

AN
ODD KNIGHT'S
DAZE

A Novel of the War for Haven

by

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Semi-Divine Revelations IV

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Semi-Divine Revelations IV

We began doing experiments using black holes for interstellar travel around 10,200 AD. The problem was, nobody ever came back. That's because the holes didn't transport people or things to other portions of space, or even to other times in space. They tunneled into Otherwhens and Otherwheres. Other universes.

So, projects to use these places were dropped. They were too unpredictable and couldn't be controlled.

Until recently. Which paradoxically means, like now and forever, back then and forwards and sideways. 'Cause we got access, babe.

Infinity is a big, big place. Anything and everything does happen. Eventuality is inevitable. Can't be helped. Well, it can be helped, sort of.

You see, when we helped to create Herself, She connected with all the other High Ones that were also created in these Otherwhens. She was still Herself, and also One. Sameness and difference were both preserved in a place Beyond, at the Center. She says from this vantage point, our usual perception of how the Universe works is pretty meaningless.

Basically, all probabilities of any given behavior exist in some already existing Otherwhen, and life form is always interacting with them without realizing it. Most are just short hops within given probabilities.

Let's say you're a typical biped who "moves" from a sitting to standing position, okay? Theory has it that biochemical and electrical impulses are transmitted causing the contraction of muscles that allow you to exert energy against the force of gravity to stand up. Simple from a three dimensional perspective.

However, a fourth level view is more than a bit different.

Our consciousness, or soul, or awareness simply jumps from the one reality of where I'm sitting to the reality of another "me" who is standing. "I" didn't really move, "I" was already in that

position in another parallel world. The parallel “I” must concurrently shift their own awareness to another continuum.

The other “I” who *was* standing simply popped his quiff off to a different Somewhen. My “I” takes his place, he takes a different I’s position and so on and so on and so on.

There are “shadows” of each universe that are very probable, and all of us flit about them all the time. These are infinite in their tiny variations, and their differences are hardly noticeable. Just as we may be reflections of our God, so these are shadows of our shadow of Herself.

(And if you can figure what a shadow casts, let alone what it can effect, you’re on the path.)

As far as Other Universes go, then, you got the really improbable, far out fantastic kinds of you-didn’t-think-you-could-have Imagined. They aren’t really reflections of our own, as another Light has cast them. Other laws and standards prevail. They are harder to get to.

(And by the way, I’m assured by Herself that they view us in much the same stupefaction as we view them.)

Most of these are/were active creations by Gods similar to our own.

Each is like a seed that inevitably creates it’s own Higher Being, who then connects with all it’s other Kin.

And Voila!

Confused enough? Imagine. And then imagine what to do with what you imagine.

Any entity’s capability to imagine is really just the capacity to tap into alternative universes where “they” already exist.

In other words, there are no such things as new ideas, except in a relative sense.

Everything you can think of and imagine already exists. How to get there is the hard part for some. But in every sentient species there are those of us with our heads in the clouds. Call us dreamers. We are not usually creatures of action. We are mostly insane. We see and hear too much of what is present -only for us.

In another way, we do appear more solid and substantial than others, more present and “alive”, even if our lives are pretty messed up. That’s because of the expanded awareness of our parallel selves in the other worlds. When we discover something that has an actual practical application in our home realms, our brothers and sisters sing a different tune, and we are lauded as geniuses.

Some of us have actually gone as far as complete integration. When this occurs, we shift “up” into fourth levels and beyond. (Most second and third level cultures try to kill these corporal manifestations then as quickly as possible.

That’s why I do recruiting and collections. We peons are given the task and duty of keeping the eventual on course. We collect souls for God.

One day, She promises, we’ll be able to help collect everyone. For now, we have to make sure that “one day” eventually comes. Something Else has a whole different ending in mind. They are more of the “get it while you can and screw everybody else” kind of beings.

The Borderlands are the corridors that manifested for travel to the Otherwhens. They were created when God grew up and met Her counterparts. They are Her Words made Light. The whole network materialized into being when God connected.

That means that what once never existed for us as an isolated universe, (except in our imagination), became an actual physical reality that always existed. Whew! Strains the brain, hey? The Borderlands amplify the natural ability of sentience for dimension hopping. Their main use is that we can actually do corporal transport. (Fifth ‘s don’t require such limited technology. They’re already here and there, and yes, they can have their cake and eat it too.) It is no longer just our souls or essence that hops. We can transmit the whole enchilada. But it must be a special enchilada, and it has to be done in a place on the world where the fabric of space/time is just a bit warped. In every world there are numerous “Doors” that meet these requirements. Places where

faith and imagination have run rampant. Sacred places, places of inspiration and the like. The dreamers are the world walkers and Keys. The Gods need us. Using the Borderlands means you can meet all your other selves. In person. It also gives us a chance to direct the future of other worlds to insure God's creation. (Besides speeding up integration and jumping to different levels.) We can make adjustments in the past, hop to the parallel future, and check it out. There is the War with Something Else. It's been going on since God knows when. Forever. It may last forever, too. Because we can't win it.

We don't want to.

We have to tolerate a certain amount of "evil", because, -after all, there wouldn't be good guys if there weren't the bad guys.

The yin-yang balance and all that jazz. But the bad guys, well, they just don't give a shit. Funny as it seems they are the purists.

They want all or nothing. And if they get it all, they'll make it into one big Nothing for sure.

If we lose, forever is over. You can't negotiate with Something whose main goal is to rip you to pieces and make you non-existent.

In a way, (She says) there are these values of love, beauty, and justice that are fighting it out with hate, entropy, and greed.

She and the rest of us are less than lily white. We too, have blood on our hands. But we try to redeem whomever we can.

Forgiveness is never freely given. It must be earned.

So be it.

Fireside Chat

I wasn't quite so breathless after ten flights this time. I had enough air left to fill my gut with alarm. The kind of alarm attached to a ticking bomb.

Now I was going to learn to be a wizard.

-Yeah, right. Learn like Merl had taught him by leading me off a cliff?

And Merl was supposedly one of the good guys.

These were the bad guys, and a few of them didn't seem all that bad. Igor, Vosh, Finch, -even Neesha didn't come off as so terribly evil.

Bitches and bastards maybe.

Except for Mordred, who had all the marks of a pompous, vain and selfish bully. None of which excluded him from being deadly.

And the lizard. The lizard, "Her Excellency" gave me the chills.

There is something that all of us can usually relate to in another.

Call it compassion, call it empathy. There is some connection; that common bond thing. What scared me was that I couldn't feel it with the reptile at all.

Hell, even Igor and those Harrs had passion and feelings. What I got from the lizard was an absence of almost all emotion.

Except hate. I could feel that.

But it wasn't an ordinary hate, like something hurt you so bad you want to kill it hate. It was a cold hate. No reason tacked on. A "just because" hate.

A just because you are not one of us hate.

It scared me because I couldn't identify with it. Which, all in all, was a pretty good thing, because if I could understand it, then I'd be like that thing in the room.

I sensed that it just wanted to use me up, suck out my marrow, and then crush my bones into powder. I thought it'd probably do the same to Mordred too.

The jerk was smart enough to see it coming, and too full of himself and his greed to believe he could be taken.

Enough of this, I said to himself, and took a deep breath and knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

I swung the door open. The same cold malevolence permeated the room.

Both reptiles were present and accounted for. Human and inhuman.

Mordred was smiling his shark’s smile. No humor, -just teeth and appetite.

I wouldn’t have been surprised if the bastard’s eyes rolled up when he got closer.

“Sit down, sit down.”

I sat. And kept quiet.

“How did your little training go today?”

I felt my blisters, and my bruised and battered body.

“Smashing.”

“Delightful. That Captain Neesha is quite some woman, isn’t she?” Mordred leered.

“You could say that.” I’d touch her with a ten-foot pole.

To beat her with it.

“We need to talk.” Mordred got solemn. “About the Big Picture.”

I sat up, and leaned forward in my chair. Even if this guy lied his ass off, there might be some useful information.

“I’m at your command.” For this moment, anyway.

“One Eye, If I may call you that...” Mordred paused.

I nodded. It looked like the name was going to stick.

“You and I and quite a few special others, I might add, are quite unique in the universe. You could call us Walkers of worlds. Some call us warlocks and sorcerers. I think that I have been to -oh, let me see □”

Mordred looked up as if visualizing, “thirty different realms since I’ve learned of the Borderlands. You, I do believe, have been to two. Your own home and here, am I correct?”

“Yes,” I blandly lied. Monkey see, monkey do.

“Well, my nearsighted friend, there are uncountable worlds to visit, to rule, and to take for the asking.”

The dark wizard rubbed his hands together in a parody of avarice, which made it less funny because he just wasn’t kidding.

I winced, because I suspected Mordred was going to go on another one of those stupid spastic tirades.

Never thought I’d appreciate Merl’s lectures. Just goes to show you.

“But that isn’t what we’re about here, really.” Mordred’s voice took on the silky smoothness reminding me of snake oil.

Because, after all, that’s what it was, and the damn lizard hovering near by like the smell of raw sewage at a garden party.

“We’re helping this world, One Eye. Coventry is dying, any fool could see that.” Mordred paused for dramatic effect.

“There are only a few thousand survivors scattered in barely habitable pockets near this base.

They need a place to go. We can furnish that place. Actually, we need your help, my new friend.

And, there’s no reason why good deeds should go unrewarded.”

I sat impassively. So far, it was the same redundant bull I heard before.

I could see why Vosh needed a stiff drink whenever he was stuck in this room.

“Yeah, well all I got so far is some bloody blisters and whacked around.”

“Patience is a virtue,” the sorcerer chuckled, “I’ll personally make sure you get just what you deserve.”

I could count on that, just as I counted on any thief to rob me.

“I believe that you will, your Lordship.”

“Good. We have an understanding. But today, in all honesty...”

The demure drop of the magicians' eyes at this point almost made me burst out with hysterical laughter. I squeezed my fingernails into my ripped palms to distract myself.

“I have to let you know of the background and the dangers involved. You must be prepared because our common foe is most treacherous indeed.”

“Who is this enemy?” I was getting interested now.

“It is a being far more powerful than you can imagine. A conglomeration of alien forms merged into one giant intelligence attempting to control this world and all others. It has even incorporated ‘artificial life,’”

Mordred shuddered with disgust.

I thought that any enemy of this crowd must be a friend.

This is the first time Mordred had looked even vaguely worried. His fear was at least as sincere as his greed.

Come to think of it, he was perfect cold-blooded material, camouflaged in a flesh of false warmth.

“You see, One Eye, I am royalty from another world̄ a world known as Avalon. I was taught by another, just like I will teach you. My teacher’s name was Merlin.”

How silly of me to think otherwise.

Mordred stopped to pour himself a drink. He tilted the flagon in my direction, and nodded his head.

I didn’t mind if I did.

“Thanks.”

The wizard continued. “I discovered my trusted mentor was an agent of this Abomination and he and my cousin conspired to take my rightful throne. I fled into the Borderlands to find new residence.”

Violin strings begin to pluck a tune of self-pity.

Ah, poor, poor Mordred.

I wondered what really came down. Maybe the jerk really wasn't such a bad guy. Maybe something changed him.

Nah. -Not likely.

Then again, once he started to hang out with the like of Her Excellency...

Mordred sipped his drink. "I learned much in my travels. Far more than my teacher had prepared me for. As you can see from my collection from downstairs, I have many mementos."

"Yeah, I noticed some stuff from my world. The microwave and lawnmower."

At this, the lizard thing gave a startled hiss. " 'Erthth."

"Yep." I didn't like the creature's spark of interest one bit.

"Yes," Mordred responded, "I expected that, from the 'rock and roll' comment you made. Ah, Ozzie Osbourne and Alice Cooper... my favorites, -if only electricity were a useable source of power in this realm," he sighed.

"Well, one can always visit. Your land is a land of wonders, One Eye.

But your people, they are much too weak. All their talk of independence. Just talk."

"Most of them couldn't survive without their marvelous toys and machines. Few take responsibility for anything, including themselves. You have nothing noble left, since giving up on nobility. "

Yeah, and Mordred was just the one to fix it with his little lizard friend. Mordred leaned forward.

"How would you like to rule a country or two in your own home world?" His voice oozed a greasy seductiveness.

"I was looking for a place that wasn't so polluted," I dodged.

The wizard nodded thoughtfully in agreement.

"According to Her Excellency, there are more than enough worlds to go around. We'll see about your rewards and position *after* the taking of my rightful throne in Avalon."

"Peachy, your Lordship sir."

“Indeed. But we must now talk of the Art.”

“The Art?”

“Of Mages and Magic. And the workings of the Borderlands.”

“Pray continue, my Liege.” I silently congratulated myself on getting the knack of appearing obsequious. Some ass kissers are made, not born.

“The Borderlands and their adjacent Doors are the source of all of our power,” the wizard lectured. “These paths were created by the false gods that I described earlier.

Each world had at least one portal initially established by those monstrosities. But we can bring into being new paths each time we walk the worlds.” He laughed. “It seems that most of the locals believe us Walkers to be of some spiritual or religious significance. The poor dolts have often established shrines where we have been seen arriving.”

I thought of the hospital room of my most recent departure.

Mordred and the lizard traded a guarded look. “Most worlds are easy to get to, and harder to leave. There are exceptions.”

Mordred began getting pissed.

“Those Doors can also be locked if someone knows you’re coming, as Merlin has locked me out of Avalon. However, he doesn’t know *you*, One Eye. It’s quite simple, really. You can’t stop what you can’t imagine.”

“Say what?”

“Your imagination, my ignorant friend, isn’t something that you, as we say, ‘make up,’ -it’s more of an ability to tune into what’s already existing in the other worlds.”

The sorcerer paused and cocked an eyebrow, “It’s about being receptive, so to speak. Some of us are so open that everything gets through and we are driven mad. Some of us are so closed off and shut down that we have no creativity whatsoever. ...And some of us can learn to do it just right.”

The inkling of an idea erased my confusion.

“You mean you can imagine anything because that’s what’s already there?”

“Yes, exactly. And your presence, if known to a fellow Walker residing in that world, can be warded. That’s why you’re here. Merlin can’t ward you off; he doesn’t know you.”

“And you’re going to teach me?” I couldn’t mask the eagerness in my voice.

“Yes.”

“About the wand too?”

Mordred scowled. “The wand is the least of your worries now. Besides, it only works by tapping the energies of the Borderlands.”

“Where does it come from?” I was curious, since I had made it work, if only a little.

“Oh, a world where there is a special tree,” stated the wizard, “a tree unlike any other. Many walkers have died trying to get a piece of it.”

He stared at me intently, “you are no stranger to death, are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I assume that you must have had some kind of life threatening accident that preceded your arrival and our timely meeting.”

I faked surprise, “I was in a car accident. How’d you know that?”

“This is the most common way for Walkers to discover their abilities.” Mordred went on.

“Usually they are close to a Door, and death, shall we say, is immanent. The only way to live is by opening a Door. Most of us choose life, my mercenary friend, as you did. Most of us cannot imagine our own ultimate demise.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean.” More than you know, I thought again, recalling Merl’s little trick on the mountain.

Mordred began to adopt that conspiratorial posturing again, “Your training, my good fellow, will be rather sporadic. We have other matters of import to attend to, and little time to do it.”

He paused, “You will undergo a simple series of exercise to discipline your mind for the task ahead. We’ll be meeting again soon.”

He made shooing motions, “now be off with you. I’m sure your belly could stand a meal.”

I nodded. My current company was giving me a bad case of indigestion, so I went off to ruminate by myself.

Of course, halfway down the staircase my stomach growled a few different commands, so I decided to risk dinner with the troops.

I was sure I could handle a knife and fork.

Well, after my brilliant display of swordsmanship today, at least a fork.

Maybe.

Table Manners

The canteen, or cafeteria, or whatever the hell else you call it was louder than a pair of neon-green golf pants.

All two hundred or so troopers were present and accounted for the not so dull roar of the grease fires and the smell of the crowd.

The food smelled strange. I remembered that I hadn't had a decent meal since... since my one and only night in Avalon.

I managed to spot some table with steaming serving platters of God knows what, and filled up an empty plate. Barrels of some kind of brew were on tap, and I managed a tankard of that as well. Then I scouted the territory for any familiar faces or snouts. None appeared. At this point, I couldn't tell one alien from another.

I did spot Neesha and quickly found an empty bench as far away as possible, turning my back to her.

(I'd received enough bruises to both body and ego for one day, thank you very much.)

I just sat for a while. For one moment I just appreciated the fact that I had food, clothing and shelter.

Well, you could skip the shelter part. This place was damn dangerous.

I raised my mug to my lips. Just as the first swallow entered my mouth, somebody clapped me hard on the back, and I sprayed the mouthful over my dinner.

"So, -can't hold on to your liquor either?"

I didn't even bother to look behind me.

It was Neesha.

With Igor, Vance and a few other almost recognizable faces.

"Yeah, seems that way." I was itching to belt her, but I figured I'd just hurt my hand, which was sore enough. And she'd probably beat the crap out of me. Anyway, I didn't hit women, -which she was. Technically.

I turned around on the bench to face her. She was wearing this green tunic that set off the fire in her hair. -A sunset waterfall cascaded over smooth mossy banks and creamy shoulders.

Neesha smiled quite prettily. Her own eyes sparkled with good humor.

“Join with us, One Eye. You never can tell when you need a friend to cover your back.”

I felt a slow flush of shame creep over my skin.

I couldn't agree more, but the problem was, -these were my enemies.

I managed a lopsided grin as uneven as my spirits, and joined them at a nearby bench.

Vance sat to one side, Igor on the other. Neesha was directly across.

I pushed the food around on my plate, and listened to the banter and bickers of those around me.

Who beat who today, who was improving in their swing, who needed to change what in their stance, etc.

It was almost like listening to some damn ball team after their last practice.

-Except they were really talking about how to kill people, plain and simple, and laughing about it.

Being the novice that I was, I felt relieved about not having much commentary to offer. What struck me oddly though, was that none of the humans or others talked of home or family.

I turned to Vance, and tried an engaging smile. “Where you from?”

The soldiers face hardened, “A place that's dead and forgotten. We don't talk about our past lives here in Coventry, One Eye.”

His voice was grim. I was taken aback by the attitude shift.

“Why not?”

“There is no hope for the past, only the future,” he retorted. “All of us come from worlds that have been destroyed. Coventry itself is close to dying.”

“Looks pretty nasty out there,” I remarked.

“That's not the problem, most of us have lived in harsher times.”

Vance laughed bitterly. “Nothing grows here anymore, One Eye.” He looked off to some distant point. “Nothing. The soil is as barren as a dowager’s womb.

“And all wombs are as barren as the desert sands. There is no food to be grown, as no seeds take root. Neither fish nor fowl lay eggs. There are no younglings. We live off what has been reaped before, and that dwindles by the day. So it has been with all the varied worlds we come from. We do not talk of the past. Twas Mordred who recruited some of us here, as well as those from other realms.”

The soldier’s face screwed up in disgust, whether at the meal or Mordred, it was hard to tell.

“Can’t say that I like the fellow all that much, but he’s the only hope we’ve got.” Vance shut down then and got preoccupied with his food.

I felt a soft nudge under the table. Neesha was kicking my foot. She had overheard the conversation. She looked at me directly with an earnest gaze, “We are a family here, One Eye. We have lost almost everything, and our only hope is finding a new world where we can be safe and begin anew. Are you with us?”

I thought about making some lame excuse, bolting from the table, and perhaps find some refuge in my quarters.

The troopers were waiting for my response.

I was not a man to betray friendship and trust. If I befriended these folks, I would eventually have to turn on them. If I didn’t, I would end up killing Guy, and betraying Avalon, and maybe even killing my own family.

I took a quick mouthful of food. It was tasteless, like chewing on sawdust.

I had lost my appetite. For all of this.

I took a deep and tired breath. And sighed. Okay, I thought.

“Of course.” I said.

But it wasn’t okay. My feelings were not a luxury I could afford to indulge at this time. But they could also not be silenced.

Several of the warriors nodded encouragingly. Igor slapped me on the back with one of his limbs. Neesha reached over and took me by the arm.

I felt like shit. But I would make myself fit in.

I would make myself eat to keep up my strength.

I would work and practice to sharpen my skills.

I would try to find a way to not despise myself.

It was a silent vow made in the vast emptiness left by what I once was.

It screamed wordlessly against the fear of becoming what I most hated.

I got up abruptly and mumbled something about needing rest, and bid goodnight to everyone.

I didn't see Neesha follow me out.

Sometimes I don't see much at all.

-Hard to see things when your "I" is all messed up.

I Spy

There was no twinkle in the stars.

They shone as flat and dead as my spirit.

I trudged back up to my quarters with leaden feet and bone-tired weariness.

The night had certain bleakness to it, a poverty of color and sounds, except for the wind's cry of desolation.

Guards were about patrolling the compound in pairs.

Just as I was about to enter my room, I felt a warm touch on my shoulder.

"Joseph" Neesha's soft and throaty voice touched my ears as delicate as mist. I almost didn't recognize her voice.

As I turned to face her, two guards made their entrance at the end of the hallway.

"Humor me," Neesha muttered. Then she put her arms around me and tilted her head back, drawing my lips to hers.

Oh my God, I thought, she's going to kiss me.

And she did.

Velvet pliant lips with a hint of spice and her full body molded against my own. I could feel the heat between her legs burn into me, even as her mouth parted slightly and a soft darting tongue flickered teasingly across my own.

I smelled lavender and sandalwood.

Somewhere in the distance I could hear the guard's coarse snicker, but I didn't really give a damn. I was lost in this moment of sensation, and found myself growing hard.

My hips began to grind into her and my hands grabbed her to pull her tighter against me. I swear I could feel the nipples of her breasts through the sheer material of her blouse.

A yielding groan came somewhere from the back of her throat, exciting me even more.

Just then, one of those irritating thoughts came up. You know the kind. They are the what-do-you-think-you're-doing kind of thoughts.

They pop up when you need them the most and desire them the least.

Like, was this another set up for me?

Fortunately for me, I really didn't have to ponder long, because the next thing I knew Neesha slammed me back against my door, opened it, and roughly pushed me inside.

She slammed the door shut.

“What the hell was that all about?” I panted, fighting off a woozy electric tingle.

“Shut-up.”

More footsteps clomped down the hall. They faded after a time.

Neesha studied me like a specimen of some exotic insect.

-Just one more time for me to feel on the defensive with this woman.

I tried to muster up some indignation, but frankly, I was still stunned.

I took a few deep and slow breaths to calm myself.

In a more controlled voice I said, “You still haven't answered my question.”

“That was about saving your life.”

“I wasn't in need of mouth to mouth.”

-Though I sure did feel like drowning in her arms.

Probably the Patty Hearst syndrome.

“You sure didn't try to fight me off too hard”, she said, “Then again, you're not much of a fighter, are you?”

I kept my mouth shut. I wasn't going to let her provoke me.

Her voice relented, “I'm sorry, that was hitting below the belt.”

“Yeah, -you're really good at that.”

This time it was Neesha who maintained a stony silence.

If eyes could throw rocks, I would have another fractured skull.

“Look,” I said, “I’m sorry. No matter what kind of conversation we get into, we always end up arguing.”

She opened her mouth to argue and I gestured for her to stop.

“See what I mean? The moment either one of us lets down their guard the other whacks them again. So, I apologize, for anything I did, anything I didn’t do, for being a jerk, for whatever, Okay? So let’s start over, and have a truce, and later on if you’re so inclined you can insult me some more.

But for now, I’m tired, I feel like shit, and I just don’t want to play any more stupid games.”

Neesha let out a breath and her posture relaxed.

“As you say. But we have to talk.” She cocked her head sideways.

“How do I know I can trust you?”

I snorted, “Trust me? Trust me? -I didn’t say you could. Hey lady, -first you beat the crap out of me all day, do your best to humiliate me and a mighty fine job you’ve done too, -you follow me here, sexually assault me, throw me into my own room, and then you want to know if you can trust me?”

I ran out of steam at this point, and stopped dead.

I genuinely liked some of these Coventry folk, and most were just trying to save what was left of their own sorry skins.

I slumped down on one of the chairs.

“Hell, I don’t even know if I can trust me.”

“Well, finally, -something we have in common,” she smiled.

But it was a nice smile, without malice.

“You mean besides liking being kissed.” I said ironically.

To my surprise, she actually blushed.

That’s the moment when I began to trust her.

You know, some people can fake anger, others can fake tears, but it’s really hard to fake a blush.

Neesha was starting to actually trust me too, maybe because I implied that it wasn't a good idea. This could have been because she was stubbornly oppositional, or it could have been because she knew that the first step to trusting anyone is to let them know that you don't. (Trust them, that is.)

Innocents and idiot's have blind trust.

At this point, I had lost most of that innocence. As far as being an idiot goes...

I've been over that before.

Neesha grabbed the other chair and straddled it, facing me with her arms over the top. She began to play with her hair, which I found to be fetchingly distracting.

"I'm a fair judge of good character, among other things," Neesha went on, twirling her red locks, "and I have to tell you One Eye, that you do not belong here working for Mordred."

"Oh Yeah?" (It was all the snappy comeback I could muster.)

"Look, good sir, the information I may reveal to you could cost me my life," she said impatiently.

"How do I know that? How do I know that you're not one of Mordred's lackeys testing me?"

"You'll have to take my word on it," she said.

I suddenly felt a weird kind of calm envelope me.

It was just the kind of calm that a suicide gets when they've finally decided to go through with killing themselves, once and for all. They know that they'll be free soon, and all the burdens and heartaches will shortly be gone. 'Cause they'll be dead.

I knew that I was going to spill the beans. Maybe not the whole pot, but enough mess me up good.

I thought about what I had seen of this woman so far. She had a lousy temper. But she also had honor and loyalty. She could have killed the Haar...

And she was a helluva good kisser.

Perhaps most importantly, I was alone. I was tired of being alone.

I looked at her. Not just the woman, -the person. I liked what he saw.

“Aw, what the hell,” I got up, went over to her and extended my hand,

“Joseph Grodin, of Asgard, Ohio, and uh, recently, “Sir Joseph of Avalon.”

Neesha’s eyes startled wide as she took my hand.

“Neesha of Coventry, and formerly, Vanessa of Cambridge,” she replied in a muted voice. Her enunciation and posture radically changed.

“Holy shit.” I exclaimed. “You’re a spy for Avalon.”

“I was, starting two years ago. My Uncle, Rodwell and Arthur’s wizard...”

“Merl...?” I interrupted.

