

AN
ODD KNIGHT'S
DAZE

A Novel of the War for Haven

by

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Semi-Divine Revelations III

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This Higher Dimensional thing is tricky, as Everything changes when you transcend. Points appear to become lines, lines appear to become circles, circles appear to become spheres, a sphere appears to become a torus.

Yet everything is still just what it was/is in the first place.

The only thing that really changes is your ability to see more of what is already present. But, - there is a trade off. The greater your ability to perceive, the less capable you are of effecting what you direct your awareness towards. When you see everything, your hands get tied into doing nothing. (AND -the less you feel like effecting it as well.)

When you see nothing, you're more likely to effect everything.

Sometimes like a bull in a china shop.

But somebody has to do the grunt work. That's when you have to let your fingers do the walking.

I guess you could call us fingers of God.

Or maybe a cell on the wart of the cuticle. I am but one of the shadows on the wall that reflect HerSelf.

I do some of the in close up-front drudge stuff for our Supreme Being.

Part of my job to recruit and harvest "souls" for Haven. They become a part of her, and she of them. You know, the old we live-in-God and God-lives-in-us kind of deal. I'm a soul too, by the way. You could also call me a copy of a fourth dimensional wave front of quantum matrices (FDWF), representing the neuro-biochemical configuration of an organic entity from an earth parallel.

Are we live or Memorex?

I just feel like I'm me.

We recruit souls here, because they add to her power. The stronger She/we become, the better the chance to stop the end of the universe.

See, our universe wasn't supposed to contract, and that's exactly what it began doing about a thousand years ago. The most distant galaxies began to pull an accelerated U-turn, and the stars within the Milky Way did likewise.

It was all very unnatural. Naturally, -especially when we figured we didn't have much time left. What's ending the Universe or stopping the show so to speak is... ?

Well, we don't know.

SOMETHING IS. We're trying to find out.

Something, for lack of a better word, -evil.

Evil with a capital E. Something with an infinite gnawing hunger.

Call this hunger greed. Greed can never be fulfilled.

The greedy are never satisfied.

There is a difference between biting your own tail and devouring it.

Having an appetite is fine. Desire is a-okay. We're not talking about that.

We're talking about an unyielding drive to change everything into yourself.

To make everything the same. To render all that is into bits and pieces that you can swallow and grind until they are nothing and you are everything.

All matter is being annihilated in structure and transformed into energy.

All energy is being annihilated as well, breaking one of the cardinal rules of physics.

To do this with conscious entities, you must reduce them to terror and fear and the gnashing of teeth. You must get them to hate and despise any thing other than what they consider their own.

Until there is nothing left but THE SOMETHING ELSE.

Think of it as intelligent cancer. *Really intelligent*, except for the self destructive aspect. Cancer needs a host to survive and will die without one.

That's what's happening to all the worlds. Everywhen, everywhere.

When God was born, she was immediately in touch with a higher dimension of infinite possibilities. There wasn't just One Universe.

There were an unending supply of them. And some of them had Beings like Herself. Some didn't.

Many of these Higher Beings want very little to do with anyone.

The Realms Directory has most of the significant Deity's listed, as well as their own individual worlds. Like Asgard, Olympus, Nirvana, Land of the Clouds, and so on. The further one travels along the Borderland Corridor, the more alien they become. ("Travel" is a poor description for the techniques of creative visualization. Suffice it to say, dystonic imagery leads to traces of this Evil.)

We believe that this Evil comes from a very, very distant section.

The very reason that She was created was to stop the end of forever.

Her Lordess was originally thought of as a unified integration of all of the knowledge of the sentients in this and other galaxies.

She has turned out to be so much more.

One particular question that has emerged for each one of us in Her Presence is,

Who created the Multiverse in the first place?

As a matter of fact, she deflects on this one. She admits that She is sort of connected to The Creator of All and that he/she/it is/was/will be a pretty swell Entity, but a bit preoccupied with stuff that's way beyond even Her own comprehension for now.

The implication was, like, She'd get back to me on this later, put a hold on the metaphysical philosophy and focus on saving our collective butts.

At that moment she also pointed out that being semi-omnipotent, she is capable of almost anything, -including being the supreme Bitch.

I got out of there.

Go West, Young Man

It was the sound of the crickets that gave me hope. I could barely make them out at first. The ground under my feet seemed to become a firmer foundation.

Or was this just my imagination? I was too afraid to open my eyes.

Which is why I walked headfirst into a tree.

Fortunately, my head was bent from the weariness of intense concentration, so I didn't break my nose.

Imagining an entire world is no easy task.

The tree, however, did give me a good bash on the forehead, knocking me flat on my ass.

My initial cry of pain was swept away by the realization of my arrival at a somewhere other than nowhere.

Laying flat on my back, I cautiously opened my eyes, and had a vision graced by sky blue lips and a fleecy cloud's softness wreathed in a dress of green.

It was such a beautiful tree. I laughed. I was back.

Back in Avalon.

-With only a minor headache.

I gingerly got myself up and impulsively kissed the tree. Its bark was a lot softer than its bite, I thought, rubbing my head.

I looked around to identify my location.

I was yards from the sheltered pool I abruptly disappeared from a lifetime ago.

"Mer!., Beth!" I eagerly called out, running towards the hidden topaz pond.

I rounded the corner of the largest out-cropping of granite.

No one was home.

My arms fell to my sides, empty.

I started to sit down with that old familiar feeling of dejection and failure.

Just started to.

Then I remembered.

I came from a place more distant than time, out of an eternity of dead ends.

I was sick and tired of being sick and tired.

In accepting all of my losses, I gained the capability to dream once more.

I had my hopes.

I would not give them up so easily again. I began to imagine. If I were Merl, what would Merl have done? (Besides manipulating.)

The wizard needed me. He would have left a message. I searched for some trace or clue. Some evidence of their presence or passage. I wasn't disappointed.

On the ground nearby their private talk was a brief message written in the dirt.

The message read. "Just in case you made it back. ---->"

Just in case? Just in case? Hah. I'd show that old lying son of a bitch...

The sign pointed towards a setting sun. I recalled Merl's chant, something about the west and senses being tied up there.

But, at this moment the knots in my hungry belly needed some slack. From the looks of the trees, the special of the day was apples and walnuts

I filled my mouth first. Then I filled my pockets.

Doing nothing and being nowhere creates the greatest hunger. Maybe that's why we give kids "time out" for punishment.

We deprive them of contact and meaning. Some of us actually have jobs that do the same, and accept money for this torture.

Some, like me, did it for free.

I had no idea how long it would take. I had no idea of how far it would be.

These were simple bridges to cross compared to the places I had already reached.

I began to walk west.

* * *

No matter how much of a hero you are, or think you are, your feet still get sore. The exposed skin on your face gets sunburn. You still have to go to the bathroom. (Except there aren't any.) And, if you are from a city, eventually you have to figure out what to use for toilet paper. It gets down to what's handy nearby. I just happened to know what poison ivy looked like. I learned about poison sumac the hard way.

Experience may or may not be the best teacher. It does give the most memorable lessons. As I was hobbling through the countryside, I was rather irritatingly distracted from appreciating the beauty of the land.

Cherishing the glory of nature does require the prerequisite of comfort.

Food, shelter, and clothing.

Well, I thought to himself, two out of three ain't bad.

That's when it began to rain.

Not just cats and dogs.

More like lions and wolves, with a few elephants thrown in.

The kind of downpour that turns rolling meadows into squishy, sodden, shoe sucking entrapments.

It rained for the first three days.

There was a covert benefit to all this misery.

I began to toughen up.

Tough in the way of endurance. My tolerance and stamina began to improve.

Working out in a gym is one thing. Survival in the woods is another.

My muscles became taut and supple. I lost that little roll around my middle.

I hardly muttered or complained at all.

Strike that. I bitched like hell -but nobody heard me anyway.

After a day or two of chaffing, even the skin rash faded.

The three weeks were torturous.

I'm not going to get into what an "adventure" it was.

It was mostly moving at a jog, resting, scrounging for food, relieving myself, finding water, moving at a jog, sleeping□ then repeat prescription as often as necessary.

A few points may be noteworthy...

My clothing did begin to get a bit worse for wear but even that was for the best.

I ripped the leather patches off my sports coat, and cut them into strips with a sharp rock.

I fashioned a makeshift hook from the bones of a small animal skeleton I discovered.

Living off nuts, fruit, berries and fish proved good for me.

Very low fat.

At night I would build a small fire from my sparse supply of remaining matches.

I lucked out there.

I'd stare at the flames with a bemused smile on my face, scratching my now scruffy beard.

I'd be sitting with my back against a tree, and my thoughts would turn towards the strangeness of my predicament.

I couldn't understand it at all.

After a while I stopped trying. I just accepted that I was where I was. And more would be revealed.

The job at hand was what mattered. Keep it as simple as possible.

Number 1. Stay alive.

Number 2. Get enough food and rest to accomplish Number 1.

Number 3. Go west, young man. Find the wizard and the girl.

My eyes and ears began to get sharper on the trail. Finding food was hard unless you were observant.

But I had to be attentive. For all I knew, I was included as an item on the menu by some of the locals.

Joe tar-tar.

I found a stout length of oak that served as a hardy walking stick. It was a dandy fishing pole, fruit and nut picker too.

A swiss army oak.

And, on at least one occasion the staff saved my life. Well, not actually.

I didn't know that it was a very old bear, with very few teeth and very little strength.

The bear was pawing through my former campfire, scavenging for leftovers. Nobody had ever informed me that you should always bury dinner scraps when camping. The animals in the neighborhood scent all garbage left out as an open party invitation. The bear neatly dispatched the fish heads and tails, and then shuffled over to where I was napping. He spied a few remaining morsels on my bearded chin and proceeded to lap at my face.

I vaguely remember I was dreaming of someone giving me this French kiss and insisting that no, -I speak English

Then I opened my eyes, screamed with all of my might and accidentally hit the bear on the nose with the stick I'd been holding while asleep.

Don't worry, the bear wasn't hurt.

But my yell scared the shit out of him, and the sharp rap he received was decidedly unfriendly.

The bear gave a gruff little yowl and rubbed his snout with a forepaw. Then he loped off into the forest.

I stood there panting and shocked before any reaction set in.

Then it was...

I whipped a bear and I am some mighty hot shit. Joe 2. Dragons/bears 0.

Now, -don't get me wrong here. I deserved to feel somewhat proud of myself. I had accomplished quite a lot since going through the Door. But it went to my head.

The days blended into moving west, finding food, and eating, and moving west. I grew, both physically and emotionally. I knew you could still be scared and act with courage. I knew that blaming anybody for your problems didn't much change them. I knew I could survive. My body had grown lean and hard. My skin had browned and reflected a coppery sheen of health. I just knew that they would raise a big stink over me in ...what was that place Merl mentioned?

Avalon. Yeah, saving the King's daughter and all.

My britches had gotten a little too big for me, though, and not just through the dieting.

Fortunately, my belt still held them up.

I thought some about the wizard and the girl. Obviously she was bait. Cheese for the mouse Merl thought I was.

And this Mordred guy who allegedly ordered my family killed, -I didn't know what the truth was there.

I decided I'd just play it off and bide my time to find out what the magical son of a bitch was really up to. I got my first sight of the castle after I climbed a small ridge a mere mile away. It was a vision right out of a fairy tale.

In the center of my view pastel towers reached skyward, capped by golden spires. Four massive lower turrets girded the corners of extended walls enclosing a storybook town. I could make out dozens of tiny shops and cottages, all interwoven with gardens and parks. A small river also meandered lazily through the village, idly mirroring the peacefulness and repose of its surroundings.

And here was me with bear in mind. The hero returns.

With dauntless confidence and renewed vigor I started on the final leg of my pursuit. The trail to Avalon was right before me.

Yeah, I was full of it all right.

-However, just to my right I heard a rustling in the bush.

I grabbed my trusty staff, and called out in a “you don't know who you're messing with voice.”

A voice soon proven to be absolutely correct.

"Whoever's in there, come out and you won't get hurt."

The bushes continued to impudently thrash about.

So, I poked my stick into the shrubs.

There was an indignant little squeal and I hastily pulled the staff back.

It was a little too late.

Just as you should never upset a wizard, there is one particular forest animal that most creatures avoid annoying at any cost.

When only mildly irritated, it becomes one of the most fearsome beasts ever to walk the earth

Yes, -the dreaded SKUNK.

The skunk angrily stalked out from its morning absolutions, turned it's hindquarters in my general direction, and let loose a noxious spray.

The malodorous essence hit me like a run-away freight train.

Enough to make me turn tail, wail like a banshee, and head for the nearest pond to dunk myself to death.

It was freezing.

I ended up discarding everything but my boxer shorts and the tattered remains of my shoes. The staff was too smelly to keep.

Two hours later, shriveled like a prune, I presented myself before the city gates.

I was right.

I raised the very biggest stink in the town's history.

Noblesse Obliged

It was dusk and chilly. No Hollywood premier spotlights or red carpet.

Not quite the drama I had envisioned.

I pounded loudly at the large wooden gate built into the outside wall of the city-fortress. Two extremely hefty soldier-types in chain mail peered through a sliding peephole and scrutinized me carefully.

At any rate, one had a hefty double chin.

"Wot 'ave we ere, now?", the first warrior asked.

He was the hefty one.

"Pears to be bedraggled, mangy, and waterlogged, wotever et is," responded the second.

The man then got a whiff of my battle with the skunk.

"Phew! Gorsh almighty!" The slat in the door clacked shut with a bang.

I pounded at the door again. "Hey, c'mon, be a good guy and open up!"

There was dead silence, followed by argumentative muttering. After about a minute, the small opening at eye level cautiously expanded to reveal the larger of the two holding his nose. His voice had the texture of gravel combined with a bad case of nasal congestion.

"Yed, bloody 'ell, wod id it?"

I said impatiently, "I'm here to see Princess Beth and Merlin the wizard."

The warrior raised one skeptical eyebrow. "Beed dou Joe?"

"Yeah, I beed him, damn it!", my teeth chattered.

"Den why din't yew say so, good suh!", the warrior defensively responded. Removing his fingers from his nose he turned toward his cohort, "Alfred, fetch 'im a blanket, so's he don't catch his death."

Wrinkling his nose he added, "Best prepare a bath, so's the smell don't kill the rest of us too. The man clearly has rank."

Amiable laughter echoed his remark. Ha ha.

The peephole shut again, and the gate began to creak and strain as it opened.

The man in charge stepped up to me and said, "Beg your pardens, sir, but yer self's not quite the pitcher we was painted for yer arrival."

I looked down on my scanty attire and rubbed my whiskers.

I smiled ruefully, "Not exactly how I planned it either."

The guard extended one hand, while keeping the other firmly attached to his melon of a nose. "I ab cawed Sir Guy of Glouster, at yer service, m'lord, also known as Guy the Good, as yew knew from yer magical ways aforehand."

"Huh?" I asked, confused.

Then I remembered my 'good guy' comment at the gate. "Yeah. Right. It was really nothing."

"Ah, modest too?, Guy said with admiration. "Tis a fine trait for one so , er....," he caught another whiff, ... "powerful."

I was rescued with the arrival of Alfred and the blanket, which he gratefully wrapped around my shoulders.

Alfred moved discretely downwind. "You have all our thanks, m'lord," he replied.

Guy added, "The Princess is most beloved by us all."

He wrinkled his nose. " But 'ere now, wot's say about yer bath, good sir? "

"That would be great."

Guy and Alfred led the way.

The city at dusk held a whimsical kind of magic all its own.

The waning sun bathed the setting in a warm pink glow with colors washed in muted pastels.

Points and angles were rounded with the easygoing flow of the river.

Every other patch of land was a garden or small grove of trees. Interspersed were cottages and houses, each uniquely decorated and painted according to their owner's fancy. Families were

sitting out on porches. Neighbors exchanged idle chat across bushes and yards. Children played the game of running wild under the taming eyes of their parents.

The word of my arrival had seemed to spread through the town's inhabitants, who gathered on the sides of the small trail that led to the castle proper.

Many of them cheered or waved to us as we made their way through the village.

I couldn't help but notice that most of them held their noses when we passed by.

And snickered.

It was one of those best of times and worst of times things combined.

"Sir Guy." I whispered tersely. "Can we speed this thing up?"

Alfred smirked, and Guy smothered a chuckle. "By all means, yer lordship. T'would be in the best interests of everyone, methinks."

We double-timed it to the castle.

The outer wall of the structure had another set of guards posted.

Upon seeing my escorts they immediately stood at attention.

One of the armed men announced "Admit."

The large grate of the entrance rolled upwards in a groan of straining metal.

Inside, the grounds were even more ornate than those of the village. The setting resembled a university more than a castle.

The towers were centrally located, surrounded by numerous other buildings and a similar profusion of greenery, including large open lawns, orchards of some kind, and seemingly endless flower gardens.

The stream flowed from a placid lake bordering the towers.

Again, there were greetings and salutations offered to our small band.

We made our way to the spires, each about seven stories tall and formed from solid rock. The middle one was slightly higher, and I practically ran up the flight of steps to the entrance.

"Old yer 'orses, sir!" Guy cheerfully remarked.

"Sorry. Moving quick is about the only way I've kept warm."

I guess he didn't notice my lips were blue.

Guy nodded and made a motion for me to follow him. He turned to Alfred.

"Be off with yerself now, and inform the wizard of the lad's arrival."

"Right away, sir." Alfred scurried off to the tower on their left.

I noted that Sir Guy had some pull around here.

With that we entered the building. The walls and floors were stone and lights in the corridors were supplied by glowing balls of crystal.

After a series of turnings, Guy finally opened a door marked "Bathe."

Inside were large wooden tubs steaming with hot water.

"You don't know how much I'm gonna love this."

