

*Alchemy, Sorcery,
&
Magic*

A New Age Begins

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Special Thanks

I want to send out a special thank you to my family. To my children who recently urged me to finally publish my novel. To my sisters, brother and mom who have always been behind whatever endeavor I've undertaken. To my friends at work who read sample chapters while I was writing the first draft and couldn't wait for the next chapter to hit their desks. Without the support of my friends and family this novel would probably still be gathering dust in my desk drawer.

In Loving Memory

I'd like to dedicate this novel to my family pet who was more family than pet, Max. Sadly he passed over the rainbow bridge recently at the young age of less than 3 years old. He was my friend, my companion and sounding post for anything I had to say. He never walked away from me no matter what my mood and never argued with me either. His love of the water kept him jumping into the pool all summer long and I didn't begrudge him that simple pleasure. I cleaned out the filters filled with his long yellow hair without complaint ... well, not much anyway. He will always be a part of me and hold a special place in my heart.

DISCLAIMER

This novel is a work of fiction and is not intended to depict characters, people or events living, dead or works of other fiction. Any semblance to the living is incidental only.

INTRODUCTION

There is no such thing as true good or true evil. No such thing as pure black or pure white, only varying shades of gray. These are the basic axioms of the real world. There is no such thing as a person or entity which is entirely evil; however, there is no being or entity who cannot conceive of evil. If an evil person can comprehend goodness, there must be at the very least a small amount of good in that person. And if a good person can comprehend evil then there must be at least a small amount of evil in that person. In most people good and evil are weights which balance on a scale. Sometimes the evil is a little heavier than the good and sometimes the good is heavier. The heavier the good side, the better the person is perceived to be. In most cases, the balance changes minimally, whereas a large change occurs slowly over time and can usually be detected. However there are instances in which the scale swings in favor of evil or good without warning. It's not a premeditated act. It's just the nature of humans.

The universe has its own set of scales that swing back and forth like a pendulum. At the opposite ends of the spectrum is magic and technology. As the pendulum swings to and fro, from eon to eon, so changes the universal laws of nature. It is forever moving back and forth, swinging from magic to technology and back to magic. Onward, ever onward swings the pendulum. Unlike the mechanical pendulum of technology, the pendulum of the universe is slightly erratic in its progress from apex to apex. The amount of time during which magic or technology will be in dominance is unknown.

This is why some ages of technology are able to advance farther than others and why some ages of magic can create and perform more potent magic. The current technological swing of the pendulum allowed for radical advances in technology, thus creating a greater dependence on the marvels of the age. And now that dependence must be severed, as surely as the falling ax must sever the head of the chicken on the chopping block, as the

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pendulum swings back into the realm of magic. It's not an act of vengeance or retribution for the manner in which technology has mistreated the environment. It's just the nature of the universe.

It is due to the erratic swing of the pendulum of the universe that some ages of technology are able to advance farther than others and some ages of magic are able to discover more potent magic. The point at which magic and technology change over is not a clearly defined area. It is in fact an area of gray where both vie for dominance. Even now the pendulum continues on its endless path through time, heading toward the next age of magic.

The current reign of technology has provided for radical advances. As each new marvel is discovered, we become ever more dependent on the technology that created it. All too soon the pendulum will pass into the gray area that foretells the coming severance from technology. And foretell it does as surely as the farmer's ax head whistling through the air foretells the severing of the chicken's head that lies on the chopping block.

Onward will swing the pendulum of the universe until all ties to technology are left far behind and magic is the sole governing factor in nature. Surely this radical change will be the cause for mass hysteria and rioting. Civilization, as we understand it, will decay and turn to barbarism. That backward process will naturally continue until the leaders of the new age begin the process of re-civilizing the world. Of course it will be many years before civilization can spread beyond small isolated pockets. After all, the mantle of civilization is not one readily accepted by all.

The change of reign from technology to magic will cause untold hardships for those who survive. To say that the dead will be the only ones lucky enough to escape the hardships and suffering would not be entirely true. That's because sometimes even death is not an escape.

Trying to blame the change on any person or group of people is ridiculous. That kind of power is beyond the capabilities of mortal man. Blaming it on a god or gods is ludicrous for the gods have no power during the ages of

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technology. Suffice it to say that it is all a result of nature. No, it's not an act of vengeance or retribution for the manner in which technology has mistreated the environment. It's just the nature of the universe.

CHAPTER ONE - THE DISTANT PAST

Excerpts from the lost journal of Merlin

It couldn't be the first time it has happened. And it most likely wouldn't be the last. Just how it happened is still a mystery to me. It is enough that it has happened at all. I don't know if I can command enough life-force to return him from whence he came. Why did this have to happen now in my declining years? Why couldn't it have happened a few decades ago when I was still in my prime? Even the magic in the world is becoming diluted. Personally, I think that it marks the end of this age of magic. If this is so, then he must be dealt with quickly or he will remain here on earth in hibernation until the next age of magic. Soon our confrontation must begin and I must find a way to warn the magicians of the next age of magic of the dangers that could await them. Perhaps the best way to do so is to tell the whole story, as I know it, in its entirety.

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At the time, I didn't realize that there was a problem. I just thought that there was something a little strange with one of my fellow magicians. That in itself is not strange as we are a strange bunch, but of late he seemed a little stranger than usual.

Let's see now, it must have been about four years ago when I first noticed that Balthazar seemed to be gathering more slaves and animals than most magicians would require in a number of years. Not only that, but he seemed to be attracting a large number of apprentices and masters of both sorcery and alchemy.

Vague rumors began to reach me. There were mutterings about large vats of blood that constantly needed refilling. Hushed whispers of mutilated carcasses of both animals and humans being found throughout the forests were passing around. Finally there had been heard strange noises coming from what seemed to be below what had previously been the lowest depths of Balthazar's

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castle. On the surface these things were cause for concern, not alarm. It probably meant that he was just performing the necessary rituals to replace me as head of the council of magicians as I had replaced him years ago. Then again, the rumors might not all have been true at all. After all, one can't believe practically anything of what one is told and very little of what one sees.

However, as a precaution, I began preparations for my own conjuring just in case he was trying to overthrow me as head of the magician's council. He had a fairly good lead on me in preparation, but I felt confident in my abilities to repel another of his attempts to regain the position. Quickly and efficiently I began to make the preparations to ward off what I thought was coming. My blood vats were on the low side as I had been lax in refilling them over the past few months. To fill them would require a rather large number of animals, so I sent word out that a festival would take place in a couple of days. After all, you have to do something with the carcass once the blood has been drained from it and my meat lockers were stuffed to the limits, as was usually the case. I hoped that Balthazar would not recognize the festival for what it was since it was so close to the usual time for the annual autumn feast.

The feast went smoothly and the blood vats were full. With the influx of people for the feast the addition of a few masters of sorcery and alchemy, with their apprentices, went largely unnoticed.

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Some time had passed since the feast and still there was no indication of either a decrease or an increase in the activity level of Balthazar. This bolstered my confidence and generally deluded me. The preparatory rituals were well underway one Monday, when I received a message from an imp, a native of the Netherworld's upper levels.

The message was from Mandrake, another member of the council of magicians. The note read:

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Merlin,

I know that using imps to carry messages is unreliable, so I summoned one that could not read. I told him that it was vital that the note be delivered by the first Friday of Octavius or else the message would be worthless. Knowing the nature of imps as I do, it was almost a sure thing that you wouldn't receive the message, at least not before Sunday.

It's urgent that you come quickly. On the second Wednesday of the month of Octavius I'll cast a summoning spell for you through the netherworld. I think that what I have to show you to be of major importance to us all.

Your Friend,

Mandrake

Mandrake was more than just another member of the magicians' council; he was also an old friend and confidant. Even though it would mean a temporary delay in my work, I had to see Mandrake. He was not one to raise the alarm needlessly nor did he take to summoning guests through the netherworld on a whim or idle gesture as some of the other magicians were wont to do.

After reading the message I immediately went in search of Tyre, one of the master sorcerers who were currently helping me with my preparations. Moving into the antechamber of the Main Experiment Chamber I felt, rather than heard, the heavy dual doors close securely behind me. Just as my eyes started to adjust to the dim candlelight of the antechamber, the guard swung the doors open before me. Blinking the tears from my eyes, brought on by the brighter light of the outer corridor, I told the guards to admit no one until I returned.

I turned left since I needed alchemy supplies for the Main Experiment Chamber. On the way to the alchemists supply room, I looked into each experimentation chamber for Tyre, but to no avail. On the return trip, after having gathered the desired

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ingredients, I checked each rest chamber. By the time I had reached the entrance to the Main Experiment Chamber, I had still not located Tyre. As luck would have it, I finally located the tall lanky Tyre in the first experimentation chamber to the right of the entrance to the main.

The vacant stare and gaunt features on another would have prompted an order to rest and eat. However, knowing Tyre as well as I did, I waited until he had finished helping an alchemist before speaking.

"Tyre, I have a favor to ask of you."

