
Another Fine Myth by Robert Asprin

Chapter One:

"There are things on heaven and earth, Horatio, Man was not meant to know."

-HAMLET

ONE of the few redeeming facets of instructors, I thought, is that occasionally they can be fooled. It was true when my mother taught me to read, it was true when my father tried to teach me to be a farmer, and it's true now when I'm learning magik.

"You haven't been practicing!" Garkin's harsh admonishment interrupted my musings.

"I have too!" I protested. "It's just a difficult exercise."

As if in response, the feather I was levitating began to tremble and wobble in midair.

"You aren't concentrating!" he accused.

"It's the wind," I argued. I wanted to add "from your loud mouth," but didn't dare. Early in our lessons Garkin had demonstrated his lack of appreciation for cheeky apprentices.

"The wind," he sneered, mimicking my voice. "Like this, dolt!"

My mental contact with the object of my concentration was interrupted as the feather darted suddenly toward the ceiling. It jarred to a halt as if it had become imbedded in something, though it was still a foot from the wooden beams, then slowly rotated to a horizontal plane. Just as slowly it rotated on its axis, then swapped ends and began to glide around an invisible circle like a leaf caught in an eddy.

I risked a glance at Garkin. He was draped over his chair, feet dangling, his entire attention apparently devoted to devouring a leg of roast lizard-bird, a bird I had snared I might add. Concentration indeed!

He looked up suddenly and our eyes met. It was too late to look away so I simply looked back at him.

"Hungry?" His grease-flecked salt and pepper beard was suddenly framing a wolfish grin. "Then show me how much you've been practicing."

It took me a heartbeat to realize what he meant; then I looked up desperately. The feather was tumbling floor ward, a bare shoulder-height from landing. Forcing the sudden tension from my body, I reached out with my mind . . . gently . . . form a pillow . . . don't knock it away....

The feather halted a scant two hand-spans from the floor.

I heard Garkin's low chuckle, but didn't allow it to break my concentration. I hadn't let the feather touch the floor for three years, and it wasn't going to touch now.

Slowly I raised it until it floated at eye level. Wrapping my mind around it, I rotated it on its axis, then enticed it to swap ends. As I led it through the exercise, its movement was not as smooth or sure as when Garkin set his mind to the task, but it did move unerringly in its assigned course.

Although I had not been practicing with the feather, I had been practicing. When Garkin was not about or preoccupied with his own studies, I devoted most of my time to levitating pieces of metal-keys, to be specific. Each type of levitation had its own inherent problems. Metal was hard to work with because it was an inert material. The feather, having once been part of a living thing, was more responsive . . . too responsive. To lift metal took effort, to maneuver a feather required subtlety. Of the two, I preferred to work with metal. I could see a more direct application of that skill in my chosen profession.

"Good enough, lad. Now put it back in the book."

I smiled to myself. This part I had practiced, not because of its potential applications, but because it was fun.

The book was lying open on the end of the workbench. I brought the feather down in a long lazy spiral, allowing it to pass lightly across the pages of the book and up in a swooping arc, stopped it, and brought it back. As it approached the book the second time, I disengaged part of my mind to dart ahead to the book. As the feather crossed the pages, the book snapped shut like the jaws of a hungry predator, trapping the missile within its grasp.

"Hmmm ..." intoned Garkin, "a trifle showy, but effective."

"Just a little something I worked up when I was practicing," I said casually, reaching out with my mind for the other lizard-bird leg. Instead of floating gracefully to my waiting hand, however, it remained on the wooden platter as if it had taken root.

"Not so fast, my little sneak-thief. So you've been practicing, eh?" He stroked his beard thoughtfully with the half-gnawed bone in his hand.

"Certainly. Didn't it show?" It occurred to me that Garkin is not as easy to fool as it sometimes seems.

"In that case, I'd like to see you light your candle. It should be easy if you have been practicing as much as you claim."

"I have no objections to trying, but as you have said yourself so many times, some lessons come easier than others."

Although I sounded confident, my spirits sank as the large candle came floating to the work table in response to Garkin's summons. In four years of trying I was yet to be successful at this particular exercise. If Garkin was going to keep me from food until I was successful, I could go hungry for a long time. "Say, uh, Garkin, it occurs to me I could probably concentrate better on a full stomach."

"It occurs to me that you're stalling."

"Couldn't I..."

"Now, Skeeve."

There was no swaying him once he used my proper name. That much I had learned over the years. Lad, Thief, Idiot, Turnip-Head, though derogatory, as long as he used one of these, his mind was still open. Once he reverted to using my proper name, it was hopeless. It is indeed a sorry state when the sound of your own name becomes a knell of doom.

Well, if there was no way around it, I'd just have to give it my best shot. For this there could be no half effort or feigned concentration. I would have to use every ounce of my strength and skill to summon the power.

I studied the candle with a detached mind, momentarily blanking the effort ahead from my consciousness. The room, the cluttered workbench, Garkin, even my own hunger faded from view as I focused on the candle, though I had long since memorized its every feature.

It was stout, nearly six inches across to stabilize its ten-inch height. I had carved numerous mystic symbols into its surface, copied painstakingly from Garkin's books at his direction, though many of them were partially obliterated by hardened rivulets of wax. The candle had burned many long hours to light my studies, but it had always been lit from a taper from the cooking fire and not from my efforts.

Negative thought. Stop it.

I will light the candle this time. I will light it because, there is no reason I should not. Consciously deepening my breathing, I began to gather the power. My world narrowed further until all I was aware of was the curled, blackened wick of the candle.

I am Skeeve. My father has a farmer's bond with the earth. My mother was an educated woman. My teacher is a master magician. I am Skeeve. I will light this candle.

I could feel myself beginning to grow warm as the energies began to build within me. I focused the heat on the wick.

Like my father, I tap the strength of the earth. The knowledge my mother gave me is like a lens, enabling me to focus what I have gained. The wisdom of my teacher directs my efforts to those points of the universe most likely to yield to my will. I am Skeeve.

The candle remained unlit. There was sweat on my forehead now, and I was beginning to tremble with the effort. No that was wrong, I should not tense. Relax. Don't try to force it. Tenseness hinders the flow. Let the energies pass freely, serve as a passive conductor. I forced myself to relax, consciously letting the muscles in my face and shoulders go slack as I redoubled my efforts.

The flow was noticeably more intense now. I could almost see the energy streaming from me to my target. I stretched out a finger which focused the energies even more. The candle remained unlit.

I couldn't do it. Negative thought. Stop it. I am Skeeve. I will light the candle. My father. . . . No. Negative thought. Do not rely on others for your strength. I will light the candle because I am Skeeve.

I was rewarded by a sudden surge of energy at the thought. I pursued it, growing heady with power. I am Skeeve. I am stronger than any of them. I escaped my father's attempts to chain me to a plow as he had my brother. My mother died from her idealism, but I used her teachings to survive. My teacher is a gullible fool who took a thief for an apprentice. I have beaten them all. I am Skeeve. I will light the candle.

I was floating now. I realized how my abilities dwarfed those around me. Whether the candle lit or not was inconsequential. I am Skeeve. I am powerful.

Almost contemptuously I reached out with my mind and touched the wick. A small bright ember appeared as if in answer to my will.

Startled, I sat up and blinked at the candle. As I did, the ember disappeared, leaving a small white plume of smoke to mark its departure. I realized too late I had broken concentration.

"Excellent, Lad!"

Garkin was suddenly beside me pounding my shoulder enthusiastically. How long he had been there I neither knew nor cared.

"It went out," I said plaintively.

"Never you mind that. You lit it. You have the confidence now. Next time it will be easy. By the stars, we'll make a magician of you yet. Here, you must be hungry."

I barely got my hand up in time to intercept the remaining lizard-bird leg before it smacked into my face. It was cold.

"I don't mind admitting I was beginning to despair, lad. What made that lesson so hard? Has it occurred to you could use that spell to give you extra light when you're picking a lock or even to start a fire to serve as a diversion?"

"I thought about it, but extra light could draw unwanted attention. As for starting a diversion, I'd be afraid of hurting someone. I don't want to hurt anyone, just...."

I stopped, realizing what I was saying, too late. A heavy cuff from Garkin sent me sprawling off my stool.

"I thought so! You're still planning to be a thief. You want to use my magiks to steal!"

He was towering in his rage, but for once I stood my ground.

"What of it?" I snarled. "It beats starving. What's so good about being a magician, anyway? I mean, your life-style here gives me so much to look forward to."

I gestured at the cluttered room that was the entirety of the hut.

"Listen to the wolfling complain," Garkin sneered. "It was good enough for you when the winter drove you out of the woods to steal. 'It beats sleeping under a bush,' you said."

"And it still does. That's why I'm still here. But I'm not going to spend the rest of my life here. Hiding in a little hut in the woods is not my idea of a future to look forward to. You were living on roots and berries until I came along and started trapping meat for the fire. Maybe that's your idea of a wonderful life, Garkin, but it's not mine!"

We glared at each other for several long moments. Now that my anger was vented, I was more than a little afraid. While I had not had extensive experience in the field, I suspected that sneering at magicians was not the best way to ensure a long and healthy future.

Surprisingly enough, it was Garkin who gave ground first. He suddenly dropped his gaze and bowed his head, giving me a rare view of the unkempt mass of hair atop it.

"Perhaps you're right, Skeeve," his voice was strangely soft. "Perhaps I have been showing you all the work of magik, but not the rewards. I constantly forget how suppressed magik is in these lands."

He raised his eyes to meet mine again, and I shivered at the impact. They were not angry, but deep within them burned a glow I had never seen before.

"Know you now, Skeeve, that all lands are not like this one, nor was I always as you see me now. In lands where magik is recognized instead of feared as it is here, it is respected and commissioned by those in power. There a skillful magician who keeps his wits about him can reap a hundred times the wealth you aspire to as a thief, and such power that...."

He broke off suddenly and shook his head as if to clear it. When he opened his eyes again, the glow I had seen burning earlier had died to an ember.

"But you aren't to be impressed by words, are you, lad? Come, I'll show you a little demonstration of some of the power you may one day wield-if you practice your lessons, that is."

The joviality in his voice was forced. I nodded my agreement in answer to that burning gaze. Truth to tell, I needed no demonstration. His soft, brief oration had awed me far more than any angry tirade or demonstration, but I did not wish to contradict him at this time.

I don't believe he actually noticed my response. He was already striding into the large pentagram permanently inscribed in the floor of the hut. As he walked, he gestured absentmindedly and the charred copper brazier scuttled forth from its place in the corner to meet him at the center of the pentagram.

I had time to reflect that perhaps it was that brazier that had first drawn me to Garkin. I remembered the first time I peered through the window of his hut seeking to identify and place objects of value for a later theft. I had seen Garkin as I have seen him so often since, pacing restlessly up and down the room, his nose buried in a book. It was a surprising enough sight as it was, for reading is not a common pastime in this area, but what captured my attention was the brazier. It hobbled about the room, following Garkin like an impatient puppy that was a little too polite to jump up on its master to get his attention. Then Garkin had looked up from his book, stared thoughtfully at his workbench; then, with a nod of decision, gestured. A small pot of unidentified content rose from the clutter and floated to his waiting hand. He caught it, referred to his book again, and poured out a dollop without looking up. Quick as a cat, the brazier scrambled under his hand and caught the dollop before it reached the floor. That had been my introduction to magik.

Something wrenched my attention back to the present. What was it? I checked Garkin's progress. No, he was still at work, half hidden by a floating cloud of vials and jars, mumbling as he occasionally plucked one from the air and added a bit of its contents to the brazier. Whatever he was working on, it promised to be spectacular.

Then I heard it again, a muffled step outside the hut.

But that was impossible! Garkin always set the ... I began to search my memory. I could not recall Garkin setting the protective wards before he started to work. Ridiculous. Caution was the first and most important thing Garkin hammered into me, and part of caution was always setting wards before you started working. He couldn't have forgotten . . . but he had been rather intense and distracted.

I was still trying to decide if I should attempt to interrupt Garkin's work when he suddenly stepped back from the brazier. He fixed me with his gaze, and my warning died in my throat. This was not the time to impose reality on the situation. The glow was back in his eyes, stronger than before.

"Even demonstrations should give a lesson," he intoned. "Control, Skeeve. Control is the mainstay of magik. Power without control is a disaster. That is why you practice with a feather though you are able to move much larger and heavier objects. Control. Even your meager powers would be dangerous unless controlled, and I will not teach you more until you have learned that control."

He carefully stepped out of the pentagram.

"To demonstrate the value of control, I will now summon forth a demon, a being from another world. He is powerful, cruel, and vicious, and would kill us both if given the chance. Yet despite this, we need not fear him because he will be controlled. He will be unable to harm us or anything else in this world as long as he is contained within that pentagram. Now watch, Skeeve. Watch and learn."

So saying, he turned once more to the brazier. He spread his hands, and as he did, the five candles at the points of the pentagram sprang to life and the lines of the pentagram began to glow with an eerie blue light. Silence reigned for several minutes, then he began to chant in a low mumble. A thread of smoke appeared from the brazier, but instead of rising to the ceiling, it poured onto the floor and began to form a small cloud that seethed and pulsed. Garkin's chanting was louder now, and the cloud grew and darkened. The brazier was almost obscured from view, but there ... in the depths of the cloud ... something was taking shape....

"Isstvan sends his greetings, Garkin!"

I nearly jumped out of my skin at the words. They came from inside the hut, but not inside the pentagram! I whirled toward their source. A figure was standing just inside the door, blinding in a glowing gold cloak. For a mad moment I thought it was the demon answering Garkin's summons. Then I saw the crossbow. It was a man, alright, but the crossbow, cocked and loaded in his hand, did little for my peace of mind.

Garkin did not even turn to look.

"Not now, you fool!" he snarled.

"It has been a long hunt, Garkin," the man continued as if he hadn't heard. "You've hidden yourself well, but did you really hope to escape...."

"You dare!?!" Garkin spun from his work, towering in his rage. The man saw Garkin's face now, saw the eyes, and his face contorted in a grotesque mask of fear. Reflexively, he loosed the bolt from his crossbow, but too late. I did not see what Garkin did, things were happening too fast, but the man suddenly disappeared in a sheet of flame. He shrieked in agony and fell to the floor. The flame disappeared as suddenly as it had come, leaving only the smoldering corpse as evidence it had existed at all.

I remained rooted to the spot for several moments before I could move or even speak.

"Garkin," I said at last, "I... Garkin!" Garkin's form was a crumpled lump on the floor. I was at his side in one bound, but I was far too late. The crossbow bolt protruded with silent finality from his chest. Garkin had given me my last lesson.

As I stooped to touch his body, I noticed something that froze my blood in its veins. Half-hidden by his form was the extinguished candle from the north point of the pentagram. The lines were no longer glowing blue. The protective spell was gone.

With agonizing effort, I raised my head and found myself gazing into a pair of yellow eyes, flecked with gold, that were not of this world.

Chapter Two:

Things are not always as they seem."

-MANDRAKE

ONCE, in the woods, I found myself face to face with a snake-cat. On another occasion, I encountered a spider bear. Now, faced with a demon, I decided to pattern my behavior after that which had saved me in the aforementioned situations. I froze. At least, in hindsight, I like to think it was a deliberate, calculated act.

The demon curled its lips back, revealing a double row of needle-sharp teeth.

I considered changing my chosen course of action; I considered fainting.

The demon ran a purple tongue over his lips and began to slowly extend a taloned hand toward me. That did it! I went backward, not in a catlike graceful bound, but scrabbling on all fours. It's surprising how fast you can move that way when properly inspired. I managed to build up a substantial head of steam before I crashed head-first into the wall.

"Gaahh. ..." I said. It may not seem like much, but at the time it was the calmest expression of pain and terror I could think of.

At my outburst, the demon seemed to choke. Several ragged shouts erupted, then he began to laugh. It wasn't a low menacing laugh, but the wholehearted enthusiastic laughter of someone who has just seen something hysterically funny.

I found it both disquieting and annoying. Annoying because I had a growing suspicion I was the source of his amusement; disquieting because . . . well... he was a demon and demons are....

"Cold, vicious, and bloodthirsty," the demon gasped as if he had read my thoughts. "You really bought the whole line, didn't you, kid?"

"I beg your pardon?" I said because I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Something wrong with your ears? I said 'cold, vicious....' "

"I heard you. I meant what did you mean."

"What I meant was that you were scared stiff, by a few well chosen words from my esteemed colleague, I'll wager." He jerked a thumb at Garkin's body. "Sorry for the dramatics. I felt a touch of comic relief was necessary to lighten an otherwise tragic moment."

"Comic relief?"

"Well, actually, I couldn't pass up the opportunity. You should have seen your face."

He chuckled to himself as he strode out of the pentagram and began leisurely inspecting the premises.

"So this is Garkin's new place, huh? What a dump. Who would have thought he'd come to this?"

To say I was perplexed would be an understatement. I wasn't sure how a demon should act, but it wasn't like this.

I could have bolted for the door, but I did not seem to be in immediate danger. Either this strange being meant me no harm, or he was confident of his ability to stop me even if I tried to flee. For the sake of my nervous system, I decided to assume the former.

The demon continued to inspect the hut, while I inspected him. He was humanoid; that is, he had two arms, two legs, and a head. He was short but powerfully built, a bit broader across the shoulders than a man, and heavily muscled, but he wasn't human. I mean, you don't see many hairless humans with dark green scales covering their body and pointed ears lying flat against their head.

I decided to risk a question.

"Ah, excuse me."

"Yeah, kid?"

"Um, you are a demon, aren't you?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I guess you could say I am."

"Well, if you don't mind my asking, why don't you act like a demon?"

The demon shot me a disgusted look, then turned his head heavenward in a gesture of martyrdom.

"Everybody's a critic. Tell ya what, kid, would you be happier if I tore your throat out with my teeth?"

"Well, no, but...."

"For that matter, who are you, anyway? Are you an innocent bystander, or did you come with the assassin?"

"I'm with him," I hastened to reply, pointing a shaky finger at Garkin's body. That bit about tearing my throat out had me on edge again. "Or at least I was. Garkin. The one who summoned ... him!... I'm ... I was his student."

"No kiddin'? Garkin's apprentice?" He began advancing toward me, reaching out a hand, "Pleased ta ... what's wrong?"

As he moved toward me, I had started backing away from him. I tried to do it casually, but he had noticed.

"Well... it's ... you are a demon."

"Yeah. So?"

"Um ... well, demons are supposed to be...."

