

The Goddess Reborn



Volume 3 of 4 of DOOR,
the first of The Five
Books of Time

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Miller

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DOOR

Being the First of the Five Books of Time

DOOR – KEY – NIGHTMARE

CLEANSING - BIRTH

The Goddess Reborn

Volume three of the four of DOOR

The Binding Returned

The World Revealed

The Goddess Reborn

The Union Rejected

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C'Holm, Changeling, The Highlands, 1020 - 1022

1 C'Holm - Midwinter, 1020

“Do you understand the consequences of your actions and accept responsibility for them?”

Hamish looked at the frozen water of the harbor in the darkness of the long hours of the midwinter day. He stood next to King Rane Rane'son d'Nor, who was wrapped up in everything he could wear. Frostbite was a real threat. Hamish had brought Rane outside to emphasize his point.

“It's not like I'm asking you to do something that has never been done before,” Rane grumbled into a cloud of his own breath. “People have sailed in the winter before.”

“Whatever might have happened in the past is not relevant to decisions we make today. All that matters is what we hope to achieve in the future – as a consequence of our actions today.”

King Rane took hold of Hamish's arm and pulled him back toward the doors of Afreya's public room. “You've told me all that before. You do not need to freeze me just to remind me of what I am asking. I am completely aware of the impression I will make when I show up in Kings'Haven to witness my daughter, and heir, being Presented to The Gods. I am the King of Nor'Isle. Diamari will be the next Queen of Nor'Isle. I want my daughter to be respected throughout C'Holm, as I would now honor her.”

Hamish stopped at the door so that King Rane could enter first, and so that he could enjoy the dark cold a little longer. This was the season of the dragon. Everything was so sharp in his eyes. Every sound was so loud in the still, frozen air. There was almost nothing stinking up his nose. The falling snow tickled his skin

through the thin shirt he wore, and pushed up between his bare toes. It was all so good.

After Rane had closed the outer winter-doors, so that he could pass through the inner summer-doors, Hamish entered the antechamber. It was warmer than outside, but still colder than the next room. Hamish had to warm up his body to match where he was going. It was embarrassing when he forgot to warm up before entering a room – he turned into a frost-covered walking cloud. People stared.

Otter was standing on a table just inside the summer-doors, which made her as tall as he was. Hamish was just about to remind her that she wasn't supposed to climb on the tables – especially when she did not have four feet and fur, when she smacked him in the face with his boots. “We do not go outside without dressing properly!”

“Ow! That hurt.”

“Not enough to get you to remember.”

“I just wanted to remind the King what it was like outside – he wants me to take him to Kings'Haven ...”

“Everyone knows that. He's been planning the trip for weeks. If you spent less time dragoning-about he wouldn't have had to ask you at the last moment.”

He hadn't been dragoning-about all that much ... well, at least no more than necessary – not much more than necessary. The dragon was still learning how to move about without leaving a trace, and how to feel everything around him without it feeling him, and how to find what should not be there. Flying with his wings wasn't as easy as using Magic ... but it didn't use up the limited Magic that existed beyond The Edge of The World.

“Don't expect me to be going with you to Kings'Haven,” Otter decreed. “I have too much to do here, and you never listen to me anyway. You'll just have to dress yourself, and feed yourself, all on your own.”

Hamish was about to remind her that she could sleep in front of the fire in Kings'Haven just as easily as here, when he realized she was completely serious.

All normal creatures need to sleep, especially in winter; Otter thought to him. *Rane only wants the two of you to travel.*

Why? Hamish glanced to the King. He had assumed there would be Guards with them, and had been wondering how they would all fit into The Goddess.

When the King d'Nor has the dragon at his side, why would he need anyone else? Otter asked.

That was exactly the kind of act he was trying to explain to the King while outside. Hamish knew he wasn't popular in about half of The Eleven Kingdoms of C'Holm. The other half either tolerated or ignored him. Only King Rane enjoyed his presence.

And the High King Ghent t'Fhar.

And that only weakened the grip the High King had over his eleven kings.

And Hamish had done all he could to avoid the title of The Lord Binding Returned that he'd once had. No one in the Islands followed The Covenant of the Nightlords of The Five Kingdoms. Everyone here still followed The Old Ways.

But ...

... but now you are The Dragon Caller. And even in the darkness of winter we all have seen you flapping about ...

The dragon does not flap! He glides ...

"The dragon flops about like a bloated bat," Otter said, which caused everyone to look away from them. *You have been a guest of Nor'Isle for several years now. You can repay your host with this small act. It is something he wishes – and understands the consequences of. It's not your place to influence the politics of C'Holm, dragon. He could order some fisherman to take him to King'Haven ...*

They wouldn't make it.

Exactly – and would that be a better thing? Otter asked. *The damage you could do by not-helping would be worse than the damage you will do by helping.*

King Rane clapped his hands together over near the burning wood in the fireplace. There were already too many Globes the dragon had breathed upon heating the room. Hamish turned to join the King. He wished he could take his clothes off – he felt much better outside ...

Otter whacked the back of head with his boots.

"What ...?"

She reached out her arms. "You didn't help me down from this table." *You have the manners of a peasant, master.*

Hamish had thought he might have forgotten how to sail the Whitestone ship that was The Goddess. But he'd been spending so much time in his dragon form that The Goddess felt like his own body – which was exactly what she was now that Pixx was with Captain Greyling studying in Kings'Haven.

They had perfect conditions. The full moon glowed low in a sky so full of stars that it was almost white. There was a strong wind on the beam, and the waves moved without surprises. The Goddess was effortlessly flying over the surface of the water on her claws and tail. Hamish had the cockpit open, so nothing blocked his senses. It wouldn't do to hit a log or foolish chunk of ice. Rane was inside, asleep.

Hamish had pushed a hot Globe into each of the floats, and two into the main hull, so that The Goddess was as hot as living body. There was no chance of ice building up upon her hull, and they were moving too fast to form a streaming cloud behind them. The dragon had learned not to warm the air around him, because when it cooled again it formed clouds.

The Goddess was his body, and sailing her was no different than flying with his wings. It was effortless when the pull of the wind on his dorsal balanced the forces of the water sliding over his claws. The regular motion of the waves was hypnotically predictable. The only things that seemed to move were the moon and stars.

They were slowly drifting into Kings'Haven, when Rane joined him. "Sorry ... I must have fallen asleep. Are we ready to leave yet?"

"I think I overdid the Globes," Hamish replied. "One would have been enough. I should have known the Whitestone would distribute the heat to where it was needed. It must have been a little hot and stuffy inside."

"Where are we? I don't see the beacon on Queens'Head. If they've let it go out, I'll ..."

"The Queens'Head beacon was fine," Hamish interrupted. "But the Kings'Haven Beacon seems to have been neglected. I was hoping they would see us before we arrived."

Rane turned around a couple of times, and Hamish could feel him recognize the black skyline silhouetted against the stars. "We're at Kings'haven already?"

"We had perfect conditions."

"But we just ..."

"The Goddess can be especially fast, and I was enjoying myself."

"I didn't feel anything ... I missed the whole trip."

"You wouldn't have been able to see anything – at the speeds we were going the cold would have frozen your eyes."

Hamish had cooled all but the Globe Rane had been sleeping next to. He opened the membrane separating the interior from the cockpit, and let the cold air freeze the

warm moist air that had filled The Goddess. She needed to slowly settle herself after waking for a run in the middle of her winter sleep.

“I had hoped we might have been able to have some time to talk together, alone,” Rane said. “You are a very hard man to separate from your admirers.”

Hamish laughed. He almost commented that he wasn't as hard to find a moment with as was a king, but he realized Rane was being very serious – and was a little frightened. In winter it was almost impossible for anyone to be alone, in Queenstown or anywhere in The World. Everyone moved into the towns where there were tunnels between all the buildings to avoid the cold and the dark. Everyone did their second jobs, preparing for summer. It was an intense period of boasting, complaining, remembering, and planning.

And for almost everyone the summers were the exact opposite, as they dispersed to grow as much food as possible. In Riversea, Barns dotted the landscape where five families worked their fields together. In C'Holm, where the landscape was much more rugged, individuals worked their small holdings in isolation. Until the High Mayors of Riversea had pulled all the masons into the New City, the Barns had been well maintained after the damage of every winter. In C'Holm there were not enough people to repair anything more than the towns – and almost everyone lived in tents for the summer.

It confused Hamish when people thought it odd he was himself, and also the dragon. Everyone had two lives in The World – their summer-life, and their winter-life. He had two names - Hamish from the mother he'd had to leave, and Altan from his father. He had several titles – and he was all of them, and yet none of them. Everything in The World was many things – The Five Elements, and also something more.

He quickly looked in all directions, checking their position. In winter The World was cold and dark, with clear star-filled skies. In summer it was almost always cloudy, and warm enough for endless rain. People lived crowded, talkative lives inside for half the year, and then isolated lives outdoors for the other half of the year.

He liked the solitude and freedom of summer, and the cold darkness of winter. Since he didn't need much sleep, he didn't mind the endless company around him in winter – they always fell asleep at some point. Pixx would say he was becoming too much of a dragon. But she'd never known him as a child. He wasn't anti-social, he was just independent ...

“Could I ask you something?” Rane interrupted.

“Of course.”

Rane looked around, and Hamish knew he was checking to see if they would be overheard.

“Are you really The Lord Binding Returned?”

“No, I am not The Lord Binding Returned.”

Rane turned to look at him. “That is good. It would be hard to tell my people that The Old Ways were not the right ways.”

“I would guess that The Nightlord was referring to himself, and something he would do in the future - if everyone followed his rules, when he created the myth of The Lord Binding who would return to reunite The World and The Underworld, and Begin Time once again,” Hamish said.

“So you are not going to ...?” Hamish knew the rest of the question.

“According to The Covenant, the actions of The Lord Binding are supposed to bring an end to the present imperfect condition of The World. According to The Covenant, once The World and The Underworld are Reunited, we will all live in a state of timeless unified perfection.”

Hamish could now see some light escaping from the windows of Kings'haven. King Rane kept Globes lighting the seawall around Queenstown just in case someone decided to go for a walk, and needed a direction home. He had assumed the wall around Kings'Haven, would also be lit. He could find his way in the dark – but he was really hoping to be discovered before he arrived.

Although he'd said it before, Hamish repeated, “I am here to do whatever I can for The Oracle of Life, and then repair the Highstone Roads between the cities of the Immortals, so that all of the parts of The World are as strong as possible, and are as united as possible, for the coming attack by The Union.”

“You are sure we are going to be attacked?”

“Yes. We will be attacked. But it's not going to be by an army that we can fight.”

Just as the freshwater surrounding Queenstown was frozen, Hamish expected the harbor of Kings'Haven to be frozen. The people of Queenstown had seen him fly The Goddess to her resting place ashore, but it still was a topic of discussion.

“Is The Underworld inside The Five Oracles?” King Rane asked.

“The Oracles collect the memories of the dead, creating a copy of our World for the Immortals - who are beings of pure thought, to inhabit.”

Rane was quiet for awhile, and Hamish began to wonder if he was getting too cold. The people of Kings'Haven were going to get a surprise very soon. They'd seen The Goddess before, when Captain Grey had returned aboard her with those Ships of The Fleet which had managed to return last summer. But they hadn't seen her fly.

