

Wizardry Novels

These novels written by: Chris Beebe, based on the trilogy of games by Sir-Tech Inc.

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Wizardry 6 - Bane of the Cosmic Forge

Part 1 - Into the Castle

Rain Child

The land was littered with the scurrying of insects, accentuated by the light splashing sound of fish breaking the surface of water, and the morning dew falling from the taller trees above. Two figures carefully navigated the thickets of wild plantlife and the liberal spread of trees, marking their passage with silent, squishing footsteps. Somewhere off in the distance, a frog issued a haughty croak, assured of his place among the endless green.

Yes, it was a swamp. But to the girl and her serpentine companion, nothing could have looked or sounded more inviting.

Somewhere past the dangers of the poisonous flora and fauna, through the hostile lands of the bizarre creatures who inhabited the forest beyond, and within the walls of the great castle that had stood for centuries nestled amidst the sights and smells of nature, lay the secret she desired to uncover... the secret to exactly how Shss had come to be standing here, alongside a Lizardman of unbelievable size and strength, and venturing far from the only home she ever knew.

Shss was here for one reason only: to find and recover the *Kassmak Ohss*, a treasure that was said to be guarded by a being of great power. With the *Kassmak Ohss*, it was said, anything in the world could be instantly yours, including the secrets to a shaded past.

At the very least, that was what she was hoping for... to not only know where she came from using its power, but to also keep the artifact from finding a vindictive owner and ever harming her people. As long as the treasure's guardian was weaker than any other being on the face of the planet, it couldn't be trusted to keep safe this artifact of immeasurable power. And whatever being that guarded it certainly couldn't match the strength of a Lizardman.

The Lizardmen were her family and had been there for her since as long as she could remember, save for a few of the villagers who refused to let go of their distrust of an outsider. Her mother and father were both adept hunters, often keeping the village stocked enough to afford a feast now and again. Together with their son, they taught Shss everything she needed to know about life in the village, how to survive in the harsh lands around them, and what was expected of her as a child of the earth.

But the fact remained that she was different from her people. Her skin was a darker shade than the Lizardmen's, her eyes shaped differently... and she even had black hair coming out of her head!

As much as she loved her family, Shss had to know... where did she come from?

The only thing her parents could tell her were jumbled and foggy memories of that late night: of a heavy rain, and a woman in a spooky mask carrying a squirming bundle. Indeed, her current companion had found it hard to believe at first. "Here is your new sister," her parents hissed that rainy night, as they handed the crying, drenched child wrapped in cloth to him.

And what a strange young creature! Aside from her obvious lack of size, her eyes were very large and the same color as her skin, a dark brown like tree bark. But what struck Serkesh as the most odd was her face: it was smooth and flat, not anything like his people's, whose jaws protruded out from the face and made it easier to capture and devour prey. In fact, her whole body seemed more compact and smooth than the massive frames of his powerful and scaly race.

None of that mattered the instant Serkesh held her, though. It was at that moment that the baby sniffled, coughed and looked up into the eyes of her new big brother. It took only an instant from when Serkesh first held her for the infant to realize that she was in a safe place, away from the rain and the scary creatures in the foliage outside.

From that day on, Serkesh and his family did their best to raise the young babe into a staple of Lizardman culture. As the years passed, the young girl took to her chores more and more readily, though of course struggling with the more difficult tasks that required the strength of a brother five or six heads taller than she was.

There was a definite difference in body shape, of course, but that didn't stop her from working any harder than her people did every day of her life. As the years went by, Shss came to pride herself on being the swiftest of all the Lizardmen of the village, though a few gave her a good running. With sleek muscle development and the ability to charge, jump and act faster than any living being in the swamp, Shss brought back at least as many foodstuffs as any of her family members or neighbors did.

Her persistently long hair would also simply not do for the adopted Lizardman hunter. As time went on and it grew longer, both Shss and her family tired of cutting it time and again, and simply resigned themselves to braiding it into several groupings of tightly knit locks. Since then, she hadn't had her hair any other way.

The most obvious difference between the two siblings was not only the size of their two bodies, but the shape as well. Though unashamed of her appearance, Shss, like the others, nonetheless donned a few tattered animal hides to protect herself from the harsh environment of the swamp she lived in.

Lizardmen were unconcerned with the style of dress, and cared more for functionality. These hides were standard dress for hunting, mealtime, prayer, sleep and just about every other daily activity.

With every passing day, the difference between the Lizardmen and this strange girl's bodies became more and more eclipsed by the similarities shared by them all. As the daughter of two of the village's hunters, Shss prayed with her family, gathered water from collected dew, scouted out new sources of food, tended the sick and did everything else a member of her village was expected to do. In the end, she was no less a Lizardman than her brother and parents were.

It ended up making things all the more difficult when she bid her people farewell a short while after her body stopped growing, when she had visibly reached adulthood. Taking with her the spear she constructed as a part of her coming of age ceremony, she ventured forth with her brother to begin the rites. He was only to escort her to the edge of the swamp, but she appreciated the company anyway.

Shss stepped over a few wriggling beetles and dodged a well-placed snake looking for a quick meal, ever careful and watchful in this maze of dangers. The air was sharp with the smell of overgrown brush, and

the sounds of beasts and bugs were all around her.

Through years of living in the swamp, she could easily distinguish the dangerous from the atmospheric. Slightly ahead of her and behind a tree was a grouping of skittering millipedes, tiny feet wriggling on the wood beneath them. A cloud of flies behind and to the right buzzed around the corpse of something very dead, and partially devoured.

The feathers tied to her spear blew to and fro with the shifting of the wind, and made a slight rustling sound with every leap Shss made over a shallow pool of water or an insect nest. It was calmer than usual today.

In truth, there was a knot in Shss' stomach. She knew that the second she saw the clearing of the swamp that she would soon be entering the forest, and it was here that she would have to part with the last of the people she had ever known as family.

And when the familiar wildlife of the swamp began to thin slightly, she felt like crying.

But as a Lizardman, she would never allow herself the luxury of wasting time regretting the inevitable when she could act, instead.

Most people asked to hunt a wild boar or scout a new area of the swamp for their ceremony, but Shss insisted on going to the castle, alone, using nothing but what her people had taught her and the spear she made to help her as she searched for the lost artifact.

The detractors of the village lost all doubt then, that this outsider didn't belong with them. Any warrior who ventured into the great castle in search of the *Kassmak Ohss*, who sought to safeguard its power and keep safe the village from its potential misuse of power, was truly someone who deserved the support of the Lizardmen. The whole village arrived to see her off.

The knot in her stomach grew stronger as the swampy lands cleared and Shss could see the wild shrubs and animal life giving way to a dense grouping of trees ahead.

With a sense of pride and thankfulness to her family, the people who cared for her and taught her everything she knew, Shss turned to Serkesh, and widened her eyes at her towering sibling. Serkesh returned the gesture, and stood strong and firm as Shss drew close and laid her head upon his chest.

The two remained there for a short while, brother and sister experiencing their last moment together before her quest began. They both knew full well she might not make it back.

But they would meet again someday. Whether in the flesh or in their next life, they were sure it would happen.

Serkesh finally broke off the farewell with a gentle push, letting Shss know it was time to go. Slightly adjusting the animal hides clinging to her body so they fit a little more properly, Serkesh and Shss finally exchanged a few slight hisses, clicks and throat rumbles, and Shss widened her eyes once more.

At last, Shss gripped her spear and pointed it forward, as if the polearm were a divining rod pointing her to her destination. The feathers glided downward off of their resting place upon the shaft, and rustled slightly as she turned her back on her brother, and her hometown.

Memories of her first kill and prayer came back to her. Much like now, Serkesh stood behind her, protective of his sister, the tiny fledgling hunter. She made certain of the pig's death and turned triumphantly, eyes wide and proud of her accomplishment.

Serkesh simply bowed his head and laid his hand upon the ground, hissing slightly in a gesture that Shss would come to know by heart: "I thank you, brother boar, for the life you have given and the lives you will sustain through your sacrifice."

Now, Serkesh stood behind her once more. It almost seemed as if the great Lizardman would follow her, as he had always done the past many years. Shss had become so accustomed to his presence, that it seemed ridiculous to think he would not come along once more.

As she continued towards the trees ahead, the sound of her footsteps, and hers alone, removed all doubt: she was, for the first time in her life, alone.

Shss didn't look back, but Serkesh's final words floated back into her mind, as they would for the rest of her journey: "Your pride as a Lizardman will carry you through. Fight well."

Bane

The forest was surprisingly quiet and serene, save for the sweet chirps of families of birds and the shifting of plantlife around the clearly hiding, timid brush animals.

We live in the swamp, instead of this place? Shss wondered. Perhaps it was a little too peaceful; living here would have caused the great warriors of the Lizardman to develop soft bodies and weak spirits. *Truly it was through great sacrifice and strife that I have brought myself to where I am today,* she proudly thought.

The winding road was slightly overgrown with wild grass where it disappeared into the trees. With every step on the beautiful dotted green road, a delightful cold tingle would shoot from her bare feet, up her spine and to her neck and scalp. Shss was delighted with every soft step she took through the trees towards her distant destination.

In stark contrast to the murky land of the swamp, filled with the poisonous needles of hidden plantlife, the bites of angry insects and the sharp hidden points of fallen tree branches, the forest was a welcome change. Stepping on anything sharp no longer bothered Shss from the years she lived with her people, but still! She felt slightly guilty at this lax in her lifelong training, but the feeling was very comfortable, good enough to make her forget herself for just a few minutes.

She travelled through the great forest for a while, as the shadows of the trees grew larger and darker about her with every step. The sun was still just barely over the treeline, offering enough light to see clearly without giving away her position to anything that might be watching her. Shss moved heel to toe, quieter than the chirping birds, who didn't so much as quiet down at her approach.

The trees suddenly began to thin out, and the road in front of her widened and twisted into two distinct paths, split by a wooden sign with strange writing on it.

Shss wished she understood the slightest of what the sign was saying. One of the wooden arrows pointed left, labeled with a great amount of strange writing comprised of dashes and lines in odd directions. The other pointed right, the writing shorter and to the point.

Clearly, one led to the castle while the other would lead to some other landmark. Shss was in no hurry, though, and sat down to rest under the sign. If it wouldn't lead her to the *Kassmak Ohss*, it would certainly do as a pillow for now.

Shss leaned back against the unhelpful guidepost and rested her spear on her shoulder. The tied feathers drifted down slowly and came to rest on the pole, catching itself in a passing breeze now and again. She closed her eyes, taking in the sounds of everything around her. There was chirping directly in front of her and also slightly to the left, definitely bird families.

Behind her in the treeline, she heard the sound of something hopping in the grass. The sound of its footsteps denoted that it was either really small, or really quiet. Shss sensed that it was the former... just a feeling that the creature, whatever it was, was incredibly scared of the large, resting beast it had just stumbled upon.

She looked slowly behind her at the long-eared, fuzzy animal that seemed frozen with fear. It was barely the size of her foot, and it trembled slightly when their eyes met. Shss widened her eyes slightly... and the creature could take no more. It darted back into the trees and lost itself in the foliage. A slight hiss escaped the dark girl's lips, and she relaxed her muscles for a few more minutes of rest.

Only seconds passed before her eyes flew open. Something was coming... and laughing. Shss tossed her spear from right hand to left and stood, dashing to the nearest tree and leaping to its lowest branch. From there, she looked down at a most peculiar sight.

A strange blue bug was flying low over the road, the path leading to the left, with a cadre of tiny green creatures chasing it on foot. The bug seemed to be playing with them, descending low to the ground and near their grasping fingers, then zipping back up when it was just within their reach.

The green creatures had a familiar shape: two arms, two legs and a head, though their skin was green like Shss' people, but smooth like her own. A few in the back of the group withdrew some containers from their blue clothing and hurled them at the strange bug. The bug suddenly shouted something peculiar and shot into the sky, and the containers arced, fell and struck the road with a loud and fiery **BOOM!**

For a brief time, the creatures seemed quite upset at their tormentor's escape... until one of them pointed up into the trees, and at Shss. She clearly wasn't as well concealed as she thought!

The ones in the back withdrew more of the firewater, and threw them into the tree. Though Shss dove to the ground just in time, the resulting explosion still added extra force to her flight. She hurtled through the air, end over end, twisting her body to land feet first on the ground and face the frenzied things.

She gripped her spear with both hands and hunched down, pointing it straight at them. The creatures foolishly charged her, hoping to win with sheer numbers, screaming and shouting and laughing with murderous intent.

"Haaaaa... ssss!" Shss hissed loudly, and the first wave was upon her.

Three of the quicker ones leapt in broken tandem at her... which proved to be their fatal mistake. Shss released her left hand from the spear, and using her right arm, swung the spear in a great arc at the leaping creatures' tiny eyes.

The first two shrieked, struck her body and fell to the ground, clutching their sliced eyes and rolling about on the road beneath her, instead of latching on as they intended.

The third's jump was better timed and continued on its descent towards Shss' face. Unfortunately, it assumed that she would be preoccupied with the two others, and didn't expect her to rush forward and strike it with a massive headbutt that sent it sprawling.

All of the others leapt as well, a semicircle of grasping fingers seeking any vital parts of Shss' body... but finding nothing but air as she charged forward.

The unlucky creature who decided to jump by itself from the center position of the semicircle suddenly found itself impaled on a massive spear, and moving in the opposite direction. The giant dark girl drove the spear into the ground and thrust the rest of the weapon through its body, using both as a vault into the back row of the firewater throwers.

Where her spear had previously touched the ground, explosions burned to a crisp every blade of grass in the vicinity, but did no other damage. Their intended target had already reached the height of her great jump, and fell spear down into the body of one of the throwers. Now with two silent creatures impaled on her spear in a grisly scene of death, the others seemed exceedingly reluctant to continue fighting.

The girl drove forward and kicked one of the creatures backwards while it still reached into its robe. It crashed into one of its friends and bounced along the ground.

When it stopped, it had only a split second to open its mouth in surprise at the sudden shattering sound in its clothes, before it, its friends and the area around them exploded. The others flew everywhere from the blast... and a few more of the semicircle drew towards Shss, leaping once more at her.

She knew they were coming, and backhanded the first. A bone in its leg snapped and it fell, shrieking. Another missed completely and flew straight into the pool of liquid that erupted from the others' bottles. The second it contacted the skin, it dashed about and flung itself on the ground in pain as the liquid ate away at its body.

The final creature jumped straight at Shss' face, but found only her hand quickly and suddenly wrapped around its body. The rest of the creatures, injured, dead and dying, were rooted to the spot in fear.

When Shss raised her spear to its neck, it suddenly realized the situation it was in. It bit her hand and cried out to its friends in a panic, though nobody answered the call for help. Looking back into her eyes, the two stared at each other for a short while.

Terror gripped the creature once more, and a tear fell from its eye, knowing now that it would die. Shss saw the pitiful murderer contemplating its own demise and hissed slightly at the creature, narrowing her eyes at it. It closed its eyes and awaited the inevitable... drop?

Shss released her grip and the little beast plopped to the road below on its rump. It looked up at her in surprise, as did the rest of the surviving ones; they clearly weren't getting the picture.

"Gyaa!" she roared from the very bottom of her gut, provoking the exact response she was looking for: the instant scattering of the creatures in every direction. The things even left their now blinded and wounded friends behind in a shameful display of self-preservation. Shss felt slightly sick as they retreated, but oddly enough, it had nothing to do with their actions.

So this is what it's like to kill something intelligent, only out of defense? she thought. It was distasteful, nothing like hunting beasts for food or clothing. These creatures panicked like any beast would, felt pain like they did, but she could sense the raging thoughts of fright within the last one's mind. To think she was the cause of that...

Her discovery of the creatures' stolen stash did little to ease her feelings of anxiety and regret. It was clear they had killed or robbed before to acquire this bag of specially prepared fruits and wrapped breads and meats clearly too big for them to eat. But still...

Though she hoped she wouldn't have to fight like this again, she doubted she would have that luxury in the coming days. After all, the castle, and possibly its fully sentient population, were probably expecting an intruder's arrival.

Shss rifled through the pack, removing the things that looked and smelled like they could not be eaten. Having spent her life in the swamp, this amounted to a good half of the bag... but there was enough left to keep her going for a few days before she ran out.

When she was finished, she stopped just long enough to put out a tiny fire here or there, ones that could lead to trouble in this land of beautiful tinder. With a new bag of emergency rations in tow, Shss continued down the path, in the direction of the enigmatic bug.

Though it was unclear where it had gone exactly, she knew it was down the path to the right, the one with the shorter description on the sign.

She continued on cautiously, knowing that as the world got darker, the chances of her running into those things again would increase. The road thankfully offered plenty of open space on either side, lending itself very poorly to any kind of unexpected ambush.

It got very dark, very quick. The trees were nothing but complete shadows now, and every sound seemed a hundred times louder than when it was still light out. Only the sky was dotted with a thousand tiny

flickers of light, but even the moon didn't help to illuminate anything beyond a few feet.

Shss was utterly taken aback when she saw the castle. At first she thought it was a mountain, from the sheer number of stars that had been blocked out by its massive shape. But as she drew closer, the individual stones and spires of the castle began to take form. It was huge.

The road stopped by the side of the castle ahead of her. Her heart sank as she saw how it ended: a great metal obstruction of interlaced poles, almost laughing at her and her futile attempts to find entry into the massive stone structure.

To the left and right were completely vertical ascensions up the great stone walls, without footholds and impossible to scale. The forest dropped down a hill to her right, leaving the castle perched high up and away from it. This was clearly the only way in from this side.

She drew closer to the gate and shook the bars slightly. They didn't move.

Drawing upon all her strength, she grabbed two of them and pulled, pushed, shook as hard as she could. Aside from some very loud clanking, nothing.

"Ket... sshstsk..." she cursed as she stood back, defeated. The easy way in was out of the question, so she'd have to find another path inside.

She looked around for another entrance, or possibly something to smash the bars in. It was then that she noticed another blocking of the stars down the hill and through the forest, a fifteen minute walk away from the castle. It was clearly too far to be part of the castle itself, but close enough to allow possible entry into it from another point.

She couldn't waste any more time. A fifteen minute walk, she guessed, but only one or two in a full sprint.

Shss dashed down the hill and through the dark trees, pushing branches out of the way, jumping over exposed roots and weaving among the trunks with expert skill. Pressure would build in her ears slightly as the length of time from the sounds of her body, to the trees, then back again, increased or decreased. Using the sounds as a guide, she could tell where several obstacles stood, even without seeing them.

Something bellowed and began chasing her, but she left it completely behind as she leapt from vantage point to vantage point through the forest, following that pressure and trusting her senses.

Finally, she broke free from the darkened forest and came to rest at the foot of a massive mountain leading up into the sky. She couldn't tell in this light, but the darkening of stars between the castle and the mountain told her that they were somehow connected off in the distance. If she wanted another way into the castle, this was it. She held her spear in her teeth, then ascended the side of the peak.

It was actually a fairly easy climb. The mountain was quite craggy and offered plenty of footholds for her to make use of, and her spear acted as an extra handhold in its softer parts. When she finally reached a safe point in the side of the mountain that led into its depths, she was surprised to find herself in a home fashioned out of the rock around it.

Torches lined the walls of this carved out area, and as Shss strained to hear in the small hallway leading into the mountain, she could make out the tinkling sounds of metal striking rock. Clearly, the people who lived here were diggers.

Shss walked cautiously forward into the hallway, spear at the ready, and marvelled at how smooth the stones were.. a testament to the craftsmanship of the natives. Annoyance flared in her slightly as the hallway broke off to the right and she found herself staring at another one of the metal bar portals. She hissed slightly and continued down the hall...

Until she heard the sounds coming from within. It sounded like pained groaning, like someone slowly dying of hunger or thirst. Shss returned to the gate and strained to listen in on the enclosed room.

Nothing came. She thought she heard a slight shifting, but couldn't be sure. The echoes of the mountain were throwing her off... then she heard it again: a groan of subdued agony. This time, it was accompanied by a shifting of shadows in the darkened prison, and Shss suddenly felt awful. Something was dying in there.

She drew back slightly and looked at the gate once again. Outside at the castle it was too dark to see, but the torch behind her showed her something she hadn't seen before: a small hole in one of the bars.

Whatever the prisoner's crime, Shss did not want to be the tacit executioner to any being if it could be helped. Placing the tip of her spear in the tiny hole, she shifted it around slightly in a possibly futile attempt to open the thing up.

It continued for a few minutes, her spear shifting and the gate unmoving. Shss noticed that the groans had ceased as she worked with the obstruction.

She suddenly jumped as the point of her spear moved something, and the gate suddenly slid into the wall. She pulled her spear out just in time to keep it from being pulled in with it and broken.

Suddenly, a shadow sprang out of the retracted gate and dove straight for her. In an instant, she realized then that it was a snake, a very large snake, with huge, shining eyes and green scales... leaping out at her. She wondered how the people of this mountain could feed captives to such a monster, and cursed her lack of readiness. Her spear was still wavering from being pulled out of the sliding metal bars, and she could only raise a hand to protect herself from the inevitable strike.

She heard the sound of fangs sinking into something soft, and immediately dove back and away from the serpent. However, there was no accompanying pain of torn flesh and burning venom.

The bag holding the foodstuffs at her side was ripped away, and spilled its contents all over the ground. The snake retracted its fangs from the tiny leather and began lapping up every fruit, every piece of bread and every slice of meat that fell to the ground.

Shss readied her spear at the crazy snake. She watched as it devoured everything on the ground, from the nastier, clearly rotten pieces to the sweet, juicy ones she had set her own eyes upon. She moved her head slightly to the side in a puzzled motion as the snake finished up. It finally closed its eyes and collapsed on the ground.

"AAAAAH, that was so delicious!!" it hissed. "There is *nothing* like eating a feast like that after years of nothing but dirt to whet your appetite!" The snake's tongue darted out in a motion Shss took as supreme bliss.

Its eyes opened and it raised upright, about the same height as Shss. It bobbed up and down in glee, shouting, "Thank you, kind stranger, for taking pity on me! Do you know how long I've been stuck in here? Over a hundred years! Yeah, pretty surprising, huh? I'd certainly be surprised if I were a Human, seeing some big talking snake and discussing the weather or some such with him. Only I'm not a snake, I'm a Wizard! I know you can't believe it, but it's all because of that stupid Cosmic Forge that I ended up like this! All I wanted was for the Queen to like me... what a babe! You shoulda seen her, all thin and sweet and powerful, totally out of my league! I mean, who'd wanna be with a lowly Wizard when you rule an entire country? Anyway, so I snuck into my master's chamber. His name's Xorphitus, by the way, the guy who locked me in here. I'll get him for that! Wait, where was I? Oh yeah... I used the Cosmic Forge to write in a little 'help' for my situation as the unnoticed lover of the Queen! I asked to be more handsome, more charming, that kinda thing! With the power of the pen, it's possible, ya know? Anyway, the damn thing turned me into a snake! I never woulda figured the Queen was a sauriophile! She's got a thing for snakes, so I became one on the spot! That *stupid* pen! And for that reason I've been locked up here for these hundred years, hungry and waiting for someone to come in and rescue me, or talk to me, or just plain *feed* me! Those Dwarves never came in; all they wanted was their stupid rocks and gold. But anyway, you let me out, and I thank you so much for doing so! I'm Mystaphaphas by the way... so how should I address my savior in... well, surprisingly lacking attire?"

Shss didn't understand a word the chattering snake had said, if it was even talking, but the way it had bounced and gestured with its head at its most emotional disarmed her completely. Eyes completely wide, Shss burst out a hissing laugh for a short while at the funny snake.

Finally calming down, she spoke. "*I sshse?*" she asked.

Mystaphaphas spoke again. "Hey, what's the matter with you? Are you diseased or something? I don't understand a word you're saying. You can speak, can't you?" he asked, perplexed.

Shss was glad to be alive, and in the presence of something so seemingly friendly, but she suddenly turned serious and spoke again. "*Kese Kassmak Ohss?*"

The snake just looked at her. The Fighter raised her hands, palms up, and asked again, "*Kassmak Ohss? Kassmak Ohss?*"

"*Kassmak Ohss?* What the heck is a *Kassmak Ohss?*" Mystaphaphas asked. His mind turned the words over slightly and he repeated it to himself a few times. *Kassmak Ohss?* he thought. *I'd need the Cosmic Forge to understand this girl.*

The brakes screeched; she was looking for the pen.

"You're trying to find the Cosmic Forge?" he asked warily. "Are you *nuts*? I just *told* you what it did to me, and now you wanna go find it?! Do you routinely listen to stories about murderous monsters or contagious diseases and seek them out for some kinda sick thrill trip? What's the matter with you, anyway?"

Shss definitely heard the word this time. "*Kese Kassmak Ohss?*" she repeated, gesturing around herself excitedly.

Mystaphaphas sighed and resigned himself to helping this crazy, hissing girl; she *had* saved him, after all. If she wanted to suffer a fate worse than death when she tried to use the pen, it was her choice.

"Ok, look, I'll tell you where it is, but know this: you use that thing outside the Cosmic Circle, and anything you ask for gets twisted into something completely different, usually with the intent of punishing you in the most painful way possible. You still want to find it after I said that?" he asked.

The girl just looked at him. "You're crazy. Insane! ...Then again, I was the one who lusted after a Queen. Hah!" he laughed.

Mystaphaphas settled into a coiled position and brooded slightly. "Well, I dunno where the pen is now, so you'd probably have to ask either Xorphitus or the King where it is. They were bickering a lot over who got to use it first after they stole it. Who knows who ended up winning?"

"Anyways, Xorphitus' cave is over there. It's been a few hundred years... but you know Wizards, always trying to beat the Gods at their own game of life. If you follow this path down here," he said, pointing his head down the corridor, "you'll run into him soon enough. That is, if he didn't use the pen and turn into a bug or a rock or something."

Shss looked puzzled, so the snake gestured his head back where she had come, into the open air of the outside. Slithering forward, he reached the dropoff to the forest below and peered his head out.

"See? Over there. That's where his cave is." Mystaphaphas pointed his head once more out the crevice, towards another opening in the mountain. Shss turned to him. "*Kassmak Ohss?*" she hissed, pointing out the opening.

"Cosmic Forge," Mystaphaphas nodded.

"Actually, I'm gonna go over there and give him a little something to remember me by, so if you wanna come along, I'd be happy..." he started, but Shss was already scaling the side of the mountain, up and out

towards the grand opening quite a distance away from her. Being the only opening visible under the light of the full moon, she figured it was the place he meant.

"Hey wait!" Mystaphaphas shouted. "That's the entrance to the Amazulu burial ground! There's nothing but zombies over there! I meant down there!" He gestured wildly at the small opening below them. "*Down there!!*"

Shss turned and widened her eyes at the bobbing snake, silently thanking him for his energetic farewell. She wondered how it was a snake could have such intelligence... perhaps he was jailed as an abomination, in which case, she was happy to assist him.

It was more difficult climb than the one from the forest to the mines. Not only was it a fair distance away from her previous perch, but the mountain's surface was harder here, making her spear useless as a crutch. Shss made her way over, spear in her teeth, hand over hand from shaking handholds to firm outcroppings. It was too dark to see how far down the ground was, which focused her mind on her movements even more.

A good while had passed before she finally placed a hand on the floor that would lead into the chamber of the *Kassmak Ohss*. Trembling slightly from exhaustion... and a little fear... she pulled herself up, dropped her spear to her side and rested on the ledge for a short while.

An owl hooted. Straining to hear it, a world of chirping crickets suddenly became audible to her. It was just one of the many things she had drowned out on her way up here as a normal part of the wilderness.

Finally, she picked up her spear and stood at the windy entrance to the chamber. A lone door sat silently at the back, leading to who knew what kinds of challenges.

But it didn't matter what dwelled within... she was ready for anything.

Someone I Knew

Shss opened the door and crept forward into a ghastly display of death. Small openings housed the bones and rotted bodies of several dozen dead women. Their remains were too decayed to identify specific body features, and most were covered with strips of tattered clothes.

Strewn among the bodies were great towering shields of animal hide and decayed spears, some of which had degenerated to the point of leaving naught but sharpened stone or metal spearheads.

What was even more disconcerting about this room was that some of the bodies had gotten up and were beginning to reach for her.

With a groan, the slightly decayed corpse of one of the figures lunged forward at Shss in an attempt to grab her. Shss swung her spear around and let the dead body run itself through under its own advance.

Though clearly stabbed through the heart, the figure continued forward on her spear, flailing and grabbing for Shss' body. A kick sent the thing off of her spear and onto the ground, though it soon returned to its feet and began lurching forward once more.

All at once, Shss noticed that the bones and bodies were coming to life all around her. They were standing up from their death slabs, spilling out of the walls, and all groaning for the flesh of the intruder. The ones who had already stood under their own power walked towards her with lifeless and cold eyes.

Shss dove forward past the burgeoning group of bodies towards the opposite wall, thankfully noticing an escape in the form of another door in front of her. She pushed one moving corpse out of her way and punched another across the jaw, but they were not stunned, not beaten. With a leap, she grabbed the metal handle protruding from the door and pushed until the door finally moved from its place.

She flew through and slammed it shut behind her. She could still hear the shuffling of the creatures on the

other side, and they started to pound on the barrier between them. Luckily, it looked as if it would hold.

She whipped around and pointed her spear in front of her, forgetting she was in a new place with possibly more of the deadly guardians. But there was nothing there; it was just a corridor.

The walls were lined with the drawings of dark-skinned women at work and play. In one, a woman held a bucket of water as two young girls escorted her on either side. Another showed a titanic battle between two women with spears, and their hulking, bestial adversary. Yet another pictured two young girls clapping one another's hands with big smiles on their faces.

The whole place seemed familiar, and not just because the women looked like Shss. It wasn't the sights, either... she couldn't remember seeing anything like this before. It was the smell of the mud and clay that made up this structure that entranced her.

Shss held her spear tightly and in front of her, and advanced to the stairs at the end of the corridor. If dead bodies guarded the entrance to this place, she could only imagine what kind of terrors awaited her beyond.

She ascended straight into the presence of several dozen of the women depicted in the drawings. They were scattered about two hallways, in front of her and to her right, and they were standing by many more of the drawings she had seen downstairs. They were obviously expecting her, as most of them had their own spears ready and pointing at her when she arrived.

Some relaxed slightly as the familiar figure came out into view. Others were confused and maintained their stances, scanning Shss for any false move she might make.

Shss was completely disoriented at seeing so many people so much like her. They were all dark-haired, dark-skinned women, and barely covered as she was. Some had skirts made of long and dried grass clinging off of their hips and a simple halter top, while others wore less or even nothing. The uniting factor between every last one of them was that they were all armed, and all staring at her.

One of them called out something that Shss didn't understand. Some of the women looked back at the one who spoke, but all eyes eventually returned to the Fighter.

She was at a loss for words. To find people who looked like her, down to their size, color and smoothness... she was completely shocked. She had no idea there were more like her.

The voice called out again, and once again Shss didn't understand. She opened her mouth slightly to hiss a response, but the words wouldn't come. Another few seconds of absolute silence made the entire situation even more uncomfortable, until finally, one of the stronger-looking women strode forward and stared Shss down.

She spoke again, in that proud and strong voice. Shss finally responded. "*A Shss, isha shase...?*" she started.

The woman sneered angrily and struck her across the cheek. She yelled something in a rage, and Shss turned back to her and hissed.

Once again, the woman reached back to strike her, but Shss was ready this time, catching her hand in mid-flight and pushing the woman back into the crowd behind her. She stumbled slightly, but caught herself and raised her spear, yelling.

Shss realized that the woman must have thought that she was one of her people, and that the language of the Lizardman was some kind of insult, a nonsense answer to a very serious question. She backed up slightly and lowered her spear in a show of nonviolence, then pointed to herself and simply said, "*Shss.*"

Save the angry one, the entire battalion of warrior women burst out laughing at the defiance of the newcomer. Their leader's face grew even darker as she shouted and silenced all but a few of the more

amused.

Wheeling back on the intruder, the woman seemed to understand that the confused girl in front of her had no idea what she was talking about. She calmed down, then turned slightly to the side as an invitation for Shss to follow her.

When Shss didn't move, the woman bowed her head in apology, then cocked it to the side, down the passage where some of the other women congregated.

Shss returned a nod and walked forward, her spear resting against her shoulder, following the woman at a cautious distance. A few of her subordinates patted Shss on the shoulder in congratulations for enraging their stubborn leader.

The two walked along pathways winding around the great structure, and Shss looked down the sloped side to the jungle below. For a moment, as she viewed the wild growth of many different types of plants and the skittering forms of strange animals and bugs, she felt slightly homesick. But at the same time, it seemed this place might just be her real home...

Something seemed to be gnawing at her companion as she slowed her walk and stopped, turning around to face Shss. She frowned slightly as she touched the cheek she had struck earlier and bowed her head in apology. Shss widened her eyes in response.

The woman gave a confused smile in return, then the two continued on.

They walked for several minutes, down an amazing amount of stairs, through a tremendous amount of doors, and past wall after wall of the drawings showing these people's daily lives. Finally, they reached another partition of steel bars, one without a small hole in the middle, Shss noticed. Perched at the top was the bust of a great beast, staring out in eternal anger.

Shss' companion shouted something. After a brief pause, a woman on the inside of the gate waved a strange green idol before the internals of the gate, and it slid silently into the wall. Shss' companion cocked her head to the inside, and the two continued into the hall and up a final flight of stairs.

When she reached the top, she was immediately greeted by the sight of several girls waiting upon a woman sitting on a throne of straw and grass. The woman's hair was covered with a very ornate ceremonial headdress of feathers and beads, and a string of polished bones and assorted jewels that hung off of her neck called distinct attention to her bare chest. Her skirt was long and made of fine thread, and covered in a pattern depicting the stars and the heavens, with a great flame sweeping across them all. She was in obvious good shape, though the children around her seemed to be living in squalor. At her side was slung a large black spear, clearly placed for both intimidation and easy access.

By her side, a woman with a spooky mask stood silently, body positioned in a protective position near her leader, but also in a place to get the best look at the girl who had just arrived. She was also barechested and wearing a simple grass skirt like the others, but around her waist hung several enigmatic leather pouches.

Behind the two, there was a great narrow path of flaming coals leading over the edge of a great pit. Shss couldn't see what was inside it, but the heat was noticeable, even from where she was standing.

The leader waved her hand at the child fanning her with a great leaf. Once the girl had stopped and sat down with the other children, the woman shouted something. Shss' companion came forward, and the two began to speak in a fast and incomprehensible language.

"Who is this girl?" the leader asked.

The guard swiftly answered. "My Queen, we found her wandering the halls after the guardians woke in the burial chamber," she said. "We believe it was she who trespassed upon it and awakened them. However, I do not think that she..."

"You entered the chamber without permission," the Queen interrupted, speaking directly to Shss. "You disobeyed our most ancient law, and you have dishonored your ancestors and yourself in the process. What have you to offer for such a grievance? Lay your offering down before me, and I may simply decide to make you a servant, rather than kill you outright."

Shss looked at the Queen for a second, then at her companion, a silent plea for guidance or a good word. Her companion caught the glance and spoke to the Queen once more. "I do not think she is of our tribe, and she seems not to understand anything asked of her," she said. "She may not know our laws."

The Queen glared silently, then simply said, "Kill her."

At those words, the woman in the spooky mask drew close to her Queen and whispered slightly. The two chattered for a short while, until all at once, the Queen's face twisted into an icy mask of murder, and the masked woman withdrew immediately.

The Queen stood, her authority established. "My children," she shouted. "This defiler of our land will die, but it will not be by the hand of any woman. I am convinced," she continued, casting a glance at the masked woman, "that Mau-Mu-Mu is the only one to cleanse this filthy child of her sins. She will travel along the Fiery Path to the Pool of Fire, where her evil will be purified by His flame."

Her people shifted uncomfortably and muttered amongst themselves, with a din of questioning and disapproval. The Queen gripped the black Spear of Death at her side and tapped it on the ground. One word escaped her lips: "Quiet."

Immediately, everyone stopped talking, and the sounds of frogs and crickets came forth once again from the outside jungle. The masked woman whispered to the Queen again, though this time the bejeweled monarch nodded in clear agreement. "The High Priestess Kuwali Kubona will now purify the path that this lost child will corrupt with her filthy feet," she said.

Kuwali stepped down and opened a pouch on her left hip. She upturned it and emptied its contents, a fine white powder, on the edge of the great Fiery Path. She then began to chant at the edge of the great bridge, lightly raising her arms and spinning in a dance of otherworldly beauty. After a while, the Queen began to look impatient... but when the Priestess suddenly finished with a bow, a hand clap and a silent prayer, the Queen's anger quelled instantly.

Shss' companion got behind her and nudged her forward, a look of powerlessness on her face. They clearly wanted her to walk on the fiery coals to who knew where. The Fighter began to back towards the stairs she entered from when the Queen shouted, and several more guards appeared from the shadows to nudge Shss forward with their spears. She saw no other alternative than to approach the path and see what was there.

When she walked to the edge of the chamber, she immediately desired to run again. Below, in the great pit of tremendous heat, was a pool of flaming red liquid. The overpowering blast of what felt like a thousand suns was unbearable even this high up. The path that the warrior women pushed her to was suspended over the great pool, and ended somewhere near the middle, a great distance above the pool itself.

She was so concerned with the heat and her inevitable death, that she didn't notice when she stepped feet first into the fine powder the spooky woman placed there earlier. She stumbled out of it, thinking it some kind of poison... but felt nothing aside from how fine it was. Whatever it was, it was certainly sticky.

She frantically looked around for an ally, an escape route, anything, when her eyes settled on the masked woman.

For some reason, just the simple nod that the woman offered was enough to get Shss to continue on. She couldn't possibly fight all these women, skilled at the spear as they were, and if the masked woman knew something she didn't, Shss somehow felt she could trust her.

She didn't, however, want to step on those coals. On her hesitation, the women pushed her forward and clearly presented her less than tempting options: she would die if she didn't step forward, and burn to death if she did. Shss apologized to her brother and family for being so arrogant coming on this fool's mission, and took a step onto the searing rocks.

Surprisingly, she felt nothing, not even the sensation of the rocks on her feet. The other women seemed less than impressed, having seen this many times before. Shss cautiously bent forward and placed her hand on one of the glowing stones, but pulled back when she realized how hot they really were.

It was the powder, for sure. She turned back to Kuwali with pleading eyes. The masked woman once again nodded, and indicated that she should continue. She had saved her once... now Shss hoped she was guiding her well again.

Shss steeled herself and drew up completely straight. She was a Lizardman and would take death with pride, as they all did. Whether the woman was leading her to her death or to her salvation... either way, she would be ready. Shss turned back to the suspended, fiery road of rock and strode down the viciously hot path.

She walked for a minute or so, feeling nothing but the heat on her skin. She began to sweat profusely, which was making it hard to get a good grip on her spear. Passing it from one hand to the other, she wiped her hands now and again on the hides covering her body.

Up ahead, the path ended abruptly, and Shss found herself alone, on a great narrow path, suspended above the pool of liquid that was hotter than every combined summer day she had ever experienced in her life.

She was confused as to what to do. Just jump off? What a pathetic execution.

The ground suddenly began to rumble and dispelled her guess about the nature of her death. She wouldn't plunge into the liquid... it was coming up to get her!

At least, that's what she thought. When the great red beast rose up from the depths of the pool and slammed two great fiery arms onto the path of coals, Shss truly understood what this execution was. Mau-Mu-Mu had risen.

She had little time to think when one of its red arms lashed out at her, barely enough to jump the clumsy blow as the great beast climbed up the side of the great coal bridge. A few of the coals were driven into the air and struck parts of Shss' body. She cried out in surprise and pain as they bounced off of her, and left extremely red spots on her thighs and left arm.

When she landed, her spear slipped slightly out of her sweaty hands, sending her stomach fluttering in terror. If she lost it...

Luckily, it only slipped point-down into the coals below, and she was able to retrieve it. But upon closer inspection, her heart sank when she saw that the coals had succeeded in melting the edge of the spearhead a little.

If the coals can melt my spear, and the monster can cling to the coals, what good can my spear possibly do against it?! she screamed in her mind.

No sooner had she finished her thought, the great beast climbed completely up the edge of the coal bridge and stood. At the sight of its unbelievably huge body, and the feeling of unbearable heat emanating from it, Shss backed up slightly.

She then noticed something strange: a glittering red ruby, lodged in the beast's gullet. She had no idea what it was, but if she was going to die, she was at least going to do some damage before it took her down.

It was at this moment that the beast prepared to squash her, seeking the quick kill it was usually expecting before it even had to climb up. With a roar, it opened its arms wide to clap together and squash her soft body.

Shss hissed loudly in response and charged towards it, feeling terrible heat as she drew closer and closer to the beast. Its great arms closed in and finally smashed around the area where Shss was running. The monster smugly held its hands there for a short while, but seemed puzzled... puzzled that it felt nothing between them.

"*I shi!*" it heard from above, and looked up just in time to see a dark figure pass right by its eyeline, then descend to the ruby on its stomach.

Shss thrust her spear directly between the monster's fiery skin and the back of the ruby as she fell, and pulled as hard as she could while she dropped back down to the coals. The spear caught on fire and the metal melted, and the Fighter was forced to let it go.

However, the ruby popped straight out of its body and was thrown end over end to rest upon the coals behind her.

The great beast suddenly lost all emotion, and ceased to see anything in particular. To Shss' horror, it began to melt and become the same liquid that filled the bottom of the great mountain.

She jumped one last time between its two former arms, now a dripping mass of red, and screamed as some of it got on her leg and began to eat into her skin.

After landing expertly on her feet, she briefly considered tearing off some of the hides covering her chest to push the devouring liquid off of her body. But no sooner had she realized that it would eat the hides, too, she suddenly remembered the ruby: the only thing that the beast had touched that had not melted.

She turned and dashed away from the disintegrating monster and the liquid it had become to the resting place of the ruby not far from her. Using it as a tiny tool, she pushed as much of the liquid as she could off of her leg and back onto the bridge.

It still burned terribly and brought tears to her eyes, but it had stopped eating away at her skin. For now, she was safe.

Shss turned back to the edge of the bridge, and saw that what little of the monster that hadn't dripped back down into the pit was well on its way to doing so. In the heated coals in the middle of the dripping liquid, the remains of her melted and fiery spear rested alone.

She hobbled over to it, grabbing the end that had protruded from the great beast, the part that was still mostly wood and only slightly charred. The spearhead had melted off and had probably joined the liquid on its descent into the pit, and the feathers were gone.

Raising the fiery pole in front of her, Shss screamed a traditional cry of victory over a superior opponent, the first time she had ever done so in her life. Her voice echoed all over the pit and came back with what seemed like greater fervor than when it was issued.

At last, she placed the fiery end of her former spear into the coals and watched as the fire spread slowly up the shaft. The victory marker wouldn't last long, but it was a testament to her prowess as a warrior of the Lizardmen.

The Queen was deathly silent when the accursed girl slowly stumbled her way back on the Fiery Path. She rose with a dangerous purpose, as the coming executioner of the one who had undermined her decisions.

She ordered the burial chamber off limits, she ordered absolute obedience from all of her subjects, and she certainly remembered ordering this rabid-looking girl to die. She tightened her grip on her spear and

descended from her throne.

Shss slowly moved forward, favoring her burned leg and holding a hand upon it. At the end of the Fiery Path, the warrior women there parted, and fully revealed a blackened, burned and injured Shss to a vengeful Queen.

Eyeing the ruby in the girl's hand for merely a second, the Queen soon spoke in an unnaturally calm voice. "As with any person who challenges my rule, you will duel me here and now, though it is unfortunate you are unarmed," she said. "Prepare yourself."

A small green drop of an unknown liquid fell from her black spear's tip as the Queen raised and pointed it straight at Shss. The Fighter removed her hand from her leg, and used the other to toss the ruby of the fallen monster onto the floor of the chamber. The warrior women knew then what had transpired.

Shss held out both of her hands to the Queen, her curved fingers like claws ready for battle. With a venomous hiss, she walked forward.

The Queen wasted no more time and struck, thrusting at the scorched girl in a knowing kill shot. Shss jumped to the right and charged the Queen's exposed side, but the Queen simply shouldered her opponent and arced her spear at her with alarming speed. The weapon opened a small gash in Shss' shoulder... and the green liquid on its tip began to burn the wound even greater than the Fiery Path's guardian had.

Shss regained her footing and began to circle the Queen, feeling slightly dizzy with every passing second. When she saw the Queen's icy grin, she knew immediately what had happened... she calmed herself and tried not to let her heart pound any faster than it already was.

The Queen had other ideas, though, and once again charged her enemy in her now weakening state. It was an easy kill, as the girl seemed to have only enough strength to keep her eyes half-open.

But it was simple deception. Shss dropped down backwards onto her hands and thrust her foot square into the Queen's jaw. She dropped back as Shss rolled to her left, surprising a guard and ripping the spear from her hands. By the time the Queen had recovered, the Fighter had already closed in.

The two exchanged a lightning fast trade of blows, feints, thrusts, swings and dodges as the two spears clacked against one another again and again. With slowing speed, Shss thrust desperately at the Queen, who merely batted her spear away. Pressing her advantage, the dishonorable ruler drove her head firmly into Shss' nose.

Her world spun as she hissed and backed away. The Queen brought her spear around and thrust straight for her opponent's heart, but Shss brought her own spear down upon the Queen's and held both upon the ground. The two stared one another in the eye, one sooty with a bleeding nose, the other with the calm visage of an inevitable victor.

Finally, the two pushed away, backed off and lunged forward again. Shss struck for the Queen's leg, but she sidestepped and countered towards Shss' stomach. The Fighter recovered and spun her spear in a wide circle, successfully striking the Queen's spear and sending it flying outwards.

The Queen diverted her attention for only a second on the spear she had just lost... when she felt the sting in her breast. She suddenly couldn't move.

Both combatants were breathing heavily, and the gravity of the situation slowly dawned on the Queen. All she could see was the back end of the spear, but the rest of it was most certainly lodged within her chest... and it had sliced through her heart. A hot stream of sticky blood flowed out the Queen's body and onto Shss' spear, then to the floor.

The Queen stared at her killer in her final moments, a look of rage, fear, betrayal... many emotions wrapped in one evil look. Shss could only stare back into the first purely intelligent eyes of death she had

ever seen in her life, and was paralyzed, unable to act or think. With her last ounce of strength, the Queen spat a mouthful of blood and saliva in Shss' face.

And with that last act of spite, her eyes took on an entirely different kind of cold as her life slipped away from her, and her body slumped down on the spear.

Shss dropped the Queen and the spear on the ground and backed away. The world spun even worse now, and she dropped to the floor. The image of the Queen's eyes remained burned in Shss' mind, and she started to cry...

The last thing she remembered was the woman in the spooky mask feeding her some kind of sweet liquid. The world went black.

Shss awoke in a room filled with strange potions and powders, with several sets of ceremonial garb in folded stacks around her. Against the wall was the spear of the woman whose life she had taken, standing against the clay by the ruby of the great red beast. She was lying on a bed of soft bird down, and the flesh that had been devoured by the red liquid was covered with a white bandage.

Over to her left, a woman sat muttering to herself on the floor, sitting cross-legged. At Shss' stirring, she opened her eyes and smiled. "You're awake," she said.

Shss groaned slightly... if this woman meant her harm, she would be able to do little about it.

"You don't know what a great thing you have done to free us from that woman," she continued. "Nobody could touch her as long as she had the Spear of Death, and held Mau-Mu-Mu wrapped around her little finger. But you stopped them both."

The Fighter looked blankly at her, and the woman smiled. "Of course, I don't expect you to understand, knowing where you were raised," she said. "I'm sorry you were not allowed to grow up among your own people, but the Queen had selected you as her sacrifice for that year, when you were just a baby. You and you alone would die by Mau-Mu-Mu's hand. That's why I had to take you away.

"You can't imagine how upset she was that day, when she found out you were gone. Of course I was able to calm her and nobody died as a result, but the only thing that mattered to me was that you were safe."

Shss simply shook her head, letting the woman know she couldn't understand. As she did so, she realized what she had overlooked in the room just a second before: the spooky mask sitting in the corner of the room.

Kuwali followed her look and said, "What I gave you was a mixture that healed wounds, and another that induced a death-like coma... two potions in one. I couldn't allow the others to know you were still alive, for our honor dictates that the slayer of our Queen, no matter how terrible our ruler is, must die as well. It keeps assassinations for the sake of power from happening with the regularity that they used to. Right now, they all think I am purifying your body for journey into the beyond."

A voice suddenly spoke from the outside of the room. "Who are you talking to?" it asked.

Kuwali turned to the door. "Nobody, I am just performing the ritual. Please be silent," she replied, then turned to Shss again.

"You must go now, and never return," she whispered. "If you do, I am certain you will be killed, even as I thank you for what you have done. The power of our nation naturally transfers to the High Priestess after the death of the Queen, and I will make sure that nothing like this ever happens again."

The voice came again. "You're talking to someone, aren't you? ...Hey you, open this door, I want to see what's going on," it demanded. Soon thereafter, a thumping sound told Kuwali that they were trying to

break in.

"Quick, over here," she urged while helping the weakened Shss to her feet. She pushed a small button in the clay of the wall and there opened... a chute!

Kuwali hoisted up Shss and put her in the slide, placing the ruby in the girl's hand and tying the black spear to her back. The Priestess seemed to want to say something, but didn't know quite how to. In the end, she just pushed the girl down the slope and closed the hatch, just in time for the door to swing open and allow entrance to two inquisitive guards.

"Take care, sweetheart," she whispered.

Shss slid down, down, down a great slide, moving left and right without control from her greatly weakened body. The spear scraped itself on the narrow wall, but did little to slow her speed. Only a minute had passed by when the path ended below her. She came to a sudden stop at the bottom, but was only at rest for a second before the stone swung out and dropped her unceremoniously on the stone floor of a long hallway.

She lay on the ground for a short while, staring at the stone ceiling above of her. Her mind was racing, going over everything she had experienced.

Clutching the ruby, she wondered what the Queen had felt like seconds before she had died. *Were hers the kinds of thoughts that have gone through every beast I have ever killed?* she thought. *What is intelligence, anyway? What does it matter if beasts and people can both feel fear... and pain?*

Shss had had enough of this silly, stupid trial. She sat up and looked at the ruby of the monster she felled. To her, it was a sick reminder of the woman she killed, and nothing more. Without hesitation, she threw it down the hall, hearing the telltale tinkle of its flight recede until it finally came to rest a good distance away.

The Fighter felt the weight of the black spear on her back, and vowed to only carry it long enough until she found another weapon she could use. She was going home, and would be party to this dance of death no longer.

It was so cold. Shss didn't know what she preferred, the red monster... or this. The night had been long, and her thoughts weren't keeping her much company.

The Queen's eyes had peered through her soul at that instant. Shss was no longer some innocent girl who fought for survival or honor... she was a killer, a murderer of an unarmed person, no matter what the woman had done.

The tears wouldn't stop coming; she felt so dirty. She had taken a life... not for food or basic survival's sake, but because she valued her desire to live higher than another thinking being's.

She hugged her knees closer to her chest, trying to keep warm. She wondered what Serkesh would think of this, his sister Shss crying because she did what her people trained a lifetime to do: kill. She supposed she had always pushed it out of her mind, seeing the beasts she killed as sources of food, of honor. She never distinguished them as separate and living individuals.

Were living beings, animals, intelligent beings or otherwise, just meant to murder one another for their own ambition? How could she be allowed to live if she didn't afford others that same courtesy? Had she been living her whole life learning to be a heartless murderer?

All of these thoughts streamed through her head as the tears fell down her cheeks. The biting cold of the drafty castle slowed their descent, and made her shiver uncontrollably. She had never felt this weak before, not in her entire life.

The hours dragged on. She couldn't sleep, even though the room was long abandoned and full of old cots. Her own guilt wouldn't let her.

She found out soon enough that she had entered the castle; the pyramid she had come from and the castle itself were linked. The *Kassmak Ohss* was in here, somewhere, but she hadn't the heart to continue searching for it.

Mom, Dad, Serkesh, what did I do wrong? How could I end up this way? How is it that death causes me no end of torment now? she wondered. She paused, almost not daring to give rise to her next thought. But in the end, she couldn't stop it. *Can I even go back, knowing you would ask me to kill again?*

Shss thought back to when she and Serkesh were younger, exploring the swamp together, chasing animals or discussing nature in their innocence. And her first kill... she was proud then, but she felt disgusted by it now.

She sniffled, and her mind continued to wander. The Queen, the green creatures, the snake, the *Kassmak Ohss*, it all jumbled together with no real purpose. *I found my home, and they didn't want me. Then, I shamed my village with my actions and personal feelings. I have no real place to belong, I suppose.*

In this, her darkest moment, Serkesh's words came back to her... *Your pride as a Lizardman will carry you through.*

Her pride... she had none anymore. She had nothing to support her without her pride, without her honor. And there was no way to regain that once it had been lost to her. Unless...

Shss raised her head, and soon began to realize her new purpose. She stood slowly and closed her eyes, ingraining the following promise into every part of her being: *Peace and mercy in all things... never again shall I kill. Never again.*

She opened her eyes. She had made a terrible mistake, and would spend the rest of her life atoning for the needless murder the Queen had suffered at her hands. She had no right to take her life, or the life of any other person. But as long as she was still alive, she could make it up to them... to those still living as well as those she killed... and to herself.

She would bring back honor to the people of her village, and do good works in their name. She was Lizardman, not whatever these women were, and she abided by the Lizardman code of honor.

From this day forward, she would act with a peaceful heart, for as long as she possibly could. She would live humbly on her knees for the sake of others, drawing a weapon only when necessary. Never again would she dirty her hands or her honor with murder.

The *Kassmak Ohss* was still a problem, though... she had to recover it and keep it safe from anybody who might try to abuse its power. As long as she was alive, she knew she had to do her best to find it.

