

Eye For an Eye

by

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(and likely a few others who aren't famous enough to bother mentioning)

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(written vicariously from +/- 4-25-11 to 5-31-11)

this is part of my
Broken Stories Unfinished Dreams
series

I never did finish it.
And I'm never going to.

Feel free to enjoy it for what it is or turn the page at your own discretion.

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Eye For an Eye

{What I believe we have here are the first two chapters of a story by Celli, discarded for whatever reason (the smart money being on general laziness and distractibility) that was later picked up by Kevin Stillwater, perhaps butcherized, and seeing what was coming, is likely the real reason Celli broke off work on the project in the first place. Or at least, that's my guess going in.

Now, to reread it and I'll see what else I remember on the other side.}

###

EYE 4 EYE NOTES

Intro? Or like any good religious parable, all the characters in the tale may be viewed as aspects -- mere parts -- of the whole: to personify Chaos, to put a face on the void.

Ally (Alley, I think you know to whom I refer), black market manna ribbon exporter, came with a box of manna, didn't work out, so decided to sell, all she had, put in window, but no one bought; instead, local artisans came with their product, which turned out to be potent stuff went brought to the right dimension.

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###

Part 1
Krala Ka Negrastrum
Bull Begins

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1.0

In my twelfth year, in the time of the rut, I left my father's herd with all that I had brought with me into this world [which let me tell you, wasn't a heck of a lot, not even a change of clothes].

As I left, my mother wished me the best of luck in the upcoming tournament, which even I found to be faintly disturbing, as I had every intention of joining my father's ladder and challenging him for his rank, his pride, and his privilege.*

And as for him, my father -- papa, dad -- the bastard in charge of this -- oh, so precious -- piddling little heard, I had only these words to say to him, "Be it the Season of Death or not, be you in this val or a thousand worlds away, if I ever so much as catch the merest whiff of your sent on the wind, I shall hunt you down and gore you through until you lie dead at my feet."

Or at least, that's what I would have said, if the old bull hadn't beaten me to the punch, blackened my eye, and tossed me head first into the mud -- a free buck, young, naked, and alone.

*[i.e. His women, mother dearest included.]

1.1

As dusk fell and night settled in, informal bouts and unsanctioned grudge matches erupted about me. These petty fights, which only served to weaken a serious competitor, would last till dawn. And I, in my first year, knew I would be easy prey for the larger bulls -- those who stood horn and shoulder above me -- if I did not find a place of safety, a sanctuary, to stay through the night.

Surmising the forest and the tactical advantage it would give me* was my only option, I ran past the crowds that had come to watch -- the gamblers and traders, the horse thieves and whores -- and headed deep into the woods. By a small creek, I encountered a group of gypsy elves from a dryer clime, who I took to be just another band of revelers. It was an honest mistake. Even as I watched them fold back the edges time to time to form a tent constructed from the fabric of reality itself, I somehow failed to grasp their true intent. And even believed them when they said, "You'll be safe in here with us."

That is I believed them until I awoke to find hands bound and my body held tight.

*[A wide rack of horns being more of a hindrance than a help among the thick underbrush.]

1.2

For the first week, we settled into a pattern. In the early morning, the gypsies would depart, and I would spend the rest of the day exhausting myself in a futile attempt to get free. And then at night, I would curse the elven wenches in a mindless rage till I grew hoarse. While for their part, the ladies would laugh in delight or simply ignore me.

But after a week, I grew tired and my will to fight disappeared. My place in the ranks had long since been lost, never attained. And what else was there?

That's when I began to listen to my hosts as they gossiped through the night, telling their stories, their accounts of the day:

Of who beat who, and how, and by how much;

Of the odds being placed;

Of the bets being wagered;

Of who won, and who lost;

Of whom was cheated;

And more fare importantly, by whom;

It was an outsider's view -- cold and calculating with no sense of honor. They happily told me of the slavers who had come to 'recruit' and the mercenaries who had come to hire, and who from among the herd had fallen prey to their promises, and who had simply slinked off into the night.

That second week was instructive, very-very instructive. I felt that I knew more about the tournament than any other member of the herd possibly could.

But as instructive as it had been, it was nothing compared to the week that would follow, the week of the rut.

1.3

I watched the gypsy elves prepare as one might watch a dead-man being led to the gallows -- dreading it, repulsed by it, but at the same time, unable to turn away, unable to control the impulse to sneak a peek at the final moment of truth.

And so there I was, watching them undress: hideous bodies, pale naked skin, and the anatomy -- the bumps and curves that one looks for -- all wrong. These were not cows. More like rats -- grotesque aberrations. And the horror of it all only growing worse as they disrobed, letting their silken frocks fall to the side, leaving nothing to the imagination.

1.4

But it was all to be a game of imagination.

No sooner were they naked, than my elven captors squeezed their nothing little bodies into skimpy, comically low cut hides that utterly failed at hiding... anything. To which they added brown and black rouge to confer the illusion of spots, fake tufts of fur, and then, of course, there were the tiny little horns they put on their heads.

I broke out laughing, into hysterics at the thought, barely hiding my contempt. I blame the stress.

"Horns? Really? Horns? You're going as cows, right? To this costume party or whatever and you're putting on horns? That's rich. That's great."

But the joke was to be on me.

"We're glad you approve, because that party we're getting ready for, you're going to be the guest of honor."

1.5

So, torture was what they had in mind.

Seriously, rats, pigs, Medusa herself, anything would have been better.

The taste of their lips: horrid.

Their bodies: disgusting.

And the smell: nauseating.

I found myself concentrating on my breath: slow and steady, through pursed lips, trying my best not to vomit.

Much to my relief, that's when they lit the k'fr -- an entire brazier full. I'd never tried it before. But if I had ever needed it, I needed it then.

