it’s because I have more audacity than anyone else.”

That got a laugh from everyone and broke the tension of the gathering.

“You’ve upheld my faith in you, my boy!” Yazadril laughed. “For a moment I was afraid you wouldn’t find a humble way to answer Alilia’s assertion!”

“Thanks.” Mark grinned, and there the conversation paused for a moment. Then he slowly lost his grin, and shook his head. “Look, I’m not near as humble as everyone seems to think I am. What I really am; is scared to death. It’s not so much that I’m afraid of all the responsibly I’ve suddenly found myself with, as much as I’m terrified I’m going to fumble it all horribly, and let everyone down, and cause a bunch of people to get hurt. So I find myself trying to minimize people’s expectations of me. Deep down, I still feel like everyone is expecting a lot more of me than I can really deliver. If I just went around agreeing every time someone started telling me how great I am, their expectations of me would be even less realistic. Not to mention how easy it would be to get as egotistical as Verzaclon the First!”

There was another somewhat awkward pause.

“Uh, pardon me for asking, but is there anything else to be discussed?” Bezedil hesitantly asked. “Officially speaking, that is?”

There was no response, as everyone looked to everyone else to see if they would speak.

“I take it that there is not.” Grakonexikaldoron commented in her gravely rumble as she nodded. “That being the case, I will take my leave, so that those who have been returned to you can celebrate their recoveries with their loved ones. It’s been an incredible day, and I am honored to have been privy to such astounding events. Thank you, and farewell until we meet again, which I hope will be soon.”

“I share those sentiments, and I am certain that none of us will ever forget what we’ve experienced today.” Tithian nodded with a whinny. *“I’ll Speak to you again tomorrow, and I eagerly await the learning of the new and amazing discoveries that I’m sure you’ll have made between now and then! Farewell until that time.”*

“I go as well, and I thank you.” Somonik rumbled with a regretful sigh as Grakonexikaldoron ended his massage. “I will remain in frequent contact with you, ensuring that you are privy to all important developments, and that your suggestions are promptly passed to their intended recipients. The implementation of your suggestions for observing over the Wards of Venak requires only Osbald’s approval, diplomatically speaking, and I’m sure he will eagerly support the mission. Initiating diplomatic relations with the peoples of Serminak is a greater matter, and inviting them to join The Just Alliance is a serious move indeed. I will forward those suggestions to all the leaders of the alliance.”

“I agree.” Mark nodded as he rubbed his eyes. “It wouldn’t be fair to go ahead with that without a complete consensus, since ending the isolation of Serminak would affect everyone, sooner or later. I also suggest that once everyone’s had a chance to think about it, we should have a meeting at The Hall of The Alliance.”

“We dare not wait too long.” Alilia declared. “Things are moving quickly, and Venak is far too close to my nation for my comfort. And besides that, it will not take very long for the leaders of the world to decide on a position on the issue.”

“Good point.” Mark agreed.

“I will call for the meeting in thirty-six hours.” Somonik decided. “By that time the observation mission may tell us of conditions in Venak, and if that effort is successful, we may consider using the same method to observe Serminak as well. It would be useful to know of conditions there before finalizing the decision to contact them.”

“That’s true.” Mark said, and paused to collect his thoughts. He looked around at the gathering as he continued. “You know, it just struck me that I’m still a long way from taking the presence of elves, unicorns and dragons for granted, even after everything that’s happened in the last few days. Every moment I spend in your presence is an honor that I truly treasure. And that’s true for every one of you.

“Somonik, Tithian, Gran, Eldest, thanks for coming. We’ll contact you at least daily.”

“Farewell till then. We’ll see you at the meeting, if not before.” Quewanak told them.

“Could you bide a moment?” Bezedil asked, and when they paused he shared a quick thought with Dalia. She smiled, and they rose and stepped to the Truthstone. They each placed a hand upon it, and swore Osbald’s Oath together.

“Thank you.” Dalia smiled, and she and Bezedil bowed deeply to the four great and ancient beings, then laughed to see the markings of The Just Alliance on each other. Dalia’s were small, and appeared just below the hollow at the base of her throat, while Bezedil’s were smaller yet, but boldly placed in the center of his forehead, just above his brow.

“You are most welcome.” Quewanak grinned and nodded.

Then, with a quick series of flashes the four great elders were gone, as was The Truthstone of Falgaroth.

“The time bubble is undone.” Yazadril observed.

“Then let’s head back up to the cottage.” Mark decided as he stood and extinguished the fire with a glance.

“Dalia, Bezedil, you can inform your kith and kin that they can come and see you there. I’ll ask Sheramiv to have refreshments prepared, and to assist with the Translocation traffic.

“And right now I’d just as soon let someone else take us up there. Anyone feel up to doing the Translocate?”

“Allow me.” Povon chuckled. “The grounds around the cottage are crowded, so I’ll bring us in high. Be ready to Levitate.”

They suddenly appeared six meters above the patio, which was crowded with Healers of every race, since those who had been there already had been joined by many others. They suddenly ceased their rapt conversation as Mark’s party appeared above them.

“Thank you, Monarchs of Hilia, for your hospitality.” the copper dragon called up to them. “We will take this discussion to my lair, and return here when the facilities of your Faculty of Healing are complete.

“Colleagues, here is the location reference.” he said as he broadcast the information to every mind present with a draconian psionic technique that was new to everyone in Mark’s party. The Healers rapidly began to vacate the area.

Hilsith glanced from the departing Healers below to Yazadril and Nemia and back again. “You must excuse me, loves.” she stated as she reached a decision. “I hate to be apart from you at this time of new beginnings for us, but this meeting will be as important to the field of Healing as the founding meeting of The Just Alliance was to politics, and besides that, it will give you time to devote to your appreciation of Dalia’s return.”

“Of course Dear.” Nemia smiled as she and Yazadril shared an embrace and a quick kiss with their new lover.

“Elven Healers could ask for no better representative than you.” Yazadril added. “Be sure to get a good Reading of the event, for I’ll be eager to review it whenever I finally find the time.”

“I’ll see you in a few hours then.” Hilsith said. “Would you help me with the Translocation?”

“I’ll get that for you.” Talia told her, and sent the white elf on her way with a single moment of concentration.

“Now just one moment!” Dalia told her parents with a laugh as they descended to the vacated patio. “Am I to understand that you two are now a bonded trio with Hilsith?!”

“We certainly are!” Yazadril chuckled as the three alighted and shared a hug.

“Well, that’s lightning from a clear blue sky, I think!” Dalia giggled. “I never suspected you and she had feelings that way!”

“Life is full of surprises!” Nemia gaily declared.

“Well congratulations! Of course she is adorable, and a fine addition to the family!”

“Well, we had lost you, and we almost lost Talia, and then we did lose her from our household to her own.”

Yazadril explained with a wistful smile. “Hilsith was there for us in every way, with comfort and love and pleasure, and it took all of that to make me fully realize what a wonderful, beautiful girl she is. And of course she has a brilliant mind, that being the aspect of her that I recognized from the moment we met. Though it is only a mild shade of the love I feel for Nemia, I do love Hilsith.”

“As do I.” Nemia giggled. “Your father has expressed my own feelings quite closely. We all know that she will probably not stay with us beyond a century or three, before finding her own great male love. But for now, we are wonderful together.”

“And now I am returned, so you finish with more than you started with!” Dalia laughed.

“We do indeed!” Yazadril laughed.

“I also have news, though it is not so pleasant.” Alilia calmly told Bezedil. “Your father and I have divorced. We had planned on remaining apart while we adjusted to it, so you will understand if we are somewhat aloof to each other when he arrives here to see you.”

“I knew you would do so, eventually.” Bezedil nodded with a reassuring smile. “You have too little in common with each other. That your marriage endured for over four millennia, sustained on love alone, is an incredible accomplishment, but it couldn’t last forever. I’ve known that for two decades.”

“Thank you for understanding.” Alilia sighed with quiet relief, and they shared a long embrace.

“And now, let us commence with a small but heartfelt celebration!” Talia laughed. “Dalia, Bezedil, if you’re ready with your lists of invitees, please give them to Sheramiv, here, who will promptly communicate your invitations to those worthy elves, and arrange Translocations for any who need such assistance.”

Bezedil immediately began reciting his list, having already decided on his choices and memorized them. “Gorsh, Barucana, Similmon...”

“Most of my choices are already here, there on the lowest lawn.” Dalia laughed as she directed their attention downslope with a glance. Those of The Volunteers who knew her personally were indeed gathered there, almost seventy of them, and were politely pretending to be absorbed in their own conversations while they awaited the signal to approach. The rest of the Volunteers were placing the finishing touches on a buffet that could feed two hundred elves.

“I see.” Talia laughed. “Of course they’ve had word from First Valley of your return to the living and of this impending gathering, and so they’ve been waiting patiently. And since they were given leave to be here before we decided that you would be visiting here, it would be cruel to send all but twenty of them away. Tell me, how many more would you like to invite?”

“Perhaps another ten, most of whom are our instructors from school, and great-aunt Idan and great-uncle Joshan.”

“All right, call it ninety. Bezedil, if you’d like to invite more, I’m sure we could accommodate a hundred of your choices.”

Bezedil had finished reciting his first set of choices a few seconds before, and now he nodded his thanks with a smile as he turned back to Sheramiv and listed another thirty off the top of his head with no hesitation.

He had just barely finished when the first of his guests arrived, that being his father Gorsh, who was so overcome with emotion that he could barely keep his feet as he hurried over. “My son!” he gasped as they embraced.

This was seen by the Volunteers, and Balen took it as a sign that they could approach. She Translocated to the lawn just below the patio and lightly ran up the steps and into her tutor’s arms. “Oh Dalia, I have missed you so much!” she cried as she burst into tears of joy.

Mark picked up Talia and murmured into her ear. “This seems to be going well. How about we make a quick trip to Focus Mountain? And then maybe get some sleep?”

“Of course, love.” Talia returned. “You tell Sheramiv and Relgemit, while I say goodbye to Dalia.”

When that was done Talia Translocated them to high above the bowl of the volcano, quickly casting Flight and Pure Breath on them both.

They were rocked by a thunderous sound and their eyes were drawn by motion to the north, where a huge volcano was in full eruption about one hundred and eighty kilometers away.

Mark immediately cast Battle Shield and Force Sphere, then gently guided them to the focus of the reflection. His extreme power depletion allowed him to comfortably remain in it for over half an hour. The feeling of pleasure the recharge gave him was a wonderful experience for them to bask in it, deeply Linked and sharing every aspect, while gazing in rapt fascination at the immense spectacle of the eruption. A dense black column of smoke and ash extended skyward, shot through with frequent lightning strikes, and the top of it was gradually flattening and spreading far overhead. Lava glowed yellow as it shot out in sprays and fountains, which must have been colossal to be visible at such a distance, while huge orange rivers flowed down the flanks of the mountain.

After a pair of minutes Mark altered his Shield to block most of the sound, since the noise was continuous and deafening, though the source of it was about a hundred and ninety kilometers away.

When Mark later realized he was sweating profusely he slowly lifted them above the focus, reluctant to leave the pleasure of it and the incredible show they were seeing.

“*You are almost asleep in the air.*” Talia teased. “*And I’m not much more alert. Come, let’s go home, while we’re still capable of it.*”

He laughed in assent, and she brought them directly to the master bedroom in the cottage at Hilia. He informed their staff of their return, and she closed the shutters and drapes against the sunlight and the noise of the continuing gathering. They’d barely shrugged out of their clothes, cleaned up with a quick spell, and curled up together beneath the covers before sleep took them.

“Mark... Wake up, my dear. You’ve slept for ten hours. If you don’t get up you’ll feel overslept.”

Mark opened his eyes and smiled up at the lovely elven face that was smiling down at him from fifteen centimeters distance. He slowly raised his head to kiss her, then at the last moment, gave her a quick peck on the tip of her nose. “Good morning, Dalia.” he laughed.

“Aww! How did you know it was me?” Dalia asked with a playful pout.

“Since the spell of Laylas chapel, I always know where Talia is. And right now, she’s hiding below the foot of the bed.

“Good morning Love.” he called down to her with a chuckle.

“I didn’t think you could sense my location so precisely.” Talia admitted with a blush as her pretty face popped up at the foot of the bed.

“Oh? And how long would you have let your little jest continue?”

“Just long enough to find out if you were fooled by our similarity.” Talia laughed as she bounced onto the bed.

“I see. I had to wonder, seeing as how Dalia here is completely naked. As are you, my lovely wife. Delightfully so. And I have to admit that the two of you are incredibly enticing. But I have to wonder what Bezedil thinks of you being here like this. Especially considering that beneath this sheet I’m equally naked.”

“I’ve noticed.” Dalia commented as she and Talia shared a giggle. “After all, we *are* cuddling you rather closely. And I’m here with Bezedil’s encouragement. You are about to fulfill the command of a goddess.”

“I am? How so?”

“You were instructed by Visinniria to allow her people to thank you in their own way, and I believe you agreed to it.”

“Ah, I see. And how do elves thank someone for whatever it is you’re thanking me for?”

“Don’t diminish what you’ve done for us, please. This is too important.” Talia told him, being pleasant but serious. “I will thank you for the life of my sister. You have returned her to me, and there is no greater service one can do for another than to save the life of a loved one. Accordingly, we elves believe that there could be no more appropriate way to express our gratitude for such an act that with the gift of love, as expressed in the most beautiful and direct manner possible. Thus, though we will always enjoy many occasions of love-making, this morning is my gift to you of my service in the acts of love, as my way of thanking you for returning my Dalia to me, for she is half my soul. And also, to thank you for saving me from the curse.”

“And I will gift you with the same, to thank you for the life of Bezedil, my destined love.” Dalia murmured with a naughty little smile. “And of course, for saving my own life.”

“I see. What time is it anyway? It looks like it’s still dark out.”

“It’s about two hours past midnight, local time. Late morning in The Nine Valleys.”

“Now we know you have some inhibitions in these matters, and so we’ve altered the traditions to make you more comfortable, and to deal with the sheer numbers of the thankful.” Talia explained with a matching smile. “Normally everyone who loves Dalia and Bezedil and who wished to thank you for their lives would be in here right now, and you could choose between them at your whim; males or females, or both at once, or everyone all together. As it is, Dalia will be with us for one hour, then Alilia will join us for one hour to thank you for Bezedil’s life, then Nemia to thank you for Dalia. I think three per morning should be about right. Mind you, there are many females who love Dalia and Bezedil and wish to express their gratitude, so if you should find that you are eager to continue after three hours per morning, we will certainly extend the activities. And I will be with you always, to lessen your fear that I may become jealous.

“Of course, we recognize that men like yourself prefer that love between males be expressed in friendship and camaraderie, and in the sharing of ‘manly’ activities. Accordingly, our males have arranged an occasion in your honor, to take place at your birthday party this afternoon.

“And by the way, happy seventeenth birthday, my love. I still find it amazing that you are so young, yet so mature and accomplished.

“Now then, you are of course under no obligation to do anything you’re uncomfortable with, since we are completely at your service. But we do intend to entice you, by exchanging kisses and caresses with one another. And should there be anything you wish of us, absolutely *anything*, you will find us willing and eager.”

“And we do mean anything.” Dalia added with a subtle leer.

“Well then, entice away!” Mark laughed. “Perhaps I’ll resist your enticements, and simply enjoy observing your performance!”

As it turned out, his resistance crumbled before four more minutes had passed.

When Alilia gently slid in among them an hour later, and soundly kissed him with a technique as advanced as her dancing, and murmured; “I thank you for the life of my son.”, he saw no reason to send Dalia away. Nor did he see any reason to send either of them away when Nemia joined them, and thanked him for the life of her daughter. And when Nemia’s hour had passed, still none of them were ready for their activities to end, and so they continued for another two hours after that. At that time, Mark was lying on his back and fell asleep in mid-activity. When the ladies realized this, they decided that he more than deserved a nap for the fine quality of his performance, so they made some effort to keep from waking him as they rode his continuing rampancy for another twenty minutes in total, until they were all sated.

He dozed for more than ninety minutes, and awoke to the bright sunlight of a clear tropical morning streaming through the window. He opened one eye a bit, squinting at the brightness, but then the Optical Attenuator spell activated and reduced the glare to a comfortable level. He couldn’t help but chuckle at this as he got out of bed. He was going to wash up when he realized that he was perfectly clean, and guessed Nemia’s cleaning spell had been used on him as he slept. This gave him another chuckle as he got dressed and mentally called to his wife.

“*Good morning, my loving husband!*” she psionically returned. “*You’ve just missed the dawn, but it’s a beautiful day! We’ve been given our privacy for a while, and as you doubtless realize, I’m out here on the patio, where I’m making brunch.*”

“*That’s perfect my love, as I’m ravenous! What’re we having?*” he asked, switching to vocal speech as he emerged from the cottage.

“Talia’s Special Omelet, grill cakes with maple syrup from Sweettower, cold mare’s milk and fruit juices, and hot willow tea with buckwheat honey.” Talia proudly reported. “All natural ingredients, with all magical preparation.”

Indeed, all the pots and pans floated before her in mid-air on magic flames, as if she were using an invisible stove. Beside her a table was set with simple stoneware, steel cutlery, and crystal pitchers glittering with condensation from their magically maintained chill.

He seated himself on a low retaining wall beside her and gave her a quick peck on the cheek, not wanting to break her concentration by giving a more thorough greeting. At that moment she was guiding the grill cakes as they turned themselves over.

“It smells delicious. And it really is a beautiful day.” he murmured affectionately.

He gazed downslope past the lawns and bare rock to the jungle that covered most of the island, the palm trees lightly swaying in the breeze, surrounded by black sand beaches. Reefs formed an irregular dotted line around the island a short distance out, acting as a natural breakwater, and marked by the foam of the sea waves crashing upon them.

“And this is a beautiful place, and you’re beautiful, and I love you.” he added.

“And you are beautiful, and I love you.” she giggled in return as she gently leaned against him without looking away from what she was doing. “This will be done in a minute.” she assured him, and when it was, she carefully served it onto their plates and poured the tea by Movement, then Translocated the pans to the kitchen.

“All right, lets eat!” she laughed as she relaxed from her efforts. “But first a proper kiss good morning!” She floated up and kissed him very pleasantly, which he returned most earnestly.

“Whew! That’s enough of that for now, or I’ll have to drag you back to bed!” Talia giggled. “And that wouldn’t do at all, since I feel half starved!”

“My feelings exactly.” he smirked as they seated themselves.

They ate without interruption, with the exception of a few heartfelt sighs of gastronomic appreciation, for it was a delicious meal.

“So my love? What shall we do today?” Talia brightly asked when she laid aside her utensils.

“I’m not sure.” Mark mused as he leaned his elbows on the table and considered. “What time will everyone get here for my birthday party?”

“At noon. It will be late for them and early for us, but I think it’s the best compromise. That’s about five hours from now. I expect the event to last three or four hours, five at the most, since that will be two hours past midnight in Finitra and The Nine Valleys.”

“Ah. Well. Until then we should work on some spellcraft. And I’d like to work on my conventional combat skills as well. Since I haven’t worked on them in over six months, I’m not sure I have enough of those skills left to avoid embarrassing myself.” He chuckled a bit before he continued.

“Sometime today I’d like to tour the constructions and see how they’re coming along, as well as getting reports from Sheramiv on the state of our holdings and from Somonik on the state of world affairs.”

“Don’t forget that the alliance meeting on diplomacy with Serminak will be held at four hours after midnight, Hilian time.” Talia reminded him.

“Right. And we need to make sure someone is working on the research into the nature of divinity, and how to achieve it.”

“That’s already taken care of.” Talia smiled as she floated around the table and settled into his lap. “Everyone who was there when our unexpected visitors arrived yesterday is spending some time on that, except us, Hilsith, and Kragorram. Dalia and Bezedil have taken it upon themselves to co-ordinate the research and to correlate the findings, and are working on it full-time.

“They feel they’ve returned to a very different world full of important happenings, and they wish to make a meaningful contribution to the cause of a secure and prosperous future, as they put it.”

“Ah. And how are they doing?” he asked as he lightly hugged her and enjoyed her affectionate cuddling.

“Very well, both as researchers and as new lovers who are recent victims of a trauma. Their love is helping them to deal with the horror of their memory of death, as is the distraction of the work. And as they are both highly trained, thoroughly educated, and very intelligent professionals, I doubt it will be more than a few days before they have neatly summarized all that is known on the subject. Of course it helps that they have the complete and discreet co-operation of The Just Alliance, which gives them unhindered access to any resource, including the surviving writings and priests of the religions that flourished before the gods withdrew. Though that was thirty thousand years ago, two clerics of the unicorn gods still live, as do most of the clerics of the dragon gods.”

“You’re right, that’s well taken care of.” he smiled and nodded. “So first, we might as well go to Focus Mountain, since I figure it’s past dawn there, and I’ll get a recharge. I don’t really need one, but it’s pleasant, and we should go there to work on battle magic anyway. Then, we should work on battle magics and physical combat skills at the same time. If we can combine the two arts effectively, we’ll be far more dangerous than we’d be if we tried to use just one or the other.”

“Good thinking.” Talia agreed. “And while it’s past dawn at Focus Mountain, we do have a bit of time before the sun shines down into the crater. So I’d like to go home to The Nine Valleys for a few minutes first. The wizard’s power field is strongest there, and I could use a recharge myself. Hilia’s stone is only of average quality that way.”

“That makes sense.” he nodded. “So let’s choose some weapons to practice with, and get to it!”

“Um, I have to admit I’ve lost track of things.” Talia admitted as she thought for a moment. “I know all our things have been brought here from The Living Palace. Here to Hilia, that is, but I don’t know exactly where.”

She cast a Speaking to their administrator with an effortless thought.

“Sheramiv, could you pass me our wedding album?”

“Certainly. Just one moment.” was the prompt reply, and then the book appeared on the table.

“Is there anything of significance to report?” Mark asked, sharing the Speaking through his Link with Talia.

“We are financially ahead of schedule, Your Highness.” Sheramiv replied, and chuckled. *“You have already returned to profitability, and the rest of your planned constructions are fully paid for.”*

“Unfortunately, the fortifications and military emplacements for your properties are behind schedule, due to a shortage of certain military materiel. Since the Wards around Venak were raised, Yazadril has brought The Just Alliance to a state of military readiness for a large and extended conflict, and the Alliance forces have requisitioned much of what is needed for those projects. Of course, the Alliance’s improved defenses, which have caused the shortage, also make the fortification of your individual properties much less pertinent.”

“All else is proceeding apace. Would you care to review anything in greater detail?”

“No, thanks.” Mark chuckled. *“Just concentrate your fortification and armament efforts on here, The Queen of Waves, and Winghoof Estate. The rest can wait till the shortages end.”*

“Understood.”

“Will you be at the party, Sheramiv?” Talia asked.

“I wouldn’t miss it!”

“We’ll see you there then.” Talia told her, and ended the Speaking.

“Now then, let me see...” she murmured as she opened the album and flipped ahead to the inventory pages. “Ah. Our stored possessions are in the Royal Hall of Hilia, which is, I’d guess, the cavern below the cottage where the wounded were treated.”

“Ah. If you’ll allow me, I’ll take us down there.”

“Give me a moment first.” Talia cast three spells with three quick glances. She cast a Preservation on the leftovers, cleaned the dishes with a spell that powdered the food and drink remnants and spread them on a nearby flower bed, and finally Sent it all to the kitchen.

“Remind me to thank Povon again, for her advice on holding my power continuously!” she laughed. “It’s really making a very big difference! That would have taken me five times as long a week ago!”

“It was well done! And I tell you, the thought of never having to wash dishes ever again impresses me as much as any use of magic I’ve seen!”

He let loose a mighty laugh of sheer youthful exuberance, stood with his tiny wife cuddled in his huge arms, and Translocated them to the bottom of the stairs in The Royal Hall.

At first glance, the place seemed to be a chaos of bedlam and cacophony, as some two hundred construction workers from every race in The Just Alliance were busily going about their tasks within the huge cavern. With a moment’s study, it was seen to be a smoothly coordinated bustle of activity, apparently directed by a gargoyle who steadily rotated while hovering six meters in the air above the center of the floor, keeping an eye on everything. The floor below him was marked with a glowing blue circle for incoming Translocations, wherein materials and tools for stoneworking appeared in a steady stream, sometimes accompanied by additional personnel.

When the hovering gargoyle spotted them, he bowed to them in mid-air, and loudly called out in a magically augmented gravely baritone; “All hail Prince Mark and Princess Talia, Monarchs of Hilia, Keys to The Just Alliance!”

Over the next four seconds everyone there stopped what they were doing and bowed to the newly arrived royalty.

“Please, don’t bow to us. We’re not that kind of people.” Mark chuckled as he and Talia waved to the workers. Then he chuckled again when he realized that Talia had already cast Field Orders on both of them, and his voice easily reached everyone in the room.

“You people are doing some amazingly fast work, and it’s obvious how beautiful this room will be when you’re finished. We are honored by the quality of your artistry and your craftworks.” Talia told them as they straightened, and then they straightened a little more with pride at her words.

She waited a moment while some there who didn’t speak Trade Common received translations, some via spells, the rest from co-workers.

While the stone of the cavern had been left as it was; a huge natural bubble formed by gas trapped in hardening black lava with an artificially flattened and polished floor, it was being artistically re-enforced. Slim white marble fluted columns with delicate orange veining now ringed the room six meters in from the perimeter of the black obsidian hemisphere, placed every six meters. Atop the circle of marble columns was a ring of the same stone set tight against the dome, and atop that were six marble arches intersecting at top center, also placed tight against the underside of the obsidian dome. The need for this additional support was obvious, as six huge arched doorways had been built on the side of the room closest to the center of the volcano. From the number of workers who had been going to and from the corridors beyond those doorways, it was obvious that other large rooms had been excavated adjoining this one.

“Actually, we’re here because our inventory informs us that our personal goods have been brought to this chamber from our residence in First Valley.” Talia stated conversationally to the gargoyle supervisor. “If you could direct us to them, we’ll shortly be out of your way.”

“Princess, most of your goods are there, beyond that stack of scaffolding, beneath those gray tarpaulins, which are used to protect them from the dust of constructions.” the gargoyle said as he pointed with an index finger. “Some of your possessions were moved only a moment before your arrival, into the rooms adjoining that corridor. May I inquire as to exactly what you are looking for?”

“We plan to get our exercise today by practicing with a few of our new weapons.” Mark told him with a smile.

“Tools of combat, that is; armors and armaments, remain in this chamber. They are scheduled for transport into your new armory adjoining your new gymnasium in eleven minutes. They are there.” The gargoyle said as he pointed, and caused one of the canvas mounds to glow blue by means of a spelled ring he wore.

“Thank you.” Mark nodded, and he and Talia made their way to the indicated place, where a black-haired man, a female gargoyle, a blond giant, and a white polar elf were carefully rolling back the huge tarps, revealing rows of weapons cabinets and armor stands.

“It is an honor to speak with you, and all of us were honored to be invited to take part in this wonderful work.” the supervisor stated. “We are proud to report that we are seventy-one percent ahead of schedule, and that we foresee achieving completion within four hours.”

“Excellent!” Mark grinned as they reached the armaments. “Would that be the completion of this room, or of this complex of rooms?”

“Uh, Prince, pardon my inaccurate speaking. I refer to the completion of all constructions and modifications on the island of Hilia that are planned at this time.”

“Wow! That’s amazing!” Mark laughed. “I wouldn’t have believed so much could be done in a little more than a day!”

“More than a million tradespersons from throughout the alliance volunteered for this work when the call came from The Atoning.” the supervisor proudly revealed. “Thousands of the most skilled and capable were chosen to take part, the greatest number that could participate without getting in each other’s way. We are determined that this will be an achievement of construction that will remain unequalled for eons to come!”

“Most excellent!” Mark responded as he looked around the huge room. “And to make sure that credit is given where it’s due, it should always be known whose achievement it was. If there isn’t something like this already planned, I’d like you to have a plaque made with the name and trade of everyone who’s worked on the improvements here on Hilia, and have it mounted on the wall by the stairwell there that leads up to the cottage.”

“Ah! That is most thoughtful of you, Prince! But you realize that for the name of every worker to be listed in lettering large enough to be easily discerned, it would need to be a very large plaque?”

“That’s all right, it’s a very big wall.” Mark chuckled.

“True enough. And of what material should the plaque be crafted? Brass perhaps?”

“No, make it a gold plaque. It wouldn’t do to have it tarnish.” Talia laughed, giving them all an infectiously bright smile.

“As you say. We are most honored.” The supervisor gave a toothy gray grin and bowed in mid-air again. “Shall the names be listed in order of seniority?”

“No, list them chronologically. Let the first name be that of the worker who first started the work here, and the last the person who finished the final task.”

“It shall be done.”

“Let’s have a cheer for Prince Mark and Princess Talia!” a male human-sounding voice called, and suddenly the huge room was loud with the strange sounding cheering of many races. They clapped and stamped and whistled and made every kind of vocalization imaginable.

The supervisor let it continue for twelve seconds, then called a halt to it with a laugh and a loudly commanding tone. “All right, back to your tasks now! We’ve lost almost four minutes to the other crews, and I intend that we make it up!”

With laughter and banter, the workers returned to their tasks with gusto.

“*Prince and Princess, with your permission I will share my memory of your visit with the other construction crews?*” a tan unicorn carrying a load of tools in a freight saddle psionically asked.

“Certainly, that is most considerate of you.” Talia replied, then spoke with Mark over their Link. “*Now then, what weapons shall we practice with?*”

“Well, we should use our regular swords so we become more accustomed to them. Beyond that, we should take shields, daggers, and bows. And arrows of course, and archer’s gauntlets. That’ll give us more than enough to work on today.”

Soon they had a number of items selected and set aside.

“Let’s take these upstairs and get Ria and GrimFang.” Mark suggested. *“We’ll leave the rest there while we go to The Nine Valleys, then stop back here to get them on the way to Focus Mountain.”*

“Agreed.” Talia nodded. She Translocated them back to their bedroom, where they strapped on their swords before she Translocated them again, catching him by surprise.

They appeared kilometers in the air above the center of Laylas Valley. The opening in the trees at the top of the chapel where they were married was barely visible below them.

“Now that was a very quick Translocation!” he chuckled as the cold wind whipped their hair around their heads and caused their clothes to flap like flags. “You almost gave me a heart cramp!”

“Thank you. It was somewhat spontaneous. But in a combat situation it would be a valuable skill to be able to Translocate with only a fraction of a second’s thought.

“Now, I was thinking that if the wizard’s power is radiated from the stone in a direction that is mostly perpendicular to the surface, there should be a point above the center of a hemispherical impact crater that intercepts most of the radiation, and is therefore analogous to the focus at Focus Mountain at high noon. I chose Laylas Valley because it’s the largest and has the strongest field. And I think I was right! Feel that! I’ve never felt the power so strongly before! This is likely the most powerful place for wizard’s power on the entire world of Kellaran!”

“Mmm, that does feel nice!” he agreed. “It was definitely smart to come here. I was surprised we didn’t go to First Valley to see your family.”

“They are all at Hilia!” Talia laughed. “Dalia and Bezedil took the first completed hotel suite on the island, and my parents, Hilsith, Bezedil’s parents, and Balen are staying with them for the time being. And they absolutely insisted on paying full price for the rooms!

“Now we have to go, before I become overcharged. It’s starting to make me feel a bit dizzy.”

Suddenly they were back in their bedroom in the cottage at Hilia, then just as quickly they and their bundle of weapons were hovering over Focus Mountain.

“Obviously you cast a very fast Translocate as well, my fine husband.” Talia giggled, then hugged him and kissed his cheek.

“Thanks. And did you notice that neither of us had to cast Pure Breath, nor did we have to cast Levitate, either here or at Laylas. The Curse...”

“The Blessing.” Talia interrupted with a giggle.

“You’re right. The Blessing cast them automatically. I think it even Levitated our weapons.”

“It must have if you didn’t do it, for I didn’t either.”

“What are they doing down there?” he asked in a sudden change of subject as he noticed movement below the west rim. “That’s Gran, and Kragorram and Povon, but I don’t recognize the rest.”

“The blue farthest from the rim is one of The Ninety-Nine. I recognize him from the founding meeting of The Alliance. He was in the second group of nine to swear on the Truthstone.”

“You have a sharper eye than I do, my love, and a sharper memory as well.” he told her with a smile. “But I do remember him, now that you’ve mentioned it.”

He looked to the sun, well above the uneven horizon, then to the volcano that had been erupting the last time they’d visited. It still rumbled quietly and smoked tenuously, and it’s copious outflows of lava and ash had hardened, making it noticeably larger.

“Well the sun’s up, but it won’t shine down into the crater for a while yet. Let’s go say hello and see what they’re doing.”

“I’ll race you!” Talia challenged, and took off like an arrow.

Mark hurried after but had no chance of catching her, since she was very skilled and he had almost no flight experience. He almost failed to stop before slamming into the wall of the crater beside the circle of nine dragons who Levitated just above the slope, their wings making occasional small movements to hold them in place against the slight air currents.

“Whoa! That was close!” he laughed. “Talia, make a note; your husband needs flying lessons!”

“Duly noted!” Talia giggled.

“Greetings Gran, comrades, honored guests.” Mark smiled as they turned to their visitors and moved into the circle between the great gold and the sleek silver.

“Good day Mark, Talia.” Grakonexikaldoron rumbled pleasantly. “You arrived at a fortuitous time. We plan to re-shape four of the pieces of the obsidian that reflects your power. The question is whether that reflective quality is purely a product of the chemical constituents of the glass, or whether it’s crystalline structure or fine scale surface texture also plays a part. If the former is the case, we simply need to melt the surface of the crater a bit and smooth it as a whole. If the latter is the case, each piece will need to be re-shaped individually, and very carefully at that. The first test piece will simply be reshaped, the second will be re-shaped and its present fine-scale surface texture will be carefully duplicated, while the third will be reshaped and have its crystal structure duplicated. The fourth will be re-shaped, and both its present crystal structure and its surface texture will then be restored to it. We will ask you to take each piece, along with an unaltered piece for comparison purposes, beyond the edge of the crater and it’s reflection, and to try to ascertain any differences in their reflective qualities.

“I asked Kragorram for his assistance in this, since he is one of our most skilled at using his flame in the crafting of items, and of course Povon accompanied him. These six are astronomers I have worked with who still remember the crafting of large lenses, a skill which is unfortunately in decline since the advent of high-quality magnification spells.”

“There’s no use talking to them.” Povon laughed. “When Kragorram is crafting, the rest of the world might as well not exist. And the concentration of these astronomers is just as intense.”

“I take it they’re examining that piece in preparation for re-forming it?” Mark asked.

“Yes.” Gran nodded. “Kragorram will heat it until it softens just a bit, while the lens-crafters will re-shape it with Movement. It is delicate work, since the heating must be very uniform, and the shaping must be perfectly exact.”

A chunk of the dark blue volcanic glass floated in the center of the circle of dragons, slowly rotating in two directions. It was roughly hexagonal, less than two meters wide and about a meter thick, which was about the average size of the pieces that made up the fractured surface of the crater. The hole it had been excavated from gaped in the slope below it.

The blue dragon Talia remembered from the meeting said something in Draconian with a growling, hacking sound.

“He told Kragorram that the shapers are ready to begin.” Povon translated.

After another moment their huge crimson friend moved closer to the center of the circle, cupped his great clawed hands loosely around the rotating stone, drew a deep breath, puckered his lips, and blew a perfect cone of intense blue fire onto the chunk. The fire cone was three meters wide when it reached the stone, and he expertly guided the excess onto the back of the stone with his hands, heating it evenly from all directions.

Even at a distance of thirty-eight meters from the stone, the ambient and radiant heat of the operation was intense enough to Mark and Talia that they quickly cast Battle Shield to block it. They watched for a minute, while Kragorram kept his flame absolutely consistent in shape and intensity.

“His skill is amazing.” Talia eventually commented, yelling to be heard over the roar of the fire.

“Yes.” Povon agreed with a smile and a loving sigh. “And his hands have become incredibly toughened from such work. Most dragons would burn themselves severely with a flame that hot, if they could even generate such intense fire, which most could not.”

“How long can he keep going like that before he has to take a breath?” Mark asked.

“He will need to take another breath about every eight minutes, but he can maintain the flame constantly for hours by holding the last of each exhale of fire in his mouth and squeezing it out with his cheeks, while inhaling through his nostrils.” Povon explained. “It’s incredibly difficult to maintain consistency while doing that. I tried it when he first told me about it, and it gave me the hiccups. I almost seared my lungs.”

“Ah. And how long will this take?”

“The first piece will be finished in about an hour.” Gran informed him. “The second will require about an hour and a half, the third two and a half hours, the fourth about three hours.”

“I see. Well in the meantime, we’re going down into the north valley for some practice with weapons and spells. How about you give us a call when the first piece is done, and I’ll do the comparison between it and an unaltered piece. If it reflects my power just as well, they won’t have to do the more difficult work on the other three pieces.”

“That is astute. I will call when it is ready.” Gran nodded.

“Thanks.”

“*Let this short flight down to the firing range be a flight lesson, my love.*” Talia giggled as they backed out of the circle. “*Let me guide your flight while sharing my thoughts on doing so.*”

Soon she had them swooping about in tight formation with their bundle of weapons, performing corkscrews across the crater, loops over the rim, and barrel rolls down into the north valley, then skimmed along the bottom, closely following its contours at a height of just over a meter.

“Woohaa!!” Mark whooped in exhilaration as they shot up the slope at the east end of the valley, then slowed, turned about and plunged back down before finally settling to a stop, hovering six meters above the bottom of the valley.

“There, you see how that was done?” she asked with a grin, somewhat breathlessly.

“Oh yes!” he laughed as he drew her into his arms. “That’s not to say I could duplicate the feat without practicing it, but it wouldn’t take much practice!”

“Good!” She concentrated for a moment, then Translocated their clothes four meters to her left. “Then if that’s out of the way, I think we are ready to try some vigorous aerial lovemaking! If it pleases you my prince, take me now, with all enthusiasm! Let us make the flight of passion!”

“What? Right here?” he chuckled as he nuzzled her neck.

“My dear husband!” she declared in happy exasperation. “I remind you that this is one of the most isolated and private locations on this world! Those dragons up there are the only people within hundreds of kilometers of forbidding territory, and they could not care less what two humanoids do in this regard, even if they were willing to tear their attentions away from their project, which they would not!

“Besides, aerial combat requires one to be able to fly amidst huge distractions and while performing multiple other tasks, so this should be good practice!”

“Well, I’m convinced!!” he laughed.

Of course, in such an isolated location Grakonexikaldoron and Povon could not help but be aware of every unshielded thought within sixty kilometers as they observed the work on the reflective fragment.

“Ah, young newlyweds.” Gran sighed with a smile. “The joy of life positively radiates from them.”

To which Povon made the somewhat distracted reply; “I wish Kragorram could hurry up.”

Thirty minutes later Talia and Mark had repaired their appearances, and now they took up their swords.

“All right my love, show me what you can do.” Mark suggested with a smile as they descended to the uneven ground.

“I only took the basic fencing lessons that were a standard part of our curriculum at school.” she explained as she began working through her moves in the order she’d learned them. “So I only learned these standard strikes and parries, and the basics of tactics, mostly as it applies to duels. The swords we used were little more than foils, whereas Ria here is a light saber, but she hefts about the same. She feels very natural and light. Her magnificent quality is obvious. Certainly these moves are far more comfortable with her in my hand than with the swords at school.”

She finished her sequence and smoothly started again, moving faster this time.

“Your sword work definitely qualifies as fencing, which is the best method for dealing with foes who aren’t wearing armor, or who are very quick.” Mark nodded as she flowed to a halt. He drew GrimFang and demonstrated as he spoke. “I learned these same moves for those reasons. But I was also trained with these fuller motions required to use and to parry heavy weapons and to strike through armor. The decision to use one method or the other generally depends upon the weight of your weapon as compared to your strength. You can reverse the direction of a light weapon quickly, but as you move up to bigger weapons that becomes more difficult. With a heavy weapon abrupt changes in direction take too long, and you’re actually quicker if you conserve your momentum by swinging your weapon around with continuous, circular swings, where the follow-through of each swing becomes the beginning of the next. Axes, war hammers, and two-handed broadswords can only be wielded in this manner.”

“But realistically, those methods aren’t pertinent to these weapons,” Talia noted, “Since GrimFang can cut through any enemy’s weapons and armor with the slightest pressure, and is more than light enough to use with the fencing methods, despite its great size. And among the many ways that Ria could be used against heavier weapons is by her ability to cast a focused Concussion with every strike of her blade, capable of deflecting the heaviest blow. And she has a fearsome Cut spell that allows her to penetrate the toughest armor and Shielding, even if it’s not so fearsome as GrimFang’s.”

“True, I guess.” Mark nodded as he continued waving the great black sword around in experimentive patterns, trying to get comfortable with its unique feel.

“And now that you have warmed your muscles and made that realization, I think it’s time for some real work.” Ria stated as she appeared floating a meter above the surface. Along with her newly black tresses, her plain steel armor now appeared in pristine condition, and she appeared to be wearing a slight smile on her rigidly immobile face.

“Good morning Ria.” Mark grinned. *“I must say that you’re looking as beautiful as an elf as you are as a sword.”*

Ria’s face made an instantaneous transformation to a brighter smile, though her new expression remained as immobile as ever. *“Thank you Mark. Visinniria’s recent gifts to me are constantly revealing new nuances. And I chose black for my hair to match the ebony grips on my hilt.”* Her face regained the slight smile.

“Now, a few moments ago you almost realized that aerial combat is the rule when large mixed-race battles are fought. It was true in my time and it’s true now. Ground fighting is fine when dealing with magically unskilled humans or when fighting silly duels, as you two have trained to do. Also when working inside structures, in dense forest, or underground. But in the war we are facing now, victory will go to the force that controls the air above the battlefield. When you are above your opponent by more than fifteen meters, any object weighing more than a kilogram can be made to serve as a fearsome weapon, simply by dropping it. When you are below your opponent by that distance, only strong projectile weapons are effective. When your opponent’s altitude advantage is greater than a hundred meters, even those will not work, and you are helpless before them unless you can cast magical attacks over that distance. The extra mobility of flight prevents your being easily surrounded, or targeted by large, ponderous artillery pieces.

“Realize this, as well. The use of magic is so widespread now, that war will be greatly intensified compared to my day, and it was hellish enough then. Even completely non-magical soldiers are now commonly equipped with spelled or magically enhanced weapons and armor, spelled items, and castable spell scrolls. Almost every arrow will be magically accurate, and carry spells that enhance their effectiveness. Consider arrows that are explosive, or invisible, or magically poisonous, or have any combination of magic destructions imaginable. In Debivin, Kletiuk, and Felion such things are being manufactured by the millions. We cannot expect our enemies to do less. Translocation of provisions eliminates most of the cost, effort, and vulnerability of supply lines. Various spells eliminate most of the encumbrance of average soldiers, greatly increasing their mobility, and many will carry spelled items for Flight and Translocation as well. This is particularly true of elite forces.

“All of this is in addition to the vastly increased number of true spell-casters there are in the world today.

“Situational awareness and multitasking will be critical. You must be able to Fly, Translocate, communicate, wield weapons, and cast spells for both defense and attack, all simultaneously. Your power and weaponry make you elite personnel, so you will attract a lot of unwanted attention from your enemies in any large engagement. You must avoid being bogged down in it or distracted from the elimination of key targets.

“I’ve fought Sylvan and Dark Dragons, though they weren’t allied then, and it appears that one or both of those peoples may be our primary opponents. Of the two, I’d rather fight the dragons, for their awesome power is balanced by their being comparatively few in number, and by the fact that as individuals they are often set in their ways, and so are somewhat predictable in battle. The Sylvan are never predictable in any way, their languages have never had words for the concepts of fair or honorable combat, and they are as likely to impulsively run from battle as to throw themselves against impossible odds, just for the excitement of it. The most dangerous Sylvan is often the one who is the most bored. They may run or they may fight, but they never surrender. Their military organization ranges from mobs of rabble to elite forces. They are absolutely vicious, and they never neglect the psychological side of warfare. For instance, they routinely torture all of their prisoners to death within sight or hearing of their enemies if they can possibly arrange it.

“Now, in order to evaluate your abilities and your character, and to teach you a few things in the most direct manner possible, you will engage in a combat exercise, which I will direct. Talia, I will borrow a bit of your power, to cast Illusions of enemies for you to practice against. I will give their flesh and armaments solidity by casting Force that is roughly equivalent to their shape and position with your power, Mark, through my Link to Talia and her Link to you. I will power their spells myself. Since the recent gifts of my Lady, I believe that conducting the exercise in this manner will be challenging, but practicable.

“Although you can strike with great power in this place, since there is little here to damage, be sure to avoid striking each other with an errant blow or spell. And Mark, your power is so prodigious that you must have a care for your nine draconian guests in the crater, as well as the potential fragility of the reflective obsidian there. You have the power to destroy the entire facility with an error of spellcraft. Remember, you may soon fight among many allies, or above the cities of The Just Alliance. You must therefore target your offense as precisely as possible, and not waste energy on excessive or inappropriate attacks.”

“How do you mean by that last?” Talia asked.

“Mark, explain.” Ria instructed.

“She means you don’t try to swat mosquitoes with a sledgehammer, or hunt them with a crossbow, as my father would say.” he chuckled.

“Precisely. Bear in mind that while this exercise presents very little real danger for you, if you make a mistake, the results may well be extremely painful.”

“Now, this first and only time I will give you a moment to prepare yourselves, and to be sure your Link is as deep and as secure as you think it should be for battle.”

The big young man and his petite elven wife considered for a moment how deeply they could Link without the thoughts and sensations of the other impeding their own efforts, and decided how much to share, then checked their psionic shields, and quickly reviewed and mentally rehearsed a few spells they thought would be most effective.

“You help guide my flight, and I’ll help guide your sword.” Mark thought as the old familiar excitement of competition rushed through him.

“Right. I’ll concentrate on defense, you concentrate on offense. Remember, Battle Shield is a one-way spell, so we can use it to block our opponents’ spells while still casting our own out through it. But if we use a Force Shield or Force Sphere to block physical attacks, we cannot physically strike out through it, and so those must be used with discretion. And we’ll each be ready to Translocate both of us whenever it becomes necessary.”

“Or even advisable!” Mark avidly agreed.

Ria tipped forward a bit, as if in eagerness for the game. *“You are thinking this through more effectively than I would have expected. I think that I will have to introduce a factor to localize the exercise, or it may become a running battle that soon takes us beyond the boundaries of this property.”* She rotated on her axis and selected a boulder that was the size of a small room, about two-thirds buried in scree and smaller boulders. She cast an Illusion on it to make it glow blue. *“This stone shall be the objective of the exercise. You must defend it. If you lose the stone to your enemies, you lose the exercise. It will take one dragon or twelve Sylvan about one minute to dig out the stone. Of course, you also lose if my players succeed in a blow or spell that would kill or disable you if the exercise was real combat.”*

She gave them the brighter smile as she faded from view. *“We begin.”*

Suddenly a black dragon appeared forty-six meters above them and to the left and flying down at them as fast as a stooping falcon, already emitting an ear-splitting roar and a blast of yellow fire. Talia cast Battle Shield around both of them even as she flew them out of the way of the fire with wrenching acceleration. It banked sharply and grabbed at them with both massive clawed feet. Talia dodged but not enough, and Mark slashed at the closest foot with GrimFang, cutting half of it off, then seized the dragon with Movement and slammed it into the ground with a huge crash, raising a great cloud of dust and ash.

Talia continued flying them at high speed in a spiraling, weaving pattern, keeping them back to back and about a meter apart to prevent blind spots, and this evasive action prevented them from being skewered by the arrows of a squad of six Sylvan who had appeared on the ground below. She yelped a bit as one passed close to her face, then Mark cast a Concussion in the midst of the squad, and the deafening blast left little more than a two meter wide crater in the gravel. Another black dragon appeared twenty meters away and directly in their path, spewing fire and casting some kind of spell, and with a quick thought to Mark, Talia Translocated.

They reappeared three meters in front of the dragon, still flying at a pace that would cover more than three kilometers in a minute, and Mark was already swinging his sword at it’s neck on the way by, cutting it more than halfway through and cleaving the spine.

A flight of twenty Sylvan, half with drawn bows, the rest casting red bolts of Force, appeared over the west end of the valley. They accelerated towards the objective stone even as the archers loosed. The Force bolts came on almost too fast to see, and Mark and Talia both poured power into their Battle Shield, which took the bolts with no ill effect other than a shower of red sparks. Then Mark swept the arrows aside with a wedge of Force before casting Movement on them and sending them back at their archers. The Sylvan wizards hurriedly cast, failed to re-take control of their projectiles, and in a panic were forced to incinerate their own speeding arrows rather than be struck by them.

Mark noticed a squadron of nine dragons swoop over the ridge to the east, recognized that they were a greater threat than twenty Sylvan, and cast an immense Concussion right in front of them. It blasted the closest three of them aside, but the Shields of the rest held, and they cast various spells. Two spells impacted while Mark buttressed their Battle Shield before Talia Translocated them behind the oncoming dragons and facing their backs.

As they re-appeared they could see that the twenty Sylvan had reached the objective stone, and that half of them were already starting to dig it out, while the other half assumed a defensive formation before it.

Mark's heart was pounding in his ears and he knew he only had a moment before the six dragons turned on them. He blasted them with Force bolts, throwing power into the spell with desperate determination. The dragons' Shields were completely overwhelmed, and the incredible power of Mark's attack tore their bodies asunder.

Meanwhile Talia had cast Movement on a huge amount of loose rock around the objective stone, raising it up in a circular wave around the Sylvan and sending it crashing down on them, burying the objective stone and everything around it under two meters of rubble. Some of the Sylvan platoon must have raised Force Shields or cast counter-Movements, for the pile shifted and a boulder flew off. Mark quickly buried it under a mound ten times as big, then viciously crushed the pile down to two-thirds its size with the strongest Movement he could muster.

An aerial army appeared all around them, filling the valley, over two hundred dragons interspersed with a thousand Sylvan, as many as could fly there without getting in each other's way. An instant later Talia and their Battle Shield shuddered under the impact of a constant barrage of hundreds of spells, and Mark barely got a Force Sphere up in time to block hundreds of spelled arrows and javelins. The light released was almost blinding, the noise painfully loud.

"NOW JUST A DAMN MINUTE!!!" Mark yelled at the top of his lungs, and a battle rage lit in him at the unfairness of the two of them being assailed by such a huge force in their first combat exercise. "Talia, cast this on the Battle Shield!" he barked as he passed her a very complex compound spell, then as the inferno of incoming spells roared around them he threw his own power into their defenses for the seconds it took her to grasp what she had been given. When she cast it, their Battle Shield became impregnable, many of the spells and missiles sent at them began to miss, and many of the others were changed and sent back at their attackers. She threw everything she had into this new shield, relieving Mark of the strain of their defense, and he attacked with Lightning. He screamed in rage as the bolt lanced in an instant from his fists, along GrimFang, out through their shields and into their simulated opponents in a constant, writhing, blinding and deafening inferno of electricity.

The blessing he had made from the curse was quicker than he was, protecting their hearing and Talia's vision before they could be damaged, while his own Optical Attenuator spell was pushed to its limits.

He roared his fury and defiance as he blasted through their opponents with his hellish spell, pouring his rage and his magic into the continuously blazing bolt in a reckless use of power. Eighteen seconds later he was almost completely spent, but he had cleared the skies of the simulated dragons and Sylvan.

"That is more than enough of that for now." Ria dryly stated as she appeared before Talia. She wasn't smiling in the slightest. "This exercise is over."

"Good." Talia nodded exhaustedly, and let the shields dissolve as she and Mark floated gingerly down to the blasted ground, keeping only the blessing's Pure Breath spell active, since the valley was now filled with clouds of disturbed ash.

"Dammit Ria, you have a lot of gall to seem as miffed as you do!" Mark growled as he sheathed GrimFang and sat slumped in the gravel and ash. "We passed your damn test, and it seems like you're upset that you couldn't make us fail! What the hell were you thinking, throwing all that at us the first time?! What were we supposed to learn from that?!"

"Instructors are entitled to appear miffed when the exercises they conduct do not proceed as they had planned. And it is standard practice to test the mettle of new recruits on their first combat exercise by facing them against ever-increasing opposition until they either choose a wise retreat or are overwhelmed. I was not capable of doing that. Please excuse me if I seem displeased with you, for I am not, your performance was so spectacular that I have no words to properly describe the magnitude of your achievement. We learned a great deal about your capabilities with this exercise. Your efforts were bold, basic, and without subtlety, but that is more than compensated for by the magnitude of your powers, the effectiveness of your weapons, and the perfection of your Link. I think there has never been a pair that fought as one being as effectively as you two do, and that is truly your greatest strength. Linked as you were, you were ten times as effective as either of you could have been alone.

"But I cannot help but feel like I am failing you as your instructor. Or rather, that you may not truly need my instruction. I have centuries of bitterly won experience in war as the sword of Visinniria, yet I do not see how you could have fought much better than you did. There is much I could teach each of you as individuals, but as a team, you need none of it. As a team, on your first day as complete warriors, you are a match for the Visinniria that was until the last eighteen years of her mortality.

"I... I worry that you may set me aside, as Visinniria did when she grew beyond the use of a sword, even a sword such as I. I am sorry. I am being maudlin. I should be congratulating you."

"I will never set you aside, Ria." Talia told her tiredly as she relaxed in Mark's arms and recovered her breath, uncaring of the drifting ash that was settling on their skin and sticking to their sweat.

“You cannot say that with any assurance, since none of us know what the future will hold.” Ria insisted.

“I can say it with assurance, since I’m promising you that I will never set you aside, and I’ll swear it on the Truthstone of Falgaroth if that’s what it takes to convince you.” Talia told her tiredly. *“Besides, you’re our friend and we love you.”* She smiled a bit and kissed Ria’s blade, then cuddled the hilt to her bosom. *“Even if you are a bit moody.”* she giggled.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you, Ria.” Mark chuckled. *“I’m not used to swords having feelings. But look on the bright side. If we’re going to be moving on to the next stage of our training, that’s true weapons training with the Eldest, and when we do that you’ll be part of our team instead of running the opposition. I think we’ll need every bit of help you can give us to deal with whatever Quewanak will throw at us. And I’m very aware that we’re much less experienced than Visinniria was when she made you, so we need your guidance much more than she did. Besides that, since you received her recent gifts, you’re far more capable and complete than you were then, both as a weapon and as a person.”*

Ria tipped toward them until she was nearly horizontal, a deep and respectful bow, for her. *“Thank you.”* she said, and began to fade from view.

“Now don’t go yet, I still want to ask you a few things!” Mark told her. *“Like how did you do all that? I mean, I know your mind is copied from Visinniria’s, and that she must have had amazing mental capacity and capability, but still, it seems amazing that you could maintain and control so many simulated enemies, plus all their spells and weapons!”*

“It was not as complex as I made it seem.” Ria told him as she regained full visual solidity and her vertical position. *“I kept you too busy to notice that all the dragons were identical, and that all the Sylvan were identical. Each simulation in a group performed identical motions, offset a bit in time, position and angle. Only four of them made any sound at any given time, and that sound was also illusory; you didn’t truly hear it, I passed it to your minds through the Link. Most of the spells were done that way as well. I didn’t bother showing the blood and guts that would have resulted from real combat, and once you had defeated an enemy and turned your attention away from it, I stopped maintaining it and it faded. That last attack wave was as much as I could maintain, and it was not enough.”*

“Ya, that’s right, now that I think about it.” Mark stated as he reviewed his memory of the exercise. *“Even so, it was an incredible display of multitasking.”*

Now Ria regained her slight smile. *“Thank you.”*

“You know, we truly learned a lot.” Talia realized. *“If we repeated the exercise right now, we’d do much better. I realize now that the defensive spell set that Mark passed me is the Wards of The Nine Valleys, complete with invisibility, Illusions, distractions, force barriers, transmuting counter-attacks, all of it. As they are Wards that are keyed to us, we can strike through them as well as cast through them. I’d use that at the first sign of danger from now on.”*

“Yah, I got that from Yazadril.” Mark nodded. *“And I’d use the Force Shield all the time, except for the actual moment I’m swinging my sword at an enemy. And I’d also cast the elven Wards on the objective stone to make it harder for them to take it.”*

“So, how representative of a real battle was the exercise? I mean, real dragons and Sylvan must be harder to beat than that, right?”

“Not necessarily, for I did not skimp on realism in that regard, not in the slightest. To be sure, I based the simulations on average dragons and average Sylvan of sixty thousand years ago, and both races are likely more capable today. At least so far as their potential is concerned, if not their experience and skill. As for opponents who are not average? You two could win over any three of the highly exceptional dragons working in the crater right now, and might survive against five, but that circle of nine would still obliterate you in a moment. The Sylvan will have their champions as well, some as fearsome as Alilia or Osbald or Emeroth. And for a humanoid race, sixty thousand years is a long time. Who knows how the Sylvan have changed in that time? I believe Yazadril has the most up to date information on that race, but I do not know it.”

“On the other hand, average is average, and for every Sylvan who is as exceptional as Alilia, there is one who is just as extremely substandard. Even the Sylvan have bootlicking toadies who survive by fawning at the egos of the mighty. And for every exceptional Draconian like Kragorram, there is a slinking, skulking, lazy brute of a dragon who survives by scavenging and by bullying lesser predators from their kills.”

“If you were facing the most substandard of your enemies, there is no number of them who could prevail against you. Though they be dragons and Sylvan, they could come at you in their millions, and you would blow them aside like chaff in the wind until you tired of it.”

“Orders of magnitude.” Mark murmured thoughtfully.

“Just so.” Ria agreed.

“Thanks Ria.” Suddenly Mark got a huge grin. “Now that the shock of it is wearing off a bit, I’m thinking that the exercise was a lot of fun! Sweet Mother above, it was exhilarating!”

“Now that you mention it, I think I’m starting to feel more than a bit triumphant!” Talia laughed. “We did do rather well, didn’t we? I think that arrow was the only close call, really.

“Yes, I’ll definitely join Mark in sincerely thanking you, Ria. I’m looking forward to the next exercise. Just not today!”

“*You are most welcome.*” Ria smiled with genuine warmth in her tone, and faded from view.

“How long do we have until they’re finished reshaping that chunk?” Mark asked as he rubbed his eyes and face.

“A bit less than ten minutes, by their estimate. And we’re spent. Should we just go back up there early and wait until they’re finished with it?”

“No, we’ll do what we’d do if we were in this shape with fighting left to do. We’ll shoot some arrows. We have enough time to test out those four bows and see which ones we like.”

“All right.” she smiled, and with a wave she retrieved their bundle of weapons from where they’d left it; floating six meters above the bottom of the valley. She untied it and unrolled the oiled leather wrap, Levitating it level and horizontal at her waist’s height to display the weapons. “This big laminated longbow is obviously meant for you. It’s only a medium bow for you, actually. The next smaller one would be a longbow for me or a short cavalry bow for you. This elven jungle bow from Dakrin Cliffs is probably too small for you to use. And we’ll have to test the pull on this spider bow to see if it’s meant for you or me. We should have brought the cards that came with these. We do know the Atoning rated these as our four most dangerous projectile weapons.”

“A spider bow, you called it?” Mark asked as he picked up the strange weapon, which was about a meter in length, and was varnished a dull green. “I’ve never heard of anything like it! And though I wouldn’t have guessed it, it’s obvious that it’s meant for me, because the grip is big enough to fit my hand!”

“Yes I see. They’re also called six wheel bows, for obvious reasons, but they’re called spider bows because the way the bowstring weaves back and forth between the wheels kind of looks like a spider’s web, and because the lamination layer on the outside of the curve of the limbs is made from pre-stretched spider silk, as is the bowstring. I’ve never used one, but apparently the extra long bowstring passing through all the wheels adds leverage to the draw. It also allows you to shoot very long arrows with a compact bow.”

The center of the black bowstring where the arrow was meant to be nocked was marked with an extra wrap of white thread, and he hooked three fingers there and drew the bow a meter. “Wow! This thing really has some heft, though the limbs hardly bend at all!” he gritted in surprise.

“Pull it back farther.” Talia advised, and he did, achieving over a meter and a half of draw at his maximum.

“I sure see the point of it now!” he panted as he gradually released the draw, then pulled it again. “It’s tough to get the draw at the beginning, but it doesn’t really get any harder to pull it the rest of the way!”

“Interesting. Let’s do some shooting! We have a wide variety of arrows, so we’ll want a variety of targets.”

“All right, let’s start with a one-meter-wide bullseye at about thirty meters. I’ll cast it as an Illusion and give it a bit of soft Force to catch the arrows.

“There, that didn’t take much, even as drained as I am.”

“The archery range at school is twenty-five meters, can we start at that distance?” Talia asked as she filled a small quiver and selected an archery gauntlet.

“Sure.” Mark nodded as he brought the target closer, then turned to select his arrows and gauntlet. By the time he’d done that, Talia had already put six arrows into the target, all close to center.

“The elven longbow and the jungle bow are both fitted to my hand.” she announced as she turned to watch him shoot. “The longbow is spelled for accuracy, so there’s no use in practicing with it. The jungle bow’s arrows are spelled for accuracy as well, but I can remove it from them easily enough and replace it later, whereas the spell on the longbow is a tricky piece of work. The short arrows simply go wherever you were looking when they were released, whereas the longbow guides its arrows to their intended target as long as it’s within range and it’s location is accurately known, even if it moves after the shot or is hidden behind something.”

“Nice!” Mark commented as he drew the fletching of a meter and a half long war arrow to his ear with the spider bow, then let fly. He struck the target dead center, and the tremendous force of the impact was obvious. “This is a wonderful bow! It’s wasted at this distance though, ‘cause it’s a marksman’s bow as sure as I’m standing, meant for distant, difficult targets.”

He created a second target a hundred meters down the valley, and sent it flying gently up the slope as he pulled another arrow to full draw, tracked ahead of the target for a moment and let fly. It struck in the third of five rings on the bullseye.

Talia gave him a happy little clap as she floated up to give him a quick kiss. “Congratulations Mark! That was a wonderful shot!

“Personally, I’ve never practiced on moving targets, and I could never shoot such a distance without magic, and I’m not even that accurate at twenty-five meters.” she admitted as she chose six more arrows and stuck them into the gravel in front of her in a neat row, then readied her bow and reached for another arrow.

“I do have one good attribute as an archer though.” she said as she nocked, drew, and released her arrow in a single smooth, quick motion, reached for the next without looking away from her target, quick-fired it as well, and the next. She hit near the center of the target with all seven arrows in less time than it would take Mark to shoot two, even if he was in a hurry. Her grouping was almost as small as that of her first six. “I can maintain a pretty fast rate of fire.” she finished, a trifle smugly.

“And an impressive attribute it is, my love!” he chuckled as he gave her a one-armed hug. “Quite valuable for close city fighting; attempted coups in the throneroom, that kind of thing.”

“A development we don’t need to worry about anyway, since every visitor or immigrant to Hilia will have sworn a binding vow of justice!” she giggled. “Still, with comments like that, you’re starting to sound like you grew up as royalty!”

Mark grinned as he nocked another arrow, and had opened his mouth to offer a playful retort, when Grakonexikaldoron Spoke.

“*They have finished altering the piece.*” she informed them.

“*We’ll be right up.*” Talia told her.

They wrapped up their bows and arrows after retrieving the ones they’d shot, then flew back to the crater at a relaxed pace.

As they arrived back at the group of dragons, Kragorram and two of the astronomers were carefully removing a second chunk of obsidian from the wall of the crater near the hole from which they’d removed the first one.

“Ah, friendz Mark and Talia, I am zorry we could not greet you properly earlier, though we would have been prepared to do zo if we had known you were coming.” Kragorram called. “Mind you, it iz lucky for uz that you *have* come, particularly if you can zhow that theze two piezez reflect your power with equal effectivenezz. As you zay, that will zave uz a great deal of work.”

“Glad to be of service, Kragorram.” Mark smiled with a wave. “I’m just glad we had a chance to see you at work, for it was a wondrous display of control and craft!”

“Thank you, but I muzt zay that the craft of my co-workerz here waz more wondrouz, though it iz not even vizable to the unaided eye, for they have zhaped thiz pieze to a perfect zpheric zeczion with an accurazy that iz about equal to one ten-thouzandth of the thicknezz of your zkin.”

“That is impressive!” Talia marveled.

“If in fact the unique surface texture and crystalline structure are not key to the reflective quality of the stone,” the blue draconian astronomer commented in a throbbing, somewhat sardonic growl, “then the altered piece should not only equal the reflectivity of the unaltered piece, but significantly surpass it, for not only is the sphericity of its shape now perfect, which will allow the many pieces to focus together on a single point, it’s surface texture is now perfectly smooth, which should vastly reduce scattering of the reflection.

“I must admit to being consumed by impatience to learn the result of the experiment. My gratitude would be unbounded if we could perform the test with no further delay. Furthermore, I would request that we be allowed to share your sensations while we do so.”

“Certainly.” Mark nodded. “Povon, would you be so kind as to set up a Link between myself and these fine astronomers?”

“Certainly.” Povon nodded, and Mark had to struggle to keep from laughing as he realized that Povon was playfully mimicking him.

“Excellent. Now, If you’d be so kind as to instruct me as to the exact procedure you wish us to perform?”

“Certainly.” The blue drake nodded, obviously completely unaware of the by-play between Mark and Povon, and so as equally unaware of the unintended hilarity of his response. Talia and Povon had to laugh aloud, though they tried to stifle it, and the astronomer completely disregarded that as well. “You will go beyond and below the rim of the crater to the south, where you will be within direct sunlight, but where we will be assured that you are well removed from the reflection from within the crater. You will position yourself so that the sun is directly behind you, and I will cast a spell similar to your Battle Shield that conforms to your silhouette between you and the sun, blocking the direct rays of the sun from you, and hopefully this will make the sensations you feel from the rays reflected onto you by the two samples more apparent. In order to maximize the sensations and the contrasts between the sensations caused by

the reflection of the two pieces, I will Translocate one of the pieces directly in front of you and just above you, positioned and angled so that the sunlight and your power are reflected directly onto your face, head and torso. I will then perform substitutions, one piece for the other. That is to say, I will Translocate the first piece out of position while you are concentrating on the sensations you perceive from it's reflection, preferably with your eyes closed to aid your concentration, and a very short time later I will Translocate the second piece into position. So far as your senses will be able to detect, the substitution should be instantaneous, which should also make any contrasts you perceive between the two pieces' reflectivity as apparent as possible. These two pieces, as well as the other three we may yet need to reshape, were chosen because their surface areas are exactly equal, so that will not be a factor."

"Got it." Mark nodded, and Talia Translocated the two of them to the appointed place before she lost control and laughed aloud at the blue dragon's somewhat pompous long-windedness with an enthusiasm that may have been taken as disrespectful.

A moment later the blue elder cast his blocking spell.

"Interesting." Talia commented. "It's like you have a pure black shadow floating in mid-air a meter behind you, staying directly between you and the sun."

Mark glanced back at it. "I could tell it was there right away, not only because it blocked the heat of the sun, but because it blocks the power I get from it. It's pretty noticeable when it's sudden like that."

"*Thank you. That is valuable commentary.*" the blue psionically told them. "*We begin.*"

The first piece appeared in front of and above Mark, and he closed his eyes to concentrate. "I can definitely feel the reflection, even though this piece is such a small fraction of the crater. I wasn't sure if I would." he commented.

Three seconds later the second piece was substituted for the first, and the process was repeated eight more times.

"*It is done. And I believe the results are happily conclusive.*"

"I agree." Mark nodded as he Translocated himself and Talia back to the nine dragons. "I thought so at the first substitution, and I'm sure now. Their reflections are pretty much the same. If anything, the second piece reflected a tiny bit better."

"Some zero point one seven percent better, actually, which is completely consistent with the theory that the properties of this stone that allow it to reflect the source of your power are entirely the product of the material makeup of the stone." The blue commented as the two pieces were replaced in their holes. "Thus we will be able to heat and reshape the surfaces of the rest of the pieces of the lining of the crater in a single, simultaneous operation. We will take our leave now, for with this knowledge we can commence the final planning for the operation. This will require two to three days."

And with that the six astronomers Translocated out on with a single flawlessly silent spell.

"Huh. He's a different sort, isn't he?" Mark chuckled. "They didn't even bother to be introduced."

"Believe me, those six seldom spend any thought on anything not directly related to their intellectual pursuits." Povon told him with a huge toothy smile. "I hope you'll forgive my teasing, but Zeverkin's manner is so academic, and your own manner of speaking changes with your perception of the formality of the situation. It just struck me as funny, and I'm very out of practice in controlling my reaction to that emotion."

"That's okay." Mark grinned. "If I wasn't the one who had to do the talking, I'd have probably laughed when you and Talia did."

"Zeverkin would not have cared if you had, since he has no real understanding of humor and is fully aware of his lack in that regard, and so he consistently ignores it as irrelevant." Gran chuckled. "Still, it was wise that you did not, since three of those who worked with him are more emotional than he. As it is, they will be mildly miffed with Povon and Talia for a time that may range from a year to an eon. In their minds, you girls have shown yourselves to be... How would it be said in this language precisely? Ah. Incorrigibly precocious adolescents. They will not seek to have you barred from positions of authority, because Mark and Kragorram's behavior was exemplary, and so they will be considered to be mature adults who are in charge of you girls as your guardian custodians."

"I see." Povon nodded, still smiling and completely unabashed as she sidled up to Kragorram and tucked herself under his wing. "And I would be upset at that assessment, except that I think it is not too far from the truth!"

"Not far?" Talia laughed as she hugged Mark's thigh. "I think it represents the situation exactly!"

"I... I believe I am... Mildly embarrassed? A bit abashed, certainly." Kragorram declared with a puzzled head shake. He gave Povon an absent-minded cuddle, which she obviously relished. "It iz ludicrous to think that I would be considered to be in authority over anyone as intelligent, skilled, and powerful as Povon! Bezidez that, she has twice my yearz of life!"

"But I have half your life experience, my love, particularly when it comes to dealing with others." Povon affectionately declared. "I have been solitary while you have been out in the world, doing things. So, since you're the

mature one in our mating, I'm your responsibility. Anything stupid I do will be considered to be your fault by those astronomers and others like them, since you will have obviously failed to supervise me correctly. It's a very freeing realization, now that I think about it!"

This left Kragorram so flabbergasted he could only gape.

"That's silly, and it's even more silly in our case, since Talia has almost twice the life experience I do, no matter how it's measured." Mark stated with a grin.

"Perhaps, but I'm definitely riding on your greatness, my love." Talia told him with a sincere smile. "Besides, I'm inspired by your wisdom, and we've already agreed that I've accepted your leadership. So anything I do wrong is your fault. You boys can punish us for our failings, but they're still your responsibility."

"Punish Povon?! I could never consider such a thing!" Kragorram protested, now completely taken aback.

"Relax, my friend." Mark laughed. "They're just teasing us."

"Oh. Zo, what they said was not truly meant?"

"Oh they meant it all right, but that doesn't mean they judge us to be the kind of mates who would ever truly punish them, nor will they make any less effort to behave in a manner that would make us proud of them."

"Oooh, that was masterfully done!" Talia teased, but addressing Povon. "Suddenly we've gone from not having to feel responsible for our own behavior, to feeling it's our moral duty to be as exemplary as they are!"

"Which only proves our point, doesn't it?" Povon pointed out, and they all got a laugh from that.

"My love," Kragorram chuckled, "I am glad we do not engage in these little contests of wit while we are alone together, for without Mark's support, I think I would be instantly overwhelmed."

"True, but then we have far better things to do when we are alone together, don't we my love?" Povon laughed as she gave him another sensuous cuddle.

"Why Kragorram, I do believe that you are blushing!" Gran observed, laughing aloud with delight.

"Blushing? How could you tell?" Mark was baffled. "I mean, he's a crimson dragon!"

"Well of course, I use the word 'blushing' because it's closest in meaning to the Draconian term for the set of physical symptoms produced by extreme embarrassment or chagrin, but in dragons it causes a certain tightening of the skin on the neck and facial area that results in the scales standing up a bit. It's hard to see on Kragorram because his scales are so small, but you can see where they are not laying as flat against his skin, producing a slightly different visual texture."

"Crag and Scarps!" Povon muttered, and sinuously licked her lips as a mischievous smile grew on her countenance. "Uh, Talia, Gran, we'll meet as planned. Kragorram and I have something we must do right now." she announced without looking away from her mate. With an abrupt wave and a throbbing growl, they were gone.

"Ah, young love." Gran sighed, and smiled.

"Am I right in thinking that Kragorram was mortified, and that Povon found that to be erotic?" Talia giggled.

"You are." Gran nodded.

"How is it that dragons smile in the same way as humans?" Mark asked. "I mean, it just struck me as amazing that when you smile, it's in such a human manner that I've been taking it for granted; even the tiniest nuances seem natural. It seems impossible that two such different peoples could have developed exactly the same manner of showing such subtle emotions."

"We did not, for dragons do not smile. Most of our physical expression of emotion is conveyed by subtle movements and positions of the head, neck, wings and tail. In order to communicate effectively in Draconian to a dragon, you would need to simulate those motions by means of an advanced inter-species translation spell that reads your facial expression, tone of voice, and body language. As the spell translates the sound of your words into Draconian, it also translates those more subtle human emotional signals into those of dragons, and conveys them by means of a small Illusion of a simplified dragon figure. The Draconian translation spell for Human Trade Common casts the Illusion of smiling on my face, because my facial muscles are not capable of forming the expression, but it also provides me with the meaning and use of various voluntary physical signals, such as shrugging and nodding. Devising such spells is fiendishly complex and requires the cumulative effort of thousands of researchers. They are constantly improved and revised, and those of us who use them often bestow gifts upon the researchers to show our gratitude."

"Interesting." Mark nodded. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now I will take my leave, so that I may finalize arrangements for the construction of the research facility on the north rim, which will begin tomorrow. I will see you later today at Hilia."

"Fare well till then." Talia called with a wave, and then she was again alone with her husband.

"Well, let's get you into the focus." she smiled as she took his hand, or rather his index finger.

“Ya, there’s enough sun shining into the crater now to be worthwhile, and I could sure use the energy.” He agreed as they rose and moved to the center of the great bowl. “Ahhh. That sure feels nice.”

“We still have about three hours before we should get ready for the party.” Talia said as they slowed, drifted back down a bit, then stopped as Mark found the focus by the intensity of the reflected power. “Should we do some more weapons practice?”

“We could, but I’d really like to see some of the world. Just some quick visits in the time we have. I’ve got all of Yazadril and Alilia’s Translocation references, so we can go almost anywhere in the alliance. I’d love to see Felion and Kletiuk, and the Xervian capitol.”

“I’ve always wanted to see Latrel. And we could visit Joseth Narr and see how his recovery is progressing.”

“We should. It would be the decent thing to do.” Mark nodded. “But I’m nervous about going back to Debivin. Strange to think that of all the peoples in the alliance, I feel least secure among humans. Winghoof is just outside Latrel, and the last time we were there you were killed, and I barely brought you back. We’re harder to kill now, but you can bet whoever did it knows we’re still alive, and their next attempt will be a lot more powerful. And remember the crowd outside our place in Thon? That was a bit scary too.”

“Those are good points. But my father is a master of disguise, and so I’m conversant with the fundamentals of the art. Even as distinctive as we are, we can pass unnoticed.”

“True.” Mark grinned. “What do you suggest?”

“First, the Unseen spell, which will prevent people from focusing their attention on us if they’re closer than a hundred paces. My paces, that is. And second, for those who see us from beyond the range of that spell, we will alter our appearance with Disguise illusions. I suggest we keep them simple. If I appear thirty centimeters taller and you appear thirty centimeters shorter, and we adopt each other’s hair coloring, we will be practically unrecognizable even if we change no other details. It would be easiest if we cast them on each other.”

“You’d look like a native Smingan plains elf, and I’d look like I came from northern Iktra or Luffan.” Mark smiled. “All right, that shouldn’t be too hard. Would you step back and pose for me please, Princess?”

“Certainly.” she giggled as she floated off a couple of meters.

He cast an Illusion of her a meter to her left, then gradually expanded it until the image was thirty centimeters taller. “Uh, I don’t have anything that casts a mirror.” He admitted after a moment of thought. “Can you do that?”

“Sort of.” She cast Summon, and the retrieving Translocate produced a two by one meter mirror, its dark wood frame ornately carved in the shapes of flowers. “It’s from my room in my parents’ oak.” she giggled.

“Thanks.” He studied his own reflection, and changed the coloring of the Illusion’s hair to match. “This is harder than I thought. It’s one of the first spells I’ve cast where I’m not just copying what someone else did. Now I’ll fix it to you by guiding it with my sense of your location.”

The image moved over and turned until it overlaid Talia, hiding her within it.

“That’s very well done, but it’s really the hard way of going about it.” Talia laughed. “Look, I just look at you and picture the differences I want, and I cast *this* version of Illusion *on you*, the same way I would if I were attacking you with it.”

“Ah. Except I’m already doing it this way, so I might as well hang onto it for now.” He grinned as he inspected his altered appearance in the mirror. “Besides, I don’t have the talent to just picture something I haven’t seen with perfect realism like that. I have to see something to get that kind of detail all at once.”

She stood beside him in mid-air and put an arm around his waist as they studied their reflections, hers hundred and sixty-three centimeters tall and black haired with light blue eyes, his two hundred twenty-one tall, light blond, with dark blue eyes.

“I’d say we’re quite unrecognizable, if no less exotic in appearance.” she laughed. “But remember, you’d have to alter the Illusion to account for our actions. Right now the Illusion of me is centered upon me, and it’s larger than me, so if I stand on a floor, it will look like my feet extend below the floor. And if I remove your Illusion... There you see, it seems like my body is intersecting yours.” She restored his Illusion. “Now, my Illusion of you is altering itself, so that when we hug, it conforms properly to your Illusion of me. I’ll take care of physical interactions between us, so we won’t try to compensate for each other’s compensations.

“Here, I’ll cast a square meter of Force to stand on and color it brown with another Illusion.” She released her Levitation and fell eight centimeters to land comfortably on her artificial surface. Sure enough, It looked to him like she was standing in brown liquid that came up to her ankles.

“I see.” He laughed. He moved the Illusion up till it was standing on the floor.

“Ah, but if I draw my sword and hold it over my head, it’s position is not consistent with the Illusion’s hand.” Talia demonstrated, and it looked like the hilt passed through her forearm. “The Disguise Illusion I’m casting follows

the surface of your hands and the soles of your feet, and compensates for size differences by altering the Illusion's posture and limb positions accordingly, and if necessary, it changes the apparent position of any object you're touching or holding. Remember, an Illusion is a psionic spell, not a colored light spell. Illusions affect the mind, not the eye."

"True." he chuckled as he drew his sword, then sheathed it again as he dismissed his spell. "You've completely convinced me, but when I was getting spells from Alilia and your parents I mostly took the general version of each spell, and didn't bother with any variations whose purpose I didn't recognize, and I didn't get that one. So if you'll just pass it to me... Thanks. Now that I've seen the Illusion I had, I can picture it well enough to use this. Much better." he nodded, seeing the taller dark-haired Talia properly holding her sword.

He caressed her with both hands as she sheathed it, and kissed her neck. "You know, with this meager sunlight, and as depleted as my power is, I should float here for at least twenty minutes..." he chuckled.

"My love, you are most admirably insatiable!" she laughed as she turned into his embrace.

"Let's be gentle, all right?" he murmured. "Making love while flying this high is intense enough, and the pleasure of absorbing power here will be getting pretty strong in a while. I worry that if it's too intense when we reach ecstasy with each other, on top of all that, we'll overload our brains somehow."

"Ha! Not only will I attempt to bring you to the most intense ecstasy imaginable, my huge but cautious love, I will endeavor to experience the same at the same moment! *And*, I will hold the Link wide open when we do, so that we will each experience all of that pleasure *and* we will each experience all of that pleasure in the other at the same time!" She was sensuously undressing him and nuzzling his body as she delivered this revelation.

"I... see." Mark eyebrows rose and his jaw dropped as he considered her declaration. "And what do you think will happen then?"

"There are five possibilities." She giggled as she opened his kilt. "One is that the Blessing will save us, perhaps by Translocating us out of the focus while dousing us with the psionic equivalent of cold water.

"The second is that our wedding spells will act directly on our brains to prevent them from being damaged.

"The third is that we will indeed die from pleasure that is too powerful to withstand, and while dying would be most regrettable, that does seem like the most preferable possible demise.

"The fourth is that we will become brain damaged, and while the results of that do include the tiny possibility that we would no longer be capable of experiencing pleasure, they also include the tiny possibility that our brains will become stuck in the experience, and we would spend the rest of our long lives trapped in a moment of absolute bliss.

"The fifth possibility is that it will not prove to be harmful in the slightest, and we will enjoy the absolute ultimate in pleasure, which may well prove to be a transcendent experience that will change us in some fundamental way. Perhaps we will realize the nature of divinity at that moment, and achieve godhood. It seems as likely a method for doing so as any other.

"And personally, I'm willing to take the chance."

By this time she had removed all of their clothing, which floated about in the breeze, for she only spent the attention to make sure their swords remained within arm's reach. Mark's constant caresses had failed to distract her from her task. Now she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him hungrily.

"I suppose I don't get a vote on this issue?" he chuckled a moment later.

"No. You do not."

Thus it was that twenty minutes later, while they had taken the time to again restore their appearances and to drop off their extra weapons at Hilia, they were still a bit dazed as they appeared in the early evening on the street in front of the guard house at the north entrance to the walled grounds of The Imperial Palace of Sming, in Latrel.

They were immediately immobilized by bands of Force and surrounded by a spell-damping field, then a fraction of a second later they were surrounded by four humans and six elves wearing the gray livery of Emperor Kevim's personal guards, all aiming swords or crossbows at them, and then beyond them appeared the mixed-race force of a local detachment of The Military of The Just Alliance, all with spells or weapons at the ready. The people on the street quickly moved back out of the way as the soldiers established a perimeter, then stood to spectate the events.

"Halt!" one of the guards barked. His command was completely redundant, since Mark and Talia were immobilized, and beyond that were so stunned with surprise they could only gape. From his more ornate insignia, Mark judged him to be an officer of some considerable rank. "You have performed an unannounced and unauthorized Translocation into a controlled area from beyond the sovereignty of the Empire of Sming! And it appears you have done so while cloaked in Unseen and Illusion spells of surpassing power! Explain yourselves immediately, or be destroyed!"

“Uh, sorry.” Mark stammered as he and Talia dismissed their spells. “It’s us. We just came to do some sight-seeing, and to visit an injured friend, and didn’t want to draw attention.”

“We’ve never been here before, so we didn’t realize the significance of the reference location.” Talia added. “Again, we offer our most sincere apologies. We’re...”

“Prince Mark and Princess Talia of Hilia, Keys to The Just Alliance!” one of the elves exclaimed, and immediately bowed. Many of the others also bowed, and many began exclaiming excitedly to one another in Smingan and other languages.

“You’re on duty!” the human officer angrily yelled.

Unsure how to respond to this, some of the soldiers snapped to attention, while others brought their weapons back to bear on Mark and Talia.

“Bah!” the officer exclaimed in exasperation. “At ease! Back to your posts, all except my squad! Dismissed!”

As the weapons were put up, the Just Alliance detachment Translocated out, and the bands of Force on Mark and Talia were released, the officer turned to them.

“Your Highnesses.” he said with a nod, obviously controlling his anger. “I can understand your intention to remain unnoticed here, considering what happened the last time you visited Sming, but you’ve chosen a poor way of going about it. It may be different in the elvenlands, but here, less than ten persons in a million can Translocate themselves. We keep an eye on such things, since we’re on the verge of war.

“Let it be officially noted that you bear the recognized Markings of the vow of justice, that you are therefore welcome within The Empire of Sming, that you have been officially reprimanded for entering The Empire without giving prior notification to The Chancellery of Immigration And Tourism, and that you have been formally warned that any repetition of these actions would result in your prosecution, if you did not enjoy diplomatic immunity. Thus my duty is discharged.

“Now, if you would be so kind as to accompany us, the Emperor wishes to speak with you.”

With that he turned on his heel, and led the way through the arch, beneath the wall, and onto the palace grounds.

