

Blessings
of
a
Curse

Wayne
Edward
Clarke

Book One of The Nexus Of Kellaran Series

Blessings of a Curse

Book One of The Nexus Of Kellaran

By
Wayne Edward Clarke

2012 Revision
Smashwords Edition
With Metric (SI) measurement units.

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The Nexus Of Kellaran Series:
Blessings Of A Curse
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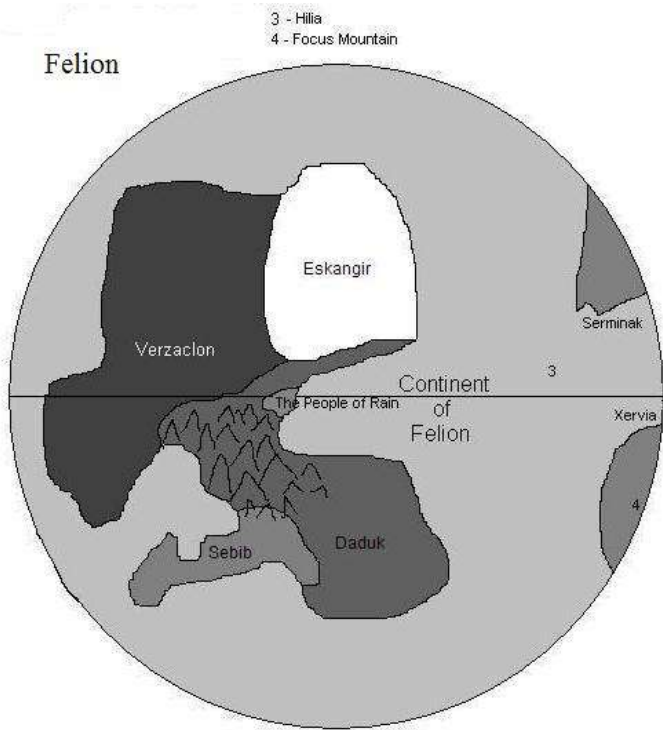
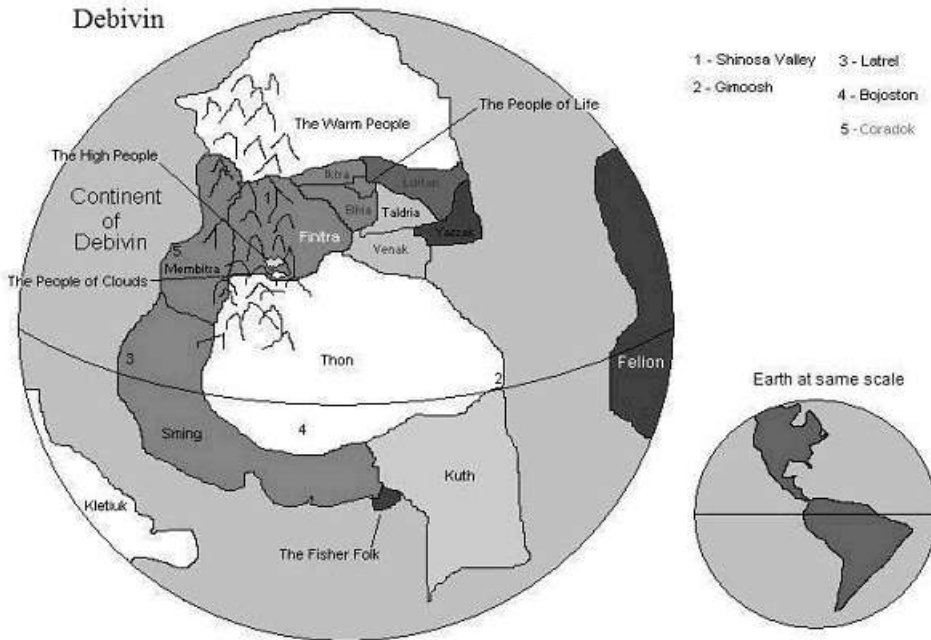
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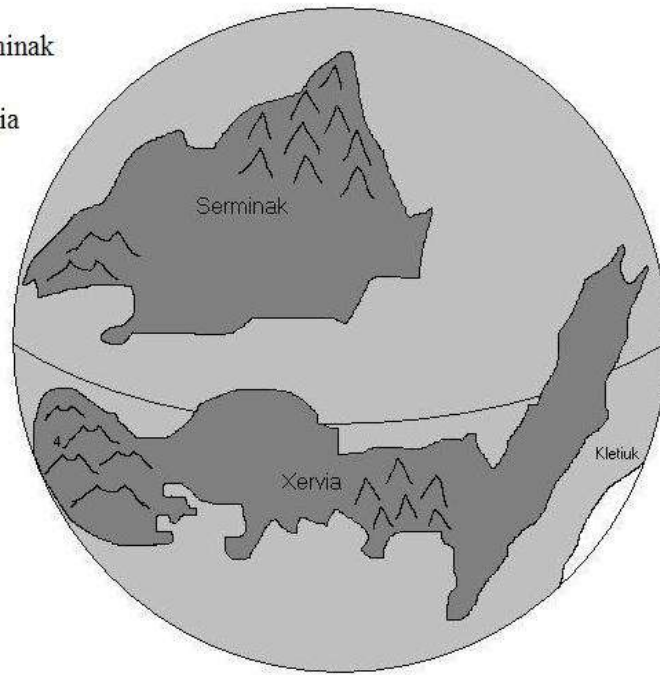
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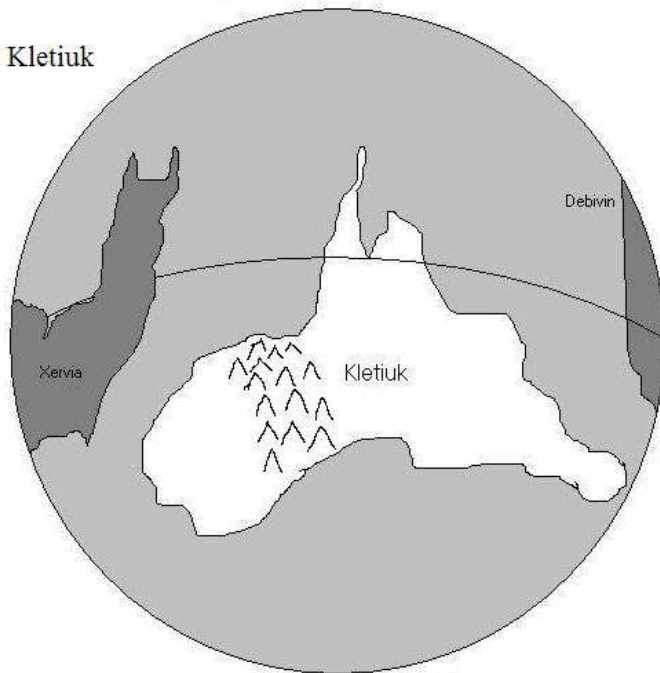
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Serminak
and
Xervia



Kletiuk



Foreword to the 2012 revision.