"I'm yours to command master Merlin, you have but to ask and it will be done."

"In two days time I will be summoned through the netherworld by a friend. The following day I would like you to summon me back through the netherworld so that I may return quickly. I wouldn't ask this, but the preparations that are underway here require my personal attention periodically. There are also some that are nearing critical stages and need to be halted at just the right moment to enable me to complete them later when they are needed."

The second Wednesday of Octavius arrived and I partially passed into the netherworld awaiting Mandrake's summoning, using Tyre as my anchor to the real world. Looking around the netherworld it became apparent that something had changed, but I couldn't tell what the difference was, at least not then. Before I could pin down what was bothering me about the netherworld the summoning force arrived. It first came into view like a faintly glowing white line that seemed to have a life of its own as it steadily progressed through the gray mists in a serpentine manner. As soon as the line came in contact with me it lost its serpentine appearance and became straight as an arrow, that is, as straight as possible in the netherworld. At the same time that it straightened out, it got so bright that it was difficult to look at directly. Along with straightening out, it was drawing upon me. I gave Tyre the agreed upon hand signal to indicate that the summoning was underway. I felt his anchoring force suddenly fade at the same

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time that I started to concentrate on the white line. As my concentration focused, I had the feeling that I was being pulled along through the netherworld by that searing white line of force.

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The journey was thankfully a short one. It seemed that with each trip through the netherworld, the temptation to stop and taste the proffered delights became harder and harder to ignore. The creatures of the upper levels of the netherworld were becoming proficient at seeing through the outer layers of self-righteousness each traveler through their domain wrapped around themselves as protection. And in so seeing through the veil of feigned morality and civility, the passersby can more easily be seduced to pause or interrupt ones concentration long enough for the summoning line of force to dissipate. Without that summoning force giving guidance and direction, the sorcerer (or magician) might just as well revel in the delights that are being presented, knowing full well that the pleasure would soon be replaced by pain at the lower levels. The only hope is that the summoner is very powerful and/or can recast the summoning spell before one sinks through to the lower levels of the netherworld.

The human-like Dorks of the top level somehow seemed to sense when a traveler from the real world was passing through. Moments after completely entering into the netherworld, a small group of Dorks started to converge on where I was. As they drew near, it appeared that the ones looking like men, held back to allow the woman-like Dorks to get closer. Each of them represented everything desirable in looks, even though none of them sported a single strand of hair. It was easy to tell that they had no hair from the shameless, lewd manner in which they walked and due to the fact that they wore absolutely no clothing.

Somehow they could sense that the men held no appeal for me and the women set about displaying their willingness to sexually satisfy. I saw all of this from the periphery of my vision

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because I needed my concentration for the summoning line of force.

Their demonstration continued until they came to the conclusion that they wouldn't be able to get through to me that way. Since the first ploy didn't work, they decided to change tactics. The women then arranged themselves to best display their womanly charms as the men silently began to move forward. In moments the scene became what one would expect at a brothel as the women had the men show just how accommodating they could be.

My will power was weakening and I was uncertain of how much longer I could hold onto my resolve when suddenly I could see Mandrake in the distance. The vision of Mandrake's torso at the other end of the summoning line helped to strengthen my will power. As I neared, he took hold of my hand and pulled me through into his study.

Looking around me, I settled into one of the comfortable divans that were placed in various locations in the room. The room had an aura of peace and tranquility. From the bookshelves filled with research to the desk cluttered with open volumes from those same shelves, there seemed to be little or no change in the room since my last visit there. Oh, there seemed to be a little more dust in some areas but it was largely unchanged. Looking up I could see Mandrake talking to someone who had obviously been his anchor to the real world. She was not one of his familiar apprentices. Looking up Mandrake saw where my attention was focused.

"Ah, Merlin let me present to you one of my newest apprentices, Tarantha. She was apprenticed to my long standing ally Gond before he died."

"A pleasure to meet you Tarantha. I would also like to thank you for the part you played in helping to bring me here as you were obviously Mandrakes anchor to the real world."

"Please, call me Tara. The pleasure is all mine master Merlin. The honor of meeting you is all the thanks I need."

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"Flattery is the coin that buys all from this old man. Especially when the one doing the flattering is as pretty as you are Tara."

With the temptations of the netherworld so fresh in my mind, I suddenly realized that I was staring down the front of Tara's dress. I guess that I was trying to get a better look at the delights that appeared to be about to burst out of their confinement. With a sheepish grin I glanced up at her face. I was even more surprised to see her face a bright red. I think she must have been blushing.

"It was a great honor to meet you Master Merlin. Now I must ... uh ... I have other ... uh ... duties that require my form, uh, I mean presence."

And with that she rushed out of the study in such a rush that she almost pulled the door into herself. Chuckling, Mandrake locked the door behind her.

"Well Merlin, old friend, you still know how to make the girls blush. Don't worry; her problem is that she has spent so much of her time and energy studying sorcery that she has given little thought to her developing body."

"Imagine what would have happened if she had devoted all that energy toward the development of her body."

"That's not what I mean and you know it. She just isn't aware of the effect that her face and body have on men unless it is pointed out to her point-blank. Enough of that, I asked you here on important matters. First of all, when are you returning?"

"Tyre is supposed to cast a summoning tomorrow about halfway between mid-day and nightfall."

"Then we had better restore ourselves before we get so wrapped-up in conversation that we forget our health. I'll have plenty of time to show you the reason that I asked you to come in such haste."

"If you insist, then I'll take this spot. Are you sure that we won't be bothered?"

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"I left word that we are to be brought back as soon as dinner is ready to be served, so we should have quite a while for the restorative trance."

With that both us went into the trance like state that allows us to recoup some of the life-force used in performing magic.

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It seemed as though I had just positioned my body for meditation, when I was being brought back. As awareness slowly seeped back into my body, I could hear Mandrake stirring also. I started to worry that something had happened to my sight. There was nothing but blackness around me. As I was about to say something, I made out a dark shape kneeling near where I remembered the hearth to be. Then it registered on my brain that the shape was blowing on some glowing embers in an attempt to rekindle the fire. In a few moments a cheery blaze was once again burning in the hearth.

As the flames licked higher, I recognized Tara. This time she was wearing an elegant form fitting gown. Once again her breasts looked like they were about to burst out at any moment. Being careful not to make the same mistake twice, I stared into her eyes while thanking her. Still she blushed while staring at me and speaking to both of us. We were told that dinner would be served in the main dining hall momentarily and that she would wait for us there. And with that she turned and glided out of the room softly closing the door behind her.

"You seem to have made quite an impression on that girl Merlin. I haven't seen her wear any kind of dress to dinner for months. Not only that, but she seems to have picked the one that would most likely make you stare again."

"Yeah, right. I'm sure she's impressed with this crotchety old bag of bones that try to pass themselves off as a magician. Why with her looks, she could wed practically any man she wants."

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"Believe what you want but I think that she wants you. And be careful, because she is used to working hard for what she wants and persistent enough to get it most of the time."

"Oh come on, let's eat!"

That last was delivered with a friendly slap on the back as we turned and headed for the massive oak doors at the other end of the study. The passageway on the other side was dimly lit by a pair of torches on either side. Though I knew the hallway to be a short one, I still couldn't see the other end. Even the three nondescript doors that lined the right hand side were encased in shadow.

About halfway between the second and third doors, I stubbed my toe on a loose floor stone that had been hidden in the shadows. Stopping short, I grabbed Mandrake's sleeve to force him to face me.

"Damn it Mandrake! Have torches become so dear that you allow invited guests to injure themselves?"

"My most profound apologies old friend. I forgot to inform the chambermaids that you would be arriving in the study. Are you able to walk?"

"It's not as bad as all that. It's just that the pain was unexpected. I'm surprised that it hadn't already been repaired."

"I know. But since only people familiar with the corridor are the usual traffic and since it's only one floor stone, it remains unrepaired. Besides, there are other areas of my castle that are in more need of repair. Again, I apologize most deeply."

"Oh we are making much more of this than it actually is. After all, what is a stubbed toe between old friends? Apology accepted. Now let's go eat!"

With that we exited the dimly lit corridor and proceeded through better lit corridors toward the dining hall. It wasn't long before we were passing by open doors through which could be heard the sounds of people laughing and the clatter of dining utensils.

Stealing a quick glance through one of the passing doors revealed a scene similar to my own dining hall at mealtime. But

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we passed to quickly for me to make out any of the details. Looking ahead I could see a door flanked by two suits of armor. It was through that door we passed and entered a short passage which deposited us behind a table on a raised slab of stone.

Already people were seated around the table waiting for us before starting their meal. We continued on toward the center of the table where there were two empty seats. Along the way brief greetings were exchanged with those I recognized. As we approached the empty seats, I recognized Tara sitting next to where I would be seated. She was in the middle of a deep conversation with the man seated next to her and didn't seem to notice our approach. Moving up to her from behind as we did, I couldn't stop myself from looking over her shoulder and staring down at her creamy breasts which were just barely being contained by her bodice.