Guy went to a cabinet and pulled out a combination of concoctions, all of which he poured into a tub.

"No offense, M'lord, but it should be known that I 'preciate this just as much's you. The smells been killing me."

He dusted off his hands. "You'd be needing some clothing as well. I'll leave you to yer comfort 'ere for a whiles."

I removed the last remaining garments as soon as Guy left and slid into the tub one inch at a time, groaning in relief.

The smell began its reluctant departure. Both of us took our time.

After a half-hour I felt truly relaxed, refreshed and water logged.

There were some large and fluffy towels on a bench near the tub. I dried myself off, and donned a thick robe hanging off a hook on the door.

Merl walked in.

Wizards do have excellent timing. Guess they'd need to.

I didn't know whether to club him or hug him.

"Merl!"

"Joseph, my boy!"

I was glad to see him, despite how he set me up.

Despite the fact that he was probably the best liar I ever met, then or now.

I compromised and we locked into a bear hug, clapping backs and pounding on each other.

He pulled back and looked me over.

"Well, I must say that you look none the worse for wear," teased Merl, "a bit scraggly. Is that perhaps fungus on your chin?"

"I think all the fungus were killed by that smell.... you're looking pretty hip yourself."

"Rather officious, don't you think?"

Merl was dressed in a black velvet shirt and leggings with gold trim. "When in Rome, etc., etc. ...

How about some food for you lad? A shave? Some warm attire?"

"Sound's great Merl, ...and how about Beth?"

My voice lowered with quiet anticipation. "She around?"

He assumed a look of regretful dismay. "She went off on an errand for her father."

"Oh."

Damn.

"It's been three weeks, Joseph. Things have turned out quite well for you, at least physically," said the wizard, eyeing me speculatively. "And mentally, -well you made it back, didn't you?"

I felt a stab of irritation, "No thanks to you."

The wizard looked away as if to collect his thoughts. "Maybe I didn't really have a choice in these matters either."

"Yeah, -sure."

Merl looked obviously distressed. -Good, serves the old bastard right, I thought. But he had a good comeback□ he always did.

“Listen lad, the same was done to me. No one could teach you what you really need to know if you’re going to learn to master□”

“Oh, -I paid my dues bit so you got to pay yours.” I sounded petulant even to me.

“Perhaps you’d care to whine some more later□.” Merl scowled, "But first let us make you half-way presentable to the Court and show you to your quarters."

“ I still have a lot of questions.”

“I have more answers than you’d care to know.”

Merl was getting that steely tone to his voice.

I know I’ve pushed the envelope when someone wants to stamp me.

“Okay, I’ll bitch later.”

“No doubt.”

The wizard took me by the arm and we left.

Everyone seemed most gracious and friendly. The barber who shaved me, the tailor who dressed me and the cobbler who fitted me with a fine pair of boots. All of them showed a tremendous respect and deference towards Merl. The wizard, in turn, treated all of them with a genuine warmth and concern. He asked about their families, their work, and even their opinions on the latest royal gossip. It took me by surprise that he was so...so... *human*. I’d have preferred to see him as a dick.

Merl escorted me to a guestroom in the left tower overlooking the whole of Avalon.

The shutters were open, revealing the village nestled between the sheltering walls of the castle. A fire burned merrily in a stone hearth, sending flickering shadows on the walls. Bread and cheese were on a small table.

"Starry Night." I murmured, entranced by the scene.

"What’s that again?" inquired Merl.

"The painting by Van Gogh, -the artist who cut off his ear. It looks just like the view outside the window." I replied.

"Yes, because it is. You know, -he wasn't crazy at all. He was just as sane as you or I. The ear was infected."

"Don't tell me that he... "

Merl kept his face closed for a moment. "You're not the first of your world to visit within these walls."

"What the hell are you...?"

"Never mind that. Come sit down with me." The wizard gestured to the table and two chairs near the bed. I plopped myself down.

I waited. He stared.

"I feel a lecture coming on," I said.

"You complain when I attempt to instruct you, you complain when I don't."

"Go ahead." I hated when he was right.

"I was full of bitterness, and longing, and blame. -I fixed my gaze so steadily on what I thought was the truth. I did make myself rather blind. -Like you. Like you, I had to make my way out of the emptiness. And then I too had to fight merely to survive in a very strange land. I became rather cocky and arrogant."

"And now you're a pillar of humility."

"At least I've learned when to keep my mouth closed and my ears open."

I slunk further down in my chair.

"The reason you're here is no accident," he took a puff and exhaled, "there are such things as accidents, you know...-at least there use to be on your world, until the invention of attorneys□"

I smiled.

"On your world, and on all the worlds, there are difficult problems that have no single origin.

Perhaps it's best to see such incidents as challenges that forge our capabilities."

"Getting up in the morning was enough of a challenge."

"Don't be merely clever lad, -it only gets you into trouble," he paused.

"Those with *special* potential often face more hardships which assist in the development of their unique talents."

"Think I'm special, do ya?"

The wizard was losing his patience, "If however, these individuals avoid such endeavors..."

He fixed me on the crosshairs of those eyes of his.

I squirmed.

"Diamonds come from coal, Joseph. One of the most precious gems starts as a bit of life that is pressured and forged and stressed beyond all imagination."

"I'm not really into pressure, -you know?"

"Yes. I know. But being put in-between a rock and a hard place does have its evolutionary impact."

"So leaving me stuck in that nothing bullshit was some test?"

"No, -it was the lesson."

"What? Pass or die? Pretty hard grading system you people got."

The wizard stared directly at me. "Yes. More like do or die."

"And then wandering for weeks in the forest?"

"You needed to toughen up a bit."

"Maybe all these stakes are just a little too high for me."

Merl pulled out his pipe and lit it. "There are greater stakes, -the fates of entire worlds rest in the balance."

"So, -that give you the right to lie to me?"

"Things are not always what they seem."

"No shit. I've heard that line before."

Merl got up and began to pace. "I'm considered a wizard in this land. I was assigned here some forty years ago."

"Assigned? What do you mean?"

"I was lost in the Borderlands, much like yourself. Someone found me."

"Who?"

"Michael is as good a name as any."

"Okay, so Michael what's-his-name finds you and asks you to go on some stupid quest?"

Merl smiled then. "Yes, actually. Then he took me to another place and time where the problem and solution originated."

"And just where the hell was that?"

"Your own world Joseph, in the year 12,543."

My jaw unhinged and my eyes widened into stupified mode. I couldn't think of anything to say.

"Excuse me," I interrupted, and reached out, took a glass of wine and gulped it.

"Better now?"

I shook my head, "no" and he went on anyway.

"I know the feeling exactly," he said. "Let me continue..."

I let.

"As I said before, my job and the job of other agents is to discover *WHO* is making the Universe collapse, and the how and why. Our goal is of course, to stop them."

"So you said."

"In order to accomplish this we need beings, -like you, like me, - who can walk through the worlds."

"Okay, -supposing that you aren't loaded on some weird drug, or just bullshitting me, just how did *we* manage to get this ability?"

"A mutation."

“So, now I’m a mutant?” Man, -he was really pushing it. I wondered if they had medieval funny farms...

“You’ve heard of Carl Jung?”

“Yeah. I majored in psychology, remember?” But, -I didn’t know where the hell he was going with this one.

Merl tapped his pipe on the table.

“Jung came up with the idea of the Collective Unconscious. He was only partially correct.”

I waited.

“Jung thought that all of us were somehow connected to stored generational memories from the past. That our myths, our dreams of what he called Archtypes were an inherited language of symbols passed genetically to our offspring.”

I started feeling queasy then.

Merl knew way too much about this shit for a medieval wizard.

“These memories are not inherited from our ancestors.”

“O...kay....”

“These dreams and imagery are intrinsic connections to our parallel selves that exist in the infinity of other realms.”

“Uh..huh...”

“The mutation makes certain individuals more in tune with these other self-reflections, and consequently gives them access to the Borderlands.”

“Now do you understand?”

Understand? Sort of. Maybe.

All my life I’ve been plagued by dreams where I always felt normal and belonged, but everything was always off center, sometimes more, sometimes less.

Dreams of different me’s in different lands, in different jobs, friends, family. Basically, I was scared that he was right. It all fit too well.

I was saved by the bell. Actually, the knocking on the door.

A page had arrived to escort us to dinner.

"We'll continue this discussion at some future time, la... Joseph," Merl stated as he rose from the chair, and motioned to a full-length mirror near the wash basin.

"A final gaze to see if you will be presentable to his royal majesty may be prudent."

I walked over to my reflection. I saw a robust and fit man in his prime, with a direct open gaze and just a trace of apprehension.

Or a trace of derangement, -take your pick.

My appearance seemed to have become more solid and substantial.

More present.

The white cotton shirt and trousers suited me well, and the boots were snug and supple. Then I realized why these clothes had looked so familiar. Merl had worn them in their first encounter.

"Merl, aren't these ..."

"Standard wizards attire. -Hurry lad, we don't want to keep his Highness waiting for dinner.

T'would be most impolite," the wizard abruptly cut me off.

Dinner. Fine.

Anything even half-assed normal would suit me.

"And by the by, you forgot this." Merl tossed me a feathered cap.

I just stood there, one arm on my hip, the other clutching the cap. "You know, Merl about this parallel world crap..." I began.

He looked at the page and shook his head in warning.

"Forget it." I said as I grudgingly put on the beret, and stalked out of the room in a huff. Of course the cap was a perfect fit.

Merl turned to the retainer and confided, "Terribly cranky when he's not fed."

I didn't bother to dignify it with a response.

* * *

The dining hall was in the main tower. Torches hung from the walls, illuminating a scene right out of the Middle Ages. My nostrils were assaulted with the pleasing aroma of roasting meat and spices. There was an enormous fireplace with various fowls and game hen turning on spits. The clatter of plates and clamor of conversation echoed throughout the chamber. The King's table was directly across from the entrance. I could barely make him out.

Men and women with steaming plates and flagons of drink bustled here and there. Finely dressed lords and ladies laughed and chatted at the large wooden tables spread around the room. (Later on, when we passed by, I smelt them. Most were drenched in perfume. Bathing was still quite a novelty in this realm.)

A dour faced man in a long purple robe introduced Merl and me. The guy looked like he had been sucking on lemons. Our announcer banged a long wooden staff on the ground three times. The noise boomed across the hall, breaking the sound barrier and the commotion came to a dead stop.

You could have heard a pin drop here too, except pins were very hard to come by in Avalon. "Your royal Highness, Lords and Ladies, and good subjects of the realm, We present to you, Merlin, wizard and friend to the Court, and his companion and savior of our most beloved princess, the most valiant and revered Joseph Grodin of ..."

He faltered for a moment, and looked inquiringly at Merl. Merl passed the look to me.

There was a brief fumble, but I was on the ball.

"Asgard, Ohio," I blurted. -Don't blame me, I didn't name the town.

"Asgard, Ohio," the purple robe shouted. All of the people in the chamber arose as one and gave us a thunderous hand.

Even the dour faced man cracked a smile, then quickly sealed it with vinegar. Merl elbowed me in the ribs and hissed through the side of his mouth.

"Bow and smile, lad. Then, up to the Kings table. Protocol and all that rot."

So we did.

As I did my impression of a bow, my cap plunked on the floor.

I sure knew how to make an impression.

Merl quickly grabbed it and gave it back. We took the applause in stride.

The acceptance melted me like warm butter on toast. I was a sucker for any kind of validation back then. Still am, -that's why I have to watch myself...

There were twelve seats at the King's table, and ten were occupied. Arthur was standing right in the middle with two seats vacant on his right.

He was this tall bearded guy with broad shoulders and gray-flecked hair kept in place by a simple gold circlet.

He dressed in a red leather jerkin that covered a violet tunic. A large broadsword hung loosely at his left side.

His eyes were cobalt blue clear. His lips held a generous smile, much like his daughter's.

Merl and I reached the front of the table and proceeded to bow.

This time, I remembered to take off my cap first.

I may be ignorant, but I'm a quick study.

Arthur acknowledged us with a voice that rang like thunder through the hall.

"Let all who are present and all who pledge their loyalty to the crown be known, that on this day we do give honor and thanks to our friend Joseph, who has saved the life of our Princess Elizabeth, and has earned through his bravery a Knighthood of this realm. -Joseph, come before me and kneel."

I shut my open mouth to avoid catching any of the flies that buzzed with the rest of the stunned conversation.

I staggered up behind the table, next to the king.

My legs had gotten all rubbery so falling to my knees was easy.

Arthur pulled the sword out with an easy, practiced gesture. It sang in the air, - original heavy metal.

I looked up.

Arthur said in a quiet voice meant for my ears only.

"Thank you for protecting my most precious treasure."

I saw his gratitude was sincere and got a little choked myself, " Yeah, you're welcome, -but I couldn't have done it without Merl."

The King nodded.

"An invaluable ally and friend."

He continued in a louder voice, "I Arthur of Avalon, do hereby decree, that from this day forward, Joseph will be henceforth known as Sir Joseph Grodin of Avalon, a Royal Knight of our Kingdom, with all the privileges and duties thereof, for the remainder of his life."

He lightly tapped each of my shoulders with the sword. "So it is said, so it shall be written," the king concluded.

He gave me a hand up.

The crowd cheered and stomped, banging their cups and scaring the hell out of the small herd of dogs, who stampeded under the tables into the kitchen.

"And now, let us get on with the feast!" Arthur proclaimed.

Merl came up and clapped me on the back.

I grinned and tipped my cap.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Don't like surprises, do you?"

Merl and Arthur embraced. It was hard to tell who got winded first, but they soon laughingly released each other.

Sir Guy, a few seats down, raised a flagon and toasted, "To Sir Joseph, Knight of the Court." The lords and ladies seconded the motion.

I pinched myself very hard.

It hurt.

I'm awake, I thought. Or, I'm dreaming that I'm pinching myself.

Either way, I was having one of the best times in my life, so shut up already and for once, listened to myself.

Merl and I took our seats to Arthur's right.

I followed the crowd and dug in to a few bites of very hearty and delicious fare. Anything other than fish, nuts, and berries was appetizing at this point.

I got caught up in the moment and had to show off. What I had here to show was mainly my ignorance.

I turned to the King and asked, "So, your highness, how's Guenevire?"

Arthur gave him a puzzled look. "Guenevire?"

Merl had overheard the question, and shook his head in warning.

I ignored him. "You know, the Queen. What happened to her, and Lancelot, and the Round Table?"

The King appeared even more confused. He looked to Merl.

Merl quickly deflected the issue. "The lad's had a hard time of it over the last few weeks, Arthur.

I do believe that he has you *mistaken*," Merl emphasized the last word with a shin kick to me under the table, "for someone else."

"Ah," Arthur exclaimed. "Well, Sir Joseph, I know how the rigors of travel often sap one's strength and stamina. My good queen, Winifred, died giving birth twenty-five years ago."

His majesty's face yielded to melancholy.

"Which is one reason my daughter remains so dear to me. She is the only part of her mother that I have left."

The king smiled a sad smile. "Other than the memories."

I could relate all too well.

“I lost my wife and son some years ago.”

We connected in a way at that moment, both understanding what that loss really meant. Maybe that’s why he helped me later. I don’t know.

Okay then, I thought to myself.

This isn’t *exactly* Camelot, but it would do in a pinch if Beth were here.

I politely interrupted. "Speaking of the princess, where is she?"

"North, near the highlands." Arthur focused his attention on me. "Sir Guy brought us the news that the Baron Rodwell of Cambridge has disappeared, and the castle attacked. Guy fended the invaders off with the assistance of the castle guard, and came back to report. Rodwell’s wife Evelyn is our cousin. Beth went to be by her side the moment she heard the news."

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "I all but ordered her to stay, as I feared for her safety. But she is a stubborn lass, and she and Evelyn are very close. -She argued that it was her blood right as friend and kin, besides her duty as a member of the Court to investigate. I sent her with a guard of twenty stout men-at-arms for protection."

"She is a hard one to reason with, at times." Merl conceded.

"Aye," said Arthur.

"I place the blame of that on her teacher who taught her to reason so well."

Merl retorted, "You do me too much honor your highness. I'd say she takes more after her father."

Arthur turned to me. "See what I mean, lad? There is just no debating with the man. His wit prohibits any unfavorable discourse. Especially in regard to his own person."

“Yeah. He’s a real open guy. ”

Merl kicked me under the table again.

We talked that night of dragons and adventures, of heroes and villains.

Every few minutes or so, some noble or retainer would approach the table for a few words with Arthur.

The conversations would shift from problems with the sewage system, to border disputes, to troop supplies, to care for orphans, to mining iron, to you name it.

I was impressed with his sense of justice, compassion, and the weight of responsibility he carried.

I learned that a king, at least a good king, was a servant of all the people.

I was glad that I wasn't a king. I could barely even rule myself.

There were songs, and dancing, and feats of skill and prowess.

I found myself entertained, but I also felt impatience gnawing a hole in me.

It was Beth.

I wanted to see her, as quickly as possible. I had this unrelenting feeling of danger.

Actually, -I had this really big crush thing going...even if it was all a lie from her side.

After the plates were cleared, I turned to the wizard and said, "We have to go North, Merl."

"I know." Merl replied without hesitation.

"You already know?"

"Of course. Have you forgotten? To the North lays wisdom, costing vision to be found. The last part of your quest."

"I thought you said this whole quest thing was bogus..."

"It is and it isn't." The wizard patted my arm with a paternal fondness and lowered his voice, "and *Sir* Joseph, if you breathe one word of anything we've discussed I swear you will be placed in a solitary cell 'till you rot."

"Touchy are we?"

"This culture is not to be contaminated by exposing them to..."

"Haven't YOU already messed them up yourself?"

