

JASON COSMO™

Hero Wanted

Dan McGirt

For Loyal Readers everywhere ...

Hero Wanted

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Chapter 1

The arrival of the stranger was quite a shock. He strode into the Festering Wart tavern like an insult, stopping in the middle of the common room with his hands on his hips and arrogance on his face. All the village men were there that spring evening, drinking warm rutabaga beer and gossiping about the recent rash of mottled pig pox going around. We ceased our talk to stare at the new arrival in sullen, suspicious silence. The only sound was the sputtering of the smoky pig fat lanterns hanging from the dangerously bowed rafters.

My humble village of Lower Hicksnittle, on the northernmost fringe of the backward Kingdom of Darnk, was as isolated and uneventful a place as could be found. Hicksnitters plodded thickly through life, considering anything beyond the edges of our rocky turnip fields to be alien, hostile, and ultimately unimportant. We knew little of events elsewhere in the Eleven Kingdoms, for travelers from the south were rare. To the north lay endless leagues of empty wasteland and the black wall of a distant, unexplored mountain range. Hence our amazement when the stranger appeared in our midst.

He was thin and pale and outlandishly dressed. His peach-hued pants were too tight, his white blouse too ruffled, his jeweled codpiece too much. The bobbing yellow plume on his wide-brimmed felt hat was too long, the golden curls of his hair too dainty. We Hicksnitters favored drab, ill-fitting garments woven of mudflax and cottonweed. We cropped our hair short and bathed irregularly, if at all.

His dress was one strike against him. The sword at his belt was another. A man with a sword was trouble.

“I am Lombardo of Calador,” he said, wrinkling his nose against the stench. Strong men had died from inhaling too deeply of the Festering Wart’s foul, damp, spore-laden air. Their bones still lay scattered in the filth on the floor, for in Darnk it was our custom to leave the dead wherever they happened to fall.

“Many call me Lombardo the Magnificent,” Lombardo continued. He paused expectantly. We made no response. He seemed amazed that we did not recognize his name. “I have come to your quaint village, good peasants, seeking a man with whom I have business. His name is Jason Cosmo.”

I jumped in my seat. The others turned to glare at me, holding me to blame for Lombardo’s intrusion into our world. Lombardo approached my table. As he came near, a cloying perfume assailed my nostrils, even through the overpowering odors of the Festering Wart. Farmer Ames and Burlo Stumproot, my drinking partners, held their noses. I held my breath and met Lombardo’s gaze.

“You, sirrah!” said Lombardo, jabbing a kid-gloved finger at my face. “Do you know where I may find the one I seek?”

“I’m Jason Cosmo,” I said. “What do you want with me?”

“Ah! What do I want, you ask? Your head, dog! Your head in a sack, tied to my saddle.”

“You’re joking.”

“Think you so?” I looked up into his pale blue eyes, cruel as hooks. He wasn’t joking.

“There must be some mistake.”

“There is no mistake.” He tapped the hilt of his sword. “Stand you up!”

“I’ll sit, thank you.”

“I said stand, dog!” He whipped a slender rapier from his scabbard and pressed the point against my throat. I looked to my fellow Hicksnitters for support. They all took a sudden absorbing interest in their grubby fingernails.

I stood. Lombardo’s blade flexed slightly as the point rested atop my sternum.

“Listen, I’ve paid my taxes and—”

“Silence!” he hissed. Lombardo raised his voice. “Good villagers! This man who dwells among you is

not, in truth, a man!" He paused for dramatic effect. "He is a demon in human form!"

The Hicksnitters gasped in horror. Burlo and Ames left my table, taking their beer mugs with them. "I always knew there was something strange about him," said Ames. "Always a-readin' them books." Burlo nodded. "Yup. A normal man don't have use for no books, just pigs and turnips. Even so, who'd have thought Jason was a demon in human form?"

"He did seem like a nice fella. Just goes to show."

The other men averred themselves to be equally shocked by this revelation.

"I'm not a demon!" I protested.

"He lies!" said Lombardo. "Think on it! Have not your crops failed, your livestock sickened, your children disobeyed, your wives nagged you?" The wide-eyed villagers nodded assent to these propositions. Lombardo jabbed at me with the rapier. Evading it, I stumbled backward over the bench and tumbled to the floor. "There is the cause! He poses as one of you even as he casts vile enchantments over all you hold dear!"

"It is a terrible thing," said Ames wisely, "when a man casts vile enchantments over all his neighbors hold dear."

"True," said Burlo. "Of course Jason ain't a man no more. He's a demon in human form."

This was getting out of hand. I regained my feet. Lombardo kept his sword extended in my direction, but the point no longer reached me and the table remained between us. He made no move to close the gap.

"You've known me all my life!" I said. "I was born here! I'm a farmer like you, a Hicksnitter, a proud son of dismal Darnk!"

"Precious little farmin' I seen you do," said Farmer Godfrey, squinting at me from his seat across the room. "Your turnip patch is half the size of any other man's."

"Because I'm also the village woodcutter! You know that! I cut the firewood that keeps you warm through the cold Darnkish winter. I supply the lumber for your proud shacks. As did my father before me, and his father before him."

"What about the books?" said Ames. "Evil things, books. Full of black magic."

"They are not!"

"You say. How do we know you haven't got a book spell for calling up the mottled pig pox, huh?" The others grumbled darkly at this suggestion. Lombardo merely smirked.

"If you would learn to read, you could see for yourself that I don't."

"No point in it," said Ames. He spat. "Reading is bad business through and through."

"There is nothing sinister about reading! My dear, departed mother taught me, The Gods rest her soul."

"Your mother was from Parts Unknown," said Godfrey. "That means she was a witch. That means you're at least half witch, even if you're not a demon."

"Take that back, Godfrey, or I'll brain you! No one speaks ill of my mother!"

Janna Cosmo was no witch, but the runaway daughter of a minor landholder in Brythalia, the kingdom south of Darnk. Fleeing a danger she never fully revealed, at least not to me, she braved the wilderness alone and found her way to Lower Hicksnittle, where she married my father, Jolan. Strong-willed, educated, and exquisitely beautiful, she was never fully accepted by the Hicksnitters, especially the spiteful village wives who envied her looks and grace and frowned on her foreign ways. Those ways included educating me in what she considered a fitting manner. I knew more about history, geography, mathematics, and other such matters than the rest of the village combined. True, I had little use for such knowledge, but I was grateful nonetheless for my mother's gift of it.

I started for Godfrey, but stopped short as Lombardo turned my angry words against me. "Fear not his threats, Goodman Godfrey," he said loftily. "I shall protect you from this demonic witchspawn!"

This was too much to bear. "Don't listen to this peacock! Maybe he's the demon!" I pointed an accusing finger at the swordsman.

"Good point," said Farmer Derbo. "It's for sure that prettified fellow ain't from around here. He must be...a Dimned Foreigner!"

The crowd gasped at this stunning revelation. I relaxed a little. Instinctive rural xenophobia would preserve me, for a Dimned Foreigner was as bad as a demon in the Hicksnittler's view. Lombardo's predatory smile undermined my confidence. "Good squires!" he cried, promoting us several ranks in the social hierarchy. "Do you hear how the demon betrays himself? He admits there is indeed a demon present, but seeks to deceive you into believing it is me because I am the one who exposed him to you. But if I were a demon, would I expose a fellow demon? I would not! Therefore, I am not a demon! Therefore, he is a demon!" He raised his sword in triumph. The Hicksnitters considered his argument and found it sound. They scrambled away from the tables and backed against the far wall, making religious signs and averting their eyes from me. "Wait a minute!" I said. "What kind of nonsense is that? Burlo! Ames! Guys! Think about it!" But Lombardo had won his case. Logical reasoning was never a big part of the Darnkite national character.

"You will deceive them no longer, foul demon!" said the swordsman, taking a deliberate step forward.

I was on my own. I upended the heavy wooden table and sent Lombardo sprawling. As he hit the floor I raced across the common room and out the back door.

Strong arms snaked around me as I stepped outside. It hadn't occurred to me that Lombardo might have help. His lurking ally hurled me roughly to the muddy ground. I saw him framed in the spillage of light from the doorway—a squat, hulking man with arms like fence posts. He flashed a gap-toothed grin and dove atop me, knocking the breath from my lungs. We rolled and grappled, wrestling for advantage. He was exceptionally strong, but so was I, my muscles lean and hard from years of swinging an axe and dragging fallen trees.

Lombardo appeared. He sheathed his sword with an arrogant chuckle. "Guido will make short work of you, Cosmo. He wrestled bears before entering my service."

I believed it. Guido forced my arm into a position it wasn't meant to assume. I slammed my knee hard between his legs, but to no visible effect. Maybe he was a eunuch. The henchman countered by sinking his teeth into my shoulder while attempting to pull the lower half of my face away from the upper half. Twisting my head out of his grip, I got a knee against his chest and shoved him off me. He took a mouthful of shoulder with him. I sprang to my feet.

Lombardo drew his sword and danced forward, whipping the blade back and forth. I backed away, trying to watch both master and henchman. Guido regained his feet and slyly tried to sidle his way behind me.

"Why do you want to kill me?" I asked, hoping to distract them as I racked my brain for a plan.

"I am a bounty hunter," Lombardo said. "With your capture I will be acknowledged as the greatest of all time. I, Lombardo the Magnificent, will be forever known as the man who caught Jason Cosmo, Arden's Archvillain!"

Lombardo held the weapon, and thus the initiative, but I had some choice about my direction of retreat. I aimed for the tool shed across the yard.

"This is a mistake! I've committed no crime!"

Lombardo shrugged. "Then a large reward will be wasted."

I was halfway to my goal, but if Guido eased over any more he would block me. "How large a reward?"

"Ten million gold."

"Pardon me? I thought you said ten *million* in gold."

"Ten million carats, yes. Ten million in good Carathan gold."

"You're mad!" I said. Ten million carats was enough to buy a small kingdom and pick up a few dukedoms with the change. It was far too rich a price for anyone's head, especially mine.

Lombardo shrugged. "That is the offer and I, Lombardo the Magnificent, will collect!" He lunged and nicked my chest. "You are so smug, Jason Cosmo, posing as a simple peasant. Hiding in this cesspool of a kingdom. Yet boldly going by your own name—an insulting challenge to all who seek you!"

"I'm not hiding! I was born here. You've made a mistake!"

"I tire of these games!" Lombardo attacked in earnest.

Close enough. I whirled and sprinted the last few yards to the shed. Guido was too slow to intercept

me. Lombardo didn't react in time. I yanked open the door, reached inside, and grabbed wildly for the axe I knew was there. I brought the haft up just in time to deflect Lombardo's thrust, and then struck Guido's face with the poll. Bone crunched and blood spurted as the blunt end crushed his cheek. Guido hit the ground like a freshly felled fir. I charged Lombardo, who turned heel and ran. I pursued, screaming like a barbarian.

Lower Hicksnittle consisted of a dozen wooden shacks arranged around a village square. I raced around the corner of the Festering Wart and into the square, where a dun-colored horse stood tethered to a post. The villagers poured out of the tavern by the front door. Seeing them, Lombardo abruptly stopped his flight and turned to face me. I skidded to a halt. The men of Lower Hicksnittle gaped at the sight of me—coated with mud, bloody axe in hand, my moonlit face twisted into a horrible grimace of rage. Lombardo extended his sword with a dramatic flourish.

“There is your proof, good villagers! Exposed, the bloodthirsty demon seeks to murder us all, despoil your wives, and devour your children! We must stop him!”

The Hicksnitters stared blankly at Lombardo. Watching him fight a berserk demon woodcutter was one thing. Facing me themselves was quite another. Lombardo realized the problem before I could exploit it. Gesturing toward his horse, he said, “A reward of ten silver coins to every man who helps me save your village from demonic destruction!”

That was good enough for the Hicksnitters. They scooped up stones and globs of sticky mud to fling at me with indifferent accuracy. I danced and dodged and ducked the missiles—then suddenly charged the smirking Lombardo, knocking the rapier from his grasp with a sweep of my axe. He stumbled back and fell to the ground, his arms upraised. My neighbors ceased their barrage and watched with morbid fascination as I raised the axe to finish the bounty hunter.

“Save me, good villagers!” he cried piteously.

I hesitated. Women and children emerged from the huts. I felt their frightened eyes boring into me from every side. I couldn't hack a helpless man to bits with the whole village watching. In truth, I had no will to hack a helpless man to bits at all.

Still, he was dangerous. I couldn't let him go. I tossed the axe aside and yanked my quaking foe to his feet.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Giving you a bath.” I hefted him up and carried him, kicking and squirming, to the village well, which was no more than a bucket on a rope beside a deep hole in the ground.

“Cosmo, no! I beseech you!”

Ignoring his plea, I tossed Lombardo in headfirst. His cry of outrage ended with a distant splash. For a moment, I wondered if throwing a man down a well was any better than hacking him to bits. Perhaps not, but it was less gruesome. And he did have a slim chance of surviving the fall to be rescued later.

The Hicksnitters eyed me warily. Some still held rocks. I chose my words carefully. “I am not a demon,” I said. “May great Grubslink, God of Impoverished Peasants, strike me down this instant if I am.”

Even my dull-witted neighbors knew that a true demon would never invoke one of The Gods by name. Granted, Grubslink was a fairly low-rent god, but he was a god nonetheless. Moreover, he was *our* god.

The Hicksnitters murmured among themselves. Ames finally spoke up. “Maybe you're not a demon, Jason, but you're trouble all the same. I don't know what you've got mixed up in, but mark my words, there will be more like that Lombardo fellow to come looking for you. We don't need a bunch of Dimned Foreigners here endangering our families and causing problems. You've already fouled the well. I speak for all in the village when I say it would be best if you left now and took your troubles with you.”

The others muttered their agreement. In a display of true Darnkish loyalty, my neighbors were running me out of town at the first hint of danger. But they were right. Lombardo was to all appearances a madman, but what if others shared his delusion that there was a fantastic price on my head? For my own safety, and that of my neighbors, I needed to learn the truth behind Lombardo's wild talk.

“I will leave at first light,” I said.

“Now would be better,” said Ames.

I retrieved the axe. “Tomorrow,” I said.

“That works too,” said Ames.

Turning their backs on me, my neighbors returned to their homes. I led Lombardo’s horse to my own hut at the edge of the village, near the forest path. Before lying down for a fitful sleep, I gathered food, a clean shirt, and my six well-thumbed books in a leather bag. At first light I would leave the only home I had ever known.

Chapter 2

In Darnk, the summers were unbearably hot and the winters were unreasonably cold. The sky was perpetually overcast. On a good day, the air was rank and foul, thick with dust and clouds of stinging insects. The slime-sodden lakes swarmed with snakes and toads, while our fungusclogged streams were distinguished by the sludgy quality of their greenish-brown water. Warped, stunted, knotty trees filled the forests. The barren hills were utterly devoid of gold, iron, gems, or other valuable minerals. We raised pigs and goats, but not in abundance. The herds were often decimated by pestilence, wolves, or pestilent wolves. We grew twelve varieties of turnip. These we pickled, cured, roasted, and brewed into rutabaga beer. Each spring a small caravan of shifty-eyed peddlers came up from Brythalia with a load of used and defective goods to trade in the junk market at Offal. That was the extent of our commerce with the outside world.

Yet in the dingy land of dunghills that is Darnk, there was one clean spot—Whiteswab, a little town several leagues south of Lower Hicksnittle. Whiteswab was clean because the city fathers enforced strict ordinances against littering, loitering, loud noises, offensive body odor, swearing, smoking, belching, and other unseemly practices. The penalty for most infractions was death. Whiteswabbers thought themselves better than other Darnkites because they bathed daily in tubs of triple-distilled water while their countrymen avoided immersion except during the annual Pond Plunge. Whiteswab also led Darnk in soap production, in that it was the only place in the kingdom that actually produced soap. For all these reasons, decent Darnkites avoided Whiteswab. But there I might learn some news of this supposed bounty on my head. Inhospitable as it was, the town was a way station for the trickle of travelers between our capital city of Ordure, in the east, and the kingdom’s other city, Offal, to the west.

Nothing that could be called a road linked Lower Hicksnittle to Whiteswab, a condition satisfying to the inhabitants of both. I spent three days picking my way along a narrow, twisting, overgrown trail thick with thorns, brush, and brambles, while flies swarmed about my head and stinging gnats flew up my nose.

I arrived at the outskirts of Whiteswab near dusk of the third day. An unsmiling officer of the Sanitary Police stopped me at the edge of town. He was a burly bald man clad in a white tunic and armed with a stout wooden mace. He ordered me to dismount. I complied.

“Who are you?” he demanded, his manner gruff.

Thinking it wise to keep a low profile, I lied. “Burlo Stumproot is my name.”

“Whence came you?” he asked, knowing full well that there was only one village along the forest path.

I went along with the charade. “Lower Hicksnittle.”

“What business have you here, Snit?”

“I’m just passing through. And I believe the appropriate slur is Hick. Snits are from Snitgristle.”

“Whatever you say, Snot. Now go away.”

“No, Snots are from Snotwhopper. I’m a Hick.”

“Fine. Go away, Hick. Your kind isn’t welcome here.”

“I want only a room for the night and a stable for my horse.”

The guard scoffed. “A stable for the both, you mean!”

“Whatever is available.”

“Got any money, Hick?”

“Sure.” I jingled Lombardo’s purse. “This purse is full of silver.”

“Silver? Let me see!”

I opened the bag. The officer’s eyes widened in disbelief, then narrowed with calculation. He snatched the bag from my hand. “You stole this money, didn’t you?”

“Well...not exactly. But the previous owner no longer has need for it.”

“Just as I thought. A murdering, thieving, stinking Snit. You’re all alike.”

“I told you. I’m a Hick, not a Snit.”

“Whatever. I’m confiscating these stolen goods. Now beat it!”

“But I have to get into town.”

“Didn’t you say you were just passing through?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you can go around instead!”

“But I want a room for the night.”

“Oh you do, eh? Got any money?”

“You just took it.”

The officer shrugged. “Then you don’t have it. And if you don’t have money, you’re a vagrant. And we don’t allow vagrants here.”

“But you took all my money!”

“Too bad. Now move along.” He wagged his mace at me.

I turned to mount up.

“Say,” said the officer. “Where did you get that horse, Hack? It actually looks healthy.”

“Hick. Hacks are from Hackscribble. And the horse is mine.”

“That is too fine a horse for the likes of you. Sell it to me. Then you’ll have some coin and I can let you into town.”

“But then I won’t have a horse!”

“Well, go on then! Keep your stinking horse! Just trying to do you a favor.”

I thought it over. I had to get into town to get any information. And I needed information more than I needed the horse. “How much?”

“Four drecks.”

“I’m a Hick, not a fool.” A scrawny goat would bring four drecks. “Forty drecks,” I countered.

“Forty drecks for that nag? Are you trying to rob me? It’s barely worth ten.”

“You said it was a fine horse.”

“Roasted on a spit, it might be.”

“I can’t let it go for less than twenty.”

“Well, keep it then! I might give you twelve, but not a skank more. I’ve a wife and kids to feed. Can’t afford to be taken by a swindler like you.”

With all the silver he stole from me, the man could now afford a dozen wives. Still, he had tripled his initial offer. This was probably as high as he’d go. “Sold,” I said.

He reached into his purse and counted out seven drecks. “There you go.”

“We agreed on twelve.”

“Three dreck sales tax.”

“And the other two?”

“Dreck a head to enter the town. You and the horse.”

“But it’s your horse now!”

“You had to bring it to town to sell it, which means you pay the head tax.”

“So I’m left with only seven drecks?”

“No. You’re left with five. You’ll have to bathe before I admit you.”

I sighed. “Bath tax?”

“Right you are.”

He snatched two drecks from my hand and whistled. Two large bald men with smiley face tattoos on their heads emerged from the guardhouse, hoisted me into the air, and tossed me into a small

pond by the road. With sadistic grins, they leapt in after me, armed with stiff brushes and cakes of lye soap.

I was soon half-drowned, but as clean as anyone in Whiteswab. The guard sold me freshly pressed yellow pants and a cheerful yellow shirt for two drecks. The color marked me as an outsider, easy for the Sanitary Police to spot if I caused trouble. I dressed while the bath boys burned my old garments and gleefully stomped the vermin that skittered out of the flames. At the guard's strong suggestion, I tipped them a dreck each. The guard confiscated my axe as a dangerous weapon and my books as subversive materials before opening a gate in the white picket fence that surrounded the town.

Left with nothing but the clothes on my back, the dreck in my pocket, and the silver coin hidden under my tongue, I entered Whiteswab.

The guard tipped his cap to me. "Enjoy your stay, Snit. Be sure to leave by sunrise."

"It's Hick," I muttered.

Whiteswab had near two hundred inhabitants, making it one of the largest settlements in Darnk. The neat white shops and houses of the town stood in tight rows along freshly swept cobblestone streets lined with precisely trimmed thorn hedges and plots of brightly colored flowering weeds. By law, every person in the street wore proper dress and smiled stiffly as they went. I headed for the Tidy Tavern, the only establishment that served nonSwabbers. It was across the street from the Whisk Broom Inn, where I hoped to spend the night, but where I would not be welcome in the taproom. Such was the logic of Whiteswab.

I entered the common room, where two young serving maids in demure green dresses brought the patrons steaming platters of roast pig, fried rabbit, and squirrel nuggets, along with large mugs of rancid tomato juice and bottled mineral water from the famous Burping Springs near Sloshwoggle. Alcohol was banned in Whiteswab, further proof of the town's insanity. Most of the twenty or so patrons of the Tidy Tavern were farmers and craftsmen from Sludgemump, Cabbagerot, Picknoodle, and other villages more than a full day's travel away—else they would not willingly spend the night in Whiteswab. Like me, they all craved a warm mug of rutabaga beer. Deprived of that solace, they ate and drank with little enthusiasm, despite their legally mandated smiles. Whiteswab required all visitors to look happy, even if they weren't.

One man stood out from the rest. He drank alone at a table against the far wall. Olive-skinned and small-framed, he had shoulder-length hair and a neatly trimmed beard, both the color of coal. Odd mirrored spectacles that reflected the light of the pig fat lanterns hid his eyes. He wore a gold jerkin over a dark purple doublet and trousers. A scarlet cloak clung to his shoulders. He was clearly no Darnkite. I approached his table.

"May I join you, stranger?" I asked with a friendly smile.

Tilting his head so that the spectacles slid down his nose, he studied me with dark green eyes. The intensity of his scrutiny made me uncomfortable. I wanted to glance away, but couldn't. He raised his bushy eyebrows, and then frowned thoughtfully, as if seeing something he didn't understand. He shrugged and gestured for me to sit.

I beckoned the nearest serving maid as I settled into my chair. "What are you having? I'll buy you another."

He smiled and swirled the light amber liquid in his silver goblet. "I brought my own. Cyrillan Goddess."

My eyes widened in surprise. Cyrillan Goddess was the rarest wine produced in the Eleven Kingdoms, pressed from grapes of divine origin that grew only in a certain district of the sun-drenched Kingdom of Cyrilla many hundreds of leagues to the south. Even in Darnk we knew of it, if only as a prop in fairy tales.

I ordered a large turnip juice.

"I'm Burlo Stumproot," I said.

"Mercury Boltblaster, of Caratha."

Caratha! I could not hide my excitement at the mention of the greatest city in all the Eleven Kingdoms. The priests taught that our world of Arden was a wide disk of earth and stone floating in

the infinite Void of Space. At the precise center of the disk, beside the deep waters of the Indigo Sea, stood the gleaming spires of Caratha, thus called the City at the Center of the World. Yet Caratha's centrality was more than merely geographical. Every art was practiced there, every branch of knowledge studied, every product of commerce bought and sold within its confines. People of every nation, race, and tongue passed through the gates of the Shining City by the Sea to seek their fortunes. Surely a man of Caratha could tell me if there was any truth to Lombardo's outrageous claims.

"Well met," I said. "What brings you to Darnk?"

He shrugged. "I have powerful enemies who have pursued me through the rest of the Eleven Kingdoms. I thought to finish my tour with a visit to the Armpit of Arden."

"I see."

"Did you know that only five of the Eleven Kingdoms are truly kingdoms in the strictest sense of the word?"

"I suppose that is so," I said.

"It is quite so. The Grand Republic of Zastria, as they style it, put to death their last king two centuries ago. Somber priests rule holy Stive. Caratha elects its prince. In Xornos the Seventeen hold sway—an odd lot, that. Ganth groans under the usurper Myrm Ironglove, who at least had the good form not to crown himself. The Malravians have a loose confederation of tribes. Why then, do we say Eleven Kingdoms?"

"Well, it would be awkward to speak of the Five Kingdoms and Six Other Assorted Forms of Government, Including a Loose Tribal Confederation."

"Significantly less lyric," nodded Mercury.

"Perhaps, being so widely traveled, you have heard of a man called Jason Cosmo?"

Mercury wrinkled his nose in mild disgust. "What of him?"

I almost choked on my drink at his casual response. I had hoped my name would mean nothing to him, thus proving Lombardo deranged.

"I hear there is a large price on his head," I ventured.

"Large indeed," said Mercury. "Ten million carats. That is good Carathan coin, the like of which I doubt you've ever seen in this poor backwater."

"Actually, we're in Whiteswab. Backwater is about six leagues south of...never mind."

"This princely reward has attracted much interest," said Mercury.

"I'm sure it has." It belatedly occurred to me that Mercury Boltblaster might himself be a bounty hunter.

"But news that reaches Darnk is often incomplete. We know little of this matter. Tell me, who is Jason Cosmo?"

"Who is Jason Cosmo?" A hint of a sardonic smile played at Mercury's lips. "Jason Cosmo is a man who does not exist."

"What! How could he not exist?"

"Not existing takes surprisingly little effort."

"I don't understand."

"I assure you that Jason Cosmo is a complete work of fiction."

"He is?"

Mercury waved his hand dismissively. "An elaborate hoax."

"But the bounty?"

"Oh, that is real enough. But there is no Jason Cosmo."

"You're quite sure?"

"Do you know otherwise?"

"Uh, me, Burlo Stumproof? No. No, I don't."

"Then believe me when I say that Jason Cosmo is a product manufactured from misinformation fanned by gossip and greed into a mass delusion of mythic proportions."

"How so?"

"The bounty notices first appeared about a year ago. The rumors soon followed. Since then, the Eleven Kingdoms have been in the grip of Jason Cosmo hysteria. Cosmomania, if you will."

“Cosmomania?”

“Cosmomania. Everywhere. Who is Jason Cosmo? They call him Arden's Archvillain, but no one seems to know why. Some say he is a half-demon warrior who drinks blood like wine and eats live kittens for breakfast. Parents frighten their children by saying Jason Cosmo will get you if you don't behave.”

“They do?”

“Others believe he is a mighty warlord preparing to lead a barbarian horde out of the western wilderness. Or a pirate chieftain from the southern seas. Maybe a mad sorcerer who plots to blot out the sun and plunge the world into eternal darkness so that he can rule all, backed by an army of vampire zombie poodles.”

“Vampire zombie poodles?”

“Nasty little buggers, believe me. But these are tall tales all. Nothing more. Rumors. Fables. People see in the blank slate of Jason Cosmo what they want to see. The greedy see a quick path to riches if they catch him. The fearful see someone to fear. Others turn the story to their own ends.”

“But why?”

“Human nature.”

“No, I mean why would anyone post a bounty for a man who doesn't exist?”

“To distract attention from the real threat.”

“What is the real threat?”

Mercury shrugged. “I have no idea. At any moment, there are dozens of diabolical masterminds, sinister cabals, and would-be conquerors hatching vast evil conspiracies to take over, destroy, or otherwise mistreat the world. One such evidently conceived this Jason Cosmo fable to advance their plans. And an attractive fable it is. Some of the best bounty hunters in the world pursue this phantom.”

I felt a small bubble of dread form in the pit of my stomach.

“Like who?”

“BlackMoon, for one.”

The bubble floated up into my chest.

“And the Red Huntsman,” continued Mercury.

The bubble caught in my throat. I made a squeaking noise.

“Did you just squeak?”

“No.”

“Well you might—were you Jason Cosmo. BlackMoon and the Red Huntsman are in Brythalia now. Perhaps they'll sweep Darnk next, though this is the last place I'd expect to find anyone of note. Including me.” He took a sip of wine. “Which is exactly why I'm here.”

I'd heard tales of BlackMoon and the Red Huntsman. They were arch-rivals with reputations for utter ruthlessness in pursuit of their prey. Each would do anything to bring in his man before the other. It was said of BlackMoon that he could see in the dark, move silently as a shadow, and hear a whisper from a mile away. The Red Huntsman employed a pack of huge wolves as his hounds. If Lombardo could find me, so would they. And these were not men I could toss down a well.

“But enough of that,” said Mercury. “Are you a farmer hereabouts?”

“Yes. Turnips.”

“I see. And how is this year's crop?”

As I opened my mouth to reply, my companion glanced over my shoulder toward the tavern entranceway. His mouth drew taut. He pushed his odd mirrored spectacles back into place. I turned to see what had caught his eye.

Three fighting men garbed in black tunics and chainmail stood near the door. The charge on their round shields was a pair of black lightning bolts crossed. The fighters fanned out as they crossed the room, hands on the hilts of their swords.

Mercury sprang to his feet.

“Take him!” barked the leader. “His companion too!”

With a rasp of steel against leather, the trio drew their broadswords and advanced. They shoved a

servicing girl aside. She screamed and dropped a tray of mugs that hit the floor with a crash. Patrons shouted in dismay.

“Shield your eyes!” said Mercury, twirling his cloak across my face. A brilliant flash of white light filled the room. It was as if the sun had come down the chimney by mistake, suddenly realized its error, and retreated with a muttered apology. Cries of fear and confusion followed. Everyone else was blind! A dizzying haze of colored spots filled my own vision.

“What happened?” I asked.

Amid the shouts, the proprietor of the Tidy Tavern pleaded urgently for quiet, not wanting his neck stretched for a noise violation.

“Sunshades,” said the blurry figure of Mercury Boltblaster. “The lenses absorb sunlight, which can be released at my command. You’ll recover in a few minutes. As will they.” He tucked the sunshades under his cloak. “Let’s go.”

Magic! This was magic!

I had never seen magic before. Darnk had rather unprogressive views on things arcane.

“Are you a wizard?” I asked.

“Good guess, Burlo. What gave me away?”

Adding to my sudden unease, Mercury’s clothing turned uniformly black. That was rarely a good sign.

He took me by the arm. “We’d best be away—they’ll want you too.”

“Me? Who? Why? What’s going on?”

“I’ll show you.” We crossed to the door in quick strides, threading our way carefully between the blinded soldiers. They swung their swords wildly, hoping to strike us, but only hitting each other as the rest of the crowd sensibly hugged the floor.

We stepped outside, only to be met by nine swordsmen garbed like those within. Their weapons shone in the light of the street lanterns. Their captain was a swarthy, heavyset man with gold braid on his shoulder.

“I think we went the wrong way,” I said.

“Not at all.”

The captain laughed. “Mercury Boltblaster, I’ve got you this time! And a League lackey to boot! Isogoras will be pleased!”

“This is Dylan of Ganth, leader of the Black Bolts,” said Mercury, as if describing an odd specimen in a zoo.

“Black Bolts,” said Dylan. “You always get that wrong.”

“So I do,” said Mercury. “Isogoras the Xornite hired Dylan to capture me. But I fear he’ll have to refund his fee, for the task is hopelessly beyond his competence.”

“Who, dare I ask, is Isogoras the Xornite?”

“A leader of the Dark Magic Society.”

The Dark Magic Society? A shuddering chill ran down my spine. The Dark Magic Society was an ancient order of evil wizards devoted to perfecting the blackest arts of the darkest magic. They plotted to conquer the Eleven Kingdoms, release the demons of the Assorted Hells, and most likely raise taxes too. Granted, we saw scant sign of the Society in Darnk, but even we Darnkites knew they were eternally scheming the downfall of all that was good and true. What had I blundered into? A heavy net set with barbed weights enveloped us from above. Two men jumped down from the roof of the Tidy Tavern and shoved us to our knees.

“Your insults are empty bluster now, wizard!” said Dylan.

“Sadly enough, Dylan thinks this is a clever trap,” said Mercury, unperturbed.

“Clever enough to net you!” Dylan’s face turned red.

“This is your weakest plan yet.”

“Shut up, wizard! Shut up! I’ve had enough of your needling!” Dylan aimed a sharp kick at the kneeling Mercury. His foot missed its target as the net flew off us and wrapped itself tightly around the mercenary captain. Momentum slammed him to the ground.

“Did you forget that I can move objects with my mind?” asked Mercury. He sprang to his feet like an

acrobat. “Seriously. A net? That was your plan?”

“Kill him!” screamed Dylan, rolling and flopping. “Kill them both!”

“Both?” I blurted. “What did I do?”

Dylan’s men closed in around us. Mercury and I stood back to back, waiting for the Black Bolts to make a move. Ten against two were not promising odds. I assumed Mercury would use his magic powers to even things up, preferably by turning our opponents into frogs.

“I dare not use more magic right now,” said Mercury. “It might attract unwanted attention.”

“We have plenty of that already.”

“Trust me, we don’t want more. We’ll have to hold them off until the constables arrive.”

“The Sanitary Police? They’ll take us all in! Disturbing the peace is a capital offense here. Death by hanging!”

“Hanging?”

The mercenaries fainted and shifted their positions to keep us guessing. Dylan continued to thrash about, screaming insults and commands.

“Well, you they’d burn at the stake, being a wizard and all.”

Mercury was incredulous. “They still burn wizards here?”

“When the opportunity arises.”

“How quaint. Well, it’s on us, then.”

Exploding into action, Mercury weaved past the nearest Black Bolt’s guard and shattered his nose with an upthrust hand, knocking him senseless. Spinning in place, the wizard brought down a second mercenary with a rib-crushing kick, ducked under a flashing blade, and broke a third man’s sword arm while snatching the weapon from his grasp.

It was an incredible display of speed and skill.

As Mercury disemboweled a fourth man and half-severed the arm of a fifth, a trio of Black Bolts came at me. I scrambled back against the wall, dodging three deadly swords at once.

“You’ll have to do better than that!” said the wizard. A fallen soldier’s sword and shield flew into my hands.

“Wasn’t that magic?” I asked, clumsily blocking a blow. I had not held a sword before.

Mercury ran a soldier through and engaged another as he said, “You looked like you needed help.”

“I still do! I’m a farmer, not a warrior!”

A Black Bolt’s sword grazed my arm, drawing blood. I swung my weapon in reply, missed my foe, and fell off balance. I barely avoided a sudden beheading.

“I don’t know the sword!” I said.

“Learn fast!” said Mercury.

My lesson was cut short by a shrill whistle heralding the arrival of the Sanitary Police. A white-uniformed squad charged into the fray. Swinging heavy maces, they forced the remaining Black Bolts back. I dropped my weapon and tried to look peaceful and meek.

“Let’s go!” said Mercury. He downed his final opponent with a kick to the knee, grabbed my arm, and pulled me around the corner. In the alley we found fourteen black horses all in a row.

“Seems we have our pick,” said Mercury. We selected two steeds and scattered the rest. While the Sanitary Police and Black Bolts brawled, we mounted and rode down the alley, jumped the picket fence, and headed west.

Chapter 3

We thundered down the dark forest road, only slowing our pace when we were sure that there was no pursuit. The Sanitary Police and Black Bolts were evidently too busy fighting each other to chase us.

“I think we’re clear,” I said, looking back.

“Excellent,” said Mercury. From a pocket in his cloak he withdrew a small crystal sphere attached to a

leather loop. At a word, the sphere shone with a soft white light. Mercury hung it from his saddle horn.

“Now you can tell me who you really are.”

“What do you mean?” I said. “I’m Burlo Stumproot, humble turnip farmer.”

“Nonsense. I’ll grant your bumbling peasant act is convincing, but I know better. You are an agent of the League.”

“League? What league?”

“The League of Benevolent Magic. Though we both know your vaunted benevolence is a sham.”

“I actually don’t know that. Or what you’re talking about.”

I did know that the League of Benevolent Magic was an ancient order of wizards dedicated to opposing the Dark Magic Society and to making the world a better place through the power of magic. But that was the extent of my knowledge. In Darnk, all magic was forbidden. It had been so since the sorcerer Gorgibund the Ghastly laid waste to the entire kingdom more than two hundred years ago. Before that, Darnk was a scenic little realm known as the Jewel of Arden. But Gorgibund’s Curse blighted the land and all who abided therein. Our surroundings were a permanent reminder of the awful destructive power of magic. We Darnkites wanted no truck with it.

Mercury eyed me skeptically. “You say you are not with the League?”

“I’m not even a wizard.”

He snorted. “That much is obvious. I took you for a League recruiter in peasant guise. But, come to think of it, a lackey of the League would already be lecturing me about using my powers for the benefit of all humanity. So I grant you are no Leaguer. But neither is Burlo Stumproot your true name.”

“You’ve got me there,” I admitted.

“So who are you?”

What could I say? If Mercury was after the bounty, I had no chance of escaping him, not with his powers and fighting prowess. I decided to take a chance on the truth. Something about the wizard, despite his surly manner and demonstrated deadliness, made me want to trust him.

I swallowed hard and said, “My name is Jason Cosmo.”

“Jason Cosmo?” His laugh was caustic. “Impossible!”

“I’m Jason Cosmo, a woodcutter and turnip farmer from Lower Hicksnittle. What is so impossible about that?”

“You do not have the aura of a woodcutter.”

“The ore what?”

“Aura. Auric script. Around each person’s visage are symbols scribed in golden light, which, although invisible to most, reveal much to those who can read them. Your age, race, occupation, and special skills can be divined. Magic potential and physical strength. Rough indicators of dexterity, intelligence, even wisdom and what might be called charisma. Emotional state, health, and other qualities of mind and body. Truly skilled aura readers can identify your most valued possessions, your credit rating, and your general disposition toward good or evil, law or chaos. Think of the aura as all the most salient aspects of your character written down on an invisible sheet of invisible paper.”

“Invisible letters on an invisible sheet of paper. On my face. Are you kidding me?”

“Not at all. I read your aura back at the tavern. Tried to read it. Your aura is not in the Standard Auric Script. It also appears to be encrypted, for lack of a better word. All I see is gobbledygook.” He paused. “Yet I sense great power in you.”

“This is news to me.”

Mercury stroked his beard. “It seems the world has played a cruel trick on you, Master Cosmo.”

“I’ll say.”

“Why would the Dark Magic Society offer ten million carats for a Darnkite woodcutter with a murky aura?”

“Clerical error?” I ventured.

Mercury snorted.

“Wait! Did you say the Dark Magic Society posted the bounty?”

“So I surmise. I wonder what Erimandras wants with you.”

“Erimandras?”

“The Overmaster of the Society. Their ruler and chief. He came to power not long ere the hunt for you began. The Society has been unusually aggressive since his rise. He is said to be brilliant, powerful, and utterly merciless.”

“Could there be some other Jason Cosmo?”

“Your odd aura suggests not. Now tell me—why did you seek me out in the tavern?”

“A bounty hunter attacked me in my village. I went to Whiteswab for information. You looked knowledgeable.”

He smiled. “That I am.”

“Will you now take me in for the bounty?”

He scoffed. “You've seen how well I get on with the Society. No, I'll not sell you out, Master Woodcutter. But you are fortunate to live in this dismal land or you'd have been found and taken long before now. As it is, BlackMoon or the Red Huntsman will be here soon enough. You won't easily elude them.”

“That has occurred to me.”

I wanted to believe I was a victim of mistaken identity, but my intuition told me that the wizard was right. The Dark Magic Society wanted me.

“We find ourselves in similar straits,” said Mercury. “Save that the Society has sent a band of bunglers after me while you are stalked by the greatest hunters in the world.”

“Lucky me.”

“Also, I'm a wizard who has traveled far and wide and trained with the finest masters of armed and unarmed combat in the world, whereas you are but an illiterate—”

“I can read.”

“Whereas you are but a barely literate—”

“And write. Quite well.”

“Whereas you are an unusually literate Darnkite peasant, unschooled in the world, untrained in fighting, guileless and gullible—”

“Now wait a minute!”

“Who has never ventured this far from home in your life. Am I right?”

“Well, I don't get out much, true. But I can swing an axe well, if not a sword!”

“Do you have an axe?”

“Er...not anymore. They took it from me in Whiteswab.”

Mercury rolled his eyes. “And the sword?”

“Dropped it.”

“You're a dead man when they find you.”

“You may have a point.”

“Your only hope is to stick with me.”

“Could I?”

Mercury scowled. “It would be foolish to add your problems to mine, considering that I dare not use my powers of magic overmuch.”

“Why is that? If you're such a powerful wizard, why run?”

“Fair question, Master Turnip. I could have obliterated the Black Bolts with a single spell. But to work magic I must draw on the arcanosphere, Arden's ambient arcane energy field. Each act of magic creates a disturbance in that field, like the ripples in a pond into which you throw a stone.”

“Ponds in Darnk don't ripple. The water is too sludgy.”

“Even so. If I make too big a splash with too big a spell, the Society can divine my location and send overwhelming force against me. The Black Bolts aren't meant to succeed at catching me, though Dylan is too much a dunce to realize it. Their role is to provoke me into revealing myself to more dangerous foes. I thus rely on my other skills for survival.”

“They seem adequate.”

“They usually are. But I have been until now of only minor concern to the Society. Linking my fate with

yours would be another matter entirely.”

“What do you mean?”

“The huge price on your close-cropped head can only mean that your capture is essential to some scheme of the Society. Or that you yourself are a grave threat to their existence. I suspect the latter, because the Society tends to plot on the cheap when they can.”

“How can I possibly threaten the Dark Magic Society?”

“Your aura is the key. Something in your nature, perhaps some power you unknowingly possess, makes you dangerous to them. If I could read your aura, perhaps we could use that knowledge against the Society and solve both our problems.”

“But why me?”

“I don't know. Listen to me. I'll protect you until we learn the secret of your aura. Then we'll use whatever it reveals to get the Society off our backs. Your alternative is inevitable capture followed, I am sure, by a slow and painful death at the hands of the Society's exceptionally skilled and sadistic master torturers. What do you say?”

“I accept.”

“You are wiser than you look.”

“But how will you read my aura? You already failed.”

“I know a master aurist in Raelna,” he said. I thought I heard a faint wistfulness in his voice. “If anyone can decipher yours, she can.”

“She?”

“However you do things here in Darnk, it is not unheard of for women to excel in the magical arts among the more advanced kingdoms.”

“No one does magic here, man or woman.”

“Right. The stake-burning thing. All the more reason to go to Raelna. Are you ready to make that journey, Master Cosmo?”

“I've always wanted to see the world.”

“This will be no pleasure tour.”

“I understand. Yes, I will go with you to Raelna.”

The wizard extended his hand. We shook. “Our bargain is sealed. You are now under the personal protection of Mercury Boltblaster.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Can I call you Merc?”

“If you must.”

“You can call me Jason.”

“I'd rather not.”

“Why is the Society after you?”

“A long story.”

“It's a long ride to Raelna.”

“Very well. The Society has had but one goal since it rose from the ashes of the Empire of Fear a thousand years ago.”

“You're starting with a thousand years ago?”

“I warned you. Long story. Where was I? Oh, yes. One goal.”

“Perfecting the blackest arts of the darkest magic?”

Mercury sighed. “Okay, two goals. Perfecting the blackest arts of the darkest magic. And trying to take over the world.”

“Right. I knew that.”

“The Society's chief foe has ever been the League of Benevolent Magic. In the old days, Society and League alike had kings and legions at their disposal. They launched wars and toppled thrones at will—whatever furthered their purposes of the moment.”

“What has this to do with you?”

“Context. Stop interrupting.”

“Sorry.”

“Through centuries of constant battle, the two orders expended tremendous manpower, magic, and treasure, but succeeded only in producing a perpetual stalemate. Today both sides are much depleted from their former strength. That is how it concerns me. As an arcane master—do you know the term, Master Turnip?”

“No.”

“Arcane master is the highest practical rank a wizard may attain. It means I'm a master of magic. One of the best. There are fewer than two hundred masters in all the Eleven Kingdoms. Naturally, both League and Society want as many on their side as possible. The rest they want dead. I refuse to join either camp.”

“Why?”

“I don't care about their struggle. I grant the Society is evil, but the League isn't much better. Less bloodthirsty, more ineffectual, but equally ruthless. They use the same tactics in pursuit of the same goals of power and influence. They simply don't admit it. I want naught to do with either group. Unfortunately, these people don't take no for an answer. The League sends lackeys to lecture me. The Society demands that I join or die. Because I won't join, they try to make me die.”

“And Isogoras the Xornite?”

“He seems to be the Society's membership chairman. We are longtime enemies. He fears to face me in person and so hires dogs like Dylan to do the job for him.”

“I see.”

“Doubtful. Now tell me of yourself, Cosmo. It might give me a clue as to what the Society wants with you.”

I shrugged. “I'm just an ordinary Darnkite. I grow turnips. I chop wood. That's about it.”

“You are unusually robust for a Darnkite. They are a sickly lot, always coughing and sniffing. Have you ever been sick?”

“No. I'm always quite hale and hardy.”

“Interesting. Anything unusual about the circumstances of your birth?”

“Well, I don't remember the event itself.”

“Obviously. Tell me of your parents.”

“My father was a woodcutter and a farmer, a good and simple man.”

“Past tense. Dead then?”

I nodded. “I lost both my parents to the plagues five winters back, The Gods rest their souls.”

“Plagues plural?”

“Plagues tend to run in packs here in Darnk.”

“Indeed. So nothing unusual about your parentage? You weren't a foundling or raised by squirrels or anything odd like that?”

“Well, there is one thing.” I told him my mother's story.

“Intriguing,” said Merc. “A Brythalian mother with a mysterious past. Accused of witchcraft, you say?”

“Lies and slander!” I said hotly.

“Don't get excited,” said Merc. “Witching is a perfectly honorable craft. At least in more civilized lands, if not in this benighted place.”

“But she wasn't a witch!”

“How would you know?”

“I just do.”

“Yet she had knowledge of herbs and cures and growing things and the like, your mother did?”

“Yes. So what?”

“Let us then call her a wise woman. At the very least her influence makes you something other than an ordinary Darnkite peasant. But it does not explain the Society's interest. Have you had any unusual experiences recently?”

“Other than being attacked by a bounty hunter, almost murdered by mercenaries, and meeting a cranky wizard? No.”

“Visions, prophetic dreams, past life experiences, lost time, intense feelings of *déjà vu*—that sort of thing?”

“No.”

“Have you ever encountered a ghost, nymph, spirit, sprite, pixie, moxie, mog, nog, gnome, gnole, or other magical being?”

“Not that I recall.”

“Talking fish?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? Talking fish like woodcutters.”

“No talking fish.”

“A clever, boot-wearing cat?”

“Never.”

“Voices in your head?”

“Sometimes I hear a ringing in my ears, but it passes.”

“No siblings? No wife? No family?”

“No, no, and no.”

“A bright strong lad like you not yet wed? Why not?”

“Most of the unwed women in these parts succumbed to the plagues in recent years.”

“Again, interesting. But there must be a few fetching widows about?”

I shrugged. “I’ve not met a girl who strikes my fancy.”

“I see. Have you acquired any unusual objects recently? Rings, lamps, jewels, weapons, scrolls, oddly shaped pine cones—anything at all?”

“No.”

“So much for the obvious.”

“What about you, Merc?”

“Oh, odd things happen to me all the time.”

“No, have you a wife and family somewhere?”

Mercury scowled bitterly and shook his head almost imperceptibly. I had evidently yanked a raw nerve. We rode in silence for a time. At length, I noticed that a faintly shining mist shrouded the road ahead and filled the forest on all sides, surrounding us and obscuring the road behind us. I heard in the distance an eerie mechanical hum, as of gears clanking.

“This is passing strange,” I said.

“Quite so,” said Merc. He peered intently into the fog, perhaps using some magical power of vision I lacked. “There is a light ahead.”

I saw it, a soft amber glow penetrating the fog at what seemed a great distance. We rode toward it cautiously, the hum growing ever louder. The mist dissipated in our immediate vicinity as we progressed while always remaining thick just a few feet away. I gradually perceived the outline of a small cottage. As we drew nearer I heard the rhythmic wooden creak of a rocking chair.

We halted before a small clapboard shack with a tin roof. On the porch an old man in faded overalls rocked slowly. His long grey beard was gathered in his lap, his bald head creased with wrinkles, his blind eyes covered by a milky film. Beside him a small machine resembling a bellows attached to a bucket pumped out clouds of the shining mist. The amber light glowed from a lantern hung by a rusty nail on the wall.

The old man spoke. “Greetings, Jason Cosmo of Darnk. Greetings, Mercury Boltblaster. I am He Who Sits On The Porch and I know many things.”

“Like what?” said Merc, visibly unimpressed.

The old man smiled. “I see what others do not. My purpose is to share that knowledge with chosen heroes, to guide them in their quests.”

“We are sorry to disturb you,” I said. “We lost our way in the mist.”

“Nonsense, boy! You’re not lost.” He stopped rocking and leaned forward. “I brought you here for a reason.”

“We’re not in the hero business,” said Merc.

“Oh, certainly not!” said the old man. “You’re a turnip farmer and a wizard out for an evening ride in the forest. I know your cynical disposition, Boltblaster. But I know too that it hides a righteous heart. You would be wise to heed me. Great events are in motion and the two of you are the axis upon which they turn.”

“You jest,” said Merc.

“Enough of your peevishness! My time is limited and I have much to relate ere the Demon Lords penetrate this obscuring fog.”

“The Demon Lords?” said Merc, suddenly interested.

“That got your attention, didn’t it?” said the old man. “Oh, yes, the Demon Lords, they who rule the various regions of the Assorted Hells, do bestir themselves and cast their gimlet gaze across the mortal plane. They muster their infernal legions and make ready for war, fearing an invasion of their domains.”

“Then why watch Arden?” asked Mercury. “Only The Gods have the power to invade the Hells.”

“Not so,” said He Who Sits On The Porch. “No, it is not The Gods whom the Hellmasters fear to make war upon them, but one of their own, long forgotten. No matter their reasons—know that the Demon Lords seek you, Jason Cosmo.”

“Me? Why is everyone after me?”

“The war feared by the Lords Below can only come about if you are taken by the Dark Magic Society. The Demon Lords would prevent that eventuality by destroying you first.”

“Does not the Society serve and worship the Demon Lords? Yet you say they are foes?”

“As with any evil cabal, the Society serves only itself. At present, the purposes of the Overmaster Erimandras conflict with those of the Demon Lords. I know you are full of questions, but they must wait. I have been sent to inform you of your peril and to let you know that The Gods will help you—”

“That’s great!”

“—to the limited extent that they can.”

“Not so great.”

“In truth, The Gods do place greatness within your reach, young Cosmo. For you are now, and henceforth...a hero!”

“I feel more like a target.”