"Hey, relax, kid. I don't bite. Look, I'm an old buddy of Garkin's."

"I thought you said you were a demon?"

"That's right. I'm from another dimension. A dimension traveler, or demon for short. Get it?"

"What's a dimension?"

The demon scowled.

"Are you sure you're Garkin's apprentice? I mean, he hasn't told you anything at all about dimensions?"

"No," I answered. "I mean, yes, I'm his apprentice, but he never said anything about the demons."

"That's dimensions," he corrected. "Well, a dimension is another world, actually one of several worlds, existing simultaneously with this one, but on different planes. Follow me?"

"No," I admitted.

"Well, just accept that I'm from another world. Now, in that world, I'm a magician just like Garkin. We had an exchange program going where we could summon each other across the barrier to impress our respective apprentices."

"I thought you said you were a demon," I said suspiciously.

"I am'. Look, kid. In my world, you'd be a demon, but at the current moment I'm in yours, so I'm a demon."

"I thought you said you were a magician."

"I don't believe this!" The demon made his angry appeal to the heavens. "I'm standing here arguing with some twerp of an apprentice.... Look, kid."

He fixed me with his gaze again.

"Let me try it this way. Are you going to shake my hand, or am I going to rip your heart out?"

Since he put it that way ... I mean, for a minute there, when he lost his temper and started shouting, he sounded just like Garkin. It gave credibility to his claim of friendship with my ex-teacher. I took his extended hand and shook it cautiously.

"I'm.... My name is Skeeve."

His grip was cold, but firm. So firm in fact that I found it impossible to reclaim my hand as rapidly as I would have liked.

"Pleased ta meetcha, kid. I'm Aahz."

"Oz?"

"No relation."

"No relation to what?" I asked, but he was examining the room again.

"Well, there's certainly nothing here to arouse the greedy side of his fellow beings. Early primitive, enduring, but not particularly sought after."

"We like it," I said, rather stiffly. Now that I was over being scared, I didn't like the sneer in his voice. The hut wasn't much and I certainly wasn't overly fond of it, but I resented his criticism.

"Don't get your back up, kid." Aahz said easily. "I'm looking for a motive, that's all."

"Motive?"

"A reason for someone to off old Garkin. I'm not big on vengeance, but he was a drinking buddy of mine and it's got my curiosity up."

He broke off his inspection of the room to address me directly.

"How about you, kid? Can you think of anything? Any milkmaids he's seduced or farmers he's cheated? You've got an interest in this too, you know. You might be the next target."

"But the guy who did it is dead." I gestured to the charred lump by the door. "Doesn't that finish it?"

"Wake up, kid. Didn't you see the gold cloak? That was a professional assassin. Somebody hired him, and that somebody would hire another one."

A chill ran down my spine. I hadn't really thought of that. I began to search my memory for a clue.

"Well... he said Isstvan sent him."

"What's an Isstvan?"

"I don't . . . wait a minute. What do you mean, I might be the next target?"

"Neat, huh?" Aahz was holding up the gold cloak. "Lined, and completely reversible. Always wondered how come no one noticed them until they were ready to pounce."

"Aahz...."

"Hmmm? Oh, didn't mean to scare you. It's just if someone's declared open season on magicians in general or Garkin specifically, you might have some. . . Hello, what's this?"

"What's what?" I asked, trying to get a look at what he had found.

"This," he said, holding his prize aloft. "It seems I'm not the only demon about."

It was a head, apparently the assassin's. It was badly charred, with bone showing in several places. My natural revulsion at the sight was compounded by several obvious features. The chin and ears of the head were unnaturally pointed, and there were two short, blunt, horns protruding from the forehead.

"A devil!" I exclaimed in horror.

"A what? Oh, a Deveel. No, it's not from Deva, it's from Imper. An Imp. Didn't Garkin teach you anything?"

"Come again?" I asked, but Aahz was busy scowling at the head.

"The question is, who would be crass enough to hire an Imp for an assassin? The only one I can think of is Isstvan, but that's impossible."

"But that's who did it. Don't you remember? I told you...."

"I thought you said 'Isstvan.' "

"I did! Wait a minute. What did you say?"

"I said Isstvan. Can't you tell the difference?"

"No," I admitted.

"Hmmm . . . must be too subtle for the human ear to detect. Oh, well. No matter. This changes everything. If Isstvan is up to his old tricks there's no time to lose. Hey! Wait a minute. What's this?"

"It's a crossbow," I observed.

"With heat-seeking armor-piercing quarrels? Is that the norm in this world?"

"Heat-seeking...."

"Never mind, kid. I didn't think so. Well, that tears it. I'd better check this out quick."

He began to stride into the pentagram. I suddenly realized he was preparing to leave.

"Hey! Wait a minute! What's going on?"

"It would take too long to explain, kid. Maybe I'll see you again sometime."

"But you said I might be a target!"

"Yeah, well, that's the way it crumbles. Tell ya what. Start running and maybe they won't find you until it's over."

My head was awl. Things were happening far too fast for clear thought. I still didn't know what or who the demon was or if I should trust him, but I did know one thing. He was the nearest thing to an ally I had in a situation where I was clearly outclassed.

"Couldn't you help me?"

"No time. I've got to move."

"Couldn't I come with you?"

"You'd just get in the way, maybe even get me killed."

"But without you. I'll be killed!" I was getting desperate, but Aahz was unimpressed. "Probably not. Tell ya what, kid. I've really got to get going, but just to show you I think you'll survive, I'll show you a little trick you might use sometime. You see all this crud Garkin used to bring me across the barrier? Well, it's not necessary. Watch close and I'll show you how we do it when our apprentices aren't watching."

I wanted to shout, to make him stop and listen to me, but he had already started. He spread his arms at shoulder height, looked heavenward, took a deep breath, then clapped his hands.

Nothing happened.

Chapter Three:

"The only thing more reliable than magick is one's friends!"

-MACBETH

AAHZ scowled and repeated the gesture, a bit quicker this time.

The scene remained unchanged.

I decided something was wrong.

"Is something wrong?" I asked politely.

"You'd better believe there's something wrong," Aahz snarled. "It's not working."

"Are you sure you're doing it right?"

"Yes, I'm sure I'm doing it right, just like I've been sure the last fifty times I did it!"

He was starting to sound annoyed.

"Can you...."

"Look, kid. If I knew what was wrong, I'd have fixed it already. Now, just shut up and let me think!"

He sank down to sit cross-legged in the center of the pentagram where he began sketching vague patterns in the floor as he mumbled darkly to himself. I wasn't sure if he was trying some alternate incantation or was simply thinking hard, but decided it would be unwise to ask. Instead, I used the time to organize my scrambled thoughts.

I still wasn't sure if Aahz was a threat to me or if he was my only possible salvation from a greater threat. I mean, by this time I was pretty sure he was kidding about ripping my heart out, but that's the sort of thing one wants to be very sure of. One thing I had learned for certain, there was more to this magik stuff than floating feathers around.

"That's got to be it!"

Aahz was on his feet again, glaring at Garkin's body.

"That ill-begot son of a wombat!"

"What's a wombat?" I asked, then immediately wished I hadn't. The mental image that sprang into my mind was so horrifying I was sure I didn't want details. I needn't have worried. Aahz was not about to take time to answer me.

"Well, it's a pretty crummy joke. That's all I have to say."

"Urn.... What are you talking about, Aahz?"

"I'm talking about Garkin! He did this to me. If I thought it would go this far, I would have turned him into a goat-fish when I had the chance."

"Aahz.... I still don't...."

I stopped. He had ceased his ranting and was looking at me. I shrank back reflexively before I recognized the snarl as his smile. I liked it better when he was raving.

"I'm sorry, Skeeve," he purred. "I guess I haven't been very clear."

I was growing more uneasy by the minute. I wasn't used to having people, much less demons, being nice to me.

"Um.... That's okay. I was just wondering...."

"You see, the situation is this. Garkin and I have been ... playing little jokes on each other for some time now. It started one time when we were drinking and he stiffed me with the bill. Well, the next time I summoned him, I brought him in over a lake and he had to do his demon act armpit deep in water. He got even by ... well, I won't bore you with details, but we've gotten in the habit of putting each other in awkward or embarrassing situations. It's really very childish, but quite harmless. But this time. . . ." Aahz's eyes started to narrow, "But this time the old frog-kisser's gone too... I mean, it seems to have gotten a little out of hand. Don't you agree?"

He bared his fangs at me again in a smile. I wanted very badly to agree with him, but I didn't have the foggiest idea what he was talking about.

"You still haven't told me what's wrong."

"What's wrong is that stinking slime-monger took away my powers!" he roared, forgetting his composure. "I'm blocked! I can't do a flaming thing unless he removes his stupid prankish spell and he can't 'cause he's dead! Now do you understand me, fly-bait?"

I made up my mind. Savior or not, I'd rather he went back where he came from.

"Well, if there was anything I could do. . . ."

"There is, Skeeve, my boy." Aahz was suddenly all purrs and teeth again. "All you have to do is fire up the old cauldron or whatever and remove this spell. Then we can each go our separate ways and...."

"I can't do that."

"Okay, kid," his smile was a little more forced. "I'll stick around until you're on your feet. I mean, what are friends for?"

"That's not it."

"What do you want? Blood?" Aahz was no longer smiling. "If you're trying to hold me up, I'll...."

"You don't understand!" I interrupted desperately. "I can't do it because I can't do it! I don't know how!"

That stopped him.

"Hmm. That could be a problem. Well, tell you what. Instead of pulling the spell here, what say you just pop me back to my own dimension and I'll get someone there to take it off."

"I can't do that either. Remember, I told you I'd never even heard of...."

"Well. what can you do?!"

"I can levitate objects ... well, small objects."

"And...." he encouraged.

"And ... urn ... I can light a candle."

"Light a candle?"

"Well... almost."

Aahz sank heavily into a chair and hid his face in his hands for several minutes. I waited for him to think of something.

"Kid, have you got anything in this dump to drink?" he asked finally.

"I'll get you some water."

"I said something to drink, not something to wash in!"

"Oh. Yes sir!"

I hastened to bring him a goblet of wine from the small keg Garkin kept, hoping he wouldn't notice the vessel wasn't particularly clean.

"What will this do? Will it help you put your powers back?"

"No. But it might make me feel a little better." He tossed the wine down in one swallow, and studied the goblet disdainfully. "Is this the biggest container you've got?"

I cast about the room desperately, but Aahz was way ahead of me.

He rose, strode into the pentagram, and picked up the brazier. I knew from past experience it was deceptively heavy, but he carried it to the keg as if it were weightless. Not bothering to empty out Garkin's concoction, he filled it to the brim and took a deep draught.

"Aah! That's better." He sighed.

I felt a little queasy.

"Well, kid," he said, sweeping me with an appraising stare, "it looks like we're stuck with each other. The setup isn't ideal, but it's what we've got. Time to bite the bullet and play the cards we're dealt. You do know what cards are, don't you?"

"Of course," I said, slightly wounded.

"Good."

"What's a bullet?"

Aahz closed his eyes as if struggling against some inner turmoil.

"Kid," he said at last, "there's a good chance this partnership is going to drive one of us crazy. I would guess it will be me unless you can knock off the dum dum questions every other sentence."

"But I can't understand half of what you're saying."

"Hmm. Tell ya what. Try to save up the questions and ask me all at one time once a day. Okay?"

"I'll try."

"Right. Now here's the situation as I see it. If Isstvan is hiring Imps for assassins...."

"What's an Imp?"

"Kid, will you give me a break?"

"I'm sorry, Aahz. Keep going."

"Right. Well... umm.... It's happening!" he made his appeal to the heavens. "I can't remember what I was saying!"

"Imps," I prompted.

"Oh! Right. Well, if he's hiring Imps and arming them with non-spec weapons, it can only mean he's up to his old tricks. Now since I don't have my powers, I can't get out of here to sound the alarm. That's where you come in, kid.... Kid?"

He was looking at me expectantly. I found I could contain my misery no longer.

"I'm sorry, Aahz," I said in a small, pitiful voice I hardly recognized as my own. "I don't understand a single thing you've said."

I suddenly realized I was about to cry, and turned away hurriedly so he wouldn't see. I sat there, with tears trickling down my cheeks, alternately fighting the urge to wipe them away and wondering why I was concerned over whether or not a demon saw me crying. I don't know how long I stayed that way, but I was brought back to reality by a gentle hand on my shoulder, a cold, gentle hand.

"Hey, kid. Don't beat on yourself," Aahz's voice was surprisingly sympathetic. "It's not your fault if Garkin was tight with his secrets. Nobody expects you to have learned something you were never taught, so there's no reason you should expect it either."

"I just feel so stupid," I said, not turning. "I'm not used to feeling stupid."

"You aren't stupid, kid. That much I know. Garkin wouldn't have taken you for an apprentice if you were stupid. If anybody here's stupid, it's me. I got so carried away with the situation, I forgot myself and tried talking to an apprentice as if he were a full-blown magician. Now that's stupid."

I still couldn't bring myself to respond.

"Heck, kid." He gave my shoulder a gentle shake. "Right now you can do more magik than I can."

"But you know more."

"But I can't use it. You know, kid, that gives me an idea. With old Garkin dead there, you're kind of cut off. What say you sign on as my apprentice for a while. We'll take it from the top with me teaching you as if you were a new student who didn't know a thing. We'll take it step by step from the beginning. What da ya say?"

In spite of my gloom I felt my spirits lift. Like he said, I'm not stupid. I could recognize a golden opportunity when I saw one.

"Gee, that sounds great, Aahz."

"Then it's a deal?"

"It's a deal," I answered and stuck out my hand.

"What's that?" he snarled. "Isn't my word good enough for you?"

"But you said...."

"That's right. You're my apprentice now, and I don't go around shaking apprentices' hands."

I withdrew my hand. It occurred to me this alliance might not be all roses and song.

"Now as I was saying, here's what we've got to do about the current situation...."

"But I haven't had any lessons yet!"

"That's right. Here's your first lesson. When a crisis shapes up, you don't waste energy wishing for information or skills you haven't got. You dig in and handle it as best you can with what you've got. Now shut up while I fill you in on the situation... apprentice."

I shut up and listened. He studied me for a moment, then gave a small satisfied nod, took another gulp from the brazier and began.

"Now, you have a vague idea about other dimensions because I told you about them earlier. You also have firsthand experience that magicians can open passages in the barriers between those dimensions. Well, different magicians use that power in different ways. Some of them, like Garkin, only use it to impress the yokels; summon a demon, visions of other worlds, that kind of schtick. But there are others whose motives are not so pure."

He paused to take another gulp of wine. Surprisingly, I felt no urge to interrupt with questions.

"Technology in different dimensions has progressed at different rates, as has magik. Some magicians use this to their own advantage. They aren't showmen, they're smugglers, buying and

selling technology across the barriers for profit and power. Most of the inventors in any dimension are actually closet magicians."

I must have frowned without realizing it, but Aahz noted it and acknowledged it with a wink and a smirk.

"I know what you're thinking, Skeeve. It all sounds a little dishonest and unscrupulous. Actually, they're a fairly ethical bunch. There's a set of unwritten rules called the Smugglers Code they adhere to pretty closely."

"Smugglers Code?" I asked, forgetting myself for a moment. Aahz didn't seem to mind this time.

"It's like the Mercenaries Code, but less violent and more profitable. Anyway, as an example, one item in that code states you cannot bring an 'invention' into a dimension that is too far in advance of that dimension's technology, like bringing guided missiles into a longbow culture or lasers into a flint and powder era."

I kept my silence with great difficulty.

"As I've said, most magicians adhere to the code fairly closely, but once in a while a bad one crops up. That brings us to Isstvan."

I got a sudden chill at the sound of that name. Maybe there was something different in the way Aahz pronounced it.

"Some say Isstvan isn't playing with a full deck. I think he's been playing with his wand too much. But whatever the reason, somewhere he's gotten it into his head he wants to rule the dimensions, all of them. He's tried it before, but we got wind of it in time and a bunch of us teamed up to teach him a lesson in manners. As a matter of fact, that's when I first met Garkin there."

He gestured with the brazier and slopped a bit of wine on the floor. I began to doubt his sobriety, but his voice seemed steady enough as he continued.

"I thought he had given the thing up after his last drubbing. We even gave him a few souvenirs to be sure he didn't forget. Then this thing pops up. If he's hiring cross-dimension help and arming them with advance technology weapons, he's probably trying to do it again."

"Do what?"

"I just told you. Take over the dimensions."

"I know, but how? I mean, how does what he does in this dimension help him rule the others?"

"Oh, that. Well, each dimension has a certain amount of power that can be channeled or converted into magik. Different dimensions have different amounts, and each dimension's power is divided up or shared by the magicians of that dimension. If he can succeed in controlling or killing the other

magicians in this dimension, he can use its entire magical energy to attack another dimension. If he succeeds in winning there, he has the power from two dimensions to attack a third, and so on. As you can see, the longer he keeps his plot moving, the stronger he gets and the harder he'll be to stop."

"I understand now," I said, genuinely pleased and enthusiastic.

"Good. Then you understand why we've got to stop him."

I stopped being pleased and enthusiastic.

"We? You mean us? You and me?"

"I know it's not much of a force, kid, but like I said, it's all we've got."

"I think I'd like a little of that wine now."

"None of that, kid. You're in training now. You're going to need all the practice time you can get if we're going to stop Isstvan. Bonkers or not, he's no slouch when it comes to magik."

"Aahz," I said slowly, not looking up. "Tell me the truth. Do you think there's a chance you can teach me enough magik that we'll have a chance of stopping him?"

"Of course, kid. I wouldn't even try if we didn't have a chance. Trust me."

I wasn't convinced, and from the sound of his voice, neither was he.

Chapter Four:

"Careful planning is the key to safe and swift travel."

-ULYSSES

"HMMM . . . Well, it's not a tailored jump-suit, but it will have to do."

We had been trying to outfit Aahz in a set of clothes and he was surveying the results in a small dark mirror we had found, turning it this way and that to catch his reflection piecemeal.

"Maybe if we could find some other color than this terrible brown."

"That's all we've got."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I have two shirts, both brown. You're wearing one, and I'm wearing the other."

"Hmmm. . . ." he said, studying me carefully. "Maybe I would look better in the lighter brown. Oh, well, we can argue that out later."

I was curious as to his attention to his appearance. I mean, he couldn't be planning on meeting anyone. The sight of a green, scaly demon would upset most of the locals no matter what he was wearing. For the time being, however, I deemed it wisest to keep quiet and humor him in his efforts.