"It's magic to them, simple magic. Acceptable to their epistemology -and you best be warned..."

We attracted Arthur's attention, and he leaned over to us, concerned.

“Anything amiss good sirs?”

The wizard hastily got up, went over to Arthur and engaged him in a rapid, hushed monologue.

The king motioned for Sir Guy to join them.

The three conferred for several minutes with me straining to hear above the roar of the crowd.

What I didn't hear was...

“I say, -tell him the truth. Seems a goodly fellow.”

“That's what your daughter said.” Merlin shook his head. “We can't be sure of his commitment.

I hate the subterfuge as much as you, your majesty. It just can't be helped.”

“Does he know that my daughter is already betrothed?”

“Well, not exactly.” The wizard sighed.

“Yer highness, yer wizardship, I say leave im' ere. 'E could turn nasty on us all when E' finds his self played a fool.”

Merl looked at the knight strangely. “We can't leave him here, Sir Guy, he's needed to open the Door in the mountains. You know that.”

“Yer sure yew can'na do the deed?”

Merlin shook his head adamantly. “We've been through all of this before. If we reveal anything more we may not be able to secure his cooperation.”

Arthur's voice rang with steel, “The man was honorable. He shall be treated honorably.”

“Beg yer pardon, yer Highness, -makin' the fellow a Knight goes against...”

“Silence.”

“But your Majesty!” Merlin implored, “I don't know if we can trust him to...”

“JOSEPH!” The King roared, “COME!”

I came.

“Yes Sir?” I sensed the tension of the men around me.

“Merlin says you fancy the Princess Beth?”

I shot the wizard a murderous glance, then looked back at Arthur, feeling like a teenage boy caught naked with the daughter in his den.

Hey, -I did see her naked, remember?

“Yes sir.”

“Sir Joseph, she is already betrothed.”

“I didn’t know.” My heart sank a bit. Not capsized completely, but a very large breach in the hull.

“Even if you’re both fond of each other, the good of the kingdom requires certain allegiances...”

“I understand, your highness.”

“But we still require your help, if you are willing. I ask you as a man of honor and virtue for your assistance.”

Hell, - it’d been a while since anyone had treated me with such respect.

If Arthur had any talent, it was inspiring loyalty.

I spoke without hesitation.

“I’m here for you sire.”

Arthur gave Merlin a meaningful look.

I couldn’t resist a jab, “Didn’t want you to tell me, did he?”

Arthur blanched and arched one eyebrow up.

“I wasn’t sure of your commitment.” Merl retorted.

I kept my face blank and said nothing. The mage turned from me and grabbed Arthur’s arm.

“I’ll send Beth back with an escort.”

“Thank you, old friend.”

Merl nodded to Guy and he dashed out of the room.

Arthur clasped my shoulder. "Godspeed to you, Sir Joseph."

“Thanks.”

Merl quickly interjected, "To the stables, Joseph. Guy is getting supplies and some horses."

"Horses?"

"For riding, lad "

I remembered that old saying, 'never look a gift horse in the mouth'.

Then again, -look what happened to the Trojans.

"Let's use a Door, or magic. Or something faster." I argued.

"We can't", said Merl. "Wards at the mountains block our capability to enter the area. We must use conventional means."

I protested, "I've never ridden a horse in my life."

"Look at it this way, lad" said Merl tersely, "Then you and the horse will be even. He's never been ridden by you in his life, either."

The wizard turned to leave.

"Fine. Let's just go already. And Merl..."

He looked back.

"You could have trusted me. You could have just asked."

"Trust is not my strong suite."

"No shit."

Maybe there is benefit to the doubt if you have ample time to indulge your cynicism.

If you don't, then doubt can be another link in the chain of defeat. The clock was ticking so we all moved like demons from hell were after us.

Which wasn't far from the truth.

Critical Conditions

From the operating journal transcript of Andrew Tucker MD, First Year Surgery Resident, Mercy General:

"So, Lefay waltzes in to the team, bitching, as usual, about whatever she can find to bitch about. She made Marly scrub again, and then had Horowitz change the compact disk to Mozart. Music has charms to sooth ... etc, etc,. She picks up the scalpel and actually begins to conduct! I mean, like really getting into it! Well, everybody begins to mellow out, because she's so mellow, you know? And, I swear, it's like a symphony. Everybody's in tune, in a groove. Grooving with Mozart and Lefay. She read the chart on the guy, who, I tell you, looks more like he got into a fight with some Tasmanian devil than going through his windshield, or whatever the hell happened. Well, they got him on more tubes than there are subway's in New York. She starts to do an exploratory, and checks the chart again. No way, she says. No way this guy got cut up in some traffic accident. The assist agreed, and she said, okay, we'll find out the story from the guy later if he makes it. Blood loss was severe, and the slices this guy had on him were deep. Like somebody had taken a garden trowel and tried to rake his head off. Popped one of his eyes, and splintered the bones. It's been about seven hours and they're still at it. I'm still on call for emergency, and will continue to observe as per my assignment.

(Bearing unforeseen wrecks, stabbings, and OD's.)

I just want to add that it is my pleasure and privilege to watch Dr. Lefay in action. I've never seen someone with her moves on the table. Like she knows just what to do before it's going to happen.

That lady has some kind of magic.

A complete analysis of surgical procedure will follow these personal observations. And, Dr. Sanders, I do object to the continued practice of

making first year residents write these so-called observation reports. Especially the "self-disclosure" aspects recommended from the psych staff. They think we're all a bunch of closet sadists anyway. Why? Because we cut people up. Well, most of them faint at the sight of blood. It's not my fault if I'm going to be paid thousands of dollars an hour compared to their measly hundred or so.

I just think that this is their way of getting back.

Respectfully yours,

Andrew Tucker, MD

12/06

PS. Are you sure that these are kept confidential? I don't want Lefay ragging my ass for calling her a bitch.

Northern Exposures

How much pain can a pain in the butt be?

Try riding a horse for eight hours when you've never ridden a horse before.

And the horse knows that you are a rank amateur.

And the horse has all of these little tricks to convince you that riding is definitely not a career choice. Like, going for the lowest overhanging branch at a full gallop. Or, swerving into the side of a tree on a narrow trail to "accidentally" brush you off.

Now imagine you are also carrying this "I didn't know they were that heavy" sword that was bashing your leg in it's scabbard as you were not so merrily bouncing through the countryside, with two companions with better things to do than playing nursemaid, although they did yell out instructions and encouragement.

Okay I got the hang of horseback riding.

At first I was hanging on for dear life.

Later, I reached the conclusion that I would almost rather be hanged than ride another second.

* * *

We had ridden all night, with Sir Guy keeping point, me in the middle, and Merl bringing up the rear.

I gradually began to let myself enjoy parts of the journey. I learned a little.

The horse flowed when I galloped, -like whitewater rafting. *Streaming in the current moment; laughing out loud at the sense of blurring speed and motion.*

Waves of scenery swept across my vision.

-Trotting was more of a brief stay in purgatory.

Like driving your car with no shocks on a railroad track.

During these times I bit my tongue. In more ways than one.

Eventually, the horse and I obtained a mutual degree of tolerance.

I learned to hold the reins loosely, so as to not injure the animal's mouth with the bit. In return, his horse stopped lunging for the closest protruding obstruction to knock me off. I also discovered my balance, to move with the animal, and not to control as much as to guide.

We both loved to run, and run we did.

Despite the aches and pains, it was very, very cool.

Guy signaled for a halt as dawn was breaking.

"Ere now, time for a rest, aye wot? 'orses are a bit lathered."

We pulled up to a small meadow with plenty of grass.

I winced as I attempted to move my leg up over the saddle. My horse seized the moment to crop at some tender shoots a few yards away. The movement resulted in my abrupt departure from my mount.

I fell with a thud.

Needless to say, this did little to soothe my sore butt.

Guy looked down at my sprawled figure on the ground.

"Intresting dismount, Sir Knight."

"Yeah, right," I responded blearily, rubbing his backside. "And Guy, just call me Joe, okay? I'm not into this title stuff."

Guy's face crinkled with amusement. "Wotever yah say, lad. Tis your name, after all. But I do suggest we wipe down the brutes," he patted his mare, "afore we rest our own weary bones."

"Just let me close my eyes, one second Guy," I said. "Just one... tiny... second ..." my eyes shut and my voice drifted into a yawn.

The wizard approached us both.

"Joseph, I see you've selected a place to rest."

I snored back at him. Fake snores, really. I wanted to see if there was anything else going on behind my back, so I listened intently.

"Methinks our Sir Joseph is more than a bit worn out," Guy drawled.

"That he is. I'll tend to his horse," Merl offered.

The men began to arrange camp, unsaddling the horses, collecting wood, and breaking out food.

"Just who exactly is 'e, yer wizardship?" Guy inquired after they were settled.

"Oh, a fellow distant traveler." Merl replied, his eyes remote and preoccupied.

"E does 'ave more 'na touch of the magic about 'im, don't e?"

"Ah, yes. More than a touch", said Merl, "although he doesn't really believe it yet." The wizard smiled with a gentle irony. "Most of his fellow countrymen don't believe much in magic, Guy."

"-Jus like our own countrymen, -not believing in Arthur an' his fancy idears?."

"A bit different. -Joseph and his people believe in logic and rationality, and in the power of reason," the wizard sighed.

"So wot? Yew'd be a fool not to."

"This is true, Guy. But if they can't understand something, then they dismiss it as illusionary, as unreal, as if it never happened. There is little room in their world for miracles, so miracles rarely occur."

"Pity. -Ya know, tha kingdom cou'd stand ta honor it's own tradition an hist'ry..."

"Enough." Merl brushed the dirt off his robe. "Enough of this idle talk. I'll take the first watch.

Get some rest."

"Much obliged."

I really went to sleep then and didn't awake until mid-afternoon.

The smell of the stew did it.

I turned over to hit the alarm clock as usual.

No clock, of course. But no nightmares either.

I sat up with a start, realizing where I was.

Every muscle in my body crying out for revenge.

I groaned and rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. Strands of tiredness clung like cobwebs, attempting to enfold me back into slumber.

If the best revenge was living well, I'd just have to wait.

You could say that I got up on the wrong side of bed, except the hardened earth didn't take sides.

"Hey!" I yelled out.

Merl and Guy paused in their fiddling with the cook fire

"Why the hell didn't you two wake me?" I complained.

"Yer needed yer beauty sleep, Sir Knight," Guy retorted with a straight face.

"I told you to cut that out."

Guy turned towards Merl. "Cranky bastard."

"Joseph," the wizard calmly explained, "You would do us little good in the sorry state you were in."

"But ... "

"Your good intentions are appreciated. However, we can't afford to have you falling off your horse due to exhaustion."

Merl gave me a wry smile, "As much as your horse would enjoy it. Now, fill your stomach, and we will be off."

The food was good. Then again, any food is good when you're hungry and half-dead tired. Especially when you are camping out.

I made myself useful by cleaning up after the meal.

Afterwards, I persuaded Guy to show me how to hold the sword and a few basic moves.

"Wot -yuh mean, yew can'na use a sword?"

"Nope, in my...land we use..." I caught Merl giving me the eye, -"lawyers"

"Wot's a loyer?"

"Kinda like a trained shark...uh, - I'll explain later."

No, I didn't know how to use a sword.

But, I did have a couple of years of martial arts training.

At the clinic I use to run we had this sixth degree black belt named Jim.

He gave free daily lessons to the kids in karate and kung-fu, and persuaded me to join the class.

For the next three years, three times a week, he kicked my ass on a regular basis.

I became an expert black and blue belt.

I learned enough from Guy not to cut my foot off, and experimented a bit with some of the other moves Jim taught me.

Did I mention that swords weigh a ton after waving them around for five minutes?

Rested and fed, we road up into the gently rolling hills.

* * *

The day progressed into night, and the grassy banks became rockier.

They transformed into hardy forests, the woods changing again from oaks and maple to evergreens.

The air began to take on a chill that bit through our cloaks, numbing faces and hands.

After hours of traveling, these were about the last parts of me that weren't numb. More often than not we had to walk their mounts.

Eons of blurred motion went by before Merl allowed us a final rest, mainly for the horses. The land was steeper, and a range of mountains made itself visible in the near distance. They reached up, - a giant wall extending into the night, blocking out the light from the stars like some immense dark curtain.

When I looked, I sensed a similar foreboding walling off what little confidence I'd gained.

Waiting patiently for my inadequacy to reveal itself.

* * *

Our camp that second night was in a wedge of rocks that gave us some relief from the wind. I insisted on a few more rounds of swordplay and Guy complied.

At least I managed to hold on to the thing and actually took a few swipes at my teacher. The damn thing killed my arm every time the blades met.

"Least yer not a coward."

"Gee. Thanks."

"Don't stand so flatfooted. Turn to the side, -present less of a target."

I complied.

"Now, again..."

We went on until I couldn't hold the sword up at all.

* * *

A shiver that had nothing to do with the cold air crawled up my spine after supper. The campfire was smoldering coal.

I moved closer, more for the warmth of my companions than for the fire itself.

Guy patted me on the shoulder. "Yer did well t'day, Sir... Joseph."

"Thanks. Sir Guy."

"So's yer can take the first watch."

"No problem." I replied, stretching a bit. "But, er, what do I watch for?"

"Yer got yer trolls, brigands, banshees, the usual," Guy responded matter of factly.

"WHAT?"

Merl cast an admonishing look at the knight. "Sir Guy..." he threatened.

"Sorry, lad. Just 'aving a bit of a jest. There be no real danger in these parts."

Guy raised his eyebrows and inclined his head, "-Yet. -Tis up on the mountain that we need be most alert."

"Where Beth is?" I became aware that my hand tightly gripped my sword. Not that I could use a sword if my life, -if anybody's life... depended on it.

Merl noticed.

The wizard knew when brooding was best left to another type of bird.

I've learned since that the hatchlings of despair grow into either foolhardiness or apathy.

"Joseph, let's take a walk."

We strolled a bit away from Guy's ears.

"I was not expecting you to dazzle me with a display of swordsmanship or knight craft. You are with me because of your other, ...ah, ...unique talents."

"Oh yeah? Like what? Skunk taming?"

"You will know what to do when the time comes," the wizard encouraged,

"that is what you must have faith in, even if you don't believe it."

"Oh yeah, just like you had faith in me?"

"Lad, you've opened Doors twice now, -have any idea how you did it?"

"Not a goddamn clue."

"It's like a surrender to death, to losing yourself, and giving up..."

"Sounds right up my alley..."

The wizard scowled at me.

"It's hard. -I'm worried."

Merl reached out to touch me on the shoulder. "As we all are, lad." For once I didn't mind the lad bit. It was actually kind of comforting.

But I needed to know what was going on...

"Tell me about this Cambridge place, the mountain, -what's up there?"

Merl began, "The mountain has long been a border outpost of the kingdom, as well as a valuable source for metals. It has the only passage through the entire range to Avalon." The wizard fumbled around for his pipe. "And adjacent to the castle is a Door."

“So...somebody’s going to use that door...No. They already did, didn’t they?”

“Yes. A small scouting party went through. ”

“From where?”

“The world ruled by Mordred." Merl grimaced with distaste.

"*Mordred? Shit!* Oh, C'mon, Merl." Just when I'm thinking that this isn't really what I'm thinking, Merl always threw me another damn curve.

“Shut up. -The world is called Coventry. In my past visits... they were peaceful. That was all well and good, until a renegade from Avalon, a past student of mine and relative of Arthur’s ...”

Merl shook his head in apologetic guilt, “...wandered into that world and took over.”

“You didn’t tell me this prick was one of your students.”

The wizard's eyes became stone, "I have only told you the truth."

“It’s what you haven’t said that bothers me.”

The wizard was silent for a moment, but I held his gaze.

“Look lad,” the mage offered, “ I’ve blocked all Doors to Avalon to prevent Mordred from massing an army and getting through.”

“The devil has also warded the Doors on his side, and kept me from him as well.”

I shrugged, "So I’m supposed to break the Mexican standoff."

"Sadly not. Sources indicate he has recruited a novice very much like yourself. This outsider already forced open a passage for Mordred on a scouting mission.”

"And ...," I pulled.

“And he has but one eye.”

My heart jumped to my throat, and I felt this surge of rage. “Then he could be the one.”

“Yes.”

What did I feel? Blood thirsty. My initial desire for vengeance got drowned in a bottle. It bubbled up now, full and rich.

I thought of Barb and her bloody corpse. I thought of pushing steel through someone's guts. And then I got afraid all over again.

"Does Beth know this stuff?"

"Arthur, Beth and Guy are unaware of the big picture. We have information linking Mordred to another alien race that may have something to do with our greater problem."

I nodded.

Merl continued, "We know Mordred and his protégé must first enter the Borderlands from their home world. There is a Door not too far from the north walls of the castle in Cambridge. The Duke disappeared and many were killed when an advance party from Coventry broke through. They could attack again at any time."

"Why the hell is Beth there at all if you knew the risk?"

"Well, er, ah," Merl seemed to be tongue tied.

"Oh, yes, She's bait for me. How foolish of me to forget. Why the hell didn't you just ask me? What was all of that talk about faith in myself?"

I dogged him some more. "What about your faith in me? Why didn't you trust me?"

Merlin had the decency to look ashamed.

"We needed a guarantee that you would, ah, join in our cause. I could offer no such promises. You are your own person, after all. So it was decided Beth would travel North, hoping that you'd follow. Arthur could not bring himself to lie"

"But you could."

"I never lied."

"What about the Dragon, -that another trick?"

"Just negligence on my part," said the wizard. "You did save her in truth."

"Oh, *-in truth!* The truth is pretty flexible for you isn't it?"

He looked away. I started back to the campfire, pretty disgusted.

Righteously disgusted.