“Yes, Merlin brought me here to join with Mordred’s troops,”

Neesha began to get animated, “They needed someone to find out just what was going on, to reconnoiter, and pass information back. Mordred had just come to this land and...” she stopped abruptly. “You have some recent acquaintance with Merlin?”

“The old bastards’ fine. He dragged me out of hell. Mordred’s set up wards of magic of some sort that blocks his entrance to the Borderlands.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Neesha questioned excitedly.

“You could say that.” I didn’t let the hesitation appear in my voice.

I’d tell the truth to a certain extent. The whole truth sounded preposterous even to me. I kept it short and sweet.

“I was sent to fix the Door here.”

I couldn’t tell her yet that her uncle was going to be murdered in a couple months.

There was a whole lot I still had to figure out.

Neesha got up. “So, let us go. Uncle has to know of these matters so as to advise the king. These aren’t a rabble of blood thirsty monsters, these are people who surely need our help, and the help of Avalon.”

“I know, I know, but we got us a few problems,” I stalled.

“Like what?” Neesha’s eyes narrowed.

“Like, I’m as good a wizard as I am a swordsman.”

Neesha’s mouth dropped open.

The bigger they are the harder they fall also applies to one’s hopes.

“Say ‘tis not so, Sir Joseph.”

“I’m afraid I can’t my lady,” I said with genuine regret. I watched her spark of optimism flickering dimly.

I gently reached out a hand and touched her face. “But I will learn. That I promise you.”

“Then, good sir, I will surely hold you to your vow.”

“That makes two of us.”

I realized that I was still touching her face, and that we were both looking at each other a little too long, a little too intensely.

Embarrassed, I pulled back.

“About that kiss...” I said.

Neesha got flustered again, “The guards were coming and...well, it seemed like a most excellent subterfuge and...”

“They were. It was.”

She said haltingly, “I felt the attraction between us, -but I must... I should tell you now, -that I have someone... waiting for me...”

Damn. I hate rejection. Makes me defensive. So to save face I opened my big mouth.

“It’s okay. So do I. Sort of□ ”

Both of us stopped speaking for a moment. The heady wine we both sipped turning to vinegar...

“Is she’s from Avalon?”

I looked away, uncomfortable, not wanting to really get into this.

“You’ll have to learn to keep a straighter face in your doings with the dark mage than you do with me, Joseph.”

All right, might as well get this over with, I thought.

“It’s Beth, Arthur’s daughter. Do you know her?”

“We’ve met once or twice. A fine Lady, if you ask me.”

Neesha gave me a puzzled look and then smiled slyly.

“If I recall her highness is betrothed.”

“Well, er, ah, uh...”

Neesha took pity on me and changed the subject. Thank god.

“From now on we’ll work together, Joseph One Eye.”

“Look, I don’t want to jeopardize□”

“As you can surmise sir, I may know how to keep a few secrets.”

Yeah. Me too.

I was the one who was the monkey wrench in the wheels of Merl’s plans.

I was forced to be his enemy and I was the one who would open the Door for Mordred’s force to invade Avalon.

Her eyes glinted with mischief, “But ‘tis no secret that you are the worst swordsman in the company. Be advised that I’ll train you well and hard. We’re up at dawn.”

I groaned.

She got up, went to the door and glided like a shadow into the night.

I just sat there staring at her absence for a while. Well, I thought.

Well. Well. Well. Which reminded me, I was thirsty.

I got a cup of water, and went to bed. The comforter was thick and snug. At least I had found a true ally in this place. That thought warmed me more than the blanket. Before I closed my eyes to dream, I vaguely remembered something about having to get another bowl.

I dreamed of Beth in my arms, who then turned into Barb.

But in the dream, I wondered why she had gone and dyed her hair red.

Breaking Training

My body felt like I was hit by a Mack truck.

At first I just lay there in bed, trying to get a muscle, -any muscle to respond to the feeble signals coming from my brain.

Obviously my limbs were all on strike to protest the harsh working conditions of my new job as a human piñata.

With much grunting and a heavy dose of self-pity, I got up and stretched out what kinks I could. I rushed, splashing cold water on my face, running down to the mess to pour some gruel into me and showed up at the practice yard to demonstrate my incompetence.

I paired up with another human named Erol, who matched me in size and weight. Fortunately, the man took a liking to me, or so I thought, and I only suffered some minor bashing and bruising.

There is this surreal aspect to any arms training.

Part of it is adrenaline coursing through your body like a runaway train on crystal meth.

Part of it is learning to direct and control that rush.

Most of the pain you feel is felt after, unless some vital organ or muscle gets hit.

The grit of sand and dirt settles in your teeth, and the tiny grains of rock chip your molars when you clench your jaws.

The salt of your sweat stings as it caresses your cuts with minute barbs of pain.

Your lips get cracked and dry, and the air you try to suck into your lungs burns you all the more.

Doesn't sound much fun, does it?

It's the actual battle that looks fun, but that's maybe only if you are watching.

The participants are usually too busy managing the difficult task of staying alive.

I seemed to retain more of the patterns and footing, and blocked a majority of blows. Then again, this guy Erol didn't seem to be trying all that hard.

Nothing like pain to provide an incentive, I thought, ducking, and weaving, with my arms and legs flaming from fatigue.

I'll make pain my friend, I thought.

Pain, however, was in no mood to buddy up, and let me know it. Frequently.

So, *screw you pain, no screw you, Joe* became the internal dialogue of the day.

Captain Neesha was all business. Although she did find one or two things to praise me about, there was nothing in her expression or demeanor to even hint at our encounter last night. Actually, most of her commentary seemed to include terms such as “sloppy, lazy, pig-headed...” and the like.

Ah, I thought, back to the good old days of our simple and singular relationship. Still, she winked at me once after an especially good combination of parries that even took Erol by surprise.

The brains in my arm had begun to develop their own memory.

Of course, just as I began to feel good about this, Erol pulled a totally different move to mess me up.

So it went.

Before I knew it, the midday sun appeared.

It was time to replenish our bodies. Neesha went off with Vosh some place.

I tagged up with Igor, Erol, and another human female named Fistle.

They all boasted with self-mockery, and laughed for no reason at all.

A mood of hilarity wafted in like a sharp cool breeze on a desert day.

Erol began doing impressions of Mordred and Vosh.

“Now, then Fistle, Lesson Number One in a takin’ a survival shat is to find your leaves *afore* ...”

The commander himself appeared out of nowhere and quietly slid up behind my sparring partner.

I made frantic motions with my head, attempting to get Erol to turn around in his chair.

“Quite in the ranks, I’ll tolerate no disrespect, especially when imparting life savin’ latrine skills.”

Those on his side of the table laughed uproariously. My side of the table stiffened as if we all had poles rammed up our butts.

I hung my head and sighed.

“Wot? -Yer head in some pain from that mighty blows I gave yer?”

Vosh chose that moment to clear his throat. “Ahem.”

Chairs screeched on the wooden floor as everything braked to a full stop.

I thought I could hear the audible pop of Erol’s neck breaking as he turned in surprise to encounter the object of his ridicule.

The table prepared for the impending beheading, or at the very least a maiming.

Vosh was impassive.

He calmly uttered, “One Eye, -his Lordship wishes your presence immediately in the tower.

And not so calmly now,-“*As for you*, Corporal Flint.... good to see that you have actual knowledge in the sanitation department. It will serve you in good stead for this weeks assigned sewage duty.”

Erol, white as a ghost, stuttered, “Yes sir. Thank you sir.”

“Oh, don’t thank me lad, think of it as lesson number one.”

Vosh smiled thinly. “Now, Mordred’s lesson would have been to string you up by your blooming balls, and let the crows pick at you eyes.”

“Yes sir.”

The commander raised his voice to the spectators, “What are you all gawking at? If you have nothing better to do, perhaps you would care to assist Corporal Flint...?”

The troops scattered like a rack of billiard balls hit by Minnesota Fats.

I scatted towards the tower.

It was wizard time at the not so Ok Corral.

Novice Warlock

“No! No! *NO! NO! NO!*” Mordred screamed.

“I’m just doing what you told me to do.” I bitched back.

The wizard and I were sitting in the darkened tower room. The musty smell of reptile permeated the air like the rank odor of really foul sneakers.

I wished it were sneakers. I surveyed the room, noticing details that I had missed on other occasions. The roof of the tower had that green fungal look of tarnished copper. Large ornate bookcases obscured by the dim light hugged the walls behind the mage.

“Look, fool, we don’t have all the time in the world,” Mordred curtly replied, “You have to relax.”

“How can I relax if I *have* to? I mean, I don’t know crap about this wizard stuff, but I do know that if I’m going to chill out, I can’t be *working* at it.”

Mordred groaned in frustration, and slammed his fist on the table.

“Now-that’s really gonna help.”

Over the last few weeks I had started to belittle him at every opportunity. I know I was pushing my luck. I was scared of the future and maybe I unconsciously wanted him to take me out...

Mordred pulled out his knife, but the lizard interrupted.

“Thiss oness rightt.” The lizard hissed from its corner. “To relaxxx, musst learn calmness. Thiss one fearss, c-c-can’t focuss.”

I distastefully watched the creature’s tongue flick the air.

I was afraid all right. Aside from the future, I was afraid as any warm blooded creature would be in the company of an ancient enemy who would love to have me... for lunch, dinner, or breakfast.

Even if the enemy had a bad lisp and stuttered.

Teeth and talons continued, “Besst I leave, yesss?”

Without waiting, it slithered up to its full size and stalked out of the room.

As it passed by me, I felt a claw delicately trace the nape of my neck and shivered.

The reptile let out a few sibilant hiss's that were anything but soothing.

“Lordship, What did that ‘Sish, Sish, Sish,’ mean?” I asked, once it slithered out.

“Her Excellency is amused.”

“Oh... ” I thought that maybe I should talk to her Excellency about lizard skin boots.

-Yeah, but that somebody else's line, and he was holding a wand at the time.

“Now, let us attempt something a little different,” Mordred began.

He wandered off to the back of the room, grabbing a handful of papers, and beginning to sort them out.

“Ah, this one..., and this one..., no..., yes..., there!” He handed a thick wad of writings over to me.

“What's this? ‘Level Three Trainee Memo's?’ Where the hell did these come from?”

Mordred sat back and made a little steeple with his fingers.

“Oh, let's just say that a little bird gave those to me. Before she sang her last song. -She was a lovely little swan.”

“So you tortured and killed an agent of these ‘false gods,’ and got this stuff off her?” I felt disgust rise like bile.

“Impressive deduction. I prefer to think that I saved her soul from immortal damnation.”

Mordred replied.

I noted that Mordred enjoyed inflicting pain as much as most people enjoy a back rub.

“So I'm supposed to study this.”

“Yes. As demonic and diabolical as this force is, One Eye, they have most superb techniques for instruction. See that you learn them. Thoroughly. -Now, where were we?”

“We were where I was supposed to sit in this chair and empty my mind.”

“Yes. And as I said previously that it should be an easy task for you, as it appears to be quite vacant.”

“Yeah, right. Let’s get on with it.” I muttered in a lower tone, “Your Lordshit.”

“What was that?”

“What was what, sire?” I asked in my most innocent voice.

We got on as well as OJ and his very ex-wife.

There are two general techniques in meditation that lead to relaxation -in most universes. The first is a focused concentration. Usually the novice is given one word or phrase to repeat over and over again, until.... Well, until the cows come home, or he or she is in a state of altered consciousness.

Mantras and Transcendental meditation (the “Om” stuff) are examples of these practices. Awareness that is focused entirely on the breath or an external source is the second method. Like Zen, it’s more advanced and another matter altogether. I needed to get the first technique down in order to achieve the second.

My awareness had to learn to take a diffuse focus, encompassing all of the thoughts and stimuli that are possible to pay attention to.

In other words, you pay attention to your attention.

It’s a bit like learning how to juggle. The first ball is the breathing.

You maintain attention of that process, and then throw in the other balls of thinking, hearing, touch, taste, and smell.

Except you do them all at once, and all with conscious awareness.

There are other ways too, of course,-the meditations of movement have all sorts of combinations that unlock our rigid perceptions of reality. The problem is, the beginner must be able to feel safe and secure in the process of learning. That left me out.

After about four hours of practice, Mordred was at his wits end, patience and tolerance not being two of his virtues.

Actually, Mordred didn't have many virtues to speak of.

Whether cleanliness or good fashion sense are true virtues is highly debatable.

Now, my problem was two fold.

First of all, whenever I began to practice the word Mordred conjured up for me (technically, -a "mantra"), something strange happened. An old dog food commercial from television began to pop up into my mind like a kama-kazi moth at a light bulb.

"EasyBeefyPrime. EasyBeefyPrime. EasyBeefyPrime. EasyBeefyPrime"

I got so busy trying to get back to the right mantra that all I achieved was frustration.

Being flustered does not assist in relaxation.

The second problem was that I was never very good at juggling.

Each time I had a ball in the air, or a plate spinning on the stick I would drop it when trying to get to the next one.

Imaginary crashes are as distracting as real ones. Add this on to hating the guts of your instructor, wanting to hurt him and wanting to screw with him in any way you can. Failing might be one way to accomplish this.

It certainly used to be my specialty.

What makes it even more irksome is when you know you once had this tendency and keep doing it anyway. Even when you want to succeed.

I knew, and it seemed I just couldn't help myself.

I was too tense to let go of any one bit of control in vicinity of either Mordred or that stinking lizard.

"Look, I'm too messed up to do this now."

"Any child could do this."

"Yeah, but any child would trust you. That would be their first and last mistake."

"You are too kind in your lavish praise," Mordred jeered. "Perhaps the dungeon will improve both your gratitude and your ability to concentrate."

Uh oh. “Wait a second.”

“I’ve been waiting for four hours. That’s over 14,400 seconds.”

“So a couple more couldn’t hurt now, could they?”

The arrogant mage sighed. “I never gave my teacher this many difficulties.”

Other than trying to kill him, I thought.

One day I hoped to continue this fine tradition.

“Oh, all right. Sit here and examine the material I gave you. If you’ve made no progress in the hour before I return, you and Quincy can become further reacquainted.”

“Thank-you, your Lord... ship.”

I studied as if my life depended upon it. Which it did.

And I learned. After about forty-five minutes of reading, I eventually got the big picture, but I had to get the little ones first.

Your mind has to be in a pretty peculiar state to enter the Borderlands. Yeah, you can leave them by imagining a destination. Getting in is another story.

One way in is to be literally frightened to death. But that stops working after a while. Mainly because once you realize that you’re not gonna die, you don’t reach that one moment of calm resignation and acceptance of

there’s nothing you can do.

Yet, according to the papers I read and Mordred there was another way.

You had to be near a Door. Then, well, most of it was trusting in myself.

Both my strengths and vulnerabilities.

I knew for damn sure that I wasn’t self-destructive anymore. -Well, maybe I was slated to rip out my own eye and everything, but that didn’t really count.

I realized that my EasyBeefyPrime thing wasn’t a problem, -it was a solution.

I sat back in his chair and repeated it over and over. Then a flash of memory struck me. Prime Dog Food was what I fed Baron, my dog at eight years of age. The dog was a shepherd/collie mix, fiercely loyal and loving. I felt safe with that dog, and powerful.

Hell, he'd use to sleep with me; just the thought of being with that dog... was calming.

My shoulders went down, my stomach relaxed. I began to get here and now. I felt my being, my breath, the sounds, the touch.

I let go, and the rest came quite naturally.

No, it wasn't the Buddha, and it wasn't Christ, and it wasn't some wise old sage.

It was a dog. (And you know what that spells backwards, don't you?)

Well, there is a reason for everything, even if we have to make it up.

When his "Lordshit" made it back into the room after forty minutes, I didn't even hear him come in.

For once, I was glad Mordred was pleased with me.

There is a first time for everything.

Pleasing someone who stands for everything you despise doesn't help your self esteem much. If Adolph Hitler and the Boston Strangler really dig you, you're really going to have to question yourself.

I hoped it would be the last time and that I'd be the recipient of the Mordred's Thinks I'm A Great Guy Award.

Unfortunately, I was wrong.

Tricks of the Trade

If “to be or not to be” is the question, than “to be and not to be” is *one* of the answers. Shakespeare only gave Hamlet two choices.

To be or ... Not.

Sure, -Hamlet could have chosen differently, but he was locked into the conviction that earned him a death sentence.

I learned that if you’re going to risk your life, it’s only a good deal if what you value survives. I figure that other lives are important. So is my own hide. I intended to save both. I was traveling two different paths in my training. One had to do with killing, surviving and keeping my skin intact. The other had to do with letting go of everything, including the need to even exist.

No wonder that the warrior-priest is never much in vogue.

It’s too damn confusing for most of us.

The first week after my successful junket into the altering consciousness business, Mordred was all toothy smiles and encouragement. Once I was able to demonstrate that I could produce the effects at will, (even with the malodorous lizard present), I was allowed to practice in my room. From time to time, the dark mage would check on me and leave more reading material. Some I couldn’t comprehend at all, other stuff resonated with me as if I had always known.

I just didn’t have the words for it.

Weapons practice began to improve as well. Neesha didn’t have to ride me as I rode myself.

Several times Vosh came out just to stand and watch. I didn’t know what he was watching, since nine out of ten troopers could easily wipe my butt all over the courtyard.

The third week it was only three out of ten.

The fifth week most would have given me a fifty-fifty chance against any trained warrior. -It was really weird.

Something was awakening in me. I felt more alive than I ever had.

I began to fit in, and was able to recognize most of the individuals in my troop, alien or not.

I started to hang out with Erol, Vance, Igor, and Finchly.

Even the Harr Renu appeared to take a liking to me.

Neesha's plan had been more than adequate. The hairy beast became one of her most loyal soldiers, and would fight to death for her. All under the pretext that he was the one who had the only right to take her life.

I thought that he'd just come to respect her ability and leadership.

At least, I preferred to see it that way.

For all I knew, he really was planning to off her.

I had a quirky fondness for the wolf creature, except his smell was next on my bad things to avoid list right under lizard stink.

Renu picked up on this, and informed me that I should be glad humans had the small noses they did, 'cause otherwise they would all die from self generated toxic fumes.

He barked this hyena laugh at his own joke, which was about as irritating as his scent. So tongue-in-cheek, I told him we were all killing ourselves with pollution on my home world.

The Harr took me seriously, patted me on the back sympathetically and never brought it up again.

(Out of respect, of course... -ritual suicide for shame was big with the Harrs before their own world died.)

Neesha would also join me when her duties permitted, and we would steal time together when they could talk about our lives and friends.

I still couldn't bring myself to tell her the truth.

It was a chilly dawn morning near the end of the second month of my arrival to Coventry. A small regiment of troopers stamped their feet to keep them from numbing, and cloudy puffs of frigid air formed at every exhalation of breath.

Those with facial hair had mustache and beardcicles of frozen ice.

Renu looked like the Abominable Snowman, which was a slight improvement over merely looking abominable.

The sorcerer finally decided I was prepared enough.

“Ready for your Walk, One Eye?” Mordred was in a cheery mood, -probably because everyone else was so miserable.

“Yes, Your Lordship,” I all but simpered.

I finally learned that the nearest and only Door out of Coventry was a day’s ride up the mountains.

Mordred, the lizard and a small mixed band of warriors including Neesha and Vance were to accompany me up the rocky terrain.

Mordred informed me a day earlier that the “proof was in the pudding,” and that it was about time to test my abilities.

And I was freaked out for good reasons.

First was the pressure.

I knew I had to perform as a wizard for the very first time.

And “having to” made it damn hard, -but do-able, or so I told myself.

In the past it had been other events and actions that had triggered my entry to the Borderlands.

This time it would be by choice.

A second difficulty was the Csarks, which Vance clued me about.

At our departure Vance pulled me aside and immediately sneezed on me, a big wet one.

“Achoo.”

“Jeeze, Vance, bless you,” I said wiping off the front of my jacket. “Lousy weather.”

“Sorry, and thanks, mate.” Now ‘bout them beasties,” he sniffled. “Csarks, ah yes. Got to fill you in. Personal hobby of mine, asides.” His voice began to drone on in a deadpan fashion, as if announcing a sale at K-Mart.

“Ugly brutes, live in the desert, tunnel in the sand and....”

From his description, I could visualize armor-plated centipedes with the heads of moray eels that were about six feet in length and a hundred to a hundred and fifty pounds. What made them difficult to fight was that they could coil and jump about ten feet in the air, as well as burrow deep into the sands, disappearing in the blink of an eye.

Their sense of smell and sight was dismal, but they were specially sensitive to sound and vibration.

Unlike snakes who devour their prey whole, their jaws didn’t unhinge and their exoskeleton prevented them from expanding. So they just ripped junks out of you as they flew by with a two-foot mouth full of razor cutting teeth.

I turned a bit pale after the captain finished up on the aggressive merits of the monstrosities.

“Okay, so what’s their most vulnerable point?”

“Well, you can hack ‘em with a strong enough swing, and good enough steel...”

“Good.” At least they were killable.

“But they travel in packs of ten or so...”

I turned a whiter shade of pale.

“But, most are gone, just as most creatures in this world are disappearing.”

The Captain sneezed again. I refrained from another bless you.

Instead I said, “Cause there’s no food, right?”

“No food, no young, no nothing.” Vance hawked up mucus and spat onto the ground. “But we’ve got to be cautious all the same. You and Mordred and Her Excellency ride in the middle, surrounded by five men. I’ll take point with Renu, and Neesha will take rear guard with the rest.

”

“No problem.” I began to take out my bow.

“Put it away. Arrows don’t do ‘nuff damage. Just make sure your swords ready for play.”

Vance turned and mounted.

It was the first time I had ridden since my last trip to Cambridge.

I approached my horse slowly and gently breathed in her nostrils. She quieted immediately. I

took a firm grip on the reins and hooked a foot in the stirrup and pulled myself over. It felt

natural

I was also cold as hell, but this time I actually felt comfortable.

The gates opened and we cantered off.

* * *

After three hours of steady riding, I never wanted to see sand again, unless it was a little strip on the beach, and I had a cold beer.

The countryside didn’t have much country to it, mostly jumbled rock islands in an ocean of sand.

It started to heat up, and layers of clothing were removed at the first rest stop for the horses.

My muscles were a little stiff, but the last months or so of training had toughened me.

Renu was on point guard because of his acute senses.

The only enjoyable aspect of the ride for me was in the apparent discomfort of the lizard on her horse. Her tail was just plain awkward, so she had to ride in this weird posting maneuver.

I felt sorry for the horse, who kept showing the whites of her eyes rolling in abject fear. I understood the revulsion factor.

The second leg of the trip was much like the first.

Mundane.

-Until the mountains came closer to break up the tedious view.

I spent a lot of time establishing landmarks for myself, just in case.

Just in case I needed to find my way back again by my lonesome.

I noticed that the mountain of the Door was shaped like a broken off bottle.

As we came riding into the base of the range, Mordred called for another stop. “Captains Vance and Neesha, direct your troopers to break camp. Her Excellency, myself and One Eye will go on by ourselves.”

“But your Lordship...” Neesha protested.

“Don’t be concerned, we’ll only be gone for a few hours. Have our supper prepared when we get back.”

Neesha and Vance both affirmed the order and began to organize the troopers.

I was glad Neesha didn’t make too much of a fuss.

Mordred and the reptile began to urge their mounts up a narrow trail and I followed.

The rest was all rather anticlimactic.

After about another twenty minutes of easy riding up the mountain we came upon a smallish stone temple carved directly into the rock face.

It was a small pagoda of blue limestone with fluted columns and a pointed dome.

“Time to show us your skills, One Eye,” Mordred ordered as he dismounted.

The lizard made no comment except to flick her tongue out to test the evening air. I got off my horse and the three of us entered the temple.

Mordred collected a torch from the entrance. He fired it up with a zippo. The torchlight illuminated an empty cavern that was part of a natural cave formation. A few stalactites hung down and dripped water in steady drops to the damp floor.

“Another lovely place you’ve brought me to,” I remarked.

“All Doors are lovely places, my apprentice, because they can bring you power, and power is a lovely thing,” Mordred countered.

“Now, a few things before you begin. Don’t even try of thinking about escape.”

The sorcerer pulled out his wand. “I’ll be right behind you... with this. Don’t think that I won’t roast you like a suckling pig. Unbuckle that sword, and relinquish the bow and dagger as well.”

I meekly complied, never taking my eyes off my adversaries the entire time.

I placed my weapons on the driest patch of ground I could find.

“Very good. -Very, very good. You may now proceed.”

Here goes nothing, I thought.

I sat down on the sodden floor and closed my eyes. I opened my senses and allowed my thoughts to flow through my mind like birds flying through the windows of a room. My awareness began to touch everything.

And once again, It Happened.

The smell of burning chrome and ozone, flashing multi-colored lights, a rumbling from deep in the bowels of the earth....

I felt this triumph then.

This taste of power and ability, of confidence, of being special...superior....

Part of me was aware that this was just like Mordred, this is how the mage felt most of the time.

Who was I to be “better” than anybody?

This elitist better-than crap.

I let these thoughts and feelings be, just reminding myself that -they too were illusions. I was Joe, and just a man who could open Doors -no more, no less.

I allowed my awareness to go beyond thoughts and feelings, beyond petty concerns.

Lightning crackled and a great sheet of white luminescence appeared over a cave wall.

I opened my eyes and got up. Finally.

I had done it.

The lizard was already in the process of entering the brilliant vortex.

I moved to follow her, but Mordred restrained him, “No, wait here. You’re not going anywhere just yet.”

“But I thought we....”

The Door began to fade away.

“I think...”

“You are not here to *THINK!*” the sorcerer thundered. “I’ve planned and plotted and schemed for years. Do you think I’d chance this all on your little whims?”

I felt my hands clenching into fists and my breath getting ragged.

Like a bull about to charge.

Mordred was not stupid, “There now,” he placated, patting me on the shoulder, “No need to rush. There’s plenty of time for excursions. We just can’t chance it now.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Did you really expect me to trust you, One Eye? A stranger? A man who I barely know?” The dark mage paused and seemed to ponder. “Trust must be earned. Oh, I daresay I trust that you are greedy as all men are. But that is not enough. I want loyalty, One Eye, -and not just with a vow of words.”

The wizard dejectedly looked off to some other place of memory that was familiar and lost.

“I’ve broken more of those kinds of vows than you can count.”

Which is exactly why you have no devoted followers, shithead, I thought.

But what I said was, “If that’s the case, then how do I know that you won’t stab me in the back when it’s most convenient?”

