

A Tale of the Gods

First Cycle - Part Two

by Marc H. Wyman

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A Gushémal Story

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XI. Playing Mortal

Maidoyú was starting to get bored. The last darktime nothing at all had happened. The darktime before, there had at least been an earthquake, and she had enjoyed fluttering madly about on her rocky wings, away from the trembling ground. It had been so wonderfully terrifying – dark, only the faintest light from the stars, and the earthquake dizzying her senses, making her hungry and ill at the same time. That had been so much fun!

But then the day had come, and she had followed the trail of the clawed feet. Mostly, anyway. Well, for a while. A short while – granted! There had been that flock of gargoyles in the vicinity, and she had wanted to fly with them. Unfortunately they were of the dark gray variety and didn't take kindly to those not of their flock. Especially if the other one was a light gray, dappled with white spots on the wings. Maidoyú still regretted that she hadn't changed her appearance in time – she did know about the darks, after all.

Anyway, the encounter hadn't been much fun, and she had fled as quickly as she could. No, not fled. That wasn't what a goddess did, ever. She... Well, she hadn't really wanted to play with those gargoyles, anyway, and so she had left. Right, that was it. Much better.

It had been close to darktime when she had returned to that spot, to take another look at the trail. By that time, the wind – and probably that flock – had erased most of the footprints. A few tracks remained, and Maidoyú had followed those tracks until the darkness made it impossible to see the light impressions in the mud anymore.

And she hadn't been that keen anymore to find out which creature had left those tracks. Some other god somewhere must have had a burst of creativity, that was all. Nothing important. So, there now was a beast that had feet like her own, except with claws. Fine. Nothing special. Absolutely.

Miffed she had found herself a nice spot to spend during darktime, a bowl-shaped impression in the rocky ground where she had rolled up her gargoyle body into a ball. For a while she had lain there, waiting, hoping for something to happen.

Nothing had occurred.

Halfway through darktime she had unfolded herself, looked around and found that a dormant volcano was nearby. A chance for fun! So she had tried to make the volcano erupt, but something had stopped her from succeeding. The mountain had stayed quiet, and she had received the impression of displeasure from somewhere. Some other god. Some other spoilsport.

Probably not from her own abode – unless Decirius had lifted that foolish barrier by that time.

She hadn't cared. Maidoyú had returned to her rolled up position, then had decided to try that mortal game they called sleep. It had been less than fulfilling, to shut down one's mind for a number of hours without *anything* happening.

When morning came she had started tracking the odd footprints again, determined to find that creature and make it pay for all the boringness she had encountered thus far. Being mortal had been so enjoyable before, the myriad of times that she had tried it earlier.

And now the sun was riding high in the sky, near its apex. Maidoyú had resumed her bipedal form again, now that the sulphuric air had given way to a fresh breeze from a nearby ocean, carrying with it the sweet scent of Mannannan's realm. It was still warm, plastering her green dress to her body. At least that felt different, although it surely wasn't enough to break through her boredom. She was floating over the ground, now covered with lichen and other minor plantlife. The creature's trail was almost impossible to see, and to be frank, Maidoyú didn't bother with following it with her eyes anymore. There were other ways, through her divine nature. That's how she could find it after every time the spoor broke off for some reason she didn't know. But she'd find out, that she would.

She was through with playing mortal. She was a goddess, after all.

Dammit, she hated it when she sounded like Mannannan.

Right before her, a flying dragon – one of the small varieties, no larger than her arm – darted down from the sky, swooping over the ground and snatching up a squeaking two-headed lizard creature. "Enjoy your meal," Maidoyú muttered sarcastically, floating aside to make way for the dragon.

Why did so many of these creatures have to feed on other living creatures? It was so... so... mortal! Right, that was it. It was the way of the mortals, and she wouldn't have anything to do with it. No, she was through, and she would never have any fun with that anymore. Definitely not.

Where was that creature? Claws on its feet, and the feet so much like her own. What had looked so intriguing before now only raised anger. How dared anybody create something like that? It was an abomination! Maidoyú wouldn't have wanted claws on *her* feet, that was for sure.

Oh, yes, she would take a good look at that thing, and then she would make it feel what it meant to displease a goddess like this. Because that's what she was. A goddess. "Sounds good, doesn't it? I am a goddess," she whispered to herself, stopped to spread her arms and survey all the land below her, barren as it was. (Barren, she repeated in her mind. There was green here, and not just her dress. Why did she then think this was barren, when the rocky, volcanic landscape of the past days had seemed so comfortable?) "Behold your goddess!" she shouted.

There was no answer. Not even a dragon's roar in response.

Maidoyú's euphoria was dampened considerably. What good was it to proclaim yourself a goddess if there was no one around to hear it? Not much, she conceded frustratedly.

So, where was that creature? There was the trail, right beneath her, the footprints for once clearly visible in the ground, twigs broken off from a thorny bush. Then the prints... Maidoyú took a deep breath in more frustration. The prints stopped again. That creature was so –

Suddenly something slammed into her back, whirling her through the air. Maidoyú flayed her arms around, trying in vain to find purchase in the empty air – and then pain shot through her shoulder when something sharp tore into her flesh, along with a vile stink that made her head reel even more than the contortions in the air did.

She howled in agony, flesh torn from her shoulder, pain suffusing her. Claws appeared before her eyes, glinting in the sunlight for just a heartbeat before sinking into her face, gouging out her eyes and launching a new wave of pain.

Terrified Maidoyú wheeled about, her arms lashing out blindly with all her might. She barely felt her hands connect with something warm, stopped at the last moment and held on to the something, squeezing it in her fingers until it turned soft and squishy.

The claws, the fangs in her back vanished. An awful noise hung in the air, something that sounded like a scream, and much like the noise Hagen made when eating a mango.

She was afraid, and she didn't care, and she had to pound the something in the air before her. It was no longer held aloft by itself, only by Maidoyú's will, but that was more than enough to let her slash it to ribbons with her hands, hands that now sported foot-long claws of their own, wet from a warm liquid that sprayed all over her.

A long time passed before Maidoyú halted her assault, still dizzy from the pain burning through her. The pain. She didn't have to feel it, she was a goddess. Nervously shaking her head she healed her body, removed the claws from her hands, and finally had eyes again to see at what was before her.

It wasn't much. Floating before her, barely held together by her might, was something that had once called two arms and two legs its own, as well as a pair of wings, a stocky torso, and a head. She could tell the general shape from what she had instinctively contained in her fury, the number of limbs. Details were impossible to tell, for there was only a mess of flesh and greenish blood.

Flesh. Blood.

She had killed this creature. Sent it off to the midrealm.

And... Realization hit her like a tornado. This was the creature she had been looking for. It had to be. There were the claws she had felt in her face, and it had been right where the spoor had stopped. It had also had the shape she had assumed, a shape like her own.

Feeling drained she saw that the creature's head was almost untouched, hovering over the mess that had once been its body. Scales covered the slightly elongated skull, interlocking dark scales. Horns grew from its back, a spiral pattern running up their length. The face jutted out from the skull, focusing on the snout with fangs still open in a final scream, Maidoyú's own red blood glinting on the white fangs. But the eyes... the eyes looked truly like her own. As if they had once held the glimmer of sentience. More than any of the creatures of the mortal world could lay claim to – except for the emperor dragons, the only sentient beings outside of the divine abodes and the midrealm.

The creature had known it was alive. And it had known that it was dying. The pain in its eyes spoke longer volumes than the snout frozen in an agonized scream.

Maidoyú shrieked, let the mess of flesh fall back to the ground and whisked herself away to a place on the other side of the mortal world, appearing right in the middle of the ocean, surrounded by water that washed the green blood off her body.

XII. A Divine Puzzle

“Did you enjoy the gathering?” Darawk asked absentmindedly, bent over a pile of parchment on the table before him.

Alyssa grunted unhappily. “Sure did, brother of mine. I nearly tore Haguen’s stupid head from his shoulders.”

“How nice.”

The old man chuckled lightly, receiving a withering glance from the goddess who then turned the same glare on her brother. “Then I stuffed Mannannan into an amphora, sent it spinning endlessly. After that I took Koultirsp and Haguen, and bashed them into Decirius’ tower. When the lower levels were completely demolished, I went to see Decirius and threw him from the highest point of his home.”

“I’m sure you had a good time. Hold this, please.”

Not turning around, Darawk held out a stack of parchments, and Alyssa sighed heavily when she took them, while her brother dug through the pile that had been beneath the first stack, reordering the parchments. “You know, brother of mine, occasionally it would be nice if you actually listened to what I say.”

Darawk cried eagerly when he found a particular sheet, scanned its contents quickly before placing it carefully on the table. Then he blinked and turned towards Alyssa with an innocent look. “But I do listen to you all the time, my dear. There is no reason for complaint, believe me.”

“Oh?” Alyssa grinned mischievously. “Then what did I just tell you?”

Darawk shrugged. “You were ranting about how you would like to hurt Mannannan, Koultirsp, Haguen and Decirius. Really, dear sister, these fantasies of yours are not exactly new – although I do appreciate the enthusiasm you put into diversifying them.”

Her jaw dropped. Gaping at her brother, she could have sworn that somewhere behind that insufferably innocent face was a smug grin. Somewhere. And he better not show it openly! Alyssa was in the right mood to make at least *one* of her fantasies come true!

“At least I’m doing something,” she sighed. “Better than sifting through some documents. The old man and I were trying to get the other gods to put their minds together. But those fools can barely stay in the same room for more than five minutes before picking a fight!”

Darawk frowned and cast a quick glance across the room to the old man. The stranger was sitting in a wicker chair by a manhigh window, tugging on his tattered coat. “You haven’t –“ Darawk started, swallowing the rest of his words quickly.