With new purpose, Shss picked up the Queen's spear and strode out the door of the small bunker, back downstairs to where she had thrown the ruby. It was clearly of importance if the spooky mask lady had let her keep it. Hopefully, it was still down there after the hours she spent in the cot room.

When she did finally reach the end of the long hallway, she was momentarily upset when she couldn't find it in any place that she looked... until she saw the door at the end of the hall.

The massive black door, with the cast image of a metal skull atop it, stared back at her... and inside the eye sockets of the skull were two shining red rubies. *The red beast must have been one of the guardians to this door*, Shss realized. *A being of that power would have guarded no mere trinket... which means...*

She slowly approached the door and opened it, knowing full well the meaning of the skull that adorned it. Down the hallway she went, down some poorly lit stairs and finally out into an open area, where a most

peculiar sight awaited.

There was a great pool of water that nearly surrounded the small outcropping of dirt around her: a river, still and unmoving underneath the gargantuan castle. It was deathly silent, and the waters were dark. She slowly scanned its earthen banks, up the shoreline and farther into the darkness where even her heightened senses could scarcely penetrate the gloom.

A cold fear gripped Shss' chest as she finally noticed the figure off to her left. There stood a pale, pointed ear shade in the shape of a girl, with jet black hair tied in a tail at the top back of her head. She didn't seem to notice Shss and was staring off into the river, sighing slightly. Her right hand rested on a long, curved black object at her side, and the other was tucked in her long white robe. A Ghost!

Shss raised her spear in anticipation of the potential fight. Her father had told her that visible souls were powerful, but confused, entities, who could not find their destined path after death. Endlessly tormenting themselves with memories of their traumatic lives, they would wander the land until they had come to terms with their passing, or somehow found their way back to the earth.

The only way to release them from their drifting pain was to obliterate the tether that held them to the physical world: namely, their ghostly form. Upon doing so, they would return to the earth and receive the healing they had denied themselves.

Taking a defensive stance, Shss hissed a warning to the female specter, and prepared herself to be overrun by her otherworldly adversary. The shade turned her head towards her and, looking quite confused, drew a slightly curved blade from the black object at her side.

The muscles in Shss' arms tightened, and a cold chill blew across the dead waters beyond the pale form. Her spine tingled.

I'll see to it that you find your way, lost one, even though it might cost me my life, she vowed, as she prepared for the coming attack.

Mercenary

Wine, mead, ale, beer, rum... east and west, Elf and Lizard, inside and outside the tavern. By the glass, by the pitcher, by the barrel, with friends, with enemies, and into her gullet by herself. Lucciana was beginning to wonder why she even bothered. No matter the nasty swill she forced down her throat, it never seemed to have any effect anymore.

Right now the tavern was really hot, and the cool spot she found on the table had long since turned heated and sweaty under her cheek. A quick flip of her head, and the Samurai found a new portion of the table that her flushed face hadn't rendered uncomfortable just yet.

The chill from the table ran through her cheek and down her spine... and made her kind of sleepy. Unfortunately, it was time for business, and she had to stay conscious for at least another ten minutes. The sobriety was no problem, but the dim and comfortable lighting of the tavern pressed firmly on her heavy eyelids.

She could already hear the excuses now, the same ones she always heard when some selfish, single-minded and tardy client decided to go and waste time on some idiotic errand, while she passed the time chasing dreams on a dingy table in some bar waiting for him.

"My horse fell ill," "I had pressing business to attend to," "You wait for *me*, commoner." There were a few standard ones. It certainly didn't beat last month's "Look, I'm in the middle of mistress hopping, so I'll make this quick." It got to the point where she could simply see her new boss crash into the tavern, shattering any hope of sleep, and know exactly which of the standbys he would use.

She'd seen better days. Her jet black hair was strewn about the table, some clumps of it coming free from

the knot at the top back of her head and cascading about her pointed ears. Her clothes were slightly dingy, though they were just simple white robes; they took the most damage when she was out on a job. Her sandals had long since dropped off of her feet and onto the dusty floor.

Normally her exceedingly pale white face would be flushed red from the alcohol, but nowadays, it was a rare sight. The world seemed to be getting more peaceful, though an occasional monster or villain would pop up here and there.

"...cciana?" she barely heard from her position on the table. Reluctantly pulling herself up from the welcoming embrace of the chilly tabletop, her blue eyes finally noticed the shrouded figure questioning the barkeep.

Unfortunately, as a regular, Lucciana knew she'd be fingered any second by the skinny man behind the counter. Sure enough, his finger slowly raised and found itself squarely pointed in her direction. The Elf groaned as her head hit the table. Why did he always have to rat her out... especially to someone dressed in that clichéd getup.

In all honesty, the man did a poor job of disguising himself. Any person with the slightest amount of sense could see the rings on his hands, hear the coins clinking beneath the cloth. A noble... which meant she'd have to get used to being addressed as "commoner." Gods above, she hated Llylgamyn and its antiquated class system.

"There are things you must know."

Lucciana perked up slightly at the new opening line. What, a client who actually wanted to fill her in on the details of his job, rather than the standard, "Sir Killme Deadman. Slay him and meet me here later?" What next, full payment in advance?

As the man spoke, Lucciana could almost see the money fly out of his pocket and out the window. She'd grown so accustomed to the money tossed at her before the speech that it felt like this might be another freebie. Didn't matter... she had enough cash floating around to make even a merchant jealous. It really wasn't about the money anymore.

She interrupted the man, not even paying attention to the details of the job. "Just to let you know, if I find out that who you wish to kill is an innocent, or you're trying to take advantage of someone through hiring me, I will spare their life and take yours, instead. Either way, I get paid."

The obvious noble was unfazed. "I know your history, Samurai," he replied. "So believe me when I say this concerns someone far from innocent... namely, the former King of Aram, a hidden chamber in his castle, and an item in his possession."

Lucciana quieted down at the mention of his name. The King of Aram was known for his frequent raids on the townships surrounding his lands. There were rumors that he had found the Cosmic Forge, the pen by which the Gods wrote the laws of destiny. Any person who wrote with the Forge altered the very fabric of the universe, and could write any of their desires into existence.

The silly and groundless legend aside, what was historically known was that the King had actually acquired a sizeable portion of the known world before he, his wife, and his Wizard suddenly seemed to disappear off the face of the planet.

When the King's unpaid armies had packed up and left, the lands under his domain quickly returned to their original owners... but nobody in their right mind would have ever considered going into that castle, or even near it. Word had it that all manner of creatures, thieves and traps waited silently for anyone to blunder in in search of immeasurable fortune.

Then, it dawned on her... and Lucciana chuckled slightly to herself. Who did this guy think he was, wearing such a flimsy disguise? It was clear that Llylgamyn's new line of royalty had the same delusions of power and wealth that the King of Aram did.

"You want me to go get the Cosmic Forge for you?" she asked.

"Indeed," he answered. "I will provide you with an advance of five hundred gold pieces, and whatever you wish upon completion of the job. Name it and it is yours. I would offer some kind of help, but nobody else wants to take this offer... and they say that you tend to work the suicidal market rather hard."

Not-the-Prince then withdrew a pouch of jingling coins and offered it to the Elf.

Lucciana bit her lip to keep from laughing at this tool. Not only did he believe those ridiculous legends, but his manner of speaking and his actions were such a tell to his identity, that she couldn't believe he was serious.

"Well, wonderful," she said, standing up and opening the bag to make sure the money was there. "And no need to come and find me. I'll see you after I find your lost pen."

The robed figure looked slightly puzzled as Lucciana leaned in. "And I don't take suicidal jobs because I seek death, Prince. I take them because I never fail."

Her client flustered at his discovery, but didn't say anything as the pale figure strode out the door.

Easiest gold I ever made! she proudly thought, pointing herself in the direction of the castle.

Cries of the Dead

Lucciana had travelled most of the roads around the castle before, but had never taken the one that led straight into it. Most of her clients not only feared to go in there, but kept their jobs from interacting with it in any way. "Curses indeed," she chuckled.

It probably explained why the road seemed to be in worse shape than what she was accustomed to. The cobblestones that used to provide a stable path to a once mighty nation were now broken and scattered, the results of bad weather and nosy animals. Grass and weeds had started to grow between the cracks, and as she drew closer to the towering form of the gigantic castle, even the drooping trees around the road seemed to suffer an empathetic depression from being so close.

Lucciana was not surprised in the slightest when the creature she had been sensing far in front of her and to the right suddenly burst out of the trees and straight towards her.

A starving wolf, whose ribs were clearly showing out of its pathetically thin body, stepped before her and growled. It must have assumed that she was an easy kill, and had stepped forward to challenge her for her very life, but the fact that it could barely stand straight enough to look her in the eye betrayed the fact that it could finish nothing more than the weakest of prey.

Obviously, the wolf had grown too attached to the deadening lands around it, and had not moved on to more lush feeding grounds as its companions might have done. Or perhaps its pack abandoned it?

In any case, Lucciana felt sorry for the poor thing. Here was a lone creature, trying to eke an existence out of an uncaring world and receiving nothing but starvation for its troubles. It growled again, its actions speaking volumes of the troubles it had experienced.

She kept a hand on her katana and slowly reached into her white robe to fiddle with the bag at her hip. Untying the top and retrieving what she was looking for, she flung a sizeable piece of roast chicken at the wolf, who immediately pounced on the morsel and began to devour it.

She continued walking down the road, prompting a slight growl from the wolf. It never took its eyes off of her, suspecting even now that she might turn on him. She smiled slightly at it and continued on.

When she reached the castle, she was dismayed to see that the gate was closed. There was no keyhole, no lever, nothing that indicated it might open for her. Two red Demon statues made of stone stood to its

left and right, pouring water from their mouths to tiny pools below them. Each clutched a tiny yellow spear.

That must be it... she thought, walking up to the statue on the right and pulling on the spear with a single hand. *Too easy.* Only, it didn't move.

Must be the other one, she concluded, striding up to it with confidence as she pulled on the spearhead. Once again, nothing happened.

Lucciana placed both hands on it this time, and pulled with all her might. The tip finally gave way and broke off at her insistence, sending her sprawling onto her backside. She sighed sharply and lay down completely, hands behind her head, staring at the starry sky above her. Why were things never as easy as they should be?

After a few minutes of contemplation, she finally decided it was time to eat. That apple had been calling to her all day, and she would be remiss to let it sit in her bag all by itself. She staked out a good spot by the gate, fished out the sweet red treat and leaned against the bars of the old and annoying obstacle...

Only to have it slide into the wall at her touch. For the second time today, Lucciana found herself flat on her back because of this ridiculous job. The gate completely receded into the wall, and Lucciana stared with annoyance at the stone wall above her. Finally, she took a bite out of the apple to reward herself for her patience.

She figured it was slightly dangerous to be in the gate's sliding path in case it changed its mind, so Lucciana rolled backwards into the corridor it had blocked off, apple in hand. Though the gate slid back as she entered the corridor, she found that any time she came close to it, it would open of its own accord.

She walked down the torchlit hallway towards another gate, finishing the apple before she was inside and had officially started her job. It, too, slid into the wall at her approach; she was finally in.

The grand hall around her was massive, tall and wide, but aside from the doors to her left and right and two archways in front of her, it was completely barren. Only dust and old cobwebs covered the stone floor and walls.

No sooner had she entered, Lucciana heard the tiny voice of something dying somewhere just beyond her. She chose the right archway to find the source of the sound... and beneath the flickering light of scattered torches, she saw the twitching form of a great rat, its fur matted with blood and its legs moving weakly beneath it.

Two were obviously broken. The creature wouldn't last long without attention.

And that was one thing Lucciana could not give. Samurai were trained in the art of the sword as both weapon and shield, and dabbled slightly in the spellbook of the Mage. She knew next to nothing about how to mend wounds... only how to cause them.

The rat was disoriented, and did not prepare for or expect Lucciana's katana suddenly removing its head. The body spasmed slightly in its death throes, then was still.

Squeak! Squeak!!! the screeching seemed to come from everywhere at once, bringing with it a sense of terror and confusion so thick it could paralyze.

Don't worry, you're safe, her voice responded. *Did you know that you died? It's true, I'm sorry to say. But you're all right.*

The rat's cries began to slow, and finally stopped at the soothing voice's insistence. *Now, do you see that light just beyond you? It's welcoming you. It wants to take you in and make you better. Won't you go to it? I'm sure it would make the both of you very happy.*

The new presence began to slowly drift away, until only Lucciana was left. No matter the thousands of times it happened, it was always sad... but it had to be done. It was her cross to bear.

"Hey, sweetheart! Whatcha doin' out here all by your lonesome?" a voice came from her left farther down the hall. Lucciana looked up from her brooding state to face her new arrival.

Several feet away was a rugged, somewhat ragged, handsome man who had clearly seen a battle or two. With a sheepish grin, he gave a futile brushing to remove the dirt that had effectively brought new color to his grimy clothes.

At least he was making an effort to impress her, though his short stubble and wavy brown hair were cute enough on their own. He had a short, flat, bladed seadog-style cutlass slung from his waist, along with a large pack on his back. He made no motion to draw his blade, or even consider doing so.

She finally replied, "Just performing this creature's last rites and venturing on. Who are you?"

"The name's Simmons, ma'am," he said as he bowed slightly. "I'm first mate to Cap'n Matey, and a member of his crew. And I'm sorry to say, but from the looks of it, you'll soon be joining as well."

"Oh?" she asked calmly, slowly moving her hand to her katana. It sounded like this one wanted to play with his prey before pouncing. "And why would that be?"

The pirate backed up slightly, put his hands up and made a pushing "relax, relax" gesture. "No, no, don't take it the wrong way," he said excitedly, "this isn't a kidnapping or anything. It just seems that with you being stuck here and everything, what with the monsters running loose and all, that you really don't have much other choice in the matter!"

Lucciana relaxed her arm; sometimes first impressions could be spotty. "Thank you, but I can handle things myself," she replied.

Simmons smiled again. "And how long are you going to go without food, water, shelter, you know, the things you need to survive?" he asked. "You just gonna run around and maim rats for food 'til the day you run into something more nasty?"

As she opened her mouth to correct him, he interrupted her. "See, that's what Cap'n Matey has ordered of all of us. We roam the castle scavenging what we can to survive, and we recruit any stragglers... like your beautiful self," he said, gesturing to her, "as honorary members of the crew before they go and get themselves hurt."

Lucciana looked confused. "Why do you need to 'rescue' people by keeping them in this dangerous place?" she wondered aloud.

Then, it dawned on her. "You say you're stuck here. Why is that?" she asked.

With a shrug, the Pirate smiled. "Because the gate's closed, of course. And there's no keyhole or anything to get out of here," he explained.

The Samurai gave a quick cock of her head to the entrance to the castle, glancing briefly at it. Simmons got the idea and began to follow her on the short trek towards the entrance. When they got there, she smiled a wry smile and waved her hand before the gate. It obediently slid into the wall and revealed the corridor leading outside.

Simmons' eyes lit up bright enough to bathe the whole castle in joyous glee. "It's true! I can't believe it's true!!" he shouted. "That little girl actually opened the gate! I've gotta go tell the Cap'n... come on, come with me and celebrate us getting out of this blasted castle!"

The overjoyed pirate's excited hopping and gesturing amused her, but Lucciana really wanted to get this job over with. "Happy to help, but I've got business here, and little time to do it in," she interrupted. "So if

you'll excuse me..."

"C'mon, you gotta come!" he insisted. "We've got rat steak, bat-fry, and bowls and bowls of vine tendrils! You'll love those... and it will be the last time we eat here, so it'll be a feast!" he exclaimed.

"Really, it's fine, I must be going..." she replied coolly.

But he was adamant. "We raided the wine pantry a few weeks ago, too," he continued. "Got just about every kind imagin..."

"I'm there," Lucciana interrupted.

The entire room was in an uproar. Dozens of brigands and pirates, merchants and adventurers, young and old alike celebrated their impending escape from the confines of the castle. Lucciana and Simmons, one arm around the other's shoulder and holding a mug of sweet-smelling brew, sang in tandem with the traditional pirate songs of Matey and his boisterous crew.

A voice popped up, "To Matey and his cursed crew!" The room replied, singing, "Living the pirate's life, you see!" Another voice yelled, "Rob the nobles for me and you!" The room sang back, "The pirate's life for you and me!"

Simmons yelled next, squeezing Lucciana, "To all our mates, until the end!" The room sang, "Living the pirate's life, you see!" Lucciana shouted next, looking at Simmons, "And no more eating rats, my friend!" The room burst out in cheer, and sang, "The pirate's life for you and me!"

Everyone burst into laughter and applause, and took another swig of their precious vintage wine. Soon, a great, strong, greasy, green-skinned toad of a swashbuckler stood on the table above everyone else and motioned for quiet.

"Me mates!" he yelled, "Today we be *free*!" The room burst out in cheer.

Once it died down, a slurred voice droned out, "Yesh, and no shanks to you Matey, ya misherable sheadog! Ya leave the shailin' to thosh who know howda run the shhip, 'specially in tha misht!"

The room cheered at the open jab to their Captain. "Quiet, or I'll have ya keelhauled!" he retorted, to which the man raised his mug.

"In all seriousness me mates, we needa give a hearty thanks to that maid Hiromi for openin' the gates, and to our new mate Lucciana for bringin' it to our attention," the Captain toasted. "May they always sail with the wind at their backs!"

The room cheered again, and a dozen dirty hands clapped Lucciana on the back in thanks, leaving an unfortunate abundance of black marks all over her white robes. She was beginning to consider a change of wardrobe for the kind of dirty work she routinely engaged in.

"Now, before we sets out to continue our plunderin' on the *dear*," he said, drawing out the last word, "well-to-do keepers of our rightful coin, I says we have ourselves a good ol' fashioned contest with yer dear ol' Cap'n! Who's man enough to take me on?" he yelled, scanning the room.

"Tch, I'll do it!" Lucciana yelled out, her inhibitions surprisingly beginning to leave her, even after years of building her impressive tolerance.

"Our mate Lucciana!" Matey yelled in response, raising a mug and staggering slightly. The rest of the crew raised their mugs and swords and roared in response. "So what's it gonna be, mate? Ya wants ta drink, or ya wants to fight?"

Lucciana stood on the table, straight and calm as she could muster, and indicated the wobbling Matey. "Seems I've already beaten you at drinking, Captain. How's about we settle this with a duel?"

The crew cheered again at another successful bit of slander on their fearless leader, and Matey laughed out loud. "Awright, but I'm not gonna go easy on ya!" he yelled, tipping back the mug and finishing the last of the wine. The second he was finished, though, he dropped his mug, drew his cutlass and dove straight for Lucciana standing on the opposite table.

Lucciana was surprised, but not unprepared. Matey struck at her arm with the flat edge of his cutlass, but she had already instinctively drawn her katana to block the clumsy assault and leap backwards for more legroom.

The pirates behind Lucciana remained seated, but cheered and whooped at the speedy deflection and withdrawal. She carefully navigated her way around the assorted meats of the castle's vermin and the half-downed mugs of wine and came to the edge of the table, before Matey's charge and hop finally brought him to within feet of her.

Unfortunately, Matey was not so careful with the food. When his foot came into contact with the greasy rat meat, he immediately lost his footing and dove sword first in a drunken dive towards a pirate seated nearby.

Lucciana positioned herself between the flying blade and the seated pirate, and drove her katana upwards into Matey's wild cutlass as hard as she could. Losing his grip from the sudden force, Matey released the cutlass and it spun into the air, where it struck the stone ceiling and sent off a shower of sparks.

She bodily blocked Matey's charge into the confused man and shoved him off course, straight into the wall, and the Captain hit the stone headfirst with a loud thump. Lucciana followed the descent of the spinning cutlass and finally grabbed the handle, using its own momentum to drive it into the table.

"Careful," she said, eyeing the prone lump in the corner.

The fallen captain groaned and slowly sat up, clutching his head and trying to find his bearings while the world spun around him. The seated pirate sat mouth agape, a small piece of rat meat slipping off of his head. The room was completely silent.

Finally, Simmons spoke up from the middle of the crowd. "Hey Cap'n, you ok?" he asked.

Matey began an agonized ascent to his feet and looked at his Elven adversary with dizzy eyes, and a new respect. "Looks like yer Cap'n may be needin' a li'l more rest..." he groaned.

Lucciana bid the pirates a final farewell, though she felt slightly bad about that big purple lump on the Captain's forehead. *Still, it's his fault that he doesn't know his limit*, she thought with a smile. When the last of them had rounded the corner out of the intersection, she actually felt a little sadness at seeing them go. It was a strange feeling for her.

What was even sadder was that none of them had known the location of the Cosmic Forge. They came in part to seek it out, and had found nothing from their tiny base of operations on this floor of the castle. That of course left the entire *rest* of the castle to explore, but at least she could assume it wasn't on this floor.

Back to the task at hand, she thought. She was now in the lower level of the castle, where the soldiers once slept before being called out on one of the King's many raids into the countryside. Behind her lay more of the lower level, to her left another bunk room, and finally, in front of her was the intersection where the pirates had left.

Lucciana finally decided to return to the entrance of the castle and start from there. No sense in leaving it

unexplored, for if the pen was there, it would keep her from wasting her time elsewhere when she could be back home, sleeping.

She retraced the steps that had brought Simmons and her here, up the stairs, around the corner and through a side door, back to the main hall of the castle. As she walked back to the front gate, she could very faintly hear the laughing of the pirates as they made their way back to civilization. That, too, soon faded away into nothingness. Once more, she was alone.

Lucciana sighed and pondered her next move. There was a grouping of doors to her left and right, and the double archway was once again in front of her. It was deadly quiet.

She went over her potential moves... she could try some of those doors, but they seemed too close to the entrance to be likely places to hide a treasure. Nonetheless, she broke down each of the locked portals to be sure. She found the sad remains of a throne, a family of rats in a bare pantry, and other things of little interest. She really didn't think the Cosmic Forge would be in the cupboard.

More rooms, more of the same. Dust, cobwebs, broken tables and rotted chairs. Six rooms, and nothing but a sneeze to show for her trouble.

"Whatever you wish," the Prince had promised her for this job. Had she known her part would amount to nothing more than brutal housekeeping, she would have asked for a bigger advance.

She continued down the grand hall past the double archways, to a pair of stairs leading to one of the castle spires. She ascended with a sigh, when a cold draft hit her. The wind came from upstairs, which probably meant somebody had left the door to one of the spires open.

But when she reached the top, the door was closed. *Strange*, she thought, taking a look at the obstruction. It was made of solid oak, though the handle looked flimsy enough. This high up, the chances of something valuable being hidden were certainly higher... a hidden object, maybe a magic pen that granted wishes and certainly wasn't the object of an overactive imagination?

Lucciana unsheathed her katana and sliced the handle between the door and the cheap copper that comprised it. It dropped to the floor and looked up at her, almost as if to sadly cry out, "Why?"

The door, free of the lock that had held it for over a century, slowly began to open inwards.

It was dark, much darker than any room she had visited thus far. Apparently, this room's everburning torch found a way to circumvent its promise of centuries without upkeep. From the light spilling up from the downstairs, Lucciana could make out only the towering figure of an elegant bed in the corner. The rest of the room was shrouded in darkness.

She cautiously made her way into the shadows, hearing nothing but the sound of her own footsteps and breathing... her surprisingly heavy breathing. The shadows soon got so thick that she couldn't even see a few inches in front of her. It was actually getting to be a noticeable hazard, so she began to chant a Fireball spell.

Suddenly, she tripped over something very heavy beneath her. She had only time to utter a sharp curse before she struck the ground, and whatever it was toppled over. Immediately after, the sounds of many unseen things thudding and shattering against the stone floor pierced the once silent gloom.

Of course she hadn't seen it... the room was pitch black. Lucciana cursed herself for her lack of foresight, and stood up in the middle of what she assumed was a pile of broken furniture and other various items.

That's when the hand grabbed her left arm, her sword arm. She had made such noise coming in that she had no idea that something was creeping up behind her. "Wha...?" she stammered, hoping that whoever had her was just trying to get her attention. But when she felt the teeth sink into her arm, she knew for certain its intentions.

Lucciana swung with her free hand into the darkness, in the space her attacker's head would likely occupy. There was a sharp *crunch* as she felt her attacker's nose break, but she was stunned by the feel of their face... it was deathly cold, rubbery, like the feel of the long dead.

She cried out as the thing tore a piece of flesh from her arm, then bit down for more. It held on fast, gnawing at her flesh. Lucciana reached down to unsheathe her katana and make short work of it... only to feel nothing but her robe. Her katana had fallen from her side when she fell.

Whatever it was grabbed her neck with its other hand, groaning unearthly, ghastly sounds of hunger and pain. It was going to kill her if she didn't do something.

It's against the code... but how am I to carry out the will of the Samurai without my life? she thought in an instant. Though she was starting to lose consciousness, Lucciana still managed to thrust a hand into her robe and pull out what she was looking for.

She unsheathed the smaller blade from the tiny sheathe on her right side, her wakizashi, and sliced at the arm grabbing her neck. The flesh and bone cut as cleanly as expected, leaving a still gripping arm holding fast and choking her. Despite the grievous wound, it continued to chew on her arm.

Finally, Lucciana got a glimpse of the thing as her eyes adjusted to the darkness, and she saw exactly where its head was. She flipped her wakizashi around in the air, grabbed the handle and stabbed the creature directly in the eye.

It began to spasm from the new hole in its brain, but after a few seconds, it released its painful bite from her arm and collapsed on the floor. The wakizashi took some persuasion to leave the vacuum-like entry in the thing's head, but she was finally able to pull it out.

As she removed the clutching hand from her neck, she reflected on what she had just done: violating the code in such a dangerous instance might be forgivable, but even so, the smaller wakizashi blade was meant to be used only in matters of dishonor, and only on herself.

Sudden pain quickly pushed aside these thoughts, and Lucciana turned to her more pressing concerns.

The mouth-sized hole in her arm was bleeding heavily and dripping onto the floor. Lucciana quickly tore off a piece of the bottom of her robe and wrapped it around the wound with gritted teeth, gently placing the injured limb into the faux safety of her robe.

With her good arm, she felt along the bottom of the floor for her katana and sheathe, and found them both directly beneath her. After she had them safely in hand, she ran from the room and back into the inadequate light from the downstairs torch.

She stood outside the darkened room, her quickened pulse reminding her just how close to death she had come this time. She didn't want to risk the thing coming back for her again, so she retreated downstairs for the torch and brought it back upstairs to the room.

Surprisingly, she noticed the mess she had made before anything else. She had managed to knock over a nightstand, and many books, toys and a now shattered glass figurine that once rested upon it... but it wasn't long before her eyes rested on the thing she really didn't want to see again.

It was a girl. She was badly decayed and missing some of her hair, and barely dressed in torn clothes... with a new broken nose, to finish. But she was Human, at least at some point in time. Lucciana's blood was still in her mouth, and it was all the Elf could do to keep from throwing up.

It had been on the bed the entire time, for who knew how many decades. From the smell of it, Lucciana figured she had been partially preserved by conventional means, but her animation was certainly the doing of some mad Wizard.

Or possibly...

No, it can't be the Forge, she thought. It was a stupid legend that had no solid grounding in reality. If something like that had existed, the entire world would have been affected by some madman's nightmarish vision by now.

Whatever the case, the threat now removed, Lucciana was free to search the room for any further clues on the mysterious pen's whereabouts.

Thirty minutes of ransacking the entire area, including the empty closet, angered Lucciana as nothing else had in quite a while; she had been attacked and nearly eaten alive for absolutely no reason whatsoever. Her mood now officially spoiled, she stalked back down the stairs in anger, replacing the torch and nursing the wound the creature had left her. *I've had it with up*, she concluded. *I think it's time to go down.*

She descended the stairs and returned to the stairwell Simmons had brought her to just a while ago. She could avoid searching the Pirate's floor for now, but maybe the path went even farther down.

Her suspicions were confirmed: just down the hall from Matey's room, a set of stairs led even deeper into the recesses of the castle. They went down to a hallway that wound around a few corners, then continued for several hundred feet in front of her.

Lucciana had had enough of sneaking around, as well, and began walking down the hall with defiance and purpose. She almost wished something would leap from the shadows to attack her, so she would have something to punish for her pain. Unfortunately, the hallway only opened up twice on the left, both to locked gates that she had no patience right now to deal with. There was nothing else alive down here.

The hallway stopped with a door on the left. A great black door bearing the figure of a skull, with two shining rubies for eyes, barred any further passage. Lucciana pushed on the handle, and was surprised to see it open so readily. The new hallway led down past some very dark stairs, until finally she found herself in an open area, surrounded by still water.

She looked around, dumbfounded, not believing her eyes. It was dark, but not so dark that she didn't recognize the earthen banks of the River Styx when she saw them. The waters ran still and corrupted or killed anything it touched. Legend had it that it was the way to the Land of the Dead... and the castle was sitting right next to it.

She sighed softly, and thought back again to the pathetic reward she was offered for this long and painful ordeal. *Five hundred gold pieces for this...* she thought.

Something hissed off to her right. Lucciana turned, startled and wondering what it could possibly be this time. It was another girl... but this one very much alive. She could tell from her black hair braided into several locks and her dark skin that she was probably Amazulu, but she seemed either rabid or diseased.

She was hardly dressed in clinging animal hides, and had a white bandage tied to her leg... but the worst part was that she was pointing a spear straight at her. Lucciana slowly drew her katana with her off hand and braced herself for a fight.

What have I gotten myself into? she thought unhappily.

Adept

Kiwi waited with the shifty impatience of her youth. Could that sun rise any slower? It was nearly morning, and that meant only one thing to the tiny, blue-skinned Faerie: time to see Master Jang!

Actually, it was one of the few things that filled her with excitement and happiness anymore. Ever since she had met the old Monk out in the forest, her life had changed drastically.

He had scared her, at first. Having spent the entirety of her life around the forest where she and her family lived, she was used to seeing tiny creatures and humanoids among the thick trees. She had seen

bugs and beasts of all shapes and sizes, and even a food nabbing Gremlin or two, but never in her life had she imagined seeing someone so... huge!

Likewise, Jang seemed quite startled himself. *A flittering, winged form flitting about in front of him might have looked like a dangerous, blood-sucking, disease-ridden insect at the time*, Kiwi thought with a slight chuckle.

But she curiously drew closer, bit by bit, and the old man seemed to relax after he saw the "bug's" true form: two legs, two arms, a being every bit as humanoid as he was. Well, except for the rainbow-colored wings.

It was really hard at first. *My people have always been naturally friendly to the beasts of the forest, so why shouldn't a Giant be any different?* Kiwi thought then. It was easier said than done to make friends, she realized, as the Giant spoke in a language of tonal sounds, like nothing she had ever heard before.

She realized he was trying to speak to her when he pointed at himself and sang, "Jang." Kiwi returned the gesture and introduced herself, and the Giant smiled.

The two began a dialogue of gestures and mutual misunderstanding, but most importantly, lots of laughter. Kiwi remembered fondly the Giant's first chuckle, when she landed on the ground in front of him, pointed to him, then spread her arms out as wide and far as she could with a big grin on her face. No words were exchanged, but the "You're huge!" message was clear.

Luckily, as time went on, the old Giant revealed certain abilities that he had acquired on his journeys. Kiwi literally jumped as she heard the man's voice in her mind, speaking to her in her own language! *Don't be afraid*, he said, *I just want to speak to you properly, little one*.

Kiwi had never seen or heard of anything like this in her entire life in the forest. People speaking to other people in their minds?

From that point on, the little Faerie's fascination for Jang (*Just an old 'Monk,' nothing more*, he told her) grew... as did her love for the kind old man. She would skip out on family activities, ceremonies, mealtime, anything happening in and around her home among the rocks, just to spend another day with Master Jang. He was always full of wisdom, and worked hard to teach his eager young friend everything she wanted to know.

Kiwi's excitable nature and constant curiosity made this a difficult endeavor indeed, but the day he asked if she would like to be his official student was the happiest in her life. "Yeah!!" she screamed out, as she shot into the sky like a hawk, returning to earth only to kiss him on the cheek.

Every day after, she would sneak out of her village again and again, for longer and longer periods of time, to spend time with Master Jang and learn more of his amazing secrets. She remembered every lesson, from his role as a Monk and his permanent connection with the universal mind of God, to how to prepare simple herbal meals and meditate.

It was the day that Kiwi decided to cut off all of her hair, to feel more like his proper protégé, that things began to take a turn for the worse at home. The other Faeries would never let it go, constantly showing off their long silver locks, and giggling at Kiwi's smooth scalp.

Kiwi had never really had anybody very close to her, but her baldness removed any possibility that another Faerie would ever consider her an equal worthy of friendship. At least, that's what she thought.

Today was no exception, either. Some of the other Faeries pointed and snickered amongst themselves as Kiwi sat on the rocks where her people lived, waiting for sunrise. *Luckily, the usual spot where I meet Master Jang is far enough away that I've never had any of them run into us*, she thought happily. It was just as well, because she never wanted to share him with anyone.

She fidgeted with her tiny light blue vest and shorts in anticipation of what she was waiting for. *Come on...*

Finally! The stupid orange ball made its way over the treetops and splashed a beautiful array of orange and red across the land. It was time!

Off like a dart Kiwi shot into the sky from her tiny village, amidst the pointing and laughter of a few of her siblings, heading straight for the circle of trees where she knew Master Jang would just be waking up. *Friendly to outsiders, but we sure can treat ourselves with real cruelty*, Kiwi thought sadly for the hundredth time in her life.

She hardly remembered the trip to Master Jang because she was so excited about what they would do today. Maybe they would meditate and see each other in the spirit, maybe he would have some new martial art move to teach her, or maybe they would take a walk and she could identify all the plants to him again! That was her favorite!

Kiwi finally saw the familiar trees lined in a circle around a field of green grass... and dive bombed the wrapped lump in the middle, which was making slight snoring noises. "Hey Master Jang, wake up! It's time to get up, come on!!" the Faerie yelled, jumping all over the old bald Monk. Her weight never served as a good alarm, but her voice always got him to open at least one eye.

He rolled slightly, and a small green figurine tied around his neck rolled with the movement. Kiwi took to the air to avoid getting crushed. His brown eyes opened slowly and his sleepy voice mentally came to the Faerie... *Kiwi, good to see you again! As early as ever, I see*. The Faerie smiled and rushed forth to hug his cheeks as hard as she could.

Returning to the ground, she sat silently in the meditative position that he had taught her, but kept her happy eyes on him. The old Monk sat up, a little more slowly than usual, and smiled.

Her voice came to his mind as her head glowed brightly. *So what will we learn today, Master Jang?* she thought to him. *Meditative tricks? Chakra energizing? Can we go explore the inner universe again?*

Jang blinked slightly as if he was going to reply in her mind, but Kiwi beat him to it. *I know! It's review day! Ok, let's see... it is not power itself, but the control of force that is one's true strength. We are all children of God, and so we are all equal in God's eyes. All the answers lie within.*

Kiwi... Jang tried to interject with a soft glow around his head.

Quiet the soul, and anything will become clear, Kiwi continued. *We live to learn, and learn to live as better people. Become attached to nothing but unconditional love for others. How's that?* she asked with a wide grin.

Her rapid speech left him slightly disoriented, but he smiled anyway. *Actually, little one, I was hoping we could just sit and enjoy one another's company today, if that is all right.*

Kiwi blinked. *What an odd thing to say*, she thought solely to herself. *We almost always do something every day, unless one of us isn't up for it.*

She couldn't really tell, but at that moment she started to notice little things that had escaped her before: his eyes looked somewhat sunken, and his face seemed very thin and pale. Even his movements were slower today. Kiwi almost wrote it off as being woken up so early, but she'd done it a million times before and not noticed anything like this.

He motioned her over to him, and she took a seat on his lap. *How is your life, Kiwi? I've never really asked*, she heard in her mind. *Do the others still pick on you? How are things at home? What do you want to do when you get older? Are you happy?*

Kiwi started to get a little worried. *What are you talking about, Master Jang? You've never acted like this before... I have problems in my village and with the people in it, you know that. And of course I'm happy... I have you!*

The old Monk looked as though someone had struck him in the stomach, and turned slightly away from the tiny Faerie sitting on his leg. With a pretend cough, he shook the telltale tear from his eye and let it drop to the ground, never to speak of any secrets it might have borne.

Master Jang? Kiwi asked in a shaky thought. She left her seat on his leg and flew up to his shoulder, where she sat down and touched her teacher on the cheek.

Ah, nothing, please ignore what I just said. Consider it the ramblings of an old man, Jang thought to her. He smiled and continued. *But I have some news for you. Last night, I was in the spirit when a figure approached me and told me something very important. It concerns you.*

Kiwi was taken aback, that she would be destined for something even remotely important enough to be discussed by someone in the other realm. Jang looked straight into her emerald green eyes. *They told me that today would be the day you would begin your destined path. And to do so, you must venture into the castle.*

The castle? That big hunk of rock over there? Kiwi asked, pointing to the far border of the forest where she thought it lay. *But Queen Saeren told us not to go there, and that it was too dangerous.*

Jang paused slightly, as if he were debating whether or not to tell her something. After a short time, he simply said, *Nothing in our lives is the result of chance, or randomness. We all live according to the will of destiny, and the will of God.*

It was no mistake that you met me, that we had such a powerful connection together so early on, or that you would take to the teachings of the Monk so well. Your destiny lies in that castle, and you have the strength to see it through, he continued.

She could feel where this conversation was going. *Is this goodbye?* she asked.

Jang turned to Kiwi and stroked her tiny cheek slightly. *Only for a short while, little one, for I cannot go with you. I am afraid an old man like myself would just get in the way,* he mentally chuckled.

She felt abandoned, that her only friend would ask her to leave like this. Sensing these thoughts, his voice came again. *Oh, my student. My little one! How I have enjoyed our time together and all the things you have taught me about you and your people, and your playful way of life. You have given me more than you will ever know.*

The Giant and the Faerie, just the size from fingertip to wrist! God truly blessed me to know such a kindly and strong-willed young girl such as yourself, he thought to her.

Kiwi was silent. She remembered those times, too, but she felt awful knowing she would never experience them again. If there was one thing she learned from Master Jang, it was that you could always trust your teacher, and the word of God. And if Master Jang had heard someone tell him that Kiwi had great things planned for her, then she believed it without question.

As the tears streamed down her face and onto her tiny blue clothes, Kiwi looked up into the eyes of her teacher. Jang stared back with watery, happy eyes, and his voice came again.

We are as connected as the day we were both born, the day we met, the day you became my pupil, and every day between. Our physical bodies have separate destinies at this moment, but our souls have always had the same. I will see you again in a few days time, but I will always be with you at the source, now and forever.

With a slight shiver, Kiwi rushed forward on his shoulder to hug him. Of course it was true, that they were connected and would soon see each other again, but it didn't make it hurt any less now. *And although you have to leave this day...* he added, *I do not see why God cannot grant us one last walk about the forest,* he thought with a wink.

Kiwi suddenly sprang to life. "Yeah!" she shouted, and took her usual spot on his shoulder. The old Monk slowly stood up, retrieving his nearby bo staff, and the two began their journey through the grassy path that wound through the trees.

So, did I ever tell you about the time I taught the way of the Monk to the ungrateful child many years ago? he asked her. Well, it seemed that this young boy would have nothing to do with anything he had to do himself, so you can imagine the trouble it caused!

The two wound their way down the path one last time. The slow, weakened footsteps of the old Monk became quieter and quieter, until only the sound of the rustling wind remained.

The Guardian of the Rock

This was the first time in a long time that Kiwi had felt this alone. Though she always felt invisible in the crowd of mocking Faeries who were supposed to be her family, at least then, she always had her daily visits with Master Jang to look forward to.

No, there was her mother, too. Faeries were born from magical dewdrops that fell from the shining Rock of Truth, which made the Queen, the oldest of them all, the mother of all Faeries. And if Kiwi didn't love Saeren so much, she never would have come back every day in the first place.

She thought fondly back on her mother, who had thrown an absolute fit when Kiwi came back with no hair that day. Saeren always asked her where she went, and what she was doing all day. But no matter how much her mother asked, Kiwi just couldn't share Master Jang, ever. He was her mentor and her friend, and she never wanted him to look at someone else with those special, approving eyes.

It seemed kind of silly, now. Why would she keep her best friend a secret from her mom, letting the two most important people in her life stay forever separated?

She made a vow to introduce the two when she came back. It was about time she lost her fear of losing one or the both of them, and letting the two parts of Kiwi as Faerie and Monk come to grips with one another.

Enough of that, she thought. First things first: face this destiny doodad and get back to Master Jang! She flexed her tiny muscles with anticipation. Master Jang had taught her more than just the nature of the universe and how to best help others; he had also taught her how to defend herself, as all Monks were required to learn. Heaven help any being who harassed this Faerie!

She had been flying around for a while, and the forest was getting kind of dark. Master Jang told her some pretty complicated directions to the castle... left, right, straight, veer left, around the tall oak, tons of stuff she could never hope to remember. She hadn't even caught a glimpse of the structure yet, despite Master Jang's insistence on how big it was... though the lack of light wasn't helping.

Kiwi flew up one more time and finally saw what she was looking for: Master Jang wasn't kidding... the place was huge!

Out of the trees poked the massive wall and turret of a small corner of the castle. If a corner was that big, it would certainly make exploring its entirety for an enigmatic destiny quite a chore. Kiwi briefly wondered if exploring the castle itself was her destiny, or if she was looking for something tangible. Master Jang had tricked her with variations of that vague riddle several times over.

She suddenly started to hear voices. It wasn't unusual for the Faerie, who often spoke mentally with her teacher over the years, but they weren't able to speak to each other from this great a distance. Slowly, she came to realize that it was a physical voice, from behind and below her.

Kiwi turned around just in time to see a Fire Bomb flailing straight for her. She flew backwards, grabbed the bottle with all arms and legs and decelerated to keep it from striking her too hard. The bottles were

purposefully made of a weak variation of glass to shatter on impact and explode.

Below her scrambled a mob of tiny Gremlins. They were spiteful little creatures, and made a habit of mugging and murdering anybody they could swarm with their great numbers and remorseless attacks. They were all green-skinned, dressed in tiny blue robes and tunics... and running around the path below her.

From her position in the sky, she knew she was safe from physical attack. The only problem was if they had more of their boom juice.

Kiwi tittered and flew lazily back and forth. "Not quite, but try again!" she taunted, unstoppering the bottle and pouring its contents onto the road. She descended and dropped the empty bottle into the grass, flying just close enough for the Gremlins to try and rend her flesh, but pulling back just in time to avoid them. She was having fun teasing them.

Several Gremlins lobbed more Fire Bombs at her next descent, but she was expecting it this time. "Meanies! I was just trying to play!" she shouted, and tore off into the sky and well out of their reach. The Bombs exploded far beneath her, and Kiwi giggled at her not-so-narrow escape from her bumbling tormentors. The castle was just ahead, and luckily, the wind was blowing straight to it.

She drifted on the breeze for a few minutes, surveying the castle in the waning light. It seemed to be nothing but stone and mortar until she finally saw a tiny source of light: an entrance to the castle, closed off by a massive portcullis.

It wasn't a problem, though. The bars were easily Faerie-sized, and Kiwi slipped right through. She drifted slowly past the burning torches, down some stairs and through a hallway. Now, to find her destiny.

A fallen sign lay upon the ground. It read simply, "Hazard Area." But clearly, that hazard had already been dealt with.

The entire area was once covered with indigenous plantlife, crawling all along the ground, up the walls and attached to the ceiling. Now, all that remained were the still smoking remains of thousands of feet of carnivorous vines. They were charred brown and black, and it smelled slightly of rotten vegetables. Kiwi darted left in fright as one piece of vine slipped from its hold on the ceiling and nearly dropped on top of her.

She flew deeper into the hallway to see more of the same: smokey, dead vines all over the walls. The smoke was still hanging somewhat in the air back here, telling her that whatever fire had burned them all had been set somewhat recently.

Kiwi flew farther down the hallway, and the rotting vegetable corpses thankfully thinned out. The passage opened up to her left, into a great dark chamber with a large pit below. As hard as she stared, she simply could not make out the bottom.

A rope dangled from a boulder on her side, and dropped down and out of sight into the darkness below. On the other side was a similar rock, with a sliced piece of rope wrapped around it. The rocks were probably attached by the rope at one point to allow passage with a good grip, but the Faerie simply flew over to the other side and avoided the whole ordeal.

She almost wished she hadn't crossed over when the great smelly corpse of something once huge and plant-like, and the green liquid covering the walls, assaulted her delicate nose. She flinched at the sight of the beast's jaws hanging open in a silent death scream, and noticed the rather large hole that had been punctured in what she assumed was its belly.

Its long tendrils, which might once have been used to subdue and acquire prey, snaked across the length of the chamber and stuck motionless along the walls. Kiwi noted the scratch marks in the solid rock that it

might have made as it was dying.

She finally put the grisly scene behind her, and continued down a chute to the next sickening sight that was surely waiting for her.

Luckily, all she found was a hallway. Just a few minutes of flying brought Kiwi to its end; the hallway came out into a vast open area, a small path winding to her right and left. Far below her, the trees looked even smaller than she was.

She had apparently wandered outside of the castle, and was now looking down the mountain that stood to its side. A bridge connected the mountain she stood upon to an even more grand mountain beyond her, but seemed kind of rickety upon closer inspection. If destiny was somewhere around here, the top of the biggest mountain was as good a place as any to start looking for it.

Just then, she heard a deep and scary voice, bellowing forth from beneath the bridge. "YARRRRRR!" the voice boomed, "I be the Toll Troll! Pay the toll or heads will roll!!"

Kiwi descended and stood on the ground as the shadowy figure slowly drew itself from the bottom of the bridge and out onto the mountain path. She called Master Jang a Giant, but she would have used a different word for her teacher had she had *this* frame of reference!

The gigantic fuzzy being stood even taller as he rose up straight, giving Kiwi a full view of his immense size. He was clothed in a simple blue loin cloth, and seemed quite proud in showing off his great muscles... muscles which gripped a sledgehammer almost as big as the bridge itself!

Kiwi was frozen with fear at the sight of such a great being. He growled slightly at her intrusion, and cracked his knuckles before he re-tightened his grip on the humongous hammer. Finally, she summoned up enough willpower to simply squeak out, "Toll?"

"YARRRRRR!" the Toll Troll bellowed. "You be payin' the toll to cross the bridge, or I turns you into my snack!"

Kiwi began to feel courage come back to her. Even if he was hostile, she was quicker; there was nothing to worry about! She flew up slightly, crossed her arms and said, "But I don't wanna cross the bridge! I'm here to find destiny!"

The Toll Troll's eyes flared with rage. "NOT PAYIN' THE TOLL? THEN HEADS WILL ROLL!!" And with that, he picked up his great sledge and swung it overhand at the hovering Faerie.

In all honesty, she was completely unprepared for its assault... more specifically, she was unprepared for how quickly he could swing his sledge. Kiwi had barely enough time to fly backwards before the sledge pounded into the mountain below with enough force to crush any living being beneath it. The wind from the great weapon's flight spun her out of control, and she toppled through the air, slamming into the rock behind her.

She had enough time to stand and dive out of the way once more, as the Toll Troll recovered and pounded his great hammer into the spot she had struck just seconds before. Kiwi screamed as she flew into the air again and struck the ground farther down the path. She couldn't fly with such heavy drafts coming off of the Toll Troll's strikes.

The Toll Troll recovered once again and raised his great hammer up, poised to drive it into the shivering Faerie, while she lay prone with her eyes closed upon the ground. "WAIT!" she screamed, holding her hands up as the hammer came down.

In an impressive show of strength and control, the Toll Troll stopped his great hammer in mid-descent, just feet away from crushing her.

"So, you decided to pay the toll, little mosquito?" he asked, bringing the hammer back to a resting position

in front of him. "Make your offer quickly, for I be hungry and wanting something to fill me up! Crusher here thinks you make a good meal, but I be givin' you a chance!" he gloated.

Kiwi opened her eyes and looked around desperately for something to trade for her life. Her clothes... but why would he want her vest and shorts? He didn't look like the type who enjoyed learning the deep secrets of the universe, not that she'd tell him anything anyway. And she had no physical power that he didn't...

Then, she thought of it. "I can make Faerie Dust, if you give me a chance!" she offered. "Sprinkle enough of it on something, and it will go straight to dreamland! Can I pay your toll with it?"

The Toll Troll flared with anger once more. "NO GOLD?" he roared. "You be payin' your debt with your delicious flesh!!"

Everything seemed to slow as the Toll Troll raised his hammer a final time. It swung back and around, and came slowly down towards the prone Faerie beneath it.

Kiwi's body acted by itself, and sprang to life. She felt herself jump up, and her wings began to beat quicker than she ever thought possible. She positioned herself headfirst towards the great Giant, and launched her body like a missile at the Toll Troll's gut.

"Yaaaaaa!!!" she screamed, driving through the air with a speed that greatly surprised even her. Behind her, the hammer smashed into the mountain and drove a shock through the stone, and a great gust of wind at Kiwi's back... only this time, the gust served to speed her flight even more.

The last thing she saw was the Toll Troll's surprised face as she drove her two tiny fists into his stomach, just before she bounced off and back to the mountain path. On the ground there, she prepared herself for his unnatural speed and recovery, and resigned herself to becoming goo.

Only the blow never came. When she opened her eyes, she saw that the Toll Troll's own eyes were dizzily spinning, his entire body shifting with the strength of a great blow to his system. His body spun in a tiny circle, the diameter of which grew bigger with every complete revolution.

Finally, his balance completely spent, the Toll Troll teetered over the edge of the mountain for just a second, then he fell backwards over the edge. His hand slipped off of Crusher, and he disappeared from sight. Seconds later, the sound of a great thud and a toppling tree pierced the silence of the night, until even its echoes gave way to the renewed chirps of startled crickets.

Kiwi sat up and looked at her hands in wonder. She had never had the opportunity to use such power before, and had no idea that Master Jang had taught her such an amazing technique. *It is not power itself*, she remembered, molding knowledge into wisdom, *but the control of force...*

There wasn't even a bruise on her hands. She struck that big bully with a single blow, and he was out like a light. She hated to think what would have happened if she had attacked a less defended part of his body.

She looked up again at the great mountain and the bridge that led to it. It was too bad the Toll Troll was too thick-headed to see that she had wings and didn't need his ratty old bridge... not like she wanted to use it anyway, what with the rot now eating away at the suspension.

Kiwi smiled and flew up again, making it a point to proudly touch the bridge as she flew over it and to the great mountain in front of her. So much for the toll!

The mountain had handholds available for an expert climber, but wings did a better job of bringing her up the nearly vertical side. She wasn't surprised to feel a fluttery feeling in her stomach; she'd never flown this high before.

She looked down at the darkness below her, and reminded herself over and over that the drop really

wasn't limitless; she just couldn't see it. Her ears popped.

She looked back up at a most amazing sight: near the peak was a cozy house nestled within the mountain, with a small puff of smoke coming out of the chimney up top. Kiwi was feeling tired, and decided to come up and ask for a little bit of hospitality from the people inside. *After the fight below, I deserve it*, she thought, *and any Faerie would do the same for any other traveller*.

The Faerie came to a huffing, puffing rest at the base of a door about the size of the Toll Troll below. A sign on it read, "Der House of Der Gyns Twyns." She immediately smelled trouble and decided to get out of there... she didn't trust anybody that big anymore.

She was lured back, however, with the throaty laugh of two congenial-sounding voices inside. They began to sing an incomprehensible song, and laughed once more. She was pretty tired, and they sounded nice enough... no need in holding a grudge against all bigfolk for the actions of one. Kiwi timidly flew up to the door and knocked as loud as she could.

Apparently, it wasn't loud enough, because the voices kept singing. Finally, she decided to let herself in and squirmed through the bottom of the door.

Inside, Franz and Hans Gyns were celebrating life with another song about eating Humans or vast riches, one that neither one really knew the words to... but that didn't stop one from trying to outdo the other. Franz sang loudly, Hans sang louder, and both Giants laughed, knowing how ridiculous this might look to someone watching.

Though in their case, someone was. As Kiwi slipped through the door and prepared to introduce herself, one of the twins stopped singing and pointed at her, bellowing, "A BUG! SQUISH!!!"

Kiwi's eyes widened, and she took to the air as a huge foot came down near the door. A big meaty paw flew through the air at her flight, and the great draft spun her slightly through the air. The two twins and the Faerie began a tirade about the house as the two Giants knocked over tables and chairs, smashed plates and left dents in the walls trying to squish the bothersome bug.

"Wait, stop! I'm sor..." she yelled, as she was interrupted by a powerful, but directionless, Gyns kick. "Hey!" she shouted as she dodged it, flying around the house in a mad dash for escape. All the windows were closed, and she would have to fly through a fire to escape out the chimney.

Finally, the Twins seemed to tire of the chase, and Kiwi landed on the ground a good distance away from them. She narrowed her eyes, set her jaw, and leaned forward with her hands on her hips, in her best attempt to look scary. The Twins exchanged a glance, then burst out laughing at the defiant bug.

Kiwi started to get annoyed. "I'm not here to cause trouble, but please stop trying to squash me!" she said. "All I wanted was some water before I headed back up the mountain."

One of the Twins snorted and threw a broken dish at Kiwi. She dodged it and took to the air again. "Sneak into our house and demand water? Who be you?" Hans asked.

"I'm Kiwi, and I've come to the castle to look for my destiny," she replied. She realized her mistake at intruding in the house and blushed bright red. "I'm... I'm sorry about all the mess. I knocked, but you couldn't hear me..." she stammered.

Franz looked at his brother and guffawed. "How nice for the snack to come to us!" he exclaimed with glee, and the two Twins charged again. Kiwi noticed the lack of foresight both Twins possessed, and immediately devised a plan. If they had no problem breaking their furniture, then...

She shot between the two of them, and both Twins raised a fist to punch her out of the air. Hans missed by a mile, but Franz struck his sibling in the chin so hard, that his brother smashed into the wall, causing the entire house to rumble.