“You don’t, One Eye. You don’t.” He gazed intensely into my face, and with a somber voice said, “I will promise you this. As long as you are useful to me, you will live and have whatever you desire. -So, be useful. Gather your weapons. Her Excellency won’t be coming back today.”

“When will she be back?”

Mordred refused to answer and we road down the mountain bound in a web of constricted silence.

The food was as warm and filling. The camp was cold and desolate.

The troopers were uneasy, and maintained the night watch in pairs.

Neesha and I did the second shift at midnight, huddling together for warmth.

“Stop hogging the blanket,” I complained.

“If ‘twas one of us with the tendencies of a pig, ‘twould surely be you, Sir Porkbreath,” Neesha tartly replied.

“There’s nothing the matter with my breath.”

“Aye, if I was a pig -I’d notice naught. Just as your lacking in notice in the proper manner of a watchman,” she jabbed.

“Hey, I’m awake.”

“Awake and alert be two different modes of attention. -‘Tis time to do a quick run on the perimeter regardless. ”

She got up, and threw the blanket over my head. “Here, that should both warm you and contain the hot air you continue to dispel.”

I angrily tore off the covering, “What’s with you tonight?”

Neesha looked as if she were going to fire off another caustic round, then let out a sigh instead.

“Sorry, my friend. It is just that we are so very close and... ”

Close? Lot’s of ways for me to take that.

“Yeah, I know, ...it’s frustrating.” I stretched and yawned, then lifted myself up off the ground.

On an impulse, I went over to her and put an arm around her shoulders.

She pushed me away at first, but I didn’t budge. Then she briefly hung on to me for dear life, and then pulled away.

Perhaps all too quickly, but we both were trying to be decent, as opposed to indulgent. She smiled at me then.

A forlorn and patient smile that I thought spoke of her frustrated attraction to me. (-Look, I had a swelled head at the time, comprende?)

My smile said much the same.

“I meant close □ to home,” she added, blushing.

“I know,” I lied.

She was the closest thing in the world to a home I had right now.

And damn it if I was going to feel guilty about wanting her to be closer, whatever that meant.
Seemed what I wanted had so very little to do with anything these days.
We walked shoulder to shoulder until it was time to rest.

* * *

We left a few hours before a dawn as cold and miserable as any.
Mordred made us ride on empty bellies, promising a hot meal at the first trail break.
We all grumbled. Basically, -a soldiers life sucks.
Of course the Csarks arrived for breakfast.

* * *

If there was anything I hated more than monotony, it was redundant monotony. The desert loomed ahead of us like a plate of bland fat-free food. -Unappetizing, -and all that's on the menu. (Unless you are the menu.)

We stopped and dismounted at the same small outcrop of rocks for some water and food. Fried meat and hard rolls, to be exact.

I was busy daydreaming about trail mix and the import/export business between worlds. Vance began a sneezing and hacking fit about ten yards from me on the sand.

Everything went to hell.

Renu, who had been sniffing the air with his big muzzle roared at the top of his lungs,
“CSAARKSS!”

The ground began to vibrate and tremble.

I saw small puffs of sand shoot up from the ground about three feet in front of my flu-ridden friend.

I jumped up and drew my sword, just in time to see two hundred pounds of wide open jaws burst from the sand, flying out as if shot from a cannon.

Vance was the designated target. Otherwise known as prey.

He didn't have time for an Amen.

The rest seemed to happen in slow motion.

The Csarks armor was the sandy tan of the desert and its white belly was the color of maggots. Vance had pulled his sword at lightning speed, and the monster reached him in mid air just as his arm was fully extended to strike. There was a very loud and very swift crunching noise, and my attention was momentarily captivated by the sight of Vance's sword spinning end over end in the sky.

The next thing I knew, bright arterial blood spurted from the ragged tatters of flesh that remained on the Captain's shoulder.

The thing had torn his arm off in one bite, and began to burrow in the sand with its prize.

Vance woozily turned, his face in an appalled expression of shock, when another of the foul beasts burst from the sands and struck his left flank, tearing off a huge chunk of meat from his side.

The creature had not cut entirely through the soldier's mail and Vance was dragged over the sands by the links caught up in the beast's fangs.

They were headed right for me.

What I felt, -pure and simple, was rage.

Just as the Csark was about two feet away, it rose its ugly head and looked directly at me.

The eyes were oval and cat-like, with red-glintered malice.

I could see it work its jaws to swallow the morsel that was once a piece of my friend.

I screamed, raised my sword overhead and swung with both hands and all of my strength.

I split its head.

And raised it and struck again.

And again.

And again.

A fetid stench erupted from the creature's wounds and I gagged.

Vance was moaning nearby, but I didn't have time to check up on him.

The things were everywhere.

Two were on the horses, who were screaming and bucking in white-eyed terror, while another Csark was busy chomping on a fallen equine that lay motionless.

Renu and Neesha were occupied with two more monstrosities, and standing back to back to cover each other.

Mordred was at the base of the rocks, yelling something incomprehensible.

The rest of the men were avoiding being eaten a piece at a time.

There was blinding sand thrown into the air by the creature's abrupt departures and arrivals from the earth.

Screams of pain, gnashing of teeth and cries for help battered my ears.

I grabbed a trooper named Nester and ducked as the man swung in hysteria. I roughly pulled him along to where the Harr and Neesha were fighting for their lives.

As I approached, Neesha flashed a grim smile.

Just as she did another Csark burst from the ground on her left.

I spun and slashed at its eyes before it could jump.

They burst like grapes, and the thing began to thrash blindly, still embedded in the sand.

Another Csark popped up and tore out its throat, only to disappear in seconds.

"Move over there, and cover her left side," I ordered Nester.

The four of us formed a circle, back to back, with weapons drawn and ready.

"Let's collect the rest of the men and horses." Neesha yelled.

"Which way first?" I yelled back.

Neesha shouted, "We'll go around the rock's perimeter, one time. Then haul ourselves and the horses up on them, -much better for defense,"

"All right, -GO."

We moved like a crab on a merry-go-round, scuttling and twisting to fight off the flying beasts. We dispatched two more in the process, and drew in another four soldiers with minor wounds. Three others were dead, and the rest were missing. Three horses were in the process of being partially eaten. We grabbed the remaining ones and scampered up the rocks. Mordred was at the edge of their island of safety, nagging us to hurry.

“Move your damn blasted hides.”

As he was busy yelling, I noticed a puff of sand erupting from the dark mage’s feet.

“Watch out!” I cried in warning. I told you I was an idiot.

Should’ve let him be breakfast.

Mordred backed up a pace and a grisly head emerged within a footstep, biting into his flapping cloak and jerking him helplessly off balance.

Without thinking, I screamed another cry of revulsion and sliced off the side of the Csark’s head to expose brains and gleaming bone. It convulsed, tearing the cloth, and the sorcerer rolled safely away.

We survivors stood gasping and panting in our shelter on stone, muscles tied in knots and hyper alert.

As quickly as the chaos started, quiet settled in like the eye of a hurricane.

A shroud of morbid silence wafted over us all as the dust subsided.

Except for the sound of moaning.

Vance was still alive.

I began running to his aid when Mordred’s hand grabbed the back of my jacket. I twisted and snarled, “Let go or you’re dead.”

Mordred smiled like a wolf, “You want to be the last course?”

Neesha took that moment to intervene, “Our Lordships right, One Eye, just wait a minute.”

Furious, I shrugged out of Mordred's grip. I breathed quietly, sustaining my exhalations until I began to calm. The quiet continued like the hush at a funeral parlor, with Vance's moaning as counterpoint.

Finally, I said, "Come on, damn it! If the things were still here, they'd have finished him by now."

Neesha and Renu nodded their assent. Mordred grudgingly agreed.

I was surprised when Mordred took point with me.

Renu and Neesha covered our backs.

Well, I thought, -cowardliness may not be one of the wizards' vices, -however many others he had.

Vance was a mess.

He wasn't dead yet, but it was just a matter of time.

"Neesha," the doomed man gasped, "Just ...get ...meto ...my horse.

Let ...me... Just ...let ...me, ... -So... cold..." His teeth began to chatter.

Neesha turned away to blink back tears. "Surely Vance, -it won't take long."

Actually, it would take forever, as Vance's mount didn't make it, either.

Mordred took off his cloak and draped it over the soldier.

He ruffled his hair as if Vance was a small boy and said, "We'll have to make a litter for you, lad. There's no need to worry," he confided, "-As you know, I'm a powerful sorcerer, and I can fix you up in no time."

Vance grinned with what little strength he had left, "Really Sire?"

Mordred nodded with assurance, "Absolutely. Just close your eyes for a moment. Think of being safe at home."

Vance did so. A dreamy smile broadened his features.

Mordred whipped out his dagger and plunged it into Vance's heart.

The soldier jerked once, and then lay still.

His eyes had fluttered open at the final stroke of this life's time, and Mordred gently closed them.

"Safe passage," was all he said.

Then he pulled his blade loose and wiped the blood on the cloak.

Renu growled, "A timely death gives honor."

I just stared, saying nothing.

My heart was pounding from Mordred's fatal show of mercy.

We all knew Vance was as good as dead; it was just a matter of when.

But time right now was a valuable commodity.

No telling when the Csarks would return.

I doubted if I could have done it, and was glad I didn't have to.

Hopefully, I would never be given the chance.

I prayed to God I wouldn't.

Mordred grumbled something about ruining fine garments, turned his back to us and began to shout orders for our departure.

On the ride back, the only talk was from the sound of the wind as it howled mercilessly through the emptiness.

Guilty Innocence

They pulled into camp that night bone weary and beaten.

Six persons were dead.

I blamed myself.

If it weren't for me, then they wouldn't have gone for the test at the Door... If it weren't for me, Vance would be alive and they would be at the mess, and laughing.

If it wasn't for me...

I unsaddled my horse, and started her over to the stables.

I'd been slashed up a bit, and hadn't even felt it until halfway back to the compound.

On the way, Mordred stopped me and curtly said, "See me in the council study, one hour."

I nodded listlessly.

The rest of the company came milling out to greet us, but we were so subdued and morose that they veered away.

None of us troopers had much to say to each other.

Neesha and I gently clasped arms, and I dipped my head in farewell to Renu.

We all felt guilty. We had survived, and other comrades had not.

There was relief in this, and also remorse that we could feel relieved about such tragedy.

'Better him than me' may work very well with strangers.

It doesn't work so well with friends.

I washed up and cleaned my wounds as best I could.

Who the hell knew what kind of bacteria and germs Csarks had? Not me.

I dragged my gear to the blacksmiths to repair the broken links of shirt and sharpen my dull and pitted sword.

Finchly, clapped me on the back and said, 'Erd yer was mighty fierce out 'er ta day, One Eye.'

"Yeah right," I muttered. "Fix this stuff, would you Finch?" I threw my sword and mail down, - harder than I expected

They bounced across the floor.

“Now Now!”, Finchly admonished, “Wot ave we ere? Yew showed yer bravry lad, -yew did yerself proud!”

“It’s my fault Finch, -those men are dead because of me!” I practically shouted, feeling my throat constrict. An iron band took hold of my chest.

Finchly peered intently.

“Aye,’ - Now I see yer problim, feelin as sorry fer yer sorry self as yew do...”

“What! What, you fat slob, I’ll give you a problem, -you son of a bitch...”

Enraged, I moved to grab the huge man but Finchly simply turned and swept his massive arms around me in a bear hug and lifted me off the floor.

I kicked and screamed bloody murder, all to no avail.

I raged, I spat, I tried to claw and pound with all my might.

But it was if the armorer were cradling an infant in his arms.

The big baby me.

“Finch...” I gasped.

“Wot?”

“I... Can’t ...Breath..”

“That’s tha’ point son.”

“Let... Me... Go...”

“Do yew promise to behave?”

Silence, except for ragged breaths.

“Promise?” An ordered question.

“Yesss.”

The burly giant waited for a moment or so more. (A very long one for me.)

“Well aw’right then.” Finchly abruptly dropped me.

From about four feet in the air.

I fell right on my ass. I sat there for a moment, then looked up and rasped, “Sorry Finch.”

Finch was somber, “Yew din’t let me finish.”

“Okay, okay.” I got up slowly, wincing. “So what’s my problem?”

“Yer arrogance, boy.”

Finchly got this harsh look on his face, as if he meant every word that he was saying.

Which he did.

“Arrogance!” I started to bluster again.

“Comin in ‘ere whining, It’s all me own fault, all me own doin’s.”

He thrust a pointed finger in my face, “Zactly who up an died an made yew God?”

“Well, uh...”

Finchly interrupted by grabbing my shirt in one meaty fist, “Do na interrupt yer elders boy, -it’s verra impolite.”

“Yes sir.”

He paused and then went sternly, “An, yew, a’ corse made those beasties attack, did ja? An yew, a’ corse, signed on them solders as recruits? An gave ole Vance the uncommon cold tha ‘elped kilt him?”

“No, ah...”

“An yew, a corse were tha sole an only reason for the trip? Were’nt no lizard wit yew then tha ’ad a needs fer travel?”

“Uh.”

Finchly sighed. “Aye now laddie, let me be saying some hard truths. Been at this soldierin work fer more years than yew. Seen a lotta good men die.”

He shrugged his massive shoulders. “Always, the same damn story.”

He pounded his chest. “It was my fault seys they who came back alive. Perhaps fer some, twas true.”

He punched me in the arm.

“HEY!”

“But yew, laddie, I ‘eard diffrent. An I be thinking ‘bout wot men do when they truly be helpless in the field ‘o battle with beast or man. Tis a cheap magic trick they do when the dust settles. Blame themselves, they do.”

“Makes tha illusion of -Aye, they coulda stopped it, they coulda saved ‘em. Donna hav’ to accept their bein’ elpless, or fate, or just plain bad luck.

Naw, -so yer fool yerselves into thinking yer was the cause, so yew cin fix it, un tha next time...aye, you’ll ‘ave it all under yer control -wontcha?

Shit appens, boy. Times thar’s nothin can be done. So, makes some fertilyzer, or eat it.”

“Uh□”

“But do us both a favor an stop yer damn whining an arrogant self pity cause I got me some werk ta do.” Finchly gruffly pushed me out of the armory.

“Shit.” I muttered.

I turned back to the smith who was busy trying to look busy. “Hey Finch?”

“Wot is it now?”

“Thanks.”

“Yer cin thank me best by not mucking up yer goddamn ‘quipment.”

“Yessir.”

I walked out with lighter steps. My heart was still heavy.

But whatever other burdens I dragged into the armory seemed to have been left behind.

As I crossed the courtyard, a huge familiar figure walked out of the shadows to block my path.

It was Quincy, my wanna-be inquisitor.

“Ah, -wot ave we ‘ere wit ‘its tail tween it’s legs?”

I looked away from him, smiled and said in a deadly soft voice, “ If I were you, I’d leave me alone right now, Quince.”

“If yew were me, yer litl strutting cock, yew’d...”

He didn't have time to finish the sentence, because I kicked him in the balls as hard as I could. As Quincy pitched forward, I hammered the man's head twice with the pommel of my dagger. Then I kicked him once more in the face before he hit the ground. By the time he did he was out cold.

Then I offered a small prayer of gratitude to the god of just desserts, and went off to see Mordred.

Some Truths Revealed

“Come in, One Eye” Mordred answered to my knock.

I swung the door open and saw the wizard seated at the table with his legs up and a goblet of wine in his hand.

“Sit down, and have a refreshing beverage,” he offered.

-Now, I was still reeling a bit.

From the battle, from Finch’s talk, from the encounter with Quincy and from just being more tired and worn than I had ever been in my life.

I realized, if I knew anything, that I had no real idea what this man was really all about.

I was certain I could use a drink.

So I sat down and poured a tall one.

Mordred continued with a slight hesitancy, “Let me be... blunt.”

“Thank you your Lordship, it’ll be such a refreshing change.”

“Very amusing. -Shut up before I have someone sew your mouth closed.”

Mordred entwined his fingers together and looked pensive.

“I could have died this morn. Why did you save my life? You could have let me die, and gone back to the Borderlands on your own. So enlighten me, Joseph One Eye, as I am sorely confused.”

I stared at my nemesis, and sipped some more wine before answering.

How to answer this question? I decided on the truth.

“Hell if I know, -it was just gut reaction. -But if I really stop to think about it,”

I gulped the rest of my drink, “I’d have to say I expected a large bonus. ”

Mordred laughed.

Well, It was better than saying that I saved you because in the near future you were still alive when we attacked Merl and my other self, so I really had no other choice.

“I’m pleased to be alive, and you have my gratitude, for what it’s worth,” Mordred said with sincerity.

As much as he could be sincere.

I gave him some credit. Maybe he really believed it, -for this second.

“Your welcome, your Lordship. And if that’s all, I’m in dire need of sleep...”

I motioned to get up.

“No, that is not all.” Mordred leaned forward with two arms extended on the table. “I hate being indebted to anyone, for anything. I find myself beholden to you, which, believe me, -is something I’m not at all happy about.”

The wizard got up from the table and began to pace.

“ My early training in Avalon still effects me, I’m afraid. As much as I try to be pragmatic, ... I still feel... ah, obligated... so to speak. And these feelings are a distraction from my purpose, so I must fulfill them.”

Mordred paused. “I know what you think of me. You think that I’m some foppish and egotistical fool.”

I didn’t bother to protest.

“I play that for the lizards. I have to.”

“What?”

“You heard me clearly. Her Excellency disgusts me as much as you, One Eye. I don’t trust her or her race, the Saron. I never have.”

“Yet, she and her kind directed me to find the survivors on other worlds. They needed me, and I needed an army.”

“To take Avalon, no doubt?”

“Indeed. To reclaim my throne.” Mordred began to do his fanatic rant thing again.

“I should have been King by direct line of succession. Arthur was standing in as Regent for years until I was of lawful age. But he and that damn Merlin deceived me.”

Ah the plot thickens I thought□

So did my wits as I took a very long draught of alcohol.

“How so, your Lordship?”

“When my time came they said ‘twas the people that wanted no other but Arthur, -as if the people have anything to do with it.”

Uh Oh. He was starting to get that look again

“*They* said commoners and nobles alike would revolt and there would be useless bloodshed were I to take the throne.”

Mordred vehemently spat these words out, “*They* are the ones who broke the tradition of generations, who flaunted the rules of succession, who betrayed me. *They* betrayed the crown itself! Now do you see, One Eye?”

I nodded, because I did. –Merl and Arthur, -twenty yards penalty for pass interference.

I also saw that Mordred was Captain Ahab, and Avalon was one great white whale. He was obsessed, and blind in his obsession and willing to do whatever wrongs to make it right.

Not that he didn’t have a grievance.

But if there was one thing that I have learned, it was becoming unjust to achieve justice usually ended up with misery and injustice for all concerned.

I also learned to avoid arguing with obsessive compulsives at the mental hospital. Great, just great, I thought.

Mordred isn’t really evil; he’s just plain nuts.

The lizards had helped him “collect” his army. What a fucking coincidence that the all the worlds that were dying had one thing in common, -the bloody reptiles were there.

Mordred began to calm. “Excuse me. This is a topic that inflames my sense of honor. -As I was saying, I owe you a debt. I also regret to inform you that we must cancel any future trips to our local Door for your practice. I don’t want to lose any more men unless absolutely necessary.”

I felt relieved. “Neither do I.”

“Good. I have only one excursion planned prior to the actual invasion. You will certainly be with me. And, I believe ... ”

The mage went back to his papers and books and grabbed a document. “I believe you were interested in wands...”

He graciously handed the writings to me.

“Thank you sire,” I said, desperately wanting to get the hell out.

“And one more thing, -there are spies here. From the lizards most certainly, and probably from Avalon. This conversation stays here.”

“Of course,” I lied. “But I have one question.”

“Yes, One Eye.?”

“Did it ever occur to you that the common factor to all these dying worlds are your slimy snake partners? ”

Mordred clasped his hands together and bowed his head for a moment.

“I’ve given it some thought. But I have no doubt that I can deal with them when the time is right.”

“And what if you can’t? What if Avalon is their next target, and you’re just being used?”

“Everyone in the world gets used, you fool!”

Mordred’s face turned red. “I’ll make my move when the time is right! Until then, your job is to obey me.”

I nodded, then got up and walked to the door.

Mordred called out as I made my departure, “Remember your boon, -it is an itch I need to scratch.”

I left feeling dog-tired and small. Flea like.

Bottom line, it didn’t really matter if Mordred was crazy instead of just plain bad. Either way, I had to stop him.

Maybe even kill him.

And now the guy was trying to trust me.

Which, all in all, made me feel as if I was no better than Mordred in the first place.

I would make my own moves, -when the time was right.

If anything could ever be right in this dismal place.

* * *

So, you could see me over the next few weeks, training, learning, growing into something...

Something different.

Funny things happen when you begin to practice meditation, provided you don't get too attached to the process.

The funny thing is called acceptance.

Yeah, you still get uncomfortable, but you accept it for what it is.

You still feel everything.

A special knowing creeps in on you, like the proverbial snake in Eden.

Feelings and thoughts become something you have instead of something you are. You may have pain, and fear and sadness.

But you are none of these. You learn to use them all.

At the very least you eliminate feeling screwed up about being screwed up.

And serious things happen when you begin to practice any military art, provided you don't detach from the process.

Movements, patterns, strategies, -all become automatic.

There is no conscious choice. Your body and vision go into a dance.

If you learn to be really good, you wait for your partner to lead the waltz.

When you finally know their steps, you can improvise with the Kali shuffle and dance with death. Your weapons and body, -they all use you.

You could see it in my practice in the courtyard.

The sword looked as if it were becoming an extension of my arm.

The truth was, I felt that the sword was directing me.

These days, most tools and weapons did.

It was almost as if each object had its own intent, it's own way to be handled, swung, and manipulated. Without belaboring the point, almost like the hammer that teaches you how to hit the nail square on the head.

* * *

Erol was backing up steadily, with a look of grim determination in his eyes. My saber was tracing a figure eight in the air in front of him at a blurring speed, blocking every attempted thrust the corporal could make.

The ring of steel and the harsh scraping of the blade's sliding off each other echoed the plaintive wail of the wind.

Our grunts punctuated the clash as weapons knocked together, each attempting to find an opening.

My face was expressionless, my eyes and ears completely attuned to the nuance of movements in my opponent.

My breathing was carefully controlled and centered on a point deep in my belly.

I began to time the soldier's moves, and waited for Erol to parry a downward overhead slash.

Just as our blades were about to make contact, I dropped to the ground on my left hand and one foot, pivoted, -and used my entire body weight to kick an arc that smashed into Erol's ankles.

His feet flew out from him and Erol smashed into the ground.

"Arrgh, -you've gone and killed me now."

I was sitting on the ground, cradling my saber with both hands. I laughed and said, "Erol, I only killed your ankles."

"Aye, then yew've gone and broken my ribs, yew bloody bastard." Erol curled up and moaned.

“Let me see.”

Alarmed, I rushed over -leaving my sword, and quickly stepped over to check the damage. Just as I was bending over, the wily corporal swept both legs out and tripped me.

My limbs flew straight up in the air, and I landed flat on my back next to him.

“Gotcha, yew upstart yew.”

Still on my back, I turned to face my friend and smiled.

“I don’t think so,” I said, poking the concealed dagger in my left hand into corporal's right butt cheek.

“Yeowww...”

Erol popped up like a slice of well down toast, rubbing his rump.

“Lesson number one, Erol...”

My companion smiled ruefully and gave me a hand up.

“Gawd, -Ya din’t have to bleeding stab me.”

“I didn’t even break the skin. It’s way too thick. Like your head.”

“Ye’wd be lucky to ‘ave one so handsome and firm.”

“Yeah. It’s all I dream about.”

“So’s that make us even? Had e’nuf fer today?”

“Yes and yes. Let’s go drink some of that swill they call beer.”

“Aye. -And One Eye, might I say that yer getting along pretty good with that pig sticker, let alone tha bow work I seen yew do. -Bet yew could take down a man at a hundred paces.”

A fleeting image of Guy’s collapse haunted me.

The golden feelings about my prowess as a thug turned to lead and capsized.

“Let’s hope not, Erol,” I murmured.

“Wot?”

“Nothing. -Let’s go.”

* * *

I still sneaked his visits with Neesha.

We were the talk of the camp, and much speculation was given to our sexual exploits. My attraction transformed itself into a special fondness and a need to protect her.

(Not that she really needed any protection, but you know how we men are, especially if there is that erotic tension that can't be satisfied.)

She became the little sister that I never had time for. I became one of her older 'bros. I learned that her skill at arms came from her tomboy days with five older brothers who became knights in Avalon.

From the age of five on she fought, fenced and dueled her way through childhood. It was no wonder that she tried to provoke me into verbal sparring matches.

There's no place like home.

Not only was it how she dealt with most men, it was her own way of letting off the steam that heated us whenever I was around.

The fact that I had developed this paternal air infuriated the hell out of her.

We were sitting in my room, idly chatting, when she started up again.

"Joseph, I know you can get me assigned to the reconnaissance mission. You told me, you have a debt owed you."

"Yeah, -a debt from a madman. The last gift I saw Mordred give was a blade in the heart."

"Twas the right thing to do. To stay would be to endanger all; to leave him there as he was..."

"I know, I know, -that doesn't mean I have to like it."

"An you do na' have to like that I'm on the mission, but tis right as well."

Neesha began to get into her "controlling bitch mode," as I called it.

I usually called it that when she pissed me off because she was, in fact, right.

I opened my mouth to contradict her, but thought better of it.

"All right, but conditionally."

"All right what, good sir?"

She began to get coy, because she knew she had won.

Again.

“Okay, I’ll ask. -There, are you happy?” I grumbled

“*EXTREMELY*,” she yelped, embraced me, and did a little jig.

“I still think it’s dangerous.”

I tried hard to keep a straight face, but her joy was infectious, and my grin broke out as she danced some more.

“Of course it is Sir Knight. But this is more important than dangerous. I am the only one that knows Rodwell. I’m the only one who can give him the message for Merlin.”

Oh my God I thought. Rodwell. The missing Rodwell.

She looked at me earnestly. “I’ve written it all down. How you’ve come here, and become our ally, and the plight of these poor people, and how this war is Mordred’s and the lizard’s doing, and everything.”

For all the good that will do, I thought to myself.

I still had not told her the whole truth.

I didn’t know was if her message was ever delivered or not.

I didn’t know the outcome here. I did know there would be a lot of spilled blood. I also knew that I’d do whatever it took to keep her safe.