"Oh, the k'fr, Mr. Bull? That's not for you. That's for us," explained the one.

"This, on the other hand, this is for you," explained the second as she tossed a small vial from a stack of many to the third, who may have said something witty as well, but the moment she uncorked the bottle, I lost all sense of reason.

1.6

"Pheromones," they explained.

"The distilled scent."

"The essence of desire."

Words? They expected me to understand words?

NEED: that's what I knew.

That's all I knew.

The primordial instinct of desire.

1.7

Bucking for weeks.

OK. Hours.

And then a new vial, a new cow, and hours more.

You don't keep track of the time. You don't count.

You see red. You see sex. You see images of flesh that will be burned into your mind, the depths of your soul. The entire herd -- I am sure of it -- focused on these three elven maidens -- nonstop over the course of a week, a month, a long dream filled year, maybe more.

This is the memory that is linked to the scent.

This is the sight.

This is the touch.

These are the words, the sound, the taste.

This is the setting. This is the place. And this is the way.

No cows. No tourney. No rut.

They ruined me.

I stopped being a minotaur.

Oh, they freed me. They gave me a new life, a new goal, a new way.

But as to a minotaur, the ladder, the herd? I had acquired a more sophisticated pallet, a more worldly taste, a more elven desire.

1.8

And then I awoke and they were gone.

I searched out the nearest elven encampment.* [*I think you know why.] But it did me little good. As beautiful and lovely as they were, without the scent, they were nothing. They could not fulfill my desire.

Nor could the herd.

The next year's rut found me angry, alone. No need to search them out. I knew the scent alone* *[in the absence of elves or similar form] could not work, would not work.

Nor was I fated to find the elves who had cursed me in this way anytime soon. I travelled in vain in searching for them, but to no avail. All the while growing older and stronger, and as the frustration of the years mounted, angrier and angrier and angrier.

#

Part II

Na'le'anna

Bull - Nell 1.1

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{So, I guess from the dates, this was to come before the latter. Oh, well. Go figure.}

1.0

At the time, my sisters and I were throwing a little party.

And by little, I mean that it included everyone we knew, stretched as far as the eye could see, and had been going on for as long as anyone could remember. On a lark, during a slow spell one summer eve, we had asked Great Aunt What's Her Name when the party had started and after a bit of hemming and hawing and in general enjoying the attention admitted that couldn't remember a time when the party hadn't been going. Personally, I always figured she had asked her own Great Great Aunt From Way Back & Time Immemorial if she knew when the party had started, and had gotten a similar answer. Safe to say, the party had been going on for a long time, a long time indeed -- centuries, perhaps millennium, possibly from the time of the first pixie fairy, or maybe even from just a little before that, from when the first pixie

fairy was just a drunken gleam in some salacious wizard's eye, you know, the type who likes a good time and a glass of wine a whole lot more than reading up on yet one more esoteric theory of magic of dubious practical utility.* *[Thus in a nutshell, we have the history of all fairy kind.]

1.1

I almost didn't see Bull, at first; I had a life.

And I should clarify here that Bull is a generic name for a minotaur. I still don't know Bull's real name. In the end, it's sort of like calling a human Man.

As in, "Hey, Man. Got a light?"

And then the kindly human comes over to where you are sitting, lights a spark, gets a taste for your pure, high quality, straight from the vine k'fr, and the next thing you know another century has floated by and yet one more generation has been lost to the eternal dance.

Only with a minotaur, it's more like, "Hey, Bull. This numbskull says I'm sitting in his spot." It being important to get those territorial juices flowing if you want a minotaur to defend your honor. And then, the next thing you know, somebody's missing more than a few vital organs. And I'm not kidding, here. I've had to pull Bull off of dead people.

"He's not moving, Bull. And he hasn't been moving for a long time."

Really, sometimes it's just easier to go and make myself a sandwich.

"OK, Bull. I'm going to go take a nap. Wake me when you're done."

1.2

I exaggerate, of course. Big duh, there; I'm a pixie.

Truth is, Bull's been getting mellow and mellow as he ages, grows wiser, and as I like to think, manages to get his needs met, which wasn't the case when we first met, not by a long shot --- not that he wasn't trying.

In fact, I almost didn't see Bull at first. I mean, there was just this pile of pixies, exhausted and happy, stacked like cord wood around him, but in the middle, almost as if it was hiding behind this wall of satiated desire was the essence of need itself -- a blur of motion, a bucking bull going wild, full bore, full steam ahead, no holds (and I mean, no holds) barred, and judging by towering wall of pixies surrounding him, he'd already been going at it for some time.

Obviously, there wasn't a moment to loose. I flew over my sisters as fast as I could and jumped right into the fray. I just hoped I wasn't too late.

Yeah, as if. The joke was on me. It wasn't long before I'd had my fill and blacked out from ecstasy. Really, I did. And I'd never done that before. But even after I woke up, Bull was still at. So, I blacked out again. And then, again! To be fair, I think the last time was from hunger, but still.

And I'm not going to say it was weeks or months, because I'm not particularly good with time, but let's just say it overall it was a long, long while.

And then the beast was through.

Finally!

O! M! G!

1.3

Seriously, I think that was as close as the party ever came to being over, just shutting down and ending from sheer exhaustion.

And that really is saying something. I mean, not only had the party been going on for, like, forever. But I've done a lot of travelling since then (like a real lot, more than I ever really wanted to). And I've seen a lot of the sisters. And the only clan of pixies

that I ever ran into that wasn't throwing a party was about to go to war... with the evil "trolls"* [*I use the term loosely] who had somehow managed to put that clan's party on hiatus. In the end, I'm pretty sure that was the basis of the "trolls" evilness. You've heard of party crashers. These were party wreckers. Clearly "trolls", the lot of them. And they were to going to die!

