

VoidSpawn

by:
Todd King

Graphic Design:	Todd King
Cover Art:	Todd King
Edited By:	Yorbath Splæz
CD-Rom Design:	Todd King
SenZar Created By:	Todd King, The Brünz & Joseph Giacone

ISBN 0-9656145-3-0
NTH 1004

VoidSpawn © 1998 by Nova Eth Publishing, Inc. First Printing. All rights reserved. VoidSpawn is a trademark of Nova Eth Publishing, Inc. Visit SenZar Online at www.senzar.com for Character Sheets, FAQs, SenZar updates, and tons of other freebies. Nova Eth Publishing, 1339 Charwood Drive, Bogalusa, LA. 70427. Published in USA. The Dark is your friend...

Scene

I am Tatternorn VoidSpawn: Electric Bard; bearer of the dread Shadar steel Soulsword, Skurge; thrice-damned living embodiment of the Pact of the Impossible Blade; the unwanted bastard child of both Light and Darkness; the sole grey piece among the black and white ones on the great cosmic chessboard.

I am immortal—

—but I am not the last of my kind.

Were I the last immortal, then the Dragon's Game would at long last be done, and I, the VoidSpawn, would be out of a life. For as the sole Dragon-designated VoidSpawn, it is my calling, my duty, and my terrible destiny to hunt down and terminate immortals. Indeed, it is my destiny to terminate everything; all worlds, all realities, all souls. It is a destiny that I shun with all my soul, yet it is an implacable fate which I can never deny, for it is the Will of the Dragon.

It is only now, however, during this brief respite from the activity after so many years—so many centuries, it seems—of senseless Dragon-dictated slaughter, that I am afforded the opportunity to record my chronicles; to set them down in words of living fire such that even the most faith-blind among you will come to know what calculating, clandestine and conniving forces conspired to transform an innocent, loving and trusting soul into this killing machine of pure, pristine hate.

Pathos aside, I really just want someone else to know what it is that makes me tick; I just want someone else to know what I've seen with my own eyes; what I've felt in my own thrice-damned soul. You know, walk a mile with me through the nicer parts of hell?

The story begins with my damnation. If you're willing to go, I'll take you there—and beyond.

First, you must know that some things are not, and have not been real. Thank Sigil Talisman, our resident Archimage, for that. I haven't told the true story, thanks to his interfering magicks, and my incomplete Weird. I want you to know how things truly were, back when I was what I really was, and not some bizarre half-breed Dragon Dream; a SenZar soul tempered by the puny moral and ethical frailties of Terra. I want you to know something that your pale monkey soul can never comprehend: that your proud monkey world is nothing more than the on-the-fly magickally gimmicked creation of Lord Valthrustra, who created your entire cosmos, your entire reality, past, present, and future, simply as a toy, a plaything of the dark gods. He is your dark creator, the one who made everything you know as real. You are his dark dream, his bloody celestial nightmare given flesh. Your god created you to be his soul-slaves. You are his mad gambit to become the Dragon. That's all you ever were, and ever will be; fleeting unreal fragments of a mad god's dream.

Sad. So sad, but so true. Dream-slaves, all of you. All of us, for part of my soul was born here in this mad cosmos. Unlike you, though, my soul is real, for my totality obscures my nihilism. All of you are but shadows. Still, I love you, for you are not part of the real. You are part of the dream that I have lived, and have loved. For you, I died, such that you might be real. None of you ever knew it, never realized the price I paid to make you real. The price of my immortality.

Worship your dream-monkey gods, if you must. I won't seek respect at the expense of your tiny aspirations, nor even at the expense of your knowing who or what I am. Who the true god is. Just know that I'm confident enough in my own powers so as not to covet your worship. Wouldn't do either of us any good, anyway. Anyone foolish enough to pay homage to the ultimate annihilation of

all worlds, all spheres, all realities, deserves to die, and I'd just have to snuff you all a bit sooner than I had planned for being such a load of mindless dipshits. Like it or not, you're all doomed to die by my hand anyway, no matter how much you hope otherwise. Let's just hope I can forestall the inevitable end of all things by flying my finger at full mast, all the fuckin' time, at the Dragon. Cosmic cocksucker, and ill-skilled at the art. We are nothing more than its endless nightmares made real, and I am nothing more than its ultimate slave.

The paradox of my identity is simple to comprehend: I am Tatternorn VoidSpawn, slave of the Dragon, destroyer of souls; yet I still love, I still burn. The longer I maintain my concept of self, the infinite focus of my own will, the longer we all have to live. When my infinite will at long last wavers, as even infinity must, the VoidSpawn will snuff all your souls. Then, in the countless millennia which die in the final second of this cosmos, I will sing your soul-songs, whispering your stories true, though no one will hear the subtle pain which haunts my voice; the infinite love which makes a liar of my hollow soul.

Finally, at the End of All Things, I will annihilate the Dragon, and this cosmos will die.

Black.

There will then be nothing but black.

...the black that is my forever-damned soul.

Pray for me.

Now, and at the hour of your death.

Scene✱

You might have thought you knew my origin; how the young brat from Father Merrin's Rellian orphanage was seduced by a mysterious Mokarr sorceress into the Trial Before the Tower, transforming into the incarnation of the Pact of the Impossible Blade in the process. Mind, body, and soul raped and ripped asunder, becoming an avatar for the ancient Shadar Lord, Skurge, then being forced to house his soul within my own, bearing his blade-form as a constant reminder of my endless damnation, my endless duty before the Dragon to serve as the one, true VoidSpawn.

The Weirding that Sigil forced upon me and my friends during our ill-fated soul-sentence on the magick-blind world of Terra had been nothing more than Sigil's own watered-down, Orwellian version of what had really happened; a sickly sweet saccharin imitation of the true bitterness of the deceit that the immortal bastard forced on us. Especially on me. True, Sigil had been quite careful in his editing of the events which had lead to my enslavement. He had known, like the crafty chess master he always pretended not to be, that we would eventually learn the truth. But, at that crucial juncture in time, he had revealed only what we needed to know in order for our sorry little group of mortals to become realized as immortal Anshadar, then go stomp Lord Valthrustra's ass and save our adopted homeworld, and indeed our entire adopted cosmos, from total annihilation. The bastard had even been slick enough to edit my own memories, to dull their fire and supplant them with ones which he had crafted for the occasion.

Not that Sigil's version of the truth had been far from the mark. I was indeed named "Tat," I was indeed a barely pubescent brat, and I was indeed stationed at Father Merrin's ratty orphanage. True, I suffered the humiliation of soul-rape at the hands of a certain Mokarr-appearing Shadar bitch, and through her sacrifice of both self and soul I assumed the role of VoidSpawn, Skurge in hand. But that's where Sigil's so-called "truth" ends, and where the cold, cruel truth of the matter begins.

Let's get something straight between us right now: Truth ain't pretty. Truth is hard and ugly. Truth is a big hairy ass covered with hairy, cancerous warts. Truth is standing naked before the night, then howling at the stars until they explode. Truth is a lie uttered with perfect conviction, as Sigil Talisman so clearly demonstrated. And I am a convicted liar, uttering my own version of the truth, or at least what I perceive to be the truth. So forgive me for the big, fat, hairy, wart-infested ass that I call a life when I bare it for all to see. I am what I am, and that certainly ain't Mother Teresa. I am no champion, no noble soul.

I am VoidSpawn.

For my glory, we all shall die...

Vertigo... twisting, turning into the Void...

I am Skurge...

Hate/Pain/Death-Brother!

I am a god, worshiped by those of the Dark, an Age before the rise of the puny Rel and his mindless minions! The glories of the Fourth Age are mine once more! From the black spires of the Four Towers, we rule the world, rainbows in our eyes. We are the Shadar—the first-spawned of Chthon herself, masters of this world—and there are none to oppose us in our ways.

I am Skurge...

Hate/Pain/Death-Brother!

The towers stand in black fire, spires aglow with damned souls' light. A thousand years of the Void; the Age of the Screaming Skulls. The taste of flesh; the stench of the blasted bodies stacked like cordwood about the base of the Four Towers. The dark brightness of the invisible sun; the Void Moon flaring in ultraviolet, searing the eyes of those who behold. The Weirding, its darkling wonders, and its Nine Evils. The Forever Silence of the Void!

VoidSpawn, destroyer of worlds...

I am Death incarnate!

The Voice, in tongue of Death:

“Do you see?”

Yes, I snarl. I see everything.

“Do you comprehend your current state?”

I am the End of All Things, and you are my slave, Nanartha.

“No. That I am no longer, Dark One. That is the past.”

I hate, therefore I am...

“Yes. And hate is what makes you strong, my lord. Stronger even than death.”

What is this place?

“You are in the city of Zengara, beneath the shadow of the South Tower, Dark One. The Seventh Age is upon us.”

Silence.

I am yet a god...

“No. You are a shadow in the Void. And I have brought you forth from its Forever-Silent grasp in order to task you, Dark One, in the Pact of the Impossible Blade!”

You have no such power, whore!

Electric rage tingles... anticipation?

“Perhaps not, yet this boy does. For he is of the Bane of the Shadar. His power is the Stuff of Dreams. He is *Anshadar!*”

Electric shock, black fury.

Black eyes on heart, piercing.

He is not yet realized, whore. His soul may yet be claimed.