“You’ll have to excuse Colonel Rekanam’s brusqueness.” The elf who’d announced their names told them with a smile, obviously delighted to be in their company. “We’ve all been on edge since the attempt on the Emperor’s life only three weeks ago, and the recent events have been of no help in that regard. The formation of The Just Alliance and the changes it’s making among the people are wondrous, but the sudden military reorganization has been wrenching to us who’ve been affected by it. We do become a bit attached to our routines, and cannot help but dislike their being disrupted. There’s the business of the conspiracy, and Venak, and the attempt on your lives outside the city two days ago.

“And of course Colonel Riana here is affected more than most, since when he is off-duty, he is Prince Rekanam, brother to His Excellency Emperor Kevim The Sixth.”

“For all the good it does me!” Rekanam grumbled. He had led them across a cobblestone marshaling yard to the steps that led up to the grand entrance of the palace itself. “We’re wasting valuable time! We know that all the conspirators and criminals are holed up in Venak, and that King Renem’s a murderous bastard who’s in it up to his neck! We should blast that barrier down and arrest or kill every damn one of them! They know we’ll be coming for them sooner or later, and with every second that passes before we do, they’ll be that much more prepared for us! We have the power of this great military alliance, but Kevim and the rulers refuse to use it *now*, while it’s still likely to be effective! Our soldiers will end up paying for this indecision with their blood!”

“If it comes to that, I’m afraid they will.” Mark nodded.

“Damn, I’m glad you agree!” the colonel cursed, and shook his graying head. “Maybe you can talk some sense into them! I’m Prince of the Realm and Commander of both the Palace Guard and the City Guard of Latrel, but they damn sure won’t listen to me!”

“There are other factors to contend with beyond those in Venak, as you must know, Prince Rekanam.” Mark patiently told him. “Battle must be our last choice, for if we attack when open war can be avoided, or while lacking critical tactical information, soldiers and citizens on both sides will pay the price. First we must try persuasion.”

“Persuasion?! Persuade them of what?!” Rekanam snorted derisively. “The best you can hope for is to persuade them to keep the peace that they’ve already broken, and we’d be fools to trust them to keep their word on it! You’ll never persuade them to give up the guilty! Sure, the greater good is served if we restore peace without battle, but I doubt it’s possible. Decent folk could go back to the routine of their lives and all that, but if the guilty escape punishment for their crimes, where’s our fine vow of justice then? What’s to stop them from trying it all again, and again and again, until they finally succeed in seizing power and making life hell for everyone?”

They'd reached the deep columned portico at the top of the broad flight of marble stairs, and realized that Emperor Kevin and four of his attendants waited for them there, attired as any well-to-do merchants might be, their clothing finely tailored but not ostentatious.

"Good day Prince Mark, Princess Talia." Kevim offered with a smile and a nod. "Welcome to Sming. Would you care to join me for a few moments?"

"Certainly, Emperor." Talia accepted with the same smile and nod.

He led them into the entrance hall of the palace, and across it at an angle to a large, well appointed office.

"Please, make yourselves comfortable." Kevim waved to a circle of various seating furniture. "Before we speak of other things, Prince Mark, I must admit that I could hear your conversation as you ascended the steps, and I'm consumed with curiosity to know how you would answer my brother."

"All right." Mark nodded. "If it comes to open warfare, a lot of innocent people are going to get hurt, no matter how much we try to avoid it. So, we can only initiate a military attack if we're sure that doing so is the only way to prevent an even larger number of innocents from being hurt. If they don't start it, we won't start it. Sure, they're getting ready for us with every second that passes, but I'm willing to bet that we're getting ready for them even faster. We must concentrate our military effort on being ready to defend our people from a military attack by the enemy.

"Remember, the original intent of the formation of The Just Alliance was *to prevent war*. We thought that someone was trying to instigate a war among us, and we all joined it so that we could assure each other that we weren't preparing to attack.

"Now I'm not involved in the military planning of The Just Alliance right now, but as far as I can see, the best case scenario goes like this: We bring them to the peace table with the bait and the cudgel. Emphasize the benefits of peace and trade with The Just Alliance, versus the costs of their being crushed in a conflict with us. Once we've restored diplomacy and trade and opened the borders, we have access to them. We use that access to learn the identities of the guilty as individuals; those who actually took part in crimes and those who ordered it done, and to know them with certainty. At that point we appeal to everyone who has any power in Venak but who did not participate in crimes to give up the guilty, in return for our backing them as they assume the positions of the guilty who were in power, and join The Just Alliance. And we appeal to the citizens of Venak to support us in this.

"If we don't get the guilty that way, we'll hunt them. We'll offer huge rewards for their capture, or for information that leads to their capture, and we'll send teams of specialists to capture them if possible, and to kill them if not. Right now the number of people who've been directly hurt by the insidious conspiracy is very tiny compared to the number who'd be hurt in a war. If we can keep it that way, and stabilize the situation, we can afford to send a thousand professional hunters after every one of the guilty. We'll hunt them relentlessly, and we'll never stop hunting them. Death is their only escape from us."

There was a long silence as his words were considered.

"I can accept that. Well said." Rekanam admitted with grudging admiration.

Kevim sat back and gave a huge sigh of relief. "There it is then. If you've convinced *him* with that policy, it will convince the rest of those who think as he does. Prince Mark, I would be most pleased if you would submit the words you have just spoken as an official suggestion of the Key to The Just Alliance."

"All right. Prince Rekanam, with your permission, I'd like to send our entire conversation. You made a very strong case for a decisive first strike, and if we learn with certainty that the enemy intends an attack on us, that may be what we have to do. I just want to make sure that what I've said is taken in context."

"By all means." Rekanam nodded.

"I'll end it right there." Mark nodded, and took a Reading of his own memory, then cast a Speaking. "Somonik, I'm here in Sming with Emperor Kevim and Prince Rekanam, and I have a suggestion as Key to The Just Alliance. I'll send you a Reading of our recent conversation."

"*I am ready to receive it.*" Somonik Spoke clearly and formally in the minds of all who were present. "*I have it. Brilliantly spoken. I am forwarding it to the heads of state of The Just Alliance. It is done. Discussion of this suggestion will be added to the agenda of this evening's meeting of The Assembly of The Just Alliance. I personally expect it will be adopted as policy shortly thereafter.*"

"Thank you Somonik. We'll see you at the party later?" Talia asked.

"Of course."

Mark ended the spell.

"I'm still on duty." Rekanam declared as he stood, then offered his hand to Mark with a sudden grin. "I'm damn glad to have met you, Prince Mark. You've given me some real faith in The Just Alliance, and in your leadership as well. And I'll be training hard in my off duty time to qualify for the hunting parties."

“Pleased to meet you as well, Colonel Rekanam.” Mark grinned in return as they shook hands.

“Princess Talia, it’s been a pleasure meeting you.” Rekanam declared with a suddenly courtly manner and a flourishing bow.

“For me also, Prince of Sming.” Talia smiled with a slight curtsy, and Rekanam let himself out.

“Thank you.” The emperor smiled. “I think you’ve restored peace to my family’s dinner table for the first time in three weeks.

“Now, I understand you wish to see the sights of Latrel, and to visit a friend who is injured. I would surmise that to be Joseth Narr, recently made Colonel of the newly-formed Hilian Cavalry, and Commander of the Academy of Cavalry of the Hilian University of The Just Alliance, as your First Minister Sheramiv recently informed me when she formally requested my permission for the establishment of that facility within The Empire of Sming. Permission which was immediately granted, I might add. Jo’s a fine man, and his Healers have given him permission to commence with planning for his new charge, though they insist he do so while remaining in bed. He and the wizards who are still recovering from the attack on you are under the care of my Imperial Healers, in another building within this palace complex.

“If you would tell me which sites you wish to see, I will assign you a very capable guide who will respect your wish to remain anonymous as you enjoy our fine city.”

“I’ve always wanted to see Latrel, ever since my father visited here when I was a child and told me about it.” Talia shyly revealed. “We don’t have much time today, but I’d like to see more of your palace, and Prince Gotimin’s palace as well, and the North High Aqueduct, and The Architect’s Garden of Falling Water.”

“Myself, I’m wholly unfamiliar with your city, so I’m glad Talia has some sights in mind.” Mark grinned. “I’m just looking forward to being among the people as just another person, to talk to them and hear what they’re saying first hand, about how the alliance is doing and the threat of war and life in general.”

“I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised!” Kevim chuckled. “I’ve sent for my grandson Reen. He’s still officially a squire at court here, but he has no patience with the ways of the aristocracy in general, and tends to spend as much of his time as possible out carousing among the folk of the city. Still, he’s a slippery little whip with a good nose for trouble, and he knows every back way, alley, and hidden passage in the city. I’m not supposed to know about it, but he’s been training with Covert Services for a few months, and doing well. Furthermore, I think some time in your company can only benefit the lad.

“And by the way, I’m sure you have no wish to receive a similar reception the next time you travel to Sming. Luckily we now have a convenient way to avoid it. Not an hour before you arrived here I received delivery of several thousand of these items from the Grand Council of Xervia. Your First Minister will have received a few as well.” He retrieved a small oval sheet of blue glass about fifteen centimeters by ten. “It Reads the look and magical aura of the Marking of The Just Alliance with such detail that each one is recognized as unique. That unique Marking is then registered with the agencies in each nation that deal with international travelers. Registered citizens of The Just Alliance are recognized as being allowed passage over borders by the Wards and Warders of each nation, and can pass freely without needing to be individually examined to ascertain their identity. It streamlines the use of the Marking as a passport, and when it’s used in this manner as a diplomatic passport, only the diplomatic services of the nations whose borders are being crossed need to be informed of the identity of the traveler.

“Since you are reigning monarchs, you will be registered as diplomatic travelers. Then you will be able to Translocate into Sming while concealing your identities and your presence from all but the highest levels of our government, without risking arrest, for the Marking of a registered diplomat will be all our sentries need to identify you as friendly and trusted.

“However, until the threat of war is past, we are asking all those who travel by Translocation to register their movements with the involved authorities. Many of our soldiers are young and jumpy, so it’s best that they have at least a full minute’s warning before someone Translocates into their vicinity.”

“I understand completely.” Mark nodded as he took the glass from Kevim. “Sorry about the disruption we caused earlier.

“How exactly does this work?”

“Simply center it over your Marking, press it firmly into contact, and state your full name and rank.”

They did so, and as Talia was finishing there was a knock on the door. Squire Reen let himself in, closed the door, and bowed to his grandfather. He was in his mid-teens and shared a strong family resemblance, being dark and slight with a quick manner, and was dressed in a simple green silk tunic with matching leggings and sandals.

“Good day, Squire.” Kevim nodded. “Be at ease. I imagine you recognize my guests?”

“I do! I’m honored, greatly honored indeed, to share your presence!” Reen babbled with a grin and another bow. “Prince Mark, Princess Talia, Keys to The Just Alliance, and heroes to humans and elves and smart people everywhere! I really couldn’t be more honored than I am right now!”

“They wish to see some of the wonders of Latrel, to read the mood of the people first-hand, and to take the pulse of public opinion, while remaining unrecognized. And they prefer an informal atmosphere, so don’t fawn over them.”

“Of course! You’re just like I thought you’d be, and that’s just the kind of thing I’d expect you to be likely to be doing! And I’m just the man for the job, too! I can guarantee you a lively time in Latrel! How long will you be here?”

“Only an hour of two.” Talia told him with a giggle at his exuberance. “We’ll likely come back and see more soon, but we have a busy day scheduled. We just wanted to go out and relax for a few hours, and we’d like to see something of the other continents as well, before we return to our agenda.”

“Ah. That isn’t a great deal of time. To make the most of it, I suggest you view Latrel’s more spectacular wonders from the air, then take refreshment at a public house for a few minutes. Do you fly?”

“We do.” Mark smiled.

“Then you’ll not only be able to see the sights, you’ll get a look at the city-scape in between, and see the great rebuilding!”

“That sounds perfect.” Talia told him, and turned to the Emperor. “Thank you for your kindness. We’ll see you at the meeting later?”

“I’ll be attending, though we may not have a chance to speak together there, beyond official discussion in council.” Kevim smiled. “So accept my gratitude for your visit and your suggestion, and my best wishes for all that you do, until our next chance to speak on personal matters. I hope you enjoy your time in our proud nation. I welcome your return at any time, to my country or to my home, with a minute’s notice.”

“Thanks. You’re always welcome at Hilia, Your Majesty.” Talia smiled. She and Mark bowed ornately, resumed their disguises without the Unseen spells, then followed Reen out into the entrance hall.

“By the way, do you have a translation spell for Smingan?” Reen asked. “A lot of people can speak Trade Common here, but they don’t tend to do so in casual conversation.”

“I’ve got the elven Tongues spell for Smingan into Elvish, and the one for Elvish into Common.” Mark mused. “I could use both of them like that I suppose, but if you know one for Smingan to Common, it would be easier if you’d let me Read it from you.”

“Oh no, I could never learn such a complex spell!” Reen laughed as they paused outside the doors, and he dug into his tunic pockets. “I’m no sort of wizard, really, I’m simply well equipped! My Flight spell is contained in my belt, and I have a Translation medallion for Smingan and Trade Common. They’re common and reliable, manufactured by the wizard’s guild for the Chancellery of Immigration and Tourism. I don’t need it, since I learned Common the hard way.”

He handed Mark a brass disk as big as his thumbnail strung on a white string, stamped on one side with the arms of the Empire of Sming, and on the other with the marking of the Tradeguild of Wizardry.

Mark tied the string around his neck.

“You can keep that, courtesy of the empire, and I’m sure one of the palace workers will have an extra one for you, Princess Talia.”

“I won’t need one.” Talia smiled. “I can use the one Mark is wearing.”

“Impressive! And handy!”

“We can fly from here, so long as we keep to a polite pace.” Reen grinned as he rose off the floor, settled into an invisible seat, and led them up to a fifth floor balcony, floated through the open doors to a lounge with games tables, and then through a pair of glassed doors that led onto an outside balcony. “We’ll gain some height, and get you oriented.” he told them as he quickened the climb, then slowed and settled some eight hundred meters above the ground.

“All right, you can see the palace complex covers almost two hundred and sixty hectares on the western edge of the city. That complex beyond the palace wall is the army base, home of The Empire’s Own First Legion. All the land behind that is theirs too, beyond the city wall to the other side of the peninsula, and you can see some of them training there with their guests; the Latrel contingent of The Military of The Just Alliance.”

“The palace is lovely! And I can see the aqueduct from here!” Talia marveled.

“What’re those people doing?” Mark asked as he pointed to a huge crowd snaking back and forth in a thick queue across a courtyard on the south side of the palace grounds.

“That’s the public entrance to the palace. Most of those are waiting to swear Osbald’s Oath on the crown of the empire. Many have already sworn on lesser items at any of several government offices throughout the city, so they could get the Marking. But to a Smingan, it really means something to swear on the crown, even if they have to wait. Grandfather joked with me this morning, saying he was glad that he didn’t have to wear the crown to activate its power! Most of those will get to swear on it today, and there’ll be another fifty thousand there tomorrow morning.”

“Ah. And what’s that over there? It’s shining with enough power to make me squint!”

“That is the palace of Prince Gotimin of The Elven Principality of Sming!” Reen proudly explained. “Everyone we have with any magic is contributing power there, even if they can barely light a candle, by Imperial Decree! I was there this morning myself with eight of my friends. We were an hour giving power to an elf who was charging Translocation Plates. He was taking power from some four hundred people at once! The plates were big enough to hold eighty men! Mind you, it’s effortless to give power once the spell’s working; I spent the hour chatting with girls. Anyone good enough to be a journeyman in the wizard’s guild is working twelve-hour shifts over there. Much of the effort goes into Flight and Translocation medallions for the military, and of course spelling arms and armor takes a lot too.”

“How far away is that?” Talia asked as she used their Link to view the glow through Mark’s eyes.

“About twenty kilometers.”

“Twenty kilometers! By the source!” she marveled as she began to realize how much magic was gathered there.

“Yup. It’s the same over at the Healers’ guildhall, there. Everybody working like mad, stockpiling Healer’s spells and supplies. And as you can see, the great rebuilding is going on all over the city. As it’s going on, of course, all over The Just Alliance.”

“What are they rebuilding, exactly?” Mark asked as they began flying around the palace and descending to thirty meters above it’s rooftops. “And why?”

“Many of our poorer neighborhoods are being razed to the ground and rebuilt from scratch, block by block, so that the buildings are taller and of high quality, designed from the outset to be permanent and disaster-proof, the streets are wider and safer, the piping for water and sewer is up to code, everything is better. Other, more prosperous properties are being enlarged, or re-enforced, or fireproofed, or fortified to assist in the defense of the city, or altered to be usable by people of other races, or simply renovated or redecorated for their owners’ pleasure and utility, or all of those at once. And of course we build what you suggested for the common good; libraries and schools and parks and whatnot.”

“Amazing!” Talia stated. “I understand the fortifications and helping the poor, but I’m surprised the rest of it is being done at the same time! It must be a great strain on the construction trades and their supply of materials!”

“I suppose it is, but no one’s complaining!” Reen laughed. “The builders least of all, for their fortunes are being made with every hour! And much of the material is being imported from all over Kellaran, newly available on the market since the founding of the alliance! This is the greatest burst of prosperity the world has ever seen! And that’s saying something, because before all this started, we were already doing better than we ever had before!”

“And this burst of prosperity was caused by the formation of The Just Alliance?”

“Kind of. It’s caused by almost all the criminals having left, and by almost everyone who remains having sworn Osbald’s Oath and gotten the Marking. I have the Marking, so I could go to any moneylender in the empire, and they would loan me money because the Marking proves I’ll repay it, as is just. I’d loan my own money to anyone with the Marking, and offer them help if they needed it. People feel safe, so they can wear their jewelry and show their homes without inviting thievery. They can gamble their savings on the business they’ve always wanted to start, knowing that even if it fails disastrously, poverty would not have them for very long before someone helped them rebuild. I mean, it’s such a hugely profound thing that suddenly everyone knows who’s trustworthy and who’s not, and almost everyone is! I tell you, it’s great! Suddenly everyone’s smiling and friendly and open! Especially pretty girls!”

“And they’re not worried about the possibility of there being a war in the near future?” Talia asked as they continued their leisurely viewing of the palace complex, flying slowly above the towers. “Particularly since your nation’s borders have no Wards? Or are they even aware of the extent of the danger, that Venak has declared war on Thon and therefore on The Just Alliance, and could attack at any moment?”

“Oh they know it all right. But they’re not worried about it. Everyone takes part in the civic safety drills, and everyone knows what to do if an attack comes. Our defenses and preparation improve with every hour, and besides, with only Venak and Serminak outside The Just Alliance, how could they hope to prevail against us? As was said at the founding, the forces of justice are fully united now, and it can only be a matter of time before our victory is complete, and all the evildoers are brought to justice! That will be the greatest day in the history of the world, as my grandfather says, the beginning of an unending age of paradise!”

“May it be so, quickly and easily.” Mark chuckled. “Though I somehow doubt the conspirators plan to make it easy for us.”

“They will if they know what’s good for them!” Reen happily declared. “Would you like to see the more interesting places inside the palace, or would you prefer to move along to another place of interest?”

“Actually, we’re told that an injured friend of ours is recovering here, and we’d like to visit him for a few minutes. He is Joseth Narr, who runs our ranch outside the city.”

“I’ll ask the chamberlain’s staff where we might find him. Excuse me a moment.” He slowed to a hover and closed his eyes for half a minute.

“His Healer says he’s sleeping right now. She requests that you postpone your visit, unless it’s a matter of importance.”

“Please tell her that it’s not.” Talia told him. “And we would appreciate it if a short message could be given to him when he wakes, telling him that we were here, and are thinking of him, and will speak with him soon, and that we wish him a short and pleasant recovery.”

“It will be done.” Reen nodded. A moment later he opened his eyes. “So, do you want to see inside the palace?”

“Another time, I think. Right now, let’s take a close look at the North High Aqueduct and The Architect’s Garden of Falling Water.”

“Always a favorite of visitors to Latrel!” Reen laughed as they gained some altitude and speed for the quick flight there.

They spent fifty minutes touring the sights, over half of it walking, to enjoy the close perspective.

Then Reen led them back to the neighborhood of the palace. “The public house I frequent is called Norka’s Palace of Refreshments. It’s a good place to hear public opinion. Due to it’s location, it’s popular with soldiers and junior officers, palace staff, civil servants and others who work for the empire, fine leatherworkers, warehousemen, and merchants of from modest to moderate means. A good cross-section of the populace, I think. I warn you, it’s a loud and cheerful and boisterous place, or at least it is where I like to sit, but if you like that kind of atmosphere as I do, there’s no finer establishment to be found!”

“It sounds like fun!” Mark chuckled as they landed before their destination, a huge gray stone building with large windows, crowned by a huge and ornately carved wooden sign lettered in Smingan. Clinks and clatters of dishware and the blended sound of numerous conversations drifted from the open windows. The street was moderately busy, and two boys paused to watch them land, but other than that no one paid them any particular attention.

“If you want to remain anonymous, let me do the talking.” Reen laughed as he led them to the doors. “Your voices are well known, and yours is very distinct, Prince Mark.”

He grinned as he led them within.

“Squire Prince! Welcome as always!” the greeter boomed over the loudness of the bustle within. He was a heavy man, with a bushy red beard and eyebrows to match, bald except for a red fringe, attired in a black floor-length silk coat with gold trim, and he grinned as he and Reen gripped each other’s left shoulders with their right hands. “Who are your new friends?”

“That’s Prince Squire to you, Citizen Norka!” Reen teased. “Here on official business of the empire, you see. It’s a top-secret operation, though. I’m afraid you’re not cleared for the details.” He embellished that with a huge wink.

“Of course, of course.” Norka nodded with a deep chuckle. “And your mission just happened to bring you to my fine establishment at almost exactly the same time you regularly arrive here!”

“You understand exactly! Bring us three specials to my usual table, would you please? I’m afraid they’ll be crucial to our mission’s accomplishment.”

“I’m afraid your mission may be in jeopardy then, for your usual table is already fully occupied by Nek and her group. We have a small one available by the badra wall, if that would be acceptable?”

“Oh, I’m sure Nek will make room for us.” Reen tossed over his shoulder as he led the way into the huge room.

The refreshments room was almost filled to capacity. The tables and chairs near the front door were artistic and delicate, set with fine linen and silver, and were occupied by formally dressed citizens who engaged in relatively quiet and dignified conversation. As they moved toward the rear of the huge establishment, the furniture and settings were simpler and more robust, the clientele more gregarious and generally younger. Most of the six hundred or so customers were human, about a tenth were elves, and four dwarfs were among those taking part in a game being held along the right wall.

Mark watched as a young brunette woman rolled two eight-sided dice onto a small table, then took careful aim at eight numbered round holes in the wall five paces distant from the line on the floor she carefully toed. The holes were

of graduated size from five to twenty centimeters wide in a vertical line, with the smallest hole at the top numbered eight down to the largest numbered one at the bottom. She tossed a small white ball through the two hole, accepted a cheer from her companions, then missed with a shot at the four hole. The balls emerged from a slot at the bottom of the wall, and rolled down a shallow inclined chute on the floor back to the throwing area. There were enough dice tables and sets of holes along the wall for twelve games to be played simultaneously.

“I take it that that game is badra, and the playing area is called the badra wall?” Mark asked as they made their way toward a rear corner, keeping his voice just loud enough to be heard by Reen.

“That it is. A popular pastime in socializing establishments all over the plains.”

“And what’s the special?” Talia asked.

“Norka’s Special is green and cold and refreshing and mildly intoxicating, and delicious. Other than that, only Norka knows, for he keeps his recipe secret and mixes it himself in huge batches. Of course the public inspectors know what’s in it, so they can certify it as fit for public consumption, but he has the right to his trade secret, so the inspectors are no more likely to reveal it than Norka is. It may even be spelled, and when you drink a few of them you really start to feel pretty great about everything. You have to be certified for it to drink more than one of them, by the new safety laws, but they have staff here who are qualified to certify you for it.”

They stopped at a huge rectangular table in the left rear corner that would normally have seated eight along each side and three at each end, but there were at least thirty-five young humans casually gathered there. Two young females who appeared to be fourteen to sixteen years old and wearing green military fatigues with short swords sat cross-legged over a game board in the middle of the table, each with a fistful of coins they used to make fast and furious wagers as they quickly exchanged moves in their complex and indiscernible game. They seemed oblivious to the nine spectators seated and standing around them, cheering and offering advice, who also wagered with each other on the outcome. Extra chairs had been brought and arranged in semi-circles along the side closest to the corner of the room, a few young females sat on their boyfriend’s laps, and there were small groups who stood around the periphery, holding their drinks and chatting with those who were seated there. Most wore various uniforms, or parts of them with various items of civilian apparel.

At the far end of the table, room had been made for a stuffed armchair, and within it lounged a young tropical woman with dark skin and short black hair, wearing a dazzling white military dress uniform. She was of average build and had a short, turned up nose, and was the center of attention for those around her. She favored Reen with a supremely confident and friendly smile. “Hey Squire, you shiftless vagabond! Good to see you! All right, make some room for the Prince and his guests!” she called, directing that last at those around her as she stood up to offer Reen a friendly embrace.

An unused hassock was appropriated from a nearby table, and the semi-circle at the end of their huge table was enlarged to make room for it. Mark sat, and Talia perched on his left thigh.

“You can sit with me.” the dark girl laughed as she playfully tossed Reen into her armchair with a deft twist, then curled up in his lap.

“My pleasure!” Reen grinned as she settled herself comfortably, then he turned to Mark and Talia. “This is Junior Lieutenant Nek Sibook, from the south coast, the shining star and darling of the first year class of The Officers’ Training Chancellery of The Armies of The Empire of Sming. She’s gone undefeated so far this year, achieving the highest score on every test she’s taken, and placing first in every competition she’s entered. She’s really quite a prodigy.” he stated proudly.

“Nah, I’m too old now to be a prodigy.” Nek chuckled as she sipped her drink. “Now I’m just a genius.

“So, how are you enjoying your time in Sming, your Highnesses?” she asked Mark and Talia.

“Uh, fine, it’s been fine.” Mark told her, somewhat caught off guard.

“How is it that you know who we are?” Talia asked.

“You arrived earlier wearing these same disguises and were greeted by a squad of Imperial guards and a company of Alliance soldiers, then you dropped your disguises and stated your identities, which was also observed by several citizens who happened to be on the street at the time. Since then you’ve been carefully watched over by wizards from every branch of the military in the city, who are all on high alert, in order to prevent another assassination attempt against you while you’re in Sming. Word gets around fast, especially among soldiers. And even if that were not so, I’ve been trained to recognize when someone I’m observing is disguised, and to recognize the person beneath it if I’ve ever seen them before. All in all, it’s somewhat obvious.”

“I think you’re overstating the case.” Reen grinned, and spoke to those gathered around. “Just because you figured it out doesn’t mean everyone else will. How many here knew who my guests were before Nek spoke? A show of hands, please.”

One slim fellow in an all black uniform who stood leaning against the back wall casually raised his hand, with a small smile.

“And how many have figured it out, given the clues Nek provided?” Reen continued.

Three more hands were raised, all by those who sat close to Nek.

“There. I think my point is proved.” Reen nodded. “I estimate that it will be another full hour before their presence in the city is common knowledge, and at least that long again before the enemy could pinpoint their location to mount a practical attack upon them. By which time they’ll be gone.”

“True, but that’s still a dangerous gamble to take.” Nek insisted. “They’d be smarter to go with completely metamorphosing disguises, or better yet, complete undetectability.”

“Shape-shifting is exceedingly difficult and dangerous,” Reen countered, “And undetectability would have hampered their enjoyment of social interaction with some of the fine citizens of Latrel, which was part of their objective in coming here. I’ll agree it would have been wise for them to change their disguises before we left the palace, but I think it’s a minor point, as I’m aware of the precautions being taken to prevent any danger. If you think that Uncle Rekanam would allow any risk that they’d be attacked within the very capital of the empire, after the loss of face we suffered at the last attempt, your brilliant brain must have slipped a bit.”

“Now be nice.” Nek smiled, and tapped him on the nose with a fingertip hard enough to make his eyes water. “I believe in being thorough. It’s an attitude that hasn’t let me down yet.”

“You are both right, so far as your arguments go.” A quietly intense voice interjected, and all eyes turned to the black clad male who slouched against the wall. He had light reddish-blond hair, blue eyes and ruddy skin, and appeared to be in his late twenties or early thirties. “Unfortunately, your actions defeat your purpose. Due to the clues you two have thrown into the room in your eagerness to display your intellectual prowess, almost everyone at this table has by now realized who our guests are. Thus you have compromised their security by arguing about it.”

“Ah. Your point is well taken, and I am abashed.” Nek nodded. “And who might you be, stealthy one?”

“My name’s Rayn.” He told her, just loud enough to be heard by those at their end of the table. He glanced around, and cast a Speaking that included those who were following their conversation.

“Zone Inspector Rayn, Royal Investigator to King Dren in Belinhome, Finitra, presently assigned to the Anti-Conspiracy Brigade of The Just Alliance.”

At that point a waitress arrived, pulling a narrow cart bearing the food and drinks that had been ordered by those around the table. She efficiently passed them to their intended recipients, jotted down several new orders as they were called out, and was gone again in less than a minute.

“I appreciate that you have the courage to remain uncowed by the conspiracy, and thus are willing to travel about with only a few sensible precautions.” Inspector Rayn said to Mark and Talia as he saluted them with his glass. *“I almost hope that the conspiracy gives us the opportunity to apprehend a few of them, by attempting a strike at you here.”*

“That is to say, if we insist on acting like bait, you won’t pass up the opportunity to set a trap?” Talia giggled as she sipped from the white ceramic tankard she’d been handed.

“Just so.” Rayn nodded and grinned. *“Odds are slight that I’ll catch anyone today, but I’m not so valuable to my superiors that they’d begrudge me the time to make the attempt. And really, no more should be said about it.”*

“I’ve cast a sound distorting field around this group and given everyone near a quick psi-scan. We can speak freely.”

“So what brings you to Latrel?” Nek asked Mark and Talia, with a slight nod to Rayn.

“We thought to take an hour or two to see the sights and to get a feel for the mood of the people.” Talia answered. “We were especially interested in what people really think of The Just Alliance and what it’s done, including the recent activities at Hilia. And I admit I was curious as to how our own activities are viewed.”

Nek’s eyebrows rose. “And your conclusions?”

Talia smiled. “Opinion seems quite favorable. We’d been told that was the case, by Reen here among others, but it means more when you overhear it in every third conversation on a busy street.”

She giggled. “The moment that made the strongest impression was when we were at the water gardens, and overheard five human children trying to convince a young elven girl to play with them. It seems the five were pretending to be us and our companions of the Six of Hilia, but they had no one to play Equemev, and so they had offered the part to a handy elf child. She was eager to play, but refused to do so unless given the part of me, which she thought was only natural since she was an elf. The girl who already had my part refused to give it up, and she was supported by those who were pretending to be dragons and a unicorn, who maintained that race was irrelevant since

they were just pretending anyway. It was a pleasant but very earnest discussion, and we left before it was resolved. And even those children proudly bore the Marking of the vow of justice.”

“By the stars above!” one of the game players sitting in the middle of the table squealed. “You’re...”

At which point her companion slapped a hand over her mouth. “And you’re pretty slow. Are you gonna yell it out to the whole place and cause a mob scene?” she giggled.

The muffled one shook her head, her eyes wide.

“Good. Try to keep in mind that we’re students of the most elite corps, and our reputation requires that we maintain a demeanor of calm confidence in the face of overwhelming excitement.” her companion advised with a grin, then removed her hand.

“I’ll try!” the other grinned.

“Well said!” Nek laughed, adding her chuckles to the many that had gone around at the exchange.

She returned her attention to Mark and Talia. “You should know that the public bulletins and proclamations carry constant updates on all your public activities since your wedding, including posted Readings taken from witnesses to the events, and a few are available at the new public Illusions displays that the dwarves are setting up in practically every neighborhood. Very industrious about it as well, the dwarves, and their Revealings are cheaper and more practical than Readings.

“My point is that everyone, including myself and all of my friends here, have been following your exploits with great interest. Your wedding, the founding meeting of the alliance, the tour of your properties, the attack at Winghoof. Mark, the particular spells you cast to save Talia’s life, and to shield yourself from the death-bolt, have both been classified as military secrets, but we all know you did cast them. One of the elves who serve you, one of the Devoted, has released a Reading of her observations of you at Hilia after the attack, and while she was never close enough to discern your personal conversation, your speech after the dinner outside your cottage was well communicated. We saw the elves and humans and the group of Healers from almost every race become Hilian citizens, including a copper dragon. And though it’s not officially acknowledged, it’s well known that you went to The Nine Valleys after that, and somehow brought two dead elves back to life, Princess Dalia of The High People and Prince Bezedil of The People of Life.

“It’s recognized that your wedding united the elves and led them to issue the warning, which triggered Osbald to swear the oath and to form The Just Alliance. Your words have defined it. Your position as it’s leader is unassailable, particularly since your insistence on the informality of your position assures everyone that you’ve no interest in gaining power for it’s own sake. You are our leader, even moreso than Emperor Kevim, since he’s publicly stated that he believes in your wisdom, and will likely follow it in almost any circumstance.

“To add to your knowledge of the opinions and feelings of the people, know that any of us here would proudly brave hell and holocaust without a blink if you say we should, just as Overlord Senchak said at the founding. The formation of The Just Alliance and your role in it are not only the best things that have ever happened on Kellaran, they’re the best things that possibly *could* happen, and we believe that with all our hearts. And, if all that hadn’t happened, the whole world would soon have been taken over and dominated by the insidious conspiracy.

“We feel we know you pretty well, and you seem like such well-grounded and friendly sorts, very easy to talk to, and I have the iron discipline of an Officer of the Empire. So, I can sit and chat with you like this. But otherwise I’d be squealing with excitement and wetting my small clothes like a schoolgirl meeting the empress.

“I expect this will be one of my very proudest and most treasured memories. I’ll sit and tell my great-grandchildren; sure, I met Prince Mark and Princess Talia, the Keys to The Just Alliance. I sat and had a drink with them, and spent five minutes blowing hot air about how great they were.”

She sat back with a grin, and took a long drink from her frosted crystal goblet.

“Thanks, but you’re wrong about three things.” Mark chuckled. “The elves were already firmly united before our wedding, we just got them all together in one place. And our wedding didn’t trigger everything that’s happened, the conspiracy sowed the seeds of their own destruction with the attack on my home valley and the curse against the children of Yazadril and Alilia. That’s what led to me meeting Talia, and to our marrying, which led to the rest. We simply reacted to the situation the best we could, and were lucky enough to fall in love.”

“Very lucky, enough to fall deeply and madly in love!” Talia giggled, and kissed him with enthusiasm, which lasted half a minute while he blushed and the rest chuckled.

She sat back and they grinned into each other’s eyes for a moment.

“And on that very pleasant note, I think we’ll be going.” Mark announced. “Or at least start getting ready to go.” he amended as he noticed that he still had most of his drink remaining. “How long do we have left before we have to start getting ready for the gathering?”

“About an hour and ten minutes.” Talia told him. “Let’s go to Kletiuk! I’ve always wanted to go there, and we’ve enough time to make it worthwhile.”

“All right, but we won’t drop in unannounced this time!” Mark laughed.

“Right.” Talia smiled.

“A word of advice.” Rayn interjected. “If you will announce your arrival, and you can manage the spell, you should psionically scan the area where you intend to arrive, just before you go. Your Speaking is very powerful, which unfortunately makes it much easier to detect and intercept. Still a very difficult thing, but possible. We can’t afford to lose you, and you might get lucky with your scan, and catch the conspiracy by surprise. Who do you know in Kletiuk?”

“Overlord Senchak.” Talia grinned.

“Whom you met at the founding of the Alliance.” Rayn nodded. “His security details are skilled. Still, with your permission, I’ll alert my colleagues there. While Senchak’s forces concentrate on your protection, the Brigade will concentrate on apprehending any conspirators who show themselves by striking at you.”

“You know, I find the idea of setting a trap for those who attacked us to be very appealing.” Mark stated grimly. “I imagine your Brigade would be most qualified to leak the information that we’ll be going to Kletiuk in such a way that the conspiracy is likely to hear about it, without it becoming common knowledge. Could you do that? In say, fifteen minutes?”

“We could!” Rayn grinned.

“Do so then.” Mark nodded, and initiated a momentary Link with the investigator. “Here’s the Translocation reference of our destination, the courtyard of the Hall of Government, but don’t deploy there, or the conspiracy may detect the trap. If they take the bait, we’ll know that you and your brigade have done your part. We’ll take care of catching any assassins who show up. You just be ready to question them when we do. That is, if any of them survive. We’ll try to take them alive, but it may not be possible without risking ourselves to a foolish extent.”

“Right. Excuse me a moment.” Rayn said with eager excitement, and cast a Speaking.

Mark and Talia conferred over their Link, and Talia laid a hand on her hilt to bring Ria into it. They did that for twelve minutes, then they cast their own brief Speaking.

“All right, we’ve told Senchak to say that we’re coming for a short and personal visit, and he’ll have cleared the courtyard of unnecessary citizens and personnel, in order to protect our privacy. Thus we’ve got a plausible reason for removing innocent bystanders from harm’s way. He knows what we plan, and he’s agreed to take no action in support of it, in order to protect the secret of the trap.”

“I’m worried for you.” Nek confided. “It stands to reason that since the last attack on you failed, the next one will be even more deadly. And if the conspiracy is to have a chance to topple The Just Alliance, they must begin with your deaths. They will be desperate to kill you.”

“Don’t worry.” Talia assured her. “We won’t be in any real danger. And the conspiracy may not even make the attempt.”

“She’s right.” Mark added. “You can trust us on this. Of course there’s a small chance something could go wrong, but I think we’ve covered almost all the possibilities.”

“I will.” Nek nodded. “Trust you on that, that is.”

“And by the way, what was the third thing I was wrong about?”

“Oh. Dalia and Bezedil weren’t dead, though the curse that struck them did a good job of making them seem like they were.”

“And you’re wrong about another thing, and that’s your attitude of obedience towards me. It’s nice that you trust my judgment, but it bothers me that a lot of people seem to be ready to go along with anything I say like a herd of blind sheep. It’s not my role as Key to be obeyed, and it’s especially not my role to be obeyed without question, as if I were a King or something. Unless there’s obviously a huge and sudden emergency that requires instant action, and I say that I have some special knowledge of how to deal with it, the people should only do as I suggest because it makes sense. They should only follow the suggestions of the Key to the Just Alliance if they honestly believe that what I’m saying is consistent with the best available evidence, and that it’s the best advice available at the time.”

“This is important because I was chosen for the role by seers and leaders of nations, and not by the rest of the people whose lives are affected by what I suggest. There’s going to come a time when I’ll choose to step down from the role and the responsibility, and I don’t know if the Alliance will choose to appoint another to the post. If they do, there could be a long line of Keys to The Just Alliance, and if we allow the initiation of a tradition of obedience to the Key, eventually one of them may become the worst tyrant this world has ever seen.”

“Impossible!” one of the cadets exclaimed.

“Ya, what about Osbald’s Oath and The Truthstone of Falgaroth?!” another added. “They’d never let someone be Key who hadn’t sworn to justice on the stone!”

“Nothing’s impossible.” Mark calmly insisted. “Just very, very difficult or unlikely. Falgaroth’s stone is almost infinitely effective due to the skill and the colossal power he put into it’s crafting, but remember that the amount of power that’s active in the world grows every day, and forever is long enough for anything to happen. In a million years a Key may find a way to fake having sworn the oath. I’m taking no chances. I’m the first Key, and I figure it’s my responsibility to make sure the post is never abused.”

“Damn. That’s such good thinking.” Nek nodded admiringly. “But you’re also Prince of Hilia, monarch by right of legal ownership and sovereignty, and as such you must be considered an Officer of The Just Alliance, with a rank equal to that held by Emperor Kevim, who’s our commander in chief. Since we’re military cadets in the Alliance’s forces, we’d obey you with the same alacrity we would him, unless his order contradicted yours.”

This took Mark back a bit, then he grinned. “Nice try. You almost had me for a moment. But as Prince of Hilia, I’m not in your chain of command. Under military law as it’s practiced in Finitra, as a member of an allied military you have no obligation to obey me unless Kevim specifically authorized me to issue you commands, or we were in an emergency or combat situation where you couldn’t contact your superiors, or you were within the sovereign territory of Hilia. And as I understand it from my training as a Ranger, those military laws are pretty much the same all over the continent, including here.”

“That is correct.” Inspector Rayn nodded.

“Ah. Then I do stand corrected.” Nek grinned, and raised her glass. “Here’s to the fine quality of human military training in Debivin. You’re proof that it works.”

“I’ll drink to that!” Mark laughed, and a toast was drunk all around.

“We have to go.” Talia quietly informed Mark. She had one more satisfying swallow of her delicious green beverage and set her mug on the table, while Mark finished his, and stood.

“Missing gods above and below, they’re going into battle *right now!*” one of the cadets quietly exclaimed as the full realization of the moment struck him.

“We are.” Mark calmly agreed, as he and Talia deepened their Link as they had during the exercise earlier. “It was nice meeting all of you, and I’m sorry I didn’t get all of your names. I’ve enjoyed it here, and we intend to return when we feel like visiting a tavern for socializing. Whatever happens in Kletiuik will probably be available in a Reading in a few minutes. And I think a few of the points I’ve made here are worth sharing with the people, so if you take a Reading of our visit, just be sure to wait until you’ve heard that events in Kletiuik are concluded before you share it.”

“One way or another, it’ll likely be over very quickly.” Rayn pointed out. “My comrades and I should join you after about ten seconds, to either help out or mop up.”

“Make it five.” Mark grinned.

“Right.” Rayn nodded, and cast a Speaking.

“We’ll see you all soon.” Talia smiled to the group around the table.

“All right. One more moment to be sure we have everything ready.” Mark quietly rumbled as his concentration sharpened. “Then we drop the disguises and go.”

He and Talia turned their backs to each other as she floated up a meter in the air. They closed their eyes and paused for five seconds, then drew their swords as they resumed their normal appearances. They quickly cast a series of spells that drew the attention of every Master Wizard in the city, as well as half the journeymen and a few of the apprentices. Then they were gone, their Translocation perfectly displaced and silent.

Precisely five seconds later Rayn Translocated with a slight pop.

“Quick, Nek, take my Reading!” the cadet to her left pleaded as soon as the investigator was gone. “I don’t want to forget one second of that!”

“Right after I finish taking my own Reading!” Nek told him as she hurriedly cast the spell.

It would have taken her six minutes to complete the process, but only one and a half minutes later one of the dwarves playing badra yelled at the top of his lungs in Trade Common and ran toward the center of the room.

“Fresh tidings from Kletiuik! A victory over the insidious conspiracy!” he bellowed as he withdrew a small, round, red stone mounted to a thin gold chain from the neck of his hauberk. Reaching the center of the room, he dropped the necklace onto a table, heedless of the surprised stares of the occupants, and a dwarven Revealing illusion appeared over it. It was like looking through an two meter wide square window into elsewhere, and like all dwarven Revealing, it had the practical property of appearing the same from any direction. Displayed within it and filling most of the picture was Overlord Senchak, who was obviously ecstatic, and nearly overcome with happy excitement.

“Great news! Great news for The Just Alliance!” Senchak gruffly cried with boundless enthusiasm, shaking his fist and his axe overhead and bouncing on his toes. “I be Senchak, Overlord of Kletiuk, and it is my *great* honor to announce that just moments ago, over my own Hall of Government and within it’s very courtyard, did the Six of Hilia defeat some ninety assassins of the insidious conspiracy! The counter-attack of the Six was so swift and so devastating that I was unable to discern what happened in any detail, but as you can see here, great energies were exchanged!”

He stepped to the side and half out of the picture as he turned and waved at the destruction behind him. A crater over six meters wide and three meters deep had been blasted out of the center of the courtyard, the great paving stones shattered and tossed about like children’s blocks, smoke still rising from the hole. The perimeter of the walled courtyard was packed with jubilant people; most of them dwarves, and the air above was dense with flyers of every race in the Alliance’s forces.

“Eleven of my Clansmen suffered injuries during the attack, but they have already been set right by our Healers!” Senchak continued. “I now give you Lipcha, Commander of the Spell-Mongers of Overclan Beijur, who will present our analysis of the battle!”

“Greetings.” stated a silver-haired dwarf whose long and flowing beard was brushed smoothly down over the chest of his iron chain-link shirt, as he stepped into the picture. “It’s obvious that the Keys have found a way to spy out the inner workings of the conspiracy, for they were clearly expecting this assassination attempt, and were fully prepared for it. I have reconstructed the battle from hundreds of observations taken by our Sentries and Warders, including many that detected magical and psionic activity, and this report has been approved for release to the citizens of The Just Alliance.

“Understand that the entire duration of the battle was two and four-fifths seconds. It is doubtful that any other battle was ever fought with such decisive speed.”

The illusion changed to the show a still aerial view of the Hall of Government and the surrounding area, while the voice of Lipcha continued his description.

“I will advance the Revealing very slowly, and in stages.

“The first occurrence was the appearance of two decoys at the center of the courtyard. The decoys were made from the meat and bone of a ganth; a large herbivore from the moors of Xervia and popular prey for dragons, so we suspect they were crafted by Sir Kragorram from one of his kills. They were animated by spells cast remotely by hundreds of elves in Hilia; they were cloaked in Illusions to appear as Prince Mark and Princess Talia, and they were very heavily Shielded, but with two-way shielding.

“Perhaps one-fiftieth of a second later, the first wave of assassins arrived. Six renegade Kleti spell-mongers and six human wizards from Venak appeared in a circle around the decoys, and twelve more humans appeared in four groups of three scattered about the sky about two hundred meters up. All of them were already spell-casting as they Translocated, and somehow they managed to cast a spell of great destruction that manifested *within* the incredibly dense Shielding that protected the two decoys. That two-way Shielding contained almost all of the blast’s power, or the destruction here would have been much greater, and surely some of our clan would have died.

“The assassins acted with the greatest possible speed, but they failed to reckon with the incredible psionic sensitivity of Lady Povon, who was central to the counter-attack of the Six of Hilia. From a distant location, she was able to detect the assassins projecting their consciousnesses to their intended Translocation destinations a fraction of a second before those Translocations were effected. Another crucial factor is that the Six are all capable of casting Translocations very, very quickly, certainly more quickly than any of the foes they faced. Thus the Six were able to arrive almost simultaneously with the assassins. Just as the assassins appeared and blasted the decoys, the Six appeared above and behind them, deeply Linked through Lady Povon, and they also were striking with blows and spells in the instant of their arrival.

“This segment occurred over a span of two-thirds of a second, and I will reveal it at one-fifth speed, replaying it for each clash within the battle. Here the incoming Translocations of the assassins and the Six. The assassins cast their spell at the decoys, while here Lady Povon casts spells at this trio and this trio, catching them off guard and encasing them in silver energies, incapacitating them.” That section of the battle was momentarily indicated by a blue wand that appeared and pointed, then disappeared as Lipcha continued speaking. “They start to fall to the ground, but she Translocates them elsewhere, capturing them for interrogation by The Just Alliance.

“Here Sir Kragorram swings his mighty sword at this trio from behind, and while his blow does not penetrate their Force Sphere, it is knocked across the sky with such impact and speed that the three assassins within are severely injured and rendered unconscious. Their Shields then fail, and Sir Silaran transports that trio elsewhere as well.

“Lady Equemev here is casting this unidentified red sphere around this trio of assassins. It does not form in time to prevent their part of the attack upon the decoys, but it is firmly fixed an instant later. One of them attempts to cast a spell at her, but the sphere contains it, and the resulting magical backlash fells all three within. Lady Equemev Sends her sphere and it’s contents elsewhere, though it is unknown whether those three will survive their injuries to be questioned.

“Here Prince Mark and Princess Talia combine to cast a simple Sleep spell on the twelve assassins on the ground within the courtyard. Though it is a simple spell, they cast it with such overwhelming power that the Shields of the twelve cannot fully resist it, and enough of it quickly penetrates to render unconsciousness. It was cast with such accuracy that it did not affect any of the Overlord’s guards within the courtyard. The Keys Translocate the dozen sleeping assassins away before they can finish falling, but not before one of them is severely injured by a piece of paving stone flung by the blast at the center of the courtyard, as are eleven of my brethren.”

The scene froze.

“Thus the Six of Hilia claim complete victory over an attacking force of twenty-four spell casters, capturing every one alive, with no loss of life on either side thus far. But, that was only the first wave of assassins. I think the Six were less prepared for the rest of the attack, for they were harder pressed and made no attempt to spare the lives of the assassins’ second wave. Those who may be distressed by this may choose to not observe further.”

He began advancing the Illusion again, even more slowly this time.

“You can tell here that Lady Povon detects additional incoming Translocations, for she turns here, and a sixteenth of a second later the rest of the Six begin to move as well. She casts these fourteen bolts of blue magic, of a type we do not recognize, while Prince Mark and Sir Kragorram swing their swords, Sir Silaran lowers his head and begins a charge, and Princess Talia and Lady Equemev prepare spells. One tenth of a second later Sirs Kragorram and Silaran Translocate, as does Prince Mark with Princess Talia, and Lady Povon casts another spell. Their Translocations are of such short distance that the transition is practically instantaneous, and an undetectably short time later several things happen simultaneously.

“I stop the Revealing as close to that instant as possible. Sixty-four more assassins have Translocated in, four flights of twelve soldiers equipped with various spelled weapons and armor, and one team of sixteen wizards. All wear medallions bearing the coat of arms of Venak, and these medallions are charged with high-quality spells of Flight, Translocation, and Shielding. But the Six are striking before they even arrive.

“Here twelve renegade gargoyles are appearing just as Lady Povon’s fourteen mystical bolts reach that location, and you see that the twelve are struck before the material of their bodies has even finished manifesting, and they are completely destroyed. No piece of them or their possessions larger than my fingernail has been recovered, and of the two who were struck by two bolts each, no trace can be found.

“The four of the Six who Translocated appear close enough to their targets to touch and moving at high speed, weapons already swinging.

“Here Sir Kragorram’s great sword is already halfway through it’s swing when he appears at the proper distance from the group of sixteen wizards to strike them at it’s apex. This human wizard at the leading edge of the group is twenty centimeters from the colossal blade’s incredibly fast-moving edge when they appear, and he has no chance. The blade is charged with lethal energies that Kragorram did not use against the first wave, and it disrupts their Shields on contact. They are eight human Venaks and eight renegade Bojudai, and the gnomes are much quicker than the humans. Four human wizards are killed and two injured by the first swing of Kragorram’s sword through the group, and even as he swings, he hoses them with his fire breath. This kills three more humans, including the two sword-injured, and two Bojudai. The remaining human and six Bojudai wizards scatter. The human and four Bojudai all cast spells at Sir Kragorram; Force bolts, Pain, Concentrated Cold, and two instances of Cut. None penetrate his Shields. Watch his work here, for such skill cannot be gained without millennia of training. With two flicks of his wrist he fells two Bojudai with his sword, while he takes the human and another Bojudai with his fire. He flicks thrice more and blasts another breath in pursuit of this Bojudai, who flies some incredibly talented evasive maneuvers before the blade neatly cleaves him. That is the most magnificent grace I have ever witnessed displayed in battle. Moreso, when it is revealed that his sword absorbed so much energy from disrupting the Shields of his foes that it’s hilt melted the scales and skin of the hand that grasped it, and adhered. He bravely betrayed no sign that he was in any way affected by what must have been the incredible pain of this injury, and it was the only injury suffered by the Six during the battle.

“The two Bojudai wizards who have not attacked Sir Kragorram now realize that Lady Povon is concentrating all of her power on reinforcing Kragorram’s Shields. In fact, at this point all three females of the Six are concentrating solely on their mates’ defenses. The two gnomes launch attack spells at Lady Povon, but they do not realize that while Ladies Povon and Equemev are floating almost stationary and appear vulnerable, their Shields are being bolstered by

thousands of elven wizards, all casting remotely, most of them from Hilia, and those Shields easily hold against the attacks of the two Bojudai. A moment later one of the two flees by Translocation, and the other is destroyed by Prince Mark's focused Concussion spell.

"Sir Silaran is flying at twice the speed of a stooping hawk as he manifests in his gleaming barding within a hand's breadth of the leading edge of this flight of twelve renegade Shiganzhu warriors, his head down to present his blade as he charges, with most of his power being channeled through his horn and into that blade to shatter the Shields of his foes. In the way of Morning Warriors, he gallops upon invisible ground as he flies an erratic line through the midst of them. He strikes four of the conspiracy's giants with his blade on this pass, breaks the hip of this one with his shoulder, and the ribs of this one with a front-right kick. The four he cuts are mortally wounded and fall to the distant ground, while the one with broken ribs flees back to where he came from, presumably Venak. Lady Equemev holds Sir Silaran's Shielding tight to him and conforming to his shape as he moves, blocking the impacts of two heavily spelled giant swords, two arrows, and a similarly treated pole-axe.

"Now look at this. Prince Mark and Princess Talia also manifest while flying very quickly and erratically in close formation as they appear within the very midst of this flight of twelve enemy Kleti. But note this person; Ria, the Spirit of the Sword of the Youth of Visinniria, which Princess Talia wields. As quick as Mark and Talia fly, she is able to fly complex maneuvers around them interspersed with instantaneous Translocations, since she is completely immaterial, all the while casting unidentifiable spells of staggering power. Talia is watching behind Mark and casting a constantly shifting series of defensive spells and Shields designed to protect them while being uninhibiting to Mark's attack. He strikes with his sword in a way that seems too quick to be possible, given it's great size and length, slicing through Shields, weapons, armor, and foes like an axe through water, while he casts a series of attack spells in such quick succession that they cannot be individually identified. They devastate all twelve renegade Kleti during this single pass. Then Ria casts a huge inverted Battle Shield around this entire flight of twelve human Venaks, while Mark casts a Fireball of incredible power within it, and it's heat is all the more devastating for being contained within her Battle Shield. The dozen humans are instantly incinerated, relieving their futile attack against Lady Equemev, and that is when Mark casts Concussion with a quick glance at the gnome attacking Lady Povon.

"Now Sir Silaran is closely pressed by the seven remaining giants, who have gained the initiative against him. The one with the broken hip and two more have been injured by Silaran at this point. Though less effective, they still attack him, though they cannot break his Shields. The rest of the Six of Hilia now realize that only these seven enemy Shiganzhu remain, and the Six attack as one. Sir Silaran kills this one with his blade, Sir Kragorram kills this one with his fire, but for these four it is difficult to judge which of the several spells that struck them truly killed them. This one flees by Translocation, but not before she loses a leg to Mark's Lightning spell.

"That ends the battle. Of eighty-eight total attackers, three escaped, two of whom were seriously injured. Twenty-four were captured, and seven of those were seriously injured. Fifty-one were slain. In order to truly illustrate the magnitude of this achievement, I will now show the entire battle at one-third speed.

"Now, I will show the entire two and four-fifths seconds of it at real speed. You see why no single observer of the battle was able to discern the details as it happened."

Overlord Senchak continued the narrative as the Illusion played on for another five seconds. "I had agreed with Prince Mark's request to refrain from deploying our forces in order to maintain the secrecy of the ambush, but at this point I worried that the conspiracy may send an even larger third wave of assassins, and so I deployed."

The illusion showed the appearance of thousands of squads of Kleti, all over the sky and on the streets and rooftops below, most of whom were then obscured by further arrivals.

"A tenth of a second later we were joined by some twenty thousand of The Fast Response Force of The Just Alliance, and two seconds after that several hundred members of The Anti-Conspiracy Brigade of The Just Alliance arrived as well, but they were all to be disappointed, for we'd already seen the last of the attack. Thus the vast host you see all about us now, most of whom will be leaving shortly.

"Presently, the Six of Hilia are with several Healers, who are treating Sir Kragorram's wound. I'm told that they needed to peel and pry his burned hand away from the hilt of his sword before they could begin treating it, and that his only response to this was a sharp intake of breath.

"Prince Mark has agreed to speak on the battle, and I should be hearing from him momentarily AH!"

Mark appeared an arm's length from Senchak, Talia cuddled in his left arm, surprising the Overlord so severely that his battle-axe was drawn and poised almost instantly. The great dwarf laughed uproariously at his own jumpiness as he re-slung his axe on his back.

"Sorry to startle you there, Senchak." Mark told him with a little smile.

“Aw, not a bother!” Senchak guffawed as he gave the big youth a friendly slap on the back. “Having you around keeps me sharp, it seems!

“Now, what are your thoughts on the battle, my boy?”

Mark slowly looked around the courtyard, taking in the jubilant faces, the smoking crater, the puddles and spatters of blood on the paving stones. His countenance was a bit grim as he turned back to Senchak. “We did all right, but only because we were very, very lucky. We should have done a lot better, and the fault for not doing so is entirely mine.”

“Done better?!!” Senchak exclaimed, flabbergasted. “How could you have possibly done better?! You achieved total victory! Only one of eighty-eight attackers escaped unscathed, while not one life was lost among your forces or mine!”

Mark took a moment to think before he replied, then nodded. “We got lucky. We beat the assassins all right, but that’s not the point. They never had a chance. They brought a knife to a sword fight. The incredible courage, skill, and power of our companions, combined with the wizardry of all the elves who’ve sworn to me, was more than the assassins expected, and more than they could hope to deal with.

“But we should have waited. I was so taken with the thought that to catch the conspiracy off guard, it was best to strike as soon after I got the idea as possible, and to tell as few as possible of what we planned. And though I didn’t admit it to myself, I still had a lot of anger over the attack on us at Winghoof, when Talia was almost killed and our friends were injured. I really wanted to be able to hit them back, to seek vengeance, moreso than justice.

“Because of all that, I disregarded many important things, including the facts that Talia and Equemev are not yet fully trained warriors, that Talia and I have had only one combat practice session together, and that we hadn’t done any training at all yet with the others of the Six or with the elves who helped us. I... I was so overcome with the urge for this battle that I had us break our promise to our mentor to avoid battle at all costs, until our training is complete.

“Thus, we underestimated the conspiracy again. We thought the decoys were Shielded so heavily that any attack on them would be completely contained. We were wrong, and it was a miracle that none of the eleven Kleti who were injured were killed.

“I feel unworthy of the incredible bravery and faith that you and your guards showed, in standing unshielded within this courtyard, knowing that an attack was likely, without protecting yourselves because I asked you not to, and trusting us to keep you safe, because I said we would. That was by far the bravest thing I’ve ever seen. We didn’t protect you, eleven were hurt, and many could’ve been killed.

“Kragorram was severely burned, and though he’s healed now, I know that could’ve been prevented as well, if we’d had more training together.

“We allowed the remains of several dead enemies to fall on your city below. Luckily your buildings are all sturdily constructed of stone and most of their space is underground, so property damage was minimal, but a young Kleti was narrowly missed by the partially burnt body of a giant that crashed to the ground beside her. She could’ve been killed, and as it was she was scared out of her wits and will likely have nightmares about it for months.

“And finally, we killed fifty-one attackers, when we had planned to catch them all alive. The first bunch of attackers were about what we expected, and we were prepared for as many as two hundred, but we thought they’d all come at once, to maximize the advantage of their numbers. But our foes were trickier than that, hoping to kill us with the first group, but holding the rest in reserve; completely ready to strike the instant they knew the initial attack may have failed. Only Povon’s incredible sensitivity allowed us to prevail. We were already starting to feel victorious and to let our concentration slip when she detected the number, locations, and timing of the imminent incoming Translocations. When we knew their numbers, we decided that we couldn’t risk trying to take them prisoner since we were no longer prepared enough for that. And so we struck at them without holding back.

“I was really hoping we wouldn’t have to kill anyone. I’ve never killed anyone before, or even been in a serious fistfight, nor has Talia, nor I think has Equemev or Silaran. I don’t know if Povon or Kragorram have, but no one should have to take the life of another person. And those fifty-one will have families and friends who will suffer from their deaths, and who may be completely innocent of any evil actions or knowledge.

“All in all, we did acceptably well, but if there’s a next time, we’ll do a lot better.”

Senchak harrumphed his exasperation. “Take it from one who’s a far more experienced leader and warrior; you’re being far too noble for your own good, and far too hard on yourself! You’ll learn with experience that no battle goes exactly as we hope it will, and any that succeeds as well as this one did today is a great and proud victory indeed! Be thankful when luck is on your side, as chance will favor your opponents when you least expect it! They certainly had things going their way in Shinosa Valley and elsewhere, until the Battle of Osbald’s Assembly! And remember

above all; *they* attacked *you*, as they tried for the second time to murder your new wife and yourself! You were defending yourselves, and your mentor can hardly blame you for fighting then, can he?!”

“He can and should, since we could easily have simply avoided this attack.” Mark quietly insisted.

“Enough, husband.” Talia quietly told him with a smile. “You’ve made your point.”

Mark looked at her with surprise, his eyebrows raised, then grinned. “Yes Dear.” he responded with exaggerated humility.

“Mark is of course completely correct about the courage and skill of our companions.” Talia said to Senchak, her voice ringing with pride. “They were magnificent, and we’re very proud of them. We’re just as proud of the elves of Hilia, who did a wonderful job of assisting us, and who were disappointed at not being asked to fight at our side. It was unfair to them that they didn’t get to participate directly, and the only reason they did not is that we’re not yet skilled enough to co-ordinate that many fighters.

“As he said, we’re all amazed and humbled by the courage shown by yourself and your folk, in waiting in this courtyard with no special protections, so that the conspiracy could have no clue that we expected their attack. From what I know of your culture, I think the eleven injured among them will bear the scars they’ve gained this day with great and justified pride, and that the rest will envy them for having been honorably wounded in the service of The Just Alliance.

“Mark’s also right in his criticisms of our efforts, though the rest of us consider them to be very minor points when compared to the positive aspects of the outcome. And he’s completely correct in that if there is a next time, we’ll all be fully trained together, and we’ll do a lot better.

“The only thing he’s completely wrong about is him being solely to blame for those minor failings. He *is* our leader, but we all participated in discussing and planning the battle’s tactics and strategy, we all approved it, and we all were at least as eager as he was to implement it!

“As for our broken promise to our mentor to refrain from battle, well, I am sorry about that. I honor him and the reasons he asked it of us, but that promise was made before the conspiracy decided to blast us with a death-bolt two days ago, which changes things considerably, in my mind! I think it more important to show the conspiracy that they can’t just attack us with impunity whenever they wish! They can consider themselves lucky that we were fair-minded about it, so twenty-seven of them survived today, for it was well within our power to prevent any of them from escaping, and to slay them all out of hand!”

Senchak grinned and clapped his hands. “Now *that* was a victory speech! You listen to your wife, Prince Mark! Better yet, next time I’ll just ask her first!”

“Now now, Overlord, he can’t help being too noble for his own good, and we do love him for it.” Talia giggled, and gave Mark a kiss on the cheek.

“We do!” Senchak laughed. “I salute you all; the Six of Hilia, the elves of Hilia, who have together given The Just Alliance a major victory over the insidious conspiracy, and saved you from being assassinated to boot!”

He grasped the shaft of his axe with both hands, slapped the huge double-bladed weapon flat on his own chest while he bowed his great shaggy head, then raised his weapon high while he gave a mighty shout, “KAI-AH-RAH KAAAAAH-JEE!!!”

Every Kleti in the courtyard repeated the salute after him, as did almost every Kleti on the continent, since almost all of them were watching the Revealing. The entire world shook a bit from the power of their millions of voices, or so it seemed to Mark and Talia.

“Thank you. We are honored.” Talia grinned.

“You are, since the words translate as ‘honor to your clan’.” Senchak grinned as he slung his axe. “They have a double meaning, both ‘We honor your clan’, and ‘You bring honor to your clan.’”

“And we are honored that you and the Kleti people have allowed us to strike at the conspiracy from within Kletiuk.” she responded. “Now I think we need to go home and relax after the battle. It would have been nice to stay longer and see more of your wonderful land, but we’ll return for that soon. Will we see you at the party later?”

“All the blackhearts in Venak could not keep me away!” the Overlord laughed.

“Then we’ll see you there.” she smiled. “Till then, farewell.”

And as suddenly as they’d arrived, they were gone.

“Huh.” Senchak chuckled, then faced the illusion’s viewpoint. “I swear that this Revealing be a true record! Let it stand to show the future how it was on the fourth day of The Age of The Just Alliance, at The Battle of Beijur Courtyard!

“Now on other matters, we’ve a hole to fix and trash to burn, and then I will have the great honor to attend a fine tournament which will be held on Hilia in honor of Prince Mark’s seventeenth birthday! In a spirit of friendly and

honorable competition, there will be contests of skill at arms and magic, and the finest young adults from every nation will display their talents!

“We of the Kleti continue to proudly gift the world with public true Revealing of great events, available where people gather, all over Kellaran! For private, commercial Revealing available in your own home, speak with a licensed Kleti Spell-Monger in any major city! Farewell and good fortune!”

In Latrel, at Norka’s Palace of Refreshments, the Kleti grinned as he retrieved his Revealing stone from the table top amidst total silence, then the room erupted with hundreds of loud and amazed conversations.

In the corner, Nek dismissed her interrupted Reading and began casting it anew. “I’ll want to remember that too, for certain and sure.” she murmured to herself.

In the center of the room, four grinning Kleti Spell-Mongers were taking orders for private Revealing as fast as they could Impress them into their memories.

Mark and Talia arrived on the patio at their cottage and were given a rousing cheer by most of those who were gathered about, which included their four comrades-at-arms, Stripe, Scout, and the Hilian elves. Kragorram, Povon, Silaran and Equemev were lounging on the smooth, sun-warmed stone of the gentle slope to the left of the patio, surrounded by elves who had been eagerly engaging them in conversation. Stripe was stretched out in the center of the patio, luxuriating in the attentions of another circle of elves, who admiringly gave him rubs and scratchings. Scout was perched on the peak of the cottage’s roof, calmly observing all, while two of the Atoning sat on the roof beside him, one of them gently scratching him under his beak with a fingertip.

“Thank you.” Talia called to them, and she and Mark gave them a smile and a wave.

Hilsith and the Healers who had worked with her on the injured from Winghoof were circulating about, examining the elves, offering a few words, and casting the occasional minor cure, and now the elven Healer hurried up to the patio and began casting diagnostics on the two of them, then stopped.

“Mark, do you have the tine band?” she asked.

“No, but I know the frequencies, and I can use the spell Yazadril used to make it.” he sighed as he and Talia took a seat at their breakfast table. He picked up the table and set it aside, pulled Talia’s chair over so she was sitting cuddled against his side, and cast a spell that vibrated his skull as the tine band did, but slightly less so. “There. How’s that?”

“Excellent.” Hilsith nodded absent-mindedly as she resumed casting diagnostics. When she finished, she nodded, and offered them her hands. She gave theirs a warm squeeze as she smiled encouragingly at each of them in turn.

“You are as healthy as it is possible to be, both physically and emotionally, for young adults of good heart who have just returned from their first taste of war. You can expect to experience strange emotions over the next few days as your mind comes to terms with it; sadness, anger, fear, guilt, pride, relief, and the joy of being alive. Try to recognize that these emotions are a normal part of the adaptation process, and try not to let them overly affect your behavior or your decisions. Simply let them run their course, and know that they are temporary. Know also that you have been spared the most common and devastating blow suffered by warriors, since not one of your comrades-in-arms were killed. At this moment your emotional resources are quite depleted, though they will recover quickly. Still, it would be best if you could manage to stay out of trouble for a few days.”

“Thank you, Hilsith.” Mark nodded as he dismissed his spell. “I think I already knew all that, but it’s nice to have it confirmed by a professional. How are the others?”

“Fifty-nine elves suffered minor magical backlash when the Shield around the decoys was disrupted. They’ve all been treated, and they’re fine now. My colleagues and I have perfected the treatments we used after the Winghoof attack, and were able to use them much more quickly and effectively this time.

“Also, Silaran and a few of the elves suffered a bit of after-battle emotional shock, mostly among the Volunteers, there was some vomiting and what have you. One’s first exposure to violent death can be a trying thing, and one never knows how a given person will react. Some of history’s most valiant warriors learned the hard way to never eat before battle, in order to prevent losing their meal afterward. But our injured are all young and resilient, and with the minor treatments they’ve received, they should not be unduly troubled by their experience.”

“Good. Thank you.” Mark nodded, and stood to address those gathered there, who had been silently following the conversation.

“You all risked death for us today. Some of you were injured on our behalf, both here and in Kletiuk. There... There can be no greater act of friendship or dedication than that. I’ve never felt so... honored. I can’t think of anything to say that does justice to the emotions I’m feeling for you all right now. Thank you. I thank you with all my heart. And if there is ever anything I can do for any of you, you only have to ask.”

He faltered, and looked down to Talia who stood beside him, one arm wrapped around his upper thigh, her other hand on her hilt.

“We have achieved three great victories today.” she stated, smoothly carrying on as he left off. “We prevented an assassination that would have killed many Kleti within the courtyard of their Hall of Government, we defeated eighty-eight wizards and warriors of Venak and the conspiracy, and most importantly, we captured twenty-four of them and sent them to The Hall of The Just Alliance, where they were immediately placed in stasis by The Grand Council of Xervia. That is, all except for the six whom Povon first captured, whom she placed in stasis before they were sent. We took this precaution in case any of them have trapped themselves with memory-blocking or self-destructing spells to prevent their being interrogated.

“One by one, they will be released from stasis for the tiniest fraction of a second, just long enough for them to be examined for traps. Then, when those traps are recognized and prepared for, they will be released from stasis again, and any troublesome spells will be immediately removed. They will then be Compelled to swear to truth and justice upon the Truthstone of Falgaroth, and then thoroughly interrogated. We will thus gain very crucial intelligence as to conditions and happenings in Venak, and within the insidious conspiracy.

“Your efforts today were magnificent, and you have justly earned the gratitude of everyone in The Just Alliance. Before today, we were simply citizens of Hilia. Today, we are also a battle-tested military force, and a formidable one at that.

“Now, we’ve about fifty minutes to visit with you before we have to start getting ready for Mark’s birthday celebrations. Myself, I could do with a light snack and a tall glass of ice-cold bumbleberry wine, and I imagine many of you feel similarly, so we’ll arrange for refreshments to be served.

“And of course, you were all suddenly interrupted by our call to battle, so if any of you have other activities that you wish to return to, feel free to do so. If we don’t get a chance to speak to any of you here, we’ll try to do so later at the party. Again, thank you all. You have our most heartfelt appreciation.”

She and Mark made their deepest and most ornate bow, and held it for a long moment.

When they straightened, almost all of the Atoning, which was most of the elves present, disappeared in a rapid series of flashes. A minute later two of them returned with a huge table loaded with food and drink, then they were gone again. Of that group, only Sheramiv and Relgemit remained.

There was a moment of expectant silence, then Balen spoke with careful courtesy. “My Prince, we can intuit that you are troubled, as some of us are, by today’s events. Please, let us ease your spirit, in the elven way.”

“The elven way? Beyond the use of Tranquilities, you mean?” he asked.

“If you give us your leave, we will sing, and we will dance, while we rub the stress from your tense muscles, and tantalize you with delectables.” Balen stated, her smile encouraging. “We’ll all take a turn in the giving and receiving of comfort and relaxing pleasures. We will celebrate life. We will forgive our enemies for attacking us, and we will forgive ourselves for taking lives in the cause of justice. We will... zhenshimlaia... In this language you would say... uh...”

“We will purify our souls and our emotions of the taint of darkness forced upon us by the cruelty of others.” Sheramiv supplied. “In ages past our people had very elaborate traditional ceremonies and songs for zhenshimlaia, that were performed according to exact procedures, but that was before the gods withdrew. We still sing the songs, but now the activity is far more free-form and spontaneous.”

“That... sounds wonderful!” Mark’s grin slowly spread upon his face. “What should I do for this zhemsum... What is it again?”

“Zhen shim LAH yuh.” Balen pronounced with exaggerated clarity, and smiled with restrained delight. “And for now, you and Talia will simply relax and enjoy, as will those of us who were most stressed by the experience. When you feel completely refreshed and you have seen what we do, you can offer your attentions to those who have been granting you theirs, or join in the singing and dancing.”

“Zhenshimlaia. Relax. Got it.” Mark grinned, as a dozen of the Devoted lifted Talia with gentle Levitations. They tried to Levitate him as well, but it didn’t work since he’d deactivated the vibration spell, so he simply Levitated himself. The elves giggled and guided their floating forms to the largest of the oval lawns by hand.

“I’m surprised that you young High People are all that familiar with the tradition, since your nation has been at peace since long before you were born.” Hilsith commented as they moved downslope.

“We learn it in school.” Talia told her. “And though none of us has truly needed zhenshimlaia before today, we practice it because it’s fun.”

Soon everyone was in place, Mark and Talia and a few of the elves lounging comfortably in mid-air a meter above the center of the largest lawn, Balen and some of the Devoted interspersed among them, while the rest of the

elves formed concentric rings around them. Sheramiv, Relgemit, and Hilsith took their places in the circles, while the Healers of other races gathered beside Kragorram, Povon, Equemev and Silaran.

Balen addressed those observers as stillness settled upon the gathering. "You are welcome to observe or to participate, as the moment moves you."

"Thank you." Povon said with a gracious nod, speaking for the group.

"We begin." Balen stated as she smiled, closed her eyes, and turned to the center. With a wave of her hand to set the time, she and all the elves began to sing, and those who stood in the circles began to dance with flowing grace. The melody was complex, yet sweet and soothing, and soon multiple harmonies were added; softly swelling, then fading back into the volume of the melody in overlapping waves of sound. Each ring of dancers used slightly different movements that complemented each other with breathtaking beauty.

Then Mark was distracted from that as dozens of tiny hands began expertly rubbing the tension from his muscles, and tantalizing his sense of touch with subtler caresses. He groaned in pleasure and relief and closed his eyes, and a wave of complete relaxation came over him. For a quarter of an hour he simply floated in complete lethargy, immersed in the singing, enjoying the occasional sips of beverages and tidbits of delicacies the elves held gently to his lips, each a surprising and delicious sensation.

Then he realized that Talia was floating right above him and caressing his face, and he opened his eyes to see her smiling down at him, her eyes only thirty centimeters above his.

"Would you care to dance with me, my love?" she giggled.

"I would." he grinned.

He swung his feet down and stood as she alighted beside him. She led him to the first ring of dancers, who made room for them in the ring. He realized that their movements were the simplest, with only the steps and gestures that were the basis of the dance, and that each ring around that added more variations on the theme. Tentatively at first, then more confidently as Talia guided him over their Link, they became part of the great dance. The most talented and enthusiastic dancers moved through the air above it all, improvising as soloists, duos, and small groups. Servers with trays of food and drink danced smoothly through it all, and those who partook of their offerings did so without interrupting the flow.

Mark began humming along with the melody as he joyously danced, his deep bass adding a fullness to the chorale.

On the slope beside the lawn, Silaran danced with Equemev in the graceful, athletic, prancing style of The People of Morning, their hooves adding a perfectly timed and delicate percussion to the song as they tapped upon the stone.

When Mark and Talia were moving to the second ring and adding their embellished movements, Kragorram and Povon leaped into the air, cleared the aerial elven dancers with two synchronized wing beats each, and began their own dance above it all. Their long and sinuous bodies intertwined in such a complex and sensuous manner that only their contrasting colors prevented it from being confusing to the eye.

Mark noticed that the gathering had grown. Yazadril and Nemia were dancing with Hilsith in the second ring, close to Dalia, Bezedil and Alilia. All the Healers had joined the dance except the old giant and the copper dragon, who stood by observing with a concentration worthy of a miraculous new kind of Healing, even as their toes tapped with the tempo of the music that surrounded them. Perhaps two hundred of the Atoning had overcome their shyness at being in Mark's presence enough to return and form a new set of circles on another lawn, since there was no room for more on the main one.

Mark cast a quick Speaking. "*Sheramiv, I think this is something all the Atoning should share, if they can possibly be spared from their duties. Call them back. Make it an order if necessary.*"

"I agree, and I will!" she laughed.

Soon every lawn had circles of singing, dancing elves, and at the center of each were those who were administering comfort, and those receiving it.

When Mark and Talia began to pleasantly tire from their exertions, she led them one by one back through the inner circles and their easier movements. When they reached the center again, they joined those who were giving comfort to others. Mark expected that there would be a rush of the Devoted moving to the center to be massaged by him, but the patience and courtesy of the elves was greater than that, and there was little visible change in the complex flow of people through the gathering.

By then he was familiar enough with the music to improvise bass harmonies in counterpoint to the melody, and as he found himself administering to a pretty young elfess, he sang to her joyously and wordlessly, simply using various vowels to play with the notes. She gloried in his attentions as he massaged her shoulders and back with his fingertips, adapting a gentler version of the Ranger's rubdown techniques he'd used after weapons practices. It never occurred to

him to translate the Elvish lyrics he was hearing, since the emotion of the music was so pure and obvious in the sound itself.

Half a minute later she floated out of his reach and into Talia's, and she gave him a smile of pure and profound gratitude as another took her place.

So it continued, until Talia's thoughts murmured in Mark's mind. *"We have to go soon, my handsome prince."*

"Do we have time for me to zhenshimlaia you first?" was his chuckled thought in reply.

"Yes, and for me to return the favor." she giggled as she floated up, turned horizontal to lay relaxed with her back beneath his strong hands, and stretched luxuriously at his comforting touch.

When she bade him to switch places, she augmented her physical strength with subtle spells of Force, so she could give him the strong, deep-muscle rubdown he hadn't felt in months. She chuckled at his deep groans of heartfelt appreciation.

"Now we really have to go." she smiled as she finished. "We're a few minutes behind schedule, so we should hurry a bit to catch up."

She turned and cast a Speaking to everyone there. *"Thank you all, so very much. Please, continue, and we'll be back in about an hour."*

She then narrowed her Speaking to a select few. *"Father, is everything ready?"*

"Yes." Yazadril replied. *"Your destination has been protected by a small-scale version of the entire system of Wards around Hilia. At the moment of your Translocation, thousands of decoy versions of you will be Translocated to similarly Warded Locations all over The Just Alliance. You will be safe, and maybe we'll catch a few more conspirators."*

"Thank you."

"Mark, we'll change into something semi-formal, and then I have a surprise for you." Talia then brought them both to their bedroom inside the cottage.

"How can you have arranged such an elaborate surprise, when I'm practically aware of your every thought?" he laughed as he rummaged through a chest of clothing. "I'm certainly aware of every spell and Speaking you cast."

"Actually, unless you make a specific effort to do so, you're not aware of my every thought when we're not actively Linked." she laughed as she instantly changed clothes with a spell. "And if we don't wish it, you're not privy to the Link I share with Ria, or to communications she has with others, like my father. After the way we planned for the attack today, you might have realized that."

"I see." he chuckled as he drew on a fresh kilt of dark brown weave.

Soon they were ready, he in a white silk shirt with pearl buttons, a gold hairclip, and a jacket that matched the kilt, she in a simple blue silk belted summer dress that fell to her calves, with some of her hair artfully arranged in ringlets atop her head and held with gold pins.

"We're going to be Translocated by Alliance military personnel." she informed him. "Simply be passive and let it happen, so that as little of our magical and psionic auras are associated with the spell as possible."

"Right." he nodded.

"We're ready to go, Father." Talia informed Yazadril, and a moment later they were elsewhere.

They appeared on the front lawn of a property that was just large enough to be considered a walled estate, in front of a stately two story home that was just big enough to be called a mansion. They could sense the abundant power of the Wards that made the air seem to subtly sizzle around them. It was night at their destination when they arrived, and the scene was lit by dozens of gas torches brightly wavering in the summer breeze at the tops of two meter tall steel posts. The lights were placed every four meters along the top of the estate walls, and on either side of the paved drive, which curved from the main gates to the front of the house, and continued around the side to the yards in the rear. The sounds of a city in the midst of a busy evening were heard drifting faintly over the three meter high walls. The home was of red sandstone blocks, and featured well-proportioned simple lines lacking any ornate detail, and large multiply-paned rectangular windows. The double front doors were only two steps higher than ground level, sheltered beneath an arched portico.

"A pleasing style for a home, I think." Talia commented. "It makes no pretensions of grace, instead offering an aesthetic simplicity and a welcoming solidity."

"I'll say it offers solidity!" Mark chuckled. "The place is a small fortress!"

"Oh? How so?"

“Look at the windows. You can tell from the depth of the lintels that the walls are at least a meter thick, and notice that the panes aren’t just held in place by lead, they’re set into a gridwork of steel bars. The shutters are fifteen centimeters of solid oak, and they can be closed and secured from inside by those hinged rods at the bottom.”

“Ah.” Talia nodded.

“So, are we going in?” Mark chuckled.

“No, actually.” Talia smiled, suddenly shy. “We’re attending a gathering behind the house. We arrived here in the front so that none would be in danger if the conspiracy managed to attack us upon arrival again, though we considered that next to impossible.”

“I thought the party was at Hilia.”

“It is, and we’re going back there in an hour. This is something extra. Something special.”

“Well then, shall we go back there and attend it?” he laughed, sweeping her up in his arms and giving her a quick kiss as he began following the paving stones of the drive around the house.

“Mark, wait a moment.” she asked, her mood still happy yet pensive. “I wanted this to be a surprise, but now I worry that it could be such a surprise that it would be a shock. And I think you may need a moment to prepare yourself. So I’m going to tell you who we’re here to meet.”

“All right, I’m intrigued now.” he smiled with raised eyebrows. “Go on.”

“We are within the city of Belinhome, capitol of Finitra, and this is the manor of retired Finitran army colonel Markhan Reginus Longstrider the Third, your paternal grandfather. Awaiting us behind the manor are all of your surviving close relatives. On your father’s side, your grandfather and grandmother, their three surviving sons and two daughters who are your uncles and aunts, their spouses who are your aunts and uncles by marriage, and a total of eleven cousins. On your mother’s side, you have an aunt; your mother’s sister, and her husband who is your uncle by marriage.”

Mark’s jaw dropped.

“Now I’m glad I told you before we went back there. You appear to be shaken.” She considered sharing his thoughts, but at this moment, it felt like that would be intrusive.

He looked over to where the drive led around the side of the house, then back to Talia. He gave her a gentle kiss, and set off along the drive.

After two paces he broke into a jog, and within six more was sprinting with a speed that Talia found both surprising and exhilarating.

As he rounded the front corner of the house, Talia clutched tight in his arms, a young boy’s voice was heard calling with excitement. “Here they come! Running!”

Mark slowed to a walk as they came around the rear corner and emerged from the relative darkness at the side of the house.

Dozens of paper lanterns were strung over a large table covered with white linen and enough dishes of food to constitute a feast. The gathering of twenty-five humans was further illuminated by a row of the tall gas torches along the back of the house, and a bonfire in a stone pit. Many had obviously been taking their ease in simple whitewashed wood plank chairs, but they were all on their feet to offer their greeting now.

There was a brief moment of silence, then a cheer was raised by a young couple and joined by the rest of the young adults. The older adults wore the same expression Mark did as he strode to join them; a tearful grin, reflecting both the joy of meeting and shared grief for those who were so painfully absent.

Talia was struck by the fact that every male present except one looked much alike. She guessed that the exception, a portly and ruddy blond fellow in his mid-forties, would be the only male from Mark’s mother’s side of his family, his maternal aunt’s husband. The rest looked a lot like Mark, though not nearly so closely as they resembled each other, since all of them had the same shade of brown hair, they had the same muscular build, and the adults among them were uniformly within an finger’s width of two hundred and thirty centimeters tall, about twenty centimeters shorter than Mark.

Then she and Mark were being soundly hugged by his grandparents; the eldest of the similar males who had shocks of white coming in at the temples of his chestnut-brown hair, and a nearly two meter tall woman with thick gray hair who appeared to be in her mid-sixties.

It was an emotional scene, and Talia was caught up in it as those around her laughed or cried or cheered. After a moment though, she began to feel a bit claustrophobic from being completely and tightly enclosed up to her neck within the embrace of the three huge humans. The feeling grew quickly, prompting her to respond with a quick wiggle and a shove and a gentle touch of Force, and she popped up from between them like a squeezed watermelon seed.

She landed with an agile twist on an invisible surface a meter above the ground, as Mark and his grandparents stepped back in surprise, and children giggled.

“Ah, sorry about that, but I think I’d better give you my own hugs.” she said as she quickly stepped over to hug Mark’s grandmother around her neck. “Sharing Mark’s was a bit overwhelming.”

“You’ll have to excuse us, lass.” the rangy matron chuckled as she returned the tiny elfess’s hug with careful gentleness. She spoke Common with a strong Finitran accent. “We must’ve half smothered you.”

