
Loran's Smile

Jeff Grubb

From set *Commander (2014 Edition)*

27. 10. 2014

This short story originally ran in The Colors of Magic anthology published in 1999. It retells portions of the story of Antiquities, including the story of Feldon, who received his own legendary creature card in Commander (2014 Edition), previewed today in an article by Ethan Fleischer and Ian Duke. Ethan took a great deal of Feldon's design from this very story, so we thought we'd share it with you all.

Enjoy!

Loran died ten years after the devastation—after Urza and Mishra destroyed most of the world with their war, after the tumultuous explosion that eliminated Argoth and altered the rest of the world forever.

Loran died in part because of that devastation. She did not die in battle, for she was not a warrior. Nor did she die in a duel of magical forces, for though her lover Feldon had mastered the study of magic, she found she could not. She did not die of intrigue, or of passion, or of some fatal flaw.

She died in bed, weakened by wounds suffered over a decade previous—wounds inflicted by Ashnod the Uncaring, Mishra's assistant. She was weakened by the lengthening winters and the cold mountain air, weakened by her own great age, weakened, and eventually defeated, by the world that the brothers, Urza and Mishra, had created.

At first she just winded easily when in the garden or cooking, and Feldon would put aside his own work to help. Then she had trouble working in the garden at all, and Feldon did the best he could, under her direction, to substitute for her.

Later she could not work around the house, and Feldon brought in servants from the nearby town to aid. When she could not get out of bed, Feldon sat beside her and read to her, told her stories of his own youth, and listened to hers. After a time he had to feed her as well.

At length she died in bed in her sleep, Feldon sitting beside her, asleep as well from his long guardianship. When he awoke her flesh was cold and pale, and the breath had long-since left her body.

He commanded the servants to dig a grave behind the house, among the now weed-choked garden that Loran had begun with Feldon's grudging, grumbling aid shortly after they first arrived. She had kept it going through several seasons by sheer force of will, but when she took ill that last, final time, she had to surrender the garden to the weeds and the cold rains.

It was raining when they laid her to rest, wrapped in her bed sheets and sealed within a coffin of thick oak planks. Feldon and the servants uttered a few prayers, then the old mage watched as the servants methodically piled the dirt atop the lid. Feldon's tears were lost in the rain.

For days afterward Feldon stayed by the fire, and the servants brought him his meals, much as they had brought Loran hers. Feldon's library and workshop stood empty for the nonce, the books closed,

the forges cold, the various reagents and solutions settling quietly in their glass jars. He stared into the fire and sighed.

Feldon remembered: the touch of Loran's hand, the Argivian lilt to her voice, and her thick, dark hair. Most of all, he thought of the smile that she gave. It was a slightly sad, slightly knowing smile. It was a soft smile, and it warmed Feldon whenever he saw it.

Now, Feldon was a practitioner of the Third Path, the way that was neither Urza nor Mishra, charting a new course between the two warring brothers and their technological miracles. He could pull from his mind great magics, fueled by the memories of his mountain home, and work wonders with them. He could cause fire to appear or the land itself to shift or summon the strokes of a lightning storm and bend them to his will.

Yet he could not heal Loran's body or dying spirit. He could not keep the life within her. His magics had failed him and had failed his love.

The old man sighed and raised a hand toward the fire. He unlocked a part of his brain that held the memories of the mountains around them. He pulled the energies from those lands, as he learned to do in Terisia City with Drafna, Hurkyl, the archimandrite, and the other mages of the Ivory Towers. He concentrated, and the flames writhed as they rose from the logs, twisting upon themselves until they finally formed a soft smile.

Loran's smile. It was the most that he could do.

For five days and five nights Feldon sat by the fire, and for a brief time the servants wondered if they would soon have to tend the master as they had tended the mistress. Indeed, Feldon was never fully healthy himself, overweight and walking only with the aid of a silver cane he had rescued from the heart of a glacier. His dark beard was now streaked with silver, and the corners of his eyes drooped from grief and age. The servants wondered if he would ever rise from the fireside again.

