

THE SPIRAL DILEMMA

BY CRAIG PETERS

Prologue

In the beginning, the boundless depths of the Universe were filled with nothing but the Gods.

The strongest of the Gods were the brother's Benef'en'en and Malic'en. They drifted through the stars with only each other for company. Although they were happy, they felt their minds growing stagnant. They longed for something new, something they had never seen before. They longed for something unexpected.

And so the brother's united. The product of this union was a world. They named this world Moure, and they were pleased.

The Gods loved their new world, and enjoyed filling it with plants and animals, mountains and valleys, rivers and seas, deserts and forests – but in time, they once again grew bored.

Something was missing from the world. Again they united, and from between them they created Maya, the first woman to walk the face of the world. She was a beautiful tanned woman, with round ears, a petite nose, and large brown eyes. Hair as black as the night sky hung around her statuesque face.

Maya lived alone on Moure, with only the plants and animals for company. She loved the Gods very much, and they loved her. The Gods were pleased.

The creation of Moure, and Maya, attracted the attention of other Gods. Kyl'en, a close friend of the brothers, became entranced by Maya. So enamoured was he that he took a piece of himself and gifted it to Maya. This gift was Magic. Maya treasured this gift, and found that with it she was able to prophesy the future. The Gods were excited, however her first prediction was not quite what the Gods expected.

Maya's first prediction was the death of the Gods themselves.

Though it was not for ten thousand years, she saw it quite clearly, and was certain that it would happen. She thought to warn her beloved creators, but instead they took it as a threat. Benef'en and Malic'en thought it heresy that Maya, their own creation, believed they could die *at all*. In their anger, they tried to destroy Maya, but the concept of mortality hadn't occurred to them yet. They had created Maya in their own image, and so she was unable to die even at the hands of the Gods themselves.

Instead, they cast her aside.

This saddened the other Gods. Kyl'en, Lami'en, and Prait'en were upset that Benef'en and Malic'en had abandoned such unique creations. Each of them took it upon themselves to create their own beings, using the form of Maya as a guide.

Kyl'en created the Orinar, with the eyes of a feline and the wisdom of ages.

Lami'en created the Pentan, with a strong sense of smell to detect the dangers around them.

Prait'en created the Ninori, with large ears to hear his voice clearly.

Each of them gave their creation one more gift – the ability to die. And so these new mortal races would grow, perish, be created anew, and grow once again, throughout all time.

They would spread throughout the world, and the God's were pleased.

Chapter One

College of Magic, Tavia

Woodrill Rivers had been teaching at the College of Magic in Tavia for a year and a half, and had spent seven years before that at Malachai Arcane University, yet every time he stood before Jilderon's office door he felt like a schoolboy about to meet the headmaster.

He knocked on the door and waited, cleaning his spectacles with the hem of his green robes. A part of him hoped that Jilderon wouldn't hear the knock, or that he wasn't in his office. When he heard the booming voice commanding him to enter, he sighed and opened the door.

Being the Head of the College, Jilderon had the biggest and most specious office in the faculty. It was an exquisite masterpiece of craftsmanship, with carved wooden panels adorning the walls, and bookshelves which looked as though the wood had somehow been coaxed to grow into that shape.

Woodrill's nose twitched as the warm sent of wood filled the room. At one end sat a large desk. As much as the room itself filled Woodrill with awe, the desk double amazed him. Carved leaves of intricate detail bordered the solid oak of the desk. If Woodrill didn't know better, he would have sworn the leaves had been turned into wood when the desk was made, rather than carved from it. On top of the desk and to one side stood a small bronze statue of Kyl'en, God of Magic and Patron God of the Orinar. Kyl'en was portrayed as a well-muscled man dressed in an open robe, with his large arms outstretched to the sky. Between his arms hovered a glowing sphere of light, illuminating the entire room.

Jilderon sat straight and tall behind the desk, and payed no attention as Woodrill crept into the room and took a seat. He was a stern-looking Orinar with an ever-present thin-lipped grimace that never seemed to leave his face. His dark, but grey flecked hair was always pulled back away from his face in a severe knot at the back of his head.