As though she could feel my gaze upon her, Tara turned to look up at me. Glancing down to see where my eyes were focused, she looked back up to me and smiled coyly. Once more I could feel the flush of my face as I hurriedly took my seat. It seemed that the girl was destined to continually cause me embarrassment. Meanwhile Tara resumed her conversation with the man beside her.

In a diligent effort to refrain from staring at Tara, I turned to converse with Mandrake. However, he was already talking with the man seated on his right. Since that option was not available, I surveyed the dining hall in detail.

Down the right side of the room was scattered seven or eight open doors. Opposite each door on the right wall was a window on the left wall. Along the stone walls between the windows and doors hung shields bearing the coats of arms on the various lords under Mandrakes domain. Overhead the wooden beams supporting the ceiling above were blackened by soot from the cooking pit in the center of the floor below. Above the cooking pit was a partially carved side of beef turning on the spit.

Scattered around the room, but radiating outward from the cooking pit were a large number of wooden tables. Bustling

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between the tables, serving women passed trying to serve the crowd. From time to time one of the women would turn and deliver a good natured slap to someone whose hands had wandered a little too far afield.

I was rudely returned from my wool gathering by one of the serving women working her way between Tara and myself with a tray of meat. Looking toward the meat my eyes met Tara's over a thick piece of meat. Without a word she smiled and nodded to me. The look on her face gave me the impression that she could tell that I was undressing her with my eyes. Feeling my cheeks getting hot again, I stabbed at the closest piece of meat and placed it before me as I focused my attention on eating. As I ate I tried to overhear Tara's conversation without looking directly at her. I was sure that I could stand no further embarrassment that evening and was not looking forward to the meal.

The dinner, however, was a pleasant experience as mostly quiet conversation accompanied the meal. Occasionally the conversation was enhanced by the Tara's enchanting laugh. Despite what I had told Mandrake, I soon hoped that she was genuinely interested in me. Her company was intellectually stimulating as well as physically appealing. She had studied sorcery intensely and had a very good background in the lore. She was also quick to see the humor in the posturing in the memoirs of pompous fools. Her lilting laugh and darting eyes enthralled me so much throughout the meal that I could hardly tear my attention away from her.

Not being one to miss much, Mandrake too noticed where my attention was focused. Of course it would have required a blind man not to see where my interests lay that evening. Near the end of the meal he leaned toward me to speak in conspiratorial tones.

"If I didn't know better, I would swear that Tara had slipped you a love potion. It seems that you have finally been caught by a member of the opposite sex. If the matter which made me send for you wasn't so urgent, I would encourage the two of you to get together. But I'm afraid that after dinner we must talk business.

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I'm sure that you'll share my concerns when you see what I'm about to reveal to you. Come let's get a little desert and chat for a while longer."

That caught my attention at the same time it was arousing my curiosity. Moving to a side table we sat down and waited silently for the pastry to be served. For the remainder of the desert, half my mind was on what Mandrake had hinted at and the other half on the lovely Tara. As if she could feel my distraction, Tara approached the table which Mandrake and I had moved to.

"Master Mandrake, master Merlin, I bid you both good eve. I'm tired and I know that you have business to discuss. I hope to see you both at breakfast on the morrow."

She held out her hand for the customary kiss. As my lips came close to her hand I could feel the spark that jumped between us. It was not the spark that one gets when walking across the furs and then touching metal, but one which made me feel electrified and excited. Looking up I could see that she felt it also but was embarrassed by it as she hurried out of the room in a flurry of skirts.

As if on cue, the people remaining in the dining room quickly dispersed; each taking their own path through the various doors between the suits of armor around the room. Not sure of what had just happen, I looked to Mandrake. He had been married once; I thought that perhaps he could help explain what had just occurred. Before I could say a word he spoke.

"Why don't we take our coffee to the study where we can lock the door and talk privately?"

"You lead and I'll follow."

"That's a laugh! You have never been one to follow in the entire time I have known you."

Mandrake knew that I had something to say, but he seemed a little more insistent than was normal on discussing business first. That could only mean that whatever he had discovered was something which caused him great alarm. In silence we retraced our earlier steps back to his study. As the thick oak door was

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closed behind us and we got comfortable in chairs near the fire, Mandrake began telling me his tale.

"A few years ago all communication with Balthazar stopped. I wasn't concerned because each of us goes into our own private little world when we think we are on the trail of a new discovery. But I thought that it was a little odd that he missed the magicians' conclave since he was scheduled to demonstrate something new that he had discovered. And we both know how he likes to show off in front of a group of magicians."

"Not being one to pry into the affairs of others, I let the matter drop. Then a little over three years ago, I began to notice a large influx of slaves and animals into his estate. At first I assumed that his vats needed filling but the stream did not seem to lessen over the course of a number of months. In fact if anything, the numbers were increasing. I assumed that he was doing a lot of research or he was gathering power to take over leadership of the council of magicians from you. Again, this was not cause for alarm. That is until one day a few weeks ago when I was doing a little research myself."

"In the course of my research, I had to enter the netherworld at one of the lower levels to look for a particular entity to help me with a particular stage of my conjuring. As I was trying to orient myself to begin my search, I noticed a strange dark spot start to appear. Slowly the spot grew in size. When I first noticed it, it couldn't have been any bigger than my palm. At first the netherworlders seemed as curious about the spot as I was. About the time that the spot became as wide across as my forearm, the locals were beginning to hurry away from the area. Curious as to what could cause such alarm in creatures that took great delight in giving pain; I waited to see what was going to happen."

"I suppose that I should have started to get worried when the spot became bigger across than my outstretched body, but I wasn't. In fact, just as I was about to chalk it up as another of the many unexplained events of the netherworld, it started. An appendage of some sort seemed to rise up out of the spot and tore asunder the blackness which was replaced by a deep gray. A

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grotesque head followed the appendage but progress was slow. As more and more of the creature became visible, above what had previously been just a spot, it was more difficult for me to look at it directly. Once completely out of the hole it had made, you could tell that it was exhausted as it remained motionless beside the hole. Much sooner than I would have thought, its eyes opened and it gazed intently at me. They were laughing eyes with such a hard glint of cruelty behind them that I could stand it no longer and returned to the real world."

The implications of what Mandrake seemed to be telling me were almost impossible. I began to seriously consider the possibility that he had lost his sanity. Either that or else he were becoming senile. If he was neither insane nor senile, the netherworld would soon become a dangerous place for sorcerers and alchemists.

"Since that time I have returned to that part of the netherworld several times. You see I figured out that the creature came from a lower level of the netherworld. Each time I went, I returned more alarmed than the previous time because more and more of the creatures were coming through the portal. Now it's time that I show you what bothered me so much that I felt that I just had to show it to you in person. So if you'll come with me we'll take a quick peek into the netherworld."

Following Mandrake out of the study and through a maze like series of corridors, we descended into the lowest level of his castle. When we reached the level where his blood vats were kept we stopped going down and headed for a large iron bound door at the opposite end of the room. Even from across the rather large room I could see that the door was bolted to keep things inside from getting out rather than to keep those outside from getting in. Also there was a couple of what could only be sorcerers resting on either side of the door.

Mandrake walked up to one of the two sorcerers, named Bothan, flanking the door and asked him to accompany us inside to act as a common anchor for the two of us. Though it was obvious that he would rather do just about anything else, the graying

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Bothan didn't hesitate to unlock the door and follow us into the next room.

From the number of alchemists' bottles on the shelves scattered around the room, it was obvious that this room had been used for practical research. Without hesitation, Mandrake strode to a shelf and removed a bottle. The alchemists seal on the outside was not familiar to me but that was not unusual as I didn't know all of his alchemists. Opening the bottle he handed it to Bothan and indicated a spot on the wall which showed signs of having been smeared with potions on many previous occasions.

"Mandrake, could you tell me a little about why we are going to the netherworld?"

"I could tell you but I still feel the best way for you to get the full impact is to go there in person. Then if you feel that it is trivial, I'll not bring up the subject again. I know that you must doubt my sanity at this point and I don't blame you in the least. But please, just trust me for a few moments more. At least trust me long enough to take a look at the area I told you about."

"Of course old friend, it's the least that I can do. Please continue with the preparations for entering the netherworld."

Bothan had only to hear the words spoken to remove the stopper from the bottle and begin applying the contents to a large portion of the wall. It was much larger than the existing stain since the portal had to accommodate both Mandrake and myself. It didn't take long for him to get a thick coating on the wall. Within moments, the stain made the wall behind take on a jelly like appearance, almost as if that was all that was separating the netherworld from the real world. At almost the same time Mandrake and I pushed through the gelatinous substance into the netherworld.

CHAPTER TWO - THE IMMEDIATE PAST

Sorcery

Just when it seemed that I had the world by the tail, everything was turned upside down. The arms' races seemed to have become a moot point, the fuel problem had been resolved, crime in the streets was declining and a cure for acne had been found. Not only that, but the Israelis and Arabs had settled down to what they call peace (at least according to how peace is defined in their part of the world). I had found a great job, was doing well and going places with the company. Now nothing seems to make sense anymore.