(I'm also thinking there were some elves involved. I might have heard something about a land development deal going south -- probably on account of some viscous rumors that started circulating just prior to the close of the deal: something regarding an angry horde of goblins and their leader, one of those maniacal mages you hear about all the time, you know, the type they like to make late night movies about.)

Anyhow, the specifics aren't important. This sort of thing happens all the time. I mean, wouldn't the fact that you were about to go off to battle and probably die a horrible death be a darn good reason -- in and of itself -- to throw one last hurrah, as in one final hurrah to end all hurrahs. And then if by some miracle you survived? Hip Hip Hooray! Time for another landmark celebration! And really, when you get right down to it, what's a pixie to do in between, but keep the fires burning, the wine a flowing, and morale as high as possible.* *[Somehow, it's very salacious when a pixie says this.]

So the fact that one lone minotaur could come remotely close to bringing the party to a halt is sort of miraculous.

Thus it should come as no surprise that as he slept and we rested quietly around him, it was unanimously decided that "We should make him our God/King."* *[One faction wanting to make him our God. One faction wanting to make him our king. And a lone voice of reason (quickly hushed up), which thought a compromise of some sort might do the trick.]

God/King or not, all I knew was that when that ride started up again, I wanted to be the first one in line, so I grabbed a spot on the big guy's chest.

It's my favorite place to sleep.

In and out, up and down, his chest gently heaving like a boat gently rocking on the waves; his breath on my face, warm and fresh like a jungle oasis; and then, every once in a while, his arm rising to hold me, brush my hair, or stroke my face.

It's Heaven, lying there with my god, my king, my lover, my Bull.

1.5

I was so relaxed, when he awoke and gently laid me aside, I almost slept right through it... and that really would have been a tragedy.

Yawn. Stretch. Murmur. Murmur.

Half asleep, searching for a warm soft place among the moss with my sisters.

And then suddenly remembering!

Bolting upright!

Standing!

Fluttering high!

Desperately searching for him!

Finally spotting him in the distance, by the tables, beyond the dancers, grabbing some food, loading his pack, getting ready to travel, my God/King was trying to quietly slip away unnoticed.

1.6

"No! You can't go!" I desperately pleaded, an entreaty to which he only smiled with amusement as if to say, "Really? And who's going to stop me?"

He hadn't said anything but I knew that look and I knew he had a point, so I tried to reason with him, "What I mean is, we took

a vote, held an informal poll, I think we had a quorum..." I could see I was losing his interest. "Whatever. The point is, it's been decided. We're going to make you our God/King. Take your pick. You could be our god!" I said, nodding excitedly hoping he'd go with the favorite. "Or our king! Heck. Some of the girls want you to be both."

But it was like he hadn't even heard.

He simply grabbed an apple from the table*, *[And not even something esoteric, no dragon fruit, no handful of dried jaspers, none of the good stuff, just a simple apple] gave it a polish on his chest hairs (melting my heart in the process, I might add), and turned to go.

"Didn't you hear me? You'd be our ruler, our king!"

He didn't even bother to look at me, didn't even slow his pace. He was just going to walk away, leaving me there fluttering, wondering, confused.

Regaining a little of my composure, I flew after him and hovered in the air before him blocking his progress, while saying the word once again, only very slowly this time, being careful to enunciate it quite clearly, because you never knew, maybe elvin was a second language for the big guy and he didn't really get it.

"King," I said very clearly, very distinctly. And then, gave him a little courtesy, a little flourish right there in the air.

"King?" he repeated, like it was the first time he'd heard it, like it was the first time he'd heard the word.

"Yeah! Yeah! King! Your wish, my command. All that kind of stuff. We'd service your every need."

And in reply to this generous offer, he just sort of brushed me aside like I was some sort of gnat, not violently, just a dismissal, a be-gone with you.

"No thanks," he said as my king walked away.

I could have sounded the alarm. That probably would have been the smart thing to do. I mean, come on. It's not like the sisters and I had never taken a captive before or prevented someone from leaving the party. Ropes, chains, they add a little spice. And all's fair in love and war, right?

Right?

So, why didn't I sound the alarm?

And if we weren't going to take him captive, why did I feel compelled to fly after him as he ducked through the underbrush?

Why?

Because he was my king!

Maybe he just didn't know what that meant yet.

Maybe neither of us did.

1.8

"A king's like a ruler, right, a chief. You tell other people what you want, fairies for instance, and then they do it." And then, thinking out loud a little, "It's not like you're opposed to taking control or having your way. I mean, you didn't seem to have any problem telling me or any of the girls what to do last night. And we know you liked it. Nobody's that good of an actor. And it's not like anyone was holding a knife to your back... was there? No. There couldn't have been. Could there?"

I had slowed down to think this last out, and flying backwards in front of him as I had been, he was forced to stop. And I don't think it was anything specific that I had said, no wonderful turn of phrase, or clever insight. Rather it had simply been how long I had been saying it that compelled him to try to explain his position as best he could in an effort to get rid of me. It was probably the most words he's ever strung together. Talking is not a minotaur's strong point.

"Listen to me fairy. I know what a king is. I know what a god is. I've been both. Been there, done that, don't need to do either ever again. Got it? So if you please, these last few weeks

have been loads fun, thank you very much, but now I'll be leaving. Alone."

Oh, yeah!

I don't think so.

As the big brute turned to leave in huff, I made damn sure to get caught in his horns.

1.9

"Ow! Don't move! You're ripping my wing!" I yelled in rage, cause believe me, the pain was real enough -- as was my pathetic, fluttering downward spiral once I got free.