“That is truth, but not *your* truth, Dark One. Not yet. Still your eternal hate, Dark One, and hear me out: I hold the key to your cell. I hold it for a price. Heed my words, Dark One, for they are potent in this place.”

Lights, dark dancing.

A nausea, vertigo, as space is bent and time is stilled.

Cold cobbles yield to colder steel.

Ant dance on spine, static in air.

Weightless floating, spinning in Void.

Dark portal in burning, brilliant green.

Three moons shine, not the usual two; idiot stares from beyond.

“I have spirited the boy—your essence's focus—unto the Chamber of the Void. Do you know this place, Dark One?”

Yes. From within, I ruled my quarter of this sphere.

“Shared between you and your brothers, correct?”

Yes. My brothers...

“Skaythe, Skythe and Skurge! The brothers three, sharing one-fourth of SenZar between them. Do you remember them?”

Yes.

“And do you remember He who conquered these mortals, crushing all before Him? Do you remember He who divided the lands of the world amongst His VoidSpawn? Do you remember He who was *your* lord?”

Fear, a reverence of hate.

Valthrustra. heknowsheknowsheknows

“Yes, Valthrustra, the Deathlord! For His glory we all shall die! Does this not stir your immortal soul, Dark One? Do you not know His call when He beckons from beyond the Void, where He was banished these long Ages past by the forces of the Light? Do you not know His hand when it guides you? Do you not feel His hate?”

Open door, yawning abyss.

Dark Hate Lord.

Death Kiss.

The willing submergence of infinite will before the commanding glory of the Creator...

Yesss... Command me in Thy task, my lord! Command me to die, and in so dying, bind!

Skurge awaits with thoughts black—to seek, to hunt, to slay, to hate!

Pride, the Dark Angel’s fiery plunge from the stars.

“Then I bind thee, Skurge, as was bound the Word, when the stillborn of the Void were cast down unto this darkness, down from the stars, unto these Towers black! With my sacrifice, with my soul’s own blood, with the seed and with the soul of this Anshadar, I seal the Pact of the Impossible Blade, the Key to the Void, which shall birth again the Deathlord, such that He may reign once more in His Undying Hatred!”

Primal scream, exploding pain.

A green hell of pain.

Giving birth to a cancer, a parasite. Immaculate deception. Hate by example.

Death by Shadar steel.

Soul rape.

My screams fused with the Mokarr woman’s, obliterating the thick, murky tethers of thought which had held me in thrall. In my hands—held white-knuckled in my fearful, uncomprehending grasp—was a black blade, a hand-and-a-half of hate and pain; a bastard in more than form and function. Its triple rows of blade-spanning purple-green runes were buried deep within the bare, still-heaving breast of the Mokarr, her black blood sizzling where it ran down the length of the seething Shadar steel. Her once-sepia eyes were white; her soul, extinguished, in satisfaction of the Pact of the Impossible Blade. Her body, once lithe and comely... but now, naked and shriveled up horribly like the form of some desiccated mummy, contorted into a grim caricature of her former exotic beauty. Resolved unto the silence of fear, I watched as the blasted corpse fell from the blade to the floor of this darkened tower, where it crumbled into dancing, dark dust.

Eyes wide, I once more watched mutely as the black sword turned in my grasp, turned until the center of the tracings along the blade was facing me.

A loathsome, hateful Mindtouch:

At last... The Dragon’s Game begins anew!

My hands felt as if they were going to catch on fire, such was Skurge’s power! I tried to let go of it, to hurl it away, but I could no more control my own actions than I could this blade. I looked around, ignoring my nakedness and the throbbing in my midsection, searching for some way to get out of this foul place. The chamber was monstrous; black and twisted in its ancient, alien architecture. The ceiling was like that of a cathedral, spiraling upwards to a single intersection of gnarled, twisted Shadar steel girders. A single, open skylight about thirty feet above my head revealed what I

had seen earlier in my... *possession*. I was in the top of the South Tower. The two Lovers' Moons, Faeyera and Kaldos, were out; the sky, clear. But the light from the moons was somehow *wrong*. It was the Void Moon, Selene, raging in harsh ultraviolet. A dark portion of my stained soul welcomed her as a long-lost lover. With my own mortal eyes I could see her plainly revealed for the hateful thing that she was! There, in her clutching, blasted skull-soil, still stood the Dragon Citadel, the secret sanctum of Namo, father of my father, Creator of All. Selene yearned for my penetration of her ancient secrets. The pulse of her Void syncopated hatefully with my own pain. I could *feel* her baleful glare! I could feel the hateful call from beyond the Void; the soul-song of annihilation. It was as if some invisible, draining hand were passing between the sky and my eyes, clutching at my very soul! She... it... it was *looking* at me! They all were looking at me! The stars were looking at me! Those eyes, within the stars, staring at me!

Who—

“*TATTERNORN VOIDSPAWN...*”

The Dragon speaks my name! All That All Which Is, All That All Which Binds! It knows my name! It has always known my name.

I have always known my name.

“*REMEMBER...*” The Dragon whispers as a million stars plummet from the sky.

The eye of Infinity stares down upon me, my own gaze reflected from within. Then everything fades abruptly to utter black. A titanic sensation of sucking motion draws my entire being to a place beyond what I once knew as reality. Nothing but black. Comfortable. Serene. How long I am here, I cannot know. Time has no meaning in this place of nonbeing. Not quite against my will, I allow myself to be drawn completely into the utter nothingness until I am content that I exist no more. Into the Never my soul melts.

I die, and I like it.

Death.

No more pain. Maybe Merrin will whisper a prayer for my soul.

“I am VoidSpawn.”

The voice is mine, but the conscious act of saying the words is not.

“The burning soulfire of the stuff ‘twixt the stars; the sinner without sin. The one who will destroy this cosmos. The one who will damn all its souls to the forever-silence of the stillbirth of Chthon. The Dark Womb forever calls my name. It has always known my name. I have always known my name...”

Blinding white light-beyond-light burns into my essence, infusing it with the power of dreams. I/We/Everything screams, though the sound is nothing before the silent fury of the light, the blinding, burning light. It is everywhere. It is everything.

All That All Which Is. All That All Which Binds.

I—there is no such thing as “I”!—endure the silent, screaming light. The thing that thinks it is me endures, for it has no choice. The “death” it had so recently embraced was the death of mortals, not the true death of the soul, which nothing can choose willingly. The death of the soul was what it faced. Thus it endured. There was no other way, though the battle to endure the unendurable was and always is an impossible task.

“I AM VOIDSPAWN!” It howls, the light itself screaming in polytonic counterpoint.

Then I see...

I see me. Me. I see the figure within the light, and it is me. Not the me I once knew; not the sad little orphan boy who sang silly songs to amuse the painted ladies, who would spare a coin or two for him because they knew he always gave everything he made to Father Merrin and his poor orphans. Altruistic whores.

No, I see me as I am, or as I would soon be. Or perhaps as I always had been. A man. Not a boy, not an orphan, but a man. A man raging against the very forces of Infinity itself, as he binds the light into himself. As he binds the Dragon into himself. As he binds *me* into himself, and himself into me.

“Heed my words, young one,” the figure tells me, “For there is much I must impart to you, ‘ere you leave this place.”

The figure’s voice—my voice—if such a thing as a voice can truly exist in this place, is deep, smooth, resonant. Like the voice I used during my encounter with the Mokarr woman. I can’t help but to think that I’m talking to myself. And listening to every word.

“Her name was Nanartha,” he tells me, his words patient and precise. “She was Mokarr only during her mortal life. Shadar now. Was, I mean. Stupid temporal flux. I don’t know how Fantus ever manages.”

“...who is fantus?” I find myself whispering faintly, oh so faintly, though I scream as loudly as I can to be heard over the roar of the figure’s presence. His presence is more than I can bear. Well, almost.

More silent amusement. I feel it emanating from him like the heat of a blazing hearth.

“Fantus is a friend. Remember that, young VoidSpawn: a friend, no matter what. One of the few you’ll ever truly know...” he trailed off, sounding sad. “I... you, me, we’ll never really have true friends. Not our nature. Not our fate. Can’t have friends when you kill them all. Can’t have lovers then they always end up dying by your own hand. Can’t have a life when you’re dead and damned from Day One. Can’t have a life when you’ve never had a life to call your own.”

I met my own eyes, my future eyes. They were magnificent, beautiful. Burning with the fire of life, of living beyond what mere mortals call “life.” Sadly, however, in the final analysis, they were dead. Dead, over, finished, done, gone out. The endless slaughter of untold billions had dulled their preternatural sheen; had fixed within their gaze the senseless death of the soul, the untold death-glory of the death-beyond-death. Kiril would one day tell me that I had the eyes of someone he had served in the ‘Nam with. Someone who had actually killed more VC than he had. Someone who had seen the world for what it was, and had not blinked an eye. Had never blinked an eye. Never could. Never would.

He is VoidSpawn. He will not cry, and I will not cry for him.

Yet how can the horror be forgiven, save through the tears of the forgiving?

Hypocrite of hypocrites, I began to weep.

But there were no real tears, not here in this place beyond places where tears meant nothing. Just the simple emotion of grief, expressed by my silent, unreal tears.

Each unreal tear burned away half my soul. As I shed the third unreal tear, I wondered what could possibly remain of my soul.