On the sixth day, Feldon retreated from the hearth to his workshop. Soon afterwards a short note appeared for the servants—a list of items that they were to procure as soon as possible. The list called for thin sheets of copper, iron rivets, cords made of various spun metals, brass gears if they could get them, steel otherwise, glass blown into a variety of shapes (with illustrations and dimensions). And there was a letter to be delivered to a place far to the south and west.

For the next two months the workshop clattered. Feldon brought the forge to life, and the small anvil rang with ear-splitting blows. Fire was within the domain of mountain magics, and Feldon was its master. He could cause it to heat a precise location with the exact amount of heat needed merely by ordering it to do so. Such was the nature of the old mage's magic.

The wire arrived, and the gears (iron, not brass), sheets of copper, and some of bronze. The glass was sub-standard, and Feldon had to resort to teaching himself how to blow it to form the shapes he needed. More wire arrived, this new amount spun with horsehair to form thick, long cords like braids of human hair.

At the end of two months, Feldon looked at his work and shook his head. The joints were stiff, and the arms jutted in the wrong directions. The head was too large, and the hair looked like what it was: a collection of wire and horsehair. The eyes were little more than badly-crafted glass spheres. It was too tall at the shoulders and too large in the hips.

The creation looked nothing like Loran. Only around the mouth, where there was the ghost of a smile, came the hint of a memory.

Feldon shook his head, and thick tears gathered at the corners of his eyes. He took a sledge and knocked the automaton to pieces.

And he began again.

He pored over Loran's journals in the library. She had studied with Urza himself and knew something of artifice. He restrung the wires and ligatures through the arms and legs, building first miniature models, then full-fledged mock-ups before proceeding to the final version. He worked in animal bone and wood as well as metal and stone. His glasswork became better, so he could provide a glass eye for an old woman in the village that matched her good one. Slowly he built the automaton in the shape of Loran, sculpting her out of myriad materials.

After six months she was finished. The statue missed only the heart. Feldon waited patiently for that organ to appear. He spent his days in the workshop, polishing, testing, and rebuilding the automaton. When he first met Loran, she had use of both arms. Later she lost the use of one of them, crippled by Ashnod. He went back and forth, removing and replacing the arm. Finally he restored the statue to its complete state.

A month later a package arrived from a place far to the south and west, from a scholar whom Loran and Feldon had known when they were at Terisia City, at the Ivory Towers. The package contained a small chip of a crystal, glowing softly—a powerstone, the heart of artifice. There were fewer and fewer stones of this type in the years since the devastation, but this was one.

The package contained a note as well, signed by Drafna, master of the School of Lat-Nam. It said simply, "I understand."

Feldon held the powerstone and noticed that his fingers were trembling. Cradling the crystal in both hands, he went to the automaton, standing guard in the center of the workshop. He had placed the bracket for the crystal where the heart would be in a living woman. Feldon set the crystal within its framework, and closed the compartment door. He reached behind the automaton's left ear and touched a small switch.

The automaton jerked to life like a puppet whose strings had suddenly been pulled. Its head shook then cocked slightly to one side. One leg tensed, the other relaxed. One shoulder dipped slightly.

Feldon nodded and raised a hand, pointing to the far side of the room. The automaton in the shape of Loran walked gingerly, like a woman finding her land legs after a long sea voyage. By the time she had reached the end of the workshop she was walking normally. She reached the opposite side, turned, and walked back.

She smiled, hidden wires rippling the lips over ivory teeth. The smile was perfect.

Feldon smiled back, the first time he had truly smiled since Loran had left him.

Every day the automaton stood patiently in his workshop. He talked to it but had to point to command it. For the first month it was enough.

But it was silent, save for the high-pitched whirring of gears and wire spooling and unspooling. At first Feldon thought he could live with it, but after the first month it became an irritant. After the second it was insufferable. The silence, its metallic lips crafted into that perfect smile, was more than he could bear. It seemed to mock him, to taunt him.

He asked it questions, then reprimanded himself for he knew it could not answer. The Loran he had built was a creature of copper skin and geared muscles. It was not the woman he had loved.