"You believe that in death we do not go before The Gods to Answer for Our Lives?" Rane asked. "You think we go become part of The Oracles, for the amusement of the Immortals - who are too proud to come out of their cities and learn the wonder of The World for themselves?"

Hamish knew that most people, except maybe those in The Kingdoms, found it easy to dismiss The Covenant, and it's bureaucratic Code, as obvious constructs of The Nightlord, but no one anywhere doubted the basic teachings of The Old Ways. Everyone knew their brief lives were meant to be a period of trial and testing, in ways that were not obvious, and that in death one went before The Gods to give an Accounting for ones actions. Those whom had lived their lives well were worthy of joining The Gods, while those who had not been successful were re-born to try again.

As his enlightened daughter, Lyze, had pointed out, The Old Ways required the existence of unseen Gods, who were omniscient - and yet still needed us. Lyze found it illogical that The Gods of The Old Ways would propose that there was a right way to live, and yet refused to define it. Existing to solve an undefined riddle, in order to join an unseen being, in an unknown after-life required too much acceptance, and not enough recognition of what actually was knowable. Lyze did not need The Gods when she could find a reason for her own existence, and a moral code to live by, with her own intellect.

"If we're not here to prove ourselves worthy of joining the Gods, then why are we here?" Rane asked.

"We exist in order to continue our existence," Hamish said. "We exist to build a World where the children we can directly create are also able to independently create children of their own. We can not directly create our grandchildren, we can only create a World in which they will survive. After creating a child to replace ourselves, we work to make their lives rich enough to have a child of their own."

"If you don't believe in The Gods, then you are not a messenger of The Gods, are you?"

"I am not a messenger of The Gods. If they do exist, then I would guess that they choose to have little contact with us."

“If The Union isn't going to attack us with an army, then what are they going to use?” Rane asked. “Do they have dragons, and Magic?”

“They do not have Magic. They do not have Life. Beyond The Edge of The World there is only Water, Earth, and Air. The only Fire they have is that which burns within their single body. They will come for our Life, and our Magic. They will come with an offer to join their eternal, peaceful, perfection. They will come to The World as our Unified God.”

Rane watched silently as Hamish left the tiller and stepped inside the cabin of The Goddess. He floated up against the ceiling, and then lifted his skin out of the water and gently drifted it over the ice-filled harbor. He folded up his dorsal sail, and withdrew his claws and tail, so that he was as compact as possible, and looked out with the eyes of The Goddess for a place to rest.

All the ships that had been in the harbor must have been pulled into sheds, for there was nothing other than snow-drifts. Hamish wanted to rest The Goddess on Earth, so that he could keep her warm for their departure. He also wanted to turn her so that she faced the Water, as was only right.

“We had better wait until someone discovers us,” King Rane said once Hamish dropped back to his feet. The Goddess was resting where he remembered there had been market stalls at the head of the harbor. She was going to melt a hole in the snow beneath her.

“What makes you so sure of everything you have told me?” Rane asked as he opened one of the feasts he'd brought for the voyage. He had food for a multi-day passage, and a full crew and troop of his Guard. Hamish figured there was just about enough for the dragon.

“Before The Breaking of Time, everyone could talk with The Oracles. Everyone had the Mind Voice, at least when they needed answers to things they did not understand. The Oracles ... at least The Oracle of Air ... and more recently The Oracle of Water ... I am ... it's like there is a bit of The Oracle within me. I just know things.”

“Do you trust The Oracles?” Rane asked, without looking up from his food. “The Immortals did once try to exterminate the mortals with their dragons.”

Hamish wasn't sure who had created the dragons to exterminate whom ... or the single dragon which had destroyed The Oracle of Life, but he did know that there had

been a war. After one thousand years, it was now up to him to try to put back together what had been broken.

He looked at the blue Mark of Bound Water on the back of his right hand, and then at the green Mark of Bound Life on the back of his left hand. He knew there was a brown Mark of Bound Earth now on the top of his left foot, and a white Mark of Bound Air on his top right foot. He put his hand on his chest and could feel the burning red Mark of Bound Fire on his chest.

It wasn't a matter of him trusting The Oracles of The Five Elements. He was the Union of their five separate entities. He was what Bound The World together.

“The Oracles want to continue to exist, just as all living things in The World do. When The Union comes to The World, it will absorb The Oracles first, for they are the source of The Magic of The World. After absorbing The Underworld, The Union might not even feel the need to consume The World, as we are nothing more than the imperfect original copy ...”

“Could that be used as our plan of defense?” Rane asked.

Hamish opened his mouth ... but couldn't speak. It was impossible for him to even think of sacrificing The Underworld to save The World.

“You have always said it's all about the survival of 'our kind',” Rane said. “The Immortals are not our kind – at least not my people's kind. You're a little different ... but there are going to be losses – that is the way of war. Warleaders have to decide what can be afforded, and what cannot be, for the end to still be called a victory. It's not just about surviving – you have to survive with what makes you what you are.”

Hamish could feel the fear, and the determination, churning within Rane. Hamish knew he had to answer gently. Dragons did not eat people who disagreed with them.

“The dragon is a creature of Magic. Magic depends upon all five of The Elements. Magic needs The World, and The Underworld, and everything within, in order to exist. Magic will do whatever is necessary to continue to exist – just as any living creature would.”

Rane set down his cup, and wiped his fingers. “So we either all survive the coming of The Union together, or we all risk the dragon, as well as the lure of a false God?”

It was a future as clear, and as brutal, as the winter conditions outside. It was the dragons choice. The World and The Underworld, and all that was within would survive. The Union would more than die, it would cease to have ever existed.

“You know what I really like about you?” Rane asked, as he rummaged into one of his many chests. “You are cruelly honest at all times. I don't even think you have the ability to be evasive, when it would suit your cause.”

Hamish remembered he once had been ... evasive. Now he knew it was not his place to trick anyone. With his Mind Voice he could direct anyone's thoughts and tongue. With the aid of Magic he could restructure The World to fit his needs - or his whims. He had done both in the past.

But Rane had been completely right. It was not just about surviving – you had to survive with what made you what you were still intact. All or nothing. The dragon was a product of The Magic of The Union of The Five Elements. The dragon existed to make sure Magic continued to exist. The dragon could shape The World in any way he needed - with the aid of Magic, so that it could survive The Union. The dragon could not change anything in The World – if he still wanted it to be The World that was the source of his Magic.

Rane turned back to face him, with an ornate Blade in his hands. “When someone like you faces someone like me, you dishonor me when you do not carry a weapon. You tell me you do not think I am your equal - a worthy opponent. You tell me you think I am your inferior - a harmless nothing.”

“I don't ...”

Rane raised his hand to stop Hamish. “I know - what you're really telling me is that you do not need a weapon. You could tear me to pieces with your bare hands, and I - and all my Guards, could do nothing to stop you. You cause us to fear you, because you do not appear as our equal. When you approach us unarmed, you tell us that there is nothing you fear – which provokes us to run ... or to rage.”

“I do not mean to ...”

“I know that, but all the young men here in Kings'Haven do not – especially those visiting from Kings'Bey. They only know you like to kill their kinsmen, and advertise your abilities by strutting about unarmed.”

“I don't ...” Hamish took a deep breath. Then he took a second one. Rane's eyes never dropped to his claws, which only slowly relaxed.

Rane held the Blade out to Hamish. “Think of it as an evasion which will suit your purpose.”

“I am not a Blademaster ... I have no right ...”

Rane tossed the Blade, and Hamish had no choice but to catch it. He knew it was old. It was way too valuable to be casually given away. He pulled the Blade a hand-span from its Rest, and saw the grain in the metal, and tempering of The Edge. He touched The Edge with his forefinger. It was sharp, sharper than anything he'd ever felt.

But it was still not sharp enough to cut through the Whitestone in his skin. What Rane had said was probably true, unfortunately. But he and Blades just did not get along.

"I can't accept this. It's way too fine. Blades and I have an unfortunate history. And I could not honestly wear the Blade of a Blademaster ... I only have three years of training and am nothing more than a Master of Iron."

"In that case, I would ask you to present this Blade to my daughter, for she is now a Master of The Blade and would continue her training another five years so that she can become a full Blademaster."

"I ..."

And then he completely understood Rane's thoughts. *When The Others come to attack The World, they will come through C'Holm first. And before they can come to C'Holm, they will have to pass over Nor'Isle. I would ask you, as The Lord Binding Returned and as The Dragon Caller, to pledge your Blade to my daughter, and give your Binding to protect her and her people of Nor'Isle, in front of The Gods, whom I still believe in, when she is Presented to Them. Although there are some in the Islands who do not favor you, by Binding yourself to Nor'Isle you will be protecting everyone, without having to force them to accept you.*

"You know that if you Bind yourself to me ... ," Hamish said. "And remember that a Binding goes both ways ... there are many who may think you are ... maybe putting me in the place of your High King. Are you sure you would want that?"

"I would be willing to place the safety of Nor'Isle in the hands ... claws of the dragon, for I have seen him fly. I have not seen much from our High King. But my daughter is wiser than I am to the ways of politics. I would only ask you to offer her your Blade. It is up to her to accept or reject." *Even if she were to feel the political need to reject you, I know you will come when she calls, if you will do this act.*

There was a knocking on the side of the hull.

“Can you really Hear my thoughts?” Rane asked. “You seemed to understand what I was trying to say ... when I am still too afraid to speak. I mean ... can anyone treat with a dragon – and survive?”

Hamish laughed. “You're going to become a legend. King Rane Rane'son d'Nor, the only man who dared to Bind a dragon to the service of his daughter. You should know, dragons are actually very gentle creatures ... until someone tries to tell them what to do. They kill those who would try to enslave them.”

Hamish stood up, as best as he could with the low ceiling. “It's a good thing you asked me to offer my Blade to Diamari, and not the dragon.”

Rane took half a step back, and then held out a purse.

“Do you want to accompany me to my Ambassador's residence as my Honor Guard, or do you wish to supervise the unloading of The Goddess as my servant? Or will you accept this payment for your services, and then present yourself to the King of Kings'Haven and ask permission to enter his harbor, and then call upon the High King, and then find yourself your own independent, and neutral accommodation, which I know you never have the coin for?”

2 Missing memories

Being invited to stay with The Brotherhood was either a bit of brilliance on their part, or yet another one of his disasters. They were clearly shocked to hear he knew his existence in The World was not to pass a test and then join The Gods. He should have chosen something gentler to speak about after his first meal as their guest.

You used to be so good with your words – before the dragon ate you.

Pixx! Where are you? Hamish asked.

Are you a dragon or a sheep, little brother?

Hamish excused himself from the Master's presence and put on his fur-lined boots and his sealskin-sheepskin double great-coat. He could walk through a waterfall and stay dry, or sleep in a snowbank and stay warm. He might have to go outside to sense Pixx, and he didn't want anyone to think it odd.

Although the people of the Kings'Haven were not short, they seemed to like walking through their winter-passages stooped. They also had not planned on anyone being clever enough to bring his outer-clothes with him, rather than leave them at the winter-door he regularly used. Hamish entered the public-room to silence, and then laughter.

You are a wonder to behold, little brother.

He saw Pixx sitting at a table next to the real fire. She was with ...

Hamish turned around to take off his boots and find a place for his great-coat near the door. He felt a hand on his back, through his thin shirt.