The enraged twin turned on his brother, and the two began a brotherly quarrel of shoves, bites and punches that reduced their fallen furniture into even smaller piles of smashed debris.

Kiwi felt guilty about the feud she had started, but refrained from getting involved any further, knowing how unreasonable the two scrappy Giants had been before. She flew up the back stairs to the top floor of the house, hopefully to find another way out.

Luckily, the top floor opened up to the outside, and the night sky was visible above her. In this small area, there were only rocks: in the walls, on the floor, and...

Suddenly, the rocks began to move. They hovered and spun, lifting from every direction and congregating in the middle of the open-air, cross-shaped room atop the twins' house. Kiwi heard a growl as a great face made of solid stone rose up from the ground, then rumbled a voice as gravelly as the walls around it. "Who dares awaken the Guardian of the Rock?" it demanded.

She was more fascinated than terrified by the creature. *A rock that talks... weird!* she thought. "Hi! My name's Kiwi, but I'm not here for rocks. I'm here for destiny!" she proclaimed cheerily.

The creature seemed to finally see her for the first time, and its voice became inquisitive. "You are not one of my keepers... what are you doing here?" it asked. "Have you come to help me?"

She cocked her head, showing she didn't understand. "I am so weak..." the Guardian continued softly. "My keepers have not fed me since I arrived here, and I fear my time is running out. How am I to guard the Rock if I have not the strength to fight?"

Kiwi looked around for something it might eat. "I didn't bring anything with me, but maybe the Twins have something downstairs," she offered. "What do you eat, exactly?"

The two black pits that were the Guardian's eyes softened in gratitude... someone was actually going to show mercy. "Stones," it answered weakly.

"But you're surrounded by..." she started, then suddenly realized the problem, and this creature's torment. It was surrounded by food, but had no way of consuming it! She had no idea the kind of suffering it had to have experienced to be surrounded by something that could save it, but at the same time could not touch.

Kiwi flew over to the wall to her left, and found a slightly cracked part of the wall. She drew up all the qi she could muster into her fist, and with a sharp yell, drove it into the wall. The crack grew larger and larger, until finally, it crumbled into a pile of stones beneath her.

She fished out one of the smaller ones that she could carry, and flew it over to the joyous Guardian. "Food! Sustenance! Thank the Gods!" it yelled, munching down the delicious stone, and diving into the pile beneath Kiwi in a frenzied state.

When it had finished eating, it was clear that its strength had already returned. The stones that made up its face shone brighter, and the empty pits that were its eyes began to glow a bright yellow.

"Little one, you have my favor for rescuing me from my neglectful keepers, and for protecting that which I could not," the Guardian said graciously. It seemed to debate something internally for a second, then smiled, knowing then what it would do. "You are a warrior of great power. I hereby bestow upon you the title of Guardian of the Rock, and entrust to you this sacred stone."

The Guardian opened its mouth, and a beautiful red ruby dropped forth from its great maw, clattering to the ground with a sharp tinkling sound. "Understand that this title comes with the responsibility of the bearer of the stone, and that you are entrusted with the most important of tasks: to return the Rock to the great Skull Door within the castle."

It smiled. "You say you seek destiny... I believe it is there that you will find it."

Kiwi was happy to finally have a lead on where she should be going. "Ok!" she yelled out, "I'll make sure this rock thingy gets back to the whatsit door in that stone place! You can count on me!"

It furrowed its great brow, unsure of the girl's words. "I... thank you," it simply said.

She waved and flew out into the sky, back down towards the castle. When she was gone, the great stone face slowly moved down the stairs, to meet the two still struggling titans as they continued their monumental battle. Its eyes flashed a bright yellow, and the Twins stopped struggling with one another to look at their loose pet. The Guardian drew closer.

It was a big castle, to be sure. She'd seen no ruby door or skull rock or whatever it was she was supposed to be looking for. However, as she was walking down a great hallway towards the main entrance to the castle, she heard ghastly moaning.

She followed the sound to some stairs near a rushing fountain, and as she ascended them, a cold wind blew down the spire she was ascending. She beat her wings faster to generate more body heat and continued up past the torches along the walls. Up more and more stairs she went, up and up and up, until she finally came to the door that seemed to be the source of the terrible sound. If someone was in trouble, it was her duty to help.

The door was locked, so Kiwi reluctantly squeezed under the door again. But when she came out the other side, she froze with terror. Flying around above her was the aged and transparent shade of half a man, wailing and moaning about his dear, sweet Annie.

Rooted to the spot beneath him, unmoving, stood a girl about half of Master Jang's size, who seemed transfixed by the moaning Ghost. Her brown hair was tied into two pigtails on either side of her head, and her green robes were spotted here and there with dirt and grime.

Kiwi put her ruby on the ground. Then, she stood up, tall and proud, and shouted at the top of her lungs, "Hey, you wispy weirdo! Let's see how you do in a *fair* fight!!" And with that, the Faerie launched herself into the Ghost's body.

Schism

I've travelled more of this land than any other person on the face of this planet.

Actually, maybe it's not exactly fair to call me a person. Any reference to me as a Human carefully avoids the obvious monstrosity that I am.

The others named me; I don't know where I was born, or when. I don't even know how it was I came to be, and for that I am thankful. To think of the kind of union that could possibly spawn a mixture of Dragon and Human makes me sick to my stomach.

Looking at me, you'd probably think as much. I'm bigger than a Human, a head or two at least, but the defining characteristic are the jet black scales that make up what should be skin. My hands are claws, my face ends in the protruding jaws of a beast, and I have an acid sac inside me, which I never use... because it reminds me of an inescapable fact.

I am a Dracon... and I am a monster.

I've gotten by as best I could since I was young. I never had anyone I could turn to; the few responses I've ever gotten from any man, woman, child, beast or bug has always been a quick 180 and a retreat, or an unsheathed weapon and a charge. Sometimes one after the other.

For that reason, I was never able to settle down anywhere for very long. Someone always caught wind of what manner of creature lived in that abandoned farm or damp cave over the ridge, and once word

spread, it only took one murderous fellow to start the attack and draw the rest of them into an uncontrolled mob of hatred.

These people claim to have faith in a higher power... Gods or God or some such invisible force that looks out for them at all times. I have no such luxury of self-deception. In fact, I find it hard to believe that any kind and just deity of any kind could allow a universally reviled being such as myself to exist, knowing the trials creatures like me must inevitably endure.

And the way I saw it, in this life, I had four options:

I could continue to take residence near people and hope for some sort of reconciliation. After being chased out of the tenth or twentieth village, I quickly ruled this choice out.

I could make war upon Humanity. My strength certainly gave this option potential, but I decided long ago never to turn on another because of their appearance, after what I've been through. Once you've suffered at the hands of the uncaring, the selfish and the evil, you never want to inflict that kind of pain on somebody else. The "Dragon" in me certainly wouldn't mind slaying the lot of them and devouring them as so much lunch, but the "Human" part always wins... mostly because I side with it.

I could take my own life. Sick, do you think? Perhaps. But then again, if you were in my position, you might contemplate it, too. I've stood above more than one precipice, held more than one blade to my bestial heart, and pressed more than one poisonous root to my black lips. In the end, I was always too frightened to go through with it.

I suppose I could end my life by laying myself down in a township and letting them finish me off, but I will never die at the hands of someone so without scruples that they would murder someone else for their twisted sense of pleasure, or their fear of an oddly shaped living being.

In the end, I settled on the fourth option: I took to the forests of the land and continued on with my accursed life as one of the beasts that Humanity considered me. At least in the wilderness, the animals tended to run rather than cry out for help and bring their friends to try and end my life.

The wilderness has treated me kindly, though it has always reminded me of that aspect that I despise so much of myself. The Dragon can sniff out game, tell me if its corpse is diseased, and causes me to salivate when I even detect the hint of meat, beast or otherwise.

Though I prefer to gather what fruit I can to sustain my cursed life rather than hunt, sometimes the desire to eat flesh overwhelms me and nocks an arrow in my bow before I realize what's happening. That part I hate the most.

I suppose I've become a sort of master of the leather as well, removing and shaping the skins of dead animals into functional, but protective, armor. Even today I wear the leathers of many animals slain in my past as a brownish-black cuirass and leggings. It serves to cover the disgusting scales well.

This morning, I was travelling in the mountain of the Dwarf near a great Human fortress when I heard footsteps behind me. I took to the shadows so as not to alert the entire mountain to my presence, for I knew these Dwarves were not the kindly priests that their distant cousins were.

They and their Giant friends mined these mountains for precious ore, and made it a point to torture, murder, and sometimes eat, any intruder in their domains. I've saved more than one Human from this fate, to be thanked only by their adrenaline-filled and terror-stricken rush down the mountain and to safety.

Usually, nothing like this is that important. They walk by, I hide, and I move on when they're gone. But this time was different.

They were apparently discussing whether or not a local legend was true. Something about a pen in the possession of a long dead king, some sort of recent war, the curse upon his castle, a bunch of stuff I

didn't care about.

It was what the pen could do that brings me here today. Write with it, and whatever written will become true. I've chased knowledge of how to eliminate my condition my entire life, and the third- or fourth-hand nature of this information mattered little to me.

What the pen offered me was freedom: freedom from this accursed existence, freedom from the hatred and fear, freedom from being exiled to the outer lands to avoid seeing a single Human soul.

I had always avoided the fortress for fear of running into a Human, even though it had been abandoned for some time. The death of the king spelled the end of his stranglehold on the townships nearby, but apparently, it was his castle that held the key to my freedom.

My mind was completely occupied as I scaled one of the castle's turrets, filled with thoughts of the new life that awaited me. I turned phrases over and over in my head, trying to pick the perfect one. In the end, I settled on, "And thus Janus, the Dracon, purged from himself the Dragonian filth and became fully Human."

That phrase embedded itself in my mind as I finally reached the top of the turret and looked around my new surroundings. I walked down the darkened hall of this massive tower, looking at the powerful stone that seemed like had been laid down yesterday. I heard the distant shriek of a bat or two, who obviously called this tower its new home.

The carcass of something very dead outside assaulted my senses only moments ago, and its stench is still with me. "Something" it will remain, because its body was utterly unidentifiable... and what's worse, open. A sniff and a glance told me that it had died of some kind of disease that affected the lungs, which might have worried me if I weren't already so resistant to such sickness.

But it's not thoughts like that that I want to dwell on. The most important thing right now is that I won't know about the rest of the castle until I reach the bottom of these stairs.

And more importantly, I won't find that pen.

They Run

Janus finally reached the bottom of the winding tower. The dead thing's stench left a permanent imprint on his mind, though the reek was long behind him.

The stairs opened up into a hallway lit up on either side by torches lining the walls. It was surprising that they were still burning, considering that this place was abandoned. Either there was still somebody around relighting the entire castle's worth of torches, or...

Or, what? He hadn't the faintest idea.

He scanned the area with his deep black eyes. A few feet in front of him, the hallway opened up in a four-way intersection in each cardinal direction. When he got closer, he saw a couple of rats and bats walking and flying towards him, directly in front of him. They were all rather large... for rats and bats, that is.

He never much liked the matted feel of rat fur, or the pug-nosed faces of the bats, and to see them together like this made his scales crawl.

That being said, Janus' stomach growled and his maw began to water. It had been a while since he had eaten, and he was sure he wouldn't find any wild berries just lying about in this great manmade structure.

Upon seeing the towering black figure at full height in front of them, the bat on the left emitted a shrill cry that pierced the silence and echoed all about the castle walls. The other rodents looked up from their bestial stupor long enough to see what had alarmed the member of their pack, and immediately joined the

wild scamper in the opposite direction.

Janus didn't pursue. The distaste of killing for survival always spiced the salty-sweet flesh of his kill with a guilty bitterness. He struggled to bear the hunger pangs, for now.

Off to his right, the intersection opened into another hallway that ended with stairs farther off to its right. Janus decided he had climbed enough for the day, and proceeded down the hall that his furry neighbors hadn't fled down in a panic.

His bare and taloned feet echoed with a sharp *tek, tek* on the solid stone, reminding him that this place was supposedly still deserted. He was never too careful, though. The wilderness, too, liked to make him think he was alone, before it came to life and sprang at him in a frenzy.

Again, up ahead, the hallway opened up in four directions, though he heard something off to his left: the sound of something struggling. It sounded like... Janus strained to hear... something stuck inside something else, from the muffled cries.

Janus silently dashed forward and peered into the room to his left. It was a stone room filled with skeletons and stained brown and red with blood, and ended with more stairs in front of him. But the entirety of his view, at that point, was consumed with the sight of a great green serpent with flecks of blue diamonds upon its scales, and the Human it was swallowing whole. Only the man's back end was visible, kicking vainly into the air at his horrible predicament.

It was at that moment that the light in the serpent's eye clearly moved to take in the new intruder. As Janus swiftly pulled out his bow and nocked an arrow from his back, the legs stopped kicking, and the serpent continued its paralyzing gaze. Janus had seen those eyes many times, the death-filled eyes of a predator in sight of its next meal.

Most creatures found themselves unable to move at the sight of their own impending death, but Janus had already seen that predatory look, in many different forms. And he was no ordinary creature.

The snake must have been surprised when Janus let loose the arrow from his powerful grip and it flew straight between its serpentine eyes. Its body reflexively tightened, ejecting the man covered in digestive fluid onto the floor, where he slid into a pathetic heap in the corner.

It hissed loudly and drove towards Janus, intent on ending the life that had so easily snuffed its own out. The Dragon had no time to react to the lightning fast strike; the glistening, dripping fangs of the serpent sank into Janus' body and swallowed the entirety of his left arm. They pierced straight through his shoulder, and he began to feel the burning sensation that he knew was the thing's poison making its way through his body.

Janus roared loudly and wrapped his great fist around the serpent's neck, then drew the beast as close as he could to his own face. The two great combatants stared at one another, eye to eye, as the agonizing seconds passed by.

In the end, it was the serpent who twitched slightly at its own mortal wound. Knowing he had proven himself the stronger, Janus responded to the snake's movement with a powerful squeeze and flip of his wrist, breaking the serpent's spinal column in a single move.

The lights in the snake's eyes slowly went out, and its body relaxed. Janus painfully pulled its fangs out of his shoulder and threw its long and limp body away from him. Once he knew he was safe, the Dragon saw that the man in the corner was still facedown, and he wasn't moving.

Janus walked over to him and flipped him over, revealing the dark and scraggly face that had been obscured for the entire fight. Like Janus, he had puncture holes in his shoulder, though they were fast turning purple.

He sniffed... it was some kind of crippling serpent poison, no doubt. Induced coma, paralysis, massive

organ failure and finally death... kept the victim from struggling while being eaten alive. He began digging through the animal hides on his body. Maybe...

Yes, here it was. A single one of the herbs that helped to slow the poison and keep it from shutting down the internal organs as it intended. Janus had no idea how long the man had been poisoned, but if he still had been kicking prior to being bitten, then he knew there might be a chance to do something for him.

Unfortunately, one herb was good for only one dose, so he had to choose between himself and the potentially lost cause below him.

It wasn't a tough decision. His shoulder didn't hurt all that much, an effect of his natural resistance to this very kind of thing. If he was to die here, so be it, but letting this man pass when he could do something to save him would be just as wrong as cutting the man's throat himself. He wouldn't just let the man die; Janus wasn't Human, after all.

Janus put the herb in the man's mouth, forced it into his throat and guided it on its way down to his gullet. *With any luck, he should be fine after a little nap*, he thought. With that finished, he hefted the scraggly man over his right shoulder and carried him down the hall to some stairs leading downward, straight to yet another four-way intersection.

Luckily, on his left and right were some doors. Janus picked a random one, and used his free claw to push it open. The inside was dimly lit by a single torch in the back, but there were plenty of cots scattered about to provide well enough for a decent night's rest.

He placed the silent man upon one of the cots and briefly considered occupying one for himself, but a rumble from his stomach changed his mind: he had to find food.

Janus left and closed the door behind him, hearing nothing but silence throughout the castle. He was about to consider which direction he would take when his ears picked up a distant sound: the thudding of two pairs of feet down some stairs to his right, and the sound of scurrying paws right after them.

"Help!!" a voice screamed. Janus rounded the corner and came face to face with two flustered, red-faced, huffing and puffing pirates, who were being chased by a rat of epic proportions. In the hands of the more flamboyantly dressed of the two was a tiny, stuffed white dog with ears and nose of black.

The pirates stopped immediately in front of Janus, and looks of sudden panic flashed across their faces. In a single second, they both seemed resigned to the fact that they would become someone's lunch tonight, closing their eyes in expectation of the pain.

Janus' stomach growled even louder, and he couldn't take it anymore. The Dragon was winning out... he had to eat. He slowly pulled out an arrow from the quiver on his back, raised his bow and nocked it, then let it fly.

The arrow sailed between the two pirates and struck the fat rat square in the haunch, though it did little to slow it down. It roared a roar of unbelievable bass and volume, and bowled the two pirates over as it lept straight at Janus, claws and fangs at the ready.

He dodged to the side and kicked the rat square in the head, immediately knocking it out as it sailed on its new course straight into the corner of the stone wall in front of it. A tiny crack appeared where it hit with such momentum-driven velocity. Janus rushed over and snapped its neck with a single stomp, though the rat was either too unconscious or already too dead to care.

The Dragon was in complete control now as Janus rend the fur from its hide, digging deep into the meat in its body. He suddenly remembered the two behind him, and looked back at the two quivering pirates with glazed and hungry eyes.

Both of the men were frozen with fear for only a second before they bolted down the hall, and with a cry of "Open up! Let us in!!" the door they stood in front of suddenly flew open, and the two dove in before it

slammed shut behind them.

Janus turned back to his kill with a satisfied sound in his stomach, pawing at its flesh and scooping the bleeding mass into his maw, his stomach thanking him every second of the way. Soon enough, the rat had been sufficiently dug into, and he was getting quite full.

He stood up with a claw full of rat meat, and was immediately sickened at what he had done... he had murdered again for the sake of hunger. The monster had won again.

Though relieved that the Dragon had not taken enough control away to kill the pirates, Janus nonetheless knew that he might lose that much control someday. On that thought, he absent-mindedly stuffed the last of the meat into his slaving maw. *Monster...*

Janus turned back towards the room with the pirate he had saved from the snake, and would have completely missed the tiny girl at his feet if she hadn't bumped into his leg and fell down. She was surprising small, dressed in dirtied green robes, and her brown hair was tied in two tails on either side of her head. She looked dizzy and disoriented.

The girl looked up at him with terror-filled eyes, her body shaking at what must have been quite a gruesome sight. The two merely looked at one another, no move being made. Against his knowledge and will, a tiny piece of raw rat meat dripped off of the outside of Janus' teeth and fell towards the floor.

She followed its descent with her deep brown eyes, until the meat hit the ground with a bloody squish. Apparently, that was all she needed to see before the injured girl started to hobble down the hall, screaming. A pirate threw open the door the other two had escaped into, and seeing the girl fleeing from Janus, he cried out, "Over here! Quick!"

The girl charged into the open door, and it slammed shut behind her. All was silent again.

Janus might have felt offended, but he had witnessed it a thousand times before... and his shoulder was beginning to ache. It might have been all the food he just ate, the serpent's poison, or perhaps a combination of the two, but Janus had only enough strength to stumble into the nearest door and practically fall in.

This room was thankfully filled with more cots, and Janus was grateful for the one that caught his exhausted descent.

Sacrifice

"Wow, look at the *size* of that thing!!"

The little Hobbit was taken aback by the sheer size of the great castle before her. When she signed on to open the gates for her friend, she thought it would be the size of a small village or two put together... but not this big!

She was dressed in the simple green robes and brown sandals of her station, and her brown hair was tied into two pigtails on either side of her head. Her dark brown eyes were, at the moment, widened with amazement at the great structure in front of her.

It was actually getting kind of dark, and she felt relieved that they would finally be reaching their goal, and arriving somewhere a little more safe than the dark wilderness.

The girl had just left the school of the Priest, which was centered in the mountains of the Dwarf and Gnome, having learned all she could from the masters there. Tiny as she was, half the size of an adult Human male, she had progressed quite rapidly through every lesson her teachers had for her.

She loved to help people, and relished the opportunity to read every week's lesson on new spells for healing and reconstruction, sometimes several weeks in advance. It became a ritual for her to completely

study them, then immediately dash about looking for someone injured so that she could mend their wounds. She never once misfired her healing magic.

She advanced through the basic ranks through simple love of healing, and even made her way to the top of the fast track. In the end, she was even allowed to study under the master healer, the Dwarf Lord of the mountain, Karain.

Together, the two discussed new techniques for healing and their mutual love for God, both of which allowed them the opportunity to help others in need. Every day the two prayed together, and she was even allowed to teach a class or two to the younger students of their church in the mountains.

Finally, she could take no more of studying, and quickly realized she would accomplish little reading books while real people suffered. Karain was surprised, but proud, when Hiromi declared that she was leaving the mountain after ten years of study to find people in trouble, and help them.

That was two days before she met Quinn, who was looking for a way to open the castle of the Bane King and end his curse upon the land.

Her companion was really good company. He was the first person Hiromi had offered to help, and she liked him a lot. He called himself a "Psionic," someone who used their minds to protect themselves and others from harm.

She didn't quite understand until the starving wolf attacked. Quinn looked at him for a second, and then the wolf suddenly began jumping around, left and right, rolled over and finally took off into the darkness.

When it was gone, he smiled and continued walking. He was so cool!

Quinn was very mysterious, which intrigued Hiromi even more. He was wearing a long, flowing black robe, with black gloves and boots. His face was smooth and somewhat thin, but his eyes always twinkled and he liked to smile.

Strangely enough, he was bald with some sort of ritualistic markings on his head. Most prominent among them was an ancient symbol meaning "sheep." She wondered with a smile if he knew its real meaning.

We wasn't all mystery, though. He was a very kind person, and the two spent hours on the road discussing their pasts and desires. Quinn steered the subject clear of when he was young, she noticed, but he had many stories from his stay at the school of magic.

Her favorite was the story of the class bully. Every day he would use his powers to light the corner of someone's robe on fire, water down their schoolwork, blow papers about the room, just about anything to be annoying.

Quinn had had enough one day, and took control of the poor boy's mind. Nobody could tell it was Quinn pulling the strings, and everyone laughed as the red-faced boy suddenly stripped down to his undergarments in front of everyone and began to dance. The class was in an uproar, and the boy was finally suspended from class for causing a scene.

Knowing the bully would still have a taste of his own medicine in mind, Quinn travelled to his house and revealed what he had done. Though the boy was angry at first, Quinn eventually was successful in teaching him of the pain and trouble he was causing others, and how they felt the same as he did in the middle of that classroom. From that day forward, no other student had trouble with the bully, and the two students became the best of friends.

Hiromi had asked what happened to him. But Quinn simply replied, "We ended up going to different schools," and changed the subject. She didn't press.

"So, can you open the gate?" he asked, gesturing towards the massive metal portcullis. Hiromi shook from her reverie and examined it more closely. Running her hands along its edges, she could feel the

power of a spell designed to not allow anyone through but the inner circle of... leech? No, something bigger... like Lamprey or Bat, the servants of some kind of blood-sucking beast...

The red stone Demon figures to her right and left seemed not to care, and stoically continued to pour water from their mouths into the pools at their feet.

Luckily, Hiromi covered the chapter on seals extensively. "Ok, here we go!" she shouted, gripping two metal bars firmly. Her hands glowed slightly, and soon enough, the light spread to the entirety of the gate. The brightness intensified, and both Quinn and Hiromi had no choice but to look away.

A few seconds later, the light finally began to dim. As the gate began to slowly slide into the wall, Hiromi wheeled around with a big satisfied grin on her face. "My first task, completed!" she said proudly. "If we need to get out, I changed the seal to open for anyone."

Quinn smiled and clapped, and Hiromi bowed. Turning back to the entrance, the two walked forward into the passage, which was surprisingly still lit by torches jutting out of the wall at even intervals.

Another gate barred their path at the end. Hiromi gripped the barrier and felt the same seal again: Only Bats Allowed, or something similar. The light brightened and dimmed, and the gate slid into the wall.

Finally, they were inside a great empty hall. It was really quiet, and only the sound of wind whipping through the main entrance shattered the uncomfortable silence. More torches lined the walls and cast eerie shadows in the corners, flickering a little light here and there, then returning them to darkness. Hiromi briefly wondered if this place really was cursed.

She cautiously moved forward and heard the comforting sound of Quinn's boots behind her. Moving towards a small wall with an archway on either side, Hiromi chose the left passage and slid along the side of it, past more stone and shadows.

Quinn strode confidently behind her, and she wondered how he could be so calm. She felt an even greater respect for her new friend.

Looking upwards at the wall she was sidling on, Hiromi noticed a tiny alcove above her. Letting her curiosity get the best of her, she jumped as high as she could and grabbed onto the side, hoisting herself up. A huge treasure chest!

"Open me first," she said, reading the inscription. "Hey Quinn, look wh..."

That was the last she remembered before something struck her head from behind, and she toppled out of the hole in the wall. She hit the floor, and everything went black.

Quinn lowered his arm and stared at the young Hobbit for a second. Then, turning to the chest, he popped the lid open and took the loot secured inside. A couple of healing potions, and an amulet.

"An Amulet of Life," he said plainly. Stashing the potions away, he carefully lifted the golden necklace from its place in the chest and held it in front of him. The red jewel in the center glowed slightly, but the amulet looked somewhat murkier than they usually did.

He looked down at Hiromi one more time, then tossed the amulet at her body. The golden chain tangled up in her hair, and draped itself past one of her pigtails.

"One charge, one life to return," he said. "Pray you won't need to use it when the rats find you." With that, Quinn tightened his gloves slightly and left the Hobbit out cold, but still breathing, upon the castle floor.

Good Friends

The world wouldn't stop spinning. Hiromi groaned and sat up, wondering what had happened to her. She had lifted herself up to the chest... and she must have fallen down and hit her head.

Quinn...

Hiromi looked around immediately, wondering where he had gone off to. "Quinn?!" she shouted, but only her own echo and a sharp headache replied. Across the great hall where she had blacked out, the body of a big rat was prone on the ground and staring at her with dead eyes. Hiromi's body recoiled automatically from the gruesome sight.

"Oh, God..." she whispered, until she heard something off to her right. More great rats were there, staring at her, though these ones were creeping towards her with saliva dripping from their teeth.

Hiromi dizzily scrambled to her feet and dashed away from them all, stumbling into the wall and nearly losing her footing. She could hear them start to sprint after her, and the clicking of their pointed toenails on the stone floor. The world spun in circles even more with her fear.

Something tugged at her hair and jangled on her chest as she dashed away from the rats... a necklace. The reds and golds jumbled together in her frightened vision, and she spared no further second trying to discern what it was as she fled.

She sped around a stone pillar with a gushing water fountain upon it to the door in front of her, then threw it open with all her might and slammed it shut, just as the rats bashed hopelessly into it.

Hiromi's temples throbbed with every speedy heartbeat, and her breath was ragged. Certain her nightmare was over, however, Hiromi began to recite some minor healing spells to remove her dizziness and bruises... when she turned around and saw the body of the serpent in front of her.

A great green snake with blue diamond spots was in the room in front of her, its mouth open as if it were hissing at her, preparing to swallow her whole. It was certainly big enough to do that.

Hiromi inhaled sharply, then ran down the hall as fast as she could, down some more stairs and deeper into the castle. She briefly wished those rats hadn't blocked her way out, or she might have been able to leave this madhouse immediately after when she woke up. She could feel it already: rats on her heels, the snake ready to bite, the wounds opening up and her body being eaten alive...

She dove down the stairs even faster, leaning on the stone wall to her left several times in her dizzy state. She spilled out into a great hall with passages leading off to her left and right then tumbled to the ground, unable to keep the world level and unmoving. Her ankle suddenly began to burn.

Her panic urged her up again, in case those things were on her heel. She started to run, but she could tell that she twisted her ankle in her last spill down the stairs. Hiromi hobbled as best she could down the hallway to her left, while the world spun harder through her pain. She could hardly breathe, and her heart was pounding faster than she ever thought possible.

She stumbled down the hallway, praying for God's guidance to a sanctuary to keep her safe. Her stomach was making unbelievably tight knots as she gasped for air.

It was at that moment that she bumped into something very big, and very hard.

Hiromi hit the ground and struggled to make sense of the spinning image in front of her. Soon enough, the world began to level out, and the shifting image slowed to reveal the great black monster in front of her.

It was dressed in the animal hide clothing of a Human, maybe because it had just eaten one. Its body was massive, more than twice her size, and covered in shiny black scales. Its black eyes stared into hers, and its jagged teeth and sharp claws were covered in blood.

Only then did Hiromi notice the open body under the monster, a rat that had been literally torn open, its innards exposed. There were still traces of meat and entrail on the creature's claws, and Hiromi wanted to vomit... but she was too scared to do anything except stare.

From the beast's mouth fell a single piece of bloody pink meat. Hiromi could only watch as it fell in slow motion all the way to the stone floor, where it bounced slightly, then settled in a tiny pool of red.

With the last of her energy, Hiromi screamed and again took to hobbling flight, down the hall and away from the monster, when she saw the familiar sight of a Human through her wavering vision. The man had a thick beard, and his head was covered in a blue rag. With his eyes firmly set on the creature behind her, he yelled out, "Over here! Quick!"

Hiromi didn't hesitate. She tripped into the door, and it slammed securely shut behind her.

She was on the floor for a few seconds before she looked up into this next room of horrors. In stark contrast to the beast occupied outside, this slightly gloomy room was populated by several dozen scraggly men, all of whom had their eyes on her. Two of them were frantically gesturing at a bloated green toad of a man, shouting something Hiromi couldn't make out.

She was about to try and heal herself of her affliction when the toad-man spoke up in a gruff voice. "I be Captain Matey, and I run this here outpost of survival in this death trap of a fort," he said. "Whatcha be doin' here, girl?"

Hiromi finished the silent, mystical words of power, and felt the love and warmth of God filling every inch of her body. The world stabilized, and her bruises returned to her normal, very slightly tanned skin color.

She stood up tall and said, "My name is Hiromi, Priest apprentice to the great Dwarf Lord Karain. I came here to help my friend Quinn enter this place... he wanted to end the Bane King's curse, so I opened the gate for him."

The entire company laughed at her words. Hiromi flustered slightly as Matey roared out, "*You* opened the gate? No offense, wee one, but I think me 'n me mates find that a bit hard to swallow!"

The laughter died down as Matey spoke again. "But seeing as we are doing ya a favor, keeping ya safe inside our little hideaway and all, it's only fair that ya be returnin' that favor," he said, grinning slightly. "And it looks like ya have just the kind of body we be requirin' for this kinda job."

Matey and a few of the other pirates closed in on a trembling Hiromi, grinning wickedly at their certain reward as she shrank back into the door.

Hiromi compared the situation she was in now to what was going on outside. It was degrading... and she longed to run back out and take her chances with the Dragon, snake and rats.

She wiped her hands on the sad little makeshift apron they had supplied her. They never, ever stopped eating, it seemed, and there were always more dishes for her to wash. She didn't mind doing some work to earn her keep, but it seemed that the pirates' "jobs" involved a lot of carousing and very little actual work, while she seemed to be taking care of everything.

With a sigh, she continued wiping the nasty plates covered with grease and old foodstuffs, with the marginally less dirty rag she had been provided to clean them. Luckily, a pirate finally came in after two solid hours of washing to relieve her, and told her that the Captain wanted to see her. She thankfully threw off her apron and abandoned her duties to see the great toad man.

He was actually quite jovial, especially when he was drinking. "Hiromi!!" he shouted out, waving his mug and spilling a little over the side. He charged forward and scooped up the little Hobbit, crushing her in a mighty bear hug. "I've never eaten off a plate so clean. Ya have the thanks of this company for makin' tonight the finest meal we've had since we landed here!" The company cheered.

Hiromi smiled and said, "It's not really that hard; you guys should consider doing it yourselves once in a while."

Matey tipped back his mug once more and said in stinking breath, "Ah, no need, no need, what with us all being busy findin' food to put on them plates, we haven't much time for the women's work." She made a face at the comment, but let it go.

"Come!" the pirate yelled, "Get our new cabin girl here some food!" Hiromi's stomach growled slightly at the offer, to Matey's great delight. "Yer stomach ain't refusin' there, girl, so ya be eatin' with the mates tonight, no matter what ya say!"

Matey finally put Hiromi down, and allowed her to sit in front of the feast that was brought before her. There on the plate was a great slab of cooked rat meat, and some kind of green vine on the side. Hiromi dug in, not realizing until now how hungry she had been.

The night continued with the colorful conversations of sailors, pirates and merchants, and their experiences on the seas. As they spoke, Hiromi began to notice that Captain Matey looked rather distracted. He was staring off into space as if something was bothering him, something that was too painful or disheartening to say in front of his men in their time of festivity.

She took a seat next to him. "Is everything ok, Captain?" she asked.

Matey broke off his stare into nothingness and met Hiromi's. "I just be worried, girl," he admitted. "Every day, we go out into the castle scroungin' up what we can to survive, and bringin' in the stragglers like yerself to keep ya from dying out there.

"But every time we be huntin' and scroungin', we seem to run into more and more of them beasts like the one Jan 'n Jack just ran inta. I'm worried for me mates, worried that we may one day lose one of our own, or run outta food. Being stuck in here... I sometimes wonder what the great Cap'n Matey's done ta be locked up in here."

Hiromi was silent for a second, then realized she had to try again. "I know the gate was sealed, Captain, but I swear to you that I opened it," she insisted. "It's how I got in!"

Matey remained unconvinced. "This place makes us all see things we wanna, girl," he replied. "I can't send one o' me mates out on some fool's errand that might get someone killed. If ever we find ourselves scroungin' in that area, I suppose it might warrant a look... but we just be doin' our best to survive for now."

She knew no amount of convincing would make him change his mind. He would find out soon enough when one of his people drew close enough to a gate to trigger its slide, and she felt happy knowing they would be out soon enough because of her. Until now, there was nothing else she could do.

Pirates slept all around her in a drunken haze. Matey had long since retired to his quarters, underneath his locker of treasure, snoring the loudest of any of the other pirates. A tiny shadow slipped in long enough to kiss the Captain on the forehead, offer a silent thanks and leave, straight out the front door where it had come in several hours ago.

Hiromi had a duty to go find Quinn, and to make sure he was safe from the dangers of the castle. She hoped he hadn't been chased off by some of those rats, and that he was safe. It was gnawing at the back of her mind, how worried he might be to return to the castle's foyer for her, only to find nobody there. He might think she got eaten.

It just made her duty to find him all the more clear. She had to warn him and get both of them out of here before someone got killed.

Luckily, it seemed much of the castle was asleep at this point. Hiromi rushed a wave of magic water through her body anyway, ready to use the Paralyze spell that would freeze a living organism's fluids solid long enough to escape. She wouldn't be caught unawares again.

As she started down the hall, she caught sight of the partially consumed rat corpse in the hallway, and shuddered at the memory of the terrible creature that had eaten it. She hoped she wouldn't run into it again.

For the time being, she began to head back towards the entrance of the castle, where she last saw Quinn. She went back up the stairs she had spilled out of, and back down the hallway past the serpent's lair. She made it a point to rush past that area rather quickly.

The air began to feel heavier as she walked through the door. A sudden chill made her shiver as she walked next to the pillar with the fountain attached to it, and was surprised to feel it disappear as she walked a few feet away. She walked back once more, and felt it again: a cold chill, hovering at one particular spot by the pillar.

Suddenly, it began to move, travelling up her arm and rushing around inside her body. Then, as quickly as it had come, it moved out her other arm towards the stairs behind her, and disappeared.

Hiromi could feel the presence of a spirit, and it was clearly travelling up the stairs. She became a Priest to help people... and spirits who still tried to communicate with the living were some of the neediest souls in existence. She went up the stairs and followed the cold feeling.

She stepped into it again, and it travelled ahead, up the stairs and down another hallway. It slowly began to speed up, and Hiromi moved faster to follow it. Up more and more stairs, she chased the cold spot until it finally travelled through a wooden door at the end of the hall, where she couldn't feel it anymore.

She reached out to the door's handle, and pushed it slowly in. The door creaked and groaned with decades of unuse, then finally came to rest on the wall to its side.

Hiromi walked in and jumped as the door slammed shut and locked behind her. She could feel the cold in her body again, and watched with fascination as it travelled up and away from her, then materialized into the head and upper torso of an old man. His eyes opened and he looked down at her, moaning softly.

"Aaaaannnniiiiieeee... yooouuu've cooomee baaack..." the shade moaned. "Aaaaannnniiiiieeee..."

Hiromi stared at the floating figure with wonder, thinking only to herself, *Who's Annie?*

The man might have heard, perhaps it was just coincidence... but immediately after her thought, he whipped into a shouting frenzy. "Annie! Annie!!!" he shouted. "You're back, after all these years of waiting!!!" The Ghost's voice bounced all over the walls, and he began flying in excited circles in front of her, coming close enough to touch her cheek slightly.

At the sensation of his cold fingertips, Hiromi suddenly lost all feeling in her body, and soon, couldn't move at all. She could only stare at the moaning, flying figure as he continued his excited flight around the room. Her body refused to move and escape, and even her mouth wouldn't work to reason with him.

Minutes passed of the shade flying in circles, yelling about his beloved Annie returning... and Hiromi still could not feel anything, even fear. All she could do was stare.

Suddenly, a tiny, high-pitched voice suddenly rang out, though she couldn't see its source. "Hey, you wispy weirdo! Let's see how you do in a *fair* fight!!"

Hiromi wondered who it could possibly be before she saw the blue blur dart straight into the wailing figure above her.

Soldier

There was no moon in the sky, and the world was dark enough to hide in plain view. The wind blew slightly, rustling leaves with its chilly movement.

Fwoosh, tep, tek tek tek...

A dark figure descended from the air, landed, and silently ran towards the towering structure before it. From its brown robes, a furry paw produced a potent acid within a stoppered bottle, ready to be poured on the massive metal gate and devour the pathetic means of barring entrance inside.

There was actually no need. Drawing near the gate, it slid open into the wall, and stayed open. The light of several unexplainably long lasting torches flickered off of the figure, revealing the cat-like face beneath the brown hood and robes to whatever creatures called this castle home.

The figure was tiger-like in appearance with orange-yellow fur and streaks of black, and his eyes were deep black, through and through. Even now they scanned the immediate corridor before him, judging whether or not this was a trap. It was never this easy to break into a castle, even deserted ones.

He uttered a low growl and entered anyway, stepping lightly on his brown buskins and mentally preparing a few of his more destructive spells, just in case. The gate closed slowly behind him.

After a short walk, another gate appeared before him. Tearn suddenly realized his mistake: he was now stuck between these two gates, and as the engineers had intended, would die soon enough from thirst or starvation.

With a loud snarl, Tearn charged the gate in front of him, but stopped short when it, too, slid into the wall at his approach. In silent thanks to his faulty first guess, Tearn's heart slowed and he cautiously strode forward into the remains of a great hall.

Probably once a site of furious comings and goings, the main hall of the castle was now covered with dust, though the stones looked remarkably fresh. There were no sounds of anything living or dangerous, either... at first.

Tearn soon picked up the faint sound of rustling, then the familiar sound of nails clicking on stone. Something barefoot was in front of him past the dual archways, and it wasn't wearing shoes... probably some kind of wild animal.

He silently drew forward, rolling his feet from heel to toe, and pressed himself against the wall ahead. Peering into the left archway, he could see the remains of a girl dressed in simple green robes, and the gigantic, mangy rat that was attempting to nibble through the fabric at her flesh beneath.

Normally he would just pass up the incident as the typical relationship of scavenger and carrion, but something about this one disgusted and enraged him. Maybe it was the fact that the girl looked like she had only recently died, with an uncaring, unfeeling, disrespectful rat desecrating her fresh corpse, that set him over the edge.

Whatever the case, Tearn had no pangs of guilt when he stepped out from his hiding place, strode into the massive main hall, and readied a spell meant to murder the disease-ridden creature. The rat suddenly stopped tugging on the girl's robe, looked up at him and squeaked, a simultaneous warning of potential attack and a betrayal of fear. Tearn was unimpressed.

The Felpurr raised his paw and concentrated on the ragged little vermin. With surprising speed, the rat was suddenly airborne, and squeaking like mad. Issuing a determined, deepthroated cry, Tearn flung his arm to the right, and the now arial rat shot with amazing speed into the opposite wall.

There was a sick crack as the rat hit the wall and fell to the floor, squeaking softly before it finally gave in to the release of unconsciousness. Still angry at the little rat and its indifference to the body it tried to devour, Tearn strode forward past the unmoving, robed figure and continued down the massive hall.

He wasn't here to protect the dead, but it seemed everywhere he went he saw the relationship between those with power, and the innocent who were used or slaughtered by them.

The thought soured his already enraged heart. Tearn came to this castle to retrieve the Cosmic Forge, a pen with such power than anything you wrote with it would become instantly true. He was hoping that it wasn't just some silly myth.

The stalemate between his people and their enemy had lasted long enough, and taken too much from the Felpurr race as a whole. Once the pen was in his power, his people would be safe, and every last one of their tormentors would suffer.

He was here to kill them all. To rip all of their hearts out one by one, to watch as they suffered like he did those many years ago... he came to protect his people and to make their enemy pay for what they had done. He could never forgive them, never forget what happened that day.

A flurry of images passed before his mind, as they did every day. The bodies, the laughing soldiers, the scent of charred flesh... and blood... all over his clothes and face, and dripping down his claws. He could still hear the screams as if they were still being issued.

Rage and determination seethed within him, clenching his stomach tightly, making the bile rise in his throat. Boundless power would be his; vengeance shortly thereafter. Nothing would get in his way.

Part 2 - Beyond Death

Skin Deep

Over the still waters, a pained moan of the damned echoed off of the walls of the castle and back into the darkness. There was a dead silence, save for the sound of a tiny splash far off in the distance.

The Human stood slightly hunched, and prepared for a charge with her black spear held out. The Elf positioned her body slightly towards the castle wall with her katana close to her body and held upwards, though holding it in her right hand made her feel awkward.

"Who are you?" Lucciana asked.

The dark girl seemed surprised when she heard the Ghost's voice. *She's aware enough to speak*, Shss thought. *She must be a being of incredible power...*

When the Human didn't answer her question, Lucciana knew then that the Amazulu had come here to kill her. She made the very slightest of changes in her stance, a foot movement that was imperceptible to even a seasoned veteran, and prepared herself to charge.

Her stomach tied in knots when the girl dropped even lower to the ground and angled her spear up slightly. She had caught the movement, and was bracing herself for the pending attack. At the same time as Lucciana was impressed and excited, she was also worried. To win against a warrior of such skill, even without a wounded arm working against her, would not be easy. She had to end this quickly, and take her opponent by surprise.

Shss had the exact same idea. With a simultaneous hiss and shout, the rabid girl and the Ghost lunged forward, katana flashing and spear swinging in two wide arcs.

With a quickness that surprised Lucciana, Shss drove her opponent's blade out and away, and followed with a straight shot to her breast. Lucciana was fast, though, and used the push on her katana as momentum to spin it and herself completely around, dodging the thrust and bringing her sword down upon the shaft of the spear.

I've got you now, she thought, but when her katana came down to cut the spear in two, it merely stopped dead on the shaft, not even leaving a scratch.

Shss took advantage of her surprise and flipped her spear pointdown into the soil, using it as leverage to vault her foot into her opponent's stomach. Lucciana jumped back enough to avoid getting the wind

knocked out of her, but was still pushed back far enough to give Shss some room to move.

The second Lucciana's foot touched the ground from the girl's sudden kick, though, she launched herself forward again, blade held out and ready to strike. Once she had the girl's spear stuck in the earth, it would be over.

Lucciana sliced downward at the girl's spear... when Shss pulled it back, spun around and cut a wide swath with the spear's sharp tip and blunt shaft, slicing through the entire area where Lucciana had attempted to strike before.

With a shout, the Samurai jumped over the path of the great swinging spear and drove her katana straight at the girl's heart. Wasting no time, Shss gripped the shaft of her spear tightly and drove the katana into a useless lunge towards the ground.

Lucciana grunted and shouldered the girl back. With a cry, she began a lightning fast assault of swings, thrusts and slices in a frenzied melee at the dark girl. Shss held tight to her spear and blocked every move she could, dodging the rest.

Her heart pounded with excitement, knowing full well that any one of these furious strikes could end her life.

Lucciana swung, and Shss held her spear vertically, stopping the strike. She thrust, and Shss held her spear level, left and right, driving it and the katana down. Shss' spear was there to meet every strike, and the thoking sound of sword on spear echoed off of the castle walls and out over the river with every lunge and parry.

Gradually, the Samurai's movements began to slow, and Shss saw an opening. After the dark girl pushed the katana's swing back one more time, she brought her spear around in a great arc, aiming to cut Lucciana from bottom to top with the sharp point.

Her opponent jumped back just in time. The spear merely nicked her chin and left a tiny red streak in its wake. Lucciana felt something burn exceedingly hot there, but the feeling left just as quickly as it had come. She was using a poison-tipped spear... and if it hadn't just grazed her, the attack might have killed her!

Shss jumped forward at this new opening, and continued the arc of her spear sideways, whipping the shaft into her opponent's exposed side. Lucciana tumbled forward several feet, landing on her wounded arm with a wince, then jumped up as soon as she found her balance.

The Samurai stared at her powerful adversary with proud defiance. If she was going to bring an advantage like poison into this battle of steel, then she sure as hell was going to return the favor.

After she took a deep breath and calmed, she conjured forth pure energy from deep within her chest. The energy, the feeling of raw power, spread throughout her body until it seemed to be everywhere. She localized the feeling into her wounded arm just as the dark girl charged forward.

Lucciana withdrew her hidden arm from her robe and directed the collected energy to lash out and strike her opponent. Two streaking bolts of swirling energy erupted from her fingertips and flew through the air towards Shss. The rabid spear girl was completely unprepared, narrowly dodging one of the two Magic Missiles. She was not lucky enough, however, to keep the other from driving straight into her chest, knocking her to the ground.

Pressing her advantage, Lucciana jumped, pointing her katana straight down at the girl. Shss brought her spear up and caught her opponent's katana on the shaft, and their weapons remained still as the two girls stared intently at one another.

In that brief moment of respite from the furious battle, Shss was surprised when she gazed into the Ghost's deep blue eyes. They were so unlike the stories of earthbound spirits her parents had told her.

There was a look of sadness, yes... but also, a strange spark of life.

Lucciana was having her doubts about this rabid girl as well, as she looked into her dark brown eyes. As she held her katana steady against the girl's spear, she wondered how a warrior so skilled could have eyes so gentle.

The two pushed apart and prepared for the second round of combat, but before they could charge again, there was a sudden splash from the River Styx. Both turned their heads in surprise.

Deadly silent and dangerously huge, the head and long neck of a great green serpent rose from the depths of the river. Its piercing red eyes flashed between the two girls, and aside from the water dripping off of its head and neck, it made no sound.

Shss and Lucciana turned completely towards the serpent, just in time for it to bare its great jagged white teeth and drive forward towards Lucciana. She was hypnotized by its crimson eyes... their hunger, their madness rooting her to the spot.

With only a second to spare, Shss pushed her out of the way, just in time for the serpent to bash its head into the castle wall hard enough to crack it, then draw back as if nothing had happened.

The serpent now turned to Shss, losing interest in the more distant of its two meals. Its head was only a few feet away, and moving towards her. Four feet, three... it drew closer, agonizingly slow, opening its mouth to reveal its great teeth, growling slightly. Shss raised her spear to the great head, her heart pounding and temples throbbing.

"ZUT!!" a voice screamed from her left, and the serpent turned towards the source. Lucciana raised her hand from her robe and a bolt of electricity shot out, straight into the serpent's eyes. The serpent roared and bellowed forth a great green stream of liquid straight at her, and as she jumped out of its way, she came face to face with the edge of the river. Luckily, she was able to drive her katana into the ground, keeping her from slipping into the waters of the River Styx.

The green liquid splashed all over the castle wall and the river bank, devouring the stone and dirt in seconds, and Lucciana had nowhere to go. *The choice is mine*, she thought bitterly. *Devoured by the king of all garter snakes, melted by poison, or take my chances in the River of the Dead...*

She prepared herself for the final strike from the staring serpent and its grotesque crimson eyes. No matter what happened, it was going down with her.

Behind the serpent's head, a shadow ran forward and flew into the air. Using her spear as a vault, Shss launched herself high up over its head, and let gravity do the rest. Her spear plunged straight through its skull and forced it to the ground, pinning it to the dirt.

The spear held for only a second as the beast's head began thrashing around violently. The weapon held fast and kept its jaws closed, keeping the beast from seizing her in its mouth or even roaring... but the quick jerking of its head tossed Shss straight into the hard castle wall, leaving her in a crumpled and dazed heap just a few feet away from it.

Lucciana saw her chance. With a powerful leap, she flipped over the poison and flashed her katana down on the struggling creature, removing its head from its neck with a single slice. Its head stopped thrashing and dropped to the banks of the river, but the neck continued to spasm while it fountained blood all over the earth. With every drop that splashed the water there was a slight hiss and puffs of smoke, until the maroon stained waters returned to their original black color.

The headless neck sank beneath the waters in a pool of red until it, too, was consumed by the dead water with a great cloud of hissing smoke. It was over.

Lucciana wiped the blood off of her katana on the dirt below, sheathing the newly cleaned blade and withdrawing her wounded arm back into her robe. She turned to face her fallen savior, but was surprised

to see her on her feet in a stance that belied her desire to charge.

Shss was worried, wondering if she had made the wrong choice sparing her enemy from the serpent; it seemed she had only succeeded in disarming herself. Her eyes flashed to the spear stuck in the serpent's unmoving head, then back to the still figure in front of her. She had put her blade away, but who knew when she might draw it again.

But for now, the robed one was just quietly looking at her.

The Fighter ran forward and kicked the head over, pulling the spear out from the tip to avoid the spearhead getting caught on anything inside. She worriedly looked back at the Ghost, but she still hadn't moved. Shss calmed and pulled her spear out with a more controlled tug, finally bringing the gooey weapon back into her hands.

The girl still didn't make a move to attack as Shss wiped it clean on the river bank. When she had finished, the girl finally spoke. "I owe you one, Fighter," she said. Shss didn't understand, and didn't reply. Lucciana waited for some kind of answer, then finally gave up and simply bowed.

Shss blinked at the strange girl, then looked back at the fallen creature's head. She had promised only minutes before that she wouldn't kill again unless necessary, and here she was standing over the body of yet another creature, dead partly because of her.

"Is this your first time killing something?" Lucciana asked, and Shss turned to her. "You shouldn't feel bad about this one. What the River Styx doesn't kill outright it corrupts... the creatures here are afflicted with a madness beyond what any mortal experience can inspire. Be thankful you weren't dragged down into Death with it."

"*A ket arak i...*" Shss hissed at the girl, indicating her confusion.

To the basics, Lucciana thought. Whether she was insane or diseased, they were getting nowhere talking like this. She pointed at her face. "Lucciana," she said.

Shss returned the gesture, pointing at her chest. "Shss," she answered. She pointed at Lucciana and said, "Oo-shia'ma?"

The Samurai smirked and said, "Yes, yes, Ooshiana. That's me. And you're... Sheh-sis?"

Shss widened her eyes at the butchering of her name... she had never heard it spoken so ridiculously.

The hissing was only slightly helpful for the pieces to fall into place, but soon enough, Lucciana began to understand why the girl could not understand her. She had visited several Lizardman tribes before, and eye widening was one of the few things she had learned from her brief time with them... a sign of amusement, happiness.

This "rabid girl" must have some connection with them, she thought.

She never stuck around long enough to learn more than basic greetings from the Lizardmen, but she never forgot the day she met the people of the Kuncha tribe, and was greeted with several dozen wide open eyes... it was only later she discovered its true meaning.

With a friendly smile, the Samurai widened her eyes and tried out what little she knew of the Lizardman tongue. "Sa," she said, a basic hello.

Shss suddenly animated, speaking in a quick barrage of hisses and clicks, but Lucciana didn't catch a thing. "Hey, hey, slow down. I don't understand much," she said calmly, widening her eyes in a friendly gesture. Shss quieted and returned the smile she had seen earlier, though it ended up looking like the grin of a madman.

The Fighter was happy to finally meet someone like her, a non-Lizardman who could speak her language. She tensed up slightly when the Ghost started to walk towards her, but she made a peaceful gesture with her hands, showing Shss that she wasn't going to attack.

Before Shss could react, the Ghost placed one of her hands on Shss' chest, where the Magic Missile had hit. Shss jumped at the feeling... her hand was warm, very warm.

Her suspicions at the true nature of this girl were confirmed, and she suddenly felt ashamed at attacking so brashly.

The girl said something Shss didn't understand, stepped back, then began to undo her robe with her good hand, her wounded one still over her stomach. Shss looked confused as the girl let the robe drop to the ground, revealing a bright white pair of soft clothes underneath.

She removed those as well, leaving nothing more than two small pieces of cloth for top and bottom to cover her. After putting her robe back on with some difficulty, she held the top clothing piece in her teeth, then guided Shss' arms into the sleeves. Shss got the idea, and put the bottom on by herself, covering her clearly insufficient animal hides with warm new clothes.

Lucciana smiled slightly and said, "You know, my mom always told me that wearing more than one layer of clothes made me look like a vagrant, but I always thought you couldn't be too prepared. You don't want to be in a place like this without proper clothes, right?" Pain suddenly shot up the arm the zombie had bitten, and she grimaced in pain.

Shss felt thankful to the girl for sharing so readily with her, even after her earlier mistake, but she had nothing to give in return, or anything to help the girl with her wounded arm.

She figured she might need some water. The Fighter turned back to the river and reached down to scoop some out for the pale girl. A hand thrust down and grabbed her arm.

"No, don't touch that!" Lucciana shouted. "It will kill you." Shss looked startled, and Lucciana cursed herself for her rashness. "No, bad," she said simply, pointing at the water.