"So this is how you do it? Love 'em and leave 'em," I cried from where I lay on the ground, genuine tears streaming down my face.

"NO! Don't even think about touching me!"

I tried to stand on unsteady legs.

"No! Don't help. You've done enough already."

And then, the real test: a little flap -- searing pain, and blackness.

2.0

I remember waking and spending the rest of the day in a semi-conscious daze, feeling safe and secure as he held me in his arms, and carried me home. That's where he was supposed to be taking me.

I mean, I wasn't surprised that it was night when I fully came to. Nor was I surprised to awaken on his chest, gently rising and falling with the tide of his breath.

No. None of that was particularly surprising.

But discovering that we were completely alone? Now that, I found surprising -- shocking even, a genuine cause for alarm.

"Where are my sisters?" And then, after piecing together the answer to that question on my own, "Why aren't we back at the party? You know, the fairy camp?"

"We're lost," was his helpful reply. "Well, I'm lost. I marked the spot, so I wouldn't make the situation any worse," he explained -- most helpfully -- as he wagged his finger towards a ribbon tied to the tree.* *[This being a common method of differentiating one dimension from the next, but being entirely ineffective.

Dimensions split and recombine all the time, a piece of cloth tied to a tree isn't going to change that.] "So, we're right where you remember. Just point me in the right direction and we'll have you back home in no time."

"Are you serious? We haven't gone that far. Just follow the noise and the lights."

And then I realized there wasn't any noise, there weren't any lights, and not a single star in the sky was where it was supposed to be.

2.1

"No! No! You don't do that! Who starts skipping across dimensional lines with the sole intent and purpose of getting lost? That's what you're telling me, right? That you got lost on purpose! That you zipped this way and that till you couldn't keep track! That you just took a few score -- times like a frikkin million -- turns at random through the multi-verse! And why? And why did you do this, Mr. Genius? So you could get lost! So you wouldn't have the slightest idea where you were! So couldn't take me home! So you wouldn't have to take me home! And that kidnapping me was your plan right from the start! Wasn't it? Just admit it! Admit it!"

Sob. Sob. Sniff. Sniff.

And then a little quieter, but no less irrational, "And that's why you broke my wing, so I couldn't ever fly away. And now, I'll never see my sisters again."

Sob. Sob. Sniff. Sniff.

"And now if you do leave me, I'll just get eaten by an ogre or a troll or just die some horrible death alone."

Sob. Sob. Sniff. Sniff.

"You know what this means, don't you? You're, you're stuck with me now. Promise you'll never leave."

He did, too, eventually -- sort of, kind of, maybe. He said, he'd protect me for the moment. It was close enough. And I had every intention of milking a promise like that for all it was worth.

2.2

Only then again, maybe not.

Because it wasn't long before I discovered there were other issues outside of finding my way home that needed resolving.

Namely, the past few weeks -- months, years, or whatever length of time it had been -- of glorious none stop partying and what I'll euphemistically refer to as action -- the hot, wet, and sticky kind -- had been a sort of last hurrah for my newfound pal. He was going to take a breather. From here on out, wherever our road led, ole Bull had every intention of putting an end to the wild, narcissistic, non-stop, blow-out party that his life had become. He said he was going to 'stop burning the candle from both ends': you know, lay off the k'fr, and maybe do a bit of exercise and trying to eat a healthy diet. Heck, he even mentioned the possibility of doing a little mediation to get his head screwed back on right.

"The more I think about it, the better it sounds to simply check into an ashram for a while."

You think you know a minotaur, and then they go and say something crazy like that.

2.3

"Seriously, an ashram?"

"Yeah, an ashram. Why not?"

Why not?

Why not?

Oh, a whole list of reasons came crashing to mind all at once: ashrams are boring, they suck, and anything resembling fun is never allowed according to their stupid book of rules.

But then I remembered that not all ashrams are like that. Way-way back, a group of traveling mystics had stopped for the night and partied with the sisters. And they'd known how to have a good time. They'd even brought their own k'fr -- high grade stuff, really-really high grade stuff. It could have come straight from the mythical Source. And what were those words of wisdom they'd chanted all night long? It was a catchy sort of refrain.

Turn On. Tune In. Drop Out. That was it.

I mean, if I was going to visit some stupid ashram, theirs was the stupid ashram I wanted to go visit. And lucky for me, I remembered that the name of their most holy temple was "The House of Gra'gl."

"The who? The what?" asked my oh so innocent, soon to be enlightened travelling companion.

"The House of Gra'gl! You're looking for an ashram! Well, The House of Gra'gl would be like perfect!"

Bull eyed me suspiciously. Smart Bull.

"No. It's not like that." Somehow, I don't think Bull believed me, even then. "A group of monks passed through once. They resisted our charms. They only stayed the one night. Seemed like they... What were you saying you wanted? Your head together? To get your head on?"

"To get my head screwed on right."

"Yeah-yeah! Right! You want your head screwed around with? Tightened? Loosened? Adjusted? Whatever? These are the guys you want! Trust me on this!"

Oddly, Bull didn't.

"OK. So, they like a good time."* [*And just by-the by, in my humble experience most conversations with fairies go something like this. They tend to be extremely one sided affairs.]

"No-no. Listen. You said you wanted to 'stop burning the candle at both ends,' right?"

"Well, I want to start. Who better to show us both how?"

"That's not fair. We're in this together."

"You promised."

"No. You promised."

"Why can't we both get what we want?"

"OK. Listen. I remember another thing they said."

"No. It wasn't that. They said, 'You must be lost before you can be found.'"

"Fine. Maybe I mixed up the phrasing a little. That just means their world famous, a top-notch organization."

"What do you mean 'What does it have to do with us?' Like, duh! In case you haven't noticed, we're lost."