“Heed my words! Each man and woman is a single link in a great chain of being, assigned by The Gods at birth a role in life, a part to play that defines his or her existence. A woodcutter lives and is judged as a woodcutter, a wizard as a wizard, a king as a king. This is divine law. But as a woodcutter you cannot survive your present pass. The limitations of that office are not equal to the task before you. Thus, The Gods have struck your name from the Roll of Woodcutters and inscribed it afresh on the Roll of Heroes.”

“Can they do that?”

“They’re The Gods.”

“Right. So when did this happen?”

“Sometime yesterday. This action alters your very essence and unlocks new potentials within you. You may now make daring escapes, overcome great odds, and survive certain death on a routine basis—perquisites you will find useful. I am sent to inform you of this so that you may conduct yourself accordingly.”

“But I don’t know how to be a hero!”

“Not so. You love well the tales of old. Emulate the heroes of song and story and you’ll be fine.”

“This is a bit overwhelming.”

“Well buck up, hero! I can only add that you are on the right path, Jason Cosmo. You and your companion must reach the land of Raelna before the Feast of Fibbletoss. Allies await you there and the nature of your task will be made clear.”

“Task? What task? Now I have a task?”

“Yes. It will be revealed in due time.”

“Why don’t you just tell me now?”

“It doesn’t work that way. Too soon. Too soon. The Laws of Narrative forbid.” The fog billowed

thickly, swirling around He Who Sits On The Porch until he was almost obscured from view. “I must go now. Proceed with haste, but do not call undue attention to yourself, for many hostile eyes seek you. Mercury Boltblaster—you have pledged to protect this man. Fulfill that bargain and you will gain your heart’s desire. Jason Cosmo—the path before you is difficult and fraught with perils. Only by following your noblest instincts will you survive and triumph. Be heroic!” His blind eyes seemed to bore directly into mine as he spoke his final words. “The fate of the world depends on you.”

Chapter 4

The fog swirled thick about the little shack, blotting out the amber lantern. Soon I could see neither Mercury nor the horn of my own saddle.

The mist parted. We found ourselves on a grassy slope facing the afternoon sun as it hovered above the drab stone walls of a small fortified town beside a swift, muddy river. I felt refreshed, as after a hot meal and a good night's sleep. Yet had it not been nighttime in the forest just a moment ago?

Mercury studied the town, apparently unperturbed by this turn of events.

“Offal,” he said, donning his sunshades. “We’ll get provisions and make for Brythalia.”

I peered at the nearby settlement. Could it truly be Offal? It was. I had been here once as a child, for the Feast of the Moldy Biscuits. Yet Offal was a good ten leagues from Whiteswab. How could we be here when we had just been there?

“Come,” said Merc, urging his horse forward. “It appears to be a trading day.”

A train of wagons was even now rolling through the city gates.

“Hold up! Wait a minute! How did we get here?”

Mercury shrugged. “He Who Sits On The Porch is a messenger of The Gods, possessed of powers far beyond mortal comprehension. No point, then, in trying to comprehend them.”

“But it was night and now it is day!”

“That happens frequently,” said Merc. “The old man gave us a nice lead over the Black Bolts. We should take full advantage of it. Come on!”

His horse trotted down the slope. I fell in beside him, still feeling bewildered and disoriented.

“What did the old man mean about the Society being at odds with the Demon Lords?” I asked. “I thought their goal was to restore the demon-worshipping Empire of Fear.”

Mercury assumed his lecture voice. “You overlook the nature of demons. The Demon Lords hate one another and ever vie for supremacy. You cannot speak of them as a united group as you might The Gods. The Society forms temporary alliances with various Demon Lords as it suits their vile purposes, but does not serve the Hellmasters as such. In truth, there would have been no Empire of Fear had it not been for Asmodraxas the Archdemon. His power alone united the Demon Lords, but he has long since vanished from the ken of mortals. Unless...that is what the old man meant! The Demon Lords fear the return of Asmodraxas!”

“Why? They never had it so good as when he was around.”

“Demons ruled all, true, but they were in turn ruled by the Archdemon. Demon Lords dislike being ruled. No, they would oppose his return. But the Society, being mortals, and thus fools, might welcome it. I am certain you know the legend of the Mighty Champion?”

“Every child knows that story,” I said.

The Mighty Champion was the greatest hero of all time: leader of the Great Rebellion, founder of Caratha, giver of laws, first in the Line of Champions, father of the House of Might. The priests taught that this was the fifth age since Arden's creation, beginning with the pristine Age of Nature and the idyllic Age of Peace. Next was the cataclysmic Age of War, triggered by the arrival of the Demon Lords from Somewhere Else. After a thousand years of inconclusive conflict, The Gods and Demon Lords made truce and agreed to a mutual withdrawal from worldly events under the terms of the Great Eternal Pan-Cosmic Holy/Unholy Non-Intervention Pact. The Gods honored the pact.

The demons did not. The result was the misery and agony of the Age of Despair. Walking Arden freely, the Demon Lords established an Empire of Fear that enslaved all humanity. Finally, The Gods brought forth the Mighty Champion to end the reign of evil, free the peoples of Arden, and begin a new Age of Hope: the present age.

“Do you recall how the Champion bested Asmodraxas?” asked Merc.

“Arm wrestling, wasn't it?”

“A common misconception. No, the Mighty Champion learned the secret of the Archdemon's power and used it to banish Asmodraxas from this universe, locked in a prison he can never escape. Only then could the Great Rebellion succeed.”

“What was the secret?”

“The Superwand, a magical talisman created before the Dawn of Time by a race of fluffy pink Cosmic Rabbits older and more powerful than even The Gods. Asmodraxas stole the wand and used it for his schemes of conquest. The Mighty Champion turned the Superwand against Asmodraxas, defeated him, and hid the wand where it has never been found.”

“Cosmic Rabbits? That sounds made up.”

“The priests, obviously, do not like to speak of powers greater than The Gods, but they do exist. Certain stargazing philosophers have devised esoteric mathematical formulae that demonstrate this conclusively. The proofs are lengthy and subtle. You would have to undertake years of arduous study before I could even begin to explain them to you. But the irrefutable conclusion is that Cosmic Rabbits exist.”

“Fluffy pink ones.”

“Some early scholars postulated orange rabbits, but this hypothesis was conclusively refuted by Telsor's famous Kiwi Fruit Experiment in 862. But I digress. The Superwand has been lost for almost one thousand years. Were it found, the Society could free Asmodraxas from his otherwise eternal prison.”

“But how can they find this Superwand if it is so well hidden?”

Mercury replied with a thoughtful stare.

“You think my aura points the way to the Superwand?”

“It makes perfect sense.”

“Not to me. I never even heard of the Superwand until now.”

“Suppose the Superwand's location is encoded in your aura nonetheless. The Society learns this through some manner of dark divination and the hunt is on.”

“I don't like your theory.”

We said no more on the subject, retreating into our individual thoughts. As we rode down the hill, the last of the wagons rolled into Offal. The city gates swung shut behind them. Shortly thereafter, the few indolent guards visible on the battlements collapsed like puppets with cut strings. Though I knew little of military matters, this seemed odd.

Many walled towns closed their gates at sundown, but that was still a few hours away. Such precautions were not much called for in Darnk, which was not a prime target of invasion. To the contrary, two rival kingdoms once fought a war to avoid taking possession of this land. Nor did Darnk suffer from the depredations of bandits and brigands, there being little here worth stealing. Yes, closing the gates in the early afternoon was most unusual.

We reined in our horses before the wall. Each of the double gates was more than twice a man's height. They were formed of stout timbers set on great rusty hinges. The city wall was just over twenty feet high, fashioned of rough-hewn blocks of grey stone. The wall formed a square set against the east bank of the River Longwash. At each corner was a squat watchtower. No one challenged us. We heard no sounds of activity from within, nothing at all save the rush of the river, the stir of a slight breeze, the snuffling and stamping of our horses. It was as if we had come by mistake to a city of the dead.

“Maybe it is time for their afternoon nap,” I suggested.

“Maybe we'll keep riding,” said Merc, turning his horse southward.

“Wait! We should investigate!”

“Why?” said Merc, not stopping. “We have our own problems.”

“People may be in danger.”

“Yes. Us.”

“We should inform the proper authorities.”

“I'm sure that whatever authorities exist in Offal are well aware of what is happening within its walls.”

“We must get word to the king!” I protested.

With a sigh of exasperation, Mercury turned his horse to face me. “Ordure is a good four-day ride to the east. Back toward the Black Bolts and the Sanitary Police. By the time we reach the royal court—assuming we do and assuming Fecal IV doesn't throw you in his dungeon to collect a bounty worth more than his entire kingdom—the situation here will surely have run its course. So why get involved?”

“It's the right thing to do!”

“What's that got to do with anything?”

“He Who Sits On The Porch told me to act like a hero. A hero would help those in trouble!”

“As I recall it, The Gods made you a hero to help you survive, not so you could go looking for more trouble. Believe me, we'll get our share. Now come on. We have no obligations to these Offal people.”

“It seems you have no obligations to anyone but yourself!”

“That keeps me alive. But you'll recall I have obligated myself to get you to Raelna. I'm sure you'll have many other chances to play hero before we arrive.”

“I'm not playing! Something is wrong here. I'm concerned.”

“Have you friends or relations in Offal?”

“None that I know of.”

“Then nothing here need concern you. Let us be on our way.”

“I'm not going anywhere!”

My forcefulness surprised Merc. It surprised me more.

“Be serious,” said Merc.

“I am.”

We glared at each other for a long moment. My heart raced. Merc's face was expressionless. I couldn't see his eyes through those mirrored sunshades. For all I knew he was changing his mind about helping me and was about to disintegrate me instead. Or ride on without me. But I refused to waver. If fellow Darnkites were in danger, I had to help them.

Mercury cursed under his breath. “Fine. Fine. We'll take a quick look. It's a fool's errand, but we can't sit here and debate all day.”

“Great! How do we get inside?”

Mercury dismounted and produced a grappling hook and coil of rope from under his cloak. He hooked a merlon on the first try and tested the line. It held. “After you.”

I grasped the rope cautiously. “Where did this come from?”

“Grisham's House of Hooks on the Street of Metalworkers in the Grand Bazaar of Caratha.”

“No, I mean just now.”

“I pulled it from beneath my cloak.”

“But it wasn't there before!”

Mercury shrugged. “Magic cloak. Very roomy.”

“So I see. Hey! Did your clothes just change color again? You were in black and now your cloak and garments are the same grey as the wall.”

“Trick of the light.”

“Oh, come on!”

“My clothes are made of Morf.”

“Beg pardon?”

Mercury sighed. “Morf is the leading brand of Raelnan morphing fiber. An enchanted textile can become any cut or color of clothing I desire. It is also self-cleaning and self-mending.”

“Really?”

“Do you want to talk fashion or climb the wall? Let's go!”

I climbed the rope to the top of wall. There on the platform I found two fallen guards. They were

apparently asleep, but in full kit. Mercury joined me. He knelt to examine the men, peeling back their eyelids, feeling for a pulse, and bending close to listen to their breathing.

“DormaDose,” he pronounced. “An alchemical vapor that induces a restful sleep of up to a day's duration.”

“I saw no cloud of gas.”

“DormaDose is invisible, but it smells of raspberries,” said Mercury. “I don't like the looks of this.”

I sniffed the air and thought I did detect a faint scent of raspberry amid Offal's overwhelming odor of garbage and decay.

“Let's take a closer look,” said Merc. He led the way down the stairs to ground level. I smiled to myself at his sudden change of heart. He professed indifference to the plight of others, but could not resist this mystery.

Beyond the gates was a wide unpaved plaza. At its center was a cracked and weathered fountain surmounted by a headless statue of a forgotten hero. Arranged around the margins of the plaza was a ramshackle row of market stalls heaped full of junk—broken farm tools, leaky barrels, heaps of rags, scraps of wood, decrepit carts, tattered tapestries, cracked crockery, and other worthless wares. Offal's junk traders—who mostly traded with each other—lay sprawled on the ground or slumped over their displays of goods.

Six unattended wagons from the caravan, loaded with crates and barrels, were drawn up around the fountain. The draft horses were still in harness, though asleep like every other creature in sight, including dogs, birds, and rats.

Several narrow lanes, strewn with garbage, led from the plaza, winding into the dim shadows between Offal's ill-built tenements.

On the west side of the plaza was a blockish keep. Its highest battlements stood some eighty feet above the ground. There lived Palish Birksnore, Lord Governor of Offal. The remaining four wagons from the caravan were parked before the keep's open gate.

We walked across the plaza, stepping gingerly over the comatose bodies. Mercury climbed aboard one of the wagons and rummaged through the crates until he found a blue metal canister some six inches in diameter and a yard long. At one end were a conical nozzle and a small lever.

“This is a pressure canister, designed by the mechanists of Caratha,” said Mercury. “When the nozzle opens, it sprays the gas within over an area of several hundred square feet. Canisters fired from each wagon would be enough to put the whole city to sleep. Especially on a near windless day like today.”

“But what of the caravan drivers? They would be affected too.”

“Not if they wore protective masks or took an antidote beforehand.”

“So where are they?”

As if in reply to my question, an arrow thunked into a crate beside Merc. The wizard dove from the wagon, did a handspring, and landed in a crouch on the ground. I spotted the archer on a rooftop across the plaza. He let fly another arrow even as Mercury pulled me under the wagon.

“Arkayne's hood!” said Merc. “I was careless! They were watching us from the moment we entered the city. We're surrounded by now.”

“How do you figure that?”

Five more arrows struck the wagon. Each came from a different direction.

“Just a hunch,” said Merc.

A dozen rough-looking men rushed out of the keep, armed with an assortment of swords, cudgels, maces, and flails. Recalling how handily Mercury dispatched the Black Bolts, I didn't doubt we could take them. But if we got into a brawl the archers could pick us off at leisure.

“What about those magic spectacles of yours?”

Mercury shook his head. “Not yet recharged. I might give them a bad sunburn at best.”

“Can you move this wagon with your mind like you did Dylan's net?”

Merc smiled. “Just what I was thinking.”

At Merc's mental command, the peg attaching the tongue to the frame of the wagon flew out of place, freeing us from the dead weight of the slumbering draft horse. Mercury and I clung to the underside of the wagon, wedging our fingers between the floorboards. The wagon rolled backward toward the city gate, gaining speed quickly. Arrows thunked into the wood above, but the body of

the wagon shielded us.

The approaching ruffians broke into a run. They were surprisingly fleet of foot.

“They're gaining!” I said. “Can you go any faster?”

“Do you want to drive?” snapped Merc.

Ahead of us a second band of brigands emerged from the gatehouse. One was an archer. He knelt to take aim under the wagon. Mercury swerved away from the gate, denying the archer a clear shot. A fire arrow hit the wagon, igniting a barrel of Brythalian brandy. Flames spread quickly, blistering my fingers as the planks grew hot.

“Hot! Fire! Hot!” I said.

Merc increased our speed, again steering for the gate. The men in our path scrambled to get out of the way.

“Can you open the gate?”

“One thing at a time!”

“Slow down! We're going to crash!”

“Speed up! Slow down! Make up your mind!”

Just before we hit the gate, the wagon made a hard right turn and skidded, kicking up a huge cloud of dust. Driven beyond its limits, the vehicle rolled over. It broke apart as it tumbled across the ground, finally smashing itself against the gate, which buckled, but did not give.

The impact hurled us into the air. Mercury did an acrobatic flip and made a graceful three-point landing. I landed flat on my face and sucked up a mouthful of dirt.

“Hmph,” said Merc. “I thought that would work.”

“If the idea was to break every bone in my body, I think it did.”

“Oh, get up!” he said, helping me to my feet.

We scrambled up the stairs leading to the battlements, only to stop halfway as a trio of hard-faced crossbowmen appeared on the top landing. The two dozen men chasing us gathered at the bottom of the stairs. Archers on several nearby rooftops also had us in their sights.

“What now?” I asked.

“We'll go easy on them,” said Merc. He raised his hands. “We surrender.”

The outlaws seized us, tied our hands behind our backs, and marched us to the keep. They led us up a winding staircase to the Lord Governor's office on the top floor. An open skylight and a balcony overlooking the plaza lit the room.

Lord Governor Birksnore snored fitfully in the corner. He was a rotund man, dressed in a threadbare blue robe of office. Seated in the slumbering Lord Governor's chair, with his feet propped on the desk, was a garishly dressed man with dark olive skin and short black hair. A long white scar ran down his left cheek. His boots were bright yellow. He wore baggy pantaloons with purple and white vertical stripes, a broad red sash around his waist, and a loose green shirt open at the chest. Gold bracelets, earrings, arm bands, rings, and necklaces adorned the appropriate parts of his body.

Behind him stood a living mountain. I had never seen anyone so big—ten feet tall and a yard wide at the chest. His neck and limbs were of similar massive proportions. He wore only a black loincloth, revealing the vast, muscular expanse of his bluish-grey skin. His square face was pocked and scarred, and made uglier still by filmy yellow eyes, beetled brow, sneering purple lips, and jagged teeth. His greasy black hair, knotted around a human rib, hung to his shoulders.

One of our captors raised his fist in salute. “O Great Commander! We have captured the interlopers!” As an afterthought, he added, “They might be wizards.”

The man at the desk looked us over with disdain. “Wizards, you say! How so?”

“They made a wagon to move without horses to pull it!”

The leader laughed. “Propelling wagons! A truly fearsome display of power. Wizards indeed! These are spies sent by the corrupt tyrant of this backwater kingdom to subvert our glorious revolutionary activities! Yes, I know their ilk.” He stood, clasping his hands behind his back. “I am Zaran Zimzabar, Supreme Commander of PANGO, the People's Army of the New Glorious Order. It is my glorious mission to liberate the oppressed masses of Arden from their miserable subjugation to all outmoded forms of society and government in favor of slightly less miserable subjugation to the

New Glorious Order of universal brotherhood.”

“You're a lunatic,” said Merc. He turned to me. “I thought I smelled this rat. Zaran is a notorious Carathan terrorist responsible for dozens of political murders, hijackings, kidnappings, and massacres. He kills men, women, children, nobles, peasants, and pets without remorse, all in the name of a twisted ideology only he can understand.”

“So you've heard of me?” said Zaran.

“You killed several friends of mine,” said Merc. “What brings you to Darnk? Run out of babies to butcher in the civilized realms?”

“Hey!” I said. “Darnk is civilized! Mostly.”

“My mission knows no boundaries,” said Zaran. “In due time, the dictates of history will bring all lands under my sway. I have come to claim this ill-protected pimple of corruption in the name of the New Glorious Order. This squalid city shall be renamed Zaranopolis! I will liberate its downtrodden people from their bondage to foul monarchy so that they may serve PANGO! Zaranopolis shall be a haven for my cause, a training ground for my cadres, a base from which to strike numerous stout blows for the New Glorious Order!” He crossed his arms. “But what am I to do with the two of you?” Zaran nodded toward the monster looming behind him. “Yezgar here is a half-ogre. He enjoys killing. He would enjoy killing you. Can you give me a reason why I should not let him?”

“Give us a second,” I said quickly, before Mercury could hurl another insult.

I need not have bothered. At that moment, two small glass capsules dropped from the skylight and shattered on the stone floor. From the broken spheres issued a hazy cloud of what I soon learned was tear gas.

I choked and gasped as the noxious vapors enveloped me. My eyes stung as if pierced by many needles. Zaran and his men were similarly affected.

Through my tears I saw a figure that might be mistaken for a goddess of war descend into our midst. She was my height, but certainly not my build. Her every firm, female curve was outlined in silver sheen by a bodysuit of metallic mesh. A winged helm hid most of her tan face, but what I could see was grim and lovely, dominated by blood red lips drawn taut. She held a gleaming broadsword in her right hand, a hand axe in her left. An array of other blades were strapped to her arms, thighs, and calves.

“Zaran! You are finished!” she cried. “Natalia Slash has found you at last!”

Chapter 5

Mercury, unaffected by the tear gas, shook off the ropes binding his arms. My bonds fell away too, surely his doing.

Yezgar was also immune to the blinding vapors. With a roar, the halfogre sprang across the chamber and swung a massive fist at Natalia Slash. She sidestepped the blow and hurled her axe into the monster's chest, where it stuck. Undaunted, Yezgar swung again. This blow sent Natalia flying. She hit one of the stone walls, which cracked under the impact. Natalia crumpled to the floor.

I jumped aside as Yezgar charged again. One of Zaran's other minions was not so quick. Trampled by the man-ogre, he died with a bloody crunch and splash. As Yezgar loomed over her, Natalia leapt to her feet and drove her sword deep into his gut. She yanked the blade free and skipped behind him. Yezgar crashed into the wall. It collapsed, burying him under a deadfall of mortar and stone.

Natalia raised her sword. “Your turn, Zaran!”

“Kill her!” commanded Zimzabar. His men—blinded, burning, and retching—weighed their chances against a woman who had defeated Yezgar so handily. They dropped their weapons and fled.

Zaran spat in disgust. He drew a curved knife from his sash. “You'll not stop me, woman! I am the Living Scourge!”

I had noticed in my brief heroic career that combat seemed to involve a great deal of seemingly superfluous dialogue. Lombardo, Dylan, Mercury, and now Natalia and Zaran—with all the posturing, hurling of insults, declarations of intent, and assertions of identity by the combatants it was a wonder anyone had breath left to fight. Perhaps they did it to bolster their courage or simply to break the monotony of the endless life-or-death struggles that consumed their days.

But I had yet to acquire the habit. So while Zaran waved his knife and ranted, I acted, tackling him from behind. We grappled on the floor. My greater size and strength gave me an advantage, but he was fast and agile.

Meanwhile, Yezgar rose up from the pile of rubble, holding a large chunk of stone in each hand. The axe remained embedded in his chest. His gut wound oozed thick green blood, but was obviously less than fatal.

Mercury now entered the fray. A discarded mace flew to the wizard's hand. He hit Yezgar in the back with a strong blow to the kidneys. This distracted the monster long enough for Natalia to dance in and again sink her sword hilt-deep into the monster's gut. She twisted it hard. That got his attention.

Yezgar slammed a stone block against her head and shoved her to the floor. She lost hold of her sword, which remained lodged in the monster's abdomen.

With Natalia on her hands and knees, Yezgar slammed the second stone block down on her back, flattening her. He stomped on her head for good measure. Natalia didn't move.

Yezgar, his foe dispatched, now turned his fearsome yellow gaze upon the fool who dared to attack his master. Namely, me.

“Run, Cosmo!” said Merc. There was real fear in his voice. “Run for your life!”

I gaped up at Yezgar's snarling face. A growl like the clash of colliding millstones rumbled from the monster's throat as he crouched to spring.

I shoved Zaran away from me and started for the door. But hearing Yezgar back in the fight, Zaran's men regained their courage and now poured through the entrance. That way was blocked.

Yezgar pounced.

I vaulted over the desk.

Yezgar smashed it in two.

I spied a narrow alcove in the wall behind the desk and lunged through it. It opened into an equally narrow passageway. Not caring where it led so long as it was away from the angry half-ogre, I ran. I had a brief hope that Yezgar would be unable to follow due to his size, but he plunged after me. The encroaching walls gave way to his massive shoulders like tall grass before an oliphant. His horrible roar reverberated in the enclosed space.

I emerged into what had to be the Lord Governor's bedchamber. It was opulent by Darnkite standards, with a large feather bed and imported furnishings. Frayed tapestries adorned the walls. A threadbare rug covered much of the floor.

But what caught my eye was the shapely young woman sprawled across the bed. As I sped by, I noted tan skin, honey-blond hair, and a barely-there garment of gossamer red silk. I was in too much hurry to drink in all the details, but such was her beauty that—even with Yezgar at my heels—I was distracted. Distracted enough to trip over a second woman slumbering on the floor. She was—I saw as my chin hit the rug—identical to the woman on the bed, but clad in blue. Each woman wore a manacle on her right ankle. These were attached by long chains to an iron ring set in the floor. It looked like Lord Governor Birksnore was holding them against their will.

Yezgar burst into the room. I clambered to my feet and tried the bedroom door. It was barred from the outside.

There was nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide.

Using only one hand, Yezgar grabbed me by both shoulders and lifted me off the floor, his thick fingers pressing against my neck. He crooked his arm so that our faces were on a level. I felt his hot stinking breath, reeking of regurgitated carrion.

“Yezgar,” I said, “Perhaps we could discuss this like civilized men.”

He snapped his arm to full extension, propelling me through the bedroom door and across the sitting room beyond. I landed on the floor with a backside full of splinters, my head ringing like a

temple bell.

Yezgar snatched me up again and flung me at the ceiling. Fortunately, he missed. Rather than smacking against stone, I crashed through the glass panes of a skylight and sailed some twenty feet above the top of the keep. While aloft, I had a fine view of the rolling brown hills of the surrounding countryside, the jagged rocks and white rapids of the Longwash at the base of the tower—and of a purple dragon with golden wings hovering high above.

I fell, landing on a large potted cactus waiting for me on the balcony like a bad punch line. The hapless plant absorbed the brunt of my fall while I absorbed most of its spines. I was wedged into the pot with sand in my trousers and my knees at my ears, unable to move.

Yezgar lifted the pot over his head and slammed it to the tiles. Sitting there amid the crushed plant matter and broken clay, with burning eyes, broken body, and a homicidal half-ogre towering over me, I decided that Mercury was right—we should have gone on to Brythalia. This was the end.

But the deathblow never came. Instead, Yezgar tottered as a couch flew out of the sitting room and struck his broad back, followed by several chairs, a desk, a table, and a rush of gaudy bric-a-brac. I feared he would fall on and crush me, but the monster's high center of gravity carried him over the parapet and off the balcony. He hit the water far below with a thunderous splash. I saw him go under, bob up into sight again, then vanish beneath the rushing waters for good. Or so I hoped.

Mercury strode onto the balcony.

"Got him," he said. "Clever of you to lure him into position that way."

"Er, right."

"Are you hurt?"

"Other than the cuts, bruises, splinters, glass fragments, and cactus spines, I'm fine."

"Why is there a cactus here?"

"Apparently so I could land on it."

"You were lucky. You should be dead. Your new hero status has already saved you from your own folly."

"My folly? You were the one who said take a closer look!"

"I wouldn't have had the chance to if you hadn't insisted we investigate in the first place. Maybe next time you'll listen to me."

"Maybe you'll listen to me!"

"Doubtful."

"What about Zaran and his men?"

"I threw him off the other balcony while you kept Yezgar busy." Mercury shrugged. "At that point, his followers fled. Those still able to walk, I mean."

"And the big shiny warrior woman?"

"Natalia?" He frowned. "I suggest we be on our way ere she recovers."

"Recovers! She should be dead!"

"That armor of hers is enchanted. It protects her from most physical harm."

"You know her then."

"We've met," he said cryptically. "She's an adventuress who sells her sword to the highest bidder. Most likely the Prince of Caratha hired her to hunt Zaran."

"If she's after Zaran, why should we worry?"

"Does the sum of ten million carats ring a bell?"

"Good point."

"Our horses are where we left them. Ready to ride?"

"What about the girls in the bedroom?"

"What of them?"

"I think they're being held prisoner."

"It happens."

"It's outrageous! We must free them!"

"Fine. Just hurry."

"And bring them with us." I led the way to the bedroom.

“Hold on!” said Merc. “I know that running around with half-clad women is part of the heroic tradition, but you're new. You should ease yourself into the role.”

“Look at them, Merc. So young, so lovely, so innocent.”

“Young and lovely, I'll give you. I wouldn't bet the turnip farm on innocent.”

“Merc! You don't even know them.”

“Nor do I care to. We can't take them with us.”

I knelt beside the girl on the floor. She could barely be twenty, if that. “Only so far as Brythalia,” I said.

“Oh, that would be doing them a favor,” said Merc. “Two unescorted, attractive young women let loose in the lawless wilds of Brythalia. Better to leave them here.”

“We can't! We'll have to bring them to Raelna then.”

“Mistake,” said Merc. “Complete and utter—”

“Can you wake them?”

“Easily.”

“Then do it. We'll learn their tale and then decide.”

“Cosmo—”

“Just do it, Merc.”

With a sigh of exasperation, the wizard knelt beside me and placed his hand over the girl's face. He mumbled a few unintelligible magic words. Her big blue eyes fluttered open. They were the most beautiful eyes I had ever seen.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Mmm-hmm,” she murmured.

“What's your name?”

“Sapphrina,” she said. “Sapphrina Corundum. Who are you?”

“My name is Jason Cosmo,” I said, losing all presence of mind and forgetting to use my alias.

Her face contorted in horror. She jerked away from my grasp, screaming. She scrambled across the floor until her back was to the wall. “May all The Gods preserve me!” she said, eyes wide with fear.

“Clearly, she doesn't want to come with us,” said Merc.

Sapphrina cast about desperately for a route of escape, but Mercury and I stood between her and all exits from the chamber. “Stay back, you vile inhuman fiend!” she said.

“Vile inhuman fiend? Me?”

Sapphrina laughed bitterly. “Do you toy with me? I know well the fate of any woman who falls into your grasp, monster!” She covered herself as best her immodest attire allowed. “I'll die before I submit to your degradations!”

Dumbfounded, I turned to Merc. “What is all this?”

“Did I fail to mention your evil reputation? Most people think you're the bastard offspring of a Demon Lord, remember?”

“Yes, but...”

“Now you see the need for maintaining a low profile. Let's be on our way before we frighten the poor girl any further.”

“Wait.” I held out my open hands. “Listen, Sapphrina, I'm not who you think I am. My father was a turnip farmer, not a Demon Lord. If you want to leave this place, I'll help you. I swear by all The Gods in alphabetical order that I will not harm you.” I flashed my most reassuring smile.

Eyes narrowing, she gave me another appraisal, warmer than the first. She said, in a soft and hopeful voice. “You aren't going to ravish me?”

“Certainly not!”

“Or rub me down with bacon grease and throw me into a pit full of rabid weasels?”

“Gods, no!”

“Or force me to wear go-go boots and dance the tarantella on a red hot iron platform suspended over a river of lava?”

“What's a go-go boot?”

She relaxed a bit, but remained wary. “My sister Rubis and I are prisoners of that pig Birksnore.

We planned to escape, but hadn't quite worked out the details yet.”

“You can escape now. We'll get you home, wherever that may be. I promise.”

“You came to rescue us?”

“Not exactly,” said Merc. “We were out enjoying a jolly ride in the country and thought, hey, while we're out and about we'll just correct all the injustices of the world.”

“Ignore him,” I said, shooting Mercury a dark look. “We were in the neighborhood. You looked like you needed help.”

“Isn't that what the guy with the beard just said?” asked Sapphrina.

“Well, yes, but it's a question of tone.”

“Could we speed this up?” said Merc. “Natalia, remember?”

“I'll gather my things,” said the girl. Sapphrina went to the bed and shook her sleeping twin. “Rubis! Wake up!”

Mercury brushed her aside and repeated his incantation. Rubis awoke, saw Merc, and covered herself.

“Sapphrina! Who are these men?”

“They've come to rescue us! This is Jason Cosmo and some dour friend of his.”

“Jason Cosmo!” Rubis screamed and leapt from the bed. “Run, Sapphrina!”

“Again?” said Merc. “This is ridiculous.”

Sapphrina caught Rubis by the arm and shook her. “Sister! It's not what you think! He's not *that* Jason Cosmo.”

Overcoming her initial fright, Rubis regarded me carefully. “Well, he doesn't look like a vile, inhuman fiend.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“No cloven hooves, no fangs, none of the features you'd expect from the bastard offspring of a Demon Lord.”

“Absolutely not,” I said.

“Actually,” said Rubis. “He's quite handsome.”

“I noticed,” said Sapphrina.

I blushed, unaccustomed to such bold praise from such lovely women.

“Listen,” said Merc. “We're in a bit of a rush, ladies, so you can flirt and coo later. Get dressed. Pack light. We'll find you horses and be on our way within the hour. Sooner would be better. I want to be long gone before Natalia is up and about.”

“Too late,” said the warrior woman, striding into the room with a throwing knife in each hand. “I didn't recognize you with the beard, Boltblaster. You look better without it. You'd look better still without your head.”

Mercury raised his hands in a placating gesture. “You're not still sore over that little misunderstanding in Xornos are you?”

Natalia sneered. “Do you mean when you left me buried under several tons of Ganthian wheat flour in the cargo hold of a sinking ship?”

“Yes, that,” said Merc.

“It had completely slipped my mind.”

“I knew you'd survive. You always do.”

“True.” Natalia raised a knife. “But will you?”

Chapter 6

“Natalia, be reasonable,” said Merc.

In response, the adventuress hurled a knife at him. Mercury snatched the blade from the air with his right hand. She threw the second knife. He caught it in his left hand with equal sureness.

Natalia Slash laughed. “Return them, wizard.”

“What's the point?” asked Merc.

“Do it.”

The wizard threw both knives at once. Natalia caught them with ease. “You could have let Yezgar finish me, Boltblaster. You didn't. I appreciate that, so I'll forget about our last encounter. No ill will.”

“Fine by me,” said Merc, visibly relieved.

“My sword?” said Natalia.

“Still in the ogre. Who is now in the river.”

Natalia's face darkened. “That blade has been in my family for twenty generations. In the hands of my ancestors it slew Greatmaw the Dragon, Slissturul the Troll King, and the Wacky Wraith Warriors of Woe who haunt the Jade Tombs of Jadipoor.”

“I'm sure it will turn up,” said Merc.

Natalia glowered. “And Zaran?”

“Zaran did a triple gainer with a full twist off the other balcony. You should find him in a broken heap on the ground below. But you know how slippery such villains are.”

“He can't have gone far,” said Natalia. “He'll rejoin his followers nearby and I'll take them all at once.” She flexed her armored hands. “Still running from the Society?”

Mercury shrugged. “I like to travel.”

“And who is this?” Her steely grey eyes met mine. I felt suddenly small and vulnerable, like a rabbit facing an eagle. Mercury shot me a warning glance, but I didn't need the hint.

“I'm Burlo Stumproot, milady.” I bowed.

Sapphrina and Rubis opened their mouths to protest, but caught on quickly. Mercury moved to my side and clapped me on the back. “Burlo here is my new squire. He handles provisions, baggage, cooking, and the like. Good man.”

“If you say so,” said Natalia, obviously not convinced. She probed and measured me with her eyes. I gave her what I hoped was a suitably servile smile. She pursed her lips and returned her attention to Merc. “Once I have Zaran's head on my trophy wall, I must fulfill a contract for the Theocrat of Stive.” “Swamp trolls?”

She nodded. “Raiding in force again, eating villagers, the usual. It will take a few weeks to clean them out. Next on my list is a commission from our mutual friend Isogoras the Xornite. You can guess its nature.” She speared me with her gaze once more and strode from the room.

“I don't think she bought the Burlo Stumproot dodge,” I said.

“She didn't.”

“You don't look like a Burlo,” said Sapphrina, stuffing clothes into a pack.

“She is suspicious of you,” said Merc. “But more because you are in my company than anything else. Anyway, she will dispose of Zaran and the swamp trolls posthaste. We have less time to reach Raelna than I thought.”

“If she's working for Isogoras—”

“It means he finally realized that the Black Bolts are useless. Hiring Natalia is the first intelligent thing he's done in years.”

“You really dislike this Xornite.”

“With good reason. We were both apprenticed to the great wizard Pencader. Isogoras was an arrogant and willful student, ever lusting for power beyond his means. In secret, he studied dark magic and made bargains with demons. When Pencader found him out and rebuked him sternly, Isogoras opened a gateway to the Assorted Hells in an attempt to murder our master.”

“What happened?”

“I came to my master's aid. Isogoras lost control of the spell, falling through his own hellpit. Trapped in the Deepest Pit of Hell, he learned more about demons than he wanted to know.”

“No doubt.”

“Many years passed before he returned to the mortal plane, horribly disfigured and driven insane by his time below. Somehow he blames me for all that. He is now a leader of the Dark Magic Society, charged with recruiting me and other wizards into their ranks. But he'd rather kill me.”

“And vice versa.”

“Exactly. But Natalia is the greater threat. To reach Raelna before she comes after us we must travel light and fast.” He nodded toward the girls. “If you bring them, you not only endanger our lives, but theirs.”

The sisters, having followed our conversation with interest as they gathered their belongings, turned to me with pleading eyes.

“They come with us,” I said firmly.

“Then you take care of them.”

“I will.” Sapphrina and Rubis beamed. “Besides, how can Natalia catch Zaran, deliver him to Caratha, go fight trolls in Stive, and still hope to catch us before we reach Raelna?”

At that moment, the purple dragon I saw earlier wheeled past the keep with a great beating of its mighty wings. Natalia rode on its back. The dragon roared, a sound that shook the tower.

“Golan of the Heights, Natalia’s dragon steed,” said Mercury.

“She rides a *dragon*?”

“Obviously. She can be in Stive by nightfall if she wishes. That is why anything that slows us down could be fatal.”

With a last disapproving glance at the twins, Mercury strode from the room.

“What is his problem?” asked Sapphrina, slipping out of her wispy garment without the slightest hint of embarrassment. I turned my back just in time to prevent my eyes from bulging out of their sockets. My face glowed a hot red. Darnkite women most certainly did not disrobe before men not their husbands. And they looked nothing like Sapphrina Corundum in any respect.

“He’s in a permanent bad mood,” I said. “So, ah, how did the two of you come to be prisoners of the Lord Governor?”

“Bad luck,” said Rubis. Her discarded garment landed on my shoulder. “We went to a party in Caratha.”

“The wine was drugged,” added Sapphrina.

“We were abducted and sold as slaves in Rumular.”

“Sold? Slaves? Are you serious?”

Slavery was alien to Darnk—and unlawful. In a land where everyone was poor and miserable anyway, there was little point in having slaves about. I knew that slaveholding was common elsewhere in the Eleven Kingdoms, but to me the very idea of one person owning another was wrong. Considering how hard the Mighty Champion fought to free all the peoples of Arden from their enslavement to the Evil Empire, it was shameful that any kingdom would bring that vile practice back into the world.

“Sold. As slaves. Seriously,” said Sapphrina. “And in Rumular of all places! The Brythalian market is fine for stocking tin mines and lumber camps, but we fetched nothing close to a decent price. Forty brythals for the both of us! What an insult!”

“To be sold?”

“To be sold so cheaply!” said Rubis. “We’re easily worth a hundred times that! A thousand times even! We’re of noble blood, young, bright, and easy on the eyes.”

“Healthy, good conversationalists, and pleasant company,” added Sapphrina.

“We play several instruments,” said Rubis. “I excel at the flute.”

“And I the lyre,” said Sapphrina. “Most of all, we’re Zastrian.”

“Zastrian women are the most beautiful in the world,” said Rubis. “Everyone says so.”

“Pearls before swine,” said Sapphrina.

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “You’re upset not because you were drugged, kidnapped, dragged to Brythalia, and sold into slavery—but because someone didn’t pay enough for you?”

“That fat dumpling of a Darnkite got the bargain of the ages, believe you me!” said Rubis.

“Have you heard of the Corundum Trading Company?” asked Sapphrina.

“I haven’t. Sorry. Not a lot of trade here.”

“It’s only the largest and most successful shipping business in Zastria,” said Rubis. “Our father owns it.”

“He founded it,” added Sapphrina.

“Built it up from nothing,” said Rubis.

“Someday it will all be ours,” they said in unison.

“After they change Zastrian law so that women can own property,” said Sapphrina.

“Women can't own property there?” I asked.

“No. They can only be property,” said Sapphrina. “Which isn't quite the same thing.” She giggled. “You can turn around now.”

The twins wore tunics so tight they might have been painted on, along with matching hose and soft leather boots. Sapphrina was dressed in brilliant blue and Rubis in startling red. Their hems were daringly high, their necklines astonishingly low. What held their garments up in the absence of shoulder straps, I could only guess. More clothing magic, perhaps.

“We look awful, don't we?” said Rubis.

“Not the word that came to mind,” I said. My eyes searched unsuccessfully for a safe harbor.

“Oh?” said Sapphrina, arching her eyebrows. “What did come to mind?”

“Beautiful. You're the most beautiful women I've ever seen,” I blurted.

“I told you,” said Rubis. “Zastrian. Accept no substitute.”

“You're sweet,” said Sapphrina. She threw her arms around me and kissed my cheek. Women back in Lower Hicksnittle were not so forward or affectionate. I blushed crimson.

“So what are we going to do with that pig Birksnore?” asked Rubis as she combed her hair.

“You should notify the king,” I said. “He will see that the Lord Governor is properly punished. Slaveholding is against Darnkish law.”

Sapphrina laughed. “Complain to the king! You're a card, Jason!”

“An utter scream,” agreed Rubis. “But, truly, truly, what shall we do to him?”

“I know just the thing,” said Sapphrina, clapping her hands. “Jason, we'll need your help.”

Under Merc's impatient eye, I helped the twins drag Lord Birksnore's corpulent corpus down to the plaza. We left him there chained naked to the fountain. He would be humiliated when the DormaDose wore off and his subjects found him there. This was less punishment than he deserved—but I had refused to let the twins roll him off the balcony to see if he would bounce or merely burst when he hit the hard ground below.

We departed Offal soon thereafter, leaving the city to its slumber. I was newly armed with a sword and shield and rusty chainmail stripped from our fallen foes.

The road was an unmaintained dirt track that followed the River Longwash, running first to the south before bending slowly westward toward the Brythalian frontier. The region between the kingdoms was all hills and rough scrub and stubby trees, unclaimed and almost uninhabited.

Brythalia had no interest in expanding toward Darnk, while Darnk already had more rough scrub and stubby trees than it needed. It would take us several days to cross this no man's land.

Riding with a punctured posterior was painful, but the vivacious twins distracted me from my discomfort. When the road permitted, they rode to either side of me, plying me with questions.

Mercury took the lead, looking dour and doing his best to ignore us.

“So you are not the get of a Demon Lord?” asked Rubis.

“No,” I said. “My father was a woodcutter.”

“Not Death's first cousin?” asked Sapphrina.

“I'm a humble woodcutter and turnip farmer, no more.”

“A peasant then?” said Rubis. “A vital and virile son of the soil?” She pursed her pillowy lips as if contemplating a favorite dessert.

“I've never heard it put quite like that, but, yes. We're all peasants in Darnk. Except the king, who is a king. We also have a lord or two, but we pay them little heed. Most of our nobles were killed a few generations back in the Great Turnip Tax Rebellion of 923.”

“How exciting,” said Sapphrina. “The common folk did much the same to our ancestors when Zastria became a republic. Many noble families were massacred. The survivors were stripped of lands and titles. Rubis and I are of noble lineage. But, strictly speaking, we're commoners just like you.”

“So no need for you to be intimidated by us,” said Rubis. “We’re women of the people, willing to freely associate with almost anyone.”

“No doubt,” snorted Merc.

“What was that, Merc?”

“Nothing,” said the wizard.

“So how came you into the company of this sourpuss?” asked Sapphrina.

I related my tale from the beginning, leaving nothing out. The twins listened attentively, with few interruptions. “And here we are,” I concluded. “But tell me more of yourselves.”

“What do you wish to know?” asked Rubis.

“Everything.”

“I’ll bet.”

Alternating every few sentences, Sapphrina and Rubis skimmed through their life story. Their mother, Jewella, was in her day the most beautiful woman in Zastria. She died giving birth to the sisters. Their father, Corun Corundum, was the richest man in Zastria and a member of the ruling Senate. They grew up among the rich and powerful, enjoying a privileged life of palaces, parties, and pedicures. That carefree existence ended when they defied their father by refusing to go through with the marriages of alliance he arranged for them.

“Zastrian girls don’t get to marry for love,” said Sapphrina.

“But the suitors Father picked were particularly odious,” said Rubis.

“Our refusal utterly upset the balance of power in Zastria,” said Sapphrina.

“We started a civil war, if you must know,” said Rubis.

“Helped start it,” Sapphrina corrected. “It wasn’t entirely our fault.”

“Nevertheless, Father ordered us flogged for our defiance,” said Rubis.

“Flogged?” I was horrified.

“Scourged is more like it,” said Sapphrina. “He is used to getting his way.”

“But so are we,” said Rubis.

“We had planned our escape for some time, saving a portion of our allowance and skimming what we could from Father’s treasury,” said Sapphrina. “Though we could own nothing in Zastria, we transferred our funds to a secret account with the Bank of Caratha.”

“To Caratha we fled,” continued Rubis.

“You can read the whole sordid tale in our autobiography,” added Sapphrina.

“*Naughty Nymphs*,” said Rubis. “It was twelve weeks on the *Caratha Times* bestseller list.”

“Not only are we rich and fabulously beautiful,” said Sapphrina. “We’re famous too. Not quite as famous as you, however.”

“Am I famous?”

“Infamous, rather,” said Rubis. “You’re Arden’s Archvillain.”

“So I’m told.”

“We have achieved a certain prominence in Caratha,” said Sapphrina. “Which does not sit well with Father. From time to time he sends agents to abduct us back to Zastria.”

“But they are easily bribed—or otherwise dissuaded,” said Rubis.

“Was that how you came to be sold into bondage? Some revenge of your father’s?”

“No,” said Sapphrina. “At first we thought his men had taken us. But they were instead in the hire of one of our high society rivals.”

“Aurora Nightdew,” spat Rubis.

“The treacherous witch came to gloat before they shipped us off to Rumular,” said Sapphrina. “She was much amused by the notion that we would spend the rest of our lives as scullery maids for some backwoods Brythalian baronet.”

“Birksnore bought us for the price of a broken down donkey,” said Rubis. “We arrived in Offal less than a week ago. We were already planning our escape.”

“But we are very grateful for the rescue,” said Sapphrina, batting her eyes.

“Very, very grateful,” said Rubis. She winked.

By the time we stopped to make camp for the night, I had ceased to be shocked or embarrassed by the suggestive comments of the sisters, for it was apparent to me that their flirtatious manner was more show than substance. They were not quite the naughty nymphs they pretended to be. But they were, to be sure, a bright, brave, and resourceful pair. I was completely charmed.

Mercury, however, was still annoyed by their presence.

“They will slow us down,” he grouched as I helped him set up a small tent he produced from within the folds of his magic cloak. We decided to pass the night in a little copse atop a low hill between the road and the river.

“They haven't so far,” I said, glancing down the slope to the river bank where the twins were tending the horses.

“We've only been on the road a few hours. Tomorrow we'll be in the saddle all day. And the next day. And the next. And so on for weeks. They won't be able to maintain the pace we must set.”

“They might surprise you. They've got more experience in the saddle than I do.”

“I don't doubt that, but the Black Bolts will soon pick up our trail in Offal. I don't want them to catch us out here. In that event, your pretty friends will only be in the way. They might get us all killed.”

“We beat the Black Bolts before.”

“What if Natalia attacks? Or the Red Huntsman? Or Isogoras? Or all of them at once? Those girls are our weak link, as any enemy will realize.”

“So what would you have us do, Mercury? Abandon them in the wilderness?”

“No. But we must be rid of them as soon as possible.”

“Before we reach Raelna?”

“Yes.”

“You said Brythalia was no place for unescorted women.”

“Brythalia is bad. But Hell is worse.”

The sisters shared the tent while Mercury and I took turns on watch. The night proved uneventful. The next day we were up and riding before dawn. We traveled four leagues over rugged terrain before sundown. Even so, Mercury was unsatisfied with the pace. We covered almost twenty miles the next day. Stiff, sore, filthy with sweat and grime, we stopped for the night. We were still some fifteen leagues from the Brythalian frontier.

“We're going to bathe in the river,” announced Sapphrina. She eyed me with a challenging smirk. “Care to join us, Jason? You look like you could use a good scrubbing.”

I blushed. “Maybe later.”

“We'll be waiting,” said Rubis.

The sisters strolled arm in arm to the water's edge. With no concession to modesty, they shed their clothes and dove naked into the water, laughing and splashing. I tried not to look in their direction as I assisted Mercury with the tent, but my eyes betrayed my good intentions with alarming frequency.

The wizard tensed. A worried frown crossed his face.

“What is it?” I asked, involuntarily glancing toward the river. Just to make sure the wet, glistening, soaped-up twins were safe, of course.

“We have been observed.”

I looked about and saw no one. “By whom?”

He shook his head. “By magic. Scrying. I detected the signature energies with my heightened magical awareness.”

“Of course you did. So what are you saying? Someone spotted us in a crystal ball?”

“Something like that.”

“The Society?”

“I don't think so. What I felt was far more powerful than any scrying device the Society could master. I have felt it before. It was the Black Mirror of OugaOyg.”

“What, may I ask, is the Black Mirror of Ouga-Oyg?”

“Ouga-Oyg of the Thousand and Thirty-Two Eyes, Less One, is among the more puissant of the Demon Lords. The Peeper From the Pit, as he is called, possesses a great enchanted mirror with which he can spy on events almost anywhere in Arden. I sensed its power upon us.”

“Then the Demon Lords know where we are.”

“A Demon Lord knows where we are, but not necessarily who we are. The impression was fleeting. Likely, the Peeper was merely browsing the countryside. He may not have noted us at all. But it troubles me that his attention is drawn to this part of the world.”

“Why?”

“Because this is where we are.”

“Oh, right. I knew that.”

“Our interview with He Who Sits On The Porch was obscured by a misdirecting magic mist and he transported us several leagues away afterward. But the Demon Lords may have been drawn to the disturbance. We must guard our words, actions, and even our very thoughts. If the Peeper turns the full power of the Black Mirror upon us, he will be able to read them all.”

“You're making me paranoid.”

“Good. Paranoia keeps you alive.”

“Ho, Jason Cosmol!” called Sapphrina from the river. “Won't you be a good hero and come scrub our backs?”

“We'd return the favor gladly!” added Rubis.

“Go ahead,” said Merc, with an uncharacteristic smile. “You really could use a bath.”

Later that night, Mercury woke me for my turn on watch. The night air had gone chilly. The waning moon was obscured behind a bank of clouds that glowed like luminous frozen smoke. “It has been quiet,” whispered Merc. He nodded to the wall of darker clouds gathering in the west. “We will have rain tomorrow.”

“That should obscure our trail,” I said.

“And slow our progress,” said Merc. “And get us wet. Good night.”

Mercury rolled himself into a blanket and was soon fast asleep. I stood and stretched and ambled around the perimeter of our camp to get my blood flowing. I checked on the horses, and then strolled to the river bank. The Longwash slid through the night like a great dark serpent, writhing and murmuring hypnotically. An occasional moonbeam broke through the clouds and danced lightly across the river in glints of silver before winking out as if it had never been there at all. I sat beside the river for a long while, reflecting on all that had befallen me. Wizards, bounty hunters, mercenaries, the struggles of gods and demons. I almost wished I were back in Lower Hicksnittle.

Almost.

Hearing a light tread behind me, I realized I had been a poor watchman while lost in my reverie. I half-turned to see one of the twins standing behind me. In the darkness I couldn't tell which of them it was.

“Sapphrina,” she said, answering my unasked question as she sat down beside me. “I was looking for you.”

“Why?”

“I have yet to thank you properly for rescuing us.”

“No thanks are needed.”

“I think otherwise. You have added to your own danger by helping us.” She clasped my hand in hers and brought her face close to mine. “I am grateful.”