Shss got the gist of it. "No, bad," she repeated, and Lucciana nodded.

The Samurai gestured after herself, and pointed at the castle wall. "Let's rest over there," she said, and they both got up and tiredly limped themselves across the river bank.

The two girls collapsed against the castle wall, Lucciana's katana in its sheathe and Shss' spear resting on her shoulder. Silence overcame them and the area around them, and the two rested side by side, in silence, for several minutes.

Lucciana finally spoke. "Thanks for helping me out back there, Shss," she said, looking into Shss' eyes. "It's admirable to see someone with your strength acting with such mercy." Shss widened her eyes, and they both leaned back to rest again.

The minutes passed by, their breath slowing to an even pace from the ragged huffs of battle. The roaring of the creature had finally ceased in Lucciana's mind. Perhaps it was the high of battle wearing off forcing her to come down, or maybe it was pity for the corrupted creature she had killed, but this one left a sour taste in her mouth.

"You ever get the feeling that you've spent your whole life doing something that'll mean nothing in the end, Shss?" Lucciana asked, staring out into the black waters. "Like you've suffered your entire life just to become this great person, someone who wants to benefit the world or save mankind... when all you end up doing is making it worse."

Shss sat in silence as she spoke. "No matter how hard we try, it seems that things are destined to get more difficult, more corrupted with time. And yet, we continue to strive, keep trying to move on and live a

normal life, trying to do what we can to help... even though we know it won't do anything in the end.

"Sometimes... I just get sick of life. The more you fail at it, the more pointless it seems. People suffer and die, and nobody cares. Nobody lifts a finger to help, nobody even turns their head to see if they can do anything.

"This world... I hate it."

Lucciana kept looking out onto the dark river, and shook her head slightly. "I hate it," she whispered, looking down into her chest. The silence continued, and several minutes passed. Both girls were lost in their thoughts of pain and pens, the mundane and the supernatural.

"We have to get across the river," *We must find a way across this river*, Lucciana and Shss said and thought together. They exchanged glances and Lucciana continued. "I have a feeling it's across the river somewhere. I've searched nearly everywhere else... and what better place to hide it than the underworld itself?"

Lucciana stood up and looked around. There had to be some kind of ferry to get across the river, some method of transportation. She searched the area thoroughly, but found nothing other than the sigil of the dead buried deep underground at the river bank. She knew no spell to interact with it.

Then, she noticed it: it had been there the whole time, but she hadn't put her finger on the sound because it had been so quiet and repetitive, like background noise unimportant during battle.

There it was again... a slight thud from somewhere out on the river.

Out in the distance, a solid-looking raft had just bumped into the banks of a tiny island and was well on its way to drifting farther down the river, and out of sight. Lucciana scrambled to the river bank and her mind worked quickly. *Rope? A fishing pole? I have to have something to get it over here...*

She gestured with outstretched hands. "Shss, do you have something this," she began to ask, holding her arms open and pointing at the raft, "big?" Shss patted herself and looked around, but saw nothing to help. She cocked her head sharply to the side in the negative.

Lucciana turned back to the raft and stroked the tiny wound on her chin, thinking quickly... the raft was going to dislodge itself from the island and float downstream if she didn't do something. An idea suddenly came to her, but she knew it might end up destroying the raft. Still, she saw no other choice.

"Stand back," she ordered, and Shss backed up. Lucciana concentrated and conjured a fiery feeling in her body, enveloping her in a powerful heat hot enough to make her blood boil. Finally, she withdrew her wounded arm from her robe, coupled it with her good arm, and conjured forth two great Fireballs in each hand.

With all her willpower, she directed the first straight into the River Styx, instantly evaporating a great path in the water directly in front of the raft. The raft dipped down into the newly created water pipe as the Fireball sank into the water, then sprang up as the river waters crashed in and the raft began to float towards them... but not quite fast enough.

She then directed the second Fireball to fly behind the raft and explode. There was a bright flash of light and a fiery blast of heat, and the raft propelled towards them on one of several explosion-induced waves in the river.

It shot up the river bank with a scraping sound, and came to rest right in front of Lucciana. She looked back at Shss, eyes wide with a big grin, and gestured towards their new vehicle with a welcoming hand. Shss smiled, better this time, and joined her next to the raft.

After a moment brushing off a few drops of the deadly water, Lucciana hopped onto the raft and lent a hand to Shss to help her up. "Coming?" she asked, widening her eyes. Shss grasped her hand, and

Lucciana froze.

She felt something... welcoming and peaceful with that touch, and strangely familiar. She stared into Shss' eyes for a second, and wondered silently what it could all mean. Finally, the Samurai grasped tighter and pulled Shss up. It was time to set sail.

Mercy

The river was still, but there was a very tiny current. The raft had been drifting north rather slowly, and the somewhat narrow body of water seemed to be completely blocked off on all sides. To the west, the wall of the castle kept even pace with the two girls and their vessel, and to the east, another... a cave-like wall kept the journey on a straight voyage north.

It would have been quiet, but Ooshima seemed to be quite the talker. The language barrier didn't seem to matter to her, or perhaps, it was the reason that she was being so open. In the end, it gave Shss ample time to reflect on what had happened in the past few days.

If I hadn't been so unprepared... The thought kept racing through her mind. The serpent had caught both of them by surprise, and she knew that using her spear to simply disarm or stun the great beast would simply have gotten them both killed. She knew it was an unavoidable kill, but it didn't keep her from feeling bad for the serpent, or for her vow, which now seemed impossible to keep.

Shss gave the beast a silent prayer to speed its journey back to the earth, and begged its forgiveness. She would give up this whole game of murder and survival once she had found the *Kassmak Ohss*, hopefully to be one of the washers or teachers of her village... whatever would make her useful to her people without taking another life.

She widened her eyes slightly... yes, that would be best.

Ooshima continued to speak, gesturing strangely as she stared off into the distance. It was kind of funny... but at the same time, she knew they had to stay alert, in case another of those things came around. What would she do if it did? Slay it, or find another way?

The Fighter kept her ears open for the slightest trickle of water outside of the raft's noise, in case another one of those things came back.

"*Ei*," Ooshima interjected suddenly. Shss looked up and followed her companion's look to a small beach off to the west. It was the exact same one they had departed, complete with the serpent's head and the strange symbol in the dirt.

The river had looped back on itself.

Ooshima seemed to get a little flustered, shaking her head in disbelief. In truth, Shss was feeling the same way. They had floated down this river for the past hour looking for the *Kassmak Ohss*, and came back to the same place they started from!

A red light began to form in the robed girl's hand, pointed towards the river. She was probably going to send them back to shore to plan their next move, but that's when Shss saw something she hadn't noticed before.

"Ooshima!" she shouted, pointing off to the east. It was hard to make out through the darkness, but then, they both saw it: an island, covered by a massive fortification of some sort, out in the middle of the river.

The glow in Ooshima's hand dimmed. The raft was drifting north, away from the shore to the west, and the island to the east. They were going to sail away from both shores!

Ooshima stood up and hooked an arm under Shss' shoulder, pulling her to her feet. After she wrapped her good arm firmly around her waist, the Fighter suddenly couldn't feel the raft beneath her anymore.

She looked down and saw it sailing farther down the river, without them, and that both her and her companion were several inches above the water, floating towards the island.

Shss saw that it was straining Lucciana hard to hold the both of them up in the air like this, and their flight towards the island faltered more and more with each passing second. They were getting closer to the island, but the flight was fast becoming dangerously wobbly.

Finally, just as they were about to reach the shore, the spell gave out. Ooshiana collapsed in Shss' free arm, and the two were suddenly waist deep in the river.

Shss could feel her strength beginning to be sapped from her, so she threw her spear onto the earthy shore and trudged desperately after it with her unmoving companion in tow. She cradled the unconscious girl in her arms and made her way into the open gate that led into the structure.

It was a crypt. Bodies and bones were everywhere, and it was too distractingly musty to think straight; they might have been its first living visitors in many decades. The most disturbing part was that the two girls looked like they might join them soon; their legs were aged and wrinkled, and their clothes were beginning to rot away.

Shss worried for a second, but it seemed that with time, both their skin and clothing were returning to their original color and strength.

She set Ooshiana down on the ground and retrieved her spear. She learned to hate places like this, ever since she wandered into the burial chamber in her homeland. To think that the people who brought her into the world could treat the dead with such disdain, and to see it happen again where she now stood... it was too much to bear. She wanted to get the *Kassmak Ohss* and go home.

Ooshiana stirred and groaned. Shss knelt down and raised two fingers up. *Saved ya twice*, she thought with widened eyes. Ooshiana got the message and grunted in mock annoyance, then pulled herself to her feet and looked around.

The girl seemed confused, and walked back out the door. She pointed at a sign in the sand, and read it aloud. She seemed troubled at first, but after a short time, began to look surprisingly happy. Apparently, what she was looking for might be here.

The two made their way past bones in what seemed like every alcove possible in the walls, around a corner, and straight into a chamber occupied by a line of six towering skeletons. Each one was standing at attention, great swords in their hands, with purple cloth around their bodies and small yellow crowns on their heads.

At their approach, the skeletons began to move.

Shss was about to prepare for a strike when Ooshiana shouted out a few arcane words of power. The world seemed to contort between her and the skeletons, and for a few seconds, it looked like the bones in the alcoves beyond the spell had warped with the sheer power of her spell.

An invisible force rocked the skeletons, and their bones disconnected and scattered, striking the wall behind them with several thumping sounds. Speaking only a few words, Ooshiana had ended the battle. With a cocky shrug, she began to walk through the pile of bones to the staircase leading farther into the tomb.

A bony hand suddenly grasped her ankle, digging its fingernails into her flesh. Ooshiana cried out and kicked her foot forward, sending the hand flying into the wall and shattering into a dozen bony pieces. The pieces struck the ground with a clatter, but only seconds later began a slow crawl back towards her.

The bones of every one of the skeletons seemed to have the same idea, as skeletal arms pieced together ribcages and legs, and heads groaned out to be re-attached to their bodies.

As the skeletons began to reconstruct themselves, Shss strode forward to disrupt their progress. She arced her spear from the right straight across the line of building skeletons, cutting ribcages in half and sending the line of bones against the far wall.

Lucciana was busy kicking skeletal hands into the air and slicing them into pieces, making sure they would never come together again. Pieces clattered all around her with tiny clinking sounds, just as she felt a slight pressure in her ear telling her something was behind her.

She spun around and sliced her sword in a neat path, straight across the upper ribs of the a skeleton with its sword raised high above and behind it. With its legs no longer able to support the weight of the blade, its arms and head dipped back, with sword still in hand, and fell to the floor with a smash.

Shss realized that they couldn't go back out the way they came, if Ooshiana was as tired as she was after such a short flight over the river. She pierced a jabbering, biting skull on the ground and pushed towards the stairs leading farther down.

When she turned to beckon Ooshiana after her, she saw a bright blue light emanate from the pale girl's hands and shoot out towards the skeletons. A massive sheet of snow and ice covered the bulk of the bones on the ground, and their struggles to end the lives of the two intruders suddenly stopped.

Ooshiana fired ball after frozen ball of blue ice over the bones still crawling and moving along the ground, until the entire chamber was encased in immobile ice. When she was finished, she tucked her wounded arm back into her robe, and smirked as she held up two fingers, marching down the stairs leading farther into the crypt. Shss hissed in disbelief, then followed her friend down.

The two entered a small room with an empty alcove in it. The sickening sounds of rattling bones and the scraping of swords being dragged along the ground above didn't follow.

Shss sighed in relief, and both girls walked around the alcove through a small archway, and into a vast hall of death. Lined up in tiny chambers to their left and right, bones were laid to rest, as far as the eye could see.

Ooshiana hunched over like she was going to throw up. Shss walked over to offer some comfort, but she waved her away, straightening up and striding down the corridor as if nothing was the matter... despite her furrowed brow.

Shss rested her spear against her shoulder, holding it firmly in case more of the creatures came to life. But there was no rattling, no shifting, nothing in the shadows that might denote an attack. The bones were still, and the two walked cautiously past rows and rows of long deceased bodies.

The hallway was extremely long. They had travelled for at least fifteen minutes, past more and more of the bodies and the penetrating quiet. Shss' back was beginning to ache from being clenched in anticipation for so long, and she noticed the same readiness in Ooshiana's set jaw and hand on her sword.

The clenching got worse when they passed through an open gate leading into a small crypt, though thankfully filled with substantially less occupants in fewer alcoves in the walls. Torchlight flickered off of their pale white bones, and cast eerie shadows in the corners of the room.

Off to the left and right, the small room opened up into hallways with pronounced fountains of gushing water latched onto the walls. Shss pointed off to the right, and the two girls walked past a small room with more bones on the ground. They were stacked in a messy pile, a far cry from the deferential and respectful manner in which the other skeletons had been laid to rest.

Shss couldn't be sure, but some of them appeared to be moving. She pushed a curious Ooshiana farther down the hallway in case the bones were planning on following.

Something was rustling straight ahead. Shss pointed her spear forward and Ooshiana unsheathed her

sword, just in time for several winged creatures to begin their furious flight towards them.

Ooshiana twirled around and beheaded the first one, showering herself with purple blood, and Shss got a glimpse of it just as its body hit the ground. They were about half the size of her, with purple skin and horns, and fully functional wings. They cried out with the haunting cry of a bat and attacked en masse, with clawed talons suitable for tearing into flesh.

Though Shss easily punched one of them in the jaw and ducked another, Ooshiana was not faring as well. After the first latched onto her stomach, it was only a matter of time before she was swarmed by several more.

Shss elbowed another of the flying creatures across the jaw and began to peel them off of Ooshiana's body before they struck anything vital. She cried out as one of them bit her in the neck, seconds before Shss ripped it off of her and smashed its leathery body into the wall. There were just too many of them...

"Shss!!!" Ooshiana cried out, then said something incomprehensible. Shss knew she couldn't pick them off of the pale girl one by one before they killed her... *but what about the vow I made?!* she thought in a panic.

Her mind raced in a split second with the training she had received at her village. There was the spear, of course... it kept the warrior out of danger and allowed for a swift kill. Unarmed combat in case of disarmament, but that wouldn't stop them in time. The sling, the staff...

That's it! she thought. Shss backhanded one of the leaping creatures, flipped her spear over shaft first, and began knocking them off of Ooshiana one by one.

Shss arced the pole over her head and brought it squarely down on the heads of the three on her companion's back, knocking them senseless, and charged forward to shoulder the two on her chest into the wall. The creatures, recognizing her as the threat, flew forward with an echoing cry.

She jumped back and thrust the pole straight into one of their eyes, then dropped to the floor in splits as two more sailed over her head. When the final one was just over her, she let it run itself into the shaft of her spear, then rose up to kick it into the ceiling. It was out before it hit the floor.

A flutter behind her told her that the others were coming back in a second wave. Shss didn't even bother to look, knowing exactly from the air pressure where they were jumping from. She backed up and flipped her spear over, thrusting it backwards into the spot where the pressure was the greatest.

A *thok* sound followed by a cry of pain issued forth, and Shss dodged right into the wall to avoid the flight of the other one. When it sailed uselessly past her towards Ooshiana, Shss reached out, grabbed its neck and drove its head into the wall. It struggled only until its skull hit stone.

There was only one creature left on Ooshiana when Shss pulled the rest off of her, and it was still on her right side. She was losing strength fast from her injuries and the surprise attack, but as Shss was preparing to grab it, Ooshiana crushed it against the wall, over and over again, until it finally loosened its hold on her and fell to its knees on the ground. With a quick unsheathing and a slice of her sword, she cleanly removed its head.

She suddenly clutched her head with both hands, as if something was causing her intense pain from the inside. She shook slightly and held tighter, but as Shss stepped forward in concern, Ooshiana suddenly stopped, then slowly stood up straight as if nothing had happened.

Immediately after, she brought her sword out, seemingly with the intention of beheading one of the unconscious creatures. Shss grabbed her arm before she could strike, hissing in a soft and peaceful manner.

Ooshiana looked at her with a look of confusion and betrayal, clearly upset with Shss for not using all of her resources and skill to protect the both of them. Shss wished she could explain.

She had practiced using so many kinds of lethal weapons, that she thought she would never need to use that style. A stunned boar could not be eaten... only a slain one. She had not seen the importance of using the blunt end of her spear before she had come to the castle.

Ooshiana roughly pulled her arm away and sheathed her sword, staring at Shss with venom in her eyes as she grabbed the creature by the neck, almost completely pinching off its source of air. Shss reached out to try and stop her, but Ooshiana yelled something at her, and the Fighter quickly fell silent.

The creature began to struggle, clawing at her hand and croaking with fear, but Ooshiana squeezed its neck harder, and it stopped trying to escape. She relaxed her grip, enough to let it do little more than breathe, and Shss understood then that Ooshiana hadn't meant to kill it.

The pale girl looked up at the nearby fountain, forcing the creature's head towards its sparkling blue waters. It began to struggle again, forcing its head away from the delicious, trickling liquid. On its reaction, she pulled it away and marched down the hall with it still in her hands, casting a quick glance at Shss but not waiting for her to follow.

Around the corner of another small room filled with bones was another hallway that led into an empty room. Another fountain ran sweet with water across from it, and Ooshiana pushed the still creature's head towards the liquid again. This time, it began to lap at the water, and Shss was amazed to see its energy and strength return as it drank more and more of the water.

Finally, it seemed finished, and Ooshiana released it. It wasted no time flying down the hall and out of sight, and she bent forward to drink from the fountain. The claw marks on her face, the puncture wounds on her neck, even her injured arm all closed up and straightened with just a few gulps of the mystical water. She withdrew her injured arm from her robe, undid the bandage and flexed it, feeling rejuvenated.

Without waiting for her, Ooshiana began to walk down the hallway and farther into the crypt. At the same time that she felt upset for not helping as much as she could, Shss also felt a small surge of anger. She had, in fact, saved this girl's life, whether or not she had killed their enemies. How dare she be so dismissive now?

Lucciana had barely turned the corner when a metallic scraping sound filled the tomb. She caught the words on the gate just before they slid into the wall. *So... Daikuta is buried here*, she thought to herself.

Shss came to a stop behind her, and Lucciana wheeled around in anger. She unsheathed her sword and pointed it straight at her companion's face. "Don't follow me," she commanded coldly.

Her companion narrowed her eyes in anger, hissing under her breath. Lucciana turned back to the rattling bones in the small chamber in front of her, and heard Shss' bare feet pad back down the hallway. It was just her and the betrayer...

"Rise, coward. I will be the next, and the last, to strike you down," Lucciana said.

Down the hall, Shss was seething with anger. She had saved her life twice, and this was her repayment? Was this how people outside of her village acted, misunderstanding or otherw...

All at once, Shss suddenly felt ashamed. *"Peace and mercy," indeed*, she thought. *One of the few chances I have to understand things from someone else's perspective, and I selfishly impose my view alone on the situation.*

She sighed and bit her lower lip in frustration at her own lack of open-mindedness. *Of course it was a misunderstanding... had she known what had happened these past few days, it would have been different. My stupid, unthinking reactions...!*

She was about to turn around and try to reason things out with the pale girl, to somehow let her know what had happened... when something began to pull at her.

It felt like... unconditional love, a feeling like the one she felt with her family. But at the same time, it was an unmistakeable attraction. Something was guiding her down the hallway towards something beautiful, and undeniable. She unthinkingly rounded the corner, and there, in the middle of a small alcove reserved for the dead, was an open black coffin.

Inside was a being of indescribable beauty. Shss stared, unable to move or think, at the green-skinned girl lying still inside it. Her hair was about as long as Shss', but straight and fine. Her face was smooth, with high cheekbones, a small nose, and tiny red lips. Her body was covered by a black sheet, though Shss could not tear her eyes away from her pretty face. The scent of lilacs filled the air with a sweet, pleasing aroma.

Shss was not startled when the girl's eyes slowly opened and the two black orbs came to rest on her own, as if they were staring into her very soul. Her leathery black wings, which Shss mistook for cloth, unfurled as she glided up and out of the coffin. She was almost completely bare, save for a small black belt around her waist, and large black boots which made no sound when they touched the ground.

The girl gracefully swept forward towards Shss, the beauty of the girl's eyes rooting the Fighter in place. She blinked and drew closer, touching Shss' face with a hand as warm and pleasant as the most relaxing of spring days...

Just down the hall, Lucciana stared down the cold and skeletal form of Haiyato Daikuta, former bodyguard and suicide assistant to her old master, Goto-sama. She gripped the handle on her katana so hard that she thought it might break from the pressure.

The bones around him began to move, and Lucciana watched with mild amazement as muscle, vein and organ began to grow out of the bones of Daikuta and his minions, finally being wrapped up in a tight layer of pale skin.

Daikuta and his three expressionless minions now stood, katanas at the ready and dressed in plated Samurai battle armor, as complete and seemingly alive as she herself was. Daikuta's fine, long black hair caught up in an unseen draft, and his handsome face stared at her with no emotion whatsoever. His dark brown eyes stared into hers, and she stared right back.

She caught a glance from Daikuta to one of his subordinates, and the Samurai stepped forward to challenge her. "You are as ever a coward in death as you were in life, Daikuta," she growled, then raised her katana in defense.

His blow was fine, but slow. Lucciana sidestepped him and removed his hands from his arms in a single slice. Her opponent and his katana dropped to the ground, and he wordlessly began to crawl towards her with mutilated arms, jaw biting air. She flipped her katana around and removed his head, and unlike the Skeleton Lords upstairs, he struggled for her no more.

The other two minions stepped forward following her victory, but their attacks were clumsy and without cooperation. Lucciana backed up towards the wall to her left and drew them into her trap.

When they had both wasted their time attacking the same spot at the same time, Lucciana charged forward and slashed her katana as quick as lightning between the both of them. An arm dropped off of both of the apathetic ghouls, and she spun around to decapitate both of them.

As their bodies slumped over, Lucciana faced the betrayer with a furious anger. He seemed unimpressed as he raised his sword.

"They... they died because of you," she said in a shaky voice. "My family... Goto-sama said we would help them, bring them food and medicine when they needed it, but you..."

For the first time, Daikuta's frozen countenance broke with a twisted and perverse smile, and Lucciana exploded. "You killed them!!!" she screamed.

Her family, and every other Elf in the forest, were distrusting beings. They made their own food, took care of their own problems, and kept their families and blood pure of the constant in-fighting of the other races of Llylgamyn.

So when the disease struck, there was nobody to turn to. The entire forest was afflicted by a sudden lack of strength, from the Elves to the beasts, and there were few who escaped the effects. Many of the ones who avoided the deadly illness travelled abroad, seeking aid from other villages, or even Humans, but none returned successful.

As for the ones who stayed, there were simply not enough people immune to the sickness to feed and support that many dying Elves... and the disease was ruthlessly efficient.

Lucciana was training in the land of Yamato at the time, with the race of Man. She had had a falling out with her family, who despised non-Elves, and who couldn't understand why she would leave her studies of magic to study the way of the sword. She had told them that the only way their people could grow was to understand and learn from people outside of the forest, but they didn't listen.

Besides, the way of the Samurai was a duality, of sword and of magic, and would represent a perfect blend of old and new ideas... the next step of evolution for her and her people.

They hadn't spoken since then, and wouldn't again until that day. When the Elven emissary came to beg assistance of the people of Yamato for food, medicine or otherwise, Goto-sama pledged that he would do all that he could.

But there were those who didn't want to become involved with another's nation's problems, content to see to their own affairs and nobody else's. There was a war...

In the end, the isolationists emerged triumphant, and Haiyato Daikuta, personal assistant to the great Goto-sama, personally saw to his master's beheading. He called it "the end of Goto's shame," and falsely claimed that his master begged to be killed for his mistakes governing Yamato.

Lucciana wasn't concerned with Yamato as much as she was worried about her family. She had no money to purchase aid from the nations of Man... but it didn't matter. When the week-long war had ended, she immediately returned home with the emissary, pushing her way through the familiar brush and trees to her old home. Catching the disease was her most distant concern at that point, and she had just enough time to hold her family one last time before dehydration and the sickness overcame them.

She was fourteen, then. At that moment, she gave up her citizenship as a citizen of Yamato, and could no longer consider herself the child of a village that no longer existed. She had no country, no master. She became Ronin.

To make matters worse, the lost child was one of the few immune to the effects of the disease, or simply away long enough to avoid catching it. She had to live to old age with the loss of everything she knew, a fate she felt much worse than a slow, but assured, death with her family.

She heard a year later of Daikuta's downfall in Yamato at the hand of revolutionaries, but by then, she was too sloshed to care. When she wasn't out on a job, she was drinking, and the death of Daikuta and his minions was an unimportant footnote to a pointless life.

She cared little for the politics of Man, or the xenophobia of Elf. The compassion the emissary showed was ineffective; the compassion of Goto-sama led to his death.

The world was a sick place to her then, and continued to be to this day. She amassed a considerable amount of money, the very same money she didn't have to help her family back then... and yet, only four years after she renounced her citizenship and the world, she was now staring face to face with the corpse responsible for it all.

"Hyaaaaa!" she screamed, bringing an overhand chop straight down towards Daikuta's disgustingly

handsome face. Unfortunately, he was still as skilled a Samurai in death as he was in life, and parried her blow with ease. With a push, he sent Lucciana backwards towards the hallway, and charged forward.

Lucciana pretended to stumble while he ran, then flipped over his careening body, bringing her katana down along his back in a long, painful slice. The armor cut with ease and undead blood poured from the wound, falling to the ground in drops with hisses and puffs of smoke.

The undead Samurai swung around with a high blow aimed at her neck, but she was prepared for the attack. It was one of the first counter-attacks they taught in Yamato, and was easily parried by simply holding one's sword up.

Lucciana did so and caught the blade on hers, sending sparks flying. She saw an opening and kicked Daikuta at his exposed side between the armor plates, sending him reflexively over in a hunch, just in time to send her knee into his jaw.

Daikuta fell back into the wall, drew up straight and walked forward with a deadly purpose. The armored warrior towered over the robed one, and his victory seemed assured with a single slice. His katana began to flash through the air, driving towards any exposed part of Lucciana's body. But she wasn't wounded anymore, fighting with a single hand. For every one of his thrusts, Lucciana had a chop, and for every swing he had, she had a parry.

The two katanas clashed against one another over and over, Daikuta slicing with effort and strength. Lucciana blocked every blow, sidestepped every kick and batted away every attempt at a critical strike with a calm that surprised even her.

He was humiliated... if he could still feel that way. Still, his expression didn't change, and he seemed as energetic as he did the moment they started battling. At that moment, Lucciana lifted her sword out at an angle and began her assault.

Daikuta wasn't the defensive master she was, and blow after blow landed on his armor, tearing off plates and chunks with every attack. Lucciana made it a point to target the straps flimsily holding his armor together, and plate by plate slipped off of his body and fell to the floor.

Every time he made a pathetic attempt to cut her, she was able to expertly bat his sword away and get in two strikes of her own. He was losing bad.

When there was nothing standing between her and his body but a single piece of armor from chest to knee, Lucciana spun around and cut off his right sword arm, and his katana fell to the ground with it. Daikuta punched at her without emotion, and Lucciana sidestepped and cut that hand off as well, followed by the rest of his arm.

Daikuta looked at the stump left for his sword arm, then back at Lucciana. A single tear dropped from her eye as her sword danced back and forth, up and down all over his body. With every flash, and every slice, another part of his body fell to the ground. His arm, his nose and ears...

At last, two neat slices removed his legs from beneath him, and his torso slumped to the ground. Lucciana kicked the bleeding stump into the wall, making sure he could still see her for every second of her vengeance.

Lucciana screamed out in rage as she began to cut at his armor, in the hopes of cutting out his black heart. Slices appeared on the armor, vertical and horizontal, and blood poured out of every new wound. She screamed louder and louder, cutting faster and faster, until even the body armor around his chest began to fall to pieces to the ground.

Finally, there was an opening, and Lucciana kicked his limbless torso to the ground, driving the katana straight into where his heart would be. Daikuta looked up at her without fear and pain, which made her even angrier.

She pulled the bloody sword out of his body and brought it down upon his neck, his head rolling slightly towards the wall before coming to a stop. His eyes were still looking at her.

She kicked the torso out of the way and pulled the head up by the hair, bringing it close to her face. "How does it feel," she spat, "to be so helpless in the face of a superior opponent? Is this how Goto-sama felt before you killed him... you sick, honorless bastard?!"

The face didn't move for a second... then twisted into another sick grimace. He didn't care.

Lucciana flung the head at the wall with a shout, but before it could fall, she thrust her katana through it with a sickening crunch. Almost immediately, the head and every other body in the room began to hiss as skin and organs dripped off of the bone into rapidly disappearing piles. Within seconds, only several pieces of bone remained on the floor, with Daikuta's skull still pinned into the stone wall by her blade.

The Elven Samurai slumped to the floor, feeling no better after destroying the corpse of the man who helped kill her people. She wished she was there to do it the first time...

She was filled with an anger and a selfishness that was not her own. She could feel the essence of Daikuta crawling inside her, whispering the most perverted of his history and desire. She felt herself being drawn into his anger, like she was going to lose her mind...

The katana stuck in his skull fell out of the wall, and both struck the stone floor with a clatter. The sound shocked her out of Daikuta's attempt to poison her mind. *Get out of my head, you sick cur*, she thought, and forced his presence from her. Everything became silent.

Lucciana remained on the ground, surrounded by the chipped and sliced bones of her enemy. *Those who wish not to help, do not... and those who wish to, cannot... or die trying*, she thought helplessly, resting her hand on her wakizashi. *What point is there to continue? What point is there to this world? Why... live?*

She unsheathed the small blade and pressed its edge to her belly. *This world can go to hell, for all I care...* she thought, and in a smooth motion, plunged the blade into her stomach.

The pain was excruciating, far worse than they had ever told her. "*Ugh...!*" she cried out, as her stomach began to gush more blood onto the floor than she thought possible. Her vision began to darken almost immediately.

At that moment, two figures chose to appear to her in the hallway. Whether they were there the whole time or for scant seconds, she did not know. One was Shss, the coward who almost let her die. The other... was an unmistakeable beauty, a girl with wings.

Lucciana stood, recovering and raising her katana with shaky hands, and hunched over to keep too much blood from spurting out before she had a chance to confront the girl she trusted with her life. Shss stared back with eyes filled with peace, and her companion walked forward to take Lucciana's blade before she even realized she was disarmed.

All fear left her, and the winged girl threw the sword away and to the side. Lucciana felt an overwhelming sense of peace as she fell forward into the winged girl.

She caught the Elf and held her in her arms, not even flinching when the warm and sticky blood began to run down her bare body. Lucciana felt her life begin to slip away. Her body became lighter and lighter as a feeling of peace grew inside her.

The world spun, and darkness overcame her. In the arms of the Demon Child Rebecca, Lucciana died.

For His Sake

The Ghost groaned and batted half-heartedly at the crazed bug, but it was much too quick to touch with his slow swipes. It shot in and out of his vaporous form so quickly that the blue afterimage streaks of its

travel filled up almost all of his vision. It was everywhere at once!

Kiwi punched through the Ghost's body over and over, leaving tiny Faerie-sized holes in him that quickly closed up as soon as she had come out his other side. During her furious assault, the girl in green suddenly seemed to regain her composure, and a spark of life returned to her eyes. She looked up and saw the bizarre battle above her.

And with good timing, too. For some reason, Kiwi's attacks on the Ghost were leaving her drained. Her body was gradually growing colder, and she found it harder and harder to avoid his clumsy blows. She punctured a few more holes in his chest, until at last he scored a lucky slap that sent the Faerie straight into the wall, leaving her motionless on the stone floor.

"In the name of God, BEGONE!" the girl yelled, pointing a single finger at the flailing banshee. A light opened up behind him, and the Ghost flew backwards towards it, growing smaller and smaller as he screamed for his beloved Annie. When he was nearly upon the distant brightness, a great flash of light overcame the room.

But when it finally dimmed, the wailing continued. The flash hadn't come from the light welcoming the Ghost to the other side, but rather from a great hand that had suddenly sprung up in front of the distant brightness. The transparent yellow hand was unaffected by the Ghost's sudden arrival and squeezed him tight, barring him from going any farther.

The wailing soon gave way to quiet sobs. The great hand released the Ghost, and he floated slowly back to the room, covering his face with his transparent fingers. His sorrowful face was still visible as he spoke. "It's no use, Annie... no use... it will never let me go. I will never see you again..." he cried.

Kiwi began to stir, and finally found the strength to lift her head to see the sobbing Ghost. She turned over on the floor, but couldn't find the energy to do much more than watch. Her tiny body rose and fell with exhausted breaths.

The green-robed girl saw the movement and walked over to Kiwi, then scooped her up and held her close to her green dress to share what warmth she could with the shivering Faerie. The girl smiled, then looked back up at the Ghost. "I am a simple Priest, a humble servant of God," she said. "I beg of you, in His name, go to Him!"

"I can't..." the Ghost replied, then unburied his face and pointed towards the light, and the now invisible yellow hand. "I can't!!" He wailed louder, and the sound became deafening.

Hiromi squeezed Kiwi to her body even tighter and called back, "Ok, I see that! We'll have you out in no time! But please, calm down!" The Ghost didn't listen.

"Can you tell me who you are?" she asked.

That got his attention. The Ghost quieted down and whispered, "I... don't remember... who am I? Why am I here? Annie... where are you? Annie?"

"It's ok," Hiromi interrupted. "Please, just tell me what you *do* remember."

He strained hard, his old face screwing up in concentration. "I remember... I remember... Annie," his hollow voice answered. "My sweet Annie, I loved her so. I broke my vow of chastity for her. And we... we had a little girl. Rebecca... she's so tiny and soft... I love them both so much!" He smiled. "They're my special ones..."

The Ghost's face suddenly contorted in fear. "Rebecca... she's... she's not normal! She's a Demon! Oh, God, she has wings... how could you do this to me, God?! What did I do to you?!? I served you all these years... I was your Vicar!

"Yes, that's who I was... I was a holy man," he realized. "I was a holy man... who served you! I sang your

praises!! And you curse me with this beast for a child?!? She's a monster! ...I have to get rid of her! ...The king! He'll know what to do... I have to give Rebecca to him... give the cursed thing to him!" He paused. "...He's giving me money, telling me I did the right thing. My wife is crying... don't cry, Annie! She'll get better!"

He was silent for a time. His face contorted again as he tried to remember something. "...I'm, I'm on a wooden block. My head is on a wooden block, and I see the ground beneath me. Someone is yelling something. I hear something swish above me... now I'm looking at the sky. Wasn't I looking at the ground a second ago?

"I'm above my body now. I can see myself on the ground. There's my body... there's my head. But they're not me anymore. I'm looking up at the sky, and I see a light. I'm moving towards it.

"I hear a voice all around me. I can't hear what it's saying, but I know it's Xorphitus. He's probably in his mountain lair, hard at work on some evil deeds. But I don't care anymore... I'm getting closer to the light, closer...

"The hand! The hand has me! It won't let me go! Let me go, let me go, let me go!!" the Ghost yelled, beating at an invisible enemy.

Hiromi yelled out, "It's ok, it's ok now! Please calm down! I'm here to help you."

He slowly stopped crying and beating the air, but he didn't look down at her. "You can't... you can't do anything. It's hopeless..." he whispered.

The Priest looked back up at the light, and scried the space around it. Soon enough, the hand appeared, palm open and ready to grab the Ghost on his next attempt towards the hereafter. But this time, she could see the tether that bound the hand to the Ghost.

Her eyes travelled up and down the powerful seal spell, poring into its very mechanics. She could feel the masterful craftsmanship present within. *Using the boundless energy of the spirit as a source of power, he will stay in this place for all eternity...* she thought. *In a way, the Ghost is keeping himself here.*

She smirked... this one was too easy, a beginner level seal. It may have been masterfully made, but the creator was clearly not expecting someone to show compassion for the confused spirit; the spell was defenseless enough to discourage none but the most neophyte Priest. She allowed the warmth of God's presence to wash over her, and nurtured feelings of opening and release.

With those feelings in mind, Hiromi stretched her right arm out at the hand, and closed her palm into a fist. The cord between the hand and the Ghost suddenly and instantly snapped. The hand didn't move as its color faded from bright yellow, to peach, to cream. Then, it slowly lost its form, becoming a blob of formless white, and slowly began to merge with the light it had guarded for so long. In a few seconds, only the light remained.

The Ghost forlornly looked down at the floor, reliving his most traumatic moments of life over and over. His daughter becoming a monster... his wife's murder by the blackhearted Queen who had seduced him... his beheading... the decades of solitude in this tower...

"Vicar... you can go now," Hiromi said, interrupting his thoughts. "Let God welcome you into His arms, and grant you and your family healing."

When he didn't move, Hiromi nurtured warmth from her body and out her outstretched arm. "Go!" she called out, and the Ghost was sent straight back into the light. It began to wail, knowing the hand would be waiting for him...

...until he passed straight through the area it had always guarded, and found himself sprawling towards the liquid warmth of the light that had been denied him for so long. The last thing Hiromi heard before he disappeared was the Ghost's choked and happy cry for his beloved wife.

Hiromi looked back down at the Faerie cupped in her left hand, and was surprised to see her up and about so soon after her close encounter. The Faerie had stars in her eyes. "That... was... so... cool!" she exclaimed. "You sent that Ghost straight back to heaven just by looking at him! My name's Kiwi! And you're Hiromi, right?"

The Priest nodded and grinned. "Nice to meetcha!" Kiwi said, hopping up on her hand.

"How can you move after touching a Ghost that many times?" Hiromi asked in surprise.

"Oh, that?" Kiwi asked. "My teacher Jang taught me how to heal little things using my mind. All I gotta do is wash my qi over the problem, and *whoosh!* all better!"

With a grin, Hiromi patted the Faerie's smooth head and said, "We should go back down, before something else happens." She paused, then smiled. "Thanks for helping me back there! I was careless letting him touch me." Kiwi giggled, and recovered her ruby from the ground.

"So what are you doing here?" Hiromi asked as they descended the stairs. "I think we both know how dangerous this place is!"

Kiwi nodded emphatically. "Master Jang told me I'd find my destiny here," she replied. "Wish he would have been more specific so I could leave sooner... you ask me, we live our destiny every day of our life, so there's not much point in going to look for it!"

"Maybe it's a destiny that is bound somewhere, so you have to go to it to experience it?" Hiromi wondered.

"Yeah, maybe!" Kiwi answered. "So what are you doing here?"

"My friend Quinn and I came in here a while ago, but we got separated," Hiromi explained. "I'm really worried about him. I blacked out... and when I woke up, he was gone. I'm just hoping something didn't chase him off or hurt him."

The Faerie looked concerned. "Where do you think we should go?" she asked.

Hiromi was silent for a time as they reached the bottom of the stairs. *How could someone treat a spirit like that?* she wondered. Kiwi waited patiently until she finally spoke. "I think... before anything else, I should go find out who did this to the Vicar, in case he did this to someone else. I won't allow this kind of behavior with departed souls."

Kiwi nodded. "Yeah! Let's go pop some sense into that guy," she exclaimed, punching a closed fist into her open hand. "I know of a big mountain near here... maybe there's something nearby that can help us."

Hiromi felt glad to have the company. "*The living suffer enough*," she remembered her teacher telling her.

"Just one thing," Kiwi said, and Hiromi looked down at her. "Can I borrow your shoulder? I'm really tired."

The Priest smiled. "Sure, climb on up," she said, holding her left shoulder out. Kiwi beat her wings a few times and sat down, legs thrown over the front. "Tha~nks!" she sang.

Kiwi directed Hiromi through the door and past the open gate. They both grimaced at the dead snake on their way down the stairs. When they reached the Hazard Area and the tomb of charred vines, Hiromi knit her eyebrows in disgust. "Can you imagine what kinda inferno must've ripped through here to make this mess?" Kiwi asked. "I'd hate to be near it."

"Yeah..." Hiromi said, weaving her way through the blackened tubes. When they finally reached the end of the hallway, Kiwi suddenly remembered what else was down here... but Hiromi saw it before the Faerie could say anything. "Wow, that's really deep!" she commented.

Across the length of the black pit was a boulder, one at either end, though the rope between them had since been severed. The pit must have looked much deeper from Hiromi's perspective than from her flying companion's. "Sorry, I forgot about this," Kiwi said, then smiled. "Good thing I can take us straight over!" she said.

She wrapped her tiny arms around Hiromi's robe collar, and lifted the surprised Hobbit into the air. "Oh, when we do get to the other side, be careful, Hi-chan," the Faerie said. "Something big and ugly went kablooie back there!" She fluttered her wings and quickly brought her passenger to a safe stand on the other side of the pit.

Hiromi scrambled away from the pit, her heart pounding. "Hey! How about a little warning next time?" she shouted, a little louder than she intended.

Kiwi turned beet red, and looked away. "I'm sorry, I should have asked first," she said quietly, speaking into her chest.

Her new friend blushed in response, and quickly apologized. "I shouldn't have said so much," she said, then immediately changed the subject. "So what's this about a big and ugly something or other?" she asked with a smile.

Her new friend brightened considerably, and pointed down the hall. "Right over there," she said. "Just try'n hold your breath!"

Outside, a cold wind was blowing around the mountain path, making the bridge sway slightly to and fro. It was too dark to see much down the mountain's slope, but there was enough light from the moon to see a few feet down the path that stretched around it.

"...so he comes rushing at me with this HUGE hammer, like he's gonna make me into a Faerie wafer! So I flew at him with all my might, and *pow!*, one hit and he's down for the count!" Kiwi exclaimed.

Hiromi balked. "You must've been scared!" she answered.

"Nah! Not for a minute!" Kiwi insisted. "Oh, we're here."

The Hobbit and the Faerie emerged from the small passage onto the mountain path. The rickety bridge swayed without care, and the mountain path continued left and right into the darkness.

"I went up that mountain, over there," Kiwi said, pointing up and past the bridge to the great shadowy figure of the mountain, "and that's about as far as I've gone, but I don't think a Human like Quinn can scale those cliffs. Plus, I didn't see any kinda Wizard house, but I did meet these other guys that wanted to eat me, too!"

Hiromi looked over at the tiny girl on her shoulder. "Are Faeries really that tasty?" she asked.

Kiwi shrugged. "I dunno!" she replied. "But it looks like we make Giant tummies rumble!" She chuckled. "So anyway, I'm just flying up, minding my own business, when I see this *biig* house..."

Tink, tink, tink, tink, the sounds came from the cave. "Wizard's Lair," Hiromi said, reading the sign next to the stairs leading down into it. "Let's go, Kiwi!"

The Faerie looked concerned. "Um..." she started, but Hiromi walked in with her new friend on her shoulder anyway.

Several brown-bearded and unbelievably tall Giants in blue loincloths, along with dozens of scruffy, bald Dwarves who were not dressed any more modestly, simultaneously looked up from their work at mining the walls around them to see who had just barged in.

Kiwi sat on Hiromi's shoulder in silence, and the Giants and Dwarves returned the surprised look. The two girls slowly smiled in unison, just as the entirety of the floor charged with a resounding yell of, "Get 'em!"

It took only a second for Hiromi to feel the vibrations of electricity begin to dart around in her chest, through her body and to her outstretched hands. With a loud crackle, several bolts of red lightning streaked out and around the floor and walls, then danced and jumped back and forth between the many yelping miners. While they were busy trying not to touch one another, she and Kiwi were already back up the stairs and running farther along the outside mountain path.

The miners had already come up the stairs when Hiromi and Kiwi had turned the corner, and were now splitting up to find the intruders in the darkness. Without a moment's pause, a huffing and puffing Hobbit scrambled down a new set of stairs with the Faerie holding desperately onto her ruby and Hiromi's collar. They had no time to read the sign out front, but any place was better than back there!

They had not run anywhere safer, they soon noticed. Kiwi gasped as she looked down the hallway to her left, where more Dwarves and Giants were mining and lounging about. A few cried out, and the entire company dropped what they were doing to continue the chase.

Hiromi ducked down the hallway in front of her, cupping a hand down on Kiwi to make sure she wouldn't fall off of her shoulder. With a bound, she was down the stairs leading farther into the mountain. She knew going deeper into the mountain mine would spell trouble, and prepared a single target Paralyze spell just in case, though it clearly wouldn't do against an army of angry miners.

"Are we gonna die, Hi-chan?" Kiwi whispered.

Hiromi smiled nervously and returned, "What kind of destiny would that be? We'll find a way out!"

The stairs ended and opened up into a hallway, which ended in stairs in front of her and a door to her right. Hiromi heard the quickening pound of footsteps on the stairs behind her, and instinct took over. She lunged around the corner and opened the door... unlocked!... and slammed it behind her.

Smitty had just stopped to take a rest from his smithing duties, seating himself next to several repaired and completed pickaxes and hammers, and was helping himself to an ear of roasted corn. He was not dressed for company in his ratty purple loincloth, and his bare chest was hairy and glistening with the sweat of a hard day's work.

His hair and beard were grey and thinning, but his grey eyes still had a spark of fire in them. His yellowed teeth had barely sunk into his delicious ear of corn when the door busted in and two girls tumbled onto the floor. "What'n tha name'a...!?" he shouted, as the two brats slammed and locked his door shut without so much as a hello.

The one in the green dress jumped and turned around in fear at his voice. She was breathing heavily, and clearly running from the idiots upstairs. "Please, you have to help us!" she pleaded.

The pudgy Dwarf exploded. "Whaddaya think yer doin' bargain' inta this mountain'n not expectin' tha locals ta keep from boilin' ye raw?" he roared. "Cancha read tha hundred'er so signs out front that tell ye ta keep tha hell outta tha mines?"

His point was proven when a pounding issued forth from the door. "SMITTY! OPEN DOOR, GIVE GIRLS!!" someone yelled. "GIVE TWO LITTLE BITE-SIZED NOW!" another one shouted.

"SHADDAP, ALLAYA!" Smitty shouted with a voice surprisingly loud for his size. "I dunno what tha *hell* ye all be talkin' 'bout, but I'm tryin' ta have a meal in peace fer *once in my life* without ye brain dead oafs breakin' down me door lookin' fer food all tha blasted time!"

"GIVE TWO GIRLS!" the muffled voice shouted again.

Smitty stalked up to the door. "GETCHER SMELLY CARCASSES OFF'A ME DOORSTEP BEFORE

ME'N ME HAMMER BE HAVIN' SOME WORDS WITHYA!" he roared. "I ain't got no clue 'bout no girls, butcha take one *step* inta me shop durin' mealtime, 'n I be makin' sure ye never get another blasted ear o' me prized corn again, *ye hear?!'*" he shouted.

A chorus of groans came from the door, until the sound of pounding footsteps slowly continued up the outside stairs, where the echoes faded into nothingness.

Kiwi stood up with her hand in the air in a tiny fist of victory. "Thank y..." she began to cheer, but Smitty cut her short, shaking his head with disbelief. "What ye two little'uns be thinkin' wanderin' inta this place?" he asked again. "The only reason them Giants'n me bros respect me is 'cause o' me cookin'n fixin', but all ye two would make is a good meal... 'n I mean that both ways!"

He furrowed his brow at Kiwi, balking at her sheer lack of size and her raw courage (stupidity?) for wandering into the mines. He walked over to Hiromi and took a hold of her arm with rough hands, rolling back her robe's sleeve and pinching her tiny bicep.

Hiromi yelped in pain and tried to pull away, but Smitty just dropped her arm, turning back to his anvil and corn. "Ye're hopeless... ye better getcha selves outta here 'fore somethin' goes'n makes ye its supper."

He dropped down backfirst onto the floor and sunk his teeth into the delicious corn... which had gotten disgustingly cool during the exchange with the miners. Smitty grunted in annoyance and brought it back to the anvil.

"See whatcha did?" he asked tiredly. "Now I gotta start all over 'gain..." He placed the corn on the large slab of metal and picked up a hammer near a glowing fire. After heating it up, he began to pound on his meal like he would a sword or a piece of plate mail.

Hiromi finally spoke. "We came here looking for, um, I don't remember his name," she said, looking at Kiwi for help.

"Mmm..." Kiwi replied, "...Zarsit? Zartrifus?"

Smitty chuckled, but didn't look up. "If ye're lookin' fer Xorphitus," he said, "ye're 'bout a hundred years too late, 'cause that ol' codger went'n died 'fore even I was born."

Kiwi whispered to Hiromi, "Well that's good, so we don't have to worry about him hurting any more people..." She flew off of Hiromi's shoulder and over to Smitty's corn. "Can I try?" she asked, smiling and putting on her best "cute little girl" face.

He looked warily at the cute Faerie. She was up to something... but he relented. "Be me guest, butcha can't lift tha hammer with arms like that," he said. He stood back, and with a high-pitched cry of thanks, Kiwi flew over the corn and sprinkled the slightest hint of dust from her body on top of it.

"HEY! Doncha be comin' inta some stranger's house'n messin' up their food, ye blasted bug!" Smitty yelled.

She giggled and continued on regardless. When that side of the corn had been covered, Smitty watched with amazement as a slight glow around the Faerie's hairless head brought the heavy, glowing hammer from its resting place to the forge, and it began to pound the corn on its own.

With another glow from her head, the corn flipped over, and Kiwi sprinkled that side as well. A few pounds of the hammer later, the steam rising off of Smitty's corn spoke volumes of the taste before he even picked it up and took a bite.

His eyes opened with amazement. "This... this be tha best corn I eva' tasted!!!" he said, nipping at the corn from left to right until the entire thing had been consumed. "How wouldja feel 'bout bein' me own personal assistant ta tha fine art'a cookin', li'l lady?" he asked with his mouth full.

Kiwi closed her eyes tight with happiness and grinned widely. "Actually, can you help my friend find someone she lost here?" she asked, changing the subject. "Maybe you ran into him, or know where he might be. If you could help her, I'll go ahead and cook five more of these for you!"

Smitty laughed and clapped Kiwi on the back, which sent the Faerie flying across the room into a pile of the corn, dazed and dizzy. "Ye be one fine lass!" he said. "I'd be happy ta help ye or ye friend out!" he said, and turned to Hiromi. "So, who's tha friend ye be wantin' ta find?" he asked.

"His name's Quinn," she said, absent-mindedly fiddling with the glowing amulet around her neck. "Has he come around here recently?"

Kiwi struggled up from the pile of corn, and wrapped all arms and legs around one to bring it over to the forge. As she began to sprinkle it, Smitty said, "Describe 'em."

"Well, for starters, he wears all black, and has a long cape, and gloves and boots. He's bald, and has tattoos on his forehead. He's really kind, and he has a really handsome, deep voice," she said, with no attempt to hide her attraction.

Smitty nodded at each of the descriptions, until she had finally told him everything. "Never seen 'em," he said. "Sorry I couldn't help ye, lass."

Hiromi looked downhearted. "It's ok, Hi-chan, we'll find him," Kiwi consoled, and finished up her second piece of corn. Smitty smelled its completion and hurried over to the forge with a noticeable quickness, and with a single motion, jammed it into his mouth.

As he chewed, Hiromi remembered something. "Wait, there was something else..."

Smitty looked back at her between sweet bites of the treat the Faerie had made. "One of the tattoos, on his head, that is, was the symbol for 'sheep,'" the Priest remembered. "I thought it was kind of funny, like someone had tricked him into thinking it meant 'luck' or 'strength,' but it just kind of stood out."

Sheep? Smitty thought. He turned the word over and over in his mind. *Sheep, wool, cloth, ewe, ram...*

Everything came to a sudden halt. That was why these two came in here... why their "little girl lost" act just didn't work. He slowly backed up to his forge and wrapped his fingers around his hammer. "Oh, I was just gonna make your third one!" Kiwi said. "You don't have to do it."

"Ye almost had me fooled," Smitty said calmly. "Pretendin' like ye be lookin' fer a lost friend, when ye jes came in here ta poison'n kill tha smith'a tha mines," he said, and with telling strength, picked up his hammer with a single hand. "But if ye be servants'a Ramm, like I know ye and yer 'friend' are, then ye messed with tha wrong Dwarf!"

Luckily, Hiromi had prepared the spell earlier, so a quick rush of a watery feeling from her hands froze the liquids in Smitty's joints and prevented him from coming any closer to her. "Wait, please stop!" she pleaded.

Kiwi yelled out, "What's going on?!" in confusion, flying over to Hiromi and looking at Smitty in fear.

"Blasted witch!" Smitty shouted. "Ye may kill me, butcha never gonna get outta these here mines alive!"

He began to suck in breath to scream for help, but Hiromi acted before even a single letter escaped his throat. She flowed a miniscule amount of the cold Paralysis water from his right elbow to his mouth. Smitty's scream for assistance became nothing more than a muffled cry.

"Please, listen to me!" Hiromi begged. "My name is Hiromi, and I studied the art of healing under the Dwarf Lord Karain since he adopted me when I was a baby... I've never known any other home than his mountain, or the brief time I've spent around this castle! I have no idea what this 'Ramm' thing is you're talking about, so please don't misunderstand! I just want to find my friend Quinn and leave!"

Smitty's eyes widened, and he blinked a few times, letting her know he understood. Hiromi released the Paralysis around his mouth, and Smitty spoke. "Few know the name of Karain, and if ye know 'em, then there ain't no way ye be throwin' in yer lot with tha Ramm folk," he said. "He be a good man... and it be a damn shame that most'a the folk who used ta be under his domain came here ta mine these here mines."

Hiromi sighed in relief, and released the Paralysis spell from the grizzled old Dwarf. He composed himself and wiped the nervous beads of sweat off of his forehead. "But yer friend, if he *truly* be yer friend..." he added, "if he be with them Ramm folks, ye best just forget about 'em. They ain't ones ta play around, and they be involved in all kinds'a despicable acts.

"'ts a wonder they haven't set their sights on tha mines or its riches yet, but we catch some'a their numbers snoopin' 'round, lookin' fer victims ta sacrifice ta their god," he continued. "Sometimes we run 'em off... sometimes, we don't."

