

**Book II**  
of  
**The K'fr Road: to Ve'kahn and Back Again**

The Third Book  
in the  
Dragon Bound  
a.k.a Dra@g©n B©und a.k.a  
a.k.a **The D-B©und Adventuring Series** a.k.a

starring  
**Ruby FireHaven**  
and so on and so forth

as conceived, written, and enchanted by

**Celli**  
the  
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and in the Earthen Vortex

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*Happy Birthday to the LeeZards*

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The K'fr Road  
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Book 2

###

Zay'ar'lyne

Zay'ar'lyne; It's a lie, a misnomer. Zay'ar'lyne has checked out of the hotel. I had expected this chapter to start with Bull, Jack, and Esse walking down the road and showing up at the big cast/crew party. At the party Zay'ar'lyne was slated to do a dance number, but now's she's gone. This is why I don't bother with a plot outline. Zay'ar'lyne is gone. She won't be in this scene. Any action or dialogue I had planned with her would be so much scrap, so why plan any in the first place. This little tidbit of information is all behind the scenes logistical stuff, and if you don't find it interesting, just let it drift away. The only point you need to take from this is as Bull walks down the hill with Esse by his side and Jack tucked deep under two layers of flak jackets, both Zay'ar'lyne and the film crew has bugged out.

Bull stops at the edge of the jungle. "Where's everyone?"

Esse wear nothing but a black slip and massive bruise on the side of her face from where the EVIL Warlord hit her. She senses Bulls tension instantly. Pulling into a fighter's crouch, she scans the landscape for danger, and silently wishes she had a weapon.

Jac'lyn slips her head out of the flak jackets. Right away she notices the film crew is gone, but it's not like no one is on the beach. All of the good people of the forest are here. Several dozen pixies flutter about, joining a conversation here, delivering food there, and stealing a sip out of someone's drink further on. They don't want to miss anything and so are trying to be everywhere at once.

Meanwhile, an Elvin matriarch in court clothes is discussing the intricacies of forest husbandry with an Ogre, while her husband flirts with the Ogre's wife. A score of Gnomes have pushed two of the large white party tables together and are enjoying a sumptuous feast. Now and again, they send over one of the youngsters to the line of buffet tables for another plate.

Mixed in among them are Humans and the more unique creatures of the world. A half man half giraffe works the open bar. A turtle like creature with a hundred eyes is the Mer-Peoples envoy. He makes an endless trek from the buffet table to the edge of the surf and back again, bringing plate after plate of sushi and sashimi to the waiting Mers. One of the younger Mermaids tires of this slow process and emerges from the surf wearing only a necklace of flowers. It takes her but a moment to attract the attention of an Enlightened Rhino who helps her drag one of the food tables half way into the surf. When the table is in place, she hops on his back and they gallop off into the forest beyond the hotel.

There is, of course, a swarm of Butter Cups and Fairies filling the sky, but they tend to hang around the K'fr braziers set up like tiki torches interspersed among the tables. The torches are set up on the beach as well to create a focal point, a stage. This is where Zay'ar'lyne would have danced.

What you won't find at the party or anywhere in this vortex are Goblins, Orcs, Skeletons, Depth Fiends, or any of other the countless undesirables. Not even as waiters or servants, but let us forget about them for a moment. They do not exist here. For Gary Ganesh appears in this scene and while he is here, you can be assured no harm will befall anyone.

Presently, Gary Ganesh, the anthropomorphic baby elephant, is lying on one of the buffet tables. His head is in the lap of a Sylvain Nymph. She feeds him the occasional peeled kirin fruit as he tosses roasted peanuts idly into his mouth. "This is the good life," he says.

“You have more guests,” the Nymph advises him indicating Bull and his party.

Gary Ganesh looks up. “Oh! I do!” He is up in a flash, jumps down from the table, and takes a few steps when he turns around. He looks sheepishly back, darts his eyes around, and grabs a handful of nuts. “I’ll be back,” he calls over his shoulder. It is not clear if he is talking to the Nymph or the food.

Nimbly the little elephantine creature runs towards Bull’s party on his hind legs. Bull notices Esse’s crouch and tells her, “he’s OK.”

“We’re safe now,” Jack agrees as she climbs out of Bull’s flak jacket and starts running towards the baby elephant.

Happiness, abundance, and long life; these are Gary’s domain. Physical fitness, exercising, or running across beaches; not so much; Gary is out of breath when Jack reaches him and gives him a giant hug. “Am I glad to see you.”

Gary breathes heavy as he holds Jack. “Huff. Huff. Always a pleasure. Huff. Huff.”

Bull leads Esse forward. “Hi, Gary,” Bull says shaking Ganesh’s hand. “This is Esse...merlence.”

“Ess’mer’lence,” the Fey’an clarifies as she kneels in greeting.

Gary has caught his breath now. Jack does not let go of him as he extends his hand in greeting to Esse. “Ess’mer’lence. What a beautiful name,” and then, “a strong and solid name. I was sorry to hear of your family. Here let me help you.” As he says this he traces along the bruise on the side of Esse’s face. The purple and black recede. It is replaced by a brown, shattered looking starburst. A sharp almost purplish line that is darker than the rest defines its edge. “That should help.”

Esse feels her face.

“Lean down more,” Gary says.

Esse complies and Gary deftly weaves a thin braid into her hair.

“That should do it,” he says when he is done. “That’s it for the gifts.” He holds out his hand. “Peanut anyone?”

“Thank you,” Ess’mer’lence says as she takes one.

“Thanks,” Bull agrees. “What was that all about?”

By way of answer Esse says, “I can understand you?”

“Hard to have happiness and abundance without communication.” Gary turns around and starts to head back to the food. The others follow him. “Just leave the braid in your hair and you’ll be able to understand.”

“What is happening?” Esse asks.

“We’re going to a party.” Gary turns around to make the proper introductions. “This is Jac’lyn, who doesn’t need a flak jacket right this minute.” At his instruction, Jack takes off her jacket as does Bull. “And this is Bull.”

Esse turns to Bull. “You will help me kill the EVIL Warlord.”

Gary interrupts her. “It’s not really an inspired quest... not really enlightened.”

Even with the braid, these words have little meaning to Esse. “You will help me kill the Warlord. You are a great hero. I saw you.”

Gary allows Bull to stammer for a moment before he replies again. “It is most unfortunate what has happened to the Or’tung, but revenge is never satisfying.”

“I will be satisfied when my blade slips into the Warlord’s heart.”

Gary gives Esse and the others some more peanuts as he plops a handful into his mouth. In between bites he asks, “When the Warlord killed your family did you feel his pleasure?”

Esse looks horrified. “NO!”

As if that explains it all, Gary says, “if you can’t feel his pleasure, his pain will also escape you.”

“You know nothing of revenge.”

Gary considers this for a moment as he puts a peanut into his mouth and hands the rest to Esse. “True.”

They are at the buffet. “Please make yourselves at home. As you may have noticed the film crew is gone, so there is more than enough to go around.”

“It’s looks very abundant,” Bull agrees.

“Thank you,” Gary pats Bull on the leg. “Very kind of you to say.” Sensing something is wrong; Gary lifts Jack up into Bull’s hands. “She belongs up there,” he says indicating his horns.

Jack climbs up. “I like it up here.” She looks down. “You all right Bull.”

“Hey, I’m happy. A Pixie riding my horns and feast before my eyes; what more could a Minataur ask for.”

“Revenge!” Esse replies.

Gary shakes his head. “You two play. Enjoy the night. Me and Ess’mer’lence need to talk.”

“We do not need to talk.”

Gary waives Bull and Jack off and turns his attention to Esse. “You want revenge?”

“Yes,” she says resolutely. She has enough of the sight to see the power in this... “Gary?”

“Yes. Gary Ganesh. Revenge will not bring your family back.” He offers her a kiwi.

The Nymph joins them and holds out a slice of lilikoi cheesecake to Esse. “There are better ways to spend you time.” It is an offer for more than food.

“Revenge,” Esse demands.

“A lifetime of training?”

“It is what right.”

Gary dismisses the idea. “Must it be by your hand?”

“No karma, no delay. Now, the revenge of the warrior.”

“But must it be by your hand? If it was by Bull’s, Jac’lyn’s, or another... say Zay’ar’lyne’s hand; you would be satisfied.”

“The EVIL Warlord will suffer?”

“Accounts will be balanced... Now? Tonight?”

Esse kneels. “Thank you.”

“It is not free.”

“It never is. What would you have?”

“The path of revenge is closed. It is done. It is fulfilled. The Warlord will suffer.”

Esse looks up. “He will die.”

“Accounts will be balanced. You are free to live a nobler life, to settle your own accounts.”

“What does this mean?”

Gary dismisses her as he climbs onto the table. “You do not owe me, for I did nothing. Perhaps you owe Bull. Perhaps you owe Jac’lyn. The Or’tung are gone. Perhaps you owe those who are not,” and with those final words he lies down with his head in the lap of the beautiful Nymph’s and enjoys the bites of lilikoi cheesecake she brings to his mouth.

Dismissed, Esse wanders around. The powerful are never clear in the advice they offer. She is in a party, but she does not feel like partying. She wonders at his words. Has the need for revenge has been satisfied? Has honor and obligation been fulfilled. If this is so, then Gary was correct, for she feels empty. She cannot feel the Warlord’s pain. She does not feel better. If she knew how to weep, she would cry. Instead she walks towards a K’fr filled brazier and let’s the fumes fill her mind as she gazes out to sea.

Around her, the party continues. Bull dances with Jack in his horns. The Buttercups fly about. Day turns to night and Esse gazes to sea.

She is the first to notice, but she does not say anything. In the distance a ship approaches. Fire glows from its belly and black smoke pours into the sky. It appears to be a Goblin monstrosity, but Gary is here. They are safe. It is nothing. It is the K’fr.

As the ship gets closer it is clear it is not nothing. The party stops as all eyes turn to the sea. It is a PT boat. Smoke pours from its engines. The sound of its failing motors drowns out the crash of the ocean. Garg stands at the bow. He still wears the green of the Seventh Realms Army. At his side is a revolver and in his hand is

a bottle of whiskey. In silhouette, he leans back and takes a long slug.

From her perch in Bull's horns, Jack says, "I thought they were going to all come in together." It is more of a question than a statement.

"So did I," Bull agrees.

They watch as Garg runs the ship ashore. It docks high on the beach, where Zay'ar'lyne would have danced. Garg jumps down with a bottle of whiskey in one hand. "Garg, first."

It's not a race. Garg, Targor, and Bruce Brilliant were to arrive together, but there it is.

The crowd applauds his entrance. "Garg, first!" they agree as he wanders into the crowd shaking hands and signing autographs.

Eventually the crowd around him dissipates and Bull and Jack seek him out.

"Garg. Bull. Jack," they say as they clasp each other's hands.

"What next?" Garg asks. He's never been one for small talk. If a script has more than a few hundred words in it, it's probably not for him.

Neither Bull nor Jack knows what is next. Tracing Esse's flight backwards and blocking off the Warlord path had seemed like a plan, but Gary has shut that door. They do not know. As they stand there, the boilers in Garg's boat explode. The PT sinks into the sand. It looks like a washed up wreck from the Second Inter-Vortal War. With a burst of smoke, it sinks even further. The sides are rusted out. Waves wash over it. In a smooth transition, in the blink of an eye, the boat has changed. It is as if it has been there for years. Gnome and Troll children play on it. An Elf dives off the stern to join a group of Mermaids, while an old Ogre relates to his grandson tales of epic adventure in a bygone era.

Noting the transition, Garg says, "We wait." There is nothing to do until Targor and Bruce show up.

Then his eyes find Esse's. He sees her through the wavering light of the K'fr tiki torch. He walks towards her stopping a foot



from the flame. He does not take his eyes off of hers. He does not blink. They are eye to eye. They stare at each other, into each other's eyes. No emotion crosses their faces.

Without taking his eyes off hers, he takes a swig of whiskey, and hands her the bottle. She accepts it and drinks as well. The whiskey mixes well with the K'fr. They stand this way for hours, passing the bottle back and forth. They do not talk. There is no need for words. He puts his hand out and traces the pattern on her face.

If I would plan the scene, I would show Garg taking Esse's hand and walking her back to the hotel. Without a word, he would show her to her room. She would go into her room. He would not enter. At the entrance to they would stare into each others eyes and then she would slowly close the door. He would then sit down with his back to the door, and whiskey bottle in hand, he would guard her room throughout the night. But, I don't get to plan these scenes and Esse is not a soft bed, feather pillow type person, so that is not how it goes down.

Instead, when the party is over and the bottle is empty, Esse finds another, a bottle of Fey'an spice wine. She takes a swig and offers it to Garg. He follows her lead. She then takes his hand and leads him down the beach. In the sand, by the derelict boat, they lie down. They stare into each other's eyes for hours. They do not look to the brilliant stars overhead, nor do they pay any head to the roar of the ocean. If they look away, what they have found might disappear, so the gaze into each other's eyes as the night goes by. By the dawn's early light, Garg traces the pattern on Esse face once again and then they go to sleep.

It is not clear what they have found in the other, but it is something devoid of thought or emotion. It is a sort of blissful emptiness, free of hope for the future or fear from the past.

Garg is not known for getting the ladies. Rather, he is known for saying, "Garg BASH!" and little else. Being but a humble narrator and not a prescient sage, I know not if in the morning

light, after the whiskey, wine, and K'fr has worn off, they will find each other's eyes as enrapturing.

###

### Targor 13

Targor is a swashbuckling, debonair, rogue, skilled with the sword, and unlike Garg, always gets the girl. He's done thirteen movies and they all end the same way, in some sort of ambiguous death scene. You could call them cliffhangers if you want to, but he never hangs from a cliff, so I don't know why you'd want to. Here, let me give you an example.

At the end of the first movie, having deflowered King Triton's daughter, Princess Starleene, Targor rides away into the night. Triton being an angry, vengeful sort of guy, calls in his Sorcerer to curse Targor. The Sorcerer says a bunch of mumbo jumbo, lightning flashes in the distance, and then we cut to Targor riding away on the desolate plains of Evergone; where the King's revenge, a giant Blood Hawk, swoops down out of the night and carries a struggling Targor into the sky. The credits roll and the movie ends as Targor is carried into the distance. The moral is simple. Mess with the daughters of royalty and you become chicken food.

But wait. Targor is a box office sensation. It appears all the vortexes love the idea of a debonair swashbuckling ne'er do well who always gets the girl, especially if that girl happens to be some jerk off King's daughter, so they do a sequel. The only problem is, Targor died in the first movie... but did he really now? All we really see is Targor being carried off helplessly into the night. As explained ever so elegantly in the second movie, the true reason for this is that another princess, Princess Y'lene, heard of Targor's daring exploits and sent her pet Blood Hawk to fetch Targor. Targor's backers still didn't have any faith in him and well, it worked for the first movie, so they killed him off at the end of the sequel as well. Once again, Targor steals off into the night leaving the broken hearted Y'lene behind. As luck would have it, he stows

away on a ship that heads right into a storm and the movie ends with Targor falling rapidly to the bottom of the ocean.