“Quite understandable.” Talia happily returned, a bit embarrassed by her action and relieved that it hadn’t been taken badly. Then she had to giggle as Mark and his grandfather shared the fierce, backslapping embrace of strong men caught up in strong emotions.

“It’s so damn good to have you here, my lad.” the elder Mark emphatically stated as the two stepped back and gripped each other’s shoulders with both hands.

“I’m sorry we haven’t been by sooner, Grandpa.”

“Bah, we know you’ve been busy, and you’ve only been out of the wilderness for five days.”

As Mark embraced his grandmother, Talia stepped to his grandfather. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Colonel Longstrider.” she said as she hugged him around his neck.

“And I’d be pleased if you’d call me Grandpa, my lass. Welcome to the family.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure you all know who we are.” Mark grinned as he and his grandmother finished their embrace and he turned to address the gathering. “And I know who all my aunts and uncles are, and most of my cousins, from the occasional letters we’ve exchanged. But Talia doesn’t know you yet, and I could stand to have my memory refreshed. So, let me proudly introduce my most loved and loving wife Talia, Princess of The High People, reigning Princess of Hilia, and a formidable wizard in the militaries of our country and The Just Alliance.”

“Princess Talia.” the patriarch grinned with a crisp bow. “You’ve met my lovely wife Sana. This is my second eldest son Wittan, named for the late king, his wife Koran, their son Dren, and their daughter Petha.”

“It’s really spooky how much you look like my pa, Uncle.” Mark quietly observed as he and Talia exchanged quick embraces with those four.

“Just two years between us.” Wittan nodded soberly, then grinned. “Mind you, I had the sense to stay out of the army, and the luck to find a happy marriage six years before Markhan. Karna and I married when we were just eighteen. My boy Dren here’s twenty-two, and he’s been chosen by his namesake King Dren to represent our nation at an important tournament soon. I guess the sense skipped a generation, as he and Petha have both been in the army since they were old enough to sign for their own careers. Damn, I wish Markhan were here to tease me about it now. He would you know.”

“I’m sure he would.” Mark nodded with a wistful smile. “He was proud of his service and the skills he learned from it.”

So it went; as each of Mark’s Father’s siblings were introduced with their wives and children, comments were exchanged that served to remind Mark of what he knew of them from his parents’ stories and correspondence, and to give Talia a little insight into their personalities.

Last to be introduced were Mark’s Aunt Tilfi; his mother’s sister, and her husband Harrik; the portly blond gentleman. Tilfi seemed hesitant, but when Mark enfolded her in his embrace, she warmly returned it. Then she took his hand in both of hers. “I’m glad to meet you, Mark. I wonder how much Helem told you of me?”

“That you were two years older than she, and that she loved you dearly, though you didn’t tend to spend much time together due to having very different interests.” Mark told her. “She said that your mother had died of pneumonia when you were girls, and that your father was a trapper, and that he and the women of the valley had co-operated in raising you both until you were seventeen and she was fifteen, when you defied your father to run off with the trader’s son.”

“That’s the truth of it.” she nodded. “Tell me, do you know how much longer it was after that when my father died? And how he perished?”

“Mam said he was buried by a winter avalanche the season before she went down to the lowlands to meet my father. She was seventeen then, so it must have happened about two years after you left.”

“Ah. Helem and I exchanged a few brief letters over the years, but she never wrote about that.” Tilfi softly revealed. “Harrik and I were married the day we made it to Belinhome from Shinosa, and set out the day after that for the winelands to the south for a load of fine bottled vintage that had to be back here within a month. We eventually settled into a regular route north to the border with The Warm People and back, twice a year.”

“And you became a wizard?” he asked. “I can see the glow of your power.”

She smiled, but shook her head. “A Healer. It took me sixteen years to get my guild certification, studying here for just three months every winter, but it’s a great profession for a traveling trader’s wife. Helem and I corresponded just enough to know that we were both very happy and contented with our lives, and that was enough. I always thought that someday I’d go back and visit her.”

“You resemble my mam more than she led me to think you would, Aunt Tilfi.” he quietly commented, noting her deep brown eyes so much like his mother’s, and the same thick black hair he’d inherited from her.

“Yes, well, we used to think we didn’t mix much because we were so dissimilar. Now I think it was because we were so alike.”

“Ah. Today is... Today is the first day I think I’ve started to come to terms with my family being gone.” Mark hesitantly revealed. “But sometime later, when I’m... more at peace with it, I’d like to give you a Reading of my memories of her.” he looked around the gathering. “And to give all of you my memories of my father’s life in Shinosa. They were all very happy times, except for the very last.”

“We could receive no finer gift.” his grandmother smiled.

Harrik grinned and offered a meaty hand. “I only met your mother once, so my status as your uncle might not count for much, but I’ve followed your adventures and exploits with interest these last few days, and I want to say I’m damn proud of you, both of you!”

“Thanks, Uncle Harrik.” Mark smiled as he shook hands with the man.

Talia unabashedly hugged both Tilfi and Harrik in turn, then proudly returned to Mark’s side as there was a pause in the conversation.

“We have your things from Shinosa here.” Sana gently informed Mark. “In the rooms above the carriage works there.” She indicated a darkened outbuilding further back in the yards.

“Oh. Thanks Grandma. Is it all, uh, intact?”

“It is. Some of it had weathered a bit, but we fixed all that. While you were missing, we finished some things. There were some dresses that your mother had obviously been working on with your sister Shelvy. The girls here and I, we all worked together on finishing them.”

“There was a pair of skis and poles that we figured Markhan had been working on with your brother Steb.” Wittan gruffly added. “And a harp we took as being matched to your fingers. Pa and me and the boys here finished ‘em up. Took pride in it too. Damn fine craftsmanship. Had no idea you were still trekking through the mountains then. Helped us remember your pa though. You could always tell his work.”

“Thank you, all of you. That was very thoughtful of you.” Mark nodded. “But I think I’ll look at those things another day.” There was another brief pause.

“This is a bit strange for me.” he chuckled. “It’s like I had three separate lives; Shinosa Valley, my trek south, and the last few incredible days since I met Yazadril. The trek was a separation between what came before and what came after, and there was nothing in common between the before and after. But now, seeing all of you here with Talia, that brings it all together, and suddenly I only have one life again. It’s good, but it’ll take a bit of getting used to.

“You know what the most disconcerting thing is? The fact that it’s night here, and a few minutes ago we left a bright late morning in Hilia. I’ve traveled around the world so much in the last few days that I’ve almost completely lost my sense of what time it is, but it sure doesn’t feel like it should be dark yet.

“I imagine you were all planning on joining us at my birthday celebrations there, and when we left there was a wonderful elven celebration of the joy of life in song and dance going on, and it probably still is. Would it be all right if we all went there now? We could bring this lovely and delicious smelling feast you’ve prepared.”

“That would be fine, except Mark here...” Sana began, but her husband interrupted her and placed a re-assuring hand on hers.

“No, you’re right, my dear wife. That would be fine.” He turned to his grandson. “The thing is, I’ve had a few battle experiences that’ve left me less than fully trusting in the process of Translocation, and magic in general. A bungled Translocation can be the kind of disaster that scars your soul to see. And it’s a long way to Hilia, and you’re both pretty young yet. Are you sure you’re up to it?”

“Absolutely.” Talia assured him. “Mark and I will cast the spell together, and we’ll both be double-checking each other’s work, while Ria triple-checks us both.”

“Good.” the patriarch nodded. “Most any other time, I still wouldn’t let myself be zapped halfway around the world, or even halfway across the yard. But this is a special occasion. A very special occasion. So I guess I’ll suck up the mustard one more time. Twice, if I want to get back here again before the year is out.”

“I’ll be attending in uniform with King Dren a bit later.” Dren said with a smile and a crisp salute, then stepped back a bit.

“We’ll see you then, cousin.” Mark grinned as he returned the salute.

“Could we have everyone move closer to the table, while we check weights and volumes?” Talia asked as she and Mark let their sense of magic encompass the immediate area, and quickly examined the people and objects they planned to transport. “And there are some loose items under the table?”

“Best bring those.” one of Mark’s young cousins advised with a huge wink.

“Thank you, ah, Migby, right? You’re twelve, Sanan and Dalev’s daughter?”

“That’s right!” the girl nodded happily, pleased that the elven princess had remembered.

“All right then.” Talia smiled and nodded as she and Mark closed their eyes in concentration, and cast their awareness around the world to their patio on Hilia.

“How many of us can you take each trip?” Karna asked.

“GODS!” Mark the elder barked in surprise at a flash of cold almost too brief to be perceived, immediately replaced by Hilia’s bright tropical sunshine.

“Why, all of you, and the table too.” Talia laughed, raising her voice a bit to be heard over the hundreds of elves who were still enjoying zhenshimlaia on three of the lawns, or lounging and chatting on others.

“Oooh, look, there’s Stripe!” Mark’s cousin Vimma exclaimed, and the six-year-old girl ran fearlessly over to the huge cat, closely followed by the rest of the young children.

The girl’s mother, Mark’s youngest aunt Nilla, drew breath for a shriek, then barely held it in check when the beautiful six hundred and forty kilogram animal merely rolled over to expose his belly for scratching, and emitted a thunderous purr.

“It’s all right, Stripe was trained to guard our children with his life.” Talia assured her as all the children began petting, scratching and climbing on the patiently enduring Sleng cat. “And it appears that until we have children, he’ll consider Mark’s cousins to be a worthy substitute.”

“He’s absolutely magnificent!” Nilla stated as the entire group moved over to admire Stripe, and to make sure the children behaved themselves with the powerful feline.

“Here comes Scout. Mind he doesn’t startle you.” Mark warned as he held up his arm to catch the great silver and black eagle, who came in fast, back-winging hard for control and to shed his speed. His widely spread feet impacted Mark’s firmly braced fore-arm hard enough to spin them a third of a turn, he gave one more wingbeat to stabilize his balance, and only then did he carefully grip his master’s arm with his claws as he fussily folded his wings.

Most of Mark’s family had ducked out of the way of this performance with laughing shrieks and exclamations, and now they moved back as Scout struck a regal pose for them.

“He knows when to show up for his share of the attention!” Mark laughed as he gave the bird a scratch under his beak.

“He’s beautiful!” one of the children breathed in amazement.

“And now he wants down!” Mark noticed as Scout began readying to jump off his arm.

He crouched to lower the bird to the paving, and the eagle hopped off, re-settled his feathers with a shake and a ruffle, and looked expectantly at nine-year-old Jind with his head cocked to one side. The boy crouched down for a closer look, mesmerized by the sight.

“Can we pet him?” Jind asked without looking away.

“Sure, just be sure to avoid his wings and tail, and to always go with the grain of his feathers.” Mark smiled as he knelt to demonstrate.

Talia noticed his adolescent and teenage cousins gazing with fascination at the Elven gathering. “This kind of gathering is called zhenshimlaia, and is considered good for the soul. Feel free to join in if you’d like, and you will be warmly welcomed. The dance movements are easier in the inner rings, so you might want to start there.”

“Are they allowed to do that?!!” Migby asked in adolescent amazement.

“What?” Talia asked, trying to follow what the girl was looking at.

“*That!*” the slim brunette pointed, and laughed. “Those in the middle there! They’re all almost naked, and they’re rubbing each other all over the place! I mean, not *everywhere*, but pretty close!”

“Ah. Well you must understand that Hilia is a tropical place, and even humans tend to wear very brief clothing in such weather. You’re lightly dressed for a Finitran evening, but if you join those dancing there you would be sweating and rolling up your sleeves in only a few moments. Beyond that, Elvish culture is far less physically inhibited than your own. So yes, they’re allowed to do that, or even to fornicate on the lawn if they should so choose, though they would not, out of respect for Mark’s sensitivities on the matter.

“You will not be asked or pressured in any way to do anything that makes you the slightest bit uncomfortable, and if any of us should unintentionally contravene a human taboo as regards your person, communicating that by the slightest word or gesture would be immediately respected, and the contravention will cease immediately.

“On the other hand, if what you *see* makes you uncomfortable...” she paused to giggle a bit, “Well, you have the right to look away. Besides, though there are elves who will make a sexual occasion out of any event, what you’re seeing there is not sexual. It is communal healing, and the joy of shared sensation, and many other fine things, but those who become sexually aroused by it will almost certainly withdraw to a less distracting location to explore those feelings further, and be completely open about doing so.”

“Go on, go play with the elves, they’re not going to bite you!” Sana urged with a smile and a shooing motion.

“Yes Grandma!” Migby laughed, but she and Mark’s four teenage cousins were still a bit hesitant.

“Balén, Zayobod, if I could have a moment of your time?” Mark asked as he stood, seemingly addressing thin air.

This proved not to be the case as those two elves appeared in the closest open area on the spacious patio, some six meters away, and nimbly hurried over. “Yes Mark?” asked Balén, who had just managed to arrive first.

“All these fine people are my family from Finitra. These five are cousins who’d like to enjoy some of this fine celebration we’re having. Would you and your cohorts be so kind as to be their guides to all things Hilian and elven while they’re here?”

“We would be delighted to do so, my Prince!” Zayobod grandly declared, and since he was only wearing a swimming clout, he immediately conjured a wide-brimmed purple hat onto his head, complete with a long blue feather, only so he could sweep it off with a flourish as part of his ornate and gallant bow. He straightened with just as much panache and replaced it on his head, whereupon it disappeared again.

This performance drew a laugh all around and a considerable lightening of the mood.

“What a show-off!” Balén giggled as she rolled her eyes in mock-exasperation and turned to the waiting five.

“I’m Balén, I’m nineteen though I probably don’t look it to you, and you would not believe how much fun there’s going to be here today! This zhenshimlaia’s almost over, though there’s still time to join in if you want to, and all the official stuff doesn’t start for over an hour, so we have time for swimming or climbing or reef diving or we could go to the beach or see the jungle or go flying...”

“You can make us *fly*?!!” Petha exclaimed incredulously, interrupting Balén’s stream of words. “Do you know how much that would cost at home?! Per *minute*? You bet, let’s go flying!”

“It would be our pleasure!” Zayobod laughed as he offered her his arm. “We’ll assign each of you a personal wizard! All of us Volunteers are from The Nine Valleys, you know, where such entertainments are as free as the air to breathe!”

The seven trooped off, eagerly discussing the possibilities, even as many of the Volunteers broke off what they were doing and moved to join the two elves and their charges on the highest lawn.

Sheramiv appeared with two of the Atoning and enough wicker chairs for thirty people in six neat floating stacks.

“I took the liberty of bringing some seating.” Sheramiv stated as the other two distributed chairs.

“Thanks, but before I use one, I think I’ll partake of this delicious smelling feast my family has so graciously provided!” Mark said as he stepped to the table and began preparing a plate. “Suddenly I’m starved!”

“Let me get that for you, my lad.” his grandmother admonished as she deftly took the plate from his hand. “I imagine you like everything your father liked?”

“I do, Grandma, thanks!” Mark chuckled. “It’ll be great to have Finitran food again! It’s been a while, and while I’ve been eating like a king the last few days, it’s just not the same when you don’t know what any of it is!”

“I thought that would be the case.” Sana smiled. “That’s why the girls and I made the same things you’ve probably had on every midsummer’s eve of your life. We cooked it all up from scratch too. Now you boys sit down and we’ll serve up.”

She and her two daughters and three daughters-in-law swung into action with practiced ease, and the two Atoning obliged them by providing small patio tables that matched the chairs for each of the diners.

“If any of you would like something different, feel free to partake of anything on this table of elven fare.” Talia invited, indicating the refreshments table that had been kept freshly stocked, and looked as tantalizing as it had when it had been produced. “Most of the dishes are intended as snack food or light fare, but it is fully nutritious, and Mark has yet to find any of it less than delicious.”

“Ya, and that way you’ll leave more of this delicious normal food for me!” Mark jested. “If I preserve it and ration it carefully, it might be enough to keep me free of cravings for a year! Sweet Mother of All, have I ever missed this stuff!”

“That’s fair, since as delicious as it is, we eat that stuff every week, or at least twice a month!” Wittan laughed as he accepted the plate his wife handed him, and moved to the elven table to augment his meal with tidbits, and a tall frosty glass of elven bumbleberry wine.

“I want to go flying too!” nine-year-old Jind suddenly complained. “How come Migby gets to go and I don’t? How come she doesn’t have to eat supper yet?”

“We’ll see about it after supper.” his mother Sanan pleasantly told him, then raised her voice a bit to be heard out on the lawn. “Migby! You and your four cousins had better eat before you run off to do whatever! It’s past time for supper, in Belinhome at least!”

“Prince Mark, may I make a suggestion?” Sheramiv asked.

Mark’s mouth was too full to answer, so he nodded and waved for her to continue with his table knife.

“As I mentioned at The Living Palace soon after we met, there are four of us among the Atoning, all males as it happens, who have dependent children at this time. It would be a kindness to their four children to allow them to visit here today, to see how their fathers serve and to gain an understanding of what we’ve been doing since we swore to you. Such things are not always easy to explain to children who have a parent who is suddenly absent most of the time.”

Mark finished chewing, deep in thought, and swallowed hard. “Gods, I never even thought.” he muttered, then turned to his youngest cousins. “Well, what do you think, kids? Would you like to meet some elves your own age, or close enough to it?”

“Sure!” Jind shouted, and the rest happily agreed.

“Sure, bring the four tykes and their parents by, now if they’re ready to eat, or after we’re done if they’re not.” Mark told Sheramiv. “And I want it known among the Atoning that I won’t have them neglecting their families in order to serve me. Their families have nothing to atone for, and it’s unjust for them to have to share in the atonement by being deprived of the presence of a family member. Have the Atoning with children serve no more than a third of the time in a work week, just like any guildsman in Debivin, with the same days off.”

“It will be known.” Sheramiv solemnly nodded.

“Are you married?” he suddenly asked.

“I am, as are almost all of the Atoning.” she nodded again. “Though none of the Volunteers have wed yet. And before you speak more on the subject, you should know that my husband is mightily displeased with me right now, and has been since the moment at your wedding when he knew that I had forsworn the vow of your invitation. When Yazadril put me back in my place, my husband told me that I had shamed him and our nation, and he has not spoken to me since. And justly so. I know I still have his love, but it will be a very long time before I earn his forgiveness. Most of our spouses feel the same.

“I’ll have the four children and their mothers brought by when your meal is finished.

“And now, with your permission, there are things I must oversee. But first...” The First Minister of Hilia turned and laid a finger on Ria’s hilt for a moment. Talia did the same, and the two exchanged a nod while Talia grinned.

“Excellent. Thank you Sheramiv.” Talia nodded again.

“One more thing before you go.” Mark said as Sheramiv prepared to Translocate. “You once told me that we had better things for the Atoning to be doing than managing small hotels, yet we have them bringing chairs.”

“Yes, since only the Volunteers and the most capable security personnel among the Atoning are allowed to serve you personally, for security reasons. Though the trustworthiness of many can be verified by the Marking of Osbald’s Oath, few of them are qualified to offer protection to you and your guests. Where we can arrange it, we take no chances with your well-being, or that of those who are dear to you. This is unaffected by there being other strong protections in place, including the Hilian Wards.”

“Ah, I see. Thank you.” Mark nodded.

Sheramiv took this as a dismissal, and disappeared.

“Do you know what ‘Reginus’ means, my lad?” his grandfather asked while buttering a hot crusty bun.

Mark had already taken another bite of his roast, and simply shook his head no.

“It means king, lad. King, in Old High Debivinian. And it suits you.”

Mark almost choked on his mouthful. “Please!” he finally laughed when he could. “Don’t tell me there’s some ancient prophecy that one of us with that name was destined to hold a crown! It’s spooky enough that the seers named us key to the nexus!”

“No, no, quite the opposite in fact.” the elder Mark chuckled as he spooned gravy onto his bun and took a big bite of it, which he finished before he continued.

“My grandfather didn’t take that name because we had a king in our future, but rather because we had one in our past! Some sixteen hundred years ago Finitra was divided by civil war into three smaller kingdoms, when the old king died without a clear heir. One of the three was ruled for some sixty years by our ancestor Markhan Reginus, which as I say means King Markhan in Old High Debivinian. He and the other two kings then made a deal to re-unite Finitra under King Wittan’s ancestor, beginning the present dynasty, which includes our reigning monarch King Dren. This unity was necessary to curb the aggressive intentions of the Kings of Bhia and Iktra of that time. As part of the deal, our ancestor was given a non-hereditary title and the ownership of vast estates down south, perhaps a third of which are still intact and are run by my father, your great-grandfather, spry old goat that he is at the age of eighty-four. And our ancestor agreed to give up his name, Markhan Reginus, as a show of loyalty to the new regime, and he took the name Longstrider.

“Then, long centuries after all that, my grandfather performed a brave act of valorous service for King Dren’s great-grandfather King Gan, the nature of which has never been revealed from a state of military secrecy. Out of gratitude for this brave unknown act, King Gan finally granted my grandfather, Kees Longstrider, the right to use the old family name again. He thus became the first Markhan Reginus Longstrider, amidst much pomp and ceremony. And that’s why we’ve passed the name down to every firstborn son ever since.”

“Fascinating.” Mark nodded. “I wonder why my pa never told me that?”

“Well, it doesn’t mean much, except to us, and it’s not wise to have it well known. We Longstriders are well liked and well regarded, and we have our own magic, we’re handy in a scrape, and we tend to stand out in a crowd. If we banded that story about, some fool would be proposing we take the crown as usurpers every time King Dren did anything that was unpopular, and then we’d have to prove our loyalty all over again, every time. It can be unhealthy to have a name that means king, my lad.”

“Good point.” Mark nodded as he started in on a huge wedge of sweet yam and berry pie. “How do you mean, Longstriders have their own magic?”

“Well you might not have had a chance to notice in the isolation of Shinosa Valley, but generally men my size, let alone yours, find that they’re bigger than a human man should be. Every man I’ve met outside our family who was my height and who had any athletic ability at all was as skinny as a post, and those with both my height and my weight often barely have the strength to lift their own weight out of a chair. And they tend to be built a bit funny. Except Longstriders. And that’s been true for at least sixteen centuries since the first Markhan Reginus.”

“Generally, the smaller an animal or a person is, the stronger they are for their weight.” Karna explained. “Thus very large men generally lose agility, quickness, and endurance, compared to smaller men.

“This isn’t so for Longstrider men, as it would be without the magic, subtle though it is. You’re all as spry as men half your size. The same is even more true of the giants; without their inherent magic they couldn’t even lift their own bodies out of bed.

“And Longstrider men breed true, but on the male side only, and their magic doesn’t affect girls at all. Thus all of your Grandpa’s sons, and *their* sons, are his same size and look almost the same as he does. His daughters look just like his wife, since his magic prevents his seed from affecting them, so the maternal characteristics are passed on complete. His daughters and their husbands produce children that are a normal admixture of both parents’ characteristics.”

She smiled a bit self-consciously. “I was curious about it after I married Wittan, so I did what research I could on the subject.”

Mark looked around as he finished eating. “That all seems true, except for me. I don’t look just like my pa did, even though he did look almost exactly like Grandpa, as you say. I got some of his looks, and some of my mam’s, and so did Steb and Shelvy. And I’m bigger than my pa too, and Steb would have been within four or five centimeters of me, and Shelvy would have been almost as big as Pa.”

“She’s right about that magic affecting you though.” Talia commented. “There have been a handful of other men in history who were your size, but I doubt any of them could have sprinted around the house like you did today in Finitra, or wielded a sword with half the quickness you showed in Kletiuik, even if their swords were as light as GrimFang.”

“As I see it, there are two possible reasons for the pattern being broken with you and your siblings.” Karna explained. “If you were in any way less than your father and your grandfather, that is if you were smaller or weaker, or less intelligent or talented, I would conclude that the Longstrider strain had finally weakened over the many generations. But that’s obviously not the case, and if anything the opposite is true. We can therefore conclude that the breeding quality and magic of your mother’s bloodline was so powerful that it was able to blend completely with your father’s Longstrider blood, producing something new that is an improvement on both lines. And though your mother

displayed no magic talent, this is supported by the fact that her sister, your Aunt Tilfi here, has more than enough magic to have mastered the arts of Healers. That level of power could have made her a journeyman in the wizards' guilds, if she'd been so inclined."

"Thank you for saying," Tilfi smiled. "And I think you're right. That's all consistent with everything I've learned as a Healer."

Mark nodded and ran a hand through his hair as he set his empty plate aside. "Damn," he quietly cursed. "That means that Steb and Shelvy's deaths are an even greater loss than I'd thought. Either one of them could have had the same knack with magic that I've got. They could've been great wizards, and neither of them were any more aware of it than I was at the time."

Karna set her plate aside, stood to walk over to Mark, and leaned down to give him a supportive hug. "Nothing could have made your brother and sister's deaths be any more tragic a loss than they were, my fine nephew. But it was very unlikely that they would have shared your gifts. Even one magic user every third generation would be a lot for the most gifted of human families, and more than one in a single generation would almost be a miracle. Thus Tilfi got the gift, while your mother Helem did not, though her blood was strong enough to fully blend with a Longstrider's."

"Ah. Thanks Aunt Karna," Mark smiled as she stood and took his hands for a moment. "It's a funny old world we live in, isn't it?"

"It surely is. At the heart of it all, blind chance determines almost everything," she agreed with a compassionate smile, and returned to her chair, where she exchanged a quick hug and kiss with her husband Wittan before resuming her meal.

"We have visitors arriving," Talia smiled as she stood, as did Mark. "Can we have that end of the patio cleared for a moment? Thank you."

Those closest to the west end of the patio moved toward the center, bringing their chairs, tables, and children with them. Sheramiv Translocated into the open space with four elven women and their four children. With his recently gained knowledge of elven development, Mark guessed the young elves ranged in age from about six to fourteen years. Sheramiv began to lead them over to meet Mark and Talia, who rose to meet them halfway.

Sheramiv opened her mouth to speak, but one of the mothers beat her to it. "Good day Prince Mark, Princess Talia, I am Chingla. We thank you for the mercy you've shown to our worthless husbands, which is surely more than they deserve after the blatant stupidity they displayed at your wedding," she said with a sweet smile, which made Sheramiv wince visibly.

Mark smiled in return and offered a gracious bow. "We're pleased to meet you all. I'd like you to know that I wouldn't have suggested the Atoning's vow of service, or any other punishment beyond a stern lecture. Though I was glad enough to accept it when they proposed it and Prince Yazadril suggested I do so. At any rate, I'm very sorry to have been part of events that have in any way detracted from your happiness, or that of your children."

Chingla giggled and made a graceful curtsy "Thank you, gracious prince. You are most charming, and it's a joy to hear the richness of your voice again. And it's kind of you to allow our children to see where their fathers spend their working time these days."

"A stern lecture, you say!" one of the other elven mothers laughed. "My idiot mate is nine hundred eighty-seven, and if he hasn't learned wisdom by now, I doubt a stern lecture would penetrate his thick skull!"

"Sheramiv here explained that you'd like our children to meet your young cousins," another revealed. "A wonderful idea, since meeting new playmates is such a rare treat for elven young, our birthrate being what it is. If you'd like, we would be glad to provide childcare for the bunch of them today, so that your aunts and uncles can be free to enjoy your birthday celebrations. You can be sure we'll keep them all safe and well entertained."

"A generous offer, which you'll have to discuss with my aunts and uncles," Mark laughed, and turned to his young cousins. "How about you kids introduce our new friends to Stripe and Scout?" he asked.

This drew enthusiastic agreement from all nine young, who were soon engrossed in lavishing their attentions upon the two pleased pets while getting to know one another. Their mothers sat close by, happily engaged in a discussion of children and their rearing, and how they contrasted between their two races.

"As I said my lad, Reginus is a name that fits you well. You're a fine prince, and you'd make a fine king."

"Thanks Grandpa," Mark said as he and Talia resumed their seats. "Of course, I learned almost everything I know from my pa, and he always said he learned most of what he knew from you."

"Bah!" the elder Mark grinned and waved dismissively. "Your pa was a damn fine soldier, plain and simple, the same as me, and I'm sure you did learn much of value from him. But that little speech you just made, you didn't learn that from us. Markhan and I, we're as well-spoken as the next man, but we couldn't come up with a phrase like; 'in any way detracted from your happiness', not if you gave us a year's wages and set fire to our feet! The same's true of

that fancy bow you do. From what I remember of your mother from her months in Belinhome before she married Markhan, I'd say you learned it from her."

That set Mark back a bit as he thought about it. "You know, I have to say you're right."

"No doubt of it." Tilfi agreed with a bit of a smug smile. "Helem always said she didn't care if she married a trapper or a prince, but she intended to be fully prepared for either eventuality. She could be a stickler for etiquette when she chose to, and she could play the lady with the best of them. I've no doubt she made sure you wouldn't embarrass yourself in formal company."

"That's very true." Mark nodded. "I guess it's just easier for a boy to remember his father's lessons in honor and tradecraft than his mother's lessons in proper manners and keeping your sleeves out of your soup. But now that I think about it, they've both been as valuable to me in the last few days. The last couple of months, I felt like my mother's spirit was still watching me, encouraging me, hoping I wouldn't disappoint her. Less so since I met Talia though."

"And now I must heed the manners that my own parents taught me, since they'll be here with the rest of my family in a few moments!" Talia laughed as she gave Mark a quick kiss on the cheek. "Which means that the planned events here will be starting in about five minutes."

Mark glanced around and noticed that the zhenshimlaia had long since dispersed, and that the Atoning had left, presumably to return to their duties and assignments. A few of the Volunteers remained on the lawns, but they were in the act of standing and gathering just below the patio. The rest of them flew into sight from around the mountain in a laughing and yelling aerial pack, and landed in groups amidst their compatriots, along with the five cousins they were guiding. The sun was just reaching the peak of high noon overhead, and there were rain clouds gathering on the northern horizon.

"Looks like rain." he commented. "They say it does that a lot here in the afternoons, as I recall."

"Don't worry, we won't get rained on." Talia laughed, just as Yazadril emerged from the door of the cottage, followed by Nemia, Hilsith, Dalia, Bezedil, and Alilia.

Yazadril was resplendent in his formal armor, Mountainfire sheathed on his back, though unlike the last time he'd worn them he was without the crown of The High People. The elves who accompanied him were also dressed somewhat formally, and Alilia wore her Battle Wizard's uniform, less her staff of office.

Somewhat to Mark's surprise, his Finitran relatives all smoothly stood and bowed or curtsied together, and his grandfather snapped to attention after he straightened and saluted Yazadril crisply before offering his greeting.

"Commander. A pleasure to meet you and your family."

"Colonel Longstrider." Yazadril nodded as he returned the salute, then he grinned and offered his hand as a human would. "We're pleased to meet all of you as well. All of us Mark's family, gathered to celebrate his birthday. I hope we get to know one another well, and to that end I propose that we make it an annual tradition."

"Your family and mine, to meet on Mark's birthday? Seems a fine idea to me!"

"And a fine idea it is, if I say so myself, for it will enrich us with fine friends and happy times." Yazadril pronounced as he turned to Mark and Talia.

"Excellent work today in Kletiuik, far moreso than anyone expected of you and your little company. You have silenced those who speculated that as a military force you were dilettantes, and we are reaping a fine harvest of knowledge in the Hall of The Just Alliance. I'm *very* proud of you both, and as proud of every member of the Hilian military. Your prowess brings honor to The Just Alliance."

He turned to address the gathering. "We'll all have a chance to make introductions and mingle in a few minutes. Mark's birthday celebrations are about to begin.

"Talia?"

A hush fell as she floated up to Mark's eye level and faced him with a loving smile, and offered him her hands, which he gently enfolded within his own. The Volunteers and Finitran cousins on the highest lawn joined those on the patio in granting the young couple their complete attention.

"Mark my love, my beautiful husband, happy birthday. Today you are seventeen years old, which is an amazing fact in itself. I had originally envisioned a birthday celebration similar to what we've enjoyed so far, a gathering of family and friends to share happiness and fun and the joy and love of each other's company. And in about three hours we'll return here with a few more friends, our family, and the Volunteers, and we'll continue to enjoy exactly that.

"But there are a great many who would like to celebrate your birthday, and to give you gifts, and many of them would like to make this a great event of such magnitude that it will be remembered for eons.

"We've achieved a compromise of sorts, in that I've made everyone promise to try to keep the atmosphere casual. But there is greatness here today, that's certain.

“There was a danger that almost every person from every race on every continent in The Just Alliance would send you birthday presents. Billions of them. They were filling rooms at a startling pace, for the sheer volume of them was staggering, and a great deal of our facilities would have been dedicated to their storage. We had to send them back, along with pleasant little notes explaining our refusal. Before we began doing so, we calculated that you’d have been sent over nine hundred times as much wealth and goods as we received as wedding gifts. I thought that would have been more than a little ridiculous, and I hope you agree with what I did.”

“I do!” he laughed.

“In the end, I decided that only your family would give you presents, and that anyone else who wished you a happy birthday could contribute worth or effort to one of our existing and ongoing projects. Those include the completion of facilities here. I allowed that if they also wished to contribute well-thought improvements or additions to our projects, that would be fine, so long as they had the approval of Sheramiv’s architectural teams. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised at what that has led to. For instance, consider that large bush at the corner of the cottage.”

She smiled and led him there by the hand, walking on a meter of air. “The bush that was here has been replaced by an Illusion of a bush, used with silencing spells to hide construction that was taking place here this morning, while we were eating breakfast. I dismiss the Illusion, thus, and you see that the front wall of the cottage has been extended over a meter, and within that wall is a door. The door isn’t really noteworthy.”

“I see.” Mark chuckled. “Just a door to the other side of a wall that you could walk around in two seconds.”

“Not quite.” Talia teased. “For while the door is not special, the doorframe is very special indeed, for it houses one of many similar gifts given to you by the Kwetkerthok. Or rather, improvements to the facility that the gargoyles have provided in honor of your birthday. It houses a spell heretofore unique to that race’s constructions; an Addressable Permanent Translocation Plane, or Plane door in conversational terms. Here beside the door are several addresses carved into the stone, and this drilled sapphire slides up and down on its platinum rod, indicating which of the addresses is on the other side of the Plane door. I’m told the sapphire is immovable while the door is open. Right now we’ll leave it at the top selection, the Grand Hall.”

She turned the doorknob and swung the door open, revealing the cavern at the bottom of the stairs below the cottage. “When the door is set for the hall, we can walk through the doorway directly from here to there. And we’ll do so now. If you would all accompany us?” and the grinning elfess led Mark through the door. He felt no particular sensation beyond a bit of a tickle of his sense of magic, otherwise it seemed no more than walking through any other door.

The doorway they emerged from was situated just left of the stairs, and the huge room they entered had finished the transformation they’d seen in progress a few hours earlier. Great arched doorways now ringed most of the room, and it seemed like a quarter of the wall on the south side had been removed from the floor up to the marble ring atop the columns. In that quadrant, between and above freestanding double doorways, there was bright blue sky above with the distant ocean below, and the occasional cries of birds and monkeys were carried in on a fresh sea breeze.

Mark knew that what he was experiencing was impossible, since half the rock of the mountain lay between that side of the room and the surface in that direction.

“I assume they didn’t really dig most of the volcano away to make a big window, did they?” he asked incredulously.

“No.” Talia laughed as she led him toward the center of the room. “It’s an Illusion of what you’d see if they had, transmitted from the surface as it happens. The sound and breeze come through Displacement Planes; smaller, simpler versions of the doorway we just used. If you walk over and touch it, the wall there is still solid rock. There are different versions of that in every fully underground chamber and corridor, so it’s all light and bright and airy. Gifts from The People of Morning.”

“Wow!” Mark marveled, then realized that there were dozens of people of every race gathered in a large semi-circle around the center of the room within the pillars. By now everyone who’d been at the cottage had filed through the Plane door and gathered behind them.

They passed between the pillars, and Mark couldn’t help looking up, his eyes drawn by the millions of tiny prisms that composed a ring-shaped chandelier six meters in diameter. It shimmered in waves and tinkled delicately as it was moved by the barely-discernible breeze.

Their group joined those who waited near the center of the room.

“My knowledge of the window Illusion and the Plane doors is almost all I’ve learned of the many modifications that have been made to the plans for Hilia since we last saw them.” Talia said as she indicated Sheramiv. “Thus it falls to our First Minister to describe them further.”

“Thank you, Princess.” Sheramiv smiled.

“Your Majesties, you have empowered me to operate the government of Hilia, including the approval of constructions and the appointment of personnel, and I have done so. Plans and finances for constructions on Hilia have been updated and expanded almost every hour since we first met at The Living Palace.

“Even before yesterday, the generosity of the people, organizations and governments of The Just Alliance was unprecedented, and colossal. Contributions of currency, materials, and effort were unstinting, from every corner of the world.

“However, yesterday morning Princess Talia bade me to announce that birthday gifts and presents for you would only be accepted in the form of contributions of worth or effort toward your existing projects. Since then your projects’ rates of completion, as well as your prosperity and that of this nation, have grown by orders of magnitude. Your treasury is now sufficient to pay for all of your vastly expanded and enhanced facilities both here and overseas. However, since almost all of the effort and materials were contributed, and the rest is already paid for, those funds are now surplus. You understand that this leaves The Principality of Hilia in a very enviable financial position indeed.”

“Huh.” Mark grunted with raised eyebrows. “Shouldn’t we give that money back, if we don’t need it for the purpose it was contributed for?”

“Much of it was donated anonymously.” Sheramiv stated as she shook her head. “And after refusing so many birthday gifts, instead directing people to contribute to the construction funds, we truly risk offending a great many if those contributions are also refused. Instead, I join all those who contributed in wishing you a very happy birthday.”

“I see. Thank you. And I do sincerely thank all the contributors for their generosity.”

“You are most welcome, your Majesty. At any rate, the completed projects I will now unveil are magnificent gifts indeed, given by many, who are all pleased and proud to have taken part in their completion.

“First, the Academy of Cavalry of the Hilian University of The Just Alliance, at Winghoof Estate in The Empire of Latrel. It is being overflowed at this moment by one of our staff, and we will cast an Illusion of what is seen by her eyes. Can I have everyone please move back from the center of the room a bit.”

They did, then gave a round of applause as a six meter wide area of the floor there became a moving picture of Winghoof as seen from a couple of hundred meters up. There was a magnificent sunset in progress there, revealing herds of hundreds of fine horses running over hilly pastures, then a vastly expanded area of corrals and barns, then four new large two-story buildings in an open block around a complex of runs and yards, and finally the previously existing yards and buildings of the guest ranch. Between the Academy and the ranch house were gathered a crowd of almost a thousand humans mixed with a few dozen elves, a handful from other races, and a young white dragon. They held two huge banners stretched taut above their heads; one read ‘Congratulations Mark and Talia!’, and the other ‘Happy Birthday Prince Mark!’. As the flying viewpoint approached, they cheered mightily, and the dragon roared and blew a great ball of flame straight up.

“The facility’s staff, and those who worked on its construction.” Sheramiv announced. “And a few who contributed horses.”

The viewpoint circled above the scene, and Mark couldn’t help calling out; “Thank you!” and waving, then he sheepishly laughed at himself. “They probably can’t see me, can they?”

“No.” Sheramiv chuckled. “But they know that all of us are watching, and they’ll be able to see recordings of this presentation later, so they’ll hear what you say then.”

“Ah. Good.” he grinned as the Illusion ended.

“Also completed recently today, with expansions and modifications; The Hilia-Heartwood Academy of Healing, a facility of The Faculty of Healing of The Hilian University of The Just Alliance. It has facilities for nine hundred patients and six hundred students. As it’s night there, I present this structural Illusion.”

The gathering applauded as a squat semi-transparent beech tree appeared, tall enough to brush the intersection of the arches overhead. It was riddled with installations from the highest major branch to the roots that spread horizontally at ground level, both within the wood and built onto the outside of it. By the size of the rooms, Mark judged the real tree to be about two hundred and fifty meters tall, and perhaps twenty meters in diameter at the base of the trunk.

“I now bring your attention to the branch of the Hilia-Heartwood Academy that is dedicated to new mothers and young infants, via a fully reciprocal Projection.” Sheramiv stated as the structural Illusion faded, to be replaced by a life-size group of six elves, four humans, a dwarf, a selkie, and a giant who sat cross-legged. The rest stood, and they were all gathered around a dark-haired human woman in a white gown who was seated in a chair and holding a lightly-bundled infant. “That means that they can see and hear us as we see and hear them, Your Majesty, though they are illusory.”

The illusory group smiled and waved and called out; “Happy birthday, Prince Mark!”

“Thank you!” he called and waved in return, which made him feel a bit awkward, as it seemed like he stood only three meters from them. He realized it was because he felt the urge to walk over and shake hands or something, and he chuckled at himself.

“Permit me to introduce Citizen Willia Sneg, of Bhia, and her son Tog.” Sheramiv indicated them with a warm smile. “Less than an hour ago, Tog became the first child to be born at the Hilia-Heartwood Academy of Healing. Healers in Bhia doubted that either he or his mother could survive his birth, for there were severe complications, yet this team of Healers brought them safely through the experience, and fully restored their health and vitality as well.”

Mark and Talia went over to get a close look at the baby as his mother held him up a bit to proudly display him.

“He’s beautiful!” Talia cooed at the sight of the tiny sleeping infant.

“Thank you.” Willia grinned.

“Happy birthday, Tog.” Mark softly murmured, his grin as wide as his face could hold, then he straightened and faced the Healers. “Thank you.” he told them sincerely, and they smiled and nodded graciously before the whole group disappeared.

“And now, I present our university’s Faculty of Skilled Trades; The Hilian Trades and Crafts School at Juncture, where the borders of the three empires of Debinvin come together, again, seen through overflying eyes.” Sheramiv announced as Mark and Talia moved back to their places.

An illusion appeared on the floor, showing a huge campus composed of two rings of twelve large buildings circling a round area of parkland. Though it was in the midst of the darkest hours of the night, the campus was extremely well lit by hundreds of elven Light spells. A gigantic banner covered the entire front of the building closest to the road that served the school, and read; ‘Grand Opening 07 01 01 AJA’.

“This school was originally planned with six buildings.” Sheramiv informed the gathering amidst another round of applause. “It is now complete, as far as its plans had progressed up to two hours ago. However, a third ring of buildings has been proposed and approved within the last hour, and they will be constructed tomorrow. With thirty-six of these structures serving almost seventy thousand apprentices, this will be the largest tradeschool on Kellaran.”

“What do the numbers on the banner mean?” Mark asked.

“That the grand opening of the school will take place on the seventh day of the first month of the first year of The Age of The Just Alliance.” Sheramiv explained. “This follows the new calendar convention that was proposed by Mileemi of Thon yesterday, and it eliminates a great deal of confusion, since almost every nation of every race used different dating before the founding of the Alliance, which is counted the first day of the new age. Adoption of the new dating has been swift, due to the pressures of impending war. Otherwise it would likely take decades to forge such universal compliance.”

“That’s good thinking.” Mark nodded.

“The fortifications and minor modifications at your other properties are also complete.” Sheramiv continued as she banished the illusion. “Including the modifications to The Queen of Waves. But since they are for the most part unaltered in appearance since you last saw them, we save the time of showing them. The facilities and modifications at Focus Mountain are almost complete as well, but you will see them in person a bit later.

“That leaves only the presentation of the completed facilities here at Hilia, but before we get to that, I present Prince Dizil of The People of Rain.”

That beaming tropical elf wore a white tunic and sandals that contrasted brightly with his black hair and skin, as did his pearl studded gold crown of office.

“Happy birthday, Prince Mark, and good day, Princess Talia.” Dizil grinned as he stepped forward, holding an ornate parchment clipped to a mahogany writing board. “I have here the treaty, based on our verbal agreement, that formalizes and finalizes the transfer of the property and sovereignty of the island of Hilia from my nation to The Principality of Hilia. Do you have the payment?”

“We do.” Sheramiv smiled, and waved forward two of the Atoning, who were towing a small and ornate marble chest that was supported by a Levitation. They presented it and opened the lid, revealing the glint of gold. “One thousand one ounce gold Hilian Crowns, the first coins minted as Hilian currency.”

“That’s a surprise to me, that we’re minting our own money!” Mark noted as he took a quick look at one of the coins, struck on one side with a bust portrait of he and Talia wearing similar ornate crowns and smiling into each other’s eyes, and on the other with a map of the island with the sword-star of Hilia in the center. “Nice!” he grinned as he replaced it in the chest.

“We are honored.” Dizil nodded. “The payment is made and accepted. Both the coins and the chest will be treasured by my people for their historical significance. We’ll leave them on display here for the next seven days, along with our copy of the contract, so that they may be viewed by your citizens and guests.” He held the writing

board with both hands as he cast a quick spell to copy it, and when he moved his hands apart they each held one, complete with the treaty and a quill pen clipped on. “Our signatures will stand to seal our agreement for all time, and will be witnessed in the third party by Prince Yazadril of the High People, First Commander of the Militaries of The Just Alliance.”

He handed one of the boards to Mark, they each signed, then Mark passed his to Talia as Dizil passed his to Yazadril.

When they’d all signed both copies, Yazadril spoke. “Please remove both copies of the treaty from the writing boards and place them back to back, thank you, now the four of us shall grasp them both, one of us on each edge, with our right hands. Thank you.”

They held the parchments high, and Yazadril drew Mountainfire. He held it hanging point down beneath the treaty with his left hand, and loudly intoned; “As it is written, so let it be, forevermore!” and drove the great sword’s point into the floor with a loud clank, which triggered a bright wave of elven binding, and a round of cheering and applause from the gathering.

“It’s amazing that you don’t chip the floor when you do that, Yazadril.” Mark smiled as Sheramiv took the documents from them.

“Ah, well it’s magic, you see.” Yazadril grinned with a wink as he sheathed his sword.

“Now, since I agreed during our original discussion to furnish you with the history of Hilia, as far as it is known, I have had this fine book prepared for you. The last page is the best.”

The tome Prince Dizil magically Retrieved and held to Mark was finely tooled and gilded, the covers were sixty centimeters long and forty-five wide, and it was seven centimeters thick.

“Why Prince Dizil, thank you!” Talia smiled as she stepped forward to accept the book. “How kind of you to gift us with this! Of course, we can’t give the appearance that you’re trying to tiptoe around our request to not give Mark birthday presents, can we?”

“Of course not, that wouldn’t be best at all!” Dizil laughed.

“The Illustrated History of Hilia.” Talia read. “Apparently, our island has a much more extensive history than I would have guessed!”

“Not really. The first chapter details it’s discovery and subsequent use as a storm haven and resupply source for fresh water by various ships over many millennia, and you should save the second chapter to read later. It’s the story of how Hilia came to be an outpost of my nation, and it’s quite an amusing story. The third chapter is quite slim, and details the various patrols our Sentries made here and the occasional pirates they roused, the fourth is a detailed analysis of the development of the stone and the life of the island since its volcanic heart first rose above the sea. The vast majority of the book is a detailed accounting of events of note that have occurred here since you became Hilia’s monarchs.”

Talia opened the book to its last page, and Mark read over her shoulder, then they both burst out laughing.

“There is a subtitle at the top of the last page that reads; The Seventeenth Birthday Celebrations of Prince Markhan Reginus Longstrider, thus identifying the chapter!” Mark whooped, relieving the puzzlement of the gathering. “There’s a nice picture of Talia receiving this book from Prince Dizil a moment ago, done to look like a masterfully realistic oil painting, as one would expect in a fine history book! The last words printed on the page are what he said just before she opened it; ‘The vast majority of the book is a detailed accounting of events that have occurred here since you became Hilia’s monarchs.’!”

“It will update when the book is closed, up to the moment before it is next opened.” Dizil explained.

“Thank you! It’s wonderful, and very thoughtful of you!” Talia laughed.

“You are most welcome.” Prince Dizil said with a bow, and turned to Sheramiv, who took up the thread of events again.

“All that remains to be done here, in your Hall of Thrones, is to display the finished facilities of Hilia.” she stated. “The spell of Illusion that will be used to display them is contained within two items. Here with the items is one of their crafters; Osbald, Emperor of the Humans of Thon!”

“Emperor Osbald! What a pleasant surprise!” Talia laughed.

“And an honor!” Mark added, as that worthy gentleman allowed himself to become noticeable, and stepped forward.

He bore a warm smile, and a black velvet covered case with about sixty litres of capacity. “Thank you, I’ve looked forward to meeting both of you. Your nation and your reign have begun without your having been crowned in a grand coronation ceremony, but I’m one of those who think that the informal atmosphere you prefer may be a far more appropriate tradition for the nation you are building here. In that spirit, I give you these.”

He opened the case, and displayed on black velvet within were two magnificent crowns. They were identical except for size, and artistically encrusted with diamonds, rubies and sapphires, each centered with a huge dark blue star sapphire with the sword-star of Hilia centered naturally within the stone.

“The crowns of nations are items of power, due to their worth, the magic that imbues them, and their centuries of history.” Osbald stated, amidst the quiet oohs and ahs of exclamation. “They carry the history of their nations, and while the history of your nation is still rather short, they also carry the history of their crafters’ years of experience. And these were crafted by twenty-four Masters of Wizardry, each of whom is, like myself, a reigning monarch of long standing and experience. And besides, by dividing the work among so many of us, each of us needed only a short diversion from our busy schedules.

“I myself was a jeweler on the project and crafted the metals, and I contributed a few spells, not the least of which are those that ensure that these will always remain light, comfortable, and securely in place, no matter how long and eventful, or uneventful, your state occasions may be.

“I am most proud of a property I had no hand in endowing. They are certified by The High Circle of Spell Casters of The Just Alliance as Eminent Artifacts of Power and Justice, and as such, an oath of justice sworn upon either of them will be sufficiently binding to merit being denoted by the Marking spell that serves as passport to The Just Alliance. The pictogram that appears will be of your crown centered before the sword-star symbol.

“There’s a card from all of us in the bottom of the case.

“Now, if you will allow me, I will fit these to your brows, and I will establish a Link with you, in order to instruct you in the use of their spells.”

Osbald set the case aside and Levitated it, then visibly hesitated in the act of lifting Talia’s crown out as the Link was established. *“My my, what an experience! The quality and depth of the Link you two share, and of Talia’s Link with Ria, are both quite refreshing!”*

“We’re grateful for this chance to share your thoughts, Osbald.” Mark told him. *“While we’re doing so, we have quite a nice selection of spells between us now, and I could pass you any of them in a usable form in a few seconds. Judging by your apparent skill, I’m sure you’d be able to take quite a few. Of course we hope that you have a few to offer in trade.”*

“Certainly, and thank you. I have a few things I like to keep to myself, but you can have your choice of these, and the ones in your crowns are these. Now as for yours... Ah, you have an amazing selection! Of course I know many of them, or things that are functionally similar, but these magecraft works are intriguing. I’ll learn these twenty-eight... twenty-nine spells. Thank you! And you already have your selections from my repertoire! Masterfully done!”

“Thank you, Osbald. Your selection is formidable, but we managed to choose a few dozen things we’d like to work with. And it’s a genuine pleasure sharing with someone who can think over a Link even faster than I can!”

“Good selections you made, but on the other point, you’re a flatterer. I could neither pass nor retrieve spells with anything close to your deftness at the task, and it’s obvious you’re just stretching your wings. It’s been a pleasure working with you. We’ll have to do it again soon.”

While this psionic exchange had been going on, Osbald had placed Talia’s crown upon her head. Mark had gone to one knee to allow the same to be done for him, but he held his head high and grinned. Now he stood as Osbald ended the Link.

“Sheramiv waited to reveal the developments here at Hilia in order to allow you the use of the spells for the display of your realm that are embedded in your crowns, since they are of particularly high quality. Why don’t you try them now?”

Mark and Talia did so, and an six meter long model Illusion of the island appeared floating half a meter in the air in the center of the room.

“It’s adjustable in dimension, area of focus, and time.” Osbald revealed. “Why not make it bigger? Don’t worry about us, we’ll just wade through it.”

The Illusion grew until it filled the entire area between the pillars.

“Wow!” Mark breathed. At this size the volcano was three meters high, and on its shallow slope was the cottage, the patio, and a tiny but easily discernible view of Stripe laying there and grooming himself.

“Now use the interior view.” Osbald suggested, and the Illusion became semi-transparent.

They could now see within the cottage, and through the stone to the stairs that led down and the chamber they were in. Mark waved his arm, and the tiny illusion of him did the same simultaneously.

“Your crowns don’t know the land yet, so they only show the parts that you two are aware of.” Osbald explained.

“Most of these gathered here are representatives of the crews who have worked on the constructions here, eager to see your reaction at the unveiling.” Sheramiv smiled. “Allow me to pass you my knowledge of the facilities. But not

all at once. Here are the hotel facilities and apartments for staff members and residents, all excavated beneath the surface of the outside of the volcano, all equipped with hidden doors and windows to the outside to maintain the existing natural look of the mountain. The top third of them on the south side are reserved for diplomats and their staff.

“As you can see, we have chosen to use various shades of white marble throughout all of the facilities, in order to brighten the ambiance and to contrast with the black obsidian of which Hilia is composed. This also gives every facility in the nation a certain stylistic unity. On the other hand, there is a great variety in the ways that the marble and the obsidian have been decoratively shaped and carved, and the representative styles of stonework of every nation can be found here. The emplacement of abundant indoor plant life is the other feature that we have insisted be included in the décor of every facility. It adds the warmth of life to the stone of the rooms and corridors, helps purify the air, provides pleasant scents, and improves our balance of trade, since every indoor plant produces food or useful products, and none are purely decorative.

“Here you see the library, university, and embassy facilities that have been excavated from the wall inside the crater, the entire surface of which is now emplaced with concentric layers of balconies, each accessed by arched doorways and double glass doors. The floor of the crater is now manicured parkland, and the plants that grew there naturally were used in the landscaping. Within the mountain, we have recreation and entertainment facilities, and below that retail shopping and trade, below that manufacturing. All told, over one hundred and sixty levels from the rim of the crater down to sea level.

“Now apart from the great beauty and scale of these works, do you notice anything in particular about all this?” Sheramiv asked with a teasing little smile.

“Only that they’ve pretty much hollowed out the entire island, clear down to sea level!” Mark exclaimed in wonder as he and everyone else walked through the Illusion, looking it over. “Those doors at the bottom of the crater wall are huge! The rooms inside are big enough to house dragons!”

“True. Those facilities are indeed meant to be usable by our draconian guests. And we have removed almost seventy percent of the volume of the stone.

She grinned and waited ten patient heartbeats before Mark asked the question. “So what did you do with all the stone?”

“In order to show you that, you will need to shrink this illusion by half, then expand the focus to show the sea for a kilometer and a half in every direction around the island. Thank you. Now I give you my knowledge of the contours of the seafloor and the reefs that surround Hilia.”

“I take it the stone was dumped into the ocean beyond the reefs?” Mark asked.

“Not quite dumped, but set into the sea by a consortium of crafters of the Selkies, the Kwetkerthok, and The Hidden Nation. They first excavated these tunnels from the lower floors of the manufacturing levels inside the mountain, to the surface of the stone six meters below the sea, and they built this.”

The illusion showed a long stone building almost thirty meters in length set into the gentle slope of the sea floor outside the ring of reefs. It had an arched profile and rounded ends, and was connected to the interior of the island by one of the tunnels. Much of its surface was made up of large round windows that emitted a cheery yellow glow.

“Its tunnel and interior were allowed to fill with water during its construction, then upon completion it was pumped out, and is now completely sealed and dry inside. Once the consortium had proven their concept, they used the rest of the tailings from the excavations on the island to build these. Every time excavations inside the mountain were expanded, they were provided with more building materials with which to increase the scale of their project.” Sheramiv continued, and a city appeared in the sea all around the island.

The scattered domes in the shallow water between the beach and the reefs were fairly small, half the size of the cottage and just extending into the air above. Corridors shaped like tubes, their surfaces almost half window, branched out and wove through the reef to the huge domes in the deeper sea beyond. Though the water there was over thirty meters deep, the tops of most of these great installations also extended to slightly above the surface, each with six to eighteen floors or levels contained within.

“Sweet mother of all! That’s incredible!” Mark breathed.

“We do like to think so.” Sheramiv stated proudly. “Take some time to look it over, for when you’re done that, Talia will lead us to the next stage in today’s festivities.”

“There’s as much room under the sea as there is on the island!” Talia marveled as she waded around in the illusion, looking down at it and holding Marks hand. “What will we have in it?”

“More hotels, homes, halls, public spaces, classrooms, embassies, entertainments, businesses, factories, and warehouses.” Sheramiv answered. “At capacity we will have a population of almost two million, counting staff, faculty, residents, students, and of course, paying guests. And we’ll fill that capacity within two days.”

“It’ll take us a year just to explore it all!” Mark stated in admiration.

“If you wish to see every meter, perhaps, but to see it in general would not take long. Over two hundred Plane doors have been installed throughout the nation, some of them of large size, so one can get directly to where one is going.”

“Why not just use regular Translocation Plates?” Talia inquired.

“The Plane doors are far more convenient for movement about the island, but standard floor-mounted Translocation Plates are used in several places for their greater security and magical efficiency, to connect places on the island to distant locations around the world. For instance, rather than try to obtain a copy of every single book for your library, not to mention building facilities to store them all, we have Translocation Plates within the library that allow travel directly to the other great libraries of the world. Similarly, they connect our university to other institutions of learning all over Kellaran. Practically speaking, they are all now one great world library, and one great university. And the embassies here are each supplied with a Translocation Plate to the seat of government in their home country.

“Frankly, you would not believe the cost of all these installations, or rather what they would have cost us if purchased on the open market. The Plane doors, Translocation plates, and Illusions of outdoor exposure are particularly expensive. I’m an experienced government financial officer, and even I’m flabbergasted at the intense concentration of wealth that your nation now represents! You could build half of the city of Bojoston for the cost of what you see here, and that metropolis is home to twenty-three million people!”

“By the source.” Talia breathed as she looked around the display. “How do we even begin to express our gratitude for all of this?!”

“Simply say thank you, and let it run.” Yazadril advised. “The educations, diplomacies, vacations, and lives that will be enjoyed here will allow Hilia to give back to the world all the value you have received, and more.”

“Wise advice indeed.” Sana agreed as she and Mark’s grandfather rejoined them.

“Then we’ll accept it gratefully.” Mark grinned, and turned to the builders’ representatives. “Thank you. We thank you with all our hearts, all of you who’ve worked on and contributed to this wonderful great city you’ve made of a tiny island paradise.”

“And the best part is, so far as you can see from outside, it’s still a tiny island paradise, pristine except for your cottage and its grounds!” Equemev commented as she and Silaran entered from one of the double doors, their shoes no louder on the stone than many of the boot heels of some of the humanoid guests.

“Notwithstanding the inside of the crater that is.” Silaran added. *“But then, that can’t be seen from the rest of the island, unless one is flying quite high.”*

“Hi, Silaran, Equemev.” Talia called as they approached, the seafloor of the illusion at their ankles. “I take it our red and silver friends are following this as well?”

“We are, from inside the crater.” Povon psionically informed them. *“We were smart enough to secure unobstructed views while it was still possible to do so!”*

“Pardon me?” Mark asked.

“It’s time to move on to our next activity, before Povon gives away the surprise!” Talia laughed, and she addressed the gathering as she and Mark dismissed the Illusion. “Please follow me, if you would. We’ll take the Plane door to the crater floor.”

As they approached it, a sentry of the Atoning in a white and gold uniform closed the Plane door, reset the sapphire to the address of the crater floor, re-opened it, and preceded them through into bright early afternoon sunshine.

They emerged from a freestanding marble doorframe on a flat-topped hillock beside the small lake, close to the center of the floor of the bowl. Every bit of space on the white marble balconies that rose one row above another up the bowl’s steeply sloping wall was covered with people of every race, as was much of the parkland around them. The lake was full of selkies, and all the way around the crater’s rim high above, hundreds of dragons perched shoulder to shoulder.

As Mark and Talia came out the door, the huge bowl resonated and shook with the cheering and applause of all those assembled, and the ring of dragons above supplied fire and smoke with their roars of approval. Mark and Talia smiled and waved all around as they moved away from the door to clear space for those who followed.

“We are over here!” Kragorram called and waved, his great voice unmistakable above the gradually-quieting roar of the crowd, and Mark waved back. Kragorram and Povon were ensconced on the patio before one of the dragon-

sized pairs of doors on the lowest level of the wall, surrounded by half the Volunteers and a quarter of the Atoning. Equemev and Silaran trotted over to join them.

Once everyone had emerged from the throneroom, Gorsh approached Mark and Talia and held up his arms for silence. He waited for a few moments while the noise barely faded, then cast a quick mass Speaking to everyone present. It was an impressively casual display of prodigious ability, since Mark estimated that there were over half a million people watching.

“Your attention please.” Gorsh called by voice and spell, and his Speaking was of sufficient power to gain him the silence he desired. Yazadril came and stood beside him as he turned to face Mark and Talia. “Hello Talia. Happy birthday Mark.

“Prince Mark, you see assembled around me some one hundred and twenty male elves, all of whom care deeply for my son Bezedil, or Yazadril’s daughter Dalia, or both.” Gorsh sincerely announced. “We are deeply indebted to you for their lives, which you have saved. As a meager token of our deep feelings of gratitude and joy at their return to us, we have chosen to offer you an event of companionship, celebration, and entertainment, which we have provided by organizing a great tournament in your honor. A great tournament deserves a great audience, so you see here assembled on the balconies and above them, and swimming in the lake, those who worked to build the facilities here, as well as many who are your faculty, students, staff, diplomats, and guests. On the floor of the bowl here, along with our group and yours, are leaders and monarchs of the nations of The Just Alliance, together with the young warriors and spell-casters who have been chosen to represent their nations in the tournament, and their trainers and teachers, who will advise them.

“The greatest tournaments are held in Felion, contested for the crowns of empires, and we went there for their advise on the enterprise. They gave us excellent suggestions on how to proceed, and Empress Emeroth of Verzaclon suggested the format for the tournament that we eventually adopted. She spoke of a conversation that she shared with you just after the founding of The Just Alliance, where it was suggested that it would be nice if all the martial races in The Just Alliance were equally represented in the elite forces of Hilia by two from each race, a mated male and female, as your companions in The Six of Hilia represent the races of dragons and unicorns. I believe that you allowed the possibility that you might form such a unit in the future.

“The idea prompted a great deal of spirited debate on the question of fighting beside one’s closest loved one. Would it be a detriment; the danger to the loved one’s life distracting from effective combat, or a benefit; each couple’s love and close relationship motivating them to fight harder for each other than for any others, and with better co-ordination?”

“Perhaps we will shed some light on the question, for today’s tournament will pit young mated couples against other mated couples of their own race, for the completely hypothetical right to represent their race in that non-existent Hilian fighting unit.”

They all shared a bit of a chuckle at that.

“The People of Morning and The Just Draconians know that their races are already well represented in your military by your companions in The Six; mated couples of warriors whose skill is proven, and whose place is guaranteed by their personal friendship and contracted service, so those races will not be represented in this tournament. This is fortunate from an organizational standpoint, since even this arena is far too small for such contests among those mighty peoples!

“Some contestant couples are a warrior and a wizard, each a specialist, but more often they each have some skill in both fields. We have pairs of giants, dwarves, gnomes, gargoyles, and selkies, but there was some question as to how humans and elves should be represented.

“Some said that you two are commanders, and that all of the races should be equally represented among your elite soldiers, and so we will have pairs of humans and elves competing to represent their races.

“Others count you among your forces, and argue that for your races to be equally represented among your elite forces, that is; one of each gender of each race, you should add another couple who are like yourselves in being a human mated with an elf. Though I would never have believed it so common, we actually have eight such couples who are qualified to compete here; six pairs from the empires of Debivin, one from The Stone Islands, and one from Semcel, the port of The Sea People in Kletiuk. Those eight couples will compete amongst themselves.

“For two hours all the competing couples will engage in contests of pure skills that are considered important in the militaries of their races; that is humanoids will compete in archery, swordplay, spellcraft for attack and defense, and so on, while couples of selkies will engage in contests of aquatic combat skills, underwater sabotage, et cetera.

“In the final hour of the tournament, the best four couples from each race will face each other in simulated combat, that is; combat by simulacrums.”

He turned and addressed the delegations. “And now, contestants may proceed to the venue of their first scheduled event. I know you will all compete with great honor. Good fortune to you all.”

He led a round of applause as each race’s contestants and coaches dispersed to the many event sites scattered about the crater floor.

Then he addressed Mark and Talia again, this time without his spell of Speaking. “The contestants arrived here only minutes ago, after completing their warm-ups and final preparations in their own countries, and they have been supplied with the schedule of events. Competition will begin quite shortly.”

He withdrew two small booklets from an inside pocket of his jacket and handed them over. “These are programs, complete with the event schedule, a map of the venues, and the lists of contestants. As scores are posted by each contestant for each skill, they will be listed in the program.

“We’ve planned an efficient route by which to tour the many events, and we would be pleased if you would allow us to conduct you upon such a tour.”

“Thank you Gorsh, and thank you to all of you who’ve helped with all this.” Mark offered as he opened his program.

“It’s a very interesting format you’ve chosen.” Talia commented as a group of the tournament’s organizers began handing out programs to all who wanted them. “Choosing mated couples as contestants, I mean.”

“It is, and I don’t mind telling you that there was an incidental and crucial reason why it was chosen. When we first let it be known that we were planning to hold a tournament in your honor here on Hilia, the response was staggering. Millions of potential contestants inquired into participating, and the sheer logistics of the event were on the verge of becoming unmanageable. However, out of all the world-class wizards and warriors there are, few are also mated to another of such formidable skill, and can prove to have been so mated for at least six months, which was the criteria we finally settled upon. This allowed us to keep the scale of the event within practical limits.

“Now, this would be an opportune time to order refreshments, should any desire to do so before the events begin. Then we’ll move over to the lakeside for the first event on our tour, the Selkie aquatic emplacement competition.”

That event featured the otter-like contestants leaping from the dock wearing a weighted pack, swimming an underwater obstacle course, attaching their pack securely to an anchored wooden plank with adhesives, and swimming back through the obstacle course to the dock, where their elapsed time was recorded. The water was spelled to be almost perfectly transparent and waveless, and Mark and Talia cheered them all on, fully aware of the deadly effectiveness of the mine-laying techniques that were demonstrated.

Most of the events the gargoyles contested involved flight, and every race except the selkies had at least one such event, so the air in the crater and above it was the site of many impressive displays of skill.

The next two hours passed quickly as they strolled about the parkland, watching the events, enjoying casual and interesting conversation, and meeting some of the contestants and rulers of nations.

At the end of that time, scores were tallied and posted, and the best four couples in each category were announced.

“Cousin Dren and his mate made the semi-finals, and I didn’t even realize he was competing!” Mark noticed. “They placed third! I take it that he avoided saying that this was the tournament he was looking forward to attending, in order to not spoil the surprise of it.”

“That’s so.” his grandmother nodded. “He and his girlfriend Mandri have been dating for about nine months. Still no announcement of an engagement, however. She’s his platoon’s battle wizard, and a fierce little firecracker of a girl as well.”

“Dren didn’t want his relationship to Mark to be known, so as to not affect the objectivity of the judging.” Wittan said. “He and the rest of us from Finitra have carefully avoided mentioning it for that reason, for which he also registered as Dren Finiak, Finiak being his middle name. Now that the judged events are finished, he has revealed his surname.”

“Wise thinking.” Nemia said.

“What is ‘combat by simulacrum?’” Tilfi asked.

“Each contestant will be deeply Read by a circle of Shiganzhu Battle Wizards, who are supplying the service and are expert at the spell.” Gorsh explained. “When it is cast upon a contestant, their consciousness will be projected into an exact Illusion of themselves. Their senses will be unable to discern that they are not within their own bodies, which will appear to be sleeping. Though the simulacrums and their equipment are Illusions, their blows, missiles and spells affect each other exactly as they would in true combat, and are perceived by the contestants as real, without truly endangering them, or the audience, or the facilities. Even such sensations as fatigue will be faithfully reproduced, and those who can finish their semi-final bouts quickly will have the advantage of being less fatigued in the final, exactly

as they would in true combat. They can also use simulacrum of any mundane or magically spelled weapons, items, or armor, provided they truly own such an item and have used it often enough to be completely familiar with it.”

“What a brilliant idea!” Tilfi marveled.

“I cannot help but agree.” Yazadril smiled. “Some of our newest elite soldiers are finding it to be a very useful training tool as well. A very difficult spell though, requiring several Master-class wizards to cast it.”

“Is it to be a simulation, or a game?” Alilia asked.

“How do you mean?” Gorsh replied.

“If it is a simulation, they must behave as if their combat here is real, including being sure that their struggle does not endanger any of the many innocents spectating here. If it is a game, they can take cover behind the crowd, since no one will be endangered by it.”

“Ah. Neither of those is exactly the case.” Gorsh said. “While in the simulacrum, they will not perceive incidental persons, to reduce the complexity of the spell. So far as they will be able to tell, there will be no-one here during the match except their partner and their opponents, though they will perceive the facilities and physical objects, and can use those for cover. The semi-finals will be held in two sets; all the pairs who placed second in the skills competitions will face the third placed pairs simultaneously, and the contestants of each bout will not even perceive those who fight in other bouts right beside them, though we will see them all.

“Then first place finishers will face those who placed fourth in the next semi-final set. Time permitting after that, the final matches will be held sequentially, as each will surely deserve our undivided attention.

“One moment.”

Gorsh cast his mass Speaking again, and held up his hand.

“Congratulations to all of you who have advanced to the final rounds of the tournament. Condolences to those who did not, who have our gratitude for the fine quality of your efforts. Even those with the lowest scores displayed championship skill, and the differences between the highest and lowest aggregate scores was very slight, ranging from an eight percent spread among the Kleti, to only three percent separating first and last among the Bojudai.

“As we conduct the first half of the semi-finals, I ask all of you who are watching to control your natural reactions to the illusory combat that will be taking place all around you. None of it can harm you in the slightest, but it can startle you and block your vision. If a huge illusory fireball explodes around you, for instance, do not let it startle you into misstepping so severely that you fall over your balcony’s railing, which the illusion may be obscuring from your view. If simulacrum fight quite close to you, please move as much as is practical to prevent blocking the view of other spectators.

“Contestants, you may begin when ready.”

A quartet of gnomes immediately appeared in the air above, all marked by the subtle blue glow that was commonly used to indicate spellcraft to observers, flying with the agility of sparrows, spells flashing and blasting and crackling. Their appearance was greeted by a huge roar of cheering and exclamation from the audience.

Then four dwarves began their combat near the edge of the crater floor, two of them taking cover behind a marble fountain as the other pair took to the air amidst an exchange of arrows and spells. The pair on the ground were passing like ghosts through the spectators, who hurried to get out of their way with a series of outcries.

Then there were combatants in every part of the arena and the air within it as the other six matches commenced. Four of the bouts were over within seconds, and Mark missed most of those while trying to spot his cousin Dren’s match, which he failed to do.

“I’m glad their wounds glow red instead of bleeding.” Bezedil commented as he watched a match among giants that had closed to sword work, blows, and contact spells. “Some of this would be rather gory the other way.”

“To us, their wounds glow red, but to them, they bleed, their guts spill and their bones break.” Gorsh stated, his eyes locked to the same match, since it was taking place within ten meters. “And their pain is as terrible as it would be from real wounds. Thus it is a true test of their mettle when faced with bloody battle.”

“By the source!” Dalia exclaimed. “Do they fight to the death?”

“To their *simulated* deaths.” Yazadril chuckled. “Unless they surrender, or are rendered unconscious or otherwise incapacitated. If one of those happen, the simulacrum spell is ended.”

“Don’t look so shocked, my love!” Nemia teased as she hugged Dalia with one arm. “Your sister faced true battle and real blood just this morning. Better for these that theirs is simulated.”

“It was disgusting.” Mark quietly rumbled. “Using GrimFang against those dwarves... Afterward I looked at Talia, and looked down at myself. We were covered in blood and offal like we’d been swimming in it. She spelled us clean a moment later, but I’ll never forget that.”

“I never thought to shield us against splashing blood.” Talia said with a bit of a shudder. “I’ll never make that mistake again.”

One of the male giants was taken out by a poisoning spell and disappeared, and his mate flew into a rage. She charged her opponents with berserker fury and struck them down with four mighty blows of her sword, even as her face was half burnt away by magical fire. Her opponents vanished, and she raised her sword high with an awful scream of rage and pain and victory, then she was gone as well.

Mark was shocked to his core when he, Talia, and most who were close to them were splashed with cool water by a Selkie bearing a short sword who leaped out of the water and onto the shore closest to them in an eruption of spray. A fraction of a second later another followed with another splash, and immediately stabbed the first in the back with a slim barbed lance. The defeated Selkie vanished, and the victor had time to bow in the direction of Mark’s party before his simulacrum ended.

“How do they make the water splash, when they’re not really there?” Mark wondered.

“The interactions of a swimming Selkie with the water are too complex for Shiganzhu wizards to reproduce accurately.” Yazadril informed him. “So they augment the Selkies’ simulacrums with physical reality constructed of shaped Force while they are in the water. Quite clever of them, actually. And of course the wizards have the capacity available to do this because Selkies use the least magic of any race, so reproducing it in the simulacrums is a light load.”

There remained only one bout still being contested. Two gargoyles flew around each other as they jousting with spears, their mates already fallen. For six long and exciting minutes they failed to make a decisive strike, then one forced the other to fly into a balcony railing at high speed, ending the match.

“That was skillfully done.” a man said to Mark’s left.

Mark turned to see that it was his cousin Dren, accompanied by a slim blond girl who lacked only pointed ears to pass for an elf, being just under a meter and a half tall with delicate features and hazel eyes. “There you are! I tried to watch for your match, but I missed it. How did it go?”

“We won.” Dren grinned. “We’re at leisure until the second set of semi-finals is done, so I thought this would be a good time to introduce you. Mandri, I present my cousin Mark and his wife Talia. Mark, Talia, I’m pleased to present my true love Mandri. Since she was almost exclusively responsible for our victory, I’ll let her tell you what happened.”

“It was easy.” Mandri grinned. “I used an invisibility spell on us, and a spell that cloaks magic, so they couldn’t detect us without casting spells specifically to find us. I had ours cast already, just waiting to be triggered by the simulacrum spell. So when our opponents’ simulacrums appeared and they didn’t see us, they assumed for a moment that our simulacrum spells were simply a bit slower in the casting, just as we hoped. We knew we had enough power in our swords to penetrate their Shields if we used hard, fast, straight thrusts, so we just tip-toed over and stabbed them. It was Dren’s idea, so really, he deserves the credit. That kind of thing only works once, and then word gets around about it, but a victory’s a victory.”

“Well congratulations!” Mark told her as he carefully shook her tiny hand. “Would those be Ashrab’s Amazing Aura of Invisibility, and Poshta’s Power Cloak? We just learned those from Emperor Osbald a few minutes ago.”

“Yes they would, actually!”

“Human spells have the most interesting names, by far.” Mark chuckled. “The basic elven illusion spell is simply called Illusion, but it’s human counterpart is called Boffrin’s Befuddling Visual Deception. Quite a different mindset to them as well, compared to elven spells. Funny that I know a great deal of elven magic of both kinds, a few draconian spells, even the unicorn version of Movement, yet I didn’t know any human spells until just a couple of hours ago, and I still haven’t cast any of them yet.”

“You’ve had a unique education.” Mandri told him admiringly. “And a shockingly quick one, from what I know of it. I’ve seen the Revealing of your battle this morning, and that was some amazing work.”

“Thank you.” Mark nodded.

“The second set of semi-finals is about to begin.” Gorsh told them.

A moment later all eight bouts started simultaneously, and the crowd roared anew. These matches were finished even faster than the first set, for only the gnomes’ match lasted longer than eight seconds, and it was done in less than a minute.

“As I expected.” Dren nodded, checking the results in his program. “Five of the eight teams who came second at the skills defeated their third-placed opponents, but all eight couples who placed first were victorious over those who finished fourth. Only the gnome pair had trouble with it, reflecting the closeness of their scores.”

“We have to go.” Mandri said. “The final matches will begin soon.”

“Good fortune.” Talia smiled as she exchanged handclasps and polite kisses on the cheek with the girl.

“They might need it.” the elder Mark commented with a worried look when the two were out of earshot. “The two they face are with a Thon division known as The Fist of The Empire. It’s a reward posting for the best they’ve got, and they’re under the direct command of Osbald himself. They’ll know as many elvish spells as human, and I doubt Dren and Mandri are very familiar with those. They’ll make a good fight of it either way, that’s certain.”

“It is time.” Gorsh stated, and cast his Speaking.

“It is now time to decide the victors of this tournament, which has truly been eight tournaments.” he announced. “The order of the final matches was decided by the total elapsed times of the semi-final matches. The two couples of the Kwetkerthok required the most combined time to achieve their semi-final victories, and they will face each other in the first final match. The pairs of elves had the quickest victories, and they will be rewarded for this by having the most time to study their opponents and to plan tactics, since their match will be the last one to be contested. All of the final matches will begin at the center of the arena except the Selkie final, which will begin at the end of the dock. There will be a one minute interval between each match.

“Finalists of the Kwetkerthok, take your places.”

A space a thirty meters wide had been cleared at the center of the crater floor, and on either side of that stood a circle of giant wizards. A pair of gargoyles sat cross-legged on the grass within each circle of giants, and nodded their readiness.

“Begin!” Gorsh called, and the gargoyles slumped into unconsciousness as their illusory selves appeared in the clearing, and the huge crowd of spectators roared louder than ever.

One pair immediately leaped into flight, but the other held their ground and threw magically accelerated war darts as fast as they could pull them out of their packs, and the two flyers were shot down before they’d gained three meters of air.

The gnomes’ final followed, and both pairs of small folk shot into the air as soon as it began and charged one another at high speed as they launched a barrage of spells. The female of one pair was killed by a Concussion as both members of the other team were wounded by Force bolts, then the felled female’s mate slammed into his weakened opponents in mid-air, breaking one’s neck with a kick while stabbing the other in the torso with a slim dagger he wielded like a saber. That stab wasn’t lethal, but the next one finished the match an instant later.

The Selkies were next, and as they took their places within the circles of wizards, Yazadril commented on their upcoming match.

“The larger pair are the better fighters, and will try to keep the contest on the dock. The smaller two are better swimmers, and will strive to bring the fight into the water.”

As he predicted, the smaller pair leaped off the dock immediately, but the female was spitted by a thrown javelin before she struck the water. Her mate’s slight edge in aquatic agility was not enough to prevent him from being overwhelmed by the larger pair when they caught him at the bottom of the lake and attacked him with short swords. When he disappeared they had time to shoot to the surface and leap clear of the water in matching graceful arcs, and their simulacrum ended just before they would have entered the water again.

The two couples in the giants’ final exchanged spectacular barrages as soon as they appeared. On one side the female cast spells in quick succession, while the male shot two meter arrows from his giant longbow, and the arrows exploded on impact with shocking loudness. Both members of the other team cast spells, but their Shields were soon overwhelmed and an explosive arrow sent them both careening wildly through the air, to land crumpled and defeated.

When the dwarves’ final began, one couple took to the air, and the female cast Firebolt spells while the male threw javelins that impacted with a loud crackle and a bright momentary arc of electricity. The other pair remained on the ground and on the defensive as the female Shielded against the Firebolts, and the male skillfully deflected the javelins with two small steel shields strapped to his fore-arms, oblivious to their crackling discharge. When the javelin thrower had cast all six of his missiles, the male on the ground brandished his axe and yelled defiantly at the pair in the air.

“Does anyone know what he’s saying?” Mark asked.

Yazadril answered. “He says; ‘We fear not your magic! If you wish to defeat us, you will have to come down here and taste my axe!’ His mate appears to be a defensive specialist, and she could likely hold that Shield for a week.”

The pair in the air made a diving attack, the female bracing her spear as the male drew a spiked war-hammer, but as they closed with their opponents they ran into a wall of invisible Force, crumpling and injuring them both, and the axe-wielder dispatched them with two quick swings.

When the human finalists took their places, the tension among Mark's family increased noticeably as their eyes followed Dren and Mandri into their circle.

Their fight lasted only an instant, for almost as soon as the contestants appeared in the clearing, Mandri felled her male opponent with an intense beam of power that gave off violet light, then she and Dren vanished. Even as her female opponent was raising her arms in victory, Mandri came out of the simulacrum spell cursing loud enough to be heard all over the arena, though she ceased her tirade when Dren wrapped her in a consoling hug.

"What happened?" Wittan asked. "Did anyone see why they lost?"

"I will check." Gorsh said, and cast a quick Speaking to the senior Shiganzhu Battle Wizard.

"Dren and Mandri were felled by a spell known as Karbak's Needle, by which the caster's entire reserve of available power can be cast as fast-moving Force that is concentrated on an area no larger than the cross-section of a hair. As the name implies, this virtual needle of Force is able to penetrate most shielding both magic and mundane, and upon reaching the soft interior of the body of the foe, it expands to sufficient diameter to inflict fatal damage. A very difficult spell to cast, but even more difficult to defend against."

"I see." Wittan nodded, his disappointment for his son evident on his face.

"Here's an interesting match up!" Alilia commented as the mixed couples of an elf and a human took their places. "I know of the two elves, and in both cases I'm very surprised to see that their mates are human! That dark-haired fellow is Dulyamil, the leader of the elven criminals of the plains of Debivin! I suppose he must have reformed himself and sworn Osbald's Oath, or he'd never have made it past the Wards, or Relgemit's security forces for that matter."

Dulyamil was the heftiest elf Mark had ever seen. At a hundred and sixty-seven centimeters tall, he must have weighed eighty kilograms, most of it in the form of hard and well-shaped muscle. His human mate likely weighed nearly the same, as she was over a hundred eighty-five centimeters tall, and looked as fit as anyone Mark had ever seen. She had her long light-red hair tied back in a ponytail, and both of them wore simple sleeveless white tunics, though that was no indication of how they might choose to be clad as simulacrams.

"You may recognize the female on the other team, though she looks much different in her armor." Alilia continued. "She is Vinya, daughter of Prince Binyacim of The Stone Islands, and she was chosen as one of your bridesmaids for being one of the most powerful wizards of the elven race. As for her mate, if I had not been told he was human I would assume he was an elf. He must be less than a meter and a half tall and lighter than Bezedil, and with his helmet over his ears, who could tell?"

The match began, and was spectacular. It was very apparent that far more magic was cast in this final than in any preceding bout. All four were obviously expert and powerful wizards, and all four used short range Translocations, something that had not been done in previous matches. The maelstrom was impossible to follow as it happened, a storm of fire and thunder, heat and cold, light and lightning, cast from and toward every corner of the arena. The din of battle ended twenty-three seconds later, and when the smoke had cleared, the simulacrams of Vinya and her mate were gone, while Dulyamil and his mate stood unscathed and victorious. Surprisingly, their simulacrams were wearing no more than the white tunics they'd dressed their physical selves in.

Like most of those around him, Mark couldn't help but cheer and applaud their triumph a bit more enthusiastically than he had some of the others. "Wow! That was really something!"

"I'll say! My ears are still ringing!" Talia laughingly agreed as she rubbed an ear.

"The winners never took a scratch in all that!" Nemias enthused. "I'd never have believed that if I hadn't seen it!"

The enthusiastic recounting of what each person had seen happening in that match continued until the contestants in the last match took their places within the circles of Shiganzhu wizards. The elven final featured two pale sandy-haired mountain elves of The Lava Shapers of Xervia, versus two dark tropical elves from The People of Rain in Felion.

Theirs was the strangest match of the day. The four simulacrams appeared, one couple on each side of the central clearing, and initially none of them did anything at all. They stood absolutely still beyond a slow turning of their heads from side to side, their eyes closed.

Dren and Mandri rejoined them then, and Mandri noticed the puzzlement on Mark's face, so she explained what was happening. "Both pairs have done what we did in our semi-final, and made themselves as undetectable as possible. And you can bet those elves are even better at it than I was. Of course we can still see them, since they're only simulacrams. Now it's a chess match. They could cast powerful spells to detect the other team, but those spells would themselves be detected as they were cast. Likewise if they use too much power to hide themselves. So it's a contest of subtleties. The less power they expend, the less likely they are to be detected, but the harder it is to detect the other team."

Then the tropical female opened her eyes and cast a Fireball directly across the clearing. The two Lava Shapers quickly turned their backs to it while crouching, hunching, and covering their faces with their arms. They were caught in the edge of the blast, their backs began glowing bright red, and they shuddered and squirmed a bit from the pain they were feeling, which must have been intense.

