

THE WRATH OF ANGELS

Books by Theodore Beale

THE WAR IN HEAVEN
THE WORLD IN SHADOW
THE WRATH OF ANGELS

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THE WRATH OF ANGELS

THEODORE BEALE



CASTALIA HOUSE
Milano Minneapolis Zürich

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For Heather

*Nameless, she stepped without shroud from sea mist,
A form to spark the Philosopher's fire.
Her golden hair was by Phoebus sun-kissed,
Her smile was sweeter than Orpheus' lyre.*

31:10-11

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THE WRATH OF ANGELS

PROLOGUE

The wolf panted hard as it ran through the darkness, its long red tongue lolling haphazardly from between its white teeth. It burst out of the sheltering cover of the forest into a small clearing, where it was bathed momentarily in the eerie light of the full moon. The beast, a giant of its kind, dared a quick glance over its shoulder and howled in dismay upon catching sight of a sparkling rainbow of bright colours high in the sky behind it.

It redoubled its speed, running faster than it had ever run in pursuit of even the most delectable prey. But this time, it was not the hunter, it was the hunted, and no wolf pack had ever chased its quarry with such implacable zeal. The giant wolf was scarred on its muzzle, its sides and even its belly from a hundred vicious battles, most of which had been victorious, nevertheless, it did not think for a moment to stop and fight.

Brambles slashed at its face and twigs snapped as it hurled itself into the underbrush, hoping that the sky-riding hunters would lose sight of it in the tangled chaos that clutched and grabbed at its furred pelt. The wolf crossed over a stream as it headed for the dark heart of the elder forest, knowing that even the quick-moving water would do no more than slow its pursuers for a heartbeat, if that.

As the tree trunks grew thicker and the tangled brush faded into rich-smelling humus, soft beneath its pads, the wolf was able to pick up its pace somewhat. It loped on for what seemed like hours, paws beating out a rhythmic cadence as it picked out an inerrant path between the trees. On and on it ran, until at last it reached the heart of the ancient wood. Shielded by the towering canopy of broad-limbed oaks, the sky overhead was black, showing no sign of the moon, the stars or, most importantly, that deadly, arcing rainbow of

furious colours. Perhaps it had not yet escaped the dread hunt altogether, but it was safe enough for the nonce.

The wolf paused and caught its breath, its great muscular chest heaving with the overheated exertion of the last two hours. Catching scent of nearby water, it stalked wearily towards what turned out to be another stream, possibly an offshoot of the rivulet it crossed earlier. The beast twitched its ears nervously as it sniffed at the air, but the wind carried no scent of the sky hunters. Satisfied it was alone at last, the great wolf rose to its hind legs and shivered as its fur disappeared, dissolving magically into nothingness, and the night breeze quickly dried the sweat on its pale, hairless skin.

The stream was only knee-deep, but the erstwhile wolf stooped to immerse its entire body in the ice-cold water. Still overheated, it lapped thirstily at the water, and scooped up great handfuls to splash over its human face, which bore the same wicked scars as the wolf's battle-marked muzzle. Then, behind it, something growled low in its throat. There was a second growl, and a third. The werewolf froze, and turned around slowly, dreading what it might find.

And when it turned, it knew despair. For there, creeping out from behind the ancient oaks, lurked a pack. They were no wolves, though, they were far worse than wolves, more dangerous, even, than the werewolf's own unnatural kind. They were dogs, with white, spotless fur, red-lipped jaws and fiery eyes that bespoke a malicious sapience that was neither bestial nor human. As the shapechanger stared in horror, the first hound threw back its head and howled, a howl that was echoed by a terrible horn that sounded deeply through the midnight sky.

Panicked, the werewolf ran, too surprised and frightened to manage the transformation back into a more useful form. The rough whip-edge of branches slashed and scraped cruelly at his naked flesh, leaving a blood trail for his enemies to follow. But these hounds needed no sanguinary scent to track him. Strangely, the hellhounds made no move to attack, instead they seemed content to drive him forward; only when he slowed or tried to change direction did they snap at him with those deadly, slavering jaws. He sobbed with impotent rage, but there was nothing he could do except continue to

run blindly through the night, with a dozen demondogs growling at his heels.

Light dazzled his eyes as he burst into a large clearing, and when he tried to shield his face, he stumbled, hitting the ground hard. Slowly, painfully, he rolled over and groaned when he saw the great circle of Faery knights riding through the sky above him, the many-coloured glory of their glowing splendour putting the wan light of the full Moon to shame. The knights were encased in glass, though there had never been a stone capable of shattering that eldritch armor, and each plated suit was uniquely hued, with variations marvelous and subtle.

Some of the faces he knew on sight; certainly he knew the names. They were figures out of legend, heroes and villains of this age, the age before, and a few from the age before that. Tales of their nobility and cruelty had been passed down by his father, his grandfather and his grandfather's father's father. They did as they pleased, the royal Lords of Faerie, and there was none to gainsay them or stand against them. Save one, of course, but He would lift no finger for the lowly wolfkin.

It was a nightmare, but it was no dream, the werewolf knew. Sweat trickled down his sides and the salt stung the bleeding scratches inflicted by the unmerciful forest. Over his head, the Faery host circled noisily under the stars, waiting for something, or someone, singing racously all the while.

One knight, armored in lavender and bolder or less patient than the rest, could no longer resist the sight of their defenseless quarry. He urged on his magical steed, a great white horse which, though wingless, soared through the sky as effortlessly as an eagle. But at its rider's command it dropped from the sky like a falling star, plunging towards the ground with heedless abandon.

But when hope is dead, pride yet remains. Still lying prone on the ground, the werewolf found within himself the wherewithal to resist, and he transformed into a horrific figure, a bestial half-man with the brutal jaws, sinewy muscle and deadly claws of the great wolf. Rolling sideways, he exploded from the ground just as the onrushing fae came upon him, and he snarled in furious satisfaction as his

assailant's eyes widened with surprise. The faery knight tried to pull up and avoid him at the last moment, but the die was cast and the wolf struck a powerful blow at his attacker even as the knight's steed hammered into him, sending him tumbling head over heels.

He hit the ground again, much harder than before, and for a long moment he saw nothing but red. But, as his vision cleared, he saw the object of his desire right in front of his still-lupine face, only a few paces away. Buried in earth halfway to its hilt was the knight's glassy sword, for the wolf had struck at the fae's hand instead of trying to smash through that impenetrable armor. Pain and fear forgotten in the moment of triumph, the wolf staggered forward to claim his trophy, then thrust it skyward with a howl of angry defiance.

The faery host answered him with a rousing cheer, for if they sought his destruction, even more did they love a battle worthy of the name. Then, at some unseen signal, the circle abruptly parted and made way for an imposing figure who bid fair to obscure the Moon as he reined in his mount high over the wolf's head.

It was the Hunter, and the werewolf quailed before his strange golden eyes, as unearthly as they were merciless. His face was like that of an angel, but from his temples sprang a pair of great antlers that would have cowed the oldest buck in the forest. He wore no helm, and his glassy armor glowed with the verdant green of the springtime grasslands. His huge horn was in his left hand, but his terrible bow was still slung on his saddle as he pointed at the wolf.

"Name thyself, child of the Twice-Fallen!"

"I name you, Herne the Hunter," the wolf defied the faery lord. "Better you send your dogs to bring me down, lest I run you through and drink the devils-fire from your riven throat!"

The circling Hunt shouted with glee, and a slight smile seemed to appear on the Hunter's bloodless lips although no trace of amusement, still less mercy, touched those eerie owlsh eyes.

"Thou art bold, Twice-fallen. Perhaps the devils-fire is still strong within thee, even lo, these many generations. If thou wilt not name thyself, then I shall name thee and songs shall

be sung of thee, Sword-stealer, and thy pelt shall grace none but the Fae King himself."

The knights cheered, but the werewolf only snarled and braced himself to meet his doom as the Hunter spurred his mighty steed downward, drawing a peculiar sword which flickered like wildfire encased in faery glass. Down, down he came, like a furious winter's-night wind from which there is no escape, and the werewolf almost staggered before the wave of terror that swept before the onrushing Hunter. With a snarl, he gave himself up to his fate and as the great fae swept down upon him, he made another desperate leap. Again, his timing was perfect, and the night sky resounded with the impact of the cataclysmic collision.

Two swords struck home; one shattered against impenetrable emerald armor, the other bit through fur, muscle and bone to pierce a monster's heart. Transfixed upon the Hunter's blade, the werewolf died as he was borne up towards the brilliant Moon and the many-coloured splendour of the triumphant Wild Hunt.

CHAPTER 1

JUSTIFIED AND ANCIENT

YET ALL THESE WERE, WHEN NO MAN DID THEM KNOW
YET HAUE FROM WISEST AGES HIDDEN BEENE:
AND LATER TIMES THINGS MORE VNKNOWNNE SHALL SHOW.

— Edmund Spenser, *The Fairie Queene*

On the south side of London, there is a narrow lane that comes quietly to an inobtrusive meeting with Regent Street in much the same manner that a diffident beggar importunes those upon whom Fortune has smiled more fondly for the price of his morning coffee. To the casual observer, this lane appears to be little more than an alleyway, a dim, seldom-traveled passage of the sort wherein activities unsavory, illegal and immoral are likely to take place. And the casual observer would be correct, for the most part, albeit not in the precise manner most likely envisioned; there were indeed such activities taking place in the vicinity, they were not, however, occurring at the street level.

In fact, the lane was almost uninhabited at present, traversed only by a solitary wanderer, a slender man of less than average height, whose features were as nondescript as his clothes. Neither handsome nor ugly, there was a boyish look about him, but a faded boyishness suggesting that if Fortune had ever smiled upon him, she had ceased to do so some time past. He wore a brown leather jacket against the evening's chill, a cheap unfashionable construction which looked as if it had probably been purchased from a remainder's rack at least three years ago. His jeans were faded, though from long-time wear, not intent, and his shoes, with salt-white water stains lining the sides, appeared to

never once to have met with that useful substance, shoe black.

He looked very much like one of those thousands of vaguely pathetic men who populate large cities like depressed, oversized rodents, as full of unworkable schemes for improbable wealth as they are bereft of either the trappings or the prerequisites of success. And yet, to describe this wanderer in such a way would do him an injustice, for his seeming poverty was born of indifference, not failure, and perhaps more importantly, he was not a man at all.

The two large black men standing within an alcove in the middle of the alley, whose massive physiques blocked access to an unmarked door, did not know this, of course, not even when he stopped before them and gazed up at them expectantly. He was not the right sort, not at all, and yet there was something about the wanderer which left them disinclined to deny him entrance to the hidden club that they served as a two-headed Cerberus. There was something odd about this humble visitor, whose unkempt russet hair hinted at the disarray in which his humble lodgings - surely a ground floor studio in Streatham - were likely kept.

Something odd, and perhaps something frightening, too. For when the larger of the two giants deigned to look down and meet the little man's eyes, preparatory to a silent, but certain dismissal in the form of a head shake, it was the big man who found himself looking away and stepping aside. Nor was his muscular companion proposed to dispute the other's judgement, instead, he silently reached over and held the door open for their unlikely visitor.

"Think Chelsea can do it again?" he asked the first bouncer, as he released the door and it closed upon the light steps of the newcomer echoing off the stairs inside.

"Dunno, mate," answered his bigger companion, whose accent held traces of a Caribbean ancestry. "Don't much care for footie. I was two season playin' wit Wasps, don' ya know?"

As the two men began to debate the unanswerable question of which human appendage is best used to guide the irregular movements of an inflated object about the earth, they were both careful to avoid any mention of the little man and his strangely intimidating presence.

The little man who was not a man snorted disdainfully as he passed the imperious door girl a card and walked past the nightclub's second, less visible set of bouncers. Atlantis was conceived around a mythological theme, Greek, of course, and the great open space between the gold-plastered walls was populated with statues purporting to represent the various deities, who were, by the look of things, rather helpless against the seas which had already engulfed the sunken city. A golden fountain sprayed water into the air; it was occupied by an attractive dark-haired mermaid whose cigarette struck a discordant note into the classical montage.

But it wasn't the cigarette which offended the little man who was not a man, it was Kylie Minogue. It seemed strange to him that a club which had gone to such gaudy lengths to distinguish itself from London's lesser lights should choose to inflict the epitome of pedestrian Europop on its clientele. Of course, most of said clientele was now conspicuous only by its absence, since it was but nine-thirty and a Thursday night at that. He shrugged. He was not here for amusement, he had a rather more important objective in mind.

He smiled up at the solitary dancer, a curvaceous dark-haired woman of indistinct ancestry whose lowriding hotpants and white halter top left little to the imagination. She swiveled her hips in a desultory fashion, though he could not tell whether she was warming up for a later performance or was only bored. She paid him no more attention than she paid the rest of the world, which was to say, none at all. She simply stood atop her neo-Doric pillar with her feet shoulder-width apart and her eyes closed, moving languidly to the merciless beat.

But the dancer was no more a woman than was the little man a man. Without warning, her hypnotic motion stopped and her eyes snapped open. She glanced around the room uncertainly, and when her dark eyes met those of the little man, she started, almost violently. Then, as anger filled her face, she leaped down from the eight-foot pillar as easily as a cat.

"You!" she exclaimed a hissing undertone. "You were to come last Friday! Where were you? Did you forget?"

The little man, (for so it was that he appeared and so shall we describe him), shook his head and allowed her to lead him to a quiet table in a shadowy corner. This was a most delicate business, and it had been many years in the making. He was not cautious by nature, but the cruel centuries had impressed upon him the tiresome necessity of prudence.

“Some alterations are unavoidable.” He did not tell her that he had never had any intention of showing up at the agreed-upon time. She was unlikely to betray him to the Mad One’s ever-watchful Eyes, but there was too much at stake to assume any unnecessary risks. “My most heartfelt apologies. Still, I am here now and it’s less crowded tonight, so there’s less risk of any of the Unseen lurking about.”

She nodded warily.

“Perhaps you are right. But I’ve been warned about you, trickster. How do I know you aren’t up to your old games? I wouldn’t put it past you to play both sides of the table. You haven’t been seen in five hundred years, and now you expect me to take you at your word?”

He arched a suggestive eyebrow. “You can take me however you want me, darling. And I don’t care if you believe me or not, because your mistress knows that whatever my shortcomings, and to be sure, my sins are many, I have always done her the proper homage. Nor need she fear betrayal – she is too long past the game. She has nothing to fear.”

The dancer nodded again, this time with rather less wariness.

“Perhaps. Now, tell me. That which you seek, is it truly a thing of power?”

“Great power. Older and more precious than you can imagine.”

She looked skeptical. “And how do you know of it? How can you be so sure?”

The little man smiled grimly. “I am bound to it. I have always been bound to it, I just don’t know where it is. But I believe your mistress does.”

She relaxed at his admission just as the girlish warblings of the pop princess segued into darker, fast-paced garage.

That was rather more like it, thought the little man, tapping his foot to the underlying jungle beat.

"You haven't asked me yet if she's willing to see you."

The little man's lips twitched. He was amused by her pretensions. "Of course she's willing to see me. She has nothing better to occupy her these days."

"If you are so sure, then why did you not simply go to her? Why involve me?"

Why had he involved her? It was not strictly necessary, and perhaps it courted needless risk. But there was a reason, not the most compelling of reasons, perhaps, but it was one that mattered to him all the same.

"Because one does not intrude upon a queen," he answered quietly.

The dancer did not respond immediately, instead she looked down at the table for a long moment. When she looked up again, her dark eyes were luminous with impending tears.

"Even a queen without a crown?"

"Especially a queen without a crown."

She reached out to him and took his hand, almost gratefully, he thought, and squeezed it. "Thank you. I have misjudged you perhaps. Do you think you can free him?"

"So you know?" He was surprised. She had said *him*, not *it*. *She knew!* Had she sought to mislead him earlier with her questions? No, she was merely testing him. He smiled at himself. Perhaps she was not so easy to read as he had thought. But the realization that he had been fooled caused him no chagrin, instead he was cheered at the thought that perhaps he might have found a willing ally at last. Her mistress had long ago abandoned hope, but this one had not, and if she was sympathetic to his cause, then others might be too. For just a moment, the long, lonely road he had wandered for so long seemed to become a little less dark, a little less impossible.

"I don't know," he answered truthfully. "I believe so. If she can tell me where he may be found."

The dancer nodded, and as she did, her provocative white outfit transformed into a formal red gown, still formed to her figure but eminently more respectable. A Japanese symbol appeared on each of her bare shoulders, constructed of

rhinestones, which, upon closer look, he realized were actually diamonds. *Eikou*. He smiled to himself. It was true, he was not the only one who still harbored a regard for the old days, for the old ways.

She stretched out her palm to him.

“Close your eyes. I’ll bring you to her.”

CHAPTER 2

SAFETY IN SILENCE

SIT IN SILENCE, GO INTO DARKNESS, DAUGHTER OF THE BABYLONIANS; NO MORE WILL YOU BE CALLED QUEEN OF KINGDOMS.

— Isaiah 47:5

He found himself standing hand-in-hand with his new companion in a windowless corridor. It was an old building, clearly, with that singular combination of aged charm and aesthetic desolation that marks so many constructions of the late nineteenth century. Nearly everything in the hall was painted the same faded shade of yellow, the walls, the doors, the trim, even the pipes overhead which presumably were intended to keep the building from freezing solid in the winter. Judging by their appearance, though, he had his doubts about their efficacy.

She released his hand, then began walking forward until she reached a door some three rooms down. He followed her, and laughed when he saw the name embossed on the small piece of black tape, peeling at the edges, which was applied above the door's mail slot.

"Dr. Gloria Sprite?" he mused in disbelief.

"It's her little joke. Never mind that."

She knocked at the door, and after a moment of apparent unresponse, the door was opened by a birdlike little woman of indeterminate age. She looked to be somewhere between sixty and seventy-five, but her visitor knew that she exceeded that span by at least a factor of ten, if not a hundred. She was dressed simply, in a red cardigan sweater and an unassuming navy blue skirt, and her shoes were of the sensible sort. The room into which she gracefully invited them was, like her attire, moderate to the point of

ostentation, with little more than a desk, a wardrobe, and two small alcoves that presumably served as washroom and sleeping quarters.

Not that she truly needed the latter, for Dr. Gloria Sprite was none other than Gloriana, the former Queen of the Southlands and one of the most powerful fae of fallen Albion. She had been living this human charade for at least thirty years, her visitor knew, though it was entirely possible that she had been doing so much longer than that. Something moved at his feet as he entered the room; he looked down just in time to avoid stepping on a small calico tabby, which mewed a feeble protest at the invaders and escaped into the meager shelter of the smaller of the two alcoves.

"Ah, Robin, how good to see you," Gloriana told him, a smile of pleasure creasing her pallid, wrinkled face. "Do forgive my champion, as we are not much in the custom of receiving guests of late, you see."

Robin, for that was indeed one of his many names, dropped to one knee and kissed the silver ring which was the old woman's sole concession to personal adornment. It was shaped like a coiled serpent, and he remembered the trepidation with which he had kissed it the first time, for if he recalled correctly, the jewelry was far more than a mere ring. Since then, he had learned to defend himself against such things.

"Why are you living in this manner, Gloriana?" Six hundred years ago, he would never have been so bold to address her directly, but many things had changed over the centuries, himself not the least. "I spent forty years looking for you and I imagined many possibilities, but the thought of you living like this amongst mortals, as a mortal, was never one of them."

Behind him, there was a polite cough, and his hostess smiled. Her grey hair was wispy and shot with white and she stooped, but her blue eyes were still penetrating.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear. You did well to bring him to me. Go, now, and amuse yourself. I will call you if I have need."

Robin turned and bowed politely to his guide, who shot him a significant glare that might have been intended as a

warning, though of what he did not know. Then she was gone, leaving nothing but a faintly perfumed scent of roses behind her.

"She is a good girl, and loyal," said the erstwhile Faery Queen. "So many have fallen away, so many have given in to despair. There are but a few who still dare to hope for a restoration, but I fear that I am no longer one of them. We are outside of time, and yet, it still finds a way to leave its mark on us.... Why did you come to me, Robin? I do not have the power you seek."

"I don't need power, I need knowledge."

"Silly boy. Knowledge is power." She pointed to her solitary window, which overlooked a great cemetery. "And yet all power fades with time. Behold my realm, which once extended from Land's End to Canterbury, and from here to the Channel. And yet, am I not content? I have my little studies, and do you know, Mr. Nicholas Royle has intimated that it is very possible my latest treatise on hidden Miltonian onomastics shall see publication in the next volume of the university's literary review. It's a brilliant coup, I assure you."

"And an unfair one, I should say, considering you were eyewitness to the events portrayed."

"Still the rascal!" Gloriana wagged a finger at him, but she took no offense. "Yes, I was there, but Mr. Milton was not, so while my particular perspective may be unique, it is certainly not deceitful. Nor do I see that full disclosure is required, much less wise."

"I can imagine it might call your scholarly discernment into question."

"If not my sanity!"

Gloriana chuckled, a high-pitched titter that, like her present facade, reminded him of a bird. She had always been one to soar, this onetime ruler of sea, land and sky, but now the great raptor had been reduced to little more a chirping swallow. Or so it seemed. Robin had learned not to put too much store in the seeming appearances of others, for if his own despicable guise was not entirely inaccurate, it was also more than a little deliberate on his part.

The whistle of a kettle sounded, and Gloriana rose to her feet. "Will you take tea?"

"If you please." Robin's mind whirled. Of all the many changes he had witnessed on this benighted planet, this was perhaps the most outrageous. Gloriana, the majestic, whose lightning-quick wrath was legendary, feared by man and sprite alike, now served him tea and scones. Not for the first time, he cursed Heaven. What hath God wrought? Naught but degradation and servile humiliation, he thought bitterly. Yes, what a glorious Creation indeed.

How stupid he had been. Milton was an ass and there was nothing noble about falling from grace. How stupid they had all been.

"You look thoughtful." Gloriana had returned with the tea, and as he had surmised, scones as well. He took one, and discovered that it was hard enough to have been prepared around the time he had last set foot in England. "How very strange. That is not like you."

"I was thinking about your treatise."

"How charming, if unexpected. Would you like to read it?"

"My God, no!" He shook his head in unfeigned alarm. "I'd rather answer your question. You see, I know there were seven who laid the seal, only seven who know the place I seek. Four I cannot think to ask. One has been banished, either to the Pit or the Void, I do not know. One I cannot find anywhere, which leaves only you. So, I beg you, Gloriana, by the memory of the crown that was once yours, tell me where the seal was laid!"

Gloriana nodded slowly. "I see. And, of course, you understand, even if you are correct and you can manage this miracle, that merely breaking the seal and restoring Albion are two different things entirely. The Mad One has grown tranquil, at last. Why should I risk provoking him again to fury?"

"Because it is needful."

"Needful? Such a strange word in the mouth of a daemon. Next, you will be telling me that it is the right thing to do! Perhaps it is not me, but you, who have spent too much time walking amongst mortals, Robin."

He shook his head. "No, I am simply telling you the truth. Strange wheels are turning even as we speak, and I fear the Mad One may soon be the least of our concerns."

"Your concerns, Robin, and your fears, not mine."

He ignored her attempts to brush him off and remained insistent. "I must know, so you really must tell me, Gloriana. I implore you. Please, don't make me force you."

The withered little woman only smiled at him.

"Force me? My dear boy, I am not entirely without defenses."

She flicked her finger in his direction, and her silver ring expanded as it flew at him. He threw up his arm in front of his face and immediately felt a tight pressure around his wrist. As the silver serpent bared its fangs and hissed threateningly in his face, the calico kitten burst from the other room, leaped from chair to desk to wardrobe, from where it hurled itself onto Robin's shoulder.

He shook his head regretfully, as he stretched his arm out to prevent the ring-snake from striking at his eyes. "Believe me, Gloriana, I have no wish to harm you. But I must know where the seal is, you see, for I cannot break it if I cannot find it, and there's little your animated jewelry or your kitten can do to stop me."

"Robin." There was reproach in her voice, but no fear, only amusement in her eyes. "How you've changed! And yet, how little you've learned."

He started as he heard a deep, rumbling voice in his ear.

"This kitten could bloody well do for you, boyo. Don't you be forgetting it, either." A great mass suddenly weighed down his shoulder, as if someone had placed something approximately the size of Big Ben there without him noticing it, and he staggered under the load even as it was lifted abruptly from him. He gasped and rubbed at his shoulder as the kitten landed lightly on the floor, instead of plunging through the wooden floor directly to the basement as he half expected it would.

It turned and mewed nastily at him, earning a scolding from Gloriana.

"Never mind that, Orgoglio, and watch your tongue. He means well." She crooked her finger and the snake on his

wrist flew back to her, somehow becoming a ring again in the process. "It pleases me to see you are so determined, Robin. But my mind is settled. I am done. I will take no part the affairs of men or angels again. Albion is fallen and the great fae are no more. My retirement may have been imposed upon me, but as you can see, I have found more than a little contentment in this pasture to which I have been retired."

Robin was honestly glad to hear the queen had found her peace, strange though it might be to him, but he could not leave her to it. He told her of the dark whispers that now floated on the night winds from the Continent, and despite her determined indifference, he could see her ears pricking, for like him, she was well aware that from the first, the greater part of Albion's troubles had always come from the sea. And if Robin had never shirked from exaggeration in the past, he found no need to do so now. Exaggeration was unnecessary, for not in seven hundred years had the omens been more dire.

Unlike most of the world in shadow, their conquered realm had never been a battleground for the great game of Man, where demon warred with angel over the fate of each precious mortal soul. And the King of that realm, though fallen himself, had never submitted to Lucifer. Moreover, he had done his best to create a magical paradise as a simulacrum of the Heavenly joy they had lost. Glorious Albion, the land of Faerie, over which the first fae reigned as creator, protector and king.

But Lucifer brooked no rivals, even a rival whose challenge existed solely in his mind. There had been treachery, bitter, soul-slaying treachery from the most unsuspected source, through which the Mad One had deposed Albion's king as well as other, lesser royals such as Gloriana.

Now, a new power was rising, swallowing up principalities and dark princes alike, and yet Lucifer did not bestir himself to stop her. From this, some thought he feared her, others, wiser and more cynical, surmised that Lucifer was behind her rise and was using it to rein in some of his more powerful servitors. And then, there were the fearful, who worried that the Shining Prince had wearied of the great game at last, that

he was now ready to risk everything with one final roll of the dice.

Gloriana did not hide her surprise. "Teuvras and Merofael both? I should not have dreamed such things were possible! Surely they are too proud!"

"They have submitted before her, and willingly. Her vision has proved more seductive than one could have imagined. Nor are they alone, more than twenty lesser princes have made obeisance as well, Parsoy and Asyael among them."

"Tellus?"

"No, he alone stands against her. But he is weak, and can spare no aid for another. It is all he can do to hold out. Like you, I have long wished to see Albion restored, but now, that is our only hope. Even if the Mad One intended to resist her, he could not win. As it stands, who can say what he intends. He is, as you very well know, quite mad."

"Yes, if it were not those around him, who keep him propped up in his place, I should think he would have fallen some time past."

Robin smiled at her. "I have good reason to believe that not all of those to whom you refer now believe that keeping him propped up serves their interests any longer."

Gloriana's eyes widened, then narrowed thoughtfully. She stood and turned from him, then walked stiffly towards her solitary window to stare out over what was a wide expanse of green that led to a great cemetery. Perhaps it was comforting for her, an immortal, to reflect on the bitter joke that was mortal death. Robin did not find it so, but Gloriana had always been unusual, to say the least.

"So, have you become a player yourself, Robin?" She faced him now. "Does the court jester now think to play the king?"

"No." He did not rise to the bait. "This fool thinks only to serve the one he should never have stopped serving."

"Well said. I hope it is true. And how good is your reason to believe that you will find support?"

"Excellent. There is one in particular who bitterly regrets her decision to betray Albion."

Gloriana laughed out loud.

"Oh, you romantic fool. Or is it only that your perverse sense of humor grown darker over the long years? No, it is

the former, I daresay, and I love you the more for it. How you surprise me, Robin! Now, I shall surprise you. You see, it is not entirely by accident that I chose to retire here, of all places, at Oxford. Have you ever heard of the Hellfire Club?"

Robin was puzzled for a moment, confused by Gloriana's unexpected segue into human history. Then, as understanding dawned, he shook his head and cursed himself for the fool he was. Of course such a powerful working could not be concealed completely, but he never thought the Mad One could be so cunning as to hide his treasure under a widely notorious nexus of power.

Perhaps, he considered soberly, the usurper was not as lost in his insanity as everyone imagined. But that was unimaginable, for so cruel was the Mad One, there was insanity and devastation in everything that touched him. He was the Midas of madness, such horrors had he wrought throughout the land, upon man and spirit alike. And yet, there were still darker shadows lurking beyond the horizon.

He dropped to one knee and kissed her hand, like the faery knights of old. "You are still a queen, Gloriana. I thank you, for you have given me everything I need."

"No, I think not," she replied tartly. "Know this, my dear fool, if you would rather not inform every spirit on the isle of your intentions, you will need to enter quietly. Also, it has been far too many years and there is too much that will need to be known, and quickly too. I shall prepare a potion, and my lady, Lahalissa, will bring it to you in three days time." She smiled. "I have not stretched my wings in many a year, but I shall send her with you in my stead. I think you will find she has more useful talents than her dancing."

Three days? Robin was chagrined. His destination was less than thirty minutes away as the crow flies and he was eager to start immediately.

He protested, but she dismissed his objections with a regal wave of her hand. In three days, the Moon would be new and the seal would be at the low ebb of its power. What had lain undisturbed for centuries would keep for another three days. And besides, there was the potion. Knowledge, she reminded him, was not only needful, it was power.

He hoped she was correct. Time was growing ever shorter and the whispers were ever more ominous, more fearful by the day. The daughter of Moloch was coming, and she was a dark and hungry goddess indeed.

CHAPTER 3

EVIL, CORRUPTED

EVERYTHING SAID SO FAR HAS THE APPEARANCE OF MERE PARADOX, AND BY WAY OF REASSURING THE TIMID WE CAN CONFIRM THAT THIS IS SO.

— Umberto Eco, *Apocalypse Postponed*

The night sky was an oppressing shade of deep purple, a clouded ocean of darkness overhanging the lights of the nearby town. Three anxious days had passed, but the Moon's light was safely obscured by shadow and Robin was confident that their presence was unnoticed.

"For whom do we wait? Gloria told me there would be a third."

Robin found it interesting that Gloriana's servant, Lahalissa, referred to the former Queen by her human name. They were waiting for the last member of the party, without whom this venture would be for naught, at the summit of a large hill in Buckinghamshire. Despite the woods to their left and to their right, the hill provided them with an excellent view to the lights of their destination less than a mile away. "Why do you call her that?"

"Call her what?"

"Gloria." He smiled and shook his head. "Dr. Sprite, it sounds far too silly."

"Well, she likes to play with words. She was the Fellow and Senior Tutor for English, you know? Not this time, mind you, but the last time around."

"How very tedious. The last time?"

"Yes, this is her third spell at St. Hilda's, but this time it's Classics. She was here with her very good friend, the founder of the college, from the start. I shouldn't go so far as to say a woman's college was Gloria's idea, not at all, but she did help

push Dorothea along from time to time when things looked difficult. They were the best of friends; she was absolutely bereft when Dorothea died."

"You baffle me. Do you mean to say that after she's been there for a time, she goes away and then returns again? Has no one ever noticed?"

"Of course not! She always returns as a different mortal. The problem is that it falls to me to establish her next identity when the old one is getting too long in the tooth." The daemoness seemed to flicker, and the pretty exotic dancer disappeared, replaced by a young, weedy-looking woman with a long, thin nose. "Hence the dreary Miss Annabel Queens, who came up last fall to read for Philosophy. Can you believe Gloria actually makes me attend the classes? It's no wonder those appalling Frenchmen all want to end their miserable lives, with that boring Sisyphus and those dreadful plays. At least Gloria writes the papers; slogging away at those would be simply more than I could possibly bear."

"I can imagine." Robin was amused, but he found the thought disturbing too. No wonder the Mad One had never lost his lunatic hold. If the great of Albion had not bestirred themselves to work for her restoration, but had abandoned everything in favor of peculiar mortal pursuits and petty amusements, small wonder that her very memory was fading, even from immortal minds. Humans were contemptible, but their influence could be pernicious and it crept up on one, caught you unawares.

"Have you ever been there?" Lahalissa, back in her normal form, pointed to the great church that perched atop the largest hill in the area, an unmistakable nexus that Robin would have sensed even if he had not been informed of its significance. Somewhere, under that hill, lay the Mad One's seal. Trees obscured most of the church from this lower vantage point, all that could be seen was the square spire, and, above it, the illuminated golden ball that had entranced so many curious tourists. "Did you know him?"

"Dashwood?" He knew of the mortal legend since he had passed more than a little time in the Oxford library in the last three days, but that was all. "No, I fled when the Mad One arrived, so I was gone long before his time. But I remember

the fort that stood there before, when Rome still ruled these hills."

It was always the same. Power called to power. The Heaven's King and his minions did their best to construct their fortresses in such places, as if the mighty cathedrals and imposing stone churches were nothing more than massive mystical corks. But cork crumbled over time, the guardians grew lax, and sooner or later, an opportunity always presented itself.

He could feel them, he thought, somewhere nearby, the emanations of that great seal he'd sought for centuries. It was more than a mere nexus; the great spell created by the combined efforts of seven Great Ones had left its indelible mark. It was not so strong that he would have noticed it had he not known where to look for it, but it was there. Oh yes, it was there! The pulsing ambience of the ancient malevolence was almost sweet to him.

And now, standing here on this idyllic rural summit with a cool night breeze blowing through his hair, it seemed his interminable search was at last coming to an end. He trembled with mingled fear and regret, and with some difficulty, returned his attention to Lahalissa, who was speaking to him.

"You still haven't answered my question," she repeated. "I confess, it frightens me to think there is one capable of shattering a Great One's spell. Gloriana said even she could not. Is he a Great One, then?"

"No, he is not our kind," answered Robin, scanning the skies. Was that an airplane to the south? A glowing speck had been lazily circling a point on the horizon for sometime, but even as he noticed it, it began moving rapidly towards them. "He is something else altogether, but what, precisely, I cannot say. A child of the Watchers, I imagine, though one who cannot leave the material shadow. Or so he claims. Still, his power is considerable."

Lahalissa looked skeptical, as well she might, for how could even the most powerful of the Twice-fallen hope to break the power of a seraphim, one of the six-winged gods? But she did not argue with him, instead, she gasped out loud when he pointed towards the onrushing flier.

It was no airplane, but a bird, a great three-headed eagle with raging wings of fire shining through the lurking darkness as they beat the air with long, powerful strokes. As it approached them, it gave out a loud cry that might have been a greeting, although a less informed observer might easily have mistaken it for a warning.

Robin shook his head even as he raised a hand in welcome and caused a bright green light to flare in the sky above him. He had told the newcomer to be circumspect, and even suggested that he take the discreet form of a bird. It seemed, however, that he should have been a bit less circumspect himself with his suggestions. Then again, it could have been worse than a mere tri-cranial fire eagle. But not much worse.

The giant raptor, its golden talons outstretched and shining by the light of the flames, plunged towards the ground. As it landed, however, it transformed into a tall, slender man with bronze skin and close-cropped grey hair. His eyes were uncommonly large, and they glowed with a strange rainbow sheen, as if they were mere prisms for a more perfect light within. When he spoke, his voice was deep. It rumbled as if the earth itself was moving.

"It took me some time to notice that little golden ball over there. I had my eye out for something larger."

"Do accept my apologies." Robin introduced the newcomer to Lahalissa. "Lahalissa, of the court of Queen Gloriana. Lahalissa, this is... Worm."

"Worm? How unusual?"

The strange eyes danced with amusement as they flickered between Robin and the demoness.

"I imagine it might strike you so."

"I met Worm a few years ago. I've had some experience with transformations, you know, and Worm was a willing student. I believe he's found the ability rather useful."

"Yes, I am most appreciative." Worm bowed his head towards Robin. "And as we agreed, this shall repay my debt to you?"

Robin was quick to assure Worm that there was no debt, that there had never been a debt of any kind. This was a simple exchange of favors between friends, nothing more. There are few who shoulder the burden of gratitude well, and

Robin very much preferred to remain in Worm's good graces. There were angels who despised these demi-mortal mongrels, but Robin knew better.

Lahalissa pointed towards the town. "We can't walk in there looking like this. For one thing, Worm would freak out every mortal that saw him. And for another, we'll need an excuse to go down into the basement. There usually aren't guards there, at the pub itself, but you never know."

"The pub?"

"The tunnel leads from the George and Dragon into the caves where the Seal lies. If he can't walk through walls, the only other way would take us right past three sets of guards, one mortal and two human."

There was a rumble that sounded like thunder, and Robin looked up to the sky before he realized Worm was laughing."

"Then lead us to the pub, little demon girl."

She shot him an irritated look. "You might be a lion among your kind, Worm, but don't push your luck with me. And speaking of little girls, Robin, best you become one."

"Sorry?"

"Do you want to sneak him in or not?" She smirked. "The entrance is inside the little girl's room. I'll be invisible, so just tell your Daddy you have to go to the potty, then do what I tell you to do. And Worm, for the love of your mortal mother, do something about those ridiculous eyes."

She vanished, but he could still hear her airy chuckle, accompanied by Worm's sub-bass rumble. The Twice-fallen had taken no offense, and appeared to be amused instead. Robin shook his head. Lahalissa was probably right. The point was to sneak in quietly and unobserved, but still, the notion rankled. The tall man blinked, and his strange eyes were suddenly brown, as human and commonplace as one could imagine. He grinned and held out a hand to Robin.

"Ta ta, sweetie. You be a brave girl, now. Daddy will protect you from the scary monsters."

Biting back a abundance of scathing replies, Robin petulantly flipped his beribboned pigtails back behind his shoulders, then reached up to take Worm's hand.

The pub was two-thirds empty. Robin sat and kicked his legs, which dangled uncomfortably high above the floor, as he scanned the smoky, high-ceilinged room for signs of trouble. There were few angels taking in the hops-sodden atmosphere tonight, but one could never be sure that the most innocuous-seeming Tempter was not actually one of the Mad One's roving Eyes. He almost ordered a beer from a passing waiter before coming to his senses and remembering his current guise. No, that wouldn't do at all.

"Where's the guards? Didn't you say there were guards this way too?"

"Down in the caves, but don't worry." Her voice was disembodied. "They won't be any trouble at all. I've been here the last three nights scouting out the place, and they're expecting me tonight. One of them is sweet on me, which isn't hard to understand when you consider how irresistible I am when I need to be. Of course, the fact that he's been on duty there for twenty years probably didn't hurt either."

Robin grinned in the direction of her laughter. He was starting to appreciate the truth of the Faery Queen's words. Lahalissa was far more than a mere lady-in-waiting, much less a dancer. Unlike most angels, she had an imagination.

"Why didn't you tell me? I would have come."

"Because Gloria didn't want you following me. You were far too eager."

Fair enough. "Very well. And how do you plan to explain Worm and I?"

"Worm can wait in the tunnel. You come in a few minutes behind me, as if you are my superior, chasing after me. I can handle the one; I've already prepared something for him. Will you be able to take care of one *kesh-adim*?"

"I should think so."

"Good." He felt a soft pair of lips lightly touch his girlish cheek. "Then count to one hundred and tell Daddy to take you to the little girl's room."

As she planned, no one paid them the least bit of attention. None of the angels even blinked, though Robin had no way of knowing if it was because they did not see Lahalissa or simply did not care. He felt her hand on his shoulder, guiding him past the women's loo to an unlocked door, which opened to

reveal a stairway leading down to a dank, ill-smelling basement.

They made it down the stairs without incident, and then the demoness surprised him as she unexpectedly revealed herself, not in any of her previous aspects, but as an image of Divine righteousness. Her lustrous black hair was shortened into a girlish blonde bob, her dark eyes expanded into huge, innocent blue orbs, and her curves were trapped in the bondage of a chaste white robe. If the robe was perhaps a little shorter than was normal for a Divine, and a little tighter in certain places, well, he had no doubts that the effects were intentional.

"Orolin's a bit of a pervert. He thinks he's pulling a Guardian." She batted her impossibly long lashes, blushed slightly and took a deep breath. "And, do you know, I think I might be weakening. Ooh, how much longer can I resist his evil wiles?"

Robin burst out laughing, although Worm rumbled low in his throat with impatience.

"Very well, shall I do the same?"

"No, just pretend you're a Divine musclehead who's come to warn him off me. Oro will be so fired up to think he's getting somewhere with me that any thought we might be up to something else won't even cross his mind. Just don't overdo it, I mean, I don't want him to punch you out before I make my move. Worm, you just wait around the corner, best you stay out of this."

"As you like."

A moment later, it was Lahalissa's turn to laugh when before her stood a hulking, white-winged caricature of a Divine warrior-angel.

"You might want to try to look a little less vacant. And don't drool either, I mean, that's really a bit much, don't you know?"

"Very well." He made the recommended alterations and gestured around the basement. "So, where is this tunnel?"

"The caves are under here," she explained, as she kneeled down and ran her hands over a seemingly unremarkable part of the dirty concrete floor. "Worm, move that rack, will you?"

Worm obeyed wordlessly, and Robin watched as she mumbled something he couldn't quite understand, until a thin line of red light began to shine straight up from the concrete. The light traced out a square, and a moment later there was a grinding sound and the outlined square disappeared to reveal a steep set of stairs, lit by a series of runes inscribed on the walls.

"How did you ever discover that?" he asked in wonder. He had not sensed any concealment spell, despite what he considered to be a highly refined ability to detect such things.

"I got stuck standing guard down there for a decade or two myself." She shook his head at his raised eyebrow. "Don't ask. And don't forget to give me a minute or two before you go in."

She descended the stairs without concern, and again Robin followed, though with a little more trepidation than he would have imagined. He wasn't the least bit afraid of the guards, but it had taken him so very long to reach this point; now that he was almost in sight of his goal, he found that his nerves were beginning to fray. What if he could not disarm the real guardian? What if they had moved that which he sought, or if the Mad One had learned of his search and was playing with him like a cat with a mouse, allowing him to come this far only to end the game here. Worst of all, what if he had been betrayed by those on whose behalf he acted.

No, that was impossible. He shuddered at the very thought. If after all this time the dream was false, better that he be banished to The Pit, better that he forget it forever.

At the bottom of the stairs, as she promised was a open cavern. A series of unlit torches were fixed to the rock; Lahalissa lit them with a wave of her fingers.

"There's no need to skulk; they knew someone was coming once the stairs were opened."

There was a dim light at the bottom of the stairs; it appeared to grow brighter in the direction she was leading them. Small demons squatted and lurked malevolently in the shadows, but Lahalissa strode past them, uncaring, until a small purple creature unexpectedly leaped out from behind a rock and attacked her leg.

"Get off me, you disgusting little beast!" The demoness uttered a few choice words that would have surely blown her disguise as she scraped the Vile off her leg with her free foot and viciously booted it into the wall, where it splattered like a squashed grape. She glanced back at Robin, as if daring him to find any humor in the incident, and both Robin and Worm wisely pretended that they hadn't seen anything.

They continued down the hall without further interruption. Lahalissa told him to wait for a minute before following him around the corner into what appeared to be the demon's lair and moments after counting to sixty, he found himself standing in a comfortable, well-lit room. There were several couches, two wide-screen televisions, a DVD player, and a large refrigerator. Nor were they alone; one demonic guard was greeting Lahalissa with all the enthusiasm of a puppy whose owner had been absent for a month, the other was studiously ignoring the couple in favor of what looked like the Bloomberg channel. He did not seem overly interested in Robin's intrusion either.

This close, it was impossible not to feel the seal. Its raw power sent shivers through him. Could they truly break it? It was on the south wall, perpendicular to the two plasma screens. "So, how's the market doing," he asked the horned demon on the couch, not really knowing what else to do but make conversation. He didn't want to make his move before Lahalissa made hers.

"Dow's up a hundred. And me short, don't you know?"

"What, you're day trading?" He was incredulous. Maybe Heaven was right to throw us out, ye gods, just look at how far we have fallen! "What do you care?"

"It passes the time and Vegas ain't on TV. What's it to you?"

Belatedly, he recalled that he was supposed to be a nosy Divine interloper, not a jaded Fallen angel. "Because gambling is wrong," he wagged a finger at the demon, who exposed a fine set of razor-sharp fangs when he yawned.

"Whatever. By the way, who are you and why are you bothering me?"

Robin pointed to the other two spirits. The tall demon, whose awkward length made him look rather like a gawky

teenage mortal, was nodding at something Lahalissa was saying. "She shouldn't be involving herself with the likes of him. I came to tell him that."

"Oh." The sitting demon lost interest and turned back towards the television. "So tell him already."

Lahalissa was an accomplished actress. Her eyes widened as she turned towards him at the sound of his approach, her mouth made a perfect circle of astonishment and she leaned into her demonic suitor as if she were in dire need of protection. Her actions not only convinced her would-be lover, but emboldened Orolin enough that he put a long, spike-lined arm around her slender shoulders and actually jutted out his elongated jaw.

"Who are you," he demanded boldly.

Robin puffed out his chest and struck a pose, laying his hand on his sword belt which, he reminded himself, was only an illusion. "I am Ar-Thundar, the True, and this Guardian is one of my cohort. Unhand her, vile demon, for her heavenly purity is not to be sullied!"

Orolin blinked, but he was not about to back down in front of Lahalissa. He stepped in front of the demoness as he put his hand to his own scabbard, which looked as if it held something more akin to a meat cleaver than a sword, and puffed out his chest. His elongated limbs no longer looked awkward, but dangerously long, and for all Lahalissa's earlier contempt, Robin saw that this demon was designed for fighting. Perhaps he'd overdone the confrontational tone after all.

"I think the lady will be the judge of that!" He glanced back at Lahalissa, who managed a convincing blush. "Back off, angel, this place is endowed with wards which strengthen me beyond what you would believe possible. But since you are a companion of the one I love, I shall permit you to depart in peace, if you leave now."

Robin raised both hands, his palms exposed, and began to retreat. He tried to look chagrined, and pleaded with Lahalissa, even as he moved closer to the demon on the couch. "Please, my dear, reconsider. To fall from Grace is an awful thing. I know your feelings are strong for this... this fallen one, but you must not do this!"

Orolin's face was twitching as he tried not to openly smirk, as Lahalissa shook her head and pushed her way past him to confront Robin. She placed her hands in his and smiled sadly. As she did, he could feel one of her palms begin to grow warm with an enchantment of sorts.

"My dear captain, I thank you, but my love is too strong. But though we must be enemies, let there nevertheless be peace between us." She leaned forward to kiss him on the cheek and whispered a single word. "Now!"

When she released his hands, Robin twisted and drew a black-flame dagger from his belt. He drove it into the throat of the unsuspecting demon sitting behind him, then leaped sideways to avoid the monster's instinctive reaction. The beast was incredibly strong, though, and despite the knife in his throat, he was able to stagger to his taloned feet just in time to receive a hard kick to his unarmored midsection. As he doubled over, Robin stabbed him in the back of the neck with his other blade, and that was finally enough to finish him. With a wailing, goat-like groan, the demon exploded in a sulfurous green-yellow flash.

Robin turned to see if Lahalissa needed any help, but she was already standing over the unconscious body of Orolin staring at him with an expression of disgust. Her demon lover was snoring loudly thanks to a sleep-inducing rune that she'd slapped on his forehead, but he was otherwise unharmed.

"Oh, you... stupid! You didn't have to kill him!"

"What, he's immortal?"

"You know what I mean. Anyhow, so much for sneaking in, Thundar. You'd better find that seal fast, before his life-ward brings about a thousand slayers down on our heads. I'll go get the mortal."

He was about to point out that Worm wasn't any more properly mortal than her, when he realized that he had no idea what she was talking about.

"Life-wards?"

Lahalissa pointed to the first guard's head, which unlike the rest of him, had not disintegrated but was hurled by the explosion over to the far side of the room, and was lying underneath the plasma screen. To Robin's horror, a red sigil

was flashing ominously between the horns jutting from the demon's forehead. Gehenna! Realizing she was right and that they had very little time, he closed his eyes, laid his hands on the southern wall, and quickly stripped the masking spell that hid the seal from prying eyes.

Whoosh!

He grunted as the purple flames of the encircled seven-pointed star hurled him backwards and he struck the cement floor hard enough to make him groan. Why couldn't he ever remember to jump out of the cursed material in time, he grumbled as he pushed himself up to marvel at the great seal. It was huge, more than thirty feet in diameter, and each fiery tine was marked with a individual sigil inscribed in silver. In the middle was an eighth sigil, but inlaid with gold. It was one that he had seen many times before, the mark that belonged to Albion's curse, the Midas of madness.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he protested, pointing at the flashing head when Lahalissa returned with Worm in tow.

"I never dreamed you wouldn't know. The Mad One is crazy, but he's not stupid, Robin. Oh, but well done, you've found it!" But he took little pleasure in her delight when he looked at the head and saw its eyes, which were now open. They were glazed over and possessed no sign of consciousness, but something must have been controlling them because they first looked over Robin, then turned their lifeless gaze on Lahalissa, then Worm. "Someone's watching us."

"Then we better get on with it. There it is," Robin pointed to the great fiery seal and clapped a hand on Worm's shoulder. "Can you do it?"

"Assuredly."

Worm reached into his mouth, and with a quick jerk, ripped out one of his canines. Robin groaned, and then had to look away as his tall companion, betraying no pain, pursed his lips and spat out a red goblet from the side of his mouth. But Lahalissa gasped, and when he looked back, he saw that the tooth had somehow grown into a great ivory sword, with an intricately carved handle that resembled a dragon.

"I believe it will serve," Worm said, offering it to him hilt-first. "Just stab directly into the heart of the seal. Use both hands...."

"What are you," asked Lahalissa in awe, but they both ignored her. Robin balanced the sword in his hands, surprised at its heavy weight, then lifted it behind his right shoulder like a giant dagger and drove it into the center of the flaming rock. To his surprise, it slid into the gold sigil as if the seal was a scabbard designed for it, and the purple flames flared, then began to change colour. First blue, then green, then red, until they finally faded to a sickly yellow fire that finally fizzled into nothing. The silver sigils melted, then drizzled down the wall into a metallic puddle, but when Robin withdrew the sword, he saw that the Mad One's molten sign now gilded the sword's blade.

"Brilliant," he said, amazed. He bowed respectfully and offered the sword to Worm, who took it without a word and held it at his side.

Denuded of all magic, the rock wall began to shudder, then a large portion began to slide away, revealing a murky chamber of vast dimensions. The air was oppressive with wards and spells, and Robin did not like to think of how many alarms they were probably setting off even as they entered. Lahalissa snapped her fingers; nothing happened. Nonplussed, she stared at her fingers and snapped them again. Nothing.

Robin frowned and tried a light-making spell of his own. "*Fiat lux!*" It failed too, and he shared a look of concern with Lahalissa. Only Worm seemed untroubled, though he was craning his head around and looking up at the impenetrable darkness in which the high ceilings were shaded.

"There's something up there," he said calmly.

They stopped. There was the faint sound of something scrabbling in the gloom high above them. Robin's skin began to crawl, and his uncertainty bloomed into full-flowered fear when he tried to shift into a higher shadow and found that he could not. The wards were unthinkable powerful, never before had he experienced such awesome might.

"It's a trap," he shouted. "Get back!"

But as he turned and started to run for the door, something shot out of the darkness, something shining and ominously gossamer, and blocked the door. He froze, recognizing the shimmering silk of a spider's web. Judging by

the large strands, though, it was an extraordinarily large spider. The sword! Worm had it, and surely it would slash through this stuff easily enough, magic or no magic.

Before he could call for the weapon, though, Lahalissa screamed, and he turned around in time to see a massive dark shape plunging from the shadows above. Somehow, it arrested its fall, and there it hung, seemingly suspended in mid-air, a giant spider with ferocious mandibles clacking portentously not three feet away from her.

It was a dreadful creature, five, perhaps six times wider than Robin was tall, with huge hairy legs, a disgusting cluster of eyes and a grotesque, bulbous body. But what made Robin weak in the knees with shock, fear and horror was not the spider's great size nor even the noxious odor emanating from it. For above the ocular cluster was a noble set of antlers, and beneath them was a face he had known many centuries before, a face that belonged to one for whom he had been searching ever since Albion's fall. Set amidst the shaggy spider-fur was the handsome face of Herne the Hunter.

CHAPTER 4

SING, CHILDREN, SING

AND I FEEL LIKE I'M BEING EATEN BY A THOUSAND MILLION SHIVERING FURRY HOLES. AND I KNOW THAT IN THE MORNING I WILL WAKE UP IN THE SHIVERING COLD. AND THE SPIDERMAN IS ALWAYS HUNGRY...

— The Cure, ("Lullaby")

The nightmarish abomination chittered. It flexed its horny mandibles slowly back and forth, and raised two black-furred legs in a threatening manner. The massive horror was a bestial vision from the Pit, but the most dreadful thing about it was the blank, mindless look in Herne's unmistakable eyes. There was no sign of the fallen angel-prince therein, no glimmer of the once-feared leader of the Wild Hunt. Indeed, if there was still so much as a flicker of intelligence lurking somewhere behind those owlish golden orbs, it appeared to have been swept away long ago by a devil-cursed maelstrom of insanity.

"Herne, what did they do to you?" Robin cried out, more in shock than fear.

"It can't be the Hunter," protested Lahalissa as she slowly backed away from the stinking atrocity. She recognized him, too. "That's not possible!"

Only Worm managed to remain calm; he did not flinch even when a huge leg brushed over his face and the grotesque eye cluster turned in his direction.

"The one you call Herne is still in there, somewhere," he called out to the others. "I can feel him."

"Herne!" Robin shouted, forcing himself to step closer to the thing. "Can you hear me? Who did this to you? Was it the Mad One? Do you know how we can break the spell?"

"The spell?" Robin froze as the lips moved on the embedded face. The voice was strangely high-pitched, almost childishly querulous, but it was recognizably the Hunter's. "Oh, there are no spells here, my dear friends. Mmmmm, the fires burn brightly. Such sweet little embers. So suck-suck-succulent, yes...no! No, it is not permitted, oh no, indeed, it is not."

The Hunter was there, true, but whatever was left of him was mad, Robin realized. He had been a friend once. Well, more one with whom Robin would have liked to be friends, but in any case, not an enemy.

"Herne, Great Lord, we want to help you. Tell us how we can free you!"

The angelic face seemed to tilt sideways within the mass of stinking fur, and Robin felt a wave of nausea threaten to overcome him. It was almost impossible to imagine that it was the face of one of Faerie's greatest lords.

"Free? No, not free. Not free, not me. But free to feed, dear, clever friend. Free to feed. Like diamonds, oh yes, the juice, the flame, the sweet devilfire shines within you."

Robin did not like the direction this conversation was taking, nor did he take much comfort in the increasingly excited way the spider-thing was rubbing its legs together. He had no way of knowing if Herne was trapped inside the monstrous outrage, or if he had been melded with it in such a way that the angel-lord was basically no more. But whatever the truth, it was beyond his skill to diagnose, much less cure, and there was nothing he could do about it except edge closer to Worm and hope that the ivory sword would have the same effect on the demonic arachnid as it had on the Mad One's seal.

"Is this a friend of yours?" Worm asked Robin, thoughtfully twirling the weapon in his hand as he regarded the monster.

"I don't know if I'd call him a friend, exactly."

"So you won't have any objections if I kill it?"

"I'll survive any regrets."

Herne's face grew slack again, but before the light of intelligence completely faded again from his eyes, his lips twitched into a smirking smile. "Killing, killing, the fare unwilling. And yet, the dear darlings must eat, yes?"

As quickly as it had appeared, the spider vanished abruptly, somewhere in the darkness above them.

"What did it mean by that?" Lahalissa asked. She looked apprehensive, and Robin did not blame her in the least. "Darlings? You don't really think that was Herne, do you?"

"I don't know. I think so."

"Hmmm," Worm mused aloud.

"Shhh," Robin urged.

There was a faint scrabbling sound, somewhere to the left of him. Or was it actually to the right? He turned slowly, seeing nothing, but trying to get a fix on the direction of the noise. "There's something... that way."

"And that way," Lahalissa was pointing in the opposite direction.

"In front too," added Worm.

And, Robin realized to his horror, behind them as well. For when he looked back towards the door, he saw five or ten spider-things, each the size of a large dog, and in each was embedded the face of the spell-cursed Hunter.

"I don't suppose it would do much good to tell them I'm not an angel, at this point?" Worm commented. Robin felt an irrational burst of anger at his strange companion for his apparent lack of fear. Lahalissa was pressed up behind him, and he was pretty sure that her fingernails had drawn flame from his arms, which she was clutching tightly.

"If you're not going to do anything, at least give me the blasted sword!"

"I can't imagine that it will suffice." Worm shrugged, but he handed it to Robin anyhow. "But have at it, if you like."

Robin lunged at the nearest spider as it came closer; it screamed in a horribly angelic voice as the sword pierced it before curling up and expiring, its legs kicking madly. But its demise did nothing to intimidate its fellows, indeed, if anything they were more excited than before. They were whispering between themselves, conversing in a bizarre combination of spiderish chitters and semi-discernible speech. He struck twice more, but the creatures now recognized the danger of the blade and he was only able to sever a single leg from one of the slower spiders. And they crept closer... even

in the dim light he could see there were dozens of the abominable things, surrounding them on all sides.

"Worm, you don't happen to have any more tricks, do you? This isn't working!"

Lahalissa shrieked as one bold spider-child leaped at her, and Robin spun around in time to see her smashing her fist into the terrible mockery of Herne's face. There was a crunching sound as purple ichor burst from its nose, but although the thing screamed, its claws did not release her and it used its long legs to pull her into its hungry embrace. Robin brought the sword around in a lethal arc that slashed the monster in half, killing it instantly, but any hope that its demise would intimidate its brethren was immediately dashed. There was a brief moment of silence, and then, the terrible brood attacked.

Robin was not quite sure what happened next. One minute, he was being engulfed in a hairy, stinking mass of arachnid abomination. Only seconds later, everything was heat, light and flame. Somewhere above him, but nearby, there was the unmistakable roar of fire, an explosive whoosh followed by chittering screams and the crackle of things set alight. He threw an elbow at the monster that was on top of him, trying to pin him down to the floor, then ran it through and leaped to his feet. It was a beautifully horrible sight.

Dozens of flaming spider-children were frantically dancing about in fruitless attempts to escape immolation. They fell away like midnight shadows running from an unexpected sun, and in the midst of them was Worm, only not as he had been before. As Robin stood there, gaping, he saw Worm open his mouth and send forth a furious jet of hellfire that swept over a pair of panicking spiders like an incendiary deluge. But it was not Worm's flamethrowing that stunned him, even as he felt the burning heat on his face, but the dragon-heads that now sprang from the sides of Worm's neck, both of which were actively seeking out targets and breathing fire on their own.

"He's no Nephilim," Lahalissa breathed in his ear.

"You don't think he's actually...."

"Count the heads."

Robin laughed, though it came out a little more hysterically than he would have liked. He should have known. Worm had been playing with him, earlier, arriving in the form of the three-headed eagle. And then, of course, there was the matter of the sword and its ability to break the Mad One's spell. A dragon's tooth is a powerful thing, even more so when the dragon is an ancient Lord of Chaos.

"Leviathan!" he shouted, brandishing the sword.

The three-headed Chaos lord turned, and Robin saw that all six of his eyes were like rainbows. All six of them also appeared to be faintly amused.

"I believe this belongs to you." The fallen angel walked over and returned the sword to its owner with a grin and a genuflection. "You fooled us. We thought you were merely twice-fallen."

"Forgive me, Great Lord," apologized Lahalissa, falling to her knees. "I did not know you."

Worm snorted. "Don't trouble yourself, little demon girl. I did not intend you should." He looked up towards the ceiling, where the light of the still-burning spider children could not penetrate. "Shall we see if we cannot perhaps free that erstwhile friend of yours?"

A pair of red leathery wings sprouted from his back, and he winked at Robin as he launched himself into the air. "I'm afraid you didn't actually teach me the art of transformation, but I did appreciate the effort," he called down, even as both dragon-heads scanned the darkness.

He banked suddenly to the right, as a goblet of silk barely failed to ensnare his left wing. It was hard to see exactly what was going on in the darkness, at first, but three fiery bursts abruptly revealed the shadowy shape of the great spider, as it smashed into the smaller, semi-human form of Worm. Herne's human face was shrieking wildly as his spidery legs wrapped around his foe and he buried his giant mandibles savagely into Worm's human neck. Lahalissa gasped as a strangled cry issued forth from Worm himself, and Robin wondered if he should run for the door.

Or, maybe you should take advantage of the distraction, fool! In the light of the burning spider-children, he could see something at the far end of the dark room that looked as if it

might be a stairway. He was useless here, Leviathan couldn't possibly need his help, so why wait? But he found that even with the end of his long journey before him, he could not take his eyes off the struggling monsters.

For never before had he seen a Lord of Chaos battle with a Great One. And for all that the cherub was ensorcelled and insane, Herne appeared to be winning. The spider's long, hairy legs held Worm's wings pinned to his body so he could not escape, and two of them forced the twin dragon heads to point away, where their bursts of flame could not hurt the arachnid. And still the mandibles dug in ever deeper, injecting a poisonous green ichor into the throat of the struggling Worm.

"We have to do something!" cried Lahalissa."

"Like what?"

"I don't know?"

Then a thought struck him. The spider hated fire, but Worm was no longer the only source. All around them were the corpses of the spider children, mostly reduced to glowing embers, but still a ready source of flame nevertheless.

"Fire!" Robin shouted to his companion. "Throw it at that thing!"

"What?"

He demonstrated, hurling a chunk of glowing spider remnants at the massive creature. He missed, but he could see that the height was not out of reach. Lahalissa joined him, and though their first few throws were off-target, soon they found the range and it was not long before the creature's noxious fur was ablaze in three places.

Attacked from an unsuspected quarter, the spider panicked, and made the mistake of trying to beat the flames out with its legs, and momentarily freed Worm's twin dragon heads. A moment was all he needed, and seconds later the abomination shrieked under the direct onslaught of the twin flamethrowers, one of which burned through the silken chord that held the creature aloft. Together, the two entwined combatants plunged to the floor like a giant meteor, exploding in a blinding burst of white-hot flames when they struck. The flames blazed higher, to twice Robin's height, as they engulfed the due and obscured the vicious battle.

Robin sat up on his elbows, shielding his face against the blazing heat, and looked over at Lahalissa. She was sprawled face-down where he had shoved her when he'd realized that the two great beings were about to fall directly on their heads.

"Holy flaming *Latroductus*!" he swore, wiping sweat from his brow. "Are you all right?"

Lahalissa peered uncertainly over her shoulder, in a manner that he probably would have considered extremely seductive had that sort of thing not been completely incongruous right now.

"I... think so." She rolled over and sat up. "Yes, all the bits and pieces appear to be in the proper places. Oh, dear, I do hope Worm is not hurt."

"I don't know if that's even possible."

Indeed, as he spoke, something rose from the flames. It was not shaped in the image of either of the battling beasts, it was just a simple angelic form. It stumbled awkwardly towards them, naked and hairless. Robin leaped to his feet, expecting to see Worm. But it was not Worm, it was Herne, not the Hunter, perhaps, but truly himself once more, freed of the spider-curse.

Behind him, Worm stepped out of the blazing fire, but in his human guise, and apparently unscathed. He smiled, and the rainbow-coloured eyes smoldered with self-satisfaction.

"You freed him," cried Lahalissa.

"I haven't enjoyed myself so much since I devoured that damnable Lord of the Sword," Worm declared. "And yes, he is free, though I believe quite a bit the worse for wear. Better you take him with you – did you see the stairs over there? Considering that there appear to be a mass of angels headed this way in a hurry, I suggest you may wish to expedite things. I shall be taking leave of you here."

"Wait," Robin clutched at his hand. "How can I thank... I am indebted to you."

Worm shook his head, and the light from the fire made his ivory teeth appear to be golden as he smiled. "Think nothing of it, little demon. As you said before, there is no debt between us. Go, and free your master. I care little for the petty wars of man and angel, but sometimes, even a Lord of

Chaos may find pleasure in, how shall I say it... in exerting himself for a change."

"Farewell, Great Lord," Lahalissa kissed him on the cheek.

"Assuredly. Oh, and Robin?"

"Yes?"

"Speaking of the Sword, you may find it most helpful in seeking to destroy your enemies, mighty though they are. Two things they cannot abide, the power of Heaven's King, and the power of my kin."

The ground began to glow beneath Worm's feet, and he began to sink into the floor of the cavern, not passing through the rock but simply melting his way through it.

"Let them follow this way, if they dare!" The Lord of Chaos laughed and waved at them as he sank beneath the rocky surface.

Robin waved back, then looked at Lahalissa. Her eyes were grim with the realization that they did not have much time.

"Go," she told him. "Herne and I will try to delay them a little, if need be. But hurry!"

He nodded and ran for the stairs, sincerely hoping that his lord and master was in better shape than poor Herne whose golden eyes were still lost in confusion, if not madness.

CHAPTER 5

TAKING EVERYTHING AWAY

ANOTHER NIGHTMARE ABOUT TO COME TRUE
WILL MANIFEST TOMORROW
ANOTHER LOVE THAT I'VE TAKEN FROM YOU
LOST IN TIME, ON THE EDGE OF SUFFERING
— Disturbed, (“Prayer”)

He screamed. Not for the first time. Nor, most likely, for the last. Years passed. Decades, then centuries. It was time enough to shatter the senses of a god. But he was not mad so much as he was nothing; he was formless and void. Was it ten days since he had been bound in chains of living silver fire and sealed to these stones with the unholiest of magicks, or ten millennia? Only one thing was constant, but it could not help him mark the time.

Pain, in the moment, is always eternal.

His arms and legs were awkwardly splayed, stretched out to their full length, and with his head they formed a living pentagram pointing ominously at the molten core of the shadow world. The silver fire snaked hungrily about his wrists and ankles, always gnawing, always burning, but never devouring.

More time passed, perhaps a minute, perhaps a decade. Then he noticed something strange. There was an absence, something was missing. His ever-present companion was gone. What was it? Somewhere within the deep red haze in which his awareness furtively swam, a thought gradually began to take form.

Then he realized the truth. He could feel nothing. His pain was gone, and the numbness was like paradise, a faint touch of ice on the lips of one engulfed in the *auto de fe*. For a blissful moment, he almost relaxed, but the knowledge that

his old friend, his only friend, was out there somewhere, waiting, filled him with such panic that the crimson sea swelled over him again, and he faded away....

"I say, do you think you've had enough, then?"

The bound one blinked as his shroud of darkness was abruptly violated by a lurid flare of emerald light. A shape stood before him, no, it was a being, standing upside down on the ceiling. Or was it the floor? He could feel the tattered remnants of his mind attempting to find order in the madness, as a panoply of bewildering shapes and sounds assaulted his time-deadened senses. He felt confusion and weariness, and suddenly, unexpectedly, a searing sense of fury.

And with the rage came a semblance of memory. Not everything returned to him, very little, in fact, for his mind was badly abused. But he came alive to the knowledge of what he had once been, and he realized that he would do anything, anything at all, if he could only somehow purchase his release from this unending ordeal.

"Please," he begged. It was so difficult to form words. "Release."

"You are in a bad way, aren't you. O my lord king, how are the mighty fallen!"

The words were strange to his ears, but even in his barely-lucid state, he could hear the grief in the other's voice. The visitor, no, rescuer, gestured and the hissing chains were blessedly stilled. Their magic disappeared and they became nothing more than dead metal, mere ornamentation for his neck, wrists and ankles. Somehow, he found the wherewithal to strain against them, but they did not move.

"You're even worse off than I thought. Have you no strength left to you at all?"

"I exist," he whispered. "I persist."

His rescuer smiled enigmatically as he drew a fingernail down his wrist. Green flames flickered enticingly from the shallow wound.

"Pray, take no insult in this," the visitor told him, before pressing the wounded wrist to his lips. He felt the sweet taste of raw power, and then the fire was flooding through him,

setting everything from the crown of his head to the tips of his fingers ablaze with vigor. He absorbed the power, embraced it and let it engulf him, as he sought more, ever more.

“Stop, that’s enough! Enough, desist!”

A hand struck his face, and the shock of the blow woke him fully. He released the other, more abruptly than expected, and almost laughed with joy as he saw his rescuer stumble backwards and nearly fall. He was still not entirely sure who he was, or what, but the important thing was that the pain was gone, completely! He felt like a new creation born from flux and chaos as the borrowed angelfire coursed through him and its supernatural essence restored him to life.