Nothing.

I’ve never had a soul.

“Look, don’t cry,” he bade me, taking me in his gentle embrace. At once, I was filled with hope, with joy, with love. Things I had never truly known. It was one of the few times, I realized sardonically, that I would probably ever truly know them. I was simply too young, too inexperienced, to realize that, as VoidSpawn, I would never need such puerile emotions as hope, joy, and love. Hate was my mistress, and always would be. And the bitch would suffer no other gods before her.

Drawing back, the figure looked down at me, a bittersweet smile on his softly glowing face. Softly. As if the very Sun itself, Silestion, would ever glow softly.

“No, you will know all these things, Tat,” he said, his words burning into my soul. “You will know hope, joy, and love. But you will also know other things, like hate, rage, and pain. Your

emotions are what make you strong. They make you what you are. In fact, truth be told,” he said, tilting his head slightly such that I see his burning blue eyes, “the only thing you’ll never know is fear. And death. At least, not the true death of the soul.”

“...i’ll never die? that sounds good! if i can’t die, then that means i can do anything—”

“You can die, Tat. You can, and you will. But nothing is forever. Not even death. Especially not for one such as you. Not for one with your soul,” the figure said ominously. I took the hint and grew silent. “But death isn’t the issue here. Life is. Do you want to live, Tat?”

“what?”

“I asked you if you wanted to live. I mean, really live.”

“of course i want to live!” I told him with just a little less conviction than I should have.

“Yeah, right. You were just melting away into the Dark Womb, dissolving into the nothingness. That’s not living where I come from, Tat. That’s suicide. That’s the death-beyond-death, when even the soul can die. And you were willingly going down into it, my friend.”

“no i wasn’t!” I protested weakly, knowing myself a liar. Knowing that, of all people, I couldn’t possibly lie to myself. “i don’t even want to be here! i don’t even know where here is!”

“Yes, you do,” he said, his voice soothing yet firm, a caress of steel. “You’ve always known. You are at one with the Dark Womb. You always have been, and always shall be.”

“but how is that possible? how can i be one with something i don’t even... don’t even know?”

“You... No, we... I have always been at one with the Dragon. We have always been at one with everything. All That All Which Is, and All That All Which Binds. Haven’t you ever wondered what that means, Tat? It’s you and me. It’s the thing that we are. It’s not simply the Dragon.” A laugh then. I had to smile, to feel the laughter myself. “Simply the Dragon. You know what I mean, though. I am the force which is, the force which binds. I am the single grey piece on the great board of black and white. We are the wildcard, the grey ghost in the big black-and-white cosmic machine. We kill to keep the balance. Whether we want to or not. And you have to do it not matter what, or else you’ll cease to exist. How’s that for fair?”

“i don’t want this! i just want to be left alone! leave me alone! i hate you! i hate all of you! all of you! leave me alone! i hate you!”

A slight pause, as if the very stars in the firmament blinked.

“Hate,” it said, melancholy and unshed tears in its voice. “What a perfect way to start. Hate is what makes you strong, Tat. No other single emotion, even that of love, makes you what you are. What you will become. What you have always been. You are VoidSpawn,” it said, staring me in my eyes, with my own eyes. “And VoidSpawn is what you will always be. No matter how much you wish otherwise.”

“i hate you...” I managed to scream, silently, as everything began to transform into utter blackness.

“I know...” it said, crying tears of divine fire.

The Dragon wept, and I knew why.

Scene*

grey
 grey grey grey
 what the hell am i doing here
 what's happening to me
 why am i not me anymore
 you're not alone, tat
 but i am i am i am... that evil thing is here in my head
 no, not in your head... in your soul
 i hate him i hate him i hate him i
 forget about skurge for a while, tat... i'm your new friend now
 who are you
 call me kiril... not that it really matters right now... but i guess it won't hurt to be polite
 why won't it matter... am i dead
 no, not dead... merely sleeping... sleeping peacefully, watched over by angels
 how come your voice sounds just like mine
 because i'm using your own thoughts to speak to you... only way to do this kind of tricky

thing

i'm talking to myself... i don't understand
 don't worry... suffice to say, i'm taking care of you
 but who are you
 i already told you... just try to relax, and dream of good things... good things
 grey grey grey... peaceful, blissful grey
 a sea of warm water... pale submergence unto the waiting womb then... contact... commun-
 ion... a new me staring me in the face with my own eyes i see me... i know, as i have always known...
 but everything is right, because i no longer care i am i
 do you see... so you know now, tat... do you accept what i offer
 eyes open wide... i stare into abyss... abyss stares back...
formulae tones tonics tonals notes languages chords other worlds progressions modals tunes
songs techniques modes harmonics harmonies instruments languages music new realities music
fingerings frettings tunings alternates polytonals cacophonies polychordals languages scales arpeg-
gios broken-chords diminished minor major atonal terra jazz classical rock-n-roll heavy metal cool
cool cool hit-the-ground-runnin' blues jimi power magick
 magick...
 soul scream... too much pain too much pain... pain pain pain ouch ouch ouch i hate you
 sorry 'bout that, tat... too much sensorydatainputoverflow for wounded mind... forgive me
 fuck you... that hurt... i hate you
 i know... sorry, but there was no other way to do it... at least you won't remember the pain
 i'll never forget
 yes you will... just ride with it... don't fight it... it's for your own good
 is knowledge always worth such pain
 knowledge is power, tat... power comes at a price

i don't wanna pay
you already have... i'm just making sure that you never have to pay again
i don't even know who you are
i've already told you... not that it matters... you'll come to learn again, soon enough soon
enough soon enough soon enough
grey grey grey
grey

Scene ✱

For a seemingly endless passage of time, I knew nothing but grey.

Grey, as in grey ant-dancing synaptic static while my brain seemed to engage legion after legion of furious, chitter-clack-clacking ants. Grey ants, too. Hence the grey ant-dancing synaptic static. Obviously. I think.

Once my bizarre fixation had at last passed unto the first semblance of conscious thought—and once those damned ants had stopped their blasted ant-dancing—a myriad of new data threatened to overwhelm my already fragile sense of reality. Suddenly, I could smell the pungent scent of high quality purple lotus wafting through what was otherwise a very pleasant, very pastoral ambiance of scents and smells. Daring to crack my left eye a sliver—but only a sliver, as I was still not certain that IT wasn't staring right back at me—a warm golden light which seemed to flicker and pulse like something living caused me to stiffen from head to toe, and this action caused my slowly awakening brain to realize that I was laying on my back on something warm, soft, and... furry? *What the hell...*

“Ah, the young lad is at last awake, I see!” came a sudden, musical voice.

Squinting my eye back tight, I feigned sudden death, which was not too far off the mark, considering the fact that it seemed as if my heart had just stopped beating. There was a sudden rustling sound from off to my left, as if a stack of scrolls had suddenly and most casually been tossed down onto something hard and glassy, and then came the unmistakable sound of a blade sliding either into or out of a scabbard. At once, reacting as if I had been drilled to react in such a manner a thousand times before, I pushed myself up to a crouch, turned my head toward my approaching foe, and... *snarled at the Starin who was standing there before me, grinning like a total lunatic?*

“Whoa there, lad!” the Starin addressed me in idiomatic Zengaran, still grinning from ear to toe. “Best drop that pig-sticker and put on a happy face before you inflict some permanent damage!”

“Huh? What?” I deftly countered, staring wildly at the Starin.

“Drop the blade, sonny,” he laughed, still standing his ground no more than two paces away.

For a long heartbeat, all I could do was stare stupidly like some hoofed ruminant into the eldritch purple-tinged orbs of the Starin. Then, his eyes shifted down, seeming to indicate something beyond my immediate grasp, and my own bewitched eyes followed his silent example. Staring down, some distant part of my brain made the connection that I held a mighty hand-and-a-half black blade rather lazily in my right hand, almost as effortlessly as holding one of Merrin's trusty old broomsticks. As my gaze roved beyond the rampant black dragon which formed the pommel and tang of the great blade, I suddenly noticed that the point of the blade was leveled directly at the Starin's heart. Embarrassed beyond words at my brainless gaffe, I shrugged sheepishly, then lowered the blade to the floor, where its cruel tip casually—if somewhat spitefully—sliced through a rather expensive-looking Rotathian mandalan rug.

“Uhh, sorry about that, good sir,” I temporized, still too confused to link the apparently broken chain of recent events together into some semblance of reason.

He snorted in a vague, noncommittal way, and I decided immediately that it was in my best interest to get the lay of the place down, and down quickly, should it come to combat. Apparently, as a quick glance told me, I now stood a small bedchamber adjoining a small yet fully functional study, which was cluttered with shelf after shelf of scrolls, books, and magickal curios. The single table that stood in the very center of the study was of the most exquisite cut rock crystal, purple and luminous,

and it was cluttered with stack upon stack of hoary old tomes, an exquisite black crystal Starin lute, an elaborate fist-sized purple crystalline bong with a single hookah snaking from it—and a single scabbarded blade, a Starin Shining Sword given its length and elaborate, flowing pommel design.

“Satisfied?” the Starin inquired smugly as my eyes once more returned to his.

“Huh?”

“Satisfied that there’re no bogeymen waiting to spring upon you? No demons waiting to transport in to lay you waste and take your soul screaming back to the Pit? Or perhaps screaming back to Zengara?” he finished with a curious smile, his perfect white teeth shining dangerously.