“Those two Xervians are in trouble.” Alilia pronounced. “I think their attacker was just guessing that they would have appeared directly across the clearing, but it was a good guess. Thus she cast Fireball, which is slow for an attack spell but affects a large area. Now, she is correctly gambling that she has scored, and she and her partner are putting more power into their search.

“If the Xervians make so much as a peep, or any large sudden movements, they will quickly be detected and defeated, but they are displaying formidable determination and self-control. It required incredible discipline to not flee the Fireball by magical means, or to Shield against it, which would have betrayed their position. They must be suffering from a great deal of pain, but if they can remain silent and still long enough to Heal sufficiently to make a strike, they have a chance. The Rain pair are showing a moderate amount of power, and they have failed to move from the location they cast the fireball from.

The tableau held for over a minute, during which the crowd yelled and cheered and called instructions to their favorites, none of which was audible to the contestants. Then the pair from the People of Rain slowly rose a few centimeters clear of the grass, and gently drifted to their left.

“A smart move.” Yazadril commented. “The power use of that minor Levitation would be hard to find behind the detection and hiding spells they’re casting. Certainly less detectable than leaving footprints in the grass. And the Xervians appear half-healed already.”

He’d no sooner finished speaking when the pair who’d been burned suddenly turned and straightened and cast a spell that showed as an expanding cone of pink light, targeting the point of origin of the fireball. Their targets had only drifted a meter from that position, and the pink spell was almost instantaneously effective, allowing no time to make a response, as well as being six meters wide when it reached them. The Felion elves were consumed by it, and their simulacrum ended.

The crowd erupted as the tension of the match was released.

“That was bravely won!” Mark called as he added his applause to the rest as the victors shakily rose and bowed to the crowd in each of the cardinal directions.

Corsh let the noise gradually diminish before he again raised his arms and cast his Speaking. “Congratulations, to all our winners! We will conduct an awards ceremony in a few minutes, and...”

“One moment.” Dulyamil called as he and his mate approached, having cast his own Speaking so that he was heard by all.

“What can we do for you, former Prince of Thieves?” Yazadril drolly asked.

“We have yet to determine an answer to the question of whether it would be better for Hilia to recruit a pair of elves and a pair of humans, or whether Prince Mark and Princess Talia would be better served by maintaining a more perfect racial balance among their forces by recruiting another mixed-race pair such as themselves. Meri and I believe the latter to be the case, and to demonstrate the truth of our conviction, we propose to challenge the winners of the human and elven competitions. Simultaneously.”

“You two would fight all four of them at once?!” Mark asked in surprise.

“Exactly, your majesty.” The muscular elf grinned cockily and bowed again.

“Well first of all, this entire racial balance issue is a bit moot, since after today, I have to consider all the elves under my command to be as elite as warriors as I am.” Mark grinned in return. “If anyone thinks the spells they cast half-way around the world were any easier work than what I did, they’re wrong. And we’re not in a position to recruit sixteen hundred and eighty-one fighters from each race in order to achieve racial balance in our forces. But since this is all hypothetical anyway, if they’re willing to accept your challenge, I’ll admit I’m curious to see how it goes.”

By this time the human couple from Thon and the Lava Shaper elves had made their way over.

“You’ll have to pardon my saying,” the human male abruptly addressed Dulyamil, “But your win in your final didn’t appear exactly effortless! What makes you think you can beat us and these fine elves as well?”

“We were holding back, that the contest would be challenging.” Dulyamil casually admitted. “Thus we fought with no weapon, armor, or spelled item, instead relying on our wizardry alone, though our opponents were brave, skilled, powerful, and equipped with a small arsenal.”

“Bah! There is no motivation for us to accept your challenge!” the female elven champion declared. “If you lose, we gain no honor or pride from a victory where we outnumber you two to one! And if you should somehow win, we are humiliated as we could never be by a loss in an even contest!”

“We will wager our unquestioning service for a year, and our entire worth, which presently equals just over one billion gold Kuth Nikmarks in funds, properties and enterprises, against nothing more than your pride and honor.” Meri coolly stated.

Dulyamil glanced up at his tall blond mate with a raised eyebrow and a slight smile of surprise, then nodded in agreement. “Of course. One would think that to be sufficient motivation to accept our challenge.”

“We don’t need more wealth than we have, nor am I certain I’d wish to associate with you, even to the extent of directing you in our service.” the Thon woman declared. “On the other hand, I’d like to beat your silly ass, just to remove your smug expression. And meaning no offense to these fine elves, but we won’t need their help to do it. We’ll accept your challenge on an even basis, and you can keep your service and worth.”

“Ah. This is not going as I’d hoped.” Dulyamil said as he lost his smile, and bowed respectfully to the woman. “It is not our intent to offend you, or to disrespect you in any manner. And I’ll admit that the point of Hilian military racial equality is merely an excuse. We merely hope to prove our full worth as warriors by this exercise, and to demonstrate a few of the more impressive tools we own. We do this to convince our hosts of our value, for we truly do hope that they will acquiesce to our request to join their ranks. All four of you are fine people and great warriors, whom we would be glad to have at our backs in any battle, but if we strive against you with our utmost effort and all of our available resources, you will need to co-operate as a quartet while fighting at the limits of your skill and power in order to have an even chance of defeating us.”

“Well that’s some sweet talk, but your girlfriend here sure looks like she’s taking it a damn sight more personally than that!”

“I apologize.” Meri gritted. “I have anger, but it is not directed at you. We have been insulted by those who have said that our category was an easy one, since only eight couples entered. It has been insinuated that we are therefore less worthy of respect than the winners of the other competitions. Dulyamil is not bothered by this, but I am of a more sensitive type, though I do share his motivations in this as well. A week ago I’d have repaid those critics with a few well-placed bruises, but we’ve since sworn the vow of justice, so now I must be contest with silencing them with a decisive victory in this challenge.” She held up her hand, showing her rings. “And I am Dulyamil’s wife. I am not his girlfriend.” she finished with a frosty glare.

“Now hold on here, let’s keep things civil.” Mark rumbled as the Thonian drew breath for a retort. “Yazadril, what do you think? Is all as it seems, and do these two really have a chance against the other four at once?”

Yazadril hummed an intricate series of notes for five seconds as he took a fairly quick Reading of all six potential contestants. “They speak the truth, concerning both their motivations and their prowess. They feel no disrespect for these four, beyond Meri being a bit miffed at that girlfriend remark. And in my opinion, which is as qualified as any, they are correct in their estimation of the outcome. The four would need to fight hard and co-operatively to have an even chance of victory, and if they achieve it, none would dare say that it was not a worthy challenge to do so.”

“Well there you have it.” Mark nodded. “Now that that’s established, there’s no need for the challenge. I want you all to know that this has been great fun, I’ve enjoyed every minute of this tournament. And before we proceed with the awards ceremony, I’ll have you know that we have room in our military for sixty-four more fighters at least. If any of the couples who were semi-finalists or finalists wish to join our forces, we’d be delighted to have such excellent additions to our ranks, and you can report to Commander Relgemit after the awards ceremony. Provided you have permission to do so from your present commanding officers of course, if you’re presently serving elsewhere. I don’t know if we have positions available for any other contestants who didn’t make the semis, but if any of the rest of you would like to join, please inquire tomorrow with First Minister Sheramiv.

“Now why don’t you six exchange some mutual congratulations at your success, and we’ll move on to the celebrating part of the tournament!”

Dulyamil and Meri looked disappointed at being unable to further display their prowess, until Talia remarked to them; “For a real challenge, remember that you’re in the Hilian forces now. We’ll see how you do in training exercises against Kragorram and Povon in the days ahead.”

Meri’s eyebrows rose, and she turned to her husband with a bit of a smile. “My love, I believe we have been successfully rebuked.”

“Yes. Perhaps we have been a bit arrogant, when looked at in that light.” he agreed with a sheepish grin.

“Well, I apologize for the girlfriend remark.” their antagonist said as she offered her hand. “And congratulations on your win and your recruitment.”

“Thank you!”

Mark was distracted from that by Gorsh, who opened the case he was handed by another elf as he announced; “The trophies.”, and displayed sixteen gold badges in the form of the sword-star of Hilia, nestled on dark blue silk.

“Each engraved on the reverse with the names and nations of the champions, as well as the particulars of their victory at this tournament.

“Would you care to make the presentations, Your Majesty?”

“Certainly, if Her Majesty will join me in doing so?” he asked of Talia.

“Certainly!” she laughed as she took his hand and kissed it.

“Aren’t I supposed to do that?” he chuckled.

“You are, and so am I.” she giggled.

“I will remember that.” he nodded and grinned as he kissed her hand in return.

Most of the hillock was cleared for the presentations, and Gorsh called for the winners of the Kwetkerthok competition to attend.

As that pair slowly flew over, grinning wide enough to reveal all of their stony gray teeth and waving to the cheering crowd, Mark asked of Gorsh; “Do we just hand these to them, or are we supposed to pin them on somehow?”

“I suggest you hand them, so that they may admire the design and read the back. If they wish to wear them upon their chest, they can be pressed on, and the back of the medal will adhere to them.”

The two gargoyles landed and bowed ornately with sweeping swirls of their wings. As they were handed their awards, the monarchs of Hilia bowed to them, and smiled, and offered their congratulations, as the crowd roared their approval. “Thank you Your Majesties.” The female offered for both of them, and they politely backed up four paces before turning and flying back to their places.

The eight pairs of awards were soon distributed to the champions, and then Gorsh addressed the assembly one last time.

“Thus ends our tournament, held in honor of Prince Mark. We hope that all have enjoyed the amazing displays of ability as much as we have. To you of our audience, thank you for attending. To you who participated, thank you for competing.”

“Yes, thank you so much!” Mark grinned as he and Talia waved all around.

Finally people began to leave, while many on the balconies came down to the floor of the bowl to join the dancing, carousing and celebrating that was beginning there.

“Gorsh, Yazadril, all of you beloved of Dalia and Bezedil, I am indeed honored by the wondrous event you’ve produced.” Mark told them sincerely. “As I’ve said, I really enjoyed it, it’s been as much fun as pretty much anything I’ve done, and I’ve really enjoyed your company as well. As a way of saying thanks for Dalia and Bezedil’s well being, I couldn’t think of a better one. Thank you.”

“You are most welcome.” Gorsh smiled.

“Still, I bet it wasn’t as much fun as the thanks the girls give you!” Bezedil chuckled, and many joined his humor as Mark blushed bright red.

“A small party of us are off to Focus Mountain, to see the new facilities there.” Talia announced. “We’ll meet the rest of you out by the cottage in a few minutes. Bye for now.”

With that, she triggered a co-operative group Translocation, and they appeared in the late afternoon sun, high above the blue bowl, which Mark immediately realized was now a perfectly smooth and symmetrical concave lens.

He took over his own Levitation from Talia and drifted over a few meters, seeking the focus by feel.

“Careful!” Grakonexikaldoron sharply cautioned, just as Mark yelled.

“AH! Damn!” he exclaimed as he suddenly backed up. “That’s intense!”

“We thought it might be.” she nodded, with a gravely snicker. “Here is a spell that should allow you to see the raw form of your power.”

“Thanks.” he nodded as he and Talia considered the spell for a moment, then Mark cast it. Suddenly he could see the sunlight as bright blue, and he could see the more intense blue light reflected from the bowl like two sections of cones with their points touching at the focus, where it was so bright it was hard to look at.

“We suggest you start in the narrow part of the upper cone of light, and explore moving toward the focus with great caution, for it is now tightly focused indeed!”

“Please postpone that.” Somonik requested, and Mark saw that the ancient white was sporting a new sword, one almost as impressive as Kragorram’s. “We are gathered, all who were present when the gods spoke to us except the Eldest, and we can speak freely here. We meet to share what has been learned during our researches into the nature of divinity. We should be quick about it, if we may.”

“It can be stated pretty simply.” Dalia said, a bit cautious in speaking before the group. “What little the sources all agree on that is, so we can trust it with fair certainty, such as it is.

“The process of becoming a god comes in waves of power and understanding. It can start with either one, but a candidate, that is anyone with the potential to do this, will reach a crucial understanding or gain a crucial power. It is never the same; each god finds their own first power or first great understanding. It can take a very long time to find that first crucial trigger, or it can happen suddenly by accident. Then one leads to the other in accelerating waves. That is, the crucial understanding is knowing how to gather power, and the crucial power is used to gather more information, knowledge, and understanding, which leads to more power, which leads to more understanding, over and over, faster and faster, until suddenly you’re a god. And that’s it. Sorry if I didn’t phrase it that eloquently. I’d have done better in Elvish.”

“You have imparted the knowledge with clarity. Thank you.” Somonik told her kindly. “I must go and attend to my schedule. I caution you again, speak of this only with each other, and guard your words and thoughts. If we do discover the secret of gaining divinity, we may not wish it to be widely known. We will speak again at the meeting of The Just Alliance in a few hours.

“Before I go, I will say; happy birthday, Mark. Your group was brilliant in battle today. Farewell till later.” he concluded, and then he was gone, as was Tithian, with a quick and wordless psionic farewell.

There was a moment of silence.

“Well Gran, I have to thank you for this wonderful work here.” Mark said as he slowly rose six meters, then drifted into the cone of blue light. “Even here it’s far more intense than the focus used to be, and I’m six meters above it!”

“Excellent.” The gold dragon nodded, lazily waving her wings against the breeze. “We would very much like you to return here when it is night. You may be able to detect which stars are sources of magic, by their reflection in the bowl. Meantime, when you have refreshed yourself in the reflection, we will see the new installation on the north rim.”

Mark ever so slowly descended toward the focus, coming within two and a half meters of it over the next minute before the sudden sweat on his brow warned him that he was becoming saturated.

“That is really intense!” he stated as he flew to the side, out of the reflection. “When you get that close to the focus, you lose the pleasurable aspect of the sensation, like a nice hot bath that gets too hot. Or rather I do, I guess.”

“As we suspected. Such is also the case for us, when using reflectors to concentrate the Source of conventional magic.”

“Let’s take a quick look at the new building and go back.” Talia proposed. “Mark’s youngest relatives will be ready to fall asleep at any time, and their parents will want to take them home to bed soon.”

“Ah. That being the case, why not save seeing the facility here for another day?” Gran proposed. “You’ve already seen monumental unveilings today, including the finished reflector, and there’s a great deal to see in the installation.”

“I’ll go with that plan, I think.” Mark nodded. “Are you all coming back to Hilia for the rest of my birthday party?”

“We are.”

“Well then, I guess we’re off!”

“We’ll get the transport this time.” Yazadril offered, and he and Nemia together cast the group’s Translocation.

They arrived in the air above the largest of the cottage’s lawns and then landed on it, a location chosen to allow all of them to gather around and speak together, including the dragons, which would have been difficult on the patio. Mark’s family rose from the patio and ambled down to join them as a few of the Atoning Levitated the light tables and chairs along behind them.

Mark grinned to see his Finitran family fully mingled with his new family and most of his new friends.

“So by the way, Mark, Talia.” Yazadril opened as they all settled comfortably. “I have a few quick questions from an Inspector Rayn that I’d like to pass on, if I may.”

“Sure.”

“He’s sure you only cast one spell of Speaking before you went to Felion to fight, and that was to Overlord Senchak. How then did you plan the battle with the others here of the Six and your elven Battle Wizards?”

Most of the Volunteers preened with pride at being called Battle Wizards by him.

“You don’t have to cast a Speaking to talk with Povon.” Mark grinned. “You just have to think real hard about her and her name, and she hears you. Then we all Linked through her.”

“I certainly hear it when it’s you two and Ria doing the calling as a Linked trio!” Povon chortled.

“I see.” Yazadril smiled. “And some experienced spell casters have stated that you could not possibly have cast as many spells as you did during the second wave’s attack, considering the short duration of time involved and the sword work you were performing simultaneously.”

“True. I cast some, the blessing we’ve made from the curse cast some automatically, of course Ria was casting a lot and I may have been mistakenly given credit for some of those, and contrary to comments I’ve heard about the dwarves’ analysis of the battle, Talia and the elves here did more than provide defense, they cast some attack spells too.”

“I see. And finally, having discovered such innovative and effective tactics, why did you decide to allow the release of such a detailed analysis as the Kleti Revealing to the public, knowing that your enemies are likely to be studying it closely?”

“Ah. Well, the Kleti analysis was accurate about the gist of events, but it only identified the most common of the spells we used, and it was wrong about enough of the details to be of limited use to the enemy. And as far as our military potential is concerned, what we did today was our baby steps. I doubt we’ll do much of that again. We’ll have far more effective tactics next time.”

“Perhaps. You certainly broke new ground with your baby steps. Fighting as such a deeply Linked unit is new, as is anticipating your enemies’ Translocations.”

“Well, we will do those again, but they’re hard to copy or counteract, and they were both obvious to any observer anyway.”

“True.”

“Perhaps you’d do me a favor in return, Yazadril?”

“Oh? What is it?”

“I’m becoming very fond of all the elves who’ve been helping us, including the Atoning. Among other things that have brought us together, we were all in each other’s minds today as we fought for our lives, and that’s a special bond. I think what the Atoning did to me at our wedding was a safety violation, not a crime, since they intended no harm, and what happened was not what they intended. I think that their vow of lifelong service to me is far more atonement than they deserve, especially considering what lifelong service can be with an elven lifespan. Yet they have the unknown eventual judgment of The Council of The High People hanging over them like a sword above their necks.

“I’m asking you and The Council of The High People to end the threat against my people, by showing mercy or by any other means you might consider. In any case and however they may judge, I ask that a decision be made quickly, not only as a mercy in itself, but so that my staff are no longer distracted by this possible impending doom. I ask this as a friend to you and to The High People, and to the Atoning, who are my people. I also ask it as Prince of Hilia, but I want it clearly understood that I do *not* ask it as Key to The Just Alliance, nor even suggest it as such. This is a matter between us, and doesn’t involve the alliance.”

“I also ask this, most sincerely and humbly,” Talia added, “As a person who appeals to the goodness in the hearts of The High People’s council, and as Princess of Hilia.”

“I see.” Yazadril nodded thoughtfully. “And I agree with you, and I will tell them so, in addition to conveying your words verbatim. Though I am not one of those charged with deciding the case, since I am too close to it. One moment.”

He effortlessly cast a multiple Speaking around the world to The Nine Valleys, and ended it a few seconds later. “They’ll get back to me shortly. A few had gone to bed already.” he snickered.

“I must say that your request is wise rulership.” he continued. “As was preventing that uneven challenge earlier. It was unlikely it could have gone ahead without resulting in hurt feelings at the very least.”

“That’s what I thought.” Mark nodded.

“We should have won that damn match!” Mandri suddenly stated.

“Oh? How so?” Talia asked.

“I blasted the wrong one out of nervousness, like an amateur!” Mandri revealed in exasperation. “I was supposed to blast the woman, who’s their primary wizard! My bolt was a lot faster than her needle spell, and if I’d taken her instead of her husband, we’d have beaten him easily after that!”

“My condolences.” Talia smiled. “I’m sure we all make fewer such mistakes as we gain more experience.”

“I know, and I appreciate your saying, but it still frustrates the socks off me!”

“Are you one of those who’d like to fight for Hilia?”

“No thank you! I mean I’m sure it’d be great, and this would be a wonderful place to live, but we could never give up our life in Finitra, or the closeness of our families and our friends in our platoon.”

“Of course.” Talia smiled. “I’d never have moved away from The Nine Valleys if I couldn’t Translocate back there at any moment.”

“The Council of The High People has reached a decision.” Yazadril announced.

“Just a moment Yazadril.” Mark asked. “Sheramiv, gather the Atoning. I’m sure they’ll all want to hear this.”

In less than a minute over fifteen hundred of them had arrived, half via the Plane door at the edge of the patio.

“All of the Atoning who will attend are here.” Sheramiv announced. “The rest are listening via my Speaking.”

“In the matter of those who cast Compulsion upon Markhan Reginus Longstrider the Fifth within Laylas chapel four days ago. You all stand convicted of gross negligence and misuse of wizardry, as well as being publicly forsworn of your vow of invitation to the wedding. You are hereby remanded for sentencing to the custody of Prince Mark of Hilia, may his judgment be merciful upon you. Beyond that, you are forgiven by The High People and their governing Council, at Prince Mark and Princess Talia’s request, and in their honor.”

“And I judge that you’re completely free and forgiven.” Mark stated. “I know that doesn’t release you from your vow of service, but you made a mistake and it’s over now. Let none cast any further aspersions on your characters and reputations over this matter. Let it be behind you, and from now on, hold your heads high as Hilia’s finest, which you fully deserve to do, because you’ve earned it. You will no longer be known as the Atoning, from now on you’ll be called The Atoned.”

The Volunteers cheered these announcements, while the Atoned mostly cried happily and hugged each other. Some came forward to offer thanks to Mark, a tearful Sheramiv first among them.

“Thank you, Father.” Talia quietly said as she hugged him. “This means a lot to us.”

“Like I said, it’s wise rulership.” he shrugged. “On both our parts, for that matter.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Strange that Hilia already has many times the population of The Nine Valleys. Mind you, we are allowing more immigration now, so our population will grow, if not by the leaps and bounds yours has here. Things are changing so quickly. When I think of the mistrust I held for humans five or six days ago, I can only shake my head in chagrin.”

“Your concept of justice will now be that of Falgaroth.” Grakonexikaldoron quietly rumbled, quoting Somonik. “That makes all the difference, doesn’t it? Many of us who’ve sworn to justice recently have had to realize that previously we were not as just-minded as we believed.”

There was thoughtful agreement with her sentiment, then Holanam handed Mark a harp and asked that he play and sing the song he’d sung at his wedding.

“Well if you think I should, I’m sure it’ll be good luck for me to do so!” Mark laughed as he took the harp and seated himself on an available chair, and began warming up his fingers with some quiet scales exercises. “By the way Holanam, I’ve been wondering as a matter of academic interest in the effectiveness of your powers, what were you and the others of The Unthinking Impulsives doing during the failed assassination attempt at Winghoof the day before yesterday?”

“We were still in the Palace in Thon. We’d chosen to tarry awhile in an unused staff quarters.”

“I’ll bet you were fornicating!” Talia laughed, prompting a wave of laughter all around, especially among the humans.

“Actually, we were doing exactly that.” Holanam sheepishly admitted, to even more laughter. “But we were in the Link today with the rest of the sworn Hilian elves.”

“I know, and it was wonderful to have you there with us, lending your power and sharing our risk.” Talia smiled.

“We tried to add our magic luck to the Link too, so we all could share it, but I don’t know if it helped any. Our precognitives tried to help Povon know where the incoming Translocations were going to be as well, and they think they could feel it having an effect.”

“They may have, though if so it was a subtle one.” Povon mused. “Mind you, at times like that even the tiniest advantage can be crucial in saving a comrade’s life, and I’m truly thankful for all of your efforts. I’m becoming very fond of all you elves, my companions at arms in the forces of Hilia. I realized that last night at the gathering for Dalia and Bezedil’s return, and it surprised me a bit, and pleased me as well. Working Linked with all of you today was a wonderful experience, and for a psionic like me, a Link like that never truly ends. I will always be a tiny bit aware of every one of you, your locations and well being, as I am aware of Mark and Talia, Equemev and Silaran. Not nearly as aware as I am of Kragorram, but if any of you are ever truly distressed, I will know it. And as Mark said, if you call to me with concentration, I will hear it passively, without either of us casting a spell.

“It’s funny, I’m not even that close with my own parents, psionically or socially. I haven’t seen them or spoken to either of them for over two thousand years. Suddenly I’m a bit saddened by that, and feel I should visit them soon.”

“We should.” Kragorram rumbled as he gently wrapped his tail around her shoulders. “We should visit my parents as well. I love you Povon, and if you will agree to marry me, we can announce our betrothal when we visit. Following the tradition of many fine people, I have made for you a token of my intention.”

He opened his hand to her, and suddenly held a dragon-sized gold ring bound in a fine network of titanium for strength, and set with the most massive fire-brilliant cut diamond anyone there had ever seen, not excluding Grakonexikaldoron, though it was small enough against the rest of the ring to seem delicate in appearance. “Will you be my wife, Povon, though it is not a Draconian tradition to marry? I know it is soon and sudden, but I love you too much to wait.”

Povon could only gape at him for a moment, then she wrapped herself around him with an embrace that entwined him with all six of her limbs as well as her neck and tail. “Of course I’ll marry you, my love! I love you so much, and I’ve never felt so flattered in my life!” she cried in tearful joy, and everyone there gave them a mighty cheer.

Mark chose that moment to begin his song, augmenting its volume enough to be heard by all, and dancing was begun here and there as a few sang along.

“Congratulations!” Nilla offered the happy dragon couple.

“Thanks.” Povon grinned, still hugging her new fiancé for all she was worth.

“I notice the youngest children aren’t here.” Talia remarked. “Are you going to have to take them home to bed soon?”

“No, we bedded them down in the cottage for now, and the elven children with them, whose parents were glad to watch over them all.” Nilla told her with a grin. “We can stay and party for a while.”

And they did, for another two hours.

Halfway through that time, Talia, Nilla, and Sana fetched the birthday presents Mark’s family had brought from Finitra from under the table that had held the feast, and everyone watched while he opened them. They were ordinary items; shirts, breeches, kilts, shoes, a pocket knife, a fishing rod, a small wooden chest, and similar things. Each of them had been handcrafted by one of more of his newly-reunited family, and for that reason he treasured them more than any gold or jewels.

Finally everyone said their farewells and went home, and the humans were assisted in this by volunteers of the Atoned, who accompanied them and supplied Translocation.

Mark’s grandparents were the last to leave, and just before they did, Mark offered his grandfather the position of head of the Military Faculty of the Hilian University.

“Huh. An interesting offer, my lad. I’ll have to think about it.” was the patriarch’s reply.

“We’ll talk to you soon.” Mark promised as his grandmother gave him one last kiss on the cheek, and a few moments later he and Talia were alone.

“Well, I figure we have about four hours to get some sleep before we have to get ready for the meeting of the alliance.” he mused as he swept her up in a hug and carried her to the cottage.

“Or we could get two and a half hours of sleep, and spend ninety minutes with six of the Volunteers, who wish to thank you for my sister’s life as our goddess directed.” Talia giggled. “Remember my six friends who served our dinner at our wedding? It’s their turn, and they’ve agreed to share it. Do you really have the heart to turn them down?”

“No, we wouldn’t want to disappoint those dear lasses, I suppose.” he chuckled as he ducked under the top of the doorframe.

“I’ll let them know.” Talia grinned.

The six giggling and nude elven lasses were already eagerly waiting for them when they reached their bedroom.

As Mark finished lacing his best sandals, a thought struck him. “How much time do we have?” he asked Talia, who was experimenting with magically coloring her hair slightly different shades of blond in order to better complement the blue dress she had chosen.

“We have about ten minutes to spare.” she told him as she settled on a hue and turned away from the mirror.

“I’m curious about that Dulyamil guy, and the elven criminals. I mean, most elves can get whatever they want by magic, so why did they resort to crime? I don’t know, but after the feel I’ve gotten for your people, the idea of there being elven criminals just seems strange.”

“From the little I know of them, the elven criminals are far from nefarious, being mostly concerned with petty thievery and pranks.” Talia told him as she climbed into his lap for a hug and a quick kiss.

“Huh. That makes even less sense.” he stated in puzzlement.

“Why not call Dulyamil and Meri here and ask them? After all, they now take our pay and are under our command, and I’m sure they’ll be pleased to chat with us for a bit. They arouse my curiosity as well, though my interest lies in how they met and came to be married. From her manner of speaking, Meri is well-educated and likely of the aristocracy of Kuth. Yet she is married to the former elven Prince of Thieves. There must be an interesting story in that.”

“All right, we’ll see what they’re like in more personal surroundings.” He nodded as he picked her up and carried her into the living room, ducking slightly through the door.

“*Relgemit?*” he called.

“*Relgemit is off duty, this is Kalem, monitoring communications for The Hilian Command Center. How can I serve you, Mark?*”

“*Hi Kalem. We have a few minutes before we leave for the meeting of The Just Alliance, and we were hoping to speak with Dulyamil and Meri before we go. Could you have them come to the cottage, if they can make it in the next minute or so?*”

“*Certainly. They’ll be right there.*”

“*Thanks.*”

Only eighteen seconds later there was a polite knock on the front door. When they answered it they found their guests looking alert and refreshed, despite it being almost four hours after midnight, Hilian time, and still wearing the simple white tunics.

“Greetings, and welcome.” Talia smiled, and she and Mark led the way back into the living room. “Sorry about the sudden call at such a late hour.”

“Not at all. We were touring the underwater facilities and enjoying the beauty of the nocturnal life of the reef.” Dulyamil smiled. “Wondrous work indeed, and the nearest Plane door was only strides from where we were.”

“Please, have a seat.” Mark said as he indicated a two place sofa, while he and Talia took the adjacent one. “We only have a few minutes right now, but we’re curious about a few things.

“I’m wondering about the elven criminals. What are they like, and what are they doing now that The Just Alliance has curtailed most criminal activity?”

“Ah. Well you must first understand that elven criminals as a rule are not evil, nor are they materialistic in a conventional sense.” Dulyamil explained. “They are spontaneous. They are generally talented but poorly adjusted minor wizards adrift in the midst of vast and populous empires, where the majority of the citizenry are humans with no appreciable magic ability. The elven scofflaws steal food from markets, and vanish without paying for their meals at restaurants, and usually the theft is only detected by accounting after the fact. They sleep in the first unused bedroom they happen upon, drop their rumpled clothing on the floor, take a fresh change from the closet when they leave in the morning, and spend much of their day attending entertainments without paying the admission. They traipse through life owning nothing, avoiding all responsibilities and social entanglements. And though no elf would violently rape, many of the males are avid practitioners of seduction, and are not above using spells to ensure that their affections are enthusiastically returned.

“Many are among the least intelligent persons of my race, though they are cunning enough to be all but impossible to catch. Many have suffered emotionally traumatizing events, and almost all are estranged from their families and former friends.

“No conventional approach had proven effective at helping them, or preventing their activities, or apprehending them.

“I took it upon myself to let it be known that they could visit my home in safety, and that they would be treated civilly and without judgment. I did what I could to see to their well-being, and to teach them what wisdom I could without risking their trust. I was never their leader, but I was their advocate.

“They knew their safety depended on their never taking anything of value, but there were a few who couldn’t resist a pretty trinket, mostly girls. I often convinced them to return the item later, and a few prevailed upon me to return an item for them, in order to relieve the pressure of a large investigation. A few times, I was charged with receiving stolen property in the course of these activities, but never convicted, since in each case I had initiated the contact in order to return the item. The cases were pressed because I refused to identify those who’d entrusted me with the task. My trials caught the attention of the news criers and gossipmongers, my activities were exposed, and I was dubbed The Prince of Thieves by popular opinion.

“Most of them are still at large, their lifestyles unchanged by the advent of The Just Alliance. I can no longer shelter them due to public scrutiny, nor will they approach me, though I still have their affection.”

“That’s fascinating.” Mark told him, his interest obviously piqued.

“I’m curious as to how you met.” Talia smiled. “Everyone knows how Mark and I got together, but I understand that such mixed-race couples are still a rarity.”

“Not so rare as many would think, as it was often kept secret.” Meri said, returning the smile. “Humans and elves mix and mingle in their thousands within the empires, and sparks are bound to fly. Many have come forward and announced their love these last few days.

“As for Dulyamil and I, my favorite hairbrush was stolen by a little elven waif only fourteen years old, and I chased her by foot and flight and Translocation all over the city. I’d have lost her a dozen times, but I was following my hairbrush, and she refused to release it. When she realized that I would not be shaken from her trail, she ran to Dulyamil. I found her cowering behind him in his courtyard. He handed me my brush, she vanished, and he invited me to dinner. Six months later we were married. In secret. My parents had apoplexy when we told them yesterday, but they’ll get over it.”

“How sweet!” Talia laughed.

“Yes.” Dulyamil smiled fondly as he squeezed his wife’s hand. “I owe the best things in my life to elven criminals. Besides bringing Meri to me, I learned some ingeniously inventive spells and techniques from them.”

“Well, it’s really a shame that we only had this short time to meet you right now.” Mark said as he stood.

“We appreciate the hectic nature of your schedule.” Meri assured him as she rose, and they exchanged handshakes “Thank you for having us; in your home, and in your employ.”

“We’re glad to have you.” Talia grinned as they held each other’s hand for a moment. “By the way, have you done any settling in yet?”

“Oh yes, we’ve been assigned some lovely quarters near the Command Center, and our personal items are already installed.” Meri assured her.

“It seems fate that sixty-six tournament contestants chose to enlist or be transferred to your forces.” Dulyamil related. “So when Relgemit allowed that we could form our own unit, we began to refer to ourselves as The Sixty-Six of Hilia. Relgemit on the other hand favors the term; The Mated Brigade. Which most of us think sounds silly.”

“Ah.” Mark grinned. “Well I’m sure you’ll be a fine and formidable unit, however you’re titled.”

“Thank you, and thanks again for having us by.” Dulyamil smiled as they were escorted out.

“Time?” Mark asked as he closed the door.

“We should go.” Talia answered.

“All right.

“Somonik? We’re ready if you are.”

They appeared beside the white dragon, the Truthstone, and Quewanak the Eldest.

“Welcome, Mark and Talia.” Somonik rumbled.

“Hello Somonik, Eldest.” Mark returned.

“A third of the attendees have yet to arrive. A place has been reserved for you at the edge of the dais, or you may choose to join one of the many informal discussions in progress. I estimate it will be at least twelve minutes before we are ready to be called to order.”

Their arrival had been noted, and there was a smattering of polite applause, so they bowed to the assembly in acknowledgment.

“Thank you, Somonik.” Talia returned as she looked around the room, noting her parents and the other elven delegations among the many groups of every size that ebbed and flowed about the room. “That sword looks good on you.” she added.

“Thank you. It was crafted by Kragorram. I was inspired by his sword work today, and inquired whether he might have another, just a few hours ago. He was with Silaran, who decided to assist his friend by acting as Kragorram’s negotiator. The negotiation was one of the best I’ve been involved in. In the end, I gave him ninety-nine of my best spells, or rather, I gave them to Povon on Kragorram’s behalf. She was so pleased with them, she gave me nine of hers that I did not have, bright young thing that she is. Kragorram then felt obliged to provide the sheath and this fitted harness.”

He gracefully drew the great sword and turned it admiringly in the light. It was very similar to Kragorram’s, but smaller by a third, though it did not seem so in Somonik’s clawed white hand. Since he was barely more than a quarter of Kragorram’s size, it was as large as Somonik could comfortably wield with one hand, whereas Kragorram was so huge his larger blade was barely enough to be a short sword in his colossal grip.

“With this in my hand, I feel my combative ability has been restored to what it was before I was maimed. And perhaps a bit more. It is beautiful work.” He smoothly sheathed the weapon again.

“The interactions you see around us represent the heart of politics.” Quewanak stated to Mark and Talia. *“You would be wise to take part. Just be sure not to commit to anything before the meeting is called to order, and the announcements have been made.”*

“On another matter, I strongly urge you to avail yourselves of my training, and I do mean soon. Your companions as well. The end of this meeting would be a good time to start. I sense that events are coming to a head. The seers assure me that the Nexus is still at least a year in the future, yet I’m convinced that the events of the next few days will be pivotal. You may have goaded the conspiracy with your exercise today.”

“Eldest, I do apologize for breaking our promise to refrain from battle.” Mark humbly stated. “But they did attack us first, and almost succeeded in killing us.”

“I’ll grant you that, and you all lived, which is the main thing. Though how much of that was luck and how much was skill is a matter of conjecture. They could have come upon you in their thousands, their millions, if they hadn’t underestimated you so badly. All the more reason you need my training. Believe me, none can make you as capable as I, in as short a time.”

“Besides all that, it’s time I made my contribution to this alliance.”

“Your contribution is worthy and ongoing.” Somonik stated. “Your experience, insight, and advice have been valuable to me on many occasions, Eldest, and to many others as well. Furthermore, I am proud to call you friend.”

“Thank you.” Quewanak nodded. *“Still, such cerebral pursuits do little to soothe the yearning to take action. Since I cannot physically take action myself, I can at least prepare others to do so.”*

“We really are looking forward to training with you, Eldest, but I don’t feel right in committing to a schedule for it right now.” Mark respectfully stated. “Almost every plan and schedule we’ve made in the last few days has been changed as we went along, and I don’t want to make any more promises unless I’m certain I can keep them.

“Right now, I’d like to speak with Tithian. Is she here yet?”

“I am.” Tithian whinnied and tossed her luxuriant silver mane as she appeared beside them, her lengthy spiraled horn waving in the air. *“I may not quite have Povon’s psionic sensitivity, but I certainly know when the Key to The Just Alliance calls my name.”* She added a snicker to that.

“Hi Tithian. I have a spell I’d like to show you. But I’d like to keep it as confidential as possible.”

“Certainly. Please hold quite still.” she told him, and gently touched the tip of her horn to the center of his forehead. *“This communication is absolutely private. What do you have?”*

“This.” he said, and showed it to her.

“By the source!” she exclaimed in amazement. *“This is the work of my people, and the complexity of it rivals... One moment! Only Falgaroth himself could have designed this spell!”*

“He did, and he gave it to me during our private moment just before he left the beach yesterday. Talia and Ria are the only others who know of it. He said to let people think that I thought of it myself, and to wait a few days before I used it, but this is a good opportunity. And since the Truthstone is your people’s property, I thought I’d better get your okay before I did it.”

“You know what it will do?”

“Yes. It will allow more people to use the Truthstone than is presently possible. Beyond that, I’d like it to be a surprise. May I?”

“Who am I to naysay Falgaroth’s plan? I am authorized to speak for my people, and we do grant you leave to do this thing.”

She stepped back and straightened, and said for all to hear; *“You may proceed.”*

“Thank you.” Mark nodded, and turned to those on the podium. “Could I have you move back from the Truthstone a bit? Thank you. Except you of course Eldest. Just tell me if you feel anything funny.”

By now he was the center of attention for half the people in the room, and moments later, everyone was watching.

He stepped up to the stone and laid his palms upon it, and it rose smoothly out of the floor until its lowermost point was two meters above the dais. A moment later a blue glow was given off by the stone, which brightened, then diminished.

“Interesting.” the Eldest declared. It appeared that he perched on the surface of the dais beside Mark, his left hand within the stone to his wrist, as he carefully observed. *“He pours power into the stone, a great deal of it, then he draws it out again. Now he pours it back in again, and withdraws it, and it is slightly different each time.”*

Quewanak thrust his head inside the stone, which many found to be an un-nerving sight, then withdrew it again. “Interesting.” he repeated.

Again and again Mark poured so much power into the stone that Talia worried for him, and it glowed brighter each time, before he drew the inferno of magic back into himself again. Then he made the power flow into the stone

one last time, held it there with what appeared to be gradually increasing effort as the blue light grew brighter and brighter, until finally it flashed actinically and was gone at the same moment that something seemed to fall out of the bottom of the stone and bounce with a glasslike tinkle.

Mark slumped tiredly. "Could you get that for me Love?" he asked Talia, nodding toward the underside of the stone. "And check the Truthstone, please? It's safe."

She scurried under after a cautious glance at the many tons of gemstone suspended in the air, and returned a moment later clutching her prize. "It's The Truthstone of Falgaroth in miniature, five centimeters long!" she exclaimed as she held it up.

"Yes, and vows sworn upon it are fully as binding as they would be if sworn upon the full-size stone." Mark said as Talia handed it to him.

"There's no hole or dimple or anything in the bottom of the Truthstone to indicate where that came from." Talia added.

"So the stone is diminished by that amount of power?" Tithian asked.

"No. In the important ways, this is still part of the bigger Truthstone. It's like this piece of it has been Translocated away to this other location, but the Translocation is still going on, frozen in time with part of it in each place. In the other reality that we pass through when we Translocate, this small piece is still a solid part of the big stone. Or maybe it would be easier to think of the surface of this small stone as a kind of Displacement Plane that allows you to touch the surface of the big stone from another location. It works the same either way you think about it. I'm hoping the Eldest can manifest himself anywhere we take this. Would you care to try it, Eldest?" Mark asked, and held forth the small stone.

"Certainly." Quewanak nodded. He touched the tip of his claw to the gem Mark held, and withdrew his other hand from the Truthstone. *"So far so good. Try Translocating over there."*

Mark vanished and reappeared close to the edge of the room, and the Eldest went with him, his claw tip still stuck in the small stone.

"Excellent. Stay here a moment."

The transparent green dragon willed himself back to the large stone, and instantly appeared beside it, touching it with his claw-tip. *"Even better."* he nodded, and closed his eyes. *"I can sense the small one. I think I could sense its location anywhere. Now to see if I truly learned anything during forty million years of napping."*

With that he reappeared back beside Mark, while remaining on the dais, manifesting in two places at once.

"Nice trick, Eldest!" Mark chuckled.

"And a difficult if useful one. Now if only you could make a few more of those, this might be an enormous development."

"Ah, but I can!" Mark said, and brought them back to the dais. "And now that the hard part's done, I only need to repeat the last part of that spell, which should be pretty easy."

He turned to Tithian as Quewanak looked himself in the eye for a moment, then dismissed his extra self.

"How many do you think I should make? A hundred? A thousand? They're really made out of my power, so the big one won't get any smaller, no matter how many I make."

"Until you know how draining it will be to do so, perhaps you should work gradually. Do not allow yourself to reach your limits unexpectedly." Tithian advised.

"Good thinking." Mark nodded, and turned to place his left hand on the great Truthstone. He closed his eyes, and there was a pulse of blue light accompanied by another tinkling impact as another small stone was released. Then there was another and another, till they were pouring out into a shallow pile that reached two meters wide and fifty centimeters deep before the output tapered off, and ended with a final plink and a blue pulse.

Mark took a deep breath and stepped back, and brought his treasures out from under the apparently undiminished great stone with a Movement spell. Once he had them gathered into a cluster floating beside him, he placed his hand on the huge stone again, and lowered it back within the dais till only its top was exposed.

"That's all I can do for now. I don't know how many are there, but it's a few hundred at least."

"Thank you. I can already think of a dozen good uses for these. They will be distributed to military and national leaders, and to highly placed intelligence agents." Somonik said as he took custody of the glinting cluster of blue gems. "That was truly a unique and most impressive display of spell-craft. Will you keep the first one you made?"

"If I may." Mark nodded as he looked at it again, still in his right hand.

"You may." Tithian nodded.

“Only three delegates have yet to arrive, the rest having made their appearance while we were distracted by your marvelous achievement. We should take our places, for we will come to order soon. Allow me to show you to your chairs.”

“There are a lot fewer here than there were during the founding meeting.” Talia observed as she took her seat beside Mark.

“Yes, only heads of state and senior military commanders are here, with at most one advisor each. This is a working meeting on policy and diplomacy, and it will be more focused than the founding, while being less prestigious to attend.” Tithian explained as she lay down on the floor on the other side of Mark with the easy manner of a dog.

Yazadril, Nemia, and Alilia took seats on the other side of Talia.

Yazadril was still marveling at his new trinket, given to him by Somonik a moment before. “The Truthstone of Falgaroth in the palm of my hand. What a wonder.” he murmured.

Nemia merely exchanged a smile and a nod with her daughter and Mark, since they’d spoken only hours earlier.

“We shall now come to order.” Somonik announced from the dais. “This meeting of the national leaders and high commanders of The Just Alliance is now in session.

“First, the latest developments.

“Efforts to see over the Wards around Venak have proved fruitless, since they grow in height in response. However, we have determined by careful measurements of temperatures that those Wards block light from one direction only, thus it is a tiny bit warmer in Venak than it should be, and also thus we can deduce that those within can see out, while we who are without cannot see in. They can deploy in force just inside their Wards in preparation for launching an attack, and we cannot detect them doing so, yet they can see any deployments we emplace outside their borders, unless we take other steps to hide our movements.

“We have also been unable to open communications with anyone within Venak for the purpose of initiating diplomatic negotiations.

“Our only appreciably positive developments have come at the hands of the Keys to The Just Alliance and the rest of their Hilian forces, whose successful ambush and subsequent battle in Kletiuk earlier today yielded twenty-four prisoners. Those prisoners were relieved of many spells that had been cast upon them to prevent them from being interrogated or Compelled, and were then Compelled to swear to truth and justice upon The Truthstone of Falgaroth, and interrogated thoroughly. While they were unable to shed any light on the nature of the Wards around Venak, since none of them have been stationed within sight of those borders since those Wards were erected, they have supplied a great deal of valuable information. While none were entrusted with any military information beyond what they needed to carry out their mission, they know all that is common knowledge in Venak, and to us, that is precious intelligence indeed.

“Venak is under harsh martial law, and every able-bodied person who is capable of swinging a short sword has been conscripted into the military, regardless of age or gender, and I do mean that literally. *Everyone* has been conscripted. Some children with only six years of life are being trained as soldiers, and the training is harsh. Children not yet strong enough to swing the sword of testing are cared for at massive and highly organized facilities housing thousands of babies, infants, and young children, in order to reduce to a minimum the number of adults required to see to them. I will grant that they have at least done their people the mercy of keeping families together as much as possible, fathers and mothers training and working beside their sons and daughters, and their youngest are returned to them during their off-duty hours. All farms, businesses, and properties have been nationalized and brought under military organization and control. No dissent or unsanctioned violence is tolerated, and infractions are punished quickly and severely.

“This is the most complete militarization any nation has undertaken in all the long history of Kellaran. The entire country of Venak, including everyone and everything within its borders, is now a single military force.

“Furthermore, we have grossly underestimated the number of our own peoples who have refused the chance to live in a just society, and have joined the ranks of our enemies. Of course almost every member of the insidious conspiracy in all our nations fled to Venak, as did almost every career criminal in The Just Alliance. What is shocking however, is the number of productive citizens who have chosen to accept King Renem’s offer of relocation to Venak, though few of them expected to find themselves conscripted upon arrival, and their possessions seized. They are those who wished to continue cheating on their taxes, or to continue engaging in drunken brawls, or seeking power through bribery and corruption. Bullies, bigots, rapists, petty thieves, liars, tricksters and minor miscreants of all types have gone over to Venak.

“Delegates of The Just Alliance, fully one of every ten of our people have defected to the enemy!! This ranges from one in thirty among the nations of the Selkies and the Kwetkerthok, to fully one of every seven humans! The full extent of this had not been realized, as many of them had avoided being listed as taxpayers or citizens!

“Due to this influx, an incredible eight hundred million persons at the very least have gone to Venak! The original three hundred and twenty million inhabitants of Venak have been subsumed by this new population, their national character and identity assimilated into the new military culture, which includes those of every race except the elves and The People of Morning. Trade Common is now the official language of Venak, and Venakian is no longer spoken in any official capacity. Those who could not speak Trade Common well enough to follow orders have learned it quickly in order to avoid being cuffed, kicked and lashed by their superiors.

“Almost every home and building there has been disassembled, the materials used in the construction of huge barracks to house this horde. Their forests are being stripped of trees for building materials and planted in food crops, and it seems that most of their new plantations will succeed in producing a harvest before the onset of the Debinian winter. New mines are dug every day to increase their metals production, and weapons factories are everywhere.

“As most of us suspected, there are Sylvan and dragons of Serminak in Venak as well. Millions of them. They assist in the work of military training and production of war materiel. This is so out of character for them that it seems almost impossible, but apparently they even assist in the most mundane and distasteful of labors with as much stoic military discipline as any commander could ask! Imagine Dark Dragons expending their flame in flaring latrine pits! I would have thought that any of them would gladly die before submitting to such malodorous drudgery, but our witnesses have seen it with their own eyes, and reported that it was accomplished with no more griping and complaint than one would expect from any other soldiers!

“It is represented to the public there that the Sylvan and Dark Dragons are hired mercenary companies. But, this is inconsistent with the fact that millions of tons of foodstuffs and raw materials are being shipped from Serminak, though the first ship will not return to Venak from there for almost two months. Smaller amounts are being brought in by Flight and Translocation. If this were not so, no amount of effort would allow the resources of Venak to support its new population. Thus the situation in Venak is unstable, and they cannot continue as they are indefinitely without complete dependency on Serminak. This also speaks of great changes of long standing in Serminak, since the peoples there have never before been known to produce a significant surplus.

“There are other ramifications that must be considered, and I now present King Dren of Finitra.”

King Dren rose from his seat at the edge of the dais opposite Tithian, and strode confidently to join Somonik and the Eldest, and graced them with a shallow bow before turning to address the assembly. “In many ways, it might be easier if our enemies were bloodthirsty lunatics who routinely raped, tortured and executed the innocent. Were that the case, we could feel comfortable with hating and killing them, and we could count on a strong sentiment of rebellion among their ranks.

“But the truth of it is a far different thing. And I think our enemies are far more formidable for being what they truly are. To illustrate this, I would like to make use of this fine Revealing stone, a gift from Overlord Senchak. What you are about to see is the testimony of one Finium Bily, who was captured by Hilian forces this morning.”

The Revealing appeared above Dren’s head six meters on a side, and showed a tired-looking human with black hair, slumped on a stone bench and holding a mug of water, the buckles of his battle-gear loosened for comfort.

“I was from Venak originally, and it’s always been home to me, but I’d moved to Taldria with my family. We went back day before yesterday when King Renem sent out the call.

“I figured even if Osbald of Thon *did* have good intentions, and even if Sorrin *was* part of some conspiracy, Osbald didn’t know that when he did what he did, he abducted the king of another sovereign nation from out of his bed in the middle of the night, by overpowering our palace wizard’s defenses and by means of forced Translocation. Well that there’s an act of war anywhere you go, isn’t it?

“And besides, what you people are doing is un-natural! Taking away a man’s natural freedom of action with magic, that’s wrong! The strong survive, that’s what’s natural! If a man insults my wife I’m gonna break his nose, not get into some stupid bad-mouthing contest or run whining to a magistrate! There’s lots of people who’re willing to take what they dish out, and you’re not going to stop them from causing trouble by going tit-for-tat with ‘em! If a man in Venak starts some trouble, he knows he’ll get it back ten-fold, hard and fast!

“You’ve forced your vow on me, so now I guess I’ll just swallow my bile if a man insults my wife. But that’s not how I’d choose to be, nor will it ever be.”

A voice spoke from beyond the Revealing’s viewpoint. “From what your friend here was saying, you’d be unlikely to break anyone’s nose in Venak right now, even if you hadn’t sworn the vow.”

“Ah, and isn’t that the funny truth of it?” the weary human chuckled. “No, he wouldn’t insult my wife, or a handy sergeant would give ‘em the beating for causing dissension in the ranks. And I wouldn’t break his nose for it, or I’d get the same. Things have changed fast there over the last four days.

“Some don’t much like King Renem, but he gets respect for talking straight, and because he won’t back down or run from anyone or anything. He laid it right out, and he said that good or bad, right or wrong, we’re all in it together now, and in it up to our necks. There might not be enough of us to beat the alliance, break all these stones and swords and such that folk have been sworn on, and kill the wizards who’ve spelled ‘em, which is what it would take to end all this foolishness. But with the folk who’ve come to join us and the mercenaries out of Serminak, we’re gonna be way too big a bite for you lot to chew off and swallow comfortably, so long as every single one of us is willing to give it our all.

“So, now we’re all in the army, and it’s a Serminak style army.

“They have a saying they live by; ‘Everyone gets the same beating.’ If someone gets out of line they get ‘the beating’, and it’s a bad one, let me tell you! But it’s a fast one and a careful one. They know exactly how much they can hurt you, and where, without slowing you down too much the next day at work or in the field, and without leaving any permanent damage. And if your sergeant beats you bad enough that your work suffers the next day, *he* gets the beating from *his* superiors, just to show him how to do his job right. The rules are simple but strict, and it’s the same all the way up the line, everyone gets treated exactly the same. If the Commander of the Infantry insults the wife of the lowest pot scrubber in my barracks, he’d get exactly the same beating my squad-mate would get for insulting *my* wife, and not five seconds later either, I mean right there and then! If you commit two infractions in one day, you get the second beating from a Sylvan, who beats you half to death, then Heals you up again, and maybe does all that two or three times if you’ve really done something disruptive. You feel fine the next day, but it’s not something you’d risk again if you’d had it done, or even seen it. They haven’t had to beat very many; folks saw where the river ran right away.

“I tell you, those Sylvan are strange, even stranger than the dragons.

“The dragons are civil enough, but they tend to treat you the way a man treats a good dog.

“But the Sylvan are another bucket of beer altogether. Last night our whole barracks was doing this dance this dwarf showed us, and we’re drinking and eating and carrying on after a hard day, and there was this Sylvan in with our group, you know, some of my friends and our families. And he was a funny guy, he really was, he had us laughing till our eyes teared!

“And I said to him; You know, you Sylvan are all right. You’re not the bloody savages I’d heard you were.

“And he says to me; ‘Finium, drinking and laughing with you and your folk is fun, and I enjoy it. But it would be just as much fun to kill you slowly and fry you up for dinner. Orders are orders though, break the rules and get the beating, and you won’t catch me causing dissension in the ranks!’

“And he damn well meant every word of it!

“I guess that’s the way of it all over Serminak too, just like Venak. Everyone’s in the army, break the rules and get the same beating no matter who you are, unless you’re tough enough to kill the top dragon.

“And the Dragon Lord, he tells ‘em to go ahead and try, too! Any assassin that tries to kill him gets sent home with the same beating they’d get for insulting my wife. The Sylvan say that when the Dragon Lord first took over, he had to beat some of his rivals dozens of times before they finally caught on that they just couldn’t kill him, or even put a scratch on him! And he never killed one of them, though they came at him by the thousands with blood in their eye, Sylvan and dragons too. He just beat ‘em bad and sent ‘em home, as he still does if someone breaks his rules. You have to admire that. Too bad Osbald didn’t have that self-control when he abducted King Sorrin. Just goes to show you how much justice there really is in The Just Alliance, doesn’t it?”

There was a moment’s pause, then the Revealing ended.

“Now we know what we are faced with.” Dren said into the silence of the huge room.

“And I’d like to remind you that while Emperor Osbald did act with incomplete information the night King Sorrin was killed, he relied on his experience and intuition to know that action had to be taken, and he was right. If Osbald hadn’t forced King Sorrin and the other conspirators, we’d have never even known of the conspiracy’s existence until their blades were at our throats!”

He paused. “The question is, what should we do now? Thank you.” And with that, King Dren tucked away his Revealing stone and resumed his seat.

“Over the long term, that is a complex question, but over the short term we only have two options, as I see it.” Somonik continued.

“I think it safe to assume that we all agree that we do not have sufficient reason to attack Venak, in light of the appalling loss of life on both sides that it would entail. But make no mistake; if it does become necessary, we do have the capability to break the Wards of Venak, and to rout their forces. And if the worst happens, even the forces of Serminak, as militarized as it appears they have become, could not stand against the united might of The Just Alliance.

“We cannot open negotiations with Venak. The cargo ships that sail from there to Serminak are crewed by civilian humans, with no authority or wizards aboard. No Venak naval vessels have strayed beyond their waters since their Wards were emplaced. And similar Wards are in place along the coastline of Serminak.

“But the Wards along the Sylvan Boundary, eight hundred kilometers out to sea from Serminak’s shores, are of a more conventional nature, and they allow the passage of sight and sound. Some of our fishing vessels work quite close to the Boundary, and some Sylvan fishermen do the same on the other side, and they have been known to exchange shouts and friendly waves as they pass on either side of the line. The crews of Serminak’s naval vessels, who patrol the Boundary in great numbers, are not immune to this urge to share a greeting with a friendly stranger, glimpsed for a few moments in the midst of a long and monotonous sea patrol. Our naval vessels keep their distance from the Boundary, since if they approach it, the Sylvan Navy rushes to gather there.

“Our first option is to try to open diplomatic negotiations with Serminak through their Naval officers. We have a Shiganzhu cruiser on station five kilometers from the Boundary. If we choose this option, they will sail to within thirty meters from the Boundary, flying every flag of peace that we recognize, and when Sylvan vessels approach on the other side of the line, they will be hailed. To get their attention, we will cast a life-sized two-way Illusion of this room and this meeting. We will announce who we are and what our intentions are, and request the attention of their superiors, preferably that of the one they name The Dragon Lord. Their vessels will include in their crews a few serious spell-casters, and they will be able to pass the word along up the chain of command with great rapidity.

“Our second option is to do nothing more than we are already doing; continuing our efforts to fortify our defenses and ready our militaries. If we choose this option we may accelerate these efforts, and do what we can to increase their scope.

“Some among you may have other ideas. This is the time to share them.

“Who would speak now? Empress Emeroth of Verzaclon.”

“Thank you.” she said as she stood and hitched at her sword belt. “We’ll keep augmenting our defenses until every wall and roof is thick steel and every building is Warded, or until the Nexus is past, whichever comes first. Our militaries are on full alert, and we’re getting recruits as fast as we can train them for both full-time and reserve service. We’re not going to do much better than that unless we institute conscription ourselves, which I will not do unless open warfare has begun. I think High Commander Yazadril will agree that much the same could be said of every nation represented here. We could curtail our citizens’ newly-enhanced luxuries and joys, and militarize as thoroughly as they have in Venak, but that wouldn’t help our defensive position as much as you might think. What it *would* do is drop a big rock on the greatest wave of prosperity this world has ever seen.

“My point is that if anyone thinks we should wait to open communications with Serminak until we’re stronger militarily, they should know that it’s unlikely to significantly improve our position in less than six months. Beyond six years, we are likely to begin to gradually lose the advantage. The captive Shiganzhu I interviewed told me that they are rewarding people for breeding in Venak. Rewards of goods or better quarters or more off-duty time are offered to those who breed the most children, and they are publicly held in high regard.

“These people are absolutely determined, and they are preparing for a long struggle, spanning generations if necessary.

“Peace or war, the sooner this is decided, the greater the probability that it will be resolved in our favor.

“The Nexus approaches. Something tells me that we don’t want to be in the middle of a worldwide war when it gets here, or we may find that the war *is* the Nexus.

“If it *must* be war, we might be wise to goad them into beginning it, and soon. Almost all of our preparations have been defensive, and all of our calculations show that we would lose the least if we remain on the defensive in the war until we are fully prepared to make an overwhelmingly decisive strike.

“But in addition to all of that, I say we do our best to talk with these people, and as soon as possible. We do everything we can to avoid war, and to forge a permanent peace. But we’ll never be able to trust these people if they won’t swear a binding vow of justice, or at least a vow of non-aggression against us. If they plan to attack, we need to find out, so we can make sure that the conflict occurs on our terms.

“Thank you.”

“Who would speak now?” Somonik asked as Empress Emeroth took her seat.

There was a long moment of silence.

“Overlord Senchak of Kletiuk.”

The Overlord of all the dwarves stood and spoke from where he was. “I’m with Empress Emeroth. Get ‘em talking and get it done, peace or war. What says the Key?”

“Yes, what says the Key?” several asked as Senchak sat down.

“Prince Mark of Hilia, Key to The Just Alliance.” Somonik intoned as Mark stood.

“I agree, there are many reasons to try to begin talks as soon as possible, few to delay, and none to refrain from it entirely.” Mark stated. “I suggest we try this naval diplomacy, and that we do so today.”

“Who would speak now?” Somonik asked as Mark resumed his seat.

When it became obvious that none were going to answer, he nodded.

“Then I ask you, are we agreed that we should seek to initiate diplomacy with the government of Serminak through one of each party’s naval vessels, and do so immediately?”

The delegates’ response was decisive.

“Let the record show that all have agreed.

“Empress Emeroth, contact your vessel and initiate the operation.”

“It will take them twelve minutes to achieve station beside the Sylvan Boundary.” Emeroth announced. “It’s not one of our fastest ships, but it’s one of the hardest to sink.” She closed her eyes and cast Speaking to her ship’s captain.

“They’re reporting that a squadron of six naval vessels have been shadowing their course from an equal distance on the Serminak side of the line. Those are closing at the same pace our ship is, so they should reach hailing distance about a minute after ours reaches the boundary and sets their anchors.”

“Is your ship armed, Empress?” Prime Wisdom Klirp of the Selkies inquired through a translator.

“Yes, but lightly, and the batteries are hidden. Not that it would have a chance against even one Sylvan battleship. If trouble starts, I’m taking my people out of danger. We’re prepared to Translocate the whole ship back to Felion waters on a moment’s notice. Not an easy trick, even with a cruiser, which is why we didn’t choose to send a battleship ourselves.”

“Wise of you.” Klirp’s translator related after translating in both directions.

“Thank you.” she nodded, and closed her eyes again to continue monitoring her ship’s progress.

“It is a fortuitous moment to refresh oneself, before contact is made.” a gargoyle majordomo suggested in a carrying voice. “We have a vast selection of beverages and comestibles available. Please feel free to avail yourselves of this by inquiring of a server, who are designated by the symbol of a drinking vessel.”

“I could use one of Hilsith’s soothing teas right now.” Mark remarked as some of the delegates placed orders, while others made their way to the privacies, and some gathered into clusters to talk.

“I know the recipe.” Nemia told him with a smile. “I’ll see if they can make it, or something similar. Does anyone else want any?”

Talia, Yazadril, and the rest of the elves all agreed that they would.

“Hilsith will be flattered.” Nemia smiled, and made her way to the nearest server.

“That was some frightening stuff we heard about Venak and Serminak.” Mark commented, a bit worriedly. “At least they’re not totally evil. I mean, they seem like the kind of people we can negotiate with.”

“No, they’re not totally evil.” Yazadril nodded. “The military discipline that’s been enforced on Serminak is far better than the barbaric state of near-anarchy that existed the last time I visited there some three thousand years ago. That very well may have been the last time any outsider went there.”

“And now, cargo vessels from Venak, though they haven’t arrived yet.” Talia said.

“Hah! I’ll believe that when I see it!” her father disagreed. “I think it far more likely that the Venak ships will be loaded by a transfer of cargo at sea from Serminak vessels anchored at the Boundary.”

“Wow! They’re that cautious?” Mark asked. “What are they so worried about?”

“Revenge.” Yazadril stated bluntly. “They have made themselves peoples to be feared by their many attacks upon the rest of us over the millennia, though they have not done so for the last five. And of course, that was when I tried to instill in them a general disgust for the presence of the rest of us, in order to help keep them from our shores, though that may have passed by now.”

“Wow. You’re still choking on things that happened over five thousand years ago?” Mark chuckled. “Long-lived types really know how to hold a grudge.”

Yazadril merely shrugged.

Nemia returned then with a waiter who bore a tray of steaming teacups, and conversation paused while they were distributed and sampled.

“Tell me, why do the dragons seem to do everything by nines?” Mark asked as he sipped the delicious brew.

“Tradition and superstition, really.” Yazadril said. “The first generation of dragons numbered nine individuals, six females and three males. Every dragon who has lived since that time are descended from the original nine.”

“How could they know that, that there was only nine?”

“Ah. Well there are two ways for a race of beings to come into being, whether they are intelligent people or dumb animals. Some develop gradually by the processes of life here on Kellaran. Every generation are a tiny bit different from their parents, and if a population becomes isolated for a time, they can develop into a distinct race. This is how humans and selkies came into being. But a race can also begin suddenly, when the sun changes for a time, shining with a brighter or different light, and the magic of the Source intensifies for a period from one day to thirty years. This is how the elven race was born. The sun changed for twelve years, and during that time, about one in every fifty babies born to human parents was an elf. Some time later it was realized that a new race was born when it was seen that bonded couples of elves were fertile with each other, but that elves were almost completely infertile with humans or during casual fornication. It was confirmed when our other racial characteristics were recognized; longevity, healing, talent with magic, and knowing what time it is without an external reference.

“When the dragons were born, Kellaran was populated by all manner of reptilian leviathans, but none were intelligent, or magical. The sun must have flared intensely for only one day, for the nine dragons later realized that they had been born within a week of each other, and had likely been conceived on the same day and within twenty-five hundred kilometers of each other. They had sufficient psionic sensitivity and curiosity to find one another over their youth, and all nine lived to be at least a half million years old, by which time they had many descendants, and had developed an advanced culture and language, with the assistance of Glup of the Zurb.”

“Oh. Well thanks, that takes care of my education for today.” Mark grinned.

“We believe they have seen our flags of peace by distance viewers.” Emeroth announced, her eyes still closed. “Both sides continue to close on the Boundary, and they’ve taken no hostile action thus far. Generally they would be opening weapons ports at this distance.”

“Somonik, if you would, I’d welcome it if you’d cast our side of the viewing Illusion.” Yazadril stated. “It’s time for us to see what’s going on.”

“Agreed.” Somonik nodded. “Could I have everyone on this side of the hall please move across the room. Thank you. There is no need to crowd, there is plenty of room, feel free to use as much as you wish. We do not need to occupy a small space for this; we merely need to face in the same direction. Thank you.”

Once one side of the hall was cleared, Somonik clicked his claws together, and that third of the room became a gigantic window looking out over a ship on a breezy, partially cloudy morning. The bottom of the window seemed to hover over the rear of the ship, looking forward. Mark thought that it would have been a pretty big ship for humans, but it’s crew of forty or fifty giants looked rather confined as they worked on her crowded decks.

In the distance could be seen the curtain of shimmering haziness that marked the Boundary, though only the whitish line it made on the surface of the water was very distinct. In the deeper distance beyond that and off to one side a bit was the squadron of six ships approaching for the rendezvous, each a twin-hulled gargantuan.

“What are their sails doing?” Talia asked. “They’re moving strangely, but it’s hard to tell at this distance.”

“They are rotating, almost edge-on to us.” Emeroth told her. “Their sails are large windmills, six to a ship, and geared to water-screws below the surface. Thus it does not matter to them which direction the wind is blowing in relation to their direction of travel. The six water-screws each have their own rudders, and they can maneuver in surprising ways. A very stable design, due to the widely-spaced twin hulls, and faster than ours of a similar size under some conditions, slower in others. They require less draft, but more clearance abeam in narrow passages. Their greatest advantage is shown when conditions are absolutely becalmed, for the windmills can be disconnected from their gearing, allowing the water screws to be turned by manual labor or magic. A far more efficient solution than putting out boats and rowing, or driving the whole ship by Force, which is what we still have to do.”

“Hey, those things are really big!” Mark realized. “Are those dragons on the decks?”

“Yes. A Sylvan battleship carries a complement of six hundred crew, eight hundred marines, and six dragons. We think one of the dragons is often in command, but not always.”

Nothing more was said while the giants’ ship approached the Boundary, then folded their sails with a clever system of ropes and pulleys that didn’t require the crew to climb the rigging, and played out anchors. It slowed almost to a stop, drifted sideways a bit in the current, then was still. Her figurehead, a winged stag, was barely thirty meters from the transparent shimmer. The crew secured the ship and came to parade-rest in formation in the center of the deck, their hands open and empty, their bright white uniforms snapping in the breeze and contrasting smartly with the deep brown wood of their vessel.

Five of the much more massive Serminak vessels dropped anchor hundreds of meters from the Boundary, and only their flagship approached within hailing distance. It was obvious when their windmills were disconnected from their gearing, for the windmills began to turn faster even as the ships began to slow. The crews of the five more distant ships lined their railings to spectate, but as the flagship came to a halt, her sailors went about their business, trying to look unconcerned and uninterested, while her marines formed up in neat lines on her huge rectangular deck and came to attention, weapons at the ready. Five of her dragons sat up looking curious between the blocks of marines, and a delegation of one blue dragon and four Sylvan in ornate uniforms approached her forward railing.

“This is the time to check our appearances and prepare for translation. I suggest we stand.” Somonik stated. “The communication will initiate in Draconian or one of the Sylvan tongues, as it falls to us as petitioners to speak the language of the hosts. I am now casting the other half of the viewing illusion, and they will see us through this window of magic, and know that we see them.”

“*Allow me to supply you with translation of the Draconian.*” Ria said to Mark and Talia via Link, and Mark glanced down to see that Talia’s grip was white-knuckled on her hilt. He gently took her other hand as they stood and they exchanged a quick smile, and she relaxed a bit.

It was obvious when the Illusion became active from the other direction, for everyone on the Serminak ships was obviously taken aback when the view into the Hall of The Just Alliance appeared floating in the air above the Shiganzhu cruiser, and they looked up and met the eyes of those within.

Somonik immediately launched into a rapid-fire discourse of the growls, roars and snarls that characterized the Draconian languages.

“*Good, he got their attention before they could do anything stupid.*” Ria said as the five officers listened. “*He says; ‘Greetings, I am Somonik, Speaker of the Circle of Ninety-Nine of the Draconians of Xervia, and Eldest of that nation with some sixty-five and one-half million years of life. You see here assembled with me the monarchs and representatives of every nation on Kellaran outside Serminak and Venak, and together we are The Assembly of The Just Alliance. We seek to conduct diplomacy with the most senior representatives of your government, and we ask you to bring this to their attention.’*”

The blue dragon at the railing of the flagship bowed his head and snarled in reply.

“*He says; ‘Greetings, I am Gaktanbak, Captain of The Crushing Claw, and Commander of The Bloody Fang Squadron. My Strike Officer will carry word to my superiors of this. Their reply may not be immediate.’*”

“*Somonik says that we will wait. He said that with a certain intensity, implying that we will wait while strongly preferring not to, and also implying that we may not wait that long.*”

Gaktanbak turned to the most ornately uniformed Sylvan beside him and communicated privately for a moment, and the Sylvan twitched her long, pointed ears, and disappeared.

“*That one is mightily displeased with her assignment, I can tell you that, though she hides it well.*” Ria confided.

“*And now Gaktanbak is forced by Draconian protocol to meet Somonik’s eye while we wait, and he is mightily discomfited by it. Even in Serminak, every dragon alive knows who Somonik is, and knows of his power, which is unmatched. The ancient white is obviously very disconcerting in such a stare-down, and he would hold it steadily for years if it was necessary. If the blue were an elf, I’d say he is already starting to sweat and itch. I wouldn’t put it past Somonik to mesmerize him through the Illusion. Look, Gaktanbak actually fidgeted, costing him much face in the eyes of his crew and in the eyes of the dragons here. He is certainly hating his life at this moment.*”

“*Maybe we can help the old gent out.*” Mark chuckled. “*Should I stare fiercely at one of the Sylvan officers?*”

“*No, Sylvan protocol is different, and it may be taken as a challenge to combat. Better to simply act nonchalant and unconcerned.*” Ria advised.

The Strike Officer returned in less than a minute, accompanied by a huge copper dragon who was easily the size of Kragorram, who hovered over the Serminak ship while room was hastily cleared for him at the front railing.

“*She’s a big one, isn’t she?*” Ria commented, correcting Mark’s misapprehension of the dragon’s gender. “*She says; ‘Greetings, I am First Flame Tekritimaki. I serve directly below my Lord. How may I be of assistance to you?’*”

“*Somonik says; ‘Greetings. We seek to enjoy ongoing diplomatic relations between our governments, abundant trade between our nations, and permanent peace on the world of Kellaran. We also have certain questions concerning the activities of some citizens of Serminak in Venak at the present time.’*”

First Flame Tekritimaki bowed, low and humbly.

“*She says; ‘I must apologize, for I am not authorized to discuss those issues with you at this time. Only my Lord may speak to those issues, and he is otherwise occupied. He has left strict instructions that he not be disturbed until another nine days have passed. I bid you to inquire again at that time. I will insure that this squadron remains here until then, to help facilitate your communication.’*”

“And Somonik says; ‘I see. May I inquire as to what activity so occupies your Lord?’

“Tekritimaki replies; ‘My Lord is engaged in astronomy, and has been thus occupied for the last twenty-seven days.’ She seems quite proud that her liege would ignore the world for thirty-six days at a time, in order to look at the stars.

“Somonik says; ‘These are crucial days. I am sure that there is some mechanism by which your Lord can be reached, should important events come to pass.’

“And she says; ‘There is such a mechanism, but it is only to be used in the event of the direst emergency. Even in that case, I would be beaten for disturbing my Lord’s observations. Can you give me reason why I should consider such a dire emergency to exist? Or give me reason to believe that you could not wait nine days for his attentions?’

“Somonik seems angry, and at a bit of a loss, but he will not give up that easily.”

Quewanak gracefully flared his transparent green wings, shook them a bit, and gently folded them again.

“In this context, what the Eldest does is a polite way of saying that he is about to interrupt the conversation.”

Tithian spoke privately in Mark and Talia’s minds. *“Your analysis of Draconian communication is accurate and fascinating, Ria, and you should continue it. But allow me to save you the effort of the translation of the language itself.”*

With that, she passed Mark a Draconian to Trade Common translation spell. Since it was a spell of The People of Morning and designed to be used by a unicorn, it took him a few seconds to translate it, grasp it, transpose the power requirements, and cast it. By that time Quewanak had already begun speaking, and Mark had to think back on what had just been said as he caught up with the conversation.

“Perhaps you could help me on a possibly unrelated matter. Greetings, by the way. I am Quewanak, formerly ruler of the Draconian race, and with one hundred and twenty-two million and some odd years of life, I am The Eldest Draconian.”

“Tekritimaki is shocked to her core.” Ria commented. *“She is not even going to bow to him, she is so flabbergasted. The Eldest is nonchalant, having obviously counted on this reaction.”*

“I seek someone I knew some forty million years ago, who preferred to be known at that time as The Darkest Black. He would be about ninety-five million years of age now, and is certainly the eldest on the continent of Serminak. I sense him some nine hundred and sixty kilometers to the north-east of the geographical center of the continent. Perhaps you could give him a message for me.”

Tekritimaki couldn’t even bring herself to speak for a few seconds.

“You... You speak of my Lord! You can sense his location?!!! From this distance?!!!”

“Oh yes. I think he has a few shields around him as well. Although technically, I am not sensing his location from here, since I am not here. I am sensing his location from a far more distant place.”

“A few shields...!!”

“And that is a hard swallow of pure terror on her part.” Ria mentally snickered.

“My Lord has spoken of you! Honored Eldest, it is thought that you have been dead for many eons!”

“Obviously not.”

The copper dragon stared in amazement for another few seconds, then shook her head as she tried to gather her thoughts *“My Lord will indeed wish to know of this, possibly without delay. For this, I will accept the beating. What message may I deliver to my Lord from Quewanak the Eldest?”*

“Only this; Let the past be the past. I would speak with you in this new time.”

“It will be done, Eldest.” Tekritimaki said as she bowed deeply, but as she straightened, she continued to do no more than stare.

“Is there something else?” Quewanak inquired.

“Your pardon, Eldest. It is just that it occurs to me that if I bring this to my Lord’s attention, and it is subsequently discovered that you are an impostor, he will give me an eternity of pain for my error. But it is difficult to discern the truth of the matter from your astral projection as viewed through an Illusion.”

“I understand. And I declare by the soul of holy Amirgath himself that I am indeed Quewanak the Eldest, and that I am indeed alive in body and mind, though I choose to communicate through this astral projection at this time.

“Besides that, I have Somonik here to vouch for my identity, and you can easily confirm his identity by conventional means, and we all know that he would no more lie about such a thing than turn into a tree.”

Tekritimaki glanced over at Somonik, back to the Eldest, bowed in what Ria judged to be an almost groveling manner, said; ‘Thank you.’ and vanished.

Somonik clacked his claws, and there was sudden silence as the sounds of the sea, the wind, and the creaking of rigging abruptly ceased.

“Well done.” Somonik said as he turned to Quewanak, and he actually grinned. “And you were right; your old enemy is behind everything again.”

“We have to avoid thinking of him as the Eldest’s old enemy, or we’ll just end up making him our *new* enemy, and we still don’t have anything that proves he’s responsible for the actions of the conspiracy!” Mark determinedly stated.

“*If you choose to think so, but cattle do not become cats.*” Quewanak insisted. “*Darkest has obviously changed a great deal, but it is becoming clear to me that he is really no better for it.*”

“*Still, you are correct in that we must be careful to be civil with him, so long as a realistic chance of ensuring peace exists.*”

“*If he comes, he will be quick about it. Be ready.*”

They waited for less than another minute, then a similar window Illusion appeared hundreds of meters above the Serminaki flagship. Somonik raised his own window to be level with it, and those on the ships below were left out of the conversation.

The illusory window they faced across sixty meters of open air and the shimmer of the Boundary was only slightly larger than the one they looked out of, but within it was the biggest room any there had ever seen. Judging by some barely visible Sylvan hurrying along the far wall, it was most of a kilometer in diameter. It appeared to have been constructed in a crater or volcanic bowl, and then roofed over with an artfully ribbed steel dome, or perhaps it was a cavern formed by an underground sea of oil or water that had been drained and re-enforced. Almost everything in it was black or red stone, and illumination was provided by huge fireballs over ten meters in diameter that burned with no visible support or fuel supply thirty meters above the floor, spaced fifty meters apart.

After a sufficient moment to allow the mood and monumental nature of that view to fully register, a dragon gradually appeared within it, fading into view just far enough from the viewpoint to be completely visible, almost filling the window. Mark couldn’t help thinking that this was the most striking dragon he’d ever seen; black with gold and silver accents, almost too muscular to be sinuous, but not quite. Each large black scale had a thin band of silver at its edge, his claws were gold, as were his eyes, his eyebrow ridges, and his sharp teeth, and the bones of his wings were outlined in gold as well. He had a prominent row of dorsal spines that ran from the top of his head to the tip of his tail, and two large, curved horns over his eyebrow ridges, all tipped in silver.

He was holding a small copper dragon around the base of its neck with one hand, his grip unshakable with the tips of his claws dug in a bit. He held the copper drake high above the floor, and when it struggled a bit and flapped its wings, he casually gave it a violent shake to take the fight out of it.

Then things snapped into perspective as Mark realized that the comparatively small copper dragon was First Flame Tekritimaki, who was the size of Kragorram; at least sixty meters from her nose to the tip of her tail.

“*Sweet mother of all!*” Mark marveled to Talia over their Link. “*He must be a hundred and eighty meters in length! Ninety meters high as he sits there!*”

Talia only squeezed his hand in response.

There was no conversation initially, as each side took the other’s measure.

Somewhat surprisingly, it was Grakonexikaldoron who broke the silence from her place at the rear of the delegation. “That aura! Zarkog?!! Is that *you*?!! *You’re* the Dragon Lord of Serminak?!!!”

“Grakonexikaldoron.” The Dragon Lord nodded. “Yes, it is I, and I do hold that position. Are you well?”

His voice was incredible, and was almost like two voices. It was a smooth and deep baritone, duplicated a full octave lower by a quaking rumble of awesome resonance and power. Mark felt exactly what people meant when they said his voice made their bones vibrate and their chests feel funny.

As he thought this, Gran was replying. “I am quite well, thank you, and you?”

“I am quite well also.”

“This person is your friend?” Somonik carefully asked.

“We have Spoken occasionally on the subject of astronomy, usually it’s more esoteric and theoretical aspects.” The gold dragon replied. “I only know Zarkog as a shining intellect and an fascinating conversationalist. Certainly one of the most pre-eminent of astronomers for the last several million years, but reclusive, and not prone to a great deal of communication. He has not contacted me for some six thousand years, so I knew he was working on something important. The only visual contact we had was the sharing of sky-scapes. I did not know he was as big as a mountain!

“Truly Zarkog, you present an astounding and handsome figure!”

“I do try to take care of myself.” Zarkog smiled, and turned to the Eldest, scrutinizing him for a moment.

“Quewanak? Is that truly you?”

"It is." The eldest nodded. *"You are he who was known as The Darkest Black some forty-one million years ago?"*

"I am." Zarkog nodded thoughtfully. "Tell me, how's your head?"

"It still gives me a twinge, every now and then. How's your neck?"

"It's fine now, but it was a hard recovery. One vertebra higher, and I'd have died in moments. I cannot guess how you survived! I saw your brain exposed!"

"As you say, it was a hard recovery. I take it you missed the crevasse?"

"I did not. I jammed at the bottom in an awkward position, completely paralyzed."

The Dragon Lord paused a moment, then shook his head in wonder. "By the gods, you truly are you!"

"And you're you. Now that we've established that, perhaps you could cease asphyxiating your First Flame before she expires."

"Oh? Right, of course." Zarkog said as he set Tekritimaki down and casually Healed her.

"That will be all for now." he told her as she rose to her feet, a trifle unsteadily. "Return to your duties. Take your choice of prey and mates tonight, and take tomorrow off."

"If I may truly have my choice of mates, I will await you in your quarters, that I may serve you further, my Lord." Tekritimaki respectfully told him as she bowed to the floor.

"You may." he replied, and she assembled what dignity she could and took her leave, while he turned back to Quewanak.

"I lay in that crevasse for three years, you know, before I could heal myself enough to move. Starving, drinking rainwater when it fell, and occasionally almost drowning in it, unable to sleep from the pain. I had a great deal of time to think.

"I realized that you had sacrificed yourself. You were the Eldest, the pact had not yet been passed, all the power in the world was yours. You did not have to answer my challenge, you were well within your rights to order any and all to slay me instead. Some would have sneered, but they would have been few, since it was generally recognized that you could not defeat me. Yet you accepted my challenge. And as I replayed our battle in my mind, again and again, I saw that you knew that you would not survive, that you accepted your death so that you could kill me, for only in that way could you be sure that the pact would be passed. In order to give up your own rights to rule unquestioned and to hunt horn-horses, you sacrificed your life.

"Again and again I silently railed at the stupidity of it, and I could not understand why you would do such a futile and self-destructive thing! But finally, as I groped for understanding, I saw the value of altruism, and I was humbled.

"When I was capable of cautiously checking the state of the world to see if you had died, I learned that it was assumed that we both had. And with both of us thought dead, any could say what they truly thought of the two of us, without fear of retribution, or benefit of reward. And you were ennobled as a hero, having given your life in the greatest act of bravery, honor, and self-sacrifice the world had seen to that time. I was reviled, my title used as a curse, and a label for those who were selfish villains, and a joke. Where is the darkest black? In the lair of the dead! Haw haw haw.

"In the crevasse I had been trapped with one eye pressed against the stone. With the other I could see only the unchanging stone walls of the crevasse, and a slice of sky. Denied any meaningful touch or feeling, or taste or scent or sound, the sight of that slice of sky was the only physical experience I had to keep me sane.

"I grew to love the sight of the stars, and wondered which of them were circled by other worlds, and which of those had life, and people, and astronomers, and whether one of those was looking at me across the unknowably vast void, seeing me trapped in the crevasse but too distant to assist me.

"When I regained my health, I turned away from the world, turned away from my grandiose plans and schemes. I took back my name and my natural light blue coloring, and dedicated myself to astronomy and the search for other life among the stars. It has occupied my nights for the last forty million years.

"I dedicated my days to improving my ability as a fighter and as a spellcaster. Having had one agonizing, terrifying, and soul-crushing defeat, I was determined that I would never risk suffering such an experience again. It was many eons later, when I knew myself to be many times more dangerous than any mortal being had ever been, that I finally began to feel safe again.

"And I found what I was seeking all that time, just less than five millennia ago! I learned to cast lenses from magic itself, vast circular spells out in the void past the moons, bending light to my eyes! First I learned to find worlds around the closer stars, and then to see if they had air and water and land, and then to see if they had cities with artificial lights glowing on their dark sides! And among the billions of stars there are billions of worlds, and tens of

thousands of them have life as we know it! I have confirmed the existence of at least nine hundred and twenty-one worlds bearing intelligent life!”

“*I must congratulate you on your achievement.*” Quewanak nodded. “*And having found life on other worlds, what led to your decisions to re-color yourself so dramatically, and to become the Dragon Lord of Serminak?*”

“Ah. To reveal that, I must ask that what I am about to tell you be kept among you. This is dangerous knowledge, and not something that we want widely known by your people or mine.”

“*This is a public gathering, Zarkog. We are responsible to our peoples for the truth.*”

“Then tell your people the truth if you so choose, but first let me tell you what I know privately. Once you’ve heard what I will say, you will *not* choose to announce it to your citizenry, I am certain of that.”

“That is fair.” Somonik stated. “Let all who are not monarchs, councilors of nations, or senior commanders clear the room.”

When the service staff and advisors had left, Somonik cast a spell that sealed the hall.

“You still have all manner of small folk there. Far too many to keep such a secret.” Zarkog opined.

“This will have to do, since every one of these folk have as much standing here as myself or the Eldest.”

“*Most have more standing than I, actually.*” Quewanak snickered.