When Jilderon looked up, and stared at him, Woodrill stared back defiantly. Jilderon's bright green Orinar eyes were unnerving, with their vertical pupils – but Woodrill would be damned to Eternity before he let Jilderon see his discomfort. "You wanted to see me, Sir?" he said.

Jilderon nodded. "Indeed. Mr. Rivers, recently I have been filled with new doubt regarding the girl, Dilemma."

Woodrill's heart quickened, and once again he fought to maintain a calm exterior. Jilderon had been hesitant about Dilemma from the start. It had taken all of Woodrill's persuasive skills to convince the Head of the College of Magic to allow him to proceed with his tests. He was on the verge of proof. He had invested too much time in Dilemma, he couldn't afford to have Jilderon begin to doubt him now! Not when he was so close! "Doubt?" he said, trying to sound surprised. "How so?"

Jilderon spoke casually, as if he discussed the future of students with unnaturally strong skills in Magic every day. "Dilemma is a young woman that, I admit, shows great potential. However, it would be a great loss if one of your tests caused her to be killed."

Woodrill cleared his throat. "Jilderon, if I am correct in my theories, then it is well worth the risk. I must put her in danger to find out if she has the power I suspect. She must be pushed to the limits to show her true potential. If I am correct, then there is no danger to her at all."

Jilderon glared at him. "And if she does not? Mr. Rivers, I do not share your disregard for life! If Dilemma does not have the power you suspect, and dies as a result of one of your tests, then you will be held for murder!"

Woodrill jumped to his feet, nostrils flaring with infuriation. "Jilderon, you know how important this is! I've kept you informed every step of the way! If I am correct, then the ramifications will be felt all

over the United Empires, and beyond! Surely this is worth risking minor possibility of the death of one young woman!"

"Woodrill, sit down!" Jilderon commanded. "All life is sacred, whether it be powerful or powerless!"

Woodrill swallowed his anger, and sat down again. This was not the time for him to lose his head.

"Are you telling me to cease?"

Jilderon paused for a long, agonising moment before answering. "No. I simply wanted to make sure you were aware of the consequences if you are wrong."

Woodrill nodded and kept silent.

Jilderon leaned back in his chair, his fingers pressed together in an arch before his chest. "What have you found out about the girl so far?"

"Nothing yet. She seems adept at World Sorcery, but on an average level. Her ability with Alchemy was abysmal. I am now testing her prowess with Star Sorcery. My latest assignment should prove very fruitful."

"And what is your latest assignment?"

Woodrill took a deep breath before answering, bracing himself for the inevitable roar that would follow his reply. "The Time Spiral spell."

Jilderon glared at him, his eyes piercing into his heart. "We do *not* teach first year students the Time Spiral spell at my College! We do not teach it at all! It is far too dangerous, you know that!"

Woodrill nodded. This was it – the moment he'd practiced for over and over in the mirror. "Sir, I realise that our normal practice is to avoid the restricted spells, however I needed solid proof."

Dilemma's powers lie in the extraordinary, so I needed an extraordinary spell to test her with. I made sure not to attract too much attention. As far as anyone is aware, I assigned her the Time Freeze spell. It's high level, but not so unusual. However, I have provided her with the incantation for Time Spiral instead. When she reports back, I will inform her of my 'mistake'."

"And what if you are wrong?" Jilderon said. "What if she never reports back? The ramifications of a miscast Time Spiral can be catastrophic!"

"I am not wrong!" Jilderon insisted. "She is powerful, I know it. I just need the proof, and this spell will provide it."

Jilderon stared at Woodrill just long enough to pass the line into uncomfortable. "If that is all, I have work I must attend to. Please report the results of the Time Spiral spell to me *immediately*, as soon as you have them. If I have to interfere, i will have your head."

Woodrill had no doubt he was speaking literally. "Of course, Sir." He nodded, and left the office.