The second movie was an even bigger hit than the first, so they had a Mermaid rescue him at the beginning of the third movie and at this point they realized they had a winning formula. In Holly Wood, they don't mess with a winning formula, so at the end of every movie, Targor apparently dies. In his latest movie, his thirteenth, he goes over a waterfall. It's a tall 400' drop. If you bother to count, Targor bounces off the rocks 47 times on the way down. It's a rather less ambiguous death scene than some of his previous endings; being caught in a blizzard, being chased after by a horde of Goblins, or even standing in front of a hundred archer firing squad, cutting away to the commanders face as he yells, "FIRE!"

The end of the thirteenth movie, the un-inspiringly titled Targor 13, is the same as beginning of the fourteenth movie, Targor 14: Time Bomb. Some say Time Bomb is the best Targor yet and I have to agree. Without a doubt it is the best Targor, but it's not really so much as a movie, as a short subject. Anyway, it begins as Targor 13 ends.

A Rock Wight's face fills the screen. Think Yeti with small thin stone spikes for fur and an affinity for earth. The Rock Wight screams and then lurches forward. The camera stays still and behind him we see a pack of Rock Wights scrambling over snow and boulders. An arrow finds one of the Rock Wights and then another. We cut to Targor standing on a slight rise. He shoots off a dozen arrows, reaches for another, and then realizes he has none left. He disappears behind the rise. A dozen Wights soon occupy the ground he was on and then moving forward with the Wights, we peer over the rise. Targor has nowhere to run to. He is backed up to a cliff. He draws his sword. The Rock Wights slowly advance and Targor swings his sword. As a mass they jump back. They stand their ground and surround him. They are happy to wait until their numbers increase even further. Targor looks over his

shoulder. It is a shear drop. He looks forward, to his side. He sees a possible break in the Wight's line and charges. Sword swinging he breaks through the Wights. They attack from the sides and the rear. He has no time to think. To his right is a shear drop. To the left is a swarm of Wights coming from the peaks. He jumps over a small rushing creek, but as he does the ground on the other side rises to meet him. Great chunks of ice and snow rush into the air as an Ice Demon emerges. The ground under Targor's feet gives way and he is swept along in an avalanche that carries him into the rushing water and over the mountainside.

Cut away to a wide shot as Targor flows over an icy waterfall. Count his bounces on his way down 1, 2, 3... 47, as his head careens off the rocks. True, sometimes it is unclear what part of his body is hitting the side of the mountain, but at others it is painfully clear he is taking the blow straight to the face or back of his head.

It's hardly an ambiguous death scene. Rumors are he asked for too much money or demanded too much creative control, but the smart money is on his choice of bedmates. Times have changed. Sleeping with princesses isn't the taboo it once was, but a summer romance with the only daughter of a frigid Ice Demon; that's probably not a good idea.

There is no soft pool of water at the bottom of Targor's descent. Rather than dropping 400' into a nice, soft, frozen, ice covered lake. Targor's lifeless body bounces comically off a pile of boulders the engineering crew 'forgot' to move out of the way into the ice-cold waters of a glacier pool. As if this is not enough to convince you of his death, the turbulence from the flowing water tows him under. We pull in for a close up. His eyes are open and unseeing. His face is white. The last of his breath bubbles to the surface as his lifeless body nestles to the bottom of frigid, ice-cold lake. He makes no movement or show of life. The camera stays on him. Just to be sure, for two minutes as credits and acknowledgments roll, we watch as the last of the bubbles leave Targor's mouth. We know who the best boy is, the lead gaffer, the

costume designer, and countless others who made this movie possible. At the end of it all we follow the last tiny bubble from Targor's mouth. It rises silently upwards for 20 seconds until it breaks the surface showing the icy landscape above Targor's final resting place. Lest there be any doubt in your mind, it is only then that the movie ends unambiguous. The final words on the screen are Targor 13: The End.

It's been 21 long years since Targor 13. The most successful movie franchise ever and just like that, the series stops. No more sequels, books, or even convention appearances. Now and again a rumor surfaces about a Targor sighting in an outer vortex, but it is never substantiated. Details of his life and work come to surface. He was a difficult, demanding perfectionist, "hard to work with," and as the series grew in popularity insisted on more and more artistic control. He demanded complete control over selection of the female lead, an exorbitant salary, and an ever-larger share of the box office gross. Some say he wanted out of his iron clad, lifelong contract Demonic Artists. Some say Demonic Artists wanted out of their contract with Targor; that in the end, it was just business. He was worth more dead than alive. Maybe these rumors are true. Maybe he was locked into a lifelong contract. Maybe Demonic Artists was 'displeased' with Targor's selection of an Ice Demon Princess as female lead. Maybe he had gone to far. As they say, maybe...

21 years ago Targor 'died' on screen for all to witness. His lifetime contracts have expired, but not even death itself can stop Targor. He is not a mere actor, a mere mortal subject to mundane rules. He is a hero. He is an icon. He is TARGOR!

So, sit back in your seat. Hold on tight. What you are about to experience is nothing short of historic. Every Targor film you have ever seen has led to this moment, his crowning achievement. Without further ado, I give you Targor 14: Time Bomb!

###

Time Bomb

Cut to the side of an ice-covered mountain. Watch the sun rise in the distance. Cut to close up of melting ice, back to the sun, and back to the melting ice. The ice turns to slush, turns to water. Water drips from a melting icicle. We follow the flow of water from the icicle downhill. It starts small at first. The drop from the icicle joins others, creating a flow over ice. Trickle become rivulets, become streams and we are once again at the top of the Cliffside waterfall. It is a gushing torrent of water now. Follow the water's flow over the side. It crashed down on the rocks far below, flooding the sides of the river in the spring melt off.

Cut to the bottom of the pool and Targor's lifeless body. The current tugs at his clothes, grabs hold, and pulls him free. He floats to the surface. He drifts with the current. We see his lifeless body float over rocks and thru rapids. We cut high and watch him float around a bend. His icy surroundings turn to rocky granite boulders. He flows through tight rushes of water and serenely floats through a canyon his face towards the sky. At the end of the canyon, the water turns to rapids again and he goes over another falls.

We cut wide, to watch him splash into the calm waters of a Water Nymph's wading pool. She is a longhaired, blonde, blue-eyed goddess. What would you expect? She is a water Nymph. She looks over Targor's body, holds him in an embrace, and gives him a deep kiss breathing life back into his body.

He opens his eyes. He looks around. "Where? Where am I?"

"You are home," she says and kisses him again.

He returns the kiss. He is Targor after all.

A kiss leads to an embrace, leads to a long shot of the two of them by the side of the pool.

Watch in montage... have I ever mentioned how much I love montages? Watch in montage as the seasons pass and 21 years go by. It will go by quickly. Like the blink of an eye or a hundred odd words in a cheap two bit novel... but back to the montage.

They kiss and play. Targor wears a bandage on his head. They swim, dive, and roll on the sand. The bandage grows smaller. Under a crackling fire they roast fish, laugh, sing, and gaze at the stars.

Targor looks up and says, "I can't help but think I'm forgetting something." He rubs his head where the bandage once was.

"You're forgetting how much I love you," the Nymph says and they embrace each other again as they roll into the water.

They run around the perimeter of the pool. Targor and the Nymph climbing on the rocks through the waterfall. They reach the other side and the Nymph waits for Targor by the edge of the woods. When he catches up, she puts his hand on her belly. She is pregnant. He kneels and kisses her stomach.

They are in their cave under the falls. The Nymph gives birth to twins. They present them to the spirit of the falls.

Targor sleeps with the twins in his arms. They build a sand castle by the side of the shore. The Nymph splashes Targor, he splashes her back, and the twins dump a bucket of water over Targor's head. He is happy.

"This is what life is about," he says.

"This is all there is," the Nymph agrees.

The twins study homework and Targor helps them. They grow older and he can't help them anymore. They swim across the pool in a race and the daughters win. The daughters grow up before our eyes. It has been 21 years since Targor has been seen on the screen. We must explain them all.

The girls go off to college. They come back with Mermen boyfriends. The six of them swim around the pool, Targor struggles to keep up. In the end he goes to the shore and prepares a supper of grilled fish. The girls sing a brief song with Targor to appease him, and then they drift off into the water with their boyfriends. He and the Nymph stare at the stars.

"Don't you ever wonder what else is out there?" the Nymph asks.

Targor smiles into her eyes. “I have everything I want right here.” He kisses her. She looks into the distance.

It is autumn. The leaves change color as we watch. The girls are gone. The Nymph and Targor are alone. They stand deep in the water in the middle of the pool. The Nymph has cut her hair. It is short, business like now. “This is where we met 21 years ago.”

“Has it been that long?”

She looks up stream. “Seven is the rule.” She looks at Targor. “I’ve broken that twice.” She looks down stream. “It is time to find out what is next.”

Targor does not understand.

“I will always love you... but it is time to move on.”

He still does not understand. She kisses him as she did so many years ago. Targor falls unconscious, the life seemingly leaving him. He falls into the water. She places him face down and pushes him down the river. The current takes him. He disappears.

“Maybe I’ll go back to college,” the Nymph says and she is gone, like so much water under a bridge.

Targor drifts down the river. He flows through rapids. He does not move. Once again his body is lifeless.

We cut to a scene of Zay’ar’lyne standing by a short falls. If you have read a Hung, Garg, Targor, or even a Bruce Brilliant novel, you’ve probably seen either her or one of her relatives on the cover. She comes from a long line of fantasy book cover models. Her grandmother, for whom she is named after, starred with Targor in his third movie, The Peaks of Passion. It has been Zay’s lifelong ambition to follow in her grandmother’s footsteps. She missed the party on the beach to do this scene. Don’t ask me how she knew where to go.

By the side of the river Zay pauses for a moment so we may appreciate her well oiled, fantastically trim athletic body. The leopard skin bikini she wears does not leave much to the



imagination. Bits of fur and feathers are woven into her long flowing black hair. She wears a dagger at her belt, a bow is strung over her shoulder, and in her hands she holds a spear.

Zay wades into the ice-cold water and stands with her spear at the ready in front of the shallow falls. Moments later she strikes. A fish squirms on the end of her spear. She walks to the edge of the river, guts the fish with a smooth slice of her dagger, and adds it a string of fish already drying in the sun. She turns around to repeat the process when Targor drifts by in the water.

It takes Zay'ar'lyne a moment to figure out the object in the water is a body and a moment more to realize it is not just any body, but Targor's. As she pauses to watch, the body flows by. Once she understands the situation, she does not need to take any time to compose herself. She had expected to meet a living breathing Targor, but in the end, even death can be overcome. Sure footed, spear in hand she runs after Targor's body. It flows downriver surprisingly fast. She runs after it through the forest and over boulders. She breaks through branches and bushes on her way, and then as the river turns to a calmer section she catches up. She jumps into water, grabs hold of Targor, turns his body face up, and looks him over.

His face is ashen white. His limbs are as cold as the water. He is completely and thoroughly dead, but this is just a detail. Zay'ar'lyne is of Picchu tribe. She lives in a magical world. Death does not have the finality here it might have other places. She kneels to lift the body onto her shoulder. Balancing herself with her spear she stands slowly. Targor weighs a good 50lbs more than she does. She shifts the load and then she starts off. Slowly at first, as she wades through the river, but once she emerges she starts to run.

It is an uphill journey through a boulder filled pine forest. The going is difficult at first, the ground rough, but the nature of the earth beneath her feet changes rapidly before our eyes. The boulders disappear. The ground turns smooth. She now runs over a bed of soft pine needles that cushion her feet. Focus in on Zay's

footsteps as she runs and watch with every step as the pine needles on the forest floor around her get bigger and bigger. As she runs, the nature of the forest changes around her. Zay'ar'lyne is a tracker, a vortex runner. The leaves beneath her feet have become broad and wide. They are the leaves of oaks and hickory, but they will not last long. Oak gives way to thinner ohia, sparse mesquite, and then all plant life disappears. All that remains is the gravel she runs on.

Zay is headed for Picchu, The Peak. It is over ten miles uphill from where she started and dozens of vortexes over. Around her the ground has become rougher again, basalt blocks loom tall overhead, but she is on a well-worn path. She does not slow her pace and easily maneuvers through them. As she does the color of the sky and the angle of the sun changes shades ever so slightly. It looks like a trick of the camera, but it is not.

On the other side of the basalt blocks the ground turns to volcanic rock, which crunches under her feet. She is very close now, the going very steep. Nothing is here, but sky and volcanic rubble. Still carrying her load, she runs around a cinder cone and the green terraces of Picchu come into view.

In a moment, Zay is running up steps between terraced gardens. The gardens are thick with life. The soil is deep, dark, rich, and moist. At ten feet the corn looms larger than life. Tomato plants burst like fireworks with their offering, but that is just the tip. Cucumbers, squash, beans, poha berries, lilikoi, and even the type of plants you would not expect at a high altitude like oranges, grapefruit, dragon crest, and apples; if it grows anywhere, it is rumored Picchu has at least one variety of it growing somewhere in its gardens.

Zay does not pause. She runs past the gardens, past the small stone walled village, up another flight of stairs, and enters a massive cavern that looms over Picchu. It is a roomy, large cavern, custom built for a dragon. An apartment building could easily fit into its entrance. Inside it is larger than an aircraft hanger. A whole town could fit inside. Ray continues to run deep into the

cave. At first the cavern is cold, damp, and uninviting, but as she runs deeper, it becomes dry and warm. Light glows from braziers set in the wall. As she continues, the light catches the glitter of coins on the ground. She turns a corner and enters a large room stacked high with gold, silver, and jewels. She runs to the end of the room where a dais is cut into the floor and lays Targor body down in the middle of the runic circle carved into the stone floor.

There is no one else in the room. She is surrounded by untold wealth, but she has passed no guards. This is normal. Picchu is The Dragon's domain and only a fool would steal from The Dragon. Ray does not pause to consider this. She walks to the wall, picks up a horn that is leaning against it, and blows hard. Its sound echoes through the cavern, across the plateau, and down the side of the mountain.

At its call, the braziers turn dark. The treasure disappears and we find ourselves in a smaller room. Targor's body lies naked in the middle of another runic circle. Braziers of K'fr are placed around him. A dozen odd women dressed as Zay'ar'lyne is in animal skin bikinis dance around Targor's body.

The women dance as only wild warrior women can. In the dark light, their shapes and forms are unclear. They twirl, shout, and jab their spears. It looks like a hunting ritual, but it is more than that. Some clans take on a bear as their totem, so that they will be as strong as a bear or a lion so they will be as courageous. The women of Picchu have taken on The Dragon as their totem for his power and his reach. They are calling The Dragon to them.

The K'fr braziers billow smoke. The women dance, thrust their spears, and chant. They promise The Dragon their lives, their bodies, and their sons. They promise The Dragon whatever it is that he desires. They ask for nothing in return, but make this additional offering of a body to do with as he pleases.