“Foolishness.” Zarkog stated dismissively. “At any rate, know that of the worlds with intelligent life that I have found, some are capable of feats that are far beyond us. I first became aware of this when I found a star circled by more than three hundred worlds and moons, and eleven have so much artificial light showing on their night sides, that their entire surfaces must be covered in cities. They are most certainly able to travel from one of their worlds to another. The possibility that so many civilizations developed and exist in isolation within the same planetary system can be considered to be zero.

“Some time after that, I spent some three hundred years watching a moon with a diameter of some three thousand nine hundred kilometers being moved. It left its orbit around a giant outer world, and took up an orbit much closer to its star. The orbital forces of it were obviously carefully planned, since it was done in a manner that caused almost no disturbance in the other worlds and moons that orbited that star. But no other sign of life was visible around that star.

“Then I found another well-lighted world, sailing through the void from one star to another at impossible speed.

“These filled me with a fear that will never leave me. The energies involved make everything we have ever achieved in spell casting or engineering seem as a puff of breath compared to a typhoon.

“I knew I needed to learn whether any of these distant peoples could ever become a threat to us. I believe that I have reached the theoretical limits of the ability to focus light. We will never be able to focus our vision so finely as to be able to observe the actions of individuals on other worlds.

“So, I took my search in other directions, and I developed the Psionic Distant Listener. I constructed it as a device, since there are so many spells involved that even I could not keep them all in mind. I poured my power into it for one hundred and ninety-one years before I detected the first vague images and thoughts from the distant void. Soon I found more and more, but when I looked in the directions I detected the thoughts coming from, I could see no corresponding worlds. Nor could I detect any thoughts from the inhabited worlds I had seen. I could only assume then that the civilizations that produce the most light are not the ones that have the most total psionic ability.

“At first it was completely indecipherable, but I gradually became able to make some sense of what I was receiving. I receive the psionic output of an entire world at once, and only the most commonly repeated patterns are distinguishable after a great deal of careful study. The thoughts and languages of it are in every case so alien as to be untranslatable, but the sights and sounds of it have been absolutely enlightening.

“I detected discernible thought from twenty-seven distant civilizations scattered about the sky. The more alike they are to us, the more of their thoughts can be discerned.

“Let me show you something.” Zarkog cast a quick Illusion. “This is a fish.” He erased it and cast another. “This creature is almost identical in appearance, and while it also looks like a fish, it is in fact a reptile. This one looks like a fish, but is an insect. And this one also shares the same look, though it is a mammal. They all have the same shape, because it is the most efficient shape for a creature that spends its life swimming in water. Form follows function.

“I have found that there are creatures and peoples on other worlds who are superficially similar to dragons, and to other creatures and peoples on our world. Form follows function. And there are people who are so different from anything here as to be indescribable.

“But I found no reason to believe that any other world’s peoples could affect us in any way without millions of years of very determined effort. The void is simply too vast, so vast it is incomprehensible; there are no numbers large enough to describe the extent of it. Even the world that moves between stars at impossible speed could not reach us for four hundred million years, and it is not moving toward us. I almost began to feel safe again.

“And then I began to systematically scan every direction outward from Kellaran for thoughts that came from places that were relatively close. Even though I had detected no signs of life around the closest thousand stars when I had looked in visual light, I decided that it was worth checking the vicinity again with the Psionic Distant Listener.

“What I have discovered is as dire as anything I had imagined. Let me illustrate what I have found.

“*This has to do with the Nexus!*” Tithian urgently and privately told those around her.

Zarkog turned and cast an astronomical Illusion on the black floor behind him as the fires overhead dimmed to a fraction of their output.

“Here is our star, and here is Kellaran with its three moons, and the circle that marks our yearly path around our star. Kellaran is the fourth world out from the sun, and these are the three closer worlds, all smaller, lifeless, and without moons. And as you can see, there are two more worlds that are smaller than ours and more distant, the farther one circled by a single moon. These six can be considered to be our star’s inner worlds, for they are distinct from the outer worlds by size, composition, and distance.

“It is interesting to note that of all the life-bearing worlds I have detected, Kellaran is the second largest. And so far as I have been able to detect psionically, ours is the only world inhabited by more than one intelligent race. Those two facts are likely related.

“We move our viewpoint much farther back, and now you can see our star’s eight outer worlds, all many times larger than Kellaran, all having many moons, all almost certainly lifeless. We move back again, much farther than that.”

The circles marking the worlds’ paths around the star shrank until the largest was barely visible, and then the dozen closest stars moved in at the edges of the Illusion’s area.

“*This is it!*” Tithian panted in excitement. “*What he is about to reveal concerns the core matters of the nexus, I can feel it!*”

“Two hundred and seventy-six years ago I made a shocking discovery. I detected very strong psionic emanations coming from this direction, and half a year later I was able to triangulate the distance.” Zarkog said as a spot glowed one-third as distant from Kellaran’s star as it’s nearest neighbor. “Three years later I was able to plot the direction and speed of the psionic source’s movement. It is moving directly toward us. I realized that it would be able to arrive here at a time that is now only six more years in the future.”

“I considered carefully what this could mean, and realized that steps needed to be taken to defend Kellaran against possible invaders from the void.” Zarkog continued. “I looked about, and realized that the races of our world were hopelessly divided, undisciplined, and self-concerned. I decided that it was my responsibility to prepare for the defense of this world. The Sylvan and dragons of Serminak seemed like they would be the most difficult to organize, yet had the greatest military potential, so I started here. I took a bit of time to design a suitable social structure and a system of administration, and then I became The Dragon Lord of Serminak. This appearance was chosen to inspire my forces, and can be considered the uniform of the post. Since that time I have been building our military capability.

“Then, one hundred and eighty-seven years ago, I made my most incredible and dire discovery thus far. I discovered another source of psionic emanation, here.”

A point was marked a third of the way around Kellaran’s star from the first one, higher as well, and further away, being half as distant as the next nearest star.

“It is also approaching us, and at a much higher speed than the other, though it is losing speed more rapidly as well. It will be able to reach Kellaran in eight and one half years.

“They are both now within the distance of our star’s outer worlds. You see now the path of their flight and their present positions, and now their projected paths, taking them within the orbits of the inner worlds, where they will certainly execute final maneuvers, for their present courses and decelerations would have them both eventually impact with the sun.

“At this distance, I have been able to achieve some results in my efforts to identify these emanations, both psionically and visually. I have been able to prove by observing them that psionic thought travels across vast distances much more quickly than light, perhaps by doing so through the medium that Translocations pass through. This does much to explain my inability to match the locations of distant civilizations I have sighted with those I have detected psionically. The mathematics necessary to correlate it all are not yet completely developed.

“The first of the two psionic emanations are a cluster of sixteen small artificial worlds, each some half a kilometer to forty-three kilometers in diameter, inhabited by a completely alien race with very little psionic output as individuals, and thus I can tell you nothing of them beyond that they seem very determined. Determined to do what, I do not know. Their aggregate emanations were only detectable initially because they number over seventeen billion

individuals. Mitigating this distressing number is the fact that I think them to be very small, perhaps no larger than gnomes, based on the size of features on their worldlets that must serve the function of doors.

“As for the other source, it has been identified more precisely, and the truth could not be worse.

“We all know that seven million, four hundred and sixty-five thousand years ago, Kellaran was invaded by a race not of our world. They conquered half a continent and created a new race from one of ours in less than fifty years, and threatened to exterminate us all before being obliterated by the collective might of the gods of Kellaran. They said that they came from another kind of reality, but that was a lie to make them seem more dangerous, and to prevent us from searching for their origin. They merely traveled through another reality. They are from our own reality, and they are about to return here. This object is an irregular piece of rock some nine hundred and twenty kilometers in its largest dimension, and it is inhabited by demons. Millions of them. Perhaps billions.”

The delegates of The Just Alliance had been listening in avid fascination, but at this they erupted into a cacophony of exclamations.

“And you plan to fight the demons with the military you have built on Serminak?” Somonik pointedly inquired, loudly enough to be heard over the noise.

“Not exclusively.” The Dragon Lord admitted. “I have plans in place to bring the other races under my influence. They will then be subjected to military reforms similar to those I have enacted here. They are soft and undisciplined now, but having established a reliable system here in Serminak, it will not be difficult to quickly duplicate it all over Kellaran. This is necessary to ensure the cohesive defense of our world. You will have to excuse me if this discomfits any of you. Things have not proceeded nearly as rapidly as I had hoped, but sufficient time still remains.”

This triggered a louder roar from the assembly, this one of outrage.

“Zarkog, you have been engaged in astronomy for most of the last month, and it is obvious that you did not refresh your knowledge of international current events before you came rushing to see me.” Quewanak sternly stated. “I strongly advise that you do so now, before we go any further.”

“I will do so.” Zarkog nodded, oblivious to the uproar he’d created. “I will return shortly.” He faded away over the space of a second, leaving the view into the vast darkened cavern, his astronomy display still active on the floor.

“That’s funny.” Mark commented with a wry smile. “He was unaware of everything that’s been happening in The Just Alliance and Venak. He’s about to find out that the whole world has changed in the last few days, and he missed it.”

“He’ll know it soon enough.” Yazadril stated firmly, thinking furiously enough to furrow his brow. “This is bad. He would not lie about the demons and the worldlets. He knows that our own astronomers will quickly confirm or deny the truth of it, having been shown the locations and paths of these objects.

“We’re already working on it. We’ll have visuals in a few minutes.” Grakonexikaldoron stated.

Mark shuddered slightly as everything sank in a bit, then he pulled himself together with a grim expression. “All right. I’d really like to know what happened with the demons seven and a half million years ago. What kind of abilities and weapons did they have, and how many of them were there back then? What kind of damage did they do, and how did the fight against them go?”

“Briefly, the demons appeared suddenly, with no warning, several thousand strong, on a land mass that has since subsided, and is now the ocean between Xervia and Serminak, which were then a single larger continent.” Somonik explained. “Cruel and voracious, they treated every creature as prey, from mice to dragonkind with no distinction between them, and took great delight in inflicting the maximum of suffering before slaying and eating their victims. Their fighters ranged in size from that of a small dog to as large as myself, for they grow constantly when well fed. They are vicious with tooth and claw and horn, and not above such weapons as swords and spears, though they never showed any particular skill in that regard, relying instead on strength, speed, and aggression. They utilized strange and terrible sorceries as their primary means of combat, against which there was initially no defense, and from which there is no healing. My maiming was done by demon-fire, early in the conflict. They were able to choose the configurations of their bodies, and could grow wings or tails if they so desired, or extra arms or legs, or horns, antlers, spikes and spines of any sort. Every part of them is poisonous to every form of life on Kellaran; their breath, their spittle, their droppings, their flesh and blood.

“The demons had their way of it in the beginning. Only those in their vicinity contested them. They were few at first, and were not considered a threat by more distant peoples, but they expanded their depredations and their populations quickly. Within six years all of Kellaran was fighting them, and losing. Our nations were not truly unified, and each fought the demons on the front closest to their homelands. The demons were just as glad that we attacked them, for they were as content to eat our war-dead as to hunt us, and it saved them a great deal of traveling.

Each death in the war only seemed to make them stronger, for they delighted in each other's pain and suffering as much as they did in ours, and they ate their own dead as eagerly as they ate ours.

"Initially the gods were content to provide aid through their priesthoods in the form of power, spells, knowledge on how to counter the demons' spells, up-to-date information, and mighty weapons. But it was not nearly enough.

"Glishkerkughthak, the Kwetkerthok God of Life, was the first deity to take a direct hand. His race was being decimated, the demons having arrived in the heart of gargoyle territory. He slew one out of every four demons on Kellaran in his first day in the fight, every one that he could kill without endangering his people or ours, and by then there were millions of demons. They withdrew from the battle and hid from his wrath for two days, and then all of them working together, they baited him and attacked him with all of their power and their hate. It's said he was nearly slain, and he was driven absolutely insane. None know how this was done. His screams could literally be heard by every person and creature on Kellaran, and we were all tortured with it for a period of eight minutes and eleven seconds that seemed to last an eternity. It took the other gods to rescue him, and it took them over two eons after that war to Heal him from an inescapable nightmare of absolute suffering and horror.

"The torture of Glishkerkughthak united the gods and peoples of Kellaran against the demons. Four out of every five remaining demons were slain the next day in an assault by the gods, and if I'd managed to convince Kellaran's armies to stay out of their way, the gods might have exterminated the demons and ended it that day. But the peoples hungered for revenge and pressed the attack at that seemingly opportune time, and thus some demons escaped, because the gods could not strike at them when they were engaged in close combat with us.

"Then the demons became serious. They had been content to warden us as prey and playthings before that, but they became bent on the extermination of all the gods and intelligent peoples of Kellaran. They had a Gate through another reality from which they'd originally emerged, and now new hordes of them poured forth from it, accompanied by what became known as 'greater demons'. Greater demons were not quite gods, but if a few hundred of them worked together, they could hold a god at bay, and a few gods were wounded. If a few thousand had been able to trap one, they could have slain a god, and perhaps broken reality to do it, but they never succeeded in doing so. They bred the Sylvan to aid them, though they had not bred enough of them to make a difference by the time the war ended. The gods and peoples of Kellaran were battled to a standstill, and the demons began to gain the advantage by sheer numbers, until Glup of the Zurb destroyed the Gate, ending the enemy's constant reinforcements. Almost all of the demons were dead within a year after that, but it was another six years before Amirgath proclaimed that the last of them had been hunted out and exterminated.

"That was a good time; all the gods and peoples of Kellaran united in victory. But the gods then resumed their aloof ways, and the people returned to their lands, and soon the same old bickering and divisiveness and hatreds returned."

"They will be prepared for us this time, and prepared for the gods as well." King Dren stated worriedly, having made his way over with many others to hear the history of the demon war.

"Will they?" Mark rhetorically asked. "As Somonik said at the founding meeting, there's more power and more population on Kellaran than there were the last time, a lot more. Our magics are far more sophisticated, and you can bet that if Zarkog knows the demons are coming, the gods are sure to know it too, and there's more gods now as well. We'll be prepared for the demons this time, and it'll be them that are caught by surprise."

"True. Still, I doubt we'll be able to escape from this completely unscathed. People are going to die before this is over, and die horribly."

"Hey! Not if we can help it, right?" Mark told him, a bit alarmed at the Finitran King's sudden pessimism.

"What? Do you really think there's a way to defeat the demons without losing a single life?" Dren demanded. "I admire your optimism, if not your sense in this matter!"

"Look, they've been detected before they could strike at us, and that's crucial!" Mark insisted. "Right now all those demons are millions of kilometers away from anything, surrounded on all sides by the deadly void, protected from it by a big rock. It seems to me that this would be a good time to blow it up, don't you think?"

He turned to Somonik. "When we were trying to see over the Wards of Venak, did we succeed in finding ways of surviving the void?"

"We have, for short periods, at great cost in power and effort." Somonik confirmed.

"We need to work on improving that, and we need to work on finding every other manner of visiting destruction on the demons from the greatest possible distance! And we need to find a way to get someone up to those sixteen little moons or whatever they are right away, and find out if the inhabitants are our enemies, or possibly our allies, or something else entirely. And I do mean right away, let's get people working on those things right now!"

“I agree. I am directing that work to begin as we speak.” Somonik nodded. “The researchers of Xervia will be tireless in their efforts, until the answers we seek are discovered.”

“We’ll have everyone working on it who’s capable of contributing, from every nation in The Just Alliance.” Yazadril nodded. “This research has to take priority over everything else. Tithian’s people can co-ordinate it, they have the best theoreticians available right now.”

Suddenly rulers all over the room were hurriedly communicating with their subordinates.

“I have an idea, inspired by something Zarkog said.” Grakonexikaldoron revealed thoughtfully. “If we cast a great magic lens between the sun and the demons, and I mean as large as we can possibly make it with every qualified spell-caster we have, we can focus enough heat and light onto the demons’ rock to boil it. We may have to wait until they move closer for that, however. They could not dodge the beam, but if it takes too long to destroy them, they may find a way to block it or reflect it away before they are burnt. A rock nine hundred and twenty kilometers along it’s major axis contains an immense amount of material, and no matter how much energy we focus on it, it will not be destroyed quickly.”

“Now we’re thinking!” Mark grinned enthusiastically. “We’ll keep our chin up, and our courage too, King Dren. They’re still a long way from spilling our blood, and with some luck and effort, they never will!”

“Damn, you are amazing!” Dren admitted, and grinned to match Mark’s expression. “I think nothing would ever be impossible for you! You make me feel like a boy, and I’m over twice your age!”

“Uh, thanks!” Mark laughed, after being momentarily at a loss for a response.

Suddenly Zarkog reappeared in his window with a huge flash of red light.

“That is a very angry dragon, making a mighty effort at self-control.” Ria stated, with the conversational speed only a Link could allow. *“I’d say he thinks he made a bit of a fool of himself earlier. He should have checked the news before he spoke to the Eldest, and to us.”*

Quewanak noticed the Dragon Lord’s mood even faster than Ria, and quickly took the conversational initiative. *“Welcome back, Zarkog, and congratulations by the way on your magnificent achievement in Serminak. Ending the murderous ways of the Sylvan and the dragons there, achieving universal adherence to the rule of law and equal rights for all, eliminating the death penalty, these are monumental accomplishments, no matter that we may disagree on what rights the populace should enjoy. Such as those are seldom suitable for a society such as ours at any rate.*

“And your achievements in astronomy are not only masterworks in their own right, they have likely saved this world from the attack of the demons. We can never thank you enough for that, though I think it would have been wiser to share those discoveries soon after they were made. All of us could have been preparing for the challenge this entire time, with as much dedication as you have shown. I know you fear a panic among the populous, but we must let this truth be known, so that all can prepare for what they may truly face. The people can be brave enough, if they have to be. Better they know it in advance, than just as the demons attack.

“As an aside, congratulations on mastering Trade Common without magical assistance. Speaking it here has been very considerate of you, and we thank you. You’ve even got the human smile right. I’d have thought we don’t have the facial muscles for such an expression.

“We were just discussing several ways by which the demons may be destroyed long before they reach the inner worlds. And as I’m sure you’ve just learned, we of The Just Alliance are now firmly united, strongly disciplined, and far more prepared to face an attack than we were just a few days ago.

“We’re aware that you’ve brought Venak into your sphere of influence, and we have no disagreement with that. Renem is Venak’s lawful King, fully entitled to ally himself with you or anyone else, or to encourage immigration. Those who’ve left The Just Alliance to go there were mostly unsuited to our system, and will likely benefit from the harder discipline your methods enforce. Certainly they will find it much more difficult to break the law there than they did in our nations. We’ll be glad to help the Venaks out with supplies and building materials until they’ve fully integrated their increased population. On the other hand, if there are some productive citizens of Venak who are unsuited to your system due to their desire to reside in a just society with greater freedoms, we welcome their immigration to any nation in The Just Alliance.

“I see no reason why we shouldn’t agree on a treaty of non-aggression at the very least, open up trade, and cooperate fully in dealing with the threat of the demons.

Ria quickly commented. *“That was masterfully spoken, and the Eldest may have decided it all right there. This is a crucial moment. He praised the Dragon Lord’s accomplishments but presented our grievances, he showed the bait and the cudgel, he stroked his ego but kept him a little off-balance. Now all Zarkog has to do is say; ‘Thank you, where do I sign?’”*

Zarkog considered the Eldest for several long moments, then he scratched his chin in an eerily humanoid manner and shook his head a bit.

“It’s not the human smile, it’s the Sylvan one; slightly different. And my facial muscles do what I tell them to do, or I grow new ones. Sylvan cannot be trained to speak Draconian in any acceptable manner, and they had some three hundred languages among them. Trade Common was the closest thing to a common spoken language on Serminak, thus it is now the official language of my society, and I have learned this distasteful noise in order to command my troops. They have no law but my law, no rules but my rules, and the death penalty is a waste of a broken tool that can be repaired.

“You are not fully alive, as you have claimed to be. You are nothing more than a ghost, a harmless spirit haunting a stone without enough power to crush a moth, while your body lies comatose elsewhere. For your deception, I will find your body, and I will give you a thorough beating.

“Your seers’ detection of a great nexus some two years from now indicates that while the sixteen spheres will require six years to arrive, and the demons’ rock eight and one half, the battle will be joined long before then. Likely when the demons are in range, they will Translocate to Kellaran. Time is short. Every moment could be crucial.

“The task of defending this world has fallen to me, it is my responsibility and my destiny, and I have invested far too much effort to risk having my orders countermanded by the likes of any of you at a crucial moment in the coming battle. I am by far the most capable commander in any case, and we cannot afford to be commanded by any less than the best available. We will of course explore every manner of destroying the demons before they reach here, but we will do it under my command.

“The defensive efforts you’ve made in the last few days are a start, but doing less than everything possible may not be enough, and so we will do everything possible. Your nations will be militarized in the same manner as Venak, and to the same extent.

“You will surrender yourselves and your nations up to me. I consider it particularly urgent that the two straight-monkeys known as The Keys to The Nexus be delivered into my custody without delay.”

“And what would you want with them?” Somonik icily inquired.

“They will be examined in order to determine what properties of theirs make them so crucial to the outcome of the upcoming events, and when it is discovered, they will be utilized in whatever manner is necessary to safeguard life on this world.”

“We already know what their function is, and it is to supply us with creative wisdom and insight. They will hardly be able to provide any practical assistance while being examined like breeding stock.”

“That is your opinion on the subject, which has not been objectively verified. And you are being evasive, since the male is a unique magic anomaly of considerable and unknown power. I consider it far more likely that his value lies in our learning to duplicate his power, and in adding that ability to each of our fighters. To this end it is imperative that the phenomenon be understood completely.”

“And if we should respectfully refuse to surrender our freedom and our most cherished leader?”

“Ah. Well here is the crux of it, Somonik. A Sylvan female can be bred reliably at the age of nine years, and can produce an offspring or two every seven months for nine hundred years or so. Such fecundity was a key feature of their design, though they are seldom so prolific if left to their own childish ways. Draconian females can be bred at the age of seventy years, and under the right conditions, they will produce a clutch of twenty to thirty-five young, every eighty years, indefinitely. Both races can be battle-ready during nineteen-twentieths of their pregnancies and early childhood parenting cycles.

“Now, I have only been the Dragon Lord of Serminak for two hundred and sixty-nine years, but we have made good use of the time. I have under my command some four and one half billion Sylvan, fully four-fifths of whom are battle ready at any given moment, every one of those a skilled wizard. The Draconians of Serminak are now eighty-nine million, and even fewer of them are non-combatant at any given time. And with demons in our skies, don’t you dare whine to me about the population limitations of The Pact of Kraka.

“Given that only one in five of your nations’ populations are trained fighters, completely disregarding the cowardly races who would rather die than fight, we outnumber you in the field at about three to one. That is before I count my fresh troops in Venak, or my eleven million ogres, or several hundred thousand hives of the Swarm that I have under my command. Then you can consider that only a few of your fighters are wizards, whereas almost all of mine are, and that I have eighty-five million more dragons than you do, over eighteen times as many in fact.

“In short, I can kill every person in your so-called Just Alliance in about five days if I so choose. And while I don’t mind taking a few days to beat you into submission and to blood my troops, I will see you all dead rather than risk having you at my back when the time comes to fight the demons.

“And before you go prattling on about peace and co-operation between us, know that I did indeed direct my subordinates to initiate the activities you have described as the insidious conspiracy. I thought it worth an attempt to avoid open warfare in uniting this world under my command. I was fully aware of the methods my subordinates employed, if not the specifics of their actions, and I did approve of them. I do admit that the gas attack in Sming and the spell-craft attack in rural Finitra were wasteful and ill-advised, and those responsible will be beaten several times. But unless I have you all under my command, you will eventually seek to act against me for the deaths of your citizens at the hands of my covert fighters. And then I would likely have to beat you repeatedly, and there are too many of you for that to be practical within the time limits of the present crisis.

“So, I give you one hour. Surrender your authority to me and deliver up the Keys to the Nexus, or The Just Alliance as a whole will be beaten into submission, and my forces will have the opportunity for some seasoning. You are still very soft and peaceful, for the most part, and I doubt that I will have to kill more than one in thirty of you before you come crawling, if they are killed in a suitable manner. But my patience has its limits, and if you do not concede to me within ten days, I will kill you all.”

“What about altruism?” Mark challenged. “If you kill two-thirds of the world’s people, and exterminate most of the races doing it, how are you any better than the demons?”

Zarkog considered him for a moment. “You know, the main difference between a horn-horse and a straight-monkey is that a horn-horse or two makes a nice meal, whereas a straight-monkey is merely a snack.

“I generally do not speak to snacks, except to issue commands, but I know who you are; Key to the Nexus, Key to The Just Alliance, and so I will make this one exception.

“Mine is a greater altruism, for I have dedicated all of my time and my effort, and if necessary my life, to preventing the extermination of every intelligent life on Kellaran, which the demons will surely do if they are not exterminated by us. With my gains in Venak, I have a sufficient breeding population of every race except the horn-horses, the elves, and the cowardly races, and we will do without those if we must. Just as we will do without the rest of you, if we must. I admit to a dislike for the horn-horses, and the elves are too few and breed too slowly to be a viable race over the long term, not to mention that they are almost indistinguishable from other varieties of straight-monkeys. The cowardly races are fit to be prey, and nothing more.

“You have one hour.”

With that, the entire illusory window into Zarkog’s domain ended, leaving them looking at cloudy blue sky.

Somonik sat staring at the sky for a moment, then dismissed his own illusion.

“Can it truly be that bad?” Dren asked, his face ashen. “One hour to war or surrender? And can he truly have us that outmatched?”

“No!” Yazadril barked. “Even if what he says of his own forces is true, his estimate of our comparative strengths is skewed! While only a fifth of our population are professionally trained as warriors, another two-fifths can fight effectively, and they will if they have to! And while most of our fighters are not wizards, they are supplied with fearsome magically enhanced equipment, which we know from our prisoners that the Sylvan do not use!”

He took a breath and calmed himself a bit. “Furthermore, according to our prisoners, the quality of their wizardry is far inferior to ours in most cases, since our increases in the industrial use of magic and accompanying research over the last century had no counterpart on Serminak. The variety of our available techniques and tactics is much greater as well. And most of his dragons will be very young and very small, with barely enough intelligence to speak! His ogres and hives of the Swarm are worrying, but if he speaks the truth, their comparative numbers are minimal.

“*He would not lie.*” The Eldest asserted. “*He is too proud and egotistical to do so.*”

“So what do you think his comparative military strength really is?” Osbald asked, making his way to the fore.

“If we remain on the defensive... Even, or close to it. He can hurt us badly, but it would cost him dearly as well. He cannot exterminate us. By the time we were down to the last fifth of our populations, his would be as well, and at that point both of our societies would be so disrupted and scattered that it would be impractical to continue with large-scale hostilities. And of course at that point we would all be helpless to resist the demons.”

“He himself is a fearsome military force, should he choose to enter the fray personally.” Gran commented. “Particularly if what we were told of his prowess during his ascension to power is true.”

“How could he have gotten so big?” Talia asked. “Eldest, didn’t you say you were bigger than he was, back when he was The Darkest Black?”

“*I was. I don’t know how he managed such growth, but I’m sure it’s genuine. He wouldn’t bother with appearing any larger than he is, just as he wouldn’t bother with exaggerating his forces.*”

“Dammit, we have to find a way to avoid this war!” Mark cursed. “I’m sure none of us are considering just surrendering to him and joining his army! He’ll never let any of us who’ve sworn to justice go free, not ever, not even

if we do beat the demons with him! He knows we'll eventually try to get him for all the people he's had killed in our lands in his try for power! In order to remain unpunished, he'd have to keep most of the people in the world in slavery until we're all dead! But we can't just let millions of people get killed in a futile war that would leave us helpless before the demons when they get here!"

"There is no way to avoid this war, your words just proved it." Osbald stated firmly. "We will not surrender our freedom without a fight, and he cannot allow us to keep it.

"He says that he will beat us for ten days before he tries for our extinction, so presumably, he will not utilize all of his forces in the first attack. If we throw everything we have at his first wave in an instant counter-attack, we may bloody them so badly that he will re-think the wisdom of his ways, with minimal losses on our side."

"I say we refuse to play his game." Yazadril offered determinedly. "Forget about waiting the hour. Hit him now, and hit him hard. We take the Fast Response Force and the best we have from the rest of the units, break his Wards, disrupt his muster and his staging. We bring everything else we have that's mobile into the fight as fast as we possibly can. If at all possible, we kill or capture him. With him gone, there's a good chance that the rest of them can be convinced to not attack us. We suffer more initial military losses, but less in the long run, and it's the only way to keep this battle away from our own populations. We'll fight in Serminak as long as we can hold the momentum, and hopefully we'll be able to make it decisive, but if we lose the advantage we'll run back to our defenses and bleed them for every centimeter of our lands they gain.

"I'm putting it to a vote right now, for there's not a second to waste! If I lose the vote, we'll vote on Osbald's plan.

"First, are we agreed that we will not surrender, so long as there's any chance of victory? If you agree, say yes!"

The chorus rang out, and Somonik intoned; "Let the record show that all have agreed; we shall not surrender, so long as there is any chance of victory."

"All right. Are we agreed that we will strike first as I have..."

"Just a moment!" Mark interrupted. "We have the Eldest, who always knows where Zarkog is! I say we make killing or capturing the Dragon Lord our first priority, and make their muster and staging our secondary targets, or even leave them off entirely. They may be Sylvan and Dark Dragons, ogres and Swarm, but they haven't done anything to us yet, and if we can remove him from command quickly enough, they won't have to! Zarkog is our enemy, and he alone is ultimately responsible for the conspiracy's crimes, because it's almost certain that they'd have done nothing of the kind without his order!"

"I agree." Yazadril nodded, and brought forth his Truthstone for a moment. "These may be crucial already my boy, for they allow us to take Quewanak with us.

"All right, are we agreed that we will strike first as Mark and I have outlined?"

"Let the record show that all except seven have agreed." Somonik intoned.

"All right, you seven should use your mobile forces to augment our defenses and stationary emplacements, and be ready to cover our retreat. Are you agreed?" Yazadril sternly asked, and the seven nodded with some relief.

"We need to apprise our populations of everything that's happened and been learned here." he continued. "Have everyone who's incapable of effective combat evacuated to our safest locations as fast as possible, and have the rest made ready to defend our lands at a moment's notice. I want everyone who's capable of Flight and intercontinental Translocation with us on the attack, whether they do it by talent or spelled item. They have three minutes to be ready to go, no more and no less, no one leaves early or late.

"We'll make a quick stop at Venak on the way to Serminak. We'll crack the Venak Wards so we can tell them of everything we've learned, inform them that we're at war with Serminak, and invite them to stay out of it, with a dire warning of the consequences if they don't do so. The chance that they'll heed us is worth the effort. We'll stage where their border with Thon meets the sea, on the Thon side of course."

"Mark, Talia, you're with the lead group. We'll want GrimFang to crack the Wards."

Yazadril hugged Nemia with one arm as he and the rest of the delegates hurriedly communicated the urgent news to their people.

Then Mark remembered that he and Talia were also monarchs with a population that needed to be warned.

"*Sheramiv!!!*" he urgently called as he quickly forged a Link with their First Minister. "*Here!!!*" he said as soon as he'd established contact, and forcefully passed her his memories of the meeting, which she effortlessly accepted. "*Hilia's safer than anywhere, so I want you to find the least safe people in The Just Alliance; children and invalids in the most outlying and lightly defended areas, and bring them there. Use as many of our people as you need for defense, have the rest meet Talia and me at the staging on the call. Better yet, if any of ours have trained with other alliance forces, have them report to those units.*"

“Yes Mark.” Sheramiv answered, and turned her attention elsewhere, leaving a tiny trace of the Link active.

Talia Linked with her father just long enough to give him a quick thought, then withdrew from his frantically busy mind. “Mark must replenish his power. We’ll be ready for the staging.”

Yazadril gave her the psionic equivalent of an absent-minded nod.

“It’s not yet dawn at Focus Mountain.” Talia told Mark. “We should go to the east coast of Xervia, where it’s high noon. This will allow you to regain the most power in the time we have.”

“We’ll go to Focus Mountain first. I have an idea.” Mark said, and took them there. They appeared thirty meters above the south rim, and he cast a bright light on the smooth blue volcanic glass below. “Would you fetch our armor my love? I’ll be busy here for a few seconds.”

While Mark considered the stone, Talia Summoned their most battle-worthy armor. Both sets were articulated steel plate, perfectly fitted and heavily spelled, if lacking in ornamentation. She also brought their best bows and deadliest arrows, and a few of their most potent magic items, including their new crowns. She donned her armor and her items in an instant with a compound spell, and adjusted the angle of her bow across her back a bit. “Hold still.” she cautioned, then did the same for Mark. He appeared not to notice, so intense was his concentration

“I’m ready. We need a Translocation reference, somewhere where there’s good wizard’s rock so you can top up your power too.” he said via Link to save time.

“I have one, the Xervian port of The Sea People.” Ria said, and showed it to him.

He took them there, to an altitude of three hundred meters above the port, and brought a two meter thick, thirty-four meter wide disk of the Focus Mountain reflector with them.

He quickly adjusted it’s angle and distance below him to put himself in it’s focus, and had no trouble holding the immense weight steadily with his Levitation as he felt the reflected power begin to flood into him.

Meanwhile Talia had cast a quick Speaking to the nearest Sentry of the Sea People, identifying herself and Mark and asking that they disregard the massive blue concave disc that had appeared above their town.

“There’s a concavity in the ground over there that’s about the right size and shape.” she then pointed out. “You should set this reflector down there. You’ll save the energy of holding it up, and of sending it back to Focus Mountain. It should be safe enough there until we can come back for it.”

“Good thinking.” Mark agreed, and Translocated the two of them and the disk again, maintaining their relative positions as the round of stone settled into the soil.

He gathered her into his arms and hugged her, a bit awkwardly and noisily since both were armored.

“Are you frightened?” she quietly asked as they watched the Sea People frantically prepare their town’s defenses and organize their muster.

“Of course. Not so badly as yesterday morning though.” he chuckled. “That was *my* first battle too, you know. And having been through it once, at least this time I know I’m not going to lose my nerve and crap myself or anything. I wasn’t too sure about it then.”

“I knew you wouldn’t. And I knew that as long as you didn’t, I wouldn’t either.”

“Command Link test.” Yazadril’s psionic voice rang clearly in their minds. Mark could tell that it was being sent all over the world, boosted by thousands of powerful psionics. “Communication is confirmed. Command Link test. Integrity and security of the Command Link is confirmed.”

There was a long pause.

“Greetings and welcome. I am Yazadril, First Commander of the Militaries of The Just Alliance. Together, all of us in this Link are The Strike Force of The Just Alliance. Today we face a grave challenge. Our freedom has been threatened by Zarkog, Dragon Lord of Serminak, who has admitted responsibility for the insidious conspiracy. He has demanded our surrender, and threatened our safety and our lives should we refuse. Thus we are at war with him.

“Our goal today is to forcibly remove him from power. We who have knowledge of the Sylvan and the dark dragons have hastily conferred, and we believe it unlikely that those people feel any true loyalty to their Lord. They serve him only because they fear him. It is likely that with him gone, they will choose not to threaten us further, for the near future at least. So long as they fear his retribution, they will obey him, but if they believe his cause is lost, they will abandon him.

“Thus, we have organized the greatest attack force this world has ever seen. Some of our peoples have committed almost their entire populations to this operation. We number among us over three million elves, four million dragons, twenty million giants, fifty million gargoyles, one hundred eighty million unicorns, two hundred and fifty million dwarves, five hundred million gnomes, and six hundred and fifty million humans. Even I, who thought myself familiar with our military strength, did not suspect that we might bring over one billion, six hundred and sixty million warriors to the fray, all capable of Flight and Translocation, and all are either equipped with magically-

enhanced weaponry and armor, or are capable of spell-casting, or both. As many of our forces are not so mobile, and they remain with our peoples, to assist them in their defense of our homes. The Selkies patrol our waterways all over The Just Alliance, and The Hidden Nation lends them power.

“While our foe actually commands greater numbers than our Strike Force, they are dispersed over Serminak, and it will take them some time before he will be able to bring most of them to bear against us. We will arrive suddenly, darkening the skies over our target and striking fear into those who oppose us. We will fight with our hearts united by our love of freedom and by the justice of our cause, and with our minds unified by this Command Link, which is the greatest joining of minds that has ever been achieved. The worth of this technique was proven by Hilian forces yesterday, and it will greatly increase our effectiveness today.

“As many of you have heard, we can waste little time in dealing with this threat from Serminak, as our entire world faces invasion from the void. Demons draw ever closer to Kellaran as we speak, and every person here may be needed to defeat them.”

Yazadril gave the many who had not known that a long moment to realize the magnitude of the news.

“The world will be united in that struggle. If we fail here today, it will be united under Zarkog, and millions of us will be killed, as will many of our friends and families, long before the demons have even arrived.

“Thus far those in Venak and Serminak are not actively at war with us. If our mission could be achieved perfectly today, and every possible objective attained, we would capture the Dragon Lord, and the world would be united under the banner of The Just Alliance without another life being lost on either side. From there, it would be highly likely for us all, working together, to be able to obliterate the demons long before they can reach our world, or hurt a single one of our people.

“To this end, we will first break the Wards around Venak, then all one and six-tenths billions of us will appear in mass above their country, and our psionics will inform their population of the true state of affairs concerning us, the Dragon Lord, the demons, and the need for us to stand together against the invaders. They will be asked to join us, or to at least not stand with Zarkog against us. They will be warned that if they raise arms against any of us, we will strike them with all our might. We will then leave them in peace, and hope they decide to behave with wisdom upon our departure.

“We will break the Wards at the Sylvan Boundary, and the ones on the coastline of Serminak. As we arrive in the vicinity of the Dragon Lord, we will cast the same message of truth to the inhabitants of Serminak that we cast in Venak. From there, we will almost certainly have to settle for less than perfection. Zarkog will likely be dwelling in a highly fortified facility in the midst of their capital city, and if he will not come out in response to our challenge, we will have to dig him out. If we truly can apprehend him without a life being lost, I will consider it a miracle, though we will not ignore the possibility. We can detect his location, and we will drive straight for him, attacking only those who come between us and our objective. If some of them attack us, we will counter-attack them with overwhelming force in the most spectacular manner possible, in order to deter others from doing the same. We will neutralize the Dragon Lord as quickly as we can, then withdraw as fast as we came, minimizing our losses.

“This is a turning point in the history of the world. Everyone and everything is depending on us, and after today the world will be well on it’s way to universal freedom, or to universal slavery. I know every one of us will distinguish ourselves with honor.

“We begin in forty seconds.”

There was a pause, then they heard Yazadril privately, without the augmentation of the Command Link. *“Mark, Talia, will you be sufficiently replenished in that time?”*

“I’ll have a bit more power than I’d have on a usual day, if I’d neither exerted myself nor charged up at Focus Mountain.” Mark told him.

“I already hold as much magic as I’m capable of, so I’m spending the time storing extra power in some of my things.” Talia added.

“Excellent. Here are the Translocation references. It’s two hours to midnight in Venak, so cast a bit of Light so you can be seen. When Mark strikes the Wards with GrimFang, we’ll be Shielding you both as much as we are able. It’s possible that those Wards will collapse as soon as they are punctured, but unlikely, so you must be ready to force the crack open further with your power, and we will do what we can to assist you in that. Do what it takes. Every civilian within fifty kilometers of the Wards on our side has been evacuated. On the other side, very few dwell close to the border since Venak is mainly a sea-fairing nation, and according to our sources, they believe those Wards to be impregnable, so there will be minimal military presence on their frontier, if any. Most Venak settlements and cities are near the coastline, and their Wards extend some three hundred and twenty kilometers out to sea in order to encompass their territorial waters, so few of them will be in danger.

“You will then deploy with your Hilian contingent for our advance into Venak, where we will deliver our message. Upon my command you will proceed from there to the Sylvan Boundary, and once you’ve brought down enough of it to allow our passage, we will move through. We’ll repeat that process at the Serminak Wards. Once we’re over Serminak we’ll strike for Zarkog, and take things as they come after that.”

“I love you both. Bless you, and good luck.”

Mark and Talia spent the remaining seconds familiarizing themselves with the Translocation references and pre-casting spells.

“Advance to the staging.” came Yazadril’s order over the Command Link, and The Strike Force of The Just Alliance simultaneously Translocated into place from all over Kellaran, only six minutes after Zarkog had delivered his ultimatum.

Mark and Talia appeared some hundred meters in the air with Povon, Kragorram, Equemev, Silaran, Dulyamil and Meri, most of the Volunteers, and half the Atoned under the command of Relgemit. Ria manifested herself beside Talia to fully join in the endeavor. All were glowing slightly and neatly ranked in a loose cube. Povon held them all in her Link and tied them into the Command Link.

“Our other people have reported to other units they’ve served in previously?” Mark asked.

“For the most part.” Povon agreed. *“Yazadril had Silaran, Relgemit, and our more experienced officers among the Atoned stay with us, so that we are not completely bereft of military experience. He agreed that the rest would be of more use with the units they have experience with.”*

“I would not leave Equemev in any case.” Silaran added.

Yazadril gave everyone ten long seconds to look about, knowing how it would benefit his forces’ morale. He and the others of the command group were staged to the Hilian left, while above and below and to either side, and as far back as the eye could see, were staged the billion and a half plus of the strike force in three-dimensional ranks of well-spaced softly glowing cubes of various sizes. Their numbers were staggering to comprehend; the most awesome gathering of power the world had ever seen.

Directly ahead some sixteen kilometers was the endless black wall of the Wards of Venak, blocking out the stars and reflecting enough of the alliance forces’ glow to be visible.

“You should stay back here for this.” Mark told Talia.

“I stay with you, now and always.” was her reply.

“Thanks.” he told her sincerely, and gave her a clanking one-armed hug as they deepened their personal Link to battle levels, and Ria gave them a mental grin of encouragement.

“Sappers to the Wards.” came Yazadril’s command.

“That’s us, we’re sappers, at least for today.” Mark grinned as he Translocated them to the wall and drew his sword.

“GrimFang my friend, I hope you’re up to this. Don’t hesitate to let me know if you’re not.” Mark told his sword as he set it’s tip against the black surface, just as the Alliance wizards added a Shield of unimaginable power to the one he and Talia were holding between themselves and the wall, though neither impeded the huge black sword in the slightest.

GrimFang only radiated a bit more simple eagerness than usual, and perhaps a bit of pride at being used for a great task.

Mark slowly pushed the sword into the Wards against barely discernible resistance, and while this produced no other visible effect, Mark thought he heard someone psionically cry out in pain. He realized that it had come from the Wards themselves, transmitted through the sword. He slashed back and forth, was rewarded with a faint scream, and he knew that somewhere, one of the wizards maintaining the Wards was in agony. It appeared that the line closed behind the sword’s path almost immediately, but not quite, though fast enough that he and the other alliance spell-casters were unable to get a wedge of power in place.

He thrust the blade in to the hilt, and he and Talia took off flying along the face of the black wall, dragging the sword through its substance with accelerating speed. Dozens of the wizards holding the Wards were now screaming in Mark’s mind. The separation behind the blade continued to close immediately at first, but as their speed increased, the repair began to fall behind, and Ria was the first to drive a narrow wedge of Mark’s power into the gap.

Millions of alliance spells were immediately thrust into the breach, and an instant later Ria frantically warned them; *“It fails! Fall back!”*

Talia brought them back to the Hilian formation as Mark and GrimFang shared a moment of exultant victory, and then the Wards failed with a bright flash and a roar of explosive force that shook the world. The Just Alliance’s

Shields held against it and none were injured, but their Healers were kept busy for a few moments treating headaches, partial flash-blindness, ringing in the ears, and impaired hearing.

“Those were tough Wards, but simple.” Ria commented. *“No illusions, transducing spells, or embellishments of any kind. Just a wall of Force that blocked the light.”*

The Strike Force immediately Translocated into Venak, dividing into sections that took up station over every population center in that nation. The broadcast of The Just Alliance’s message began immediately, while those few in the late-night streets below could only stare up in shock, and frightened eyes peered up from the windows. A few tried to attack, but had no hope of cracking the alliance’s Shields, and they were not retaliated against.

With the message half delivered, Mark and Talia and a few million wizards, dragons and unicorns, including the Hilian contingent, were dispatched to the Sylvan Boundary. They were off the east coast of Serminak, in bright mid-morning sunlight, and there were no enemy naval forces in sight.

Mark touched his sword-tip to the shimmering transparent plane, and was rewarded by a huge discharge of energy.

“I think these Wards will fail suddenly.” Povon stated from sixteen kilometers back with the millions of spell casters. *“When threatened, it shifts immense power to the point of the threat, and quickly, but it is very integral compared to the black wall. I’d say it’s designers never dreamed that it could simply be punctured, and when it is, it will likely lose all integrity at once.”*

“Then wait until we’re done delivering the message here.” Yazadril ordered.

Mark remembered Kragorram’s experience in their first battle, and cast a thin, insulating layer of Force between his gauntlet and his hilt. Surprisingly, this did nothing to impede his communion with GrimFang’s rudimentary mind.

“Strike the Barrier.” Yazadril commanded half a minute later, and Mark swung against it with all his strength.

“Cut!” he commanded GrimFang, and GrimFang cut.

Even with all the Shielding that protected them, he and Talia were blasted back most of a kilometer from the Barrier’s line in the resulting explosion, and knocked senseless by it.

Povon gently caught them in a web of Force and started decelerating them long before they could strike the surface of the sea, and by the time they had slowed to half their speed, Yazadril, Nemia, and Hilsith were already beside them. Nemia matched their speed and course, and Yazadril cast a spell that cooled their armor to the ambient temperature, while Hilsith cast diagnostics on Talia and examined Mark manually.

“They are merely stunned, heavily bruised, and lightly burned. Their armor made the difference. Mark may have a mild concussion.” the Healer pronounced in great relief, which was shared by every soul in the Strike Force. “Talia is almost healed already, two seconds for me to complete it. Watch the sword, it’s white-hot.

“Talia? Talia, have Mark heal himself, or have him cast the spell that will allow me to heal him.”

Though barely coherent, Talia forced her mind to clarity enough to seize a little of Mark’s power, and used it to cast the vibrating spell on his skull that would allow him to be affected by wizardry.

“Though the magic of it was Shielded, the physical concussion in the air might have killed you if you were anchored to anything.” Yazadril told his groggy daughter as Hilsith diagnosed and treated Mark.

“Ouch. Thanks Hilsith, that’s much better.” Mark said, then dismissed the vibration in his skull as he experienced a moment of disorientation and almost wretched. Since they were still being decelerated, his body and his eyes disagreed on which direction was down. Once they reached a stop and he assumed control of his own flight, his wooziness quickly passed. He noticed GrimFang was still glowing white as Povon Levitated it beside him. He held his hand as close to the hilt as he could, and succeeded in establishing contact. To his surprise, it seemed GrimFang was primarily worried about his wielder’s well-being. They both experienced relief that the other was all right, then shared a moment of pride at their accomplishment. Mark carefully cast Cold on the blade, cooling it down gradually, it’s glow in his shadow fading to yellow, then orange, then red. After twenty seconds it was flat black again, and Mark closed his grip on the hilt.

“We’re battle-ready, sir.” he told Yazadril as he gave Talia a one-armed hug and a quick kiss on her forehead.

“Then proceed to the next objective.” Yazadril ordered over the Command Link, and the millions of The Strike Force cheered as they were simultaneously Translocated eight hundred kilometers to the coast of Serminak. They faced the black wall in the same formations they’d staged in outside Venak, but from eighty kilometers away this time.

“Sappers to the Wards.” Yazadril ordered.

Though they suspected that these were of the same type as the Wards in Venak, Mark took no chances, and proceeded as cautiously as he had the first time. Their suspicions were confirmed however, and he and Talia took off along the black wall, slashing it with GrimFang as they went and hearing the psionic screams of Sylvan wizards. The wind in their faces grew fiercer until it became a danger, then their Shields suddenly blocked it. This wall did not

succumb so easily as the first, and they slashed it for almost eight kilometers over the next minute, accelerating that whole time, before Povon managed to be the first of many to force her power into the crack.

"It fails!" she cried in triumph, and Mark and Talia barely made it back to their lines before the vast barrier exploded.

Mark barely had time to notice that there was a settlement on the coast there, behind the beach where the Wards had stood, and perhaps sixty thousand enemy forces had been arrayed in the air and on the ground, but all of them were seen to have been scattered by the blast as the alliance force disappeared.

It was just past dawn over the stronghold of the Dragon Lord when The Just Alliance's mobile forces appeared there, and just less than nine minutes after the ultimatum's delivery. It was indeed an extinct volcano capped with a steel dome, situated beside a vast metropolis whose suburbs covered the lower half of its slopes on that side. The strike force filled the skies for a kilometer and a half beyond the city in every direction.

Alliance psionics immediately began blasting their message at the awakening population below. *"We are The Just Alliance, and we have come for the Dragon Lord! We come for him, and none other! Stand aside and you will not be harmed! Stand between us and our quarry, and you will be slain! You cannot hope to stand against our might, so do not throw away your lives for nothing! Know as well that demons are approaching our world..."*

Meanwhile the strike force was rapidly concentrating over the mountain in response to the Eldest's confirmation that Zarkog was within it, and Hilia's forces joined most of the rest in blasting it with a roiling maelstrom of spells. Though they were at least three hundred meters above the dome, the reflected power of their own attack had to be deflected by their Shields or it would have devastated half the force. A moment later new destructive energies streaked skyward from the dome, cast by those within it, further straining the alliance Shields.

"It is incredibly heavily Shielded and Warded!" Somonik reported after a few seconds. *"Furthermore, the dome itself is an amazingly tough alloy, and is over ten meters thick! We can get through it all, but it will take some time, unless we wish to annihilate the population of this city with the overspill of our attack!"*

"Form Shields into a dome over the top half of the mountain to contain the energy!" Yazadril ordered. *"Concentrate our attack on a single point on the stone just under the lower edge of the steel dome! Give it all we have!"*

As that was being done, a force rose in flight from the city and began an attack on the alliance fighters. Though estimates would later place their numbers at two hundred and thirty-one thousand Sylvan with twenty-three thousand young dragons, they were almost instantly obliterated by the massive alliance response, and the few spells they'd managed to launch were harmlessly absorbed by the alliance force's hastily shifted defenses.

The attack on the mountain was resumed in earnest, then the alliance lookouts screamed in warning as a ball of energy three hundred meters in diameter came roaring into view from over the south-western horizon. The Strike Force hastily scattered out of its way, and only a few close to its path were killed by it as it streaked through them an instant later and impacted beyond the city, destroying a huge tract of farmland.

Suddenly the enemy were among them, millions of Sylvan and dragons in squadrons of thousands, having Translocated into place in the energy ball's wake, and Yazadril detailed half of his forces to deal with them while the other half resumed the attack on the domed volcano.

Hilia's forces were assigned to defend their sappers, and were soon cutting a swath through Serminak's soldiers like a snake of destruction with the Six at the head, Dulyamil and Meri bringing up the tail, the elves arrayed into an outward-facing tube between them.

A Sylvan recognized Mark and Talia and pointed them out as he cried; *"The Keys! There! Kill them!"* Relgemit's violet energy beam vaporized him a second later, but the damage had been done. Millions of the enemy turned and fired at them at the same time, and in a panic, Povon Translocated the entire Hilian contingent to the other side of the mountain.

"Relgemit, take command of our elves!" Mark ordered. *"Dulyamil and Meri, you're with them, guard them well! We six will try to draw off as many of the enemy as we can until the rest of you kill Zarkog!"*

"No!!! Don't leave us, you need us!" one of the elves screamed, and Mark realized it was Holanam The Lucky.

"You'd only slow us down!" Mark barked in return. *"Follow orders, and keep each other alive!"*

He gave no chance for further complaint, as the Six Translocated back to the part of the battle where they'd been recognized. A second later it happened again, and they took off, using all their power for flight speed and defense. They circled erratically halfway around the mountain, dodging destructions and accelerating as they went, and drawing almost a quarter of the enemy's force in their wake before they headed away from the mountain and north. The thunder as they broke the sound barrier was lost in the cacophony of the thousands of spells that exploded all around them, but their Shields protected their sight, their hearing, and their lives. When the strain of holding the Shields

began to tell, Mark, Povon and Equemev turned their flight control over to their mates, and Ria joined those three in turning back to face the way they'd come and unleashing a storm of destruction upon their pursuing enemies.

They spared a tiny bit of their concentration to mentally cheer when their allies broke through the Shields and Wards that protected the Dragon Lord's mountain.

To gain a few moments to breathe, The Six Translocated ahead five kilometers in their flight path without losing any of their momentum, checked a few moments to see if they'd be spotted, and when they were, they Translocated another five kilometers.

This brought them almost five seconds of reprieve, and they exulted to hear over the Command Link that the reduced force of enemies left at the mountain were being decimated by the Linked attacks of the alliance armies. Then the enemy's spells were exploding against their Shields once more, and the chase was on again. The number of enemy hunting them grew by the second, and their pursuit constantly became more effective. Soon they were Translocating in random eighty kilometer jumps every five or six seconds, and it suddenly became apparent that there were two dragons who were now leading the enemy hunt.

"This is truly becoming frightening!" Povon shrieked. *"We jump, and four seconds later there are the bronze and the black, just close enough to see but too damn far to strike, and a second after that the horde are all over us again! Like that, dammit! Those two have played this game before, and they're good at it! We're killing a few hundred of the quicker ones every time before we have to jump again, but there must be a quarter million of them on our tails right now, a tenth of them dragons!"*

Then the excited cry came over the Command Link saying that they'd broken through the stone under the edge of the steel dome and were inside the stronghold. This gave the Six the will to continue their deadly game of cat and mouse, knowing that every enemy that chased them was one less to impede the hunt for Zarkog.

Equemev began to wheeze from over-exertion in a worrying way, and Mark sent her and Silaran back to Hilia the next time the squad Translocated.

Four remained, running through the skies of Serminak, jumping a hundred and thirty kilometers every three seconds now, only the enemy were now managing to arrive in their new vicinity two and a half seconds later, and they were shaving a hundredth of a second off that time with every Translocation.

Then, just as they were getting confirmation that their unicorn friends had arrived safely and without being pursued, the crimson dragon was struck in his right haunch by a steel javelin. It had been hurled by a Sylvan, and speeded on its way by the spells of thousands more, piercing his faltering Shields.

"Kragorram!" Povon cried, even as Talia yelled, her psionics still strong.

"Take him home!"

The next time they leaped across the skies, only two emerged over Serminak. Two Translocations later, word came over the Command Link.

"Did we get him?" an unknown voice demanded.

"No!" Quewanak responded, his burning frustration obvious in his tone. *"He has fled, curse his shriveled soul! And I can no longer sense his location!"*

"Fall back!" Yazadril commanded, and a fraction of a second later his entire mobile military simultaneously Translocated back to their defensive assignments.

In Mark and Talia's case, they appeared in their grand hall, along with the rest of their forces, where Kragorram was being treated by a pair of elven Healers while Povon looked on in concern. More Healers hurried to assist arriving elves who had been injured.

"Thank the source!" Sheramiv breathed in relief after casting a quick counting spell. *"All of you made it back! One hundred fifty-seven injured, thirty-one seriously, none critically, none dead!"*

"It's our luck!" Holanam crowed happily. *"We put all our power into it, and this time I know it worked!"*

Suddenly the pre-dawn view out the huge magic window was blindingly brightened by millions of spells impacting against the Wards. The sounds of the breeze and the surf against the beach abruptly ceased as the sound spell was instantly overloaded.

"It looks like someone followed us home." Mark observed tiredly.

"Are we safe here?!" a Healer loudly asked without taking her eyes off her work.

"We are, for a while at least." Mark stated, as he closed his eyes and concentrated. The Wards were keyed to him and Talia, and he could read their condition. *"Some of the attacks miss because of the illusions and perception-distorting spells, and some are deflected, and some are transduced into something else and sent back at their casters. The rest are absorbed, and they're absorbing a lot right now. I'd say the first layer are about a quarter of the way to failure, but there's a lot of other layers. The last layer are Xervian Wards, and they draw power to maintain*

themselves from any attack that gets thrown at them. They can't be overpowered, they can only be overloaded, if you know what I mean, and that would really take a lot. On the other hand, there's really a lot of spells being cast out there."

"By the source!" Sheramiv breathed, having cast her counting spell again. "There are over a hundred and fifty million of them out there! Two hundred million... Three hundred million...! *Five hundred million! Nine hundred million!!!*"

"The first layer of Wards has failed." Talia quietly reported, her face going white. "So has the second."

"They didn't follow Equemev and Silaran." Mark stated thoughtfully. "They didn't follow Povon and Kragorram. They followed us. We'll let them get down to the last couple of layers of our Wards while we get our breath back, and then we'll go to Xervia. Our Wards have a lot of layers, and the last layer is of the same type as the Xervian Wards, but they're new and haven't had very long to charge up. The *real* Xervian Wards have been charged constantly by millions of wizards for millions of years. We'll get that horde out there to follow us, and see how long they want to pound their heads on the rock.

"How long until at least a quarter of the Focus Mountain reflector is in sunlight?" he asked

"Four hours." Sheramiv supplied, her face ashen and her limbs trembling.

"Too bad. I'll have to have the Xervians open a corridor in their Wards when it's high noon there. I'd take on anyone and anything, including that horde outside, if I'm in the focus at noon the way it is now."

"They are over two billion out there now." Sheramiv reported, looking like she was going to faint.

"Huh. It looks like they're sending their whole army after little old us." Mark nodded stoically.

"They're up to the second-last Wards." Talia stated, looking grim but determined. "We have to go."

"All right. If the horde keeps attacking here instead of following us, abandon Hilia. Use the Translocation Plates if you have to, but get everyone evacuated before the last Wards fail. Mind the Link."

"I will." Povon nodded.

Mark and Talia Translocated back to the Xervian port of The Sea People and resumed their position floating in the focus of the smaller reflector, both of them soaking up power like the warmth of a hot shower after a cold day.

"*They're leaving.*" Povon reported from Hilia with obvious relief.

"*Thanks.*" Mark told her with a grim smile. "*We can see that from here, actually.*"

The Xervian Wards were only a hundred meters offshore here, and Mark and Talia were only sixty meters back from the beach, so when two billion or so Sylvan and dragons appeared outside the Wards and began blasting at it with everything they had, they appeared like a colossal living wall across the world spewing fire and light, and a frighteningly close one too.

Suddenly Holanam arrived in mid-air beside them, and yelped at the sight.

"Is there any particular reason why you decided to join us?" Mark asked. "As you can see, this might not be the safest place right now."

"Ya. Iski said I should, and she's our best precog. You'll probably need some extra luck, and I think I'm getting good at it. Can you tell what I'm doing?"

"Yes. Your power isn't just making you glow like elves usually do. It's making a whole area glow for about three meters around, including around Talia and I."

"That's my luck field. I'm pretty sure it is, anyway."

"After what we just went through, we'll take it." Talia nodded.

"Ya. It was pretty weird back at Zarkog's mountain after you left too. Balen was in a meter and a half wide sphere of Shielding, and this dragon blew up right above her and covered it with so much dragon guts she couldn't see out, and she vomited in her bubble and was stuck in there with it. She kept fighting though. She's a little toughie, she is. I don't think he was one of ours, the dragon that is, even though he was pretty big. I sure *hope* he wasn't one of ours."

He shivered a bit, and Talia gave him as tender a hug as their armor would allow.

Yazadril suddenly joined them. "Are you kids okay?"

"Yes, we're fine. None of our people were killed." Talia assured him, and shared a hug with him too.

"Good to hear." he nodded, and turned to watch the Serminakis. "We didn't get Zarkog, but we think we wounded him, and other than that almost everything else is going our way. He didn't get you either. We estimate he lost at least seven thousand of his best spell-casters when the Wards in Venak went down, and another thirty thousand that minded the Sylvan Barrier, and perhaps sixty thousand more on the Wards around Serminak. And from what we saw when those Wards went down, he likely lost all manner of emplacements, personnel and infrastructure that was

situated on his coast next to the Wards. He lost as much as all of that in the actual battle, and we only lost one for every seventeen of his.

“The Venaks have dumped the bodies of a few dozen Sylvan and twenty dragons into the harbor, as well as a few hundred humans. We suspect that there has been a change of regime there, and that King Renem is one of the ones now floating in Cartyop Bay. And since most of the Sylvan and Dragons stationed there have remained there, we think they may have joined the insurrection, though we have no idea whether they’re still loyal to Zarkog. On the other hand, they seem to be well hunkered-down behind their defenses and none have joined our battle with Serminak on either side, so we can still hope they’ve decided to remain neutral for the duration.

“We suffered an amazingly small amount of casualties in the battle, and we got out with all our fallen and our wounded. The inclusion of our entire force in a compound Link was a crucial breakthrough.

“There’s a good chance that these here are all he has left who’re capable of Translocating. And right now, all of these fools are here attacking these Wards in order to get at you, which is a futile effort, instead of attacking one of our less well-protected positions. Meanwhile our wounded are being treated, our Translocation and Flight medallions are being recharged, and with every minute that passes, our nations are more prepared to repel invaders.”

“Their efforts are truly futile?” Talia asked. “They cannot break through these Wards?”

“There’s enough of them that they could do it if they went about it the right way, but they’re not.”

None of them faced each other as they spoke; instead they watched the endless wall of attackers.

“This is weird, just floating here while two billion enemies try to kill us from a stone’s throw away.” Holanam observed nervously, and the others had no response to that. “Especially with the way the Wards here are completely invisible. Not even a ripple when lightning hits it.”

After a pair of minutes, Mark asked; “Is there anything else we should be doing right now?”

“Actually, that’s what I came here to ask.” Yazadril chuckled. “Nemia’s helping Hilsith see to the wounded. I was sent on behalf of The Just Alliance to see if you had any suggestions.”

“No, the only idea I have is to wait till noon at Focus Mountain, have the Xervians open a corridor in their Wards from the west coast to there, and blast the hell out of this bunch after we lead them in. After I put this piece of the reflector back, of course. We’ll see how they like fighting in the middle of Death’s Teeth.”

“Ah. Well it is a good plan, if not a solution to our overall strategic situation. Oh well, I guess we can’t depend on you for everything.”

“No, but I’ll let you know if I think of anything.”

“Could you do us a favor, Father? Could you see if we can have some repair done on our Wards at Hilia? They took quite a beating.”

“They didn’t crack the ones The High People gave you, did they?”

“No, nor the Xervian ones, but those two layers were the last ones left.”

“Ah. Good to know. I’ll see what I can do.” Yazadril nodded. “I’ll be listening in case you need anything else, or just to talk.”

“Thanks, us too.” Talia said, and with a quick kiss for his daughter, Yazadril was gone.

They floated there for another fifty minutes, and then all of the Serminakis stopped attacking the Wards. The black dragon and his bronze companion who had directed the hunt for them appeared, opposite the barrier from where Mark, Talia and Holanam floated. They appeared to be yelling in anger at all about them, though the sound of it was blocked by the Wards. They organized perhaps thirty thousand spell-casters in concentric rings centered on a spot in the Wards about three hundred meters up, and then they all cast a spell on it. A red beam appeared between the spot they cast on and the distant horizon.

“Did my eyes deceive me, or did that ray shoot *away* from the Wards?” Holanam asked.

“It did.” Mark nodded. “It looks like they’ve finally decided to go about it the right way, as Yazadril would say.”

“Instead of attacking the Wards with all their power, they’re draining power out of them.” Talia stated with grudging admiration, even as millions of Sylvan and dragons started adding their efforts to the spell.

The red beam thickened and brightened considerably, and kept on doing so.

“Somonik?” Mark asked. “You might want to look at this.”

“We see it. A worrying sight. That power drain is a straight line, venting horizontally, and while it eventually reaches the void, it is out of sight due to distance while still within the atmosphere. I have dispatched a team to intercept it beyond our enemies’ vision. They will attempt to recapture the energy and feed it back into our Wards without the enemy’s knowledge. However, it appears doubtful that they will succeed before the Wards are holed. Ours are not of a nature to fail catastrophically, but if the enemy continues as they are, they can eventually open a hole large enough to allow some number of them to pass within, and onto Xervian soil.”

“If you wish to make a stand there, we will assign the necessary personnel to hold the breach. The enemy will be in a tactically disastrous position, having to hold the hole open and deploy through it into our concentrated fire.”

“No, not yet. We’ve got to find a way to end this war, so I’d like to avoid further bloodshed if at all possible. We’ll buy some time. Try to find a way to hunt down Zarkog, as I’m sure we’re already trying to do. If nothing else, we have to hold down the death toll as much as possible, on both sides. Sooner or later we’ll all have to turn our attention to the demons, and we have to find a way to get this horde on our side before then.

“How long till they’re through?”

“Four minutes till they can pass a Sylvan through the hole, fourteen for a dragon, at their present pace. But they’ll be able to cast a spell through it in less than a minute.”

“Well, I’m replenished enough that I’m starting to sweat.” Mark stated. “How about we see if these guys can chase us all over the world as well as they chased us all over Serminak?”

“One moment.” Talia said with a thoughtful look. “Somonik, I imagine you know a great number of Translocation references.”

“I do.”

“Would you give them to me? We’ll want to have as many prepared choices as we can get.”

“I will.”

“Thank you. We’ll stay available for communications.”

“You’re welcome. I will try to keep you abreast of developments. The Just Alliance appreciates the risk you will take in order to hold our enemies’ attention. Be assured that we will make full use of the time this grants us.”

“Hold on a moment.” Mark said. “Holanam, how many references can you keep in mind at once?”

“Maybe a dozen.”

“All right. Talia, give him ten random references. Holanam, you pick one of them at random. Got it?”

“Yup.”

“All right, we’ll just see where your luck leads us. You pick our destinations at random, and when we should go. We’ll cast the Translocations, and you trigger them. All right, here we go.”

They appeared a moment later over open ocean in the dark.

“Are they following us?” Mark asked.

“They have ended their assault on our Wards.” Somonik assured them. *“We will take steps to ensure that the same method will not be effective again. Take care.”*

“Thanks.” Mark told him as the white dragon closed the Link.

Then there was nothing but the stars above and the ocean below, and the wind.

“I wonder why Somonik would have a Translocation reference to a place in the middle of the ocean?” Talia mused.

“Only one reason I can think of.” Mark grinned. “Good fishing.”

“I’m so scared.” Holanam stated a moment later, and Talia pulled him over so that she stood between the two males with an arm around each.

“We are too, my friend.” Mark told him.

“Ya? You don’t act like it.”

“It’s the training. When you’ve trained as a warrior in the manner I did, you fully expect that there’ll be days, or even weeks or months, when you’re scared to death all the time. Having a few years to get ready for constantly having the crap scared out of you makes it a lot easier to deal with. It’s the most important part of the training, learning to deal with fear. But no one can eliminate it, and they’d be foolish to do so if they could.”

“Ah. I could’ve been a knight by now if I’d wanted to, but I never did. It seemed like too much work, really. The scholar’s easy life for me, I thought, little did I know. There wasn’t much that was scholarly about our little jaunt to Serminak today.”

“True, but the world will need to know what happened today, so it’s lucky that there were scholars there and taking part. You can make a good account of the truth of it, in years ahead when there’s less to do.”

“I could do that.” Holanam nodded. “Maybe we should go soon.”

“Any time you want.” Talia smiled. “Pick somewhere.”

“All right. Let’s go.” Holanam smiled.

Sylvan and dragons appeared all around them, and one Sylvan was right in front of them and facing them, so close that Talia could have reached out and touched her. A fraction of a second later Talia’s Translocation took effect, even as Mark reached for his sword and Holanam yelled in panic.

They emerged over the stark mountains of southwestern Kletiuik, muscles tensed and hearts pounding.

“Sweet Mother that was close!” Mark cursed.

A second later Holanam started to chortle. “I wonder if we looked as surprised as that Sylvan? She looked like she was ready for a heart cramp!”

Another second and the three of them were laughing almost hysterically, and they did so for almost a minute.

Suddenly Holanam stopped laughing and pushed the bangs of his black hair out of his brown eyes as two dragons appeared in the valley far below them, so far away that they could barely be seen to be a black and a bronze. He triggered the next Translocation without another word.

They appeared over a jungle fifteen hundred kilometers to the north, only fifteen meters in the air, and were warmed by a late-afternoon tropical breeze.

“They’ll never give up you know.” Holanam stated nervously. “Dragons are like that. As long as the order to get you stands, and even after that if they start to take it personally. They’ll keep hunting you for a thousand years, or a million if you live that long and that’s what it takes, until they get you or you die.”

“Or until we get them.” Mark countered. “We’re pretty fresh right now, and we could take those two spotters if we wanted to. If it comes to it, we will. But as long as they’re all wasting their time chasing us, they’re not hurting anyone else.”

“That’s right.” Holanam nodded as he glanced around at their surroundings. “Somonik probably came here for hunting. Doesn’t he go anywhere where there’s people?”

“I haven’t been passing you any references to places close to settlements or within Wards.” Talia explained. “We don’t want our pursuers to endanger anyone else, but we don’t want them to lose interest in the chase either. So we’ll just keep touring the wilderness of Kellaran for as long as we can. Then we’ll either go to Xervia or The Nine Valleys and rest up behind their Wards for the next round.

“That’s why your luck could be so important.” Mark agreed. “Not so we can escape our pursuers, but so we can remain just out of their reach while remaining safe, tantalizing them for as long as we can. But it’s likely to be scary a few times, and we’ll probably have more close scrapes. You don’t have to stay with us if you’d rather not.”

“I have to stay with you, for my vow of service and Princess Alilia’s Compulsion, and for my own self-respect.”

“And we’re glad to have you.” Talia told him with a warm smile.

“Thanks. Say, I have some good hiking rations, dried fruit and nuts and whatnot. Shall we have breakfast?”

“Certainly.” Talia chuckled. “And to add to our menu, we can have a few things left over from yesterday’s breakfast.”

“Excellent!” Mark chortled. “Let’s make a production of it! If our pursuers catch a glimpse of it, it’ll vex them for sure!”

And so it happened that when the black and the bronze appeared as distant specks high above, it was to observe their quarry lounging on a huge white silk tablecloth that was scattered with glinting silver dishes and pitchers and centered by a twelve-flame candelabra, leisurely enjoying a fine repast. The rest of their pursuers enjoyed the merest glance of this spectacle when the horde arrived, just before their dining prey vanished. They were to enjoy this brief view another twenty-seven times over the next hour and a half as the big human and the two elves took their time with their meal. Then they became ghosts again, and the psionicists in Serminak’s mobile forces were frustrated to have to find them over and over again, only to arrive there a fraction of a second after those they sought had fled.

Still, the interval needed to re-acquire their targets became gradually shorter as they shaved a bit of time from every repetition, though the chase now ranged over the entire surface of Kellaran. While they had needed almost three minutes to verify Mark and Talia’s location when the pursuit began on the east coast of Xervia, ten hours later they had it down to fifty seconds on the average.

Grakonexikaldoron had convinced Mark of the inadvisability of luring the enemy to Focus Mountain and fighting them there at noon, pointing out that the reflector and the new facilities on the north rim were almost certain to be destroyed in the battle.

Now Mark and Talia’s energies were ebbing from having cast so many Translocations, and he and Talia had not had sufficient sleep the night before. He suffered from this more than she did, since elves require less sleep than humans, and he was becoming a bit groggy.

“Why are they chasing us with so many?!” Holanam asked in exasperation, after one particularly close call. “I mean, their numbers look to have dwindled to a third of their original force over the last few hours, I imagine because a lot of them have expended their power or become exhausted. But why chase us with so many in the first place?! I know you two are incredibly powerful, but you wouldn’t have a chance against even a thousand dragons if they catch us. So why chase us at the beginning with fifty million dragons, and some two billion Sylvan besides?!”

“In case they catch us, and the Strike Force of The Just Alliance comes to our aid, I imagine.” Talia ventured. “The Alliance tried for Zarkog with everything we could bring to bear, and we failed. If he can succeed at catching us, it will do a lot towards giving him the upper hand in the minds of the populace.”

“I dunno.” Mark said tiredly. “We’re told the Dragon Lord was probably injured, and he must have been mighty upset at our attack on him, and at us of the Six leading a quarter of his forces on a merry chase all over Serminak. I picture him retiring to his lair to recover and get some rest, and just before he slams the door in his subordinates faces, he yells something like; ‘Get the Keys to The Just Alliance, all of you! I want them dead!’”

“So now they’re all chasing us, even though it’s a totally wasteful misuse of his resources.”

“Let’s go.” Holanam said, and triggered their next jump across the world just as the horde appeared around them.

“They’re even less now.” Mark commented as they appeared over the north coast of Felion. “I’m getting pretty tired, but I’d bet that they’ll all have to give it up before us. We still have power for a few hundred jumps. If they don’t give it up in the next hour or so, we’ll try to find a place to hide for a few hours’ rest.”

But nineteen minutes later, above the vast icefields of northern Debivin, the Dragon Lord himself appeared only ten meters away, surrounded by his dwindled but still vast mobile forces. His close appearance was shocking, as it came only twenty-one seconds after Holanam had triggered their last Translocation. Mark triggered their next jump in a panic as Zarkog blasted them with his prodigious fire.

Talia cast their Shields as they arrived above the plains some four thousand kilometers to the south. They’d felt an instant of pain on their exposed skin from Zarkog’s fire before they jumped, and their eyebrows and eyelashes were singed, but none of them had been burned.

“Crap that was close!” Mark yelled. “How long was that?”

“A third of a minute.” Talia told him shakily. “Our remaining power won’t last long at that rate, and he’ll likely just get quicker. I have the power stored in my items, I’ll use that for the Shields.”

“Start including some references in Xervia and The Nine Valleys in the ones you’re giving Holanam.” Mark instructed. “If his luck says we run for shelter, that’s what we’ll do.”

“I don’t know if my luck is still reliable.” Holanam told him as he shook from the tension of the unexpected attack. “I’m almost out of power too, and without magic, I’m no luckier than any other.”

Talia opened a flap in her armor at her hip and withdrew a simple white stone ring and a teardrop-shaped diamond on a slim gold chain. “Wear these.” she instructed as she cast a mild Tranquility on the shivering elf.

“Wow! These things have a lot of power!” Holanam marveled. “A lot more than I’ve ever had access to before! A lot more!”

“Your glow is far brighter than it was when we started, and larger in area as well.” Mark nodded.

“Here, ten new Translocation references, each pre-cast and ready to go.” Talia said as she psionically passed them over, and he triggered one immediately. She passed him another reference, and he jumped them again sixteen seconds later, then fourteen seconds after that.

Soon they were Translocating about every three seconds.

“Do we run for home?!” Talia asked, her face tight as she held her fear at bay by sheer will.

They Translocated before he could answer.

“His luck hasn’t brought us there yet, even with all the power he’s using!” Mark said as he drew GrimFang.

Holanam jumped them again.

“This is leading to something, it has to be!” Mark continued excitedly, speaking through the jumps now. “Let it run till he takes us home or we only have enough power for one last jump, whichever comes first!”

Holanam moved them at shorter and shorter intervals, sweat beading on his brow. Every second. Then every two-thirds. Then every half-second, the world streaming by in blinks of light and dark. All four including Ria pooled their mental resources in a deep Link to maintain the pace.

Then Holanam faltered, unable to choose the next reference quickly enough, and the enemy was upon them. Zarkog’s head seemed as huge as a castle as he blasted them with his fire from only six meters away.

The world suddenly stopped, and went absolutely silent. There was Zarkog, frozen in time, his jet of fire covering half the distance between them. All around them a late-evening sky was full of Sylvan and dragons, still at least half a billion of them in all, every one frozen in position and posture.

And hovering two meters from them was a being like none of them had ever seen before. It was roughly a triangle with curved edges. It’s form was forty-five centimeters long and twenty-five wide, with a surface like burgundy velvet on its top side, white velvet on the bottom. It was generally flat, being about an three centimeters thick in the center, and paper thin at the edges. The closest of the three sides was shorter than the other two, and just above the middle of that edge were three small round eyes, each a different color, themselves arranged in a triangle

and spaced two centimeters apart. The foremost eye was blue, the right-rear one green, and the left-rear one red. They blinked often and with independent timing in a disconcerting manner. The skin around them formed circular eyelids and the opening between them remained circular as they irised open and closed. Just below the front edge of the creature under the eyes was a five centimeter wide horizontal slit that might have been a mouth. The creature's edges rippled gently as it regarded them.

They simply stared back, flabbergasted by the entire situation. Even Ria manifested to see it, and was struck speechless.

Then its psionic touch was gently in their minds for an instant, and a moment later, it communicated. *"Will you be my friend?"* it asked in some strange variant of a Speaking, the words barely discernible in the alien feel of the creature's mind.

"We will, if you will be our friend as well." Mark immediately replied.

"I will." the being stated with a particularly energetic wiggle, its intent more clear than its words. *"I will hide you from those, if you would want me to do that."* it continued as it pointed at Zarkog with a momentarily folded front-right corner. *"To my people, I am God of Hiding. I have competence with that skill."*

"We'd greatly appreciate that right now." Mark smiled as he sheathed his sword. *"Though not as much as I'd welcome a chance to speak with you at length."*

"And you can have that too." the strange being stated.

Suddenly they were elsewhere, without any magic having been cast as far as Mark and Talia could tell. Their surroundings were dark at first, and when Talia cast a gradually brightening Light, they were soon seen to be huge and strange.

They merely looked about for a moment, and as Talia's light reached sufficient luminosity to reveal the full extent of the colossal room about them, it was seen to be constructed of blue stone. They then realized it was a nine-sided amphitheater, built on a scale that would dwarf the biggest giant, with an open and flat bottom, a nine-sided domed roof above, and a nine-sided stage raised six meters above the floor in the center. It looked to be as big as Zarkog's hall beneath the steel dome in Serminak. Their Levitations were still active, and they floated thirty centimeters above the center of the stage.

"This is the safest place on your world." the strange being told them. *"Your foes cannot detect you here."*

"I've seen a painting of this!" Holanam excitedly revealed as he turned to look all about. *"This is in Kraka, the abandoned city of the dragons! This was the chamber where The Ninety-Nine used to meet to decide questions of government, before their population dispersed!"*

"And no doubt built to insure the privacy of the deliberations that were held here." Talia nodded as she inspected the immense room. *"I'm not surprised that our pursuers can't find us here. If they're even moving yet."*

"They are, for I released time when we came here." their benefactor stated.

"Thanks." Mark grinned as he ceased his inspection of their surroundings and regarded the alien god. *"I assume that it's your people who inhabit the sixteen spheres that are approaching our world?"*

"That is true. You can refer to me by my standing and my marking. I am First Burgundy."

"My people struggled to control our world, and did, and after a time we learned to stop fighting ourselves, and then we had peace and happiness. Then came those you call the demons. We fought, and we lost. A tiny few of us hid, deep beneath the water and stone of our world. We waited a long time. When we were sure the demons had taken all they could find and left, still we hid, for most would not leave their new homes and lives, all hidden deep in our world. And we were afraid. Ages later one of us emerged onto the surface, and found that nothing lived there, nothing at all. The demons had consumed all life they could find, and left long before. We knew that if we rebuilt our society, the demons would return when time had passed, and they would kill us again. Maybe more time passed, maybe less, but they would come. So we made ready for many generations, and then we set out into the void to hunt them."

"Long and long and long we have hunted them. Some worlds we have saved, more or less, from the demons. Others, we could not save, and all life died there. Each time we meet the demons, many of my people die. Sometimes we kill all the demons we find. Sometimes, some flee. And sometimes we flee, when they are too many, or too strong. After we fight the demons, time must pass, and we heal and breed, and then we are many again, and then we can hunt them again."

"We saw those demons who are coming here. We saw them eat the life of a world that had little, only simple things with no perception, but great potential was lost there. We saw they would come here, and we hurried to come here first."

"You are many. You are strong. With you, we can kill these demons. The demons do not know my people come here, for I hide my people from demon-sight. Maybe not so many of my people die this time. Maybe you will help us"

then. Maybe we will find the demon home-world, and we kill them all. Maybe some time, we kill all the demons everywhere. Then my people rest. Then we have peace and happiness again.

“Your people should not kill your people. Your gods should not let your people kill your people, but your gods are stupid. We should all fight demons. Even gods, demons can eat.”

“I agree.” Mark stated emphatically. “I cannot commit my people, I don’t have that authority, but I think that the leaders of The Just Alliance will agree with me. If you will help protect my world from the demons, we can fight them all together, and we’ll try to make sure that none of our people die. Then we’ll help you fight the demons on other worlds. We will help find their home-world, and together, we will kill them all. We know as well as you that if even one breeding pair of demons survives, they may eventually return to ravage our world. They are a blight that must be eliminated wherever it appears.”

“We agree, but you must show you are not like demons. We saw the energy your people spent in recent time, spent killing and hunting your people. We are still far away in the void, but we saw the energy, for it was great, so I came to see what happened. Your people must stop killing your people, or my people will not talk to you. We will fight the demons without talking to you, and then we will leave, win or lose. And if your people ever go to another world to kill, we will hunt you.”

“That’s fair.” Mark nodded.

“Demons do not breed in pairs.

“If your people stop killing your people, I will talk to you again. I saw you not killing those who tried to kill you, though you could have killed many. Because I have seen you do this, I know your people can do this, maybe. You are safe here now, for unknown time to come. I will see what happens.”

“Thank you, First Burgundy. I’ll do what I can to achieve what we both want to happen.”

“Thank you, Mark.” First Burgundy returned, and then he was gone.

The three intrepid travelers stared for a moment at the spot where the alien god had been, then Talia drew them into a three-way hug, and they spoke not a word as they considered what they had just experienced.

A minute later they were joined by Povon, Yazadril, Alilia, Tithian, and Somonik. Povon wore a red ribbon around her neck.

“Well that was exceedingly interesting.” Yazadril stated. “They are almost certainly a semi-aquatic life form. Air breathers and water dwellers, perhaps a bit more aquatically oriented than the Selkies.”

“Ya, I thought that too.” Holanam nodded. “And the way he pointed at Zarkog by folding his edge, I think they could fold their edges with more than enough dexterity to use them as hands and fingers.”

“You’ve been following our day then, I take it?” Mark asked Yazadril.

“Yes, through Povon, since you left Xervia at the beginning of the chase.” Yazadril nodded. “Passively that is. She could still faintly receive your thoughts after you came here, but only because she was in contact when you arrived. And I hope you don’t mind that most of the citizens of The Just Alliance have also followed events, via shared Readings and Kleti Revealing, from the time you started breakfast until three Translocations after Zarkog took a hand. It’s been a trying day, and everyone needed a boost in morale. Your nonchalant meal in the face of such danger from the most fearsome force ever assembled, well, it made a big difference. When it looked like your lives were endangered we ended public access to events, since viewing your deaths would have traumatized many more than merely hearing of it would. Not that we intended to let it come to that. Billions cheered and laughed with joy and relief when we announced that you were safe.

“We didn’t announce the existence of First Burgundy, or reveal anything he said. We’re afraid that knowing his people will help us if we make peace with Zarkog may lead to increases in popular sentiment for appeasement. This is both premature, since we may yet defeat him at a reasonable cost and in an acceptably short time, and futile, since it would likely lead to the enslavement of most of our people, without significantly increasing the probability that we will defeat the demons.

“Already many of our people have claimed that Zarkog is correct in his assertion that complete militarization offers our best chance of resisting the demons. To that we have responded that they are welcome to do so, so long as every one of them freely chooses it, and they remain under the auspices of the existing governments of The Just Alliance. Many are doing so.

“The Kleti have embraced this with particular zeal. Overlord Senchak asked his people to say whether each wished to join the mobilization, and over nine in ten said they did. He then declared a civilian zone in the center of his continent. Every Kleti from outside that zone who wished to remain civilian traded his property with someone from within the zone who wished to militarize, and whose home and land or business was of the same type and general worth. Everything and everyone in the surrounding militarized zone is being consolidated as a military asset.

“Having found a solution that pleased almost everyone, his example is rapidly being emulated by almost every government in the alliance. Our military planners are tearing their hair out from the sudden extra workload, but our front-line generals and admirals are smugly pleased.

“Ironically, our reformed prisoners from your battle over Kletiuk have been of great value as advisors in this process, having recently experienced the sudden and complete militarization of Venak. Other than certain modifications to suit the morality of The Just Alliance, we are directly emulating Zarkog’s practices, including much of his system of childcare and the housing of the populace in large, centralized, easily defended barracks, particularly those from outlying and isolated places.”

