



TRIAL OF THE WIZARD KING

THE WIZARD KING TRILOGY

II

CHAD CORRIE

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DARK HORSE BOOKS

CHAPTER 1

HERE THEN IS THE CHALLENGE WE FACE: THE TWO PATHS EVENTUALLY MUST MEET. FOR WHAT IS POWER BUT KNOWLEDGE ATTAINED, AND KNOWLEDGE BUT AN INCREASE IN POWER? EACH IS THE REFLECTION OF THE OTHER. SO THEN IS THERE ANY REAL DIFFERENCE IN THE END WHAT PATH ONE WALKS? AND IF SO, HOW SHOULD ONE WALK IT KNOWING THIS TRUTH?

—**Khurai the Dark, Telborian wizard king**
Reigned 60 BV–12 BV

“**W**h—who are you?” Cadrissa dared to ask. She needed some answers. She’d already survived a frightening fiend, an angry wizard, and jungle-strangled ruins swarming with hobgoblins. Now she was prisoner in some ancient black tower she’d seen raised from the earth by her skeletal captor.

The lich lifted his head from the large tome he’d been paging through. The tongues of azure flame flickering in his empty sockets sent a fresh shiver down her spine. Not even his threadbare hood could dim their icy glow.

“Cadrith Elanis,” he said, “the last wizard king of Tralodren.” Yet again she was struck by how he could speak despite lacking a tongue and the muscles to move his jaw. And yet the jaw moved and his voice came forth.

Another burst of thunder overtook the tower and shook the shelves of the small study, though little else. Cadrissa couldn’t say the same for herself. This was madness if ever there was any. Another roaring blast of thunder pounded her ears and head but she retained her focus on the lich—on Cadrith. He resumed his reading, bending back over the gruesome silver podium. It’d been created to resemble a hunched human

skeleton supporting the weight of the book above it. Just one of the less-than-pleasant items she'd already encountered since they entered the tower and this terrible storm overtook them.

Had she been bolder and not afraid for her life, she might have inquired further about the book. It was clearly something important. Instead, she racked her mind for what she'd learned of the wizard kings in an attempt to make better sense of what was going on. She'd learned some of their names and the times of their rule, but there were so many more who'd made their mark on Tralodren. And given the chaos that followed their reigns, she also knew still more might have been lost to time. Could Cadrith be one of them?

His devotion to his studies left her in the awkward position of standing between him and the door to the study like a nervous pillar. She barely shifted her weight from foot to foot as she continued assessing the situation. While it might have seemed the lich was too engrossed in his reading to take notice of anything else—even a sudden dash for the door—she pushed the thought from her mind as quickly as it bobbed to the surface. Even if she could make it to the door before he could react, she was confident it'd only take just one word to place her before Asorlok's gates.

A sudden jerk of Cadrith's bony head jolted her from her thoughts. "Wait here." He said nothing more, placing the tome he'd been reading under his arm and grabbing hold of his staff.

Another rumble of thunder shook Cadrissa as Cadrith passed. She tried granting him a wide swath but her legs were unable to come completely unlocked, birthing a shaky, slow twirl instead. As he passed, she couldn't escape his icy aura. She wondered if he even felt the cold anymore, or anything else for that matter. He passed without a glance, his attention focused on the door, which was already opening as he neared.

She tried to think of something to say—some sort of protest—but nothing came. Instead, her lips were frozen half-open and her tongue clung to the roof of her mouth. And so she watched him depart with the door closing silently behind him. She was certain she heard it lock. No doubt with a spell as well. At least the light in the room remained. Her shoulders sunk with a heavy sigh. Madness.

“Wait,” she repeated as she took in the various tomes and scrolls resting in the bookcase across from her. The tug to brave a look in a book or two was appealing, but there was something much more vital vying for her attention. A moment later she was marching for the door, eyes half squinting in intense study.