This is a very big book, bigger than most three-book trilogies, yet most of my readers tended to blast through it in the shortest time possible, and then plead for the sequel. (Which is finally available!) Many who read it in earlier editions have complimented me on the rich detail, as well as the compelling action.

However, a few with less patience had pointed out that there were four conversations that, while revealing interesting information, could still be removed without impacting the storyline any. Therefore, in previously published editions of this book, those four conversations were removed from the main text and placed at the end as excerpts.

Since then, the majority of my fans have vindicated my original editing and recommended that the excerpts be put back into the main text. With this edition I have done so.

Whenever I release a new book in a series, I always go over the previous books in that series and check them again for editing and consistency, and re-issue them. No matter how many times I re-edit a novel, it seems there are always a few more tiny punctuation or sentence structure improvements to be made, and my fans sometimes point out small inconsistencies that I also correct at the next revision. Therefore this revision is a little different from the last, but beyond having replaced the excerpts it would take a sharp eye to find the differences. One of them is a more modern version of the Times New Roman font.

The fact that this book is not divided into chapters is not an omission, it's a carefully considered stylistic choice.

Other elements of my style that the reader should note are my use of *italics* to indicate quoted sentences that are telepathically or psionically communicated. For example;

"It's wonderful to be able to think with you, mind-to-mind." she responded.

I use the same MS Word files for both eBooks and paper books, and paper book printers don't like bold or underlined text, so I also use italics occasionally to indicate words that are spoken with intensity. For example;

"You are absolutely *out* of your *mind!*" he growled.

If a sentence is already italicized because it's a telepathic communication, any words in that sentence that are communicated with extra intensity will be indicated by being non-italicized, for example;

"That's all a bunch of crap, and you know it." she psionically reprimanded him.

I use ALL CAPITALS occasionally to indicate yelling or great loudness, whether the words are spoken or telepathic; volume and intensity being distinct qualities.

In this story, many common words are also the names of magic spells, such as Sending, Flight, and Speaking, or have traditionally had highly religious connotations like The Source, and those words are capitalized to indicate this.

Since languages began, they have constantly changed and evolved. The advents of written language and printing both slowed language evolution, but it still goes on. Sometimes the resulting conventions that make up 'proper English' don't make a lot of sense, and they are slightly different in every English-speaking country. In most of these cases I've caved and used the conventions anyway in order to avoid irritating my readers who are sensitive about these things, like writing 'seven thousand, three hundred and fifty-five'. It makes no sense that the compound words for numbers up to one hundred are hyphenated, like fifty-five, and the others aren't, like three thousand. But I go with it anyway.

However, there are some English conventions that I absolutely refuse to follow because they distort the emotional connotations of the writing. I'll point out the most common one here so that you'll know that it's not a mistake; I'm doing it on purpose. If a quoted sentence is a question or an exclamation, it is conventionally written as a complete sentence within quotations, for example;

"Get down!" she yelled. Or;

"Is that right?" he asked.

However if a sentence that would normally end in a period is a quotation, correct English says that it should be ended with a comma. For example;

"I live here," he said.

But the comma makes it a sentence fragment rather than a complete sentence, and leaves the reader hanging, giving a different emotional feel to the writing compared to the way I would write it, which is;

"I live here." he said.

I only use a comma to end a quotation if it truly is a sentence fragment, because the sentence was interrupted where a comma would normally go. For example;

"I live here," he said, "And you're not welcome."

I suppose in that case I shouldn't capitalize the word 'and', since it's not really the first word in a sentence, but it bugs me if I don't.

There are a few other conventions that I don't follow, so if you see what would normally be considered a writing mistake that is repeated consistently in every possible instance in the book, you'll know that I'm doing that on purpose too.

It's hard to change what is considered Correct English, but I hope that other writers who read my books will agree with me about these points and do the same in their own writing, and that eventually doing it our way will be correct.

Coming this spring to [my website!](#)

*A new rotatable 3D map of the globe of Kellaran with much more detail and showing every place that is mentioned in the series.

*A complete list of major characters with descriptions.

*A timeline of major Kellarani historical events.

*And an appendix of encyclopedic facts and figures about Kellaran.

Wayne Edward Clarke, January 20, 2012.

Blessings Of A Curse

(If you are reading this account in a language other than Grand High Draconian, you might consider making a contribution to the Translation section of your local Magic Users Guild. XVD)

Yazadril watched the huge human walk blithely through the border Wards of The Nine Valleys like they weren't even there, and his breath hissed in between his teeth. The ancient mountain elf was stunned with surprise for the first time in decades, and he nervously tugged his long white beard in consternation. Nothing could pass the Wards unless a Warder had admitted it, nothing! And since he was one of the Warders, he knew with certainty that no such admission had occurred! He felt a moment of fear, an emotion he had not experienced for centuries, and quickly cast Unseen upon himself with a quietly hummed note and a practiced gesture.

Then his intellect re-asserted itself. He reasoned that since the human had been completely unaffected by the Illusions, Force Barriers, and other magic defenses of the border Wards, he may also be unaffected by the Unseen spell. That thought gave him another fright, and he carefully moved behind a tree, then peered around it at the human.

'By the Source, it is the biggest one I have ever beheld with these eyes!' he thought to himself. 'He is the size of a great plains bear, and just as shaggy as one!'

He forced himself to calm, and considered what he knew that was pertinent.

Only fourteen times had human wizards managed to see through the Illusions of the Wards in Yazadril's exceedingly long lifetime. Five of them had openly camped before the Wards, since they had come to speak to the mountain elves, to peacefully trade in knowledge and goods. Six wizards had sought to sneak into The Nine Valleys to steal objects of power, and only two of those had passed the Wards. And three wizards had come with armies, and had attacked the barriers seeking to conquer the valleys beyond, and usurp the more concentrated power available there.

They had all failed. The High People did not trade with human wizards, neither for knowledge nor for goods. The two thieves who made it past the Wards had used masterfully subtle spells of disguise and distraction to pose as resident High People, only to be caught by the hidden Sentries at the top of the pass. And none of the three would-be conquerors had survived their attempts, since all three were brute-force types, and the defensive spells of the Wards had transduced the massive power of their attacks and sent it back at them in unexpected forms.

They had all obviously been human Master Wizards, gray or white of hair, wrinkled of face, clad in ornate clothing and festooned with signs and objects of power.

This huge human was another matter entirely. His long black hair and beard covered most of his face and stuck out in all directions, making it hard to judge his age, but his muscles bulged beneath the bushy hair on his chest and along his arms and legs, and his movements were smooth. He wore a tattered kilt of dark gray plaid, the remains of a gray cotton shirt with the sleeves ripped off that hung open and untucked, and he carried the remnants of a black cloak gathered as a bag and slung over his shoulder, stuffed with unknown items. Crude leather sandals whisked quietly through the deep grass as his long and seemingly slow stride carried him upslope almost as fast as Yazadril could run.

