

Halfling's Curse

Short Stories

by

David Korinetz

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A previously unpublished sequel to Magic of Mars.

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A previously unpublished short four chapter prequel to FireDrakes.

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The original forward that was cut from the final draft of FireDrakes.

CATNAP

On occasion, I've had the opportunity to notice a bright orange tabby perched in the windowsill next door. Sprawled in my driveway, with its eyes closed and little pink tongue hanging to one side, it more closely resembled a deflated basketball. I had arrived very late and bleary eyed the night before, after pulling double shifts cataloguing inventory. Was I responsible for the unfortunate feline's demise?

Since the curtains next door were still drawn, I picked up the evidence of my crime intent on concealing it within the confines of a trash can. The container, however, was already overflowing with refuse, so I just tucked the body beneath the topmost layer of grass clippings and catalpa leaves. Mission accomplished, I drove off to begin a new day.

As reward for finishing ahead of schedule, the boss had invited the entire staff for a late afternoon joy-ride on his catamaran. Later that evening, with the tabby incident completely forgotten, I was shocked to find the stiff orange corpse lying next to the empty trash can upon my return. Had it fallen out before the garbage truck arrived?

I was still fussing about what to do when I noticed Fred, my next door neighbour, looking out his window. Swallowing down a cold lump of rising panic, I nonchalantly tipped the can over and covertly coaxed the stiff little bundle inside with my foot. Flipping the container upright, I slammed down the lid and gulped my first breath since spotting Fred in the window. Halfway to my door, however, I nearly turned cataplectic when confronted by Fred's smiling face.

"Hello, neighbour," he said. "Haven't seen my Lucky, have you?"

"Ah, Lucky," I replied, struggling to keep my eyes from wandering down to the trash can in my hands.

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“Oh, where’s my head,” Fred said. “You’re new to the neighbourhood, aren’t you? Used to everyone knowing Lucky, especially the little ones. Gentle as a kitten, my Lucky.”

“Sorry, but I haven’t seen a tabby,” I said, attempting to manoeuvre around Fred’s beefy form.

“If you haven’t seen him,” he said, grabbing a handful of my sleeve, “how do you know he’s a tabby?”

I froze.

“You feeling alright?” Fred asked through squinted eyes. “You look a little green if you don’t mind my saying.”

“Too much coffee,” I squeaked, trying to act like I had nothing to hide. Like I hadn’t killed his sainted cat and wasn’t trying to hide the evidence. I’m no catastrophist, but the suspicion on Fred’s face didn’t bode well. Then to my rescue came an elderly lady, with three small children in tow, who waved to Fred from the foot of my drive.

While Fred was waving back, I tried to make good my escape. Unfortunately, my sleeve was held fast in his iron grip. Apparently, Fred wasn’t done with me yet. “Well, just in case old Lucky shows up,” he said, “I should warn you about his cataleptic seizures.”

“Catalepsy?”

“Yes, the poor old thing suffers them seizures something awful. Goes stiff like an old board, he does. Thought he’d kicked the bucket the first time.”

How much air was there in a garbage can?

“Where’s Lucky?” the smallest of the three children asked.

Something in that angelic face struck a cord. I tore the lid off the trash can and upended it. Lucky’s orange body tumbled out like a brick of old Catalonia cheese. By this time, more people had stopped to gawk. Ignoring them, I grabbed Lucky and blew three quick breaths into his nose and mouth. I followed up by pushing gently on his little chest. When his hind legs kicked out, the gathering crowd gave a collective gasp.

“He’s okay, he’s okay,” I yelled.

As her wards began to caterwaul, the old lady’s eyes rolled up and a couple of teenagers caught her just as she collapsed. Suddenly aware of excruciating pain emanating from between the thumb and forefinger of my right hand, I looked down. Above the needle-like teeth sunk deeply into my flesh, two narrow demonic eyes stared back.

Someone screamed. It took a moment to realize that it was me. After a few gratuitous rakes down the sides of my forearms, Lucky catapulted into Fred's welcoming embrace. I could see my neighbour's angry glare mirrored on many faces among the gathering crowd. A lynch mob out for blood came to mind and I decided to leave before someone produced a rope.

"He should be locked up," someone yelled as I skulked into my house amid a cloud of shame.

As dusk turned inevitably into night, I kept a close watch on the angry mob through a slit in the kitchen window blind. Fred and Lucky were the last to leave. Suddenly famished, I threw a bowl of frozen Catelli pasta in the microwave before pouring myself a scotch. I was in such a state, I downed the viscous liquid straight up like it was water. While rinsing the glass, I thought I heard someone at the front door, but when I went to peek out the peep hole, there was nobody there.

"Rotten kids," I muttered to myself before heading back to the kitchen. I paused by the back door, however, when I noticed a scratching sound coming from the other side.

"Gotcha!" I growled, as I flung the door open and rushed outside.

I scanned the entire backyard twice, but there wasn't a soul around. On the way back, I paused to avoid stepping on a big hairy caterpillar; that's when I noticed the long deep scratches on the back door. They appeared to have been made by some small cat-sized animal. A quick trip around to the front revealed similar marks on the front door.

The microwave was dinging, so I went back inside, but my appetite had vanished and I poured another drink instead. A warm itchy sensation running up my injured arm set me to wondering whether or not I had contracted the cat scratch disease, until a scraping noise at the front door distracted me. It stopped after a while, only to start up again a few minutes later at the back door.

Like fingernails on a chalkboard, the sound made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. I was dangerously close to slipping into a state of catatonia when something in my brain snapped. Like a cat burglar, an evil grin crept silently onto my lips as I opened the broom closet door and selected the sturdiest handle. Dark thoughts grew even more wicked as I unscrewed the broom head and tossed it back in the closet. I was through being a hapless cat's paw in Lucky's little game.

Holding my broomstick like a cattle prod, I crept to the front door and switched off the hall light. The noise at the back door stopped. Catalysed by the

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strong drink, the muscles in my arms were like coiled springs. At the first sound outside, I yanked the door open and swung with all my might. There was a satisfying thud, followed by a yawl, but I was ill prepared for what I would see when I flicked the light back on. A very angry police officer was bent over, holding his knee, while his female partner was pointing a gun at my chest.

While they were cuffing me, I learned the officers were investigating an alleged animal abuse report. I was in the process of categorically denying any wrongdoing when Lucky curled himself around the injured police officer's leg.

"It was Lucky!" I screamed, as the officer reached down to scratch behind the purring cat's ear.

"What?" the officer replied. "You mean this harmless cat?"

"It's all his fault," I declared. "He set me up!"

"How much you have to drink tonight?" the other officer asked as she leaned over to sniff my breath.

"I'm not drunk," I insisted, but convinced otherwise, they refused to listen.

A short time later, from the backseat of the squad car, I watched Lucky sharpen his claws on the side of my car while the officers were busy talking to Fred. Without warning, Lucky suddenly paused mid-stroke and looked me in the eye. Never in my life had I seen a cat smile like that. It haunts me still.

At the risk of sounding catachrestic, when it comes to felines, I have always been passionately indifferent, but that is all behind me now. Since it was my first offence I was offered the option of performing a community service. I had to choose between extended jail time and working as a feral cat caretaker on Catalina Island. Without hesitation, I took the time.

DANIEL'S DEMON

As flickering firelight dancing across the ruby's polished multifaceted surface, its black heart held Daniel's eyes transfixed until the acrid smell of burning meat forced a cavernous growl to erupt from the depths of his empty stomach. In response, the young thief gave the sizzling spitted carcass a half turn before the sharp snap of a twig further interrupted his culinary duties.

Had someone seen him leaving town? After tucking the ruby safely away, Daniel withdrew a knife from its hidden sheath. The slender blade wasn't much to look at, good for little more than skinning rabbits, but it was razor sharp and he knew how to use it. If it was Nicholas lurking out there somewhere, he would soon be sorry.

While poking the roasting meat with the point of his knife, as if it were Nicholas's back side, Daniel covertly scanned the dark outline of trees surrounding him. Accustomed to working alone at night, at least ever since he and Nicholas had parted ways, the dark held no terrors for Daniel. Indeed, just as for many others in his chosen trade, darkness was often a trusted ally. Rewarded with nothing but cricket chirps, and an occasional flash of a firefly, Daniel finally relaxed. Satisfied that all was well, he turned back only to nearly jump out of his skin, for a middle-aged man was standing on the opposite side of the fire. Barely four feet tall, the stranger stared at Daniel while stroking his beard amid a chorus of crickets accompanied by an occasional crackle from the fire.

After freeing himself from the grip of the stranger's piercing hazel eyes, Daniel seized the opportunity to think. Any man capable of moving so silently was

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dangerous, even a dwarf, but what was he doing out in the woods, alone, and after dark. The cut of his garments bespoke quality, while the gemstone mounted in his sword hilt looked to be worth a small fortune, yet neither compared to the large flawless emerald set in a thick gold ring on his left middle finger. Many would kill for far less.

The strained silence was finally shattered by the dwarf's voice. "My name is Baldric," he said, folding his thick arms across his chest. "Now if I may be so bold as to inquire after your name, young sir."

Still deep in thought, Daniel was slow to find his tongue. "Daniel," he finally blurted out. "My name is Daniel." Even as the words left his mouth he was berating himself for using his real name instead of an alias.

Despite a haphazard array of mismatched teeth, Baldric's smile was oddly disarming. "Well met, Daniel," he said, with a slight nod of his oversized head. Though short for his age, Daniel was a head taller than the dwarf and looking down at a full grown man made him feel uneasy.

In the wake of Baldric's salutation, a second stranger invaded the small circle of light cast by Daniel's fire. The pale yellow glow revealed a seven-foot giant clad in battle-scarred armor. Long strands of hair, the colour of summer straw, had worked their way free from under a worn leather helmet bound in tarnished brass. In the giant's hands rested a massive two-handed sword. Long and slightly curved, the weapon had a wicked sawtooth ridge running along most of the back edge.

The grace with which the towering warrior sat down next to Baldric reminded Daniel of an alley cat, smooth, supple and dangerous. As large calloused hands reached up to grasp the sides of the helmet, Daniel's attention was drawn to the giant's left shoulder, where a blue-black raven was perched. The bird squawked in irritation as it hopped over to Baldric's shoulder, which was level with the giant's even though the dwarf had remained standing.

"This little lady is Angel," Baldric said scratching the Raven's head with his stubby finger. "And this," he added indicating the giant with an open palm, "is my good friend and protector, Bridget."

Daniel stared in shocked disbelief as the giant lifted her helmet and vigorously shook out a mass of tangled hair. Despite her size, a few smudges of dirt and a small white scar on her right cheek, she was quite pleasing to look upon.

“But, she’s a woman,” Daniel blurted out.

Bridget’s deep blue eyes narrowed to slivers of ice as her lips tightened to a fine white line, forcing the tiny scar on her cheek to pucker up. Daniel fought down a large lump trying to form in his throat.

Leaning forward, Baldric spoke in a conciliatory tone, “I’d be careful with that kind of talk around Bridget, lad. She’s a wee bit sensitive. Now, if you’re as smart as I think you are, you’ll heed my advice and offer your most heartfelt apology.”

Hard-won experience had honed Daniel’s ability to assess a situation well beyond his years. In his line of work, it often meant the difference between a full stomach and losing an ear. “I beg you pardon,” he said with a hasty nod. “I meant no disrespect. It’s just you’re so..., so beautiful.”

The lines of Bridget’s face softened as her lips regained their pinkish colour and formed what could almost be called a smile. “I believe you’re right, Baldric. He is a smart lad, or at least a very convincing liar. Apology accepted, Daniel. Now, what’s for dinner?”

Daniel’s eyes flicked from Bridget to Baldric and back again. Roast rabbit was a hearty meal for one, but hardly adequate for three. “Just this rabbit,” he replied with a shrug.

For a moment Daniel was transfixed by tiny pools of greenish fire in Baldric’s eyes. Simply reflected firelight, Daniel concluded, because when he blinked they were gone.

“Looks like enough to me,” Bridget remarked.

When Daniel looked back down at the roasting carcass, his breath caught in his throat. Distracted by the ruby, he had failed to notice the abnormally large size of his game.

“And I have this,” Baldric added producing a round crusty loaf of bread from somewhere under his thick cape.

A damp wineskin thudded into the dirt beside the fire. “My contribution to the meal,” Bridget said. “A fine Katan red.”

“Katan,” Daniel said. “Is that a village near here?”

“Katan is a country,” Bridget replied. “Beside a well-earned reputation for excellent wine, you’ll not find a more sensible place in the whole world.”

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“It’s no surprise you haven’t heard of it,” Baldric added. “Our homeland is a long way from here, and I dare say with customs that would seem strange to your people. In Katan, you see, women like Bridget are the warriors, the builders, and generally tend to the day-to-day affairs of state.”

“Really,” Daniel replied. “Then what do the men do?”

“Oh, the men tend to more important matters,” Baldric replied. His words drew a snort from Bridget. With a twist of his head, the dwarf cast a dark frown in her direction even as she turned away to hide the wry grin on her face.

“Are there many dwarves in Katan?” Daniel asked as he rotated the spit another quarter turn.

Once again, for the briefest of moments, green fire flashed across Baldric’s eyes before he replied. “Most men in Katan are what you would call, dwarves.”

There was an unmistakable hint of danger in Baldric’s words. “So, what brings you so far from home?” Daniel asked, hoping to change the subject.

Baldric’s smile was quick to return. “Bridget and I are hunters. It’s a profession that sometimes requires traveling.”

“You carry no boar lance, nor bow,” Daniel said, after making a show of looking them over. “What do you hunt? Rabbits!”

“It’s not animals we hunt,” Baldric said leaning forward again. “We seek far more dangerous game. Beings so evil, so vile, that we put ourselves at risk just to speak of them.”

It was Daniel’s turn to snort. “I’ve seen a lot of strange things, but I have never seen evil. What’s it look like? How do you hunt it?”

Unperturbed, the dwarf reached under his cape and produced a large ruby. It was a twin to Daniel’s, lacking only a black core.

“Ever see one of these?” Baldric asked, holding up the gem.

Daniel was about to deny any such knowledge when a better idea came to mind. Nicholas always said a half-truth bore more fruit than outright lies. “Yes, come to think of it. I saw one like it earlier this very day.”

“Really,” Baldric replied, seemingly intrigued.

“Yes,” Daniel said, “in a village not two leagues from here, there was a white-haired old man who carried such a gem.”

“Was he alone?” Bridget asked.

“No, he was in the company of three mangy hounds. I remember because of the fuss he made when the animals were refused admittance to the inn. The innkeeper didn’t fancy scraping their droppings off his floor. Wouldn’t have made much of a difference, if you ask me.”

“And, how did you come to see this gem?” Baldric asked. “Was it in plain view for all to look upon?”

Despite his misshapen appearance, Baldric struck Daniel as someone with sharp wits. To avoid becoming ensnared in his own web of lies, Daniel would need to tread carefully. “It was in his purse. I caught a glimpse when he purchased food for his hounds.”

“So, you saw no more of it after that.”

“No,” Daniel lied, fighting back a smile at the memory of how skillfully he had cut the old man’s purse strings. Perhaps while his new acquaintances slept he would take the other ruby, and that fine short sword too; no sense in letting it go to waste. The gem he would extract and sell along with the rubies, but the sword he could use to fend off thieves, like Nicholas, who might try to steal his newfound wealth.

“Well, it’s a good thing you’ve not touched it,” Baldric said. “Like this once was, I believe the ruby you saw was a conduit for evil. It’s known as a Soul Stone.”

Daniel’s left side, where the ruby was hidden, suddenly felt uncomfortably warm. “If they’re so dangerous, then why do you carry one?”

Baldric’s eyes narrowed. “As I’ve told you, Daniel, we’re hunters. This innocent looking gem was once a source of great power. The previous owner gave his life for it. Fortunately, the Soul Stone’s power died with him. I keep it to remind me of the lives it cost to obtain.”

Daniel nodded sagely, as if he understood Baldric’s reasoning.

“I’ve no doubt whatsoever this man you saw was another Dark Sorcerer,” Baldric said. “A fool who has freely exchanged his soul for the kind of dark power only evil can bestow. I cannot imagine anything more dangerous than coming between a Soul Stone and its rightful owner. Nothing short of death would stop such a person from getting it back.”

“And those hounds you saw,” Bridget quickly added, “were no hounds at all.

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They are his familiars. Abominations conjured from another world. Demons, linked to the sorcerer through the Soul Stone. One of those three killed my sister on the eve of the last new moon.”

The dangerous tone of Bridget’s voice made Daniel shiver. “Demon hounds,” he said, remembering the three toothless old hounds. Half blind and barely able to walk, they had seemed harmless enough. If Bridget’s sister was anything like her, she could have dispatched any one of them with a well placed kick.

“Very bad business, Daniel, very bad,” Baldric muttered as he tucked the ruby back under his cape. “Demons from another world. Deadly and near impossible to kill by conventional means. But, no matter, we can rest easy, for they are far from here. Isn’t that so, Daniel?”

A howl in the distance sent another icy shiver down Daniel’s spine. “We’ll be giving the poor lad bad dreams,” Bridget said. Daniel looked up in time to see her staring at him, just before something very large smashed through the fire and swept her away.

When the campfire erupted in a cloud of sparks and flame, Daniel rolled away instinctively rubbing hot ash from his eyes. Through smoke and tears he could see that Bridget, Baldric and the rabbit were all gone. Beside scattered bits of charred wood and glowing embers, the only recognizable object was Bridget’s two-handed sword laying in the dirt.

Grunts and growls echoed in the darkness as someone shouted Bridget’s name. It sounded like Baldric, but Daniel had no time to wonder about what else was happening, for the deep, menacing snarl directly behind him demanded his full attention. Without another thought, he leapt for the sword. Nimble as ever, he snatched up the heavy blade and landed back on his feet facing the threat with the unwieldy weapon held high above his head.

Small red eyes like twin drops of blood glared back from the darkness. Only when they finally moved, did Daniel understand what he faced: a pitch black wolf, half again as large as any he’d ever seen. Its wet lips peeled back in a snarl to reveal unnaturally large pointed teeth. With recognition came mind numbing fear. It took all the courage he could muster just to keep his bladder from emptying on the spot. His arms began to shake uncontrollably as the monster drew closer. He knew he would get one chance to strike before the monster tore him apart.

As the beast moved closer and closer, Daniel's heart pounded like never before. Then, to his great relief, the beast stopped just out of reach and cocked its head in the direction of a light that had appeared in the trees. The glow grew in intensity until a tall figure draped in a long white robe stepped into the clearing. The man gripped a thick black staff in his left hand, while in his right rested a glowing orb bright enough to fill the entire clearing with an eerie, pale light.