“I'm not supposed to be here ... but I just wanted to see you ... before ...” Diamari pulled his head to hers, kissed him, and then disappeared.

Hamish wiggled his toes. He couldn't stand wearing shoes anymore. He loosened the lacings on his shirt. It was too hot inside. And then there was the problem he'd been having every time he thought of Diamari ... a problem he hadn't had in years. He

turned to face Pixx, who was standing on her chair, so that she was almost as tall as his shoulder.

“You're looking good, little brother. You should have warned me.”

“You're ... turn around for me,” Hamish asked. Just before winter had set in he'd tried to give Pixx the Elements of his body while he went off to the Highlands to talk with Lyze. But there wasn't enough Magic beyond The Edge of The World for him to sustain his stay for the winter, and he'd had come back to himself. He'd felt bad about stealing Pixx's body, but had then managed to do what he could to give her a body of her own.

Pixx was now about as tall as Otter, but much sligher. She was no longer a clear glass figurine, and was in every way a ...

I am completely normal, which is more than can be said about you, dragon.

“You're skin ... the color ...”

“You left me as white as yourself, but I've been sleeping in a ring of Globes ...” ... *and I haven't been burning myself as you have.*

“Actually,” Hamish said, as he kissed the Lady Pixx's hand, “I think the dragon solved that problem.”

Pixx snatched her hand away. “You haven't eaten another whale, have you? That was disgusting – the poor thing was still alive ...”

“They don't have necks to break, and the dragon only chewed through the blubber so he could use his venom.”

“It was twice as big as you!”

“Eating it was your idea. The dragon would have been satisfied with a moose or two. You wanted to feed just as much as the dragon did.”

“You left me an abused body. I only went with you to make sure you took care of yourself. I'm a vegetarian now. I am to be The Goddess of Life. I can't eat my own children.”

Hamish smiled. Pixx had once been the bloodthirsty thorn in the side of the gentle dragon. “And how is your Captain?”

“They decided he must be Presented to The Gods if he is to become a Captain of a Ship of The Fleet. He's been off in Seclusion for the last two weeks. Same place the Princess is supposed to be. I don't see why The Gods don't want people to live normally before they are Presented. Life doesn't happen when people don't ...” *How long have you ...?*

Hamish turned bright red.

What happened to you on the way back from your visit to the Highlands? There is a hole in your memories. You're different, and I don't just mean between your legs.

For a Goddess, you can be awfully crude.

“I am The Goddess of Fucking, little brother, and you can't fuck if your cock won't crow.”

Hamish burst out laughing, and knew all the faces within hearing were turning red.

“I hope you've been putting these stirrings to good use ...” ... *don't tell me you've been saving yourself for the Princess. Your Mistress Afreya would be much more suitable, or even your little Otter who shares your bed.*

“She has bad dreams about having her tail chopped off ...”

“I have those same dreams – because they are my memories ...”

“The dragon freed you from your tail. You are a woman now, and not a beast.”

You don't have to be so proud of yourself.

“You are too perfect to be anything other than proud of, Lady Pixx.”

I am the Magic that made you dragon ...

And I am the Magic that made you, little sister.

Although your enlightened daughter might think you are also a Pixie like I am, Pixx said with a smile, *she is wrong. I am the first of my people. You are a dragon.*

“I wonder if The Underworld is ready to be invaded by an army of your kind?” Hamish mused.

“Pixies are too nice to invade anything, and until you get busy and make some more of me, we're not an army.”

“If I felt the need to maintain the element of surprise, for strategic reasons concerning The Others, could I keep a secret from you?” Hamish asked.

Pixx stopped smiling. “We should drink something ... the Master here is not bad – not as good as you, but he doesn't have your command over Water, does he?”

Hamish had never used Magic when brewing ...

... you never use Magic. Magic uses you.

The only way I can keep a secret from you, and The Oracles themselves, is if I don't remember it.

You went into The Underworld didn't you? You Bound the other three ... Earth, and Air, and even Fire ... they gave themselves over to you. It's not just your mother,

Water, and my naive sleeping-self of Life anymore, is it? You are The Lord of The Five Elements ...

“There is no Lord over The Five Elements!” Hamish snapped. “Don't even think there ever could be, or will be. The dragon will not allow it! The Five Elements are free and independent. Their only Union is that which is more than themselves – Magic. Magic will allow no interference with The Five Elements!”

Pixx slide out of her chair, and dropped to a knee and bowed her head. “I am sorry, Master, I misspoke ...”

“No, you didn't. You're trying to do what you think you must do – watch over me. You're still sure I'm going to go ... bad, aren't you?”

You are a dragon. You killed me once.

“That dragon is gone. The Nightlord killed it. There is no war between the Immortals and the mortals. We now have a common enemy.”

If this is true, then why would you need to keep secrets from those who exist to help you? I am all that is left of The Oracle of Life. I am one of your Five Elements. I am the Source of the Magic that you are. Why would you try to hide something from me – when you exist to defend me?

“I don't actually know,” Hamish said. “On the way back from the Highlands ... something happened which I chose to forget. I have to trust myself, and believe that I acted for a good reason.”

Pixx climbed back into her chair. “You're up to your dragon-tricks. I don't like it.”

“Whatever happened,” Hamish said, “it left the dragon with a hunger so fierce he could eat a creature twice his size, and only have enough left over to give you your beautiful body.”

“I am not a product of your indigestion ...”

“Did I ever tell you how all that greasy whale came out the other end?”

“Everyone in C'Holm could smell it ...”

“Think of it as the dragon marking his territory.”

You then ate a Globe ...

The dragon ate the tail of Life, and one of the Globes of Earth. He's bigger than you – and the light of the Globes isn't enough for him. Hamish looked at Pixx. “You know, you're like a plant – you can grow the Magic in your body from the light of the Globes.”

“And you still are the carnivore that can only survive by eating the flesh of Magic.”

Hamish smiled. “And I returned with a ... an ...?”

“A cock that crows?”

“An embarrassing adolescent problem around beautiful women.”

“At least all these beautiful boys are safe around you ...”

“More or less ...”

Pixx laughed with her wonderful, tinkling voice. “Are you trying to prove you really are The Lord Binding of the Covenant? Celibacy is a crime – against me. You dishonor me when you don't embrace your resurrection ... maybe we should ...?”

“I don't think your Captain ...”

“He enjoyed your body – when it looked like ... me. He still knew it was you – and didn't mind.”

Hamish laughed. “Don't you think I should learn to crawl before I try running?”

“Your daughter Lyze proves you know how to walk – you just get to get back on your feet. How about the girl who keeps wondering if she should interrupt us and offer us something to drink?”

Hamish didn't turn around. “How about you staying out of it?”

“And have you turn into one of those demented dragons that can't do anything with maidens other than fly off with them ... and eat them?”

Hamish turned around and signaled for two drinks. “You know ... I never thought of eating them – I bet they taste even better than whale.”

“So you think you decided to forget something of such importance that we can only enjoy it ... when comes back as a surprise?” Pixx asked.

“Does that worry you?”

“More than anything you've ever done, dragon.”

“I like it. It gives living an Edge.”

“The coming of The Union is not a Game, dragon. You can not play for the thrill of your moves – you have to play to win. The Union must be destroyed. It must not be toyed with. They are not going to wait until you have pulled your snout out of your ass and found your tail.”

“Speaking of tails,” Hamish said as he raised his pot and risked the aroma. “Have you noticed the dragon has been watching over you?”

His tongue braved a taste, and was rewarded. He glance back to the girl who was hiding behind the counter. He knew this was her work, and not her Master's. He gave Pixx a moment to enjoy her pot, and moved to the counter so he could share The God's First Drop with it's creator.

He watched as she raised the pot to her lips, knowing she had not tasted her work - and had risked serving it on it's nose alone.

"Hold it in your mouth," Hamish said. He took the girl's hand in his, and thought to her to close her eyes as he took a sip of his own.

Every sensation of the brew filled him. Everything that was beyond words, that didn't require words, he passed though his finger-tips. He felt the echo of the girls sensations match his own. Neither of them could express the experience – but they they both knew it was the same.

Hamish then sorted through her memories, and they both reviewed the steps she had followed to achieve her success. Every flavor, every texture, every odor, every color, every feature had a source, and they both knew them all. When he opened his eyes, she was looking at him. "Is that the Mind Voice? You told me everything I did, and why it worked."

"Yes ... sometimes words are not enough to explain ... something as good as this." Hamish let go of her hand a took another long pull. He'd been drinking his own work for so long that he'd forgotten what a finished dark brew could taste like on it's own. His own work was an evolving series of ingredients, and unfinished products, and known errors needing to be fixed in the next batch. By the time his own product was finished, he knew it inside-out, and couldn't simply enjoy it.

"Can you ... can you show me what I did wrong ... with everything else I've done?"

"I doubt you've had that many failures." He glanced back to Pixx, but she was gone. *I know what your up to.*

I'm not listening – I respect your privacy.

"Can you come with me right now?" The girl asked. "You won't have time to come back."

Hamish glanced to the cellar door, and then looked at the girl. "The Mind Voice only works if I'm touching you."

She took his hand. "My fiancé won't mind. Everyone knows you're safe."

3 No respect

When Hamish came down from his room to the Small Hall of The Brotherhood, Pixx was already eating. She had a table to herself, with an empty space across from her. Brothers ate silently everywhere else.

You came in just before Morning Prayers, Pixx thought to him. You should have joined us in the Great Hall.

Us? Hamish asked.

You did manage to loose the Mistress of The Brotherhood last summer, didn't you? Pixx asked, as she handed him one of her boiled eggs. *And they do follow The Old Ways here, remember?*

You lead The Brothers in their Prayers?

Does it shock you that I am recognized for what I am? Are you threatened by my acting without your permission? Hamish popped the egg into his mouth, and swallowed it whole. Pixx burst out laughing, and then put her hand over her mouth quickly. *You are beautiful, my little dragon. You do not have to remind me that you could swallow me without chewing.*

I always egg boiled eggs that way.

Pixx snickered between her fingers. *You can't lie to me. And if you want another egg, you'll have to fetch it yourself, since you managed to forget your little Otter.*

Hamish picked up half a dozen eggs, two loaves of heavy bread, and the hunks of cheese and smoked bacon that had been neglected. He went back for the jug of still warm creamy milk.

Worked up a bit of an appetite last night? Pixx asked with a raised eyebrow.

I pushed The Goddess harder than I should have.

There is nothing in The Goddess to 'push', Pixx chastised. She is merely a skin you wear.

Does it sit comfortably with you – being accepted as The Goddess of Life?

You ask as if you think it shouldn't.

Hamish got stuck into his food, and waited for an answer. Fresh milk in the middle of winter was a real luxury – a gift to The Brotherhood even a King could not afford.

Becoming The Goddess of Life feels ... right. I was not expecting it to ... but I am slowly purging the dragon from within me. I am what I am. I am not you.

Hamish stopped Pixx's gaze, and smiled. *When it comes time to awaken the rest of your kind – it may be better for you to do it, rather than me. We don't need little dragons which all will have to have their tails docked ...*

I cannot give birth to all of my kind, Pixx interrupted, unless you are able, and willing to do your part.

Hamish concentrated on tearing off a hunk of the bacon.