He appeared to be a simple peasant, and for him to have simply walked through the Wards, apparently without even realizing they existed, was almost inconceivable! He walked with his head down, watching the ground, and there was a slump to his shoulders.

As he passed within six meters of Yazadril's hiding spot the elven wizard caught his scent, and realized that the human was surprisingly clean, given his generally unkempt state. Which might indicate that his appearance was a disguise.

As Yazadril began stealthily following the human upslope another thrill of rare emotion raced through his old heart, this one composed equally of fear and a burning intellectual curiosity.

A moment later his quarry stopped beside the path to dig a wild onion with a small knife, scrubbed most of the dirt off with a handful of dry grass, and stood to stow it in his cloak. He stretched hugely, then looked to the right of

the path. He noticed the Clearing of Contemplation where Yazadril had been meditating until he'd heard the human's distant approach up the scree slope outside the Wards.

The big human ambled into the small meadow and sat himself down on Yazadril's favorite sitting log, and looked out on the great untenanted valley beyond the Wards, enjoying the very view the old elf so often enjoyed. Or so it seemed at first.

He surprised Yazadril again when he put his head in his hands and began to cry, softly at first, then with great wracking sobs of utter despair. It sounded very strange, as his voice seemed unnaturally deep to elven ears.

After ten minutes of that he seemed to have cried himself out, and gradually calmed. He looked to the setting sun, then began to set up a crude camp beside the log. Having finished that, he set up some small snares around the perimeter of the clearing, then returned to his camp to relax against the log and eat some wild berries and roots he withdrew from his cloak. After eating, he drank deeply from a waterskin, hid his possessions in the hollow end of the log, and rolled himself in his cloak before laying down in the grass beside the log. He soon appeared to be asleep.

Yazadril watched all this from the cover of a clump of bushes ten meters beyond the clearing's edge. He watched a half-hour longer to be sure the human truly slept, then silently made his way back to the path.

He hiked halfway up to the top of the pass before he cast a careful Speaking to the sentinels there.

"Dilimon, it is I, Yazadril! Bring three others of the Sentries, some food and drink, and a warm cloak. Meet with me on the pathway down to the border, move most silently, and do not cast the power in any way! As well, bring your hunting weapons! And before anything else is done, call to duty every Sentry we have available, have them equip themselves with every mundane weapon that they own, and post them in defensive formations about the top of the pass!"

"I hear you Yazadril! Myself, three others, food and drink, a warm cloak, mundane weapons, in stealth down the path, all Sentries to defend the top of the pass! We follow your instructions!" Dilimon's mind-voice rang in Yazadril's head with youthful excitement, and Yazadril could tell that Dilimon was relaying the orders and taking efficient action to carry them out, even as he continued the mental conversation. *"What is it Yazadril?! A basilisk?! A dark dragon?!"*

"It is a human, Dilimon. He is camped and sleeping in my Clearing of Contemplation, two hundred paces inside the Wards!"

"By my soul! Shall I alert the other senior wizards?"

"Do not wake them if they are already sleeping. This human does not appear to be a wizard. If any are still awake, have them informed, and tell them that I will speak with them about it in a few hours. Beyond them, and the eight members of your squad, none must know of this! Tell the extra Sentries that they are there on my order, as a precaution only, that there is quite likely no danger, and nothing else!"

"Yes Yazadril. But... If he is not a wizard, how did he pass the Wards?"

"I am not sure. He did not so much defeat the barriers, as simply ignore them! He did not appear to even realize that they were there! I have kept myself concealed from him, and I doubt that he even knows that he has trespassed onto our lands!"

"By my soul! He must have elven blood in him, somehow!"

"I doubt that such is the case!" Yazadril chuckled. *"He is the biggest, hairiest human I have ever seen! He must be two and a half meters tall, and weigh as much as any six of us!"*

"He must be a giant, or partly one!" a female voice said.

"No, Yalla." Yazadril replied, recognizing the interjecting voice as that of the on-duty Sentry Wizard. *"I have had that thought as well, but there is no flavor of giant in his scent or his aura. I would certainly have sensed it. He is simply a very large human. I do not think he is very dangerous to us, but who can say?"*

"However, he is definitely a heretofore unique magical anomaly, with unknown abilities, perhaps including the ability to detect us Speaking right now! So, we end this conversation, and hereafter none will cast the power in any way on this side of the pass, until we have learned all that we must know about him!"

"We hear you Yazadril, no magic beyond the crest of the pass. We follow your instructions." Yalla responded, seeming worried.

"We see you, Yazadril. We will be with you in six minutes." Dilimon reported.

When they arrived, the four Sentries seemed to simply appear out of the darkness, exhibiting incredible stealth and woodcraft far beyond that shown by Yazadril, even when he'd had their youth.

"Well done. You made good time," he told them with quiet pride. "Give me the cloak, I am chilled to the bone. Thank you. Now food and drink. Thank you." He wolfed down a few huge bites of sausage and cheese, then took

smaller bites so he could talk with his mouth full. It was an unthinkable performance under most social circumstances, but standard procedure on military operations where time was of the essence.

“I will need you to guard me while I perform a very deep Reading on him.” Yazadril continued. “You will take no action unless you are *absolutely certain* that he is attacking us! If he does attack, we will retreat if we can, and you may have to assist me. However, he may move very quickly, so retreat may not be practical, particularly if I am incapacitated.

“Yalla, if you must defend against him, and your spells affect him, cast Binding and Sleep. If they do not affect him, cast Concussion on the ground in front of him. A few blasts of dirt in his face should discourage him. If it does not, tip a few trees down between him and us. Do not injure him unless absolutely necessary! Find a stone as large as your head, and if he is getting within five meters from us, you can cast Movement on it and break his legs with it.

“You three keep your hunting bows ready. If he actually gets his hands on one of us despite everything Yalla can do, then, and only then, you will kill him. Immediately. And thoroughly.”

“We follow your instructions, Yazadril!” Dilimon stated. He and the other two males grinned eagerly with barely-suppressed excitement. Yalla’s warm smile was a bit worried, but fully resolute.

“After uneventful decades guarding the pass, finally there is a chance for some action, you think young ones?” Yazadril asked with a smile. “Let us enjoy that feeling for a moment.

“Now, let us also remember how much we hope that things will remain peaceful. It is a painful thing to have a killing on your soul, no matter how justified, and seeing a comrade hurt or killed is worse. Let your training and your intellect guide you, no matter how intense your emotions become. What this human has done is completely unique and very dangerous to us all, I do not need to tell you that, so it is imperative that we learn how he has done it!