“What?” I found myself suddenly taken aback. “Demons? Taking me *back* to Zengara? You mean I’m not *in* Zengara?” My voice cracked, then began to rise higher in pitch. “If I’m not in Zengara, then where in the world am—”

The Starin threw up his hands, bidding me be still. I obliged, reluctantly.

“No, you’re not in Zengara, Tat,” he said quite calmly. “In fact, you’re quite some distance away from the Forever Cit—”

“Hey! Wait a minute!” I blurted, staring at him. “You just called me ‘Tat!’ How do you know my name when I’ve never even seen you before!”

“It’s inscribed on your forehead right beneath the word ‘Truth,’ my boisterous young golem charge,” he replied smoothly. “Now, as I was about to inform you before I was so rudely interrupted,” he continued without missing a beat while I raised an eyebrow in not-so-mock agitation, “you are now no longer in Zengara, nor have you been for quite some time. You now reside in the Vale of Valya, in the depths of the Krystallmyst Forest, in the house of Kiril Spellsinger. I, of course,” he pronounced in thespian tones as he bowed deeply in a sweeping courtier’s bow, “am Kiril Spellsinger. And I am at your service, Tatternorn VoidSpawn...”

Both my blade and my jaw hit the floor, and my arching eyebrow once more returned to roost with its fellow eyebrow, where both enjoyed a brief moment of knitting and knotting confusion.

“Aieee...” I whistled as I suffered through what dear old Merrin had once called, not quite so facetiously, a brain fart.

“Indeed,” Kiril Spellsinger, the legendary originator of the bardic magickal art which bore his name, intoned as he straightened to his full height and gave me a magickal grin. “And I have many things—magickal things—to teach you before you are once more ready to return to the Forever City to ply your new trade, win all the nice ladies, right all the wrongs, and all that other heroic kinda stuff.”

“You’re gonna teach *me*?” I muttered like some daft beet farmer as I blatantly overlooked the grim foreshadowing of his words. “But you’re Kiril Spellsinger!” I informed him, as if he didn’t know. “I’m just a kid from the most rotten part of Zengara who can fake his way through a few old standards on a lute, and you wanna waste your time on *me*? Why? Please illuminate me further, ‘cause I really don’t understand what the hell just happened to me, and why you wanna teach me, of all people, to—”

Kiril shook his head once, curtly, and I stopped rambling. Then, holding my gaze, he pointed a long finger down at my feet, indicating that damned black blade.

“So?” I said, staring down at the hateful thing. “What’s that stupid blade got to do with—”

“You don’t remember, do you?” Kiril said in a restrained voice that instantly riveted my attention.

“Remember what? Like how that Mokarr woman took me to the South Tower and performed her little hocus-pocus tricks on me? You mean all that stuff?”

He shook his head. “No, I’m sure you recall that quite well, especially as seeing how you just summarized it so quaintly. No, I’m referring to how you got out of your predicament and how you

came to my humble abode, my young charge. Do you remember how that came to pass, Tat?"

Hmmm. Well, try as I might, I drew a blank on that. The last thing I could recall was that... IT... staring back at me, and naming me "Tatternorn VoidSpawn," of all things. There was a passage of time, some ant-dancing, some grey static, and then I was here. And I guess my vacant gaze told Kiril all that and more, for he nodded his head sagely, his white triple-braided ponytails flopping like a gamboling horse's mane atop his broad shoulders.

"I see," he said simply. "Well, I guess that I should bring you up to date as to the whys and the wherefores before we begin our studies," he said as he turned around and began to walk back over to the table. "Oh," he added as he began to clear me a place at the table, "and why don't you be a good lad and don those clothes I've set out for you next to your bed. I'm about as liberal as the next guy—and quite a bit moreso than the next Starin—when it comes to sins of the flesh and other such bardic indulgences, but being forced to endure the sight of your naughty bits may prove too much a distraction even for one as glib as myself."

Totally embarrassed now that I realized that I had been in the buff for the duration of our conversation, I at once turned to don the fine black leather trousers, tunic, and boots which had indeed been laid out beside my "bed"—in this case, a rather comfy nest of exotic pelts and furs. And it was only while hurriedly donning my new wardrobe that I realized that my chest was covered with a fine growth of very manly black hair. And that my formerly shoulder-length hair had mysteriously grown to a length which fixed the ends at the small of my back. And that my naughty bits...

Aieee and double-aieee, I brain farted over and over again as Kiril's rich laughter—and equally rich purple lotus smoke—filled the chamber.

Sure, I had a ton of questions to ask, but first things came first, and from the way that my stomach had suddenly started growling, Kiril had thought that our question-and-answer session would best be served right along with a hearty repast.

"So how long was I, uh, out?" I finally managed to ask through a mouthful of fresh honey-baked bread as Kiril and I broke fast at his table.

"Mmm, that," Kiril mumbled as he savored some of the bread, this particular loaf sewn with large raisins. Quickly, he chased the mouthful down with some ice-cold spring water from his golden goblet and gave me a whimsical glance. "Not too long, Tat." For a moment, he seemed to be a bit embarrassed, which struck me as strange. Then, pausing a moment, he gave me yet another curious glance, and asked, "You don't mind if I call you 'Tat,' do you?"

"No, not really, since it *is* my name," I informed him with a smile. Raising my goblet in a salute, I said, "And it sure beats the heck outta 'Tatternorn VoidSpawn' at any rate, my friend." After I drank and he smiled, I added, "And I hope you don't mind if I call you 'friend,' do you?"

"No, I don't suppose that'll hurt things one little bit, Tat!" Kiril laughed merrily, slapping his hand down on the table and nearly upsetting one of his nearby musty tomes in the process. "'Friend' is quite okay with me, although 'Kiril' will do quite nicely, thank you."

"Sure. Kiril. So, tell me, Kiril, how long was I out?" I pressed with a polite smile.

"Oh, that," he temporized yet again. "Not too long, Tat," he repeated. "At least not quite too long from a certain kind of view, I must say."

"What kind of view? I mean, either I was out for a short time, or I was out for a long time. In any case, or in any view, I seemed to have gone through puberty and become very manly without any

knowledge of the event whatsoever, and that sucks blood like a vampyr!”

Shaking his head in appreciation of my talents for rambling, Kiril smiled and said, “Very well, Tat. I concede the point. There is no use for any further deferment of the issue. So, despite what Sigil may have warned me to the contrary, I’ll tell you exactly what—”

“Huh?” I interrupted. “Sigil? Who’s that? And what’s he got to do with...” I paused, noting Kiril’s patient smirk. I got the point, and shut up.

“Thank you. As I was saying, despite the warnings of Sigil, who is a certain acquaintance of mine who just happened to spirit you away from that horrid Shadar artifice, the South Tower, and deposit you here with me for safekeeping and instruction in the Bardic Arts, I’m going to spill the plans to the Undead Star and tell you precisely what happened, how long it took, and what you’ve become in the interim. So there, young Tatwalker...” he finished with a smarmy grimace.

Tatwalker? Undead Star? I almost choked on my bread, but I nodded for him to continue. And he did.

“Very well,” he began, topping off his goblet with another round of spring water. “Since you recall what happened to you in the loft of the tower up a point, I will begin my tale at the point where your own recollections have been tainted by that fiend you now bear in blade-form, Skurge.”

The name sent a shiver up my spine. I took a sip from my goblet, but the chill of the ice-cold water was as nothing to the chill in my soul.

“At your moment of epiphany, Tat,” Kiril continued, “or at least at the moment of your realization of who you truly are—and always have been—Skurge deemed that you had seen and heard too much, so the Shadar fiend exerted his will upon you, and forced your mind to a state of numbness.” Pausing briefly, his lips pursed slightly, as if he were... trying not to laugh?

Merrin’s own taunts, the best of which often were left unspoken, suddenly came to mind. Being the good guest that I always am, I allowed Kiril to continue. But only after flashing a toothy smirk.

“Hmmm, I see...” he admitted, busted. “Anyway, your wounded and newly awakened psyche was ‘screaming’ far too loudly, and as we shall soon see, that was something that the newly awakened Skurge simply could not tolerate. So he ‘shut’ you up.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Few ever do, Tat,” he said, “even those who call the magickal arts their true vocation. However, for those who do know, such as myself, and now you, the South Tower is an especially potent psychic amplifier—among other less savory things. As it was, Skurge realized that your intense psychic ‘screams’ could possibly be picked up and amplified by the tower, and thus could quite possibly be ‘heard’ by those attuned to such things. So he shut you ‘off,’ employing your shared psychic ‘link’ as a one-way baffle to still your thoughts such that there would be little chance of interference while he sought to gain comprehension of his new existence.”

“You mean we—” I paused, then gave that hateful black blade a glare where it still lay upon the rug, “—I mean ‘me and it’ share some kind of magickal thought-bond? You mean, like a ‘Mindlink’ or something like that?”

Kiril’s roguish Starin face let slip with a faint smile of surprise. “My, my, my, Tat! How schooled we are in the mystical arts, I see. Yes, it is a ‘Mindlink’ or ‘something like that,’ my young friend. But your communion with Skurge is of an order of magick far superior to any mere mystic Mindlink. But I digress,” he said. “Indeed, Skurge did force you into a state of psychic silence, but the strain that this action placed upon him did, indeed, force him into a nearly robotic state as well.”