Risking a glance over his shoulder, Daniel caught sight of Bridget locked in a silent struggle with another wolf-like beast. Fighting desperately to keep its long wicked teeth away from her throat, Bridget's pale skin glistened with sweat, or was it blood, Daniel couldn't be sure.

An invisible hand suddenly twisted Daniel's head back, forcing him to face the man holding the glowing orb. Though he seemed larger, and much younger, Daniel knew without a doubt that it was the ruby's previous owner. A dark sorcerer, Baldric had called him. Even as his demon abandoned Daniel, in favor of a place by its master's side, the sorcerer seemed to understand Daniel's revelation. His smile only added to Daniel's terror. "Didn't think to see me again, did you boy?"

The sorcerer let go of his staff, yet it remained perfectly straight as if rooted to the ground. "You've led me a merry chase, I'll give you that, but now our little game is over." His smile quickly vanished as he thrust out his hand. "Give me what is mine," he barked. "Now!"

The words hit Daniel like a lash. The sword slipped from his fingers as his muscles tensed. Like a marionette, his legs carried him woodenly toward the sorcerer. Regardless of how much he struggled, Daniel could not prevent himself from placing the ruby in the sorcerer's waiting hand; yet whatever force had taken control of his body fled the moment he let go of the gem.

Instinct quickly took over, and while the old man's eyes were ardently fixated on the gem, Daniel began to slowly back away. He didn't get far, however, before a brilliant flash of green light preceded a shrill and unholy scream that vibrated up and down his spine. He turned just in time to see Baldric withdraw his short-sword from the body of a demon in the final throes of death. The sword itself was the source of the strange light. Green tinged flame raced along its edge as if a blacksmith had just drawn it from his forge.

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Baldric pointed the tip of his glowing blade toward the sorcerer just as Bridget screamed his name. Baldric spun at the sound and hurled his sword. The blade flipped end over end tracing bright emerald circles of light in the air until it stopped abruptly, embedded in the demon's side. The monster yelped once and then fell away. Bridget sank to the ground in an unmoving heap.

"Ahhh," the sorcerer screamed as the staff leapt back into his hand. The ruby was now fastened to the top and glowing like a tiny red sun. When he pointed the ruby end of the staff at Baldric, a crimson bolt of crackling energy leapt out like the head of a striking snake. The jagged streak of red slammed into a wall of greenish flame that had formed halfway between the two men. A fine green line extended back from the wall of flame to connect with the ring on Baldric's outstretched fist.

A second streak of red lightning erupted from the end of the sorcerer's staff. It too slammed into a fiery wall, but this time the shield had formed much closer to Baldric. A third was followed by a fourth. Each time Baldric's shield was forced farther back. The last collision was hardly an arm's length away. The dwarf staggered backwards, barely able to stand.

Wearing a smug grin, the sorcerer took careful aim with his staff just as something dark flew at his eyes. Short jagged red lines appeared on his cheeks as the creature savaged his face. In spite of the terror he felt, Daniel smiled. It was Angel.

The sorcerer slapped the raven away with an oath and she hit the ground in a ball of flapping feathers. The sorcerer's demon lunged for the bird but its jaws snapped shut on empty air. Angel had managed to take wing at the last moment. With a snarl, the black beast bounded off in pursuit. With Angel out of the way, the sorcerer's attention returned to Baldric. "And now you die, half-man," he said in a cold raspy voice.

Knowing full well he was next, Daniel waited in terror for a final killing stroke that never came. Instead, the sorcerer's eyes grew wide and his face went as white as his robes. Finally, a short gurgling noise escaped from his lips as he toppled face first into the dirt. The orb rolled from his hand and began to fade. Daniel watched with fascination as the old man's body glowed red and burst into flame. The event was marked by a howl of pain from somewhere out in the trees.

In a wink of an eye the body was consumed and amid the fading sulfurous smoke stood Bridget. A small piece of red cloth hung from the jagged upper edge of her two-handed sword, which was crimson for half its length. The stain on her blade turned to yellow smoke as she turned toward Daniel. "Are you injured?"

Bridget's left forearm was a mangled bloody mess. It was a wonder she could still hang on to her sword, yet the concern etched on her face was not for herself. "No," Daniel replied, once it finally registered in his mind that she was actually talking to him. "At least I don't think so."

"Good," she said, reaching down to retrieve the staff.

With the orb gone, the clearing was lit only by the stars and a rising full moon but Daniel's eyes were quick to adjust. Scorch marks were all that remained of the sorcerer and two of his demons. The third must have perished while off in the woods chasing Angel, because she had returned to caw down at them from the security of a tree top. Bridget was examining the ruby, which she had worked free from the staff. The centre of the gem was as clear as the one her companion carried. She stuffed it under her belt before casting the staff away and walking over to Baldric, who was sitting on the ground holding his head.

After helping the dwarf to his feet, Bridget examined the scratches on his face. Ignoring his protests, she proceeded to prod and poke until reluctantly proclaiming him fit. In return, Baldric produced a small vial from under his cape and poured its contents over Bridget's wounded forearm. She cursed under her breath, as he began wrapping it in a white cloth. Pale green fire danced in Baldric's eyes as he worked. This Daniel knew was no reflection.

After seeing what it could do, Daniel had discarded any notion of stealing Baldric's ring. The ruby Bridget had hidden under her belt was another matter entirely. By the time Baldric was finished, Daniel had formulated a plan. Recalling how Bridget had saved his life gave him pause, but only for a moment. His experience with Nicholas had taught him just how foolish it was to think of anyone but himself.

"I have not yet thanked you for saving my life," Daniel said, as he moved closer to Bridget. When she reached out to take the hand he offered, however, Daniel made a show of stumbling over a rock and grabbed at her belt for support. That brief moment of contact was all he needed to slip his fingers inside the pouch

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concealed beneath her belt and palm the ruby.

His goal accomplished, Daniel turned to leave, but Baldric clamped a strong hand on his shoulder. “Come now,” he said. “We’ve a camp not far from here, and there is still the matter of our supper.”

“A camp,” Daniel replied, somewhat confused. Then realization sank in. “Finding me was no accident, was it? You knew I had the ruby all along.”

Baldric shrugged. “I’m afraid so Daniel. We tracked it all the way from Katan. You can imagine our surprise when the trail led to you. But, no matter, the evil thing will trouble us no more.”

After a short moonlit walk through the woods, the three of them hunkered down to a meagre meal of dried fruit and stale biscuits. The rabbit and bread were lost, but Bridget had managed to salvage the wineskin. The contents proved well worth the effort. Daniel offered to stand watch, but Baldric assured him there was no better guard than Angel, who would sound the alarm at the first sign of anything untoward. Right after gobbling down a handful of dried fruit, the raven abandoned Bridget’s shoulder in favour of a perch in the treetops overlooking the camp.

“You remind me of my nephew,” Bridget said, after finishing off the last of the wine. “Eric would be about your age. Alicia hoped he would become a scholar, but he refuses to be anything but a hunter like his uncle Baldric.”

Daniel’s reply was muffled by an involuntary yawn.

“Let the lad sleep, Bridget,” the dwarf said. “We can talk in the morning.”

Bridget grunted, but said no more.

Daniel yawned again dramatically before curling up under the woolen blanket Baldric had provided. As he lay with his face turned away, so neither Baldric nor Bridget could see that his eyes remained open, rest was the farthest thing from his mind. Even if he had wanted to fall asleep, the overwhelming feeling of being watched would have prevented it.

When the camp had long gone silent, and the last of the fire’s embers had died, Daniel finally rolled over. Two sleeping forms were easily discernable in the pale moonlight. Praying that Angel would not give him away, Daniel arose and tiptoed to the nearest tree. He carefully cut off a few leafy branches and then returned to stuff them under his blanket. The crude shape was not as convincing

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as he'd hoped, but it would do until dawn.

Moving silently to Baldric's side, Daniel's practiced fingers soon found the ruby hidden beneath the dwarf's tunic. With the tip of his knife Daniel made a tiny slit in the cloth, just enough to squeeze out the ruby. Once it had joined the one he'd taken from Bridget, he searched for Baldric's sword and was soon rewarded with the slippery feel of oiled leather.

Daniel couldn't believe his luck. Baldric had removed both sword and harness before going to sleep. When Daniel's hand gripped the hilt, however, he was reminded of the dwarf's valiant battle with the sorcerer. Though tempted to leave the sword behind, he knew that friendship, gratitude and pity were all in violation of Nicholas's first rule of thievery. One driven home when his former partner turned him out, homeless and penniless, all because Daniel had grown too large for slipping into the places Nicholas himself could not.

Shaking off his hesitation, Daniel clutched the hilt of the sword even tighter, but before he could lift the bundle from the ground, Angel cawed. Daniel froze in near panic. Baldric stirred, but then just turned and made a few smacking noises with his mouth before settling back to sleep. Daniel waited until his pounding heart stopped threatening to burst from his chest before cautiously backing away.

Since the sword was too large to conceal, Daniel would have to remove the gem before he could return to his village. Such delicate work required the light of a fire, and his former campsite was as good a place as any. The gem alone would provide a good horse, provisions and enough coin to see him far away, but he would have to accomplish the task quickly to avoid the unpleasant circumstance of being caught.

As he moved through the trees, Daniel kept glancing over his shoulder, still unable to shake the feeling that he was being followed. Twice he stopped to listen, sure he had heard something suspicious, only to discover a small harmless creature scurrying through the detritus of the forest floor.

When he finally reached the clearing, Daniel paused only long enough to scoop up a handful of leaves for kindling. He was searching for his flint when a flash of red in the trees caught his eye. It was gone before he could tell what it was, yet it left his hands shaking in fear as he struck the flint against the back edge of his knife three times. After another nervous glance at the trees, he bent down

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to blow on the smoldering leaves just as a familiar deep throaty growl stopped him cold.

Knowing all too well what he would find, Daniel looked up, still clinging to the faint hope that he was mistaken, but the demon was even more terrifying than he remembered. Wisps of sulphurous smoke were rising from its charred, cracked skin. Each jagged crack in its hide was glowing a bright red, as if a fire raged within. When their eyes met, the demon went silent and then launched itself at him with the speed of a catapult.

Raising his puny knife in an obviously futile gesture, Daniel clamped his eyes shut. Braced for a painful death, he expected to feel his flesh being torn and ripped from his body, but instead he heard a loud yelp. One eye popped open in time to see the demon's headless body collapse at his feet. Following the jagged edge of a massive sword, he looked up into Bridget's cold blue eyes. "That was for Alicia," she said.

Shielding his eyes from the ensuing flare of crimson fire, which consumed the demon, failed to prevent spots from dancing before Daniel's eyes as Bridget's strong hands yanked him to his feet. Before he could say a word, she had spun him around to face the dwarf, who had the short-sword in his hand, a stormy look on his face and emerald fire burning in his eyes. "Return what you have taken," he demanded.

Wordlessly, Daniel placed a ruby in Baldric's outstretched hand. The fire in Baldric's eyes vanished, though his glare remained angry. Twice in one night they had saved Daniel's life, and twice in one night he had betrayed them. Yet, instead of fear, Daniel felt only shame. The feeling made him think of Nicholas, and how his betrayal had planted a seed of hate in Daniel's heart. It was a seed that had grown into a demon of different sort, yet nevertheless, one with the power to imprison his soul just as effectively as a Soul Stone.

With the truth revealed, the festering hatred living within Daniel shrived and died, leaving him feeling nothing but pity for Nicholas, a man incapable of wasting even a single thought on anyone but himself. Was Daniel doomed to become such a man? Without really knowing why, he retrieved the second ruby from its hiding place and thrust it toward Bridget.

"What," Bridget barked as her hand shot to her side.

Daniel couldn't bring himself to look at her. "I'm sorry," was all he could think to say, as he stared at his feet.

Baldric reached over and gently took the ruby from Daniel's outstretched hand. Without saying a word he slipped it under his cape. When Daniel finally found the courage to look at Baldric's face, he was surprised to find the dwarf smiling.

"You've more pluck than any lad I've ever known," Baldric said. "We could use someone with your talent. That is, if you can practice a degree of restraint. What say you, Daniel? Will you join us in our quest?"

"How can you trust me after all I've done?" Daniel asked, surprised to find how deeply Baldric's faith had touched him.

"We all make mistakes," Baldric said softly. "Why do you think we do what we do?"

"But he's a filthy little thief," Bridget roared.

"Ah yes," Baldric said, without taking his eyes off Daniel, "but he'll be our little thief, won't you lad."

Bridget's eyes narrowed. "He best take care of where he puts his hands from now on. That's all I have to say."

"Oh, I think the lad has learned his lesson," Baldric said soothingly. "Isn't that so, Daniel?"

"I owe you my life, twice over," Daniel replied. "If you take me with you, I swear that you will never regret it."

Bridget scowled back, as if she wasn't believing any of it, but Daniel knew he meant every word. For once in his short life he was telling the truth.

Baldric put his arm around Daniel's shoulder and laughed. "I can see we three will get along famously."

The sky had just started to brighten as they walked through the woods, but that was not foremost on Daniel's mind, just as his thoughts were no longer of gems and riches, for he had found the most valuable treasure of all. Himself.

NOMED'S BUTTON

Sam was in an ugly mood. The vivid image of the driver's smug grin, as he was hauling away Sam's new pearl white Mercedes, just flatly refused to quit creeping back like a thief into his thoughts.

"Having a bad day?" the bartender asked after pouring Sam another shot.

The words barely registered as Sam picked up his drink. "Too drunk to drive anyway," he grumbled with the glass poised beneath his lower lip.

"What's that?" the bartender asked.

"Yeah, I'm having a lousy day, okay, so just let me finish my drink in peace."

The bartender shrugged and went about his business, leaving Sam to ruminate on why he of all people deserved such a miserable life. Finally, overwhelmed with despair, he knocked back the drink in one swift motion, but his body rebelled in a series of coughs and wheezes when a portion went down the wrong way.

"Go easy on that," a soft alluring voice chimed in his ear. "You will need a clear head to make a proper choice."

The words belonged to a slender blue-eyed blonde perched on the next stool. She was absolutely drop-dead gorgeous, so why hadn't he noticed her before? Somewhere in his muddled, whisky-logged brain, Sam struggled to make sense of her strange comment. Blinking a few times to clear away the alcohol-induced haze, he set his empty glass aside to offer his hand.

"The name's Sam."

"Yes, I know," the woman replied, with a broad yet sad smile curved across

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her full sensuous lips. “You may call me Legna.”

Such an odd name deserved inquiry, but Sam was too distracted by the sensation of her delicate fingers sliding across his palm. Her touch was colder than ice. Within seconds, the chill had ferreted into the remotest recesses of his body. He was shivering when she finally released his hand, but he was also stone-cold sober.

Stunned, Sam gawked in silence, until the sharp click of a hard object striking the bar’s brass footrest diverted his attention. A well-dressed man, with stylishly coiffed salt-and-pepper hair, was easing his lanky frame onto the next stool. When his eyes captured Sam’s, the man smiled. “Can I buy you another drink?” he asked. “You look like you could use one.”

“Sure, why not,” Sam replied, shoving his empty forward. Propelled by unfocused anger, the glass sailed across the bar’s wet slippery surface to tumble off the far side.

“Sorry,” Sam muttered, after an explosion of shards sent the displeased bartender in search of his broom. “Whatever I touch turns to crap. My old man was right. Never expect too much, because life’s a bitch and then you die. Guess I was just too dumb to listen.”

“That’s the spirit,” the man next to him said through a big toothy smile. “There’s no finer garnish for abject misery than a liberal sprinkling of self-pity.”

“Sam,” Legna whispered close to his ear. “Don’t let resentment poison your soul. You can find good in anything. All you need do is look.”

“The name is Nomed,” the man interjected, ignoring the young woman completely. Sam reached out to accept the man’s extended hand but instantly yanked his own back in alarm. It was like touching a hot tin roof. Nomed just smiled as if nothing had happened.

While Sam was dabbing his fingers in beads of condensation left behind by his last drink, the bartender was filling another glass. Sam snatched it up and downed the liquor without a second thought. It scorched his throat, but he managed not to cough this time.

Nomed pulled an object from his coat pocket and placed it on the counter. It was an odd looking thing, consisting of a black plastic disk about the size of a tea saucer, with a large red button dominating the center. “We’re running a little

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behind schedule,” he said. “So I’ll forgo my usual verbosity and get right down to business. It’s time to renew your contract.”

Sam laughed. “If you’re looking for money, get in line. The bank took everything, even my car. Paying my bar tab will clean me out.”

“What I have to offer is absolutely free,” Nomed replied. “Just push that button and all your troubles will be over. Trust me. I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“Ha,” Legna snorted. “Only because it’s against the rules.”

“You two know each other?” Sam asked.

“Oh, we’ve never actually met,” Legna replied, “but I’ve dealt with his kind before.”

“You might say we’re competitors,” Nomed offered.

“Okay,” Sam said. “So what happens if I push the button? Do I win the lottery or something? I sure could use the cash.”

“Oh, this is far more interesting, my boy,” Nomed replied. “You will travel back in time. One whole year.”

Barroom chatter filled the silence that ensued, until Sam finally found his voice. “Yea, right,” he replied with a sarcastic sneer. “Check please,” he added, waving his hand to catch the bartender’s attention.

“Wait a minute” Nomed said. “What’s the rush? Hear me out. I promise you won’t regret it.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Legna said. “Your best interests are certainly not his, but he is right about one thing. You can’t just leave.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed. “Why not?”

Legna was wearing that sad smile again. “People in your position are granted eleven minutes of divine clarity in which to make their choice.”

“Eleven minutes and six seconds to be precise,” Nomed amended while brushing a speck of fluff from his sleeve. “Just a formality, really. Won’t change anything in the end.”

“You both belong in the looney bin,” Sam said, “but I’ll play along for a while. So tell me what’s with this eleven and six thing?”

“Oh, I think it’s buried somewhere in the fine print,” Nomed replied. “Just one of the rules. A bit of entertainment, you might say. The boss has quite a sense of humor; it was probably one of his ideas.”

“This is no joke, Sam,” Legna said sharply. “Your soul is on the line. Move forward now, or continue to be a prisoner in your own past; the choice is yours.”

“Why take risks with an uncertain future?” Nomed said, waving away Legna’s words like pesky insects. “If you want another glorious year, just like the last one, then press that button. Think about it. The best year of your life just ended. It’s all gone: business success, gobs of money and Desirae.”

Nomed cracked a grin, winked and then prodded Sam in the ribs with an elbow. “Let’s not forget about Desirae, eh. I tell you Sam, your life’s a slippery slope from here on out. Failing health, loneliness, poverty, all culminating in a long drawn-out painful death. Gives me goose bumps just thinking about it.”