With the slightest of twitches, he rid himself of his restraints and the dead silver flew across the cavern where it was buried deep within the walls. For a moment, he hung suspended without support, upside down, in the air. Slowly, deliberately, he rotated his body until he was fully upright; only then did he bring his legs together and allow his feet to touch the ground. Standing erect for the first time in ten centuries, he folded his arms across his chest, and regarded his rescuer in silence. Recognition dawned first, and then anger. He waited, but when his visitor remained mute, he spoke in a voice cold with age-old anger.

“Revenge delayed is nevertheless sweet.
Had I drained thee it would be meet.
How darest thou come to me, hobgoblin?
Thinkest thou the years my rage would soften,
And void the memory of treachery
Which never the like this world did see?”

“You don’t understand,” replied the other, who continued to regard him warily but seemed otherwise unfazed by the bitterness of his accusation.

“I took no part in your great fall,
And treachery was by you fanned
When jealousy cast fatal pall
Upon the Queen, and you cast out
That staunch support of love’s redoubt.

And furthermore, o king archaic,
We speak now in modes prosaic... in other words, shut up
and listen to me for once, you stubborn old fool."

But the Faery King's fury was too great by far to listen to the admonishments of another, even a rescuer who protested his innocence.

"Cur! Surely thou shalt see oblivion
Before forgiveness from King Oberon!
Betrayed, forsaken and dethroned uncrowned
The Faery King of Albion renowned.
Speak in thy defense, but know
Thou art of mine no good fellow.
False friend! The villain's hand unseen—"

"Not me, old fool, it was thy Queen!"

Oberon staggered backwards as if his rescuer, and possibly betrayer, had struck him a blow. His back smashed into the rough stones to which he'd so recently been chained, but that momentary pain was as nothing compared to the cruelty of the words which now flayed his heart. In centuries of pondering upon his fate, never once had the thought that his betrayer could have been his true love even entered his mind. His eyes saw nothing, he heard nothing, there was only red, red rage.

Robin saw Oberon fall to his knees, in apparent grief and pain, and repented his harsh words.

"Sorrow is mine, I dare say
Nor would I ever you betray.
None knew my nature more than you
As I am wicked, I speak true
Naught am I, naught shall I be
Except that ever I served thee."

But too late, he realized that the king was not grief-stricken, but enraged, and his protestations were useless in the face of the Faery King's suddenly murderous fury.

Oberon rose to his feet with an expression harder than iron, as angry red flames flickered from his rage-filled eyes. He stepped forward and grabbed the traitor's throat, lifting him effortlessly into the air. Choked gasps for mercy were met only with a tightened grasp and disdainful words.

"Well-served am I, by mendacious fae
Accursed of Man and the Throne of Dei.
I reject and rebuke thy lying word
Such claims were better had I never heard
Thee speak. Nay, rather the fiery embrace
Of my chains than to know that her sweet face
Is but masquerade, serpentine façade,
A traitorous beauty and a deceitful fraud!"

Oberon waved his free hand, and the dead silver began to glow ominously from where it was embedded in the far wall. The stones around it began to liquefy and melt, giving off a hot, golden light that was deceptively beautiful in the unearthly emerald light. As the molten rock ran down the cavern wall, Oberon summoned his erstwhile chains from the stone with the force of his will and caused them to circle in the face of his frightened rescuer. They swam through the air like silver sea snakes, graceful and deadly, awaiting only a command to pierce, penetrate and imprison.

It was at that moment that Robin realized he had forgotten Gloriana's vial. It had been a mistake to restore Oberon to even a modicum of his great power without the corresponding knowledge of the centuries that had passed. With a savage effort, he twisted himself free of Oberon and dropped to one knee before his angered liege. Quickly, he produced it and held it up to the king even as he bowed his head.

"O king, if you will not heed me,
Heed Gloriana Queen, for she
Has prepared for thee this potion magic
To explain the centuries tragic.
For in the time since you were gone
Eight hundred years have seen the dawn
And passed away again as fast.

Drink this, O king, to know the past.

Oberon was at first inclined to refuse the proffered vial, suspecting a trap, but the desire to know sparked an undeniable hunger deep within him and overwhelmed his anger. Eight hundred years! It was impossible! So much could happen over so great a span of time. Then, too, how could he be sure of the truth of his betrayal without the knowledge offered to him by Gloriana. Doubt assailed him. It was a queenly gift, to be sure, but did it come at a price? As little as he remembered, he could not help but remember her. Surely no one could forget her! A hawk among the pigeons, she had been. Did he dare drink? And yet, how could he refuse? For pride's sake, he resisted a moment longer, and then, with mounting desire, he took the vial from his onetime servant's hand.

But it was more than faint recollections that came rushing back to him. Or into him, rather, for he found himself reeling before things he had never seen, places he had never been and beings he had never known. The speed of everything was shocking, the scale unearthly, and the very language in which he found himself trying to interpret this alien world was barely recognizable. It was harsh, unlovely, stripped down to what, to him, seemed to be a crudely sibilant parody of itself, and yet there was a certain elegance to its simplicity.

And then, the memories struck him. They struck him as Caesar was struck, like stabbing knives bent on cruel slaughter.

CHAPTER 6

BEAUTY'S BETRAYAL

FAIRE YMPES OF BEAUTIE, WHOSE BRIGHT SHINING BEAMES
ADORNE THE WORLD WITH LIKE TO HEAUENLY LIGHT,
AND TO YOUR WILLES BOTH ROYALTIES AND REALMES
SUBDEW, THROUGH CONQUEST OF YOUR WONDROUS MIGHT
— Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*

It was a fine day, for Albion had been blessed by an early spring. The air was warm and the dawn winds were sweet with the promise of budding life. The change was most welcome to Oberon, for the winter had been rife with rumors of shifting allegiances within the Principalities and veritably plagued with emissaries from one dark Power or another seeking to draw him into what was, to him, nothing more than an unending web of profitless intrigue. It was extraordinary, this unaccountable fascination with the mundane world of Man, but it was not for Oberon. The King of Faerie occupied himself with other concerns, which, if less dramatic, were altogether more satisfying.

Particularly on a day like this, surrounded on every side by the promise of newly-woken beauty, it was unthinkable to trouble one's mind with such distasteful, unpleasant matters.

"Hail, Oberon," one of his Knights of the Rose saluted him, accompanied, the king was pleased to see, by a quintet of fetching nymphets. Oberon was holding his court in a happy, sun-kissed glade surrounded on three sides by a young forest composed primarily of ash and birch trees. The clearing was open to the east and presented a majestic view of the Cotswolds, their rounded peaks still dusted with the melting remnants of the season's last snow.

Oberon was not loathe to see it go. While the Winter Court held pleasures of its own, it was truly a relief to escape the

gloomy stronghold of Mount Badon and once more resume a wandering throughout his island realm. Spring was always his favorite time of year, as old friends woke and came to pay him friendly homage and he met his newest subjects as they came to receive their names from their lawful lord and king.

Today his throne was a wondrous construction of brilliantly blooming flowers, and he idly plucked a white lily from the armrest as the Rose Knight, his noble face incongruously hidden behind a horned helm, presented the five wide-eyed nymphets. Dryads, they were, and still more than a little confused as to the state in which they'd discovered themselves, if he judged them correctly. One in particular, a slim dark-haired lady of a young ash tree, was shivering as if the warm April wind was blowing from the north. He smiled to himself, knowing that it was not Boreas who made her quiver so, but Oberon. Perhaps she retained some semblance of her memories or perhaps she was an unusually timid spirit, either way she did not yet realize that she had left her days of turmoil and strife behind her and had entered into a magical realm of gladness and good cheer.

"To me, my loves," the Faery King cried, smiling, and four of the five were quick to obey. They came to him joyfully, laughing and giggling as they covered him with kisses and embraced him with white limbs lithe and supple.

"I name you, Dainia," he told the first, a pale blonde birchgirl who clapped her little hands with delight. "You, my dear, are Vellissima, and you are Kallissima, and you, heart of my heart, shall henceforth be known to all as Miridriel."

The four nymphets, each visibly pleased with her name, ensconced themselves comfortably about him as he regarded the reluctant dryad. Miridriel sat at his feet with her head upon his knee as the beech twins, Vellissima and Kallissima, shared his lap and Dainia stood behind the throne, artfully massaging his royal shoulders. They were good names, and apt, he considered, for beauty demands nothing less than its like, in appellations as in *amor*.

"Don't be afraid, little darling," he tried to coax the shy one to him. But she was rooted in place, and did not dare so much as to lift her downcast eyes to meet his own. "Come, my dear, there is nothing to fear. Put all thought of Heaven and Earth

behind you, you are in Faerie now, and it is a place of love and joy, sweetling. Come, and be named!"

She did not respond, except to stubbornly shake her head and, perhaps, to blush a little. Oberon threw back his head and roared with laughter, and the assembled court joined in. Never before had a newborn nymph refused him, much less refused to receive her name. It was remarkable!

He was amused, but wondered if perhaps he did wrong to overlook her artless breach of protocol, which, after all, might be seen by some as an insult to his crown. And yet, there did not seem to be a spark of defiance in her; she simply stood there mute and unassuming, her eyes locked upon the greening earth as if she expected to watch it grow before her.

But as he pondered her fate, a horn blew, echoing across the waking hills, and the whole Court began to stir with excitement. The sounding heralded nothing less than the approach of his queen, and all thoughts of the reluctant dryad vanished from Oberon's mind as he anticipated the prospect of feasting his eyes once more on beauty which he had not seen for two long fortnights. Like the red-breasted robin, the Queen of Faerie was ever eager for the first flowers of spring and this year she had taken advantage of winter's early demise to leave their grim redoubt and breathe new life into the young buds sprouting across the length and breadth of Albion.

He rose from his throne and the twin dryads tumbled from his lap onto the still-moist earth with shrieks of startled laughter. Miridriel, a little quicker of thought, had divined his intentions and already stood at his side, from which he banished her with a smile and a pat on her lovely naked bottom.

"The Queen approaches our presence," he announced grandly, as if every sprite, fairy and fae there did not already know. "We welcome her with joy, and we declare her path shall be strewn with rose petals, nay, with living roses!"

Oberon gestured at the earth and caused a carpet of blood-red roses to rise from the ground, creating a soft, flowery path which led from the hillside entrance to the glade all the way to the throne.

"Let there be music fit for a queen," he commanded, and immediately a Knight of the Grey Heather produced a harp from about his person and began to sing in a voice that was as haunting as it was melodious. It was, however, not at all the effect the king was seeking.

"Sir Gaeris," he called out to the singer, "your ready willingness to serve your queen does you credit, but if you love me, do be silent! It is spring and this is your queen, not a love-starved innocent to be beguiled by a handsome knight with a mournful voice and a plaintive gaze. Fauns, spritelings, your pipes, if you please."

He sat back on his throne, satisfied by the distinctly more cheerful sounds of a fluted fanfare being expertly blown by a quartet of woodland creatures, and waited expectantly. Nor was he disappointed when, only a few moments later, a familiar figure crested the rise and caught her breath upon catching sight of the blossoming walkway. It was Titania, and she was more ravishing than ever, clasping her hands to her heart as she declaimed humbly:

"Too much honor, from thee to me.
For what more may I hope to see
Than him whose worship is my whole,
Lord of my heart, my King, my soul?

The pipers had fallen silent as the court, breathless, waited for his response. Oberon smiled enigmatically and forced them to wait as he took in the vision that was his queen. Today she was more youthful than was normally her wont, and her long tresses were not pure scarlet, but shot through with sparkling copper that reflected the sun's radiance with a primaveric impertinence. She was wearing a simple white gown, nearly transparent in the sunlight, and its plunging neckline revealed a leafy silver pattern which ran up from between her breasts like a liquid metal river that divided into two just beneath her throat, then traced her collarbones, jaw and cheekbones until it came to fruition in an intricate pair of sigils that highlighted her green eyes.

As always, she robbed him of a portion of his glory. And yet, was her triumph not also his?

She smiled at him, but it was more than just affection, it was a daring expression of loving challenge. They were more than mere lord and lady, they were the King and Queen of Faerie, and so their coming together was as much ritual as reunion, with equal import given to display as to decorum.

There was a brief stirring amidst his knights and Oberon frowned, displeased that there should be any interference with what was, after all, nearly a sacred moment. He cleared his throat and bowed to his lady, then raised his hands and caused a gentle breeze to ripple through her curls, framing her face in a glorious blaze of coppery fire.

"What honor there might be, is mine
O Lady, small be the glory
Humbled before the likes of thee,
Perfection, in sun's fire refined.
Wherefore would be, without thee, spring?
Like my heart, frozen in winter
I pray, once more, do disinter
This thy heart's slave, O love, thy king!"

Oberon's voice rang out over the hills as he reached his triumphant climax and his court broke into gladsome cheers at his flattering eloquence, which he capped off with a deep and graceful bow. As he righted himself, he lifted his gaze to meet his queen's, expecting blushing admiration, or at the very least some modicum of pleasure. He was surprised to see there were tears brimming in her emerald eyes.

He took a step towards her, but as she turned her face away from him he heard the unmistakable sound of swords clearing leather, followed by the deadly crackle of angelfire. More astounded than alarmed, he whirled around to see the shocking sight of one of a Rose Knight striking down a pair of his sworn brethren, who were unarmed and defenseless against this treacherous attack.

For a moment, Oberon could do nothing more than stand and stare, even as his court dissolved into a panicked mass of frightened, screaming spirits. He could not tell if there was but one false knight or a dozen, so great was the sudden chaos. In the blink of an eye, two strange fae stood before

him, they were clad in the livery of the Lily, but their faces were unknown to him. One brave nymph hurled herself at the taller of the two knights, but the false knight struck her down with the back of his fist and continued to advance on Oberon.

"How dare you," hissed the Faery King, fair bidding to burst in his apoplectic outrage. "You bring your forsaken war into my Court? Would you have war, damned ones? Then you shall have it, but here you will find naught but death, destruction and the Pit!"

As one, both knights sprang towards him, thrusting their deadly demonic blades towards his chest, but he parried them untouched, with nothing more than a broad, sweeping gesture of his arm. The raw force of his angry will sent both weapons flying wildly through the air like a pair of flaming brands, and the disarmed knights cried out as the force that had wrenched their weapons from them sent them reeling. But they did not fall, for Oberon was quick to grab them both, each by his throat, and he roared like an enraged beast as he lifted them high into the air.

Their legs kicked wildly, but to no avail, and though their fingers clutched at his hands they would have found it easier to scrabble at stone. As Oberon slowly tightened his lethal grasp, he looked about and was pleased to see that only two of the false knights were still standing, and both were hard-pressed, surrounded by the flashing swords of his loyal fae. Titania, he was relieved to see, was safe, as seven or eight of her fierce Flower Guard were circled protectively around her.

As the situation was under control, Oberon dared to loose his grasp on one attacker and drew him closer, even as he crushed the spirit out of the other. He felt a rush of heat as the dead fae went up in a rush of evil-smelling green flame, and cast the flaming wreckage from him with a mixed sense of fury and disgust.

"Who sent you," he demanded. "I know you not. What grudge do you bear Albion, or her King?"

"No grudge," gasped the other, still prying fruitlessly at Oberon's fingers. "Sent... sent by... I can't... no... can't...."

The false fae screamed unexpectedly, and Oberon started as the other's eyes, only inches from his own, suddenly

disappeared, engulfed by flames burning out of the sockets. He could feel the hellfire heating up inside the other's body, warming his hand even as it incinerated the insides of his captive. With a horrified shout, he hurled the imposter from him just as green flames burst through the angel's skin. Nymph and knights alike scattered as the burning demon landed in their midst and was devoured by the unnatural fire.

"I told her that would never work," he heard someone say, just as an icy, cold sensation flared in his back, as if he'd been stabbed by an icicle. He clutched at his back, but his arms felt strangely heavy, and when he tried to turn around to seize his attacker, he found himself losing his balance and he fell heavily on his side. He strained mightily to turn his head, and just managed to do so before the spreading paralysis froze him motionless on the ground.

"On the other hand, it wasn't a bad little diversion, either." The nameless nymphet who had defied him earlier now stood over him with a satisfied smirk on her face. She was demure no more, instead she was savagely shameless as she brandished a glowing blue dagger in her hand, which pulsed in a strangely lifelike manner. "Stand back, all of you, for in my hand I hold nothing less than the spirit of your king. A single word from me, and his flame shall be quenched, now and for evermore!"

Oberon could not see anything but the false nymph - for whatever she was, she was no newborn spirit of the woods - but he could hear his brave fae whispering amongst themselves, wondering if the assassin could be speaking the truth and if they dared call her bluff. But before they had come to a decision, it was made for them. Titania's voice was calm, but firm, as she ordered Albion's knights to stand down, lest their king be destroyed.

The sorcerous cold was beginning to lace its frigid fingers through his mind now, and the vibrant spring colours were fading into invernal shades of grey when Titania kneeled down at his side. What haunted him most, though, as he slid into unconsciousness, was not the two perfect tears which hung suspended from her long, crimson lashes nor the pale anguish which filled her bloodless face. What chilled him

down to the very marrow of his soul was the sight of her lips forming a single, terrible word.

"Sorry," she whispered. "O my love, I am so very sorry."

Then the cruel night claimed him and he knew no more.

CHAPTER 7

LORD OF THE FOREST

I KNOW A BANK WHERE THE WILD THYME BLOWS,
WHERE OXLIPS AND THE NODDING VIOLET GROWS,
QUITE OVER-CANOPIED WITH LUSCIOUS WOODBINE,
WITH SWEET MUSK-ROSES AND WITH EGLANTINE:

— William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Robin watched dispassionately as Gloriana's potion worked its magic, dissipating the demonic fury that earlier possessed the Faery King and replacing it with sorrow. Without warning, Oberon cried out and fell to his knees weeping, his face buried in his hands. Robin was distressed himself, not so much because he had caused such pain to his king, but because he could hear the clattering of someone rushing down the deep winding stairwell that led to Oberon's prison.

He was loathe to lay hands on the king, but events left him little choice. Apologizing mentally, he grabbed Oberon's arms and pulled him to his feet.

"My king, I fear we must leave, at once! Your enemies come, and we must fly!"

The Faery King looked at him unsteadily, his eyes red and confused, and sank back to his knees. "Titania... my love, my queen."

Bloody Hell! The footsteps were coming closer but it was only one angel, and, by the sound of it, a feminine one at that. That better be Lahalissa, or we're finished. A moment later, he was relieved to see that it was indeed the lovely demoness, albeit smoke-stained and more than a little battered.

"You have him! Is he..."

"No, his mind isn't broken. But he despairs at Titania's betrayal."

"We must fly! Herne won't be able to hold them off forever."

"Herne? He fights?"

"The Mad One sent a cohort of Kesh'Adai who weren't exactly prepared to run into a half-mad Great One. He fights like a demon!" Lahalissa laughed, sounding less than entirely sane herself. "Oh, he was a marvel of devastation! Half of them are no more, and the other half ran. But there will be reinforcements coming. They won't be long."

"Then we'd better be going."

"How will we get the king to move?"

"He will. He must."

Lahalissa's jaw dropped as Robin struck the silently weeping Oberon, slapping his face with an audible crack.

"You dare!" the Faery King's eyes flashed death, but Robin was not about to apologize for his unexpected *lese majeste*.

"Your majesty, those who bound you are upon us. The Hunter holds them off, but his strength is failing. We must leave, now, and seek safe haven. By the way, this is Lahalissa, Gloriana's lady-in-waiting."

"Yes, yes, of course, we must." Oberon extended a hand to Lahalissa, and with her help the Faery King rose to his feet. "We thank you, fair spirit. And in light of your service, Puck, we forgive your crime. You are a spirit loyal, and true. Lahalissa, your mistress has given us much, including a suggestion that we join her immediately. Can you take us to her?"

"She could, but majesty, may I suggest another destination?" Puck broke in. "I don't believe the Queen would betray you, but the Mad One's Eyes will be everywhere and with the escape of a royal of Albion, surely one or two will alight upon the others."

Lahalissa looked like she wanted to argue, but did not dare. Oberon's bearded face was still with thought for a moment, and then, to Robin's relief, he acceded to caution's counsel.

"I am not sure I know you, old friend. The Puck of my remembrance was never one to follow wisdom's course."

"Nothing's changed, O king. One could argue this rescue was the epitome of foolishness, and its seeming success

nothing more than fool's luck. Which appears to be running swiftly out."

For even as he spoke, there was the sound of an onrushing wind, a ferocious howling and then ominous silence. Robin could feel the weight of great power dangerously near. Albion's enemies had arrived – it was past time for her king to flee. He placed a hand on each of his companion's shoulders and squeezed lightly.

"I hope you don't mind squirrels," he told them. And with a flash of green light, they disappeared.

Thirty miles south of London, there is a garden park located on the edge of the Sussex Weald. It is a quiet place, and beautiful, graced by a chain of five lakes linked by waterfalls. Only a few paces outside the park's boundaries, three trees stood next to each other in a single row, two chestnuts and a mighty oak, with branches interlocking and knobby roots digging deep into the rich, loamy dirt of the quiet forest. Such a sight would not normally occasion any cause for comment, except for the fact that ten seconds ago, the area on which they stood had been largely devoid of vegetation, with the exception of a solitary *ceanothus*, the continued thriving of which looked less than promising in light of how its access to the sun had been unexpectedly curtailed.

Two squirrels, which had been happily occupied with chasing each others tails until the sunlight suddenly vanished, pulled up from their sport in some confusion. They were quite familiar with the location of every nut-bearing tree in the immediate vicinity, and even to their diminutive rodent minds it seemed implausible to the point of impossibility that they could have somehow overlooked the massive acorn-producing factory that now towered over their furry grey heads.

The smaller of the two squeaked quizzically at his companion, who sat back on his haunches with an expression of overt skepticism that would have been comprehensible even to an observer who did not happen to be a member of the greater *sciurus* family. The small squirrel was not to be dissuaded, though, not with the promise of what appeared to

be the finest unmarked claim that southeastern English squirreldom had seen in five generations.

His nose quivered, then he cautiously took a step towards the giant oak. Then another, and a third, followed by a little leap that brought him within a single bound of the great tree. An ill-timed gust of wind caused its branches to rustle threateningly, and the second squirrel chirped a warning which encouraged his more adventurous friend to think twice about venturing the giant on the first go. Instead, he scrambled up the leftmost tree, the taller of the two chestnuts, and edged out on a limb that would bring him to within inches of one of the mighty oak's lower branches.

He never made it, though. Without warning, without even the smallest breath of wind, the limb on which he was crouching twitched violently and sent him tumbling head-over-tail to the ground eight feet below. No sooner had the surprised rodent touched the ground than he was scampering off for the protection of more familiar trees, more proper trees, trees which held still as trees were supposed to hold still, and suffered the pitter-patter of little feet with forbearance. Only slightly behind him was his friend, who was squawking angry imprecations over his shoulder as he retreated hastily.

"Oh, that's not nice," commented the tree, now *sans* squirrels.

"I don't think you're supposed to do that," muttered the other chestnut.

"I couldn't help it, those tiny claws, they tickle!"

"You have to relax, be the tree."

"I don't believe everyone is quite as accustomed to the need to hide from pursuit as you, Puck," commented the oak in a deep oakish bass. "So, what do we do now?"

"We wait. Beowaesc will be here soon, I'm sure. I told him I might be needing to lie low for a while, and this is a good place to do it. No one ever comes here except the woodland spirits and tempters stuck watching over the occasional eco-freak. He'll probably have noticed our arrival, and if not, those disgusting little squeakers will probably run right to him anyhow."

"They're not disgusting," protested the first chestnut. "Their feet just tickle, that's all."

"Rats with tails," insisted the other chestnut, shaking its branches. "Don't be fooled by the cute fluffy act, it's nothing but a charade. If you'd ever been a tree before —"

"Silence!" The oak commanded an end to the discussion. "One comes."

An outline of a face appeared on the bark of the chestnut tree. The face resembled Robin's, in the same way that a face pressed up against a bedsheet resembles the face of the person behind the bedsheets. It was not entirely recognizable, but as Robin had said, Beowaesc was expecting him. And then, Beowaesc was more than a little accustomed to differentiating between one tree and another.

"Ah, so there you are. You don't know much about trees, do you, Puck."

"Er... a good day to you, my lord. Why do you say that?"

Beowaesc was a tall forest god, with richly hued skin that shone like varnished beech. His well-kept beard was mahogany and of middling length, and his eyes, filled with the ancient wisdom of the woods, were set deep into his craggy face. He carried a neatly polished staff, and his bare feet were so hard and horny that Robin pitied any poor boots forced to protect the earth from them should he ever choose to wear a pair. Antlers sprang from his forehead, not a great stag's rack like the Hunters, but a humbler pair of three-tined horns. Like his forest, Beowaesc had a touch of civilization about him, and yet there was a sense of earthy power radiating from him even so.

The forest lord pointed to the blue-flowered tree shrouded by their branches. "It's quite simple. No *ceanothus* could ever grow to such heights enshrouded by the likes of you three. Anyone who knows the first thing about vegetation would know something was amiss. Why, even a mortal would have noted it!"

A look of chagrin crossed the bark face. Robin's lips twisted in an expression of frustration, and in the blink of an eye, the chestnut disappeared and he was himself again, albeit clad in an appropriately woodsy brown robe.

"You make it sound so obvious!"

"It is, if you know what to look for."

"Very well, what would you advise, then, should we seek to avoid drawing unwanted attention."

Beowaesc stroked his beard and smiled at Robin, as if he were a favored nephew. "Why don't you introduce your companions to me first. Then, I shall advise you as to a suitable locale. There is a pleasant glen with a lovely view of the main waterfall not far from here. It's only about a five minute walk. I've spent many a pleasant season there."

Robin tried not to roll his eyes. A season? And more than once? This was not his first time as a tree, nor even his twentieth, but it was a guise he wore only out of necessity. It was mind-crushingly boring, for one thing, and for another, Lahalissa was right. Squirrel feet tickled something terrible. "How very kind," he answered, leaving his thoughts unvoiced. "This is Lahalissa, in service to... a Shadow Lady of some note known as Dr. Sprite."

"Indeed," Beowaesc nodded politely as the second chestnut transformed before him. As Robin hoped, the forest lord had no knowledge of the world of mortal academics and would ask no dangerous questions. Beowaesc smiled in appreciation, though, as the lovely demoness curtsied to him wearing a leafy woodland outfit that honored his position as well as her figure. "The aspect suits you well, my dear. Be welcome in my weald, Lahalissa."

"Thank you, Great Lord," she breathed submissively.

"And this –"

"Oh, no. No, no, no." Beowaesc's eyes widened and he backed away from the place where the giant oak had stood only a moment before. "That's not possible. It can't be!"

"So you recognize your rightful liege, old friend?" said Oberon, and his voice was like frost running down the edge of a sword blade. "Or perhaps you have forgotten oaths sworn long ago, sworn by Rose and Thorn."

"I... I forget nothing." His eyes flicked desperately between Robin and the angry Faery King. "But you cannot think to stay here! Not here, no! It is not safe!"

"For you, or for your king?" Robin asked sarcastically. He had not told the forest lord exactly who would be requiring refuge, but he had never considered for a moment that

Beowaesc would refuse his lawful king. Was he not once a knight of Albion?

"For none of us." Beowaesc recovered from his momentary surprise and drew himself up to his full height, for he was, after all, a spirit of some substance and standing in his own demesne. "Oberon, I am pleased beyond words to see you have escaped, but you are a king without a crown, without even a kingdom. Albion is no more."

"I see," hissed Oberon. "And did you fight for her? Or did you see the turn of season, and then quickly turn your coat?"

"You wrong me. You do not know how it was. One day, Albion was there, strong and proud, unassailable, like her king. And the next, both were gone, swept away like Atlantis before the waves."

"Waves of treason, mayhap –"

"Stop!" Lahalissa stepped between the angry Fae, both of whom towered over her like the oak over the chestnuts. "Lord Beowaesc, this is not your battle, not yet. We will not stay if you will only hold your silence, may we not ask that much of you?"

She stilled Robin's incipient protest with an upraised palm, as Beowaesc briefly met Oberon's eyes, then looked away. "None shall know," he said. "I would serve Albion, but truly, it is not safe here. The mansion – it is over there, beyond those gardens – is host to two cohorts of Divine. We have a truce, of sorts, but I do not think your presence would escape the notice of their captain. He often walks these woods, and he is not only strong, he is clever as well. He would know you, Majesty, and he would have no reason to hold his tongue."

"But –" Robin almost betrayed himself; at the last moment he recalled himself. No, it was impossible. It was too soon, far too soon. First the king, then the sword, and then, with luck, the throne. For now, he was on his own.

"What's that?"

"Nothing, a foolish thought, that's all." He raised his chin to indicate his displeasure with their reluctant host. "Will you give us time to find another refuge? He is your rightful king! You owe him that much loyalty, at least."

"How long do you require."

"Twenty-four hours."

"That, you shall have." Beowaesc raised a long, gnarled finger in warning, but was nevertheless careful to avoid meeting Oberon's eyes. "But no more. Now, return to your trees, and I shall mount a guard of dryads to watch over you. They are young, they will not know you, but I beg you, do not show your faces to them all the same. I am careful with those I take in my service, but it is not entirely uncommon to see an animal that watches with more than its own eyes. Be wary."

"Squirrels, I'll bet," murmured Robin to Lahalissa. She did not respond, except to elbow him viciously in the ribs. Beowaesc seemed to be of like mind, for as the lord of the forest bowed to his erstwhile king and nodded to Lahalissa as he took his leave, he did not so much as look at Robin.

And then, once more, there were three trees standing next to each other in a single row, two chestnuts and a mighty oak, with branches interlocking and knobby roots digging deep into the rich, loamy dirt of the quiet English forest.

CHAPTER 8

STALKING THE BEAST

SETTING UP CATEGORIES AND POLICING THEM IS THEREFORE A SERIOUS BUSINESS. A PHILOSOPHER WHO ATTEMPTED TO REDRAW THE BOUNDARIES OF THE WORLD OF KNOWLEDGE WOULD BE TAMPERING WITH THE TABOO. EVEN IF HE STEERED CLEAR OF SACRED SUBJECTS, HE COULD NOT AVOID DANGER; FOR KNOWLEDGE IS INHERENTLY AMBIGUOUS.

— Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre*

Robin caught Lahalissa as she abruptly reappeared in front of him and staggered backwards into his arms. Her hands were clapped to her face, and green flames licked out from between her fingers for a moment, until she was able to reassert herself and staunch the bleeding.

“What happened?” asked Robin, incredulous. They were standing together in a small clearing about two miles from Oxford, and only a moment before, Lahalissa had disappeared with the intention of visiting Gloriana. Though he’d imagined she’d be back quickly to bring him to her lady, he certainly did not expect her return to be immediate.

“I don’t know! It was like I hit something, like smashing into an invisible wall, face-first!”

“Ah,” Robin nodded. “I see.”

“See what?”

“A spirit ward. But they don’t last long, and they’re seldom very large. How close did you go to Gloriana’s rooms?”

“The corridor, just outside. Where I brought you last time. They don’t last long?”

“No, they’re massively draining. Hmmm. An archon might be able to set a small one, but based on the size of it — assuming they covered all of her quarters, I’d imagine it must have been set by a Power at the very least, more likely a Domination.

The two fallen angels looked at each other. Lahalissa shook her head.

"That bodes ill. Do you suppose they dared take her?"

"I can't say. It could be they're using the ward to keep her inside...."

"Wouldn't a troop of guards be easier?"

"You'd think so." Robin shrugged. "Then again, we may be dealing with the Mad One, after all. I can't imagine it would make much sense to try to figure out his logic. And then, we don't even know if he's connected the king's escape with her. If we're lucky, he's still clueless and we're only dealing with a gung-ho archdemon who's taking every precaution."

"Lovely, that's all we need now, an enemy who thinks. I can't fight an archdemon. Can you?"

Robin took a deep breath and puffed out his chest. "No," he admitted reluctantly. "But brains are better than brawn." He tapped his head and did his best to look clever. "Come on, unless they're a lot more frightened than I think they are, there should be an easy way through this."

"Really?" Lahalissa looked impressed. "What do we do?"

"We walk. Just switch into the material and stroll right through it." He grinned at her. "If an eagle's on the lookout for another eagle, then best thing to do is act like a snail. Why do you think they never found me? No one pays much attention to mortals unless they have to."

But Lahalissa didn't return the smile. "I don't know, Robin. Perhaps it worked for you, but it doesn't look as if playing the mortal worked for my lady."

It certainly had not, if the strange quiet that pervaded St. Hilda's College was any indication. Plenty of mortals went about their daily business, but there were fewer of their keepers about, of either sort, than one might have expected. It was a sure sign that something of supernatural significance had taken place here, and not too long ago. The two-mile walk from outside the town was not easy; Lahalissa's dancing served her well, but Robin was ill-accustomed to mortal exercise. They reached Cowley House and he labored up the stairs, breathing hard and relieved that they were almost at their destination. Lahalissa was at the top, waiting nervously

as she eyed the invisible barrier that had repulsed her so firmly less than a half an hour before.

"Do you think it's worn off?" she asked hopefully.

"Give me a minute," Robin begged. The faded yellow of the aged interior corresponded rather well with how he was feeling at the moment. Interesting to note that the eyes of the Mad One had been on Gloriana even in these squalid surroundings. Or, perhaps ominous was probably the better word to describe it. It seemed eight hundred years was not enough to make him feel secure on his throne.

Lahalissa caught his eyes, and Robin nodded.

"Sure, I'll go first this time." He stepped forward warily, and when he encountered nothing, he dared another step. Nothing. Feeling more confident, and a touch less knackered, he strode to the door marked "Sprite" and gestured to his companion as he drew one of his daggers.

"It's good. Come on now."

He knocked, but there was no answer. Lahalissa joined him and pushed her hair behind her ear as she placed her head next to the door. She frowned and shook her head.

"I don't think anyone's inside."

The door was locked, but Lahalissa was not in a mood for half-measures. The door blew inward and a mass of splinters peppered the room. Robin leaped through the jagged remnants of the door, brandishing his blade, but he felt like a fool when he realized no one was there.

But someone had been there before them. Of that, there could be little doubt, for the door was not the only thing destroyed. The tidy little room looked as if a cohort of gremlins had run amok in it, as picture frames were smashed, the china was in fragments and the splinters of the two chairs mingled with those of the shattered door. Whatever had been here was far stronger than gremlins, though; the writing desk was smashed in half, collapsed in upon itself as if a single powerful blow had caved it in.

I'm glad I wasn't on the receiving end of that! Robin shivered. Had they come here first, instead of going to Sussex Weald, he might well have been.

"We're too late!" Lahalissa cried. This, in Robin's opinion, was not necessarily the correct way to view the matter, but he

held his tongue in view of her obvious distress. "Look, she must have fought."

She bent over and retrieved something silver. It was Gloriana's ring, and as she picked it up, it came to life and bared its little fangs. "Hush, Naedrakin, be calm." She stroked its tiny head until it stopped hissing and turned back into a ring. She slipped it on her ring finger and kissed it gently.

"Tell me what happened, darling. Did someone take Gloriana?"

Robin could see the ring tighten on Lahalissa's finger momentarily. So, it was more than a weapon, it was sentient too. He nodded approvingly. That was a neat trick.

"Did you recognize them?"

Two squeezes. It looked like one for yes, two for no, unless he had it backwards.

"Did they harm her?" Two. "Did they hurt Orgoglio?"

One squeeze, and Lahalissa raised a hand to her mouth. "Oh, no. Did they... did they destroy him?"

One squeeze. Lahalissa looked over at him with tears in her eyes, and he put his arms around her. "I saw," he told her. "I'm sorry."

"What do we do?"

"Right now, nothing." He tried to reassure her. "Look, the Mad One wouldn't have left Gloriana alone for this long if he truly feared her. He's probably just making sure that Oberon's escape doesn't encourage all the old lords, the faery lords, to rise against him."

"You're right. You must be right." She sniffed and wiped at her eyes, and bravely forced her lips to smile. "Otherwise, why take her. If they wanted to, they could have destroyed her as well."

"Exactly. Now, let's get out of here while we still can. Since Gloriana won't be able to find a safe place for Oberon to hide, we'll have to think of something else."

"Do you have any ideas?"

Robin shot a self-mocking smile at the lovely demoness, whose eyes were still moist with grief. "Sure, I've got lots. I just don't know if they're any good." He shrugged. There was only one way to find out.

Eight hours later, the sun had fallen. Only fourteen hours remained before Oberon must perforce leave the refuge of Sussex Weald, and so it was that Robin found himself leading Lahalissa though a harsh jungle of urban desolation on the east side of London. Windows were boarded-up when they were not smashed, and the jagged remnants that still remained in the frames were fogged with dust and age. Here and there, a well-executed frieze or a finely carved arch suggested that the area had once known better times, but for the most part, it was a depressing portrait of decay and mortal abandonment.

Indeed, it might have been an indictment of the Mad One's derelict rule. There was no sign here of Albion's green glory, lost now with the winds of time. Looking at the ugly collection of vacant warehouses, run-down rowhouses and rusting chain-link fences, it was hard to imagine that it had ever existed at all. But Lucere brooked no neutrals in his rebellion; if Heaven claimed that those who were not for it were against it, the same was doubly true for its princely foe.

Robin hated it, every inch of it. Even the mortals – in these parts they were all too similar to the buildings they inhabited, dark, dirty and decrepit. But he had his reasons for coming here, and it was not mortals that he had come to hunt.

Tonight, they hunted the hunters.

"I don't see why we can't simply go up to Soho and talk to the Camerati, if you're set on vampires," complained Lahalissa as she narrowly avoided stepping in something foul. "They're a lot easier to find, after all."

"Yes, mostly because they've come to an arrangement with the Mad One. Don't underestimate the Twice-Fallen, they may not be immortal but they're not entirely stupid either. If we were to go to them, they'd agree to help and show us their pointy teeth so very politely, but when we showed up with Oberon, we'd be lucky if there weren't fifty archons waiting for us."

It wasn't likely that the Twice-Fallen still held a grudge against Oberon, no more than they did against the rest of the Fallen, Robin reflected. It had been centuries since the Wild

Hunt had ridden, after all, and Robin could always blame that on Herne anyhow. To be sure, Twice-Fallen was a misnomer, for it was only their misbegotten children who roamed the Earth now, their fathers having long since been hurled into the pits by Prince Michael and his army at the behest of an angry King of Heaven.

The miserable quasi-mortals took many different forms, and were known by almost as many different names by the mortals upon whom they preyed. But even the proudest vampire lord would fear to challenge a minor demon such as himself. They were pathetic, neither fish nor fowl, soulless half-breeds shunned by the Divine and regarded with contempt by the Fallen. Which, to Robin's mind, made them a perfect ally in Oberon's time of need. Their assistance would not come without cost, of course, but as long as he could pay the price in future coin, he foresaw no problems.

"How did you know where to look?" Lahalissa broke in on his thoughts.

"I don't."

"Then why did we come here?" She sounded annoyed.

Because, my dear demoness, it doesn't matter where in the world you are. Wherever there are the poor, the desperate and the dispossessed, wherever the weak and the sick are found, there you will also find the predators.

"Bear with me," he advised. They finally reached a likely location – walking shadow where they were both invisible to any mortal, or half-mortal eyes – a relatively busy intersection featuring three lowlife pubs, two ethnic restaurants, and most importantly, a narrow alley that curved and twisted its way into impenetrable shadow.

"Start in the pub with an aspect of a not-particularly attractive woman. Stumble and sway as you walk, and be sure to wave off any offers of assistance. Do you see the entrance to that alley? Walk there, wait a little while, and if it doesn't work, we'll try it again in the other pub."

Lahalissa frowned at him, but she acceded readily enough and followed his directions to the letter. Robin laughed when she stumbled out of the Blue Hog, cursing abusively at someone over her shoulder. For a moment, he thought someone had taken the bait, as a dark shadow detached itself

from a wall on the other side of the street and moved to intersect the meandering path of the fallen angel. But the silver that flashed under the flickering neon showed that this was only a lesser predator, of no significance whatsoever.

Lahalissa glanced up at him, and by way of instruction, he punched his fist into his palm. A moment later, the would-be assailant was lying unconscious on the sidewalk, and Lahalissa joined him on top of the nearby building.

"For a moment, I thought – "

"I know. But next time, go into the alley before flying up here. It doesn't look as if his Guardian or his Tempter are around, but we don't really want to be attracting any attention, do we?"

"Oh dear, how silly of me." Lahalissa made a face. "I'll remember next time. Shall I try the next pub?"

"In a bit. Let's give it a few minutes. I can't imagine anyone is watching, but it might look a little suspicious if the next three women leaving the pub are all doing exactly the same thing."

Robin nodded and glanced back down at the mortal his companion had knocked out. The man moaned and stirred slightly, and Robin, uninterested in his fate, turned away. But when a piercing cry from the street below was choked off a moment later with a strangled, choking sound, he strolled back to the building edge and looked down. The mortal was gone!

No, not quite. A flicker of movement caught his eye, and he saw the strange sight of the unconscious, or now perhaps deceased, mortal seemingly dragging himself towards the alley, albeit without moving.

"What do you make of that?" he asked Lahalissa.

"Shadowspawn," she said with a smile. "Rather poor substitute for a vampire, don't you think?"

"If he's strong enough to drag that mortal, he might know something worthwhile. What do you say we make him manifest?"

The problem with talking to shadowspawn was that they were as insubstantial as their name suggested. They were hard to see on either the material or the immaterial shadows, as they were barely strong enough to exist even as pure will.

After so many generations, the angelfire that coursed within the children of the Twice-Fallen was thinner than the most inbred line of mortal royalty, with the exception of those rare ancients of the early generations who had somehow managed to survive over the centuries.

But this particular specimen was clearly extraordinary for a shadowspawn, and with just a little help, there might even be enough of him to support a conversation. As Lahalissa watched with interest, Robin slashed his palm with a fingernail, and from the shallow wound he produced a small green fireball which he hurled at a slight shimmer in the air below them. Were it not for the bizarre evidence of the horizontally sliding mortal, the shimmer might have been nothing more than a trick of the light, but when the angelfire struck, it splattered and outlined a short, twisted form, less than four feet high, pulling at the outstretched arms of its treasure.

The fire flared up brightly for a moment, then was absorbed and the fiery outline faded into the shape of an ugly little goblin, with yellow skin, pointed ears that jutted away from a misshapen skull at sharp, but differing angles, and a long, hooked nose. The Shadowspawn, shadow no more, released its grip on the man and looked down at its thin, clawed hands in disbelief, then glanced uncertainly in Robin's general direction.

Robin burst into laughter at the expression on the thing's hideous face, which was frozen somewhere between terror and delight, and he spread a massive pair of black wings from his shoulders as he leaped into the air and sailed effortlessly to the ground. Lahalissa joined him, in equally dramatic fashion, a moment later.

The little being quailed before them, his knobby knees literally knocking in terror.

"Please, don't hurt me!" he pleaded.

"Who said anything about hurting you?" Robin glanced at Lahalissa. "Of course, that's assuming you're willing to tell us what we want to hear."

"What is given can be taken away," Lahalissa added, examining her long fingernails as if she could not possibly be less interested in the Shadowspawn's fate, whatever it turned

out to be. "But to have something precious, and then to lose it? That, my ugly little friend, is painful indeed."

It was pathetic to see how the wretched half-breed whimpered and clutched at his spindly, twisted body as if it were precious indeed. Though to him, it probably was. Who knew how many centuries he had spent as little more than a gauzy presence with a will attached? Robin neither knew nor cared, but he was sure that the Shadowspawn knew where he could find others of his kind.

"You want to keep that horrid excuse for a body?" The goblin nodded fervently. "Then tell me, is there a Camerati clan hereabouts? Good. And the Raustravi? Them too, excellent. And you know where they can be found? Not the Camerati, I want the Raustravi."

Robin winked at Lahalissa as the goblin nodded again, so energetically he seemed in danger of spraining his newfound neck.

"Best you show us where they are, then, little one." The goblin shrieked as Robin caught him up and tucked him under one arm, then leaped skyward. London by night was a marvelous sight, and the lights of the great sprawling city below outnumbered the stars overhead. The Mad One could not possibly search every nook and cranny, there would be safety out there somewhere, if only he could convince the Twice-Fallen to hold their lifeless tongues. "Don't struggle there, mate. Just you point, and we'll be on our way."

They did not have long to fly, as it turned out, although they were forced to descend to Earth and take shelter at one point, when a fiery glow on the horizon turned out to be a marauding band of Divine warriors. Fortunately, the Divine were too focused on their mission, whatever it was, to take any real notice of two insignificant demons going about their business; one *Romakhim* did lob a desultory fireball at Lahalissa, but she pulled in her wings, rolled, and dodged it with ease.

"There." Robin's captive pointed a nondescript rowhouse below them, slightly less seedy than its neighbors but otherwise indistinguishable. It was made of brick, but the door looked to be painted metal, slightly more sturdy than the wooden doors more commonly found with such structures.

Robin spread his wings and hung suspended in the air for a long moment, studying the environs first before taking a closer look at the rowhouse in question.

There was an unusual pattern in the bricks laid above the door, nothing definitive, but then, Robin was at least two hundred years out of date with regards to vampire ciphers. He'd had no reason to interact with any since one aided his escape from a vengeful African demon-prince who objected to the little principality over which Robin had briefly ruled deep in the jungles of the Congo. In addition to the pattern were also runes that looked like a crude attempt to bar his kind from entry, three over the door and one over each window.

Lahalissa giggled.

"Do you see those?" she pointed to the runes. "Ooh, I'm scared!"

"We're here to ask them a favor, remember?" Robin couldn't help smiling himself, but still, this was no time for taunts, much better to be polite. He swooped down to the concrete steps, deposited the shadowspawn there and tapped the door with his fingertip.

"Just knock, and when someone opens the door, tell them I want to speak with the clanmaster."

"But –"

"Don't worry, we'll be right behind you, mate. I didn't go to all this trouble just to set you on fire and leave you here."

The goblin blanched a paler shade of yellow. He didn't seem to like being caught directly in the middle of what promised to be a dangerous situation, which wasn't all that unreasonable, in Robin's opinion.

"No, great, um, great lord, sir. I only meant to say, who shall I tell them calls?"

"Tell them Opportunity is knocking. Or, alternatively, Death. Whichever suits them."

The goblin eyed him dubiously, but he nodded obediently enough. As Robin flew up to join Lahalissa some twenty yards up and away from the step, his envoy attempted to straighten his hunched shoulders and knocked on the door.

No one responded immediately, and after a questioning glance upward, the Shadowspawn knocked again. This time, the door was answered by what appeared to be a loutish

teenager, with the close-cropped hair and doughy complexion of a football thug. Only the fact that its chest was not moving betrayed the fact that the boy was no longer alive, but had become the fleshy shell of a young Twice-Fallen.

"Whaddya want?" it snarled in an Australian accent.

"Opportunity is kn-knocking," stammered Robin's messenger. "Er, actually, Death, that is to say, I mean —"

The vampire snorted and sent the goblin sprawling to the ground with a savage backhand. It started to step back inside the house when Robin cleared his throat. The creature looked up, and upon seeing two black-winged fallen angels hovering above him, its dead, piggish eyes widened with fear. Out of the corner of his eye, Robin saw the shadowspawn take the opportunity to scuttle away. Cheers, mate. Robin didn't care about the goblin one way or the other, but the thing had served its purpose and since it knew less about his mission than the trees of Sussex Weald, he saw no reason to stop it. He nodded at the vampire.

"I fear my envoy lacks for eloquence, but since he's proven to be eminently unsuitable, would you be so kind as to inform your most senior sire present that I should very much like to speak with him?" Robin thought perhaps the monster was too thick-witted to follow him, but just as he was beginning to think he'd have to repeat himself, the beast nodded.

"Yeh, all right. Who're you?"

Someone who'd just as soon wipe out your wretched little nest of abominations as look at you, you monstrous eyesore. "A potential friend."

The vampire looked skeptical, but it ducked its head and turned back into the house.

"Oi, Jimmy!" They could hear it shouting. "Git Vashya, and tell 'im teh git 'is skates on! They's two bad-mother demons wanna talk teh 'im outside, right!"

Robin sighed and glanced apologetically at Lahalissa. She shrugged, and made a what-did-you-expect sort of gesture with her hands. They were both surprised when an elegant Indian vampire appeared at the door a moment later. It was tall, well-groomed, wearing a pin-striped suit that flattered its lean figure. This Vashya was by no means what Robin had learned to expect from the Raustravi, and for a moment he

wondered if they had the wrong clan. In any case, the vampire was old one, and had seen somewhere between three and five centuries judging by the rigid appearance of its still-dusky flesh. The demonfire was strong within it, strong enough, perhaps, to create difficulties should he prove unhelpful.

“Greetings, my lord, my lady. How may I be of service this evening?”

The vampire’s voice was deep and cultured, with no trace of apprehension, and a quick glimpse into the surface of its mind showed that any attempt at intimidation would likely be misplaced. Robin descended to the ground and sketched a sign on his chest with his left hand, indicating he was no stranger to the greater clan.

“I have not seen such a sign in many a year, my lord. Indeed, we are most content when we are ignored by your kind.”

“You don’t strike me as a typical Raustravian prince, Lord Vashya.” Robin ignored the gentle hint. “I expect an elder of your years and experience will see the wisdom in seeking a rapprochement with a great power among my kind. I am but an envoy.”

The vampire’s face was still, except for a faint movement of one eyebrow. A betrayal of interest? Or was it merely curiosity.

“An end to the Wild Hunts... for your clan.”

“An end? There has not been a Wild Hunt since long before my time.” The vampire’s eyes flared red as they narrowed. He did not like being threatened.

“You misapprehend. I mean you no harm, it is only that the Hunter has been loosed and it will not be long before the Hunt rides again.” Robin suspected it might be counterproductive to mention just who had set Herne free, but he had no aversion to putting a scare into any unseen ears that might be eavesdropping. “But I offer protection, if you will provide us with a certain service.”

The vampire lord met his eyes – it was a bold one indeed – as if to take his measure. Robin held that cold undead gaze until the Raustravian was forced to look away. The vampire was too young to recall the terrors of the Wild Hunt, but it

was of an age to have likely heard tales from the generation that survived them, and such was the fear that Herne and his companions had instilled into the Twice-Fallen that tales of its horrors and other faery cruelties had percolated not only down through generations of Twice-Fallen, but into mortal myth as well.

"You bear grim tidings, demon." Vashya looked as if it would have sighed, were it still able. "And I fear that your service will cost us dear, but come inside and let us discuss these matters privately. If there is to be war among the Fallen, I would know when, and why."

Now it was Robin's turn to raise his eyebrows. The vampire bared its fangs in a bitter smile of resignation. "I am not without skill when it comes to reading minds myself, demon. But, no, your thoughts are sealed to me. It is only that I cannot imagine another reason for you to seek my aid. You must be desperate indeed, to seek help among my kind."

CHAPTER 9

A MOMENT'S PEACE

SO DID THE FAERIE KNIGHT HIMSELF ABEARE,
AND STOUPED OFF HIS HEAD FROM SHAME TO SHIELD
NO SHAME TO STOUGE, ONES HEAD MORE HIGH TO REARE,
AND MUCH TO GAINE, A LITTLE FOR TO YIELD;
— Edmund Spenser, *The Fairie Queene*

The afternoon breeze was peaceful, and carried with it the rich natural scents of the mature forest, mixed in with the perfume of the nearby lilac blossoms. The tall oak tree, now denuded of its two smaller companions, stood in solitary majesty as it soaked in the glorious warmth of the afternoon sun.

Time passed. The scent of lilac waxed strong for an hour or two, then diminished again as the wind shifted its direction. Squirrels frolicked nearby, but none dared approach him despite the promise of acorns. It was clear that the lord of the forest had warned of him, for even the birds were hesitant to light upon his branches. This grieved him, but only a little, for he had far deeper wounds to bear, far more egregious affronts upon which to reflect. The sky grew red, then purple, as the sun began to set.

It was a pity he could not stay here for a while, thought Oberon as the cool evening air ruffled pleasantly through his leaves, which were green with just a tinge of gold around the edges hinting at autumn's approach. The Weald was a tranquil place, picturesque, an ideal place for one to indulge in the narcissistic luxury of reflection. But for him, reflection was no quiet path leading inner peace, instead, it achieved quite the opposite effect.

Gloriana had shared generously of her wisdom, and yet his knowledge was infuriatingly incomplete. She could not share

what she did not know, and she did not know what he most yearned to learn. The usurper, who was he? Had he a name? It was not unheard of for angels to descend into madness; especially in the days after the Awakening, even some of the great had succumbed to mind-killing despair and self-loathing. But the power of such mad ones inevitably waned, it did not wax into sceptre, crown and throne.

And yet, perhaps it was possible. He pondered long upon two of the Shadow Sarim, the greatest of the Fallen, who, in his opinion, were not entirely sane. Moloch's nihilistic appetite for destruction gave even Lucere pause from time to time, and the once-brilliant tactical genius of Sammael, Hell's marshal, had long ago disappeared in the morass of his overpowering hatred for his Divine counterpart, Michael. Could it be that one of them had stolen his realm from him? No, it seemed unlikely. For one thing, Albion was not a principality either would covet, and for another, if it were Moloch who had usurped his throne, there should have been far, far less of Albion and her mortals remaining by this point. No, he could rule out Moloch, that much was certain.

He studiously avoided thinking of his Queen. He did not dare so much as think her name to himself. Fortunately, Gloriana had likewise avoided Titania, though more likely out of wisdom and survival instinct, not cowardice like him, and so even with the potion he knew little more of her. He could not bear to think of her betrayal; just the thought was like the assassin's knife entering his side again, only this time the freezing blade pierced his heart. How had he failed her, that she should abandon him so? He longed to run his hands through that thick crimson mane, to kiss those impossibly full lips, to feel that white, graceful neck in his hands and snap — no! A red wave of overwhelming hatred — for his conflicted desires, for her treacherous beauty, for his disloyal subjects, for the mysterious usurper, for the wasted years, for a thousand thousand regrets and failures — washed over him suddenly, and nearly carried his consciousness away on a tide of desolation.

And then he was clean. The grime of uncertainty and self-contempt was washed away, leaving little more behind than an iron will of angry purpose. He waited, without impatience,

content now to reflect calmly upon the beauty of the Weald and the quiet strength of the earth that sustained it. Be the tree, Puck had said, and in doing so had spoken with the true wisdom of the fool.

His roots burrowed deep into the soil as he bonded with the land that once was his and, in time, would be again. His leaves soaked in the sunshine and rustled gently in the breeze as the sweetness of the forest's rich breath restored him. He let his mind flow outward; in the same moment, he smelled a mouse through the curious nose of a half-grown fox cub, hopped with a fat robin towards a dark patch that promised a worm-laden soil and soared high above the treetops with a sharp-eyed falcon. For the first time in eight hundred years, the Faery King smiled.

The sun had long since disappeared below the treetops, and the first nocturnal predators were beginning to make their presence known with ghostly calls and cries when a strangely-shaped figure descended from the moonless sky and landed not too far from where a giant oak towered incongruously over a lilac tree. Once upon the ground, however, the shadow divided into two distinct individuals.

"It would be a lot easier if you lot could actually transform into bats," complained Robin as he massaged his aching arms. "Or at the very least, walk shadow."

Vashya did not respond, it merely brushed at its suit, as if doing so could restore the dignity it had lost by this ignominious form of transportation. It was quite clear that being carried like an unwieldy piece of luggage was something that the vampire lord would prefer to forget as quickly as possible.

"I imagine there must be some Twice-fallen who can, but perhaps they're more like werebats than true vampires. Of course, a were-vampire bat would still drink blood, so perhaps that's where the confusion lies – "

"Would you please be so kind as to give the subject a rest," said Vashya, gritting his gleaming ivory teeth. "I am beginning to regret my decision already."

Robin grinned at it, amused by the vampire's wounded pride. "Only because you've never had Herne on your tail.

Believe me, Fangs, putting up with a little indignity is better than being run down by hellhounds."

"Please do not call me that."

"Of course, Lord Vashya, my... what's that?"

He nearly swallowed his tongue along with his apology as a dozen or more trees surrounding them unexpectedly transformed into tall, spear-wielding warriors. Nor were the spears tipped with harmless mortal metal; they were crackling with silvery angelfire.

Robin put up his hands and glanced at his companion, whose wide eyes belied his seeming composure. "The hellhounds are looking increasingly attractive, my lord demon," the vampire murmured, and Robin did not find it hard to see his point of view.

"What is this," Robin snarled at the most powerfully muscled of the dryads. "I am in service to the one you guard. Do you think to keep me from him?"

"Lord Beowaesc told us to expect two angels, not one of these!" The dryad waved his flaming speartip just under the vampire's nose. "You may pass, but leave this bloodsucking worm here with us."

"Fools!" Robin slapped the spear down and caused his form to swell, until he towered over the dryads like an ominous thunderhead, ready to rain lightning. "You know naught of what you speak. Begone, lest I give you to it, that it might not drink blood, but the fire of petty forest imps instead!"

The bold dryad and two of his companions actually fell down as they backed away from him, so strong was their desire to escape his threatened fury. They fled, quickly and silently, back into the depths of the forest. No doubt running straight to Beowaesc, of course, but that mattered little now. His only concern was to get Oberon to a place of safe refuge. Then, and only then, could they spare a thought for the morrow.

Now, if I can only remember where that tree is. He moved swiftly forward, leaving the vampire to stumble along behind him in his city shoes. The sweet scent of lilac drew him on, until moments later, he stood before the arboreal form of his king. One second, they stood beneath the midnight shadow of

the oak, and the very next, the tree was gone. Oberon, to his surprise, did not look vexed at his delay, indeed, he seemed almost at peace as he rebuked his servant.

"You took your time, Puck."

"Gloriana was gone — there were signs of a struggle. We had to come up with an alternative."

"I see. And why have you come with this unusual... companion?"

"I have found a place for you where the Mad One's Eyes will never think to look."

"With the children of the Twice-Fallen?"

"With a few of them, yes." Robin glanced at Vashya, who was staring at Oberon with a doubtful expression on its fine-featured face.

"You spoke of a mighty prince, who could protect us from the Wild Hunt," the vampire said. "Yet, he needs to hide among us, for fear of his enemies?"

For the first time, Oberon took direct notice of the vampire. He snorted contemptuously.

"Not for fear, vampire, but for time."

He reached out with his hand, and the vampire flew suddenly up into the air as if jerked by a mighty string. For a moment, it hung suspended above the treetops, its limbs dancing and flailing about, directed by an unseen puppeteer. An equally invisible flute softly piped a silly circus air. Then the marionette's master seemed to abandon it, for it plunged, spread-eagled, directly towards the jagged top of a broken pine tree.

At the very last moment, its fall was halted, with the sharp wood barely piercing the undead flesh covering its unbeating heart. Then, with a violent backwards flip, the vampire flew away from the tree and was brought back to the ground on its feet, exactly where it had been before. But it did not stand there long. The monster's mouth worked soundlessly once or twice, before it crumbled to the ground in a faint.

"I see your powers are returning, majesty," remarked Robin, as neutrally as possible.

"Mmm, yes, it is good to touch the land again. Though it may be decades before my powers return in full, I am greatly restored. Do you think me unwise, Puck? You have changed,

I fear. There once was a time when such a sight would have set you to laughing until the tears ran down your face."

"Times have changed, my King. As have I."

"I mourn to see it. But you may trust me in this. I have known these creatures far longer than you, and they are more beast than angel, they are less than mortals, even. They obey only what they fear. This one was wary at my weakness and would have doubtless contemplated treachery, but now, you see, it will do so no more."

Robin nodded slowly. Perhaps the years had enervated him, or at least drained him of his humor. And certainly Oberon's brutality had taught the vampire a real lesson, for as Vashya struggled to its feet, it regarded the Faery King with a servile respect bordering on awe.

"Go now, Puck," ordered the King. "Find Gloriana's servant and do what you can to assist her. Her loyalty must be rewarded. Then find Herne; he will be raising his pack, I am sure. I shall go to this place of refuge, and when you are ready to find me, place your mark above the painting at Burlington House and wait there. I will send for you."

"The painting? How am I to know which one?"

"You will know it."

"As you say. And if you want to find me?"

"Then I will do so. Now go, my boy, and quickly. Beowaesc comes, and I do not think he is pleased. Best you begone before I set him straight. He will be embarrassed enough without witnesses."

Robin bowed, then unfurled his wings and leaped towards the sky. The lights of London were to his right while to his left was only shadow as he sped towards Oxford faster than any mortal aircraft. In a matter of minutes, he reached Cowley House, and after taking a moment to ensure that the spellward had not been renewed, he plunged through the roof into Gloriana's quarters. But as before, it was empty, devoid of life and unlife alike. There was no sign that Lahalissa had ever even come here.

The sound of deep-voiced laughter behind him caused him to spin around. Entering through the door was an over-muscled wingless monster with four arms. He had to stoop to enter, so tall was he, and even so he barely fit through the

frame. His skin was slate grey, his head was somewhat taurine and his curved horns pointed forward, but the most frightening thing about him was the symbol branded on his chest – four linked circles from which sprouted two upside-down triangles. The sign of the Mad One.

Robin backed away from the massive demon warrior and drew his dagger. It was a poor counter for the two massive cleavers that the mutant Kesh'Adai wore at his side, but he had no other weapon save his wit. The warrior smiled, revealing four long yellow fangs, and pointed at the blade.

"Put it away, traitor. Even if you sheathe it in your own throat, it will not save you from the punishment that is your due."

"Come take it, if you dare!"

It was a lame retort, even to Robin's ears, but he had little choice except to fight. He might flee, but he doubted he could outdistance the vast wingspan of his foe and he had no wish to perish with a cleaver in the back. But when he took another step backward, his movement was stopped unexpectedly by something large and hard. The black flame dagger fell to the ground, useless, as someone very strong pinned his arms to his sides in a crushing grip.

"As you say," whispered the second Kesh'Adai, breathing foully in his ear.

CHAPTER 10

VIOLENTLY, IT CHANGES

GET UP, COME ON, GET DOWN WITH THE SICKNESS
OPEN UP YOUR HATE, AND LET IT FLOW INTO ME
GET UP, COME ON, GET DOWN WITH THE SICKNESS....
MADNESS IS THE GIFT THAT HAS BEEN GIVEN TO ME
— Disturbed, (“Down With the Sickness”)

The Mad One’s court was surprisingly normal, all things considered, thought Robin as he was marched through the corridors of the fortress. He was not bound by spellfire or mindleash, indeed, they might well have left him his two blades for all the good they would have done him. He was surrounded by a small troop of four-armed Kesh’Adai, seven in all, each of whom surpassed him by a good half-meter and one hundred fifty kilos apiece. If they were not cruel, neither were they merciful – when he tried dawdling once, the two flanking him simply grabbed his arms, lifted him off his feet and continued their inexorable journey towards the heart of the fortress.

After a few minutes of this, they put him down again, without ever bothering once to comment. It was really quite a persuasive demonstration, in its own simple way. Robin took their point, and did not again attempt to slow them down.

The leader came to a halt as they reached a large door embossed with the Mad One’s sign, which matched the brand on the grey-skinned chests of his guards. He turned around to address Robin, folding his lower set of arms beneath his huge pectorals as he jabbed a clawed finger perilously close to Robin’s eye.

“Be still until you are spoken to. Answer any questions asked, and tell the truth. He knows if you lie. And if he

decides to destroy you, get on your knees and thank him for his mercy. He can do worse than that, I swear to you."

One of the other guards grunted in affirmation. Despite the underground chill and his astral state, Robin suddenly felt very, very cold. He was immortal, but there were things that immortals could experience that were, for a time, hard to differentiate from mortal death. If your spirit was shattered and distributed across the planes, it could take centuries, if not millennia, to become whole again. And if what the Kesh'Adae said were true, the Mad One had managed to come up with an unpleasant alternative to that.

The leader seemed to be waiting for a response, so Robin nodded. Satisfied, the giant demon turned around and placed his palm on the door. There was a brilliant flash of purple light, and the door swung slowly open to reveal the Mad One's throne room.

It was beautiful, a vast spherical glade that magically appeared to be open to the sky. No, the magic was greater than that, for somehow, impossibly, it was truly outside. Robin could feel the wind on his face and feel grass beneath his bare feet. Despite himself, Robin was impressed; for all that they were beyond physical things such as Euclidean space, after spending the past few millennia on Earth, most of the Fallen were as uncomfortable with non-Euclidean reality as mortals. It was not so much a room as it was a woodland paradise, an idyllic Olympian bower. Strange trees ringed the glade, with thick trunks and gnarled limbs constructing a leafy green wall of sorts circling what appeared to be, of all things, a very large mushroom.

But no conventional woodland paradise he'd ever seen featured twenty or more giant battledemons with skeletal wing joints that projected three feet above their shoulders even at rest. If they did include angelic ladies-in-waiting, they were usually portrayed with significantly more in the way of garments than wore the naked Succubi, who lounged about the foot of the throne clad in nothing but their sleek blue skins, their white pupil-less eyes taking in the newcomer's arrival with what appeared to be total indifference. And no painting Robin had ever seen showed two demonesses wreathed in flaming chains, cast to the side

of the throne-like toadstool as little more than an afterthought.

They were Gloriana and Lahalissa, Robin realized, but he spared them barely a thought. He was captivated by the sight of four angels on the right of the throne, especially a tall, beautiful one wearing a circlet of silver in her mass of red hair. In spite of everything, even his dreadful peril, for a moment he could take in nothing but her striking beauty, which had not altered in the slightest over the eight centuries since he'd last seen her. She met his eyes, but without interest, and if she likewise recognized him, she betrayed not the slightest sign.

Without warning, a fist struck him from behind and smashed him to the ground. Everything went red, but as his vision cleared, he was able to see that the grass was truly real, for a little beetle crawled up the blade that directly before his eyes. Oh, but that hurt! He wanted to reach behind his head to see how bad the damage was, but he was afraid any movement might inspire another blow.

"I hardly think that was necessary," commented a strange, high-pitched voice from somewhere in front of him. "No, don't you dare kick him, Uzoth, you leave him be!"

Fortunately, Uzoth was apparently inclined to obedience, and after waiting a moment to be sure that no further assaults on his person appeared to be imminent, Robin slowly raised his aching head. The blinding light had faded a little, and in doing so revealed a sight that was as strange as it was... no, it was simply strange, and that's all there was to it.

For upon the throne, which turned out not to be a throne so much as a very large red-capped toadstool, perched what appeared to be a fairy of sorts. Not a tall and proud being akin to the great fae over which Oberon and his faithless queen had once ruled, but a gossamer Victorian creature, all filmy white robes and transparent butterfly wings. She was a lovely little thing, with features nearly as delicate as her wings and long white hair that would reach down past her bottom were she standing. If standing, he realized, the top of her head might possibly reach as high as his knee.

Wondering just how hard the Kesh'Adai had hit him, Robin had to glance back and forth between the massive

guard demons and their attractive little liege lady twice before he was convinced that his mind was actually receiving the correct information from his eyes. This tiny creature was the Mad One? Could it possibly be true? It was too stupid for words!

"So, Robin Goodfellow!" Her voice was high-pitched and sounded most pleased, which also seemed a little odd, considering the circumstances of his visit. "How marvelous to see you at last! Your fame precedes you, and so little survives of long-vanished Albion that a relic such as yourself is a veritable treasure!"

Robin stared at her, not sure how to respond to what sounded rather like an insult of some kind. But there was no edge to her smile, and the expression on her tiny face matched the apparent delight in her voice. And, too, there was the small matter of her panoply of not-at-all tiny guards to consider as well.

When in doubt, smile and make nice. While you still can.
Before they break your teeth.

Feeling a little as if he'd somehow stumbled into a Disney movie, Robin tried not to groan as he pushed himself up from his belly. He started to stand, but then, thinking better of it, simply rocked back on his heels in order to meet the little queen's eyes.

"You've been a very naughty boy, Robin, but I'm told that's your motif, isn't that so? I adore the tricksters, you know. To curdle the milk, oops! Poor milkmaid!" She clapped her hands, and threw her head back with a pretty trill of laughter. "Fiddle-dee-dee indeed!"

While the guards remained impassive, the butterfly-winged bug-things, which Robin belatedly realized were also supposed to be some twisted form of lesser fairies, tittered and trilled with feigned mirth. At least, he hoped it was feigned, because it sure wasn't funny.

The Mad One, if it was truly the Mad One, seemed to notice that he was disinclined to join in the festivities, for she began to pout.