The room turns even darker. The dark purple smoke from the K'fr obscures most everything. The women's bodies recede into the smoke and reappear at random. Vision is reduced to near nothing and then The Dragon's face appears. Insubstantial,

wavering, hardly there, but it is enough. The Dragon takes in the dancing women, their offering of K'fr, their bodies, their son's bodies, and this additional body... Targor.

The Dragon's forked tongue licks the air tasting the K'fr and the scent of the women. He makes his decision quickly and starts to fade. Before he is gone, he exhales deeply and fills the room with more purple smoke from his nostrils.

The Dragon's breath seeks out Targor's nostrils and flows into his lungs. Targor's body lurches. His muscles clench in spasm. He vomits water. The smoke has dissipated. He is alone in a room with Zay'ar'lyne. She holds him close under a pile of furs and together they sleep.

###

### A Rude Awakening

It is morning. Zay'ar'lyne holds Targor close under a pile of blankets. They are in a shallow cave and we can see mountains and valleys in the distance. They are no longer at Picchu, though the runic circle they sleep on is the same. They are in a vortex closer to their destination.

Targor stirs.

Zay'ar'lyne wakes in an instant. As Targor's blinks at the dawn's light coming in through the cavern's opening, Zay says, "you owe me."

Targor blinks.

"You were dead. Now you live. You owe me. You owe The Dragon."

Targor blinks his eyes again. "Do I know you?" and then "Zay'ar'lyne?"

"You knew my grandmother. I am named after her. I am Zay'ar'lyne as well."

Targor tries to make sense of this as he stretches, but as he raises his head he starts to black out. He wavers and tries to steady himself.

Zay'ar'lyne repeats her demand. "You owe me. You owe The Dragon."

Targor closes his eyes and tries to remember, tries to concentrate. "What do I owe you? Why?"

"I found you floating down a stream," and then the memory comes back to Targor; of the Rock Wights and an ill conceived romance with an Ice Demon. "You were dead. You owe me for you life," Zay continues.

Targor remembers there was something else after the Ice Demon. In the river... Was it a Nymph? A hazy notion of raising two elemental daughters flashes through his mind, but it could have been a dream... or a movie script he'd rejected. He'd have to talk to his agent. "I don't owe you..."

In a flash Zay'ar'lyne's dagger is at Targor's throat.

Targor tries to smile, but finds the effort to be too much. "Maybe we can work something out," he tries to leer, but instead blacks out as he drifts into unconsciousness. He'd been dead a long time. His body is not yet ready.

Zay'ar'lyne lets him sleep. She goes out to hunt and returns with a trio of rabbits. She starts a fire and roasts them in the mouth of the cave overlooking the valley.

Targor stirs.

"Are you hungry?"

Targor does not answer.

"You owe me," Zay'ar'lyne repeats her mantra.

"I'm never going to get out of here until I agree am I?"

"No."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Revenge."

"It's not very enlightened."

"Revenge never is."

Targor nods and she throws him a rabbit

The scene fades in and out. They are walking down an empty paved road now. Zay'ar'lyne walks with her spear in her

hands and bow strung across her back. Empty-handed Targor walks next to her.

“21 years?” he repeats what she has told him.

“Yes.”

“I bet things have changed a lot.”

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” Zay’ar’lyne reaffirms her statement and leads them sideways into the next vortex. In the distance, past a road and a line of parked cars looms a large white building. It looks something like a country club or a southern plantation mansion set in a tree-lined park. As they walk towards the building they pass a low monument sign lit with golden letters. They are at the Riverfront Country Club and Casino.

As they walk across the greens, cars pull into the drive, and they see men wearing tuxedos and women wearing fancy evening dresses walking up well-lit stairs into the club.

Targor looks at Zay’ar’lyne. “Don’t get me wrong, I like the bikini warrior woman look.” He plucks at his dirty shirt. Decades ago it was a bright satiny white. It is now a dirty beige. His trousers are torn. He is not wearing boots. “Are they going to let us in?”

“They have shops?” Zay’ar’lyne reassures him. “It’s a cross promotion. Don’t worry. They are expecting us.”

True to her word, the Human at the door, they are all Humans in this vortex; the human at the door greets them. “Welcome to the Riverfront Country Club and Casino, have you been here before?”

“No,” Targor replies.

“Then let me show you around.”

I know some folks don’t like to see promotional pieces in fantasy literature and if that is your bent, view this scene as one of the perks of being a famous movie star/hero. All you have to do is show up at a luxury resort and they treat you like royalty. If that bursts your bubble as well, you can just assume Zay pressed a large

stack of coins, er bills in this vortex, into the doorman's hand and this is the result.

Think montage using stock promotional footage and a witty narrator voice over, spliced in with new footage of our heroes antics.

What kind of resort would the Riverfront be, if it didn't have shops? Long shot of the Riverfront mini mall arcade and then pull behind Targor and Ray to watch them pause in utter amazement at all the diversity of selections. Over fifteen shops at the Riverfront! Wow!

OK. Enough with sarcasm. It's a mini mall. It's not like shopping in downtown Rigor Pass, but for an isolated casino in a backwoods dimension, it is pretty impressive. So lets start over.

Targor needs a new get up. He starts with the shoe store and after trying on sandals, running shoes, and a pair of dress loafers, he settles on a pair of soft black leather boots similar to the boots he's been wearing for the past 13 movies. Didn't see that coming did you? From there it's to a tailor shop to be fitted for a pair of dark slacks, a new ruffled white shirt, and another fun sequence with him trying on a variety of hats. Ever wonder what Targor would look like wearing a Mets baseball hat? Well, now you know. We also see him wearing a brown derby, a gray felt 10-gallon cowboy hat, and a black fedora, but Targor is more of a let your hair blow in the wind type guy and so passes on them all. The next stop is the weapons shop. He throws a few axes into the wall for fun and then we see him trying out an endless series of swords and bows. It takes him forever and it's hard to believe, but Zay actually gets bored in this scene.

Oddly enough, Targor isn't bored at all in the next store where it is Zay'ar'lyne turn to try on skimpy revealing dress after skimpy revealing dress. It really is hard to come up with a dress that covers less than a string bikini, but finally Zay finds the right one and they are done with the shopping.

This, of course, means they didn't go into the art gallery, jewelry store, travel agency, flower shop, general store, on site

chiropractic clinic, or gift shop. Targor and Zay are moving on though, so put down that plastic replica of an old time riverboat you've been eyeing and let's catch up.

The Riverfront gives them the bridal suite. After all, they are Targor and Zay'ar'lyne. It comes complete with a balcony opening onto the river, detached bedroom, Jacuzzi, wet bar area, and sitting room all done up in a tasteful Victorian style. They won't really be spending much time in the room, but it's nice to know the Riverboat is treating them right.

Targor gets cleaned up and puts on his new clothes, while Zay slips into her slinky black dress. Will you look at those curves? I think I speak for all the men in the audience, when I say we should just pause her for a moment and reflect on the wonders of nature and the marvels of the textile industry. Zay notices Targor's eyes and gives a twirl for him, which lifts the hem of the dress even higher. Being the ham, Targor strike a pose for her as well and I must admit he's looking pretty good too. When they are finished mugging for the cameras, they strap on their weapons and head on down to the Casino. This is one of those times when it helps to be a celebrity. Unless you're Targor or Zay'ar'lyne, I wouldn't try walking into a casino carrying a bow or a spear.

The Riverboat is a large casino with over a 1000 different slot machines and 25 different table games with limits to meet any pocket book, but there I am sounding like a commercial again. If I was doing a commercial, I might also mention the Riverfront has an award winning spa, three swimming pools, 60 acres of groomed horse trails, four 18 hole golf courses, extensive guest library, an office area equipped with state of the art intervortexal communication equipment, and plenty of nooks and crannies to sit down to count your winnings, plan your future, whisper sweet nothings into that special someone's ear, or simply relax. I also don't know if I mentioned it or not, but they have a friendly, dedicated staff capable of making your next event a rousing success. So whether you need a 3,000 seat stadium style



conference hall to host your next annual meeting or a quiet candle lit table for two in the Riverside's Five Star Bistro restaurant for your next anniversary or private get together; The Riverboat is dedicated to meeting your needs and exceed your expectations. At the Riverboat with any luck your dreams will come true.

As the commentary ends, focus in on a giant slot machine by the entrance to the casino. Watch in slow motion as the reels gently fall into place, 7, 7, 7! Buzzers go off, gold coins drop down, a sexy young lady squeals in excitement, and kisses the gentleman she is with.

And, just between you and me, if you're going to do any gambling at any casino anywhere, try the machine they always put right by the casino entrance. I must have done a thousand of these casino scenes by now and in every one, it's the same. The one by the door hits a jackpot just as the hero's walk in the door. So, do yourself a favor, play the slot machine by the door. My insider tips on how to win big by playing smart over, back to the action.

Focus long past the slot machine and the vixen's passionate embrace to a crap table where a balding middle-aged man throws the dice.

"Craps Again," calls the croupier.

"I'll say," agrees Bruce Brilliant international agent; or should I say, agrees a pot bellied out of shape drunk with a thinning comb over who is slightly reminiscent of Bruce Brilliant. The man tosses another black chip down as he picks up the dice. "For BB7," he whispers as he blows onto the dice. "Daddy needs another hit." He throws the dice. They bounce around and stop on 1-1, snake eyes.

"Crap," he mutters and the croupier agrees with a hearty. "Snake Eyes. Craps again."

He is about to throw down another chip when Zay wraps her body around his. "Let's go."

Bruce does not look at her. "I'm on the edge. I can't leave now. It's going to turn around." He throws fingers one of the two remaining chips in his hand and puts it on the cum line.

"Give it up, you'll never win," Zay advised him.

"I'm Brilliant, Bruce Brilliant. Of course I'll win."

Targor watches with interest as Bruce throws the dice.

"Double sixes. That's good?" Targor asks, but the croupier's retort of "craps again, double sixes" dispels that theory.

Bruce eyes his last chip and whispers to it. "Come on. You're my last chance." He eyes the board. "Snake eyes pays 30 to 1?" he asks.

"Straight up," agrees the croupier.

Bruce puts his chip down on 1-1.

Zay takes a gem out of... not really much carrying space in that dress? Zay puts a gem down on the cum line.

"You're betting against me," Bruce cries in horror.

"You'll never win."

"What do you mean? I always win. I'm Bruce, Bruce Brilliant... you think my luck will turn?" He doesn't wait for an answer. He puts his chip on the cum line. Zay moves her gem over to craps.

"Why are you doing this?" Bruce whines in an amazing un-super agentish sort of way.

"Just roll the dice so we can move on."

"It's not sporting," Bruce complains. "We're supposed to be on the same team."

"So, cash out and let's go. How much is a black chip worth anyway?"

"\$1000," the croupier answers but Bruce is ignoring them. He throws the dice. They bounce around, tumble and turn, ricochet off the back wall, twirl and spin, that sort of thing. As if it wasn't predetermined, they land snake eyes again.

"Crap," he says.

"Snake eyes," the croupier agrees. "The lady is a winner."

"Can we go now?"

Bruce eyes the large pile of black chips the croupier has pushed in front of Ray. She makes the gem she bet with disappear. Don't ask me where she puts it. Bruce looks her over. "You can't really carry all of those chips."

"We can leave them for charity."

"Or, degenerate gamblers," Bruce asks hopefully.

"I thought you were some sort of big espionage agent or something," Targor chirps in.

"Yeah, Yeah. Brilliant, Bruce Brilliant, BB7 to my fans... so about those chips." He thinks for a moment and puts an oversized alarm clock with big bells on the table. "How about a trade?"

"Aren't you coming with?" Zay asks.

"My luck is going to turn. I can't leave now... I'll catch up."

Targor doesn't understand. "Aren't we supposed to see Z or something before we get the clock. You know do a whole bit."

"Come on Brilliant," Zay says. "I'm sure this clock is complicated to work. Let's have Z show us the ins and outs. Maybe get a new toy for the lady?"

Brilliant is twiddling his super agent ring in his hands. "How much do you think I can get for this?" He notices Zay's glare. "Look the clock is easy to work. Just replace the one he has with this one and bingo, it's done. What could be easier?" He turns to the croupier. "So, how much for the ring?"

"What else do you have brilliant?" Zay asks. "Besides the clock and the ring."

"Just my B99-Glock," Brilliant says laying a pistol on the table. Oddly, no security guards rush in to pummel him to a pulp, but then even a bit washed up, he still Brilliant... Bruce Brilliant.

Zay'ar'lyne grabs Brilliant's gun, his ring, and the clock. "There's a quest starting down in the cove soon. If you can sober up and pull yourself together long enough to contribute, you can have your ring back."

"Don't worry, I'll be there... just as soon as my luck changes.

"Whatever," Zay says as she leaves.

Targor follows after her. “I’m surprised... I thought he was a hero.”

“So did I,” Zay agrees. “So did I.”

As they walk down the casino floor Zay’ar’lyne shifts vortexes. They are in a western bar. In the table behind them a croupier yells, “Craps Again!” and an old miner swears, “Damn! Not again.”

Zay does not pause. With the next step the bar disappears, and with the next the sky, the stars, and even the ground. They walk through the foggy plains of shadow. Getting to shadow is easy. It’s getting out that takes some skill.

“What’s here?” Targor asks.

“We’ve been over this Revenge.”

Matt is a few paces ahead of them in the blank expanse of shadow. He does not know he is being followed. It has been a long night of killing the innocent and raping the virtuous. He is tired. It is time to wake up and start the day. He is walking back to his waiting body. He takes off his manna reinforced, protection from everything, spider silk shirt and hangs it on a waiting coat rack. He takes a few more steps and hops out of his flame retardant, abrasion resistant trousers and discards them into the gloom.

Ray and Targor follow behind him. Ray hands Targor the clock. “Just as I told you. Follow him. Leave this with him. Don’t do anything else.”

A few steps more and Zay’ar’lyne cries out. “Matt!” .

Naked, exposed, vulnerable; Matt, the EVIL Warlord turns around in a panic. Zay’ar’lyne charges with her spear. She hits him low in the abdomen and strikes upwards lifting him into the air. She holds him as he squirms on the end of the shaft. He clutches at the spear. His eyes are wide with shock. He gasps for breath as he slowly grows dizzy and the darkness of shadow seeps into him. He fades and dissolves.

As he disappears, Targor follows him.

Zay is alone. She waits. She has a thought. Just in case, she gathers up the clothes Matt has discarded.

Targor reappears at her side laughing. He holds a bunch of weeds in his hands.

“I told you to do nothing else.”

He shrugs. “Hey, I’m a hero. I take the initiative.” Then he notices the clothes in her hands. “Good idea. We should gather it all up.”

They walk through the shadows. They find the EVIL Warlords boots, hat, sword, and rings. They find his bag and place it all inside. They find his horse. Zay grabs it by the reins and holds a blade to its throat. “You will never carry the EVIL Warlord again,” she demands.