The old man raised his eyebrows, then smiled wistfully. “Do not worry, my young friend, I have not. The warning of your abode’s lord were very clear, and I do not wish to anger the, as your sister put it, ‘pasty-faced baboon’ anymore than I already have. What is a baboon, by the way?”

“A baboon?” Darawk asked cheerfully. “A marvelous little thing these creatures are. Made by the same abode who devised the mongoose, as far as I know. They came up with baboons a few dozen millenia ago. Their shape –“

“Excuse me?” Alyssa interjected angrily. “*What* are you talking about – and don’t say baboons, brother! You know exactly what I mean!”

The god’s face fell as he saw the fury in his sister’s eyes. After withstanding her fire for a few moments he hurriedly turned back to the pile of documents. “I’m sorry, I have no idea. Now if you’ll pardon me, I –“

“You’re going to answer me!” the goddess shouted and waved her hand up and down. A sudden gust of wind came out of nowhere and scattered the papers from Darawk’s table. He leaped up, tried vainly to catch a few of the sheets, gave up when even three quickly grown arms would not suffice.

“Why did you do that?” he shouted and raised his (currently five) arms exasperatedly.

“I can do much worse,” Alyssa promised, “if you don’t speak up now. I could go reading in your library with a torch. By accident, of course, I might set a few of those precious volumes aflame.”

In his wicker chair the old man watched with interest – and quite a bit of surprise about the nasty turn the discussion seemed to have taken.

Darawk on the other hand showed only frustration rather than fear or anger. “My books are fireproof, you know that. Please, sister, don’t ask any more. Decirius –“

“He’s frightened you,” Alyssa said with sudden calm. She put a hand on her forehead, took a deep breath, then made a wicker chair appear behind her so she could sit down. “Our chief god has frightened you. A god that you’ve known for all your existence. I could accept Lonapal acting like a vole and scurrying to the next hole, or Haguen deluding himself that he’s doing his duty. But you... Darawk, dear, you...” Her voice trailed off.

The god of knowledge shook his head slowly, then stepped forward and put his hand on her shoulder. “Something has happened to all of us, it seems. Lately I’ve come to sympathize with the creatures of the midrealm, like the villagers you and Lonapal fancy. They spend their existence at our whim, expecting dread and joy at every heartbeat.”

Alyssa closed her eyes, rested her head for a moment on his hand, then she gently pushed it away and got back to her feet. “We are not midrealm creatures, Darawk,” she said, every word growing more forceful. “We are gods. It’s about time we acted that way. What’s the worst Decirius could do to us? Throw us out of the abode?”

She was close to regaining the old fury, ready to rattle off some more angry words – then she noticed a strange expression on her brother’s face. One that was mirrored on the old man’s. “He did not! Decirius didn’t say he’d throw you out of the Eternal City!”

“Sister, I –“

“Shut up,” Alyssa muttered. Quickly she started to pace up and down the length of Darawk’s study, ignoring his indignant looks, while she tapped her fingers on her lips. The god of knowledge shook his head, folded his arms before his chest – and realized that the fifth had no paired number. He grunted, then dropped the supernumerous limbs. Meanwhile Alyssa was rambling to herself,

“Something made Decirius do this. Something... The old man? No, not he alone. Decirius has a plan, one that he doesn’t want anybody else to know. So he locks us up, keeps us from finding out anything. Is he worried that other abodes may find out? The old man could be a spy...”

In his wicker chair the old man raised an eyebrow at that comment, a light smile playing on his lips as if amused that he could be thought of as a spy.

Alyssa continued her pacing and mumbling. Finally satisfied with the number of his arms, Darawk commented, “Sister, he has not kept all of us in the Eternal City. Maidoyú has escaped, and Taurkémad left a short while before the gate was closed.”

“What?” Alyssa whirled about in a graceful pirouette, her skirt flying up for a moment. “You’re absolutely right, brother of mine! Taurkémad left *before!* Decirius wouldn’t care about Maidoyú, the little girl doesn’t know her own mind, what else would she know? But Taurkémad... Taurkémad, she’s different!”

The old man leaned forward in his chair, resting his hands on his walking stick. “In what way is she different?” he inquired gently.

“She has a brain, for one thing,” Alyssa shot back, paced three more steps, then came to a halt at an equal distance from the two male gods. “And she cares about the midrealm. Darawk, you just mentioned them. But Taurkémad frets only about her dwarves. She took part in creating them, after all. Decirius convinced her some while ago that only he should talk to the dwarves, which took all his wit to accomplish. Or... did he?”

“What are you thinking?” Darawk asked, clearly intrigued by her line of thought. “Mind you,” he hastily added, “I am *not* inquiring about why the abode has been locked down. Only about Taurkémad.”

“Granted,” Alyssa waved the added words away, then tapped a finger against her lips in an even rhythm. “What if the two of them lied to us? What if Taurkémad had been in on Decirius’ little game from the start? She pretended to relent, but she still kept in touch with the dwarves, thus furthering our chief god’s goals.”

“Well...” Darawk sighed and sat down casually on his desk. In the process he wrinkled several sheets that had still stayed on the tabletop. The god glared at them with a mixture of frustration and anger that the sheets would thus betray him, then he shook his head and continued, “Taurkémad *has* been visiting the cave of the dwarves every other century or so, when they sleep. She’s taken a number of their artefacts and displays them in her home. Decirius hasn’t complained.”

Alyssa nodded quickly. “No, he hasn’t. If they had been honest, he would have forbidden her from going to the dwarves, right? After all, how could Taurkémad be sure that one of them wouldn’t wake and see her?”

“I think,” Darawk said with a glint in his eyes, “you are on to something here, sister of mine.”

The goddess curtsied gracefully, a naughty grin on her face. “Why, thank you, oh divine brother of mine. My mind’s faculties must share some of your impeccable grandeur.”

“Excuse me?” the old man said and tapped his walking stick on the floor. The other gods whirled their heads about in sudden shock as if they had forgotten about his presence. “Excuse me,” the old

man repeated, “but *why* did Decirius want to talk to the dwarves alone? Also, did he convince the other abodes not to interfere? If those had a hand in the dwarves’ creation as well, then they would have a good right to guide the dwarves as well.”

Alyssa frowned, but Darawk only smiled. “The dwarves are our own creation. We used the villagers as templates and then went from there. The other abodes only observe, but they don’t interfere. The same way I only study their creations without questioning the motives of the creator gods.”

The old man nodded slowly. “That still leaves open the question of why Decirius would not allow anybody else to speak with the dwarves. Has he stated a reason at the time?”

“It was an experiment,” Alyssa answered. “To see if midrealm creatures could also be creative. The dwarves were given their caves, their axes, and the desire to form the stone. Decirius said that they should be left to their own minds mostly, so that we could see what they produce without any interference, save the guidance Decirius lends them.”

“But they still worship you?” the old man wondered.

“Yes, they do. The strength of their faith has always been with us, it has fueled our —” Alyssa suddenly fell silent, looking down at herself with an expression of stupefaction on her face.

“What is it, sister?” Darawk asked, quickly covering the distance and clasping her hands.

She looked up. “They do not believe anymore, brother. I do not sense their faith within me. Do you?”

The stupefaction grasped the god of knowledge as well. “No,” he said slowly, worried. “There is no part of the dwarves left inside of me, either. But... I have felt them for millenia, ever since they were created, they have always been... Why have they stopped believing?!” The last words became a scream, so loud that the walls started to tremble, and Darawk quickly caught himself, looking about with embarrassment. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Alyssa fumed. “This is part of his plan, I’m sure. Take away the worship, concentrate it on himself. We should have seen this from the start, brother. He’s wanted the dwarven worship and power for himself, that’s it. And Taurkémad... She must be in on it. I’m sure that *she* still receives their prayers’ fuel.”

Darawk’s head quivered, as if wondering whether to shake or to nod. “But that... That doesn’t explain Decirius’ behavior. Or does it? I mean, we would have found out sooner or later, and we would have questioned Decirius, or simply gone to the midrealm to set matters right again. Being locked up for sixty days doesn’t change that!”

“Unless,” Alyssa said carefully, “something is happening that will only take sixty days to be put in place.”

The old man got to his feet, his hands still resting on the walking stick. “My dear friends, I cannot imagine anything momentous that could be taken care of in the blink of an eye. And what are sixty days but a blink? Aside from that, good Darawk, I caution you to heed your lord’s words. You have already moved too close to breaking the oath you gave him.”

Darawk’s glance to the old man was cold enough to freeze a volcano. He didn’t say a word.

Alyssa felt less constrained. “You should keep your mouth shut, stranger. I am talking to my brother, and if you should ever say something like that again, I might wish to test my strength against yours.”

“No, please,” the old man said gently. “I did not want to anger you. But your brother should be more careful. To be sentenced harshly for a minor transgression, that is a fate he should not bear.”

Before Alyssa could speak, Darawk nodded quickly and said, “Yet a sentence richly deserved, that is one borne gladly.” The old man smiled, then Darawk tightened his grasp of his sister’s hands. “My dear, he *is* right. I will not inquire into my chief lord’s business any longer, for *I* am bound to his commands. *I* cannot do more than look into the matter of dwarves, of the midrealm, of worship. Of these topics *we* may speak, yet *I* will not go any further. Now.”

The goddess squinted at him. “Brother of mine, you’re making less sense since you’ve met the old man. All right, I understand. Get me that information.” She sighed, loosened his hold and started for the door. “Let’s meet again in a few hours, and then we’ll see whether I’ve found out something else. I am not bound by any particular oath, after all.”

She swept out of the room. Darawk and the old man shared a glance.

“We have work to do, I believe,” the god of knowledge broke the silence after a moment, then began to gather the scattered sheets of paper, assisted by the old man.

XIII. Two Searchers

She could not recall how long she had been racing across the mortal world. She had been in an ocean, then she had flown over it, the sun drying her body. A sandy beach had appeared beneath her, a giant turtle burying its eggs. She had turned herself into a turtle as well, tried to cozy up to the mother animal. But it had been so slow, getting closer, and the other creature had ignored her gradual approach.