You know, Jeruska will never forget the night you just gave her. A simple tumble would have been less impressive. Sharing the understanding of every brew in the cellar ... you've ruined her farmer's chances of ever being enough for her.

Hamish looked at Pixx for a moment, and realized she was correct in both her comments.

“So, I am to come with you to Changeling next summer, rather than accompanying my Captain to Riversea?” Pixx asked. There was some tension in her voice, and even more in her thoughts. None of The Brothers turned to the interruption. Hamish knew they were aware Pixx and he were conversing with the Mind Voice. He should have observed their silent meal ...

To late now.

All the ... the history you and I have together ... I can recreate it with another shard of The Oracle of Life, Hamish thought to Pixx. You do not have to become the seed of the Rebirth of The Goddess of Life.

You do not think I am worthy ...

I think you are more than worthy - that's the problem. The Oracles ... I don't think they are ... alive on their own - they are just the body in which the Immortals live.

I was wrong when I told you that I did not want to become a fat lump destined to be nothing more than host for some Immortal parasites ...

This time Hamish had to cover his mouth to stifle the laughter.

That was back when I had to much of you in me. But these last few months, as the Brothers, and all of Kings'Haven, and the nearby Kingdoms, have come to me ... I have learned what it is that I really am. I have outgrown your fear of serving, and have come to understand that I truly am The Rebirth of The Oracle of Life. I am myself – an individual self ... and I will be ... the mother to all my people you give life to - inside my body. I am ... when I become completely what I am meant to be ... I will be a World, and not just an individual.

Hamish stopped chewing. He didn't want to choke.

He knew Pixx was right. She would become one of the five ... copies? Or were they the five separate versions of the Underworld?

He looked around the room at all the Brothers. They were all finished eating, but were not going to leave when they were listening to a conversation they could not hear.

I don't want you to come with me to Changeling until I have seen what is there. You are too important – especially if you are sure about ... about what your sure about. Hamish held up his hand to stop Pixx from protesting. One thousand years ago, the dragon killed you. All the pieces of you have stayed dead. It may be that the site of The Oracle is still poisoned. Next summer I'll go to Changeling and ... and see what's still there. Then we'll met in Riversea ... and you can decide what you want to do next. Your future is for you to decide. I am merely here to insure that you survive, and are able to implement your decisions.

“You will play the hero, even when this is not your war,” Pixx said. *You are here to fight The Union. You are not here to decide the future of The Goddess of Life.*

If I were the dragon that killed you, I would have made sure Life would never have the ability to ... to live on your grave. Hamish waited until he was sure Pixx understood what he meant. *Whatever the first dragon did – it won't be easy to undo. It's going to require ... everything you are not.*

Pixx looked at him, and then he knew she understood.

“You won't do anyone any good - if you're dead!” She gasped.

Hamish swallowed his last egg. He was just as hungry as when he started eating. “It's you that The World cannot exist without, Milady Pixx of Life.”

Pixx suddenly slid off her bench. “Where's your sword. Aren't you supposed to be married to it?”

“It's a Blade, and I am not a Blademaster.”

“Don't be stupid. Go fetch it and follow me. You need to meet someone.”

In his room Hamish could feel Pixx moving towards where he knew the residence of the Ambassador of Nor'Isle was. He didn't bother with shoes or a jacket.

Pixx used her size, and her prestige, to move quickly through the crowded narrow passageways. People froze when they saw Hamish, and he had push his way past them as gently as possible. He caught up with her when he suddenly found himself in a crowded public room, that went silent.

Seventeen men were standing in a group facing Pixx, and watched by an audience of forty-six. The master and two girls were behind the counter. The tables and their benches formed a series of barriers between him and Pixx. The seventeen men had Blades!

Hamish stood in front of Pixx, hands at his side, Blade strapped over his shoulder in it's Rest. Two men fell at his sudden appearance, and the rest were pushed against the wall. Even Pixx jumped backwards.

Prince Cegezed, son of King Cegget d'Nor, has come to challenge his half-brother, King Rane, for the right to rule Nor'Isle. Pixx informed him.

Hamish didn't move. He knew the story of Rane and his step-father who had claimed the throne after Queen Balta d'Nor had died. Rane had challenged the man who should only have been regent in the name of Rane's older sister. Now the son of the usurper was going to challenge the man who had kept the crown for himself.

What does this have to do with me? Hamish asked Pixx.

“Stand aside, Highlander, this has nothing to do with you. I am Cegezed, son of Cegget, the last rightful King of Nor'Isle. I have come to challenge the usurper Rane Rane'son, who killed my father. This is the way of The Islands, and you have no right to interfere.”

Hamish recognized the face. It had been amongst those who had attacked Falkyr Fhar'son in Newton. It had been amongst those who had chased after him the night of the Leave Taking. It had been watching the attack on Diamari a few months ago. Hamish took a step back, and pushed the table behind him away. Pixx was standing on the table. *There is someone else I would like you to meet ...*

“If you were the King of Nor'Isle, would you make me as welcome as Rane Rane'son has?” Hamish asked.

“You, and your kind, have no place in Nor'Isle or C'Holm!”

Play nicely, little dragon, because you do need your home in Nor'Isle to watch for the coming of The Others.

Did you provoke this?

I hear peoples problems, and do what I can to help them. This is your problem.

Hamish commanded the middle of the room. There were no exits behind Cegezed and his men.

"I intend to live in Nor'Isle whenever I feel the need to, for as long as I feel the need to," Hamish said quietly. "If you wish to challenge Rane, you'll find the only way is by getting past me, here and now, and in the future."

He drew his Blade and held it poised in the formal opening for a Pass of Blades. *I would recommend all of you act together; for only in a mass attack will any of you get past me alive.*

"Stop this disgrace, Assassin!" Someone shouted from behind Hamish. "This is not The Way of The Blade!"

Hamish didn't have to turn around to sense the presence of a Blademaster and his Apprentice. He slide his Blade back into it's Rest, and then extended his scales and claws. He had tried to play nice.

"I need a friend to rule in Nor'Isle, and you are not my friend. You continually interfere in what I must do to defend The World and The Underworld ..." People were fleeing from the public room. The dragon's head bumped into the ceiling, and he crouched over Cegezed. His words were punctuated with bits of fire and pungent black smoke.

"Beast! Do you recognize this sword? It killed you once!" The voice belonged to the Blademaster behind him.

The dragon leaned very close to Cegezed, and reflected the fear he radiated back into the man. *The next time we meet, I will feed upon your flesh.*

He slowly turned to face the Blademaster, who held a burnt and pitted broadsword ... that he'd once held when he'd killed the Baron of Bari. But it hadn't been him – he'd been somewhere else at the time, and had only been watching. He wondered ...

The dragon only saw a threat – and screamed in anger. The Blademaster was tossed across the room and slammed into a wall. The dragon pounced, his claws nearly severing the Blademaster's arms as he grabbed the offending sword. He lashed his tail against the Assistant, who's Blade bounced off his scales, knocking him over several tables.

Nothing dared move.

Hamish shrank back to his normal size, and pulled in his scales and claws. He shook off the shreds of his clothes. He looked at The Sword in his hands. It was as ugly as he remembered it. He touched the pitted and scarred Edge, and bright red blood welled out of his thumb.

What have you done? Pixx asked. She was trembling.

Hamish turned around, and noticed Cegezed and his men were still present, standing wide-eyed. A drop of his blood fell on the floor, and burst into flames. He watched, fascinated. Then he closed the cut on his thumb, as another drop set a bench on fire.

Dragon ...

“I was taught that a Blademaster never talking from behind his Blade. He either spoke, or drew he weapon and used it.” Hamish looked at Cegezed. “Are you ready to die, or would you like to leave this room?”

“You killed them,” Pixx said, as the room cleared.

Hamish turned to the crumpled Blademaster, and dipped his finger into the puddle of blood forming around his wrists. He Tasted it, and was filled with one thousand years of serving The Blade, and the styles of every Champion of the Order that he had trained. He embraced the memories as he'd never done before, and felt his body reform. One thousand years of training and discipline became part of what he was.

He put his hands on the Blademaster's head, and felt his own skull crack, and then heal. He felt several ribs that had hit a bench break, and then heal. He closed the lacerations on the Blademaster's wrists, without opening his own veins. His blood was still too angry to risk spilling. The cuts of the dragons claws were left as raised red scars.

He took several deep breaths, and forced his stomach to obey. It always felt real – because the healing was real.

He stood up slowly, and turned to Pixx. “That one can't die – he's an Immortal.”

Pixx doubled over, and lost her breakfast. *I felt that ...*

Hamish moved over to the Assistant, and Tasted the blood leaking from a nastily broken arm ... and Knew the life of a young man struggling to become a Blademaster. He then imagined a Whitestone wall around the two of them, a place of silence where Pixx couldn't follow. He fixed a dislocated shoulder and the broken arm.

He took a moment to settle his stomach once again. Then he stood up, and let his wall evaporate.

“Don't ever do that again, dragon!” Pixx hissed from right next to him. She was standing on a table, and could look directly at him. “Anywhere you go, I go. Anything you suffer, I suffer. Anything you hide – I do not trust!”

“Sorry ... I was ...”

“I'd already chucked my guts – all you had to do was warn me. I know what healing feels like.”

“Sorry ... I keep forgetting that you're Listening to everything I do.”

“I'm not Listening to you, dragon. I am one with you – you ate part of me, remember?”

Hamish looked at Pixx for a moment. He was still settling his memories, as well as his stomach. *So I don't have to explain anything to you – about who these two are, or who I thought they were?*

I am now the Blademaster that you are. Pixx reached out her hand towards the Sword. She didn't touch The Edge. *I understand your actions, dragon. I even congratulate you on your restraint. You left them both alive, and you gave those who would trouble King Rane something to remember; without eating anyone.*

Hamish looked at the two men who were slowly attempting to stand, and then at the empty room filled with splintered tales and benches. He noticed the Blademaster was reaching for The Sword Hamish had dropped when he'd moved towards the Assistant. He opened his hand, and The Sword jumped into it.

He now knew this was The Sword of Santos a'Mann, The First Champion of The Order of Blademasters. It was the weapon which had killed Drey Gorn, the first dragon, the man who had destroyed The Oracle of Life, the one who had be created to save the morals from the Immortals ... but then had not died.

Hamish watched the Assistant recover his Blade, and then move in front of his Master, and then settle himself into the formal defensive pose. Hamish now knew it was called The Wall Poise. He'd once been shown the position, but not all the possible responses to all the possible attacks. d'Mond was an Assistant of The Blade. He'd been passed over to on his first attempt to make Associate, and in the appraisal of Hamish's new memories would never make the final step to Blademaster.

He looked at Blademaster Tino, and knew the man felt there had been no one deserving of the title of Blademaster since Santos a'Mann himself. “I should warn

both of you that I have Tasted both of you - I have Known all your memories. Neither of you have any secrets from me, or Lady Pixx – for she knows everything in my mind.”

He stabbed the tip of The Sword into a plank of wood so that it would stand next to him, out of his grip. “I am sorry, Blademaster Tino, that my appearance frightened you. You are the only person I have ever met who has actually seen the wild dragons of the Immortals, and the man who is now known as the dragon. I want you to know that I am neither a wild dragon, nor am I what Drey Gorn was.”

