

Lessons In Living

“You should both probably know,” I began matter-of-factly as we comfortably rode through the night inside the carriage, “I’m the only one who can reverse your change from being a wolf. You run away, you might as well find another wolf and settle in. You’d also better hope I remain alive. Should I die, your transformation will become permanent. It’s all part of the Diamond family magic.” And this was all a lie. Had Jordana studied more, she would have known that. Princess Serafin had no clue and virtually no possibility of knowing whether I spoke the truth or not. Her business was being a snobby princess and she had not the least clue about sorcery. Someone from her entourage had referred to sorcery as a ‘dark art’. Please. Sorcery was dark when used in a dark manner. There was certainly nothing inherently evil about it.

The palace coach I’d taken came to a gentle halt outside one of my Regillus City estates. “Ladies, this is my East Briar house,” I told them, stepping down from the coach. In the pleasant glow of the gaslights that lit the front of the house, the driver had no difficulty spotting or catching the small gold coin I tossed him with a smile. “Well, come on,” I told the two wolves. “You can’t go with the nice man. You’re place is with me.” Neither moved aside from looking around through the open door.

With a less pleasant smile I raised my hand. There came a faint, electrical popping sound and both of the wolves yelped and spontaneously leapt out of the carriage. Grinning, the driver threw me a salute before departing into the night. No doubt, working at the Castellum, he’d almost certainly seen stranger things than a member of the royal family talking to wolves as though they were people and then using magic to help coax them along.

“Here are the ground rules,” I told the two wolves as I walked towards the front door. “The time you spend with me will be as pleasant or unpleasant as you choose to make it. I’m fine with doing things either way. As for the rules themselves, they are simple: what I say goes. Do what I tell you, when I tell you. Not very generous rules to be sure, but they don’t need to be. I won the dual and you both belong to me until I say otherwise.” Jordana growled menacingly.

“Oh?” I asked with an artfully raised eyebrow. “You couldn’t beat me at sorcery so you think maybe you can take me as a wolf? Don’t be silly dear. A wolf is a good form to be in. You have claws, you have sharp teeth, and the ability to run all day. It’s a much better form than say... a rat perhaps? Or a speckled copper fish.” Seeing the look on my face and coming to a sudden understanding of the tone of my voice, she took my hint and the growling stopped. With key and spell I unlocked the door before leading them inside.

“I don’t stay here very often despite the fact I’m rather fond of the place. It has an excellent view of the city from the garden terrace. Perhaps we’ll have tea here sometime so you can have a chance to appreciate the vista. However, not tonight. Tonight, we’re going to Edotoma. A small house out in the country. You’ll like it. There’s good hunting there and virtually no people.”

Stopping in the east parlor, I pulled the cover off the large mirror there as the two wolves warily followed me into the room. After blocking their view of the runic location code I punched into the base of the mirror, I quickly moved aside as the reflection in the mirror changed to a daytime view of a small house in the country. The time differential between Regillia and Edotoma varied a bit. Time was generally a little faster in Edotoma but not a great deal. Usually, about five days in Regillia meant that seven had passed in Edotoma. It sometimes varied a bit depending on certain fluctuations

between the Well of Time and the Probability Maze. A nice and orderly arrangement, all things being equal. The Possibility Vortex, which began at the very furthest end of the Maze, was another matter. It was much closer to an opening in the Well and events there were usually much faster. It is said that some worlds in the Vortex move so quickly that entire generations are born and die during one of our single days.

Coming out of my reverie, I noticed both the wolves staring at me. “Well, go ahead,” I told them. “Step on through. We haven’t got all night.” Serafin whimpered again.

“No, you’re going through and you’re going through first. I can’t have you running around the city as a wolf. What if you were to get caught and put in the pound? How would I explain to your mother that the litter of puppies you had thanks to the attentions of some stray were actually her grandchildren?” Oh yes. I was in a high humor tonight.

Wolves have to make quite an effort to look horrified but to my eyes Serafin succeeded. I made a shooing gesture and she hopped over the base of the mirror and through. Jordana gave me a long, baleful look before following her into the sunlit world beyond. With a pleased smile, I followed after them. The mirror’s default connection time for a location connection still had another twenty three seconds so I waited until I was sure the connection had dropped before turning my attention to my new surroundings.

To my right stood a tidy little house which still had one of my warding spells protecting it from intrusion. With a wave of my hand I disabled it. Easier than dispelling it, especially since I’d be needing it again when we left.

All around this clearing stood deep woods. At one end of the clearing a garden grew; one that was evidently still being tended by the wood sprites I’d struck a previous deal with. I’d guaranteed their woods would remain free of lumberers and they’d agreed to tend my garden so that I’d always have fresh vegetables ready when I visited. On top of the large rock in the shade at the edge of the garden were today’s pickings. What was still there when the sun went down the sprites would distribute amongst themselves. Conjuring a basket, I gathered up what I thought would be good with dinner and made my way to the house.

Reaching the porch, I found both wolves looking at me from a short distance away. “If you like, you can explore the area. There’s no other houses for several miles in any direction. I’ll leave the door open so you can come and go as you please. Do not leave the woods and try not to provoke any of the Fae who call this area home. Otherwise, you could end up with a nasty curse.” And with that I opened the door and stepped inside. Serafin immediately followed me inside. I was not particularly surprised.