Then she had given up, returned to her ordinary form and run across the beach, trying to find another distraction. Something! Anything! *Don't think about it*, she had told herself.

It hadn't worked. The beach had been so empty, and her mind only conjured up sights of the man-like winged creature that had attacked her. The one that she had destroyed. Killed. Sent back to the midrealm where it came from.

No! That didn't happen! she had screamed to herself, then she had taken flight and rushed onwards, as far away from the beach as she could.

Who was she? A goddess, yes. But what kind of a goddess destroyed life? Koultirsp never thought twice about it, yet she wasn't Koultirsp. She was different, she was... She didn't know.

A jungle was beneath her, a river crossing through it, its waves covered with leaves from the trees. Small creatures climbed over the leaves. Ants, she surmised as she dropped down to the river and alighted on its watery surface. "Who am I, really?" she wondered. "My name is Maidoyú, but that doesn't mean anything at all. Is that the purpose they talk about?"

She scooped up a leaf from the surface and sent it spinning towards solid ground. The ants on top scurried about in confusion, but once they touched down, they quickly left their vessel. "Have fun, little ones!" Maidoyú cheered. "See, I can help! I am not a taker of life! That isn't..." She hunched her shoulders forward. "That isn't my purpose," she muttered.

Then what was? What was it that she did?

She marveled at the fact that this had never occurred to her. The river's water seeped into her clothes, and she rose an inch higher. There was nothing that made her *be* someone. Really, who was she? A goddess who spent her days in empty search of fun? That was nobody. That was anybody. All she could say about herself was, "I have killed."

That wasn't what she wanted to be. Why had she never chosen anything? Why had she never pointed at something and said, "That is like me, I will take care of it. I will nourish it, I will guide it." Why had it never seemed important?

And, did it now?

She looked about herself. There was the jungle, teeming with life. Plants, animals, all filled with their own purposes. The ants were seeking their way back to their hive. A leopard was stalking prey. A flower just blossomed. Was any of that important to Maidoyú? Important enough that she wanted to make it her purpose?

“No,” she muttered bitterly. The creatures were nice, she liked them, but they did not matter much to her. Not enough to fill a god’s existence with. There had to be something else, something that was for her alone.

Maidoyú lifted herself into the air, rose over the treeline and wondered where she would go. There were a few birds in sight. A swarm of parrots rushed over the trees, to an unseen destination. She watched them amusedly, until they were gone, and behind them –

Suddenly she dropped down into the top of a tree, scaring small creatures into panicked flight. They were almost as scared as she was herself. There had been *somebody* in the sky! A figure much like her own, with two legs and two arms. Flying, without any wings.

Another deity!

But one from another abode, or from her own? Somebody sent to recapture her? Haguen?!

“No,” she reasoned after a moment. The figure had not worn a cuirass, and its shape was unlike that of tall, broad Haguen. Really much like her own – which meant that it could be a goddess. Alyssa? Taurkémad? Or Koultirsp?

If it was Koultirsp, then Maidoyú had better get as far away as possible. That goddess was permanently in a bad mood, and Maidoyú had never liked her, anyway. Alyssa? No, there was no way Decirius would entrust her with *anything*. Taurkémad? That was more likely, but not much better.

Taurkémad had always berated her on finding a purpose, as if there was nothing better to do! *Do something worthwhile*, in a million variations on the theme. So boring, so...

“But I want a purpose, don’t I?” she asked herself, amazed at the new idea. It might be good to talk to someone about this. At least Taurkémad might understand a little. Maybe she wouldn’t force Maidoyú straight back to the Eternal City and talk to her a bit before.

The goddess hesitated. She didn’t want to be locked up. On the other hand, she had found the mortal world less pleasant than before.

Before she quite realized that her thinking was done, she was flying again, rushing towards where she had last seen the other deity.



Taurkémad shook her head sadly. Before her was a small clearing in the forest, with the remains of bushes hacked to pieces on the ground. Berries had been scattered about and now were quickly devoured or gathered by small rodents. “Oh, my little dwarvies, what have you done here?” the goddess wondered. “Eating berries? In the cave you had all the food you could ever desire! I took care of that, don’t you remember?”

But saddest of all was the tree at the edge of the clearing. It was a giant of a tree, twelve feet wide at ground level. Its bark was hewn off in rough strokes, as if the tree should have been felled, but the blades had not been strong enough to carve out more than a few chips. “Stone axes,” Taurkémad

muttered. “You have the *gadmú*, why don’t you use it? With your good axes, you would have cut through the tree in a scant hour.”

They must have left the axes for some reason. Yet she had not found a trace of the *gadmú*, only the strangely doubled set of footprints. How could there have been *eight* sets when there were only four dwarves in the whole world?

“Taurkémad, I’m... I’m here. And you can take me back, all right? Just... not now, please!”

The goddess jerked her head up, swiveled it around to her back – and saw little Maidoyú hovering in the air behind her, a humble and pleading expression on her face, along with the reddish tint of embarrassment. “What are you doing here?” Taurkémad muttered. “Look, child, I don’t have time to waste with you. My dwarves need me.”

Maidoyú blinked. “You’re not here to take me back?”

“Why *would* I? You’re free to waste your existence as you please. Now go back to being a gargoyle or whatever you want to be right now!” Taurkémad waved her off, returned her head to its normal position and started to follow the dwarven trail once more.

Unfortunately Maidoyú stayed right behind her. “You mean you don’t *know*? You really don’t?”

Groaning, Taurkémad stopped to face the other goddess. “And what is it that I don’t know? Be fast about it.”

“Well,” Maidoyú shrugged, then took a quick step forward. “Decirius has ordered the abode shut down for sixty days! Nobody is allowed to leave, or to be outside. Except for me! I went out right before, and I hid from him, so he wouldn’t find me, and he didn’t, and so I thought that you were sent to fetch me back, but you weren’t, and –“ She abruptly leaped forward to wrap her arms around the very surprised Taurkémad. “I’ve killed somebody! I’ve *killed*! I didn’t want to but he attacked me, and –“

Stiffly Taurkémad brushed Maidoyú from her. “Slowly, girl!” she shouted and held the arms of the other goddess well away from herself. “Whom have you killed? And how? You’re not strong enough to harm anyone of our abode, or was it a foreign god?”

Tears crept into Maidoyú’s eyes when she said, “It wasn’t a god, but... It was a he, I’m sure of it, and I killed him, I –“

Taurkémad hurled her violently up into the air, spinning her several times, before the other goddess righted herself and hovered in the air confusedly. Taurkémad flew up to her and held out her hand. “I hope you’re calm now, girl. Start from the beginning. You did not kill a god, right?” Maidoyú shook her head sullenly. “Good. But, since you cannot kill in the midrealm, that leaves only the mortal world. Little one, there are *no* sapient souls here, no he or she, only the animals. And you don’t want to start such a ruckus over slaying an animal, right?”

“But you say that we shouldn’t,” Maidoyú muttered.

“That’s right,” Taurkémad groaned. “That’s still no reason to act like a dragon pup that can’t find its mother! Look, the animal is now in the midrealm, and it’s feeling a lot better. Animal souls don’t change much when they’re sent back. If it had been a sapient soul, that’s different. But there are none of those here, right?”

Maidoyú bit her lip.

“Right?” Taurkémad repeated.

Shyly, Maidoyú asked, “Well, aren’t you looking for the dwarves here in the mortal world?”

The other goddess abruptly dropped a few feet and had to get her bearings again before rising back to her old position. “My dwarvies?” she yelled. “You didn’t kill one of *my* dwarvies?”

“No, no, no!” Maidoyú hurried to say. “It wasn’t a dwarf, I’m sure of it! He was bigger than me, and he had wings, like leather, and there were horns on his head, and fangs, and –”

Taurkémad held up her hand, grimacing. “That’s enough, girl, be quiet.” To her surprise – and relief – Maidoyú did stop speaking. “That sounds like one of Shenaumac’s playthings. The harsnetts or whatever he calls them. But they’re supposed to be in the midrealm, too. Like my dwarves. Are you sure that you killed the harsnett in the mortal world, not in the midrealm?”

“Of *course* I’m sure!” Maidoyú hollered. “I was being a gargoyle when I saw the footsteps of the – the harsnett. I followed, then he attacked, and I... killed him.” Her fury waned quickly. “I don’t want to kill, Taurkémad, really I don’t, but it happened, and I... Yes, I’m quiet.” The last words were spoken demurely, after a very clear look from the other goddess silenced her.

Taurkémad drifted a couple of feet away, to gaze down at the jungle. Her dwarves had left the midrealm, and so had the harsnetts. Neither had been supposed to. At least the harsnetts were better equipped to deal with the mortal world, and honestly she didn’t care much about them. Nonetheless this was much of a coincidence. Add to that the odd tale about Decirius locking down the abode, and things were decidedly odd. Did that have something to do with her dwarves? Perhaps Decirius had *known* the dwarves were leaving the caves? Perhaps he was behind the four new pairs of feet?

“Come with me, girl,” Taurkémad muttered and headed back down towards the trail. “We’re going to find my dwarves now, and hopefully some answers. I hate being kept in the dark around here.”

XIV. A Chink in the Armor

The city wall towered high over Lonapal. The god gazed up its broad gilded blocks of stone, towards the silver caps cresting it. Like the sea, Mannannan had said, when he did this section. Hagen had not been pleased that the god of water had presumed to build a part of the wall. For half a millenium, the two had not spoken a word to each other.

And neither did they now. The charades had been a bad idea, he now realized. Both were so serious that they could not see how enjoyable they were. Oh, how much fun Lonapal had always had playing with the villagers! How they amused him by trying to transform their tiny ideas into gestures! They had rarely guessed his gestures right, at least in the beginning, before he taught himself to lower his ideas to their level. After all, how could they possibly comprehend the concept of a moon circling a planet because of its own speed and the planet's gravity?