“Perhaps the most surprising development we have to report is the defection of several hundred Sylvan and nineteen dragons.” Somonik stated with a smirk. “We told them that they were welcome to quit Zarkog’s forces and to join The Just Alliance, so long as they were willing to swear Osbald’s Oath on The Truthstone of Falgaroth. They agreed to do so, on the condition that they not be asked to fight their former comrades in Zarkog’s army, or asked to reveal any military secrets of his, and we allowed that, so long as they would tell us what is common knowledge in Serminak. And it was agreed! Over six hundred Sylvan have actually sworn to justice on the Truthstone of their own free will! In some ways it was the strangest thing I’ve ever seen!”

“And it’s the strongest reason yet for hope for peace with Serminak.” Mark nodded.

“Not to mention a fearsome weapon in the propaganda war.” Alilia chuckled.

“Propaganda war?” Talia inquired.

“Now that the Wards around Venak and Serminak are down, those two and the alliance have been sending mass messages to each other’s populations, by various means. Venak’s say ‘join us and be free of binding spells, join a system with the discipline to overcome the demons’, and Zarkog’s say ‘surrender or be horribly annihilated’, and ours say ‘join us, since only in The Just Alliance do you have the best opportunity for survival, happiness, and freedom from slavery.’

“Announcing the defection of the Sylvan will raise a lot of questions amid our foes’ populations, which will surely lead to even more defections.”

“More and more it becomes a choice between swearing a binding oath to justice, or risking being brutally beaten for the slightest transgression, since our societies are becoming more alike in every other way with every minute that passes.” Tithian said. *“Once we’re all completely militarized to face the demons, the only difference will be the methods used to enforce discipline and social order. That was the thinking that led to the defections.”*

“But what about First Burgundy and his people?” Mark asked. “I think his appearance and intervention prove that Holanam’s luck works, because having him do that and then speak with me as he did has to be the luckiest break we could possibly hope for!”

“True, as far as it goes.” Yazadril nodded. “But we still have to deal with Venak and Zarkog before First Burgundy’s people will truly be our allies. And it’s a good thing you didn’t commit us to anything. I’m not too sure about the idea of wandering about in the void with them for eons, hunting the demons.”

“First of all, we beat the demons before, and now they’re back for another try at us, and it’s almost certain they’ll be a lot harder to beat this time! We have to assume that they’ll keep trying till they exterminate us and leave our world lifeless, unless we help First Burgundy’s people hunt them down and exterminate them first! I don’t propose that we pack up our whole civilization and take our entire population along to do it, but we should put what effort and resources we can spare into the hunt!

“Maybe joining the hunt in the void would be too big a disruption for elder types like yourselves, but after we’ve fought the demons here, I’m sure there’ll be a lot of young and capable types who will be ready to volunteer to continue with the struggle! And not only to prevent it from happening here again, but to prevent it from happening to anyone else!

“And secondly, there’s obviously a great deal of valuable knowledge we can learn from First Burgundy’s people, including new ways to fight demons, and how to travel about in the void! Just as I’m sure there’s a great deal they can learn from us!

“We now know that our world isn’t alone in having people and civilization! From what Zarkog said, there are many mighty civilizations out there, and they can do a lot that we can’t! That doesn’t seem like a very safe situation to me! We’ll likely meet some more of them someday, and whatever happens after that, we’ll be better off and more secure if we can meet them as equals at least! The stronger and more knowledgeable we are, the more likely we’ll be able to deal with them peacefully, and in a way that benefits everyone involved!

“I mean really, this is just good sense, and you’re all experienced leaders and diplomats, and we’ve all sworn Osbald’s oath! You must realize all this as surely as I do, even if it’s some uncomfortable truth to have to swallow!”

He realized he was getting carried away, though no one was arguing his points, and he forced himself to calm. “I don’t mean to be so vehement about it, but I think it’s important. I’m making all that an official suggestion as Key to The Just Alliance. We need alliance and trade with First Burgundy’s people, and we need to end the threat of the demons. All of them.”

“As you say, though those are not issues that need to be debated or decided in the immediate future.” Somonik said. “The issue before us is; what should we do now?”

“Now, we need to talk to the gods.” Mark stated decisively. “We know they’re listening, and I respectfully request that they deign to speak with us.”

There was a long pause.

“Falgaroth, please, we could use a bit of help here.”

Another pause.

“Visinniria, you said you’d be pleased to visit us at our beach sometime. Why not here and now, at this critical time?”

Again they waited in vain for a response, and Mark’s brows lowered as he controlled his anger. “Don’t make me add; ‘or else’.”

After another suitably long pause Somonik spoke in a slightly dry and sardonic tone. “Since they are not here to ask the obvious question, I will do so. The gods will speak with you, or else you will do what?”

“I’ll tell every person in the world that I’ve met a god of another world, who thinks our gods are stupid for letting us kill each other! And I’ll tell them that I think he’s right! Visinniria was furious with the gods for not stopping the War of the Segregation, and now they’re doing it again, and she’s part of it! They’d rather maintain their withdrawal than do everything they can to save their peoples from extinction, and maybe save their own hides in the bargain! I’m sure the demons will remember that it was mainly the gods who beat them last time, and they wouldn’t be coming back if they didn’t think they’d found a way to beat the gods this time, so their butts are in the bucket the same as ours! But they still won’t work with us because they’re stupid! And I’m going to tell everyone all that, and most of them are going to think I’m right! Maybe the gods really don’t care what their people think about them, but I have the ear of the whole world right now, and if the gods still want the respect and good esteem of their people in the future, they’ll talk to me right now!”

“All right all right!!! You’ve made your point!!!!” Amirgath groused in irritation as he appeared, along with Falgaroth, Visinniria, Glup of the Zurb, and a god of the Sylvan who looked angry enough to chew rocks.

“You are the most irritating mortal who has ever lived!!!!” the Sylvan god raged. “Never has there been such impudence! Dearly would I love to crush you into paste at this very moment!!

“Did you not learn from your last divine visitation that breaking the Withdrawal by speaking to you can only be done with the unanimous consent of all the gods, according to agreements we have forged unanimously among us after extensive debate?!! Did you never think that the consensus for such a visitation might not be instantly achieved, even for the gods?!! *Particularly* when our attention is demanded by you only moments after an alien god has appeared on Kellaran?!! That perhaps the intervention of that alien god at a crucial moment in a pivotal event, and it’s insults to us, might not merit some discussion by us, and that it is most certainly of a higher priority than your impatient concerns?!!! *Did you?!!!*”

Mark stared at the Sylvan god for a moment, then shook his head a bit. “I’m sorry.” he quietly stated as he bowed formally, then faced the god with a level gaze. “I apologize most sincerely, that was childish of me. I’ve been under a bit of stress lately, and I can only think it must be affecting my behavior in a detrimental manner.” While his tone was apologetic, his expression and stance were defiant.

The Sylvan god glared back at him another moment, then smiled, then laughed. “By the source, I like you human, though I truly wish I didn’t! Your courage and that of your two companions at the end of Zarkog’s chase will be celebrated in song for eons! To think that you entrusted your lives, as well as the fate of your alliance and perhaps the fate of this world, to the untested luck of an adolescent elf! And in the very face of Zarkog’s fire! That was courage and audacity of the finest order! Perhaps you have indeed experienced a bit of stress, as you say!”

“Enough.” Amirgath said to his Sylvan peer. “He is as I said he was. The best ones are always troublesome. The elf here is a prime example of the type.”

“Why thank you Amirgath!” Visinniria laughed. “You’ve never said I was one of the best before! At least not where I could hear it.”

“Bah!” Amirgath snorted. “Let’s get this done. We have things to do, and time is short.”

“By all means, tell the human what he wishes to know!” the Sylvan god agreed with a nasty smirk. “After all the trouble he’s caused, he deserves to hear it! I doubt his stressed condition will have improved much when his ignorance has been dispelled!”

“Now don’t be nasty.” Visinniria sternly admonished, and the other gave her a mocking bow, which she ignored.

“That’s Gvetwa by the way, first god of the Sylvan.” she told Mark. “Like all Sylvan, he can get on your nerves a bit, but he’s fun at parties.”

Gvetwa delivered another florid bow, and grinned.

“Know that there will indeed be a time that is most opportune for all of us to strike at the demons, and long before they reach Kellaran, but not until they are much closer than they are now.” Visinniria told the gathered mortals.

“There is still ample time to settle things here first.

“Know as well that our last discussion with you sparked a fierce debate among the gods. Eventually, opinions coalesced, until only two courses of action still remained under consideration, each supported by an almost equal number of us.

“One faction favors the status quo, and is represented here by Amirgath and Gvetwa. If their course of action is enacted, the withdrawal will remain in effect. We will engage in minimal communication with the peoples of Kellaran in order to defeat the demons that approach this world. When that is done, we will hide and isolate Kellaran’s sun and everything that circles it from the rest of the void, until our peoples develop their civilizations to the point where they cannot be threatened by any other race that we can detect. And that development will occur naturally and in it’s own time, without the interference or interaction of the gods.

“The other faction, which is of course represented here by Falgaroth and myself, is for change. If our course of action is adopted, all the gods of Kellaran will rejoin our peoples as citizens, with no more rights than any mortal person, and we will work closely with them to defeat the demons. We will all swear Osbald’s Oath upon The Truthstone of Falgaroth.”

“Funny that you haven’t chosen to swear anything on the stone yourself, Falgaroth, and least not thus far.” Gvetwa smirked.

“We will strive to give all our peoples immortality.” Visinniria continued, ignoring the interruption. “We will help them to travel the void, and to make new homes on new worlds, starting with the lifeless worlds that surround our sun. We will help all who are capable of becoming gods to do so. In short, we will do as you have suggested. And most likely, we will also follow your suggestions to form a true and complete alliance with First Burgundy and his people, and to join their quest to eradicate the demons wherever they may be found.

“The two factions were unable to reach consensus, and it appeared that we were hopelessly deadlocked. Only Glup of the Zurb did not declare a position, and he is here as a neutral party. At his suggestion, the issue will be decided upon the mortal plane.”

“That means it’s all up to you, human.” Gvetwa smiled humorlessly. “And up to Zarkog. One of the two of you will dominate the course of society on Kellaran for at least the next two centuries. There’s no doubt of that, unless the demons eat us all. If it’s you, we follow your course. If it’s Zarkog, the withdrawal remains. Zarkog is also a Candidate for Divinity.

“You decide the fate of the gods and the world in your favor if you defeat Zarkog convincingly, or if you ascend to divinity before he does. If he defeats you, or if he reaches divinity first, my faction wins. None of those who surround him are candidates, but his candidacy is stronger than that of any of your group except Quewanak’s. That gives him a bit of an advantage. To balance the scales, you get to know these truths, and Zarkog does not.”

“We won’t be able to speak with you again, until it’s decided.” Falgaroth stated. *“Know that we of the faction for change are confident that we have chosen the best course, and the best champion. We have complete faith in your ability, and in your wisdom, and that you will triumph. Until then, be well.”*

In the next second, the gods were gone.

Long moments of silence passed.

“Well that’s just great.” Mark sarcastically grumbled as he sat on the floor and rubbed his eyes. “Just bloody great. I’m a seventeen-year-old human who has to beat the biggest damn dragon that’s ever been, a being with untold power and ninety-five million years of experience, but that’s okay, because *I* get to know that if I fail and he kills me, he’ll hold the world in slavery for at least two centuries, and the gods will never help us with anything ever again! Is it just me, or does that seem just a little bit unfair?!”

“The gods said that knowing would balance the scales, so either knowing that will make a great deal of difference, or the scales were already close to balancing before you heard their revelations.” Somonik gently told him. “I think the latter to be the case. You do have many advantages that Zarkog lacks.”

“You think so?” Mark responded, a bit bitterly. “I’d like to know what they are!”

“You have love, and you have friends.” Talia told him as she Levitated him three centimeters, spelled off his armor, and settled him to the floor again. She Sent her own armor back to Hilia along with his, their crowns, and their extra weapons. Then she sat beside him and took his hand. “No one has ever had so many loves and friends as you do right now. You have the true, heartfelt affection and loyalty of most of the population of Kellaran. Zarkog has neither love nor friends. I think that will make the difference.”

Mark turned and hugged her, and cried with great wracking sobs. She stood to return his hug less awkwardly, and Alilia hugged him from the other side, while Tithian gently and comfortingly nuzzled his chest.

Yazadril Summoned food, and a luxurious tent that would be spacious for six, complete with a soft bed that was more than roomy enough for Mark and Talia. “Eat, and then get some sleep. We’ll keep watch. Things will look better in the morning.”

In a few minutes Mark made himself take a meal, and he became introspective and thoughtful as they ate. None disturbed his meditations. He didn’t notice when Talia spelled them both clean, and cleaned their clothes as well.

When he, Talia, and Holanam had finished eating, he Summoned Stripe and Scout, gave them a quick scratch and a few words of greeting, and set them to guarding the premises. “Not that I doubt your vigilance, I just feel safer knowing they’re on guard.” he explained to the others.

“And Povon, inform the others of the Six. In the morning we go to Quewanak for training.”

He and Talia cuddled together on the bed without bothering to undress, and were asleep within seconds of their heads meeting the pillows.

Eight hours later they were gently awoken by Povon’s soft psionic voice. *“Wake up, my fine young hibernators. You are well rested now, and it’s a new day, so to speak, so I imagine you’ll want to get going on things.*

“You probably don’t want to look outside the tent right away. The view is a bit disconcerting.

“We were found by Zarkog’s forces some two hours ago. By process of elimination, I imagine. There aren’t that many places that are so heavily shielded against psionics that they cannot be penetrated by a search of that magnitude. But we had a plan in place, ready to go the instant we were discovered, since Somonik suspected that we would be.

“So now I am randomly Translocating us twenty-seven times every second. I am Linked to ninety-nine of the finest Draconian sorcerer-wizards, who lend me power and assistance in this, since even I would quickly become fatigued at maintaining such a pace by myself. We’ve completely frustrated the hunt for you with this technique, and it has finally been called off.”

“Thanks Povon.” Talia told her as she sat up and stretched. “And pass our thanks to those helping you too.”

“You are most welcome, from all of us.” the silver dragon’s voice chuckled from outside the tent.

Talia peeked through the tent flaps as Mark roused himself. There was nothing outside the tent but Povon and the world flickering by too quickly to make out. “Uck. That’s horrible.” she grumbled. “I don’t know how you can stand the sight of it.”

“I’ve learned to ignore it.” Povon told her. “A twenty-seventh of a second isn’t enough time to see anything meaningful of your surroundings anyway. After a while it all kind of blends together into a blur, if you’re not paying attention to it.”

“In or out my love, you’re blocking the door.” Mark groggily requested.

“In.” she stated decisively. “I’m not going out in that.” She sat back down on the edge of the bed, Summoned a brush, and began straightening the bed-tangles out of her hair.

“You’re right.” he agreed as he stuck his head out. “That *is* pretty disturbing.”

“Well, now that you’re awake, perhaps you would care to accept Tithian’s invitation to join her for breakfast on the plains of her people in Xervia. Likely a few others of The Just Alliance’s senior leaders will join you as well.”

“There are no senior leaders in the alliance.” Mark chuckled as he withdrew into the tent to share a hug and a kiss with Talia. “We’re all equal, as our every nation is equal.”

“The Chieftain of Pinatupa is an independent monarch with his own vote in the Assembly of The Just Alliance.” Povon chuckled in return. “That vote carries as much weight as yours, as prince of Hilia. But if you think his lordship over some four dozen completely mundane and semi-literate fish-catchers gives him the same authority in debate as Overlord Senchak, who leads some one billion, two hundred million dwarves, then you are more than somewhat mistaken!”

“Granted.” he agreed. “Is that the most? Senchak’s one and a fifth billion Kleti?”

“Yes, for theirs is the only one of the more populous races to be united under one leader. Next would be Osbald of Thon, with just over a billion humans, closely followed by the other two human empires of Debivin; Sming and Kuth. Then King Wosea of Enj, the largest of the nations of gnomes, with just over six hundred million.

“Shall we continue this over breakfast in Xervia?”

“Sure.” Mark yawned. “I need to wash up. With water. Cleaning spells just don’t wake you up the same way.”

“*Welcome to Xervia, and to the grasslands of The People of Morning.*” Tithian said from outside the tent, revealing that their strange journey had ended.

Mark and Talia emerged onto lush green grass, and discovered it was knee deep on Mark, hip high on Talia.

“Thanks.” Mark acknowledged, and yawned again.

“*The stream there is quite good. Will you wish to eat right away?*”

“Not immediately. I could use a cup of Hilsith’s tea first.” Mark said as he dropped to his knees beside the tiny stream, then plunged his head in while Talia cupped a double handful of water to drink.

“*I will invite Hilsith, and ask that she bring some.*”

Talia rose and dried her hands on her breeches. She concentrated a moment, then exchanged what she’d been wearing under her armor for a blue wool spring dress, warm enough to counteract the slight chill.

She looked about at her surroundings in the pre-dawn brightening of the sky to the east. The grasslands extended as far as the eye could see, rippled with slight hills and coulees in three directions, while to the east the ground gradually fell away into a lowland that extended for kilometers, affording a wonderful view in that direction. Everywhere she looked there was a sparse scattering of unicorns, and she realized that there were thousands of them in sight, perhaps tens of thousands. Most of them were still asleep, and a third of them slept standing up in tightly grouped little herds.

Closer at hand were Tithian and Povon beside a huge round table of dark wood with sixteen matching chairs of various sizes around it. Beyond the table were a group of seventy or so unicorns who were obviously engaged in spell casting.

“*My companions here are blocking your auras. We are reasonably certain that we can hide you from Zarkog by doing this.*” Tithian explained.

“Oh. Thanks, we really appreciate your time and effort.” Mark said as he squeezed water out of his hair, looking much more awake and refreshed. “And you’re right, that stream is good. It’s surprising that water can taste that good.”

“Who else is coming?” Talia asked as she absentmindedly Summoned a towel for Mark, who just as absentmindedly took it from her and sat down on one of the chairs to dry his hair.

“*Senior leaders of the alliance, and some of your and Mark’s friends and family, whose company should help you with your serenity after your trying day yesterday.*”

“That’s thoughtful of you, and well appreciated.” Mark offered as he finished drying his hair.

Talia took the towel from him and Sent it back, then began brushing his hair.

“Ahh...” he moaned with a grin as he relaxed further into his chair. “I didn’t think having your hair brushed could feel so nice. Thanks.”

“It’s the love that goes into it.” Talia giggled, and kissed him on the top of his head before continuing her ministrations.

“When will everyone get here?” he asked.

“*In a few minutes. First you will have an opportunity to see something that few not of my people have ever seen. And you will learn why the unicorns are called The People of Morning. You see, when my people first became sentient, it was only for a few hours a day after bathing in the power of the source at each day’s dawn. Now of course, we are sentient whenever we are awake, but we still revel in the revitalizing rays of the source at sunrise, and it is still the most special time of day for us.*”

“*You see now, my people are stirring, in anticipation of the coming of the sun. You can see Silaran standing out in the herd just over there. Big pink and white fellow that he is, he’s easy to spot. My darling daughter is just on his far side, though you can’t see her from here. They’ll be joining us when they’re done their awakening.*”

“I’m sorry you had to be up before the dawn for our sake.” Talia smiled as she finished Mark’s hair and re-bounded it at the back with his gold and diamond hair clip, then settled into his lap for some cuddling.

“*I was not, for I slept and woke on my home grazing far to the east of here, where the dawn occurred an hour ago. So now I am lucky enough to experience it twice in one morning.*”

“The time problem again.” Mark said.

“*Pardon me?*”

“To me, time was always decided by the position of the sun, and nobody I knew traveled faster than a run, and not far at that.” he told her as his eyes swept over the huge open vista, where more and more of the visible unicorns were stirring, standing, shaking themselves off, and slowly wandering to the nearest water for a drink. “But now we’re traveling all over the world, and it’s a different time of day everywhere you go. I get all confused as to what time it is and how long it’s been since I last slept. I’m just not used to the implications of fast travel. Like just now, I assumed that you’d slept here, even though I know you’re an important person who travels a lot, and who might have slept anywhere.

“If I didn’t have Talia to keep track of time for me, I think I’d go mad.”

“I didn’t know it was bothering you that much.” Povon admitted, a little guiltily. “Here, this should help a bit at least. I should have thought to give it to you earlier. It’s called a time-sight.”

She passed him a simple compound spell, and when he cast it, it produced the Illusion of a seven centimeter ball, yellow on one side with a white spot in the center, and a deep blue that was almost black on the other. Further inspection revealed the simplified outlines of the continents of Kellaran drawn in thin black lines on the light side, and in thin white lines on the dark side. The equator and poles were similarly marked.

“The white spot shows the position of the sun.” Povon explained. “That is, the place marked in the northern tip of Kletiuk by the white spot is experiencing high noon right now, as the sun is directly overhead there. It is daytime on the light side, and nighttime on the dark side, and it changes constantly with the real time. The glowing blue dot marks your position in the world, so you can see that we’re in northeastern Xervia, and because it’s at the trailing edge of the dark side, you can see that it’s almost dawn here. You can also see that it’s just before midnight in Hilia, and that it’s mid-afternoon in Finitra and The Nine Valleys. It also shows the seasons and the time of year. The sun is north of the equator, indicating that it is summer in the northern half of Kellaran, and the farther north it is, the closer it is to mid-summer. The sun will be on the equator at the spring and autumn equinoxes, and south of the equator when Finitra experiences winter. You see?”

“Yes, this is great! This’ll help a lot!” Mark crowed enthusiastically.

“Then I will give it to you as a late birthday present, though it is not a Draconian tradition to do so.”

“Thank you! Mind you, you risked your life in our cause on my birthday, and your performance in the battle was both crucial and incredible. Birthday presents don’t get any better than that.”

“Thank you.” Povon smiled.

“As for this, now I know what time it is on Kellaran, but we still need a simple way to say what time we’re talking about to someone who’s also a fast traveler. We should just pick somewhere at random and number the hours from there.

“For instance if we picked right here as a standard time reference, the standard time everywhere in the world right now would be about the sixth hour, numbered from midnight. People who lived here wouldn’t have to make an adjustment. But people in Hilia would just have to get used to having midnight at the sixth hour in standard time, just as they’d have to get used to having the sixth hour at noon in east-central Kletiuk, and in mid-afternoon in Finitra. The benefit of it is, if you say you’re going to be in Bojoston at the sixth hour of the fourteenth day of the month, everybody knows exactly when you’re talking about, no matter what time of day it is where they’re at. Do you follow me?”

“That is one of those ideas that is so brilliant, I’m chagrined that I never thought of it myself.” Tithian stated admiringly. *“Mind you, fast intercontinental travel was very rare before the founding of the alliance, so standard time would have been much less useful than it is now. It will be of particular benefit to our military planners and commanders, given the world-wide scope of our conflict with Zarkog, and with the demons. And this standardization of time perfectly complements the standardized calendar we’ve recently adopted. May we consider it an official suggestion of the Key to The Just Alliance?”*

“Sure!” Mark smiled as he dismissed the illusion.

“I have forwarded it.

“Now the first sliver of the sun will appear above the eastern horizon. Watch my people. Open your mind to them, and share in the glory of it.”

While Mark had been somewhat distracted by conversation, the unicorns had been casually wandering about, seemingly at random. But now patterns emerged. They were spaced so that in the last few seconds before daybreak they could turn sideways to the dawn to absorb the most light, with only their heads turned to face the emerging sun, and each would be in the least possible shadow from the others. He realized that even differing heights were taken into account in the spacing.

Looking toward the lower land to the east, he could see the line of direct daylight appear on the horizon and speed toward them. In less than a second it swept past just as the first bright rays of the sun struck the eye from the horizon. As the light touched each unicorn, they lifted their heads and called out with a sound that no horse could ever make, a pure and smooth tone that rang in the air for a second or two. As each one called out, their minds became fully awake and alert, and they called out to each other psionically as well. Within a second after daybreak every unicorn in sight was part of a massive and joyous Link that burst into Mark and Talia's open minds like an unstoppable explosion of pure happiness.

It built and built as the sunlight slowly increased for a minute or two, then the most distant unicorns to the east suddenly began running, which seemed to prompt those just a bit closer to immediately break into a gallop as well, and the wave of movement swept toward and past them as fast as the dawn-line had. The herds ran together with the perfect co-ordination of a school of reef fish or a flock of small birds, and then they began to mesh together into swirling patterns.

"By the source!" Talia breathed in admiration. "It's a dance!"

It seemed impossible that a herd of hundreds of unicorns who seemed to be galloping almost shoulder-to-shoulder and nose-to-tail could meet another herd head on or at a right angle without a collision, but the only part of them that contacted was the long and flowing hair of their manes and tails.

The patterns became more stable as their muscles warmed, and then all of the largest unicorns synchronized their gaits into a coordinated beat that made the ground throb. Those not quite as large synchronized into a quicker counterpoint beat a moment later, then those of the next smaller size did the same with a quicker one yet, and with a few seconds the entire plain was an immense and hypnotic percussion ensemble.

Then they began to sing. It seemed that each of The People of Morning could only sing one note, but each sang their single note perfectly. It was impossible to tell whether they had all memorized the incredibly complex score, and knew the correct timing and duration of their note within the music whenever it occurred, or whether it was all a great improvisation, and they continuously created the intricate melodies and harmonies as a group by adding their own note whenever it felt right. However it was done, the wordless music was like the universe's most magnificent symphony, and it was uplifting and haunting in its beauty.

Suddenly Silaran and Equemev leaped out of the swirl and into the clearing around the tent and the table, and skidded to a sudden stop with their hoofs landing in time with the music.

"Come! Ride! Run with us!" Equemev joyously called, and Mark and Talia ran over and leaped to their backs with the aid of a judicious use of Levitation, Mark upon Silaran and Talia on Equemev. Tithian and their seventy warders joined them as they leaped into the dance with careful timing.

"I'll guard the tent!" Povon laughed as they blended into the swirl.

The unicorns were such capable and stable mounts that the slight fear of falling beneath the thousands of pounding hooves or being pierced by a stray horn faded within moments, to be replaced by breathtaking exhilaration. The deep grass concealed many tiny streams that were hidden until the last moment, but they were always jumped without losing the beat of the music. Soon Mark found himself singing along, improvising his own wordless harmony. A minute later he saw that Talia was standing in a slight crouch on Equemev's back with one foot in front of the other and her hands out for balance, with the wildest grin he'd ever seen on her pretty face, her blond hair and the hem of her dress flying behind, her cheeks pinked by excitement, exertion, and the cool wind of their speed. He thought of imitating her for a moment, but her elven reflexes were up to the task, and he doubted his own were.

Eventually the song began to simplify as fewer and fewer of the singers added their note, until finally the last voice faded and everyone broke stride at once as they slowed to a trot, then a walk, all of them pleasantly winded and panting.

"I can never thank you enough for allowing me to witness that." Povon grinned as the others returned.

"Me too!" Talia added psionically, since she was breathing too hard to talk comfortably.

"It is a sacred thing to us; the dawn ceremony." Tithian happily responded as she drank from the stream. "And it is not often shared with the other races, since we dread the thought of it being disrupted by those who are unable to fully appreciate it, which one cannot do without being fully psionic. We hold you in high esteem, and we thought it might help replenish your emotional resources."

"That it did!" Mark grinned as he slid from Silaran's back. "That was as fun and as beautiful as anything I've ever experienced! And coming from a young newlywed, that's saying something! It was absolutely wondrous!"

"Thanks." Silaran said with a huffing unicorn chuckle at his friend's exuberance.

At that moment Kragorram, Somonik, and Grakonexikaldoron arrived a hundred meters overhead with a muffled boom of displacement, and flying fast enough that they had to circle a few times before they could land.

“Good morning!” Gran called. “We were just taking some morning exercise, as Kragorram’s Healers say that it’s important that he do so. I take it that you’ve just done the same?”

“*We have.*” Tithian happily agreed, still panting a bit “*I did so twice this morning, and I almost think I’m getting too old for that!*”

“Hah!” Somonik chuckled. “If I can still force my old muscles to fly with our spy youngsters, you can still run with yours!”

“*You’re right of course. And you’re still as graceful in flight as any youngster, despite the wing, which is astounding, really.*”

“Thank you. I’ve gotten used to compensating for it with the power.” Somonik grinned as he came in for a perfect landing.

“Good morning my love.” Kragorram grinned as he came in for an almost dainty landing, back-winging to a hover first and favoring his injury. “You are beautiful in this light. The red ribbon compliments you nicely.

“Thank you, my loving flatterer, but it clashes with me horribly. I have to wear it as punishment.” Povon smiled as they gently nuzzled.

“For what?”

“At the end of the chase yesterday, we were ready to Translocate Mark, Talia, and Holanam into the midst of The Strike Force in case they should be caught by Zarkog’s forces, who would have gotten a good surprise. Yazadril said that we would not interfere with whatever they were doing unless one of them was injured. He re-iterated that when Mark said it was leading to something. But when they were jumping with every second I lost my nerve. I thought if we waited any longer, they would be Translocating so often that it would be unsafe to extract them, as the military types say. I tried to grab them between their jumps, contrary to direct orders, and Somonik restrained me, so to speak. Which I found to be extremely surprising and embarrassing, particularly after First Burgundy intervened.

“Afterward, Yazadril told me to wear a red ribbon. That’s all he said. It’s a mark of shame, even if only he and I knew it till now.”

“You meant well, my love, and he certainly couldn’t have been that upset.” Kragorram consoled as he gently enfolded her with arms, wings and tail.

“Kragorram! You’re speaking normally!” Talia realized.

“Yes. A great circle of Healers put their minds together and came up with a spell that cancels one resonance of my vocal cavity, and eliminates the effort of remembering which sibilants to vocalize. I can’t help but think that I sound more intelligent this way. I even find that I tend to not speak as slowly. And my Draconian has improved even more than my Trade Common.”

“Well I think it sounds nice, though I like the way you sounded before too.”

“Thank you.”

They were soon joined by Yazadril, Nemia, Hilsith, Alilia, Dalia, Bezedil, Holanam, Zayobod, Balen, Senchak, Emeroth, Osbald, King Dren, Wosea, and Mark’s grandparents. They were short two chairs, so Talia sat in Mark’s lap and Wosea simply Levitated, lounging in an invisible chair above the table. The dragons lounged about, and Tithian produced a feast for the humanoids that appeared on the table with a wave of her horn, before she and the other unicorns began grazing on the nearby grass.

The meal was enjoyed with a great deal of discussion of the battles, chases, and revelations of the day before.

As they were finishing, Somonik reported the latest developments. “Zarkog is testing our defenses. A few million of his forces will appear above one of our cities, military bases, or naval shipyards, launch a quick attack, and be gone before we can do much about it. A minute or so later they send a high-altitude observer by for a few seconds to check their results, which are generally negligible.

“Defections continue from both Venak and Serminak. It’s still just a trickle, but the numbers are growing.

“With their Wards down, we’ve been able to send our own observers to learn their dispositions. With the information they’ve gathered, combined with what we’ve learned from the defectors, we have a fairly complete accounting of their numbers, cities, deployments, fortifications, and other assets. We were particularly interested in learning where Zarkog’s Swarms and trolls are, and we now know that.”

“How long do you think it’ll be before they stop probing, and start attacking in earnest?” Mark asked.

“Impossible to say.” Yazadril stated. “We should ask Quewanak that. His knowledge of our opponent may be forty million years out of date, but he still knows Zarkog better than any of us.”

Mark retrieved his small Truthstone from a pocket, and sent his awareness into it. “Eldest?”

Quewanak appeared sitting behind Mark, reaching over to keep a claw-tip in contact with the stone. He instantly updated himself on the conversation from the minds of the participants by doing little more than being interested in the

knowledge. *"I couldn't say either. He was never in command of a military force back then, and I don't know what he's learned of that discipline since. Based on what I learned of modern military practices from Somonik at the founding, Zarkog appears to be rather conventional in his strategic thinking. Conventional for evil tyrants, that is.*

"One thing is certain. Your decision last night to finally undergo my training is the best course you could choose at this time. You do not presently have the ability to defeat Zarkog. I can give you that ability, and in a reasonable amount of time."

"Really? You think your training will make me able to beat Zarkog?" Mark asked in surprise. "How long would it take?"

"Again, that is impossible to say, as I will be using completely new techniques which I developed in a dream, and I had no reference to real time while I did so. A great deal depends on how much discomfort you and your companions are willing to endure. The greater the realism of the training, the greater it's effectiveness and the lesser the time that will be required. But participating in a perfectly realistic combat exercise is exactly as unpleasant as participating in actual battle."

"To beat Zarkog, I'd be willing to endure a great deal of discomfort. For my part, I'm willing to do whatever it takes to be finished as quickly as possible. This little interlude from the war has been nice, but I know people are dying out there as we sit here feasting, though Somonik tries to spare me a bit by glossing over that fact. Every second counts in lives. I feel that we don't have a moment to waste."

"I feel the same." Talia agreed.

"He speaks for us all." Kragorram nodded, and the other three of The Six nodded as well.

"Excellent." Quewanak nodded. *"Then if you are finished here, we'll get started. Mark, keep the stone in your hand."*

"All right. Thank you for a wonderful start to the day, Tithian." Mark said as he and Talia stood. "Please pass our gratitude along to all who took part. And thanks to all of you for coming to breakfast, it's always good seeing you.

"We'll try to get in twelve hours' training today, then we'll check in to see how things are going."

"They will be safe from Zarkog while they are with me." Quewanak stated assuredly. *"No one could find them where we will be."*

"Thank you. I was wondering about that." Yazadril nodded.

"All right then, my fine students, prepare to Translocate." Quewanak briskly instructed, eager to get started. *"Silaran has the reference, and you'll follow him, but each of you will take yourselves there. And gather all your power before you do so, it's a very long jump. And whatever you do, do not try to fly or levitate when you arrive!"*

"Povon, cast the Link. Now, if we are all ready, let's go."

They cast their Translocations, and all except Silaran were surprised that the brief flash of cold that came with it seemed to last noticeably longer than they expected.

"Report on your surroundings." Quewanak directed as soon as they emerged, but none heeded him right away.

"Great missing gods, what is that *smell?!?!?*" Povon cried, and Silaran actually retched for a moment before Equemev cast a spell on all of them that blocked the horrible odor and the nausea that came with it.

The next thing to be noticed was Mark floating off the ground for a second when he turned a bit. "I don't fall right here!" he exclaimed in momentary panic as he flailed in the air.

Talia jumped two meters in the air when she tried to step toward him. "We have no weight! Or almost none!"

Povon cast a Movement on each of them, roughly proportional to their weight, and stuck them to the floor. Silaran stumbled a bit as he landed from the slow jump his initial convulsion had caused.

"This is really weird!" Mark stated as he regained his balance. "I think I'd be losing my breakfast without Equemev's spell, even without the horrible stink!" He watched some dust they'd stirred up ever-so-slowly drifting down, then knelt to take a pinch of sand from the floor, and dropped it from a meter. "Things fall a lot slower than normal here." he said as he stood.

"We must be near the center of Kellaran, in the very center of the world!" Povon guessed. "Things would fall slower there!"

"No, there's not enough magic in play here to maintain this cavern against the pressures that exist deep within Kellaran." Equemev mused as she looked around. *"From all the evidence, I'd say we are within one of Kellaran's moons."*

"Excellent deduction." The Eldest congratulated. *"We are indeed within the stone of Blenda, the largest and most distant of Kellaran's moons."*

He had no sense of smell as an astral projection, so he experienced it second-hand from Kragorram over the Link Povon was still maintaining.

“Ugh. You’re right, that scent is disgusting. And worrisome.”

Mark looked around and tried to identify the source of the smell. They were in a round cavern shaped like a flattened bubble, perhaps two hundred meters in diameter and a third of that from the floor to the center of the ceiling. In the center of the floor a pink crystal as large as he was protruded from the floor. He’d have assumed it was quartz, were it not glowing brightly in both visible light and in his magic-sensing vision. The rest of the cavern was light gray stone, and the only other color in the place was an area on the far side that had the green of plant life on the floor and up the curve of the wall a bit.

They made their way over there, and saw that there were several varieties of plants, dominated by something that looked somewhat like a fern. As they drew close, they saw that there was a small spring trickling water out of the wall, and it flowed down in a tiny stream to a small pond in a shallow depression. The little watercourse was almost completely hidden by the plants, and only its faint sound and occasional reflected glint among the stems revealed it. And in the shallow pool, also hidden from their sight by the plants until they reached the edge of the water, was the source of the smell.

“I take it that that’s your body, Eldest?” Mark asked as he fought to control another wave of nausea.

“I’m afraid it is. I am obviously on the very verge of death, and have been for a very long time.”

His body was little more than skeleton and skin, and his green color had faded to a sickly off-white. He lay half submerged in the water with the tip of his snout just above the surface at the edge of the pond, and bore many horrible wounds. The worst of those was a gash that had cleaved his skull almost in half, and only a thick layer of scab covered his brain where it was exposed.

“I suppose that since I’ve lasted this long, I’ll probably last long enough to get you trained.”

“Crap on that! We can’t afford to lose you, and I won’t give up on any friend’s life until I have to! I’m calling in some Healers, the best we’ve got! You’ll just have to trust them to keep this location secret, the same as you’re trusting us.”

The eldest stared at his physical self for a long moment before he replied. *“I am not going to argue. Let Silaran cast their Translocations. Lend him some power if he needs it to do so. The reference location here changes in a constant and complex but predictable manner as Blenda circles Kellaran, making for a very tricky jump, but he has the knack for such things.”*

“Hilsith!” Mark called, somewhat frantically.

“Yes?”

“We’re with the Eldest’s body, and he’s near death. He’s really, really in bad shape. Assemble the best Healers we have, and we’ll bring you all here.”

“What is his condition?”

“He’s got about twenty serious wounds that have been slowly putrefying for forty million years. His skull’s all split open, and there’s a big scab on his brain. He’s lying in a pool of water with a bunch of plants. I’m sure he’s too sick to move him, so bring anything and everything you might need.”

“Give us thirty seconds.”

“Povon, be ready to cast the Movement on them when they get here, and Equemev, the anti-smell and nausea spell. Silaran, how much can you Translocate to here?”

“Perhaps one and a half times my own weight.”

“Tithian!”

“Yes Mark?”

Mark reported everything to the unicorn seer in one quick burst of thought.

“Understood. As many of us as necessary will assist Silaran. Don’t worry. If Quewanak can possibly be saved, he will be.”

“Let’s move over by the wall at the far end of the pond to make room for arrivals and their equipment.” Mark said as he briskly strode that way.

They’d reached there and Kragorram and Povon had just curled up together to save room when Hilsith Spoke.

“We’re ready.”

“Hold still a moment after you get here. We’ll have to cast some spells on you to allow you to work in this environment, because things here have very little weight, and there’s a smell that would make you vomit.” Mark told her.

“You deal with the weight issue then, we’ll deal with our own reaction to the smell.”

A moment later forty-two Healers of every race arrived, including three dragons, four Selkies, and a dozen gnomes, along with some fifty containers of every size full of equipment and supplies. Povon immediately cast her weight-replacing Movement on them and their gear as they cast a Link among themselves, then rapidly went to work.

“What magic is in play here?” Hilsith briskly asked the Eldest.

“There’s a stone in my stomach that produces a basic food, and a simple Movement that moves the water from the drain at the bottom of the pond through a small passage to the outlet on the wall there. That’s it. Both are powered by the emanations of the crystal at the center of the cavern, which also heats this airspace.”

Some of the other Healers were draining the water into a giant spherical water droplet to one side, while some supported Quewanak’s body with gentle spells of Movement. The selkies examined his newly exposed underside, and the rest were casting diagnostics, including Hilsith.

“I appreciate your urgency, but after forty million years, is all this rushing around really necessary?” Quewanak asked.

“Yes!” Mark and Hilsith answered simultaneously.

“Ah. And the selkies?”

“They are experts on the conditions that flesh is subject to when immersed in water for extended periods of time.” a gargoyle said without looking away from the wound she was examining.

“Ah.” the Eldest nodded again.

“Look, I’m sure the work that we must do here will be extremely unpleasant for you, and we need our concentration.” Hilsith stated sternly as she glared between Mark and the Eldest. “Isn’t there something else you can be doing? Preferably at the greatest possible distance from our patient?”

“Sorry.” Mark nodded sheepishly. “We’ll be over at the other side of the cavern. Just call us if you need anything.”

But Hilsith had already turned back to her work and gave no sign of having heard.

Mark led his group away, but before they’d gone three meters Quewanak turned back and spoke with such urgency that Hilsith gave him her full attention.

“Listen! You absolutely must not allow me to regain consciousness! Whether asleep or comatose, induced or natural, it is absolutely critical that my body remains unconscious! I will bring these six youngsters into my dream while I am training them, and if I wake while they are in my dream, we all may lose our minds, if not our lives!”

“Understood. Have no fear, your body will not be waking for at least three days, and likely not for months. You’re closer to death than anything I’ve ever seen that wasn’t actually dead already. We can probably save your life, but you must face the possibility that your body may never wake again.”

“Understood. That is as I expected.”

Hilsith nodded and returned to her task.

“Now then.” Quewanak began as he and his students settled at the far side of the cavern. *“Being this close to my body, even as decrepit as it is, I have the power to draw you all into my dream with me. You will cast a timed Sleep spell on yourselves, set to last the twelve hours you have decided to train with me for today, and a timed Awaken to rouse you at the end of that time.*

“You will learn by trial and error. Not the easiest way to learn, but the one that offers the most retention. I warn you again, you will not find this to be a pleasant process. You will train as warriors by engaging in war. The war will be simulated, but the simulation will be absolutely lifelike. As each exercise begins, you will be aware that you are dreaming, but you will forget that within a few minutes, and then you will no longer realize that what you are experiencing is a dream. You will believe that what you are experiencing is reality until the end of the exercise. Unless of course you become completely emotionally overwhelmed, in which case you will remember for a few minutes that what is happening around you is only a dream, which should allow you to carry on with the exercise.

“The arena that I will simulate for you is the world of Kellaran itself, complete in every way, with everyone and everything on it reproduced to the limits of my knowledge and awareness, exactly as it is in reality. Since the fall of the Wards around Venak and Serminak, my awareness of the world has become nearly complete. Rather than spend my time since then in delivering to our commanders an exhaustive report on the detail of enemy dispositions, I have instead prepared the training program you are about to experience. When you can win the war and defeat Zarkog in the dream, then you will be ready to do so in reality.

“You have chosen to have me train you as quickly as possible, which means giving you the most difficult and challenging training I can provide. As I said, that will be as traumatizing and as emotionally disturbing as fighting in the most brutal war that has ever been fought on our world. I give all seven of you this one opportunity to reconsider that choice, including Ria.”

Ria manifested, and joined the others in looking at each other to see if any would take the Eldest's offer, but all seemed equally determined.

"We have no choice." Mark stated firmly. "Innocents are being killed right now, and we are sworn."

"So be it." Quewanak nodded. "I only hope you don't hate me for it when we're done."

"Povon, have one of those Draconian Healers take over your Movement spells that simulate the pull of Kellaran for the Healers and their equipment. Equemev, have one of the unicorn Healers take over the spell you are using to block the stench and the nausea for this group. It reeks in here so badly, it might register on your minds in your sleep otherwise, and we don't want that."

"Done." Povon said a moment later.

"They will also check us hourly, and make certain that we do in fact awaken in twelve hours." Equemev reported.

"Excellent." the Eldest nodded. "There is nothing here to sleep upon except the stone floor, but the pull of this moon is so slight that you should be comfortable enough if Povon ends her Movement spells on you just before you cast your Sleep spells."

"You may do so now."

Mark and Talia cuddled with each other on the floor, as did the unicorn and dragon couples. Talia made sure her hand would remain in contact with Ria's hilt by binding them together with her sword-belt. As soon as Povon removed their artificial weight, Talia cast the timed Sleep spell on her and Mark. The other two females cast for themselves and their mates, and tied their Sleep spells to Talia's, since her elven sense of time was the most accurate among them.

It seemed that as soon as they fell asleep they woke up again in exactly the same positions, but now they were on the grass of a fenced pasture, within view of a huge city that was under attack by dragons, and likely by Sylvan as well, though that was impossible to see for certain at this distance.

The Eldest appeared to be physically present, a very small green dragon in robust health, as he must have looked before being struck comatose by Zarkog forty million years before. "Welcome to your first exercise." he said with a nod as his students stood and gathered round, and it seemed strange to hear him speaking normally.

"This is very strange." Ria stated. "I have never had a dream before, nor even truly been asleep."

"Yonder city is Bojoston, capitol of Thon." Quewanak informed them. "Zarkog has decided to take it as his first conquest in The Just Alliance, and has assigned one-tenth of his forces to doing so. Your task is to prevent that. In order to teach you to make your own decisions, you will be unable to contact any of the other senior leaders or commanders of the alliance."

"Begin." he said, and vanished.

"All right, let's deepen the Link to battle levels and precast a few spells." Mark briskly ordered. "I'll contact the city's defenders and determine the state of the siege, and find out where we're needed most. For now, we'll disrupt that pack of dark dragons there. They seem pretty determined to crack the shields of whatever they're attacking below them, which is a good enough reason for us to prevent it. Ria, you have tactical command."

"Thank you Mark." Ria acknowledged. "Does anyone have any comments before we begin? No? Then let's go."

Within minutes they forgot they were dreaming, and that they were participating in a training exercise. Then they fought for their lives.

This was an entirely different situation than any they had faced previously. Unlike their first battle over Kletiuk, they were vastly outnumbered and out-powered. Nor could they flee as they'd done before, since they were tasked with holding Bojoston. Within an hour they faced some four hundred million Sylvan and dragons, most of whom were fully mobile forces; capable of Flight and Translocation. This host dwarfed the population and defense of the city they attacked, and the Strike Force of The Just Alliance could only send one hundred and eighty million to assist the city's defenders, since other battles were commencing all over Kellaran. All told, the defenders were outnumbered at two to one.

The exercise was a disaster. Povon and Kragorram were killed in the second hour, soon after the enemy commander identified them as priority targets. Equemev fell two hours later. Mark and Talia only escaped being killed on several occasions because the curse would automatically Translocate them an instant before they were absolutely overwhelmed, and even with that it had to re-integrate Talia once when she and Mark were struck by a massed Concussion spell cast by over six thousand Sylvan.

By midnight, Zarkog's army held the city. Once they had it secured, they began systematically beating every member of the populace that was old enough to walk, and severely enough that none of them would be walking the next day. Thus they suppressed rebellion among the conquered.

The seven students re-appeared in the pasture with the Eldest. Above Bojoston, Zarkog's forces were starting their attack anew, exactly the same as they had at the commencement of their first attempt at the exercise.

"You have failed the exercise. Begin again." Quewanak simply stated, and vanished once more.

"Dammit!" Mark cursed. "We only have a few minutes to set a different course before we forget it's an exercise again!"

"No, not quite." Povon disagreed. "I'm starting to get a feel for what the Eldest is doing. We'll be able to learn from our experience, even though we'll forget that we've fought this battle already. I'm not sure how he'll handle the discrepancy, perhaps we'll think we've learned from other previous battles, but however it's done, we'll remember what we tried before that worked, and what didn't work."

"All right." Mark nodded. "Obviously, we have to make sure we're not recognized by presenting different appearances. And we'll have to change our appearance again every time they start to realize how much damage we're doing, so they don't send so many after us all the time. Maybe we should just be as undetectable as possible."

"I think we're missing the point." Silaran stated. "No matter how well we fight, the seven of us are not going to turn the tide by ourselves, not in a battle of this scale. We do need to fight more effectively, but far more important than that, we need to find a way to make the entire defending force more effective."

"All right. That's good thinking." Mark nodded. "I think the crucial breakdown was the loss of the reservoir and the eastern industrial district. Does anybody remember who was defending that?"

"That was the Nineteenth Thon Division, aided by a brigade of The Fist of The Empire." Kragorram supplied.

"All right, we'll go help them." Mark decided.

"As far as our fighting ability goes, Kragorram and I are catching up to the rest of you in spell casting as fast as we can." Silaran pointed out. "But we really need to do something for Talia and Equemev's physical combat skills. Far more of our enemies have succeeded in closing to sword range than we expected."

"Ria, did Visinniria give you the ability to bend your body as elves do?" Equemev suddenly asked.

"No, and I wouldn't do so if she had." the spirit of the sword stated with assurance.

"So why then did she give you her physical combat skills, as we heard her say she did at the first visitation? They are of no use to you, due to your rigidity and your insubstantial nature. I can only think it was so you could pass them to Talia somehow, and thereby skirt the gods' restrictions on helping mortals. As well, if I could find a way for Silaran to pass his combat skills to me, I might be able to avoid being killed in the next exercise as I was in the last one. That was... disturbing. To say the least. Even Povon, whose physical combat abilities are quite fearsome, could greatly benefit if she could access and integrate Kragorram's more highly trained fighting skills."

"Mark, you have passed the knowledge of your combat skills to Talia, but the knowledge does not save her the necessity of practicing the moves. I'd be willing to bet that Visinniria's fighting skills can be passed from Ria to Talia in a much more immediately useful form, and if we carefully observe how the spell works, we may be able to duplicate it. Then you could also gain from Visinniria's many centuries of combat skill, and Silaran could share his with me, and Kragorram his with Povon."

"I am extremely chagrined not to have realized this sooner." Ria stated. "I feel like I was given a nicely wrapped present, which I then failed to open until it was almost too late. You are indeed correct. Distinct from the martial skills my Lady gave me is the skills-transference spell she used to do so. Talia, I pass it all to you. Povon and Equemev, I pass you the skills transference spell."

"Oh, that is nice!" Talia grinned, and shivered. "There's nothing like a gift from a war-goddess to brighten your day! Remember this?" she asked as she drew Ria and danced through the same incredible sequence of moves that Visinniria had done when she'd passed her gifts into the sword.

Then she passed her new skills to Mark, and used the transference spell to access his skills in immediately usable form, as Povon and Equemev learned their mates' skills in the same way.

"Well!" Mark grinned. "That sure put a whole lot of new tricks up my sleeve! Are we ready? Let's go."

This time the defenders held out for twenty-seven hours before the city was lost.

After the Eldest restarted the exercise again, Mark paced in frustration.

"Those damned fools!" he cursed. "Those stupid, closed-minded, mule-headed fools! Well I'm not going through that again! This time I'm taking command of the nineteenth division, and if I have to break a few noses to do it, fine! Let's go!"

This time they held out for thirty-five hours.

At their seventh repeat of the exercise, Mark began taking command of the entire city's defenses and all of the mobile forces assigned to it.

And on their twenty-third attempt, after a battle that lasted for eleven days, Zarkog's decimated forces were forced to withdraw.

They had finally won the battle of Bojoston.

When they appeared in the pasture, Qewanak let them have a bare thirty seconds for a giddy celebration of their victory. "Congratulations. You have successfully completed the first exercise." he told them, and then the pasture around them was gone, replaced by a clearing in a dense pine forest.

"The second exercise chronologically begins at the completion of the first, and is on the same time stream. Having held Bojoston for eleven days and routed its attackers, you are now assigned to the defense of the nation of Membitra. You are fifteen kilometers east of Coradok, the capital city of Membitra, on the west coast of Debiniv. Your objectives for the exercise are to hold the nation intact for thirty-three days, while losing no more than one in ten of its populace. Zarkog has assigned one-fourth of his remaining forces to the conquest of this nation. They are experienced and hardened from their recent victory over eastern Kletiuk, which took place while you were holding Bojoston.

"Begin."

It only took them nine tries to complete the second exercise, but that added up to the better part of a year spent defending Membitra.

Even when the Eldest met them in the clearing between attempts, they no longer remembered that they had ever lived any other life. There was only the exercises and the brief interludes between them, and when they were in them they didn't remember that they were exercises, so there was only the war.

The third exercise was their first offensive action. Their objective was to take the Sylvan city of Gewn, a port on the south-east corner of Serminak. They were assigned one-eighth of The Strike Force with which to do so.

It was there that they first faced trolls, ogres, and the Swarm.

They learned the hard way that while trolls and ogres were of the same race and could interbreed, they generally would not do so, and the two groups were more distinct from each other than polar elves were from tropical elves. Trolls were the smaller by a quarter, but quicker of arm and wit, and capable of casting crude but powerful spells. Ogres weighed as much as an average unicorn and came equipped with skin that was tougher than gargoyle hide, and they were capable of fighting with almost undiminished capacity after sustaining wounds that would reduce most warriors to thrashing and screaming.

The Swarm were a nightmare of small biting bodies in their multitudes, and while they each weighed only half a kilogram or so, each bite could remove a chunk of flesh the size of a fingertip. A quarter of them were warrior class and had poison stingers that could fell a giant in six minutes, and their hive-queens possessed strange and inscrutable magics.

The fourth exercise was to hold the Empire of Kuth against an all-out assault by Zarkog's hordes.

The fifth was to take the nation of Venak for The Just Alliance. It was the only exercise they completed on their first attempt, and was a convincing success that required only fifteen days.

The sixth exercise required that they win the war.

The seventh and final exercise required that they win the war, and that Mark ensured the personal defeat of Zarkog to win the gods' favor. Even after they finally succeeded at that on their twelfth attempt, they were required to do it again under more difficult conditions, and then again, and again, thirty-seven times in total. If they took longer than two years to complete the objective, they had to finish it while demons attacked Kellaran in ever-increasing numbers.

Eventually, in the cavern in the stone of the moon Blenda, the Eldest's astral projection manifested, and was immediately harangued by a frazzled-looking Hilsith.

"Just what the hell have you been doing?!" she demanded, then continued before he could answer. "Your life hangs by a thread, yet you've been spending your life-force like water! It's been a constant and frantic struggle to keep you from death for the last twelve hours, yet we dared not disturb whatever it was you've been doing, as none of us had a hope of understanding whatever the hell it was! Only constant, delicate and difficult spells of Movement have kept you breathing and your heart beating, and that would not have been enough to keep you alive without a constant infusion of power and a hundred other procedures besides! And even as an astral projection, you look absolutely exhausted!"

"I thank you for your efforts." Qewanak nodded tiredly. *"And know that if I die, it was worth it."*

“My charges will be waking momentarily. And while twelve hours of struggle has passed for you, they have been engaged in constant warfare for a subjective time equivalent to some seventy-eight years. During that time they have fought as many battles as Visinniria fought in any three hundred year period of The War of The Segregation. You can imagine that they may require some care. Like any dream, their tribulations will fade from mind much more quickly than true experiences, but they may still be subject to extreme battle fatigue and all that goes with it for a few days.”

Hilsith stared at him for a moment, then shook her head. “I will see to them. You get some rest.”

“He is stabilizing!” one of the dragon Healers exclaimed with such huge relief that tears flowed from her eyes. “Thank all the missing gods, he is stabilizing!”

“Rest. Yes.” Quewanak nodded. *“I will withdraw into my dream. This manifestation is difficult right now, particularly when not in contact with the Truthstone. But I wanted to tell you what they have experienced before they wake, for their souls will certainly need healing. Besides, there were a few spare moments remaining in the twelve hours, and their training is as complete as I can make it. And I admit that I’ve no wish to meet their eyes when they return to reality. I put them through a great deal of torturous hardship, and though it was in a good cause, I cannot be proud of it.*

“If you would, please tell them for me that I am sorry for their pain, and that I am immensely proud of them. They were magnificent.”

“I will tell them.” Hilsith told him, her anger forgotten, and Quewanak’s projection faded from view.

She strode across to the sleeping figures, checked them with a quick diagnostic scan, and sat on the floor nearby to await their awakening. Then she reconsidered, and moved to wait at a greater distance.

She was to be glad she did, for half a minute later the six sleepers awoke simultaneously and immediately leaped to their feet as they drew weapons and cast spells with a speed that took Hilsith’s breath away. They leaped to stand in an outward-facing semi-circle against the wall as Ria manifested and Povon probed every mind in the vicinity with disturbing speed and strength.

“Safe!” Povon called, but none of them moved for a long moment.

“This... This is reality!” Silaran stammered incredulously. *“Remember?! This is where the Eldest’s body is, where we were before we started!”*

“It’s Hilsith!” Talia sobbed with a strange look of recognition, and broke into tears as she ran to the Healer. “It’s the real Hilsith, she hasn’t changed at all!”

“How long were we out?!!” Mark demanded angrily, and he strode over as fast as Talia could run. He raised his hand like he meant to seize the polar elf and shake the answer out of her, but controlled himself with an obvious effort as he repeated the question. “Dammit, how long were we out?!!!”

Hilsith had been unable to answer right away, so intimidated was she by his terrible expression and fearsome manner. It was all she could do to not back up as he loomed over her. “Just... just twelve hours. Just the twelve hours that you instructed us to allow you to sleep!”

“By the gods!” Kragorram exclaimed. “It cannot be possible!”

“You’re serious?!” Mark demanded, obviously unconvinced. “We’ve only been out for twelve hours?!!!”

“Settle down, my love.” Talia tearfully told him as she hugged the Healer. “You’re frightening her, and she’s done nothing to deserve it.”

“I swear by my honor as a Healer, you have slept for twelve hours, no more.” Hilsith assured him as she returned Talia’s hug, but kept her eyes on him.

Mark shook his head as the tension drained from his body, and his arms fell to his sides. “Twelve hours. Unbelievable.” he murmured.

“We can stop!” Povon stated quietly, like she could barely believe it. “I mean, we don’t have to fight anything right now! Even if it’s only for a little while, we can actually stop!”

“I’m not going back to it!” Kragorram suddenly insisted. “I don’t care if *has* only been one day of training in reality, I won’t go back to it! And if anyone thinks to make me do so, they will find that they are profoundly mistaken!”

“Your training is complete!” Hilsith hurried to assure them. “The Eldest said that it didn’t even require the full twelve hours. He asked me to tell you that he is sorry for your pain, and that he is immensely proud of you. He said that all of you were magnificent.”

They absorbed this for a moment, then Mark asked Talia; “How long were we gone?”

“In the dream, it added up to seventy-seven years, six months, nine days, two hours.” she responded in wonder.

“Sweet mother. And we did all that in twelve hours.” he said, and let himself slump to the floor, where he sat with his feet spread and his elbows resting on his raised knees, his hands and head hanging limp. Then he quietly started to laugh. His mirth built quickly, until he was rolling on the floor in uncontrolled hysterics.

“What? What’s so funny?” Povon demanded in irritation, and Mark held up his hand to stall until he could regain enough self-control to answer.

“All that never happened!!!!” he whooped. “*None* of those exercises really happened! Don’t you *see*!!!! Everyone thinks we’re the same as we were the last time we were in this room!!! And we’re *still at the beginning!!!*”

“Great fiery source above us!” Kragorram said in realization and wonder. “Is Zarkog ever in for a huge surprise!”

Then all seven were laughing and crying, hugging and nuzzling and backslapping and dancing for joy. Kragorram and Povon picked the others up one by one and hugged them like children hugging kittens, and Ria remanifested with her arms straight out to the sides and spun wildly about like a top while gaily singing in Old High Elvish.

Hilsith provided them with food and drink, and their jubilation continued for half an hour. Finally they slumped into relaxation, grinning and panting, their excess energy spent.

“Hilsith, do you need us to stay here for anything?” Mark asked.

“No. Tithian has arranged Translocation to and from here.

“Now listen; you will all feel some effects of battle fatigue for a while. There is no way to exactly predict its symptoms, duration, or severity, since your experience today was completely unique, and everyone reacts differently to the shocks and stresses of war. If there is somewhere you can go that is safe and secure, go there and seclude yourselves for at least three days. Try to do nothing but rest and enjoy yourselves. The Just Alliance can do without your services for *at least* that long, and if any disagree, tell them that those are your Healer’s orders! You may refer them to me if they wish to know when you will be sufficiently recovered to take part in war or politics. Quewanak tells me that like any troubling dream, the emotional after-effects of your training should fade quite quickly, compared to symptoms produced by similar events experienced in reality.”

“I just hope the skills, spells, techniques and strategies we’ve developed don’t fade just as fast.” Talia said.

“Take a Reading on yourselves and store it, while it’s still fresh in our minds.” Mark instructed, and the seven did so.

“Ahh! Great fried gods on a stick!” Povon cursed in shocked surprise as she clutched the white wood bracelet that had once been a staff. “Everything I stored in this while in the dream is actually stored in it in reality! Every spell, every Reading, every note taken on enemy personnel, everything! How is that possible?”

“I can think of a few techniques that might do it.” Mark grinned. “And so can you, except for the surprise of it. However he did it, I’m thankful. He’s given us all the tools we’ll need. Quewanak the Eldest, truly Master of the Dream. I’m surprised he hasn’t shown up for a post-training briefing or something.”

“He gave his life to give you that training, a hundred times over, and we struggled mightily to give it back to him a hundred times and more.” Hilsith tiredly informed them, and she realized in that moment how close she was to being completely spent. “He is finally stabilized, and if he takes no more turns for the worse for a few hours we might be able to consider his condition to be serious, rather than critical. He has withdrawn into his dreams to rest, on my instructions.

“And now, you should all do the same.”

“We don’t need to rest, we’ve been sleeping for twelve hours!” Mark laughed. “Seriously, we feel like we’ve been fighting the war for years, and it won’t kill us to postpone our vacation for two or three more days. We’ll refrain from battle for a day while we set a few things in motion, and then we’ll *end* this war once and for all! After that we’ll be able to rest for at least a year! But we can’t risk losing our fine edge now. And the sooner we win, the fewer people will die.

“And... I’m sorry for the way I acted toward you when we woke up.”

“That’s quite all right. From what the Eldest had told me, I should have expected the possibility of such behavior. My Healer’s dispassionate objectivity towards a patient slipped a bit there, and I should’ve known you wouldn’t do anything foolish, no matter how fierce you looked.”

“Thanks.”

“We’ll see you soon.” Talia said as she gave Hilsith a farewell hug. “Are you and my parents still staying at Hilia?”

“I’m not sure. We’re jumping all over the world lately, Yazadril with Nemia to see to military and political matters, and I with The Just Alliance’s Mobile Healers Team. Things change minute by minute, so you’d have to ask your father.”

“We’re off to see him now.” Mark said. “Actually, I think we’ll ask him and the rest of the senior leadership to meet us at the Assembly Hall. Can we give him a message for you?”

“No need.” She showed them a silver ring with a smooth, round, bright pink stone. “He and Nemia crafted this for me. It allows me to Link with them, securely and privately. I’ll contact them once I’m done here. And I do still have work remaining here, so run along and attend to yours. Good luck and stay well.”

“Thanks.” Talia smiled.

“All right troops, let’s go home.” Mark said. “Mind your psionic shields. Silaran, we jump at your cue.”

A moment later they arrived in the Hilian throneroom, which was empty. It was close to noon here, and the bright tropical sunlight from the magic windows lit the room, while the fresh sea breeze and the sound of the distant surf filled the air, punctuated by the chirps of bird life.

“Hah! Our minds are so cloaked, even Stripe didn’t notice our arrival!” Povon gloated. “I tell you, we are going to show those Serminak wizards a thing or two!

“And my love, even the Eldest could not bring my sword out of the dream where it was made, and I feel naked without it. We’ll need to replace all the weapons and tools we accumulated in training, and quickly, but I’m hoping you have a suitable blade in your inventory now.”

“I do, and I know what you mean.” Kragorram nodded. “I don’t feel right without my crossbow strapped to my back. It was a revolution in Draconian warfare in our training, and now it will be again!”

“Why don’t you see to replacing all our nasty toys now, and I’ll get things rolling with personnel.” Mark told them. “We’re going with the ‘distraction and infiltration’ plan; that worked best when the enemy was less prepared. And they were never as unprepared as they actually are right now! Mind you, our forces are all still tyros as well, and we’ll need at least a day to introduce them to the new methods we’ve developed. Once we’ve whipped our defenses into shape, we’re go. Call it twenty-four hours from now. But we’ll want you at the command meeting before then. Mind the Link for when it’s scheduled.”

“Right.” Kragorram briskly agreed, then he and Povon were gone.

“We’ll have the Draconians and The People of Morning for personal support?” Equemev asked.

“Yes, and the elves.” Mark nodded. “At least those.”

“The elves won’t take long to organize. We’ll get things started among the Xervians.”

“Go ahead.” Mark told her, and contacted Somonik as the two unicorns vanished.

“Somonik?”

“Yes Mark?”

“I’m calling an emergency meeting of the Assembly of The Just Alliance, and all senior wizards and military commanders, to be held at everyone’s earliest possible convenience.”

There was a long pause before Somonik responded again.

“We can be assembled in one hour and ten minutes.”

“That’ll do. Thank you.”

Meanwhile Talia had Spoken with Yazadril.

“Father?”

“Yes daughter. How is your training progressing?”

“It is finished. We know how to win the war. Actually, we have several viable methods for doing so. We’re calling an emergency meeting of the Assembly, so I imagine you’ll be hearing from Somonik about it momentarily, and we’ll see you there. I just couldn’t wait to talk to you and Mother. I know it’s only been a day since we spoke, but it’s been many decades to us. How are you?”

“We’re fine dear.” Nemia assured her, having joined the conversation as soon as Yazadril realized it was Talia’s Speaking. *“How do you fare?”*

“We’re a bit stressed, but fine otherwise. I should break off. We’re fairly certain the enemy can’t detect us or our communications, but it’s best not to take a chance. We’ll see you in a few minutes. I love you.”

“As we love you.” Nemia returned, and Talia ended the Speaking.

“Sheramiv, report please.” Mark requested, and she responded by appearing in person.

She seemed a bit frazzled, but smiled with gladness at seeing them.

“Almost every spot of floorspace is taken up by evacuees and supplies, except for your personal quarters. The Wards have been repaired, as you’ve probably noticed, and are now charged with considerably more energy than they were before the attack. Our people are well, Atoned and Volunteers alike, and we’ve been kept busy seeing to our

many guests, and organizing them into a civil defense force. Organizing the adults that is, over two-thirds of our guests are children.”

“This throneroom is considered part of our personal quarters?” Mark asked with a raised eyebrow.

“It is.”

“That’s silly, if considerate. We’ll keep the cottage private, but the rest of this shouldn’t be sitting empty while people are crowded into other places. Store our extra possessions as compactly as possible, and make the space available for those who need it.”

“I’ll see to it.”

“From now until further notice, we’ll be keeping our present location secret. That is to say, we’ll want the cottage, it’s surroundings, and our beach kept off-limits to all. No one is to know when we’re here, though you can feel free to announce that we’ve been here after we’ve left. It’s just safer for everyone that way.

“We’ll want you and Relgemit with us at the meeting of the Assembly that will take place in an hour or so. You’ll be attending as Hilia’s Senior Wizard, rather than as First Minister, and Relgemit goes as our nation’s military commander, to avoid repeating the address and demonstration of techniques we’ll be holding with all the top wizards and commanders in the alliance. Prepare accordingly, and report to the Hall of the Assembly on Somonik’s call.

“We’re going upstairs for a change of clothes and a bite to eat.”

“I follow your instructions, my Prince.” Sheramiv formally intoned with a grin and a short bow. “I have a feeling things are soon going to become a bit more exciting than they are already.”

“You’re not wrong!” Talia laughed.

Once Somonik reported that the Assembly had gathered, The Six of Hilia appeared on the dais in an outward-facing circle around the Truthstone.

The first impression they made was as the most heavily armed squad most there had ever seen. The two unicorns wore full plate barding with huge blades in front of their horns, razor-sharp shoes that covered their hooves completely, and racks of various projectiles on their backs, ready for launching by Movement. The dragons wore full steel chain mail with plate gauntlets, great dragon-sized swords strapped to their sides, quivers of two meter bolts on their chests, crossbows and racks of smaller projectiles strapped to their backs, and each held a gleaming steel lance that was half their respective length. Mark and Talia wore full plate armor, along with their swords, and they wore smaller versions of the projectile racks on their backs. Their helmets were shaped to mate with their crowns and lock them in place.

The second impression was made by their manner. All traces of youthful naiveté and frolic were gone, replaced by a hard, confident appraisal of their audience that made many there feel like a recruit being inspected by a sergeant. Their stances seemed relaxed, yet ready to burst into action instantly, and they wore their burdens of arms and armor with the absolute ease and comfort of long familiarity.

Somonik allowed himself and the Assembly a moment of suitable length to appraise their new appearances, then he announced them and opened the meeting.

“Prince Mark and Princess Talia of Hilia, Keys to The Just Alliance, with their companions in The Six of Hilia.

“We shall now come to order. This meeting of the national leaders, high commanders, and ranking spellcasters of The Just Alliance is now in session.”

“Thank you, Somonik, and thank you all for attending on short notice.” Mark announced. He paused a moment, for dramatic effect as much as to decide how he would proceed.

“Our entire world is in upheaval, and billions are affected. Yet today, a single person of greatness and courage gave forth his supreme effort, and with it, he has given us the means to achieve a swift victory. Quewanak the Eldest, Master of The Dream, is not here. Instead he rests while his body struggles for life. He could not have achieved his triumphant act without the unstinting efforts of some of the finest Healers we have, for it required the full of their skills to keep Quewanak alive while he gave his gift.

“He has many talents, and the greatest of these is a nearly complete awareness of everyone and everything on Kellaran. He found a way to pass on that immense body of knowledge in the most useful form he could give it, and in only twelve hours, and he gave us a way to develop that knowledge and our ability to use it to the fullest.

“He took us within his dream, and there he recreated the entirety of Kellaran, with almost everyone and everything on it as they are in reality. And there we fought this war, over and over again. While twelve hours passed for you, we have waged this war for seventy-seven and a half years of unremitting battle. We’ve lost this war in dozens of different ways, but we’ve won it in dozens of ways as well. And in all of those scenarios, we faced far more difficult conditions than we do now.

“We have detailed knowledge and revolutionary methods that will allow us to win the war with Zarkog within three days, and if things go perfectly, we can have it all wrapped up in thirty-six hours.

“Perhaps the only detrimental side-effect of Quewanak’s training is this; in order that we learn independently and without depending on others with more experience, none of the senior leaders or commanders of The Just Alliance were represented in our training exercises. Thus, we’re familiar with most of your subordinates below the rank of general or admiral, and we know exactly how they’ll react in a crisis or when faced with hardship and challenge, but we don’t have that knowledge of any of you.

“You’ll have to trust us to know what we’re doing, and we’ll have to trust you to be able to carry out your parts in our plan.

“Before we discuss that, we should hear a report of our present military situation as it’s developed over the last twelve hours.”

Yazadril appeared before him and bowed to the Assembly. “Since Zarkog abandoned his pursuit of you, he has sent occasional skirmishes against our population centers. While more substantial than his initial probes of our defenses, they are still comparatively small, and can be counted as acts of psychological warfare, moreso than as acts of conquest.

“Our best psionics have been unable to locate Zarkog, and he is not personally participating in the attacks.

“Venak has thus far remained neutral. They are frantically fortifying their border, since their Wards remain down, but none have ventured forth from there to make war for either side. Not even the dragons and Sylvan that Zarkog has there have taken part in any attacks, so it remains uncertain whether they still follow him, or whether they now report to Renem directly, or to someone else, since there is some evidence that Renem may be dead. On the other hand, they take no particular action to impede defectors of all types from fleeing into Thon. Almost a quarter million have defected to The Just Alliance so far, and while that is still an insignificant fraction of their population, those numbers continue to increase.

“Those of our peoples who are not facing Zarkog’s attackers at any given time send mobile forces to assist those who are, and the rest proceed with further fortifications of their defenses, and the provision of non-combat support.”

“What are our total losses, and Zarkog’s?” Mark asked.

“We have lost less than one per million of our citizens, and none within Xervia. We have lost between three and four per million of our military forces, while Zarkog has lost between five and six per million of his population, the entirety of which can be considered military, most of them in the battle over his hall.”

“So, the facts that you’re reporting in such a honey-coated manner are that some eight or nine thousand of our people have been killed, and about the same number of our fighters, many in the most horrifying manner that Sylvan minds can devise. Zarkog has lost about twenty-three thousand. I assume about ten times as many have been wounded on both sides, and about half of those seriously?”

“You assume correctly.”

There was a pause.

“And?” Mark prompted.

“Pardon me?”

“You’re going to have to adjust your thinking, Yazadril.” Mark sternly told him. “I find your report to be almost completely lacking in tactically and strategically relevant detail. I’m asking for a professional military report, and you’re treating me like a child.”

“Fine. Here.” Yazadril stated, and thrust such a huge collection of facts into Mark’s mind that he was sure the young man would have to take a few minutes to absorb it all. He was somewhat chagrined to find how irritated he was at the sharp rebuke, being unused to the experience, particularly when he realized after a moment that it was fully deserved.

Mark accepted his report effortlessly, then nodded. “All right, listen up!” he called, then was interrupted.

“*Caution!*” Ria snapped in the Link as she manifested, while Talia said;

“*Hold, my love. This is not a dream, and that is not the best way to proceed among these honored leaders.*”

Mark regarded her for a moment, then turned back to Yazadril.

He considered the ancient elf, then went to one knee and bowed to him. “Honored Yazadril.” he said as he straightened, but remained on one knee. “I have said that I should not be directly obeyed as Key to The Just Alliance, except for during the most pressing and dire of circumstances, and only then if I have unique and crucial knowledge of how to proceed that cannot be effectively communicated to everyone who needs to know it in a short enough time for it to be most effective. That is presently the case.

“You were chosen as Supreme Commander of the militaries of The Just Alliance because you were the most qualified candidate available at that time. That is no longer the case.

“Honored Yazadril, and honored members of The Assembly of The Just Alliance, I therefore most respectfully suggest and request that you confer upon me the authority to command our alliance for the next five days, or until Zarkog has been completely defeated, whichever comes first.”

There was a long pause, and a certain tension built in the room.

“You ask for command over the entirety of The Just Alliance, and not just command of our military?” Yazadril finally asked.

“I do. I may need the assistance of persons or the use of resources which are not presently under the command of the military.”

“I see. And if you fail to defeat Zarkog within five days?”

“Then the accuracy of the Eldest’s simulations is far less than we believe it to be, which would render inaccurate any plans based on it. But I am certain that such is not the case. By my vow on the Truthstone of Falgaroth, I am *certain* that we can achieve victory in three days, for the simple reason that we’ve done it several times already, and under far more difficult circumstances. I only ask for five days as a prudent margin against the unexpected, and if I cannot achieve it by then, I will gladly relinquish command to you, or to whoever this Assembly should choose for the responsibility.”

“How would this victory be won?” Somonik asked. “And at what cost? I realize your plan must be complex indeed if it is more practical to assume command than to take the time to explain it, but still, some summarization must be possible.”

“It is a five layered assault.” Mark answered, confidently and decisively.

“First and foremost, we must end Zarkog’s terrorist attacks on our citizens, and do so in such a convincing manner as to give him pause. He must be made to reconsider the practicality of attacking us.

“Second, we will convince many of Zarkog’s followers to abandon his cause by means of a display of force that is obviously beyond anything Zarkog could match.

“Third, we will call Zarkog out to personal combat and defeat him. If these three parts of the plan are successful, that will be all that’s necessary. Zarkog will be punished for his crimes. At that point one of us will assume the Lordship of Serminak. After Zarkog’s punishment, if he is allowed to live, he will be forced to swear to justice on the Truthstone. At that point it may be wisest to restore him to Lordship of Serminak, though he would be subject to the decrees of the Assembly of The Just Alliance. The reason for restoring him to power is that many of the Sylvan and Dark Dragons feel a strong personal loyalty and admiration for him, contrary to our expectations, and restoring him to power would help to ensure their loyalty to the Alliance. Of course, we will also begin swearing every one of them on the Truthstone, until all of them are bound to justice.

“Fourth, we will turn as many of his commanders as we can, starting with his most senior officers, by Compelling them to swear Osbald’s Oath on one of the portable Truthstones. We will actually do this before initiating steps two and three. If those two steps are unsuccessful, we will foment civil war among the forces of Serminak, and thereby curtail much of their ability to wage war against us. With many of their commanders on our side, whether that support is overt or covert, we will have a much easier time in bringing the rest of them to heel.

“And finally, if none of that works, we will attack Serminak with an all-out assault, using everything we can bring to bear against them, and take complete control of everyone and everything there. It would cost us a third of our military, and result in the deaths of half of the population of Serminak, but we *will* win, and quickly, and without exposing *our* nations, homes, and non-combatants to the destruction of such a huge conflict.

“And I’d like to point out that it’s not merely explaining our plans in full that would take too long if I don’t have command, it’s explaining and enacting many of the smaller aspects of it. For instance, I have a long list of personnel who will be immediately promoted, and a few who will be demoted, and many who will be re-assigned to duties that they are better suited to. My reasons for these changes are based on years of simulated experience, but the truth of the matter is that the way those people behaved in the simulations is based on the Eldest’s assessment of them. And I trust his assessments. I don’t have time to explain in detail why some twenty thousand individuals should be assigned to different duties. Nor do I have the patience for it, to be honest. My eagerness to get on with what we have to do is greater with every passing moment.”

Again there was a long and rather tense silence as his words were considered.

“All right.” Yazadril finally nodded. “I will endorse your proposal. Fully and without reservation.”

“Thank you.” Mark answered, and stood.

“Who would speak now?” Somonik asked in the sudden hubbub that followed. “Chieftain Tokibimina, Spokesperson for The Association of Oceania.”

“If we choose to refuse the Key, what will we do?” the old woman asked as she stood, a touch of derision in her voice. “I have heard nothing that makes me believe that any of you have a viable alternative to his proposal. The only other course that has been proposed with any seriousness involves fighting a very long defensive war, and relying on the tactical advantage that such a defensive stance conveys. But the devastation to our peoples and their properties from a war of that style would be hideous, and it would have little guarantee of success. Oceania is particularly poorly suited to such an effort, and there is little that can be done to change that. Meanwhile the demons are closer to us with every passing moment.

“I tell you, Oceania stands with Prince Mark. He is truly Key to The Just Alliance. Key to the Nexus. His is the voice of destiny.

“Let us put it to a vote. His proposal should pass unanimously, since any who’d vote against it is a shortsighted and small-minded fool. At the very worst, we’ll just be back in this same situation five days from now. But I believe in him, and in his companions. I trust that he will lead us to a great victory.”

“I’ll second that, every word of it!” Overlord Senchak called exuberantly as Tokibimina resumed her seat.

“Who would speak now?” Somonik asked after a moment, during which many of the Assembly exchanged quiet words with those nearby. “Tithian, Speaker for The Senate of The People of Morning.”

“*The People of Morning stand with Prince Mark.*” she declared.

“As does Verzaclon!” Emeroth called. “I could give him my throne right now, and none of my people would disagree!”

“Thon stands with the Key!” Osbald loudly declared.

A moment later the many calling voices blended into an enthusiastic roar of approval.

“Who would speak now?!” Somonik eventually yelled, loudly and insistently enough to restore order, and a moment passed while everyone looked around to see if any would argue against Mark’s plan. None did.

“Then I ask you, are we agreed that we will enact Prince Mark’s proposal, granting him supreme command of our militaries and the power to act by emergency decree in any of our nations’ affairs, for a period of five days, or until we have achieved victory over Zarkog and ended the threat of war between the peoples of Kellaran?”

The response was enthusiastic enough to be deafening.

“Let the record show that all have agreed.” Somonik pronounced when the din had died down a bit, but his pronouncement only triggered another round of cheering.

Mark found himself grinning, and wiping away an unexpected tear or two, shed for the power of his emotion in that moment.

“All right, let’s have some order!” he finally called. “We’ve got a lot to do, and the faster we can do it, the better off we’ll be. I said we could achieve victory in thirty-six hours, but we’re going to see how many hours we can shave off that estimate!

“The first thing we’re going to teach you is better use of our available magic, and better protection for our spell-casters. And everything we’re about to reveal must be considered absolutely most secret information. This must be stressed to each of your subordinates, since millions of us will need to know it, yet if Zarkog finds out what we’re up to the results could be disastrous.

“The important thing is the sharing and concentration of power. If a thousand wizards all personally take part in a battle, every one of them is vulnerable to attack. But if they choose the best fighter among them, and the rest use their power and ability remotely to help that one person in their fight, only that one needs to be exposed to danger. The rest can remain hidden or dispersed.

“There are four methods by which this can be done.

“First, the support wizards can directly cast spells to a distant location, as the Hilian elves did to assist us over Kletiuk, and they will be much more effective in doing so for having access to the battle wizard’s on-scene perception of the situation, as opposed to casting to a remote location by projecting your consciousness there as one would do in preparation for Translocation.

“Second, the support wizards can use what we’ve come to refer to as ‘push’ type spells to pass some of their power to their battle wizard for his use in the spells he’s casting. This is quite common, particularly among the elves.

“Third, the battle wizard can use ‘pull’ spells to draw some of the support wizards’ power. Push and pull type spells only differ as to whether the contributor of the power or the receiver of it casts the spell and controls the flow of power. They both share a crucial limitation, that being the amount of raw power the recipient can hold without suffering from it.

“We’ve developed a fourth method that doesn’t share that limitation. We call these ‘draw’ spells. Talia and I developed the basics of the method to cast each other’s power. A Link is cast between the support corps and the battle wizard, and the fighter is given direct control of the others’ power. In essence, when the battle wizard casts a draw spell, it seems like he is drawing power from his support corps to cast it, but in reality, as far as the power flow is concerned, they are casting spells remotely under his guidance. The power never truly passes through the battle wizard, and so the only limits on the spells he can cast with this method are the amount of power that can be safely spent by the support wizards without becoming depleted, and the skill of the psionics maintaining the Link, which decides how many support wizards can be Linked.

“We’ve discovered that the best combination is for the support corps to take care of their battle wizard’s defenses with remotely cast spells, while the battle wizard concentrates on offensive efforts with draw spells.

“Concentration of power is the key. Any of us six have sufficient psionic skill to co-ordinate the Links and cast the power of several million spell-casters with draw spells. Several million wizards casting Shields and Wards around one person can make that person very close to invulnerable, but this can be taken farther still.

“You will learn a new style of spell-casting, which involves many of the methods used to cast a blessing or a curse. We call these ‘automated’ spells. By giving my defensive spells a very limited and focused awareness and decision-making ability, they become self-activating, and can act much more quickly and accurately than I can. They no longer need to waste power keeping a Shield all the way around me all the time. If someone shoots an arrow at me, I only really need a Force Shield a bit bigger than the arrow placed right in front of the arrowhead for a fraction of a second before it hits me. Only automated spells can do this with any practicality.

“Conversely, using the power of several million wizards to cast offensive draw spells is an amazing concentration of power, but if all of that energy can be further concentrated by being focused into a beam no thicker than a hair, no conventional shielding can withstand it. Wiggle it a little, and a hair-thin hole becomes a nasty slice. Make such spells self-activating and a bit aware, and equip them with the ability to discriminate friend from foe, and they will immediately devastate every enemy they can detect.

“We’ve also developed better methods for conventional troops, both in how they’re transported and deployed, and in how they’re equipped.

“Now, we’ll divide the spell-casters and commanders into four groups. Povon will teach draw spells and the psionic skills necessary to their casting, Equemev will teach the casting of automated spells, Silaran will teach deployment and transportation, and Kragorram will teach the crafting and use of the new weaponry and equipment. These will be ninety-minute lectures, and then everyone will rotate until all have heard the first four lectures.

“Then the four subjects will be covered in greater depth for those who will specialize in those subjects.

“The teaching will be done by Linking. You have twelve hours to learn these matters with sufficient depth to effectively teach them to your subordinates. If you’re ready to do so sooner and your instructor agrees, then do so.

“Meanwhile, could I have all the political leaders who are neither military commanders nor Master spell-casters gather here with me and Talia.”

His four instructors made their way to the edges of the room at the four cardinal points, and the crowd divided themselves accordingly.

At the center of the room the purely political group gathered, including Tokibimina, three human kings from Northern Debivin, six selkies and nine gargoyles. Talia spoke to them as Ria looked on.

Meanwhile Mark raised the Truthstone of Falgaroth two meters above the dais and began making another pile of miniature versions of it.

“We are about to correct an injustice, or at least we’ll attempt to do so.” Talia explained. “For eons, the Swarm, trolls, and ogres of Xervia have been kept in quarantine in Warded preserves for crimes committed by their ancient ancestors. It has been impractical to free them until now, since by their natures, they are likely to commit new crimes if freed without restriction. We will go to the borders of their preserves, and offer freedom to any who are willing to swear and be bound by Osbald’s Oath.

“Since there are millions of them, the twenty-one of us won’t be able to administer the oath to all of them, but it’s important that the process be begun by senior leaders of The Just Alliance, in order to show the seriousness with which we regard this matter, and to show that they will be treated with respect if they comply. We’ll administer the oath to the dominant and leading members of those races, then delegate the swearing of the rest who wish to accept our offer.