“Now, you know where the clearing is. When I am in position, I will take the Reading, which could last from fifteen minutes to an hour. Then we will return to the path, and I will tell you what I have learned, and we will decide on further action at that time.”

With that, he turned and strode down the path, his old shoulders braced with determination.

He returned to his spot in the bushes, sat cross-legged on the turf, and immediately fell into trance. The three archers deployed themselves to advantage around him, while Yalla knelt beside him to monitor him and to lend him some power if need be, her eyes locked to the dark form of the sleeping human.

After almost an hour Yazadril began a strange humming unlike any there had heard before. Dilimon looked to Yalla with inquisitive concern, but she only shrugged. Satisfied that the elder was in no danger, even if Yalla did not understand what he was doing, Dilimon returned his attention to his vigilance.

Finally, over two hours after he had began, Yazadril rose and moved quietly back to the path. The four Sentries melted through the forest in his wake, and the five huddled closely on the path to hear Yazadril’s whispered report.

“He poses no danger to us, not directly at any rate. I had to bring myself so far out of tune I could barely feel the power, to even get a basic analysis and a fringe Reading of him. And after two hours of effort, I was only able to learn a few things about him, including the nature of his ability. He is physically so perfectly attuned with the power field that it passes right through him, like light through clean water. He is... transparent to magic, and all magic is therefore transparent and invisible to him. That is how he passed the Wards. It means that though he is immune to magic, and our spells will not affect him, he also cannot attack us magically. The second thing I learned is that he knows nothing of this property in himself, or anything else about magic. If we have a conflict with him, it will be no more difficult to fill him with arrows than any fat boar.”

There was a long silence as the sentries absorbed that with relief.

“As to his personality, I sensed no particular evil in him, and his soul is shattered.” Yazadril related, so quietly their keen hearing could barely make him out. “I could get no details, but he has lost his family, his home, everything, to some horrible disaster. Or... Or to a series of disasters.”

“Huh. He is strange indeed.” Yalla stated thoughtfully. “I would have thought that with an hour’s effort, you could Read anyone so deeply that you would know what they had eaten for breakfast on every morning of their lives.”

“Yes. Anyone but him.” Yazadril nodded. “And the tiny bits of information I did get cost me as much effort as any spell I have ever cast.”

“What will we do?” Dilimon asked.

“We will wait until he wakes, and then I will speak with him. Perhaps something in his history will reveal how he came to exhibit this property.”

“Honored Elder Wizard Yazadril, Prince of The Nine Valleys of the High People, I hesitate to advise you without invitation, but you must sleep, while we will keep watch. You appear near exhaustion.” Yalla told him with a look of concern.

“I know. I will sleep while we wait. And as I say, he poses little danger without magic and armed only with a paring knife, so two of you may sleep as two guard him, or one of you can return to the top of the pass for relief.”

“We are the night watch for the south pass this year, Yazadril, and had arrived on station only a few minutes before your call.” Dilimon told him with a grin. “It will be no trouble for us to remain alert until dusk on the day after tomorrow, if necessary.”

“Excellent. Report to the wizards and Sentries that he is harmless, dismiss the extra Sentries, and inform everyone that I have taken this human under my protection as a study animal. Do and say no more than that, then return here.”

“A study animal? Like he was a rare butterfly you had never seen before?” Dilimon asked with a quiet chuckle.

“Exactly like that.” Yazadril replied, grinning. “I return to my place behind the bushes to sleep. Wake me when our guest first stirs.”

Awakening. Grass beneath him, scratching his neck. Then as always, the memories, the sadness, the despair, the pain. Weeping, weeping like a child. And why not? There was no one to see or to care.

But somehow it was not as bad this morning, and he forced it away with less effort. He sat up and rubbed the sleep-sand and tears from his eyes, and looked around. Perhaps it was this beautiful, magical seeming place, this little high meadow with the tiny brook and the perfect view of the valley below. It seemed to bring him a small measure of serenity, somehow.

He rose and crossed to the brook to wash, then checked his wire snares. Four of the simple traps held prey; three squirrels and a small rabbit, and in each case the snares had functioned perfectly, bringing death to the small animals almost instantly by breaking their necks. He was glad to see that; it made it easier when he respectfully apologized to their spirits for their deaths in a brief prayer.

Having done that, he moved all ten snares and reset them, then cleaned his prey on a flat rock by the brook.

After assembling a shallow bronze pan and three iron rods into a small tripod brazier and building a tiny fire in it, he roasted and ate his catch one by one.

He reflected that it was rare to harvest such a bounty. Generally, only one of the snares caught anything on every second morning, and the meat was only a supplement to his general diet of roots, leaves, berries and nuts. Those were plentiful here as well. Perhaps he would stay here, until a pair of weeks before the snows should fall.

Then he realized that it was the first time he had consciously thought about the days ahead since... Since he left Shinosa Valley.

Clamping down hard on his thoughts, he fiercely concentrated on the sensations of the moment; the taste and texture of the food he was eating, the heat of the fire on his face, the morning sun. In this way he managed to avoid weeping again.

Having finished eating everything but the cleaned skins and bones, he took those with him when he walked a hundred meters to visit the forest, and buried them with his spoor.

He returned to wash in the brook, then cleaned and disassembled the brazier and stowed it in the log.

He sat on the log to admire the view for a while before he set out to gather plants.

A voice called from over by the path, giving him a violent startle.

“Hello the camp!” was called, and it sounded like an old woman.

“Uh... Yes?” he stammered.

Yazadril, standing by the path, almost lost his train of thought. What a voice! Even raised a bit to call out, it was the deepest, lowest, richest voice he had ever heard! And it’s fundamental resonant frequency was exactly in tune with the power field!

He gave himself a shake to recall himself to the business at hand, and called out again in the Trade Common language. “I generally sit where you are, of mornings, and meditate while contemplating the view. May I join you? I have some very tasty apple pastry I would share, and some good bumbleberry wine as well.”

“Uh, sure.”

Yazadril walked into the clearing, whistling a happy tune as he retrieved the pastry and wine from his trail bag. The huge human was standing and staring at him strangely, then suddenly dropped to his hands and knees and bowed his head.

“Now now, no need for all that!” Yazadril told him in surprise. “I doubt you’ve seen one of The High People before, but you’ve nothing to fear from me!”

Slowly, the human’s startlingly bright dark blue eyes rose to look him up and down, taking in the fine doeskin boots, the loose satin breeches colored the same green as the grass, the silk shirt in the same gray as the rock of the

mountain, the stout brown woolen cloak and matching trail bag. His gaze settled for a moment on gracefully pointed ears peeking through shining gray hair, before meeting Yazadril's ancient eyes with a puzzled look.

"You... You're not a god?" he finally asked, his voice rumbling even deeper and lower now that he spoke quietly.