Lonapal smiled. A little longer, and then he could play with the villagers again. Maybe they had devised a new game? Something physical perhaps. He could easily limit his strength and limbs to the same as the villagers had, that wasn't difficult, and then he could have fun from the start.

Still so many days until he could traverse the city wall. He sighed and leaned against the gleaming surface. It felt warm under his back. "Like the sea," Lonapal chuckled. The sea wasn't warm, it was cold, but Mannannan hadn't let that stop him. He'd wanted to be comfortable with this.

Lonapal patted the wall, reaching a bit inside to see how far the warmth extended. He frowned after a moment. It was still warm several inches inside, not the cold of rock. He was sure that Mannannan had only coated the surface, not worrying about the interior. Curiously Lonapal turned around and stretched his arm further out, extending it further than the normal length. And it was still warm. He reached out more, and then he felt his fingers pass through the wall into the open air.

"I should ask your forgiveness," Lonapal shook his head. "Mannannan, you are a better artificer than I gave you credit for."

A presence came closer, he felt and turned his head. Alyssa strode along the circumference of the wall, seeming very concerned with herself. The poor girl, Lonapal thought. She was taking the situation worse than he was. "Hello, Alyssa!" he called out. "Care for a little game?"

The goddess gave a start, then essayed a small smile in his direction – which died the moment she saw him. "What are you doing?!" she shouted and hurried over to his side.

"Why?" Lonapal asked as he withdrew his arm. "I'm... Well, I wanted to find out how Mannannan built this, I mean how –"

"How far did you reach through the wall?!"

Lonapal shrugged. "To the outside. Did you know that it's warm all the –"

Alyssa pushed him aside, stepped past the confused god through the wall. Lonapal blinked, wondered if he had missed something when the goddess re-emerged, a bright gleam on her face as she slapped his shoulder. "That's wonderful, Lonapal! You did it!"

“Good,” he mumbled, rather insecurely. What was it about a warm wall that excited her like this?

She laughed heartily, slapped him again then patted the wall which was solid to her touch now. “I didn’t think this was possible. Hagen’s always so concerned with duty, and he – Well, we won’t tell him, will we?”

Lonapal wondered what exactly she was referring to, but he quickly shared her laughter. “No, certainly not.” He went on laughing a bit longer before he realized that Alyssa had stopped. “Uhm, is there a problem?”

“Apparently so,” Alyssa said with a raised eyebrow. “You haven’t realized that you’ve found an exit, have you?”

“An exit?” Lonapal gaped at her, before his eyes swiveled first to the wall, then to his arm which had just reached the outside of the Eternal City. “An exit!” he cried.

Alyssa snickered, but sobered up quickly. “All right, there is a way out of this cage after all. I need to tell my brother, so please don’t go out before he’s here, too. When Decirius finds out about this, you can be sure he’ll close it down in a heartbeat.”

Lonapal stared at the hidden passageway in merriment. He could go to the villagers *now*, there was no need to wait! He could play charades, he could – oh, he could do all the things he so enjoyed. Casting the blaze of happiness, becoming air and light. Oh, yes!

“No,” he whispered.

“What is it?” Alyssa asked, on the verge of leaving for her brother’s study.

“I...” Lonapal started, stopped and thought about the right words. “Decirius said we are not to leave. If he overlooked this opening, it... That doesn’t mean we should disobey his commandment.”

“Excuse me?” the goddess muttered. “You’re happy to stay here? Look, it doesn’t make any sense to coop us up here! Decirius hasn’t said a word why he’s doing this!”

“He’s always taken care of us,” Lonapal insisted cautiously. He could tell that Alyssa didn’t like what he said, but he needed to explain himself. He needed to make her understand and appreciate his opinion. Yes, that was it. She might not enjoy it at this point, but she had to see it was the right thing. “Alyssa, our lord has never steered us wrong. We have followed every one of his commandments for all our existence, and that was good. We shouldn’t disagree with him whenever we do not like his orders.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, absolutely,” he hurried to say. “We do not know the purpose of his actions. I... I have faith in Decirius that there is a good reason for this, one that will benefit us all. You cannot think that he would intend to harm us!”

Finally! That thought hit her enough to make her angry façade melt for at least a brief while. She had to see the truth of his words!

Alyssa turned up one end of her lips. “No, he wouldn’t harm us. That is, as long as we follow his orders. The question, Lonapal, is whom he wants to benefit. The entire abode, or himself?”

The god was taken aback. She was questioning Decirius, he who had always been there for the abode, he who had taken up justice as his purpose. “Alyssa,” Lonapal whispered, “you’re treading a

dangerous course. Because you don't believe in our lord's righteousness anymore. That only because of one decision, a single order that is unpleasant to you. Please, reconsider. Talk to Decirius. Ask him to explain everything. I... Alyssa, he has always been just. Always! You mustn't forget that, I beg you."

She listened to him. That was more than he had expected. But then she said, "Justice is a two-edged sword. My brother could lecture you about it for a couple of centuries, but I don't have the patience. If you're convinced that Decirius has imprisoned us for our own good, fine. I don't agree, and my brother and I will decide what we do with this opening." She had spoken with an even voice up to this point. Now her voice took on a deeper tone as she leaned forward to look into the god's eyes. "Don't tell anybody about this passage. If you do, I'll make sure you'll rue this day. I *am* stronger than you."

"Yes, you are," Lonapal agreed. The conversation had taken a turn for the worse, worse than he had imagined. "You... I won't do anything against you, I promise. I like you too much for that."

Her stare did not waver for several uncomfortable heartbeats, then she pulled her head back and smiled. "I know, Lonapal. I like you, too. But now, I will go see my brother," Alyssa said sweetly before whisking herself away.

Lonapal frowned and wiped his forehead. He was glad, in a way. Alyssa liked him, that was very... nice. Yet she would leave the Eternal City, along with her brother. What would become of her when Decirius found out? The chief god would be angry, that was sure.

Maybe Lonapal should tell him, so he could not punish Alyssa. On the other hand, would she then still like him? He sighed. Why did existence have to be so difficult? The mortals had it much easier, with their tiny lives that held no problems when the gods provided everything for them.

XV. Through the Hole

The old man smacked his walking stick against the wall. It bounced back, with a reassuringly solid sound. “Nice workmanship,” he commented.

Alyssa shrugged, then stuck her foot straight into the wall. “We can still get through. Lonapal hasn’t run to Decirius yet.”

“I doubt he will do that,” Darawk said. He had exchanged his usual clothes for a pair of simple breeches, a linen shirt and a tweed vest. The attire went well with the much younger appearance he’d taken, seeming to be about the same age as Alyssa. Now it was surprisingly easy to see the resemblance, the cut of the nose, the curve of the chin – all except for the eyes formerly hidden by the wrinkles of age. “Lonapal wants everybody to like him. Especially you, dear.”

“Want to make a bet on that?” she countered, not too happy about Lonapal’s affection.

Darawk smiled, dug in his left vest pocket and extracted a silver medallion about the size of his palm which he handed over to the old man. “He’ll wait two full days before telling Decirius about this exit. Two days after we’ve gone through, that is.”

His voice blank, the old man asked, “Are you certain that you wish to leave your abode?”

Alyssa’s gaze was withering, but the god of knowledge smiled as he pointed at his sister. “My friend, I would not hear the end of this if I were to stay behind. My sister can be rather annoying when she chooses to be.”

“You take this matter too lightly,” the old man cautioned. “The rashness of youth speaks from your mouth, but you should let wisdom shade your words.”

Alyssa stepped by the side of her brother, clasping his arm gently and looked over his shoulder at the old man. One might have thought that Darawk served as her shield, yet the fire in her eyes would disabuse any observer of that notion quickly. “You are free to stay, of course. Sixty days, then you’ll be out anyway. What’s the big difference?”

“The big difference,” the old man answered calmly, “is that I have spent hundreds of millenia alone outside. The warmth of a fine abode is something I have done without for too long. You may be throwing away your place here and have to join me in my wanderings. Believe me, that is a fate you do not want. And I certainly don’t want to be the cause.”

Before the goddess could answer, Darawk raised his hand and gently closed her mouth. “Old man, you are *not* the cause. Although we’ve only known each other for a few days, you should have learned that I do not make fast decisions. Nor am I swayed that easily by my sister – contrary appearance notwithstanding, of course. Decirius does not act the way he ought to, and I question his motives. Since he has made it clear that he will not answer those questions, I seek to learn more by another method.”

He raised his chin a little, focused his gaze on the stranger. “This abode was built on freedom, old man. Free deities who have joined together. We are not like other abodes where one god is a tyrant

who may never be opposed. In all the time of our existence Decirius has never threatened a member of our home. If there were questions, he answered them. Sometimes he did not immediately offer all the facts at his disposal, but he said enough to console us. That he does not seem to care about consolation anymore is troubling. Can you see that?”

“I can see,” the old man sighed, “that you are set on this course. Your reasoning seems sound, and the yearning for knowledge is strong within you. As strong as your sister’s yearning for respect, I would say.”

Darawk’s grip on her mouth suddenly tightened, fully aware this was the only way to keep her quiet. “I suggest to you, old man, to refrain from rashness yourself. There is more to my sister than what you have seen and heard in these short days. Now, are you –“

He suddenly stopped, a concerned expression on his face, then he urged, “Decide now, old man. Alyssa, we are leaving this moment.”

She did not ask for any explanation but strode straight through the wall. The old man though frowned at Darawk who had already put one foot into the wall. “What has happened? I have not sensed anything.”

“I am the god of knowledge, my friend,” Darawk smiled. “You may have traveled through all there is, but I have found a lot that you haven’t yet seen.” With these words, he stepped through the walls and left the Eternal City.