Neesha read the concern in my face.

“It won’t take but minutes, Joseph. If I can’t find him, there is a secret place in the castle that I can leave the message. A loose stone in an outside wall. Most know me at Cambridge, even if I’ve been gone a while. They’ll be no problems, I assure you.”

But I wasn’t assured. I still felt helpless about safeguarding her welfare.

So I did what I knew I shouldn’t anyway, and again tried to control her.

“You’re right, Neesha. You should go, you have to go.”

“Thy will be done sire,” she curtseyed.

“Under one condition.” The merriment stopped. She looked at me coldly.

She asked, Ice Princess fashion, “Pray tell what is That?”

“That once you are in Avalon, you stay there.”

She started to open her mouth in rebuttal.

“And *shut up* Neesha, right now. Just *shut the hell up*.” I squelched any attempts at protest.

“Because if you don’t give me your word on this, I promise you that the *one* favor I will ask is that you are left here. *Period*. I can deliver the message to your little hidey hole.”

“You arrogant bastard...”

“Now Now Now!” I admonished, “Sticks and stones can break my...”

“I’ll break your head, you blackmailing pig of a man...”

“I don’t care. Either way, you still won’t go then, will you?”

“*Arrgh!*” She screamed in frustration, then, with venom. “You know the road to hell is paved with good intent sir.”

I calmly replied, “Perhaps it is. But if you already reside in hell, you thank the pavement company and use it as an escape route.”

For this she had no reply.

So I continued my badgering. “Now promise me. Right now. Promise.”

She got up stiffly and made for the door. “all right, I promise.”

“All of it.”

“I promise that when we get to Avalon, I will stay there when you depart.”

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“Unfortunately, good sir, it was and is. I bid you good night.” She stalked out of the room and slammed the door.

Despite her tirade, I still felt an immense satisfaction.

I would at least do something to insure her safety.

I slept well that night, never dreaming how much I would regret her keeping that vow in the days to come.

Although good intentions may always sustain for our souls, sometimes they just don't mean shit in the world of flesh and blood.

They can mean everything and nothing, both at once.

Like the Borderlands.

Point Man

I didn't sleep well the night before.

No one really does before a battle. No one sane.

Besides, I had more than enough to make me toss and turn.

Like, -how could I prevent a slaughter without Mordred becoming suspicious? Mordred was not easy to lie to, -being so good at it himself.

I did manage to convince him that Neesha was necessary on this reconnaissance mission to Avalon. She was on the team.

I told Mordred he could pay his debt to me by having her there to watch my back.

He about bored me to death the day before we left, -going on and on and on and on about trust and loyalty.

I listened and nodded appropriately.

There are dangers to feigning sincerity and humoring the insane.

Sometimes you can't get out of the car and end up being driven crazy.

And speaking of pretenses, I wasn't fooled one bit by the wizard's song and dance about the necessity of this mission.

Mordred's paranoia about spies mirrored his own demented schemes.

I would have bet my right eye that somebody waited in Cambridge to plot with the maniac.

Whatever his ravings, Mordred's grievances were based on reality. According to his rules and his culture, he was, -in truth, betrayed by the court of Avalon.

There had to be some of the old guard who felt the same way.

Maybe they were those who saw any deviation from the status quo as treachery.

Or opportunists who could prosper from Mordred's rule.

Or then again they could be the bloodthirsty assholes getting off on adversity and conflict.

Oh, yeah, - I knew there would be someone helping him.

At least Neesha was no longer giving me the cold shoulder.

She wasn't exactly peaches and cream either.

We had an understanding. I kept my word; she would keep hers.

We were on speaking terms again.

Of course, I had to beat her into it...

Earlier that morning she had tried to knock my block off in weapon's practice for the upteenth time. I'd been -oh so pissed about the attitude she threw at me.

But these days my anger became something cold when I fought.

Calculating and deadly.

I actually managed to disarm her. In more ways than one, it seemed.

I knocked her sword right out of her grip.

For a moment she just stared at me.

"I yield," she muttered.

I looked straight into her eyes and scowled.

"Doubt it. Don't think you know how."

"I gave my word, good sir."

"Yeah, and you've been giving me freezer burn ever since."

"Freezer burn?"

"The cold shoulder, shut down, cut-off, distant, pouting, bitchy..."

"ENOUGH!"

I'm good at stepping on hornet's nests.

"Sir. Does it *ever* occur in the semblance of intellect that infrequently operates in your so-called brain that I am just as concerned about your welfare as you are of mine?"

Frankly, it hadn't.

One side effect of being selfless is the blindness of disregard.

In this, one becomes preoccupied with the welfare of the other, neglecting their own. The other is perceived as weak or helpless with little if nothing to contribute. They are made to feel unimportant.

The secret selfishness of most martyrs is that they cling to their noble image like miserly despots, no matter what the cost.

"Sorry. Sometimes I'm an idiot."

"Sometimes?"

"Sometimes frequently."

"YOU! You are..." She laughed.

The first real laugh I had heard in weeks.

"Put up your sword so that I may at least attempt to redress this woeful imbalance."

"Yes, captain mam."

She proceeded to demonstrate the flaws in my technique by trying to kick my ass big time.

The funny thing was, -she couldn't.

These days few could. I'm not bragging here.

Well, maybe a little.

As far as my participation in the upcoming skirmish, -that was taken care of for me. The Trodge Igor was assigned to play nursemaid.

His Lordshit had made it perfectly clear.

I was a valued asset not to be wasted in any fighting.

Go figure, but good for me. I wouldn't have to draw on the men of Avalon.

Igor was going to be a pain to ditch, but I'd figure out how when the time came. The most important thing was to get Neesha stashed safely in Avalon.

So, having exhausted myself by the dawn's early light, I got up.

Igor fetched me and we headed out for the courtyard to join the squad.

Mordred had ordered no rest stops so we took twice as many horses on this jaunt. The Csarks had become even bolder in their attacks as of late. Reports had come in from remaining villages near the desert fringe that there had been eighteen deaths in a week.

Whole packs of them were leaving the ocean of sand for firmer soil to dine on people sushi.

A few dwellings supplied meals, all the portions done bloody rare.

Halfway to the Door the company would change to fresh mounts and ride straight through. We were taking twenty armed men.

Erol, Renu and Nestor were also assigned to the detail.

Vosh was there to see us off. -He was staying to guard the fort.

The commander was doing his usual stoic fussing about equipment, formations, and rule number one.

On occasion there are merits to being obsessed.

"Morning, Commander."

"Aye, -to you too, One Eye."

Vosh looked me over. "Won't do to have your scabbard twisted like that lad."

Embarrassed, I fixed my sword.

Vosh still made me feel like an adolescent with a bad case of acne.

"Thank you, sir."

"Just doing my job, lad. See to it that you do yours."

"Yes sir."

And the thought was, -my job is to keep Neesha safe, keep her safe.

My new mantra, keepersafe.

Renu growled a hello, and Erol winked. Neesha gave a quick and nervous smile. Mordred nodded a curt greeting, and we mounted up.

The ride was unmarred by anything but the repetitious scenery and moving at a pace guaranteed to put blisters on anybody's ass.

We stopped at the rocks where the Czarks ambushed us the last time.

The change of horses in mid-journey was a Keystone cops flurry of frantic bustle.

-Too many bad memories at this death spot and we were eager to put it behind us.

The faces of the troopers with me were grim and determined.

* * *

Nothing was going to thrive in this desolate wasteland.

They had no real quarrel with Avalon; they were simply seeking sanctuary and would do whatever was necessary to obtain it.

Whatever was required.

Obviously, my own peace of mind would not flourish here either.

No great loss, it hadn't for years.

But I still had to figure out the right thing to do.

It wasn't so simple anymore.

My comrades weren't bad folks, only desperate.

I was just going to play it by ear, hoping that I wasn't completely tone-deaf.

Neesha and I couldn't exchange more than a few words of conversation here and there. Our previous plans depended on so many different ingredients, -all boiling down to seek and hide.

Neesha would seek a safe place to hide in the castle.

Of course, first, she would have to get in, which she assured me was no real problem. -Then, she would have to get past the guards, and wait until the Coventry force was gone.

Then to find someone she trusted to get her to Merlin and then... and then I could worry about my other dilemmas.

We arrived on the mountain trail with the taste of sand in our mouths. Not much different than the taste of ashes, only grittier.

The sun was turning the sky into crimson fool's gold and the bare peaks of rock jutted ominously into the heavens.

The horses were lathered and over heated.

The entire company made its way up the narrow path in a silent single file.

Even Erol kept his mouth shut.

We reached the temple as darkness set in.

I brooded a while on how the night mirrored the dimness of my future.

I was scared shitless.

Bitter Truths

"Corporal, select two men to stay and watch the horses."

Mordred strode in front of the temple, pacing in agitation.

"The rest of you, I want ten bows out and the rest with swords. Captain Neesha, get your troops into formation, and One Eye come with me."

Mordred stepped into the shrine as Erol selected Renu and Nester to help keep watch. I followed the wizard into the temple.

The rest of the company was equally apprehensive, for different reasons.

Most had only been in the Borderlands once before. Some were native to Coventry and didn't have the dubious pleasure of interdimensional travel.

Nor did they want it.

But in times of war, our best judgment is often sacrificed to the supposed greater good.

Combat has its own democratic aspects. War is an equal opportunity employer, -everybody has a fair chance at getting killed.

The sorcerer had a torch lit, and its wavering light did nothing to help my mood. I had already seen the results of this skirmish among the wounded at Cambridge, -the last time I saw Beth.

My memory of her was becoming more and more flimsy, flickering in and out like shadows cast from the torch in Mordred's grasp.

"Listen well, One Eye."

Mordred paused for my undivided attention.

"Once you have opened the Door to Cambridge, you are to stay with Neesha and your Trodge playmate. Is that understood?"

"Yes, your Lordship."

"Good. As you may have guessed this brief excursion is more than just a test for you. I..." The wizard appeared to hesitate.

"I... have someone to meet who is instrumental in our cause, a loyal and true follower of the Avalon crown.

The would-be king laid an arm on me in confidence.

"This charade will be over soon, and the forces of justice will prevail."

"That is my most fervent wish," I said truthfully.

"So, my good and loyal pupil sir, are you ready?"

"I'm ready." -I was ready to screw up his plans as best I could.

"Then Godspeed and good luck to us all."

Mordred gestured for me to begin and he went out to get the rest of his force.

I sat down, closed my eyes and began to clear my mind. I started focusing on my breathing and everything else I had learned.

You know.

In a very short time, the familiar smell of ozone enveloped my nostrils, and the cave around me began to rumble.

A firm grip on my shoulder startled me, and my eyes opened.

Mordred had already brought the remaining troops in and they were ready to go.

"Well done," and now it is time to take our leave. Ready?"

Mordred motioned to the swirling wall of white and incandescent colors.

Neesha nodded her encouragement.

At that point I felt my commitment harden.

I would do whatever it took.

To help Neesha, to save these poor bastards, to protect Avalon...and Beth.

What about Beth?

"ONE EYE!"

"Ready."

I got up and walked without hesitation towards the shimmering curtain.

The rest of the battalion froze behind me in fear.

Mordred ranted at them to move, but they were having none of it.

As I put one foot through I turned to them.

"C'mon you chickenshits. If you stay here you'll die for sure. Besides, this thing's only gonna stay open for so long...and if the Door closes on you, you could get cut in half."

Mordred scowled as the warriors followed after me, and we all exploded into the place in-between.

* * *

It was just as misty as ever. The crackling of electricity and a muffled silence soaked the air of normal sounds.

Some of the troopers were disoriented and confused from the transition.

I went over to Neesha to see how she was doing.

I whispered, "You okay?"

"Not until we depart this wretched land of uncertain airs, good Knight," she muttered back.

Mordred and Igor popped up a few feet away. "What in blazes was that comment about getting cut in half, oh novice wizard?"

Mordred was pretty pissed off again.

"Seems to me like they needed the motivation," I replied.

"Hrrumph."

"So your Lordship, what do we do now?"

Mordred calmed himself.

"What we do is I talk, and you listen. *AND*...in the future, *I* will decide on what devices to use to inspire those at my command."

"Sure thing. Wouldn't dream of raining on your parade."

He flared his nostrils.

I was surprised at how spunky I was feeling.

Then again, I was no longer worrying; I was in action, -doing.

Mordred directed his attention to the rest of the company.

"Line up two abreast and follow us. All of you are to maintain physical contact with the man in front of you."

The troopers did so, each putting a hand on the shoulder of the person ahead. Neesha was right in back of Igor, while Igor followed Mordred.

I had to dispel the image of two elderly ladies walking arm in arm on some boardwalk in Miami accompanied by a boy scout troop.

Probably wouldn't do to materialize there with assorted monsters and armed soldiers playing footsie with each other.

"Close your eye, take my arm, and listen."

The warlock began to murmur very exact and vivid descriptions of the Cambridge site --the feel of chill and coldness, the castle design, the textures of the rocks, the quality of light and colors, the thin air, even the sounds of the wind. Every other sentence he had me imagine us smack dab in the middle of this picture.

He made me repeat details of the characteristics at the entry site.

Over and over again.

All the while we kept walking, my eye remained closed.

When I did take a peek, I saw Mordred had his wand out and he was making erasing motions.

Gradually, the mists began to solidify and forms began to emerge from the shrouded fog. The ground lost its crackling elastic touch and became more substantial frozen ice. The vague shapes became humps of rock.

I could feel snowflakes melt on my face.

I opened my eyes and the castle of Cambridge stood out in the wintry night a few hundred yards away.

I was in Avalon again.

Mordred turned to me with a wild gleam to his eye. "We've done it!"

Caught up in the excitement I yelled, "Bet your ass we did."

I went to give the wizard a high five, and then abruptly censored myself.

What the hell are you doing, buddy?

These people are going to do put some very serious hurts to the folks in the castle, and you're busy here congratulating yourself for helping them?

The one person I needed to assist here was Neesha, and I was so enthralled with my wizard prowess that I completely forgot about her.

I swallowed my pride along with some shame for a chaser.

There was no time for either at the moment.

I'd cough up his these hairballs later.

I pulled Neesha to the side, and we watched Mordred dispatch the troops.

The Trodge settled himself nearby.

The archers were sent to the castle perimeter, and entrenched themselves in the snow.

They were to cover the wizard's retreat, if necessary.

Mordred took the remaining soldiers with swords and urgently whispered to them.

He slinked over to where we were standing.

"You are to wait *exactly* here. We shall be gone no longer than twenty minutes. -Be prepared to open the Door again at that time."

He turned to Igor.

"And you, -don't let these two out of your sight."

"Es, 'ordship," the Trodge dutifully responded.

Mordred spun on his heels and he and the swords faded out into the night and cold.

We three stood around in silence for a few moments.

Then I began to stamp my feet up and down, and flap my arms around my body.

"Brrr... damn -I'm cold. I've just got to get warmer somehow."

I looked over to Neesha, and inclined an eyebrow.

She got the hint, and began to imitate my movements.

"Aye, and as well this body chills to the very bones."

"Well, lady, I've got a way to increase your temperature," I leered.

I looked over at Igor, "Hey bud, we're going for a short... walk."

"'ordred seys..."

"His Lordshit said to not let us out of your sight. We'll be right over there."

I pointed to a spot some twenty yards away.

"'Kay," Igor reluctantly agreed, "'urry."

"Five minutes."

I took Neesha by the hand and led her to a nearby snow bank.

I pulled her down to the ground and embraced her.

"Ready?" I whispered in her ear.

"Yes, Sir Knight. But this feels very nice."

"Yes it does, my captain, -but we're a little short on time."

"Truly good sir, we are. But I have a confession to make, and I need to make it now."

She turned her head to me. "I lied to you when I said I had someone else waiting for me. I was wary. The truth is, no man in Avalon would have me because of my headstrong ways."

"Wha...what?" I stuttered.

She put her hands on my lips to silence me.

"If by chance or circumstance you're no longer interested in your little princess..."

-Then she grabbed my head with both her hands and kissed me long and deep.

I couldn't resist. All that repressed desire and longing imploded in a nuclear meltdown.

After a while, we both came up for air. She spoke first.

"Now, we'll say no more of this until you have a reason."

She shivered once and then let go of me.

I looked deep into her eyes and saw all of the could be's and might have been's.

I felt my throat tighten but managed to choke out, "Stay safe, or I swear I'll kill you."

She smiled once, then slipped into the guise of the warrior she also was.

"I can cut around the bowmen and hide behind the castle until you depart."

"Be careful."

She nodded.

"Stay here a moment and then take off. -I'll keep in front of Igor's line of vision."

I grabbed her and kissed her hard.

"For luck."

I got up and walked back to the Trodge, my paces slow and sure.

I didn't look back for fear of alerting my lobster-clawed friend that something was up.

It was one of the longest short walks of my entire life.

Igor's first comment was "Neesha?"

I looked back to where we had been. It was empty.

"Oh, she had to take a pee. She'll be right back."

The Trodge grew extremely agitated, waving his four arms. "No, 'un Eye,

bad, bad thing, you muss..."

"It's okay, Igor, really."

"No!" The creature was emphatic. "You don't know. You don't unnersand."

"Don't understand what, buddy?"

Before Igor could reply, the castle guard picked this unfavorable time to sound the alarm. The shit decidedly hit the fan and flung in all directions.

I heard the ring of clashing steel and the war cries of the soldiers.

The archers were busy firing at the castle ramparts. The drawbridge dropped and armed men began to burst through the opening, only to be skewered by arrows.

That's when I broke with the plan.

I lost it then, impulsively running in the direction that Neesha took, with Igor close behind.

As I ran past the twang of bows, I yelled out, "Cover me, I've got to help Mordred."

I caught a swift glance of a few sporadic nods as I ran over the crisp icy snow. Grimly satisfied, my breathing gasped as my heart thumped in time with my steps.

I ran. 'Keepersafe' pounded in my ears. "Keepersafe."

Just as I approached the right front corner of the fortress wall, I heard voices coming from the other side.

One of them Neesha's.

Another, -Mordred's.

Shit.

The third was vaguely recognizable, but I couldn't be sure.

I stopped my running and crept stealthily up to the front wall, peering around the corner.

Coventry's warriors were fighting off a small detachment further down my line of vision.

Yards away, Neesha was surrounded by four men.

One held a broadsword at the other's throat.

From the look of the captive he was some noble, -probably Rodwell.

The guy pinning his neck back faced away from me.

Mordred held Neesha by one arm.

The girl appeared to be pleading with the man whose sword was drawn.

And then all of a sudden... she spit in the armed man's face.

I pulled my weapon and prepared to leap into the fight when a giant clawed arm lifted me up in the air like a baby.

Another appendage wrapped around my mouth.

Still another encased both arms in a vise-like grip.

Igor had caught up with me.

In the next split second my worst fears were realized.

The man with the broadsword became enraged, and cursing, thrust his blade right through Neesha's chest.

Her eyes opened wide in shock, and she coughed up a mixture of blood and bile.

I watched the gleaming point slowly emerge out of her back.

I saw the bastard twist the blade and she writhed in agony.

I began a silent scream as she hung there, for what seemed like an eternity. Rodwell went wild with fury, and was bludgeoned down by Mordred.

Tears of rage filled my eyes as I struggled to break free from the Trodge's grasp, to no avail.

I watched Neesha use her last breath trying to spit in the man's face again.

A gout of blood dribbled from her mouth and her eyes glazed.

She stood there and convulsed for a moment, then slowly slid off the sword to lay still on the ground.

The fucker that killed her turned then and I finally got a good look at him.

It was Guy of Glouster.

Mordred's spy and ally in Avalon.

I screamed in silence. I would kill them. I would kill them all.

Guy, Mordred, Igor -they were dead.

I renewed my struggles with murderous frenzy but saw the rest from the corner of my eye.

They left Neesha where she was and threw Rodwell's body off the side of the mountain. I guess Neesha was left as a message for Merlin.

Mordred and Guy went their separate ways.

And Igor bashed my head hard against the wall.

My vision dimmed and the sound of rushing wind drowned my hearing.

Igor dropped me and I sprawled on the cold snow.

Just as my eyes were closing I saw the Trodge run over to her body and touch her on the head with something.

Then he ran back.

Before I lost all consciousness I heard the lobster prick whisper in perfect English.

“I am sorry my friend, but this could not be changed. When you have finished what you started, find the Tree.”

Then I slipped into a yawning chasm of grief where everything was dark and tinged with red.

* * *

I was dreaming of being with Neesha, someplace in the country. We were having a cup of coffee and laughing over some small joke. She was wearing a flowered summer dress, looking beautiful and the sun warmed us both.

All at once I felt this stabbing pain in my head.

She reached out in alarm and the scene shifted to me falling...

Falling away from her.

I awoke in my room in Coventry. I remembered everything.

When I opened my eyes, Erol, Renu and Finchly were standing above me with concerned looks on their faces.

My head was pounding and there were sparkles of flashing light obscuring my vision.

Neesha was dead.

Gone forever. I touched my head and felt the bandages.

I ripped them off.

“How long have I been out of it?”

My voice was raspy and hard.

“One day, mate.” Erol replied with a nod and a wink. “Not to worry, no permanent damage.”

I grunted, “How’d I get back?”

Finchly’s bass voice rumbled, “They seys the Trodgy yew calt Igor dumped yah back near tha’ Door. Seys yew was ‘urt in a run in wi’ tha Dukes guards.”

The big man scratched his beard. “ ‘E disappeared hissself shortly after. Must a got kilt.”

“Hope not,” I muttered, -wanting that pleasure for myself.

“Fixed yew a litter, tha did, an dragged yew ‘eres.”

Renu growled softly, “One Eye, -Neesha dead.”

The wolf creature half snarled and half moaned.

“Yeah,” I said, deadly calm and devoid of all feeling.

My knuckles whitened as my hands strangled the quilt to my sides.

I could still see her there, gutted by Guy’s sword.

I would always see her there.

Neesha had kept her word. She stayed behind in Avalon.

A smile of irony graced my lips before they hardened into a thin sneer.

I choked out in a whisper, “Mordred’s man in Cambridge killed her, -she was a spy for the enemy.”

Erol broke in, “So the bugger said.”

Renu growled again. “This killer of Neesha dies anyway. The blood debt is mine.”

“Yeah,” I murmured, “he dies anyway.”

And I let it go at that. I didn’t have to argue with the Harr, -I already knew that part of what was to be.

What little strength I had departed with my hope and I let myself drift off.

“Nuff talk of killin’ fer now, Yew’l be killin’ soon e’nuf. Let the man gets ‘is rest,” Finchly argued.

The three turned to leave.

“One week,” I said to their backs.

“What?” Erol was startled.

I mumbled “We leave ‘gain in one week.”

“Pray tell, good friend, how did you know that juicy tidbit?” Erol asked, “Vosh just received those orders from Mordred an hour ago.”

My eye began to close of its own accord.

“I’m... a... wiz...ard, -remember?”

I stopped for the moment as my head sank into the pillow and I floated off into the turbulent waters of unfulfilled dreams.

The three shared an apprehensive look.

“Wizards.” Renu shrugged, and they left the room.

* * *

My next awakening some hours later was equally difficult.

“Get up lad.” Vosh commanded.

He leaned over my still figure and jostled me in my bed. “I said move your carcass, son -now.”

I growled, springing up from my sleep with feral eyes. One hand grabbed his jerkin and the dagger in my other found its way to his throat.

He grabbed the knife hand in a fluid motion and eyed it blandly.

“Yew prepared to use that thing, or what?”

“Just like you taught me.”

“I’m rather busy at present, so if you wouldn’t mind ...”

I gritted my teeth and took a breath.

“Well?” Vosh raised one eyebrow.

I shook my head, and let the dagger fall to the bed. Vosh released my arm.

“Sorry Vosh, ...sir, -I thought you were somebody else.”

“Glad then I am to be me. How are you feeling?”

“How am I feeling? Like shit. I feel like...” I hesitated for a moment..., “Like killing someone.”

“So I gather. Will anyone do or do you have a particular individual in mind?”

“A few particular someone’s.”

“I see.”

“Do you?”

When you have walls around your heart you pretend that no one can see.

You can even try to hide from yourself.

The ostrich technique. Highly ineffective with those who know you.

“Aye, lad, - I see more than yew know. I’ve lost a friend too. Do ya think tha’ yew are tha only one who is grieving this day?”

“No.” -But that’s what I felt.

“Look lad, this is not the first time I’ve been betrayed, and it won’t be the last,” Vosh sighed in resignation. “We not only lost Neesha, we lost who we thought she was from the first, - a comrade, a friend, an ally. She was never any of that. She was a damn traitor. And that I cannot forgive.”

I held on to my tongue and my head slumped.

According to Vosh, I was a traitor as well.

“So, son, I do understand the depth o’ yer sorrows. But we got a job ta do. There be thousands counting on us ta save their lives.

Asides from all of that, Neesha was a warrior.

Whatever else she was, she must o’ known tha price she might ‘ave to pay. ”

I maintained my silence.

Vosh patted me on the shoulder.

“Mordred want’s to see you in the study. Best get up now. We all have work to do.”

The commander rose from the bed to leave.

“Vosh?”

“Aye lad?”

“If there was a way to save these people, -your people, -without fighting this war, would you take it?”

Vosh barked out a laugh, “Of course lad. -Just because I’m good at killing doesn’t mean I’m want’ in the so-called glory of battle. That’s for the foolish and stupid.”

He shook his head in regret. “Mordred an his stinkin’ lizard friends ‘ave been our only hope in this mess. If there be another way...” he looked off into the distance.

“What if the Lizards are the ones that are killing the worlds?”

“Intrestin’ conjecture...” Vosh scowled, “but we got no time fer analysis...”

“What if I could find that other way?”

“That’s too many ‘what if’s’ for one like myself, laddy. I know about war, and leading troops.”

“I’m talking about saving lives, Vosh, -same as you.”

Vosh gave me a skeptical look, “Then lad, If yew culd find that ‘other way,’ I suppose you wuld be a true mage. But it makes no never mind. -Mordred will never give up on his pursuit of the crown, an’ he says he needs the snakes. ‘Es the one who ‘elped build and organize this refuge fer us all.”

He shook his salt-and-pepper head with genuine regret.

“Starvin men don na question the hand that feeds ‘em, -they just take the bread.”

Then his eyes became cold. “Asides, that -inna a head to head fight, - I’m sorry to say, boy -I believe that the wizard ‘as the stronger magic. Until yew got somethin’ other than wild idears, I suggest that yew keep yer mouth shut an follow orders”.