* * * * *

Chapter Two

Dilemma's Cottage, Tavia

With a canvas bag in one hand, a small wooden box in the other, and three scrolls balancing on top, Dilemma shouldered the door open and thrust her way into the cottage. As she dropped her things on the desk by the door, she shivered. The chill air wrapped around her like a wet cloak. She lit a candle, and the flicking light banished the sunset shadows.

She picked up her dark blue cloak from across the back of the chair. The thick wool of the cloak and white fur of the hem kept her warm despite the unnaturally freezing air in her home. She wrapped the cloak around herself, revelling in its warmth as she watched her breath form small white clouds when she exhaled.

Every white cloud her breath formed was yet another sign of her failure. It was the 8th day of Kyl'don, the Festival of the Sun was a week ago, and yet here she was shivering with cold, when outside it was swelteringly warm.

Dilemma knelt before the fireplace and picked up a short, thick log. She threw the log into the fire, and shouted as loud as she could, "*Reif fo het drowl, getini!*" The log burst into flame, and she warmed her numbing hands. The single log didn't heat the entire room as much as it warmed the area immediately in front of the fireplace, but that was enough for her.

Dilemma knew she wouldn't be able to study on an empty stomach, and went immediately to the kitchen. After loading up the wooden tray with a loaf of crusty bread and a chunk of smelly cheese, she carried them back to the desk and finally took a seat.

The knife was already here, she must have forgotten to put it away this morning. She cut a small wedge of cheese to set upon a thick slice of bread. With a large bite, she enjoyed its tangy sweetness for a few moments, before setting it aside and glancing with caution at the small wooden box to the right of the table.

She pulled the box towards her, eyeing the five small holes on top. Slowly she opened the lid and peered inside. A small brown mouse stared up at her and squeaked. She slammed the lid shut again. Dilemma had no love of mice or rats, and there was no need for the box to be open when the spell was cast anyway. At least she hoped so.

From the bookshelf to the right of the desk she pulled a large brown leather-bound tome and placed it on the desk in front of her. Her pride and joy, this was her well-loved personal spell book. She used it to record spells of interest, and spells she had learnt from her mentor – also noting any strange or uncommon side effects. With excitement she flicked through the pages until she came to the section on Star Sorcery. This part of her spell book had remained empty so far, but that would soon change.

She grabbed the scroll her mentor had issued to her, and copied it onto the page.

Spell Name: Time Freeze

Incantation: 'Het ripals fo imet veren dens.'

Description: This spell traps the target in a small bubble of time. The target is not aware of its predicament until the spell ends and they experience the phenomenon of missing time. In practice, this spell is used for defence, or escaping particularly annoying people.

If she could this spell correctly, the mouse would appear frozen like a statue until the spell wore off.

She hoped it was as simple as it sounded, she couldn't afford another failure on her record.

Last week, her assignment to make a Potion of Nothingness, which was intended to imbue the drinker with the substance of nothing, did nothing at all. One sip and she was still as solid as a plank, and

not see-through at all. It was quite ironic really. Disappointed with herself, she had thrown the remainder of the failed potion in the nearby creek.

The week before, when she had intended to cast the Icewind spell, her only success was making the inside of her cottage freezing cold – an effect she could have definitely lived without!

She hoped with all her heart that this spell would not add a third failure to her record.

Making sure to hold the box firmly, she conjured an image in her mind of the mouse remaining as still as a statue. She took a deep breath, and shouted, "*Het ripals fo imet veren dens!*"

She had expected a bright flash of light, some sparks, or at least a puff of smoke. Instead, there was nothing. No sign that her spell had succeeded or failed. With trepidation she opened the box.

The mouse twitched its nose up at her and squeaked happily.

Dilemma closed the box and sighed. Another failure. With three straight failures on her record, she was sure she wouldn't be allowed to continue her studies. But what would she do if she were asked to leave the College of Magic? For all her life, she had hoped and dreamed of becoming a Sorceress. If she lost that, she'd lose everything.