"You lying sack of shit!"

The sound of drawn steel rang into the night, "Careful what yer say, boy."

Guy had unsheathed his sword. We looked venomously at the each other, and a deadly quiet pervaded the camp.

Merl imposed himself between us, and said with a fatigued disdain, "Enough squabbling. Joseph, you have no right to judge me. I would sacrifice myself, you and any of us to stop this invasion."

And then with a trace of regret, "Our task is not easy and it burdens my heart, and weighs heavily on all our souls."

It got to be a different kind of quiet then.

We sat down and I whipped sticks into the fire, throwing sparks into the night air.

After a while, Merlin broke the silence.

"In some ways, Arthur has already sacrificed his honor to prevent Mordred's rule. You have no idea what Mordred is capable of. You have no conception of what kinds of evil he can let loose in this world."

Glaring at the rotund warrior he added, "And you, Sir Guy, had best put that blade in it's bed and follow it soon after. Joseph and I will take the first watch together."

Guy grumbled and did what he was told. His muttering soon turned into rhythmic snores. I sat in cold stillness by the fire.

The wizard looked so forlorn my anger began to cool.

"So why didn't Arthur come with us?" I asked, breaking the ice that had formed between us.

"Because, lad, I threatened to turn him into a toad if he did. Not that I could, mind you. But the land need's its king. -Besides, there's more at stake here in all of this than little Avalon."

His eyes glittering in the starlight like black coals. "Mordred's war on us is just another battle, and I'm rather awfully tired of the whole mess myself."

"You must get tired of wading through all the crap you make up."

The wizard rubbed his eyes. "You said it, lad." More wearily now, "don't ask any more questions and I'll tell you no lies. I've said too much already."

Merlin's reticence continued for a time while I scowled at the fire.

"So you're really from the future...?"

"One of them."

Quiet again.

"You really need my help?"

"You were all we could get at the moment," He gave me a small smile.

"But I was pretty sure you'd do."

"This is all way beyond me"

"It's well beyond most of us, Joseph. This land, -these people have only shadows of ideas concerning these matters... most of us condemn what we don't understand lad. Besides, you sorely needed some venting, I'm sure."

"I would have come to help anyway, you know," I put in my last two cents.

"Really? I thought so..." Merl stared into the fire and stated offhandedly, "but I didn't know so."

"Well, now you do."

"Most certainly."

"Okay then."

"As you say."

"Are we okay now or what?" I asked.

The wizard turned, facing me squarely. "Yes lad, that is one thing that I would dearly like us to be. There are few I can really confide in here."

"You could try the *truth*."

"Oh *REALLY*...? and be sanctioned for compromising my mission out of some simpleminded idealistic notion serving only the egotistical needs of some novice who has no idea what's at stake and jeopardizing the work of thirty years?"

I had nothing to add.

The wizard stilled his ruffled feathers and put wings on one last arrow.

“And of course,” Merl leaned closer, “there is also the matter of your apprenticeship, which we can deal with later.”

“Man, -you won’t give up, will you?”

Merlin looked genuinely taken aback. “*Of course...*when it’s the wisest and most empowering choice.”

I laughed.

“Okay, okay -so how do we do the Door thing to stop this creep Mordred and his sleazy pal?”

“You have been there in the Borderlands,- First we have to open the door and get to there. That will be part of your task, and I will help you to achieve it.”

“So, no sweat. It’ll be like falling off a log.

“Yes, indeed,” the wizard stifled a cough, “but it’s the middle and ending part that may give us cause for most concern.”

“Why ?”

“Because, lad. When you open the Door to the Borderlands, Mordred and his friends will be in the corridor preparing to come through.”

I managed a grim smile, “Then we’ll just have to kick their asses, won’t we?”

Merl’s returned a wolfish grin, eyes glowing red from the fire.

“I dare say,” the wizard affirmed. “ And, we can lock the Door by disposing of Mordred’s one-eyed apprentice.”

“Dispose?” My eyebrows lifted.

“Alright, - Killing him is a viable option. -Now, -enough of this talk. It would be wise to for you to rest. You’ll need your strength.”

Rest was the last thing on my mind.

"-Can't go to sleep. I'll stand watch with you."

"Very well," said Merl, "I'm happy for the company. T'will be a long night fore dawn."

We hands stood watch as the hours of the night dragged on.

Pulled by a team of snails.

Reunited

The air was as crisp as a new dollar bill, and as cold as the miser hoarding it. Navigating the horses up the narrow mountain path kept us from freezing to death. Pushing, pulling, yelling and encouraging...

But, there are all sorts of ways to freeze. Some of these involve fear. Horses are not always the most sure-footed beasts. Slips and slides on various ice patches of the trail kept us in a constant state of alert tension.

The view was our only compensation. It was spectacular.

Avalon was spread out below us like some Shangrila, -some undiscovered Eden. -With a snake at its door. After hours of steady climb, the weather shifted from the brightest of days into rolling masses of cloud that mashed the sun underfoot. It began to snow.

When it snows in the mountains, and the wind is blowing hard, the flakes become tiny shotgun pellets. The holes get filled with ice that chatters your teeth and shakes your body into some wild South American dance.

A blinding whiteness blanketed our vision. Although I couldn't see the steep drop, I could still hear the depths of the rock face call out to me. The wind moaned through gorges and crevices warning of impending doom. The higher we went, the louder it seemed to wail.

We got off their mounts and tied ourselves together, each also holding on to the horses tail in front of them. Guy led the way, I followed and Merl took the rear. Unfortunately for me, Sir Guy's horse had a severe case of flatulence. Every few minutes or so the animal let one rip right in my face.

"Jeeze, Guy!" I exclaimed.

"Beg pardon, M'lord?"

"Your horse. Stinks. Like. Shit." Guy and Merl were almost too weary to laugh.

"Mebbe so, yer Lordship, ...'scuse, me, ...Joe, but at least 'e's warm, aye?-'Sides, I smelt lot's worse, quite recent, if yer recall."

I agreed that at least it was warm, taking whatever small consolation I could find. At this point, any consolation would do.

Step by step we trudged through the cold, the snow, the wind.

"Should have been a mail man."

"Wot? Mail? Yew'd freeze to yer death in mail 'ereabouts, lad."

So much for my sense of humor.

Moving was painstakingly fierce.

One foot following the other following the other.

Vague moments of terror flashed as feet sometimes lost their purchase.

I had images of being discovered in the lost, found and broken department on the bottom shelf of the peak.

Despite all of this, we made it by sundown.

The trail ended before a huge structure of blocks and turrets that was barely discernible through the howling ice powder.

We were half frozen and chilled to the marrow and I wasn't the only one wearing frosted eyebrows.

Right outside the castle gates I grabbed a handful of snow to wipe my face off.

It was stained red with blood.

I threw the offensive muck down, found a virgin patch in the near vicinity and scrubbed my face.

Guy knocked on the gate with his sword pommel.

After a brief conversation with the guard through the peep-hole, the gate opened. Visibility was just as poor within the courtyard, but the mud squishing under my boots felt safe.

It held on to my feet like a firm handshake.

The guard led us through to the main hall.

Instead of lords and ladies dining, men were laid about on the tables and benches in various states of injury.

Soft moans filled the air, with the counterpoint of an occasional piercing scream as red-hot irons cauterized a wound. The smell of copper and roasting meat hit my nostrils hard. A death smell, if ever there was one.

I preferred the skunk.

I felt a little faint. Merl noticed my wavering and gripped him firmly on the arm. "Steady now. Not a pretty picture, I agree. Nor a pretty smell, for that matter, -slaughter houses seldom are." The twenty or so wounded were being attended by a small number of women who appeared exhausted. One of them was holding a knight's hand at the table close to the roaring fire. She made a hasty good-by, and lifted up her skirts to sprint at us full speed between tables and milling people.

It was Beth.

"Sir Guy! Merlin! Joseph!" She called out.

I felt my heart stop, my breath draw tight, and my entire being focus on her like a moth to a flame.

Great, I thought to myself. Besides smelling like horseshit, I won't be able to talk.

Every time I saw this woman I became retarded.

Guy grabbed Beth and whirled her into the air. "'Sight fer me sore eyes, yew are, yer 'ighness," he said with a groan, "'an a bit 'eavy fer me old sore arms." He gently put her down.

Merl firmly embraced her, "As you see, we have arrived as promised," the wizard assured her.

"I knew you would come, my lords," she replied with gratitude. Turning to face me, she curtsied. "And you!" Beth sternly admonished, "I was most concerned for your welfare, good sir."

Her face took on a brighter shade of rose.

I felt this conflicting impulse to kiss her combined with the equally compelling urge to call her a goddamn liar.

Instead, I restrained myself and said, "Uh, I've been worried about you too. Er, that is ..., I missed you. You know I didn't mean to disappear, and, I uh ...," my voice trailed off.

I had an acute case of foot-in-mouth, followed by the main course of legs and torso.

Sensing my awkwardness, the princess moved closer and extended both of her hands to mine. "I have much to apologize for, Sir Knight."

I began to get a dreamy look in my eyes. Like a puppy intently gazing at someone eating an ice cream cone.

Merl gruffly interrupted, "And very little time in which to do it in, as we do have a matter of import to attend to."

"Ah, don't be a fuddy-dud, now", Guy scolded. "Let the young 'uns 'ave a word or three."

"Very well."

Beth and I moved to sit in front of the fireplace.

I knew that I was falling in love. Or at least lust.

No, not falling, I thought. It was a swan dive with a triple somersault.

And I knew the pool was empty. I could never have this woman.

I know now that loving is quite unreasonable and irrational.

That's the way it's supposed to be, and there's no way to get around it, as much as you try.

Love is our greatest strength, and our strongest weakness. It is a timeless state, and can manifest in the blink of an eye. In other cases, it may take years before you realize that you are so blessed or cursed.

Usually it's both conditions, otherwise known as blurses.

Although I haven't ever really understand love, it always been love that enabled me to accept misunderstandings..

We stared with tentative smiles plastered on our faces in a silence filled with the cries of the wounded and the crackling blaze of the fire.

“Come here often?”

“Pardon?”

Nobody got my sense of humor here.

Men and women have it equally tough in the game of love, although in different ways. It is hard for the woman as she waits for someone to approach. She fears waiting all alone, -never to be noticed, -never to be recognized. She sits on a cushion of patience while the man must needle himself to move. Even the beautiful wonder, as their beauty often instills fear or desire for conquest. To be truly desired for who you really are is another matter entirely.

It is equally hard for the man. He has the fear of walking across the vast space between hearts to learn that the heart was waiting for some other. It is nothing personal, and yet it is so very personal for us.

You would think it would be easier for a Princess. After all, Beth was trained in the ways of royalty. She had learned to command.

But love entails surrender.

I don't think she knew much about surrender, -except perhaps to her duty.

So I took her hands in my own. They were gentle and warm.

I saw her breath quicken, and a surge of electricity seemed to pass between us as we touched.

I pulled her to me; she pulled me to her. Hey, what the hell did I have to lose?

Oblivious to the world around us, we kissed and melted into each other's embrace. Now maybe I was fooling myself. I really didn't give a shit about our future together. We didn't have one.

At the very least I was going to give her something to remember me by. I saw my two keepers muttering from a distant corner of the room and paid them no mind.

“I've got to stop them before...” Merl remarked. Guy grabbed his arm.

“Nay”, said Guy, “Yew leave 'em be a whiles, wizard. Both deserve a bit 'ov pleasure 'afore the pain yet to be.”

Merl grudgingly agreed, "Alright. Time they shall have, however short. Now let us find Lady Evelyn, and offer our support and condolences."

The two comrades went off down the hall.

So we were left alone, to be warmed by our desire and need for comfort.

"I know you're betrothed," I said as I was kissing her neck.

"Pretend I'm not." She whispered.

"But..."

She grabbed my face between her hands and locked her lips on mine with her tongue gliding and darting around my teeth.

She tasted like cinnamon.

By the way, did I mention I love cinnamon?

We talked and kissed, and held tightly to each other, and then we talked and kissed and embraced some more...

What we talked about is really none of your business.

But you can guess.

We spoke of hopes, and dreams and fears, past times of grief and loss, the joys and the pleasures we found in common.

The important stuff. The kind of things you used to share before you began to take him or her for granted.

The kind of things you could still share if you only took the time.

Time is so very precious to those of us who have so little of it. Those of you with an abundance of time may find that you don't waste it. It wastes you.

You get fooled into thinking there will always be enough. So you forget.

We didn't have the time to forget. We were too busy trying to make this last and first time memorable.

After too brief an interlude, I felt a firm hand clasp my shoulder.

"Sorry, but we have to go," Merl apologized.

Beth gave the wizard a frantic glance, and tears began to well up from her eyes like blood seeping from a deep wound.

They rolled off her face in a steady silence stream.

I attempted a smile. I swallowed once, and tried to speak, but the words came out as cracked as my heart.

My voice grated..."Hey", I whispered, "Hey now. It's okay. Everything is going to be okay."

My sight began to blur as something got in my eyes...

"Surely it will." Beth replied, but the only thing she was certain of was uncertainty.

I reached out with both hands and gently held her face. I could feel her tremble.

"I promise," my words attempting to sooth us both, "I'll come back. I swear it on my life."

A cheap promise really, all things considered, seeing as how I'd likely be dead anyway if I didn't return.

Beth turned to Merl and Guy.

Her voice assumed the power of the throne for a brief instant. "Then you two must protect that life, as it is now as dear to me as mine own," she commanded.

It was Merlin who broke the spell.

"Surely your betrothed, Sir Gawain, would have a say in that, your Highness, as well as your royal father...."

Beth began to cry and reach out to me. "NO! Wait, Joseph, it's true I'm betrothed, but I love him not, and... and..."

I felt my eyes welling with despair.

"You wanted me to be honest, Joseph." The wizard added.

Guy glared at him, then turned to me.

"Tis true, Joseph. Yes she is engaged, and she has no feelings for the man."

But, my parade had been rained on, and all my old stuff came back. Nothing like making a bad situation worse.

“But you will marry him anyway, won’t you?”

She sadly shook her head yes.

“You always do what you’re told?”

Beth’s dismay froze into something harder. “It seems there’s many men who wish to order me about... methinks that you are just like all the others...”

“Ditto, lady,” I huffed back.

“I will choose to do what is honorable and right for the kingdom. I must.”

I started to see red then.

“Ah, You were kissing me for the kingdom then. Honorably!” I jabbed.

Her lip began to quiver and I hated myself for wounding her.

Merlin interrupted, “Please! Can we not stop this senseless bickering? Hopefully we’ll be back in time for you two to continue your foolishness here, but may I remind you we have another battle on our hands?”

Beth and I mirrored offended glances towards each other. Then her voice deliberately relaxed,

"And you both must return as well, my loyal and good friends."

You know the voice. It’s the same one your spouse or lover uses after screaming at you when they answer the phone with a calm and upbeat friendliness that makes you want to strangle them.

I bit my tongue.

"Don't be a worried, yer 'ighness. 'E's got us an another twenty good 'uns with swords to watch 'is back, 'sides the wizard an me 'ere," said Guy with forced joviality.

Merl simply reached over and hugged her. "We'll do the best we can."

He looked grim. "All the lives in Avalon are forfeit should we fail."

Beth nodded and visibly pulled herself together. "Thank you, good wizard. I had not forgotten the true purpose of our battle, nor the most noble cause for your deed."

Her eyes began to soften, but her spine remained stiff as she grimly addressed me, "Stop Mordred, my Joseph, or there will be neither me nor Avalon to come back to."

I felt all snarled and twisted inside.

Confusion about whether or not I was still being played a sap.

Anger at those who threatened my so-called friends.

Regret at having last found something special that I must leave...

How sad and ironic that what we hold most dear often vanishes while close at hand, then appears in our hearts only when it's gone.

Well, I had changed.

Part of me was trying to say what the hell, it's only a dream, and all of the other "it's only..." excuses we make for not doing we need to do.

Another louder voice opened up.

"We'll stop the bastard," I said. I grabbed Beth and kissed her full on the mouth. Hard and long, and deep.

Then I let go. Her eyes glazed a bit.

"We'll deal with your betrothed later."

I turned to Merl and Guy, who seemed a little taken aback. "Now, -let's get this show on the road," I said brusquely.

"Right yer Lordship."

"As you say, lad."

I smiled thinly at the two older men.

Each smiled back the smile of carnivore's white teeth ready to bite.

We began walking down the hall to the waiting storm outside.

After a few steps, I stopped and turned back to Beth, who stared with her own tremulous smile plastered on her face.

Ah, shit.

Twenty more armed warriors met us at the entrance.

I turned around just one more time to see her still staring at me as our small troop made our way out into the howling dawn.

I looked at Merl and noticed his head was bowed.

Funny, considering that the wind was at our backs.

“Merl, what’s up?”

He was silent a while as we trudged through the freezing snow, then turned to me with eyes full of pain.

“A young friend of mine was killed in the battle here.”

“Sorry.”

“We don’t have time for sorrow.”

He closed off, distancing from his pain and me.

And I thought□

I thought of my first meeting with Merl, and the strangeness of that meeting.

I thought of the dragon and my terror. I thought of being trapped in the nothingness of the Borderlands, and how I had found my way.

I thought of my survival in the forest, and of the applause and cheering of the lords and ladies, of being made a knight. And I thought of Beth.

But most of all I I was thinking I finally found a life worth living.

No. That wasn't exactly right. I hadn't found a life for myself.

I'd been busy *making* a life from what I had found.

The bitter and biting cold caused me to shiver as we walked across the courtyard. The ground was frozen hard this time.

Merl stopped us all at the outer castle gates.

He brought out a stout piece of rope and looped it through his belt, passing on the length to the others in the party.