Vosh pushed himself off the bed.

“Otherwise, I’d have to kill yew myself. ”

The commander walked stiffly out of the room.

I threw the quilt off me and attempted to get on my feet.

The room spun around once or twice, but I gradually found my balance. My ears had this ringing in them, but the noise gradually faded along with the sparkling lights.

My anger was the only thing that protected me from feeling completely empty and alone. I held on to this with other vague and ambiguous plans, unformed as yet.

Their common thread was vengeance.

Although revenge is best served on a cold plate, my gut was aching for a banquet cooked on roaring fires.

I imagined how I would kill them, how I would torture them, how I would watch them die. Mordred, -for holding her.

Igor, -for stopping me.

And Guy.

For Guy, an arrow in the throat was way too quick but it would do in a pinch.

Then it hit me. Here I was going along with the bloodshed I wanted to change in the first place. And soon after I quenched my thirst, my younger self would tackle me and we'd roll off into some bizarre semblance of a burning hell and I'd be done.

Well done.

But, -what if I sliced Guy's belly open and had him watch his own entrails spill out. Yeah, that was it.

I could beat him with a sword now, I felt sure of it.

Maybe that would change things enough to...

Hell, I was beginning to understand just how Mordred felt.

How righteous, how just it all seemed.

I was beginning to think like Mordred.

-To act like him. -To become like him.

To make one thing so important that everything else loses its value and meaning.

Hadn't I learned anything in my stupid life?

Obviously not.

I had to think. Had to think with my head.

Had to remember, what was important.

What the hell did I really believe anymore?

What mattered besides the pay back?

Maybe one thing.

What Neesha would want.

To stop the war. To protect the innocent.

People's lives, love, honor, justice. -Trust.

If these didn't count for *something*, then everything was meaningless.

There was no one left to trust but myself. And right then I was devoid of dreams and hope and trust.

Shit.

Pretty easy to go from someone who can't stand to hurt a fly to the next serial killer.

I laughed to myself.

It was as hollow as I was empty.

Guy and Mordred, I could understand. They were full of the same righteous self-indulgence I was at the moment.

Of course they felt justified, just like me.

The end justifies the means kind of guys.

Easy to slip into, I thought, as I put on my boots.

They believed in their "cause" so they were willing to do anything to achieve it.

Igor, though, I just couldn't comprehend.

Why did it dump me off back to Mordred for safe keeping?

Igor must have been a spy as well.

But for who? I'd have to find out.

And what was that last whisper of Igor's about "go to the Tree?"

Sure, I read about the tree from Mordred's notes.

Something about the source of wands. Something to think about later.

I had to deal with Mordred now.

I mused on how difficult it is to be polite to someone you long to kill.

I finished dressing.

I would dress my other wounds as well.

As I left my quarters, I noticed that the courtyard had begun to fill for the exodus from Coventry.

There were several hundred soldiers in various companies getting equipment and horses together.

Outside the walls there were thousands more.

Makeshift tents and camps dotted the desert landscape for a mile out.

Most were human, but there were contingents from other realms.

Vosh had runners organizing details for the move and I saw my own company helping out.

I set out for my appointed meeting, accompanied by my two new friends, rage and loathing, whom I held on a tenuous leash.

* * *

It really wasn't all that difficult.

Mordred was extremely solicitous and concerned.

When I entered the tower study, he was all warm and cuddly.

"One Eye, -good to see you up and around. I was quite worried about you."

He poured us both some wine. "Seems as if you took quite a beating at Cambridge."

I took the goblet that was offered and raised it to my lips.

"Yes your Lordship, I did," I said evenly.

“You’ve heard about the demise of our Captain Neesha?” The wizard asked the question with a note of sympathy.

I felt my rage build and my blood boil.

I wanted to say, I saw you hold her, you bastard, while the other bastard gutted her. But I didn’t.

“I heard.”

I kept my voice harmless, but I had a hard time looking at the mage.

“Such a waste and a pity,” Mordred drawled on...

“I was taken quite by surprise, and more than angry at her death. She would have been so much more useful alive.”

I gritted my teeth together.

“I know you were... fond of her, were you not?”

“Yes. I was. That’s in the past.”

I didn’t know how long I could take this line of questioning without losing it.

Mordred came over and patted me on the shoulder, “Then, you too know what it is like to be betrayed. I’m sorry for your loss.”

I thought of Guy of Glouster, and was able to look the sorcerer directly in the face.

“Yeah, -I feel used and lied to.”

I guzzled the rest of my cup, “And I wouldn’t mind some pay back.”

I let the menace and anger creep into my voice at last.

Mordred laughed sardonically, “Well, that I can guarantee you shall have.”

“That is one promise I’ll hold you to, your Lordship.”

I scratched at the stubble on my face. “And another thing, sire...

“Yes?”

I was told that the Trodge that stood guard with us is still missing.”

Mordred leaned over the table with an intense expression on his face.

“What do you know of this?”

“Not much, -except he’s the one that battered me unconscious.”

I leaned forward to an inch of Mordred’s nose. “I want to kill him... -it. Badly.”

Mordred’s eyes lit up and a malicious grin bent his lips.

“You shall have the Trodge -if and when we find him.”

He leaned casually back in his chair.

“And by the way, One Eye, you passed.”

“I passed?”

“Indeed.” Mordred gestured behind him and two guards with armed crossbows silently glided out of the shadows.

“You were under suspicion as well. As of this moment, you are not.”

I nodded my head in gracious acknowledgment while mentally kicking myself for not realizing my own precarious position.

Mordred really didn’t need me. He had erased the wards.

I was very expendable.

But he thought I was his man now.

I’d do nothing to discourage that idea.

“Now, there is much planning and final arrangements to make. We leave again for the Door in less than a week’s time.”

The sorcerer briskly rubbed his hands together, “Avalon falls shortly, and a new reign begins!

The traitors will fall! And justice will prevail...”

I put on an agreeable smile, and let him rant for a while. After another five minutes of thundering oration, Mordred gave me his leave.

I took it gladly.

Any more and I’d have had to puke or kill the guy.

But this wasn’t the time or the place.

Knowing when you’re going to die has its small advantage.

Prelude to More Bad Dreams

Coventry was dying and the rats were deserting the sinking ship. That was one way to look at it. If you wanted to consider yourself a rat.

Then again, maybe most rats were given a bad rap. The Lizards, the “Saar” probably thought of everything un-Saar as rat-like, I thought.

The scurrying and rush of the exodus was rising to a fevered pitch.

It was a sale, the final blow out bargain basement sale to end out all sales. The one where you buy a chance at life. A one and only one time offer.

The wind howled and the muted colors of the setting sun cast a surreal glow on the proceedings. Swirls of sand lifted in whirlpool eddies to buffet the encampment. Camp fires began to throw sparks into the churning elements and the smoke stung the eyes to tears. Me, Erol, and the rest of Neesha’s former company had been assisting Finchly for two days in packing up the armory and we were finished at last. For the last forty-eight hours I watched the stragglers come to this last bastion of hope. All hungry, -some starving.

We soldiers gave what there was to spare of our own supplies, and kept the peace as best we could. The wagons were finally loaded and provisions stored.

It was late afternoon on the day before we were going to march...

I wiped the grime and sweat from my face and paused for a breath.

“Anything else Finch?”

“Naw, at’l do it, lads. Fine work,” the big smith grunted. “ Gots a bit of a thirst needin’ quenched, I ‘ave.” Erol nodded with enthusiasm.

“So wot yew waitin ’fer?” We all headed for the large public room. Fortunately for us, a keg or two was left out for just that purpose.

It was warm, but it was filling. Rations had dwindled considerably over the last few weeks. What little food left was dried out and stale.

Any food animals left alive had already been slaughtered for provisions. The troopers till recently had the cream of the crop. Now there were no crops; there was no cream. It was the twilight of the world of Coventry in most every way. Vosh and the other captains were already present. The room was subdued, and the somber mood tainted us along with the waning light. I exchanged greetings with those I recognized. I didn't expect to see any of them again. All in all, I didn't expect to be alive much longer. I had resigned myself to whatever fate had to offer, as my own well of inspiration had run dry. Vosh got up on a table, and hoisted a mug in the air. We all stopped to listen.

"Cock an ear to me now!" His voice boomed across the hall.

"A toast to you brave ones, who would cross worlds and make a new home! May we fight with courage, die with honor and live in peace 'ere we share our cups again!" The hall thundered with cheers and the pounding of tables and swords.

I raised my cup, and drank. My bitterness did not wash away. I made my excuses to those I called friends, and went off to stare at the empty desert. There were no answers for me there either. So I went back to my quarters and dressed the part I was meant to play. I donned the suit of mail and oiled and sheathed my sword. I made sure my crossbow was at the ready. I packed the papers that Mordred had given as gifts for my studies. I slipped on the steel talons and watched them gleam in the moonlight. A black heavy woolen cloak completed my ensemble. I looked at my reflection in the mirror, numb and cold as ice.

Then I sat alone and mourned. Mordred sent word of our departure at dawn. The wizard had traded his usual black garb for a silver suit of armor with a winged helmet.

He was preening in the courtyard and from what I could see, getting in the way of Vosh's customary efficiency.

I got a horse, -a big palomino mare that went by the name of Leg Breaker.

"Yippie-io-ky-ah, mother fucker." She didn't mind the verbal abuse.

I fed her a dried apple that she was happy to munch on, and proceeded to check my saddle and gear.

As Mordred strode by I commented, "Nice outfit."

The sorcerer puffed up a little, saw my smirk, then scowled and went off on some other self-important task.

I laughed and ruefully shook my head, then joined the commander at the head of the parade, feeling reckless

The ride to the Door was uneventful.

The Csarks had vanished, possibly killing themselves off in their insatiable hunger.

Three hundred horsemen rode at the front of the exodus.

The rest of the infantry acted as rear guards, and the remaining populace of Coventry tagged along behind them.

Mordred, Vosh and I were at the lead of the formation with twenty scouts a mile or so ahead at point.

Little was said. Comments about the weather prevailed as a major topic.

(As they often do when we wish to hide our deeper thoughts.)

I looked behind me at the remnants of the world.

-Of several worlds, if Mordred wasn't lying.

There were several thousand civilians of various races and species milling about.

But I wasn't really paying much attention to all of this.

I was thinking about murder.

Would I still kill Guy?

I felt no desire to kill anyone at this point.

My passion for revenge was burning itself out. All I could feel was pity. -For the wretched of Coventry, for Avalon, and for my impossible situation.

It was oh, so simple for the Mordred's and the Merlin's of the universe.

Black or white is like that, -each side seeing the other as black.

But I was learning to see the grays along with both extremes.

The truth was Merlin was not white, but that didn't make him black. Mordred was not all black, and that didn't make him white. Each of them looked for the shade in the other that helped justify their own beliefs.

And these deep thoughts plumb tired me out.

One problem with wisdom is that it seldom makes you feel any better.

It does make you feel worn out, as if you were a pair of shoes that traveled a great distance. The part of you that's the heel usually falls off first.

In the long run, it usually just trips you up.

Your sole may get holy only to better feel the stark reality of the ground underfoot. Your tongue gets frayed from the wear and tear of countless questions laced with ambiguity. Finally, you have to tie yourself together the best you can to stop from falling apart at the seams.

* * *

We came to the mountains after a hard day's ride. It would take the rest of the population another day or two to catch up.

I realized then that Merlin never knew how great this "invasion" really was. Arthur's wizard only had twenty warriors with him in the first place.

Actually, -he didn't need any more than that, provided he could take Mordred out. I didn't know if he could, or if he even did.

I didn't even know if I'd ever find out. I just knew that whatever happened, -I was going to hell.

* * *

We reached the path of the shrine at sunset. Mordred kept the majority of the company at the base of the mountain, with Vosh in charge. He called for Renu and me, -then selected a squad of twenty or so badasses to join us. We started up the rocky path, all of us nervous.

Me, anyway.

I saw behind us, that Vosh was organizing the few hundred into formations, preparing to follow...

I smelled the Lizard's presence the moment we entered the temple.

A dank smell of treachery and deceit.

The Saar was waiting by the already opened Door, swaying from foot to foot with its tale swishing. Her eyes were glowing, reflecting the incandescence of the Borderland entry. The cavern was rumbling with energy. Her Excellency's dark cowl was replaced with some metallic tunic, loaded with pockets and strewn with belts and packets. Her tongue darted in and out, flicking in distaste for us humans. Needle teeth poised in a permanent mock smile of ill humor. "Mordred and friendsss..." She hissed in greeting.

"Well met, and just in time." The wizard simpered.

I felt like kicking him.

Mordred was a cow being herded, and like Mrs. O'Leary's dumb beast, not realizing the consequence of playing with fire.

"We are ready, your Excellency."

"Thiss isss good. You have trained the one eyed one welll."

"He was a most apt pupil."

I nodded. "Just dying to get on with this."

I felt impatience and annoyance with the prevalent blindness and stupidity of my mentors.

Renu gave me a puzzled look.

I reassured him with a hand on his shoulder, more to quiet him than anything else.

"A ssslight change of planss, King of Avalon."

The Lizard drew herself up to an imposing height.

"The SSSaar have recruited sssome additional alliess to assisst you in your battle. They await your command in the Borderlandsss, to desstroy all who pose a threat to you..."

“I need no further assistance than what your Excellency has already provided.” Mordred’s protest had an edge of suspicion. The reptile waved a talon in an air of disregard.

“Merlin and his ward will be there soon. They have but a small force.”

-Take the troops you have now with you as well. I will remain here to keep the Door available for more of your men, and for the rest of the transfer.”

Mordred looked ready to argue, and he stood there almost shaking, his face turning crimson.

Then he abruptly seemed to change his mind.

“Your Excellency knows best. Let me get my men.”

Mordred pulled me out into the night air with Renu close behind.

“I don’t trust that blasted creature,” he angrily confided.

“Our original plan was to have all of the available warriors and the Saar come through at once.

Something rotten is afoot. Perhaps you were right, all along.”

No shit, you pompous idiot.

Renu uttered a soft growl of assent. Mordred signaled to Erol, who quickly joined us “Corporal-ride down to Commander Vosh.”

“Get him up here with half the regiment at once and wait in the Temple by the Door. Tell Vosh he may take any action he feels necessary to prevent the Lizard from leaving.”

“Yes indeed yer Lordship.”

Erol’s face broke out in a wolfish smile.

No love was lost on any of the soldiers for the Lizards.

Erol jumped on his mount and took off at break-neck speed down the mountain trail.

“A little late to bite that hand that poisons you,” I noted.

“Perhaps.”

The wizard was closer to actual panic than I had realized.

That’s the way it is with the obsessed.

Change their routines and they begin to fall apart.

But Mordred was still putting on his game face. He took off his helmet and wiped the sweat off his forehead. His voice was fraught with urgency.

“But we need to stall for time until Vosh arrives. Any suggestions, my one eyed pupil?”

Mordred waited expectantly.

This was my chance.

Sometimes all or nothing is the only game we have and our lives are the only stakes we can bet with. Our fortune depends on the spin of a wheel, -the roll of the dice, where everything converges to take a new form, or blows apart in our faces.

In general, all or nothing is a terrible way to run your life.

In specifics, it can't be helped.

The colors around me got sharper, the sounds crisp and distinct.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood out at attention, and my limbs tingled. Maybe it was the wizard stuff waking in me.

I still don't know.

“We need to make a play,” he jabbed at me.

That's when it hit me. -I hadn't thought of it since high school football.

“Oh, maybe I could think of something.”

How about the truth, I thought. The truth hurts, doesn't it?

I had a whole lot of pain to dish out...

“How about if I turned traitor?”

“What?”

“Listen, Mordred, -here's what we'll do...”

I began to speak softly and distinctly in his ear.

Renu and a few of the others listened in.

It took all of five minutes.

I was playing ball with him for real.

He just didn't know the play was the old double reverse.

* * *

Mordred marched in with my arm around his throat and holding my crossbow cocked at his temple. I cleared my throat rather loudly and talked to the reptile.

“Excuse me your most high Excellency. It seems we have another unforeseen change of plans.”

The Lizard hissed, “What isss thisss?”

Then she quickly made a move to reach into one of her pouches....

“Not so fast, you fork-tongued fuck,” I warned her, “Or our Lordshit's head will be leaking brains all over the floor. Move your claws away from your body and keep them out at your scaly warted sides.” I gestured to the Haar, who had his saber drawn and silently approached her in the commotion.

“Renu, if that smelly thing so much as moves an inch, cut her head off, - we can always use another wall decoration. -If the tail bothers you, cut that off too.”

The Lizard shook with rage, but remained motionless. Its eyes glittered with hate. Mordred started to speak, “I beg your forgiveness...”

I interrupted. “Stop begging Morddy. It makes me sick. As a matter of fact I'm sick of all of this.”

Mordred turned his head around and whispered through clenched teeth, “Enjoying yourself?”

I nodded and spoke out in a louder voice, “The time for truth is here.”

I searched the eyes of everyone in the cavern, then began...

“I must confess that ... like a lot of you, I just got thrown into this mess without much choice.

However, I do know the court in Avalon , -they made me a knight.”

The men began to stir and postured menacingly.

I hurried, “I don't want to betray them. -Just as important, I don't want to betray you and those other poor bastards who need to escape this wasteland. -I know we can work something out.”

I looked around the cavern and asked, “Who really wants to die today?”

There were no takers. But the soldiers weren’t exactly cheering me on either. I tried again. “Look, -before I got mixed up with all of this wizard and magic stuff I was just an ordinary schmuck who couldn’t tell his ass from a hole in the ground.”

A voice from the men interrupted me. “Wot’s a schmuck?”

Someone chimed in, “ ‘E means e’s a wanker like tha rest of yew sorry buggers.”

A few men broke up in laughter and some of the tension dissipated.

I turned to Mordred and said, “But I have learned a few things since I started.” I jabbed my finger “*THIS* is an Ass.” Most of the group snickered.

Then I pointed at the reptile.

“And this is the hole in the ground for each and every one of us.”

The men became silent. But it was a quiet filled with an explosive tension that could blow any moment. I started giving orders.

“Renu, move our leapin’ lizard friend away from the Door, she makes me nervous. ”

Renu growled and the Saar stepped forward.

“Very good. Thanks. Now... I want everyone to just take it easy and relax. We’re going to wait for the cavalry.”

I nudged Mordred with the point of the bolt.

“Do what he says,” he barked.

The Door flickered out after another few moments, and the cavern was still except for the occasional clanking of armor and weapons. I held Mordred as a shield, and Renu guarded the reptile. After fifteen minutes of forever, Vosh and his men burst in. Twenty-five archers leveled their bows at the Saar. I stretched, “Took you long enough.”

Mordred cocked his fist to take a roundhouse swing at my nose.

“Of all the IMPUDENT....!”

I weaved back and said, “Temper, temper. -you thought it was a good idea.”

“You insolent upstart ...”

The Saar was on her hind legs too, outraged all over again.

“A trick? You betray usss?”

“Not really,” Mordred stated calmly, “Just a little bit of, what do your people call it, One Eye, - insurance? Commander Vosh is only here to keep you company until we return for additional help.”

“And these weapons pointed at mee?”

Mordred was slickly sincere, “Oh, not at *you*, your Excellency. At the *Door*. Which of course you’ll be keeping open.”

Mordred smiled. “Of course they’ll fire at anything that attempts to take your exalted presence away from where you stand.”

“Or you if you move one damn inch.” I added.

The Lizard cocked her head and stood her ground. She made that horrid gasping sound that was the Saar’s sorry excuse for a laugh.

“Very well,” she hissed, apparently amused. “Thiss one will wait here, jusst ass sshe intended.”

Mordred gave a courteous bow, “I have the utmost confidence in that, your Excellency.” At this point, he could afford to be polite.

Then he turned to me and scowled.

“And didn’t I tell you, never, ever to call me Morddy?”

“Realism, sire.” I turned to the men who were present. I took a breath.

Now was the time.

“Didn’t you guys believe that our act was for real?”

The men who were present nodded in the affirmative.

I lifted my bow again and pointed it at Mordred’s head.

In a smooth and deadly voice I played my next card.

“That’s ‘cause it is.”

* * *

Everybody was frozen.

I put on my best mad-dog look and yelled.

“Anyone moves and I swear to God that I will kill him.

Right now.

Right here.

Really.

Look in my eyes if you think I’m lying.

-I have nothing to lose here.”

I looked as if I would be happy to keep my word.

“Listen up,” I gestured to the Saar. “That thing over there killed your worlds. It’ll kill the next one you go to. And the next. And the next. Even Morddy here doesn’t trust them.”

By this time Mordred’s eyes were bulging out of his head and he was foaming at the mouth.

“You all want a home, a chance at life.”

I pointed to the now quivering and apoplectic wizard.

“All he wants is revenge, and he’ll sacrifice anything to get it.”

“The man gave us refuge.” Vosh protested.

“He gave you shit. The moment the lizard got here, this world began to die. Crops died, no children were born, -everything began to fall apart. That’s how they operate. The wizard is blinded by ambition. Don’t let yourselves be led by the nose the same way.”

The fifty or so troopers in the room muttered in agitation.

Her Excellency the reptile began to make a move and found Renu’s sword digging at its throat.

I blurted, “I can get you a world of your own. A safe world.”

Mordred protested, “Don’t listen to him.”

I jabbed the arrow point into his temple.

“Shut up.”

I nodded at the commander. “So... Vosh, I’m going to make this your call. These are your men, and the people of Coventry are your people.”

I gestured disdainfully to the wizard and the Saar.

“Do you really trust *them*?”

Vosh held his tongue, watching.

“I know this Merlin.” I went on hurriedly.

“He doesn’t want a war. We can negotiate, -find a new home for all of us.”

Mordred spit out, “You’re dead One Eye, *whatever* happens, you are dead and you are mine.”

Erol walked over to me and pulled out his sword.

“Beg pardon, your Lordship, but if yer don’t put a sock init, I’ll be moran ‘appy to sheath my blade.”

I gave him a grateful look of thanks. -I needed the momentum.

“Keep the lizard here. We’ll take just a small force and try to parlay.”

I laughed in self-depreciation.

“If I’m wrong, -you still have a way to get out. Hell you can even kill me. But if I’m right...”

Vosh looked at me, as if sizing me up for a coffin.

He turned his unflinching gaze to Mordred, then to the lizard. Weighing all the odds, he shrugged.

“Seems as if you have us by the balls laddy.”

Mordred grimaced, “I’m not going anywhere.”

I replied, “Fine by me. If you stay here it’ll be six feet under. -Your Lordship’s choice.”

The entire cavern went silent again -waiting for the bomb to explode.

I’d rather blow it up myself, so...

“Tell you what, your Lordshit, - I’ll give you some time to think it over. Open your mouth.”

Erol provided some motivation with a sharp prod to the wizard's side.

The wizard stretched his gums wide. I calmly shifted the arrow point directly into the soft palate of Mordred’s jaws. I let Neesha’s death to mind, as it was never far away.

I let my eyes reflect the blackness in my soul.

“A count of three should be enough... One, Two, ...”

“Op!” Mordred gagged. He knew a murderous look when he saw it.

His ambition had made him crazy, but not half-witted.

He nodded in defeat.

I withdrew the arrow.

“I’ll come along,” he said with resignation.

“No doubt,” I said. “With my arrow at the base of your skull the whole time. As you said, -we call it... insurance. ”

The wizard glared balefully.

The lizard found this entire scenario vastly amusing. It began its gasping wheeze again. I nodded to Renu, who swiftly whacked it in the head.

There was an abrupt squawk, and then silence.

“Now ,” I addressed Mordred, “what do you think we should do about Her Excellencies playmates waiting to ‘help’ us in the Borderlands?”

“Feed them your scurvy hide?”

Vosh interjected, “Keep them between your troops and the forces of Avalon, lad. That ways, they’ll ‘ave more than enough trouble on their minds an think twice, afore attackin’.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet, son. I still may ‘ave to kill yah.”

“Fair enough.” I turned to address the soldiers around us. “Now, who’s willing to go with me?”

Even as I said it, futility nibbled my heels with its little rat teeth.

Somehow, some way -there was going to be a battle regardless of who was leading this expedition.

I was in charge now.

Shit.

Dawns aren’t always beautiful. Sometimes they’re gray and miserable, with the sun trapped behind threatening clouds.

I wasn’t only risking the little of my remaining life.

I was also asking these persons to do the same.

Then again, it may be their last chance anyway, screwed as it was.

It was tough shit for all of us.

A chorus of voices greeted my return from the hypothetical.

All of them affirming.

“I’ll go,” I heard.

“And I.. And I.. Me too ...Aye, I’ll join yer... I’m yer man, One Eye...” -and assorted growls and whoops.

Before too long, every trooper in the crowd had volunteered to join me.

I grinned and muttered, “Pack of fools.”

I selected twenty of the best, with the help of Erol and Renu.

It was time to go.

I saluted Vosh and said, “Someone will be back for you. If not, then we didn’t make it, and I guess you’ll have to resort to lesson number one.”

Vosh returned the salute, and addressed the volunteers with me.

“I’ll take it as insubordination if yew allow anyone to kill this cheeky bastard. If he’s tellin’ the truth, he’s saving all our asses.”

He paused.

“If he’s lyin’, I want to hang ‘im myself.”

I nodded to him and he nodded back.

“Thank’s Vosh.”

I calmed down and did my focusing thing.

The Door opened in ripples of energy and color.

Pushing Mordred in front of me, we fools rushed off where wise men would be foolish to tread.

If they had any choice, that is...

Final Battle Part Two

The Saar's pets were already waiting for us as soon as we popped into the Borderlands, ambiguous shapes in the wavering grays.

-Five creatures whose parents must have surely committed suicide at first sight of their offspring. Failed genetic experiments at least, unless you were trying to win the Most Ugly Stinking Vicious category at the Transylvanian State Fair. Vaguely anthropomorphic and insectile, they scuttled out of the mist and chittered their way over to our party.

Most had too many arms, too many claws, too many eyes and by far what big teeth, grandma. Just way too much all around.

The only good thing about them looked like their capability to do grievous bodily harm. Mordred quipped, "I'm sure you speak their language."

The putrid stench that wafted over us was enough to make a few of the men retch.

One of the beasts came forward and croaked at me.

"You order, we obey." (Only it was more like *Ooo ord -ee o bay.*)

Its breath stank of decomposing flesh.

I shoved Mordred further to the side, and whispered, "One word outta you and you'll be a porcupine."

So, I guess I became our spokesmodel.