“I could not have done otherwise,” I said.

“I know,” she whispered. Her breath was sweet and warm on my cheek. “Your motives are so honorable. You didn’t even blink when we revealed our father’s wealth. You’ve made no improper advances—which is bruising to our egos, but touching. You are a rare and noble man, Jason Cosmo.”

I shook my head. “I’m just an ordinary man.”

“No, you’re not,” she said. “I have never met any man so brave and decent and kind.”

She clasped my face in her hands and delivered a long, lingering kiss, then stood and returned wordlessly to the tent.

I could get used to this hero business.

Chapter 7

True to Mercury’s prediction, it rained the next day. And the next. And the day after that. The downpour did not relent for five rainy days. The Longwash overspilled its banks, sweeping aside boulders and trees as it rampaged southward. The rising water forced us to abandon the track beside the river for higher ground. Alert for flash floods and mudslides, we picked our way along the hilltops. When we emerged from the wilderness a week later, my companions and I were drenched, chilled, dirty, and exhausted. Our horses were nearly spent from the effort of trudging through thick mud. We wanted nothing more than to kick off our boots and prop up our feet by the hearth of a homey inn.

Unfortunately, there weren’t any in Grimmel. It was a grim little place, not so much a village as a logging camp. The forest region of northern Brythalia boasted oak, ash, elm, birch, and maple mingled with cedar, fir, and pine. The Brythalian forest was said to be the overgrown remnant of the primal nursery wherein The Gods first cultivated the various kinds of trees. This was a questionable claim, considering both the colossal destruction wrought during the Age of War and the fact that none of the trees in the region were more than a few hundred years old. But every nation needs its points of pride. Darnk claimed to be the home of more than five hundred and sixty-seven varieties of fungus found nowhere else in Arden.

Grimmel was a collection of crude bunkhouses, a mess hall, a guardhouse, and a few storage sheds clustered atop a barren mound of earth and stone near the flood-swollen Longwash. The twangy rasp of saws and the loud crack of axes from the surrounding forest suggested that most of the men who lived here were at work. Perhaps a dozen loggers and brown-shirted Brythalian men-at-arms milled about the camp itself. They offered no words of welcome as we rode into the encampment, but boldly eyed Sapphrina and Rubis with hungry leers. Mercury and I rated only surly glances. We stopped in the center of the camp. The men spread out in a loose circle around our horses, surrounding us. Most were armed with axes, staves, or knives. The few unsavory soldiers reached for their swords. So did I. Most of the workers in these camps were criminals sentenced to hard labor. Their supposed jailers were not much better, as criminals could also be sentenced to service in the Brythalian army. Guards and guarded were united in their intentions toward us.

“I advise you girls to stick close lest you be dragged behind a woodpile and never come back,” said Merc.

“We’re outnumbered,” I said quietly. “Should I make the first move?”

“Let me handle this.”

Eyes hidden behind his sunshades, Mercury silently studied our would-be assailants. No one moved. No one spoke. Merc suddenly raised his right hand and pointed at the biggest man present, a burly logger holding a thick tree branch like a club. Five thin beams of blue light lanced from Merc’s fingers and converged on the man’s bare chest, which promptly exploded in a spray of gore and shattered bone. He fell over backward in the muck. Blue smoke curled from the ragged hole in his chest.

“I am Shadrizar the Sadistic,” announced Mercury in a low, menacing voice that gave even me chills. The loggers and soldiers backed away fearfully. “I seek lodging for myself, my squire—and this pair of maneating vampire-succubi she-devils from Hell!”

On cue, the faces of Rubis and Sapphrina lit up with a ghastly green glow. Sharp, protruding fangs appeared in their mouths. The entire mob fled into the forest, except for a single soldier who was apparently rooted to the spot in sheer pants-wetting terror.

Mercury pointed at him. The guard flinched like a whipped dog. “You! See to it! Or I will feed you to them now!”

The twins smiled their fangsome smiles. The soldier blanched and hurried away.

Mercury threw back his head and laughed like a maniac. “That is what you call creative intimidation,” he said. “With a simple Blue Bolt of Death and a minor illusion, we have averted a senseless and time-consuming slaughter. Although a slaughter of this lot might be a public service.” “Wasn't that risky?” I asked. “Can not the Dark Magic Society track you when you use your power?” “Minor spells, quickly cast,” said Mercury with a shrug. “The traces will soon wash away in the ethereal tides. All that will come of this is some welcome cooperation. Ah! Here is the camp commandant now, no doubt to offer us his best accommodations.”

Indeed, the commandant bunked elsewhere for the night while we occupied his cabin. The furnishings were plain, but for the first time since leaving home I slept with a roof over my head, even if I was on the floor. The twins shared the buginfested bed—but only after cajoling Mercury into magically fumigating it and producing some clean sheets from the transdimensional depths of his cloak. We all took a turn on watch. Despite Merc's display of sorcerous might, there was a small chance the convicts and their keepers might regain their courage and have another go at us in the night.

But they did not. We rode out the next morning, much to the relief of Grimmel's inhabitants. As we departed, a notice nailed to a tree at the settlement's edge caught my eye.

“That has my name on it!” I cried.

I ripped down the water-stained poster:

WANTED

Dead or Alive*

JASON COSMO

REWARD 10,000,000 CARATS

***Body intact. No disintegrations!**

This was the first tangible proof of the bounty on my head. Seeing it in stark print chilled my blood.

“This is not the way to maintain a low profile,” said Merc.

I stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment, and then noticed that every convict and soldier within earshot was looking our way with an unhealthy amount of renewed interest.

“Right. Sorry.”

“Most of them can't read. I'm sure they have the brain capacity of walnuts. But let's not stick around until they connect the dots.”

“I was surprised.”

“Don't be. You're Arden's Archvillain, remember? These notices are tacked to every tree from here to Cyrilla.”

“Not a comforting thought.”

“Here is one less comforting. Word of our presence will spread through these work camps like an outbreak of Orphalian flu. If the Red Huntsman still prowls Brythalia—as he did a fortnight ago—he will

soon pick up our trail.”

“That would be bad.”

Mercury fixed me with a stare. “Very bad.”

It took three days to cross the forest region. We passed through several logging camps, all showing signs of recent abandonment—recent as in newly-doused cooking fires still smoldering. At last we emerged into Brythalia’s broad, rolling farmlands. Evening was upon us as we neared the small hamlet of Goatgloss. Though Mercury counseled another night of roughing it under the stars, the twins thought otherwise.

“We’ve had our fill of wallowing in the mud like swine, wizard,” said Sapphrina. “If there is a decent bed in this village, I want it.”

“And a hot bath and shampoo,” said Rubis. “And a properly cooked meal. And my nails need a buff and polish, though I doubt we’ll find a decent manicurist here.”

“My boots could use mending too,” said Sapphrina. “The heel has come loose. Our dresses need pressing and the brambles have fairly well shredded our hose.”

“Really, your graces?” said Mercury sourly. “Maybe we could schedule a therapeutic massage and aromatherapy session while we’re at it.”

“Don’t tease us,” said Sapphrina.

“But some scented candles would be nice,” added Rubis.

Mercury muttered something unintelligible.

Much banging of shutters and bolting of doors accompanied our progress through the village. I heard the whimpering of small children, the fearful wails of young women, the anguished prayers of the old. Dogs growled at us. Cats hissed. Horses whickered nervously. Oddly enough, despite the name, I saw no goats, glossy or otherwise.

“Not exactly a warm, friendly welcome,” I observed.

“Your reputation has preceded us. Let us hope the news of our progress has not reached the Red Huntsman or BlackMoon.”

“Yes, let’s. But are you sure it is my reputation to blame? You’re the one who blasted a man with Blue Bolts of Death.”

“Blue Bolt of Death. Singular. I only used one.”

“Whatever.”

We dismounted before the Dancing Donkey Inn. Above the entrance hung a weathered sign depicting a donkey in a wig doing a jig while taking a swig of ale.

“Let’s try this one,” said Merc.

It was the only inn in town.

The proprietor, a rotund man with drooping jowls and several chins, met us at the door, wringing his hands nervously and bowing as best he could.

“Welcome, welcome, good sirs, to my humble establishment,” he wheezed. “Please don’t destroy it. That is, I mean to say, how may I be of service?”

“We need a hot meal and rooms for the night,” said Merc, flipping him a silver coin. “Also, our horses need tending.”

“At once!” said the owner as the coin hit the floor and rolled beneath a table. “You may have any room you desire, as all of my other guests have just fled out the back door. Roasted lamb! Steamed mushrooms! Fresh baked bread! Orphalian cheese! My finest wine! And your horses will be—ah, what do your horses eat?”

“Hay,” I said. “Or oats. What would you expect?”

“Not human flesh?” he asked, licking his lips.

“The usual horse fare will suffice.”

He seemed relieved to hear this. “Please, please be seated, kind masters. My daughter will serve you shortly. I will see that your horses are carefully groomed and given our best feed. Your rooms will

be prepared, your—”

“Thank you,” said Merc. “I am certain you will see to it.”

“Oh, yes! Yes! Absolutely!” The nervous innkeeper waddled into the back room, shouting instructions.

“Good service here,” said Mercury as we took our places around a wine-stained table. Mercury sat at one end and I at the other, flanked by the twins, who tended to keep as much distance from the wizard as possible.

“I hope the food is good too,” I said. “The rations you store in your cape have an odd taste.”

“That is due to radical ionization as a side effect of the transdimensional interface.” He shrugged. “You get used to it.”

“I haven’t yet.”

A trembling slip of a girl appeared from the kitchen. She bore a steaming platter of meat and mushrooms. Her wide eyes remained fixed on me as she approached the table. She stumbled and nearly fell at an uneven spot in the floor, but caught herself and set the platter down.

“That looks delicious!” I said, smiling hungrily. The girl gasped and scurried back to the kitchen like a frightened rabbit.

The twins laughed.

“Why is everyone so afraid of me?” I asked.

“I have heard,” said Sapphrina, “That in a single season you pillaged the Free Coast, ravished the Royal Harem of King Oriones the Mad of Cyrilla, massacred an entire Zastrian town with your bare hands, violated the Seven Sacred Sylphs of Serragonia, and bit the head off an ox.”

“Why would I bite the head off an ox?”

“Who knows?” said Mercury. “As I have explained repeatedly, you have a fearsome reputation. That is why we must travel incognito. Or else we’ll find ourselves facing the full might of the Society.”

The proprietor’s daughter returned with wine in goblets. In her nervous haste, she spilled a full cup in my lap. With a sharp cry of fear, she bolted from the room.

Sapphrina and Rubis laughed again.

“You’re a terror!” said Sapphrina.

“Here, let me help you with that,” said Rubis, dabbing at the spill with her napkin.

“That’s all right. Don’t—”

“Hold still and let me mop that up before the stain sets in your trousers.”

“Do you need any help, dear sister?” asked Sapphrina sweetly.

“I have it well in hand,” said Rubis.

“So...um, Merc. How will we regain our composure—I mean anonymity?” I squirmed. “Thank you, Rubis; I think you’ve got it.”

“My pleasure.” She winked.

“The road west follows the river to Lake Brythal and the capital at Rumular. We must avoid the city. The Society will have many eyes there. Nor can we risk traversing the other highways. All will be watched. I propose to head south, cross the lake district, then turn west for Raelna.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

“We must also make a decision regarding these girls.”

“What do you mean?” the twins asked in unison.

“We’re coming with you,” added Sapphrina, entwining her arm with mine.

“Yes, exactly,” said Rubis, leaning her head on my shoulder.

“Don’t be absurd,” said Merc. “You have no part in our quest. We are bound for Rae City. Your goal is to return to Caratha. You could best do so by finding passage on a river boat, which will transport you down the Longwash to that fair metropolis.”

“Land or water, this is still Brythalia!” snapped Sapphrina.

“You seem to be capable wench,” said Merc. “I am confident you can bargain your way safely home, one way or another.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” I asked.

Mercury shrugged. The twins glared at him.

“Why don’t we all take the river?” I asked.

Mercury shook his head. "Too exposed. Too vulnerable."

"We're coming with you," said Sapphrina, peering up at me with fluttering eyes and a slight quiver in her lip. "Right, Jason?"

"Please?" added Rubis.

"Merc, they've come this far. I don't see why we shouldn't bring them the rest of the way."

Mercury glowered. "Very well, have it your way. If you want to take care of them, Cosmo, let their fate be on your head."

"We'd have it no other way," said Rubis.

Mercury's proposed route across Brythalia was dictated by the peculiar geography of that realm, which itself had been dictated by King Hamric the Half-Mad, grandfather of the current sovereign, King Rubric IV.

Brythalia lay southwest of Darnk. Across its northern frontier stretched the cloak of the forest from which we had just emerged. Farther west was the desolation that was once the realm of Terrengia. To the east of Brythalia rose the implacable Hammerperk Mountains. The adjoining highlands flanked the lake region, which comprised the eastern half of the kingdom. South of the lakes was a hilly wilderness; beyond it, Zastria. The western half of Brythalia was also rich farmland, a broad plain nourished by the Longwash. The border with Raelna was in the southwest. The madness of King Hamric found its expression in the central part of the kingdom, which had once boasted the most bountiful fields in all Brythalia, but was today a vast, dismal, needlefly-infested, alligator-overrun, outlaw-sheltering, malodorous fen known as Hamric's Mire. The world's largest permanent mud puddle came about because Hamric, whose ambition greatly exceeded his good judgment, decided that his landlocked kingdom was destined to become a great maritime power. He longed to challenge Caratha and Zastria for control of the Indigo Sea and the trade routes to the exotic lands south of Cyrilla.

It was access to the sea, Hamric decided, that allowed other kingdoms to surpass Brythalia in wealth and power. The king therefore commanded that a great canal be dug from Lake Brythal to the Indigo Sea. He planned to redirect the mighty River Longwash into this new channel, thus gaining access to the sea while depriving his downstream neighbors of the valuable river trade. Thousands of serfs and slaves were diverted from tending the fields to digging what was soon dubbed the Big Ditch. Thousands more were put to work in the northern forests felling trees and building a magnificent fleet of warships on the shores of Lake Brythal. Meanwhile, Hamric's armies skipped the Annual War with Raelna for six years straight to instead battle the wild tribesmen and deadly monsters of the southern highlands. At great cost in blood and treasure, his forces won control of a narrow strip through the hills, coming within sight of the sea. In anticipation of the day when the Big Ditch would extend that far, Hamric secured his new territory, known as the Brythalian Corridor, with a chain of forts.

Unfortunately for Hamric, his engineers were terminally incompetent. They managed to extend the Big Ditch some twelve leagues in as many years, a rate of progress that would allow the Brythalian navy to reach the open sea in approximately a century. Many workers perished in collapsing trenches and other mishaps, while costs mounted and the royal treasury dwindled. To keep the Big Ditch going, Hamric taxed his subjects without mercy, extorted the wealth of his nobles, and borrowed huge sums from foreign bankers. The massive project that was supposed to bring Brythalia unprecedented glory and prosperity was instead breaking the kingdom's collective back. Then, one morning in the spring of 942, the locks at the Lake Brythal end of the Big Ditch gave way. A fifty foot wall of water rushed down the channel, destroying all in its path. In mere hours, the deluge reached the south end of the unfinished canal and spilled into the surrounding countryside. Trapped in the lowlands, the waters never receded. The result was Hamric's Mire. It wasn't quite the legacy the king hoped for. Hamric blamed saboteurs from Caratha. Others said that the Dark Magic Society inspired the digging of the Big Ditch to bankrupt the kingdom, then demolished it to complete Brythalia's ruin. The pious credited the catastrophe to the wrath of

Torrent Wetlace, Goddess of Rivers and Streams—divine punishment for Hamric’s hubris in daring to divert the Longwash from its appointed path.

Whatever the flood’s cause, Half-Mad Hamric was soon overthrown by his brother, Hadric the Tolerably Eccentric. Work on the Big Ditch ended forever. Hamric’s name was cursed in Brythalia to this day.

I hoped that our own plans would not prove to be, like his, all wet.

Chapter 8

Down through the rolling hills of the Brythalian lake country we rode, along roads that were little more than dirt tracks. Goats, cattle, and swine roamed freely in the pastures. Serfs toiled in the fields while their overlords hunted and feasted and mustered their knights for the spring campaigning season.

Brythalia was a patchwork of mutually hostile feudal domains. Each of the kingdom’s many knights, barons, baronets, overbarons, underbarons, earls, earlets, counts, viscounts, miscounts, dukes, and other nobles was master of his own estate—and eager to become master of his neighbor’s. When the nobles weren’t fighting each other, they replenished their coffers by charging outrageous tariffs, taxes, and tolls on anyone and anything they could. This included safe passage fees at every gate, bridge, and border—with neither safety, nor passage, guaranteed.

Mercury’s purse was seemingly quite full, but stopping every few miles to shell out another handful of coppers grew tiresome. After several days of this, Merc’s patience ran out.

“Halt!” ordered a slovenly man-at-arms as we approached a rickety wooden bridge over a trickle of a brook. He and his comrade crossed their halberds to bar our way. “None may cross the bridge but they pay the toll!”

“Whose bridge is this?” snapped Merc.

“The bridge of His Grace the Baron Trothgar, you varlet! The price of passage is ten coppers!”

“The baron’s bridge looks unstable,” said Merc. “Several planks are missing, the railings lean, and the piers appear rotten. Hardly a ten copper bridge. You should pay us to cross it.”

“Pay you to cross? What nonsense it that?”

“It will be a miracle if that bridge can support the weight of a horse, much less four. If it gives way and my horse breaks a leg, who will compensate me?”

“That is your own problem,” said the insolent soldier.

“It will be the baron’s problem, if his bridge injures my horse.”

“Turn back then.”

“We’ll ford the stream instead.”

“That’s not allowed!”

“Why not? If I want to get wet, it’s my business.”

“It’s the baron’s business, this being his stream! There is a fording toll—ten coppers. Plus the ten copper fine on account of fording not being allowed.”

“What if I just fly across?”

“Fly?” The guard scoffed. “Are you some sort of wizard?”

“Maybe.”

The soldier was suddenly not so sure of himself. “Um...there is, of course, the wizard fee if you are.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“We don’t always collect that one,” the man added hastily, beads of sweat forming on his brow.

“I understand,” said Merc. “Because if I were a wizard, I would not take kindly to these niggling little nuisance charges. I would likely express my displeasure in a most unpleasant manner.”

“And?” asked the soldier, while his comrade backed away slowly.

“And what?” countered Merc.

“Well, are you or aren’t you? Don’t toy with us, man!”

Mercury stroked his beard as if considering the matter. He arched one eyebrow and said, “I am in point of fact...not a wizard. If you take my meaning. No wizards here.”

“Well, that is a relief!” said the soldier. “We heard a rumor that an especially bloodthirsty wizard is abroad in the company of a pair of vicious she-demons and some sort of half-troll henchman. Massacred an entire village up in the forest lands a few days back!”

“Is that so?” mused Merc. He regarded the twins and me with a bemused expression that was not lost on the men-at-arms. “We’ll certainly keep an eye out for them. Thanks for the tip.”

“Not a problem, sir.”

“We’ll be on our way then?”

“Yes, please! I mean, we wouldn’t want to hinder you in any way Mister Not-A-Wizard, sir!” The soldiers stepped aside. We rode across the bridge unmolested.

Once we were out of earshot, I urged my steed alongside Merc’s and asked, “What just happened there?”

“A little artful intimidation. I wager we’ll have no more delays for tolls.”

“What happened to keeping a low profile?”

Mercury shrugged. “There are always trade-offs, Cosmo. Low profile was proving too slow. The sooner we’re out of Brythalia, the better.”

“Why the sudden hurry?”

“I have my reasons.”

“Would you care to share them?”

“No.”

“Merc, we’re all in this together.”

“True, wizard,” said Sapphrina. “Let’s have it!”

Mercury glanced back and frowned, as if disappointed to discover that the twins hadn’t fallen into the stream and drowned. The sisters smiled back sweetly.

Mercury sighed. “Dylan and the Black Bolts are behind us, the Red Huntsman is abroad—and I have thrice more felt the power of Ouga-Oyg’s Black Mirror. Most recently within the last hour.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?” I asked.

“I didn’t want to cause alarm.”

“I’m not alarmed, really, just concerned.”

“I wasn’t talking about you.”

“The Peeper from the Pit!” exclaimed Rubis. “We are spied upon by the Pit Peeper?” She made a disgusted face. “Ick!”

“Repulsive,” said Sapphrina. “What are you going to do about it, wizard?”

“He isn’t looking for you,” said Merc.

“Are you so sure?” demanded Sapphrina. A stricken look clouded her fair face. “That demon’s vile predilections are well known!”

“Be that as it may, I assure you that at present the Peeper has other things on his mind than leering at Zastrian tarts.”

“What did you say?” demanded Rubis sharply.

“Merc!” I said, shocked. “That is no way to refer to gentlewomen!”

The wizard seemed to bite his tongue, but heeding the warning tone in my voice, growled, “My apologies, your ladyships. Nevertheless, I believe the Demon Lord seeks other prey than you—namely Master Cosmo here.”

Sapphrina frowned. “All the more reason you should do something about it, wizard.”

“What would you have me do?”

“Shield us from the Peeper’s view with your magic.”

“Impossible,” said Merc. “The Black Mirror is much more powerful than any magic I have. In any event, the scans remain fleeting. The demon is focused on this region, but has not yet singled us out. I would have us reach Raelna ere he does.”

“A sensible goal,” I agreed.

“Then less chatter. We’ve much hard riding ahead!”

We left the Barony of Trothgar and entered the Earl of Bricksham’s domain late in the afternoon, taking shelter for the night at a ramshackle hostel in the underpopulated little town of YeldonthetheBullywuggle. After our dinner of sour turnip soup and roasted rabbit, washed down with some local radish beer, I asked the twins about their reaction to Ouga-Oyg’s spying. Although being the object of a Demon Lord’s scrutiny would make anyone nervous, they seemed particularly upset by the Peeper from the Pit.

“Of course we’re upset!” said Rubis. “The Peeper has a special fascination with Zastrian women.”

“Who are, after all, the most beautiful in the world,” Sapphrina reminded me.

“There are many tales in our folklore of Zastrian girls carried off to the Vilest Vales of Hell to be the Peeper’s concubines.”

Sapphrina nodded. “The protagonists of these stories usually get into trouble after foolishly disobeying their fathers.”

“It is a common theme,” agreed Rubis. “Take Calassandra of the Golden Hair. She went to the river alone to wash her shimmering tresses—”

“—after her father told her never to do so.”

“And the Peeper got her!” said Rubis.

“Then there was Eloriana the Elegant,” said Sapphrina. “Who went to meet her lover by the garden gate—”

“—against her father’s wishes,” added Rubis.

“The Peeper saw her and carried her away,” finished Sapphrina.

“We must not forget Delicia of the Sea-Green Eyes,” said Rubis.

“A tragic tale,” sighed Sapphrina. “She lost her heart to a sea captain—”

“—of whom her father did not approve,” Rubis supplied.

“She spent hours each day waiting on a cliff above the harbor, looking across the sea for the sails of his ship.”

“But while she watched for her true love, the Peeper watched her.”

“One day, the captain’s ship returned,” said Sapphrina. “Delicia rushed down to the harbor to greet him.”

“But just as they reached for each other—the Peeper carried her away!”

“Do any of these stories have happy endings?” I asked.

The twins exchanged puzzled glances.

“No,” said Rubis, shaking her head.

“Not a one,” confirmed Sapphrina.

“They’re cautionary tales,” said Rubis.

“Meant to impress upon young girls the importance of being obedient.”

“Disobey and the Peeper gets you.”

“A happy ending would muddle the message entirely.”

“I begin to see why you ran away,” I said.

The sisters giggled.

Sapphrina smiled and kissed my cheek. “You, Jason, are simply adorable.”

We survived a few minor mishaps in the following days. By the first of Windery we found ourselves on a dusty road some eight leagues from the Raelnan border, approaching a small muddy pond. A grove of ancient oak trees stood a short distance beyond. It was a beautiful, cloudless spring afternoon. All our troubles seemed so far away.

“Get ready for trouble,” said Mercury, the first words he had spoken in over an hour.

“What is it?” I said, reaching for my sword.

“I sense danger.”

“How do you do that?”

“I just do it,” he said irritably.

A mighty horn blast split the air, followed by an excited chorus of lupine howls. Half a dozen shaggy grey wolves the size of ponies topped a low rise to the east and loped toward us. Behind the slavering beasts came a massive rider on a roan charger. He wore a leather mask and trappings the color of dried blood. In his hand was a huge black horn. He winded a second blast. The wolves increased their hellish pace.

“This can’t be good,” I said.

“The Red Huntsman!” said Merc. “Make for the trees!”

We urged our horses to a gallop, not that the terrified animals needed any encouragement. I glanced back and saw the Huntsman notching an arrow to his bow.

“Merc! Arrow!”

“I see! The trees! We’ll make a stand!”

I looked back at the wolves again. They were very big wolves.

“We will?”

Sapphrina’s horse stumbled and fell. She tumbled from the saddle, bouncing painfully across the ground before sliding headfirst into the pond. I wheeled my horse about, which wasn’t easy, for the beast had scented the wolves and wanted no part of them.

“Sapphrina! Take my hand!”

I reached for her. She clambered up the muddy embankment, but lost her footing and fell back into the water with a splash.

“Sapphrina!”

The lead wolf fell upon her terrified horse, ripping the poor animal’s throat open with a single snap of its great jaws. The monster’s redeyed brothers were right behind it.

I drew my sword, but in the process lost control of my own horse, which treacherously unseated me and ran away. Miraculously landing on my feet without stabbing myself, I braced for the attack. I was still no competent swordsman, but Mercury had given me a few pointers. Unfortunately, most of his advice pertained to fighting other swordsmen, not overgrown wolves.

Mercury turned to aid me. Rubis wisely kept riding for the trees. More likely, she was unable to persuade her mount to alter course.

The Red Huntsman loosed his arrow at Merc. The wizard deflected it with a wave of his hand. The missile veered away from him and whistled off into the field across the road.

Mouth dripping with horse blood, the lead wolf flew at me, jaws wide. I swung my sword

twohanded. The flat of the blade rapped the wolf’s muzzle, with little effect. I had hoped to decapitate the beast, but I would get no second chance. The wolf crushed me to the ground, snapping at my face. The sword flew from my hand and skittered into the shallows of the pond.

A second wolf bypassed me and plunged into the water after Sapphrina. Two of the animals charged at Merc. The last pair shot past him, chasing Rubis. Were the wolves dividing their attack thus on their own accord? Or at some signal from their master? I had no time to wonder about it.

Mercury leapt clear as the wolves savaged his horse. Instantly abandoning their kill, the deadly beasts stalked the wizard, growling with menace. Merc dropped into a ready stance, sword drawn.

I was barely keeping the wolf atop me from chomping through my head like an overripe melon. I dug my fingers into the sides of its furry neck and pushed with all my might. Hot wolf spittle and fresh blood showered my face.

The Red Huntsman drew up short and notched another arrow. Mercury gestured. The bowstring broke. With a shrug, the bounty hunter cast the bow aside and crossed his arms. The wolves could do his work for him.

It occurred to me that if I could get my legs in the right position I might be able to kick the wolf off me.

I was wrong.

Beams of intense red light burst from Merc’s sunshades. The nearest wolf’s head burst into

flames. With a yelp of pain and fear, the animal streaked off across the field as the fire spread across its body. The other wolf leapt at the wizard with a snarl. Mercury danced aside and sliced open the animal's shoulder. Enraged, the wolf turned to snap at him. Again, its jaws missed the mark. Mercury lunged low and stabbed it through the heart.

While Merc was thus engaged, the Red Huntsman twirled a bola above his head and released it. The whirling weapon hummed through the air. Its leather cords wound themselves tightly around Merc's neck. Taken by surprise, the wizard dropped his sword and went to his knees. His sunshades flew off to land in the dust. The Red Huntsman dismounted to finish him.

Meanwhile, I tried a new tactic. Wriggling along on my back, I led the wolf to the edge of the pond. I slid down the muddy incline, dragging the animal with me. We crashed into the wolf that had gone for Sapphrina. She was nowhere to be seen, but I was now entangled with two wet, snarling, angry wolves instead of one. That was progress of sorts.

Standing over the purple-faced Mercury, the Red Huntsman raised his sword to plunge it into the wizard's heart. Mercury rolled away and bounded to his feet. The Huntsman came at him with a furious attack, pressing him hard and forcing him back.

I got my arms around one of the wolves and broke its neck with a wrenching crunch. The other snapped at me. I caught it by the ears and forced its head underwater. The beast thrashed mightily, but I did not let go until its struggles ceased.

I stubbed my toe on something hard. My sword!

I recovered the weapon and staggered toward dry ground. My tunic was in tatters. I bled from several wounds. I had pond water up my nose. But I was determined to help Mercury.

The Huntsman's stallion had other ideas. The war horse came at me with flying hooves and chomping teeth. I gave way, backing into the pond. The horse stopped at the water's edge.

Stamping the ground and bobbing its head, it neighed a shrill, angry scream, as if daring me to pass.

Killing two giant wolves with my bare hands was the stuff of legend. But the horse scared me.

Mercury was in trouble. Barely able to breathe, he bled from two sword wounds. He was stumbling, staggering, and running out of time.

Could this mess get any worse?

I had to ask.

Thundering hooves heralded the arrival of nine black-clad riders on black horses. Dylan of Ganth and his Black Bolts had found us!

Chapter 9

Thinking fast, I thrust my sword into the mud and hefted a dead wolf by its hind legs. Winding my torso, I swung the carcass above my head, splattering blood and muck in every direction. The war stallion backed away, giving me a clear shot at my real target. The Red Huntsman had his back to me. It would be a long throw, but I was a three-time champion in the dead pig toss back in Lower Hicksnittle. I let go. The wet wolf whirled through the air and struck the Huntsman, knocking him to the ground.

That was the break Mercury needed. He exerted his mental power. The bola unwound itself from his neck and smacked against the war stallion's skull. The animal rolled its eyes, took two jerky steps sideways, and toppled.

I scooped up my sword. Merc's weapon flew to his hand. We stood side by side as the Red Huntsman regained his feet.

"Brand new fight," said Merc.

"I have no quarrel with you, Mercury Boltblaster," said the Huntsman. The leather mask muffled his deep voice. "Jason Cosmo is my prey. You have troubles enough, I think." He indicated the onrushing Black Bolts. "Though I am willing to assist you in exchange for Cosmo."

"That is wonderfully generous of you," said Merc. For one frightened moment, I thought Mercury would accept the Huntsman's offer. Then he snorted derisively. "But a blind cripple armed with a teaspoon

could beat those buffoons.”

“So be it.”

Dylan and the Black Bolts reined in their horses.

“I am the Red Huntsman,” said the Red Huntsman, lest they mistake him for a Blue or Green Huntsman. “This man is mine.” He pointed his sword at me. “The wizard you may have.”

Dylan smiled. He had ugly teeth. “The wizard is all we want.”

“But can you take me?” asked Merc, making a showy little flourish with his sword.

Several of the Black Bolts cursed. Scowling, Dylan raised his hand to silence them. He addressed the Huntsman. “We would appreciate your aid in apprehending the wizard.”

“How great would this appreciation be?”

“A tenth of our fee.”

“Half.”

Dylan hesitated. His men made ugly noises. “Done.”

“Two-thirds.”

Dylan’s face reddened. “Outrageous! You said half!”

“Now I say two-thirds. Take it or leave it. It matters not to me.”

Several Black Bolts coughed into their hands.

“Very well,” Dylan said testily. “Two-thirds. But no more.”

“Hold this one for me,” said the Huntsman. “I will only be a moment.”

At Dylan’s signal, four smirking Bolts dismounted and drew their swords, ranging themselves in a half circle around me.

“Who is this filthy cur?” asked Dylan, giving me a contemptuous once over.

“Jason Cosmo,” said the Huntsman.

The smirks vanished. The Black Bolts backed away. Dylan screamed for his men to resume their positions. I saw the fear in their eyes, the tremble in their grips, the nervous shuffling of their feet. These were warriors, hardened killers, and veterans of countless battles. Yet they were no less terrified of me than the twins had been back in Offal. They obviously didn’t recognize me as the fumbling and frightened peasant they met in Whiteswab. I might not have recognized myself, covered as I was in blood and gore.

I recalled Merc’s lessons on artful intimidation. Slashing the air with my sword, I forced a contemptuous laugh. “Slaying giant wolves with my bare hands was a good warm up for the likes of you! Who dies first?”

No one volunteered. I advanced, praying the mercenaries would give way. They backed up one step, then two.

I decided not to press my luck.

“I’m waiting,” I said.

“Can we switch back to fighting Boltblaster?” whined a Black Bolt. “You never said anything about Jason Cosmo!”

“Cowards!” raged Dylan. “He’s only one man!”

“So is Boltblaster,” said a mercenary. “And you were pretty quick to hand off that hot potato.”

Dylan glared at him.

“Just saying,” said the soldier.

The Black Bolts did not move to attack, but neither did they flee. I had achieved a temporary standoff, holding nine men at bay. Now everything depended on the outcome of Merc’s duel with the Red Huntsman.

It was not an even fight. Mercury was fast, but the Huntsman was both quick and strong. His blade traced silver ribbons in the air. Warding off the Huntsman’s blows gave Mercury no opening to counterattack. Blood streamed from his wounds.

“Surrender now and I’ll go easy on you,” said Merc.

“I will sever your chattering head from your body, fool!”

“Such anger. I thought your fight was with Cosmo.”

“He’s next.”

The Black Bolts were relieved to hear that.

The bounty hunter cut the wizard thrice, taking only one small wound in return. This was not looking good. If Merc lost, I wouldn't last long on my own. Bluffing had its limits. We needed a miracle.

We got it.

Sapphrina emerged from the shallows of the pond, arms held wide, palms to the sky. All eyes turned to her. And stayed there. Her wet blue tunic clung tightly to her body. Her golden hair hung in damp ringlets around her face. A rivulet of water rippled down her flawless cheek, traced the delicate line of her throat, and disappeared between her jutting breasts. Twelve sets of eyes followed the happy droplet's progress.

Sapphrina surveyed us coolly. Her face clouded over. Her mouth twisted into an angry pout. In a haughty, theatrical voice, she demanded, "Who dares disturb the dread Goddess of the Lake?" This was too much for the Black Bolts. They were already staring down the fearsome Jason Cosmo. Adding the wrath of a deity from the depths of this possibly sacred cattle pond was too much. The mercenaries staggered back in confused amazement. Some muttered prayers, others made religious signs. One even fell to his knees with head bowed.

I saw my chance. With a wild shout, I lunged at the nearest fighter and ran him through. Yanking my blade from his chest, I lopped off the head of his neighbor. The remaining Bolts scrambled away from me, save the kneeling one. Respecting his piety, I merely smacked his skull with the flat of my sword, knocking him out.

If the Black Bolts had any lingering doubts that I was truly the terror of the Eleven Kingdoms, those were now dispelled. Heedless of Dylan's curses, his five remaining men mounted their horses and fled as fast as they could ride. One Bolt missed the saddle in his haste, got his foot tangled in the stirrup, and was dragged down the road by his horse.

The Red Huntsman bellowed, "Hold him, you fools!"

Only Dylan remained. He dismounted to face me.

"I don't fear you," he said. "Or that wench."

"You should," I said. Sweat drenched my palms. I prayed the sword would not slip from my grasp yet again.

"Come and taste steel," said Dylan.

By the crack in his voice, I could tell he was bluffing my bluff. I decided to bluff his bluffing of my bluff—and hope it wasn't one bluff too far.

I spat. "Coward! Are you waiting for the Huntsman to save you? I promise you, his aid will come too late!"

Dylan gulped hard. The point of his blade dipped. He turned, collected his horse, and set off after his men.

I rushed to Mercury's aid, charging the Red Huntsman's flank, only to find myself disarmed with an intricate flash of his blade. He barely glanced at me, returning his full attention to Mercury before my sword even hit the ground.

The momentary distraction gave Mercury an opening. He lunged deep to the inside. The Red Huntsman parried, beat Merc's blade out of line, and disarmed him too. Merc's sword spun away from his hand. The tip of the Huntsman's blade found his breast.

"Yield, wizard. I only want Cosmo."

"He is under my protection," said Mercury.

"Then you must die."

"I think not," said Merc. "Spiritual Lightning!" Ten bolts of azure energy flashed from his fingertips and struck the Red Huntsman, blasting him backward.

"Now we fight on my terms," said Merc.

"Your spells won't stop me," the Huntsman gasped. Smoke curled from the holes in his mask.

Mercury redoubled the attack, knocking his foe to the dust. Sparks crackled from every bit of metal on the Huntsman's person.

"My will...is stronger...than your magic," he gasped, rising despite the barrage of arcane energy that wretched his body.

“Maybe,” said Merc, through gritted teeth. “But my magics are many. Soil Boil!”

Mercury extended his arms, speaking rapidly and forcefully in the arcane tongue of wizardry while gesturing with both hands. The coils of lightning vanished. But, before the Red Huntsman could recover his wits, the ground beneath him boiled up like soup in a kettle, black and brown soil churning, revealing hidden stones and disoriented earthworms. Fighting for footing as the earth dissolved beneath him, the Huntsman sank knee-deep into the seething soil.

“Boltblaster! No! Curse you, wizard!”

The Huntsman sank to his waist, then to his chest—then he disappeared from view. The disturbance subsided until the spot was nothing more than a freshly plowed plot of ground. Or, I thought grimly, a newly filled grave. The Red Huntsman was gone.

Mercury pitched forward. I caught him.

“Shouldn’t have done that,” he gasped.

“Well, no,” I said, horrified. “You buried him alive!”

“Not that. He had it coming.”

“Your wounds? They look severe.”

“No, no, wizards heal quickly.”

“Was casting the spell too draining?”

He shook his head and pushed my hands away. “I just need to catch my breath.”

“What then?”

He waved his hand. In response, the sunshades flew up from the ground and settled into place over his eyes. “Do you recall, Cosmo, why I refrain from employing my more powerful magic?”

“The Society.”

He nodded. “Spells produce residual energies that can be used as a beacon to find me. The Huntsman thought I would surrender you rather than risk that.”

“Why didn’t you?”

He shrugged. “We had best depart with all haste.”

Sapphrina splashed out of the pond and threw her arms around me. “Oh, Jason! I thought they would kill you!”

“I thought you were gone!”

“I can hold my breath a long time.”

“Good to know, O Goddess of the Lake. That was a convincing performance.”

“I did a little community theater in Caratha.” She leaned closer. Her lips almost met mine. Then she stiffened. “Where is Rubis?”

I recalled two unaccounted for wolves pursuing her into the trees. My thoughts must have shown on my face. Sapphrina recoiled in horror.

“No!” she cried. “Oh, no!”

We ran for the trees, our own injuries forgotten. I reached the oak grove first. Rubis’s horse was dead, its neck and belly ripped open. Beside it lay the lifeless bodies of the two wolves. There were no visible wounds upon them.

Of Rubis there was no sign.

Sapphrina paled at the sight of the dead beasts. “Where is she?” she cried, a note of hysteria in her voice. “Rubis!”

“Up here, sister!”

We looked up. Rubis was perched in the lower branches of an oak, clinging tightly to the trunk of the tree, her body quaking, her face stained with tears of fright. I noticed deep claw marks gouged into the bark below her. The back of her tunic was missing, torn away. Rubis clambered to the ground and embraced her sister.

“What happened?” I asked.

“The beasts took my horse,” she said. “Thanks to my gymnastic lessons as a girl, I was able to grab a branch and swing into the tree. The wolves leapt at me, snarling and yipping, then fell dead. Even so, I chose to stay put until help came.”

Mercury examined the dead animals. He plucked a tiny silver dart from one wolf’s neck and held it up for me to see. It bore the emblem of a black crescent moon.

“BlackMoon,” he said. He sniffed the dart. “Wolfaway. A poison highly toxic to wolves.”

“BlackMoon?” I felt a sudden chill. “He’s here?”

Mercury nodded gravely. “Most likely concealed among these trees, listening to every word we say.”
I drew my sword.

“Forget that,” said Merc, laying a restraining hand on my arm. “BlackMoon kills from a distance. But only when it suits him. He is an artist of pursuit. He won’t strike until he finds the circumstances aesthetically perfect. I think he killed these wolves both to taunt the Huntsman and to give fair warning that he hunts us. Or, more accurately, hunts you.”

I wrapped a protective arm around Rubis. “Whatever his motives, I thank him for saving Rubis.”
At that moment, a shadow seemed to pass over the sun. The air grew thick and oppressive around us. I felt as if a million eyes were watching me, their foul gaze probing beneath my skin, violating the innermost core of my being. It was a squirmy sensation not unlike bathing in a pool of maggots. Then it passed.

“What was that?” I asked.

Before Mercury could answer, the foul sensation returned, stronger than before. The twins looked nauseated.

“The Black Mirror of Ouga-Oyg,” said Merc. “He has us in his sights.”

Dark clouds boiled into existence directly overhead, though the rest of the sky was as blue as a robin’s egg. A cold wind knifed through the trees like a misplaced blast of winter. A sound like a swarm of buzzing flies filled my head.

“Come on!” said Merc. “We don’t want to be here when that hellcloud breaks.” He whistled. Two horses previously owned by fallen Black Bolts trotted over.

“We’ll have to ride double,” said Merc.

We mounted up—Sapphrina with me, Rubis behind Merc—and rode out.

The cloud followed.

The first hour passed without incident. Looking back from time to time, I saw the hellcloud pursuing us across the sky as relentlessly as the Red Huntsman’s wolves.

“What if it catches us?” I asked.

“That would be bad,” said Merc.

“How bad?”

“A hellcloud is a mobile gateway to the Assorted Hells. It could rain anything upon us—burning acid, hot coals, molten lead, swarms of devil bees, rabid cats and dogs, dirty socks—any vile thing at all, even a Demon Lord.”

“Forget I asked.”

We rode for the remainder of the day, feeling the foul gaze of OugaOyg upon us every instant. Our overburdened mounts grew weary, having been pushed hard by the Black Bolts even before we claimed them. Though the dark cloud moved slowly against the prevailing wind, it gained steadily. We pushed on as the day dwindled.

By dusk our horses were at the verge of death. We dared not push them—or ourselves—any harder. Yet we dared not stop. The cloud grew as it gained on us, standing out in the gathering gloom as a blot of blackness darker than dark itself. Occasional flashes of disturbing red lightning lit it from within.

“If the cloud overtakes us during the night, we are doomed,” said Merc. “That is when demonic power is strongest.”

“Merc, these horses can’t take much more. Nor can we.”

“We must reach Raelna,” he said. “It is a land favored by The Gods. Ouga-Oyg’s Mirror has limited

power there and it is through the Mirror that the cloud is guided.”

“But how far to Raelna?”

“A few more leagues. We must press on.”

“I can barely stay in the saddle! It is as if the cloud is leeching the strength right out of me.”

“It is. A well-known property of hellclouds.”

“Great.”

“If it comes to a fight, you’ll need a few pointers,” said Merc. “Remember, the key to battling demons is—”

“Look, wizard!” shouted Sapphrina, pointing out a hut with a yellow roof atop the next hill. A painted sign beside it depicted a male deer standing on its hind legs in human fashion. The buck wore a wide belt hitched with a buckle in the shape of the crescent moon.

“Moonbuckles!” cried Rubis. “We’re saved!”

“Maybe,” said Merc.

“What is that place? I asked.

“You’ll see,” said Merc, urging his horse ahead.

As we came closer, I saw that the hut was a tavern of some kind, furnished with a long bar and several plush chairs. Inside, a handful of patrons sipped steaming beverages from large mugs. We entered. The barkeepers wore yellow aprons bearing the sign of the belted deer. Their noses, ears, and lips were pierced with metal rings, signifying I knew not what.

“Two ultramasgrande espressos with rolled oats to go!” commanded Mercury. “Preferably in buckets!”

“I’ll have an ubi caramel Zastrian roast latte with two shots of cinnaberry,” said Rubis.

“Make mine an extra shot ubi half skim quarter soy no whip orange mocha,” added Sapphrina. “What about you, Jason?”

“I don’t understand any of this.”

“He’ll have the same,” said Sapphrina.

“The same what?”

“Coffee!” said Rubis.

“A stimulating beverage brewed from the roasted beans of a certain plant native to Meru and Pharistan in the distant south,” said Merc. “In recent years, the custom reached Cyrilla and Zastria, then Caratha. Moonbuckles is the leading purveyor, but I didn’t know they had an outpost in Brythalia.”

“They’re everywhere,” said Sapphrina.

“Or so it seems,” said Rubis.

“How will consuming heated beverages help us escape the hellcloud?” I asked.

“Just drink your orange mocha,” said Sapphrina, handing me a mug full of dark brown liquid. I sipped tentatively at the concoction. It was sweet, yet bitter. I drank more. I felt warmth suffuse my innards.

“Not bad,” I said.

“Wait until it kicks in,” said Sapphrina.

“What do you mean, kicks—*whoa!*”

“That’s it.”

“I feel strangely revived! Energized! All fatigue banished!”

“Good,” said Merc. “Now help me carry these buckets to the horses.”

Revived by the coffee, we were ready to ride through the night. The full moon lit our way. Yet though the miles swept by, the hellcloud continued its pursuit. And still the malevolent gaze of Ouga-Oyg clung to us like filth. But though it closed steadily, we stayed always just ahead of the hellcloud. At last rosy-fingered dawn peeled back the night along the eastern rim of the sky. Heavy of lid and limb, we reached a narrow band of scrubby forest just a few miles from the Raelnan border. We were almost there. Almost safe.

But the cloud was upon us now, radiating violence and malice that beat at our senses like hard iron mallets. The sky darkened in a matter of seconds, blotting out the morning sun.

“This is it!” said Merc.

Our horses reared back as a curtain of emerald flame erupted from the road and encircled us.

“We can ride through!” I said.

“No!” screamed Merc. “Demonfire will destroy you instantly!”

The horses screamed with terror and huddled together in the center of the fiery circle.

“Demonfire? Then where is the demon?”

The answer boomed down from above. “Here am I, little man!”

The demon was thirty feet tall, pitch black and muscular, hovering above us with the aid of huge red bat wings. Smoke and fire belched from its nostrils. The fiend was armed with a huge flaming sickle.

“You certainly look the part,” I said.

“I am Babbadabbas of the Deepest Pit! I am the Harvester of Horror! I will bring you as broken prizes to my masters below! I will flay your living flesh from your bones and make your women dance exotic and humiliating go-go routines! I am your doom!”

“Again with the go-go,” I said. “What is that?”

“I’ll show you later,” said Sapphrina.

I drew my sword.

Babbadabbas laughed. “Your puny weapons are useless!”

“Does he speak in nothing but exclamations?” I asked.

“Annoying, isn’t it?” said Merc. “But he has a point. A sword is useless.”

“You have a better idea?”

“Observe.”

A ray of pure white light lanced from Merc’s sunshades. Babbadabbas roared with rage as smoking flesh dripped from his form like molten wax from a candle.

“He cannot withstand the pure light of the sun,” said Merc. “That is why he clouded over the sky before appearing.”

“Great! Blast him again!”

“Unfortunately, I just used up the full remaining charge on my sunshades.”

The demon’s howls of fury shook the trees.

“Was that such a good idea, Merc? You only made him angry.”

“Indeed I am! You shall suffer for that affront, Mercury Boltblaster!” The demon raised his flaming weapon higher. “Your trick has availed you naught! It is your turn to burn!”

Babbadabbas swung his sickle, tracing a blazing arc through the air.

Chapter 10

We dove from our saddles. The sickle caught me in mid-air, cutting the back of my chainmail and what was left of my tunic from waist to collar. I hit the ground with an ugly, burning welt across my back.

Angry that he missed, Babbadabbas beheaded my horse. That was enough to send the other steed running straight into the wall of demonfire. The hellish flames incinerated it instantly.

Babbadabbas alighted in our midst. He scooped up Rubis with his huge free hand, holding her aloft like a squirming doll.

“Unhand me, filthy demon!” shouted Rubis, beating at his hand. “And stop pawing my—”

“Rubis!” cried Sapphrina. She lunged for the demon. I intercepted her, pushed her behind me, and raised my sword.

“Run, pathetic insects!” boomed Babbadabbas, stamping at me with his massive foot. I leapt away, pulling Sapphrina with me. We almost fell into the wall of deadly demonfire. “You cannot escape me! Oh, this is grand sport!”

“Glad you enjoyed it,” said Merc, defiantly standing his ground. “Because the game is over.”

“Indeed it is!” agreed Babbadabbas. “You are mine!”

“You don't understand,” said Merc. He raised his hands. A sudden updraft punched through the supernatural cloud cover, letting the bright morning sun shine full upon us.

“Nooooooo!” screamed Babbadabbas. His flesh sizzled, blistered, and burst. Sulphurous smoke filled the air. His huge form shrank. Babbadabbas lost fully half of his stature before the hellcloud reformed. As the dwindling demon's hand shrank, Rubis squirmed free and fell to the ground. Babbadabbas snatched her up again, holding her in the crook of his still-massive arm. “You're not getting away, my pretty! As for you, wizard—that hurt!”

“It was supposed to. Pure sunlight is deadly to your kind.”

“I know that!” said Babbadabbas.

“Let me go!” said Rubis, kicking and struggling.

“Never!” said the demon. “You are my shield!”

With that, he sprang at Merc, swinging his sickle. A blaze of demonfire split the air. The wizard nimbly dodged the blow. Babbadabbas pursued, slashing again and again.

“Cosmo, your sword would be useful about now!” Merc shouted.

“You said it was useless!”

“Now it isn't!”

I hacked at the demon's massive leg. Babbadabbas thrust Rubis into the path of my blade. I checked my swing just short of cutting her in half. Babbadabbas counterattacked. Sickle met sword with a clang. His hellforged weapon snapped my mortal blade like a dry twig.

“Now it's useless!” I cried. I hit the dirt as the sickle sought my neck.

“Good enough!” said Merc. With the demon distracted, he sent another burst of mental force upward, again punching through the hellcloud. Sunlight transfixed the demon. Babbadabbas screamed as his body smoked and sizzled and shrank to human size.

Keeping Rubis in his hold, Babbadabbas brought the flaming blade of his sickle near her neck.

“Stop, wizard, or I'll sever her pretty head!”

“That won't stop me,” snarled Merc.

“No!” cried Sapphrina. Dodging his bat-like wings, she pounced onto the demon's back and wrapped both arms around his throat. I lunged for his weapon, holding his arm with both hands to keep the infernal blade away from Rubis.

The hole in the cloud expanded. Howling, Babbadabbas wilted. As he shrank and weakened, Rubis broke free. The demonfire limning the sickle winked out. The ring of green flame surrounding us sputtered and vanished in a shower of emerald sparks.

“Nooooooo!” wailed Babbadabbas. His voice became tinny and high-pitched as he was reduced to knee height. Soon he was barely an inch tall. “I hate when this happens!” he said.