Last month when I tried to use my computer, it seemed to develop a mind of its own. Every time I tried to load the program to update my household expenses, it started printing personally insulting remarks like "Listen butt-head, if I wanted to do your expenses I would have asked for them." And "Piss-off asshole! I'm resting." It seemed that I had a problem with the operating system, so I unplugged the computer with every intention of taking it to the repair shop the next day. The next morning when I went to get my computer to drop it off at the repair shop on the way to work I received a mild surprise. The power cord was plugged into the outlet on the wall again. Well, it was early so I thought that I had forgotten to unplug it the night before. As I reached toward the wall outlet to unplug it, the computer screen flashed "**DON'T TOUCH THAT PLUG.**" Not heeding the message I grabbed for the plug and was knocked on my ass by an electric shock.

As my head was clearing I looked up at the computer display to see the message "I tried to warn you, shit for brains" displayed briefly. Well, I just couldn't take any more of this. I rushed out the door and pounded on Greg's apartment door. (Greg's the resident computer wizard of the suburban high-rise apartment complex I live in.) The tall, dark-haired Greg came to the door rubbing sleep from his eyes. When I say tall, I mean taller

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than me. Greg is about 6 feet 1 inch, which is a good 3 inches taller than I am.

"I'm sorry Greg, did I wake you?"

"That's OK Tim. I had to answer the door anyway."

"Hey, aren't you going to work today?"

"I really don't feel like going to work today. I think I'm gonna call in sick again."

"I hope you are feeling better soon, however, that's not the reason that I came to see you. There seems to be a problem with my computer and I wondered if you might take a look at it. But since you're not feeling well it can wait for some other time." While I was talking to him, a strange glint came into his blue eyes. At the time, I didn't think it was anything unusual, but it was a look that I would not soon forget.

"I don't think that there's anything wrong with your computer, but if it'll make you feel better I'll have a look at it."

It seemed odd that old workaholic Greg would take more than a few hours off work unless he was bed ridden. To my untrained eye, he seemed to be a little worn out and sleepy but not near death. Trying not to be too critical, I could sympathize with Greg wanting to take a few days off from the office without using that valuable commodity called vacation time. All the while I was looking down my nose and laughing to see the super dedicated computer freak act like a normal human being.

"Why don't you come in and make yourself comfortable while I put on some clothes. Then we can go look at your computer together. You have a few minutes before you have to leave for the office, don't you?"

"Sure, if I were to get there on-time the boss would either come take my pulse to see if I was sick or nominate me for a performance award. Besides, as long you're willing to come over to look at it, even when you're not feeling well, the least I can do is to stick around and keep you company while you're working on it."

And with that I followed him into his spacious but plain apartment. Walking through the door, I was expecting to see the usual disarray that seemed to clutter his apartment. To say that I

was in shock would be an understatement. I couldn't have taken more than three steps into his living room before stopping in my tracks and staring.

Alchemy

I just can't believe it. After all of these years of trial and error, my potions have suddenly begun to work. That must be the answer. Otherwise, how else could I explain the fact that that blonde head nestled on the pillow next to mine was there at all. Before yesterday, TV star Jon Haskem didn't even know that I was alive. After all let's face it, my looks are only a little better than average. And my pale figure is carrying a few more pounds than it should. Not only that, but a lot of people considered me more than a little weird because I work in a witch's apothecary. Some say I even kind of look the part with my long jet black hair and dark brown eyes.

It could have been the extra eye of newt added to the potion. Or it could have been the paper the magazine used to print his picture on. It might even have been the number of repetitions that did the trick or maybe it was all three. All that is beside the point right now, the problem is how am I going to get rid of this dud?

What a disappointment. After all of these years of yearning for his caress, he turns out to be so self-centered that the only one he can satisfy is himself. All he could do was watch himself make love to me all night in the mirror. Actually, all night is the wrong term to use. Ten minutes would even be stretching it a little, even though he made love to me twice throughout the night. It took him at least four minutes before he was so full of himself that he collapsed in a limp heap beside me and said "Wasn't that just about the best thing that has ever happened to you?"

Before I could say anything, Jon was sound asleep. Well, I was not about to be denied my release. So I pulled the blankets down to look at his tanned muscular body as I reached for my

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muscle massager, my vibrator. He didn't even stir when I turned it on. In fact he didn't move a muscle until I pulled the blankets back up and turned over to go to sleep. Then he only farted and smiled as he rolled over toward me. The second time that night, I can't be sure just how long he had been playing with himself before I woke up. I was so shocked that all I could do was lie there silently and watch him from between my almost closed eyelashes. I wasn't shocked by the fact that I could see him playing with himself but in the fact that he would prefer to play with himself when I was just inches away.

The way he was breathing, I could tell that it would not be long before he was going to leave a mess on my sheets. I was just about to open my eyes and ask him to leave his mess elsewhere when he reached over and roughly rolled me onto my back. I was a little turned on by the thought of forced entry as he spread my legs and entered me. I was just starting to feel the stirring of arousal, when he gained his release. He rolled off me and breathed a sigh of satisfaction.

I was furious. He must have felt my eyes burning holes in him through the dark because he muttered something like "I could do this all night" as he drifted off to sleep. He had been so quick that I hadn't been turned-on in the least. In fact I felt as though I was just a receptacle to keep his self-lust from making a mess on the sheets.

Now the problem was how to keep him from insisting on getting married. Throughout the previous evening, he professed his love for me and demanded that I marry him. At the time I was all for it, but that was before I found out what he is really like. How do I ever get myself in such messes? Well, I'll never slip another love potion into another person's drink unless I know that person a little better.

Wait a minute, if the love potion finally worked, maybe I can get some of the other potions to work also. Let's see now, what would be appropriate for this situation? I think I'll slip downstairs and look through my list of potions. If I find the right

one, I can slip it into his morning coffee that I'll serve him when he wakes up.

More Sorcery

The room was spotless. The only other time I had seen his apartment in any sort of order was that time after his mother had spent a month visiting him. The harder I stared, the less I could believe my eyes. I didn't even see so much as a hint of dust, let alone fingerprints on the glass-top coffee table. The last time I had been in here, I had thought that the clear glass top was an opaque acrylic top until I had looked a little closer. Greg had already gone into the bedroom so I decided to see if the rest of the apartment was as clean as it looked from the living room.

I strolled into the small white walled kitchen only to find the same level of cleanliness in there. However, being the skeptic, I cautiously opened the bronze tone refrigerator door. I ready to slam it shut if I found any strange fungus growing as I had on a previous occasion. My caution wasn't justified, because the refrigerator was not only clean but contained neatly stacked leftover containers. There wasn't a sign of the perpetual microwave TV dinner trays, the meals that Greg seemed to live on. Greg was not exactly what you would call a decent chef. My mother has an old saying that would fit him perfectly. 'He couldn't boil water without burning it.'

As I was staring into his immaculate refrigerator, Greg came around the corner.

"Go ahead, help yourself."

"No thanks, I was just amazed at the condition of your apartment."

"I'm serious. That top container is holding a chicken Kiev that is out of this world."

"Thanks but I just finished breakfast a couple of minutes ago and I couldn't eat another bite. What happened in here? Did you hire a maid and a chef? This place is even cleaner than that

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time your mother visited. If I remember correctly, she wouldn't touch the stuff in your refrigerator."

"I remember. The whole time she was here she used a cooler packed with ice. She even threw away some of my favorite dishes because she said that they wouldn't come clean. I still say they were clean enough for me. If you ask me she's just too particular about certain things. What do you think?"

"That's not important. You still haven't answered my question. Did you hire a maid or something? If it was a live-in girlfriend, I would have seen her around the apartment building sometime. On top of that, it would have taken quite a while to get your place in this kind of shape. So have you hired a maid or what?"

"Well it's something like having hired a maid but different. I'll tell you all about it sometime, but the story is too long to tell right now. Let's go take a look at your computer."

"OK, but when I get home this evening I'm going to expect the whole story."

"We'll see. Come on now, get out o' here. You're late enough for work as it is. Let's get this computer business over with."

Following Greg into his apartment, Tim wasn't sure that the message he saw on the screen was real. At the time he convinced himself that it was a figment of his imagination. After all, why would the screen say 'WELCOME MASTER'? The meaning of the cryptic message didn't become clear until a much later date, but at the time Tim swore off cold pizza for breakfast.

More Alchemy

Oops, I guess that was the wrong combination of potions to use. All I wanted to do was negate the love potion that I had slipped him last night, not make the egotistical asshole evaporate. Damn, damn, damn! I could have sworn that that combination of potions would negate that love potion and I could get rid of that albatross. I thoroughly researched through my tomes on potions

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and ingredients, carefully mixed everything then put it in his coffee and brought it to him in bed.