"Okay, er, uh, -guys? We're looking for other humans here in the corridor. Can you find them?"

The thing nodded its head "Yes" and dripping saliva splattered to the ground.

"Good, but you're not to attack unless we give the word. Got it? Not to attack."

The creature gave me a puzzled look, and hesitantly nodded again.

"Repeat that after me, so I know you understand", I ordered.

"Nah to tack uness ee giv erd."

"Good Fido. Smart boy." I encouraged. The creature looked annoyed, and looking closer I realized my mistake.

“Sorry, -I meant that’s a good girl. A very good and pretty girl. Now tell your other...uh... friends.”

The thing actually preened, then went over and chattered away at the rest of the beauty pageant losers who’d been busy growling at each other.

All of a sudden, there was a free-for-all pile up as the creatures turned on each other.

Fido seemed to be at the top of the pecking order and she bullied the pack into submission. The ruckus stopped and she scuttled over to me.

“Good job, Fido. Beautiful girl.”

To my immense disgust, she licked my face and rubbed against my thigh in a display of affection.

Erol said, “Yew two look SO cute to’gethar. Think yew could get a date after we sort this mess out?”

The rest of the troopers broke up.

“That’s enough. -Fido, lets find those other humans.”

The beast trotted off with its bunch of fiends.

Somehow, the creatures were able to navigate the corridor without its typical resistance. Our band followed in their reeking wake.

Maybe that’s what kept us together, -the sheer stink...

But it wasn’t long before we saw shadows in the shrouds of fog ahead.

* * *

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

Holy de-ja-vu I thought.

Man, I was as close to cracking up as you come.

Never been so wired in all my life.

If my heart could beat any faster my body would take off.

Merl was here!

Merl. -I wanted to run up to the old bastard, hug him and say, hey, -it's me, I finally made it back!

Yeah, but how the hell could he know...

It was all I could do to keep myself still besides Mordred.

Then I saw Guy and the blood rage came up.

I found my hand tightening on the grip of the bow that covered Mordred's head.

No! I told myself. STOP IT! Get control, or we're all dead here.

Then I saw myself. It seemed like years...

My younger and blissfully ignorant self. I felt a warm rush of affectionate regret.

Brother if you only knew.

Then I heard the ring of steel as swords pulled from scabbards.

I shoved Mordred ahead of me through the Saar's pets.

Fido tried to nuzzle me some more, and I shoved her too.

She gave me a hurt look.

"DON'T ATTACK!"

To the human monster I said, "Greet them cordially."

Mordred smiled balefully at me, then turned to face the Avalon contingent.

"My, my, my, What do we have here. Ah, the traitor welcoming committee from my own home! With my favorite teacher! How very special of you. You really shouldn't have."

Damn, it was the same. The same words. The same everything.

I knew Mordred's obsessive crap was coming up, threatened by death or not. Maybe I made a big mistake in letting him start.

He continued working himself into a fit, "*You-really-shouldn't-have!*"

The idiot was practically foaming. I pushed him aside, bow still cocked and arrow at his neck.

I stepped into view, attempting to run the show.

“Joe,” I called out, (immediately beginning to question words that popped out of my mouth seeming to have a life of their own).

“I’ve heard all about you.”

I looked disparagingly at my enemy and jabbed the arrow in emphasis, “From our most beneficent Lordshit, Mordred.”

I softened my voice, “All of you throw down your arms, and you won’t be hurt, I promise you.”

I remembered the Saar said the beasts wouldn’t attack unless ordered or threatened. -But the Saars were liars.

I heard the human reptile, -Guy the betrayer.

Barely, but I heard him.

Guy the killer whispered “E’s a liar.”

My younger version spoke up next with, “My friend says you lie.-Now which one of those beauties is your old lady?”

Renu laughed, just like he did before. Things were not going so well.

“Shut up, Renu.” I couldn’t afford distractions now.

For whatever reason, Mordred had calmed down, maybe finally getting some sense inside his thick head.

Or was it my arrow point pricking his neck?

Then the dark mage laughed and said, “Perhaps we’ll introduce you shortly, but my esteemed ‘colleague’ has insisted on a little talk first. Hindsight now tells me that *most all apprentice wizards should be killed off at the very first opportunity.*”

I realized then that fucking Mordred had just ordered a hit.

Guy of Glouster was standing right behind the Joe that was.

Behind the younger ME.

The traitor knight shifted his weight, took a step back and drew his sword and he looked Mordred in the eye.

I watched Mordred nod.

My Joe hadn't a clue, and neither did I until now.

Now I really had no choice...

As if I really ever did.

I finally understood more about destiny than I ever wanted to learn.

Guy of Glouster was going to stab my younger self right in the back.

His sword was poised and he had a sneer on his face.

The same sword that gutted Neesha.

The same look of contempt.

All of my hate, rage and pain directed the fluid motion of my arm as I aimed my bow and fired.

Merlin only saw this move as the enemy's attack, and yelled "Beware."

He fired his wand, with Mordred quickly retaliating.

In a horrid ballet of retribution and chaos, I watched Guy jerk as a deadly arrow lodged in his throat.

My hand burned with a thousand flames and my bow exploded from Merlin's blast.

The white wizard fell to the ground blasted by Mordred's own lightning.

My right hand felt numb. My soul and heart too.

It was all happening again. All hell broke loose ...

As it is, as it was, and as it always will be my fate at this unique time and place in the universe.

* * *

I was stunned physically and emotionally, surrendering to futility.

The Saar's hybrid monsters began a roaring attack as Avalon's guard went on the offensive.

Battle lust seized everyone.

War cries and growls were the music of the day as the ringing of swords bid entry into homes of soft flesh.

The silence between those notes was filled with soft moans.

I was standing in a daze until I heard myself scream.

My other self.

“NOOO! NOOO!” The sound wrenched me with its torment.

It was all too familiar.

To remember that heart rendering anguish, and to also know that I myself brought it about, and that I had no other choice...

It's more than I could bear.

I watched the apprentice Joe wade through the battle directly towards me.

Fido looked like she was going to attack him, but caught a sniff and purred.

We were one and the same after all.

She actually protected him from harm by throwing herself at another monster. He saw none of this. His vision was clouded with hate and single-minded vengeance.

I remembered.

I coldly watched him approach, -my assassin to be.

Younger Joe was raving, “You killed my friend, you lying fuck.”

“It was necessary.”

I couldn't restrain the look of grim satisfaction on my face, even though I knew he misunderstood completely.

So I meant to apologize, to connect here, and I shook my head and said,

“Shit does happen. Consider it a personal favor to you and Avalon.”

I was just about to add that ‘I saved your life and Guy was a spy,’ and all that good stuff, but my first words didn't exactly make a favorable impression.

Quite the contrary.

My former self got even more pissed off and started to lose it completely, cutting me off. He screamed something about killing Barb and Shawn and seeing me dead. My only certainty was that he'd get his wish and live to regret it. -He'd live for a while. Then he charged me.

I laughed and said something like, "Just when you think you've stopped being self destructive..." I could tell he thought I was laughing at him.

-Which I was in a convoluted way.

I watched him ineptly swing his sword with reckless abandonment.

He was strong and quick, and even though I could see how I could kill him five times over, my right hand was weak from Merlin's bolt. I trapped a wild thrust and started to bait him.

Sometimes I'm too self depreciating.

"You know -you could have spent some time trying to learn to use that thing."

I took a lazy swing I knew he would duck.

"I've been busy," my other self panted.

Good, I thought -maybe now we can get into an actual conversation and end this stupidity.

"Me too," I said. "You don't know what I've been through to get to this moment -my brother."

However, the fact of the matter was that my previous version was trying to kill me, had a pretty big toad sticker and he wasn't in bad shape.

He tried to stab me again, and I parried it, but took a shallow cut on my side.

Damn.

Never knew I scored that last time.

It pissed me off, and I blurted out, "And -to think that Beth will be waiting for me -not you, you idealistic little"

My younger self picked that moment to slice full speed ahead, damn the torpedoes. My training took over and I did what Neesha did to me on countless occasions -flipped the sword out of the beginner's hand.

Just like before.

And at that instant, I got fatalistic again.

Despite my best efforts, everything has gone exactly the way it once did. The best that I might do is minimize the damage...

I grimaced and touched my ruined eye.

I saw my younger self still unbowed.

Had to admire the pluck.

“Well,” I cocked an eyebrow, “don’t just stand there, get your sword and let’s be finished with this for once and for all.

The younger Joe was wary and disbelieving.

“No, it’s for real. You get a chance to dive for the sword. -Really!”

I watched the other me do a tuck and roll and come up with his weapon.

I said, “Nice move, bud. Now get on with this.”

He screamed and rushed in.

I went on auto-pilot.

I had rehearsed these moves so many times in the courtyard that they all but do themselves.

That was the problem, because at the end of my parry and counter I realized that I had just dealt a killing blow.

At the very last second I turned my blade so the edge didn’t cut.

Still, it was hard enough to splinter bones.

I heard them crack and winced.

Damn it.

I remembered *exactly* how it felt.

And now I was really tired. I couldn’t change anything. I might as well be done with this.

I remembered that Mordred’s creature (yes, me-myself and I) got me to attack the very last time through further taunting.

So I went for it.

“Some hero. Come on now, how about another chance, or are you going to use that pea of a brain you have?”

There, that ought to do it, I thought.

Besides the downright hatred, I noticed a glimmer of understanding beginning to take shape in my former self.

The understanding of how to get rid of me.

About being the key.

Great, just great, I thought.

Pretty soon I'll get sacked and we'll both roll off to God knows where, and I'm done with.

I started to feel some self-pity.

Well, death would certainly be a kind of relief, after all of this crap.

I mused on this for a second or so and pretty much resigned myself to the fact that my number was up.

I let my attention wander to the murky field of battle.

It looked like everybody was losing.

The monsters were chewing up both sides, and the wizards were winging assorted blazing lights at each other.

A few individuals lay prone and silent on the ground in puddles of blood.

The rest were screaming and swinging.

Not a pretty sight.

I was sick of this shit.

For just a moment, one tiny second, I thought I saw other figures materializing out of the mists at the fringe of the battle.

-Right behind the younger Joe who was getting to his knees and facing me. I hadn't seen this before...

A weird purple glow emanated from the figure in front.

It was yet another wizard with a wand.

He waved.

It was ME.

“Attaboy,” I smiled in relief.

Then I was detoured by linebacker Joe. He was the bull. I was that red flag.

I got hit and we tumbled through the mists.

Gone.

Back to Hell again.

* * *

I hit the ground rolling, trying to grab on to anything, anything at all to stop my rush into oblivion.

My lungs burned from the sulfur and heat, and the ground and sky spun wildly.

I felt my body go over the edge of the cliff, and with one final desperate effort, I hooked my hand on to the wall of rock.

Lucky for me, it was the hand with the steel belted radial claws.

I was hanging there, just barely, and my body swayed from the force of the fall. The talons could break through the rock at any moment.

I looked down. -Big mistake.

Thousands of feet below was a pit of volcanic fire.

A churning urn of burning funk, as the song says.

I told myself not to panic, but my reason got lost in my body’s reactions. The rest of me was surfing a tide of fear that drowned any assurance of logic.

“Help me,” I yelled, “Joe, *Damn it* get over here.” –God, I sounded just like my old man. I heard my other self groan and crawl over to the precipice.

Little pebbles and bits of rock cascaded into my face.

I shook my head, swayed, and panicked some more.

Most of you would think that after all I'd been through, surely I could stand a little more.

Don't kid yourself.

Even a good rope will wear and tear will eventually fray and ... snap.

"Listen to me Joe, You've got to listen."

For a fleeting moment back there I thought I was going to live.

"It's almost over, just one thing left. Please. Just help me up."

I had hope now; -so I also had fear.

I heard the fright in my own voice.

Mainly because, that last wizard I saw.... was me. There was a chance I would get outta this.

Joe with two eyes said, "Damn it! Why couldn't you just have died?"

No can do, I thought. Not now.

Young Joe extended a helping hand, just as I knew he would.

I took a firm grip. But my hand was still injured from Merlin's bolt.

As I did I said, "Trust me... Can't say you'll thank me for this later. Just want to tell you..." I hesitated.

At this point I was thinking, fuck fate and destiny and all that shit.

I'm not going to put my own eye out.

I'm just going to let him pull me up, and then we'll see, won't we?

But my wounded hand was slipping.

And my talons broke free of the rocks.

So fate spit on me again.

In a blind instinctive reaction I clawed out for my life...

the younger Joe's head got in the way...and in the blink of that proverbial eye, my talons impaled my own flesh and bone.

I will never see things the way I used to.

I heard the screams and whispered, "I'm sorrier... than you'll ever know."

Which, by the way, isn't true.

I know.

Then I did the next most inane thing imaginable.

Horrified at my actions, I put all of my weight on my damaged hand on the cliff. The hand, of course, I couldn't grip with.

At the same time my past self is screaming in agony, as you would if someone ripped your eye out.

Naturally, he shook his head free, throwing me off balance.

The laws of gravity also applied in this realm.

If hell has any intrinsic quality, it's gravity.

The blood was an excellent lubricant for my already weak hand.

My grip broke free and I plummeted into the abyss.

* * *

As I fell, I concentrated in that very special way I learned.

Everything and nothing were the same. An updraft caught my cloak and I shrugged it off.

I pondered endings and beginnings, and the full circle of my life.

A Door opened after a hundred feet of free fall.

Above me, a bloody broken man with one eye saw a flapping black costume falling to its doom.

So it is with the appearance of things.

The man on the edge of a cliff said good-by to the way things once seemed and begins this history anew.

And yes, my story will repeat itself.

Or merely seem to -depending from when and where you look.

* * *

My body softly bounced off all that which is possibly tangible. I got up slowly, groaned and wearily brushed myself off.

Then I staggered off at a steady but slow pace.

I had the drunken gait of a man tired to the marrow of his bones.

Frayed as I was, a lot of loose ends had to be wrapped up.

The newest version of myself had a wand.

I closed my one good eye to visualize a place I had only read about.

Where a Tree was God.

As in all journeys, I put one foot in front of the other and the mists gradually enfolded me.

They blanketed me in a soft embrace like a nurturing mother.

Delivering me into new domains.

The Tree of Life

There was the smell of green and the feel of lush carpet underfoot.

A quiet similar to gliding underwater in a tranquil pond, -no birds singing, nor any sounds of animals, except...

Windsongs softly playing chimes through the air.

I opened my eye and looked around.

I saw the Door was in the trunk of one of the massive trees that surrounded me.

I spun around again and surveyed this new world.

The first impression was of a giant church with a stain-glassed roof.

No. That wasn't right. I was... I was...

I was in a forest.

An *alien* forest for certain.

The trees were thousands of feet tall, and hundreds of feet wide.

Graceful columns holding the roof of the heavens in their lofty branches. -Made the Redwood forests look like a bunch of scrub brush.

There was no debris on the forest floor, only a lush matting of soft... white moss where the sun's rays directly hit.

Yet more often, patterns of blue and green and yellow floated and...

I looked upwards. Branches started a few hundred feet up where they intertwined. Light filtered through fifty-foot translucent and colored leaves.

As they brushed each other, a gentle ringing tolled.

The leaves themselves were all the hues of the spectrum, and the softly glowing rainbows poured down like waterfalls, drenching the world about me in moving tinted glows.

The trees grew at regular intervals of a quarter mile or so.

The trunks were a deep rich brown with veins of corded blue about them.

As I watched, the network of lines seemed to pulsate.

I stared, entranced. The air was sweet in my lungs, -a heady ambrosia compared to the hell I'd just been through.

I filled my chest and softly exhaled.

There was peace here.

A feeling of quiet serenity.

The trees went on forever, and I remembered that it was really only one tree.

Ygissdrill, -another god of sorts.

A Being I needed help from most desperately.

Calling or yelling out felt like a sacrilege in this place.

But did I have a choice? How do you get the attention of a tree?

Call its name?

Hell, I couldn't even pronounce "Ygissdrill", and what happens when you piss off a Deity by screwing *that* up.

I scratched my head and shrugged.

Impulsively, I put two hands over my mouth and bellowed.

"HELLO! -ANYBODY HOME?"

The stillness prevailed. I sat down on the mossy surface and waited.

I didn't wait long.

From overhead, forms detached themselves from the leaves and fluttered down in a lazy spiral.

They looked a lot like butterflies, and their markings were miniature versions of the beautiful coloring of the trees.

They were just so pretty that I had to smile.

Until they got closer.

I realized that each was the size of an eagle, with metal plated bodies, wicked, multifaceted eyes and stingers like scorpions.

By the time I managed to pull out my sword, the swarm was upon me and their chittering mandibles devoured the silence as they attacked at once.

I felt a sharp sting on the back of my neck.

I immediately lost all my strength.

My weakened fingers couldn't even hold on to the sword and it fell from my grasp.

Another creature darted in my face, curving its' thorax downward and I watched in horror as it stabbed its' stinger deep into my chest.

Liquid flame tunneled through me and the beast flitted away as I crumpled to the ground, paralyzed.

My one good eye was frozen open and my face was parallel to the ground.

I could see the things still hovering around in my peripheral vision.

The rest of my body became ice cold, except where I was stung.

Those parts of me still burned with an agonizing fire.

I would have screamed but the muscles locked in my throat.

I began to feel another kind of burning in my chest.

My lungs weren't working, -weren't pulling in any oxygen.

My sword was inches from my face and I strained every muscle to move my body *towards* ...

All of my will became focused; steel drawing to the steel...

The sword *shifted* on the ground.

I felt a brief moment of exultation.

Then I saw the ropy, blue-veined tendrils slithering from underneath my weapon and pushing through the earth all around me.

Something Else was moving the blade because it was in the way.

The appendages curled through the air like cobras weaving towards my still form.

I was beyond horror when needles emerged from tips of the wormy things.

The tentacles struck, and I numbly felt them rip into my skin, burrowing deep into my body, probing...violating...

I shuddered and went into spasms, the cords jerking me around like some puppet.

They had penetrated me almost everywhere.

One final coil lunged directly into my mouth.

My vision began to dim and the world outside muted as all colors and sounds faded into oblivion.

But that was only outside.

Inside, I continued screaming.

The roaring fountain of torment gushed into white hot agony as my soul was ripped from my flesh.

I saw the butterfly things hover over my lifeless body only a moment before they danced skywards.

It was a delicate flight to music they alone could hear.

I died.

* * *

AND IN THE DREAM OF THE TREE CALLED Ygissdrill...

Every branch grew another branch that continued to branch out endlessly.

Each branch had a leaf that collected and reflected the LIGHT.

They were MANY and ONE.

There was no transition.

Neesha is wearing a flowered summer dress, and the sun warms us both.

It's a small bistro and we're sitting in the garden patio, surrounded by a profusion of flowers and vines that spreads across the old brick walls. Birds flit

on the other empty tables and the cobblestone floor scavenging for bread.

It was my favorite place back home, -one I could barely afford.

I tasted the wine in my mouth without remembering sipping any.

I sat across the table from her in a severe state of shock and confusion.

Just staring in wonderment.

One of her eyebrows arched, and she smiled coyly, reaching over and touching my arm reassuringly.

I jumped when I felt the contact, -silken and tender.

“Well M’lord, t’would seem as if the cat has indeed taken hold of your tongue.”

“Uh... uh...” I began to hyperventilate.

Maybe you would too, if the dead had come back to life.

Her eyes filled with liquid concern and she swiftly pushed her chair back and came over, bending down on one knee and grasping both my shoulders in her hands.

“My poor sweet knight...I’ve been so worried...”

I gasped, trying to untangle the multitude of conflicting feelings binding me immobile.

I exhaled and inhaled slowly.

I could smell her perfume and feel the heat of her hands on me.

I broke down then, grabbing Neesha hard, crushing her to me and sobbing.

“God, I’m sorry, I’m so, so sorry. I saw them...”

“Shhh... Not your fault... It’s all right.”

I was soothed and the pain gently subsided.

There was no transition.

“Don’t ask any questions please. We’ve waited long enough.”

I felt myself nodding and I pulled back to search her eyes.

They were deep wells glistening with love and desire.

And I was so parched from all my trials.

I realized we were on a bed together naked.

There was a gossamer canopy and veils enfolding our privacy.

Windchimes tinkled beams of delicate melody like fireflies at dusk.

I reached out to cup her face and she took my hand and laid it on her full and rounded breast. I felt her nipple stiffen under my palm as she gave a little moan of yearning.

She reached both arms around my neck and moved her face closer to kiss me.

I tasted sandalwood and lavender.

Surges of electric current darted from her soft lips and the tongue she lazily slid across my teeth.

Then -more urgent as she opened herself to me and I to her.

Our hunger devoured our separateness and we joined.

Our bodies fell back into the bed and she spread her legs and arched her hips,

-pulling me deep into her. I felt myself enclosed in her slippery heat and

we began our own dance of need, of giving and receiving...

Until her cries aroused me to that point of no return and we both shuddered, riding waves of ecstasy and release...

...and the currents of pleasure took us to far distant shores...

Sometime during this forever, she looked up at me, smiled impishly and said,

“ I... yield!”

I laughed, rolled to the left and pulled her up on top of me.

“Your advantage now.”

She took it, ...and the music of our bodies continued the timeless duet with rhythmic surging of affinity.

When the next crescendo faded after a thousand years or so, we snuggled together and I gazed at her silently...

“ Uh... You know I have some questions...”

Neesha nodded, “Of course you do.”

There was no transition.

*Both of us are sitting on easy chairs. It's a cozy room with Victorian furniture
Dotted with busts of Plato, Socrates and assorted thinkers.
Merlin tapped his pipe into the fireplace once and drew on the clean shaft before packing it
again. He was wearing faded Levi's and a red flannel shirt.*

He picked a long branch out from the small flames and touched his briar, puffing.

The light flickered over the face of a man far younger than I remembered.

"Merl? Is it you?"

The aromatic smoke wafted over reminding me of my grandfather's cherry blend.

"You must be Joe," the wizard smiled politely and extended his hand.

I took it in both of mine and peered intently in the wizard's face.

"Neesha told us a lot about you, Joe. We're glad you made it."

"You don't know me? You don't remember me?"

*The wizard laughed, "That would be quite a trick, lad," I've been..." he gestured around him,
"here... for several hundred years I think, -your time."*

"Is this that, uh... Haven place you talked about?"

"I don't recall talking with you at all, but, to answer your question, No, -we're with the Tree."

He puffed out a wisp of smoke that converged into branches and roots before it dissipated.

"What?"

"You came here for the wand, didn't you?"

"Yeah, -but..."

"Well, I have to instruct you on its use."

"But..."

"You don't have the luxury of the time, lad..."

With that, the wizard stared at me and begins to murmur. I strained to hear but the words rush through me and I couldn't seem to catch their meaning and I couldn't even protest. The world about me flickered in and out of light and darkness as the constant droning flooded my awareness.

After eons, he stopped and I almost fell over.

"What! What the hell did you just do?"

"A shortcut. You'll know what to do when you most need to do it."

The wizard pulled me closer. "Now I'll tell you...the TREE is it's own world, Joseph-One Eye-whom-I-do not-know. We, this..." -his hand swept a circle around us, "are all the Tree's province. I'm not sure how to explain it."

A cup of mulled wine appeared in his hand. He took a sip, smacking his lips.

"Ah, that's good! Care to indulge?"

I disdainfully declined. "You always were short on explaining."

Merlin acquiesced, "Perhaps a poor analogy is better than none. Now...what do you know about virtual reality? "

"Not much."

"Your world, -earth late 20th century, -correct?"

I nodded.

"Your world has computers that can interface directly with the senses, does it not?"

"Yeah, -there are these... games and stuff."

"Well, -let us say that the Tree is an intelligence that provides the same opportunities. It can link directly with all of your senses, -taste, touch, vision, hearing and provide any experience that you desire."

"Then this... all of this isn't real!"

"Perhaps you'd care to define reality."

I'd about had it. "Listen , -I'm starting to get really pissed..."

The wizard smiled. "Who are you really angry with?"

There was no transition.

Mordred walked with me through the gardens of Avalon. It was raining slightly, just enough to cool us from the heat of the afternoon sun.

"Of course, I've always been a bit... difficult."

I raised an eyebrow.

Mordred cleared his throat, "Ah...well, though nothing like I've heard about recently. Must have been a whopping pain in the arse for all concerned, aye?"

I nodded ruefully.

"Well I was counting so much to be king, you know. It's quite upsetting to be robbed of your inheritance. -Never liked the wizard stuff much at all. Much better at strategy and swordplay. Devising taxes, that sort of thing.."

I nodded again.

"Speaking of swordplay, it would be best if we went a few rounds, seeing that you'll probably have to battle my more recent self back in the Borderlands."

There was no transition.

I was now in a courtyard with my saber in my hand, -my eyes are fixed on the man pointing a blade at my throat. Mordred darted in under my guard and I felt the stinging bite of the blade on my left side.

"Damn it", I gasped, assuming a defensive position.

Mordred saluted me and said, "Let me talk about my weaknesses..."

He feinted a strike, then danced back and smirked.

"Few that they are."

I felt the hunger for revenge and...

There was no transition.

Igor was crunching a porcelain bowl with great relish in the kitchen, where he

also prepared a meal.

I was standing next to him looking into a vast pot.

Confused. Ready to attack...

The Trodge stirred the concoction, -which smelled quite wonderful, -with a large wooden spoon.

“So, Neesha told me my later self used the wand and made a copy of her and...”

Igor took a spoonful and slurped it, “VOILA!... the Tree took her in. She lives again.

“There is no death here, Joseph One Eye.”

“But Neesha died, I saw her die!”

“Not here. Never here.”

There was no transition.

Merlin shook his head and remarked, “Now, - that Freud of yours, he had it half right.”

My lips were pursed in the thin line that holds a biting remark.

“To join with and become One, Joe. You think of it as death.”

I groaned in frustration.

“What the HELL are you talking about?”

The wizard closed his hand and held out his pinkie and asked, “What is this?”

“It’s your goddamn little finger,” I said with disgust.

Merlin opened the rest of his fingers and asked, “Now, -what is this?”

“It’s your hand, -asshole.”

Merlin slapped me and said, “You know, I didn’t have to cut the little finger off to become a hand, did I? And you can do so much more with a hand Joe.”

I leaned over and gripped the wizard by the shirt shaking him ...

“Tell me the truth, GODDAMN IT...!”

There was no transition

“Don’t be mad”, she winced, “he’s only trying to be accurate.”