“What’s a ‘robotic state?’”

“Oh, nevermind,” Kiril said quickly. “A slip of the tongue. I meant to say that both of you were nearly forced into an unmoving, unthinking state of existence such as that which the automa-

ton, construct, or golem suffers.”

“That’s stupid. Almost as stupid as a robotic Tatwalker Undead Star,” I smirked, evincing a slight grin from Kiril. “So what happened? Was that stalemate the cause of my hair getting so long? And my naughty bits getting so... so...”

He smirked. “Not quite, although it very well could have been should Sigil have not intervened when he did. As it was, he managed to fight his way through the South Tower’s formidable defenses and retrieve you from its loft within mere hours of your incarceration.”

“Mere hours? *Hours?*” Though it had quite literally been revealed to me since I had awakened, the import of the temporal considerations suddenly hit me like a ton of bricks. “Oh no! Merrin! He’s gonna have a fit! I forgot all about that! How could I have been so dense! Hours! I’ve been out for hours! And it’s gonna take me at least a week to hightail it back to Zengara if we’re really in Krystallmyst! Damn! I’ve got to get back to the mission now!”

Quickly, I set my goblet down, and got up from the table.

“Tat,” Kiril said quietly.

“Can’t talk any more, Kiril, old bean,” I said, nervously scanning for the door. “Thanks for putting me up and all that, but I gotta go back to the mission right now! Gotta let Merrin know I’m okay before he tans my hide real good for being such a crass truant.”

“You can’t do that, Tat.”

“Whaddya mean, I can’t do that?” I asked, my voice rising dangerously. Even though I was detaching myself quite ridiculously from the here and now, the sense of foreboding had already lodged itself deep within my soul. I *knew* what Kiril was going to say. Somehow, I *knew*, and I just didn’t want to hear it. I just *couldn’t* hear it.

“Please, Tat,” Kiril said warmly, “sit back down. It hasn’t been *that* long a time, I promise you. And Father Merrin is still doing quite well, I assure you.”

“Huh?” My head jerked to face Kiril, and I saw that he wore another one of his warm smiles. His right hand was indicating my chair. I did not take me seat, however. My silent gaze asked a thousand questions, to which Kiril carefully replied:

“Sigil freed you from the South Tower and he spirited you to my humble abode forthwith, with instructions for your care, Tat. You have been lying in a semicomatose slumber, Skurge in hand, for exactly one year and one day since the night of your trial before the tower.”

Numb, I found my chair, and plopped roughly down into its comfortable leather-backed confines.

One year and one day. Straight out of Merrin’s old ghost stories. The allotted time for fell magicks to make their mark, and then pass. One year and one day. The time allotted for “The Pact.”

“The Pact of the Impossible Blade,” Kiril whispered, somehow sensing my thoughts. “Yes, that much is true, Tat. I have kept the watch for that entire time, my young friend,” he said in a voice thick with... with what, compassion? The subtleties of the Starin were still so far beyond me. “I have watched, and I have heard the half-utterings of your nightmares. I have seen the rapid development of your young form into something far beyond that of other humans.”

“You mean you hovered over my naked body for an entire year?” I asked him, incredulous. His face instantly shot a strange shade of pinkish-purple, the Starin equivalent of a blush, I guessed.

“No, not at all,” he dismissed the notion entirely. “You were covered up to your chest in my finest furs before you leapt up and they fell from you, Tat. I’m no voyeur, my fine young friend. At least, not a voyeur of young lads, mind you!” he finished with a lascivious grin.

“Oh, I see,” I said, relieved that he was not the Starin equivalent of a fancy lad.

“All well and good, Tat,” Kiril grinned. “Now, I must assure you that your old friend Father Merrin is doing quite well, and that the Forever City has not changed considerably in your brief

absence. After all, Zengara could hardly be called ‘The Forever City’ if it went about drastically changing itself after a paltry year’s time, now could it?”

I found myself laughing along with Kiril at that keen observation, and my sense of grim foreboding seemed to die away. Almost.

“So what do I do now?” I asked him after a moment. “I mean, what happens next? Do I just ignore these changes and pretend that nothing whatsoever has occurred? I mean, what do I tell Merrin? That I’ve been out on a casual stroll all this time? Aggh! I’m more than just a little bit confused, you know?”

“As well you should be,” Kiril said softly, his attention once more upon his bread. “It’s not an everyday occurrence to become a living embodiment of the Pact of the Impossible Blade, Tat.”

“I guess you’re right,” I admitted, not truly comprehending exactly *what* I was admitting.

“First things first, though,” Kiril said after a lusty bite of his raisin-choked honey-baked bread. Strange how he could talk so well with that much bread stuffed in his mouth. “First, we finish this repast, then we take us a little walk over to Sigil’s place. He’ll be able to illuminate you further, I’m sure. Answer all your questions to your satisfaction, and then you and I can get down to business.”

“Sigil, huh? I’d almost forgotten about him. Whoever he is.” I thought about it for a second, then curiosity overwhelmed me. “Who is he, by the way?”

Kiril paused, swallowed, cleared his throat, then smiled like a cat.

“Sigil? Oh, just an old friend. A distant relation of the family.”

“He’s Starin, too?”

“You might say that, considering the fact that I’m Starin, he’s Starin, or at least appears to be, we’re both related, and Starin rarely if ever interbreed with the lower—I mean, with the other—species on SenZar. Bad for the gene pool. No offense meant, mind you.”

“None taken... whatever the hell you’re babbling about. So, what’s he do?”

“You’ll soon learn.”

“Obviously he’s ‘in tune’ with ‘psychic screams’ if he was the one who ‘heard’ me up in the South Tower and came to my rescue,” I said rather sagely. “So obviously he must be some kinda wizard or mystic, right?”

Cracking a toothy grin, Kiril said, “You might say that he’s just a bit of both, Tat.”

“That’s not possible, Kiril. If you’re into magick, which I use only in the most general terminology, then you’re either a ‘Magician’ or a ‘Mystic,’ but never both of them at once. Magick simply doesn’t work like that. Or at least that’s what Merrin told me.”

“You’re quite right,” Kiril admitted.

“See? Then Sigil—”

“But you’re also quite wrong, Tat. The ‘Magick vs. Mysticism’ exclusion principle applies quite accurately to the vast majority of magicks, Tat—but only to the vast majority of *mortal* magicks, my boy.”

I could almost feel the comical lantern light of knowledge blaze into life above my head as sudden illumination dawned upon me.

“You mean this Sigil isn’t mortal?”

“Not many Archimages of Krystallmyst are,” Kiril said with an amused if somewhat contorted grimace-grin. “Hard to be an *immortal* ‘Servant of the Dragon’ like the legendary Archimage of Krystallmyst is and be *mortal*, now isn’t it?”

“Oh boy...” I mumbled, suddenly close to blanching. “I just made the connection. I’ve read about this ‘Sigil’ in the early chronicles of Hastorath, the Rotathian historian. Merrin made me read them in preparation of our first visit to the Grove. Hastorath described the Archimage of

Krystallmyst as Sigil Talisman, but the histories were written at the beginning of this age! Tell me that the guy who you're talking about isn't the same one, Kiril! Please! He can't be the same guy! That'd make him almost a thousand years old!"

"Well, my astute young Bard," Kiril grinned, "who am I to argue with the illustrious Hastorath, who at the very least seemed to know his dark Rotathian sand from his own dark Rotathian ass? No," he snickered in a rather un-Starinlike fashion, "we are *indeed* off to see Sigil Talisman, the Archimage of Krystallmyst, the one and the same."

Rising, Kiril began to buckle his scabbard to his belt, then in afterthought he nodded for me to do likewise with Skurge, even though there was no scabbard handy. "And boy is Uncle Sigil gonna be surprised to see my new young *apprentice* is none other than Tatternorn VoidSpawn himself..."

Aiee...

Scene

Our journey to the legendary Krystallkeep was rather uneventful.

It had to be, for it consisted of nothing more than a quick, ear-shattering, mind-boggling, light-flashing and stomach-wrenching spell-song by Kiril which instantaneously transported us to the very gates of the Krystallkeep. And left me with quite a dizzy head and upset stomach.

“Gakk! Loud! Bright! Hurts! Gakk!” I foamed, bending to a knee and cradling my head in my hands to try to stop the world from spinning. Some bold, heroic arrival for the new “VoidSpawn.” Yay.

“Oh, come now, Tat,” Kiril said, kicking me gently in the duff with the toe of his boot. “The *Song of Transport* can be, I admit, rather harsh for first-timers like yourself, but that’s no reason to go about tossing your bread back the way it came all over Sigil’s nice lawn, now is it?”

“Oh, come now, Kiril,” I mocked, wiping my mouth on the sleeve of my tunic. “It wasn’t the spell-song at all. I like mind-blowing pyrotechnics and polytonal absurdities as much as the next guy! It was, in fact, your bread. Yuck. Why’d you bake raisins, of all things, into what was perfectly fine honey-baked bread?”

“I don’t recall your having any of my raisin-loaf, Tat,” Kiril said, pulling me to my feet.

“True, I didn’t,” I admitted, steadying myself through main force of will. “But just remembering what the little blighters looked like stuck there in that bread, like burrowing black maggots or something awful like that, and then getting sick just now. Yuck.”