He caught something that flashed through the Blademaster's mind. “You will find anyone whom The Sword has Tasted can call it. It's just that your Champions leave few men living. The Binding of Blade and Champion is born when they accept their Duty - and they feed The Edge with their own blood. I am not your new Santos a'Mann. I am not the new incarnation of The Champion of The Order of Blademasters.”

Hamish wasn't sure if either Blademaster or Apprentice were registering his words – they were too deep in The No-Thought. “I have no disputes with anyone in The World or The Underworld. I am solely here to defend all that we are from The Union. The only thing I would ask of you and your Order is that you do not wave that Sword at me, for as you know – it can cut me. Like all living things - I will not allow myself to be killed.”

He looked over the shoulder of d'Mond to Tino. “You may be an Immortal, but you do not have the Healing ability of a Dragonslayer – my breath will kill you, my blood will burn you, my skin will poison you, my claws will cut you ...” ... *and my Mind Voice always knows where you are, and what you are thinking – and can tell your heart to stop beating when ever I wish.*

“I want you both to understand that there is nothing you can do to stop me with your Blades, or other martial skills. I want you both to understand that there is no need for either of you to feel the need to resort to your skills. All you need to do is loosen your tongues. If I had wanted to hurt either of you, you would be dead. Instead I took your injuries into myself, and healed myself.”

Both Tino and d'Mond were well into the relaxation breathing, and were not ready to actually relax. Hamish turned to Pixx. “I think we should go on to the Ambassador's residence. I need to find some clothes ...”

Pixx gave him a good looking over, and he could feel what she was feeling, which was exactly what he didn't want to feel. She laughed as he began to color. *Nothing gets the blood up for a bit of lusting like a bit of a fight - eh, my mighty dragon?*

You know, I am never going to let you introduce me to anyone again? Never, ever. Your friends don't play nice at all.

“Your Sword ... ?” Pixx held out the Blade he was to present to Diamari. When he'd expanded into the dragon, he'd broken the shoulder strap.

“It's a Blade,” Hamish corrected once again. “The Sword of Santos a'Mann is a sword. They are completely different. One is a thing of elegance and honor. The other is not.”

Do you really want to leave it ...

Blademaster Tino is The Swordbearer of The Champion of The Order. It's his duty to carry The Sword of Santos a'Mann – now that it's been recovered from The Nighlord.

Neither turned around at the sound of feet following after them.

4 Lessons of the Blademaster

“What happened to you? Is anyone hurt? We heard you'd been attacked – we were just coming to help.”

“No one has been hurt,” Hamish reassured King Rane and the Ambassador. “I was going to start a fight with your half-brother, but the Blademaster ... I should introduce Blademaster Tino and Assistant Blade d'Mond ...”

“Where are your clothes?” Rane asked.

“After Blademaster Tino stopped me from fighting with Cegezed and his sixteen men – he thought such an act was that of an Assassin - rather than a follower of the Blade ... the dragon took The Sword of Santos a'Mann from the Blademaster ... it's the weapon The Nightlord used to kill the last dragon ... not something that should be waved about amongst friends.”

Rane looked to Pixx for an explanation.

“Perhaps the Ambassador could show you some of the clothes the Princess Diamari has had made for you,” Pixx told Hamish. “I would recommend the plain black pants and one of the white shirts without any embroidery – the other items are for her moment before The Gods. It would not do for you to damage them before their time.”

Hamish didn't think clothes were the most important thing he needed to deal with. Fighting in winter was prohibited, everywhere. Summer was the time for settling differences. Winter was the time for walking away ... and remembering. He needed to make sure no one, especially Pixx, tried to accept the blame for what he'd done.

I put you in front of Cegezed ... she thought to him.

I belong in front of you, whenever anyone threatens you. Accept it. How I protect you is my choice, and the consequences are mine. You are The Goddess of Life and are blameless.

I won't ...

I won't get dressed if you attempt to hide my responsibility for my actions.

Pixx burst out laughing. *And I will help those two girls peaking from the pantry, and those two Guardsmen licking their lips, ravish your beautiful body if you run around naked much longer.*

Hamish didn't need to take his eyes off of Pixx. He knew he was defeated yet again. *You don't fight fair.*

No one who dares to fight a dragon can afford to fight fair.

Somehow Pixx even managed to get the two giggling peepers included into the party sent upstairs to dress him. That meant he had to close his mind to all the thoughts around him, and he couldn't try to follow her tricks. It also meant that simply putting on a pair of pants and a shirt took a frustrating amount of time. He really didn't need a bath, and to have his hair washed and combed and braided. He didn't have that much of Tino's and d'Mond's blood on him. But no one could defeat the conspiracies of a Goddess.

When he was allowed to return downstairs, the King of Kings'Haven had arrived with a troop of The Guard, and everyone was settling into a midday meal. Hamish loved buffets. He could taste everything by the handful before seeing how much he could get onto his plates. It was always good when no one tried to make speeches before eating. Even Pixx did nothing more than tell him that the Princess knew how to dress a man.

When Hamish was ready to go back for another helping of some of the things he'd missed the first few trips, Pixx told him, *leave some space for dinner. It's time for your butt to get whacked.*

It seemed their host from Kings'Haven was standing, and waiting to speak.

"It's extremely rare for someone in my position to have to deal with a situation as serious as this morning's behavior, with people as esteemed as yourselves. I am looking forward to proving to my people of Kings'Haven, and all of C'Holm, that our law applies to everyone, and not just the usual drunks and troublemakers."

The King turned to Rane, who was sitting next to him. "The domestic dispute within your family, Rane Rane'son, has gone on long enough – and must not be allowed to violate The Peace of Winter. Unfortunately, your idiot half-brother has managed to run off into a bit of a storm, and I'll not risk my men's lives to bring him back. He can hide until summer if he wants. It will only make his situation worse. You, Rane Rane'son, should have known better than to travel without an appropriate

guard. Kings are never simply fathers with daughters. Your brazen behavior provoked the idiot, but until you both can be dealt with together, I will say no more.”

The King turned to Pixx and Hamish. “Lady Pixx, it is not my place to tell a Goddess how to behave, but I am sure you are aware that it is never good to take sides in a family squabble. I would have thought you would have had other, more noble causes to champion.”

Pixx stayed quiet and contrite.

“Sri Altan, I have never quite understood who you think you are, nor have I believed the stories of your pet dragon. However, something managed to destroy Master Tomash's public room so thoroughly that I doubt if one man could do it on his own. Since you seem to have managed not to kill anyone, and heal those whom you injured to their satisfaction, I would ask you to personally repair the property you damaged, except none of those who witnessed your actions want you to come anywhere near them.”

The King paused, and Hamish looked up, while Pixx grabbed his hand under the table. “For someone who claims to be our Defender, and who says he is only acting for the good of The World - and not for his own self-interest, I hope you can understand what it means when you only leave a trail of fear and distrust behind you.”

Pixx squeezed his hand, but didn't have to tell him to keep his mouth closed.

“I do not intend to violate The Peace of Winter with any physical acts of punishment for any of you,” the King concluded. “Instead I would ask you all to raise a glass and salute the values of our society that have allowed us to survive for the last one thousand years.”

Everyone raised a glass to The Peace of Winter.

Hamish was escorted back to The Halls of The Brotherhood by ten of the Kings'Haven Guards, and the Blademaster and his Assistant. The Guards then conferred with The Master of The Brotherhood while Hamish retreated to his room, still followed by the Blademasters. d'Mond carried the naked Sword.

Hamish sat on the bed. Tino claimed the chair and gestured to d'Mond to place The Sword on the small, bare table. d'Mond was left to stand in the doorless entry. The Brotherhood did not believe in secrets. It was good that Hamish didn't need to sleep in the bed, as it would only accommodate midgets.

“How is it that you can steal a man's memories - his entire life, with a simple drop of blood?” The Blademaster asked.

Hamish had thought the Blademaster would ask about something else. “It’s not about the blood. In the past, The Knowing was exchanged with a kiss ... but even that was just a symbol ... the Knowing is an voluntary exchange between equals ... it’s the basis of the culture of the Double-Lived. It’s even more important than their ability to live in two forms.”

“I know about the exchange of the Knowing among the Changelings – but that’s not what you did to my Assistant and I.”

“You Immortals used to be able to separate your memories and your thought-identities from your bodies, and did so when ever you returned to your cities ... so it’s not hard for me to do what I did to you ...” Hamish turned to d’Mond. “The memories of mortals are much harder to isolate ... as they know themselves.”

“That doesn’t explain how you were ...”

“Magic.” Hamish knew the Blademaster wanted more, but also knew there wasn’t anymore to the explanation.

“If you had let us die, you would have had our Souls, as well as our memories,” the Blademaster said. Hamish guessed that he was being tested.

“When you accused me of being an Assassin, I immediately Rested my Blade. You did not show me the same respect. I therefore wanted to Know what sort of men you were. The last time I saw that Sword it was in the hands of a man who used the Mind Voice to convince everyone that he was me, while he killed the Assassin Baron of Bari of The Highlands,” Hamish said. “Once I had Tasted you, I knew you were not that man, and that there was no need to let you die. I had no need to tear your Soul into raw Life and add it to my own.”

“Only someone with the skills and arrogance of an Assassin would Rest his Blade when facing seventeen men in front ... and two behind,” the Blademaster said calmly. “You think a Blademaster should either talk, or act. With experience, you will learn that only works with men of intelligence and honor. It is an unfortunate fact that men without intelligence, or honor, have to be threatened, or even cut, in order to be persuaded.”

Hamish held the Blademasters eyes. “With experience you will learn the dragon has both intelligence and honor. Even without any experience of the dragon, you should know he has no need of Blades, or armor. I had hoped that you, and Cegezed, would have understood this – and responded to me as a man ... armed with nothing more than a Blade.”

“I have known both true dragons, and the dragonslayer Drey Gorn ...”

“They are both dead.”

“If you actually have my memories, and if you know anything of what it is to be one of the Immortal, then you know that Drey Gorn and Santos a'Mann are both equally alive in the body they share.”

Hamish closed his eyes, and ran backwards through his new memories, towards the time of the last dragons ... and quickly discovered the limits of the memories of the Immortals. “The bodies you Immortals wear were never meant to remember, were they? You had The Oracles, and your Mind Voice connections. You were meant to observe, and leave the remembering to ... to that which you are now cut off from. If you exiles are going to be of any use to me – you are going to need to be able to enter my library.”

Hamish felt the Blademaster stiffen, and d'Mond grow tense.

“You have actually entered our cities ...?”

“I did not give myself these five Marks of The Bound Elements,” Hamish said. “When we return to The World I can show you how to visit my library. It's not ... it's not the experience you once had when you left your body and became one with the Oracle, but it's a beginning. There are Doors from the library ... to the inside ... they will open again, soon, I promise you.”

“No!” d'Mond shouted, as he jumped between Hamish and his Master. Hamish could feel him try to take up The Sword, but it was too heavy.

“What are you doing?” Tino asked his Assistant.

“He's trying to seduce you! He's offering you exactly what you want! It's what the Goddess Pixx warned us he would do!”

Hamish floated The Sword so that it hung between d'Mond and himself, ready for the Assistant to grasp, and then dropped it. d'Mond bent to pick it up, but it was once again too heavy.