“So, are you saying I can change all that?”

“Nope, the past is carved in stone,” Nomed replied shaking his head. “But, you can relive it. At least that one good year. Come on, get it over with, you know you want it. Push the button.”

Sam remained unconvinced. “Why should I believe such a ridiculous notion?”

“What time is it?” Nomed asked.

Sam looked at his watch. “Minute past nine. Why?”

“Your understanding is limited to three dimensions, so I will put this in terms you can conceptualize. I come from another level of existence; the final dimension. In between your dimension and mine lies time. Resonating at a higher dimensional frequency, I can traverse time threads as easily as you could walk up and down the streets outside.”

With that, Nomed waved his hand over Sam’s empty glass and suddenly it was full again. “What time is it now, Sam?”

Sam’s eyes flicked back and forth between his watch and the glass. It was eight fifty-nine. “Okay, for argument’s sake, let’s say time travel is possible. The real question is, how could I possibly enjoy myself knowing it all ends up in the crapper?”

“That’s the beauty of it, my boy. You won’t know a thing. Push that button and you turn back the clock one year, no strings attached. Every experience will be like the very first time.”

“Sounds too good to be true,” Sam said, still skeptical. “So what’s the catch?”

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There's always a catch. What happens after the year is up? You suck out my soul or something?"

Nomed's eyes glazed over as a wistful smile spread across his face for the briefest of moments. "Ah, those were the good old days, but no, one year from now we meet for you to choose again. Relive your year as many times as you like. It's no big deal; you can quit anytime. Tell me now, where's the harm in that?"

"What about new experiences," Legna said grabbing Sam's arm. He instinctively shrank away from the coldness of her touch. "You will only suffer the same loss all over again and be right back where you started. True existence is about change, Sam. Learning. Evolving. What he offers you is, is..."

Nomed's wagging finger silenced Legna before she could finish. "Don't pay any attention to her," he said. "Very soon you'll see that everything I told you is absolutely true." Nomed looked at his watch. "Starting right about now, as a matter of fact."

The room grew dark as Sam's life suddenly began to play in his head like a grade-B video in fast forward. Years of grueling fourteen-hour days, seven-day weeks and nothing to show for it. Then it happened. His big break. Suddenly Joseph Samuel Mires was a somebody: wealthy, respected and desirable.

Success was everything. No one cared anymore what Sam looked like or how he sounded. He was on everyone's party list. Then came Desirae. A whirlwind three day romance ending in a Vegas marriage. She was way out of his league, but Desirae had expensive tastes that only large sums of Sam's cash could satisfy. The money seemed endless too, until Desirae disappeared with his company's assets and left Sam holding the bag.

As his life continued to unfold, Sam soon found himself in virgin territory. The future. He watched in horror as everything Nomed had predicted came to pass. His final hours would be spent alone in a hospital bed, a shrunken corpse-like creature with a tube up his nose, but wait, there was a man standing next to him. He was placing a plastic disk next to Sam's pale skeletal hand. "Oh my God," Sam gasped.

Nomed's face turned sour. "Now, let's leave him out of this shall we," he said tartly.

"But, it's all true."

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“Of course, my boy. I tell no lies.”

“It was you,” Sam said, looking at Nomed through new and enlightened eyes. “You came to me in the hospital.” He looked down at the button. “With that.”

“I can’t tell you what a warm feeling it is to be fondly remembered,” Nomed said. “Brings a tear to my eye.”

“Don’t let his silky words blind you, Sam,” Legna said. “He’s not telling you the whole truth. You need to move on. Living in your past forever is nothing more than...”

Once again Nomed’s wagging finger silenced Legna. “What forever,” he said. “Just one year. The one you yourself picked in those last few minutes, I might add, and just like I told you, in one short year you can choose again. No harm in that, right?”

“So it’s not permanent then,” Sam said breathlessly, his hand suddenly hovering over the button. “I can choose differently next time?”

“Of course,” Nomed said still looking at his watch, “but you better hurry, just twenty seconds left.”

“Listen to me, Sam,” Legna pleaded “If you press that button, you will never know what could have been.”

“Fifteen.”

The sudden urgency a driving force, Sam glared intently into Legna’s cool beautiful blue eyes. “From what I’ve seen, the rest of my life isn’t worth squat. Can you promise me it gets better? Can you tell me anything at all?”

“Ten.”

Crestfallen, Legna stared down at her clasped hands. “No,” she whispered. “I can’t make promises and I can’t show you anything beyond what has already been revealed. You must have faith. I have no other answer for you, Sam.”

Nomed continued his countdown. “Five, four, three, two...”, but before he got to one, Sam’s hand slammed down on the button.

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“Oh, dear,” Legna said as Sam vanished in a brilliant flash of purple light that no one else in the room seemed to notice.

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“This must be your first purgatory assignment,” Nomed remarked as he snatched the plastic disk from the counter and swung his legs off the footrest. “I hate it when they send in greenhorns,” he added to the sound of cloven hooves clicked on the hardwood floor. “I like a challenge, you see, but in this case it wouldn’t have mattered anyway. Sam is one of my best. Real dependable.”

“Don’t you feel even the slightest bit of pity? His soul is trapped. Frozen in time.”

“Look, sweetheart, I’m just doing my job.”

“Haven’t you ever made an exception?”

“Let me tell you something. Once, a long time ago, a Nomed gave some jerk a break. When the boss found out, he decided to make an example of him. As far as I know he’s still up to his nose in boiling crap. So no, they all get same treatment and I don’t play favorites.”

“There is something I really must know,” Legna said. “How many times has Sam pushed that button?”

A thick red book popped into existence in front of Nomed and he plucked it from the air. “Let’s see,” he said thumbing through the pages. “Ah, yes, here it is. Counting today, that would be nine hundred and eighty-seven.”

“Why in heaven does He allow this go on,” Legna whispered.

“Read the rules,” Nomed replied while glancing at his watch. “Free will. You gotta love it. Now if you will excuse me, I have a very important appointment in 1942.” Without another word, Nomed abruptly vanished in the same fashion Sam had moments before.

“I’ve sure made a mess of this one,” Legna said to Nomed’s empty stool, “but your boss isn’t as smart as you may think. No matter how many times Sam makes the wrong one, he only has to make the right choice once. Time is on my side. Perhaps next year.”

Another flash of light, and a single white feather resting on Legna’s empty stool was the only hint anything had happened at all. In the process of wiping the counter, the bartender leaned over and flicked it off with his cloth. “Wish to heck I knew how those darn things keep getting in here,” he muttered, and somewhere in the final dimension another Nomed laughed.

MAGIC OF MARS

What had she gotten herself into? At fifty-two, Felix was two decades past the company's age limit for an off-world contract. She should be planning her retirement, not hurtling through space exposing herself to solar radiation and who knows what else, but for an opportunity to study evidence of an ancient civilization on Mars, she would have done just about anything. It would be the crowning jewel to an already stellar career.

The company had demonstrated such great faith in her abilities; even Felix had been convinced she was the only one for the job. Six months in space however, with little to do but think, had taken its toll on that conviction. Anxiety had nestled into the pit of her stomach ever since making Mars orbit. Transferring from the interplanetary transport, to one of the two small moons aboard a service pod wasn't helping matters. The confines of the two-person craft bordered on claustrophobic.

To distract herself, Felix contemplated what real gravity would feel like after six months of artificial gravity onboard the transport. Then the tiny pod came to an abrupt, teeth chattering, stop. She tried to release the latch on her shoulder harness, but her gloves were too thick to allow for a decent grip. Just one more frustration to eat away at her already enervated confidence.

The pilot's voice crackled over the comm, "Sorry about the rough landing Ms Jones, haven't done this before."

Felix ceased her struggle with the latch. *Well, I suppose it's a good thing he didn't mention that before we left.* "I had assumed you did this all the time."

The pilot turned his seat around. He looked far too young for such responsibility. Felix offered up a grateful smile in anticipation of much needed assistance with the harness. It was not forthcoming. The smirk on his face was

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plain to see even through the glare on his bubbled face shield. He obviously found her difficulties amusing.

“No, not at all,” he finally replied. “Company policy is to drop the hydrogen tanks to the surface first, and then dock a shuttle for passengers, but that won’t happen for another seventeen hours. Your departure was expedited. Someone high up must want you on the surface ASAP.”

“Okay, so how do I get to the planet from here.”

“They’ve been holding a shuttle for you here. It’s sitting thirty meters away. Just sit tight and someone will be along shortly.”

Felix renewed her struggle with the stubborn buckle until it finally popped. Free at last, she leaned forward in an effort to peer through the entry hatch view port. The perimeter around the pod was dimly illuminated by the navigation lights. They cast enough light to make out the moonlet’s grey pitted surface, but little else. It was an eerie sensation. She pushed herself back into her seat. “If we are on the surface of the moon, how come I still feel weightless?”

“Phobos basically has no gravity. Jump out that hatch and you would reach escape velocity. You’d either end up a grease spot on the planet surface or drift in orbit for all eternity.”

Felix swallowed down a lump in her throat. “Won’t we fall off,” she blurted out.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” the pilot replied, but the contempt in his voice screamed liar. “Super conducting magnets in the pod’s landing struts have locked onto iron particles in the moonlet’s surface, so don’t get your pressure up cause it’s not going anywhere.”

In response to a loud beep, the pilot spun his chair back to the pod’s consol. “When the escort brings the safety line over from the shuttle, just make sure that you’re secured before you leave the pod. I don’t want to lose my first VIP, wouldn’t look good on my record.”

Felix bit down on her lip in frustration. She prided herself on being easy to get along with, but occasionally she came across an ego that just made it impossible. This was one of those times, but a loud clang outside prevented her from voicing her nasty thoughts. The metallic sound was followed by a hiss as the pod door swung up.

A cable floated in through the opening. It reminded Felix of a snake she had once seen in India. It was followed by a feminine voice on the comm, “Attach yourself to this line.” Felix took the offered cable, clicked it onto her tether hook,

and very carefully climbed through the narrow hatch. "I'm your escort," the voice said, "just relax and follow my lead."

Feeling a lot like a child's balloon, Felix drifted along behind the escort as the woman reeled them both over to the shuttle. They left a swirling trail of moon dust in their wake. When they reached the waiting spacecraft, Felix chanced to glance up. Her breath caught in her throat. The sky was filled with the giant rust red Planet. "It's so big," she gasped.

"Impressive, isn't it," the escort replied. "We are only five thousand kilometers from the surface." Felix felt a tug on the line. "Come on, you'll get a chance to see it up close real soon."

They entered through a hatch in the side of the shuttle. A hiss of air as the airlock pressurized, followed by two sharp beeps, and then the inner door slid open. When the escort removed her helmet, Felix was not surprised to learn she was as young as the pod pilot. She removed Felix's helmet with the precision of someone who had done it a thousand times before, but her eyes went wide upon seeing Felix's face for the first time without the glare of the face shield.

The young woman's reaction was something Felix had grown accustomed to since leaving Earth. Yes, the age limit for a Mars contract was thirty, but her knowledge and skills could not be acquired overnight; it took decades of hard work, study and research, but she had grown tired of explaining all that. "Felix," was all she said while offering her hand and flashing her best smile.

It seemed to work. The woman's look of shock was replaced with a warm smile as she took the offered hand. "I'm Gwen, welcome aboard the Artemis."

Exchanging her deep space suit for a Mars atmosphere unit was like shedding a medieval suit of armor in favor of cotton coveralls. Gwen led the way to the forward section of the shuttle and the last empty passenger seat. As Felix watched the young woman check the rest of her passengers on the way to the co-pilot's seat, a large gloved hand appeared in front of her nose. It belonged to the passenger sitting next to her. "Hello," he said in a thick Slavic accent the moment she made eye contact. "I am Viktor Minoff."

He was a handsome young man in his late twenties, with a wide rugged face, a square chin and lovely blue eyes. In her high school days she would have called him a hunk. He must have noticed her age, but had the grace not show it. She liked him right off. "Felix Jones," she replied taking the offered hand. "Your name sounds Russian."

A big toothy grin spread across Viktor's face. "Belarusian, from Minsk. You

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are American, yes?”

“Canadian actually. Just arrived on the transport.”

“Ah, you are going to Deuterium facility.”

“What,” Felix said a little confused.

“Your country is number one in deuterium production,” he replied. Felix didn’t have a clue of what he was talking about. “Heavy water for the CANDU reactor... You are nuclear physicist, yes?”

“No, I am an archeologist,” Felix said just as the shuttle lifted off. “I am heading for the caves at Nix Olympus.”

“Ah, The Caves,” Viktor shouted over the roar of the thrusters. “I have heard rumors about that place. Requires very special security clearance. You have very interesting job, I think.”

This was news to Felix. Not that it was interesting of course, but she had not been aware of any special security requirements. “What about you,” she yelled back.

Viktor tapped a thick thumb on his chest. “I am geologist transferring from asteroid mines to Nix Olympus platinum mine. Nine more months and I return for Minsk a rich man.”

“We’ll be returning on the same transport then,” Felix said.

Shock registered on Viktor’s face. “You return in only one rotation! How will you pay transport fee.”

“The company has waved my fee.”

Viktor’s eyes rose so high they almost blended into his thick blond hair. “I should have been archeologist,” he muttered as the shuttle penetrated the thin Martian atmosphere.

The Artemis landed at what Viktor said was the company’s newest complex. Rover vehicles were waiting to take the passengers on to their final destinations. With some relief, Felix stepped out of the shuttle only to be stunned by the sight of the twenty-six kilometer high Nix Olympus Mountain. It literally filled the northern sky. She felt a heavy hand on her shoulder. Viktor’s deep voice crackled over her headset. “Impressive, yes.”

“You know, I have been hearing that a lot lately, but yes it is. I have never seen anything like it.”

Viktor wished her luck before leaving in one of the rovers. Felix watched as one after another the rovers drove away, until only one remained. She was about to step back into the shuttle when the rover’s door opened. “Get in,” a voice said

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on her comm. She walked over to the vehicle, got in, and closed the door. The driver turned to face her. He was a swarthy man, easily pushing thirty. An old timer by Mars standards.

The man smiled. "You must be Jones," he said. "I'm Richard Perez, chief security officer for this sector, but you can call me Rickie. It'll be a two-hour trip to The Caves. It's a rough ride, so you'd better buckle up."

As Felix reached for the harness, she noticed a transparent container of clear liquid hanging between the seats. "What's the rover use for fuel?"

"Methane and oxygen like everything else around here, but the tank you're looking at, that's just water condensed from the rover's exhaust. On Mars we can't afford to waste anything, see."

As soon as they were underway, Rickie embarked on a long lecture explaining the intricacies of Martian economy. It must have been his favourite subject.

"Mars imports just three things, see: hydrogen, food and people. We need the hydrogen to produce methane, oxygen, water and Deuterium. Fruits and vegetables we grow in pressurized carbon dioxide enriched greenhouses, but we can't make enough protein. As for people, with a pay level twenty times higher than Earth, there's a long lineup."

Felix laughed. "Back on Earth they say Mars has a vein of pure gold a metre thick and two kilometres long."

"That's a fact," Rickie replied. "But like once you factor in the transport costs, even gold won't generate that much profit, see. The company's Lunar helium-3 production has a lot more potential for profit, if the reactors can ever be brought on line. Lucky for us, they'll need even more deuterium."

"Yea, it's true Mars exports like tons of gold and platinum every rotation," Rickie said as the rover topped a rise, "but it's the little things like refilling the hydrogen tanks with deuterium that make it profitable, see."

It was time for Felix to change the subject. Commerce had never been of much interest to her, at least not unless it was a few thousand years old. "I was briefed before leaving Earth, and I must say I was shocked to hear what you've found here."

Rickie looked sideways at Felix. She could see the wide smile he wore, even through his face shield. "What exactly did they tell you?"

"I was told that mining operations had uncovered artifacts which clearly indicated intelligent life once existed here."

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“Did anyone mention the hieroglyphs? I can tell by the look on your face that they didn’t, so like I know they didn’t tell you that we dated them, see.”

Felix’s mind was racing. *Hieroglyphs on Mars*. “How old?”

Rickie smiled. “Eleven thousand standard Earth years.” Felix was speechless. Rickie laughed. “You should see your face.”

Felix suddenly felt an affinity with a certain young blonde girl peering down a very dark rabbit hole. “What else haven’t I been told?”

“We’ve learned a lot since you left Earth, see. You can read the full report once we’re inside. The complex is just over the next rise.”

Felix had a million questions, but they would have to wait. Rickie’s supply of information had suddenly dried up. It was late afternoon by the time they arrived. Once inside, she was impressed with the resources the company had invested in sealing and pressurizing the caves. It sure felt good to be able to walk around without the cumbersome environmental suit.

Rickie guided Felix to the main chamber, where the sight of row after row of Glyphs carved into the stone walls left her feeling light headed. She was introduced to John and Mark, two computer engineers assigned to the project. They were exactly what she would have expected, right down to their school tattoos, shaved heads and thick-rimmed glasses.

After slipping a reader into her hand, Rickie left Felix on her own. The first thing she did was to take a leisurely stroll around the chamber to examine the glyphs. More than once she stopped in awe to trace the symbols gently with her fingers. They were so well preserved; it was as if they had been carved only yesterday. Her initial curiosity satisfied, Felix found a chair and sat down to read.

After plodding through the rather lengthy report, Felix set the reader aside and closed her eyes. She couldn’t shake the feeling there was something important she had missed, but was too exhausted to think about it. How long it had been since she last slept anyway? Slowly, she drifting off. Then a strange voice whispered softly in her ear. “We have been waiting for you, Felix Jones.”

Felix’s eyelids snapped open. She leapt up in alarm looking quickly from side to side. Except for the two engineers at their terminals six metres away, the chamber was empty. John and Mark glanced up momentarily from their terminals, smiled, and then went back to work. Felix sat back down feeling a little more than foolish. *Gotta chill out, it was just a dream.*

With a sigh Felix picked up the reader and started once more from the beginning. Mars did not suffer from a shortage of scientists, or engineers, and

every test that could be done, had been, but the information was overwhelmingly riddled with incongruities.

Martian technology was as advanced as it was alien. Even after six months, the engineers and scientists involved had been unable to explain it. Conflicting theories outstanding, the one thing they all agreed on, was that the Martians had been inter-planetary travellers for thousands years. Physically they were a reptilian humanoid hybrid with an average height of three metres. Computer simulations concluded it would not have been possible for them to walk under the weight of Earth's gravity, even though the records clearly stated that they had. The primitive Earthlings they encountered had understandably mistaken them for gods. Martians had no such concepts. By the time they understood, the beliefs were too ingrained to dissuade.