Outside stood Alyssa, her head angled to look at the perfectly blue sky. She had changed her clothes to a leather dress that clung tightly to her figure, but proved supple with every movement. “Whereto, brother of mine?”

“The cave of the dwarves.” He pursed his lips. “Taurkémad may be there. We have to be careful, in case she is in league with Decirius. But...” He grinned back at the wall and held out his hand to help the old man outside as well. “You seem able of rash decisions as well, my friend.”

“I seem infected by youth,” the old man shook his head feebly. “I want to see how you handle this affair. Strange that after all my existence I can still be so moved by two young deities.”

Alyssa frowned. “You’d better learn to move fast. The cave of the dwarves. Now!” She linked her hand with Darawk’s, whose other arm still held on to the old man – then the three gods vanished from the divine realm.



The air had barely reclaimed the space vacated by the gods when Decirius stepped through the wall. He folded his arms, took a deep breath, while his black eyes focused on a point invisible in this realm. A thin smile played about his lips. “I appreciate predictability. It is good to know that I can count on these two in my calculations.”

From beyond the wall, a voice commented, “The old man didn’t figure in those calculations.”

“No, he didn’t,” Decirius frowned. “He forced my hand a bit sooner than I had planned. Keep an eye on him. Should he endanger our plans, you know what to do.”

“Oh, yes, I surely do,” the voice answered, dripping with anticipation.

Decirius nodded to himself. Yes, his plan was proceeding well. The road to greatness had been started, and with the help of unwitting Darawk and Alyssa, he would walk the road to its end.

Yet there was still work to do, he told himself. “I will seal the passage now. Lonapal might talk to others about it. You have your own door, after all.”

The voice didn’t answer. Decirius raised an eyebrow. Predictable. “Good,” he said, then went back into the Eternal City and closed the doorway in the wall.

XVI. The Birth of a Race

The goddesses had covered the remaining distance to the dwarves in only a few hours. Darktime had fallen. The jungle had grown more silent than in the day, yet there was still plenty of noise to distract Maidoyú and make her wonder which creature made the sound. A lonesome howl rose from the trees, much like a wolf, yet with a shriller sound that she couldn't identify. She would have gladly investigated the hollering beast, but Taurkémad kept plowing on through the thick of the jungle, and Maidoyú didn't want to be alone again. At least, not for a while.

Smoke came from up ahead. She didn't see any particular brightness through the foliage, so she reasoned that it must be from a campfire by the dwarves. Maidoyú wondered how the little creatures had started the fire. It must be difficult to do so in this moist forest, when one couldn't just make a couple of burning logs appear.

"There they are, my little dwarvies!" Taurkémad exclaimed happily.

Finally, Maidoyú thought and started to brush the remaining branches aside – when her companion instantly made those branches immobile for the weaker goddess. "Why –"

"I want to take a look at them first," Taurkémad announced, while she lifted herself several feet into the air and gently coasted closer to the dwarves' campsite. "To see how my little ones have made it so far, without the aid of a god," she added proudly when she was ready to peer through the leaves.

Maidoyú shrugged and joined her companion. The clearing ahead was very small, no more than ten feet at its widest. Big enough for the eight dwarves huddled around the dying fire between them. The twigs and branches were shoddily arranged, by somebody who hadn't had much experience in building a fire. Why, even Maidoyú herself knew better than that! At least the dwarf had taken care not to light any of the foliage around them, or the entire jungle would have gone up in flames, she was sure.

"Eight dwarves..." Taurkémad whispered, a mixture of excitement and frustration in her voice.

"Yes, there are eight," Maidoyú confirmed, then a thought hit her. "Oh, didn't you say there were only four? And weren't they only males?"

Taurkémad swallowed hard, but didn't answer.

What was she so worried about? All right, there were now eight of them. Maidoyú was quite sure that four of the dwarves were female, since they had no beards and their faces seemed a bit softer than those of the males. They were more like basalt, instead of the masculine granite. But... "They don't look right, do they? The women, I mean. They're so swollen up."

Taurkémad's voice was raspy when she answered, "They are pregnant."

"Pregnant? You mean like animals? I thought sapients couldn't have youngens."

The other goddess didn't reply. Maidoyú sighed. All this seriousness, just because somebody had toyed around with the dwarves. After all, that happened often, didn't it? You make something, then a deity from another abode comes along and changes it. Why, those villagers in the midrealm, nearly

all the gods there were had taken a part in their creation. Maidoyú hadn't, of course. She had never been interested enough.

"You should be happy," Maidoyú decided after a moment. "There are going to be even more dwarves for you to like."

"Animals!" Taurkémad rasped and turned away from the sight. "My dwarvies have become *animals*."

Maidoyú frowned. One of the dwarves, a male, put his hand around a woman and spoke to her in a guttural voice. The speech wasn't as clear and well-defined as that of a god, but it was language. "Animals don't talk. The dwarves are still sapient. So they have children... I wonder what dwarven children look like, and how they act!" More and more enthusiastic, she remembered the various young ones she had seen of other species – animals, yes, but those very little ones had been so cute! How they tried to figure out how to walk, or how to fly, and all of that! "I really want to see those children, you know, Taurkémad? They must be precious. Oh, come on, look at them! They're still your dwarvies. Taurkémad?"

The other goddess didn't answer. Maidoyú still sensed her in the vicinity, but now her companion had taken much higher to the air. She floated up as well, bubbling with the desire to talk about dwarven children. Yet looking at Taurkémad's face, she realized that words would drive her off, leaving Maidoyú alone again.

So she resigned herself to silence, waiting for her companion to speak first.

The fire below died down. The dwarves settled down to sleep, paired off as they already were. Did they have names? Maidoyú wondered. She could think of several for each of them, but perhaps they had chosen for themselves. Now that was fascinating. Creatures choosing for themselves! And they would have to teach their children the art of choosing, too. She desperately wanted to dive down to the dwarves, perhaps take their form, and share their little adventure. But, no, there was still her companion.

"Decirius promised," Taurkémad whispered. "He promised that the dwarves would stay in their cave, untouched by another abode. *We* made them. We put so much work into them! I wanted to see how much they could become. They were supposed to be the perfect sapients, unlike the hodge-podge villagers and elves. All that work – and then some fool couldn't keep his dirty hands away from them! They're ruined!"

"Ruined? How can you say that!" Maidoyú cried. Why did these words hurt so much? "They can have children now. That's... that isn't bad! They have all the space of the mortal world to explore, so much more than their dark little cave, and they can teach their children. Oh, Taurkémad, imagine how the parents walk their little ones around – that'll be just like we have the other sapients, right?"

Taurkémad finally looked at her. Coldly, she said, "They are not gods. They are only sapients. We gave them intelligence, and they pay us back by their worship. Having children, sapients will start to see themselves as deities. I will *not* have my dwarves forget their proper places. Move aside."

The cold voice seemed to bite into Maidoyú's heart. "Why? What are you going to do?"

“I told you to move aside, child,” Taurkémad snarled. “I’ll take my dwarves back to their cave where they belong, and those new dwarves – I’ll teach them polluting my good creatures!”

She wants to destroy the women! Maidoyú realized with sudden fright. But the females were pregnant, they would give birth to little dwarves. And she wanted to watch the children! “No, please,” she said, “let them live. They –“

A whirlwind suddenly caught hold of Maidoyú, twisting her away, whirling her about herself, like a twig in a hurricane. Meanwhile Taurkémad shot down towards the camp. *I can’t let her do that!* Maidoyú screamed to herself – then caused a hurricane of her own to thrust Taurkémad aside.

The goddess crashed into a giant tree, waking a flock of birds that scattered in moments. Taurkémad stared up, her eyes full of fiery anger.

“Please stop,” Maidoyú shouted. “Just don’t hurt them, and we can talk, and –“

Taurkémad hurled a bolt of lightning up, its bright discharge rushing towards Maidoyú. The goddess dodged, and without thinking sent a bolt of her own into the treetop. She hadn’t aimed.

Neither had she needed to.

Stupefied she watched the entire tree light up for a heartbeat, then it blinked out of existence. As easy as that. Flakes of ash rained down, along with the body of Taurkémad who dropped out of the sky. The goddess fell on a smaller tree, setting it aflame with the heat still in her, then she crashed to the ground, her body twisted and mangled.

The fire of the second tree spread to the next, closer to the dwarves. Maidoyú had to protect them, and moments later a sudden rainstorm doused the fire.

Taurkémad still didn’t move. She should have come back up again, shouldn’t she? She was stronger than Maidoyú, after all. Not that they had ever compared strength, not that Maidoyú had ever cared, but...

She suddenly felt cold. Only a little while earlier had she killed the harsnett. And now?

“No,” Maidoyú breathed a sigh of relief. She could still sense Taurkémad with her. The goddess hadn’t died, she was only unconscious.

Only unconscious? What have I done?

“I’ve...” She frowned, trying to come to terms with something very unfamiliar. “I have protected the children.”

Perhaps she had found her purpose, after all.

XVII. The Village Green

Caltraya sat on an outcropping over a field and threw a pebble down. It fell on a patch of blue grass. Often had she wondered why some of the grass here was blue when it was green almost everywhere else. (Except for that purplish grass growing a mile off, near the burrows of the manlings. But that grass grew to her shoulders, so it wasn't really grass, was it?) Had the gods disagreed on what the proper color was?

"No," she frowned and dropped the pebbles she held in her other hand. Slowly she got to her feet, brushed her dark red dress down. "I never thought of it that way," she said to herself as she wandered down from the outcropping to the village green.

Before, she had thought that the gods must have had a special reason for the blue grass, one that a mere villager like her could never understand. It had seemed so right, like everything else about her existence. The gods had made her, they had made the village and all her friends there. The same was true of the manlings, of the creatures in the air and on the greens – like the deer that cautiously grazed several hundred feet away from her. Something as perfect as all of this, how could there have been disagreement?