“Stop that!” the Blademaster hissed. “You either fight with honor, and with the Blade and nothing else, or you destroy everything you seek to defend. Magic is not a toy, and you must never use it as a weapon – because if you do, then it will be used against you. Santos a'Mann honored Drey Gorn as one Blademaster against another. They both held dragon-forged Blades, and nothing else. They both had the ability to cut each other to pieces, and called for no other assistance – they used none of your Magic. They fought until their abilities to heal themselves were exhausted.”

Hamish allowed d'Mond to pick up The Sword, and waited until he figured out that the only thing he could do with it was put it back on the table. "I remember a story of a young Lord who got his Lady with child, but was then warned the birth would kill his love. In a desperate act to prevent this, the Lord went on a quest to find the Elixir of Eternal Life hidden deep within The Underworld. It is not said that the Lord managed to open a Door, but he did kill the dragon that guarded the Door. The blood of the dragon burned his sword, and his body – and perfected both of them. The sword became ... The Sword we have before us. The Lord became an Immortal, but with a Black Soul, for his transformation was through violence and a death, rather than love and a birth."

Hamish paused for a moment.

"The Lord learned Immortality and indestructibility are not the same, and he barely managed to get his burned body back into The World. Had he not been discovered by a Healing Woman, he might have been condemned to an eternity of endless pain. With the help of the Healer, his body recovered. As soon as he was able, he rushed back to his Lady, bringing with him this Healer, hoping he was not to be too late for the impending birth. But the young woman who welcomed him home was not his wife - it was his daughter. His lady was the mature Queen upon his throne who now renounced him for abandoning her in her moment of need. In her anger the Queen drove the Lord and his mistress from his realm. In his contrition he allowed this ... for he knew he would outlive his Lady. But to remind his Lady of the sacrifice he had made attempting to help her, he gave his daughter a drink of wine, into which he'd added some of his blood."

Hamish paused again.

"In this act of spite, the Nightlord created the Black Princess, for her Soul was not immortalized with love and mutual consent. When the Healer tried to return to her home, the Nighlord claimed her forever as The Mistress, with an act of betrayal - leaving her with an Immortal Black Soul. From this union, and whatever love existed within it, a son was born – an impossible gift, for Immortals are usually childless. The High Prince of The Kingdoms has a White Soul since he was a birth, blessed of Life. As the first son of the Nightlord, he was the favorite ... until the aging, mortal Queen seduced him."

"In the blindness of his love, the High Prince shared himself completely with the Queen, and from their two Immortal White Souls the Prince of The Kingdoms was

born. The Nightlord would have killed the High Prince in revenge for giving Immortality, and a child, to the Queen, but the Mistress intervened and protected her son. At some point, the Nightlord and the Mistress temporarily recovered their love, and had a second child who is the Princess of the Kingdoms.”

“That is just a story told to children,” d'Mond mumbled.

“It is a story everyone in The World has grown up with ... for at least the last 500 years or so,” Hamish corrected. “It explains the origins of the seven Immortal Nightlords who now rule their seven Kingdoms with the kind of peace that can only be found in a family ... where everyone hates each other.”

“But it is not the true story of Drey Gorn ...” d'Mond argued.

“The only thing missing is the names the Nightlords might have once had,” Hamish said. “When the Nightlord killed one of the dragon guards of the five Doors into The Underworld, The Binding between what we see in The World, and all that is real - and yet unseen in The Underworld, was broken. Time was Broken. Time Began.”

“But ...”

“After one thousand years, The Sword still exists,” Hamish said. “It is an evidence that there was a beginning to the 500 years of The Time of Legends. It survived the next 300 years of The Time of Stories, and our modern 200 years of The Time of History. Just think of the memories which The Edge of that Sword must have ...”

Hamish looked at his thumb, with which he'd allowed the Sword to Know him. He faintly remembered the Fire of his birth, and then his baptism in The Blood of The Dragon ... and then nothing but gathering dust ... until Life again, and feeding upon the Baron of Bari. Hamish looked at d'Mond. “I once visited the Nightlord ... unannounced, by mistake – and the man I saw was as burned as his Sword.”

That stopped d'Mond. Tino was equally surprised. Everyone knew the Nightlords never showed themselves to anyone. Only the Black Princess, covered in full plate armor, ever left her Citadel – because she was The Champion of the Combined Army of The Seven Kingdoms.

“Let me tell you another story,” Hamish said. “This one is about is about a young scholar who faced the same problem as our young Lord – a wife with child facing a difficult birth. But, unlike the Lord who chose to confront The Gods and take from them what they had hidden, the scholar sat very still - and from his five senses and his

ability to reason, set about attempting to understand the intentions of The Gods. His immediate goal was to understand if the threat to his wife was actually a Test of The Gods, and if it was her Test, or his Test, or the child's Test, and then to understand how to succeed, or at least survive, The Test.”

“My Master and I are from The Empires, and we both Follow The Path,” d'Mond interrupted. “You do not need to challenge our faith with your version of The Life and Learning of The Sublime Guide.”

“I think we can all agree that the one who became known as The Sublime Guide learned The Five Truths - one from each of The Five Elements,” Hamish said. “From Fire, The Sublime Guide learned The Truth of the Existence of Suffering. From Life The Sublime Guide learned The Truth of the Source of Suffering. From Water The Sublime Guide learned The Truth of the Change that can bring an End to Suffering. From Air The Sublime Guide learned The Truth of that Transcendence is available to the living. And from Earth The Sublime Guide learned The Truth of The Path that can achieve this Transcendence.”

“And again, from The Five Elements, The Sublime Guide discovered the circular Path that can be started at any point. The Five parts of The Path are; from Air - Right Thought, from Earth - Right Action, from Fire – Right Emotion, from Life - Right Purpose, and from Water - Right Attitude.”

“The Enlightenment of The Sublime Guide did not save the life of his wife or child, but it did inspire him to share his insight with anyone who would listen. Before his mortal life ran it's natural course, The Sublime Guide traveled to the Kingdoms, and shared all he knew with the Nightlords. After the passing of The Sublime Guide, the Nightlord expanded, and structured, the simple words of The Sublime Guide as The Code of the Covenant.”

Hamish held up his hand to stop the protests of d'Mond. “At the beginning of The Time of Stories – about 400 years after the death of The Sublime Guide Santos a'Mann, another Santos a'Mann – The Champion of The Guards of The Auguries, also felt as insulted as you do, d'Mond, by what the Nightlord had done to the teachings of The Sublime Guide. He lead a vast army from The Empires towards The Kingdoms, and at the place now known as The Summer Gathering faced The Combined Army of The Seven Kingdoms. This second Santos a'Mann, and The Black Princess, had a choice between a vast slaughter ... and a Challenge between Champions. They agreed upon the latter, and exchanged Blades and met between the two armies, naked, and

equally close to death. The Black Princess is not a dragonslayer – her Immortality does not heal her as fast as she dies. The Sword she gave to Santos a'Mann ... was the dragon-blooded Sword of her father ... our relic.”

“The Blade the Black Princess received was of the new style now favored by your order ... and the outcome was inevitable. The elegance of The Blade beat the lethality of The Sword. The Black Princess gave The Sword of Santos a'Mann to the Blademaster who had trained him ... so that anyone who wanted to follow in the footsteps of The First Champion of The Order of Blademasters would have the appropriate weapon ... one that could not win.”

Hamish stopped for a moment. “It's those little acts of honor ... and arrogant - that inspire the dragon ... and the Cult of the Assassins.”

d'Mond opened his mouth, but then Blademaster Tino whispered, “I had forgotten ... I was there - I was the one ... but what I now remember ... it's all so different from what happened ... I don't know what is right anymore ... there are too many versions ... of the same history.”

“Everything you remember is right,” Hamish said gently. “And every version of history is equally untrue. All that we can learn from the past is that in the future we can either act like the young Lord, and take what we need – and know we will become corrupted, or we can act like the first Santos a'Mann, and allow our simple wisdom to be reformed into something we never intended, or we can act with the noble honor of the second Santos a'Mann ... and keep the peace by being tricked into dying on the field of battle.”

5 Binding his Blade to Princess Diamari Rane'da d'Nor

“It’s times like this that force me to acknowledge what I will have to answer to The Gods for,” Rane said. Hamish was standing close enough to know Rane hadn’t even been celebrating before the ceremony. He wasn’t a morbid drunk anyway.

“I was always taught that the regrets we have been thinking about all our lives – The Gods have already heard our explanations for,” the Ambassador said. “It’s those things we’ve completely forgotten that are going to trip us up.”

Hamish kept his mouth shut, and his mind closed. The two peepers and the Ambassador’s fussy manservant were dressing them. The outfit Diamari had created for him was requiring the groping of all three, leaving Rane and the Ambassador to struggle on their own.

“I have failed to ensure that the women around me ...” Rane had to pause to allow the Ambassador help untangle his arm. “My mother ... and my sister, have not received the respect that they should have. I will not allow it to continue to my daughter.”

“The fact that your mother, the good Queen Balta d’Nor, had terrible taste in men was not your fault,” the Ambassador argued. “Behind his beautiful face, your father hadn’t the brains to keep his fly fastened from one conquest to the next. The Queen was only trying to prove she was above petty jealousy, and could also play the game, when Cegget got his spawn into her. The usurper never loved our Queen ... he only loved her crown. You only did what you had to do. His time after the death of the Queen was as Regent. He was not a King. He was meant to step aside, and not for any children he might have fathered.”

“I acted in the name of my sister ... she is the first-born.”

“... and all of us on your Council acted in the name of Nor’Isle. We’d had your mother as our Queen, and it hadn’t gone well. We did not need to continue the pattern with your sister. Cegget wanted to weaken Rane’Da’s claim on the throne when he

married her to the Highlander Captain Grey. He knew we would never allow your sister's half-blood son to be our next King. It's bad enough having them as our Captains ... no offense meant to you, Prince Altan."

"None taken, Ambassador. When you can produce an Islander Captain half as good as Captain Grey, I'm sure your crew might consider serving under him. Until then, you'll have to accept Captain Greyling, who brought The Fleet back last summer and has the ... the love of a Goddess."

"Not to mention the double-edged friendship of a dragon," the Ambassador said, looking directly at Hamish.

"Are you prepared to accept the next Queen of Nor'Isle?" Hamish asked, not-so innocently.

The Ambassador burst out laughing. "Our Princess Dimari is not one to be accepted, she is one we simply try to survive. You do not need to worry about Her Gentleness – she is several steps ahead of all of us, and anyone who would oppose her."

The three dressing Hamish were now only undoing each others efforts. But it was fun watching Rane and the Ambassador struggle.

"I should thank you for sparing the life of my part-brother," Rane said to Hamish. "If you have the misfortune to meet him again, I don't want you to kill him."

"I don't want to hurt anyone, especially in winter, in anyplace where I am but a guest," Hamish said.

"Good. I reserve the right to kill him before my daughter becomes Queen. I will not allow anyone to be in a position to challenge the next Queen d'Nor. He is my blood, he is my enemy - I claim him for my Blade. His meat shall be the last meal my Blade feeds upon."

Hamish didn't say anything. The ancient words of those who Follow the Blade made the dragon seem gentle.

"Where is your Blade?" The Ambassador suddenly asked Hamish. "You are attending The Presentation To The Gods at the request of The Lady Pixx. You are to serve as her Defender, only symbolically we all hope you understand – but you can't do so naked."