On the other side of the door Cadrith was making his way down the hallway, letting the magical light that followed him through the tower serve as guide. He didn't need it, of course. He'd been down these halls enough times to find the room he was seeking with his eyes closed. Though it might have been close to eight centuries since he last set foot in the tower, he'd only seen five of those years, thanks to his magic-induced sleep. But even those years had inched forward at a snail's pace.

All told, the additional amount of time worked in his favor, he supposed, at least when it came to the populace. But it wasn't them he had to contend with. Another thunderous shaking reminded him of his last encounter with Endarien. The god had tried the same tactic before and failed. He'd thought Endarien would be smart enough to try something new. Maybe he thought the tower and the spells around it had weakened over time. It didn't matter. Cadrith didn't plan on staying here long.

As he walked, he went over recent events. Everything was going as he'd planned. Sargis, his onetime demonic ally, was back in the Abyss where he belonged, and Cadrith was back in his tower with the last of his tools now safely locked up in the study. And things would be even better with Cadrissa instead of that fool Valan. After watching the other mage come unhinged when he failed to master that corrupted dranoric device, he could see how much better it—

He stopped.

He thought he saw some movement on the stairs below, some dark shape slinking about the shadows. At once his mind returned to the Abyss and the hidden enemies and trouble lurking on the peripheries, but just

as quickly he brought himself back into line. He was in his tower and it was secure. None could get in but him, and nothing else was here. That was, unless . . . He spun back on his heel. No. There was no one here and there had been no one here since he'd left. Even if she'd found a way, she'd be long since dead by now. This wasn't the time for sentiment, only for continuing in his resolve.

He focused on an old door at the end of a dark hallway, deep in the tower's heart. As thick as the stone wall surrounding it, the door had grown gray over the years but still held firm. The magical energy coursing through it held it as fast and true as the day it was first set in place. He waved his skeletal hand, and it silently swung open.

As soon as he set foot inside, light burned away the darkness. Seeing the room brought everything back in rapid succession. It was here he'd spent his last days as a living man. It was also the last piece of Tralodren he'd seen before leaving for the Abyss . . . and now he'd come full circle. Just like he always knew he would.

He took in the old room in silence. After all this time, everything remained just as he'd left it. Books lined the wall to his right in giant shelves, reaching all the way to the ceiling a few feet above his head. The ancient covers resembled a cobblestone walkway rising to the top shelf. While these books seemed to have maintained their shape, Cadrith knew they'd crumble to dust with just the slightest breath. But he wasn't concerned with these anymore. They'd served their purpose and he'd learned from them all he could. His attention, instead, went to his left and an old wooden table. On top of it lay a humanoid form covered by a dusty white cloth. He didn't need to remove it to discern the body was still whole.

Shifting his attention to the wall opposite the door, Cadrith stepped forward, inspecting a circular mosaic very similar to the one in the ruins he'd used to bring himself back to Tralodren. The small azure and violet tiles had been arranged in a swirling pattern just like the one he'd found in the ruins, though this one had a selection of white and silver tiles added into the design. The portal was also only eight feet in diameter and was only half built when he'd first found it. He'd done the final work

himself—each tile and spell needed to tie it together undertaken with great care. Now here he stood centuries later, gazing at it from the other side.

“You should have joined me, Kendra.” He traced the jagged scar-like crack crossing the entire mosaic in a diagonal slash. Something so seemingly simple, yet it had stopped him from returning and set into motion a series of events that led to him using that foolish wizard Valan to cast the needed spell to free him from the Abyss.

In theory it shouldn't have worked as well as it did. When he happened upon the portal and the connections around it back when he was still searching for release in the Abyss, it was a far-fetched concept, as the portal wasn't meant for use between planes, just to travel between locations across Tralodren. But the longer he considered it, the further an idea manifested—and the Transducer was a great help toward that end. Steeped in chaotic magic and power, it helped tip things in his favor and allowed a slim opening for him to work his will. And when Cadrissa entered the equation, things took on an even better outcome.