Actually, the clothes fit him fairly well. The shirt was a bit short in the sleeves due to the length of his arms, but not too because I was taller than him, which made up for most of the difference. We had had to cut off some of the trouser legs to cover for his shorter legs, but they, like the body of the shirt, were not too tight. I had made the clothes myself originally, and they tended to be a bit baggy, or at least they were on me. Tailoring is not my forte.

He was also wearing Garkin's boots, which fitted him surprisingly well. I had raised minor protest at this, until he pointed out Garkin had no further use for them but we did. Pragmatism, he called it. Situational ethics. He said it would come in handy if I was serious about becoming a magician.

"Hey, kid!" Aahz's voice interrupted my thoughts. He seemed to be occupied rummaging through the various chests and cupboards of the hut. "Don't you have anything here in the way of weapons?"

"Weapons?"

"Yeah, you know, the things that killed old Garkin there. Swords, knives, bows, stuff like that."

"I know what they are. I just wasn't expecting you to be interested in them, that's all."

"Why not?"

"Well... I thought you said you were a magician."

"We aren't going to go through that again, are we, kid? Besides, what's that got to do with weapons?"

"It's just that I've never known a magician who used weapons other than his powers."

"Really? How many magicians have you known?"

"One," I admitted.

"Terrific. Look, kid, if old Garkin didn't want to use weapons, that's his problem. Me, I want some. If you'll notice, Garkin is dead."

It was hard to argue with logic like that. "Besides," he continued, "do you really want to take on Istvan and his pack with nothing but your magik and my agility going for us?"

"I'll help you look."

We went to work rummaging for weapons, but aside from the crossbow that had killed Garkin, we didn't find much. One of the chests yielded a sword with a jewel encrusted handle, and we discovered two knives, one white handled and one black handled, on Garkin's workbench. Aside from those, there was nothing even remotely resembling a fighting utensil in the hut. Aahz was not overjoyed.

"I don't believe this. A sword with a cruddy blade, bad balance, and phony jewels in the handle and two knives that haven't been sharpened since they were made. Anybody who keeps weapons like this should be skewered."

"He was."

"True enough. Well, if that's all we've got, that's what we'll have to use."

He slung the sword on his hip and tucked the white handled knife into his belt. I thought he would give me the other knife, but instead he stooped down and secured it in his boot.

"Don't I get one?"

"Can you use it?"

"Well...."

He resumed his task. I had a small knife I used to skin small game tucked in my own belt inside my shirt. Even to my inexperienced eye it was of better quality than the two Aahz had just appropriated. I decided not to bring it to his attention.

"Okay, kid. Where did the old man keep his money?" I showed him. One of the stones in the fireplace was loose and there was a small leather pouch hidden behind it. He peered at the coins suspiciously as they poured into his palm.

"Check me on this, kid. Copper and silver aren't worth much in this dimension, right?"

"Well, silver's sorta valuable, but it's not worth as much as gold."

"Then what's with this chicken-feed? Where's the real money?"

"We never really had much."

"Come off it ... I haven't met a magician yet who didn't have a bundle socked away. Just because he never spent any of it doesn't mean he doesn't have it. Now think. Haven't you ever seen anything around that was gold or had gems?"

"Well, there are a few items, but they're protected by curses."

"Kid, think for a minute. If you were a doddering old wreck who couldn't fight your way out of a paper bag, how would you protect your treasures?"

"I don't know."

"Terrific. I'll explain while we gather it up."

In short order we had a modest heap of loot on the table, most of it items I had long held in awe. There was a gold statue of a man with the head of a lion, the Three Pearls of Kraul, a gold pendant in the shape of the sun with three of its rays missing, and a ring with a large jewel we took from Garkin's hand. Aahz held up the sun pendant.

"Now this is an example of what I mean. I suppose there's a story about what happened to the missing three rays?"

"Well," I began, "there was a lost tribe that worshipped a huge snake toad...."

"Skip it. It's an old dodge. What you do is take your gold to a craftsman and have him fashion it into something with a lot of small out-juttings like fingers or arms or ..." He held up the pendant. "... rays of sun. It gives you the best of two worlds.

"First, you have something mystical and supernatural, add a ghost story and no one will dare to touch it. Second, it has the advantage that if you need a little ready cash, you just break off a ray or an arm and sell it for the value of the gold. Instead of losing value, the price of the remaining item increases because of its mystical history, the strange circumstances under which it was torn asunder, purely fictional, of course."

Strangely enough, I was not surprised. I was beginning to wonder if anything Garkin had told me was true.

"Then none of these things have any real magical powers or curses?"

"Now, I didn't say that. Occasionally, you stumble across a real item, but they're usually few and far between."

"But how can you tell the real thing from a fake?"

"I take it that Garkin didn't teach you to see auras. Well, that figures. Probably was afraid you'd take his treasure and run. Okay, kid. Time for your first lesson. Have you ever daydreamed? You know, just stared at something and let your mind wander?"

I nodded.

"Okay, here's what I want you to do. Scoot down in your chair until your head is almost level with the table. That's right. Comfortable? Fine. Now I want you to look across the table at the wall. Don't focus on it, just stare at it and let your mind wander."

I did as he said. It was hard not focusing on a specific point, so I set my mind to wandering. What to think about? Well, what was I thinking about when the candle almost lit. Oh yes. I am Skeeve. I am powerful and my power is growing daily. I smiled to myself. With the demon's aid, I would soon become a knowledgeable sorcerer. And that would just be the start. After that....

"Hey!" I said, sitting upright.

"What did you see?"

"It was ... well, nothing, I guess."

"Don't give me a hard time, kid. What did you see?"

"Well, for a second there I thought I saw sort of a red glow around the ring, but when I looked at it squarely, it disappeared."

"The ring, eh? It figures. Well, that's it. The rest of the stuff should be okay."

He scraped the rest of the loot into a sack, leaving the ring on the table.

"What was it?"

"What? Oh, what you saw? That was an aura. Most people have them. Some places do, but it's a sure test to check if an item is truly magical. I'd be willing to bet that the ring is what old Garkin used to fry the assassin."

"Aren't we going to take it with us?"

"Do you know how to control it?"

"Well... no."

"Neither do I. The last thing we need is to carry around a ring that shoots fire. Particularly if we don't know how to activate it. Leave it. Maybe the others will find it and turn it on themselves."

He tucked the sack into his waistband.

"What others?" I prompted.

"Hmmm? Oh, the other assassins."

"What other assassins?" I was trying to be calm, but I was slipping.

"That's right. This is the first time you've tangled with them, isn't it? I would have thought Garkin...."

"Aahz, could you just tell me?"

"Oh! Sure, kid. Assassins never work alone. That's why they never miss. They work in groups of two to eight. There's probably a back-up team around somewhere. Realizing Isstvan's respect for Garkin, I'd guess he wouldn't send less than six out on an assignment like this, maybe even two teams."

"You mean all this time you've been fooling around with clothes and swords, there's been more assassins on the way?"

"Relax, kid. That's the back-up team. They'll be waiting a ways off and won't move until tomorrow at the earliest. It's professional courtesy. They want to give this bozo room to maneuver. Besides, it's tradition that the assassin who actually does the deed gets first pick of any random booty lying around before the others show up to take even shares. Everyone does it, but it's considered polite to not notice some of the loot has been pocketed before the official split."

"How do you know so much about assassins, Aahz?"

"Went with one for a while . . . lovely lass, but she couldn't keep her mouth shut, even in bed. Sometimes I wonder if any profession really guards its secrets as closely as they claim."

"What happened?"

"With what?"

"With your assassin?"

"None of your business, kid." Aahz was suddenly brusque again. "We've got work to do."

"What are we going to do?"

"Well, first we bury the Imp. Maybe it will throw the others off our trail. With any luck, they'll think he grabbed all the loot and disappeared. It wouldn't be the first time."

"No, I mean after that. We're getting ready to travel, but where are we going?"

"Kid, sometimes you worry me. That isn't even magik. It's common sense military action. First, we find Isstvan. Second, we appraise his strength. Third, we make our plans, and fourth, we execute them, and hopefully him."

"Urn . . . Aahz, could we back up to one for a minute? Where are we going to find Isstvan?"

That stopped him.

"Don't you know where he is?"

"I never even heard his name before today."

We sat in silence staring at each other for a long time.

Chapter Five:

"Only constant and conscientious practice in the Martial Arts will ensure a long and happy life."

-B.LEE

"I THINK I've got it figured out, kid."

As Aahz spoke, he paused in honing his sword to inspect the edge. Ever since our trek began he had seized every opportunity to work on his weapons. Even when we simply paused to rest by a stream he busied himself working their edges or adjusting their balance. I felt I had learned more about weapons in the last week just watching him tinker than I had in my entire previous life.

"Figured what out?"

"Why people in this world are trained in weapons or magik, but not both!"

"How's that?"

"Well, two reasons I can see just offhand. First off, it's a matter of conditioning. Reflexes. You'll react the way you're trained. If you've been trained with weapons, you'll react to crisis with a weapon. If you're trained in magik, you'll react with magik. The problem is, if you're trained both ways, you'll hesitate, trying to make up your mind which to use, and probably get clobbered in the process. So to keep things simple, Garkin only trained you in magik. It's probably all he had been trained in himself."

I thought about it.

"That makes sense. What's the other reason?"

He grinned at me.

"Learning curve. If what you told me about life expectancy in this world is even vaguely accurate, and if you're any example of how fast people in this world learn, you only have time to learn one or the other."

"I think I prefer the first explanation."

He chortled to himself and went back to sharpening his sword.

Once his needling would have bothered me, but now I took it in stride. It seemed to be his habit to be critical of everything in our world, and me in particular. After a week of constant exposure to him, the only way I would worry is if he stopped complaining.

Actually I was quite pleased with my progress in magik. Under Aahz's tutelage, my powers were growing daily. One of the most valuable lessons I had learned was to draw strength directly from the earth. It was a matter of envisioning energy as a tangible force, like water, and drawing new energy up one leg and into my mind while releasing exhausted energy down the other leg and back into the earth. Already, I could completely recharge myself even after a hard day's walking just by standing motionless with my eyes closed for several minutes and effecting this energy exchange. Aahz, as always, was unimpressed. According to him, I should have been able to do the energy exchange while we were walking, but I didn't let his grumbling dampen my enthusiasm. I was learning, and at a faster pace than I had dreamed possible.

"Hey, kid. Fetch me a piece of wood, will you?"

I smiled to myself and looked around. About ten feet away was a small branch of deadwood about two feet long. I leisurely stretched out a finger and it took flight, floating gently across the clearing to hover in the air in front of Aahz.

"Not bad, kid," he acknowledged. Then his sword flashed out, cutting the branch into two pieces which dropped to the ground. He picked up one of the pieces and inspected the cut.

"Hmmm . . . there may be hope for this sword yet. Why did you let them fall?"

This last was directed at me.

"I don't know. I guess you startled me when you swung the sword."

"Oh, really?"

Suddenly he threw the stick at me. I yelped and tried to duck out of the way, but it bounced painfully off my shoulder.

"Hey! What was that for?"

"Call it an object lesson. You know you can control the stick because you just did it when you fetched it for me. So why did you duck out of the way? Why not just stop it with your magik?"

"I guess it never occurred to me. You didn't give me much time to think."

"Okay, so think! This time you know it's coming."

He picked up the second piece of wood and waited, grinning evilly, which with pointed teeth is easy. I ignored him, letting my mind settle; then I nodded that I was ready.

The stick struck me squarely in the chest.

"Ow!! "I commented.

"And there, my young friend, is the difference between classroom and field. Classroom is fine to let you know that things can be done and that you can do them, but in actual practice you will never be allowed the luxury of leisurely gathering your power, and seldom will you have a stationary target."

"Say, uh, Aahz. If you're really trying to build up my self-confidence, how come you always cut my legs out from under me every time I start thinking I'm getting someplace?"

He stood up, sheathing his sword.

"Self-confidence is a wonderful thing, kid, but not if it isn't justified. Someday we'll be staking one or both of our lives on your abilities, and it won't do us any good if you've been kidding yourself along. Now let's get down to work!"

"Um ... have we got the time?"

"Relax, kid. Imps are tenacious, but they travel slow."

Our strategy upon leaving the hut had been simple. Lacking a specific direction for our search, we would trace the force lines of the world until we either found Isstvan or located another magician who would be able to steer us to him.

One might ask what force lines are. I did. Force lines, as Aahz explained them, are those paths of a world along which its energies flow most freely. In many ways, they are not unlike magnetic lines.

One might ask what magnetic lines are. I did. I will not quote Aahz's answer to that, but it was not information.

Anyway, force lines are a magician's ally and enemy. Those who would tap the energies of those lines usually set up residence on or near one of those lines. This makes it easier for them to draw upon the energies. It also makes it easier for their enemies to find them.

It was Aahz's theory that searching the force lines was how Garkin was located. It was therefore logical that we should be able to find Isstvan the same way.

Of course, I knew nothing of force lines or how to follow them, at least until Aahz taught me. It was not a difficult technique, which was fortunate as I had my hands full trying to absorb all the other lessons Aahz was deluging me with.

One simply closes one's eyes and relaxes, trying to envision a two-pointed spear in glowing yellows and reds suspended in midair. The intensity of the glow indicates the nearness to a force line; the direction of the points shows the flow of energies. Rather like the needle of a compass, whatever that is.

Once we had determined that Garkin had set up shop directly on a force line, as Aahz had suspected, and established direction of the flow of energies, we had another problem. Which way did we follow it?

The decision was doubly important as, if Aahz was correct, there would be a team of Imp assassins waiting in one direction, very probably in the direction we wanted to go.

We solved the problem by traveling one day's journey perpendicular to the force line, then for two days parallel to the line in our chosen direction, then returning to the line before continuing our journey. We hoped this would bypass the assassins entirely.

It worked, and it didn't.

It worked in that we didn't walk into an ambush. It didn't work in that now it seemed they were on our trail, though whether they were actually tracking us or merely following the force line back to Isstvan was unknown.

"I keep telling you, kid," Aahz insisted, "it's a good sign. It means we've chosen the right direction, and that we'll reach Isstvan ahead of his assassins' report."

"What if we're heading in the wrong direction?" I argued. "What if they're really following us? How long do we travel in this direction before we give up and admit it?"

"How long do you figure it will take for you to learn enough magik to stand up to a pack of Imp assassins armed with off-dimension weapons?"

"Let's get to work," I said firmly.

He looked around, and pointed to a gnarled fruit tree strewn round with windfalls across the clearing.

"Okay. Here's what I want you to do. Stare at the sky or contemplate your navel or something. Then when I give the word, use your power to grab one of those fruits and toss it to me."

I don't know how many hours we spent on that drill. It's more difficult than it sounds, mustering one's powers from a standing start. Just when I thought I had it down pat, Aahz switched tactics. He

would engage in a conversation, deliberately leading me on, then would interrupt me in mid-sentence with his signal. Needless to say, I failed miserably.

"Relax, kid. Look, try it this way. Instead of mustering your power from scratch each time, create a small space inside yourself and store up some energy there. Just habitually keep that reserve squirreled away and ready to cover for you while you get set to level your big guns."

"What's a gun?"

"Never mind. Just build that reserve and we'll try it again."

With this extra bit of advice at my disposal the drill went noticeably better. Finally Aahz broke off the practice session and put me to work helping him with his knife practice. Actually I rather enjoyed this task. It entailed my using my powers to levitate one of the fruits and send it flying around the clearing until Aahz pegged a knife into it. As an extra touch of finesse, I would then extract the knife and float it back to him for another try. The exercise was monotonous, but I never tired of it. It seemed almost supernatural the way the shimmering, somersaulting sliver of steel would dart out to intercept the fruit as Aahz practiced first overhand, then underhand, now backhand.

"Stop it. Skeeve!"

Aahz's shout jolted me out of my reverie. Without thinking, I reached out with my mind and . . . and the knife stopped in midair! I blinked, but held it there, floating a foot from the fruit which also hung suspended in place.

"Hel-lo! That's the stuff, Skeeve! Now there's something to have confidence in!"

"I did it!" I said, disbelieving my own eyes.

"You sure did! That little piece of magik will save your life someday."

Out of habit, I floated the knife back to him. He plucked it from the air and started to tuck it in his belt, then halted, cocking his head to one side.

"In the nick of time, too. Someone's coming."

"How can you tell?"

"Nothing special. My hearing's a bit better than yours is all. Don't panic. It isn't the Imps. Hooved beast from the sound of it. No wild animal moves in that straight a line, or that obviously."

"What did you mean, 'in the nick of time'? Aren't we going to hide?"

"Not this time." He grinned at me. "You're developing fast. It's about time you learned a new spell. We have a few days before whoever it is gets here."

"Days?"

Aahz was adapting rapidly to our dimension, but units of time still gave him trouble.

"Run through those time measurements again," he grumbled.

"In seconds, minutes, hours...."

"Minutes! We've got a few minutes."

"Minutes! I can't learn a new spell in a few minutes!"

"Sure you can. This one's easy. All you've got to do is disguise my features to look like a man."

"How do I do that?"

"The same way you do everything else, with your mind. First, close your eyes ... close 'em ... okay, now picture another face...."

All I could think of was Garkin, so I pictured the two faces side by side.

"Now move the new face over mine . . . and melt away or build up the necessary features. Like clay . . . just keep that in the back of your mind and open your eyes."

I looked, and was disappointed.

"It didn't work!"

"Sure it did."

He was looking in the dark mirror which he had fished from his belt pouch.

"But you haven't changed!"

"Yes I have. You can't see it because you cast the spell. It's an illusion, and since your mind knows the truth, it isn't fooled, but anyone else will be. Garkin, huh? Well, it'll do for now."

His identification of the new face took me aback.

"You can really see Garkin's face?"

"Sure, want to look?"

He offered the mirror and grinned. It was a bad joke. One of the first things we discovered about his dubious status in this world was that while he could see himself in mirrors, nobody from our world could. At least I couldn't.

I could now hear the sounds of the rider coming.

"Aahz, are you sure...."

"Trust me, kid. There's nothing to worry about."

I was worried. The rider was in view now. He was a tall muscular man with the look of a warrior about him. This was reinforced by the massive war unicorn he was riding, laden with weapons and armor.

"Hey, Aahz. Shouldn't we..."

"Relax, kid. Watch this." He stepped forward, raising his arm. "Hello, stranger! How far to the next town?"