"Tie yourselves together," he yelled above the shrieking of the wind, "otherwise we shall be separated and lost. Joseph, you will lead us."

"How the hell am I going to do that, Merl?", I shouted back.

"Quite easily, lad, I hope," the wizard replied.

He pulled his wand out of his cloak.

"Hold this in front of you, and blank out your mind. Close your eyes when we walk out the gate, and just keep on walking."

"What if I fall off a cliff or something?" I all but screamed.

"Don't worry, lad. I dare say you wouldn't believe it if you did. Besides, the rope will hold you," the wizard yelled back.

"Gee. Thanks. Thanks a bunch."

They opened the gate. I closed my eyes and walked blindly into the mountain blizzard.

* * *

As luck would have it, I got about two hundred yards.

...before I stepped into about ten thousand foot yawning abyss that swallowed me like a bug.

I hurled down the empty chasm with jagged rocks to the sides and below.

One moment I was on solid ground, the next I felt himself bawling in shock, "*MERLLLLL... .*"

Plummeting downwards, the wind was a freight train pounding my ears on the certain tracks of death.

I thought I heard Merl's muffled voice through the thin air.

"Easy as falling off a log. "

"FUUUCKK YO...!"

Then I just accepted I was toast. Dead toast.

The world exploded into a million different colors.

Then I passed out.

Final Battles

Passed out of this world.

I couldn't believe what was happening.

After all I had gone through, after all I had accomplished.

To be smashed to smithereens by walking head first off a cliff?

It was unbelievable.

So powerfully unbelievable that obstructions shattered and a Door opened between the time I cursed the wizard and went briefly went unconscious.

Just as Merl had planned.

As the entire company fell, all of us slowed to a gentle landing as we were caught in that molasses field of nothingness called the Borderlands.

I was *very* awake now.

-Released from the nets of ordinary time and space to flop like a fish on the “ground”, if you want to call it that. There were no bumps or crashes, only the bruised dignity of one very angry magician's apprentice/knight with a death grip on to a small stick of wood.

As we got up to our feet, the soldiers had those deer-in-headlight expressions.

I got into Merl's face.

"THAT was a dirty, stinking SHITTY trick. I should shove this wand right up your ass..."

"Shut up. I need the wand."

He snatched it from me as I was thinking of more names to call him.

"We might have spent weeks getting you in the proper frame of mind to enter. Too much is at stake here lad."

"Aye, young lordship," said Guy, pulling some snow out behind his neck.

He cast a baleful eye at Merlin, "Yer not to be blamed for a'wanting to bash the wizard. I felt like throttling the fellow myself, 'numerous times."

"Well, both of you will just have to wait your turn," Merl said quietly.

"It appears that there are some few waiting at the head of the line."

Vague shapes began to solidify out of the mists in front of us.

The wizard gestured for us to wait and casually remarked. "By the way lad, -you don't need the bonewood wand to open Doors, just to lock them."

He pointed ahead, "And for the likes of *Those...* it has it's uses."

Crackling, hissing and growling noises began to nip at our ears as a stench of rotted meat and decay fouled the atmosphere.

Mordred and friends had arrived.

Imagine your worst nightmares.

Now multiply that by a number higher than you can conceive.

The four-legged advance guards were five slithering, crawling, multi-armed, slimy, oozing and toothy clawed things that chattered as they approached.

Add the worst parts of rats and vultures and scorpions and spiders together. There you have it.

Them, I mean.

As if that wasn't bad enough, throw in a dozen werewolf types with blades and another batch of hard-asses who escaped from death row by eating through the bars.

I felt my heart skip a few more beats. "Any chance these things illusions Merl?"

"Fraid not, lad."

Avalon's warriors and Guy pulled cold steel from their sheaths.

The ringing sound of metal cut through the beastly noises and everything was still.

The procession stopped, and two figures parted through the ranks of the creatures to greet us.

One was dressed in a silver suit of armor with a winged helmet.

“Mordred,” Guy murmured in disgust.

He had the appearance of a young man in his twenties, freshly scrubbed, strong and muscular, -a hero's look, except for the sardonic gleam in his eyes and the sneer on his lips.

He smiled cheerfully at the defenders.

"My, my, my. What do we have here? Ah, the *traitor-welcoming committee* from my old home! With my *favorite* teacher! How very special of you! You really shouldn't have." Mordred's face and voice became darker with malice as he barked, "*You-really-shouldn't-have.*"

Another hidden figure materialized from behind him, and took his right side.

He was the one eyed man. I felt enraged.

I pulled my sword and moved towards him without thinking.

Guy blocked me with his arm.

“Yew’l git yerself kilt fer nothin lad. Bide yer time. Take note of yer enemy.”

It took all my willpower. I...I’ve never felt such intense hatred for anyone.

My blood was boiling but I let it go to simmer and looked the bastard up and down.

His arms were corded with muscle. He appeared to move with fluid grace, sure of himself.

In his right hand he held a crossbow. Attached to his belt was a polished saber. He was armored in some kind of chain mail, covered by a hooded black cloak. His left hand was covered in a taloned glove wickedly gleaming with steel claws.

"Joe", he addressed me. ME. How the hell did he know who I was?

His voice was resonant, "I've heard all about Avalon from our *most beneficent* Lordship, - Mordred.”

Did I detect a trace of sarcasm here? It really didn’t matter□

“ *-All of you!* Throw down your weapons and you won’t be hurt, -I promise this," he said with assurance.

I stood a little taller and straighter and tried to stare him down.

Guy got behind me and whispered in my ear, "Es a liar."

"My friend says you're a liar," I blurted out.

Looking around at the other four-legged monstrosities I added, "Now which one of these beauties is your old lady?"

Our men and some of the wolf-like creatures barked growling laughs.

"Shut up Renu", Eye Patch replied and began to tremble.

Well, maybe I wasn't the only one scared shitless, I thought.

Then again, maybe he was shaking with anger. -I didn't know.

Mordred laughed unpleasantly, and placed both hands on his hips. "Perhaps we'll introduce you shortly. But my one-eyed colleague here has insisted on a little talk first. Hindsight tells me that most all apprentice wizards should be killed off at the very first opportunity."

I sensed Guy's shifting his weight behind me.

The one-eyed freak screamed in rage, and the shit hit the fan.

"Ware!" Merlin's voice thundered.

He lifted his wand as Eye Patch lifted his crossbow.

Three bolts flew through the air.

Two were crackling energy, -one was wood and steel.

Mordred's blast struck Merlin down, but not before Avalon's wizard shattered the One-eye's bow into splinters with a flash of blue lightning.

BUT...not before the bolt of wood and steel released and found its target.

I was struck on my back by a heavy weight crushing me to the ground.

It was a body.

It was Guy.

He had a crossbow bolt through his throat.

Blood was pouring from his neck as he attempted to get up. He pulled the arrow out with a grunt.

A red fountain spurting into the air.

I reached over to help as all hell broke loose. Mordred and Merlin began tossing blinding charges of energy at each other.

Avalon's warriors engaged the creatures in a frenzy.

Swords and screams and growls converged in a maelstrom of destruction.

I was in a state of shock. I held Guy's head in his arms, and tried to put pressure on his wound.

But it wouldn't stop.

It just wouldn't stop.

Guy's eyes began to film over, their spark of light dimming. He tried to speak, but nothing came out except for ragged gasps and bubbles of blood.

With his final strength he hissed, "I'm sorry lad... I be...trayed..."

"You saved me Guy," I choked back tears, "You know damn well that bolt was meant for me."

Guy of Gloucester gave a quiet little sigh, shook his head and his eyes took on a bewildered look as darkness embraced him.

He died in my arms.

I screamed in anguish and pain. "NOOO"

I stood up, covered in gore. I pulled my own sword out and began to walk grimly towards the onslaught.

I was blinded by my hate.

I walked through talons and cutting sabers and gnashing teeth untouched.

Just another prophet parting the Red Sea of battle.

The one-eyed asshole was waiting, calmly surveying the spectacle of carnage and mayhem, and coldly watching hard steel slice gaping wounds into soft flesh.

He was mine.

"You killed my friend, you lying fuck." I spat at him.

"It was necessary", One Eye said flatly, continuing in a softer voice.

"Shit does happen. Consider it a personal favor for you and Avalon."

I screamed, “ You killed my WIFE and KID, you fucking piece of SHIT! ‘C’MON, *come and get some.*”

He smiled and said, "Just when you've reached the point when you think you've stopped being self-destructive..." then gave a little laugh of self-depreciation.

Mordred's creature pulled out his saber and advanced to meet me.

I held my sword in two hands, drew back and swung at his head.

Eye patch nimbly dodged and parried.

"You know, you could have spent some time trying to learn to use that thing," he said, trapping my blade.

He then disengaged, and swung the saber at blurring speed, and I ducked just in time.

“Fuck you. I’ve been busy,” I panted.

"Me too. You don't know what I've had to go through to get to this."

“Fuck you.” I tried another lunge, which he blocked effortlessly.

He paused for a moment, as if searching for the right words.

"And," Eye Patch taunted, "To think that Beth will be waiting for me, not you, you idealistic little..."

That DID It.

I roared and charged. A big mistake.

The saber caught my sword in a downward arc and it flew from my hands.

I stood there furious and helpless.

“Well,” One Eye cocked an eyebrow, “Don’t just stand there, Get your damn sword and let’s be finished with this, for once and for all.”

I pulled myself into a wary crouch and hesitated.

He nodded encouragingly. "No it's for real. You get a chance to dive for the sword. Really," he said in a bemused and distant voice.

I dove for my sword, rolled, picked it up and rose to the semblance of a dueling position. A semblance though, because I didn't really have a clue. Eye Patch gave a laugh and said, "Nice move. Now can we get on with this?"

I screamed again and rushed him point first, then twisted around to slice him.

He parried with an upward stroke so hard that my weapon flew from my hands again and then spun completely around with the blade coming full circle.

I knew he would cut me in half.

Instead, the sword smashed flat into my side. Luckily, he turned the blade.

Yeah right. What luck, hey?

Burning bright pain exploded into my side as if a thousand sharp knives were thrust all at once.

Ribs snapped and drove themselves into my flesh., puncturing my lungs.

I would have cried out, but the wind was knocked out of me.

I fell and sucked for air like a drowning man, and as it came in, a thousand more daggers stabbed me again. I groaned in pain and despair.

"Some hero," the asshole hissed, "Come on now, how about another chance, or are you going to use that pea of a brain you have?"

One Eye paused as if to clean his nails, and muttered, "We don't have all day."

I just lay there, giving up, thinking -just tell him to kill me and be done with it.

Then I remembered I was sick and tired of giving up.

So, I gave up giving up. I'd rather rot in hell.

-Rot in hell? Merl said I didn't need a wand to open Doors.

It came to me. Like pieces of a puzzle falling into one picture

A cold and cruel smile bent my lips. Hell, - here, -here I was the Key!

I could open a Door. Even to hell, if that's where I wanted to go.

I closed my eyes, imagining fire and brimstone, desolation and flames and the sounds of lost souls wailing in eternal torment. I imagined the smell of sulfur, and a burning heat that blistered skin and scorched the lungs.

I pushed myself off the ground in agony and rushed head down, my arms spread out.

I was growling as I took him in a flying tackle.

We held on to each other in a lover's embrace as we rolled over and over.

The pain was overwhelming.

Funny. At some point I thought I heard him say, "Attaboy."

Then we tumbled together into the mists and disappeared.

Saving Grace

If you've seen one nightmare, you haven't seen them all.

Especially not this one. It was pure hell.

Pure as a toxic waste dump.

We sprung, pin-wheeling into the burning desolation of red sky and volcanic fury, landing on the narrow plateau a sheer drop thousands of feet high on all sides.

Beneath us flames roared in hunger for some offering.

The very atmosphere seared my lungs from the first breath on. Which didn't help much, considering my splintered ribs. What did help me, though, was the principle of inertia.

A body in motion tends to remain in motion. The bigger the body, the more difficult it is to stop.

I saw Eye-patch keep rolling, hit the rock edge and topple right off.

I lay feet away sprawled on my side. I twitched and winced in pain with every ragged breath. I saw no sun, or clouds.

Just an eerie blood tinged glow that tainted everything with suffering.

It took a while for the world to stop spinning. The first other thing I noticed was a diamond the size of a baseball right next to my head.

There were similar gems scattered about the ridge.

The irony did not escape me.

People went to hell for this kind of stuff all the time.

Then I heard the plaintive cry from the side of the cliff.

"Help me!" He called. "Joe, -damn it, get over here!"

"Shit." I muttered. I painfully dragged my body inch by inch to the cliff edge, pushing myself gingerly up on both arms to look over.

Heat burned my face as I gazed down. The ragged precipice terminated into a roaring volcano a thousand feet below.

The figure clothed in black was hanging like a fly on the wall, looking up.

It was that damned taloned glove.

Quick as the snake he was, Mordred's pet had snagged the metal claws of his hand on the rocky wall. His body dangled like a limp rag on a clothesline two feet below me.

One Eye's face was pale and strained. Sweat dripped off into his good eye.

"Listen to me Joe", he implored, "-You got to listen."

I really wasn't in a listening mood at the moment.

"Why don't you just die." I whispered.

He began to whisper, "It's almost over, -maybe I could change this - Please. -Just help me up."

"You're kidding."

"Please. I'm begging."

"Guy didn't have a chance to beg" I rasped.

"You don't know what he"

The clawed hand slipped a little then and his one good eye got wide with fear. I told you I was an idiot.

I just impulsively reacted and grabbed out to catch his other free arm.

We had each other by the wrists. One Eye smiled in relief.

"Trust me... can't say you'll thank me for this later... just want to tell you..."

Then the rock splintered completely from the metal talons, and the asshole revealed his true nature. He gasped in alarm, then, he pulled up on my arm and ripped his claws into my head.

I screamed in agony as one talon punctured my eye and the rest embedded in my skull. The eye burst like a grape, and blood streamed down the ruins of my face. I heard the howls of a tortured animal.

Me.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," the bastard lied, and shifted most all of his weight back on his bare hand now slick with the copious flow of blood.

Slippery as a slide on a greased pole.

I jerked my head like a dog shaking water from its ear. The claws tore out of my face, the flesh hanging like wood shavings, exposing gleaming white bone.

I screamed again. Then his hand slipped.

For one brief frozen instant in time, the inhuman mass of hardened muscle appeared suspended in mid-air. The son of a bitch seemed to smile in resignation for a brief moment. Then I saw the cloaked body become smaller and smaller as it plummeted into the consuming flames below.

-As if I were the one that was moving higher and higher, away from all that was vile and corrupt. I watched as crimson tears dripped from my face, showering the black speck that diminished into nothingness.

Then I crawled off into another oblivion.

* * *

Someone was carrying me as gently as they could. Through the place of otherwhen's and otherwhwere's, and timeless mists. Someone who knew exactly where he had to go. I was half raving, calling for Barb, Shawn, Beth, and Guy, and the wizard himself. Words slipped into my awareness and out again.

"I don't know if this is getting through to you or not. "I *know* you're going to make it... just a little worse for the wear and tear..."

Even if I couldn't understand, the words soothed me.

I was alive. Sort of.

"I have to take you back home. Otherwise, you'll die. Your injuries are too severe...but I want you to know, you *did* matter. You *made* a difference, far more than you'll know. "

The figure paused to lay me down and wipe the sweat that had collected on my brow. I smiled in my fevered sleep, dreaming of a cool breeze on the ocean. We began to disappear in the swirling fog.

"I'm supposed to give you some directions, I think. I forget exactly what...now you must remember to think of nothing,"

Someone cleared his throat, "Ahem, not exactly nothing, it requires full concentration on everything, which is doing nothing, -you see, ... "Well, it's like dying but it's not..."

The voice faded as I disappeared into the dream of another world.

Psych Eval: Admissions

David Nelson, Ph.D., Treatment Coordinator

Preliminary Status Report: Joseph Grodin

The patient is a white male in his mid-thirties, widowed, previously employed at Vista Advertising. His employers and landlord reported him missing two months ago. (Note: Check into social services for Medical Eligibility for long-term inpatient. His insurance company is protesting psychiatric treatment as a pre-existing condition, although surgery costs have been reimbursed.)

Mr. Grodin was brought in three weeks ago for severe injuries sustained in an automobile accident, resulting in a skull fracture, the loss of his right eye, numerous broken ribs, a collapsed lung and moderate facial disfigurement. All injuries have responded well to surgical treatment and medication. Unfortunately, the patient is also suffering from delusional symptoms that may be the result of organic damage, post-traumatic stress, or late onset of paranoid schizophrenic disorder. There have been two suicide attempts on grounds. A CAT scan has been ordered ASAP.

The delusions are psychotic in nature and have shown a marked interference with social and interpersonal functioning. The patient fantasizes that he is an apprentice wizard/warrior recruited to save the world, rather typical heroic fantasies with religious overtones involving some magic door. He believes this door can be opened through the immanent threat of death, which is his rationale for the attempted suicides.

Fortunately, the ceiling fixture broke in the hanging episode, and his attempt from the roof was thwarted when the awning on the outside patio broke his fall.

Magical thinking and typical infantile fusion motifs here may relate to a pervasive thought disorder.

Compensation for the loss of control relative to his injuries, organic damage and residual depression related to the loss of his wife and son five years ago are also clinical factors to be considered.

Mr. Grodin has been transferred to first floor psychiatric unit, and is now on Stellazine and Resperadal.