She'd be much easier to control. Not to mention the other unexpected but still highly favorable boon she brought with her. He couldn't have done better if he had Kendra herself at his side. But for all her potential, Kendra hadn't had the strength to hold to the vision. She might have been powerful and skilled in magic—a wizard queen in the making—but she showed her true heart in the end . . . as had he. And now she was gone to Mortis, her body dust and memory. He refused to share the same fate.

He made his way to a small table that rested before the bookcase and set the Mirdic Tome upon it. The ancient book had been created by the titans long ago and held in it the secret to becoming a lich, among other things. Cadrith had taken it from his former master, who'd also used it to become a lich. It was part of his plan, Cadrith later learned, for surviving the coming Divine Vindication while taking his final step on the path of power. Cadrith was able to uncover these final steps and adopt them as his own. And he was now very close to their completion.

However, he wouldn't be able to do much more if he didn't take care of his time-ravaged frame. The spell he'd cast to become a lich had now finally taken its toll upon his body—what little remained. Like many

self-sustaining spells, it sought out means to keep itself strong—to enforce the effect it was created to enact. For Cadrith this meant the very bones that were all he had left to inhabit were being destroyed—ironically enough—to keep them intact and him bound to them.

Such a juxtaposition was a troublesome one, but not the biggest worry. As the spell hungered for more power, it started pulling away and weakening his ability to use other spells, as he had to use his magic to counter the original spell's immediate negative effects. The result was him getting weaker all the time and Sargis eventually discovering this weakness. He'd worried this might happen. After seeing how his former master had fared in plotting the workings of his plan, he knew it wise to prepare for the worst, and so he had. A new body had been readied and safely guarded for him. He just needed to rehearse the spell for transferring his spirit into it.

The thunder and shaking hadn't ceased. And while he'd boasted Endarien wouldn't find a way inside, he didn't want to take any needless risks. Opening the Mirdic Tome, he started his studying. The tome had long ago been transcribed into a smaller book, making it more manageable for human hands even before his master's possession.

Though altered in size, it was still hefty, its brown leather spine four fingers thick. The ancient titanic text had proven to be more enduring than anything Cadrith was aware of. Long ago, he deduced the pages were created from a specially crafted leather—probably from a titan or giant. Fitting, he supposed, given the secrets they contained.

Carefully flipping through the pages, he recalled all the secrets he'd already mastered. He'd come so very far and would step even higher still. It was just a short matter of time, and all would be his. Finally he found the page and began reading.



Cadrissa stared at the door, hoping she'd discover a hint of something she'd passed over and break the spell holding it shut. She'd tried some simple spells to chip away where she could, but didn't get anything useful.

She wasn't strong enough to force it down, though that didn't stop her from ramming it a couple of times just to be sure. She had tried searching for something to pick the lock but to no avail. Not that a pick would have done any good anyway against magic, but keeping her mind searching for solutions was better than worrying when Cadrith might return . . . and what might follow.

After all she'd been through with the ruins and everything leading up to them, she didn't know how much more she could pull from her well. She had to be judicious in her spell selection. If this lich was really a wizard king, she didn't know what she was up against. She closed her eyes and focused on a final spell she hoped was strong enough to do the job. As she did so, she felt a patch of heat on her leg. The warmth came from a necklace she'd taken from the ruins in Taka Lu Lama and seemingly intensified the deeper she dipped into her well.

Unable to repress her curiosity, she retrieved the object from her pocket and made a careful study. The thin chain wasn't really that interesting, resembling just about every other one she'd seen in her young life. The golden disk-shaped pendant, however, was another story. It was about three fingers in width and probably no thicker than an average slice of cheese. It was clearly pure gold, and there definitely was some heat radiating off of it. Heat she hadn't experienced back when she first retrieved it in those dranic ruins. The pendant was adorned with strange carvings and symbols she knew held some key to its identity and abilities. But without the proper time and resources for a greater inspection she wouldn't be making much sense of them anytime soon.