Yet Caltraya had learned something new three days ago. She had seen how gods were admonished by another. The good lady Alyssa had been forced to bow before Decirius. Against her will she had been forced to leave the village and return to her abode.

The memory hurt her, as if the world had come apart in that moment. In a way, it had. But Caltraya wasn't sure what that way was, and how her life had changed.

The village wasn't as perfect as it had been before. Several houses had been destroyed by the goddess Koultirsp. The people living there had been burned to death. The day after they had come back home, from the place where their death had put them, and they had thought that their houses would have been restored, the same way it had happened every time before.

Only that the houses were still ruins. Voldert had asked Caltraya if he could stay at her home until the gods rebuilt his. She had agreed, cautiously so. It was strange sharing one's house with somebody else. Voldert was a nice fellow, and she liked being near him. Yet to have him sleep under the same roof? Eat every meal with him?

To be honest, that was the reason why she had come to the village green. Her house felt so small with Voldert present. Out here, the world still looked as she knew it. That was reassuring, even though she felt very different.

Why had none of the gods repaired the damages? Why had none of them spoken to them through the blue flame in the plaza? The villagers had convened there for worship as they had always done. (Caltraya hadn't mentioned the events of that night, so they had no cause for worry. None except for the still smouldering houses.) Most of the time, a god would answer. Sometimes one from the abode

of Decirius, sometimes one from another abode. They all deserved equal worship, all five of the abodes that she knew.

Voldert said that there were more abodes than that. He'd spoken often with Lonapal, the bright God of the Games. When she'd first heard about this, she had wondered why those other abodes never spoke to the villagers. Didn't they like their creatures?

"What has become of me?" Caltraya shook her head sadly, then sank to her knees and looked up to the perfectly blue sky. "I am questioning the gods! Please, oh great creators, strike me down now for I am failing my faith in you! Please!"

The words echoed empty into the air. The deer looked up in sudden fright, then rushed off to the forest. There was no answer. Caltraya was alone.

Alone.

Tears started forming in her eyes. How could she be alone? The gods were always by her side, weren't they? The villagers were not supposed to ever be alone!

"Please," she whispered. "Show yourself."

Nothing happened. Not even a wind that would start bending the grass, twirl up her hair. No sign from the gods.

Caltraya huddled down, pressed her arms against her legs and prayed with all her devotion to Alyssa that she would show herself. She had been so nice to her, she had called her *Callie*. Yes, she wanted to speak to Alyssa. The good lady would explain to her what had happened, and she would put things to right.

"Except that she can't."

Caltraya bit on her lip. Why had she spoken those words? How dared she doubt the omnipotence of the gods? Perhaps that night had only been a test of her faith! And she was failing.

That had to be the truth. The gods were testing the villagers. Yes, that was the only explanation.

Then why didn't she believe in that? Was her faith weakened that much?

She couldn't return to the village like this. The others were still waiting for the gods to come back. They still went to their hours of worship, praying as if nothing had happened. There was no reason why they shouldn't. If this was a test of faith, then they were doing exactly what the gods wanted.

But she no longer had that faith. It could be that she had been chosen for a special test.

She had to learn more. Had the gods shown themselves to the other beings in this world? What about the manlings? Caltraya had been to their burrows only once, a long time ago. The curious little beings had been likable enough, but her place was in the village.

Voldert would not understand her doubts. Maybe the manlings wouldn't ask why she had left her home.

"I shouldn't doubt you," she spoke to the sky, hoping in vain for an answer.

Finally she shook her head, wiped the tears from her eyes and set out in the direction of the manling burrows.

She didn't know what else to do.

She was alone.

XVIII. A Goddess Defeated

“Open up!” Taurkémad yelled and banged her fists against the gate of the Eternal City. “Haguen, where are you? Move your bum feet and let me in!”

She kicked the gate, but it didn’t budge. The wood glowed in darktime. It had never done so before, and unwillingly Taurkémad had to admit that Maidoyú had spoken the truth. The Eternal City was shut down. She hadn’t been able to go straight to her home. A force tasting of Haguen had repelled and deposited her before the gate.

“Open up!” she repeated, angry and frustrated. It had been a very long time since her body had last hurt as it did now. She couldn’t remove the pain. Taking a different form didn’t solve the problem, either. The pain was in her self, and now she wanted to get back to her own bed, lie down and try to forget that Maidoyú – *Maidoyú!* – had defeated her so easily.

The gate still didn’t move. Taurkémad twisted her fingers and sent a bright orange light up, flaring into a golden shower along with thunderous noise. That should wake Haguen up. Where was he anyway? Didn’t he stick around the gate at darktime, too? Most of the time, anyway.

She rubbed her side. The pain receded for a moment, but the instant she let go of the side, it returned at full strength. How could Maidoyú have hurt her like that? The insignificant little goddess who had been little better than a pest?

Finally a noise came from behind the gate. Taurkémad stretched her body, tried to appear undisturbed. When the gate slowly opened and Haguen peered through the slit, his halberd ready, she realized that her attempts were in vain.

“What happened to you?” the guardian god asked with raised eyebrows.

“Nothing,” Taurkémad muttered. “Step aside, all right?”

Haguen pulled the gate back wide enough for her to pass through. “You were gone for several days. Much has changed here, you –“

“I know!” Taurkémad shouted, slipped by the god and started for her home.

She had taken a few steps only when Decirius appeared before her. “Have you found the dwarves?” he asked calmly.

Taurkémad shuddered, remembering how awful the little beings now were. “Yes, I have. Can I –“

“Are they fine?” Decirius continued.

Her eyes widened, her breath quickened. “They’re –“ she started angrily, then cut herself off. “They’re fine. You were right. Leave them in the mortal world, that’s the thing.”

Decirius nodded, then looked over her shoulder and ordered Haguen to close the gate again. The goddess stared at the chief god. Should she tell him about the dwarves? After all, Decirius had taken charge of them.

No, she decided quickly. If Decirius had taken care of them rather than merely charge, none of this would have happened. The dwarves would still be her little ones, still in their cave, and she

would never have been hurt by Maidoyú. “If there isn’t anything more, I’ll be going,” Taurkémad said.

The chief god studied her with his darktime eyes for a moment – only to vanish suddenly.

Taurkémad frowned. “He could have said something,” she muttered.

“Our lord has much to think about these days,” Haguen noted. “You’re hurting, Taurk. Please, let me take you home.”

“I can walk!” Taurkémad protested.

“Then I will accompany you,” the guardian stated and waved his hand ahead.

Unwillingly, she muttered, “Whatever.”



Haguen had stayed with her throughout the night. In the morning he had conjured up a meal for her, a selection of jungle fruits. She had stared at the fruits as if they were obscenities. Too fresh were the memories of the jungle where she had seen her dwarves. No, *the* dwarves. They weren’t hers anymore.

The guardian god had seemed to sense her discomfort, so he’d replaced the fruits with steaming vegetables from a different climate, and with a sigh Taurkémad had eaten them. Then Haguen had spoken to her a bit, about insignificant little things like the burning sun or the system of winds on the mortal world.

She’d claimed to be very tired. Haguen had understood immediately and left, probably for his post at the gate. He was like that, after all. He wouldn’t open the gate, but he’d have to stand close to it during the day.

Taurkémad had looked about her home. There had been all the creations of the dwarves, the statues, the friezes, the small, symbolic carvings. At one point she had loved them so much that she had taken them from the cave to look at them every day. Now, though, she had not been able to bear watching them.

So she’d mustered her strength – strange that she had so little left – and turned them into slag, melting them on the spot, then throwing them out of her home onto the street before it. Without them her house looked empty. Taurkémad decided that she liked it that way, then she settled down in a corner, staring at the emptiness.

After a while she became aware of a presence outside. Another god was near the trash, and he wouldn’t go away. She tried to ignore the god, focused her stare, then launched a lightning bolt at the nearest wall. The tiny sparks coming from her fingers only disheartened her more. She closed her eyes for a moment, then got up and walked to the entrance.

The first thing she saw outside was a small orange creature climbing the pile of slag. A... a cat? Yes, that was the name. The race lived only in the midrealm, a constant source of prey and confusion. She had never paid them much heed, but what was one doing here? More than that, why was it on *her* slag?

“Hello, Kemad!” Shenaumac greeted her.

Taurkémad blinked. She’d forgotten about the god’s presence for a moment. “What are you doing here?” she muttered.

The God of Sharpened Things smiled. “I heard you were back. You’re redecorating your place?”

“Shut up.”

“Oh, come on, Kemad, I was only trying to start a conversation.” Shenaumac rolled his eyes, while his arms grew longer and picked the cat from the pile it was sniffing. “Can Tiger and I come inside?”

Taurkémad’s grip on the door tightened. “No. I want to be alone.”

The cat struggled against the god’s hands for a while, before it relented and started making a soft noise. Shenaumac looked down at it, shrugged and stroked its head gently. “Tiger, Tiger, you’re a selfish one, aren’t you?” he whispered.

Taurkémad frowned. “It follows your lead, that’s all, Shen.”

The god raised his head a bit and smiled. “You’re right. He’s a good student, aren’t you, Tiger? Yes, you *are*, believe me.”

“He?” Taurkémad asked bitterly. “You’re growing too attached to the animal.”

“Perhaps I am,” Shenaumac shrugged. “Well, we all have our pets. You take care of them, and they’ll give you joy in return.”

“Until somebody takes the pet away.”

Shenaumac frowned. “Yes,” he said after a moment, “Tirspie tried that a few days ago. She didn’t like Tiger one bit, the spoilsport. Sometimes I wonder if she’s taken every creature in the universe as her pet, or if she minds somebody else having fun.”