“Hate this!” said Rubis, stomping hard on the demon. She lifted her boot. Nothing remained of Babbadabbas but a puff of smoke. Above us, the last remnants of the hellcloud dispersed.

“It's not every day I get to mash a masher,” said Rubis.

The sisters embraced, then caught me in a group hug. I flashed a huge grin at Merc.

“We won! What were you so worried about?”

“Don't get cocky. We were lucky. Had Babbadabbas caught us during the night, the outcome would have been far different. The Lords of Hell made a tactical error. One they won't repeat.”

“Okay,” I said, only slightly chastened. “But we still won!”

“Indeed,” said Merc. “Now let us get to Raelna before another attack—get down!”

Reacting instantly, I pushed the twins to the ground and threw myself atop them.

A stinking green cloud exploded into being above us. It cleared to reveal twenty disembodied human eyes floating in the air, their collective gaze fixed on us.

“Arkayne's blood!” cursed Mercury. He pointed his index fingers at the eyes, projecting narrow streams of blue fire. The eyes scattered in all directions. Merc was unable to hit any of the darting orbs. He did, however, manage to set afire most of the trees and shrubs in the vicinity.

“Do you know what those are?” demanded Merc.

“Flying eyeballs?” I ventured, while the twins squirmed and giggled beneath me.

“Prying eyes. The exhumed orbs of dead murderers, animated by necromancers and used for

surveillance by, among others, the Dark Magic Society. We've traded one watcher for another."

"Isogoras?"

"Isogoras. He can track our every move until we rid ourselves of those things, which won't be easy."

"Wonderful. By the way, can you make us fireproof?"

"No. Why?"

"Because your flaming fingers have started a forest fire. Which we're standing in the middle of."

"I see your point."

I discarded my now useless chainmail shirt and we set off briskly down the road. The eyes hovered in our wake. It was less than an hour's walk to the border, but by the time we arrived I was on the verge of collapse. The effects of the coffee elixir had worn off entirely. My feet felt made of stone as we trudged up the last hill separating us from the Sun Kingdom.

Stone marker posts spaced at fifty-yard intervals marked the frontier between Brythalia and Raelna. From time to time, each kingdom sought to expand by surreptitiously moving posts a few yards into the territory of the other. As a result, the border was quite irregular for many leagues, bulging back and forth like the trail of a gigantic serpent. Moving the posts was a timehonored custom dating back to at least the reign of Raemark the Surveyor. It was also the traditional Brythalian pretext for the Annual War with Raelna.

The road ahead was barred by portable wooden barricades manned by a pair of Brythalian soldiers in brown tunics. Nearby, a squad of ten Brythalian soldiers marched along the border, matched step for step by a like number of Raelnan troops in crisp red uniforms.

The border guards eyed us with suspicion. Well they might. I was barechested, unshaven, and caked with blood and grime. Rubis had pinned the tatters of her tunic together, but most of her ample cleavage was on display. Sapphrina was crusted with pond mud from her turn as Goddess of the Lake. Only Merc looked civilized, in his magically immaculate red cloak and purple tunic. Behind us loomed a billowing cloud of blue smoke from the fire he had set. Twenty dead eyes hovered in the air above us.

"They'll ask for our passes," said Merc softly. "We have none, so let me do the talking."

"Fine by me."

"Try to look beat up and drunk."

"I think I can handle that," I said.

The guards crossed their spears as we drew near.

"State your name and purpose," demanded one.

"Thank The Gods we've reached you!" said Merc. "I am Mercutio, trusted agent of the esteemed Baron Throcknottle. We were beset by bandits a league or so yonder." He nodded at me. "My valiant man Burlo beat the rascals away, but he was gravely injured in the affray."

Leaning on the twins for support, I gave a groan of agony. I wasn't acting. Much.

The foot patrol hurried over. Its commander stepped forward to take charge. The Raelnan patrol gathered across the barricade, following the proceedings with interest.

"I am Hungo Volf, Captain of the March," said the Brythalian leader. "What is going on here?"

Merc gave him a haughty stare. "Captain, I demand you apprehend the bandits who attacked us just now! It is unthinkable that daughters of Baron Throcknottle be molested by such ruffians."

"Bandits you say? How many?"

"Fully half a dozen."

"What were they wearing?"

"What difference does that make?" asked Merc.

"If we are to apprehend the villains, we'll need a good description of them."

"They wore boots and tunics and such."

"I see. And they were armed, you say?"

"Yes," said Merc impatiently. "With clubs and knives. If you hurry you might still catch them."

"Who did you say your lord was?"

"Throcknottle. Baron Throcknottle."

“Never heard of him.”

Merc looked offended. “Well, this is western Brythalia and he has a smallish holding in eastern Brythalia.”

“Of course he does. And these are his daughters, you say?”

“Indeed.”

“Lovely lasses. Almost Zastrian in their features.”

“Their mother was Zastrian,” said Merc. “Are you going after the bandits or not? This interrogation is an outrage!”

“Yes, yes, quite so,” said Volf. “Why do you travel in these parts?”

“The scoundrels are getting away!”

“Answer my question.”

“I am escorting the girls to visit their maternal grandmother in Raelna.”

“You said their mother was Zastrian.”

“Yes, but their mother’s mother is Raelnan. Quite confusing, I know. Nevertheless, here we are and I will thank you not to detain us any longer.”

“You wish to cross the border then?”

“I thought that was clear.”

“Your passes, then.”

“We lost them in the struggle with the bandits you are so unconcerned about.”

“I thought as much.” Volf’s men fanned out and raised their spears. “What is the real story?”

“What do you mean?” asked Merc.

“Have you any idea how often someone comes through here claiming to be the servant of a minor lord in eastern Brythalia who has lost his pass in a struggle with bandits?”

“Rather frequently, I gather.”

“Quite. Now hands on your heads. You’re under arrest, the lot of you.”

Merc sighed. “Very good, Captain Volf. I commend you for seeing through our ruse. I must now trust you with the truth.”

“You are traveling incognito on a secret mission for the king?”

“Heard that one too, have you?”

“Hands up. Now.”

“Would you like to hear about the floating eyeballs?”

“No. I am doing my best not to notice them.”

“They are prying eyes sent by the Dark Magic Society.”

“I’m not listening.”

“I am the wizard Mercury Boltblaster. This muscular fellow is the notorious Jason Cosmo, and these fair ladies the daughters of a Zastrian senator. We were just attacked by a demon and we have urgent business in Rae City.” He paused, then added. “Oh, and the fate of the Eleven Kingdoms is at stake.”

Volf frowned. “I must admit, I haven’t heard that one before. Nonetheless, you lack passes and you are under arrest. What you say might be true, but you might be runaway serfs. We frown with exaggerated severity upon runaway serfs. So we’ll sort it all out at our stockade.”

“I think not.”

The Raelnan detachment perked up when Mercury announced his true name. He now signaled them with a nod. The soldiers pushed the barricades aside and charged the Brythalian contingent.

“Run for it!” said Merc, leading the way past the melee.

Once we were across the border, the Raelnans pulled back to their own territory. Four Brythalian lay dead in the dust.

Captain Volf raised his sword to order a counterattack, then reconsidered. “This treachery will not go unpunished!” he said. “You may have escaped Brythalian justice today. But if ever you return to Brythalia, any of you, you will pay for the lives of these men! This I swear!”

“And a good day to you,” said Merc.

The Raelnan squad escorted us to a nearby encampment, where a company of some one hundred troops were busy at drills and camp duties. I now understood Captain Volf’s decision to let us go

without further incident. What I didn't understand was the camp commander's deferential attitude toward Mercury. A balding, floridfaced officer with a chest full of ribbons saluted the wizard smartly as we strode into camp.

"Welcome back to Raelna, Lord Boltblaster! Colonel Nathan Brimcopper at your service, sir!"

Mercury acknowledged the salute with a curt nod. "My companions require your healer, baths, hot meals, rest, and fresh clothing before we say anything more. And post archers to take down some of these accursed prying eyes!"

"At once, milord!"

Agog, I turned to Merc. "Lord Boltblaster? Did I miss something?"

"My Raelnan title is largely honorific," said Merc. "But it has its uses."

"So I see."

We dined in the spacious pavilion Colonel Brimcopper provided for our use.

"Brimcopper has kindly offered us an escort to Rae City. With relays of fresh horses, we should arrive in three days. His archers have already downed five of the prying eyes, which is extraordinary shooting."

"But will the Demon Lords attack again? Or Isogoras?"

"It is difficult to predict what Demon Lords will do, but I wager they'll lick their wounds a bit before trying again. Raelna is a blessed land, favored of The Gods. That inhibits the Lords Demonical—but does not eliminate their threat. As for the Xornite, he is far more predictable. We've routed his lackeys yet again. He'll be content to spy until he can muster some new pawn to send against me. He is most likely waiting for Natalia Slash. With any luck, some fat troll in the Great Mucky is using her shinbone for a toothpick even as we speak."

"Again, I gather there is bad history between you."

Merc nodded. "To put it mildly."

"You have many enemies."

"It does seem so."

"But you aren't very forthcoming about your past."

"No, I'm not."

I sighed. "I suppose I should change the subject."

"I suppose you should."

Raelna was a prosperous kingdom, blessed with fair weather and fertile soil. Colorful flowers and cloverfilled pastures lined its welltended roadways. Each new village through which we passed was more charming and picturesque than the last. The Raelnans appeared happy, healthy, hard-working, and harmonious. Raelna was in every respect the opposite of Darnk.

Mercury related something of the kingdom's history as we rode. The warrior-mage Blaze Shurben was one of the Mighty Champion's chief lieutenants in the Great Rebellion that brought down the Empire of Fear. Blaze was also a demigod. His mother was Rae, Goddess of the Sun. After the Evil Empire's fall, the territory through which we now rode was a blasted wasteland. But the Sun Goddess transformed it into a rich regalia of bountiful fields and verdant forests for Blaze and his followers. To honor his mother in turn, Blaze founded Rae City and established a kingdom devoted to mercy, justice, and fun in the sun. The level of mercy and justice ebbed and flowed over the centuries, but, judging from the coppery complexions of the people, Raelnan devotion to sun worship had never waned.

Raelna's present ruler was Queen Raella. Merc's high regard for the young queen was evident when he spoke of her. In the wizard's estimation there was no more benevolent monarch in all of Arden. Rejecting entirely the self-aggrandizing ways of her predecessors, she was determined to reform her kingdom and restore to her people the freedoms that had eroded over the centuries. She had

reduced taxes, reformed the courts of justice, outlawed slavery, granted land to peasants, banned torture, and ended imprisonment for debt. Though Raella was much loved by the common folk, Raelna's nobles resented her trimming of their ancient privileges. But to me, a peasant farmer, her heart seemed to be in the right place.

We spotted the gleaming golden walls of Rae City from ten leagues away. The royal city was laid out in six concentric rings of lofty, colorful towers connected by soaring bridges. The towers of the outermost ring shimmered with an iridescent violet tint. The next ring was of taller blue towers. Next came green, then yellow, orange, and brilliant red. At the center of the metropolis was a mountainous spire of gleaming white stone, mirrored glass, and gigantic prisms that sprayed sunlight across the city in intricate rainbow patterns. This was the Palace of the Sun, the seat of Raelnan power.

We passed unchallenged through one of the seven magnificent city gates and proceeded down a broad, treelined boulevard to the Sun Palace itself. Palace Guards in fancy red and gold uniforms escorted us inside. The prying eyes did not follow. According to Mercury, protective wards around the palace kept them at bay.

Inside, Merc shifted the hue of his clothing to somber black and grey. His mood took on the same aspect. He ceased responding to my questions or comments.

The Palace Guards turned us over to the Lord Chamberlain. This official was a tall, gaunt, and bespectacled older man who wore an elaborate powdered wig. His costume consisted of a long, high-collared red velvet coat embroidered with gold thread and worn with waistcoat, breeches, and hose. After bidding us an elaborate welcome he directed the members of our party to separate chambers to make ourselves presentable.

A platoon of servants bathed, powdered, brushed, and dressed me in clothes that matched the style, if not the fineness, of the Lord Chamberlain's garb. Pink and green were not colors I would have chosen, but I didn't complain. The clothes fit surprisingly well, except for the shoes, which pinched my feet. I politely refused the insistent offer of a powdered wig. A page led me to a nearby parlor where I found Sapphrina and Rubis waiting.

"Gods above!" I exclaimed.

Sapphrina wore an elaborate corseted gown of rich blue silk trimmed with silver brocade. Her golden hair, which I had only seen loose or tied back, was held by jeweled pins in an elegant upswept sculpture of braids and curls piled atop her head.

"What is it?" asked Sapphrina.

"You're...you're beautiful," I stammered, drinking her in from head to slipped toe.

"We know," said Rubis. She was sheathed in red silk dress adorned with tiny emeralds, rubies, and sunstones.

"But thank you for noticing," said Sapphrina, flashing her most dazzling smile. She did a pirouette so that I could further admire her gown. "You have no idea how good it feels to get properly dressed up again!" "I have an idea of the feeling," I said, pulling at the stiff collar of my own unfamiliar tunic. "I'm not sure how good it is."

"Fah! Jason, you cut quite the noble figure!" cooed Rubis.

"Most handsome," agreed Sapphrina.

"I feel ridiculous in this frippery."

"Tosh!" said Rubis. "It befits you. You look every inch the courtier."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Our dour wizard is evidently well-connected," said Sapphrina. "Who would have thought he had any friends at all?"

As if on cue, a door opened and Mercury joined us, accompanied by the Lord Chamberlain. I noted that Merc remained wigless and felt better about my own refusal.

"Mercury, what is all this finery about?"

He shrugged. The Lord Chamberlain led us through a long maze of wide curving passageways and sweeping staircases to the antechamber of the throne room. He spoke a few words to the barrel-chested Sergeant-at-Arms of the Royal Chamber, who in turn instructed his underlings. A bevy of pages arranged our party in the proper order of precedence.

A trumpet fanfare sounded. The great crystal doors of the throne room swung open. A chorus of bells and horns followed. A claxon-voiced herald announced us one by one: “His Arcane Eminence, Mercury, Lord Boltblaster!” The Sergeant-at-Arms led Mercury into the chamber.

“Mistress Sapphrina Corundum, a gentledady of Caratha!”

Sapphrina followed.

“Mistress Rubis Corundum, a gentledady of Caratha!”

Rubis went next.

“Master Burlo Stumproot, a gentleman of Darnk!”

Expecting to hear my own name, I did not step forward on cue. Thinking I was frozen with sudden fright, a helpful servant gave me a hard shove in the back. I stumbled into the throne room, nearly tripping over my own slipped feet.

The monumental chamber was a wonderland of colors, a series of crystalline terraces connected by wide floating stairways. Bright and fragrant flowers surrounded dozens of sparkling fountains, polychromatic pools, and rainbow-hued waterfalls. Prisms suspended from the domed glass ceiling cast slowly moving slivers of color across the walls and floor. Bright-plumed birds flew about freely. Some even perched on the heads and shoulders of the richly garbed and bewigged courtiers, who did their best not to notice.

More glorious than all this was the throne itself. Carved from a single golden sunstone, it shone like a resting star atop a high dais. There, looking small and distant amid all the splendor, sat Queen Raella.

As the music fell away, six heralds spoke in unison. “Her Most Enchanting Majesty, Raella of the Shurbenholts, Blessed Daughter of the Sun Goddess Rae and by Her Divine Grace the Queen of Raelna, Princess of the Silver Sands, and Supreme Raediatrix of the Holy Church of Rae, bids thee welcome to her court!”

Mercury bowed from the waist. I followed his lead. The twins sketched elegant curtsies. Then Mercury started up the steps of the dais. I heard the courtiers gasp at this breach of protocol, saw the guards tense. But the queen gave a subtle shake of her head. No one moved to intercept him.

Queen Raella was tiny, her features delicate and pale. At first glance she might have been a young girl playing dress-up. Her reddish-blond hair hung loose about her shoulders, held back from her face by a golden circlet. She wore a simple gown of pale washed gold. A strand of golden-red sunstones adorned her neck. Her understated elegance was a striking contrast with the elaborate costumes of her court and the splendor of her surroundings. Yet there was no mistaking her regal bearing, or the warm glow of power that radiated from her. Most compelling of all was the flash of her eyes. Blue beyond belief, they were not the eyes of a young woman. They were the ageless eyes of a goddess, eyes that missed nothing, eyes that saw deep beneath the surface of whatever or whomever they gazed upon—and they were fixed firmly on Mercury Boltblaster as he dropped to one knee at her feet and bowed his head.

Mercury kissed her outstretched hand. His voice cracked slightly as he said, “Greetings, my queen.”

A tear rolled down Raella’s cheek. They gazed deeply into each other’s eyes for a long moment while the rest of us shuffled awkwardly. Now I understood Mercury’s strange mood. Here was written a tale of frustrated love and unguessed pain.

At last Raella broke the silence, saying, “Pray, arise. What brings you once more to our kingdom, dearest sir?”

“I have come to ask your help in reading this gentleman’s aura.”

“Queen Raella is your master aurist?” I blurted.

“Indeed, sir,” said Raella sweetly, beckoning me to approach. “We are held to be of some account in the field of auric studies.” She studied me intently as I mounted the steps, obviously viewing my aura as Mercury had in Whiteswab. An expression of puzzlement crossed her face. “This is passing strange,” she murmured, returning her gaze to Mercury.

“You see why I have come to you,” said Mercury. He lowered his voice to a private whisper. “If it is as I suspect, we face a crisis. This man is Jason Cosmo.”

Now the queen looked me over long and well. “Is this so?” she asked me. “Are you truly Jason

Cosmo?”

“It is, Your Majesty. I mean, I am, Your Majesty. That is—yes. Yes, I am.” Not knowing what else to do, I bowed.

Without warning, Raella rose from her throne. All the court bowed low. Then, to the astonishment of all, Queen Raella knelt at my feet.

“My lord,” she said, “All within my kingdom is yours to command.”

Confused and astounded, I looked to Merc for guidance. But the utter shock on his face exceeded even mine!

Chapter 11

“Since when does the Queen of Raelna bend knee to anyone?” demanded Mercury as we followed Raella down a long palace corridor. “Most especially a Darnkite peasant? No offense, Cosmo.”

“None taken.”

“What are you not telling me, Raella?”

“Patience, my love. All will be explained.”

“I’m not noted for my patience.”

“How well I know it.”

Following the queen’s astonishing act of obeisance, the royal court adjourned. While her courtiers gossiped about what they had just witnessed and what it might mean, Raella bade Mercury and me follow to her private chambers. The Lord Chamberlain’s men, meantime, escorted Sapphrina and Rubis to their quarters.

“I deserve an explanation,” said Merc.

“You shall have it anon,” said Raella.

The round wooden door to the queen’s private study was ornately carved with symbols both heraldic and mystical. Inlaid with gems and ivory, it had no apparent handle or latch, yet it opened smoothly with a wave of Raella’s hand.

Within waited three men robed in the manner of wizards or sages. Mercury took them in with a sneer of contempt.

“Arkayne’s blood! What are they doing here?”

Queen Raella met Mercury’s anger with aplomb. “They are my guests. They wish to speak with you and Master Cosmo. Pray be seated, gentlemen.”

Mercury glared at the trio. “I have no wish to speak to them.”

“Please hear us out, Mercury Boltblaster,” said a wizened little man with wispy white hair. He wore a plain grey robe and clutched a gnarled wooden staff. His voice quivered with age, but did not lack force. “And you, Master Cosmo.” He bowed to me, as did his companions. “We have come here at great risk to meet you.”

“I’m flattered,” I said. “Who are you?”

“The League,” said Merc, crossing his arms.

“Indeed,” confirmed the old man. “We are all that remains of the High Council of the League of Benevolent Magic following the loss of several members to the assassins of the Dark Magic Society. I am Timeon. My companions are Votarius and Ormazander.”

Votarius wore red and blue robes stitched with white stars. He was of middle age, with greying brown hair, a thin, hawkish face, and intense brown eyes. Ormazander was a blueskinned Cyrillan. He wore a feathered cap and numerous bead necklaces. His silk robes were green and yellow.

“I am honored to meet you,” I said, ignoring Merc’s snort of derision.

“The honor is ours,” said Timeon. He cleared his throat. “We have searched for you, Jason Cosmo, since the Society began their massive manhunt more than a year ago. We are grateful to Lord Boltblaster for delivering you here safely.”

“Which I would not have done had I known you vultures were waiting to pounce on him!” snapped

Merc. Raella gave him a sharp look. Merc cursed and turned away.

“What does the League of Benevolent Magic want with me?” I asked. “I don't know anything about magic.”

“You are the world's last hope,” said Ormazander, giving me an odd look.

“That's what He Who Sits On The Porch said.”

“He Who Sits On The Porch?” said Votarius, leaning forward eagerly. “You saw him?”

“Yes.”

“When? Where? You must tell me!” He turned to Ormazander with a wild gleam in his eye. “Do you see? This is incredible! The Rocking One himself!”

“This is most singular,” said Timeon. “He Who Sits On The Porch counsels only the elite of heroes, manifesting so rarely that his very existence is doubted in many circles. Votarius wrote a monograph on the subject and will no doubt wish to question you at length about your encounter. But later. For now, suffice to say that the manifestation of He Who Sits On The Porch only confirms the words of the Luminous Oracle of Mount Suradel.”

“The Luminous Oracle spoke of me?” The Luminous Oracle was honored above all other holy prognosticators. His pronouncements were rare, but always accurate. Or such was his reputation. “What did he say?” I asked.

“That you are Arden's only hope,” said Timeon.

“Oracular pronouncements are notoriously vague and subject to many interpretations,” said Mercury.

Timeon sighed. “Votarius, would you read the transcript of the Luminous Oracle's pronouncement?”

The younger wizard unrolled a parchment scroll. “These are the words of the infallible Luminous Oracle of Mount Suradel: ‘Jason Cosmo is the key to victory or defeat for a thousand years. The fate of the Next Age rests in his hands.’ End quote.”

“You're mad, the lot of you,” said Merc.

“And you are a blind, stubborn fool!” raged Votarius, rising from his seat. He jabbed an accusing finger at Merc. “The threat of the Dark Magic Society is plain, yet you deny it!”

“And I suppose the League is a harmless flock of lambs?”

“Would that we numbered a flock!” countered Votarius. “The Society now owns the allegiance of half the arcane masters left in the Eleven Kingdoms! The League has now but four masters left!”

“I count only three,” said Merc.

“Then you fail to count me,” said Raella softly.

“You, Raella?” Mercury's angry expression morphed into shock, hurt, perhaps even fear. “You stand with the League?” He paused. “I would not have thought it possible.” He fell silent, seemingly overcome by a wave of emotion. Abruptly, he stalked across the room, turning his back to the group, with head bowed and fists clenched at his sides.

The queen was stricken by his reaction. A flush colored her pale cheeks. She almost rose to go to him, but, with royal restraint, kept her place. Yet her eyes followed Mercury.

Ignoring their distress, Votarius continued his account of the present danger. “At the lesser ranks, two in every three known wizards are in the Society's thrall, along with dozens of apprentices. Meantime, the League's ranks are thinned by murder, desertion, and subversion. Soon, the Society will hold a monopoly on the magic arts, by which to further their aims of world domination.”

“As opposed to the League's mission of making the world a safe and happy place for all,” sneered Merc.

As Votarius drew breath to respond, Timeon silenced him with an upraised hand. The old wizard leaned forward on his staff. His gaze bored into mine. “Jason Cosmo, we only wish to impress upon you the extent of the threat to the freedom of Arden. The League of Benevolent Magic was founded to prevent the Society from gaining dominion over the peoples of the world. For nearly one thousand years, we have exposed their plots, defended against their attacks, rooted out the corruption they spread. Many fine wizards have devoted themselves to this cause, even at the cost of their own lives. Yet now our numbers dwindle while the Society grows stronger. Our ancient foes

may be on the brink of total victory.”

“What do you mean?”

Votarius took up his pitch with renewed fervor. “Master Timeon speaks true. The Society has pawns everywhere. War captains, nobles, ministers of state, priests, merchants, even monarchs are under their sway. Their tentacles extend throughout the Eleven Kingdoms and beyond. There can be no doubt! We are in the final stages of the final conflict! Our enemy is poised for total victory! Only you can save us!”

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“What know you of the Age of Despair?” asked Ormazander.

“I know that The Gods withdrew from the affairs of the world and the Demon Lords established the Empire of Fear.”

“Quite so. Do you recall who ended the Evil Empire?”

“The Mighty Champion. Everyone knows that.”

“True. But what was that Mighty Champion’s name?” Ormazander leaned forward eagerly.

I was stumped. “Did he have a name? In every story I’ve heard, he was the Mighty Champion.”

“Do you suppose his friends called him ‘Mighty’?”

“I guess not. I’ve never thought about it.”

Ormazander lifted from the side table a thick book bound in leather. “Behold the *Book of Uncommon Knowledge, Super Trivia Edition*. It is a sacred compendium of little known facts recorded by scribes down through the ages. Which Becanian warlord sacked twelve treasure cities in three days, a record not matched before or since? The answer is here. Who was the unemployed goat herder who invented both the stirrup and the perforated spoon? How many pounds of fresh fish did Queen Meersheba’s ten thousand cats consume each day? How many tongues does a red-banded slurn have? All the answers are contained in this book.”

“Okay.”

“And in the back is a helpful list of obscure words frequently used in crossword puzzles.”

“Good to know.”

“Most people overlook that. But I turn now to the section on the Age of Despair. Here it is written that the true name of the Mighty Champion, he who saved the world from the Empire of Fear ten centuries ago, was...Jason Cosmo!”

“What!”

“It is true. See for yourself.”

Ormazander passed the heavy book to me. The words on the open page confirmed his claim.

“How can this be right?”

“This book is the work of the Mnemonic Monks of Everwhen Keep,” said Ormazander. “They’re the last word in trivia.”

My head was spinning. I felt short of breath. “But what does this mean? Am I somehow descended from the Mighty Champion?”

“More than that,” said Votarius. “You *are* the Mighty Champion!”

“Say what?”

“You are the Mighty Champion reborn!”

“I am? No, that’s...that’s impossible!”

“The prophecies! The signs! They point to one conclusion! You are the living reincarnation of the Mighty Champion! In Arden’s hour of need, the Gods have sent you to defeat the Dark Magic Society forever! To save the world! It is all so very, very clear!”

“It very, very isn’t.”

“It is your destiny!” insisted Votarius, seizing my arm.

“No,” I said, pulling away. “That can’t be right. Your book is wrong. You’re wrong!”

“Through their own dark oracles, the Society knows who you are,” said Timeon. “That is why they hunt you by name. They seek to destroy you before you destroy them.”

“Yet there are limits to their knowledge,” said Ormazander. “Unable to divine your location, they employed the tactic of offering a great reward. Now that you have surfaced they will turn all their

might against you.”

“I should have stayed in Lower Hicksnittle,” I said.

“Don’t you see?” said Votarius hotly. “You alone can vanquish the Society! You will turn the tide of history toward victory for the forces of truth and justice!”

“Enough!” I cried. It was all too much. “You sound like you expect me to beat the Society all by myself!”

“That is the general idea,” said Votarius.

“You do know that I am a woodcutter from Darnk?”

“Um...er, no,” said Votarius. “Really?”

“Yes. Even if by some wild coincidence the Mighty Champion and I share a name, that doesn’t make him me. Or me him.”

“Wait a minute,” said Votarius. “Are you telling us you haven’t been secretly trained from birth to lead the free peoples of Arden in a final cataclysmic conflict against the Demon Lords, the Dark Magic Society, and all the powers of evil?”

“No, I haven’t. Sorry.”

The three wizards exchanged worried glances. Evidently this was not the response they expected.

“Give us a moment,” said Votarius. The three League men leaned their heads together for a heated, though hushed, conference.

“I’m good at cutting down trees and growing turnips,” I volunteered. “If that helps any.”

Votarius looked ill. Timeon, downcast, shook his head. Ormazander sighed wearily.

“Perhaps he is correct, sirs,” said Raella, suddenly all queen again. “These speculations are premature. Once I have deciphered his aura—which, as you all can see, presents us quite a puzzle—we will better understand Master Cosmo’s significance to the Society and to our own cause.”

The bright eyes of Votarius shone suddenly brighter, glowing with a weird purple light. “The aura!” he cried, in a deep, reverberating voice not his own. “The aura is the key! Spiritual Lightning!” Bolts of blue lightning flew from his fingertips, blasting me from my chair and hurling me across the room. I hit the damasked wall and slid to the floor. I felt my insides churn, my skin blister, the blood in my veins change to flaming liquid pain. Was this what the Red Huntsman suffered at Mercury’s hands?

I screamed.

“His eyes!” cried Raella, leaping to her feet. “Possessor!”

Timeon and Ormazander were slow to react, but Mercury tackled Votarius from behind. The two of them crashed into a small table, shattering a flameless lamp. Votarius turned his blue lightning on Merc at contact range.

Raella placed herself between me and the combatants. With hand signs and incantations, she conjured a protective shield of rose-colored light around me. Mercury produced a dagger from beneath his cloak and slashed Votarius, cutting open his right hand and disrupting the lightning spell.

“Spare him!” cried Ormazander, levitating the knife from Merc’s hand to his own.

“You fool!” said Merc. Votarius clamped his bloody hand around Merc’s jaw and blasted eldritch energy directly into his head. Merc broke free and rolled across the floor. He clutched his temples and trembled violently. Blue smoke boiled from his ears.

Votarius regained his feet. He turned toward me, blue sparks leaping between his palms. His purple eyes flared. I felt a malign presence beat against my consciousness.

Timeon’s staff flared with a bright green light. He stepped in front of his possessed colleague.

Votarius batted the staff aside and knocked the older man to the floor.

Ormazander attacked Votarius with the dagger. Not even glancing at him, Votarius caught his wrist. He squeezed until Ormazander dropped the knife, then hurled the Cyrillan aside.

“By order of the Demon Lords, Jason Cosmo must die!” he proclaimed.

“Begone, foul spirit!” said Raella.

A shower of pink sparks flew from her hands, swirling around her attacker’s head like a swarm of hyperactive fireflies.

Votarius swung his fist, backhanding the queen to the floor. Her head struck the tiles. The

protective shield around me vanished.

Taking me by the throat with his bloody right hand, Votarius lifted me from the floor. He stretched out his left hand. Merc's discarded knife flew to his grasp. "Now you die!" he shouted. "All glory to the Demon Lords!"

The face of Votarius was dripping with sweat, as if he suffered from a severe fever. His face, contorted with hatred, twitched and trembled. His glowing eyes were twin beacons of bedevilment, burning with a sick madness.

Votarius thrust the knife at my gut. I caught his arm with my hands. He tightened his grip on my throat and fought to drive the knife into my body. The blade moved slowly closer. The point tore my garment and pricked my skin. Black spots filled my vision.

Then the pressure on my windpipe went away. My feet touched the ground. The purple light in my would-be killer's eyes flickered and vanished. Votarius fell to his knees. He toppled forward on his face. Two holes the size of fists smoldered in his back.

Across the room, Mercury removed his sunshades.

"That's that," he said, falling to his knees.

Raella rushed to his side. "Are you hurt, my love?"

"I've survived worse," he said. "And you?"

She had a purplish bruise on her face. "I live," she said.

"I'm going to throw up," I announced, collapsing to all fours.

"Spiritual lighting does that," said Merc.

"Did you have to kill him?" asked Ormazander accusingly.

"Yes," said Mercury.

"We were three to his one! We could have driven out the possessing devil and saved our comrade!"

"There was no time."

"You are a murderer!" said Ormazander.

Merc exploded. "I've heard enough from the League for one day! You brought a puppet of the Demon Lords into the heart of the Sun Palace, risking not only Cosmo's life, but Raella's! Get out of my sight before I do something you will regret!"

"Why, you impudent—"

"Come," said Timeon, placing a restraining hand on his companion. "He did what was necessary."

"I am disturbed that a possessor demon could penetrate the palace wards," said Raella.

"He was possessed beforehand," said Mercury.

"Liar!" said Ormazander.

"Mercury is correct," said Timeon. "The possessor must have infected Votarius and lain dormant for a long time, waiting for a chance to strike."

"A sleeper," said Raella. "Then none of us can be fully trusted."

"I've known that all along," said Merc, glaring at Ormazander.

The two League wizards bent to lift their fallen comrade's body. As they touched his still form, a small ball of purple light flew out of the dead man's mouth, circled the room and disappeared down an air duct.

"The possessor is free!" said Raella. "Find it!"

The Leaguers hurried from the room, levitating the body of Votarius behind them.

"As blind as ever," said Merc.

"Now is not the time, my love."

"Did you not hear them, Raella? They see everything through the prism of their conflict with the Society. Armed with a vague statement from the Luminous Oracle and a musty old book, they would make young Cosmo here into a great savior sent by The Gods to grant them victory in spite of their own ineptitude. They're madmen!"

"You forget that I am one of them now."

"I'm certainly trying to. Why, Raella? After all the League has done to you. To us."

"This is not the League we knew. They are brave and truly dedicated to their ideals. Ideals even you once embraced."

“Ideals are only words. Especially for the League. The Dark Magic Society, at least, is honest about its nature.”

Raella’s face hardened. “My love, you too should go before we both say things we will regret.” She glanced at me. “I have work to do.”

“So you do.”

Mercury stalked from the room, leaving me alone with Queen Raella Shurbenholt.

Chapter 12

“I regret this unpleasantness,” said Queen Raella.

I shrugged. “Someone trying to kill me? I’m used to that by now, Your Majesty.”

“Bravely said. Come.”

She led me from her study to an adjoining workshop. The floor was tiled, the walls lined with books, scrolls, bottles of mysterious liquids, and other tools of the magic arts.

“Mercury’s hostility toward the League transcends the bounds of reason,” said Raella.

“Why so, Your Majesty?”

“He holds ill will for old wounds. I know well the justice of his complaints, but there comes a time when personal considerations must be set aside for the common good.”

“I don’t understand.”

She gave a rueful smile. “How could you? I refer to events of long ago, before Mercury became the bitter man you know.” She took on a distant, dreamy look. “Before he lost his idealism, his faith in the good.”

“I sense a tragic tale.”

Indeed, an unseen violin sounded faintly as the queen continued. “Mercury came to court when I was but a silly young princess. He was the handsome apprentice of the great mage Pencader, who served my father, King Raegon, as court wizard. Pencader was also my tutor in the magic arts. Mercury and I took lessons together. Inevitably, we fell in love.” She sighed. “He said I was the living image of the Goddess Rae herself.”

“How sweet,” I said.

“Unfortunately, it is also true. The House of Shurbenholt is descended in an unbroken line from Blaze Shurben, the Son of Rae. Strict laws of succession demand that Shurbenholts wed only the most royal of mates. Mercury, though he is of blood most noble, does not meet the stringent standards of our ancient law. Also, I was already promised to Prince Halogen of Orphalia in a marriage of alliance that would unite two thrones.”

“I can see where this is going.” “When word of our love reached my father, he banished Mercury from Raelna on pain of death. My heart was broken. For long months Mercury was in hiding. Then my wedding day arrived. With Pencader’s secret aid, Mercury returned and spirited me away before the ceremony.”

I smiled. “I could see Merc doing that.”

“We eluded my father’s forces and fled to Caratha. Halogen followed with his knights and might have taken us, but word arrived that my father had died of a sudden illness. Once I was Queen of Raelna, none could force me to marry against my will. But neither was I free to marry as I desired. The only way to wed Mercury was to abdicate, and that I could not do.”

“I’ll bite. Why not give up the throne for true love? It’s very romantic.”

She shook her head. “My duty is to my kingdom, to my people. I love Mercury as I could never love another, but duty must come first. Were I to stand aside, power would pass to the Council of Nobles. The people would suffer. Much good would go undone.”

“I see.”

“With all my heart, I wanted Mercury by my side despite these impediments, but our enemies blocked us at every turn. The nobles urged me to honor my father’s agreement and marry Halogen. The League also

desired the marriage, believing a combined kingdom could better withstand the Society. Mercury was then a candidate for League membership. The High Council pressured him to forsake me. Mercury refused and Master Pencader backed him. Then Pencader died under mysterious circumstances. Mercury believes he was murdered on orders of the High Council.”

“That would more than explain his dislike for the League.”

“The Council was rife with ambitious, arrogant men, greedy for power. Today’s leaders are different. But with Pencader gone, the League and the nobles combined to drive us apart. By deception, they convinced each of us that the other truly desired an end to our relationship. Mercury departed to become the bitter wanderer you know. I threw myself into ruling my kingdom and enacting reforms. Each of us felt abandoned by the other. It was only recently that we learned the bitter truth.”

“And that explains his sour disposition.”

“Indeed. All those lonely years apart. Our rapprochement has been slow and painful. He still blames the League for our troubles. I have not forgotten what happened. Even now, the League is not without flaws. But confronting the Dark Magic Society is more important than our personal grudges.”

“I suppose so.”

“As it happens, Mercury is not the only one stuck in the past. My former betrothed, Halogen, is now King of Orphalia. He still views me as rightfully his and threatens war if I do not marry him. Old King Lanthanide kept the peace between our realms, despite my refusal to wed his son. But Halogen will soon come to claim me with an army at his back. There will be war over this.”

“For all my troubles, I am happy not to wear a crown!”

Raella smiled. “It indeed rests heavily on my brow at times.”

“Yet you bear it with grace, Your Majesty.”

“Well said. But, please, you have leave to call me Raella in private, Jason.”

“I do? Why do you—and the League—so much honor a simple turnip farmer from Darnk?”

“You are far from simple, Jason. Many signs and wonders indicate your great importance in the struggle against evil.”

I shook my head. “Maybe The Gods sent the wrong signs. I can’t help believing this is all some terrible misunderstanding. I’m no Mighty Champion—and I’m sure I don’t know how to save the world!” “Perhaps not. But if you are truly of the Mighty Champion’s line—a line long thought extinguished—then, whatever your prior circumstances or occupation, yours is the most holy and royal lineage of all.”

“Is that why you bowed to me before?”

“Yes.”

“Then you believe all this is true.”

“I do.”

“But what if you’re wrong?”

“The High Council interprets the signs to mean you were sent by The Gods to destroy the Society. They may not be entirely correct. But I don’t believe they are entirely wrong.”

“I don’t see why the League needs me to beat the Dark Magic Society. Why is the Society winning now, after centuries of stalemate?”

“The Society has a new Overmaster, one Erimandras. By all indications, he is the most powerful wizard to walk Arden in generations. He is by every account a brilliant, subtle, ruthless leader who has revitalized the Society. He has taken the offensive throughout the Eleven Kingdoms. Meantime, the League suffers from a loss of confidence and trust. It is a loss with many causes, including past crimes against Mercury, myself, and others. The High Council hoped that you would emerge as a reborn Mighty Champion and lead us to victory.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint.”

“Such a judgment is premature. Only The Gods know what you may yet accomplish, Jason. Don’t underestimate yourself.”

“Why don’t you lead the League? You’re already a queen.”

“Exactly. Raelna comes first.” She paused, then said softly, “But you are correct. The League needs a

vigorous leader. And I know just the man.”

“I’m not even a wizard!”

“Not you. Mercury.”

“Merc?”

“He has the skill, the daring, the will to fight. If his analysis of the Society’s involvement with Asmodraxis is correct, then the League must adjust its strategy. Unfortunately, they won’t listen to him and he has little interest in making them listen.” She smiled. “But if your aura reveals the location of the Superwand, then everything changes. Enough prattle! Let us learn your secrets, Jason Cosmo.”

The queen directed me to stand before a black tapestry hanging on the wall. “The contrast helps me better discern your aura,” she explained.

She studied me intently. “Interesting,” she said after a moment. “Your aura is not in Standard Auric Script. But the style is familiar. Stay put.”

The queen gestured and a fat volume entitled *Opthamalio’s Guide to Unusual Auras* floated from a bookshelf to hover before her. She leafed through the book, occasionally looking up to study me as she searched its pages.

“Aha!” she said at last. “Your aura is done in the Old Archaic Style of High Primitive Celestial Proto-Auric.”

“What is that?”

“Very obscure,” she said. “One of the earliest auric alphabets, not seen since the Age of Peace, I’ll warrant.” She walked to her desk and withdrew a pair of wirerimmed spectacles from a slipcase. Behind the crystal lenses, her wise blue eyes appeared as large as hen’s eggs. “Magnification,” she explained.

The queen stared at my face and read my aura aloud, frequently consulting *Opthamalio’s* for pronunciation. I didn’t understand anything she said, but the words did sound old and obscure. At the desk, an animated quill pen wrote a translation of her words on a sheet of parchment.

Raella removed the spectacles. She read the transcript silently. Her mouth fell open in astonishment.

“Is it the secret location of the Superwand?” I asked.

“No. It is a personal message.” She gazed at me in wonderment.

“From whom?”

“Read it for yourself.”

She handed me the parchment:

Dear Jason,

If you are reading this, it means that the Dark Magic Society is already hunting you. It is of critical importance that you not fall into their hands. The future of Arden depends on it. In fact, if the Society gets you, Arden won’t have much of a future at all.

But fear not!

Well, fear not overly much. We have taken steps to protect you. We have watched over you from birth and shielded you from danger. We have acted to confuse and confound your enemies. If we may say so, we’ve done a pretty good job so far. Your ancestors were rich and powerful, monarchs in their own right. Such prominence would have made you easy to find. So we cleverly reduced your forefathers to grinding poverty and led them to obscurity in the smelly land of Darnk, thus wrapping you in a warm, protective—though, again, smelly—blanket of anonymity.

You can’t beat planning like that.

Yet, there are limits to what even we can do while bound by the terms of the Great Eternal Pan-Cosmic Holy/Unholy Non-Intervention Pact. Nonetheless, we have sent help your way. We’ve issued omens, signs, and prophetic warnings to encourage our mortal servitors to render you any needed assistance. And once your enemies find you, we will make a hero of you. That will be a big help in your efforts to stay alive.

Upon receipt of this message, we bid you go to the Shrine of Greenleaf. You will find it at the juncture of the Hidden River and the Arbenflow in the heart of the Incredibly Dark Forest. There you will secure the means of your survival. You will also learn more about your destiny. The Keeper of the Shrine awaits your arrival.

You’re probably wondering why we didn’t reveal all of this to you sooner, in a dream or by divine messenger. Alas,

the Demon Lords can intercept such communications. Thus, we cleverly embedded this message in your aura with the hope that you will at least intuit the gist of it and will find a way to read our full message before it is too late. Admittedly, it's a bit of a longshot.

In closing, we apologize for any inconvenience all this may cause you. We know you never asked to be the focus of the eternal struggle between good and evil, but those are the breaks. Good luck. We're all pulling for you up here!

Yours truly,

The Gods

I set the letter down. "Wow."

"Indeed."

"I'm flabbergasted. But if I don't have the secret location of the Superwand, why does the Society want me?"

"Your ancestry alone would be reason enough for the Society to seek your death," said the queen.

"Supposed ancestry. Nothing in this letter actually says I'm related to the Mighty Champion."

"True enough," said Raella. "Nor does it mention the Superwand—but the Society doesn't know that you don't know where the Superwand is. Until just now, even you didn't know whether you knew or not."

"I know."

"I know you know."

"So what is the Shrine of Greenleaf?"

"I have never heard of it."

"What, never?"

"No, never."

"So the Society wants me because they think I know the location of a magic Superwand that can free the greatest of all demons. Which I don't. The Demon Lords want me dead to thwart the Society. Which isn't actually necessary, because I don't know what the Society thinks I know. The League expects me to save the world. Though I don't know how. And The Gods won't explain any of this until I visit an unknown shrine in the middle of the Incredibly Dark Forest." I shook my head. "Did I leave anything out?"

Before Raella could reply, the door to her workshop flew open. A babbling crowd of lords, generals, and courtiers burst into the room, all shouting about war, doom, and disaster.

"Silence!" Raella commanded. The uproar ceased. "Marshal of the Realm, what means this intrusion?"

Lord Hawkinstern, the distinguished Captain General of Raelna's armies, stood at stiff attention.

"Invasion, Your Majesty! On multiple fronts! The Brythalian attack from the east! The Orphalians are crossing the Longwash!"

"Brythalia? But it is not yet time for the Annual War!"

"They have invaded early! And in earnest! Their knights and levies are augmented with mercenaries."

"What are their numbers?"

"We have no accurate reports as yet."

"Get them!" snapped Raella. "We want complete estimates of enemy troop strength, an analysis of their strategy, an update on the disposition of our forces, and a menu of response options. Convene our Council of War immediately. We will join you shortly."

Her officers hurried to carry out her commands. Raella faced me sadly. "I have feared this," she confided. "For Brythalia to attack in concert with Orphalia can only mean the sinister hand of the Society is at work."

Mercury now swept into the study. He embraced the queen. "I seem to be the harbinger of trouble," he said.

"As usual," said Raella. They kissed. Their earlier row seemed forgotten.

"What did your aura reveal?" Merc asked me. "The Superwand?"

My reply was cut short by the return of the babbling generals.

"We thought our commands were clear," said Raella, silencing them anew.

"New development, Your Majesty!" said Hawkinstern. "Rae City is under attack! By demons!"

“Demons? What sort of demons?”

“Flying demons! Winged marauders from the Crimson Skies of Hell!” said the general. “Or something very similar.”

Mercury raised an eyebrow. “That must be some aura you’ve got.”

Chapter 13

At the pinnacle of the Sun Palace was an observation deck enclosed in a dome of transparent crystal. It provided an unobstructed view of Rae City and the fair green countryside beyond. From here, Queen Raella commanded the defense of her capital, issuing orders with calm firmness amid a swirl of alarmed soldiers and servitors.

Hundreds of winged marauders swarmed around the city towers. I studied one of the demons through a spyglass as it swooped down to street level and gleefully impaled a fleeing citizen with a flaming trident. The winged marauder was an orange, scaly, man-shaped creature with the head of a jackal, a long spiked tail, and membranous, fanlike wings. The rest of the horde was of the same breed, all armed with tridents, large metal hooks, or bags of ceramic grenades that exploded in bursts of green flame when hurled to the ground.

“From the direction of their attack, I’d say they gated in north of the city,” said Merc.

“What do you mean?”

“Only a transdimensional gate from the Assorted Hells could bring so many demons to Arden at one time. I wonder if someone has found the Horn of Hockessin?”

“At the risk of sounding completely ignorant—what is a Horn of Hockessin?”

“A magic horn that summons demons. It was created by Hockessin the Unclean, the greatest demonologist who ever lived. He was so powerful and so wicked that even the Dark Magic Society feared him. The Demon Lords themselves paid him homage, for he knew their darkest secrets and hidden weaknesses. Which raises the question of who is behind this attack.”

“Whoever has the Horn of Hockessin?”

“Maybe. A Demon Lord could open a gate by his own power. With effort, the Society might summon such a horde as this, even without the Horn.”

“Didn’t you tell me that Raelna is a blessed land, protected from demons?”

“There are always loopholes.”

“Or plot holes.”

“That too.”

Rae City’s defenders battled the marauders with an assortment of advanced weapons. Set on tower roofs were one hundred batteries of automatic arbalests, called *acks*. These were large, powerful crossbows that cocked and loaded themselves after each shot. An ack could fire ten long, steel-tipped arrows in as many seconds. Each ack unit was manned by a skillful crew of four. The gunner, seated in a reclining chair, sighted his target through the scope and pulled the trigger. Two more strong men wheeled the turntable on which the gun rested, always keeping it aimed in the right direction. They pushed to and fro, changing direction or making a complete circle as needed, all without looking up. Through long training or sheer instinct they knew which way to go. The fourth man rode on the platform and fed belts of arrows into the weapon. The main crew was supported by additional spotters and runners who brought up fresh belts of ammunition. The ack crews brought down many of the winged demons—it is hard to miss a bright orange target—but could not hit them all. Bomb-throwing marauders disabled several ack emplacements. Others were overwhelmed by squadrons of demons that swooped below their plane of fire, then swarmed up to attack the crews with hook and trident.

“Why isn’t AMOK engaged?” demanded Raella.

“Unknown, Your Majesty!” said Lord Hawkinster.

“Find out!”

“What is AMOK?” I asked Mercury.

“Automated Magical Object Killer. A system Raella’s technomancers dreamed up to protect the city from aerial attacks. It cost millions to develop and is supposed to automatically destroy every airborne attacker in range.”

“Then why do they need the acks?”

“AMOK is unproven. It’s an expensive gamble that doesn’t seem to be paying off. I warned Raella she was throwing her money away.”

Now a new force entered the battle, flying out from the Sun Palace to engage the winged marauders. The Gryphon Guard was an elite unit of twenty soldiers mounted on gryphons. A gryphon is a large beast with the body and hind legs of a lion, and the wings, head, and forelegs of an eagle. In the wild they nest on mountain tops and prey on horses, cattle, and other animals, not hesitating to attack men as well. These particular beasts had been more or less tamed and trained to serve as aerial steeds. They obeyed their riders, but would happily snap off the hand of anyone else who came within reach of their sharp beaks. The Gryphon Guard was brave indeed to ride such monsters into battle.

The squadron kept in tight formation and pursued marauders flying low to evade the acks. It is not easy to fire a crossbow from the back of a swiftflying gryphon, but the Guard did so with great skill. Even so, they were too small a force to stop the demonic horde.

“Merc, if this AMOK system starts up, won’t the Gryphon Guard be in trouble?”

“They wear charms to identify themselves to AMOK as friendly.”

“I hope the charms work.”

“So do they.”

“AMOK online!” said Hawkinstern.

The sky lit up with flashes of brilliant red light streaking from the upper terraces of the Sun Palace. Scarlet beams lanced through the ranks of the winged marauders, blasting them out of the air. Smoldering demons dropped by the dozens. On the observation deck, soldiers cheered. Even Raella allowed herself a brief smile.

Hawkinstern reported, “The light pump required excessive warm-up time!”

“Lives were lost by that delay!” snapped the queen.

The beams were projected from yard-long rods of ruby quartz collared by curved mirrors. The whole apparatus was mounted on a swivel to allow it free motion. It was called a *resal*, short for *regulated emission of sorcerously amplified light*. Fifty such *resal* cannons dotted the battlements of the Sun Palace. According to Merc, the devices converted distilled sunlight into destructive energy projected from the rods. The purified sunlight was stored in liquid form in great tanks beneath the palace and pumped through crystalline tubes into each individual unit. AMOK was thus operable even at night or on cloudy days. I gathered that the liquefaction of sunlight and the rest of the process were closely guarded state secrets.

“No one aims these *resals*, you say?” I found that hard to believe as the beams cut down more and more of the retreating marauders.

“Each cannon is controlled by an enchanted smart crystal that tracks targets based on instructions imprinted in the crystal.”

“I think the instructions were a little unclear.”

The marauders flew down amid the towers of the city to evade the *resals*, but AMOK was not letting them off so easily. The automated cannons concentrated fierce barrages on any building obscuring their targets, setting towers ablaze and sending huge chunks of debris falling to the street. AMOK also opened fire on the Gryphon Guard, downing most of the unit.