The horse neighs its agreement.

She ties the bag containing Matt’s equipment to the horse. “We found you once. We can find you again if you break your word.”

The horse neighs.

“Find a real hero this time,” she says and slaps the horse on the rump. It races off, disappearing from shadow in a few steps.

“Is that a good idea?” Targor asks.

“One never knows... did he have anything you wanted?”

“No.”

“Then no loss.”

Zay and Targor walk on. The sky reappears. Beneath their feet is sand. The roar of the ocean sounds in the distance.

The weeds in Targor’s hand smell of K’fr and Zay realizes why he took them. “He is isolated?” Zay asks.

“For now,” Targor agrees.

Zay looks at him.

Targor makes no offer to explain. If death is not permanent, how can a prison be? Without word, he tosses the plants he has been carrying into the jungle to die or for a Pixie to find and nourish to health.

They have returned to the cove, the party on the beach. The morning twilight fills the air. Garg and Esse sleep in the sand. Bull and Jack are nowhere to be seen. Nor are the majority of the partygoers. Targor leads Zay'ar'lyne over to the buffet tables still piled high with food. On one of the tables Gary sleeps with his head in a Sylvain Nymph's lap. She holds her finger up for them to be quiet.

Pixies and Butter Caps flutter over to join Zay and Targor as they fill up a plate of food.

"My debt is repaid?" Targor asks.

"Yes," Zay agrees.

Targor indicates a chilled bottle of Fey'an spice wine. "Then perhaps you would care to join me over a drink and explain why you didn't just take care of Matt yourself."

"It would be my pleasure," Zay'ar'lyne replies dreamily.

We will leave them here and let Zay in her own time and way reveal her childhood fantasies to Targor.

###

Wake Up Screaming

Let us return to Matt's house. Dee sleeps restlessly on the couch. Cockroaches have found a new home in his beer and Matt has a spear in his chest. Let's take a closer look at that last one.

Matt is fading from the dream world. He hears his name. "Huh," he eloquently vocalizes as he turns just in time to see a groupie running towards him. It is late, but he is after all the EVIL Warlord. He has his fans and then there is the paparazzo. You don't want to get on their bad side, so he smiles, opens his arms in a welcoming hug, and takes a spear straight to the gut.

If you've own the EVIL Warlord EXP video game, we've got the spear sequence all set up as a demo. Funny thing, in a ha, ha, not going to do that again, sort of way, is that all those controls and options you can exercise in EVIL Warlord EXP just sort of recede

out of reach when the pain hits. Sure, the controls are still there, but do you have the presence of mind to activate them?

At first person, it goes something like this. “Oww.” You might try to add, “blast that hurts,” but it’ll just come out as sucking for breath. The pain is excruciating. It’s your body’s way of warning you. You know, “danger, danger,” you have a spear in your gut. If you’re lucky, at this point you pass out from the pain. If you’re not, you clutch at the pole that is now suspending you in the air, as if that will relieve some of the pressure. If there is a person, say an insane warrior woman, on the other end of the spear you might try to meet her eyes and sort of plead earnestly, “please let me down. I promise to crawl into a hole and die quietly.”

She’d ignore you. “You’re looking at my breasts,” she might add. She is, of course, crazy. Here she is wearing a bikini, custom made by wardrobe to reveal every possible curve on her well-oiled body... she actually puts on oil, and she’s copping an attitude about your checking her out. She gives the spear a little twist, because if you’re checking her out, it’s clear you’re not concentrating on the pain enough.

So, feel the spear twist. Clutch at it. Try to suck on air around it. Breathing hurts. See, this is your helpful body again. It’s trying to tell you; every time you breathe, you sink lower on the spear, so don’t breathe. This would be good advise if the different parts of your brain were actually communicating with each other, but they’re not. In response to the intense pain you’re body has dumped every last drop of adrenaline it has into your bloodstream. Now, Adrenaline is great stuff. It increases your heart rate and blood pressure, so you bleed more; it increases your rate of breath, so the spear sinks in faster; and if you’re really lucky the sudden rush will cause you to black out in shock.

Suck in a big breathe of air there, Matt. He’s awake and wide-eyed. He bolts upright in his bed. He’s hyperventilating and it feels like his heart is trying to escape from his chest. All he can hear is the pounding rush of the blood in his ears. Sweating

profusely, he lurches out of bed, scrambles to the bathroom, and splashes water on his face. He stands in front of the sink with the water running for a long time. He starts to get his breathing under control, but wait, what's this? It's his body being helpful again. Remember all that adrenaline that woke him up in the middle of the nightmare? Not only will the adrenaline surge activate his memory nodules, so try as he might, he'll never get that experience out of his head; the left over adrenaline coursing through his veins has to do something before it will dissipate. It doesn't matter that the spear was imaginary, the danger is no longer present, or as is usually the case, the next step is totally unhelpful. See, the adrenaline was there for Matt to run, fight, have sex, or use his muscles for something. He didn't, so his muscles do the next best thing. They use up the adrenaline by twitching at random, i.e. shaking. A little excess adrenaline in the system causes a little shaking. A lot of adrenaline in the system, like from taking a spear to the gut, causes a lot of shaking. Spasms rack Matt's body. He lurches uncontrollably. If you're into technical jargon, they call this little after effect "the shakes."

As we've said, the human body is a wondrous thing. It's great when the different parts of the body communicate with each other. The beauty part is that in the next step of this cascade of events, Matt's puny mammalian brain will interpret the shaking in his body as fear, which as we all know is as good excuse as any to dump more adrenaline into the system, which in turn will cause shaking, which will cause fear, etc. You just got to love it when everything falls into place and the whole array works together like a well-oiled machine.

"I need a beer," stutters the near helpless Matt as he tries to gain control of his shaking body and work his way towards the kitchen. It's hard to drink out of a bottle, when your body won't cooperate, but Matt is determined. He can't hold his hands steady enough so the bottle clinks against his teeth as he as tries to down the precious elixir. Eventually, his efforts are rewarded with a soothing mouthful of creepy crawly cockroaches. Now would be a



good time to bring up that along with convulsive shaking, adrenaline withdrawal also causes nausea. Matt spits the beer onto the rug, drops the bottle of beer off the edge of the counter, and lurches to the bathroom where he will puke for the next few minutes. It doesn't really matter that after the first go, there is nothing left in his gut to puke up. I think we've already hammered the point home that at times the human body is not all that it's cracked up to be.

So far, Matt's morning has sucked. He's woken up from a horrifying nightmare, swallowed a cockroach, and spent the last few minutes dry heaving. Matt tries to wash the vivid image of being impaled on a spear out of his mind by spending the next few minutes splashing water on his face before he stumbles out of the bathroom. Immediately, the bright light from the hall closet blinds him. This is where he grows his weed. He's got a wrap around array of grow lamps in the closet and the walls are covered with tinfoil. With the door open, it's way too bright. The door is not supposed to be open. More importantly, the closet isn't supposed to be empty. He's supposed to have two giant marijuana plants in there; carefully tended and groomed giving off bud after precious bud of perfect resinous delight. He stands at the door. His mind is empty. Somewhere deep in his heart, he is hoping his eyes are deceiving him and if he stares long enough he will discover that his first impression was wrong and the closet is crammed full of weed. His first impression isn't wrong and despite his best efforts he cannot bring the plants back by force of willpower. He stares blanked eyed into the closet for a full two minutes before even crankier than before he grabs one of his last beers out of the fridge.

He leans against the counter trying to figure out where his beloved plants went. In truth, he can't remember having a party last night. Maybe he was robbed. He runs to the front door to check to see if it's locked and that's when he sees Dee sleeping on the couch.

"What are you doing here?" he asks the sleeping form.

“Where did you come from... wake up,” but Dee does not stir.

OK, it’s not like we don’t meddle. This isn’t a purist reality production. It’s unlikely Matt would have gotten Dee into this vortex without our help, so when the mood strikes us, we’ll mess with Matt, as if waking up with a spear in your gut wasn’t bad enough. Anyhow, the compulsion to drink a cockroach filled beer bottle, that was courtesy of us Matt, but then, as we’ve said, so is the beauty sleeping on your couch, so take it all with a grain of salt. The truth of the matter is Dee is a bit of a light sleeper. For dramatic effect, we’ve hit her with a slumber spell. She won’t wake up until Matt touches her.

“Come on, wake up,” Matt says. “Where did you come from anyhow?” He takes a swig from the beer as he taps the couch with his feet. “Party’s over, time to go.”

He kneels down next to her. She really is beautiful. He watches her sleep. He doesn’t recognize her. Maybe she’s somebody’s sister. “Hey wake up,” he says gently. He’s down close to her now. He puts his hand on her, “hey...”

“AHHH!”

Dee’s hands go flailing hitting Matt in the eye as she bolts upward, slamming into Matt’s jaw and grazing his face with the top of her head. The impact pushes Matt backwards over the coffee table where he crashes backwards onto the floor.

“AHHH!” Dee repeats as she tries to push herself as far as possible into the back of the couch away from Matt. Breathing hard she clutches a pillow across her abdomen. “Who are you? Where am I?” she demands to know in Fey’an, which of course Matt doesn’t understand.

From the ground Matt starts to swear. He stands up muttering an endless stream of obscenities on the way. He grabs his now empty beer bottle off the floor, realizes it’s empty, and throws it back down in disgust. “What the...” he swears at Dee.

Dee does not understand his words, but the conveyance of anger is clear enough. Slowly she recognizes Matt, the EVIL

Warlord. She remembers her family, her flight, that she has been taken captive, and she remembers her training, the soft road. She prostrates herself on the floor before the Warlord and asks him what his desire is.

Matt does not understand a word she says. “What the heck are you doing now? Get up? What the flick is wrong with you?” And then in a moment having carefully analyzed the situation, he adds, “I need a beer.”

###

### The Dangers of Chlorinated Water

Matt grabs the last beer in the fridge. As he drinks it, he realizes a beer isn't going to do it. He goes back to the closet and rummages around. “What then flick.” There is nothing left. No bag. No seeds. No pipe. Nothing.

He's getting mad now. He chugs the rest of the beer and throws the empty into the closet and slams the door. “ARG!” He screams. “Who took my plants?” He goes back to the bedroom. He usually has a stash there. He finds nothing. The bathroom is the same, as is the kitchen. From the kitchen he can see Dee prostrated form on the ground.

“Get up!” he screams.

She doesn't move.

“Get the frk ding blast up!” He's in a rage now. She doesn't move. She doesn't look up. She is after all the perfect subservient captive. She will do whatever he says... once she understands.

“Get the frk up!” Matt yells as he grabs her arm.

She stands quickly as he drags her to the closet. “Where is it?”

She says something meekly in Fey'an. She tries to kneel. Matt holds her up. “Where – Is – It?”

She says a stream of seeming nonsense in Fey'an.

“ENGLISH. En-glass-e. Comprehend-e.”

The response comes in Fey'an.

“What the firk language is that?”

Matt notices Dee is shaking again. He lets go of her. She drops to her knees, her head bowed.

Matt walks past her to the kitchen and gets himself a glass of water. He gets on for Dee. “Water?” He holds it out to her where she kneels. He kneels beside her and motions with his hands. “Get up... water?” He is trying to be nice. He hands her the glass. He clinks his glass against hers and drinks.

What manner of potion or poison has the EVIL Warlord given her, Dee thinks. She has no choice, but to drink. It tastes like water. She wonders what it will do.

Matt leads her back to the living room couch on which Dee was sleeping, he sits her down and takes the chair opposite her.

“Who are you?” he asks. He is calm now. He gets no reaction and so points to himself. “Matt. I am Matt.”

De’sca’lence says her name, but it doesn’t come out right. She repeats it. “De-s-call-le-ens.” It’s all slaughtered. She can’t even say her own name. What manner of befuddlement was in the water she drank?

“Da-call-ends?” Matt asks.

De’sca’lence tries again, “Dee-t-sca-klens?” Worry fills her eyes. She touches her lips. “Dee,” she repeats daring to go no further.

“Dee?” Matt echoes.

He has a strange way of talking. It is very flat almost dead. His voice does not carry the singsong of the forest creatures. It is more like the words of a Skeleton Chieftain. De’sca’lence says her name slowly again, “Dee...” She cannot finish it. The ‘ in her name denotes the use of magic. Did the liquid she drink render her unable to use magic? She looks around with concern. There is no magic, no manna. If it is there she cannot see it, cannot feel it, and more importantly cannot use it. The EVIL Warlord... “Matt,” she says the name.

He nods, he is pleased. “Dee,” he says.

“Dee,” she repeats in the same flat voice. It is a cruel prison he has crafted for her. Without magic, it is true, she will be unable to escape, unable to hop vortexes; but without magic, how can she live? How can she please her master? A lifetime of training and determination to be the perfect slave is not enough. To live without magic, the inhumanity, the needless cruelty of it; she tries to hold back, but she cannot, she starts to cry. Tears fill her eyes. Silently she sobs. She cannot help it. Her body shakes. Death is one thing, but a life without magic. It is a dreadful, hopeless fate.

Matt watches her. He does not know what to do. “What? Why are you crying? Look, I’m sorry I yelled at you. It’s not your fault.” He sees that her glass is empty. Knowing nothing better to do, he goes to the kitchen and fills it back up. He sits down on the couch next to her. He does not know how to give comfort. He tentatively touches her shoulder. “It’s OK,” he says soothingly as he holds out the glass of water. “Here, drink this. It will help.”

Spasms of grief shoot through Dee. The EVIL... Matt; Matt she corrects herself. Matt holds out another glass for her to drink. She convulses as she grabs hold. She is the perfect slave. The perfect captive, trained since birth to follow the soft road. She tries to hold the glass, but she cannot. Matt steadies her grip. In Fey’an she says, “I hope my grief gives you pleasure, Matt.” She drinks the liquid in one fell gulp and hands the glass back to Matt.

It is empty. He does not know what else to do. He goes and gets more. In the kitchen he can hear her weep.

He returns to the couch and tries to comfort her. He puts his arm around her. She hugs him close. He is nervous by the contact. Even in her grief he can think of little else but her body and how her tears are making her nearly insubstantial dress even more so. “Here,” he says holding the water between them, so he can distance himself from her.

“Whatever my master desires,” Dee says in Fey’an as she tries to comply, but the grief is too much. Her body will not obey her commands. She shakes as she unintentionally spills the water

around her. “I’m sorry,” she cries as she desperately pleads. “Please. No more.” She holds Matt close so he will not refill the glass and cries an endless string of tears.

As she cries, she hears birds outside. They do not sing as birds do. They have lost their voice. Matt has stolen the magic from them as well. Matt is uncomfortable, he goes to move, but she will not let him. “Please. No more,” she pleads again as she holds him close. Unbidden the warrior chant rises to her lips. They would be the words her sister might say in battle to give herself comfort during a hopeless assault. She had always considered them mere words, but now she knows them to be true. She whispers them into Matt’s ear, so that he might enjoy her pain. “The lucky one’s die,” she says and then the grief at her loss racks through her body and it is all that she knows. “The lucky one’s die.”