As she continued her inspection, she thought she heard whispering. It was soft and distant at first, but grew in volume, as if those who were creating it were drawing near. She couldn't make any of it out but there was definitely something being said. Not enjoying the sensation, she returned her focus on the door and the finishing of her spell.

"Calin agora naslin!" she said, belting out the words with a renewed sense of urgency.

The whole door glowed for a moment in a flash of azure light. She was surprised by the power which rose up from her well when she'd cast

it, but was pleased it apparently had done the job. The door silently surrendered, sliding slightly ajar.

With the spell's completion, the whispers ceased. She took one last look around, placed the necklace back in her hidden pocket, and braved the door. The first thing she'd need to overcome was the darkness, but upon leaving the room she was pleasantly surprised when the spell that formerly lit her way renewed its efforts. So it wasn't just tied to Cadrith—anyone's movements could activate it.

She supposed having the spell set up that way was a wise precaution, for it allowed Cadrith to keep an eye out for things sneaking about, a simple means for added security. Of course, with the light also following her it would make it easier for Cadrith to track her movements as well—if he was watching for them. She had no idea where he'd gone. All the more reason she needed some speed in her task.

As she cast her eyes above, she could see another level and what looked like a ceiling. If there was a way onto the roof she could poke her head outside and scour the tower's surroundings to better identify her location. Translocation spells required knowledge of the distance between where one was and where one wanted to go. And she figured such a spell was her only way out of this mess. Providing she still had enough left in her well to pull it off.

The tower shook again. It wasn't as forceful as it had been, but was still strong enough to remind her it hadn't given up just yet. All the more reason to hurry while this window of less angry skies remained.

She took to the stairs with all her might, racing up to the top floor and then ascending another group of steps she was pleased to find ended at a wooden trapdoor. There was an old iron latch holding it shut like a crooked talon. A touch of the wooden planks revealed they were dry and warm despite being so close to the steady downpour. Neither being buried so long in the dirt nor the tower's recent raising had distressed it in any way. Clearly the door was enchanted.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on recasting the spell she'd used with the door in the study. Once again she felt the warm swell on her leg where the hidden pocket holding the necklace resided, as a wave of power,

stronger than it should have been given the circumstances, poured out of her.

“Calin agora naslin.” The trapdoor took on a faint azure aura that faded from sight almost as quickly as it had appeared. She reached for the latch and gave it a small tug. It slid smoothly. She slowly placed her hand under the small iron handle near the door’s lip and gave a concerted push. The trapdoor flew up and back with a violent force as the rain-soaked wind slammed into her body and face.

She squinted as she pushed through the constant howl of agitated wind while ascending the final steps out onto the roof. She did her best at ignoring the slobbering slaps of rain splashing over her face and soiled golden robes along with the chaotic fingers making flailing banners of her sable hair. Craning her neck, she observed the pitch-black clouds.

She noted that they started taking the form of a colossal humanoid from the waist up. Built like the strongest of men, its bald head slowly adjusted its gaze toward the tower . . . and Cadrissa. Though it possessed just a rough shape of a face, it did have something like eyes. And these seemed fully able to take in any and all things before it. And it didn’t appear to like what it saw. A sturdy arm lifted above the dark, lightning-riddled clouds before rapidly descending with a clenched fist right for her position.

Cadrissa grabbed hold of the now-slick metal handle on the trapdoor and pulled it back as she ducked down into the tower, latching it right before that great fist made its impact. The echoing thud shook everything to its core, herself included. Cadrith *had* told her it was Endarien trying to break his way into the tower.

Madness.

She dared another glance at the trapdoor. The latch still held, but she could see it quiver with each successive pounding. And each time it did, she could see sprays of water spitting onto the steps below. With the spell gone, it wouldn’t be long until the trapdoor was compromised . . . and then . . .