Sometime after I’d finished eating, Jordana showed back up.

During the following week, Aunt Helena tried mirroring me three times. I ignored all her attempts. I did however answer Max’s calls. She wasn’t thrilled with having to run the company without me but she did seem to be getting used to it. Moreover, she was getting good at it.

On the fifth day, I changed Jordana and Serafin back to human form for the afternoon. Both seemed relieved even if their ballroom clothing wasn’t suitable for a little house in the woods. Being in a generally agreeable mood, I conjured them each an Edotoman sundress. Neither seemed particularly appreciative but then what did one expect from spoiled brats?

We spent the afternoon in quiet conversation, nibbling at some of the vegetables from the

garden. For this first talk I steered the discussion away from anything controversial. Both women were pleased enough to be able to speak again that they forgot to be angry for a while though there was some sulking. I suspected from little glimpses of her expression when she thought I wasn't looking that Jordana was considering hitting me with a spell. Fortunately for her, she chose not to try it. Serafin just seemed relieved not to be a wolf for the moment. And later when I told them I was changing them back, she seemed quite upset again. Still, neither of them tried to fight me which surprised me a bit. Even if Jordana had given up on throwing a spell at me, I had more than halfway expected her to try balling up a fist and hitting me.

Again, lucky for her she did not.

To be honest, I wasn't sure if this lack of attack came from some acceptance of their situation or perhaps from the fact that I still had the knife near my hand; the one that I'd been using to cut our vegetables with. Daddy had a nasty reputation as a knife fighter and most of the court knew that he'd trained me in the same fighting techniques from a very young age. It was the reason I almost never assassinated someone with a knife. Nothing to draw suspicion towards me.

Both were quite surprised when, after I changed them back to wolves that evening, I changed myself into one as well. A handy ability I'd picked up early on walking the Great Machine. As a wolf I was a bit larger than either of them. I wasn't honestly sure if this was due to something I'd unconsciously done or if this was simply how matters stood.

Leading them outside, I took them hunting.

"That was barbaric," Serafin declared later after I'd once more changed them back to human. She continued to tremble and shake slightly. The small deer had died quickly. Serafin had been torn between the hunting instincts that came with her wolf form and the behavioral restrictions that had been pounded into her as a princess. The smell of blood had been hard for her to turn away from. But she'd done so.

Not Jordana.

She'd been right there with me for the kill and the meal that followed. And while Serafin seemed shocked and troubled by the whole episode, Jordana seemed surprised and maybe a little thoughtful. I marked it as a very small victory but a victory nonetheless.

Two nights later, walking back inside the cabin and setting my communications mirror down thoughtfully, I turned to the once again human Serafin. "What type of weapon were you planning on dueling me with?" I asked her.

"Excuse me?" she replied, obviously surprised by the turn of our new conversation had started off with.

"Had I taken you up on a more traditional duel at the ball, what kind of weapon would you have chosen? Since you challenged me, I would hope you've had some training."

"Oh. That." She shrugged dismissively. "Well, I'm actually pretty good with a dueling sword. Some time ago Princess Helena suggested you were not so good with a long blade. I remembered that when you insulted me. Unfortunately, I was angry enough that I didn't remember that the challenged party has the choice of weapon." Very little insult if any had been given. Perhaps

she really did have a temper but I had yet to see any sign of it. I was thinking she had an ulterior motive. Just what that might be still eluded me.

“A dueling sword. Okay, and you?” I asked, looking to my captive cousin.

She laughed. “A machine gun? Laser pistol? So far as traditional weapons go, I suppose I would choose a dueling sword as well. And I won’t make the same mistake twice and assume that you haven’t been getting better with one of those either.”

“I do not believe the modern weaponry will work where we’re going.” Moving back towards the door, I called, “Come along, we’re going shopping.”

Serafin laughed and clapped her hands together. At least she did until she saw Jordana’s face. “What’s wrong?”

Sighing and shaking her head, Jordana didn’t reply. Instead, she simply followed me out into the night.

“Alright,” I told them walking into the center of a nearby clearing, “Stay close to me. I’m going to generate a teleport circle around us.”

“But where are we going?” Serafin asked.

“Warburtons,” I replied as I began casting the spell.

“Teleport circles are advanced magic,” Jordana stated with a frown. “Generating a teleport circle leading to other worlds is very advanced magic.”

“I’m glad you appreciate the difficulty involved,” I muttered, dividing only a small amount of my attention away from building the circle.

“So you know where this Warburtons is?” Serafin asked.

“Yes,” Jordana replied. “It’s in a world called Califan which is also the capital city. Warburtons is a magic shop on the outskirts of the capital. Used to be over a league away but the city’s grown over the years. It is a *very large* magic shop. Rather pricey but you can find just about anything you might be looking for there. The real question is why are we going there?”

Rather than reply to them, I spoke with the guardian spirit that was the outer layer of Warburtons’ security, “Ambrose, this is Clarissa Dyle. I’m coming through and bringing two with me.”