"So, we get more lost."

"Me? I say we take The K'fr Highway right down to the root, as far as it'll go."

"Really? Neat. Then I get to show you something."

And then finally, while showing off my petal necklaces and tapping the flowers woven into my hair* [*Because if you take a k'fr flower or the seed thereof from one location and plant it in another, travelling between the two via The K'fr Highway becomes a fairly straightforward matter. Which is another way of saying, Na'le'anna knew she wasn't giving up all hope of ever going home again. As long as she had the flowers, growing them to the right size so as to form a portal was only a matter of time], "One thing I know for sure, the vine is my friend."

###

Celeste for Sving

Sving la'string la Tringa'linge'ling

His full name, just in case you were wondering.

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1.0

Hi, Celli. Come on in.

I think you know everyone.

Yes, you are indeed correct. Gretchen, may I present the Great Uncle Celli. He likes to read minds, you know, so you'll want to be extra careful about what you let pop into your head as long as he's around.

No, unfortunately, hiding behind my leg won't help in the least.

1.1

Now Gretchen, that wasn't so bad, was it.

Well, I bet if you ask real nice, Uncle Celli will read everyone's mind after he and I are finished.

I said if you ask nicely.

So, Uncle Celli, what do you say?

There you are children, it's a promise. I'll send Uncle Celli outside to play as soon as we are through.

1.2

Oh, don't say it like that, Celli. You know you can't wait; an eager audience, it'll be quite the relief after interviewing me.

Oh, no. Sving can't make it.

Yes, Sving got your message and that's precisely why he isn't here.

I believe the mine. As you well know, past the coal and tin, after the gold and gems, the vein turns to pure manna. Good luck finding him down there in that. But if you'd like to search, I'm sure Sving has an old pick lying around here somewhere. I'd be happy to set you up.

1.3

Come now, Celli. The children may well adore you and your antics, but Sving...

It might be best if you simply let it go. Might I offer you some tea?

1.4

Yes, lilikoi.

Yes, with goat's milk.

Yes, and honey.

My, aren't we particular today. Lavender honey was what I was planning on offering his high holiness, but if your extreme worshipfulness finds the meager offerings his ever so humble servant has been able to scrape together on such extremely short notice to be an affront to his grand sensibilities, then perhaps we should reschedule our appointment for a later date after I've had adequate time to prepare a feast worthy of his eminence -- say sometime in the coming millennium?

I thought you'd see things my way. By way of amends, have a pixie dust cake and tell me how absolutely divine it is.

While you're at it, feel free to tell me how radiant I look today.

1.5

Ah, Celli. You do have a way with words. Might I presume therein lies the reason for your visit?

Yes. Yes. On behalf of The Dragon, blah-blah-blah. To the purpose of?

No, you misunderstand me. The Dragon is, indeed, my favorite despot in all the multiverse. Still, you have not answered my question. Why are you here?

Yes. Yes. To talk to Sving. To the purpose of?

1.6

Krala Ka Negrastrum? A centaur?

Well, I wasn't that far off.

They're both creatures of the field.

They live in the open range.

It's not a representative sample. You ask me that guy probably ported off the map, met up with some yokels who got scared, and trapped him in a maze.

From the way I hear it, it's not like they were feeding him carrots and he decided to up and eat a porter. They didn't send something down to eat but once a year. He was starving.

Trust me. He was an aberration, not the rule. Oh, dear me, I hope he isn't this Krala'ka'negstrum that you're here to talk about.

Good.

Well, I'd hate to think Sving ever -- and I mean ever under any circumstances -- would associate with a man eater.

It just isn't savory.

1.7

So, Krala?

Krala Ka Negrastrum?

Ka'ka'ka'ka'ka?

Sving wouldn't say it right, assuming you're even saying it right. So, I'm just trying to figure out how would he butcher the pronunciation? Maybe I know Ka'krawl by a different name.

We live in a mixed household. We don't dwell on the differences. Saying he's a minatour doesn't narrow it down any. It just means we know Sving didn't work with him in some mine along the way.

Kalala's horns would get in the way.

Sure. And I've got some shears in the kitchen. We could just start loping parts off of you.

1.8

What else do you know about this Kala'ka'ka'ku? Ku! Wait! That's it!

Ku!

Ku, it means friend, the god of war, a fighting companion, and much more telling one who is worth fighting for.

Sving called Krala Ka Negrastrum, Ku.

I don't know. Maybe that's what he called himself.

1.9

Wait a second.

I'm having a vision.

I like my visions, you're just going to have to wait a second.

2.0

So, Celli? The Dragon sent you here, right? Told you to talk to Sving?

And The Dragon knew Sving wouldn't be here and you'd be forced to have this conversation with me instead, right?

And The Dragon would have a reasonable idea how that was going to play out in advance, right?

So, he'd have a pretty good idea on what I just flashed about. Clearly, that's what I supposed to relay to you.

{KEVIN INTERLUDE

Fear.
Dial it all the way up.
Feel the adrenaline surge.
You're OD'ing on excitement, on fear, on your own body's
feeble attempt to cope.

Load up the battle. You're in the midst of it all. Goblins,
orcs, trolls, or would you prefer zombies?
Not an ounce of fear in their eyes. No regard for your life.
Coming at you full bore. A wall of death.

Crap your pants. Vacate your bowels. Try not to puke.
Oh, and the shaking. You were not made for this. You are no
hero.

You trade blows. It's all you can do to hang on to your
sword. Ten seconds in and you're already tired. Your arms ache.
You're dizzy. You can feel death around you. You are entering the
tunnel.

A misplaced step, someone's head, maybe your brother, and
you fall, slip to the ground.