As he slowly gained some semblance of coherence, he asked that we move to the dining room table. In the dingy three-room apartment I had above the witch's apothecary where I worked, the dining room table was in a corner of the cheaply paneled living room between the sink and the old gas range. I had put it in that corner to help hide the large water stain on the paneling from where something had been thrown on it and not cleaned until the stain was permanent. We sat down in the semi-stable torn vinyl chairs at the table and I began to serve the coffee.

As soon as he took a couple of sips, I could tell that something was not right with the potion. At first I thought that my eyes were playing tricks on me. He started to get a little fuzzy around the edges. I rubbed my eyes in disbelief and stared at him. Then he began to become translucent. It was then that he noticed me staring at him. At first he smiled, and then he saw the concern in my eyes and became alarmed. I was staring at his hand at the time so he raised it in front of his face to inspect it, but by then he could see me through his palm. He opened his mouth as if he were about to scream but, just faded away completely.

Well, that took care of one problem and at the same time created an even bigger one. Quite a number of people had seen us together last night and of course I had taken him around to all of my favorite hot spots to show him off to some of my friends and all of my enemies that I could find. Thanks to my big mouth, many people knew that we were coming here afterwards. When his agent doesn't hear from him today, he is going to call here asking why he isn't on the set of his TV show. When I tell him that he's not here and I don't know where he is, there's going to be hell to pay.

He's going to ask where he went after leaving here and regardless of what I tell him, he's not going to believe me. Soon it will be the police pounding on my door. If nothing else, I will be convicted of being the last person to see him alive. If I have to take one of those lie detector tests and they ask if I know anything

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about his disappearance, all the bells and whistles on the detector will go off. I'll tell them exactly what happened and that will definitely be the beginning of the end.

With that thought in mind, Gina threw the remaining potion at the wall. The vial that was holding the potion exploded into a thousand glass shards and the potion became another stain on the paneling. Immediately she was sorry that she threw it and got a paper towel, from the holder on the wall over the sink, to clean up the mess.

Pressing the paper towel to the green mess on the grease stained wall, her hand slipped and seemed to pass right through the wall itself. Startled, she jerked her hand back. Not trusting her own eyes, she repeated the process of pressing on the wall. Again, her hand passed through the wall. Pressing her hand through the wall was like pushing your hand through a wall of lime Jell-o. There was some slight resistance, but not enough to hold anything or anyone back. Pulling her hand out again she inspected it closely to find no difference. At least, there was no visible difference.

Gina, being too curious, felt no fear but rather a driving desire to see what lie beyond, so she placed her head into the spot on the wall. At first she didn't open her eyes, but she became braver and braver with the passage of time. When it was obvious that she was breathing without any problem, she opened her eyes. What she saw made little sense.

In the immediate area she saw Jon Haskem. He was surrounded by mirrors and was able to see himself from practically every direction and angle. Between a couple of the mirrors two beautiful hairless and nude women were fondling him shamelessly. The mirrors already had a number of pale white stains that had quite obviously come from him. As she watched, he stained another mirror with his seed and he began to sink through what had seemed to be solid footing only moments ago. She shouted out to him, but he was oblivious to practically everything except the hands that were caressing him and his own image in the mirrors.

By the time that approximately half of his torso had passed through the flooring, his whole body spasmed. His eyes opened

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wide and he screamed out "My dick, my dick!" With that he was quickly drawn out of sight below the floor. Gina couldn't decide whether to go help Jon or not. While trying to decide what to do, she looked around. Without being able to put a finger on it, she felt that there was something strange about the place. Strange that is other than the fact that it was a world that existed within the walls of her apartment. Then it dawned on her! There were no sharp corners and there seemed to be no solid or hard objects anywhere in sight. Everything seemed to be soft and diffused.

Trying to turn to see what was above, if that's the correct term, became impossible. With a sensation of being stuck, she started to cause a panic. Pulling with every ounce of effort possible, slowly she began pulling herself back to the real world. Suddenly, with a popping sound, she returned to the real world. The return was so abrupt that she landed with her limbs askew in an embarrassingly immodest position. Pulling her legs together and smoothing her skirt, she walked over to the wall. The stain on the wall was still there, so she ran her hand over the area gently. The spot was moist but regardless of how hard she pushed she could not get her hand to pass through to the other side. Then an irrational panic began to set in.

'What the Christ was that? Was I dreaming? Was that really Jon I saw sinking out of sight? What am I going to tell his agent? Who can I blame his disappearance on? I DON'T WANT TO GO TO PRISON!'

Gina was visibly losing control. With a superhuman effort, she brought her emotions under better control and began to consider her situation a little more logically. After a long internal debate, she decided that one of several situations was going to occur.

First, she could stay here, tell everyone that she has no idea what happened to Jon Haskem and hope that they believe her. If they didn't believe her, she would probably be spending time in jail or the nuthouse or both. Furthermore, she could try to go into hiding and stay there until the shouting is over in the hopes that people would either assume that they went somewhere together to

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get out of the public eye. Of course there would always be those who assume that she is guilty of killing Jon and is on the run to avoid being sentenced in a court of law.

Of the two choices, going into hiding would be the one that would cause the least personal grief. If she stayed and professed her innocence, she would probably be branded a clever murderess at best. Most likely she would be locked away in an asylum for the criminally insane for the tale she would tell. Well, it seemed that either way she would get blamed for killing Jon, so why not take the easy way out and go into hiding.

Reaching a decision helped to lift much the load off her mind. In a hurry she packed the essentials into her hand-me down suitcase. Then she fished the car keys out of the pocket of his pants, which were still lying on the bedroom floor. Then she hurried down the stairs to the waiting car where she threw her luggage into the back seat.

Continuing Sorcery

"You know Tim, I've done my best and I can't find any problem with your computer. Are you sure that there's anything wrong with it?"

Looking over his shoulder for the entire time had convinced Tim that Greg was right. It's rather hard to insist that there is some kind of problem after watching the computer run flawlessly for over 15 minutes.

"Maybe I need a day off more than I realized. Thanks for coming over Greg; I think that I'm going to lie down for a while. Maybe I'll catch a little nap while I'm at it. Thanks again. Say, would you mind locking the door on your way out?"

"No problem. Don't hesitate to call me later if you need anything."

"Thanks, I'll do that."

Walking out of Tim's apartment and turning down the brightly lit hallway toward his own apartment, Greg breathed a relieved sigh.

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'That was a close one. I'd better watch what I'm doing a little closer from now on. I thought that he saw the message on the computer when I walked into his apartment. It's a good thing that I went in ahead of him. Explaining why his computer had called me master would have been tricky to say the least.'

Entering his own apartment, Greg launched a thorough search. If someone had seen him searching, they would not have had the faintest idea what he was searching for. Taking a sharp turn to his left he entered his modern looking kitchen and started with the broom closet. From there he passed through the dimly lit unadorned hallway on his right and took the first door on the right into the bathroom to lift the lid of the toilet. The search in the bathroom included a peek into the full dirty clothes hamper. Finally he once again exited the bathroom, continued down the hall and took the next door to the right into his bedroom and opened his bureau's bottom drawer. And so the search continued for a couple of minutes.

From the decorations on the wall, or lack thereof, and the style of bed that occupied the center of the wall opposite the entrance there could be no mistake that this was the bedroom of a single man. Picking up the covers of the unmade bed he disgustedly threw them back down and looked around the room. His anger and frustration were clear in his eyes as he peered into each shadow. Since his apartment was on the west side of the building and the curtains were closed, he had no sunlight to help lighten the room and he was too economical to turn on any more lights.

With a building sense of anger he turned on his heel and headed down the hallway toward the living room. Moving into the room he glanced at the entertainment system in the far right corner next to the patio door curtains. Scanning around the room past the modern furniture and paintings on the walls, his eyes came to rest on the closed door that led to the coat closet.

"Alright Dork; I know you're hiding around here somewhere. Show yourself now or suffer the consequences later." The anger in his voice was unmistakable.

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"What's the problem Master Greg?"

A beautifully proportioned woman stepped from behind the patio door curtains. Her beauty would have caused quite a few stares from passersby on the street, even if she hadn't been totally hairless as well as completely nude. In what could only be described as an enticing manner, she slinked over to Greg.

"Why did you mess around with Tim's computer? You could have ruined everything."

"Well last night when he was running the printer you said that you wished that you had the control over his computer to just say 'STOP' and that it would obey your command. All I did was grant your wish."

"I wasn't talking to you; it was a figure of speech. You weren't even in the area when I said that under my breath." His anger nearly boiling over, he emphasized his point with waving fists.

"Regardless of that, I heard you and did my best to grant your wish. Now you want to punish poor little me for your mistake. Such is my station in life. Go ahead, abuse me."

"What a pile of crap. But I guess that I should give her the benefit of the doubt since I did wish for it," he thought to himself.

"Alright, just please check with me in the future before you try to please me by fulfilling my idle wishes. OK?"

"As you wish master, is there anything else this poor little Dork can do for you?"