In a deep, rich voice that was not generated by vocal cords, the spirit replied, “Lady Clarissa. A teleport circle? Very well, the teleport pad is clear. You may initiate travel when ready.” And with a sudden surge of power into the spell, we were suddenly standing in Warburtons. “Thank you Ambrose. Hope you’re doing well.”

“Indeed, Lady Clarissa. Did you like my use of the phrase ‘initiate travel when ready’? I’ve been dealing with more and more high tech worlds of late. That is how they speak.”

“You’re becoming a very world-wise spirit,” I told him with a smile. A woman wearing store livery walked up bearing a tray with a drink, which she immediately and wordlessly offered me. “Thank you,” I told her accepting the drink.

“Why didn’t we get something to drink?” Serafin pouted.

“It’s a mana potion,” I explained, before taking a long drink. “It’s to restore the magical energy I just spent bringing us here.”

“Oh,” she replied. She then turned her attention to the store around us.

“Come along,” I told them. “Let’s get off the teleport pad and over to the section we’re here for.”

“And what section would that be?” Jordana asked, looking around like a tourist in a wonderful new realm.

“Weapons and armor,” I replied, leading them along.

“Why?” my cousin asked.

“Because we’re going to a war zone and may see some fighting,” I told them as we walked through the huge store. Before they could answer, a salesman on a flying carpet floated up next to us.

“Would you prefer a lift?” he asked pleasantly.

“Indeed,” I replied, stepping onto the carpet. The other two followed.

“We didn’t sign on for any war,” Jordana growled quietly. “And even if we had, I’ve got a suit of armor and weapons back home.”

“Family weapons marked with the family crest.” To the salesman, I said, “Weapons and armor, please.” Returning my attention to the two women, I said, “This is not a family operation and I do not want it confused as such. Cheer up. It’s going to be a great change of pace. You’ll see.” Serafin’s mouth dropped and Jordana frowned as she tried to figure out if I was joking or not.

“I never had a pair of magical underwear before,” Serafin stated quietly as we walked out of the huge store. She seemed a bit awestruck. “Nor armor or the other protective gear you bought. I would never have believed there existed magical gear that cost the same as an entire kingdom.”

“Tell her Jordana,” I said, making fists with my new gauntlets. They felt good, the armor and magic a potent combination of defense and raw power, both physical and magical.

“Tell me what?” Serafin asked a moment later when my cousin remained silent.

“This equipment is nice but it’s really not that great. Mother’s got a sword that would cut through any of these suits without a pause. Most, if not all of my cousins, aunts, and uncles do. I wouldn’t be surprised if most of the great families didn’t have something similar or equivalent.”

After walking for a while, Jordana asked, “Okay. Where are we going now and why didn’t we use one of the transport mirrors at Warburtons?”

“Too public,” I replied, leading us through the streets to the Dyle Alchemical factory here. “My factory has a mirror. We’ll use that one.” They were clearly not satisfied with my answer but neither asked anything further.

Half an hour later, once we had all stepped through the large transport mirror at the factory, I announced, “Welcome to the war.” We stood on a mountain precipice in a good-sized army camp. Dyle special forces troops immediately disabled the mirror on this side and took it away. Below us lay a large city nestled amongst the mountains. A large city abounding with life and magic, though the magic was not of the quality the three of us now bore.

“War? What war?”

“Some months ago, an Abyssal lord showed up on this world fragment with a legion of shadow minions. We’re here to help prevent them from killing everything in this world.”

“What’s an Abyssal lord?!” Serafin demanded with an edge of panic in her voice.

“A dark lord,” Jordana replied angrily. “A creature of pure evil. Originally a man or a woman, they voluntarily went to hell under special circumstances and there they were steeped in dark magic. Demons taught them every low means of fighting known to them. They were taught to lead armies by fear alone. They are said to be immortal,” she finished, eyes locked on mine.

“They are not immortal,” I told her as though I knew this for a certainty. “Nor are their armies. And in this case we have superior ground. Vastly superior.”

“How so?” Jordana asked with a notable trace of challenge.

“Notice how yon city is surrounded by mountains?” I asked, trying not to smile.

After looking around for a long moment, she nodded.

“There are three paths into the city. One is via an underground river. The second is via an enchanted wood. The last is a winding mountain road. And well over a league of that road has a very long fall on one side and a sheer rise on the other. The Abyssal lord had to take the mountain road.”

“What does it want?” Serafin asked, trying to calm herself.

“It’s been destroying cities in this world for months. Ever since it got here really. However, there is a pattern to this destruction and we finally found it. The creature is seeking out high temples of the Creator. Val Galadan,” I said with a nod to the city below, “was the nearest city to the last that was conquered and destroyed by the Abyssal lord.”

“How long have you been fighting on this world?” Jordana asked in a more normal tone.

“I became involved about a month ago when an envoy reached me,” I explained. “They’d originally looked for Victor but he had other plans. This war was a little too small for his tastes. He sent them on to me.”

“Why would Victor do that?” Jordana demanded.

“Because he’s a Diamond and sometimes we have perverse senses of humor,” I replied blandly. “That’s my guess anyway. If you truly want to know his motives, you’ll have to ask him. After we’re done here though.”