The enemy towers above you as his the warhammer falls for
the killing blow. This will be your final moment in life.

Time stands still.

Smell the blood. Smell the shit. Was the ground really this
wet?

Watch as your comrades fall -- like wheat to the scythe.

You can't even hear. It's all a million miles away.

Fishing. Diving for clams. Under the surface, that sweet summer day, far-far away.

Ha-ha. The angels, a blessing, your assailant's shoe is untied. Let the dopamine rush in. Laugh. It's over. What does it matter? Say your prayers. It's been a good life. I am sorry I have but one life to live.

And then the arrow strikes. The ogre staggers. With a fell swoop, his head falls to the side.

Glimmering out and away, into that vast beautiful world beyond, the angels sing as your side redoubles, a minotaur leading the way. His horns wreak havoc. His ax cleaves to and fro.

You have a hero, a savior; if not a god, then at least a way.

END KEVIN INTERLUDE}

2.1

So, pretty it up.

Then rough it up.

I don't know. It's not like I've ever seen combat.

Only in my mind's eye when Sving tells his stories.

No. This would be my perception of his perception of the thousands he's seen die -- and the lucky one or two who should have but didn't.

It's not a judgment. You know, what? Why don't you just let me continue? I have told this story before.

As a matter of fact, I integrated a similar tale into my thesis back in Knight School.*

[* Not nearly as exciting as it sounds. Turns out I misheard and she meant Night School, which simply means the courses are held at night. All in all, it's sort of like someone telling you they went to Dragon University, when what they really meant was that they went to a university where the courses really dragged on. (This, of course, is one of the many reasons why it's preferable to read a mind rather than have a conversation because I still don't know if she was trying to mislead me on purpose or make a joke.)]

2.2

Oh, I guess I don't dwell on it.

No. Getting in was easy. But going to university anywhere at all, that came as a total surprise and something I owe completely to The Dragon.

I was born beholden.

It means I was a slave.

Yes, I lived in the royal family, with the royal family, but I wasn't of the royal family.

I was a Handmaiden.

No. There's nothing royal about it.

You know, I forget. You date elves all the time, so I figure you know, but then you are who you are, so you've never really bothered to delve deeper than the surface and learn thing one about our culture.

Why don't I just tell you the joke? You like jokes, right?

2.3

You've heard of Ladies in Waiting?

Well, as the name suggests, they wait around. They're basically on call 24-7 to take care of the queen's business, whatever that may be.

I'm getting to it. I trust you've, also, heard of the title the Queen's Mistress, maybe gotten your hands on one or two of those in the past.

Well then, you know the position is quite prestigious, as that lucky little lass gets to take care of the king's business -- once again, whatever that might be, for whoever, or in your case, whatever might be involved.

I'm sure every last one of them saw it as the honor and privilege you describe, Celli.

I'm just saying that I'm sure you'd never take the liberty of planting such an idea into another's head, no matter the benefit to yourself or your rather over-developed ego.

I suppose that's just a matter of opinion.

Maybe it would be best we just moved on.

Well, as I've said, I was a Royal Handmaiden -- and that meant I got to take care of everybody's business.

2.4

Yes. That's the joke.

Well, I found it funny.

Maybe I'll just have to spell it out for you. As a handmaiden, I started every day by emptying every last one of the royal family's chamber pots.

Yes. Filthy, sloppy, hard to believe a dainty little thing like that could hold so very much, filled to the top, retching chamber pots.

2.5

And then The Dragon came along.

And a bunch of the nobles died.

Considering my position in the scheme of things, no one really consulted me about it. But I gathered it had something to do with their heads no longer being attached to their bodies.

Yes, it was dreadful, simply dreadful. But somehow, through it all, I failed to shed a single tear.

Maybe I didn't dwell on that whole chamber pot thing enough. Or maybe I had been so conditioned by then to rejoice in the success of my benefactors -- whoever they might be at any given moment -- that I managed to hide my true feelings, put on a happy face, and have a grand ole time at the party we threw in honor of The Dragon.

You really don't have the slightest idea, do you? It's amazing. Without a mind you can read in the room, you can barely follow along. My sarcasm is completely lost on you.

Then let me spell it out for you. The Dragon gave me my life. I am forever in his debt. If someday he should want my life back in payment of that debt, then can have it. I would give it willingly.

2.6

Maybe that's because you're a narcissist, Celli.

You forget that I'm an elf.

And I forget that that means nothing to you. Trust me, for an elf to call someone else a narcissist is a complement of the highest order. I have known kings that were not your equal, Celli.*

*[Sarcasm, I think not.]

2.7

From there? Well, considering how highly trained as I was in the field of pots and all things chamberish, I could have easily found a new job in the same line. But for some reason, I felt it was time for a change in career.

And that's when I enrolled in Night School.* And that's where I met Sving.

*[Spelled it right this time.]

2.8

Sving la'string la Tringa'linge'ling. Ah, I loved teasing him. It took ole Sving la Tring of the Clan Gold Grubbers months to figure out I was butchering his name on purpose.

Because it was fun. Me and the other girls working in the cafeteria had made a sort of game of it. You know, see how many times we could get one of the dwarfs* to say their name over and over again in some ridiculously vain attempt to get us to pronounce it correctly.

Well, what was fun about it was how seriously they took the entire thing.

I don't know. I guess, all they had was their names, so it was a big deal to them. And being dwarfs and unlike you, being unable to read our minds, they never knew we were pulling their legs.

*[from the Mine Management classes]

2.9

Actually, I'd never thought of it before, but that might be one of the reasons Sving and I to hit it off.

Well to start, he was always very respectful and polite.

He always cleared his tray, and said "Thank You" and "Please." I mean, when was the last time you heard a dwarf say either of those things and a dour dwarf at that? So he was different. The rest of the guys seemed to take a perverse pride in the size of the mess they left behind.