"A god?! No no, don't be silly!" Yazadril laughed as he sat on the log and spread his treats beside him. "I imagine your people would refer to me as a mountain elf. Why would you think me a god? I admit the beard gives me a somewhat dignified air, but..."

"You're glowing."

"Am I? How very interesting! But it is no sign of divinity, I tell you that for certain!

"I am Yazadril of The High People of The Nine Valleys. Here, have some pastry."

"Thank you. I'm called Markee, from... Shinosa Valley." The huge human said as he sat a respectful distance down the log.

Suddenly he was struggling to contain his tears.

"Ahh, Markee, anyone could see that you bear a great grief." Yazadril gently told him. "There is no cure for that except time, and living a good life. But I could lessen your pain a little, for a while, if you'd like."

"Yes. Please help me." Markee quietly sobbed as his eyes closed, and his tears spilled from them.

Yazadril hummed a short note and cast a mild Tranquility upon him. It passed through Markee like he didn't exist, and dispersed beyond him a moment later.

"Oh yes. I'd forgotten about that." Yazadril muttered in chagrin. He concentrated hard while humming a discordant air, and with great effort managed to bring himself and his intensified spell out of synchronicity with Markee, at least enough that the spell would adhere to the human a bit when the old wizard shoved it into him.

The effort left him gasping and shaking, and Markee quickly reached down to gently steady his shoulder, or he'd have fallen off the log.

"I'm... I'm all right. Just give me a moment to catch my breath." the old elf gasped.

"I... Thank you. My sadness seems more... distant, now." Markee mused. "Like it was a year older than it is."

"You're welcome. That was my intent." Yazadril nodded as he regained his composure, and poured them each a goblet of wine. "It should last a few days. Perhaps a week."

"You're a wizard!" Markee stated in soft amazement.

"Yes, I am." Yazadril nodded again, and took a deep drink. "That's why I seem to glow to you, I suspect. You can see my power."

"How is that possible?! That I can see that?" Markee asked in confusion.

"I'm not sure. Tell me, if you don't mind my asking, how old are you?"

Markee was surprised at the question, and considered his answer carefully. "I'll tell you, if you tell me how old you are first." he eventually replied.

"Fair enough. I'm eight thousand, four hundred and seventy-six years old. I am the eldest of my people, by a wide margin."

Markee gaped, and Yazadril sighed.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have told you that, but you asked, and I'm a bit vain about it. I admit to some pride at having fought off the great darkness for so long, though of course it's simply good luck, for the most part." Yazadril grinned, combing his beard out with his fingertips. "Now, will you keep your part of the bargain? Will you tell me your age?"

"I'm sixteen." Markee stated, still gaping. "You're really that old? That's... I mean, what you must have seen! You must know everything by now!"

Now it was Yazadril's turn to gape. "Sixteen! I'd guessed from your manner that you were younger than you seem, but by the Source! Have you even finished growing yet?!"

"I might be seventeen by now. I've lost track of the date." Markee said defensively. He turned away, mildly embarrassed, and gazed down the valley. "I doubt I've finished growing. This shirt fit me loosely when I left home, and I had to take the sleeves off a few weeks ago, because they were too tight around my arms."

"Amazing! Well I have seen some things all right, and I know much, but I know a great deal less than everything! You're certain proof of that!"

"How do you mean?" Markee asked, turning back to the old elf. He was suddenly reminded of the delicious scent coming from the pastry he was holding, and took a huge bite of it.

Yazadril considered him carefully, and decided to be honest. “You display some remarkable properties, young fellow. Your apparent ability to see my power, for one. For another... Tell me, as you came up here, when you passed the top of the scree slope a few hundred paces downhill, did you notice anything, ah, different, shall we say?”

Markee considered as he chewed, then shook his head.

“I thought not. That’s the border of the lands of The High People, and...”

Markee swallowed hurriedly as he stood. “I didn’t know, I didn’t mean to trespass! I’ll leave if you...”

“No no, my boy, I very much wish you to stay!” Yazadril assured him, interrupting in return. “Please, sit down, you are welcome here, and under my protection.

“You see, raw magic power comes from the sun, with the sunlight. But that raw magic energy is not useful, it is not in a form that elves and wizards can use. It passes completely through most things without affecting them, like sunlight through clean water, until it strikes the stone of the world. Some rock is completely out of tune with the raw power, and it reflects the raw power back into the sky. Some rock is partly in tune with it, like the rock of the Nine Valleys of the High People, and this rock absorbs the power, and slowly re-emits it at a lower frequency. Do you understand that?”

“I don’t think so.” Markee admitted. “In tune you said, like music?”

“Yes. The small strings on a harp vibrate much more quickly than the large strings, and they sound a higher note. The number of times they vibrate every second, that is, how frequently they vibrate, is called their frequency.

“Energy vibrates as well. Red light has a slowly vibrating low note, up to violet light which has a quickly vibrating high note, so to speak, in the order of the colors of the rainbow. The rainbow is like a harp of light, showing all the notes in order. You see?”

“Yes, I think I’ve got that.” Markee nodded.

“Good. So the completely-out-of-tune rock reflects the raw magic power back into the sky, like sunlight from a mirror, it just bounces off. Yes?”

“I understand.” Markee nodded again.

“Yes. Now if you take a poker and hold it in a fire, it gets hot as it absorbs the energy from the blue and yellow light of the fire, and when it’s full of it, and you take it out of the fire, you can see it glowing red. It has absorbed the higher frequency blue and yellow light, and it releases it as lower frequency red light.

“The rock of our land does the same thing with the raw magic power. It absorbs it during the day, and constantly radiates it at a lower frequency. That radiated energy from the absorbent rock forms the usable magic field of the world, it’s the energy that wizards and elves use. You see?”

Markee nodded.

“Good. I think there are others who could explain this more simply, but bear with me; we are almost to the crux of it.

“Now air, and water, and solid material like you and me, are made of invisibly tiny parts, and those are made of tinier parts, and those are made of tinier parts yet, and so on, and all of these tiny parts vibrate. How quickly some of those tiny parts vibrate, how *in tune* they are with the vibrations of the energy field of useful magic, determines how they are affected by magic. Objects of power are closely in tune with the magic, they resonate to it in harmony, so they may reflect, absorb, or transmute the energy.

“Some of the tiny parts that make up the bodies of elves and wizards, and the energy of their brains and nerves, also vibrate in harmony with the field of magic to varying degrees. So, we can use magic, and elves can see the magic field itself.

“Now to the point. Some of the most important tiny parts in *your* body, particularly your brain and your nerves, all vibrate at *exactly* the same frequency as the energy field of useful magic. Not in harmony with it, in unison with it!

“Because of this, you are transparent to magic. It passes right through you, like light through clean water. So you are, for the most part, immune to the direct effects of magic, both good and bad, harm and healing. This is why you were able to walk past the Illusions and Barriers of the Wards on our borders, though they’d have stopped a flight of dragons, and you didn’t even notice them.