Mr. Grodin was assigned the only available room on the unit vacated by Father Murphy who died from a heart attack yesterday. The staff will recall that the Father was hospitalized for paranoid schizophrenia with both auditory and visual hallucinations. The room is coincidentally adjacent to the hospital chapel. I'm sure the priest was a good man. However, indulging his delusions of direct communication with God was not part of my treatment plan. The validation he received from his visiting congregation only entrenched his psychosis and worsened his illness. These visits were unauthorized by me and the "unusual" incidents that were reported by said members were nothing more than mass hysteria. Yet another parishioner visited Mr. Grodin's room last night, as she was uninformed of the death of the priest. I've yet to determine what influence this may have had on his condition. I have subsequently written up two nursing staff for breach of treatment protocol. Please advise the nurse's station to restrict all visitations, as Mr. Grodin is a proven threat to himself, and restraints are prohibited because of his physical condition.

I will not tolerate any more reinforcement for his psychosis. MMPI and Cattell's PI are scheduled for Thursday. David Nelson, Ph.D.

Witch Doctor

I called her Nurse Ratchett. Her real name was Martha something.

I don't know why I enjoyed taunting her so much. Maybe it was the eye patch, or maybe because she had such a plastic uptight politically correct facade. I just wanted some *real* reaction from her.

Yeah, I looked like a fucking pirate.

My appearance had changed, for the worse or better depends on your perspective. Three lines of white scar tissue ran from my forehead through my cheekbone. It gave me a formidable look. A look of a man who has survived some bad times. Hard times. The look of a man who fought some battles. Lost some battles, more likely.

I *know* who I looked like.

I looked like the asshole that did this to me.

I didn't want to think about that just yet, -I already had more than enough on my mind□besides, annoying the nurse was one of the high points of my day.

"Time for your meds." Martha chirped with a fake cheerful smile.

"How are We today?" She chirped.

I took the pills, a water chaser and gulped. I looked indignantly at her and said, "WE don't exist. You and I will never be a WE, Nurse Ratchett, no matter how much you may want me."

I paused briefly.

"You want to see me naked, don't you?" I started to get up.

The nurse blushed, pursed her lips with distaste, and scurried out of the room. One petty victory for me.

I took the pills out from under my tongue and hid them for a quick after-flush and smiled. I had too few things to smile about these days.

Most of the time I just stared at the wall, imagining Merl and Guy and Avalon. And Beth. I still grieved for Guy.

Dr. Nelson said that I was really mourning the loss of Barb and Shawn and Guy was the symbolic nurturing figure for my lost family.

I thought Nelson was full of shit and told him so.

And Merl, where the hell are you Merl? What were you?

Was I just plain nuts? That's what it looked like, even to me.

I should take the pills, I thought, except that they made me feel like a robot-zombie. They made me feel like hell.

I remembered hell. And hell, I remembered it all.

Except for one thing. -How to get back.

I had gone over it dozens of times, hundreds of times. Inside, outside, and upside down. The directions from Merl were becoming even more obscure in my memory. Grasping for them was like trying to grab water with my fingers. Stuff about thinking nothing, or everything, or some such.

I remember falling off that cliff and the disbelief that I could die, or something close to it. So, I focused on that.

That's why I tried to kill myself. Seemed to work with Merl. Like, -if I thought I was really dying I'd pop through a Door.

That's what got me into restraints for a week, and medication, and a possible permanent vacation in loony-toon land.

Hanging myself was ineffective and I had a sore neck for weeks.

I had even tried to jump out the window from seven flights up.

Naturally, I would hit an awning. And the only door that opened for me led to the psych unit. It was all very confusing to me now.

I wondered if I was crazy. I didn't think I could try that route again. It scared me too much. If I was wrong ...

I'd be dead wrong.

They told me it had been six weeks since I was first admitted and they didn't know how long I'd be staying. Till I got "better". Yeah. Right.

I'd have to start faking a cure pretty damn soon or else this place would really drive me nuts.

I reached over the bed to the little rolling table they give you, and turned on the radio. Everything came in with static except this one classical station with an oh-so-very-refined DJ. It was Mozart time. The name made me think of moats, and castles, and dragons and ...

"Oh good, they're playing our song!" An attractive blond-haired woman in a surgical gown and cap strode into the room.

I felt another smile breaking free. It was the chief of surgery. She was a knock-out and funny and someone I felt treated me like a human being.

I think I had another crush thing going.

"Hey, Doc Lefay."

"How's my star patient?"

"Crazy as ever and shivering my timbers, Doc."

"Not attempting free fall from the building again I hope?"

"Nah, -had enough of heights for a while."

"You Joseph, are a most mysterious case," she intoned in a mock solemn voice. "No way did you get that messed up in a car wreck."

I shrugged my shoulders, "Yeah, I told you..."

"Yes, that you did, Joe." The doctor playfully grabbed a pen.

"You are a wizard. Excuse me. An apprentice wizard, knight, etc. etc."

She laughed and said, "And I Joseph, in my secret identity, am the resident conductor of the London Philharmonic."

“Maybe so Doc. You did some kind of magic healing on me.”

She shrugged, closed her eyes, and used her pen as a baton. Beginning to sway to the music of Mozart, totally absorbed in its style and elegance.

Letting the music move her. Being the music, until the music was everything and there was nothing else at all in the world.

I watched her, entranced, and closed my eyes. You know what happened next? I felt the tingling in my forehead.

As the music increased in its intensity, so did the depth of my own concentration and focus. My eyes noted every shade of light and dark.

My ears picked up, not just the sound of the music, but the noises of the building, the traffic, my own breathing.

Every cell in my skin became alive with sensation. My thoughts emerged, formed and faded before the eyes of my mind.

Everything became just as important . Every-Thing.

And because Everything was just as important, Nothing Was.

A Door began to Open. Right on the wall they told me connected with the chapel. I began to feel tingles up and down my spine. I began to smell burning metal.

Lefay's eyes were shut tight and her whole body was swaying to the movement of the symphony.

"Don't stop!" I urged in a prayerful whisper.

It didn't.

I began to hear a crackling noise, and the wall to the left side of my bed misted over in shrouds of fog.

The entire room began to shake.

Lefay screamed.

The floor began to buckle with intense vibrations. Multi-colored shards of light flickered from the luminous mist permeating the wall.

My lips were also moving in a silent litany.

The wall began to glow in pulsating surges of whiteness, revealing an obscure landscape of ambiguous fog that could be just about anything.

And was just about Everything.

I remembered everything too. One of the things I remembered was that *I was the key to the Door.*

I bounced out of bed and jumped next to the surgeon, who was now semi-hysterical.

“Joe! What... Wha...?” I planted a grateful kiss on her cheek.

“Gotta go. Monsters to battle, castles to defend,” I laughed, “And a date with a beautiful princess.

Probably have to mess up her wedding... ”

"B,B,But," Lefay stuttered in amazement.

"Doc, you are a life savior. Maybe a wizard besides," I whooped.

The room began to shake even harder, and mirrors and glass began to crack and explode. I took a step towards the incandescent swirling mass that used to be a wall, and turned to face her for the very last time.

I yelled, *"IT'S BEEN ENCHANTING, LEFAY!"*

Okay, I'm a ham. I admit it.

With that, I vaulted through the Door.

The wall and room instantly transformed back to their normal state.

There was a grave silence.

It is in these grave silences Lefay always remembers that joyous laugh.

She conducts herself with the secret of it's magic every day. The echo of its music continued to light the darker passages of her future journeys.

She never explains the secret smile she carries with her either.

There is no need.

Like the sun, it warms without your having to give anything but your openness.

And of me...

* * *

I made it back to the Borderlands. I looked around me at the hazy nothingness and laughed my ass off.

I made it, and I was going back.

I took a few breaths and imagined the sweetness of Avalon, the beauty of Beth, and Merl's paternal wisdom, friendship...and trickery.

I closed my eyes and allowed myself to recapture the very first experience of following Merl's footsteps.

I found little resistance to my steps as I walked the shrouded mists.

So guess who was really waiting for me with open arms?

C'mon. Guess.

Merlin?

No. Too simple.

Let's leave out the Easter Bunny and Santa.

No. I began to picture Avalon as I had *first seen it*.

That's right boys and girls. I was a powerful, -if untrained wizard having the capability to do more than go to different "*Theres.*"

What I didn't know was I could also go to different "*Thens.*" Very few of us wizards can do this. As a matter of fact, only one that I know, -yours truly.

So I began walking to *the very same Time I did the first time around*.

And before I could emerge in Avalon, someone was there to greet me.

Someone who was more than willing to meet me half way.

Someone looking for their very own little pupil.

"Lost our way, have we now?" I heard a voice growl.

I opened my eyes and saw □ Mordred.

Mordred was there. Well, where the hell did you think One Eye came from in the first place? He was me. I am him.

Mordred didn't actually wear a smile. It was more of a sneer. I mean scary, freeze the blood, pee in your pants type stuff. Fortunately I had nothing to drink over the last few hours. But that didn't stop my heart from stopping.

Just when you thought it was safe to go into the water, er..., -Door again... And I thought I had made it. Wouldn't you? I thought I'd get what I deserved, saving the kingdom and all that stuff. Right? You know, what goes around comes around, karma, all's well that ends well. Think again. People don't always get what they deserve. People don't deserve to get AIDS, don't deserve to die in a stupid traffic accident, don't deserve to get raped or starve to death. People don't deserve to win fifty million in a lottery or inherit a trust that allows them to flake their life away, or to be the twenty-sixth caller to win those concert seats. Some things in life are not deserved, nor earned, nor fair, nor just. Some things just are what they are, and you did nothing to really cause them at all. But you still have to deal with them.

-The Mordred's of the universe.

And then you are in deep shit. You're in deep shit because your choices become very limited. Sometimes you no longer have the option of doing right or wrong. The choice narrows from doing bad to doing worse.

"Shit," I said.

Then I charged the guy, knocking him over.

Mordred was totally unprepared. Few dared mess with him in any realm.

I immediately went for the wand that Mordred dropped in the brief struggle. I raised it, and saw Mordred cringe. Then I realized I didn't know what the hell to do with it. Think quick, stupid, I said to myself. Intuitively, I focused my anger through the wand and low and behold, the tip of it glowed and shot off sparks. Like a sparkler at the 4th of July picnic, I thought. A rocket of red

glare flared from the wand to burst into a red, white and blue American flag lighting up the area above Mordred's head.

"Very pretty," the dark wizard complemented and raised three feet of sharp polished steel to my throat.

If I had seen the sword I'd never have rushed him in the first place.

"Now hand over the wand, if you please."

"No problem."

"Thank you," said Mordred, "And please let me show you how it's done."

A flash of red light burst from the asshole's wand, consuming me in a fiery pain. I collapsed in slow motion to the ground.

Before I lost consciousness, I heard the son of a bitch say, "You'll do nicely." I heard the ground crackle as I hit it.

Then everything went black.

The Bindings of Despair

"Wake up, yew miserble piece 'o dog dung."

Dungeon Master Quincy threw a bucket of questionable liquid on the man chained to the wall.

The man was me.

I was in shackles, arms bound up to where my toes could *almost* find purchase on the floor.

Smokey torches dimly lit an underground cavern fetid with the stench of rot and waste.

Faint cries and screams randomly drifted into the dank stillness.

I was in chains.

I came back to consciousness only to be greeted by the pain of my arms being pulled out of their sockets.

I let out a soft moan.

Another bucket drenched me and I almost vomited from the smell.

"Huh, Wha..?"

"There yew go, that's a good 'un," the guard proceeded to slap my face until I opened my one good eye.

" 'Ad pleasn't dreams, did we ?"

I grunted in pain.

"Is lordship will be coming in a whiles' to discuss yer new job."

I said nothing, but the rest of me throbbbed in pain. The guard slapped me across the face again, and laughed.

"Speak when spoken to, you worthless sot."

"Don't mind me", I gasped through my teeth, " Spread good cheer to those less fortunate."

"No ones as unfortunate as yerself."

The torturer burst into a braying laugh, pounded on the wall and made his exit.

"Very funny, asshole," I mumbled softly.

It's hard not to have your hopes dash away, especially when they are the only part of you that can escape.

It doesn't help to have crawling vermin begin to bite places you can't reach. And scuttling vermin nip at your legs and feet.

And lances of white-hot flame cutting into your muscles and bones.

You begin to feel like vermin yourself.

So, you shut down, numb out and go away.

You can't focus, or concentrate.

At least I couldn't.

Remember that one tiny burning ember of hope I talked about before?

It's not all that hard to lose it.

When you're all tied up like I was, moments take on an eternal futility. Every would have-could have-should have emerges to add on to the burdensome weight of self-reproach.

I'd been in this place before. It wasn't much fun.

“In a whiles” seemed forever.

Seconds crawled into minutes and hours moved into an eon of days.

I felt my already parched throat dry out and my lips crack and bleed, then crack and bleed again.

Then again, I did have a great deal of time just to hang around and think.

I did that.

The wheels were a bit rusty and strained. Turning them was an effort.

My first thought was that Mordred would eventually recognize me.

Of course he didn't.

He didn't know who I really was.

-Shit, he wasn't going to meet the old version of me until months from now.

I assumed Avalon's enemy to be vicious and heartless.

-One of the bad guys.

However, Mordred didn't strike me as especially evil.

I mean -yeah, repulsive, deranged and after all he did beat the crap outta me.

Not anyone I'd really want to hang out with.

But here I was.

I figured that the one-eyed warrior was from a similar yet different earth. Guess again.

He wasn't. I was him. Now.

This wasn't supposed to be happening. The realization hit me hard.

I was the one who Merl said was Mordred's pupil.

And I was the one who killed Guy.

And even worse, -did I go back and for whatever Godforsaken reason, *kill Barb and Shawn?*

And I was going to beat the crap out of myself, do a seriously convoluted eye for an eye number, and plummet into hell for a grand finale.

Shit on a stick.

What was fixed, and what was changeable?

Where did choice come into all of this? I thought maybe I should kill myself now.

Except, if I did, none of the final stuff would happen. Then what?

My temples began to pound.

I knew that I was back to the time I started this craziness in the first place. My earlier self was simultaneously schmoozing with Merl in the Borderlands and off to deal with the dragon.

My headache moved from the pounding to the smashing stage.

It just added to the other pains.

Icing on the Goddamn cake.

Before I passed out again, I was comforted by the thought that it was impossible to kill myself in the current position I was in.

Then came the notion about biting my tongue off and drowning in my own blood. What a resourceful fellow I am, I thought.

And what a chickenshit. I had no intention of taking myself out.

I went in and out of consciousness through a revolving door of agony.

I wasn't going to give up yet.

The rest of me knew differently, and slipped off into silken darkness.

Yet, every so often, a soothing would occur.

Hands lifted me up to ease the pain in his arms.

A sip of cool clear water would dribble down my throat.

By the time I roused to awareness again, the presence would be gone. Despite these tender, mysterious ministrations, I felt my soul slipping away.

On the eternity of the third day I was ripe for death.

That's when Mordred came to reap his harvest.

BAD COMPANY

“Wake up.” *SLAP*.

“Wake Up.” Harder *SLAP*. And a shake to rattle the teeth for good measure.

I opened my eye.

“Tch, tch tch.” Mordred mocked in the darkness.

I slowly lifted my gaze to the owner of the smirking voice. My head felt like it was bench pressing at least a ton.

Mordred was dressed in your basic black cape, cowl, and leggings. Very fashionable. His youngish clean-cut good looks were still marred by the sneer that crept into his voice.

“You know you gave me no choice”, he said apologetically, “There I was, just about to welcome a poor lost traveler, and then, you attacked!”

The dark wizard shook his head in a parody of regret.

I hated his guts. I hated his guts, stomach, heart and lungs. Hell, I even hated his appendix. But I couldn't afford to do anything, being all tied up at the time. I decided to play docile.

“Scared me”, I muttered.

“I scared you?” Mordred chided. “Since when does one's fear justify an unprovoked assault, although not a very fearsome one at that, upon a fellow innocent wayfarer?” Mordred's eyes glittered with bad humor.

“Din't look so 'incent to me.”

SLAP again. My head rocked back.

“Appearances can be deceiving,” said Mordred.

God I hope so, I thought. I squinted through the darkness with my one good eye.

“So what's your name, you sorry excuse for a lost soul?”

“Joe.” Shit. I gave him my real name.

“Do you know where you are?”

“In a nightmare?”

Mordred chuckled evilly, “Perhaps you are. We met in the Borderlands.”

I put on my stupid look. It wasn’t that hard. I had years of practice.

“Borderwhat?”

Mordred grabbed me by the hair.

He pounded my head against the wall with emphasis.

“You know, little man...” *BAM* “I hate it...” *BAM* “when”...

BAM “moronic...” *BAM* “lying...” *BAM* “smelly”... *BAM* “bastards”... *BAM*,

“underestimate my intelligence. Now, who sent you?”

The room began to spin, and I felt a warm fluid drip down my face.

Good, I thought, Maybe I’ll just pass out.

No such luck. Mordred stepped back and distastefully flicked the blood off his hands.

This time he grabbed me by the throat. “You know”, he purred, “ I just hate senseless violence.”

He smiled thinly. “But our chief inquisitor in training does not seem to have any such reservations. Oh Quincy!” he called out, -inviting the family pet vulture for dinner. Quincy lumbered in bearing a torch. All six four of him in height. All five feet five of him. That was his width.

I had a fleeting notion about developing a fear of widths.

Then again, I was looking sideways out of my battered head.

“My favorite shower attendant,” I mumbled.

Quincy twirled the flaming baton with cheerleader finesse, and rammed it into my stomach.

White searing pain crushed my abdomen.

I retched and gasped.

“Help our friend remember some more, Quincy.”

“No. No. Wait a sec”, I groaned. “ Let me catch my breath.” I took some shuddering tentative wheezes.

They stood there silent and we all listened to me breath.

After a few moments I croaked, “Alright, -I’ll tell you what I know, but it’s not much.”

“Then pray continue, good sir”, said Mordred, examining his nails for more dirt. “And lets not have to get any more messy than we already are.”