Taurkémad didn’t answer. The cat raised its chin, and Shenaumac obliged it by scratching under its head. “I guess it’s the latter. Before the gate was closed, Tirspie destroyed a couple of the villagers’ houses in the midrealm. You know, she probably did that just because Lonapal’s taken a liking to them. Can’t have anyone be having fun while Tirspie is feeling miserable.”

“She always feels miserable.”

He smiled. “Yes, she does, doesn’t she? Tirspie should get a pet of her own, instead of tampering with other gods’ pets.”

Taurkémad’s gaze suddenly intensified, shifting from the god’s face to the cat nestled in his arms. She didn’t say anything, but her mind was starting to run through thoughts in quick succession.

Suddenly she stepped back and smashed the door shut. The noise echoed through the street, rousing the cat from its near-slumber.

Shenaumac grinned, hoisted the cat on both hands and touched its nose, watching its eyes with glee. “Who’s following whose lead, Tiger? We’re on our own road to greatness, aren’t we?”

The cat mewed uncomfortably.

“All right, Tiger,” Shenaumac relented and let the cat back on the ground to roam the slag again. “Enjoy yourself!”

XIX. The Power of Prayer

“At least the villagers are still there,” Darawk muttered and leaned on the walking stick he had made, an identical copy of the one the old man was using.

Alyssa sat down on a rock. “The dwarves and the harsnetts are gone from the midrealm, off into the mortal world. Does that make any sense to you, brother of mine?”

While Darawk breathed deeply and looked up at the sky, the old man said, “You have already come up with one explanation, my friends. The worship of specific gods. For the dwarves, you considered Decirius and Taurkémad. Is there a god especially fond of the harsnetts?”

“Shenaumac,” Darawk shrugged. “He is the God of Sharpened Things in our abode, and – please don’t ask why he chose that. Shenaumac doesn’t have much power, so he had to settle for that. He’s making the best of it, I suppose. He gave the harsnetts their claws – sharpened things, you know? – so that they could hunt.”

“He likes hunting,” Alyssa muttered.

The God of Knowledge nodded. “He’s good at hunting so I’m not surprised he likes it, dear sister. The question is who let the harsnetts go to the mortal world? Our little godling couldn’t protect them down there, after all.”

“No,” Alyssa agreed with a smile.

The old man was watching them with interest, enjoying the exchange of ideas. Yet there was a different noise that suddenly caught his attention, a noise much like the wind, but heavier. Much heavier.

“Besides,” the goddess said, “Shenaumac never gets along with anyone. Least of all Decirius.”

The noise grew louder. The old man swiveled his head about, studying the sky.

Darawk said, “Most of the time, you’re right. But Decirius also cares about the harsnetts. They pray to him first of all, then the chief gods of a few other abodes, and only afterwards to Shenaumac.” He frowned. “Isn’t it interesting how Decirius managed to edge out other chief gods?”

There was a dark speck in the sky. The old man focused his eyes on it, sharpening his vision. Wings. Wide wings, gently flapping. It wasn’t a bird, it was something else. A memory surged in his mind.

“Our abode has taken the most interest in sapients,” Alyssa noted. “The others care more about animals and plants, or about the shapes of rocks and rivers.”

The frown on Darawk’s forehead deepened. He opened his mouth to answer, but the old man interrupted him, “I think it might be prudent to take cover.”

“Excuse me?” Darawk blinked.

The old man pointed at the sky. Sharpened vision was no longer necessary to see the wings coursing the sky, a large, golden body between them, stretching into a thin tail on the one end, and a

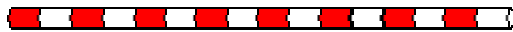
massive head on the other. Dark red eyes glistened in the skull, angrily directed at the three gods on the ground.

“Lógrims?” Alyssa raised her eyebrows. “Old man, he’s a god of dragons. I don’t think he cares much about sapients, nor that we have run from our own abode.”

“Unless,” Darawk said, “you have a history with him, my friend.”

The old man shook his head and started walking away from the approaching dragon god. “That history doesn’t concern the present. But I know Lógrims as well as his temper. We should –“

Their conversation had eaten up precious time, enough to let the dragon come into range. Lógrims opened his jaws, launching a wide stream of fire towards the ground.



The manlings hadn’t been of any help to Caltraya. They hadn’t spoken to the gods recently, either, but they weren’t worried one bit. “Well,” one of them had told her, “you can’t speak to everyone at the same time. It would be nice, I’m sure. Goodness, I’d love that! That would be fun! On the other hand, it’s also fun if you speak to only one person at a time, at least sometimes, so the gods probably do that, and therefore –“ Caltraya had stopped listening at that point, while the manling droned on and on. Around him, everybody else was talking as well, as if they never stopped.

Which probably was true.

Caltraya hadn’t enjoyed their company very much. She needed time to think. Time and thinking both were commodities that the manlings didn’t put any stock in, obviously. So she had resumed her walking, this time without any goal in mind.

Returning to her village still seemed a bad idea. Her faith hadn’t been restored. Quite the contrary. She was starting to worry about the *gods!* About the good lady Alyssa in particular. Could it be that Decirius had meant her harm?

Why should she worry? The gods *were* gods, after all! They were eternal!

Caltraya was walking along the edge of a forest, several miles away from the burrows of the manlings. Birds were singing. A few were flying overhead, quickly darting between the trees, occasionally scooting out over the meadows stretching onward from the forest.

A loud noise intruded on her ponderings.

It came from across the next hill, she realized. She turned her head – and felt her heart skip a beat. A dragon coursed in the sky, sending its fiery breath towards the ground. A dragon!

She had been fried by a dragon a long time ago, feeling the fiery breath tear her apart. For almost a week she had been gone, her mind drifting in nothingness, only feeling the pain. Then she had reappeared, hale and sound, to walk back to the village. But she remembered the pain.

She ought to get away from the dragon. It was so close, lumbering over the meadows, blocking out the sun with its giant body. The forest... She had to get to the forest.

Then lightning flashed up from the ground, beyond the next hill, streaking towards the dragon, impacting on its wing. The dragon screamed, sending another wave of flame down.

Where had the lightning come from? And how had it been caused?

Curiosity fought with fear in her heart. She pounded her fists against her legs, yearning to run away. But she couldn't. Lightning meant gods. Gods like the good lady.

She had to find out if the gods were still there!



"Why are you attacking us?!" Darawk screamed, running across the field of grass.

Lógrims didn't bother with answering. Unless the flames jetting down counted.

Darawk was hurting from one that had seared his leg. He had reset the limb so he could run again, but the pain persisted. It took so much strength to keep the leg from limping! A scholarly god shouldn't have to worry about anything like that.

"Run faster, brother!" Alyssa yelled, firing lightning from two arms she had grown in her back.

The old man barely matched their pace. He was breathing hard, as if he were truly old.

Darawk wished that he could have just whisked the three of them away, to the mortal world perhaps. Lógrims might not be able to follow them. *Empty wishes!* The god of dragons was keeping them in this place, by a powerful field surrounding them.

The three gods were no match for him, Darawk knew. Lógrims ruled an abode of one deity alone, himself. He had all the power of his small abode, didn't share it with any other god. And that power was now turned on them.

"We didn't do anything to you!" he yelled.

Lógrims belched a ball of fire straight at the God of Knowledge. Darawk dived aside, rolling over the meadows. He lost his bearings for a moment, scrambled to his feet, looking first for the god of dragons, then his companions. The first look was sufficient to make him leap aside again, since Lógrims was streaking towards him. "Your creatures infest the mortal world!" the dragon's booming voice rushed over the meadows as if it were a gust of stormwind. "You will pay for that!"

Darawk fought against the wind, but he was buffeted back, landing on his back. The dragon came closer, ready to fire another jet of flame.

Darawk raised his hands, sent off lightning. Its energy dissipated on Lógrims' snout, making the god of dragons laugh. "You will pay!"



Caltraya sank to her knees in sudden fright when she had crested the hill. At first she had taken the three people in the meadow beyond for villagers like herself. Then she had seen how one of them fired lightning at the dragon, and she realized that they were gods.

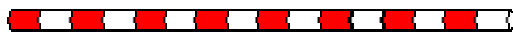
Gods. Fighting for their lives.

The next instant she had recognized the woman among them as the good lady Alyssa. Her precious Alyssa. Caltraya gaped at the scene. One of the gods was separated from the others, stumbling down a hillside. The dragon flew towards him, ready to destroy him.

She saw Alyssa stop her flight and turn around. The separated god must be very important to her, Caltraya thought. Alyssa sent lightning at the dragon. She only succeeded in drawing its attention.

Caltraya clasped her hand around her throat when she saw the large dragon swoop over to point its snout at Alyssa. The flames were ready to come.

“No!” Caltraya screamed, then bowed her head, unable to watch anymore, and she prayed for her good lady with all her might.



Alyssa didn't think when she saw her brother attacked by Lógrims. Darawk was already injured, he couldn't outrun the dragon god. She raised her arms, sparked off lightning, and screamed, “Over here, you coward! Take on someone who can still fight!”

“Foolish goddess!” Lógrims snarled. “Infestor! Violator! You will pay!”

Her lightning hadn't damaged him at all. The first volleys she'd scored on him had at least torn gashes into his wings, but now Alyssa's strength was starting to wane. *Run, Darawk!* she thought, hoping that her brother would come to his senses and get some distance between the dragon and himself.

She fired another bolt of lightning. Lógrims trembled under the impact, shaking his head wildly. *Surprised that there is something left in me,* she groaned. The bolt couldn't have hurt him.

Alyssa stood her ground, her arms raised for a last shot, while she prepared for the dragon god's fire. Maybe she could withstand the jet for a while. Long enough that Darawk could escape. *A lone goddess against Lógrims. Brother, you ought to write a nice book about this.*

The flames came.

Fiery red engulfed her, seared the clothes off her body, tore at her skin, flames dancing on her hair.