The man veered his mount toward us. He half raised his arm in greeting, then suddenly stiffened. Heaving forward, he squinted at Aahz, then drew back in terror. "By the Gods! A demon!"

Chapter Six:

"Attention to detail is the watchword for gleaning information from an unsuspecting witness."

-INSP. CLOUSEAU

THE warrior's terror did not immobilize him long. In fact, it didn't immobilize him at all! No sooner did he make his discovery than he took action. Strangely enough, the action was to lean back in his saddle and begin rummaging frantically through one of his saddlebags, a precarious position at best.

Apparently I was not the only one to notice the instability of his pose. Aahz sprang forward with a yell, waving his arms in the unicorn's face. Being a reasonable creature, the unicorn reared and bolted, dumping the warrior on his head.

"By the Gods!" he bellowed, trying to untangle himself from the ungraceful heap of arms and weapons. "I've killed men for less!"

I decided that if his threat was to be avoided, I should take a personal hand in the matter. Reaching out with my mind, I seized a fist-sized rock and propelled it forcefully against his unhelmeted brow. The man went down like a pole-axed steer.

For a long moment Aahz and I considered the fallen man, catching our breath.

"Relax, Skeeve! This'll be easy, Skeeve! Trust me, Skeeve.' Boy, Aahz, when you miss a call you don't do it small, do you?"

"Shut up, kid!"

He was rummaging through his pouch again.

"I don't want to shut up, I want to know what happened to the 'foolproof spell you taught me."

"I was kind of wondering that myself." He had produced the mirror again and was peering into it. "Tell you what, kid. Check his aura and watch for anything unusual."

"Shut up, kid! Check his aura, kid! You'd think I was some kind of... Hey!"

"What is it?"

"His aura! It's a sort of a reddish yellow except there's a blue patch on his chest."

"I thought so!!" Aahz was across the clearing in a bound, crouching at the fallen man like a beast of prey.

"Look at this!!"

On a thong around the man's neck was a crude silver charm depicting a salamander with one eye in the center of its forehead.

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure, but I've got a hunch. Now play along with me on this. I want you to remove the shape warp spell."

"What spell?"

"C'mon, kid, wake up! The spell that's changing my face."

"That's what I mean. What spell?"

"Now look, kid! Don't give me a lot of back talk. Just do it! He'll be waking up soon."

With a sigh I shut my eyes and set about the seemingly pointless task. It was easier this time, imagining Garkin's face, then melting away the features until Aahz's face was leering at me in my mind's eye. I opened my eyes and looked at Aahz. He looked like Aahz. Terrific.

"Now what?"

As if in answer, the warrior groaned and sat up. He shook his head as if to clear it and opened his eyes. His gaze fell on Aahz, whereupon he blinked, looked again, and reached for his sword, only to find it missing. Also missing were his dagger and hand-axe. Apparently Aahz had not been idle while I was removing the spell.

Aahz spoke first.

"Relax, stranger. Things are not as they seem."

The man sprang to his feet and struck a fighting stance, fists clenched.

"Beware, demon!" he intoned hollowly. "I am not without defenses."

"Oh yeah? Name three. But like I say. relax. First of all, I'm not a demon."

"Know you, demon, that this charm enables me to look through any spells and see you as you really are."

So that was it! My confidence in my powers came back with a rush.

"Friend, though you may not believe me, the sight of that talisman fills me with joy, for it enables me to prove what I am about to tell you."

"Do not waste your lies on me. Your disguise is penetrated! You are a demon!"

"Right. Could you do me one little favor?" Aahz leisurely sat cross-legged on the ground. "Could you take the charm off for a minute?"

"Take it off?" For a moment the man was puzzled, but he quickly rallied his forces. "Nay, demon. You seek to trick me into removing my charm that you might kill me!"

"Look, dummy. If we wanted to kill you we could have done it while you were knocked out cold!"

For the first time, the man seemed doubtful. "That is, indeed, a fact."

"Then could you humor me for a moment and take the charm off?"

The warrior hesitated, then slowly removed the charm. He looked hard at Aahz and scowled.

"That's strange. You still look like a demon!"

"Correct, now let me ask you a question. Am I correct in assuming from your words you have some knowledge of demons?"

"I have been a demon hunter for over fifteen years now," he declared proudly.

"Oh, yeah?" For a minute I was afraid Aahz was going to blow the whole gambit, but he got himself back under control and continued.

"Then tell me, friend. In your long experience with demons, have you ever met one who looked like a demon?"

"Of course not! They always use their magik to disguise themselves."

Fat lot he knew about demons!

"Then that should prove my point!"

"What point?"

I thought for a moment Aahz was going to take him by the shoulders and shake him. It occurred to me that perhaps Aahz's subtleties were lost on this world.

"Let me try, Aahz. Look, sir. What he's trying to say is that if he were a demon he wouldn't look like a demon, but he does so he isn't."

"Oh!" said the man with sudden understanding.

"Now you've lost me," grumbled Aahz.

"But if you aren't a demon, why do you look like one?"

"Ahh . . ." Aahz sighed, "therein lies the story. You see, I'm accursed!"

"Accursed?"

"Yes. You see, I am a demon hunter like yourself. A rather successful one, actually. Established quite a name for myself in the field."

"I never heard of you," grumbled the man.

"Well, we've never heard of you either," I chimed in.

"You don't even know my name!"

"Oh, I'm sorry." I remembered my manners. "I'm Skeeve, and this ... demon hunter is Aahz."

"Pleased to meet you. I am known as Quigley."

"If I could continue...."

"Sorry, Aahz."

"As I was saying, I had achieved a certain renown among the demons due to my unprecedented success. At times it was rather bothersome, as when it was learned I was coming, most demons would either flee the territory or kill themselves."

"Does he always brag this much?"

"He's just getting started."

"Anyway . . . one day I was closing with a demon, a particularly ugly brute, when he startled me by addressing me by name. 'Aahz!' says he, 'Before you strike, you should know your career is at an end!' Of course I laughed at him, for I had slain demons more fierce than he, sometimes in pairs. 'Laugh if you will,' he boomed, 'but a conclave of demons empowered me to deal with you. Whether you kill me or not, you are doomed to suffer the same end you have visited on so many of us.' I killed him of course, assuming he was bluffing, but my life has not been the same ever since."

"Why not?"

"Because of the curse! When I returned to my horse, my faithful squire here took one look at me and fainted dead away."

"I did no such thing! I mean ... it was the heat."

"Of course. Skeeve." Aahz winked slyly at Quigley.

"At any rate, I soon discovered to my horror that the demon had worked a spell on me before he expired, causing me to take on the appearance of a demon to all who beheld me."

"Fiendish. Clever, but fiendish."

"You see the subtlety of their plan! That I, fiercest of demon hunters, am now hunted in turn by my fellow humans. I am forced to hide like an animal with only my son here for companionship."

"I thought you said he was your squire."

"That, too. Oh, the irony of it all."

"Gee, that's tough. I wish I could do something to help."

"Maybe you can," Aahz smiled winningly.

Quigley recoiled. I found it reassuring that someone else shared my reaction to Aahz's smile.

"Urn ... how? I mean, I'm just a demon hunter."

"Precisely how you might be of assistance. You see, at the moment we happen to have several demons following us. It occurs to me we might be of mutual service to each other. We can provide you with targets, and you in turn can rid us of a bloody nuisance."

• "They're bloody?" Quigley was horrified.

"Just an expression. Well, what do you say? Is it a deal?"

"I dunno. I'm already on a mission and I don't usually take on a new job until the last one's complete. The mis-informed might think I was quitting or had been scared off or something. That sort of thing is bad for the reputation."

"It'd be no trouble at all," Aahz persisted. "It's not like you'll have to go out of your way. Just wait right here and they'll be along."

"Why are they following you, anyway?"

"A vile magician sent them after us after I was foolish enough to seek his aid. The curse, you know."

"Of course . . . wait a minute. Was that magician's name Garkin by any chance?"

"As a matter of fact it was. Why? Do you know him?"

"Why, he's my mission! That's the man I'm going to kill."

"Why?" I interrupted. "Garkin's no demon."

"But he consorts with demons, lad." Aahz scowled warningly at me. "That's enough for any demon hunter. Right, Quigley?"

"Right. Remember that, lad."

I nodded vigorously at him, feeling suddenly very nervous about this whole encounter.

"Where did you hear about Garkin anyway, Quigley?" Aahz asked casually.

"Strangely enough, from an innkeeper . . . Isstvan, I think he said his name was . . . a bit strange, but a sincere enough fellow. About three weeks ride back . . ., but we were talking about your problem. Why did he send demons after you?"

"Well, as I said, I sought him out to try to get him to remove any curse. What I did not realize was that he was actually in league with demons himself. He had heard of me, and flatly refused me aid. What is more, after we left he set some of his demons on our trail."

"I see. How many of them did you say there were?"

"Just two," Aahz assured him. "We've caught glimpses of them occasionally."

"Very well," concluded Quigley. "I'll do it. I'll assist you in your battle."

"That's fine except for one thing. We won't be here."

"Why not? I should think that as a demon hunter you'd welcome the chance once the odds were even."

"If I were here there would be no fight," Aahz stated grandly. "As I have said, I have a certain reputation among demons. If they saw me here they would simply flee."

"I frankly find that hard to believe," commented Quigley.

I was inclined to agree with him, but kept my silence.

"Well, I must admit their fear of my charmed sword has a bit to do with their reluctance to do battle."

"Charmed sword?"

"Yes." Aahz patted the sword at his side. "This weapon once belonged to the famous demon hunter Alfans De Clario."

"Never heard of him."

"Never heard of him? Are you sure you're a demon hunter? Why the man killed over two hundred demons with this sword. They say it is charmed such that whomever wields it cannot be killed by a demon."

"How did he die?"

"Knifed by an exotic dancer. Terrible."

"Yes, they're nasty that way. But about the sword, does it work?"

"It works as well as any sword, a little point-heavy, maybe, but...."

"No. I mean the charm. Does it work?"

"I can testify that I haven't been killed by a demon since I started using it."

"And demons actually recognize it and flee from its owner?"

"Exactly. Of course, I haven't had occasion to use it for years. Been too busy trying to get this curse removed. Sometimes I've thought about selling it, but if I ever get back into business it would be a big help in . . . urn ... reestablishing my reputation."

I suddenly realized what Aahz was up to. Quigley rose to the bait like a hungry pike-turtle.

"Hmm. . . ." he said. "Tell you what. Just to give a hand to a fellow demon hunter who's down on his luck, I'll take it off your hands for five gold pieces."

"Five gold pieces! You must be joking. I paid three hundred for it. I couldn't possibly let it go for less than two hundred."

"Oh, well, that counts me out. I only have about fifty gold pieces on me."

"Fifty?"

"Yes, I never travel with more than...."

"But then again, times have been hard, and seeing as how you would be using it to do battle against the fiends who put the curse on me.... Yes, I think I could let you have it for fifty gold pieces."

"But that's all the money I have."

"Yes, but what good is a fat purse if you're torn asunder by a demon?"

"True enough. Let me see it."

He took the blade and hefted, giving it a few experimental swings.

"Crummy balance." He grimaced.

"You get used to it."

"Lousy steel," he declared, squinting at the blade.

"Nice edge on it, though."

"Well, my trainer always told me 'If you take care of your sword, it will take care of you!' "

"We must have had the same trainer."

The two of them smiled at each other. I felt slightly ill.

"Still, I dunno. Fifty pieces of gold is a lot."

"Just look at those stones in the handle."

"I did. They're fake."

"Aha! They're made to look fake. It hides their value."

"Sure did a nice job. What kind of stones are they?"

"Blarney stones."

"Blarney stones?"

"Yes. They're said to ensure your popularity with the ladies, if you know what I mean."

"But fifty gold pieces is all the money I have."

"Tell you what. Make it forty-five gold pieces and throw in your sword."

"My sword?"

"Of course. This beauty will take care of you, and your sword will keep my squire and I from being defenseless in this heathen land."

"Hmm. That seems fair enough. Yes, I believe you have made a deal, my friend."

They shook hands ceremoniously and began effecting the trade. I seized the opportunity to interrupt.

"Gee, it's a shame we have to part so soon."

"Why so soon?" The warrior was puzzled.

"No need to rush off," Aahz assured him, giving me a solid elbow in the ribs.

"But Aahz, we wanted to travel more before sundown and Quigley has to prepare for battle."

"What preparations?" asked Quigley.

"Your unicorn," I continued doggedly. "Don't you want to catch your unicorn?"

"My unicorn! All of my armor is on that animal!"

"Surely it won't wander far...." Aahz growled.

"There are bandits about who would like nothing better than to get their hands on a good war unicorn." Quigley heaved himself to his feet. "And I want him at my side to help me fight the

demons. Yes, I must be off. I thank you for your assistance, my friends. Safe journey until we meet again."

With a vague wave of his hand, he disappeared into the woods whistling for his mount.

"Now what was all that about?" Aahz exploded angrily.

"What, Aahz?"

"The big rush to get rid of him. As gullible as he was, I could have traded him out of his pants or anything else vaguely valuable he might have had on him. I specifically wanted to get my hands on that charm."

"Basically I wanted to see him on his way before he caught on to the flaw in your little tale."

"What, the son-nephew slip? He wouldn't have...."

"No, the other thing."

"What other thing?"

I sighed.

"Look, he saw through your disguise because that pendant lets him see through spells, right?"

"Right, and I explained it away saying I was the victim of a demon's curse. ..."

"... that changed your appearance with a spell. But if he could see through spells, he should be able to see through that spell to see you as a normal man. Right?"

"Hmm. . . . Maybe we'd better be on our way now that we know where Isstvan is."

But I was unwilling to let my little triumph go so easily.

"Tell me, Aahz. What would you do if we encountered a demon hunter as smart as me?"

"That's easy." He smiled, patting the crossbow. "I'd kill him. Think about it."

I did.

Chapter Seven:

"Is there anything in the universe more beautiful and protective than the simple complexity of a spider's web?"

-CHARLOTTE

I CLOSED my eyes for concentration. This was more difficult than drawing energies from the force line directly into my body. I pointed a finger for focus, pointing at a spot some five yards distant from me.

The idea of drawing energies from a distant location and controlling them would have seemed impossible to me, until Aahz pointed out it was the same as the candle-lighting exercise I had already mastered. Now it did not seem impossible, merely difficult.

Confidently, I narrowed my concentration, and in my mind's eye saw a gleaming blue light appear at the designated point. Without breaking my concentration, I moved my finger overhead in a slow arc. The light followed the lead, etching a glowing blue trail in the air behind it. As it touched the ground again, or where I sensed the ground to be, I moved my finger again, moving the light into the second arc of the protective pentagram.

It occurred to me that what I was doing was not unlike forming the normal flat pentagram Garkin had used at the hut. The only difference being that instead of being inscribed on the floor, this was etched overhead with its points dipping downward to touch the earth. It was more an umbrella than a border.

The other major difference, I thought as I completed the task, was that I was doing it. Me. Skeeve. What I had once watched with awe, I was now performing as routine.

I touched the light down in its original place, completing the pentagram. Quietly pleased, I stood for a moment, eyes closed, studying the glowing blue lines etched in my mind's eye.

"Terrific, kid," came Aahz's voice. "Now what say you damp it down a bit before we draw every peasant and demon hunter in the country."

Surprised, I opened my eyes.

The pentagram was still there! Not imagined in my mind, but actually glowing overhead. Its cold blue light gave an eerie illumination to the scene that negated the warmth of our little campfire.

"Sorry, Aahz." I quickly eased my control on the energy and watched as the lines of the pentagram faded to invisibility. They were still there. I could feel their presence in the night air above me. Now, however, they could not be seen by normal vision.

More for the joy of it than out of any lack of confidence, I closed my eyes again and looked at them. They glowed there in shimmering beauty, a cooler, reassuring presence to counter the impatience of the redgold glow of the force-line spear pointing doggedly toward tomorrow's path.

"Sit down, kid, and finish your lizard-bird."

We were out of the forest proper now, but despite the presence of the nearby road, game was still plentiful and fell ready victim to my snares. Aahz still refused to join me in the meals, insisting alcohol was the only thing in this dimension worth consuming, but I dined frequently and royally.

"You know, kid," he said, looking up from his endless sword-sharpening. "You're really coming along pretty well with your studies."

"What do you mean?" I mumbled through a bone, hoping he would elaborate.

"You're a lot more confident with your magik. You'd better watch your controls, though. You had enough energy in that pentagram to fry anything that bumped against it."

"I guess I'm still a bit worried about the assassins."

"Relax, kid. It's been three days since we set 'em up in that ambush of Quigley's. Even if he didn't stop 'em, they'll never catch up with us now."

"Did I really summon up that much power?" I urged, eager for praise.

"Unless you're actually engaged in magical battle, wards are used as a warning signal only. If you put too much energy into them it can have two potentially bad side effects. First, you can draw unnecessary attention to yourself by jarring or burning an innocent bystander who blunders into it. Second, if it actually reaches a magical opponent, it probably won't stop him; just alert him that he has a potentially dangerous foe in the area."

"I thought it was a good thing if I could summon up lots of power."

"Look, kid. This isn't a game. You're tapping into some very powerful forces here. The idea is to strengthen your control, not see how much you can liberate. If you get too careless with experimenting, you could end up helpless when the actual crunch comes."

"Oh," I said, unconvinced.

"Really, kid. You've got to learn this. Let me try an example. Suppose for a minute you're a soldier assigned to guard a pass. Your superiors put you on the post and give you a stack of ten-pound rocks. All you have to do is watch to see if anyone comes, and if they do, drop a rock on their head. Are you with me so far?"

"I guess so."

"Fine. Now it's a long, boring duty, and you have lots of time to think. You're very proud of your muscles, and decide it's a bit insulting that you were only given ten-pound rocks. Twenty-pound rocks would be more effective, and you think you could handle them as easily as the ten-pound variety. Logical?"

I nodded vaguely, still not sure what he was driving at.

"Just to prove the point to yourself, you heft a twenty-pound rock, and, sure enough, you can handle it. Then it occurs to you if you can handle a twenty pounder, you should be able to handle a forty-pounder, or even a fifty-pounder. So you try. Then it happens."

He was getting so worked up I felt no need to respond.

"You drop it on your foot, or you pull a muscle, or you keel over from heat exhaustion, or any one of a hundred other things. Then where are you?"

He leveled an accusing finger at me.

"The enemy strolls through the pass you're supposed to be guarding and you can't even lift the original ten pound rock to stop them. All because you indulged in needless testing of idiotic muscle power!"