My look hardened. “You have three days,” I told them, abruptly changing the subject.

“Three days for what?” Serafin asked almost hesitantly.

“To practice or otherwise prepare,” I replied simply.

“What happens after that?” she asked, her voice plainly saying she didn’t want to hear what she knew I was about to say.

“We exchange practice and preparation for the real thing,” I told her gently. “These ladies will show you to your tents,” I said, gesturing to the two attendants who’d just joined us. “Do not stray from the camp. Do, and you’ll be fighting shadow minions in only your magical underwear.”

“My mother’s going to be quite upset if you get me killed during one of your little games,” Jordana said. From the way she blushed, it was plain to see that she regretted saying it as soon as she’d done so.

“Then be a dear and practice hard and well,” I replied simply.

Late that night Maxine walked into the command tent. “I just gave Jordana one of my old spell books and an extra large restorative potion. She should be able to cast all night with that.”

“What of Princess Serafin?”

“She practiced for a while with some of the guards. Using normal weapons I might add. She got the stuffing beat out of her but they gave her a healing potion and she’s sleeping it off. They all agreed that there’s hope for the girl.”

“Very good,” I said with a smile. “Sit down and rest. You’ve been making me tired just watching you.”

“Funny,” she replied with a wry smile, “I was just thinking the same thing about you. Changing the subject briefly before we both go get some sleep, how is it that taking these two into

a war is going to help anything? Other than preventing a bunch of good people from being slaughtered if we succeed?”

“Jordana’s become used to being walked over by her mother. Because of this, she’s become bitter, repressed, and even more bitchy than she used to be. And that’s saying something.

“There is something of a warrior spirit in each of us Diamonds. Awakening that spirit reminds us that we’re alive. I just hope it hasn’t been ground to ashes in my cousin. I doubt that I’ll like her any more if she wakes up and starts being a little truer to herself.. but I doubt I’ll like her any less either. Time will tell.”

“And what about Princess Serafin?”

“Oh, I rather expect this has been and will continue to be something of an awakening for her,” I said with a wry grin. “Whatever her real motives might be.”

“Oh,” Max replied with a shake of her head, “I’m sure at the very least it’s been that. At the very least.”

“Is the enemy army progressing as expected?” Jordana asked.

“Yes,” I replied seriously. “They’ll be here this time tomorrow. More specifically, they’ll be about a third of a league out there along the mountain trail.”

“And they’ll be there because that’s where we’re going to engage them?” she said with just a hint of questioning in her voice.

“Yes. That’s correct.”

“What can we expect from the shadow minions,” Serafin asked. She’d gained a lot of confidence in the last couple of days.

Max answered her question. “This Abyssal lord is called Abbadon. She has the corrupting touch and her minion’s share it as well. The touch, usually delivered via some nasty claws or a bite, destroys living flesh. It works quickly and is an unpleasant way to die. And that is also how new shadow minions are created. Basically, they are a nasty, virulent form of undead.”

“But our armor will protect us, right?” she demanded.

“Yes. The corrupting touch has to actually touch flesh in order to do its damage.”

“How big is the army that’s coming at us?” Jordana asked.

“Just shy of five hundred thousand,” I answered. Her jaw dropped.

“We only have twenty five thousand here,” she stated incredulously. “How can you hope to win against such superior numbers?”

“A sound strategy, good tactics, superior magic and equipment, terrain suited for our strategy, and a healthy supply of angelic channelers. They’ll be healing our wounded and bolstering morale.”

“Oh, we are so screwed,” my cousin declared with a sigh before stalking out of the tent. Serafin threw me a frown and quickly followed after Jordana.

“How have they been progressing?” I asked Max.

“Jordana’s surprisingly competent with her sword. Few of the guards can stand up to her now. Watching her practice is like watching someone slowly wake up. She’s becoming more focused, more confident, and more formidable. She’s also been practicing her spell casting. Energy bolt seems to be her favorite but she’s also good with ghost grip and object detonation.”

This brought a rather bitter laugh from me. “Ghost grip is a variant telekinetic spell. When we were young, she made my life miserable for a while with that sort of spell.”

“Matters are somewhat different now,” she told me with a pat on my back.

“Indeed.”

“So you grew up and she remained the eternal teen. Filled with angst, no great ambition for herself, and no prince to sweep her off her feet? Is that it?”

“Something like that,” I agreed tiredly. All the arrangements for the upcoming battle were a tiring pain. They always were no matter where one took an army.

“And now she’s going to grow up,” Max stated. “You know she could very well die tomorrow. For that matter, we all could.”

“Possible but unlikely,” I replied thoughtfully. “And if she does die, then she’ll die like a Diamond. She chose her path when she challenged me. Now I’m going to let her do something her mother should have done decades ago.”

“What’s that?” my best friend asked.

“I’m going to let her live her own life and let her pay her own way for the choices she’s made.”

“What’s the situation,” I demanded with a scowl.

“Our forward elements engaged the enemy’s scouts. They then created a small landslide which covered about half the trail. They’re holding that position against the enemy advance.”

“How close are they to the trail entrance?”

“About a third of a league,” Max replied with a frown to match my own.