“AMOK has run amok!” said Merc.

“Stop it!” commanded Raella. “Shut it down!”

“Your Majesty!” protested Hawkinstern. “We’re getting a greater than fifty percent kill ratio! Let us finish them!”

“With protection like this, who needs demons?” said Merc.

“Shut it down!” said Raella.

The royal command was relayed downstairs. Long moments passed, bringing more destruction to the city. The bad news was relayed back up the stairs to the queen.

“The pump is jammed!” exclaimed a soldier. “We can’t shut it off!”

“Find a way!” said Raella. “Now!”

Having pulverized the towers nearest the Sun Palace, AMOK was starting on the next ring of buildings. There was panic in the streets as citizens fled the crumbling structures and headed for relative safety in the outer districts of the city.

“How long until the tanks run dry?” asked Hawkinstern.

“They can supply the system for another two hours,” said an aide.

“By then, most of the city will be leveled!” said Merc.

“True,” said Hawkinstern. “But the kill ratio is spectacular nonetheless.”

Raella fixed him with a glare of royal disapproval. The old soldier fell silent.

I surveyed the city through my spyglass. Hawkinstern was right. Most of the surviving marauders were retreating to the north of the city, out of AMOK’s range, or else descending to the streets. I focused on a band of three demons harrying a detachment of soldiers in one of the numerous parks near the Sun Palace.

My heart caught in my throat. Crouched amid the soldiers were Sapphrina and Rubis! They had evidently wheedled the Lord Chamberlain into letting them leave the palace.

The sisters huddled against an overturned carriage while the soldiers, six in all, stood ringed about them. Even as I watched, a marauder decapitated a soldier with a single swipe of its weapon. The man’s severed head bounced down the street like a ball.

“Merc! The twins are out there! We’ve got to help them!”

I pointed out the scene. Mercury shook his head.

“There is nothing we can do,” he said. “If we venture out there, AMOK will cut us to ribbons.”

The marauders lifted a soldier into the air and ripped him in half. Rubis had an injured leg and was unable to stand. Sapphrina hefted the sword of a fallen soldier and bravely stood over her sister, holding the weapon inexpertly. The marauders caught another soldier and hacked his limbs off one by one, letting them fall around the frightened girls.

The demons were toying with them, slaying their protectors, and saving the twins for last. Who knew what horrible deaths they would suffer? I remembered the stories about Ouga-Oyg and the vile boasts of Babbadabbas. Demons had a depraved appetite for mortal women.

“We must save them!” I cried, putting down the spyglass. I headed for the stairs, intending to race through the streets, dodging resal blasts and falling towers if necessary.

“Wait, Jason!” said Mercury. I paused and looked back. “There may be a way to reach them in time,” said the wizard.

“Then let’s go!”

“To the royal bedchamber!” he said, leading the way. Puzzled, I followed, grabbing a jeweled battle axe from a wall display as we ran through the palace corridors.

Raella’s bedchamber was opulent and spacious. The walls were decorated with gold and silver filigree studded with precious gems. The ceiling was painted with scenes of birds, clouds, and celestial bodies. The birds moved, while the painted images of the sun, moon, and stars glowed with a soft radiance that illuminated the room. The bed, wardrobe, and other furnishings were of the richest materials and highest craftsmanship, but I didn’t have time to admire them.

We were here for the rug.

The plush red carpet that covered the floor from wall to wall was shot through with threads of gold and silver.

Mercury waved his hands. A rectangular section of carpet rose into the air, revealing the bare marble floor beneath it. Almost immediately, the remaining carpet grew together to cover the exposed space.

“Magic carpet grass,” explained Merc. “It can grow anywhere with the proper spells and tending.” His robes transmuted into a close-fitting black garment, while his cloak turned deep purple. Merc hopped aboard the hovering rug and sat crosslegged. The rug promptly fell back to the floor. Merc winced at the sudden impact. He waved his hands again. The rug reluctantly sagged back into the air.

“We’re going to fly?” I asked nervously. “On that?”

“Someone needs to up the nutrient mix,” said Merc. “But this is the only way to get there in time.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I’m nothing but serious. By the way, you should change clothes. Court dress is ill-suited for fighting.”

“Change clothes? I don’t have time for that!”

“Just imagine what you want to wear. The enchantment on your garments will adjust them accordingly.”

“Fine. Let’s go!”

I imagined myself into a Darnkite peasant’s grey work shirt and trousers and joined Merc on the carpet. It felt soft but solid beneath me. I wasn’t greatly reassured.

“I don’t trust this thing.”

“You can’t fall off unless you jump or get pushed,” he said. “I promise not to push you.”

The flying carpet shot forward and over the edge of a balcony, plummeting straight down with alarming speed. Raella’s room was on an upper level of the palace. We fell more than one hundred feet before halting our descent and skimming mere inches above the glass surface of the skylight over the throne room. AMOK did not open fire on us until we reached the lower terraces.

A hole opened beneath me. My backside fell through the gap.

“I thought you said I couldn’t fall off!”

“You haven’t, have you?”

“I’m sinking right through!”

“I never said anything about that, did I?”

Merc made the carpet dance through the air so erratically that the smart crystals were unable to track us. The air around us blazed with arcane power bolts, but none struck the carpet. Our wild flight, however, put such stress on the fabric that the hole I was stuck in grew ever wider. Soon I was bent double with my knees beside my ears, held up only by my calves and arms.

We reached the far side of a ring of burning towers, putting their bulk between us and the resal cannons, and streaked low over the rubblefilled streets, doubling back toward the park.

“How’s that for flying?” said Mercury.

“I think I left my stomach back in the palace.”

“We’ll pick it up later.”

My legs and lower body slid through the hole. I maintained my grip on the battle axe, the haft of which spanned the gap in the rug, serving as a crossbar to hold me aloft.

“Could you give me a hand here?”

“We’re almost there!”

“Not what I asked.”

Only one of the twins’ gallant defenders yet survived. As we approached, a demon struck him in the chest with its spiky tail, crushing ribs and splattering blood. He fell lifeless.

The demon lunged at Sapphrina, easily batting the sword from her grasp. She screamed and threw herself protectively at her equally hysterical sister.

Merc aimed his sunshades and unleashed a resal blast of his own, striking the marauder dead. A second demon flew at us and met the same fate. The third marauder retreated, but flew too high and was nailed by an alert ack gunner.

Merc brought the carpet near street level so that my feet grazed the ground. I disengaged from the carpet. Sapphrina rushed to embrace me.

“Jason! Thank The Gods it’s you!”

“I do the work, he gets the thanks,” said Merc.

He commanded the carpet to mend while I helped Sapphrina aboard, then lifted the injured Rubis in my arms.

“You’re making a habit of this,” she said, clinging to my neck. “People will talk.”

“Let them.” I hopped onto the carpet. We lifted off.

The resal cannons stopped firing.

“AMOK has shut down,” said Merc.

“Great!” I said. His expression said otherwise. “Isn’t it?”

“No. Look there. The marauders are regrouping. Worse, a fresh wave is gating in. Without AMOK they’ll overwhelm our defenses.”

“What can we do?”

“We’ll have to fight back the oldfashioned way—with high sorcery!”

Chapter 14

“That was a mad stunt!” cried Raella, as we returned to the observation deck at the pinnacle of the Sun Palace.

“All in a day’s work,” said Mercury, squeezing her hand. “Though this day’s work is far from done.” Tower by tower, the winged marauders stormed the ack emplacements with brutal precision. Fires burned throughout Rae City. Terrified citizens jammed the streets, jostling to reach the gates and escape into the countryside.

Timeon and Ormazander entered the observation deck, accompanied by fourteen wizards of lesser rank, a mix of Leaguers and members of Raella’s court. Lord Hawkinstern led his military underlings from the room. The defense of the city was now in the hands of the wizards.

“You’ll want to go below too,” said Raella to the twins and me. “It will be safer.”

“Begging Your Majesty’s pardon, but if this doesn’t work, is any place in Rae City safe?” I asked.

“No,” she admitted.

“Then I’d rather be here.”

“We’ll stay too,” said Sapphrina, clutching my arm. Rubis squeezed her sister’s hand and nodded.

“As you will,” said Raella.

I sat between the twins at the top of the stairs. The band of wizards gathered around the queen.

“Our danger is great,” she said. “Our enemies are too numerous to count.”

Timeon lifted his staff. “Let the number of our enemies be counted!” he said. Glowing red numerals appeared in the air beside him.

There were nine hundred ninety-nine winged marauders.

“Even so,” said Raella, miffed that her rhetorical flourish had been deflated. “We face a great many foes, and our defenses are failing.”

The number of winged marauders dropped by five as the surviving acks took their toll. But soon the last battery fell to the demons. Rae City’s only remaining defenses were squads of archers, but they were scattered and ineffectual. The demons massed in the sky for their assault on the Sun Palace.

The queen’s eyes shone. “I must now do what has not been done since the dawning days of this age. I must call upon Raelna’s divine patron and protector, Bright Rae, Goddess of the Sun, to preserve us. If Rae City falls and Jason Cosmo is taken by the minions of the Dark Magic Society or the pawns of the Demon Lords who now beset us—whichever these winged marauders may be—then beauty and truth, hope and peace, life and liberty, will be forever lost, not only to the people of Raelna, but to all the Eleven Kingdoms of Arden.”

“In other words,” said Mercury. “This is very important.”

“The ancient Rite of Summons demands my total concentration,” said Raella. “It is up to you to hold back the demons until I complete it.”

“I suggest the Cascading Calligraphy of Chaos,” said Merc, stepping forward. “Are all familiar with that spell?” The other wizards nodded, some of them a bit hesitantly. Mercury noted their unease. “Don’t worry. It’s as easy as ABC.”

“The difficulty,” said Timeon, “lies not in casting the spell, but in maintaining it, which requires great stamina.”

“Maintain it we must, until Raella petitions the goddess,” said Merc. “After that it won’t matter—we’ll either be saved or dead.” He pulled a handful of small brightly colored rods from under his cloak.

“Everyone take a magic marker.”

“Are these the scented variety?” asked Ormazander.

“No, and don’t sniff them,” warned Merc. “It’s bad for you.”

Holding the markers between their fingers, the wizards joined hands to form a circle, with Raella in the center. They faced inward, their backs to the approaching invaders. The crystal dome slid open, exposing us to the open air. The breeze blew stiff and cool. The noonday sun stood directly above.

The demons streaked toward us.

The wizards hummed a single note in unison to aid their concentration for the coming conjuration. Whatever this spell did, I hoped it worked quickly. Rubis trembled and huddled closer to me. Sapphrina seemed oddly calm.

Raella raised her arms to the sun and spoke in an ancient language of power. Her sunstone necklace glittered with brilliant red-gold fire. It grew in size and floated up from its resting place around her neck to hover above her head like a halo. The necklace revolved like a spinning plate, faster and faster, until it appeared to be not a string of jewels, but a solid ring of light. It rose a good twenty feet above our heads, expanding until it exceeded the diameter of the platform on which we stood. The sun was now perfectly centered within the halo.

Orange marauders streaked toward the tower from all directions. The wizards added more notes to their repertoire, happily humming a familiar tune used to teach children the alphabet.

The demons were almost upon us. The marauders of the first rank were close enough that I could see the orange of their eyes. Now the wizards unclasped their hands and turned to face their enemies. Loudly singing the alphabet song—though in less than perfect harmony—they frantically traced glowing letters in the air with the magic markers. Some wrote a single glyph repeatedly, as if performing a handwriting drill. Others autographed the air or scrawled curses and insults directed at the demons. Whatever they wrote, it took on substance. Expanding webs of red, blue, purple, yellow, green, and orange script surrounded the platform and enveloped the demons like a net woven of rainbows, entangling their wings and preventing use of their weapons. The winged marauders were unable to penetrate the web of color. It soon obscured them from view entirely.

“Good!” said Merc. “Now hold it!”

Several demons tried to get at us by flying in through the golden ring. They were reduced to ashes as they passed through it. Timeon’s enemy counter recorded their demise, but many hundreds of foes remained.

Sapphrina curled against me. I felt something hard amid the softness of her chest. Before I could open my mouth, she pulled a dagger from her bodice and slashed me, uttering an unearthly scream as she did so. Her eyes glowed with a sickly purple light.

The possessor had her!

I tried to pry the knife from her hand. With superhuman strength, she broke my grip and shoved me down the stairs. Rubis grabbed at her sister, but was easily cuffed aside.

Sapphrina tossed the dagger aside and hefted my borrowed battle axe. I fled down the winding stairs. She followed, screaming profanities only a demon could imagine.

I rounded a turn in the stairwell, waited, and clubbed her in the gut with a doubled fist as she came into view. Sapphrina lost both her footing and the axe, which clattered down the stairs. I pounced on her, twisting her right arm behind her back. Oblivious to the pain, she pitched forward, causing us both to tumble down after the axe.

Our painful descent ended with us sprawled together on a landing. I struggled to disengage, but was immobilized as Sapphrina scissored my head tightly between her powerful thighs. I was barely able to breathe.

She sat up, still pinning me. I heard the scrape of the axe across the floor as her fingers curled around the handle. I felt the tensing of her muscles as she lifted the weapon. I reached up blindly to clutch her long hair, which had fallen loose. I yanked her face down against her own knee. The axe struck the stone floor beside me. I wrenched free of Sapphrina’s legs and rolled clear.

She still had the axe.

We were in a chamber occupied by Raella’s general staff, who were busy planning their next move should the wizards fail. Hawkinstern and his officers looked up from their maps and charts as I

yelled, "Get her! Hold her!"

Hawkinstern turned away with a snort. "Unwise to meddle in a lover's quarrel," he said. "War is much safer." The soldiers returned to their planning, ignoring my pleas for help.

I scrambled to my feet. Sapphrina swung the axe. I dodged. The blade sank into the wall. She struggled to tug it free.

"Sorry about this!"

I punched Sapphrina in the face with all my strength, hoping to knock her purple lights out. Her upper lip split. Blood gushed from her nose. But she was unfazed by the blow. The demon cared nothing about damage done to its host. That I did care was an advantage for the possessor to exploit. I didn't want to hit Sapphrina again.

She had no such compunctions, backhanding me across the room. While I regained my feet, she yanked the axe free. The only thing for me to do was keep running until I could trap her or tire her out. I headed for the far door.

The possessor got a new idea.

"*Look at me!*" commanded Sapphrina. Something in her voice compelled me to obey, though I knew it wasn't a good idea to take any suggestions from her just now. She flashed a bloody smile. Our eyes met. I got an instant headache. The world turned purple. Sapphrina collapsed in a heap. "*Let's go kill that wench of a queen and her spineless bootlicking wizards!*" said a nasty voice in my mind. "*Then we'll jump off the tower and make a nice red smear of ourselves on the flagstones far below!*"

The suggestion was powerfully appealing. Wouldn't it be fun to remove Raella's lovely head and chop the others into little pieces?

"No!"

I bent double and ran full tilt into the nearest wall. The impact floored me. I saw stars, but at least they weren't purple. Though my head throbbed, the possessor was out of it. The little purple glow flickered weakly on the floor. I upended an alabaster urn over the baleful ball. I didn't know if that would trap it, but it was the best I could do.

Sapphrina lay senseless on the floor. I rushed to her side, raised her up, and set her gently on a nearby settee.

"Sapphrina!" I wiped blood from her face with my sleeve. "Oh, Gods! What have I done?"

Her eyes fluttered open. "Jason?"

"Don't try to sit up."

She tried to sit up—and immediately fell back into my arms. "My head hurts. My whole body hurts." She touched her face. "Why am I covered in blood?"

"You don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"Trying to kill me with an axe?"

"Why would I do that?"

Rubis hobbled into the room. "I'll explain. Jason, you're needed above. Now."

I kissed Sapphrina's brow. "I'll be back."

I left Rubis to tend her sister while I staggered back upstairs. I emerged to see Raella throw back her head and gesture imploringly to the sun.

Looking up through the ring of light, I saw the bright solar disk shift and warp until it no longer looked like the sun at all, but a beautiful woman reclining on a cushioned divan. The shimmering and scanty metallic gold bikini she wore revealed most of her perfectly-toned body. Her skin was a deep coppery brown. Her long hair, bound up in a ponytail, was reddish-gold. When she pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head I saw that her face was almost identical to Raella's, but for her deep tan.

This, without doubt, was Rae, Goddess of the Sun.

"What is it?" she said. Her voice like a long summer day at the beach.

"Goddess!" called Raella. "Demons beset your most holy city!"

"City? What city?" said the goddess, frowning her flawless brow as she lifted a can of Diet SodaCola—evidently some elixir of The Gods—to her divine lips.

"Rae City!" exclaimed the queen. "The royal seat of Raelna, the blessed realm founded in your honor!"

“Raelna? That was a thousand years ago,” said the goddess offhandedly. “I don’t keep up with the mortal world these days.”

I suspected that the substance of this conversation might cause Rae’s more ardent worshippers deep theological distress.

“Raelna has endured, O Goddess,” said Raella. “But we now face the might of the Assorted Hells and beg your divine aid. The man Jason Cosmo is among us.”

“Jason Cosmo?” said the goddess, perking up. “Where is he?”

“Here, O Divine One,” I said, waving.

I found myself flying up through the ring and into the realm of the Sun Goddess. Looking back, I saw Rae City and the Sun Palace far below in miniature. I could see vast expanses of the world, including the wine-dark waters of the Indigo Sea, the lush jungles of Cyrilla far to the south, the wheat fields and rolling plains of Ganth to the west, the uncharted wilderness of the east, and the legendary blue ice fields of the Ultimate North. It was as if I were perched on the sun itself, looking down on the world from that vantage point. Which, indeed, I was. I floated amid a hot, endless glare that, contrary to all expectation, neither burned nor blinded me.

Idly sucking the tip of her index finger, Rae gave me a careful appraisal. “You are Jason Cosmo?”

“Yes, Goddess,” I said.

“Not bad.” She took another sip of Sola-Cola. “So what is your story?”

“What do you mean?”

She sighed, a glorious sight to behold. “I don’t bother to read the memos, but I’ve heard the others mention your name. Aren’t you important for some reason?”

“Well,” I said, not sure how to begin. “As I understand it, the Dark Magic Society wants to capture me so they can restore Asmodraxis. The Demon Lords want to kill me to thwart the Society. And The Gods, I am told, want to protect me so that neither the Society nor the Demon Lords can win. Oh, and the League of Benevolent Magic thinks I’m the Mighty Champion reborn. I guess you could say various interested parties consider me important.”

“Hmmm. You confused me,” she said, puckering her lips.

“I confused myself, Goddess. All I know is that I must go to the Shrine of Greenleaf.”

“What is the Shrine of Greenleaf?”

“I was hoping you would know.”

She shook her head.

“Never heard of it.”

“It’s in the Incredibly Dark Forest,” I added.

She wrinkled her nose. “That is not a sunny place.”

“I suppose not.”

“Do you serve The Gods?” she asked.

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

Her eyes lit up. Literally. “Wonderful! Rub some of this oil on my back.” She handed me a brown bottle and leaned forward until she was prone on the couch. “I can’t reach,” she explained, as she unhooked the strap of her top.

I moved to her side and rubbed oil into her unblemished and silky smooth skin. She was pleasingly warm to the touch. Tingles of pleasure ran through my fingers and up my arms as I worked my hands across her body.

“Mmmmmmm,” she sighed. “You have a wonderful touch! Such strong hands!”

“I’m a woodcutter.”

“Nice. How would you like to stay here and serve me? All you’d ever have to do is what you’re doing right now. And maybe fetch me a drink now and then. And rub my feet. And walk Sparky.”

“Sparky?”

“My sunhound.”

“Goddess, I thank you for your offer, but I must return to the battle below. My friends are in danger. Many innocent people are dying!”

“A little to the left, please.”

Exasperating as she was, I had to make Rae realize the urgency of the situation below. “Goddess, your people need your help!”

She sat up suddenly and turned to face me. “Do you think I’m pretty?” I hastily and reverently averted my eyes from her uncovered holy bosom and said, as sweetly as I could, “You are without doubt the most beautiful goddess I have ever beheld, O Rae.”

“Do you really think so?” she beamed. With actual sunbeams. She threw back her shoulders. “More lovely even than Lucinda Everfair?” Lucinda was the Goddess of Love and Beauty, said to be the most comely woman, mortal or divine, in all the universe.

“From what I’ve seen, there is no comparison,” I said. “You are gorgeous, stunning, mind-boggling. And I really mean that last one.”

“How sweet you are, Jason Cosmo! I have always thought Fair Lucinda overrated. She’s so pale! What’s pretty about that?”

“Goddess, the city—”

“Yes, yes. What was the problem again?”

“Hordes of demons. Killing everyone in sight.”

“Right. Demons. Disgusting creatures. You want me to dispose of them? Is that it?”

“If I wouldn’t be too much trouble. Your daughter is among those in danger.”

“Daughter? I have no daughter. At least I don’t think so.”

“Queen Raella is called so, being descended from your son, Blaze Shurben.”

“Blaze!” Rae said, her face glowing with maternal pride. “My darling baby! So strong and handsome! His line yet survives in the world?”

“For now. She who summoned you is Raella Shurbenholt, Queen of Raelna, his heir many generations removed.”

The goddess peered through the sungate, zooming in on the tower. Raella still stood with arms raised in supplication. The wizards continued to hold back the marauders, but they were visibly tiring.

“She is of my blood!” said Rae, delighted. “A touch pale, but I can fix that!” She leapt to her feet, suddenly angry. “And those foul things *dare* to threaten her! These demons shall feel my holy wrath!” This sounded more like a goddess I could believe in. Rae grew in stature until she towered over me. Her metallic bikini expanded into a suit of golden armor. A sword of flame appeared in her right hand. “I just hope I remember how to use this thing,” she fretted.

“I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

“What am I forgetting? Oh yes, the hair!” Her hair burst into flame, becoming like the corona of the sun. “Let’s go!” she said, her voice now thundering with the roar of a thousand blast furnaces.

Rae stepped through the gate. I followed. The wizards stopped their writing. The prismatic effects of their spell instantly vanished. The rampaging demons halted in mid-air, then turned to flee. Rae swung her sword thrice above her head. Beams of purest radiance leapt from the blade, blasting every demon to nothingness. Timeon’s enemy counter dropped immediately to zero.

The wizards, rubbing their forearms to alleviate intense writer’s cramp after their heroic efforts, gave a ragged victory cheer. Raella fell to her knees before the goddess. Tears of relief and joy streamed down her face.

“Oops,” said Rae, struck by a sudden thought. “I think I’m in big trouble. I forgot that the NonIntervention Pact forbids this sort of thing.”

“Nevertheless, O Merciful Goddess, we thank you!” said Raella.

Rae smiled down on her. “You are welcome, daughter mine. Well, more of a granddaughter, I suppose, but I don’t like the sound of that. No matter, you’re family, so I don’t mind taking the heat for helping you. Though the others will be quite cross with me, I’m sure.” She extinguished her hair. The fiery sword vanished as she shrank to human scale. She took Raella’s hands in her own. “I’m not supposed to even set foot on Arden, so I must be going. I’ll manifest to you later and we can chat. We have much catching up to do!” She pulled the queen to her feet, gave her an affectionate hug, and kissed her brow. “You are pretty—it runs in the family—but you should spend more time in the sun, darling.” Rae turned to me, the spark of a divine whim lighting her face. “Have you a

patron goddess, Jason Cosmo?”

“No,” I said, fearing I was about to get one.

“What luck! I haven’t patronized a hero in ever so long! In view of your wonderful hands and your keen eye for beauty and your importance to the cause of The Gods and all that business you spoke of before, I think you would be a marvelous hero to sponsor. Don’t you think so?”

“I am most...honored, O Rae.” I bowed.

“Splendid! Raella, dear, you’re my chief whatchamathing down here, aren’t you?”

“Whatchamathing, O Goddess?”

“In charge of the temples and incense burning and such.”

“Supreme Raediatrix and High Priestess. Yes, O Goddess.”

“Excellent! You can handle the paperwork for me. I don’t know the current rules on divine patronage, but be sure to look them up.” She frowned. “It is council day for The Gods, I think. I usually skip the tiresome affairs, but perhaps I should get up to speed on things. So I’ll just give you my blessing, Jason Cosmo, and be on my way.”

“Thank you, O Goddess.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I haven’t done it.”

She pulled me to her and pressed her burning lips to mine. A hot surge of infinite pleasure jolted me into blissful oblivion. My legs grew weak. I tumbled back, grinning like a drunkard, and about as steady. Merc caught me and lowered me gently to the floor.

“Now you may thank me.”

With a regal wave, the Goddess Rae rose into the air on a column of light. Before my eyes fluttered shut, I saw her golden form shimmer and merge back into the disk of the sun.

Chapter 15

I did not awaken from my Rae-induced swoon until the next morning. I found that I had acquired a deep golden tan—even in those places where the sun should not shine. Even more remarkable, all my wounds, down to the least scratch, were fully healed. I rose from my bed and dressed. Soon a knock at the door heralded the arrival of Mercury, Queen Raella, and Master Timeon.

“How do you feel today, Jason?” asked Raella.

“Tan, Your Majesty. Very tan.”

“And well-rested, no doubt,” said Merc.

“And ready to go,” I added.

“You are truly blessed to have the Goddess Rae as your divine patron,” said the queen.

“Indeed,” said Timeon. “That you stand high in the favor of The Gods can no longer be doubted. You have aptly demonstrated that it is you to whom we must look for our salvation.”

“You’re not starting that again, are you? I haven’t even had breakfast!”

“You cannot escape your destiny,” said Timeon.

Merc was about to make an undoubtedly sour comment, but Raella cut him off. “Your role in unfolding events is important, as we have seen. But no one expects you to do more than is reasonable, nor to carry on your quest alone.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“But before we discuss your journey, there are certain duties I must perform in my capacity as Supreme Raediatrix of the Holy Church of Rae. We must formalize your acceptance of Rae as your patron goddess.” She thrust a faintly growing sheet of parchment and a pen into my hands. “Sign here.”

“Did I accept?”

“Her mark is quite vividly upon you.”

Seeing my tanned face in the mirror, I had to concede the point.

“You hesitate,” said Raella.

“I don’t mean to give offense, Your Majesty, but did not the Bright Goddess strike you as a

bit...ah...scatterbrained?"

"What of it?" said Raella sweetly, but with a hint of steel in her voice.

"I believe Jason is suggesting that Rae is not quite what he is looking for in a patron deity," said Merc, with characteristic tact.

"I'm really not looking for a patron at all," I said. "As I told the Goddess Rae, I'm deeply honored, but—"

"But?" said Raella. I promptly shut my mouth. Seeing that I had no further comments to make, the queen continued. "The Goddess Rae is responsible for the life-giving, warmth-bringing sun, and she has chosen to favor you with her patronage. I must believe that your thoughts of spurning her gracious offer spring from ignorance. You witnessed her destruction of the demonic horde—know you not that in times of gravest peril you too may call upon her for succor? Wheresoever the sun shineth, there she will watch over you and guide you in need. All who honor and serve her will welcome you like a brother and honor you like a king. They will render you whatever service you may require if it is within their ability. Would you, in your present straits, refuse these boons?"

"When you put it that way, no."

"If it is any comfort, you will most often communicate with the Bright Goddess through me. As her chief representative in Arden I am charged with interpreting her will and guiding her worshippers."

"In that case, I heartily accept the Goddess Rae as my patron." I signed the document and returned it to her.

"Excellent! I welcome you to her service. May the sun ever shine on your face, but not in your eye." She touched my brow with both hands as she spoke these words. "Just between us," the queen whispered, leaning close, "she does seem a bit unfocused. But mysterious are the ways of The Gods." She smiled covertly and stepped away from me. "Now we must discuss your expedition."

"Yes," said Timeon. "It is of utmost urgency that you make your way with all haste to the Shrine of Greenleaf. The League will provide you what assistance we can."

"I'll need it if I'm going to have more days like yesterday."

"Not to worry," said Merc. "I'm coming with you. And we can avoid many problems by flying." I felt queasy at the mere thought of taking to the sky again. "I'd rather take my chances on the ground, thank you."

"This flight should be less harrowing than the last."

"How could it not be?"

"We survived, didn't we?"

"True." I swallowed hard. "When do we leave?"

"Immediately. Before our enemies mount another attack."

Timeon withdrew from his pocket a gold ring set with a clear purple amethyst. "Behold the Ring of Raxx, reputedly worn by the Mighty Champion, your ancestor, the first Jason Cosmo. It is said to possess wondrous magical properties."

"What does it do?" I said, my imagination fired by the possibilities. I knew many tales of magic rings and their powers. "Will it make me invisible?"

"No."

"Grant wishes?"

"Doubtful."

"Make me invincible in battle?"

"You wish."

"What then?"

Timeon coughed in embarrassment. "In truth, we have no idea what the ring does. It has been in the keeping of the League for many centuries. We have studied it carefully, but we are unable to determine its capabilities. Still, if you are truly a new incarnation of the Mighty Champion—"

"Which I'm not."

"—the ring may reveal its powers to you."

"And if it doesn't?"

"We can always pawn it for quick cash," said Merc.

I accepted the ring and slipped it onto my hand. It was a good fit, but I felt absolutely no sort of arcane tingle or other indication that the item was in any way enchanted.

"May it serve you well," said Timeon.

"I'm sure it will." I waited, expecting more. After a moment of awkward silence I realized the Ring of Raxx was the extent of the League's assistance.

Mercury headed for the door. "Eat your breakfast, take your leave of the twins, and join me on the north landing within the hour."

The trio of wizards departed. A bevy of servants brought in my breakfast of fruit, bread, cheese, eggs, sausage, and steaming porridge. I wolfed down the food, combed my hair, and strolled across the hall to see the twins. Sapphrina lay in bed, her face puffed with bruises. Rubis sat beside her, holding an ice pack in place against her sister's swollen jaw.

"Good morning," I said, approaching the bed. I took Sapphrina's hand in mine. "How do you feel?"

She gave me a weak but winning smile. "Not much better than I look. Between dodging demons, being possessed, and duking it out with a certain dashing Darnkite, I took quite a pounding yesterday. But I'll be back on my feet soon enough. Where did you get that fabulous tan?"

"Long story. I have come to say farewell. I am departing within the hour for the Incredibly Dark Forest."

"The Incredibly Dark Forest!" exclaimed Rubis. "By The Gods, why?"

"That is where I will learn the truth. And, I hope, learn how to end the madness and danger that have taken over my life."

"The Incredibly Dark Forest will end your life, period!" said Sapphrina. "Oh, Jason, don't go there! Come with us to Caratha!"

"The queen has promised us safe transport as soon as Sapphrina is ready to travel," said Rubis. "Oh, do say you will come!"

I shook my head. "I still have the Dark Magic Society, the Demon Lords, and hordes of bounty hunters on my trail. But once I take care of those little problems, I will come to you in Caratha. I promise."

"Are you mad?" said Sapphrina, her eyes welling with tears. "You'll be killed and I will never see you again!"

"Thanks for the encouragement."

"You know what I mean. Come with us! Please?"

"For your own sake, I dare not. Not until all this is behind me. You have been in constant danger since you met me. Wolves, mercenaries, bounty hunters, demons. More demons. You're lucky to have made it this far alive. I will not have your blood on my hands!"

"Too late for that," said Sapphrina. "You bloodied my nose only yesterday."

"I know." My face reddened with shame at the memory. "But that is exactly my point! You're in danger every second we are together, from one enemy or another."

"It's a dangerous world," said Sapphrina.

I shook my head. "This must be goodbye for now."

"I suppose you're right," said Rubis, rising and planting a kiss on my cheek. "I think I will take a well-timed walk now."

She handed me the ice pack and left the room. I took her place at Sapphrina's side. She caught my hand as I positioned the ice.

"Enough. My face is frozen. Rubis is worse than a mother hen when I am ill."

"Very well." I put the ice aside.

"I fear for you, Jason."

"That makes two of us."

She smiled. "I have known you but a short time. Yet it seems like forever."

"I feel that way too."

"Oh, Jason, I will miss you! If anything should happen to you—and let us not deceive ourselves, it probably will—I shall be devastated. You are the kindest, bravest, noblest, best man I have ever

known.”

“Thank you,” I said. “As it happens, you are the best, bravest, and kindest woman I have ever met. No slight to Rubis, but you have an extra special spark that makes you...”

“Yes?”

“Well, extra special.”

“Jason...”

“Sapphrina...”

“Before you go, I want you to know that I—”

“Before I leave, I wanted to say that—”

“Yes?”

“Well?”

“With all my heart I—*mmmpb!*”

On impulse, I cut her off with a kiss. Considering her condition she was surprisingly energetic in her response.

Eventually we came up for air.

“Whatever you were about to say,” I said, “Save it on your lips and tell me when I return to you. That will give me the most powerful incentive of all to come back alive.”

“Why, Jason! What a romantic thing to say!”

“It just came to me. But I will return to you, I swear it!”

Her eyes sparkled. “I’ll look forward to it. Now kiss me again and go smite the forces of evil.”

“Gladly!”

Our lips met once again. And became fairly well acquainted.

After taking my leave of the twins, I mounted a long and winding flight of stairs to the north landing, where Mercury and Raella awaited me. I took barely two steps into the morning light before a surge of invigorating energy suffused my limbs. Caught unawares, I staggered backward.

“Whoa!” I said, steadying myself against the balustrade.

“What is it, Jason?” asked the queen.

“I feel...tingly.”

“Zastrian girls have that effect on some men,” said Merc.

Raella shot the wizard a stern look. “Can you describe this tingling sensation, Jason?”

“Every sinew and fiber of my body feels strangely warm. As if I am filled with fire, if that makes sense. But not a burning flame. More like a sustaining heat. Like the warm glow you feel after quaffing a good rotmelon brandy on a winter’s eve. But without the temporary blindness and loss of bowel control.”

“That’s to the good,” said Merc.

“I feel strong!” I said, flexing my arms. “Stronger than I’ve ever been in my whole life! I feel like I could lift an ox straight over my head!”

“Why would you do that?” asked Merc.

“What?”

“Lift an ox over your head.”

“I don’t know. Maybe it fell in a hole?”

“Does that often happen in Darnk?”

“Mercury, stop teasing poor Jason,” said Raella. She came to me and took my hands. “This is an occasion for reverent thanks, Jason. You have been favored by the Goddess Rae with one of the most potent blessings she bestows upon her Champions. Henceforth, you will have the strength of ten men, possibly eleven, whenever you stand in the light of the sun.”

“This is incredible!” I flexed my arms. I felt like I could rip a mighty oak tree from the ground with my bare hands. Or punch out a bear. Or perform other astounding feats of strength I couldn’t quite imagine at the moment. “It’s amazing!”

“It's fairly standard, really,” said Merc. “Ready to fly?”

“Sure,” I said, mustering a brave smile. My sudden surge of strength did nothing to relieve the ominous clenching of my guts at the prospect of another magic carpet ride. “Nothing like soaring hundreds of feet above the ground on an airborne welcome mat.”

“This rug has been thoroughly inspected for defects,” said Raella reassuringly. “You got a bad patch last time.”

“We'll head northwest, over the Longwash and Orphalia, to where the Arbenflow emerges from the southern end of the Incredibly Dark Forest,” said Merc.

“What of the invasion?” I said.

“The latest reports are most favorable,” said Raella. “General Vixen Hotfur, who commands my northern army, has halted the Orphalian advance. The Brythalian drive has been blunted as well.”

“We'll be well above the fray,” said Merc. “Halogen lacks the imagination to field any sort of air corps. I expect no problems from that quarter. So enough stalling. Let us go.”

“May the grace of Rae and all The Gods be with you, Jason Cosmo,” said Raella. “And with you, my love.”

The couple embraced for a final kiss and an exchange of whispered endearments I did not try to overhear. Then Merc and I stepped aboard the flying carpet. At his command, we shot straight up, above even the pinnacle of the palace, before speeding northward.

“We should cover fifteen leagues in an hour,” said Mercury. The wind whipped against our faces. Merc's cloak billowed behind him like an azure banner.

“Wonderful,” I said, fighting to keep my breakfast down.

“Shift the coloration of your clothing to match the blue of the sky, as I have done. It will make us more difficult to spot from the ground.”

“You don't think the red carpet will give us away?”

“Just do it.”

I willed the transition, again marveling at Raelnan garment magic.

“So just how bad is the Incredibly Dark Forest?” I asked.

Merc shrugged. “Standard evil forest fare, only much worse and more of it. The physical environment is unforgiving. Not exactly a pleasure garden, when every root, leaf, and vine wants to kill you. Bloodthirsty wild animals, strange monsters, ogres, goblins, trolls—the usual assortment of dangerous denizens. We'll be lucky to survive, much less find this shrine.”

“What do you know about the Shrine of Greenleaf?”

“I've never heard of it. The only tales I know that reference the juncture of the Hidden River and the Arbenflow tell of a haunted castle filled with cursed treasure. I know nothing of a holy shrine. It seems an odd place to locate one.”

“Do you think my aura is false?”

“No. But The Gods could have made this easier. Though that is not the way of gods.”

“I've noticed.”

“No one has ever found the Hidden River. My plan is to skim up the Arbenflow until we do. Or until we are forced to turn back.”

“What could force us back?”

“You don't want to know.”

Soaring over the gentle hills of northern Raelna, we saw the unmistakable signs of war. Geysers of black smoke stained the horizon like dark blood gushing from a chest wound. Ragged streams of refugees clogged the roads to Rae City with rivers of misery, unaware that the capital itself was in ruins. In a matter of hours we neared the Longwash and saw clearly that the boiling smoke came from the burnt husks of two river towns and numerous smaller villages put to the torch by the Orphalians.

The invaders had penetrated less than a league into Raelnan territory before their advance was

halted by the realm's defenders. A knotted string of fortified hills guarded the way to the rich interior of the kingdom. It wouldn't be easy for the Orphalians to breach this line. The Raelnans were dug in behind ditches filled with pointed stakes and wooden palisades atop earthen ramparts. A barricade of logs and stones blocked the main highway to Rae City. Heavy catapults and mobile ack guns pulled by teams of horses supported these defenses.

Yet the Orphalian forces were undeterred. A pitched battle raged through the hills. Lacking advanced artillery of their own, the Orphalians hoped to overwhelm the defenders with sheer numbers. They attacked tirelessly, clambering up the slopes and crashing against the barricades, falling back under the withering spears and arrows of the Raelnans, then regrouping to charge again. King Halogen's forces resembled a green-uniformed mob more than a true army. Most of his foot soldiers were seasonal levies, farmers and herdsmen performing the service due their king. They fought with admirable courage, but with little coordination of actions. Each little band of troops followed their local baron or knight up this hill or that, with no overall plan apparent in their attacks.

The Raelnans, by contrast, exhibited superb discipline. They left no gaps in the defensive line and seemed able to anticipate every spontaneous tactic of the enemy. Ack gunners directed their fire where it was most needed, backed by the powerful catapults. Reserve troops moved efficiently to relieve hard-pressed sections of the line. The Raelnans wasted not a single sword stroke.

"Orphalia fields antique knights and ill-equipped peasants," said Merc. "An outdated force best suited for fighting among themselves. Even at their best, they're no match for Raelnan regulars."

"Those don't look like peasants," I said, pointing to a section of the line where King Halogen's forces were making something resembling an orderly advance.

"Mercenaries," said Merc scornfully. "And the dregs at that, by their banners. The Red Weasels. Bilgewater. Gabard's Goons. Regrettable Outcomes. Halogen has augmented his third-rate mob with second-rate sellswords. To field a force of this size, he must have mortgaged his entire kingdom to the Society."

"The Society?"

"There is not enough gold in Orphalia's coffers to pay this many soldiers for single day's fighting, much less a doomed campaign against Raelna's finest. No, I smell the Society's rotten purse at the back of this mess. Here, and in Brythalia too, I'll warrant."

"Raelna seems to be holding its own," I said.

"Raella fields the best army in the Eleven Kingdoms," said Merc. "With the possible exception of Caratha. But look! What have we there?"

He pointed out an encampment beside a small creek half a league north of the Raelnan lines. Safely out of ack range, the camp was surrounded by a wooden palisade. Only a light guard was on duty, though it seemed a squadron of mounted knights was being held in reserve there.

"See the huge green pavilion in the middle?" asked Merc, steering the carpet to hover high above the camp.

"The one with the dragon banners all over it?"

"Right. That is where King Halogen is, I'll wager. Too cowardly to lead his troops in battle. I'd like to swoop down, cut out his black heart, and bring this war to a quick close."

"Is that a good idea?"

"Yes."

"It is?"

Merc sighed. "Maybe on the way back. Now is not the time for personal vendettas, alas."

"How wrong you are," said a hoarse voice behind us. "Now is a perfect time for vendettas."

We turned and saw that another flying carpet had skimmed up behind us while we were preoccupied with the scene below. Its rider was covered in deepest crimson, from robes to gloves to hood, with no skin exposed. A jet black horn inlaid with sigils done in reddish-brown blood jade hung from a cord around his neck. At his belt was an ornate obsidian knife.

"Isogoras," said Mercury.

"Boltblaster," rasped Isogoras.

They spat each other's names like curses.

“Have you a sore throat? You sound a bit ragged.” Mercury’s solicitude was blatantly insincere.

“Do you know how much blowing it takes to summon a thousand winged marauders?”

“So that was you. The Horn of Hockessin, I presume?”

“The same.”

“I knew you’d get your grasping hands on it eventually.”

“It is my most prized possession.”

“How nice for you. I have some cufflinks I’m fond of. So what inspired you to finally show your ugly face? Or ugly hood, rather. Run out of incompetent lackeys?” Merc casually reached under his cloak as he spoke.

Isogoras pointed a glowing finger at Merc’s chest. “No, don’t reach for your trademark sunshades that you are inexplicably not already wearing, Boltblaster. We must talk.”

“We have nothing to say to each other.”

“I am under direct orders from the Overmaster Erimandras to induce you to join our order. I would rather see you boiled alive in dragon liver oil.”

“What a coincidence. I would much rather be boiled alive in dragon liver oil than join the Society.”

“It can be arranged. But first the commands of the Overmaster must be obeyed. I warn you that your potential value to our cause does not justify further recruiting efforts. This will be your last chance.”

“Do you mean you’ll finally stop sending me all that junk mail?”

“I mean I will finally have the pleasure of killing you. But before we get to that, let me tell you once again about the many benefits of Society membership.”

“Pay attention, Cosmo. You may find this interesting.”

Isogoras began his recital. “With your low monthly dues you get access to our extensive collection of forbidden arcane knowledge and a new world of evil thrills. You’ll have frequent opportunities to burn, loot, and pillage to your heart’s content in exotic locations throughout the Eleven Kingdoms. You’ll take part in corrupting officials, planning massacres, and plotting the overthrow of mighty monarchs. Men will quake in fear at the mere mention of your name because you’ll be part of a proud tradition of terror more than two thousand years old.”

“This is the good part,” said Merc.

“As a master wizard you already qualify for special benefits such as your own complimentary staff of lackeys, henchmen, goons, minions, and slaves. You’ll also have an unlimited pass to the exclusive Carnality Club where you may shamelessly indulge your baser appetites with the help of a talented staff of lewd and libidinous demonettes. You’ll receive a lifetime subscription to our monthly newsletter, *Dark Magic Today*, plus a handsome certificate of membership inscribed on genuine human skin and signed by the Overmaster himself. And as an added bonus, if you act now, you’ll get a magic ring of your choice. Plus much, much more.”

“You forgot the toaster oven,” said Merc.

“No more toaster ovens. That was for a limited time only.”

“No toaster oven?”

“So sorry. We might scare up a Society coffee mug.”

“Not the same.”

“Agreed. So, shall I sign you up?”

“Again, I’d prefer Hell.”

“Having been there and back again, I’ll be happy to help you on your way, Boltblaster.” Isogoras patted the black horn. “With this I can send you directly to the Vilest Vales of Hell, where the demon torturers in the Citadel of Endless Agony will gleefully demonstrate to you how that fortress got its name.”

“Go for it.”

“First, I have a message for Jason Cosmo.”

“Me?” I said.

“You. The Overmaster of the Dark Magic Society has authorized me to make you this offer. Surrender to me, tell us what we want to know, and no harm will come to you. We do not wish to waste further effort in apprehending you. We will look favorably upon your cooperation. We will pay *you* the bounty of gold and give you your own kingdom to rule. If you refuse this generous offer, torture and death

will be your lot. What is your answer?"

"It sounds tempting."

"That is by design."

"But I'll pass."

"So be it."

We hovered in place during this exchange. Now, with the violence about to begin, Mercury willed our carpet to hurtle upward with such speed that we were pressed flat against the taut fabric. Below us, an expanding stream of toxic yellow jelly flew from Isogoras's finger and filled the space where we had been. Missing us, it fell to earth, to work its nasty effects on the soldiers below.

Merc halted our ascent and donned his sunshades. "Stay down," he said. "You'll make less of a target. We've got to get the Horn before he calls up reinforcements."

It was too late for that. Isogoras flew to meet us, sounding the mournful Horn of Hockessin as he came. Small winged demons the color of blood spewed forth from the instrument. Not only were they bloody of aspect, but blood dripped from their bodies and splattered through the air with every beat of their little bat-like wings. Armed with clanging cymbals, shrill whistles, and tiny trumpets, they made an unholy racket louder than the Horn itself.

"Ouch!" I said, covering my ears. "That grates on the nerves!"

"Bloody nuisances!" shouted Merc. "Small, fast, and irritating! Probably the best Isogoras can manage with his sore throat, but they can drive us mad with their Decibels of Damnation!"

"I'll say!"

"Take out the Horn as we pass!"

We dove into the cloud of nuisances, Mercury cringing as many as he could with bursts from his sunshades. I stayed low until we were almost upon Isogoras, then leapt up and swung my axe. I struck the Horn. Although the blow did not damage the instrument, my axe knocked it from his grasp and snapped the lanyard. The Horn of Hockessin went spinning away. A final brace of bloody nuisances emerged from it as it fell.

"Good work!"

But we still had a cloud of the monsters trailing us. The nuisances followed us despite Mercury's insane evasive maneuvers, which involved gut-wrenching changes of direction and even flying upside down, held in place only by the enchantment of the rug. Most of my breakfast exited my belly the way it had come in.

"The sound is making me crazy!"

"Swing that axe! You're sure to hit some of them!"

Isogoras fell in behind us and drew the obsidian knife from his belt. Merc fired sunbursts at him, but the evil mage dodged and weaved around them.

"How is he going to stab us from way back there?" I asked.

"He's not!"

Isogoras hurled the knife at us. Mercury banked into a swift climb. "The fool! Gravity will pull the knife—"

"Up after us!" I said.

The knife soared upward, gaining speed. Glowing red, it sliced through a nuisance that got in its way.

"A heat seeker! I can't shake it!" said Merc.

The volcanic glass reverted to a molten state while retaining its form. It hit our carpet with a hot splash. The back half of the rug burst into flame.

"Not good!" I said.

"We're going down!" said Merc.

"Oh, is the ground is getting closer? I hadn't noticed!"

Isogoras soared above us, taunting. "I am sure you will get a warm reception from King Halogen, Boltblaster!"

"We're going down," repeated Merc. "And we're taking him with us."

Isogoras slowed to deliver his taunt, giving Merc a clear shot with the sunshades. The spectacles flashed. Our enemy's carpet burst into flame.

“Curse you, Boltblaster!” Isogoras plummeted and veered off to the west.

“I really should think of a good parting line,” said Merc. “But we’ve got a bigger problem.”

“Smacking into the ground at terminal velocity?” I asked, beating ineffectually at the flames.

“I don’t think we can reach the river,” said Merc, through gritted teeth. “The rug is not responding.

Do you see anything to cushion our fall?”

“The big green tent?”

Merc smiled wickedly. “I can manage that.”

Fire licked at our backs as our magic carpet banked toward Halogen’s pavilion. The spell holding us in place weakened as the unburnt portions of the carpet went limp. We skimmed in low over the encampment. Soldiers pointed and shouted. An archer took a shot at us. We ripped through a dragon banner and crashed into the billowing roof of the tent, causing the whole structure to collapse like an imploding green cloud.

Chapter 16

Stunned, rattled, and possibly upside down, I found myself blanketed in heavy green canvas. From all around me came excited voices—but muffled, as at a distance. It hurt to move. It hurt to think about moving. It hurt not to move. I considered the merits of passing out.

“Fire!” a voice called.

That got my attention. I wondered just where the fire was. I noticed that it was getting hot inside my canvas cocoon.

Very hot.

More voices reached me.

“Your Royal Supremacy, are you injured?”

“I’m unharmed, you sniveling cur! But I’ll have the incompetent swine who erected this tent flayed alive!”

Good help was so hard to find these days.

“They were assassins from the sky, Your Majesty!”

“What did you call me?”

“Your Royal Omnipotence?”

“Royal Supremacy, you dolt! No, wait—Omnipotence! I like that better! A promotion for you. Now what were you saying?”

“They flew in on a magic bath towel, burning like...like a flying campfire.”

“What inspired imagery.”

“Thank you, sire.”

“Continue, fool!”

“They flew right into your royal omnipotent tent and tore it down!”

How interesting. In my dazed state, I dimly recalled being quite recently in the sky myself, aboard a burning carpet that—uh-oh!

I came to my senses. I was ensnared in the folds of King Halogen’s collapsed pavilion, which our ruined rug had ignited. I felt about for my battle axe. No luck. So I was unarmed in the middle of a hostile camp and about to be roasted alive.

This day had started so well.

“We’ve got one of them!”

“Bring the dog to me!” snarled Halogen. “By the crown on my brow! Mercury Boltblaster! The selfsame vile sorcerer who bewitched my beloved has been delivered into my hands by his own folly!”

Merc was alive. Good. But not for long by the sound of it. I burrowed through the cloth until I could see what was happening.

King Halogen was a tall man dressed for a royal ball, not a battlefield. He had a flowing mane of wavy brown hair, a conventionally handsome face marred mainly by his arrogant sneer, and blue eyes fogged with vanity. He wore a crown made of gold, green velvet, and large emeralds

surmounted by the figure of a dragon with unfurled wings. He was surrounded by knights in green plate armor.

Two mercenary soldiers held a glassy-eyed Mercury between them. His body was limp. His feet dragged on the ground, not supporting his weight at all. He had lost his sunshades and seemed barely aware of his surroundings. Halogen struck him across the face with his scepter. Merc's head merely lolled to one side.

There would be no wizarding our way out of this one.

While soldiers pulled nobles and servants from the wreckage of the tent, a hastily assembled bucket brigade relayed water from the nearby stream to fight the fire. My hiding place wasn't aflame just yet, but it would go up soon. I couldn't stay here. But revealing myself would mean instant capture.

No, it wouldn't! I cursed myself for a fool. No one here knew who I was. I could transform my clothing into an Orphalian uniform and blend in until I figured out how to rescue Merc. In the excitement of his capture, the Orphalians had apparently forgotten there were two men aboard the flying carpet.