I was impressed, and gave the matter serious thought before replying.

"I see what you're saying, Aahz, but there's one flaw in your example. The keyword is 'needless.' Now in my case, it's not a matter of having a stack of ten-pound rocks that would do the job. I have a handful of gravel. I'm trying to scrounge around for a rock big enough to do some damage."

"True enough," Aahz retorted, "but the fact remains if you overextend yourself you won't be able to use what you already have. Even gravel can be effective if used at the right time. Don't underrate what you've got or what you're doing. Right now you're keeping the finder spear going, maintaining the wards, and keeping my disguise intact. That's a lot for someone of your abilities to be doing simultaneously. If something happened right now, which would you drop first?"

"Urn...."

"Too late! We're already dead. You won't have time to ponder energy problems. That's why you always have to hold some back to deal with immediate situations while you rally your energies from other activities. Now do you see?"

"I think so, Aahz," I said haltingly. "I'm a bit tired."

"Well, think about it. It's important. In the meantime get some sleep and try to store up your energies. Incidentally, let the finder spear go for now. You can summon it up again in the morning. Right now, it's just a needless drain."

"Okay, Aahz. How about your disguise?"

"Hmm ... better keep that. It'll be good practice for you to maintain both that and the wards in your sleep. Speaking of which...."

"Right, Aahz."

I drew my acquired assassin's cloak about me for warmth and curled up. Despite his gruff manner, Aahz was persistent that I get enough sleep as well as food.

Sleep did not come easily, however. I found I was still a bit wound up over casting the wards.

"Aahz?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"How would you say my powers right now. stack up against the devils?"

"What devils?"

"The assassins that were following us."

"I keep telling you, kid. Those weren't Deveels, those were Imps."

"What's the difference?"

"I told you before. Imps are from Imper, and Deveels...."

"... are from Deva," I finished for him. "But what does that mean? I mean, are their powers different or something?"

"You'd better believe it, kid." Aahz snorted. "Deveels are some of the meanest characters you'd ever not want to tangle with. They're some of the most feared and respected characters in the dimensions."

"Are they warriors? Mercenaries?"

Aahz shook his head.

"Worse!" he answered. "They're merchants."

"Merchants?"

"Don't sneer, kid. Maybe merchants is too sedate a phrase to describe them. Traders Supreme is more like it."

"Tell me more, Aahz."

"Well, history was never my forte, but as near as I can tell, at one time the entire dimension Deva faced economic ruin. The lands suffered a plague that affected the elements. Fish could not live in its oceans, plants could not grow in the soil. Those plants that did grow were twisted and changed and poisoned the animals. The dimension was no longer able to support the life of its citizenry."

I lay, staring up at the stars as Aahz continued his tale.

"Dimension travel, once a frivolous pastime, now became the key to survival. Many left Deva, migrating singly or in groups to other dimensions. Their tales of their barren, miserable homeland served as a prototype for many religious groups' concept of an afterworld for evil souls.

"The ones who stayed, however, decided to use the power of dimension travel in a different way. They established themselves as traders, traveling the dimensions buying and selling wonders. What is common in one dimension is frequently rare in another. As the practice grew, they became rich and powerful . . . also the shrewdest hagglers in all the dimensions. Their techniques for driving a hard bargain have been passed down from generation to generation and polished until now they are without equal. They are scattered through the dimensions, returning to Deva only occasionally to visit the Bazaar."

"The Bazaar?" I prompted.

"No one can travel extensively in all the dimensions in one lifetime. The Bazaar on Deva is the place the Deveels meet to trade with each other. An off-dimension visitor there will be sore pressed to not lose o'er much, much less hold his own. It's said if you make a deal with a Deveel, you'd be wise to count your fingers afterward . . . then your arms and legs, then your relatives...."

"I get the picture. Now how about the Imps?"

"The Imps." Aahz said the word as if it tasted bad. "The Imps are inferior to the Deveels in every way."

"How so?"

"They're cheap imitations. Their dimension, Imper, lies close to Deva, and the Deveels bargain with them so often they're almost bankrupt from the irresistible 'fair deals.' To hold their own, they've taken to aping the Deveels, attempting to peddle wonders through the dimensions. To the uneducated, they may seem clever and powerful; in fact, occasionally they try to pass themselves off as Deveels. Compared to the masters, however, they're bungling incompetents."

He trailed off into silence. I pondered his words, and they prompted another question.

"Say, Aahz?"

"Hmm? Yeah, kid?"

"What dimension do you come from?"

"Perv."

"Does that make you a Pervert?"

"No. That makes me a Pervect. Now shut up!"

I assumed he wanted me to go to sleep, and maintained silence for several minutes. There was just one more question I had to ask, however, if I was going to get any sleep at all.

"Aahz?"

"Keep it down, kid."

"What dimension is this?"

"Hmmm? This is Klah, kid. Now for the last time, shut up."

"What does that make me, Aahz?"

There was no answer.

"Aahz?"

I rolled over to look at him. He was staring out into the darkness and listening intently.

"What is it?"

"I think we've got company, kid."

As if in response to his words, I felt a tremor in the wards as something came through.

I bounded to my feet as two figures appeared at the edge of the firelight. The light was dimming, but was sufficient to reveal the fact that both figures were wearing the hooded cloaks of assassins, and the gold side was out!

Chapter Eight:

"In times of crisis, it is of utmost importance not to lose one's head."

-M. ANTOINETTE

THE four of us stood in frozen tableau for several minutes studying each other. My mind was racing, but could not focus on the definite course of action. I decided to follow Aahz's lead and simply stood regarding the two figures coolly, trying to ignore the two crossbows leveled steadily on us.

Finally, one of our visitors broke the silence.

"Well, Throckwoddle? Aren't you going to invite your friends to sit down?"

Surprisingly, this was addressed to me!

"Ummm...." I said.

"Yes, Throckwoddle," Aahz drawled, turning to me. "And aren't you going to introduce me to your colleagues?"

"Urn...." I repeated.

"Perhaps he doesn't remember us," the second figure injected sarcastically.

"Nonsense," responded the first with equal sarcasm. "His two oldest friends? Brockhurst and Higgens? How could he possibly not remember our names? Just because he forgot to share the loot doesn't mean he'd forget our names. Be fair, Higgens."

"Frankly, Brockhurst," responded the other. "I'd rather he remembered the loot and forgot our names."

Their words were stuffy and casual, but the crossbows never wavered.

I was beginning to get the picture. Apparently these were the two Imps Aahz had assured me couldn't overtake us. Fortunately, it seemed they thought I was the Imp who had killed Garkin ... at least I thought it was fortunate.

"Gentlemen," Aahz exclaimed, stepping forward. "Let me say what a great pleasure it is to...."

He stopped as Brockhurst's crossbow leapt to his shoulder in one smooth move.

"I'm not sure who you are," he intoned. "But I'd advise you to stay out of this. This is a private matter between the three of us."

"Brockhurst," interrupted Higgens. "It occurs to me we may be being a bit hasty in our actions."

"Thank you, Higgens," I said, greatly relieved.

"Now that we've established contact," he continued, favoring me with an icy glare, "I feel we should perhaps secure our traveling companion before we continue this ... discussion."

"I suppose you're right, Higgens," Brockhurst admitted grudgingly. "Be a good fellow and fetch him along while I watch these two."

"I feel that would be ill-advised on two counts. First, I refuse to approach that beast alone, and second, that would leave you alone facing two to one odds, if you get my point."

"Quite. Well, what do you suggest?"

"That we both fetch our traveling companion and return without delay."

"And what is to keep these two from making a hasty departure?"

"The fact that we'll be watching them from somewhere in the darkness with crossbows. I believe that should be sufficient to discourage them from making ... ah ... any movements which might be subject to misinterpretation."

"Very well," Brockhurst yielded grudgingly. "Throckwoddle, I would strongly suggest you not attempt to avoid us further. While I don't believe we could be any more upset with you than we already are, that might actually succeed in provoking us further."

With that, the two figures faded back into darkness.

"What are we going to do, Aahz?" I whispered frantically.

He seemed not to hear me.

"Imps!" he chortled, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "What a stroke of luck!"

"Aahz! They're going to kill me!"

"Hm? Relax, kid. Like I said. Imps are gullible. If they were really thinking, they would have shot us down without talking. I haven't met an Imp yet I couldn't talk circles around."

He cocked his head, listening.

"They're coming back now. Just follow my lead. Oh yes ... I almost forgot. Drop the disguise on my features when I give you the cue."

"But you said they couldn't catch..."

I broke off as the two Imps reappeared. They were leading a war unicorn between them. The hoods of the cloaks were back now, revealing their features. I was moderately surprised to see they looked human, seedy perhaps, but human nonetheless. Then I saw Quigley.

He was sitting woodenly astride the unicorn, lurching back and forth with the beast's stride. His eyes were staring fixedly straight ahead and his right arm was raised as if in salutation. The light of the fire reflected off his face as if it were glass, and I realized with horror he was no longer alive, but a statue of some unidentified substance.

Any confidence I might have gained from Aahz's assurances left me in a rush. Gullible or not, the Imps played for keeps, and any mistake we made would in all likelihood be our last.

"Who's that?" Aahz asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I realized I had been dangerously close to showing a betraying sign of recognition of the statue.

"There will be time for that later, if indeed there is a later," said Higgens, grimly dropping the unicorn's reins and raising his crossbow.

"Yes," echoed Brockhurst, imitating Higgens's move with his own weapon. "First there is a matter of an explanation to be settled. Throckwoddle?"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," said Aahz soothingly, stepping between me and the crossbows. "Before you proceed I must insist on introducing myself properly. If you will but allow me a moment while I remove my disguise."

The sight of the two weapons had rattled me so badly I almost missed my cue. Fortunately, I managed to gather my scattered senses and closed my eyes, shakily executing the change features spell to convert Aahz back to his normal dubious appearance.

I'm not sure what reaction I had expected from the Imps at the transformation, but the one I got surpassed any possible expectations.

"By the Gods below!" gasped Brockhurst.

"A Pervert!" gasped Higgens.

"That's Pervect!" smiled Aahz, showing all his pointed teeth. "And don't ever forget it, friend Imps."

"Yessir!" they chorused in unison.

They were both standing in slack-jawed amazement, crossbows dangling forgotten in their hands. From their terrified reactions, I began to suspect that despite all his bragging, Aahz had perhaps not told me everything about his dimension or the reputation of its inhabitants.

Aahz ignored their stares and plopped down again at his place by the fire.

"Now that that's established, why don't you put away those silly crossbows and sit down so we can chat like civilized folk. eh?"

He gestured impatiently and they hastened to comply.

I also resumed a sitting position, not wishing to be the only one left standing.

"But. . . what are . . . why are you here . . . sir . . . if you don't mind my asking?" Brockhurst finally managed to get the whole question out.

However incompetent he might be as a demon, he sure knew how to grovel.

"Ah!" smiled Aahz. "There in lies the story."

I settled back. This could take a while.

"I was summoned across the dimensions barrier by one Garkin, a magician I have never cared much for. It seems he was expecting some trouble from a rival and was eager to enlist my aid for the upcoming fracas. Now, as I said before, I had never been fond of Garkin and was not particularly wild about joining him. He began growing unpleasant in his insistence to the point that I considered swaying from my normal easygoing nature to take action against him, when who should appear but Throckwoddle here who did me the favor of putting a quarrel into the old slime-stirrer."

Aahz acknowledged me with an airy wave. I tried to look modest.

"Naturally we fell to chatting afterward, and he mentioned he was in the employment of one Isstvan and that his action against Garkin had been part of an assignment."

"You answered questions about an assignment?" Higgens turned to me aghast.

"Yes I did," I snarled at him. "Wouldn't you. considering the circumstances?"

"Oh, yes ... of course. . . ." He darted a nervous glance at Aahz and lapsed into respectful silence again.

"Anyway," Aahz continued, "it occurred to me I owed this fellow Isstvan a favor for ridding me of a nagging nuisance, so I suggested I accompany Throckwoddle back to his employer that I might offer him my services, on a limited basis, of course."

"You could have waited for us." Brockhurst glowered at me.

"Well... I wanted... you see... I..."

"I insisted," Aahz smiled. "You see, my time is quite valuable and I had no desire to waste it waiting around."

"Oh," said Brockhurst.

Higgens was not so easily swayed.

"You could have left us a message," he muttered.

"We did," Aahz replied. "My ring, in full view on the table. I see you found it."

He pointed an accusing finger at Brockhurst. I noticed for the first time the Imp was wearing Garkin's ring.

"This ring?" Brockhurst started. "Is it yours? I thought it was part of Garkin's loot that had been overlooked."

"Yes, it's mine." Aahz bared his teeth. "I'm surprised you didn't recognize it. But now that we're united, you will, of course, return it."

"Certainly!" the Imp fumbled in his haste to remove the ring.

"Careful there," Aahz cautioned. "You know how to operate it, don't you? It can be dangerous in ignorant hands."

"Of course I know how to operate it," Brockhurst replied in an injured tone. "You press against the ring with the fingers on either side of it. I saw one like it at the Bazaar on Deva once."

He tossed the ring to Aahz who caught it neatly and slipped it on his finger. Fortunately it fit. I made a mental note to ask Aahz to let me try using the ring sometime, now that we knew how it worked.

"Now that I've explained about me, how about answering my question," Aahz said, leveling a finger at the Quigley statue. "Who is that?"

"We aren't sure ourselves," Higgins admitted.

"It's all quite puzzling, really," Brockhurst added.

"Would you care to elaborate on that?" Aahz prompted.

"Well, it happened about three days back. We were following your trail to ... um ... with hopes of reuniting our group. Suddenly this warrior gallops out of the brush ahead of us and bars our path. It was as if he knew we were coming and was waiting for us. 'Isstvan was right!' he shouts, 'This region does abound with demons!' "

"Isstvan?" I said, doing my best to look puzzled.

"That's what he said. It surprised us, too. I mean, here we are working for Isstvan, and were set upon by a man claiming to be sent by the same employer. Anyway, then he says, 'Behold the weapon of your doom!' and draws a sword."

"What kind of sword was it?" Aahz asked innocently.

"Nothing special. Actually a little substandard from all we could see. Well, it put us in a predicament. We had to defend ourselves, but were afraid to harm him on the off-chance he really was working for Isstvan."

"What did you do?" I asked.

"Frankly, we said 'to heck with it' and took the easy way out. Higgens here bounced one of his stone balls off the guy's forehead and froze him in place. We've been dragging him along ever since. We figure we'll dump him in Isstvan's lap and let him sort it out."

"A wise solution," commented Aahz.

They inclined their heads graciously at the compliment.

"One question I'd like to ask," I interjected. "How were you able to overtake us, encumbered as you were?"

"Well, it was no small problem. We had little hope of overtaking you as it was, and with our new burden, it appeared it would be impossible," Brockhurst began.

"We were naturally quite eager to ... ah ... join you, so we resorted to desperate measures," Higgens continued. "We took a side trip to Twixt and sought the aid of the Deveel there. It cost us a pretty penny, but he finally agreed to teleport our group to the trail ahead of you, allowing us to make our desired contact."

"Deveel? What Deveel?" Aahz interrupted.

"Frumple. The Deveel at Twixt. The one who...."

Brockhurst broke off suddenly, his eyes narrowing suspiciously. He shot a dark glance at Higgens, who was casually reaching for his crossbow.

"I'm surprised Throckwoddle hasn't mentioned Frumple to you," Higgens purred. "After all, he's the one who told us about him."

Chapter Nine:

"To function efficiently, any group of people or employees must have faith in their leader."

-CAPT. BUGH(ret.)

"YES, Throckwoddle." If anything, Aahz's voice was even more menacing than the Imp's. "Why didn't you tell me about the Deveel?"

"It ... ah ... must have slipped my mind," I mumbled.

With a massive exertion of self-control, I shot my most withering glare at the Imps, forcing myself to ignore the menace of the crossbows. I was rewarded by seeing them actually look guilty and avoid my gaze.

"Slipped your mind! More likely you were trying to hold back a bit of information from me," Aahz said accusingly. "Well, now that it's out, let's have the rest of it. What about this Deveel?"

"Ask Brockhurst," I grumbled. "He seems to be eager to talk about it."

"Well, Brockhurst?" Aahz turned to him.

The Imp gave me an apologetic shrug as he started.

"Well, I guess I've already told you most of it. There's a Deveel, Frumple, in residence in Twixt. He goes under the cover of Abdul the Rug Merchant, but he actually maintains a thriving trade in the usual Deva manner, buying and selling across the dimensions."

"What's he doing in Klah?" Aahz interrupted. "I mean there's not much business here. Isn't it a little slow for a Deveel's taste?"

"Well. Throckwoddle said. . . ." Brockhurst broke off and shot me a look.

"Go on, tell him." I tried to sound resigned.

"Well," the Imp continued, "rumor has it that he was exiled from Deva and is in hiding here, ashamed to show his face in a major dimension."

"Barred from Deva? Why? What did he do?"

I was glad Aahz asked. It would have sounded strange coming from me.

"Throckwoddle wouldn't tell us. Said Frumple was sensitive on the subject and we shouldn't bring it up."

"Well, Throckwoddle?" Aahz turned to me.

I was so caught up in the story it took me a few beats before I remembered that I really didn't know.

"Urn ... I can't tell you," I said.

"What?" Aahz scowled.

I began to wonder how much he was caught up in the story and had lost track of the realities of the situation.

"I learned his secret by accident and hold it as a personal confidence," I said haughtily. "During our travels these last few days, I've learned some rather interesting items about you and hold them in the same esteem. I trust you will respect my silence on the matter of Frumple as I expect others to respect my silence about those matters pertaining to you."

"Okay, okay. You've made your point," Aahz conceded.

"Say . . . um . . . Throckwoddle," Higgens interrupted. "I would suggest we all shed our disguises like our friend Perver . . . um, Pervect here has. No sense in using up our energies keeping up false faces among friends."

His tone was casual, but he sounded suspicious. I noticed he had not taken his hand off his crossbow.

"Why?" argued Brockhurst. "I prefer to keep my disguise on at all times when in another dimension. Lessens the chance of forgetting to put it on at a crucial moment."

"I think Higgens is right," Aahz stated before I could support Brockhurst. "I for one like to see the true faces of the people I'm talking to."

"Well," grumbled Brockhurst, "if everyone is going to insist."

He closed his eyes in concentration, and his features began to shimmer and melt.