At last he reached behind her ear and touched the small toggle, deactivating her. She stiffened as the power left her, though the smile remained on her lips. He removed the powerstone from her heart, set the stone on the shelf, and placed the inactive automaton in the garden standing guard over Loran's grave. Within a week the steel gears had rusted solid, locking it forever in its stance, its glass eyes seeing but not recording the world around it.

In the week that followed Feldon returned to the fireside, staring into the flickering flames as if they held some secret. At the end of the week, under a cold rain, he departed, leaving his servants to keep up the house in his absence. He left the town in a small wagon, heading eastwards into the lands most affected by the devastation of the Brothers' War.

As he traveled, he asked questions. Did anyone know of mages, of spellcasters, of individuals with wondrous power? Before the destruction of the Ivory Towers, there had been many who had explored the paths of magic, but they had been scattered when Terisia City had fallen. Surely some survived, somewhere.

He asked merchants and mendicants, farmers and priests. Some looked at him as if he were mad, and some were frightened, terrified that he was seeking to bring back the powers that created the devastation in the first place. But enough understood what he was looking for, and of those a few knew of this wise man or that shaman who walked the Third Path. In time he heard of the Hedge Wizard, and he turned his wagon to the east.

He found the Hedge Wizard near the wreckage that had been Sarinth, one of the great cities that had resisted Mishra and was destroyed for its sin. Most of the great forests of that land had been later lumbered and its mountains stripped to feed the war machines of the brothers' battles. Now it was a barren landscape, its soil runneled and ravined by eternal rain. What forests that survived were overrun by a tangle of briars and young trees.

In one of those briar-choked shambles Feldon found a hermit. The man had defended his patch of ground from Mishra's armies, and the strain had nearly broken both his mind and his spirit. He was a hunched figure, bent nearly double with age, with a drooling grin and a cackling laugh.

Feldon approached him with open hands, showing he was weaponless. The hermit had heard of the Council of Mages at Terisia City and had known of Feldon's name among them. He laughed and capered and allowed Feldon to come within his forest, to study the hermit's magics.

Feldon offered to teach the hermit his own spells in return, but the hunched madman would have nothing to do with the mountains or their power. Instead, he taught Feldon of the woods, and they crossed and re-crossed his small domain, which he had so laboriously held against all invaders. Over the course of the next month Feldon felt he knew the land as well as the old hermit. They spoke of many things—of plants, of trees, and of the seasons. The hermit felt the world was getting colder beyond his borders, and Feldon agreed. It seemed to him that the glaciers of his home were swelling slightly with every passing year.

Finally, they spoke of magic. Feldon showed his power, summoning images from the flames of birds, mythical dragons, and, finally, a simple, knowing smile. When Feldon had finished, the hermit cackled and nodded.

The madman stood, arms folded in front of him. Feldon started to say something, but the hermit held up a hand to quiet him. For a moment there was silence in the forest.

Then there was a noise, or rather, a sensation, a rumble that pounded through the ground and into Feldon's bones. The ground quaked beneath his feet, and the campfire collapsed in on itself from the shuddering ground. Feldon cried out despite himself, but the hermit did not move.

Then the worm appeared. It was a great, ancient creature, as large as one of Mishra's dragon engines of old. Its scales were golden and green, and it had baleful, red eyes that glimmered in the dark. It loomed above them for an instant, and was gone. A wall of scales surged past them—the worm's elongated body hurtling before them. After a long time, the worm's whiplike tail spun out, smashing the trees like a line pulled from a runaway wagon.

The ground stopped shaking. The old hermit turned and bowed deeply. Feldon returned the bow and understood how the ancient mage had kept this patch of forest for all these years.

Carefully, Feldon outlined his problem: He had lost someone dear to him, and his own magics lacked the power to restore her. Did the power of the hermit hold more?

The old hermit rocked back on his heels and grinned.

"Is this one who is dear still alive?" he asked.

Feldon shook his head, and the hermit's grin faded. He, too, shook his head.

"I can only summon the living—that is the power of the growing briar. But perhaps I can send you to someone who might have the power you seek."

Feldon left the hermit's forest the next morning, heading north.