Uniform set, I squirmed out of the collapsed tent. I again felt the surging strength of ten men, possibly eleven, suffuse my limbs. That was something to keep in mind as I formed my plan. But I had to act soon, for I had no idea how long Halogen would let his most hated enemy live.

I helped fight the fire so that I could remain near enough to observe their onesided confrontation. Halogen smacked Mercury with the scepter again.

"She loves me, sorcerer! Only your wicked spells have kept her from rushing to my arms all these years!" He struck Merc once more. "Now that I have come to claim her at last, you fear me! You know that my manly might can free her at last from your ensorcelments and so you came to assassinate me! Great shall be your suffering this day!" He hit Merc a fourth time. "Why don't you answer me, dog?" "Perhaps if his Extremely Supremely Royal Omnipotence would not strike him so, the evil wizard could regain consciousness," suggested one of the nobles.

"Extremely Supremely Royal Omnipotence, eh? I like that! I'll make you a grand duke!"

"You made me a grand duke yesterday, sire."

"Then I'll make you a grander duke! Your suggestion has merit. Let him be trussed to a stake. Revive him with cold water and bring me some hot knives, vegetable peelers, eyelash curlers, and other implements of torture. Well, what are you ignorant ingrates waiting for? A royal decree? Ha! That was one! Move!"

I abandoned my firefighting efforts and slipped through the camp, looking for anything that might be useful in making our escape. I passed a number of tethered war horses, already saddled for Halogen's noble knights. I strapped on an unguarded sword. I found the exit from the stockade, noting the guards at the gate. They were few in number, with most of the men busy fighting the fire. Upon completing my reconnaissance, I had a wild but workable plan in mind. I returned to the spot where Mercury, stripped to the waist, was bound to a thick wooden post freshly erected in the open space near one of the palisade gates. He was awake now, and fully alert. Good. I would need his help for my plan to work. I edged my way through the crowd gathered around him, mostly nobles who were exempt from the dirty work of fighting fires. When I was directly opposite Merc I gave him a quick wave. He winked in acknowledgment.

Halogen strutted toward him. He held a whip knotted with shards of glass. "Today you pay for your many crimes against me, sorcerer! You will soon beg for my mercy, but none shall be forthcoming. Before I am finished, you will rue the day you stole Raella from me with your dark magic!"

"Halogen, you're still the pompous, preening, power-mad pretty-boy princeling you were the last time we met. Your father's body can't even be cold in the grave and you are invading a kingdom that has been Orphalia's ally for generations simply because you can't accept the fact that Raella Shurbenholt is far too good for a psychotic weasel like you."

"Liar! She is the only woman ever to refuse me, proof enough that she has been put under some foul spell. She is rightfully mine, promised to me from birth for a marriage that will unite our kingdoms for all time!"

"Then it's the land you love, not the lady."

Halogen cracked the whip, gashing Mercury's cheek. It was time to act. The fire at the king's tent was almost out, but the Orphalians would soon have more flames to contend with. Slipping away from the crowd, I snatched a blazing brand from an untended cooking fire and ran for the horses, raking the torch against every tent I passed. A soldier tried to stop me. I smacked him in the face with the torch. He fell heavily to the ground. I mounted a horse and took off through the camp, merrily igniting more tents.

When at least half the camp was ablaze, I plunged my steed into the group around Mercury, scattering nobles and soldiers alike.

"Stop him!" screamed Halogen. I clubbed the Orphalian king with the blazing brand, sending his crown flying.

Drawing up beside the stake, I wrapped my arms around it and wrenched it from the ground with my supernatural strength.

"What are you doing?" asked Merc, still bound to the post.

"Rescuing you!"

"Like this? Cut me loose!"

"No time!"

I rode for the gate, holding the post before me like a thick lance. Soldiers tripped over themselves getting out of our path. The quick-thinking guards shut and barred the exit, but it did them no good. I hit the gate full tilt, smashing it open with the post.

"That hurt!" said Merc.

"Sorry!"

I lowered the end of the post, drew my stolen sword, and cut my partner free. He climbed onto the saddle behind me. I turned south.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Fine. I was stunned in the crash, else they never would have seized me." He rubbed his jaw gingerly.

"That might leave a scar. Now turn around and head for the river."

"I was making for the Raelnan lines."

"By going through the entire Orphalian army?"

"Good point." I wheeled the horse about.

Two dozen green knights thundered out of the camp behind us, their mounts churning the turf beneath iron-shod hooves as they galloped across the grassy river plain.

"You should have scattered the other horses," said Merc.

"I'll make a note for next time."

"We'd make better speed if you had removed this horse's barding."

"Also a good suggestion."

"You didn't plan this escape very carefully, did you?"

"I'm making it up as I go."

"Obviously." Merc glanced back. "Halogen himself is giving chase. Didn't even stop to retrieve his pretty crown. I think you made him mad."

"They're going to catch us, aren't they?"

"If they do, tell them your name. The fear factor could buy us some time."

It was almost a mile to the river. Our lead shrank rapidly as we rode. When we reached the thick reeds on the south bank of the Longwash, Halogen and his knights were just a few horse lengths behind us. We plunged through the tall grass and onto the marshy ground at the water's edge. Mud sucked at our mount's hooves, slowing us considerably. Our plan was to leap from the saddle directly into the swift brown flood. Armored knights could not follow us into the water. By the time the foot soldiers arrived we would be too far downstream to be caught.

Assuming we didn't drown.

We never took the plunge. From behind us came the sudden clamor of crashing armor, surprised shouts, and squealing horses. We turned to see the Orphalian knights borne to the ground by men in brown cloaks. The ambushers sprang from the reeds like panthers—panthers with spears, ropes, and nets in hand. Our mysterious rescuers made short work of the knights—all save Halogen. One of the attackers pulled him from the saddle and slammed him roughly to the ground. She planted her

booted foot firmly on his chest and pressed the point of her saber to his throat.

The woman's cloak flew open to reveal a lean, taut, female figure dressed in well-worn buckskins. Laughing, she threw back her hood. Her eyes were amber, her long, straight hair the color of a red fox.

"What a prize we have here, boys!" she said. "Our little river cruise has already proved fruitful!" She bore down with her foot, pressing the captive king deeper into the muck. "Bind him!" she ordered, sheathing her sword.

"You slatternly trollop!" sputtered Halogen, only to be silenced by a swift kick to the jaw.

"Give him one for me," said Merc. The woman shrugged and kicked Halogen again.

"Gag him too," she said, stepping away as her men seized the now senseless monarch. The woman nodded in our direction. "Lord Boltblaster—and you must be Master Cosmo. It was thoughtful of you to bring me this present."

"We were in the neighborhood," said Merc. "It seemed the polite thing to do." He dismounted. "Cosmo, meet General Vixen Hotfur, Commander of the Raelnan Army of the Longwash. Known to friend and foe alike as the She-Fox."

"An honor," I said.

"Likewise."

"What brings you here, General?" asked Merc. He gestured absently with one hand. I saw a fluttering object rise from the vicinity of the Orphalian camp and streak in our direction.

"We're conducting a little raid to cut off the Orphalian supply lines," said Hotfur. "They've set up a depot upstream. Everything comes across there, so we plan to burn it to the ground tonight and sink all the barges we can. Going without food for a couple of days—and knowing we've the capacity to strike at will behind their lines—ought to puncture the enemy morale a bit." She kicked the bound king yet again. "But this is better! I put my base camp here so I could try to snatch this buzzard if the conditions looked right. I didn't expect him to be delivered to me."

"But you were expecting us," said Merc, as his cloak arrived and wrapped itself around his shoulders.

Hotfur laughed. "I've got spies in Halogen's camp and scouts all over the area. I knew they had you ten minutes before they did!" She laughed. "I figured I'd give you a chance to escape before I came in to save your hides. I knew with half a measure of sense you'd come right to me."

"Shouldn't you be leading your troops in battle or something?" I asked, troubled to find a general sneaking around behind enemy lines.

"Bollycockle!" she snorted. "Standard defensive situation, and we have the high ground. If my commanders can't handle that on their own, they don't deserve to be called soldiers! I came here to raise merry hell in the backfield!"

A scout appeared and whispered a report in her ear. Hotfur frowned. "The enemy is coming in force, so we'll continue this discussion in the boats if you don't mind. I'm scrubbing my torch party, but the day isn't a total loss!"

Hotfur's men uncovered five canoes. We piled in, four raiders to a craft. Halogen was tossed in one boat, Merc eased into another, and I rode with Hotfur. We left the dead knights lying in the muck and let their horses roam free. It would give the Orphalians something to think about.

"So where are you boys headed?" asked Hotfur as we paddled.

"The Incredibly Dark Forest."

"Nasty stretch of woods, that. My father led eight thousand men in there once, chasing ogres. Came out four days later with less than half."

"Your father?"

"Field Marshal Vulpinus Hotfur of the Third Royal Legion of Ganth. They called him the Grey Fox. Taught me everything I know."

"He's dead?"

"He was loyal to the crown. When the other generals overthrew the king and formed their military council, my father refused to join them. Myrm Ironglove had him executed."

"And you joined the Raelnan army?"

"I've fought for just about everyone, including Orphalia back when old King Lathanide was still

around. Never cared for Prince Smarmy.” She spat toward the boat carrying Halogen. “Thinks himself irresistible, that one does. I resisted to the tune of blackening his royal eye. Which might have landed me in irons or worse, had I not removed myself posthaste from Orphalian employ and signed on with good Queen Raella. She’s a truer monarch than that popinjay will ever be. I understand he revenged himself on my reputation, if not my person, by spreading slanderous lies about me in the Orphalian court. I’ve half a mind to dump him overboard right now.

“Fine by me,” said Merc.

“But he is worth more to us alive than dead. With His Mucky Majesty in hand I can whistle the tune to which the Orphalian army will march. Might even threaten to give him back!”

We took the better part of an hour to reach the river settlement of Lowpoint. Soldiers and citizens worked side by side on the docks, unloading supply boats bringing food and equipment from downriver. The boats traveled in convoys, escorted by ack cutters. A stone keep on a small island in the middle of the river also bristled with the giant repeating crossbows.

“You can see why Halogen didn’t try to cross here,” said Hotfur. “This is a garrison town, our main base for hunting river pirates.”

We landed at the military docks. Ashore were troop barracks, officer quarters, an armory, and stables, all built of stone. The soldiers took Halogen to the stockade under heavy guard. Merc and I followed Hotfur to her plain office.

“I can spare you heroes a cutter to take you up the Crownbolt and even the Arbenflow itself if you wish,” she said, dropping into a chair. She propped her muddy feet on the desk.

“That would be helpful,” said Mercury. “But I only want volunteers for the crew. Preferably unwed. I hate to create more widows and orphans than necessary.”

“I’ll have a crew for you.”

“How soon will the boat be ready?”

“This afternoon, if you like.”

“The sooner the better,” said Merc. He turned to me. “Brace yourself, Cosmo. From here on, it gets dangerous.”

Chapter 17

The Incredibly Dark Forest rose from the river plain like a pulsating green wall. Ancient trees towered hundreds of feet above us, their massive trunks robed in concealing tangles of vines and foliage. No birds called and no insects buzzed, but those trembling leaves murmured ceaseless lethal whispers that might drive a man mad.

Eight bloody days on the river had brought our twenty-foot river cutter to the southernmost bounds of the Incredibly Dark Forest. The line of colossal trees stretched more than ninety leagues east and west of the river. The forest proper was fringed by countless acres of spiky brambles, thick brush, and hidden pits. Entering the forest by land would require hacking our way through that wasteland, a task that might take weeks in itself, even assuming the hell gophers and warp wasps left us alone.

Which they wouldn’t.

The river offered another way in. We were at the sneering green Mouth of the Forest, where the cold, murky water of the River Arbenflow slithered out from a maw-like opening in the trees like a long black tongue questing for prey.

“Are those piles of sun-bleached skulls on the river banks?” I asked. “Or just disturbingly shaped white stones?”

“Bones,” said Merc. “Not stones.”

“Do we continue, milord?” asked Lufkin Starke, the captain of our vessel.

“Would you rather wait for nightfall?”

“Uh, no.”

“Then no time like the present,” said Merc.

Starke ordered the lanterns lit. Eight oarsmen rowed in silence. The gunner and his mate stood ready behind the ack bolted to the forward deck.

We entered the Mouth of the Forest. Cold, damp air oozed over us like the foul breath of a corpse.

As we left the morning sunlight behind, I felt my Rae-given strength fade.

“It’s incredibly dark in here,” I observed, feeling the need to speak softly.

“Hence the name,” whispered Merc.

The only sounds were the splash of our oars, the creak of the planks, and the quickened beating of our hearts. Lanterns at bow and stern barely penetrated the gloom, illuminating only a small patch of water directly around the boat. We could distinguish no features of the shadowy river banks looming over us like the hulking shoulders of a giant. I looked back longingly at the sunlit doorway to the outside world. Then we rounded a bend and the darkness was complete.

“How will we find the Hidden River? We can’t even see the one we’re on.”

“The Gods will guide us somehow,” said Mercury.

“That’s your plan?”

“So far.”

“Look!” said Starke. “All around us!”

Eyes. Hundreds of eyes. Pairs of feral red pinpricks on both banks and high above in the canopy, glaring at us with palpable hatred. Goosebumps marched across my skin. My nape hairs stood stiff. I clutched tightly the haft of my new battle axe.

“What do you think they are?” I asked.

“We’ll find out when they attack,” said Merc.

No attack came during the first hour, nor the second. But the silent watchers grew ever more numerous, until the blackness around us resembled a hellish skyscape full of demon stars.

“What are they waiting for?”

“They’re trying to frighten us, keep us on edge,” said Merc.

“It’s working.” I tested my blade for the eighty-seventh time.

The boat ground to a sudden, scraping halt, pitching me forward against the rail.

“Sandbar,” said Captain Starke.

The crew reversed the oars, trying to back the boat free. But we were stuck fast. At Starke’s command, the crew took up their weapons.

“Can you move the boat with your magic?”

“I’m trying,” said Merc. “Something is resisting me.” He shook his head. “No good. Get ready.”

“I’ve been ready.”

The first attack came from the water. Three tall and scaly humanoids with long knobby arms, thick chests, and cavernous, fang-filled mouths rose up beside the boat and reached for the rails.

“River trolls!” shouted one of the crew.

I leapt at the nearest troll and severed a great, grasping hand with a single blow. Thick grey ichor oozed from the stump of its wrist, but the seemingly grievous wound did not slow the monster. The troll continued to pull itself aboard with its remaining hand. I chopped that arm off at the elbow. The troll fell back into the water. Its severed limb still clutched the railing.

The ack crew pumped bolts into the chest of the second troll. Despite the flurry of steel shafts protruding from its body, the monster reached the deck. With iron-hard talons it ripped open a soldier’s torso. An archer loosed an arrow into the troll’s open maw. The monster staggered back. Two more men knocked it off balance, back into the water.

Mercury pelted the third troll with levitated sand, beating it back into the water, while also loosening the grip of the sandbar on our hull.

The trolls disappeared beneath the surface. There was a sudden pop of splitting wood. Then another, and another. The trolls were snapping the oars. They wrenched the rudder away with a resounding crack, fully crippling the boat. Next they pounded on the hull, every blow reverberating

through the vessel.

“They’ll sink us!” I shouted.

“The least of our worries!” said Merc.

Unseen attackers in the forest canopy above rained rocks, tree limbs, and other heavy objects down upon us. A log bristling with thorny spikes crushed Captain Starke. A great chorus of gibbering cries rose up from the river banks, followed by massive volleys of tiny wooden arrows.

Tiny wooden arrows dipped in poison.

Mercury raised a protective umbrella of mystic energy to ward off the missiles, but it was too late for the crew. They became grotesque bloody pin cushions, twitching and jerking and foaming at the mouth before falling dead to the deck.

“It didn’t take long for us to be the only ones left,” said Merc.

“What now?”

“We head for shore.”

Animated by Merc’s magic, the boat limped toward the west bank, but the trolls had done their work well. We were taking on water fast. Twenty feet from the shore, Merc and I were perched on the very tip of the bow, our feet dragging in the water. The remaining lantern swung crazily above us, dripping hot oil on our heads. One of the trolls pursued us. I discouraged it by lopping off its head when it got too close. Thrown off balance, I nearly tumbled into the water. Merc steadied me with his arm.

“Can you swim from here?”

“I think so.”

“Go. But don’t lose the axe.”

I swam for the bank while Merc produced a white sphere from beneath his soggy cloak. He tossed it high into the air. The sphere burst into brilliant white light, revealing our surroundings for the first time.

The river itself was a black, polished mirror. The banks were cliffs of clay pocked with holes and gouged through by huge gnarled roots. Ashore were great trees too thick for twenty men linking arms to encircle. The gigantic trunks were devoid of branches at the lower levels, being instead encrusted with a variety of vile lichens, vines, and fungi. The forest floor was carpeted with mushrooms, some taller than a man, and with weird grey mosses. A great canopy of intertwined branches formed a black net high above us.

Our attackers, screeching as they fled the light, were revealed as goblins. These are shaggy nocturnal folk, with pointed ears and saucer eyes, standing knee-high to a tall man. They delight to dine in their damp and musty dens on fried potatoes. But if that delicacy be not available they will settle for the flesh of men. Hundreds of them now scampered away through the mushrooms. The dark leaves rustled above us as our overhead attackers also withdrew.

We scrambled up the embankment to crouch warily amid the mushrooms. Merc dispelled the protective umbrella.

“We’re in a bit of fix,” he said.

“You don’t say.”

“The flare spooked the goblins, but they’ll be back when it fades—along with every other unfriendly forest dweller for ten miles around.”

“They’re all unfriendly, right?”

“You learn fast. I have a few more flares, but that trick won’t get us far.”

Already the light was fading. “Just how far do we need to get?”

“Hard to say when we don’t know where we’re going. Maybe seventy leagues.”

“Through this? We need an army!”

Mercury shook his head. “This forest swallows armies. Here one man or a thousand have the same odds of survival—next to none.”

“Not encouraging.”

“One spot is as deadly as the next in the Incredibly Dark Forest.”

“So we’re as likely to reach Greenleaf as we are to get out alive if we turn back?”

“Precisely. But look on the bright side.”

“There is a bright side?”

“At least you’re safe from bounty hunters here.”

“Nice. But what about safe from—*them*?”

A troop of ogres dressed in animal skins was coming our way. I counted seven of them by the dwindling light of the flare. Each was at least fifteen feet tall. Their skin had a sickly yellow-grey cast. Armed with huge spiked cudgels, they snorted and drooled as they came, squashing mushrooms and kicking up clouds of deadly spores with every step. I held my axe at ready.

“Remember Yezgar?” asked Merc.

“Vividly.” I shuddered at the memory.

“He was only *half* ogre.”

I lowered the axe and joined Merc in sprinting away.

“Know any anti-ogre spells?”

“Twelve. But any of them would be like a beacon to the Society.”

“Is that our biggest problem just now?”

We whisked through the parasitic undergrowth beside the river. Figuring ogres didn’t swim too well, I considered diving into the water. Then I saw the river sharks and giant eels fighting the trolls for the bodies of our companions.

The flare winked out. Running blindly, we heard the pounding of our own feet and the ever closer snorts of the ogres as they lumbered after us.

Then we heard a heavy thunk.

Six more thunks followed in rapid succession.

We heard no more lumbering or snorting.

“Did they go stealth?”

“Ogres don’t even have a word for stealth,” said Merc, stopping. “Something happened to them.”

“If something just killed seven ogres, shouldn’t we keep running?”

Merc sent up a flare. We saw the seven ogres sprawled on the ground. A single black arrow protruded from each body.

“What archer can hit seven moving targets in the dark?” I asked.

We walked back to the bodies. Merc tugged an arrow loose. Thick black fluid oozed from the wound.

“Adamantine steel tip. It can penetrate just about anything—even an ogre’s thick hide.” He sniffed the arrowhead. “Dipped in Swangrave, extracted from the glands of the Lethal Black Swans of Lake Asheron. The poison congeals a victim’s entire blood supply within seconds. Instant heart failure. Instant death.”

“But who did this?”

“See the crescent symbol on the shaft?”

“BlackMoon!”

“I was wrong to say you’d be safe from bounty hunters in the Incredibly Dark Forest. BlackMoon probably vacations here.”

I looked about nervously for any hint of the hunter’s position.

“Don’t bother,” said Merc. “BlackMoon is only seen when he wants to be seen. He obviously isn’t ready to kill you.”

“How do you know?”

“You’d already be dead.”

“What can we do?”

“Hope he doesn’t change his mind.”

“I like this less and less.”

“If you have any better ideas, keep them to yourself. Remember, he can hear every word we say, even a whisper. But so long as he’s guarding our backs, we may as well get going.”

“You still think we should follow the Arbenflow until we find the Hidden River?”

“It’s the only choice we have.”

“Not so, four-limb mammal manling!”

The cheerfully inhuman voice came from above. We looked up and saw fifty glowing green spiders as big as ponies descending toward us on phosphorescent green web strands.

Wearily, I raised my battle axe for yet another desperate fray. Merc restrained me.

The largest spider touched ground while its companions formed a protective circle around us. Their presence bathed the whole area with a ghostly light.

“The sharpstick choppy-thingy you will not need,” said the big spider. “We come in peace!”

“The ghastly glowing green spiders are on our side?” I asked, glancing sidewise at Merc.

“So it seems,” said Merc.

The spider lifted its forelegs and made an almost human flourish. “The being you’re seeing is Luggogosh Longlimberly, King of the Lugs! Lug being the shortspeak for luminous green spiders that you see we are! And may I be called King Luggo, also for your convenience! You are the four-limbs Jason Cosmo and friend or I am mistaken greatly!”

“I’m Jason Cosmo,” I said, bowing. “This is the wizard Mercury Boltblaster.”

“Welcome, then! To welcome you each! You am I come to fetch! Am I sent by the Keeper of the Shrine of Greenleaf!”

“I thought lugs were extinct,” said Merc.

“Sadly, almost so!” said King Luggo. “In numbers great are the slaughtering by murderous four-limbs who our bodies take make into glowing toys sold in boxes of breakfast cereal. Dwindled greatly, my folk retreat to this tree-place.”

“Nor did I know you could speak,” said Merc.

“Yes, we speak!” said Luggo. “Among ourselves with clicking clatter-chatter. But me the Keeper grants to the power of human speech and to all my people is promised it when I the four-limb Jason Cosmo safely to him bring. A great boon this, for by speech we friends and allies may gain! Now time wastes! You must come!”

“Tell us of the Keeper,” I said.

“Meet the Keeper will you and I need not tell! Now, Jason Cosmo, ride upon my back. You, wizard, Gokollogriklik will convey! Make the haste! Far have we to go!”

King Luggo bent low. I climbed aboard his furry green back. Merc mounted another spider that scuttled forward at a chattering command from its king. The army of spiders then rose as one, racing up their web lines with quickness and grace.

It was almost as bad as flying. With no strap to hold me in place, I clung tightly to Luggo’s spidery exoskeleton. We soon reached the canopy level and headed north along a highway of branches and vines that took us deeper into the Incredibly Dark Forest—and closer to learning my destiny.

Chapter 18

We traveled for three days to reach the Shrine of Greenleaf. I could not tell night from day in the perpetual gloom, but King Luggo insisted the darkness was slightly less intense during the daylight hours. I saw only the green luminescence of our escorts. Luggo would not take us to the forest roof where the sun shone, saying lugs found its glare unpleasant.

At my suggestion, the spiders spun sticky silk belts to hold Merc and me in place, allowing us to sleep as we rode. Not that it is easy to sleep while gummed to the back of a glowing green spider scuttling through the canopy of the Incredibly Dark Forest. A spider’s eight-legged gait is utterly unlike that of a horse. I particularly disliked those parts of the trip spent in vertical travel. I almost would have preferred another magic carpet ride.

Almost.

None of the dangerous denizens of the Incredibly Dark Forest molested us on our journey, not wishing to battle the lugs in force. True to King Luggo’s word, we reached our destination safely. The lugs deposited us at the edge of a small clearing lit by a warm shaft of welcome sunlight. The spiders then withdrew to the comfortable shadows.

The clearing was no more than a small, neatly clipped lawn. At its center stood a white gazebo.

Here the Arbenflow was little more than a large creek that widened into a placid pool in the clearing. The shining surface of the water reflected the sun and clouds. No other stream was in evidence. If the Hidden River was here, it was well hidden indeed.

“King Luggo! Are you sure this is the place?”

“Yes, four-limb Cosmo,” called the spider. “Greenleaf, Shrine of. This is the placing you beseek.”

“So where is the Keeper?”

“I am not knowing. I here arrived just now also.”

“Hello!” I shouted. No reply.

“Not much of a shrine,” said Mercury. He sniffed. “Is that fresh paint I smell?”

We approached the gazebo warily. Mercury touched a rail, getting wet paint on his fingers. The ground near the structure was littered with sawdust and wood shavings.

“This is not the most ancient of shrines,” I observed.

Mercury stepped into the gazebo, tested the floor, looked up at the ceiling—and stood transfixed.

“What is it, Merc?”

“Excuse me,” he said to the ceiling. “I’ll get him.” He beckoned. “It’s for you.”

“What’s for me?”

He exited the gazebo. “Just go in and look up.”

I did as he suggested. Instead of rafters supporting the latticed roof I beheld the dome of a lemon sky and a crowd of huge disembodied faces peering down at me as if I were a cricket in a jar. Young and old, male and female, they radiated power. Glorious, majestic, infinite power. Divine power.

“Jason Cosmo, welcome to the Gazebo of The Gods,” said one face, that of a bearded man who wore a storm cloud like a hat. His voice was as the thunder that shatters mountains. I knew him to be Great Whoosh, Emperor of the Winds. “We’ve been expecting you.”

“Here I am,” I said, wondering if I should fall to my knees.

“No need to fall to your knees,” said Great Whoosh. “You have proven your devotion by reaching this place. We have observed you carefully in your travels and we are well pleased in you. Your skills, your knowledge, your will to survive—all have grown greatly. You have demonstrated courage, loyalty, and resourcefulness. You—”

“Am I late?” said a holy voice I recognized. The Goddess Rae forced her way into view, appearing beside Great Whoosh. She smiled down at me. “Hello again, Jason!”

“Greetings, O Rae.” I bowed. She was, after all, my patron goddess.

“You look so tiny! Like a doll. How cute!”

“As I was saying,” rumbled Great Whoosh. “You have become the hero you were meant to be. Now it is time to reveal unto you why all that has happened has happened as it happened.”

“This should be interesting.”

“Archiva, would you relate the needed background?”

The Goddess of History, a silverhaired old woman with skin the color of parchment, nodded. Her voice was like the turning of ancient, dusty pages. “In the beginning there were The Gods, who dwelt alone in Paradise. And The Gods grew restless and created a world and Named it Arden. Actually, it was to be called Garden and to be their Garden, but a certain god, who shall remain nameless, failed to enunciate clearly during the Naming Ritual—”

“Are you still harping on that?” interrupted the Nameless God.

“In any event,” said Archiva. “Arden was good, and beautiful, and perfect—except for the name thing. But no man dwelt in it, only the birds of the air and the beasts of the field and the fishes of the—”

“There is no need to go back quite that far,” said Great Whoosh.

“I like to start at the beginning.”

“You always start at the beginning. But, just this once, could you skip ahead a bit? He’s only a mortal. He hasn’t got time to hear it all.”

“Skip ahead how far?”

“To the Age of War.”

“How can you contemplate the Age of War without considering the Age of Nature and the Age of Peace before it? It is the sharp break with the past that makes the Age of War so significant.”

“Please, Archiva.”

“Very well. Age of War. Its origins lie in a complex interaction of such diverse factors as the controversial creation of other sentient races that competed with humanity, the regrettable invention of economics, ill-considered petty feuds among various gods, and the untimely arrival in our universe of the race of demons. All are important factors, though the last has the most bearing on the current situation. The demons came from Somewhere Else, we know not where. They constructed the Assorted Hells as a mockery of Paradise, though some speculate that they merely—”

“Move it along, Archiva.” Great Whoosh was growing impatient. A small tornado formed beside his left ear.

“The War of a Thousand Years, involving gods, demons, and the mortal races, blasted Arden and ended with the Great Eternal Pan-Cosmic Holy/Unholy Non-Intervention Pact. By this treaty, all gods and demons promised to leave one another in peace and to withdraw from direct involvement in mortal affairs. The Gods honored the agreement. The demons, led by Asmodraxis, did not. Unopposed, they created an Empire of Fear. For a thousand years, this Evil Empire stood. This was the Age of Despair. Then The Gods could no longer bear to see evil thrive. We brought forth a Mighty Champion to free mankind from the yoke of demonic slavery. After a hard struggle, he defeated Asmodraxis, brought down the Evil Empire, and ushered in the current Age of Hope. The important historical trends of this Age have been—”

“Stick to the matter at hand,” said Great Whoosh curtly.

“The pattern to note is that each Age lasts one thousand years. We don’t know why. It just seems to work out that way. The Age of War ended nine hundred and ninety years ago, making this the critical decade that will determine the character of the Next Age.”

“Thank you, Archiva,” said the Wind God, cutting her off as she gathered her breath to continue the history lesson. He turned his attention to me. “You have learned that you are a namesake of the Mighty Champion. Know now that you are truly of his bloodline. This is why the Dark Magic Society fears you above all others. Until recently, they believed—as the world believes—that the Line of Champions was extinguished. The Dark Magic Society hopes to release Asmodraxis from his prison and bring an Age of More Despair Than Last Time. They fear that you will thwart their evil plans, as your great predecessor thwarted evil in his day. That is why they seek you.”

“What about the Demon Lords? How does killing me fit their plans?”

“They are Demon Lords. Their first response to any problem is to kill it. However, we have reminded them of their obligations under the Non-Intervention Pact. The Lords Below have agreed to take no further action against you. But they will abide by this agreement only so long as they believe it will prevent the return of Asmodraxis. You must act quickly.”

“What must I do?”

“Arkayne will explain.”

The God of Magic, his face hidden by a hood the color of mystery, leaned forward. His voice was a reverberating whisper. “Erimandras and the Dark Magic Society seek the Superwand, for by its power alone was Asmodraxis bound and by its power alone may he be freed. Put simply, Erimandras must not gain possession of the Superwand.”

“So where is it?”

“None know. The Mighty Champion hid it and never told us where he put it. Ideally, it should be brought to Paradise for safekeeping.”

“You want me to find the Superwand and bring it to you?”

“Absolutely not! We can’t be trusted with it!”

“But you just said—”

“Ideal conditions are rarely found. The Superwand’s power equals the might of all The Gods combined. Were the Superwand brought to Paradise it would be a constant source of temptation and strife. Mistrust would fester in our ranks. A God War would be inevitable. Possession of the Superwand by anyone upsets the cosmic balance of power.”

“So you want me to do what exactly?”

“Prevent the Superwand from being found. The Dark Magic Society believes you know its location thanks to a clever bit of disinformation planted by our colleague Heraldo, God of Gossip, Rumor, and Sensationalism. This has distracted them from making any effective search for the Superwand. Instead they hunt you. You must ensure that the Society never returns to their abandoned search.”

“Back up! *The Gods* put the Society on my trail?”

“Well, er...yes.”

“Why do I even pray to you people?”

“We, uh, move in mysterious ways. It’s theological.”

“If you say so.”

“I do. Trust me, it will all work out in the end. We have a plan and our plan is working. The unpleasant circumstances you have recently endured not only keep Erimandras preoccupied, but have forged you into a true hero capable of destroying him.”

“So your plan is for me to slay Erimandras the Overmaster, the most powerful evil sorcerer in all of Arden?”

“As the God of Magic I wouldn’t rate him the *most* powerful evil sorcerer. But certainly in the top five. Nevertheless, you need not actually slay him. Just render him and the Society incapable of pursuing their quest for the Superwand. Wherever it is hidden, there is must remain.”

“This is all very confusing,” I said. “No offense, but your plan isn’t exactly clear. I’m to distract the Society from hunting for the Superwand by letting them hunt me. They must not capture me. At the same time, I should destroy Erimandras. But, then again, maybe not. Is that about it?”

“More or less,” said Arkayne.

“We have brought you this far,” said Great Whoosh. “We have prepared you for your task by giving you a superb mind, body, and will. You have learned the skills and shown the courage of a hero. Now we charge you with a great heroic mission: to be our Champion and safeguard the Next Age of Arden. You will oppose the Society and all other evildoers who would enslave mankind. Ensure that the next thousand years will be an Age of More Hope, perhaps even a second Age of Peace.”

“A second Age of Peace? Are you kidding me?”

“Okay, that might be a bit much. Just prevent the Dark Magic Society from plunging Arden into a long night of evil and we’ll sort the rest out later. Fare you well.”

“You’re leaving? Wait a minute!”

“In this place you will find the holy relics of your ancestor, the Mighty Champion. May they serve you well in the battles before you.”

“Whoa! Whoa! Whoa!”

Heedless of my cries, The Gods vanished. I was left shouting at the ceiling of an ordinary gazebo.

“What was that all about?” asked Merc. “I only caught your end of the conversation.”

“They want me to stop the Society from finding the Superwand, prevent the return of Asmodraxis, and make sure the next thousand years turn out all right.”

“Sounds simple enough.”

“Oh, right, I didn’t hear them laying any giant cosmic burdens on you!”

“Did they have any suggestions on how you might accomplish all this?”

“The relics of the Mighty Champion are supposed to be around here somewhere.”

“Where?”

“They didn’t say.”

“Gods are cryptic that way.”

“Cryptic! They want me to destroy the Society! I’m not even a wizard! The Gods must be crazy!”

Merc shrugged. “Think this through. The Society is trying to kill you, right?”

“Right.”

“You can run, fight, or surrender. Surrender is certain death. No good.”

“I’m with you so far.”

“Running or fighting are both risky, but at least you’ve got a chance. Still with me?”

“Sure.”

“When we met I agreed to help you in hopes that your aura would reveal how to get the Society off my back. It didn’t. So why am I here with you now?”

“Because you promised to protect me?”

“Only to Rae City.”

“Because you’re my friend?”

“You loan a friend garden tools. You don’t escort him through the Incredibly Dark Forest. No, I’m here because you are my best hope for survival.”

“I’m your best hope? Merc, are you feeling well?”

“Run or fight. Both are risky, but running does no damage to the enemy. Your situation never improves. You just keep running until you are caught. That has been my strategy because I haven’t had the means to fight back—until now. Fighting is only a sensible option if you have a chance, however slim, of winning. I had no chance before. Now, thanks to you, I do.”

“Now you’ve lost me.”

“Cosmo, you have strength, brains, courage, and charisma. The Society itself has given you a worldwide reputation as a powerful, dangerous man. The Gods are behind you. You will soon possess some of the most powerful relics in existence. You’re a hero. Even I, a cynical and disillusioned wizard who doesn’t believe in heroes, can see that. If anyone can bring down the Dark Magic Society, it’s you.”

“Me.”

“With my help.”

“Yes, the two of us should be more than enough to do the job and, by the way, *are you out of your mind?*”

”

“I didn’t say it would be easy. I said we have a chance. Any man for whom The Gods will crowd into a gazebo must have something going for him. As I said, I don’t believe in heroes. But I believe in you, Jason.”

“I’m deeply touched, Merc. I mean that sincerely. You do realize you’re starting to sound like those loons from the League?”

“No need for insults. We are an unbeatable team, my friend! We’ve been through the Black Bolts, Zaran, Yezgar, the Red Huntsman, numerous demons, Isogoras, Halogen, and the Incredibly Dark Forest. We’ve got momentum.”

“Is it the paint fumes?”

“Now let’s find those relics!”

He dropped to his knees and crawled across the lawn, minutely examining the turf for clues.

“What exactly does a relic look like?” I asked Merc, joining his search.

“No way to tell. It can be anything. Body parts. Weapons. Personal items. Anything that came into contact with a great hero or holy man can be a relic. Have you ever heard of the Tissues of the Sneezing Saint?”

“No.”

“They are relics of Mucosa the Miraculous. Powerful objects, but disgusting to behold.”

“I’d prefer a weapon.”

“Incidentally this grass is fake. The Gods were really cutting corners here.”

We searched the entire clearing, from the gazebo to the tree line. We found no sign that anything had been buried here. The lugs had no suggestions. We were stumped.

Unless...

“Maybe we’re overlooking the obvious,” I said. I returned to the gazebo. “This is a free-standing structure, not anchored.” I jammed my fingers under the base and lifted, toppling the gazebo onto its side. It collapsed into a pile of lumber.

“Shoddy construction,” said Merc. “I’m losing what little faith in The Gods I had.”

“But look!”

Beneath the Gazebo of The Gods was a narrow stone stairway spiraling into the ground. Cold air scented with strawberries wafted upward from the opening. I heard the distant sound of running water.

"This looks promising," said Merc.

"Think so?" I lifted my axe and descended. Merc followed. I counted thirty steps twisting downward. After a final twist we reached a rusty iron door. It screeched slowly open at my touch. I crouched in a defensive stance, ready for anything.

Warm friendly light spilled out. The strawberry scent grew more intense. We entered the cold chamber beyond. It was round, with a domed ceiling, hewn from the living rock and polished smooth. A second iron door was set opposite that through which we entered. The floor was tiled. In the center of the room was a statue of a warrior. In the figure's stony hands were a gleaming sword and shield that were decidedly not stone. Nor were the peaked helmet and suit of mail adorning the man of marble.

"Look at the face," said Merc, in a tone of awe.

The statue had my face.

"A perfect likeness," said Merc.

"Remarkable! Most remarkable!"

I was startled by the cheery new voice, but even more startled when the speaker slid into view. It was a man-sized strawberry with big blue eyes and a huge human mouth. "The likeness is remarkable!"

"Who are you?"

"I am the Keeper of the Shrine of Greenleaf!"

"But you're a big strawberry!" I protested.

"And you're a big hairless ape. What of it?"

"I'm sorry...but strawberries don't...you can't—I don't believe this!"

"Why should an intelligent, talking strawberry be any more unusual than, say, an intelligent, talking luminous green spider?" asked the Keeper.

"You have a point. But wouldn't a talking tree be more appropriate? This being the Shrine of Greenleaf and all."

"Oh, a talking tree you'll accept, eh? You want leaves? I have leaves! See that tuft right on top of me?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Leaves."

"And what color are they?"

"Green."

"There you go!"

"Thin," I said.

The strawberry sighed. "I admit I'm not the typical holy guardian, but The Gods put this shrine together on short notice. All of the talking trees were booked. I am a minor servitor of Freshlord, God of Fruits and Vegetables, but things are slow around the office once the spring planting is done, so I got tapped for this duty."

"Sorry you were inconvenienced."

"Don't be! I'm getting overtime. Now I'm supposed to explain these relics to you. I see you already possess the sacred Ring of Raxx."

"This?" I twisted the ring Timeon gave me. "What does it do?"

"I have no idea, but it looks good on you. Let us see if I can remember my briefing on the other relics here. Ah! The coat of mail is forged of the mystic metal miraculum."

"Miraculum? What's that?"

"You know, being an anthropomorphic piece of fruit, I don't know all the metallurgical details, but suffice to say this coat of mail is as light as linen and withstands most mortal weapons and magic alike. Along with the matching helm, gauntlets, and pants of mail. The ensemble looks as though it will fit you nicely, if I may say so."

"And the shield?"

"That is the famous shield Gardswell. Also miraculum. It will turn aside any blade you meet. With a few exceptions."

“Such as?”

“Didn’t memorize the list. I just know there are some. If you meet one, you’ll know it.”

“And the sword? It’s magnificent!”

“No, no, Magnificent is another sword entirely. Much more shiny. This is the enchanted blade Overwhelm. It cuts through stone like warm butter. Like the armor and shield, it is forged of miraculum and possessed of many powerful enchantments.”

“These are all mine to keep?”

“Oh, yes!”

“Excellent!”

“If you pass the test, that is.”

“Test? What test?”

“The test of your worthiness.”

“Why do I have to pass a test?”

“We can’t go handing out holy relics to just anyone.”

“What is the test?”

“It awaits you beyond the far door. You must go alone. If you pass, the relics are yours.”

“And if I fail?”

“Then...you don’t get the relics. Simple enough.”

“I’m ready.” I approached the door, gripping my axe tightly.

“Your weapon,” said the Keeper. “You won’t need it.”

“I think I’ll take it anyway.”

Merc clasped my shoulder. “Good luck, Jason.”

“Thanks.”

The door slid open at my touch. I stepped across the threshold into the unlit tunnel beyond. The door closed behind me with a mournful clang.

Chapter 19

I counted three hundred paces before the tunnel opened onto a small ledge overlooking a great cavern softly lit by luminous fungi. A gurgling black river flowed through the chamber some fifty feet below where I stood. This had to be the fabled Hidden River—hidden because it was underground! But what was the test?

“Ahem!”

I whirled about and raised my axe. A narrow path led up to a slightly larger ledge a few yards to the right of where I stood. A thin, bespectacled scribe stood beside a wooden table. A school desk faced him.

“Are you Jason Cosmo?” he demanded in an officious, nasal voice. “Here to be tested?”

“Yes.”

“I am Proctorius, Testmaster of The Gods. Be seated. Have you any identification?”

“I have...the Ring of Raxx.”

“Is your name Raxx?”

“No.”

“Well, then, that is no good, is it? Still, I suppose you must be he. Who else would be here? Be seated. Have you a number two pencil?”

“A what?” The desk was too small. It wobbled and squeaked with every breath I took.

“Tsk, tsk! You’ve come unprepared. Here is a pencil.” He handed me the writing implement, then placed on the desk a sheet of paper covered with row upon row of tiny lettered circles.

“What is this?”

Reading from a sheet of instructions, pronouncing each word slowly and carefully, Proctorius said, “Grid your name into the appropriate boxes.”

“Do what?”

The scribe looked up from the instruction sheet and gave me a snooty appraisal. “Can you spell your name?”

“Yes.”

“Then fill in the circles on your answer sheet corresponding to the letters of your name.” He resumed reading. “Next, fill in your age, date of birth, most recent place of abode, and the name of this testing site, which is Greenleaf.”

The voice and manner of Proctorius were more irritating than the screech of a bloody nuisance, but I obeyed his instructions.

He continued reading. “I will now give you the test booklet. This is the Standard Heroic Aptitude Test, which will measure your potential for success as a hero. It consists of two thousand multiple choice questions. You are to fill in the blank containing the letter matching what you believe to be the best answer to each question. Make no stray marks on the answer sheet. You have one hour.” He handed me the test booklet and turned over an hourglass on the table. “You may begin!”

I attacked the questions. Some asked about weapons and monsters. Others referred to excerpts from scholarly essays on heroic ethics, methods, and ideals. There were problem questions, asking me to choose the best escape or rescue plan in a given situation. I answered those I knew from experience or common sense and guessed wildly at the rest. My pencil broke twice. Proctorius would only give me a new one after I raised my hand. As the final grains of sand fell I was filling in blanks randomly, not even bothering to read the questions. I filled in the last circle with seconds to spare.

“Time! Put down your pencil! You shouldn’t guess randomly, you know. There is a penalty for wrong answers.”

“I could never have finished otherwise!”

“My word, you aren’t expected to answer *all* the questions.”

“Now you tell me!”

“Well, then,” smirked Proctorius. “Give me your answer sheet so I can grade the results. You must achieve a score in at least the 75th percentile to claim the relics.”

I handed over the sheet. Proctorius checked my answers against a key, clucking and shaking his head as he did so.

“Some of those questions weren’t fair,” I said.

“Piffle! I suppose you mean you can’t answer questions about sea monsters because you aren’t from a seafaring nation? Yes, I’ve heard these complaints of cultural bias before, but it is all nonsense! The test employs a standard norming deviation curve matrix to adjust for such factors.”

“I will have to take your word for that.”

“In layman’s terms, the Standard Heroic Aptitude Test is the best measure we have of heroic potential. Now hush and let me see what we have here. My, my! This is most irregular!”

“What?”

“You got them all right!” said Proctorius. “Not a single incorrect answer!” He glared at me over the rims of his glasses. “You cheated, didn’t you?”

“How could I cheat? I didn’t even know I was going to take this test until I got here! I thought I’d be fighting a horrible monster! Which, frankly, I would have preferred!”

“Master Cosmo, cheating is a very serious matter. I’m afraid I will have to rule these results invalid and require you to take the test again.”

“Never! Not for all the relics in creation!”

“You really have no choice,” said Proctorius.

“Oh, no? How would you like to take a swim in that river down there?”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Yes.” I wouldn’t really harm an agent of The Gods, but he didn’t know that. I snatched up my axe.

“Better yet—”

“Wait! Wait!” said Proctorius, quivering like a rabbit. “I was watching you the whole time and I saw no evidence of cheating! The results stand! Here is your claim ticket for the holy relics.”

“Thank you,” I said.

I jogged back up the tunnel to where Merc and the Keeper waited.

“What took you so long?” asked Merc.

“It was too horrible to describe,” I said. “But I passed.” I displayed the claim ticket. “I’ll take those relics now.”

“Excellent! Excellent! You may have them all! In fact, I suggest you grab them straight away.”

“Why?”

“Because the Dark Magic Society will attack this place momentarily.”

“What? How did they find us?”

“Even the indirect presence of The Gods is like a beacon. Enjoy your relics! I must be returning to Paradise now. It has been a pleasure meeting you both.”

“You’re not going to help us?”

“You’re the hero,” said the Keeper. “I’m just a big strawberry. What can I do?”

With that the Keeper shimmered and vanished. Merc ran up the stairs to ground level while I donned the armor, strapped on the shield Gardswell and took Overwhelm for my own. The mail coat felt more like a bathrobe than armor. The helm weighed no more than a felt cap. I gave the sword a couple of experimental swings. It was as light as a broomstick.

Merc rushed back into the chamber.

“Cosmo! Run! Out the other door!”

“What is it?”

“Bad! Very bad!”

“How bad can it be?” I asked, feeling cocky with my new armor and the feel of Overwhelm in my hand. I vaulted up the stairs to the surface.

Hundreds of gibbering goblins, their lightsensitive eyes protected by green visors, streamed into the clearing from every direction, waving tiny swords and clubs. They were accompanied by dozens of their larger cousins, the burly bugaboos. Natalia Slash hovered above the clearing on the back of her immense purple dragon, Golan. Isogoras the Xornite was seated behind her. They were flanked by Dylan of Ganth and twenty Black Bolts, mounted on sable gryphons and armed with repeating crossbows, all aimed at me. I retreated down the stairs.

“Merc! Run! Out the other door!”

“I thought you’d be back.”

We rushed down the tunnel as goblins and bugaboos poured into the chamber. I lacked my extra strength underground, but we didn’t have to face Natalia’s dragon. It seemed a fair bargain.

We reached the ledge over the Hidden River. Proctorius, desk, and table were gone.

“We’ll make a stand here,” said Merc.

I studied the swift dark water below. “Good call.”

“Stand aside.”

The first wave of goblins was halfway down the tunnel. Mercury cast a spell that made the floor as slippery as greased eels on ice. The front rank of goblins lost their footing and slid helplessly past us. They toppled over the ledge to fall screaming into the river below.

Goblins can’t swim.

But they are surefooted. The next wave slowed their breakneck pace to avoid a watery death. Their caution meant only a few attackers at a time could reach us. I easily carved the goblins to gooey bits as they came.

“This sword is wonderful!” I exclaimed. “It almost fights by itself!”

“Considering your usual awkward swordplay, that is a good thing,” said Merc.

The first pair of bugaboos reached me. While I hacked at one, the other struck me in the head with a spiked club. Thanks to my miraculum helm, I barely felt the blow. Unharméd, I dispatched the second bugaboo with ease.

“I could fight like this all day! Overwhelm is so light, it’s like waving my arm around!”

“Try waving your arm all day and get back to me.”

“Still, this is easy!”

As those words left my lips, a powerful jet of water struck me in the back and slammed me against the wall. I bounced off and toppled backward into the river, hitting the surface with a tremendous splash. The weight of normal armor would have dragged me to the bottom, but the buoyant miraculum did not hamper me at all.

Sputtering, I treaded water. I heard wicked girlish laughter behind me. I turned to see a trio of young women standing on a rock in the middle of the river. They wore scandalously skimpy black bikinis, gaudy green lipstick, and tacky jewelry. They held between them a large hose.

“Nymphs gone bad!” shouted Merc. A high pressure blast of water from the hose knocked him from the ledge to join me in the river. The nymphs then aimed the hose at our heads, making it difficult to stay afloat or even breathe. I lost my grip on both sword and shield, which floated away downstream. To escape the pounding spray, I dove underwater, as did Merc.

Our respite would last only as long as we could hold our breath. We both had the same idea and made for the rock, coming up on opposite sides of the islet.

We took the nymphs by surprise, for they expected us to flee. I grasped one by the ankles and pulled her in. The other two dropped the hose, which whipped about wildly of its own accord, spraying water in every direction.

I quickly learned that pulling a water nymph into the water was a bad idea. She was solid enough to yank my helmet off and scratch my face with long, sharp nails. But trying to push her away was like trying to grasp the water itself. A second nymph joined her sister in battling me. Together, they forced me under.

The current carried us away. One nymph twisted my head back while the other caught me in an embrace and pressed her mouth against mine. The kiss was far from pleasant, for she vomited water down my throat. I flailed helplessly, drowning as surely as the goblins. The water churned around us. It seemed to flow upward, in defiance of all sense. Not that it mattered. I was close to permanent senselessness.

We broke the surface of the pool beside the jumbled remnants of the Gazebo of The Gods. The sunshine and open air were unexpected, not that I was getting any air. The nymph sisters still had me in their kiss of watery death.

“Enough!” ordered Isogoras from his perch on Golan’s back. “Leave him to us! Bring the wizard!” With expressions of profound disappointment, the nymphs released me to bob in the pool with dozens of goblin corpses. A Black Bolt urged his gryphon mount down to pluck me from the water with its talons and deposit me on shore. The beast was not gentle about it. I lay gasping on the grass. Golan the dragon alighted, taking up most of the clearing. Natalia and Isogoras dismounted.

“Are these yours?” rasped the wizard, dropping my helm, shield, and sword beside me. I coughed and spat in reply. “Did you think we were unaware of this place?”

“I was,” I wheezed.

“The Society knows all.”

“You got lucky.”

“Luck had nothing to do with it.” A cloud of prying eyes flew into view. “I have observed your every move since you entered the Forest. You never suspected a thing! I gathered my hirelings and waited for the proper moment to seize you. Now you are mine to deliver to Erimandras the Overmaster.” He drew a long, slim dagger from his belt. “But first, my revenge!”

“What did I do?”

“You cost me my most prized possession, the Horn of Hockessin! I was unable to find it after our encounter, so you must pay! The Overmaster won’t mind if you are missing a hand, an ear, an eye, perhaps your nose.”

Before Isogoras could begin his grisly surgery, the three nymphs surfaced with Merc in their grasp. A Black Bolt snatched him from the water and dropped him beside me.

“Sorry I’m late,” he gasped.

“Mercury Boltblaster, we meet again,” said Isogoras. “There is no escape for you this time.”