But then also, and probably more importantly, because none of us ever said their names correctly, and I mean never, it made the dwarfs very dismissive of us.

Probably, normally, but in this instance, it simply meant that they didn't mind if we listened while they told their stories.

Oh, boring minutia mostly, always one upping the other about how long their clan had been working the same vein or how much ore they could move in a day. Dwarf stuff. But every once in a while, they talked about the wars, and not a lot of work got done in the cafeteria when that happened, because as a rule, dwarfs can tell a good story.*

*[To Celeste's credit, she paused and gave me ample opportunity to say something at this juncture. But to my credit, I let it go. Elves tell good stories, too.]

3.0

Now, if Sving was telling his story, he'd add a bunch of clan names, tracing his lineage back to the Elemental Wars after which Mr. Earth himself finally emerged victorious.

I'm sure you have your history wrong. We are talking about dwarves, here. Earth was victorious. Or then, maybe you don't want to hear the rest of the story and would rather get sidetracked into a theological debate?*

*[To which, the answer was no.]

3.0

So, yada-yada. Sving's clan was the greatest there ever was. And by way of thanks for services rendered, Stone Henge granted Sving's forefathers a Right of Deed for that illustrious pile of rock they called home.

Yes, much shorter and to the point. This is why an elven spokes-maiden should be assigned to relate all the dwarven tales of all. Unless you're trying to put your children to sleep, that is. For the most part, the little ones never manage to keep their eyes open past the begats.

You know, Thorax who begat Triton who begat Rin Tin Tin, and so on. It's sort of a pity, because the stories get pretty lively once one gets past what amounts to an incredibly dull beginning.

3.1

Well, Sving's family had this mine. And long story short, because of the alliances their clan had made over the years, they found themselves on the wrong side in a war against The Dragon.

Oh, of course, they made a brilliant showing... if by brilliant showing, you mean they were defeated horribly.

When you feel the need to list the names of each and every survivor on each retelling of the story, it's clear that a sort of cultural bottleneck had been reached.

Less than a hundred survived the final battle.

I don't know. How many dwarves usually live in Mount Home**, the greatest grouping of peaks and vales known of anywhere in the whole of the 'verse?

*[or whatever he's called.]

**[names and dates being changed to protect the innocent and the always hoped for dwarf on the run.]

3.1

Actually, I don't view it so much as an honorable last stand as just plain stupid. A lot more of Sving's family would have lived to see -- or fight -- another day if they'd just kneeled down and ceded their titles to hearth and home once it was clear they were going to lose it all, anyway.

Oh, right. I forget. You're a tough guy, from Clan Tough Guy.

And the name of that vortex from where a He Man like yourself hails?

Right. Personal. Confidential. All hush-hush.

No, I understand. It's on a need to know basis, that sort of thing. And has absolutely nothing to do with that little orc infestation.

Sorry, goblins. And then as I hear it, the valiant forces of Celli-kind, held out for, how long was it? Two? Maybe three seconds?

Precisely. And I bet it's all whole lot easier to list your war dead -- like dwarves usually do -- than to list your survivors.

That's my point. Nearly all of them died; and of the survivors, to a dwarf, they shackled in chains and carted off to spend the rest of their -- presumably very short lives -- being worked to death in a coal mine. But that that's where the story get really interesting.

3.2

You know how The Dragon likes to go undercover.*

Well, the story goes** that for his own reasons The Dragon decided to assume the form of a low-level human flunkie -- some green lieutenant, straight from the Citadel -- who upon receiving his commission had had the extreme misfortune to being assigned to a backwater coal mine managing a bunch of POWs

So, in order to make a name for himself in The Dragon's army, this lieutenant let it be known that the slaves had to increase their output by an additional wagonload every day; and if they didn't he was going to ship out any missing wagonloads with slaves stacked like cordwood.

Bluff? No, you're thinking of The Kinder Gentler Dragon of late. You know as well as everyone else that back in the day he was psychotic.

You don't roll over a thousand vortexes being a nice guy.

*[Take on another form as a disguise and infiltrate his own kingdom -- often as a revolutionary -- for the purposes of internal security and, uh, fun.]

**[A story we have reason to believe is true.]

3.3

The point is, an additional wagonload is easy enough to achieve the first couple of days, but it gets sort of progressively harder as the weeks go by. And that's what enabled Sving to save the day.

He brokered a deal with lieutenant whereby the wagons would be measured by value and not quantity.

Because as is his gift, Sving directed the tunneling of the mine so that it slowly changed from yielding coal to tin to copper and so forth.

3.4

To hear Sving tell the story, he was pulling genuine deeds of trust and marketable securities out of the ground by the time he was done.

Of course it's a lie.

OK. A fib.

Because that's impossible.

Well, it's the same mine he's working today; and let me tell you, we would have made a few changes around here by now if good ole Sving was wheeling out a barrow full of stocks and bonds at the end of every day.

3.5

No. He hadn't gotten that far.

No. Not to diamonds

Nor rubies.

I'm sure I don't know what "quartzite gems" is supposed to mean.

They had barely broken into the precious metals.

Are you doubting me?

Let me tell you something, Mr Celli, Sir. You learn a thing or two about mining when you're married to a dwarf – you know, whether you want to or not. And this here elf can read the writing on the wall as well as the best of them.

It means I can read the deliberate marks, indications, and notes relating to the dig that dwarves always put in their mines. But more than that, I can see the signs that tell you what no dwarf would ever want you to know.

Oh, whether the pick being used is sharp or the wielder skilled; whether a dig is going as intended or if the miners have given up hope; when and where a tunnel has gone off course, taking a bad turn, chosen the wrong vein to follow; or as in this particular case, where and when the miners decided to take a break and abandoned their work for a few decades.