She had to get out of there and fast. If the roof wasn’t an option, there was only one other possibility. Closing her eyes, she focused her

thoughts on the tower's ground floor while whispering the words that magically teleported her to it. When she opened her eyes again, she saw the solid demonic-crafted doors blocking her from her hoped-for freedom. The magical light had risen around her after her appearance, but that was now dimming as she took cautious steps forward. Above her another shaking strike reached her ears and feet.

The closer she drew to the doors the thicker the darkness became until, with just a few feet remaining, Cadrissa found herself swallowed in a thick lake of pitch. She couldn't hear the storm outside or the pounding above. All was silent. Dark and silent. Thinking Cadrith had come to deal with her at last, she didn't know what to do other than keep still, hoping for the best.

She shivered as a slight breeze twisted about her frame. The moving air felt like icy fingers dragging across her flesh, which was soaked from her previous adventure. Was this another spell meant to keep her at bay? Something to hold her until Cadrith returned? It could be a defensive option. If it was, she should have been able to at least make out some shapes by now as her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

"You will stay in the tower." An emotionless voice came from all around her. She was sure it wasn't Cadrith's. It sounded nothing like him—more an unusual mixture of male and female voices.

"Endarien?" She cupped her left hand and called forth a tongue of fire. The flame floated above the center of her palm. It was a simple spell, which after years of practice, she could cast with great ease. It was also the best spell she had for turning back at least some of the darkness.

As the simple illumination burst into existence, it almost as rapidly extinguished when she gave a startled cry, seeing a black tentacle undulating mere inches from her face. Sleek in the darkness, it was dotted with pockets of white-toothed maws chomping with a fearful energy—eager for anything they could sink those teeth into. A larger mouth capped the tip of the tentacle facing her. And while her impulse was for retreat, her legs proved traitors to the cause.

"You will stay in the tower and help Cadrith." The same voice she heard earlier issued out of all the tentacle's mouths in unison.

“Who are you?” She tried to sound braver than she felt, pushing the squeamishness down while imagining being encircled by dozens of those tentacles . . . and whatever they were connected to. At any moment they could be sliding over her body, twisting around her legs and arms and—

“Obey and you’ll live.” The words were spoken with such finality that she could feel an icy hand clamp itself upon her heart.

“Help him do what?” Finally her legs had come around, letting her retreat a few paces. Even though it lacked eyes, she was sure the tentacle watched her movements. “Endarien—”

“Isn’t a threat.” Cadrissa watched the tentacle slink back into the impenetrable darkness. “Just do what you’re told.”

“Who *are* you?”

“You will *stay* in the tower.” The emotionless voice snarled in her ears. Cadrissa suddenly found herself ensnared by a thick coil of tentacles. Her nightmares had become flesh and were slowly squeezing all the air from her lungs. Their clammy touch wrapped her from neck to ankles as she tried seeing anything through the thick darkness. Worse still was the chattering, chomping sound of those terrible teeth, especially the ones close to her ears.

Suddenly, one of the tentacles swung out and faced Cadrissa head on, snapping the larger of the mouths at its tip just a breath away from her nose. She gave a small yip, unable to remove her wide-eyed gaze from the threat.

“Do you *understand*?” The mouth facing her growled as the tentacles’ grip increased to such a painful degree that she thought she was going to pass out.

“Yes,” she managed to wheeze from between clenched teeth.

The darkness began fading, the light behind it filtering through like rays of sunlight after a heavy storm. As the light increased, the study she thought she’d freed herself from came into view. And then it was all gone. The pain. The pressure. The darkness. All of it. She was back in the study with the pounding from above competing with the banging of her heart against her chest. It was then the last of her strength gave out, dropping her on the floor in a heap. And it was there she’d remain for some time, weeping.



Cadrith peered up from the Mirdic Tome and took in the cloth-draped figure behind him. He'd found the spell and was confident he was ready to enact it. Ignoring the renewed pounding of yet another of Endarien's attacks, he focused on pulling what power he could from his well. He wouldn't get a second chance.