Dilemma consoled herself with the fact that she had a week to master the spell. She could try again tomorrow night, maybe she'd get lucky.

She picked up the knife once again and cut a small piece of cheese, popping it into the mouse's box before sliding it to the right, out of the way.

Yawning, she stood and put her spell book back into the bookcase. As she picked up the tray from the desk and headed towards the bedroom door, she was halted by a curious sensation. A tingling at the

back of her neck, like someone was standing close to her, breathing over her right shoulder. She spin on the spot, but the room was empty.

Dilemma shook her head and forced herself to laugh. It wasn't the first time her mind had run a way with her – and she knew it wouldn't be the last.

The glow of the sunset shone through the window, filling her bedroom with an golden glow. Dilemma sat on the side of her bed and placed the tray on her small side-table. Picking up a silver brush, she stared at her reflection in the mirror and began to brush her hair.

As the sun set, and the room darkened, Dilemma had no trouble seeing. Biologically she was a half-breed: Orinar/ Pentan, although he was Orinar in appearance. She had the Orinar/feline eyes (her's yellow), so she could see moderately well in the dark. However, she had none of the Pentan's powerful sense of smell.

As she glanced around her dark bedroom, she saw the candlelight reflected in the blade of the knife she had left on the desk. 'Everything must be in its place, before you take yours in bed' – if the Nun's had taught her anything during her childhood it was that.

She carried the tray into the living room, placed the knife upon it, then carried it back into the kitchen.

Back in the living room, she slipped off her cloak and returned it to the back of the chair the fire had warmed up the room quite nicely, and it was time to curl up in bed to read the next chapter of 'Ages of Earth'.

Before she could move, the door to her cottage rattled. She watched as the door opened and, to her horror, she saw herself enter the cottage. The woman was an exact copy: from her long blonde hair and pale blue dress, to the identical box and scrolls she was balancing in her arms.

"By the Gods!" Dilemma cursed, and took a fearful step backwards. She was unable to take her eyes off the stranger that looked so much like her, but the woman ignored her completely.

Watching herself spread her things onto the desk was a very perplexing experience. Dilemma was drawn to many small features she had never noticed before. Her face was long and her nose pointed, with slightly flared nostrils. Of particular fascination were her long fingers. Only now that she could see herself physically in front of her, attached to this other woman, did these features become apparent.

The woman approached the candelabra on the desk and stared at it for a moment. She seemed confused about something, but shrugged, and lit a second candle.

"Hello?" Dilemma called, but received no answer. Instead, the woman picked up Dilemma's dark blue cloak and wrapped it around herself. "Hey, that's my cloak! Take that off!"

The woman continued to ignore her as she knelt before the fireplace and placed a second log onto the fire. After shouting, "*Reif fo het drowl, getini!*" once again, the second log burst into flame. The cottage grew warmer around her."

"Don't waste my logs!" Dilemma snapped.

Next, the woman entered the kitchen, returning moments later with the food tray, and set it upon the desk.

Like a static shock, Dilemma shook with recognition. The woman was re-enacting Dilemma's own actions when she had entered the cottage earlier that evening! She'd gotten the bread and cheese, and now the woman was going to attempt to cast the Time Freeze spell!

Just as she predicted, the other Dilemma sat down at the desk and, after cutting a slice of cheese and bread, pulled the box towards her. She opened it, checked on the status of the mouse, then closed it again.

Dilemma watched eagerly as the woman took the spell book from the book shelf and turned to the section on Star Sorcery. When she found the Time Freeze spell already written there, she gasped.

"How could that be..." she heard her mutter to herself. Dilemma held her breath, awaiting the coming reaction at such inconsistency with her version of events, however the woman merely shrugged.

Dilemma found it hard to decide if she was horrified or fascinated by the situation. She couldn't take her eyes off the woman as she took a deep breath and yelled, "*Het ripals fo imet veren dens!*" Once again, nothing happened – although now Dilemma was wondering otherwise. She wasn't quite sure if she had accidentally taken herself back in time, or brought a past version of herself forward. But either way, it deserved further study.