It was right at the silver line. They hadn't even made it into the gold, yet.

Because The Dragon is The Dragon and not a dwarf and decided he'd had enough of living his life underground and would rather be off doing battle and fighting a war someplace.

3.6

I won't bore you with the particulars.

I suppose because I don't know them.

No. I've got a better idea. Why don't you fill out the details?

{KEVIN INTERLUDE

Greed.

Dial it all the way up.

Nothing else matters.

There is no right. There is no wrong.

Only the promise of gold and ownership of a mine --
whatever mine you want – that is, if you do right by this man.

You are a dwarf -- Sving.
Feel the axe in your hand. Feel its heft, its weight, and the
promise of the gold it will bring.
Feel it deep in your soul.

Swing the ax, so you get the feel.
And then drop into the rhyme:

Swing low and drop a foe.
Swing high <blanket-blank> into the sky.

END KEVIN INTERLUDE}

3.7

Sving and The Dragon fought side by side for years; only like
I said, Sving didn't know the man he served was actually The
Dragon.

Because Sving is no idiot. He recognizes a capable leader
when he sees one, and the man, The Dragon, he promised Sving
his freedom, and a bounty in gold -- basically, whatever he wanted.

Exactly, which for Sving meant ownership of a mine.

3.8

So like I've said a couple times now, the two of them fought
side by side, while The Dragon assembled a specialized force.

Yes, just like The Dragon usually does.

What do you mean, why would The Dragon include Sving?
Think about it. Being a dour dwarf, Sving can trace a vein of ore
from its humble beginnings as a lump of coal as it grows into a
vein of gold, a spray of diamonds, and eventually a fountain of
manna, which spews forth from the Heart of the Elemental Source
itself.

Yes, of course you know all this. But clearly you haven't thought through all the implications.

Just because dwarves always mine a vein of ore towards greater wealth doesn't mean they can't trace it in any other direction they want.

It means that as long as Sving's got a pick in his hand and a vein of ore to guide him, he can slip sideways through the vortexes to his heart's content and wind up nearly anywhere.

3.7

Come on, Celli. It's just the sort of skillset a trans-dimensional raiding party would find amazing useful, don't you think?

I'm not trying to sell short all the standard modes: taking a shortcut through the ethereal, jumping into the astral, phasing through the planes, and all the rest have been shown to be very effective methods for outflanking an opponent who hasn't quite mastered the corresponding technique themselves. But that's the key.

Those methods are only effective against an opponent who hasn't quite mastered the corresponding technique.

Walls, moats, guardians; I'm no expert, but can't you just poke a hole into the Elemental Plane of Fire and pretty much make any section of the astral inhospitable?

3.8

Thus, reinforcing the concept that I'm no expert. But The Dragon is. And to hear Sving tell the story, he was always right there at the head of the column*, leading the way, and just before he took the last swing of his pick, breaking into some castle keep**, Sving would step back and let the cavalry take over.

Actually, a berserking minotaur by the name of Ku*** is closer to what I had in mind.

*[Not suprising that Sving would fail to mention the elf who enabled the force to skip through the trees, an aging mystic who favored the K'fr Highway, a leprechaun with an affinity for rainbows, and all the rest. I could go on, really I could. Personally, I go for the K'fr Highway whenever I can, but lately I've been branching out into Crystals and Harmonics, but I digress.]

**[Say, a bedroom full of sleeping maidens or a throne room full of warlords argueing about the coming battle]

***[Or Krala Ka Negrastrum for those keeping score at home]

{KEVIN INTERLUDE

Rock Face

Yes. You knew there was a reason you were willing to follow this man. He's smart. He different. He's brutally effective.

Oh, it took a while for him to move up the ranks; but after he made captain, they let him form his own team and he brought you along.

And here you are doing what you do best, navigating a mine.

The rock is smooth, formed, it's a castle wall. The folks who built had no idea the trail they were leaving from the quarry. Six inches, that's all, and then you're into the keep.

No need to fight through the streets or over hill and dale, straight to the heart, one battle to end it all, end the war, this war at least, before you go on to the next.

So you step away.

And horns first the minatour goes crashing through followed
by his troops, his follows, his men, his elves, his dwarves and
trolls, to wreak havoc on the foe.

Take no prisoners.
No quarter given.
No quarter asked.
Death to them all.

Word travels fast and when it's time to parley with the next,
they bow down low to his minions, never knowing that the one to
whom they are bowing is The Dragon himself.

END KEVIN INTERLUDE}

3.9

Yes, basically.

Well, one battle blurs into the next. It's hard to know where
one campaign ends and the next begins.

Honestly, because I just don't care. And so when Sving talks
about such things, I often drift away and focus on the parts I like,
the parts that make sense, in lieu of how many times he counted
coup or the name of the exact kingdom involved.

#

{At 3.7, the final notes on the parchment are:}

Ku never took any loot
Troops regarded him as a god, a king
Evolution of religion

I groped around at first: Anthropology, Psychology, Music, Arts, and the Humanities. But eventually, I settled on Child Development.

{Actually, I can't say that I reread it just now. It's just one of those things. It would explain in large part why the story was abandoned mid-stream. Writing and/or editing is about rereading the same thing ten and twenty times; and I've gotten to the point where I find it hard to reread the same thing just once. Say la vie. I actually like the feel of that second chapter, what I read of it.

Anyway, you know the come on, if you're up to finishing this or monetizing it in any way, drop me a line, perhaps we can work out a deal...}

Brett@Paufler.net

December 2nd, 2014

Three years later and I haven't touched it since, yeah, this one is going nowhere fast.