I saw I had my hands on her shoulders and was gripping them with white knuckled strength.

I let go, appalled at myself and pushed off her.

There was no transition

Merlin said, "Get a hold of yourself, lad."

"I'm trying... I keep on drifting back and forth to..."

"I know, -that's the way of this place until you get the hang of it."

"What's happening to me?"

The wizard took another drag of his pipe, "Well, to tell you the truth, -you're being copied."

"Copied?"

"Yes, Ygissdrill, ah, -the Tree, is making a replica of your intelligence, personality, memories, your essence to -join with us here."

I patted myself on the chest, then reached over to feel Merlin.

I questioned softly, "I'm the real me, ...aren't I?"

"Harrumph," Merlin cleared his throat.

"We'd all like to think we're the real me."

"And... Neesha?"

"Ask her yourself."

There was no transition.

We're back at the cafe. It's the same setting, but a different season.

More like autumn.

She looked at me with those gorgeous eyes and I melted.

"I think I'm real", she whispered playfully, and pinched me.

I yelped. It was a hard pinch.

"You sure you're not a dream?"

She smiled and said, "I'm both and neither."

"Not you TOO!" I mock-groaned.

She playfully lifted her hand as if to smack me and I raised an arm to fend off the swat...

There was no transition.

Just in time to block Mordred's blade from slicing my head off.

"Very Good. Very Good! I'll make a swordsman out of you yet!"

I felt my body drenched with sweat and fatigue hit my arms like leaden weights.

It seems we've been in this battle for days, months, -years.

But I was still plenty mad.

"Somebody already did, your Lordshit."

Mordred gave me a taunting look and advanced with a flurry of slashes, smiling deviously.

I blocked them all with moderate effort. Then, I deliberately dropped my guard, hoping my opponent would lunge.

He did.

I stabbed him through the heart.

The blade entered quickly and fluidly, without resistance.

There was a moment as our eyes met. Mordred was surprised.

The derisive smile turned into a grimace of pain.

I realized that I should feel exalted, victorious, empowered.

I experienced none of these.

I was... just... emptied. Drained from being so confused, wearied of not understanding, fatigued from shifting from one dream to the next.

"I'm sorry," I gave up. "I can't play whatever this stupid game is anymore."

"Excellent!" Mordred proclaimed as blood poured from his mouth.

He looked down at his impaled chest with some amused impatience.

"Do you mind?"

I pulled the sword from his torso. A disgusting sucking sound echoed as the blade resisted parting from his flesh.

I watched while the ragged wound closed and the clothing repaired itself and the bloodstains disappeared.

“That stung more than a bit,” Mordred complained.

“I bet,” I commiserated.

There was no transition.

Merlin joined Neesha and me at the bistro. Igor was serving us his stew.

Mordred arrived and plopped himself down next to the girl.

My head was spinning.

They all just stared at me.

“Let me talk to the Tree,” I plead.

They all laughed at once.

“You are,” she said and winked.

“We’re all the Tree, lad. As you will be.” Merlin graciously added.

I felt a an overwhelming sense of terror and revulsion.

I stood up, and pushed myself away from them all; the sense of dread quickening my pulse.

“NO! NO!”

“There there, Joe -you’re also leaving.”

Neesha moved to touch me and I backed away, horrified.

She looked at me, wounded.

“Didn’t think you’d be such a whiner about it,” Mordred bantered.

“If I recall...,” Merlin turn to the dark mage, “You had panic attacks though out the entire translation... besides your material self going insane.”

“Well, ah, that was before...”

Igor chuckled.

Merlin was still amiable. “It’s the price for the bonewood wand. We all paid the piper.”

They all began to fade.

“What’s happening?” I started to panic.

Neesha said, “It’s time.” Her face was contrite and wistful.

“Good-bye and hello, Joseph One Eye,” Igor murmurs.

“Neesha!” I took a step towards her and she reached for my hand.

I felt her warm fingers on mine...and then watched her hand sink ghost-like into my own.

Words became fainter still.

“Remember, the wand is just an extension of your will.”

“If you go after that Beth girl you’ll start another civil war, -you know...

-it was bad enough that Arthur...”

“Shut up!”

“I love you...”

“I love...” I said...

*As the world imploded into pale fragments of color and sounds of wind chimes
echoed in the whiteness.*

* * *

I was flat on my back.

I opened my eye only to see the rainbow lights above me.

There was that immense stillness that could have filled me with awe, but my body was already preoccupied with stiffness and pain.

I tentatively moved my arms and legs to stretch a few of the knots out.

The knots held a protest rally, -then slowly dispersed.

All in all, I didn’t feel too bad.

As I raised my head to look down to my feet I saw... *IT.*

Laying on my chest; a slender rod of wood.

The bonewood wand.

I reached down for it and it felt warm and alive in my hand.

The sound of chimes laughed and gently brushed my ears.

“God...” I whispered softly.

At least one of Them.

I grasped the wand and got to one knee and picked up my sword, swaying a bit as I found my balance.

I looked around me and shook my head in disbelief, then turned and headed for the Door.

I felt a melancholy loss, but a loss of what I could not say.

Prior to stepping through I thought I heard Neesha call my name.

At first I berated myself for wishful thinking, but stopped anyway and listened hard.

Nothing.

I walked forward and disappeared in the swirl of light.

* * *

And in another world, -if one could call it that...

I sat at the table holding hands with Neesha, with the others now joined with the One and me.

Merlin said, “So now you understand.

I laughed, as my roots grew deeper.

Because I knew we’d all branch out to forever.

Back to the Drawing Board

Just because you think you *have* all the time in the world doesn't mean you won't feel a sense of urgency. Hands on a watch *tell* time.

They can't hold on to it.

I strode the corridors of Anywhen talking to myself.

I was no longer vengeful. -No longer filled with rage.

Some bitter sweetness perhaps.

Mordred was just plain nuts. Merlin was a manipulating, good intentioned pimp for the Haven crowd.

Maybe they were the real righteous guys in all of this but their methods stank like shit.

The Lizards, now -they were the real danger and would have to be dealt with. Beth, -who the hell knew what her problem was?

She had her own duties and obligations.

With that parting crack from -well, ... the *Tree people* was as good a term as any, -about starting a civil war...

I was having second thoughts about romance.

Maybe...

NO! -No maybes.

I had to take some decisive action and quit my bellyaching.

Hell, -the only ones I felt any real allegiance to were my friends from Coventry. Erol, Renu, -Vosh and the rest.

Basically, this hero business sucked. Plain sucked.

But the thousands in Coventry would die without a new home. Avalon had plenty of room, and I had given my word.

I had given my word to Arthur as well to protect the kingdom.

Shit.

I sighed and walked aimlessly. Deliberating. Calculating. Pondering. Bitching.

Strategizing, planning, and praying that somebody else would show up and take care of this mess.

Nobody did.

I could have walked away ... escaped.

What I dreamed of doing my whole life.

I had the freedom and power now.

But I was done with walking away.

After a while, -and who knows exactly long a while was in this place,

I put it all together and a grim and tight smile plastered itself on my face.

The one way I figured out how to be just and honorable here would get *everybody* enraged at me, screaming for my blood.

At least they all would be *equally* pissed.

It wouldn't be the first time I set myself up to be an object of contempt.

Nor the last.

You know, if God hadn't wanted the Ten Commandments broken he would have made them out of rubber instead of stone.

* * *

My first stop was the Door at Coventry.

I wasn't too shocked to discover that the Lizard had flown the coop.

-Birds being the descendants of the great reptiles and all.

As I stepped through the portal, Vosh was there to greet me with a dour expression and a large sword pricking at my chest.

“Nice to see you too, Vosh.”

I carefully pushed the blade away.

“Been expectin yer sorry ass.”

He eased the weapon back into its’ scabbard.

I let out the breath I was holding.

“I see Her Highness managed a clean getaway.”

“Lizards be slippery creatures, One Eye.”

The commander spit on the floor of the cavern, “Pult out some kinda weapon tha’ fried two o’ my men.”

“Sorry.”

“Not as sorry’s tha’ sorry snake gonna be.”

Vosh cocked his head and questioned with a hopeful voice, “ You’ve been gone for a whiles an tha civilians are already here. I take it yer won tha’ truce?”

“Not exactly.”

“*WHAT* the *BLOODY HELL* do yer think yer...”

I surprised myself when I abruptly shouted.

“*THAT’S ENOUGH!*”

Of course it was enough. I had *had it*. What surprised me even more was that Vosh took two steps back. I saw the reason in an instant. It wasn’t exactly my compelling voice, which, -to give me credit, was pretty damn good. The bonewood wand was glowing a deep purple.

Even Vosh knew you *really shouldn’t* upset a wizard.

I gave an apologetic shrug and stashed the wand in my belt.

Vosh had a mixture of apprehension and respect on his face.

“Just where’d ya come by that, lad?”

“I earned it.”

Vosh went mute, but only for a moment.

“I’m sure ya did. But, ya also gave yer word that ya would take us to a new home, or I culd kill ya myself.”

My hands wandered on their own accord to my sword and the wand.

“Maybe once you could have...”

The air grew still and ripe with a tension

“But I really don’t think that’ll be necessary... I’m keeping my word.”

I raised my voice loud enough for the rest of the troops in the temple to notice.

“How’s about we get everybody the hell out of here?”

The men cheered and Vosh finally cracked a grin and extended his hand.

We locked on each other’s wrists and grasped firmly.

The older man whispered in my ear.

“Never really wanted ta killya, lad. But rule number one for...”

“Tell me later, Vosh. Got to get this show on the road. Make sure we have plenty of blankets and firewood. It’s going to be damn cold.”

Vosh started organizing for the departure.

* * *

We lined up in rows of twenty abreast. The first five lines were bowmen, the next ten armed troopers.

After these three hundred trailed the homeless of Coventry.

-Thousands more carrying all of their worldly and otherworldly possessions on their backs.

Finchly and Vosh were at the point with me.

“Yer sure the Door won’t close on these good folks behind us?”

Finchly was, above all -pragmatic.

I shook my head.

“As long as the people keep moving through it’ll stay open. -Everybody has to be in physical contact, so keep those behind touching the forward ranks.”

Vosh added his two cents, “Right then, -An you say you’re going to take us to tha’ skirmish ‘tween Mordred an tha Avalon troops?”

“Yep.”

“How canna tha’ be? You say yourself tha twas more’n a day ago?”

“Beats me, Vosh. I just know that if I can see it in my mind I can get there, no matter what.”

Vosh shook his head in doubt and Finchly clapped me on the back.

“Anywhere’s better than ‘ere.”

“Finchly’s right.”

I brought my face close to the scarred leader. Vosh stared directly back.

“Remember your promise. We’ll fight only to defend ourselves.”

“Aye lad, the troops ‘ave their orders.”

“We stop the battle, period.”

“Aye, -we stop the battle, but then we go on to Avalon.”

A twinge of guilt struck me as I nodded. Merlin was not going to be a happy camper. Tough.

They’d have to work it out. I just hoped Arthur was as noble as he appeared.

I turned to face the portal letting my mind wander to the *possibilities*... and the smell of lightning was immanent.

Scintillating sheets of color and soft rumbles answered me as the Door opened.

Hundreds of the civilians in the chamber cried out in alarm, and began to panic.

Vosh’s voice roared out, “*Atten-SHUN!*”

The crowd calmed, but still exchanged the fearful glances of animals believing they’re headed for the slaughterhouse.

I closed my eye and held the last image I had seen of the battle like a precious gem.

I grasped the bonewood wand and pointed it ahead.

Vosh took his cue.

“*Arms at ready!...*”

Steel sang as it was drawn from scabbards.

Spears glittered as they caught the alien light.

“RANKS CONNECT!”

The rows of soldiers and civilians did a giant line dance of touching their forward partners, linking them into human chains.

“ FORWARD!... MARCH!”

Before the Door took me I felt a tremendous release and a calm repose swept through me. For the first time in quite a long while, my future fate was unknown to me. The only direction I had was the certainty of my commitment. Maybe it's all anyone ever needs. It was the grail of my quest and quite likely the same for anyone who becomes a seeker.

There are always turnings on the path.

Just no turning back.

* * *

I strode along the crackling mists with the legions of the once damned behind me.

My sight remained closed to envision the conflict that I hoped to resolve.

Escher's hand drew itself as I drew myself closer.

The imagined sounds of battle and blurs of steel and blinding energies became stronger and louder until...

I felt Vosh jostle me in the side and I opened my eye.

I saw them thirty yards ahead.

I focused my will on the wand as my other arm lifted my blade.

A deep purple radiance began to flicker from the rod, casting an eerie strobe light on the carnage.

Guy's body lay with the shaft through the throat.

The wizards were firing bolts of energy. Renu and Erol were back to back, protecting each other from Avalon's warriors. The creatures were attacking both sides at random *and* each other in a fury of blood lust.

And I was just in time to see two entwined figures tumble into the mists

I waved.

They disappeared.

Without knowing why I pointed my wand in the direction of the warlocks and ground my teeth, focusing every ounce of my determination.

I roared, “*STOP!*”

There was a sound like a sonic boom.

The purple radiance contracted into two intense beams that split, striking both Merlin and Mordred at the same time and lifting their bodies off the ground.

They stopped all right.

The rest of the tableau froze.

Even the creatures, except for the bloody drool and froth that dripped from their muzzles.

Vosh and the bowmen fanned out to surround the crowd.

Bows were cocked and ready.

Vosh commanded, “*Men of Avalon, drop your weapons!*”

They remaining fifteen or so weren’t stupid. They did as they were told.

I ran over to Mordred and picked up the wand by his slack body.

The mage was already showing signs of regaining consciousness.

Erol and Renu limped over, both with bite marks and gashes from the melee.

Erol looked at me, then over to Vosh and the soldiers.

His eyes got even wider as he saw the thongs of others trailing in the mists.

“We jus’ saw yer...!”

“Watch Mordred.” I ordered.

Renu wolf smiled, and growled an assent.

I was worried about Merlin. The wizard was curled up on his side and breathing shallowly. I checked his pulse. It was still strong.

For insurance, I snatched my old mentor's wand as well.

The old man's eye's fluttered open. When he saw who it was, he scowled.

"So, -you treacherous, lying assassin, -think you've won, do you?"

Fido picked that moment to continue her infatuation, and nearly knocked me over with an affectionate stench-filled tonguing on the back of my neck...

"OE."

"Get off me, Fido! -Sit!"

The creature sank contentedly on her haunches, growled once at the wizard and proceeded to lick herself.

The wizard choked and gasped at the smell.

"C'mon Merl, -I've smelled worse." I took a deep breath and gagged.

"Well, maybe not, but it's on par with skunk, don't you think?"

Merlin did a double take.

"Guy was the real traitor, in thick with Mordred. -Swear to God, he was trying to kill me, -the other younger version. I *had* to shoot him."

The elder mage's eyes strained in their sockets.

"YOU?"

"Let me help you up."

I caught the older man by the arm and gently assisted him to his feet.

Merlin was still dazed and wobbly.

"How can this be...? The temporal paradox strictly prohibits..."

"Hey, -not my fault for being ignorant of the rules."

The wizard shook his head to clear the cobwebs and I led him over to Vosh and Finchly.

On the way I kicked one of the creatures that had begun to sniff at a corpse.

It snarled and began to crouch for a lunge -until Fido slinked over and roared. It veered off, pretending to be much more interested in something else. The bowmen were still at attention with weapons cocked.

“Put those things down before you hurt someone,” I snapped.

The archers looked over to Vosh and he curtly nodded his head.

The men of Avalon breathed a collective sigh of relief. Vosh looked on cautiously as Merl and I approached.

“Merlin, wizard and chief advisor to King Arthur of Avalon, -Vosh, commander in chief of Coventry’s forces.”

The two men sized each other up like strange dogs at a park.

Vosh tentatively put out his hand.

“One Eye, ‘ere says you want peace.”

Merlin looked at me and squinted.

“One Eye?”

“A rose by any other name, Merl.”

The wizard grinned and met the warriors welcome with a handshake.

“That’s all we ever wanted. Peace.”

“Well, it’s gonna cost you Merl, ‘cause these folks...” I gestured behind us,

“they’re part of the package. Avalon’s a big place and can surely support...”

“*NOOO!*” Mordred was screaming a few yards distant as Erol and Renu restrained him. “*YOU BASTARDS!* I’ll not be *cheated* again...”

We all turned around to check out the commotion and witnessed the struggle. Mordred, slippery as the snakes he befriended, wrenched himself out of the men’s hold.

He reached into his cloak and pulled out his wicked looking dagger, piercing me with hateful eyes and taking aim.

There was no time.

“You’re dead now !”

He cocked his wrist back in a fluid motion and... -froze.

“For NEESHA!”

Renu’s sword burst through the front of Mordred’s chest and the knife fell from his hand.

The Harr kicked him in the back to free his blade and the dark wizard crumpled, falling to his knees.

Blood gushed in spurts from the fatal wound.

He looked down in bewilderment as eyes glazed over and whispered *“Dead...?”*

Then he collapsed face first onto the ground.

Renu raised his sword and howled while we stood in silence.

Merl went over to the prone body and turned it over.

The eyes stared up at him in quiet accusation.

He closed them gently and sighed.

“I never wanted this.”

I joined him and looked down with pity at the still warm body.

“Thanks, You saved my life,” I said to Renu.

The Harr shifted uneasily, *“No thanks. I let him go.”*

“What!”

“You heard, -this one mine to kill. No peace if he live and blood debt paid.”

“But Renu...”

The Harr put a hairy paw on my shoulder. *“One Eye, -you good human, but naive. Too foolish sometimes.”*

The Harr gave me his bloody sword.

“Okay -you kill me now for break orders.”

I wearily shook my head. *“No more killing. No more.”*

I clasped the Harr on the shoulder. *“All debts are canceled.”*

Renu cocked his head to the side and shrugged.

I turned back to the wizard.

“So Merl, I promised these folks a home.”

“There are plenty of worlds...”

“Avalon is as good as any.”

The wizard sputtered, “*But... But...!*”

“At least for now. You *do* want your *wand* back don’t you?”

The wizard anxiously patted himself, and then looked with dismay at the rod I twirled in my hand.

“Lad, you don’t know what it takes to get...”

I pulled out his own wand, and Merlin gave a little start.

“Sure do. What the hell do you think knocked you for a loop?”

Merlin’s face began to take on a stubborn cast.

“But you have no idea how this will effect the continuum...”

“Look, Merl, are you and the Haven crowd the good guys or *what?*”

“Of course we are...”

“Then prove it. Besides, Vosh and his men here are willing to pledge their loyalty to the king, *Right?*”

“Aye’s” came out loud and clear.

I raised my voice, “And all these folks besides, *Right!*”

The crowd cheered.

“So...?”

There was a long turn of silence where I could see the gears grinding in the wizard’s head.

“All right,” he said with resignation.

“All right what?”

“We’ll take them to Avalon and let the king decide. If they can’t stay, we’ll find them a suitable world. That’s the best that I can do.”

I looked across at Vosh.

“Acceptable?”

The grizzled warrior pursed his lips and looked at the crowd around him. He gestured to the men from Avalon.

“Give our new allies back their weapons.”

* * *

It took another day for the rest of the populace to catch up.

By that time, I had sent Fido’s troop back to whatever nightmare world they were spawned.

Fido herself would go to Avalon and promised to obey Vosh, who was not too thrilled with his new pet.

“Merlin thinks she can provide some useful information about the lizards”.

“I don’t like it one bit. Tha’ stink alone...”

“Shhh! Don’t want to upset her, do you?”

Vosh grumbled something murderous, but said it with a twinkle in his eye.

Or so I hoped.

Earol, Renu, Nester and the blacksmith wished me well.

“Sure yer won’t care ta join us? Ya earned yer place wit’ us, many times over. Culd settle down, raise sum brats...”

-Finch was into the hearth thing, -like most blacksmiths.

But I had a family once...and a thought occurred...

“Maybe. Maybe later. I’ll check in with you, make sure the bargain’s kept.”

The big man’s bear hug took most of my breath away.

Erol was Erol.

“So, tha name of tha pretty lass, Beth is it now? Probly’ take a fancy to the handsome one of the lot, ay mate?”

“Yeah, if her betrothed doesn’t run you through first. Watch out for her.”

“That I will. Take care.”

“And you.”

For some reason, it was more awkward with Renu. Our common bond was the loss of Neesha, and it forged a stronger link that made the leaving harder.

The Harr stared at me intensely -never blinking.

“Renu, -I saw her... her spirit lives in this forest...”

The hairy snout barked a laugh.

“Where all Harr spirits go.”

He pointed a taloned finger, “-you, -you too be a brother of the People. Always. Maybe see you in forest.”

I grinned. “Yeah.”

We clasped paws and Renu slipped away to join the others of his kind.

A trace of a plaintive howl echoed his passage.

* * *

On the other hand, Merl was quite aggravated with me.

“*What do you mean you’re not coming back with us?*”

“Jeeze, Merl, take it easy.”

“Take it *easy? EASY!*”

The wizard grabbed me by the tattered remains of my shirt.

He spat his words through clenched teeth.

“Do you have any *IDEA* of the trouble I’m going to be *IN? MY SUPERIORS? HERSELF?*”

“Hey, you’ll work it out, -you’re good at manipulation.”

“*WHY YOU UPSTART...! YOU...*”

I looked at him calmly and put frostbite in my words.

“You lied to me. Numerous times. You got others to lie to me... Beth.

You set up that lunatic Mordred by taking away his right of succession...”

Merlin flinched as the barbs struck him.

“You don’t understand what’s at stake...”

“Shut up. Your little elitist Haven crew would have let thousands rot.”

“For the sake of billions...”

“Spare me that *greater good* shit. -Heard it before.”

I got up and walked away as Merlin vainly threw a few more enticements at my back.

“There’s so much for you to learn...”

“I’ll find others to teach me.”

“Beth is waiting.”

That hook bit deep but didn’t hold.

“Really? Then she can wait a little longer with her *betrothed*.”

I pivoted around.

“You really want to encourage another civil war with the old guard? What happened the last time you broke with tradition?”

I pointed to the dead on the ground.

“You want more of *this*? ...*DO YOU?*”

The wizard finally looked away, breaking contact and muttering.

“What was that?”

Merlin met my gaze again and forthrightly apologized.

“I’m sorry lad.”

“-I know. Apology accepted.”

We smiled at each other, and for just a moment it was like old times.

But my smile was on probation.

It would be some time before I could feel free to trust this one.

-If ever.

I turned and started walking.

“Come back later then... damn it all!”

I kept talking as I moved through the mists.

“Maybe. Got a few things to do. Then... we’ll see.”

“You’ve got us all wrong.”

“On second thought, -I will come back. Someone has to make sure you keep your word.”

I could almost see him scowl.

“My word is *always* good.”

“Yeah, I forgot. It’s what you didn’t say that *always* messed me up.”

I kept walking.

Merlin called out, “*Lad, where will you go?*”

“Disneyland.”

“WHAT?”

With that, I stepped through more than distance and visualized the inferno again.

Somebody had to take my mangled carcass back home for repairs.

* * *

Hell was just the way I left it.

Ugly as sin.

I spied my poor thrashed form, bleeding like a stuck pig.

“God, you’re a mess,” I uttered.

My earlier self was trying to crawl but mainly floundered on the searing ground, occasionally moaning in delirious pain.

As I knelt to pick up his/my broken body, the gems I had seen earlier gleamed in the fiery light.

I took a few handfuls and immediately burned myself.

“*SHIT!*”

Cursing more, I ripped some material off my shirt, wrapped the stones and stashed them in my boots.

Then I picked up my battered figure in a fireman’s carry and was gone in the blink of an eye.

I supported him as gently as I could. My burden was half raving, calling for Barb and Shawn, Beth and Guy and the wizard.

I knew I had heard *something* from my rescuer on this path before.

I tossed out words and ideas in the stream of consciousness to make a difference in the flow.

“I don't know if this will get through to you or not. -I *know* you’re going to make it... just a little worse for the wear and tear...”

Even if my severely injured self couldn't understand, the words appeared to soothe him.

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

I walked on, trying to remember other snatches of talk.

I paused at times to lay him down and wipe the sweat collecting on my brow. My other self tossed and turned in fevered sleep.

The gray mists cloaked us both in ambiguity and I couldn’t think of much more to say.

So, I began to imagine that small road I once took eons ago.

The sounds of highway traffic, the smog, and my battered car.

I picked him up again and we began to disappear in the fog’s ebb and flow.

A few more thoughts darted in.

"I’m supposed to give you some directions, I think. I forget exactly what...”

I stopped, adjusted his weight, then started again.

“Now you must remember to think of nothing.”

I cleared my throat.

"Ahem, not exactly nothing, it requires full concentration on everything, which is doing nothing, -you see, ..."

Damn, I sounded just like Merl. I went on anyway.

"Well, it's like dying but it's not."

My voice faded as we disappeared into the dream of another world.

* * *

It was morning. The same morning I started from.

I placed him gently in the car behind the wheel, taking the apartment key off the ring that was still on the front seat. There were some spare coins in the glove compartment and some laundry in the back seat.

I changed quickly, and hid my warriors garb and sword behind some nearby bushes. I kept the wand and the gems on me. Then I ran like hell to a pay phone a hundred yards down the road. I dialed 911.

I stuck out my thumb, and got picked up by a truck driver.

The stones turned out to be rare blue diamonds, which netted me almost twenty million dollars.

I donated a portion of it to the hospital anonymously, and spent a large sum on equipment and training I felt would give me an edge.

After setting up a home base I went back through the Door.

* * *

Three months later, I walked through the Borderlands dressed earth style, dragging the body bags.

It wasn't hard to find dead bodies on most of the worlds.

I just imagined the places that had the carnage going that would supply my needs, -two corpses.

One young woman and one small boy.

I found them in a bombed-out village near some version of New York City.

The hardest part was skinning their faces.

But the dead don't really care.

I did it with my eyes closed to stop myself from puking.

I had a Glock in a shoulder holster and a throwing knife on me.

Just in case. I had a bunch of USA currency, coins and some gold besides.

I traced the route to the burial ground through the canyons of my mind down the freeway to the exit on Coldwater, where Barb and I lived in another lifetime. The "now" I looked for was five years ago.

This was my second trip here. The first time I rented a pick-up, filled the tank and left it locked not too far from the Door.

I pictured them out in the back yard playing, -throwing a frisbee.

I was scared.

But they *had* to be alive still in at least one of the infinite worlds that could be. In somewhere, -in somewhen.

I saw myself taking them both in my arms.

Loving and being loved again.