"I ..." He'd forgotten that he was supposed to offer his Blade to Diamari ... and he wasn't even sure when he was supposed to make the offer ... and he wasn't sure where the Blade had gotten itself too ...

“The Blademaster Tino has offered his Assistant to serve as Swordbearer,” the Ambassador's manservant whispered. “The Goddess Pixx thought it might make people uncomfortable, in light of the recent events, if her Defender felt the need to bear arms as she allowed the youth of C'Holm to be Presented to Her.”

“I ... what?” Hamish asked.

“The Goddess Lady Pixx instructed us to allow her to explain your role in The Presentation To The Gods,” the Ambassador said. “We are just supposed to see that you are properly dressed.”

Hamish burst out laughing. “That does sound like Pixx. I will give you no trouble. I will save it all for her.”

“You know ...” Rane said slowly, “... if the Lady Pixx really is a Goddess ... you probably shouldn't speak about her that way.”

The dressers stepped away from Hamish, and he gave himself a looking-over in the mirror. He could only see parts of the outfit, since the mirror was meant for normal-sized people, but what he saw ... reminded him of the dandies he'd always watched from the wall before Madam Eloise made him go out and dance.

“The Lady Pixx is as much of The Goddess of Life as currently exists in The World,” Hamish said. “I think everyone should understand that it is perfectly safe to speak of her, and to her, in anyway, anyone, might choose. However, I doubt if flattery will gain anyone any favors, and I hope foul-words will not cause any enmity. She is ... much bigger than any one of us - or our opinions.”

Try to remember that, little dragon.

Hamish stepped away from the mirror and indicated that the King and the Ambassador where the ones who needed assistance.

You could have warned me that I wasn't here just to observe.

You should know by now, little dragon, that you and I cannot simply stand by ... and observe, ever. For the last one thousand years The World has slept in peace. Thanks to your stirring, that sleep is no longer possible. Thanks to your kindness, and wise foresight, The World does not have to face this time of trouble armed only with faith ... and Gods they cannot directly know ...

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Hamish asked, forgetting Pixx was ... somewhere else.

Playtime is over, Sri Altan, Defender of The World, The Underworld, and all that is within. For the first time in one thousand years, the youth of C'Holm, and all of The

World, do not announce their Adulthood to the ... the void. For the first time in one thousand years they speak directly to me - and I hear them. And you, my Defender ... my servant ... and my Beloved Master, witness The Binding the youth of The World give to me ... for you are the one that holds me to The Binding I give to them in return.

“If I asked you to affirm that you understand the consequences of this plan of action five separate times ...” Hamish spoke in the direction he knew Pixx was ...

“I affirm that I understand, and accept, the consequences of being, and being accepted as ... The Goddess of Life. I make this statement to my four sisters – The Goddess of Water, The Goddess of Fire, The Goddess of Earth, and The Goddess of Air, and to you – Our Lord Binding.”

Hamish took a deep breath and then turned to the five other people in the room - King Rane Rane'son, the Ambassador of Nor'Isle, the Ambassador's manservant, and the two of his maids. “If you are all ready, then we should go to The Goddess of Life, for she holds all of you close to her heart, for you have Stood Witness to her accepting herself as what she is.”

Actually, it seemed that everyone in Kings'Haven - and probably even all of C'Holm, had heard the words of Pixx. Hamish wondered - and hoped that all of the rest of The World had heard as well.

We are beyond The Edge of The World – my Voice is not as strong as yours.

That was probably for the best, Hamish realized. There wasn't much point in The Goddess announcing herself, when she wasn't actually there. Next year – next summer actually, for most places celebrated The Coming Of Age in midsummer rather than midwinter ...

That is what I was also thinking.

Hamish snorted. *You can't claim all my ideas.*

They are such rare things – someone must preserve them.

Hamish laughed, which turned a few heads away.

It is one thing to watch The Dragon Caller pass by, dressed as he should learn to dress at all times, and it is another thing to hear him talking to himself, Pixx chided.

Can you leave me in peace then? Hamish asked. *Walking and talking at the same time are hard for me.*

Hamish could hear Pixx laughing, somewhere ahead of them. *One last thing, my beautiful beast ... when you see the princess, I don't want you to slobber. Maintain some dignity. You are not a little puppy – you are a mighty dragon.*

Why was it that no one tormented little puppies, or cute Otters? Hamish wondered. Why did everyone only try to poke at big, dangerous dragons?

They entered a room ... a hall ... a natural cavern that was bigger than any Hamish had ever been in. He could see the ceiling, but he guessed no one else could see anything more than the tiny points of light that were the attached Globes. He tested the space with his dragon sonics, and realized he could fly comfortably.

“This is The Great Hall of C’Holm,” Rane said quietly. “This Hall is the reason C’Holm exists. It is warm in winter - without the need for Globes, cooled all year with flowing water, and always lit by the stars in the ceiling.”

Hamish was astounded. He’d never known the place existed.

He looked at the floor, and saw that it was flat, and polished smooth.

Many feet have walked here, for many thousands of years. They had entered near a raised dais. Pixx stood, motionless, glowing in the light of the Globes that surrounded her. *Your place is beside me, Master.*

“If you get caught up in things ...,” Rane said, as he held Hamish by the arm for a moment, “I would like to return to Nor’Isle by the end of the week, weather permitting ... Milord Sri Altan.”

Hamish nodded, and then gripped Rane by the shoulders, and bend down and kissed his forehead. He did the same to the Ambassador, while he kissed the two maids and the manservant on the lips.

When he got to the top of the dais he was about three times his own height over the gathered Islanders. He could now see the room was as big as he’d measured. He could sense everyone from Kings’Haven was present, as well as a large percentage of the peoples from the other three kingdoms on the island. These were three of the five kingdoms that did not favor High King t’Fhar – a rough audience, not the kind who would understand any changes to the traditional ... just the kind of audience he loved. Pixx dropped to her knees as he approached. Even when she was standing, she only reached his waist, which was a little small for those at the back.

He stopped just outside of the ring of Globes in their tall holders. He turned to the audience, and spoke so that every corner of the cavern could hear. “One thousand years ago The Goddess of Life was killed.”

Every Globe in the room went dark at his thought.

“One thousand years ago, Time Ended.”

It was absolutely black. Hamish could see the sparkling Life in everyone before him, and he could feel their rising panic. It was in the darkest times of winter when people felt the strongest needs. It was during the cold blackness when the ... not just the dragon, but also The Nightlords, stood guard ...

“For one thousand years, The World has survived upon its faith. For one thousand years, The World has lived in hope ...” The Globes on the distant ceiling blinked back bright, one at a time, as he spoke. “The World has lived in hope that The Goddess of Water, The Goddess of Fire, The Goddess of Earth, and the Goddess of Air were still watching over the lives of men. For one thousand years The World has lived in hope that The Gods had not forsaken us for our transgression against their sister.”

A Globe in the ring around Pixx shot up a pillar of solid blue light, and then the next a pillar of red, followed by a pillar of brown and a pillar of white. There was a gap in the columns of color, where one was missing.

“The Goddesses of the remaining four Elements have never left us, but until now they have kept their distance, and their silence. The Goddesses have never stopped caring for The World, for they need The World as much as The World needs them.”

Hamish reached out his hand, and called The Sword from wherever d'Mond was standing. “One thousand years ago, this Sword, in the hands of a dragon, killed The Goddess of Life. Today, there is something much more dangerous than this Sword, waiting way beyond the shores of C'holm.”

Hamish released The Sword of Santos a'Mann, and floated it across the cavern, until it disappeared into a dark corner.

“Today, all the creatures that were once feared, and all that is hidden in The Underworld, face the same future as The World does. The time has come for The World, and all that has been hidden in The Underworld, to put the past into the past, and face the future as we are meant to be – United.” Hamish pointed to the missing column, and it rose up in brilliant green.

“It is time for The Five Goddesses of The Five Elements to return to The World.”

Hamish moved behind the ring of Globes. The audience couldn't see him behind the lights. The five columns began to shimmer with all of the five colors, and then they flashed, blinding everyone ... and leaving Pixx alone, on her knees, head bowed toward the audience. She was surrounded by a ring of Globes, burning their usual cold white light.

“For the first time in one thousand years, The Goddess of Life is here to Witness her youth become Adults of C’Holm. Those that are not here tonight, are equally in her presence at their Presentations To The Gods, wherever they occur.”

When Lady Pixx stood, a second copy of her – The Goddess of Life, rose up around her, big enough for everyone to easily see. Within the shimmering image of The Goddess of Life, the small figure of The Lady Pixx glowed.

Hamish knew he needed someone brave to be the first to approach The Goddess to Present Themselves. He reached out to find Greyling, and urged him up the steps with a gentle thought. He suggested the others to prepare themselves as they had planned, quickly noticing that Diamari was supposed to be the final one to approach The Goddess.

Hamish knew the ceremony had, in the past, consisted of each of the Presented standing in the ring of Globes, and announcing themselves to the audience, in the hope The Gods would overhear. Hamish had Greyling stop just before entering the ring of Globes, and tell the gathered simply, “I am Greyling, son of Captain Grey of Nor’Isle.”

Greyling then stepped into The Grace of The Goddess of Life – into the ring of Globes and into the shimmering, towering image of Pixx, and everyone could see them exchange unheard, private words. The Lady Pixx within The Goddess of Life kissed Greyling, and handed him an unlit Globe. He stepped out of the ring, and out of the Grace, and turned again to the audience. “I am Captain Greyling, in service of the High King Ghent t’Fhar.”

Greyling kissed his Globe, and it flashed into brilliance. “The Goddess of Life, Sri Pixx, Knows me.”

As the next to be Presented began the process, Greyling came to stand behind Hamish. There were ninety youths from Kings’Haven, and similar numbers from Nor’Lac, Nor’Haven, and Kings’Bey waiting for their moment. It was a long ceremony, but no one noticed. Food and drink began to circulate, and people began to sit on the floor, husbanding their strength. Hamish could only stand silently, hungrily – which he had to ignore so that no one else felt it.

He didn’t understand the sequence of the people crossing for their moment with The Goddess. He’d expected each of the Kingdoms to be grouped together, or perhaps the most prestigious to go last – but it seemed everyone was equal in the eyes of The Goddess.

And then he saw her face rise up from the edge of the dais. With each of her upward steps, Hamish could feel his hearth beat. Everyone who had been sitting began to rise. Everyone who had been eating, or drinking, stopped. The cavern had been quiet, and now it was silent.

Diamari was wearing a plain white robe unlike he'd ever seen – it was exactly like that of all those who'd come before her. Her hair was loose, and hung down her back and over her breasts almost to her waist. She always had it braided and tied with ribbons, so he'd never ...

She paused at the top of the steps and turned to the silent, awed audience. “I am Diamari Rane'da of Nor'Isle.”

She then stepped into the silence of The Grace of The Goddess of Life. She seemed to speak forever with the Lady Pixx, because Hamish couldn't hold his breath that long. Pixx then kissed her on the lips, and handed her a Globe. Diamari stepped out of The Grace of The Goddess of Life.

“I am Princess Diamari Rane'da d'Nor. I am the next Queen of the Kingdom of Nor'Isle. I was offered The Sword of The Defender of The Union of The Five Elements, and am honored to have the importance of C'holm, and Nor'Isle, recognized by the one who has the task of defending all of us in The World and The Underworld.”