Mars itself was a utopia; crimes, disease, hunger, poverty, were nonexistent. Then without warning, Lucifer, the fifth planet, exploded. The meteor storm that followed was catastrophic. After being struck repeatedly by deadly missiles from space the planet cracked, poisoning the air and boiling the rivers dry. Prior to this event, Mars had been a moonless planet. Phobos and Deimos are pieces of Lucifer captured by the gravity of Mars.

The surviving Martians used what resources were left to them to seal off the caves. Outside of their safe haven the temperature dropped drastically and almost overnight most of the atmosphere was lost. Their last hope was that rescue ships would return from earth, but the window came and went with no such ships.

Trapped in the caves, the Martians lived for a few more rotations until their food stores ran out. In that short time they recorded their history on the cave walls in the hope some day it would be found. Near the end, they began preparations for their final journey. This is where the report ended.

Exhausted, Felix set aside the reader. She studied the glyphs on a nearby wall. Parts of them were well known to her, having elements of ancient Egyptian, Mayan, Greek, Arabic and even Chinese, but they were all jumbled together in an incoherent mess. It was obvious the symbols had different meanings than what she had come to know on Earth. She finally decided to talk with the engineers. Perhaps they had more information to offer. She walked over to their station and leaned on the desk between them. "What are you doing?"

The two young men looked at each other as if she had spoken in a foreign language. Finally Mark spoke. "Well, you're here, so I guess it's all right." He pointed to his screen. "We're analysing the holograms."

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“Holograms, what holograms.”

“From the crystals, of course.”

Felix did her best to hide her surprise. *Crystals, there was no reference to crystals in the report. What’s going on here?* “Okay, tell me what you know about the crystals.”

“Well they were embedded in the walls with the glyphs. See those round holes about every two meters. Security took them all after we digitized them. They are some kind of storage medium.”

“I would sure like to have seen one of those,” Felix muttered.

Mark looked at his co-worker. John shrugged, and then reached under his desk. He pulled out what looked like a plum sized diamond. “We call them crystals,” Mark said, “but to tell you the truth, we aren’t really sure what they are.”

John handed it to Felix. “Here, take a look inside.”

Felix held the crystal up to her eye. She saw a three dimensional image of someone moving toward her. It was much more vivid than any hologram she’d seen before. Closer inspection of the person’s face revealed scaled skin. “Martians,” she gasped.

“We still don’t know how they’re encoded,” Mark said, “but we were able to download the images onto the main computer’s hard drive through a video link.”

“So I can look at these images on a terminal,” Felix asked, still holding the crystal to her eye.

“Well, not exactly.”

Felix lowered the crystal. “Why not.”

“Well, when we first started downloading them we checked the images against the originals, and well, they are never the same.”

“Data loss,” Felix offered.

“No, I mean they are totally different. It’s like someone overwrote the crystals with new data. They’re still holographic images of Martians, but different ones that’s all.”

Felix looked at the crystal. “Mind if I keep this.”

Mark looked at John, who shrugged. “We aren’t supposed to have one, so don’t tell anyone where you got it, okay.”

Felix pretended to pull a zipper across her lips, winked, and then went back to her seat. After studying the crystal for while, she yawned, closed her eyes, and

laid her head back. She needed to rest her eyes for a minute. Before she knew what was happening, the strange voice had returned. It whispered in her ear like a ghost. “Look into the portal, Felix Jones.”

An icy shiver ran down her spine. Felix looked around the now empty chamber. The engineers must have left for the night, but somehow she knew she was not alone. She took the crystal from her pocket and held it up to her eye. An alien face glared back at her. It’s thin lips moved. It was speaking to her. Then she smiled. “You’re just a recording,” she said.

“This is no recording, Felix Jones, my name is Jakarta.”

“Where are you,” Felix replied once she found her voice.

“Right here, standing before you.” Felix waved her hand through the empty space in front of her. She heard what sounded like a chuckle. “You cannot touch me,” the voice said, “I exist on another plain of reality. You can see me only through this dimensional portal. I have been awaiting your arrival for a long time.”

Was this some kind of joke? John and Mark were hiding around the corner playing her for a fool. Well, she was a good sport. She’d play along with the joke. “Why me,” she asked.

“You were selected long before you were born, but that is unimportant. I have a gift to bestow upon you.”

“And it’s not even my birthday. Okay, what is it.”

“Everything.”

Felix collapsed back into her chair. It felt like icy fingers ran through her hair, and then she heard Jakarta’s ghostlike voice inside her head. Slowly, understanding came to her. She looked at the first row of glyphs on the wall. The meaning was clear to her. She closed her eyes and tried to relax but she was so excited it took a long time for her to calm down. She finally opened her eyes and looked at the next row of symbols. The Martian’s voice whispered again. Understanding came once more. Staying relaxed, she repeated the process again and again until at some point during the night exhaustion claimed her.

Felix was awakened roughly by Rickie who wanted to know if she had made any progress. Felix rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “It’s all in here,” she said, tapping her temple with her index finger. “In our minds. Latent abilities we’ve only dreamed of.”

“What are you talking about,” Rickie barked?

Felix stood up. “All matter consists mostly of space, right. Well, manipulating the bits in between is child’s play, once you know how.”

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Rickie looked annoyed. “You’re not making any sense, Ms Jones.”

Felix took a deep breath. This was going to be even more difficult than she thought. “You’ve been unable to find a power source because there isn’t one. Martian technology was based on psychokinesis. Their ships were airtight shells constructed of simple rock and powered by pure thought. The pyramids on Earth were human attempts to imitate them.”

Rickie’s mouth hung open. He shut it like a trap. “You expect me to believe this,” he said turning toward the wall of glyphs. “I mean you’ve been here all of one whole day, and you say you understand all this.”

“I didn’t figure it out on my own, I had help. The crystals aren’t recorded history, they’re portals into another dimension.”

Rickie’s eyes narrowed. “Who told you about the crystals. You weren’t authorized to access that data.”

“It doesn’t matter. Listen. The Martians have just moved on to a place where the cataclysm had no effect. They are still here, all around us, just on another plain of existence, an alternate universe, the fourth dimension, another time, call it what you will.”

Fear registered on Rickie’s face as he looked around. “Just because I’m not a scientist doesn’t mean I’m stupid. What you are suggesting isn’t possible.”

“Don’t you see? It explains it all. They were giants from a planet with only two-fifths the gravity of Earth, but they could walk. Why? Because they used the energy from the subatomic particles around them to deflect the excess gravity. It’s all there,” Felix said pointing back at the glyphs. “They left behind complete instructions on how to do it.”

Rickie looked confused. “This is way over my head, Ms Jones. I need to talk to someone back on Earth. Like, just sit tight till I get back, see.” He turned and practically ran out of the chamber.

Once he was gone, Felix realized she hadn’t eaten since leaving the transport. She walked back to the food dispensers near the entrance to the complex. She selected synthetic eggs, toast and coffee. After wolfing down her meal, she headed back with a second cup of coffee in hand to continue her study of the glyphs.

After another look around the cave, Felix sat down and took a sip of her coffee. It was stone cold. She was about to make a trip back to the food dispensers to use the microwave, when she got a better idea. Setting the cup down on the table, she closed her eyes and remembered what Jakarta had told her. *All you thought you knew about the universe was an illusion.*

In her mind's eye Felix could see the cup of coffee. She focussed on visualizing the molecules and then went deeper, down to the atoms. Finally, she arrived at the subatomic level, the quanta. Her first attempts to control a single quantum particle failed. They were elusive, blinking in and out of existence. Then a single electron responded. Spurred on by her success, she extended her influence on an ever expanding group of quanta. A sizzling sound accompanied by the acrid smell of something burning forced her to open her eyes. The coffee cup was gone. In its place was a bubbling lump of grey plastic.

Felix clasped her hands to her cheeks in shock just as Jakarta whispered a word of warning in her ear. She turned to see Rickie standing a few metres away. He was flanked by two grim faced security men. "How long have you been there," she asked.

"Long enough," Rickie replied. Felix froze when she saw the pistol in his hand. "Sorry Ms Jones, but I've got my orders. You've spun a gear, or it's all true, I don't know which, and I don't really care. I just can't let you leave these caves alive, see."

"I don't understand. This discovery will solve all of Earth's energy problems."

Rickie rolled his eyes. "You just don't get it, do you! The company has everything tied up in Mars, and it barely covers costs. We want a new energy source to make money, see. If anyone can produce their own by pulling it out of thin air, then where's the profit. You would put us out of business." He raised his weapon and pointed it at Felix's head. "I really am sorry about this, Ms Jones. And I was just starting to like you, too."

Felix looked at the hard faces of the other men. There would be no help there. "You won't get away with this. It's murder."

Rickie shrugged. "What murder? The poor old gal was just too old for the rigors of Mars. They never should have sent her. Cause of death, heart failure. Body recycled as per company policy." Felix could hear the condescending sneer in his voice.

Felix stepped back involuntarily. She was near panic, until Jakarta whispered in her ear. *You are a part of everything and everything is a part of you.* With a great effort she forced back the overwhelming urge to turn and run. Closing her eyes, she concentrated on the energy around her, drawing it to her like a human energy field, and then projecting it. The gun clicked twice but didn't fire. Felix opened her eyes. Rickie was staring at his pistol in confusion. He didn't know it,

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but the molecular structure of the explosive charges in the bullets had been altered; turned to harmless carbon and salt.

“It’s you who doesn’t get it, Rickie,” Felix said as she visualized the neural network of his brain. Rickie looked at her, his eyes glazed over, and then he crumpled to the ground. The other two men reached for their pistols but collapsed with the weapons only half out of their holsters.

Felix let out the breath she had been holding and felt for the dimensional portal in her pocket. She had a message to deliver to the people on Earth, but she was going to need help to do it. She thought of Viktor and the shuttle pilot. People like them would help once she explained; for there was something she had neglected to tell Rickie. The Martians who had been on Earth when Lucifer was cast down from the heavens were still there, and she was going to find them.

SHADOWS OF MARS

Punctuated by the rumbling vibration of directional thrusters kicking in, the deep metallic clang of external cargo locks being released announced the departure of heat shielded deuterium containers en route to the planet's surface. Global-Tec Universal owned the transport, so the precedence was payload before people. It served to remind Felix of just how important her mission was. Humanity stood poised at the precipice of an evolutionary leap, and she had come home to shove it kicking and screaming over the edge.

Gazing down at the big blue and white planet below had stirred Felix's emotions into a curious concoction of elation and dread. As the massive interplanetary cargo containers penetrated Earth's atmosphere, in a dazzling display of friction-generated heat, she found herself momentarily distracted by her own translucent reflection. Captured within the viewport's four heavy layers of fused silica glass, and framed in long gleaming auburn hair, the face belonged to a vibrant young woman in her late twenties. It was a far cry from the fifty-two year old, white-haired archeologist Global-Tec had sent to study ancient Martian hieroglyphs two years before.

A second, unmistakably masculine, face suddenly appeared in the viewport next to Felix's. "It is good to be back, yes?" a deep voice whispered softly in her ear, as Viktor's prominent chin nuzzled its way into the crook of her neck.

In response to his powerful hands cupping her shoulders, Felix reached up to give Viktor's fingers a firm squeeze. Besides restored youth, her physical transformation had reawakened powerful biological desires. During the long monotonous journey back to Earth, these intense emotional forces had turned a casual friendship with the big Slavic geologist into something much more carnal. The fact that she was chronologically twenty-five years older than her lover

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seemed irrelevant under the circumstances.

“It feels like I’ve been gone a lifetime,” Felix replied wistfully, just before the feel of cold slimy fingers creeping up her spine shattered her moment of melancholy.

The disquieting, but all too familiar, sensation Felix was experiencing hailed the arrival of Jakarta, the Ka-Itzu bound to the dimensional portal she carried in her hip pocket. In their wildest imaginings, no one on Earth could ever have anticipated the discovery of a highly advanced Martian race living in an alternate universe; a parallel reality in which Mars had not been rendered lifeless by a catastrophic cosmic event.

This human male is an unacceptable distraction, Felix Jones, Jakarta’s reptilian voice hissed in Felix’s mind. You must send him away.

Felix made no outward acknowledgment of her mentor’s sudden arrival, but simply let her free hand slide down to her side. Touching the portal was no longer necessary, but she did so out of habit before responding silently with her mind. *Not now!* she said, far more harshly than she had intended.

Am I your teacher, or some servant to be dismissed by your whim? Jakarta asked, with naked outrage.

Please, Jakarta, Felix said, can’t this wait until later?

While you humans were still living like pathetic primitives, Jakarta replied, unperturbed, we Ka-Itzu were unravelling the secrets of the universe. The knowledge I have shared so freely with you is the result of uncompromising dedication spanning countless generations, but then humans have always been an extremely self-serving species so I suppose I have only my own naivete to blame for such misguided expectations of respect and gratitude. Even so, because of my intervention, you now have the potential to extend your lifetime tenfold. Is that not worth a few moments of your precious time?

Of course it is, Felix said, but not right now. Please, just leave us alone. There was no response, but the chill that had gripped her spine slowly dissipated.

“The alien was with you just now, yes?” Viktor asked.

Felix turned and gazed into her lover’s pale blue eyes. “How did you know?” she asked softly, suddenly aware of the deep lines of concern etched into his ruggedly handsome face.

“Your shoulders tensed up and your skin turned as cold as moon ice,” Viktor replied. “I know how important this is to you, Felix, but I still cannot force myself to like this..., this creature.”

“If not for Jakarta, I would still look old enough to be your mother. How interested in me would you be then?”

The look on Viktor’s face made Felix immediately regret her thoughtless words, but it was too late to take them back. “If you have to ask that,” he said, with a hint of anguish in his voice, “then maybe we are making the big mistake.”

“I’m sorry Viktor,” Felix blurted out, as she spun around to face him. “I didn’t really mean that.”

There was a dreadful moment of silence before the corner of Viktor’s mouth curled back up and Felix relaxed. Her lover’s inability to sustain any form of negative mood was one of his most endearing qualities. “Consider the matter forgotten,” Viktor said, “but since you are always so preoccupied with this Martian of yours...”

“Ka-Itzu,” Felix corrected.

“Ka-Itzu,” Viktor repeated. “I am thinking it best to remind you that our shuttle leaves in less than two hours.”

Felix kissed him quickly on the lips. “Thank you Viktor, I just need a few more minutes alone to think.” After a pause, she turned back to gaze once more upon Earth. “I can’t decide on the appropriate way to share Ka-Itzu teachings with everyone else down there. If I screw this up, the consequences could be widespread and disastrous.”

“Such is life,” Viktor replied. When Felix looked back, he placed a forefinger under her chin and tilted her head up slightly so she was looking directly into his eyes. “Just do what you think is right and all will be well. Your heart is strong and pure, my love. Trust in it to guide you.”

“Thank you Viktor,” Felix replied, after kissing him once more on the lips; this time with real passion. “I really needed to hear that. Now please go on ahead and I’ll be along shortly.”

Viktor kissed her quickly one last time before walking away. The moment he was out of sight, however, Jakarta returned. *The excitement of seeing your home world must be very distracting, Felix Jones. I must apologize for not making allowances.*

The disarming voice in her head was reminiscent of their first encounter back on Mars, fifteen long months ago, but the sudden change in attitude only helped to fuel a growing suspicion that Jakarta was keeping a hidden agenda. Still, Felix didn’t want to appear ungrateful so she cast her suspicions aside. After all, Jakarta had shown her how to unlock the power of her mind. This wondrous gift allowed

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her to consciously control matter at the quantum level, and it was all that had saved her life when the company's chief of Security back on Mars, Rickie Perez, had tried to kill her in a bid to keep the existence of the Ka-Itzu from leaking outside of company boardrooms.

Perhaps Felix was expecting too much. The Ka-Itzu were far from the omnipotent Gods ancient humans had mistaken them for so long ago. Unable to prevent the shattering of the fifth planet, Lucifer, from destroying their own world, and lacking the time to construct ships that could carry them safely to Earth, the Ka-Itzu had fled into another dimension. With that in mind, Felix was left with one troubling question that had plagued her ever since making orbit. *Now that we have reached Earth, why do you still need me?*

There was a long pause before Jakarta replied; a little too long for Felix's liking. *In my present form, I do not actually exist in your reality, Felix Jones. Being unbound by the physical laws of this universe gives me a certain degree of freedom, but I require someone special, like you, to act as an anchor within your dimension.*

Felix mulled over Jakarta's words for a bit. From what she had learned, at least so far, the Ka-Itzu valued and respected honesty, yet her gut told her that Jakarta still wasn't telling her everything. *If any Ka-Itzu were left stranded on Earth, she said, wouldn't they have been discovered by now?*

We are a resourceful race, Jakarta replied. *The survivors would have found a way to stay hidden among you.*

The idea of a covert alien presence on Earth was worrisome enough to sour Felix's mood. *I should think a reptilian alien would be impossible to hide, especially one three metres tall.*

Perhaps we should continue this discussion another time, Jakarta replied. *When your thoughts are not so clouded by all this excitement.* The chill of the Ka-Itzu's presence abruptly drained away, leaving Felix more suspicious and confused than ever.

* * *

The ten-minute shuttle pre-launch briefing left Felix inadequately prepared for an Earth re-entry. With the experience of penetrating a thin Martian atmosphere as her only frame of reference, hurtling through one that was a hundred times thicker, at twenty-two times the speed of sound, proved to be

profoundly terrifying. At one point, convinced they were all going to die, she clutched Viktor's arm and didn't let go until the shuttle rolled to a stop at Global-Tec's high altitude space facility deep in the Canadian Rockies.

After two years of complete and utter dependency on artificial life support systems, standing by an open airlock wearing nothing but a jumpsuit, boots, and a warm jacket, was an eerie sensation. The interplanetary transport's simulated gyroscopic gravity, combined with daily exercise, had made the transition to Earth's surface painless enough, but stepping off the shuttle on a blustery March morning nearly stopped Felix dead in her tracks.

"We should have kept our environmental suits," Felix shouted out against the bitter wind, as they lugged their cumbersome travel packs across a frost-covered tarmac.

"This reminds me of Minsk," Viktor yelled back.

Up ahead, leaning against a small service building, two heavily armed security men were scrutinizing shuttle passengers as they trudged by. When Felix and Viktor drew near, however, both men detached themselves from the wall with obvious intent. The vivid memory of Rickie pointing a gun at her head was all the motivation Felix needed to select the appropriate action. Without hesitation, she prepared a potentially lethal defence that would effectively disrupt their nervous systems; before she could follow through, however, Viktor cast his pack aside and placed himself between her and the two men.