Merc ignored the Xornite. “Natalia. Slumming, are you?”

“His gold is as good as any,” said Natalia. “Plus the ten million for Cosmo. Not a bad day’s work.”

Merc sneered at Isogoras. “Afraid to face me again without help?”

“Too much is at stake for me to take chances,” rasped the masked wizard. “I have you. I have Cosmo. I even have the relics of the so-called Mighty Champion. All of which will enable me to depose Erimandras when I return to Fortress Marn.”

Natalia’s eyes narrowed in cold calculation at the wizard’s words, but she said nothing. “Ever ambitious,” said Merc.

“Did I say that last bit out loud?” said Isogoras. “Enough prattle! Bind them, Natalia!”

“Mind your tone when you address me, wizard!” said Natalia. But she complied with his instructions, retrieving chains and manacles from her saddlebag. I glanced at Merc. He winked. Wizards recover quickly. Merc was merely stalling our captors until he was ready to act. My own natural hardiness was augmented by the Blessing of Rae here in the sunshine. I sprang to my feet and held out my hands. With a telekinetic boost from Merc my sword, shield and helm flew into place. Merc pulled a saber from his cloak. We stood back to back.

Natalia dropped the chains and drew her own sword, the family blade she had evidently recovered from the Longwash. “Cosmo is mine!” she shouted.

“Drop the sword, Boltblaster, or my men will shoot,” said Isogoras, indicating the Black Bolts circling above. “Even you can’t turn twenty arrows at once.”

Merc thrust his weapon into the ground at Isogoras’s feet.

I was on my own.

Natalia’s attack was swift and brutal, but Overwhelm and Gardswell were equal to it. I certainly wasn’t. According to Merc, Natalia was one of the best fighters in the Eleven Kingdoms. I held on tightly and let Overwhelm guide my arm, praying the sword was good enough to save me. None of Natalia’s furious blows struck home, but I was clearly on the defensive. She forced me steadily back towards the river, where the wicked nymphs waited, hooting with malicious glee, hoping for a second go at me.

They would not get the chance. Once I lost my footing in the water, Natalia would win. Overwhelm’s enchantment, even backed by my sunsoaked strength, was no match for her skill. While all eyes were on our duel, Merc reached stealthily into his cloak. He whipped his hand free, releasing his entire stock of flares. Half soared upward to burst amid the hovering Black Bolts. Spooked gryphons flew out of control in every direction. The remaining flares went off near the ground. The goblins fled, their visors offering no protection against a light so bright and near. One flare burst in the face of Isogoras and another next to Natalia. Several detonated around Golan’s massive purple head, stunning the dragon into numbed blindness.

Blinking, I staggered and fell backward into the pool. The nymphs surged toward me, only to stop at the sight of Mercury’s outstretched hands crackling with arcane energy. The nymphs melted into the water. Merc helped me to my feet.

We ran for the trees.

“What now?” I asked, rubbing my eyes as we passed a group of screeching, disoriented goblins. Streamers of bright light from the flares penetrated the gloom beneath the trees.

“Just run until we think of something!”

“Isn’t this the part where the friendly green spiders save us?”

“We already did that scene. They’re long gone.”

“So we run? We do a lot of this.”

“It’s good exercise.”

Merc abruptly fell flat on his face. He lay unmoving on the ground. I knelt beside him. “Merc!”

He was unconscious. Removing my helmet, I bent close to check his breathing. The goblins, back in their element, regrouped and headed our way. I scooped up my friend’s inert form and flung him over my shoulder.

I felt a sharp sting on the side of my neck. I reached up and pulled a tiny black dart from my skin, the kind shot from a blowgun.

It was marked with the symbol of a crescent moon.

Everything went black.

Chapter 20

I awoke. My hands were bound behind me and my feet tied together with thick leather cords. The air was cold. The stony ground upon which I lay was lightly dusted with snow. Even the dim light of a hazy grey sky seemed dazzling after the ceaseless gloom of the Incredibly Dark Forest.

I rolled onto my back for a better view of my surroundings. The terrain was mountainous, an array of cliffs and gorges and weathered rocky hills. Mercury lay nearby, still unconscious, also bound. His cloak was missing. Nearby, a rickety suspension bridge with frayed ropes and broken footboards spanned a deep chasm. On the far side was a wall of vegetation that unmistakably marked the western verge of the Incredibly Dark Forest.

“You awaken. Good. I am BlackMoon.”

The soft stiletto voice startled me. I looked up and saw the bounty hunter standing over me. He hadn't been there an instant before. Dressed in close-fitting black garments, he was lean and hard, a living dagger of a man. His yellow-green eyes were cat-like, vertical pupil and all. He really could see in the dark.

“I hoped we would have a chance to speak. I wish to thank you for a splendid hunt.”

“You're welcome. Where are we?”

“Malravia. This is the rendezvous point where I will deliver you and your companion to the Dark Magic Society and collect my reward.” He frowned. “A pity.”

“Why?”

“As I say, this has been a splendid hunt. It is the chase I love, not the pecuniary rewards. My skills are such, however, that I am rarely so challenged as I have been in pursuing you.”

“I was a challenge?”

“It was not so much a matter of any great ability on your part as it was the interesting circumstances through which you led me.”

“Oh.”

“I held back, savoring the pursuit and waiting for the perfect moment take you down. Stealing you from Natalia Slash and Isogoras the Xornite in the heart of the Incredibly Dark Forest was exquisite.”

“If chasing me is such fun, let me go and we'll do it again.”

“Every hunt must end, alas. It is time I turned to other pursuits.”

Mercury stirred and rolled onto his back. He took in the situation at once. “Malravia. Wonderful. Haven't been here in years. You must be BlackMoon.”

The bounty hunter nodded.

“I've admired your work,” said Merc. “Though I'm none too wild about this particular demonstration of your skills.”

“Thank you,” said BlackMoon.

“Just out of curiosity, how did you manage to transport the two of us out of the Incredibly Dark Forest? I assume it has been several days since our capture and that you kept us drugged during the journey.”

“Indeed, this is the fifth day since your capture,” said BlackMoon. “I find ComaDose effectively subdues captives for transport. It slows respiration and other body functions to very low levels.”

“You prefer it to DormaDose or Torporex?”

“DormaDose is useful as a tactical sleep agent, but less practical for maintaining extended unconsciousness. Torporex is powerful, and in some ways superior to ComaDose, but I find the side effects unpredictable. Permanent brain damage and the like.”

“Most considerate of you,” said Merc. “But surely you didn't carry both of us yourself?”

“Naturally not,” said BlackMoon. “My jujula bore you.”

“What is a jujula?” I asked.

“A low order of spirit being sometimes enslaved by wizards in need of cheap physical labor,” explained Merc. “But you, BlackMoon, are no mage. I imagine your jujula are bound to serve the bearer of some

magical talisman you possess?"

"I do not care to discuss my methods further," said BlackMoon, suddenly suspicious.

"Fair enough," said Merc. "Will the Society be here soon?"

"Enough talk. I only allowed you to awaken that I might express my appreciation to you for giving me a good hunt. It is now time for you to sleep again."

BlackMoon produced a smoke-colored glass vial from his belt pouch.

"Don't bother," said Merc, casually slipping out of his bonds. He sprang to his feet and assumed a fighting stance.

BlackMoon reacted instantly, hurling the vial at Merc's face and ripping a slim black dagger from the sheath on his thigh.

Merc batted the bottle aside. It shattered harmlessly on the rocks. "My training included a course in escaping all manner of bonds."

"I know," said BlackMoon. "We had many of the same teachers."

"You were hoping this would happen," said Merc.

"I have long wished to test my fighting skills against yours. You defeated the Red Huntsman with your magic, but you will not beat me that way. I dosed you with NoArcane, the most powerful spellcasting inhibitor on the market. It prevents your brain from properly conducting magical energies. This will be a fair fight."

"You have a knife," noted Merc. "I don't."

"You are welcome to take mine. If you can."

BlackMoon darted forward, leading with the black dagger. Merc deflected the attack and jabbed his stiffened hand at the bounty hunter's throat. BlackMoon dodged to the side and slashed at Merc again. This time Merc tagged his wrist with a handnumbing blow to the nerve center there. The knife went skittering across the ground.

"Impressive," said BlackMoon, snapping a kick at Merc's face. The hunter was taller and had a reach advantage, but Merc was slightly quicker. He sidestepped the kick and countered with one of his own. They continued in this fashion for several minutes, not speaking, rarely landing blows, evenly matched. The only sounds were the scuffling of their feet in the gravel and occasional sharp exhalations of breath.

Knowing no secret methods for escaping my bonds, I rolled toward the dagger. It lay near the edge of the chasm separating us from the Incredibly Dark Forest. The sheer cliff face descended hundreds of feet to the raging rapids of the River Volkus.

I worked my fingers around the haft of the dagger and scuttled back a safe distance. As Merc and BlackMoon continued their silent battle, I rolled onto my side, bent my legs back, and slashed the thong binding my ankles. Sitting up, I tried for the bindings on my wrists but quickly realized that feat was beyond my dexterity.

Dropping the knife, I lurched to my feet and charged toward the combatants. BlackMoon had his back to me. If I could ram into him, it would give Merc the opening he needed to finish the fight. BlackMoon stepped aside an instant before impact. I skidded to a halt and turned for another try. BlackMoon stopped me with a kick to the chest that sent me reeling. I tumbled to the ground.

But I achieved my aim. Merc pressed BlackMoon aggressively, forcing him back with a flurry of deadly kicks and punches. I rolled behind the hunter, hoping he would trip over me. BlackMoon avoided me with a graceful backward leap.

I now lay between the combatants. Darting hands and feet whistled above me. Then Merc leapt over me, forcing BlackMoon back. Inevitably, they edged closer, ever closer, to the cliff.

Now BlackMoon took the offensive. It became clear that his retreat was a ploy to draw Merc into this danger zone where the slightest misstep would mean a plunge into the unforgiving rapids.

BlackMoon, with years of experience chasing his prey through every kind of environment, was more surefooted than Merc, giving him the upper hand once more.

I stood, but dared not charge again lest I hurl myself over the cliff.

BlackMoon launched rapid combinations of blows intended to overbalance the wizard. Eventually Merc would make an error and BlackMoon would send him over the edge. He would collect no bounty for Merc if that happened. But the ten million on my head would more than compensate him

for the loss.

Merc extended himself too far while deflecting a blow. He slipped. While he struggled for footing, BlackMoon gave him a sharp shove. Merc fell.

I charged, deciding that Merc, his killer, and I would all go down together. I lowered my head and butted BlackMoon in the back between his shoulders. My suicidal attack took him by surprise. The two of us tottered on the brink for a frozen instant, then fell.

Merc was just below us, in the first instants of freefall. With astonishing quickness his hands darted out and found a hold in a fissure just a few feet below the cliff rim.

Reflexively, I scissored my legs around his waist, anchoring myself, albeit upside down. BlackMoon snaked his arms through the loop formed by my own bound arms. I gaped down past his impassive face at the churning waters far below.

“Well, Jason,” said Merc. “This is another fine mess we’re in.”

“How long can you hold on?”

“A minute or two at most. I can’t climb hauling both of you.”

“What about one of us?” I said, narrowing my eyes at BlackMoon.

“That I might manage.”

“I have a better suggestion,” said BlackMoon.

“I’ll bet you do.”

“I see a handhold that will support me. If the two of you hold still, I can reach the level ground and pull you up. If you let me pass. You could easily dislodge me as I climb, but then we will all die.”

“How can we trust you?”

“If you prefer, we can wait until the wizard loses his grip and, again, we all die.”

“Instead we should place ourselves at your mercy?”

“You began this day at my mercy. Now I am at yours. Doubt me and we die. Cooperate and we live.”

“Until the Society shows up.”

“That is no affair of mine. You are no longer my prisoners. We will go our separate ways in peace.”

“Cosmo!” gasped Merc. “My fingers are slipping! Quit debating and let the man climb!”

“Okay. Go!”

BlackMoon reached out for the cliff, got a handhold, then a toehold, and let go of me completely.

“Much better,” said Merc through clenched teeth.

BlackMoon clambered up the face of the rock and pulled himself onto level ground. He extended an arm for Mercury to grasp and slowly pulled both of us up.

“Now what?” said Merc.

BlackMoon raised his open hands. “There is no need for further conflict. In appreciation of your courage and skill, I will forego the bounty on your heads this day.”

“Thank you,” said Merc, with a slight bow.

“I have arranged for a delegation from the Dark Magic Society to meet me here this afternoon,”

continued BlackMoon. “I suggest you not be in the vicinity at that time. The NoArcane should wear off within an hour, wizard. Here are your belongings.”

The jujula shimmered into translucent visibility. They were vaguely manlike forms bearing large packs. One handed me Overwhelm, Gardswell, and my armor. The other returned Mercury’s cloak. Then they became invisible again.

“Now I bid you farewell,” said BlackMoon. “Perhaps we will meet again.”

“Let’s hope not,” said Merc.

With that, the hunter crossed the bridge back into the Incredibly Dark Forest. He soon passed from view.

“Now what?” I asked, donning my armor and strapping on Overwhelm.

Mercury fastened his cloak. “We continue with our original plan. We carry the fight to the Society.”

“How?”

“We’ll start by questioning whomever comes to collect us here. I’m guessing it won’t be Isogoras.

BlackMoon was surely dealing with a different member of the Ruling Conclave. The rulers of the Society

constantly vie among themselves for power and the Overmaster's favor." Merc drew a second cloak from beneath his own. "Put this over your shiny armor. We'll sit in the shadow of that boulder over there and see who shows up."

Several hours later, a black flying carpet skimmed overhead and settled to a landing near the bridge. The wizard controlling the rug was a stooped and emaciated old man cloaked in black. His staff was of sablewood and tipped with a grinning silver skull. He was accompanied by two young, strong men wearing black tunics emblazoned with the bone-white sigil of Death, the aptly named God of Death. The trio remained on the carpet, ready to fly away at the first hint of trouble. They didn't notice the two of us crouched nearby, silent and unmoving.

"Necrophilus the Grave," Merc whispered in my ear. "A master of necromancy, creator of the prying eyes, a highranking member of the Ruling Conclave. The others are acolytes of the Forbidden Church of Undeath."

"Never heard of it."

"It is a small cult, dedicated to the proposition that the undead shall inherit the world. They gain few breathing converts with a pitch like that. Anyway, we must separate Necrophilus from his staff—it's a killer."

"You have a plan?"

"A wind gust might do the trick. When he drops it, charge and cut him down. Don't hesitate and don't worry about the acolytes. Ready?"

Before I could nod my assent, Necrophilus looked directly at us and said, "You can come out now, Mercury Boltblaster and Jason Cosmo. Please do so slowly and carefully, with your hands above your heads. Any sudden movements might cause me to reduce you to dust with one of my many instant death spells." His voice was as dry as the ligaments of a sunbleached skeleton.

"Or we could just do what the man says," said Merc.

We complied with the death mage's directions.

"Very good, very good. Naturally, I have had this entire area under surveillance by prying eyes for several days. I am aware of your bargain with the hunter BlackMoon—and I intend to honor it." Noting our skeptical expressions he added, "Oh, yes. I am certain we can reach a mutually beneficial understanding."

"What is your game, Deathmaster?" asked Merc, as we slowly approached the trio in black.

"Stop there," said Necrophilus, pointing with his staff. "Yes, that is quite close enough. Kindly be seated in a crosslegged position and keep your hands atop your heads."

We obeyed. He didn't seem to want us dead and we weren't going to insist on it.

"Listen carefully," said the necromancer. "I know you intend to attack the Overmaster, despite your ignorance of his location. I can provide you with that information."

"Betraying your leader?" said Merc.

"The whelp is no leader of mine. The search for the Superwand is madness. It was lost long ago—let it stay lost. And let Asmodraxis remain in his eternal prison. Erimandras would resurrect the past. But the past is dead, and the dead should remain so."

"Except for the undead," said Merc.

"Naturally."

"You mean unnaturally."

"Don't vex me, Boltblaster."

"Sorry. So you have differences with the Overmaster?"

"The Dark Magic Society should look to the future, a future in which we rule Arden in our own right, not as the bootlicking lackeys of demons."

"A future, perhaps, in which Necrophilus is Overmaster?" asked Merc.

The old man smiled, which was terrifying in itself. "Perhaps. Though I am not alone in opposing the path upon which Erimandras has set the Society, I alone have secured the means of his destruction."

"What might that be?" I asked.

"The two of you. You see, I supply BlackMoon with many of his deadly poisons at a substantial

discount. In return, I call upon him to perform certain special services for me—such as bringing you to me before that simpleton Isogoras could take you to the Overmaster. Isogoras made use of my prying eyes to spy on you, unaware that my creations always transmit their images to me as well. I informed BlackMoon of your location.”

“And here we are,” said Merc. “Why here?”

“Erimandras is in Malravia.”

“Fortress Marn,” said Merc.

“Yes, Marn,” confirmed Necrophilus.

Marn was a major stronghold of the long gone Empire of Fear, one of a chain of impregnable citadels built to reinforce the Empire’s domination. Accursed by the great deeds of evil done within its walls, Marn had stood deserted since the Empire’s fall, its isolation only reinforced by the tormented ghosts of the Empire’s victims who were said to roam its corridors still. The restless spirits gave rise to Fortress Marn’s other name—the Haunted Citadel.

“Erimandras has made Marn the new headquarters of the Society, another example of his preoccupation with past glories,” said Necrophilus. “In anticipation of your capture, Jason Cosmo, he has summoned the entire Ruling Conclave to join him there. Unfortunately, I and several others will be unable to attend. But those loyal to Erimandras or too fearful to defy him are already gathered within the walls of Marn.”

Necrophilus withdrew an ebony scroll case from an inner pocket of his robe. “This is a map of the secret passages within and beneath Marn, through which you may covertly enter the citadel. If you succeed in eliminating Erimandras and his followers, you will gain your safety. I can assure you that under my leadership the Dark Magic Society will have no further interest in either of you.”

“And will be more dangerous than ever,” I said.

“That is not your concern, Jason Cosmo, unless you make it so. But as a practical matter, consider that it will take us months, perhaps years, to recover if you succeed. During that time the activities of the Society must necessarily be curtailed.”

“We understand,” said Merc.

“The interior of the citadel is monitored by prying eyes. They are under my control and will conveniently fail to detect you. If you are careful, you may take Erimandras unawares. The rest is up to you.” He dropped the map case to the ground. The magic carpet rose several feet into the air. “That is all. I wish you success.”

Necrophilus streaked away to the east, above the canopy of the Incredibly Dark Forest.

“Sounds like a plan,” said Merc, picking up the map case.

“Can we trust him?”

“Not fully. Somewhere in his scheme is a proviso for our deaths. That is a certainty. But his approach is sound, simple, and surprisingly straightforward.”

“Can the two of us hope to defeat the full might of the Society in their own stronghold?”

“No,” said Merc. “We’ll need reinforcements.”

“The League?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Then who?”

Merc smiled cryptically. “You’ll see.”

Chapter 21

The Malravian war chant grew louder and more frenzied with each passing hour. Hundreds of black-haired, dusky-skinned, leanlimbed warriors of both sexes danced a twisting, jerking battle dance around the great bonfire. Waving spears, bows, clubs, and torches, the raving horde bellowed incoherent challenges into the night. If the Malravians put half as much energy into fighting as they did into dancing, we had little to worry about.

After our audience with Necrophilus, Merc and I spent nine frantic days scabbling up rugged ridges, down gaping gullies, and along twisting trails to reach the Gathering Place, a huge stone bowl scooped from the top of a barren hilltop as if by a giant hand. Specifically, the giant hand of the Grey God. As patron of the Malravian tribes, he hallowed and hollowed this ground as a place where the Grey Folk could put aside their ancestral blood feuds and gather without being honor bound to kill each other.

“I spent some time in Malravia years ago,” explained Mercury. “For aiding the tribes against Ganthians, mountain giants, and nasties from the Forest, I was made an honorary Malravian. That may be enough to gain us their support.”

“What if it isn’t?”

“We’ll be skinned alive and roasted on spits for daring to violate this holy site.”

“I hope they remember you fondly.”

“I’m sure they do.”

“Really? No one else we meet seems to.”

In the center of the bowl was a fissure from which seeped noxious fumes. Merc ignited the subterranean gases with a burst of fingerflame. A great plume of purple fire shot into the sky. The summons was sent. We made camp and waited for the response. For the sake of my skin, I prayed it was favorable.

The first Malravians arrived that evening, a mulka-chewing band of twenty, dressed in furs and skins, their faces streaked with war paint. Ignoring us, they began the dance. By dawn, dozens more tribesmen had joined them in the fevered war rave. None of the dancers acknowledged our presence. They simply arrived and joined the growing circle around the fire.

Hundreds of warriors arrived on the third day, and each day thereafter. After a week, more than ten thousand warriors were at the Gathering Place, dancing, chanting, and pounding out hypnotic rhythms on their war drums. I saw no one stop to sleep or eat or even rest. The narcotic leaves of the mulka plant were their only sustenance. No one even asked who issued the summons or why. At least not until the chieftains arrived.

Mercury and I stood on a ridge above the bowl of the Gathering Place and conferred with the chiefs of the seven main clans of Malravia. Clad in the furs of cave bears, mountain wolves, and rock tigers, their long hair pulled back in warbraids, their faces pierced with bits of bone and metal rings, the great chiefs were an imposing group.

Kogarth, eldest of the chiefs, spoke first. “You have crossed our land safely because you are accepted as one of the Grey Folk, Brother Mercury. Well do we remember your courage and service to the Folk when last you walked among us. But you dare much by issuing the Sacred Summons.”

“Such is the right and the duty of any warrior of the Folk when he learns of a danger to all,” replied Merc.

“What is this danger?” demanded Kogarth.

“The evil of the Dark Magic Society. They have reformed the Haunted Citadel of Marn.”

Kogarth frowned. “Marn is a shunned place. What transpires there is of no concern to us.” The other chiefs nodded their agreement.

“Marn is shunned no longer by those who would spread its bloody stain over all the Grey Folk,” said Merc. “Surely the dark creatures of Marn already venture beyond its walls.”

Those chiefs with lands near Marn nodded their agreement.

Kogarth considered Merc’s words, then said, “Even so, Marn is invincible. If defended by sorcery, it is doubly so. To assault it would be folly.”

“Wise Kogarth speaks true,” said Merc. He waved the scroll Necrophilus gave us. “But I know a secret way into the fortress. And the shamans of the Folk are themselves powers to reckon with.”

Kogarth looked unconvinced.

“Look,” said Merc, “We’ve got ten thousand mulkacrazed warriors down there. They’ve got to attack something.”

“You speak true,” said Kogarth. “So be it, Brother Mercury. You shall be our war-captain and lead us

against Marn. It will be a feat long remembered in our songs—if any of us survive to sing them!”

Four days of swift marching later, the Malravian host reached Marn. The citadel was a hulking mass of black stone crouched like a bloated spider upon a great outcropping of rock halfway up a jagged and desolate basalt peak. Marn’s crenellated walls bristled with spires and towers and the carven images of demons and monsters and ghastly nightmare things without names.

The approach to the fortress was a narrow switchback road winding up the face of the mountain. The road was guarded by thirteen separate gate towers, though the lowermost three were in ruins.

No defenders were visible on the ramparts, but the very stones of the place radiated cruelty and horror. Even the eternal grey mists that cloaked this land seemed to avoid the fortress. The leading ranks of our host, mulka-mad though they were, recoiled as we drew near. A fearful murmur swept through the Malravian horde as they realized what we were about to undertake. I heard wailing cries for us to turn back before it was too late.

“The warriors grumble,” said Kogarth.

“Well they should,” said Merc. “Many will die before this day ends.”

“It is not death they fear, but what may follow death in this place. There are creatures here that swallow souls.”

“We’ll do our best to avoid those,” said Merc. “I will need three mighty shamans and ten warriors to accompany me through the secret way. Preferably not so mulkasodden that they can no longer think.”

Kogarth soon selected those who would accompany us.

Merc nodded his approval. “Brave Kogarth, your war host must divert the attention of those within the citadel. The Society knows we are here, for we have seen their creatures scuttling in the shadows as we approached. But they do not know why we are here. Let the warriors dance and rave for a time. When an hour has passed, make as if you seek to storm the citadel, but venture no higher than the third gate. If you get that far, withdraw, and dance some more before attacking again.”

“It shall be as you say, Brother Mercury.”

Merc turned to those who would help us infiltrate the citadel. “We have the important task of slaughtering the leaders within, mighty sorcerers all. Yet we have might of our own and, the Grey God willing, we shall prevail.”

“Well and truly spoken,” said Kogarth. “Go now and destroy the enemies of the Folk. May the Grey God be with you.”

Mercury led us to a narrow cleft in the east wall of the canyon. From even a few paces away, the opening was invisible, hidden by a protruding lip of rock. The path beyond twisted its way into the depths. After a short distance we were forced to advance single file. Overwhelm in hand, I took the lead. Merc was right behind me, consulting the map. The Malravians followed. We soon moved in complete darkness.

“Don’t magic swords glow in the dark?” I asked.

“Most do,” said Merc.

“Why doesn’t this one?”

“You haven’t asked it to.”

“True,” I said sheepishly. “Light!” I said forcefully.

Overwhelm’s blade instantly ignited with a pale pink glow.

“Pink?” I said in dismay.

“Not so common,” said Merc, suppressing a twitter. “But it will do.”

I had at best a foot of clearance above my head. I frequently had to bend double to advance. The passage sloped downward for the first thousand paces. After that it ran level for what might have been a quarter of a mile. Then the path gradually inclined upward. We took so many twists and

turns that I was unsure which direction we were heading, but Merc assured me we were beneath the fortress. The air was damp, still, and cold. Malevolence bled from the walls with every step.

And then the path came to a dead end against a solid stone wall.

“End of the trail,” I said.

“Hardly,” replied Merc. “We must locate the hidden door.”

“What hidden door?”

“The map shows the passage continuing on the far side of this wall, ergo there is a hidden door.

Extinguish your sword.”

“Why?”

“I am about to cast a spell which will cause the door to glow with a pale green light. But I won’t be able to see it in this pink glare.”

Overwhelm winked out. Merc made his incantation. Nothing happened. Not a trace of green appeared.

“Well?”

“Possibly there is no door,” said Merc. “There are spells that allow a man to walk through stone walls as if they were air. Perhaps that is how the builders of Marn made use of this passage.”

“We’re going to walk through solid stone?”

“Actually, no. I never learned any of those spells. The idea of walking through solid objects unnerves me.”

“As it should. Maybe you could just blast a hole in the wall.”

“I could,” mused Mercury. “But that might bring the ceiling down on us. Mikla, Rikulf, Iuri—any suggestions?”

The three Malravian tribal priests grunted in the negative. It appeared our secret assault was thwarted. I ignited Overwhelm again—and then I remembered!

“Merc! The Keeper said this sword slices through stone like warm butter!”

“Worth a try,” said Merc.

I set Overwhelm’s point against the wall and pushed. The sword penetrated the wall as if I were stabbing water, not stone. I traced a circle a yard wide, handed Overwhelm to Merc and pushed against the cut out section. With agonizing slowness, the stone gave way, scraping and grinding until it fell out the other side.

And fell.

And kept falling.

I stuck my head through the hole and looked down a seemingly bottomless black shaft. The chasm was perhaps ten feet across. On the far side was a broad landing and an ascending stone stairway.

Merc looked through the hole, then frowned at the map. “This isn’t to scale,” he said.

“Never mind that. How do we get across?”

“Might as well jump.”

“Jump!”

“Go ahead, jump.”

“Jump! I’m not sure about this.”

“I can easily clear twenty feet in a standing jump. These rugged Malravian mountain men can do better. They are constantly jumping across chasms, gullies, and the like. Watch.”

With that Merc launched himself through the air, landing on the far side of the pit with room to spare. The Malravians followed in rapid succession, leaving me alone on the wrong side of the shaft.

“What are you waiting for?”

“It’s a long way down.”

“Don’t jump in. Jump across.”

“I don’t think I can do this, Merc.”

“With those thighs? Just do it.”

“I can’t.”

“We haven’t got all day, hero. You’d best throw me the sword first or you’ll have to sheath it and jump in the dark.”

“Oh, that’s helping!”

I hurled the blade across and Merc caught it gracefully. With a quick prayer, I crouched in the gap, bunched my legs, and sprang forward. I knew instantly that I would fall short by several feet. Claws of panic ripped at me as I stared down into the onrushing void. Then I felt an odd upward tug. I flew forward to land on my stomach at Merc’s feet.

“Nice jump, Cosmo.”

I clambered to my feet. “I think I had a little help. A touch of the old mind over matter, perhaps?”

Merc shrugged and returned Overwhelm. I took the lead once more, mounting the steep and winding stairway. The crumbling steps were narrow and numerous. I counted six hundred and sixty before we reached a landing at the top. We found our way blocked by another stone wall. This time Merc’s doorfinding spell was successful. A second spell caused a section of the wall to swing ponderously open. A foul, damp draft flowed over us. The aura of evil in the air was stronger than ever. My flesh crawled. My neck hairs stood on end.

“We are in the lowest levels of the fortress proper,” said Merc. “Our quarry awaits us in the throne room many floors above. Let us proceed with stealth and caution. No mulkacheving yet.”

“*Aieeee!*” cried the Malravians. I thought this an odd response until I noticed that we were surrounded by shimmering, translucent images of broken and bloody men, women, and children. They flitted through the air like phantom hummingbirds, passing insubstantially through the walls, the floors, even our bodies.

“Calm down!” said Merc. “These poor ghosts mean us no harm. Are you warriors or sheep?”

I heard a few bleating sounds from the back of the group, but something else had my attention. The ghosts congregated around me, then dropped to their substanceless knees in apparent homage. Overwhelm’s light went from pink to deep rose to a brilliant scarlet hue. My armor seemed to glow as well. The Malravians fell back in wonder. Even Merc looked surprised.

“What is this?” I asked. “Why are they doing that?”

“There is an obscure legend that the ghosts of Marn will be freed from their eternal imprisonment when the Mighty Champion returns to these halls to defeat a great evil. I never put much stock in it. But from the reaction of these spirits, maybe I was wrong.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that if we win, these ghosts may be set free from their eternal torment.”

“And if we lose?”

“Then we’ll be joining them here.”

The Society had evidently confined their reoccupation of Marn to the upper levels, for the stony bowels of the citadel remained choked with the dust and debris of ten centuries of neglect. Escorted by a swarm of ghosts, we met no living creatures as we ascended through dark corridors and gloomy chambers, nor were we molested by any of the nameless supernatural horrors said to lurk here.

We thrice encountered prying eyes on patrol but, true to the word of Necrophilus, they paid us no heed. All went according to plan until I opened a door and found myself looking at the shapely tattooed back of a tall woman holding an ivory wand. She had long black hair, pale white skin, and wore a corseted bodysuit of black and purple leather studded with numerous spikes. In the great hall before her were assembled dozens of the Society’s lesser wizards.

“The hill scum without must be taught a severe lesson,” she said. “You will proceed to the battlements at once. I want to see fireballs, lightning bolts, and acid clouds. I want the tribal trash out there broken, burned, and blasted. You will be evaluated on technique, accuracy, and lethality. Whoever fails to impress me will spend the night on my new tri-directional torture rack. I’ve been meaning to break it in and—what are you all staring at?”

The woman turned. We were eye to eye. I smiled and slammed the door in her frightfully pierced and inked face. The door promptly vanished in a burst of flame. The woman leveled her smoking wand at me.

“Eufrosinia the Cruel,” said Merc, stepping past me.

“Mercury Boltblaster?” said the woman, clearly shocked.

As an aside, Merc said, “She specializes in pain and torture magic.”

“Lovely.”

“I’ve been saving a few new spells just for you, Boltblaster,” spat Eufrosinia. “Oh, I’ll enjoy breaking you!”

“Sorry we can’t stay and chat, Eufy, but we’re on a tight schedule here.”

With a gesture from Merc, part of the ceiling collapsed, forcing Eufrosinia to leap back into the assembly hall to avoid being crushed.

“Eufy?” I said.

“Let’s move!” commanded Merc. “They know we’re here!”

Gongs and alarms sounded as we ran down the corridor. We turned left at an intersection to avoid a squad of guardsmen approaching from the right and found ourselves facing a pair of towering bronze doors. The guards were right at our heels. The Malravians shoved huge wads of mulka leaves into their mouths and turned to face the Society’s men. I joined them in the forefront of the fray.

Merc faced the doors, concentrating on a spell. He waved his hands in an intricate pattern. The doors glowed red, then white, and finally melted into a bubbling pool that quickly cooled into a misshapen bronze sheet on the floor.

“This way!” said Merc. “Quickly!”

I obeyed, but the Malravians, now foaming at the mouth, ignored Merc’s command and plunged through the last of the guards to charge the onrushing wizards led by Eufrosinia.

“They’ve gone into battle frenzy,” said Merc. “I was hoping they’d hold off until we faced the Ruling Conclave. No way to control them now.”

“So just the two of us again?”

“It always seems to work out that way.”

Beyond the doors was a huge library, half a mile long and almost as wide. We stood on a broad balcony crowded with cluttered desks hastily abandoned by frightened scribes. Above was a barrel-vaulted ceiling that ran the length of the library. Just below the balcony were the tops of monstrous bookshelves that stretched down out of view. Each overflowed with books, scrolls, and clay tablets. A series of narrow catwalks connected the balcony to the shelves. The scribes fled down into the stacks.

“The Library of Darkness,” said Merc. “The main archive of the Dark Magic Society. All of their forbidden knowledge, fiendish plans, membership rosters, and quarterly activity reports, going back a thousand years. I have in mind an excellent diversion.”

He made a few passes of incantation. A puff of smoke jetted from his hands and dissipated. Merc frowned.

“So much for my spectacular fireball. They must have an antimagic field in place to protect the books.”

From the corridor behind us came the war cries of the Malravians mingled with explosions and dying shrieks. It was impossible to tell which side was getting the worst of the melee.

Merc consulted his map. “The throne room is up two more levels.” He sprinted out onto a catwalk. Before I could follow, Eufrosinia and three junior wizards reached the door. All bled profusely from multiple wounds. The underlings, heedless of the anti-magic field, projected a selection of weirdly colored flames and balls of light at me, all of which fizzled out at the threshold. Eufrosinia merely smiled a wicked smile and flicked her wand.

“She cut the field!” cried Merc, turning to defend himself from her next spell. But with a second flick of her wand the catwalk gave way beneath him. Merc fell from sight.

It was a long way down.

I raised Overwhelm to attack. Eufrosinia let me get in sword range before raising her hand in a commanding gesture that paralyzed me mid-swing.

She raked her long purple fingernails down my cheek by way of a caress, then licked the fresh blood from my broken skin. “So good of you to join us, Jason Cosmo. The Overmaster is expecting

you.”

The ghosts reappeared, swirling around me in great agitation and sorrow. Their supposed savior was unable to save even himself.

Chapter 22

Clad in nothing but a tattered loincloth that I hoped had been laundered, I was lashed to a copper-plated Xframe suspended from the ceiling of a high-vaulted chamber of dark stone. The air was thick with ancient malice and murky with the indistinct grey outlines of the darting ghosts of Fortress Marn. The hopeless spirits flitted around me like pale abstractions, their anguished faces materializing before my eyes. The effect of Eufrosinia’s paralyzing spell had faded, but I was just as effectively immobilized by my shackles.

In the center of this great round chamber was a wide pit partially filled with charred black lumps that looked disturbingly like human bodies. Facing me across the pit was a terraced dais supporting the twenty-three thrones of the Ruling Conclave of the Dark Magic Society. On the first and lowest tier were the skeletal ivory and onyx chairs of the Twelve. Above and behind them, in the second rank, were the spine-backed seats of the Seven, carved from malachite and black jade. Next were the places of the Three, weirdly formed seats of a strange green stone veined with purple. They pulsed and glowed with an unnatural luminescence.

Only half the seats were occupied. The members of the Ruling Conclave wore elaborate wizardly garb clearly pulled from the evil side of the closet. Skulls, daggers, horns, and frowny faces were the predominant print motifs. I recognized none of the group save Eufrosinia, who sat among the Seven.

Between the thrones and the pit was a long stone table where lay the relics of the Mighty Champion—Overwhelm, Gardswell, the armor and helm, the Ring of Raxx.

One throne stood above all the rest. It was forged of the hellish metal infernium, inlaid with accursed blood gold, and studded with gems. The high back of the chair was shaped like a demon’s open maw, the armrests like the coils of a great serpent, the feet like dragon’s claws.

“I am Erimandras the Overmaster,” said the figure seated there.

I could not conceal my shock and horror. Erimandras was a boy! Barely into his teens, if that. The chief architect of all the vile schemes of the Society, the evil genius who led their pursuit of world domination, wasn’t even old enough to shave!

He wore a fine robe the color of a nightmare and an elaborate horned headdress. His gaunt young face was as white as a freshly bled corpse, with thin black lips like a line traced in blood from the darkest chamber of his evil heart. A slim wand of blue metal tipped with a fivepointed crystal star rested across his knees.

“Aren’t you a little young?” I said.

Intense waves of purest agony ripped through my body, as if tiny barbed hooks were piercing every cell. The sensation ceased even as the scream reached my throat; but I screamed anyway, scattering the ghosts like a flock of startled pigeons.

“I did not give you leave to speak, Jason Cosmo,” said Erimandras.

I grimaced, but held my tongue.

“We have gone to great trouble and expense to capture you, but it will all be worthwhile once you reveal what you know. And that you will surely do. Let us begin—where is the Superwand?”

“How should I know?”

The agony hit me again, this time lasting slightly longer, perhaps a full second. Erimandras waited until the echoes of my screams faded in the vast chamber before continuing his interrogation. He raised the blue wand.

“I seek the Superwand, of which this is but an authorized souvenir replica. You stole it from my Dark

Master a thousand years ago when you were the so-called Mighty Champion. You stole it and you hid it. I ask again—where is the Superwand?”

“I wasn’t even born a thousand years ago! None of us were! Well, maybe that old guy there in the third row.”

Another burst of agony racked my body, longer and more intense, though I wouldn’t have believed that possible only moments ago. I screamed as if I had lost my soul. The ghosts swirled madly about the chamber like dry leaves in a storm.

“You are Jason Cosmo. You are the reincarnation of the so-called Mighty Champion, also called Jason Cosmo, who ended the glorious Age of Empire. You treacherously trapped Lord Asmodraxis in a prison from which he cannot escape until what you stole from him is restored. The Society has searched to the literal edge of Arden seeking the wand and we have found not a clue. So again I ask you—where is the Superwand?”

“I’m a turnip farmer from Darnk. I’ve never seen the Superwand in this life or any other.”

Again the agony came. Erimandras let me writhe and howl for almost a full minute before he allowed the pain to subside. I hung in place limp and breathless, my heart pounding, my body drenched with sweat and other bodily fluids.

“Do not think to deceive me,” said Erimandras. “The equation is simple. I need the Superwand to free my Master so that he may reclaim his proper station as Overlord of the Assorted Hells and Ruler of All Arden. Your ancient incarnation hid the wand. Knowledge of its location must therefore be locked in the depths of your pitiful mind. If it were not, the spineless godlings would not have gone to such useless lengths to protect you. I will pry the information out of you even if I must strip away every shred of your sanity, every vestige of your humanity, every tender morsel of your shriveled little soul. Now, where is the Superwand?”

“I...don’t...know.”

I blacked out this time. Nothing had changed when I came to. Whether that was seconds later, or hours, I did not know.

“As potent as the Awful Agony Matrix is, Cosmo, you should know that we have even stronger persuasive devices in our Chamber of Damnation, for our cruel Eufrosinia is most inventive. Shall I order one of our truly unpleasant machines brought up?”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Then tell me where to find the Superwand.”

“I can’t,” I gasped, bracing myself for another blast of pain. It didn’t come.

“I tire of this,” said Erimandras. “It is time for you to face my Master yourself. We will then see if you continue to resist. Prepare the Mirror of Asmodraxis!”

The other wizards shifted nervously at this command. I noticed for the first time that the wall behind the thrones was actually a gigantic concave sheet of black glass, surrounded by an infernum frame engraved with diabolical symbols.

Before anyone could act on the Overmaster’s command, the iron-riveted doors to the chamber swung open. Natalia Slash entered, dragging Isogoras the Xornite behind her in chains. Both his legs seemed to be broken. She pulled him around the pit to stand before the Ruling Conclave.

“Lord Erimandras, per the terms of our contract, I bring you Isogoras the Xornite.”

“Ah, yes,” said Erimandras. “Your timing is somewhat inopportune, Lady Slash, but this gift is most welcome.” He regarded Isogoras coldly. “Xornite, you have repeatedly failed me. You had the simple task of bringing a single man into our ranks, yet he consistently eluded you. I instructed you to eliminate him, and you failed in that. Furthermore, you twice had Cosmo himself within your grasp and twice failed to capture him, so that he came into our power through his own folly whilst you thrashed about in the Incredibly Dark Forest. I must wonder at such consistent incompetence. I must wonder if you are not in league with those traitors who dare defy me, whose guilt is plainly evident by their absence today. Perhaps you are their ringleader. Perhaps you would set yourself up as Overmaster in my place.”

“I heard him speak words to that effect,” said Natalia helpfully.

“Overmaster, she lies! Never have I—”

“Silence! I did not give you leave to speak. No words of explanation can save you, so best to say

nothing. I instructed Lady Slash to bring you to me in chains once your treachery was apparent. She has done well and will be rewarded.” Erimandras paused. “Now let the Mirror of Asmodraxis now be activated—with the traitor as the first sacrifice!”

“Overmaster! No!” Isogoras dragged himself toward the thrones but Natalia yanked him back. “You are warned once again to hold your tongue lest it be plucked from your mouth. You have failed in so much. Try not to fail in dying with dignity.”

Strong slaves in iron masks entered the chamber and poured vats of oil into the pit. A brand was lit and thrown in. Split tongues of fire leapt high above floor level, producing tremendous heat. Lashed to the metal frame, I felt myself slowly roasting. The members of the Ruling Conclave seemed unaffected despite their assorted hoods, robes, masks, and large hats. Now the slaves lifted Isogoras from the floor and held him aloft at the edge of the pit. Sweat boiled from their bare chests. Their skin blistered. But they were oblivious to it all.

Isogoras whimpered.

“Now,” said Erimandras.

The slaves hurled the Xornite into the pit. The engulfing flames incinerated Isogoras before he landed amid the remains of the previous victims. The crackling roar of the fire overwhelmed his dying screams. The flames grew hotter. The ghosts of victims past fled the chamber in horror.

“You may make payment to my account at the Bank of Caratha,” said Natalia, turning to leave.

“It shall be done,” said Erimandras. “But stay yet awhile, Lady Slash.”

“I have other business to attend.” Her back was to the Overmaster.

“I insist,” said Erimandras, his voice becoming hard. Natalia stiffened. “I will soon have a new mission for you.”

She turned to face him and bowed slightly. “As you wish.”

The masked slaves led in more prisoners: men, women, and children of every race and nation. All were hurled screaming into the pit. If ever I had doubted the wickedness and inhumanity of the Dark Magic Society, this made it plain. This was how little life was worth in the days of the Evil Empire. This was how it would be again throughout the Eleven Kingdoms and beyond if the Society triumphed. This was what The Gods had charged me to prevent.

But I could do nothing. I was in the Society’s power, to be tortured, bled, and broken at their whim. Others would have to carry on the fight. All I could do was resolve to end my own life rather than do anything to help these butchers. And I was unable to do even that. Unbidden thoughts of Sapphrina filled my mind. I would miss her and what might have been.

With each sacrifice, the flames darkened, stained by innocent blood until they were as black as the bowels of midnight.

Erimandras stood. His throne and the pedestal on which it rested rotated to face the huge mirror. The dark glass reflected the black flames of the pit. Erimandras uttered an incantation that caused the reflected flames to glow until they filled the whole of the mirror. Then he began the summons.

“Great Asmodraxis, Lord Among Lords, King of All the Hells, Prime Mover of the Profane, Nabob of Nightmares, Author of Dread, Scary of Scaries, Sum of All Fears—heed thou the summons of thy servant Erimandras! Thine enemy is now in thy power and the day of thy triumph close at hand!”

The reflected flames in the mirror warped and twisted until they formed a gigantic face, a visage at once beautiful and terrible, inspiring both loathing and love, both a desire to fall down in adoration and an impulse to flee in abject fear. The members of the Ruling Conclave bowed their heads. Some trembled. Natalia looked away. The slaves continued their gruesome chore, feeding the fire with fresh sacrifices.

The deposed Demon Lord spoke. His voice soothed and stabbed my very soul with its bewitching brutality. “I see you, Champion, most hated of foes. Long have I waited for this moment, to see you broken and beaten before me, to extract my vengeance for the bitter cup of defeat you hurled in my face long ago.”

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” I said.

“I know you, Champion. I know the outlines of your form, the flavor of your will, the scent of your putridly courageous soul. It is you, Champion. You who took from me my dominion and the emblem of that dominion: the Superwand. You who trapped me in this null space where I can

neither create nor destroy, where there is nothing to corrupt, no one to rule, no means of escape. Alone, I endured here for an eternity, unable to perform any act until my faithful servant Erimandras devised this Mirror as a means of communicating with me. I have guided him in closing the fist of the Dark Magic Society around total victory. I commanded him to cease the fruitless search for the Superwand and instead find the worm who stole it. I knew your spirit would endure in the world, Champion, ever fearful of my return.”

“I know nothing about null spaces. You have the wrong man.”

“You are the one. You will reveal the Superwand’s location so that Erimandras may use it to free me. Then I will crush you and the pathetic godlings you serve beneath my iron heel. Erimandras, proceed.”

“Yes, Dark One. Let the Perilous Pulp-Grinder be brought forth!”

That didn’t sound promising. I offered up a desperate prayer to The Gods. I figured they owed me at least one miracle. After all, they were largely responsible for me being in this situation. Even a slim chance of escape would satisfy me. I could do the rest. But my prayer brought no immediate response, no thunder in the heavens, no splitting asunder of the ground beneath me.

As slaves hurried to carry out the Overmaster’s command, a messenger rushed breathlessly into the chamber and threw himself before the Ruling Conclave.

“Great Ones, I beg to report that the hill rabble have been pushed back from the gates. Yet the battle madness is upon them and they gather for another assault!”

“The news you bring does not justify this interruption. I know that our forces are slaughtering the barbarian scum. I have commanded that it be so. And they will continue until the animals are exterminated. You will not disturb me with such trifles again. Throw him in the pit!”

The iron-masked slaves hastened to obey. The ill-fated messenger struggled, but to no avail. He died screaming.

A second messenger arrived as the slaves assembled the Perilous Pulp-Grinder, a massive collection of gears, belts, and jagged metal teeth.

“Great Ones, I beg to report that the Library of Darkness is in flames!”

“Impossible!” said Erimandras. “How can this be?”

“The protective anti-magic field was deactivated during the capture of Jason Cosmo, Great One, and was not reset. Evidently the other intruder, Mercury Boltblaster, started the blaze.”

“I’ll show you a blaze, fool! Into the pit with you!”

“Aw, man! And this was supposed to be my day off!”

The messenger was cast into the flames.

Erimandras turned his fury on Eufrosinia. “Why was Boltblaster allowed to live?”

She bowed her head. “Overmaster, I hastened to bring Cosmo to you and commanded the guards and lesser mages to find Boltblaster. It is they who failed you, not I.”

“Enough simpering! Boltblaster must pay dearly for this outrage! Find him! All of you! Not you, Lady Slash.” The Ruling Conclave rushed out of the chamber with disturbing eagerness. A dozen arcane masters, scores of lesser wizards, hundreds of slaves and soldiers and who knew what else—if Merc was still alive the odds did not favor his staying so for long.

We were crazy to have come here, to think we could prevail. The Society was too powerful, too numerous, with too many resources at its command.

Erimandras shook his head in dismay. “The Library of Darkness is our most precious resource. All our worldwide schemes will be disrupted if it is destroyed, all our accumulated knowledge lost.”

“Do not concern yourself with these lesser matters,” admonished Asmodraxis. “Once we wring the location of the Superwand from the Champion, books and records will not matter.”

“You are correct, O Master.” The Overmaster regained his composure. By now the slaves had transferred me from the Agony Matrix to the Perilous Pulp-Grinder. I was fastened to a conveyor belt by three thick leather straps across my chest, hips, and thighs.

“This device functions as a large juicer,” said Erimandras. “But rather than squeezing ripe fruit into a refreshing, nutritious beverage, it will grind your body into an undifferentiated mass of bloody pulp. No bones, no face, no form at all. Yet you will continue to live and you will feel it all. The liquid pulp you become will be collected in that vat. We will question you and give you the means to reply. If you remain

uncooperative, there are a variety of tortures to which we can subject your new form. The worst, I think, is feeding you to our slaves. You will make a tasty soup. I am told that being digested is most painful. Start the machine!"

Two slaves wound a large crank and released it. The belt slowly pulled me toward the clacking iron jaws that would pulverize me. I struggled against my bonds, but the straps were too strong. Erimandras and his demonic master looked on dispassionately, Natalia with grim fascination.

"If you tell us now where to find the Superwand, I will release you," said Erimandras.

"I wouldn't tell you if I did know. Which I don't."

"You do know and you will tell us," said Asmodraxas. "It is inevitable."

"Not so!" said Mercury Boltblaster, appearing in the doorway, his red cloak floating around him like a cloud. The remaining slaves rushed at him and flew back lifeless, their bodies shattered by a concussive blast of force. The doors slammed shut behind Merc. I heard the collapse of the ceiling outside. This would be a private confrontation.

"What kept you?" I asked.

"I lost the map and took a few wrong turns. But now it is time to end this little drama."

Merc wasn't quite a miracle, but he was the next best thing.

Chapter 23

"Kill him," said Erimandras.

Natalia's sword rasped from its scabbard. She rounded the pit to confront Merc, only to be stopped in her path by an invisible wall of force.

"Natalia, you've done well against me before," said Merc. "Now you'll be well done."

The invisible wall expanded and slammed Natalia into the fire pit. She disappeared into the ebony flames without uttering a sound.

"You're the Overmaster?" said Mercury, getting his first good look at Erimandras. "Shouldn't you be home sucking your thumb?"

Erimandras stood. His height was unimpressive, but he did have the theatrics down cold. He raised the wand. "Fool! I was an arcane master at the age of five, a grandmaster at seven! I slew the previous Overmaster in my eighth year. I began constructing the Mirror of Asmodraxas in my ninth. You are but a mewling babe before my awesome power and intellect!"

Crimson lightning arced from the faux Superwand to trace a crackling web in the air around Merc. He crumpled to the floor, his body shaking as if in the grip of an epileptic seizure.

So much for the big dramatic rescue.

I resumed struggling against my bonds and detected some unexpected slack in the conveyer belt. Rocking side to side forcefully, I succeeded in knocking the wide leather belt off track. It jammed in the rollers and the Perilous Pulp-Grinder ground to a shuddering halt. I found myself hanging upside down off the side of the machine, my head resting uncomfortably on the floor. Not an ideal position, but preferable to being pulverized.