"Gorneal orthel falish. Waquire to-rahl!" The last of his well faded from his grasp and was channeled through his staff, shooting toward the cloth-covered body in an azure shaft of light. Then, like a kitten slowly pulling apart a ball of twine, he felt the magic binding him together finally failing.

He heard the cracking of his femurs fill the room even as he felt his ribs fracture. Like dominoes, the rest of the tethers began falling away with increasing speed. His feet and legs crumbled into dusty chalk with each measured step toward the table. There was no means of comfort as his spirit untwined and traveled past his chest and arms, then neck. He felt his skull unraveling next.

His field of vision began to fade as his legs, pelvis, and chest collapsed into gray, billowing dust. As his vision failed, he imagined the twin azure tongues of flame in his sockets winking out just before his skull turned into slate-tinted sand, joining the rest of the pile and the dusty, threadbare garments. The last thing he heard was his staff clanking hollowly on the stone before darkness washed over him.



When he woke, he found himself lying on the floor. Something wasn't right. He should have awakened in his new body on the table. Sitting up, he found himself wearing a robe he hadn't seen in years. Odder still, he could feel a fading warmth again in his body. This wasn't right. The spell that made him a lich sent out constant coldness from his bones. It had to in order to keep everything well preserved, allowing him the use of his body for as long as possible.

“Cadrith?” Kendra’s voice called his attention to the pregnant, blond Telborian woman rushing to his side. He’d forgotten how beautiful she’d been. “Cadrith?” Kendra took his hand.

“You’re like ice.” She placed her hand on his chest. He could see her fear melt into rage as she felt nothing stirring in his rib cage. Not even breath. “You didn’t . . .”

“I told you,” he heard himself say, “it was the only way. Now I have time to—”

Kendra’s slap didn’t really do anything. Pain wasn’t the same thing it had once been before. He’d soon discover there wasn’t so much as a sting in response to once hurtful things, just a dull awareness of their occurrence.

Kendra rose to her feet, livid. “How could you do this to us?”

“You can still join me.” He heard himself repeat what he’d said all those years before. “Together we can find the throne while we wait for magic to return.”

“All this time,” Kendra said, watching him rise, “it was just a lie. You pretended to be so *different*—so much *better*, but in the end you’re just like Raston.” She crossed her arms over her protruding stomach. “No—*worse*.”

This wasn’t true, of course. She was just upset and wasn’t thinking straight. She always did let her emotions get the better of her. If she just stopped and listened to reason—listened to what was before them. They were on the cusp of everything falling into place—so close to victory.

“Kendra . . .” Cadrith extended a hand that in time would become nothing but a skeletal shadow of its former self.

“All those months laboring to build that mosaic, saying it was for both of us. But it was really just for you. It *always* was.”

His hand fell. She still wasn’t seeing things clearly. He wasn’t the enemy—she was, and she’d prove to be to *both* of them if she kept this up. There wasn’t time to debate the finer points of what needed to be done. It was time for action.

“We can still go together.”

“And *where* would that be?” Kendra huffed. “You never *did* tell me.”

And for good reason. He knew how she'd react. But there was no escaping that now, was there? "The Abyss."

"The Abyss." Kendra's head dropped.

"It's away from the gods' eyes and we'd be free to—"

"I can't believe it's taken me this long to finally see you're *obsessed* with power. You'll do *anything* to get it." He saw the tears forming in Kendra's eyes. As then, he pushed any sentiment far from him. It wouldn't do any good—for either of them. "I've just been nothing but a *means* to an *end*. You don't love me—you never did."

At the time the accusation had stung him more than he thought possible, but now he knew the truth: she was right. He'd never really loved her—at least not in the truest sense of the word. He admired her, had lusted after her more than once, but loved her? Actually really cared for her the way the priests of Causilla and the bards said was right? No, he never had.