Her fear now forgotten, she watched with fascination as the second Dilemma returned the spell book to the bookshelf. Dilemma noted that when the woman pushed the mouse box aside, it was *next* to the original box. She hadn't pushed it into the same position – for that matter, she'd also lit a second candle, and threw a second log into the fire. Dilemma hadn't done that.

She was thrust from her thoughts when the second Dilemma suddenly pushed her chair back. She scrambled to move out of the way as the woman stood and crossed the room. Dilemma grinned as an

idea formed in her mind. Silently she sneaked behind the woman and grabbed her shoulder, squeezing tightly. The woman was startled out of her mind, and whirled around in surprise.

"Can you see me?" Dilemma yelled loudly in her face. Just as she suspected, there was no reaction. Instead, the woman searched the room high and low for anything that could have caused such a peculiar feeling. Although the room was small, it was easy for Dilemma to stay out of reach.

When the woman gave up her search and entered the bedroom, Dilemma giggled. She'd just scared herself – this would indeed make for an interesting report.

As the second Dilemma entered the bedroom, Dilemma made to follow, but stopped short when she felt a familiar chill at the back of her neck. Just as she had earlier, she felt a strange presence, as though someone was watching her. She spun around, but the room was empty.

Dilemma grinned. "Hello? Are you there? It's so peculiar... I felt a chill, but there's nothing here at all!"

She reached wildly with her hands, but met with nothing.

With a quick glance in the bedroom, she noted the second Dilemma combing her hair. So while she was occupied, Dilemma decided to do some further investigation. Turning back towards the desk, she pulled both wooden boxes towards her. Opening them, she found the two mice were as identical as the two of herself. She closed the boxes and returned them to the right side of the table.

The glint of the candlelight in the knife's blade caught her eye. When she had first entered her cottage that evening, the knife had already been on the desk. Yet when the second Dilemma had entered, she had brought the knife in from the kitchen. She guessed that since she was the original, she had the power to change events for the other woman. With a chuckle, she decided to test that theory.

Dilemma picked up the food tray and carried into the kitchen.

When the second Dilemma came out of the bedroom, and stopped at the desk in shock, Dilemma watched eagerly. The second Dilemma looked all around the room, but couldn't find the bread, cheese and knife anywhere. Dilemma grinned.

The second Dilemma had just removed her cloak, and placed it over the back of the chair when the door rattled. Dilemma's smile faded as she left the kitchen. The two Dilemma's stared as the door swung open.

"By the Gods!" the second Dilemma exclaimed, taking a fearful step back.

"Oh... no..." To Dilemma's dismay, a third Dilemma had entered the room and placed a box and two scrolls on the edge of the table. Dilemma watched the second Dilemma watch this third Dilemma as she lit a third candle.

"Hello?" the second Dilemma called to the third, but the third ignored her. Instead, she picked up the cloak and wrapped it around herself.

"Hey, that's my cloak! Take that off!" the second Dilemma snapped to the third.

"Well, actually it's mine," she said.

Dilemma stood next to the second, watching the third kneel in front of the fireplace. As she threw a third log onto the fire, she shouted, and the log burst into flame. The cottage had never been so warm.

"Don't waste my logs!" Dilemma said in unison with the second. She moved out of the way as the third Dilemma entered the kitchen and returned with the food tray. As the third sat at the desk, the second watched her with a mixture of fear and wonder.

Remembering what would happen next, Dilemma stood to the right of the room, between the desk and the bookshelf. She would have a clear view of the action from this position, and not be in any danger of bumping into her other selves.

Dilemma watched the events replay themselves, feeling much like she was watching a play she used to star in herself. When the third Dilemma cast the spell, as she had seen twice before, nothing happened.

As the third Dilemma finished up, and moved to the bedroom, the second reached out and grabbed her shoulder. The third whirled around, quite shocked.