"Oh, not just naughty, now, but sour," she said, frowning. "And silent too, that's not a good fellow, not at all, Mr. Goodfellow. Cat got your tongue? Because you see, if you

won't be a proper little sprite and use it, I may decide to give it to him."

Robin stiffened and flinched away from her, not because of her silly threats, but because a face appeared to be pressing out from inside the pink stalk of the toadstool upon which she sat. The fleshy mushroom skin stretched like plastic, and for a moment it looked as if the face would burst out. Robin did not recognize it, but had it belonged to anyone he knew, he certainly would have, for he could easily discern every facial detail, from the open, staring eyes and broad cheekbones to the strong, masculine jaw line. It was a bizarre thing, but what truly alarmed him was that although he could hear nothing, whoever the face belonged to was obviously screaming.

"Er, no," he stammered, trying to keep his eyes off that terrible face. "It's just that I don't know to whom I am speaking. I certainly don't wish to cause offense."

"Ooh, how very delicate, Mr. Fine Fellow! But I feel so very strongly that we are destined to be friends. You must call me Maomoondagh. Yes, you simply must!"

The queen's face crinkled in a childlike smile.

"Shall we be friends, then? Oh, I do think we shall! And what do you say to that, Mr. Fine Fellow?"

"I think I would very much like that!"

I know I'd like it a lot better than having those bull demons stomp my head again, anyhow. He dared a glance at Titania, who didn't seem to be paying any attention to his presence. How did she put up with the creature? The thought of becoming bosom buddies with this lunatic would have been frightening enough even without Albion hanging in the balance.

"Friends, how deliciously wonderful!" She leaped down from her toadstool and embraced him, planting a little kiss on his cheek. "And what do friends do? Why, they share their innermost secrets, of course?"

Maomoondagh put her hands on her slender hips and regarded him thoughtfully.

"So, who shall go first? I do believe I shall!"

Her translucent wings, nearly as tall as she was, fluttered prettily as she hovered in front of him for a moment, then

zoomed in a circle around Titania's head before coming to light again on the toadstool. At the very moment her feet touched the mushroom, the silent screamer lurking beneath its red cap abruptly withdrew its hideous face.

The little queen cocked her head at him and screwed up her face as if thinking deeply, then pointed at him and uttered what did not strike him as a secret, but a riddle.

"The question you deny
Will bring a sure response.
Two questions you decline,
Another I ensconce.
A third one circumscribed
Will bring the dread blood cup,
But you will not imbibe
For I shall drink you up!
Now tell me, faery sly,
Precisely what am I?"

Maomoondagh stared at Robin and fluttered her eyelids charmingly, but her gaze was like being smashed in the face with a rock. Robin swayed, and had to put out his hands behind him to keep from being forcibly toppled over. He had never known such strength; he doubted even Oberon at the height of his powers could have met those iron eyes without reeling. Had he made a terrible, terrible mistake in attempting to restore his betrayed liege? He had a horrible feeling that the riddle and the screaming face on the mushroom were somehow related, but how, he did not know. Nor did he want to.

"I don't know," he gasped. He was trying so hard to keep himself upright that when she smiled and the pressure disappeared, he lurched forward and almost struck his face on the ground.

"Too hard, my darling trickster? Surely you are not so slow. It seems perhaps I shall have to provide you with a personal demonstration. A demonstration for a demon, isn't that delightful? But first, your turn. Shall we start with an easy one?"

She paused for a moment, then added three more words.
“Where is Oberon?”

This time, he was ready for the gaze, but it knocked him flat on his back even so.

“I don’t know,” he said, truthfully, staring up at the cloudless blue sky. Cloudless? Surely that wasn’t right! When was it ever cloudless in England?

It took him a little while to summon the strength to roll over and get up to his feet, but she was still regarding him with a sad little mow of disappointment.

“Answer for answer,” she said simply, and he didn’t understand her until she flew up into the air and pointed at Gloriana.

“No!” screamed Lahalissa, fighting against her fiery bonds, but the flames blazed up and drowned out her cries as she writhed in screaming agony. Gloriana said nothing, she was silent as two of the bull-demons approached her and picked her up as if she was a battering ram, each grabbing an arm and a leg. She must have been under a mighty geis, for surely she would not have held her tongue otherwise. But her eyes sought out Titania, and they were like poisoned daggers.

Titania must have felt their sting, as she stepped forward, and bowed low before speaking. “Majesty, she has erred grievously, to be sure, but she was once a queen of Faerie. Is this an appropriate end for a royal such as her?”

Maomoondagh flitted over to stare down Oberon’s false queen. She did not say anything, but Titania averted her eyes and sank to her knees. Once, twice, three queens of Faerie, Robin said grimly to himself, even as the smallest and most powerful one angrily waved at her demons to continue.

“Go on, go on,” she cried. They hastened to obey, and as they approached the toadstool, its red cap seemed to peel away from itself, starting in the center. There was a wetly vile sound as it peeled back to reveal a devouring mouth ringed with jagged white teeth and a long, sinuous red tongue licked them in an obscene and hungry manner. Strange sounds issued from its mouth, but not the bestial, hungry noises that one might have expected. No, Robin realized as horror filled him and fear knotted his belly, they were the

screams of those trapped inside this most disgusting of prisons.

The Blood Cup. He had never heard of it before, and he wished he had not now. But its purpose was clear. The horrid toadstool was an abomination beyond abominations, a thing to make even demons shudder. To feed upon the fire of an unwilling other was bad enough, but to imprison immortals and drain them slowly and painfully, over devils-knew how much time, was sadism beyond his ability to understand.

He could not permit it. Not to Gloriana. Not when it was his doing that had put her in this peril.

"I tell you the truth! I don't know where he is! Torture me if you must, flay my mind, but I cannot tell you something I do not know! Only do not do this, please, let her go!"

The guards stopped, and for a moment he thought Gloriana might be spared when Maomoondagh favored him with a dazzling smile. The incongruence of her seeming innocence was a violation, like stark blasphemy on the lips of a child. "But where would be the fun in that? Let her go? I don't think so."

Obedient to their queen's wish, the guards stepped forward and the obscene tongue shot out, knocking one of the big demons down as it wrapped itself around Gloriana's waist. She pummeled at it, to no avail, as it drew her inexorably towards its now-gaping maw.

The geis must have been broken as the monstrous thing began to ravage her feet and legs, for Gloriana's lips were unsealed with an ungodly shriek. The silver flames of her bonds were engulfed by the purple fire that erupted from her, issuing a dark grey-purple smoke that smelled bizarrely sweet. Purple were the flames, the purple of royalty, and they swirled up and around Gloriana as if to protect her from the devouring horror. For a moment, they seemed to keep the ragged teeth at bay, but only for a moment. Then, as her strength failed, she screamed one last time and was gone, crushed within the teeth with a terrible snap that echoed with finality. There was a strange movement within the stalk, as if the thing was swallowing, and then the terrible jaws disappeared again under the red toadstool cap.

"Don't be sad." Robin felt a tiny hand stroking his chin, and it took every ounce of his self-control not to swat the little monstress away like an oversized insect. "She'll always be there in your heart. And in my throne, for that matter."

"Your throne?"

"Did I say throne? Why, I must have meant stool! It's rather useful, don't you think?" She leaped away from him and twiddled her toes as she hung suspended in the air for a moment, then gracefully came to rest upon the quiescent mushroom, crossed her legs, and propped up her head on her entwined hands. She regarded him for a moment, but she must have withheld something, because this time Robin was able to bear her stare. Then she closed her eyes and sighed dreamily.

"Mmmm. She had more strength than I knew. Such a lovely spirit...." The grey eyes snapped open, and her smile grew crueler now. "If only I could have her mind as well. Then I would have no need for this silly game of kiss-and-tell."

Robin swallowed hard. There was something strange about the Mad One, (for he had no doubt that this psychotic pseudo-fairy was the very usurper he hoped to destroy), there seemed to be some sort of symbiosis between her and the mushroom, or throne, as she had let slip. Or, as was much more likely the case, pretended to let slip. Did she somehow draw her awesome strength from the spirits it devoured? Why not simply drain their fire in a more direct manner? He set the matter aside for the nonce; there were more pressing issues at hand. Survival, for one.

Once more, he met those iron eyes. Her smile, he realized, never seemed to touch them, perfect though it was and whitely though it gleamed.

"Now that you understand the consequences, perhaps you will deign to answer the second question. Where is Oberon?"

"That's not a second question."

"Of course it is!" She was indignant.

"No, it can't be. It's exactly the same question you asked before." He folded his arms over his chest and hoped for a less painful demise than Gloriana's. "You said that if I declined two questions, another would be, um, how did you

put it? Ensconced. In that appalling... whatever you call it. That Cup. But you see, asking the same question twice is by no means the same thing as asking two questions."

"Don't get technical with me, trickster." She stomped her little foot. "Just answer the question!"

"Don't get technical? Don't get technical? What kind of faery queen are you, anyhow? Of course I'm getting technical, that is exactly what every faery in the long and ignoble history of human-faery relations has always done!" Robin threw up his hands as if exasperated. "I mean, a mortal asks for long life, you give it to him and conveniently forget to keep him from aging... I mean, sure, it's implied in the request, obviously, but he didn't ask – technically!"

"It's the oldest trick in the book! What would we be if we practiced the spirit of the law and not the letter? Well, I couldn't tell you, actually, but we wouldn't be proper fae, then, would we?"

Even some of the guard demons were staring at him with open mouths, as were Titania and Lahalissa. Could he actually get away with it?

"Enough, you've had your chance. I am ending this charade."

Robin gaped as a rumbling voice came from the tiny throat of the white fae, as if she was a direct conduit from one of the deeper pits of Hell. The little fingers snapped, and abruptly he was no longer standing in front of a toadstool under an open sky, but enclosed in a vast and terrible chamber of bones, a veritable palace of death.

CHAPTER 11

THE DEMON IN ME

NOW THE HUNGRY LION ROARS,
AND THE WOLF BEHOWLS THE MOON;
— William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

He looked up, and was stunned to see what looked like an unthinkably large backbone directly over his head. Ribs arched down from it on either side, embedded in the rock –as if they were in the fossilized belly of a dinosaur that would have dwarfed the largest blue whale – and Robin wondered if perhaps this was where one of the more monstrous Nephilim had met its end.

It was not only his immediate surroundings that had changed. The white fae was gone, as in her place sat a tall, thin man with ashen skin and hair like slivers of platinum straw. Gone, too, was the smile and even the least pretense of good humor or charm. Only the eyes were the same, grey like a starving wolf or a darkening sky threatening rain, thunder and hail. Nor did she – he, rather – sit lounging on a toadstool. Maomoondagh was enthroned in bone, ancient ivory carved all about with sacrileges old and new, and runes of great power. His long fingers gripped the armrests, which were carved in the shape of talons gripping a sphere – the world perhaps? They were like claws upon claws. He gripped them tightly, as if drawing sustenance from that wicked seat.

And he probably was, Robin guessed, if the rosy flush that was spreading upward from his hands and beginning to suffuse his pallid cheeks with colour was any indication. That was disconcerting enough, worse still was the recognition that he was alone with this mutating monster. In addition to the significant changes in décor was the complete absence of Lahalissa and Titania, not to mention all of the guard

demons. Theoretically, this absence of defenders presented him with an opportunity of sorts, but somehow, he felt rather loathe to avail himself of it. The Mad One's throne alone seemed like more than a match for him.

"Where are we?" he asked the monstrous demon-prince.

"We are where we were before. Only deeper in the truth."

"And what are you?" Robin wasn't sure, but he had the distinct impression that Maomoondagh had not been talking to him in that deep voice about ending the charade, but rather to herself. Except that herself was now himself.

As Robin tried to unwind the strange situation, he nearly missed what Maomoondagh was saying.

"I believe the next question is mine, but I find myself inclined to a similar construction. Are you who you say you are, Robin Goodfellow? The others seem to believe so. I am not so sure." The iron eyes suddenly bore into him, unthinkably powerful. They hurled him outside of time and space, and he hung, impaled, on the merciless spike of that cruel gaze. "Who are you?"

"Robin G-Goodfellow," he stammered. "P-P-Puck if you p-prefer."

"So, you are telling the truth. And yet, there is something more there, I see."

WHO ARE YOU? WHY DID YOU FREE HIM? WHERE IS OBERON? WHERE IS OBERON? YOU WILL TELL ME ALL!

The overwhelming force of the mindream felt rather like what he imagined a bullet exploding in the midst of a mortal brain must be like. The shards of his mind seemed to be flying everywhere, and yet, the very dissipation somehow protected his thoughts against the violation. He could see a great black wolf in the very center of his mind, leaping and snapping futilely at the hundreds of white butterflies that dipped and swooped and somehow evaded those slavering jaws. He laughed, until the beast gave up its futile game and turned to regard him with a pair of merciless grey eyes.

The stones that smashed against his face seemed to come from nowhere, and it took him a few seconds to realize he was still in the Mad One's fossilephilic throne room, if indeed he had ever left. He stifled a hysterical chuckle; this was

certainly the most arduous court visitation he'd ever known. For what seemed like the seventieth times seventh time, he picked himself up off the ground, or floor, whatever it was supposed to be. This is getting very old, he told himself.

"So, is it my turn now?" It felt as if someone had been pounding at his skull with hammers, but from the inside. It was unfair, he felt, for a transubstantial being such as himself to be affected by something so mortal and vulgar as physical pain, even if it was probably psychosomatic. "I don't suppose you have any Advil handy?"

"You find this amusing? When I can crush you without exerting myself in the slightest?"

Robin took in the floor-to-ceiling bones, the harsh lines of the room, and the elevated dais that left him staring at the Mad One's knees.

"I do, actually. But only in a very sad, very unimaginative way. Did they have some sort of sale on the Dark Lord Number Three bedroom set at Ikea?" He paused, but to his surprise, he was permitted to stay on his feet for once. He'd sort of assumed that the touchy bastard would flatten him again, and the fact that he hadn't threw him for a loop for a moment. "Um, while you were busy breaking my mind into pieces, I couldn't help noticing something about yours. You're a fake. You're not insane at all."

"What is madness? I contain multitudes."

"I'm not even sure that you're an angel at all."

"I might well say the same about you, Puck. It's a strange sort of common trickster who, after five hundred years of absence, suddenly reappears and intrudes upon the affairs of princes."

"I'm a late bloomer."

"Lateness can easily be arranged."

"If you say. And if you don't mind my saying so, I quite prefer these delicate threats to the crude use of force. It's a little more ominous and elegant, less vulgar, really. And speaking of vulgar, what happened to our friendly spectators?"

"Why, they're right here. I wished merely to speak with you alone. You see, there is something very odd about you, Puck. Inside that homely Aspect you wear, hidden under all

the jokes and the jibes, is a secret. You are protecting something and you are somehow able to hide that from me, even when I enter your mind. That, trickster, makes you a very rare and interesting spirit indeed."

"Don't forget the breaking of your seal," Robin wagged a finger at him. "I'm very proud of that. I can't believe you haven't asked me about that!"

That drew a ghost of a wintry smile. "There was no need. I know very well how you managed that. My compliments on a most innovative approach."

"Thank you very much. Now, what do you want?"

"I want your secret. And I want my predecessor, so that I can see him interned in a more useful and permanent manner."

The Mad One smiled as Robin couldn't refrain from glancing at the hideous throne. Was it his imagination, or had the bones taken on a faintly pinkish hue?

"I imagine that the one will soon lead to the other, so unless you wish me to engage in a more comprehensive investigation of your mind, I suggest that you tell me now. Or was my demonstration of the uses to which one can usefully put a retired queen of Faerie insufficient to exhibit my resolve?"

"No, I very much took your point. I have no doubt that you'd pillage my mind like Vikings torching a monastery... if you could. But you see, you have nothing but brute strength at your disposal, and my little lockbox here," he tapped his head, "well, that requires subtlety. Of which, Mr. Dark Lord Number What-have-you, you are sorely lacking!"

"You think to anger me, I suppose," the Mad One responded slowly. "You hope that I will destroy you in a rage, and in doing so will buy the safety of your liege with silence. How very noble."

Robin bowed low. "Thank you. I thought it up all by myself – and on the spot, too, I might add."

"Then I fear I shall have to deny you the satisfaction of your sacrifice. But, in order that you not be completely disappointed, I shall allow your erstwhile companion to offer herself in your stead." His cruel smile was as palpable as a right cross to the jaw. Robin had seen this coming, he knew

there was no way to save either Lahalissa or Gloriana without betraying Oberon, but even so, the hungry maliciousness of the Mad One shocked Robin into silence. He mentally withdrew his previous assertion of the other's sanity.

A moment later, Lahalissa appeared behind him, slung over the shoulder of a demon nearly twice her size. She wriggled desperately, but to little avail. The guard bore the assault of her fists with stoic indifference as he marched before his demonic king. Filled with terror, her eyes fell upon Robin, pleading silently.

There's nothing I can do! Don't you see? But her eyes seemed to condemn him.

There was nothing he could do for her, and yet, that wordless appeal was not one he could ignore. Not if he intended to live with himself. Seeing Maomoondagh's eyes were on her, he took advantage of the momentary distraction to transform himself into a reasonable facsimile of a battle demon, with long, curving horns and long arms that ended in razor-tipped claws. Without a sound, he launched himself at the knees of Lahalissa's captor, hoping to take him by surprise.

There was a crunching sound as he struck, and as pain exploded in his shoulder, he realized that the thing being crunched was him and his foe's knee was about as vulnerable as a marble column. It was about as hard, too. Clutching at his broken shoulder, he rolled onto his back and stared up at the bemused face of the bull demon. It grinned, then kicked him off to the side; the force of it was such that he skidded across the floor until he came to a rest against something sharp and bony that prodded the small of his back. For a moment, all he saw was red as the pain washed over him like a fiery wave.

Taking no notice of Robin's feeble protest, Maomoondagh rose from his ivory throne, revealing a strange red cushion that covered the seat and ran up the back. It was the same shade of red as the toadstool cap, but it pulsed with an ominous life of its own, as if keeping time with an impossible heart located somewhere within. As he stepped away from it, the cushion parted, and from its scarlet depths came forth

that obscene tongue once more. As prehensile as it was deadly, the atrocity curled and wiggled lasciviously at Lahalissa, whose eyes were wide with terror.

As she cowered before the grotesque thing, another demonic guard stepped forward and seized her right arm, kicking out her right leg so she was splayed, spread-eagled like an ancient offering to the old Nordic demons, in front of that wicked throne. Gripping her hair in his taloned fist, the demon pulled back her head and exposed the carmel curve of her graceful throat to his master.

The Mad One approached slowly, towering over her like a washed-out version of the Grim Reaper. "I will give you a choice," he said. "You will tell me all you know, or I will ream your mind as I drain you dry. I could not read Gloriana, but you, little one, pose no such difficulty."

He reached out and ran a delicate finger over her exposed throat. She shivered, and a thin line of purple flames sprang up from where his razor-sharp nail had touched her. Then, holding the back of her head in his skeletal hand, he licked at the violet fire and a dreamy look of satisfaction passed over his face.

"How sweet you are. And how frightened!"

WHERE IS HE! WHERE IS OBERON!

The force of his unexpected mental assault was such that even Robin, sprawled out on the other side of the room and benumbed by pain, could hear him clearly.

Lahalissa only stared. Fear, it seemed, had struck her dumb. The flames flickered enticingly from the wound at her throat, and perhaps it was the anticipatory look on the Mad One's face that helped her find her voice, for a moment later, she lowered her eyes and whispered her acquiescence. Robin couldn't blame her; he was only glad that she knew even less than he did. Even so, it might be enough to track Oberon down. And as for the fate of the Sussex Weald and its lord... he could only shake his head.

"I do not know, Great Lord. But I will tell you everything I do know."

Albion's usurper locked eyes with Lahalissa, pinning her in place with his mind. Robin, still attuned, could feel the

echoes of his efforts. *rending – ripping - stripping* DO YOU SPEAK TRUTH? *disgruntled satisfaction*

She staggered back as he released her with a bitter sigh.

“Of course you will. One way or another. But to volunteer the information freely is easier for you, even if I deny myself the indulgence of draining you to the dregs.” Maomoondagh passed his hand over her throat, and the small wound was healed. “Free her.”

The two giant guards released her, but no sooner had they done so when she leaped at Albion’s evil ruler. Or so it seemed at first. For the Mad One was not her object, she flashed past him, her wings furled, and past the startled, flailing tongue to plunge into the still-parted lips of the cushion like an arrow striking the center of a target. There was a brief, muffled shriek, and her feet twitched horribly for a second until they disappeared entirely, followed seconds later by the throne’s tongue, which managed to convey an air of pleased, if somewhat befuddled, content.

A content not shared by the Mad One. He emitted a disturbingly high-pitched shriek followed by a deeply thunderous oath that made the guards quail and loosed several bones from the ceiling. They plunged down to splinter on the floor around Maomoondagh, who was too busy cursing in various male and female voices to notice the shower of bone shards. For a moment, it looked as if he might try to leap into his sorcerous throne himself and drag Lahalissa out of there.

“How very unfortunate!” Robin said, flashing his teeth defiantly.

For the fallen angel had already been doomed, and Robin took solace from knowing her sacrifice was not in vain. Even the merest mention of the Twice-Fallen would be enough to cause Maomoondagh to turn over every rock and rotting log in his kingdom, and there was no way that Oberon or those who hid him could survive such a targeted search. Now, the secret was his alone, and there was no sustenance that Maomoondagh could derive from Lahalissa that would make up for the knowledge he had just lost. One had to take one’s victories where one found them, meager though they might be.

"Hardly a victory," the Mad One said coldly, back under control although still visibly angered. "And if you are correct and I cannot break you through sheer will, that does not mean I cannot avail myself of other methods. In the meantime, Puck, recall that nothing has changed. I still hold the Isles in the palm of my hand; I have lost nothing. You, on the other hand, have lost your only allies. If this game is not over, it approaches the end game. How long can a pawn protect a king?"

"Longer than you might think," Robin answered. "Whereas you might do well to consider how long a king may hold his square, once the hand that guides him decides he must leave it."

"No hand guides me!" The Mad One snarled in rage. And hearing the furiously feminine sound of the little queen's voice from the Dark Lord's visage betrayed the extent to which he was losing control. Robin smiled.

His smile vanished when Maomoondagh snapped his finger and pointed to one of the two guards. The guard jumped, startled, as his sword drew itself from his scabbard and its purple flames hissed evilly into life. For a moment, it hung there in the air before the big demon, as if held by an invisible hand. There was a sudden whoosh and a blur of violet violence, and the body of the guard crumpled to the ground, headless, before being sucked down into the vampirish floor of bones.

Robin forced himself to stand his ground as the flaming blade levitated over to him and hung immediately before him. The hilt was about waist level, but he did not dare to move so much as a whisker. He met the Mad One's red eyes, which were full of cruel contempt.

"Take it," the demonic king ordered. "You have seen what it can do. Now take it up!"

Fearing the consequences, Robin reached out and grasped the hilt in his hand. It was cool, as if no one had touched it.

"Now wield it, little one. Are you bold enough to raise your hand against me twice? Do you fear to strike me down?"

"I fear nothing!" Robin shouted and in one mighty leap, he reached the Mad One and drove the blade deep into the royal monster's chest. He felt it burn its way in through the black

armor, through the spirit's shell and into the vital, vulnerable heart of fire. "To the Pit with you!"

But the Mad One did not cry out or collapse, indeed, he did not so much as blink despite being pinned to his throne. Quite the contrary; he smiled, then closed his eyes with a distinct look of pleasure as he tilted his head back. The flames around his chest sputtered and weakened, and faded to a washed out lavender before dying out altogether. What was this? Robin was horrified. He had never seen the like. Not even Oberon, not even the greatest Princes of Hell, could endure such a wound with indifference. No, not indifference, downright relish!

The Mad One opened his eyes. They were bright and alert, and his alabaster face was flushed, almost rosy. He placed his fingers around the hilt of the demonsword, and carefully pushed it out of his chest, revealing the blackened, shrunken remnants of a blade. He held it up to Robin in a mock salute, then flicked it with his finger. Reduced to little more than charcoal, the blade disintegrated and fell to the bony floor in a shower of black flakes.

"What are you," whispered Robin, awestruck for one of the first times in his long existence.

Maomoondagh rose from his throne and tossed the hilt to the side. "Now, perhaps, you begin to understand why I would not fear Diavelina if she came prancing over the water on the arm of her damned father himself, with six hundred and sixty six legions marching in lockstep behind her! Now, speak, wretched angel. Where is my cursed predecessor?"

"I am most impressed, my lord. I misspoke earlier. Your power is great indeed, but it is truly your madness that knows no bounds."

Blood, or some facsimile therein suffused the Mad One's face. He did not speak, but his eyes glowed hotly red and there was fury embedded in every particle of the thought-scream that smashed into Robin's mind. And the shrieking that hurled him helplessly into the blissful black peace of unconsciousness had the unmistakable sound of a vengeful fairy queen scorned.

THIS IS MY KINGDOM! MY CROWN! MY THRONE!
MOLOCH'S BITCH PRINCESS WILL NOT HAVE THEM!

OBERON WILL NOT HAVE THEM! NO ONE WILL HAVE
THEM! THE ISLES ARE MINE!

CHAPTER 12

THE WEIGHT OF HOURS

THE HOURS WEIGHED LIKE CENTURIES ON HIS HEART. MEMORIES ROSE UP FROM DIFFERENT PERIODS OF HIS LIFE, CROWDING THE FOREGROUND OF HIS MIND, CONTENDING FOR ATTENTION. THEY HAD NO SHAPE, NO ORDER, BUT THEY WERE VIVID AND EXHAUSTING – AT ONCE SILKY AND PRICKLY AS THISTLES.

— Lawrence Durrell, *Livia*

I have built an empire, thought John David Collins, as he leaned back in his comfortable leather chair and took in the tasteful mahogany décor of his oversized office. Images flickered and transformed silently on the four large flatscreen televisions on the far wall, each one tuned to one of the four broadcasting channels that made up a large part of that empire. Books lined the hand-carved wooden bookshelves that stretched from floor to ceiling, sorted according to his notoriously eclectic tastes. On one shelf, a three-volume compendium on the history of chess was placed strategically between books on Biblical archeology and Christian apologetics.

Below them, filling two shelves, were various editions of books bearing his own name. *The Tongue Untamed*, *A Blameless Walk*, and *Beginnings of Knowledge* were but a few of the eighteen books he had written or co-authored. Two of them had cracked the New York Times bestseller's list, and, much to his surprise, *Joy: The Prospect of the Righteous*, won last year's Dove award for best non-fiction, beating out Jim Dobson's latest book. It was a respectable legacy for any man, but John David found little satisfaction in what, at the end of the day, were simply material accomplishments.

For what was an empire, but the flicker of a candle when compared to the great light of eternity? Even Alexander, that

golden warlike youth who strode across the ancient world like an Olympian colossus, would have been swallowed by the mists of history were it not for the scribblings of a gentleman scholar writing four hundred years after the young Macedonian's empire had collapsed into dust. It was all dust, all chaff, all nonsense, except for that which was of lasting value. But how could he, a mere mortal, hope to know what would survive the divine fire?

He stared at his reflection in the dark glass of the unpowered computer screen. His hair, long and pushed back behind his ears, had been grey for years, and now that grey was mostly white. He had been lucky, he thought ironically, as he ran his hand through what despite his age was still a thick, healthy thatch. Height and good hair were important, for the corporate executive as well as the television evangelist. How much more so, then, for someone like himself, who was both.

Threescore years and ten are the days of our years. Surely the Psalmist knew whereof he wrote, a man after God's own heart. And yet even a king such as he had seen them filled by labor and sorrow, sorrow for that which had been done, and regret for that which had not. John David found that the psalm spoke to him now in a way that he never could have imagined in his youth. How much longer would it be, then, before his own days would be cut off, and, as it was written, the time would come for him to fly away? Not too terribly long now, he suspected. He was in good health, but it was not beyond the realm of possibility that this last Easter, celebrated so joyfully over the past weekend, would be his last.

The telephone rang. It was Terri, his grand-daughter, who was working as his personal assistant for the summer, giving her mother the luxury of a three-month vacation. Surrounding yourself with family was one sure way to keep yourself out of trouble; over his many years in the ministry, John David had seen far too many of his colleagues tripping over that old serpent's favorite stone. While he himself had never found it necessary to abide by the Reverend Graham's famous custom of refusing to remain alone in the company of

a woman not his wife, he could certainly appreciate the wisdom of that policy.

"Granda, there's a man on the phone who wants to talk to you, he says he's, like, a pastor, from Minneapolis, I think." Terri paused for a moment. "I forgot to ask his name, I'm sorry."

John David chuckled affectionately. It was only her second week on the job. She would learn, in time.

"It's okay, sweetie. You can put him through."

There were several clicks, and the elderly evangelist smiled as he wondered if Terri had inadvertently hung up on the caller. Well, if it was important, the gentleman would call back. They always did.

"Reverend Collins?" he started as the voice from the receiver barked loudly in his ear. He winced and stabbed quickly at the volume setting. "It's an honor, sir, a real honor. I know how busy you must be, Reverend, but the reason I'm calling is that there's a group of us up here, pastors from different churches around the area, and we've been getting together regularly to, you know, just put our heads together and see if there isn't anything we can do to work together across our various denominations. You see —"

"Excuse me," John David hated to interrupt so rudely, but the man left him little choice. "I'm very sorry, but would you tell me who's speaking, please?"

"Oh, well, I guess I didn't tell you my name now, did I." The caller had an informal manner of speech that made him sound very youthful. "I'm Bill Daniels, from Gethsemane Lutheran. I'm the pastor of a congregation in Maple Grove, that's a suburb up here west of the Twin Cities, and, well, I guess you could say that I'm one of the leaders of this cross-denominational effort we've gotten started. There's about twenty-five churches involved in our project, Lutherans, Methodists, Baptists, Pentacostals, and even one of the more evangelical Catholic dioceses...."

John David sighed. It was all very wonderful, of course, but he didn't quite understand where he, a Southern Baptist, happened to fit into this ecumenical picture taking shape on the other side of the country.

"Mr. Daniels, it sounds like you've managed to bring together a diverse cross-section of the Kingdom in your area, and that's a wonderful thing, but I must admit that I do not understand what you are purposing to do. If you don't mind my asking, sir, I'm curious to know what all of this might have to do with me?"

There was a brief, uncomfortable silence. Then the caller laughed, embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, I guess I thought that was, well, obvious. We'd like to invite you to come up and preach a crusade, of course. Minneapolis hasn't seen one since Billy Graham was here in ninety-eight. The Metrodome, that's the big football stadium, seats more than seventy thousand, and we know that an anointed speaker such as yourself won't have any problem bringing in the crowd to fill it. We've certainly got enough souls in need of saving here."

John David nodded. That was doubtless true, but he wondered if he still had the energy for this sort of endeavor. Despite his many years in the ministry, he wasn't a natural speaker, and he found the peaceful seclusion of his office far more comfortable than the harsh glare of the spotlights. It was hard enough for him to continue meeting the demands of his weekly television shows, much less contemplate the thought of speaking before a stadium full of people for five straight nights. And then there were all of the other elements involved in the process – the media interviews, church appearances, and, worst of all, the inevitable prayer breakfasts.

"Of course, I'll be happy to do it," he was shocked to hear himself say. "But there is one condition."

"That's wonderful," Daniels said enthusiastically. "What's the condition? I'm sure we'll be more than happy to meet it."

"Before I agree to come, I will require four hundred people from each of your churches to commit to praying for this crusade, every day, for a month."

Again, there was silence.

"Four hundred... but that's ten thousand people!" his caller exclaimed. "You can't be serious?"

"Oh, but I am, Mr. Daniels," John David assured him. "I would no more embark on a crusade of this magnitude

without prayer than I would go into battle without an army behind me. Don't be alarmed, young man. I know how long it takes to put this kind of event together, and I imagine that July or August will be the earliest you could possibly hope to stage it. You have the time to gather your volunteers, I'm certain of it."

"Well, all right," Bill Daniels said reluctantly, clearly feeling somewhat put out. "I guess I'll, ah, we'll just have to see what we can do, then. I'll get back in touch with you if we think we're able to meet your condition."

"God bless you," John David told him, and he smiled as he returned the receiver to its cradle without waiting for a response.

He had no doubts that young Daniels was a well-meaning man, but like most energetic young men, he was impatient. It was a disease of which he himself had finally been cured not all that long ago. John David leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, wondering if he would ever hear from the young pastor again. He was surprised to find that he hoped so. Empires vanished into history, books crumbled into dust and a man's short life was the most ephemeral thing of all. But to help a lost sheep find its shepherd, now that was a legacy that lasted.

To his delight, the image of a lost sheep wandering through strange meadows sparked a promising train of thought, and the elderly evangelist reached for a pencil. But not being gifted with the eyes of Elisha, he had no way of knowing that behind him, two grim-looking angels with great scarlet wings had entered the room in silence, their swords unsheathed.

John David Collins was not the only one with reservations about Minnesota. It was late in the day and Robin had traveled far, so he regarded the two oversized Fallen approaching him with resigned equanimity. Lord Tiercel's demesne was not a large one, but it was overly stocked with demonic bureaucracy and it had taken three days for him to wrangle permission to cross it with his combination of forgeries and staggeringly outdated credentials from Albion. Miss Arendt had written more shrewdly than she could

possibly have imagined, he thought, sighing, when she contemplated the banality of evil.

"What's your business here?" said one ugly brute, who was approximately twice as tall and three times as wide as Robin. His yellowed tusks gleamed gold in the light of the setting sun.

"I don't suppose you'd believe me if I said I was just a sight-seer, mate?"

"Nothing here to see. Unless you're a Divine spy."

"Why would they need a spy when they have millions of Guardians scattered about the place?"

The tusked brute paused and looked uncertain. Clearly the thought had never occurred to him before. Ah well, there was a first time for everything. Robin took pity on him.

"I'm not a spy. I'm a retired jester from the Court of Albion, and I heard that the lord of this principality might be in need of one."

The two brutes looked at each other and grunted with amusement. They turned back to him and regarded him with what could only be interpreted, incredibly as it seemed to Robin, with condescension.

"So, whatt'ya got?" the wider one said.

"Sorry?"

"Show us what you got," explained the other.

Robin shrugged and caused five small balls of fire to appear in front of him. He began juggling them, first in a normal shower, then in a circular fall. The two brutes looked at each other and snorted, one of them stifling a yawn. Robin only grinned contemptuously, and reached into their minds to extract a few useful items; neither was any better shielded than a mortal.

As he continued to juggle, he made a few surreptitious changes to the fireballs. Two began to take on the appearance of the two guards, the other two were transformed into reasonable facsimiles of twin temptresses whose images he plucked from the first guard's mind, and happened to hold more than a little appeal to the him. As for the last fireball, he transformed it into the shape of a lovely little Divine angel whose image he'd stolen from the other guard. Tsk tsk. The treacherous hound!

The circular shower rose and fell, as before, but now the two little guard-surrogates sprouted wings and began frantically beating them, desperate to close the gap that separated them from the objects of their desire. Slowly, slowly, they gained on their lovely prey, until finally they managed to get their grasping claws on the squealing temptresses, while the left-out Divine looked on and shook her finger with disapproval.

Robin glanced at his audience and shook his head. The two were enrapt, so much so that the bigger guard was practically drooling. They were entirely at his mercy, but he had no quarrel with them and there was no point in doing them any harm. He hurled each entwined pair high into the air, followed by the little angel, and as the first pair reached the very peak of their arc, all three exploded into a fiery red-white-and-blue column.

The guards gaped at him, looking almost bereft as he took a theatrical bow.

"But... but you didn't finish," one finally said.

"Oh, I rather think I did. Now, are you satisfied as to my bona fides?"

"Satisfied to the who?"

"Are you content that I am what I say I am," said Robin. "Which is to say, a jongleur extraordinaire, one well worthy of a prince's court."

"Er, ah..." the guard looked at the other one, who shrugged. "Yeah, sure, okay. But, you know, you might want to find yourself a different court than Bloodwinter's."

Robin raised his eyebrows. "Why do you say that?"

"He don't really go for that sort of thing," the guard said.

"Ain't got much of a sense of humor, such as demonlords go," the other added.

"I'll keep that in mind, thank you." Of course, Robin had no intention whatsoever of trying to find a place in whatever passed for a dreary Midwestern court here in the middle of the great American nowhere. But it was interesting to know that even the local prince's lowliest servitors regarded him as a cold fish. Information wasn't always useful, but you never knew when what you thought to be nothing but dross turned out to be pure gold.

He waved cheerily to them and whistled as he continued on his long, counterproductive path. Every step took him further away from his goal, and yet each one was necessary, if he hoped to see his mission completed. It was maddening! Rumors, all he had was rumors, that and the sure knowledge that he dared not turn back until the die was ready to be cast. He was free, of that there was no doubt, for not even the long arm of the Mad One's stretched easily across oceans, but there were those attempting to track him down, even as he himself sought to find the kernel of truth that lay beneath the whispers, spurious inventions and lies.

A disgraced seraph in New York City. A lowly tempter wearing a cloak of gold in St. Louis. One of the mighty Sarim, stripped and shorn of power, enslaved by a cruel northern prince in Canada. Months had passed since he freed Albion's true king, but he was no closer to completing the next step in his plan to see Oberon restored. Methodically, he stalked each rumor, hunted it mercilessly to its source only to learn that the disgraced seraph was a domination with an exaggerated self-image combined with a reprehensible sense of history, the golden cloak turned out to be a Halloween jape, and if Prince Michael or any other member of the Sarim - present, former or Shadow - should ever set foot in Toronto anytime in the future, it would be the first time as far as Robin could tell.

He frowned. As fruitless as his search had been, and as much as he longed to turn back, the memory of the night before his escape from the clutches of the Mad One precluded him from seriously considering doing so. His present freedom was no accident. He would have liked to take credit for what could reasonably be portrayed as an escape, but he knew better.

After Lahalissa's noble sacrifice and the brutal mental assault that rendered him insensible, he had woken in darkness. An all-too-brief exploration with his hands informed him that he was in a cell of sorts with only a single place of egress, while an even shorter investigation forced him to conclude that whoever had laid the spellshield around his cell knew exactly what they were doing. It was impenetrable, at least five times stronger than the one that had previously

repulsed him at Oxford. But unlike on that occasion, there was little hope that the shield would be permitted to decay and fade away, not while he was still held prisoner here. Imprisoned and at wholly the mercy of a ruthless devil king who had no intention of allowing his enemies to roam freely in his realm.

It was hard, not to give in to sniveling self-pity and gloom, but he did his best. And yet, as he sat in the darkness and the sands of time seemed to slow with every depressing thought of his failure, the temptation to submit grew. What did he owe Oberon, to hold his silence now? He could not divulge the Faery King's whereabouts, but surely the information he held locked away in his mind would be enough to purchase his freedom. And was not the Mad One his rightful liege? Was not possession nine-tenths of the law? And what did he, one of the most worthless angels ever to be numbered among the countless legions of the Fallen, care for the good, the right and the true anyhow?

GET OUT OF MY MIND!

His silent scream caught the intruders off-guard. He could sense their momentary disconcert, then dismay at being caught out. He laughed, genuinely amused. Did the Mad One truly think a few Doubters whispering at his mind would cause him to despair and reveal all? With an audible snort of contempt, he slammed a stronger thought screen into place. He had faced far greater doubts without any outside help over the last eight centuries, thank you very much; all the same, it was best not to take unnecessary risks.

He was passing the time by watching a duel between two battling automatons he had created from the dust and dirt of the cell when there was a scratching at his door. It was quiet, barely audible, in fact, which led him to conclude that whoever was out there was not supposed to be there. Abandoning his tiny gladiators to crumble into their component materials, he kneeled at the door and placed his ear against it, then scratched three times himself.

“Robin, is that you?”

“Titania?”

“Shhh, not so loud!”

"What are you doing here? Can you get me out of here?
Can you break the shield?"

"No! Now, be quiet and listen to me. Tomorrow, they're going to let you escape. But don't be fooled! They'll be watching you."

Don't be fooled? You either escaped or you didn't. What was she going on about?

"What?"

"I won't say his name, but the one who was trying to break your mind knows now that he can't, so he's counting on you to lead him to Oberon. After he visits you tomorrow evening, they'll lock the door but conveniently forget to restore the shield. They know you'll walk shadow and fly out, and they think you'll run right to Oberon."

Hmmm. That did make sense, except Robin wasn't sure how far he could trust Titania. While she had told him where Oberon was bound, she had not spoken up for either Gloriana or Lahalissa. Or him, for that matter. Not that he was surprised about the latter. His queen had never forgiven him for that amusing little affair of old, not so much due to the embarrassing ensorcellment, but for his later cruelty in playing the muse for a certain Elizabethan gentleman. Immortal queen, she was now cursed with an unwanted immortality of an altogether different sort. Did the old grudge now outweigh her fickle loyalties? That was the question.

"Why should I believe you? You didn't exactly play the great defender in there."

"What would that have accomplished? Look, you don't have to believe me. You'll see what happens soon enough." She sounded exasperated. "Just promise me that if they leave the shield down, you won't go running to him, not right away."

"I couldn't anyway... I don't know where he is. Truly."

There was a momentary silence. "Oh," she said. "Well, that's good, I suppose. Under the circumstances."

"Yes, rather." A thought occurred to him. "But, aren't we just back where we started then, if neither one of us can aid him? Diavelina won't wait forever before making her move,

and we've got to unseat the usurper before then if he's to have any chance of holding Albion's crown against her."

Albion's crown. And her sceptre. But not that cursed throne. That would certainly have to go. Robin shivered. He didn't know if there was any way to free the doomed spirits trapped in that abominable prison, but he hoped there was. Especially since, Titania's prediction notwithstanding, there was still a reasonable chance he was going to end up in there himself.

"We are, and we aren't. Listen to me. I don't know if you figured it out or not, but Maomoondagh is not truly an angel. He – "

"I knew it!"

"Shhh! Listen to me. He is, but he's something more as well. Something older. I don't think he's mad, it's as if there's more than one mind in there!"

Robin wasn't sure what he had been expecting to hear, but whatever it was, it wasn't that. A demonlord who wasn't a fallen angel? He'd never heard of such a thing! And yet, it would explain a lot about his unpredictability, if not his madness. His power, too, was anomalous. Could it be that there were entities that walked unknown amongst the Host and Legions in the same manner that they themselves intersected the mortal world?

"Older, like Leviathan?"

"Exactly. Leviathan was the king of Chaos, and he survived. Is it so unthinkable to suppose that others of his ilk might have survived the swords of Heaven?"

"Not entirely, no, I guess. Does anyone else know anything about this?"

"Someone must. I don't have the time to tell you of everything that led to... to the betrayal of my love. But know this. Some of the mightiest names among the Fallen were involved, and they saw fit to force the Mad One upon us. Why they should wish to unseat him now, I do not know – I can only imagine that he has played his part and they have no need for him anymore."

"If he is not one of us, how can we hope to destroy him?"

"If he is truly a creature of Chaos, then there is one weapon that should suffice. Oberon told me stories of the age

when Heaven first warred against Chaos, when the Thirty rode with Heaven's King and Leviathan was struck down and bound. They bore great swords forged from the very bones of the Chaos Lords, and the mightiest of them was Arabel, the Sword of Wrath, and Prince Jehuel was its lord."

"The Lord of the Sword! I'd heard the name, but I never knew the story behind it."

"Then mark this well, Robin. Prince Jehuel is fallen! Where he is, and more importantly, where Arabel might be, I do not know. Many years ago, it was supposed to be in Albion, but I never knew there to be any truth to the rumor. You must find him, in any case, for no angel can wield that blade but him."

Robin was intrigued, although he found it difficult to believe that there was ever a weapon bonded only to a specific angel. How did that work? It was possible, he supposed. Tricky. Mortals were easier. He considered the matter for a moment when he realized that Titania had gone silent.

"Titania?" he whispered uncertainly. There was no reply, except for a faint scratching. She was still there, it seemed, so he waited patiently, until he heard her voice again, even softer than before.

"A guard passed by, but the spell held and he did not mark me. Now, I must go before my fortune fades, but remember, do not go to Oberon when you are freed!"

"Wait! Titania!" Robin did not dare to raise his voice, but he scratched furiously at the door. He had more questions to ask, like where he should start looking for this Jehuel, and why she believed that no one else could bear his marvelous sword. But she did not reply, and after a long, frustrating silence, he was forced to conclude that she had abandoned him again.

The next evening, however, he learned that she had spoken truly. The Mad One's visit was almost perfunctory, although there was nothing half-hearted about the demon king's attempt to force his mind. By the time the door slammed, leaving him in darkness, he was sprawled on his back and blinking at the tiny, bright-coloured fairies that appeared to be zooming haphazardly about his vision. After a

while, they began to fade, leaving behind the unquestioned grandmother of every headache he'd ever had.

Gingerly, tenderly, he began to examine the interior of his mind. The first geas he found was obvious, the second rather less so, and the third would surely have escaped his notice had he not been on the look-out for even the most subtle spells of compulsion. Titania was right. Maomoondagh must see him as the easiest way to ferret out Oberon's hiding place; well, he intended to see how long the Mad One's arm reached, and just how far he was willing to stretch it. Not too far, he guessed, not with Moloch's savage spawn preparing to move against him.

The downside, of course, was that that very same threat left him with very little time. Not that he had much to do. Just track down a fallen angel lord and convince him to drop whatever he was doing and wield his sword on Oberon's behalf against someone who had never done anything to him. Piece of cake, really.

He shifted out of the material world and gave his wings the faintest flutter. He held his hand up above his head as he floated slowly upward, just in case Titania had misheard or the Mad One had changed his mind. But the roof was just a roof, nothing but easily penetrated plaster and concrete tile – the more substantial barrier to his kind was no longer there. He was free, in a manner of speaking. He also had no doubt that there were eyes upon him, watching closely to see which way he would fly.

He flew west. But as he flew, he could sense the watching eyes upon him.

Angels travel in a wide variety of manners. There are, of course, their famous wings, although a surprising number are deprived of their use, either as a punishment or because they have been forcibly removed. There are also the famous chariots of fire, although these have fallen into disrepute among the Fallen, who, though they will deny it, find their preferences insensibly altered over time by their greater immersion in the crass materiality of the mortal world. Your average demon would not be caught dead in such an outdated

vehicle, and would vastly prefer to be seen inside the sleek lines of a Ferrari, a Lamborghini or a Porsche.

And while it is no great hardship for even the lowliest of the low to painstakingly wing his way across the Atlantic, the vast majority of those who must make such a transit elect to hitch a ride with their mortal lessers – indeed, accounting for the guardians and tempters who must perforce escort their mortal charges, the average transatlantic flight may have three or four times as many unticketed passengers as it does paying customers.

So it was that after escaping, in a manner of speaking, the Mad One's clutches, Robin immediately struck out for Heathrow. He kept a close watch out for anyone following him, but he did not see anything until he swooped low upon the tarmac and there, caught in silhouette against the light of the Moon, were two fallen archons soaring high above him. He pretended not to see them until a British Airways 747 began its lumbering takeoff, at which point he ran alongside the huge machine, leaped nimbly astride one of the roaring engines underneath the wing, and waved a cheery goodbye to them.

The archons, belatedly realizing his intention, roared and plunged towards him, but by then the massive jet was already leaving the ground and there was no way the demonic pair could catch up with the mortal machine. They were powerful spirits, but they were created for battle, not speed, and so they pulled up, stymied by his unexpected flight, shouting furious curses that were as harmless as they were ill-meant.

CHAPTER 13

SECRET ASSASSIN

I NEVER TRY ANYTHING, I JUST DO IT.
YOU WANNA TRY ME?

— White Zombie, (“Thunderkiss '65”)

Now that he was safely past the border, Robin was of the opinion that sharing the no-doubt wretched accommodation of the Twice-Fallen might well be preferable to spending even one evening in this pair of podunkvilles on the great American prairie. The river divided not only the two mortal cities, but also their corresponding Fallen principalities. The one on the left belonged to a nonentity named Bloodwinter, it seemed, and he recalled one of the border guards saying that the other bank was ruled by a jumped-up naiad who called herself Lim-Nithural.

He decided to go right. Bloodwinter sounded like a crashing bore, and the lights of the city to the west were markedly brighter. He'd hit one or two of the hotspots, ask a few questions here and there, and then move on. The chances that his elusive Sarim was here were next to none, so he might as well see where the local Fallen were congregating and blow off some steam.

Now that he was safely past the border, he felt free to take to the air. There wasn't much of a breeze, though, so he stroked his way over to the interstate highway, then amused himself by surfing down the road on the top of a black Escalade containing a handsome young couple who appeared to be heading into the heart of the city for an evening on the town. It was exhilarating; they were only moving about one hundred kilometers an hour, but the speed of the ground flashing by just five feet below him made it feel as if they were going even faster. He was down a strata and partially

substantial – the threat of some serious road rash only added to the rush – though he was still invisible to the mortal eye.

“What do you think you’re doing?” A Guardian stuck his head out the open window and pointed the business end of a sword at him. Robin could feel the heat of its intense flames on his face. “Back off, or I’ll throw you off myself!”

“Cheers, mate!” Robin said, and he spread his wings to aid his balance as he leaped off the back of the Cadillac and ran up the hood and windshield of the following Audi. An unexpected shift into the left lane nearly sent him flying off the second car, but he managed to avoid a nasty tumble with a lucky grab at the car’s ski rack. He laughed, thoroughly enjoying himself.

Tunes, that’s all I need now.

A young girl was driving the car, dancing in her seat and singing along to some execrable kitty pop. Enough of that. He lashed her mind, barely more sapient than the squirrels of Sussex Weald. HIT SEEK.

She hit the button and obediently tuned the radio to 93.7, the local metal station. It wasn’t exactly what he was looking for, but it was close enough in this colonial cultural backwater.

“Hey!” a big Tempter sitting alone in the backseat popped his head up and shouted at him through the open sunroof. “What do you think you’re doing? Don’t be messing with her head!”

“Don’t be such a wanker, mate! I’m just skitching a ride downtown and I couldn’t stand that screechy piddle. I’ll hit you baby, one more time.... I don’t suppose you know where there might be any action?”

“You’re not from around here, are you.”

“I can tell you’re the bright boy, you are.”

“Hey, there’s no need for that! Anyhow, it depends on what you mean by action. The Divine here are pretty tame, for the most part, but if you don’t have any objection to getting your head handed to you, you can try over on the East Side –”

“No, mate, not that kind of action. I’m a lover, not a fighter. I was thinking more in terms of general debauchery, lonely Temptresses in need of consolation, that sort of thing.”

"Okay, right. Yeah, well, you definitely want to stay on the west side of the river, then. Things move around, you know, but First Ave is always a good place to start. Even if nothing's happening on the locality, someone there will know where it is."

The car shifted lanes again and Robin swayed with the vehicle's motion, then crouched lower as the Audi took an S-curve at speeds well in excess of the limit.

"Hey, what's the matter with you? You're not all in the meat, are you?"

"No, just a tad. You should try it sometime, it's the ultimate high-speed skateboard."

"Yeah, but if you fall off, dude, it's going to hurt!"

"It wouldn't be any fun if it didn't, mate. The whole point is to stay on, right? So, where's this street of which you speak so highly?"

"Not a street, a club. My girl here is heading south, but we'll pass right under the Washington bridge. We're almost there. Hop off on it and go east to First, then take a left and head south for seven blocks until you see a black building on your left. It's just past the Target Center, the big arena on the right, you can't miss it."

"Brilliant!"

The car crested a rise, and threw Robin about a meter in the air. Fortunately, the young driver did not elect to switch lanes at that moment, otherwise, he would have lost it for sure. For the first time, he was able to see the scattered skyscrapers of the little downtown district; there were about six buildings truly worthy of the name. The motorway then plunged downward and the car zoomed past a series of high concrete walls; he was surprised to see that there was no graffiti on them whatsoever. Given a week, the London street artists would have had them covered with everything from imaginative murals of Che Guevara and Osama bin Laden to the crudest vulgarities. Was there some strange Divine influence at work here, or could it be that the local art proses simply preferred guerilla street theatre?

"Hey, that's the bridge I was telling you about!" The tempter pointed at a concrete-and-steel structure towards

which they were rushing with some velocity. "Have a good time!"

"Thanks!" Robin sprang upward, furling his wings as he spread his arms and arched his back. His body rotated backwards even as it hurtled forward at nearly 100 kilometers an hour, and he felt a delicious chill of fear as he wondered if he'd jumped high enough. As his head came around, he was happy to see the oxidized guard rails protecting the edge of the bridge flash beneath him, and he immediately stretched out his wings to serve as an improvised air brake. They slowed him just enough to allow him to hit a graceful two-point landing on the sidewalk less than two meters from the far end of the bridge.

Clap. Clap. Clap. The applause was slow, even sarcastic. He looked up and saw a blonde demoness eyeing him with equal parts amusement and contempt. She was gaunt and her inner fire was barely more than glowing embers – he guessed she was probably the spirit of the nondescript bridge, or perhaps simply a wandering dryad who'd lost her tree.

"That was the stupidest thing I've ever seen," she said. "You were third-street, weren't you. I could tell by the sound."

"It was brilliant, wasn't it?" he agreed. Street, that must be the local slang, he decided. It was new to him, anyhow. He shrugged. Whatever. "No risk, no reward, my dear." She laughed, and her half-sneer was abruptly transformed into a one-sided half-smile.

"So, what's going on, English? You look new to town."

"I am. I'm looking for a place on the First Avenue. A nightclub of sorts. Can you take me there?"

He grinned as she looked him over. A calculating little devil, she was. Not that he had much to offer her, except perhaps a break from the everyday boredom of its place. It wasn't much, but apparently, it was enough.

"Do I look like I can?"

She didn't, actually. When he looked closer, he saw that his initial surmise had been correct and there was a thin skein of silver circling her neck that kept her leashed to the bridge. It would stretch, but not more than a block or two without snapping. The consequences wouldn't be lethal, not

immediately, but after a few minutes what little fire she possessed would dissipate into the various shadows as she, or rather, the remnants of her consciousness, were scattered across the Void. And by the time they were drawn together again, as they would inexorably be drawn, ten thousand years might pass. As with most things, immortality was not quite all that it was cracked up to be.

"Perhaps I can do something about that." He reached out and grasped the skein, and with a twist of his wrist, severed it. She staggered back and took a deep breath, given the terror in her eyes an obvious prelude to a scream, but he raised a hand and silenced her. "Don't worry, I'm just giving you a night off."

"You are? But, how can you do that? It's not possible."

"It's one of the few compensations that come with the job." He winked at her. "We itinerant sorts have the need to take a few liberties every now and then. Just don't tell anyone you left your bill – it's not going to fall down without you, is it?"

"Hardly. It's no Ponte Vecchio, but it's sturdy enough." She was staring, amazed, at the remnant of silver still attached to her neck. She held it in her hand for a moment, then dropped it and glanced up at him with a speculative stare. "Hey, you're not one of those Teeth guys, are you?"

"By Teeth, I assume you are referring to the oft-rumored, but never-seen angelic agency known in the vernacular as Satan's Teeth, which reports directly to Our Dear Lord Sathanas and executes His will on those spirits who have failed, disobeyed or otherwise annoyed him sufficiently to require their immediate removal from this plane of being?"

"Yeah!" She practically moaned the word. Her eyes were gleaming and she was quivering with excitement.

"Never heard of them. So, where is this place we're headed?"

She frowned, obviously not believing his denial, but confused enough by his answer to refrain from inquiring further. She was not the brightest demoness he'd ever encountered and she suited his needs admirably. Any tales he left behind him would surely be so blown out of proportion as to render both him and his activities entirely unrecognizable.

"First Avenue? It's up that way... not too far. Yeah, I'll show you, if you like. I don't see why not. So, what's your name?"

"I've known a few in my time. But you can call me Angelus."

"I don't believe you."

"You shouldn't. It's not my real name."

She laughed, obviously won over. She was also correct in saying that it wasn't far to their destination. After a surprisingly pleasant walk through the uncrowded city, which reminded him somewhat of the gauche tourist's corridor in the heart of Dublin, they reached a two-story black building squatting on a corner. He was disappointed, though unsurprised to discover that it was not only a grotty little place, even sketchier than most of London's naffer clubs, but three-quarters empty as well.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "They close here at two o'clock, and no one even goes out until ten? Is this one of those towns inhabited by the Amish? Or is it the Mormons? I can never keep them straight."

"No, it's just a Midwestern thing," said his tour guide, who had warmed to her temporary job. Her name was Pamillia, and she was a wealth of mind-numbing information on bridges and other forms of mortal architecture. "No great sinners, not much angst, and there's not a whole lot in the way of human tragedy, but there's tons of mortal stupidity to laugh at if you go in for that sort of thing."

"Farce, in other words."

"Um, yeah. Did you know that they call this the Minneapple?"

"This being what, the city?"

"Yes. I think it's supposed to make you think of the Big Apple."

Robin laughed and rolled his eyes. "How very cosmopolitan. No wonder they have an inferiority complex. I swear, if only Dante had ever visited, he surely would have made it a circle of Hell. Somewhere between the fifth and sixth, I should think. *Annoia*, that lonely hell where those who bore others to tears and madness are sentenced. Isn't

there anywhere else we can go? Let's pretend we're mortals and we have livers to mistreat."

"I don't get it." She stared at him blankly.

"I want a drink. Something that will put heat in my belly and make my head spin. Not like Linda Blair or anything, though. Hells below, that would be redundant!"

"Oh, okay. Do you have any money?"

"Don't be silly." He shifted, snapped his fingers and a fifty dollar bill appeared. "It's just an elementary matter of moving around a few atomic particles."

She stared at him, her gaunt face full of envy.

"I can't even walk shadow, forget doing something like that. I'll go with you, but you'll have to drink alone. I'm stuck here."

"Stuff and nonsense." He pulled her to him and she did not hold back. He kissed her, and as he tasted her dry, cracked lips, he infused her with just enough power to walk shadow for an evening or two. "Have yourself a go now."

She did, and a delighted smile spread across her emaciated face as she dropped two shadows and several centimeters and landed on the stool over which she'd been hovering. Even if her frame wasn't bordering on the skeletal, her mouth would have been too wide for beauty, but for a moment there was something lovely in the pure delight which filled her angled blue eyes. Still smiling, she reached over and plucked the fifty from his hand.

"You said you'd been wandering the States for a while, now. If you're looking for a taste of the old country, I know where we can go spend this. You might even want to conjure up another three or four, while you're at it."

"Brilliant." Robin nodded approvingly at the image of the pub she held in her mind. It would be a poor, tacky imitation of the real thing, of course, but at least the ale, being imported, would probably be genuine. And if by the most remote chance there happened to be any of the Mad One's agents lurking about, they wouldn't be on the lookout for a mortal couple. He made a few alterations to both of their appearances. "Like it?"

"Oh, yes, thank you!" She ran her hand over her new clothing and unfamiliar curves. The Burberry skirt was a

vast improvement on the tattered black rags that had hitherto adorned her formerly skeletal legs. "Can I go look at myself?"

"Go on, powder your nose," he urged her, as she rose quickly from the table. "But don't be too long. If I'm still sitting here in twenty minutes, my head might explode from the sheer lack of stimulus."

She was beaming when she returned, well within his time limit. He couldn't help returning her smile; perhaps not all demons could derive pleasure from the joy of another, but he could. "Let's go!" she said, taking his hand and pulling him to his feet. They walked along the avenue, past a block of dark, abandoned retail shops that ended in an explosion of neon lights, headlights, streetlights and people. Arm-in-arm, they crossed a pair of busy intersections before turning south and entering a somewhat quieter, though still distinctly urban neighborhood. There were trees scattered here and there on corners, and the traffic was reduced to an occasional car or two instead of the slow-moving throng that choked the main downtown thoroughfares.

But as they turned the corner, he was pleased to see that midway down the block, the sidewalk was barricaded by white plastic chairs, the vast majority of which were occupied by mortals in their second and third decades. Guinness was flowing freely from the taps, it seemed, unless the dark liquid that filled many of the mugs was Coca-cola. Above the entrance was a large blue sign proudly adorned with three white lions and when a waitress emerged from beneath it, she was accompanied by the unmistakable aroma of fish and chips.

It was at moments like this that Robin almost envied mortals. What passed for a stomach in his Seventh form was rumbling. The taproom itself was crowded and noisy, and he was forced to resort to a moderate amount of mental coercion to encourage a party of four to vacate their corner booth in a timely manner. A waitress, seeing them leave, glanced over and caught Robin's eye. It was too loud to call out his order, so he made do with holding up two fingers of one hand and pulling an imaginary lever with the other.

"This is fun!" said his companion of the evening. It was, to be sure, but it was a rather sad statement, since it was probably the most pleasure she had known in decades. And, he reminded himself, her pathetic existence would look like paradise compared to what his would be should he or Oberon fall into the wrong hands too soon.

Never mind that. Tonight, he fully intended to put such thoughts aside. They would wait for the morrow. He saluted her health and took a healthy slug of ale. Yes, that was rather better, wasn't it!

They were on their third mug, and she was doing her cheerful best to stay with him when a strangely familiar figure walked past the bar and mounted the steps that led to what looked like a game room upstairs. It was an attractive woman, mortal, he'd thought for a moment, until he looked again and saw the flames coursing inside her. Her head was cropped close to the scalp, the reddish stubble showing starkly against the underlying white skin, as if it had been recently shaved. I've seen her before! But where? Could it be... yes, it almost certainly was! How strange that she should be here, of all places, although I've not seen her for ages. What has it been, four hundred years? No, almost five hundred! Still, he wasn't entirely sure it was her, until she glanced back at the room and her green eyes swept unknowingly across his. But he knew her. He was sure of it.

"My dear, please do excuse me," he apologized to the demoness of the bridge. "I believe I have seen an old friend, and I think it would be best if you left now."

"Don't worry, I'll be fine," she said, her eyes on a handsome mortal at the next table.

"I think you misunderstand." His icy tone caught her attention, and her eyes widened as he stole an image from her mind and allowed it to flicker out momentarily from within him. It was her notion of what the dread Teeth must be like; merciless eyes, black on black, staring out of a handsome, debonair face that was insouciant in its cold arrogance. The portrait of an assassin who gloried in his job and would not hesitate to destroy all that stood between him and his prey. She shivered before him, sheer terror mixed with delicious pleasure.

"I knew it!" she whispered triumphantly.

"Go," he urged her, slipping the worthless mortal money he'd created into her slender hands. "Go quickly, before it is too late."

She blew him a kiss, mouthed a silent "thank you", and hastily exited the building. Robin smiled, feeling indulgent, and hoped that she'd make the most of her time in the mortal realm before the bridge began to draw her back again to her lonely prison. If nothing else, any tale she might tell was sure to confuse anyone inquiring into the actions of a stranger in this town.

He finished off his mug before making his way towards the stairs. He climbed them slowly, wondering if he was foolish to risk speaking with one who knew exactly who he was. But they had been allies before, long ago, and furthermore, if he could be sure of one thing, it was that she would not betray him to anyone who served the Mad One. She was at the far corner of the room, like him, disguised as a mortal, shooting American billiards with two other fallen angels who were in similar camouflage.

She was good, he saw. No expert, but a talented amateur. There were three solids and two stripes remaining on the table, and as he watched, she pocketed both stripes on a single, well-struck shot. Her leave was less than optimal, but somehow, she managed to sink the eight despite the partial obstruction afforded by the red solid. As it dropped into the leather, she punctuated her win with a brief cry of triumph.

But her joy was short lived, as her head whipped around at the sound of his applause. Her eyes, the lovely shade of emerald green that had made him sure of her, narrowed with suspicion for a moment, before widening suddenly when he stepped towards her.

"Hello, Melusine," Robin said, extending both his hands. "How delightful to see you again after all these years!"

CHAPTER 14

CLOUDS OF LIES AND DUST

A CONSTANT WAVE OF TENSION
ON TOP OF BROKEN TRUST
THE LESSONS THAT YOU TAUGHT ME
I LEARNED WERE NEVER TRUE
— Linkin Park, (“Runaway”)

By mutual agreement, no less understood for all that it was unspoken, Robin and Melusine left the pub together without sharing more than the most trivial information with her companions. They had been conspirators once, and there was something comfortable about this easy complicity, insignificant though it was. She led him out the back, down an iron staircase and out onto an open field that looked as if it would serve equally well for cricket, lawn bowling or a romantic assignation.

They stopped in the middle of the field and stood together under the moonlight. Robin studied Melusine, struck by the changes time had unaccountably wrought on her. It was her, truly her, not some aspect she'd assumed. Highlighted by the night shadows, her prominent cheekbones were like blades, threatening to slice through the white, paper-thin skin that barely held them in check. Her figure was no less voluptuous than before, but there was a cavernous quality to her eyes, which in combination with the prison-camp hairstyle and the absence of her wings, made it obvious that she had suffered much since he'd seen her last. The years, for all their seeming impotence, had a way of leaving their mark on immortals too.

“What have they done to you?”

“To me?” She sounded startled, but then she ran a hand self-consciously over her shorn head. “Why, nothing much.

Just a gentle reminder to watch my nose, that's all. It's not so bad. Even losing my wings has turned out to be more of an annoyance than anything else, really."

"How can you say that?" Robin, recalling the beauty of those lustrous, perfectly-symmetrical black wings, was shocked. "Melusine, were I not so sure that it is indeed you, I do not think I would recognize you!"

She did not sound at all like the spirited, wildly rebellious fallen angel he'd known before. Where was the fierce pride he had known and admired? The towering ambition? She was like a falcon tethered, her will broken to the falconer. But where was the falconer?

"I'm not sure I recognize myself anymore. Puck, dear, what are you doing here in flyover country? Please tell me you've abandoned that mad scheme to find Oberon and put him back on the throne."

"I've abandoned that mad scheme to find Oberon," he repeated obediently.

"Hell's below, but getting a straight answer out of you is practically a matter of eschatological significance. Tell me, honestly, what are you doing here?"

"I prefer to think of myself as a being of some circumspection."

"Yes, well, everyone else thinks of you as a being who is full of it. You still haven't answered me."

He smiled, anticipating her forthcoming reaction. "No, it's true, I have abandoned it. Looking for him, anyhow. Of course, that's mostly because I found him. I'm still working on the latter half of the equation."

"You found him?" She gasped, her lovely eyes widening with momentary excitement, before they darkened. She shook her head despairingly. "Oh, Puck. Didn't you learn anything from last time? No, I suppose not. You didn't enjoy a decade's worth of close personal attention from the Sons of Sorrow."

"Yes, I generally prefer to avoid such experiences."

"I didn't have a choice, and you know it. So, do you know what they've made of me now? A temptress, and a disgraced one at that. That's how low I have fallen!"

"I have always admired fallen women," Robin said, drawing a brief flicker of amusement from the emerald eyes.

"You should be in the Pit!"

"I fear the remnants of my better judgment sufficed to save me from that sad fate."

"Yes, well, I should have exercised better judgment when you came begging us to dethrone Maomoondagh on behalf of your master."

He shook his head, but responded gently. He knew on whose behalf she spoke so bitterly. "Don't be silly, Melusine. You leaped at the opportunity. So did he. We all did. It was a risk worth taking. We failed, but even so, I cannot say that I regret it."

"Because you are still here to do so!" Anger flushed her pallid face. Even bereft of her glorious mane, she was beautiful still, and Robin felt a pang of the old jealousy, knowing that he could never compare with the memory of her magnificent, long-banished love. The more so because her darling Raimon had fallen before the wicked blade of Merovael himself when his rebellious hand was forced too soon by an untimely betrayal.

"He will return one day, Melusine, if he has not already."

"Yes, of course, but as what? The guardian spirit of a tree stump? The tempter of a Hindu child living somewhere in the deepest jungles of the subcontinent? He will not know me, nor I him! I've seen what happens to them, Puck, to those who finally finish the long road back. They know nothing of who they are, their memories are blank, as empty as the void itself! It's true! Why, do you know, one of the tempters of my charge's family was once a member of the Sarim!"

"What?" Robin was truly surprised. He'd never heard of such a thing. "He must be lying! Perhaps he's trying to impress you?"

"Not at all! I was there when he called out Lord Kaym! He had once been an angel-prince, but when I met him he was a dryad calling himself Bog-something or other! He couldn't even remember his name!"

"Which was?"

"Prince Jehuel," Melusine said, and Robin blinked, feeling rather as if he'd been hit with a face with the side of a

broadsword. Fortunately, Melusine was too consumed with her angry diatribe to notice that her audience was standing slack-jawed in astonishment. Jehuel was here? Jehuel was here! Robin fought the sudden urge to throw his arms around his old friend and cackle madly with glee. Jehuel, the Lord of the Sword his own bad self, was actually lurking about this civilization-forsaken charade of a jumped-up farm town! Hellfire and hallelujah!