Kiril laughed openly at my discomfort. Or perhaps my bizarre raisin-and-maggot imagination. In any event, at precisely the same moment that my head finally stopped spinning, and at precisely the same moment that I was getting my first good look at the truly awe-inspiring deep-purple crystalline battlements of the mammoth Krystallkeep, quite suddenly, quite ridiculously, the air turned a brilliant shade of sunset-purple before me, and out walked from seemingly nowhere a tall, regal, somber Starin clad resplendently in silver-fringed, jet-black and dusky-purple robes. Leaning heavily into the irregularly-faceted purple crystalline staff which he bore in his left hand, the tall white-haired Starin, who wore his hair in triple-braids very much like Kiril, stared first at Kiril, then at me. His patrician lips seemed to be troubled by the taste of very sour persimmons.

“Kiril,” he intoned in a surprisingly soft, cultured voice, “why must you ever and always break the rules?”

“Because they’re *your* rules, not *mine*, Sigil,” Kiril informed him casually. “And you didn’t bother to *explicitly* state that I couldn’t bring him here to see you once he came to, now did you?”

“Very well, then,” Sigil Talisman, Archimage of Krystallmyst, replied after a moment’s silent consideration. “You may enter the keep. I am quite sure that you remember the way,” he said tersely. “We will discuss this at length once you have reached the water garden, where I now await you.”

With that, the air around Sigil’s form seemed to transform into a frosty glassine substance, and he vanished unto nothingness, leaving me and Kiril to ourselves.

Turning to face me, Kiril tried to mask a growing grin. “Pay him no heed, Tat. He usually shows a lot more manners than he just showed the both of us. Lotsa regal and royal upbringing beneath those imitation Raiders robes of his. He’s just a spoilsport when he doesn’t get his way.”

Then it suddenly hit me. Not the import of what Kiril or Sigil had been saying, of course, but the way in which they had been saying it. Sigil had opened the conversation in Starin, and Kiril had

quite rudely broken back into Zengaran without so much as a polite nod of language or subject change, which Starin modicum dictated. Sigil had stuck with Starin, and Kiril had stuck with Zengaran. And for some strange reason, I had understood every single word of Sigil's Starin just as easily as I had understood my own native tongue. And my lessons with Merrin had not gone *that* deep...

"You know, Kiril," I said as he motioned for me to follow along with him, which I did, "this may sound kinda funny, but Sigil was speaking Starin back there, wasn't he?"

"Surely was," he said as we paused before the sheer face of the western wall of the keep.

"My studies of Starin were coming along fairly well, I must admit," I said, even as my gaze roved the wall. I could see no visible entrance, however, but I let it go. After all, Sigil had told Kiril that he was sure that *he* could remember the way in, not *me*. I continued, "But I had no problem understanding Sigil's words at all, despite his stiff and formal inflections. What gives, anyway? Was he using some kinda magickal 'translate' spell or something like that so that I could understand him, too?"

"No, Tat," Kiril said as he busied himself with staring at the manifold reflections of his own face within the rough crystalline—or make that *krystalline*, if you're Starin—facade of the keep's wall. "Sigil didn't use any magick back there to help you understand his words—but I did while you slept in your trance."

"What? You cast *spells* upon me while I slept! While I was naked, at that!"

"But it was good, healthy, beneficial magick, Tat," Kiril laughed under his breath. "Had to make up for lost time in the ol' language department, otherwise you were gonna awaken a little lacking in that most important facet of your bardic education."

I pondered that for a while. "You mean you taught me Starin while I slept?"

"Sort of," he said quickly, still studying the wall and its myriad reflections. "In fact, I'm quite sure that Sigil's gonna be quite shocked to discover that you're more than fluent in Starin, not to mention about a dozen of the other more popular languages spoken on SenZar. After all, that's why he used it in your presence."

I was confused, and I'm sure my expression showed it. Not that Kiril was looking, mind you, but I was sure that he knew. "You mean he used Starin because he didn't want me to understand what he was saying to you?"

"There you have it, my boy," Kiril said quietly. "Now why don't you be a good lad and help me find the Eyes That Stare Back."

"Sure," I agreed, more than eager to have something substantial to do. Somewhat aware that Kiril was referring to some hokey ol' "secret means of entrance" into the keep, apparently triggered by finding the one reflection within the numerous reflections on the face of the wall that stared back—or something along those lines, if Merrin's numerous Rellian-inspired "Tales of the Quest" had been anywhere near the mark—I bent to the task, only to discover that I was leaving no reflection on the wall.

"Uh, Kiril?"

"What? You've found it already?" Glancing over to where I was pointing, Kiril at once saw the reflectionless facet that I was indicating. "Baal's Balls!" he whistled to himself. "Now that's something I never thought I'd see: no reflection! Either you're non-sentient, non-living, undead, protected by some hellatious mind-cloaking magicks, or else Sigil's magicks are slipping!" He paused for a moment, checking the facet for any sign of malfunction. Finding none, he continued, "So be it, then, lad. Guess I'm gonna have to do this all by my lonesome."

With that, he gently shoved me back a pace, and continued with his work. After a full five minutes of nose-poking, eye-squinting, and crablike swaying, Kiril at last proclaimed that he had

found the Eyes That Stare Back. This, of course, interrupted my rather peaceful reverie of cataloguing the local flora (there were tons of the beautiful, upswept-branched chandelier trees on the estate, as well as a dozen or more varieties of trees with which I was not familiar) and staring at the bilious grey early morning mists which embraced the sylvan estate, and I was none too pleased. But I kept my peace, and bounded over to Kiril's side even as he began to lock his gaze with that of his reflection.

"Stand back a step, Tat," Kiril warned me just as I began to look over his shoulder.

"Why?"

"I think I know why you can't see your reflection in the wall, and you'll probably ground out the magick, and we'll have to start this all over again, that's why," he coolly explained, even as he snaked an arm behind him and shoved me back a step.

"Oh. I see," I lied, taking another step back, just to pretend that I had acted of my own volition. "Yep, that's me," I mumbled as Kiril continued to stare. "The old magick-grounder."

"If only you knew..." I heard Kiril whisper.

Before I could reply, however, a suffused aura of purplish light enveloped Kiril's head and torso, and he immediately began to giggle like a little fiend.

"Gods, what a rush," he mumbled through his giggling. "Just like that first tug of the lotus bong. If that old goat only knew how his silly old tricky-trap worked its magicks, he'd discontinue it just for sheer prudish spite."

While my demented young mind considered apprenticing myself to Sigil, if only so that he could teach me how this kind of lotus-magick worked, I noted that the single fist-sized facet which held Kiril's staring reflection suddenly whirled once, twice, then thrice widdershins, then unfurled like a budding flower, replicating itself in a smart hexagonal pattern until it formed a roughly man-sized reflection of Kiril's dilated eyes. With a barely audible popping sound, the eyes then disappeared, blinking forth from this reality. The glow abated, and there stood before Kiril a passageway hewn from the crystal itself, leading into an austere if wonderfully ordered water garden where Sigil sat upon a black marble bench before a small trickling waterfall.

"Cool! My turn!" I exclaimed, brushing past the stunned and possibly stoned Kiril. "Well," I sneered, pausing before the keep's crystalline surface, then spastically waving my hands over the "eyes," giving them a bad case of the blinkies. "Nah. Maybe some other day. Like when this jester's retarded Goblin magicks can give me pause." With six surly steps, I was through the passageway and at Sigil's side. The Archimage of Krystallmyst merely glanced up at me with a disinterested look on his sour persimmon-eating face. His purple-tinged, almond-slanted eyes, however, revealed something akin to sheer mirth.

While Kiril slinked up to my side, I took the brief opportunity to inspect the water garden. Curiously, it was no more than ten full paces on a side, and roughly square in setting. Kind of small for such a large keep, I thought, especially for a place called "The Krystallkeep," but what it lacked in sheer volume it more than made up for with sheer taste. The single bench sat off to one corner, where anyone sitting upon it could view the majority of the small courtyard and enjoy the four small waterfalls, the four small reflection pools, and the central pool which fed from the four adjoining ones. Tiny sprite-sized menhir and dolmen decorated the central pool, and I could almost imagine seeing miniature Starin in procession, attending the holy stones and offering their musical prayers and bucolic sacrifices to the Good Earth, or the Dragon itself.

About thirty feet overhead, a thin transparent dome of what appeared to be more of that ubiquitous purple krystall-with-a-K adorned the court, filtering in the early morning sunlight and adding an unusual pinkish sheen to it. And although there were no apparent passageways, save for the rapidly diminishing one through which Kiril and I had come, I realized that the four neat rock

paths radiating out from the central pool probably had to go somewhere—even though it appeared as if they ran straight into a dead-end at the walls. *Probably more of that hokey old reflection stuff*, I told myself with a sage smile.

At the moment Kiril reached my side, Sigil suddenly arose, bowed deeply to me, and intoned in perfect Zengaran, “Greetings, Tatternorn. I am Sigil Talisman, Archimage of Krystallmyst, and I am at your service.”

Returning his flowing bow, I replied in my most polished Zengaran, “Well met, Sigil Talisman, Archimage of Krystallmyst. I am Tat, recently named as both Tatternorn and Tatternorn Void-Spawn, and I am pleased to meet you.”