Hiromi shivered slightly... either Quinn had been taken in by these people against his will, or he truly hadn't revealed as much of himself during their brief meeting on the road as she thought. She didn't say anything for a short while, letting everything sink in.

"Hi-chan?" Kiwi whispered to her.

She broke from her thoughts, her mind made up. "I need to find him, in case he's being forced to do something bad," she stated firmly. "I can't believe that he's a bad person... not after all the things he's told me."

Smitty shook his head slightly. "Ye have no clue whatsoever whatcha gettin' yerself inta. None. And that's why..."

He picked up his hammer. "I'm goin' with ye... and ye ain't gonna stop me," he said. "Ye'll find tha Temple of Ramm on tha outskirts'a tha forest, near tha swamp on tha edge'a tha River Styx. I'll take ye both there... consider it payment fer tha corn," he said with a smirk at Kiwi, "and fer not bein' there when Karain needed me tha most..."

Kiwi cheered and Hiromi smiled. "Thanks, thanks, thanks!" Kiwi shouted, hugging the stout Dwarf with all her might and planting a big kiss on his cheek. "I'll give you *lots* of Faerie Dust for this!"

Smitty nodded in response. "Heh, I'll be lookin' forward ta it, lass," he said, and grabbed one last ear of corn. "Now we make way fer tha Skull Door, in tha castle. Stay close ta me and try not ta let tha miners see ye."

As the Dwarf made his confident way out the door, corn and hammer in hand, Hiromi whispered to Kiwi. "Told you that Faeries tasted delicious!" Kiwi giggled, and the three marched their way up the stairs, towards Quinn and the Temple of Ramm.

Silence and Motion

Stairs and hallways everywhere... going on forever! Good thing I got to borrow Hi-chan's shoulder, or I never would have made it this far.

A short, shirtless and grizzled Dwarf, a green-robed Hobbit with a gold and red amulet around her neck, and a tiny blue-skinned Faerie in a light blue vest and shorts, reclining on the Hobbit's shoulder, stood outside the ominous passageway. Past the locked gates, wild rats and a myriad of stairwells, at the end of the hallway, was the thing they were looking for: the black Skull Door.

The eerie portal was actually less impressive than it could have been. A metal skull stared out with empty eye sockets and an obstinate expression into the corridor, clearly signifying what was beyond it. Kiwi scrunched up her nose and set her jaw in an impressive mockery of the look on its face, and Hiromi laughed.

Smitty stomped forward without fear and yanked on the door handle. It didn't move.

"All right lasses, ye two stand back'n I'll take care'a this here door," he said gruffly.

When he raised his hammer, Hiromi knew he meant business. Kiwi tightened her grip on her friend's collar, and no sooner had Hiromi scrambled away from her powerful friend, they heard the first thud rock the wooden portal and echo down the halls.

The strange part was the lack of a *crunch* along with the *thud*. When Hiromi turned around, Smitty was scratching his head in similar confusion with his hammer at his side. There was not a single mark on the door.

Kiwi left her perch and flew over to the door, checking for any damage. Nothing... and the skull stared out with a look seemingly more stubborn than before Smitty's forceful knock.

She flew closer to the skull, coming face to face with it. It stared back with hollow eyes, and for a moment, she was afraid it might come to life and bite her. She felt around cautiously, but saw no trigger in or around it, just those blank and hollow sockets. They almost looked jewel-shaped.

Ah ha! "Got it!" she shouted, raising her red ruby triumphantly. *This is what the Guardian was talking about, she thought, the thingy that went in that one place or something.* It slipped in easily, and a one-eyed skull was her reward. It looked to be difficult to pull the ruby back out of the slot, and she hoped she didn't make a mistake by sticking it in there.

"Where did you get that, anyway, Kiwi?" Hiromi asked.

The Faerie smiled. "I made friends with a big rock head, and he gave it to me as a present!" she explained.

Smitty harrumphed. "Well, 'less ye have another one'a them things, looks like we'll need ta drill our ways through," he said.

Hiromi just shrugged in response. "Maybe it opened something somewhere, and the other jewel is there," she offered. "Let's look around a bit."

Kiwi hopped down and started feeling the walls, pushing on stones, anything that might open a compartment somewhere. Hiromi stared at the door, trying to find another button on it.

In the end, it was Smitty who found it. "Ye mine long 'nough, ye pick up on things like this," he said. The Dwarf brushed away the dirt from a small pile of red in the corner near the Skull Door, and unearthed a second jewel, seemingly identical in size, though it was certainly dirtier.

"Lucky, lucky!" Kiwi said with a great smile, and snatched the jewel out of Smitty's hand with a flitter. He only had time to sputter a surprised "Hey!" before Kiwi had shoved the second jewel into the other eye socket. Kiwi turned back with a smile at the very audible *click* from within the door.

"Blasted, mischievous bug..." he muttered, pushing the door open. Kiwi flew back to a rest on Hiromi's shoulder with a satisfied grin.

The smell hit them all at once. It was like the stench of a stagnant lake mixed with the musty rank of old dust and death, and made them all wince in disgust. "The Temple is," Hiromi started, coughed, then continued, "past here?"

"Charron'll give us a lift ta tha mountains above tha swamp, 'n after we treks across 'em, we'll reach tha Temple," Smitty explained, taking point and walking down the steps past the door. "'less either one'a ye wanna march yeselves through a few miles'a that bog'n climb a vertical slope'a mountains... we takes this path, and heads straight fer tha Temple."

The door began to close slowly behind him, but Hiromi grabbed it before it could close all the way. "Hey Smitty, is it really ok?" she yelled out, "the door's closing by itself, and it smells bad down there."

His voice called up. "Long as nobody nicks those jewels," he shouted. "Stop worryin' so much'n get down here! Ye wanna find yer friend 'fore somethin' happens, right?" Kiwi and Hiromi looked worriedly at each other, but followed the powerful Dwarf down the stairs anyway.

The smell got worse, but the two girls started to get used to it. Once Smitty's echo had faded away, only his and Hiromi's footsteps reminded them that they were still alive in the inky darkness. Hiromi felt along the wall for a handrest on her way down the stairs, while Kiwi's comforting voice whispered in her ear the spots where loose rocks or sudden drops might be trouble. She could see better in the darkness, it seemed.

Down another set of stairs, light finally began to spill out from the hallway in front of them. The walls were probably lined with the everglowing torches, but some upstairs had managed to go out. It turned out that this torch was the only one that was lit past the door.

When the girls had passed the small area it illuminated, they were relieved to see Smitty standing out in an open area ahead of them, glancing about carefully for any potential enemies.

The hallway ended there, and Hiromi stepped out onto soil, on the edge of a vast body of still water. She could feel a distinct aura radiating from the black liquid. It wasn't evil, though some might construe it in that way. The water expelled the feelings of absolute neutrality and finality that accompanied death... they had found the River Styx.

"Looks clear," Smitty said. "Now we need ta find tha seal'a Charron... right here."

He cleared a small patch of dirt away from the red circle on the ground. Placing one bare foot in the dirt, and the other in the center upon the figure of the boat, he issued forth a guttural groan that drifted across the unmoving waters and echoed back with an eerie strength. Hiromi shivered and nearly shook Kiwi from her shoulder. It was a spooky sound.

All was silent for a few seconds, Kiwi and Hiromi staring at Smitty's unmoving silhouette as he looked out upon the river. In the distance, a soft, even splashing sound pierced the gloom, and grew steadily louder as time passed. After a bit, even Hiromi could make out the shadow drifting closer and closer towards the shore.

Then she saw it completely: the black-robed figure, its face hidden in shadows, was pushing a great staff into the water atop a simple brown skiff. Every slow push of its staff into the water produced the quiet splashing sound, that would have chilled the girls to the core if it hadn't been so methodical. He gave off the same aura of neutrality that the river did, but to a much more palpable degree.

Finally, the skiff pushed up on the shore, and Smitty hopped in without hesitation. "C'mon, time ta hitch a ride on over ta tha Temple, lasses," he said, beckoning from his seat. Hiromi walked forward with lead feet, not taking her eyes off of the robed figure. He didn't move.

When she got in the skiff and sat down next to Smitty, the figure turned and began to row them out on the water. As they got farther away from the shore, Hiromi could make out an island a few hundred feet out, covered from shore to shore by a great stone structure.

"All right, we'll be wantin' passage ta tha openin' jes south'a here, inta tha mountains above tha swamp," Smitty said to the mysterious boatman. Strangely, their otherworldly helmsman made no attempt to adjust course and continued to row, sending the boat north up the river.

The Dwarf sat up straight. "Hey, ye damn ghoull!" he roared. "Ye never had trouble takin' any'a us where we wanted ta go before! Turn this pile'a rotten wood 'round right now'n take us..."

A low growl from above Smitty suddenly stopped his tirade.

The great towering head and neck of a green serpent protruded from out of the river and stared down at him, its eyes red with hunger and madness. Most of the black water dripped off of its head back into the river, but the few drops that did find their way onto Smitty's body began to add even more wrinkles to his skin before everyone's eyes.

Hiromi backed up on the skiff as far away from the serpent as she could, but not near enough to touch the water that could age with a touch. The serpent's head glided down and slowly approached the skiff. Its jaw opened and revealed its glistening teeth.

It was almost close enough to touch now. Hiromi readied a Paralyze spell and almost shouted to the ferryman to paddle them away, when she was stopped by movement off to her side.

The ferryman turned slowly towards the serpent, and even in the pitch black of her surroundings, all three of them could see his frightening white skull. Even as he moved, he continued to row with his coldly steady movements.

The serpent's head turned all at once, straight into the eye sockets of the ferryman Charron. It held the look for only a split second before it cast its crimson eyes down towards the river, then sank back beneath the waters. Charron turned back towards the front of the boat, and they continued on.

Smitty grunted in frustration and furrowed his brow. "Blast it... Xorphitus made sure tha Vicar'd keep this haunt in check with tha Horn'a Souls, so why's he goin' wherever he damn well pleases?"

Kiwi's ears perked up. "Hi-chan, that's the Ghost you sent away, right?" she whispered.

Unfortunately, everyone heard her in the absolute silence. "WHAT?!" Smitty yelled, pounding the skiff. It began to rock slightly, but Charron kept rowing without a word.

Hiromi shrank back. "It's... he was stuck there, in the spire!" she stammered. "We had to help him escape!"

"Of all tha...!" Smitty sputtered. "This ain't worth no amount'a corn, bein' stuck out here'n tha middle'a tha Styx with tha carrier'a dead souls himself! And tha worst part is..." He sighed, then continued. "Ain't no reason fer me ta blow me top at ye, knowin' ye was only doin' it fer tha Vicar's sake... guess we'll figure it all out when we gets there."

"Sorry," Kiwi whispered, her face flushed and pained.

Smitty caught her ashamed look, and was visibly moved. "Ain'tcha fault, lass," he comforted her. "Neither'a ye. Les just see where this spook is takin' us."

They rowed on in silence for a few minutes, nobody saying a word. The wind rustled eerily, sending shivers down Kiwi and Smitty's spines. Hiromi, well dressed as she was, was more immune to the chill.

She was quiet for a few more seconds, then stepped cautiously forward towards Charron, taking a seat behind him.

"Mister Charron, um, sir?" she stammered, though he gave no indication of hearing her. "You take souls to their resting places, right? So you'd know if someone was alive or not?" Charron made an almost imperceptible movement at this, turning his head just slightly to the side. "Quinn, maybe of the Temple of Ramm... he has a tat..."

"Alive."

Hiromi jumped at the unexpected hiss that came from beneath his hood. His voice was at the same time soft and grating, calm and firm, a voice that spoke from centuries of occupying a space somewhere between life and death. But as much as it scared her, she was relieved to hear that Quinn was all right.

The boat approached another island in the stream, and came to a slow halt upon its earthy bank. "HEY!" Smitty roared. "Why'd ye bring us ta tha Isle'a Minos, ye bony dreek?! Ye know jes how many'a tha Demons'n Undead live here!"

Charron's hood lifted slightly, and the voice came again. "Go."

"Ain't no way we're gettin' offa this boat, ye rottin', double-crossin' blit!" Smitty protested. "Hiromi, Kiwi, don't either'a ye move! We'll stay in this thing as long as we need ta get ourselves a ticket back ta safety!" He crossed his arms as he stubbornly sat in the back of the skiff.

Kiwi heard a rushing sound, and looked down at Hiromi's feet to see that the boat had not only begun to take on water, but was dipping into the river. Hiromi noticed it, too... so she grabbed the Dwarf's beefy arm without a word, and yanked him out of the boat and onto the earthy bank. With a cry, they all toppled onto the dirt just as the back end of Charron's white skiff plunged into the river, while he stood poised upon the bow.

Seconds after the back end of the boat had been submerged, it resurfaced, and the now level skiff began to float back into the darkness on the river. Charron calmly dipped his staff into the waters and pushed, turning the boat around as the water in the skiff began to disappear with a slight hiss and several puffs of smoke.

As Smitty continued to yell wordless obscenities mixed with the guttural howl that first summoned the boat at the ferryman's back, Charron slipped farther and farther out into the darkness, and finally disappeared.

"Unbelievable!" the Dwarf shouted, waving his arms frantically towards the sky and the river. "Ye all know where we be now, right? Stuck'n tha middle'a tha Styx on an island populated by tha nastiest tha underworld has ta offer!"

He patted his purple loincloth down and was relieved to find two ears of corn still there. He shoved one of them into his mouth, but his face screwed up when he realized how lukewarm it had become. "Not even yer magic dust can help it when it's this cold..." he muttered, then looked back at the girls. "We gotta stick together 'til we find a way outta..."

The two of them were messing around with the gate leading into the crypt, and not even listening. Thankfully, the rest of the gates guarding the island's many tombs to his left and right were all closed. Smitty could have sworn he saw shadows moving from within them, but he neither worried nor cared as long as they remained secure.

He strode up behind them. "There's the key..." Kiwi whispered as she pointed at the floor inside the gate.

"Whatcha doin'?!" the Dwarf yelled. "Stop fiddlin' with that 'fore somethin' comes out ta drag us all inta death with it!"

"It's just a crypt, right?" Hiromi asked. "And we'll be stuck here without a way to cross the river; we all saw what the water did when it spilled on you! So we can either stay outside and hope for a rescue from someone in the castle, or go downstairs to try and find something to help us. But I don't think anybody's going to be coming for us anytime soon."

"But dontcha know what manner'a beasts be down there, lass?" Smitty asked.

Hiromi lifted her chin with courage and looked straight into his eyes. "I fear no Undead," she said. "As long as God and my friends are here to protect me, they won't harm anyone."

The Faerie flexed her arm. "I'm with ya, Hi-chan!" she exclaimed. With a flutter, she flew off of Hiromi's shoulder and was through the hole in the gate. "And..." she said, picking up the key on the floor and pushing it through the hole to Hiromi, "...nothing's gonna stop us!"

"Kiwi, you can fly back to shore. You don't have to come down here if you don't..." Hiromi started.

"Nope! We're friends, through and through!" Kiwi interrupted. Hiromi grinned, but before she could turn the key in the lock, the tiny Faerie flew down the stairs. "I'll scout ahead," she called back.

Hiromi prepared a high degree healing spell, and felt the warm light of God flow through her body while she held the key to the lock. If there was trouble, she would be down there in an instant.

There was no need. She flew back just seconds later, hovering inside the crypt. "Looks clear, just a bunch of bones," she said. At that, Hiromi turned the key in the lock and the gate slid into the wall.

Before she walked in, she turned back to the Dwarf. "Sorry, Smitty," she whispered with a nervous grin.

Smitty shrugged. "I came ta tha conclusion that I ain't tha leader'a this here expedition, so doncha worry. I'll back ye both up with all I gots..." he said, then pushed Hiromi aside and strode straight past Kiwi. "But I'm goin' first."

The Dwarf's bare feet padded down the stone steps, and Kiwi took her usual spot on Hiromi's shoulder. Just seconds later, they were inside.

It smelled like old dust and decay, much like when they first came upon the river, but they were all used to the stench by now. However, they weren't used to corpses standing up as they came down the hallway...

"Back, back! Get back, now! Up tha stairs!" Smitty commanded as the corpses started to shuffle forward with ghastly groans.

Hiromi wheeled around and started for the stairs, but stopped short when she saw the winged purple creatures coming down them. "Nightgaunts!" she shouted as the humanoid bat-like creatures flew forward with clutching talons. Smitty glanced back long enough to see the perfectly timed pincer attack, then charged towards the nearest corpse in front of him. "Hold 'em off, I'll be right there!" he shouted.

With a mighty heave, Smitty swung his smithing hammer in a great circle, bringing it around and into a green-skinned zombie's exposed knees. Both joints separated from the body with a great crack and exploded into a dozen fragments against the wall. Its torso and head began to fall towards him, but Smitty continued with his hammer's momentum, spun around and drove it into the jabbering, rotting head that had been just out of reach a second ago.

Its skull caved in and joined its knees in a disgusting pile of rotten flesh and bone. Smitty had just enough time to bring his hammer to a stop before the next zombie was on top of him. He charged and shouldered it with all his might...

Behind him, the Nightgaunts were in full flight, all six of them calling out with a hollow, eerie cry. Kiwi had had ample time to see what they were up against, and knew that this was not just a simple one-on-one battle. It was time to stop fooling around.

"Yaaaaa!!!" the Faerie yelled, then launched herself off of Hiromi's shoulder with unbelievable force. Hiromi stumbled back a step to keep from falling over, not expecting such power, and the entire line of Nightgaunts hovered in place to meet Kiwi's flight.

The Nightgaunt that Kiwi aimed for faltered for just a second when it saw her speed, just before her tiny, bare foot caught it in its pointed chin. It flew up the stairs, struck the ceiling at the top and hit the stone floor, motionless.

Kiwi continued her flight to the stone step in front of her as something scratched into her back, and shot backwards towards the next Nightgaunt. It didn't have time to react before the Faerie spin punched it in the cheek.

It spun twice through the air in a spiral, straight over Smitty's head and into a lurching zombie. Both

tumbled to the ground, and the Nightgaunt suddenly found itself in a fight for its life with the biting, scratching zombie.

A watery shriek whizzed by Kiwi's ear into a third Nightgaunt just as it was about to grab her in its claw. Hiromi started another chant and nurtured another feeling of power in her body as the Nightgaunt's bodily fluids froze solid and it stopped moving altogether.

Kiwi smiled in thanks, then spun towards the Nightgaunt, catching it in the chest with her left heel, then her right in an impressive spin kick. A split second later at the end of her spin, she flew backwards and drove both elbows into the spot she had kicked, and the Nightgaunt struck the wall with a thud. A crack appeared in the stone where its head hit.

She felt a small gust of wind and flew up, dodging the clawed hand that had almost grabbed her, but instead cut deeply into her skin. Kiwi cried out, looped around and brought two fists down on the Nightgaunt's shoulder, breaking the bone instantly. Its reflexes brought its face down to look at the wound, and Kiwi's head was waiting to strike it in the forehead and send it sprawling to the ground.

Smitty had crushed a few more of the zombies, but there were more and more piling out of the crypts. They were finally able to swarm him, and one took a great bite out of his neck. Smitty cried out in pain as it ripped the skin and flesh from his bones and blood began to spurt.

But then, four of the nearest zombies, including the one who had bitten him, exploded into a pile of useless, unmoving meat. The body parts flew into the wall as if something had pushed them, and a feeling of warm liquid ran down his spine. He hurriedly looked down at the wound on his neck.

Hiromi's glowing hand was there, and when she removed it, only a teeth-shaped scar remained. He nodded in respect and turned to take down a few more of the disgusting creatures.

The Priest turned around to her other friend, just in time to see the lucky strike one of the Nightgaunts had gotten. Kiwi's fragile body was already cut up pretty bad from the slicing talons of the Nightgaunts, but now one of them had struck her cleanly and broken several of her bones. They advanced as Kiwi's unmoving body started to fly towards the groaning zombies...

And, instead, landed in Hiromi's outstretched hand.

She gently closed her hand down on the brave Faerie, and felt the warmth of God's love and healing leave her hand and pour into the little one's body. Only seconds later, her bones had knit and the scratches had closed completely.

Kiwi opened her eyes and smiled. Hiromi nodded, and pointed her hand towards the remaining two Nightgaunts who had almost completely closed in. Kiwi hunched herself down on Hiromi's outstretched hand, then shot forward with all her might. This time, the Priest braced herself for the little one's immense power, and kept her balance.

Her flight drove her straight at the first Nightgaunt's forehead. The force of her attack pushed his head back and cracked it down on the stone steps. With a cry, she rocketed towards the final, suddenly cowering one.

At the same time, Smitty pushed forth with renewed energy, indebted to the girl who had just made such short work of the undead creatures. He jumped and swung his hammer at the stomach of one of the zombies, and it fell back into the crowd of its brethren in a twitching heap. He was about to continue on to the zombie off to his right, when a small blue figure began to dart between them.

It was too fast to see, but every time the figure flew near one of the zombies, it was suddenly and violently whipped in one direction or another. One after another was driven into walls, alcoves, into the ground or even blasted up into the ceiling. Then, they started exploding.

It was then that Smitty realized that Kiwi was immobilizing the clumsy corpses while Hiromi was dispelling

the very magic that bound them to this plane. He was impressed... and joined in.

Smitty jumped into the fray, creating new piles of zombies with every swing of his hammer and every shoulder charge. Kiwi punched and kicked, spun and flew, bringing down several more. And with every pile the two made, Hiromi was there to reduce their bodies to pieces, to make sure none of them would get up again.

It was finally over.

The smell was unbelievable. Every one of the zombie's bodies was on the floor, open and reeking of fecal matter and organs. Kiwi flew back to Hiromi's shoulders, puffing and wheezing with exhaustion from the awful aroma. She wrapped her nose in her friend's collar in a futile attempt to block the smell.

"Probably better company when they were tryin' ta eat our brains, eh, lasses?" Smitty asked with a hand over his nose.

Hiromi nodded and coughed. "Is everyone ok?" she asked. "Come here, let me look at you."

Smitty rested his hammer on the ground, and rolled his head to the side so Hiromi could see where the zombie had bitten him. "Does this hurt?" her muffled voice came from her cupped hand, and she touched his shoulder.

He winced in anticipation, but there was no pain... none at all. "No... feels like it did before I went'n woke up tha dead," he answered. Her hand glowed again, and when she removed it, the scar itself was gone.

Kiwi spoke up from Hiromi's collar. "Why'd they come to life when we all came down, but not when I came alone?" she asked.

Smitty began to clear a path into the crypt. "Probably 'cause yer such a wee one, they didn't even notice ye comin' in. But when me'n ye," he said, pointing at Hiromi, "went down... dinnertime."

At that, Kiwi looked up as if she were going to say something. Smitty immediately cut her off, pointing his hammer at her. "Doncha be apologizin' none, missy!" he bellowed. "None'a us saw this comin', and ye fought harder than most'a me bros back home ever do'n their entire lives! So shut it 'fore I shut it for ye!" She smiled shyly, and didn't say a thing.

"And ye, lass, I be in yer debt fer mendin' me wounds tha way ye did," Smitty said to Hiromi. She grinned and rubbed the back of her head modestly, when the Dwarf suddenly switched gears. "Now, getchaselves movin' on findin' a way off'a this island, 'cause these things might get tired'a their li'l nap soon. Ye two take that one," he said, pointing at the small archway to his left, "and I'll check this one over here."

Kiwi and Hiromi nodded, and they all began to search the alcoves in the crypt.

Each alcove, some of which were still housed by the bodies of the dead, was filled with the belongings of its current resident. An umbrella, a rusted sword... and in one crypt, a doll with a small, stitched red smile and a missing eye. Someone had died too young and been buried here.

There seemed to be nothing here to help their problem, Hiromi guessed. But at that moment, Kiwi got off of her shoulder and flew towards the southern side. She immediately saw something in one of the crypts. "Hey Hi-chan, look at this," she called out.

Hiromi started towards Kiwi's voice, but Kiwi had already flown out with a great black book in both hands. "What is this?" the Faerie asked.

On the other side of the crypt, Smitty had found all manner of baubles and trinkets, but not a single item that might help. But when he had returned through the archway to rejoin the girls, a small glimmer caught his attention; it took a miner's eye to see something so small.

"The Siren's Song of Woe," Hiromi and Kiwi read the title together on the black book. Hiromi opened the book, and they both scanned a page of the animated language of a madwoman. *'Tis Madness Makes Us Free...*

"It's... instructions," Hiromi said.

"What kind?" Kiwi asked.

The Priest glanced at her, then back at the page. "It's a coping mechanism," she explained. "The one who wrote this book believed that the world existed solely to imprison her, to chain her down. And it was through insanity that she found her freedom from this bondage."

"What a defeatist attitude," Kiwi remarked.

Hiromi hummed softly. "Maybe so," she mused, "but I think understanding another's pain is a more important first step than judging them and leaving it at that. It's the only way that we can truly help one another."

Kiwi blushed, and Hiromi immediately backpedaled. "But I know you didn't mean it like that!" she insisted.

Do I really judge others like that? the Faerie wondered. The familiar, crushing weight of depression began to weigh down on her shoulders at the thought... it took only a second for the world to take such a dark turn.

Smitty suddenly broke in with a loud "Hey!" and interrupted the two. "Look what I found!" he proclaimed. He opened his palm, and there sat a dirty old key.

"Think it'll open tha gates up top?" he wondered. "Maybe we'll find somethin' we can use there." With that, he started back for the stairs. Hiromi squeezed Kiwi affectionately and the two went up top together.

Each gate was closed, and locked completely. Some were populated by imprisoned Nightgaunts, others by unmoving bones. It was the fourth gate they investigated that made their hearts leap with hope. Past the portcullis within the locked room, and right next to a resting skeleton, a raft clunked against a stone wall as it floated atop the River Styx.

Smitty glanced back at the girls and nodded, making sure they were ready. When they nodded back, he turned the key in the gate, and it slid into the wall. Smitty gripped his hammer tightly, but nothing lunged out, and nothing screamed for his hide. The bones, too, remained still.

His heart pounded as he walked inside and glanced at the shadowy corners where monsters may have been waiting. But a short while passed, and nothing emerged. He made his way over to the other gate on the far wall, and with a simple turn of the key, it slid away to reveal the raft.

It was tied to a rope and crank, which could easily be turned to send it farther down the river. Smitty stepped on it, and noticed that it seemed strong enough. He beckoned Hiromi and Kiwi over, holding it still and safe for them to come on. When they were all on the raft, the Faerie flew up to the crank. "It's a bit high up, so I'll take care of it," she said. It turned surprisingly easily, and the raft and the three started down the river.

If there had been water lapping against the raft, or the usual sounds of an active river, they might not have heard it. But everything was deathly silent, and the voices came floating over the unmoving water. It was several women's voices, all singing a song of haunting beauty. Their voices were silky smooth, strong and perfectly pitched.

Smitty was the first to be affected. "It's... amazin'..." he said, as his jaw went slowly slack. A little bit of drool passed his lips and collected in a tiny pool on the raft. His grey eyes were focused on something distant, and glazed over.

Kiwi and Hiromi began to feel it, too. The song was so pretty that they couldn't focus on anything else. As the raft sailed farther and farther down the ropeline, the voices grew louder, and they found themselves more and more affected by it. They were losing control.

Control... Kiwi thought as she slipped down to the deck of the raft. "Hi-chan... remember the... book? We read it before... but I don't... remember what it said..."

The Priest's mind moved slowly through what had happened in the past few minutes. The song was everywhere, penetrating her to the very core. She couldn't...

And then, there it was: the key to freedom was madness. She let her mind whirl with a flow of insane ideas. She thought of throwing herself into the river, kissing the mysterious boatman, attacking Kiwi and Smitty, any number of illogical and awful things to help push the song out of her head. With every thought, a little more of her mind came back to her.

The raft kept sailing onward, closer and closer to a big rock jutting out of the river. Atop it were several women with blonde hair and no clothes to speak of, though they all had fishtails for legs. When they saw the raft approach, they all positioned their bodies towards the incoming travellers and sang with all of their might. Smitty's face was glazed over in supreme bliss. Kiwi stared, dumbfounded.

Hiromi got up and whispered in Kiwi's ear. "Madness! You have to embrace madness!"

She seemed to struggle internally at Hiromi's words, but only a few seconds later, she finally understood and sprang to life. She flew up to Hiromi's shoulder and prepared to launch herself at the singing women. They had been brought here for a reason, and she knew it wasn't a kind one.

The eyes of the Sirens moved to each of the three on the raft. They all glanced over Smitty rather quickly, but all eventually looked upon only Hiromi and Kiwi. The Faerie tensed her legs for a quick spring, and Hiromi felt fire brimming in her stomach.

One of the Sirens began to sing. "One of them is enchanted with our song, but the other two truly understand..." she intoned. Another Siren sang out, "Freedom from the bonds we impose upon ourselves... embracing madness!"

Another Siren sang, "Return to your world, and spread this song of ours... let all know the beauty that is madness..." A final Siren flung a pair of red objects onto the raft, and they all began to laugh with maniacal glee. Their voices joined together in a deafening crescendo of volume and insanity, and the raft began to sail backwards of its own accord.

Kiwi flew down and grabbed the two items, winged shoes, before they could fall off of the raft. Smitty was still stricken, and only grinned at the Sirens' laughter, drooling onto himself without a care.

"Whoa!" Hiromi shouted out, fluttering through the air. "How do you do this and keep your balance, Kiwi?!"

Her friend tittered. "I dunno, I learned how to do it when I was born!" she answered, as a groan came from below. Smitty sat up, feeling very confused. *Where am I?* he thought.

Suddenly, a great blur shot by his face. He was going to grab his hammer and defend himself, until he heard the laughter. When he looked up, he was greeted by the unbelievable sight of his Hobbit and Faerie companions flying several dozen feet off of the ground, mostly in random directions.

"What'n tha hell ye lasses doin'? How...?" he sputtered, which provoked even more laughter.

Hiromi smiled down at him. "Look what the Sirens gave us!" she shouted, flying back down near his face. The red shoes were on her feet, and the white wings on either side of them were flapping lazily. Smitty started to reach out to touch them, but Hiromi was too quick, and blasted into the air. "Whee!" she

shouted. "Can't catch me!"

"GET DOWN HERE 'FORE YE BREAK YER NECKS!" Smitty shouted, and both girls flew down as fast as they could. He was still taken aback by the whole situation. "Ye... ye can control those things?" he asked.

"Yeah, I got plenty of practice while you were still sleeping it off from seeing the beautiful Sirens!" Hiromi giggled.

Kiwi tittered with her hand over her mouth, and both flew out of the way before the annoyed Dwarf could swat them down. "Have all tha fun ye wants, lasses, but if I do recall, ye be wantin' ta find yer friend, right?" Smitty asked, with his arms folded.

Hiromi suddenly grew serious and returned to the ground. "Yes, you're right. We should get going... here, climb on my back," she said, kneeling to the ground. Smitty hopped up and threw his hands over her neck. *He's really, really heavy!* she thought, though once she commanded the shoes to start flying, his weight seemed to disappear. "Ok, which way?" she asked.

"Jes down there," he said, pointing towards the south. With Smitty firmly secured, Hiromi and Kiwi began a steady flight towards the path that the Dwarf's outstretched finger indicated.

They had only flown for a few minutes before they heard a scream. "MAI-LAI!" Smitty yelled in Hiromi's ear. She winced at the sudden volume. "Dammit, Bork! Hiromi, fly south as fast as ye can!"

Hiromi poured on the speed with Kiwi just behind, heading straight for the source of the scream; it wasn't that far away. A floating structure sat out in the middle of the river, and as Hiromi got closer, she could make out the beautiful figure of a dark-haired and dark-skinned woman in a beautiful blue shirt and yellow dress, desperately holding a pounding door back with her body.

Though it seemed the door should have easily broken off of its hinges, the woman's surprising strength was keeping it from moving... for now at least. She looked up at the fluttering sound heading for her, and she suddenly looked overjoyed. "Smitty!" she yelled, wincing at another blow from the door behind her. "It's Bork! He's gone nuts again!"

Smitty jumped down as soon as he could, and stood just outside of the door's swinging radius. "Open it up, Mai-Lai," he ordered. The girl nodded, and let the door swing open and slam against the stone wall, taking a very vulnerable position right next to the river. There was no place else left to go.

A crazed, brown-bearded Dwarf with wild eyes was busy running amok inside, throwing around weapons, armor, a hookah pipe, tools and a myriad of other assorted items all around. He was dressed in functional leathers, though they were torn up from all the carnage that had taken place inside.

Before he could do any more damage, Smitty's muscular arm met the top of his head. Bork grunted and crumpled to the ground. He lay there for several seconds, groaning loudly. Finally, he sat up, holding his head. "What happened?" Kiwi asked, flying up. "Are you all ok?"

Smitty shook his head in disappointment. "Hiromi, Kiwi, meet me brother Bork, and me sister-in-law Mai-Lai." Mai-Lai grinned a friendly smile and waved, but Bork just moaned with pain. "It's too much... too much..." he muttered softly. "The orders keep coming, our customers are jerks, the Caterpillar keeps losing his claim number... I gotta get outta here!"

With a sigh, Smitty spoke. "How many times do I gotta come over here'n knock sense inta ye, ye daft idjut?" he asked.

Mai-Lai looked up, trying to remember. "Well, it *has* been about a month since the *last* episode," she said. "But he knows I still love him!" She helped her husband to his feet and hugged his hairy head.

"It's too much! I can't take it!" he yelled out. "So much to be catalogued, shipped out, taken care of! And

only two of us doing it! It's too much!!"

With a glance at Kiwi and Hiromi, Smitty explained his brother's frustration. "Mai-Lai'n Bork run tha Isle'a tha Keep here, and keep people's things safe while they be out'n about. Gets a surprisin' amount'a business for bein' on tha River Styx."

He sighed again. "I love ye both, but I ain't gonna take no more'a this craziness from ye, Bork," he said. "I'll stay here'n help ye get yer work done, if ye promise not ta pull this stunt again, ye hear?"

Bork stood up straight and cheered with a mighty bellow. "Thank ya, bro!" he shouted. "We'll all get this place in tip-top shape!" With that, he ran back into the Keep and began to pick up the damaged items. Mai-Lai shook her head with a smile and looked back over at the stunned Hiromi and Kiwi.

The Priest winced slightly. "Is it safe to be married to a man like that?" she asked as politely as she could.

Mai-Lai looked over at the animated Dwarf. "Bork has, and never would, lay a hand on me," she said. "And if he did... he'd find himself at the bottom of the river faster than he'd realize. There's no comparison between the strength of the Dwarf and the Amazulu! Right, Smitty?"

Smitty dismissed her with a wave. "Speak fer yerself, lass," he replied, then cracked his knuckles. "I'll be gettin' on tha business'a helpin' ye two get this place fixed up."

He turned to his two new companions. "Kiwi, Hiromi, ye two can make it from here," he said. "Jes ta tha north'a here along tha western edge of this here river, ye'll find tha stairs that'll lead ye ta tha mountains near tha swamp. Skirt tha edge'a that, and tha Temple'a Ramm'll be right'n front'a ye, in tha forest."

"Will you be ok?" Kiwi asked. "Can you get back to the mountain by yourself?"

Smitty nodded. "Bork'n Mai-Lai gotta boat I can borrow," he said. "I'll need ta stay around long enough ta make sure this place gets back in order."

"All three of us have gone insane at some time working in this place, with all the never-ending work," Mai-Lai added. "That's why you left in the first place, if I remember correctly, Smitty," she added with a smile.

Kiwi looked close to tears. "I guess... this is goodbye," she said.

"Hey, doncha go'n get all weepy on me, now," Smitty said gruffly. "Ye both're welcome here at tha Keep or in tha mines anytime ye want. I'll make sure those blits back in tha mine don't go'n try ta eat ye next time either. So get yer butts on outta here'n find yer friend, ye hear? And ye be careful in that blasted Temple! Getcher friend'n get out, ken?"

Hiromi sniffled. "Thank you so much, Smitty... we never could have made it this far without you..." She drifted forward and hugged the stout Dwarf as hard as she could. Smitty fake protested the embrace with a few light pushes.

After a couple of seconds, he gave her a serious nudge away, when it was clear she wasn't going to let go. "Ah, ye both woulda found yer way sooner or later. Just wish I had somethin' ta give ye ta remember me by..." he said.

Kiwi snapped her fingers. "Allow me!" she exclaimed. She flew into the Keep and returned with a beautiful crystal bowl. Through her tears, she flew above it in a perfect spiral, and filled the bowl to the brim with glittering dust.

She smiled and waved as she flew out above the river. "Think of us when yer back ta tha cookin's'n tha fixin's," she said, imitating his voice with near perfection. Hiromi waved, too, and soon the two girls were up and over the river. Smitty watched them from the river bank, and something caught in his throat.

Mai-Lai snuck up on him. "Choked up, are we?" she whispered in his hear, and the Dwarf jumped. "It's not like you, Smitty!" she laughed, running back into the Keep.

Smitty rolled his eyes. "Today be tha day I be beset by mischievous lasses, it seems," he said, then began to clean up.

The winged shoes had sputtered to a halt the second they entered the swamp. Apparently, they were only meant to be used around the River Styx until the person had found safety outside of it.

It was like Smitty had said... the path skirted straight around the edge of the swamp and went straight into the forest. "We're far away from my home..." Kiwi whispered into Hiromi's ear. "I don't know thi..."

She cut short when they both saw it: the enormous structure, staffed by several dozen axe-wielding and heavily armored soldiers, peeked out of the trees. Hiromi could feel the evil emanating from within it, and knew immediately what the structure was. The two of them hid in some thick bushes near the path leading up to it.

"Do you see him?" Kiwi asked. Hiromi scanned the area, seeing nothing but armored guards... at first. But then, she saw him... his hood was down, and his tattoos and handsome face were as clear as day: it was Quinn!

"There," she said, pointing at him, "the one in all black."

Kiwi giggled. "What?" Hiromi asked.

"Good taste!" the Faerie replied. Hiromi pinched her side, and Kiwi squeaked in surprise.

Quinn was shouting something to a group of soldiers, gesturing towards the Temple and the sky. The soldiers were carrying an abundance of wood and building supplies, their axes slung at their sides. Finally, he thrust his arm out towards the spot Hiromi and Kiwi were hiding in, and the soldiers began to march towards them.

Hiromi pushed farther into the bushes, until the twigs began to stick and scratch at her. Only seconds later, the group of dozens of disciplined soldiers marched by, focused only on their mission. When they had finally passed and travelled down the cave that would lead them to the River Styx, Hiromi poked her head out. All the soldiers were gone, from the builders to the fighters.

"Where'd he go?" Kiwi asked. "Maybe inside the Temple?"

Hiromi nodded slowly. "I think so..." she answered. She began to stand up and walk towards the Temple, but Kiwi tugged on her sleeve. "Hiromi, I peeked into his mind," she said. "I can't make out words or anything from this distance, but I could tell that what he wanted wasn't good... I could feel murderous rage in him. It scared me."

The Priest glanced back and forth between the Temple, and Kiwi's frightened eyes. "Are you sure you want to go find him?" the Faerie asked.

There was a brief moment of silence as Hiromi struggled with the question. She trusted Kiwi's judgement, but she also knew a different Quinn, the one who had entered the castle with her. She couldn't believe that he was evil, or at the very least, beyond redemption... not after what he shared.

"Yes," she said. "But you don't have to come. He's my friend." Hiromi smiled at Kiwi, letting her know that whatever her decision, it would be ok.

The Faerie tapped her cheek playfully. "I'm with you, no matter what you choose, Hi-chan," Kiwi replied. "You're my friend, and if you know this is important... then I'll protect you with all I have!"

Hiromi squeezed Kiwi to her neck and let out a choked cry, feeling too much happiness to bottle up at once. The Faerie smiled and sharply whispered, "Charge!"

Her friend nodded and started to run towards the nearest door into the Temple. A group of three guards suddenly appeared from one of the other archways, so Hiromi poured on the speed, praying that she and Kiwi could make it inside without being spotted. Once they had made it through and down the stairs, she knew they were home free.

In the new room, fountains of water hung from the walls amidst ugly depictions of sacrifice, frightening images of murder and mayhem, and all adorned by the sick, horned and shrieking visage of the goat's head symbol of Ramm. It was everywhere, staring at the two with empty eyes from every direction, and made the entire chamber all the more unsettling.

Two more gates were in front of them, but that was the last thing they saw before rough hands had clamped down around Kiwi's entire body, and grabbed Hiromi's chest and covered her mouth shut.

"Looks like we got some trespassers here, boys!" a voice called out. Hiromi couldn't see, but she could sense that there were at least two or three of them; it was the group she thought they had escaped earlier.

"And it looks like one of the girls is just the right size...!" the voice behind her, probably the one who had her, said. "Think she might be 'unspoiled?'"

The other voice laughed. His hand went from her chest to farther down her green robe, and he began to tug it open. Kiwi screamed out, but was silenced by a powerful squeeze, and a second hand that clamped over her head.

Hiromi struggled, and he became more violent, tugging on her robe even harder. The fabric began to tear...

Something grasped the hand undoing her clothes. It pressed down harder and harder, until the man who had her sharply cried out in pain, and released her. Hiromi stumbled forward, then wheeled around in fear.

There were four men... three of the soldiers in the heavy armor were facing her. One had two hands around Kiwi's body and head, another was standing with his axe at the ready, and the third was holding his pained hand while he stared daggers at the fourth.

The last man was taller, much more muscular than the others. While the soldiers wore helmets that covered up most of their faces, the other man had no protective headgear. He was dark-skinned and bald, and was wearing a simple cloth tunic and pants spattered with green and black, standing tall in giant black boots. His arms were crossed over his chest.

"Hey, the *hell*...!" Crushed Hand started to yell.

"What are you doing in the area I was assigned to?" Savior suddenly asked. He turned his head slowly towards Two Hand. "Release her." Two Hand immediately let Kiwi go, and she breathed heavily as she flew back to Hiromi. He had cut off her air supply for a good while.

Savior looked back at the two girls, just as Axe raised his weapon to strike. But when Savior turned back, Axe seemed to suddenly lose his nerve. Crushed Hand growled and winced. "This's what we always do when we find trespassing wenches, goddamned mercenary... keep your nose outta other people's business!"

The dark man stepped forward, and all three of the others stepped back. "Return to your posts, now," he said in a strong and level voice. Crushed Hand's temper reached a boil, and he spat in Savior's face. Savior made no attempt to retaliate, and the three men stalked back up the stairs. When they had gone, Savior wiped the saliva from his face and flung it to the ground.

When Hiromi stood up to thank him, Savior had already begun to speak. "You are trespassers upon the sacred grounds of the Temple of Ramm." He turned to them and stared them both in the eyes. "You will come with me."

"Wait, please!" Hiromi said. "I came here to speak with Quinn, because he..."

Savior raised his hand to interrupt her. "You will not speak of your masters with such a casual tongue," he stated. "Lord Quinn will see you if he wishes to see you." With that, he plucked Hiromi up by the robe and enclosed Kiwi in a powerful hand, marching them both towards one of the closed gates. "In the meantime, you will remain in this cell, until such time that Lady Rebecca, or his grace the King, decide your fate," he finished.

He pushed Hiromi towards the gate and used his free hand to unlock it. Once it had slid open, he pushed her in and tossed Kiwi as far in as he could. Before either one could try and fight their way back out, the gate was already closed. It was immediately clear that the space between the bars was much too small for Kiwi to fit through.

Inside, Hiromi took in her new surroundings: it was a bare stone cell, with unoccupied chains against the wall. There were a couple of rodent skeletons spread along the floor and an old layer of mildew travelling along the wall, to complete the hopeless atmosphere of caged despondency.

When she turned completely around, she noticed that they weren't alone... an Amazulu was sitting with her back to the wall, her eyes on Hiromi since the Hobbit first entered. Her black hair was braided into several knots, and her white cloth shirt and shorts were stained brown with blood. Her eyes were red from crying.

Cradled in her arms was the body of a very pale Elf, with long black hair pulled back in a tail at the back of her head. She was wearing a white robe and she, too, was stained with blood, though to a much greater degree than the Amazulu was. It was clear from the non-existent color of her lips and the lack of movement in her chest that she was dead. It didn't take much more than the sight to realize the two were once friends.

Kiwi soon noticed the two, and came to rest on her friend's shoulder.

The two looked wordlessly at the Amazulu. Hiromi's hands began to glow.

Half-Breed

"Hey, yer up," a voice called from his left.

When Janus awoke, his left shoulder throbbed just slightly and he was running only a slight fever, letting him know that the worst of the serpent's poison had run its course, and that he would be better in a few minutes. But the sudden voice set him on edge all over again.

He turned to face the substantially less-digested man that he had saved from the serpent just a while ago, now sitting on a cot in good health. He had cleaned up nicely, wearing a nice blue tunic, brown belt and pants, and brown boots. His chin was still straggly with the crispy hairs of a thick black beard, and his hair was long and wavy. Tucked in his belt was a cutlass, but his hands were nowhere near it.

Janus knew what was coming. He stood up to full height to reveal his massive body and scaly black maw, knowing full well the terror it would inspire. Why speak with anybody who was just going to run seconds later, he had come to believe.

The man suddenly animated, though not in the manner Janus had expected. "Hey, hey now! Don't be standing up right now, ya gotta rest," he insisted, standing up and ushering Janus back down to the cot. "That serpent bit ya just as bad as he bit me."

Though he was confused at the man's reaction, Janus followed his suggestion and sat. "You... you're not

running," he said with confusion.

The man smirked with a "you must be joking" look. "Why would I run from the guy who saved me?" he asked, taking a sitting position across from the Dracon. "That girl Hiromi and some of the patrols around this here castle told me they saw a black monster running around nearby, and when I finally find him, he's napping just down the hall. Looks like you 'n me share the same wound, bro."

He rolled back his sleeve. The purple marks of the serpent's fangs had long turned a healthier red and pink, and the man showed no sign of discomfort. Janus pulled back his leathers to see the black scales on his shoulder and, indeed, the marks were almost identical. The snake obviously found itself an effective place to bite and subdue its prey and stuck to the plan.

"The name's Queequeg," he introduced himself, proudly pointing at his chest. "I guess ya could call me this castle's unofficial supplier. Weapons, armor, ammunition, oil, scrolls, whatever ya need, I got."

The Dracon looked at him strangely. "I'm... Janus," he replied warily. He was unaccustomed to introductions... this whole meeting was weird.

"Janus huh? I like it," Queequeg said, and bowed slightly. "So... it looks like ya favor the bow. I took the liberty of adding a couple more arrows to yer stash, and a crossbow and quiver of bolts if ya ever need them. Won't do ya much good to be outta ammo in a place like this!" He pointed off to the corner to indicate Janus' new weapons.

He followed Queequeg's finger to the neat pile against the wall. His bow and arrows were there, but next to them now sat the crossbow and pouch of bolts that Queequeg had promised. Etched on the side of the crossbow, Janus could make out a "Q" in exquisite penmanship.

"Made them myself, outta materials I save for my regulars," the dark man said. "I hope they can protect ya as well as ya did me." He stood up and started towards the door. "Well, I better get back to mindin' the store. Them pirates need all the help they can get in a place like this. Come look me up if ya ever need help, bro, I'm just down the hall." He smiled and waved, and began to open the door.

Janus stood up suddenly. "Wait..." he said, reaching towards the merchant.

"Yeah, bro?" Queequeg replied, turning to him.

"I'm, um, looking for something," Janus stammered. He noticed that he was mumbling a lot... but then again, he'd never really talked to anyone before. "I, uh, overheard the men in the mountains talking about it. Some sort of, um, pen that... that when you write with it, it... it becomes true..."

Queequeg shut the door quickly and rushed back to Janus, leaning in close and whispering. "You here for the pen too, huh?" he asked quietly. "A lotta the pirates in here came here to find it, but they got nothin' to show for it. However..." he continued, checking around for any hidden ears among the shadows.

"They don't call me a jack of all trades for nothin'," he finally said. "I dabble in more than just material goods; I have the info ya need, too. Ya wanna find the pen, ya go down the hall, downstairs, and make a couple of lefts. Go past the Skull Door, and talk with the Bane King at the Isle of the Dead on the River Styx. Remember: stairs, door, river, island, king. Ya follow my instructions, and you'll find it.

"Word'a caution though, bro," he continued, "some say the reason this whole castle fell is 'cause'a that pen. I wouldn't touch it for the life of me, but if that's whatcha came here for, then I won't stop ya. So ya be careful when ya go and deal with the Undead to find that thing, got it?"

Queequeg smirked again and kindly clapped the Dracon on his good shoulder. With a wave, he was across the room and out the door.

Janus felt confused. *This was the first time, in my whole life, someone has treated me like a Man...* he thought.

Stairs, door and river, all check. The Skull Door was where Queequeg had said it was, and it led straight down to the banks of a wide and dark river. The waters were still, and it was very chilly. Janus knelt at the banks and sloshed his left claw around in the water, withdrawing it quickly.

When he had pulled it out, he was shocked to see that his normally jet black scales had taken on a slight grey tinge, as if they had aged several years in just those few seconds. Luckily, a short while later, the scales had reverted to their normal color.

Hmm, he thought. Can't stay in there too long...

Janus scanned the waters, easily discerning shapes among the shadows with his sensitive vision. The Isle of the Dead was next... and there it was: an isolated clump of soil out on the river, about a hundred feet ahead of him, and a large stone structure covering the bulk of it.

An island sitting on a river that could kill in seconds. It had to be the right one; it certainly wasn't the Isle of the Papayas if it was out here.

He went back to the stairs of the castle where there was enough torchlight to see. Under the flickering light, he secured as best he could his bow and crossbow, and tightly tied the two quivers of ammunition closed. Lastly, he checked the wound on his shoulder, and saw that it had closed up nicely.

With everything on his body held down nice and firm, Janus stood up and dashed as fast as he possibly could towards the bank of the river. With a powerful push on his muscular legs, Janus launched himself into the air, over the river and straight towards the island's shore.

The jump wasn't good enough, as he knew it wouldn't be. He fell just a dozen feet shy of the shore, and dipped beneath the waters of the River Styx for the briefest of seconds. He swam to the top as fast as he could, feeling the strength sap from him with every stroke, until he finally broke the surface of the water. He could feel the weight of his armor and weapons dragging him down... they felt so heavy.

A labored, heavy paddling brought him to the shore of the Island, and Janus dragged every last part of his body out of the river to come to an exhausted rest on the earthy shore. He didn't have the strength to wiggle out of his wet leathers, and he could see even in the darkness how wrinkled and faded his scales had become. Even his weapons looked like they were rotting.

However, with every passing second and every drop of water that dripped off of his body, Janus felt his strength return. Within minutes he had the strength to sit up, and saw that even his weapons were returning to their original luster.

Luckily, his ammunition was still secure inside their sealed containers. He doubted that there would be enough of the arrows and bolts left to become whole again if they had come into contact with the water.

At last, he could stand. The water wasn't behaving as it usually did, and seemed to be more like oil or blood in a glass of water, not sticking to or mixing with anything and simply rolling off. The last of it dripped onto the sand below, and Janus felt himself again. "Isle of the Dead," the sign on the earth said. Now all that was left was the King, and he would be whole.

Janus passed an open gate into the structure. There were skeletons everywhere, in small alcoves, piled up in the corners... and when he had rounded the corner, he even saw some standing in a row in front of him.

But these skeletons seemed different. They almost looked like royalty, wearing fine purple tunics and faded old crowns, and wielding great two-handed Flamberges.

He immediately reached for his bow, but they didn't move. They simply stood there, their swords held straight up in their bony hands. They seemed almost like statues... if he didn't detect the faintest of

movements in a finger here, or a jaw there.

Then Janus realized: the water was gone, but the essence was still there. He smelled like death... and the Skeleton Lords found no reason to behead an undead brother. He stealthily walked forward, every single footstep causing a painful echo throughout the entire island, it seemed. The skeletons didn't seem to notice, or care.

When he had finally gotten around them, he saw a set of stairs leading farther into this mausoleum. At the bottom in a new chamber, an empty alcove gave off an aura of anger and suffering. He could almost feel a presence standing in front of him, and the pain it exuded...

And he could almost make out the faintest of whispers, but it might have just been the wind. "Go..."

He had come too far to do that. Janus walked to the back of the chamber and through a new hallway... but he almost immediately wished he hadn't.

The musty smell of death suddenly assaulted his nose as he came face to face with alcove after alcove of skeletons. They were lined up in a neat row, hundreds strong, each the remains of a mighty warrior or influential noble. Janus' mind reeled as his vision continued down the hall. It looked like there were enough skeletons here for every person who had ever lived...

He began to walk down the hall, glancing into every alcove, waiting for a sure attack from any one of them. He had never been surrounded by so much death.

The attack didn't come from the side, though. Several minutes later, when Janus began to take another careful step, his foot wouldn't move. He looked down long enough to see the white glob that bound his foot to the ground, and followed the trail of a small white string up to the abdomen of the giant, hairy brown spider clinging to the ceiling above him. *Careless... didn't check the entire hallway...* he thought in dismay.

The most grotesque part of the whole situation was the lack of sound: nothing from the web, nothing from the spider. It simply began to bind him, as if it expected this meal as readily as it expected any other.

But it didn't understand who he was. The fool... it thought because of his beast-like form that he would have a like mind. Janus pulled his new crossbow from its position slung on his back, popped in a few bolts, cocked and began to fire.

Queequeg wasn't lying... this crossbow really was something special. Three bolts fired at once, straight into the brown spider's disgusting black eyes. And that was when it began to make noise.

With a piercing shriek, the spider cut its web loose, dropped to the ground and began to scurry away. The coward had lost its clearly advantageous position and was now fleeing in a fair fight. Janus reloaded and plugged a dozen more bolts into its abdomen. The spider convulsed and flipped over in its death spasm, finally closing its legs up towards the sky and lying still.