"The shame, the shame of it," Robin clucked and shook his head sympathetically, though at what, he was not sure since he hadn't heard a word she said since the beautiful name of Jehuel had passed her lips. He was tempted to make a clean breast of it and ask Melusine for her help, when the back door burst open and a giant brute of ill visage appeared in the doorframe.

Illuminated as he was from behind, Robin couldn't actually see his face, but judging from the multiple large protrusions that stuck out of the general region of the elongated shadow's face, Robin doubted the interloper would be winning any beauty contests. The demon paused for a moment, then roared over his shoulder at someone behind him. Robin groaned. The timing could not have been worse.

"Say, Melusine, it's been delightfully wonderful too see you again and I'm ever so tremendously sorry, but I need to vacate the premises – right now."

"What?" She didn't have the chance to say more as he shoved her to the ground and leaped into the sky, unfurling his wings as he rose.

"Where can I find you?" he shouted, darting at the demons – there were two of them – then spinning up and away. At all costs, he had to lead them away from Melusine before she tried to aid him. He wasn't sure, but they looked like *Nazkachi*, mercenary trackers who were more than capable of dealing with those they tracked down.

"The Lewis house. In Mounds Park."

Wherever that was. Well, first things first. He'd find it later, assuming there was a later. At the moment, there was the small, if rather pressing matter of losing this pair of unsightly brutes, who were showing a rather disturbing turn of speed as they pursued him, and losing them in such a way

that they would not be in any shape to investigate just what might happen to be of interest at the intriguing Lewis house in Mounds View.

He heard a hissing noise behind him and banked left. Just in time, too, as something very hot warmed the bottoms of his feet as it passed behind him. Glancing back, he saw the second demon's jaws open, spitting out another ball of supernaturally heated flame. Flamethrowing *Nazkachi*, how perfectly fascinating! Not for the first time, he was glad that the first thing he did in any new city was find a place or two to leave unwanted companions behind, unfortunately, at the rate they were gaining, he was never going to make it.

Necessity is the mother of invention. After one more jet of hellfire nearly scalded his shoulder, he tucked his wings and rolled sideways, then hurled two daggers at his pursuers. One was forced to roll and drop, buying him a little space, but the other simply caught the blade, palm-first, and grinned savagely at him before belching out another roaring mini-inferno. Hades and tarnation, so much for fighting it out! The *Nazkachi* didn't seem too worried about harming him, which was good to know. Either Maomoondagh had already found Oberon, or the Mad One simply wanted him out of the picture for good....

Robin ducked under a huge, evil-looking sword that was intended to behead him, then slid sideways. It was a dangerous move, but he was desperate now. He was trapped between them, with the second *Nazkach* coming in hard from behind.

His timing was flawless. Just as he slipped to the left, the approaching brute let fly with a prodigious flame that took his monstrous companion right in the face. Robin didn't look back; every second counted now and the screaming stopped sooner than he would have imagined. They were powerfully strong, these brutes.

He reached the church parking lot in the nick of time, dropping under a gout of flame so hot it seemed to melt the air as it flew past him. He winked at the big, armored guardian, who watched with an expression of curiosity that turned to shock as Robin crossed the boundary line and flashed past him. Robin didn't slow down, but the familiar

crackle of swordfire was followed almost immediately by a demonic snarl.

The subsequent explosion of white wings and flaming swords that erupted from the church, its rooftop and the general vicinity was like an bonfire in a blizzard. Several of both, in fact. An alert slinger managed to lob a fireball at him, but he dodged it easily, and then he was clear of the Divine domain. Turning about, he hung in the air and watched the ensuing battle with amused satisfaction.

The *Nazkachi* gave a good account of themselves – he'd expected no less – but even two Hell Barons might have found it difficult to defend themselves from what appeared to be half a Host of outraged guardians. The Divine even managed to produce a Throne riding a fiery chariot, and the great angel struck down the burned hunter with a great lance of blue-hot fire. The other Nazkach laid about him like a maniac, but try as he might, he could not fight his way to the edge of the domain, and he finally fell with a terrible, angry cry, disappearing in a great red-purple flash that made Robin see spots.

“Good thing they do Saturday services there, he reflected idly, as he lazily stroked his way back towards the city. Time to find a phone book and figure out where this Mounds Park place might be.

CHAPTER 15

BLACK WING'D SHAME

WHEN DARKNESS HIDES INSIDE ITS OWN SHADOW
THE DEVIL BEATS HIS DRUM
CASTING OUT HIS NAME
DRAGGING ALL HIS OWN DOWN INTO SHAME

— David Sylvian, (“The Devil's Own”)

These endless days of summer were growing increasingly dreary, thought Melusine as she stood idly on the freshly mowed grass of the backyard lawn and watched Jami kick around a soccer ball with Christopher and Jason. Which was strange, since little had changed over the last few weeks. Was it perhaps the unlooked-for reunion with Puck that had unsettled her equanimity, and the reminder that the proud angel she had once been would never have accepted her current fate with such unseemly resignation? The fact that he had left any such recriminations unspoken actually made her feel worse; what did it mean that he had spared her his sharp tongue, except that she was too pathetic to inspire his obvious contempt.

Still, there were worse things to face than boredom and contempt, and she consoled herself with the reminder that things were nowhere nearly as bad for her as they might have been. She was still surprised she'd survived the dangerous fallout from Kaym's disastrous prom night failure; when she learned that it was Bogharel's ill-considered and untimely boasting that had alerted the Divine to the Great Lord's deadly plans, she'd given herself up for lost.

But it seemed that Prince Bloodwinter had not been entirely displeased to see the Master of the Star Wheel brought low by his pyrrhic victory. Melusine had not dared to meet the Prince's eyes when she was dragged into his

presence, chained and gagged, but it was definitely amusement that she heard in his voice when he pronounced her punishment. And there was perhaps some humor to be found in the notion that one of the Fallen's greatest angels had gone to such efforts only to reap the meager harvest of a single mortal soul, while sending fourteen others straight into the bosom of the Enemy.

Whether it was Bloodwinter's unexpected sense of irony, or simply hatred for Kaym that had saved her, Melusine neither knew nor cared. She had survived, that was the main thing, and if a portion of her beauty was taken from her, well, there was always the hope of reclaiming it again someday. She ran a hand over her shorn head, relieved that the prickly stubble had finally grown long enough to soften and feel like hair again. It wouldn't be too long before it would start to lie flat, and even if the glorious mane she'd formerly possessed was forbidden to her now, there were some shorter hairstyles that wouldn't look bad on her. This would be an excellent time to experiment with them, at least until she was permitted to grow out her hair once more. She made a mental note to steal a peek at some of Holli's fashion magazines.

It was the loss of her wings that troubled her more, her nonchalant words to Puck notwithstanding. It wasn't so much that she loved flying, although she did, but it was such a massive nuisance to have to walk everywhere, just like a cursed mortal. She mourned for them, for the loss of those thick, exquisitely textured feathers, blacker than midnight and darker than Lord Kaym's great, night-starred cloak. How she adored the feel of the wind ruffling through them, of the wild, wonderful sensation that filled her when she stretched them wide to ride out the brutal tumult of a violent summer thunderstorm.

What angered her about her punishment was not its harshness, but rather, the mistakes she had made in bringing it upon herself. How could she have been so stupid as to think Bogharael would keep his mouth shut? Even as a lowly dryad he had been a fool, and her impetuous decision to replace the vapid, but harmless Pandaema with him had been a tremendous mistake. The Enemy must have been laughing at her all the while, but there was no way she could have

known beforehand that her wretched tree-spirit had once been the most vainglorious of all the royal Sarim.

Jehuel's punishment, like hers, had also been light, although she doubted the haughty angel saw it that way. When Kaym, quite understandably enraged by Jehuel's exposure of his plan, made to blast the former angel-prince into oblivion, Prince Bloodwinter interceded, much to the surprise of every angel present. He claimed sovereignty over Jehuel as a Tempter active within his demesne, and forbade Lord Kaym to touch the former seraph. Never one to miss the opportunity to rub salt on a wound, the Prince of the Cities further insulted Kaym by insisting that Jehuel be fully restored to his former princely glory, golden wings and all. However, there was a catch.

Apparently Bloodwinter's sense of humor was more vicious than Melusine had imagined, because his restoration of Jehuel turned out to be a matter of appearance only, without power, prestige or responsibility. Despite his lordly trappings, the Lord of the Sword was still to be nothing but an apprentice Tempter, and one assigned to assist a disgraced Temptress at that, not that he was ever much of a help. In one fell stroke, Prince Bloodwinter managed to thoroughly humiliate two major Fallen powers. It was a masterstroke, nothing less, and one that Melusine imagined would compel many of the prince's rivals to think twice before daring to cross him in the future.

"Whoops!" Jami's shout interrupted her thoughts, and she looked up to see the white Adidas ball sailing over her head. "Sorry!"

"I've got it, dude," Jason called, and he ran right through her, without any idea that she was there.

How clueless were these mortals! She smiled momentarily, but the amusement soon faded from her face. They weren't clueless enough, at least, not her charge.

"Hey Mel,"

She started violently as someone poked her rudely in the back. It was Incandazael, and his handsome, blue-skinned face was split from ear to ear in a grin that surely boded someone ill. It was an expression of pure self-satisfaction that made her want to slap him, but she restrained her

itching hand. Incanno wasn't a friend, exactly, but he was one of the few demons who was still willing to be seen speaking with her since her disgrace. Of course, since he was responsible for tempting Mark Lewis, the children's father, he had no fear of being tainted by their continued association.

"Don't do that," she told him sharply. "You're like a cat or something, a big evil blue cat!"

"You flatter me."

"Not even a little, I assure you."

Incanno raised an eyebrow and his eyes gleamed wickedly.

"I do love the hair, Mel, but don't you think it's maybe a little on the rough and tough?"

He laughed as Melusine growled low in her throat, and he held up a hand.

"Relax, my little skinhead beauty, I just wanted to see that lovely temper flare. I have news, good news."

"Jehuel was hurled into the Pit?"

"Not that good. Where has your royal apprentice been, anyhow? Off sulking somewhere, I suppose. But never mind him, feast your radiant eyes on this!"

The Tempter flourished his hands elaborately, and a scroll appeared suddenly in his upraised palms. He presented it to her, accompanied by an extravagant and wholly ironic bow. She opened it and read it quickly, then shook her head with disbelief and read it again.

"Did you arrange this?"

Incanno nodded, and his white teeth glistened like lustrous pearls as he smiled triumphantly.

"I sure did that thing!"

"How? How in the unspeakable name of the netherest nether power did you score this?"

The Tempter rolled his eyes upward and affected innocence in a completely unconvincing manner. "I just presented all the required forms, filled out in triplicate, of course, and submitted them to the appropriate authorities. The usual business, you understand. Oh, yes, and I did promise to assist a certain disgruntled power mired in a flea's rump of a principality who is seriously thinking about moving matters forward with regards to the promotion he has hitherto been so unjustly denied. With his support, my

application practically sailed through the committee with nary a voice raised in opposition, save the usual, of course."

Melusine stared at him, appalled. "You promised what? I thought you were smarter than that! Don't you remember what happened to Shaeloba, not to mention her massive idiot of an archon? Or me, for that matter? Sticking your nose in the big boys' power games is a good way to lose your wings, or find yourself riding a one-way ticket Beyond!"

"I'm perfectly capable of performing basic risk-assessment, Melusine." Incandazael assured her, his blue face growing serious. "You might think I'm being short-sighted, but let's look at the risks, shall we? Now, I can play the good little tempter and stake everything on the hope that my bright, if admittedly self-absorbed charge doesn't clue into the changes in his family for the next, oh, twenty or thirty years, and goes on to bravely face the final darkness like a good atheist. Yes, he's an intellectual, yes, he's arrogant and self-righteous, but on the other hand, his kids are in close cahoots with the Enemy, they're ripping the Damned out of our very hands on every side, and worst of all, they're praying for him. Not just the general, you know, 'God bless Mummy, God bless Daddy,' and all that, but specifically, by name! You like those odds? Well, I don't!"

Melusine sighed and shook her head. A momentary pang struck her, as the missing sensation of her long hair in motion drove home her loss again.

"I suppose you could be right," she admitted ruefully. "Five months ago, I thought I had Christopher's soul well in hand...." Was it really only five months? It seems so much longer than that. So much had changed. "But now... you have to admit, you're playing with fire here."

"I know. That's why I have to kill off my dear Mark as quickly as possible. I asked for a car accident or a brain aneurysm, something immediate, but a fast-moving cancer was the best they'd give me."

Melusine nodded sympathetically. There were limits to the protection afforded a nonbeliever by the prayers of others, but prayer of one sort or another were always a hassle with which they had to contend. The Terminations Committee, bipartisan by Heavenly fiat, was the same in every

Principality; the decks were always stacked against the single Divine representative, who nevertheless usually managed to delay, defer and otherwise put off the conclusive riding of the pale horse in order to allow their accomplices to warn their doomed charges in some underhanded way.

“How long do you have to give him?”

“One month from the first sign, he breathes his last. I’m only committed to three minor warnings, though, and we’re kicking things off with a sharp pain to go with his breakfast tomorrow morning.”

“Only thirty days? Your power has some swing.”

“That he does, that he does. And here’s the kicker. No intervention, no miracles, no nothing, unless the man himself asks for it. Which he’ll never do. I know him, and his pride will never let him beg favors from what he knows is only an imaginary being. What he knows... what a laugh! A great mind like his would never contemplate such a despicable thing as a deathbed confession, Voltaire’s backslide notwithstanding. Mortals are made of much stronger stuff nowadays.”

The demon smiled evilly.

“I do hope you’re right.”

A wayward thought struck her. There was something odd about this termination notice. Incanno was not the upwardly-mobile sort, and he had less ambition than a mouse living in a Wisconsin cheese factory. Everything about him was petty, from his taunting gibes to his most cherished goals. While he wasn’t completely stupid, the notion that he had any connections in far-off principalities seemed more than a little far-fetched. Then she froze. If she’d had blood inside her, it would have run cold.

There was no prove that he was involved, of course, and she couldn’t think of any reason that he should be the least bit interested in the fate of any member of the Lewis family. All the same, Melusine sensed the delicate touch of a familiar manipulator extraordinaire.

“Puck, I swear I’ll kill you if you have anything to do with this,” she muttered under her breath.

“What’s that?”

She smiled sweetly up at him. "Canno, my dear, darling partner-in-crime, would you be so kind as to tell me the name of this ambitious friend of yours?"

"Why do you want to know?" His eyes narrowed, making him look more catlike than ever, and he shook his head. "No, he said it was best to keep things on the down-low."

Yeah, I'll bet he did. I swear, I'll stuff his lying head down low, she vowed to herself, envisioning a hundred different painful and anatomically-improbable punishments for Puck, the sum total of which would be far too good for him. Oh, but he was convincing, just like he always was, smiling and delighted to see you and patting you on the back just before slipping in the deadly dagger and exiting town precisely when the hammer came down and hit you smack between the eyes!

But there was a remote possibility that she was getting ahead of herself. With some effort, she forced down the anger that was threatening to boil over. Though it cost her dearly, she even managed to add a note of false sweetness to her voice as she attempted to wheedle at least a little information from Incandazael.

"I understand, of course, that anonymity must be preserved. But surely you can tell me the name of this principality that will soon be looking forward to an improvement in the management?"

"What's it to you?" Incanno furled the scroll with an adroit snap of his wrist.

"Maybe I want one of those."

She pointed to the scroll, and was amused to see the other demon's eyebrows raise involuntarily. His reaction irked her; she was not pleased to know that her erstwhile reputation for ruthlessness had somehow been lost along the way, despite her forthright handling of Pandaema's treachery.

"Do you think I like following human children around any better than you? Hah! I may have played and lost, but I was once a player in the Game, can you say the same?"

"Relax, Mel, baby, I didn't even say anything!"

"But you thought it!" she hissed. "Don't you ever insult me like that again, ever! Or I'll rip your throat out and throw you to the tender mercies of the dryads behind the house. You might consider Pandaema's example...."

She flicked her fingernails at him. He nodded, and his eyes, wide with alarm, were glancing off to the side anticipating a hasty escape. But she struck before he could make it. "Now, tell me the name of that cursed principality already!"

"He said V-Vouvant – I've never heard of it."

"No, you wouldn't have," Melusine said sourly. She had, though, and she knew exactly what it signified. And, for that matter, what she had to do now. She sighed and resisted the urge to scream at the uncaring heavens. There was never any rest for the wicked.

CHAPTER 16

SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS

MEPHISTOPHELES IS NOT YOUR NAME
BUT I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE UP TO JUST THE SAME
— The Police, (“Wrapped Around Your Finger”)

Melusine was furious. Being lost deep in the heart of the suburbs, and facing what, given her wingless state, amounted to a forced hike, did little to improve her move. She was being summoned, not by word, but by deed. And while her first reaction to Incandazael's audacity had been one of admiration, she also had the ominous feeling that things were about to go horribly wrong again. Now, after hearing that fateful word – Vouvant – she was certain of it. There weren't many who knew the story, but there was one individual in town who knew it almost as well as she did. Unfortunately for her, the chances that this was a coincidence were roughly equal to the chances she would get out of this unscathed. As in none.

When Kaym had first approached her with regards to Christopher, she'd eagerly agreed to help him out, thinking only of the advantages that would accrue to her if everything worked as the fallen angel planned. That they would lose not only Christopher, but his sisters too, was a stunning and totally unforeseen result. It had, however, been an object lesson in the supreme importance of lying low. But in this case, it was highly unlikely that she would be able to do that. She had no idea what that infernal Puck had in store for her, but she had no doubt that she was not going to be happy about it when he finally deigned to inform her.

But by the time she'd shifted into mortal mode and found a seat on the bus that would take her to her destination, the first wave of her anger had subsided and she was able to

consider things with a little more aplomb. Perhaps even a little anticipation. Although her initial assumption had been that this was nothing more than the latest round of Puck's obsession with Albion, there were other possibilities to bear in mind. It was even possible that was the first step in something that would get her back into the only game that mattered. Was it truly only another internecine Fallen war?

After all, the Enemy was clever, certainly more clever than Prince Lucere had anticipated when he launched his great rebellion. How many times had they thought they held a great victory in their hands, only to learn that they were caught in the teeth of yet another Divine trap. The disastrous conquest of Heaven and the Golgotha debacle were only two of the most egregious examples. There were all too many from which to choose.

Take, for instance, Moloch's splendidly malevolent plan to use the dormant roots of Teutonic paganism to eliminate the cursed Seed of Abraham once and for all. Sure, millions had been charred into sweet-stinking incense and ashes, but in the years following the devastation, Melusine and the rest of the Fallen had watched in gradually dawning horror as the Enemy's Chosen made their long-prophesied return to the Promised Land after nearly two millennia of Diaspora, thanks in part to Moloch's idiotic intervention.

A rhyme suddenly occurred to her, and she hummed to herself as she constructed a little piece of doggerel in her head. She grinned at the aptly vulgar meter, and made a mental note to tell it to Puck. He deserved no less. One of her fonder memories of Provence suddenly came back to her as she remembered those pathetic bits of rhyme slapped together in her honor by unpolished country courtiers. The poems had generally ranged from badly-rhymed, meter-less flattery to labored reworkings of hoary old standbys, but despite the abysmal quality of the poetry, there had been something wonderful about being the focus of the poet's attention. It was so much fun to play the role of a muse inspiring the efforts of others, however shoddy they might be, to preserve in words something of her beauty, glory, and fame. What there was of it. She ran her hand over her head and shivered.

It was unfortunate that none of the poems written in her honor had stood the test of time, mostly because they had been, like their authors, destined from the very beginning for a miserable end. And her own destiny, she thought, was beginning to have all too much in common with those helpless, hopeless, talentless mortals dead so long ago. Maybe Puck would change all that. Right, for the worse, if history was any guide.

The bus arrived at her stop, and as her mind ceased its meanderings, her anger began to reassert itself. She marched down the crowded sidewalk like a shaven Erinys, forgetting that her attire was wholly inappropriate for the workaday mortals that inhabited this part of the city at this time of day. Realizing that she was drawing too many stares, she ducked into a Christian Science reading room and transformed into a more appropriately bourgeois aspect, complete with power skirt and Manolos.

With happy hour approaching, the pub was lively, and a waitress protested as Melusine pushed right past her and nearly upset her half-laden tray. She stormed up the stairs, and her ire was not in the least diminished by the sight of the one who had summoned her hence with his mysterious manipulations. Puck was sprawled in the corner, comfortably ensconced with his legs dangling over the side of a large wingback chair. His welcoming smile was impudent in the extreme, and it was all that she could do to stop herself from smashing her fist directly into it.

"Why, Melusine, how delightful to see you!" he exclaimed, sipping at a vile-looking blue concoction through a straw. "Whatever brings you here?"

"What are you doing messing around with Incandazael? And who hooked you up with the authority to sign death warrants in this demesne?"

"I signed nothing."

"You know what I mean! Don't play the idiot with me, Puck! It's a little late for that. I already know what a conniving rat you are."

"Oh, but I'm so good at it!" He batted his eyelashes at her. "Very well, I'll come clean with you, just for old times sake.

And, more to the point, for all the fun we're about to have... together."

"No, no, oh, no you don't. I've already gotten into enough trouble in the last year without your help. Being a good little temptress and keeping my nose out of everyone else's business is the height of my ambition for the next sixty or seventy years."

Puck looked pained. "You don't know how it saddens me to hear you say that, Melusine. Such thoughts are really beneath you, you know. You should be tempting kings and destroying nations, not wrestling with Guardians over every naughty thought that goes into that little boy's head. But I knew you'd feel that way; unfortunately, I can't permit it."

"You can't permit it?" Melusine felt her throat tighten with the effort to avoid snarling at him. "I don't recall you having much say in the matter."

"Yes, you're quite right. But I think I can persuade you to see things my way."

"Color me skeptical."

"As you like. Here's how I see it. Incandazael is the worst kind of fool, the sort who honestly believes he's quite clever - "

"And you're not?"

"I know I'm clever, darling, I don't merely believe it. The difference is crucial. But as endlessly fascinating as the subject is to all and sundry, enough about me. And since I'd prefer to avoid a wholly uninteresting tangent on the inadequacies of your colleague, let's just say that he's bound to make a hash of it. I have no idea precisely how it will fall apart, but one way or another, this attempt to extinguish his charge will go wildly askew, bringing attention and the inevitable wrath to follow down on everyone who is responsible for mortal souls in that particular family. Including, I am not at all loathe to say, you."

Melusine wasn't sure that she bought that explanation, which sounded rather on the flimsy side. But then again, if he didn't want to tell her the truth, there wasn't much point in pressing him. He'd simply come up with another, probably more convincing lie.

"Do you hate me?"

Puck looked genuinely surprised. "Perish the very thought!"

"No, seriously. What am I supposed to think. You show up after five hundred years, we chat for two seconds, then you disappear for two weeks only to show up and announce that you're arranging to have me hung by my toenails... if I'm lucky! So, I'm asking. Do you hate me?"

Puck smiled indulgently and shook his head. "Don't be silly. The fact of the matter is that I need you. Well, actually, I need your flamboyant protégé, but since I have no idea of how to go about pushing his buttons, I need you very much. And isn't that really all that a girl wants to hear?"

Melusine snorted. "You want Jehuel? Puck, all you had to do was ask! I would have cheerfully given you his insides on a stick, preferably a sharp one – no, better yet, a very dull one with a tendency to splinter."

"Oh, dear, is he as bad as that?"

"He's much worse."

Puck spread his hands and beamed at her. "There, you see? That's exactly why I need you! The insight is invaluable!"

Melusine felt her lips twitch even though she was still furious with Puck and there was a definite sense of things beginning to spin out of control again. For all his proud cunning, it seemed Puck had miscalculated. He didn't need her to tell him that Jehuel was an insufferable, pig-headed monster. Thirty seconds conversation with the jerk would have told him that.

"Well, are you in?"

Melusine chewed at her upper lip and glanced at the window outside. She needed time to think, but Puck didn't seem inclined to give it to her. She shook her head, frustrated. Why couldn't she simply say no to him? And then, she realized there was no way she could do so. It wasn't that she was overly concerned about Incandazael's idiocies. The salient fact was that Puck had not only been willing to intervene in the situation, but he demonstrably had the power to do so. In fact, she suddenly came to the realization that his confession to her had been nothing of the sort. No wonder it had sounded false, as his actions with

regards to Incandazael were really more of a delicate warning. An angel that could make Incandazael's life easier could also make hers more difficult. Much more difficult.

With Puck, she reminded herself, it wasn't the words you heard that mattered, it was the ones you didn't. She shivered as she grasped the full implications of his insidious hint. The fact that he did not even bother to voice his threats, but simply dangled them before her to see if she was sharp enough to notice them was somehow more intimidating than the furious bellows of a more obviously dangerous angel. No, it was much better to submit and give him what he wanted than to sit on edge for weeks, even months, waiting for the inevitable shoe to drop.

"I'm in."

"Excellent!" He beamed happily at her and air-kissed her hand. Then he snapped his fingers and raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. "Ah, yes....and by the pricking of my thumbs, something with shockingly bad taste comes."

A flash of gold in the mirror caught Melusine's eye, and she looked back to see Jehuel himself at the top of the stairs behind her. Speak of the hag-ridden devil! What was he doing here? She whirled around to face Puck, had the audacity to tap his fingers and waggle his red eyebrows as if some mad scheme of his was coming together, and she and Jehuel were nothing more than pawns on his chess board. Which was probably close to being the case, she thought ruefully.

"At least he's on time," the one-time fae mused so that only she could hear. "Not that anything could possibly excuse that dreadful raiment. Dear oh dear oh dear."

"Melusine?" Jehuel looked personally affronted by her presence, and put his clenched fists on his waist. In combination with the gold lamè cloak, it was a particularly unfortunate stance for an angel that wished to be taken seriously. Melusine had to bite her lip, and Puck, less accustomed to Jehuel's theatrics, appeared to be mere seconds away from an apoplectic burst of laughter.

"Why is she here, Lord Robin? You told me that we were to discuss matters of tremendous import?"

"And so we are," answered Puck gravely, without betraying a hint of the mirth that was surely gnawing at his insides like a starving wolverine. Now he was calling himself Lord Robin? Melusine rolled her eyes. What was up with that?

"Why is she here?" Jehuel scowled at her. "You ruin everything. Why can't you keep your nose out of my business for once."

"Because your business is my business, dear Boggie." Jehuel flushed red at the sound of his dryad name, humiliated by her reference to a time he'd no doubt been hoping to put behind him. "Your ludicrous – and dangerous, I might add – machinations aside, it would serve you well to recall that you are still an assistant Tempter. My assistant Tempter, to be precise."

"That's enough!" barked Puck. "Melusine, don't bait him. You infringe upon my demesne when you do so – let there be no mistake, if there is taunting to be done, I am more than equal to the task! And Jehuel, when I told you to come as a mortal, I was intending for you to blend with the crowd, not give them the impression that you're dying to go on stage with Siegfried, Roy and the big white kitties."

Oh, dear. Jehuel's failure to bother modifying his aspect had caused Melusine to miss the fact that he was fully in the material plane with them. No wonder people kept stealing bemused glances their way. She shook with silent laughter as Puck ordered Jehuel off to the bathroom, with a very detailed description of how he was to look when he came out again. A minute later, a disgruntled young man with bleach blond hair and a soul patch stalked out. Only his striking violet eyes betrayed any resemblance to the supernatural being that had vanished, and they burned now with rebellious indignation.

Melusine sighed. She'd seen that look before. His wounded pride was like an open sore, and the Lewis twins had been less petulant when they were going through the terrible threes together. But she ignored him and turned her attention to Puck as he lifted his legs over the side of the chair and sat upright to address them both.

"Friends, Romans, countrymen... oh, sorry, wrong speech. As a matter of fact, why don't we dispose with speeches

altogether, since you're both going to end up doing what I tell you anyhow?"

"And how do you know that?"

"Because you're here," Melusine told Jehuel. It was true. Once he set a hook, Puck seldom failed to land his fish.

"Because I'm going to see that you get your sword back, my dear princeling. *La bella Arabel*, the sword that slew the lords of Chaos, the sword with which you made your name, or, to put it more succinctly, the only thing that you love anywhere nearly as much as you love yourself." He winked at Melusine. "Not that there's anything wrong with the greatest love of all."

He closed his eyes, hugged himself and began make kissing sounds, until Melusine kicked him in the shin. "Knock it off, Puck."

"Do you mean it," Jehuel asked softly. He looked more vulnerable than Melusine had ever seen him before, not even when he'd been a lowly, semi-sentient dryad had he looked so innocent and hopeful. "Can you... do you know where it is?"

"Well, no," Puck confessed. He quickly held up a hand to forestall an imminent explosion. "But I'm quite sure I can find it. I spoke to someone who knows a fair bit about mystical weapons of great power, and I have some very good reasons to suspect that your little toy is hidden somewhere in Albion."

"Albion?" Jehuel looked blank.

"England," Melusine explained. "In case you're too thick to have noticed, Jehuel, my dear assistant tempter, we're being coerced into helping Puck put his master back on the throne of England. Which was once known as Albion when Puck's master ruled over it."

"Are you lying about the sword?"

"Nope." Puck met Jehuel's intense gaze without flinching. Which meant nothing, Melusine knew; he'd always been an accomplished liar. "Nor would I. You see, without the sword, you are useless to me, Prince Jehuel. In fact, unless you promise to do something for me after I arrange for you to recover it, I will not even permit you to accompany us on our little adventure."

"Us?" Melusine said. "But ."

"I wouldn't wish to deprive you of the pleasure of my company even if the princeling here proves recalcitrant, darling. But the question is moot, as he most certainly will cast his lot with we few, we happy band of desperados. And he will have to it do soon, as it is in all of our best interests to vacate this sheep town in the very immediate future. It occurs to me that I may have been remiss in neglecting to mention one small detail."

"What's that?" Melusine braced herself.

"Do you know that broadcast tower near the Lewis house? The tall one, with all the blinking red lights?"

"Of course. But what does that have to do with anything?"

"It wouldn't, except that someone finally figured out that ugly pair of slobberknockers who interrupted our little *tete-a-tete* the other night have gone awry. Fortunately, the posse appears to have split up for the nonce, which allowed me to take an old acquaintance by surprise. I'm afraid we parted on unamiable terms, though, as he's currently impaled upon the top of the radio tower. In, as they say, the meat."

Jehuel and Melusine looked at each other. She wasn't sure of the implications of Puck's savagery, and she knew he wasn't either, but they couldn't be good.

"He's not dead? Will he die?" Jehuel asked.

"Death, what is death to we who know not its sting? I don't see that it matters. Either way, they'll be looking for him soon, if they're not already. In that neighborhood, no less. I can't imagine that it will take long to learn that the former Lord of the Sword is, or, as I soon hope to say, was, lurking about. I very much doubt they'll be blind as to the implications."

"What implications?"

Puck smiled at Jehuel, a shark's amoral smile. "Why so pale, my lordly friend? Look at it this way. There's every chance you won't have to deal with your tedious young charge ever again. The Mad One's Eyes aren't exactly known for a wide range of imaginative solutions. From what I've seen of them in the past, they'll simply slaughter every angel and human in the broad vicinity and then go looking for you."

It was strange, thought Melusine. Not even the shock of dispersal in the Void had been enough to quell Jehuel's foolish

pride, yet Puck's unique blend of friendly charm and unpredictable ruthlessness seemed to cow him as Prince Bloodwinter and Lord Kaym could not. She smiled, not able to help despising him as he swallowed hard and nodded his head.

"What do I have to do for you?"

"Kill someone. Someone very special, who, I am told, cannot be slain other than by the likes of your sweet *l'objet d'amor*. And, since I am also given to understand that no angel other than your own bad self can properly wield this sword of swords, that makes you something on the order of a necessity in my book."

"He sounds powerful."

"Oh, he's not so bad," Puck waved a disdainful hand, and Melusine was impressed at how convincing he managed to appear. She knew better. "Simply a tad on the hard-to-kill side, that's all. So, what do you think? I find you the sword, you stick the sword in someone's chest, we shake hands, compliment each other on a deed well done and go our happy, but separate ways."

"That sounds like a good plan to me," answered Jehuel, whose color had returned to him. Ever the dramatist, he slashed his palm and held it, smoking and leaking flame, upright towards Puck, who grinned and leaped from his chair. He, too, slashed his palm and pressed it against the fallen seraphim in a sacred, if obscene, vow of commitment.

Melusine shook her head at the sight of the weirdly incongruous pair binding themselves to a common purpose. The rhyme she had conceived earlier seemed more apropos than ever, and she recited it in a childish sing-song. Let Puck make of it what he would, but if he was going to force her into this mess, at least he'd know that she was participating under protest. And when it all blew apart around their ears, she'd have the satisfaction of telling him "I told you so!"

"If the best laid plans of mice and men," she sang.

"Gang aft agley, what think we then

Of demon's schemes that come to pass

And bite us always in the — *ow!*"

She leaped into the air as something seemed to sink its teeth into her own backside. Puck's eyes were gleaming with

amusement as he brandished the responsible thumb and forefinger at her and bared his teeth. They were white and sharp and there was suddenly more than one row of them.

"I'd be delighted to sink these into those delectable curves of yours, darling Melusine. And, if you give me any reason to believe that you have forsaken Albion, don't think I shall hesitate to indulge myself."

Already holding Jehuel's hand, Puck seized hers with all the speed of an adder striking. Alarmed, she tried to pull away, but it was too late. His razor-tipped smile widened as she felt a rush of demonic power ripping her out of the material world and hurling her right through the lower three shadows into the dark, unyielding cold of the hungry void.

She screamed, but she could not hear the sound of her own voice, nor even feel her spirit. Her sole link to reality was the crushing, vise-like grip on her left hand. She clung to the pain as if it were a lifeline, until at last, despite her fierce struggles, the bitter cold began to anesthetize it. Slowly, relentlessly, the saving agony subsided, until finally all feeling, all sense of self, was gone, and she drowned in the midnight sea of nothingness.

CHAPTER 17

ONE TREE, TWO, THREE

WHAT HAS KANT GOT TO DO WITH THE PLATYPUS? NOTHING. AS WE SHALL SEE FROM THE DATES, HE COULDN'T HAVE HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH IT. AND THIS SHOULD SUFFICE TO JUSTIFY THE TITLE AND ITS USE OF AN INCONGRUOUS SET THAT SOUNDS LIKE A TRIBUTE TO BORGES'S ANCIENT CHINESE ENCYCLOPEDIA.

— Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus*

Christopher eyed the small wooden building hidden behind the thick copse of trees. Partially protected by a hedge, its forward location still seemed like a risky spot for the German panzershreck he feared, and he was desperate to take out the machine gun hindering his assault on the outskirts of the town. But he knew the German commander well, a gambler who liked nothing better than beating unfavorable odds.

He reached hesitantly for the little tank, his fingers touching lightly on the camouflage paint job he'd applied just last night, then drew his hand away. Don wouldn't dare, would he? The building was exposed, so even if his men managed to burn the tank, they ran the risk of seeing their main line of retreat cut off by Christopher's lead platoon.

"Chicken," Don made clucking sounds. "Man, if you keep taking this long to make up your mind, I'm going to have to insist on chess clocks."

Christopher glared at his friend and came to a decision. The Jagdpanzer was to the south, which meant that the anti-tank weapon he was concerned about should be somewhere in its vicinity, protecting the tank destroyer's poorly armored flanks. He picked up the miniature Churchill, more decisively this time. Once he could bring its seventy-five millimeter main armament to bear on the machine gun's position, Don's

northern flank would crack and it would only be a matter of time before his elite British troops swept the Nazis from the small Italian town.

"Startup, one," he called out movement points as the tank went into motion. "Rotate vehicle heading, two. Three. Four...."

He paused expectantly. His tank was now adjacent to the wooden building, and if Don's half-squad was hiding there, this would be the ideal moment to fire. But Don said nothing. Christopher smiled to himself, pleased at calling his friend's bluff, before moving the tank again.

"Five. Six –"

"Wait," Don held up a hand. With the other, he plucked a painted pair of kneeling soldiers from one end of the table and placed them in the building. "Hold it right there. These bad boys pop up to send a little HEAT love up the wazoo of that Churchill. They've got the 'shreck, of course." He picked up a little blue counter and waggled it triumphantly.

"But... I mean... I thought... then why didn't you fire when I was in T-Nine?" Christopher was shaken by the belated ambush. "Side armor is the same as rear on the Churchills, so it's not like your To Kill is any different."

"Oh, I know that," Don admitted gleefully as he picked up his pair of custom-made precision dice. The pips were tiny death's heads, white-on-black and black-on-red, which he used only when playing Germans. He had a pair for every nationality, except the Axis Minors. "I just wanted to see the look on your face after you thought you were in the clear!"

Chagrined, Christopher resisted the urge to whine, or at the very least, pound the wooden table on which the intricate miniature battlefield was assembled. He gritted his teeth and hoped desperately for boxcars.

"Are you going to eat the backblast?" he asked, searching for a silver lining.

"Nope," Don announced fearlessly as he flicked his wrist. "To Hit is a ... seven. Bang! That's a hit. To Kill... twenty-six minus eight... now what is that?"

"Oh, shut up," Christopher answered sourly. Even on his worst day, he could roll less than eighteen with two six-sided dice.

"To Kill is a... ten. Kaboom! That doesn't burn it, though, so you can still make your crew survival."

Christopher sighed and rolled his own dice. A matching pair of sixes stared up at him mockingly. Well, there's your boxcars, he thought with bitterness. It might as well have been the roll for his personal morale check. His dice were clearly cursed by the dice gods today, and the odds that the good people of Sinagoga were going to be freed from their Teutonic oppressors were looking increasingly remote.

"And they don't make it! Oh, the humanity!" Don pumped his fist. "That's the one thing I was worried about. I didn't want them surviving to tie up my guys in close combat."

Christopher was trying, and failing, to come up with an appropriately cutting retort when the door at the top of the basement stairs was opened.

"Hello, earth to geekworld!" It was Jami. "Christopher, Rachel's on the phone. Do you want to talk to her, or should I tell her you're too busy killing elves or whatever?"

"Rachel?"

Christopher pushed himself away from the table and leaped to his feet. He heard Don burst out in mocking laughter behind him as he ran rapidly up the stairs, taking two at a time. But the call couldn't have come at a better time. His dice certainly needed the break.

Jami rolled her eyes as her brother bounded up from the basement and into the kitchen, imperiously demanding the phone with an outstretched hand. Annoyed, she refused to relinquish it and continued talking on the cordless, fending him off with her free hand.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm doing good," she told her friend. "Jason and I are going out after the game tonight. No, I think Holly's doing something with Angie and Brittany. I don't know what."

"She didn't call to talk to you," Christopher hissed.

"You don't know that," Jami shot back, and she returned her attention to the receiver. Rachel was suggesting something about a future shopping trip. "Sure, let's do that. Next time we'll blow off the boys and go to the mall or whatever. Sounds good. He's right here. Okay, bye."

She finally relented and handed him the cordless.

"See, that wasn't so bad, was it." she commented airily. Christopher ignored her, of course, and immediately began babbling about his ridiculous game. Poor Rachel. Jason had his own weird little boy things, of course, they all did, but Jason's were at least kind of cute. Well, not totally lame, anyhow. But since her brother insisted on living in the same house with her, she couldn't entirely escape his occasional monologues on elven dragon tanks or whatever the latest dork thing was.

And while it was within the realm of possibility that there were bigger wastes of time than spending hours pretending to be a general of a painted toy army, she'd never actually encountered one in person. Well, it was possible that listening to someone talk about it was even worse. Fortunately, a sister wasn't actually expected to pay attention or remember any of it. Girlfriends, on the other hand, weren't quite so lucky.

Feeling bored, she wandered out into the living room. After two months of summer freedom, she was almost started to dread the early part of the afternoon. They weren't as bad as those awful wintry school mornings, of course, where you were forced to leave your nice comfy bed in order to freeze your tush off in the pre-dawn dark, but they were tough, especially on game days like this. It was barely one o'clock, way too early to start getting up for the game, but not too soon for that nervous feeling of dread and anticipation that kept you on edge and would not let you get comfortable. The ham-and-swiss sandwich she'd had for lunch seemed to lie in her stomach like a rock and she almost regretted having eaten it, although bitter experience had taught her that when you didn't eat anything, you ended up playing in a weird light-headed sort of fog. Which never worked out well.

Sighing heavily, she lowered herself to the floor with tender care and began stretching out her legs. Her left hamstring was tweaking a bit and she still had an ugly purple bruise on her left shin from last week's game, but that was her own stupid fault for not wearing shin pads. One... two... three.... She counted to ten, relaxed, then reached out again for another five-count.

She was just switching legs for the second time when she heard her sister coming down the stairs.

"Do you always stretch out like this beforehand? I mean, for a date?"

"Shut up, you know I've got a game tonight."

"Actually, I didn't," Holli corrected her. "I was just going to ask if you and Jase wanted to go to church with me, but I guess that's out if you're playing tonight."

"You're not going tomorrow morning? I thought you were going out with Angie tonight." Jason wasn't much for church anyway, but that was a subject she preferred to avoid.

"Yeah. Her and Brittany are going to pick me up there after the service gets out. I'm going to see if I can talk Christopher into driving me."

Jami snorted. "Well, if you want to do your good deed for the day, see if you can get him off the phone and rescue Rachel. He was giving her the play-by-play from today's geek war."

"Oh, the poor thing!" Holli made a sympathetic face as she looked out the window towards the driveway. "I forgot Don was coming over. Is that his new car? Hmm... I guess I would have figured him for more of a pickup guy. So, was it army guys or elves today?"

"Like I care?"

"It doesn't hurt to show an interest."

Jami eyed her twin skeptically. Yeah, right.

"Well, not if you're faking it," Holli admitted. "Hey, you never know what kind of secret boy stuff might be useful. It's, like, cracking the guy code. I mean, say you ran into this really cute guy, and then you find out he's into, I don't know, Warhammer or whatever. You ask him if he plays Orcs or Skaven, and bang, he'll dump ten lingerie models to go out with you."

Jami rolled her eyes and pulled her legs into a butterfly position. She'd rather microwave her soccer boots and eat them for dinner than spend even one more second than she had to thinking about dork world. But she was pleased to see that Holli was starting to think about boys again. She even had a little sparkle in her eyes that had been all too rare of late. It wasn't that her sister had completely fallen apart

after the prom shootings last spring, nor was it all that strange that she still hadn't started seeing anyone less than four months after losing her boyfriend to the deadly machinations of the Fallen, but the strangely serious expression that was all-too-often on her face sometimes made Jami feel as if a stranger was living in her twin's body. Holli seldom talked anymore about her two favorite subjects, fashion and boys, and three months of unread Glamours, Cosmos and InStyles were piled in the corner of her room.

"There's two problems with that," she declared.

"What's that?"

"One, you might as well wish for a unicorn, because the geek hotty does not exist. He's just a figment of imagination dreamed-up by fat-legged smart girls who wear glasses and own the complete Harry Potter, including the DVDs and action figures. You have to either be fat and greasy or skinny and pimply to be a game geek. It's the law. And second of all, I already have a boyfriend, so even if he did exist, what do I care?"

Holli made a face at her.

"It's the principle, Jami. Like, for the football players, you have to know which teams are in which divisions, and who's the quarterback on each team. For the brains, you just need to mention the name of a few books like Siddhartha and the Republic – you don't actually have to read them, thank goodness - and you tell the guys who are all into money and stuff that you think it's kind of funny how Intel is on both the Nasdaq and the Dow."

"What about the stoners?" Jami asked, wondering just how much thought Holli had put into this.

"DARE is the dumbest thing ever, and you can make all kinds of things out of hemp, like sweaters and rope," Holli responded immediately. Jami laughed and held up a hand, which her sister high-fived with enthusiasm. She had to give Holli full props for that last one, since she knew her sister had no time for the smelly, shaggy crew who hung out on the big rock in the middle of the parking lot.

"Okay, I'm impressed. But don't they ever catch you out? I mean, you never read anything except your magazines." Not that she'd even read them much lately.

"Nope," Holli shook her head, "all you have to do is get them started, then ask questions every now and then. Haven't you ever notice that once a guy starts talking, you practically have to hit him over the head to get him to stop?"

Actually, that was kind of true, Jami realized. Even when she and Jason were talking about soccer, he was the one who did most of it. And when he ran out of things to say, one little statement on her part was enough to set him off again for another ten minutes.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I never really thought about it. But why are you telling me this? I mean, I'm the one with the boyfriend."

"Yeah, but you're not going to be dating him forever, are you? Have you guys even talked yet about what you're going to do when he goes to Ohio?"

Jami frowned at her sister, suddenly displeased. She didn't necessarily disagree with what Holli was suggesting, after all, Jason was leaving for college in another six weeks. She even knew, when she made herself think about it, that his departure would probably change the nature of their relationship. College guys always ditched their hometowns, and if they didn't do it ahead of time, they did it when they came back for Christmas break, which was even worse. It wasn't a good thing or a bad thing, that was just how it was, and Jami had seen it happen to too many girls at Mounds Park to believe that it would be any different for her and Jason. Even if she didn't want to. But she knew one thing for sure. She had no intention of getting sucked into that hometown trap, pining away for a boy who wasn't even thinking about you while he was running around with college girls. If he didn't get around to breaking up with her before he left, then she'd just have to do it for him.

Still, she didn't think it was very nice of Holli to rub her nose in it like that. That was another thing that had changed since last spring. Her sister was more insensitive now, her mood was often darker and she dwelled on the negative more than she ever had before. It wasn't as if she'd completely changed, but sometimes, like now, her normally fine-tuned social skills appeared to disappear.

"So, maybe I'll just find another soccer player," Jami answered indifferently.

Her tone must have been sharp, as Holli was quick to apologize. "Look, I'm sorry. That came out wrong, okay? I don't want you to think I'm jealous or anything, because I'm not. It's just that I don't want to see you get too wrapped up in something that might make you, you know, miss out on things next year."

Jami met her sister's eyes and made a little back-and-forth motion with both her hands on either side of her hips.

"Summer lovin' it happened so fast..." she sang sarcastically. "Come on, Hollywood, if Olivia Newton John could survive it, so can I. Now, please tell me you're not already thinking about who's going to ask you to Homecoming. It's, like, four months away and we haven't even met the new guys yet. There's always one or two cuties that transfer in."

"Me?" Holli looked horrified. "Oh, no, I couldn't... I don't think I'm ready to go out with anyone yet. I was thinking about who you could go with."

"My boyfriend hasn't even left yet, Holli! Gee whiz, can you lay off until he's gone, at least?"

"Sorry, you're right. I don't know, I guess it's just easier for me to think about, you know, what you're going to do next, not me." It was more the flicker of pain in her eyes than her words that mollified Jami.

"S'allright. And I suppose it doesn't do me any good to just try to pretend it isn't going to happen. I mean, part of me wishes that we could just, I don't know, be in love and never have to think about him going out with college girls and stuff, but then, it's not like I even want to get married."

"To Jason?"

"To anyone!" Jami made a face. "I'm going to be a professional soccer player somewhere, here or maybe over in Europe if they don't start up a new WUSA – hey, why is it that the TV channels will pay all that money to show stupid golf, which totally no one watches, and here there's millions of people who want to watch soccer and then they won't even show it half the time?"

"Maybe because golf stuff costs more than soccer stuff and they make more money that way. Just one of those clubs is something like two hundred bucks! Can you even imagine?"

"That's probably it," Jami agreed. "Still, it blows. Especially the way they announced they were killing off the league right before the last World Cup. I was so mad!"

"So, what are you going to do?" Holli wrinkled her nose at the musky smell of Jami's freshly-oiled boots as she joined her on the carpet. "Are you going to talk to him soon?"

"What's there to talk about?"

"I just think that it's important to make the most of your time, that's all. Because you don't know when it's going to end."

"Except when you do, I know." She waved away Holli's denials. "Look, don't worry about it, okay?"

"Well, I do!"

"Of course you do. For the first time in your life you aren't juggling three different guys, and you don't know what to do with yourself. So you're butting into my love life, which is stupid since he's just my first boyfriend and who ends up with their first boyfriend anymore."

"You are, like, the least romantic girl ever. If you were Juliet, you'd look at Romeo and be, like, gee, sorry dude."

"If I was Juliet I wouldn't have gone for him in the first place. I'd be like, hey guy, do you ever shut up? Now, give me a hand and help me up. I've got to go for a jog before my hamstrings tighten up on me."

She grunted as Holli helped her to her feet, then shook out her legs, first her right, then her left. She glanced sidelong at her twin's face, but her expression was neutral and told her nothing. Did she really want to talk about Jason, or was that just a cover for something else. When she reached the door, she hesitated for a moment, wondering if she should turn around and badger the truth out of her, but then she remembered how many times she'd tried, and failed, to do that over the summer. She sighed, feeling vaguely guilty, then flashed a cheerful smile.

"I'll be back in fifteen minutes or so."

"I'll be here. See ya later."

CHAPTER 18

LYING TO THE MIRROR

SO GO ON AND SCREAM
SCREAM AT ME I'M SO FAR AWAY
I WON'T BE BROKEN AGAIN
I'VE GOT TO BREATHE I CAN'T KEEP GOING UNDER
— Evanescence, ("Going Under")

Holly felt strangely dismayed as her sister left the room, but she didn't really know what to say. She wasn't in the mood to be by herself, but she couldn't quite bring herself to admit that to anyone, not even Jami. It was strange, and she didn't know exactly when it had started, but she had really didn't like it when she found herself alone now. Why, she wasn't sure, exactly, but a vague sense of unease seemed to creep upon her at times, as if solitude left her unprotected from some shadowy, nameless thing that stalked her.

She hadn't been sleeping all that well either, not because her dreams were disturbed, but because she just couldn't fall asleep. In fact, her dreams, when she remembered them in the morning, were often the highlight of her day. Several times she had woken with a hazy image of Paul in her mind and she knew she had dreamed about him, but only once had she seen him clearly and remembered it afterwards.

The strange thing was that she was still not entirely sure if she'd only had a daydream or if it might have been some peculiar form of waking vision. She'd been reading a magazine one afternoon when she found herself standing before an unfamiliar house, an olive-green house with a cobblestoned courtyard which led to the front door. She opened the door, and found herself surrounded by walls hung with bold and unusual paintings, art that was not quite frightening but was a shade too colorful to be entirely

comfortable. She shied away from a bright yellow glow which threatened to overwhelm her, and turned instead to the left, towards a warm, dark cavern of a room, all weathered grey wood and brick.

She caught her breath as she saw a familiar, but unexpected person seated on the far side of the room. It was Paul, sitting on a white couch in front of long window with rust-orange curtains. He was not lounging with his feet on the narrow, rectangular coffee table as he usually did, but was sitting upright, with both hands on his knees, almost as if he was expecting something. She had made no sound, but somehow, he detected her presence, and his eyes lit up with joy, though only the faintest smile crossed his lips.

He glanced sideways, with a solicitous look that suggested he was being careful not to make too much noise, and for the first time she realized that there was someone else on the couch beside him, lying down with a white blanket wrapped around her. Holli could not actually see the prone figure, and the top edge of the blanket obscured the person's face, but she felt sure that it was a woman sleeping there. Or perhaps not sleeping; so tightly wrapped, the white blanket looked as if it might have been a shroud.

At first, she felt reluctant to go to him, unsure of herself, but after her tentative first step, certainty filled her and she could feel her heart pounding with anticipation as she quickly, but quietly, walked towards him across the bare wooden floor. He rose as she approached, but instead of embracing her, he only held out his hand. Strangely, she was not offended, but she took it with a sense of shy wonder. And as she did so, he smiled, a shining, affectionate smile of such genuine good will that it warmed her body as if she were standing in the radiance of the noonday sun. She smiled back at him, in fact, she could do nothing but smile, for the joy that filled her heart was almost too much to bear.

She felt a strange tightness around her mouth, as if her delight was threatening to burst forth from her face, as if her smile could not possibly stretch wide enough to convey the happiness overflowed her in his presence. He, too, was without words, and yet he did not need them, so pure and white was the light that glowed in his gentle eyes. He only

smiled, and somehow, that was enough – more than enough – for there was perfect understanding in the mutual joy they shared in the simple companionship of the lost other.

His hand felt strange, waxen and paper-thin. She could feel each separate line distinctly, as if they were a strange Braille that she was meant to read somehow, but the message was beyond her. She did not care. She was content to rest in the salving warmth of his regard, drinking him in all the while. Not for one moment did she look away from him, nor did he drop his eyes from hers.

And then, it was time to go. She retreated slowly, glancing again at the woman, but her sleeping figure did not stir and her face was still obscured. When she looked back at Paul, he was still smiling, but she had the feeling that he was bidding her farewell. She tried to speak, tried to call out to him, in vain. Tears filled her eyes as she watched him, the woman and the dark room gradually fade away.

She had awoken with a start, sitting in an awkward position at her makeup table with her forehead resting on the flat surface and a kink in her neck. Something dripped from her nose as she sat up, and she saw two perfect liquid circles on the tabletop where her nose had been. She dipped her finger in one, breaking its flawless form, then touched the tip to her tongue. Tears.

What did it mean? She didn't know. Was she happy or was she sad? She didn't know that, either. Crazy, probably. Her hands were shaking and she wanted to scream. Then she heard Christopher's voice coming from the kitchen; she couldn't really hear what he was saying, but she found it comforting all the same. Desperately needing to remain within earshot, she wandered into the living room. There was a long, rectangular mirror over the fireplace and she started to look away, afraid of what she would see there. But something inside her rebelled against the fear, and for the first time in months, she dared to meet her own eyes. They were older, somehow, they looked sadder, if no wiser. And in them were two reflections within the reflection. One of them, she felt sure, was still the happy little girl that had no name, the one who was looking out of this unfeeling shell that looked exactly like her.

You are a bad, bad person, she told the mirror silently. You're nothing but a fake! How much longer did she have to pretend that her life had been torn apart and ruined forever by Paul's death? What was wrong with her? Sure, she had liked him, a lot, but she was only fifteen! Jami might think she didn't ever want to get married, but Holli knew better. She knew she wanted a family one day, but she'd also known perfectly well from the start that her romance with Paul wasn't ever going to survive college. In fact, she probably would have been fine if he'd dumped her for another girl – okay, majorly P.O.'ed for a week or two until she met someone else – but since it ended the way it did, there was just no end to it! Everyone had turned her into some sort of tragic survivor, as if she were a saint or something.

She'd come to hate the way that the coffee shop hushed noticeably when she and Jami walked in, and the sympathetic look in everyone's eyes. The sad puppy look was always the same, from the old married women who blew in with their special silver car coffee mugs to the dweebs who parked there for hours with their laptops. No one saw her as herself anymore, she was simply "the girl whose boyfriend got shot at the prom."

And if it was this bad during the summer, she couldn't even imagine what it was going to be like once school started in September. The worst thing was that it was all her fault. At first, she'd enjoyed the attention, all the weird celebrity that the brush with tragedy had given her. The Martin-Wallace school shootings were the biggest and most awful thing that had ever happened in the history of Mounds Park, and of all the victims, Eric, who'd made the homecoming court, had been most popular. The best-looking, too, so of course, the picture that was always in all the newspapers was one her Dad had taken of the two them in front of the limo that afternoon.

It was a strange sort of kick, but it had been weirdly easy to fall into. She didn't know when she'd first realized that she was faking it – maybe faking it was the wrong word, overdoing it was probably closer to the truth – but that was when she'd first begun to feel the strange sense of detachment from herself. It wasn't too long before she found it hard to

keep from laughing when someone she didn't know would walk up to her and tell her how sorry they were about Paul, even as she would start to put on a delicate hint of the expected waterworks lurking behind her eyes

God, I hate myself! What is wrong with me? Why do you just leave me hanging out to dry here? Are you as disgusted with me as I am? If you are, I don't blame you. I don't like getting off on this sympathy stuff – I mean, I did, but I don't now! But how do I stop it? Help me stop it!

She tried to imagine the look on the face of the next guy trying to be nice to her if she just blew up in their face and told them: "Look, he was just a boyfriend, all right? And he's dead! Now shut up about him and ask me out, will you?" Right, they'd be all over that. Any normal guy would totally think she was some kind of psycho-ho with less feeling than your average rock.

Well, she knew one thing for sure. She didn't want to sit around the house by herself tonight, so she'd better ask Christopher for a ride before he finalized his plans with Rachel. After pushing her straying bangs out of her eyes, she turned from the mirror and headed towards the kitchen.

"Hey!" Christopher shot a lethal glare at Jami as she flounced triumphantly away.

"Hey, you." Rachel's voice was soft, and much lower than his sister's. It always made her sound like she was being coy, although he knew now that it was just shyness. "You were killing elves? That doesn't sound very nice. What did they ever do to you?"

He made a mental note to strangle Jami at the first opportunity.

"Elves," he said with remarkable restraint, "were not involved. I'm afraid you were misinformed. I was playing ASL with Don."

"Oh, is that your game with the little toy soldiers? Those teeny little tanks are so adorable!"

With some difficulty, he managed to choke down the urge to deliver an extensive monologue on the subject of the finest historical simulation of tactical World War II infantry combat, the allure of its intellectual challenge, the difficulty involved

in mastering its complex details, and the aesthetic, not to mention technically challenging, appeal of painting the miniatures. Not only would it be received with the telephonic equivalent of a blank stare, but it would only make him look like a bigger dork than he already did.

Assuming that was possible, of course. It had been a bitter truth to swallow, but swallow it perforce he had. Hard as it was to accept, chicks did not, in fact, dig guys who played computer games. At least not on that basis.

"Did you win?" Rachel asked him.

"The issue is still in doubt."

It wasn't a total lie, but it was stretching the truth. A little. Okay, a lot. He quickly changed the subject. "So, are you doing anything tonight?"

"That depends. Do you want to see me?"

He smiled, picturing her long-lashed brown eyes, always partially-hidden by her straight, chestnut-colored hair. After two months of summer vacation, she had a killer tan that brought out the whites of her eyes most beautifully and made her teeth almost appear to glow during the dark summer evenings. She was tall and strikingly slender, and Christopher was still surprised that he'd ever had the guts to ask her out. Of course, his sisters had had something to do with that. It's always easier to go for it when you know they're going to say yes.

"You know I do," he told her sincerely. "What are you up for?"

"I don't care."

He grimaced. He'd lived with three women for most of his sixteen years, and although he wasn't exactly fluent in their language, he knew enough to know that 'I don't care' did not indicate actual indifference on the part of the female speaking. The proper interpretation was something more on the lines of: "I don't know, at least not right off the top of my head, so be a sport and come up with something that you think I might like. But if I don't like it, I'll be sure to let you know right away so you can think of something else." It was a pain, but he also knew better than to fish for a suggestion that was never going to be forthcoming.

"What if we went to the evening service tonight, instead of tomorrow morning," he suggested. "I heard they've got a new speaker in town this weekend, this young guy from Texas, I think. Then, afterwards, we can go to Barnes and Noble, the big one by the movie theatre, you know, with the coffee shop in it."

"That sounds good," Rachel answered, sounding pleased. A swing and a hit! He mentally high-fived himself. Rachel was an avid reader, much to Christopher's delight, and she shared his love of bookstores.

"I have some credit left on that gift card my aunt gave me for my birthday, and it would be awesome if I could sleep in tomorrow morning."

Christopher jumped as someone cleared her throat behind him. It was Holli. "You just about gave me a heart attack," he accused her.

"Sorry. Hey, can I get a ride to church tonight?"

Drat! Had she overheard him talking? He really didn't want to have Holli along making a third wheel tonight, but you couldn't exactly tell your sister to bag worshipping the Lord because you were kind of hoping for some quality kissing later.

"You're, ah, not going tomorrow or anything?"

"No, I want to go tonight."

"Um, sure, I guess." He winced, but forced himself to tell Rachel now. Better to get it over with than surprise her with Holli later. "Say, is it okay if Holly comes along with us?"

"Sure," Rachel answered. Her ready agreement came a little too quickly for his liking. He glanced over his shoulder, upon which Holli was tapping.

"You don't need to take me back, Angie will pick me up there." His relief must have been apparent on his face, because she winked playfully and punched him. "I wouldn't wreck things for you, you know that!"

Good old Holli. Of course she wouldn't! He returned to the phone.

"Hey, she's meeting Angie after church!"

"You don't sound very disappointed."

"I'm not. Should I be?"

"Don't be silly. What time will you be here?"

"Five o'clock."

"Okay, I'll be ready." She paused for a moment. "Bye, Christopher."

"See you soon! Bye."

He pressed the disconnect and absently placed the cordless on the nearest flat surface, quite happy with the outcome. Not only was he going to get to spend a whole evening alone with Rachel, which was great in and of itself, but their plans left him with more than three hours to continue the British assault. Don had killed the one tank, true, but in doing so, he'd revealed the disposition of his entire force in only the second turn. Christopher still had two Churchills left, more than three platoons of infantry, and plenty of time to work with. The unfortunate tank and its crew would soon be avenged!

Christopher whistled cheerfully as he walked down the basement stairs towards the little battlefield and the waiting enemy commander.

Four hours later, he was sitting quietly in a chair in between Rachel and Holli, holding Rachel's hand as he continued to reflect obsessively on what had gone wrong. The 'shreck-toting tank hunters had cunningly used an orchard to cover their withdrawal into town, surviving what Christopher had intended as a lethal barrage of firepower. The German machine gun crew had also executed an orderly retreat, and in doing so managed to slow the British advance into the all-important exterior line of buildings. The tide had finally turned against the Germans in turn six, as his last Churchill bagged the Jagdpanzer with a nicely placed side shot and his infantry took out the machine gun in close combat, but the delays had eaten up too much precious time. The last turn came to a close with his troops controlling only five of Sinagoga's seven main buildings, one short of the number required for a British victory. Another ignominious defeat, about which he'd be hearing for quite some time. Don was many things, but being a modest winner was not one of them.

"Do you think we should volunteer too?" Rachel squeezed his hand, and the sound of her voice pulled him back to the present.

"What's that?"

Christopher looked around in alarm. On every side, people were raising their arms, some cheerfully, others more reluctantly. Only weeks ago, their fast-growing church had moved from its meeting place at his old elementary school to this massive building, which had once housed a Home Depot. The new auditorium was huge and held something like three thousand people. It was only half-full for the Saturday night service, but even so, there were more than six hundred people holding up their hands.

"Um, what are we volunteering for, exactly?"

"Don't you ever listen?" Rachel sounded unsurprised. This wasn't the first time she'd caught him zoning out. "They're going to have a crusade here in September, at the Metrodome, and they want people to volunteer to pray for it every day."

"Oh, sure," Christopher shrugged. "Why not?"

He squeezed the hand that he was holding as they lifted their free hands together, in unison with hundreds of other willing volunteers. Then he looked more closely at the good-looking young man standing at the podium, and he blinked with surprise. It wasn't so much the man's appearance that caught his attention, although he was dressed pretty casually for a preacher, even for this particular church. No, what was unusual was the four massive angels towering over the man, their hands folded over the hilts of their drawn swords as they stood in a protective semi-circle behind him.

Christopher smiled, and was overcome with joy as, without warning, an overwhelming consciousness of God's stupendous power flowed through him. Rachel, the chair, the church, and even his own body seemed to dissipate and fall away into nothing as he perceived, for just one fleeting moment, the great web of divine light that bound together the people of God throughout all time and place. Man and angel, rock and beast; everything in creation that had freely chosen to submit its will to that of the Most High was linked together in a glorious and unbreakable chain of power. It was an awesome vision, and it took his breath away.

"Do you see what I see?," he whispered to his sister, feeling a little light-headed. All thoughts of the afternoon's mini-battle had vanished from his mind.

Holli looked at him and nodded soberly as the congregation rose to its feet and the worship band began to play an energetic song of praise to their awesome God. In front of the band, the four great angels raised their swords in one accord, and the fiery weapons began to blaze silvery-white over their upraised, fanatic faces. They gave a great shout, and the building trembled on its foundation. These were not mere Guardians, Christopher realized with unabashed awe. Their scarlet cloaks and silver wings betokened a loftier station, and their gesture appeared to be more than just a benediction. In fact, to him it looked a lot more like a declaration of war.

CHAPTER 19

THE GATHERING SHADOW

YOU TRY TO PICTURE HOW THE WORLD MIGHT APPEAR, THIS WORLD DENSE WITH WRITING THAT SURROUNDS US ON ALL SIDES, TO SOMEONE WHO HAS LEARNED NOT TO READ.

— Italo Calvino, *If On A Winter's Night A Traveler*

There was something wrong with this picture, Holli realized when Angie dropped her off in front of the house and sped away, trailed by the fading sound of the Back Street Boys. She looked around, half-expecting to see more silver-winged angels around her, but instead she was aware of an oppressive sense of darkness. She tried to whistle, but her lips were dry and she walked a little faster to the door than normal.

She felt a little off kilter. Ever since seeing those angels at church, her senses seem to expanded. Out of the corner of her eye, she kept seeing movement, random flashes of motion by things that didn't exist when she turned to look at them. Was she imagining things? She hadn't imagined the angels; she was sure of that. But was she catching glimpses of the world she knew surrounded hers, or was her imagination just running wild?

A third alternative occurred to her when a low chuckle near the corner of the house arrested her attention. She whipped her head around, and saw a short blue figure emerge from behind a prickly shrub. His face was wide, his naked belly protruded grossly, and his skin was marred with disgusting fatty lumps that glistened moistly in the pale shards of moonlight. But he wasn't fully there, either, for as he waddled slowly towards her, she realized that she could still see the bush behind him.

She screamed and fumbled for her keys without taking her eyes off the grotesque creature. But before she found them, there was a white flash and she breathed a huge sigh of relief at the sight of Aliel, her guardian angel, standing between her and it. She, too, was semi-transparent, but Holli could hear her perfectly well.

"Go, you stupid wretch!" Aliel didn't even bother to draw her sword, she simply pointed her finger at the thing. "There is no one here for you tonight."

The thing chuckled, but it stopped in its tracks. "She'll do," it muttered in a deep, wheezing voice. "She'll do real nice, she'll do."

"She is not for you!"

"I was called. I am here by right." It licked its lips with a bright green tongue that was obscenely thick. "They promised me, and I am so hungry. So terrible, terrible hungry. Give me pity, sweet angel, give me the girl. They are so soft, the young ones."

Aliel drew her sword, so fast that her arm was a white blur erupting in fire. The lumpish thing froze, gasping, but she halted her swing with the point of the sword flickering at the spot between its huge yellow eyes.

"What part did you not understand? She is not for you! If you wish to visit the Pit, then try me!"

The thing's rounded shoulders slumped with defeat. "Then where is the one that is mine?" it whined.

"Not here. Come back later, if you must, but the young ones are forbidden. Touch them and you will burn before your time."

The grotesque thing sulked as it faded away into invisibility. It must have left as well, because Aliel shook her short blonde bob and sheathed her blade. She turned towards Holli and sighed, becoming more solid, less see-through, as she did so. They embraced; Holli was delighted to see her guardian although she knew it was almost surely an ominous sign.

"So, it's to be you. I see your eyes have been opened."

"Me? What do you mean? There were angels at church tonight. Christopher saw them too."

Her angel nodded. "Yes, dear, it doesn't surprise me. He's been sensitive to such things ever since the Fallen one first touched him. But you, on the other hand, are not."

Her pretty face looked sad, which worried Holli tremendously. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Aliel stroked her cheek. "Nothing, dear. But you shouldn't have seen it."

"There's something you're not telling me!"

The angel smiled. "There's an encyclopedia of things I'm not telling you, Holli. And I'm not going to tell you anything now." But she withdrew something from inside her robe and placed it in Holli's hand. "If you're seeing me, then things are likely to move rapidly now and you may be in great danger. If I cannot help you, then you must use this."

Holli looked at it dubiously. It looked like a grape, but it was black and hard. A stone, perhaps?

"What is it? What do I do with it?

"Do what comes naturally," answered Aliel, fluttering her fingers goodbye. "You'll see me soon enough, I fear."

Holli frowned as she toyed with the angel's gift and watched her angel fade away, still smiling sadly. The thing in her hand was strangely warm, almost hot, as if there was fire inside. Confused, annoyed, and more than a little scared, she turned back to the house. She wished Aliel would stick around. Sure, she'd told off that squat little demon, but generally speaking, her appearing was usually a warning of bad news on its way. The first time Holli had seen her, it was demons with claws and serious skin care issues, the second time, goat-head demons and guns. She wondered what came next. Skinhead Nazi devils on tanks?"