A physically powerful man, Viktor was quite intimidating when his anger was aroused, which was probably why both security officers stopped short. The closest one struggled to speak while stumbling over his own feet trying to back up. "Are you Ms Jones?" he asked, looking at Felix over Viktor's shoulder. "Ms Felicia Jones."

"Yea, that's me," Felix replied. "But I prefer the name Felix."

"Please come with us, Ms Jones," the man said politely. "The CEO is waiting to debrief you and we have been assigned as your escort."

"It's okay," Felix said, placing her hand firmly on Viktor's shoulder. The big Russian glared at the two men briefly before letting out a disgusted grunt and reaching for his pack. "Leave it," Felix said. "If they want our company so badly then they can work for it. Now, let's get inside. I'm freezing."

After collecting the packs, the security men directed them into the service building through a side door, and then, by the way of an underground passageway, on to the main complex. A short while later, they found themselves seated at a

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long, polished boardroom table, in an otherwise drab, windowless room. Felix was warming her hands on a welcome cup of steaming hot, black coffee, while Viktor sat stone-faced next to her. Every other chair in the room remained empty, save for one. Directly across the table from Felix, peering over steepled fingers, sat a balding bell-shaped man in his mid fifties. As if awaking from a trance, he suddenly smiled and leaned forward to offer Felix his hand. Felix took it cautiously, but to her dismay found his meaty hand to be soft and clammy.

“Ms Jones,” the fat man said, as he pumped her arm vigorously. “I can’t tell you how thrilling it is to finally meet you. I’m Gordon Squires, the CEO of Global-Tec Universal, but you can just call me Gordo.” His eyes flicked to Viktor. “And this must be Mr Minoff,” he added, reaching for Viktor’s hand.

Felix opened her mouth, but Gordo didn’t give her half a chance to speak. “First of all, Ms Jones,” he said, “on behalf of everyone here at Global-Tec Universal, I want to extend our deepest and most heartfelt apology for that unfortunate incident back on Mars. I can assure you that Mr Perez was acting solely on his own initiative and in no way was his misguided attempt on your life ever sanctioned by Global-Tec Universal.”

He sounded sincere, but Felix’s gut still screamed liar. “I understand,” she replied, with a polite smile. “But let’s cut to the chase, shall we. Since I intend on addressing the next full sitting of the UN council, I need to know what restrictions you intend to impose. I must warn you; I plan on making everything I discovered public: the crystals, the Ka-Itzu, everything.”

A sheepish grin crept across Gordo’s face. “Why, after our little meeting, Ms Jones, you and Mr Minoff are free to go. Say and do whatever you want, but before you leave, I have something to show you.”

Gordo plopped a solid looking metal briefcase down on the table and tapped in the code to open it. “We received a communication that should be of great interest to you, and well..., you best read it for yourself. It arrived eighteen months ago.” Felix didn’t need to do the math; the date coincided roughly with her discovery of the Ka-Itzu.

As she accepted the tattered envelope Gordo had produced from his briefcase, Felix noticed that one end had been neatly slit open. She squeezed the sides, pulled out a large sheet of yellowed paper, and then unfolded it. *Felix Jones. I have all the answers you seek, but first you must bring the portal to me.* It was signed, *Malic*. On the reverse was a crude map drawn in faded red ink.

“We checked it out, of course,” Gordo said. “The location is in Peru and this

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guy Malic is the head of some sort of native cult down there. Wouldn't have thought anything of it, just another third-world crackpot, but this arrived with the letter."

Gordo handed Felix a small wicker box. After lifting the lid to see what was inside, she sucked in a quick breath. The box contained a plum-sized crystal identical to the portal in her pocket. Unable to resist, she picked it up and looked inside. Unlike the one she carried, with which she could gaze into Jakarta's world, this one revealed nothing. "Someone must have brought it back from Mars," Felix said, placing it back in the box.

"All of the crystals on Mars are accounted for I'm afraid. We've checked and rechecked a dozen times. The fact is, you have the only one we ever allowed to be taken from the caves."

"Then it must be a fake," Felix said, almost smiling at his choice of words, since she hadn't exactly given them any options.

"The lab reports were quite conclusive. It's not from Earth. The moon either for that matter. No, I'm afraid this is the genuine article all right."

"But how..."

"That's what Global-Tec Universal would like you to find out, Ms Jones."

"Why me?"

"Because where these crystals are concerned, you are the closest thing we have to an expert. To everyone else, they are very interesting but otherwise useless Martian rocks."

"I understand," Felix replied.

"Good," Gordo said, as he glanced from side to side and then leaned in closer. "Is it here?"

"What?" Felix asked, knitting her brow in confusion.

"The Martian. Is it here in the room with us right now?"

"No," Felix lied, ignoring the cold slimy fingers creeping up her spine.

"Ah, well," Gordo sighed. "Should you choose to accept the assignment, Ms Jones, you will of course be very handsomely compensated for your time."

Felix was about to refuse when Jakarta spoke to her. *You will go, Felix Jones.*

"I'll go," Felix replied, not entirely sure why she was agreeing.

"Splendid," Gordo said, clapping his hands together with glee, like some overstuffed adolescent. "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist such an intriguing opportunity. There is a transport ready and waiting to take you to Peru without any further delay."

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“Felix isn’t going anywhere without me,” Viktor said.

“Of course, of course,” Gordo replied. “More than enough room for all of you.”

It took a moment for Gordo’s last words to register. “What do you mean, all of us?” Felix asked.

“Well, we really don’t know anything about this Malic fellow. Could be a sadistic killer, or worse, a spy for another company, so I’m sending a security team with you.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“On the contrary, Ms Jones. It’s not your integrity that’s in question here. These security men are going along for your protection, nothing more, other than to ensure the crystal doesn’t fall into the wrong hands, of course.”

“I see,” Felix said, “so it’s the portal you’re really worried about.”

The smile on Gordo’s face wavered. “Legally it is still company property, Ms Jones. Global-Tec Universal owns anything brought back from Mars. Our UN off-world contract is quite clear on that point.”

“What if I don’t want to give it up?” Felix asked, trying to read the reaction on Gordo’s face.

“Not to worry, Ms Jones,” Gordo replied, as he reached over to press a small red button on a control pad attached to the table. “Let’s just say you have it on indefinite loan, shall we.”

A smoked glass panel directly behind Gordo slid open with a whoosh to reveal a uniformed security officer waiting on the other side. “Rickie!” Felix yelped, even as Jakarta’s training kicked in and she instantaneously constructed a mental map of the man’s nervous system while syphoning off some of the limitless energy contained within the quantum particles around her.

“Wait Ms Jones, wait!” Gordo yelled, frantically waving her off, as if grasping her deadly intent simply from the look on her face. Only then did Felix realize that everyone was on their feet, including her.

“I’m terribly sorry, Ms Jones,” Gordo said, “I should have warned you. The man you knew as Richard Perez back on Mars was a clone. The company has produced hundreds of them over the years. No family ties or outside influences, just complete and utter loyalty to Global-Tec Universal. This is Chico Perez. He will be heading up your security team.”

Though sorely tempted to follow through with her original plan to short circuit the clone’s neural network, Felix allowed the energy she had gathered to

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dissipate. The map of his nervous system, however, she tucked away, to keep handy just in case.

“Perhaps someone else might be more suitable,” Felix said, trying to sound calm, but well aware that the tightness of her voice betrayed her true feelings.

“The Perez security series is the best we have,” Gordo replied, “and I can give you my personal guarantee that Chico’s conditioning was first rate.” Upon seeing that Felix was unmoved by his assurances, Gordo sighed. “If you find him unacceptable, Ms Jones, then we will bring in another model, but it will delay your departure for at least another day.”

“Never mind,” Felix said, feeling her shoulders sag in resignation. “Let’s just get this over with.”

“Good,” Gordo replied. “Now, I have a few other pressing matters to attend to, so if there are no more questions, I must say good day, and good luck.”

* * *

After leaving the boardroom, everything happened so fast that it was nearly impossible for Felix to keep up. Within minutes they were back on the icy tarmac heading for the supersonic transport that stood prepped and waiting to take them to South America. Once on board, Felix took a seat where she could keep a wary eye on Chico. The clone’s presence was so disturbing that even though she hadn’t eaten since leaving the interplanetary transport, Felix hardly touched the contents of the boxed lunch served by the flight attendant once they had reached cruising altitude.

Even though Felix felt like a nervous wreck, Chico seemed completely unaware of the effect his presence was having on her. Like the clone she had known as Rickie Perez, Chico was a compulsive talker. Finding Felix unresponsive, he simply switched to Viktor. Grateful to no longer be the centre of his attention, Felix just sat back and listened to Chico’s colourful rendition of Global-Tec Universal’s long and somewhat sordid history.

“With their short term cloning patents in place, the company then turned to space, see. Started on a shoe string with just two old Soviet Union Buran shuttles, a warehouse full of NASA shuttle surplus, and a couple of satellite repair contracts. Today, they own Mars and half the moon.”

“No one owns Mars,” Viktor scoffed. “Global-Tec just holds the mining and exploration rights, they do not own the planet.”

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When Chico smiled, Felix shuttered at how identical he was to Rickie, right down to his oddly shaped upper lip and the pronounced space between his two front teeth. To get her mind off Rickie, and how he had left her with no choice but to take his life in order to preserve her own, Felix focussed on what Chico was saying. She had to admit, at least to herself, that he was right about one thing; Global-Tec Universal had complete control of Mars, and when it came right down to it, that was pretty much indistinguishable from ownership.

By the time her frayed nerves had returned to a state that resembled at least some degree of normalcy, Felix's interest in Chico's stories had waned considerably. Turning away to gaze out the window, she was soon lost in her own thoughts until pulled back into reality by the pilot's voice crackling over the intercom. "We are now on final approach to Global-Tec Universal's Peruvian space facility and will be landing in five minutes. Everyone please fasten your seatbelts."

Twenty minutes later, Felix was being rushed up the steps of an ancient De Havilland twin turboprop, which she was sure had to be even older than Global-Tec's Russian shuttles. "Don't look so worried," Chico said, when Felix hesitated at the doorway. "For where we're going, this old bird is the best there is."

As they lifted off the runway, the groans and creaks emanating from the aircraft's old bones did little to instill confidence, or settle Felix's uneasy stomach, but like everyone else she bore it all in silence. At the end of a gut wrenching forty minute flight north, the turboprop finally broke through the clouds. According to her calculations, they were still high in the Andes, somewhere near Kuelap, on a steep approach to an overgrown dirt landing strip that seemed grossly inadequate. By the time the aircraft lurched to a stop, and the crew had shut down its engines, Felix found herself struggling with second thoughts.

It was difficult to accept that a single nonfunctional dimensional portal justified this insane headlong rush into the wilds of South America. Perhaps such a remote location was a likely place for the Ka-Itzu survivors to hide, but was that really why Jakarta wanted her here, and if so, why had the Ka-Itzu remained silent ever since the meeting with Gordo? Portal or no, something wasn't right. Felix was getting a really bad feeling in her gut, and this time it couldn't be blamed on turbulence. As she maneuvered down the turboprop's narrow steps, she leaned forward to whisper in Viktor's ear. "Doesn't this whole thing seem a little weird to you?"

Viktor paused, one step from the ground, and twisted his head back. “You just think this now?” he said, with a raised eyebrow. “I could have told you that back in Canada.”

Felix laughed in spite of herself, and placed a hand on Viktor’s shoulder as she scanned the surrounding terrain. Using her mind, as well as her eyes, she found the entire area to be deserted, except for a solitary figure waiting at the edge of the runway. In the heart of a Peruvian jungle, this tall, lean, fair-skinned native couldn’t have been more unexpected. It was as if a character of mythological proportions had just stepped off the page of an archeological text book. Chachapoyas was the name the Spanish conquistadors had given to these fabled warriors, before they conquered Peru and wiped them all out. At least that was how historians of the day had recorded it.

The warrior’s face was a latticework of blue tattoos, and it suddenly occurred to Felix that the purpose of such unusual markings might just be to make his skin appear reptilian, much like Jakarta’s. Naked but for a skimpy loincloth, the Chachapoyas strode towards them as fearlessly as any Spanish legend could portray, until two of Chico’s men moved in to block his way. The warrior stopped, but ignored the security men and smiled directly at Felix, revealing a row of white pointed teeth.

“Cannibal,” Viktor whispered, leaning in close to Felix’s ear. She had an entirely different explanation, but she kept it to herself. Those teeth had been chipped to match the tattoos, to mimic the appearance of a Ka-Itzu.

Wordlessly, the Chachapoyas extended his long slender arm toward Felix. There was a small folded note pinched between his thumb and forefinger. The paper looked very similar to the letter Gordo had shown her. Felix took a step forward, but Chico beat her to the punch and snatched the note from the warrior’s hand. Felix felt a twinge of anger, but let it slide.

“It’s from Malic,” Chico said. “He has sent this savage to show us the way, but it also sounds like we’ve still got a lot of ground to cover today, so we better start hoofing it.”

“What about us?” the pilot asked, as he stepped down from the aircraft with a backpack slung over each shoulder.

“You and the rest of the flight crew can stay here and keep an eye on the plane,” Chico replied.

With relief written all over his face, the pilot and his crew placed six light-weight survival backpacks on the ground and scurried back inside the aircraft,

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presumably before Chico could change his mind. Shouldering a pack, and taking the lead with Viktor at her side, Felix wasted no time in signalling the Chachapoyas to head out. The moment they stepped off the runway, however, the jungle swallowed them up like some great green beast. Within five minutes it was impossible to tell where they were in relation to the turboprop, and their only link to civilization.

After wading through nearly a kilometre of dense undergrowth, they came upon a narrow game trail. Felix had to assume that it saw frequent use, otherwise, like the detritus beneath their feet, the jungle would have already reclaimed it. They followed the trail, mostly downhill, for almost five kilometres, at which point it angled back up steeply. Within another kilometre, Chico and his men had grown irritable. The terrain was far from easy, and even Viktor was beginning to look haggard, but for Felix, even though every muscle in her body ached, it was an exhilarating experience. The further in they went, the better she felt. Having spent nearly half her life in places just like it, she was in her element; a living breathing jungle, teeming with life: parakeets, Macaw parrots, monkeys, and even sloths, not to mention hundreds of insects she couldn't even begin to name.

Space travel had forced Felix to spend far too much time in unnaturally sterile and lifeless artificial environments. The jungle's heavy, moist, oxygenated air soothed her lungs and warmed her heart. Having almost forgotten what real air tasted like, she savoured the flavours of chlorophyll, damp musty soil, and even the putrid smell of rotting vegetation. When a growl deep down in the pit of her stomach reminded her that she had eaten next to nothing all day, Felix called for a halt. "Let's stop here for supper," she said. "All this fresh air has given me a voracious appetite and we can all use a break."

"There's no time for that," Chico snarled back. "We got to keep moving, see."

"Feel free to go on without me if you like," Felix said, "but I'm going to stop and eat something."

There was a long angry pause, as Chico tried to stare Felix down. "Ten minutes," he finally said, offering an obviously forced smile after having failed to intimidate her. "Then we got to get moving, see, because this place gives me the creeps and I don't want to be stuck out here when the sun goes down."

Felix smiled as she rummaged through her pack for something edible. To her, the prospect of spending a night under the stars was appealing, but after eating barely enough of her tasteless rations to satisfy her immediate needs, Chico had

them all on the move again, demanding that she pick up the pace to make up for lost time.

* * *

Their journey through the jungle ended all too soon for Felix, but when the wall of greenery parted, her disappointment was muted by the breathtaking sight of a massive stone temple. The bulk of the ancient structure was obscured by rising mist and masses of treelike vines that seemed to grow out of the very stones themselves. It was so well hidden that they could have passed within fifty metres of it without even knowing it existed.

Suddenly, a dozen tattooed men, all indistinguishable from their guide, rose up from the mist like spectres. Each one carried a wicked looking wooden club imbedded with bits of sharp edged quartz, shells, bones, and even animal teeth.

“This wasn’t part of the deal,” Chico muttered, as he eased the pistol out of his holster. Felix heard a soft metallic click when he thumbed off the safety, followed by three more just like it when the security men followed his example. The warriors responded as one, by extending their arms back in preparation to hurl their weapons.

“Felix,” Viktor said, tugging on her arm and pointing behind them, where ten more warriors had sprung up from the undergrowth. Two of Chico’s men spun around to face this new threat with raised weapons. The situation was rapidly getting out of hand.

“Are you trying to get us all killed?” Felix yelled. “Put your guns away.”

Felix had expected an argument, but Chico just swore under his breath and slid his weapon gently back in its holster. “Do as she says,” he barked to his men, who thankfully followed his orders without question.

Their guide barked a few orders of his own, in a language that seemed oddly familiar yet outside of Felix’s understanding. In response, the other tattooed men melted back into the swirling mist. A moment later, it was as if they had never existed at all.

Beckoning for them to follow, their guide walked toward the temple and abruptly disappeared through an ingeniously devised entrance that was practically invisible even from as much as a metre away. With Viktor by her side, and the security team at their backs, Felix followed the warrior inside. A narrow zigzagging passageway eventually deposited them into a large angular chamber

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awash in flickering torchlight. A raised throne, carved from a single piece of polished marble, dominated the centre. Though large enough to hold a Ka-Itzu, it was occupied by a frail old man who appeared completely lifeless until his thin chalky lips moved.

“I am Malic,” the old man said. His voice was raspy, as if he had to fight for every breath. With seemingly great effort he turned his cadaverous head to face Chico, who was standing off to the side with his men. “Did she bring the portal?”

“Yes, it’s in her pocket,” Chico replied.

“What’s going on?” Felix demanded, confused by the sudden display of familiarity between Chico and Malic.

“You have done well,” Malic said to Chico, ignoring Felix’s question entirely. “You and your men may leave now.”

“What about her companion?” Chico asked.

Malic looked at Viktor as if noticing him for the first time. “He may prove useful. Leave him.”

“As you wish,” Chico replied. As he turned to leave, he paused to lock eyes with Felix. “I suggest you cooperate Ms Jones. You don’t want to cross these people, see.”

Too shocked to respond, Felix just stared helplessly as Chico and his men left the chamber. Once they were gone, Viktor nudged her shoulder and then indicated the old man with a quick flick of his eyes. “Give the portal to me,” Malic said, leaning down towards her and extending his skeletal hand, even as an icy sensation crawled up her spine.

Never before had Felix felt Jakarta’s presence with such intensity. *Give it to him*, the Ka-Itzu’s voice boomed in her head. In a daze, Felix didn’t think, she just fished the portal out of her pocket and offered it freely to the old man.

“What are you doing?” Viktor shouted, pulling her arm back, but he was too late. The portal was already clutched in Malic’s gnarled bony fingers. To Felix’s surprise, the old man reached up and placed it against his forehead, just above the bridge of the nose, where it attached itself like a magnet to steel. When Malic spoke again, it was Jakarta’s voice that Felix heard with her ears for the very first time.