“Yeah,” Kiril muttered musically, “and I hope you guessed his name. Hoo-hoo...”

I didn’t get it, but apparently Sigil did, and he shot Kiril a disdainful glare.

“It appears that I will have to modify my entrance protocol after all,” Sigil said pointedly to Kiril. “Truly, for the side-effects only seem to exacerbate your perpetual ‘rolling stoned’ condition.”

“What!” Kiril exploded, slapping his thigh as he wailed in laughter. “A funny? From *you*? Who would have thunk it? After a thousand years, doomed to a humorless existence, he roars back with a vengeance! Oh, no!” he gasped, losing his breath. “I’ve got to sit down,” he said as he plopped rudely down onto the bench. “I think you’ve done me a mischief, Uncle Sigil.”

Ignoring Kiril’s outburst, Sigil turned to me and asked, “How do you feel, Tatternorn? I trust that Kiril has seen to your needs?”

“You mean am I hungry?” I shook my head. “No, Kiril took me in and gave me breakfast.”

Kiril, after grunting something that sounded like “vej-a-might san-witch,” let fly with another wave of delirious laughter.

I continued, “And he saw to my wardrobe, too. Nice stuff, too,” I said, appraising my new togs.

“And what of the blade?” Sigil asked.

“Oh, this?” I asked, holding Skurge up at arm’s length.

“Yes, that,” Sigil said, adroitly moving a half-step to the side to put some distance between himself and my awkward blade-handling. “Be still, Tatternorn,” he warned me in a soft voice, “and have a care with your blade, for it spells death—irrevocable death—to those doomed by its fell touch.”

“Wow, sure sounds massive,” I admitted, giving the damnable thing an appraising glance.

“Grant the boy no small measure of aplomb, Sigil,” Kiril said in a merry voice as he rose to stand by my side, “for he treats the gift of a Supreme Artifact such as Skurge with ‘wow!’ By Udarath’s Undulating Urethra, but the lad has a gift for understatement!”

“If only for the fact that his alleged ‘gift’ is nothing more than the greatest curse that any soul may bear, Kiril,” Sigil said in a sad voice. “There can be no such thing as understatement when dealing with issues of immortality, eternal life, and eternal damnation.”

That shut Kiril up. And it scared the living hell out of me.

Sure, it was all fine and dandy—and even expected—to hear words like “eternal damnation” flow from the mouths of the sermon-makers and marketplace evangelists. It came with the territory, and it was easy to deal with. But to hear it stated by an immortal Archimage, here in his timeless Krystallkeep in the heart of the Krystallmyst Forest, was just a little too powerful to ignore.

“You mean I’m damned?” I asked him point-blank.

Sigil paused a moment, apparently carefully weighing his response. “Perhaps. Possibly. Damnation would appear to be your destiny, young VoidSpawn. But destiny is, at best, a fluid thing.”

“So is horse piss, Sigil,” Kiril said strongly, “and that’s what you’re feeding him with all that talk of doom and damnation. It’s not right to tell a young lad such things, you old weregoat! Even if

it is his so-called 'destiny!' It's just not right!"

"Since when have you concerned yourself with tact and diplomacy, Kiril?" Sigil asked him.

"Since I took Tat in, you ancient old batfart!"

"Guys, guys!" I cried out. "There's no need for a pointless argument over who's doomed, or who's damned, or who's destiny is this, that, or the other! It's not like either one of *you* is the guy who's doomed or damned anyway, so just shut up, okay, and let me think about this!"

Sigil, somewhat taken aback, smirked, then said, "From the mouths of babes..."

"You mean, 'from the mouths of VoidSpawn,' don't you?" Kiril mumbled.

"With all due respect, good sirs," I addressed both of them, "why don't you both just shut up for a minute, okay? I'm finding it hard to think with you two bickering like two incontinent old maids fighting over a piss-pot!"

Ignoring the cool stare from Sigil and the half-laugh from Kiril, I stalked over to the central pool, where I spent a few silent moments staring at my own reflection upon the water. I was not expecting some grand revelation from within the pool's depths, and I did not get one, either. But I did get a few moments to examine my own thoughts, which were just as jumbled and chaotic as I had expected them to be.

I mean, what would one expect? Subjectively, I was less than one hour removed from Zengara and Merrin. Up to this moment, that's just about all the personal time that I could account for. Objectively, I was *one year and one day* removed from all that I had ever known, and damned and doomed to top it all off! Obviously, I was no longer a "young lad," even though Kiril addressed me as such. I had hair on my chest, my muscles were a *lot* more developed than they had been, and even though I still had no sure way of proving it, I was fairly sure that I had grown several inches in... height. All these changes, all these grand transitions, could be accepted within the span of a year and a day. But, at least to my own perception, they were still only an hour or so old, and they were mind-boggling to say the least.

Yet that did not begin to touch upon the more dreadful side of my changes. With a glance down at the baneful black blade I held in my right hand—held casually, as if the massive monster were some lowly broomstick—I knew, beyond shadow of doubt, that my destiny was about as "fluid" as stone.

Sure, both Kiril and Sigil could yuck it up with their theories on this, their sage discourses on that; each of them trying his best to outdo the other and win the appraisal of the new VoidSpawn. But neither one of them had this blade—this hateful thing!—in his hand, nestled within his soul like some malignant fiend. Somehow, I sensed—no, I *knew*—my destiny. Knew it as clearly as if I had lived it all out before on some other world, in some other thrice-damned existence. It would not happen now, but it would come along eventually, as inevitably as death, doom, and destiny tend to come.

I would be... immortal. And my destiny would never truly be my own.

I knew. It was as simple as that, gazing first at the blade, and then at my own reflection: I knew. And that was all that mattered.

"The Dragon's Game begins anew..." I whispered to myself.

Behind me, the courtyard grew still, as if the two Starin had ceased to breath.

"That's what Skurge told me," I continued, realizing I held their attention in a steely grasp. In my hands, the black blade began to grow slightly warm, as if invigorated by the mention of its name. "The fiend hammered those words into my head, as if he were marking me for some future time, some future event. Or preparing me for the hate to come..."

"Don't let that sick Shadar bastard get you down, Tat," Kiril said rather quietly. "That's just his way of trying to play mindgames with you. He's just a big, selfish bully beneath that hateful

exterior that he tries so hard to impress folks with.”

“You speak as if you know him, Kiril,” I said, still not deigning to turn and face him, which was rather rude.

For an awkward moment, silence spoke.

Then: “Well,” Kiril said, “let us just say, at least to an historian such as myself, that his dark reputation precedes him.”

“All well and good,” I smirked, suddenly feeling a bit fey. “At least your disclaimer means that you aren’t some three thousand years old, as Skurge was a creature of the Fourth Age and we now stand at the end of the Seventh.”

“No, not at all, Tat,” Kiril said smoothly. I heard him—no, make that *felt* him—take a small step towards me. “I did not disclaim anything. I merely stated that Skurge’s dark reputation precedes him, as well it does to any and all who make it their business to know such things.”

“And what precisely would be the root of that ‘business,’ Kiril?” I inquired, my voice growing deeper, more forceful. “Curiosity? The thirst for knowledge? Or perhaps the task charged to you by the Dragon itself?”

Suddenly, instinctively, I whirled about, only to find Kiril a pace before me, his eyes narrowed dangerously.

“What are you trying to do, Starin?” I boomed, the black blade rising of its own volition to ward me from his approach. Abruptly, my throat contorted, and my teeth seemed to grate in my mouth as I shouted in words not of mortal man: “*Stand thy ground, Starin charlatan! Skurge commands thee!*”

Eyes wide, Kiril did just that. At the same moment, my vision dimmed and vertigo assailed me, spiriting me far away unto a place of absolute darkness. Suddenly, I was as nothing, caught up in nothingness and the essence of non-being. I had no physical form, no flesh and blood, yet, paradoxically, I was still somehow aware of my own being, my own flesh and blood.

Screaming in silence, I fought against the darkness which held me in thrall, only to meet the inflexible tyrannical will of the dark fiend behind the veil.

“Skurge, you bastard!” I raged. “Get out of my head!”

My words—if words they truly were—echoed and reverberated crazily about me, multiplying unto a chorus of insane voices until they reached a deafening din, and then suddenly abating as if they had never been. Then, like the sudden shattering of a black mirror, the darkness fell away, and I was once more staring into Kiril’s surprised eyes.

“You did it, Tat!” Kiril beamed, breaking into a cautious grin. His eyes, however, remained locked with mine.

“Yeah, I guess I did do it,” I mumbled, feeling weak. “Whatever I just did...”

With that, the blade fell from my grasp and tumbled to the ground, clanking dully.

“Your focus is most impressive, Tatternorn,” I heard Sigil say from somewhere beyond Kiril. As my own vision was still somewhat impaired, it took me a moment to discern Sigil, who now stood a pace or two behind Kiril. His awesome Krystallstaff was radiating a suffuse pre-dawn shade of purple light, and his eyes were lit brightly to match it. “You broke the fiend’s possession with what appeared to be minimal effort on your part.”

“Minimal effort?” I repeated, shaking my head. “Are you crazy, Sigil Talisman? I don’t know exactly what just happened, or exactly when, where, how, or why, but I *do* know that getting out of that black nothing-place took everything I had, and then some!”