“Somewhere in all that is the reason you can see my power, though unlike elves, you cannot see the magic field around you. I’ll have my finger on it in a while.” Yazadril mused, absent-mindedly scratching his chin through his beard.

“So you want me to stay here, so you can study me, so you can find out how to make the magic barriers not let me past?” Markee asked.

“Yes, that’s important, though my interest is far more general. I wish to understand the phenomenon completely for the sake of understanding, not just so we can bar you from our land. Though we must know that as well, in case some wizard ever learns to duplicate your abilities.”

“Huh. You’re right. I’m sure there are others who would have explained it more simply.” Markee chuckled, then suddenly sobered as he became a bit suspicious.

“And how long would you want me to stay here?” he inquired.

“Until I understand it, or failing that, for as long as I can interest you in staying.”

Markee stared at him intently. “This is important to you? How do I know you won’t hold me against my will, or trick me? Or that another of your people won’t do so?”

Yazadril’s brows drew together a bit. “I understand your concerns. But I’ll have you know that I am Prince of my people, and I have the right to speak for them, and to make commitments upon their behalf. And I do solemnly swear that none of my people will seek to harm you, or seek to impede you should you choose to leave.”

“Hold on a moment!” Markee exclaimed. “If I’m immune to magic, how did you do that thing for me earlier?”

“Ah, I was able to purposely make myself slightly out of tune with you, and with the power field. Then my spell could resonate within you and affect you, though not very strongly.

“Of course you must realize that everything I’ve told you about magic, including that, is an analogy that is a tremendous oversimplification of the rules of reality, but at least it gives you some understanding.

“If it makes you feel better, I can tell you that I probably couldn’t magically affect you enough to harm you, even if I tried. Though if I did try the reverse of that, I could make you feel a bit more depressed, which I assure you I would never do.

“I very much doubt that there is another wizard alive who could even affect you that much. I was only able to do it because of some rather specialized theoretical work I did a few centuries ago. And because I’m a pretty good wizard, to say the least. Believe me, no one else would have thought of it.”

“Huh. How long do you *think* it would be? Honestly?”

Yazadril considered, and swallowed a guilty look. “I see your concern. And your suspicions are correct. I could easily spend centuries on such research. Centuries you do not have within your human lifespan. Still, perhaps we could agree on a limited time, just so I could understand the basics of it?” he asked hopefully.

“The basics? How long for the basics?”

“Well... Perhaps forty years?”

“Forty years!” Markee exclaimed, rising to his feet. “I think perhaps one year, if that!”

“One year! Impossible! We will barely know one another in one year!” Yazadril sputtered. “You must give me... You must give me ten, at least!”

“Ten years?! Ten years on the side of a mountain, being poked and prodded like a leech on a plate?! I think not! I may feel bad enough right now to throw my life away, but I’m smart enough to know I’ll feel differently in ten years!”

“Now see here! It needn’t be as unpleasant as all that! I like to think I’m pretty good company, and if you have any interest in the subject of magic, you may very well find it to be a fascinating time indeed! As for living on the side of a mountain, you must admit that this is very pleasant place, and if you choose to stay here I will have a lovely home built for you at the edge of the meadow there, and you may consider it yours for as long as you choose to stay with us!

“Beyond that, I happen to be a very powerful and wealthy wizard, and I would be willing to reward you very generously for your service! I could make you as wealthy in gold or jewels as any king in any of the human lands out there! I can build you a castle with a waterfall that flows uphill and a basilisk to guard the gate! I can give you a charm that will make you irresistible to every woman and admired by every man! Come now, I am willing to be reasonable, and I can give you almost anything you could want!”

“You must really want this very much.” Markee told him grimly, and sat back down, staring with eyes unfocused into the grass. “I don’t want those things. And you can’t give me what I want, for I want what I’ve lost. And I doubt even you can return the dead to life.”

Yazadril didn’t answer for a moment, and when he did, his manner was compassionate. “You’re right, in that I want this very much. You are the most unique magical phenomenon that’s ever happened. According to everything we know, you are impossible, and your very existence negates much of what we thought we knew about magic. The implications cannot be overstated. Nothing else is this important.

“And you are right, even I cannot bring back the dead if they have been gone for more than a moment, or if their brains or spines are destroyed.

“But, everyone needs affection, and companionship, and love. Elves and humans are the same that way. I will give you my companionship and my affection, Markee, and perhaps I will grow to love you like a grandson. Also, you will be a great novelty among my people, and many of them will want to visit you, and I’m sure you will like almost all of them.”

Markee didn’t reply, as he considered the enormity of what was being asked, and what was being offered.

“Perhaps there is something else I can offer, that you would value more.” Yazadril ventured quietly. “Tell me your story, Markee. There must be something I can do. Tell me of your home, and of what happened there.”

Markee stared at the ground for a long time before he spoke, and did not look up when he did.

“Shinosa Valley is in the mountains north of here. It’s a long way from anywhere, you have to hike over thirty-five kilometers of mountains and passes to get to Pimata; the next inhabited valley. The trader only comes twice a year, on foot with a pack train of nimble donkeys, and we were the very end of his route. It’s a hundred and ninety-three hard kilometers east to Copper Strike; the nearest town, and another hundred and twenty-nine to the foothills and farmlands of Finitra proper before you come to anything that you could really call civilization. Other than that, to the north, west and south, there’s only mountains for hundreds of kilometers, uninhabited and mostly impassable. Fifty-three people lived in Shinosa valley, including me. The traders and five people from Pimata and two of the King’s Rangers are the only other people I’ve ever seen. And you.

“One morning just after dawn last winter a storm came, the most terrible blizzard any of us had ever seen. It was sudden, one minute there was clear blue sky, the next it was hell. The wind blew so fast that pieces of straw were blown three centimeters into solid wood, and it was so cold that people in warm winter clothes froze to death in moments. I’ve never been so scared as that. Lots of blizzards go on for days, and I knew if that one had even lasted till supertime there wouldn’t have been anything left alive in the whole valley. It only lasted an hour, and it killed everyone that was caught outside, or that went outside to save their children or animals, and everyone whose house was too exposed to the wind.

“My family was spared, because Mother wouldn’t let us go out to save the mule and the sheep, though one window blew in and my little sister Shelvy got awful sick. All five of us huddled together on my parents’ bed under every stitch of clothing and bedding we owned. It was really, really cold, and the wind was so loud you had to yell into each other’s ears to be understood. Twenty-one of our neighbors died from the storm. It ended as suddenly as it started, then it was completely gone, the sky was blue again.

“We gathered everyone who still lived at Dob Jorman’s mill, since it was the second biggest place, and made of stone, and well sheltered from the wind.”

He paused for a long moment, and when he continued he was so choked with emotion that it was difficult to speak clearly.