“Well, I got into the, er, Borderwhatever by accident,” I rasped. “I was just going to work the other morning, and then... Wham! Weird lights, sounds, and then this misty cloudy place. I couldn’t even move. Then this old guy...”

“Guy, did you say Guy?” Mordred interrupted harshly, grabbing me by the throat.

“Man. Another word for man. Old man. -You’re getting blood on your sleeve.” I said deadpan. Mordred quickly dropped his hand.

“Anyways, he wanted me to go somewheres with him, -I thought he was a loony tune...”

Mordred and Quincy looked at each other in puzzlement.

“Crazy,” I quickly interjected. “I thought he was crazy, or I was. So, I pretended to go along with him, and then bonked him on the head at the nearest opportunity, and eventually ran into you.”

“So”, questioned Mordred, “Where did the old man go?”

“You got me. Maybe he ran off when he saw you coming, -I don’t know.”

“Maybe”, Mordred mused. “How did you learn to work the wand?”

“The wand? You mean that little stick? I know magic wands and stuff from fairy tales, you know, -make believe, -fantasy stuff in my own country.”

Mordred paused, looking thoughtful. “Hmm. Well, I do have a use for you, Joe or whomever you are.”

“Oh yeah?” I looked at the chains binding me. “Wall decor?”

Mordred smiled. “No something much, much more attractive.”

“I got a choice?”, I asked, cocking my head with a smirk.

“Of course. You can stay here and play with Quincy for as long as he wants, which I don’t think will be very long, as he plays much too rough.”

Quincy got that hungry happy vulture look.

“Or... you can come to work for me.”

Now I could do the stupid hero thing, or I could do the live to fight another day routine. As much as I wanted to spit in Mordred’s face, I had no spit left. And, what would it prove? Dying for something or someone is easy. You only have to do it once. But living the thousand deaths of a coward? Was it really so simple? Does wanting to live make me a coward? Does dying make you a hero? Besides, can you really play fair and just with those that are unfair and unjust? And, what did that make me?

Just as bad as them?

None of you can judge me until you’ve walked in my shoes.

I didn’t have a good choice. Seems as if I was always getting stuck in the bad or worse options.

Not even knowing which was which.

It doesn’t matter how much you’re broken. What really matters is how much you can mend.

And aside from all that, -I didn’t want to die.

Swallowing that thought didn’t make my next move any easier.

“I guess I’m your man.” I wearily surrendered.

“I just knew you’d come around to see it my way. Release him,” Mordred barked to Quincy, who removed the chains.

I slumped to the clammy ground on my knees, one hand thrust to the floor to prevent falling on my face.

“Ah that’s what we like to see here, -a little respect”, Mordred encouraged.

I looked up with my face a mask, hiding a murderous wrath.

“Yes, your, uh, ...”, I said with forced meekness, “What should I call you?” Besides asshole buttwipe, I thought.

“ Mordred or your Lordship will do. Show him his quarters, Quincy. Clean him up and bring him up to the council study.”

Quincy nodded, and brutally gripped me under his left arm. His armpit stank too.

Mordred turned to leave, and looked back over his shoulder.

“And don’t hurt him.” Mordred commanded.

Quincy gave an exasperated little pout.

“Yet.”

Quincy smiled.

I was half dragged up through winding stairs, and noticed the interior of my prison began to change.

Rough stone was replaced by smooth wood. Wall lamps replaced smoky torches. All in all, I thought the place didn’t look half bad. When we got to the first floor I saw stout beams, tapestries and building windows made of rough glass.

All of this didn’t really help improve the view of the landscape.

If the term “God-forsaken” means anything, it meant the land of Coventry. It reminded me of hell, without the fires. A flat plane of desert was punctuated with islands of barren drab rock.

The sky was the institutional green of a really lousy hospital room.

Thick, rolling clouds resembling mucus slimed through the sky.

In the distance were jagged mountains with sheer faces thousands of feet in height. I watched the wind whip the sands in violent flurries.

There was a constant howling, almost as if the land itself were crying out in misery.

I grimaced at the sight, and said, “No place like home, hey Quince?”

The giant figure grunted and roughly shoved me down the corridor.

We began to pass others in the hallways.

Most were men armed with blades walking swiftly with purpose to unknown destinations.

No words were exchanged in these passing encounters, although most gave us a raised eyebrow or two.

A few times truly alien creatures, much like those I had battled before, startled me.

Werewolfs, lobster-looking guys, and assorted dreck.

It didn't surprise me that these icky things actually smelled as bad as they looked. Of course when I took a whiff of my self, it was the pot calling the kettle black.

After various lefts and rights and ascents up a few more stairways, Quincy stopped at a particular door, and opened it, throwing me inside.

“Clean up, ya stinkin' shit, an do yer bladder proud, -I'll be waitin'.”

The door swung shut with a click and locked.

There were no windows, although three wall lamps provided ample illumination. The room was a good size, as big as my old single apartment back on earth. A large bed with a clean ornately designed comforter was very inviting. So too, was the chamber pot in which I relieved himself. There were a few tables scattered about, one with a large basin of water and a white linen towel.

I drank out of the bowl in little sips to soothe my parched throat and used the rest of it to wash and clean my battered body. A built-in closet opened with a slight tug of its handle, revealing a pair of woolen leggings, a short rough tunic, and some soft deerskin boots. I guess Mordred's good fashion sense was a mandate for the troops as well.

I dressed.

Completing my absolutions, I ran my hands through my wet unkempt hair.

Got the last few fleas.

I tried thinking of my next move.

Maybe I could brain Quincy with something when he came back.

I went to the nearest wall lamp and tugged.

It didn't budge. The water basin was about five pounds of solid porcelain. I grabbed it with one hand, hid it behind my back, and knocked at the inside of the door.

"Ready," I called.

The door swung open. Quincy stood there with one of the lobster creatures.

Six limbed, red exo-skeleton with antenna and a half-dozen eyes. Wicked looking giant claws opening and closing on air and only eight feet tall.

I smiled charmingly and brought my unused weapon slowly to the side.

The creature shot out a lobster like-arm with a pincher and grabbed the basin, crumbling it into his open gaping maw, crunched it, and swallowed. Six black faceted eyes pinned me to the floor.

The three of us stood in a frozen tableau.

"Nice 'owl", the creature rumbled.

Guess it's hard to talk without lips. Ask any bird except a parrot.

I looked inquiringly at Quincy.

"Roughage", Quincy scowled. "All of 'em Trodgs' needs 'ar damn daily roughage fer digestion."

"Oh..." I said.

The creature continued looking expressionlessly at me.

(Although if you actually knew a Trodgs' facial expressions you would note laughter.) "Anks", it croaked.

“Don’t mention it.” I casually replied, -though my heart was pounding.

“Who and what the hell are you?” I was proud my voice didn’t crack.

The creature replied something like, “Igortchorthczpkhniploskixx.”

Quincy blurted, “ ‘Es a Trodge.”

I thought a moment and managed a smile, “Mind if I call you Igor?”

Igor gave shrug of sorts. As it had four arms, it was hard to tell.

“Okay, Igor, Quince, -let’s go pay our respects to the Master.”

I moved a few steps between and beyond them, then turned around in the hallway.

“Well Quincy? I haven’t got all day now, have I?”

Quincy snarled and began to grab my arm. A warning growl from Igor brought him to a rapid halt.

“This way,” Quincy said dourly, and moved on ahead.

I followed with Igor trailing, and thought, you know, it’s always nice to share a meal with friends,- especially friends who would ordinarily make you their meal. Lobster was always one of my favorites.

For the first time since my captivity, I began to cheer up a bit.

It didn’t last for long.

The Other Side of the Coin

From the appearance of things, it seemed that Mordred was operating a military compound.

High walls surrounding four or five acres encased all the residential quarters. Through fleeting glimpses of the inside windows I saw troops in a courtyard drilling in hand to hand combat. Various kinds of weapon practice and other forms of mayhem were accompanied by grunts, groans, shrieks, and howls. Maybe sixty percent of the combatants were human -males and females both, which came as a surprise.

I don't know why, -maybe my sexist upbringing. What should have been more surprising were the alien types, -a few more specimens like Igor, a whole bunch of hairy werewolf types, and assorted weird oddities that were neither fish nor fowl.

-I didn't see any of the really nasty monstrosities that chewed up the men from Avalon in the Borderlands.

All together there were maybe a few hundred or so soldiers.

A black obsidian tower of at least ten stories high dominated the scene, painfully reflecting the harsh green light. The other inner buildings were all connected to the walls by enclosed halls, made from blocks of dull granite, with white slated roofs.

Quincy led us across the courtyard towards the black tower. I could hear the ringing clang of steel and smell the stink of sweat. As I watched, a woman combatant screamed in rage at one of the wolf things. It appeared to taunt her, and she charged in with sword and dagger.

The monster nimbly sidestepped, but not in time to prevent a backhand slash that almost severed it's tendons behind one knee. Blood spurted from the wound and the creature howled and began to lose its' balance.

The woman assisted it's fall by smashing the thing's head with the pommel of her weapon. It collapsed to the ground in a heap.

I felt my mouth drop open. She caught me looking stupefied and flashed a calculated glance my way. God, she was pretty. She had this flaming red hair and big elfin eyes. All her muscles had curves in them.

“Want to play?” she wheezed, out of breath.

‘Uh, no thank-you.’”

Two guards began to drag and carry their fallen comrade off the field. He was whimpering like a puppy. A very, very big puppy.

She stood there waiting and I had to say something

“I just finished getting my butt kicked, and I’m on a strict limit of getting only one ass whipping per day.”

I noticed her halter barely enclosed a nicely rounded chest.

She watched my eyes drop to her breasts and she curled her lip.

“We’ll see about that,” she jeered, then flounced off. -Ruggedly.

Gee, I could hardly wait.

Igor nudged my shoulder with a claw and we entered the tower.

The first thing I noticed was the coolness, if not downright chill. Maybe it was just me, and I had the willies.

Every right to, I mused to myself. Yet, despite this, I walked with a cocky attitude that would fit a soldier of fortune. Or, in my case, -misfortune.

There wasn’t much in my control right now, and I had learned from necessity to go with the flow, as long as it wasn’t going to drown me.

I submerged my senses into the details of the building, looking for exits, weapons, guards, and any other useful information.

The place was full of hanging tapestries, implements of destruction, and artifacts that I couldn’t make hide nor hair of.

Yet some were surreally familiar.

I noticed a lawnmower and a microwave among a bunch of other devices.

The collection had a Lewis Carrol type of logic. (The kind of “if ‘Nobody’ passed you on the highway, ‘Nobody’ should have arrived first” logic.)

I didn’t really have the time to figure it out just then.

We began to climb a long circular staircase built on to the inside of the spire.

Ten stories of climbing make it really hard to keep up a facade of nonchalant insolence.

At the eighth level I puffed out, “That’s it,- I’m just going to jump. At least I’ll get a chance to rest on the way down before I splatter.”

Quince looked back at me with disregard. “Go right ahead, yer strutting ‘litl cod piece. Save me some extra time and bother.”

“On second thought, I’ll pass.”

We made it to the very top of the turret. Quincy took a deep breath before a large black stone door. He knocked.

No response.

He knocked louder. The door swung open.

Mordred was seated with his legs up on a large oaken table. To his left was a grizzled old warrior type, with a harness and buckle on his bare chest. More scars criss-crossed his body than railroad tracks in a Chicago stockyard.

The guy was holding a goblet of an ambiguous beverage that sloshed out when he turned to meet us.

In the far corner there was a lean figure dressed in a dark hood and robe sitting in a throne-like chair. It hissed, and threw back its’ cowl

It was a very large anorexic lizard with two horns on its’ forehead.

I wanted to step on it and crush it under my heel.

Except I’d lose my foot.

My immediate reaction was instant hate, instant fear, instant loathing.

“Come in, come in,” Mordred impatiently ordered. The lizard hissed again, louder. “Just you,” he nodded at me.

Igor growled in irritation at the reptile, which caused one of my eyebrows to raise in speculation. He backed out through the door, almost slamming it shut on the inquisitor. As I said, the musky smell of snake didn't really appeal much to me either. Neither did the flickering tongue and slit eyes.

Here was power.

Somehow, this being was somehow more alien and venomous than any of the others I had seen so far. Mordred was running the show, but maybe something was running Mordred. Just as Merlin had said...

My distaste evidently made it's way to my face.

“Well, let's not be rude to your hosts,” sneered the wizard.

“Nothing personal,” I gestured to the reptile, “Had a run in with a second cousin of his...”

“*Hers*, -also known as Your Excellency, and please do not bore us with your tale,” Mordred interrupted, and motioned me to take a seat in front of the table. He poured another goblet of wine and passed it over.

I nodded, “Sorry, Your excellency.”

Mordred raised his own flagon. “I'd like to propose a toast.” He looked at his companions. “To new found allies, and to the beginnings of a mutually profitable relationship.”

I looked skeptically at my drink. Seeing that they were all waiting for me, I raised my cup into the air.

“To new found allies,” I toasted, mentally keeping my other hand behind my back and crossing my fingers.

Okay, -sometimes I'm childish.

I was never very fond of lying, even to liars, but, when in Rome...

I drank, and was surprised by the smooth flavor of the wine. I gulped the rest down. One of the few talents I had in my past life was in the drinking arena. I used to be an excellent drunk.

The warrior type gave me an appraising glance, perhaps recognizing a fellow imbibor.

“Ahh,” I uttered, “Good stuff,” my new allies nodded in approval.

“Sso,” the the most excellent lizard began, “Thiss isss thiss one of the onesss.” She pointed a talon at me. I noticed that she had three fingers and a thumb with some very serious nails.

No white gloves. Very dark Disney.

“Yes”, he is the one -for now,” chuckled Mordred. The warrior type was busy fiddling with his goblet, looking bored. Mordred was watching him out of the corner of his eye.

“Patience, Vosh,” he stated in a neutral tone, although his eyes were a bit baleful. Vosh put his drink down without hesitation and calmly folded his hands.

Mordred got up from the table and started to pace. The lizards tail kept up the to and fro beat as he rambled on in a politician’s oration. Shit. He was Merlin’s pupil after all...

“There is a place in Coventry for you, ah, -What is your birth name?”

“Joe, -Joseph Grodin.

“Yes, Joe,” the youthful seeming dark lord went on, “This is a place where one of your potential can go far *indeed*.”

(The “indeed” was accentuated with a strong finger pointing gesture that reminded me of either Bush or Clinton, or was it Reagan?) “You can ask yourself, Joe of the one eye, what is in this for me?”

I guess he thought he was on a roll.

“Let me tell you. -No, let me ask you. First of all, despite the fact that you were chained to a wall, and slapped up a bit, have you really been injured, hurt, or damaged?”

Before I could respond, Mordred let out a resounding, “NO! You have not!”

It was interesting how white froth began to collect at the edge of those pouting lips. Need a raincoat soon, I thought.

“You, who attacked an innocent fellow traveler, were *Taken Care Of*.”

Yeah, right, I thought.

The reptile maintained an impassive presence, and Vosh was busy snaking his right hand out to his goblet while appearing to listen. “We only want what is rightfully ours, -due to necessity.

Due to the needs of the people of Coventry.”

I didn't buy the sales pitch much, except perhaps about the needs of the people.

This world was truly a shit hole and a half from what I could tell.

Mordred pounded his fist on the table, spilling the wine. Vosh looked at the puddle with regret.

“There's a War On!” he yelled, spraying saliva. The muscles around his neck stood out in rigid relief.

I casually flicked a bit of spittle off my cheek.

“And, my friend, *We Need You. And You Need Us!*”

I wasn't always one for thinking fast on my feet.

Fortunately I was sitting down. Being in this position rather consistently, I had learned to think fast on my behind. How could I string these jerks along and avoid getting killed. How could I gain their confidence? The answer was simple.

Greed.

The most common denominator among Mordred's type.

“What I *need*,” I guilefully intoned, “is money. Gold. Jewels. Cabbage. Geld.

I thought a moment more, “And Women, Wine. Sex, Drugs, Rock and Roll.”

The Lizard gave an approving hiss. Vosh had a look of benign contempt, and Mordred clapped his hands together and said, “A man after my own heart.”

Only to cut it out and roast it, I thought.

“Taking care of the needs of the people, One Eye, can be very rewarding work. Yes, very rewarding. Good for the soul besides”, Mordred chuckled. The lizard thing did its’ approximation of a laugh. It sounded like the back end of a flushing toilet.

Vosh looked on, bored.

“Yes, my new comrade”, the warlock went on, “we can provide you with these desires, most capably provide you. But you must also provide us with a few little services in return.”

“Such as?”

“Opening a Door.”

I put my poker face on again. “Hey, I don’t know how I got in the damn place the first time.”

“Never mind that. The point is, good sir, you did. That makes you, ah, -wizard material”, Mordred said with a flourish. “Besides, we, -I will teach you.” He put both hands on the table and his face an inch away from mine.

“And I do *guarantee* that you will learn.” He then sat back in his chair.

I didn’t like the sound of the “guarantee” part.

It had the silent ring of “or else” left out.

However, I decided to play the jaded mercenary bit to the hilt.

“Well, I could use some rest and food prior to the schooling, Morddy.”

Mordred reached for a dagger belted at his waist, flicked it out and threw it at my head.

I felt the rush of displaced air by my ear. The blade entered the hard wood with a dull *twack* a quarter inch from my head and vibrated...

I didn’t even flinch.

I didn’t have time to.

I just sat there hoping I didn’t piss my pants.

My good eye maintained contact with Mordred’s glare.

“No offense meant, your Lordship,” I stated quietly.

“None taken, but if you ever dare get familiar with me again, I’ll split more than a few hairs with you.”