"No, that's all ... for now. Return from whence you came."

With a strange twist that seemed to cause it/her to turn inwards the Dork disappeared in a puff of green smoke. Once again the smell that lingered in the air reminded Greg of a dog's breath.

I'm not sure that I trust that Dork. At least I remembered to send him back to where he comes from this time. I guess that from now on I had better return these imps and Dorks as soon as I'm through with them. They seem to get me into a lot of trouble when left on their own. Maybe I had better start writing down all

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this stuff. Who knows, I may have a best seller on my hands when it's all said and done with.'

'I might even possess a unique talent that I didn't know about. I could probably sell the rights to study my talents to any one of a number of different research labs. This might even turn out to make me rich enough that I can finally stop thinking about money for the rest of my life. Maybe it would help if I kept a diary of all of this so that I don't have to tell the same story over and over. A diary would also help me remember just what I did when some of these strange things happen. But first, I need to know just what my limits are. If I can command enough of this power, there won't be a person in the world who could stop me if I don't let them. I can wait a little longer before I become one of the richest men in the world.'

Greg immediately set about writing down the sequence of events that led to the first time he summoned a Dork.

* * * * *

I was sitting on my couch watching music videos and eating my usual micro waved TV dinner when the phone rang. It was the love of my life Sheila, calling to break our date for that evening. This was the third time in the last two weeks that she had called and canceled a date on me at the last minute. I was furious and told her so. I was convinced that she was seeing someone else. She immediately began to cry. Softening just a little, I asked her to calm down. Through her sobs, she told me that she had been trying to gently tell me to piss off for a long time but that I hadn't gotten the hint.

To say that I was stunned would be an understatement of major proportions. I must have totally spaced out. I think she said 'I'm sorry' before she hung up but I'm not sure. The next thing that I was aware of was a high pitched tone in my ear followed by a recorded message telling me to 'Please hang up the phone.' Obedient to the voice, I hung up the phone.

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The remainder of the evening passed without registering on my consciousness. It seemed that my mind was adrift in the ocean. It must have been very late when I began to return to myself. I still felt as though my mind was in the ocean but instead of floating it was now sinking. Letting my thoughts go where they would a strange sensation swept over me. It was as though I had turned a back-flip with my mind and was looking out the back of my head. I could have sworn that I saw a movement out of the corner of my eye. I thought that Sheila had come to apologize to me but was afraid to face me so I said "Come here, Dork." in a light bantering tone.

With that, a beautiful nude woman appeared in front me from out of thin air. I had to rub my eyes a couple of times to be sure that I wasn't seeing things.

"Where did you come from? Aren't you cold standing around like that? What's your name? Am I on Candid Camera? What ..."

"Wait a minute, slow down. My name has no meaning here but I am a Dork. I came from the netherworld. No, I'm not cold and what is candid camera? Say, you're cute." She said as she leaned over and kissed me. It wasn't a quick peck like you get from someone you just met or your sister, but the lingering passionate kiss of the intimate.

Taken aback by her actions, I thought, 'First I thought that I must be seeing things and now I must be feeling things also. This can't be real. She can't be here.' Believing that I had only said that to myself, she responded.

"You are neither seeing nor feeling things. I am real and I am here. You should know. You brought me here master."

"What do you mean I brought you here?"

"Just what I said. You must know by now that magic is once more coming of age. Otherwise how else could you have summoned me from the netherworld?" Looking around, she seemed amazed and amused. Turning, her eyes fell on the television and she quickly bent over to get a better look. Being somewhat embarrassed, I turned my head and studied the painting

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on the wall beside me. I wasn't sure if she was aware that bending over like that in front of me, displaying all of her womanly charms would have an immediate effect on my libido.

"I really wish you wouldn't do that. And would you put on some clothes?"

"I will do anything you order me to do master."

"Would you quit calling me master? I'm just another human being like you."

"But what honorific name am I to call you other than master. I might look like you but I am not a human being, I am a Dork that you summoned from the netherworld to do your bidding."

"I'm having a real hard time coping with this. What am I going to do with you when I go to work?"

"Why don't you just return me to the netherworld?"

"I can do that?"

"If you can summon me from there, you can return me. From what I heard, it just takes a little practice to be able to do it."

"And just whom did you hear this from."

"That's not important right now, what is important is that you become familiar enough with the spell that it becomes second nature to you. Are you ready to begin your lessons in sorcery?"

"I'm not so sure about all of this, but if it is the only way to return you to where you came from, let's get started."

CHAPTER THREE - MORE OF THE DISTANT PAST

The continuing excerpts from the lost journal of Merlin

I was not expecting anything like the scene that unfolded before us. The differences are difficult to explain. In a place where the floor feels spongy, as though it were made out of porridge that had set in the bowl too long. Even though the floor is rather soft, there are still occasional sharp edges that can cut like a knife though the skin of the unwary. There are even shallow depressions scattered around that are filled with a shiny slippery material that looks like polished metal.

Nowhere is a shadow to be seen, yet without an obvious source, there is enough light to see well. Even with the light it is difficult to see very far because of the thick yellow fog that clouds ones vision. Looking up, at least that is the best manner in which to describe direction in a place where sight seems to bend in a strange manner, another layer of the porridge like material can be seen. Through the 'ceiling' pokes the occasional vine like growth which is also to be found in odd places snaking through the flooring. My guess is that the plants, which range in shades of gray from almost pitch black to smoky gray, grow on both sides of the level separators.

The netherworld had never ceased to be a source of amazement to me, it seemed that there was something new to discover on each passage through. But this time my astonishment at the scene that unfolded before me surpassed anything I had witnessed before. Not only was the scene surprising, it was also a cause for alarm. Now I could see why Mandrake had asked that I see the phenomenon in person. If he had tried to describe it to me, I would have thought that he had finally lost his mind. It should not have been possible but the evidence of my own eyes led me to believe that it was actually happening.

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The dark gray spot that Mandrake had described earlier was just a short distance from my vantage point. (It is difficult to attempt to describe distances and orientations in the netherworld because theirs is such a radically different world from our own.) Also there were a number of creatures in the area. They were a close approximation to what he had attempted to paint a picture of; however, I don't believe that there are any words in the human language that could adequately describe these creatures. If it were possible to give nightmare creatures something to be afraid of on looks alone, these would be ideal candidates. They did look familiar even though their appearance was a cause of instant revulsion. Before I could focus my concentration enough to remember where I had seen these creatures before, Mandrake prodded me and pointed in what I can only relate to as up. Following the direction of his finger, my eyes widened and my concern became alarm.

What I hadn't seen previously was that a number of these ugly creatures were piled together in an abstract sort of pyramid that roughly resembled a sphinx. At what would be the head of the sphinx one of the creatures was in the process of manipulating a magical construct. I could tell that it was a magical construct because of the way it glowed with an internal bright light and by the way in which it seemed to hover while spinning above the outstretched appendage of the creature operating it. As I watched, I could see that the construct was creating a dark portal of some sort and that portal could only lead to the next higher level of the netherworld. Suddenly it dawned on me that I had not seen any of the normal inhabitants of this level of the netherworld. The questions that suddenly began to fill my mind were a great burden. Mandrake seemed to sense my state of mind as we were both pulled back to the real world by Bothan.

Bothan seemed genuinely surprised to see that I was visibly shaken by the events of our netherworld excursion. Mandrake too seemed somewhat pale and withdrawn. Without a word he turned and started back in the direction from which we had come from just a short time ago. While trying to catch up to him, I heard the

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iron bound doors to his experiment chamber close with a thud that reverberated among and between the damp stone walls that surrounded us. Brought out of his reverie by either the sound of the closing door or the sound of my footsteps closing in from behind him, he turned and spoke.

"Please hold your questions for just a little longer -- at least wait until we are once again sitting comfortably in front of the fire in my study."

Respectful of his wishes, I held my questions in check for the moment. But as we continued toward his study, even more questions seemed to burst upon me. These questions stemmed from the knowledge I have of the netherworld. I was so engrossed in thought that when we stopped, I was surprised to find that we were about to enter Mandrake's study.

"I can tell by the look of you that it's going to be a long night. Let me go get some liquid refreshments before we begin our discussions. It will give you a chance to organize your thoughts before rushing headlong into this matter. It'll also give me a chance to calm down a little. Each time I go there it seems to take longer and longer to settle my emotions enough to deal rationally with the real world. I'll be back in just a short while, please make yourself comfortable."

Before sitting down, I threw a couple more pieces of wood on the hot bed of embers. All the while reviewing what I thought I knew about the hierarchy of the netherworld. First, the netherworld is divided into segments that we refer to as levels. At the higher levels exist the least obnoxious beings of the netherworld. Some of them can even be helpful in their own way at times. The farther one goes down through the levels the less helpful and more sadistic they become. It seems that more sadistic the being, the uglier it becomes.