“That night, just after supertime, everyone but me went mad. They just completely lost their minds. Most of them, you couldn’t tell what they thought they were seeing, or what they were trying to do, but some were running away from nothing, and some were fighting the air, and some were yelling gibberish and thrashing around and... Some hurt themselves, and some hurt others. My brother Steb killed my mother with one blow to her head, and... And other bad things happened. A few minutes later, most of them became themselves again. Some were dead. My little sister was dead. She looked like she had died from sheer terror. Steb never came out of it, and Dob Jorman knocked him cold with a chair, to keep him from killing his son Verk.

“Some who had gotten their minds back wanted to run. But my father yelled that we were under magical attack, and that we couldn’t run from it, and a regular attack might come next, so we all had to stay together to help each other. Everyone saw the sense of that, so we all stayed there. There were twenty-one of us left alive, seven of them injured or sick, four of them still mad.”

He stopped to wipe at his tears with both hands, and tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

“The next morning, about midmorning... I was leaning against my father, we were sitting on the floor against the wall, and I was holding Marja Dobbim. She was thirteen, and everyone knew she’d be my wife someday. I was very fond of her, and besides, she was the only girl who was near the right age in the valley. Then everyone except me screamed, they screamed so horribly... And... they... died. They died, and their skin turned black and green pus started coming out of all their...”

Markee had to stop, and wept openly for a minute before he regained enough control to continue.

“Anyway, I ran. I grabbed a few things and I ran. I was really stupid about what I took, too, and I’ve regretted it a million times. It’s like all my training just flew out of my head, but I was in such a panic that I couldn’t even think. I just ran away and left them all lying there dead, because I was so scared. So... horrified. I ran south, because I was afraid of the ice storm, and I knew it was warmer, south. I ran until I dropped, just eating snow for water and running,

and when I dropped I slept, and then a nightmare woke me up and I ran again, until I dropped. The next day I couldn't run anymore, so I walked fast. The next day I stopped and gathered food, because I was so hungry, and kept on walking south.

"And that's all I've done since then; walk south, and climb when I had to. About six months, I think. Every few days I climb high enough up a mountain to choose a way ahead through the passes. That's why I came up here; the top of the pass faces south. From the maps my father had, I know the mountains must end a few more week's walk south of here. I know there are plains south of that, and south of that is the shore of the ocean, where it never snows. I guess I'd sort of thought of going there."

He turned to Yazadril and tried to smile with tears pouring from his eyes. "Now that I know I'm immune to magic, I suppose I should go home and give my folk decent burials. But I don't think I could bear to do it."

His look of despair made Yazadril look away, and there was a painful silence for a minute.

"Have you thought about the cause of it?" Yazadril finally ventured. "The source of the storm and the madness and the death?"

"Not really." Markee answered after a moment. "I haven't been thinking about it, really. I try to keep my thoughts on the here and now, or I review the lessons I was taking, or just engage in abstract philosophizing. Anything to keep from thinking about it, or I weep constantly. Until your spell. And I'm still weeping, just not as much."

He paused again. "None of us had any real enemies, so it makes no sense. I suppose some evil wizard must have killed them for his own amusement."

"That is one possibility." Yazadril nodded. "They were definitely killed by magic. Or a wizard may have made a mistake, or had an accident. If one tries to put too much power into an object, for instance, it could explode, and that could cause what you've described. Or a small piece of a world that is a source of raw magic may have fallen from the sky nearby. The magic storm from that could do it too."

"By far the most likely possibility is that your folk were simply caught in the crossfire of a battle between two distant wizards. In which case, one or both of them are probably dead. Two very powerful, very incompetent, very sloppy, very unethical, and undoubtedly human wizards, I might add. No elf would even contemplate such methods."

"That is one thing I can offer you. I can help you find out what caused those unfortunate events. If we find that someone is at fault, I will help you take action."

"I should clarify that. If your people were killed by intent or incompetence, by a wizard or wizards, and we can identify any surviving perpetrators, my people will take appropriate action, whether you choose to or not. Such atrocities cannot be allowed to continue unchecked."

"Hmm. Would you be able to find out from here, by magic, or would you have to go there?" Markee asked.

"I might be able to find out from here, but most likely I will have to go there." Yazadril mused. "Along with a few hundred elven warriors, all of whom have various magical skills, as well as another dozen senior wizards of The High People."

"So you sometimes go beyond the lands of your people?"

"We do indeed!" Yazadril laughed. "I've spent a third of my life out in the world, and I've seen most of it!"

"Hmm." Markee said. He stood and clasped his hands behind himself, and slowly strode to the center of the glade. He remained there, deep in thought, for many minutes. Finally he turned and made his way back.

"Here's what I propose. Please, hear me out." He stated as he sat down again. "I'll stay here for your study, in the house you will build me, for five years. You will also help me with furniture, clothing, boots, and bedding for the winter. And with food, or I'll have to gather and trap so much in this small area that it would start to become barren in less than a year. You will also teach me what you can about magic during that time."

"I won't count the time we spend on dealing with what happened to my people against the five years."

"If after the five years I no longer want to stay here, or whenever I choose to leave after that, you will give me enough jewels to buy a good ranch with a nice house, small enough that I can work it by myself, somewhere south where it never snows, as well as enough to equip it, to furnish it, and to buy some breeding stock and the first year's seed. If I leave here and you do that for me, I'll let you come with me and study me during my free time, but you'd also have to continue my magic lessons."

"For how long?" Yazadril asked.

"Pardon?"

"For how long could I accompany you and study you and teach you during your free time at your new ranch, after we left here at the end of the five years?"

"Oh. As long as we didn't get so sick of the sight of each other that we couldn't stand it. As long as we both enjoy spending the time together, I mean. Other than that, as long as I live."

“Agreed then!” Yazadril stated happily as he rose to his feet.

“It’s a bargain?” Markee asked as he also stood and offered his hand.

“Wait. You understand that during the five years, I will not be the only wizard of my people studying you? That sometimes one or two others will join us?”

“That’s all right.”

“And do you understand that a vow with an elven wizard is magically binding, like a geas or a Compulsion?”

“I didn’t know that!” Markee stated. “So when you swore you and yours to not harm or impede me earlier, and your glow got brighter...?”

“I couldn’t break it to save my life.” Yazadril nodded. “Though to save my daughters’ or my wife’s lives, I could break it. Most could not.”

“That’s good to know. But what if I’m immune to the binding, as I am to other magic?”

“Then I’ll just have to trust your honor.” Yazadril smiled.

“You can.” Markee nodded, offering his huge hand again.

“So let it be agreed, as it was spoken!” Yazadril smiled, and he placed his small and bony hand within the other’s huge one.

“Agreed!” Markee stated, with a bit of a smile himself as they shook on it.

Yazadril grinned as they resumed their seats. “Tell me, did you feel anything special just now?” he asked.