“You’ll each be issued a portable Truthstone, and we’ll bring a bunch of extras as well to leave with the leaders of the races we’ll be freeing. They’ll administer the oath to the rest under the supervision of personnel you’ll contribute for the task.

“That’s the plan, but we’ll have to be flexible. Even Quewanak’s awareness gives him no way to reliably predict these races’ reactions.

“I’m ready if you are.” Mark announced, and began handing out portable Truthstones.

Soon they stood in a clearing in a strange jungle. Across one end of the clearing was the shimmer of Wards that appeared to be similar in style to the Sylvan Boundary. Talia led them to within a few paces of the Wards as she cast several spells.

“Talia will handle the presentation to the ogres and trolls.” Mark announced as he touched a fingertip to the Wards and altered them a bit. “Theirs is a difficult language, even with the use of a translation spell, and she has a better knack for languages than I do. She’ll lower the pitch of her voice as well, and cast it loudly and widely enough to be heard over the entire preserve.”

“I’ll be directing it away from us, but you’ll still want to block some of it.” Talia told him as she took a few steps away from the rest of the group.

“Ah.” Mark smiled. Suddenly the background sound of the breeze and the jungle around them dropped to a fraction of its volume, and almost perfect silence reigned.

Talia began roaring into the preserve with an unearthly noise.

“It won’t be long before we get a response.” Mark assured the group of rulers. “The preserve is seven hundred and twenty-four kilometers long and about a hundred and forty-five kilometers wide, so it’ll take a long time for all of them to come here, but we’re near the best territories, where the most dominant individuals live. Trolls can run thirty kilometers in an hour, so the closer ones should be here pretty soon. The ogres will follow the trolls to see if they can get some easy food.”

“Your Highness, if I may.” one of the human kings said with a polite bow. “What exactly is the Princess saying to them?”

“King Karbof, she’s saying; ‘We are The Just. We are mighty and strong. Our magic is scary. Come here, and we may let you out.’ She’s repeating it. You have to keep things simple with trolls. If they have to absorb too many concepts at once they only get confused. And you have to demand respect, or you won’t get any.”

King Karbof of Bhia smiled, and was surprised at how pleased it made him that Mark knew who he was.

“We don’t want to have a crowd here right now, but once the swearing really gets going we’ll need quite a bit of help, as we said.” Mark continued. “I’m thinking that if each of you supplies fifteen hundred people, it should all be finished by nightfall. Do any of you need assistance with bringing them here?”

“Not at all.” King Karbof said. “We all carry items for Speaking or Linking with our administrators, and with Somonik.”

A selkie chattered shrilly while thumping the base of its gnarled driftwood staff on the turf, and a strange voice issued forth from it. “Age of magic and wonder. Items of power in every market, spells for hire and gift. One need not talent for magic to use it, and everyone a wizard who can trade for it. My people no less.”

“Quite so, Prime Wisdom Zop.” Mark smiled and nodded, and the selkie’s staff chattered its translation.

“I bring people now. People speak troll, hear Talia. They say again Talia’s words to other trolls after we go. Say again exactly.”

“That’s good thinking, thank you.” Mark nodded.

“Ogres almost too stupid to talk. What you say to ogres?”

“Less.” Mark grinned.

Zop hissed, and giggling laughter issued from his staff.

Talia finished her troll-call. Movement in the jungle showed that beings moved there, just behind the first screening layers of plant life, but none ventured forth into the clearing.

“Trolls smell bad. Ogres smell worse.” Zop quietly chattered as he waved a paw under his nose.

“Ya. Bodies a bit like gorillas with tusks, skins like elephants, smells like rotting skunks.” Mark agreed.

Suddenly one of the other selkies softly chattered directly in Zop’s ear, but his staff still picked it up and translated it. “Your staff set wrong syntax! Your Trade Common sound like infant, like fool!”

“I know, but am understandable, so fine.” Zop calmly returned. “Was good trade; six big pearls. Looks nice, feels good in hand. Has seven other spells, better than this. Speaks good Morning, good Draconian. Excellent Shield. Nothing is perfect.”

“At this moment, my fine comrade, I’d say that shielding might take priority over eloquence.” Karbof commented.

Trolls and ogres were emerging into the clearing, forced into view by the rough shoving of those arriving behind them, and the crowd of them shook the bushes and trees around them while filling the air with guttural snarling.

Meanwhile, dozens of selkies were arriving in the clearing behind the delegation.

“Why talk to trolls? Why talk to ogres?” Zop asked. “Cast question on Truthstone; do you swear Osbald’s Oath? Throw Truthstone into preserve. Trolls touch stone, say yes, pass Wards. Say no, stay there.”

“We’re hoping for a bit more than that, actually.” Mark admitted.

A minute later a harsh boom was heard, triggering the trolls and ogres to snarl and growl even louder as they looked behind them. A moment later the boom was repeated, closer this time, and they began to clear an aisle. Those who were slow to do so were shoved out of the way, and a five meter tall troll emerged into the clearing, accompanied by two six meter ogres, all three carrying massive clubs made from tree trunks thirty centimeters thick and about three meters long, smoothed at the handle and chipped and cracked at the business end from long use. The troll slammed his club into the ground of the clearing and cast a crude Concussion with it as he did so, revealing the source of the booms.

“Hm. A lot bigger and older than any Zarkog has.” Talia commented.

“These will be the dominant males.” Mark stated with assurance. “Now for a show of force, just to establish our credentials. I’m sure Talia can handle this, but I’m her back-up, so excuse us while we give this our attention for a minute.”

With that, Talia calmly stepped through the Wards.

This seemed to surprise the big troll a bit, then he growled and shoved one of his ogres forward.

That one roared his challenge as he took a running overhead swing. Talia blocked the blow with a forearm and the club broke at the point of contact with a loud crack, the end of it flying into the ground behind her with a thud and a bounce. The ogre took another swing with his shortened weapon, but Talia danced inside his swing and neatly tripped him, sending him sprawling forward.

As the ogre struggled to his feet, she calmly strode toward the troll. As she came within range of his club she made a quick sliding step to the side and seized the end of it with clawed fingers that sank half their length into the wood as splinters flew free from the impact. Before the troll could react to the blinding speed of her move, she had ripped it from his grip and spun to threaten the ogre behind her with it. That one took two steps back in shocked surprise, and the tableau held for a moment.

Then she calmly handed the huge club back to the troll with one hand, and he took it from her just as the handful of wood she was gripping broke free with a crunch. She dropped the chunk and walked back to her group, rubbing her forearm where the first club had hit like it pained her a little. As she passed the ogre she made a quick feint toward him and he warily jumped back, and she giggled as she rejoined her husband.

“Nice moves.” Mark chuckled.

“Thanks.” she nodded as she gave his waist a quick hug, then turned back to the dominant troll and began speaking the aggressive noise of his language again.

“She’s repeating the introduction. ‘We are The Just. We are mighty and strong. Our magic is scary.’” Mark translated. “You can touch this stone.”

Talia held forth a portable Truthstone as she continued her speech.

“You can say you will not fight first at people. You can say you will not hurt those people who hurt no one, and you will not let them be hurt. You can say you will uphold justice. If you touch the stone and say those things, you will have to do what you said, but I will let you out.”

The troll answered her just as aggressively.

“He says; ‘The burners and the runners will hunt us then.’ I think he means the dragons and the unicorns.

“Talia says they will not, for if they speak on the stone as she says, they will wear the mark of The Just, and will be protected from the burners and the runners.

“He asks what ‘uphold justice’ means.

“She says, touch the stone, and you will know what justice means. If you do not speak while you touch it, you will not be spelled.”

She held it through the shimmering curtain, and the troll hesitantly advanced to the Wards and touched it with a fingertip for a moment. Then he looked at his fingertip like he might see some profound truth there.

“He says; ‘That is strange. If I do this thing and I don’t like it, can I come back and be what I was?’

“She says; ‘You can always come back here, for the preserve will always be the land of your people. But once you speak on the stone, you are spelled for all time.

“Now she’s offering him a job. His choice of jobs, actually, either joining the Hilian forces or cutting trees for a timbering concern. She telling him about the excellent food we have. She’s telling him that if he’s lucky and works

hard, he may get to fight demons. And it looks like that's decided him." Mark finished with a chuckle as the big troll reached for the stone again, and swore his oath upon it.

Mark barely noticed the flash of the spell as the white and blue symbol of The Just Alliance appeared on the troll's enormous belly, and large enough to cover almost all of it, while the blue symbol of the Truthstone appeared covering his entire face. He shuddered, then took a deep breath, and stepped through the Wards.

Mark had to marvel that even the lumpy face of a troll covered with a blue symbol could bear an expression that shone with the wonder of freedom.

"He says; 'My Marking is big, so dragons can see it easily. I am Kugkugki, strong and fierce. I will walk through that forest. I have never walked there before. Maybe I will trade my strength another day. If demons come, find me, and I will kill them.'"

With no more ado, the troll strode off.

The ogre with the broken club was next to swear, though it was unclear whether he truly understood what he was saying. It mattered not. The symbols appeared on him as they had on Kugkugki, and he stepped through the barrier. He looked around, considered the selkies who were closest to him, then looked at his broken club. Suddenly he broke into a jog, and crashed off through the trees.

Then trolls and ogres were surging forward, and Talia turned to her party. "Space yourselves out along the Wards and hold your Truthstones halfway through the barrier. That way they can touch the stone to swear on it without being able to grab your hand and pull you into the preserve."

Soon trolls and ogres were streaming out of the preserve by the dozens.

"You appear to have this well in hand." Talia said after a few minutes. She handed her Truthstone to one of the newly arrived selkies. "Inform the High council of Xervia and all the local authorities that they have new citizens, sworn and trustworthy, with all the rights we enjoy."

"I'll have the other holders of Truthstones send theirs along if they're not using them." Mark told them as incoming gargoyles arrived. "And I'll make up some more when we get back. Meanwhile those of us of the Assembly will go see the Swarm."

Mark and Talia appeared with the nineteen rulers on a dusty plain that was almost a desert, with shimmering Wards extending from horizon to horizon in front of them. A huge hive queen appeared on the other side with her millions of workers and soldiers only a moment later. More queens and their swarms appeared behind her, then more still, and in five seconds they extended as far as the eye could see.

"I know who you are, and I know what you are about." a buzzing psionic voice suddenly proclaimed. *"I have been listening since you appeared to the trolls."*

"I am the Queen of Queens, and all of The Swarm who live are my daughters, my daughters' daughters, my daughters' daughters' daughters. Even those who were stolen from me to fight and breed for the Dragon Lord. He must be made to pay for his offense against me. My daughters must be returned to me. I rule The Swarm, and no other."

"I will swear on the stone for my freedom. All of The Swarm will do so. The prize is worth the price. I demand a full voice in your Assembly for myself, and an equal place in The Just Alliance for my people."

"I am seventh in power on this world, fourth in psionics, second in awareness only to Quewanak the Eldest. The might of The Swarm is considerable. We will strike fear into the demons, and work must begin immediately to prepare to repel them. But first we deal with the Dragon Lord."

"Throw the stones into the preserve, and we will swear. I would waste no more time. Nor do I expect you to share your plans with me before I have sworn, and I am eager to know them."

Talia tossed her stone onto the sand in front of the glistening insectoid as Mark altered the Wards with a fingertip. There was one more moment to enjoy the coppery colors of her glassy carapace and the rainbow shimmer of her transparent wings. Then she swore the oath and became pure white except for five blue Truthstone symbols, one centered on each of her four long oval wings, and one on her head between her antennae. Her millions of twenty-five centimeter long workers and forty centimeter long warriors assumed the same coloring at the same moment, since their minds were merely extensions of hers.

"Wings of a dragonfly, body of a wasp." Talia breathed as she watched the spectacle. "Beautiful. And it's nice that your bottom jaw moves up and down, rather than having two that move side to side like many insects. It's a lot easier to tell that you're people that way, somehow."

"Thank you." the Swarm queen acknowledged as she rose to her full two meter height and spread her wings to their full four meter span. She fanned herself a bit, then gracefully flew through the Wards.

“Throw your Truthstones as far into the preserve as you can.” Talia instructed her companions. “It’ll speed things up and reduce crowding. Once they’ve all sworn, we’ll have the Wards taken down by the High Council of Xervia.”

“That would be a waste.” The Queen of Queens chided. *“No layer of defense should be discarded while the demons still threaten. Once I am accepted into the Assembly, I should also be accepted into The High Council of Xervia. Then I can have these Wards Keyed to me, and use them to help defend my land, rather than contain it.”*

“My daughters will return your stones when the last of them have sworn. And as you can see, that will not take long.”

Indeed, her workers had neatly caught the thrown stones as her daughter queens lined up in rows, and now the stones were flown down the rows. Each queen needed only to reach up and touch a passing stone with an antenna to effectively swear the oath. They and their minions became white in waves across the dry prairie, and they were distinguished from The Queen of Queens and her first-generation workers and soldiers by their lack of the blue symbols on their wings, having it only on their heads.

“That’s a stirring sight, and a beautiful one.” Mark stated. “An entire race being delivered from captivity. Two of them in one day, actually. Not a bad day’s work. There’s a lot more of you than I expected.”

“One of my daughters is a seer. She knew we faced troubling times some seventy-two years ago. Since then we have bred to the capacity of our rainfall and water supply. As soon as I have a spare moment I intend to trade for an irrigation system. We can remove impurities from seawater, but we need an underground river built from the coast.”

“We number more than seventeen million Queens, twenty-one billion workers, six billion soldiers.”

“Ah. That is an impressive host indeed. Well, your part of the plan will be to wait until we have Zarkog completely distracted, and then reclaim your family. After that, if Zarkog hasn’t fallen, you’ll help us see to his downfall. We know that Zarkog holds your daughters in thrall by means of a specialized Compulsion spell. It took our companion Povon a few months to crack it, but she’s formulated a countering spell. If you’ll allow me to Link with you, I’ll give it to you, along with what you’ll need to know to carry out your part of the plan.”

“Thank you.”

The first thing he did once the Link was established was to check her trustworthiness. The hive-mind was so alien that Mark worried whether even the Truthstone could turn their voracious appetite and xenophobia. He needn’t have worried. She was fully sworn to justice and comfortable with it, and fully dedicated to the new course she had committed her people to. She considered this the beginning of a new golden age for her race.

“Sorry about that, but I had to know.” he thought. *“Here’s the counterspell and the information.”*

“Quite understandable, and thank you. I am surprised to find that you have a beautiful mind. A rare thing among the single-minds.”

“Thanks, so do you. Hey, do you want to trade spells? I’ve amassed quite an impressive collection, if I say so myself, and I’m sure you have a lot of stuff I’ve never seen before.”

“Certainly.”

“You know, we have a word for a Queen of Queens, and it is Empress.” Mark told her when they’d made their selections. “May I call you that?”

“Ah. Empress. I like that, it has nice connotations. And I like these fond memories you have of helping your neighbor to keep his honeybees, and of the good food they made. They are close to your thoughts and obvious, triggered by your experience here. They are such cute little things. We keep them ourselves you know, for their honey and their company as pets. I have never had a personal name before, as your people would consider such things, but I would be pleased to be known as Empress Honey. I think it will help my image in your peoples’ minds.”

“Empress Honey you are then, and I think that’s good thinking on how it’ll be received.”

He withdrew from the Link, and turned to Karbof. “King Karbof, ruler of The Kingdom of Bhia in far Debivin, I am pleased to formally present Empress Honey, ruler of The Swarm and their lands. Empress Honey, I present King Karbof.”

“I am pleased to meet you.” Karbof grinned, and offered her a bow.

“As I am pleased to meet you.” she returned with a bow of her own.

Meanwhile Talia reported in. *“Somonik, we have good news. I think you’ll want a few minutes to prepare before we return to The Hall of the Assembly.”*

She proceeded to pass him a quick reading of their last half-hour.

“I have it. Good work. We will prepare a suitable welcome for Empress Honey.”

By the time Mark had finished formally introducing his party, finishing with Talia, Honey’s workers were returning with the Truthstones.

“All right, we’re off to The Hall of The Assembly of The Just Alliance.” Mark announced as he pocketed his stone, noting that the workers had made the effort to return each one to the person who’d thrown it. “Any last thoughts before we go?”

“I will bring one hundred workers and one hundred soldiers, for the sake of my emotional comfort.” The Empress announced. *“They will not be in the way. Besides, they are so pretty this way, I’d like to show them off. The rest will return to their duties with the livestock and the crops and the young.”*

Her two hundred drones crowded close around her.

“All right, here we go.” Mark announced, and they Translocated.

They arrived on the dais at the center of the hall beside the maimed white dragon. The lessons had been interrupted, and everyone was gathered around.

“Somonik, Speaker of The Ninety Nine, honored members of the Assembly of The Just Alliance, I present Empress Honey, ruler of The Swarm, seventh in power on Kellaran, fourth in psionics, second in awareness.” Mark declared. “Empress Honey, by the power vested in me by this Assembly as temporarily ruling Key to The Just Alliance, I do declare you to be a member in full standing of this Assembly, and I do declare your people to be a full member nation of The Just Alliance in good standing.”

The Assembly gave her a round of applause, and she gracefully bowed and waved her wings in each of four directions, while her drones flew in beautifully complex patterns over her head.

“Thank you, I am honored.” she stated when she was done that. *“And I must admit that my ranking now stands at nineteenth, eleventh, and fifth. Some here are more accomplished than I had known.”*

“Time is of the essence. I have a complete grasp of the spells being taught here today, having received them from Mark earlier. It is brilliant spell design, by the way. I hope to have a chance to speak with all of you and to get to know you in the coming days, but right now I can assist in the teaching. After Zarkog has fallen, there will be ample time for socializing.”

“Excellent.” Somonik nodded. “Many of us have already learned what is taught here today and have gone forth to teach our subordinates. I am doing so remotely as we speak. The wizards of the Shiganzhu are having trouble grasping automated spells, however, since they have never used curses or blessings. Perhaps you could work with them. A different perspective on the work may be all that they need.”

“I will endeavor to succeed.” Honey stated with an eerily human nod.

She flew off the dais, and was soon surrounded by giants, and deeply Linked with them.

Mark raised the Truthstone again, and made a few hundred more portable Truthstones, then sent all but five to the crew at the troll and ogre preserve. Then he noticed that their platoon of nineteen rulers still attended, and turned to Prime Wisdom Zop.

“You know, Zop, you really gave me a good idea, though I have a better use for it.” he stated with a grin, then turned to Somonik.

“How many spell-casters do we have available at this very moment to help us with some power for a draw spell?”

“I could have several hundred million Linked and ready in half a minute. I’ll have them Link in hierarchies, I’ll Link to a thousand who are each Linked to a thousand, and so on. More will take longer to organize. Call it four minutes to have everyone who is available; some two billion or so.”

“You’re all learning a lot faster than I’d hoped.” Mark grinned. “We surely did miss not having the top echelon available in the training. We didn’t have you or Tithian or anyone here. I keep forgetting what a difference it makes.”

“Anyway. Give me a hundred thousand for a hundredth of a second in one minute.”

“We will be ready.”

“Help me out with this, Talia my love? And Ria too? That’s a lot of power. It wouldn’t do to slip with it the first time we try this in reality.”

“Of course.”

The three Linked deeply and prepared their spells. Mark and Talia cupped their four hands together, holding the five portable Truthstones. Talia psionically gave the countdown for the last ten seconds, Somonik Linked them with the multitude of power suppliers, and as she reached ‘five’ Ria called out with unignorable psionic power to those in the hall with them; *“Guard your eyes from the flash!”*

“...Three, two, one, now!” Talia called, and the spell was cast with a crackling bolt of sound and a flash akin to a lightning strike.

“Ow! They’re a bit hot!” Talia grimaced as she dumped the stones into Mark’s hands.

“Ya, but it worked fine other than that! And the portion of the power we lost to light, sound and heat was minuscule compared to the total that went into the spell!” Mark crowed. He stowed four of the stones in his shirt, and

held the fifth one up to show that the center on both sides was now marked with a small yellow pictogram of the Sword Star of Hilia in the center.

“As you suggested, Prime Wisdom, we have cast the question into the stone.” he grinned. “When any person who is not sworn to justice touches this stone, the question will be automatically and psionically asked in a tiny fraction of a second; ‘Do you swear to not break the peace, to protect the innocent, and to uphold justice, forevermore?’ But that was easy, we put that in with a bit of Talia’s power beforehand, along with a mark to tell these apart. More importantly, in the same fraction of a second in which the question is asked, a Compulsion with the power of a hundred thousand wizards will be cast as well, and the person touching the stone will silently and psionically answer; ‘Yes I do.’, in an even shorter fraction of a second! Even Zarkog couldn’t resist it without prior knowledge and a good deal of preparation!

“Now, we need a test subject. Are there any Serminaki attacks going on right now?”

“No.” Somonik answered. “We just dispersed one in Felion a few minutes ago. Quite likely another will begin within six to ten minutes, if they follow their pattern.”

“Good. That gives me time to make a couple more special stones. Have everyone who’s competent with the new magic techniques get ready. We’ll counterstrike the moment we hear they’ve begun.”

“We will be ready.” Somonik nodded.

Mark made two more stones from the Truthstone, and these were bigger, one as big as his fist, the other the size of his head. He cast spells upon them as he held them in his hands, first the smaller, then the larger. Then he drew his sword and told it; “Cut straight, GrimFang!”, then carefully sliced off one end of the smaller stone, freeing a thin piece eight centimeters wide. He sliced an even smaller piece only four centimeters wide from one end of the larger stone.

He sheathed his sword and set the two larger remnants to Levitating, then handed the two smaller pieces to Talia. “The smaller one’s yours, the larger one’s mine. If you’d be so kind, my love, could you fetch two of our gold necklaces and mount these so that the flat sides rest against our skin?”

“Certainly, Dearest Prince.” she smiled. She Summoned the gold chains and attached the two stones to the center five links by magic, and was done in ten seconds.

One of the Selkies clapped with delight at their dexterous performances.

“We’ve had time to learn a thing or two of crafting and fabrication from Kragorram.” Talia bashfully explained.

Meanwhile, Mark had cast again on the two largest pieces to reshape them, flattening the Levitating stones into thin discs with rounded indentations on one side, like large versions of the symbol of the Truthstone. The fist-sized piece was now over a meter wide, the head-sized piece over three meters wide. Finally he protected them from breaking with an internal strengthening of rigid Force.

He and Talia donned their necklaces, then Mark Translocated them to the focus above Focus Mountain. He Levitated the smaller disk into place in the focus, and set it to slowly Move with an automated spell.

“I get it!” Talia laughed. “As the smaller Truthstones transfer the larger one’s godpower, so the disk transfers your power from the focus to your necklace stone, which then shines into you! You can draw all the power of the reflector remotely, for the entire time that the sun shines upon it!”

“You do have it.” he smiled as he gave her a one armed hug and a quick kiss.

Then he jumped them again. “Greetings, Sentries of The High People. It’s us.” Mark psionically announced as they appeared.

“Greetings Mark, Talia. How are you?”

“We are well, Yalla.” Mark returned. “How fares Dilimon and yourself, and all our friends here?”

“Dilimon and I are busy, stressed, crazy in love, and happy as gophers in a granary. The war has not struck in The Nine Valleys. Theramin’s wife Yzell is with child again. It’s like a miracle, their fifth in twenty years or so.

“What can we do for you?”

“We’re only here for a minute. We’re leaving a big flat Truthstone floating in the air a couple of thousand meters above the center of Laylas Valley. We’d appreciate it if it wasn’t disturbed. Folks can fly up and look at it if they want I guess, since it’s rather pretty, or even swear oaths on it, since it is a genuine part of the Truthstone of Falgaroth. They just can’t try to move it.”

“We follow your instructions, Prince Mark.”

“Thanks Yalla. We’ll see you again soon.”

“Be well till then.” she said in closing.

“We will, and you as well.” Talia called. “Say hi to everyone for us.”

Mark ended the speaking.

“Ah, my love, this is beautiful!” the lithe blond elf breathed as she pirouetted in the air, her hands clasped over the powerstone on her chest.

“Thanks.” he grinned, vicariously glorying in her joy. “With the larger size of your transmitting stone, and the fact that it’s power delivery is far more consistent and lasts all day and all night, it transfers almost as much power as mine does. In both cases, it’s as much power as we can absorb internally at peak output, or I’d have made ‘em bigger. If you start to feel overloaded, just turn the receiving stone over so the flat side faces outward. Any wizards standing in front of you within five meters are sure to notice and appreciate it.”

“We’ll have to find a handy way to store any excess power.” she mused. “Then you *can* make the transmitting stones bigger.”

“Ha! Good point! But right now we’ve got to get back to the Assembly Hall and get ready for a quick battle.”

They appeared beside Somonik again, and Mark immediately questioned him.

“What’s the Serminaki method of attack on these terror raids?”

“They have their most undetectable scouts making quick reconnoiters above our cities.” Somonik replied, nonplussed at the abruptness of the question. “When they see one or more of our citizens emerge from the safety of shielded and Warded zones and buildings, they call an attack force of two to three million Sylvan and a few thousand dragons. They snatch their victims, and a few Sylvan torture them just above rooftop height, amplifying their screams, while the rest Shield them. When enough of our forces are brought to bear against them to have a chance of cracking their Shields, they kill their victims and drop them, then Translocate away. We kill a tenth of them on average before they can finish making their escape. It’s a nerve wracking business for our mobile forces, being constantly ready to counter-attack at a moment’s notice, and they’ve yet to save any victims.

“Our defenses become more complete by the minute, and we’ve warned the populace repeatedly to avoid exposing themselves, yet there always seems to be someone who can’t resist checking the health of his cows in their unWarded barn, or trekking to the next street to visit someone, or some such thing. They’ve improved, though. When the terror attacks began they were snatching hundreds of victims at a time. Now our citizens are so wary that the Serminaki seldom get more than three per attack.”

“All right. Squad, here.”

Kragorram, Povon, Equemev and Silaran immediately left off their teaching and appeared beside him on the dais.

“Have everyone who’s available to supply power and cast remote defenses stand ready.” Mark told Somonik.

“Have our best combat spell-casters come along to observe. Have the support corps provide defenses for the combat wizards under Equemev and Silaran’s guidance. Us seven will see to our own defense, but we’ll take all the power the support corps can provide to attack with, and we’ll show you how it’s done. It won’t take long either, so everyone’s going to have to pay attention.

“Pass control of the Link to Povon. No slight on your psionic skills, Somonik, but we’ve done this a thousand times, and you’ll have all your concentration available for observation this one time.”

“I understand, and take no disrespect.”

“I have almost a billion in the Link.” Povon announced. “What an exhilaration!”

“Greetings everyone, and welcome to the effort.” Mark announced over the Link. “Stay ready. We should be getting word of an attack any minute now. We won’t make it neat with hair-thin attack spells this time; we’ll make it as spectacular and overpowering as we can without endangering our own citizens. We leave six of the enemy alive and take three of them prisoner, leaving three to run home to Zarkog and tell him what happened. And we damn well better be fast enough to save whoever they snatch. These are the automated spells we’ll be casting, but recognize that you often won’t know in advance what your attack wizards are going to have to do. Just be ready with the power when they need it, and if things get really exciting, don’t let yourselves become dangerously depleted.”

A tense silence enveloped the huge room as the waiting commenced in earnest.

Two and a quarter minutes later, Somonik frantically cried out in the Link, transferring his thoughts in a blink. “Now! A Shiganzhu child climbed a roof to fetch his pet, and they have taken him! Lemukjin Township, northwest coast of Felion! Now they have jumped, emerging above Verzaclon City, where there is a larger audience for their depravity! Here!”

“Go!” Mark ordered, as soon as the Translocation reference was received.

The Six of Hilia and Ria were already drawing power and casting spells as they emerged with several hundred combat spell-casters above the arched stone rooftops of the giant city, half a kilometer north of their opponents.

Before another twentieth of a second had passed a massive bolt of bright white destruction had lanced across the sky and instantly devastated the enemy force, obliterating their Shields like paper and vaporizing their bodies, while the young giant boy they held was Sent to safety, and three of their number were rendered unconscious and Sent to

The Hall of The Assembly. Those four were unscathed by the white bolt, though they had been in the midst of it and the three Sylvan had been stripped of Shields, as had three young dragons who floated in frightened shock for a moment in their suddenly emptied airspace before vanishing.

“Mission accomplished!” Mark triumphantly announced over the Link, and let those in the city below hear him as well by means of a modified Field Command spell. *“That’s how it’s done. We saved the boy before he could get more than bruises, and killed almost three million torturing murderers. A good toll. And since I have a pretty good idea what they were about to do to that boy, I don’t feel a damn bit bad about any of them. The same will happen to any who attack the citizens of The Just Alliance.”*

“Back to base.” he commanded, and they left just as a wild cheering began to rise from the city below.

“How was your education program coming before I interrupted you for that?” Mark asked his companions as soon as they arrived back in The Hall of The Assembly.

“Enough of them understand it all.” Povon answered. “Things have proceeded with amazing rapidity. Efforts are already well underway to teach the rest the magic, to build and distribute the new weapons and to train fighters in their use, and to redeploy them. Promotions and reassignments have been effected.”

“Good. Let’s see if our new toys work.” Mark nodded as he took out a Compulsion-spelled stone and stepped to their three captives, who lay immobilized at the edge of the dais, their eyes wide with fear.

“Don’t worry, this won’t hurt a bit.” he chuckled as he forced a Link on the nearest one, effortlessly cracked her psionic shields in a blink, and touched her with the stone. He nodded in satisfaction as he noted the oath taking effect, and the Markings appeared on her left forearm.

“Most excellent.” He chuckled again as he touched the other two Sylvan with the stone in quick succession, then released the three from their paralysis as he turned to the nearest steward, a gargoyle who waited attentively for an opportunity to serve or assist. “Have these three taken to our other sworn Sylvan. Thanks.”

As the three were led away he turned to the white dragon.

“Somonik, carry on. The six of us are off to infiltrate the enemy. If they try another terror strike, use everyone available and blast them again. If they try anything else, let me know. Keep the Link hot, with at least a few million spell-casters ready to go at all times. If we get into trouble, we may need to grab some extra power in a hurry.”

“Right. There is just one thing that I’m curious about. You still refer to yourselves as six, though it’s obvious that Ria is as valuable to your efforts as any. Why not name yourselves the Seven?”

“Ah. Well we have a running argument about that, though it’s only teasing.” Mark told him with a smile. “When we suggested it to Ria, she countered that since she and Talia and I are absolutely inseparable, we three should only count as one person, and that therefore we can only be considered the five of Hilia. Another time she said that we have to remain as The Six, since we’ve chosen a six-pointed sword-star to represent us, and it would look silly with seven points. Myself, I think she’s just a bit shy about being considered a real person, but since she’s not comfortable with it, we don’t push her about it.”

“I see.” Somonik chuckled, and closed his eyes for a moment as he focused his attention elsewhere.

“You know your targets.” Mark said to his unicorn and dragon friends as he handed out sword-star marked Truthstones, keeping one for himself. They stowed them in their packs by Movement, since the unicorns had no hands, and the stones were too small for the dragons to handle easily. “Don’t take any chances. In and out as fast as you can. These should make this a lot easier.”

“I’ll say!” Silaran snickered. *“It’ll be like playing tag! Simply show up, slap them with the stone, and be gone!”*

“Remember, the point is to bring these people over to our side.” Talia counseled. “We won’t gain much loyalty from them by cracking them in the head with a rock, notwithstanding their Compelled oath. If you can get them to touch the stone voluntarily or by stealth, so much the better.”

“In that case, we might as well use the cute approach.” Povon laughed. “No one can resist a tiny, helpless-looking little animal with a huge jewel!”

She set her stone on the floor and cast a compound spell on herself with great concentration. A moment later, she and her possessions began to shrink. This continued for sixteen seconds, by which time she was only a meter and a half long including her tail, her head only fifty centimeters above the floor.

“What a wondrous metamorphosis!” King Karbof exclaimed.

“Thank you.” Povon nodded as she retrieved her Compelling Truthstone and tucked it under her chain mail. “It’s the refined version of an experimental spell that Somonik was working on some time ago, one of the ones he traded for Kragorram’s second-best sword. It took me a while to make it workable, and longer yet for these friends to learn it, but we have it now. It’s very useful for stealth, though it requires a great deal of compensation spells. I still have all of my weight and strength compacted into this tiny form, thus I am so dense that no steel could cut me, nor could

almost any spell harm me, even if I were caught without Shields. But I have to Levitate most of my weight all the time so that my concentrated heft doesn't crack the floor. Moving around and flying become tricky. My sight, smell, taste, and voice pitch also need to be compensated for, and without a compensating spell, my lungs would be far too tiny to supply sufficient breath to my body, since my air requirements remain undiminished."

"On the other hand, it does indeed make us look very cute and non-threatening." Talia giggled, and Karbof realized with a shock that the entire squad had shrunk while he was concentrating on Povor.

Not counting the length of his tail and neck, Kragorram was now the size of a large dog, and so was Silaran, both about a meter high at the shoulder when standing on all fours. Equemev was a few centimeters shorter. Mark stood only sixty centimeters tall, Talia only thirty. Each were perfect miniatures.

"I intend to masquerade as statuary." Kragorram confided with a chuckle. "I have seen a statue of a dragon that was made by a human, and it used an appropriately silly pose. It was so grandiose and ridiculous that no real dragon would ever actually assume the position unless their goal was hilarity. Or deception. Let me show you." He stood balanced on his left foot with his right foot lifted high behind him, his wings spread high, his neck and his tail held up in matching, graceful, mirror-image S curves, his Compulsion stone held high before him in both hands.

"I will wear a note addressed to a recipient other than the officer I am visiting." Kragorram added with a snicker as he held the pose with perfect stillness. "It will say; 'Thanks for all your help.' There is not a single Sylvan or a dragon of Serminak who could resist trying to steal the stone under those circumstances."

"I think you have something there, my crimson friend." Talia laughed. "There are certain poses that are used so often for statues of elves that they are clichés. With a note such as yours, and standing still in such a position, none will suspect me before they touch the stone."

"However we do it, let's get it done." Mark grinned. "We're way ahead of schedule, and I don't want us to lose momentum. We'll spend six hours on this, then move on to the next step.

"Let's go."

Six miniature warriors vanished to attend to their tasks.

In a cave on a mountainside overlooking The Dragon Lord's Point Bay Naval Facility, Senior Admiral Gragok carefully watched over Serminak's largest naval refitting docks. His great red bulk filled the passage behind him, and he lay relaxed with his chin on the edge of the cliff at the cave's mouth. Nothing in the vast shipyard below escaped his attention. Occasionally he emitted a thin stream of smoke from one nostril to test the breeze.

Suddenly something tickled his tail and an immense energy rushed through him. The psionic question was asked and the answer given before he could draw breath to voice his distress. And nothing was ever quite the same for him again.

"Damn! That's one tacky statue! And misdelivered! It's meant for my surly and insubordinate subordinate Wemb! There's only one thing to do, my friend!"

"Right. I have a piece of blue quartz that should fit where the sapphire is. Give me a moment to rummage for it. And don't scar the jewel when you remove it! I lost half the value of a topaz that way once."

"I woAAH!!!"

"Crap! It's gone! Hey! Commander! Are you all right?"

"What is General Kimorler's condition?!!! You!!! Report now!!!"

"I... I'm not sure, Commander! I'd just brought him the latest reports and I'd turned to go when there was a flash behind me, that is where the general was, and he yelled real loud; 'No! No! I cannot be like that! I won't, I refuse!' I turned to him and he turned to me, and... I've never seen him that angry! I could tell that he was going to kill me, I mean, he really, *really* wanted to kill me, just to have something to vent his frustration on! And he was going to do it, he'd made the decision, I could tell! He jumped over and loomed over me, and he drew breath to burn me as his claws reached for me, and then he stopped. I mean he just froze, and he got all tense like he was fighting some immense Force, but there was nothing like that around, I could tell! Then he suddenly turned and clawed a big chunk out of the wall at the same time that he burned his desk and his reports to ash with his breath! And he screamed; 'Leave me! Get out!' with his back still turned to me, and I got out of there fast! Then you could hear him raging and destroying things for a while, and then it got all quiet. I reported in to the staff sergeant and apprised her of the events. That was three minutes ago."

Equemev was careful. This was the oldest Sylvan alive, and a fearsome wizard, though you could tell neither from the look of him. She appeared in a shadowed corner of his kitchen, under a stool. General Zwak Deathbringer was preparing food at a counter, his back to her. She flung the jewel at him by Movement, aiming for the exposed skin at the back of his neck.

Quicker than a striking snake, he spun and caught the stone in his fist. If the stone flashed with the spell, the light was absorbed by his hand or lost in the bright morning sunlight streaming in the window. He betrayed no sign that he had been affected by the Compulsion or the oath, and instead eyed her with interest, apparently unsurprised at finding a miniature unicorn in his kitchen and throwing huge jewels at him. She was just deciding to strike at him to retrieve her Truthstone when he spoke.

“I’ll need this. I can’t do much without my soldiers, and their co-operation will require its touch.”

“I still need that now. Give it back and show me where you stand. If I trust you, I’ll return with the stone in a few hours. Perhaps with many of them.”

He nodded and crouched to hand her the stone, and she trotted over and touched his finger with the tip of her tiny horn. His psionic shields were lowered to her. He had realized what had happened the instant the spell had struck, and had considered all the relevant implications a second later. He was sworn to justice, therefore he could no longer assist Zarkog, and he could not remain neutral and do nothing. Therefore his own survival and his fulfillment of the oath required that he assist The Just Alliance in any way he could.

“I’ll be back. Here is the list of your fellow commanders who have felt the touch of the Compulsion stone, here the list of those who are scheduled to feel it over the next three hours. Those who have been sworn now wear the Marking of The Just Alliance on their bodies, as you do. Like yours, their Markings are hidden from view, but with line of sight or close proximity you will be able to sense who wears it. Coordinate efforts with them to the extent that you can without revealing yourselves to Zarkog.”

“Hey! What’s that?”

“What?”

“There, in the corner of the garden! Behind the shrub! Here! It’s... By the source, it’s a pixie! It looks to be wounded and exhausted!”

“There’s no such thing as pixies, Administrator! Be careful! It could be a gnome, and I hear they’re fearsome enemies, despite their tiny stature!”

“I know what a gnome looks like! Easy now, you’re scaring her! It’ll be easier to catch her if we can gain her trust!!”

“Oooh. I see. What’s it got behind it’s back?”

“You’re right, she’s trying to hide something from us! It’s... A bit of light... My soul! It’s a jewel as big as a large plum! Sapphire, it looks like! Here pixie, give us the pretty jewel... Come on, give it over... That’s right...”

The Six were in a fine mood when they returned to The Hall of The Assembly, though Kragorram wore a white protective dressing on his left wing.

“Ah! The look on General Nebrekathi’s face when I suddenly moved and got him on the finger with the stone!” Povon laughed as the squad gradually returned to full size, except for Kragorram. “I swear, I have never seen such a look of astonishment before, and likely never will again!”

“Healers!” Somonik snapped, even as Povon was speaking.

“I can’t believe my luck!” Silaran brayed. *“All but eleven of my targets were sleeping!”*

“You were all damn lucky.” Ria snapped as she manifested, but she was smiling. *“Doing that with no shielding beyond the psionic was as foolish as it was courageous.”*

“Maybe so,” Mark grinned, “But it was necessary for the stealth of it, and it worked. We can raise Shields quick enough if we have to.

A comparatively small purple dragon appeared and immediately cast diagnostic spells on Kragorram, and she was joined by an elven healer as she did so. “What happened?” she asked.

“An encounter with a caustic dragon.” he replied. “She detected me just as I acted, and caught me with a bit of her spew before her vow of justice took hold. I quickly washed it in the ocean, and my density in this form protected me to some extent. It still moves well, and the pain is manageable. I thought it best that I get it looked at before I resume my normal stature.”

“Wise thinking.

“Tell me Kragorram, why are you always the only one wounded on missions of The Six?”

“Povon would tease me about perhaps having slightly slower reflexes than the others, but it is only chance. In training, I took fewer wounds than any except Silaran, and was killed on fewer occasions than the average for the squad.”

“I see.” she chuckled. “The corrosive is acidic. All affected areas will need to be washed with a high-pressure spray of a mild alkaline solution, as you may have traces of the spew trapped beneath your scales. After you are washed, we will have you resume your full size before affecting the remainder of your treatment. You’ll have to come with us to The Draconian Military Hospice.”

Kragorram turned to his leader. “I am unimpaired. Perhaps I should postpone this treatment. Things have gone better than we expected, and I am as eager as any to finish it. We should continue now.”

“I think not.” Equemev disagreed. “*We should give those we’ve just visited as many Compulsion stones as possible, and some time to organize and work. With luck, they could have the entire population of Serminak sworn to justice by this time tomorrow, which would assure our victory without another drop of blood being spilled. With a bit more luck, one of them might even tag Zarkog with a stone.*”

“Hm.” Mark nodded as he considered. “The only problem with that plan is that we may need the gods fully with us in order to beat the demons, so I have to beat Zarkog personally and convincingly. I don’t think having him tagged with a Compulsion stone by some Sylvan would qualify.”

He paused a moment, then turned to Somonik. “We’ve sworn about two hundred of Zarkog’s officers, including most of his top commanders. We also left them the five Compulsion stones, and they’re tagging their subordinates.

“What’s been happening while we were busy doing that?”

“The enemy attempted another terror raid an hour after you left. They seized a boatload of elves from southern Debinin who had decided that they simply had to go fishing. Zarkog sent ten million Sylvan and a million dragons to Shield their torturers, and they went to Gimoosh to provide an audience for their repulsive act of propaganda. This time we were not able to act before the Sylvan began torturing those elves, but we were quick enough to save their lives, and they healed well. We used a new variant on your automated, hair-thin attack spell that Yazadril, Nemia, Hilsith and Alilia designed, and for that reason Yazadril and Alilia were our attack wizards. It manifests as a tiny volume of destruction both as thin as a hair and only eight centimeters in length. It penetrates shielding and skull, then forms a circle and spins around in the brain for a moment at eighty revolutions per second. *Very energy efficient, and completely effective. And it creates far less mess than your version would have, I might add.*”

“Twelve minutes later Zarkog reacted, and sent a force twenty times as strong. Two hundred and seven million Sylvan, nineteen million dragons. Although their methods are still much more crude than ours, they have begun applying the principle of concentration of power. The speed and suddenness of their attack was much improved as well. They attacked in Gimoosh, likely in an attempt to counter our triumph there just minutes before. They appeared above the civic government buildings in a tight sphere, all of them packed in as tightly as they could be and still breathe, in order to minimize the surface area of their co-operative spherical Shield. They attacked together as well, casting concentrated Fire on a small spot on the Wards and Shielding protecting the municipal complex below. They broke through and incinerated their target thoroughly, killing the mayor, every member of the civic assembly save two, and most of their staff, as well as some twenty thousand citizens.

“I led the counter-attack myself, with Grakonexikaldoron as second attacker, since we are quickest in the application of psionics. We had over two and one third billion of us in the Link, including almost a billion magic-users from The Hidden Nation, who supplied power while being blocked from knowing exactly what was occurring with it’s use, at their request. We were too slow to prevent the attack, but we were quick enough to strike down the attackers to the last soul before they could make their escape. That was not such a meager accomplishment, since they had planned to strike and flee. Most of them had already begun to cast Translocation when they were felled, and if we’d been a twentieth of a second slower, they’d have gotten clean away.

“Since that time, there have been no more attacks against us.

“The techniques we are using now are at the very limits of most of our spell-casters’ abilities, and therein lies the certainty of our victory over Serminak. Their spell-casters are highly trained, but poorly educated. They use only a few hundred spells, but train with them as intensely as fencing-masters train with their swords. It requires the education of a Journeyman Wizard to even grasp the concepts inherent in automated spellcasting, and a Master Wizard to use them, and the Serminaki lack the mental flexibility. As well, almost none of them can cast remotely. As psionicists, many use Speaking, and are adept at psionic attack and defense, but the paranoid aggressiveness of their society has ensured that almost none of them are capable of casting a Link. They would strenuously object to participating in any Link, especially one so deep as is required to use the draw spells. Without those, they cannot match our concentration of power.”

“All true, but don’t get too confident.” Mark nodded, thinking with fierce concentration. “We’ve learned the hard way that if you let them have some time, they’ll be surprising us with all sorts of horrors that we wouldn’t have thought of in a million years. We have to keep them off balance.

“All right, we’ll strike while the iron is hot. Kragorram...”

“We need a two hour break.” Talia interrupted.

“Nah, I think we’re fresh enough HEY!!”

Talia had sharply struck the back of his knee with the heel of her hand, painlessly collapsing his leg and almost tumbling him to the floor.

He stared at her in shocked surprise. She was glaring at him, and her eyes glistened a bit with tears, but her voice was calm.

“We need two hours. Preferably three. Or I will be unable to satisfactorily perform my duties. I have been resisting my condition for the last hour.” she stated.

“I... see. Can you give me a few minutes?”

“Make it fast.”

“Somonik, have every spell-caster we have who isn’t crucial for defense Linked and ready in three hours. We’ll be back ten minutes before that.

“Squad, your time is your own until then.”

“*The additional Compulsion stones?*” Equemev asked. “*If you make them up, it will only take the four of us a short while to deliver them. We’ll get at least a two-hour rest after that, and Kragorram can have his wing treated. You can see to Talia’s treatment once you’ve made the stones.*”

“Good thinking, and thanks.” Mark grinned sheepishly as he raised the great Truthstone. “Somonik, how many are available for the Link right now?”

“We have everyone on standby. Almost three billion, and increasing as fast as we can teach the techniques.”

“Have them get ready. I’ll take the Link in a moment.”

He placed his palms on the godstone and poured power into it, and was rewarded by a rush of tinkling as a stream of small stones poured out the bottom. He scooped them up by Movement and lowered the godstone back into the dais.

“Ware the flash!” he yelled, then took control of the Link and cast his spell. Surprisingly, there was no light or sound emitted as the swordstar appeared on both sides of each small stone, despite the incredible expenditure of power.

“I blocked the flash, the heat, and the noise.” Povon shrugged. “They would have been dangerous to everyone here who isn’t Shielded.”

“Thanks.” Mark chuckled, further chagrined by his failing to realize the danger. “Equemev, here’s a thousand Compulsion stones. I’m sure you’ll see them put to good use. Have the sworn in Serminak remain covert. When we need to distract Zarkog the most, we’ll have them declare for The Just Alliance. Sometime between three and four hours from now.”

“*And if they should have a chance to tag Zarkog?*”

“Have them take it, but only if they’re absolutely certain to succeed. It wouldn’t do to have them miss and be discovered before we’re ready.”

“*Right.*”

“And thanks, to you and to everyone. Our squad, Somonik and the other leaders, everyone in the Link right now, you’re all doing a fine job, better than we expected by far. In three hours we act, hopefully to strike the final blows in this conflict.”

“We will be ready.” Somonik pronounced.

“So will we.” Mark nodded, and picked one mind out of the multitudes in the Link.

“*Dilimon, if you and Yalla have a moment, we’d like to see our wedding present.*”

“*Certainly.*” Dilimon replied with a chuckle. “*Here’s the reference. Cast a Light when you get there.*”

Mark, Talia and Ria disappeared, the rest of their squad having already left.

They emerged from the jump in a roughly spherical cavern over three hundred meters high. Giant crystals of every color protruded into the space, ranging from the size of a fist to the size of a building. The glittering display was dazzling as their Light was reflected and refracted around the cavern a million times and more. They stood on a level six-sided facet that was ten meters in its longest dimension, about a third of the way up from the lowest point in the hollow space.

Dilimon and Yalla appeared beside them.

“It’s good to see you.” Talia said as she shared a hug with Yalla.

“And we you.” Dilimon grinned as he looked around. “This is a geode. It was a bubble of vaporized rock made by the impact that formed First Valley, trapped hundreds of meters below the surface. When the vaporized rock slowly cooled and solidified against the inside of the bubble, it formed these crystal formations. We call it our Cavern of Crystal Contemplation. This is the only level spot of any size, but it’s well situated to provide a nice viewpoint. We hope you enjoy your time here. And since it *is* a wedding present, even though you still have to share it with us, I’ll take this opportunity to congratulate you again on your recent marriage.”

“Thanks.” Mark grinned as he fondly clasped forearms with the Sentry. “Our wedding seems like yesterday, yet it somehow also seems like a million years ago already.”

“We’ll leave you to your privacy.” Yalla smiled, noting the growing tension in Talia’s face. “Come, Dilimon.” With that they were gone.

Over the next three seconds Talia had Summoned their bed from the cottage in Hilia, removed her and Mark’s clothing and items with spells, and produced a familiar meter long rod, which she handed to Mark.

“Our wonderful blessing is still a damned curse.” she stated bitterly as she climbed onto the bed. “It would have been fine if we’d attended to it an hour ago, but I didn’t want both of us to have to abandon the mission. This is one problem that the Eldest never simulated in training. The need is upon me with growing urgency, and I can wait no longer. I need it bad, my love. Rape me. Make me scream. Make me scream a lot.”

He sighed regretfully, but did as she asked for almost thirty minutes. And then they held each other closely and cried together. Then they made gentle love for over an hour, and then they cried again.

There was no sign of that when they returned to The Hall of The Assembly. They appeared well fed and refreshed, their arms and armor perfectly cleaned and polished.

Kragorram’s recent wounds were only visible as slight discolorations of his scales.

Within a minute, everyone was assembled, everything was ready. The cavernous room was full to capacity, and buzzing with excited conversation.

“Somonik, report please.” Mark crisply requested.

“A wave of thousands of small accidents has occurred in Serminak, disrupting their activities, almost certainly courtesy of those who are sworn to justice there. They have still made no more attacks against us.

“We have made great strides. Of all the discoveries you six made during your training, the most important is not one of the things you said you would teach us. It is your improvements in Linking multiple minds and transferring information that has led to most of our breakthroughs since your return. We have found a way to tap the inherent magic of the Kwetkerthok, though none of them are spell-casters in the conventional sense, and have also found that every Bojudai can contribute, since they are also a highly magical race, though only one tenth of them are wizards. We have also found that our junior wizards who are not psionically capable of participating in the Link can still contribute by sharing their power with one who is Linked, via what you would refer to as conventional ‘push’ and ‘pull’ type power transference spells.

“Thus, almost everyone with enough magic to light a candle in the entirety of The Just Alliance stands ready to lend you their power. The total is difficult to quantify, but I would estimate it to be equivalent to the efforts of some five billion human Journeyman-class wizards. Those who lack magic have been equipped with every available magic item and tool, and they stand ready to defend our lands during this momentous action.”

“Wow. That is impressive.” Mark grinned. “I’ll take the Link. Thank you.”

When next he spoke, he addressed the room as well as the billions who were listening over the Link. “Honored citizens of The Just Alliance. With your help, I intend to call Zarkog out and beat him into submission in the most public manner possible. But first we’ll demonstrate our power, and intimidate the Serminakis a bit, just so they know where they stand.

“Talia and I will go to Serminak and stir up trouble until Zarkog shows up. This might be tricky, since Zarkog is one the few people who is able to avoid the Eldest’s awareness, and is the only one the Eldest can’t Read at all, so we’ve never fought an accurate version of him before. Luckily, he’s the only such case among the enemy. We’ll use your power for our defense, as well as our attack. The rest of our squad will be several hundred meters above us, watching carefully but remaining undetectable. If we run into something we can’t handle, they’ll take control of the Link and see that we’re extracted. If necessary after that, Somonik and his crew will assume command and control of the Link. But that only happens if we’re rendered unconscious or yell for help.

“If the enemy attacks our territory while we’re doing this, we’ll break off the operation just long enough to deal with the incursion, then return to what we were doing.

“Are we ready? Then here we go.”

They appeared in the main public square of Zarkog’s capital city, his domed mountain visible in the near distance, still scarred and broken from the recent battle there. Talia floated a meter in the air and a meter behind Mark, keeping watch with her back to him.

Mark yelled at the sparse crowd of Sylvan scattered around the square, and magically augmented his voice to be heard with the same volume throughout the city. “Where’s Zarkog?!!! I’ve come to beat him into submission and to bring him to justice!!! I am Prince Mark of Hilia, Key to The Just Alliance, and if anyone gets in my way, they’ll get a beating as well!”

Before he was a quarter of the way through that speech they were attacked by thousands of Sylvan and dragon spell-casters who appeared all around. Their energies were effortlessly absorbed by Mark and Talia’s defenses and stored. Their items were soon charged to capacity, then Talia began distributing the excess power to their invisible squad mates far overhead, who distributed it further to others in the Link who had the capacity to hold it.

Mark ignored that, just as he ignored the quickly-growing maelstrom of incoming spells, other than to increase his volume to be heard over their rising cacophony. “Come on out and face me Zarkog, unless you’re afraid! I’ll beat you senseless, as easy as I beat these lackeys of yours!!” he yelled as he stuck out his arm and spun in a circle, casting a wave of automated Force spells all the way around him as he did so, while Talia spun behind him in perfect unison.

The Force spells selected their targets, drew sufficient power to have the intended effect on each one, pierced their targets’ Shields as hair-thin bolts, then expanded into spheres half the size of the target’s head and struck them each a rollicking blow to the face, knocking them half-unconscious. Thus his circling arm traced out a wave of cries and shouts of pain that extended to the horizon in every direction. None of their attackers escaped the staggering blow of his counter-attack. A few fell out of the sky, but retained enough consciousness to save themselves from the worst of the impact with the ground or buildings below. Civilian Sylvan in the square who had not been part of the attack stared in shock, and some of them fled with their children.

Mark nodded in satisfaction. “Does anyone else want a beating?” he yelled.

Another wave of attackers appeared as word of what he was doing quickly spread. There were several million of them this time, filling the skies for half a kilometer, but they fared no better.

In a moment of sudden inspiration, Talia reached behind her to Mark’s pocket and retrieved his portable Truthstone. She was reaching a limit of how fast their support wizards could distribute the power their Shields were absorbing, but if she’d begun reflecting it, as Shields were most commonly designed to do, it would lay waste to the entire vicinity around them. Instead she sent it into the Truthstone. The power almost seemed to disappear, so easily did the stone contain it.

“The godstone is receiving the power, and appears to be absorbing it easily!” Tithian reported.

“The other small stones are also becoming charged proportionately!” Yazadril added.

Meanwhile, Mark had waited a good long five seconds, so it would be obvious to the attackers that their efforts were completely futile, then repeated his circular wave of magic blows to the face.

“Now this isn’t doing you any good at all, is it?” he yelled. “You’d better start realizing that there’s a new champion in the neighborhood! Zarkog is sure going to realize it as soon as he shows his arrogant face and gets it beaten!”

As he spoke an even larger wave of Serminaki had appeared and attacked.

“The stones are getting hot!” Talia told him. *“We can absorb no more power! Cast your next spell out of the reserve in the stone!”*

“Well it looks like Zarkog’s not here, so I’ll punish you fools for attacking me, then go knock on his door!” Mark yelled, and clapped his hands over his head, unleashing his magic punch in the face on every attacker at once, then Translocated himself and Talia to the top of the steel dome that capped the neighboring mountain.

Talia switched their Shields to reflective and reported that his Truthstone had cooled considerably. As the next attackers appeared, most were above them in every direction, and she had another inspiration, and shaped their reflective Shield into a tall and thin spike, pointed above and below. This ensured that almost all of the torrents of energy that the hundreds of millions of attackers cast at them was reflected down onto the steel dome below. For kilometers around, it looked like a new sun had been born atop the mountain, and then the dome began to explode.

“Let them pour it on for a while.” she smugly chuckled. *“All they’re doing is destroying their Lord’s home and seat of government. He’s sure to be upset by that.”*

The attackers had to Shield against the blowback of their own efforts. Then it began to rain steel on everything for ten kilometers, and globs of glowing yellow liquid were intermixed with orange-hot drops that were barely

hardened and jagged red-hot chunks of every size. A portion of the attackers had to divert their efforts to protecting the city from this bombardment, but the rest continued the attack. After a pair of minutes, the rain of steel became a rain of stone as the destruction of the great dome was completed.

"I think that's enough." she mused a minute later. *"There can't be much left intact down there."*

"Right." he nodded.

"Well you have to be the biggest bunch of slow learners I've ever had to beat some sense into at one time!" he yelled, and cast his magic mass beating again.

"Wow! Now that was a spell!" he marveled. *"I got almost three billion of 'em with it that time!"*

The attacks did not resume. The air gradually cleared of smoke and debris and visibility was restored, revealing Zarkog floating some two hundred meters away. Only after they had seen and recognized him did he drop his cloaking, and his psionic presence became powerfully apparent.

"He does have some nice tricks." Mark admitted.

"Concentrate! This is the crux of it all!" Quewanak sternly advised.

"Nice to have you with us again, Eldest." Mark chuckled.

"You snacks are liars." Zarkog stated derisively, and he actually sneered. "There is absolutely no chance that you two could hold even one hundred of my fighters at bay. You are nothing more than claws on the hand of those who are far more capable than you. You are a spelled sword in the fist of another."

"Your main point is correct." Mark nodded. He and Talia began to grow as he continued answering Zarkog. "I couldn't give such a well-deserved beating to three billion Serminakis at once without some help, but the fact is that The Just Alliance is absolutely united in opposition to you and anyone who fights for you. So yes, perhaps it's more true to say that you're about to be beaten by everyone in The Just Alliance, rather than by me. On the other hand, I *have* been given absolute command of The Just Alliance. Mine is the fist that bears the claws and the sword. As for our personal capabilities, Talia and I are perfectly capable of beating your arrogant head in by ourselves, and without assistance. But we're here to bring you to justice, not to engage in a glorification of our personal power, so we're not going to chance that you'll slither out of our grasp.

"You deserve to be killed for killing our citizens. Thus we have killed those who attacked our lands, and we killed some of those who sought to keep you from our justice the last time we were here.

"But as you've shown here in Serminak, it's a greater victory to beat your opponent bloody without fear of reprisal due to overwhelming power than it is to simply kill him. More importantly, we have no wish to kill all of your people, or we would do so. Most Serminaki have not taken a direct part in crimes against us, unless you count chasing me all over the world and defending you, and we'd be willing to forgive that. Believe me, I could kill every Sylvan and dragon on Serminak right now if I wanted to. I just knocked three billion of you half senseless, and I'm not even breathing hard.

"Make no mistake. The Just Alliance is taking over Serminak. Our little demonstration here today, including the beating you're about to receive, will show your people how things stand from this day forward in their own terms. The way of Serminak is that you have the right to do whatever you have the power to do. We have the power to beat you severely and to bring you to justice for what you've done to us. We have the power to find everyone who took a direct hand in killing our citizens and to do the same to them as we'll do to you, and we have the power to prevent any of you from attacking us again. And we're going to do it."

"Perhaps." Zarkog sarcastically replied. "But you should know that the way of the Serminaki has changed. I have shown them the way of order and efficiency, and I have won their admiration and their loyalty. They will not be swayed from my command by your words.

"Furthermore, you are not alone in the ability to wield the power of others. I can do so, even if most of my people cannot, and I am supreme at the skill. And while you have been stating your position in an obvious attempt to undermine my authority, my fighters have recovered from your attack and have withdrawn beyond your immediate reach. As you can see.

"I now wield their power. I don't know how you manage to contain the magic of your alliance in such puny bodies without burning up like dry leaves on red lava, but you cannot continue to do so forever. And while my Sylvan may lack the thousands of tricks you fools have been using, I do not, and each one of them carries far more power than most of your best. Even my young dragons have no lack of raw power, for all their lack of experience.

"So while I may be facing the combined efforts of your pitiful alliance, you face the consolidated power of mighty Serminak. And I would judge my power to exceed yours by a full half. I give you this one chance to surrender, or it is *you* who will be beaten, and I promise you, you will be beaten to death. Both of you. If you

surrender, you will survive your punishment, which *will* end, eventually. Your foolish illusion of size cannot save you.”

“*Can he really do that?!*” Talia asked in a panic, though she kept her expression calm. “*Take the power of an entire continent of wizards within himself with conventional pull spells without burning out?! Without even having to Link with them?!*”

“*He would not say so if he could not!*” Quewanak urgently insisted. “*Kill him! Kill him now, while you can!*”

“*No! Let’s see what he can do first!*” Mark countered. “*He’s under-estimated us before, he could very well be doing it again! This is also a propaganda battle for the loyalty of Serminak, and we don’t gain that by killing him!*”

As Mark had spoken with Zarkog, he and Talia had continued to grow, so far as observers could tell. Mark now stood a hundred and twenty meters tall, and his thicker build meant that he bulked a quarter more than the Dragon Lord. Behind him, Talia was sixty meters tall.

“You really should pay more attention to those you consider to be snacks, Zarkog.” Mark laughed. “While I can well believe that your foolish young dragons might actually revere you so much as to sacrifice themselves on your behalf, Sylvan lack any such sentiment. You have the power to beat them with impunity, so they’ve had no choice but to obey you, and they’ll do the same for me for the same reason. Once I’ve sworn them to justice, they can do whatever they want, without fear of such tortures.

“And while you’re right that this body is magic and not meat, it’s not an illusion, it’s a fully-powered Simulacrum. It doesn’t matter if my fists are flesh or Force, it’s still gives me the reach I need to punch your fire out. And while I could use other spells, there’s something instinctively compelling about a good old-fashioned beating. Like this one.”

As he said that last, he leaped forward and threw a strike with his fist, but most of the magic he used in that moment went into thousands of immensely powerful Force particles, each no bigger than a speck of dust. They shredded Zarkog’s incredibly charged Shield just in front of Mark’s gigantic fist of Force, which struck Zarkog’s snout without impedance, shattering it in a fountain of blood as the dark dragon spun back and away to minimize the impact.

Zarkog instantly Healed himself as he checked his spin and momentum. His incredible double voice screamed in rage as he blasted them with his fire and shot the most powerful bolt of destructive energy ever cast on Kellaran from his outstretched claws. Nor was he fooled by their simulacrum’s appearance, his bolt was aimed at their real bodies, floating in the center of Mark’s gigantic simulated torso.

As quick as he was, Talia was quicker, and she Translocated herself and Mark up into his simulacrum’s head, avoiding the bolt’s intense but short duration, which harmlessly passed below them.

It was to be noted later how lucky it was that it was aimed at a slight upward angle and so disappeared into the sky, for if that bolt had struck land it would have devastated everything for hundreds of kilometers in that direction. Zarkog’s blast of fire-breath was more instinctive than tactical, and was almost insignificant compared to the other energies being exchanged.

Meanwhile Mark had been unremitting in his attack, and ignored the bolt that passed through his simulacrum’s chest. He moved forward with his punch and followed it with an expert kick that broke Zarkog’s ribs, since his boot was also preceded by his many tiny Shield-shredders.

Even as Zarkog recoiled from the kick he blasted Mark and Talia with a directed Concussion, cast with unmatched speed. The cone-shaped explosion blasted up and shredded Mark and Talia’s Simulacrums, their Shields, their armor and possessions, their weapons except for Ria and GrimFang, and their bodies. The two swords were thrown for kilometers by the blast.

It was a development that sent a shockwave through the minds of The Just Alliance’s wizards and sorcerers, and it was followed less than a twentieth of a second later by Povo’s cracking command; “*Hold the Link!!! I have control!!!*”

A tenth of a second after that they were all shocked again as the curse of Alilia showed it was indeed a powerful blessing. It seized control of the great Link from Povo and abruptly ripped a colossal burst of power out of the alliance spell-casters. It was so severe that several of the closer minds in the Link were momentarily stunned by their sudden loss of power, and Povo and Kragorram had to assist Equemev and Silaran to prevent them from falling out of the sky or revealing themselves to Zarkog. The curse restored Mark and Talia to life and health and restored their possessions as well, including fetching their swords by Translocation, all in less than another fifteenth of a second. It caused a flash and a crack of sound like lightning confined to a small point, and they momentarily illuminated and shook the sky and the land for kilometers around.

Less than a fifth of a second after their deaths, the Keys to The Just Alliance were back in the fight.

Zarkog had already healed his ribs and restored his Shields.

“Now stop playing with him!!!” Quewanak thundered over the Link as soon as Mark had retaken control of it. *“Take him!!! Kill him if you can!!!”*

“Zwak!!! Honey!!! Now!!!” Mark roared, his anger equal to the Eldest’s.

Three hundred and thirty-two thousand Sylvan and Serminaki dragons declared by voice and by Speaking to everyone within their range that they stood with The Just Alliance, and most of them succeeded in retaking control of their own power from Zarkog.

At the same time Empress Honey cast the spell that regained her command of Zarkog’s Swarm. With her entire race Linked under her control, she then attacked Zarkog psionically and shredded dozens of his mental shields. He poured power into them with reckless speed, risking damage to his own brain in the process. She was on the verge of victory, having penetrated so deeply into his autonomous functions that he urinated involuntarily, before he turned the tide and forced her out of his mind.

Meanwhile, Mark attacked on the physical plane while Talia re-formed their shielding with a completely different set of defensive spells than she’d used previously. They’d re-manifested almost a kilometer and a half from Zarkog, at the geometric center of the cloud of particles he’d momentarily made of them. Mark furiously cast millions of copies of his automated Force needles, but Zarkog had also changed the style of his defenses, which now extended for half a kilometer around him in every direction. Rather than penetrating and shattering his Shields as they’d done to his thinner and harder ones, Mark’s hair-thin Force bolts were bogged down and absorbed before they could reach Zarkog’s black and silver scales.

Zarkog was still blasted back by the Force for almost ten kilometers as he struggled to deal with the shock of losing his turncoats to The Just Alliance while conducting his psionic battle with The Swarm, but the only injuries he suffered were from the fierce and sudden acceleration forces he experienced. He Healed those, assessed the situation in a tenth of a second, and attacked again without even spending any time to check his momentum.

Talia’s fear and rage were almost overwhelming. She made one quick scan of the vicinity for enemies other than Zarkog and found none, then broke formation to turn and join in attacking Zarkog, while separating their defenses into duplicate sets of Shields around herself and Mark. She hoped they would create a tactical advantage by attacking Zarkog from two directions, but it was a critical mistake.

It had occurred to Zarkog to wonder why Mark had Talia with him, when she could be participating remotely as the rest of The Just Alliance’s magic users were doing. Why did Mark need her proximity? With her error, Zarkog seized his opportunity to find out. He hurriedly examined her with all his senses and all his concentration, then Translocated her away to the far side of Kellaran, and kept Translocating her around that hemisphere twelve times per second to prevent her from regaining her bearings and returning to the fight. Rather than deal with her Shields, he had simply Translocated them with her as a unit. Her defenses remained completely intact, but they did her no good now.

For the first time since it had struck her in Bojoston five days previously, Alilia’s curse seized her mind with its full and original horror, and more powerfully than it ever had before. The last remaining rational corner of her mind realized that she needed to return to Mark’s side to make the agony end, and that this need to stay close to him was the only harmful aspect of the curse that he’d failed to deal with when he’d made it into a blessing. These realizations also did her no good, and her helpless psionic shriek of tortured terror filled the Link for a moment, until Povon shut her out of it.

Zarkog realized that his gamble had paid off when Mark cringed and cried out and almost convulsed from the power of his wife’s psionic scream, followed immediately by the shock of suddenly being completely out of contact with her for the first time since before their wedding. Mark knew where Talia was as she was forcefully jumped about on the far side of the world, but that was it.

The dark dragon laughed triumphantly as he and his huge Shield crashed to the ground in a thick pine woodland, sending broken trees flying like matchsticks in a patch a kilometer and a half long and almost a kilometer wide.

Mark marshaled his mental resources with a fierce and determined effort. He roared with rage and unleashed Lightning on Zarkog with all the offensive power at his command as the dragon was rising back into the air. Zarkog countered with a highly concentrated beam of magic Fire a meter in diameter. They streaked towards each other to increase the effectiveness of their attacks until the facing surfaces of their Shields met and rebounded a bit.

Then it was a matter of power against power, and both were lost to view in the midst of the roaring and crackling inferno they were creating. Again, a new sun was born over Serminak, temporarily blinding any unprotected Sylvan or dragon who looked at it from up to three kilometers away, and the constant explosion of horrible noise partially deafened them as well.

In only a moment Mark realized that Zarkog was right; when it came to pure power, his and Serminak’s were greater than Mark’s and The Just Alliance’s.

Frantically Mark called The Swarm into the Link and added their power to his spells, but still it was not enough. He felt it when the power of the Serminakis who were sworn to justice began to be gradually added to his effort, as alliance spell-casters who had the ability and concentration to spare commandeered it with pull spells. He threw in all of his personal power, including what his powerstone was sending him from Focus Mountain and the remaining magic stored in the Truthstones and his other items. Still, Zarkog's attack was weakening his Shields slightly faster than his attack was weakening the dragon's Shields. He dared not falter for an instant to try something else, for fear he would be immediately overwhelmed.

If he took power from his Shields to boost his attack, Zarkog's Fire would be through his defenses in a blink. If he took power from his attack to boost his Shields, Zarkog's Shields would be less strained as well, and the new balance of power was unlikely to be significantly more advantageous. Either way, he was still short on power.

His mind raced as he frantically tried to think of an answer to his dilemma.

He remembered what he had learned about holding his power, and how it increased his mental and psionic functions. In a desperate gamble, he took as much power as he could personally hold out of his attack. It was more than any mortal humanoid had ever personally held before, though it was a tiny fraction of the total, and it reduced by a bit the amount of time he could hold Zarkog at bay. At the present rate, Mark estimated his defeat, and that of The Just Alliance, to be about six seconds away.

Then many answers all came to him in a great flash of insight.

If the flesh of a person's body absorbed raw power from the light of the source or the heat of the stone, and that was the only way it was done, then those with larger bodies would have more power than those with smaller bodies, all other factors being equal. But obviously that was not the case. The wizards of the gnomes were more powerful on average than the wizards of the giants, and by a wide margin. Many of the best wizards were some of the smallest individuals of their own races.

It must be that each person's flesh and nervous system absorbed raw power with an individual efficiency, which then formed a field of energy around them, which acted like a collector that absorbed more power. A person's total magic power must depend on their size, multiplied by the efficiency of their bodies in absorbing raw power, times their efficiency at converting that raw power into usable magic, times their inherent conversion rate of usable magic into a collecting field, times the size of the field, times the field's efficiency at collecting more power. Which then allowed the creation of a larger field, which would collect more power, which allowed the creation of a larger field ... One limiting factor must be the amount of a person's power that was spent in collecting more power. When their capacity to hold power was reached, no more personal magic power was added to the energy field that collected raw power.

Control of the collecting field was key, as were the processes that transduced each type of energy to the next. Perhaps from the raw power to the collecting field to usable magic and right into a spell, skipping the body completely, like using a draw spell, with power from a larger energy field replacing Linked spell casters... There could be no limit to the power one could wield... And if he could make his collecting field surround Zarkog's, he could block the dragon's access to any source of raw power...

"Dammit, I need three seconds to figure this out and my Shields are collapsing!!!" he frantically called.

"Cast Shrink, curl your body into the tightest ball possible, pull your Shields into the smallest, hardest sphere you can manage, then pass me the Link as fast as you can while you have a momentary advantage!" a voice called back, and Mark realized it was Alilia.

He did exactly as she instructed as fast as he could, curling his suddenly sixty centimeter tall body inside a greatly strengthened sphere of Shielding only thirty centimeters in diameter, and now much of Zarkog's meter wide beam of blue fire was bypassing him. This bought a critical second and a half before Zarkog further intensified his Fire to a white-hot beam twenty-five centimeters wide.

But now Alilia had the Link, along with control of Mark's Shield and the ongoing Lightning attack on Zarkog. She lost a tiny fraction of the time she'd gained him by taking a little power out of his Shield, but she used it well.

Mark was suddenly plunged into absolute darkness and silence. Then his eyes and ears began to adjust, and he realized that the lack of light and sound was not absolute, there was a dull red light coming from one side, along with a low rumble.

"Good job Alilia!!!" he impulsively yelled into his knees as he grasped what had happened.

'She's cast the volume inside my Shield into a reverse-stasis sphere!' he thought with excitement. *'For every second that passes out there, at least a thousand must be passing in here! That gives me at least ten minutes! All the time in the world!'*

As it happened, six minutes later Alilia ended the stasis field and started Translocating him every tenth of a second, Shields and all, around the shattered mountain in eight kilometer jumps. This took Zarkog's aim off him long enough to do what he needed to do. Alilia kept him constantly apprised of his position, and where he was about to be on the next jump, and where Zarkog was in relation to those.

Mark took control of the Link, came to a sudden stop right in front of Zarkog, and cast an energy field around his opponent that cut off the Dragon Lord's access to his followers' power, and his access to the surrounding raw power from the stone and the Source as well. As he did that, the exultant young man expanded his collecting field to cover all the land for kilometers in every direction except over the city, and used the resulting power to harden his Shields.

Zarkog fought to the last without realizing what was happening, blasting at Mark with his concentrated Fire beam for another third of a second, until he suddenly depleted the power he personally held and fell from the sky like a stone. He thrashed and screamed in rage all the way down, frantically beating his wings for control, but without his inherent Levitation, his wings had no hope of holding him in the sky. His center of mass had been over two hundred and fifty meters above the ground, and he hit with a force that broke a quarter of his bones.

Talia appeared clinging frantically to Mark's thirty centimeter wide spherical shield and screaming hideously. He quickly cast Sleep upon her with enough power to ensure dreamless unconsciousness, caught her with Movement, dismissed most of his Shielding, and resumed his normal size.

He cradled her gently in his arms, and took a quiet moment to enjoy sweet victory.

"Thanks. We won." he tiredly announced to his multitude of compatriots. *"Start swearing everyone on this continent to justice. Don't stop till you're done."*

He took a deep breath, held it, let it out. *"I no longer command The Just Alliance. Someone take the Link. I'll talk to you later."*

Tithian took control of the Link, and Mark dropped out of it altogether.

He was still personally holding his limit in power, and controlling almost every bit of raw power in the district. Ideas started to fire off in his mind.

Understanding had given him power, power had given him more understanding, which had given him more power, and now he suddenly grasped the next level of understanding.

'There it is. The key to becoming a god.' he thought in profound amazement. 'I know how to achieve the next order of power. From there, the process would be unstoppable.'

He looked down at the small, warm form of the elf he loved so much cuddled against his chest, her face covered in tear tracks, her face slack with exhaustion. Then his view of her blurred as his own eyes filled with tears, and he softly kissed her cheek.

"I don't want it." he stated aloud. "I'm not ready for divinity."

He released some of the power he was holding by heating the air for kilometers around a tiny bit, and withdrew his collecting field to the areas surrounding Zarkog and himself. The rush of thoughts tricked away with the excess power, but he still remembered the last great understanding he had reached.

"A strange choice, refusing deification." Visinniria chuckled as she appeared beside him. "Understandable though, considering your youth. And you can still take the last steps any time you wish. Though I certainly hope you plan on doing so in time to help deal with the greater demons."

"I don't even want to think about that right now." Mark said with a slow headshake.

"Again, understandable." the elven goddess of war grinned as she considered Zarkog's broken body.

"You know, he's going to die in about half a minute if you don't let him have some power." she idly commented. "It's your choice, but he's not without potential, and he might be useful."

"I suppose you're right." Mark tiredly nodded. He flew down as he carefully transferred Talia to his left arm. Even in her sleep, she was still tightly gripping his portable Truthstone in her right hand. He gently pried it from her fingers as he reached the ground, cast the question and the Compulsion into it with most of his remaining power, and slammed it against Zarkog's ankle with all of his natural human strength.

The gargantuan dragon was shivering all over from his agonizing pain, and barely noticed the further insult of the blow, but he shuddered and spasmed powerfully from the energies of the Compulsion and the binding vow.

"Childish." Visinniria giggled. "But..."

"I know, understandable." Mark nodded with a slight smile as the Marking of The Just Alliance colored Zarkog white, with the blue emblem of the Truthstone placed on his front and back, the two of them large enough to cover most of his torso.

Mark withdrew his energy field from around Zarkog, who managed to cast Healings on himself before he passed out.

Mark's four companions landed around them, triumphant but subdued by the experience, and by the presence of the goddess.

"Will he live?" Mark asked, without much apparent interest in the answer.

"He's Healing." Visinniria judged. "He won't be walking or talking for a few days, not with that jaw and that hip, but he'll eventually pull himself together."

"Fine."

They stood there staring at the fallen foe for a long minute before Mark spoke again.

"So, I take it that you and the other gods will keep your word. You'll rejoin the world as citizens and swear Osbald's Oath on the Truthstone?"

"We will, but not yet. We think such an occasion deserves to take place at a great public event. We do still have the egos of gods, after all. I'm sure your comrades will have a ceremony and celebration of your victory, once things have settled down a bit. We'll make our appearance then, swear on the stone and declare for The Just Alliance, and help toast your triumph."

"Ah. Okay.

"Say, do you think you could let me feel your aura? I could really use that right now."

"For the Six of Hilia and my beloved Ria, I could do that." Visinniria smiled, and her aura shone forth from her like a shower of contentment and well-being. "And for my favorite weapon, my favorite elf, and my favorite man, I can do better than that."

With that she leaned close over Talia and brushed a stray blond lock back from the sleeping princess's forehead.

As Visinniria touched her skin, Talia awoke, feeling completely content and refreshed, and gazed up at the divine elf. "Goddess." she smiled, and nodded in greeting.

"Hello Talia." Visinniria smiled in return. She lowered her head, and their lips met in a kiss. When she straightened, Talia was grinning in giddy bliss.

Then Mark was graced with the elven deity's kiss. For a moment his passion was fired to the burning point. He ran the fingers of his right hand up into her luxurious mane of red curls and held the back of the goddess's head firmly, so he could return her kiss hungrily and hard. Then his ardor magically cooled, and he released her as she gently pulled away, and he was left with a wonderful feeling of happiness and pleasure.

"Ahhh." he sighed in contentment, then turned to his companions.

"You are the finest friends anyone could ask for." he told them. "We really did achieve a great victory today. Thank you for everything.

"And now I think we're due for some real sleep, with nothing but normal dreams. You're officially off duty. Feel free to get some rest or have some fun, whatever you prefer, and we'll see you at the next Assembly meeting. As long as it's not for at least twenty hours. Now get down here and give us a hug."

The dragon and unicorn couples shrank to the size of ponies, and The Six huddled together in an affectionate and tearful embrace.

Ria manifested at Visinniria's whim. "Why don't you join them?" the goddess smiled. "It'll be good for you. You don't have to move or anything."

Ria suddenly smiled in her stiff, folded-arm posture. "*Thank you, My Lady.*" she psionically murmured, and drifted over to The Six, who affectionately welcomed her into their group hug. And while her skeleton remained as rigid as steel, this one time she was not insubstantial, instead her hair and skin were as soft and warm as any woman's, and her sense of touch as sensitive.

When the moment finally felt right to end their embrace and step back, Equemev said; "*I love you all, as much as my own brothers and sisters. I know we all feel that way.*"

"*We'll see you later.*"

Then she and Silaran were gone, followed a moment later by Povon and Kragorram.

Visinniria then graced Ria with her kiss, though of course Ria made no move to return it. Still, her pleasure was apparent in her voice when it ended.

"*I love you, My Lady. Thank you.*"

"I love you as well. Farewell till next time, which will be soon."

Ria disappeared.

"Well, I guess we'll be going too." Mark said. He gazed downslope at the nearby city, where healers, damage control teams, and the forces of The Just Alliance were hurrying about their work.

"I was hoping I could accompany you." the red-headed deity giggled mischievously.

"Oh?"

“Yes. I’d like to thank you both for everything you’ve done.”

“Oh. You mean, ah... In the elven way?” Mark stammered, unsure he was understanding her correctly.

“In the elven way, for the lives all of my people, which you have most likely saved. That’s a lot of gratitude.” she giggled again like a teenage girl, and drifted up to hug them both with warm affection. “Well? It’s not an offer that comes along every day, you know.”

“Uh, sorry, I was just boggled by the idea of sharing lovemaking with a goddess. Of course we accept, and we’re very honored to do so.”

“I know, but then, so am I.”

An hour and a quarter later, they lay sprawled about on the huge bed in their cottage in blissful lethargy.

“That was... Heavenly.” Talia murmured.

She started to cast a cleaning spell, but Visinniria blocked her.

“Excuse me?” Talia asked in surprise.

“The mastery is in the details, my fine disciple in the pleasurable arts.” Visinniria smiled, and tickled the other with one of her red curls. “A light layer of moisture feels pleasant right now, don’t you think?”

“I do.” Talia agreed as she gracefully executed a luxurious stretch. “But that’s only now, while it’s fresh, and in a minute it’ll be stale and cold.”

“True, and so you would clean it if we were finished, but I don’t think we *are* finished. In which case, one might cast a spell to ensure that it retains the perfectly pleasant scent, freshness, temperature, and volume of a freshly broken sweat. Like this, you see how that was done?”

“I do! I bow to your wisdom, my goddess. Even if Mark does not bow. So to speak.”

“Ah, he does not. He must remain unfulfilled, which would explain why he is refraining from showering us with compliments, as one might expect.”

Mark remained unmoved, laying in boneless relaxation on his back, his limbs sprawled, still breathing hard to get his wind back while staring blankly at the ceiling.

Talia reached over with a toe to tickle his ribs.

“Huh?! What?!” he gasped in surprise as he bounced away from her reach.

“What are you thinking, my love?” Talia giggled.

“Just... re-living the experience. I saved it in a Reading.” he mumbled, obviously still distracted.

“Why bother, when you can simply enjoy it again?” the goddess teased.

“Huh? Sure, then I can save it again too!” Mark eagerly grinned.

“There is one who might join us, one who longs to be with you two more than any others, but who fears to intrude on your moments of private celebration. One who sits alone, wracked with lonely longing, and who was critical to your victory today.”

“Ah. I can guess who you mean.” Talia giggled. “And it will be nice to have her by for a... visit.

“Oh Alilia? Would you care to come by the cottage for a while? We have a surprise for you.”

In the cavern in Kellaran’s most distant moon, two female Senior Draconian Healers sat vigil with the Eldest, feeding his Levitated body a slow trickle of power to ensure it’s continued gradual recovery and monitoring it closely. Meanwhile Quewanak’s astral projection chatted with them, and they had not failed to realize that the visible spirit of the Eldest was flirting with them outrageously. The two were as close to adolescent giggling as it was possible for two venerable dragons with eons of experience to be.

Suddenly a quiet voice spoke behind them, a voice that was incredible, even for a dragon. “Let me help you young girls with that.” it said, and suddenly the Eldest’s body was as recovered as it would have been after another twenty years of their care. It was healthily muscled and a dark shiny green, and the skin and bone had grown back over the brain injury.

They gaped, then spun as one to see who had done this wonderful thing.

They gaped again as they recognized Amirgath the Quicksilver, First God of Draconians.

“Greetings. Could I have a private moment with Quewanak?” he politely asked. “I assure you, he will be quite safe in my company. I’ll call you back before I leave, if he still needs your professional care then. If not, perhaps he will contact you for more personal care at some other time.”

“Uh, Certainly, uh...”

“Amirgath will do.” he nodded. “And I would appreciate it if you refrained from mentioning my appearance here until after the official announcement of the ending of the Withdrawal, which will occur some time tomorrow. After

that... Well, after that I will be permitted to openly consort with mortals again, like any other citizen. You are both such lovely young females, and I would be pleased to share a social occasion with you some time, if you would welcome it?"

"Uh, I would, Amirgath!" the copper stammered as her scales veritably rippled in bashfulness. "The memory of your virility has not been forgotten by the females of your people!" She disappeared in embarrassed pleasure right after her last syllable.

"I would as well!" her friend blurted, then she too was gone.

"Ahhh, it's been a long time since I seduced a mortal female." Amirgath said, with the equivalent of a thoughtful grin.

"It's been longer for me, far longer, and I saw those two first, you poacher!" Quewanak laughed. *"And thank you for the Healing."*

"I have not healed you. What I have done is far closer to accelerating time around your form, allowing your natural recovery to proceed more quickly in this timeframe.

"But with the withdrawal undone, I *can* heal you. I know you fear that any major disturbance of your condition may cost you the unique capabilities you've developed over forty eons of slumber, but I am here to tell you that it is not so. If you allow me to heal your brain injury, you will enjoy the use of all your old abilities, and your new ones as well, with far greater facility than you ever have. And if you allow me to heal the rest of your lingering injuries and wake you, you will be even more capable. You will be unable to refrain from allowing your awareness to expand considerably, and you will instantly know what Prince Mark has realized. You will be able to take the step that he has postponed.