###

Hi Ho – Hi Ho

Dee has stopped crying, but Matt is still holding her. He could stay like this forever. The most beautiful girl in the world has magically appeared on his couch and every time he goes to pull away she holds him closer as if she is afraid he will leave.

True, she’s afraid Matt will leave only to return with another watery potion to drink, but Matt doesn’t know that. What he knows is that he likes the way she feels, the way she smells, the way she looks at him as she snivels and tries to hold back the tears. It’s no accident. This is what the soft road is all about. Dee’s grief is real. Her tears are not fake, but that doesn’t mean she’s forgotten her training. With every breath, every sniffle, every clutch of her hand, or look of helplessness she is endeavoring to manipulate Matt. She’s trying to get him to fall in love with her. It’s working.

Finally Dee lets Matt get up and he quickly returns with a box of tissues. Bumbling and self-conscious he dabs at a tear on

her face. She looks at him with the eyes of utter helplessness. Let's let them enjoy the moment.

In a second Matt will realize that he is already late for work and off they will go, but until then, let's take this opportunity to go over some logistics of ambiguity. Not because I claim to have any morals or ethics, but because of confidentiality laws, we won't divulge Matt's last name, where he lives, or even anything remotely personal about him. It's odd when you think about it. With a signed release we can open a vortex and drop a Goblin war party in Matt's living room, but if we so much as divulge his last name we stepped over some sacred line. Normally I wouldn't even bring this up, but I expect in a moment Matt will head off to his bartending gig and this may raise some questions. Although bartending is more lucrative than many people realize and it has plenty of fringe benefits, namely getting paid to flirt with girls all night long; bartending doesn't pay enough to enable one to afford a house in the islands. Not these days anyhow. So how does Matt afford the house? Well, to start, he doesn't sell enough weed to even cover the gas for his car, so that doesn't explain it. What might explain it is the untimely death of his more successful wife from cancer, an inheritance from a father he never really knew, or that he is renting and is currently between roommates. None of these explanations are true, and we won't go into it further, suffice to say Matt is lucky he has a house. One of the perks of living in a house is that Matt gets to live precariously from paycheck to paycheck as he desperately scrambles to stay up with rent or the mortgage payment, whichever it might be.

I also won't be bothering to describe Matt in very much detail. He's not as tall as he'd like to be, not as good looking, not as clean, well dressed, in shape, financially secure, and so on. What I'm saying is without too much effort, should you desire, you just might be able to imagine yourself as Matt; or your boyfriend; or that guy... I'll let you work it out. In the end, you probably already have an image in your mind about Matt and it's probably pretty accurate, so go with that.

Dee is holding onto Matt. Even without magic at her disposal, she is pleased with the spell she was able to weave around Matt's heart. It surprises her when Matt suddenly stands up.

"What time is it? Why am I asking you? You don't even speak English." He looks at her. "English? Englashe?" It doesn't matter. "Work," he says. "Money, moolah. I got to go. We got to go."

He runs into the bathroom and hops in the shower.

She goes to join him.

He holds the shower curtain around himself as he pushes her away. "Come on a little privacy."

She ignores him and sheds her insubstantial dress.

He disappears into the shower. "NO! GO!" He yells.

She nearly falls in fright at the shock of his voice. She scrambles away.

In a moment, Matt peaks his head from around the curtain and is relieved to see she is gone. Who knows whose kid sister she is. He showers quickly and puts on a pair of black slacks and a white shirt. He almost looks like somebody trying to dress up as Targor for Halloween.

He runs around the house frantically looking for his wallet, keys, sunglasses, and cell phone. He notices Dee on the couch. "PUT YOUR CLOTHES BACK ON!" he yells as he throws her dress at her.

At his yell she shakes and screams. "Yi-Ahhhh!"

He wants to comfort her, but she's naked. He takes a moment to get a grip. "Sorry." He gives a weak smile. "Sorry, OK. Work. We go to work now. You... you," he says as he points.

"Dee," she smiles.

"Dee gets dressed." He tugs at his shirts. "Clothes. Get dressed," and then he takes a moment to gaze at her body again. He shakes his head. "Get dressed," he says over his shoulder as he finds his sunglasses on the kitchen counter, one down, three to go.



The wallet is at the bottom of a pile of clothes. The keys are next to the toilet and the cell phone is...

Ringing on the coffee table. Dee yells.

The phone rings again. Dee yells again. She pushes herself into the cushions trying to escape the evil monstrosity. She is paralyzed by fear.

Matt grabs the phone and looks at the number. It is his boss. He doesn't answer. "Come on," he says grabbing Dee by the arm.

She is frightened and confused.

He guides her outside, locks up, and heads to the car. He unlocks the car with a beep and Dee shrieks again.

Matt turns her. "Stop yelling."

She is shaking. "It's OK," he tries to reassure her. He helps her into the car, gets in himself, and backs out of the driveway. "Your seatbelt," he instructs her, but she hasn't got a clue. He leans over her and belts her in. As he is doing this, a garbage truck roars by belching smoke and you guessed it, Dee screams an ear-piercing holler of blood curdling distress directly into Matt's ear.

"Stop Yelling!"

Dee shakes. Matt puts his finger to her lips. "Shsh... please... pretty please. No more screaming."

They pull out to the main drag and despite her efforts Dee screams again as a pickup truck goes by on the highway.

Matt jumps at her voice and tries to ignore her. Work is only a mile away. He turns on the radio. Dee screams again. "Great," Matt mutters to himself as he turns up the volume.

Dee holds on tight to the arm rests. Her knuckles turn white as the ground rushes by at an incredible speed. Matt is clearly insane. He is charging at other metal beasts. It is only a matter of luck that they do not ram into each other. She breathes deep. Over the loud chanting of Gra'gl priests, which must power this infernal contraption, she tries to regain her composure. The Warlord must know what he is doing. The other beasts move to the side of the road at his approach. There is a pattern. It is predictable. A car

pulls out of a driveway in front of them, breaking the pattern. She cannot help herself. She screams.

Matt turns up the volume on the radio some more. The tires on his car squeal as he turns recklessly into the bar's parking lot. It shouldn't surprise him, but it does, when Dee screams again. She was not expecting the turn. She knows her screams are annoying Matt, the Warlord, but she can't help herself. She is hyperventilating. She is terrified. She even screams when he pulls into a parking spot and suddenly stops.

He is angry. She can see it in his eyes. She apologizes in Fey'an. "Sorry."

He turns off the engine, reaches over to roll down her window, and then looks at her. He bursts into laughter. "Welcome to America. Where the heck are you from anyhow?" Dee does not understand and he does not wait for an answer. He points to the building he parked behind. "Rest. Compose yourself. Come in when you're ready... or not, whatever. This is where you were last night, right?" He doesn't know. He can't remember. He's not in the habit of picking up girls. Girls are not in the habit of being picked up by him, but where else would she have come from. He gets out of the door. Things are safe here. He rolls down the driver's side window as well before he shuts the door.

Dee yelps as the latch catches.

Matt slaps his hand on the car door. Dee gives a start as she fights down another yelp.

"Calm down. Relax." He laughs at her. "When you get it together, come inside," and with that Matt disappears into the bar.

Dee sits in the car. She does not know how to work the doors. She pushes on them, but they do not budge. She pulls on the belt, it gives way so she is comfortable, but it does not unlatch. She looks around. She sees no sign of magic. The birds do not have their voice here either. Matt must be the only one who can work magic in these parts. She sits in the car. Remembers Matt's smile, but does not know it was based in anxiety and confusion. She reasons, he enjoyed scaring her, but she had screamed too

loud. She must try not to yell as loud. It will be difficult. She had not intended to yell at all. She cannot remember a time when she ever felt as frightened as she does now. She holds her hands out and watches them shake. He must have cast a spell of fear over her. She was not always like this. It must be what he wanted of her. She thinks this over as she sits in the car and she waits for his return.

###

It's off to work we go

Matt, the Warlord, is gone. Dee sits alone in his car. She waits. Cars pull into the parking lot. She shakes and grows tense whenever they do. She is happy when their occupants go into the building to meet with Matt. They make her nervous. Some of them smile, waive, and say "Hi." It is a greeting. Despite her anxiety, she smiles, waives, and says, "Hi," back. They are Matt's friends, visitors, or underlings. It is her obligation to meet them with kindness.

Time goes by. The sun disappears behind nearby hills. It grows cool. The evening birds are out. They hunt in the parking lot for food. Dee tries to call them to her, but she has lost her voice. She slips out from under the seatbelt without undoing it. She does not know how to undo it nor does she know how to work the door, so she climbs out the car window. A pickup truck pulls up as she does this. Her body lurches with startled fright despite her will. She nervously waits. Will this be interpreted as an attempt at escape? She waits in the car window. "Hi," she says to the pair of Lieutenants? Foot soldiers?

"Hey."

"Hi. Let me help you." The Warlord's assistant gives her a hand.

She thanks him in Fey'an.

He smiles. "English?" he asks. When she doesn't answer he says the equivalent in Japanese and Tagalong.

His companion says a few words in Hawaiian.

She recognizes the effort to exchange languages. She can sense the different tonal inflections and emphasis of sounds in even a few short phrases. A slave learns the language of her master. The opposite is not expected. Perhaps these are the Warlord's interpreters. She goes down the languages she knows. A dozen of the realms tongues. All more or less related; Elf, Pixie, Classic Fey; she even tries the magical chants she knows. She says them sheepishly as she slaughters the words. She does not have any magic at her disposal to say the words correctly.

It becomes clear they do not share a language.

"Going inside?" one of the young men asks as he points with his thumb.

"No?" She does not know if it's the correct word. She had heard Matt say it decisively. It was a refusal. She put her hand on the car as if to say, I stay here. I belong to Matt.

The answer seems to appease them. Maybe it had been a test. Either way, they are satisfied and they depart into the building were Matt holds court.

When they were gone, she shivers. The evening is approaching. The warmth of the sun is gone. She feels a breeze blow easily through her dress. She wonders how cold it gets here at night, but she quickly forgets all of this when a bird hops close by.

"I am a friend," she says to the bird in Fey'an. Though she knows other languages, and Classic Fey may have been a better choice, she feels most comfortable speaking Fey'an. When she talks in other languages, she always has to convert it back to Fey'an in her mind. Classic Fey is one of the worst. First she has to convert the words to Modern Elf, then to High Elf, and finally to Classic Fey. It is a long process and not conducive to conversation.

"I am a friend," she repeats to the bird as she kneels in greeting. "I am sorry I don't have any food," but the bird does not seem to mind. She smells like a friend ought to smell. The bird, a

myna, and its mate hop closer. They let her scratch their heads and when she puts out her hand they hop on. She carries them out of the parking lot and into the grassy field where she lays in the grass with them and helps them hunt for grubs. “This is a good one,” she says as she holds a beetle in her hands. “Which one of you wants this?”

Matt has come out of the bar. He watches Dee silently. Are those really birds eating out of her hand? The birds notice Matt before Dee does and they fly away.

“I can’t believe you got that close to those birds.”

His voice startles her. She looks around quickly in a panic. She checks his face and his eyes for any sign. He is not angry. He is smiling, pleased. She runs back to the car and puts her hand on it as if to say, here I am, right were you left me. She realizes Matt has been enjoying watching her form as she runs. She slinks over next to him and gives him a hug as she whispers provocatively. “My Master. My Liege. My Matt.” They all mean the same thing to her. “What is your pleasure?”

Matt enjoys her embrace, but he pulls himself away. Though in truth Dee is older than Matt by several decades, she looks younger. He doesn’t know who she is, where she is from, or... anything about her. As much as he might desire it, he is hesitant about any intimate contact with her.

Dee senses the emotional distance. She puts her arms around her shoulders as if to say, I’m cold, I need your warmth, and tries to hug him again. Matt does not fight her advance. He lets her hold onto him. He enjoys the sensation, the warmth and closeness of her body, but her presence makes even the littlest task more difficult as his concentration wavers and he can’t help but steal glimpses of her body out of the corner of his eyes. Fumbling with his keys, he beeps the car trunk open. Dee is startled by the sound, jumps, and yelps. Matt closes his eyes and shakes his head. It’s just a car beeper. Dee notices his annoyance and says, “no yelling?” as she puts her finger to her lips.

“No yelling,” Matt agrees as he takes an old Cardinals jacket out of the trunk and helps Dee into it. She is cold. More importantly, her dress is a little too revealing for the bar.

Dee beams with delight. It is a gift. He cares for her. It is protection against the cold and it bears his crest. No. This coat does not bear the markings of an EVIL Warlord. It is gray with red stripes and lining and has a crest of a red bird on the back and front over her heart. He had seen her with the birds and made a custom crest just for her. It is more than just a jacket, just a gift. It is a mark for all to see. He has claimed her for himself, but not just claimed her; claimed her for the value he sees in her; as a friend to birds, as a Fey’an. Dee beams with delight. She tries to kneel at his feet, but he will not let her. She tries to thank him with a hug, to press her body against his, but he retreats from the gesture. She is not put off. He has claimed her. She bows her head in deference. “My Master, Matt,” she says in words he does not understand.

Matt straightens the jacket, zips it up, and leads her into the bar. It is a half restaurant, half bar. He leads her to a stool in the bar area and has her sit. Dee looks around. The lieutenants smile and wave to her. She smiles and waives back.

“You know them?” Matt asks, but Dee does not understand. She turns to look at Matt.

“Do you know them?”

She smiles. She makes no move to join the lieutenants.

“OK, maybe you don’t know them,” he continues. “So, just sit here, you know, maybe somebody will come looking for you.” He hands her his cell phone. “If you need to call somebody...” He breaks off, it is clear she does not know how to work the phone. He flips it open. Shows her the dial pad. “What’s the number?”

Dee smiles. She does not understand.

A blonde girl, who looks suspiciously like Da’zi, puts a tray on the counter and orders a slew of drinks.

“Look, I’ve got to work,” he says as he starts to fill Daisy’s order. “Hang out, call whoever you need to.” Where are his

manners? “Can I get you anything? Soda, wine, beer, orange juice?”

“Orange juice,” Dee says repeating the last thing he said trying to make some sense of it. Matt fills Daisy’s order, puts a glass of orange juice in front of her, and goes on with the duties of being a bartender.

Bars are nothing new in Dee’s experience. What sort of fantasy slave wench would she be if she had never been in a bar before? She watches Matt work. It seems like typical bartending stuff; pouring beer, mixing drinks, and putting in the occasional order for food. She wonders if these are his friends. He is joking with everyone at the bar. Even without understanding the words, she can grasp that they were having a good time. That a warlord would work part time as a bartender does not surprise her. Many heroes retire into a second career of tavern ownership or work behind the bar. What more could an adventurer want after a lifetime of slaughtering evil monsters... or ransacking castles and plundering the innocent princesses they contained? It all made perfect sense to Dee.