“What is it?” Jordana demanded, as she joined our conversation. Standing in the edge of the gap where the trail first changed from the treacherous mountain path into a more friendly road, I’d hoped to be able to see the leading edge of the enemy army from here before any fighting started. Daddy always said that no plan survived the first few minutes of battle. Looked like he was right again.

“The battle has started,” I replied grimly.

She turned her gaze down the trail but like me saw only trail. “But our army is still on the other side of the gap,” she said quietly.

“Yes,” I agreed angrily. “It is. The enemy forces moved faster yesterday than they had in the previous three weeks. And as you can see, our army is just now moving through the gap.” As we spoke, the first ranks ran past our position and out along the road. “The enemy forces are not going to be where I’d hoped they would be,” I finished, speaking more to myself than either of them.

“This can still work,” Max stated. “The forward elements engaged them to give the regular army time to get into position. We’ll just have the lead elements fall back after the regulars are in position.”

“How much of the enemy army has entered the trail?” I asked.

Max pulled out a scrying crystal and muttered a quick spell. I muttered a second spell that made the vision the crystal showed much larger than the small, clear stone could have otherwise managed. A plague of what had once been people was crowded around the other end of the mountain trail. Thousand upon thousands of what had once been human beings, their skin wilted to a dull black, strained to enter the path. Some were jostled off the edge of the cliff but not enough. Not nearly enough. And there, at the center of this dark swarm, was a point of stillness. A deeper, fouler darkness.

The Abyssal lord Abbadon herself.

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Once, twice, and a third time. With a frown, I glanced at Max to see if she knew what had caused the sounds.

“That’ll be Edgar and Elise. A couple of Dyle sorcerers I borrowed earlier along with the special forces troops. They volunteered to join the forward teams.”

Jordana’s gasp caught our attention. Following her focused gaze, we realized that a wave of darkness was sweeping up towards our viewpoint just a moment before the crystal exploded in Max’s hand. Max screamed, blood splashing the crystal shards ripped through her hand.

My cousin turned and bellowed, “Channeler!” Max began a slow collapse before I caught her and eased her the rest of the way down to the ground.

“I should have expected that,” my friend whispered, her eyelids fluttering. “I was careless.”

“You’re human,” I replied, checking her hand. As I’d glimpsed earlier, it was badly burned and cut. And that was with her wearing her armor ring on that hand. I shuddered to think what would have happened had she not been wearing it. “You’re bound to make mistakes every so often. Learn from it and don’t repeat it.” Three angelic channelers came running up. “The channelers are here. They’ll have your hand fixed up in no time at all.” Then I noticed something that turned my blood cold. Plucking a shard of crystal embedded in her hand, I realized the crystal had not been burned black.

It had been contaminated.

The first of the three channelers slid to a stop next to us. “Sorceress DeArkanos!” he gasped. Grabbing her hand, he began muttering prayers beseeching the Archangel Gabriel to speed her healing. After his first prayer was done, small pieces of crystal that had been buried in her flesh pushed their way up and dropped to the dirt. The bleeding slowed. “I think we can move her back to her tent now,” he told us, even as thin lines of black began slowly spreading out from the wound beneath the skin of her wrist and finger.

“No,” I replied gravely. “The Abyssal lord touched the crystal with her power. It was tainted before it exploded.” The other two channelers, a man and a woman arrived in time to hear my pronouncement.

“We’ll have to purify her here,” the woman stated, taking the other two in with her look. “This will give us a much better idea of what we’ll face on the battlefield. Let’s join together. We’ll focus our prayers. I don’t think any taint can withstand the focused powers of three different archangels.” The three formed a triangle around Max and began praying.

Turning away I began walking quickly towards the front lines.

Jordana caught my arm further down the trail and slowed my fast strides towards the enemy. Serafin had followed her. “Clarissa wait!” she demanded. Stopping, I turned a glare upon my cousin. “You can’t fight them alone! You need to get back to following your plan. You had a plan going into this. A strategy. You need to get back to it.”

“I’m going to deal with this now,” I growled, pulling away from her and moving once again towards the front.

“And how are you going to do that?” she demanded, keeping up with me by means of shoving people out of her way. She’d definitely inherited the family’s physical strength, so moving large, heavily armored men and women out of her way presented no real problem. A fact she demonstrated over and over again as she kept pace with me. Serafin followed in her wake.

“I’m going to drop an expanding, mystic’s energy thread on her,” I snarled. “Screw the strategy.” She stopped in her tracks. From the clatter, I suspected that Serafin ran into her but I

didn't stop to look.

A moment later she came running up and stopped in front of me. For a moment I considered pitching her off the cliff but it was only a momentary urge, quickly gone. "What?" I demanded, stopping before her.

"You can do that?" she asked. When I stepped to move around her she stepped with me to block my path. "Okay," my cousin said hurriedly, "I get it. You can."

"I don't understand!" Serafin informed us, moving to stand a bit off to my side. "What's so bad about this thread thing? If it kills the Abyssal monster quickly, so much the better. Right?"

"Yes," I agreed, taking another step to move around Jordana at the same time she moved with me and almost shouted, "No!"