I didn't watch the whole process. My mind was racing desperately back to Garkin's hut, when Aahz held up the charred face of the assassin. I hastily envisioned my own face next to it and began working, making certain obvious modifications to its appearance to repair the fire damage.

When I was done, I snuck a peek out of one eye. The other two had changed already. My attention was immediately drawn to their complexion. Theirs was a pinkish red, while mine wasn't. I hastily re-closed my eye and made the adjustment.

Satisfied now, I opened my eyes and looked about me. The other two Imps now Showed the apparently characteristic pointed ears and chins. Aahz looked like Aahz. The situation had completely reversed since the Imps had arrived. Instead of being normal surrounded by three disguised demons, I was now surrounded by three demons while I was disguised. Terrific.

"Ahh. That's better," chortled Aahz.

"You know, Throckwoddle," Higgens said, cocking a head at me. "For a moment there in the firelight you looked different. In fact..."

"Come, come, gentlemen," Aahz interrupted. "We have serious matters to discuss. Does Istvan know about Frumple's existence?"

"I don't believe so," answered Brockhurst. "If he did, he would have either enlisted him or had him assassinated."

"Good," exclaimed Aahz. "He could very well be the key to our plot."

"What plot?" I asked.

"Our plot against Isstvan, of course."

"What?" exclaimed Higgens, completely distracted from me now. "Are you insane?"

"No," retorted Aahz. "But Isstvan is. I mean, think! Has he been acting particularly stable?"

"No," admitted Brockhurst. "But then neither has any other magician I've met, present company included."

"Besides," Higgens interrupted, "I thought you were on your way to help him."

"That's before I heard your story," Aahz pointed out. "I'm not particularly eager to work for a magician who pits his own employees against each other."

"When did he do that?" Higgens asked.

Aahz made an exasperated gesture.

"Think, gentlemen! Have you forgotten our stony faced friend there?" He jerked a thumb at the figure on the unicorn. "If you recall your tale correctly, his words seemed to imply he had been sent by Isstvan to intercept you."

"That's right," said Brockhurst. "So?"

"What do you mean, 'So?' " Aahz exploded. "That's it! Isstvan sent him to kill you. Either he was trying to cut his overhead by assassinating his assassins before payday, or he's so unstable mentally he's lashing out blindly at everyone, including his own allies. Either way he doesn't sound like the most benevolent of employers."

"You know, I believe he has a point there," I observed, determined to be of some assistance in this deception.

"But if that's true, what are we to do?" asked Higgens.

"Well, I don't have a firm plan of action," Aahz admitted. "But I have some general ideas that might help."

"Such as?" prompted Brockhurst.

"You go back to Isstvan. Say nothing at all of your suspicions. If you do, he might consider you dangerous and move against you immediately. What's more, refuse any new assignments. Find some pretext to stay as close to him as possible. Learn all about his habits and weaknesses, but don't do anything until we get there."

"Where are you going?" asked Higgens.

"We are going to have a little chat with Frumple. If we're going to move against Isstvan, the support of a Deveel could be invaluable."

"And probably unobtainable," grumped Brockhurst. "I've never known a Deveel yet to take sides in a fight. They prefer being in a position to sell to both sides."

"What do you mean 'we'?" asked Higgens. "Isn't Throckwoddle coming with us? "

"No. I've developed a fondness for his company. Besides, if he doesn't agree to help us, it would come in handy to have an assassin close by. Frumple's too powerful to run the risk of leaving him unallied to help Isstvan."

As Aahz was speaking, Brockhurst casually leaned back out of his line of vision and silently mouthed the word "Pervert" at Higgens. Higgens quietly nodded his agreement, and they both shot me sympathetic glances.

"Well, what do you think?" Aahz asked in conclusion.

"Hmm . . . what do we do with him?" Higgens indicated the Quigley statue with a jerk of his head.

"We'll take him with us," I chimed in hastily.

"Of course!" agreed Aahz, shooting me a black look. "If you two took him back to Isstvan, he might guess you suspected his treachery."

"Besides," I added, "maybe we can revive him and convince him to join us in our battle."

"I suppose you'll be wanting the antidote then." Higgens sighed, fishing a small vial from inside his cloak and tossing it to me. "Just sprinkle a little on him and he'll return to normal in a few minutes. Watch yourself, though. There's something strange about him. He seemed to be able to see right through our disguises."

"Where's the sword you were talking about?" Aahz asked.

"It's in his pack. Believe me, it's junk. The only reason we brought it along was that he seemed to put so much stock in it. It'll be curious to find out what he thought it was when we revive him."

"Well, I believe that just about covers everything," Brockhurst sighed. "I suggest we get some sleep and start on our respective journeys first thing in the morning."

"I suggest you start on your journey now," Aahz said pointedly.

"Now?" Brockhurst exclaimed.

"But it's the middle of the night," Higgs pointed out.

"Might I remind you gentlemen that the longer you are away from Isstvan, the greater the chances are he'll send another assassin after you."

"He's right, you know," I said thoughtfully.

"I suppose so," grumbled Higgs.

"Well," said Brockhurst, rising to his feet, "I guess we'll be on our way then as soon as we divide Garkin's loot."

"On the contrary," stated Aahz. "Not only do we not divide the loot, I would suggest you give us whatever funds you have at your disposal."

"What?" they chorused, their crossbows instantly in their hands again.

"Think, gentlemen," Aahz said soothingly. "We'd be trying to bargain with a Deveel for his support. As you yourselves have pointed out, they are notoriously unreasonable in their prices. I would hate to think we might fail in our negotiations for a lack of funds."

There was a pregnant silence as the Imps sought to find a hole in his logic.

"Oh, very well," Brockhurst conceded at last, lowering his crossbow and reaching for his purse.

"I still don't think it will do any good," Higgs grumbled, imitating Brockhurst's move. "You probably couldn't buy off a Deveel if you had the Gnomes themselves backing you."

They passed the purses over to Aahz, who hefted them judiciously before tucking them into his own waistband.

"Trust me, gentlemen." Aahz smiled. "We Pervects have methods of persuasion that are effective even on Deveels."

The Imps shuddered at this and began edging away.

"Well. . . umm ... I guess we'll see you later," Higgs mumbled. "Watch yourself, Throckwoddle."

"Yes," added Brockhurst. "And be sure when you're done, the Deveel is either with us or dead."

I tried to think of something to say in return, but before anything occurred to me they were gone.

Aahz cocked an eyebrow at me and I held up a restraining hand until I felt them pass through the wards. I signaled him with a nod.

"They've gone," I said.

"Beautiful!" exclaimed Aahz gleefully. "Didn't I tell you they were gullible?"

For once I had to admit he was right.

"Well, get some sleep now, kid. Like I said before, tomorrow's going to be a busy day, and all of a sudden it looks like it's going to be even busier."

I complied, but one question kept nagging at me.

"Aahz?"

"Yeah, kid."

"What dimension do the Gnomes come from?"

"Zoorik," he answered.

On that note, I went to sleep.

Chapter Ten:

"Man shall never reach his full capacity while chained to the earth. We must take wing and conquer the heavens."

-ICARUS

"ARE you sure we're up to handling a Deveel, Aahz?" I was aware I had asked the question countless times in the last few days, but I still needed reassurance.

"Will you relax, kid?" Aahz growled. "I was right about the Imps, wasn't I?"

"I suppose so," I admitted hesitantly.

I didn't want to tell Aahz, but I wasn't that happy with the Imp incident. It had been a little too close for my peace of mind. Since the meeting, I had been having recurring nightmares involving Imps and crossbows.

"Look at it this way, kid. With any luck this Frumple character will be able to restore my powers. That'd take you off the hot seat."

"I guess so," I said without enthusiasm.

He had raised this point several times since learning about Frumple. Each time he did, it gave me the same feeling of discomfort.

"Something bothering you, kid?" Aahz asked, cocking his head at me.

"Well . . . it's . . . Aahz, if you do get your powers back, will you still want me as an apprentice?"

"Is that what's been eating at you?" he seemed genuinely surprised. "Of course I'll still want you. What kind of a magician do you think I am? I don't choose my apprentices lightly."

"You wouldn't feel I was a burden?"

"Maybe at first, but not now. You were in at the start of this Isstvan thing; you earned the right to be in on the end of it."

Truth to tell, I wasn't all that eager to be there when Aahz confronted Isstvan, but that seemed to be the price I would have to pay if I was going to continue my association with Aahz.

"Urn ... Aahz?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"Just one more question?"

"Promise?"

"How's that?"

"Nothing. What's the question, kid."

"If you get your powers back, and I'm still your apprentice, which dimension will we live in?"

"Hmm. To be honest, kid, I hadn't really given it much thought. Tell ya what, we'll burn that bridge when we come to it, okay?"

"Okay, Aahz."

I tried to get my mind off the question. Maybe Aahz was right. No sense worrying about the problem until we knew for sure it existed. Maybe he wouldn't get his powers back. Maybe I'd get to be the one to fight Isstvan after all. Terrific.

"Hey! Watch the beast, kid!"

Aahz's voice broke my train of thought. We were leading the war unicorn between us, and the beast chose this moment to act up.

It nickered and half-reared, then planted its feet and tossed its head.

"Steady ... ow!"

Aahz extended a hand trying to seize its bridle and received a solid rap on the forearm from the unicorn's horn for his trouble.

"Easy, Buttercup," I said soothingly. "There's a good boy."

The beast responded to my coaxings, first by settling down, pawing the ground nervously, then finally by rubbing his muzzle against me.

Though definitely a friendly gesture, this is not the safest thing to have a unicorn do to you. I ducked nimbly under his swinging horn and cast about me quickly. Snatching an orange flower from a nearby bush, I fed it to him at an arm's length. He accepted the offering and began to munch it contentedly.

"I don't think that beast likes demons," Aahz grumbled sullenly, rubbing his bruised arm.

"It stands to reason," I retorted. "I mean, he was a demon hunter's mount, you know."

"Seems to take readily enough to you, though," Aahz observed. "Are you sure you're not a virgin?"

"Certainly not," I replied in my most injured tones. Actually I was, but I would have rather been fed to vampire-slugs than admit it to Aahz.

"Speaking of demon hunters, you'd better check on our friend there," Aahz suggested. "It could get a bit grisly if an arm or something broke off before we got around to restoring him."

I hastened to comply. We had rigged a drag-litter for the Quigley-statue to avoid having to load and unload him each night, not to mention escaping the chore of saddling and unsaddling the war unicorn. The bulk of the gear and armor was sharing the drag-litter with the Quigley-statue, a fact which seemed to make the unicorn immensely happy. Apparently it was far easier to drag all that weight than to carry it on one's back. "He seems to be okay, Aahz." I reported. "Good," he sneered. "I'd hate to think of anything happening to him, accidental-like."

Aahz was still not happy with our traveling companions. He had only grudgingly given in to my logic for bringing them along as opposed to leaving them behind. I had argued that they could be of potential assistance in dealing with the Deveel, or at least when we had our final showdown with Isstvan.

In actuality, that wasn't my reasoning at all. I felt a bit guilty about having set Quigley up to get clobbered by the Imps and didn't want to see any harm befall him because of it.

"It would make traveling a lot easier if we restored him," I suggested hopefully.

"Forget it, kid."

"But Aahz...."

"I said forget it! In case you've forgotten, that particular gentleman's major pastime seems to consist of seeking out and killing demons. Now I'm aware my winning personality may have duped you into overlooking the fact, but I am a demon. As such, I am not about to accept a living, breathing, and most importantly, functioning demon hunter as a traveling companion."

"We fooled him before!" I argued.

"Not on a permanent basis. Besides, when would you practice your magik if he was restored? Until we meet with the Deveel, you're still our best bet against Isstvan."

I wished he would stop mentioning that. It made me incredibly uncomfortable when he did. Besides, I couldn't think of a good argument to it.

"I guess you're right, Aahz," I admitted.

"You'd better believe I'm right. Incidentally, since we seem to be stopped anyway, this is as good a time as any for your next lesson."

My spirits lifted. Besides my natural eagerness to extend my magical abilities, Aahz's offer contained an implied statement that he was pleased with my progress so far in earlier lessons.

"Okay, Aahz," I said, looping the unicorn's reins around a nearby bush. "I'm ready."

"Good," smiled Aahz, rubbing his hands together. "Today we're going to teach you to fly."

My spirits fell again.

"Fly?" I asked.

"That's what I said, kid. Fly. Exciting, isn't it?"

"Why?"

"Whadya mean, why? Ever since we first cast jealous eyes on the creatures of the air we've wanted to fly. Now you're getting a chance to learn. That's why it's exciting!"

"I meant, why should I want to learn to fly?"

"Well... because everybody wants to fly."

"I don't," I said emphatically.

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid of heights, for one thing," I answered.

"That isn't enough reason to not learn," Aahz scowled.

"Well, I haven't heard any reasons yet as to why I should." I scowled back at him.

"Look, kid," Aahz began coaxingly, "It isn't so much flying as floating on air."

"The distinction escapes me," I said dryly.

"Okay, kid. Let me put it to you this way. You're my apprentice, right?"

"Right," I agreed suspiciously.

"Well, I'm not going to have an apprentice that can't fly! Get me!?" he roared.

"All right, Aahz. How does it work?" I knew when I was beaten.

"That's better. Actually it doesn't involve anything you don't already know. You know how to levitate objects, right?"

I nodded slowly, puzzled.

"Well, all flying is levitating yourself."

"How's that again?"

"Instead of standing firm on the ground and lifting an object, you push against the ground with your will and lift yourself."

"But if I'm not touching the ground, where do I draw my power from?"

"From the air! C'mon, kid, you're a magician, not an elemental."

"What's an elemental?"

"Forget it. What I meant was you aren't bound to any of the four elements, you're a magician. You control them, or at least influence them and draw your power from them. When you're flying, all you have to do is draw your power from the air instead of the ground."

"If you say so, Aahz," I said doubtfully.

"Okay, first locate a force line."

"But we left it when we started off to see the Deveel," I argued.

"Kid, there are lots of force lines. Just because we left one of the ground force lines doesn't mean we're completely out of touch. Check for a force line in the air."

"In the air?"

"Believe me, kid. Check."

I sighed and closed my eyes. Turning my face skyward, I tried to picture the two-headed spear. At first I couldn't do it, then realized with a start I was seeing a spear, but a different spear. It wasn't as bright as the last spear had been, but glowed softly with icy blues and whites.

"I think I've got one, Aahz!" I gasped.

"It's blue and white, right?" Aahz sneered sarcastically.

"Yes, but it's not as bright as the last one."

"It's probably further away. Oh well, it's close enough for you to draw energy from. Well, give it a try, kid. Hook into that force line and push the ground away. Slowly now."

I did as I was instructed, reaching out with my mind to tap the energies of that icy vision. The surge of power I felt was unlike any I had experienced before. Whereas before when I summoned the power I felt warm and swollen with power, this time I felt cool and relaxed. The power flow actually made me feel lighter.

"Push away, kid," came Aahz's voice. "Gently!"

Lazily I touched the ground with my mind, only casually aware of the curious sensation of not physically feeling anything with my feet.

"Open your eyes, kid! Adjust your trim."

Aahz's voice came to me from a strange location this time. Surprised, my eyes popped open.

I was floating some ten feet above the ground at an angle that was rapidly drifting toward a horizontal position. I was flying!

The ground came at me in a rush. I had one moment of dazed puzzlement before it slammed into me with jarring reality.

I lay there for a moment forcing air back into my lungs and wondering if I had broken anything.

"Are you okay, kid?" Aahz was suddenly looming over me. "What happened anyway?"

"I... I was flying!" I forced the words at last.

"Yeah, so? Oh, I get it. You were so surprised you forgot to maintain the energy flow, right?"

I nodded, unable to speak.

"Of all the dumb ... look, kid, when I tell you you're going to fly, believe it!"

"But. . . ."

"Don't 'but' me! Either you believe in me as a teacher or you don't! There's no buts about it!"

"I'm sorry, Aahz." I was getting my breath back again.

"Ahh . . . didn't mean to jump on you like that, kid, but you half scared me to death with that fall. You've got to understand we're starting to get into some pretty powerful magik now. You've got to expect them to work. A surprise-break like that last one with the wrong thing could get you killed, or me for that matter."

"I'll try to remember, Aahz. Shall I try it again?"

"Just take it easy for a few minutes, kid. Flying can take a lot out of you, even without the fall."

I closed my eyes and waited for my head to stop whirling.

"Aahz? "I said finally.

"Yeah, kid?"

"Tell me about Perv."

"What about it?"

"It just occurred to me, those Imps seemed scared to death when they realized you were a Pervect. What kind of a reputation does your dimension have?"

"Well," he began, "Perv is a self-sufficient, standoffish dimension. We may not have the best fighters, but they're close enough that other dimension travelers give them lots of room. Technology and magik exist side by side and are intertwined with each other. All in all it makes a pretty powerful little package."

"But why should anyone be afraid of that?"

"As I said, Perv has a lot going for it. One of the side effects of success is an abundance of hangers-on. There was a time when we were close to being swamped with refugees and immigrants from other dimensions. When they got to be too much of a nuisance, we put a stop to it."

"How?" I pushed.

"First, we took the non-contributing outsiders and ran 'em out. Then, for an added measure of insurance, we encouraged the circulation of rumors of certain antisocial attitudes of Pervects toward those from other dimensions."

"What kind of rumors?"

"Oh, the usual. That we eat our enemies, torture folks for amusement and have sexual practices that are considered dubious by any dimension's standards. Folks aren't sure how much is truth and how much is exaggeration, but they're none too eager to find out firsthand."

"How much of it is true, Aahz?" I asked propping myself up on one elbow.

He grinned evilly at me.

"Enough to keep 'em honest."

I was going to ask what it took to be considered a contributing immigrant, but decided to let it pass for a while.

Chapter Eleven:

"One of the joys of travel is visiting new towns and meeting new people."

-G. KHAN

"AH! What a shining example of civilization!" chortled Aahz exuberantly as he peered about him, delighted as a child on his first outing.

We were sauntering casually down one of the lesser used streets of Twixt. Garbage and beggars were strewn casually about while beady rodent eyes, human and inhuman, studied us from the darkened doors and windows. It was a cluster of buildings crouched around an army outpost which was manned more from habit than necessity. The soldiers we occasionally encountered had degenerated enough from the crisp recruiting poster model that it was frequently difficult to tell which seemed more menacing and unsavory, the guards or the obviously criminal types they were watching.

"If you ask me, it looks more like mankind at its worst!" I mumbled darkly.

"That's what I said, a shining example of civilization!"