A shadow grew larger and larger over Janus' head, and he looked up in time to see another spider, almost as big as he was, dropping down upon his head. Janus' reflexes took over, and he rammed a powerful fist into its thorax which sent it flying into the nearest skeleton alcove. It was a disgusting feel to have its bristly hairs touching his claw, but satisfying to see the situation so easily managed.

Many of the bones spilled out of the alcove and onto the floor as the spider rebounded off of the wall. On its flight back to the hallway, Janus lifted his non-webbed right leg and kicked the spider in the back of the head, driving it into the division between the two alcoves to his left.

After it had fallen to the ground and rolled to a disgusting stop at his feet, Janus brought his foot down once more and crushed its head with a single stomp. Spider juice splattered everywhere, all over the bones and his hides, and it quickly ceased to move. Janus pulled out an arrow from his quiver and cut himself loose from the sticky webbing.

He didn't want to risk anything. Using his claw as a rag, he cleaned as much of the spider goo as he could from the bones, and replaced them as neatly as he could back in the alcove. The skeletons probably appreciated the spiders even less than he did... maybe they would thank him for dispatching two of the disgusting things by not coming to life and trying to poke out his eyes.

Several minutes later, Janus had twisted and turned his way to the end of the hallway of death, and he was thankful to have not seen any of his neighbors come to life during that time. He stepped through a small archway and into another torchlit chamber, filled with substantially less skeletons.

The skeletons rested silently in tiny alcoves in the stone walls, but there were much less of them. Perhaps these ones had done something more noble in life than the others... or less noble, depending on how one looked at it.

Off to his left and right, small passages opened into hallways with barred gates and small fountains of water off to their sides. Janus chose the right path, and jumped when the gate opened of its own accord at his approach. He was able to make out what the sign said just before it slid into the wall: "Robin Windmarne, Highlander Drow, Guardian of the 1st Order."

"Ariiise..." a whisper came from all around him. Inside, bones and bows began to rattle and shake, moving and coming together into the figures of Elven beings. When their skeletons had formed completely, muscle, sinew, blood vessels and finally, dark skin, wrapped around the pearl white bones, and a collection of deadly serious, white-haired, black-eyed Drow Elves stood poised and ready for battle.

Each of the four women simultaneously nocked an arrow and held their bows steady towards the ground, and the two in the middle parted to reveal a taller, more athletic Elf with long white hair pulled into a ponytail.

This new Elf walked forward with deadly purpose, unslinging a red bow inscribed with runes from her back. When she pulled a single white arrow from her quiver and pointed it at Janus, his heart jumped in fright. She had Peacemakers... the most dangerous arrow in the land, and was using a clearly enchanted bow to fire them.

Janus ducked back into the hallway just before all five women let fly their deadly missiles. The four Highlander Drow were too slow to strike him, and their arrows bounced harmlessly off of the stone wall and the fountain outside the chamber.

The Peacemaker user, who he assumed was Windmarne, was much quicker on the draw. He didn't feel it at first when he ducked out, but the second he swiveled his torso to look down the hallway for other potential dangers, the fiery pain in his side told him what had happened before he even saw it.

He looked down with revulsion, knowing what he would see, but needing to confirm anyway. The white Peacemaker was sticking out of his ribcage, and from the way it was bleeding, it had hit something vital.

As much as he hated being this close to the pen and losing everything, Janus couldn't help but feel a certain release. Finally, his struggles could end here... not through magic, but through death.

In the end, the realization came to him with a sick pleasure. This was what he was seeking all along... fighting toe to toe with a giant serpent, jumping headfirst into a river of death, all of it wasn't an attempt to find the enigmatic pen.

It was just a search for death.

Janus chuckled to himself, and the acidic blood of the Dracon began to drip out of his maw... it was a game. The whole goddamned thing was just a game, every last minute of it. *Wonder how many I can take out before the end?* he thought with a laugh, as he choked on his own acidic blood.

He placed several dozen bolts in his crossbow and whirled back into the hallway. The foolish Undead Elves had advanced, coming out of the tomb so they could come outside and finish him, and were

unprepared for Janus' sudden return.

He pulled the trigger on the crossbow and a dozen bolts screamed out of it, one by one. Three caught the first Elf in the forehead and easily dropped her, while the rest sailed past her useless body into the torso, arms and eye of the next one. The same apathetic mask remained on both of their faces as they fell, neutral and oblivious to their return to death.

Windmarne fired another Peacemaker straight at him, and the second Janus caught it in his arm, he felt excruciating pain as it shot straight through his bicep and lodged in his chest.

Janus fired one more bolt into another one of the Highlanders' necks with the crossbow in his right claw, and lunged forward to give her an uppercut with his left that clearly broke her neck. As her body began to fall, he dropped his crossbow and snapped the arrow pinning his arm to his chest with a single thrust of his arm. Then, he unslung his bow from his back, nocked an arrow and let it loose into the body of the final Highlander. Her impaled body dropped, her eyes cold and empty.

Windmarne's undead corpse didn't seem to care about the loss of her allies, and she began to draw another Peacemaker. Janus charged at her, feeling another sharp sting in his leg as the archer let loose early and punctured his leg with another arrow. He shouldered her with all his might, but she didn't budge... her strength was unreal.

Janus looked up just in time to see Windmarne's emotionless face, staring at him with her cold black eyes. *Her skin's actually quite nice this close up*, he thought with a mad chuckle, just before her knee caught him in the jaw and sent him sprawling backwards.

No sooner had he hit the ground, another arrow caught him in the stomach, and Janus coughed up blood all over his hides.

This is it... he thought. This is what I came here for. Finally, it's over... and this world will have finally gotten what it wants. The death of a monster, and an abomination. He settled back on the floor, his body feeling colder by the second, feeling the pain wash over him from the many arrows in his body. When Windmarne slowly brought up the last arrow, aimed straight at his head, Janus was smiling.

"Stop, Robin," said a female voice from the entrance to the crypt. Windmarne returned the Peacemaker to her quiver, slung her bow on her back and bowed to the newcomer. Her body suddenly fell to pieces, body parts rolling in every direction.

Within seconds, the skin and flesh of her and her comrades had melted off, and only a collection of skulls and bones remained in piles on the floor, as they had been when he entered. Janus painfully turned his head in anger at the one who had robbed him of his release.

It was a girl... a girl with green skin, medium-length black hair and great, black leather wings. Aside from a tiny black belt barely covering her pelvis and her big black boots, she was completely naked. She glided over to Janus' fallen body with a grace he had seen in neither beast nor Human, and she made no attempt to cover her chest as she came to kneel next to him.

Janus stared straight into her sad black eyes. They looked as if they might have seen more than he could have imagined, and his anger melted slightly. She glanced over his bleeding, broken body, almost as if she were analyzing every single pore on his body, searching for something. Neither one said a thing.

Her eyes travelled from his face, down his torso to his legs, and back up his arms to his face again. She continued this cycle a few times, until she seemed satisfied that she had found what she was looking for.

"Do you really think that you're alone in your struggles?" she asked softly.

Janus just stared. The world started to spin slightly, and his vision doubled.

"Do you think you're the only one who feels like half a being?" she continued, with a voice almost cracking

in sadness. "The only one who feels as if God and the entire world is out to unjustly punish them?"

He remained silent, and the girl kept her eyes on him, not letting up; she didn't even blink.

"What... would you know...?" he croaked out through his blood. His vision started to darken, and he began to lose consciousness. Before darkness overcame him, he saw that she was still kneeling there, still staring him in the face.

Her eyes... they looked familiar.

Xorphitus

He knew it had to be this gate, the one that stood between him and the Forge. Every other barrier in the castle was a variation on the "affordable privacy before security" standard, with doors of wood and other flimsy material blocking further progress.

There were few other gates in the entire area, but this was the only one with a sign on it. "Keep gate closed during service hours," it said. Tearn hmphed from under his deep hood with slight interest... funny to see such a saying in a castle as ancient as this.

Inside the flimsy and rusted bars was a dark room, barely twenty feet wide and long. In the back, he could barely make out some stairs leading down, farther into the castle. Tearn meditated slightly on the feeling of fire.

His body began to feel hotter, spreading out from his chest, all the way down his stomach, legs and arms, until his entire body felt wrapped in a comforting warmth. He placed his paws slightly apart from one another, forming a cup around an empty space between them.

Light began to shine dimly there for a short time, until a small ball of fire grew in size and brightness between his cupped paws. A few seconds later, it was a palm-sized ball of snapping flame. Tearn let his left paw drop to his side, and directed the floating Fireball in his right to a nice hole between the bars of the gate. With a single thought of acceleration, he pointed it towards the hole, and the flame shot forth into the gloomy area.

When it reached the middle, Tearn closed his paw and the ball exploded, lighting the room in a brilliant glare. Amidst a pile of old bones, crouched in the corner and deathly silent, lay a gigantic, coiled serpent he had not seen in the darkness before. It had a green body flecked with blue spots, and looked big enough to swallow five or six Felpurr whole. Despite its position being made, it still didn't move, leading Tearn to think it might be a statue.

There was no such thing as too careful for a magic user; scouted danger was simply an obstacle. Tearn directed the sparks of the exploded Fireball to cover the unmoving serpent, and a disgusted tingle went up his spine as the snake writhed slightly in annoyance at the tiny, burning embers.

He wasn't prepared at all for when the snake lunged at the gate, hoping to sink its fangs into the shrouded creature that had just burned it. The snake drove into the gate with a great crash, accomplishing nothing but a great ringing sound that echoed off of the halls to Tearn's left and right.

It missed completely, but left Tearn shaken; he had actually jumped in fright at the thing's sudden movement. Luckily, its fangs were the only things that came through the holes in the old gate, and they had apparently left the beast quite stuck. The snake began to violently jerk left and right in an attempt to free itself.

Tearn wasted no time in withdrawing the small pouch of Faerie Dust at his side, and with a violent heave, smashed the entire contents onto the snake's stuck head. It was out cold almost instantly and came to rest on the bars of the gate, its fangs keeping it from moving any farther.

Luckily, a simple Knock Knock spell looked like it would open this gate. Tearn closed his eyes and let the

feelings of "open," "unlock" and "move" fill his entire being, and accompanied each word with an appropriate mental image.

Finally, came his favorite part. Tearn closed his paw and rapped his knuckles on the rusted portcullis. "Knock, knock," he said, and the gate slid into the wall at his insistence.

The snake and its fangs moved right along with it, and the gate jammed halfway open, trying over and over to tear the fangs from the snake before it could continue all the way into the wall. The movement drove the snake's sleeping head into the wall over and over again, but it didn't wake. Tearn slipped past the wretched thing and went down the stairs.

At least it was brighter down here. Another gate that now barred his path, labeled "Hazard Area," actually lifted his spirits... if the Cosmic Forge was anywhere, it would be behind several locked barricades and a guardian. It seemed he was on the right track.

Tearn heard something creeping inside, a slithering type of sound. At first he thought it might be snakes, but a look inside showed the truth: the entire area was overrun by vines.

And not any ordinary vines, either. These ones were moving, stretching along the ceiling and down the walls, creeping along the floor and twisting around one another.

They must have sensed him coming, because a few of the vines closer to the gate began to creep between the bars and reach for him. Obviously carnivorous, they wiggled forward to strangle the life out of him.

Tearn removed the vial he was going to use on his way in here, the vial of acid, and threw it on a larger grouping of the creeping vines. It shattered and spread the acid all over them, but seemed to have no other effect as they continued to slither towards him.

Once again, he felt warmth overtake his body... though this time, it was almost too hot to stand. Tearn cupped his paws together and summoned forth a wild, leaping mass of fire, finally directing it straight onto the pool of acid and the vines in it.

The fire leapt forward in several twisting streams, and the acid suddenly burst into explosive flames. The vines in the pool retreated from him, and the ones still coming faltered somewhat, but it was too late. The flames burned brighter and hotter with so much fresh tinder available to it, and streamed back into the gate to ignite more and more of the others.

As the flames flowed left and right, they licked the ceiling and set more and more of the plants on fire. Within seconds, the entire room and every last vine was aglow with flickering red flame, until they could no longer be seen amidst the the choking smoke that emanated from their charred forms. Tearn stood back with a satisfied grin at the pathetic resistance that had been left for him. A trapped snake and a room of fuel for a ready inferno were hardly ways to guard such a precious artifact.

The fire burned hotter, and he suddenly began to feel angry. The tiny, piercing screams for help came to him again, and he smelled blood. His face flushed, his jaw tightening, and he felt a tiny sting in his eyes. Before the tears could come, a woman's voice cried out... "*Tearn!!*"

He snarled, shaking loose a telltale tear, feeling the same pain he relived every day of his life. Just as quickly, though, he pushed the thoughts aside with more images of opening, and Knock Knocked the gate open. Later... there was always time to remember later.

By this time, the air was absolutely black with smoke, though nothing more remained of the fire save a few vines that were still burning here and there. Tearn conjured a swirling, blowing sensation in his chest, and conjured forth an Air Pocket spell to blow the smoke and ash away from him.

Creating a bubble of fresh air, he moved forward into the mesh of charred vines, wincing slightly at the strong and pungent odor of broiled plantlife. The flowing feeling in his body continued as Tearn's Air

Pocket kept the ash away, and he walked down a small stone hallway in the back. The vines hadn't travelled back this far, and the smoke finally let up.

Tearn pushed the Air Pocket behind him and created a stationary barrier between himself and the ash. The flowing feeling left him.

Up ahead, a small group of dark-skinned women were fiddling with something in an opening on the left, speaking quietly amongst themselves. Half of them were bare from the waist up, but they were all wearing grass skirts, and all had spears.

Suddenly, one of them looked up from what they were doing, and pointed at him with a cry. The other women followed her pointed finger, then they all scurried down the path to the left, disappearing from sight.

Tearn calmly walked forward to the opening... a small, open cave-like space with a seemingly bottomless pit for a floor. One of the women was still in view, moving hand over hand on a rope tied to a boulder on either side of the chasm, her spear clenched in her teeth. At the other end of the rope, and with surprising agility, she swung herself up to the other side, landed on the stone floor and cut the rope with a swipe of her spear. Seeing the path as impassable, she ran down the hallway, out of sight.

He relaxed, and felt an airy sensation overcome his body. He began to feel lighter and lighter, until his feet began to lift slightly off of the ground. He made sure to keep that feeling well in mind as his weightless body began its slow movement over the pit to the other side of the chasm. If there were people still living in this blasted place, he was sure as hell not going to let them go anywhere without getting all the information they had.

When he reached the other side and had just set down on the stone floor in the hallway, he heard the shouting echoes of the women he had just seen. They sounded like battle cries, but had no tinge of fear within them. Perhaps they were prepared, and were waiting for him.

Tearn looked right down the hall, towards the source of the shouting, and came face to face with the hulking, flailing, roaring monster that took up almost the entire room ahead of him. It was green, and it had several large roots and moving vines coming out of its body. He might have called it a plant, had it not had a mouth and a row of teeth to put the serpent to shame.

Two of the women were behind it. While one was running down another passageway, a bare chested one was pointing at Tearn as she looked at the creature and shouted something. When she finished, the thing roared even louder, and its vines shot towards his body. The woman smirked confidently and strode out with the others, spear in hand.

Tearn dodged to the side as two of its tendrils smashed the stone beneath him, cracking it in the process. He conjured up the feeling of cold, and in mid-dive had manifested two sharp spears of ice to drive through the thing's tendrils and into the crack it had just created. The back of the tendril swung wildly, but the end was firmly pinned to the crack in the stone by the ice lances.

He hit the wall as two more vines swung out and struck at him. One missed completely and hit the wall next to him, but the other managed to hit him in the shoulder, sending him flying down the passage. He hit the ground and rolled to a stop several feet away, but was relieved to see that the creature couldn't come down the same narrow hallway.

Unfortunately, when its vines stood up vertically and several openings appeared in them, Tearn knew it didn't need to physically approach. He pushed a feeling of air out of his body in time to create a shield of swirling wind, scattering the dozens of thorns the beast had shot out of its tendrils into the walls around him.

The Missile Shield wouldn't hold long, so as the thing readied another deadly volley of thorns, Tearn ran back down the brief strip of stone between the hallway of thorns and the bottomless pit. Almost

immediately after he was safely blocked by the wall next to him, he heard his shield disperse, and a veritable hissing wall of hundreds of thorns whistled down the corridor to deflect harmlessly off of the walls.

The creature roared, but Tearn was unimpressed. It was stuck and had no way to attack him, and they both knew that it was at his mercy. He reached into his robe to pull out another of his acid vials, but cursed himself when he realized he was out of them. *Ah, well*, he thought. *That's why I studied the versatility of the Mage along with the strength of the Alchemist...*

He held out his right paw and sent forth a feeling of burning liquid. A hovering pool of green acid coalesced into a small ball, which the Felpurr quickly directed into an empty bottle in his robe. In his left paw, a powerful image of anger and heat brought forth a tiny white streak of intensely hot flame. He made sure to keep that paw and the bottle very separate from one another.

He flattened his back to the wall, and sidestepped into the corridor, leaving himself open to another barrage of thorns. He was only out for a second before he threw the compact Acid Bomb potion down the hallway with a backhanded fling, straight into the creature.

The thing was strong, but not smart in the slightest. Its continual roar left its mouth wide open, allowing the bottle to travel directly into its gullet.

Tearn's heart leapt with glee at the sight of the thing's raging stupidity. He pushed the arc of white flame towards the beast, which was now burning from the inside out, and it flew through the sky like a winged serpent, writhing straight down the plant-thing's mouth as it roared with pain.

He jumped back into the chasm room, holding onto the boulder for dear life, before the explosion rocked the room behind him. Almost immediately, several clumps of disgusting green liquid flew down the hall and hit the floor with satisfying squishes. He heard the sound of stone being chipped into and vines beating on rock, all through the sound of its echoing screams.

Then, all was silent.

Tearn emerged to the disgusting sight of the now unmoving creature, complete with a new hole in its body. Some of the acid was starting to leak out, but the creature was most assuredly dead. There were tear marks in the wall from where its powerful tendrils had rend the stone in pain, and the ice spears still held one of them to the wall.

Too easy, the Felpurr thought. He walked past the corpse of the great plant-thing, going slightly out of his way to proudly squish one of the vines winding down the hallway that the women escaped into. The passage ended with a chute, led into another hallway and finally opened up into a wide area where he could see the stars once more. He was outside.

The sky was still dark, but he could see the impressive silhouette of a great mountain off in the distance and the massive bridge leading to it, a deep forest below him, and a path leading left and right on the mountain he had emerged onto. He didn't see the women anywhere.

On principle, Tearn went left, minding the slightly sandy and rough terrain to avoid wasting a Levitate spell on any unintended journeys down. *Gates and snakes, wild plants... they all have to lead to something important, right?* he thought.

Dwarves and Giants lived here in the mountain. It was plain as day from the one foot pickaxes and the ten foot hammers to the barracks he had stumbled into, filled with some cots small enough for a child, and others large enough for three men.

If any one of them was alerted to his presence, the entire mountain would be in an uproar, thirsting for his blood. Anybody with a brain knew that Dwarves and Giants were cruel, especially when someone came

between them and their jewels.

Tearn hadn't used it in a long time, but his Wizard Eye spell kept him out of the paths of their patrols and miners. Getting a bird's eye view of the area several dozen feet around him helped to avoid the miners when and where he could.

It didn't help that this place was utterly confusing. There were stairs leading to stairs leading to stairs, doors all over the place, and non-descript walls adorned with those everburning torches that made getting lost a prerequisite, rather than a possibility.

He had no way of telling what area was which because the walls all looked the same, and every time he thought he had gotten somewhere interesting, it would simply lead to an empty room filled with nothing useful aside from some pointy rocks. Tearn wondered offhand where the jewels they mined could possibly be held.

After what seemed like days later, he had all but given up on finding the pen... when he came across something strange. Several floors down and past an unlocked wooden door, there was a hallway that led to a tomb of sorts. Four exits led out of it to the north, south, east and west, and each one was completely blocked off by a massive crystal that encompassed the entirety of the tomb.

He couldn't see inside, even with his Wizard Eye, and no amount of destructive magic was making the crystal budge. Acid, ice, flame, rocks, nothing would shatter it. Even using a rock at the crystal's base as a chisel had no effect.

Inside the heavily protected room, an old pile of bones rested in an alcove on the far wall, surrounded by books, potions, Wizard clothes and other assorted trinkets. He couldn't see them without moving slightly, because the crystal he was staring at had a very fine fracture running its length from top to bottom, and it distorted the image.

A fracture, huh? he thought. Tearn pushed a feeling of hardness and earth into his paws, and created a finely crafted sharp stone in one paw, and a large rock in the other. Using his mind to hold the sharp stone on the fracture, he stood back and mentally ordered the rock to pound the wedge farther into it.

It cracked, slightly. Tearn made the rock strike the sharp stone again and again, watching as the fracture grew larger and larger with each hit. *So, controlled magic is the key...* he thought.

A few minutes passed as the fracture grew wider and wider, until suddenly, the crystal finally shattered under the relentless pounding. Not just this wall, but every crystal on every opening broke into a thousand pieces and fell to the ground, then disappeared into puffs of colored smoke. He entered the tomb.

What happened next made Tearn jump back in fright and ready several spells in defense: a massive, disembodied head materialized out of thin air and looked Tearn straight in the eyes. He was a Human, with a long white beard and hair, and wearing a great purple Wizard's cap on his head.

He looked the part of your typical Wizard, but his great shining eyes spoke of the unnatural amount of wisdom he must have gained in his many years. When he spoke, the sound seemed to come from everywhere at once.

"I know who you are," he said. "And I know what you seek. One hundred and twenty years ago, I craved the same thing as you: absolute power. And yet, I wanted power of a different form. Not the power to destroy my enemies... rather, I desired something else.

"Following the theft of the Cosmic Forge from the Cosmic Circle by the Bane King and I, there was a great struggle of power between us," he continued. "To have a single artifact of infinite power divided among two people was more than either one of us could bear. Absolute power was not absolute as long as another wielded it. And so we fought... and the Bane King emerged the victor."

Xorphitus... Tearn thought with a smirk. *Looks like you weren't quite the all-powerful, immortal Wizard the*

legends made you out to be.

"But what a prize he had earned," the Wizard continued. "The fate of undeath visited upon the King left me free to quickly etch my destiny into the fabric of the universe, through my complete ignorance and apathy of the Bane. In that moment I, Xorphitus, scribed with the pen that I would come to know all there was to know in the cosmos... and the pen granted my desire.

"In an instant, the sum of all possible knowledge ingrained itself firmly into my unready mind," he continued, pain evident on his great face. "Can you understand what it is to know all there is to know in a single fraction of a second? You cannot... and yet, I know that despite my tale, you will seek the pen regardless."

Make a stupid wish like that, and you get what you deserve, Tearn thought. Some of us are smarter with the choices we make.

"It was also in that moment that I was split into two separate beings," Xorphitus said. "For you see, by his very nature, man is divided... and to know all there is to know at once would thus create an impossible perfection that man is destined never to attain. That was the bane... the Bane of the Cosmic Forge. For if one uses the Forge outside of its rightful place in the Cosmic Circle, whatever he shall desire will be twisted in such a way to cause unbearable suffering.

"And it will anger you to know that I do not know where it is."

Tearn snorted and began to walk back the way he came, content in letting the babbling and insane apparition spend eternity conversing with his own bones for all he cared. "Waste of time..." the Felpurr muttered.

His voice spoke up from behind him. "However, I can tell you who does know."

Tearn stopped and turned his head slightly. Even if he were insane, it was the only lead he had to go on now.

"Xorphitus, that is to say, my other half," the Wizard explained. "Whereas I know the history of the Forge and how it is utilized, he will know its location. Though I have warned you about the consequences of going against the divine, it is in man's nature to fail to understand anything prior to his personal experience; it is the only way you will truly understand the destruction you will bring upon yourself.

"If you truly seek your own undoing, to be destroyed by the very power you seek, you will find him with the Bane King. Beyond death, you will find them," he said.

Then the ghostly figure turned upwards, looked past the stone ceiling into the sky and whispered, "We finally meet, Marten." And with that, it faded into nothingness, leaving Tearn alone in a silent room with nothing but his own thoughts as company.

The Ghost seemed like it knew what it was talking about. If so, did the pen really carry with it such a terrible bane? Would his revenge be worth whatever price it decided to make him pay?

He dismissed every last one of his doubts. Of course it was worth it... the bane didn't scare him. If his power sent him to hell, he would laugh at the millions he brought with him. Their suffering was worth any price.

"Beyond death, huh?" he asked aloud. He had no idea what it meant. Was he supposed to kill himself and find Xorphitus in the hereafter?

"He probably means the Skull Door," a voice came from behind him. Tearn whirled around to see a giant snake slithering down one of the other passageways. He wondered briefly if it was the same one that had tried to attack him earlier, but noticed this one had no blue markings... and was talking. Tearn growled slightly.

"Easy, fuzzface!" the snake insisted, slithering into the chamber. "I'm just here to pay my respects to this old codger for locking me up in that cage for over a hundred years." Tearn relaxed slightly, but kept his piercing eyes on the snake. "Where is the Skull Door?" he asked simply.

"In the castle, down the stairs from the barracks area where the guards used to sleep. Look, I gotta tell y..." he started, but Tearn was already leaving.

The snake shook his head in disbelief. "Tch! Fine!" he called out. "That hissing stunt girl didn't wanna listen either! You can all just turn into a buncha Giant dung when you use that blasted thing for all I care! Doesn't bother me none!"

The snake slithered up to the bones with a satisfied look in his eyes. "And as for you, you buck-toothed old bat, this has been a long time coming!!"

He sunk his teeth deep into the old bones, feeling smug that he at least got a chance to defile the Wizard's remains. A sudden jolt of purple-colored electricity shot out of the bone and into the snake's mouth, causing him to jump back with a yelp. The bones were still loaded with a little magic!

"Damn you, you withered bag of bones!!" he screamed, hissing in anger at his master's last laugh.

He found the Skull Door quick enough, just where the snake said it would be. He certainly had the chance to meet a bunch of freaks on this journey...

The best part was that the door ended up leading straight down to the banks of the River Styx. The waters were black and still, and the whole area felt like the death that ran deep in its waters. There was a cold wind blowing across them, which disturbed Tearn more than it did the water. Past the inky blackness, he could make out the dim silhouette of an island in the middle of the river.

Tearn felt an airy feeling envelop his body, localize around his feet and lift him off of the ground. There was no way he was going to do something stupid like touch the water when he was this close to the Forge.

He used a small, focused Air Pocket spell to push himself much faster than Levitate did, just in case there was something out here that wanted to toss him into the river. Within seconds, and without incident, he was standing on the earthy bank of the island.

There was a simple sign at his feet: "Isle of the Dead." *Past a door with a skull upon it, over the River Styx to the Isle of the Dead...?* he thought. It certainly lent credence to the words of the Wizard and the snake... the Cosmic Forge had to be down here.

A ghastly wail issued forth from the structure before him. The cries of the damned beckoned him to enter, to join them...

Things were starting to get interesting.

Part 3 - Confrontation

Understanding

"...a matter of re-attaching the soul to the body."

"Does it work every time?"

"It can be tough, especially when they've seen the beauty of the afterlife! In the end, it's up to them whether they want to come back or not. Lord Karain... my teacher, that is... told me that it's a lot easier when they've died very recently."

"What's it like there?"

"It's a place good people go to to live out the rest of eternity in happiness with God. I hear it's a beautiful place, and I hope to go there someday."

"And how about the bad people?"

"The bad people? Well... um, they go to another place, a place of eternal suffering for their misdeeds."

"That's awful! Can they get out?"

"No, it's forever. That's why you have to do your best with the life you're given."

"Is that fair?"

"What?"

"Being punished forever for a single life's mistakes?"

"..."

"I think the place we go to after we die is the place that resonates closest with who we are. And if you change yourself, then that place would no longer suit you, so you would go somewhere else, you know?"

"...is it... fair? Well..."

"Hey, I think I just saw her hand move!"

"You're right, her eyes are moving, too...!"

"Welcome back, Ooshima!"

Lucciana felt more and more of her consciousness returning to her. She could barely distinguish light from dark a second ago, but now she could hear voices and understand sentences.

She couldn't remember where she was, but it was dark. Someone was there, tearing at her and laughing, ripping out her greatest fears and pushing them in her face to see. She was screaming, and there was no escape...

And then, she was here. The memories slowly began to fade from her mind like the confusing fragments of a lasting nightmare, until she was left only with the feeling of utter helplessness. The memory would haunt her for some time.

Her senses started to come back, but she hadn't the strength to open her eyes, and could only roll them under her closed eyelids. She could hear some rustling in front of her, and a slight hiss above her head.

In someone's lap. She could feel it now. It was warm and comforting, unlike the cold and dark place she had been in earlier. Something warm began to stroke her cheek... someone's hand. Lucciana finally found the energy to crack her eyes open just a slit, and saw the blurry image of two small girls in front of her.

Her eyes slowly began to focus. One was a Hobbit wearing a torn and dirty green robe, and a slightly glowing golden amulet with a red jewel in the center around her neck. Her hair was tied in a pair of brown pigtails on either side of her head, and she had a friendly smile on her face.

A bald and blue-skinned Faerie dressed in a tiny blue vest and shorts sat on the Hobbit's shoulder, and when the Faerie's eyes met Lucciana's own, the little one waved with a mischievous grin.

They were in a stone room of some sort, but it was too dark to see anything more than the shadows in the corner and a giant steel barrier off to her right.

Wasn't I...? she started to think. Yes, she was in a room like this, last she remembered. There was someone there... a Samurai...?

It all came back to her at once. The Nightgaunts, the fountain, Daikuta... then the world came crashing down and...

She winced at the memory of the blade in her stomach. It was only painful for the minute before... something happened. She plunged her katana into her belly, then there was the mysterious winged girl and Shss standing there...

Shss.

She slowly rolled her head to see the face of the one cradling her exhausted body. Sure enough, it was the coward, smiling a smile of relief and happiness that made Lucciana sick to her stomach. With great effort, the Samurai rolled her weakened body off of Shss' lap and winced as her head hit cold hard stone.

"Hey, careful!" the Hobbit said. Then, as a teasing afterthought, she added, "You just came back from the dead... you should be resting!"

The recently revived girl seemed to be trying to say something. Hiromi knelt down, and put her ear to the girl's lips. "Get..." she whispered, "get her... away from me..."

The short girl drew back. "Who, Shss? She's been keeping watch over you the entire time you two have been locked up in here," she said.

Lucciana ignored her and crawled with great effort away from her former friend. Her anger seemed to be making her stronger. "Left me to die... you coward," she seethed, rolling over to face her. Shss looked pained, biting her bottom lip and looking away. *Ashamed... as she should be*, the Elf thought.

"What are you talking about?" the Faerie asked.

"Nightgaunts attacked us... I got swarmed," Lucciana struggled to say. "In the middle of it all, she stood there... watched me get attacked, with my wounded arm... and everything. She let them... tear at me, and refused to kill them when she had the chance. She hesitated, and I almost died..."

"But she saved you in the end, right?" the Priest asked.

Lucciana struggled to face her. "Be quiet about things you don't understand!" she croaked, her voice rising. "I saw the look in her eyes. She valued those creatures' lives over mine, and would have seen me dead with her cowardice! I should have known this world was populated by nothing more than self-seeking, fair weather fools... who care nothing about the well-being of others!"

Shss didn't understand what she was talking about, but her voice made it clear that she felt betrayed. *Maybe the little one can help*, she thought.

Thankfully, the Faerie did indeed speak up. "Ooshiana..." she started.

"It's Lucciana," the Samurai interrupted. "Don't let the Amazulu's inability to speak poison your own communication skills." *This whole ordeal is tiring... just wanna sleep... she thought, maybe with a bottle of that barkeep's special reserves...*

"You say that we don't understand," the Faerie said. "But, I think there's something you need to know."

She didn't reply, and didn't care... until she felt the pressure squeezing at her head, and saw the Faerie's head begin to glow with a shining purple aura. *So, you're going to kill me after all? Lucciana thought. I would expect no less from anyone...*

No, I'm not going to kill you, a voice spoke in her mind. Lucciana twitched in surprise, seeing the Faerie's

shining emerald green eyes staring straight back at her. *But I am going to show you the truth. I'm forming a mind connection between you and Shss now... she'll tell you.*

What came next was hard for Lucciana to describe. They weren't words like the Faerie used, but rather, images. They were pictures loaded with feeling and meaning, and with every image, Lucciana saw the very real memory that was associated with it. Shss was talking to her.

She saw many things in those brief seconds. A rain-soaked baby brought to a Lizardman's village. Gripping fear, cold pain.

Then, there was a great Lizardman holding the baby in his arms. Warm comfort and love. A first successful hunt, training, shamanistic ceremonies, chores. Security, pride, belonging. But slowly, the images began to take a darker turn. There was the slaughter of some Gremlins. Pity, confusion. A homecoming to a great clay pyramid. Fear, more confusion.

And then, Lucciana saw them: the eyes of the Amazulu Queen. Shss' first murder of an innocent, an intelligent life taken in anger. The torrent of feelings that swept over her were painful and varied. She felt simultaneously scared and alone, confused and ashamed, and most of all, lost.

Lucciana already understood by the time Shss shared her memories of the Sea Serpent, and of the Nightgaunts. That feeling... that sense of everything not making sense, of losing who she was, and of the pain she felt when taking another life... was her own.

I can't believe how callous I have been... she thought. All these years she had been afflicted with that witch's curse, and she'd taken murder and its associated pain as just a sickening, but unavoidable, part of the job. She really had learned nothing.

Her eyes stung. *Enough, Shss, please...* she thought. The images stopped, and Lucciana reached her hand out to the one she had hated just moments before. Shss reached out quickly, and pulled Lucciana's head and shoulders back to a comfortable position on her lap again.

She could only meet Shss' forgiving eyes for a few seconds before she turned her head back to the wall in shame. Even so, Shss gently brought a hand down to her cheek and rolled her head back up, smiling with happiness at having regained her friend. There was still sadness in her eyes, but it felt much more distant than before.

I'm sorry... Lucciana thought. Her head was suddenly filled with images of their first meeting, when Lucciana drew the Sea Serpent's attention away from Shss, the silly "saved you" game they played in and around the Isle of the Dead, and the familiar feeling that enveloped the both of them when they first grasped the other's hand.

It wasn't so much the memories, but the feelings of admiration and understanding that went beyond barriers between two people from different walks of life, that made Lucciana happy.

"Did you hear... her?" the Faerie gasped, as beads of sweat began to roll down her face. She was visibly straining. "This... is a bit tiring!"

Lucciana nodded. "Yes, I heard her," she answered. "And I understand now... thank you, little one."

"Hooo!" the Faerie exhaled sharply as she collapsed on the Hobbit's shoulder. "No sweat!" her muffled voice came from the robe covering her mouth. She lifted her head and grinned sheepishly at the tiny sweat stain she left there. "Well, not much at least."

Lucciana hadn't been in company like this for a long time, between people who helped one another freely. There were the pirates earlier, but before that... it had been years since she had met people so generous.

First, she came back from the dead... and now her worldview had been turned upside-down. She was starting to get a little dizzy.

"I'm Hiromi," the Hobbit introduced. She pointed at the Faerie on her shoulder. "And this is Kiwi. We met each other in the castle, and got captured here less than half an hour ago."

"Where is here?" Lucciana asked.

Hiromi swept her hand across the room. "A prison underneath the Temple of Ramm," she explained. "I was looking for a friend of mine, but I get the feeling there's more to him than I originally thought..."

"So you're the one who brought me back?" Lucciana asked.

The Priest nodded. "Yeah..." she said with a shy hand behind her head.

"Thank you... I'll find a way to pay you back," Lucciana whispered, and Shss bowed slightly as well.

"Oh, that?" Hiromi asked. "Well, it was your choice to come back, so no thanks or payment needed!"

Lucciana raised a suspicious eyebrow, but quelled the feeling as best she could. She rolled her blue eyes over to the tiny girl on her shoulder. "And the Faerie... who is she?" the Elf asked. "Does she grant wishes or something?"

Kiwi puffed her cheeks out in anger. "Excuse me, but I'll have you know that I am a Monk, disciple of the great Jang!" she said proudly. "And given the chance, I could beat you anytime and anyplace!!"

With a slight chuckle, Lucciana responded. "Very well, then, I look forward to sparring with you someday. When I can walk, of course."

Though Shss felt happy to be in such good company, her smile turned to a cautious frown when she heard something coming down the hallway. "Ooshiana..." she whispered, pointing at the door. Everyone became completely silent, straining to hear what she had heard. Several seconds passed by, until they could finally hear the voices themselves.

"...elfish bastard about it."

"Well, Rebecca said to take good care of this one, but she didn't say anything about the ones in the cell. Maybe once it's done slaughtering all of them, we can have a little fun with the corpses!"

"Hahaha, great! Teach that damn mercenary to hog the good ones for himself."

Kiwi and Hiromi took positions by the door, ready to charge out the second it opened. Shss placed a protective hand over Lucciana's body, but tensed in case she needed to make a move. "We still have the other three we're bringing in, so either way, we won't be missing out much," a voice said.

The steel gate opened, and before anybody could react, two rough hands shoved a big black form into the room. Shss was too far away, but Hiromi and Kiwi saw the large jaws and shining teeth of the wounded beast before it hit the ground. By the time they composed themselves, the gate had already shut.

The great lump didn't move, allowing everyone to get a look at what it was: it seemed to be a Dragon, though man-sized. It had jet black scales and was wearing simple animal leathers, which were punctured and torn in several places. Some of the larger holes revealed that it had some pretty serious injuries, but it wasn't bleeding.

That was all the time they had to look at it before it began to stir. It growled deeply and slowly fluttered open its eyelids. Its black eyes scanned the room, and eventually rested on the closest figures to it: Hiromi and Kiwi.

Shss tightened her grip on Lucciana and prepared battle strategies in her mind, considering she was unarmed. It was wounded, so she might be able to knock it out with a few blows to the head. Lucciana

was surprisingly relaxed.

The creature pressed a claw to the ground and began to rise. Its nails dug into the stone and cut deep scars into it with surprising ease.

"Get back!" Hiromi screamed, jumping backwards. The cold feeling of ice water overwhelmed her body and she fired a Paralyze spell out of her hands. A blue light rotated through the air and struck the beast through a hole in its armor around its chest, straight into one of its wounds.

"Stop!" Lucciana yelled as loud as she could, which wasn't loud at all. Only Shss heard, and she repeated the word as loud as she could. "Sta-pa!" she shouted.

Hiromi looked over, confused, then back at the creature. It had resisted the Paralyze spell, but was making no move to attack her. It stared at her for only a second before it stumbled to the corner, then coughed up a small amount of blood. With a slump, it came to a sitting position directly opposite the four girls, and stared neutrally at them.

"Do as you wish; it is no concern of mine," the beast said.

Hiromi blushed. It... or rather, he, was intelligent. Kiwi and Shss flushed as well, though they literally paled in comparison to the beet red color Hiromi's face had become.

"I... I'm sorry..." she stammered, and walked away ashamedly to kneel next to Lucciana. She bent down close to hear the Samurai's voice. "Wha, er... who is he?" she whispered.

"A Dracon," Lucciana replied. "A mixture of Human and Dragon blood. Despite how they look, they are rather private, passive beings unless provoked... little different from any other person you would meet on the road."

The Dracon Janus stared at the wall ahead of him. He passed out with that winged girl above him, and could have sworn that that was the end of it. But now, he woke up with more panicked people around him, back in the same harsh reality he had tried so desperately to escape from before.

Now the girls were whispering to one another, probably planning on the best way to kill him without dirtying their clothes. He recognized the Sorceress in green, the one who tried to eliminate him with that little light show. The same one who had run away screaming a few... hours or days before. It was hard to tell with all the times he had blacked out from exhaustion or injury.

Now the same girl was coming over, with her hands in the air in a supposedly peaceful gesture. *What, so you can pull the knife out when you are within striking distance?* he thought, turning his head towards her. *Put an end to the savage beast trespassing on your lands? Fine, go ahead, I don't care anymore.*

When he turned his head, the girl stopped suddenly, obviously afraid of him. Anger flared in him, hotter than he had ever felt it. He had experienced this so often before, and had learned to deal with it as a part of his existence. But this time, he couldn't just brush it off again.

What had he ever done to deserve being born such an aberration? Why was he constantly hunted when he had done nothing to warrant any of it? And most of all, who was this creature to fear *him*, seconds after *she* had tried to kill him?

How was any of this just?

"Um..." she started. Janus clenched his claw in fury. "My name is Hiromi... I, I think I saw you before, and I ran away, while you were eating something. I'm sorry that..."

Janus exploded. "You're sorry?" he demanded. "You miserable wretch... you're sorry that you've acted in the same manner every other person I've met has acted? You're sorry because you feel a fraction of what I feel every day of my cursed life?"

The girl's face winced, and she looked away in shame. "You sheltered, pathetic excuse for a living creature..." *Why am I saying these things?* "Even though you had an idea of my intelligence, you still faltered, you unbelievable fool..." *Is it because of this feeling?* "I can see it's in your nature to murder those different from yourselves, you deluded cretin..." *It feels good. I feel powerful, strong, in control...*

"Do not come near me," he roared. "Do not even look at me, you sickly, stupid child." Hiromi started to sob, and tears dropped from her eyes. *Once I've had a taste of it, I can't stop. Her pain is giving me pleasure.*

"I'm sorry!" she choked. "Please forgive me, I didn't know! This situation we're in, it's not usual... I almost died so many times, and it's hard to know who wants to kill me, and who doesn't! I don't know anything about the outside world!" *Every tearful word makes me feel stronger, better. Is this...?*

"Please, let me heal your wounds... let me pay you back for this terrible misunderstanding!" she insisted. "It was wrong of me to judge you with just a glance, so please..." Hiromi touched his cold arm, but Janus slapped her hand away. "Don't touch me, brat!" he roared.

She began to cry again, and turned back towards the others with her face in her hands. *I understand now, this feeling... it's the same feeling Humans have when they hunt me down and try to kill me. Power over another... cutting another down to bring oneself up.*

I faced a lifetime of this judgement, and I didn't understand it until I became its practitioner. Any doubts I had until now about being a monster are gone. I am truly perverse...

Janus snorted in anger... purely at himself.

Hiromi sat next to her friends. "He's right, about everything," she sobbed, and sniffled. "Kiwi, I had the nerve to call you judgemental about the Sirens back then..."

"Don't wor..." Kiwi started.

She raised a hand to quiet her. "No, it's ok," she continued after a few coughs. "It was me, the whole time, being so judgemental. I was as wrong about Quinn as I was about that man over there... I'm so stupid..."

Lucciana felt a pain in her breast from every word. Hiromi had put into words every feeling she had had with Shss just a second ago.

"What are you talking about?" asked Kiwi. "You are a good person! Remember the Vicar? Remember how you helped Smitty and me back there on the island?"

The Hobbit nodded, but still hung her head.

"And here's something I don't want you to forget," the Faerie continued. Before Hiromi could look up, the little one was on top of her head and beating her with two tiny fists. "Don't... call... yourself... stupid... ever... again!" she said in time with each punch.

Hiromi choked out a laugh. "Thank you," she whispered, but not loud enough for the Dracon to hear. She wanted him to think she was still suffering, if it made him feel any better.

Kiwi started to fly over to him before Hiromi could protest. She looked at the floor in shyness as the Faerie came to a stop next to him.

"She's really sorry, you know," she said. "Could you please forgive her?"

Janus simply stared at the wall. "Can you at least tell us your name?" she further asked, but he didn't say anything.

"Do you have one?" she continued.

The Dracon closed his eyes briefly in exasperation. "Janus. Leave me alone," he grumbled.

"Ok," she said, then flew back to the group. "His name's Janus," she whispered from her place on Hiromi's shoulder. "I think it's best if we let things cool down for a little, then we can try again later."

Everyone sat down and the minutes passed by in silence. Shss got up and began pushing on the walls to find a way out. Lucciana sat against the wall, resting to get her strength back. Hiromi stared at the floor deep in thought, while Kiwi fidgeted with boredom.

"Sure hope they feed us," she muttered. Hiromi chuckled slightly.

After a few moments of silence, Lucciana spoke. "So why is everyone here?" she asked.

Kiwi answered first. "I'm here because my teacher Jang said I would find my destiny here. I think he meant Hi-chan, because she's my best friend now!" she said, hugging her cheek. "So, once we break out of this prison, I want to take her to meet him!"

Hiromi smiled. "I came here to unlock the castle gate for my friend Quinn, but he went missing after I opened it," she explained. "I fell on the floor and blacked out, and he was gone. Kiwi and I saw him a second ago, but... he seemed different. Once we find a way out of here, I want to see him again before we leave."

"Shss told me that she's looking for a '*Kassmak Ohss*,'" Kiwi said. "It's supposed to grant wishes, which is something I *can't* do." The Faerie glared at Lucciana, who smirked. "So what are you here for?" she asked the Samurai.

Lucciana chuckled slightly. "So Shss and I really are here for the same reason..." she said. "The '*Cosmic Forge*' is a pen that writes into the fabric of the universe whatever is scribed with it. In other words, whatever you write, becomes true."

Janus glanced up at the mention of the pen. *So that's what it's called...* he thought. The dark-skinned girl got closer to him on her way around the cell, patting down the walls. When she finally reached the corner he was sitting in, their eyes met. She looked down at him calmly, and he blinked.

Finally, he shifted to the side to allow her to explore the area he had claimed as his own. She nodded with thanks and widened her eyes. Janus narrowed his eyes in confusion, but let her go about her business anyway.

"My client hired me to look for it," Lucciana said. "I thought it was just a children's fable, but with all the strange things I've seen since coming to the castle, I'm getting the feeling it might be true. If that's the case, the greedy pig can come get it himself, because I'm not going to deliver it into the hands of someone like that." She sighed. "Five hundred gold pieces..." she muttered.

Hiromi nodded... an artifact with that power could be abused most easily.

Suddenly, the floor and walls shook. Everybody looked at Shss, who had jumped back from the wall she was exploring. She cautiously reached forward to touch the same stone again, but before she could, the Temple shook again.

Faintly, off in the distance, they heard the sound of someone screaming. Janus stood up painfully and looked around, walking over to the gate for a better look. Shss hissed in confusion, and joined him to peer through the gate at his side. The screaming was clear to her heightened senses, and there was some sort of hissing sound outside, but she couldn't tell what was going on.

Then there was a metallic clanging, and a man fell screaming down the stairs outside of the gate. He struggled to get up, clutching his eyes... but all of a sudden, he was thrust back into the wall behind him at amazing speed. There were four scraping sounds, then the sound of something grinding into rock. With each noise, the man screamed louder.

More explosions and screams came from outside, and Lucciana struggled to her feet. "What's going on, Shss?" she asked. She limped over to the gate... someone outside it and around the corner, out of sight, was dying. Shss pointed in the direction of the scream, and made a face of worry and confusion.

"Guys, get over here," Lucciana urged everyone.

Hiromi came up with Kiwi on her shoulder, just in time for a male figure to come out of the shadows and approach the gate. He fiddled with the lock, and the gate slid open. Three long black items, two wooden items and a pair of quivers spilled to the floor. "Take these; you'll need them," the man said.

Kiwi opened her mouth in surprise. "Hey, it's..." she started.

"Hurry," he interrupted, "the Temple is being attacked, and Lady Rebecca needs your help." The man stopped next to the gate, and didn't move any farther. Lucciana knelt at the pile, and felt whole again when she saw her swords among the other items. She unsheathed the both of them, and winced when she saw the brown blood stain still on the wakizashi.

She picked up Shss' spear and handed it to her, then opened one of the quivers to see what was inside: arrows, and bolts in the other. Along with the bow and crossbow at her feet... *Must be his*, she thought.

"Hey," she said to Janus, handing him the bow and crossbow. "I think these are yours."

He took his weapons, then checked the inside of the containers. It all seemed to be there, so he slung his quivers and bow on his back, then tied the crossbow to his waist. Without a word, he began to walk out of the prison alone.

A gurgling sound made him stop. Next to the man who had opened the gate, a soldier was pinned to the wall with four precisely positioned, deadly sharp lances of ice. Two went through his shoulder, one through his stomach, and one had clearly pierced him through the groin. He was sobbing in pain, and bleeding profusely.

Hiromi heard it, too, and ran out. She tried not to look at Janus as she noticed the man on the wall. It was the one who grabbed her earlier, who tried to...

She tried to slide the freezing lance out of his stomach from the wall, but it wouldn't move, and her hand dug along its crystalline edge. "Ow!!" she screamed out, a bloody streak the only reward for her efforts. She held a glowing hand over the injury for just a second and it knit completely.

The others had gathered around as well, casting pitiable glances at him. "Please... help me! I don't want to die!" he gurgled.

Hiromi looked worried. "It's an Iceball spell," she said, and turned to the others. "It's way beyond my ability to dispel. I can't get rid of them.. and even if we drill through the wall, they'll still be stuck in his body!"

"You don't have time to help him," the man who opened the gate said. It was Savior, the man who had assisted, and then imprisoned, her and Kiwi. "Lady Rebecca needs your help. She and the King guard the Forge, and if it falls into the hands of the one attacking the Temple..."

"But this man is dying now!" Hiromi protested.

Savior narrowed his eyes at her. "He tried to rape you a short while ago, and now you worry for his welfare?" he asked.

The Hobbit stared back with equal intensity, firmly set on helping anyone she could... even the wicked.

"Fine, let me make it easier for you," the dark man said. He withdrew a knife from his belt, flicked it around in his hand and slit the man's throat with a single motion. The soldier struggled for a second, but he was dead within seconds.

"No!!" Hiromi screamed out. "He... I could have done something! We could have helped him somehow!!"

Savior sheathed his knife. "Had you any idea of this man's crimes, you might not be so ready to preserve his life. Come." He started to walk towards the stairs.

"But... no... how could you...?" she murmured in shock. Kiwi put a hand on her cheek in comfort, and tried hard to block her view from the dead man. Shss put Lucciana's arm around her shoulders and helped her forward. "The Forge, where is it?" Lucciana asked.

"In the depths of the Temple of Ramm," Savior said. "Lady Rebecca and the King will meet you near its holding place, but you must find your way past the Demons who inhabit the Temple to get down there."

"Great..." she muttered sarcastically.

Savior whirled around. "Make no mistake, any of you," he said. "The Forge must be protected at all costs, unless you wish to see this universe of ours ripped asunder. You are free to go if you choose, but by doing so, you risk damning everything to oblivion.

"I fear this attacker may best Lord Quinn, and even Lord Xorphitus himself, with the power he wields," he continued. "Without help, my Lady herself may die, as may the King."

Janus had heard enough; all he needed to know was that the pen was in the Temple. He started up the stairs.

"Protect them, with all you have. Please," Savior implored. "My Lady has instructed me to escort the three virgin sacrifices back to their homeland, and to help you find your way to her. I have accomplished one of these tasks; I leave now to finish the other."

Savior ran up the stairs, pushing past Janus and out of sight. "What do you think?" Lucciana asked.

Hiromi shook her head. "It's... too much," she whispered. "All this death and torture has to stop, and if the Cosmic Forge is responsible, we must do something about it."

"Where Hi-chan goes, I go!" Kiwi said. "That is my destiny!"

Lucciana nodded. "Then I shall go with you. Hopefully, I'll be healed enough from this sickness later to fight alongside the two of you." She turned to her friend, still assisting her with her walk. "Shss? *Kassmak Ohss*," she said, pointing outside.

Shss gave a determined nod. *Of course she's coming*, Lucciana thought with a smile. *Even if it were just for me...* "And you?" Lucciana asked Janus.

He didn't even turn around. "I have no relationship with any of you. Fight your own battles," he answered gruffly, then disappeared up the stairs.

Hiromi beckoned to the others. "Come on," she said, and they all ascended with him.

Everything seemed to go in slow motion when Hiromi came to the top of the stairs... she saw an unbelievable amount of carnage. There were charred and melted bodies everywhere, and the ground was littered with tear-sized holes, like something hot had fallen from above and burrowed its way into the earth. It smelled like acid and charred meat.

And there, in front of everyone, was Quinn. He was wearing his usual black boots and gloves, but his robe was gone. In its place were a pair of dark pants and a shirt, and a flowing cape behind him. The runes on his head were glowing, and he was chanting a Mental Attack spell.

"Quinn!" Hiromi shouted out and ran forward. She was overjoyed to see him, but when she had gone forward a few steps, something else came into view. It was Janus, crying out and clutching his head in

pain on the ground. The Priest switched gears immediately. "Don't you dare hurt him!!" she screamed out.

Quinn stopped his spell in surprise at the girl's suddenly powerful voice. "He's had enough trouble in his life without people like you making it worse for him!" she yelled. Janus whimpered in pain from the attack, but he could still hear the girl's voice as plain as day. *Is that...? Can't be...* he thought.

Hiromi stepped out between Janus and Quinn. "I swear to God, I won't let you cause one more bit of pain to him... do you understand?" She looked back at his shivering body. "I have a lot to make up to him," she said, turning back to Quinn, "but this isn't about penance. This is about protecting someone in pain, and I won't allow you to make him suffer anymore than he has!"

"You big bully!" Kiwi yelled out. "If there's one thing Hi-chan has taught me, it's how to stand up for other people! If you're going to attack him, you go through me first!"

Hiromi nodded, and raised her head bravely. "You go through *us* first," she clarified. "If you want him so badly, you have to kill us to get to him."

There was a brief pause, a period of motionlessness between everyone present. In the end, Quinn finally closed his eyes, and the runes on his head began to glow. When he opened them, the girls' worlds went black.

Shss was standing behind the two tiny ones when the world dropped away into darkness. She was afraid and alone, not knowing what was happening. Something seemed to penetrate deep within her, and suddenly, they were everywhere.

The Queen's eyes stared at her from every direction. Shss screamed and closed her eyes, but they were there in her mind, too. She turned, shook her head, anything to keep from seeing them, but everywhere she looked, they were there. Accusing her, judging her.