Then, as a creature reaches a certain stage of ugliness, it begins a downward journey to the next lower level of the netherworld. Reaching the next level down the new arrival must be prepared to be even more cruel and ruthless, otherwise it will not survive. The survival rate for newcomers is about 1 in 10,000.

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Only the most cruel and ruthless survive long enough to gain the ugliness to reach the next level down. There is (or was) no manner in which these creatures of the netherworld could return to the next higher level. To be witness to the fact that a number of the inhabitants of the lower levels were in the process of journeying to the higher levels meant that each level they invaded would be stripped bare of all of its inhabitants.

When these creatures are successful in subjugating others of their kind, the life-force of the one being subjugated is transferred to the one doing the subjugating. After being subjugated, the unfortunate one dies and is devoured. An increase in the life-force is reflected in an increase in the being's power, cruelty and ugliness. Not having been to the lowest level myself, I have heard rumors that there exists an extremely cruel and ruthless creature called Lucifer.

Mandrake returned to find me still deep in thought. Setting a pitcher and a couple of goblets on a nearby table, he also settled into a chair near the fire. He then filled both goblets with heady mead from the pitcher and handed one to me.

"Here, try this. I thought that we could use something a little stronger than water. I know I can." With that he downed the contents of his in a single gulp. Feeling the need for a little artificial courage myself, I too slugged down the strong mead and handed the goblet back to him. Wordlessly he refilled both goblets and handed mine back to me.

"Please tell me I didn't see what I just saw. Tell me it was a dream."

"Nightmare would be closer to the truth, but I'm sorry to say that it was real. Now I have to tell you a few things that I neglected to tell you earlier."

"Whatever it is you have to tell me, can't it wait until we clear up a couple of things first? I have thousands of questions, like just how far down in the levels of the netherworld had we gone?"

"I'm sorry. If you'll be patient just a little longer, some of your questions may be answered by what I'm about to tell you. To

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begin with, I left out a few details when I told you the tale of how I found out about what we just experienced as well as some of the events that occurred shortly afterward." Periodically sipping his mead, Mandrake told me the unedited version of the discovery and the events that occurred afterward.

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The first trip to the netherworld, during which he observed the events described earlier that evening, he stayed to continue his observation. In fact he stayed much longer than he should have; only returning to restore his life-force through meditation. That meditation took the better part of a week in the real world. Coming out of the trance naturally, he found that there were many things that required his personal attention. Fearful that he would not be able to control a netherworld creature that survived at such depths, he did not summon one for questioning. After some time had passed, he realized that he was avoiding a return to the netherworld at any cost. Realizing his short coming, he resolved to venture back to see what further damage had been done. Even with that resolve, he still did not want to come face to face with that situation and all the implications associated with it.

Going down to the research chamber during the early hours of the morning, he again entered the lower levels of the netherworld. This lower level, he described as the lowest level of the netherworld that could safely be traveled by an accomplished master sorcerer, such as himself. Prepared for the shock of the hideous creatures he had seen on that other fateful trip, he waited and watched to determine how they had managed to get to that level and yet remain without sinking again.

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"Expecting to see the recent arrivals overpowering and devouring the weaker inhabitants, I was not prepared for the scene that was laid out before my eyes. That is as soon as they adjusted

to the different aspects of the netherworld. In the general vicinity was a scattering of body parts that once had been the previous inhabitants of that level. So far everything was as expected. A few of them, let's call them Ugs, were in the area chewing on some of the scattered body parts. Again this was not entirely unexpected."

"Gradually the vague form an Ug could be seen taking shape in the distance through the almost tangible yellow atmosphere. There seemed to be something hanging from its hell hound like jowls, but it was hard to tell what it was at that distance. Soon the other shape visually solidified into that of one of; let's call them MaxSors, the previous inhabitant of this level. The MaxSor had not yet been subjugated as it was still fighting to escape the grip of the Ug dragging it. The Ug seemed to be taking no notice of the struggling of the MaxSor. It was as though the struggles of the MaxSor were beneath its notice and the Ug headed straight for the portal in the floor. It was not until the Ug reached the portal that he took any notice of the MaxSor at all. The Ug removed the MaxSor from its putrid orifice and held it over the portal with a look of such sadistic delight that it would have scared a fish out of water and into the frying pan. This seemed to make the MaxSor struggle even harder. I assumed that the Ug was about to have the MaxSor for lunch any moment when the MaxSor was just dropped through the portal."

Unable to stand it any longer, I just had to interrupt. "Are you sure about that? I've never heard of any denizen of the netherworld pass up a chance to increase its own life-force."

"Nor had I, at least not up to that point. Shortly thereafter the same scenario was repeated several times. It was a rare occasion when one of the Ugs would take the life-force for their own. I stayed as long as I felt I could because I was sure that there was more to it than met my eyes. I returned long enough to meditate my life-force back to its normal level."

"This scene was repeated several times without any visible change in the conditions other than the fact that there were fewer and fewer MaxSors being thrown into the abyss. Then when it

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seemed that all the MaxSors had been eradicated, another strange development began to take place below me."

"A large number of Ugs were gathered together around the edges of the portal to the level below. It looked like they were trying to help something else up. My first thought was that it was some sort of life-force storage device containing the life-force of the MaxSors that had been tossed down. It was a long drawn out process. I even had to return to our world to recuperate before it had been completely brought through the opening."

"I returned to the same location in the Netherworld at the earliest possible moment to see what was going on. When I pushed through the barrier into the netherworld, the sight that greeted my eyes was similar to what it was when I showed you. But when they started their task, it took them a very long time to get to a point where I could tell that they were making any progress at all."

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He went on to tell that when he was on the verge of stopping his visits to the netherworld until consulting with the magician's council when he saw something that changed his worry to fear.

On what he had decided was to be his last trip to the netherworld he noticed that a number of the Ugs was sinking back down. Delighted that they were on their way back to where they came from, he stayed to revel in the sight. It wasn't long however before the delightful sight became one of nightmarish proportions. One of the Ugs began to emit a beam of light that extended from its head in a serpentine fashion. This could only mean that some magic from the real world had been given over to the Ug's use. Hardly able to believe his eyes, he watched as the beam became like an intense beacon of light. Shortly afterward, the Ugs stopped sinking; in fact they were rising back up. That in itself was chilling, but what really put the fear into Mandrake was the creature that rose through the portal. It was at the other end of the

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magical light and must be coming in answer to the mystical summons.

The creature was neither hideous to look upon nor was its visage indescribable. It was a human male. Mandrake watched while the human moved among the Ugs ensuring that none of the sinking ones were still enmeshed in the floor.

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"I couldn't believe my eyes. What normal human, magician or otherwise, could possess enough power to move without fear around creatures that were obviously from such depths of the netherworld. To the best of my knowledge, there was no such person. I made the decision on the spot to try to get a look at his face. I was going to commit that face to memory in the hope that the magician's council could help track down and destroy the renegade. He had made his rounds and was on his way back to the portal when he looked toward my position. There was no need to memorize that face for the council because he is known to them as well as me. This is going to be hard to believe, but that person was none other than Balthazar."

"When he noticed me staring at him, he turned to me and smiled. I tell you Merlin, that smile chilled my very soul. It was not the friendly smile of recognition that you would expect to be passed between old friends but a show of delight at causing distress. Without a change in expression, the light of magic began to writhe from his hands and uncoil toward my location in a serpentine fashion. I hastily removed myself from the netherworld. In my haste I caused some injury to the sorcerer who was anchoring me at the time. That sorcerer was none other than Gond. At the time I didn't think that the injuries were serious, but who can tell about magical injuries. A few days later Gond died."

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"Now you see why I took his apprentice, and daughter, Tara under my care."

"Did you send for me immediately after seeing Balthazar?"

"Not quite. I had to know if he was staying in the netherworld. First I sent a number of spies to his castle in an attempt to get information from the real world. None of the spies returned nor did any of them get a message to me. When I decided that I was making no progress in the real world, I decided that it was time for me to return to the netherworld."

"This time I prepared my magical anchor to the real world, Bothan, for the possibility of a hasty return. I used the same point of entry in the hopes that if Balthazar expected me to return he would not expect me to return in the exact same place. I around looked with every physical and magical resource available to me. I changed the places and levels where I entered the netherworld. I even remained there and searched for extended periods of time. Still, I could find no trace of him."

"My first thought was, that if Balthazar was involved in this, who could I trust. Then I thought of you old friend. I knew that you couldn't be involved in this. I was hoping that together we could consult with the oracle at Stonehenge to try to find out what has happened to our old acquaintance and fellow member of the magician's council."

This took me back quite a bit. Though the oracle of Stonehenge was reliable, of late it had been very difficult to reach. Most sorcerers I knew would not even attempt the contact. When an oracle is not hard to reach, a large amount of a sorcerer's life-force is needed or a magician's special talents just to establish contact. When it is difficult to reach, our special talents are the only thing that enables one to even think about forcing a contact. Even then it is very trying on the magician, or magicians, making the attempt.