And that was it.

Alyssa blinked incredulously. Her gaze shot down, looking at the fire around her naked body. The fire hurt, but it didn't injure her. She felt strong, stronger than she had moments before. Power was running into her, power enough to...

She launched a bolt of lightning. It burned through the sky, towards Lógrims' left wing – and it blew straight through the wing. The dragon howled, dropped dozens of yards, cradling its wing to its body. Then it stretched the wing again, strained to flap it in the air, keep itself afloat.

The goddess wasted no time wondering about this miracle. There was more power inside her, and she put it to good use. A second bolt of lightning crashed through Lógrims' right wing, at the shoulder, tearing off muscles and blood.

Lógrims howled and howled and howled.

He fell from the sky, but before hitting the ground, the god of dragons vanished, beaten.

“You...” the old man panted, next to Alyssa. “You are... surprisingly powerful!”

Instead of answering she looked across the meadow to where her brother had been. Darawk hadn't run, the fool. Instead he had been crouching on the grass, his hands raised for firing bolts of his own, as meaningless as they were. “Idiot,” she muttered affectionately. “As if you could have saved me.”

She waved towards him. “Come on over here, brother. It's over!”

On the meadow, Darawk slowly got to his feet, shook his head – then appeared next to her. “I cannot believe that you bested Lógrims, sister, although I'm not complaining.”

“Sure you're not,” Alyssa grinned. They embraced, pressed tightly against each other.

After a while the old man coughed politely, and the two distangled themselves. “We are not alone,” he said and nodded to a hill several hundred yards away from them.

A woman was kneeling there, a villager, her head bowed forward, her body swaying slightly in prayer.

Alyssa breathed deeply. “Callie.”

“You know her?” Darawk asked.

She nodded, then said gently, “She saved us, brother. Her prayer fueled me.”

Darawk gaped at her. She understood his confusion, felt it herself. One villager's prayer, dedicated to only one god rather than the entire abode, had strengthened her enough to stand up to Lógrims.

How much power could the prayer of an entire race bring? One that was growing in the mortal world and that dedicated itself to only one god, like Decirius?

XX. The Cat's Pawn

"Shenaumac, are you here?" Lonapal called into the wide open space of his fellow god's home. The walls were as stark and white as he recalled them, but Shenaumac seemed to have added several new pieces of furniture. At least as far as Lonapal could tell. It had been an eternity – quite literally – since he'd last been here.

Nobody answered.

Lonapal sighed. Should he stay until the other god returned? Or should he leave? After all, he wasn't all that keen on talking to Shenaumac. Except that he didn't know who else to talk to. Sadly, he scratched his chest. His clothes were scorched from Koultirsp's lightning. *She* had not been in any mood to talk. Well, Lonapal should have known better. There was still the matter of the villagers – she had wanted to destroy all the houses, and Lonapal had stopped her from burning more than some four or five.

"That's odd," he muttered and picked up a small wooden statue. It looked much like Decirius, about a foot tall and very heavy, probably with lead embedded. But its surface wasn't as pristine as it ought to be, there were scratchmarks all over it. The marks looked as if they had been made by claws – rather tiny ones, if Lonapal was any judge. Curiously he smelled at the statue, picking up a distinct scent that reminded him of a jungle, wild, teeming life. He couldn't place the specific smell, though. It was somewhat familiar, yet... different.

"Oh, Pally, I'm sorry," a voice intruded. Lonapal looked up, half-smiling when he heard his name mangled like that. About a third of the way to the ceiling a door had appeared in mid-air, a spiral stairway descending. Shenaumac stood in the doorway and smiled lopsidedly. "I didn't hear you, sorry, and – Whatever happened to you?"

He quickly ran down the stairs, stopped a couple of feet from the God of Light and stared at his chest. "You've been hurt?!"

Lonapal shrugged. "Koultirsp. I probably should have stayed away from her."

"That's what it looks like," Shenaumac agreed, then made a table and two chairs appear next to them. A pitcher of water and a bowl of fruits stood on the table. "Let's sit down, you have a drink, and we can talk, all right?"

"Fine," Lonapal nodded. When he was seated, he reached for the pitcher and poured himself a glass. (Shenaumac had remembered to add glasses only moments before Lonapal had grasped the pitcher.) After taking a sip, the God of Light frowned at his host. "You don't look all that marvelous yourself."

Shenaumac frowned, then a smile brightened his face and he held up his scratched hands. "This, you mean?" He shook his head. The scratches vanished from his hands and face. "Tiger and I had a disagreement. Tiger's my cat, you see? Well, I thought he was reeking and needed a bath. Tiger on the other hand thought that he'd worked too long at his smell to have it washed off."

Lonapal blinked, trying to find his way through the words. “What did you do?”

“We agreed to disagree,” Shenaumac grinned, as he took an apple from the bowl and bit into it. “Tiger is sleeping now, as usual. Unless I want him to get grumpy again, I’d better let him sleep.”

“Why didn’t you just cleanse his fur?” Lonapal asked. “You don’t have to bathe him!”

Shenaumac raised his eyebrows, took another bite, then said, “Pally, you have no idea how to treat a pet, do you? If you always take the easy road, there’s no way to appreciate him. You’ve got to work for it. Only effort can make you truly be grateful for something, my friend.”

“If you say so.” Lonapal emptied his glass, concentrating on the sensation of water pouring down his throat. So pleasant and refreshing. He liked this shape, although it was so vulnerable. Koultirsp had now taken to a snake’s form, curling around in her home. For a moment during their conversation he’d thought she would twirl around him and squeeze him. The lightning had been a bit of a relief, he had to admit.

“Well, I do say so,” Shenaumac insisted. “Pally, you’ve got to reach out to the creatures. I mean, look at your villagers. You’re affectionate of them, you play with them, but do you try to reach them? Or do you just stay one of their gods?” He smiled softly. “Of course I’m probably Tiger’s god. Even though he doesn’t mind putting his will ahead of my divine decisions. But I treat him as if he were divine himself, and that... Let’s just say, it makes me enjoy his antics more.”

“Really?” Lonapal frowned. He couldn’t remember Shenaumac ever having been this cheerful. Normally he was more of the brooding kind. Perhaps he’d grown up? Taking care of the – the *cat* might have helped. He sighed. “Maybe I should take a pet of my own, then.”

Shenaumac nodded eagerly. “You really should, Pally. It gives you a whole new outlook on existence. Let’s see...” He turned the apple over in his hand. It was starting to get brown. After a moment, the god noticed and made the apple fresh again. “I guess a bird would suit you. An eagle. You could fly with him – or her? – through the sky. That’s what you like to do, and your pet could share your joy.”

Lonapal couldn’t help but agree. The idea of *sharing* the experience was invigorating, in a strange way. He’d never considered it. Oh, yes, he’d often flown with birds, but they had been just birds. Animals who happened to fly along. None of them had had a bond with him, of the kind that Shenaumac and his Tiger had.

Nor had Alyssa enjoyed it much, he thought with a sour note. The single time she had flown with him, she had tired within an hour or two, only to return to the ground.

But a bird... An eagle... Already at home in the air, it wouldn’t mind that at all. Yes, he liked the idea a lot, Lonapal decided.

“Yes,” Shenaumac smiled, “I can just picture you with an eagle by your side. A good, loyal pet, that’s what you need, Pally. Like Taurk and her dwarves.”

Lonapal breathed deeply. “Taurkémad and her *dwarvies*,” he said. “Now I really don’t know if that’s such a good comparison. She used to be so obsessed about them, and what’s she done now? Melted all the trophies she’d gathered, as if the dwarves didn’t mean anything to her anymore! No, that’s not how I want to treat a pet.”

“Right,” Shenaumac said slowly. “I talked to her a while ago, you know? It seems that somebody toyed around with her dwarves and changed them. That’s not a nice thing to do. If that somebody were to try to alter my little Tiger, why, I –“

“Would you just forget about him, or would you try to defend him?” Lonapal asked eagerly.

“Well,” his host frowned, dropping the apple on the table, “come to think of it, I would defend him. I already did, you know? Tirspie, our unfriendly neighborhood goddess, tried to kill him. *My Tiger!*”

Lonapal nodded. “See? That’s what I mean! That’s how I want to treat a pet! As something worthy of my affection!”

“Someone,” Shenaumac corrected. “A pet isn’t a thing.”

“You’re right.” Lonapal shook his head. “I’ll get used to that once I have my own pet. An eagle, an – Did you say that Tirspie, I mean, Koultirsp tried to kill your pet?”

“That’s exactly what she did,” Shenaumac said sourly. “I’ve been keeping a close watch over Tiger ever since. You never know when that goddess might strike next. Why, I wouldn’t be surprised if it had been *her* who altered the dwarves, to spite Taurk!”

Lonapal somberly agreed. “I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“Ahh,” Shenaumac shook his head and smiled, “let’s forget about those dour things, all right? You’ve got to get yourself a pet, Pally, and then you’ll find out what a joy pets are! Watch out a little for Tirspie, but never forget that you can smell her stench from twenty miles away.”

Lonapal had to smile. “I will, Shenaumac. I will find myself a pet.” He rose, waved good-bye and headed for the entrance. “Thanks for your conversation. I’m feeling much better now.”

“Glad to hear it,” his host answered. “Introduce me to your pet, will you?”

“I surely will!” Lonapal asserted, then left.



Behind him, Shenaumac’s smile froze on his face. “Thus, you join my little game,” he said. “Watch out for your pet, Pally. You never know what’s going to happen next. Or who.”

A mewing came from above, beyond the door in mid-air. Shenaumac rolled his eyes and smiled as he started walking up the steps. “Will you stop it, Tiger?” he yelled. “Trust me, you’re going to have to suffer a bath before there’s going to be any food. We’ll see who’s the master around here, and who’s the pawn!”

TO BE CONTINUED