Ronom Lake bordered the lands of Sarinth, and the lake had fared as badly as the land. Where once there were expanses of white beach now only leprous gray moss flourished, and the lake itself was little more than wide expanses of stagnant, oily water broken by pungent algae blooms in greasy shades of green and red. Feldon guided his small wagon along the perimeter of the lake. The hermit said he would recognize the signs when he reached the domain of the sorceress who ruled part of the shore.

Indeed he did. The gray moss began to fade and at last retreated fully, leaving only a cascade of white sand as pure as any Feldon had seen. It was broken at the shore by a thin line of rounded black stones, themselves smoothed by the rolling surf. Feldon took a deep breath and smelled the fresh spray, without a tinge of musty fog.

He found her at the foot of a crystalline waterfall, in a small pavilion that seemed to be spun from golden threads. She was taller than he, dressed in a shimmering robe that looked like a translucent rainbow. She granted him an audience as muscular servants brought a simple meal of cheese and dried apples. The provender seemed insufficient for such opulent surroundings, but Feldon said nothing and accepted the sorceress's hospitality.

She asked him his quest, and he told her: He sought to regain a love that had been lost. She nodded, and a tight smile appeared on her face.

"Such matters have a price," she said.

Feldon bowed his head and asked her to name the price.

"Stories," she said. "You must tell me the stories of Loran, so I may better grant your wish."

Slowly, Feldon began to tell the tale. He recounted what he knew of Loran from her own tales and her journals—of her life in the far east, in the distant land of Argive, of her early life with the brothers, and how she eventually rejected their war to seek another path. He spoke of how she came to Terisia City and joined a band of scholars looking for that path—scholars that included Feldon.

He stumbled a few times, but the sorceress said nothing. He told of how the two met, how they studied together, and how they had fallen in love. He explained how they had separated when Mishra attacked their city and what had happened to Loran at Ashnod's hands. She seemed to heal slowly in their time together before spiraling downward into her eventual death.

As he spoke, he halted fewer times, and his mind was alive with her memory. He recalled her black hair, her lithe figure, her touch, and her smile—always that knowing smile.

He spoke of how she had died, and what he had done afterward. He recounted his construction of the automaton and his trip to the hermit and now his visit to her.

As he spoke, he forgot the sorceress was there. Loran was alive for him.

At last he came to the end of the tale and looked at the enchantress. Her face was impassive, but a single tear trickled down her cheek.

"I rule in the sea and sky," she said, "much as you rule in the mountains, and the hermit the growing vegetation. You have paid my price with a story. Now let me see what I can do."

She shut her eyes, and for a moment, it seemed that outside the golden pavilion the sun passed behind a cloud. Then it brightened again, and Loran stood before Feldon.

She was young again, and whole, her black hair shimmering like a dark waterfall. She smiled that knowing, secretive smile she always had for him. Feldon rose and reached out to embrace her.

His hands passed through her like smoke.

The relief in his heart was replaced with fire, and he turned toward the sorceress. She had risen from her divan now and held up her hands as if to ward off a blow.

"She isn't real," cried Feldon, spitting out the words.

"I rule in the blue," said the sorceress, "and blue is the stuff of air and water, of mind and imagination. I cannot bring back that which is gone, only create its image. If you want her truly back, you must seek another."

"Who is this other?" asked Feldon, and the sorceress hesitated.

Again, Feldon asked, "Who is this other?"

The sorceress looked at him with cold crystalline eyes.

"There is a swamp farther north. He who lives there rules in the black. He can bring back what you seek. But be warned"—and here her voice softened—"his price is higher than mine."

And another tear appeared on the sorceress's cheek.

Feldon bowed, and the enchantress offered him her hand, which the old man kissed. While the sorceress's flesh appeared young and supple, to Feldon's lips it felt leathery and ancient. He re-boarded his wagon and continued.

A short distance beyond the golden pavilion, he dismounted on the pristine white beach and felt the ground. It looked like pure white sand but felt like rocks covered with gray moss.

Feldon gave an understanding grunt and set out for the swamp.

Here along the northern border of Ronom Lake there had been a village, but the land of the village had settled, or the lake had risen, so that it was nothing more than a collection of buildings rotting in a

ruined swamp. Great dark birds hovered through the arch-rooted trees. No, Feldon corrected himself. Bats. They were bats, which no longer feared the light in this land of eternal gloom.