"What... why isn't it?" Serafin demanded, sounding confused.

"This is a magic leaning world," Jordana explained as I stood fuming. "A thread big enough to kill an Abyssal lord would be uncontrollable. And as this is a magic leaning world, it will grow. It will pull all magic towards it, growing with each bit of magic it consumes. Eventually, it will burn through the very fabric that makes this world fragment. It would end up destroying this entire world and us with it!"

"You can't do that!" Serafin gasped.

"Oh, I most certainly can!" I countered angrily.

"But if you do, you'll hate yourself later," Jordana said quietly. "Please. Let's go back and try to salvage what we can of the original strategy."

Taking a deep breath, I let it out and turned another glare on the two princesses before me. Neither looked happy, but neither of the quailed either. "Are you volunteering?" I finally asked.

"Yes," Jordana stated and after biting her lip, Serafin nodded as well.

"Then come with me," I commanded, stepping past my cousin. The two followed after me until we reached a predetermined point almost a third of a league further down the trail. Those first portions of the regular army were gathered here, formed up in ranks and kneeling. The forward elements were much further along but we could now see them in the far distance. Flashes of light showed that at least one of the sorcerers was still alive. "There," I stated, stabbing a finger at the point of battle.

"The front," Jordana breathed.

"Yes," I agreed grimly. "And it needs to be here, right where we're standing. You two go to them. Take command and lead a fighting withdrawal back to here. If you can do that before the Abyssal lord decides to split her forces and attack from two or three sides instead of one, then I won't..." I let the rest of the sentence hang.

"I thought you said she couldn't attack from the other sides," Serafin said, sounding confused again.

"Not easily," I replied. "But not impossible. Not impossible by a long shot. You don't have much time. She could change her own strategy and then I'll have no choice. We'll start evacuating this world and save those we can."

With a growl, Jordana set off at a run.

Serafin watched her run a moment before turning to me. "You really love Max, don't you?"

"She's the sister I never had," I answered.

"The channelers will save her. You heard them."

I glanced back the way we'd come but saw no hint of Max's fate in that view. "Perhaps," I said quietly. "But the demons of hell invest a lot of power into the few Abyssal lords they make.

Their curses are deadly and spirit damaging. They could end up saving her body but still losing her soul. If you're going to catch up with Jordana, you'd better go."

"Don't worry, the channelers know their business. And I remembered something the salesman said that evidently your cousin forgot."

"What's that?" I asked, mildly curious.

"These armor suits are enchanted for flying." And with that she flew off to join Jordana. Maybe there was hope for them after all.

"By the mites on angel feathers," Jordana gasped almost five hours later. "My arms feel like they're made of solid gold. I've been swinging this sword so much I can hardly move."

"You've done well," I admitted. The two of them had done just as I'd asked. They'd taken command of the small forward units and they had slowly retreated back. Their exhausted people were being carried back through the ranks now as the regular army units took their place on the front line. "I watched you the whole way. You, Serafin, and your troops took down a lot of shadow spawn. You made good use of the cliff as well. I lost count of how many you knocked over the edge."

"Me too," she panted in between drinks from the canteen I'd handed her.

"Unwounded," the channeler kneeling next to Serafin informed me when I looked the question to her. "She's exhausted though. Same for him," the angelic minion said with a nod for one of the sorcerers. "The other magiker is wounded and the wounds are contaminated. I've dosed her with holy water. That should give us time to get her back to the triage area."

"Help them," I told the nearest group of soldiers waiting to reinforce those on the front line. A bellowing sergeant began giving specific orders to ensure that this was done smartly and in an orderly fashion. "You," I told my cousin, grabbing her shoulder and smiling, "Go to the gap and rest. You've earned a spot with a good view since you managed to salvage the original plan. Rest. And when our retreat reaches the boulder that juts out partway across the trail, start paying special attention."

"Attention to what?" she asked, interested despite being exhausted.

"You'll see," I reassured her. "Now go. I'll see you after the battle." I took it as a sign of just how tired she was that she actually obeyed without even giving me a dirty look.

It was almost dawn by the time the main army's fighting withdrawal reached the boulder I'd told Jordana to watch. Soon now. Very soon.

A corporal came to me from the front lines, "We've reached our way point ma'am," he said after a quick salute.

"I see that," I acknowledged. "You and your troops have done very well. The withdrawal stops as planned. Tell them to hold the line."

"Yes ma'am!" he grinned, throwing me another quick salute before pushing his way back through the ranks with shouts of 'make way!'

"And how are you feeling this morning Miss D'Arkanos?" I asked Max as she came walking up, her left hand tightly bandaged.

“Pretty good all things considered,” she replied, not sounding like she meant it in the least. “Channelers said my hand was going to have to heal naturally. Took ‘em a while to get all the contamination out. Healing potion helped but not nearly as much as it should have.”

“That’s what I’d heard,” I told her somberly. “All of the wounded seem to be having the same problem. Gonna be a lot of scarring after this fight.”

“I suppose I’ll have to wear gloves at social events from now on,” she mused aloud with a frown.

“Probably not,” I contradicted. “Most likely after it heals we can break out the Dyle alchemical potion and salve arsenal and take care of the scarring. However, if the healing potions we brought didn’t do much, all that will probably have to wait until time takes care of the healing.”