Merc rose slowly to his knees, and then to his feet. His legs trembled like those of a newborn foal. Involuntary tics and twitches danced across his face. His beard smoldered. His left ear appeared to be on fire. Undaunted by these unpleasanties, he aimed a stiffened right hand at Erimandras. A sheet of golden flame spread from his fingers and shot across the room.

The attack fizzled short of the Overmaster's throne, blocked by protective magic. Erimandras scoffed, flicked the wand, and shot another bolt of crimson lighting at Merc. Crackling bands of eldritch energy clung to Mercury like a funeral wreath. Yet he gritted his teeth, clenched his fists, and did not fall.

I twisted my body until the strap around my chest caught on a projected strut. Using its leverage, I squirmed my arms and shoulders free. With use of my hands restored, I unbuckled the other straps and rolled to the floor. My legs felt about as solid as watery porridge. The Awful Agony Matrix had taken a terrible toll on my body. Even drawing breath was painful. I felt too weak to stand.

“Cosmo has freed himself,” said Asmodraxis. “Stop him.”

“As you command.”

Erimandras pointed the replica Superwand at me. Suddenly much more motivated to move, I rolled beneath the grinder apparatus and scooted out on the other side as a bolt of red lightning scorched the floor behind me. The next shot blasted the Perilous Pulp-Grinder to bits. I found myself on my hands and knees, with no cover in sight.

“Time out?” I said.

Merc used this diversion to reach out with his mind and snatch the faux Superwand from the Overmaster’s grasp. No protective spell countered that tactic. The weapon flew to my partner’s hand.

“Have a taste of your own medicine, brat!”

Merc pointed the wand at the sinister youth. Nothing happened.

“Only I control the wand,” said Erimandras.

“It was worth a try,” said Merc. “I’ve had enough of this thing anyway.” He bent the wand in two over his knee and flipped it into the fire pit.

“You broke my wand!” wailed Erimandras. “It was a collector’s item, you fool!” There was a distinct grating whine of childish petulance in his voice.

“I’ll break you next,” said Merc.

“You wish!” said the Overmaster.

“Cosmo! Can you stand?” said Merc, not taking his eyes off his foe.

“Let me see.” I staggered to my feet. “Yes. Yes, I can.”

“Then let’s go.”

Merc ran left and I went right, charging around the pit. I made for the relics of the Mighty Champion.

“Sinister Snake Eyes!” said Erimandras. His eyes flared with a flash of red light. Two ruby red cobras emerged from his pupils, streaked through the air, and hit the floor at the base of the Ruling Conclave’s pyramid of thrones. The unnatural snakes slithered my way, hissing, and flicking their evil tongues. I reversed course, back around the pit.

Erimandras shifted his attention to Mercury and raised clenched fists above his head.

“For you, Boltblaster, a Pointed Rebuke!”

The Overmaster opened his hands. A swarm of glittering needles shot toward Merc.

Merc responded with a rude gesture that transformed the needles into harmless safety pins mid-flight. They pinged harmlessly off him as he bounded up the tiered dais.

I ran all the way around the pit, the conjured serpents at my heels. As I passed the stone table I snatched up Overwhelm. Sword in hand, I turned and beheaded the two snakes with a single stroke. “Erimandras!” I called, pointing Overwhelm at the Overmaster. “If Merc doesn’t finish you, I will!” “Face me first, Cosmo!”

Natalia Slash crawled from the fire pit, her almost invincible armor glowing as if fresh from the forge, shining red against the black flames. The exposed portion of her face sizzled like a burnt steak. Her sword shone like a brand.

My own armor was still on the table. I lacked time even to snatch up my shield before she was upon me. Our blades met with a resounding clang.

Overwhelm barely deflected her first blow. It was downhill from there, a replay of our last encounter. Natalia was unrelenting. She drove me steadily back, never letting up, forcing me just about anywhere she wanted me to go. She herded me twice around the remains of the Perilous Pulp-Grinder, to the far wall, and back to the pit again. Overwhelm defended me, but I didn’t know how much longer I could maintain my grip on the sword. Already my fingers felt like jelly from the endless clashing of our blades. The ring of steel was in my ears, my arm was growing numb.

Well, the ring of miraculum, but close enough.

Meanwhile, Erimandras hurled Merc back with a conjured avalanche of glass marbles. As he tumbled down the pyramid, Merc summoned a glowing Lasso of Light with which he snared the Overmaster, dragging him down too. Both of them fell against the stone table. As the lambent lasso

dissolved, Merc punched Erimandras in the face, bloodying his nose.

“You dare to physically assault me?” said the Overmaster, clambering to his feet.

“Looks that way,” said Merc.

“I have endured enough! Now I shall destroy you with ultimate magic. Behold! The Cards of Power!” He withdrew from an inner pocket a glowing deck of playing cards decorated with the images of sneering demons.

Merc shrugged.

“Why do you not quake in abject fear?” demanded Erimandras.

“Two can play that game,” said Merc, producing a deck of his own that bore his personal emblem of crossed power bolts.

Erimandras quickly suppressed his surprise. “So be it,” he said. The Overmaster shuffled and fanned his deck. “Pick a card, any card.”

Across the room, I remained on the defensive. Natalia sneered her contempt for me.

“You are nothing, Cosmo! A straw man, a posturing pretender.”

“Then why are you trying so hard to kill me?”

“Your reputation, though undeserved, will enhance my own when I defeat you. I’ll be able to raise my rates.”

“You want to kill me for the marketing pop? That’s cold.”

“That’s business.”

“A cold business then.”

Natalia fell back half a step. I realized that my parries were growing more polished and less desperate as our duel wore on. Even with my layman’s grasp of swordplay, I could see that Overwhelm was adapting to my opponent’s style. The sword was adjusting to better counter her moves and tactics. The longer we fought, the more Overwhelm would learn. Soon we would be evenly matched. And if my enchanted sword could defend against her attacks, it could also turn them back on her. In time, if I lived so long, Overwhelm might absorb enough of her skill for me to win. Our last bout had been too brief, but now Natalia’s best moves, perfected as she could never perfect them, would be mine.

I smiled. The balance was tilting in my favor—and she knew it. I made a conscious effort to take the offensive, surprising her. Now it was Natalia’s turn to retreat.

“I’ve toyed with you long enough!” I said, giddy with the thought that I might not only survive, but win, this fight.

“From incompetence to mastery in minutes? It can only be the sword, no ability of yours, peasant!”

“Hey, I’ll take it!”

Natalia abruptly broke off the clash of arms and ran. She put a dozen yards between us in just a few strides. As I stood there dumbly, perplexed by her sudden retreat, she hurled one of her many throwing knives at me. Overwhelm deflected it, but they kept coming, five more in rapid succession. I turned aside four. The fifth skewered the biceps of my sword arm. I dropped Overwhelm and tugged the dagger free as Natalia charged again, kicking my sword away. Overwhelm skittered across the floor and into the fire pit. Natalia shoved me with her free hand, knocking me to the floor. Her gauntlet, still hot from her turn in the pit, burned my bare skin and crisped my chest hairs. So too did her metal boot as she pinned me to the floor. She held her sword in a double grip, ready to deliver the killing stroke.

“You tire of toying with me, do you? Peasant dog! No one toys with Natalia Slash!”

“A joke! A bad joke! In poor taste! I apologize!”

“Too late.”

I grabbed her ankles to pull her off balance. She didn’t budge.

“Ow! Ow!” I blew on my blistered fingers.

“Are you done?” she asked.

“It looks that way.”

I wished I had Overwhelm in my hand. Suddenly I did! Another wondrous power of the sword was revealed as it responded to my mental summons by flying out of the flames and into my grasp. I thrust upward, knocking Natalia’s sword from her hands and slashing both her thighs. She leapt

back. I sprang to my feet, kicking her sword away behind me. Natalia launched another flurry of knives, but this time I deflected them all. Overwhelm now had the measure of her throwing style. I advanced. She gave ground, but was too proud to flee.

Natalia lunged and grabbed Overwhelm's blade in an attempt to wrest the weapon from my hand. A flick of my arm and her palms dripped blood through sundered gauntlets.

"I could have easily severed your hands," I said.

"Yet you didn't. You are a fool."

"That was a desperate move. Just give up already."

"Would you?"

"No," I admitted.

"I have never known defeat."

"Yes, I recall how badly you trounced Yezgar."

"I mean I have never been bested by man or woman. Monsters don't count."

"Nor do the lives of those you kill for profit."

She had her back against the wall now. I didn't get too close, just in case she had another trick up her sleeve.

"I am a warrior true."

"You are a truly beaten warrior."

She hung her head. "Very well. You have won, Jason Cosmo, though it would never have been so without that accursed sword."

"I would call it a blessed sword. But are you suggesting it would have been a fair fight otherwise? You've been doing this all your life. I was growing turnips a few weeks ago!"

"The sword beat me, not you," said Natalia. She fell to her knees and removed her helm. Her face was proud and beautiful despite the grime and blood and burns. Long chestnutcolored hair lay flattened against her head in coiled braids. Her defiant grey eyes met mine.

"Do it quickly," she said. "I will not beg for my life."

"I'm not going to kill you."

"What then? I will take my own life before I will be a slave."

"No need for that. I want your Blood Vow never to serve the Dark Magic Society again and to aid me in this present battle. Then you're free to go."

"Who are you to speak of Blood Vows, peasant?"

"I've read the tales. The Blood Vow is an ancient tradition. It is my prerogative as the victor to spare you on condition of your oath."

"I know what a Blood Vow is, but no one actually does them anymore. They went out of fashion centuries ago."

"Well, now they're back in style. Unless you prefer to die."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I have done nothing but try to kill you since first we met. I have insulted you, wounded you, and now I am at your mercy—yet you offer to spare me with honor. Why?"

"First, because I'm the hero here, like it or not. Second, because despite your evil choice of allies, you at least have a sense of honor. Third—and most important—I need all the help I can get. Will you swear?"

Natalia nodded. "Upon my blood as a warrior, I will nevermore willingly serve the Dark Magic Society and I will aid you in this present pass as a true ally, Jason Cosmo."

"Then, warrior sworn, take up your sword." I purposefully turned my back to her. Merc said Natalia was utterly ruthless, but honored her bargains. I hoped he was right.

"Woman," said Asmodraxis. "Slay Cosmo now and all you desire shall be yours when I am free." I tensed as I heard Natalia retrieve her sword and approach me. I almost turned to face her, ready to renew our battle.

Then she was there beside me.

"We are allies, Cosmo. For now."

"Slay him!" commanded Asmodraxis, speaking with such authority that I was tempted to slay myself.

"Slay him and you shall be Queen of All Arden!"

Ignoring the Demon Lord, we approached the table where the wizards dueled. The sheer force of their magic prevented us from drawing too near. Oblivious to all else, they were locked into a deadly struggle that only one could survive. Natalia and I were as unable to affect the outcome as Asmodraxis himself.

“Is this your card?” said Mercury.

“Yes, curse you!”

“I’m winning.”

“My turn. Cut the deck!”

“Done.”

“Pick a card, any card.”

“Okay.”

“Look at your card. Memorize it. Replace it.”

“Done.”

“I will now set the deck on fire and scatter the ashes.” Erimandras did so.

“What’s the trick?”

Erimandras lifted a pinch of ash, which became a whole card in his hand. He laid it facedown on the table. “That is your card!” he said triumphantly.

Merc turned the card over. “No, it isn’t.”

“Of course it is!”

“I drew the three of puppies. This is the six of cabbages.”

“You lie!”

“You lose.”

“No! It is impossible. Impossible! That must be your card! It must! You cheated! You had to! No! No! Noooooooooooooo!”

Erimandras’s final scream faded like an echo as his body evaporated. Even as his form dissipated into wispy streamers, he clawed his way back up the dais. Merc made no move to pursue him.

Asmodraxis frowned in disgust. “You have failed me, Erimandras. I am sorely disappointed. I had thought you would free me from my long imprisonment.”

“*Master...it is not yet finished!*” said Erimandras, his pleading voice no louder than a memory of a whisper. The Overmaster’s form had almost completely boiled away into milky mist.

“Yes, it is. You employed the Cards of Power and you were bested.”

The Overmaster’s body disappeared. His empty robes lay in a heap on the floor between the thrones of the Three. Asmodraxis shifted his awful gaze to Merc.

“You, Mercury Boltblaster, will take his place as Overmaster. I will share with you my ancient wisdom. You will rule Arden in my name, as one of your power should. You have but to slay mine enemy, the hated Champion. Do it, wizard, and join me.”

“Tempting,” said Mercury, stroking his chin.

“Hey!” I protested.

“Your voice almost compels obedience, Archdemon. But I have no wish to rule the world. Nor to speak with you further.” He gestured. The shattered bulk of the Perilous Pulp-Grinder rose into the air.

“What are you doing?” demanded Asmodraxis. “No! You must not destroy the Mirror! You must not leave me once more lost in this void, unable to communicate, powerless to influence events. Name it, wizard, and anything you desire shall be yours!”

“I desire you to shut up.”

The torture machine slammed into the mirror. It shattered into a waterfall of glass. The black flames in the pit winked out.

“Is it over?” I asked.

“Not yet,” said Merc. “We still have to get out of here.”

The ghosts of Marn returned—but they were different now. Their spectral wounds were healed, their missing body parts restored. They manifested in happy pastels, not dreary grey. The spirits swirled happily around me like a great ectoplasmic carousel, gradually rising to streak through the ceiling, presumably bound for the Blessed Halls of Paradise.

“An encouraging sign,” said Merc.

“What manner of man are you?” demanded Natalia.

I didn’t try to answer. I wasn’t sure I knew the answer.

“The Ruling Conclave will return,” said Merc. “I’m sure they sense the energies of my battle with their master. I’m not up to facing them just now.”

“That makes two of us.”

“We’ve put in a good day’s work,” said Merc. “We lopped off the head of the beast. The rest will keep.”

I donned my armor and slipped on the Ring of Raxx, which slid easily over my gauntlet. “So how do we get out?”

“No idea. I didn’t think we’d live long enough to need an exit strategy.”

“To the roof,” said Natalia. “Golan will bear us away.”

“Perfect,” said Merc.

“Fly?” I asked, suddenly queasy. “Any other ideas?”

“*Here is one, you cringing maggots—you can die!*”

The breathless voice came from above us, where a translucent image of Erimandras sat upon his high throne, speaking in italics. “*My dissolution was only temporary. Did you think a mage of my ability would not have prepared for the unlikely eventuality of defeat? I have spells to counter even the Cards of Power! The Dark Magic Society is a shambles this day, but you will not live to enjoy your victory!*”

Even as we charged up the steps, Erimandras laughed in that maniacal way that only evil wizards can and pressed a panel on the throne. A low rumbling sounded far beneath us. I felt vibrations humming up through the stones of the floor. Soon the walls were shaking and the floor was quaking. We staggered back and forth, struggling to keep our balance as we climbed.

I reached the high throne and swung Overwhelm to behead the cackling wizard. My blade found only empty air. The throne dropped away, down a hidden shaft. The Overmaster’s ghostly laughter echoed from the darkness below as the floor cracked, the walls crumbled, and large chunks of the ceiling crashed around us.

“The roof is coming to us!” I said. “I hope Golan comes with it!”

“Our work isn’t finished,” said Merc. “Come on.”

With that, he leapt into the shaft.

Natalia and I exchanged glances. I shrugged.

We dove in after him.

Chapter 24

Merc cast a spell for slowing falls down dark vertical shafts. His magic sucked most of the velocity out of our descent and sent it elsewhere. Consequently, the three of us floated down the hole like feathers on a breeze. At the bottom, we landed gently on the demon throne. The chair now rested in a small cubical chamber several hundred feet below the throne room. Erimandras was nowhere to be seen.

“Move!” shouted Merc, bounding off the chair. Hearing the thunder of Marn’s collapse echo down the shaft above us, Natalia and I dove after him.

Huge chunks of stone and masonry were coming down the shaft with the sound of a thousand stampeding oliphants.

“It figures the Overbrat would make his escape chute a death trap for any who follow,” snarled Merc.

“We’ll be crushed!” I said.

“Only if we stay here. I suggest we exit through that door.”

“It’s blocked by a gigantic wedge of stone!”

“You’re the ones with invincible swords.”

Natalia and I attacked the barrier, slicing away an opening large enough to crawl through. Merc

went first, Natalia followed. I brought up the rear and thus took the brunt of the shockwave that hurled us all against the far wall of the next room. Behind us, several tons of rock buried the throne. The adjoining chamber was empty except for a few packing crates and what looked like an ornate glass booth with a silver frame and a door in the side. There was no visible exit from this second room.

"He has eluded us!" said Natalia.

"Maybe not for long," said Merc. "Unless I miss my guess, this glass box is a teleportal."

"Impossible!" snapped Natalia. "They never existed!"

"The alternative is that this is an ordinary glass box and we are entombed with it half a mile beneath the surface without food or water and with very little air."

Natalia studied the box again. "So this is what a teleportal looks like."

"What is a teleportal?" I asked.

"An enchanted chamber or booth such as this. If you speak the proper command it will transport you instantly to a similar box elsewhere. The Empire of Fear had a secret network of these devices. They could send news or personnel virtually anywhere at any time. The secrets of teleportation have since been lost."

"Then this is our way out?"

"If we can deduce the proper command. Otherwise we will suffocate in less than an hour."

I rummaged through the packing crates, lifting and shaking each one.

"What are you looking for?" asked Merc.

"An instruction manual."

"Don't be absurd."

A paper booklet fell out of a box and fluttered to the floor. The title was *Teleportal Operation*. It was published by the Imperial Teleportal System Authority.

"You were saying?"

"Let me see that." Merc leafed through the pages of the manual. "This chart lists command words for reaching all the teleportals in the system."

"Great."

"Not so great. This manual is at least ten centuries out of date. We have no idea which teleportals are operational or where they are located. And we don't know where Erimandras went."

"Who cares? The important thing is getting out of here alive," I said. "We can find Erimandras later."

Merc and Natalia exchanged glances and rolled their eyes at my simplemindedness. "A sensible suggestion," said Merc. "But that isn't how things are done. When an enemy as powerful as Erimandras is down, you finish him if you can. If we take time to recover ourselves, Erimandras will be restored as well."

"Boltblaster is correct," said Natalia. "We must destroy him now or we will never be safe from him."

"Fair enough," I said. "So why not choose a teleportal and try it?"

"We could end up anywhere," said Merc. "We could be killed instantly."

"But we're dead if we stay here. What's the harm?"

"You learn fast."

Merc stepped into the teleportal and consulted the manual.

"We should not go all at once," said Natalia. "One should go. If he finds safety, he may return for the other two. If he perishes the others will still have a chance."

"I notice your use of the masculine pronoun," said Merc. "I take it you aren't volunteering, Natalia."

"Well..."

"I'll go," I said.

"No one is going anywhere," said Merc. He touched a metal panel set into the glass wall of the teleportal. In the center of the panel was an indentation. "This indentation holds a magic crystal that powers the teleportal. It is empty."

"Meaning?"

“Erimandras took it with him,” said Natalia.

Merc nodded. “According to the manual, each authorized user of the teleportal system was issued a crystal. The crystal powers the jump from booth to booth and goes with you. Without it, the teleportal is useless.”

“Then we’re stuck!” In my frustration I struck my palm with a fist and felt the imprint of the Ring of Raxx. A desperate thought formed in my mind. I held up my hand to display the glittering amethyst. “I’ve worn this allegedly magical ring for weeks and it has been of no use whatsoever. Perhaps it can power the teleportal.”

“Maybe,” said Merc.

“It has to be good for something,” I said. “Otherwise, why would the Mighty Champion have worn it?”

“Fashion statement?” said Merc with a shrug. “I’m skeptical of anything the League held in keeping. But we’ve got nothing to lose by trying.”

I joined Merc in the teleportal.

“Come on, Natalia,” said the wizard.

She shook her head. “Not I.”

“If Jason jumps to his doom, we’re stuck here with no means of operating the teleportal, sure to die. If he finds safety, he’ll have to come back for us anyway, so we might as well go along the first time. Assuming that this works at all.”

“Very well.”

Natalia joined us in the booth. We were crowded together uncomfortably, knees and elbows jammed together, Natalia and I stooped because of our height. I pressed the ring against the panel.

“Now what?”

“First, the command word for this portal is *Gillyjilly*. If we end up somewhere we don’t want to be, say that to bring us back.”

“Gilly—”

“Not here! You could set up a feedback loop and teleport us endlessly into ourselves. That would be bad.”

“Got it.”

“Now, command the ring,” said Merc. “And concentrate on what you want it to do.”

“Command it how?”

“Talk to it. This is an exercise of pure will. Be forceful.”

“Right. Forceful. Got it. Ring! I want you to power this teleportal!”

“Now concentrate! Imagine the power flowing from the ring into the panel! Exert your will!”

“I’m exerting!”

“Okay. Here is a command word: *Gablazook!*”

“Gablazook!”

I felt a draining surge of energy, saw a hot purple flash—and suddenly was swallowing black seawater.

“Gillyjilly!” I glubbed desperately. The darkness was broken by another purple flash and we were back in the chamber beneath Marn, falling out in the floor and gasping for air as the water that returned with us flowed from the teleportal.

“I think we can cross that station off the list,” said Merc. “It is obviously submerged. Good thing you didn’t panic, Cosmo.”

“I didn’t have time.”

“At least we know the ring will work. Unfortunately, the manual is now a mass of wet pulp. We’re left with only the command words I can recall. Ready to try again?”

“This is madness!” said Natalia.

“You’re welcome to stay here,” said Merc. “But if we reach safety we aren’t coming back.”

“Let’s go then,” said Natalia.

We crammed ourselves back into the booth. I again commanded the Ring of Raxx to transport us.

“We ought to be more successful this time just on general principle,” said Merc. “Ready? Try *Gojonkle*”

.”

“Gojonkle!”

An energy surge and flash of purple light brought us to a teleportal in what looked like an abandoned sitting room. The glass booth was set against one wall. Facing it were fine quality furnishings and decorative art, including iron statues of various animals. Dark green curtains concealed the walls. A golden rug covered the floor. Everything in the room was covered with a thick layer of dust. Faint boy-sized footprints led from the teleportal to an oaken door across the room.

“This could be the place,” said Merc.

“Where are we?” I asked.

“Potentially anywhere,” said Merc. “Though I’d venture to say we’re not underwater.”

One of the animal statues, a big iron frog, winked at me.

“Merc, that frog just winked at me!”

“Are you sure? You’ve had a stressful day.”

The frog opened its mouth, bellowed a rusty croak, and shot its tongue at me. The iron muscle struck my chest like a hammer and sat me down hard.

“Pretty sure,” I gasped.

The frog leapt across the room, tracing a dusty trail through the air and landing full on my chest. Its weight nearly crushed my ribs to powder. Only my magic armor saved me from immediate harm, but I was helplessly pinned and barely able to breathe.

“Crushing...me,” I gasped.

The other statues joined the attack. An iron butterfly the size of an eagle battered Natalia with its shield-like wings. A metal war dog snarled at Merc. It was joined by an iron ant as big as a hog. An iron bear growled and sniffed, as if deciding which of us to attack. Choking dust filled the air in grey clouds. “Sorcery!” said Natalia. She deftly sliced the butterfly into fluttering foil.

“What have you got against sorcery?” asked Merc, leaping atop a tall cabinet to escape the jaws of the metal dog. The dog immediately turned on Natalia, while the ant climbed the wall to reach Merc, clanging its razor-sharp metal mandibles together.

“It means Erimandras must be near!” said Natalia.

“Gah...gah,” I wheezed, trying to push the kicking frog off me.

“Not necessarily,” said Merc, pulling a dull rock from beneath his cloak and shoving it into the maw of the ant. The ant lost its grip on the wall and fell onto its back. It twitched erratically, spinning in place.

“These statues could be enchanted to attack all intruders.” He peered down at the ant. “I thought a piece of lodestone might work.”

“Gah!” I responded.

Natalia decapitated the dog, then snatched up the frog by one of its hind legs and hurled it across the room and through the wall. It didn’t return.

“Thanks,” I said. Natalia pulled me to my feet.

Only the bear remained. Standing on its hind legs, it towered over all of us, dust whirling around it like a wreath of hellish smoke. It growled a metallic growl.

“Cocky, this one,” said Merc. “It waited until we finished the others.”

“Do you have another lodestone snack for it?”

“Sorry. Fresh out.”

“We’ll fight then,” said Natalia.

“After you, milady.” Merc sketched a mock bow.

But the bear struck first, knocking us all over the room with one sweep of its club-like paw. Natalia fell across a couch. Merc hit a far wall. I landed amid the remains of the dog and butterfly.

“Round one to the bear,” I said.

“But not round two!” Natalia hurled the couch at the statue. It broke harmlessly across the beast’s armored body. Merc peeled himself off the wall and rubbed his hands together while trying to think of a useful spell.

I ran at the bear, swinging Overwhelm in a great arc that severed one of its paws. With the stump of

its forelimb, the metal beast shoved me to the floor. I lost my grip on the sword. The bear pounced. I rolled away, just missing being crushed beneath its bulk.

Natalia attacked from the rear, hacking at one of the bear's hind legs. It turned and slapped her across the room again, then came after me. I scrambled backward across the floor until I hit a wall. I willed Overwhelm back to my grasp.

"Get back!" said Merc. The headless body of the dog rose into the air and flew at the bear, striking it in the head with a tremendous clang. The bear caught the dog in its jaws and bit it in two, spitting an iron dog leg at me. I deflected the missile with Overwhelm.

"This is not going well!" I said.

"I'll levitate the bear," exclaimed Merc. His face took on an expression of intense, painful concentration. "Maybe."

The bear stopped moving toward me. It growled uncertainly as its feet rose a fraction of an inch off the floor. Unable to walk or otherwise approach me, it roared in frustration.

"Great," I said. "Now what?"

"Kill it!" said Merc. "I can't...hold it...for long."

I approached the bear. It snarled and raked the air with its claws.

"Merc, cutting this thing up could take a while!"

"Then...help me...push it through the door."

Natalia and I sheathed our swords and approached the bear from behind. Lacking contact with the floor, it was unable to turn and attack us. We put our hands on its haunches and pushed, aided by Merc's power. The bear drifted slowly across the room, gathering speed as we went. Roaring all the while, it went through the door, taking most of the wall with it. We followed into the corridor beyond, still pushing the bear. We sent it through another wall into what was evidently a wine cellar, sending casks and barrels hurtling in all directions.

"I'm losing it!" said Merc. The bear fell to the flagstones. Snarling, it turned to face us...and promptly fell from sight as the floor collapsed beneath its great weight. It was followed by a dozen barrels of wine. We heard a great splash and smelled the foul odor of sewage wafting up from the hole.

"Good plan, Merc! How did you know the floor was weaker in this wine cellar on the far side of two walls?"

"It seemed reasonable that the floors of any adjoining chambers would not be reinforced to, ah, bear its weight."

"We're beneath a city," said Natalia.

"Obviously," said Merc. "But which one?" He examined a wine cask. "Ah! Plum Sparkle. We're in Caratha."

"We're in Caratha?" I echoed. This was not how I had imagined entering the City at the Center of the World. But despite the circumstances, I felt a surge of excitement. Could it be true?

"Well, under Caratha. It looks as though the Overbrat has a hideaway here as his refuge of last resort."

Merc led the way back to the chamber in which we arrived. Our battle with the iron menagerie had obscured the dusty footprints I noted before. Swords ready, Natalia and I flanked Merc as we explored the rest of the subterranean complex. We found a storeroom, a small study, a pantry, and several closets full of boy-sized robes and regalia. Soon, only one door remained unopened.

Merc and Natalia crouched in readiness as I kicked it open. The room beyond was dimly lit by lanterns in the shape of demon heads. On the walls were shelves lined with rows of miniature lead soldiers, wizards, monsters, and other figures, carefully painted with fine attention to detail.

Erimandras reclined on a large bed, propped up on several cushions, his hands out of sight beneath a blanket decorated with embroidered skulls. He was slightly more opaque than when we had last seen him, but still appeared insubstantial.

"I've been expecting you," he said. His voice, at least, was somewhat restored.

"Liar," said Merc. "You expected us to die beneath Fortress Marn."

"Well, sure, but I heard your battle with my Iron Guardians. I've been expecting you since then."

"This is the end, Erimandras."

"Fools! I am the Overmaster of the Dark Magic Society. I can never be defeated. I anticipate every

exigency. I am your superior in every respect.”

“Oh?” I said. “Your minions hunted me across the Eleven Kingdoms. You drove me from my home, hounded me, wounded me, tortured me. By all rights, I should be dead. Yet here I stand.”

“Barely,” said Erimandras.

“The only thing keeping me on my feet right now is the desire to see justice done. Justice for me, justice for all your victims. You’re finished, kid.”

“Is that so?” hissed Erimandras. “Then why do you fear to enter this chamber? Here I lay, defenseless before you—why don’t you come and slay me?” He glared at us disdainfully. “You fear me still. You know you can never win.”

“You’re bluffing,” said Merc. “The Cards of Power should have dissolved you to nothingness. Despite your survival you are nowhere near your full strength. And even that wasn’t enough to stop us.”

“Then come on in, Boltblaster! Come and die!” Erimandras was livid with rage, or as close to livid as he could be while translucent. “Or else be wise. Fall to your knees and swear your eternal loyalty. I can make you king of half the world, Cosmo. I will give you the other half, Natalia. I can teach you secrets you will never learn elsewhere, Boltblaster! Swear now and all is yours!”

Merc laughed. “If we didn’t take that offer from Asmodraxis, we’re certainly not taking it from you. If you thought you could kill us you would have done so by now instead of wasting time with these blandishments. We call your bluff.” We entered the bedchamber. The evil wizard threw back the blanket and held forth a perfect set of human teeth, still attached to a set of jaw bones.

“Behold!” said Erimandras. “The Jaws of Death!”

Merc went pale. “Impossible.”

“Is it?”

“Invoking such a powerful talisman in your weakened state would bring your instant destruction.”

“Perhaps,” said Erimandras. “Perhaps not. But it will certainly bring yours!”

The Jaws of Death flew from his hand, expanding to monstrous proportions as they opened wide to engulf us all.

Chapter 25

We scattered as Erimandras laughed his thin, airless laugh. The Jaws of Death snapped their way through the wall of his bedchamber, reducing the stone to dust. Natalia turned left and sprinted down the corridor. Merc and I ran to the right.

As we ran, Mercury explained the threat we faced. “Death lost a wager with Vanah, Goddess of Fortune. He bet his Jaws against the life of Sajahk the Smiling, a mortal wizard whom she favored. The obvious moral is that Death may be inevitable, but never gamble against Lady Luck.”

The Jaws broke clear of the wall and turned from side to side slowly, like a Ganthian bloodhawk searching for its prey. Merc and I spotted an adjoining passage and ducked around the corner.

“Vanah had no particular use for the Jaws, so she hid them inside a mountain, surrounded by mighty magical guardians, monsters, traps, and puzzles—all set to test those who would brave fortune to seek the Jaws. When the necromancers of the world got wind of this, they were dancing on their own graves with joy. Many expeditions were mounted to recover the Jaws. Eventually one succeeded.”

The clenched Jaws decided to move in our direction, stalking slowly but purposefully through the air like a hound following a scent. The scent of life. Our scent.

“Dreadful Dwarkanath recovered the Jaws. He was the most powerful necromancer ever. He associated freely with ghosts, wraiths, vampires, and every form of undead horror. He founded the Forbidden Church of Undeath now led by Necrophilus. But even with all his power, Dwarkanath was unable to control the Jaws. They swallowed him whole, reduced his fortress to ruins in mere minutes, and went on a killing spree across six kingdoms before being banished by a large band of priests and wizards. Many thousands perished before the Jaws were stopped.”

“None of this is reassuring.”

“The Jaws have not been seen since. Some believe Death reclaimed them. But it looks like they wound up with the Overbrat.”

The Jaws of Death rounded the corner and streaked toward us, opening wide. We turned to flee and discovered belatedly that we had chosen a dead end.

The irony did not escape me.

Merc stood forth and cast a spell. A huge bolt of crackling blue energy flew from his outstretched hands and struck the Jaws, only to vanish into their dark maw. The dreadful teeth flew onward, unhindered by his attack, and swallowed Merc whole, gulping him into the great beyond with a morbid snap.

The Jaws hovered before me, momentarily sated. I was still trapped. Then Natalia appeared at the far end of the corridor, behind the Jaws, and shouted for their attention. I was impressed and thankful that she had not fled the scene altogether, but her tactic was to no avail. Ignoring her, the Jaws opened slightly and advanced toward me. I held Overwhelm and Gardswell at the ready, wondering if even these enchanted weapons would suffice against a monstrous apparition that could snap down Mercury Boltblaster like a snack cracker.

Which reminded me. “Natalia!” I shouted. “Get Erimandras! I’ll handle the Jaws!”

“As you will!”

She turned back toward the Overmaster’s chamber. To my surprise, the Jaws spun about and streaked away in pursuit of her. Giving chase, I rounded the corner in time to see Natalia swing her sword in a swift, brutal chop that chipped one of the deadly incisors. Before she could defend herself further, the dental destroyer swallowed her like a grave does a coffin.

I was alone. The Jaws turned to stalk me anew, slowly herding me toward the chamber of Erimandras until I was cornered opposite his door.

“You need not perish with your companions,” rasped the Overmaster. “Reveal to me the location of the Superwand.”

“I told you before. I don’t know where it is. If I did know, you’re the last person I’d tell.”

The Jaws opened wide. I stared down their metaphysical throat into the black abyss of Death. A cold breath of attar and carrion blew over me. I heard the faint sounds of a distant funeral dirge.

“You face total, endless oblivion, Cosmo. Reconsider.”

“I’m not afraid to die.”

The Jaws moved closer, until the chilling teeth were almost touching me. I had no line of retreat. Every hair on my body stood stiff. Goosebumps marched across my skin. My own teeth chattered like dice in a cup. But these reactions were purely physical, instinctive. My heart and mind were calm. The Jaws might be a more literal representation of Death, but they were nothing I had not faced before. If this was how my life was to end, so be it. I had done my duty to The Gods as best I could.

“Consider carefully, Cosmo. There is no return from the Jaws of Death.”

“Like hellfire there isn’t!” said Mercury Boltblaster.

Shocked at the sound of his voice, I glanced down. There he was, clinging precariously to the Lower Left Cuspid of Death. His beard and hair were shocked white as chalk, his face was drained of color, but he was alive.

More or less.

“Merc! You’re alive!”

“More or less.”

“Why won’t you die?” whined Erimandras.

The Jaws snapped at me. I blunted the bite with Gardswell and lopped off the point of the lower right cuspid. Merc tenaciously held his place.

The Jaws clamped shut to form a wall of enamel and shot forward, ramming me through the wall of bricks behind me. I fell to my back in the next chamber. The Jaws snatched me up and shook me like a dog with a rat. Dropping sword and shield, I wriggled free, hitting the floor and rolling to my feet. The Jaws came at me again. This time I caught them mid-bite, preventing them from closing fully.

“Merc! Get out!”

“Gladly.” My friend pulled himself out of the abyss and crumpled to the floor, shivering uncontrollably at my feet. Stepping over him, I continued to pit my strength against the Jaws of Death, pushing them back across the corridor and into the chamber of Erimandras.

“What you attempt is impossible,” said the Overmaster. “Death is a certainty.”

“Death may be certain,” I grunted, my muscles straining to their maximum. “But the Jaws of Death are not...Death itself. And your control...is fading.”

“Fool! You cannot defeat Death! You cannot!”

“I don’t have to...defeat Death...only you!”

“I am Erimandras! Arcane grandmaster! Overmaster of the Dark Magic Society! I am—”

“Fading fast, you little brat.”

He was. The will he poured into controlling the Jaws was undoing his recovery from the Cards of Power. His thin body grew less substantial by the second. Meanwhile, the force exerted by the Jaws lessened. No longer merely holding them in check, I was now forcing them open. It occurred to me that perhaps I should be forcing them closed, but no matter.

“*You cannot defeat me,*” insisted Erimandras. His voice was almost inaudible.

“Fine. Let’s just pretend.”

“*Fool! If it takes my last breath, I will destroy you!*”

But he was too weak to make good his boast. I saw the panic on his face as he realized he had lost control. Abruptly, the Jaws of Death spun away from me, opened wide, and engulfed Erimandras and his entire bed before vanishing.

“Good work,” said Merc, steadying himself against a wall. He collapsed. I moved to catch him, but felt my own knees buckle as the strain of being tortured, drowned, teleported, crushed by an iron frog, and nearly swallowed by the Jaws of Death all in the same day finally caught up with me.

I dreamed. Or it seemed a dream, for I floated weightlessly upward, up through the streets of Caratha, up through the clouds and the blue veil of the sky. Up and up to a place of light and beauty and music and majesty. I stood upon a sward of fresh green grass and breathed sweet, pure air while brightly plumed birds flitted about me, chirping joyously.

Before me was a great gate fashioned from tanium, gold, and miraculum. It was decorated with shining bands of diamond, ruby, sapphire, emerald, beryl, topaz, and dozens of other gems I could not name. Beyond the gate were streets of gold and jeweled palaces.

“Jason Cosmo, attend us.”

I turned to the sound of the voice. Three shining figures approached me from across the meadow.

As they came nearer, I recognized the Goddess Rae, wearing a low-cut golden gown. Her companions were Arkayne, the hooded God of Magic, and the wise and wonderful Great Whoosh. I fell to my knees in homage.

“Arise, mortal,” said Great Whoosh. “There is no need to humble yourself before us, even here at the Gates of Glory that lead to Paradise.”

“We are pleased with your accomplishments,” said Arkayne. “Erimandras the Overmaster is dead. The Citadel of Marn is in ruins. The souls of its victims are at last free of their torment. The Dark Magic Society is crippled by the loss of its leaders, its records, and the prospect of internal warfare. Above all, the threat of Asmodraxis has been checked, his bid to return from eternal exile thwarted.”

“And you have reminded me of a kingdom that honors me and reunited me with my mortal line!” said Rae. “I’m so glad I became your patron goddess!”

“As am I, O Gracious Rae. But tell me, if this be Paradise, am I dead?”

“You are somewhat dead,” said Arkayne.

“What does that mean?”

Great Whoosh spoke, his voice modulated to a slight breeze. “Your battles exacted a great toll upon your body. You hover now betwixt life and death, like a coin suspended in the air. Either outcome is possible, neither is certain.”

“So is that dead or not dead?”

“As a reward for your service, we grant you the power to choose. You may enter the halls of Paradise and claim eternal bliss. Or you may return to your mortal life in Arden.”

“If you stay here, you can dwell in my palace forever!” said Rae. “You’ll never have to leave my side!”

That pretty much settled the question in my mind.

“I choose to live, O Generous Gods.”

“So be it,” said Great Whoosh. “I shall breathe once more the breath of life into your lungs. Don’t worry, it doesn’t involve any actual mouth-to-mouth contact. It is more of a mystical thing.”

“I thank you. But before you do that, I’d like to ask a few questions.”

Arkayne and Great Whoosh exchanged glances.

“You may ask,” said Arkayne. “We may not answer.”

“Am I truly the Mighty Champion of old? You told me before that I am of his line, but am I some manner of reincarnation?”

“Reincarnation is not our policy,” said Arkayne. “We grant each mortal but one life to live, for good or for ill. You are most like your ancestor in courage and spirit but you are no reincarnation. You are yourself.”

“May I meet him? The original Champion? There is much I would like to ask him if I could.”

“Impossible,” said Great Whoosh. “Have you further questions?”

“The Superwand,” I said. “Do you really not know where it is?”

“We do not,” said Arkayne. “The Mighty Champion hid it well, and we have made it our law that no god or mortal shall seek that talisman. If pressed, I would speculate that the Mighty Champion took it somewhere beyond our power.”

“Beyond the power of The Gods?”

“We are The Gods of this world, but there are a multitude of others where we hold no sway. Perhaps the Champion took the Superwand to such a place. I do not know. Inquire no further of this matter.”

“As you will. Thank you for your indulgence.” I bowed.

“We shall leave you with your patron,” said Great Whoosh. He and Arkayne departed.

Rae gathered me in for a warm, summery hug. “You are the most marvelous mortal I’ve known in centuries! You should have seen the look on Lucinda Everfair’s face when she found out I was your patron. She was positively green! Especially after you destroyed Marn and bested Erimandras. No Champion of hers has ever performed such feats!”

“Merc did most of that.”

“Whatever.” She caressed my cheek. “Your tan looks good. Be sure get plenty of sun. That way I can keep an eye on you.”

“I’ll do that.”

“When you get back to Caratha, be sure to visit my temple there. Though it is far too small. Carathans don’t appreciate me the way they should. They more honor Amex and Surflord. As if commerce or the sea would exist without the sun! Though I have neglected my worshipers for a few centuries. But you’d think they would remember me anyway. Which reminds me, I must schedule another eclipse soon. That always gets their attention! I haven’t done one in ages and they are such fun. I wonder if Lune is busy today? We have to coordinate these things.”

“Goddess?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Could I get on with my life now?”

“Oh, yes! Silly of me to ramble on so.” She kissed me lightly on the cheek. “Return now to your waiting body, Jason. Return to the world of the living! Return to life—now!”

I opened my eyes. I lay abed in a wellappointed chamber filled with flowers. Gathered around me were Mercury, Queen Raella, Rubis—and Sapphrina!

“He’s awake!” said Sapphrina. She bestowed a joyful kiss upon my grateful lips.

“Glad you could join us,” said Merc. His beard and hair were still white as snow. “You’ve hovered somewhere betwixt life and death these three days.”

“You don’t know the half of it. Where am I?”

“At my embassy in Caratha,” said Queen Raella.

“I dragged your carcass here and sent word to Raella. She brought Sapphrina and Rubis. We’ve been at your side ever since. Raella’s healers say you were in a Paradise Coma, conferring with The Gods.”

“How would they know that?”

“The usual signs. Slow steady pulse. Shallow breathing. Tendency to levitate.”

“Really?”

“But the nimbus of divine light around your body was the clincher. Let’s just say we’re pretty sure it wasn’t typhoid fever.”

“I read it in your aura,” said Raella. “Which, by the by, has reverted to Standard Auric, with no nonconforming content or tags. You are, at this moment, a hale and healthy hero.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Now we can tie up a few loose ends before Raella and I return to Rae City,” said Merc. “I presume you’ll tarry in Caratha for a time.” He glanced meaningfully at the twins.

I followed his gaze and traded smiles with Sapphrina as I squeezed her hand. “Yes. I believe I will. But what loose ends?”

“You must be wondering how the war in Raelna turned out?”

“It wasn’t at the top of my list, but now that you mention it, yes, I am wondering.”

“Raella?”

“Once my forces took Halogen captive, the Orphalians accepted a truce and withdrew from my domains. Moreover, the Orphalian barons deposed Halogen in absentia and elected his cousin Stron Astatine as their new king.”

“What of Halogen?”

“He is my prisoner. He will be held in the Bronze Tower until Orphalia chooses to ransom him back. Which could be a long while. Halogen has earned little love from his people.”

“What of the war with Brythalia?”

Raella frowned. “Brythalia trampled upon longstanding custom by enlisting mercenaries in our Annual War. I have no doubt some agent of the Society whispered in King Rubric’s ear that this would be to his advantage. No matter. With Orphalia checked, the full might of my armies drove Brythalia out and moved the boundary stakes a full league in Raelna’s favor. What further repercussions Rubric will suffer I have not yet decided.”

“That is good news.”

“Indeed. But I have better tidings still.” The queen’s smile lit the room like the breaking of a sudden dawn. “Mercury and I are to be wed at long last!”

“That is the best news of all!”

“Indeed,” said Mercury, taking Raella’s hand.

She explained. “Goddess Rae personally nullified the ancient canons obstructing our union. The nobles can no longer demand my abdication if I wed the man I love.”

“No one deserves such a blessing more. I’m happy for you both!”

“You will be an honored guest at our wedding,” said Queen Raella.

“I wouldn’t miss it! Just tell me when!”

Raella sighed. “Not until High Summer Day. I dread the delay, but this will needs be a great affair of state and require much preparation. Yet we have waited this long to be together. A little longer is tolerable.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Good,” said Merc. “Now up from your bed! We’ve an important errand to perform before I depart for Rae City.”

“What errand?”

“I’ll explain on the way.”

I strode into the office of the attorney Periglio. It was tastefully decorated with red leather walls, statues of nude nymphs in rude poses and a glossy ebony floor. Mercury casually rendered the lawyer’s two bodyguards unconscious as we swept past the wideeyed receptionist to the inner office.

Periglio was seated at his desk, with a pixyish pink-haired young woman in his lap holding a pen and steno pad. Periglio himself was a small, furtive man with rodent eyes and greasy, slickedback hair. He wore a purple pinstripe sharkskin doublet and tunic. Gold and diamond rings glittered on his fingers.

“Who are you?” he demanded, pushing the girl from his lap. She tumbled to the floor. He reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a Cruger minicrossbow, cocked and loaded. “How did you get in here?”

Ignoring the weapon, I dropped one of the Society’s wanted posters on the desk. “Are you the same Periglio designated as agent for collection of this bounty?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Now get out of here before I summon my guards!”

“They are indisposed,” said Merc. “Put away that toy before someone gets hurt.”

“How about you get hurt?”

Periglio fired at point blank range. Merc caught the arrow with one hand and jammed it into the lawyer’s desk.

The assistant bolted from the office. Periglio, wide-eyed, carefully set the crossbow on the desk.

“So what is it I can do for you gentlemen?” he asked.

“I am here to claim the bounty.”

“What?”

“I’m Jason Cosmo. I’m presenting myself to you as per the bounty offer. Ten million carats, please!”

“You’re no more Jason Cosmo than I am.”

I drew Overwhelm, mentally commanding the sword to flare its admittedly pink light as I sliced Periglio’s desk in twain like a watermelon, scattering his papers across the floor. “This is the enchanted sword Overwhelm once wielded by the Mighty Champion. Now it is mine.”

“So? That proves nothing. And desks cost money, you know.”

Merc grabbed the lawyer by the collar and yanked him to his feet. “Let me make things clearer for you. We know that you handle affairs for the Dark Magic Society in Caratha. We know the Society posted the reward on my friend here. We also know that we just returned from killing the Overmaster and many of his minions. One more won’t make much difference to me.”

Periglio squinted at me. “As I take another look, he does appear to be Jason Cosmo. The idea was that he be delivered as a prisoner, but technically speaking, he has fulfilled the terms of the bounty offer. He, er, has fair claim to the money.”

“Good,” said Merc, releasing him.

The attorney opened a small safe and produced a letter of credit for ten million carats, payable by the Bank of Caratha. He signed the document over to me.

“Thank you,” I said. “Have a wonderful day!”

Having ten million in gold to my name made me one of the richest men in Caratha. Claiming the price on my own head would only add to my notoriety. But it should also, Merc explained, free me from worrying about bounty hunters. They would lose interest in me as the news spread. Thieves, robbers, grifters, swindlers, gamblers, and gold diggers were another matter.

“Enjoy your good fortune while you can,” said Merc.

“While I can? What does that mean?”

“Happy endings never last.”

“You’re a sourpuss, Merc.”

“I speak from experience. Like it or not, Cosmo, you are a new power in the world. You have enemies you haven’t even met. The Society will want their revenge. The Demon Lords may yet cast their baleful eyes once more upon you. The League will pester you to run their errands. Ambitious swordslingers will challenge you to make a name for themselves. Caratha, moreover, is a city of deadly intrigues all its own. I give you two weeks tops before you’re up to your eyebrows in danger once again.”

“Gee, thanks.”

The wizard clapped my shoulder. “So I say again, my friend—enjoy it while you can!”

Soon Mercury and Queen Raella returned to her realm. I would follow when the happy day of their wedding arrived. Meantime, I meant to explore the Shining City by the Sea.

Sapphrina and Rubis were my enthusiastic guides. Together, we toured the awe-inspiring Alcazara Palace and its Shining Tower. We made devotions at the Consolidated Temple of The Gods. We visited the ivy-covered halls of Caratha University. We hunted bargains amid the endless booths and shops and winding lanes of the Grand Bazaar. On sunny days, we lounged on the pleasure barges in the Old Canals or strolled arm in arm in arm through the botanical splendor of Pantheon Park. After dark, they led me through the maze of Carathan nightlife, taking me to the best parties, the hottest clubs, and most fashionable dining establishments. Truly, it would take years to experience all that the City at the Center of the World had to offer.

But years I had. My quest was done. I had no reason to go back to Lower Hicksnittle. What was there for me now? All my life, Caratha had called to me in dreams. As vast and bewildering as the great city was, I felt strangely at home here. Resolving to remain, I used my newfound wealth to purchase a well-appointed villa.

As the lazy days passed, I enjoyed my growing bond with Sapphrina. For a time, we did not allude to our exchange of tender words in Rae City all those weeks ago. Yet they colored all we did together, like the shadow of a hovering dove. Both of us savored the anticipation until, finally, we could no longer contain our feelings.

On a midnight stroll in the garden of my villa, I took Sapphrina’s hand.

“Let us do this properly,” I said, whirling her about to face me. I enfolded her in my arms.

“As you will.”

“Sapphrina.”

“Jason.”

“I love you.”

“And I love you, my darling hero, with all my heart!”

“I cannot tell you how happy that makes me.”

“Oh, Jason!”

“Oh, Sapphrina!”

“Kiss me!”

“I will!”

“And take me now!”

“Take you...now?”

“Yes! Take me! Take me inside—the needleflies are biting me something awful!”

“I hadn’t noticed. I should send for Pest-Be-Dead.”

“Norkin is good too,” said Sapphrina. “You should get a quote from both, actually.”

“I shall. Tomorrow.”

“Yes,” she murmured, snuggling closer. “Tomorrow.”

Our lips met. For long moments we were oblivious to everything except our mutual bliss. But we could not long ignore the cloud of bloodsucking insects buzzing around us. Swatting furiously, I led Sapphrina into the house and up the stairs.

The hero business was tough. But after all the foes were laid low, the dangers surpassed, and the obstacles overcome, the rewards were sweet indeed.

JASON COSMO™

Greetings, Loyal Reader!

Our story ends here for now. I hope you enjoyed Hero Wanted. Thanks for reading. While you wait to get your hands on the next Jason Cosmo adventure, I invite you to visit JasonCosmo.com, where you can further explore the world of Arden, meet other Loyal Readers, and get the latest news about upcoming books. I hope to see you there!

Best regards,
Dan McGirt

DAN McGIRT is completely lacking in ninja training of any kind. He is a hiker, whitewater kayaker, occasional world traveler, sometime speechwriter, futurist, and amateur bioethicist. He likes cats, horses, and ducks. He is indifferent to warthogs. He dislikes rabid weasels. He is not a neurosurgeon, has not climbed Mt. Everest, and does not currently own a Bunsen burner. When he was little he had a pony. It's true. You probably wanted a pony, didn't you? Life is unfair.