The village had a rough, rotting palisade, little more than a collection of sharpened logs driven into the muck. The guards at the gate were sallow, hollow-eyed men dressed in tattered armor. They threatened Feldon with capture, but he summoned fire in a great wall between him and them. After the guards stepped back from the flames, and after a quick consultation with each other, they chose to escort Feldon to their master.

Their master was an aged spider of a man who received his visitors on a throne carved from a gigantic skull. Feldon thought briefly of the great worm that the green hermit had summoned, and wondered if the fleshless skull before him was of the same type. The ruler of the swamp was short, pot-bellied, and bald, and slouched in a corner of the throne as Feldon explained his quest. He had lost someone dear, said Feldon, and was told that the master could find a way to return her.

The man gave a watery, choking laugh. "I am the master of black magics, redling," he said. "I know the powers of life and death. Are you willing to pay my price?"

"And your price is?" asked Feldon.

The master stroked his hairless chin. "I want your walking stick."

Feldon gripped his silver cane tightly. "I cannot part with it. I pulled it from a glacier many years ago. It is like a part of me."

"Ah," said the master, "and your love is such a pale, insubstantial thing that you cannot part with a hunk of metal for it."

Feldon looked at the twisted spider of a man, and then at his rune-carved cane. He held it out. "Your price is met."

"Excellent," hissed the master of the swamp, taking the cane. "Let us begin."

For three days and three nights Feldon studied at the feet of the master. He memorized the marshes around the village, and felt the thick, viscous pull of the land in his mind. It was very different than the cold, clear mountains that he normally used. It left him feeling soiled and unclean.

At the end of the third day the hollow-eyed guards escorted Feldon to a small, windowless hut at the edge of the village, just within the walls of the palisade. Here Feldon worked the spell that the master of the swamp gave him.

In the light of a single tallow candle, Feldon cleared his mind and meditated. Normally he would think of the mountains, but now he thought of the bogs around him. He felt their watery pull, sucking him down, embracing him with their power. He spoke the words of the spell and called forth Loran.

The candle flickered for a moment, scattering Feldon's shadow behind him on the wall. Far above him, the wind coursed through the mangrove branches and sounded as if the lake itself had built a great wave to swallow the village. Everything grew quiet.

There was the sound of footsteps outside.

They moved slowly and ploddingly, the thick mud pulling at heavy feet as the sound approached. It was the sound of a figure staggering and sloshing through the muck. For a moment Feldon's heart leaped. Had he succeeded?

Something heavy and wet thumped against the door, sounding like a bag of wet earth. Slowly Feldon pulled himself to his feet (he no longer had his cane) and shuffled to the door.

The door gave another sloshing thud and then another, as Feldon reached it and grasped the knob. The stench hit him. It was a moldering, heavy smell, of rotted flesh and damp earth. It was the smell of death.

Feldon's heart sank as he realized what he had done with the master of the swamp's spell.

There was another thump, and the door shifted, but Feldon was leaning against it now, seeking now to keep whatever was on the far side out. He did not want to see if the spell had succeeded. He did not want to know.

There was another thud and a gurgling cry that sounded like sloshing water. Feldon's heart shattered as he reached inside himself and willed the spell to end, to send whatever was beyond the door back where it had come from.

The smell of death was gone, and with it the sounds. Feldon stayed pressed against the door, holding it shut with all his might, until morning.

When morning came, he slowly opened the door. There were no footprints in the muck outside the door. Indeed, the entire village had been abandoned. There were no hollow-eyed guards, no master of the swamp.

Nothing called his name in a gurgling voice like sloshing water.

Feldon staggered to his wagon, pausing only to use a piece of black driftwood as a makeshift walking stick. He did not look back.

In time, as he traveled, the ground began to rise, and dry. He had circumnavigated the lake now, and all that was left was to return home.

He dreaded that, for fear of what he would find in the garden.

He was three days from his village when he heard of the scholar in a small town further west. Propelled in part by curiosity, in part by dread, Feldon turned his wagon westward. He found the scholar in the musty remains of a temple library. The building had been shattered long ago by an earthquake, and the snows and rains had rotted most of the books. Yet among the tattered remains of books and scrolls, the scholar hopped like a bird-shaped automaton. He was a spindly thing and regarded Feldon from behind thick lenses of crystal.