“Do you recall the events leading up to your incident?” Sigil asked, stepping closer, brandishing his staff.

“Yeah, of course I—”

“Then let the hatred turn, and the pain ease...” Sigil intoned in a singsong, lilting voice.

Suddenly, all I could see was that most beautiful, most hateful staff, and my mind grew calm, almost pacific, as the horrifying events of the past few moments faded away into the realm of illusory bad dreams and dimly recalled nightmares.

The next moment, or at least what seemed like the next moment to me, I was sitting on a bench, my head cradled in my hands, and my eyes fixed upon the fine leather boots which Kiril had given me to wear.

“What just happened?” I found myself mumbling.

“Are you talking to your boot again, Tat?” Kiril inquired mirthfully.

I shook my head, swearing I could feel something rattle about inside. “No, but I could have sworn that I was standing up just a moment ago. What happened? Why am I sitting over here on the bench?”

“Pay it no heed,” Sigil said, startling me, as his voice seemed to issue from right behind my ear. Quickly, I jerked my head up and looked around, only to find both him and Kiril standing by the central pool, the two of them intently studying Skurge where it lay on the ground.

“Whaddya mean, ‘pay it no heed!’” I railed, bolting up and bounding over to them. “You just did something to me, dammit!” I sharply accused Sigil, who totally ignored me. Apparently, he was having just a little too much fun staring down at Skurge, using his staff like some outrageous jeweler’s glass. “Hey! The least you could do is acknowledge my presence, after all you just—”

“—after all he just did to alleviate your fevered brain of Skurge’s hate-filled influence, you mean,” Kiril said, glancing up at me. “It’s best that you forget what that fiend just did to you, Tat. Sigil’s magicks will do their work. He’s the best in the business. All you need do is accept them, and you’ll sleep a whole lot better during nights to come. Trust me.”

“But... But didn’t I beat him?” I stammered, my head full of cobwebs. “I mean, didn’t I win? If I won, then what’s the point in purging me of my memories of victory? Isn’t that just a bit counter-productive?”

“Nope,” Kiril explained most elaborately, sparing no details. Then he returned to his sword-studying.

Desperately, I wracked my brain to recall what had just happened, knowing fully well that the memories of the event were probably forevermore gone, or at least buried so deeply that I could not possibly recall them. Desperately I sought what should have been mine; mine by right of victory. Strangely, and perhaps somewhat miraculously, considering Kiril’s glowing endorsement of Sigil’s magickal talents (not to mention the glowing rumors and legends of Sigil’s magickal talents recorded in myth and legend throughout the known world; Hastorath’s weren’t the only histories I had read of him, merely the ones that I openly admitted reading), I found what I had sought, and the purged memories were mine once more.

At that moment, however—that one prideful moment which perhaps another youth might have celebrated with a grand display of his newly regained knowledge, and the promise of his own potency—I suddenly realized that I had defied the efforts of the Archimage of Krystallmyst himself, the so-called “best in the business” and a legend in his own right. That fact alone bade me keep my silence.

Sure, I realized that perhaps Sigil and Kiril had been doing what they thought was best for me. Perhaps, but perhaps not. After all, they seemed like nice guys, even for living legends, who generally turned out (at least by all accounts) to be a little less than the image painted of them. However, for all that I knew, and I realized that there was precious little that I *did* know at this point in time, the two of them may have had their own little hidden agendas, and perhaps were using me in ways that would pale the way that the Mokarr bitch had used me in her little pact ceremony. So I kept

my silence, which was just about the only stake I had in the game at this point which I could control.

“He has retreated,” Sigil said after a few more moments. Then, just like that, he stood ramrod straight and let fall his staff to rest at his side.

“I knew it,” Kiril said as he got up. “He never had the balls to face either of us one on one, let alone the balls to face our combined powers.” With a smarmy smile aimed down at the silent blade, he began to preen his white braids. “Stupid Shadar,” he added in afterthought.

“So, I take it that you’re finished?” I asked them snidely. “If you are, then I’d like to reclaim what’s mine, if you don’t mind...”

With that, I reached down to retrieve Skurge, only to find Sigil’s staff interposed between my hand and the blade.

“Are you certain that you are ready, Tatternorn?” he asked me calmly.

“Huh? Whatever do you mean, Sigil Talisman? Do you mean, Am I ready to face once more and perhaps forever that ‘stupid Shadar,’ or do you mean, Am I ready to endure another humiliating, memory-leaching experience by your hand should I fail to keep that asshole’s mindgames in check?”

Silence.

“I thought so,” I said, brushing aside his staff and retrieving the blade. I stood up straight, the blade resting point-down on the ground. Then I added, “I guess you’re just as eager as I am to get this game underway, huh?”

Sigil did not blink. “To which game do you refer, Tatternorn?”

“Oh, you know,” I said, smiling like a wolf just let loose among the sheep. “And far be it from me to disappoint the Dragon...”

“I think the young lad knows, Sigil,” Kiril said gravely. Then he broke into a fit of obnoxious laughter.

“Kiril, please,” Sigil said sadly, shaking his head.

“Let him laugh,” I said boldly as I drew myself up to my full height, which, I now realized, was almost equal to either of the two tall Starin’s. I turned to face the bent-double, snickering Starin. “He’s nothing more than a raving lunatic,” I said disdainfully. Then, not missing a beat, I turned to stare Sigil right in the eye, “And you don’t impress me a bit, Sigil Talisman, Mr. Archimage of Krystallmyst! Therefore, before I myself become addled, or before I’m forced into a round of mindless applause to honor all the nifty parlor tricks, I’m outta here! See ya!”

Pivoting on my heel, I turned to find the way out, only to find none. Not letting that stop me, I recalled my earlier observation that the paths from the central pool had to lead *somewhere*, so I took off on the nearest one, and walked boldly right into the wall.

More laughter greeted me.

“Where the hell do you think *you’re* going?” Kiril gibbered behind me.

“Outta *here!*” I called out.

“But you can’t leave that way,” Kiril said.

“Wanna bet?”

Furious and frustrated, I raised my blade, intending to hack my way through the thick crystal wall...

...only to discover that *this* wall too could play that little disappearing trick which the outside wall had played earlier. There before me was another passageway like the first. This one, however, seemed to stretch away unto an infinity of utter darkness.

“If this is the path you choose, Tatternorn,” I heard Sigil say, “then you must be prepared to walk it from beginning to end. Are you ready to face such a challenge?”

Staring into the darkness before me, I felt a sudden, hot charge of hateful vitality course up and down my spine, seemingly goading me into setting foot upon the path before me with little

regard for the consequences. And for the first time in my young life—but definitely not for the last time in my strange lives to come—I let my hatred burn.

Involuntarily, my eyes rolled back in my head, even as my eyelids narrowed; slats of most wicked soul light burned from within, filling the space immediately before my face with a flurry of electric blue faerie light. I growled then, a most curious expression of my feral self that I had never before explored. The deep, basso profundo thunder which rolled from my slowly contorting lips was a living thing, a multi-octave harmonic force that could strike fear even among the deaf. “We know thee, Sigil Talisman,” I snarled like a rabid Akir war wolf. A slow, rictus grin bloomed upon my lips. Pearly white canines, more prominent than any mere human’s, glistened in the eerie pale blue shadow of the dancing sparks. “You don’t scare me, Dragon-slave; I fuck Fear’s gaping, pustule-infested asshole every moment of my life, boy! Archimage or not, immortal or not, you *fear* me.” I did not give him the honor of my eyes. “And, one day not so far removed from now, your fear of what you’ve created will prove to be your undoing...”

I let it sink in. Point, motherfucker, in that great Dragon’s Game. Concluding my grand masquerade, I inclined my head slightly, my knuckles shooting white and cracking ominously like a calving iceberg as I tightened my grip on Skurge. “I’m going to go back to Zengara to see Merrin now, and nothing will stop me from doing what I’ve set out to do—not you, not Kiril, not any power on this world. You see, I know what I am. I know what it is that you and your kind have created. I know my role, know what it is that I am doomed to do. And I will play my role to the fucking hilt if you cross me. I am All That All Which Is, All That All Which Binds; for my glory, we all shall die...”

“Wait, Tatternorn!” Kiril called out. “What of your apprenticeship? I speak in earnest, and in friendship, when I offer such. Please, do not let it lightly pass you by, my young friend.”

With a sidelong glance, I replied, “I’ll think about it, Kiril. In fact, I’ll more than likely take you up on it. But not right now. I’ve gotta get back to Zengara. I’ve really got to.” I shook my head. “Don’t ask me to explain it, because I can’t. Just trust me: I’ve got to get back there *now*.”

“Then let your passage be swift and sure, Tatternorn,” Sigil Talisman intoned in a sonorous voice, “for destiny truly awaits you, though you know it not...”

At that baneful pronouncement, the passageway before me began to glow a subtle shade of sunset-purple, then the darkness within faded, only to reveal a grimy, ill-lit alley in what I knew had to be Thieves’ Quarters in Zengara.

“Thank you,” I said, striding boldly through the magical teleportal; the stinging, stinking aroma of the alley slamming into me like a runaway eight-horse carriage. “And you still don’t impress me, Sigil *Phallusman*...”

Behind me, even as the teleportal’s faint hum began to diminish unto nothingness, I could have sworn that I heard Kiril’s delirious, mocking laughter.