Except, he is evil. True, Matt is what he wished Dee to call him, but to the rest of the vortexes he is still the EVIL Warlord. He would not stop being evil in his retirement or his off hours. She thinks on it and tries to figure out the angle and then in a flash she knows. He is pretending to be these people’s friends. She can sense it in his eyes and in his tone of voice. Behind the bar is a wide array of bottles. She wonders what vile magic lurks in the bottom of each one. She wonders how he decides which potion to give to any particular customer. Does he sell their souls to Gra’gl, a devil, or does he simply lay a curse on them for the pure joy and malfeasance of it.

She turns around and faces the room. The bar stool rotates beneath her as she is done. She smiles. It is fun. She watches Da’zi at work. She does not look happy. She looks like she’d rather just take a sword, slit the throat of the customers, and be

done with it. Dee listens to the words Da'zi uses as she repeats them silently to herself. "Can I help you?" "May I take your order?" "Another round?" She catalogs the words Da'zi says and the response they elicit, "beer, bloody Mary, daiquiri," and "wine" among others. It is a queer flat language. Even when they seem happy, their voices do not sing. It as if they say the least amount possible to convey meaning, but take no joy in verbal flourish.

Dee has decided to help Matt deliver his potions. It is not an ethical question for her. She is his slave, his property. She is to do his bidding. It is not optional, subject to debate, or open to discussion. Besides, she does not know what Matt is doing for sure. Perhaps the potions he gives them lengthen life... or these are his countrymen after all; perhaps what he feeds them dampens their spirit and prevents them from launching nightly crusades into other vortexes. It would not be the first time an evil creature realized the true nature of its kind and turned against them or weakened his clan for his own betterment.

The decision to help came quickly, but it is not Dee's place to take rash action, so she watches longer than she needs to in order to assure herself she understands the routine. She watches Da'zi at work. She is obviously unhappy, perhaps overworked. She hates her customer's. This is clear. She hates Matt as well. Dee wonders if Matt realizes this, but then she remembers how he enjoyed torturing her. Of course he knows this. Da'zi as well must have no choice, but to work here. He is Matt, the EVIL Warlord... but it is clear Matt is not enjoying the night as he might ordinarily. He does not like leaving his station from behind the bar to wait on tables. Perhaps it means exposing his back, leaving the protection of the bar, or simply missing some of the conversation. Dee has watched enough. She is ready. The next time Matt comes around into the sitting area, Dee grabs a tray like she has seen Da'zi do and beats him to the table with the lieutenants.

"Maay, I help U," she says slowly and deliberately.

The lieutenants hold up their bottles. "Two more."



Dee takes the empties off the table and holds the tray for Matt to see. “Two more,” she repeats without the slightest idea what it means.

She goes to the next table and repeats the process. Matt watches. Dee turns around and repeats the table’s order to Matt. “Mar-ga-ra-eta,” she says slowly and then dead pans in a somber voice, “another,” as she shakes an empty tumbler.

“OK, you’re hired,” Matt says as he returns with her to the bar.

“And make it snappy, I’ve haven’t got all night,” she says repeating the meaningless phrase of banter she has heard Daisy say.

Matt turns with a sour look in his eyes, but when he sees Dee’s happy smile he grins as well. He plays along. “I’ll get right on that.”

As we speed through the next few hours. Dee serves drinks. She smiles, laughs with customers, and is amazingly well versed in the art of presenting her body for viewing pleasure, while keeping it out of hands reach. They had been short handed. Daisy’s mood noticeably improves. She is able to join the conversation at the bar and helps Dee with the more difficult orders. Matt is happier. He is pleased with her job. She can tell. He watches her and smiles. Dee knows Daisy always stays on the opposite side of the bar from Matt, but if she is to be his concubine, Dee must establish her rights. She walks behind the bar and holds Matt’s hand as she repeats the orders. She sees him make the easier drinks, beer, wine, and takes it upon herself to fill these orders herself. Matt does not seem pleased at first, but she can tell it helps, so she continues to do it. She is lost with the food orders though. Daisy must handle those, but Daisy does not mind. Food orders mean bigger tips.

As the night goes on and customer’s leave Dee copies Daisy’s actions and brings the bills to Matt. He rings them up and

gives her the change. When they leave it on the table, Dee brings it back to Matt.

“It’s yours,” he says.

Dee tries to put the money into his pants pockets.

“You can’t do that,” he says with a nervous laugh as he backs away. “Here put it in this empty pitcher.”

Over time the pitcher fills up. Dee has an award winning smile and a way with her fantastic body. Her tips are large.

The shift continues and Dee waits on tables. The pitcher fills up with coins and crumpled bills. There is a crash from the kitchen when a stack of dishes falls. Dee jumps and yells in response.

Matt reassures her, “it’s all right.”

She starts bringing out food as she continues to carry heavy trays filled with drinks. It is amazing how many phrases she has picked up without really understanding what they mean. Some of the later customer’s do not even realize how limited her vocabulary is.

A TV, a crystal ball, has been playing some important sporting event in the corner all night long, but the game is now over. The sound from the TV is turned down. Dee is relieved when this occurs. Every time the crowd cheered, she had to brace herself from yelling. They turn on music instead. A girl invites her boyfriend to dance. They do a slow number in the corner, but after the first song is done, he sits down.

Dee knows that in your better bars, girls dance on tables and the bar tops. She knows how to dance. There are few things she enjoys better. As the next song starts, she climbs up the stool onto the bar. She does not understand the words to the song, but from watching the previous couple, she has an idea of which part of the beat is important to follow in this vortex.

Pretend for a moment you have just arrived at the bar and you have never seen Dee before. As the next song starts you see a

petite, lithe, brown skinned Fey'an beauty climb onto the bar. She wears a cardinal's baseball jacket over a revealing, thin white dress. She sways hypnotically as the diamonds in her long black hair reflect the light from the neon beer signs around her like liquid fire. Her movements are unreal. I know words fail to describe these things, but try to visualize it. Her body does things that a body does not normal do. Dee's hands trace patterns in the air, like flowing water or a ribbon being twirled around. The pattern goes from one hand to the next. She picks the flow up with her shoulders and head. It is a feat of skill and years of practice as her entire body moves like jell-o. Her hands move like they are made of rubber as she sends a wave off them and into the mirror behind her. She appears to watch for its reflection and catches it as it returns. The wave enters her hands, travels through her arms, shoulders, torso, hips, legs and then feet. She glides around the bar in a circle with out ever seeming to moving her feet. She comes to the end of the bar and turns around. The different parts of her body play off each other. One wave starts in her foot. It travels upwards in a flowing curving moment. Another starts in her hand and travels downward in the same surreal way. She is a Fey'an. She travels the soft road. If she had magic at her disposal, she could do so much more, but even without magic, her movements are near unbelievable. It is as if her entire body has become a long flowing piece of silk that is blowing in the wind. Her body flows in a fluidity of motion as it traces circles and repeating patterns in the air.

All eyes in the bar are on her. Conversation stops. It truly is a remarkable sight. It is like viewing a contortionist or circus act. You wonder at it. How can a body do that? You wouldn't believe it, except there it is. She dances in perfect time to the music. When the song is over, the bar erupts in applause. They share the wonderment of what they have seen with their hands. The air fills with thick layer of emotional release. There is no doubt in anyone's mind, they have just witnessed something magical, miraculous.

Dee smiles happily in acceptance of the applause, but in truth, there is only one person's reaction she cares about. She finds Matt's eyes and smiles at him brightly. Are you pleased? She asks with her eyes.

"That's fantastic," he says as he joins the bar in applause. He silently hopes she will not find whoever it is that brought her to the islands and that she will come home with him again tonight by default. He looks at his hands as he tries to imitate her. He does not come close. How do you get a body to move like that? He does not get far in the thought.

A voice from the kitchen, mesmerized like the rest until the dance was over, calls out angrily. "Get her off the bar!"

He was going to add, "What are you trying to do? Shut me down?" dancing on bars is illegal, but in response to his shout Dee yells in fright and loses her balance. As she falls, she notices the shout came from a short man reminiscent of Dr'gr.

Matt catches her, breaking her fall. It is blind luck that he is standing beneath her, but Dee knows this is not the case.

She fell because of a yell from his henchman, because she is on edge from the fear potion he gave her. When she fell, he was waiting for her. It is not a coincidence. He cares for her. He must. He has given her a personal crest to wear for all to see. This was all an elaborate ploy to show her that he cares, he can control her, and that he will protect her. She need, but trust him, and he will provide.

"I am happy that I am able to please you Matt," she whispers in Fey'an as she holds him close. Soon, she will know how to say the words in his language.

She notices he is about to put her down, so she shakes and feigns fear for his benefit, his pleasure and because she does not want him to put her down, not yet. She is light in his arms, Matt does not mind. He holds her.

The soft road has worked. He will protect her and care for her and she will fulfill her end. She will be the perfect slave, the perfect mistress, and the perfect concubine. She knows many

dances, many arts. She will show him them all. She will please Matt, her master, however she can.

###

### The Sleeping Dragon Problem

Have I mentioned that Dee has trained since infancy in the ways of the soft road? The things she can do...

I know in some of the more warrior prone vortexes the whole concept of a soft road is a little alien. So let's review. If you come from a warrior culture, you know conflict is inevitable. If you accept that a death on the battlefield is an honorable and likely fate, it stands to reason that your loved ones might someday also find themselves up against the wall and in a similar fate. The question arises; at the end of time, when your forces are destroyed on the field of battle, your troops are routed and defeat is inevitable; do you want every last member of your clan to die, swear a hopelessly futile blood vendetta, or otherwise throw their lives away against what has been up until that moment a superior force? Or, when your numbers have been reduced to a mere fraction of what they once were, maybe it's time to concede the opposition is stronger, smarter, more numerous, or simply luckier and to surrender and take on their ways. Fighting till the bitter end is the hard road. Accepting the historic inevitability of defeat and preparing for its eventuality is the soft road. And, if you've been training since birth to give up your ways and be the perfect slave, you might be surprised at how little of your ways you really have to give up and how nice slavery can be. Needless to say, the soft road is not for everyone, but it can work... and if nothing else if you are from a warrior culture, isn't the soft road just the sort of insidious philosophy you'd like your enemies to adopt?

From Dee's perspective Matt has proved himself on the field of battle by destroyed her clan and taking her prisoner. He has proved his competency as a warrior and he has proved the

superiority of his clan's ways over her own clan's ways. From Dee's point of view, Matt has earned the intrinsic right of mastery over her. He is a worthy mate and due all attendant rights, privileges, and pleasures. He is her Liege. Obedience is an imperative. Dee has surrendered, completely and without reserve, her heart, body, mind, and soul to Matt.

As such, it was inevitable from the start of the evening Dee would go home with Matt. No one is looking for her and she is not looking to escape or go anywhere else.

So, let's join the happy couple in their marital bedchamber... but wait? What's this? Dee lies on the couch distraught, listening ever hopeful for her master's call, worried that she did something to displease him. Matt, on the other hand, is in his bed staring at the ceiling. He is tormented by his desire for Dee. She was throwing herself at him, but it would be wrong. He couldn't do it. Desire for Dee and remembrance of last night's dream will keep Matt awake most of the night. But again, how can this be? Dee is all Matt has ever dreamed about and by virtue of the soft road Matt is all Dee has ever dreamed about. Why are they not consummating this happy union?

The explanation is simple. In the end, Matt is a good guy. This isn't a storybook for him or a role in a movie. This is his life. He doesn't know Dee is willing to give him everything and anything he has ever dreamed of by virtue of the fact he is the EVIL Warlord. He doesn't know that her kingdom has been destroyed or that he did it. He doesn't know she has nothing to go back to. He doesn't know the first thing about her. Where she came from? How she appeared on his couch? Why she's here? The language she is speaking? Nothing. Who knows who will eventually come looking for her? More importantly, he's been brought up in a very restrictive, slow moving sexual culture with extensive courting rituals. It is a culture where there are very real physical, legal, emotional, social, and financial penalties for choosing the wrong mate or having an ill-advised one-night stand.

Some people would play this scene out differently. Some people, even as we speak, are loading up the Home Cumming sequence in EVIL Warlord EXP. Keep in mind; there is a reason Dee is with Matt and not one of the other countless warlords out there. In the end, Matt is a good guy.

I can already see the hate mail. “The EVIL Warlord killed my family, destroyed my entire vortex. How can you say he is a good guy?”

It’s simple. I say it, because it is true. Matt is a good guy.

Why it might not seem this way, is a problem of perspective. In inter-dimensional trans-vortexular philosophy, there is a thing called the Sleeping Dragon Problem. In a nutshell, the Sleeping Dragon Problem goes thusly. In his sleep, a dragon dreams of burning a vortex’s crops, ruining their land, and destroying everything they worked their whole lives for. Understandably, the villagers of that vortex are upset. They form a mob and wielding torches and pitchforks they attack the dragon in his lair. This all seems clear cut. The dragon burns some crops, so the villagers attack the dragon, but from the dragon’s point of view what happens is that he is minding his own business trying to get a few hundred years in of much needed rest and his slumber is disturbed by an angry mob. He’s cranky, tired, and upset. He takes the only reasonable course of action and burns the villager’s crops, ruins their land, and destroys everything they hold dear. From the villagers viewpoint the dragon struck first, but from the dragon’s viewpoint the villagers struck first. Where this gets really interesting, is even if you look at it objectively thru high powered crystal balls and cast all sorts of revelation spells on the subject, you still don’t get a clear answer. Once you cross over a vortex boundary the Law of Intervortex Ambiguity comes into play and the result is Temporal Instability and Casual Fracturalization. It is impossible to determine ultimately who attacked first, the villagers or the dragon. The villagers will always view the dragon as attacking first and the dragon will always view the villagers at

attacking first, but an outside observer will simply see villagers and a dragon at war and it will be impossible to determine who attacked first. Happily there is an easy solution. If either side doesn't attack (turns the other cheek as it were), the other side won't attack either. Thus if the villagers choose to ignore the fact that the dragon burned their crops, the dragon won't burn their crops. Or, if the dragon ignores the villagers coming at him with torches and pitchforks, they won't come after him with torches and pitchforks in the first place. Unfortunately, although the solution is easy, it is hardly ever utilized as most villagers don't understand the subtleties of inter-vortex causality and dragons aren't very reasonable when they are being provoked by an angry mob.