Feldon spoke of his tale—of his loss, of his resolve to regain what he had lost. He told of the hermit, the sorceress, and the master of the swamp. And when he finished his story, the scholar blinked at him behind heavy lenses.

"What do you want?" he said at last.

Feldon let out an exasperated sigh. "I want to have Loran back. If magic can do everything, why can it not do this?"

"Of course it can do this," said the scholar. "The question is—do you want it to?"

Now it was Feldon's turn to blink, and the scholar gave a thin, amused smile.

"Green calls to the living," he said. "Black calls to the dead. Blue creates the shadow of life. Red consumes, and that's very important as well, because you must often destroy before you can build. I study, and the magic I wield is White, which is the magic of comprehension and understanding."

"Can you bring her back to life?" asked Feldon, his voice catching. The memory of the swamp was still with him.

"No, I can't," said the scholar, and, despite himself, Feldon sighed in relief. "But I can help you to create an exact duplicate."

"I tried that with the automaton," said Feldon.

"I speak of a creation not of gears and wires but of magic," replied the scholar, "identical in every way."

"I don't understand," said Feldon.

"When you cast a spell using fire," explained the scholar, "I believe you do not create fire. Rather you take the magical energy and form it into the shape of fire, which then does your bidding. It is for all intents and purposes fire, but it is made of magic."

"But what about when I use fire," asked Feldon, "or when the hermit calls a great worm?"

The scholar waved his hand, "Different uses for the same tools. Yes, in those cases it is a real fire and a real worm, but the magic alters it. For the moment, assume that you can create something made of magical energy."

Feldon thought about it and nodded slowly.

"So if you study an object, you can create the object over time," said the scholar.

Again, Feldon nodded.

"If you study me," he said, "you would be studying that which makes me a scholar. Therefore you could call at a later time that part of me which is my scholarliness and rely on its advice."

Feldon shook his head. "I'm not sure I understand," he said.

"Study me for two weeks," said the scholar, "and then see if you understand. Don't talk to me. Just bring me my meals. Two weeks. That's my price. That, and later you'll have to let me and other scholars into your library. Is it a bargain?"

For the next two weeks Feldon brought the scholar his meals, in much the same way as he had brought Loran hers when she was bedridden. Feldon used his magic to keep a small flame going and to cook for the scholar as he pawed through the rotting texts and decaying scrolls of the ruined temple.

For the first two days the scholar seemed little more than an amusing bird, hopping from one location to another. But soon Feldon noticed there was method to the madness, that there was intent behind each of the scholar's movements. He began to see how the man thought and knew. Through it all the scholar ignored him, save at meal times.

At the end of the two weeks the little man turned to Feldon and said, "Summon me."

Feldon shook his head. "Pardon?" he asked.

"You have watched me for two weeks," said the scholar. "Now see if you can use your magics to bring me into being."

Feldon blinked. "But you're already here."

"So bring another me," said the scholar. "You've got the power. Use it."

Feldon took a deep breath and called upon the powers of the land. He thought of the nervous scholar in his thick spectacles, rummaging relentlessly through the decaying paper and rotting vellum. He tried to call a being that summed up the nature of the creature in one place.

There was a pause, and then an identical duplicate of the scholar appeared.

No, not identical. It was taller, and its flesh had a ruddier hue. But it was thin and nervous and had thick spectacles and a knowing manner.

The scholar (the real one), walked up to the created being and looked over his glasses at it. The duplicate did the same.

Feldon was amazed. "Is it real?" he choked out at last.

The scholar reached out and touched the quasiduplicate, and the duplicate touched back. "Feels like it," said the scholar. "A lot of the little details are wrong, but you aren't just summoning me. You're summoning the essence of my me-ness as a scholar. You can keep this me around by keeping that part of your mind aware of me, but it isn't. Me, that is."

Feldon worked his way around the scholar's thinking process. "But what can I do with this—you."