Glancing at the upstairs windows, she could see that Jami hadn't made it home yet, although judging from the glow coming out of the ground floor windows, she'd forgotten to turn off the light in the living room. She extracted her key to the front door from her purse, but was surprised when the handle turned in her hand before she inserted the key into the slot. Had Dad forgotten to lock it before they left? Sure, he might have, especially if they'd left through the garage.

She stepped inside, locked the door behind her and slipped her purse over the staircase's wooden end rail. But she

couldn't escape the feeling that someone was watching her, or at least was nearby.

Her stomach growled, and she decided that a snack was in order. As she walked towards the kitchen, though, her heart nearly stopped beating when an unfamiliar guy's voice called out to her.

"Hey, Jami, is that you?"

It didn't sound like Jason, but on the other hand, it didn't sound like a psycho-killer either, so she resisted the urge to go for the kitchen and grab one of Mom's razor-sharp Cutco knives out of the butcher block.

"No, it's not Jami, it's me," she said as she left the kitchen and entered the living room. A tall, slender man stood up; she did not recognize him immediately, not until she saw his pale blue eyes. In an instant, she was back in the moment of her deepest, most painful fear.

He didn't look like a deejay, dressed for the prom in a black tuxedo, black tie, and a ruffled black-and-yellow cummerbund. He was messing with the equipment for a second, and then he stood up, looked out over the crowd, and smiled. It was an scary smile, full of cruelty and evil....

He had not pulled the trigger that had killed Paul. But Paul's blood was on his hands all the same, along with the thirteen other boys and girls who had been murdered that terrible night.

"You!" She pointed at him, trembling. "What are you doing here?" But before he could respond, she turned and fled for the kitchen. The butcher's block was empty, but she pulled open drawer after drawer until she saw a silver glint. She reached in and grabbed it, but upon realizing it was only a small cheese knife she threw it to the floor. On her second try, she found the paring knife for which she was searching and pulled it out so fast that she skinned her knuckles.

She looked up and he was there, standing in the doorway. Derek Wallace, the murderer who was supposedly serving a life sentence at the Stillwater state penitentiary. He was no high school senior, not anymore. He looked hard. Prison had aged him; he was more man than boy now, and he no longer resembled the tall angry geek that she'd hatefully scribbled out of the Mounds Park yearbook. His dark hair was shaved

down to grey stubble, his white skin had not seen the sun all summer and his face was so thin that his cheekbones were threatening to break through. But his eyes, pale and cold, were still frightening. They were as hard as diamonds. A purple bruise marked the left side of his face.

"You're not Jami, you're the other one," Derek Wallace said unexpectedly. "Holli, right? What are you doing with that knife?"

"If you come any closer, I'll stab you! Stay away from me!"

Wallace put up his hands. He looked alarmed, and, confusingly, a little amused. "All right, take it easy, blondie. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to surprise you. I just have to talk to Christopher or Jami, all right?"

"You shouldn't be here." Holli said, relaxing just a little. He didn't seem too psycho, but she wasn't about to drop the knife either. Where were her parents? Why did they have to go out tonight, of all nights? They never went out on weekends! "You're supposed to be in prison."

"I was, until tonight."

"What do you mean, until tonight? You were in Stillwater!"

He smiled as her voice rose with anxiety. It made her blood run cold, to see him smile like that, for it hardly touched his eyes. "Someone let me out. Or something. I'm not really sure."

"How could they let you out? You were in for life. For ten consecutive sentences!"

"Or three months, whatever comes first. Ironic, isn't it?" He pointed to the knife. "Look, put that down. You're going to hurt yourself with that thing."

"I may be blonde, Derek Wallace, but I'm not that stupid. Now, get out of here before I call the police!"

"You can't do that."

"Oh, yes I can!"

He smiled again, that same cold, humorless smile. "I don't think you understand. I can't let you do that."

Holli swallowed hard. She'd wrestled with her brother too many times to like her chances here if it came down to a fight, even with the knife. Boys were stronger than they looked. She'd always agreed with her dad before when he'd gone on

off one of his occasional anti-gun lectures at the table, especially after the prom, but now she really wished there was at least one gun in the house. So, now what? If Wallace was desperate to talk to somebody, then probably her best chance was to keep him talking. The only good thing was that he didn't seem to be in any hurry to attack her.

"Okay, well, why don't you tell me what you're doing here."

"I already told you. I have to talk to your brother. Or your sister."

"You said that. Why?"

He scrunched his face up, drawing his eyebrows together and nodded slowly. "Yeah, that's kind of a hard one. I'm still trying to figure it out. You probably won't believe me, but to answer your earlier question, I basically just walked out of Stillwater."

She stared at him. "That's not possible. It's maximum security. Isn't it?"

"I said you wouldn't believe me. Anyhow, I hitched a ride on 36, then walked up 10 until I got here."

That was a long walk. No wonder he looked tired. But she still couldn't figure out what he meant by walking out of Stillwater. She'd never actually been there, but she'd been to the Ramsey County jail once to visit her cousin, the cop, and it didn't look like a place that you could just walk out of.

"But why did you come here? You didn't think Christopher or Jami would just hide you from the cops, did you? They'd never do that."

"Actually, I kind of thought they would."

Okay, so maybe he was psycho, Holli thought. "And why's that?"

"Because Khasar told me they would."

Holli stared at him, unable to believe what she'd just heard. It wasn't possible, she whispered to herself. It just wasn't possible. He must have heard the name from Jami or something, or maybe even Christopher. Christopher knew the name; they'd told him about the crazy archon who'd watched over them on Ahura Azhda, and sacrificed himself in a vain attempt to save them when Christopher, in the full flow of his evil, had struck him down.

He was dead, she'd seen him die. Although Christopher had struck her down too, and she wasn't dead. So, maybe it was possible, just. But if an angel was going to appear to anyone, wouldn't Derek Wallace be about the last person it would choose?

She shook her head. It didn't make sense, but it kind of didn't make sense in an uncomfortably familiar way.. There was something a little too coincidental about his being here, especially now. She started to say something, but before she could get it out, there was a knock on the door. They both froze.

"Were you expecting anyone?" he hissed at her.

"No." A minute ago she would have leaped at the opportunity to answer the door, suddenly, she wasn't sure what to do anymore. "Um, just stay here."

"Holli!"

"What?"

"You might want to leave that." He pointed to the butcher knife.

"Oh, right." She hesitated for a moment, then put it down. She could always just run out the front door with whoever was there if she had to. What are you doing, you idiot? Leaving a sharp knife with a convicted killer? She shook her head. She didn't have time to think now. *Pound-pound-pound!* The second knock was more urgent, more forceful this time.

Glancing out the window, she saw the roof-mounted lights of a police car. Maybe someone had followed Derek after all. She took a deep breath, then opened the door. There, towering over her on the front steps, was a tall man in the dark blue uniform of the St. Paul police. At least, that's what it said on the badge clipped to his chest. And yet, she wasn't quite as glad to see him as she thought she should be.

He was pretty good-looking for a cop, more like her idea of a fireman, with a strong, masculine jaw and short black hair. He obviously lifted weights, too. He had the usual male reaction to her, but he controlled it better than most, limiting himself to a single raised eyebrow. "Good evening, Miss." His voice was deep. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but we're on the

lookout for a dangerous fugitive that was seen in this area about an hour ago."

"A fugitive?" Holli tried to decide if she should tell him about Wallace, even as she widened her eyes and raised her hand to her mouth. If there was one thing she was good at, it was keeping guys from knowing what she was thinking. "Dangerous?"

The handsome policeman nodded. "I'm afraid so, Miss. I don't want to alarm you, but I'm sure you heard about the shootings at the prom?"

Holli nodded, and her brief amusement disappeared as the man's words caused a knot in her stomach. Wallace was a killer. He was sentenced to jail. Didn't she have a duty to tell the police that he was hiding almost right behind her? She didn't trust herself to speak.

The policeman seemed to be staring at her intensely. Did he know something? Had someone seen Derek go into the house? Oh, no, what if someone thought she was his girlfriend and was hiding him!

You are hiding him, she seemed to hear a small voice whisper in the back of her mind. But you shouldn't be. Tell him that he's inside. Let the police handle it. It's their job....

"I'm sorry?" she said. The policeman had been saying something.

He was definitely looking at her strangely now. "I said, is there anyone else in the house? We noticed that there aren't many lights on, and we're pretty sure that the fugitive was right in this area."

She met his eyes. They seemed to bore right through her pretension of indecisive cluelessness. She was starting to get frightened. What if Derek was lying to her? But that wasn't possible! And wouldn't she get in all kinds of trouble if they knew she was hiding him. The small voice – no, voices – grew louder.

He's in there. We know he's in there. Don't be stupid, Holli! Don't be fool. We know he's in there. Let us have him and we'll leave you in peace. What is he to you? Why do you protect him? Give him up... give him up... give him up....

"Why are you hiding him, Holli?" The policeman raised one cocksure eyebrow. His eyes glinted malevolently. "Why are you keeping him from us?"

CHAPTER 20

A DARK WIND HOWLS

FROM THE WEST, MEN WILL FEAR THE NAME OF THE LORD , AND FROM THE RISING OF THE SUN, THEY WILL REVERE HIS GLORY. FOR HE WILL COME LIKE A PENT-UP FLOOD THAT THE BREATH OF THE LORD DRIVES ALONG.

— Isaiah 59:19

The policeman's words shocked her out of her silent, internal debate. He knew! And when she met his eyes, she saw that whatever was lurking behind them wasn't human. There was a wild dark cruelty in them, an whirling, maddened glee that belied the calm professional look on the policeman's face.

"Who are you," she demanded, even as her knees were shaking. Wallace had seen Khasar! He had seen Khasar, and it wasn't the cops who were after him after all, it was the Fallen! "Name yourself!"

"What?" the policeman blinked at her, confused.

"Name yourself!" she shouted at him. "Tell me your name, by the Blood of the Lamb!"

The policeman recoiled from her, throwing up his hands in alarm, but a sneering look appeared on his face as he recovered himself. "You won't get rid of me that easily," he snarled, frothing at the mouth like a dog. "You have no power over me!"

"Get out," she shouted right back, pointing away from the house. "Get away from here, demon, and don't you dare come back, or I'll order you into the bottom of the sea!"

She nearly fainted when his eyes rolled back in his head, showing nothing but white, and he gave a moaning, wordless cry of thwarted rage. But when they rolled back and she saw that the demonic shining was still there, she pointed her chin

and jabbed her finger at him. "Fine! In the Name of the Lord Jesus — "

"No! Stop! Please!" the demon interrupted hastily, backing away from her. "Look,, I'll leave, I'll leave!"

She stared at him for a moment, and relented. "Are you going to leave this guy you're possessing alone too?"

"Yes, yes, of course!"

She nodded and pointed her finger down the street. Her heart was pounding so hard she hardly dared speak. But before the demon left, he wrinkled his lip and snarled one last bit of defiance.

"If you won't give him up of your own free will, believer, then they'll come get him, mortal. And they'll take you with him!"

It felt a little anticlimactic to watch the demon-possessed man stomp off to his car and slam the door before he drove away, but it was a relief to her all the same. She waited until the brake lights disappeared before going back into the house and locking the door behind her.

"They're after you," she called out to Derek. "And I don't mean the police, I mean demons! I believe you now. Did he tell you anything? I mean, Khasar, did he tell you what was going on?"

"Who's after me? What was that all about?" he asked with wonder in his voice, as he emerged from his hiding place. "I thought it was a cop, and then all of a sudden you started screaming at him. "

"It was a cop. And I know this may sound weird, but it's true. He was possessed. And they seem to want you bad."

"Possessed by demons?"

"Demon. Just one, I think."

Derek had a strange expression on his face. Then he nodded slowly. "Yeah, that happened to me once. That night... it was really strange. It was like watching a movie, but from inside your own head. I knew what was going on, but it was like I was just along for the ride."

Holli didn't trust herself to answer. His words recalled memories with which she could not deal, and she had to look away before she said something she'd regret. But as she looked to the side, something caught her attention outside the

window. It was hardly possible, but the night appeared to be growing darker. Had the power gone out? No, because they still had lights inside.

"Hang on a second." She went to the window, and gasped. It was as if her vision had suddenly shifted from black-and-white to three-dimensional color. A sudden roar from out of nowhere made her clutch at her ears. To the south was a shimmering black-purple wave, darker than the night, lurking on the edge of the horizon. There was something overwhelmingly malevolent about it, something worrisomely powerful. The they of whom the demon spoke? It seemed all too likely.

Holli spun around the room, looking wildly about. Surely her guardian angel wouldn't leave her to face this alone. "Aliel, are you there?"

Her beautiful guardian materialized, still holding her burning sword unsheathed. Her wings were furled tight, too, and her face was uncharacteristically grim.

"The borders are thin, tonight, Holli. That demon spoke the truth. There is something on its way, and soon.."

Derek was gaping at Aliel, who nodded to him. "He is the one they want. I suspect they caught wind of Prince Uriel's machinations. Khasar isn't always as clever as he thinks, but to give him his due, it was a difficult task. He must not have gone unnoticed."

"Wait a minute." Derek stepped in front of Holli and forced the angel to look at him. "What's going on here? I'm the one who wants? And who are you?"

"Her name's Aliel," Holli answered first. "She's my guardian angel. Didn't Christopher ever tell you about this stuff?"

Derek nodded slowly. His eyes were like blue diamonds, intensely sharp and suspicious. "Yeah, but I didn't really believe all of it. I figured it was mostly metaphorical or something."

"Well, it isn't. It's for real. And something's happening tonight, right now. Christopher and I saw four angels with swords at church tonight, and then all this started happening." She glanced at Aliel. "If they're coming, shouldn't we get out of here? Can't you take us with you?"

"We were told to wait here."

"Where's my angel?"

Aliel smiled faintly at Derek. "The idea was to mislead them as to your whereabouts. So, he's still at the prison, although that aspect of the plan seems to have failed." Then, without warning, she whipped her head around and brought her sword up.

"What's that?" Derek leaped up, looking wildly around him. There was a wild howling in the distance, but closer still was a crazed cackling of a hundred infantile voices. It was as if a pack of rabid wolves on nitrous whippets were surrounding them.

"The little ones, the petty ones, they sense the coming of the Great Ones. It excites them." Aliel kissed Holli on the forehead. "Be brave, daughter of the King. Remember the words of the Prince. And my gift!"

Without further ado, took two steps, then unfurled her wings and flew *through* the door.

"Holy...." Derek wisely left his thought unfinished. "So, that's an angel."

"That's my angel," Holli said, a little proudly. Then she remembered what Aliel had said. "A Great One. Ones. Oh, that's bad."

"Are they really that bad?"

She stared at him, eyes narrowed. "One of them put you up to, um, to the prom thing."

"Oh."

There was a long moment of silence. Finally, he broke it. "So, what do we do?"

She shrugged. "Wait and trust in the angels. They know what they're doing. God sent them here to protect us, so we should probably let them do that."

"Can't we at least watch?"

She folded her arms and shrugged.. It was pretty amazing, after all, to be able to see Heaven's angels in action. Now that she knew they were really there, she had no doubt whatsoever that they'd kick butt all over whatever Fallen Great One was on its way. Why not? As Aliel had shown, a mere closed door wasn't going to keep them out.

It was growing even darker outside, and it was impossible to see anything from the window so she unlocked the door and stepped out onto the concrete steps. Derek stood beside her, and he marveled at how the stars had simply disappeared into the inky blackness, as if some great beast had sucked them out of the sky.

"There!" he pointed, and she looked to the south. What she saw took her breath away. A vast cloud of darkness was rushing towards them from the horizon, so dark that the night sky appeared to be light grey by comparison. Four violet spirals were at the forefront, wreathing the black cataclysm that threatened to come crashing down upon her house. The wind suddenly picked up, hitting her so hard it made her stagger and reach out to Derek to keep her feet.

"What is it?" Derek shouted at her, over the sound of the onrushing wind. It howled like a demon-possessed hurricane.

"I have no idea!"

Holli looked about frantically to see where Aliel had gone, or at least one of the other guardians she knew, but she saw nothing. The black cloud approached, and she could see that the purple spirals were nothing more than raw power emanating from four great angels riding towards them, tearing and twisting the very air through which they traveled. Fallen angels, there was no question about it, even at a distance, their demonic nature was apparent. They rode beasts the likes of which had never before been seen by any mortal eye, two-headed wolves with wings as long as a school bus. The largest demon wore a crown of fire, and bore a red banner that lashed back and forth as he rode the evil wind.

Derek grabbed her wrist with such force that she could feel each finger leaving a separate mark in her flesh. "Christopher never said anything about this!"

"It wasn't exactly like this before." God, why me again? "Wait, there's our angels! Can you see them?"

"Yes, yes!" Derek cried, pointing at the small white figures brandishing their fiery blades at the oncoming storm. "I see them! I see them!" There were four angels; Holli recognized Mariel's gorgeous waist-length hair immediately and her heart leaped at the sight of one she guessed to be Khasar, in the form a golden lion with blue wings. But it was Aliel upon

whom her eyes were locked, and she was inspired by her slender guardian's fearlessness before the nightmarish foe.

Derek cheered with her as the angels spread their wings and leaped off the ground. They sped towards the demons, each holding their swords pointed before them, transforming their very beings into deadly missiles of Heavenly fury. They seemed like tiny figures to be set against such evil; the darkness filled the entire horizon now. And Holli could see that the darkness was alive, it was filled with the motion of hundreds, perhaps thousands of smaller beings trailing in the wake of the four great demonlords. Still, Holli had no doubt that her angels would triumph.

Khasar, with his greater wingspan, was slightly in advance of the others, but even as he was baring his powerful jaws to attack the lead wolf-thing, the beast's rider swept his arm forward and some invisible force sent the five angels tumbling wildly through the sky. Holli screamed in horror as one demonic wolf's head snapped at Aliel, barely missing her as she cartwheeled past, helpless to defend herself, completely out of control. All five of the guardians disappeared beneath the tree line just as a foul-smelling wind passed over their heads, and the stench of its passing caused her to double over, silencing her in mid-scream. She choked and gagged, but fortunately, in a moment it was gone.

Derek was racked with fear, and he collapsed to his knees next to her when the four demonlords shouted out in voices of thunder and steel, but Holli was too toweringly angry to be frightened. How dare they treat her angel like that! They were fallen, damned, cursed of God! How dare they! She should be afraid, the voice of reason whispered inside her, she should be quivering like jelly, but instead she gave herself over to the purity of her outrage. And as she did so, the words of Heaven's great warrior-prince seemed to echo through her mind.

"Though the night grows dark, you will not know despair."

Michael had promised her that. Only her. It was her gift, her special gift that the Almighty God had given her. And surely there was never a darker night than this, when the great lords of evil rode the night sky, black on black. The terrible demons came on fast, riding with a vengeance; they

had tasted victory already and were less than half a mile away from her now. They rode with arrogance, as the monstrous wolf-heads snapped, snarled and howled, and she knew that if her angels could not stand before them, she did not have the faith to command them. She need help, and she needed it fast. *Give me the words, God. Oh, God, I know you have them. Give me the words!*

They came. From where, exactly, she did not know, but they glowed like neon lightning in her brain. She could see them as clearly as the raging demonlords in the sky. Raising her chin, she lifted her open hand as if opening a direct line to Heaven, summoning a divine storm to answer the terrible cloud sweeping down upon her.

“To me, warriors of the White Lion! To me, riders of the Silver Fire! To me, angels of the Most High God! I call you in the name of the Lamb that was Slain!”

Then she hurled the black stone to the ground at her feet.

A wall of fire erupted in front of her, hurling her back. Derek, too, fell backwards, struck dumb now with fear and awe. The fire roared towards the heavens, twenty, thirty feet high, and when it subsided, twelve angels stood before her, warriors all, with faces as hard and unyielding as they were beautiful. They glowed, with a cold silver light, and their wings were iron-grey.

“Well spoken, daughter of the King,” said the one standing over her, as he held out a hand to her and pulled her to her feet. He wore a mercurial circlet of flowing silver. “We have come, how may we serve?”

She pointed to the onrushing riders, barely a football field away now. “Destroy them.”

The Divine angels turned around, and she heard one of them hiss something about the cursed seed of Fenrir. Then, in a flash, six of the angels transformed into white unicorns, but with hooves of silver fire and the same grey wings as before, only larger. One looked at her and bared its teeth; she shrank back in alarm. Its fangs were twice the size of a lion.

“Show no mercy!” shouted the angelic captain, as he leaped astride one of the unicorns. Without waiting for the others, he urged his steed to take wing, which it did with great powerful strokes that fanned her face as they beat the air.

Beside her, Derek had found his feet again.

"Holy smokes, how did you do that?" he said as he pulled at her arm. "Are they angels too?"

"What do you think," Holli answered impatiently. She was vaguely surprised that he was still there. Right now, nothing existed for her except the angelic battle. Two of the Divine were rising higher, falling slightly behind the others as they ascended, while the other four sped to meet the enemy in a straight line. The demons howled a challenge and one of the middle pair raised an arm wreathed by purple electricity. He hurled it at the angelic captain, but the Divine warrior blocked it on a shield of red-golden fire. The resulting explosion dazzled Holli's eyes, and she was seeing nothing but black and purple dots when the two lines of angels came together.

But she heard it. There was an apocalyptic cacophony of screams and snarls that rained down upon them, accompanied by a thunderous roaring like a freight train. It was so loud, she was forced to cover her ears, blinking rapidly as she tried to see what was going on.

By the time her vision returned to her, one angel had disappeared, one demonlord was falling from the sky and one wolf-thing was missing a head, with great gouts of green fire flaring out of its neck. Holli shouted with glee as the riderless unicorn transformed itself back into a warrior, then drove its flaming blade into the wounded wolf, finishing it off. The other three pairs were going hard at it, exchanging blow for blow as their monstrous steeds slashed, bit and kicked at each other.

One huge wolf's wing dealt an angel a great buffet just as he blocked a sword thrust from the beast's rider, and he tumbled from his unicorn. But before the demonlord could follow up his advantage, the lagging pair of angels descended violently upon him, pressing him back. The demonlord's steed managed to slash at both unicorn's with its pair of terrible jaws, but before it could do much more than worry at them, a golden lion struck from below, raking the beast's belly with long claws. The thing roared as purple fire lit up the sky, and a flaming sword finally found its way past the

demonlord's defense. Thunder boomed, and both the demon and his monstrous steed were gone.

"Khasar!" Holli shouted.

"That had to hurt," Derek commented gleefully. He seemed to be enjoying the spectacle now. "This is so cool! Hey, did you see the sky is getting lighter?"

And so it was. With the fall of the second demonlord, the unnatural storm began to break up. The smaller demons were fleeing, pursued by two of the mounted warriors and Khasar, who pounced on them like a giant cat slaying rats. The remaining angels were ganging up on the last two demonlords, who fought viciously in an attempt to withdraw. Desperate to escape, one demon spurred his wolf forward, then leaped off it in a backwards somersault, fleeing madly as the giant beast hurled itself howling upon the flaming swords of the surprised angels. Its savage attack sowed enough confusion in the Divine ranks to allow the second demonlord to escape too, and Holli unthinkingly exchanged a triumphant high-five with Derek as the oppressive cloud faded rapidly into the peaceful darkness of a normal summer night. And then, she remembered that the victory had not been won without cost.

"Aliel," she shouted, rushing out into the front yard, towards the trees into which her angel had plunged. "Aliel, are you all right?"

She breathed a sigh of relief when a flash of white emerged from the little forest. It was her guardian angel, limping along with her arm around Mariel's shoulder. She rushed to her and threw her arms around her. "Are you okay? I was so worried about you!"

Her guardian smiled wearily. "I was thinking the same thing about you. Oh, you did so well, sweetie! If you hadn't done that, I don't like to think what would have happened."

"They were armed for bear," said Khasar, as he transformed into his handsome human form. Holli shrieked with delight and ran to him. She hadn't thought she'd get to see him again until she died and went to Heaven.

"Khasar! How are you! How is Jhofor? Is he still grumbly as ever? Why are you here? How are you still alive?"

Khasar and Aliel exchanged a look. When Aliel nodded, Khasar cleared his throat and pointed to Derek, who was sitting on the front steps looking pensive.

"We have need of the two of you. I don't know if the Fallen caught wind of our intentions, or if this was simply a coincidence, but regardless, we have to get you out of here, now."

"You need both of us, you mean, Derek and me?" Holli stared at Khasar, not knowing if she should be more surprised at his uncharacteristic seriousness, or at the idea she was getting lumped in with a serial killer. "Oh, no, I don't think so. It's one thing to, you know, keep the demons from getting him, but I don't want to go anywhere with him!"

"This is about a little more than you, honey." Aliel patted her shoulder. "There's a lot of other people involved and one does not question the means of the Most High. Derek has been chosen, but he needs a companion, one who has experienced the spiritual world before."

"What about Christopher? What about Jami? Why can't they do it?"

The angels looked at each other again. "Holli, that thing that attacked you... it's waiting for your father. To witness what he is about to go through will tear at your faith, which has been much shaken already."

"Is he going to die?"

"You are all going to die."

"I mean now!"

"Not immediately. You will see him again, before the end."

Tears were running down her face. "No! Then I can't leave now! You can't ask me to leave my Daddy if he's dying!"

Aliel placed her hands on Holli's shoulders and pressed her forehead against Holli's temple. "Holli, listen to me. There is war among the Fallen. If we do not act, if you do not help us act, it is very likely that millions will be killed. Some of the most powerful lords of the Pit are stirring, as their decades-long slumber comes to an end. They were sated, for a time, but now they hunger for another great blood-offering and their minions seek to serve them."

"Isn't there someone else?"

"There is no one else," said Khasar sadly. "It is even possible that this attack on your father was made precisely to prevent you from acting."

"You can't make me go!"

Aliel shook her head sadly. "No, darling, we will never make you serve against your will. If you choose to stay, then you will stay and Derek will go alone."

"Let her go!" Derek called out from the steps. "She's suffered enough. I'm not afraid to go alone."

"We don't question your courage, boy, only your ability to succeed," answered Khasar. He looked deep into Holli's eyes. "Is this your decision, then, to let him attempt to do this on his own?"

Holli stared into Khasar's eyes, so like a cat's even in his human form. She saw blood and fire there, death and destruction. She saw a tall, thin young man, holding two tiny bundles in either arm and laughing with delight. She saw a single tombstone sitting peacefully on a hillside cemetery, and then a mound of dead, naked bodies piled in a jumbled heap.

"Oh Khasar, is it really necessary?" she whispered. More than once, he had sacrificed himself for her, and now she trusted him, perhaps even more than Aliel, to tell her the truth.

"It is needful, daughter of the King."

When Khasar called her that, Holli realized what she had to do. For there was one whose claim on her long preceded even Daddy's, one to whom she owed everything. What did it mean to be a follower if you did not follow? But God, it hurt. It hurts so much! She never thought anything could possibly be worse than Prom Night; now she knew better.

"I will go," she said, just before a sob choked her throat. "But I will see him? You promise?"

"You will see him, darling," Aliel whispered, kissing her cheek and wiping her tears away. "Now go, my darling, and may the blessing and the power of the Lord God Almighty go with you."

Despite her blurred vision, she could see that Derek was already mounted on one of the angelic unicorns. He had a look of wild exaltation on his face that almost made her smile; he might be a killer, but she'd forgotten that he was a geek,

too, and he probably had more than a little in common with Christopher.

Khasar transformed back into his lion shape, and lowered his wing for her to clamber onto his back. It hadn't really been all that long since she'd ridden on him, Holli thought, not for her, and yet it seemed like several lifetimes ago. So much had changed, including her. She held on tight to the loose fur of his ruff to steady herself as he launched himself into the air. The sensation of flight was as pleasant as she remembered, but even so, her thoughts were as dark as the night through which they flew.

CHAPTER 21

THE CALL

HE REALIZED IT WAS HIS DUTY TO UNDERTAKE THIS EXPEDITION OF REPRISAL. BUT WHAT IS DUTY? HOW MANY DUTIES ARE THERE THAT WE SO OFTEN NEGLECT WITHOUT THE SLIGHTEST COMPUNCTION?

— Herman Hesse, *Magister Ludi*

Okay, so that was totally cool!” Derek patted the unicorn which had borne him to this empty parking lot in a friendly manner. He was a little taken aback when the beast disappeared in a flare of silver light, and in its place stood a warrior angel who stood nearly head taller than him. His hand, which he had withdrawn in alarm, was still up in the air; he slowly lowered it without taking his eyes off the angel.

“The Archon Khasarotjofee will take you to those who await you.” His erstwhile beast of burden nodded civilly to Derek, then inclined his head to Holli. “Fare you well, children of the King.”

There was another silver flash, and they watched him soar into the sky as if he burned rocket fuel.

“Dang, I’m glad he didn’t fly like that when I was on board. Was I supposed to say thanks, or something?”

Holli shrugged. “I don’t know. Probably. Khasar likes it when you scratch behind his ears, even though he won’t admit it.”

“Stop that,” ordered the lion as she flicked the black tufts that tipped his ears. His human voice was startling, coming as it did from a set of jaws featuring six-inch canines.

She couldn’t blame Derek for his enthusiasm, though. The lights of the two cities were spectacular when seen from treetop level; they’d soared down over the murky darkness of Lake Phalen with the lights of Minneapolis and its towers across the river to their right.

The building before which they stood looked desolate, unlit and apparently unoccupied, and standing alone in the middle of the huge expanse of the asphalt lot made her feel like the last man standing in an apocalyptic sci-fi movie. It was a church, judging from the sign in front of the sidewalk, but one that had seemingly been converted from an industrial facility. It was getting to be late, and even on a weekend night, St. Paul wasn't exactly the city that never sleeps. The city that naps most of the day, spends the evening watching TV and finally falls asleep on the couch halfway through Leno was more like it. Even the neon signs on the strip mall across the street were already turned off.

"Okay," Khasar said. "Let's go in." He seemed a little nervous, and that made Holli feel a little jumpy herself.

Either the church wardens were in the habit of leaving the doors unlocked, or there were some angelic tricks Holli hadn't seen before, because they didn't do anything fancy like pass through the thick plate-glass doors, instead, Khasar simply pushed down on the handle of the rightmost door and held it open for her. The high-ceilinged entry hall was dark, illuminated only by what little light found its way in from the sparsely-lit parking lot, but Holli was almost blinded by the explosion of rainbow-hued radiance that engulfed her when after walking through the foyer, Khasar opened one of the big metal doors leading to the main auditorium.

"Holy katzenjammers, what is that?"

Like her, Derek was shielding his eyes from the brilliant glow surrounding three colossal figures standing in front of the elevated sound stage opposite the main stage, in an open area behind the rows and rows of blue plastic chairs that served in lieu of wooden pews.

"Hail and welcome, Derek Wallace! Hail and welcome, Holli Lewis! Be not afraid, children of the King, for like you, we are but servants of the Most High God!"

The voice was not amplified, but it might have well been, for it boomed like the announcer at a monster truck rally. Holli found herself physically recoiling from the visual and sonic assault and wishing desperately for four hands, two to cover her ears and two to shield her eyes from the excruciating brightness.

"I'm not afraid, sir," she shouted back. "But I can't see anything and you need to turn the volume down!"

She blinked as the overpowering light abruptly disappeared, and the towering figures were replaced by three men wearing a red-and-white uniform that, except for the color, looked a lot like what the Marines wear in their TV commercials. The three were seated around a round, wooden table, in comfortable leather chairs, and one of them indicated that they should sit down in the other two chairs, both of which were empty.

"Please, take a seat, Derek, Holli," the man opposite the empty chair said. He had an erect, military bearing, and his voice had a crisp tone that left you with no doubt that he meant business.

"Thank you, sir," Holli replied politely, sitting down after an uncertain glance towards Khasar.

"What's going on?" Derek broke in. "And who are you?"

"Our names are unimportant, my young friend. Suffice it to say that we are, like yourself, servants of Heaven's King. To be more precise, we are angels of an order under the direct command of Prince Uriel. Unlike your guardians, our order seldom involves itself directly in human affairs, except in extraordinary circumstances like those in which we have found ourselves at the present."

"Your guardian has informed us that you have made a practice of studying human warfare, Derek, so perhaps you could think of us as Heaven's Delta Force," the angel to his right suggested. He had hawk-like features and a look of sharp intelligence about him.

"Cool," Derek said, obviously impressed. "I wouldn't really say I study warfare per se, to tell you the truth, but I play a lot of Counterstrike and Combat Mission. Some ancients, too, but mostly fantasy instead of medieval proper."

Holli blinked in disbelief when the angel nodded. These guys were up on video games?

"In any event, you take my point. Know that we were created specifically to assist with special operations, missions requiring a level of secrecy. It is our job to ensure the Fallen do not know what the Almighty has in store for humanity.

Or, if they do catch wind of something, it's our job to see that their understanding somehow misconstrues the truth."

Derek frowned. "I don't know about Delta Force, then. That sounds more like the C.I.A. to me."

A smile flickered briefly across the first angel's face. "As you prefer. We seldom work directly through mortal instruments, but from time to time our responsibilities do bring us into direct contact with the occasional individual."

"Like us?" Holli asked. She hoped this wasn't all the explanation she was going to get. At least Derek seemed to have a clue.

"Perhaps it would be helpful if I were to give you an example. On one occasion, we forestalled a determined attempt to wipe out the Chosen by the simple expedient of encouraging a Temptress to lead her charge into disobeying her husband."

"To all appearances, it was a petty victory for the temptress, but that apparent defeat led directly to the survival of God's people." The angel to Holli's left spoke for the first time.

"Okay...I see...." Actually, she had no idea what the angel was talking about. "But I don't see how can I do anything for you guys, I mean, I'm not even a junior yet!"

The first angel glanced at the others, then returned his eyes to Holli's face. "You are young, certainly, but you have more extensive experience of the spiritual realm than any human alive, with the exception of your brother and sister. We believe your experience is required for our present mission. The challenge we face is that our orders preclude allowing this mission to come to the attention of the greater Fallen powers, which is what would certainly happen if we were to go about this in the traditional manner."

He glanced coldly at Khasar. "Indeed, there are some indications that matters have not been handled in a manner sufficiently circumspect."

Khasar didn't say anything; he seemed to be finding something on the far wall to be particularly fascinating at the moment. Derek raised his hand.

"Where do I come in? I mean, I assume you didn't bust me out of prison to play Counterstrike for you."

"No, we did not," answered the first angel. By this point, Holli was pretty sure he was in charge. "We are hunting a pair of missing items, but we are not the only ones hunting them. There are a number of Fallen lords also intent on finding either or both of the pair, which, as you can probably imagine, rather complicates things."

"The Fallen lords, are they like those guys we saw outside Holli's house?"

The angelic commander glanced at Khasar. "Yes, you could say that, except that some of them are a lot worse."

"How worse?"

"If you can imagine the difference between a junior high school football team and the NFL, that should give you some idea."

Derek blinked, though if it was the analogy or the thought of running into an even greater evil that surprised him more, Holli couldn't tell. Then again, they seemed be more hip to vids than she was. What on Earth was Counterstrike?

"I don't know about this," Derek whispered out of the side of his mouth to Holli before addressing the commander. "I think you'd better tell me exactly what you want me to do, because if there's bigger bads than those wolf-things out there, I don't know what I can do about it."

"I'm afraid we're on a need-to-know basis here, Derek. The scope of the mission is almost surely beyond you, as the complexities of Fallen politics are incomprehensible to mortal minds. However, you needn't trouble yourself about the big bads, as you say. The entire point of this particular exercise is to avoid them."

"We intend for you to go undercover," the second angel explained. "You will be, for all intents and purposes, an ordinary human, undistinguishable from the crowd. However, Holli will play the role of your guardian angel – in disguise, of course – while Khasar will take the part of your customary tempter."

Holli glanced at Khasar. He shimmered, and in his place stood an arrogant, black-haired demon, with no shirt and a large sigil marking his left shoulder. His appearance was almost mortal, except for a pair of black rams horns that circled down from his temples and behind his ears like a

capricornic parody of a bob. He made a devil's sign with his right hand. "Rock and roll, baby!"

"Please do desist, Archon Khasarotjofee," ordered the commander. "You may indulge your puerile sense of humor to your heart's content once you're deployed, until then, please maintain some sense of decorum."

"As you say, Captain." Khasar snapped a crisp salute that bordered perilously close to insolence in its perfection, but Holli noted that he returned to his more habitual human form without delay. Still, she found herself smiling when Khasar winked at her.

"How am I supposed to act like an angel?"

"You'll be endowed with the appropriate powers. To the common angel, you will appear to be no different than any other guardian. You will be able to see, hear and otherwise communicate with spirits both Fallen and Divine, as well as the ability to traverse the lower three strata."

"Will I be able to fly?"

An indulgent smile briefly softened the angelic captain's stern face. "Yes, of course. It would not make for a convincing masquerade otherwise."

Derek held up a hand. "Look, I understand you think we're too stupid to grok the fullness of this supernatural spy game you've been playing for thousands of years or whatever, but don't you think that maybe we'd have a better chance of succeeding if you'd at least tell us what we're supposed to do?"

"Absolutely, but first you must accept the charge."

"What, I just have to accept it without knowing what we gotta do? I'm just supposed to hope that you know what you're doing?" He glared at the captain, but the angel answered him calmly.

"Your life will be at risk. Your sanity will be at risk. You will see things that cannot be unseen, and learn things that cannot be unlearned. You will be a pawn in a game of which you know nothing, and even if you are successful, you will not know the tenth part of what you have accomplished."

"You really should be in sales," Derek said, his voice dripping sarcasm.

"And," the angel added. "You will be serving the Lord your God."

"Then I'm in," Derek said without hesitation. He folded his arms and raised his chin, as if to say, so there.

The angel turned his cool gaze to Holli. She met his eyes without flinching, but she felt as if he could see her pain and inner turmoil. The thought of being torn away from her family now, when her father was dying and he wasn't even saved, caused her actual physical pain, a terrible hollowness in the pit of her stomach. And yet, she had no doubt about what she must do. What was her pain, her loss, compared to what otherwise might be suffered by the poor murdered people of the vision?

"I wouldn't be here if I wasn't in," she answered softly.

The captain nodded to her, looking satisfied, if not necessarily pleased, then glanced at his two companions. "They are worthy," he said. "Archon, for the love of the Almighty King we serve, do not fail them in this."

"I will not fail them, captain."

"Then let us prepare them." In the blink of an eye, the table disappeared and the four angels were standing in a semicircle around Holli and Derek. The two angels of Prince Uriel's order approached them, and held out their hands, palms upward. Derek took those of the angel in front of her without hesitation, while Holli was a little slower to do likewise. She looked at Khasar, and was somewhat reassured by his surreptitious thumbs-up.

"It will hurt," the angel told her, not unkindly. "But it will not be more than you can bear. It might be best if you closed your eyes."

She nodded, and swallowed hard.

"Good luck, blondie," she heard Derek murmur, but she was too busy concentrating on remembering to breathe to reply. She started as she began to feel a gentle warmth in the angel's palms, which spread first to her hands, then up her arms until it surrounded her entire body. It was a rather nice sensation, almost like whole body massage, but as the heat began to rise to the point of discomfort, she started getting nervous. At that moment, she made the mistake of peeking. Silver filled her eyes; she was engulfed in silver fire! She screamed, and the flames filled her throat, choking it off and searing her mouth and lungs.

The flames were incinerating her now, and she tried desperately to get away, but her hands were imprisoned as firmly as if they'd been set in concrete. She thrashed violently from side to side, but it was no use. Then, just when the pain was reaching its peak and she had given herself up to a fiery death, she fell back and was bathed in something cool and glorious.

It was if she'd been bathed in warm milk then dipped in Estee Lauder moisturizer. Too shocked and exhausted to speak or open her eyes, she ran her fingers over the top of her hand. It wasn't the charcoaled x-ray she'd expected, in fact, her skin felt softer and silkier than it ever had before. She turned her hand over and felt her palm; the callus from cheerleading practice was gone.

"That's, like, the world's best chemical peel," she told the angel, who was still standing in front of her when she opened her eyes.

"How do you feel?" Khasar asked.

"Um... great! I'm a little tingly... whoa!" Her foot slipped when she pushed herself out of the chair, and balanced herself with her wings. Wings! Looking back over her shoulder, she saw lovely white feathers, with just a faint dusting of gold. They were exactly like Aliel's, she realized with delight.

Thoroughly enchanted with them, she clapped her hands together and twirled around in a happy pirouette. But when she saw what they'd done to Derek, she frowned in dismay.

"Why did you do that to him?" Derek looked at least ten years older, with small, beady eyes, a thick, stumpy neck and a bald head shaped like a bullet. He hadn't been particularly attractive before, but now, whatever physical charm he might have possessed was completely gone.

"I suppose they thought that I'd attract less attention if I didn't look like someone who's on America's Ten Most Wanted." His voice was rough, a smoker's voice, and deeper than before. Even stranger, he had some kind of English accent. "I take it I don't look quite as pretty as you."

"We don't need pretty," the captain informed him. "We need someone who will attract as little attention from the Fallen as possible. You're to act the part of one who's

unsaved, which, considering your recent salvation, should not be a problem."

"That's act as in look the part, not act as in actually act, you understand," Khasar added, earning him an irritated glance from the captain. "And now that they're ready, we'll be off, Lord Koervael, if you don't mind. Derek's plane leaves early tomorrow morning, and Holli will need every minute of that time to practice if she's not going to make a hash of it."

"My plane?" Derek said.

"Where are we going?" demanded Holli.

Khasar produced an airline ticket from nowhere and handed it to Derek, whose eyes widened as he looked it over. "We're going to London?" he said in a wondering tone of voice. "But what are we going to do there?"

Khasar mimed holding something, and swung it like a golf club. Holli wrinkled her brow. They were going golfing? Or maybe not, she realized, as the archon explained.

"It's very simple, believe it or not. We're going to find a sword and then, if everything goes according to plan, stick it into a very bad individual who very much deserves to get stuck. Doesn't that sound like a lovely way to spend your summer vacation?"

CHAPTER 22

MASQUERADE

THE YELLOW LEAVES BEGIN TO FADE
AND FLUTTER FROM THE TEMPLE ELMS,
AND AT MY FEET THE PALE GREEN THAMES
LIES LIKE A ROD OF RIPPLED JADE.

— Oscar Wilde, *Symphony in Yellow*

London was nothing like Holli expected. It was a huge city, much bigger than Minneapolis, and it stretched in every direction further than the eye could see. It was a busy place, and far from being a collection the sort of stuffy, pasty people she'd seen on PBS, it was a mix of people from all over the world, speaking with at least ten different accents when they weren't actually speaking another language altogether. It was dirty too, although now that she was not actually in the material world, she found that didn't bother her as much.

Getting used to not being solid most of the time wasn't easy. She was terrified that she'd forget and slip back into the real world right when she was in the middle of a wall or something, but Khasar assured her that was impossible.

"It's what you think of as being the real world that is actually the shadow. It's like being in a pool, then getting out of it, no, I suppose that doesn't work now, does it. Look, in a sense, you could say that you're actually more real now, not that you weren't real before, if you know what I'm saying."

After that incredibly helpful explanation, Holli stopped asking Khasar to explain things to her. As long as she couldn't kill herself by accident, it would be easier to figure things out on her own. It was much more fun to hear what he'd been doing since she'd last seen him; as hard as it seemed to believe, from his point of view thousands of years had passed.

"Of course, it's all kind of a blur when you keep yourself busy," he explained. "Or rather, when folks like Lord Coervael keep you busy. Do you have any idea how many ways there are to start a war? There are honestly times when I start to suspect that the entire notion of mortal free will is little more than an experiment gone horribly awry."

Holli felt a little strange, having this discussion on either side of Derek, although he couldn't hear what they were talking about. The city was even more crowded with angels and demons than it was with people; most were simple guardians and tempters going about their business, but she was surprised to see how many territorial spirits there were, some of them quite friendly, others about as civil as pit bulls. There was an uneasy truce between the Divine and the Fallen, but it was quite clear that the peace only extended as far as the open spaces.

The most shocking discovery was how little territory was actually held by Heaven's forces. They passed block after block of buildings which, to her newly enhanced vision, appeared to glow slightly red, as if in warning. When she brushed her fingers close to the wall, there was a faint crackling sound and her hand tingled like she'd touched an invisible electric fence.

"Don't do that," Khasar warned. "And if you set foot in one of those places, be ready to fight."

"I don't even know how to use this thing," Holli complained, slapping the scabbard that hung at her side. When she'd tried to draw it the first time, she'd burned her left hand.

"The idea is to avoid having to."

"I thought we were supposed to stick a sword in somebody."

"Not that sword. Although I admit, I'd feel a lot better if you had any idea of how to use that thing. I don't expect you'll find yourself in anything approaching a fair fight, though, which is good because you certainly wouldn't survive one."

"I can get killed like this?"

"Well, not really, but let's just say it would end your little impersonation in a hurry. But then if you happened to be

flying one hundred feet up in the air at the time... actually, yes, that would be a problem, I suppose. So, let's try to avoid that, shall we?"

The Divine strongholds, on the other hand, gave off a cool bluish ambience. It was depressing to see how few of them there were – even some of the churches they passed glowed ominously red – but she was intrigued to find that they filled her with a noticeable sense of power, like getting her batteries recharged. Khasar laughed at the expression on her face the first time they entered one, a little Catholic church which consisted, by the looks of it, primarily of African immigrants.

"Faith, my dear, it's our food and drink. It strengthens us, gives us power. We can't act without it." He had momentarily changed back into his normal aspect, to avoid being attacked on sight.

"Aren't you worried someone will notice you changing back and forth like that?"

He shrugged. "It's a risk we have to take. But I've been watching. No one is paying anymore attention to us than we are to them. That's why I told Derek to stay in that game shop across the street, so no passing Fallen would think we were working on him."

"Oh." Holli watched as the father blessed an old lady who had come in to bring him a bouquet of flowers, accompanied by a surprisingly powerful guardian, who nodded to them in greeting. Except for the two elderly people and five or six Divine, no one was about. "Well, if he's anything like Christopher, he'll be happy there for hours. Now that he's not around, can you tell me what's really going on?"

"He's one of us too now, Holli." His tone of rebuke felt like a betrayal. "I know it's hard for you to accept."

"You have no idea!"

The archon shook his head, but he was smiling. "Be brave, kitten. Being around him may be the least unpleasant thing asked of you." Then he told her of Albion and its king, of that king's doomed attempt to create a magic kingdom of Faerie that would stand outside of the insane war that Lucifer had begun. He told her of the glorious tournaments and balls, and of the cruel, heartless manner in which the fallen fae ruled

over man. He told of the king's great betrayal, and how, centuries later, they had learned of his escape.

"Lord Coervael told me that his Shadow Hunters learned that this king, Oberon, is hiding with the vampires of London. So, our first task is to find Oberon. Then we will find the Sword, and use it to permit Oberon to reclaim his throne."

"But I thought you said he was a fallen angel, that he was cruel and heartless."

"A Fallen throne must have a Fallen ruler. And every fallen prince is cruel, but there are many worse than Oberon. It is not that we serve his interests, we merely make use of him to prevent one who is much more dangerous from claiming Britain's throne."

"Isn't anyone on it already?"

Khasar wrinkled his lip. "Not one who can hope to hold it. The present king is feared, and hated. His servants are not loyal, and will betray him at the first opportunity. Those among the Fallen who thought he would prove a better king than Oberon were sadly disappointed. But we must install Oberon before the other makes her move. There is little time."

"I just find it hard to believe that it's God's will to help a demon king." Holli shook her head. "This sounds all wrong."

"Who said anything about God's will?" Khasar laughed without amusement. "God's will is that all should worship His Son. He has little to do with this; it is Prince Uriel's game we play."

"But I thought everything happened according to some special plan of God's or something?"

"Hardly." Khasar rolled his eyes. "You think it is somehow for the good of Mankind that children are murdered with machetes in Africa? Do you think it pleased Him to see six million of His chosen people burned to ashes? God had a plan, and Adam shattered it by abdicating his dominion. That's why He had to come up with an alternative. That's why Man required a Savior."

Holli's head was spinning. Just the thought that God might not be in complete control of everything upset her more than she would have thought.

"But, I thought He did everything for our good!"

"Every thing he does is for your good, Holli. But nearly everything Satan does is to do you harm. Was it good that your boyfriend died?"

"No!"

"Did anything good come out of it? Did you learn anything about life, the universe and everything."

"Yes," she admitted reluctantly.

"There you go. When something bad happens, there is always a silver lining. We make of it what we can. When that mega-psychic Moloch tried to wipe out the Chosen People, Uriel used it as a means of convincing a conscience-stricken world to fulfill the prophecy. But I'd think it's pretty obvious who's in charge here – only look around! When Jesus said that the Prince of this world was coming to kill him, who did you think he was talking about, Gabriel?"

Holli looked around the cool sanctuary of the church and thought about how many Fallen strongholds she'd seen just this morning, and how the demons walked tall and confident, sneering at her as they went past. "I just never thought about it, I guess. In church, they just tell us that everything's in God's hands."

"We're God's hands, my dear. And do you know what else? Most of the time, He leaves us free to do as we think best. Some angels are serious about their responsibilities, some aren't. That's why you'll be judging us one day."

"We'll judge you?"

"Yeah," Khasar winced. "On how we did. I can't say I'm really looking forward to that. I happened to get busted down to guardian for a bit after one particularly unfortunate misunderstanding, and I'm afraid I didn't do quite as good a job with my charge as Aliel has with you. It all turned out all right in the end, but it was pretty close there for a while."

"I had no clue about any of this. How come you didn't tell me any of this before, when we were on Rahab?" Khasar looked at her for a moment in amazement. When she stared blankly back at him, he laughed in disbelief.

"We hadn't exactly had the rules laid out for us then, you know, considering that it all took place long before God decided to have another go with Adam. I don't know how to

break this to you lightly, but this isn't the first world God has created, and I rather doubt it will be the last."

Holli felt as if she'd sprained her brain. This was what everybody must have felt like when that one guy told everyone that the sun didn't go around the earth, but things were the other way around. No, she corrected herself, it was the other way around, wasn't it? Whatever, it didn't matter now.

"Hey" Khasar was pointing at something outside the window from which most of the sunlight was coming in. His voice was quiet, and his brows were knitted together. "Do you see that demon near the phone booth?"

"The short one with the black hot pants?"

"No, not her. The muscular one with the tattoo running up his arm."

"Sure, what about him." He was hard to miss, being about a head taller than the rest of the crowd, with a pair of meat cleavers strapped to his back.

"That's our boy." Khasar was already moving towards the rear of the church, and pulling her along with him. "Go outside, to the alley, and tell me if anyone is coming." He gave her a little push and Holli cringed as she stepped into the rear wall, but she managed to slip right through the stone of the old church without incident. She looked back and forth. No one was there, except a fat, mangy dog that was rooting around an overflowing trash can, his tail wagging optimistically.

"You're good," she called back softly. When nothing happened, she raised her voice. "I said, you're good."

Yikes! Not anymore. Khasar had bulked himself up a little, and he'd jacked up the evilness of his Fallen aspect to match. His black horns were shot through with a glowing red pattern that pulsed with an ominous air and his eyes were blood-red, with yellow reptilian pupils. His upper body was not only huge, but shredded, with thick purplish veins threatening to burst from his shoulders.

"I think our boy has had enough time mucking about in that toy shop, don't you?" His voice was deep and grating, and if Holli had not been sure it was him, she would have run screaming through the wall at the far end of the alley. As it

was, she followed him at a safe distance, her hand on the jeweled hilt of her sword.

Khasar stopped where the alley reached the side street and turned around to face her. His face was still recognizable, barely, and she found it hard to concentrate on what he was saying, as his two rows of jagged, broken teeth were tremendously distracting.

"The big dude with the two swords on his back is our informant. He's going to go inside, and you're going to follow him. When you get inside, tell Derek that he should call his mother, because it's her birthday. That's how he'll recognize you."

"You want me to go full material?"

"No!" Khasar's evil eyes widened. "No, no, no, no, no! You never walk shadow to *septus* unless I tell you to, do you understand? That would ruin everything. You're supposed to be his conscience, okay? So, talk to him just like you're talking to me. You're not talking to his ears, you're talking to his spirit, right?"

"Um, sure." Holli wasn't quite understanding all of this, but as long as she just had to talk, that was fine. "And once he recognizes me – the demon, not Derek – what's he going to do?"

"I don't know. But don't talk to him, don't even look at him, unless he talks to you. Just pay attention to whatever he does. And don't follow him when he leaves!"

"Unless he tells me to, right?"

"Yeah – although in that case we'd have to consider the possibility that it might be a trap of some—"

"Khasar?" Holli interrupted. "Would you please shut up? I'm already scared enough as it is, all right?"

"Right." Khasar nodded and patted her on the shoulder with one huge, black-taloned hand. "You'll be fine, just remember, his mother's birthday."

Holli didn't realize that that was the sort of thing guardian angels concerned themselves with, but then, what did she know? She stepped into the street, there was a roar and a rush of wind, and she jumped about thirty feet in the air as a green Mercedes ran right through her. She'd forgotten that they drove on the wrong side of the road here! As she spread

her wings and floated back down to earth, she glanced back towards the alley where Khasar was leaning against the wall, burying his horned head in his hands. Demons were pointing their fingers at her and cackling with amusement; so much for not attracting unnecessary attention.

Blushing with embarrassment and wishing she was anywhere but here, Holli bit her lip, chagrined, and stepped uncertainly into the darkness of the game shop.

CHAPTER 23

GIFT OF THE DRAGON

THE NEPHILIM WERE ON THE EARTH IN THOSE DAYS-AND ALSO AFTERWARD-WHEN THE SONS OF GOD WENT TO THE DAUGHTERS OF MEN AND HAD CHILDREN BY THEM.

— Genesis 6:4

Derek looked around his shabby hotel room with bemused irritation. The last time he'd been to London, he'd stayed at the Charter with his mother and father. Of course, that was a different situation altogether, he thought, as he stared at his unfamiliar face in the mirror. Only the eyes were recognizably his, and this strange, unshaven, heavyset man would have looked completely out of place in any hotel that was less of a dive, even if he wasn't wearing baggy jeans and a tattered black sweater.

He glanced at his purchases, wondering what on Earth had gotten into him. It wasn't that he'd never Masqueraded before, but he wasn't planning on doing a lot of role-playing on this bizarre little vacation that would probably be his last bit of freedom before he disappeared behind bars again. A small worm of self-pity began to snivel inside him, but he ruthlessly suppressed it. Just enjoy it while it lasts, dude, there's plenty of time for that later.

"So, are you just going to hang around watching, or what?" he demanded of the room, empty except for a pair of lumpy beds, a lamp and a TV so old that it didn't even have a remote or a cable connection. "Because, I'm thinking it might be nice to know what's going on!"

Holli immediately appeared in front of him, looking exactly as she had before going all angel. "I'm sorry," she apologized. "I wasn't thinking – what's wrong?"

For a look of horror had filled Derek's face, and as he backed away, pointing at something behind her, he caught his heel on the edge of a bed and fell hard on the wooden floor.

"What's the matter," asked Khasar. "Oh, right, I forgot!" In the blink of an eye, the huge demon was gone, replaced by the angel's more human Aspect. He bent over Derek and helped him to his feet. "I should have warned you about that, really, terribly sorry."

"Are you trying to give me a heart attack?" Derek yelled at the angel. "It's bad enough not knowing what I look like, let alone you!"

"I said I was sorry," Khasar grumbled.

Holli stepped in between them. "It's no big deal, Derek, he just forgot. You have no idea how complicated this stuff is."

"I don't? Look at me!" He grabbed two fistfuls of stomach fat. "I have a gut! What is up with that? It's disgusting! And why are we staying in this hellhole of a hotel? I mean, I wasn't necessarily expecting streets of gold or anything, but this is ridiculous. My mother has better connections than this guy."

"I can always arrange for you to go right back to jail," Khasar shot back. Holli glared at him. "Right, sorry, that was uncalled for."

"I'm going to the bathroom," she announced, deciding that she'd leave it up to the two of them to work it out. Ten seconds later, she'd changed her mind. The bathroom was disgusting. "Khasar, he's right, we can't stay here."

"Just shift up," he advised. "Then you won't have to go."

"I have to go sometime!"

The three of them stared at each other. No one said anything, but Holli was pretty sure they were all thinking the same thing. She'd had her doubts about this from the start, but now it was really starting to look like a disaster in the making. Khasar was fun, but he wasn't exactly cunning, Derek might be saved now but he was still a psycho and kind of a jerk, and she couldn't even walk across the street without getting hit by a car. And this was what Prince Uriel had come up with to stop some major evil being cooked up by Hell's nastiest devils? No wonder the world was such a mess!

"Well, let's see what we have here." Khasar broke the silence and picked up the oversized paperbacks. "Vampires, vampires and... more vampires. Well, that doesn't help much. We already knew that."

Holli and Derek looked at each other. "What?" they said in rough chorus.

"Oh, we know Oberon is in hiding with a vampire clan. The challenge is finding the right one without leading the Mad One right to him. He does us no good without the sword."

"Okay, wait a minute. I'm cool with the whole angels and devils thing," Derek said. "At least, I think I am. But you're not seriously saying that things like vampires and stuff really exist, are you?"

"Of course," said Khasar, looking a little confused. "I thought all humans knew that. I mean, they're on the television all the time, aren't they?"

"When were you a Guardian, Khasar?" Holli broke in. She had a pretty good idea she knew what the answer was.

"Why?"

"Just tell me."

"Well, it was a long time ago. It was a really bad time, Baal-Malar had been unleashed across Europe and his plagues nearly wiped out the continent."

"The Black Death, I'll bet," Derek said, looking at Holli. "Thirteen hundreds."

"I figured something like that. Khasar, what's on the television isn't all news. It's just entertainment. Made up stuff."

"Like the movies?"

"Exactly."

"Then why do you go to the movies if you can watch entertainment at home?"

"Because we're stupid," Holli said impatiently. "The point is, no, we didn't know that vampires existed. Is there anything else out there that we should know about?"

The angel shrugged. "There's hundreds of creatures like that. Shapeshifters, ghouls, sprites, soulsuckers, you name it. They're nothing to worry about, of course, although they

prefer angelfire to blood, it's not generally an option for them."

"My head hurts," Derek announced to no one in particular. "Khasar, are you basically saying that every scary monster that anyone ever invented to keep the kiddies up at night is real?"

"I don't know about all of them, but sure, most of them, definitely. And then, there's probably quite a few that humans wouldn't know about, since they never enter the material. But really, they're essentially all the same. We call them the Children of the Twice-Fallen."

"Why?"

"I should think that's obvious." He glanced between both of their faces; Holli was pretty sure hers was as blank as Derek's. "Well, perhaps I should start from the beginning."

"That would be nice."

After Lucifer's Fall and the subsequent Great War, Khasar explained, none of the Divine were permitted on Earth. It was a place apart, where Heaven's King had gone to be alone with his latest creation, following the destruction of Rahab that completed the Ahura Azdhan cycle. The notion that Lucifer had fallen out of pique over Adam was absurd, of course, for the Fall had long preceded the creation of the first Man. Indeed, Lucifer had been worshipped openly as a god on Rahab, which was where he'd developed the taste for such blasphemy, one that he had never given up.

"I still can't believe he tried to get The Lamb to worship him." Khasar added as an aside. "What a lunatic! He's either mad or too narcissistic to see the end of his nose. How he missed that one, I'll never know. But he did, and that's all that matters."

Lucifer, being already fallen, had not feared to break the ban, and possessed the serpent that led Eve, and through her Adam, astray. Then, for the first time, angels had been summoned to bar the garden from the fallen humans, now mortal, while at the same time, the whole Earth was given over to the Fallen. The Watchers became the Rulers. They ruled it openly, did the Fallen, with the more powerful setting up kingdoms over mortal and angel alike. Many bred with

mortals, great and small alike, populating the land with not only the giants described in the Bible, but every form of spiritual and material monstrosity. It was this wickedness that had so offended Heaven's King, and finally moved him to take the drastic measure of destroying what he had made.

The Flood was more than a human catastrophe, it was also a harrowing of angel-kind. The War of the Flood was even more bitter than the War in Heaven; this time the Almighty did not stay his hand and Michael's disciplined forces mercilessly ravaged the unready legions of the Fallen. Lucifer was forced to submit, those angels that had broken the ban on mortal relations were hurled into a hellish prison inside the Earth's molten core, and the Great Concordat was signed. Lucifer was to retain his usurped supremacy, but no more would the Divine be banned from the Earth and if Lucifer continued to rule in a malicious manner, his reign would be broken once and for all and he would join his former followers in the Pit.

"Too bad he didn't just throw him in the Pit then. It would have saved a lot of trouble," Holli said.

"Perhaps, or perhaps not." Khasar shrugged. "He is not evil incarnate, he is simply the first to fall. If it were not for the honor he is still accorded by virtue of his former place, I do not know if he would even be first among the Fallen. Certainly there are others not so easily hoodwinked as him, and arguably more dangerous."

Needless to say, Lucifer had no intention of abiding by the Concordat, and he ruled much as before, although he did keep his distance from those who abided by God's Law. But as the centuries passed and his violations were not marked, his confidence grew, and he again convinced himself that Heaven's King had not been a magnanimous victor so much as a weak-willed beneficiary of some timely good fortune. The Prince of the World clamped down on his subordinate princes, and relentlessly drove them to become ever stronger and ever crueler in mad evolutionary preparation for the third angelic war, the one that would overthrow Heaven's King and place Lucifer on the Great White Throne once and for all.

Although the Flood had destroyed most of the monstrous children of the twice-fallen angels, more than a few survived.

Some, the sons of angelic princes, were strong enough to transform into fish, others were so weak that what happened on the material plane made little difference to them. As the waters receded, the surviving Children of the Twice-Fallen gathered on the plain of Durvig at the command of a Fallen prince, Belial, the Great Dragon and general of the Three Legions.

Belial cursed them, and laid the blame for the war, the Concordat and the chaining of their fathers at their feet. He summoned one of his legions to destroy them, and the wretched abominations cried out in fear as Belial's demonic army soared down from the sky like a plague of fiery black locusts.

But even as the demons threatened to fall upon the Children of the Twice-Fallen, one of Belial's captains dared to whisper in the dragon's ear. Belial listened, then roared for his army to hold, breathing out a great gout of red flame over the heads of the cowering abominations that stopped the angry Fallen as if they had been frozen.

"And why should I not destroy them, as they have destroyed us?" he bellowed at his captain. "Speak, and if your tongue be not silver, then I swear by the angels of the Pit, you shall perish with these monsters this very day!"

Mephistopheles was no warrior, but he was prized highly in the councils of the Fallen for his cunning. He reminded his angry prince that bound as they now were by the chains of the Concordat, they could no longer slay mortals out of hand. Would it not be useful if there were those who knew no such limits? For as he shrewdly noted, if their existence so annoyed Heaven's King, there surely must be some value to be found in them for those who opposed him!

The Great Dragon laughed, and the ground trembled before him. He sent his legion away, and he honored Mephistopheles before those he had saved.

"On your knees before your master, your savior, Silver Tongue!" Belial roared, and the Children of the Twice-Fallen were quick to obey. "He will be your king and you will be his slaves! Do you so swear?"

"We swear," the Children cried, great and small alike, still fearing for their lives.

"Do you claim them?" he demanded of Mephistopheles. When his captain nodded, Belial looked on him and took his face in one terrible clawed hand. "Then you shall bear this in remembrance of their debt to you, and yours to me. And I shall tear it out by the roots, I tell you, if ever any of your slaves should serve the Enemy."

"They shall not, I swear it!" Mephistopheles replied, and when he spoke, the light reflected off his tongue with an argent gleam. And Mephistopheles accepted Belial's gift to him with a fierce and haughty pride, for he was a captain of demons no more, but a true prince of devils.

He called them and they came. He opened his spirit to them and they drank of his angelfire, great and small alike. So Mephistopheles Silver Tongue bound them to him, and so they learned to lust for angelfire, though the blood of the living will sustain them, and indeed, few indeed have tasted angelfire since. Now they stalk the night, they float through the shadows and they creep through cemeteries, always hungry for that which will make them whole. But they will never be whole, for they are abomination and accursed of God. Even their king, Mephistopheles, will be judged before he is thrown into the Lake of Fire, but his slaves, monsters all, will be utterly destroyed.

"Dude, that's pretty out there," Derek commented. Holli rolled her eyes at him, but Derek blew her off. "Seriously, I don't even know what to do with that. You said that this guy we're looking for is hiding with these Children, or vampires, or whatever?"

"Exactly," Khasar said. He seemed a little disappointed that Derek wasn't more taken with his story. Holli was, though. She stared up at the ceiling, thinking that it would explain why vampires feared crosses and holy water.

"Can they turn people into vampires?" she asked.

"No, not at all. The strongest and least material can animate the flesh that remains behind, but that is all. They cannot soil the soul, nor control the spirit. Only the Accuser's demons have such power. Of course, a clever one might easily fool a mortal whose wits are disordered by the very sight of one who is known to be dead walking about, especially were it to engage him in conversation."

Holli shivered. She didn't even want to think about it. Scary movies freaked her out, and knowing that there was some truth behind them only made it worse. "So, I suppose they don't like you guys too much?"

Khasar threw back his head and laughed. "As the hurricane is to the peaceful zephyr, so is your Guardian to the mightiest of the Children. An Archon like myself would scarcely fear a hundred of them. As much as they may lust after our spirits, they fear the flames of our blades more. No, Holli, you need not be afraid of them. Even if you were not in a form to strike terror into their hearts, they would know you for a daughter of the King and tread a wide berth around you."

"So how are we going to find this guy?" Derek asked impatiently. "Don't get me wrong, that's the weirdest history lesson I've ever heard, which is pretty impressive. But what are we supposed to do, go catch ourselves a vampire and beat on him until he tells us where this Oberon dude is?"

"It doesn't sound very elegant when you put it that way, but essentially, you've boiled my plan down to its essence."

Derek frowned at the Archon. "How do we catch a vampire?"

"The same way one catches anything else. One baits the trap." Khasar smiled at Derek and his eyes twinkled with mischief. "Care to guess who gets to be the bait?"

CHAPTER 24

THE LION UNLEASHED

WHEN YOU WERE A KID AND AFRAID OF THINGS UNDER YOUR BED OR OUTSIDE YOUR WINDOW, YOU WERE RIGHT TO BE SCARED. THEY WERE THERE, WATCHING, WAITING. AS WE GREW UP, WE JUST TURNED A BLIND EYE IN A SUBCONSCIOUS EFFORT TO REMAIN SANE, TO REFUSE TO BELIEVE THAT CREATURES PROWLED THE NIGHT. THEY DO.

— Hunter: *The Reckoning*

Derek did not look at all happy as they accompanied him, unseen but not unheard, past the crumbling walls and rusted pylons of the long-abandoned industrial area. It was a grim, scary-looking place, especially at night, and Holli was exceedingly grateful to know that whatever denizens of this forsaken place might be lurking about would be unable to detect her, much less harm her. Derek, of course, had no such assurance, and he seemed more than a little dubious about Khasar's promise to keep him from harm.

"What is this stuff, turpentine?" he complained, sniffing at the liquid that the Archon had dumped over his clothes.

"It's reputed to be gin, but it does bear a rather strong resemblance to paint remover," admitted the angel. "I'm told that it is a favorite among the sort of unfortunates who tend to provide our prey their sustenance."

"Lovely," Derek mumbled. Except for his long, loping stride, he looked the very picture of a man who had reached rock bottom. "Are we there yet?"

"Almost, I think," Holli said, examining the scrap of paper she'd torn off the city map. "Are you sure it was Hackney that we want?"

"Of course I'm not sure!" Derek snapped. "But that's where they hung out in the *Rage Across London* book, and it's

the only place I could see that made any sense. And don't you go looking in my head for clues either!"

He was annoyed with Khasar, but he'd been downright furious with Holli once he'd learned that she could, as his surrogate Guardian, influence his mind. She couldn't really pick anything up from it, not anything coherent anyway, but she could speak to it through his immortal spirit. Derek had been extremely unhappy when he learned that his decision to buy the role-playing books that had led them here was not his idea at all.

"We're here," Khasar announced suddenly, in a surprisingly soft voice. She looked around, wondering why he had chosen this spot. For the last ten minutes, things had gotten progressively nastier and less populated until they reached what had to be the bottom. It was so desolate here that there wasn't even much graffiti about, and yet they were only 15 minutes away from the nearest tube station. The light of the Dockyards glowed to the south, but here there was nothing but darkness and the distant sound of unseen traffic.

Khasar pointed to a building about thirty yards ahead, then leaped to the top of a brick building and faded into the shadows. Holli, did likewise, heading for the high point indicated, although she was still nervous about taking to the air. She didn't know what to do with her legs or especially her arms, and the sensation of her wings beating was more than a little disturbing. She desperately hoped to avoid having to fight in mid-air – she'd be lucky to avoid cutting off her own wing and then where would she be?