He turned away and then back again as an afterthought. “What are your own weapons of choice, by the way?”

“Atomic bombs, hand grenades, and bazookas.” I stated with bland authority.

Mordred didn’t know he was being put on.

“Well, none of those are available, nor are they functional in this realm.” Mordred pondered.

“Hmm. -Vosh will arrange to instruct you in arms while you’re here. Practice daily with the troops, and the remainder of your time will be spent in learning wizard craft. -Take him to the kitchen and fatten him up. Not so much that he pukes his guts up, because after that -he’s yours in the yard.”

Vosh glided up from his chair and went over to me.

“You heard him,” he said gruffly.

“That’s it?” I asked.

“All for now.” Mordred stood up with an air of dismissal.

We left.

A Lesson in Discipline

Vosh was silent as he led us out of the room. His gait was strong and brisk, and I had a tough time keeping pace. Despite the earlier consumption of alcohol, the man appeared alarmingly sober.

Maybe he wasn't such a lush after all.

Maybe he was just playing a part too.

"So, Vosh, how's it hanging?" I asked.

He abruptly spun on his heel and I had a hard time not slamming into him. Which didn't really matter, as Vosh grabbed me by the front of the shirt and slammed me against the wall anyway.

"As for now, you are under my command. The only thing that may hang will be your scrawny neck. You are to be instructed. I will instruct you."

He smiled cryptically. "Lesson number one: Never underestimate the power of underestimation."

He spun again, pushing me in a jog down the tower's stairs and past the practicing warriors in the courtyard.

All that saw the grizzled fighter made some sign of obeisance. Salutes, grunts and chest thumpings were the order of the day. Vosh turned to one of the humans wearing some insignia on his shoulder harness. "Wait here," he said curtly to.

Vosh and his officer had a brief exchange in low tones.

I began to wonder if my neck was really that scrawny.

Maybe, compared to some peoples. In daylight, Vosh appeared to be a robust man in his late forties, with a lanky frame molded by corded muscle.

His skin was burnished leather that fit him like comfortable worn boots. Along with the stripes of scar he reminded me of a tiger. Like he was always in a state of relaxed alertness, ready to pounce.

My prior take was definitely an underestimation...

Vosh nodded and we were about to take off when the female soldier I encountered earlier strode boldly up to us.

“Go away, Neesha,” grumbled Vosh. “Whatever it is -not now, not here.”

She kept pace anyway, a determined look to her face. Long red hair swished in tandem with her strides.

Vosh regarded her as he would an annoying gnat. “Don’t you have something better to do?”

“Relatively speaking, indeed yes. But the Harr I cut requests a blood duel -right now.”

“I know, I talked to Vance. So, -kill him.”

“Commander, he can’t even walk.”

“Kill him sitting down.”

“Shit.” Such a nasty word coming out of such a delicate mouth, I thought.

Neesha caught me eyeing her again and sniped, “Mind your own business, asshole.”

I quickly began counting the number of clouds in the sky.

Vosh began in a rapid-fire monotone. “Neesha, you are a *Captain*. Captains run platoons based on the respect of their troops. If there is no respect, there is no authority. The Harr, from, what I understand, denigrated you in front of your men. You hurt him. He was shamed. Your fault here, *Captain*, is that *you lost your temper!* Harrs can’t stand being shamed, so he chooses to die.

You will help him in his request. If you refuse to do so, you will lose respect, as well as deny the Harr’s opportunity to restore his honor.”

He paused and gave her a deadly glare.

“Order for all must be maintained. There is no other way. End of story.”

“But...”

Vosh’s eyes were the dull gray of a gun barrel. “I will tolerate no disrespect either.”

“No disrespect intended sir. What if the Harr gives quarter?”

“I’ve never seen it, lass.”

“Well sir, what if?”

“Then you can spare him and bloody hell will freeze over.”

Vosh turned back to me. “Wait here and watch.”

I nodded.

He abruptly trudged off to do more of his commander thing.

“Yes sir. Good idea about the sitting part sir”, she called out.

She turned and marched off to her own company. Vosh watched her go and scratched his head, probably wondering what the hell she was up to. Neesha talked briefly with a few of her troops, and a Trodge and a Harr proceeded into one of the smaller buildings.

A few seconds later, the previously beaten Harr limped up, accompanied by the other two with a chair. The woman and the wolf creature engaged in a brief dialogue.

The Harr first protested vigorously, then gave a grudging nod.

Neesha sat down on the chair. Two soldiers tied her ankles around its’ legs.

The entire courtyard became silent as all of the troops formed a large circle around the combatants.

Vosh came back to my side.

A sword and dagger was handed to each participant.

I watched the blades glitter in the sunlight and noticed that I was holding my breath. The company around me called out bets on the fighters.

The other captain, a guy named Vance, announced in a loud voice, “Harr of Renu’s request for blood feud has been granted. Neesha of Coventry has chosen to fight seated, as to not take unfair advantage of Renu’s injury.

I will count to three and the duel will begin...

One. Two. Three...”

The wolf creature snarled, and hobbled in, his sword in a downward swing. Neesha ducked as it hit the side of the chair and remained stuck.

Its other paw gripping the dagger thrust towards Neesha’s heart.

She deflected it with her longer blade, cutting into the Harr's forearm, drawing blood, and causing him to drop the shorter weapon.

She quickly slid her own dagger towards the beast's crotch, pressing the blade home and looked up with a wicked smile.

Ouch.

The Harr looked down to see the hilt of the knife protruding from its groin, and gave a plaintive whine. Her sword was now pricking its neck.

“Would you like to go into the afterlife without your balls?”

The creature shook its' head and growled a vigorous “No”.

I thought that maybe the Harrs confused honor with the presence of testicles. Then again, most guys did.

The redhead surprised us all with her next move. “I humbly beg this One's forgiveness for the dishonor I have caused. My prior actions were unworthy, and I am shamed.”

She hung her head for a moment, then gave the beast a desolate look. “If I take your life, I will be further dishonored as you have wounds that make this contest unjust. I humbly ask that Harr of Renu give quarter to me, so that when he is well again he may regain his honor by killing me in a manner that brings glory to his clan and company.”

The wolf creature looked a bit confused. He hissed a growl to a few other Harrs who began a low but heated debate on the merits of the proposition.

Then with as much dignity as one can have with a blade to the gonads, the Harr growled, “Renu of Harr grants the request of Coventry's Neesha.”

Neesha pulled back her weapons and the two clasped forearms.

The troops both booed and cheered the combatants, and began to mill around.

It was over.

Now -there are those who possess some romantic notion that there is an art to the matter of killing.

Perhaps there is, just as there is foreplay in the making of love.

I have learned death has no music; -it is only noise.

A final gasp of air.

A shudder.

Then the eyes film over to block the light, and the dark cold settles to freeze forever.

I knew this. Maybe Neesha did too.

“Damn hell hounds, terrible at defense”, Vosh commented wryly, “Killer instincts frequently impede self preservation. Pity. -Neesha, two hours additional defensive drill for all Hars.”

Neesha gave a subdued “Yes sir.” I thought her eyes twinkled, but she kept her feelings at some veiled distance, so I couldn’t be sure.

She headed back to her company, shouting orders. The whole thing made me feel a little queasy.

“And you One Eye,” the commander addressed me, “ Time to get some food.”

“I’ve lost my appetite.”

“Have a weak stomach, do you?”

“It all depends on what I swallow.”

Vosh eyed me with an appraising glance. “Working for the lizard and Mordred, I expect you’ll have more than enough to choke on.”

“Most likely.”

“Lesson Number One, One Eye -a soldier takes care of his weapons. Your body is your principle weapon. Eat when you must, sleep when you can.”

“I thought you said that lesson number one was never to underestimate the power of underestimation.”

Vosh gave a cynical laugh. “Whatever keeps you alive is lesson number one.”

I thought he had a point there. Somewhere.

Then again, so does a needle in a haystack.

“So then, Lesson number one: Always humor your commanding officer?”

The warrior chief looked at me as if he was either going to decapitate me or laugh his own head off.

I thought he could probably do both at the same time.

I quickly added, "Sir."

Vosh smiled thinly, "If it keeps you alive, boy. If it keeps you alive. -Well then, you'll eat when you're hungry enough, I dare say. Go along after Neesha, she'll look after you."

I unconsciously reached down to protect my own family jewels.

The commander of Mordred's forces shook his head in amused disgust and went about his business.

It was a hell of a way to start the day.

Suiting Up

Neesha had twenty troopers going through some kind of drill with swords. There were three other women, a handful of men, a few Harrs, Trodges, and numerous specimens looking like they mutated from a box of animal crackers.

A little bearish, a little tigerish, a little turtlish, a little birdish.

Yet, 'little' wouldn't exactly convey a good first impression, since none of them stood under six feet. Hands, paws, claws and a tentacle or two grasped weapons and grunted, growled and squawked in exertion.

I came up behind my new boss, just watching. She went in and out of the formation, correcting footing here, limb position there, -yelling or praising as the situation required.

"Ahem." I cleared my throat. The captain ignored me.

"Excuse me." In a louder voice. She ignored me with even more dilligence.

As much sympathy as I had for the woman, this was starting to get a bit annoying.

So I yelled at the top of my voice, "*Excuse Me Please Sir Captain Sir.*"

This brought things to a dead halt. The entire company waited in anticipation.

She turned her head and viewed me as if I were an accident some puppy made on her new rug.

Neesha's eyebrows raised. "Well?"

"Reporting for weapons training."

Oh, she smiled then.

The smile of the cat who has swallowed the canary.

Or the cat that knows the canary is a sure thing.

I could just see her licking her whiskers.

She called out to one of the Trodges.

"Igtchorthczpkhniploskixx." You know, the name off her lips was just as disgusting as it would be off anyone else's, I thought.

But I kind of recognized it.

Yep, It was Igor, alright.

“Take this,” she gave a sneer of distaste, “ ‘recruit’ to the armory and get him outfitted. Then return him.”

With that she turned her back on us both.

“Hey, Igor.”

“ ‘Ey ‘Un I’.” The creature pointed two of its’ arms to a small building on the south side of the courtyard, and tapped me in that direction.

I was quiet for a bit. This “one eye” thing was getting to me.

“Captain Neesha’s quite a handful isn’t she.” I remarked, making idle conversation.

The Trodge looked down at his four pinchers in confusion.

“Never mind, Igor.”

“ ‘Kay.”

It’s hard to have idle conversation without common points of reference. Perhaps I should have said, “quite a clawful, or pincherful, or...”

The closer we got to the building, the more the sound of hammers banged my ears.

Igor seemed profoundly effected by it, flinching as we got closer.

I thought the Trodges must be very sensitive to sound.

We reached the open armory door. Inside were bins and bins of equipment, from swords to maces, to bows, daggers, shields, armor, and so on.

To my far left, I could see a blacksmith type yelling instructions to a few assistants busy at an anvil and fire.

It was roaring hot in the place. Igor walked up behind the fellow and tapped him on the shoulder.

As the clamor finally ceased and desisted, the smith, a burly fellow with arms the size of my legs, came up with a gruff, “Wad ja want?”

I looked him up and down.

He was another big man who would have won the Bluto look-alike contest.

“You are’t related to that Quincy fellow by chance, are you?”

The smith grabbed me by the throat and cocked his fist back.

“Cause I really hate that bastard,” I wheezed out of the small opening left in my throat.

The armorer’s face split into a wide grin. “Pleased to make yer acquaintance, trooper.”

“Then... you don’t mind letting me breathe,”

The large man promptly let go and dusted off the front of my shirt.

“Sorry lad, that’s not the first time I’ve ‘erd the comparison. Right sick of it, and it’s been a long morning anyways.”

He wiped his hands on his leather apron. “Finchly’s the name, -what can I do yer for?”

Igor piped in, like a broken organ, “Epons oder Capn Neesh.”

“Aye, need to be outfitted, do ya?”

I nodded.

“One sword, one dagger, one suit of mail, and another two weapons of yer choice”, Finch said by rote. “Sign ‘ere afore yer leave”.

The smith produced a quill and piece of parchment and laid them on a small desk.

What to get, what to get, I pondered.

I felt just like a kid in a poison candy shop.

There’s no doubt about it, certain men love weapons. They love the look of them, the feel of them, the smell of them. They call them by various pet names, and fondle them with affection. They oil them and shine them, and some even mount them.

(On their walls of course.)

I had some of these tendencies. But like some other men, I was acquainted with the reality of death.

I had blood on my hands. I could smell the coppery tang of that too. Because of this, it wasn’t so romantic.

And, because of this, I remembered a scene in a world a lifetime ago where nightmares walked out of a shrouded mist.

I guess they're right when they say everything in a dream is you...

I said with some reluctance, "Not sure what I need, Igor."

"Egor 'elp."

The Trodge went rummaging through the bins as if at a closing sale at Macy's.

"Hey, don't be making a mess in 'ere!" Finchly yelled from the background.

The clanging of the hammer began again. This time it seemed to direct the beat of my heart. I felt the blood rhythm in my ears, and a roaring of white noise clouded my hearing.

Igor startled me by dropping a bundle at my feet.

" 'Ere."

The first thing I noticed was a taloned glove made of mail and black leather.

The fingertips extended into razor sharp claws of some reinforced alloy.

Then there was the crossbow.

It was small and solid looking, barely two feet across, with a quiver of arrows that had green feathers. Each bolt was a foot long.

The saber was next.

I picked it up, and felt its' weight. Not that I knew a damn thing about swords. The pommel was golden metal in the shape of four entwined dragons and the arm length-blade had a slight curve.

The steel shimmered in ribbons of color, iridescent waves of frozen light reflecting it's deadly intent.

The dagger reminded me of Hitler's SS. It had a little skull on its grip.

Real cute.

There was a suit of mail attached to a black leather jerkin. The links extended below the crotch and down to the thighs.

A sturdy black cloak completed the wardrobe.

I stared down at the assortment in shock.

“Come.” Igor pushed him impatiently. “ ‘ractice.”

I shook off my mood like a dog shaking off water. I didn't have time for self-pity at the moment.

Maybe I could dwell on time and paradox later.

Now I should learn to stay alive.

I would think of this as just a costume. I knew that I would look the part, but whether I would do a repeat performance would be another story.

I awkwardly grabbed the stuff up in my arms, and got the hell out.

“Hey, -ya fergot to sign.”

I went back and thanked Finchly, who made some never no minds, but was pleased at the courtesy.

On a whim I signed the form “One Eye”.

Well, it was better than Bozo.

Because if I didn't start to get serious soon, it looked like I was going to become a murderer who's consumed by hellfire.

Igor and I double-timed it back to the squad, and I tried not to drop the bundle I was carrying.

One of the humans helped me to suit up with the mail and I picked up the saber.

Both felt comfortable. For ten minutes.

Then the drills and practice began. It was monkey see-monkey do as the group of us formed a country-killing line dance.

Sometime later, it was one on one. Neesha picked me as her sparring partner.

Uh Oh. -Just my lucky day.

It went like this:

“Move your left foot. More. Good. Now, put your weight on your right foot. Bend the knee. Not that much, you idiot. Turn your body sideways, you're less of a target that way. Raise the sword.

Bend your elbow more. Good. Now shift your balance from your right foot forward to your left

back. Good. Keep the sword in the same position, Damn it! Now here's the first pattern, we call it U-ku..."

We call it Neesha-the-bitch, I thought.

How could I ever find myself even momentarily turned on to such an arrogant, heartless, ball busting ...

Neesha twacked me on my left side with the flat of her blade.

A few of my comrades-in-arms chuckled and snorted.

I felt my old wounds sing out in pain and gasped.

"Next time I won't be so gentle. Concentrate. What did I say about compensating for your blind spot? And again..."

If it weren't for the fact that she could beat the crap out of me, I would've knocked her block off.

And so the day wore on...

* * *

I quickly deflected an overhand stroke, -feeling aha, nothing to it, only to have her blade slide under mine, catch the guard, and flip it out of my hands.

She had done this seven times so far. The other troopers were taking bets on how far she could heave it. I'd been out here for two hours today, feeling like the last kid picked for the neighborhood ball game.

The mail was heavy, I itched, and was sweating up a storm and the blade felt as light as a ton of feathers.

My hands had already formed blisters, and a few had broken. But I kept my mouth shut as best I could, except for the sporadic yelp or grunt that escaped involuntarily. Still, we worked on.

And on, and on.

Maybe I should have opted for the dungeon.

As I kept pace with the exercises, I noticed Quincy ambling up. He went right over to Neesha and they had a brief conversation.

“You’re relieved for now, soldier. I’d get some ointment for those hands, ‘cause your going to need them at first dawn tomorrow.”

To better wring your neck, I thought, as I responded with a sarcastic “Yes Sir, Captain Mam.” Captain Sir Mam acknowledged with, “Better keep those balls of yours in a safe place, One Eye. Waving them around like that makes such an inviting target. -I’m just doing my job, trying to teach you how to stay alive. I suggest you do yours and learn something here.”

I felt embarrassed. “Sorry Captain, I’ll bear that in mind.”

Her expression softened from steel to concrete. “Do that.”

Quincy was busy shifting his footing impatiently. “Come on, yer little cock strutter, Mordred is awaiting. Go to the tower, I’ll see that yer gear ends up in yer room.”

I peeled off his protective covering and handed my weapons over.

It was good to feel unencumbered movement in my limbs.

“I gotta wash up first, Quincy, -you know how our Lordship hates a mess.”

“Better bleedin ‘urry, then.”

I went to the latrine that had been pointed out earlier by one of my fellow soldiers and relieved and cleaned myself.

Running water was available through some kind of aqueduct system. Containers of leaves were available in the private stalls. At least they weren’t poison sumac.

I looked up at the black monolith.

The tower waited for me like an unpaid bill from a bad check.