"What you would expect a scholar to do," returned the bespectacled man, "research, investigate, know certain things." In a slightly more excited voice he added, "but I wouldn't know anything about fighting or lands I had never visited or anything like that. It would be beyond my nature as a scholar."

"And I could do the same with... Loran?" asked Feldon.

Both scholars nodded. Feldon found the duplication unnerving and dismissed the part of the spell that held the magical scholar in place. He faded from view like snow in the rain.

"You can summon your lost love back," said the scholar, "if that's what you truly want."

Feldon thought about the scholar's words on the way back to his home, the wagon shuddering through the deep ruts in the road. It was raining again by the time he returned, and the servants had kindled a fire in the hearth. Before he entered the house, he checked Loran's grave, beneath the inert, rusting form of the automaton. The earth was undisturbed, and that made him feel slightly better.

He thanked the servants and retreated to his workshop. There, among the tables draped with cloth and the reagents settled into multicolored layers in their beakers, he allowed himself to remember.

He remembered Loran. Not just the feel of her touch or the way her hair moved like a dark waterfall. He remembered her: when she was happy, when she was angry, when she was gardening.

When she was dying.

Feldon thought of Loran and the life she spent with him, of the tales of her youth, of their work and lives together. The joy of life with her and the sadness of her departure felt like a great bubble rising within him. He fed his memories of the land into that bubble, memories of the mountains, the forests and shore, the swamps and the temple, and he filled it with power and life.

When Feldon opened his eyes, Loran was there. She was perfect and whole and as young as when he first met her at the gates of Terisia City.

She gave him a knowing smile and said, "Why am I here?"

"You died," said Feldon, his voice choking as he spoke.

She nodded and said, "I seem to remember that. Why am I here?"

"You're here because I missed you," said Feldon.

"I missed you as well," replied the spell-Loran, and she reached out to him.

Despite himself, Feldon shrank from her embrace. She paused, then asked, "What's wrong?"

"You're not her," he said at last.

"No, I am not," she said, her voice in the lilting Argivian accent he remembered. "We both know that, and you know that I could be nothing less than what you remember of her. You remember her as being honest and strong. I am the sum of her, taken through your feelings. I am what you remember."

"You are memories," sighed Feldon, "and though you are pleasant memories, I must leave you as memories. If you are here, you are no more than the automaton in the garden—un-living, an imitation of what was. I'm sorry. I went to so much trouble to bring you about, but I know that I cannot keep you."

"Then why am I here?" she said.

"You are here," said Feldon, taking a deep breath, "so that I can say good-bye."

The spell-Loran paused, then smiled slightly. "I understand," she said at last.

Feldon crossed to her and embraced her. She felt very much like Loran as he had known her. All that was Loran in his memories was encased in the spell-creature he had created.

When they parted, there were tears in both of their eyes.

"Good-bye," he said, his voice thick with emotion.

"Good-bye," she replied.

Feldon allowed the spell to elapse, and the form of Loran began to dissolve.

"I understand," he said to her vanishing form. "At last, I think I understand."

All that was left was a knowing, soft smile. Then that was gone as well.

Feldon returned to the work in his library and workshop, taking up small matters that had been abandoned ages ago. In a few weeks, the scholar appeared at Feldon's doorstep and was amused to see that save for the servants, Feldon was alone.

After a meal the birdlike scholar asked, "What became of your lost love?"

"She was lost," said Feldon with a deep sigh, "and it was beyond my power to bring her back. It was beyond my desire. But I had a chance to say good-bye."

"That is what you truly wanted?" asked the scholar.

"That is what I truly wanted," said Feldon.

The scholar spent three weeks in Feldon's library and then left, but he promised to send interested students to the grizzled man's home. Every so often, some would-be scholar or mage would appear, and Feldon, remembering his promise, would let the wizard go through the library. Over dinner he would tell his own story of what he had learned about magic.

Sometimes the aspiring mage would listen politely, sometimes intently. Occasionally, after everyone had gone to bed, a mage would creep down and find Feldon sitting by the fire. The flames twisted into the form of a smile, a soft and knowing smile.

And Feldon, the ancient wizard, seemed to be content.



Feldon of the Third Path | Art by Chase Stone