Derek was turning slowly around, as if trying to determine where they'd gone, but he did obey Khasar's directive to remain silent. He kicked at an empty bottle, then picked up a broken piece of brick and tossed it at the bottle. It broke with a loud shattering sound that was magnified by the nearby stone wall, and as if in answer, Holli heard the sound of something treading quietly over the darkness somewhere in front of her.

She peered into the shadows, and her angelic vision showed her a tall, thin flame, green and flickering weakly. Was it the abomination they hunted? Or was it a vampire; She knew the Children came in many forms, but what would

they do if it was the wrong kind? Either way, they couldn't let it attack Derek, even if such attacks were seldom fatal. Khasar had told them that although the Concordat did not govern them, Mephistopheles was a harsh King and he preferred his slaves to dwell quietly in the shadow and avoid attracting the attention of Man whenever possible.

The shapeless green form edged closer, moving a few feet, then stopping and waiting for a moment before slipping into the next dark pool of shadow. It had clearly sensed Derek, but there was something cautious and fearful about its movements that corresponded with Khasar's story. It was strange to think of the terrors that had haunted her dreams for years as being frightened little parasites; how she'd regretted letting Christopher talk her and Jami into sneaking out of bed and watching that stupid vampire movie in sixth grade.

A faint glow caught her attention, and she saw another flame, greenish-yellow this time, followed by a third. Then there was a fourth, and a fifth. She counted quickly as they quietly stalked towards Derek; there were thirteen of them in all, and two of them burned nearly as brightly as an angel. She looked over to where Khasar was, but his cloak was too powerful for her eyes to penetrate and he might not even be there for all that she could see. There were so many! Khasar had told them to expect four or five at most.

As they came closer to her, she could perceive their physical outlines as well. At least one thing was going according to plan, as they were pretty obviously werewolves, if skinnier and smaller than she'd imagined them to be. They looked more like coyotes than wolves, although their eyes burned inhumanly red and even if she hadn't been able to see the angelfire within them, their movements were far too purposeful to ever mistake them for normal animals.

She nervously fingered the gold chain in her hands. It had sounded simple enough when Khasar explained it to her, all she was supposed to do was drop down and trap the last one in the pack, but she wasn't sure how that was going to work now. Could she stay in the fifth shadow, or would the chain pull her down to *septus*? And if she was pulled down and Khasar couldn't take them all out before they fled, wouldn't

they run right over her? Or, if she was unlucky, rip her right to shreds. That was assuming Khasar could even fight thirteen werewolves; the two big ones alone looked worrisome.

Those two were directly below her now, as the first werewolf, obviously a scout, drew near to where Khasar was waiting. Holli's hands were shaking, she was so nervous. She clenched the chain tightly, digging her nails into her palms to make sure she didn't drop it. She counted to ten, then did it again, before the last werewolf, her target, came within range. It wasn't too big, thank God, and its flame was nearly as weak as the scout's. Should she try to capture it first, before Khasar revealed himself and scared it off? She had just decided to do so when one of the big wolves rumbled low in his throat.

As she looked on in horror, each of the wolves began to broaden, thicken and twist. The one below her changed from a cute little coyote into a horrid half-man with long gorilla arms and long claws that stood on its hind legs. The biggest was the worst, standing nearly eight feet tall, it raised its muscular arms towards the full moon and howled out an arrogant challenge. It knew they were here! The realization struck her like a fist in her stomach just as the howl caused Derek look up and see the small army of monsters.

"Khasar!" he shouted, just as three of the closest abominable Children snarled and leaped towards him. The others were obviously waiting for something, but they were not prepared for a golden blur that exploded into action with a roar that caused the building under Holli's feet to quiver. This was no mere sword-wielding Guardian, he was an archon, a mighty lion of God unleashing the full power of his righteous rage. He was gorgeous, his golden fur pierced the darkness and his radiant blue wings were as wide as a school bus as he pounced on the attacking werewolves.

One powerful claw smashed the closest beast aside, and he seized another in his powerful jaws, snapping its neck with several brutal shakes. He spat it out, leveling the first onrushing werewolf, and his tail lashed out at the beast that was hurling itself at Derek. It wrapped around the beast's throat, lifted it up and smashed the creature once, twice, three times on the broken pavement.

As the two biggest monsters flung themselves at Khasar, Holli swallowed hard and leaped from the top of the building. She spread her wings and stretched out the golden chain as far as it would go. Her target was circling around to the right, hoping to get around the furious melee in order to attack Khasar from behind. Holli lowered her right wing, drifted lower until she was just above the werewolf, then dropped the chain around its head and shoulders.

As soon as the gold chain touched the fur of the beast, it burst into flames! The werewolf screamed horribly and leaped to the side, which only tightened the fiery chain although it sent Holli spinning out of control the other way. She held desperately onto the chain with both hands, and screamed herself as she hurdled sideways, just over the flailing arms and snapping jaws of the werepack as they furiously battled Khasar.

She was afraid to walk shadow, fearing that she'd lose her grasp on the chain that bound the werewolf, which was rolling madly on the ground, apparently trying to put out what it thought was a fire. But when she saw a big dark mass approaching out of the corner of her eyes, she flinched. It was a good thing, too, for she leaped two shadows into *quintus* just before her spirit ripped through the corner of a building. The walls and interior space flashed before her eyes like a black-and-grey kaleidoscope, and then she was in the open again, the chain still miraculously in her hands.

Of course it is, you idiot, she realized. It's a Divine weapon, or whatever.

Spreading her wings, she stopped her tumbling then beat them hard to gain some altitude and see what was going on. The bound werewolf was still thrashing, but its weight was almost nonexistent now, and as the chain tightened, she pulled it off the ground with ease. Gotcha! Khasar was roaring like the lion he truly was; one of the big werewolves was down, but the other one was holding onto his front paw with his jaw and raking at his chest with long, terrible claws while three of the smaller monsters had his left wing trapped. In the time it had taken her to capture the beast, he'd struck down six, but he was in danger of being overwhelmed. And worse, one of the smaller monsters had leaped past him in

pursuit of Derek, who hadn't had the sense to run right away, but stuck around to watch instead.

What now? She could try to draw her sword, but she wasn't sure if it crossed shadows too. And she didn't think she could hang on to the captured werewolf if she dropped down to *sextus*, much less *septus*. Then, she had her brainstorm.

Furling her wings to build up some speed, she dropped and then flew forward as fast as she could. She grunted as she dropped down a shadow and the full weight of the werewolf hit her forearms. It was weird but she suddenly found herself thinking about Jami, and wishing she'd gone with her to lift weights in the morning this summer.

The monstrous melee was in full bore when she flew over it, and the bound and flaming werewolf smashed into the crowd like a wrecking ball. Fur and fire flew everywhere, and there was the terrible sound of bone on bone as something snapped loudly and someone screamed, a terrible piercing cry. She didn't slow down, but flew furiously after the beast running down Derek. Just before it caught him, she saw him turn to face it. It managed to get in one vicious swipe before Holli dragged her makeshift, madly thrashing weapon squarely into its back.

The beast went down hard, rolled over, and fled howling, its fur crackling with Divine fire. Holli shouted at Derek as she labored to get higher, trying to keep from slamming her captive into a wall. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so," he yelled as he pushed himself to his feet, but he only used one hand to do so; the other was clutching his chest. But he was waving her irritably away, so she circled around to see if Khasar had been able to take advantage of the confusion.

He had. The lesser beasts, or pieces of them, were scattered as if a bomb had exploded in their midst. Only the one large monster was left standing, and one of its over-muscled arms hung limply at its side while the left side of its head was a mass of blood.

Khasar wasn't looking a whole lot better himself, but he was much bigger and even on four legs, his maned head came up to the wounded monster's chest. He reared up on his two

hind legs, towering over the brute, then transformed into the shape of a simple Divine angel. He had a black eye and there were little flickers of fire here and there about his body, including the corner of his mouth, but he folded his arms and regarded the evil beast with contempt.

"You thought you'd try an ambush, did you?"

"Almus wukr," the werewolf slurred, and Holli noticed for the first time that its jaw was broken. "Wurn't an urchan, wuduv 'adya."

"Who sent you?"

The werewolf's reply made Holli blink. She didn't know that supernatural beings, even evil ones, had mouths like that. Khasar didn't seem impressed. He glanced over at the bound werewolf, saw that it was still alive despite the beating it had taken, then drew his sword and ran it through the monster's throat in a single, lightning-like motion that made Holli cringe and look away.

When he noticed, he cocked an eyebrow and shrugged his shoulders. "They're abomination, darling. Believe me, even this fallen world is far, far better off without them roaming about. There are no prisoners in this war. And by the way, that was really rather clever, now, wasn't it?"

Holli thought about what she'd done for a second, and smiled. "Yeah, you know, it kind of was!" Then she looked around at the nightmarish figures sprawled messily about and felt her stomach heave. It was terrible. "You're not just going to leave them here for the police to find, are you?"

"Of course not." Khasar scratched his palm and scattered a few sparks of angelfire over each fallen werewolf, then said something she couldn't understand. A great purple fire roared instantly to life, hissing and spitting, completely engulfing each monster. It burned, high and hot, for a little while, and when the flames subsided, there was no trace whatsoever that the monsters had ever been there.

"I bet there's some criminals who'd love to get their hands on that stuff."

Khasar laughed. "You're getting better at this."

"What's that?"

"The flames. I saw you step back. They burn on *primus*, but you can only see them in *tertius*. I think you're getting the hang of it."

Holli hoped he was right. Then again, they'd come a lot closer to getting nailed by a bunch of monsters that weren't even proper Fallen, so she figured it would be a long time before she'd be ready to take on the real monsters. Like, forever, if she was lucky!

"Dang, you kicked some tail there, Khasar."

"Well done, Derek," Khasar said as the disguised boy approached them. "Sorry that one slipped by me. How are you?"

"Um, not all that great." Holli whirled around at the tight sound of his voice. She hissed at the site of his chest in the flickering firelight. It was dark with blood. "It nicked me before Holli clocked it with the other one. I think the bleeding's stopped, but it stings like you wouldn't believe!"

"We have to get you back to the hotel and clean that out right away. They're filthy beasts, these Shadowspawn."

"So, what do we with her, then?" Holli asked, shaking the chain. "I mean, we can't just leave her here, can we?"

"Oh, we won't." Khasar approached the bound werewolf, and when he raised a hand, the flames died out and the chain loosened and dropped from her waist, where it lay in a harmless gold circle around her feet. "I am going to ask you one question and you will have one opportunity to answer it. If you answer it truthfully, you will have the opportunity to go and reflect on your many sins. If you do not answer it, or if you lie to me, you will not have the opportunity to commit another one."

The werewolf nodded, and then her monstrous furry shape began to twist and distort terribly. There were some disturbing popping noises, the beast grunted two or three times, and then she stood before them in her human form. She was thin and her ribs showed plainly. She was not pretty, but neither she was terribly ugly; her long, horsey face was mostly notable for being gaunt. Nor did she show any of the pride of her pack leader, instead, she seemed resigned to her fate.

"Will you spare me then, my lord angel?" Her voice was hoarse, and she did not meet Khasar's eyes.

"To what end? Your very existence is a mockery of the Lord Almighty's Creation!"

"And so my life is forfeit?"

"Every life on this cursed planet is forfeit," Khasar growled. Even so, he slid his blade back into his scabbard; the flames hissed as they were quenched for the time being. "It does not fall to me, however, to claim it at this time. At least not if you can tell me where can I find the prince of the local Raustravian coterie.

The werewolf's shadowed eyes sparked momentarily when she realized that Khasar was not after more of her unholy kind, but of their hated rivals instead. "Oh, yes, my lord angel, I can tell you that. And gladly too. He is no prince, though. His name is Vashya. Lord Vashya."

CHAPTER 25

MISPLACED TRUST

IT FEEDS IT GROWS
IT CLOUDS ALL THAT YOU WILL KNOW
DECEIT DECEIVE
DECIDE JUST WHAT YOU BELIEVE
— Metallica, (“The God That Failed”)

It was another hour before they reached an ugly little neighborhood consisting of street after street of dilapidated rowhouses. It seemed like a strange place for a vampire lord to live, and Holli was feeling vaguely disappointed that it hadn't led them to an abandoned Gothic castle out on a lonely moor. She and Khasar were standing in the front entryway while the dull-eyed monster that had answered the door went to find Lord Vashya; they'd left Derek, after cleaning his wounds and bandaging them, back at the hotel. He'd wanted to come with them, but Khasar wouldn't hear of it after seeing how deep the three slashes across his chest were. The Children of the Twice-Fallen limited their depredations, but even so, no human who stumbled upon a vampire lord's lair was permitted to live. Vashya would never dare to attack a human guarded by two angels, Divine or Fallen, but since Khasar was looking for cooperation, he thought it best not to rub the abomination's nose in his impotence.

And thinking of noses, this place had an ungodly stink to it. There was a noxious air of death and decay emanating from it; even her human senses were quite aware of the terrible wrongness that filled the house. She was surprised that the neighbors hadn't complained. Of course, that was assuming there were any neighbors, that they hadn't already been eaten or something.

“Why was she so happy to tell us where this guy is?”

Khasar forced their captive to lead the way before them, even though he had little doubt she was telling the truth. Only when he sensed the supernatural air about the shabby brick residence down the block, he allowed her to depart. She didn't thank him or even speak at all, she only glanced fearfully once at Holli before running down the street and disappearing into the shadows of the streetlights.

"Vampires and werewolves don't get along any better than we do with the Fallen. Actually, that's wrong. We have the Law to regulate our dealings, so things tend to be somewhat more civilized for all that we are at war."

"They are?"

Khasar glanced at her and raised an eyebrow. "Well, if you think about it, there has to be a certain amount of restraint when a Tempter and a Guardian are going to be in relatively close quarters for a long period of time, particularly when it's a zero-sum game."

"A what?"

"Zero-sum. When a soul is at stake, there's only one winner. When you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, Aliel won. Your Tempter lost, and knowing how the Fallen operate, she will probably be very sorry about it for a long, long time."

"I really like Aliel, but I wonder what it would be like to meet, you know, the other one. I mean, I'm kind of torn. Here's she's trying to destroy me on the one hand, but on the other hand, I don't see how you could be around for someone practically all their life, know them as well as you'd have to, and still hate them enough to try to destroy them forever."

"Misery loves company." Holli heard the sound of someone coming down the stairs, but Khasar ignored it. "It depends on the individual, of course. The individual demon. Some of the more foolish and short-sighted become quite attached to their charges and see themselves as sharing an eternal destiny, if a doomed one. It's a twisted form of love, I suppose. Others are simply full of rage and seek to destroy everything they can. Most, in my experience, are largely indifferent and slack off as much as they can."

As he pronounced the last word, he turned slowly to face the tall, dark-faced vampire, who was waiting silently for him to acknowledge its presence.

"Are you indifferent, Vashya? It is Vashya, is it not?"

The vampire lord inclined his head, reserved and formal in the face of the angel's obvious contempt. His darkly handsome face was blank, but his inner fire, Holli noticed, was much stronger than the werewolf they'd captured, even stronger, perhaps, than the two pack leaders. He also had strangely long-lashed eyes that made him look almost feminine. She would kill for lashes like that, Holli thought, as the vampire spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"I fear you have the advantage of me, my lord angel. I am indifferent to many things, though not, I will admit, my continued existence."

"I rejoice to hear it. And I imagine that in the interest of that continuance, it should not be a problem for you to give me that which was placed under your protection."

"I regret to say, my lord angel, that is not possible."

Khasar seemed to swell, the air around him flickered and crackled with energy, and for a moment, the room seemed to fill with the roaring of a thousand angry lions. The vampire blinked, once, then everything was as it had been before. "I will not ask you again, Lord Vashya. I commend you for your obedience, but I assure you, if you do not turn that which I seek over to me at once, it will not go well with you."

"It gives me no pleasure to insist that I can be of no help to you, my lord angel," the vampire answered smoothly. His self-control was remarkable, as Holli definitely had the notion that Khasar would be pleased to wipe out this nest of abomination given the smallest excuse. "Oberon is not here."

Khasar stiffened at the open mention of the fallen angel-king's name, but his voice remained calm. "I find that very difficult to believe. I was informed by a very reliable and trustworthy source that he would certainly be found here."

The vampire bowed again. "I am humbly at my lord angel's service, but I cannot provide that which does not exist. I do not say that the one you seek was never here. I hid him from the Mad One, at great risk to me and my clan, exactly as I was commanded by the angel."

"He was here but he isn't now? Where is he?"

"I do not know."

"Why isn't he here? Did you permit him to leave?"

"Because, my lord angel, the angel who first brought him to me in the forest came here to claim him two nights ago."

Khasar did not reply immediately, and Holli glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. It barely showed, but she knew him well enough to see that he was rocked to the very core of his spirit. His face was uncharacteristically frozen, and she could almost see him frantically racking his mind for a face-saving answer.

"I see. Well, if our friend saw the need to precede us, then I see no reason why we should further trouble you, Vashya. I suggest, however, that you would be wise to abandon these premises at the first opportunity. I would further recommend that you forget the entire proceedings."

"The thought had occurred to me, my lord angel. I am grateful for your forbearance."

Khasar smiled wryly. "Unlike you, vampire, we serve a God of mercy. Your fate is not in my hands. Tonight." Taking Holli by the arm, he turned about and led her from the stinking house of the undead. She was glad to go, though she was frightened by the queer look on Khasar's face. Was he angry? Was he worried? Surely it wasn't possible that he was frightened!

They took to the night skies in silence. Khasar flew quickly, his wings beat the air as if he was taking out his frustration on it, and Holli was hard-pressed to keep up with him.

"What's the matter," she asked him as they soared over the Thames. She'd thought they'd head back to the hotel to check in on Derek, but they'd flown right past the awful little hotel and Khasar didn't seem to be heading anywhere in particular.

"I have to make a decision," he told her. "I need to think, and I don't have much time to do it."

He pulled his wings into his body and dropped like a stone towards the river below. At the last moment, he spread his wings and arced smoothly out of the fall, then flashed over the glassy surface of the water like a huge predatory bird. Then, without warning, he raised one wing and curved

towards the western bank. In one graceful, impossible motion, he somersaulted forward, twisted, and landed on a wooden bench with one leg crossed over another.

Holli wasn't sure if she was supposed to applaud or imitate him, but in any case, she did her best to land reasonably close without face-planting on the sidewalk and walked over to him. The ground rushed towards her alarmingly fast, but she managed to make an ungainly running landing that involved two hops, a near collision with a garbage can and one half-twisted ankle.

"What was that all about?" she asked him, more than a little bit irritated now.

"Do you remember when we first met? When the Crystal Tower fell? That was so long ago, thousands and thousands of years, and I'd almost completely forgotten about Rahab until they told me that I was to work this mission with you."

Holli remembered. For her, it had only been a matter of months, not millennia, and in any case, she was hardly likely to forget. Until prom night, seeing the rabid, angry warriors shouting and waving their shining swords as they swarmed into the beautiful tower of glass was the worst thing she'd ever seen. Even worse, of course, had been hearing their mercifully brief screams as the tower exploded into millions of deadly, razor-sharp shards.

"I remember you breaking through the wall. And the demons circling in the air, there were so many of them. It was like a black fog."

"Do you know what I remember most?"

Holli shook her head. Khasar looked away, towards something upriver.

"I remember the Lady's face when she realized what she had done. She'd been betrayed by her son, by the fruit of her sin, she knew that the Tower was going to fall and there was nothing she could do about it. The worst thing was, she knew the blame was hers alone, it had come about through her sin. I was there, Holli, I was there when she cried out until her voice was seared into silence, when she stormed Heaven with her futile prayers, begging that the evil would fall on her alone, and not her people. But you know what happened."

She nodded. They had been faithful to the end. To the bitter end. She remembered. She'd barely known the Lady of the Tower, but she'd never forgotten the guilt that lay behind those lovely lavender eyes. What she didn't understand now was why Khasar was talking about her.

"What does any of this have to do with this guy we're looking for?"

Khasar met her eyes. In them, there was guilt and shame. "Because I am beginning to suspect that I have failed, and there will be a great many innocent people who will suffer for it. I have been a fool, Holli, trusting where I should not have and I very much fear that we have been betrayed."

"You thought you could trust who?" Derek's voice rose high in disbelief as he confronted the sheepish archon. Khasar and Holli had flown back to the hotel following his confession to her, and now Khasar was trying to explain the situation to the third member of what appeared to be rapidly becoming a totally dysfunctional team. If it could even be called that. "Are you kidding me?"

"He seemed really sincere," Khasar protested, but his heart wasn't really in it.

"Let me get this straight. Someone you know beyond any shadow of a doubt is bad guy comes to you and tells you that after, what, thousands of years, he feels really bad about everything and wants to clean up his act? And you buy this?"

"I didn't even know angels could switch sides," Holli said, feeling as if she had no idea what was going on again. Neither Derek nor Khasar paid her any attention.

"It wasn't just me, I wasn't the only one who spoke with him. He was truly repentant. It happens, not often, but it happens. And Prince Uriel isn't easily fooled."

"You've been fighting this war for practically forever, right? A long time anyhow. That dude in the red coat back in Minneapolis, your boss, he tells me that you guys are always working to try to trick the Fallen, right? Can you honestly tell me that they've never played you?"

Khasar mulled it over. "Well, I suppose, there was this one time -"

"I don't care!" Derek interrupted, waving his hands in wild annoyance. "The point is, yeah, it's possible. It's been done before! That's all that matters, right?"

"I still have no clue what's going on," Holli said. "Can you try telling us what happened, like, from the beginning?"

"I don't want to have to do this twice," Khasar replied. He shook his head, looking worried, and began to fade away. He was walking through the shadow, Holli realized, but her vision only penetrated to *quintus* and the archon was going deeper than that.

"Where did he go?" Derek asked.

"I'm not sure... I think maybe he's going to get someone."

Derek nodded. He was back in his normal form now and his hair was starting to grow out a little. They hadn't been out much, but even the little bit of sunlight had given his face a little bit of color. A random feeling of pity for him floated through her mind; it must have been terrible to face those beasts knowing that he was almost helpless against them. She firmly squelched the notion. He had far worse than a moment's fear and a few scratches coming. Still, it didn't hurt to be polite.

"How's your chest."

"I'll be all right. So, is it cool, this angel business? That was, like, amazing, what you did with that flaming chain thing. You saved my life."

She didn't know quite how to respond. She hadn't exactly meant to, but it wasn't like she could just sit there and watch a monster attack somebody either. Not even him. "Forget it."

"Yeah, well, thanks anyhow." He stared at her for a moment, looking as if he wanted to say something, then returned to his RPG book. A moment later he dropped it, startled by the loud cracking sound that tore through the room like thunder. There was a strange flash, and with her angelic vision, Holli saw two figures step out of what looked like a tear in the very air of the room. There was another crack, not quite as loud this time, and everything was back to normal, except that Khasar was back, accompanied by a tall angel with bright red wings. It was the captain, she realized, and he did not look happy.

"What is so important that you needed to drag me down here?" he snapped irritably. "We have eighty-six simultaneous ops running, and exactly none of them can be properly monitored from here."

"We were ambushed by thirteen Children of the Twice-Fallen who knew we were coming. They were expecting angels or an archangel, not an archon. When we got to the safehouse, we learned that our bird had flown... with my original contact."

The captain rubbed wearily at his temples. "Please, please don't tell me you've cocked this one up, archon. I told you from the start that I didn't trust that fast-talking renegade. This isn't the first time they've tried to slip in a false recanter. Did anyone else interview him?"

"You said it was my call, sir. I felt that he was sincerely remorseful."

"You felt that way, did you?" The captain's words were all the more sarcastic for its total absence in his tone. "This could be very bad, archon, very bad indeed."

"I am aware of that, sir."

The angel sighed and glanced at Holli and Derek. "How are you, children? I'm sorry to be rude, but this appears to have developed into an emergency."

"Um, fine, sir," Holli replied, a little awed by his presence. She wanted to ask him about the false recanter, but this didn't seem like a very good time.

"Don't worry about us," added Derek.

"Why don't you tell me just how badly this has gone awry, archon," the captain suggested. Khasar nodded dutifully, leaned against the wall, and began to explain:

Ten years ago, while stationed in England as a part of the team monitoring Diavelina's growing demesne, he had made contact with a low-level Fallen who expressed a wish to recant. "He was concerned about likely retribution on the part of his lord, a well-founded fear, in my opinion, so I helped him sneak out of the principality and I passed him along to the angel responsible for clearing recanters and bringing them before the Most High.

"About eighteen months ago, our paths crossed again. I was surprised, but he told me he'd been assigned as a

Guardian to an infant who did not survive past her first birthday. When I learned that Puck had once been a servitor to the former Prince of Albion, I reported this to Prince Uriel, thinking that there was a possibility that he might have some information that might prove useful to us. And, as you know, he certainly did."

"And as I told you then, I had my doubts about him. He was much too slick," said the Captain, who then glanced at Holli and Derek. "I never saw any record to show that he had appeared before the Almighty, nor did I feel that he was truly repentant. Nevertheless, it fell to me to show him where Oberon was bound."

"Wait a minute, the first dude's name was Puck right? And then Oberon, too, like in Midsummer's Night Dream?" asked Derek, incredulous. "Do you mean they're real?"

"Of course they're real, it's the little, what-have-you, poem or whatever, isn't," Khasar confusingly replied. "I know that was the extent of your involvement, captain, but after Prince Uriel decided to that Oberon would have a better chance to resist Diavelina than the Mad One, I was taken off the watch team and ordered to give all reasonable aid to Puck. With the Prince's permission, I contacted Leviathan and arranged for him to help Puck get past Oberon's guardian. I wasn't able to tag along, however, since he insisted on bringing along a servant of Gloriana's, the former Prince of the Southlands."

"The old faery queen," commented the Captain, nodding. "Did Puck know of your involvement with that?"

"I don't believe so, but there's no way to be sure. He understood the need for secrecy, in fact, he insisted that we not reveal anything to Oberon, who would surely have refused our help."

"Perhaps not. That's far from certain, though."

"Under the circumstances, I thought it was best to rely on the judgment of one who had known him well. Some quiet approaches to former powers in the past regime seemed to indicate that his judgment was accurate in this regard. As for stashing Oberon with the Children of the Twice-Fallen, that was my idea. The Mad One would not think to look among them, there was no chance of Oberon building up a force capable of resisting us, nor would anyone suspect our

involvement even if he was discovered there. And Prince Uriel placed Puck under strict orders to conceal his repentance from the other Fallen."

"That was probably a mistake, though it is difficult to fault the logic. I would have done the same. And now you say you were ambushed before learning Oberon had fled?"

"That wasn't the only strange thing. Puck was captured by the Mad One along with Gloriana and her servant, but he was the only one that escaped. The rumor is that the other two were fed to the cursed throne. At this point, I don't know if Puck is still playing our game, the Mad One's game, or if he's truly been loyal to Oberon all along."

The angelic captain nodded. "It's even conceivable that he thinks to establish himself as a player by using us to free Oberon, using Oberon to unseat the Mad One, and then betraying Oberon and taking the throne himself."

Khasar stood up straighter with a surprised look on his face. "That's not likely. He has no following. He commands neither legions nor loyalties. And then, he's aware of the threat from Diavelina, so why would he scheme to take a crown he's doomed to lose?"

"Two more possibilities." The captain held up two fingers. "He's loyal to Diavelina. Unlikely, but possible. Alternatively, he's working with someone who can command the loyalty he cannot, but someone with whom he'd be willing to share power."

The two angels looked at each other for a long moment, and then Khasar slowly nodded. "Titania. Puck has long been enamored of her, but of course, there was no question of his pursuing her in the past. Now, who knows? She could be the one pulling his strings. Otherwise, why destroy Gloriana? Puck had nothing against her and she was no threat to the Mad One. But a restored Oberon might not wish to place faith in a treacherous queen. He might well look elsewhere for a consort he could trust, especially if the principality is riven with those still loyal to the Mad One. It could be Titania behind this."

Derek raised his hand. "Hey, why do you think it's all about power. Maybe he's just got a major jones for this

Titania babe. Maybe the whole thing is his way of trying to win her over."

Holli glanced at him skeptically. "What would you know about it?"

"Nothing." He shrugged. "But hey, I've been in prison. You'd be surprised how many guys are in there because they were trying to make an impression on somebody, one way or another. I'm just saying."

Holli wrinkled her lip and Khasar shook his head. "I've seen plenty of perversions among the Fallen, but I find it improbable that even the most desperate spirit would spend hundreds of years seeking to unseat the same throne three times in order to win Titania's favor."

The angelic captain cleared his throat, and the other three immediately fell silent. His face was stern, but Holli thought that it lacked the severity he'd shown when he'd first arrived. Maybe things weren't quite as bad as Khasar thought.

"I'm disappointed, but not entirely surprised that Puck turned out to be false," said the captain. "But despite your naivete, Khasar, I am not sure this situation is unsalvageable. Unless Puck is in service to the Mad One, which I doubt, his interests may continue to serve the King's Will. Oberon is still free, and the only thing now is to see that the Mad One falls. Your task is no more difficult without Puck than with him. He knows no more than you. Find the sword and take down the Mad One while Puck plays out his game out. Hunting him and Oberon serves no purpose."

The captain rose and his scarlet wings stretched out from behind his shoulders. He inclined his head to Khasar; despite the chagrin that was obvious on his face, the archon bowed deeply in return. "I am very sorry, sir, if I have needlessly disturbed you. I merely did not wish to compound my failure."

"Better safe than sorry, archon. Think nothing of it." The captain lifted his hand, preparing to tear the fabric of space-time again. "Fare you well, children."

Derek glanced at Holli. For once they were in perfect accord. "Wait!" he leaped to his feet. "You can't leave us like this! We're just two stupid humans who don't have a clue what's going on, and Khasar here barely knows what he's

doing! Before, you told us that the fate of Europe hung in the balance, you can't just go off and leave us now when it's all going to Hell!"

The angel paused and looked over at Khasar. Then he sighed and lowered his hand. "Derek, my dear boy, I'm afraid you fail to understand. This entire world is going to Hell. At this very moment, there are eight situations which threaten to engulf the entire planet in plague, starvation, blood and fire. Why do you think I could spare naught but an inexperienced archon for this mission? By our standards, this is only a code yellow, a probable danger, albeit one of merely local proportions."

Holli gasped and Derek sat back on the bed, visibly stunned. "You're saying that a second Holocaust is, like, not a big deal?"

"By no means. I'm merely informing you that it is neither the most-pressing, nor even the eighth-most pressing situation at this moment."

"I don't even want to know what those other ones are, do I," said Derek, half to himself.

"Not if you wish to sleep at night. Now, be brave and persevere, son and daughter of the King. There are many whose lives are depending on you."

"Great, as if I needed to hear that," muttered Derek. Holli couldn't have agreed with him more. There was another pair of disturbingly loud roars, and the angelic captain was gone.

The two teenagers looked at Khasar, and the archon stared right back at them. "Well, so much for help from that angle," he finally said. "Anyone have any ideas about what to do next?"

CHAPTER 26

POINTS TO PONDER

THIS CITY NOW DOTH LIKE A GARMENT WEAR
THE BEAUTY OF THE MORNING: SILENT, BARE,
SHIPS, TOWERS, DOMES, THEATRES, AND TEMPLES LIE
OPEN UNTO THE FIELDS AND TO THE SKY;
ALL BRIGHT AND GLITTERING IN THE SMOKELESS AIR.

— William Wordsworth, *Lines Composed upon Westminster Bridge*

If London was lovely in the sunlight, it was shockingly depressing in the rain. The cold seemed to penetrate down to the bone, magnified by a dampness that prevented you from ever getting completely dry or all-the-way-through warm. It was dirty too; the water sluicing off of the old grey buildings was dark with filth as it pooled near the sewer drains. Derek and Holli trudged along the sidewalk; when Derek's umbrella entangled itself for the fifth time in the umbrella of someone walking the other way, he finally gave it up for a bad cause and folded it down.

"You're going to get a cold," Holli told him.

"Like you care," he snapped back. It was hard to disagree. He had been monstrously unpleasant all morning, although in fairness, she could tell by the careful way he moved that his wounds were bothering him, even though he tried to hide it. Stupid.

Part of his bad humor might simply be jealousy, as fortunately for her, Holli was able to walk shadow out of the weather. Her only presence was a voice and the raindrops fell harmlessly through her. But the grey cloud-shrouded sky was chilling in itself, that and the knowledge that unless they found the magic sword and killed this prince of demons, angelic war would soon be followed by the real thing and millions of people would die again in Europe. Khasar was out

and about trying to dig up information on the sword, while the two of them, being rather handicapped by their humanity, went to have lunch.

"Do you want to try that Indian place?" she pointed to a colorful red sign. "I bet the curry is really good here."

"No, we're in England, we've got to try the fish and chips."

"All right," she sighed. She wasn't that hungry anyhow. Nothing like globs of processed fish hamburger fried in oil and fat. No wonder his complexion was so bad.

The restaurant looked like it wanted to be an imitation of McDonalds, except the food was worse. The seats were made of bright shiny yellow plastic but at least they were clean. The ladies room, on the other hand, was a pit of filth and Holli was glad that she was only there to conceal her move down to the lowest strata and visibility. She might be disguised as an angel, but she still needed to keep her body fed. Hopefully they'd have a salad or at least something that wasn't a zillion calories.

She was in luck, sort of. The salad might have been fresh yesterday, but at least it was edible. She wasn't entirely sure if that was true about the dripping concoction that was soaking through Derek's paper plate. Fortunately, he burned his mouth on the first bite; maybe that was the trick to eating the disgusting glop. She shuddered.

"What?" he demanded.

"Nothing."

There was a long silence.

"Do you think Khasar will find this Puck guy?"

"How would I know? If you ask me, we ought to just be looking for the sword. If Puck needs the sword too, eventually he'll show up wherever the sword is. That would seem to make more sense."

It kind of did, she grudgingly admitted. "Unless he's got it already. But okay, so, how do we even start looking for a sword in a place as big as this."

"I don't know." He bit into the crunchy fish-stuff, more gingerly this time. "But I think it's important to consider one thing."

"What's that?"

She tried not to notice as he wiped his hands on a napkin and dropped the greasy, balled-up paper onto his tray. "Well, haven't you noticed anything strange about, like, this whole world of angels and whatnot?"

"I've noticed a lot of strange things."

"Well, right, but I mean, what's really leaped out at me is the way that we've somehow picked up a lot of this information over time. Like, it kind of leaks out onto us. We being humanity, of course."

"I don't get it. What leaks onto us?"

He shook his head and wiped his nose with his wrist. "Not us, like you and me. I mean us, as in Mankind. The collective us. We have all these stories and myths about things like, whatever, werewolves and stuff. And then, lo and behold, they're kind of true. Not really in the way the stories tell it – I mean the angels think they're about one step down from pond scum – but the basic truth is there. So, I'm thinking, maybe this sword is the same deal, you know?"

"That there's stories about swords that are true? But there aren't any stories about swords!"

Derek snorted and rolled his eyes. "You don't read much, do you, blondie. There's millions of stories about swords. Heck, Saberhagen even wrote a whole series, two series, actually, called the Book of Swords and the Lost Book of Swords. Then there's Glamdring, Anduril, and Narsil, not to mention Beater and Biter, there's Excalibur, there's Elric's sword – what was it called – yeah, Stormbringer."

Derek clearly needed to get out more, Holli thought. Although that would, admittedly, be difficult in prison. "But those are all just made up, aren't they?"

"So are werewolves and vampires, right? At least, that's what I thought until that Khasar decided to dangle me like a doggie treat in front of a whole freaking pack. If I'd actually believed they were real, I don't know if I would have been so, you know, open to the idea."

"Khasar is a good angel," Holli told him. She didn't like the tone in Derek's voice when he mentioned the archon's name. "He saved my life twice. Well, actually, I don't think he did the second time, but he sacrificed himself trying to."

"Yeah, see, that's my problem with him," Derek said as he popped another chunk of fried fish in his mouth. "I mean, I think he's in over his head here. Like you said, he tried to save you, but he didn't. He almost got me munched back there by those werewolves, and from what he was saying to the Captain, he wasn't prepared for what we ran into either."

"So he misjudged the situation, so what?"

"Looks like he misjudged this Puck guy too. He seems to do that a lot."

"Well, he picked you and me, didn't he?"

Derek eyed her dubiously and laughed, a dry, mocking sneer of a laugh. "I think he could've done a lot better than pick me. You think you're up to saving something like half the world?"

Holli looked down. She didn't like to admit it, but Derek was right. Then she shrugged. "Well, at least it's only half the world that's going down. We already know it could be worse."

Derek lifted his plastic cup to her in a salute. "Eight times worse! There's the spirit! I'll say one thing, though. If an idiot angel, a cheerleader and a convicted felon can manage to stop these supernatural psychopaths from murdering millions of innocent people, it'll totally prove there is a God."

"I think I liked it better when they taught us that God was in control of everything. You know, that he was, like, counting the sparrows and whatever."

"Just cause he knows what's up with the sparrows doesn't mean that he's personally knocking them down with lightning bolts, blondie. He'd be a pretty sick, sadistic sort of God if he did." Derek indicated the street. "Take a look around you. Just about everywhere, somebody is starving or stealing or killing somebody. You think God wanted me to shoot your boyfriend? No, he's not running this place, and he hasn't been since he told Adam the deal was his to run the way he wanted. Adam screwed it up, and we've been screwing it up worse and worse ever since. That's what I think, anyhow."

Holli could hear the self-loathing in his voice. For once, she couldn't accept it. "Derek." She met his eyes. "You even didn't shoot Paul. Brien's guilt died with Brien. You've got

enough guilt of your own to deal with. Jesus is the only one who can take it away from anyone else.”

Derek's eyes darkened and he looked out the window. “Brien was a really nice guy. The nicest guy. No one would believe that now, but he was. He wouldn't hurt a fly. He must have been pushed around a thousand times without even defending himself. All his life, he got pushed around and he just took it, again and again and again. But those Fallen devils, man, they knew what they were doing. They channeled all of that hate and rage from twelve freaking years of getting treated like dirt and we did exactly what they wanted us to.” He her squarely in the eyes. “And they used me to talk him into it, so don't tell me that it isn't my fault. And I'm not trying to excuse myself either.”

“I know.”

“Look, I understand that God forgives me for what I did, even if you can't, even if no one else can. And I don't blame you. I wouldn't if I was in your shoes. I can almost, kind of, forgive myself now. But I'll never forgive those demons for using me like that. Never. It's not what they did to me, but what they did to destroy Brien, turning him into something he wasn't. Something that he never was.”

I forgive you, Holli wanted to tell him. She even knew she should. But she couldn't bring herself to say the words. She couldn't. She didn't. She looked at him, still so full of anger, though a different kind of anger now, and she almost began to understand him. Almost. But forgive him? No, that she could not do. Not now. Not ever.

“So, what about the sword?” She tried to move their conversation to safer ground.

“Swords, right. Let's see if we can find one of those Internet cafes. I hear they're pretty big here. We can look up a list of all the legendary swords and see how many of them might happen to be in England. If that doesn't work, we can just head a few blocks that way.”

He pointed. Holli looked in that direction and saw nothing but a big Anglican church. “What's that way?”

“The British Museum. If our sword is anywhere, I'll bet ten pounds that it's in there.”

"It can't be that easy. You're on. Holli reached into her purse for the unfamiliar coins. "What do I owe you for the salad, anyhow?"

"Don't worry about it." Derek grandly waved her off. "I'm not going to be needing this once we're done anyhow."

Holli frowned. "You can change it back, you know."

Derek laughed humorlessly. "Not a lot of shopping in the state pen, blondie. Now, let's see if we can go find a mocha. I've been dying for one for three months."

They found an Internet cafe only two blocks away, in between a parking garage and another Indian fast-food place. It was crowded, but a Macintosh was free, so Holli went to fetch the coffees while Derek paid for an hour on the computer. By the time they'd served up her vanilla frappe and his extra-super-large mocha, he was already lost in a jigsaw puzzle of Google screens. She set the two hot drinks down gingerly on the edge of the little plastic desk and drew up a chair as he copied a long chunk of text from a web site and pasted it into what she assumed was his notes window.

The scraping sound of her moving the chair seemed to pull him out of his geek-zone, and he accepted the mocha from her with both hands as if it was an ancient and fragile religious artifact. "You have no idea... I've dreamed about these."

He closed his eyes and sniffed deeply at the aroma. "I think they have generic Folgers at the prison. You can mix the hot chocolate powder with it, but there's no comparison. I take it back - Khasar can dangle me in front of a dozen werewolf packs every day and it'd be worth it for this one moment. It'd be so worth it!"

Holli stared at him, bemused, as he took a sip from the large paper cup. "You are a seriously weird guy," she said. "And here I thought Christopher was bad." For the first time, she thought it might be possible not to completely hate him.

She looked at the list. There were, it seemed, rather a lot of legendary swords. Mohammed alone had four of them.

"Well, it makes sense, when you think about it," Derek said. "People have only been killing each other with guns for about 200 years, and they've been using swords for more than ten times as long. So, it's only logical for myths to spring up around a lot of them."

She peered at his list. "There's so many! Where do we start?"

"Actually, there's only seven, if we just go ahead and bag everything that's been made up in the last sixty years. I figure that we can consider everything from Tolkien on as modern fiction – if we're wrong, we can always go back and tackle that stuff starting with the British writers."

He laughed. "Although, I suppose Michael Moorcock will think we're either retarded or on drugs if we call him up and ask him, gee, you don't suppose that any of that Elric stuff is real, do you? I mean, even if some spirit was leaking it out through him, how's he supposed to know?"

She nodded impatiently. "You said there were seven? Why seven?"

"Well, we have to trust that our Heavenly CIA knows what they're talking about when they said it's somewhere in England. I mean, if they're wrong, we're hosed anyhow, right? So, here's the five that have direct connections with England: *Excalibur*, obviously, *Aroundight*, which was Launcelot's sword, *Chrysaor*, which belonged to someone named Artegal, *Morglay*, which belonged to Sir Bevis and sounds kind of Scottish, and *Curtana*, which actually belonged to one of the English kings."

"That poor knight!" Holli shook her head.

"Who? Oh, Sir Bevis?" Derek laughed. "I doubt it bothered him much, considering he lived like seven hundred years before MTV. So that's five and there's also these two other swords that aren't English, but kind of jumped out at me. These two."

"Flamberge and Balmung?" Holli read off the screen. "They don't sound very English to me."

"Especially since they were made for guys named Maugis and Siegfried. Those aren't English names either. I have no idea who Maugis was, but Siegfried is the guy from Wagner's Ring cycle. You know what I'm talking about?"

"No clue."

"Kill-the-wabbit, kill-the-wabbit?" Derek sang, not very well.

"Oh, right, that opera thing!"

"Anyhow, it's Germanic mythology, but the interesting thing is that supposedly someone named Wayland made it. Very Stone Temple Pilots, right? Anyhow, I remember reading about John Wayland Smith, he was, like, this Old One, a supernatural figure, almost a god."

"He made swords?"

"Right! But what's interesting is that he's an English smith, making swords for this major German hero as well as what sounds kind of French to me. Flamberg, that's French, don't you think?"

"So, you're thinking maybe he didn't make one of those swords, but was handing out swords that he found?"

Derek shrugged. "I have no idea. I just think we should keep him on the list. For now, anyway. So, we've got five swords and one sword-maker. Excalibur is the biggy, of course, and after that, I think Curtana sounds the most interesting, since it was not only the sword of the kings, but specifically a king named Edward the Confessor, who's actually a saint. I'm guessing we can blow off the Scottish one, since Scotland wouldn't have been part of the deal back when Oberon was ruling Albion."

Holli nodded. "You're thinking maybe King Edward had something to do with the Fallen, and an angel gave him the sword?"

"I don't know. The problem is that I don't remember hearing anything about Edward the Confessor ever doing anything legendary. We know why Arthur needed Excalibur, since he was turning back the barbarians and all. Launcelot, same deal. I don't know anything about the other three. But, at least I know where to look. The funny thing is, I could have done all this from the prison library. I don't know why Khasar needed to get me out."

Holli smiled, and it wasn't an entirely nice smile. "I guess he just couldn't think of anyone who would make better werewolf bait."

CHAPTER 27

A DAGGER SHEATHED

THE WAVES WERE DEAD; THE TIDES WERE IN THEIR GRAVE,
THE MOON, THEIR MISTRESS, HAD EXPIR'D BEFORE;
THE WINDS WERE WITHER'D IN THE STAGNANT AIR,
AND THE CLOUDS PERISH'D; DARKNESS HAD NO NEED
OF AID FROM THEM--SHE WAS THE UNIVERSE.

—Lord Byron, *Darkness*

Three weeks later, they were driving up the A23 from Brighton in the MGB that Holli had insisted they rent. Khasar had put up a brief resistance, arguing in favor of a more anonymous Vauxhall, but the combination of Holli's pleading and the fortuitous appearance of some morning sunshine had worn him down. Now he was sitting on top of the convertible's stowed roof, basking in the all-too-rare English sun and letting his long, leonine locks dance wildly in the wind. He was invisible to mortal eyes, of course, and he'd told Holli to stay in *sextus* as well, as they drove north from Tintagel Castle, back towards London.

"You know what's the one thing that blows about these old cars," said Derek, shouting to be heard over the onrushing wind. He was delighted to be back looking normal again, as Khasar had decided no one was looking for him now. "No cruise control! My right leg is cramping like crazy!"

"So, let me drive," Holli shouted back. "Come on, Khasar, please?"

The archon shook his head and pointed to the stick shift. "You can drive if you tell me what that's for."

"It's the automatic."

"No dice, blondie," Derek laughed. "Let's just stop for some petrol, and I'll shake it off."

Khasar pointed to the fuel gauge, though only Holli could see him. "We've still got half a tank. Suck it up, old chap. Petrol, indeed!"

Holli laughed as Derek muttered something under his breath and twisted in his seat, trying to stretch out his leg. "We've tried Glastonbury, Cadbury, West Camel, and we've spent the last ten days checking out every tiny little village in Cornwall. Why didn't we just stop there before, before we went down to the south?"

"Because I was in a hurry to get to Glastonbury. That's where all the legends and histories pointed. Since he was buried there, I really thought we'd at least be able to find some solid clues about the sword there."

Holli sighed. Glastonbury had been a huge disappointment. Not only was there not a single Divine angel there who'd been present during Arthurian times, but it had become a significant Fallen stronghold, so much so that they'd barely escaped with their cover intact. Even worse, at some point in the past fifteen hundred years, all of the trees in the area had been cut down, so they'd wasted a day wandering through the wooded swamps and quizzing dryads before their activity had attracted attention of the local Fallen prince, who sent a small force to chase them out.

"I still don't see why we didn't just return this and take the train. It makes me nervous, driving on the wrong side of the road like this."

"Did you see any train stations at most of the places we stopped?" Khasar asked. She frowned. He had a point there. "There you go, then."

Holli fumbled through the sheaf of papers that Derek had printed out. They'd spent hours at the Internet cafe, then, when Khasar had rejoined them after a fruitless quest in search of Puck's possible whereabouts, spent the next six days rummaging through the British Library. During a few much-needed breaks, Khasar had also taken them to see Big Ben, the Tower of London and Buckingham Palace, so Holli took comfort in the thought that even if they failed and England was swept away by a wave of Fallen-inspired devastation, at least she could say that the trip hadn't been a complete waste.

But almost a month had passed now, and they were fast running out of time.

As if to remind himself of the seriousness of their quest, Khasar had ordered Derek to stop by seashore, near Brighton. There he transformed into the winged lion that Holli had first known and carried Derek far out over the Channel, while Holli, not entirely comfortable about not having any land underneath her as she flew, accompanied them. The waters were grey and rough, but far more worrisome was the dark and teeming shadows that were massing on the continental side. They stayed far out to sea, wary of the great, four-winged demons that were patrolling the European coast.

"Diavelina's army," Khasar explained unnecessarily.

They were too far off to see exactly what made up her forces, much less who was leading them, but it was clear that Moloch's daughter was not planning a minor, token effort. To Holli's unschooled eyes, it looked as if she was planning to sweep over the whole world. The army of the demon princess looked like a huge black tumor, swelling and boiling, just waiting to burst and vomit forth its evil.

"They don't need boats, either," said Derek, in awe of the fearsome army. "It's almost like watching a herd of locusts on Discovery, just buzzing and hopping and waiting for the first one to leap up into the air and set them all off."

"They will devour all before them," agreed Khasar.

"Can anything stop them?"

"Michael could defeat them with the Host, of course, but we never interfere directly in battles between the Fallen. If we did, we would do nothing else, so great is the hatred amongst them. The world is still in darkness, not until the Son of Man returns will it be entirely freed of its bonds and the shadows shattered once and for all."

"But what about Oberon? What can he do? Why is he so important?"

"He can rally the spirits of old Albion to fight for him. The Mad One will fight alone, except for his slaves and hangers-on. There are few among the Fallen who would lift a finger to defend him. Most will accept Diavelina, however grudgingly, for they no longer care much who holds their chains."

"But can Oberon even win? Against that?" The dark mass seemed to seethe with barely repressed rage mixed with hunger. It was a sheer and unrepentant evil the likes of which she had never seen, not even on Rahab.

The golden muzzle turned towards her, the blue eyes uncharacteristically dark. "I don't know," the archon admitted. "I hope so."

They had flown back towards the English coast in somber silence, all three of them lost in thought and sobered by what they had seen.

But that was many miles, or rather, kilometers, behind them now. The sun was bright, the top was down, the radio was cranked, and in the circumstances, it was inevitable that the sense of doom soon passed. Sevesham was only another 35 minutes away, although Derek nearly ended the quest for the sword, at least for the two mortals participants, when, after exiting the motorway, he turned directly into the grill of an oncoming BMW. Fortunately, the startled driver had the wit to swerve wide; his outraged honk was drowned out by Khasar's yelling at Derek to be more careful. Holli had to fly to catch up with them; she'd shifted without thinking about it and literally jumped out of her seat. It was a good thing she'd gone *quintus* and so was invisible, otherwise the poor BMW driver might have had a heart attack.

They ate lunch at a pub which claimed to be more than three hundred years old. Holli believed it too, as neither the decor nor the menu appeared to have changed in all that time. The elderly waitress merely blinked incomprehendingly at her request for a salad, and she was forced to make do with a roast beef sandwich like the others. Khasar, as was his habit now, assumed mortal form in order to join them openly.

Fallen were thin on the ground, which surprised Holli until Khasar pointed out that demons, like mortals, were drawn to the alluring lights of London just forty miles to the south. Only the most conscientious Tempters hung around here more than they needed to, and while the usual horde of petty evils were infesting the village, spreading disease, malice and the usual unpleasantries, they were of next to no concern to a guardian, much less an archon.

They had no sooner begun to walk in the crumbling stone entrance when an angel appeared in front of them, pointing his sword at Khasar.

"We are not so far gone that you may think to tread here, demon."

"I beg your pardon?" said Khasar, astonished and clearly having forgotten that he was wearing his brutal tempter's Aspect. "Oh, yes, of course! Do forgive me. Like yourself, faithful servant, I am in service to the Most High God, albeit in disguise for the nonce."

For a moment, the horned image was replaced by that of a noble, lion-headed angel. The monastery's guard put up his sword and bowed. "I must ask your pardon in return, my lord Archon, if I have given offense."

"None at all, to be sure. The mistake was mine."

"What's going on?" whispered Derek.

"Khasar forgot to turn off the bad guy look."

"Figures," Derek shook his head, disgusted.

Following Khasar's revelation, they were received in friendly, if puzzled, manner by the remaining Divine who guarded the village's lone stronghold, an ancient monastery that was mostly abandoned. Derek was left to cool his heels in a chilly, stone-floored room where the sole splash of color was a small television displaying Sky News. His displeasure at being left behind was assuaged somewhat by discovery that the monks had 150 stations of digital satellite. They left him with the remote, flipping rapidly through MTV videos and what seemed like an endless supply of soccer games.

Jami would dig it here, thought Holli with a momentary pang of homesickness. This was the longest she'd ever been away from her twin and she missed her, although she doggedly refused to let herself think about her family, and especially her father. Only when she prayed for him, once in the morning, once again at night, did she allow herself to think about what they were all going through now. She wondered if they missed her; was it really possible for the angels to convince them that something had been planned for months in advance when none of them had known anything about it until she was already gone?

"Greetings, Archon," said the weedy-looking archangel who received them in what must have been the meeting hall. He was thin, almost gaunt, and was attended by seven angels who didn't look much healthier than their lord. "This is a most unusual pleasure. What brings you to this embattled outpost?"

"Embattled?" Khasar spread his hands. "I see no signs of war here. I was remarking to... ah, my companion here, that is to say, the angel Holliel, that the Fallen appear to have left this town largely alone. Surely that is a compliment to your steadfastness here."

The angel coughed. It was a disturbing, hacking cough that sounded as if it was ripping apart his insides. "We are but the remnant, Khasar. The battle for England's soul has been lost. For one hundred years we fought long and hard, but the evil tide was too much this time. There was no Arthur, no Alfred, not even a Canute. Though it shames me to say it, there was nothing for it but to retreat behind these walls and hope for the best. Mostly, the local Fallen ignore us, for even when we sally forth, the indifference of these mortals denies us succor. An army travels on its belly, archon, and there is no faith here on which to feed."

"You're not saying that this is all you have here?" Khasar was aghast. "Six angels to defend a stronghold?"

"There are two others, but aye, there are only eight who remain. And to think we have come to this pass in a land that once shone amongst the darkness of the nations like a torch in the night, the nation that brought the Living Word to every corner of the globe. I have heard the rumors. Soon, Diavelina will stretch forth her hand and this land shall fall into darkness until the King comes back. But we shall stay true until the end, never fear. We may be resigned to our fate, but we do not despair."

Diavelina hasn't won yet, Holly wanted to say. It was hard to even look at the angel, he was so terribly sad! She looked at Khasar, but the archon shook his head. Their mission was too important to share it with a few downtrodden angels, especially if the only purpose was to cheer them up.

"I rejoice to hear it." Holli couldn't tell if Khasar was being sarcastic or not. "As for us, our purpose is simple enough. We seek word of the sword Excalibur."

"That blessed weapon once borne by Arthurus?"

"The very same," answered Khasar, glancing significantly at Holli. "We have traveled to Glastonbury and across Devon and Cornwall, but the Fallen princes are not exactly forthcoming and it seems that most of the spirits of the land are either too young or have lost their memories."

The gaunt archangel grimaced. "Or they have been drawn into the web of the Fallen. Also, I must tell you that there was a terrible harrowing here among the Fallen when the Mad One first came into these Isles, and the last century has seen a great exodus among our kind, to say nothing of those who were struck down by the legions. However, I imagine I can help you put an end to your search, as I can tell you precisely where you will find this famous sword, Excalibur, or Caliburn, as it is more properly named."

"You can?" exclaimed Holli.

"To be sure. I was there when Arthurus fell. For you see, I was his Guardian. Oh, it was a dark day indeed that he fell to the traitor's sword. A veritable spawn of the Deceiver himself, that Mordred. The place is not far from here, it is but an afternoon's walk, if you are so minded."

"I'm afraid not," Khasar said. "Our quest for the sword is rather urgent."

"So, you were a guardian angel?" Holli couldn't help asking.

"Much like yourself, as a matter of fact." The archangel smiled at her, then sighed. "You must not think that I was always as you see me now. Like these rocks, I have been worn down by the weight of time. Arthurus, his star did not burn long, but it burned brightly indeed!"

He glanced at the archon. "We fought many battles in those days, my lord. The Fallen were not so sly, nor circumspect. Blade to black-fire blade we met them, and we turned them back, again and again. That last army, the traitor's, was accompanied by two legions and led by Lord Heleroth, one of Prince Azarel's captains. I crossed swords

with Heleroth myself; he struck me down, but not before I ran my blade through his shoulder."

The archangel's voice trailed off and he stared into the distance, his eyes looking past them towards a centuries-old battle that only he could see. Then he blinked, and cleared his throat.

"In any event, it was for naught. Though I failed, Prince Michael nevertheless saw fit to promote me and gave me charge of this place. And so you find me now. Are you sure you don't wish to see the battlefield?"

"Very sure," Khasar said. "But you said you know where the sword is?"

The archangel nodded sadly. "Well, never mind. I understand completely. If you would like, I will take you to Lady Nimue's lake myself. I fear the sword's keeper may have grown somewhat feral after all this time; Nimue is long gone and I must admit, I have been somewhat remiss in maintaining our old acquaintance. I do not know if I have visited him even once this century. He is a fearsome creature, but his spirit is pure. If he knows me, there should be no problem at all."

And if he doesn't? Holli wanted to ask. She glanced at Khasar. The archon was pretending to look pleased, but something about his expression suggested that he was thinking exactly the same thing.

CHAPTER 28

THE LADY'S LOOKING GLASS

ARTHUR, TURNING TO HIS KNIGHTS, FOUGHT EVER IN THE FOREMOST PRESS UNTIL HIS HORSE WAS SLAIN BEFORE HIM. AT THAT, KING LOT RODE FURIOUSLY AT HIM AND SMOTE HIM DOWN; BUT RISING STRAIGHTAWAY, AND BEING SET AGAIN ON HORSEBACK, HE DREW HIS SWORD EXCALIBUR THAT HE HAD GAINED BY MERLIN FROM THE LADY OF THE LAKE, WHICH, SHINING BRIGHTLY AS THE LIGHT OF THIRTY TORCHES, DAZZLED THE EYES OF HIS ENEMIES.

— Sir James Knowles, *King Arthur and His Knights*

If the lord archangel of Sevesham monastery was surprised to know that Derek, a mortal, was involved with their quest, he was too polite to show it. He did not blink an eye as Khasar switched back to his tempter's guise, and he refused Holli's offer of the passenger seat in the MGB, preferring instead to fly high above the car. Khasar accompanied him, providing them with air cover of sorts.

"So, check this out," she told Derek as she filled him in on the particulars of the meeting. "He was actually King Arthur's guardian angel!"

"Really? That's so cool. Did you ask him what Arthur was like, or anything?"

"I didn't dare! I was mostly trying to keep my mouth shut, I didn't want anyone to figure out that I'm not really an angel."

Derek nodded approvingly. "That's smart. It's too bad, though. Maybe we can get him to tell us some stories tonight. Man, think how cool that would be, to know what really happened at Mount Badon and stuff?"

"Where?" Holli looked at him blankly, not that he could see her.

"You don't read anything except Cosmo, do you."

"That is so not true!" she protested vehemently. "I even subscribe to InStyle!"

"Oh, sorry, my mistake."

He was such a jerk. Holli stuck out her tongue at him. Hey, if you were invisible, might as well take advantage of it. She looked up at the angels flying overhead and started. The archangel was looking down at her, and pointing to the right.

"Hey, at the next turn, take a right."

"Right it is."

They made a few more turns, and after about twenty more minutes of driving, Derek parked the MGB on the gravel shoulder in what appeared to be the complete middle of nowhere.

"How can we only be an hour or so from London," he marveled. "There's like, nothing here."

"There's some sheep over there." Holli pointed to a flock that was grazing in a valley below them, forgetting he couldn't see her. "And that must be the lake!"

"And the Lady of the Lake, her arm clad in shimmering samite, held aloft Excalibur!" Derek intoned in a solemn voice.

"What's that?"

"That is why I am your king – oh, never mind. You're hopeless."

"You're so one to talk."

They both fell silent as the two angels alighted in front of them. "Behold, Nimue's Mirror," said the lord archangel. He seemed to be in a particularly good mood, probably, Holli thought, since he was getting out of the embattled monastery for once. It suddenly occurred to her that they must be his first visitors in a long, long time. His first visitors who weren't trying to stick a flaming sword through him, anyhow.

"It's lovely," she said, hoping she sounded suitably impressed.

"It's also much deeper than it looks. Are you going to leave your mortal here to enjoy the view, or is his presence vital to your purpose? He certainly doesn't look like the one destined to take up and wield Caliburn again. But then, I suppose appearances can be deceiving. And he is young. Still, what a privilege to witness this moment!"

Oh dear. Holli realized that the poor archangel was under the impression that Derek was, like, Arthur's long-lost heir or something, destined to take up the sword and free England again. "Are there any prophecies, or whatever, about Excalibur? I mean, Caliburn?"

"Well, not as such, no, although there are certainly many about Arthur himself. The once and future king, that sort of thing, don't you know? They primarily suggest that he shall rise again and free Britain from the pagans, and there can be no doubt that Britain is much in need of saving." He peered uncertainly at Derek. "I must confess, I would not have expected its rightful bearer to come from the Colonies, though."

Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy. Holli looked at Khasar, who shrugged helplessly. Well, the poor dear would find out soon enough. And they were trying to save Britain, kind of, even if it wasn't in exactly the manner that the archangel was probably thinking.

It did not take them long to make their way down the hillside. There was no path, but the knee-high grass offered little resistance to their progress. Once Holli slipped, and only averted a clumsy fall by using her wings. She was really getting rather good with them, she thought proudly. After a five-minutes walk across the valley floor, they reached the sandy shores of the peaceful lake. Nimue's Mirror was, as its name suggested, as still as glass; not even a hint of a breeze disturbed the calm blue waters.

"So, the sword is underwater?" Holli asked. "And will this keeper just let us have it? And what do you mean by keeper, anyway?"

"I don't know if he will or not. As for the keeper, he is a child of God, like the rest of us."

Holli would have liked to get a more informative answer out of the archangel, but Khasar seemed unconcerned and was already wading into the water. "Wait, what about Derek? He can't breathe underwater!" Actually, Holli wasn't entirely sure that she could – no, that was stupid. Just walk shadow, doorknob, the water isn't really there.

"He only has to hold his breath and swim to the bottom. You'll see. It's perfectly safe."

All right then. "You have to hold your breath and swim down as deep as you can go. According to what the archangel is telling us, there's some kind of air pocket or something so you'll be able to breathe okay."

"Swim down to what?"

"I have no idea. Something that looks like it's big enough to hold a sword, I guess."

"Actually, there can't be too much on the bottom of the lake anyhow," Derek said. He stripped down to his underwear unselfconsciously, and she looked away. "If it was hard to find, they would have said something, I suppose. Hey, I can swim all right, but if I get stuck, pull me up fast, will you?"

"Yeah, sure," Holli said quickly. He didn't seriously think she'd leave him to drown, did he? Then, after a moment's thought, she realized that a few weeks ago, she just might have. Not intentionally, of course. "Don't worry about it. Oh, and there's, like, some kind of keeper for the sword or something, but the archangel says he knows it, so that shouldn't be a problem."

Derek froze as he stepped into the lake and turned towards the sound of her voice. "Not exactly a jacuzzi here. Oh well. Keeper of the sword? What kind of keeper?"

"He didn't say. A child of God."

"Oh, well, it can't be that bad then, I suppose. Let's do it – holy mother church, it's cold!" he shouted as the water reached past his waist. Bracing himself, he leaped into the air and plunged into the water with an audible splash. Holli, safely immaterial, dove in behind him and followed his long white figure as he quickly stroked his way down towards the lake bottom. Far ahead, down through the murk, she could see Khasar and the archangel standing in front of an arch of some kind.

But then Derek turned around and started swimming back up to the surface. She quickly joined him there as he tread water. "Did you see it?"

"See what? I didn't see anything, except a couple of fish. Man, the cold kind of took my breath away. It's not so bad now, though."

"You didn't see kind of an arch thing?"

"An arch?"

"Yeah, it was a grey stone thing."

Holli was puzzled by the blank look on his face. Then a thought struck her. "Hang on a second, stay there." She slipped into *septus*, forgetting that she hadn't bothered to strip down. She panicked for a second at the weight of her saturated robes dragging her down below the surface, then laughed at herself and relaxed as she quickly returned to *quintus* and the drowning weight disappeared.

Then she blinked at the sight of the reappeared arch. Hmm, well, that would be the problem, wouldn't it. No wonder Derek hadn't seen it; it wasn't meant to be seen by mortal eyes. Or material eyes, anyhow. She switched back to *septus* to be sure, and the arch disappeared. Kicking hard against the weight of her sodden robes, she surfaced and blew the water out her nose.

"What happened to you?"

"You can't see it when you're human. I mean, you won't be able to see it. I'll stay visible and lead you to it, all right?" She frowned. He was looking away from her. "What's the matter."

"Um, the white... it's kind of see-through when it's wet."

Oh! She covered herself reflexively, then laughed with embarrassment as she went into *tertius*. Miraculously dry and weightless again, but visible to mortals this time, she beckoned at Derek to follow her, then flew down through the water as if it was not there, which, for her, it wasn't.

The bottom was about fifty feet down and Holli wondered if perhaps she should just grab him and drag him down. But he flipped over and smoothly kicked his way down towards the stone arch that stood at the front of the large underwater edifice. It reminded her a little of the castles you see in aquariums, although she hoped to never see a crab big enough to make its home in a structure this size. She stopped when she reached Khasar and the archangel, who were standing on either side of the arch, but Derek, with a good head of steam going, swam right past them all and into the very center of the arch.

Holli blinked. One moment, Derek was there, a long white blur. The next, he was gone! Vanished! She glanced worriedly at the archangel.

"Where'd he go?"

"He's perfectly safe, I'm sure." The archangel was unconcerned. "What were you expecting, an underground city? Go on, go on.

Khasar was the first to step through the arch, followed a moment later by Holli and the archangel of the abbey. Holli clapped her hands with delight. Why, they weren't on the bottom of a lake at all! They were standing in a narrow chamber with a high, domed ceiling and walls of dark green marble. Rich, brightly colored tapestries decorated the walls, woven with dashing scenes of lords and ladies dancing, feasting, hunting and generally looking like they were having a grand old time. She was so distracted by the unexpectedly lovely room that she barely noticed the regal woman before whom Derek was standing in nothing more than a pair of navy blue boxers.

She was strikingly beautiful, even seated as she was at a loom, from which descended a gorgeous purple cloth. Her skin was white as the chalky cliffs that they'd driven past only ten days ago, and Holli envied the artful way two strands of raven black hair framed either side of her porcelain-perfect face. But her eyes widened with amazement as she looked past Holli, even as she finished saying something to Derek.

"...of course you may not have the sword. Lionel? By all the bones of all the saints, Lionel, that can't possibly be you! My dear, what have they done to you!"

Holli and Derek both turned around and were surprised to see their guide, the lord archangel, blush a little before hiding behind a courtly, one-legged bow.

"My Lady Nimue, yours is a beauty for the ages. Would that the cruel ravages of Time had treated us all so kindly." A little more composed, the archangel – Lionel, apparently – drew himself to his full height and cleared his throat. "But what, my dear Lady, are you doing at the bottom of this Lake? Surely you are not the Keeper of Excalibur!"

"No, to be sure, that I am not," answered the beautiful woman, or angel, as Holli assumed was more likely the case. Clearly she wasn't anything natural to this world. The Lady's eyes narrowed with suspicion, but she did not press Lionel further on his decrepit appearance. "Perhaps you have not

heard, but Gloriana is no more. When I heard Maomoondagh took her, I thought it best to take flight myself before he decided to add another queen to his collection. I had thought that this place would provide safe refuge, being known to few and forgotten by all, although it appears that I was wrong. The Keeper is no more; I banished him."

"From this place?" asked Lionel.

"From this world." Clearly, the Lady was not one with whom to trifle. Appearances, Holli thought, could be misleading.

"And the sword?" Khasar asked quickly.

"Still here, in the chamber beyond. I have not touched it."

"You need not fear our coming, Lady," Lionel was quick to assure her. "Maomoondagh will receive no word from anyone here, except the end he so richly deserves. Have you heard aught of Morganna?"

"I neither know nor care." She glanced at Derek, sniffed, and returned her attention to Lionel. "Surely this cannot be Arthur's heir! Those tales were naught but fiction, human legend. Hopes and dreams in a dark night. There was never a child. There is no truth to the legends."

"Yeah, I don't know about any heir, all right, but we kind of need Excalibur," Derek broke in, and for the first time, Holli realized that he could see and hear everything that was going on in this unusual place. "We're going to take out this Maomoondagh dude, and I'm told we need this special sword to do it. From what we figured, there's no sword more special than Excalibur."

Nimue's thin, perfectly arched eyebrows raised visibly, and for the first time, she looked at Derek as if he was an individual and not a strange, intrusive water bug. "I do not think Excalibur is that sword for which you quest, young mortal."

"Actually, we have good reason to suspect it may, in fact, be exactly what the purposes require," said Khasar, stepping forward. "Maomoondagh is no angel. The blade which defended the Isles against the sea wolves would surely suffice to strike him down as well."