There wasn't much I could say to that, not feeling like getting baited into another one of Aahz's philosophical lectures.

"Aahz, is it my imagination or are people staring at us?"

"Relax, kid. In a town like this the citizens will always instinctively size up a stranger. They're trying to guess if we're victims or victimizers. Our job is to make sure they think we're in the second category."

To illustrate his point he suddenly whirled and crouched like a cat, glaring back down the street with a hand on his sword hilt.

There was sudden movement at the windows and doorways as roughly a dozen half-seen forms melted back into the darkness.

One figure didn't move. A trollop leaning on a windowsill, her arms folded to display her ill-covered breasts, smiled invitingly at him. He smiled and waved. She ran an insolent tongue tip slowly around her lip and winked broadly.

"Um...Aahz?"

"Yeah, kid?" he replied, without taking his eyes from the girl.

"I hate to interrupt, but you're supposed to be a doddering old man, remember?"

Aahz was still disguised as Garkin, a fact which seemed to have momentarily slipped his mind.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. I guess you're right, kid. It doesn't seem to bother anybody else though. Maybe they're used to feisty old men in this town."

"Well, could you at least stop going for your sword? That's supposed to be our surprise weapon."

Aahz was wearing the assassin's cloak now, which he quickly pulled forward again to hide his sword.

"Will you get off my back, kid? Like I said, nobody seems to be paying any attention."

"Nobody?" I jerked my head pointedly toward the girl in the window.

"Her? She's not paying any more attention to us than she is anyone else on the street."

"Really?"

"Well, if she is, it's more because of you than because of me."

"Me? C'mon, Aahz."

"Don't forget, kid, you're a pretty impressive person now."

I blinked. That hadn't occurred to me. I had forgotten I was disguised as Quigley now.

We had hidden the demon hunter just outside of town . . . well, actually we buried him. I had been shocked by the suggestion at first, but as Aahz pointed out, the statue didn't need any air and it was the only surefire way we had of ensuring he wouldn't be found by anyone else.

Even the war unicorn following us, now fully saddled and armored, did not help me keep my new identity in mind. We had been traveling together too long now.

I suppose I should have gotten some satisfaction from the fact I could now maintain not only one, but two disguises without consciously thinking about it. I didn't. I found it unnerving that I had to remember other people were seeing me differently than I was seeing myself.

I shot a glance at the trollop. As our eyes met, her smile broadened noticeably. She displayed her increased enthusiasm by leaning further out of the window until I began to worry about her falling out... of the window or her dress.

"What did I tell you, kid!" Aahz slapped me enthusiastically on the shoulder and winked lewdly.

"I'd rather she was attracted to me for me as I really am," I grumbled darkly.

"The price of success, kid," Aahz responded philosophically. "Well, no matter. We're here on business, remember?"

"Right," I said firmly.

I turned to continue our progress, and succeeded only in whacking Aahz soundly in the leg with my sword.

"Hey .!Watch it, kid!"

It seemed there was more to this sword-carrying than met the casual eye.

"Sorry, Aahz," I apologized. "This thing's a bit point-heavy."

"Yeah? How would you know?" my comrade retorted.

"Well... you said...."

"I said? That won't do it, kid. What's point-heavy for me may not be point-heavy for you. Weapon balance is a personal thing."

"Well ... I guess I'm just not used to wearing a sword," I admitted.

"It's easy. Just forget you're wearing it. Think of it as part of you."

"I did. That's when I hit you."

"Hmm ... we'll go into it more later."

Out of the corner of my eye, I could still see the trollop. She clapped her hands in silent applause and blew me a kiss. I suddenly realized she thought I had deliberately hit Aahz, a premeditated act to quell a rival. What's more, she approved of the gesture.

I looked at her again, more closely this time. Maybe later I would give Aahz the slip for a while and....

"We've got to find Frumple." Aahz's voice interrupted my wandering thoughts.

"Hmm ... ? Oh. How, Aahz?"

"Through guile and cunning. Watch this, kid."

So saying, he shot a quick glance up and down the street. A pack of three urchins had just rounded the corner, busily engaged in a game of keep-away with one of the group's hat.

"Hey!" Aahz hailed them. "Where can I find the shop of Abdul the Rug Dealer?"

"Two streets up and five to the left," they called back, pointing the direction.

"See, kid? That wasn't hard."

"Terrific," I responded, unimpressed.

"Now what's wrong, kid?"

"I thought we were trying to avoid unnecessary attention."

"Don't worry, kid."

"Don't worry!?! We're on our way to meet a Deveel on a supposedly secret mission, and you seem to be determined to make sure everybody we see notices us and knows where we're going."

"Look, kid, how does a person normally act when they come into a new town?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I haven't been in that many towns."

"Well, let me sketch it out for you. They want to be noticed. They carry on and make lots of noise. They stare at the women and wave at people they've never seen before."

"But that's what we've been doing."

"Right! Now do you understand?"

"No."

Aahz heaved an exasperated sigh.

"C'mon, kid. Think a minute, even if it hurts. We're acting like anyone else would walking into a strange town, so nobody will look at us twice. They won't pay any more attention to us than they would any other newcomer. Now if we followed your suggestion and came skulking into town, not talking to anyone or looking at anything, and tried real hard not to be noticed, then everyone and his kid brother would zero in on us trying to figure out what we were up to. Now do you understand?"

"I... I think so."

"Good ... cause there's our target."

I blinked and looked in the direction of his pointing finger. There squatting between a blacksmith's forge and a leatherworker's displays was the shop. As I said, I was new to city life, but I would have recognized it as a rug merchant's shop even if it was not adorned with a large sign proclaiming it such. The entire front of the shop was lavishly decorated with colorful geometric patterns apparently meant to emulate the patterns of the rugs inside. I guess it was intended to look rich and prosperous. I found it unforgivably gaudy.

I had been so engrossed in our conversation, I had momentarily forgotten our mission. With the shop now confronting us at close range, however, my nervousness came back in a rush.

"What are we going to do, Aahz?"

"Well, first of all I think I'm going to get a drink."

"A drink?"

"Right. If you think I'm going to match wits with a Devel on an empty stomach, you've got another think coming."

"A drink?" I repeated, but Aahz was gone, striding purposefully toward a nearby tavern. There was little for me to do but follow, leading the unicorn.

The tavern was a dingy affair, even to my rustic eye. A faded awning sullenly provided shade for a small cluster of scarred wooden tables. Flies buzzed around a cat sleeping on one of the tables ... at least I like to assume it was asleep.

As I tied the unicorn to one of the awning supports, I could hear Aahz bellowing at the innkeep for two of his largest flagons of wine. I sighed, beginning to despair that Aahz would never fully adapt to his old-man disguise. The innkeep did not seem to notice any irregularity between Aahz's appearance and his drinking habits, however. It occurred to me that Aahz might be right in his theories of how to go unnoticed. City people seemed to be accustomed to loud rude individuals of any age.

"Sit down, kid," Aahz commanded. "You're making me nervous hovering around like that."

"I thought we were going to talk with the Deveel," I grumbled, sinking into a chair.

"Relax, kid. A few minutes one way or the other won't make that much difference. Besides, look!"

A young, well-dressed couple was entering the rug shop.

"See? We couldn't have done any business anyway. At least not until they left. The kind of talk we're going to have can't be done in front of witnesses. Ahh!"

The innkeeper had arrived, clinking the two flagons of wine down on the table in a lackluster manner.

"About time!" Aahz commented, seizing a flagon in each hand and immediately draining one. "Aren't you going to have anything, kid?"

A toss of his head and the second flagon was gone.

"While my friend here makes up his mind, bring me two more . . . and make them decent sizes this time if you have to use a bucket!"

The innkeep retreated, visibly shaken. I wasn't. I had already witnessed Aahz's capacity for alcohol, astounding in an era noted for heavy drinkers. What did vex me a bit was that the man had departed without taking my order.

I did eventually get my flagon of wine, only to find my stomach was too nervous to readily accept it. As a result, I wound up sipping it slowly. Not so Aahz. He continued to belt them down at an alarming rate. For quite some time he drank. In fact, we sat for nearly an hour, and there was still no sign of the couple who had entered the shop.

Finally, even Aahz began to grow impatient.

"I wonder what's taking them so long," he grumbled.

"Maybe they're having trouble making up their mind," I suggested.

"C'mon, kid. The shop's not that big. He can't have too large a selection."

He downed the last of his wine and stood up.

"We've waited long enough," he declared. "Let's get this show on the road."

"But what about the couple?" I reminded him.

"We'll just have to inspire them to conclude their business with a bit more speed."

That had a vaguely ominous ring to it, and Aahz's toothy grin was additional evidence that something unpleasant was about to happen.

I was about to try to dissuade him, but he started across the street with a purposeful stride that left me standing alone.

I hurried to catch up with him, leaving the unicorn behind in my haste. Even so, I was unable to overtake him before he had entered the shop.

I plunged after him, fearing the worst. I needn't have worried. Except for the proprietor, the shop was empty. There was no sign of the couple anywhere.

Chapter Twelve:

"First impressions are of major importance in business matters."

-J. PIERPONTFINCH

"MAY I help you, gentlemen?"

The proprietor's rich robes did not successfully hide his thinness. I am not particularly muscular ... as Skeeve, that is ... but I had the impression that if I struck this man, he wouldn't bruise, he'd shatter. I mean, I've seen skinny men before, but he seemed to be a skeleton with a too-small skin stretched over the bones.

"We'd like to talk with Abdul." Aahz said loftily.

"I am he, and he is I," recited the proprietor. "You see before you Abdul, a mere shadow of a man, pushed to the brink of starvation by his clever customers."

"You seem to be doing all right for yourself," I murmured, looking about me.

The shop was well stocked, and even my untraveled eye could readily detect the undeniable signs of wealth about. The rugs were delicately woven in soft fabrics unfamiliar to me, and gold and silver shone from the depths of their designs. Obviously these rugs were intended for the wealthy, and it seemed doubtful their current owner would be suffering from a lack of comfort.

"Ahh. Therein lies the tale of my foolishness," cried the proprietor wringing his hands. "In my blind confidence, I sank my entire holdings into my inventory. As a result, I starve in the midst of plenty. My customers know this and rob me in my vulnerable times. I lose money on every sale, but a man must eat."

"Actually," Aahz interrupted, "we're looking for something in a deep shag wall-to-wall carpet."

"What's that? ... I mean, do not confuse poor Abdul so, my humble business...."

"Come off it, Abdul ... or should I say Frumple." Aahz grinned his widest grin. "We know who you are and what you are. We're here to do a little business."

At his words, the proprietor moved with a swiftness I would not have suspected him capable of. He was at the door in a bound, throwing a bolt and lowering a curtain which seemed to be of a substance even more strange than that of his rugs.

"Where'd you learn your manners!" he snarled back over his shoulder in a voice quite unlike the one used by the whiney proprietor. "I've got to live in this town, you know."

"Sorry," Aahz said, but he didn't sound at all apologetic.

"Well, watch it next time you come barging in and start throwing my name around. People here are not particularly tolerant of strange beings or happenings."

He seemed to be merely grumbling to himself, so I seized the opportunity to whisper to Aahz.

"Psst. Aahz. What's a wall-to-wall...."

"Later, kid."

"You!" The proprietor seemed to see me for the first time. "You're the statue! I didn't recognize you moving."

"Well...!...."

"I should have known," he raved on. "Deal with Imps and you invite trouble. Next thing you know every...."

He broke off suddenly and eyed us suspiciously. His hand disappeared into the folds and emerged with a clear crystal. He held it up and looked through it like an eye glass, scrutinizing us each in turn.

"I should have known," he spat. "Would you be so kind as to remove your disguises? I like to know who I'm doing business with."

I glanced at Aahz who nodded in agreement.

Closing my eyes, I began to effect the change to our normal appearance. I had enough time to wonder if Frumple would wonder about my transformation, if he realized I was actually a different person than the statue he had seen earlier. I needn't have worried.

"A Pervert!" Frumple managed to make the word sound slimy.

"That's Pervect if you want to do business with us," Aahz corrected.

"It's Pervert until I see the color of your money," Frumple sneered back.

I was suddenly aware he was studying me carefully.

"Say, you wouldn't by any chance be an Imp named Throckwoddle, would you?"

"Me? No! I... I'm...."

But he was already squinting at me through the crystal again.

"Hmph," he grunted, tucking his viewer back in his robe. "I guess you're okay. I'd love to get my hands on that Throckwoddle, though. He's been awfully free spreading my name around lately."

"Say, Frumple," Aahz interjected. "You aren't the only one who likes to see who he's doing business with, you know."

"Hm? Oh! Very well, if you insist."

I expected him to close his eyes and go to work, but instead he dipped a hand into his robe again. This time he produced what looked like a small hand mirror with some sort of a dial on the back. Peering into the mirror, he began to gently turn the dial with his fingers.

The result was immediate and startling. Not merely his face, but his whole body began to change, filling out, and taking on a definite reddish hue. As I watched, his brows thickened and grew closer together, his beard line crept up his face as if it were alive, and his eyes narrowed cruelly. Almost as an afterthought, I noted that his feet were now shiny cloven hooves and the tip of a pointed tail appeared at the bottom hem of his robe.

In an impressively short period of time, he had transformed into a ... well, a devil!

Despite all my preparations, I felt the prickle of superstitious fear as he put away the mirror and turned to us again.

"Are you happy now?" he grumbled at Aahz. "It's a start," Aahz conceded. "Enough banter," Frumple was suddenly animated again. "What brings a Pervert to Klah? Slumming? And where does the kid fit in?"

"He's my apprentice," Aahz informed him. "Really?" Frumple swept me with a sympathetic gaze. "Are things really that tough, kid? Maybe we could work something out."

"He's quite happy with the situation," interrupted Aahz. "Now let's get to our problem."

"You want me to cure the kid's insanity?"

"Huh? No. C'mon, Frumple. We came here on business. Let's declare a truce for a while, okay?"

"If you insist. It'll seem strange, though; Perverts and Deveels have never really gotten along."

"That's Perverts!"

"See what I mean?"

"Aahz!" I interrupted. "Could you just tell him?"

"Hmm? Oh. Right, kid. Look, Frumple. We've got a problem we were hoping you could help us with. You see, I've lost my powers."

"What!?" exploded Frumple. "You came here without the magical ability to protect yourself against being followed? That tears it. I spend seven years building a comfortable front here, and some idiot comes along and...."

"Look, Frumple. We told you the kid here's my apprentice. He knows more than enough to cover us."

"A half-trained apprentice! He's trusting my life and security to a half-trained apprentice!"

"You seem to be overlooking the fact we're already here. If anything was going to happen it would have happened already."

"Every minute you two are here you're threatening my existence."

"... which is all the more reason for you to deal with our problem immediately and stop this pointless breast beating!"

The two of them glared at each other for a few moments, while I tried to be very quiet and unnoticeable. Frumple did not seem to be the right choice for someone to pin our hopes on.

"Oh, all right!" Frumple grumbled at last. "Since I probably won't be rid of you any other way." He strode to the wall and produced what looked like a length of rope from behind one of the rugs.

"That's more like it," Aahz said triumphantly.

"Sit down and shut up," ordered our host.

Aahz did as he was bid, and Frumple proceeded to circle him. As he moved, the Deveel held the rope first this way, then that, sometimes looped in a circle, other times hanging limp. All the while he stared intently at the ceiling as if reading a message written there in fine print.

I didn't have the faintest idea what he was doing, but it was strangely enjoyable to watch someone order Aahz about and get away with it.

"Hmm...." the Deveel said at last. "Yes, I think we can say that your powers are definitely gone."

"Terrific!" Aahz growled. "Look, Frumple. We didn't come all this way to be told something we already knew. You Deveels are supposed to be able to do anything. Well, do something!"

"It's not that easy. Pervert!" Frumple snapped back. "I need information. How did you lose your powers, anyway?"

"I don't know for sure," Aahz admitted. "I was summoned to Klah by a magician and when I arrived they were gone."

"A magician? Which one?"

"Garkin."

"Garkin? He's a mean one to cross. Why don't you just get him to restore your powers instead of getting me involved?"

"Because he's dead. Is that reason enough for you?"

"Hmm ... that makes it difficult."

"Are you saying you can't do anything?" Aahz sneered. "I should have known. I always thought the reputation of the Deveels was overrated."

"Look, Pervert! Do you want my help or not? I didn't say I couldn't do anything, just that it would be difficult."

"That's more like it," Aahz chortled. "Let's get started."

"Not so fast," interrupted Frumple. "I didn't say I would help you, just that I could."

"I see," sneered Aahz. "Here it comes, kid. The price tag. I told you they were shake-down artists."

"Actually," the Deveel said dryly, "I was thinking of the time factor. It would take a while for me to make my preparations, and I believe I've made my feelings quite clear about you staying here longer than is absolutely necessary."

"In that case," smiled Aahz, "I suggest you get started. I believe I've made my feelings quite clear that we intend to stay here until the cure is effected."

"In that case," the Deveel smiled back at him, "I believe you raised the matter of cost. How much do you have with you?"

"Well, we have...." I began.

"That strikes me as being unimportant," Aahz glared warningly at me. "Suppose you tell us how much you feel is a fair price for your services."

Frumple graced him with one withering glare before sinking thoughtfully into his calculations.

"Hmm . . . material cost is up ... and of course, there's my time ... and you did call without an appointment ... let's say it would cost you, just as a rough estimate, mind you, oh, in the neighborhood of... Say!"

He suddenly brightened and smiled at us.

"Maybe you'd be willing to work this as a trade. I cure you, and you do me a little favor."

"What kind of a favor?" Aahz asked suspiciously.

For once I was in complete agreement with him. Something in Frumple's voice did not inspire confidence.

"A small thing, really," the Deveel purred. "Sort of a decoy mission."

"We'd rather pay cash," I asserted firmly.

"Shut up, kid," Aahz advised. "What kind of a decoy mission, Frumple?"

"You may have noticed the young couple who entered my shop ahead of you. You did! Good. Then you have doubtless noticed they are not on the premises currently."

"How did they leave?" I asked curiously.

"I'll get to that in a moment," Frumple smiled. "Anyway, theirs is an interesting if common story. I'll spare you the details, but in short, they're young lovers kept apart by their families. In their

desperation, they turned to me for assistance. I obliged them by sending them to another dimension where they can be happy free of their respective family's intervention."

"For a fee, of course," Aahz commented dryly.

"Of course," Frumple smiled.