“From this vessel’s memories I can see our absence has allowed humankind to despoil this planet beyond anything we could have imagined. While polluting the waters and poisoning the air, you consume the planet’s dwindling resources like a swarm of hungry locusts. The Ka-Itzu will not permit this to go on. If you

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had once lost your world as we did, you would understand.”

Malic turned milky white eyes toward Felix. “Our original colony now rests beneath the sea, but no matter, just as the Ka-Itzu civilization will rise to its former greatness, so too will Atlantis be raised and rebuilt. Once the rest of the portals have been brought here to Earth, the humans that survive the inevitable cull shall assume their rightful place in servitude to the Ka-Itzu.”

“I don’t understand,” Felix said. “You told me it was impossible for the Ka-Itzu to return to this dimension.”

“That is true, our physical forms were destroyed along with the rest of what you call Mars, but our life-force survived. The dimension we travelled to had a form of sentient life, not unlike your own. We used their bodies as hosts while we waited for an opportunity to return. We have been waiting a very long time, Felix Jones. Waiting for someone like you.”

“You lied to me!” Felix accused.

“Not at all,” Jakarta’s voice replied. “I simply kept certain facts from you. An omission is technically not a lie, Felix Jones, but none of that matters now. Humans will act as our new hosts; at least until we find a more suitable form. You and I shall be the first such symbiotic union between our two races. Do you not feel honoured?”

“Hardly,” Felix replied.

Jakarta laughed. It was a hissing sound, much like a snake. “The process requires a catalyst. Since you were thoughtful enough to bring along your annoying friend, he will provide a suitable sacrifice.”

Two brawny warriors grabbed Viktor’s arms, while their former guide wrapped a garrote around his neck. Felix attempted to strike out at the one holding the garrote, but the inert energy within the air around her refused to respond to her will.

“I cannot allow you to interfere, Felix Jones,” Jakarta’s voice said, as Malic’s body slowly rose to its feet. The portal was still in place, protruding from his forehead like a small horn. “Opening a dimensional hole requires the violent release of a healthy sentient life-force, and your friend here is going to prove useful after all. Now you will follow me, Felix Jones.”

As Malic turned away, Felix fell into step behind him. Like some kind of wooden puppet, completely under the Ka-Itzu’s control, she followed the old man up a series of worn stone steps that seemed to go on forever yet ended all too soon. Viktor’s gasping breaths haunted her assent, and enduring her inability to

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help him was agonizing beyond description. Their destination was a flat ledge carved into the side of a cliff somewhere above the far side of the temple. Beyond the ledge stretched a vast crevasse. Obscured by mist, it was impossible to tell if the bottom lay merely a few metres down or hundreds of metres below.

At the centre of the ledge, a moss covered slab of rock protruded a metre above the surface. Malic walked around to one end while Felix's feet took her to the opposite end. The three Chachapoyas restraining Viktor lowered him spread-eagle across the slab. The garrote was removed only after his wrists and ankles were soundly lashed to four wooden posts embedded in the stone.

Once Viktor was secure, the two warriors who had been holding his arms grabbed Felix's instead. When the remaining warrior ripped open Viktor's shirt, Felix realized with bone chilling horror that he was secured to an altar designed for human sacrifice. What she had at first mistaken for iron ore rust on the sides was actually faded layers of dried blood.

Driven by fear, Felix renewed her frantic attempts to strike out at her captors. For a fleeting moment she sensed a connection with the mind of one of the warriors, but then it was gone. The exercise left her so drained she nearly passed out.

Malic's right arm rose from his side, exposing a long jagged flint knife grasped tightly in his white-knuckled hand. He pressed it to Viktor's chest until the point pierced the skin. When a tiny trickle of blood appeared, Malic lifted the deadly object to a position directly above Viktor's heart; then once again Jakarta spoke through Malic's lips. The words were difficult to understand, as if Jakarta was speaking in many different languages all at once. As the portal on Malic's forehead began to glow, Felix closed her eyes in response to the words resonating painfully within her mind. With each passing moment she could feel who and what she was begin to slowly slip away.

Though it made her head feel like it would explode, Felix fought back with the only thing she had left; her sense of self. There was still something there, she could feel it. Her eyes snapped opened in time to observe the muscles in Malic's arm tighten. She knew without a doubt that in seconds Viktor would be dead, but she was not going to let that happen regardless of what it cost her. Ignoring the painful Ka-Itzu words in her mind, she focussed entirely on the human arm holding the stone knife. The pain was excruciating. Her vision blurred and her head felt like it would explode. Then she heard an ear-piercing scream.

The scream had been Malic's. The old man clutched his arm, just below the

elbow, where Felix had severed the tendons. The voice in her head was silent. Her mind was free, for the moment, but she had to act quickly. With a single thought, the cords binding Viktor's hands and feet instantly decomposed.

"The portal," Felix screamed. "Smash it!"

Viktor leapt up to rip the still glowing crystal from Malic's head. The two warriors holding Felix seemed stunned, but still refused to let her go as the third leapt forward and wrapped his garrote around Viktor's neck. Fortunately, Felix's thoughts proved faster than Chachapoyas reflexes. She found her way into the warrior's mind before he could twist the knotted cord and he dropped like a stone. With the cord still dangling from his neck, Viktor slammed the portal against the side of the altar.

There was a blinding flash as shards of crystal pelted the stone at Felix's feet. As the spots dancing before her eyes dissolved, the faint sound of Jakarta's voice echoed in her mind. "We are not finished, Felix Jones."

With Jakarta gone, and Felix's abilities restored, it was an easy task to subdue Malic and the other two Chachapoyas. Once they no longer posed a threat, Viktor embraced Felix in a bear hug that nearly squeezed every bit of air from her lungs. For her part, Felix was just happy they were both still alive.

When Viktor finally released her, there was a worried expression on his handsome face. "What happened to the alien?"

"Gone," Felix replied. "Without the portal, Jakarta had no link to this dimension."

Viktor still looked concerned, "Are you sure you are okay? You look different somehow."

Felix smiled. "Maybe I am, Viktor. For a brief moment I shared a singular mind with a Ka-Itzu. All the experiences from Jakarta's incredibly long life were mine. What I've learned in the past two years is just the tip of the iceberg. Even now, the sum of that knowledge is like a giant book inside my head, only it's written in a language I don't quite understand. Yet."

Despite her smile, Viktor still appeared uneasy so Felix put a hand on his shoulder to reassure him. "Don't worry, Viktor, I'm fine, but we have to go now. Chico can't have gotten very far, and he and I have some unfinished business."

Viktor returned her smile and then looked down at the limp forms of the Chachapoyas warriors. "I think I am feeling sorry for him already."

Felix laughed and then, clutching Viktor's shirt in both hands, pulled him roughly to her, planting a long wet kiss on his lips. Chico could wait a little while longer. She literally had all the time in the world.

ELVES AND DRAGONS

Chapter 1

As the nameless three year old filly clicked and clopped her way down Jenour's cobbled street, her rider was very careful not to stare at passers by. Among his own people, a meeting of the eyes, accompanied by a warm smile, was considered good manners, but this ingrained habit provided no end of trouble when outside the borders of Toth. To members of the Carpathian patriarchy's upper-crust, eye contact by the lowborn was considered an affront, punishable by two days in the stocks. Having learned this lesson firsthand, Rendalt crossed the border into Sidon determined to err on the side of caution.

Under a hot mid-day sun, the streets of Jenour bustled with townsfolk, sailors, merchants and a fair number of Sidon's ever-present warrior class. Rendalt prudently coaxed his mount aside to make way for a pair of Sidonese Knights riding abreast behind him. The long tuft of sand-coloured hair, spouting from the top of each man's glistening shaved head, danced in perfect harmony with the well-groomed tails of their magnificent mounts as they trotted proudly down the center of the street.

Distracted by their exotic appearance, and his filly's jitteriness, Rendalt failed to avert his eyes in time when one of the knights glanced his way. The narrowing of the man's eyes was enough to tell Rendalt his gawking had not gone unnoticed, but when both men continued on their way, he assumed they considered a white-haired old foreigner like himself unworthy of their rebuke.

Once the knights had been swallowed by the press of activity up ahead, the motion of a wooden sign swaying stiffly on its rusty hinges attracted Rendalt's attention. Though the sun-bleached paint was flaked and peeling, the image of a

white dove perched on the back of a black boar was still discernible. It marked Jenour's most favored inn and alehouse, the very place Rendalt sought. The weariness of a long hard journey gave way to a tingle of excitement. His thick beard hid any hint of a satisfied grin from all but his eyes.

Just past the sign, a poorly constructed stable leaned against the inn's north wall like an afterthought. Rendalt dismounted before its open doors and paused to calm his nerves. It was no easy task. Half as many years spent in fruitless searching, for what most considered a mythical place, would have given any reasonable man cause to conclude the whole idea a fabrication of strong drink or a weak mind, but Rendalt was obsessed, and for good reason.

According to folklore, this place was inhabited by a race of ageless elves, or demons, depending on who was telling the story, and Rendalt just had to find it, for something very strange had happened to him in his sixtieth year; inexplicably, he had stopped aging. While everyone around him continued to suffer the ravages of time, he remained practically unchanged. In the past fifty years he had aged no more than one or two. When his youngest child died a wrinkled old grandmother, Rendalt set out in search of answers. Only last new moon, Rendalt spent more than he could afford to purchase the name and whereabouts of a Sidonese innkeeper who claimed to have seen it in his youth.

"You there," a deep voice barked. "What is your business here?"

Forming a pleasant smile, despite his growing apprehension, Rendalt turned to face the same two knights who had passed by moments earlier. Though seemingly at ease, with both hands resting calmly on their saddle horns, they had positioned themselves to either side, effectively blocking any escape.

Forgoing caution, Rendalt simply replied with the truth. "I seek a man who claims to know the way to Penardun. Abel is his name. Abel the innkeeper. Do you know him?"

One of the knights glanced at the other before exhaling a harsh laugh. "Penardun is it?" he asked with a grin.

"Yes," Rendalt replied. "The place where the elves dwell."

"Thought I had heard all of Abel's stories, but that one I do not recall. Tell you what, friend; for a tankard or two we will persuade Able to tell us about this Penardun of yours."

A lifetime of peace under a normal matriarchal system made the harsh Sidonese feudal regime seem barbaric at best, but in this one instance, it might just work in Rendalt's favour. How could a common innkeeper refuse a request from

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such men?

“Done,” Rendalt replied, silently hoping the Carpathian coins in his slender purse would be acceptable, and that the knights were not so thirsty as to leave him without the means to replenish his meagre supplies before leaving Jenour.

Once the horses were stabled, the knights followed Rendalt into the inn like a pair of oversized shadows. Finding the table nearest the serving counter unoccupied, Rendalt took a seat. The wooden stools to either side disappeared quickly beneath the sun-reddened flesh and polished armour of his new found friends. The broad smiles spread across their scarred faces did little to alleviate the overwhelming sense of being their prisoner.

“Abel,” the knight to Rendalt’s left barked as he slammed a meaty fist on the table. “Three tankards.”

“And be quick about it,” the other knight added with a big toothy grin as he pounded the table so hard Rendalt’s forearms bounced up and down.

Gripping two pewter mugs in one hand, with a third in the other, a mountain of a man forced his way through a three foot wide opening in the serving counter. “Hurry, Abel,” the knight on the left said, “before my brother and I perish from thirst.”

A pleasant aroma filled the air as three mugs of foamy ale were deposited onto the table just under Rendalt’s nose. “Talked you into paying for their drink, did they?” Abel asked in a tone that bespoke more a statement than a question. Easily the largest person Rendalt had ever come across, at least in width if not height, the innkeeper’s furrowed brow and cold stony stare gave Rendalt pause. The bulging muscles of his forearms and thick neck cast doubt on earlier expectations of capitulation through threat of violence. Momentarily speechless, Rendalt could only nod a reply.

“What they promise you?” Abel asked as he tilted his head sideways and squinted one eye, as if trying to somehow see into Rendalt’s thoughts.

“A story,” the knight on the right replied after wiping the froth from his lips. “Our friend here seems to think you know of a place called Penardun.”

Abel’s big bushy eyebrows disappeared momentarily in his generous crown of thick curly hair, before dropping back down as he pursed his lips. “That be a dangerous place. No reasonable man would ever want to go there.” A smile curled on his thick lips revealing a gold tooth. “Would you not rather hear of the wondrous olive-skinned beauties to be found beyond the southern islands? Now that be a story worth the price of ale.”

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“No,” Rendalt replied, having finally found his voice. “Just tell us what you know about Penardun, and don’t leave anything out.”

“Very well,” Abel said with a sigh. The table creaked under his weight as he leaned forward on his knuckles.

“Been there, I have, but that were a long time ago, before I heard the call of the sea. Me pappy were a trader and when I was but ten years old he took me along to learn a thing or two about the world. Travelled clear to the northern ice fields, we did, to trade steel implements for ivory, furs and even a few raw gems, but it was on the way back the story you’re after begins.”

Realizing he hadn’t drawn a breath since Abel began talking, Rendalt sucked in a lung full before gulping down a mouthful of ale. The combination produced a fit of coughing that only ended when one of the knights administered a good natured slap on the back.

“As I recall,” Abel began, “it were about three sun-marks past mid-day when we found the body, except it weren’t a body really. We thought he was dead, on account of his skin being as pale as new fallen snow, but alive he were, though busted up pretty bad from a great fall. Since he was still breathing, me pappy fashioned a litter from a seal skin and two long walrus tusks. We moved him as gently as we could into the back of our wagon and continued on our way. Wasn’t till just before dusk that the great winged serpents came. Three of them there were. Wet my small cloths on the spot, I did, and bear no shame to admit it even today.”

The room had gone deathly quiet. As he lifted his mug to his lips, Rendalt glanced from side to side. Both knights sat motionless, their own mugs poised before gaping mouths.

“Dragons, me pappy called them,” Abel continued. “Near as big as this inn, every one of them. The nearest lowered his spiked head to look me pappy square in the eye. Changed him, it did; he were never the same after that.”

“But what about Penardun,” Rendalt asked.

“I be getting to that,” Abel replied as he leaned in a little closer and lowered his voice. “Another fellow, just as pale as the one in the back of our wagon, slid down the neck of the dragon as pretty as you please. Told us they were all elves, and asked me pappy to take his injured kin to Penardun, on account of him being too bad off for riding dragons. Me pappy agreed of course. Can’t say as he had much choice.”

Rendalt had been holding his breath, hanging on Abel’s every word. When

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he exhaled, he took a small sip of ale to wet his throat, which felt as dry as sun baked clay.

“By morning the dragons were gone, but the elf remained behind to guide us to their home. Still ten days north of Gurgaon Lake, it were, we turned west and passed between a pair of tall cliffs. Following an ancient river bed, which cut like a snake through the mountains, we entered a small valley about midday. By nightfall we had arrived. A big black fortress it was. Built at the base of a mountain so tall, the top be still covered in ice even in late summer.”

“They carried the injured one inside, fed and watered our horses and even served us a hot meal. Me pappy and the elves talked a while, but I wasn’t privy to their conversation. We left early the next morning, and when we got back, me pappy sold his rig and all his goods to build this inn. He never went trading again. Three summers later, I signed on to a good ship bound for distant shores and adventure. When word reached me that me pappy passed on, I came home to run the inn, and now here we are.”

After a brief moment of silence, two empty mugs slammed down on the table. “That was the best one yet, Abel,” roared the knight on Rendalt’s right. “Better even than the Balorian wild-men.”

“So, another mug then?” Abel asked, looking at Rendalt. After a nod in reply, the innkeeper smiled and went back to get three more.

Mulling over what he had been told, Rendalt sat for a time, just staring into his ale, until the knights finally got bored with his company and went looking for more interesting games. As the room grew dark with the setting sun, Rendalt looked around to see if anyone was looking his way. Assured that no one was, he reached out to the unkindled candle stub sitting in the centre of the table. As his hand drew near, a white spark leapt from his fingertip and ignited the wick. A hint of a smile curled in the corner of his mouth, for within the moon he might finally know why he could do such things.

Chapter 2

It took Rendalt a moon, plus a day, to find the entrance, and then the better part of another day to traverse the dry river bed before he finally reached a lush hidden valley dominated by a towering snow-capped mountain. Using a little trick he had devised while observing hunting hawks, Rendalt willed his eyes to reshape themselves. In an instant, the far end of the valley leapt toward him, and there it was, Penardun, just as Abel had described, right down to the dark forbidding walls.

Through his hawk-like eyes, the fortress seemed to stand right before him, yet Rendalt knew it was still some three leagues away. His only desire was to get there, but the sun had already kissed the highest of the western mountains and both he and his mount were exhausted. A quick survey of the nearby foothills yielded a dark shimmering stain on a narrow cliff face that meant fresh water. After allowing his eyes to return to normal, Rendalt gauged the spot to be a quarter league due west. It took great effort to convince the filly to abandon the tall grass, where she had been happily nibbling on an abundance of green hairy seeds, but once sensing the presence of water, she needed no more coaxing.

The filly found a small bubbling stream of cold sweet water just before dusk and Rendalt made camp in a small clearing nearby. They were about three hundred feet east of the rock face, which, by the smooth grooves cut a hand deep along the upper edge, promised to be a gushing waterfall come spring. Still a farmer at heart, he couldn't help but appreciate the quality of the deep rich soil as he gathered deadwood for a fire. Even a hopeless bumpkin could grow anything he wanted in such a place.

Near a large smooth rock, just the right height to serve as a chair, Rendalt

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built a modest cookfire. After a trip back to the stream, he hung a pot of water over the flames to boil before harvesting the feathery leaves from a nearby patch of chamomile. With his hand full of fresh picked leaves, Rendalt made a fist and squeezed. It was another trick he had discovered quite by accident, one which he had performed countless times for his grandchildren. The memory of their age-wrinkled faces made him sad enough to weep. Shaking it off, he opened his hand. The chamomile was dry and crushed to perfection. He sprinkled it into the steaming water and sat down to wait for a good strong brew.

While the tea was steeping the filly began to start a ruckus. When Rendalt turned to see what was bothering her, a powerful gust of wind threw ash from the fire into his eyes. He managed to rub one eye clear in time to watch the horse's backside disappear into the woods. He wasn't overly concerned. The filly couldn't get far, hobbled as she was, but he decided it would be best to find her before it got too dark. That's when he saw the dragon.