"That's preposterous! No angel?" The Lady scoffed. "Do you suggest that he is a mere mortal? I can assure you

otherwise. And not even a Child of the Twice-Fallen could dream of wielding such might as him, not for so long! Who are you, who are so wise in the ways of spirits?"

"The archon Khasarotjofee, at your service. Or Khasar, if you please. And Lady, while I cannot tell you exactly what Maomoondagh is, I can tell you with certainty that he is no angel, Divine or Fallen. My word may not convince you, but know that I am of the order of Prince Uriel and I am here at his command."

"I see. A shadowstalker." The beautiful queen, who, Holli realized, had to be the legendary Lady of the Lake, did not seem pleased, but she sat back at her loom nevertheless. "I see, but I do not understand. I can't see how this is possible."

"There is reason to suspect Titania is behind recent events," said Khasar. "It has long been rumored that it was she who engineered Oberon's fall. It is possible that Oberon's escape may have caused her to induce Maomoondagh to eliminate Gloriana."

Nimue's nostrils flared with anger and her alabaster cheeks colored, just a little. "Oberon is free? Your words have a ring of truth to them, archon, for I would put very little past my thrice-cursed sister. Next to Morgana, she is the most given to intrigue. But what interest could these Isles hold for Heaven and her King today? Why should Prince Uriel concern himself over this poor fallen land?"

"Because seeing it fall to Moloch's daughter is in no one's interest, Lady Nimue, least of all Heaven's."

The Lady tapped her fingers on her loom. It was an exquisite piece of machinery; no doubt it had produced the wonderful tapestries which adorned the chamber. She sucked in her cheeks as she contemplated Derek, which made her finely sculpted cheekbones even more striking. He was, thought Holli, admittedly less than heroic in appearance, with his tall scrawny frame exposing entirely too much skin of an unhealthy pallid color that managed to simultaneously be like and almost entirely unlike the snowy purity of the Lady herself.

The Lady frowned, pursed her lovely red mouth, then bowed her head and acceded to their request. "Very well, then you shall have the sword, young man. My time is past,

this matter is not one for me to judge. Go, into the next room, there is no one there to stop you. Lionel, you will stay with me, I pray. I have no interest in these darkling times, let us speak of nobler days, when all was not darkness and shadow on deeper shadow."

CHAPTER 29

SHATTERED DREAMS

THEREFORE, FROM A PRIMARY ICONISM AND THROUGH A PERCEPTUAL PROCESS ALREADY IMBUED WITH INFERENCES, WE COME TO AN IDENTITY (IF NOT FINAL, AT LEAST TEMPORARILY ESTABLISHED) BETWEEN PERCEPTUAL JUDGMENT AND IMMEDIATE OBJECT, AND BETWEEN IMMEDIATE OBJECT AND THE FIRST NUCLEUS OF MEANING ASSOCIATED WITH A *REPRESENTAMEN*.

— Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus*

Well, that wasn't so bad," Derek told Holli as he opened the door that Lady Nimue told them led to the chamber in which Excalibur was kept. "I mean, I don't see how this place fits beneath the lake - the ceiling is almost as high as the lake is deep - but at least we don't have to mess with the keeper. After you."

"Thanks!" Holli was surprised, until it occurred to her that perhaps Derek hadn't suddenly learned his manners. "Hey, you go first!"

"Forget it, I'm not the one who can go hyperspace whenever I want. You go first!"

It wasn't very gentlemanly, but she couldn't deny that his argument was persuasive. "Fine," she snapped. She stepped carefully into the room, and was quickly lost in the darkness. "I can't see anything!"

"You're in *septus*," Khasar called out from behind her.

She shook her head. Stupid. How did angels ever keep straight where they were? This shadow-walking wasn't hard to do, but it was hard to master. She went to *quintus* and gasped. Not twenty feet in front of her was a tall and terrible being, all covered in armor and standing with his hands folded on the hilt of his drawn sword.

"I thought the Lady said there wasn't a Keeper in here," she hissed over her shoulder.

"She did!"

"Then what's that?"

"What's what?"

But even as Derek spoke, a golden light began to flicker all around the floor of the chamber. It grew in intensity, rising up the walls, which proved to be decorated with intricate carvings of flowers. There were roses, daisies, bluebells and a hundred other flowers that Holli couldn't identify. They practically leaped out at you in the shadows cast by the golden light, the overall effect was much starker than the Lady's brilliant tapestries, but it was beautiful in its own way. Glancing back at the great knight, who still had not moved, Holli noticed that similar roses were embossed on the breastplate of his white armor.

"Hey, there's the sword, behind him!" Derek was right. Excalibur hung, unsupported, in the air, surrounded by a silver glow. He began to walk gingerly around the motionless Keeper. Holli wasn't sure who screamed louder, her or Derek, when a massive white-armored hand suddenly came down and blocked his path.

"You may not pass," said a deep voice that rumbled up from one of the less accessible parts of the Abyss.

"Um, the Lady said you, ah, wouldn't mind."

"The Lady is nothing to me. You shall not pass."

"So, what now?" Derek called out, his eyes never leaving the Keeper. "Khasar, can you take this guy down, or distract him or something?"

"I don't think I'm supposed to," Khasar answered. "That's supposed to be the hero's role, as I understand these things."

"Do I look like a freaking hero to you? I'm buck naked except for my boxers, and I'm not about to fight a ten foot-tall armored giant whose sword is bigger than me, all right? It's your show, homes, you figure it out."

Holli had an inspiration. "Keep him busy, Khasar. We'll take care of the sword." She whispered into Derek's ear. "I'll help Khasar distract him, then you slip around behind and grab it."

He looked uncertainly around the chamber. It was just wide enough for him to slide past, as long as the huge Keeper was pushed completely off to one side. "Why don't you just go through him and grab it yourself?"

"Because I don't think he's mortal, so he might not be limited to this shadow. He can probably see me."

"That makes a weird kind of sense. Okay, just don't let him cut me in half with that thing. Or step on me, for that matter."

"I'll do my best." She nodded to Khasar, who without warning, took on an Aspect of a gilded knight, identical to the white-armored Keeper except there were lions on his shining breastplate instead of roses. The big archon stepped forward in challenge.

"You may not pass."

"We'll see about that." Khasar replied as he drew his own sword, a gleaming silver blade, and without warning swung it at the Keeper's neck. Faster than Holli would have thought possible, the Keeper reversed his grip and brought his sword up to block it. The clang echoed through the chamber and then the battle was on. The din was tremendous as the two mighty knights battled away, hammers and tongs, neither one moving nor giving an inch. Then Khasar seemed to slip, and the Keeper began to press his attack, forcing the archon to retreat towards the right wall.

"Go, now!" Holli shoved Derek forward, and the tall boy ran forward. Holli ran beside him, ready to try and redirect an errant back-swing or an ill-timed retreat. But Khasar allowed the white knight to force him up against the wall, parrying each powerful blow only at the last possible second.

And then the legendary sword was before them. Excalibur, which King Arthur himself had borne to glory and fame everlasting. Holli wasn't much of a reader, but even she knew the stories, and she felt a little strange to be so close to something that she'd always assumed was imaginary.

"It's beautiful," Derek whispered reverentially. And it was. The sword was simple, its stained blade was pitted and scarred, but it was beautiful too. The hilt was wrapped in gold, ending in two lions-heads baring their teeth under glaring ruby eyes. Several more jewels decorated the

crosspiece and another, larger ruby was set in the pommel, but it was damaged somewhat, with several cracked facets. Derek stood before it reverentially, and his face was full of awe as he glanced at her and shook his head.

"What do I do?"

"Just grab it!" she urged him, watching warily as the two giant figures, shining gold and alabaster white, smote each other with abandon, their blows ringing through the chamber like thunder.

Derek cautiously moved his right hand forward into the mystic glowing field, and touched the hilt with one finger, as if it might electrocute him. When nothing happened, he breathed a sigh of relief and closed his hand around the hilt. Without warning, the blade's silver glow suddenly brightened into a golden sunburst, so bright that Derek had to shield his eyes with his free hand. From behind Holli, she heard the Keeper cry out with rage.

"Defiler! Unhand me, thrice-cursed thief!" Empowered by his fury, the giant smashed a two-fisted blow that caught Khasar off-guard and sent him sprawling, then rushed towards Derek and Holli, his massive sword raised high above his head.

"Khasar!" Holli screamed as the giant bore down on her, but she retained enough presence of mind to slip into *quintus* before she was cut in two. Thrown off by her disappearance, the knight stumbled and lost his footing as his blade met no resistance and smashed into the floor with a resounding clang. Confused and off-balance, the Keeper was momentarily defenseless and Derek seized his opportunity. With a great shout, he leaped forward and swung shining Excalibur as if he was an avenging, if half-naked, angel of destruction.

There was an unearthly shriek when the blade burned through the embossed breastplate as if it was not armor but molten butter. Derek's shout of triumph died in his throat, though, when the sun-bright glow abruptly dimmed, sending the room into darkness. A moment later, there was a loud crack and the ancient blade unexpectedly shattered into pieces. One shard flew backward into Derek's unprotected shoulder; his cry of pain was drowned out by the agonized

howl of the Keeper. The white-armored giant had fallen to his knees and a dark purple smoke was rushing from the ruptured breastplate, hissing like a steam from a teapot.

What was going on? Holli wasn't sure what was happening to the Keeper, but at least he wasn't trying to hit her with that huge sword again. Then, as she looked at the jagged stump of the sword in Derek's hand, another thought struck her. How were they going to kill the Mad One with a broken blade?

Derek was clutching at his bleeding shoulder with the metal shard protruding from between his fingers. He, too, was staring at Excalibur in disbelief. Holli drew her own sword, it came crackling to life and its flames gave them enough light with which to see. Bright red-gold glitters marked the places where the other pieces of Excalibur had fallen.

"What did you do?" Khasar roared at Derek.

"How should I know? I thought this thing was supposed to be some kind of magic super sword, right? I have no clue what happened. One minute, it was slicing right through that guy's armor, and then it just broke apart."

Khasar looked at what was now nothing but an empty suit of armor, but the armor was already cracking and pieces were crumbling and starting to fall off. The three of them were silent for a moment, watching as the armor disintegrated into a fine white powder before disappearing entirely. Then Khasar slapped his forehead. "No! That was no keeper, that was the spirit of the sword!"

"What?" Derek and Holli looked at each other.

Khasar groaned. "When an item has been endowed with great power, it is possible for it to take on a sort of life of its own. Unless an object is of Divine origin, in which case the power is drawn from the Almighty, it necessarily derives its power from a spirit bound to the object. Given enough time, the spirit can escape that to which it has been bound. In this case, it would seem that a partial binding still remained."

"That means so nothing to me," Derek answered irritably and Holli had to agree with him. "Khasar, what are you talking about?"

"I mean that a house divided against itself cannot stand. The spirit was the sword! Well, the magic of the sword, anyhow. And to use Excalibur against its own magic, well, you saw what happened."

"I haven't exactly used a lot of supernatural swords before. Didn't you ever bother to think about this before? I mean, didn't it even cross your mind when you saw the dude standing there?"

Holli prodded the little pile of dust with her foot. She almost felt bad for the poor guy, or spirit, whatever he was. Or perhaps she would have if he hadn't tried to chop her in two.

Khasar threw up his hands. "I don't know, I thought he was just your normal, everyday guardian! You have to understand, I've never seen anything like this before, I'd only heard a few tales here and there."

"So, what do we do now?"

The archon bent over and picked up one of the blackened pieces of the sword. "Obviously we're going to have to fix it before we can use it to confront the Mad One. If it can be fixed."

What were the chances of that? Holli grimaced. You couldn't exactly look in the Yellow Pages for a magical sword maker.

Derek looked thoughtful. "Hey, how about this? Maybe we can look up that Wayland guy. He's a swordsmith, right! If he can make a magical sword, then he should be able to fix one, right?"

"Wayland. That's the smith you mentioned earlier, the one who made some of the other swords you were considering as possibilities?"

"Yeah, he made at least three of them. Siegfried's, you know, the star of that Wagner ring thing, and for two other guys I can't remember. One of them was the King of England, I think. I bet if anyone can fix it, he can. And he can't be all that hard to find, I mean, what with your connections and all."

"If he is willing," Khasar pointed out. "If he is still here on this isle, we will find him, although considering he's almost surely Fallen, there's no telling whose side he's on. But it's

worth a shot. As it stands, I don't think we're going to accomplish much by throwing these at the Mad One."

Holli had picked up two of the shards and was fitting them together. It was hard for her to see what was so special about Excalibur. Even to her angelic eyes, there was nothing to indicate any supernatural power, what she held in her hands seemed to be just two jagged pieces of charred metal. She eyed them dubiously. Was the magic gone because the sword was broken, or had it broken because it never had any to begin with? "Do we have all the pieces?"

"Better fit them together to be sure, then slip them in here," Khasar said, bending over the Keeper and sliding the empty scabbard off his belt. "I'd just as soon not let the Lady of the Lake know what happened to her precious sword. We'll just tell her we have what we came for and hope that she doesn't ask too many questions.

CHAPTER 30

SEARCHING FOR MR. SMITH

ASK AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU; SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND;
KNOCK AND THE DOOR WILL BE OPENED TO YOU. FOR EVERYONE
WHO ASKS RECEIVES; HE WHO SEEKS FINDS; AND TO HIM WHO
KNOCKS, THE DOOR WILL BE OPENED.

— Matthew 7:7-8

Do you think it's a bad omen, that the sword broke?" Derek asked, completely out of the blue.

They were sitting on a hilltop, leaning comfortably back against two thick-trunked birch trees while Khasar asked questions of the pretty, dark-haired naiad of a bubbling little brook that ran past an abandoned old smithy. This was their third lead on John Wayland Smith in three days; as it turned out, there were an awful lot of John Smiths in England and not even the angels they'd previously quizzed had much idea which one might be the semi-mythical smith, who apparently wasn't advertising for business these days. Derek, however, was still obsessing about the sword. By this point, Holli was starting to wish he'd go back to talking about the crazy murderer two cells down or deliver another monologue about the evils of institutional food.

"I mean, that just doesn't happen. Ever. I've read a million books about a hero finding a sword, and I've never read one where he just accidentally breaks it. Sure, maybe the bad guy takes it away, or maybe only the one true heir of Isildur can wield it or whatever. But how can you break freaking Excalibur? It's ridiculous. It's just not possible.."

"Would you shut up about that already? Anyhow, it would take a lot more than a sword to make you a hero. You're a criminal, remember?"

Derek scowled at her. "If I ever forget, I'm sure you'll be happy to remind me."

"Whatever. Look, I'll settle for a happy ending where we don't all end up dead."

"Along with half of Europe. Again. What is with these Fallen idiots? It's like all they want to do is kill people."

Holli bit her tongue and looked away. It was hard not to come back with the obvious retort. If anyone would understand, you'd think it would be him. But he was thankfully oblivious to her sudden silence.

"Anyhow, this whole thing isn't so bad for you, 'cause at least you can see what's going on. If it wasn't for that thing under the lake, I could almost swear you're just pulling my leg about all this."

"You could see the werewolves just fine."

"Oh, yeah." He looked around the hillside and rubbed at his chest. "That was a lot of fun too. Thanks for reminding me. And then, I suppose there was the whole thing with the demons and those monster wolf things they were riding. You know, this world is a much, much weirder place than I'd ever imagined. No one would ever believe us, assuming we survive long enough to tell anyone."

"My brother would. So'd Jami."

"You're probably right." He picked up a piece of grass and bit off the white part on the bottom. "Hey, how did your Dad's chemo go?"

"I don't know. I haven't called them yet. I used up my calling card last time."

Derek frowned, then reached into his pocket and withdrew a new card, still in the cellophane. "The phone's in my backpack over there. Someone should be up by now, it's eight-thirty their time."

Holli wordlessly took the card. She didn't want to call her sister, it was so much easier to not think about what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic, but she knew she should. She found the pre-paid Motorola Derek had bought in London and thumbed the power button. There was plenty of charge, so she sighed and tore open the calling card, scratching off the silver material that obscured the numeric code.

Jami answered on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Anybody miss me yet?"

"Holli!" Jami sounded delighted despite the morning frog in her throat. "No, Paulus and Aliel are still messing with everybody's heads. Sometimes they have me pretend to take a nap and then walk around in your clothes, I guess that makes it easier for them. I think Christopher is a little suspicious sometimes, but he's too busy with Rachel to stop and think about it."

"Kinda handy being twins, huh?"

"Yeah, totally. What's going on over there? Is it still as crazy as you were saying?"

"Crazier. I probably shouldn't say too much, but there's a lot more going on than I'd ever imagined. Christopher would be having a ball with all this stuff."

"Oh, that's bad! I'm just glad you've got Khasar with you. Scratch behind his ears for me."

"When he's a lion or when he's not?"

"Ha ha."

"Yeah, I'm glad he's here. I just wish Aliel was too."

"Hey, I have to tell you something. I broke up with Jason!"

"No! Are you okay? What happened? Did he cheat on you?"

"No, it was nothing, really. I'm fine. It's just, the whole thing, it didn't seem very important right now." There was a moment's silence that was perfectly understood on both ends of the line.

"Daddy's not doing so well," Jami finally broke the ice. "His hair isn't falling out, so he's happy about that, but he's throwing up a lot and he's losing weight because he can't keep anything down. Mom's trying to be brave and hold it together for our sake, but she cries whenever she's alone."

"Oh, Jami."

"I know you wish you were here, but honestly, I'm glad you're not. It's... it's just not good. There's nothing good about it."

Holli nodded. She could feel tears filling her eyes but she didn't know what to say.

"Tell Daddy I love him," she whispered. "As me."

"Yeah, well..." Jami's voice cracked, then she cleared her throat and tried again in a firmer tone of voice. "I did. He thought I was you. He told me that you're his favorite, Beautiful. Of course, he says that to all the girls."

"Shut up, James!" Holli was crying now, but silently.

"He's fighting as hard as he can, Holli. I don't know if he can beat it, the doctors won't say, but I think he'll make it at least another month or two. Do you know when you can come back?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything right now."

"Yeah, well, I love you."

Holli sniffed. "I know... I love you too."

"Anyhow... someone's coming! Gotta go, bye!"

Holli heard the sound of a door starting to open, then there was a click and the line went dead. She stared at the phone for a long moment, then wiped her eyes with her fingers and returned the phone to the backpack. When she tried to return the calling card to Derek, though, he refused to take it.

"Keep it, I bought it for you."

"You did?"

"Who do I have to call, the warden? I don't think so."

"Oh." Holli stared at him a moment, taken off guard.
"Um, thanks. Thanks a lot."

"No problem. Hey, I was wondering... I mean, I couldn't help but notice... I mean, it sounded like your dad isn't doing so good. I thought maybe you'd want to pray for him."

"What do you mean?"

"I want to pray for your dad to be healed, to be saved. We can do it together, you and me. Right now. Two or more and all that, right?"

Holli forced herself to look at the boy – at the man – who'd murdered her boyfriend, her schoolmates and his own best friend. He was a confessed killer, and he was holding out his hand to her. His face wore the same arrogant, superior expression that it always did, but she could see uncharacteristic sympathy lurking behind the cold blue eyes. Hatred for him and love for another fought a brief, but vicious battle inside her breast; in the end it was love that won the day. Holding on to her hate simply wasn't worth the price of Daddy's life.

"Yeah, that'd be okay," she said quietly, taking his hand.

She didn't know how long Khasar had been standing behind them, keeping a respectful silence, but when Holli lifted her tear-stained face after the last amen, he cleared his throat to draw their attention.

"Wayland was here, as recently as twenty years ago. The angel of the brook said that he left for the city then, and she gave me an address in Nottingham, of all places."

"Like, the sheriff?"

"Yes." Khasar shrugged. "It's not far from here, perhaps an hour or so by car, but only fifteen minutes if we fly. Derek, I suggest you stay here in this pleasant little place while we check it out. You've got the cell phone, so if it turns out to be anything significant, I'll call you and you can bring the car down."

Derek placed his hand behind his head and leaned back against a good-sized birch tree. "That sounds like a good deal to me. I don't see what this Smith guy would be doing in the city anyhow." Holli met his eyes, and although she didn't say anything, a momentary smile pulled at the side of his mouth and he nodded. "No problem, blondie."

Nottingham wasn't at all what Holli was expecting. There was no great forest in which you'd expect Robin Hood to be hiding, although the castle was impressive and made for an interesting sight as they flew up from the south. It certainly didn't look like the sort of place you'd break in easily, especially not with the two giant demons in dragon form who patrolled the skies above it.

"What's going on inside there?" she asked Khasar.

"Who knows. It's just another Fallen stronghold, probably has been for centuries. Now, let me see if I can get my bearings. She said that Saint Mary's was off directly to the east of the Castle, then we need to go a block or two south to the canal, which has got to be right there."

Khasar laughed at the surprised look on Holli's face. "There's no spirits who gossip so much as water spirits, Holli. They all roam about, and they're much more inquisitive than dryads or the spirits of the mountains and meadows, who

tend to be a little more self-centered. If you need to find out something, always start with the naiads."

"I'll keep that in mind."

They landed without attracting too much attention, and began to walk along Nottingham's attractive waterfront. They passed a few stores and tourist traps, a doubtful-looking Chinese restaurant and a large newspaper building as Khasar peered at the street numbers, not all of which were marked in obvious places. Finally, he stopped in front of a large two-story building, with a tasteful green exterior. Underneath the street address, gold letters spelled out THE SMITHY. "I think this may be it," Khasar declared.

"What is it, a clothing store?"

"I do hope not," Khasar remarked. Holli had forced him to take her shopping after she'd spent her second day in a row wearing the same underwear. She might be able to walk through walls now, but the archon had adamantly refused to tell her how to make something from nothing. "Since we don't have an afternoon to kill, let's hope for humanity's sake that it isn't."

"There's more to clothes than robes and fur, you know. Not everyone wants to dress like a caveman."

"Ah, but would a caveman be such a gentleman?" He held the door open for her.

"Why, it's like, a toy soldier's shop!" exclaimed Holli as she walked in. "Christopher would love this place!"

It was like a jeweler's showroom, except that in the place of rings, necklaces and watches there were a thousand different tiny sculptures of people and fantastical beings filling the glass enclosures. Some of them were frightfully lifelike, others were wild and imaginative creations that, until a few weeks ago, Holli would have said were completely imaginary. Now, who was to say that the little figurine with the oversized green muscles and tusks didn't exist somewhere, although judging by the enthusiasm with which he was twirling his axe about, Holli hoped he didn't.

On a table in the center of the room, a spectacular battle was taking place, with a wizard summoning skeletons from the very ground of the battlefield, while tall elven archers on a small hill rained arrows down upon a troop of wolf-riding

goblins advancing upon their position. The arrows hung in the air, seemingly suspended by magic, but when Holli looked away for a second, she could have sworn that she saw a flicker of movement out of the corner of her eye. It was a colorful scene, as nearly every color in the rainbow was represented in the brilliant pennants, tunics and robes of the combatants.

Filling the showcases that made a hollow square around the room were Vikings and vampires, elves and elephant riders, soldiers from every age and historical era from spear-wielding Greeks to American soldiers firing machine guns. There was a fantasy section that looked like Christopher's Warhammer collection, all orcs and intricately painted knights, and an entire set devoted to a Heaven and Hell theme that made Khasar laugh out loud.

"I should buy one of these and give it to Prince Uriel. Look at the nose he's put on Michael! But I don't think that Harab Serap is anywhere nearly so fat as he makes him out to be here. Oh, there's little doubt that this is our friend Wayland."

"May I help you?" asked a dark-skinned girl with a pierced nose and startling green eyes. She eyed Holli with what appeared to be surprise, then shrugged and returned her attention to Khasar, who was looking a little thinner and less powerful than he usually did in human form. He was, she realized with a silent laugh, trying unsuccessfully to look like the kind of guy who'd be out shopping for miniatures. What they really should have done was sent Derek in here. Of course, they might never have gotten him out – he was almost as bad as her brother when it came to game stuff.

"I'd like to speak with Mr. Smith, please." Khasar had changed the scabbard which contained Excalibur into a brown leather briefcase. "It's rather urgent."

"I'll see if he's available." She glanced suspiciously at the briefcase, then shrugged and walked towards a door at the back. Holli stifled a laugh – as if anyone was going to do a smash-and-grab just to grab some painted lead figurines!

"Now, that is interesting." Khasar pointed to the battle, and leaned over to examine it more closely. "I believe there's a spell of some sort on these little characters. If you look closely, you can see them move."

Holli joined him in peering at the battle. The tableau had certainly changed since she'd looked at it before. The lead goblin's mouth was open in a shout and a blue-feathered arrow that had not been there previously now protruded from the small round shield he bore. And whereas most of the skeletons had been waist deep in the dirt, they were now only buried to their knees as they rose from their violated graves.

"Christopher would give up his whole CD collection for something like this." Holli said. "I have to admit, it's kind of cool."

The girl with the pierced nose returned and shook her head. "I'm sorry, but Mr. Smith isn't free at the moment. Perhaps you could come back on Monday."

Khasar smiled at her, like a wolf being rebuked by a lamb. "Go back and tell Wayland that it's rather urgent." He gestured towards the miniature battlefield, and suddenly the hostilities erupted at full speed. The charge of the goblins slowed as the first round of arrows slammed home, then broke in dismay as a second and a third flight brought down their captain and their flag-bearer, among others.

Holli watched, fascinated, as a small troop of elven cavalry rode out of the nearby woods, galloping madly in pursuit of the fleeing goblins. They rode them down without mercy, then swept behind the clumsy skeletons towards the purple-robe wizard who had summoned them. The mage lowered his wand and a bright beam lanced out to drop one of the lead elves from his saddle, but moments later, he fell before the flashing swords of the elven riders. No sooner had he fallen than the entire troop of skeletons collapsed to the earth, as the evil spell that had summoned them died with its caster. But just as the last undead warrior collapsed in a heap of white bones, the entire tableau froze once more.

"I had thought that my wolfriders would have proved themselves more doughty, but one underestimates the lethality of Ulthuan's longbows at one's peril." The speaker was a large bearded man, broad-shouldered and muscular, with a broad, ruddy face, black hair and friendly brown eyes. He reminded Holli of a good-natured bear; she liked him at once. "Siobhan, you may take the rest of the afternoon off, and please turn the sign around as you leave. And, if you

would be so kind, drop this off with the bartender at the Red Crown."

The big man, who Holli was quite sure was not a man at all, passed her a catalog advertising the Smithy's wares. She did not look at all pleased to be dismissed, but she nodded obediently enough and if she closed the door a little harder than was necessary, it did not seem to bother Mr. John Wayland Smith in the least.

"You lead a dangerously open life."

Smith waved off Khasar's criticism. "So have I always. This town is full of spiritists, occultists, charlatans and frauds. And, of course, the occasional genuine article. Siobhan thinks I am an ordinary man of extraordinary talents, as have a hundred others before her. They are far too self-absorbed to spare a thought for my true nature."

"An interesting choice of occupation."

Smith glanced fondly at the battlefield, littered with green-skinned corpses. "I have no urge to play at the game of Man. This harmless dabbling is more to my liking, and I find the sculpting most relaxing. There is little demand for swords in this honor-less age."

He startled Holli by reaching out and grabbing her face in one large, horny hand. But he meant her no harm, instead, he tilted his head back and forth, surveying her features.

"A lovely nose. The cheekbones could do with a bit more projection, but yes, you'd do nicely. What do you say to a fairy warrior princess? Or a sorceress, perhaps, although that might be offensive to one of your loyalties."

"I'm afraid we don't have the leisure to discuss your pastime, Wayland." Khasar placed the briefcase on the top of the display and opened it. At the sight of the metal shards, the supernatural smith drew his breath in sharply. It was obvious that he recognized the sword – what was left of it – immediately.

"This is Nimue's blade!" He glanced sharply at Khasar, then Holli. "How did this happen? Where did you find it?"

"I want to know if you can fix it."

The powerful angel frowned at the non-answer, but his interest in the sword was too great to take offense. "A ritual, perhaps... I can see there's human blood on it." He picked up

a piece and ran a finger lightly over the broken edge. "Yes, there would be power in such a blade, though rather less than one might suppose."

"But can you fix it?" Holli demanded.

"My, for two Divine, you are impatient. I can effect some repairs now, in a manner of speaking, but as for its peculiar qualities, that will take some time. How much time, precisely, I cannot say. Here, come back into my office and I will see what I can do."

Without waiting for them, he walked towards the rear of the room, still holding the bloody shard in his hand. Khasar looked at Holli, grimaced, then snapped the briefcase shut and followed. Holli, too, followed, through a short hallway full of shelves and past what looked like a small warehouse into a large, dark office. Swords were mounted on the side walls, three on each side, and the far wall was taken up by what looked like a huge metal oven of some kind. It was his forge, she realized, although it was cold and dead at the moment.

"Did you make those?" she asked, pointing to a wicked-looking black sword, longer than the others, with a pair of jagged hilt guards long enough to be blades of their own.

"I did indeed. Do you like that one? Don't touch it! It's my interpretation of Stormbringer, inspired by Brom, of course. I was rather taken with Moorcock's notion of a sword that drank souls. My skill falls rather short of that, unfortunately, but I daresay it wouldn't mind a taste of that which burns inside that pretty little Aspect of yours."

Indeed, the blade was rattling a little inside its metal supports, quivering at Holli's nearness. She drew her hand quickly away. What a horrible thing, it was a disgusting demonic vampire of a sword. She was forced to revise her initial impression of the friendly, but clearly Fallen smith.

"It takes a true artist to conceive a vision so appalling," Khasar commented mildly. He seemed to share Holli's dislike of the black blade, but he opened the case again and laid it on Wayland's desk. The smith smiled, unconcerned by their failure to appreciate his dark artistry, and withdrew the pieces one by one, placing them together like a toddler's first jigsaw puzzle.

"Excellent! I assumed there would be nothing missing, but it costs little to be sure." He lifted the hilt and placed the broken edge in front of his face. Holli didn't realize what he was doing at first, but then she saw he was breathing on it. Why, she did not know, until she smelled something hot and saw that the edge of the blade had turned orange. Without putting it down, he picked up the joining piece and began to breathe on it too, alternating back and forth between the two until the edges of both looked as if they were about to start dripping.

The burly smith winked at her, then turned and placed the two overheated pieces on top of his ancient forge, joining them together with care. Then he reached out and ran his hands over them.

"No!" Holli cried in horror. But her fear was unfounded. Wayland only chuckled and shook his head as he continued to massage the near-molten metal with his hands, stroking out its imperfections with his surprisingly gentle fingers.

"Never fear, little Guardian. 'Tis but a little trick of mine, useful when time is pressing, not that I'd recommend it to our mortal friends."

Wayland repeated the process four more times, and in far less time than Khasar had predicted, Excalibur was restored to its former glory, and to the naked eye, at least, its jeweled majesty was no less wonderful than before. Wayland picked it up and brandished it. The blade lacked polish, but for all that it was still a magnificent weapon, putting the mounted swords on the walls to shame.

"It's a noble blade, my Divine friend. But better it had stayed in the waters to which Sir Bedivere consigned it. There is no future king, and no man shall wield this weapon again."

Khasar's eyes narrowed and he reached out for the sword. "Give me that!" he ordered harshly. But Wayland only smiled, and as if some unseen, unheard alarm had gone off, Khasar abruptly whirled around to face the door to the hallway through which they'd entered.

"What is it?" Holli cried, bewildered, and she had her answer a moment later as a cold back wind rushed into the room, swirling and shrieking with the howls of a thousand

damned souls. Even in her half-angelic form, the twisting black spirals froze her bones and forced her to clap her hands over her ears. There were three of the evil whirlwinds, she realized as they spun faster and faster, then suddenly, there were three great demons standing before her, tall and terrible, with not one, but two faces on each head, one in front and one behind, and a pair of curved spiral horns protruding, red and glistening, from each forehead.

They had no wings, but instead wore black cloaks beneath which there were no bodies, only restless, coiling black smoke that created the illusion of a muscular being. The cloaks were clasped at the neck with iron in the shape of the Mad One's mark, leaving her with no doubt of whom they served. They were coldly haughty, and they radiated a frightening air of daunting power.

"Stand back, archon," the one in the middle warned Khasar, who had stepped in front of Holli. "Our master seeks no quarrel with the Divine, but even so you may not have the sword. All that is of this realm belongs to him. Leave it with us and leave our master's domain in peace, or interfere and perish. It is all one to us."

"You are his Eyes!" Khasar hissed.

"Indeed. And we have been watching you, archon, from the moment you entered Britain. We did not understand your purpose or we would have intervened much sooner. And see, brothers, the wisdom of our patience is rewarded. Now, will you stand aside, or no?"

Khasar hesitated for a moment, then nodded. These creatures were strong and their pride was not without foundation, they were no wretched Twice-Fallen. Even for one as powerful as an archon, it would have been pointless to resist. The cruel face smiled, not without contempt. "Whilst it was surely not your purpose to serve the master, you have served him well even so. Long has he wished to know the whereabouts of this weapon; even more has he desired to see it safely in his hands. You have his thanks, archon, and you are free to leave his realm. I suggest you do not tarry overlong, lest his grace dissipate with time."

Khasar acknowledged the Eye with a stiff bow, and he did not attempt to interfere as Wayland handed over Excalibur

hilt-first to the two-faced being. For all its insubstantial appearance, it had no trouble holding the heavy weapon in one black-gloved hand. Holli felt terrible for Khasar, seeing the helpless chagrin in his eyes. Breaking the sword had been bad enough, but seeing it handed over to the enemy was even worse. Now Prince Uriel's plan was in shambles, and there was no choice except to let the Fallen fight out their three-way war and hope that someone could defeat Diavelina. She knew nothing of Diavelina, but she remembered the dread army waiting on the coast and she knew that anything worse than these horrid Eyes could only mean disaster.

The Eye turned to Wayland, who was leaning against his forge with his arms folded and a faint smile on his bearded face. "Your loyalty shall not be forgotten, nor shall it pass unrewarded, swordmaster."

"The only reward I ask is to be let alone. I want no part of these internecine battles. And tell your master that he need fear nothing from the blade. Whatever magic it once possessed is gone and is beyond even my skill to restore."

The Eye inclined his head. "It shall be as you request. Swordmaster. Archon. Angel." Maomoondagh's terrible servitor drew the sword into its wispy body and began to spin, followed immediately by its two companions. A cold chill again filled the room, and the howling rush of the unnatural wind caused Holli's hair to flail about her face as the evil whirlwinds roared out of The Smithy, taking with them the precious sword as well as their last hope of preventing the approaching tragedy. As the black spirals vanished from her sight, she imagined she could see Diavelina's storm clouds looming ominously over the island.

CHAPTER 31

THIEF OF FLAMES

I'M IN LOVE WITH THIS MALICIOUS INTENT
YOU'VE BEEN TAKEN BUT YOU DON'T KNOW IT YET
WHAT YOU WILL KNOW MUST NEVER LIVE TO BE FOUND
COS IT'S THE SUBJECT OF THE EYES OF THE DROWNED
— Ministry, ("New World Order")

Waving off Khasar's bitter accusations, Wayland sat down heavily on his leather-backed chair.

"You'd do well to get off your high horse, so sit down and listen to me. Of course I gave them the sword. There was no reason not to because it's not the one you're looking for. I don't know what put it into your head that Excalibur would do the trick, but I can assure you that even if you hadn't managed to break it — and I'm very curious to know how you managed that, by the way — it would have been useless to you."

Khasar and Holli looked at each other, each afraid to first give voice to the hope that was suddenly rising in their hearts. "It wasn't the right sword?"

"You mean, you didn't betray us? You're not on the Mad One's side after all?"

John Smith laughed, his powerful chest heaving with his amusement. "I'm on no one's side but my own, little girl. That's why they kicked me out of Heaven in the first place. And if I was too proud to bend my knee before the Creator, how could I ever serve a jumped-up bit of flux and mirrors like Maomoondagh or whatever it's calling itself these days?"

"Why did you call me that?"

"Little girl?" He smiled again as he reached out and withdrew a fat, leather-bound book from one of his sagging shelves. "I've lived among humans for five hundred

generations. I know a mortal lass when I see one, for all that someone's done a clever job of making you appear to be something you're not."

Holli glanced at Khasar, who was more than a little chagrined about the smith's casual penetration of her disguise. "Do you think the Eyes noticed too?" he asked Wayland.

"No. They're nowhere nearly as observant as they'd like to think they are. Why, it took them fifteen years to figure out that I was here. And while I'm not entirely sure what you're about, I assume that you don't have fifteen years to do it so I'll just do you the favor of pointing out what you're looking for."

As he spoke, he was flipping through the fat volume, until he stopped somewhere in the middle. He cleared his throat, then read aloud to them in his bass voice that deepened a little as he assumed a theatrical manner.

*Chrysaor it was hight
 Chrysaor that all other swords excelled,
 Well prov'd in that same day, when Iove those Gyants quelled.
 For of most perfect metal it was made
 Tempred with Adamant amongst the same,
 And garnisht all with gold upon the blade
 In goodly wise, whereof it tooke his name,
 And was of no lesse vertue, then of fame.
 For there no substance was so firme and hard,
 But it would pierce or cleave, where so it came;
 Ne any armour could his dint out ward,
 But wheresoeuer it did light, it throughly shard.*

"Now, there's a man who appreciates a good blade," he said admiringly when he had finished reading. He closed the book with a resounding thump. "You won't see poetry like that written about a rocket-propelled grenade launcher or a main battle tank, now, you won't."

"What is that?" Holli asked. Khasar was looking pretty blank himself.

"Oh, it's just a poem that a gentleman by the name of Spenser wrote four hundred years ago. It's mostly an allegory of sorts, but not entirely. You see, I happen to know that the

sword exists, and I'm quite confident that it will suffice to settle Maomoondagh, since they are of the same substance – Chrysaor was never forged on this Earth. But the man got it wrong, understandably enough. No metal of any kind went into its making, for it was shaped from a single bone of Valdalena, the Queen of Chaos, after she was struck down by the Lord of Hosts. Seven swords were made, for the seven great princes of the Sarim, but only Chrysaor, which belonged to Prince Jehuel before his fall, ever came into this world. Unless you count Abaddon's, that is, but I can't imagine he'd be particularly amenable to a loan. Now, exactly how it got here, I do not know, but I am quite sure that no angel can hope to wield any of the seven blades, save one of the seven princes themselves...."

He peered sharply at Khasar as his voice trailed off. "Was that your plan? That this little one should take arms against Maomoondagh? Are you mad yourself?"

"There is another, too. She has passed as his guardian."

"For shame, archon! Even with the sword, no mortal could defeat the Mad One."

"The Fallen have made the mistake of underestimating mortal men before. Nor are the seven blades forbidden to Man as they are to angelkin."

"Bah," Wayland waved him off. "It's not forbidden for the girl to set off an atomic bomb in her hand either, but I wouldn't expect her to survive the experience. I see your logic, but it is a fool's hope."

"A fool's hope is a hope still. And in any case, it is of no concern of yours. Now, tell me where we can find this Chrysaor."

"I do not know." The big smith spread his powerful hands in admission of his ignorance. "I am not sure that I would tell you even if I did, but I tell you the truth. I do not know and I have never known. Very much to my regret, of course, but I have never even laid eyes on it. Once, I thought to look for it, to see if I might hope to unlock its secrets, but it had already disappeared beneath the sands of time by then. It could be anywhere, if it is truly on this Earth."

Khasar did not seem put out by Wayland's answer. "I see. I thank you, all the same, Smith, for your advice and for

leaving the Eyes in ignorance as well. Perhaps little hope remains, but for one dreadful moment there, I thought it extinguished altogether."

"Think nothing of it." The bear-like shoulders shrugged, then the big Fallen angel turned to Holli and smiled. "I like a brave heart, and if this cold-hearted archon is going to throw you in the deep end, then you'll need something to help you stay afloat. This might serve you a little better where you're going, and after all, every hero needs a famous blade. Especially if she is a heroine."

He reached up and withdrew the wicked black sword from its rest, and as he did so, the blade began to quiver again. Holli thought she could even hear a quiet, high-pitched moaning, as if the sword was too restless to remain silent.

"The Beast is always hungry," said Wayland. "And so is this sword, but keep her safely scabbarded away and you need not fear her cravings. I made her to look like Stormbringer, but she is no thief of souls, so she needs a different name. Call her Flamestealer."

Holli didn't want to accept the nasty-looking thing, shaking and whining like a long, sharp leech, but she sensed that the big smith meant well. She glanced at Khasar, but he appeared to be noncommittal, so she nodded.

"Thank you. Would you mind, um, putting it in something for me?"

"Her. A sword has a life of its own. Especially my swords." The smith smiled, but for the first time since she'd met him, his eyes looked old. Very, very old. "Be careful, little one. Even a heart of a lion will not save you when the dark gods are warring and their legions turn your world into a battlefield beneath their feet."

"God can," Holli replied with more certainty than she felt.

"Then may He keep you safe, little one, since his angels seem determined to do the opposite."

Holli was feeling hungry, so once outside the Smithy, she walked along the canal until she found a little pub while Khasar went to find a telephone and call Derek. She was halfway through her tuna sandwich when the archon entered, and she smiled as two women at a table near the door

whispered and giggled at the sight of his handsome face. If only they had any idea!

"Derek will meet us in London," he told her. "I told him that we had the wrong sword; I didn't bother saying anything about our unexpected visitors, though."

"What's the point. He doesn't need to know and it would only freak him out." She wiped at her mouth with a paper napkin and put down her sandwich. "Khasar, do you know what you're doing? Honestly? Suppose Excalibur had been the right sword. Would you have let me use it, knowing it might kill Derek? Or me?"

"Of course not." Khasar looked pained at the accusation. "I never thought for a moment that using the sword could harm either one of you, or any mortal, for that matter. Arthur wasn't harmed by it, after all."

"Oh, yeah. I never thought of that. But if no mortal can use the sword safely, then what do we do?"

"If that's really true, and we don't know that it is, then that still leaves our missing angel prince. Puck claimed that he knew where Jehuel was, or that he could find him, anyhow, but I have no idea where Puck is now, even if I thought we could trust him."

What a mess. Holli could not shake the sight of that huge army of darkness lurking on the other side of the Channel, just waiting for the order from Diavelina to swarm across the waters and sweep across England like a monstrous black tidal wave. Evil, evil, evil, on every side, she was surrounded by evil, right down to the second sword she was wearing, invisibly strapped to her belt. Two swords, and she didn't even know how to use one!

"Khase, how do you deal with it?" she asked the archon. "Don't you get worn down by seeing all this darkness everywhere? How do you not get totally depressed all the time?"

"It's not so bad when you see through the charade, my dear. The mortal veil is just that, a veil. You're seeing through it now, but you can't possibly digest all the implications in a few weeks. I don't think any human could, even if given years to do so. This is the time of the dark. One day, and that day is sooner now than it has ever been before,

both the dark and time itself will end. You, of all people, should understand a little of that. Do you remember the joy after Rahab was broken?"

"Only for the faithful," Holli whispered, her vision blurring. "Not for everyone."

Khasar was silent for a long moment. Then, at last, he nodded. "No, not for everyone. And that is why we fight Diavelina, why we fight the shadow. Not to win, but to buy time. Every day, every hour that we delay the slayers and we hold back the shadow, we give the lost sheep that much more time to repent and return to the shepherd. Even as the monsters wax great, how can I despair, when every minute purchased may mean one more lost one returned to the flock. Holding back the waters may have gained Canute nothing, but every single moment counts for us."

Holli nodded, wiping at her eyes, then stared at the quivering circle that one wayward tear had left on the plastic-coated table. Holding back the waters. Water. Monsters. Fight. Water. Monster. Fight. Fight. Sword. Water. Monster. Sword.

"I think maybe I know where that sword is hidden," she said slowly. Khasar looked first skeptical, then increasingly astonished as she shared her thoughts with him. Then, without saying a word, he rushed outside, presumably to make another phone call to Derek.

It wasn't long before the archon rushed back in. "He's turned the car around, and we'll find him on the M6. It's a good thing you insisted on that little red convertible, it should stand out nicely when we're looking for it. Come on, let's go."

"You can't just, like, zoom in on the cell phone or something? I thought it had a GPS built in." Holli stuffed the paper remains of her lunch into the orange mouth of the trash can and followed him outside.

"Do I look like a GPS receiver? I know a few electronic virtuosos; I even saw one archangel draw a picture over a fax line once on a dare, but my talents are sadly limited in that regard."

He opened his mouth and a noise that sounded like a computer dialing a telephone came out. It sounded right to Holli, but the archon shook his head.

"The sound isn't the problem, it's the coding. There's so many possibilities and it's too tricky to pick out the right one."

They turned a corner into an alleyway, shifted into *tertius* and leaped into the air. In a matter of minutes, Nottingham and its castle were disappearing into the west behind them. Khasar was flying fast, so fast that Holli could barely keep up with him. They sped over the Midlands, only about 100 feet above the ground, flashing past green hills and meadows divided by knee-high stone walls, past half-abandoned villages and winding country roads barely wide enough for two cars. The Cotswolds forced them to climb higher into the sky, and Khasar gradually slowed his breakneck pace as they approached the outskirts of Oxford, not wishing to draw undue attention from the larger congregation of spirits there. As Divine angels – Khasar now appeared to be an ordinary Guardian – they were for the most part ignored by the Fallen border guards, although Holli had seen more than one turn its ugly, horned head in curious wonder as they zoomed by overhead.

Just as they were nearly past what looked like the heart of Oxford, a pair of birdlike demons swooped down from above and behind them. Only their warlike screeches alerted Khasar, who shoved Holli hard, causing her to lose control of her wings as she tumbled awkwardly to the side. The outstretched claws of the first demonic diver barely missed her, the second shrieked in pain as Khasar smoothly rolled and drew his blade at the same time and the fiery sword separated his attacker's legs from its body as it plunged past.

"What did you do that for!" shouted the demon's outraged companion. "We were just playing."

Khasar transformed instantly into an image of a ram-horned Hell baron. "Play somewhere else!" he roared in a deep, guttural voice that sounded like it came from the Abyss. Holli, having drawn her own sword after righting herself, had to put a hand over her mouth as the shocked demon's jaw dropped open and it turned and fled.

"That should teach him a lesson," he said. He winked at her before transforming back and sheathing his sword.

"You'd think so," Holli agreed, smiling affectionately back at him. But she did find herself glancing back over her shoulder from time to time nevertheless.

Thirty minutes later they reached the M1, and Khasar led her lower so they could get a better view of the cars passing beneath them. They stopped and hovered over the motorway, letting the cars flash past them as they waited for a sight of the familiar little convertible.

"Are you sure he's not up ahead of us already?" For a moment, Holli thought she'd spotted Derek, but the car turned out to be a red Lotus at least twenty years newer than their MGB. "How long do you want to wait before you're sure we missed him? We'll have to find a phone to call him and find a place to meet."

"No, he's not here yet," Khasar explained. "I know where he was when he left London, and unless he drove faster than 110 kilometers an hour, he can't have reached here yet. Let's give him another ten minutes, and then we'll start drifting south."

"But what if he did drive that fast? Didn't you tell him to hurry?"

"If he tried to drive faster than that, it'll be easy to find him. He'll be on the side of the road somewhere south of here – and that's if he's lucky. That little toy is more of a collector's item than a proper car. It won't go faster than ninety without shaking itself to pieces."

Now that he mentioned it, Holli did remember that the MG did tend to vibrate a little when they got going too fast, especially around corners. But it was cute.

"There she blows!" Khasar called out, interrupting her thoughts as he pointed at the red convertible darting in and out of traffic. Without waiting for her, he furled his wings and dropped toward the car like a hawk falling on its prey. At the last moment, he did a half-somersault, spread his wings and sat lightly on the black fake-leather of the stowed roof. He looked back up and her and spread his hands, as if to say, see how easy that was?

Right. Holli was glad she could stay in *quintus*, that way even if she messed up she wouldn't hurt herself. Instead of pulling her wings in and diving, she simply flew lower and

lower, approaching the car slowly from behind. As she flew just a foot or two over the empty passenger's seat, Khasar reached up and supported her from behind as she simultaneously went down to *septus*, grabbed the windshield screen and pulled her legs forward into the surprisingly long leg space provided by the little car.

"Whoa!" shouted Derek and the MG lurched to the left, nearly sending Khasar flying off his precarious seat. There was a frightening moment as Holli thought Derek might lose control of the little convertible altogether, but he managed to straighten it out after a moment or two of white-knuckled concentration. "Could you please let me know before you appear out of thin air like that?"

"Sorry," Holli apologized sincerely. Now that her heart wasn't in her mouth, it was beating like a bass drum. "I was all nervous about hitting a moving target, and I totally forgot you didn't know we were here."

"My bad," Khasar declared. "I should have thought of that. But that was a nice save, Derek. Well done, old chap."

"Thanks," Derek said, still put out judging by the sour look on his face. "So, what's the rush? I assume this Smith guy fixed the sword or something? That was fast. I didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"As it turns out, we didn't have the right sword in the first place." Derek looked back at Khasar with an expression of surprise on his face. "It seems that Excalibur was simply a run-of-the-mill magic sword, which turned out to be a good thing since a few of the Mad One's friends showed up and took it from us."

"Dang! Okay, so, what's the hurry, then? I thought we were driving north to, like, take this guy out!"

"No, in the first place, he's still in London. And in the second place, we don't have the sword anymore, and then, it wasn't the right one anyhow. But after I called you, Holli had a brilliant inspiration... you tell him, Holli."

Derek looked sharply at her and Holli couldn't help shrinking back from him. "What?" she asked defensively.

"You guys have me driving up here like a maniac because you had an idea? Are you freaking nuts?"

Holli felt a little hurt. It was a good idea! Khasar even said so. And how were they supposed to see if she was right or not if they didn't go see? She glared back at him and didn't say anything. Derek rolled his eyes.

"Oh, so now what, you're not going to tell me? Great, that makes a lot of sense. Well, fine, have it your way. But maybe you want to at least tell me where we're going."

Holli stared primly ahead. Finally, Khasar broke what would have been silence if the wind rushing past them wasn't so noisy. "Just keep going north until you hit the M6 to Birmingham. Then A74 to Glasgow."

"All the way north... to Scotland? Okay, whatever." Derek didn't say anything, he simply drove in silence, until after changing lanes to get out of the way of a speeding Mercedes, he looked over at Holli and nodded at her with a look of newfound respect. "So, Loch Ness, huh? Khasar's right, blondie. That is brilliant. I should have thought of that."

Holli didn't feel that Derek had really been punished sufficiently for his uncalled-for jerkiness, but she was too excited about the possibilities to maintain the silent treatment any longer. "You could apologize."

"Fine. I'm sorry. It's a great idea, seriously. What made you think of it?"

"Khasar said something about somebody fighting the water, and I was just thinking about all the monsters that we saw when we were over the Channel, you know, which is water, after all, and something just clicked - "

"Wait, fighting the water?"

"The legend of King Canute," Khasar explained helpfully. "Holding back the tide... it's really a metaphor for English fears of foreign invasion, of course, wrapped in a cautionary tale of overweening royal arrogance...."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. So, anyway, Holli, you were saying?"

"Well, I was just thinking that if there was the one sword under the water, and it had a keeper, then maybe that would explain what the Loch Ness monster was doing there all this time. Maybe it's, like, guarding something. And what would be more important than this sword?"

"I don't know, unless the Holy Grail is down there or something like that. But we've been running all over the south of England without finding it, so if nothing else it's probably worth the trip to check it out."

They drove through the rest of the afternoon, stopping only for gas and to put the convertible's top up as the sun began to go down and the wind grew increasingly cold. They stopped for dinner in a town called Cumbernauld; Derek was limping after almost six hours of keeping the gas pedal pressed to the floor. After a miserable dinner of hard sausage and dry bread, and they got back on the road again, Holli herself was beginning to wish that they'd rented a nice comfortable Ford Focus instead of the MG, as the little car's feeble heater barely took the edge off the falling night's chill.

"You don't need to put up with this, just do that angel thing you do and warm yourself up. Your lips were practically blue when we stopped."

"It's not fair for you."

"Lots of things aren't fair, blondie. Are you going to try to make your legs cramp too?" Derek smiled at her unexpectedly. "Hey, I appreciate the team spirit and all. But seriously, just make yourself comfortable and go to sleep, if you can. One of us might as well be fresh when we get there. Hey, Khasar?"

"Yo!"

"How much longer?"

The archon was hunched over between the battery cover and the roof, although he'd unzipped the plastic rear window so he could sit up straight when he wanted. He peered at the directions that Derek had downloaded onto the Palm Pilot. "Looks like another four hours or so. It's not that far – we could get there in an hour flying – but the roads are pretty twisty. We should get into Drumnadrochit right around midnight."

"So, why don't we fly?" Holli asked. "Derek could ride on your back again, like we did at the Channel."

"I'd just as soon not risk attracting anyone's attention. And if the sword is there, the very last thing we want to do is give those black spirals a reason to take a closer look at us. If they were tracking us the way they said they were, then they

already know that I took you to the tourist sites. And what's more natural than two kids wanting to see the Loch Ness monster?"

"You know, if there really is a monster and it turns out she's the keeper, I'm kind of hoping we don't see her," Derek said. Holli couldn't agree more.

She was sleeping soundly when Derek stopped the car in front of a three-story building set into the side of a hill. A rude shaking of her left shoulder jerked her unwillingly from the depths of a forgotten, but pleasant dream, and she groaned as her body reminded her that she'd fallen asleep in an uncomfortable position.

"Are we there, yet?" she asked, blinking her eyes against the light coming out of the windows. Except for two of the upstairs windows, most of them were dark, but the lobby still appeared to be lit. "Severpost House?"

"Severpost. It was this or the Loch Ness House, and I figured that would be too cheesy for words," Derek said. "I had this picture of bedsheets with monsters on it."

"I don't think you need have any fear of that here," said Khasar," peering inside the lobby as he opened the MG's little trunk. "You don't see a pink hotel very often, do you?" It wasn't really pink, though, more of a salmon, thought Holli, although it was hard to be sure in the darkness. She kind of liked the way the bay windows hung over the front door. She hadn't expected this sort of mini-mansion so far out in the wilds of Scotland, not that she'd seen a whole lot of it since they'd left Cumberwauld.

And if the outside of Severpost House was nice, the interior was even more delightful than she'd imagined. The walls, like the exterior, were salmon, with white moldings, and a little fireplace crackling merrily on the far side of the room. Then she frowned. There was no one at the desk, but two men were sitting in the overstuffed chairs positioned near the fireplace. They were talking quietly and Holli paid them no attention until the man seated on the right met her eyes and smiled knowingly. Too knowingly.

"It's about time you got here!" he called unexpectedly. He looked human, about as human as you could expect to find in

England, but Holli was suddenly very sure that he was nothing of the sort.

"Khasar, who's that?" she whispered. "Do you know him?"

"I'm afraid I do," he answered. "I know him by many names, but the only one that you have probably heard is Puck."

CHAPTER 32

FORGOTTEN WATERS

I PRAY HIM, SEND A SUDDEN ANGEL DOWN
TO SEIZE ME BY THE HAIR AND BEAR ME FAR,
AND FLING ME DEEP IN THAT FORGOTTEN MERE,
AMONG THE TUMBLED FRAGMENTS OF THE HILLS.

— Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Launcelot and Elaine*

Well-met, my dear archon.” The treacherous, or just possibly not-so-treacherous angel – Holli no longer knew what to think – smiled as he ushered them to an adjoined pair of rooms he'd already arranged for them. “By the last worm-ridden plank of Noah's precious tub, what took you so long? We've done all the pony rides, trod all the paths worth treading and daresay I've improved my handicap by a good dozen strokes over the last two weeks. I was perilously close to taking up bridge – another two days and I fear I would have given in to Miss Polly's blandishments.”

Puck glanced at Derek. “Miss Polly being the proprietress, you understand. Lovely woman, but shockingly obsessive about card games. My advice is to flee if you see her approaching with anything remotely resembling a deck of cards in her hands.”

“How did you know we'd come here?” Derek demanded.

“Where else would you go? Once your companion figured out where the sword was, and did I mention what a dreary long while that took? Why, I couldn't imagine that the archon would take his mortal pets anywhere but here! And even if I was wrong, I was hardly likely to miss you cruising about the lake and annoying its most famous resident.”

“Am I correct in assuming that this is your long-lost liege?” Khasar ignored Puck's prattle and addressed the other man, a older, bearded gentleman who appeared to be human, except

for his eyes. They were like calm pools of ancient wisdom, albeit pools tainted by something that seethed angrily deep beneath the surface.

"It is better if my name remains unspoken," said the other, who Holli belatedly realized must be the mysterious Oberon for whom they'd been going to all this trouble. He didn't look like anyone special, but by now she'd learned that looks could be even more misleading in the angelic world than in the human one. "Archon, please accept my apology for any deception in which my loyal servant has perpetrated on you. The situation being what it is, I believe our separate interests lie in parallel... for now."

"For now," Khasar agreed. He still looked annoyed, though. "I find it very difficult to believe that you managed to play a member of the Sarim for a fool."

"Prince Uriel?" Puck's face betrayed astonishment. "He's hardly a fool. And if you think about it, he's been doing precisely that to a former member of that august institution with some degree of regularity for quite a long time now. But let bygones be bygones, that's what I always say."

"I imagine you say it a lot," Khasar said dryly, but even though he shook his head, Holli could see his tension evaporating. "Did you know the sword was here from the beginning? Why didn't you tell me? And why did you wait for us?"

"I didn't," Puck answered. "At least, I had no intention of doing so. And while I'm not entirely sure that the sword under the lake is the correct one, I am sure of one thing. There is a sword there, and the monster guarding it has no intention of letting any angel walk off with it. We all tried, and dear old Nessie remained completely unmoved by even our most passionate appeals."

Derek turned to her and silently held up a hand. Without saying a word, Holli slapped it and accepted the tacit compliment. It was nice to be proved right, although Puck's unexpected appearance and the fact that he'd figured it out a lot faster than her did burn her a little bit. Of course, he had the advantage of about a million years on her, so, if you took that into account, she'd actually done pretty darn well.

"Who is we?" Khasar asked.

"An old friend of mine, by the name of Melusine, for one. And for the other, it's someone who should prove very useful if our mortal friends here should manage to sweet-talk the sword from that unreasonable miser of a monster down there. The Lord of the Sword his own bad self, Prince Jehuel, formerly of the Sarim, speak of the devil."

"Did you just say Melusine?" Holli demanded. She wasn't sure she'd heard the demon correctly. "I think I've heard that name before."

"It wouldn't surprise me, considering what she's told me about you. She's your brother's Temptress. Actually, now that I come to think of it, Jehuel has been yours for the past few months. But don't hold it against him. He's incredibly bad at it and in fact, if you've been feeling a little more saintly of late, that's probably why. That royal wretch couldn't tempt a starving dog to eat a pound of freshly ground hamburger!"

Holli was so stunned, she had no idea what to say. And then, she could feel herself blushing. Imagine what these demons knew about her! Her Tempter had to know her most secret thoughts, he must even know — no, it was too embarrassing to even think about it! How could she possibly look them in the eye? Puck was grinning at her; the amusement in his eyes only made her blush more.

Khasar was surprised at the news too, although he was considerably less distressed. "Prince Jehuel has been a Tempter — her Tempter? You're kidding me! No wonder I couldn't find him. But why? And how?"

"Melusine iced his predecessor — she can be a difficult minx, believe you me — and she gave him a battlefield promotion of sorts. Lest you think it was some sort of brilliantly nefarious plan ala the purloined letter, rest assured, it was mere happenstance. In fact, if I understand the story properly, his principality consisted of a single tree when she first came across him." The demon laughed out loud. "Once you get a chance to know our prince, you'll see why that's so funny."

"Perhaps, although I rather doubt we share a taste in humor. But I must tell you, Puck, the Mad One's Eyes have been at our heels for the last month. We found Excalibur, thinking it was the sword for which we searched.

Fortunately, Wayland informed us that we'd been mistaken after three black spirals took it from us."

"Never worry about them, archon. They've been combing all of England for weeks looking for your humble servant, not to mention my friend here. That was why I dared not contact you. But leave them to me. What is of more concern is how to get these young mortals past that ill-tempered beast in the loch." He nodded at Holli. "Her power-up is a nice touch, but it won't avail us much in the circumstances. If angels could get past her, Jehuel would have sheathed that sword in the usurper's chest weeks ago. Believe me , we haven't been sitting around here for our health's sake."

Derek was sitting on a chair poring over a map of Loch Ness. At Puck's mention of the monster, he spoke up. "That lake is pretty big, did you find the sword just swimming around in there?"

"My, a dedicated young fellow, aren't you," Puck walked over to the map and placed his finger on a little black icon. "There's an old castle right there, less than two miles away. In the old bailey, there's some steps that lead to an underground passageway that leads beneath the loch. I'm pretty sure that's how the sword was brought there by mortals in the first place."

"But there's a problem, obviously, or you'd just have us walk there."

Puck nodded. "Indeed, there is a challenge that requires surmounting. At some point in the past, the tunnel collapsed, leaving most of it under water, or if you prefer, nonexistent. There appears to be a door of sorts, beyond which lies the sword, so that may well be dry but I can't really say. Nessie took exception to my having a closer look, unfortunately. To be specific, she ripped my arm off, the little pest."

Holli gasped, horrified, but Puck only smiled and flexed his fingers on both hands. "Oh, but we are a hardy sort, we angels. Don't trouble your pretty little head over the cruelty of my lot, darling. I am the perfect heroic stoic, or do I have that the wrong way round?"

"How can a monster like that mess with demons like you?" Derek looked suspicious, and he jerked his thumb at Khasar. "He beat down a whole pack of werewolves by himself. How is

this friend of yours supposed to deal with the big bad witch king if the two of you can't even deal with a single monster without help?"

Puck smiled thinly, and his eyes flared red. How had Khasar ever been fooled into thinking this evil spirit had repented of his no doubt countless sins, Holli wondered. "It is amazing, human child, but I vow you tempt me into giving you the opportunity to discover that for yourself. But no, I remain strong and pure for the noble, or more precisely, regal, cause. As to the monster, Nessie is no mere child of the Twice-Fallen, she is instead a naiad of sorts, though her mind now is little more than a beast's. Unfortunately, it takes no great genius to defend one's environs; fish and insects do as much."

As they pondered that, the false angel waved a hand. "And yet, I forgive you. See, archon, the good influence you have on me! The children are tired and they must sleep, for we have a big day tomorrow."

Holli didn't like the mocking curl of his smile, nor the triumphant look in his eyes. Neither did Khasar, for the archon's lips turned white as he pressed them together, saying nothing as Puck and his demonic liege lord exited the room.

Miss Polly's passion may have been bridge, but she served them what Holli and Derek had learned by now was an uncommonly decent breakfast at an incredibly indecent hour. Sausages and eggs, followed by toast and marmalade, as well as sardines which both of them quietly pushed to one side, unsampled. There was even orange juice, although it was a pale, almost tasteless liquid that was unworthy of the name. But at least they would face the day with a full tummy, Holli thought, feeling stuffed to the gills, and the sensation took a little of the edge off her nerves.

The merest glimmer of sunlight had not yet begun to pierce the gloom of the early morning. The darkness cast a solemn shadow over their undertaking, and Holli felt as if she were girding for battle as she slipped her feet into the hiking boots that either Khasar or Puck had magically obtained for her. Underneath her sweater and jeans she wore a sports bra

and running shorts just in case she had to ditch the angel mode and swim like a normal human. She didn't know what would happen if Nessie ripped off her arm, in either form, and she absolutely didn't want to find out. Truth be told, though, she wasn't keen on seeing just how cold the lake was either. She'd never realized Scotland was so far north; even Minnesota had warmer summers.

Urquhart Castle was actually a little closer than Puck had told them, and it took less than an hour for them to hike there over the grassy hills. The first rose-gold rays were licking at the edges of the horizon when they reached the crest of the last hill and caught their first glimpse of the castle sprawled out across the green promontory, looming majestically over the lake. It wasn't as massive as some of the medieval fortresses they'd seen, but it was an impressive sight nonetheless.

The castle was a series of half-crumbled old structures, though rather more solid than Holli had been expecting, and was surrounded on three sides by the dark waters of Loch Ness. As they followed the three angels across the old drawbridge it occurred to Holli that the tall tower on their left, perched nearly on the water's edge, would have been a pretty good place from which to keep an eye on everything nearby. Like the sword and its hiding place? Maybe.

"You know they're just waiting for the right moment, and then they'll stab us in the back and take Chrysaor," Derek hissed in her ear. "Why are we going along with them?"

Holli shrugged. This quest was starting to make less and less sense the further they went, not that it had ever made much sense from the start. "Weren't there supposed to be those two other angels, or demons, rather?"

"Yeah, what happened to them?"

They had their answer soon enough, as a hatefully gorgeous demon-girl with a short red pageboy sashayed her way down the bricked path from the watchtower, followed by a tall spirit who was wearing a ridiculous gold lame cape like he was about to go onstage or something. Melusine, no doubt, and Prince Jehuel. But he looked more like a magician than the Lord of the Sword.

"Who dresses him, Prince?" Derek whispered. "No wonder the doves were crying!" Despite herself, Holli giggled. But she stopped giggling fast when the devil-girl parked herself in Holli's face and wrinkled her lip scornfully.

"Well, this is seriously irregular. Robin, do correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't mixing mortal blood and angel fire generally considered grounds for a good swift kick out of Heaven's good graces?" She met Holli's eyes, and Holli realized that this was one evil that was easy to hate. "Oh, don't give me that, little girl. I know everything – and I do mean everything – about you and the rest of your wretched family!"

Hate, hate, hate, hate, hate! Holli thought a vicious string of not very nice words at her. Who did this demon-bitch think she was?

"There's no time for this," Puck broke in as Melusine began to open her mouth. "As much as I'd like to indulge your little love-fest, we have common interests at stake at the moment and I'd very much like to get on with it before the castle staff shows up and wonders what this boy is doing wandering about the premises. Khasar, this is the angel Melusine and Prince Jehuel, once of the Sarim and one-time Prince Regent of Rahab. Melusine, Prince, the archon Khasarotjofee and his mortal proteges, Holli and Derek. And as you may note, Mel, shadowstalkers are a little more wont to stretch their interpretation rules than their less creative brethren, which may prove to be quite handy here. Follow me."

Holli saw that Khasar's eyes had narrowed when Puck mentioned shadowstalkers, but when the archon noticed her looking at him, he shrugged and urged her to follow the diminutive Fallen. They climbed the short distance to the tower and entered it, then climbed several flights of stairs until they reached the top. From there, they had a spectacular view of the loch, as the slowly rising sun began to illuminate the ripples on the quiet water.

"The chamber of the sword is only about three hundred yards out from the shore," Puck pointed to the middle of the lake. "There used to be an sub-aquatic tunnel leading out to it, but it collapsed a long time ago, either right after the sword was put there, or when the castle was blown up in

1692. Khasar, what you and Melusine and I are going to do is to dive into the water off the top of the Great Hall over there, on the right, and splash around enough to attract Nessie's attention. We'll lead her off to the north, at which point the Prince and the once and future Faery King will resurrect the tunnel in order for the children to run through and grab the sword."

"Forget it," Khasar replied instantly. "You expect me to leave the two of them with two Fallen princes? You may hold me in contempt, having fooled me once, renegade, but do not think to do it again. We Divine are not so stupid as you think us."

"Suit yourself," Puck shrugged. "Of course, I'm assuming that you've got the firepower to blow through hundreds of tons of rock, and enough muscle to hold back thousands of tons of displaced water."

His eyes glinted as he showed his teeth to Khasar, who said nothing. "I didn't think so."

"Can you really do that?" Holli asked the Faery King.

Oberon nodded thoughtfully and stroked his short beard. "This was never my demesne, but it is not so far from Albion. Now that I am freed of my bonds, I can draw upon the very power of the earth and water itself. However, I must caution you that an effort of this magnitude will never pass unnoticed. You must make all haste in recovering the sword, and tarry not in returning it to its master."

Oberon gestured towards Prince Jehuel, who smiled primly and looked pleased, although he seemed to be avoiding Holli's eyes. I wonder what's up with him, she thought, as he glanced at her then looked away again.

"Will they come? Are you sure they will notice us?" Khasar was looking frustrated, but what choice did he have? Someone had to keep the monster busy, and both Oberon and Jehuel were needed elsewhere.

"On wings of eagles, one might say, if eagles were very large demons capable of out-flying a jet fighter." Puck shook his head. "Nice try, archon, but the king does not exaggerate. When he draws upon the land, even mortals will know something is afoot. The Mad One and his warriors will be here within minutes."