"Can you see me?" the second yelled loudly in the face of the third.

"Of course she can't, you mackard!" Dilemma replied with a grin. "But I can!"

The third Dilemma searched the room high and low, but of course found nothing. As she gave up her search and entered the bedroom, the second began to giggle.

Dilemma grinned, and sharply grabbed the shoulder of the second Dilemma. To her delight, the woman shrieked and spun around, totally surprised.

But as she knew, the second wasn't surprised for long. "Are you there? It's so peculiar... I felt a chill, but there's nothing here at all."

"Wrong, I am here!" Dilemma replied, waving in the woman's face. The second reached out to her, but Dilemma easily stepped back out of the way.

The second shrugged and began to watch the third comb her hair, but quickly grew bored of it. Dilemma rushed to the table as the second approached it. She leant over and pulled the third box closer,

as the second took hold of the first and second boxes. Together they opened all three boxes, and each identical mouse squeaked up at her in unison.

After returning the boxes to the right of the desk, Dilemma alternated between watching the second Dilemma hide the bread, cheese and knife, and the third Dilemma combing her hair.

After a few moments, the third Dilemma returned to the living room, surprised to find the desk empty. Dilemma could hear the second chuckling to herself as the third looked all over for the breadboard. She wondered at herself – such a simple thing had amused her so much.

The third had just taken off her cloak and placed it on the chair when she heard the ominous rattle. The second rushed into the room, and together they watched as the door swung open, and a fourth Dilemma entered the room.

"By the Gods!" shouted the third Dilemma.

"Oh... no..." exclaimed the second.

"Holy crap..." said the first. Dilemma staggered backwards as the true nature of her situation hit her like a runaway carriage. She was well and truly stuck, and if she didn't do something to stop it, she could be stuck here forever. How many copies of herself would fit inside her small cottage? What would happen when they reached breaking point?

Dilemma watched silently as the fourth Dilemma repeated the actions over again, exactly as the third and second had. When she entered the kitchen and returned with the food tray, a glint of white caught her eye. After the fourth had set the board upon the table, Dilemma picked up the knife. Her shock was so great she almost dropped it again – it was not a knife at all, but a dagger. Why hadn't she noticed this before? The silver dagger was long and thin, with mysterious symbols etched along the

shiny blade. The bone handle was elaborately designed with a roaring wolf's head perched on the end. This was a dagger, for thrusting into the chest of an enemy, but a knife meant for cutting bread and cheese.

And with that thought, she knew what she had to do.

Each time a new Dilemma came into the cottage, she would cast the spell, which would cause another loop to occur. This was all the spell did, cause one loop. If she were ever to get out of this, she needed to stop the fourth Dilemma from saying the spell.

But where had the dagger come from? It didn't belong to her, she'd never seen it before. How had it gotten inside her cottage? Daggers were for killing, they weren't kitchen utensils.

The second and third Dilemma were paying her no attention. Instead, they stared transfixed as the fourth Dilemma studied the spell book.

She heard the fourth take in a deep breath. Before she could change her mind, she stepped forward and plunged the dagger into the back of the fourth. It slid inside her smoothly, almost as though it guided her in. It didn't take long before she slumped over the table, dead. The handle gleamed a clean, bright white as it stood upright from the fourth Dilemma's back.

Dilemma froze, her mind a blur. She had never killed another person before, and her victim having her own face didn't help the matter any. She had taken the life away someone.

Although the act filled her with revulsion, she was more horrified at her own future. Did she just commit suicide? Would she now die? Did she have to kill the other two Dilemmas to finish it off?

Dilemma balked with disbelief as she saw the second and third looking straight at her.

"What have you done?" The second cried, incredulous.

"You killed her..." murmured the third. She shifted her gaze from the dead body of the fourth, to Dilemma herself. "You killed *me!*"

"It was the only way!" Dilemma pleaded. "I had to break the loop!"

The second shook her head in shock. "Yes, but to kill her?"