"And our child?" Kendra continued through her tears. It was pathetic really. So much confusion and fear over something so trivial. So much supposedly justified righteous wrath. Once they'd taken the throne, he would have brought their child back to life along with them. It was fear clouding her mind. And there was only fear because she hadn't decided where her place was. "You'd throw us to a pack of wolves in an instant if it could gain you anything worthwhile."

"If you just take a moment to step back—"

He was interrupted by a large booming sound: the beginning of Endarien's first attack on the tower all those centuries ago.

Kendra pressed on, undaunted. Her anger had overtaken her fear. It was fueling most of her fire. "You were right about one thing, though. It *is* time I choose my place. After all this time it's clear to me that it's *not* with you." Kendra ran from the room.

"Kendra!" Cadrieth had cried out after her but knew it was too late. She had finally made her choice . . . and now was going to have to suffer through it. Another boom rattled the tower as an inky blackness spilled over the scene. A blackness that swam and swayed as it blotted out more of the light. He could imagine something alive in that mass of swarming

night, something eager to clamp over him . . . But before he could dwell any further on the thought, he slipped into unconsciousness, letting his past fade away.



Just as rapidly as he passed into the darkness, Cadrith felt himself again returning to wakefulness. Before him was a sable-colored sea. Thinking he was lost somewhere in transition, it took him a moment to realize he was now in a new body. One with eyelids. Opening them brought forth a vast field of white, which he quickly understood was cloth. Flinging it away, he sat up, and found himself at the center of a swirling cloud of dust.

He felt muscles and tendons twist and moan. That was a good sign. The magic had sustained the body without any apparent trouble. Though this was temporary too. He was still a lich and in time the natural process of decay would take this body as it had his original one. But he didn't plan on having to keep this one long enough to deal with any of that.

From where he sat on the table, Cadrith saw what remained of his old form. The discarded, dusty garments reminded him of a serpent's shed skin. He supposed it was a fitting metaphor. He'd left the old behind in favor of the new. Already he felt it was no longer part of him—something weak cast aside. And then there was the deep well of magic he could feel humming with power inside him. It had been too long since he felt the strength of his true potential. Still no heartbeat, but at least he had a body strong enough to get him where he needed to go and sustain him throughout the entire process.

His attention fell to his hands. Fingernails and pale skin instead of the dry bones he was used to seeing. It would take some getting used to. Putting his hands on the skin of his face, he traced his fingers around his eyes, exploring the flesh surrounding them. Flesh that he now knew held piercing blue orbs rather than empty, flaming sockets. He smiled as his fingers ran through the short black hair that had remained all these centuries. It was amazing how quickly he'd adapted to its absence.

A small gesture brought forth a full-length mirror. The reflection marked him as a man of some thirty years with a body that still looked amazingly fresh—as if he'd just died mere moments before. In many ways he resembled the man he'd been when he'd first become a lich. As his dark smile widened, he delighted in the fact his lips now added to his charming manner. But enough of this. He needed clothing and his staff.

As soon as he'd thought of such matters, they appeared: his staff flying into his grip as a deep purple cloth fell upon his shoulders. The robe the cloth formed was embroidered on the hem with silver scrollwork and covered with ruby studs the size of a thumbnail. Black leather boots climbed from his feet to his knees. A moment later his former belt and all it held materialized about his waist. A pure-white hooded cloak gathered thickly around his neck like wave-birthing froth before flowing down to a finger's breadth from the floor. Around its hem and hood were golden stitched runes. It was a departure from his former attire in more than one way.

When he'd left for the Abyss, he'd donned an outfit and gear he assumed would have to withstand centuries while serving him well in just about any terrain. This time he knew where he was going, and what needed doing. In some ways it was a step into the past, letting him pick up and carry on where he left off. Only this time there was nothing standing in his way.

He pulled up his hood and made his way from the room with a strong stride. There was still much that had to be done, and it sounded like Endarien had finally relented in his assault.