Lucciana was in her old house, and her family was dying inside. There were faceless people outside, holding medicine, food and water in their hands.

"Please, help me! Help my family!" she screamed. They didn't move, and didn't speak. Lucciana ran closer to them to take what they had, but the farther she ran, the farther away they seemed to go.

"No!" she screamed, and turned back to her family. But no matter how she ran, they got smaller and smaller. "Help us..." they pleaded weakly. The others had gone... her family was disappearing...

Everyone Kiwi had ever known and loved was standing in front of her, laughing. "What kind of Faerie has no hair?" her mother Saeren laughed.

Laughing through her tears, Hiromi spoke. "Hahahaha! Look at her! She's so useless!"

Master Jang nodded. "Yes, and what a poor student," he said with a shake of his head. "How many times did I have to explain the role of qi, Kiwi?"

Kiwi retreated into herself and was completely silent as their barbs continued. *They're right, I am worthless...* she thought. *I hate myself so much...*

Hiromi was hunched over a dying man. "Help me...!" he struggled to say. But no matter what she did, she couldn't. The wound would not knit, and he died in her care. She looked over the dozens, the hundreds, the thousands of people begging for her help, but each person she tried to heal continued to degenerate and eventually succumbed to their injuries... while in her care. She could hardly see through her tears.

With a blank expression, Quinn looked down on the four girls and the Dracon. The girls were on the ground, screaming and holding their heads or staring off into space, but the Dracon was just silent. He stepped forward with a great knife in his hand, ready to slit the throat of the girl he had been traveling with just days before.

Before he was able to end her life, the Dracon began to shift. *Perhaps he is more resistant to the effects of the Psionic Blast spell, considering his unnatural origins*, the Psionic reasoned.

She... was willing to die for me? Both of them were... Janus thought. Never in my life... would I have expected...

He struggled with the vision in his mind for the briefest of seconds, but it couldn't hold him. And with that much power under this man's control, he saw only one option left to survive: it was a choice he never made, and one that sickeningly reminded him of what he was... but now, there was no other recourse.

He could hear the footsteps of the man in black, and opened his eyes when they stopped next to his head. The tattooed runes on his head glowed, and the images came to him again. Humans were chasing him, calling him a monster and threatening to kill him.

Janus stood up slowly among the struggling girls. Quinn inhaled sharply with surprise, and the runes flashed even brighter. The image came even more powerfully, but still it had no effect.

"A monster? Is that what you called me?" the Dracon asked. Quinn looked panicked as the runes grew brighter.

"There's a difference between Humans and myself, in case you hadn't already guessed," the Dracon continued, even as the Psionic burned horrendous images into his mind. "And the difference is..." He paused as Quinn stopped, then prepared another Mental Attack to liquify his brain.

Janus opened his maw and sprayed a wide stream of green acid straight into Quinn's face... and he recoiled, screaming in pain. He tried to claw the acid away, but it ate into his hands as fast as it did his face.

He opened his eyes for a final attack on the girls, intent on killing them before he died, but Janus sliced his sharp claws over the acid burning into Quinn's face. But before the Psionic could fall, he pulled him close to his jaws and whispered, "...I know that I'm a monster."

Looking into the deep black pits of Janus' eyes, Quinn saw his own frightened, burning and disfigured face. In his terror, he completed the spell with his eyes on his own reflection, causing the magic to seek a new target entirely. The flashing blue light reflected from Janus' eyes straight back into his own mind. He cried out as his worst memories and fears were brought to light...

The street was cold...

He was covered in snow...

So hungry... please, somebody... anybody... I need food...

It was still cold, but he had stopped shivering. The world was slipping away, and nobody cared...

"Aaaaaah!!!" he yelled in sheer terror, clutching his head. Janus pushed him away, and the Psionic fell to the ground. The girls recovered from their illusions with Quinn's focus gone, and were finally able to see Janus, standing over the shivering Psionic's body.

He was hugging his knees in a fetal position and staring off into space, shivering and sobbing heavily.

Janus left him on the ground and walked over to Hiromi, who was still recovering on the ground. He stared down at her for just a second, then reached a claw down to help her.

Without hesitation, she took it, and he pulled her up. Kiwi flew up to her friend's shoulder and looked up gratefully at the great black Dracon who saved them.

Hiromi smiled shyly at him, and offered him her glowing hands. Janus faltered for a second, as if he were

struggling with something. *Do I even deserve this, after all I've said?* he thought.

Dolt, another thought came. *For once in your life, forgive and trust one person.*

Finally, after some thought, he reached out and took them, and felt a warm liquid pouring over his entire body. His wounds closed and relaxed in a wave of pure love, and within seconds, he was completely restored.

"Thank you..." he said, putting his claw on the Priest's head. "Thank you both..." Kiwi giggled and flew up to his shoulder, and kissed him on the cheek. He didn't know how to react.

Shss got up and helped Lucciana to her feet, and noticed that her friend could now walk. If she saw the Queen's eyes, she could only imagine what kind of horrors that her friend had seen. In response to Shss' worry, the Samurai widened her eyes and patted her friend on the shoulder.

Lucciana could see that the Dracon had both started and finished this battle. Apparently, she owed him for getting her out of that nightmare... and she was now in debt to more than one person.

Strangely enough, it didn't unsettle her as much as it should have. Lucciana walked up to him and held her hand out. He took his claw off of Hiromi's head, then cautiously took her wrist and shook. She smiled and nodded, then released him to grab the sick twit responsible for her ordeal.

She knelt down and pulled the quivering man up by the collar. He was completely gone, and didn't even seem to see her.

"Please, don't kill him, Lucciana," Hiromi said.

"Wasn't going to," she replied, and let go of him. He slumped to the ground in a shaking heap.

Hiromi knelt down, and her hands began to glow. "Hey, what do you think you're doing?!" Lucciana yelled.

"He's a living being, and he needs help," she replied. Lucciana was about to protest, but Janus interrupted her.

"Let her do as she sees fit," he said. Lucciana knit her eyebrows in disbelief, but saw that he had quietly unslung his crossbow and placed a bolt in it. Luckily, with her back to him, Hiromi couldn't see what he was doing.

She nodded in agreement, and Hiromi closed her eyes again. The light and warmth of God flowed out of her body and into Quinn. Physical injury was usually easy to cure, but mental pain was always a different story.

For a full minute, she kept her warm hands on him. With every passing second, more and more of Quinn's composure returned as the acid burns and claw marks shrank and disappeared. Finally, he was able to sit up, staring distractedly off into space. Hiromi opened her eyes and stared straight into his.

"Quinn, why did you do this?" she asked. "Were you being forced to by those Ramm people? Did they have you under some sort of spell? Did they threaten to hurt someone if you didn't kill us?"

He sat quietly for a short while, then shook his head. "No..." he whispered.

She started to follow up, but Quinn interrupted her. "The people of Ramm... took me in when I had nothing," he explained. "It was my fate to die on the streets with the rest of the war orphans. Nobody looked twice at the starving, shivering children in the street. I was so alone... until they came."

After a slight pause, he sighed. "They brought me to their Temple and fed me, clothed me, kept me safe from the harsh life outside. I was happy for the first time in my life, learning all I could of the ones who saved me and their beliefs."

Hiromi nodded. "I can understand that you would feel loyal to them after saving your life," she said, then shook her head. "But how can you kill other people in their name? You know what it means to suffer, and you were a good person before Ramm. What changed?"

He hung his head. "You're right," he said. "But it wasn't until after I finished my studies at their school that they started to teach me the parts of their faith that initiates never hear, at least until we are too far in to turn back. Little by little, they started to tell me about how their sacrifices, ritual summonings, murder, and other things were all natural, expected, and good.

"If you had told me that this is what they believed in the beginning, I wouldn't have joined in the first place," he continued. "But as time went on, I slowly came to make their ideas a part of my life. And through it all, the memories of my life before haunted me.

"I did anything in my power to keep from going back there. I even managed to convince myself that what we were doing was right, for myself, our templegoers, and those who had not yet understood the wonderful benefits of being with Ramm."

Hiromi put her hand on his shoulder. "I've killed so many, seen to the executions of countless more..." he whispered, then suddenly pounded his fist on the ground. Impressively enough, Janus didn't unconsciously jerk the trigger at the harmless movement.

"The King and his Wizard Xorphitus... they were the ones who started the Temple, long ago," he explained. "A century after they stole and used the Forge, there was a struggle for power, but Xorphitus... even though he is bound to the Temple, he can't be touched, not as long as his other half remains. There were whispers of a 'Seeker of Power' who would destroy both halves of Xorphitus and leave the Bane King in power, but nobody believed it."

Lucciana lowered her head and crossed her arms over her chest. "Whoever attacked the Temple might be that Seeker," she guessed.

"The members of Ramm chose sides, but it didn't really matter," Quinn continued. "Xorphitus could not be slain while his other half remained, and the Bane King had already used the Forge to gain eternal life. It was an eternal stalemate, and became a war of ideologies.

"The Bane King insisted that the pen never be used again, never be given an opportunity to provoke the Bane, while Xorphitus sought to increase the power of the Temple, to lead a Human wave assault on the Bane King and the Forge. For the most part, the people of Ramm sided with the Wizard and his desire for control.

"I have served Xorphitus all these years. When he saw the power I wielded, he promised to reveal to me the secrets of the universe for my servitude, promised that I would always be safe with him... and made me leader of the Temple for my loyalty. But still, he wanted more.

"So I went out into the world, seeking someone who could undo the seal that Lady Rebecca cast upon the gates... a seal she placed there to keep more from becoming entangled in this cosmic mess. If I succeeded, new initiates would have easy access to come and pledge themselves to the Temple.

"That's when I met you," he said, looking at Hiromi. She felt betrayed and used, but showed nothing on her face.

"Once that had been done, Xorphitus ordered me to build a bridge over the River Styx to complete an outside path from the Temple to the swamp, so we could avoid the interference of the Elves and Faeries in the forest," Quinn explained. "We were using different types of wood, but they all crumbled and decayed upon contact with the water. Now, the Seeker of Power is most likely here, and the Temple will fall."

He shook his head slightly. "I kept my memories close enough to remind me of the pain I felt on the street, and of the fear of death taking me at any moment," he whispered angrily, "but far enough away not

to let them affect my decisions inflicting those same feelings on others. Hundreds, if not thousands, have died under my orders... and with my support. Deal with me as you wish; I will accept any fate you decide for me."

Hiromi shook her head, shocked at the story he had just told her. *But...*

"God has already forgiven you," she said. "It is up to you to forgive yourself, and to seek the forgiveness of those you have wronged.

"You must atone."

Quinn nodded and rose slowly. "Then I will spend the rest of my life doing so."

Lucciana shook her head and scoffed. "So, what, you're just going to let him go like that?" she asked incredulously. "How do you know if he's really serious?"

On her doubt, Kiwi's head glowed, and she peeked into the innermost recesses of the Psionic's mind. Despite the telepathic power she felt inside him, he allowed her full access to every one of his innermost feelings, memories and experiences. There was hatred within him, but it was all directed at himself. "He's serious," she stated.

Hiromi looked at him imploringly. "Come with us!" she insisted. "We can start by helping Rebecca and the King defend the Forge. We'll need your strength when we get there!"

Quinn shook his head. "When Xorphitus finds out what I'm doing," he said, "he'll be able to slay me with a thought. Such is the oath that the leader of the Temple swears when he is granted that power. I will not take the coward's way out and rush into an easy death.

"Besides, there are three sacri... three women," he corrected, "out there, ones I had ordered brought to the Temple to be tortured and murdered in a summoning ritual to bind another demonic guard to the Temple. I will start with them, and seek their forgiveness before I set out to find the others'... over as many lives as it takes."

Everyone watched as he began to walk towards the forest, then stopped. "Hiromi," he said, with his back to her. She blinked in response. "You have a light in you, a light I could never hope to have," he said. "Never let it go, ever."

He quickened his pace, sending his mind in every direction for the confused and panicked thoughts of the fleeing Elven captives. Moments later, he was gone.

Goodbyes

The second they had turned from Quinn's run towards the edge of the mountain, and once again faced the Temple, they noticed the knights closing in on them.

For ones wearing long grey chain tunics and pants and carrying six foot Blackblades in a single hand, they made surprisingly little noise. Their black boots were trimmed brown, and their black tabards bore large red skulls.

Their faces were imposingly hidden under great Crusader helms with tiny slits for the eyes. The identically dressed occupants of these great pieces of armor had virtually no characteristics to distinguish one from the other; they were now little more than whatever force they represented.

There were a dozen of them, maybe more, eyes flashing an unearthly white from the slits in their helmets that offered the only visible way to strike through their armor. What was even more disconcerting was that they were all winking in and out of sight, disappearing and reappearing under a Blink enchantment.

Janus, Lucciana and Shss raised their weapons quickly, and prepared to go down fighting. Kiwi tensed

and prepared to launch, and Hiromi readied her most powerful healing magics. The line of knights stopped in front of them, and one stepped forward.

"Lady Hiromi!" his muffled voice boomed out. "Quinn has given us life, and sent us to meet thou."

"Betrayer..." Lucciana hissed.

The knight ignored her. "We will escort thee to the Temple of Ramm and to the Cosmic Forge, and help thee in thy battles there," he proclaimed. "Come! We must leave at once!"

Hiromi took a confused step back. "I..." she stammered.

"What are you waiting for, 'Lady' Hiromi?" Janus asked. "Lead on."

She stuck her tongue out at him, then said, "Um, sure... let's go!"

The second the words escaped her lips, the knight yelled, "MOVE OUT!" and the entire line turned on their heel and charged the Temple entrance.

"Come on guys!" Hiromi shouted and sprinted after them.

They weaved in and out among the charred and punctured corpses along the earth behind the spectral, blinking knights. Temporarily transporting the blinker to a parallel dimension, the spell kept the one under its effects out of harm's way for the time the enchantment was active.

In these knights' cases, though, the effect seemed permanent. Hiromi had never seen a Blink spell last so long.

Everyone could hear the Demon's cries before they even reached the entrance. The inside of the Temple was hot, and the path to the small prisons on multiple levels ahead of them suddenly dropped off into a very distant pit of oil. On every level all the way to the bottom of the Temple, there was a room barred off by a gate, and all manner of unholy creatures writhed and roared from within their prisons.

Goat-legged red Demons, humanoid rams in green tunics with electricity sparking from their staves, scraggly Giants, skeletal pharaohs, giant rock heads that Kiwi recognized, and even more of the black Crusaders that were now accompanying the group all pounded and roared, flexed and fought within the small rooms.

"Leave it to us, Lady Hiromi. One must hold this staff," he said, holding a twisted knot of wood bronzed at one end up, "to conjure the road we need to cross." Hiromi started to reach for it, but the knight held it higher where she couldn't touch it.

"Nay, Lady Hiromi, nay!" he boomed. "The Staff of Aram will drain thy life with every second thou hold it, bonding itself to thee with a touch, and we will not see thou fall prey to its magics! Perhaps one of thy knights would be the standard bearer for this dangerous artifact."

Hiromi giggled at his antiquated, but polite, speech. "Hand it to me, good sir, for I possess the powers of healing, and I will not be made the victim of foul magic this day!" she proclaimed in her best impression of his deep and powerful voice. Kiwi giggled, and the Priest wondered just what manner of, well, manners, she was picking up from the mischievous Faerie.

The knight saluted with his massive Blackblade, and held the Staff to her. "Thou are truly one of great honor, Lady Hiromi, to place thyself at such risk to protect the knights who serve thee!" He handed her the Staff. "Hold proudly the symbol of thy courage, and let we Dark Crusaders handle the demonic infestation for thee!"

With that, the Dark Crusaders started to run straight towards the pit, and to everyone's surprise, charged over empty air to the other side over an invisible bridge.

They barreled into the area ahead of them, and seconds later, there was a clicking sound. Metal scraped on rock as the gate ahead of them opened and the dozen Crusaders ran, blades forward, into the room of Demons and out of sight.

The Demons and beasts locked in the chamber to the left suddenly looked away from the gate in front of them, and back towards the unseen, armored intruders.

The collective roar of the Demons shook the Temple walls. All at once, every one of its denizens that the party could see floated, bounced, flew and scrambled to engage. The Dark Crusaders countered with a united battle cry of their own, and engaged their monstrous opponents.

Metal clanged hard against metal, and the sound of tearing flesh filled the air. "Have at thee!" "Back to hell with thee, Demon!" they shouted.

A red Greater Demon swiped a meaty arm out at one of the Crusaders, when the armored illusion blinked out of existence, leaving his sword standing visible and perpendicular to the ground. The red monster's claw batted the sword towards the wall, where it bounced off, then clattered to the stone floor.

Suddenly, it thrust upwards through the Demon's belly in a quick thrust. The last thing the Greater Demon saw was the Dark Crusader slowly fading back into existence, hands firmly on the Blackblade, before the Demon was kicked off of the sword and had fallen.

Another two Crusaders engaged a scruffy Giant and sliced their blades around his great, descending hammer, dodging the clumsy attack and drawing their swords along his ribs in perfect sync.

A few others were not faring so well. Pixies swarmed one, laughing and giggling as they covered his body completely and kept him from moving. Once they flew inside his helmet, they pushed and punched his metallic body from the inside as they struck and cast dangerous magic at the grey armor. Finally, his armor and sword fell to the ground in a heap, with no discernable corpse in it.

The Pixies flew out en masse to the next Dark Crusader, but he swung his Blackblade with a strength and speed unmatched by any living knight. They fell to the ground in pieces and turned into little piles of dust, laughing and giggling on their way down.

A line of six knights cut downwards, to the side, up and down in perfect tandem, and under their assault, the goat Priests of Ramm and enemy Crusaders who stood against them had no chance against the perfectly timed whirl of blades.

Amidst the chaos of battle, a screaming, transparent, white-bearded spirit of a purple-robed Wizard suddenly flashed up past the party and the invisible bridge. With an unending scream of "Nononono!" there was a flash of light, and his spirit disappeared before they could get a good look.

Nobody's attention was focused on him for long. Everyone's stomach tied in knots when every gate in the Temple simultaneously, suddenly opened.

In the prison where the Dark Crusaders battled, Demons fell and Giants toppled, Priests fled and rock heads splintered, but it was clear when the gates opened and more of the beasts began to pour in that reinforcements had arrived.

The entire Temple was teleporting itself from chamber to chamber, straight up to the battlefield above them. The Crusaders began to drop before the onslaught of a multitude of summoned guardians, one by one, until they all were nothing but piles of armor and swords. Every denizen of the Temple was now spilling out of the chamber in front of the party, and were heading straight for them. "We have to get rid of the Staff!" Hiromi exclaimed.

But to her horror, she realized that her plan to remove the invisible bridge would not be as easy as she had thought. It had taken a few minutes, but she started to notice that the Staff was digging into her hand, like it was devouring her flesh.

She let go of the Staff in a pained panic, but it was stuck to her hand. "Ow! It's eating me!!" she yelled. "Get it off, before they get to us!!"

Kiwi started to panic. "What's going on? Throw it down!" she exclaimed.

"I can't!!" the Hobbit screamed, pushing her other hand at it, but succeeded only in getting it stuck, too... and the Staff began to eat into both of her palms. Though she tried to keep it from digging much further down with a powerful healing spell from both of her glowing hands, the pain was excruciating... and the Demons were over the chasm, almost upon them!

"Hold your hands apart!" Lucciana ordered. Hiromi did so, and held the Staff up with her hands on either end. Lucciana unsheathed her katana and in one quick motion, sliced the Staff straight down the center and into two pieces.

The Giant and two Priests of Ramm on the invisible bridge widened their eyes as the ground dropped out from beneath them, and they fell straight into the pool of boiling oil at the bottom of the Temple.

The other Demons stopped short on the other side, but the throng of bodies pushed a few of the more unlucky Greater Demons and Priests straight into the pit below. Their comrades made no move to help them.

Meanwhile, the two pieces of the Staff were still stuck to Hiromi's hands, and she knew she wouldn't be able to keep them skin deep and away from her muscle and bones much longer. She used as much of her power as she could to stave off the injury... but the curse was winning. There was no way she could stop it from overtaking her whole body.

Janus reached forth to pull them off of her hands, but Hiromi pulled away. "No, you'll just get stuck, too!" she warned.

Kiwi thought quickly, but there was nothing she could do to help her friend besides brainstorm. "Can you remove it?" she asked. "Can anybody remove it?!"

Lucciana shook her head quickly. "It's a higher level spell, to Remove Curses," she explained. "Only the most powerful of Priests and Bishops can cast it." And with that, she raised her katana to the Priest. "I want you to hold your hands out for me, Hi," she said calmly. "Palms out and perfectly straight."

Though she did as she was told, her lower lip began to quiver in pain and fright. "What are you going to do?" she asked worriedly.

"Stay still and don't move a muscle," Lucciana ordered. Of course, that made Hiromi shake harder. "Janus, Shss, hold her hands still!" she insisted.

Janus firmly held her left arm, and at Lucciana's indication, Shss followed suit with her other. They shook with fear as well, but at least she could get a better shot with them helping...

"Hold still... don't move..." she said, bringing her katana above her head.

Hiromi began to struggle. "You're not going to cut my hands off, are you?!" she yelled, pulling her hands away from Janus and Shss, but Lucciana shook her head violently. "No! Hold still!" she ordered. The other two held on tightly, and the Samurai cut neatly down her hands...

Though Hiromi flinched and closed her eyes tightly, she slowly came to realize that there was no pain to accompany her terror. She heard two wooden thunks beneath her... and when she opened her eyes, she saw that the two pieces of the Staff fell to the ground with a thin layer of her skin attached to each.

With no cursed artifact to fight against, the healing power the Priest used to hold back the Staff's curse immediately washed itself over the bleeding wounds on her hands and returned them to normal. Shss nodded and smiled in approval, and Kiwi cheered. "That was awesome!!" she yelled.

A singled bead of sweat fell from Lucciana's brow. She subtly wiped it away before anyone could notice.

"We better go, NOW," Janus insisted. The Demons were stuck on the other side of the chasm, but the Pixies were flying straight over it. Their carefree giggling was unnerving.

They all started to run back towards the edge of the mountain, and Janus was relieved to see that the Pixies could not come any farther out of the Temple than the entrance. They, and even the multitude of Fireball spells shooting out of the Demons' claws, were bound to the unholy structure.

"We can't fight through all those guardians if the Dark Crusaders barely put a dent in them," Lucciana realized.

"So we go ask my mom and Master Jang for help!" Kiwi suggested from Hiromi's shoulder. "My teacher and the Faeries never turn down anyone in need! I don't know this place too well, but I'm sure if we can get down the mountain, I'll know how to get home."

The others agreed, and the party headed away from the resting place of the Cosmic Forge. Just a few minutes walk away, the cliff beckoned... and it was quite a drop. "How are we all going to get down there?" Hiromi asked. "There must be some climbing equipment around here somewhere..."

"We could search for some," Lucciana started, "but you heard that man back there. The Forge is vulnerable now, and we have to get to it before someone else does."

Kiwi stood proudly on Hiromi's shoulder, and pointed happily at herself. "Don't worry, I can go alone!" she said.

"Not likely! I'm coming with you," Hiromi insisted.

The Faerie grinned widely. "Another transport, courtesy of Kiwi Travel?" she asked.

Her friend shook her head, and pushed a feeling of air down from her chest to her feet. "You're not the only one who can fly," she said with a wink, and the two began their descent into the trees.

Wish I spent more time practicing spellcraft, instead of just the blade, Lucciana thought. "Be careful, and hurry back!" she shouted down.

Perhaps it was the sound of her voice, or maybe Hiromi had used up too much magic in the past few days, but once she heard the encouragement, her Whirlwind spell cut out completely and she fell full speed towards the ground. *It never was meant to be a flying spell...* she thought calmly.

Kiwi gasped and flew up towards her falling friend, hoping she had enough strength to stop her fall. When her body came into contact with the Faerie's hands, though, Kiwi was pulled down with her. She was falling too fast!

A few dozen feet above the ground, Hiromi shot water through her body, out of her hands, and back into herself. Her movement slowed almost to a stop, and she gently, gradually descended to the ground on her feet.

She sat up, seeing the world around her moving in blurry speed under the effects of her own Slow spell. Kiwi was blazing around and around her head, probably wondering what was going on. It took only a minute for everything to slow down to normal speed, when Hiromi stood up with a sheepish grin.

"Stop scaring me like that!" Kiwi exclaimed. "My little heart can only take so much! Warn me next time you're going to use some strange move or I'll pop you one, ok?!" she said, with a fist aimed between Hiromi's eyes.

"Where's home?" her friend asked, deftly changing the subject.

Kiwi looked around. "Um... let's just go into the trees, and I'll recognize something sooner or later," she said, with a smile and a shy hand behind her head. *Not lost, just exploring!* she thought.

Janus watched the two girls go into the forest several hundred feet below them, and shook his head in fear for their safety. "Are they always so hasty?" he asked.

With a chuckle, Lucciana shrugged. "Just met them, myself," she admitted. "Seems to me those kids are perfect for each other."

Shss looked at them fondly as they went into the trees. *The little ones... kind of like Serkesh and I when we were still young*, she thought. She smiled at the memories. *Every day filled with excitement, new creatures to befriend or tease. Every morning we would wake up with exciting ideas, new adventures to be had.*

Serkesh, mom, dad... tell me. Are you proud? Have I matured into a woman worthy of the Lizardman, knowing what I have experienced and how I have changed these past few days? Will you welcome me back with warm hearts and open arms as you did when I was young, knowing the distaste I have acquired for the hunt?

Lucciana saw the reflective look in her friend's eyes. She had been very silent since they met up again in the prison, and it looked like it stemmed from more than an inability to understand one another's words.

"Shss," she said. Her friend broke from her thoughts and met her friend's eyes. "Hi," Lucciana continued with a wave.

Shss cocked her head.

"Hi," Lucciana repeated, and waved again. "H'ai," her friend returned, with the same wave.

Lucciana pointed at Shss, and she understood. "Sa!" she exclaimed with widened eyes. "A, Shss," she said with a point at herself. "I, Ooshiana," she continued, pointing at her friend. She continued to Janus. "Eo, Aness."

Though he wasn't looking, Janus heard the voice directed at his back. "Aness?" he asked.

Lucciana cast a quick glance at him. "Yes, that's you," she explained.

He grunted in response. "Hmph, either way. Doesn't matter to me," he muttered. With that, he sat down on the edge of the cliff, swung his legs over the side, and hoped that the two girls would be safe wherever they were headed. The cliff was too steep to descend with his climbing skill alone.

Even at this distance, Janus could still hear their heartbeats getting farther and farther away. He knew that if he heard anything out of the ordinary, he would scale the cliff wall down to assist, broken legs or not. He wouldn't let anything happen to them.

The beautiful stone reflected Hiromi and Kiwi's image in a thousand different angles and directions. It was absolutely enchanting.

"There! The Rock of Truth!" Kiwi exclaimed. "That's near my home! Come on, quick!!" She flew off of Hiromi's shoulder and into the thicket of trees. "This way!" she called back.

Hiromi did her best to keep up, but it turned out that the lights of the other Faeries guided her better than her spirited companion. There were sprites everywhere, of all different shapes and sizes, though none bigger than her forearm. Some were naked, some were robed, some were hued green while others were blue, or even purple.

The common trait they all shared was a common feeling of happiness and playfulness, hopping and flying around a collection of rocks at the base of a strong and healthy tree. Kiwi had already flown over the rocks and into the crowd by the time she arrived.

"Hey, it's Kiwi!" one Faerie piped up. "We thought you ran away because your hair's gone!" The other Faeries began to crowd around her, teasing and rubbing her smooth head. "I might know some magic to bring it back... hey, look! A visitor!" another yelled when she saw Hiromi. All of the Faeries turned to the Hobbit, and Hiromi wondered if she had made a mistake, arriving so suddenly.

"Visitor!!" they all yelled. Each one dipped low to the ground and picked up something, then flew with furious speed towards her. Hiromi raised an arm to block her body, until she saw that they were carrying food, water, tiny towels and other small plates of helpful goodies.

"Hungry?" "Thirsty?" "Let me clean your face!" "Can I touch your hair?" "Wow, you're big!" "Come sit on my rock over here!" "What's your name?" Faeries swarmed and besieged her with kindness. Their wings fluttered against her cheeks and arms, and it tickled. Hiromi laughed, and felt right at home.

"Mom!" Kiwi called out from the middle of the little village. "Mom, we need your help! It's me, Kiwi! Where are you?"

Queen Saeren was dressed in a fine red gown with intricate patterns of golden leaves and trees stitched all over it. With her piercing emerald eyes and light blue skin, she might have easily been mistaken for her daughter, if it weren't for her long silvery hair and more mature facial features.

When she heard her child's voice, she came down from one of the higher stones with a worried look on her face. She fluttered forward and squeezed Kiwi tight. "Kiwi! Where have you been?!" she exclaimed. "You always disappear for hours at a time, but this time is too much! Even the Delphi didn't know where you were! I was about to send your brothers and sisters out to find you!"

Kiwi's voice came in her mind. *Please, listen to me, mom. You won't believe what I've seen...*

Though only a second passed around the two, it was enough for Kiwi to relate the entire experience of Ghosts, Giants, pens and Demons that had comprised her unbelievable experience these past few days.

"How did you...?!" Saeren started.

I'll tell you later, mom, but we don't have much time! Please, help us! Kiwi thought.

Her mother looked stunned for a moment, but then nodded. Wasting no time, she flew atop the highest rock and spoke. "Everyone, the Temple of Ramm has long plagued our lands with attacks and kidnappings... of this you are all aware," she said, then waited until she had the attention of every Faerie.

"But now, even the Bane King and Lady Rebecca themselves cannot hold back their forces from a most dangerous artifact. Those who are willing to come with Kiwi and me to assist our new friends would be most welcome, though you are not required to do so."

Wings fluttered and beat through the air, and an army of hundreds of Faeries flit to and fro before Saeren and her stunned child. While Kiwi felt slightly superior knowing that some of the Faeries who had bullied her earlier now sat fearfully on the ground, their eyes cast down in shame, she was surprised that so many of the Faeries would so willin...

Never mind, she thought. It's not for my sake... they just want to help mom. She could see their teasing looks, even now. "We should also go get my teacher Jang," Kiwi said. "He's the one who taught me the ways of the Monk. With his help, those Demons don't stand a chance!!"

"Monk?" Saeren asked.

Her daughter blushed and looked away. "Spiritual... seeker and, um, martial artist," she said softly.

Saeren opened her mouth slightly in surprise, then smiled. "Is that all? You could have told me, Kiwi," she said. "You know I love you know matter what you choose to do with your life."

The little Monk perked up immediately. "Thank you so much, mom!" she yelled out. She flew out in front of her hundreds of brothers and sisters and hovered there. "All right, everyone! We're going to pick up my teacher, so please give my friend Hiromi a ride over to him! Then we enact the business end of a little physical karma on the denizens of Ramm... let's give 'em back a little of what they've been giving us all these years!"

The young Faerie blasted energetically into the air. She felt on top of the world with both her family and her friends there at her side. With her in the lead, the army of Faeries and a now flying Hobbit tore through the sky to Jang's resting spot.

Hiromi's stomach fluttered as the Faeries held her arms and legs, and the trees below her zoomed by with unbelievable speed. The sun had risen, and she could see far and wide over the tree canopy.

From this height, she felt like she could see the entire world... from the impressive stone castle to her left to the outskirts of a thick and lush swamp to her right. The trees were too dense and the mountains too high to see the Temple, though.

Still, she felt somewhat frightened in the hands of the Faeries. They were strong as a team, but they looked so small and delicate. Even so, she knew she could trust them if they were Kiwi's family, and it beat walking through the Gremlin-infested forest.

Kiwi had already set down in a grassy clearing surrounded by trees, but there was no sign of the Monk she had spoken so fondly of in the past. "Master Jang?" she called out, but nobody answered.

She looked around in confusion as Hiromi and the rest of the Faeries set down behind her. "I don't get it," she said, "he always sleeps here when I meet him at daybreak..."

After flying forward to a clearing in the forest, she suddenly spoke up. "Oh, here he is!" she called back. "A little change of venue sleeping between the trees!" Hiromi walked down the path until the tree was no longer blocking her view.

The old Monk was sleeping on the ground in his dirty old robe, and his face looked very peaceful. Like Kiwi, he was bald. Hiromi smiled at seeing how cute it was seeing the two of them together, especially when the Faerie got on his chest and started hopping up and down in excitement.

Master Jang, wake up! I've brought my family and my friend to meet you! Kiwi thought to him.

He didn't stir. The Faerie's face slowly fell, and she stopped jumping. "Master Jang?" she asked vocally. *Come on, wake up, I want you to meet everyone...*

His body continued to lie still, and he made no sign of hearing the little Faerie. *Please, wake up!* she implored.

That's when she noticed it: she wasn't rising and falling on his chest like she usually did when he was...
...breathing.

"No... God, no, please... you..." Kiwi stammered. Hiromi realized then what was going on, and knelt beside the old Monk. "Jang, wake up! Please!" the Faerie pleaded. She ran up to his face and shook it hard. "You promised me that we'd see each other again today! You can't be... it wasn't supposed to be like this!!"

"Kiwi..." Saeren started.

"NO!" her daughter screamed, holding her face in her hands. "It's not fair! It's not fair!! You were the only

one who..." She started to cry, until a sudden thought came to her. "Hiromi... you can bring people back from the dead, right?" she asked. "So that means you can help Master Jang! So please, bring him back, I beg you!"

Hiromi shook her head. "If someone died of natural causes, it won't work... his body won't be able to function. It was his time... as it will be yours and mine someday. But you still have your memor..."

"Please just try!!" Kiwi interrupted, with heartbreakingly teary red eyes pleading for her friend's assistance.

Hiromi was shocked out of what she was trying to say, and consented. "I'll do my best, for you, Kiwi," she relented. "But please, promise me you won't expect anything... I don't want to see your hopes shattered, ok?"

Her friend nodded and flew over to Hiromi's shoulder, who opened up Jang's robe so she could see and feel his old, but surprisingly chiseled, chest. She laid her hands upon him and felt the renewing warmth of God flow from her body, through her hands and into the old man. *God, please guide this being from your loving embrace to the empty shell before me...* she prayed.

A light suddenly and quickly spread from her hands and over the old Monk, then shot into the sky in a bright pillar. It went so far up that Kiwi couldn't even see where it ended. Hiromi felt the presence of the old Monk resting on the other side, and gently called for him to return to his body.

Unlike many of the others who had witnessed the beauty of the hereafter, the Monk willingly followed the pillar back to the tiny forest, on this single, lonely little planet. She could feel him coming closer with every passing second.

The process of returning life was twofold: providing the spirit access to the physical world in the form of the light pillar was key to restoring life, and unfortunately, the easy part. The actual process of attaching the soul to the body was more critical, and depending on the wounds of the body, the emotional scarring of the soul, attachments to the hereafter or death itself and a multitude of other reasons, made Resurrection a difficult spell to pull off.

He seemed more than happy to assist however he could, though. With his help, Hiromi nurtured and flowed a tiny amount of spirit energy from herself and the Monk's spirit. A few minutes later, she had formed two tiny cords of energy protruding from both his physical body's stomach, and out of the formless spirit energy that was just above the body. With a little coaxing, this spiritual link from body to spirit extended from both forms, and met one another in the middle.

The second this attachment, born of energy and strength from both Hiromi and Jang, had been completed, the Monk's spirit became visible, took on the form of his physical body, then glided down gently to overlap with it. The pillar's light dimmed, and the old Monk's spirit disappeared from sight.

"Master Jang?" Kiwi asked quietly. She was extremely gentle, stroking his face with a very warm hand and crying openly on his robe. Her brothers and sisters looked on in awe at the sight of an actual Resurrection spell, but her mother simply looked concerned.

Master Jang? she repeated in her mind. She probed every corner of her mind and his for even the slightest spark of consciousness.

But nothing came to her. *It didn't work... no...*

Kiwi's lower lip quivered, and she bit it to keep from sobbing openly. She was in control of her emotions... she had to put on a brave face for him... but her body began to shudder of its own accord, and a choked cry came from her mouth. Her tears fell in streams.

..... *Kiwi... you always were an impatient one...* a voice came to her. The old Monk's head began glowing softly.

"Master Jang!!" she yelled, and hugged his face much more gently than she would have liked.

His voice came to her again. *I'm sorry... too weak to move. This body is dead, but we still have a connection more powerful than any physical restraints, right, little one?*

Of course! she thought as her head glowed, wiping away her tears. He chuckled in his next thought to her. *I guess I couldn't hold out long enough to give you a proper goodbye, my student! Please forgive me for that.* Kiwi shook her head... he was back, and that was all that mattered.

I must go soon, as your friend's concentration and my own ability to be this dense wanes with time, he thought, and Kiwi glanced over to see that Hiromi was struggling hard to keep the connection in place. *But I wish to tell you this, Kiwi: never have I had a student as bright and as energetic as you, and I will forever treasure our every moment together. The world is a more wonderful and rich place to have you, which is something you will come to see for yourself one day.*

In truth, I have seen that your opinions of yourself are less than truthful. You are quick to forget and dismiss your praises, as quick as you are to accept your faults.

She blushed and looked away. *Kiwi...* he thought to her, and she slowly looked him in the eyes once more.

You are a much more powerful, much more beautiful being than you know. We all are, and once we realize this simple fact, we are truly free to love, and to create, as our Creator intended for us.

I don't regret my passing, for I will always be with you, and I will see every one of the great things you will accomplish someday. The difference in vibration between this world and the next is significant... but even though you cannot always hear my voice from there, love crosses all boundaries. I'm sure you realize this from the friends you have made on this journey.

I love you dearly, my student, my friend... Kiwi started to cry again, but they were tears of happiness.

I have seen a possible future for you, he continued, *one that is full of pain and suffering. In that time, you may think that I am not there, but I promise you that I will never leave your side. Always remember, a bond this strong... can never... be... broken...*

His thoughts began to fade as Hiromi's hands dimmed. She was losing the spell...

And finally, they turned completely dark. She wouldn't be able to heal without any rest, but... "Kiwi," she said breathlessly, "did... it work?"

She kissed her teacher on the forehead, saying goodbye one last time. Then, with a flutter, she was on Hiromi's shoulder and squeezing her cheek with the strength she wished she could have shown her teacher's fragile body. "Thank you... so much, Hi-chan..." she whispered through her tears. "I will never forget this..."

Saeren flew next to her and cradled Kiwi's head to her chest, as her brothers and sisters shuffled ashamedly... this was the girl they had been ridiculing all this time.

"Ka," Shss said. Lucciana took her hand off of Shss' spear and pointed to her katana. "Ka," Shss repeated. She pointed to Janus, still sitting on the cliff, at the bow and crossbow on his back and at his side. Shss hissed a laugh. "Ka."

"All weapons are Ka?" Lucciana asked, with a final point at each weapon.

Shss nodded once, and reviewed what she had learned. "Esu, Da'kom," she said with a point at Lucciana and Janus.

"Elf and Dracon," Lucciana corrected. "*Te i?* (And you?)" Shss blushed and stared off into space, as if she were thinking about something upsetting.

Lucciana understood. "Amazulu and Lizardman," she said.

Shss was silent for a moment, then whispered both words to herself. "Ama'su-u, *te Izza'ma*," she repeated, turning both of the words in her mind. *Which am I?* she thought. *Where exactly do I belong?*

Not wanting to open up any old wounds, Lucciana changed the subject. "Now, my turn," she said. "A, Lucciana. *I*, Shss." Shss nodded emphatically, and looked towards Janus. "*I ta*, Aness."

Lucciana turned to the still Dracon. He hadn't moved since Hiromi and Kiwi descended the cliff. "She said, 'You go, Janus.'"

Janus made no indication of hearing her. The Samurai pointed at him. "'A, Janus?'" she asked Shss, but the Fighter seemed to find the sentence amusing. "*Ket, ket*," she said with a shake of her head. "'O, Aness,'" she corrected.

They must have gender built into the language, the Elf thought. *This is actually kind of interesting.*

At that moment, Janus shifted, and Lucciana watched him stand. "They're coming," he said.

And indeed they were, in a strange fashion. Kiwi was leading an army of Faeries, and Hiromi was balanced atop several dozen of them. Her robe was pulled in every direction by the hands of the Faeries as they flew her over the treetop and back to the group.

Shss hissed another laugh and Lucciana shook her head, until the two girls had descended. "That had to have been one of the most ridiculous things I've seen in my life, Hi," she said.

Hiromi giggled. "Well, better get used to it, 'cause Kiwi and her family are going to fly all of us straight to the bottom of the Temple," she said.

"That so?" Lucciana asked. "This your family, Kiwi?" she asked, then suddenly noticed that the Faerie's cheeks were flushed and her eyes red. "You ok?" she further inquired.

Kiwi nodded and smiled. "Yes, don't worry," she answered, then swept her hands behind her. "I want everyone to meet my mom, Saeren, Queen of the Faeries."

At her introduction, Saeren fluttered forward and shook the hand and claw of every one of the giants. The pale and dark girl nodded in respect. "Pleasure," was all the big black one had to say.

"Let's not waste any more time," Lucciana said. "Forge to save."

In no time at all, the group and the mass of Faeries jogged and flew back to the entrance of the Temple of Ramm. They flattened themselves along the wall next to the entrance, and peeked in quietly. Many of the Demons had begun to wander the rest of the Temple, and only a small cadre of them were left on the bridge overlooking the chasm.

Kiwi caught Lucciana's look, then pointed at herself, then into the Temple. She nodded in response.

Like a dart, the Faerie shot in quickly, took a quick look around, and came back. "It's like a big Demon flophouse," she explained in a nervous voice. "Every floor is covered with those monster rooms and they're all running around them... but I think I see the way in."

She pointed below them. "There's this huge pit of something hot beneath us, and a bridge going directly into the Temple right below us," she said. "It's the lowest possible place in the whole area, it takes you right through all those Demon chambers, and it sounds like what that guy back in the prison was talking about. It must be it."

"How far down?" Lucciana asked.

Kiwi looked to the sky and calculated mentally. "Couple hundred feet," she guessed, "but I think we can go down quick enough if we have enough of my brothers and sisters bringing you guys down with them."

"Ok... how many Faeries to a person?" Lucciana wondered aloud. Faeries swarmed around her and pulled until they had gotten her off of the ground. "Around forty for me... now, Shss."

More Faeries came to her and pulled with all of their might. "About fifty. Looks like I'm a little lighter than you," she said with a laugh, patting her robe around the stomach. Shss shook her head and rolled Lucciana's sleeve back, comparing muscle size. "Yeah, yeah, I know," she answered.

"We still have quite a few left," Kiwi said. "We'll probably need them to hold Janus up, being the big guy he is." Janus snorted in response.

Over a hundred Faeries crowded around him, straining hard to lift his massive, muscular body off of the ground. Though it seemed to tire them greatly, they were finally able to do it.

"How many do we have left?" Lucciana asked, and Saeren took a quick count. "Not many, maybe ten or so."

"If I use my Slow fall, I can make it ok!" Hiromi insisted.

The Samurai hmphed. "If you use your Slow fall, you'll be target practice," she said. "Those Demons will be giving us everything they have, and that equates to a lot of fire."

Hiromi stubbornly dug her heels in. "I'll be fine!" she assured. "Ten Fire Shields is a lot of protection."

The Samurai crossed her arms over her chest. "And if they use ice?" she asked. The Priest smiled. "I trust the Faeries to use the right spells on the fly. Right, guys?" she asked.

"We will need our strongest ten spellcasters to accompany Hiromi, then," Saeren replied. "Tangerine, Cherimoya, Sapote, Papaya, Carambola, Feijoa, Mango, Calabash, Kumquat and Biriba, you will all protect her with your best, understand?"

Each Faerie flew over to Hiromi as their name was called, and the ones who were not already assigned to carry someone filled in for the carrying duty that the spellcasters had left behind. Kiwi flexed, and flew next to the entrance to the Temple. "Here we go!" she said. "I'll draw their fire."

Hiromi couldn't see what was happening, but heard enough to know what was going on. "Nyah, nyah! Come get me, Demons!!"

Typical Kiwi... she thought.

"Go," Lucciana hissed, and ran around the corner with Faeries in tow. She jumped off of the pathway towards the boiling oil below her, feeling her descent slow and control itself straight towards the bridge leading into the Temple. Fireballs began to rain down on her, and the Faeries did an excellent job of coordinating her falling speed to avoid them all.

Looking up, she saw that Janus and Shss were experiencing the same. The Fireballs whizzed by and exploded into showers of flame and spark behind them, and none of them struck flesh.

Finally, Hiromi jumped from the broken bridge and fell past everyone. Her entire body had been shielded several times over with several layers of transparent colors, from red and blue to completely white. Her descent slowed just below Lucciana, and the first of the spells began to rock her body.

Fireballs and Iceballs rained down on the slowly falling Hobbit by the dozen, as the Demons ignored the harder to hit targets for the slow one who was almost to the bridge. Most of the spells were fire-based,

and caused the outer layer Fire Shield to glow as they were absorbed. The few Iceballs that did come penetrated straight through the red glow, and disappeared with a flash into the blue Ice Shield closer to her body.

With every few shots, the Shields grew weaker and eventually disappeared, but there were more to absorb the next volley. When Hiromi reached the bridge, she made a slow run for the opening in front of her.

Shss hit the bridge first, picking up the slowed Hobbit and slinging her over her shoulder before she ran down the length of the bridge to the dead end ahead. Kiwi waved from over there, and disappeared into the solid wall behind her.

Lucciana and Janus hit next, and sprinted with all of their might as magics exploded behind them. At this point, all of the Faeries stayed behind to create a massive shield that blocked any further spell from affecting the party.

The creatures started a mad charge towards the fake wall the party had disappeared into. Frenzied Demons and powerful casters charged onto the bridge to meet the army of Faeries hovering in their way. At the same time, there was a bright rainbow glow as magics erupted from each of the powerful Faerie magic users. Under the assault, Demons flew off of the bridge, back into their comrades and in every direction imaginable.

Kiwi popped out of the wall one more time. *Mom, let's go!* she thought to her.

Saeren looked back quickly. *The Demons are coming... they know something is behind that wall,* she thought back. *We'll hold them back as long as we can, so please hurry!* Her daughter hesitated, then quickly nodded and went back down the chute her friends had slid down.

One spell got through the Shield and hit one of her children. Saeren immediately caste Haste, then Whirlwind, on her child, shooting her up and out of the Temple where the Demons could not reach her. With each passing minute, more and more of her little ones fell, and she shot them back out of the Temple in turn. They were losing strength, and couldn't hold the enemy off much longer.

Kiwi, please be safe... she thought.

Absolute Power

Piles of bodies he could handle. Piles of bodies he had *seen...* but this was too much.

First, there were the bone fragments and twitching fingers in the massive blocks of ice on the top floor. The ruined skeletons of several regal Undead were trapped within the chilly, crystal clear cubes, and even in that state, were trying to crawl for him and rip out his life.

Then, there came the hallway of corpses. They were everywhere, lined up in alcoves on either side of the passage, and in differing states of decay. There were the freshly rotting, the completely decomposed, the skeletal, and even some covered in the slimy, goopy, hairy bodies of gigantic brown spiders.

At the end of this vast stone corridor of death, there were tombs of clear importance. The one he had passed was littered with heaps of bone and skull fragments which began to clatter and shake when he walked by. And just past there were the remains of three or four Nightgaunts, creatures which resembled tiny purple Gargoyles.

Someone had been doing his work for him, as if the way to the small tomb in front of him was cleared for the sake of his arrival.

Perhaps it was the sign on the wall as he passed by that drew him in. The other crypts were not marked, or were labeled with placards and epitaphs that spelled out with no uncertainty the lack of importance of the one buried within.

But here lay the "Goddess of Aram." The Queen herself... someone who very likely had the pen of legend buried with her to keep its magics from falling into the wrong hands... or just to keep it from leaving hers.

When he entered the tomb populated by a single skeleton in an alcove in the back, he felt anger. It was a rage that was brighter than his own, a feeling quite possibly the remains of the resident spirit's mortal suffering, an anger that was only strengthened by its subsequent death.

Tearn began to back out of the chamber, but the gate closed behind him. And to think, he hadn't even seen a Ghost before he came to this wretched place...

"Revenge..." an angry voice echoed from everywhere at once. Tearn gathered the swirling energy needed for a Dispel Undead spell in his body... and now all he needed was a target. "Kill them..." it whispered, louder this time. The air got heavy with the combined force of the spirit's rage and its rising volume. A swirling white mist began to form in the small alcove of bones in front of him.

"They will die!" the voice roared, at the same time as the mist flowed into a cohesive shape, of a dark and long-haired beauty of a woman in a flowing black robe. Tearn could see right through her misty figure into the alcove behind her, which more than likely held what remained of her physical body.

She slowly raised her sleeved right arm to point straight at him. "You," she spoke in a chilling whisper.

Tearn raised his paws and unleashed the Dispel Undead spell, but once the invisible magic had gotten close enough to send her away from the physical plane, she had already swiped her left arm through the air and batted the imperceptible spell away. As he charged up a more powerful version of the same spell, the Ghost spoke, with no indication that he had tried to destroy her.

"I have waited for you, Seeker of Power," she continued. "Long ago, Charron told me you would be coming here... and how I have waited for you these many decades. You seek the Cosmic Forge, and I will give it to you. But first, I will have my revenge!"

He put his paws down and calmed the energy within. He withdrew them into his brown robe and nodded at the spirit. "What kind of revenge, Ghost?" he asked calmly.

"I was not always like this," she said. "Once, I was a beautiful and beloved Queen of a mighty empire. And though my rule was from a kind and peaceful hand, the Bane King, my former lover, ruled with a terror unequaled by anything that has ever come to pass.

"Once he had taken a sip from the well of absolute power, his thirst grew ever greater, as does your own. He made alliances with the foulest of Humanity, and sought to control the entire world with his wicked reign."

Tearn hmphed. "Thanks for the comparison," he muttered sarcastically.

"Once it seemed his goal was within his grasp, he grew all the more hungry to conquer and control all that he could," the Queen continued, seemingly ignoring his interruption. "He forged alliances with otherworlders, even the most hellish and demonic, provided they had the power he sought. It was with one of these most vile of Demons that he sacrificed an innocent and sinless virgin, so that the Demon might produce offspring that gave him the right to dwell within our world.

"And so it was that she was impregnated in the most vile of rituals, under the King's instruction, with the girl that would become the King's lover... and my murderer! The Demon Child Rebecca and the despicable King formed an unholy union of power and carnality, a union that is made even more dangerous by their control of the Cosmic Forge!

"Once they had turned on and slain the girl's demonic father, there was no end to their terror. They had the virgin and her husband tortured and put to death... and then... and then...!"

Tearn felt an intense anger then, wrath that felt strong enough to destroy the entire Isle of the Dead. He

wondered briefly what could be worse than a wrongful death, to set this Queen so wholly on edge, but understood when she gave the definitive answer: *"He used the pen!!"* she roared.

The spirit shook with rage at the memory of the Forge's power. Her lovely face contorted in a mask of absolute fury, and her ghostly teeth were clenched tightly together. Tearn had seen that face reflected to him many times before...

"He got exactly what he wanted," she explained. "First, his whore lover struck me down with her own hands. Second, she became pregnant with his bastard son... and finally, he became immortal. He used and discarded me like an old plaything, and took the Demon Child for himself as a lover.

"They murdered countless innocents, including myself, and all who have attempted to end their reign have met similar fates! With the Forge in their control, this world will be theirs... unless you can stop them!"

Tearn wondered if the Queen's comparison was as off the mark as he had originally thought. If she knew what he was planning to do with the Forge, she would probably view him with the same disdain as she did her murderers.

"I have waited for you for decades, because I knew you wielded the power necessary to murder them both!" she continued. "With the power of the Forge in your hands, they will not be able to stand up to you! Go, to its resting place in the Temple of Ramm! West of here through a passage on the River Styx, up the mountain, go to their base of depravity!

"Put an end to the senseless slaughter at their hands and slay them! The King, the wretched whore girl, and their hellborn child! Kill them all! KILL THEM ALL!!"

The ghostly form exploded from within with a powerful scream of anguish and revenge. The mist that made up its body fanned out in all directions and towards the Felpurr, encompassing the entire room. He could feel the coldness of her death, as well as a lifetime of anguish, as the mist passed through him, then finally disappeared.

Her scream echoed, losing no volume for several seconds, until it finally began to die down. Shortly after, it had receded... and a metal clang clattered where her spirit had disappeared seconds before. Tearn knelt down to recover the Silver Cross that the spirit had dropped, tucked it into his robe, and sighed.

He was beginning to tire of the dead yelling at him their untold tales, and was annoyed at being sent on yet another chase for information on his way to the Forge. He had no doubt in his mind that the second he reached the Temple, he would only meet another wailing specter with clues on the pen's *true* whereabouts.

Tearn exhaled sharply in exhaustion. He was sick of wasting time, knowing how many more of his people may be dying while he was sent around in circles for this pathetic pen. He finally conjured and summoned a powerful anti-force throughout his body.

With the powerful Levitate spell in effect, Tearn became a blur. A single thought propelled him at unbelievable speeds out of the Queen's crypt and down the hallway of skeletons. At the speed he was travelling, he didn't even have time to focus on any particular alcove of the dead.

In no time at all, he had made his way past the frozen skeletons, out the front door of the massive mausoleum and over the River Styx to the passage leading to the Temple of Ramm.

Not a single one of the soldiers had seen the robed Felpurr silently flying onto the roof of the Temple... and there were a lot of them. The first rays of dawn peeked over the trees on the mountain's edge and cast a pleasant hue on the black walls of the vile Temple. Because of his Levitation spell, he was completely out of air magic for the time being, but it made little difference. His most destructive spells, the

ones he preferred, belonged to the realms of fire and water.