"You couldn't have pushed her over?" asked the third. "Or put your hand over her mouth?"

"There was no other way! The dagger... the dagger was here, it was a sign! If she had cast the spell again, there would have been a fifth! I couldn't allow that to happen..."

"But..." the third began.

"She's right," the second interrupted, staring at the dagger sticking out of the fourth's body. "This dagger doesn't belong here. It was put here to give us a way out."

The third nodded in understanding. "*Magic* always gives you a way out, so they say." She took a shuddering breath. "So, what happens now? What order do you two go in?"

"I'm the original Dilemma," she answered, and pointed to them. "She's the second, and you're the third."

The second Dilemma looked at her with curiosity. "How do you know you're the original?"

"That's right!" the third exclaimed. "There could be another Dilemma in a loop before you. You wouldn't even know it, we didn't!"

Dilemma was taken aback for a moment, but only a moment. "No, there can't be another one. I'd have felt something... another hand on my shoulder..."

"But can you be certain?" the third asked/

"No..." Dilemma was forced to admit. "I can't."

The second Dilemma let out a sudden gasp, and backed away from the desk. The body of the fourth Dilemma was slowly fading, and within the space of half a minute, had vanished completely. The dagger was left standing on its point, and clattered to the desk. The flame of the fourth candle disappeared, as if snuffed out by an invisible hand, and the fourth log on the fire somehow appeared back on the log holder, as if it had never been used.

The room grew ever so slightly darker and colder.

"What happened?" the third asked quietly.

"The loop is broken," Dilemma answered. "Time is resetting back to normal."

"But where did she go?" the second wondered aloud.

"Did she ever exist in the first place?" the third asked, echoing her own thoughts.

The three of them fell silent, the air between them thick with tension. Dilemma looked from the second to the third, and guessed that the same expression of fear they both wore was also on her own face.

After a few moments, the third Dilemma raised her hand to her face, examining it. She said nothing as she noticed herself fading away – she didn't need to say anything. Her extreme terror was quite evident. Dilemma reached out, but it was too late. She was gone.

"I don't want to die!" the second Dilemma suddenly shouted. "I don't want that to happen to me!"

"We don't have a choice!" Dilemma's heart was pounding loudly in her ears. She intimately knew the fear the second was feeling, for it was her own.

The second Dilemma's eyes lit up with hope. "Yes, we do! We can say the spell again! That'll do it! Then I won't die!"

The second turned towards the table, but Dilemma grabbed her hand, stopping her. "No, you can't do that. You know that."

The second turned back to her, with tears in her eyes. "But I want to live!"

"And you will live!" The tears in her own eyes echoed the second's. "You will live on inside me, just as the third and fourth will."

Dilemma pulled the second towards her, embracing her tightly. "You will exist within me forever!"

Sobbing, the second hugged Dilemma until her hands began to sing within her body. Pulling away, she stood quietly, her tears staining her cheeks. The second Dilemma closed her eyes as she vanished completely.

Now alone in her shadowy cottage, Dilemma stood very still and quiet. More tears hovered at the edge of her eyes, but would not come. A thought came unwanted to her mind – what if they were right? What if she wasn't the original?

Was she about to disappear too?

She shook with nerves. Gods! She wanted something to happen, anything to happen! She had to know if it was over!

Her heart leapt into her throat as she heard a faint rattling. She stared with dread as the handle of the front door turned. "This cannot be happening!" She whimpered to herself. "This is not happening again!"

She was filled with utter relief as a tall, burly man stepped into the room. "It's Keldis, Dilemma." The man announced. "I came to check if you needed more firewood, sorry for coming so late. I was... gosh are you alright?"

Dilemma rushed to Keldis, collapsing into the comforting embrace of the man's arms. The tears now flowed freely down her cheeks, tears of sadness and tears of relief. It was over, but at what price?

She had no doubt in her mind how real the other versions of herself had been. They may have been mere copies of herself, but they thought and felt real emotions to the very end.

And she had killed them.

* * * * *