The beast came to ground a stone's throw from the fire. Rendalt would have fled in terror, had he not noticed the passenger perched at the base of the creature's long neck. Stunned, Rendalt watched in silence as the rider climbed down from his gigantic mount. Once on the ground, the rider glanced at him, before turning back to the dragon. For a moment Rendalt imagined he heard voices, but when he realized the sounds were inside his head he waved a hand about his face to chase away whatever insects were buzzing in his ears.

When the rider stepped away, the dragon extended wings that were easily twenty feet wide and leapt into the air. Sparks, dust and ash swirled all around as the beast soared over the tree tops. When a parting gust of wind blew the rider's long red hair askew, uncovering a tall pointed ear, Rendalt knew he had finally come face to face with an elf.

"Rest easy," the elf said in a strangely melodious voice. "Dross will not return until summoned. Now, if you would be so kind as to tell me your name, halfling?"

In the dragon's absence, Rendalt's courage had returned, if not his manners. "Rendalt," he replied with an indignant air.

"Greetings, Rendalt," the elf replied pleasantly. "My name is Manus."

For many a sleepless night, Rendalt had lain awake compiling a list of important questions to ask the first elf he chanced to meet, but anger, his lifelong bane, forced him to ask something else. "Why do you call me Halfling?"

"Ah," Manus replied, "so you do not know. I call you halfling, because that

is what you are. I could sense our kinship the moment I saw you.”

Rendalt could barely contain his excitement. Manus had answered the very question which had for so many years driven him to seek Penardun, but Rendalt needed more than just a name. “What does it mean?”

“Ah,” Manus replied again, “that will take some explaining. Perhaps over some tea?”

Rendalt dug a spare cup out of his pack and hastily filled it to the brim. “As a rule,” Manus said, taking the offered cup, “elves shun humankind, for we trust them not at all. Long ago, however, before the birth of steel and war, couplings did take place between humans and elves. The offspring of such unions were dubbed halflings, half elf and half human, but where their elfin heritage granted magic and longevity, the taint of human blood made them aggressive and unstable.”

“So, halflings and elves share this ability to do tricks,” Rendalt said, as he pulled energy from the air to form a small ball of light in the palm of his hand.

Manus returned a lopsided grin. “If by tricks you mean magic, then the answer is no.” At seeing Rendalt’s eyebrows knit in confusion, Manus sighed. “For you to fully understand, I must tell you the whole story.”

“Please do,” Rendalt replied.

“No one seems to know how it started,” Manus said after a sip of tea, “but when a great conflict between warring halfling factions threatened to involve elves, something had to be done.”

“To an elf, the willful taking of life is unthinkable, so after much debate, my ancestors agreed to sacrifice their gift in order to stop the war. The spell our magi cast was intended to remove all elfin magic from the world, but it was not entirely successful. Some unforeseen factor of mixed blood, they say, left elves powerless while halflings retained their gift. In the end, it was the human inclination for violence that accomplished what our elfin magi could not. Decimated by war, the few surviving halfling bloodlines eventually became so diluted that gifted offspring were rare. You, in fact, are the first I have seen in more than a hundred years.”

Rendalt felt his jaw drop. “That would make you nearly as old as I,” he finally blurted out. “Yet, you look no more than one and twenty.”

Manus displayed a lopsided grin, then took another sip of tea before replying. “Elves do not age as humans do. You see me now as I will appear until the day I die. As a halfling, you spent your youth as do your human ancestors, but now that

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you are beyond a human lifetime, you will age very slowly over the next two or three centuries. It will all depend on the strength of your bloodline.”

Once again, Rendalt felt his anger stir. “It hardly seems fair that I should live most of my life as an old man.”

Manus smiled, but this time it contained a hint of sadness. “That, I am afraid, is what we call the Halfling’s Curse.”

Everything Rendalt thought he knew about himself had fallen to the wayside in the short time it took to drink a single cup of tea. As the stars made their nightly journey across the sky, they finished the pot, and then two more, all while trading tales of human and elfin history. Their kinship, it seemed, included sharing an insatiable curiosity.

The eastern sky was hinting at morning, and Rendalt had just described what it felt like to outlive his entire family, when Manus let something slip about his consort. Moria, he revealed, was head of the ruling Elf Council. If Rendalt had it right, that meant she was their Queen, which in turn meant he had just spent the entire night sharing tea with the King of the elves.

Dross arrived with the morning sun, bearing a heavy flax sack. “I sense only good in you,” Manus said as he handed Rendalt the sack, which turned out to be filled with books. “I also understand your need to know who and what you are. Penardun’s library contains everything there is to know, but since halflings are forbidden to enter, I took it upon myself to give a small part of it to you.”

“I hope you choose to stay a while, Rendalt,” Manus said as he climbed onto Dross. “You make a fine cup of tea,” he yelled as they lifted off.

With Manus gone, Rendalt’s attention returned to the sack of books. He hadn’t mentioned it, because that would have been rude, but he couldn’t read. Books were for the rich, not hardworking farmers. Nevertheless, Rendalt’s mind was made up. As soon as he constructed a new home he would extract the knowledge contained within the volumes, even if it took the next hundred years, but first he had to go and find his horse before some dragon decided to have her for breakfast.

Chapter 3

Once Rendalt had finished building his modest but cozy cabin in that clearing by the stream, he devoted himself to the task of learning to read. The problem was twofold, since he first had to learn elvish, but when the time came to plant crops the following spring, he had read all but the largest and most formidable of his books. The tome in question was an otherwise unimpressive plain black volume with a single pale gold line inlaid along the edge. Though the rest were informative, and perhaps more skilful in their design, the firsthand knowledge the last one contained promised to be far more interesting.

The author of the book Rendalt had yet to finish, was one of the four great magi responsible for the last spell the elves would ever cast. He and his contemporaries were utterly convinced that only by placing the sum of all elfin magic within four elemental bloodstones could they prevent a devastating halfling war. The plan was sound; with no one left in the world capable of wielding elfin magic, it would be safely locked away for eternity. The stones themselves were housed in amulets crafted by the most skilled elfin artisans and given ancient elfin names of great power: Aedon for the Fire Elves, Gryffith for the Forest Elves, Gweneal for the Silver Elves and Myrddin for the Blue Elves of the sea. The most intriguing part of the story was a warning; *should a halfling ever obtain all four, he or she would, in theory, become immortal, and such an event would foreshadow the end of us all.* Did such immortality include youthfulness? That was the burning question on Rendalt's mind as he tried to massage an ache from his stiff shoulder.

Late one warm spring day, just as Rendalt was getting into the details of what became of the amulets, his reading was interrupted by a rather large dragon

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landing in the clearing. When Rendalt went outside to investigate, he was confronted by an unfamiliar elf.

“It is of the utmost importance that you come to Penardun at once,” the elf said, without even bothering to introduce himself.

“Did Manus send you?” Rendalt asked.

“I was instructed to deliver the message, nothing more,” the elf replied coolly.

Given how highly valued politeness was in elfin society, according to Manus, the messenger’s rudeness raised an immediate alarm, but after waiting nearly a year for such an invitation, Rendalt was loath to quibble. Such an opportunity, however, was still not enough to make him consider climbing onto a dragon.

“Well,” Rendalt replied, barely able to contain his excitement, “since I have no intention of flying upon your dragon, you best return to whoever sent you and advise them that I shall be along in a few sun-marks.”

Expecting an argument, Rendalt was somewhat surprised when the elf climbed back on his mount and left without another word. After taking his riding cloak from its hook by the door, Rendalt walked around to a large shed attached to the cabin’s south wall. He had built the shed to keep the mare safe, since to a dragon anything on four legs was considered fair game, with horseflesh being particularly tasty. He opened the shed only when the elf and his dragon were out of sight.

Driven by a sense of urgency, Rendalt pushed his mount to reckless speeds until the timeworn outline of Penardun loomed up from the shadows ahead. Just as darkness was descending, the delicate form of a woman took shape in a sphere of flickering torchlight near the gatehouse. The moment Rendalt reined in, she pulled back her hood and a thick mass of fiery red hair tumbled out.

“Thank the gods you have finally arrived,” the strikingly beautiful elf said. The strain in her voice was unexpected yet undeniable. “When Wryen returned without you I was afraid... Manus has spoken very highly of you. I am Moria.”

As he passed his reins to the taciturn elf standing nearby, Rendalt observed hints of raw angry redness lodged in the corners of Moria’s eyes. They stood out prominently against her alabaster skin. Rendalt’s eyes flicked to the elf leading the mare away. “To what great disaster do I owe your most gracious invitation?”

“Come with me, please,” was Moria’s clipped response as she turned and strode back through the gate’s massive archway.

Apprehensive, yet curious, Rendalt followed her to a small airy chamber just

inside the main gate. An unconscious elf lay on a small cot within. His skin bore an unhealthy grey hue. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead. A closer inspection revealed a dull yellowish swelling around the ears. Had it not been for Moria's presence, Rendalt would never have recognized him.

"Manus was poisoned by his dragon," Moria said as she gently caressed her consort's cheek. "It happened well after midmorning, just a scratch from a jagged tooth, yet healing him is now beyond even our most skilled in the craft."

It didn't require a trained eye to see Manus was in the death god Ulrich's embrace. While gazing upon the elf, Rendalt's subconscious sifted through what he knew about dragons. They were one of the few telepathic creatures left in the world, and Fire Elves were the only beings long-lived and patient enough to tame one. Manus probably knew all there was to know about dragons, but the sum of Rendalt's knowledge came from a few books and what little Manus had shared while teaching him elvish.

Over the long winter, in the course of his studies, Rendalt had come across numerous references to dragon venom, and each one conveyed much the same thing; *death was certain, and within a single day*. Dispirited, he continued to contemplate the fate of his stricken friend, but Manus's cadaverous face only confirmed Rendalt's suspicion that the deadly venom had claimed all but the last spark of life.

"I am very sorry Moria," Rendalt finally replied, "but you must know as well as I, there is no known cure for dragon venom."

Moria's steely eyes locked on Rendalt's as she handed over an ornate leather bound book. The tooled surface was soft, silky smooth, and stitched with fine gold thread. The moment his fingers came in contact with the cover, Rendalt could feel the latent power within. There was certainly nothing like it in his collection. Though he sensed the book to be old beyond reckoning, it was untouched by time. Each page was fresh, crisp and clear, as though the scribe had just put ink to parchment.

Finding a page near the back marked with a blue ribbon, Rendalt read the first few lines of the passage. "If I understand this correctly," he said, "it is an enchantment for a joining. The combining of two individual beings into one."

"Dross is immune to his own poison," Moria replied. "Melding them will save Manus's life."

Rendalt had always been good at tricks, and he had learned much about spell casting from his collection of books, but what Moria asked was far beyond either

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his understanding or ability. "Dross is too large," he replied, looking for a way to let Moria down gently, "and I possess neither the skill nor the power required for a spell of such magnitude."

In a silent response, Moria held out a small flaxen sack. When Rendalt reached out, she upended it. Blood-red specks flashed and gold sparkled as an amulet dropped unceremoniously into his hand.

"Now you have all the power you need," Moria said, "and with Aedon, skill is not necessary."

Dumbfounded, Rendalt stared in disbelief. Moria had just deposited an ancient artifact, of incredible value, in the palm of his outstretched hand as if it were a mere trinket.

Since the moment Manus had first explained how Aedon was crafted to house the sum of Fire Elf magic, Rendalt had longed for the chance to examine it. Moria must have anticipated his inability to turn down such an incredible offer, for when Rendalt looked up, she nodded at two elves standing nearby. At her signal, they immediately set about transferring Manus's limp form to a span of cloth held taut between them. The act seeded a new crop of tears in Moria's red rimmed eyes.

So as not to intrude on their Queen's grief, the other elves averted their eyes. In an attempt to comfort her, Rendalt rested his hand on her shoulder. The touch seemed to restore her resolve, for she quickly wiped the tears from her cheeks and composed herself. "If Manus dies, Dross will refuse to eat until he too perishes. Such is the bond between dragon and elf. Even you must see now that a joining is their only hope."

Rendalt could find no fault with Moria's logic. "Very well," he replied, with a touch of sadness. "I will perform the ritual."

With an air of triumph, Moria led the way back outside, where Dross lay sprawled across the courtyard, his great head resting on the ground like some gigantic dog. Another dragon, female by the look of her, sat unobtrusively on her haunches a short distance away. Dross was extremely agitated and mewling loudly as they approached. In order to calm him, Rendalt recited a simple spell he had practiced more than a few times on his mare. Dross's yellow eyes soon fluttered closed, his large round belly moving rhythmically to the beat of slow and steady breathing. The two elves holding Manus's limp form slung between them, lay their charge next to the sleeping dragon.

"Their flesh must touch," Rendalt said, after reading the instructions further.

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In response, Moria reached down and gently laid Manus's right arm across Dross's leg.

With the spell book open in his left hand, Rendalt raised Aedon aloft in his right before starting to read aloud the words of enchantment. With each word he uttered, the amulet grew warmer and warmer, until by the last verse, it felt hot enough to sear his palm. Ignoring the discomfort, Rendalt finished the final verse. Even as the last syllable was leaving his lips, an aura of bright crimson light formed around both Manus and Dross.

Moria gasped as the fingers on her consort's right hand began to dissolve. Unable to look away, Rendalt watched with fascination as the rest of Manus's body appeared to liquefy as it flowed like quicksilver into the dragon. During the process, Dross's scales shifted from bright green to a dull red. The glowing aura had faded away once Manus was gone. Satisfied his part in it was over, Rendalt closed the book.

With the deed done, Moria's face turned to stone. All her emotion remained hidden behind an elfin mask of non-expression, until the dragon's eyes opened; eyes, Rendalt noted, that were no longer yellow, but green like an elf's. When one of those large emerald orbs turned to Moria, a smile cracked her face. She nodded as if spoken to and then tenderly touched the dragon's snout. That was when Rendalt heard a familiar voice inside his head. *Moria has explained everything to me.*

Realizing he had been holding his breath, Rendalt exhaled sharply as he spoke. "Manus! Is that you?"

It is, the voice replied.

"Dross," Rendalt asked, suddenly fearing he had in a sense killed the poor beast. "Is he..."

Rest easy, my friend. Dross is here, too. We are as one.

Rendalt relaxed. "Then I am done."

"Not yet," Moria said quickly. "You have one more task to perform before our bargain is sealed." She turned toward the female dragon which moved a little closer and submitted her head to be scratched. Moria obliged by rubbing behind one of the dragon's huge catlike ears. "You will now meld us too."

"What!" Rendalt gasped.

"Jade is Dross's mate, and like me is most willing to join him in his new form. The four of us will soar together, as we always have."

"This is pure madness," Rendalt exclaimed. "You must realize a spell of this

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nature can never be undone."

Moria's face darkened. "Jade and I will be with our mates, however that is made possible."

"If you are absolutely sure," Rendalt said, still hoping she would come to her senses.

"I have never been more sure of anything," she replied.

Rendalt's shoulders sank in surrender. Like his dear mother used to say, in for a penny, in for a crown. With no other viable recourse he opened the book to carry out her request. With Aedon hanging safely from his neck by a twisted hemp cord, Rendalt wasted no time in taking his leave of Penardun once the spell was cast.

Given that Fire Elves had guarded the amulet from the likes of Rendalt for over a thousand years, he had expected trouble, so it came as quite a shock when no effort was made to hinder his departure. Manus had always maintained that elves never lied, but Rendalt knew they were masters of manipulation when it suited their purpose. With little insight in understanding their actions himself, Rendalt just accepted his good fortune with grace and made haste to get home before they changed their minds.

Chapter 4

As eastern sky changed from gray to pale crimson in anticipation of a rising sun, Rendalt was busy coaxing the old mare from her shed just like he had done once every quarter moon for the past ten years. The mare didn't fancy being disturbed so early in the morning and made her objections known by making the effort of saddling her difficult. Determined to visit Penardun's library and then be back again by nightfall, Rendalt payed her no mind, but they were well into the tall grass before she finally resigned herself to the journey.

Still a full two leagues south of Penardun, the amulet at Rendalt's chest began to feel warm against his skin. For it to be noticeable, even through the folds of his thick robe, meant only one thing. Lifting a hand to his chest, he touched it. Images of Manus and Moria came instantly to mind. Clutching the talisman tighter gave him a better sense of their direction. They were together, somewhere high up and to the west. It was in a flash of inspiration, two days after the melding, that Rendalt had discovered Manus and Moria were irrevocably linked to Aedon. Even now, he could still feel the beating of their hearts against his hand.

Like so many times before, ever since becoming Aedon's keeper, Rendalt wondered what would come of it all. Experience had taught him that ancient spells could be very unpredictable. Did it bode good or evil? Only time would tell.

The sun had crested the mountains before he was even halfway across the valley. Drowsy from the rising temperature, he was in constant danger of falling asleep as he rode. Perhaps that was why he failed to notice an otherwise obvious ripple of halfling magic. Registering only in his subconscious, the ripple bore the signature of a powerful yet poorly constructed invisibility spell. It wasn't until someone leapt up from the tall grass to his left, that his senses sounded the alarm. Unfortunately, before he could act, his thoughts were scrambled by an explosion

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of pain.

Touching his temple left his fingers stained red. Dizzy, he swayed in the saddle as his vision blurred, and then the world tilted as the ground rushed up to greet his body with great violence. The impact forced all the air from his lungs. He gulped for breath in between coughing and spitting out dusty bits of dry grass.

“Too much blood,” a high-pitched voice wailed. “I told you I needed him alive, you idiot!”

“Toad did his best, master,” a gravelly voice replied. “The stone was small and smooth. It not be Toad’s fault the old-one’s skull is like a bird’s egg.”

“Well, for your sake, he had better not die, at least not yet. The old goat has knowledge I must have. Quickly now. Get the talisman and bring it to me, you worthless bag of dung. It should be easy to find. Something that powerful must be large.”

Though Rendalt had finally caught his breath, his eyes stung and still refused to focus. For a brief moment he felt the kiss of cold steel on his neck, then a sharp tug reignited the pain in his head. As consolation, vision returned to his right eye in time to see the receding figure of a short stocky man who bobbed from side to side as he walked. Rendalt thought his vision still faulty, until he realized this person’s right leg was a hand shorter than the left. As if in some cruel form of compensation, the left arm was also a hand longer than the right.

“Here it is, Master,” the misshapen man said, as he offered Aedon to a tall thin man holding the reins of two horses.

The second one was younger, a thin wisp of hair barely visible above his upper lip; a southern noble, by the cut of his clothing, possibly Carpathian. After snatching Aedon from the shorter man’s hand, the tall one stared at it like a child eyeing a cooling honey cake as a broad smile spread slowly across his face. “Do you not wonder how I knew where to find it?” he asked without taking his eyes from the amulet.

“Toad doesn’t know,” the misshapen man said as he scratched his head. “Master could not find the elf thing in his magic dish. Protected it is, master was saying. It not be Toad’s fault.”