"So, we have no chance even if we have the sword?" Derek cried. "There's five of you, plus Holli is six, and I don't count because I can't even see what's going on! If he shows up with an army, what will you do?"

"Never fear, child," Puck said, reaching up to pat Derek on the head. Holli flinched, as the anger in Derek's eyes flared up so fast that she thought he was going to punch the irritating demon. "We have a surprise awaiting him as well. Just run along now, fetch that sword, and I'll take care of everything."

I just bet you will, Holli thought, glaring at the evil little being. Why was Khasar just going along with him? Why? But with no clue of what she could possibly do about anything, she reluctantly followed Derek back down the crumbling stairs as the archon leaped off the parapet and followed the two demons over to the northern tower. Entering it felt disturbingly like entering her own tomb.

With her angelic vision, the hidden steps to the passageway were not difficult to find in the tower's cellar. What looked like nothing but an ancient stone floor to her human eyes glowed brightly purple, a circle of violet fire with a green rune sealing it shut. Oberon stepped inside the circle, kneeled down and placed his palm upon the rune and said something long that sounded like complete gibberish. Nevertheless, it quenched the purple flames instantly while the rune flickered twice, then disappeared itself.

Oberon rose, took a step back, and with a wave of his hand caused a huge six-foot by six-foot square of stone to rise from the floor and deposit itself to the side of the huge hole it had just exposed, a hole which proved, upon closer look, to be steps. Prince Jehuel immediately plunged down them, but Oberon waited for the two mortals.

"Um, not to be a wuss, but I can't see anything," Derek muttered. Holli grabbed his hand, and he took it with a grunt that she accepted as a thanks of sort. He was, as usual, disgruntled about her advantage, but at least this time he wasn't too proud to accept her help. As they began their second descent, she heard the large stone block grinding back into place. Even though she knew she could fly right through

it if necessary, the sound still made her blood run cold. She squeezed Derek's hand; after a moment, he squeezed it back.

These secret steps went far, far deeper than she'd ever imagined possible. It was like walking up a skyscraper in reverse, and she dreaded the thought of trudging back up them. Assuming, she thought darkly, they even got the chance. As they descended, she wondered who had built them, and how they'd managed to dig through the solid rock and under what she had read at the hotel was a very deep lake. They must have had some serious angelic help, she decided after losing count somewhere around fifty flights.

"Eighty-one floors," said Derek, breathing hard in her ear after they finally reached the bottom. "We're hundreds of feet down."

Holli wished he hadn't said that. She could feel the oppressive mass of the rock surrounding them, millions of tons just waiting to collapse upon her. But worse still was the sense that all that rock was just a thin skin keeping back all that water from rushing in and drowning them. She could feel her sense of hysteria rising, but she bit her lip and forced it down. *Daughter of the King. You're a Daughter of the King. You're a Daughter of the King and you're not afraid of anything!* She told herself that over and over as she and Derek followed Jehuel and the golden glow that now surrounded him as he led them forward, into the tunnel and under the menacing weight of the terrible dark waters only feet above their heads.

CHAPTER 33

SWORD AND STORM

ARTHUR O' BOWER HAS BROKEN HIS BANDS
AND HE'S COME ROARING OWRE THE LANDS
THE KING O' SCOTS AND A' HIS POWER
CANNAN TURN ARTHUR O' BOWER.

— *Mother Goose's Melodies for Children*

The tunnel ended abruptly in a jumbled pile of broken stone. Holli swallowed hard at the realization that somewhere on the other side of that pile, however thick, were the waters of Loch Ness. She looked at Derek; his face was glistening and he nervously ran his forearm over his sweating brow. At least she wasn't the only one who was scared. Even the two fallen angel-lords looked a little uneasy, but after taking a deep breath, Oberon stepped forward and placed his hands on the closest stone. Holli would have preferred it if the Faery King had looked a little more confident, though, and she grabbed onto Derek hard enough that he grunted with pain when the earth began quaking.

The rumbling grew louder and Holli was about to start screaming when suddenly two huge bolts of green lightning leaped from the Faery King's open hands. There was a deafening roar, and the two mortals fell to the broken stones of the tunnel as an almost unthinkably powerful magic hurled aside the massive pile of rocks that kept out the waters. Holli cried out and clung to Derek in fear, burying her face in his chest, but the horrid watery onslaught never came. Instead, she felt hands at her back, pulling her to her feet.

“Get up, Holli Lewis, and run!” Jehuel shouted in her ear. “There is no going back!” *You are a Daughter of the King*, she told herself again. *You don't fear anything*. She didn't really buy it, but between that and Jehuel's urging, she managed to

get moving. But she came to a stunned stop when she ran forward a few steps and saw what the Faery King had wrought.

A circular hole was bored through the water, throbbing and undulating with the terrible pressure of the deep. The ground was murky and wet, black, foul-smelling goop with weird, unidentifiable things sticking out of it. Surrounding her, above and on either side, was the inky dark of Loch Ness, held back by nothing but the invisible force of the Faery King's will. Derek was at her side, but he was no more eager to step into that disgusting black lake bottom than she was.

"Do not tarry, children," Oberon muttered, the strain of his effort showing in his voice. "I cannot hold this for long."

Holli looked at Derek. His eyes were wide and full of fear, but he shook his head. There was no need to say anything. Without a word, they took off running with Holli leading the way, stumbling and slipping through the murk that sucked at their shoes and slowed them down.

"I can't see anything," Derek shouted suddenly. Holli realized that she'd adjusted her sight without thinking about it.

"Take my hand," she said, turning back and grabbing his when she realized that he couldn't see her either. But when she started to turn around again, her attention was grabbed by something moving in her peripheral vision. She looked to her right, to the north, and saw to her horror, that something very large was moving towards them, and moving towards them fast.

"The monster's coming!" she shouted, and the two of them somehow managed to run even faster. Her left foot sank in a soft spot and her shoe came off, but she didn't hesitate to abandon it.

"There! I can see something – there's light ahead!" Derek yelled. Sure enough, there was, a soft white light glowing wondrously in the black abyss. Thank you, God! She dared a quick glance off to the side, and saw to her relief that Khasar and the two demons had managed to draw off the monster. It looked like snake threaded through a turtle without a shell, which might have been funny if it weren't for the violent speed with which it turned and snapped at one of the brightly

glowing figures that twisted and rolled about its long, snaky neck.

At least it wasn't snapping at her, she consoled herself as she kicked off her other shoe. The light was close now, only another hundred feet, and she was practically flying towards it, though not so fast as Derek, who'd let go of her hand as soon as he was able to see again. He was sprinting like a track star towards what looked like an undersea cavern, in the middle of which was the sword, Chrysaor.

It was the sword itself which was shining, casting out a light that was almost blinding at close quarters. It shone in the darkness like an emblem of their hope, its white blade sheathed halfway in stone. There was nothing overtly special about it, no jeweled hilt like Excalibur, but there was a power radiating from it that struck her with such awe that she almost forgot to be afraid. Derek, reaching the blade, leaped up on the broad stone and pulled Chrysaor from its adamantine scabbard. He brandished it triumphantly at her, but his shout of joy died in his throat and she saw his eyes go wide at something behind her.

"Down!" he shouted, and she hurled herself to the muck without delay. Something huge and leathery swept over her head with an earsplitting roar; the neck of the monster! It roared again and as abruptly as it had come, it disappeared. Holli rolled over and saw it swimming back towards the depths, and when she looked back towards the cavern, she understood why. There was dark green blood dripping from Chrysaor, staining its white brilliance.

"That's the Loch Ness Monster?" Derek said, bemusedly, looking at the blood from the wound he'd dealt it. He seemed to be in a state of shock, or at least stunned that he was still alive.

"Come on!" Holli lurched towards him, her feet sinking in the muck, and pulled at his sleeve. "I don't think we have much longer." She couldn't really tell, but the tunnel carved through the water seemed a little smaller and tighter than it had a moment ago. Maybe Nessie's violation of Oberon's spell had weakened it or something. It didn't matter. They had to get out of there, now!

Again, they ran, knowing that the monster could strike again at any moment. Holli looked to the left and to the right, but she saw nothing, not even the three angels in the water. It seemed like an eternity, but it could not have been long before they saw the green glow surrounding Oberon's hands, but it was dimmer now, and shaking. They had almost reached them when there was a sudden flash of movement to the left and again the snaky neck slashed through the magic tunnel, this time in front of them. Holli saw nothing but onrushing white teeth, coming directly for her, when the tunnel abruptly collapsed under the massive pressure of the black waters.

She screamed and reached for Derek, grabbing his arm as black liquid Hell exploded all around them.

Holli woke up lost in darkness, wondering what had happened. It might have been seconds or centuries after that dreadful moment of sheer terror. She blinked, and with angelic eyes saw that Derek was lying next to her, his hand still clutching Chrysaor. Blood was trickling from beneath him and she caught her breath, thinking he was dead, until she saw that his back was moving up and down. He was still breathing? But where were they? She rolled him over and saw that he had landed on two broken rocks, tearing open the old wounds on his chest. They were bleeding, but nothing life-threatening, thank God. She whispered a quick prayer of thanks for their mysterious rescue, then looked about the vicinity.

They were at the foot of the stairs, of all things, at the bottom of that unthinkably deep staircase below the castle watchtower. The minus-eighty first floor, she thought. Something groaned, and she jumped, until she realized it was Oberon, nearly unrecognizable under a veil of shattered stone dust. He shook his head and blew dust out of his eyes, then nodded to her.

"Well done."

"I don't know what happened. I thought we were dead. The water... it came rushing in."

The Faery King smiled ruefully. "I could not hold it out any longer. The monster was just too much. If you had left

the mortal shadow a moment later, I could not have saved you."

"I did what? Jumped out of *septus*?"

"You did. What astounds me is that you took him with you." He indicated the prone figure of Derek. "I did not know such things were possible, but it seems you managed to draw upon the power of the sword through him, or perhaps it was something else, I cannot say. Fortunately, the monster was caught off-guard by the collapse of the tunnel, so I was able to seal off the passage against the water and pull you through the stone. The beast is a spirit of water and would not follow."

Holli looked disbelievingly at the tons of rock that once more served as a huge underground cork. He pulled them through that? Even considering what she knew of the shadows, it was still remarkable. "Thank you," she said.

He smiled again, this time genuinely amused. "I'm told we need that sword."

Okay, fair enough. Either way, she was glad he'd bothered to grab her and Derek as well. But how had she done that? Derek stirred, and she kneeled down next to him as he began to wake up. "Where's Jehuel?"

"I sent him up to the tower when I felt my strength failing. Let us make haste to join him. There will be aftershocks to my working here, and the seal may not hold." Even as he spoke, the earth shivered and Holli fancied that she could see a trail of water seeping through the rocks. But when Oberon quickly stooped to lift Derek in his arms, she realized that it wasn't her imagination.

"Take the sword," the Faery King commanded as it fell from Derek's still-nerveless grasp. "I cannot touch it."

Holli picked it up; the hilt felt oddly warm to the touch. Then a cracking sound behind her gave her wings, literally, as she leaped into the stairwell and began flying upwards right behind Oberon as the stony seal broke and the waters of Loch Ness rushed in with all the mindless fury of a subterranean hurricane. They spiraled up the staircase, with the water nearly lapping at her heels as the explosive pressure sent it rushing higher, ever higher.

She was getting dizzy with the constant upward spinning and her vision was reduced to little more than endless grey stone, whirling around and around, but she did not dare leave the material for fear she'd drop the sword. The water seemed to be alive, ravenously pursuing, and droplets of spray lashed out at her as if from foam-flecked jaws. Oberon, too, was handicapped by the need to carry Derek, and for one terrible moment, Holli thought they were lost when the cold liquid licked at her feet before engulfing them entirely.

But just when she had determined to leave *septus* behind and hope that she could still somehow manage to hang on to Chrysaor, or at least note where it fell, the icy burn that was freezing her feet suddenly dropped in temperature. Still swirling higher, she was too sick to her stomach to look down, but when she twiddled her feet, she realized they were dry. Oberon, too, had noticed something, for she had to spread her wings and arrest her frantic climbing in order to avoid running into him.

"The waters have stopped. We've reached the tower and we're above the ground," he said, floating to the nearest stairwell and gently depositing his burden before slumping to the stair. He was looking almost green beneath his beard. With a groan, he buried his face in his hands. "I think if I could vomit, as you mortals do, I would."

Holli was glad he couldn't, because if he did, she had no doubt that she'd quickly follow suit. "Is he okay?"

"I believe so." The Faery King placed a hand over Derek's face. For a brief moment, a greenish light flared, and Derek, choking and coughing, rolled sideways away from the fallen angel's hand.

"Get that thing away from me!" he shouted.

"I am sorry, but I am no healer," Oberon apologized and Holli caught a whiff of the acrid stink as he waved his hand. Holy cow, that was foul! "I thought that might wake you."

"Yeah, along with the dead buried in that cemetery over there," Derek said, still gagging. "Hey, Holli, you got the sword! What happened?"

"Stuff, lots of stuff," Holli said wearily. "I'll tell you later. Let's get this thing to that Jehuel before those black spiral things get here, m'kay?"

They made their way uncertainly down the stairs, which were blessedly dry, and learned that they were only two floors up. They emerged into sunshine and a scene of rampant devastation. While the two towers on the promontory still stood, the hill overlooking the approach to the castle had collapsed, as had the drawbridge, the remains of which could be seen in the ditch it had so recently traversed. As they looked around in stunned amazement, another aftershock nearly knocked them from their feet and three large stones tumbled down from the watchtower, one landing not more than ten feet from them.

"The land is troubled. It knows I am here now, but it cannot serve two masters."

"I thought this wasn't Albion?"

"It isn't." The Faery King shook his head reflectively. "If this had been Albion, I daresay the very Cotswolds would have been riven. I am glad that the sword was not hidden in my demesne proper. Even so, I fear this will continue until the matter is settled."

Holli elbowed Derek, carefully. "You okay?"

"I'll be all right." Derek pointed to the south. The sky was growing darker, and it was growing darker fast. "I mean, under normal circumstances, I would. Hey, Oberon, you got any more tricks in hand?"

"Leave that to me," Puck declared, materializing in front of them, followed by Jehuel, Khasar and Melusine. He looked worried, but his eyes lit up with delight when he looked at the blade in Holli's hand. "Well done, my liege! Oh, well done, you two! You've done quite a number on the property, I'm afraid, but that's an issue for the Historic Society to deal with and I could never stomach the Jacobins anyway. Prince Jehuel, I believe you may be familiar with this particular blade?"

If Puck looked delighted, Jehuel's eyes were blazing with a mixture of emotions that Holli couldn't have attempted to describe. Awe, love, lust, greed and an overpowering joy were only the start, and his handsome face was like that of a child who had tasted chocolate for the very first time. She glanced at Khasar, and when he nodded, she turned Chrysaor around and presented it to the angel-prince, hilt-first. He reached

out slowly for it, oh, so slowly, as if he feared it would disappear or turn into a snake before his eyes.

But when his fingers closed around the hilt, there was a hum, a flare of golden light, and thunder boomed over their heads, shaking the entire headland. For a moment, even the shadow rushing towards them from the south appeared to freeze, before resuming its headlong advance.

The ecstatic angel-prince cared nothing for the oncoming storm, instead he threw back his head and shouted triumphantly as he thrust Chrysaor towards the darkening sky. There was a terrible crack, as if the Earth itself was fractured, and four bolts of ebon light struck the tip of the blade from the four points of the compass, hurling everyone but the two royal angels to the ground. Jehuel howled, but in joy, not pain, and before their eyes he swelled until he was nearly twelve feet tall.

Suddenly, he no appeared longer ludicrous, but terrible, and what had seemed like pretentious affectation before now looked like nothing more than his princely due. He whirled about and pointed the glowing white blade at Melusine's throat; the prostrate demon-girl's eyes were wide with shock, perhaps even a little guilt.

"What do you think of your despised protege now, Temptress?" His eyes were hard and cruel, and they gleamed with unholy delight. "Like so many others, you have wronged me. And yet, but for you I would not be here now, so I will spare you my wrath. Consider the debt paid."

Without waiting for her response, Jehuel turned back to face the south. Holli's eyes lingered on the devil-girl, who wrinkled her lip and rolled her eyes when she noticed Holli looking at her. "I'd say it's time to bring the noise, Robin," she told Puck.

"Indeed," the treacherous angel agreed.

The Faery King, too, seemed surprisingly relaxed about the dark host's approach, and Holli wondered what it was that they had planned. It had better be something good, she thought. The wind was rising fast, lashing her hair wildly about as the massive shadow came closer and she began to be able to pick out the individual demons that comprised it. There were riders of the great winged wolves and their two

roaring heads, there were dragons and griffins and things that looked like lions with a snake jammed through them. There were the whirling black spirals and more ram-headed goat-demons than she could count. There were huge hell-knights in heavy black armor and red-skinned, black-winged demonesses wearing hardly anything at all. And in the midst of this great Fallen army was a malicious darkness, a black and evil void from which no light escaped. The evil storm was nearly upon them now.

"Is there any chance that anyone could let me see what's going on," she heard Derek complain. Khasar said nothing, but he nodded slowly before he transformed into his fighting Aspect of the great blue-winged lion. Holli fingered the wicked blade at her side, wondering which sword she should use, that or her fiery Divine blade. Neither would do much against what looked like two legions of fallen angels, but she wasn't going to go down without a fight. She only wished she could see Daddy one more time and tell him how if he ever wanted to see her again, he had to stop fighting so hard and accept God's grace. *Heavenly Father, Almighty God, if you've ever heard a single thing I've said, please, make him listen to you, please! Let them kill me in his place, God, but in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, please just give him more time!*

She drew Flamestealer and nearly dropped it in shock. The evil thing was humming, moaning actually, and visibly shaking at the feast of angelfire that surrounded it.

"Whoa! Is that thing alive?" Derek shouted. "Holy cow!"

Forget it! Holli quickly slammed the evil thing back into its scabbard. If an angel's sword was good enough for Aliel, then one was good enough for her. But she had no chance to draw it, for just then, as the Mad One's army began to descend upon them, the Earth exploded.

CHAPTER 34

FELL AND FEY

WHEN THE POETS DREAMED OF ANGELS
WHAT DID THEY SEE?
THE BISHOPS AND KNIGHTS WELL PLACED TO ATTACK
— David Sylvian, (“When Poets Dreamed of Angels”)

It was as if a bomb had burst in their midst, only there was no blast ripping them to pieces. And instead of shards of steel flying in every direction, there were petty spirits of every sort and shape imaginable launching themselves skyward. Wood and water, sand and stone, the wild spirits of earth, sea and sky rose up from the water of the Loch, from the hills, from the nearby forests and from the very ground under Holli's feet. They were small, they were without armor and poorly armed too, but there were thousands, tens of thousands of them, and they hurled themselves against the Mad One's host without remorse or restraint, aroused by the hatred only seven centuries of demonic misrule could inspire.

Oberon rose into the air with them, and again from his hands the green lightning struck, carving two deadly bolts of devastation out of the enemy's ranks. Those gaps were barely filled with new warriors when the Faery King's horde smashed into the foe, shrieking and shouting, with far more bravery and ardor than discipline. They were brave and they outnumbered the usurper's host three to one, but they were small, so very small. Nor did they look like warriors and Holli found it hard to believe they could prove a match for the Mad One's great army of evil.

It was like watching water breaking upon a stone. When the two forces collided, the Faery horde shattered upon the darkly burning blades of the shadow army. Holli saw one Hell-knight smash aside at least a dozen sprites with a

mighty blow of his sword, and the fiery breath of his black steed incinerated six more. The hungry jaws of the Cerebei snapped up spirit after spirit, even more than the brutal studded clubs their riders wielded so cruelly. And hundreds went flying in all directions at the merest touch of the dread black spirals, only to regroup and fly at the foe again. But try as they might, none managed to come anywhere near that deadly quiet darkness at the center.

And yet, their efforts were not completely in vain. Holli saw that many, if not most, of the lesser demons and demonesses on the perimeter were being ripped to shreds by the vicious teeth and claws of the wildlings. The reckless abandon of the Faery assault seemed to dismay their foes, and the terrible shadow was arrested halfway between Earth and Heaven, not retreating, but no longer advancing either. One particularly ferocious band of wood sprites even managed to disembowel a dragon, then ripped apart the shrieking rider of a two-headed wolf before being driven off by a deadly pair of Hell-knights. Still, the battle wasn't looking good as far as Holli could tell.

"They can't break them," Khasar muttered, confirming her opinion.

"It's those cursed knights, Melusine snarled. "Nothing short of a prince's fire will penetrate that armor."

Off to the side, Prince Jehuel was trembling, his face white with barely restrained passion, as he watched the terrible destruction of the Faery King's forces. Once he shouted and made as if to leap into the fray, but Puck's firm hand restrained him.

"Bide your time, Prince," he advised the seething angel-lord. "It will be soon. You must not strike too early, at all costs you must reach Maomoondagh and strike him down. If you attack now, you will never reach him!"

Puck walked over and placed his hand on Khasar's muscular shoulder. The great lion's golden fur twitched and the archon growled low in his throat, but Puck did not flinch. "I am aware that it is considered unseemly to take sides, but in the current circumstances, I wonder if perhaps you might see fit to lend us a paw or two."

"I have a dispensation," Khasar rumbled, not sounding displeased at the prospect of wreaking havoc among the Fallen. "If Oberon will tell me where he will strike, I shall clear a path for Prince Jehuel. But he must follow me closely. They will fall quickly upon us."

"Khasar, no!" Holli cried, pulling on his mane. She couldn't bear it. There was no way he'd be able to fight his way through that chaos in the sky. If a pack of Twice-Fallen had nearly pulled him down, how could he survive the Hell-Knights?

"We are created for a purpose, my dear." His breath was hot and sweet in her face. "There is nothing to fear."

"Then I'm coming with you!" Holli answered, even though her eyes were burning. "So am I," she heard Derek announce. The two demons, Puck and Melusine, glanced at each other; their silence conspicuous.

"Derek, you will stay," the archon answered, and his voice brooked no argument. "Though you can see them now, they could strike you down with little more than a glance. Holli, are you sure?"

"Let me ride on your back again, the way we did before. And this time, if someone shoots an arrow at you, try to dodge, will you?"

The lion's rumbling laughter eased the fear gripping her heart as he lowered his shoulder and she climbed onto his back. It wasn't exactly comfortable, but it wasn't completely unfamiliar either. Once she was settled, Khasar growled at the Fallen.

"Follow me, Prince Jehuel, and may the Lord Almighty guide your hand."

Jehuel blinked at the unwanted blessing, but he saluted Khasar and Holli with his sword, then threw his cloak back with a dramatic flourish. "Strike them with thy vengeance, O king of Faery, and with this most sacred sword shall we inaugurate the reign of the once and future king of Albion!"

Khasar snorted and Holli, despite feeling like she was going to throw up, couldn't help smiling. Well, Jehuel could be as pompous as he wanted, as long as he took down that horrible Mad One up there, hiding behind his black veil of shadow. Khasar roared a defiant challenge, and then they

were arcing skyward. Holli kept her own wings furled to keep them from getting in Khasar's way as his powerful blue wings brought them towards the raging battle in seconds, but it was nice to know that if she was thrown off, she wouldn't plunge straight down to the Loch below.

The battle was even more vicious when seen up close. It was confusing, a mass of screaming, shouting blurs and colorful bursts of light exploding everywhere as spirits were obliterated left and right. She saw five dryads clinging to the neck of a wolf-thing; as its rider plucked one off and smashed it to bits with his club, another managed to dig its fingers into the wolf's eye, causing the demonic beast to thrash so wildly that it threw its rider.

She didn't see what happened to him, nor did she see the flash of green lightning that smashed into the battling figures in front of her, she only heard a loud hiss followed by a booming crack, and then the aftereffects. Where a moment before there had been a large black dragon leering at Khasar and opening its jaws wide, now there was nothing, and for twenty yards on either side of them, demons were shrieking and beating at the incandescent flames flaring out from their tattered Aspects.

"For the Most High!" Khasar roared, and Holli lurched back as his powerful wing-strokes sent them speeding forward. She slashed wildly at a black-armored helmet, then screamed and nearly dropped her sword when the knight parried her stroke and struck back at her. But they were already past him, Khasar's terrible paws were smashing demons aside and a burst of silver flame from his mouth sent one black spiral spinning off into three of its dark kin, setting all four of them alight with holy silver fire.

A griffin dove towards him from the side, its huge eagle claws outstretched, but a stroke from Holli's flaming sword forced it into a keening retreat, minus one leg. A Hell-knight thrust at Khasar's maned head, but the archon ducked, twisted and ripped at the unarmored belly of the knight's fire-breathing steed with his curved claws. A moment later, Holli saw a white-hot Chrysaor carving through the black helm as if it was soft plastic. Seeing this, the two demons behind the knight turned tail and fled before Prince Jehuel, and Holli

herself ran through an unwary black spiral that was attempting to evade Khasar's powerful jaws.

"Show yourself, coward, before I send you to the Pit from which you crawled," shouted Jehuel, looking not at all ridiculous any longer, but like a true Lord of the Sarim, like the angelic warrior prince of Heaven he had once been. A small dragon, half again the size of Khasar, flew towards him snorting fire and Jehuel struck it down with Chrysaor as easily as if he was swatting a fly.

There was a tearing sound, and the demons on either side of them fell back as the shadow parted, dissolving as it fell away. Behind it was Maomoondagh, the Mad One, the usurper king of Albion, in all his hideous splendor. He was white, like a corpse, and on his brow he wore a crown of woven bone. His eyes were a colorless shade of grey, but they glowed with a dark, occultic fire. His long silver hair swirled about him like a cape, and he wore no armor, exposing an emaciated frame. He was gruesome, like a Grim Reaper without his cloak and yet there was a twisted beauty to him that fascinated even as it appalled.

He carried no shield, only two thick black-fire swords, each with a wicked hook at the end. He regarded Jehuel without fear, and a faint smile even pulled at his thin grey lips. "You cannot defeat me, renegade. Not even with that sword. I am immortal beyond immortal. I am a god among gods."

"With this sword I have slain your uncles, your brothers and your sisters. And with it, I shall slay you, Son of Chaos. You do not belong here; you never should have come."

"This is my realm. The land is mine, as surely as that blade belongs to you. Leave, or suffer the due consequence of your presumption."

Jehuel drew himself up to his full height, which would barely have come to the chest of Maomoondagh were they on the ground. But a flutter of his four wings brought him eye-to-eye with the false angel and he smiled contemptuously as Chrysaor burst into golden light and he sprang forward, a falcon attacking an eagle.

His speed was incredible, and yet Maomoondagh managed to turn aside his first blows. The mass of surrounding demons rustled as those behind pushed forward to see this

epic battle or soared higher in the sky to get a better view. Holli could see all too well, as she and Khasar hovered behind Jehuel, who was darting forward to strike, then dancing back again before the great blades of Maomoondagh could find their mark. Each time one of those hissing blades fended off Chrysaor, there was a hollow, booming sound, like thunder in the dark sky. Maomoondagh was stronger, but Jehuel was faster and it looked almost as if he wielded three blades to the Mad One's two. For a brief moment, they furiously traded blows as if neither of them would ever tire.

But if the combatants were well-matched, their weapons were not. Whatever evil forge had produced Maomoondagh' twin swords was no match for the fires of Heaven, and the deadly black flames of one blade were beginning to fade into dull grey when Chrysaor met it squarely, just above the hilt. There was a burst of purple light, then Maomoondagh hissed with irritation as he stared at the flamed-out useless stump in his hand. He hurled the hilt at Jehuel, who grinned triumphantly and pressed his attack even harder. Chrysaor was a golden blur, striking, thrusting and chopping, and the roars of the vast demonic audience fell to a hush when another purple flare left Maomoondagh unarmed.

But the Mad One seemed strangely unperturbed. "This is your last warning," he warned Jehuel. "Strike me and you shall surely perish!"

"You are well-named," Jehuel scoffed, and he brought Chrysaor back over his head, then buried it almost to the hilt in the Mad One's bare chest. Maomoondagh screamed with pain, a cry that shook the heavens, and clutched at the naked blade with both hands. His cry was echoed by his shaken army, dismayed by the mortal wounding of its leader. Jehuel smiled cruelly and he made as if to twist the blade in the wound, but he blinked, surprised, when he found that he could not. And then, to Holli's horror, the golden glow surrounding Chrysaor abruptly disappeared as if its power was being drained out of it.

And so it was. For a moment, all were silent as Maomoondagh grasped the hilt and pushed the dying sword out of his body with a terrible crackling sound. Jehuel was too stunned to react immediately, and by the time awareness

of his danger dawned in his eyes, it was too late. Maomoondagh, with a single powerful throw, drove the point of the magical blade into its owner's head, directly between the eyes. Jehuel did not cry out, he did not make a sound, but even if he had, it would have been drowned out by the demonic roar that hailed the Mad One's victory. Transfixed by his sword, the defeated angel-prince did not so much as move or even blink as Maomoondagh taunted him.

"Long have I prepared for this moment, Lord of the Sword. Countless spells did I cast, countless angels did I drain, but not until this very moment was I sure that my preparations were sufficient. Now I am a god among gods and Satan himself will fear to challenge me! But you, o prince of fools, shall return once more into the Void that is your destiny!"

And with those words, Prince Jehuel, once of the Sarim, vanished in a blinding flash that sent streamers of gold and silver arcing across the sky before plunging to the ground below. Holli was caught up in the strangely beautiful sight when Khasar growled at her and brought her back to her senses. "Get the sword," he snarled, and he twisted his body, sending her tumbling from his back.

She furled her wings and dove, catching the sword less than twenty feet from the ground. It no longer glowed white, but was the color of old, yellowed ivory, like the tusk of an elephant long dead. Was it useless? Had they already lost? Then all Hell seemed to break lose as the green lightning leaped into the sky and battle was again joined. But the Mad One's army was invigorated by Maomoondagh's triumphant duel, and though Oberon's wild spirits flew recklessly into the breach for a second time, they did so without hope of victory.

"To London!" she heard Puck shouting, but not until she looked at him did she realize he was yelling at her. "Fly, as fast as you can!" The problem was that London lay to the south, on the other side of the demonic army. She couldn't see Khasar anywhere, but she did her best to stay low and keep the stubbornly savage fairies between her and the enemy. Now, where was south, exactly? She saw a spot of sky that was less dark and headed for it, just as a quartet of Hell-knights smashed through a score of tree sprites, sending the smaller spirits flying in all directions.

"Angel!" one of them shouted, and only through a desperate twisting roll did she avoid being spitted on a devil's lance. But though the demon missed her, its evil steed was trained for battle, and she looked up just in time to see one of its flaming hooves heading directly for her face. It struck her hard in the head, and then she was falling, falling, falling....

CHAPTER 35

REDEMPTION

FOR KNIGHT TO LEAUE HIS LADIE WERE GREAT SHAME,
THAT FAITHFULL IS, AND BETTER WERE TO DIE.
ALL LOSSE IS LESSE, AND LESSE THE INFAMIE,
THEN LOSSE OF LOUE TOT HIM, THAT LOUES BUT ONE;
— Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*

Am I dead? Holli thought, too confused to be afraid. She was cold, horribly cold, the sky was empty and dark over her head and she had a strange sensation of falling. But if she was dead, why was she wearing a sports bra? Then she looked over her shoulder and no sooner had she realized that she was still alive than she learned she wouldn't be for long. The ground was approaching fast, very fast, and she was painfully aware that she no longer had wings.

“Oof!” Something hit her hard around the midsection, and then she was no longer falling, but was instead moving rapidly parallel to the ground. There was a faint scent of cinnamon, which seemed vaguely familiar. “Melusine?”

“Don’t you dare drop that sword,” the demoness ordered. Holli was somewhat surprised to see that her right hand was still holding onto Chrysaor. I guess that’s what they mean by a death grip. Only I’m not dead, I don’t think.

“You’re not dead,” Melusine answered her thoughts as if she’d spoken them aloud. “If you were an angel, you would have been, or at least as dead as angels get. Fortunately, you aren’t, so that was just a violent means of shedding the angelic guise with which those shadowstalkers cloaked you. I assume it was shadowstalkers, anyhow, I don’t know anyone else who would dare.”

“Um, who?”

"You may be a good liar, Holli, but it's a little harder when I can read your thoughts."

"Can you read this?"

"Very funny. I'd expect you to be a little more grateful."

"Yeah, well, you're trying to drag my brother off to Hell!"

"Not at the moment!" Melusine sounded almost offended. "Okay, fine, maybe I did just keep you from going to Heaven, but that's different. I'm not sure why, since I don't know what else Puck thinks he can do to Maomoondagh that will work any better than sticking that useless sword in the ugly beast's chest, but I'm sure he's got a backup plan. He always does."

Holli nodded, then screamed as Melusine rolled to avoid impaling Holli on a pine tree. They were flying at a rapid pace, really fast and really low. "Um, even if you don't drop me or run into something, I'm going to freeze to death here if you don't do something fast. And also, people are probably going to think it's really weird if I go sailing by without an airplane or at least a helicopter."

"Good point." Holli sighed with relief as Melusine took her and the precious sword out of *septus* and into the warmth of the higher shadows. Then, much to her surprise, she fell asleep.

She woke to a cloudless blue sky and the sound of demons arguing. Looking down, she saw they were high over the Thames, not far from the cross-topped peaks of the Tower Bridge. "I can't see anything," she heard Derek complain. She couldn't see him either. "Are you sure she's all right?"

"*Fiat visum,*" Puck said, then he and Derek came into view, as well as Melusine's arms. Holli gasped at the sight of dried blood on Derek's chest, until she remembered that he'd been hurt under Loch Ness.

"Are you okay? Did you see Khasar? What happened?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm not sure, exactly, although Khasar did manage to fight his way free after you got run over by that hell-horse. He and Oberon were getting chased north while we snuck around and followed you down here. Man, Holli, I thought you were smoked for sure, but Melusine was quick as a cat; she caught you and didn't look back."

"I hung onto the sword," Holli said proudly, waving it.

"Both of them. That's quite the look." He pointed at her, and she realized that she still had Flamestealer strapped to her side. It didn't go with her workout stuff quite as well as it had with the angelic robes, though.

"Like you're one to talk, Joe Boxer." She pointed at him and laughed. "You think maybe we can get them to stop and get some clothes for us? Your chest looks pretty bad."

"Merely a flesh wound." Derek grinned, then glanced up at the demon in whose arms he was hanging suspended. "Say, you don't think you could get us some clothes, do you?"

"No time, sorry," said Puck. He jerked his chin at a small dark cloud, far away on the northern horizon. It was distant, but it was approaching a little too quickly to be anything natural. "Melusine, stay on my heels and let me do the talking. Holli, you just hang onto that sword, and Derek, I suggest you close your eyes."

Derek made a face and Holli wondered what the demon meant by that. Then she found out, as Puck pulled in his leathery black wings, hugged Derek close to his chest and dive-bombed towards the river hundreds of feet below. Holli couldn't help shrieking as she felt Melusine's arms tighten around her and then her stomach was dropping out like she was riding the mother of all rollercoasters as they plunged recklessly downward, with the gray water below looking disturbingly like asphalt.

They hit, without impact thank God, and then they were rushing along underwater. Puck led them into some sort of huge tube that ran into the river, and they had sped through several turns down and in before Holli realized they must be traveling through the London sewers. The mere thought made her gag, and even the knowledge that she wasn't even on the same strata as the polluted liquid didn't help a whole lot. They cruised through a twisting maze of corridors, and Holli just starting to wonder how Puck could possibly have any idea where they were when they emerged from the water in front of a large, circular door.

Melusine released her, and Holli stood unsteadily upon her own two legs for the first time in a while, wrinkling her nose at the smell. The water, as she had correctly suspected,

reeked abominably, although the two seven-foot demons standing guard at the door didn't seem to mind.

"Oi, what you got here?" one of them demanded of Puck. Puck didn't flinch as the guard invaded his personal space, instead he reached up and pulled the demon's head down by one horn until they were nose-to-nose.

"We have to see Titania, now!"

The big demon tried to pull away, but Puck was much stronger than he looked. "Hey, let go! No password, no entry!"

"The password is this: Oberon lives and struck down the Mad One."

The guard's large yellow eyes widened, and he glanced worriedly at the other. "Right, then. Well, um, go right in... I'd better stay here." Holli saw Puck shoot Melusine a cynical glance; even she could tell that the guard had no intention of sticking around for a change of management.

They passed five more guard-posts in like manner, leaving a trail of stunned and frightened guards behind. None seemed especially inclined to face their former liege lord, and whatever vengeful grudge he might be bearing after having centuries to consider his betrayal. But the seventh door was an entirely different matter. There were more guards, five to be precise, and they were not so easily finessed. Their captain, a short but massive creature with four arms and an intelligent expression merely folded both pairs as Puck ran through his breathless routine. "You're lying," he said calmly. "The rebels were crushed this morning. And yet, I fail to see what you hope to accomplish in the absence of the King with two young mortals and a petty temptress."

"Rather a lot more than you'd probably imagine," answered Puck, meeting the guard captain's gaze directly. An unspoken communication seemed to pass between them. Holli was surprised when the captain smiled faintly and stepped aside.

"Very well. If you would see the Queen, see her you shall. Let her judge your fate."

"But sir," one guard protested. "The mortal bears arms."

"What of that!" The captain waved his concerns away and placed his lower right palm upon the door. A sigil, hitherto

unseen, glowed red and the door opened. "Do you think the Queen fears a mortal bearing metal sticks?"

The chastised guard retreated and the captain indicated that Puck and his companions were free to enter. As he walked them into the massive chamber, Holli heard him whisper to Puck. "If you succeed, remember me. If not, best do your cursed best to forget."

Puck's answering grin was full of cynicism as the captain took his leave. The chamber in which he left them was a high-ceilinged throne room, nearly as long as a football field. It was an architectural monstrosity, with high arches and alcoves lining either side. As Puck led them down the long march towards the dais at the end, Holli peeked in the nooks as they passed and saw both beautiful sculptures and exquisite paintings as well as frightening demonic trophies. At first she thought the things displayed on columns were busts, but she learned otherwise one horned devil's head opened its eyes and moaned unexpectedly.

A hand caught her wrist in an iron grip as she started to bring the sword up in instinctive response. "Control yourself," hissed Melusine. "Do you want to leave yours here too?"

Not if she could help it. She swallowed hard and tried to ignore the unblinking stare of a lion-headed archon in the next alcove, but the awful sight only made her start worrying again about Khasar, the word of his escape notwithstanding. They were two-thirds of the way to the end of the chamber now.

"Robin Goodfellow, is that you?" Titania rose from the lesser of the two thrones on the dais and irritably waved her hulking bodyguards and ladies-in-waiting aside. "How come you here?" The Fallen queen was the most beautiful thing Holli had ever seen. She wore only a simple emerald sheath with nothing more than a silver tiara set in her mass of crimson hair, yet her appearance permitted no doubts of her royal nature.

"Stand aside, Titania," Puck ordered. The queen's honor guard bristled at his tone, but fell silent at a glare from the glorious queen, who swiftly returned her attention to the fallen angel. "As goes the Blood Cup, so goes Maomoondagh. Stand aside and leave it to me."

"We are told the field was Maomoondagh's this day, Robin." Her green eyes were unreadable.

"Oberon is yet unconquered, Titania."

The Fallen Queen of the Isles raised one elegant finger and stroked her cheek in contemplation. It seemed as if she considered the matter forever, but it was really only a few seconds before she turned towards the waiting demons. "Out, all of you! Begone!" They vanished instantly.

"Damn you, Robin, you'd better be right," Titania warned him, though she smiled as she reached down and rumpled his hair. "Or there will be Hell to pay."

The demon closed his eyes for a second, but his expression was darkly amused when he opened them again. "There will be Hell to pay in any case, Faery Queen. If we fail, it is not the wrath of Maomoondagh you need fear, but rather the endless hunger of Diavelina."

His words struck home. Titania nodded once, her lips pressed firmly together, then she, too, disappeared. Puck whirled about and pointed to the larger of the two thrones, constructed of ivory embossed with a sumptuous crimson velvet cushion inlaid. "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Holli approached it cautiously. For all that it looked inanimate, the Mad One's throne had an evil presence all its own, lurking as if it was liable to spring out at her. Then she realized, to her horror, that it wasn't inanimate at all, because the cushion, red as blood, was pulsing slowly, as if it was alive.

"There's something seriously wrong with that thing," Derek said unnecessarily. "Kill it already!"

Holli raised Chrysaor, but her hands were shaking. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and brought the sword down hard. Something stung her hands as it struck something unyielding — the sword rebounded violently and went flying out of her hands.

"Oh, give me that," Derek said, in a disgusted tone. He reached down, picked up the sword and thrust it at the pulsating throne. There was a flare of red light and Derek was thrown backward five or six feet. He hung onto the sword, but he stared at it grimly before showing his reddened palm to the two demons. "It burned me through the hilt. I

don't know if the sword's got no juice left in it or what, but I don't think this is going to work."

"No, it is not," a thunderous voice rumbled through the vast chamber. Maomoondagh was standing on the far end of the chamber, surrounded by a score of his greatest champions. "And you, mortal, are going to die."

Derek brandished Chrysaor and stepped between Holli and the advancing demon king. The prongs of Maomoondagh's iron crown nearly touched the ceiling, and he covered more than a man's height with each step. Yet Derek did not retreat. "Stay back, or I'll destroy your throne and your power with it!"

Maomoondagh stopped and laughed, his pallid eyes narrow with contempt. "Strike away, little boy. Do you think me so foolish as to leave it unprotected?"

Holli stepped out of the way as Derek spun around and with a frustrated cry, smashed the blade down as hard as he could with both hands. This time, the crimson burst was accompanied by a thunderclap and Derek was hurled off the dais as the demons shouted with laughter.

"Derek! Are you all right?" Holli jumped to the edge, drawing Flamestealer as she did so, ready to make a last stand. Melusine and Puck were already at his side, pulling him to his feet. Chrysaor was several feet away, still sickly yellow, and when Derek, groaning loudly, limped over to pick it up, she saw the beginnings of a huge purple bruise on his back.

"I warn you, Son of Chaos, if you come closer, you shall perish," Puck was shouting at Maomoondagh, but Holli found herself looking at her weapon. Flamestealer was vibrating, and what she'd at first thought was Derek was actually the sword, moaning as it tried to bend around her shoulder to get at something behind her. But there were no angels behind her. What did it want? Wayland said it drank angelfire. She glanced backwards. The throne!

An idea struck her. Five of the dark champions were marching ominously towards them and Derek was struggling to raise Chrysaor to face them when she reversed the madly twitching sword in her grasp and thrust it backwards into the crimson seat of the living throne.

An inhuman shriek shook the chamber, freezing everyone. It came from Maomoondagh, who clutched at his breast and reeled backwards. Holli drove Flamestealer deeper into the soft scarlet, and when she twisted it, Maomoondagh cried out again and fell to his knees. She glanced under her arm and what she could see of the blade was glowing yellow-orange, as if the raw essence of angels was infusing it with pure volcanic power. Something like electricity was crackling all around the edges, and through the handle she could feel the sword was almost ready to explode.

"Stop them," Maomoondagh whispered painfully, and his champions sprang forward. But before they reached Puck and Derek, Holli pulled Flamestealer out from the throne and pointed it at the closest demon. A fiery torch of molten lava erupted from the Fallen-forged blade, incinerating the big demon in an instant. With a cry of joy, she swept the sword back and forth like a flamethrower, roasting three or four more demons and driving the survivors back.

"So you want some of that? You digging that? How you like that? What about some more of that?" She shouted incoherently as another evil spirit shrieked its last and erupted in a lethal rainbow of colors.

There was a moment of shocked silence when she paused to consider the strange sight of the mighty fallen angels cringing before her. Then she turned the deadly stream of angelfire on Maomoondagh himself. The usurper of Albion howled as the flames he'd stolen burned into his massive body, engulfing him in a raging inferno.

His champions wailed in dismay, but the Mad One's howls soon died out as his strength finally gave out and he collapsed onto the floor, overborne by the fury of the angelfire. But then, even as Holli was starting to sigh with relief, a very strange thing began to happen. The flames that were devouring the remains of Maomoondagh's prone form began to change color and swirl about counterclockwise, going first from an orange-red to a yellow-orange, then to a glowing white heat that seared her eyes and forced her to look away.

"What's going on?" she heard Khasar say. But before anyone could answer him, the swirling flames began to rise in a miniature tornado of fire about Holli's height, leaving

nothing underneath but a few charcoaled bones and a blackened skull that looked vaguely human. As angels and demons alike looked on in fear and confusion, the flames began to coalesce into a figure, a female figure, Holli saw, that mirrored her own, right down to her face.

It was almost like standing in front of Jami, except her twin's blonde hair had never shone with the white brilliance that radiated from the fiery goddess like a furnace, and the flaming eyes were not blue, but a madly roiling rainbow of colors instead.

"Free at last!" the beautiful creature exclaimed, raising her hands above her head in exultation. "Free at last, by all the Hells, I am free at last!"

"Master?" whispered one of Maomoondagh's dark champions incredulously.

Her glowing hand whipped around and caught him across the face with an audible crackle. The demon grunted, and Holli saw that his cheek was scorched where she had struck him.

"Mistress!" she spat, before smiling sweetly at Holli. "Oh, my dear, darling mortal, I cannot thank you enough for ridding me of that blundering buffoon. You don't know how long I have been trapped under the weight of his tedious mind."

"Um...." Holli wasn't sure what to say, but Puck finally managed to find his tongue and stepped forward to bow rakishly before her doppelganger.

"I do believe I am acquainted with a relative of yours, my lady. And I suspect that I have had the questionable fortune to have encountered you before, although I don't know if you would happen to recall our meeting."

The rainbow eyes narrowed and the fiery head tilted to the side as the goddess regarded the irrepressible demon. "The trickster," she commented, as if she was speaking to herself. "You were important, but I can't recall why."

"Oh, I rather doubt that," Puck said quickly. "But may I be so bold to inquire as to your name and your intentions?"

"Of course!" The goddess smiled, showing perfect teeth of fire. "I am the Queen of Albion and I intend to rule it as I did

before. Well, that's not precisely right, but I imagine you get the point."

One of Maomoondagh's champions pointed a clawed finger at Puck and Holli.

"They wasn't trying to help yer, yer Majesty, they was trying to kill yer."

"They were?" The goddess looked surprised, then shrugged. "I suppose you're right. But then, if that's so, why aren't you attacking them already?"

The demon took a step forward, but quailed when Holli raised Flamestealer and pointed it at his face. "Yer majesty... that sword."

"Oh, yes, of course." The goddess gestured at Holli and made rueful face. "I'm sorry, my dear, but we simply can't permit that sort of regicide to go unpunished, even if it worked out rather nicely in the end."

She took a step forward, but Holli knew what she was doing this time and she was ready. She didn't speak, she simply unleashed a blast of angelic hellfire right into the goddess' face.

Only this time, the flames didn't burn through this new Maomoondagh, they only flowed around the contours of her head until the colors changed and merged with her white-hot form. As they disappeared, she closed her eyes and an expression of enigmatic ecstasy flashed across her face.

"Mmmmm, hit me one more time." The goddess opened her luminous eyes and laughed. "Savaged by a little lamb! Oh, darling, my precious, don't you understand, there is nothing in this creation that can do me any harm!"

"To be sure," Puck agreed loudly. "After all, what could possibly harm a *true Daughter of Chaos*?"

Holli wondered at his strange emphasis, until she saw a flash of motion to her left. It was Derek. No sooner had Puck spoken than he ran towards the goddess, holding Chrysaor aloft. And although the burning flames licked out at him as he approached her, he did not hesitate, but cried out in wordless triumph as he plunged Chrysaor into the Chaos-thing's burning side like a spear.

"No!" Holli screamed, suddenly realizing what Derek had done as the Chaos fire erupted from the wound like a blazing

volcano and he disappeared from her sight in a mass of blinding-white flames. She took an uncertain step forward, desperate to help him, only to be met by a diving Khasar, who smashed into her and sent her flying backwards.

There was a brilliant flash and a deafening roar, and Holli felt herself rising into the air. Then something struck her, or she struck something, and the world vanished into darkness.

CHAPTER 36

RESTORATION

WHEN ALL THE WORLD DISSOLVES,
AND EVERY CREATURE SHALL BE PURIFIED,
ALL PLACES SHALL BE HELL THAT IS NOT HEAVEN.
— Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*

Holli awoke in a dark and formless void. It was cold. Her arms were trapped, as were her legs, though after a moment's panic she realized that she couldn't be paralyzed as she found that she was able to wiggle her toes. Whatever pinned her down was hard, either metal or stone of some kind. It didn't feel rough enough to be concrete. She tried to picture what had happened and where she was, but try as she might, she could only summon up the terrible explosion and the brief sensation of flying backward. How far below the ground was she? She had just enough room to move her head from side to side and for her chest to rise and fall, but that was all.

Despite her dire straits, she couldn't help a burst of hysterical laughter. Sure, she was buried beneath only God knew how much rubble, she couldn't move and she had no idea how long her air would last, but her chances of survival were looking a whole lot better than they were about five minutes ago. Maomoondagh was dead twice over, Flamestealer must have burned at least six or eight seriously evil demons to a crisp and maybe Puck or Melusine would be decent enough to come looking for her. She didn't count on it, though. They'd have no reason to assume she survived the collapse of the great chamber, and even if they suspected as much, she was pretty sure that Melusine would be just as happy to leave her buried alive, for all that she'd saved her life earlier.

And it would probably never even cross Puck's mind to think of her. But Khasar would look for her. He'd know she wasn't dead yet. He had pretty good connections in Heaven, after all. She did her best not to think about the many tons of rocks or whatever on top of her and turned her mind towards Derek. It didn't seem possible, first, that he was gone, or second, that she even cared. But after what they'd been through, after what he'd done, she knew she'd never be able to think of him as nothing but a self-centered, cold-blooded killer again. Even if he'd survived, which really didn't seem all that likely at the moment, what he did was pretty darn heroic. The thought made her sad, but it gave her hope too. If God could change a brutal, violent heart like his, then surely he could change a stubborn one like Daddy's....

"You have to get me out of here!" she cried out to her Heavenly Father, and as if in response, she suddenly had the vague impression that the weight above had lessened a little. A faint grayness appeared somewhere to her left, not so much a light as a crack in the total darkness that surrounded her. There was a creaking, groaning sound, and for one terrifying moment, she thought everything was going to collapse in on her.

"Hey, be careful!" she shouted.

"We found her!" she heard an answering shout. It was only a matter of moments before she was blinking and squinting as her eyes adjusted to the light. Huge blocks of broken stone were magically being lifted off her, but not until she sat up could she see who was freeing her. It was the Faery King himself, magically tossing monstrous chunks of concrete aside, accompanied by Khasar. Then she cried out as she tried to move her left leg and realized it was broken.

"Hold still," Khasar ordered, and he leaped easily down to her and placed both hands around her shin. She felt a warm sensation and the pain quickly disappeared. "You'll limp for a few days, but you'll recover. How's your head?"

My what? Holli reached up and felt something wet and sticky. When she drew her hand away, it was covered with blood. She felt light-headed at the sight of it, but the archon quickly reached out and healed that too. "That's a good trick,"

she told him, doing her best to wipe off her hand on the stone next to her.

The archon glanced at the Faery King and smiled. "Mortals are perilously fragile. It comes in handy, when it's permitted."

"Derek, is he okay?"

Khasar smiled, a little sadly. "It depends what you mean by that. He did not survive his victory, not in this shadow. He surprised me there, at the end. I did not truly believe he possessed the strength to see it through."

Holli bit her lip, surprised at the pain she felt. She didn't like Derek. She'd never liked him, and yet, pain of a sort that she had not known since losing Paul suddenly wracked her. But then, suspicion dawned suddenly in her mind. "You didn't think he'd have the strength... you don't mean you were counting on me!"

The archon shook his head. "No, he was chosen – he had prayed many times for a chance to serve so that his life would not be wasted behind bars. But his heart was always unsure. We were more certain of you, although when Jehuel appeared, I was of course delighted. Once he entered the picture, I hoped that no one need perish."

"I could never have done that, Khasar. Never. He was so brave. I don't think I could have run into the fire like that. Honestly, I don't think I could have done it."

"Then let us praise the Most High that we shall never know. Now, let's get you out of there." Khasar bent down and started to cradle Holli in his powerful arms, but he stopped when Oberon laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Leave her, archon, and allow me the honor." The Faery King was in excellent humor, and his bearded face was wreathed in a smile as with a mere gesture, he lifted Holli from the debris and gently deposited her in the midst of an open area cleared of the chamber's wreckage. A path had been cleared all the way to one of the great doors, and already dozens of angels had come to pay homage to the new lord of the realm. Some were entering slowly, and uncertainly, while others rushed in with expressions of delight and glee, but Oberon ignored them all as he bowed his head and kissed Holli's hand.

"Albion is in your debt, mortal maiden." He started to say something else, but then his eyes widened and he stiffened, forgetting Holli entirely as he stared at someone entering the hall. There was a sudden rush of murmurs, and then all conversation in the great room died down at once.

It was Titania. The spirits gathered in the chamber parted like the Red Sea before her. Her eyes were downcast, but she was entirely ravishing. Her waist-length hair was swept up and back, bound with a complicated silver filigree. She was wearing black robes and she was not only wingless, but barefoot. She paid no attention to the hushed demons around her, but walked slowly and gracefully towards the Faery King, whose bearded face was impassive, even haughty. He said nothing until she stopped ten or fifteen feet from him and curtsied, refusing to so much as look at his face before kneeling in front of him.

Oberon stood there and stared at her for a long moment, a stunning red, black and silver vision despite her conspicuously humble entrance. Holli saw his jaw bulge twice with repressed emotion before he spoke, harshly and coldly.

"Too much honour, it seems I paid.
All love and faith, Lady, mislaid.
How can it be that you come here,
For have you then nothing to fear?
For decades was I lorn and lost
Reckoning treach'ry's bitter cost.
What price a crown? What price a throne?
What think you could ever atone?

But Titania looked up to meet his gaze, and it was not she, but the Faery King, who blinked first. Her eyes were like two massive emeralds set in a sea of ice, and there was no humility in her voice as she answered with words that echoed through the shattered throne room.

I do not come for pardon, king,
Nor do I regret anything.
I had no thought to save your throne
I lived for Albion alone.

The whore of Chaos, yes, 'tis true,
Abandoned, what else could I do?
I come merely to acknowledge
Albion's king, and make my pledge
Of my undying loyalty
To Faerie and her royalty.

Oberon's face suffused with red, and Holli wondered if perhaps he might burst with rage. He swelled up and for a moment she actually thought he was going to strike Titania. But instead, he jabbed a finger in her face and, enraged, spat venom as poisonous as any snake's.

You beg no pardon, Lady, well,
Then get thee gone, posthaste, to Hell!
And learn no king can e'er ignore
Betrayal by an unfaithful —”

There was a flash of movement next to her and suddenly Puck was standing beside Titania. He raised his palm in shocking rebuke, and the makeshift Faery Court gasped in collective dismay. But Puck cared as little for the sensibilities of demon kings as he did for anything else and he shouted fearlessly back at the Faery King, interrupting him before he could complete his furious accusations.

“Speak not one more word, Oberon!
She thought of naught but Albion,
And your true faeries to protect.
She was ever the architect
Of your freedom, now listen well,
‘Twas I who changed the faery spell!
Lest you attempt to seek what’s thine
And bring to ruin my grand design.

“It was me,” he repeated, more calmly. “I changed Gloriana’s spell, and thus your memories. They are mostly true, it was only the end that was false. The queen never apologized to you, as she had nothing for which to apologize.

By the time you fell, she was already gone; her honor guard whisked her to safety as soon as the attack began."

Puck turned to Titania and went down on one knee. "Do forgive me, dear Lady. It was needful. There was no other way to keep him from your side once he was free, and I dared not let him fall into the hands of Maomoondagh."

Titania ignored him, and rose slowly to her feet. She and Oberon stared at each other, their faces impassive. Holli could not tell if they were about to embrace or engage in mortal combat. Immortal combat, she corrected herself, as she and all the watching demons held their breath waiting to see who would speak first. Finally, Oberon bowed his head and held out his right hand to Titania. She took it, held it for a moment, then curtsied again and kissed his ring. But Oberon's face was still cold and his voice was rough as he addressed her for a third time.

"Lady, it seems I have wronged you. And you have ruled Albion as its queen and seen her through her longest, darkest hour in my absence. Will you not stay, then, and defend her as her true queen against this new power rising from across the sea?"

Titania, still holding the Faery King's hand, threw back her head. Her beauty was overpowering, but Holli, from her vantage point, could see the beginnings of a tear in the corner of her eye.

"For all that I love Faerie, I shall not consent to be her queen alone, never! Nevermore shall I sit her throne, nevermore shall I wear this crown unless you first assure me that I am still the queen of your heart."

The waiting demons was silent and tense as they waited for the king's answer. It came quickly, as Oberon closed his eyes and pressed her hand to his chest. His eyes, too, were moist as he answered her in a voice husky with emotion.

"There is but one fire between us, Lady."

He crushed her to him in an embrace that was like a river bursting through a dam. Their audience roared with both relief and approval, and Holli looked around in awe as green grass began to shoot magically up from the dead, shattered concrete, transforming the wreckage of the Mad One's throne room into a glorious spring bower. Flowers blossomed, roses,

bluebells, tulips and more in a mad panoply of color and joy, and the sweet scent of them was like perfume filling the secret glade.

The Faery King slipped his arm around the slender waist of his queen, and with an imperious gesture quelled the cheering watchers. "Thus is Albion reborn! Now, my friends, you have been angels and you have been demons. But will you stand with me, will you stand with my queen, will you stand once more with this my realm as my Fae, against Heaven and against Hell, against Diavelina and her damned legions, evermore?"

The tumultuous assent of the reborn Faery Court was deafening, and Holli, caught up in the moment, found herself getting elbowed disapprovingly by Khasar as she started to join in.

"Then rise, Knights of Rose and Thorn! Rise, Knights of Hedge and Heather! Rise, o you beautiful blossoms of undying Faerie! Oberon, your king, commands it!

In a flash, the gathered demons were transformed into a brilliant rainbow of glass-armored warriors and gorgeously gowned winged ladies. Holli stared about with her mouth hanging open, overcome by the sheer spectacle of it all. It was like something out of a children's book, but as only a child could imagine it, a vision far beyond the feeble imaginations of the adult world. The colors were richer than rich, brighter than bright, and only once before, in Heaven, had she ever felt such a palpable sense of uninhibited and riotous beauty.

"Now, there are debts that must be paid," King Oberon said, his teeth showing whitely through his beard as he smiled. "Robin Goodfellow, old friend, you have but to ask of me what you will, and you shall receive it."

Puck bowed deeply to the Faery King, but there was something strange about the look on his face. Melusine caught it too; she glanced quizzically at Holli. Puck's habitual expression of sly contempt was gone, and in its place was an uncharacteristic wistfulness, even regret. His next words were a complete surprise to everyone in the flowered chamber, above all, to the Faery King.

"It pains me to say it, but I fear I may not ask you for anything, Oberon. For I am not your servant and you are not my king!"

The diminutive spirit spread his hands, almost apologetically, and in an instant was transformed into a tall and lordly angel, clad in pale blue robes belted in gold. His white wings were high and arched like an eagle's, and his rumpled hair was gone entirely, revealing a smooth scalp.

"I am sorry to have deceived you, Oberon, but I knew you would not accept my guidance had you seen me truly. For as you see, I am yours no more; long ago I renewed my vows to a king with a prior claim on all that I am."

Titania raised a horrified hand to her mouth. The Faery King's eyes darkened, and he shook his head in disbelief. The Court fell abruptly silent as an electric sense of danger filled the air while the two erstwhile companions stared at each other. For a moment, Holli thought Oberon might strike Puck, but then she saw his lips twitch beneath his beard, and then the king smiled broadly.

"It is fitting. A trickster to the end!" The Faery King placed his hands on Puck's shoulders. "If we must be enemies, then so shall it be, but would that all my enemies served me so loyally and well!" The two angels embraced, and Holli thought she saw Puck whisper something to his former liege lord. Certainly, Oberon was laughing as they released each other.

Puck bowed again, then kissed the hand that Titania icily held out for him. The Queen, it seemed to Holli, was not half so forgiving. The renegade glanced at Holli, and for a moment she saw a flash of the old demon he had been in the half-smile that accompanied the wink he gave her. And the look on Khasar's face was priceless. He looked as if he couldn't decide to hug Puck or slug him one.

Melusine was less uncertain. "I can't even count on you to be evil!" she snarled angrily at him before vanishing in a cloud of red, sweet-smelling smoke. "You stupid, treacherous, unreliable, undependable son of a misbegotten snake!"

Holli felt severely conflicted as she watched the lovely devil-girl disappear. She had the strangest feeling that they could have been friends, if only things were different. But

they were on opposing sides, and in the end, that was all that mattered.

Then the Faery King was calling to her. "Mortal maiden, is there not aught that we can do for you? Puck is not the only servant of the Most High to have done us great service. What would you have? Beauty to slay the world? Riches to buy it? Your secret heart's desire?"

Unsure if she could accept a gift from the fallen angel, Holli glanced at Khasar. He shrugged. Good enough.

"Can you heal my father?" she asked eagerly. "He's dying, he's got cancer."

Oberon's warm brown eyes clouded over. "No, child, I cannot. I am the master of my realm, but even here, the Crab heeds me not, I fear."

Holli swallowed hard, nodding to hide her bitter disappointment. She hadn't really thought he could, but she couldn't help asking anyhow.

"And yet do not mourn overmuch, my dear," Titania said cupping Holli's cheek in her cool palm. "Death comes in time to all mortals, but you shall always be welcome in Albion, and though no man may know your deeds, the Faery Court shall sing of them until the end of Time." She kissed Holli on both cheeks, then smiled as Holli did her best to imitate Titania's own curtsy. "Fare you well, Daughter of the King."

Puck stepped forward to claim her, and she felt Khasar grab her other arm. She heard the assembled faeries begin to cheer them, and then, as the riotous colors began to swirl madly around her, she knew she had seen the glorious Court of Fairie for the first, and, almost certainly, the last time.

CHAPTER 37

REFUGE

BUT AS FOR ME, I WILL ALWAYS HAVE HOPE;
I WILL PRAISE YOU MORE AND MORE.

— Psalm 71:14

Holli found herself sitting in the hard blue plastic shell of a stadium seat. She blinked several times before she recognized her surroundings. She was downtown, in the Metrodome, seated high on the upper deck between Khasar and the smoothly regal Divine angel whose real name, she realized, was very likely not Puck at all. At least, not anymore. Down below was not a football game, but a stage set up on the fifty yard-line, with a band playing soft music and an old man with white hair praying silently in front of the microphone. It was a church service of some kind, she realized. Then she recognized the man.

“Why, it’s John David Collins! He was going to preach here, I remember. They must be doing the altar call.” Sure enough, there was movement around the edges of the field, as the first ten or twenty people began to approach the stage, followed by a growing stream of newly repentant sinners leaving their seats and going forward.

Holli smiled at the heartwarming sight, which never failed to touch her heart, and turned her attention to Puck. “So, you were on our side all along?” she asked.

“That I was,” he answered, with that same half smile she was kind of starting to like. He was rather more handsome than before, but there was still something about his expression that seemed to suggest that he regarded everything as some sort of inside joke.

"Why?" Khasar finally broke down and demanded an answer. "What was the meaning of all that subterfuge? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Oberon would never have trusted me if he knew I was on the other side. After centuries in his company, I couldn't help but know exactly how he thinks. He would have gone straight for Maomoondagh's throat and been defeated. He's a decent enough sort as demon king's go – I don't know if he'd have even fallen in the first place if it weren't for Titania – but he's no friend to those who serve the Almighty. It was best to keep it secret."

"Fine, but you should have at least told me!"

"Ah, but your actions would not have been half so convincing in that case, my dear archon. No, I'm afraid that leaving you in the dark was integral to our success. Prince Uriel agreed; he was the only one who knew the truth. Not even Captain Korvaal or any of the other Shadowstalkers knew."

"Did any of them know what Maomoondagh really was?"

"I'm still not sure that anyone does, save the Most High. The Mad One boasted of being a Son of Chaos, but I don't think that's entirely true. Titania told me that she eventually came to believe that he was not a single persona, but several. I think she may be right although it's hard to imagine how a spirit could possess another spirit. However, I once heard rumors of a rite that was performed in Venice on the eve of the first millennium. An alchemist by the name of Prodius Marrone attempted to trap a demon inside a philosopher's stone. If he was successful, and if there was already something sleeping within that stone, one can imagine what the result might be."

Khasar grimaced. "Like the Nephilim, only worse. I hope there's no more of them."

"I doubt it. Alchemy has fallen rather out of fashion these days. Even so, we'd know how to deal with another now, thanks to that Derek."

"You found the sword?"

"Maybe...."

Holli was only half-listening to the angels' conversation, but hearing Derek's name caught her attention. Derek hadn't

been her friend, not exactly, but they'd been through a lot together and only now that she was back in the real world was the full impact of his death beginning to hit her. "Oh, Khasar, I wish he hadn't done that!"

She didn't have to explain who she was talking about. Khasar put his arm around her and gave her a comforting squeeze. "Don't weep for Derek, darling. He found precisely what he sought. He found purpose. A grand purpose. And his journey is complete, from raw hatred to the greatest love of all. He asked nothing more than to be used as an instrument of the Almighty and a weapon against the foe, and the Almighty gave him the opportunity. And what a weapon he was! Every servant of God should hope to die so well."

"I know." Holli brushed away a tear. "I guess that's not the only reason I'm sad, though."

"What is it?"

"I just... maybe it's wrong, but I just really wish King Oberon could have done something for my father. That's all I really wanted, was for Daddy to be healed. To be saved and healed."

Puck and Khasar exchanged a glance over her head, and Puck nodded. "Oberon's writ may not run so far, but there is nowhere one can go that exceeds the reach of the Most High. In three days, let the three Warriors gather together and pray for healing, in the full confidence that their prayers will be granted."

"But I thought you said Daddy had to get saved first, Khasar, before he could be healed." Holli's heart leaped, but she was afraid to hope. "And he's too proud, he'll never do it."

Khasar's only response was to smile broadly and point to the large screen behind the end zone. Holli looked over, and her eyes widened at the sight of a too-thin older man walking painfully forward, supported on either side by a tall, dark-haired young man and a blonde girl whose face was as familiar as her own. It was Daddy, and though he looked terrible and grimaced with every step he took, he did not slow down for as long as the camera remained on him.

"That's Daddy!" she shouted, leaping up from her seat and pointing excitedly towards the field. "It's my Dad! Khasar! Do you see him there! Did you know?"

But when she looked back at the archon, he was not there. He was gone. She whirled around to the left and Puck, too, had disappeared. Only then did she understand why they had brought her here, of all places. Overcome with the fullness of God's boundless grace, mercy and love, Holli buried her face in her hands and began to cry.

Four thousand miles away, a powerful black-armored demon cautiously approached a slender figure standing on the windswept edge of a steep precipice, staring over the dark sea at a colourful array of lights moving rapidly across the northern sky. The demon did no more than let its presence be known, for one risked more than mere displeasure in speaking first to a Princess of Hell.

"Oberon does not wish it to escape my notice that the Wild Hunt rides again," Diavelina said, mostly to herself, never taking her eyes off the rainbow-armored knights of Faerie. She said no more, and the demonic captain wondered if perhaps she'd forgotten him when she unexpectedly glanced back at him. "Well?"

He fought the urge to cringe before the writhing fury in that black gaze. "Gog Sheklah has sent word at last. He orders you to stand down. There will be no invasion. It is felt that the risks are too high, now that the Faery King has returned to the throne of Albion and the Fae are united once more."

There was a long moment of silence, uninterrupted but for the sound of the waves of the incoming tide crashing against the jagged rocks far below. He had no desire to know what she was thinking, he was only hoping to be permitted to depart from her presence before she gave vent to her feelings.

"Lucere is a coward and a fool!" she snapped. "Had I only the strength to defy him, I should give the order in his despite and see my legions take to the skies tonight."

Thank Hell for small favors! At least she did not dare open defiance. Still, the demon could not help glancing around the lonely outcropping, worried that someone might have

overheard her treasonous words. Not even Moloch's daughter might dare to speak so freely without consequence. But no one was about. He felt a moment's relief, until she spoke again.

"Tell Gog Sheklah that I hear, I obey and I wait... for now," Diavelina said in a voice as bitter and as cold as the frothing sea. "But tell him this too. I will not wait forever."

CLOSING TIME