A similar, but by no means related problem is the Butterfly Effect. The Butterfly Effect is most often misrepresented as a way of saying the future is so unknown and casual forces are so intertwined and subtle that the mere flapping of a butterfly's wings can bring about the downfall of an a great empire. Though it is true that ordinary mundane butterflies have this power, the explanation for why this is so is misleading. It is a well-documented fact that as empires and cultures grow in power, the activities of the leisure class expand. They collect art, drink fine wines, have dinner parties, go to boring lectures, and you guessed it; they start collecting butterflies. Historically when this happens, some butterfly somewhere flaps it's wings in grief and the days of that empire are numbered. So far, this is hopefully clear-cut and easy to understand. An empire starts to collect butterflies, the butterflies respond by flapping their wings in grief, and the presto bang-o through the diffusive nature of casual linkage, the empire collapses. It's straightforward and unambiguous. Where the complexity arises is when you have a particularly sentient and prescient butterfly, a sort of butterfly prophet if you will, who sees the wanton murder of his fellow lepidopteras happening in a (perhaps Gra'gl given) vision of the future. This is an understandably traumatic experience for the butterfly and in response to it he either proactively flaps his wings or simple can't



help himself and sort of let's his wings fall down in a little sigh. Either way, once it's done it's done. The winds of change are in motion and another empire collapses, because it's citizens at some future date might have collected butterflies.

Unless you're a Blue Adept of the Wizards Circle, this probably doesn't make a lot of sense to you. We can take it a step further though and say, if this doesn't make sense to you, it goes a long way towards explaining why your application to the Wizard's Circle was turned down. Oddly, and if you think things have been confusing so far, just wait; Oddly, although not understanding The Sleeping Dragon Problem or the Butterfly Effect is often cited as the reason they turn down an application, that's never really the reason. The Blue Adepts turn down every application they get. You see, and I tell you this in all confidentiality, so don't go blabbing it around... OK. This is mass market, so I guess everybody will know. Spill the beans all you want. Nobody believes me when I say it, so nobody will believe you either, and that's the beauty of it. So, I'll tell you the secret. To be a mighty wizard all you have to do is say, "I'm a mighty wizard," and then do whatever it is that a might wizard would do. It really is that easy.

Bruce Brilliant will do this in the next chapter or so. Of course, precious few wizards are mighty. Most are eccentric, mysterious, unreliable, careless, dangerous to those around them, and amazingly haughty. This is the type Bruce will become, but all it will take to become a wizard in the first place is his claiming to be a wizard, stopping by props to get a wand, and changing his name a little. Instead of introducing himself as secret agent Brilliant, Bruce Brilliant, those around him will comment on his wizardly ideas and actions, in a manner befitting his new station. They will say his name in a way that communicates a respectful wonderment and awe in his abilities. Try visualizing Jack saying, "brilliant Bruce, simply brilliant," in a tone dripping of sarcasm and you'll begin to understand what I mean. Anyhow, the bottom line is claiming to be a wizard and acting like a wizard is all it

takes to become a wizard. Really, it's that easy. Once you do that, the Blue Adepts will send you off an acceptance letter in no time. So, now you know why your admittance application to the Blue Adepts was turned down. They turned down everybody. I mean, if you can't be bothered to say, "I'm a might wizard," and then start acting like one, you probably don't have what it takes to make it through the grueling years of study and apprenticeship that being a Blue Adept requires.

Being enlightened is as easy as being a wizard. To be enlightened, all you have to do is say, "I'm enlightened," and then start doing whatever it is that enlightened people do. Oddly enough, because you are enlightened, you'll know exactly what to do. Of course, nobody believes me when I say this. "It's not that easy," they say. "It takes years of practice, study, and dedication." I don't deny it. For most people the path to enlightenment is a long hard road, until they wake up one morning and realize, "Hey, I'm Enlightened," and then start doing the sort of stuff that an enlightened person such as themselves does. I say if the end result is just waking up and saying I'm enlightened, why not just start with that instead of waiting half you life?

This isn't just some random gibberish to fill up a book. It's the real deal. If you don't believe me, just ask Gary Ganesh the next time you see him. He'll back me up. He's like an authority on enlightenment. He knows.

And, believe it or not, that brings us right back to Matt, the whole reason we went down this thread in the first place. Gary Ganesh says accounts are balanced with Matt and, like I've said, he knows this sort of stuff. If Gary says accounts are balanced, then accounts are balanced. It's simply the way it is.

Why? Because...

From Matt's perspective, everything he ever did as the EVIL Warlord was not real. It was play, pretend. It's a little unreasonable to come down hard on the guy for what is metaphorically equivalent to playing a game of chess. If the pieces

aren't real, then killing off pawns isn't a big deal. It's not until you realize that the pieces are real representations of actual lives and souls, that the true nature of what is actually taking place on a chessboard becomes apparent; but it's a little late in the game to be bringing in new metaphors, so let's stick with what we know.

Matt conducted his activities across vortexes. When crossing vortex boundaries the Sleeping Dragon Problem arises. Did Matt set the actions of his fantasies into motion or was he called forth from beyond to fill a role. It is a little simplistic to say that the thousands of Goblin raids Matt took a part in over the years simply would not have taken place if Matt hadn't participated. It's all fine and dandy to say there would be no war if everybody put down their swords, but in the history of Man, Goblins, or the vortexes, it has never happened. Little corners and little pieces have made treaties, but there has always been war, always been conflict, and innocent people have always died. Always. Since the beginning of time. So, even if Matt did not participate, all of the military actions he took part in would have still taken place and all those innocent bystanders he killed would have still died. No war has ever not been fought simply because some one, ten, or ten thousand people refused to fight. It brings to bear an important point. Was Matt the casual factor in these events or not? The Sleeping Dragon Problem says no. Without a force to fight against, without a mob of angry villagers, there is no dragon massacre. To blame the dragon, to blame Matt, overlooks the problem. In a nutshell it take two to tango.

This is just the start. The Butterfly Effect says that the casual forces are so subtle, that it is impossible to understand the full ramifications for any action, but more importantly, if a mere lepidoptera prophet can bring about the collapse of an empire, of what unimaginable power do the greater beings have. If Gra'gl, Karthrax, or any of the others had desired Matt to be in a fight or not in a fight, is he, a mere mortal, strong enough to foil their desires? More importantly, the butterfly flapped it's wings long ago, Matt's fantasies do not go back eons to trace casual factors

and subtleties of politics and international relations. He shows up for a battle and nothing more. The battle was there, planned and enacted, a fate accomplished before he even started dreaming.

I am not saying we should not accept responsibility for our actions or that Matt should escape unpunished. Rest assured, he will be unable to consummate whatever relationship he might desire with Dee, before freedom is made available to her. Whether she will take it, or will feel obliged to stay with Matt, I know not, but it is not unreasonable to suppose at some point Esse will show up, capture Dee, and give Dee the freedom to follow her true heart's desire. I'm not saying it will happen, but it does seem likely; if not in point of fact, then by proxy.

At which point, if Dee goes away, Matt will know the pain of losing his heart's true desire. He will live the rest of his life knowing all his dreams were within his grasp, but he failed to make the grade. In the meantime, he will be tortured by the proximity of her fantastically hot body. As if that wasn't enough, to make matters even worse, he will not be able to escape into the fantasy of daydreams. If we go back to his shift at the bar, we can see him pause every time he goes to poke a toothpick into an olive, lemon, or slice of orange. He has been reliving the spear to his gut the entire day. Tomorrow he will awaken by an arrow shot into his throat. The next day he will awaken to his leg getting cut off by a sword. The next day he dies in a failed charge against a machine gun position in the trenches of World War I; and on, and on. From this day forward, Matt will be unable to escape into his fantasies. His fantasies are doomed to lead him directly into a reliving of his own, vividly painful death. So, Matt is in a cruel prison of sorts. His nightly forays into the vortexes will quickly end with his sudden death. He will relive this death throughout the day, thereby cutting off his only other escape from the mundane world, his fantasies. Further, due to his own inhibitions, which we will play on and magnify, he will be unable to consummate a sexual union with the girl of his dreams and, as if all this wasn't enough, since

he is cut off from the world of fantasy alternative forms of release will be beyond his grasp.

You say he killed your family? You say it's not enough?

Remember, revenge is a fool's game. It never is enough. It never is satisfying, but I put it to you, Matt never fantasized about killing helpless farmers in their sleep. He never fantasized about jumping a wayward traveler and stabbing them in the back. He met opponents on the field of battle where they showed up of their own free will and volition.

Don't take my word for it though. Gary Ganesh will be with us again soon enough. He's crazy-worlds smarter than I am about these things. If he says accounts have been settled, then accounts have been settled and if he's got an issue with anything else I've said here, I'm sure he'll make mention of it.

###

A Portent

The cove is just a hop skip and a jump away from the chaos vortexes. At the transition from night to day and day to night the air picks up the reflection of those less stable dimensions and the display in the sky can be incredible.

Jack is lying in Bull's arms. Bull's chest rises and falls in rhythm with his snores. It is a reassuring, comfortable sound to Jack. She is happy and content. She knows that she is safe. No harm can befall her. She can see Gary's sleeping form in the distance and she is in Bull's arms.

They are at the edge of the jungle overlooking the beach and the site of last night's party. They are not the only ones here. All along the forest's edge, every dozen feet, there are similar groups and couples. Home is not that far away for any of them, but who wants to leave the biggest party in these parts for the last ten years and for many of the groups, home lies in different directions.

Jack sits up and wiggles in tight next to Bull, holding his arm across her chest to keep warm. She watches the sunrise.

The stars slowly fade. The black of night becomes, purple, dark blue, and then a violet that stretches over the sky. The high cirrus clouds become more visible and then the painters go to work and go crazy with the color. The sky fills with a deep dark blood red...

“You can’t miss a portent like that,” Nancy one of Jack’s cousins says as she flits over. “Say it’s a little cold,” she adds by way of excuse as she nestles in next to Jack under Bull’s arm.

“You’re not trying to horn in,” Jack says a little un-Pixie like.

“Don’t be like that Jack. Share the wealth.” She runs her hands over bull. “He’s hot. They’re enough to go around.”

“He’s mine!” Jack warns her.

“Shhsh. You’ll wake him. You know how cranky Minataurs are... oh, sorry Bull.”

“Wow! Now that’s a sunrise!” Bull exclaims. “Hey Nancy what’s shaking?”

“I am big guy,” Nance says as she jiggles back and forth, nuzzling in tighter.

Jack glares at her.

“What do they say?” Bull asks.

“Red sky at night, sailor’s delight. Red sky at dawn, sailor be warned,” Nancy helpfully chirps.

“That’s it.” Bull ignores Jack as he put his other arm around Nancy. “A sky like that; you know a bad storm is coming in. Fifty foot waves, buckets of water...”

Nancy is game. She plays along. “Typhoons, hurricanes, a downfall of water. It’ll be something... probably lighting and hail,” she adds as an afterthought.

“Want to see it up close, Nancy?” Bull asks. “We’re going on a boat trip this afternoon. I’m sure our course will take us right through that. It’ll probably be the storm of the century.”

“You’re kidding,” Jack says.

“No. No doubt about it.” Bull is serious. “A sky like that. We’ll be in a boat before dark for sure. I’d lay money on it.”

“Why? You’re crazy?”

“So, you want in Nancy?” Bull asks again ignoring Jack.

“Ah, you see. I’d like to, but I got this thing. I got to go. Catch you around...” Nancy’s voice trails off as she disappears back into the jungle.

Jack smiles. “You just said that so we could be alone.”

Bull puts both of his arms around Jack and lies back down. “I didn’t think you were the jealous type Jack?” The sky fades from bright red to orange and yellow. “I’d sleep if I were you Jack. We’re not going to get any tonight on the boat.”

“You’re not serious?”

Bull brings her up next to his nose. He breathes his warm breath into her face as she wraps herself around his neck. “Fifty foot waves?” she asks as she drifts off to sleep.

“Probably hundred footers at least,” he whispers soothingly into her ear, but she is already asleep.

###

An Omen

It is afternoon. Most of the Pixies, Butter Cups, Elves, Gnomes, Ogres, Hippo-Men, Giant Mongooses, and other denizens of the forest are up and have gathered back around the food tables for a late snack and an early drink. Targor and Garg are talking shop, as are Zay and Esse.

A band of frogs is tuning up their instruments.

The noise wakes Bull up. As he moves and stretches, Jack wakes up as well. “It’s time,” he says. Before she can get worried he says, “relax.”

“Are you sure Bull?”

“I’m sure. We need to go to Gary’s store. Get some supplies. Find out the good word. I’m expecting a package.”

“What’s in the package?”

Bull flips Jack up onto his horns. "I'm not sure... I'm not even sure there's a package, but..." he walks briskly towards the store. "You know how these things go. If I say I'm expecting a package maybe they'll be one. Let's just see how it plays out."

In the store Gary Ganesh is waiting for them. "Good day my friends."

"Hi."

"Hey. We need some motion sickness pills," Bull says to start. "Do we have some credit or something on account of the movie guys?"

"Credit?" Gary asks. "Credit is not good for business." He sees the concern in Bull's eyes. "What do you need?"

"I don't know? The motion sickness pills."

Gary walks behind the counter, pushes a rolling ladder along until he comes to the right spot, and then climbs up halfway to the ceiling. The wall behind the counter is filled with cubby holes, stacks of bottles, and a mess of rolled up paper, books, and half filled store displays selling everything from ginseng gum to firecrackers and rolled up fortunes.

Gary climbs back down. Come here Jack he says. "It's a patch. One application of the Captain's Cure and you're good for the rest of the adventure."

"No puking!" she says excitedly.

"Guaranteed."

Bull watches Gary put the patch on. It looks just like a band-aid. In fact, Bull could have sworn it came out of a band-aid container.

Gary notices his eyes and shrugs.

"Maybe I should take one as well," Bull says thinking it through. If Jack isn't going to spend the trip puking, maybe somebody else will. He doesn't need to be the one.

"Of course," Gary agrees and puts a band-aid on his arm. "Anything else?"



“I was kind of hoping you’d help me out... maybe give me a package I could open later.”

Gary smiles his award winning; it will all work out smile.  
“No package... that would be cheating.”

“We don’t mind,” Jack chirps in. “Cheating’s good. We like cheating. Don’t we Bull?”

“Sorry,” Gary says as he holds out a cookie jar. “Gungu snap?”

“I am kind of hungry,” Bull says as he grabs one, as does Jack.

“Maybe you’d like to take a couple for later?”

“Yeah. Good idea,” Jack agrees as she fills her pockets. Bull takes an extra couple as well as he looks around the store. “I’m not really good at the whole provisioning racket... maybe... maybe we should wash up.”

“Be my guest,” Gary indicates the way to the rest rooms.

“What’s this all about,” Jack asks as they walk down the way.  
“What good are gungu-snaps?”

“I have no idea,” Bull says as he swings open the restroom door. He is disappointed to see it is just the same small restroom it’s always been. True, it’s not really the same. With Gary in charge of the store, it glitters with a magical white glow that any housewife or ad executive would be proud of, but Bull had been hoping for a supply room, maybe Z from the Brilliant series making a cameo and outfitting them with weapons or something.  
“I guess we wash our faces,” Bull says.

Jack turns on the faucet and they clean up. “You were hoping to get some supplies weren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Like a super death ray wand or a ring that does cool stuff?”

“Something like that,” Bull agrees.

“What do we do now?”

“I don’t know? I guess we just close are eyes and grab stuff at random.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jack agrees.

As they exit the restroom, Bull calls out to Gary, "OK, if we just grab some stuff."