“It is true,” the young man replied, without so much as a glance back to the one calling himself Toad, “that because of its inherent concealment spell I could not locate it in a scrying dish, but the moment the walls of Penardun disappeared, I deduced the talisman must be moving north. Once I had established speed and direction, it was then a simple matter to triangulate his position and plot an

intercepting course, but why am I wasting breath trying to explain my brilliance to the likes of you?"

Staring at his feet with a look of consternation, Toad scratched his head again. Then the pained look on his face morphed into a smile. "Because no one else will listen, master. Toad is very good at listening."

Even as Toad beamed with satisfaction, the young man's face clouded over. "Toad is good for nothing," he spat.

As if struck an unseen blow, Toad toppled backwards. Rendalt winced at the wave of raw unfocused power that washed over him. Amazingly, Toad rebounded as nimbly as a young sapling in a gust of wind. Once back on his feet, he resumed staring at the ground as if nothing had happened. Rendalt tried to push himself up, but before he could rise more than two fingers from the ground, invisible coils clamped his arms tightly to his side. As if caught in a giant vise he dropped face first into the dirt, unable to move.

The young halfling laughed. "So you are not dead after all. Good. You have much to teach me, old man. The others turned me away, all jealous of my power. You can feel it, can't you? Finally, I will have the recognition I deserve. Soon the whole world will tremble at the name, Ruadri Cola. When I..."

Young Ruadri's tirade was interrupted by a stiff gust of wind which propelled a clod of dirt into his face. The horse suddenly reared, tearing the reins from his grip, and bolted after Rendalt's own fleeing mount. With his one good eye, Rendalt sought to identify the source of the disturbance. There amid swirling dust and grass stood Manus. His massive head snaked toward Ruadri even as a spear of fire erupted from his open maw. Moria suddenly appeared next to her mate to add fire of her own, as Toad ran screaming for his life.

Rendalt stared in awe as flames engulfed Ruadri only briefly before being sucked into the amulet. When the two former elves ceased their attack, the young halfling was left miraculously unscathed. The look on Ruadri's face implied he was as shocked as anyone else by what had happened.

"Back," the young halfling screamed. "Back I say." His voice was angry yet heavily laced with fear. Instantly, both Manus and Moria's long necks recoiled. In the silence that followed, a cruel crooked grin crept onto Ruadri's face. "Down," he barked. "Prostrate yourselves before your master."

To Rendalt's great horror, Manus and Moria collapsed as if the hand of Ulrich had crushed them to the ground. The young halfling looked pleased. "Well, well," he said, looking first at Manus, Moria and then back to Rendalt. "Is this

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what you have been up to. Conjuring fire-breathing dragons. FireDrakes. You will have to teach me that spell.” His lips curled as his smile turned even crueler. “You will teach me all your spells if you wish to live a little longer. By the look of you there is little enough time left, but then I suppose the less you have the more precious it is.”

While Ruadri was strutting and postulating, Rendalt was busy testing his bonds. They were crudely forged ropes of air made unbreakable with twisted threads of Aedon’s magic. Similar bands covered his mouth, presumably to prevent him from uttering spells, but the inexperienced halfling had missed one very important thing. Likely unaware of his own telepathic ability, he had failed to safeguard his adversary’s mind. Telepathy took training to master, something young Ruadri obviously lacked.

Once the young would-be wizard had demonstrated control over the dragons, Toad had returned somewhat cautiously to his master’s side. Rendalt probed the misshapen man’s mind and found him to be motivated by a twisted, but nevertheless incredibly strong loyalty to Ruadri, so Rendalt set to work using it to his own advantage.

Your Master is in danger, Rendalt projected, so only Toad could hear. The misshapen man looked around both confused and fearful. The amulet is dangerous. It will harm Ruadri. Only you can save him, Toad.

Rendalt could hear the echo of Toad’s thoughts clearly in his mind, just as if they were his own. *Save him. How?*

If Rendalt could have moved his lips, he would have grinned from ear to ear. *The amulet. You must take it away from him and give it back to the old man.*

Toad’s thoughts were laced with both doubt and fear. *But Ruadri will punish Toad.*

It is the only way, Toad. It is the only way to save Ruadri.

With a little more prompting, Toad’s fear was eventually transformed into something much stronger; a sense of purpose. *Toad must save Ruadri.*

Toad raised his long arm mechanically and, without a pause, tore the amulet effortlessly from his master’s grasp. The bonds of woven air restraining Rendalt dissolved the moment Aedon left Ruadri’s hand, but he was still unable to do anything of consequence. Apparently too shocked to respond, Ruadri stared wide-eyed as his servant turned and walked toward Rendalt.

Just as it looked like Rendalt’s ploy would succeed, Ruadri raised his hand and screamed, “Stop!”

Toad fell to the ground clutching at his throat and writhing in agony, but he still somehow managed to toss the amulet in Rendalt's direction. It landed three feet short, but in Rendalt's current state it might as well have been a league. The pain being inflicted on Toad was too much to bear so Rendalt released his link with the poor man's mind. Then, as if on cue, Ruadri ceased his assault. Face contorted with rage, he stomped toward Rendalt, but before he could reach the amulet, a huge claw slammed down on top of it. Ruadri looked up to gaze into the angry eyes of Manus.

The shock of facing rows of teeth the size of small daggers forced Ruadri to topple over. He landed hard on his rump. As he tried frantically to propel himself backwards with his feet, a hand whipped up to cast a nasty heart spell directly at Manus. There was no doubt he intended to kill. The pure hatred and raw power behind it left Rendalt horrified, but the spell seemed to have no effect. Manus simply cocked his great spiked head sideways, looking curious. Moria however, as if sensing the intended threat, lowered her head to within a few feet of Ruadri and let loose a deafening roar. The young halfling buried his face in his hands and wailed like a wet baby.

It suddenly occurred to Rendalt that these former elves had changed in more than just appearance. They had taken on much of the dragon's aggressiveness, Moria more so than Manus. She roared again before backing away, but her eyes never left the cowering halfling. Manus stepped back too, uncovering Aedon as he did. The force of his weight had pressed the amulet flush with the ground. Awkwardly, he pried the embedded amulet out of the dirt with a front claw. Still wary, Moria maintained a watchful eye on Ruadri as she pressed protectively against her mate. When Manus raised his front leg, Aedon hung from a talon by a glowing red chain. Even as Rendalt wondered where the chain had come from, Manus allowed the amulet to slide off.

Aedon landed within reach of Rendalt's left hand. It took effort to stretch out his fingers, but at the moment of contact, as if in response to his need, waves of Aedon's power flowed into his body. With each new breath the pain in his head diminished while his strength increased, until finally he was able to stand. It was then he detected the buildup of magical energies around Ruadri. Even terrified, as he surely must have been, the young halfling was still unwilling to give up. No matter how distasteful the idea, Rendalt was going to have to do something drastic.

Due to the amount of residual magic still within Rendalt's body, a single

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whispered word was enough to encase Ruadri within an unbreakable red translucent sphere of pure energy. Once aware that he was trapped, Ruadri's eyes went wide in shock. "Don't kill me," he pleaded. "Please, don't kill me."

"Oh, have no fear," Rendalt said. "I will let you live. Not that you deserve it, mind."

Aedon grew brighter as Rendalt created a second more complicated spell. Once completed, a bolt of crimson light streaked out to penetrate the glowing sphere and strike Ruadri in the forehead. The halfling's head snapped back, his eyes rolled up, and then he crumpled to the ground like so much loose clothing.

The moment the sphere faded, Toad rushed to his master's side. "It not be Toad's fault," he muttered helping a dazed and shaken Ruadri to his feet.

"Where..., where am I," Ruadri asked, his face a mask of confusion.

Rendalt spit out a small bit of grass that his tongue had found wedged between two of his front teeth. "You have had a nasty fall," he said, "but will be fine now. Perhaps it is time for you to return home."

Ruadri smiled pleasantly. "Ah, yes..., home." The smile quickly faded as the look of confusion settled back into place. "At the moment, I cannot recall where home is, exactly."

"I trust your good servant will help you to find your horse and guide you home," Rendalt replied.

Toad took Ruadri's hand and began pulling him away. "Yes, Toad will take master home."

Casting fearful backward glances every few steps, Toad led the young halfling away as swiftly as his uneven legs would allow. Rendalt watched patiently as the two men faded to specks in the distance, until Moria finally broke the silence. *Are you sure letting them go was wise?*

Rendalt shrugged. "He will not return, I have seen to that, but it would be foolhardy to not expect others like him. Unleashing Aedon's power will have alerted every halfling within two hundred leagues. They will be drawn as bees to nectar."

The amulet is now too dangerous for you to possess, my friend, Manus replied.

"I was not thinking of my own mortality, but of the danger to you and Moria. With both of you obviously in thrall to Aedon, I cannot just give it back. When the pigs are out of the pen what purpose would it serve to lock the gate? At least with Aedon in hand I can keep them at bay. Hopefully, I will live long enough for this

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day to be forgotten; then elves can safeguard Aedon once again. But, for now, I see no recourse other than taking up residence in Penardun. That is, of course, if my presence is acceptable to both of you and the other elves.”

I still speak for the Fire Elf council, Moria said, and I say you will always be welcome at Penardun. In an awkward attempt to smile, Moria’s lips peeled back revealing rolls of long pointed teeth. *And you may be surprised by how much time you still have.*

“Well, I will need to find my horse first,” Rendalt said. “It is a long walk to Penardun from here for an old man.”

Extending his long neck straight out, Manus lowered himself to the ground. *If you can find ropes or some sort of saddle to secure yourself, I would be honoured to take you.*

Since the damage was already done, Rendalt slipped the glowing chain over his head and then clutched the amulet tightly. When the image of a saddle came to mind, an identical glowing red saddle appeared at the base of Manus’s neck. “That should do nicely,” Rendalt announced, pleased with his handiwork. Releasing his grip on Aedon, he grabbed one of the spikes on the side of Manus’s head and pulled himself up.

What was it that young halfling called us, Moria asked as Rendalt settled into the saddle.

I believe it was FireDrakes, my love, Manus answered tenderly.

FireDrakes. I do like the sound of it, she replied.

“Well, I must admit it seems most appropriate,” Rendalt added.

Are you ready to be the first to ever ride upon a FireDrake, Manus asked.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” Rendalt replied.

Good.

By the third flap of Manus’s powerful wings, they were airborne. As each new stroke took them higher and higher, Rendalt’s initial dizziness gave way to a sense of joy greater than any he had ever known.

HALFLING'S CURSE

Rendalt was perplexed. No matter how hard he tried, his thick puffy eyelids could not blink the blurred script back into focus. The penmanship was arguably undisciplined, but Penardun's library boasted the finest reading light in the known world and should have compensated for that. After brushing back a few loose strands of fine snow-white hair, he allowed his eyes to close.

While he was mulling the problem over, Rendalt's heart stopped beating. The resulting pain elicited a gasp as his claw-like hand clutched at his chest, desperately searching for the object hanging from his neck. Once found, a soothing warmth radiated from his clenched hand, up through his arm, and into his heart, where blood pulsed anew on its tenuous journey through age hardened veins and arteries. Once more Rendalt had escaped Ulrich's cruel grip. At four hundred and twenty, would it be his last?

When swirls and splotches once more resembled letters and words, Rendalt traced them with his finger until he found his place. The volume was one of those Manus had given him so many years before. The story of the amulets was well documented in various other books, but only this one included theories on how they could be used to grant a halfling immortality.

Rendalt tried to imagine what it would be like to be young again; what it would be like to live forever. He thought and thought, until he forgot what he was thinking about. Finally, a thick red volume laying nearby caught his attention. Pushing the black book aside, he slid the red one into its place. A smile found his lips as gnarled fingers traced his own tidy script.

At times, particularly when his mind had wandered, Rendalt liked to read from his own journal, but on this day, other things preoccupied his thoughts. How many years beyond his allotted time had Aedon kept him alive? Long enough for two generations of FireDrakes to be born. Long enough to see Penardun all but abandoned. Except for Rendalt and a handful of older elves, the once bustling complex stood lifeless.

The exodus from Penardun had been in favor of a new elfin community established among the large natural caves of Drakenmount. Their new home under the mountain had proved to be congenial for both FireDrakes and elves alike. Flightless for their first fifty years, and prone to mischief, which they had no

trouble finding even in the confines of Drakenmount, the young FireDrakes required a great deal of care; something the elves seemed more than happy to provide.

Greetings, a soft musical voice chimed in Rendalt's mind.

Well accustomed to their silent movements, Rendalt was not startled by an elf appearing unannounced at his side. "Merflyn," he exclaimed with genuine pleasure. "Long have I missed your fine company. Are you here to visit your grandsire's grandsire?"

"Yes," the elf replied. "Hywita's time draws near and he requires assurances that someone will care for the library after he is gone. I have agreed to take over his duties, when the time comes."

Merflyn put a hand on Rendalt's shoulder. "I promised Manus to look in on you, as well."

Rendalt waved the words away with his hand. "Totally unnecessary, I can take care of myself."

Merflyn smiled. "Of course. Have you eaten today?"

The question gave Rendalt pause. "I feel no hunger so I must have, though I confess what it was I cannot say. So, how fare the young hatchlings? Is Moria well? She must be in a fretful state with all these new grandchildren."

The elf laughed. "Moria is kept very busy with so many hatchlings. She claims her daughters are still babes themselves and she must supervise everything." The elf's face turned sombre. "Manus has expressed concern over the state of your health. It has been overly long since you and he have spoken."

"Thank you, Merflyn. I shall contact him straight away."

"Good, I will leave you to it then."

Once the young elf was gone, Rendalt touched the amulet again and projected his thoughts. *Manus, please join me on the roof of the keep.* He didn't need to wait for a reply. Manus had heard and would come. Amid the sound of creaking joints, Rendalt pushed himself up and donned his cloak before beginning the labourious journey to the roof. It was no easy task to climb the steep steps and Rendalt found himself winded by the time he reached the top. Reluctantly, he paused to draw strength from Aedon before stepping outside.

As expected, Manus was waiting for him. The FireDrake's massive head lowered to the wooden planks of the roof as Rendalt approached. *Rendalt, old friend, it is good to see you again.* The voice in Rendalt's mind was soft and gentle, little changed from when Manus was just an elf.

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A warm smile formed on Rendalt's lips as he responded. *I have allowed the days to slip by again. How long has it been this time, a full season?*

Manus snorted. *It has been two years.*

Rendalt was shocked. *Two years, surely it cannot have been two years. Well that settles it. I think the time has come to give this back.* Rendalt lifted the glowing red chain over his head. "Take it," he said aloud, "for I will wear it no longer."

After all these years you are as bound to Aedon as I, Manus replied. *You will die without it to sustain you.*

A smile curled on Rendalt's lips as a passage from the black journal came to mind. "According to one of your Magi, had I all four then I would live forever."

I know where the other three are, Manus replied. *You will have them before the next new moon. I will leave tonight.*

Despite his resolve, Rendalt considered the offer for a brief moment before shaking his head. "You must be aware of your own ancestor's prophecy. Should a halfling ever come to possess all four, it would mean the end of the elves."

There is naught but good in you, my friend. You could never do anything to harm us.

"No mortal was ever meant to have the power of a god. If I was willing to put the life of every single elf at risk, then I would not be worthy of your trust, but there is another reason, a more personal one. Do you remember my horse?"

That was a long time ago.

"Yes, but did you ever wonder why I did not give her a name? For an elf, it might be hard to understand, but after losing all those I once held dear, I hoped that by not naming her I would forgo the sense of loss when she eventually died. Even that did not help. No, I desire neither youth, nor immortality, just peace, and to see what might lie beyond this world. Not even Penardun's vast library can provide such knowledge. Perhaps those I have loved are waiting for me. How would I ever know if I remain here? No, my decision is made. You will take Aedon now."

I understand better than you think, Manus replied sadly. *The briefness of human existence is one of the primary reasons elves prefer no contact with humankind.*

"I have lived far too long, even for a halfling," Rendalt replied as he touched the amulet to Manus's temple. As always, the amulet responded to need. Additional links grew from the chain until it was long enough to slip over the

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FireDrake's head.

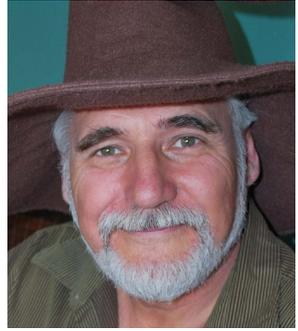
Rendalt stepped back. Without the amulet to keep him warm, the sudden chill of the evening air made him shiver. He pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders. "Now I must go back inside before I freeze to death."

Farewell my old friend. If we do not meet again in this world, I will search for you in the next. Manus's head rose to its full height as he backed away and spread his wings. Wind whipped Rendalt's hair about his ears as the FireDrake lifted gently off the roof.

Though the sun had not yet completely set, a full moon hung low in the sky. As Rendalt wondered if he would ever see another, his old friend shrank to a red dot against the moon's pale light. After making his way back down to the library, Rendalt collapsed breathlessly into his chair. Once recovered, he picked up a quill and opened his journal. Dipping the point in black ink, he began to write.

Aedon provides strength, but there is a cost. I am convinced that what is imprisoned within the bloodstone seeks desperate release. With the original donors of the amulet's magic long dead, Aedon struggles to stay linked to the world through their descendants. This conflict will only increase with time. I must... Rendalt paused, looked at a majestic moon framed in the window, and then promptly forgot what he was thinking.

With a tired sigh, Rendalt closed his journal. *There is always another day*, he thought. Unfortunately, for Rendalt the sun would not rise again. During the night his heart stopped for the final time. Finally free of the Halfling's Curse, Rendalt embarked on his greatest adventure.



About The Author

David Korinetz grew up in Winnipeg, where he was employed in the Aerospace industry for 19 years. In 1993 he packed up and moved to Vancouver Island, where he began a new career in the software industry. His travels finally brought him to Penticton in 2000. While working there as computer programmer he decided to try writing in his spare time. This decision would ultimately alter the course of his life.

The catalyst that made David's dream of being a Fantasy writer become a reality was enrolling in a Writer's Digest correspondence course in 2002. His instructor, Steven F. Havill, taught what POV (point of view) means, why stories have plots, and more importantly, how to make an outline. Armed with this new knowledge, David spent the next four years writing, rewriting, and ultimately publishing his first fantasy novel, *FireDrakes* (2007).

In 2009 David published his second book, *Sorceress*, and started Red Tuque Books, a book distribution company for Canadian self-published authors and small presses. In 2011 David published the third novel in his *Daemon Knight* Fantasy series, *Halfling*. He is presently working on a fourth.