“What did I miss? I fell asleep some time ago,” Jordana asked, walking up with a tired looking Serafin. She threw a look at the princess who trailed after her and amended, “What did we miss?”

“Just a long night of slow, fighting retreat. The army has only just now reached the way point I told you about yesterday.”

“So whatever your plan was, it is only just now getting ready to begin?” Serafin asked sounding tired and confused.

“The next stage of it my dear,” I replied with a distracted smile.

“Do those by any chance have something to do with your plan?” Jordana asked, pointing to the sky just over far horizon.

“What is it?” Serafin asked, squinting as she tried to make out the slowly growing shapes.

“Yes,” I told my cousin with a smile.

“This should be good,” Max said, pulling out a silver bowl and setting it on the ground. She then pulled out a small flask and poured its contents into the bowl. Despite the size of the flask, it seemed to have more than enough water in it to fill the bowl. She exchanged the flask for her casting wand and began casting a scrying spell. This took longer than the scrying crystal would have but not overly so. Max was good at her job. The princesses Jordana and Serafin divided their attentions between the approaching shapes in the sky and my friend’s spellworking.

“No!” my cousin gasped, staring off at the sky about the same time a vision of that portion of the enemy army that wasn’t trapped on a league long length of mountain trail appeared in Max’s scrying bowl.

“Oh, yes,” I countered with a smile as I absently enlarged the image from the casting bowl.

“Dragons?!” Jordana asked incredulously causing Serafin to gasp.

“Yes,” I purred. “It seems they hate demons, and therefore Abyssal lords, with a rather extreme passion. Of course, it required more than that to get them here. Dragons don’t leave their lairs cheaply. It took a lot of gold and promising them a couple of princesses, but it was worth it.” The looks of surprised suspicion on their faces were simply precious. With a laugh, I admitted, “That last part was a joke. Not very nice of me, I suppose.”

“But very funny,” Max said with a grin.

“Eh,” Jordana disagreed.

“Oh! Here they go,” I told them, alternating my gaze between the distant flight of dragons and the scene hovering above the scrying bowl. As one, the dragons began a steep dive towards the apparently unaware army of shadow spawn. A moment later they passed out of our view and our eyes all turned towards the scryed image.

The scene was at once fascinating and disappointing. One moment there was an army of

shadow spawn sprawling out at the extreme ends and focusing down to a narrow point where the mountain trail narrowed. This portion was much smaller now that a large part of that army had become spread out along a league of mountain road. And then the next moment flames filled the entire image. Our viewpoint caught the briefest glimpse of a wingtip passing through and that was it. The flames were now definitely on the ground but the all encompassing fire was so intense that all we could see was a single, gigantic, roaring blaze. Not even demons liked dragon fire. That portion of the plan had worked quite nicely. Even if it had been extremely expensive in the arranging.

After a few minutes, we could see a column of thick smoke rising up from the around the edge of the mountain. Max began putting her scrying tools away. Time for the next step.

“Excuse me ladies,” I said before walking into the ranks of troops lined up along the mountain road. The soldiers made way for me and I quickly arrived at the front line.

“Maintain this line,” I commanded. “I’m going to move into their ranks for a moment. Do not advance to follow me.”

“Understood General Dyle!” the sergeant in charge of this group acknowledged even as she parried and slashed at a shadow spawn. The front line troops were rotating back to rest every ten minutes so I had no doubt these troopers were ready for anything.

“Very good,” I said more to myself, drawing the sword I’d bought for this occasion. It was a good blade, shorter than most duelist seems to prefer but plenty long enough for my needs. Light and magically sharp, the blade had been blessed by a high channeler of the Archangel Azrael some two thousand years ago. And if there was one thing other than demons the archangel of death disliked, it was undead. This sword carried that dislike and channeled it into magical energy. It had cost ten times what either of the swords I’d bought for the princesses had and I couldn’t even keep it when we were done here. It had come with a caveat that it be passed along to another in need as soon as I finished with it. Just how Warburtons had been able to keep it was known only to them.

Wading into the fray, I slashed and hacked my way through the ranks of undead to a point some twenty paces past my lines. Holding off the shadow spawn with the sword in my left hand, I placed my right hand against the wall of the cliff.

“Humphry!” I called both aloud and with a pulse of magic. “Wake up Humphry! It’s time for you to go to work!” The dead again shadow spawn were beginning to pile up next to me when a deep, vibration echoed from the mountain. It turned into a rumbling sound that shook this portion of the road before a vaguely humanoid figure stepped out of the side of the mountain itself onto the path that suddenly seemed much too narrow for the large figure. The shadow spawn scabbled at it but were unable to damage the huge, stone figure.

“Is it time?” the earth elemental Humphry asked sleepily in a voice that rumbled so deeply I could feel the vibrations in the stone beneath my feet.

“Yes,” I told him, fighting off shadow spawn. I was plenty glad for the armor I’d bought and for the wall next to me that kept them from completely surrounding me. “It is time. You know what to do.”