It was a piece of cake. No harder than getting into any other world.

I popped out of the door with my bags and retrieved the pick-up.

I came out at about noon, with my heart in my throat and a feeling of anxiety and excitement that tensed my back up like a coiled spring.

I thought of all the explanations I could make about my scars and the changes I went through.

I saw Barb's face scared to death and yelling for Shawn to run away from me...

I couldn't come up with anything plausible.

I started shaking.

Nervous shakes. Couldn't sit still.

Gripped the wheel until it almost cracked.

Better the wheel than me. I'd think of something.

I stopped a block away from what was once my home and walked towards the house with my heart going bam-bam-bam...

I saw our nosy neighbor give me the eye as she peeked through the curtain.

The front door was open. I called out their names.

No answer.

I had a bad feeling. Very bad. I stepped into the front hall.

Then I smelled the foul odor of musky snake.

Saar.

I bolted inside and pulled the gun, took the safety off and padded around the living room and kitchen with my back against the walls.

I did the same upstairs. Nobody home.

I found the note on the dining room table.

If you want them alive, walk to the world without a sun...

And I felt my heart break again.

Maybe it needed to be broken once more, just like that broken leg that heals but was never set properly.

So they break it again so it gets set straight.

They were alive and that's all that mattered.

I would find them.

And I would do my best to make sure that they would survive.

What good would it do if all the worlds survived and my own family didn't?

What, -the medal would make up for it?

I would find them, save them, and find out what this crazy end of the universe bullshit was all about in the process.

I'd try to stop that too, but first things first.

Even if it killed me, which it probably would.

You know that saying, killing two birds with one stone?

Well, me, -now I was going to catch fish with one stick.

One stick of dynamite.

Obviously, - I'd given up being sporting...

I went back to the pick-up and got the body bags and dumped the corpses in the house, and threw some blood around.

Then I lit the place on fire.

I didn't know I was crying until I looked at myself in the mirror of the truck.

I drove away without looking back.

LEVEL FOUR ADMINISTRATION MEMO

URGENT/PRIORITY 1B

TO: All Field Agents
FROM: The Director of Spatial Temporal Operations
RE: Rouge Walker

Please be advised that all agents are now assigned to determine the location of a human male, height approximately 5' 10", weight, 170-180 lbs, hair coloring brn, one eye -hazel, facial scars. The subject has Borderland access and capability for temporal shifts. Is armed and can be considered dangerous if threatened. Rumors from many of the worlds have been substantiated that the rouge has used advanced weaponry in a variety of Level Two and Level One Realms and has archaic combat expertise. Subject has also obtained an unauthorized bonewood wand, and is reportedly hunting Sarr's. World line continuums have been severely disrupted due to temporal paradox, and capture of the subject is imperative. This entity calls itself Joseph Grodin, AKA "One Eye; a few of the native cultures questioned have shortened this to "Odin."

Please contact headquarters immediately if a sighting is obtained.
Do not use force to apprehend. We want this guy alive and healthy.
HERSELF wants an audience with him.

Sincerely,
GABE

LEVEL FOUR ADMINISTRATION MEMO

URGENT/PRIORITY 1A

MEMO: To All Administrators and Agents
RE: Alien Documents from Coventry FYIO

From: Mike

The following is an excerpt of material provided by our chief field agent from Avalon. It has been translated by the linguistics team with a sixty seven percent accuracy rating, providing us with our first real insights on the Enemy's psychological profile as well as potential strategies for conflict management.

Mandatory division meetings are to be set at 0400 hours tomorrow for data analysis and discussion.

We've been here forever. Forever for us since born from the nests... .

We do not age nor sicken nor grow frail. Our memories are perfect.

Once we were legion.

Now we are the last of our kind, the last of our generation.

Sixty million years ago we engineered a gene that destroyed sickness and death. Immortality begot infertility. We robbed from ourselves... the future evolution of our species. There are only thousands left out of billions who roamed the earth and stars.

Yet as we've learned the folly of our ways we also learned to smell the paths of Otherwhens. So we admit to our soulless mistake and rectify it.

The Continuum will be changed and the illusion of what is will transform again into what should be.

Our unborn await new beginnings.

So we shall create the ending...The Sarr shall rise again.

Appendix
3rd Level Trainee Memos
(For All who wish to Walk the Worlds)

Level Three Trainee Memo

To: All Corporal Manifestations, Level Three

Re: Temporal-Spatial-Value Juxtaposition

It's about balance.

You know. Finding the middle ground. The center. The harmony.

We have other words for this...

Justice, fairness, equity. We all at least pretend to support these values. Some of us actually believe in them.

We at Haven do.

It's still hard as hell to balance the equation in our actions. It's because we get confused on what the middle ground is.

The middle ground is easy to find in Space.

Take any line. Point a is on one side, point c is the other side.

a. _____ .c

We can pick out the midpoint with a fair degree of accuracy. We'll call that point b.

a. _____ .b _____ .c

As easy as A-B-C. Right? B is that middle ground. In Space.

But we live in both space and time. When you attempt to find the midpoint of a line in space, the midpoint appears to come before the end point.

This changes when we add the dimension of time.

What we do here is scale our line in the dimension of time.

This means we draw a picture of how the line was drawn in the first place, and when each point was made.

The When of the line.

We have the same beginning point a.

a. _____.

We went all the way to the other side before we got to the midpoint.

So, let's call this other point b.

a. _____ .b

Our movement in time was completed at the midpoint of the line, which we can call c.

We had to backtrack to get there.

a. _____ .c _____ .b
<.....

It's pretty weird when you really think about it. A midpoint in space comes before the end point Our midpoint in time comes after the end point.

You see, we don't just live in spatial dimensions.

We also live in the dimension of time. As a matter of fact, space and time are inseparable companions.

Time is a dimension of movement and motion. It is all of the NOW's that any space can manifest.

In time, an oak tree can be an acorn, a seedling, a tree, a chair, or even a warm fire. We perceive these objects as different "things." They are all aspects of an oak tree. Different branches growing from the same trunk.

Which brings me back to balance, middle grounds, and harmony.

You have to go from the beginning to the end before you really know what the middle is. Halfway there doesn't cut it.

You can't know what's half way unless you've been to the other side. It's just another end until you go back over some of the ground you've gained. We tend to view all human behavior in pairs of opposites.

Selfish/selfless, weak/strong, stupid/intelligent, unimaginative/creative, cold/warm. The list is endless. All of us seem to load these traits with a

good/bad, or desirable/undesirable value. We aspire to reach the end point of being caring, strong, smart, imaginative and feeling entities. How is it that we become caretakers who enable others to become greedy and exploit us? How is it that we educate ourselves and adopt a narrow focus that dulls our vision? How is it that we exercise to the point of ruining our bodies? How is it that we become so imaginative that our big picture is so big that we can't even get it on canvass? How is it that we lose our warmth of caring after being burned so often?

Because we lose our balance. We forget the middle ground.

Our goal, our end point in time, requires a balance.

It can be very smart to admit when you are being stupid.

It can be very strong to admit when you are being weak.

It can be very caring of you to be cold to another, especially when their reliance on you keeps them stuck.

The endpoint in time means that you are attached to both sides equally. Otherwise, we end up where we started from in the first place.

Only the unintelligent outsmart themselves. Only the selfish give so they can be rewarded. Only the unimaginative sink into the ruts of passive

contemplation without action. The harder we try not to be something, the easier it is to become what you are trying to avoid being.

Those of us who stuff our anger are the most likely to explode.

Those of us compelled to prove our strengths take on such burdens that foster our own collapse.

Mainly because we get confused about that end point.

It just seems to be on the other side.

If you wish to perform like clockwork remember that clocks go around in circles, and that time doesn't ever stop. It just changes the shape of things.

That the pendulum swings back and forth to keep that clock working.

That everything manifests in time.

And that the end is somewhere in the middle ground.

Note for Instructors: This material is for any sentient that come from a class D urban technology. If you have trainees from lower classifications see the Central Office for amended versions.

Level Three Trainee Memo

Re: Constructionism of Beliefs and Attitudes

1. All beliefs and attitudes are worthy of respect, if only for the power they have to influence sentient behavior.
2. Our respect is given regardless of the content of such declarations. We respect all beliefs and attitudes, as they are reflections of the sentient needs for security and freedom. Discriminate respecting from support here. We do not condone the denigration or exploitation of any intelligent life form.
3. As these aspects of self give feelings of security to the individual who asserts them, attempts to belittle or remove beliefs and attitudes only creates resistance. These dispositions may be affected, provided that their underlying intent is validated, and an alternate empowering belief or attitude is available.
4. In order to help accomplish this transformation, the agent assisting in such matter must first believe that change is possible.
5. The agent must also believe that he or she is not the sole cause or reason for the alteration. The agent merely acts as a tool for a greater system to influence this event.
6. This greater system can be perceived as the unconscious, the family, society, or some higher order of being. (HerSelf included.)

7. The agent of change must be open to contact with this greater system through their own intellect, imagination, affect, or sensory process.

8. The agent still has the responsibility to develop his or her own integrity, compassion, creativity, and knowledge. A sense of humor doesn't hurt, either.

Level Three Trainee Memo

Manifesting in Parallel Dimensional Spheres

As representatives of Her Most Divine, we expect you guys to behave with some propriety and manners relative to the locals. It has come to my attention that certain entities have been using less than desirable means to accomplish task assignments and mission goals. This will not be tolerated, as deviations from the Prime Directives of Corporal Manifestations, (except when recorded and corroborated from CFT- Center Future Archives), taint and jeopardize system temporal flow. Consequently, all beings not on active duty will report ASAP to remedial Ed programs for a follow up course on ethics of cultural relativity and paradigm shift states.

Furthermore, all service members will memorize the following articles of the Directive, be prepared to operationally define them, and provide the rationale for their inclusion :

1. The taking of any sentient life is forbidden, except if there is an imminent danger that requires you to protect the life of another sentient or your own.
2. No parallel technologies or use of higher spatial/temporal capabilities are to be introduced in any culture or world. The exception here includes access to and activity in the Borderlands.
3. Thou shall not lie to any sentients, although you may withhold information to protect your origins and the welfare of others.
4. You can heal the sick and wounded, providing that you use only the existing technology of the assigned world, and that such efforts do not interfere with your mission.

There will be absolutely no resurrecting of the dead without authorization. Requests for any entity copies (FDWF) must be cleared by this office prior to translation.

5. No sentient entity is to be objectified as a receptacle for sexual or aggressive needs, even at their request or consent.
6. Accumulation of economic assets and acquisition of direct political, judicial or theological authority is prohibited.

7. Competition and in sporting events and any other corporal structured rivalry to prove capability or skill is prohibited.

(Betting of any kind is also excluded, with the exception of Bingo.)

8. The consumption of alcoholic beverages and other substances that will distort cognitive and sensory motor functions, although not prohibited, must be moderated. Entities showing signs of dependency will be removed from their assignments and placed in Purge Rehab.

9. Theft and/or property damage that effect the welfare of locals must be reimbursed. (Itemized expense form 2435)

10. Consorting with the Enemy will result in banishment from Haven, and the destruction of any inactive FDWF copies we have in our possession.

Level Three Trainee Memo Addendum

To: All Corporal Manifestations of Level Three and Above:

Clarification via previous Memo:

The bit about bingo was a joke. It has come to my attention that entities have bankrupted several religious institutions on worlds # 223, 596, 14, and 846.

I don't give a damn that these proceeds were donated to your favorite local charities.

1. You are to anonymously reimburse the institutions you fleeced immediately. Get your vouchers inputted into the Audit division now!

Failure to do so will result in punitive actions from Central office.

(Take my word for it that you don't want to even know what they are.)

2. In regards to the construct of not "lying" to locals. Several new trainees have approached their supervisors as to the necessity for this mandate. All candidates have been given "Synergistic Impacts of Ethical Deviations and Quantum Field Structure for input. Let me make it simple. When you lie, you destroy field integrity. When you destroy field integrity, the structural resonance of your existing neuro-analogs deteriorates. Consequently, your access to and departure from the Borderlands becomes restricted. False representations of existing realities are thus prohibited. However, in a "do or die" situation, prefer life over death. Just be aware of the potential consequences. Make your decisions accordingly. Martyrdom is after all, it's own worst punishment. We can't always come back to save your butts when you screw up.

Level Three Training Memo

Unfocused Imagery

As many of you are aware, tragedy struck the training group number 1432 of Level Threes in their most recent practicum of Field Definition and Emergence. Seven trainees were lost to us when an unauthorized Door was opened, and an entire realm and corollary section of the Borderlands vanished from the continuum. From what we can deduce, several students decided to randomly focus on a site that had a fictional counterpart in the myths and legends of their home world. Although the group's temporal-spatial-probability coordinates were tracked to within nanoseconds of their disappearance, locals of the realm managed to block emergency evacuation and recovery with a technology subsequently unknown to us.

This same hereto-unknown force field that restricted our efforts unfortunately triggered the cataclysm that annihilated their own realm and eliminated our access to the locality.

Please be advised that haphazard use of imagery for uncharted realms has much the same impact as the old earth game of "Russian Roulette."

There once was a place called Atlantis. There isn't anymore.

Level Three Trainee Memo

Bonewood Wands

See: weapons, fourth dimensional wave front quantum matrix storage, Asgard, Ygissdrill, non-chordate sentience

One of the most fabulous discoveries made after the birth of Our Most Holy Lordess was the existence of other Seventh Level Entities assisting in the creation of the Borderlands.

May the sum of their Wholeness be always with us forever, -Amen.

As your previous training has inferred, these Beings are distinct in Their Own right, and Their interrelations with Each Other are not easily conceptualized for us on the lower dimensional levels.

(Actually, whenever we attempt to describe such interactions we are invariably mistaken to some degree.)

As much as Haven and our work is interdependent with the realm of Asgard, Ygissdrill remains somewhat of an enigma to us all for reasons that will soon be apparent. Asgard, like all Borderland realms, is another parallel of Aearth. However, it is a world where no animal life ever evolved. The most developed ambulatory creatures on the planet are Dragonda Lepidopterist Stingus, which resemble a cross between butterflies and scorpions. They have three-foot wingspans and the intelligence and attitude of wolverines. Other insect forms abound, and can be equally dangerous to most chordates who visit. The most evolved and intelligent sentient is the Seventh Level Entity, Ygissdrill.

Ygissdrill, for want of a better term, is a Tree. More accurately, a world wide forest composed of a nonsummative group mind that actually directs the activities of the entire planet of Asgard.

As with all higher dimensional entities, the collective consciousness of qualitatively diverse and quantitatively numerous beings must coalesce in order to achieve the Most Perfect Union.

In each realm this is achieved in different ways. Current speculation is that the cataclysm that triggered the extinction of the dinosaurs in our own world initiated consciousness for Ygissdrill, as well as endowing ITS Woodness with significant Attributes. In line with similar patterns of such Entities, Ygissdrill actively recruits corporal supplicants. Here the similarities end.

As no other sentients evolved or are permitted to live on Asgard, the only possible penitents are those beings who have the capability to enter the Borderlands. (This means you trainees, among others.)

Besides control over Its' own world and capabilities to relate to and merge with Her Divineness and other Deities, Ygissdrill's main claim to fame is a faculty for reproduction of fourth dimensional quantum wavefronts for sentient and non-sentient life. In other words, the Tree God of Asgard can clone souls.

It can copy the identity of any life form, incorporate and maintain the consciousness of that form in Its own Being.

Haven's technology in this regard is totally dependent on Yigissdrill's good graces, and on Its' perpetuation in the lower planes as a corporal forest.

(See the training handout on the death of Gods in realms 243, 761, and 416, to name but a few.) Bonewood wands first and foremost function is for soul collection.

This is the only means that we have for preserving the identity and consciousness of entities that have proven indispensable for Haven and eternity in general.

The gathering and storage of an entities' identity is accomplished by placing the wand point-first near the cortical region.

The matrix copy and transfer process is automatic. The transfer of this consciousness takes place in Haven at our own creche body storage unit.

Needless to say, the exact duplication process by the Tree God is completely different, and information on this procedure is currently restricted for Level Threes. All accidental or intended visitors to Asgard must contribute an “I” in order to both survive on the planet and become the beneficiary of Its’ sanctity. This benediction manifests in the material gift of the bonewood wand that you have seen in training.

Just as wands can take and disperse this form of energy, so can they also be used in translating other neural wave lengths into any force along the quantum-atomic-molecular-electromagnetic spectrum.

All it takes is a little imagination. However, there are various prerequisites involved.

1. The wand is inoperative if it is holding a soul for recovery. Attempts to use the device when it is charged here will result in the loss of that entity.
2. The wand must be within the Borderland’s field of influence. The field range is one hundred meters from most Doors. It can be used once outside that radius prior to energy depletion.
3. Each wand is keyed to it’s original recipient, and cannot be triggered by any other entity, except to create certain photon emissions within the usual visual spectrum.

Training exercise will begin at 1100 hours tomorrow in offensive energy translation and force field manifestations (wards). We will be using actual wands to test your imagery capabilities.

See you then.

Level Three Training Memo

RE: Borderlands Access, Human Rendition

See: Orientation Manual; Chapter I, Altering Consciousness, Theta Brain Wave States and Spatio-Temporal Field Interpolation

There are hundreds of ways to meditate, so be aware that there is no one “right” way to do this procedure. This means that there are any number of ways “left” to learn how to achieve the meditative state. There is however, only one wrong way, and that is trying too hard. An altered state isn’t something you make happen; -it’s something you *allow* to happen. The by-products of meditation can be an increased sense of relaxation, serenity and a deeper contact with your intuition. Visual images and colors may appear; you could feel a type of ecstasy, and connect with EverythingAsOneInTheUniverse. However, the moment you try to make these occurrences the “goal” of meditation, you are going to mess it up.

It’s very much like picking a flower off its stem to preserve its beauty.

The moment you do it begins to die. We live in this world on this planet. Visiting other planes and dimensions and communication with “higher beings” is all very well and good. However, that material will be covered in our Advanced Seminar on Spatial-Temporal Field Translations. These techniques were in vogue way before the Borderlands manifested out of probability, and besides being a means to gain entry, we believe that they are a necessary practice for your psychological and spiritual welfare. It’s always good to ask for directions when you are lost, but remember that one of your tasks in life (besides coming up with your own individual meaning and purpose) is to carry out Her missions.

Vacations and escapes may seem to be without an innate purpose in and of themselves.

In the bigger picture, they give us energy to accomplish the goals we set for ourselves, and the ability to come back to our work recharged with new perspectives.

In meditation, we need to keep in mind the goal of not having a goal for the duration of our journey. When we meditate, we are learning to just “be.”

We can learn to allow thoughts, feelings, imagination and senses to just “be” as well. When this is accomplished, we no longer have to live directed by reaction or illusion. We can begin to live by intent. Your Self or essence that is uniquely you is very much like water. Now, what is the true shape of water? If we pour water into a glass, very few of us would state that the true shape of water is a cylinder. If we pour water into a pan, very few of us would confuse the true shape of water with a square or rectangle. Our Self is fluid in much the same way. Yes, water has a molecular configuration of hydrogen and oxygen, known as H₂O. Water can also be a solid, liquid, or a vapor without losing that same molecular formation. The true shape of the Self can also be simply formulated as “awareness.” Our thoughts, feelings, senses and imagination are the containers for our “Self.” In this manner, most of us confuse our own identity with thoughts, feelings, senses, or images that border and touch this awareness called “Self.” The “I” that is you is the sum total of all the possibilities that can be encountered. In truth, our identity is based more on how we learn to interact with these receptacles of experience than anything else.

The object of meditation is to get beyond the illusion of structure that traps us into being less than what we really are.

Here we may need to dwell on the concept of “Nothing” for a brief while. Energy and matter are neither created nor destroyed, but simply transformed. The concept of zero, or nothing is a paradox. “Nothing” doesn’t exist.

As we explore the sub-atomic world in quantum mechanics, and the universe at large in astrophysics, we learn that there are always more particles, more matter, more energy that has always been there undetected. “Nothing” is an invention of the conscious mind. We usually consider nothing to be the absence of or negation of an object or process.

In other words, the construct “nothing” acts as a wall that allows our awareness to concurrently separate from one “thing” and join with another. The object of meditation will be to

remove this wall of nothing. It is no surprise that these also allow us access to the Borderlands as well. How we accomplish this is by allowing all of our containers, -thoughts, senses feelings and images to become equally important within the flow of our awareness. (If you've ever attempted to get everything done all at once, perhaps you've also accomplished nothing.) We allow our attention to unfold in this manner *without having to do anything to or with these emerging sensations/thoughts*. The aspect of the Self that is labeled the "unconscious" is usually monitoring and performing these functions. Our "conscious" awareness is only triggered to make contact with the internal/external world of experience when there is a "difference", or abrupt change in patterns of stimuli that the unconscious has become accustomed to.

In this manner, a good percentage of us have learned to become habituated to noisy, smelly and just plain awful environments that some other percentage of us would go mad in.

To a fisherman, the stink of fish means a good days work, to a nurse, the sight of blood means getting into emergency mode, and to a fourteen year old, a messy room means it's "my place."

What we are going to do here is allow our conscious mind to engage in the same task that is usually handled by our unconscious.

We are going to pay attention to the "samenesses" within our perceptual field as well as the differences. Our intent here will be to simply be aware without having to do anything else.

What we are doing in this process isn't necessarily rational. To make "sense" of the world is different than being able to make it logical.

So, here are your instructions:

1. Pick a standard time and place where you can be free from interruptions and other responsibilities. You can lay down flat on your back, sit in a chair or on a pillow, or do any of the more fancy lotus positions.

If you need to scratch, sniff, or sneeze at any time during this process, feel free. You have a right to be comfortable.

2. Allow your eyes to gently close. If you have a hard time relaxing, pick a place or situation where you once felt the most safe and secure. Imagine being there and then for a while.

3. Let your awareness first flow to any external sounds. Let these noises come in and go out. If you are in the city, there may be noises of traffic; in the country there may be the sounds of animals or the wind in the trees.

The house or office may creak, your own breathing or stomach may make the sounds you hear. Allow your awareness to touch all and any of these without having to take any actions.

4. Now, also allow your attention to brush against any thoughts that pop through your consciousness during this time. Thoughts often come in like waves from the ocean.

Some are crystal pure; others contain floating debris and garbage. Your job here is neither to fight nor surrender to these thought-waves, and to “surf” them instead, while still being in contact with external sounds.

It makes no difference right now what you think you should have, could have or will do; you’re meditating. Remember the aspect of you that is listening to these thoughts is a very different entity than the “you” who is transmitting them. As a matter of course, most thoughts here are pre-recorded messages from a previous sponsor. In other words, these are commercials from some past authority figure or another who is still trying to get you to buy into something that you may not need right now. You may not be able to shut the program off (just yet) but you are under no obligation to purchase.

5. While you are still being aware of external sounds and internal thoughts, let your awareness also contact the process of breathing. Feel the air going through your mouth and/or nose. Feel it going down your throat and into the lungs. Be aware of the sensations of your chest and diaphragm expanding.

Be aware of a slight pause before you begin the exhalation. Let go of that breath, and as you exhale, feel the muscles relax as your chest deflates.

As you breathe in, you can let your body experience a floating sensation; as you breathe out, you can relax even deeper. It's very much like floating on a raft in a pool or lake. You can drift weightlessly even as you feel your back and legs relaxing deeper.

6. And now, while still allowing your awareness to touch the sounds, thoughts, and breath, become aware of the patterns of light behind your eyelids. Allow yourself to notice how these patterns may shift and change. At times, a spherical golden, silver or colored light may appear. Let yourself drift closer to it, and allow it to drift closer to you.

7. Even as you are letting your awareness contact and flow with these types of knowing, we also have the physical sense of touch. You have hundreds of millions of sensory neurons in your skin that detect gravity, temperature, air pressure, electro-magnetic radiation and texture. Permit your conscious awareness to begin experiencing these sensations. Each neuron is a part of your brain, and each has an identical structure.

If you are going to learn how to use all of your mind, then remember that this is also a part or container for your awareness. Also remember that there is nothing that you have to change here. Start at your toes and allow your attention to wander to your instep and heels. Go up to your ankles, shins, calves and knees. Allow your awareness to contact your thighs, pelvis and buttocks. Let this continue with your attention drifting upwards to your stomach, sides and chest. Let the process continue with awareness of your shoulders, biceps, forearms, hands and fingers. Now become aware of your lower back, middle and upper back. Allow your awareness to touch your neck, throat, jaw, chin, lips, cheeks, nose, eyes, and ears. Now be aware of your forehead, temples and the back of your head.

8. Make each of these aspects of your total Self just as important to contact with your awareness during the exercise. You may, at times, get caught up in one particular "container."

Thoughts, sounds, images and sensations are offshoots of awareness, just as the child is an offshoot of a parent. Avoid loving any one better or more than any other during this process. Give them the same kind of attention in differing ways. If you find yourself caught up in any one

container, then go back to the awareness of your breath, and allow that flow to reconnect you with all the others. You may become aware that thinking seems to cease. (Of course you may start to “think” the moment you notice this.)

What is really happening that these aspects, containers, or process’s begin to blend together, much as colors that are mixed create a whole new shade that you have never before experienced. Nothing is lost here, you are simply integrating these separate parts to get beyond the walls that have previously trapped you. They can be reformed (perhaps in a more comfortable way) the moment that you finish meditating.

For those of you who are worried about “losing control,” be assured that you are temporarily putting the need for control aside, while holding on to your right to gain a certain kind of power. This is the power of creativity, of relaxation and of Self-direction. When we are no longer afraid of what we feel, or what we think, or what we imagine we truly begin to obtain freedom.

If at any time during this exercise you become frightened, then allow yourself to open your eyes or shift your physical position to regain your sense of command.

9. Now allow yourself to flow through, in, around and between all of these containers of your awareness. At one time you are hearing and thinking and seeing and breathing and touching. All-at-Once.

You always have been, without the realization that you are doing Everything and Nothing simultaneously. The sum of this experience is merely another way to relate to yourself and the world. There are benefits to this state emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually.

Imagine living untroubled by most thoughts and feelings.

Imagine being able to respond to conflicts without having to react, and responding constructively instead. Imagine enhancing your natural intuitive ability. Practice every day. As you gain muscular strength you work out, so you gain these benefits as you practice.

And remember you can lift weights with such dedication that you end up screwing yourself up too, so don't make this process your god. There is always a balance to achieve. After a while meditating will seem the most natural thing in the universe. -Because it is.