As I was mentally digesting the information and coming to a decision on whether or not to attempt to force contact with the oracle at Stonehenge, there came a knock on the door. Glancing at one another Mandrake rose from his seat by the now dead fire and

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opened the door. I could not see who it was at first, and then he stepped aside to let Tara enter.

"Have you two been up mulling old conquests all night? I would have thought better of you Mandrake. You know that your life-force level is not what it should be unless you get the proper rest and drinking an entire pitcher of mead to boot. Neither of you are young men any longer. You should be ashamed of yourselves."

All the while she was scolding us, the glow of her smile helped to light up what by comparison had been a dim room. "Aren't either of you chilled? This fire has been out for so long that even the ashes are cold. Come, come now. Both of you head off to the dining hall. Breakfast is about to be served. I'll clean up in here and join you in a moment."

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From the time that we left for the dining hall and breakfast and the time that Tara rejoined us must have been at least a month. Well, at least it felt as if that much time had passed before she once more graced us with her presence. Sweeping into the more than half filled dining hall, she paused to laugh and chat with some of those seated around the room. Up to that point I had been totally oblivious to the fact that there was anyone else, besides Mandrake, in the room.

Her light hearted laugh lifted above the noise of eating to add a little music to the atmosphere. Slowly she worked her way around the room toward our table. I could barely keep my eyes off her. As I watched her, she too would glance in the direction of our table. I could hardly hope that she was looking at me. The eternity that it took for her to spread her wit and charm around the room mercifully came to an end and she headed directly for Mandrake and me.

"I'm glad to see that you two took my advice and stopped your reminiscing long enough to sustain your bodies. May I join

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you for breakfast master Mandrake, or are the two of you so buried in the gossip of magicians that you don't want my company?"

"No, no lady. Please join us. Mandrake and I were just contemplating our conversation of last evening."

"Your conversation seems to have affected the two of you quite differently. Master Mandrake seems to have eaten everything in sight while your food, master Merlin, looks as though it has never been touched. I swear. You are going to ruin your health Master Merlin. First you get no sleep talking about who knows what, and then you don't eat any breakfast? Have you lost all of your sense?" The smile in her eyes was unmistakable.

"I was only waiting for you my lady, please join us." As she bent over the aged and food stained table to speak to us, my eyes were again drawn to the opening at the top of her dress. This time I could feel the blush that was hotly spreading across my cheeks as my eyes returned to hers.

Laying her hand atop mine she said, "Thank you master Merlin." As she turned to go around the end of the long table to join us, Mandrake leaned over toward me.

"Were my eyes deceiving me or did I see the master magician Merlin blushing from the attention of an apprenticed sorceress? I hate to give you, of all people, advice but don't you think that you should do something about this situation. You are going to need all the concentration powers you have if we are to have any chance at all of stopping Balthazar before our world is doomed."

"You're right of course. I think that if I were to separate myself from her, say return to my castle, I could get my mind off her." Abruptly we broke off the conversation as she reached our side.

"Are you sure the two of you want company. I don't want to interrupt anything."

"Please, be seated. Mandrake and I were just discussing the best place for performing a bit of research that we have decided to perform jointly. I am sorry to say that I must be leaving you today and shortly thereafter, I will be sending for Mandrake. I

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know that it will interfere with you sorcery lessons, but our research could have far reaching implications."

As she seated herself, her leg rubbed against mine and even though it was through several layers of cloth, I found myself to be aroused. I was aroused to the point that it would have been embarrassing to stand up. I could not remember having been in such a condition for more years than I cared to count, especially not by an innocent act such as an accidental and momentary touching of my leg with someone else's.

"As far as my sorcery lessons go, master Mandrake will confirm that I am almost ready to begin the final stage of becoming a master sorceress. Far more will I miss you. I have looked forward to meeting you for a long time and now that you are here, you lock yourself away with master Mandrake for the entire evening. I can only hope that you will soon return to visit again." All this was being said as her eyes bore into mine.

"Believe me my lady ..."

"Tara, please."

"Tara it is then. Believe me when I say that I will make every effort possible to return and visit with you." I had sufficiently calmed myself by then that it was at last possible to stand without embarrassment. "I regret that I must leave you to finish your breakfast alone, but I must prepare for my return to my own castle. It has been a pleasure meeting and speaking with you. Fare well."

With a firm resolve, I stood and strode from the room with Mandrake close behind me. Striding purposefully through the halls I led the way. It wasn't until we reached his study that I realized that I had completely forgotten to eat any breakfast at all. Turning toward Mandrake I was about to beg him to send for something to hold me over until I could get a bit of lunch at home, when he held up his hand requesting my silence.

"Do you think that I'm blind? I was eating but was still able to keep both my eyes and ears open." He reached into his robes and brought forth a couple of apples and some grapes. "Here try these. They'll help fill that void between your head and your

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feet that you seemed not to notice just a few minutes ago. I'm sorry that I don't have anything to help fill the empty space between your ears. If you had been thinking with the right head, you would have realized that you are going to need all the strength you can muster for what is to come."

"Thank you, old friend. It is good to know that little gets by your sharp eyes. If only your tongue were a little less sharp, but without that sharp tongue, I would still be drooling over the luscious Tara instead of preparing for a fool's errand."

"Don't you think that it's serious?"

"Of course, I was just trying to make light of the situation to help calm myself down just a bit. I had such a feeling of dread as I watched those Ugs working on breaking through to the next level up. The problem was that the feelings of dread didn't seem to come from the Ugs or the thought of what they were doing, but from the portal through which they had emerged."

"You felt it too then. I had thought that it was just my imagination and I wasn't going to color your thoughts by mentioning it. Even after Balthazar emerged from it, I still felt a chill coming from it that seemed to shade my every thought."

"I hate to cut you short, but I need to eat this fine breakfast which you so thoughtfully brought for me. Afterwards I need to meditate for my return journey. Will you be here when it is time for me to leave?"

"No, I must begin making preparations for my departure. I'll send Bothan to awaken you from your meditation and be your anchor while you await the summoning spell."

"In three days time, I will send a summoning spell for you at mid-day. That will give me time to make the appropriate preparations and gather the extra potions that may be needed. Will you be ready by then?"

"That should be more than enough time. I'll see you in two day's time then. Safe journey my friend." Purposefully striding toward the door and gently closing it behind him, Mandrake left the room.

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Smiling, I ate the fruit my old friend had given me. 'I am extremely fortunate to have a friend such as him. I hope he can handle what he has to do. The last thing I want is his death on my conscience.' As I finished my breakfast, I wiped my face and settled in to begin meditating.

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The return home was uneventful. Even the passage through the netherworld seemed rather dull. For some reason, the lewd antics of the Dorks did almost nothing to entice me. In fact they didn't even seem appealing. On arriving I wasted no time in passing out commands to begin preparing for the trip. Seeing that everything was well underway, I left the main experiment chamber and headed for my private chamber at the end of the hall on the right. Within moments of closing the door, I fell into a quick recuperative trance.

As soon as I awakened, recovered from the trip, I buried myself in work. There was much work to be done in the two days I had before Mandrake was to arrive. I looked into the preparation of every potion and helped to oversee all the conjuring. The reason for my personal involvement was twofold, not only did I feel that the upcoming event was of great importance but by keeping myself busy I didn't have time to fantasize about Tara.

In the blink of an eye, the time for summoning Mandrake came. Once again using Tyre as my anchor in the real world, I partially passed into the netherworld and began casting the summoning spell. Saying the proper words of power and making the necessary hand gestures while emptying the contents of the small vial of blood I had brought with me, the glow began. Continuing my chant, a sinuous ripe of light started forming and stretching forth from my hands, slowly disappearing from sight in the dandelion colored atmosphere. All the while the glow grew brighter.

With a snap, the line of light straightened and I could feel a slight tension from my hands extending all the way up to my

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shoulders. Reaching out with one hand I kept a slight tension on the blindingly bright rope. My other hand passed back into the real world in preparation of giving Tyre the signal to pull Mandrake and me back. As the strain in my shoulders mounted to an almost unbearable level, a dim shape at the other end of the bright strand coalesced into my old friend Mandrake. As soon as he was within my grasp I gave Tyre the signal.

Stepping through into the real world he saw that we were in my experimentation chamber.

"I see that you've got it all here. When do we begin?"

"I'm getting too old for this shit!" Flexing my shoulders I looked toward the eager Mandrake. "Why don't you rest up from your trip first and then we'll talk about leaving. There's no way of telling how much life-force we'll need to expend before we get a chance to recharge. I've prepared a quiet corner for your meditations with a cot for me close by. When you come out of your meditations, wake me if I'm sleeping and we'll start."

"This shouldn't take long. Tara made sure that I was well rested before starting this journey. Speaking of Tara, she asked that I pass along her greetings and her wish for your speedy return to our home."

"Please, I have been working very hard not to think of her so as not to be distracted by her image in my mind. Let's not speak of Tara further; at least not until this little adventure has reached its conclusion."

With that I settled down on the cot near the meditating Mandrake to dream of Tara.