"I told you that the chance would come, and this is it. I strongly suggest you take it. The demons will be here soon enough, and who knows what could happen then? This chance may no longer be available."

"I see. And what would I do then, do you think?"

"Well, you might join me at the celebration of the gods."

"You are celebrating? Am I mistaken in remembering that you were with the faction that lost?"

"I was. But understand, my friend, the withdrawal was not something any of us wanted to do, it was something we felt was necessary. And besides, the celebration of The Faction For Change is a fine one, and they were enjoying themselves immensely. So we thought; what the hell. There is no use in being sore losers. And as I was just realizing, the new circumstances do have their benefits."

"I couldn't agree more." Quewanak laughed. *"So? What are you waiting for? I can't wait to taste real prey again! So to speak! I think that the prey at a celebration of the gods can hardly be considered real!"*

"You won't be able to tell that it's not, my friend, I assure you!" Amirgath chuckled as he cast his Healing. "Pay close attention now, you'll want to have the clearest memories possible of your last moments as a mortal, and your ascension to divinity.

"Now awake and rise up! The Pantheon of Kellaran salutes Quewanak, The Draconian God of Dreaming!"

Mark awoke, and tiny hands were covering his eyes. A lithe and warm little form was laying on him on top of the covers, his arms lay by his sides, and her feet were lightly holding his wrists to the bed

"Guess who?" the most familiar voice murmured playfully, and her lips met his in a lingering kiss. It was slightly different this morning, somehow, and his arousal grew rapidly.

"Mmmm, good morning Love." he moaned, and slipped his wrists free to hug his arouser.

He was shocked to discover by feel that she had four arms.

"Wha?!" he exclaimed as he suddenly sat up.

The hands fell from his eyes amidst an explosion of feminine laughter, to reveal twin blond elves spilled onto the bed before him.

"Aaaahaha! We got you good!" Dalia brayed in hilarity as tears rolled down her cheeks. "Talia was laying on my back and Levitating to hide her weight! Your fine location sense has let you down, you handsome fool! You didn't know it was me you were kissing!"

"Ah, Mark, your expression is priceless!" Talia laughed, wiping her eyes of tears repeatedly.

"Fine, you got me." Mark admitted, then grinned. "So, are you two going to finish what you started, or are you just teasing me?"

"Oh, I suppose we can spare an hour or so, but then we have to go for breakfast." His mischievous wife nonchalantly decided. "It's a formal breakfast, and we wouldn't want to be late, as there are a few guests coming to say good morning and whatnot."

“Oh, I imagine there are. Now come here, and get what’s coming to you.”
“I hear and obey, My Prince!”

They ended up procrastinating until the last minute, and then having to hurry to be ready in time.
Once they were, Talia Translocated them.

They arrived in the midst of a huge celebration, surrounded by the Assembly of The Just Alliance and their families and friends, in an outdoor oval amphitheater that must have been the largest stadium on Kellaran. The infield was five hundred meters long, and the gigantic banks of seating rose one above another hundred and fifty meters high, filled with people of every description. Everywhere there were scattered tables where people of every type sat before mountains of food and barrels of drink of every kind, with plenty of open lawn left between for mixing and mingling, and for dancing to the joyous music that was heard throughout the great facility. Glowing circular blue Translocation Stages like the one they’d just arrived in were scattered about, marked with warnings. All the way around the top of the gigantic grandstand Kleti-style Revealing’s thirty meters high showed other people celebrating at other huge gatherings all over Kellaran. And Mark realized by the size of the doors and seats both tiny and huge that the facility was literally gigantic, being of Shiganzhu design, so they must be in Felion somewhere.

Kleti Spell-Mongers wandered about in the crowd, transmitting what they saw to other places and providing exuberant commentary, as did others who transmitted the experience via broadcasted Readings.

Mark, Talia and Dalia looked around for a moment, then a pretty young Kleti Spell-Monger recognized them and hurried over, the glowing red stone on her chest showing that she was transmitting a Revealing. “The Keys to The Just Alliance, and Princess Dalia! Good day and greetings, from the people of Kellaran, most of whom are watching right now!”

Mark laughed as he noticed the great Revealing’s at the top of the stadium quickly switch to a view of himself and the radiant twin elves. “Good morning, my fine friends! At least it’s morning for me, as I just woke up! Welcome to a bright new day, whatever time it is where you are!

“Other than that, I’m afraid I’ll need some breakfast before I’ll be capable of the eloquence this wondrous occasion surely deserves. It’s sure nice to say good morning to everyone in the world at once though! For now, I see my grandmother beckoning me, and so is the big stack of berry cakes on the table there!”

“Thank you everyone, for everything you’ve done for our victorious effort!” Talia grinned as she gave a friendly wave.

“Hi! She’s Talia!” Dalia laughed as they turned away, clearing up a great deal of confusion, since Mark had one of them on each arm, and they were informally dressed for summer weather, and so wore no signs of office.

“Thank you for talking to us!” the broadcaster grinned.

Yazadril and Colonel Markhan Longstrider the Third presided over a gigantic long table occupied by everyone in Mark and Talia’s families. Most of those they knew by name were seated close by, or stood gathered in small bunches around the table, most with a glass or a small plate in hand.

“Welcome to your victory celebration!” Bezedil called over the music and the many happy voices.

“Those are my mother’s aunt and uncle! I haven’t seen them in months!” Talia happily pointed out.

“And these new faces seated with us are your cousins’ spouses and children, and some relatives of mine.” Mark’s grandmother announced.

“There was ample room, so we thought to bring as many of your family together as we could find on short notice!” Yazadril chuckled, as Alilia filled the newcomers plates and smilingly graced them with a quick kiss.

“Most fine!” Mark laughed. “Good morning everyone, and welcome to... Where are we, anyway?”

“The Arena of The Empire, in Verzaclon City.” Talia told him. “It was here that Empress Emeroth has won the throne of Verzaclon on four occasions.”

“It’s the biggest arena on Kellaran!” Dilimon added as he and Yalla moved to stand at Mark’s shoulder, their hands filled with glasses and rolled peach-filled sweetened flatbreads.

“I suspected that!” Mark chuckled, and set to with gusto.

He paused in his enthusiastic consumption a few minutes later, but only long enough to ask Yazadril; “Any significant developments?”

“The gods have shown themselves to some, and in every case it was an act of Healing. They have healed all the sick and the wounded, and brought peace to the traumatized. And I do mean all of them. That includes thousands who were in the Great Link and were driven to the brink of breakdown by sharing in your deaths and Talia’s suffering during your battle with Zarkog, and some suffered from being Linked or contributing power beyond their healthy limits. Also thousands who have been hurt or shattered by the events of the war all over Kellaran, including those

Serminaki who were near the battles in Zarkog's capitol, and his wizards who were stricken when we breached their Wards. Thanks to the gods, every person who lives at this moment is well.

"Quewanak appeared physically in The Hall of the Assembly two hours ago, after we had decided the location and timing of the festivities and their activities. He tells us the gods will appear here at an appropriate point in the agenda, and that they will officially announce the ending of the withdrawal.

"Every Serminaki we could catch has been sworn to justice, and that's almost all of them. They've been encouraged to mingle among us all over the alliance, and to take part in enjoying the festivities. The rest will be caught by tomorrow.

"Crafters and builders from all over The Just Alliance have gone to Serminak to help rebuild their battle damage, as many of their crafters have volunteered to help rebuild ours. It is a great act of healing and reconciliation.

"It was found that many of Serminak's young dragons have been suffering from an abnormal lack of parental attention due to Zarkog's forced breeding programs, and all of the worst-off have been fostered to a Xervian dragon. Almost every Draconian adult in Xervia is caring for a young dragon who was deprived of affection or forced to be a warrior from too young an age, and most care for two or three.

"Once most of that was in motion, those in Venak saw how things were developing, and decided to take the prudent course. They have astronomers who were capable of confirming what we told them of the approach of the demons. That helped decide King Pirkan, heir to the late King Renem, who was killed in an insurrection by those in Venak who objected to attacking The Just Alliance on Zarkog's order. Pirkan has requested entry into The Just Alliance for Venak, and he has been sworn. Most of his citizens have agreed to be sworn as well. He will probably force it on the rest by use of the Compulsion stones, and we will not impede him. He is eager to make amends for his late great-uncle King Sorrin's crimes on behalf of Zarkog's conspiracy.

"In about an hour there will be a few official addresses made to mark the victory, and everyone hopes you and Talia will consent to speak. I imagine the gods will make their appearance after everyone has spoken.

"General Zwak has asked to speak on behalf of the Sylvan. He says he has a proposal that will suit the sensibilities of his people and The Just Alliance's as well. I'm eager to hear what he has to say, since I'm one of many who doesn't think that returning Zarkog to power is the best choice of government for Serminak. Many who've lost loved ones due to his actions would not stand for it, despite his having been sworn to justice, and I don't blame them. I remember all too well how I felt when we thought Dalia was dead. If you feel he should be returned to power when he is ultimately responsible for the atrocity at Shinosa Valley, you're a more generous soul than I."

"Luckily, I don't have to say." Mark nodded after a swig of berry juice. "I'll leave that for cooler heads to decide, and I don't plan on offering a suggestion one way or another, because frankly, I'd just as soon think about him as little as possible."

"That's how I feel as well." Talia added with a bit of a shiver. "Is there anything more pleasant to report, or to discuss?"

"I have something." a familiar voice contributed, and a tiny, glistening white dragon only a meter long landed carefully on the table in front of Nemia, in a clearing between the dishes. "The gods have found the secret to Healing the wounds of demon-fire."

"Somonik? Is that you?" Nemia asked in amazement. "You look wonderful! And I see you've mastered the Shrink spell!"

"Yes. It required ninety Draconian gods and nine gods of other races working together to Heal me, but I am restored. It feels even more wonderful than it looks! To be free of pain after enduring it for so long is ecstasy itself!

"And if you look around, you will notice many people who have altered their apparent size in order to mix with other races more comfortably. There, a giant who has Shrunk to a third her height dances with a selkie, and there is a gnome who is two meters tall, due to his size-altering Simulacrum. And that female hovering there is not a one meter tall elf with pretty and decorative artificial wings, that is the queen of the sprites, who has not yet chosen a personal name that is pronounceable by any of us. She casts her fully-sensory Simulacrum from the safety of her distant location in Xervia, but experiences every sensation of being here in person, and in a more appropriate size for such experiences as shaking hands and offering hugs. A delightful experience she shared with me a few minutes ago, I might add. Her aura is almost as pleasant as a goddess's, even through a Simulacrum."

"Well congratulations, my handsome friend!" Mark told him with a broad smile.

"Thank you. And now I intend to ask Grakonexikaldoron to dance in flight with me. I haven't danced since the demon war. And you know, I may just ask her to be my mate for an eon or two!"

"You have my blessing, old friend!" Yazadril laughed.

“Good! I may need it!” Somonik laughed as he launched himself carefully enough to not wrinkle the tablecloth, and flew off, darting with agility through the crowd with crisp snaps of his wings like an exuberant adolescent in an obstacle course.

“There’s one who truly trusts his flying, considering that he still weighs many tons.” Alilia commented with admiration.

“Ah, he is reborn, and his joy is wondrous to see.” Sana laughed, shaking her thick gray hair in ripples. “As is yours, my fine young grandson.”

“I was healed by a goddess last night, Grandmother.” Mark chuckled. “And enjoyed many other glorious experiences as well. And I had an extremely pleasant wake-up call too!”

“That would explain it.” Colonel Longstrider nodded, and grinned as he availed himself of a frosty mug of ale.

Mark’s cousin Dren turned to his girlfriend Mandri, and grinned. “Maybe Somonik has a point. Why get married, when we can simply agree to have a quick fling for the next two million years or so? I mean really, you’re sure to be bored of me by then!”

“You still have to marry me.” Mandri insisted with a matching grin. “It’ll take me at least three million years to become bored with you, and when I do, I’ll ship you off to join the navy and have tawdry affairs behind your back while you’re at sea.”

“Oh you will, will you?” he laughed. “Do you still think it’ll work now that you’ve spoiled your plan by telling me?”

“Are you serious? You can’t even remember where you left your socks last night! There’s no chance that you’ll remember this conversation in three million years!”

“I see. I guess I’ll have to write it down on something.” he smiled mischievously as he rummaged in his pockets. “Now lets see, I don’t have any paper, but I can write it inside this little box I have. The lining is white, but first I’ll have to empty it of all the stuff inside.”

He opened the little blue silk-covered box, took out a gold ring bearing a diamond, and said; “Here, could you hold this for me for a minute?” as he handed it to Mandri.

The girl almost went crazy! She started jumping around and screaming in joy while trying to inspect the ring at the same time, then jumped into his lap and frantically hugged him, then jumped off and bounced around some more, waving the ring overhead like a battle trophy and cheering at the top of her lungs.

“All right, give it back.” Dren chuckled as he stood and deftly snatched the ring from her fingers.

She froze and her countenance dropped in shock, but Dren went down on one knee before her. “We have to do this right.” he explained with a grin as he held the ring up to her again. “Mandri my love, will you marry me?”

She almost collapsed into his embrace and wrapped her arms around his neck, and sobbed hysterically into the hollow of his shoulder for a minute, too overcome to even speak to say yes. But five minutes later she sat perched on his lap with the ring on her finger, grinning like a madwoman and wiping at her tears as she accepted the congratulations of all.

When Mark and Talia had finished eating, they excused themselves for a dance. They joined a huge throng of dancers in the center of the field, where many of the tables had been cleared and taken away.

Eventually the music stopped at the end of a tune, and the dancers were politely asked via a Speaking; “*The organizers would be most grateful if we could please have the center of the field cleared for a presentation?*”

Once the dancers had dispersed, Empress Emeroth’s magically augmented voice was heard to announce; “I present Somonik the White, Speaker for The Ninety Nine, Speaker for The Grand Council of Xervia, Communications Director of The Just Alliance!”

Somonik appeared full-sized in the center of the field, and was warmly and enthusiastically applauded. He waited a moment for silence to fall, and as he did, half the Revealings high above changed to various views of him from different Spell-Mongers throughout the great stadium, the others showing various crowds of happy and expectant people waiting for him to speak, indicating that his image was being watched by people of every race, from locations all over The Just Alliance.

“It is fitting that we have feasted before commencing with the more official portion of today’s activities, for this is a time of great contentment, and one is seldom more content than after feasting!”

Some found humor in his sentiment and laughed, while others applauded, and some cheered with boisterous joy.

“We came together to deal with the threat of the insidious conspiracy, but we have triumphed, and that threat is no more!”

This time the cheering was a great roar of happy approval.

“When Zarkog’s conspiracy failed to give him power over us, he declared war upon us with all the forces of Serminak and tried to terrorize us into submission, but he failed!

“He swore that he would exterminate us if necessary to ensure his conquest, but he was brought down in defeat as we rose in triumph!!

“Today, justice reigns supreme and unopposed on the united world of Kellaran!

“Today we enjoy the dawn of a new age of prosperity even greater than we ever hoped for!

“We declare this the first day of an official week of celebration for our victory!”

After each sentence he had to pause for a louder cheer, and his voice rose to match them, until he let the last great outburst run its course for a few moments.

Silence fell as he continued speaking in a more somber tone. “Unfortunately, our victory was not without a grievous cost. Three hundred and forty-one of us were slain by the insidious conspiracy before it was discovered. Nineteen thousand three hundred and sixty-one of our soldiers lost their lives in open warfare with Serminak, as did one hundred forty-one thousand and twelve of our citizens.

“A great monument to all of those who fell in the struggle against Zarkog and his forces will be raised in every great city in The Just Alliance. Each monument will be a large roofed open-columned quadrangle of purest white marble surrounded by lush and beautiful gardens, and in the center of each will be a great cube of gold, and on the sides of each cube will be written a brief history of this conflict. Also written upon the gold will be the names of each and every person who lost their lives in the great struggle that finally ensured that we who survive them can live in freedom and justice. In this way the memory of our fallen comrades and loved ones will be forever preserved, revered, and honored.

“Let every one of us at every place on Kellaran now have a minute of silence to remember those we have lost.”

After the minute was past, the ancient drake continued in a brighter tone. “We must also remember that many more lives were saved than lost, and they were saved by acts of bravery, of brilliance, and of sacrifice. The stories of these fine acts should be remembered and preserved, and I urge every one of you to record anything you feel to be significant that you experienced or observed over the last nine days and nights, for collection in The Archive of the War of the Founding of The Just Alliance.

“Many of those acts of bravery, brilliance and sacrifice were of such significance that no one could deny that they are deserving of public recognition and a token of our appreciation.

“To speak further on this, I present my dear friend Grakonexikaldoron, of The Ninety Nine.”

“Thank you Somonik.” the gold dragon said with a bow as she appeared beside him. He bowed in return and vanished, and she continued speaking.

“I hold in my hand the award for the very first act of heroism performed in this struggle that is deserving of our public recognition. It is The Medallion of Service of The Just Alliance, the first such to be commissioned, and it bears the words: ‘For bravery and sacrifice.’ If our broadcasters will supply a close view, you can see that it is the symbol of The Just Alliance in sapphire on white gold, and it is mounted on a silver plaque. The words on the plaque tell the story of the act that is being recognized. Sixty-one years ago, in one of the first violent acts of the insidious conspiracy, they firebombed a warehouse in Pabaks, a city in northern Thon. The recipient of this award is a warehouse porter named Basrin Davess, who risked his life to save two co-workers from being burnt alive in the fire. The two had been overcome by heat and smoke, and though all three were severely burned before they escaped the flames, they all lived and eventually recovered.

“Basrin Davess will receive this award before all who know and care for him in a presentation held in Pabaks within the hour. Every one of the thousands who performed such acts of valor will receive one for bravery, all who were wounded will receive them for sacrifice, and all who contributed important ideas or research will receive them for brilliance. All those will be presented over the coming hours and days, at the celebrations the recipients are attending all over The Just Alliance.

“But first, there are fourteen individuals whose actions were absolutely crucial to our victory, and who deserve to be recognized for their service before the watching and appreciative eyes of the entirety of The Just Alliance. Without the efforts of these fourteen individuals, it is very likely that we would all be Zarkog’s slaves right now, or in the near future.

“The first two will receive The Medallion of Service for Brilliance, but their awards must be presented anonymously, for they are seers, and it is easier for them to read the shadows of the future of events that they are not part of. They fear that even having their identities widely known may cloud their visions, but they still contributed many crucial insights to our victory, including their help in the discovery of the coming great Nexus, and in identifying the two who are Key to that Nexus.

“Our third great seer is possessed of a slightly different variation of the talent, and needs not fear that acting publicly will affect her performance. She will be asked to receive the awards on her companions’ behalf, and to convey them to their rightful recipients with our profound and heartfelt gratitude.

“Tithian; seer, oracle, Justicer and Speaker of the Senate of The People of Morning, please come forward.”

Tithian’s striking black and silver form appeared beside the gold dragon, and they bowed to each other.

“Tithian, for your crucial insights into many matters of magical research and spell design, for your crucial role in initiating the formation of The Just Alliance, and for your work as a seer, both that which you accomplished on your own and that which you shared with the previous two recipients, I present you with The Medallion of Service for Brilliance. Please accept it with our deepest respect and our most sincere thanks.”

“I am humbled and honored beyond words. Thank you all.”

“I will faithfully convey my companion seers’ awards to them. They are taking Readings of these events and following them closely. They ask me to say for them, that they feel they do not deserve these awards as much as some others may, but they will accept them in honor of all who labored or fought for our great triumph in anonymity or obscurity. They offer their humble gratitude.”

“I also feel that there are others more deserving of this recognition than myself, but I will gladly accept this medallion with honor, and with great pride. Again, I thank you all.”

The crowd cheered her from all over the world, as they did for all of the fourteen who received a globally broadcast presentation.

The next four presentations were of a similar pattern, and all were of awards given for brilliance.

Osbald the Eighth was honored for creating his oath, for being the first to swear it, for helping to make doing so the defining act of the new age, and for his crucial role in initiating the formation of The Just Alliance.

Alilia was honored for her role in initiating the formation of The Just Alliance, and for her deciding insight near the end of Mark’s confrontation with Zarkog.

Yazadril was honored for his role in initiating the formation of The Just Alliance, and for his tactical, strategic, and command performances prior to Mark’s assumption of command.

Somonik was honored for his communications brilliance, and it was pointed out that at one point he had been conveying or participating in over eighteen hundred different conversations simultaneously.

All of them gave brief and humble acceptance speeches.

Then Grakonexikaldoron called out; “Lady Equemev of The Six of Hilia, please come forward.

“You are presented with The Medallion of Service for Bravery, Sacrifice, and Brilliance, for your actions in the battle, for participating in training that involved far more suffering than any warrior endured in the real fighting of the war, for your part in the infiltration of Zarkog’s senior officers, and for your contributions to creating the solutions that won us the war on it’s final day.”

Equemev was almost frozen with stage fright. *“I am so very moved by this. I thank you all.”* was all she said before Translocating back to her place beside Tithian and the rest of her friends and family.

Silaran and Kragorram were the next two called, and were honored as Equemev had been for the achievements they’d shared.

After Silaran was presented with his medallion, he reared joyously and did a pirouette on one rear hoof before sweeping a graceful bow onto one front knee with the tip of his horn touching the turf. His body language portrayed his emotions with great eloquence, so he simply added; *“Thank you my friends!”*, and galloped off to rejoin Equemev.

Kragorram was more loquacious in his acceptance, after taking a moment to consider what he would say, while the crowd waited in anticipation. “I bargained my service as a wedding present for Mark and Talia only eight days ago, but it seems that I have done a great deal of living since then. I am changed profoundly, and for the better I think. I received in the bargain a chance to finally win the love of the beautiful Povon, my perfect mate, and she has blessed me with her affection, and exhilarated me with her prowess as my companion at arms.

“I hoped that my association with Mark would give me a chance to combat the forces of evil in an effective way, and that I might share in mighty deeds, and that I might be considered a great champion of justice who is recognized and cheered by multitudes. I have wanted this as long as I can remember, and one of my earliest memories is of playing at being a hero, but my dreams have often seemed like foolish ones over the years. And now my hopes are fulfilled beyond my farthest imaginings. Mostly because of my association with others whose greatness far exceeds my own, and whose love and friendship I treasure above all else.

“It is with profound gratitude that I accept this award, and I will dedicate it to the memory of my dear friend Dekagnath, who fell while fighting over Zarkog’s lair as a warrior of The Strike Force of the Just Alliance. Thank you.”

For his eloquence, the crimson dragon was indeed cheered by multitudes, and heartily.

Povon was given the award for the same reasons as her squadmates, with special emphasis on her groundbreaking contributions to spellcraft and psionic techniques.

“I did it all because I love Kragorram, and because I wanted to be a better person, so that I would truly deserve his love.” she frankly explained. “Then I had to see him wounded three times in reality, and I saw him wounded and killed dozens of times in training, and each time that hurt almost as much as if it was real. I like to think that it was all worth it. We stand ready to do it all again if we have to.

“I thank you all for this honor.”

Rather than Translocating back to her place at Kragorram’s side, she Levitated from the turf and slowly flew back with great grace. After she landed, Mark saw to his surprise that between her and Kragorram was a very young black dragon only six meters long in total. The young drake wasn’t using a translation spell, so Mark couldn’t read it’s expression or understand it’s words, or even guess it’s gender, but the black infant clung to Kragorram and Povon with desperate affection.

“Prince Mark and Princess Talia, Keys to The Just Alliance, please come forward.” Grakonexikaldoron called.

They appeared before her, smiling and holding hands as the multitudes cheered them with a mighty roar. They bowed in unison to the four corners, then waved as the wild applause went on and on. Finally the gold dragon held her wings and her hands up for silence, and eventually the crowds quieted.

“Princess Talia, we award you The Medallion of Service for Bravery, for Sacrifice, and for Brilliance. You have shared in all the valiant deeds of The Six of Hilia, for which you deserve this award and recognition. We also recognize the crucial nature of your work as Key to The Just Alliance, for everyone knows that you and Prince Mark share every task. His is the role of leadership, but I think that neither of you could have achieved what you have without the other, and your contribution was no less important than his. Furthermore, due to the brilliance of the battle methods that your squad introduced, only you two, of all our fighters, needed to take direct and personal risk in the final battle of the war, though most of the world took part in the fight. You and your husband volunteered to take the risk for all of us. You were killed in that battle, and you were tortured with madness. We know for a fact that you were killed, as the experience was shared by the billions in the great Battle Link, and we know for a fact that you two are not gods. Our researchers have yet to reconcile the discrepancy between those two facts, but I suspect that we will soon. You suffered horribly for us, and you were crucial to our victory, and for all of that we offer this award.”

“Thank you so much.” Talia smiled as she took the plaque from Gran’s careful claw-tips. She took a long look around at the hundreds of thousands in the arena, and the huge views of millions more in other places. She gave a spontaneous giggle and a wave. “Hi everyone!” she called, and billions laughed and waved and called greetings in return. Then she waited until almost total silence had fallen, and it didn’t take long.

“The last ten days have been... incredible. Yesterday, they seemed like seventy-eight years, but the memory of the Eldest’s training is fading a bit, and it’s starting to seem like ten days again. During that time, it seems like we’ve been sucked up by a tornado of events, and there’s been no time to get used to things before everything changed again. I’ve been cursed and blessed, been married and assassinated, fallen madly in love, been gifted with fortunes and tasked with great responsibility. I’ve saved lives and I’ve been killed. Four times in real life, and dozens of times in training, perhaps hundreds. It’s amazing how many times you can be willing to experience the horror of death if you know that a curse is going to bring you back to life again, especially when millions of your fellow soldiers and citizens are depending on you. And sometimes even then, you cannot do enough, and they are lost anyway.”

She paused to wipe away a tear, then smiled and carried on.

“Now, we should have some time to achieve a new stability in the new order of things, time to come to grips with everything that’s happened, time to enjoy all the good fortune that we still have.”

She spent a moment considering her award, then hugged it to her chest and bowed her head over it. “I’ll always treasure this.” she quietly finished, and her tears escaped her control and ran down her face.

Mark unabashedly picked her up and hugged her warmly, and she clung to him and reveled in his love as the people roared their approval, and many were those who wiped away a tear.

“Prince Mark, we award you The Medallion of Service for Bravery, for Sacrifice, and for Brilliance. We honor you for all the valiant acts you shared with The Six of Hilia, for your role in triggering the formation of The Just Alliance and in defining it’s spirit, for your inspiring words of wisdom and your suggestions as Key to The Just Alliance, for your cheering good nature and optimism, for your firm and swift leadership in our hour of indecision, and for fighting and winning, with Princess Talia, the final battle against Zarkog.

“That victory is almost beyond belief in it’s wonder. Zarkog is the second eldest living being on Kellaran, he is first in years of waking experience, he is first in personal power, and he had significantly more power available for his

use in that last battle than you did. You are barely seventeen, and with Talia together you have less than half a century of life. Ten days ago, any of us would have thought such a performance to be absolutely impossible, but there it is.

“Truly, you are The Keys to The Just Alliance. Should the moment ever come again when you feel we need your direct leadership, know that we are yours to command. Now don’t object, we’re aware of your feelings on the subject, but that doesn’t change our minds about it.

“There’s something profoundly wondrous about your turning down the chance to truly rule the world when it’s freely given to you. And for that too, we honor you. Our gratitude is boundless and eternal.”

The people began to give him another mighty cheer as the dragon handed down the award, but he started speaking before they could drown him out, so they fell silent again.

“Thank you, Gran, and thank you everyone.

“First, I’d like to say that it’s really nice that I receive the same award as Basrin Davess, the first hero of the war, and he receives the same as me, and that everyone who’s being recognized for their efforts gets the same medallion. It wouldn’t have felt nearly as right if you’d given mine a bunch of extra gold trim or anything. All of us did what we had to do with the tools that came to hand, and with each other’s help. I only stand here right now because I had very good tools, and even better help.”

He paused for a quiet chuckle. “Ten days ago I was homeless, destitute, unknown, and alone. The world was divided, the insidious conspiracy sought to undermine us all, and Zarkog ruled Serminak. Things have changed a lot in that short time. We have achieved what we set out to do, and reckoned the terrible cost, and now we enjoy our well-deserved celebration of our good fortune.”

He paused and let the enthusiasm of the crowd find thunderous voice for a few moments.

“Still, there are important things that need to be said here. Our greatest leaders have come forth and been honored, and they’ve not chosen to say them, so I guess it falls to me.

“We still have great challenges ahead of us.

“Those who are guilty of crimes against us have been sworn to justice, including Zarkog himself. The families of our comrades who were killed in attacks on our territory, along with our finest Justicers, must find a just punishment for the guilty and a just restitution for the victims. I don’t envy them the task, and I offer no suggestions, though my family were among those killed.

“However, as I have said, I strongly suggest we find forgiveness for those who fought in defending against our attacks in Serminak, and for those who chased me and Talia and Holanam around Kellaran. We need to make peace with the Serminaki, now that they’re sworn to justice, and we can’t really do that if we insist on punishing the majority of their population. We need reconciliation.

“Our societies are still girded for war, and that will continue. Our increasing militarization will continue as well, though we must also carry on with trade and commerce, and some enjoyment of life’s luxuries. We will continue the rebuilding of The Just Alliance with one eye to civilian utility and enjoyment, and one toward defense and military utility, and we will find ways to ensure that one doesn’t interfere with the other.

“We all know that the demons are coming, and fast, though they’re still a very long way away. Dealing with them remains our highest priority. That was the one thing we and Zarkog agreed on, and all our lives are on the line in this together, including the Venaks and Serminakis. Deciding who was going to be in command of our efforts against the demons was the sole point of the conspiracy and the war, and it is a point that is now solidly decided. Our world is now united against the demons, and the sooner we can find a way to eliminate the threat they represent, the less danger we’ll have to face. If they’re allowed to get close enough to attack us, the war we just won may seem like a fistfight in comparison.

“Also quickly approaching from a vast distance are the worldlets of a new race, and they are many, perhaps as many as everyone on Kellaran. They travel the void to fight the demons, and if we can earn their trust, they may be mighty allies, and they may aid us in defending our world. I cannot over-stress how important it is that we offer them our genuine friendship, and that it be accepted.

“It appears that they are small individuals, weighing only two or three kilograms each at most. But we must not underestimate them. They have been chasing demons through the void for ages, fighting whole worlds of demons again and again, and they are still strong enough to choose to come here, and to face the unknown millions of demons that approach. They *will* fight the demons, of that I’m quite sure, and that’s good as far as it goes.

“I think they consider the eventual extermination of all the demons in the great void to be necessary to their long-term survival, but that doesn’t necessarily make them nice people. Who knows what they might do if we earn their enmity? If we offend them, it may become convenient for them to sacrifice us to the demons as bait, or as a distraction, or as a discardable shield to hide behind.

“Personally, I think they *are* good people. Their representative admired it when I refrained from killing my enemies, and said that if we ever marauded the void as killers, they would hunt us down. He started the conversation by asking if I would be his friend, right after he saved us from Zarkog. I said I would, and he said he would be my friend as well. Mind you, he’d just learned Trade Common and he was obviously still working out the knack of it, so we might have been misunderstanding each other, but I don’t think we were. I think they are a great force for justice, and that’s why they’ve hurried here to help defend us from the demons, at the risk of their own lives. They said if we stopped killing each other, they may help us directly, and we’ve done that.

“I just want us all to remember that these people will be very different from us. They may also be battle-fatigued and heavily armed, and as jumpy as any soldier fresh off the front lines. They may have manners and etiquette we can’t even understand.

“So, we’re all going to be on our very best behavior when our visitors contact us. Right?!”

He was grinning, but there was enough steel in his voice to prompt most of those watching to spontaneously answer him, and firmly in the affirmative in every case.

“There’s a few other things to be said, but I’m pretty sure someone else is scheduled to say those. So I thank you all for this award, and more importantly, I thank you for everything that all of you have done together since The Just Alliance was formed.”

The crowd erupted again as soon as they sensed he was finished, and he and Talia waved as he bowed with her. Then he prepared to walk back to his seat, since it was close and many were crowded around their chairs, but Grakonexikaldoron stayed him with a gesture. She spoke to him privately by excluding the area around them from the sound amplification spells of the arena’s operators.

“We were scheduled to award one more medallion, for sacrifice and brilliance, and it was to go to the Eldest, but we have been unable to reach him. He was last seen with Amirgath, so we’re not worried about him, but that brings us to the next item on our agenda. If you would stay and permit it, Zwak Deathbringer wishes to publicly speak with you on behalf of the Sylvan who are sworn to justice.”

“Ah. I understood he was to address The Just Alliance?”

“He will not. He has refused to discuss matters of state with anyone but you, but he wishes to speak with you publicly, *before* The Just Alliance, in their entirety.”

“Oh. Well, he *is* sworn to justice, so I don’t see why not.” Mark shrugged.

She nodded, restored the amplification, and made the announcement.

“And now, I present Zwak Deathbringer, General of The Sylvan First Guard of Northern Serminak, eldest of the Sylvan, and that people’s chosen representative. He will treat with Prince Mark, Key to The Just Alliance, for the rights of The Sylvan.”

Zwak appeared standing straight and confident with his arms folded across his chest, before offering Mark a deep but simple bow, placing his arms straight at his sides and bending at the hips.

Like almost all Sylvan males, he was close to two and a quarter meters tall, with broad shoulders and narrow hips. He wore simple black leather trousers and shirt that were soft and supple of material and cut to enhance the virility of his build, and thick black cavalry boots. The tips of his ears twitched above his long black hair, and Mark noted they were much longer than an elf’s ears, even when his greater size was considered, almost eighteen centimeters from tip to lobe. His slit-pupiled yellow eyes blinked slightly more slowly than one would expect. All in all, he presented a somewhat disconcerting appearance, but Mark had faced him before in a dream, and many times at that.

The two met each other’s smiles with equal confidence.

“Greetings, Prince Mark, and congratulations on your great victory! Your fight with Zarkog was surely the greatest spectacle ever seen on this world! And to think you achieved victory by assuming the size of a rat, and hiding in a sphere the size of a unicorn turd! Absolutely brilliant!”

Some in the crowd cheered, and some laughed, and some grumbled and growled at the compliment delivered in insulting terms.

Mark laughed. “I see that Osbald’s Oath hasn’t deprived you of your caustic wit, Zwak. You’re just as vicious as ever.”

“I am, within the limits of the intentions of Falgaroth when he made the stone, as concerns the concept of justice.” Zwak grinned. “And that’s what I mean to speak with you about today. My people are at a great turning point, due to our having sworn.

“Yours has been a strange form of conquest, being limited to Compelling our oaths. You have defeated Zarkog and removed him from power, at least temporarily, but you have not actively replaced him. There is no Lord of Serminak except you. But, we have not been asked to join The Just Alliance. Our command structure would have

remained completely intact, except for the fact that our dragons are deserting us. Most of the formerly dark dragons, once sworn on the stone, seem to suddenly feel the need to take part in the great re-unification of all Draconians, in Xervia. Mouths still need to be fed in Serminak, and crops still need to be sown, things must go on, yet two-thirds of the dragons of Serminak have deserted their posts, their duties, and their responsibilities. This adds to the many disruptions of our activities caused by the recent war. If it were not for aid from The Just Alliance, Serminak would soon be in a severe social crisis.

“My people are not like the dragons, we are not like any other people that has ever been. The oath does not sit well with us. When one of any other race swears Osbald’s Oath upon The Truthstone of Falgaroth, they will generally follow their oath and like it. We will follow our oaths, but even the great Truthstone cannot make us like it. It’s too contrary to our nature. So the first thing I did after I was sworn and received my Compulsion stone, was to swear a company of my soldiers to Osbald’s Oath, and I then set them to testing the limits of the binding.

“They tested exactly how hard one could strike one’s companion when giving a slap on the back as part of a friendly greeting, before the oath considered it a breaking of the peace, or an attack on an innocent, or an injustice, and prevented them from carrying out their own intentions. They tested exactly how much information could be withheld during a transaction involving a faulty item. They tested exactly how far the oath could be pushed, in every direction. We were somewhat frantic at our findings. It limits us too severely. We are sworn and bound, but the binding chafes.

“You seem to have a good grasp of what it is to be Sylvan. In fact, you act like we’ve met before.”

“We haven’t.” Mark told him. “The Eldest knows you, indirectly. And I fought you in a dream. Many times. You were an effective opponent.”

“Thank you.” Zwak smiled, with another of his distinct bows. “You must know that to the Sylvan, life is a game. In fact, one of our most popular phrases is the one our ancestors coined for our lifestyle; ‘the game of status.’ Status is achieved through power, authority, wealth, combat and magic skills, and all the other ways that one’s worth is measured among any of our peoples. And Sylvan males are accorded greater status among themselves for mating a greater number of females, while our females gain status among themselves for being mated by the males with the highest status.

“Before Zarkog seized power on Serminak, there was only four rules to the game of status, for both Sylvan and dark dragons. Do whatever it takes to advance your own interests, protect yourself from attack, protect your young until they become a danger to you, then throw them out. Those imperatives are instinctual for Sylvan, and undeniable.

“But, none survive alone, so most soon learn to co-operate, then communities are formed and hierarchies established, then the advantages of manipulation and betrayal become apparent. And, in order to keep your young alive until it’s time to throw them out, they must be trained and educated to some extent. Serminak was hunted out long ago, so if we do not keep crops and livestock, we starve. For these reasons, we have always had a society and a civilization of sorts, though none of us have what you would consider sentiments of patriotism or community spirit.

“There is nothing on Serminak for Sylvan to hunt except dragons, and nothing for dragons to hunt but Sylvan, and each other of course. And so we all did hunt one another, and we all liked it just fine. Nothing finalizes a victory like eating your enemy.

“Sylvan are eternal optimists. Our system did allow us to be swindled, robbed, enslaved, tortured and killed. But each one of us are absolutely certain, deep down inside, that the worst will not happen to us. We are all deeply sure, even unto the last moment of life on a torture pole, that we will somehow escape and survive, and find a way to gain in power and status, and that eventually, we will achieve the ultimate triumph and enslave the entire continent under our fist! *That* was the prize for the ultimate winner of the game of status! So we weren’t worried about what might happen to us, so long as we might have the chance to do the same to everyone else.

“Many have held the lead in the game, and have held the highest status at any given time, but none of them ever truly won the game until Zarkog. It could not be won by any sort of coalition, for once a group have triumphed over all others, their unity dissolves into infighting for the top prize. It could not be won without the power to stand alone against anyone and everyone, and it could not be held without such a vast awareness as to be invulnerable to stealth and betrayal.

“Zarkog did that, and in the most convincing style. That he didn’t kill us because he didn’t need to, that was very powerful. We were his toys, and he made it clear that he did not break his toys, nor allow them to be broken. And nothing earned our admiration more than his encouraging us to try to take his life by any means we liked, if we dared, and he said he would not kill the assassins in retribution for trying. He even rewarded the best attempts, though the recipients were still beaten for days. Now that’s *style*, as the Sylvan see it!

“He gave us his rules, and he made an army of us. There was no refusing him, but he never really understood my people. He could never tell us apart visually, and he had to do so by psionics. Most dragons cannot differentiate or

identify individual Sylvan by any means without the use of external markings and insignia. Nor for that matter can people of most other races.

“Many of our adolescents were simply too high-strung to obey the rules, and too foolish to avoid being caught breaking them, so they were beaten daily until they lost their minds, or were reduced to little more than automatons. But then, before Zarkog, they’d have been killed by more capable and disciplined youths in their struggle for status.

“Many of the dark dragons actually came to believe in Zarkog’s rules, but for us, they merely changed the shape of the arena in which we played the game of status. The struggle for wealth and land and slaves was replaced by competition for rank in the army and sumptuous quarters, but the game went on. The competition for mates went on unchanged, so long as the females were pregnant most of the time. We found that Zarkog would allow us our schemes, and that we could get away with almost anything, so long as it caused no open dissension, did not cause a decrease in production, and did not reduce the military capabilities of the army. At least so far as anyone could detect.

“That was more than enough leeway for us to enjoy our lives, and besides, we knew that eventually, when we were numerous enough, Zarkog would have us conquer all of you, in which case there would be loot and slaves for all. Or, Zarkog would eventually fall, and things would go back to the way they had always been.”

“Things don’t always work out the way you think they will, do they?” Mark chuckled.

“You are most certainly correct.” Zwak laughed in return. “We never counted on the oath. And now we have returned to the point in my tale where my soldiers were testing the oath. We found out how far we can push it, and I’m certain it’s a lot farther than you think, in many instances.

“Was it unjust of me to offer an insult veiled in a compliment when I first arrived here? Obviously it was not unjust enough for the oath to prevent me from saying it.

“Many seem to think that because we are sworn and bound that we will simply integrate into The Just Alliance like any other people, but if you allow that, you will regret it, and you will regret it severely. We would be unleashed among you, and the limitations of the oath would not keep us from seizing every bit of status we can get. Once we are established among you, we would be almost impossible to uproot, and we would make the rest of you just a little bit miserable, all the time.

“But that would not be enough for us. The limitations of the oath are too restricting, and it would be actively binding our actions twenty times a day until we started to go mad. Sylvan are not meant to live like that.

“We were saved by the fact that the vow allows us our games in the name of sport. As you said at the founding of The Just Alliance, and apparently Falgaroth would agree, if a person wishes to enter the formal arena of sport, with a referee and agreed conditions, they can do what would otherwise be unlawful. They can attack each other with fists or swords or spells, if they are qualified to do so and the conditions are equal for both sides.

“The crucial discovery came when a sergeant took a deck of cards, and proposed to a private; ‘Let’s gamble, and you try to cheat me.’ The private replied; ‘is it still cheating if you allow me to do it?’, and the sergeant told him, ‘I’m not going to allow you to do it, I’m going to try to catch you, and you’ll have to be very good at it to cheat me while I’m watching for it. But I *am* giving you permission to try. It’s still a game of skill, only now the gambling is unimportant, it’s your skill at cheating against my skill at catching you.’

“The private was unable to fool the sergeant, but the point is, for the first time, he was able to *try* to cheat at cards while sworn to justice on the Truthstone of Falgaroth!

“I realized the implications immediately, and convened our finest thinkers. We have mapped out the future for our people.

“You have two choices, as Lord of Serminak.

“You can follow the course that I just mentioned, and have Sylvan interspersed among your nations, constantly pushing the limits of the oath, and driving you all to distraction for the rest of eternity.

“Or you can agree with our proposals. And by the way, a quarter of our dragons are with us in this, which is most of them who haven’t gone to Xervia, and every Sylvan in Venak as well.

“We propose that Serminak be given equal status with the rest of you in the Just Alliance. Every one of us will swear on the Truthstone to be completely nice, following the spirit as well as the letter of the laws and of our oaths, *except* where it concerns registered players of The Game Of Status.

“By formalizing the game and by designating The Lord of Serminak as official referee, our oaths of justice will allow us to continue to play the game among ourselves as we played under the reign of Zarkog, ourselves being only those who are qualified and registered players. As then, we can do anything to one another that does not get us caught by The Lord or his inspectors for causing dissension, slowing production, or reducing the effectiveness of the army. As I said, these rules lend a certain civilized restraint to the game, while allowing enough leeway for a healthy life for a Sylvan. It’s easy to kill someone, hard to keep from getting caught, harder yet to hide the fact that the victim is dead,

and hardest of all to replace that person's output or fill his emptied spot in the fighting line without anyone noticing. But, it has been done by skilled players a time or two. If we get caught, we will gladly submit to the beating, the same as always. We will be ranked for our performance into ten leagues of skill and status, and one can only contest by underhanded means against those players in the same league, in order to protect the beginners from being hopelessly obliterated by the masters.

"We'll even swear to never attempt to kill another otherwise valid player while they are parenting dependent children.

"What are your thoughts on this?"

"First, why come to me with this?" Mark asked.

"Until the demons are gone, we need the army, so we need the command structure, including a Lord of Serminak to enforce the rules. You are the Lord of Serminak, having won Zarkog's place by unlimited combat without even having to kill him. We know that if we don't appease you, we'll have to deal with you some other way, and none of us wants that, particularly while crippled by the limitations of the oath. We know we cannot stand against your power and that of The Just Alliance, you proved that against Zarkog.

"And besides, despite your strange style, you truly do rule all of Kellaran, and any Sylvan can see it as plain as the sun. To me, every nuance of your status is as obvious as your nose. As you accepted your award it was said again that you had given up your rule, and then you proceeded to tell everyone exactly what they were going to do as concerns almost everything that's going to happen on this world for at least the next six years. Even when you said you would not do a task, you made it very clear exactly who *was* going to do it. You might as well admit it. You expected those orders to be obeyed without question, and it never crossed your mind that they might not be."

"Huh. I'll admit that it kind of bothers me, what a good argument that is. When we were in training, we were the only ranking members of the Assembly of The Just Alliance in the world. I had to get used to taking command, and quickly, in order to get anything done. I'll have to watch that.

"Anyway. Why did you not just enact your plan in secret?"

"That cannot be done, since the oath demands that we declare and register ourselves as players before it will allow us to play. Besides, we plan to market recorded Revealing of our machinations after the fact. We think that The Game of Status will become the most popular spectator sport on Kellaran, and we will profit handsomely thereby. We will be Marked as players for all to see. We welcome players of any race to the game, and there are many in Venak who are eager to join. There are a few among the other races there who show some promise, particularly the gnomes, much to my surprise. Of course, no one can scheme and intimidate like a Sylvan. But they will add to the marketability of the lower leagues, since every race can have a few, shall we say, local favorites, to cheer for.

"Everyone who is not a declared player will know that they are absolutely safe from us, and that they can trust us to be honorable with them, and nice. And we will keep our sanity, and be able to enjoy our lives.

"And besides all that, all of Kellaran and The Just Alliance are playing in a higher league now. Zarkog's astronomies, and the approaching demons and sphere-people, all show that there is a greater game going on out there. It is being played by the peoples of many worlds throughout the great void. Consider our strength, which matched the power of The Just Alliance in the last battle, and also that we'll soon learn all those nasty spell tricks that you hit us with in the war. One never knows when The Just Alliance may need to have a few billion underhanded and sneaky cut-throats available."

"Well. That's a good point, or I've never heard one." Mark nodded. "And what you've said is well thought-out, that's certain.

"It's true that you haven't joined The Just Alliance, though we've been honoring the Markings of your oaths as passports in our nations. So, regardless of whether I truly do rule The Just Alliance or not, if I don't accept that I'm now Lord of Serminak, then we have no control over anything you do besides trusting your oaths. And if we're not holding you responsible for Zarkog's actions, except for those who attacked and killed in our nations, we have no further claim against the rest of you.

"So fine, I'm Lord of Serminak."

He had to pause and shake his head with a grin as the crowd suddenly gave him a mighty cheer.

"The first thing I'm going to do with that authority is to curtail Zarkog's forced breeding program. If we can't beat the demons with the number of us that we'll have with voluntary breeding only, then we don't deserve to win."

"Thank you, My Lord. My people will sing your praises for that. Some of our females have been almost continuously pregnant for many decades, and will be very glad to be free of the burden for a while."

"My next decree is to delegate to you the problem of finding the proper environment for your rambunctious adolescents. If they were chafing that badly under Zarkog's rules, they're likely to feel worse under the vow. They

have to be allowed to develop as healthy Sylvan, yet they have to be kept under control to the extent that they're not an unacceptable danger to others or to themselves. That has to be accomplished without beating them more than superficially, at least until they're of an age and development to leave home and join the first league of the game. You figure it out, and if you and your people can't figure it out, ask for help from our researchers."

"Yes, My Lord."

Mark turned to Gran. "Do you have a Truthstone we can use for a moment? I ended up putting the Compulsion on mine so I could hit Zarkog with it."

She handed over her pristine blue stone. Mark took it, and held it out to Zwak, who touched his fingertip to it. "Do you swear to enact and install the rules and infrastructure of The Game of Status, exactly as you've described it to me, including the oaths you described to protect non-players and to live by the spirit of your oaths, and to swear those oaths and abide by those rules yourself?"

"I do." Zwak said, his words accompanied by a great pulse of blue light from the stone.

"Then I authorize you to do so." Mark nodded, and turned to the audience.

"Can I have silence from everyone except the ruling members of The Assembly of The Just Alliance? Thank you.

"Members of The Assembly of the Just Alliance, acting only in my capacity as Lord of Serminak, and not as Prince of Hilia or as Key to The Just Alliance, I ask that the Sylvan people be recognized as my vassal; The Sylvan Nation, and that those dragons who choose to remain in Serminak be recognized as my vassal nation; Serminaki Draconia, and that those two nations be granted entry with full standing into The Just Alliance."

There was a cheer that might have seemed mighty in the Hall of the Assembly, but it did little to fill this vast outdoor space.

Mark turned to Gran as he chuckled and shook his head in chagrin. "I don't have Somonik's counting spell, and I forgot to cast one of my own." he admitted.

Somonik appeared and snorted. "It's not a counting spell, it's just good awareness." he lectured, then turned to announce; "Let the record show that all have agreed!"

The crowd erupted again.

"Thank you My Lord." Zwak smiled with another bow. "The Game of Status will have a great inaugural round, and by this time tomorrow I'll be able to report on who's been promoted to fill the vacancies in our command structure left by the dragons who've gone to Xervia.

"Now I've duties to attend to, and I won't take up any more of your time. Nor will your duties as Lord of Serminak, really. Zarkog designed the system to run itself while he engaged in astronomy, and he only concerned himself with detecting rule breakers, thwarting assassins, reading general reports every three months, and issuing new general orders at that time. And unless you plan to become a player, you won't even have to thwart assassins."

"I'm not, and I'm going to delegate the rest of the duties as well. As a member nation of The Just Alliance, your senior commanders will give your military reports to the high command of The Just Alliance, they will participate in military discussion with the other national commanders, and they will receive general orders from the First Commander of The Just Alliance. Right now that's Prince Yazadril of The High People.

"You're right that Serminak still needs someone at the top to watch for rule breakers and to make sure everything's running smoothly. That would have to be someone with incredible awareness, a huge intellect, and an intimate knowledge of both Sylvan and dragons. Being one of the best psionics around would help too. I'm not that person, so I'm appointing a regent to rule Serminak on a day to day basis, and that regent will answer to no-one but me."

"I humbly offer my services, my Lord." Zwak smiled and bowed again.

"Forget it, Zwak." Mark laughed. "It has to be someone who's not a player in The Game of Status! The regent will referee the game, and we can't have the fox watching the chickens!"

He turned and met the bluest eyes in the stadium. "Povon, you're the best I've got for this job. How'd you like to be Dragon Lord Regent of Serminak?"

"Dragon Lord Regent of Serminak? It sounds like fun!" she called in return. "Can I have Kragorram as my second in command?"

"Sure! We'll make him Prince of Serminaki Draconia under you. His shining nobility should draw most of the new Just Draconians back to Serminak before Xervia is swamped with them; at least once they've had a while to enjoy the draconian reunification.

"We'll make Zwak here Prince of The Sylvan Nation under you, at least until some other player sticks a knife in him or something."

“Then I’ll take it!” Povon laughed.

“Excellent.” Mark smiled.

“The Dragon Lord Regent will be a difficult referee to deceive. Well chosen My Lord.” Zwak nodded with a grin. “And thank you for honoring me by naming me Prince of The Sylvan Nation, though that does put the position up for grabs in The Game Of Status. With that great honor I already sit about as high as any player can aspire to, and a worthy prize it is, so for now I am the unofficial champion of The Game of Status. With that momentum and the esteem I will have gained for my work here today, I will be difficult to topple, and I fear nothing so crude as a knife in the back. Let it never be said that the game was not a true challenge from the moment it was officially inaugurated.

“Farewell, My Lord. I will continue to monitor events here with great interest as I work. I have a feeling that settling the future of Serminak will not be the only great deed done here today.”

“Drop by some time, Prince Zwak. I’d like to get to know you.”

“Thank you My Lord. I will.”

The Sylvan vanished with a loud pop of overdisplaced air.

It had been so long since anyone Mark worked with had done that, that he had to chuckle in amusement. “What’s next?”

“Now you have to promise to stop acquiring titles.” Talia teased, and gave him a quick kiss on the chin. “You know they’ll want to list them all with our arrival at every official occasion, and that could get tedious if you get three or four more.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.” Mark chuckled, then felt a touch of bashfulness as he remembered that they were still under the eyes of the world. “What’s next?” he asked, to distract himself from it.

“Actually, we have nothing else planned, officially.” Somonik smiled sardonically. “So of course, now something unexpected will happen. All things considered, including the issues that have yet to be addressed, it is inevitable.”

“Ah, I have been contacted psionically.” the gold dragon chuckled. “People of The Just Alliance, I present Quewanak the Eldest, Master of the Dream!”

Quewanak appeared in person for the first time in forty million years; a very small green dragon, but glowing with health and vitality, his scales sleek and his muscles rippling. He carried himself proudly, and had a powerful presence.

“Quewanak, I present to you the Medallion of Service for Brilliance and Sacrifice, for spending the last spark of your life-force hundreds of times over a twelve hour ordeal, in order to give The Six of Hilia the crucial knowledge, time, and training they needed to help us win the war so swiftly. We are eternally grateful.”

“Thank you. I was glad to do it.” Quewanak nodded as he accepted the award, and he was cheered mightily, particularly by the dragons present, including Somonik and Grakonexikaldoron.

“And now,” Quewanak called, “It is my greatest honor to introduce those who quite literally need no introduction, for to see them is to know them. I proudly present The Pantheon of Kellaran!”

The gods appeared, some three hundred of them on the surrounding lawn and floating in the air above, scattered about a bit. They were almost half of them dragons, and with their great size that race visually dominated the group. Of the others, some were of hidden races who had never been seen by any mortals before. Most surprising were a dozen gods who appeared to be halfway between a selkie and a seal, and over six meters in length.

When those in the audience spoke of the event later, not one could be found whose view of those at the center of the lawn was blocked by one of the gods.

The arena became absolutely silent.

Quewanak was right. To know the name and character of each god or goddess, it was only necessary to look at them. They all offered their various words of greeting at once, and they were all distinctly understood by everyone watching.

“Greetings and welcome, most honored guests, from The Just Alliance to The Pantheon of Kellaran.” Mark smiled, and bowed deeply and gracefully with Talia still in his arms, and she followed his movement perfectly. They actually bowed to Falgaroth and Visinniria, who were right in front of them and facing them.

“Thank you Prince Mark, Lord of Serminak.” Visinniria smiled a bit teasingly. “Congratulations on your recent victory.”

Then she turned and regarded the crowd. “There is something you should know, that some of you do not.” she said.

In the next moment, everyone learned or remembered what was said at the gods' visitation in Kraka, where it was revealed that the future of the gods and their level of participation in the society of Kellaran depended on Mark's contest against Zarkog.

"Now you know what was at stake when Prince Mark and Princess Talia fought Zarkog." The elven goddess continued. "Prince Mark triumphed, and the withdrawal is broken. You have honored him, but honor him and Talia for that as well. They could have won the war without facing Zarkog, and they knew it at the time.

"Today we healed our people. It was a good start. We intend to help our people in many ways, but we will never behave as we did when last there were gods among you. Now, we are simply citizens, helping our fellow citizens as so many of you have done. As Prince Mark suggested, we can be thought of as people like any other, with the same rights as any other, though we do have the status of being the most powerful spell-casters. We will force our will on none, and we will not cast our power on any individual in the slightest way without lawful authorization. For instance, if any we healed today had refused our treatment, we'd have respected their wishes and left them with their injuries."

The crowd was relaxed enough by then to get a chuckle out of that.

"The reasons we withdrew from the world are still valid, and we will allow no religion on Kellaran. No temples will be raised to us. If you call our names, we will hear it, but that is true of any masterful psionicist here. If you are in the mood to offer friendly greetings occasionally, that would be nice, but if anyone calls to one of us repetitively, or as a matter of course, they may be answered rather rudely, and if it still continues, they will be prosecuted in the courts of their nation for harassment. We will especially discourage anything being done for our glory, or anyone singing our praises repetitively. We'll take care of our own glory, thank you, and we certainly don't need you to tell us that we're great. We like it of course, but most of us have enough bother with controlling our egos as it is."

The people laughed again, and warmed to her charm.

"I'll give you a quick example of why we will allow no religion." she continued. "When I was still young as a god, an elf with almost no magic sought to build a small shrine to me on a remote mountaintop, a shaded and wind-sheltered cupola with a wonderfully comfortable marble chair. I had saved his life in the war of the segregation in his distant youth, and after a long life as a simple farmer, he chose a place with a beautiful view atop a peak deep in a remote and forbidding range to build his tribute out of personal gratitude. He never prayed a word to me, he just did it, but I noticed because I was so warmly in his thoughts. He climbed the mountain again and again with heavy stones and shaped them with muscle and steel, and one day he fell, and I saved him again. He simply offered thanks and returned to his work, and was soon finished. He returned to his life as a farmer, and for another millennium, he mentioned none of this to any other. I sometimes went to the shrine he built and took comfort in enjoying the view and the solitude, for none knew it was there but he and I.

"One day he mentioned it in passing to a friend, and a few years later that one told someone else, and eventually his story was widely known. Thousands declared him to be a saint, and they trekked to his farm in hopes that he would give them words of wisdom. But he had no eloquence to offer them, and he was vexed by their constant presence and attentions. They brought him gifts and tribute, and his wife began to covet their new wealth and status, and she took charge of dealing with their many visitors as his priestess. Soon there was a temple complex where a simple farm had been, and he lived in seclusion to escape the expectations of the throng, and they took his lonely misery to be holy contemplations. Finally he allowed himself to die from a common infection.

"My attention had been elsewhere as this happened, and on a clear and starry night I returned to the mountaintop, and his beautiful little shrine was gone. Thousands had made the arduous trek to the mountain and had climbed to its peak. As an act of pilgrimage, even those who could fly climbed the mountain by muscle, and the most determined of them did it while carrying stones as he had done. Some fell. Some jumped, hoping I would save them. But his shrine had never been designed to be visited by mortals. It sat at the very tip of the mountaintop, and in order for climbers to sit in the seat it was necessary for them to grasp the base of one of his slender columns and pull themselves up into the cupola. Eventually the column broke, and a while later the roof fell in and smashed the throne, and then the pilgrims claimed all the pieces as holy relics.

"All of their arduous effort was a colossal waste, as I hadn't been paying them any attention. In their well-meaning zeal, they had hounded a simple farmer to death and destroyed something precious to me.

"The list of harms that religion caused before the withdrawal is appalling, and we will allow no repeat of it. Do not test us on this.

"However, that's not to say that you should never appeal to us. If you're in very, very serious trouble, and there's no way you can get yourself out of it, and you see no way that any mortal can help you, then you can call to one of us for help. Maybe we'll help you. Maybe we won't.

“Don’t ever ask us for anything political or military. Anything we do of those natures will be conducted with The Assembly of The Just Alliance directly, and with their High Command.”

Visinniria turned back to Prince Mark. “There was much debate about how we would conduct ourselves among you. We wish to be integrated into the legal and political framework of The Just Alliance, yet we also wish to have a greater voice in governmental and military affairs than the average citizen, as I’m sure you can understand. We also do not wish to be under the political authority of any of the mortal monarchs, and so we will not accept citizenship in any of the existing nations of The Just Alliance. To explain the proposal we have agreed upon, I present Citizen Amirgath.” She followed that with a chuckle as the quicksilver dragon-god took a place near center-stage beside Somonik.

“I am pleased to announce the formation of a new nation; The Nation of Amirgath.” he announced with a grin. “I ask for recognition for my nation, and a position and voice in The Assembly of The Just Alliance that is equal to that of the other nations of Kellaran.”

“I suppose you are your only citizen.” Somonik chuckled. “An understandable position, since you bring as much power and resources to the table as any nation. If all of you do the same, you’ll be able to swing any vote in the Assembly. Why not simply ask for command?”

“As it happens, I am not the only citizen of my nation. I am joined by eighteen draconian gods who have consistently shared my position in debates among the pantheon. If our petitions are accepted, there will be fourteen nations formed among the gods of Kellaran, each representing a faction who consistently share similar views on matters of policy, each nation named for their dominant spokesperson. Thus each of our positions will be represented.

“And as for dominating the vote, you know as well as I that The Assembly of The Just Alliance is a body that decides by consensus, and not by a vote of the majority. All but two of the questions put to it were answered unanimously, and in the two cases where there was a dissenting minority, a solution was found where the minority were allowed to act in keeping with their convictions, rather than being compelled to act with the majority. We anticipate no disturbance in this pattern of behavior from our entrance into your political arena.”

“In that case, I see no reason not to endorse your proposal whole-heartedly, and in its entirety.” Somonik nodded.

“I agree.” Mark nodded. “It’s a good compromise solution. It gives the gods the voice in international affairs that I think they deserve, without presenting any suggestion that they wish to take over. I suggest we put it to the question now, and I hope it passes.”

“Right.” Somonik nodded. “Members of The Assembly, do you agree that we should admit the fourteen nations of the gods to The Just Alliance as member nations of full and equal standing?”

“Let the record show that all have agreed!”

“Thank you.” Amirgath nodded, looking quite pleased. “Visinniria?”

“Thank you Amirgath.

“Now, there’s something else you all need to know.”

Then everyone remembered or learned of the intervention of First Burgundy in Zarkog’s hunt for Mark and Talia and Holanam, and of his conversation with Mark.

She let a long moment pass so everyone could absorb the sudden learning a bit, and grasp the more important implications.

“We know for a fact that First Burgundy and the other gods of his people are watching and listening right now.” Visinniria happily told Mark with a sparkle in her eye. “If there’s anything you’d like to say to them, go ahead.”

“Thank you.” Mark nodded, and spoke to one of their unseen listeners. “First Burgundy, we agreed that we would be friends, and you said that if we on this world stopped killing each other, then you would talk to me again. We stopped the killing, and now would be the perfect time for you and your people’s other representatives to visit, since this is the first time that all of our gods and almost all of our people have focused their attention on one place at the same time. So I most respectfully do invite you to speak with us now, and to visit if you would be comfortable with doing so.”

Somonik hurriedly barked; “How many of The Assembly of The Just Alliance agree to authorize Prince Mark to negotiate on our behalf with the visitors from the void and to be bound by any treaties he may enact with them?”

“Let the record show that all have agreed.”

Just as he finished speaking First Burgundy appeared floating two meters off the ground in front of Mark. “Greetings, my friend Prince Mark, it’s good to see you again. And as you have inferred you suspected I would, I have become much more effective at communicating in this way.”

“It’s good to see you again as well, First Burgundy, and yes, your Trade Common is completely fluent now. And that’s an interesting speaking technique you’re using. Not physically spoken or psionic communication, but magically generated sound. It’s quite elegant.”

The alien god blinked strangely at him for a moment. “That is a very unusual way of thinking about what I am doing, but now that I have considered it, you are essentially correct.

“Before we continue, I ask your leave for others like me to join us. I should be the one to talk to you. But I am not the best one of my people to talk to these around us, the gods of your world. For one thing, they are being rather rude. Some of them seek to probe my secrets, moreso than I consider polite, though I have made particular effort to not be privy to the private thoughts of any being on this world. Only language have I taken from your mind, and I have learned more of it by listening to conversations in public places, and I have observed much that is there to see of your world, so that I could gain knowledge. I would not have gone into your mind without your leave, were it not necessary to learning your language for the first time. I should give you some knowledge of our worlds and our language in trade, but that will take some time, since our minds are very, very different, and you are not a god. But these gods of yours, some of them seek to take beyond what is fair.”

“Ah, but you came here and interfered in affairs of this world without asking permission.” Visinniria reminded him pleasantly. “You could say you did it to save Mark from danger, but we all know that that’s not true; he and his companions would have managed well enough without you. Since we both know he didn’t really need your help, you don’t have any real excuse for probing his mind without permission and taking his language, along with all the concepts and general knowledge necessary to use it. You could have taken the time to learn his language by more conventional means. But you did the smart thing and attended to your work in a timely manner, and gambled that we would judge your assistance to be worth this transgression. And you were right, but don’t get upset if a few of us are curious enough to inspect your mental shielding, and maybe see if there’s anything obvious and interesting sticking out.”

First Burgundy considered her, then returned his attention to Mark. “I am not the one who should talk to her. I am instructed to ask permission for two of my friends to join us.”

“They may.” Mark nodded.

Two more alien gods arrived, similar in appearance to First Burgundy except for coloring and size, and he introduced them.

“My friends First Mauve, god of intelligence, and First Aquamarine, god of power, the two most senior and respected of our pantheon.”

Everyone in the stadium was taken a bit aback, mortals and gods alike.

The two newcomers were named for their top surface’s coloring, and like First Burgundy, they were white on the bottom. It was somehow understood that First Mauve was female, her two companions male.

First Mauve was eight and a half meters in length, and appeared fifteen meters in the air between two dragon gods, who drifted aside to make more room for her.

First Aquamarine was a monstrous one hundred and ninety-five meters long and sixty four meters wide, and over ten meters in the center. He floated at the level of the highest seating and practically roofed over the entire arena, blocking so much of the daylight that the arena’s night-lighting spells had to be hurriedly activated to restore visibility. He curled his front edge under with surprising suppleness in order to see below himself, since his eyes were on his top surface.

Both of the newcomers were horribly scarred over much of their surfaces by demon-fire, and First Aquamarine was missing a six meter wide notch out of his trailing edge. First Mauve was missing her forward eye, which had been replaced by a smooth pink diamond sphere.

Both of them radiated an immense dignity and an air of quiet sorrow, not to mention a palpable aura of power.

“You know, I think he was that big as a mortal.” Visinniria mused as she gazed up.

“He was.” First Mauve agreed with a strange chuckle. “You were unwise to judge us by First Burgundy, I think. He is a lovable little soul and the quickest among us, which is why it was he who was sent to investigate the release of power we detected when The Strike Force sought to capture Zarkog in Serminak. But after all, he is our God of Hiding. Your own God of Hiding is a sprite even smaller than he is, when she chooses to be her natural size. And he is impulsive, and so he chose to intervene upon his arrival here, which most of us would not have done.

“We cannot fault his result, however. Contact was established, and crucial thoughts exchanged. Conditions have indeed changed here since then, changes which we sincerely approve of. Peace reigns among you, and you who are gods here have begun to fulfill your responsibilities to your people.

“We stand ready to join you in friendship, and in opposition to the demons, if you will fulfill our condition.”

“And what is that?” Mark asked, and he was answered from above by First Aquamarine.

“Your gods, who have so recently rejoined you, must swear upon the artifact you name The Truthstone of Falgaroth to always speak the truth to us, to always reveal any information that is pertinent to us, and to never act against our interests. And for those who are gods of the Sylvan, you must swear to follow the spirit of the agreement as well as its literal wording, and to not seek to test the limits of the vow. Your Truthstone would have no effect of us, as we are of a fundamentally different nature, but we will swear reciprocal oaths, and be bound by The Diamond Eye of First Mauve. Once that is done, we will share thoughts with you without shielding, so that we can confirm the validity and binding of each other’s oaths.

“We will swear your oath of truth, openness, and fidelity, if you will join us in swearing Osbald’s Oath of peace, protection, and justice.” Falgaroth countered. *“There’s a great deal of overlap between the two sets of oaths, but with two sets of minds as differently constructed as ours, it is best if there is no room left for misunderstanding.”*

“We agree.”

A moment later it was done. Falgaroth had summoned his stone, the gods all swore on it in a quick flicker of movement, and were back in their places in a blink. The truth of the action was in the vast outpouring of energy released by the bindings of the Truthstone, and though enough of it was blocked by Falgaroth that it was no more than mildly dazzling, enough was allowed to reach the mortals present that none could doubt what had occurred.

A moment after that First Mauve and First Burgundy met beneath First Aquamarine, and the three swore their oaths on First Mauve’s diamond eye.

Two voices cried out. One was Mark’s, who screamed as his skin and eyes were momentarily burned, then Healed by the curse of Alilia. The other was the utterly unnerving psionic and physical cry of pain released by Glup, god of the long-lost crustacean people now known as The Zurb, who rested on the grass some ten meters behind Mark.

“I’m... I’m all right!” Mark gasped, gray smoke still rising off his skin, his mind already racing on the implications of his injury.

“As is Glup, though he was caught by surprise for the first time in many eons!” Gvetwa laughed, slapping his thighs in hilarity. The Sylvan god’s manner was like an adolescent laughing at a practical joke.

“What an instructive development.” First Mauve commented as she appeared over the crustacean god. “You are most interesting. And not merely for the fact that you were capable of avoiding my direct attention until now, an impressive demonstration of unnoticability. There are three kinds of gods here, and not merely two, for you are almost as different from the rest of your pantheon as I am.”

“Yes, and he’s difficult to understand.” Gvetwa laughed again. “We’ve yet to find a way for him to speak directly to a mortal, as he is so different in thought and language. Even for one such as you, it will be a day’s work for you to grasp it, and a millennium to become fluent.”

“Let us proceed.” First Aquamarine urged. “We must confirm our oaths, and share our thoughts and our knowledge. The enemy approaches, and every thirteen and seventeen sixty-fourths of a second could be crucial.”

“It is unlikely that we are that close to disaster.” First Mauve disagreed. “We have ample time to prepare, I think. Still, let us proceed with the sharing.”

Mark and Talia were incapable of sharing in more than a tiny fraction of the psionic exchange that followed, but Visinniria and Falgaroth made sure that they and the other senior leaders of The Just Alliance were privy to as much of the gods’ conference as they could deal with.

A thousand thoughts flashed through their minds in a moment, concerning a wide variety of subjects, but Mark recognized some as more immediately pertinent than others.

Dealing with the demons directly was no longer Kellaran’s first priority. First Mauve considered it likely that the Sylvan had been designed by the demons to be instinctively obedient to their creators. The mechanism by which the demons may yet be able to exert control over the Sylvan needed to be identified and eliminated from every individual of the Sylvan race, because every one of them could suddenly turn traitor at any moment, and begin acting as the demons’ helpless slaves. Eliminating this danger was the new top priority.

The newcomers stated that the first demon attack on Kellaran had likely been launched from the demon’s homeworld, since the hordes who ravaged through the void were seldom capable of creating a gate such as the one that had been used to launch that attack. They therefore considered that there were two likely possibilities concerning the nature of the approaching demons.

The first was that they were a wandering horde who were so out of touch with their homeworld that they were ignorant of the failed first demon attack on Kellaran, in which case they were a minor horde, weaker than most, and likely thought that they approached a completely unprepared world that had never faced demons before. If this was the case, they would present little challenge to the peoples and gods of Kellaran and the newcomers combined.

The other possibility was that the demon homeworld had dispatched a force of DemonLords and their minions to crush the world that had defeated them before, since they did not take defeat lightly. The demons considered the entire void to be their larder, and they became incensed when their food bit back. If this was the case they would send a force that would be at least ten times as strong as any resistance they expected to encounter. DemonLords were beings of such great and terrible power that they could not utilize the gates they been known to use to transport greater and lesser demons. They ranged from as dangerous as four greater demons to as strong as any ten gods the newcomers had.

It was learned that the gods of the newcomers were significantly less powerful than the gods of Kellaran as individuals, on the average, because of the completely different way their power worked. On the other hand, the gods of the newcomers numbered seventeen thousand, three hundred and three. To Kellaran's gods, this was a staggering amount, and it indicated how much longer the newcomers had existed.

They knew how to utilize far greater energies than Kellaran's gods had ever dared to cast on the mortal plane for fear of breaking reality, and they knew how to hold reality together while they did it. They also revealed that reality was self-correcting to some extent. Many of their battles had torn a volume of reality as large as Kellaran's closest moon, but it had healed itself within a millennium, though that was little consolation to those who had been obliterated by the tear. The greatest catastrophe of that kind that the newcomers knew of had destroyed reality in an area as wide as the distance from Kellaran's star to the next nearest one, but that had finally finished reverting to normal void after two and a half million years.

Their people would never live together with Kellaran's, since they required an environment hotter than Kellaran's harshest desert at high noon, their air and water contained a large proportion of sulfur compounds, and it was thick with alkaline mineral salts. They also doubted that any mortal on Kellaran could ever learn to communicate with their people directly, since the sphere dwellers communicated by means of taste, scent, and magnetic fields. It was thought that the two groups of people were so alien to one another that they could only speak to one another through their gods.

The round doors on the outside of their spheres were small, not because their adults were small, but to preserve the strength of the sphere, and because only their youths needed to use doors.

Just before the Link slipped away, Mark realized Quewanak was no longer the eldest living mortal, and that he chose to keep the fact that he'd become a god a secret from all mortals who were not Candidates for Divinity. He recommended that any of the other Candidates do the same if they ascended to divinity, in order to smooth their relationships with those who remained mortal.

"Wow." he stated in wonder as his mind returned to the here and now.

"I agree. That was quite amazing." First Mauve commented. "Your world is unique in our experience in important ways. It is by far the largest naturally-inhabited hard-surfaced world that we have encountered. This gives it a very deep atmosphere, which allows life to thrive here, even though your star is one of the most energetic of those that support life. We think these facts explain the incredible diversity of life forms and peoples that have developed here. Your star gives you great power, as does your diversity. No single race could have the breadth of creativity and intellect that this world has, and knowledge is power.

"You have as many spell-casting and engineering techniques as we do, though we have learned from many races on many worlds, and we have a continuous history that encompasses some two and one half billions of your years, over five times as long as yours. Similarly, you have as much knowledge of the rules of reality as we do. There is still much of the workings of reality that none of us knows, but our ignorance has shrunk by half this day, because each of our civilizations know important subsets of the rules that differ from what the other knows, and our combined knowledge will be far more complete. Still, even for gods, it will be centuries before the two sets of knowledge are completely integrated.

"The life of your world is in its prime, and except for the first attack of the demons here, you have never had to face a disaster that threatened to sterilize all life here. This allowed the insular attitude of non-interference displayed by your gods before today.

"But we have seen that the time of life on any world is temporary. Even before our homeworld was attacked by demons, we had dealt with three threats that may have killed everything on our world; the explosion of a nearby star, an episode of extensive volcanism, and a civil war among our gods and peoples. We have learned with certainty that those gods that do not do everything they can to help their people survive and thrive will soon find themselves without mortal people to care for, as happened to Glup of the Zurb. And when this world finally dies sometime in the far future, as it eventually must, your people will be lost forever, unless some of them live on other worlds. When your

star finally dies, long after the death of this world, you will need to already be established on worlds that circle other stars.

“The void is death, and the life-bearing worlds within it are only tiny sparks in the midst of the endless and sterile emptiness. It is a sacred duty to establish life in every possible suitable location, or the forces of death may finally win some day, and leave a completely dead reality.

“For these reasons, we do more than hunt demons as we travel the void. We also establish colonies of our people and gods in every place we can.

“We ask a boon of you. Yours is the fourth closest world to your star. We ask that we be allowed to build a colony for our people on the third world out. It is not suitable for life right now, but it is not so different from our homeworld that we cannot change it to suit us over a period of time that you would refer to as an eon or two, and it cannot be made suitable for your people without removing most of the atmosphere or moving it further from the star. In return for this boon, once our colony is well established, we will assist you in altering your star’s fifth most distant world, which can be made suitable to your world’s life in half an eon. Of course, there is no utility in even discussing these matters further until the demons that approach here are destroyed.

“This is a great day for all of us. As different as our peoples are, this is the first time we have found any who were so suitable to be our friends, and our allies against the demons. All of us will benefit greatly from this association. And you will not fall to the demons unless we have all fallen with you. Today we stand together, and together we will protect ourselves, and drive the demons from the skies.”

“I am certain that your boon will be granted.” Mark nodded. “And we welcome you all to our neighborhood. This is indeed a great day for all our people. Gaining the friendship of you and yours gives us another reason to celebrate today.”

“Then celebrate with all your energy.” First Mauve said, and she actually nodded. “Our people have already begun to celebrate the successful beginning of our association, since First Burgundy has already returned to them with the news.

“We will speak again tomorrow. At that time we will craft formal treaties between our civilizations. Also by then your gods and ours will have begun to make sense of the vast quantity of information we have exchanged here, and we can begin dividing and assigning the vast number of research tasks that we need done to answer our most urgent questions.

“Until then, we thank you, and wish you all forms of fulfillment.”

“As we thank you, and we also wish you every happiness.” Mark grinned. “There is just one thing I need to ask before you go. We’ve never really needed a word to use for everyone of this world before, but I guess I would refer to us collectively as the Kellarani. What should we call you, your gods and your people that is?”

“We do not differentiate between our people and our gods, generally, since both groups have been integrated into a single society for hundreds of eons. In fact, many of our most advanced mortals are of higher rank and greater wisdom and power than some of our most junior gods, so the differentiation is not so clear.

“We refer to ourselves quite simply as; ‘The People’. And since we do not use sound to communicate, we have no true word for the concept. One of you will have to give us a name. Preferably something simple and of neutral connotation.”

“Ah. Then I suggest we call you the Triax.” Mark proposed.

“We will accept that.”

“In that case, First Mauve of the Triax, we bid you fond farewell.”

“And we you, Prince Mark of the Kellarani.” the alien god responded, and then she and First Aquamarine were gone. Suddenly sunlight streamed unimpeded down into the arena again as the Triax god of power no longer blocked most of the light.

First Burgundy had left minutes before, though only three gods of Kellaran noticed his leaving, and no mortals did.

“This also ends our visitation for today.” Falgaroth announced. “I encourage you to enjoy your week of celebration. We will have important research assignments available after that, for any theoreticians, Master spell-casters, and engineers who can be spared from the researches you are already conducting.

“Again, we thank you all. Despite the threat of the demons, today begins a new golden age for all of us; the Kellarani.”

With that, the gods of Kellaran also took their leave, and there was a long moment of silent wonder left in their wake.

“Well, I need a drink.” Mark suddenly announced. “And let’s have some more music! I wasn’t finished dancing yet when the awarding of medallions started!”

This broke the mood and the tension as well. Millions laughed and enjoyed a deep breath or two, and then the revelry commenced with abandon, everyone drunk with amazement on the wonder of events.

Someone handed Mark a fresh bottle of cold redberry elixir, and when it was gone a while later, he was handed another.

As dawn was breaking the next morning Yazadril noticed Mark asleep in his chair, a half-full bottle in his hand, Talia asleep in his lap. Hilsith was still awake and chatting with Alilia, but they were looking quite sleepy, and Nemia was found asleep in a huge fur with Dalia and Bezedil in the lowest bleachers at the edge of the field, all three curled together in a single giant’s seat with room to spare. All around the celebration continued without slowing, since so many wanted to come here; where great events had taken place, and new revelers constantly arrived to replace those who’d left.

Yazadril and Hilsith cast hangover cures on their loved ones, then took them home and tucked them into bed.

Mark and Talia slept for twelve hours, and their routine the next day set the pattern of their days for some time to come. They officially worked for twelve hours each day, but their duties were not arduous. During the first four hours and the last four hours of each workday they lazed around and played on their private beach, engaging in informal discussions on every subject and visiting with their many guests. Monarchs came to discuss politics and administration, wizards came to share the latest spells, generals came to discuss battle strategy in the void, engineers came to show off and demonstrate the latest weapons and devices. Tithian and Grakonexikaldoron kept them abreast of the latest magical and astronomical research.

It was made clear to the Keys to The Just Alliance that these informal discussions were of great value to those they spoke with, and that their off-hand commentary on the things they learned consistently led to new breakthroughs and new directions of research, even if their discussions were conducted while enjoying archery practice on the beach or while paddling in the lagoon.

The gods had taken to using the subtlest of disguises. While in their presence, most people forgot the fact that they were gods, even though everything else about them was easily recalled. After they had left, it was remembered that they were divine.

This was not the case on Mark and Talia’s secluded beach, where they were often visited by the gods of two pantheons. They would sometimes drop by singly, and sometimes in small groups of no more than five. A few of their discussions on morality and policy went on continuously for days.

The middle four hours of their workday was spent traveling and talking to people. This involved anything from informal chats over tea with chance-met citizens in a hostelry they’d picked at random, to formal speeches delivered to vast multitudes. They attended formal social occasions of every variety and every size with persons of note in every field, and often visited schools, Healers’ hospices, and public works sites.

When off duty, Mark and Talia enjoyed life to the fullest; attending the arts, participating in sports and games, and playing the tourist, and routinely hid their identities when off-duty in public. Often they selected a beautiful and isolated place to simply relax and enjoy each other’s company, and let their love grow.

Their passion for lovemaking and erotic play continued unabated, and on roughly a third of those occasions they were joined by one or more lovely females, and not all of them were elves, but all wished to convey their most profound gratitude in the elven way.

They were surprised by a knock on the cottage door as they were just going to bed one night, and it was surprising because they were expecting no visitors at that time, and Stripe had not announced his detection of any visitor’s arrival in his patrolled area, and Sheramiv had not asked if an unexpected visitor should be admitted.

When Mark psionically checked to see who was there, he found it was Neela, first goddess of humans. When he opened the door, he was surprised again to see her looking as bashful as a fourteen-year-old, though her little smile seemed a bit mischievous. Her smooth black skin and hair looked enchanting, contrasted strikingly by a simple but slinky white wrap dress.

“Hi. I know we didn’t exactly start off on the right foot when we first met. I’m hoping you’ll give me a chance to make amends.” she quietly announced, and managed to seem positively shy while being obviously and very effectively seductive.

“Come on in.” Mark grinned. “You’re always welcome here, but as to amends, you’ll have to ask my wife.”

Talia thought it was a wonderful opportunity to enjoy a uniquely and incredibly pleasurable experience with the most enchanting of playmates, and as it turned out, she was not mistaken in the slightest.

He got another surprise several nights later, when he came out of the privacy after preparing to retire for the night, only to find Talia and a strikingly attractive Sylvan woman posed erotically beside each other on the bed, waiting for his arrival and wearing nothing but their smiles.

“I wanted you to have a chance to see what it would be like with a girl who was close to your height, but there are very few human women who are both tall enough and of a type I find to be extremely attractive.” Talia explained with a giggle. “And then I remembered that all Sylvan women are just over two meters tall, and quite striking in elven eyes, so here we are. I am pleased to introduce Penakiana Tokbitkeze, who is very unique for her people in being two hundred and thirty-six centimeters in height. My research indicates that she is one of the five finest courtesans in Serminak.”

“Third finest, to be exact.” Penakiana confidently smiled; obviously delighted with his suddenly rampant virility, and she gracefully beckoned him closer.

Of all their nights of erotic adventure, that was one of their most adventurous.

Then came a particular sunny afternoon on the beach, five weeks after their victory over Zarkog. An engineers who had been there that morning had demonstrated a device he had invented; two flat blades of wood with their ends twisted a bit that had been bound at their centers into a cross. With a bit of practice at the throw, it could be made to fly in a perfect circle and return to the hand of the thrower, without using any magic whatsoever. He had left several of them of various sizes, their blades ranging from fifteen centimeters to three meters in length, and now everyone in attendance was playing with them.

“Have you noticed exactly who is here today?” Quewanak asked Mark while throwing a white cross to circle the young man.

Mark looked around, then shrugged. “Just our usual friends and accomplices.” he grinned, and threw his cross to circle his green friend at the same time.

“Think a moment. Myself, you and Talia, Dalia and Bezedil, Yazadril, Nemia and Hilsith, Silaran and Equemev, Povon and Kragorram, Alilia, Tithian, Somonik, and Grakonexikaldoron. Of the gods we have Neela, Visinniria, Heklivmalgiso, Falgaroth, Amirgath, and Glup. This is not the first time that this exact group has been together in this place.”

It took a minute, then realization came.

“Ah.” Mark nodded. “Right after I Healed Dalia and Bezedil. When we first found out that all of us except Gran were candidates for divinity.”

Quewanak nodded, and made another toss while calmly meeting Mark’s eye. “It’s an incredibly beautiful experience, you know. And it’s as easy to set godhood aside and ignore it as it is to do so with the magic you already know. Sure, it changes you profoundly, but you can simply enjoy time as a mortal whenever you want, just as being a great wizard and warlock isn’t impeding your enjoyment of playing with toys like a child right now.”

Mark nodded thoughtfully. “You’re saying you think I should take the big step?”

Quewanak raised an eyebrow. “Don’t you?”

Not the End.

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Afterword

Join us for further adventures in *The Fire And The Storm*, Book Two of *The Nexus Of Kellaran*, available now; wherein it is seen that things are not proceeding as well as they appear to be, and; Mark loses his temper.

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