“Yes,” he agreed, turning away from me. He then sank down most of the way into the stone road. Raising his arms, a section of trail rose up with him. Twisting a bit sideways, the rise turned with him, tossing a few of the undead monstrosities over the edge. The elemental looked back at me.

“That’s perfect Humphry,” I told him. After a nod, he turned to face away from me. With a shout that shook the mountain, the elemental began racing down the length of the road, the wave he’d formed throwing nearly all the undead off the mountain path as he went.

Looking back, I was only mildly surprised to find Max, Jordana, and Serafin fighting on the front line.

“Forward unit! At a walk... advance!” I yelled.

A joyous shout came from the army as they began slowly advancing. Ten minutes later they had finished cutting down the knot of shadow spawn that had been between them and the gap formed by the big elemental. After that, it was simply a matter of taking care of the stragglers Humphry had missed. I went jogging along with the front ranks, both in the hopes of finding Abbadon, the Abyssal lord, and in order to pay Humphry the gems I’d promised him.

Far below us, dragons swooped in and burned the broken remains of shadow spawn down on the rocks at the base of the cliff. They seemed to be enjoying themselves doing elaborate dives and aerial spins and such.

In Humphry’s wake, the road had been smoothed out. Almost perfectly flat, it was easy to make good speed trotting along after the big elemental. Eventually, I caught up with him. The rest of the forward units remained a bit behind me. He stood just to this side of the slowly dying conflagration that had been the enemy army.

“Thank you Humphry,” I told him, handing him a large bag of cut gemstones.

“I like the way your people cut the stones,” he replied before stepping into the side of the mountain. Elementals weren’t renowned for their conversational or social skills.

Walking through the slowly dying flames, my enchanted armor more than equal to protecting me from this much reduced fire, it took me over half an hour to find the Abyssal lord. Badly burned, she was still alive, a fact that surprised me none at all.

“Tricks,” she snarled, struggling to stand, she began tottering her way towards me. “You defeated my army with tricks.”

“You can look at it any way you want to,” I told her. “Regardless of how you choose to do so, it’s time for you to go back to hell.” And with that, I lunged forward and lopped her head off. The sword of Azrael really loved the combination of demon and undead. In a pulse of holy magic, her body turned to dust almost instantly.

Walking back out of the flames, I found Max and the two princesses near the spot where Humphry had stepped into the mountain. “Is it over?” Serafin asked.

“Yes,” I told her with a smile. “We’re finished. Let’s all get cleaned up and some rest. After that, I suspect we have a victory celebration to attend.”

“Now where are we?” Jordana asked a few weeks later.

“The Great Cultural Hall of Edotoma,” I replied, leading the two princesses around to the back of the stage. We were once again dressed in some of our best finery as we slowly walked the halls of this magnificent building. I’d released the both of them last night but had asked them to accompany me tonight. I was pleased that they had both agreed to do so.

“What are we doing here?” Serafin asked, looking around at the statuary and other art that had been built into this incredible building as we slowly walked around. “Is Akiko playing?”

“Jordana’s going to perform,” I answered with a quiet smile. “If she’s up to it.”

“What?” my cousin snapped. “Now you think I’m some sort of pet to be called upon to perform for you whenever you snap your fingers?!” Still so very touchy. A condition caused by long term and deep seated insecurities.

“No. You remain a Diamond. And Diamonds are no one’s pets,” I replied seriously. “No, I simply offer you the chance to play here. Just as some great painters cannot resist painting a scene of great beauty, as dancers cannot resist the theater at Percussis, so can most singers and musicians not resist the Cultural Hall or an instrument crafted by Morioko.”

“You have an instrument here that was made by Morioko?” she asked, suddenly most attentive and almost subdued.

“Indeed,” I acknowledged. “The great harp, Saseabo.” All of Morioko’s instruments were named. All the names were legendary among musicians. Aunt Flosia owned three of his creations. Daddy five. Personally, I had none. I wasn’t a musician so I left accumulating instruments to those who were or to the hard core collectors. This one had come from Aunt Flosia’s collection. Jordana’s lips formed the name without any sound.

Another thought visibly struck her and she frowned at me. “What’s the catch?”

“The catch is that you’ll be playing for the entire Edotoman high assembly,” I replied with a smile. She nodded thoughtfully. “And for the Regillian high court,” I added and watched the blood drain from her face.

“You can do it, Jordana,” Serafin told her with a smile and a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

“Yes,” I agreed seriously. “You have the talent. You’ve been practicing with Akiko for the last week. She’ll be out there with you.” Akiko was an Edotoman treasure. She sang and played a host of instruments like an angel. I’d known Jordana was good but I’d been shocked to discover that she and Akiko were on the same level. Indeed, Akiko thought Jordana a little better. I wasn’t sure enough to argue the point with her.

“Will...will my mother be out there?” my cousin all but whispered.

“Yes,” I told her firmly. “And so will our grandfather.”

“Jordana?” Serafin asked quietly, “Could doing something you love possibly be any worse than killing deer with your teeth or fighting an undead army?” My cousin didn’t reply for a long moment.

Finally taking a deep breath, she announced, “I’m going to do it.”

And she did receiving the most standing applause ever by a non-Edotoman in the history of the Cultural Hall.