"Peanuts," Gary calls from the front of the store.

Jack flits up onto Bull's shoulder as he walks to the front of the store.

"Peanuts," Gary repeats, but they don't understand. "You can't take it with you."

Jack just about jumps out of her skin.

"No, no," Gary laughs at her. "You're going on a boat ride, right?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"So, take some snacks and call it a day. If you pack six months worth of provisions, you'll be at sea for six months. If you take your flak jackets and case after case of equipment, your boat will only sink. Your best bet for a short safe trip where your ship doesn't sink is to take nothing, but a little snack. I recommend peanuts," Gary said as he hands them each a bag.

"I think I can see the logic in that," Bull says as he nods his head.

"So, explain it to me."

"It is easy Jack." Gary smiles. "How can you loose what you no longer have?"

"I'm not keen on riddles," counters a perturbed Pixie.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Gary ignores her as he hops behind the counter. "Where did I put it?" He pokes his head out worriedly. "Don't go," he says before he disappears again. "Where did I put that?" And finally, "Aha, here it is," he calls out triumphantly as he emerges with a dark top hat. "We've got a promotion going on. No purchase required. Just reach in and grab a slip of paper."

Hesitantly Bull reaches in, grabs a small folded slip of paper, takes it out, and reads it. "Map?"

"A map," Gary says excitedly. "You won a map. I just happen to have it here in my back pocket."

"A map of Ve'kahn," Bulls says doubtfully.

"Genuine antique. Now you Jack."

Jack reaches in excitedly. She can see where this is going. Gary is giving them a package without giving them a package. Sort of hiding right out in the open with it. “Seeds!” she cries out.

“Of all the luck, I have those in my front pocket. Now you two run along and have a good time being heroes.

“Are we really going back to Ve’kahn,” Jack asks worriedly. “You’ll come with us right.”

“Oh, I forgot, one more thing,” Gary says as he hands them each a fortune and hurries them out the door.

In a daze they let themselves be pushed out. Before they are two steps out the door, the door slams behind him. They turn around. The store is already dingier. A closed sign hangs in the window. Gary is gone. Out of the store. Out of the vortex. Possibly out of the story. Things could turn grim. His protection is over. It’s not cowardice. It’s simply the way it is.

Hesitantly, Bull opens his fortune. “It says; With Great Risks Come Great Rewards. What does yours say?”

“You Can Never Go Home Again.” Jack looks at Bull and reminds him worriedly. “I’m from Ve’kahn Bull.”

“Maybe he got them mixed up.”

“I don’t think he did.”

Bull takes her fortune and hands her his own. He puts on a cheerful face as best he can. “Great Rewards, you sure pulled a good one.”

But Jack demurs. “It doesn’t work that way Bull.”

“Sure it does Jack. Sure it does.”

###

Boat Now

It’s time for some action.

Cut to a street level view of an old dirt road tracing a line into the distance through a sugar cane field. The scene is peaceful, serene. The cane wafts back and forth in a gentle breeze. A pair of mongooses sit by the side of the road and enjoy a fresh egg

together. Birds are singing. The sky is blue and out of the silence, the bottom of a car goes screaming over the top of our camera position.

Don't ask me why we couldn't hear the car coming. We must have had a sound filter on or something. Now that we've turned the filter off, the roar from the car's supercharged, three miles to the gallon, competition engine with dual Hu'at exhaust fills the air. The car is a classic shiny metallic green Cadillac with Zaire water buffalo horns tastefully mounted to the front hood.

We cut to a side view of the car showing Bruce Brilliant at the controls. He's got on a black leather cowboy hat, worn jeans with matching jacket, and dark sunglasses. A pair of fuzzy red dice hangs from the rearview mirror, which he taps with his fingers as he smiles at the camera. His luck must have turned. It is the only way to explain why sitting next to him is the famous lingerie model Klara Bo Southborne. Cut to a view of Klara's feet inside the car. It is in her contract that we pan slowly from head to toe the first time she is on screen, so enjoy. She wears stiletto heels. As we pan up, it is revealed that she is wearing tight, low cut jeans. Instead of them making her look sexy, they make her look old and past her prime; like she's put on a few pounds and the jeans are working overtime just to keep from splitting at the seams. The contract says we have to pan, it doesn't say we have to make her look good. We pan up a bit further to reveal a large diamond mounted in her belly button. The diamond is worth more than you, I, and everybody we know put together will earn in our lifetimes. Further up we come to Klara's most important assets framed in a loose white tube top, which gives them free reign. As they speed along the dirt road bouncing back and forth, and I do mean bounce, shimmy, and rock hypnotizingly back and forth in a jiggling manner pleasing to the eye, pause for a moment to ponder the imponderable. Are they real? A gentleman doesn't ask, which means Bruce did. She was suitably shocked and appalled at his effrontery stating, "I do declare," while arching her back slightly and thrusting her chest out further. Word to the wise, if you have

to ask, they're probably not real. Having paused long enough at her bosom, if we can coax the cameraman upwards... there we go. Around her neck she wears enough diamonds to buy a small vortex and then we continue up to her face. Blonde hair, pouting thick ruby red lips as real as her tits, lipstick covers the cigarette she holds in diamond-encrusted fingers. Pan out a bit to take in a bit of the road. They fly over another hill and Klara says her trademark line yet again, with heartfelt emotion and zeal, squeezing whole paragraphs of meaning and promises of future delights into a single catch all phrase; "I do declare." Although Klara is a Highborn Elf, no one has accused her of being anything but Low for years. Bruce skids through a hairpin turn and Klara says her line again, "I do declare." She is practicing. She is, after all, an artiste and we have promised her a speaking role.

In the back seat sits a Giant Praying Mantis they picked up hitch hiking. He is none other than Irvin Mont star of the Grasshopper Chronicles. He's a very cool, quiet, reserved Mantid. In a typical episode of the Grasshopper Chronicles he doesn't say much. He hooks up with a nice family who is being trampled down by an abuse landlord, overbearing boss, or annoying neighbor who Irvin then kills and eats. It's a happy, empowering show that has won numerous awards for its clever dialogue and depiction of real life solutions to real life problems. Just last season it won the coveted GORY award for its DIE-ALEX-SIS episode. In DIE-ALEX-SIS, Grasshopper meets up with a down on its luck family. Mom is an alcoholic, dad is out of work, and their daughter, Shelly, has kidney failure. To make matters worse, every day at the bus stop Shelly is harassed by her friend Alex's nine-year-old bully of a sister, Katie. It really is an emotionally charged scene when Grasshopper walks Shelly to the bus stop and without saying a word lops off Katie's head. He then disembowels her on the spot and gives her kidneys to Shelly. She puts them in her lunch thermos, rushes off to the hospital, and has the surgery she needs to save her life. Grasshopper even visits Shelly in the hospital. After he is done cheering her up with a retelling of

Katie's death, the episode ends as he puts on a doctor's outfit and sneaks into the terminal cancer ward to spread his particular brand of good cheer. As it often the case with high caliber shows of this nature, the networks were hesitant to give the Grasshopper Chronicles a try. It is rumored that Irvin had to kill, or pitch his idea to over 17 production assistants before he finally talked with a visionary who wanted to live and could see the potential in a homicidal insectasoid with a heart of gold. Truthfully, I haven't got the slightest idea where Bruce and Klara picked up Irvin, but I'm not going to be the one to tell him we don't need him.

Bruce does not slow up as he reaches the cove. He drives onto the beach and through the party. The Pixies and Buttercups take to the air like sea gulls, while the earth bound revelers dive in all directions. Not content with one pass, Bruce whips the car around in wild u-turn, but he loses traction and the wheels dig into the sand at the edge of the water.

Klara sums the action up nicely by saying, "I do declare," and that my friends, is what's called acting.

You might think folks would be upset about a madman tearing through the middle of a quiet party on the beach, but these are mostly industry people. They are used to the wild reckless antics of stuntmen and set scenes that have almost no discernable purpose.

"Nice car," Targor observes as he watches a wave roll up against the front tires. "Tides coming in." He looks at the sky. "Storm's coming in as well."

Bruce forgets about Klara and his passenger as he gets out and gives Targor a slippery handshake. "Where's that Amazon?"

"I'm glad you could make it," Zay says in greeting.

"Yeah, Yeah," he hands her a bag of gold. "So, my ring."

Zay'ar'lyne smiles. "I'm not a pawnbroker. You want the ring back. You have to help."

Bruce takes her hand and places the gold in it. Zay lets it drop to the sand. “Don’t be difficult,” Bruce says annoyed. “Look, I’m here. I’m playing. I work better with my ring.”

Zay shrugs.

“The Picchu are not known for negotiating,” Targor explains.

“Fine, Fine,” Bruce says. “So first stop is weapons. Who needs a weapon?” he calls out as he walks over to the trunk. He takes a wand out of his pocket and taps the trunk with it. It doesn’t seem to do anything.

“I do declare,” Klara says as she tossed him the keys.

The keys do the trick. Inside the trunk, Z sits at his workbench. “Hi there Bruce. Ready for action?”

“Just outfit these guys,” Bruce says as he leans against the trunk.

Z has it all. Whatever you might want AK-47/5889s, glocks, magic swords, rings that levitate, disappear, or make sounds in the distance, carpets that fly, potions that make you larger, smaller, slipperier, prettier, stronger; if you’ve seen, heard, or read about it, Z has a newer, better, more powerful version of it. Typically he works the high tech side of things, but he is versatile professional, eager to break out of his pigeon holed role. Not that we plan on helping him with that, but every cameo helps.

We need not go through the blow by blow of outfitting everybody. Bull gets a nice sharp Ax. Jack gets a small bow. Esse gets a simple sword and even Klara grabs an AK-47/5889.

“Do you know how to use that?” Bruce asks.

Klara pulls the trigger and once again the Buttercups take to the air and the other revelers dive for cover. The beach erupts in a cloud of sand where countless projectiles explode in the sand.

“I do declare,” Bruce angrily spits out beating Klara to her line. “How’s it going to look, when I do the same thing with my wand?” He pulls out his wand. It is a very complicate looking wand, with dials, slides, and little targeting eyesights. He points it seemingly by accident into the crowd. It doesn’t take a genius to see what is coming. The revelers once again scatter as the ground

erupts in a ball of fire. “See, just doesn’t have the same effect,” Bruce exclaims sulkily as he slams the trunk of the car onto Z’s head.

It’s always a good time for another, “I do declare,” so Klara avails herself of the opportunity.

“You’re a wizard now?” Zay says doubtfully.

“Yeah. Garg is a mercenary. Targor did a secret agent spoof...”

“Actually, legal wouldn’t let us do the Bruce Brilliant spoof, so we just played it straight.”

“No matter,” Bruce waives him off. “I’ve got the wand. I’ve got the hat.” He tips his cowboy hat. “And, I’ve got the reckless attitude.” He says as he tracks a slow moving anthropomorphic porcupine wearing suspenders with his wand.

Zay grabs hold of the wand and forces it towards the ground. “You can’t just say you’re a wizard and become a wizard.”

“Shows what you know,” Bruce counters and then smugly adds. “It’s why you’re not a wizard yourself.”

Irvin Mont is filling up at the buffet tables. Garg watches silently from the sidelines. Esse stands next to him, unsure about what is taking place.

Bull speaks up. “We need a boat still.”

No one responds.

“We need a boat.” He holds up the map of Ve’kahn. “We’re going back to Ve’kahn, the original Ve’kahn.”

Garg checks his weapon. It is clean, loaded, and ready for action. He checks the dagger at his belt. It is sharp. He looks at Esse. “The Kahn?”

She does not answer. The Kahn is not her fight.

Garg can see their paths will split her. “Boat,” he demands as he walks toward Bruce dagger and pistol in hand. “Boat wizard... Now!”

“Er, of course,” Bruce responds. “You’re making me nervous Garg, maybe you could just stand a little over...”

“Boat Now!”



Bruce dials the wand in. Aims it at the wreck on the beach, presses a button, and a yellow stream of flashing light, like a cartoon lightning bolt shoots out the end of the wand. It misses the boat and hits a crab instead. The crab slowly turns into a giant sized monstrosity. It regards the party on the beach for a moment and then crawls towards Garg's rusted out PT boat. It does it like a hermit crab shell and then disappears into the depths with the boat on it's back.

Garg repeats his request again with the pistol pressed against Bruce's head. "Boat now!"

"Yes, Yes. Of course," Bruce stammers. "You sure you're not just taking the thrashing my last movie gave yours a little too personally. It wasn't my idea to release them on the same weekend." He tries to hand the wand to Garg. "Look, you give it a go."

"Garg announce release before Bruce." Garg cocks the weapon he is holding against Bruce's head. "Boat Now! Garg tire of this game."

"Boat now, boat now," Bruce whispers to himself. He anxiously strokes the wand as he searches the beach with his eyes and then remembers the car. It's a big car. They nickname them boats. There must be a reason. He gives the car a testing tap with his wand.

Garg holsters his weapon. "Bruce lucky," he explains. Behind them the Cadillac has turned into a large Viking style open decked dragon ship. The wind picks up all of a sudden. A spray of mist blows in from the ocean. A table is knocked over from the gust. "Boat Now!" Garg calls out as he leans into the bow to push it out to sea.

"Hang on," Bull advises Jack as he joins Garg. She doesn't need to be reminded. She is in Bull's horns clutching on tight. Zay joins them at the prow of the boat, as does Targor. Irvin flaps his wings as he does a flutter hop into the boat.

The four of them push the boat into the water as the storm rises up. It is a large boat and slow going, but the rising surf helps

them. Soon the boat breaks free from the sand and the surging tide grabs hold of the vessel.

“Boat Now!” Garg yells again as he helps the crew aboard. Quickly the current carries the ship past the breakers, into the sea, and towards the horizon and a waiting storm.

On the beach Bruce taps the sand with his foot. Z peers out from beneath a trap door set in the sand. “You can come out now,” Bruce informs him.

Around him, the revelers are packing up the food and tables. The frog band struggles with their equipment. The party is over. The quest has moved on. The forces that Gary’s presence was holding at bay have been released.

Esse holds her sword to Bruce’s throat. “You will help me now.”

“There’s no need for violence,” Bruce begins, but Klara has leveled her AK-47/5889 with over under rocket launchers, detachable diamond tip bayonet, and near endless supply of 1/64 hardened manna rounds against Esse’s head. “I do declare,” she says.

“There’s no need for violence,” Bruce repeats his earlier entreaty. “We’re all on the same side here.” He moves away from Esse’s blade. “You’ll remember that from now on?”

Esse nods. Klara lowers her weapon.

“Good. Then lead on.”

Esse leads them up the hill back to Bull’s homestead. On the way, Bruce wonders how this will pan out. Neither Esse nor Klara are talkers. He’s a witty banter type guy. How is he going to work in an explanation for how he turned his losing streak around? And with Jack in a different party, who’s going to say his new name right?

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The Bags are Packed  
A destination has been decided

It's time to do a little traveling  
And see the sights

# # #