Diamari paused for a breath, while everyone else held theirs. “I cannot accept such special treatment for myself, for Nor'Isle, or for C'holm - when all of The World is equally deserving. I will accept no special treatment, because I am to be a Queen rather than a King. I do not need special favor just because there are others who might claim my title - others who would either refuse to aid The Defender, or sell themselves to win favor.”

Diamari tucked her long, blond hair behind each of her ears, and then swept her hands past the gold pendants that hung there. Some fluke of the light of all the Globes in the entire cavern seemed to flash upon the Crystals in her earrings, leaving everything else in momentary darkness.

“I am Princess Diamari Rane'da d'Nor, the next Queen of Nor'Isle. The Goddess of Life, Sri Pixx, Knows me. Sri Altan, Defender of The World, The Underworld, and all that is within, Knows me – and will remember me. The Dragon who defends us will remember my people in Nor'Isle, and all of us in C'holm. We humbly thank Sri Altan for the Offer of his Blade, and I assure everyone in C'holm that we do not need the Blade of the man ... when we have the love of The Dragon.”

The glowing super-image of The Goddess began to sparkle, just as Hamish saw Life itself. And then the sparkles dropped into Pixx, leaving her alone in the ring of Globes. Hamish felt an urging to go join her, and stepped into the ring for the first time. Pixx reached out and took his hand.

“When The World, The Underworld, and all that is within, has the love and protection of The Dragon, there is nothing we need to fear.” Hamish wasn't sure if the words had come from Diamari or Pixx.

“When The World, The Underworld, and all that is within, has the presence of The Goddesses of The Five Elements, there is nothing we need to fear,” Hamish said.

There was a moment of silence. Hamish realized everyone was kneeling. He glanced over to Diamari, who looked up and then stood.

“Sri Altan and Sri Pixx, all of the people of C’Holm thank you for being with us this Midwinter. Those of us who have become Adults of C’Holm tonight thank you for Witnessing our Presentation To The Gods. We would all like to ask you to please stay and eat, and drink, and dance with us to celebrate this moment.”

Hamish moved to escort Pixx, but Greyling beat him to it.

“Please make sure Sri Altan eats before he dances,” Pixx told Diamari. The dais was suddenly full of people congratulating each other. But there was a space around Hamish, Diamari, Pixx, and Greyling.

“If you would like to follow me, Milord ...” Diamari said, after curtsying to Pixx.

“You honor me, Princess,” Hamish said, after he bowed.

Diamari stopped, and slowly turned completely around. The two of them were in a quiet well, surrounded by the celebrations of three kingdoms.

“Everything is different now, isn't it?” She asked quietly. “I no longer exist ... there is only a title now – The Queen To Be ... I am ... completely alone ...”

Hamish took her arm and steered her towards the stairs. The food was on the far side of the cavern. “You are exactly what you were – you are whatever you want to be.”

“That's easy enough for you to say – you're special.”

At the bottom of the stairs people seemed to step back as they passed, which was a good thing. They would never have reached the food otherwise.

“What makes you think I am special?” Hamish asked.

“Come on, haven't you ever looked in a mirror?” Diamari asked. “Can't you see how everyone stands aside to let you pass?”

“Everything I saw when I last looked into a mirror was given to me by you,” Hamish said. “I should thank you for these clothes, and what you had them do to my hair – even if it’s a little complicated. And I should thank you for parting the crowd – for everyone can see it is I who am following you.”

Diamari laughed as they arrived at the food. The plates were tiny. He’d been hoping for an elbows on the table, endless line of dishes brought to him ...

“You really do have an answer for everything,” Diamari said. “You’re just like The Lady Sri Pixx says.”

Turning the Globes off and on hadn’t been all that hard. He knew it hadn’t taken all that much out of him, but he still felt a hunger ... he looked at Diamari and could feel the warmth of her body, he could smell ... it was as if she’d perfumed herself with drops of Silverwater ... and it made him hungry for ...

He needed to focus on food.

“Please excuse us, Princess.” Hamish recognized the voice of one of the peepers, but had his mouth full of something he was testing. “Your father, our King Rane Rane’son d’Nor, would like to offer you his congratulations before he retires for the evening.”

Diamari looked at Hamish. “Will you come with me?”

“This is your moment.”

“Will you wait here for me?”

“You are a Princess now, you only have to give the order.”

She reached up and pulled his ear down to her lips. “Real Princesses do not have to give orders. Especially not to gentlemen who have the Mind Voice.” *I want you to know me – as I told all of C’Holm you do.*

“I ...”

“I want the two of you to stay here with Sri Altan,” Diamari told the two maids. “Make sure he has whatever he needs. Do not let him out of your sight.”

Hamish just about choked as the two curtsied, and said demurely, “As you wish, Milady.”

He concentrated on testing dishes, but the two peepers never gave in to the giggles – they only turned a little red as they kept their hands over their mouths.

Someone dared to get between him and some seaweed-wrapped cubes of raw salmon ... Otter food, good for the fur.

“Hamish, there is someone I - as an adult responsible for my own actions, want you to meet,” Greyling said. He was living dangerously.

One of The Others suddenly stepped out from behind Greyling. “Hamish, this is my younger brother, Gresson.”

Everything was frozen, and yet Gresson shyly smiled. Hamish stopped his body at scales and claws ... trying not to destroy his beautiful clothes. Nothing was moving – he had stopped time ... and yet Gresson spoke, completely unaffected.

“It is an honor to meet you cousin Altan, Prince of Sarzana.”

“Who are you?”

“I must apologize for surprising you. I am Gresson, son of Captain Grey.”

Hamish felt his way around the room, searching for more of ... of things that did not belong ... things that were not right.

Nothing moved.

Nothing escaped his probing with every sense he had. He tested the shadows with his sonics, looking for darkness. He looked for holes in the pattern of Life, and found nothing ... no moving dead things. He forced the weak mist of Magic to reveal itself ... and found nothing strange ... except that he couldn't see the Magic in the creature in front of him.

“My father forbade me from meeting you, he was afraid you would do to me what he thinks you've done to my brother. I always felt he did both of us a dishonor for not believing we both can decide our own lives. I don't see how you seduced Greyling into following you ...”

“What's wrong with you?” Hamish asked. “Why aren't you frozen, why are you invisible? I can't see you – where is the Magic of The Five Elements within you?”

“I ...”

Hamish held up his claws, “You're one of The Others, aren't you?”

Gresson's white skin lost its last bit of color.

“I am not ... Greyling told me about ... please believe me ...”

“There is something wrong with you – you are not like everyone else.”

Gresson quickly glanced around. “What's happened ... why is everyone stuck?”

“I froze time,” Hamish said. “Nothing is moving because The Magic of The World has acted to give me time to think ... before I kill you.”

“Why ... what have I done?” Gresson tried to back away, but hit a wall of immobile people.

“Don't move,” Hamish hissed. He concentrated all of his senses on the creature in front of him. He'd never met one of The Others before. He'd only met the shells of the crew of The Ships of The Fleet. They had been shadows, lacking Life and Magic. Before him ... it had Life ... it was just that the cloud of Magic drifted right through it.

“Please ... let Greyling speak – he'll tell you ...”

Maybe it was like the Albinos – another agent of The Others ... something ... someone of The World who had been taken, turned ...

“If you do anything, to threaten anyone,” Hamish said slowly, “I will destroy you ... do you understand?”

“Yes ... I mean no ... just let Greyling explain.”

The World moved again, and Hamish was shaking with exhaustion.

What have you done? Pixx shouted.

I have found one of The Others.

I am coming. Stay calm. It is only Gresson. I thought you knew. He is invisible to us. You do not need to be afraid.

“Hamish?” Greyling was now standing behind him. “What ... ?”

“Tell him who I am,” Gresson begged his brother.

“Who is this?” Hamish asked Greyling.

I forgot to warn Hamish, please tell him Gresson is safe – he's only invisible to Magic – remember? I told you this, didn't I ... you know I can't remember him. Pixx was so upset she wasn't focusing her Voice.

Hamish could feel Pixx coming from one direction, and Diamari, Rane and the Ambassador from another. Everyone else was backing away.

“You didn't tell me you had a younger brother,” Hamish said to Greyling. “Even stranger ... I didn't Know this from when I've Tasted you.”

“I sorry – our father forbade ...”

Hamish stopped Greyling, and turned to Gresson. “Would you allow me to Know you?”

“I don't think that will work,” Greyling said. “Pixx says nothing of Magic has any notice of Gresson. She can only see him, and remember him, when his body is right in front of her – when it comes to telling you of him ... I also just forgot ...”

Hamish reached around behind Gresson's head with his left hand, scratched his forehead with a claw on his right hand, and then kissed him. There was only the taste of blood in his mouth.

What are you doing? Stop that! Don't be stupid. You don't know what you are trying to do! Wait for me.

In his World there were The Five Elements. In his World there was The Union of The Five Elements. There could be no other way. Everything that was of his World was made of The Five Elements and their Union.

All that was ... was part of this order. It had to be. Otherwise it was part of that which was not ... it was part of The Others – The Union ... it was part of that which would come to destroy The World.

Hamish closed his mind to everything but the Taste in his mouth.

Nothing could hide from him in his World.

As if it were a double-grating, Hamish twisted The Knowing around. Where it had been open – allowing Magic to wash through unobstructed, he ...

Hamish was naked. He was trapped in a dark cave, filled with bodies – it was loud, and yet he could barely hear. His nose was blocked - he could smell nothing. His eyes were blinded by darkness, and his whole body hurt. He felt ... panic ... fear ... and he Knew his own mortality.

He tried to breathe, but his mouth was full – blood ... his dragon blood was pouring out of his body – setting everything it touched on fire as it tried to flee his ... his nothing ... his void.

He was so alone ... he was so afraid ... how could he have been so stupid ...

He suddenly Knew ...

... he Knew living without the touch of Magic!

It was ...

This wasn't who he was! He was The Union of The Five Elements. The Elements belonged to him ... he belonged to The Elements ...

He felt his heart pounding ...

But it was pumping nothing ... for without Magic he was ... he wasn't ...

The void was closing him off from everything ...

He was The Union of The Five Elements.

He was Magic!

Magic was his to touch ...

He turned the grating.

Magic touched him again.

There was no fire surrounding him. There was no pool of blood he was standing in. Just the Tasting of Gresson. He Knew ...

The floor rose up to hit his back.

He looked up at the stars ... he knew they were only Globes.

“What have you done?” Pixx's face said from above him. “You were gone ... Heal yourself! Do it now! Do not try to remember ...”

“Are you alright?” Gresson asked from above him.

“I lost Magic – Knowing you almost killed me.”

“I didn't ...”

“What did you do to him?” Diamari asked, as she knelt beside him.

He looked from Diamari to Gresson, and a new memory hit him. “I'm sorry Princess ... I didn't mean to ... no one told me the two of you had an understanding. I mean, I should have known there would be someone waiting for you ...”

Hamish looked at Gresson, and was filled with sadness. He slowly realized that he was so enriched by Magic that he didn't even notice seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling things no one else could. Everyone had some Magic ... and yet Gresson lived with none.

Except the magic that was the Princess Diamari.