“You glowed a little brighter for a moment there, when I said ‘agreed’. It’s getting harder to see as the sun gets higher and the daylight gets brighter, but for a moment it was as plain as when you were walking through the shadows under the trees.”

“Ah. Interesting. Here, do try some of this bumbleberry wine. It’s very good, and you haven’t tasted yours yet.”

“I’m not allowed to drink wine until I’m eighteen.” Markee admitted sheepishly. “But I’ll sure have another of these pastries! They’re delicious! The first real food I’ve had in a long time!”

“Ah, it’s so easy to forget your age. But it is wise, to avoid the possibility of drunkenness until you are mature, and perhaps even after that. Before we give wine to our young, those under twenty-five years, we generally take most of the alcohol out of it. If I did that, do you think you would be permitted to drink it?”

“I suppose that would be all right. I hesitate to assume so though. The thought of offending my mother’s spirit is... very painful.”

“Ah, understandable. But we are celebrating an agreement, and it’s a new chapter in your life, and you’ve had to assume responsibility for yourself as an adult before your due time. You knew your mother well, and loved her very much. If you think of how she was, and how she would decide if she were here now, I think your heart will know the truth of it.”

Markee thought about it. “I... I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t mind, as long as it couldn’t make me get drunk.”

“I think you are almost certainly right.” Yazadril gently smiled. He hummed a note and touched his fingertip to the surface of Markee’s wine, making tiny ripples of vibration in the liquid as bubbles rose. “There. Generally we remove alcohol from wine with a slow selective evaporation process, but it’s no trouble to transmute the alcohol. Try it.”

“Mmm! It’s good! Sweet and tart and spicy, all at the same time!” Markee exclaimed, holding the silver goblet delicately but awkwardly with his fingertips. It looked almost ridiculously small in his hand.

“I rather like it myself.” Yazadril chuckled, then finished his gobletful and poured them both another, and neutralized the alcohol in Markee’s.

“You know, you seem like a well educated youth, moreso than most from such isolated places.” Yazadril commented.

“My father was from outside.” Markee explained. “And so was my teacher the widow Sorel. And everyone always ordered books from the trader, though they’re pretty expensive. We were determined to not be ignorant, and tried to keep up with the major events outside the valley, mostly by exchanging letters with relatives who lived down in Finitra. I loved it there, but it was good to know I could probably get by if I had to go somewhere else.”

“Your people were wise in that, I think.”

“Yes. Life was good there.”

“Life will be good again, I assure you.

“Help yourself to these pastries, I know they’re probably much smaller than the ones you’re used to.”

They shared a companionable silence for a while, before Yazadril spoke again.

“Sometimes it’s good to start over. I had a wife and a daughter when I was only a bit more than two hundred years old, but I lost them in a war some eight hundred years later. I lost my parents and my brother then too. I had a second wife and two sons, over five thousand years ago. None of them lived beyond their third millennium.

“And now, to my great and constant surprise, at the age of eight thousand four hundred and seventy-six, I have a beautiful young wife again, and two lovely twin daughters only slightly older than yourself!”

“Oh! Well, congratulations, I guess!”

“Thank you! Thirty-five years I have been married to Nemia, and it is still very much a subject worthy of congratulation, *I think!*” Yazadril chuckled.

“Ah.” Markee smiled, his heart touched by the ancient wizard’s obvious joy. “Thirty-five years. If it’s not impolite to ask, how old is your young wife?”

“She is only two hundred fifty-eight, and the very *picture* of beauty! I don’t mind telling you, I’ve found it wise to increase my exercise since we married, and still there are times when I’ve had to augment my stamina with the power to keep up with her bounteous energy!”

Markee actually chuckled, and the small amount of his face around his eyes and nose that wasn’t hidden by his hair and beard blushed bright red.

“Oh not that, Nemia is a wonderfully relaxing lover.” Yazadril chuckled. “Dancing mostly. That’s when she really tests my old heart! A touch of the power can be very important at times like that!”

Markee burst out laughing, which was a unique experience for Yazadril, since the powerful, incredibly low sound of it made Yazadril’s entire chest cavity and all the sinuses in his skull vibrate with a rumbling sensation that almost tickled.

Markee misread his surprised expression. “I’m sorry Yazadril, I don’t mean to offend! But it will take some adjustment in my thinking for me to picture a woman who’s two hundred and fifty-eight years old as your bright young new wife! The oldest person I ever knew died of old age at seventy-six!” And he burst out laughing again.

“And what does that make me?” Yazadril asked with a smile and a raised eyebrow.

Markee laughter calmed, but he still smiled. “You are beyond old. To me, at eight thousand and whatever years old, you’re eternal. You’re immortal. And I must admit, simply because you’re so completely outside my experience, that there’s a small part of me that’s skeptical of your claim.

“Ah, understandable. And well spoken; most could not have phrased it so diplomatically.”

“Well, my speaking and my writing were the delight of my teachers, but my maths were their despair. Though I’d have done all right at the maths if I didn’t hate them so much!” Markee revealed, and chuckled again with a sound so low and quiet that Yazadril felt it more than heard it.

“And how quickly did you learn musical skills?” Yazadril eagerly asked.

“Pretty fast I guess. We had quite a few different kinds of instruments around the valley, and I could play them all as well as anyone, I guess. I was a good singer too, until my voice changed when I was eleven. I could still sing I guess, but I think it sounds too strange. The girls all giggle when I sing now. I mean they did. And I couldn’t play the tin horn when my lips got too thick for the mouthpiece, but I was still okay on the bigger horns. And I had to figure out new fingerings for some of the chords on the lute when my fingers got too thick. At least they got reach too. I could still play the harp, but I had to pick the strings with my fingernails. The harp’s my favorite. My father and I were making me one, with more space between the strings so I can play it with my fingertips like you’re supposed to. It’s about half done, after a year’s work, but every part had to be perfect for my father, and there are a lot of parts in a forty-nine string harp.”

“Ah. Excellent! Did you know; when you are unsure of yourself, you say ‘I guess’ quite frequently?”

“I guess.” Markee grinned.

“In this case, it’s obvious that you’re unsure of your musical skills, simply because of the rapid and unique adjustments your unusual stature has necessitated. Once you’ve finished growing, and taken some time to become accustomed to your unique gifts, both musical and otherwise, I’m sure you’ll find that they won’t hinder you in any way.

“And as to your voice... My boy, I assure you that I do not exaggerate in the slightest when I say that you have the most beautiful voice I have ever heard in my life! It gives me a powerful emotion, simply from hearing you speak, and laugh. The mere thought of hearing you sing is almost enough to bring a tear to my eye!”

“Huh. Well, I’m glad you think so. I still think it sounds strange. But then, when you first called hello, I thought you sounded like a little old lady.” Markee chuckled. “I imagine you don’t have very many bass singers among the High People, if most of them are your size.”

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