Tearn crept forward on the rough material and came to a crouch at the edge, just overlooking the crowds of Ramm members. They were all wearing plate mail adorned with the symbol of the Ramm, and all of them were armed. The bearded war axe and tower shields seemed to be their equipment of choice, though some held polearms or swords of varying strength and size.

He had figured that he would need to take out an army to find the Forge, and he was prepared; it was time to use his full arsenal.

He lowered his hood and fluttered open his robe in complete silence. Attached to the inner lining of his robe were hundreds upon hundreds of flasks, vials, potions and other mixtures of every color imaginable.

"We've got three for the ceremony tonight," he suddenly heard someone say. Tearn peeked over the edge to see a man favoring his arm, as if it were bruised or broken. "Well, we would have had eight, but that mercenary is busy keeping them all to himself. When Xorphitus hears about this, he'll have his hide for sure."

Xorphitus? Tearn thought. *So the other one is here...*

He heard a little laughing and rustling, then the man spoke again. "Oh, here they come now," he said. "Remember, I won the bet, so I get first pick."

Tearn scanned his green eyes past hundreds of the soldiers, trying to find the ones the man was speaking about. He could see, off in the distance, that a group of about a dozen soldiers was making its way towards the entrance of the Temple. Once the ones in the middle had spread apart somewhat, he could finally see the captives who would be taking part in the ceremony.

All three were black-haired Elven women, probably plucked out of the forests nearby. They were dressed in ritual black halter tops and cloth undergarments, and were barely limping themselves along with the armored soldiers. One of them seemed especially injured, with cuts and bruises all over her body. She continued to struggle bravely despite her condition, until one of the soldiers punched her across the jaw.

She stumbled into one of the other women, who picked her up and held her in her arms for the final stretch towards the Temple. They looked utterly without hope.

This... this is what these bastards are doing here? Tearn thought angrily. Fire raged within him, and memories returned to him unbidden. *Tearn! Help us! Tearn!!* the voices shouted.

No matter where he went, there were more like those filthy mongrels who attacked his people. It didn't matter if it was bestial, Human, or even those dirty Rawulf. Evil held to no particular race... and it was in places like this, where it was allowed to congregate and grow stronger and more self-assured with every passing day, that its stench was the greatest.

Tearn closed his robe. Circumstances like these called for one of the more painful and destructive spells in his employ...

He conjured flame energy in his body, hotter than he ever believed possible. The flames raged within him, then began to intertwine with his already painfully powerful anger, and the two started to draw strength from one another. When the combined heat had finally reached its apex, he held his paws out towards the sky.

The dawn sky was already red and orange with the rising sun, but once Tearn had gestured towards it, the only color left was a deep crimson. The soldiers who were bringing the women to the Temple stopped their march, looking up with wonder at the strange sight. Perhaps it was another of Xorphitus' rituals, they might have wondered... before the sky began to cry blood.

As Tearn shot three successive Fire Shields at the captive women, freeing them from the effects of the Firestorm spell for the time being, he noticed off to the side that the first tears had struck. The liquid fire burned straight through a soldier's plate armor and began to eat into his body.

He tried to pull his heavy armor off in time to nurse the wound, but it was too late. The rain began to fall heavier and heavier until the entire area was coated with maroon streaks... and screams.

The escorting soldiers ran towards the Temple and safety. One of the soldiers tried to drag an Elf with him, but once the rain had begun to pour, he felt his armor and body begin to melt away with it. He ran screaming towards the Temple, but didn't make it ten steps before he was overcome and left burning from the inside on the crimson stained ground.

The Elves, too, covered themselves with their arms and hands. But when the transparent, circular shields winked and glowed around them with every drop of fire that fell, they realized that this was a rescue. They wasted no time in helping their wounded friend up, and ran back towards the edge of the mountain and the climbing equipment that brought them up here.

Tearn reached into his robe and began throwing his bombs in every direction towards the soldiers who made it back to the Temple in time to live. Flasks of green exploded in showers of acid that melted soldiers to the bone, while red ones shattered in fiery explosions among the soldiers and shook the walls of the Temple. He saw a group of twenty or so who had almost made it to the Temple, were it not for the purple potion that he shattered at their feet.

The air around them was suddenly pulled into a newly created vacuum, and the men were not able to move. They all fell to the ground clawing at their throats, with no air to breathe, and asphyxiated just inches away from the roof that would have protected them from the rain. The crimson drops made short work of their bodies. *And now, for the ones who had made it back...*

Tearn flipped off of the roof and sought shelter from the rain with several other soldiers who had gotten the same idea. Three men were there, including the one with the wounded arm. Tearn pushed a paw into either side of his robe and withdrew a pair of red potions, then threw them at the soldiers before they had a chance to react.

He purposefully aimed the both of them at the non-injured soldiers, and after the bombs had exploded on their bodies, they screamed as their flesh was stripped from their bones in unbearable heat. The injured one took a splash of liquid fire from both of his dying comrades, and with the Fire Bomb eating away at his body from both sides, he charged Tearn with his pathetically small axe.

Tearn threw a small red vial into his eyes, closing his immediately after, and the man screamed when the vial's sudden flash made his world go black. With a kick to the chest, the man was sent sprawling down the stairs in a heap of metal.

He conjured forth four sharp and pointed spears of ice, and sent them straight at the falling man. The first two burrowed into his shoulders and pinned him to the wall, the next plunged straight through his belly, and the final one cut straight through his groin and stopped in the stone behind him. Stuck fast to the wall and in unbearable pain, he tried to scream, but managed only a slight gurgle as blood fountained out of his mouth.

Tearn aimed the deformed Iceballs for the most delicate and painful places he knew, but made sure that none of them were lethal shots. He would suffer before he bled to death.

The attack on the soldier quelled a small fire of rage within Tearn... knowing the kind of man he was, and what he planned with those captive women. It felt like murdering the Rawulf who had attacked that day, but Tearn would never be satisfied until he killed them all with the Forge.

There was a clanging off to his right, and when he turned around, he saw that the entire cadre of soldiers that had survived was pouring out of the Temple and closing in on him. There were hundreds running

towards him under the Temple's roof, and dozens dead and dying out in the rain.

Before they had a chance to close, Tearn was throwing potion after potion into their midst. In only scant seconds, his entire array of Alchemical destruction was suddenly in the air and at the feet of the charging soldiers.

Clouds of green and purple gas sprang up from the shattered containers, then rose so fast that the soldiers had no time whatsoever to escape before the gas met their lungs. Their bodies spasmed as they gasped for breathable air, and crumpled to the ground in dead and dying heaps.

The ones who didn't breathe the Poison Gas either ran out into the rain to melt underneath its fire, or continued to barrel towards Tearn. Unfortunately for the more brave of the Temple guards, Tearn's Fire Bomb potions and Fireball spells charred them to cinders faster than the rain ever could have.

Once the crowd of soldiers had been neutralized, Tearn fired the smallest of Fireballs into the clouds of gas, and dove down the stairs before the explosion shook the Temple and sent the charred bodies of the soldiers of Ramm flying in every direction.

The explosions continued as the fire jumped from gas cloud to gas cloud, and the floor beneath his feet shook with every blast. Finally, after the fifth blast, there were only the cries of the wounded and dying upstairs. Tearn cast a spiteful glance at the bleeding, hanging man behind him, then went back up the stairs to finish off the wounded.

At the same time, a man in all black, from his shirt and pants to his cape, gloves and boots, was furiously making his way up the Temple towards the surface. The tattoos on his head were glowing as he concentrated hard on what was going on upstairs.

Quinn had heard the shouts of the wounded and the series of explosions from upstairs, but the Temple was too complicated and confusing to make a straight dash for the surface. He had to use teleporter after teleporter to finally make it to the top, while hearing more explosions and screams of pain punctuated with thoughts of sheer terror in the meantime.

When he had finally made it to the top, he was mildly surprised at the carnage that awaited him. There were blackened skeletons and charred corpses everywhere he looked, and no survivors to be seen. With the explosions that he had heard a moment ago still fresh in his mind, he was expecting such a display.

He heard the random thoughts of people approaching him. They were coming from the prison downstairs, and they were getting louder. Quinn clenched and unclenched his gloved hands into fists, and awaited the arrival of the ones who had done this.

Inside, Tearn was chasing down the last of the soldiers he had seen escape. The pathway into the Temple ended abruptly, overlooking a great pit of boiling oil. On the other side of the broken pathway, a series of small prisons to his left and right held the forms of roaring and clawing Demons, playful, but dangerous, sprites, mysterious and moaning wraiths and other creatures of otherworldly origin.

From his vantage point at the top, he could see that the Temple descended into the earth, and that there were several more levels with other chambers filled with more of the horrors. Some of the soldiers tried to jump across the pit, but only two of them were able to make it. The ones who fell screamed on their way down, though their cries were abruptly cut short by something he couldn't see.

The other two scrambled up the side of the pit, until a voice boomed out from below. "How *dare* you defile the grounds of the Temple, you filthy beasts?!" The soldiers looked around, panicked, for the coming punishment. *I've heard that voice before*, Tearn thought.

A streaking bolt of rainbow colors flashed between the two men. One simply dropped to the ground and died instantly, while the other's flesh suddenly turned to stone.

Another bolt flew up towards Tearn from far below, and before he could react, it hit him straight in the

forehead. He suddenly felt completely nauseous, and threw up into the pit of oil below him.

A Prismic Missile... and he was lucky it didn't have the same random effect on him as it did on the men across the pit...

Tearn drank from a potion of blue in his robe, one of his last, and felt the effects of the nausea leave him immediately. This whole place was a disgusting structure; he wished he had the power to level it.

He felt that his Levitate spell had just a small amount of power left in it, and with no interest whatsoever to rush through crowds of Demons to find the Forge, he knew if there was a shortcut, he would take it. He crawled to the edge of the pathway and looked down... and couldn't believe his eyes.

It was Xorphitus... but it wasn't the patient, floating head that he had met earlier. This was a fully formed, body and all, insane Wizard that was as real as he was. And he could see Tearn.

Another Prismic Missile shot from his fingertips, but Tearn ducked back onto the pathway to avoid its nasty effects. Once it had gone above him, he lept out over the pit, using the Levitate spell to bring him straight onto the catwalk that Xorphitus now occupied.

"Intruder! Thief!" he shouted. "You have trespassed upon Temple grounds without prior presidential approval, and I will have you imprisoned to redo the money required to project our company's profits! You will hang from a tree when I'm through with the serial number on the back of your fish!"

Apparently, this Xorphitus still embodied half of the universe's knowledge, but was not able to put it all together as the other one had. Tearn wondered for only a split second then, if it was truly a good idea to use the pen... when it could result in such insanity.

But he had promised, on their graves, that he would do all that was necessary to kill them... if it meant his life, he would scribe the Rawulf's deaths.

A flash of light suddenly shot out of Xorphitus' hands, and a red portal opened between them. He was conjuring something from a land of ash and fire... a Demon of some sort.

Tearn made the same movements and opened a second portal, just in time to see the Greater Demon step out of Xorphitus' portal. Tearn hoped that whatever decided to assist him in this battle would be of equal power.

When another Greater Demon stepped out of his own portal, Tearn sighed in relief. Both looked identical, with furry goat legs holding up muscular red bodies, both surrounded by an aura of flame. Beneath the tall Demons' green horns, black eyes of perverted and base desire stared the other down.

They roared at the same time and grasped one another's claws in an impressive display of power. The two flame auras joined together into a bright white fire that licked the catwalk above the battleground. The heat from the oil below and the Demons battling one another was almost unbearable.

Xorphitus and Tearn simultaneously began to fire spell after spell at the other while their titanic monsters battled it out between them. Four Magic Missiles struck Tearn in the gut, and as he recoiled in pain and shock, he fired back a Deep Freeze spell to encase the mad Wizard in ice.

The spell hit him, but nothing happened... not even the smallest of frost on his body. Xorphitus laughed long and hard, then fired a blue and white ring into Tearn that rooted him to the spot. No matter how much he struggled, he couldn't move his legs anymore.

NO! he screamed in his mind. I've come too far to die here!

Tearn unleashed spell after spell from his paws, conjuring every power from every elemental realm that he could. Smoking Fireballs, Chilly Iceballs, the awful smell of Noxious Fumes, multiple spells in a rainbow of colors streaked towards Xorphitus, and were absorbed into his robe. The mad Wizard laughed

even harder, and shot several Magic Missiles around the struggling Demons and into Tearn's body.

They hurt, a lot, and were beginning to burrow into his skin... and Tearn realized that Xorphitus was playing with him. The Felpurr tried every other spell in his repertoire, sucking the air from around the Wizard's head, trying to put him to sleep, even trying to Web his mouth closed. But nothing worked.

The Greater Demons continued to trade blows and wrestle atop the tiny catwalk. Tearn's Demon started to get pushed back, almost on top of the immobile Felpurr. He shouted out, and the Demon looked back to see what was happening. Understanding that he would crush his master soon, the Demon called on all of his strength to push his adversary back.

It was a stalemate, through and through. Another round of Magic Missiles pushed into Tearn's body, and he could feel them digging into his chest. One more volley, and he was finished.

Why? Why?! Why am I so powerless?!? Tearn screamed in his mind. *Nothing I'm throwing at him is having any effect...*

He slumped to his knees in defeat. *This is why they died. Because I had no power, and I couldn't protect them. And now, I'm going to die because of it, too.* He lowered his paws and resigned himself to his fate. *I won't be able to avenge you, my sweetheart, my little ones... I'm sorry. But at least... at least, I can be with you now...*

Xorphitus' hands glowed, and an invisible force pushed both of the Demons off of the catwalk and towards the boiling oil. Before either one could touch it, though, they both exploded in a ball of fire and recalled themselves to their plane of existence, to continue the battle in their homeland.

"You can't touch me, I'm not along for the ride like you!" the Wizard cackled. "I'm there, not here, you're here, see there? Hahahahaha!"

A final set of Magic Missiles charged up in his hands. *So, is that how it is?* Tearn thought. *I understand... The faces of his wife and sleeping babes flashed through his mind. I'll see all of you soon, but it won't be now...*

With the last of his strength, Tearn called forth divine energy in his chest, the last attempt to save his own life. "Begone!!" he yelled, pointing his paws at his opponent.

The proud smirk wiped itself from Xorphitus' face, and his body slumped to the ground. "Nononono!" he screamed as his soul came detached from his now useless form. The Banish spell pushed his soul up and away towards the entrance of the Temple.

A light began to shine down from the top, and though he couldn't be sure, Tearn thought he saw two distinct Xorphiti... before the blinding light enveloped the entire Temple, then disappeared completely.

"Only way..." he grunted, "you could exist after the other... was gone, is through magic... dolt."

Demons and the Undead were always the easiest to kill through a simple Dispel or Banish spell. With no real claim to the physical world, their eventual quick removal from it was all but assured.

The Hold Monsters spell soon released itself from Tearn's feet, and he stood up shakily. He was out of magic, out of potions, and had no way to defend himself if he was attacked. This was the only bad part about being a magic user...

He crawled off of the broiling catwalk and into a small hallway in front of him. There was a wall he could rest against for a little bit, but he doubted that he could stay alive long enough to get his power back before the Demons found him. He stumbled forward and pushed against the wall, hearing the powerful sound of numerous pieces of metal scraping against stone behind him.

The wall was an illusion. Tearn fell through the empty space and tumbled down a chute into a small room,

no bigger than a closet. There was barely enough room to stand up, and just a simple wooden door in front of him. Here was a good a place...

Tearn didn't finish the thought before he fell asleep.

He didn't know how much time had passed, but he could feel the power of all six realms of magic within him again. Tearn sat up and felt around the holes in his robe where the Magic Missiles had struck him. There were bruises where they had hit, but otherwise, he was fine.

Suddenly, he began to hear voices from the other side of the door. Tearn prepared a standby Fireball spell and burst through the portal.

It was once a regal chamber, but the beautifully colored tapestries along the walls were now faded and torn. There was a door about fifty feet ahead at the other end of the room and it had a sign on it, but he couldn't read it at this distance. In the middle of the room sat a winged girl, and a man who looked deathly sick.

The man was exceedingly pale, and had pointed ears and glowing yellow eyes. He was dressed in a beautiful black robe and cloak with red lining, seated upon the stone floor. His mouth was slightly open at the sudden intrusion, and Tearn had plenty of time to see two pointed fangs protruding out there. He stared into the floor listlessly.

The girl, on the other hand, was a beauty, in stark contrast to the sickly man. She was crouched behind him, with her arms protectively around his chest. Her black hair was cut neatly at medium-length, and her green skin looked soft and inviting. When Tearn charged in, she had been whispering something in his ear, but stopped to look up at the intruder with her deep black eyes the second he had entered.

She closed her eyes and nuzzled the man slightly, then stood up to face Tearn. She was wearing only a large black belt and boots, and was unashamed at Tearn seeing her near-naked body in all of its beauty.

He felt enchanted at her approach, but dispelled the feeling immediately with thoughts of his mission, and of those he had lost. The juxtaposition of anger and love in his mind kept her from whatever enchantment she was trying to cast on him.

"The Demon and the King," he said. Rebecca seemed slightly surprised that her charm had been resisted, and stopped between the Bane King and the intruder. She placed her right hand on her hip and left the other at her side, tilting her head towards the ground but not keeping her eyes off of Tearn.

Though she seemed to be relaxed, he knew that she was by no means unready to ward off any attacks. "Yes," she answered softly.

Tearn summoned forth a greater fire than the one he had prepared earlier, knowing just what he was up against. "I've come for the Cosmic Forge. Stand aside and I won't harm either of you," he stated.

"Why?" she asked.

Tearn growled softly, then spoke. "That's none of your business," he replied gruffly.

Rebecca blinked in response. "For power?" she asked. "Don't you have enough already? Do you really need more?"

"It's none of your business!" he repeated, louder this time. "Now move aside, murderer, before I send you both back to hell."

He reached for the Silver Cross within his robe and pointed it towards the two. Rebecca closed her eyes and looked off to the side in pain. "You've been talking to the Queen, haven't you?" she stated more than

asked.

"I will not ask you again," Tearn warned. "Move, or burn."

She looked back up at him. "You were taken in by the Queen's lies... as were the Vicar, Xorphitus, and the many who have come here seeking the power of the pen," she said. She indicated the bones of Humans and things vaguely humanoid resting against the walls; Tearn hadn't noticed them until she pointed them out. The Bane King buried his face in his hands.

"My lover and I remain here to protect the pen from those who do not understand the Bane," she continued. "Please, good sir, I beg of you..." She paused, then turned completely towards Tearn and knelt down before him. "Turn back now and go home, lest you become consumed by the Bane as my lover and I have..."

The fire burned to almost more than Tearn's mind could take. "I... I don't care what you people are, or who's telling the truth, or what this Bane does to me..." he growled, when the flames visibly gathered in his paws. "I will have that pen, and you will *not* bar me from its power!"

In that moment, the Bane King was gone, and a black bat was in his place. It flew remarkably quick towards Tearn. When it was mere feet away from him, the bat suddenly grew and morphed back into its humanoid form, and descended upon the Felpurr with hands outstretched and fangs bared.

Tearn was quicker. The Fireball in his right paw blasted the King in the face, and he dropped to the ground at the Felpurr's feet; such a clean hit would leave him out for some time. He began to dash past the kneeling girl towards the door in the back, and his heart leapt at the words on the sign: "Chamber of the Cosmic Forge." He'd found it!

He hadn't taken another step before something grabbed his leg. It was the Bane King, and his face was charred black.

Something amazing began to happen. Before Tearn's eyes, the flesh closed and knit, wounds turned into scars turned into skin, and his blackened face returned to its original pale color in just seconds.

Tearn shoved the Silver Cross in his left paw into the King's face. There was a sizzling, but the Vampire showed no sign of pain or discomfort. He simply batted the cross out of his opponent's paw to reveal the imprint on his cheek, then stood up and wrapped a hand around his neck. The cross hit the stone floor some distance away with a metallic clatter.

With his free paws, Tearn shot Fireball after Fireball into the Vampire's body, but the wounds closed faster than he could cause them... and he was beginning to lose consciousness from the lack of air. The Bane King looked over at Rebecca, as if he were confirming something. She merely shook her head, and stayed kneeling on the ground.

Tearn blacked out, and the Bane King turned back to his unconscious body with emotionless eyes... then sank his gleaming fangs into Tearn's furry neck.

Part 4 - The Cosmic Forge

The Bane Be Ended

There was a deep chute past the wall. Down, down, down, Janus fell... right on top of Shss, who had just hit the ground herself.

"Gah!" she grunted out in the small enclosed room that the chute led into. There was a wooden door in front of them, but not much else.

"Whoa!" another voice came from above. Before Lucciana and Hiromi could further cramp and crush them both, Janus stood up and pushed open the door, then tossed Shss through it.

Down two figures came, one taller and the other much more small and noisy. Janus immediately reached out to catch the Hobbit, and left Lucciana to spill out unceremoniously onto the floor, where she rolled out into the new room with Shss.

Hiromi looked up at her savior from her position in his arms. "Hehe, thanks," she said with a smile. Janus nodded, and set her down gently.

"And the others are left to meet cold hard stone, I see..." Lucciana muttered. Shss got up and helped her to her feet.

Kiwi fluttered down to the bottom of the chute, and came to an easy rest on Hiromi's shoulder. "What'd I miss?" she asked innocently.

"You're not fooling anyone..." Lucciana further remarked.

The chamber was full of ruined tapestries, and there was a small door in the back with a sign on it. In the middle of the room was a small, black blast mark, and lying right next to it was the body of a brown-robed Felpurr, his fur orange and yellow with black stripes.

Even with his fur in the way, nobody could miss the two red puncture wounds in his neck, or the blood caked on his fur that had dribbled down onto the floor. Hiromi immediately ran forward and knelt down next to the fallen cat-man, and her hands started to glow.

Shss felt uneasy since they entered the room, seeing as how the walls and corners were so dark and visibility being as low as it was. She thought she had noticed them moving earlier, thinking it was a trick of her eyes.

But when the shadows started to reach for them, she knew it had nothing to do with tricks. There was a flutter, and a sickly pale man in a black cloak with red lining drifted down from the corner, arms outstretched and fangs bared at Hiromi. She was so busy working on the fallen Felpurr that she didn't even notice him coming.

Janus had a bolt nocked in case of a surprise attack, and luckily, this was the time to use it... he took aim at the descending Vampire and shot him straight through the forehead. The Vampire made no sound, even though everyone heard the bolt strike true. He simply fell to the ground in a heap, with the bolt firmly lodged in him.

But seconds later, the bolt pushed itself out of his forehead and fell to the ground, and the wound closed in mere seconds. "Hi!" Lucciana shouted as the Vampire lunged again for the little Priest, but by this time, both she and Shss had drawn their weapons and were ready for him.

Hiromi was right in the middle of the battle, she saw, and ducked low while weapons and ammo whizzed over her head. *He's been drained...* she thought. The glow in her hands died, and after she pointed them at the Vampire, her healing spell was replaced by an invisible power that rocketed across the room and into him.

There was no effect. *That should have dispelled him!* Hiromi thought.

She went back to work on the Felpurr, knowing that she could at least help him, and they might even have another potential ally in this battle. Kiwi rotated herself on Hiromi's shoulder, keeping the Vampire in sight at all times, ready to defend her friend as she worked on the cat-man.

Shss ran with her speartip forward, and saw that the Vampire was anticipating catching it with his hands slightly apart. She widened her eyes slightly and flipped the spear around in mid-charge. It was enough of a diversion to give her an opening when he dropped his guard in confusion.

She dipped the spear's shaft down slightly, then brought it up in an arc underneath its chin. With a crack, the Vampire stumbled backwards, and Shss thrust the butt of her spear forward into his body. He bent

over to favor the shot, when she brought the end of the shaft down on the back of his exposed head.

The Vampire hit the ground, and was just getting to his feet when Lucciana jumped above him and thrust her katana through his back, straight where his heart would be. He remained silent during the strike that should have killed him... or at the very least should have caused some sort of pained reaction. His empty yellow eyes were still scanning the room, closely examining each member of the party.

When he was satisfied at how many there were, Lucciana's katana spat itself out of his body and into the ceiling. She grabbed it before it could cut her on its way down, and was distracted enough not to notice the Vampire close and sink his teeth into her neck.

She was suddenly paralyzed, and fell into his arms with a complete lack of feeling in every part of her body. Shss cried out in fear for her friend, then wrapped her arms around his neck... but he had just finished with the Elf and easily slipped out of her grasp, grabbing her arms and bringing her close to drink his fill.

Janus took his now clean shot and fired several bolts into the Vampire's body and neck. Though he didn't fall as before, and the bolts were pushing themselves out of his body faster than he could reapply them, it kept him from moving any closer to Shss' exposed neck artery.

And it gave Kiwi an opening to attack. She blasted off of Hiromi's shoulder, knocking her over in the process. The Priest was trained to heal in a combat situation, though, and kept her healing hands on the wounded Felpurr. She cast a worried glance at Lucciana, knowing she would have to be next.

Kiwi shot like an arrow into the Vampire's exposed knee joint, and with a cry of, "You're mine!" she drove her fist into it with unreal strength. It cracked under the blow, and the Vampire lost his footing, and his hold on Shss. Now free, the Fighter elbowed him in the stomach and backhanded him across the cheek, and he was thrown violently into the wall.

The Faerie flipped over and flew to the ceiling, and prepared for another launch off of it and into the Vampire. A look at his non-existent injuries, however, made her think that their efforts were succeeding only in tiring themselves out.

"My love, they are the ones who have come to help us!" a voice yelled.

Nobody noticed during the battle that the back door had open. When it closed, everyone saw something slightly different. Shss, Lucciana and Janus saw the enchanting girl they had met on the Isle of the Dead.

Kiwi and Hiromi saw a girl with black wings, belt and boots, and medium-length black hair. Aside from that, she was wearing nothing, and had an unearthly beauty about her. In fact, Hiromi had a hard time concentrating on healing while she stared at the girl.

They all, however, now had time to read the sign on the door: "Chamber of the Cosmic Forge."

Janus' heart skipped a beat. He would finally be free of this wretched existence...!

Lucciana was simply surprised. *So it really does exist...* she thought.

Though the Vampire's wounds had already closed, he launched no counter-attack. The winged girl glided over to him and sat down behind him, where she wrapped her arms around him and held him close to her. She guided his head down to her lap and stroked his cheek, though the Vampire made no gesture that denoted pleasure, annoyance, anger... any emotion at all. He simply looked absolutely neutral.

"Thank you all for coming, though it seems the Seeker of Power was no match for my love," the girl said. "In truth, we were deciding what we should do with him when you came in.

"I am Rebecca, and this gentle soul," she said, giving the Vampire a squeeze, "is the one you might call the Bane King. We have been here for decades, guarding the precious Cosmic Forge from any who

sought to use its power, for good or for evil."

"For good, too?" Hiromi asked. The healing spell was finished, but the Felpurr wasn't moving. She could feel that he was feigning unconsciousness and listening to what was going on around him before he made a move. With a cautious look at the man and girl in the corner, she walked over to Lucciana and removed her paralysis, and laid glowing hands on her to heal her as well.

"Yes," Rebecca nodded. "Whether the wish is born of a good or evil heart, the author will suffer the Bane... the Bane of the Cosmic Forge. For they who use the pen outside of the Cosmic Circle shall have their desire twisted into a mockery of what they originally scribed."

She closed her eyes, then continued in a voice barely above a whisper. "My love himself scribed that he would be immortal, and this," she said, squeezing him gently, "is the result."

At her words, the Bane King showed no sadness at his condition, though it was clear how painful it must have been for him from the look on Rebecca's face.

"We have both suffered from the Bane, and have resigned ourselves to this chamber, this Temple, for as long as I can remember," she continued. "We have been under attack by Xorphitus and his demonic servants since this whole mess began, and with only the two of us immortals to defend ourselves, it has been a permanent stalemate. No matter who or what the mad Wizard sent to take the Forge, he could never get very far with us here."

Kiwi flit around in excitement. "Yeah, yeah! The entire Temple is coming now!" she exclaimed. "All the gates opened and now they're coming in to get the pen!"

Her words were all the Vampire needed to suddenly jump up and fly through the door in the back. "My love, no!!" Rebecca yelled, and rose as the door slammed shut. "We can stop them ourselves! We promised we wouldn't use the pen again...!"

The door locked behind her. "The Hand of Destiny!!" she proclaimed, but nothing happened. A full minute went by in silence, and she realized it was too late. When the door opened, the Bane King was standing there, and Rebecca looked with horror at the words he had written in a simple book, sitting in a tiny alcove in the middle of the chamber: *From that day forward, the minions of the Temple were forever barred from entry into the resting place of the Cosmic Forge.*

"No..." she said, backing up in disbelief. She wrapped her wings around her body in comfort. "Why did you...?"

Without a word, he pushed at the space between himself and the door, but a force kept his hand from travelling any farther. He turned around and embraced Rebecca. It was the work of the Bane: the Demons could not get in, but he was now stuck here forever.

Lucciana sheathed her katana, and the party gathered in the Chamber of the Cosmic Forge. In the alcove, there was a floating, glowing pen, which was emitting a pleasant humming sound.

It's so close, but if what they say is true, am I really going to use it? Janus wondered.

"Have you any idea what it means to never feel?" the Bane King asked in a flat and neutral voice. "Happiness, fury, hope, the warm touch of your lover... all of this, forever beyond your reach.

"I exist, and nothing more. Long ago I sought power, boundless power, to make myself the superior of all. And yet, I still feared death. I feared that someday, I would not be able to experience this world, to shape and change it as I saw fit, to be changed and moved by it."

His eyes looked out at nothing, as empty as they had been for decades. "Xorphitus and I stole into the Cosmic Circle for our own petty reasons," he continued. "He came to know all there was to know in a single second of time, and was split into two forms, each carrying one half of his sum total knowledge.

And now, he is dead.

"Were it the same for me..." he whispered.

With that, he gently pushed Rebecca away, and turned to face the group. "I am... tired. So very tired," he admitted. "Please, if you have any goodness within your hearts, you will grant my final wish, a wish I dare not ask the pen to grant: I ask for you to end my miserable existence."

Rebecca held her arms over her chest and covered her mouth slightly. She seemed about to cry, but at the same time, it seemed as if she had expected this to come for some time. Janus and Lucciana shuddered slightly, understanding only a small part of the man's pain, but understanding nonetheless.

Hiromi shook her head. She couldn't possibly understand his feelings, but was anything really worth losing your life over? Janus had taught her, however, back then in the prison...

The Bane King continued. "I am immortal, and can be slain only by holy power. You, Priest," he said, pointing at her, "have you any Holy Water, that you might put an end to my trials?"

"No, and even if I did... I don't... I don't want to be party to murder..." she answered.

The Vampire stared at her pleadingly with his yellow eyes. "It is not murder, it is mercy," he said. "I beg of you, please, end my life, so that I may finally be free of this accursed Bane..."

Hiromi shook her head again. "No... there has to be another way!" she protested. "Can't you use the Cosmic Forge, and ask for your life back? Can't you take it back to the people you took it from and ask for them to help you? There has to be some way!!"

Without a sound, he stepped forward and placed a hand on her shoulder. Everyone tensed, expecting an attack, but he did not do so. "If I used the Forge, the Bane would twist my words, as it would any others," he explained. "To ask it to end my immortality would most likely cause it to erase my existence completely. Though I have no fear of this, I do have my memories of my life as a mortal, and realize that this would not be an ideal choice.

"As for the Cosmic Circle... well, it took power enough to get there with Xorphitus and I alone," he said patiently, even though he had turned the idea around in his mind a thousand times over. "Even if I were to find another of his talent, of which I doubt there are any, I cannot leave this chamber."

Hiromi knew he was right, but...

Slowly, he took his hand from her shoulder, and bowed his head. "You must help me escape," he pleaded. "Spending another century locked in this room, without feeling... is too much to bear, for both me and my love. Please..."

Why was she always forced into these kinds of situations, with people she could not help? *God, why aren't you...?* Hiromi wondered, then immediately stifled the thought. *No... forgive me. Please, take this lost one into your arms and help him, as I could not...*

"Lucciana..." she choked. "Please, hold out your sword, and cover it with water."

In silence, the Samurai solemnly unsheathed her katana and held her free hand over it. With a cold feeling, she coated it with a thick layer of ice, then conjured up a flame to melt the frost completely. It was now dripping wet.

Hiromi held two hands on top of it, careful not to get cut, and her hands glowed. The conjured water became clear, beautifully clear, as if it were not even there.

And within seconds, she was done. She turned away, crouched down and closed her eyes, putting her hands over her ears. Kiwi flew down to her shoulder and held her tight.

Lucciana turned back to the Bane King. "Kneel," she ordered.

Putting his back to her, he did as he was told and lowered himself. He looked up into Rebecca's eyes, and she knelt down to hold him one last time. She squeezed tighter than she ever had before.

"I love you..." he whispered, taking a beautiful diamond ring with a golden band from his pocket and placing it on her left ring finger. Rebecca was stunned... even moreso when the King pushed her backwards and she fell to the floor in front of him. "Do it," he said calmly.

His Elven executioner brought her katana up and over her left shoulder. A drop of Holy Water flowed down the handle and onto the floor. "I'm sorry," she said to the two lovers, and as the first and last tear fell from the Bane King's eye, Lucciana swiftly cut down.

The Felpurr Tearn heard the entire procession from beginning to end, and knew that this was his best chance. With the Bane King gone, the Cosmic Forge was his.

Energy built up in his chest, then he leapt to his feet and fired a Hold Monsters spell into the group of people standing over the headless corpse in front of them. They were all suddenly stricken with paralysis, and could only watch as he reached for the pen...

Against his own wishes, he turned to see the eyes of Rebecca. They were shining, staring straight at him... and he couldn't move. His paw was inches away from the Cosmic Forge.

NO! I'm so close! Move, damn you, MOVE! he pleaded with his unresponsive legs and paw.

Rebecca stood tall and proud, her wings unfurled as she revealed herself to him once again. "Have you learned nothing, fool?" her voice boomed through her tears. "What disaster this pen can wreak upon those who use it?!"

"Fine words, coming from someone who allows sacrifice to take place mere feet away from them!" Tearn spat back. As he spoke, his pupils dilated until his eyes were almost solid black. "Hypocritical wench...! Speak of another's morality when you yourself have taken steps to enact justice and defend the innocent!"

Rebecca took in his words, but stared him down nonetheless. "You speak much, but understand little," she answered.

He growled dangerously. "Tell that to the women who have been tortured, murdered as you watched helplessly, Demon," he barked. "Tell them of your 'understanding' as they lay prostrate and helpless beneath the snickering beasts who call themselves Human above you. You understand nothing of their suffering, and deny the power that could help them to one who fights for their sake!"

"I was those sacrifices," Rebecca said cryptically. Tearn glared at her, but said nothing.

"With the pen, I scribed into existence soulless constructs to fool those of Ramm into thinking they were murdering real people," she explained. "Be it Elf or Human, child or adult, male or female, I had hundreds of them made to placate their desires... every last vile, carnal one of them..." she said, shuddering and holding herself.

"The Bane..." she continued, "...was that they were not constructs, but rather, my soul occupying bodies created by the pen. From the very beginning... from the very first sacrifice, the very first torture, everything they did to those constructs... they did to me. Decades of this I have endured, for the sake of others, for I had not the power to stop an army of Ramm members."

Blood rushed to Tearn's face, and his ears began to buzz. He briefly tried to convince himself that she was lying, that he couldn't possibly be wrong... but the pain in her face was evidence enough that she

spoke the truth. His pupils contracted, and his eyes returned to their normal green color.

"Their pain was, in fact, mine, including the three women you spared," Rebecca said, her black eyes staring deeply into his. "I sent the only pure-hearted member of Ramm on an errand to 'escort' them home, when in fact, the constructs disappeared once reaching the forest. It is by doing what I did that I spared the life of the only good man to grace the Temple of Ramm from death at your discretion."

Pain washed across her face as she continued. "Thus, the lives of innocents were spared," she said. "Thus the sick desires of the denizens of Ramm were placated. And thus, I understand all too well why you seek the power of the pen, to safeguard the lives of others, to kill in vengeance..."

Rebecca's dominance over him began to break, though even without its hold upon him, Tearn began to have second thoughts in the face of such a noble sacrifice.

However... "I need that pen... so please, don't interfere..." he replied softly. The enchantment broke, and his paw was around the pen. It was so warm...

He pushed the Cosmic Forge towards the book. One more inch, and the war would be over...

Suddenly, a black claw grabbed his paw. The pen hovered above the book, too close to even see a gap between the two, but they did not touch one another. *It's that fool Dracon!* he thought, but when he wheeled with anger on the being the claw belonged to, he saw that the bow-wielder was still rooted in place.

Instead, Tearn looked into the eyes of a massive black Dragon, easily twice the size of the half-breed Dracon. His powerful muscles held Tearn's arm in place, and resting on his green chest was a locket with a golden chain and red jewel in the middle. The Felpurr could feel its power even from this distance.

The Dragon's blue eyes stared into his own, but despite his great size, Tearn could see gentleness, even wonder, in them. "What do you wish for?" he asked Tearn in a deep, kind voice.

Against his better judgement, and for a reason he couldn't explain, the Felpurr answered automatically. "Power... boundless, absolute power," he said.

"And for what purpose?" he asked.

Tearn tried to fight, but answered the question under the powerful gaze of the black Dragon. "Vengeance... for my family, my people..." he said. "To stop the war with the Rawulf... save my people... murder the murderers."

"Then I will help you," the Dragon replied with a smile. "Put down the pen, for I have chased knowledge of an artifact with similar power for some time. And this artifact... has no Bane upon it."

Tearn's paw shook, but the Dragon did not allow one drop of ethereal ink to stain the book. *Can I trust this being?* he thought. *Something tells me he's telling the truth, but... the pen... it's right here!*

"I will take you to this artifact," the Dragon assured him. "I ask only that you put down the pen; enough have suffered because of its power."

Tearn tossed the proposal around in his mind... then, in one of the hardest decisions he had ever made, he finally let go of the Forge. It floated back to its position, hovering above the book, where it continued to hum and shimmer.

The Dragon nodded again. "Good," he said happily. "My name is Bela, and I believe you have met my sister, Rebecca." Tearn turned around to see that the girl had her hands clutched in front of her, like she was going to rip him to shreds. Seeing that the pen was safe, she stood up straight and bowed slightly.

"Follow me," Bela beckoned. Tearn weaved his way around the Forge's resting place, and a second later,

there was the sound of a door opening and closing.

"Tch, some gratitude for saving his life," Lucciana said.

The whole party began to move, little by little, until everyone was finally back to normal again. Hiromi seemed especially disoriented and scared, having had her eyes shut when her body was held by the Felpurr's spell.

Something was off... Lucciana looked around her, saw her friends and comrades standing around. They looked so young, vital. She could hear their heartbeats... see the arteries in their necks pumping blood. *Thump thump... thump thump...* their hearts beat loudly.

She backed up into the wall, breathing heavily. *What's going on?* she wondered.

Shss saw that she was losing her balance, and put an arm around her shoulders. "*I sha?*" she asked, but Lucciana saw only her friend's lifeblood pumping in her neck. Something was wrong!

She pushed Shss away and clutched her head, feeling something trying to dig its way out and take control of her. There were images, of a little girl with black wings holding her hand... soldiers ravaging the countryside by her order... years of defending the Forge...

They were memories that were not hers, but she recalled them as if they belonged to her. Among all the images, she felt the constant bloodlust... compelling her to kill, drink, survive...

Shss looked pleadingly at Hiromi, who immediately brought the love of God from her heart to her hands and clamped them on Lucciana's stomach. She struggled at first, but then, all of a sudden, she seemed to return to normal. "What's going on?" Kiwi asked from Hiromi's shoulder.

"I... don't know..." she admitted. "I think something was trying to... take control of me or something..." *Actually, I do know... I killed the Bane King, and my curse...*

Hiromi looked concerned. "I can feel something in there," she said. "It's... powerful! My God... I can't get rid of it, it's too powerful..."

Lucciana suddenly began to feel better. "Don't worry about it," she said, "it's not that big a deal. Happens all the time."

"What do you mean?" Hiromi asked. She took a step back and looked at her friend strangely. "The only reason it's not taking over right now is because I'm holding it back! And the only reason I can hold it back is because it's your body, so it makes it an uphill battle!"

"It'll pass," Lucciana said confidently, but in truth, she wasn't so sure. Usually the voices and feelings went away within seconds, but this one... "The important thing right now is the Forge," she continued. "What do we do about it?"

"I'll take that..." a low, strange voice said.

If they hadn't seen it with their own eyes, none of them would have believed it. A man, made entirely of metal, shimmered in front of them in a blue light and took the pen from its resting place. He was wearing a red tunic, much like any commoner, but his skin was a pallid grey. Stranger still, his head was transparent and exposed the cold metal and multi-colored lights that made up his brain.

"No!" Rebecca cried out and lunged for the machine-man, but he disappeared and reappeared behind her. She slashed the stone behind the pen's resting place strong enough to leave several claw marks behind.

"Calm yourself," the machine-man said. "I am Aletheides, and I have come simply to return the pen to its rightful place in the Cosmic Circle. My Lords await its return, for without it, they no longer have the ability

to scribe the destiny of the cosmos."

Everyone gave him a confused look. "Without its protection, the resting place of the Astral Dominae, the most powerful artifact in the known universe, has been discovered," he explained. "Even now, forces are at war to claim it as their prize. Chief among the combatants fight the militaristic Umpani, and the swarm known as the T'Rang, whose battles across the galaxy are legendary."

"I've never heard of any of these people," Janus said, "and I've been just about every place there is."

Aletheides turned with a whirl to the Dracon. "The battle of which I speak is fought among the stars."

"What?!" the whole room responded, and Kiwi balked. "There are other worlds?" she asked incredulously. "And *people* on them?!"

He nodded. "Countless numbers, but now is not the time to discuss them," he said. "What matters is that the Black Ship approaches the lost world of Guardia, and the Astral Dominae hidden somewhere on its surface."

"Aboard that ship, the Harbinger of Doom, the Dark Savant himself, stands ready to claim the artifact and challenge the Cosmic Circle. And he holds the key to unlocking it... a girl named Vitalia Domina, who holds a powerful connection to the Astral Dominae."

The many unfamiliar buzzwords rang through the minds of everyone present. It would take some time before they were able to understand it all.

He was silent for a moment, then spoke again. "I know this is a lot to take in, but I ask now for your assistance in securing this artifact," he said. "With your permission, I will take two of you to Lost Guardia, where you may hopefully join one of the groups in contest with the Dark Savant. If you care anything for the future of this universe, and its multitude of peoples, the only fitting choice will be clear to you."

Kiwi did her best to mentally relay all of the information to Shss, though honestly, she didn't understand much of it herself.

When Aletheides was finished, Shss stepped forward. She came here to safeguard the *Kassmak Ohss*, but because of it, another problem had arisen. Her ceremony would continue.

"Hell, if you're going, you know I am, too," Lucciana said with a clap on her shoulder. They exchanged a smile, and a blue light began to envelop them...

"Wait!" Hiromi shouted, and the light began to fade. "You can't go! If you do, I won't be able to focus on holding back that thing inside you... it's too dangerous!"

"Sounds like this Black Savant guy won't wait for us to get another ride," Lucciana said. "Those who hesitate in the face of evil risk the lives of others through their inaction. If this guy's as bad news as Aletheides says he is, I'm going."

Hiromi stood proud. "Then I'm going with you," she said. "Whether you realize it or not, you're a risk to yourself and others as long as that thing's in you. You need me, even if you won't admit it."

Kiwi smiled, and raised her fist to the sky. "Me too!" she proclaimed. "No way is Hi-chan going anywhere without me to protect her!"

"Impossible," Aletheides replied. "My ship carries enough air, food and water for only a single passenger. While three is dangerous, four is impossible."

Kiwi puffed out her cheeks in anger. "Come on!" she protested, her hands on her hips. "How much can I possibly breathe?!"

"Enough to doom the entire ship," the machine-man answered. "Your race is not as small a consumer as you may think. You will all decide which of you will come, or I will go alone."

Hiromi closed her eyes. *Kiwi?* she thought.

Luckily, the Faerie caught it. *It'll be ok with just us three.* She started to verbally protest, but Hiromi made a slight head shake imperceptible to everyone but her friend. *I want you to do something for me, if you can,* she continued. *Please, look after Janus. I will work hard to finish this task as soon as possible, then I will see you again, ok? But until then, we can't abandon him. So, please...*

Kiwi snuck a glance at Janus... aloof, angry Janus, who trusted nobody but himself. If Hiromi counted on her to support him, on a new life path that they both knew was so very difficult for the Dracon, she knew she couldn't let her friend down.

With a flutter, she flew forward and hugged Hiromi's cheek, but refused to be sad. *Just... a little while, right? Then we'll see each other again?* she asked, with a telling glow around her head.

Her friend nodded slightly. *I promise.* The Faerie hugged her even harder, as if her physical power alone could keep her new friend from leaving. Then, she flew off of her shoulder, hovering in midair. "We've decided," Hiromi said, "that we three will go, Shss, Lucciana, and myself."

"You understand well the risk involved," Aletheides said, "so I accept your decision. Please make no unnecessary exertions while aboard the vessel, and keep your movement and breathing down to a minimum."

Something suddenly came to the Priest. "Can we take Lucciana to see my teacher, and help us with the Presence in her mind?" she asked.

The machine-man's exposed brain glowed and blinked somewhat as he turned the request over in his mind. "How long will the cleansing take?" Aletheides asked.

Hiromi took a deep breath and thought it over. "Um... maybe a day or two, depending on its strength..." she guessed.

"Too long," he interrupted. "Every day we give the Savant is another day he has to increase his powerbase, and expand his search efforts. We leave now."

Begrudgingly, Hiromi finally nodded. Before the light took them, she said, "Lucciana, I need you to stay near me until we can figure out what this entity is, ok? Don't try and battle it alone."

As if I ever needed help to fight it off before, Lucciana thought dismissively.

Hiromi turned back to Kiwi and waved with a smile. *I love you, my friend...* the Faerie heard in her mind. And then they were gone.

Janus stepped forward and put a claw on the Faerie's back. "You ok?" he asked. Kiwi nodded, and suddenly remembered the other who was with them.

She was on the floor, cradling the Bane King's body and head, holding them together and rocking back and forth. She was humming a peaceful tune with her eyes closed. The Bane King's head looked at peace, even as his body rested separately on the floor. "Rebecca..." Kiwi started.

"Please go," she whispered.

Kiwi nodded. They couldn't go back up the chute, even without the Demons there, because Janus couldn't fly... so she figured it might have been best to just follow the other two out the back. She was starting to get worried about her mother and siblings, and how they had fared on the bridge. No Demons had come in, but she didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

She fluttered over to Janus, and pointed at his shoulder. "Mind if I borrow this for a while?" she asked.

He didn't look at her, but he did stretch his shoulder out slightly.

Kiwi grinned. "Thanks..." she said, and took a seat. "Come on," she continued. "Let's see what the other two are up to."

"WHAT?! What do you *mean* we have to fly there?! I have *no* time to waste putting around the cosmos in your blasted ship when there's a war going on as we speak! People are dying, and you're asking me to fly for months to a planet with an artifact you don't know the location of, much less seen for yourself?"

Bela was unfazed. "When you hold the Astral Dominae within your paws, you will hold the key to life itself," he assured Tearn. "According to my research, at the same time that it will grant you immeasurable power, any who have perished can come back to life by simply invoking it, no matter how long they have been gone."

Tearn's mind suddenly reeled with the possibilities. If that was true, then he could see his wife and children again...

"Really?" Kiwi asked from behind them. Tearn growled at the Dracon and Faerie who had just barged in. "What do you two want?" he barked. "Go stick your noses in someone else's business."

Bela turned around and smiled a great smile. "Well, it looks as if the other two members of our party have been assembled!" he exclaimed. "Now let's board the Forge... that's my ship... and make our way after that stuffy servant of the Cosmic Lords!"

"Party?" "Ship?" Tearn and Janus simultaneously asked.

They both glared at each other, and Bela smiled. "Yes! The four of us are going to catch up to them, and follow them straight to the Astral Dominae!" he said. "I'd like to see it for myself, and I'm certain you'll all have plenty to do and see there. Meet friends, grant wishes, standard adventuring stuff."

Janus cocked his head to the side in a questioning manner. "Bela, this Astral Dominae... holds power equal to that of the Cosmic Forge?" he asked.

Bela nodded, and said, "Some might say even greater, considering the lack of a Bane."

At that, the Dracon balled his claws into fists in response. "Count me in."

Look after Janus... "Yeah, me too!" Kiwi said. Janus looked at her, confused. "We're friends, right?" she continued.

Janus felt vulnerable, like something was going to step on his chest at any moment. "Um, yes, I guess so," he stammered.

She nodded and smiled. "Let's go then!"

"Make no mistake," Tearn suddenly warned as he stood in their path, "I don't need either one of you here, and if you get in my way, I'll kill the both of you. Do not interfere with me, or the Astral Dominae, once you've gotten whatever pathetic wish you desire."

Kiwi glared at him and stuck her tongue out, and Bela laughed. "Well then, on that happy note, let us get going," he said. "Through this door is my ship, and then we will be on our way to Lost Guardia!"

He dashed to the door in the back of the small room and yanked it open, running through. "Hurry!" he called back. "We don't want to lose them!"

Tearn held his challenging look one second longer, then turned and went through the doorway. However, when Janus and Kiwi reached the entrance to the new room, they almost bumped into him. He had stopped in awe to stare at what took up the entirety of the huge room.

A great sleeping beast of grey steel sat motionless in the room. Both of its massive wings were streamlined and perfectly straight at its sides, and it had a strange red and blue trim running along the length of its hide. Its head was transparent, allowing a full view to its lack of a brain on the inside.

Bela fiddled with the amulet around his neck. Seconds later, the beast suddenly roared to life, and opened its maw to swallow the great Dragon whole.

Or rather, he walked in. "Come on!" he yelled from inside.

Kiwi and Janus thought Tearn had suddenly lost his mind, but he, too, entered the mouth of the great beast. With a worried glance at one another, they followed.

Embrace the Night

Only minutes after the first ship had begun its ascent away from Llylgamyn, another rocketed out of the mountain below the Temple of Ramm and over the forest.

Queen Saeren of the Faeries was outside, busy tending to her fallen children on the ground, when the ships shook the ground with their tremendous power. It was unusual, of course, but she had no idea why she felt a wrenching in her heart when the second one disappeared past some clouds.

Smitty had finished cleaning up the mess his brother had made, and promised to come back once he had gotten his things. When he was just about to enter the mines, a great grey beast blasted into the sky.

He watched it, and then another, disappear into the blue with some confusion. After a time trying to figure out what it was, his thoughts slowly turned to more important concerns. A smile crept across his lips as he descended into the mountain, pushing thoughts of invading grey monsters aside... in favor of the pouch of Faerie Dust slung at the side of his purple loincloth.

The pirates had finished "acquiring" their vessel from one of the extravagantly wealthy nobles downwind from the castle and were sailing out on the seas, looking for adventure and fabulous riches. Simmons burst in on Cap'n Matey in the middle of his afternoon nap, yelling something about a creature in the sky.

Matey groggily opened an eye and looked out the window, seeing the great grey whale pierce the clouds and disappear into the distance. He shrugged slightly and went back to a snoring sleep.

Quinn and Savior could not hear the sound of the roaring ship in the sky. At the moment, the lives of the Elves in this village were at stake, menaced by a thirty foot tall beast bearing thousands of sharp spines as it crashed into their tiny houses and threatened to stomp and chomp them all.

Its roars drowned out the sound of the eight flying above... and with a quick look at one another, the two lunged forward to slice and melt the monster to quivering pieces.

Serkesh saw nothing through the dense canopy of plantlife above them, but he and his entire tribe heard the roar all the same. Some of the Lizardmen ran to get their weapons, while the younger ones climbed trees to get a safe glimpse of the loud creature. The roar disappeared as soon as it had come, though, and the entire village was soon left with nothing more than questions.

Aboard the vessel, Shss was pressed against her seat with an enormous amount of force. Once this ceremony was complete, perhaps she would earn the right to truly call herself Lizardman. But she needed to find a new weapon...

Lucciana felt the Presence in her mind, gnawing at her, waiting for a moment of weakness so it could strike. She ignored it; it taunted a lot better than it controlled. She was here to help the people of

Llylgamyn, to keep the Astral Dominae from the clutches of this Dark Savant. She would never treat anybody with as much disregard as those of this world showed her and her family, even those she did not even know.

Unbeknownst to her, Hiromi was devoting a small part of her focus to keeping the Presence at bay. She hoped that they could find this Astral Dominae soon, so she could come back and be with her friends. She wanted to introduce them to Karain and have a peaceful, happy time with all of them together. Maybe she could even bring them into the fold. Yes, that might be best for Janus... and great for a spunky girl like Kiwi...

On the other ship, Kiwi thought back on her memories of Hiromi, and the fun times they experienced in the short time they had together. She waited for the day that they would meet again, when she could suddenly show up and surprise her friend on a whole new planet! She balled her hands into tiny fists and smiled, vowing to give it her all to finish this quest and find Hi-chan.

Janus felt the beast within him getting slightly hungry, and hoped that the Dragon had packed enough food to keep them alive on this journey before he lost control. *A Dragon, huh...* he thought. He never thought he would meet someone like him on this journey, though Bela probably understood little about what it was like to have both Human and Dragon blood coursing in his veins. Surely, once he had the Astral Dominae...

The Felpurr Tearn sat with his arms folded, staring at the metal wall in front of him. His family's screams echoed in his mind, and he felt the warmth of the Cosmic Forge in his paws. He had been so close... and yet, here he was again on yet another fool's errand for a device he wasn't even sure existed. He had predicted on the Isle of Crypts that he would be shoved out the door with nothing to show for his efforts but directions to another area, and how infuriatingly correct he had been. He clenched his paws in anger... those bastards would pay.

And then, there were stars...