"C'mon, Aahz," I chided. "It sounds like a decent thing to do, even if he was paid for it."

"Quite so!" beamed the Deveel. "You're quite perceptive for one so young. Anyway, my generosity has left me in a rather precarious position. As you have no doubt noticed, I am quite concerned with my image in this town. There is a chance that image may be threatened if the couple's relatives succeed in tracking them to my shop and no farther."

"That must have been some fee," Aahz mumbled.

"Now my proposition is this: in exchange for my assistance, I would ask that you two disguise yourselves as that couple and lay a false trail away from my shop."

"How much of a false trail?" I asked.

"Oh. it needn't be anything elaborate. Just be seen leaving town by enough townspeople to ensure that attention will be drawn away from my shop. Once out of sight of town, you can change to any disguise you like and return here. By that time, my preparations for your cure should be complete. Well, what do you say? Is it a deal?"

Chapter Thirteen:

"The secret to winning the support of large groups of people is positive thinking."

-N. BONAPARTE

"PEOPLE are staring at us, Aahz."

"Relax, kid. They're supposed to be staring at us."

To illustrate his point, he nodded and waved to a knot of glowering locals. They didn't wave back.

"I don't see why I have to be the girl," I grumbled.

"We went through that before, kid. You walk more like a girl than I do."

"That's what you and Frumple decided. I don't think I walk like a girl at all!"

"Well. let's say I walk less like a girl than you do."

It was hard to argue with logic like that, so I changed subjects.

"Couldn't we at least travel by less populated streets?" I asked.

"Why?" countered Aahz.

"Well, I'm not too wild about having a lot of people seeing me when I'm masquerading as a girl."

"C'mon, kid. The whole idea is that no one would recognize you. Besides, you don't know anybody in this town. Why should you care what they think of you?"

"I just don't like it, that's all," I grumbled.

"Not good enough," Aahz asserted firmly. "Being seen is part of our deal with Frumple. If you had any objections you should have said so before we closed the negotiations."

"I never got a chance," I pointed out. "But since the subject's come up, I do have a few questions."

"Such as?"

"Such as what are we doing?"

"Weren't you paying attention, kid? We're laying a false trail for...."

"I know that," I interrupted. "What I mean is, why are we doing what we're doing? Why are we doing Frumple a favor instead of just paying his price?"

"You wouldn't ask that if you'd ever dealt with a Deveel before," Aahz snorted. "Their prices are sky-high, especially in a case like ours when they know the customer is desperate. Just be thankful we got such a good deal."

"That's what I mean, Aahz. Are we sure we've gotten a good deal?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, from what I've been told, if you think you've gotten a good deal from a Deveel, it usually means you've overlooked something."

"Of course you speak from a wide range of experience," Aahz sneered sarcastically. "Who told you so much about dealing with Deveels?"

"You did," I said pointedly.

"Hmmm. You're right, kid. Maybe I have been a little hasty."

Normally I would have been ecstatic over having Aahz admit I was right. Somehow, however, in the current situation, it only made me feel that much more uncomfortable.

"So what are we going to do?" I asked.

"Well, normally I deal honestly unless I think I'm being double-crossed. This time, however, you've raised sufficient doubt in my mind that I think we should bend the rules a little."

"Situational ethics again?"

"Right!"

"So what do we do?"

"Start looking for a relatively private place where we can dump these disguises without being noticed."

I began scanning the streets and alleys ahead of us. My uneasiness was growing into panic, and it lent intensity to my search.

"I wish we had our weapons along," I muttered.

"Listen to him," Aahz jeered. "It wasn't that long ago you were telling me all about how magicians don't need weapons. C'mon, kid. What would you do with a weapon if you had one?"

"If you want to get specific," I said dryly, "I was wishing you had a weapon."

"Oh! Good point. Say ... ah ... kid? Are you still looking for a private place?"

"Yeah, I've got a couple possibilities spotted."

"Well forget it. Start looking for something wide open with a lot of exits."

"Why the change in strategy," I asked.

"Take a look over your shoulder... casual like."

I did as I was bid, though it was not as casual as it might have been. It turned out my acting ability was the least of our worries.

There was a crowd of people following us. They glared at us darkly and muttered to themselves. I wanted very badly to believe we were not the focus of their attention, but it was obvious that was not the case. They were clearly following us, and gathering members as they went.

"We're being followed, Aahz!" I whispered.

"Hey, kid. I pointed them out to you, remember?"

"But why are they following us? What do they want?"

"Well, I don't know for sure, of course, but I'd guess it has something to do with our disguises."

I snuck another glance at the crowd. The interest in us did not seem to be lessening at all. If anything, the crowd was even bigger and looked even angrier. Terrific.

"Say, Aahz?" I whispered.

"Yeah, kid?"

"If they're after us because of our disguises, why don't we just change back?"

"Bad plan, kid. I'd rather run the risk of them having some kind of grudge against the people we're impersonating than facing up to the consequences if they found out we were magicians."

"So what do we do?"

"We keep walking and hope we run into a patrol of soldiers that can offer us some protection."

A fist-sized rock thudded into the street ahead of us, presumably thrown by one of the people following us.

"... or. ..." Aahz revised hastily, "we can stop right now and find out what this is all about."

"We could run," I suggested hopefully, but Aahz was already acting on his earlier suggestion.

He stopped abruptly and spun on his heel to face the crowd.

"What is the meaning of this?" he roared at the advancing multitude.

The crowd lurched to a halt before the direct address, those in the rear colliding with those in front who had already stopped. They seemed a bit taken aback by Aahz's action and milled about without direction.

I was pleasantly surprised at the success of my companion's maneuver, but Aahz was never one to leave well enough alone.

"Well?" he demanded, advancing on them. "I'm waiting for an explanation."

For a moment the crowd gave ground before his approach. Then an angry voice rang out from somewhere in the back.

"We want to know about our money!"

That opened the door.

"Yeah! What about our money?!"

The cry was taken up by several other voices, and the crowd began to growl and move forward again.

Aahz stood his ground and held up a hand commanding silence.

"What about your money?" he demanded haughtily.

"Oh, no, you don't," came a particularly menacing voice. "You aren't going to talk your way out of it this time!"

A massive bald man brandishing a butcher's cleaver shouldered his way through the crowd to confront Aahz.

"My good man," Aahz sniffed. "If you're implying. ..."

"I'm implying nothing!" The man growled. "I'm saying it flat out. You and that trollop of yours are crooks!"

"Now, aren't you being just a bit hasty in...."

"Hasty!" the man bellowed. "Hasty! Mister, we've already been too patient with you. We should have run you out of town when you first showed up with your phoney anti-demon charms. That's right, I said phoney! Some of us knew it from the start. Anyone with a little education knows there's no such things as demons."

For a moment I was tempted to let Aahz's disguise drop. Then I looked at the crowd again and decided against it. It wasn't a group to joke with.

"Now, some folks bought the charms because they were gullible, some as a gag, some of us because . . . well, because everyone else was buying them. But we all bought them, just like we bought your story that they had to be individually made and you needed the money in advance."

"That was all explained at the time," Aahz protested.

"Sure it was. You're great at explanations. You explained it just like you explained away those two times we caught you trying to leave town."

"Well... we ... uh," Aahz began.

"Actually," I interrupted, "we were only...."

"Well, we've had enough of your explanations. That's what we told you three days ago when we gave you two days to either come up with the charms or give us our money back."

"But these things take time...."

"You've used up that excuse. Your time was up yesterday. Now do we get our money, or...."

"Certainly, certainly," Aahz raised his hands soothingly.

"Just give me a moment to speak with my colleague."

He smiled at the crowd as he took me by the arm and drew me away.

"What are we going to do, Aahz?"

"Now we run," he said calmly.

"Huh?" I asked intelligently.

I was talking to thin air. Aahz was already legging it speedily down the street.

I may be slow at times, but I'm not that slow. In a flash I was hot on his heels.

Unfortunately, the crowd figured out what Aahz was up to about the same time I did. With a howl they were after us.

Surprisingly, I overtook Aahz. Either he was holding back so I could catch up, or I was more scared than I thought, which is impossible.

"Now what?" I panted.

"Shut up and keep running, kid," Aahz barked, ducking around a knot of people.

"They're gaining on us," I pointed out.

Actually, the group we had just passed had joined the pursuit, but it had the same effect as if the crowd was gaining.

"Will you knock it off and help me look?" Aahz growled.

"Sure. What are we looking for?"

"A couple dressed roughly like us," he replied.

"What do we do if we see them?"

"Simple," Aahz replied. "We plow into them full tilt, you swap our features for theirs, and we let the mob tear them apart."

"That doesn't sound right somehow," I said doubtfully.

"Kid, remember what I told you about situational ethics?"

"Yeah."

"Well, this is one of those situations."

I was convinced, though not so much by Aahz's logic as by the rock that narrowly missed my head. I don't know how the crowd managed to keep its speed and still pick up things to throw, but it did.

I began watching for a couple dressed like us. It's harder than it sounds when you're at a dead run with a mob at your heels.

Unfortunately, there was no one in sight who came close to fitting the bill. Whomever it was we were impersonating seemed to be fairly unique in their dress.

"I wish I had a weapon with me," Aahz complained.

"We've already gone through that," I called back. "And besides, what would you do if you had one? The only thing we've got that might stop them is the fire ring."

"Hey! I'd forgotten about that," Aahz gasped. "I've still got it on."

"So what?" I asked. "We can't use it."

"Oh, yeah? Why not?"

"Because then they'd know we're magicians."

"That won't make any difference if they're dead."

Situational ethics or not, my stomach turned at the thought of killing that many people. "Wait, Aahz! "I shouted.

"Watch this, kid." He grinned and pointed his hand at them.

Nothing happened.

Chapter Fourteen:

"A little help at the right time is better than a lot of help at the wrong time."

-TEVYE

"C'MON, Aahz!" I shouted desperately, overturning a fruit stand in the path of the crowd.

Now that it seemed my fellow-humans were safe from Aahz, my concern returned to making sure he was safe from them.

"I don't believe it!" Aahz shouted, as he darted past.

"What?" I called, sprinting after him.

"In one day I believed both a Deveel and an Imp. Tell you what, kid. If we get out of this, I give you my permission to kick me hard. Right in the rump, twice."

"It's a deal!" I panted.

This running was starting to tax my stamina. Unfortunately, the crowd didn't seem tired at all. That was enough to keep me running.

"Look, kid!" Aahz was pointing excitedly. "We're saved."

I followed his finger. A uniformed patrol was marching... well, sauntering down the street ahead of us.

"It's about time," I grumbled, but I was relieved nonetheless.

The crowd saw the soldiers, too. Their cries increased in volume as they redoubled their efforts to reach us.

"C'mon, kid! Step on it!" Aahz called. "We're not safe yet."

"Step on what?" I asked, passing him.

Our approach to the patrol was noisy enough that by the time we got there, the soldiers had all stopped moving and were watching the chase. One of them, a bit less unkempt than the others, had shouldered his way to the front of the group and stood sneering at us with folded arms. From his manners, I guessed he was an officer. There was no other explanation for the others allowing him to act the way he was.

I skidded to a stop in front of him.

"We're being chased!" I panted.

"Really?" he smiled.

"Let me handle this, kid," Aahz mumbled, brushing me aside. "Are you the officer in charge, sir?"

"I am," the man replied.

"Well, it seems that these . . . citizens," he pointed disdainfully at our pursuers, "intend us bodily harm. A blatant disregard for your authority... sir!"

The mob was some ten feet distant and stood glaring alternately at us and the soldiers. I was gratified to observe that at least some of them were breathing hard.

"I suppose you're right," the officer yawned. "We should take a hand in this."

"Watch this, kid," Aahz whispered, nudging me in the ribs as the officer stepped forward to address the crowd.

"All right. You all know it is against the law for citizens to inflict injuries on each other," he began.

The crowd began to grumble darkly, but the officer waved them into silence as he continued.

"I know, I know. We don't like it either. If it were up to us we'd let you settle your own differences and spend our time drinking. But it's not up to us. We have to follow the laws the same way you do, and the laws say only the military can judge and punish the citizenry."

"See?" I whispered. "There are some advantages to civilization."

"Shut up, kid," Aahz hissed back.

"So even though I know you'd love to beat these two to a bloody pulp, we can't let you do it. They must be hanged in accordance with the law!"

"What?"

I'm not sure if I said it, or Aahz, or if we cried out in unison. Whichever it was, it was nearly drowned out in the enthusiastic roar of the crowd.

A soldier seized my wrists and twisted them painfully behind my back. Looking about, I saw the same thing had happened to Aahz. Needless to say, this was not the support we had been hoping for.

"What did you expect?" the officer sneered at us. "If you wanted help from the military, you shouldn't have included us on your list of customers. If we had had our way, we would have strung you up a week ago. The only reason we held back was these yokels had given you extra time and we were afraid of a riot if we tried anything."

Our wrists were secured by thongs now. We were slowly being herded toward a lone tree in front of one of the open-air restaurants.

"Has anyone got some rope?" the officer called to the crowd.

Just our luck, somebody did. It was passed rapidly to the officer, who began ceremoniously tying nooses.

"Psst! kid!" Aahz whispered.

"What now?" I mumbled bitterly. My faith in Aahz's advice was at an all-time low.

"When they go to hang you, fly?"

"What?"

Despite myself, I was seized with new hope.

"C'mon, kid. Wake up! Fly. Like I taught you on the trail."

"They'd just shoot me down."

"Not fly away, dummy. Just fly. Hover at the end of the rope and twitch. They'll think you're hanging."

I thought about it... hard. It might work, but... I noticed they were tossing the nooses over a lower limb of the tree.

"Aahz! I can't do it. I can't levitate us both. I'm not that good yet."

"Not both of us, kid. Just you. Don't worry about me."

"But... Aahz...."

"Keep my disguise up, though. If they figure out I'm a demon they'll burn the bodies ... both of them."

"But Aahz...."

We were out of time. Rough hands shoved us forward and started fitting the nooses over our heads.

I realized with a start I had no time to think about Aahz. I'd need all my concentration to save myself, if there was even time for that!

I closed my eyes and sought desperately for a force line in the air. There was one there... faint, but there. I began to focus on it.

The noose tightened around my neck and I felt my feet leave the ground. I felt panic rising in me and forced it down.

Actually it was better this way. They should feel weight on the rope as they raised me. I concentrated on the force line again . . . focus . . . draw the energies . . . redirect them.

I felt a slight loosening of the noose. Remembering Aahz's lectures on control, I held the energies right there and tried an experimental breath. I could get air! Not much, it was true, but enough to survive.

What else did I have to do? Oh yes, I had to twitch. I thought back to how a squirrel-badger acted when caught in a snare.

I kicked my legs slightly and tried an experimental tremor. It had the overall effect of tightening the noose. I decided to try another tactic. I let my head loll to one side and extended my tongue out of the corner of my mouth.

It worked. There was a sudden increase in the volume of the catcalls from the crowd to reward my efforts.

I held that pose.

My tongue was rapidly drying out, but I forced my mind away from it. To avoid involuntarily swallowing, I tried to think of other things.

Poor Aahz. For all his gruff criticism and claims of not caring for anyone else but himself, his last act had been to think of my welfare. I promised myself that when I got down from here....

What would happen when I got down from here? What do they do with bodies in this town? Do they bury them? It occurred to me it might be better to hang than be buried alive.

"The law says they're supposed to hang there until they rot!"

The officer's voice seemed to answer my thoughts and brought my mind back to the present.

"Well, they aren't hanging in front of the law's restaurant!" came an angry voice in response.

"Tell you what. We'll come back at sundown and cut them down."

"Sundown? Do you realize how much money I could lose before sundown? Nobody wants to eat at a place where a corpse dangles its toes in his soup. I've already lost most of the lunch rush!"

"Hmm ... It occurs to me that if the day's business means that much to you, you should be willing to share a little of the profit."

"So that's the way it is, is it? Oh, very well. Here . . . for your troubles."

There was the sound of coins being counted out.

"That isn't very much. I have to share with my men, you know."

"You drive a hard bargain! I didn't know bandits had officers."

More coins were counted, accompanied by the officer's chuckle. It occurred to me that instead of studying magik, I should be devoting my time to bribes and graft. It seemed to work better.

"Men!" the officer called. "Cut this carrion down and haul it out of town. Leave it at the city limits as a warning to anyone else who would seek to cheat the citizens of Twixt."

"You're too considerate." The restaurant owner's voice was edged with sarcasm.

"Think nothing of it, citizen," the officer sneered.

I barely remembered to stop flying before they cut the rope. I bit my tongue as I started into the ground, and risked sneaking it back into my mouth. No one noticed.

Unseen hands grabbed me under the armpits and by the ankles, and the journey began to the city limits.

Now that I knew I wasn't going to be buried, my thoughts returned to my future.

First, I would have to do something to Frumple. What, I wasn't sure, but something. I owed Aahz that much. Maybe I could restore Quigley and enlist his aid. He was supposed to be a demon hunter. He was probably better equipped to handle a Deveel than I was. Then again, remembering Quigley, that might not be a valid assumption.

Then there was Isstvan. What was I going to do about him? I wasn't sure I could beat him with Aahz's help. Without it, I wouldn't stand a chance.

"This should be far enough. Shall we hang them again?"

I froze at the suggestion. Fortunately the voice at my feet had different ideas.

"Why bother? I haven't seen an officer yet who'd move a hundred paces from a bar. Let's just dump 'em here."

There was a general chorus of assent, and the next minute I was flying through the air again. I tried to relax for the impact, but the ground knocked the wind out of me again.

If I was going to continue my efforts to master flying, I'd have to devote more time to the art of forced landings.

I lay there motionless. I couldn't hear the soldiers any more, but I didn't want to run the risk of sitting up and betraying the fact I wasn't dead.

"Are you going to lay there all day or are you going to help me get untied?"

My eyes flew open involuntarily. Aahz was sitting there grinning down at me.

There was only one sensible thing to do, and I did it. I fainted.

Chapter Fifteen:

"Anyone who uses the phrase 'easy as taking candy from a baby' has never tried taking candy from a baby."

-R. HOOD

"CAN we move now?" I asked.

"Not yet, kid. Wait until the lights have been out for a full day."

"You mean a full hour."

"Whatever. Now shut up and keep watching."

We were waiting in the dead-end alley across the street from Frumple's shop. Even though we were supposedly secure in our new disguises, I was uneasy being back in the same town where I had been hung. It's a hard feeling to describe to someone who hasn't experienced it. Then too, it was strange being with Aahz after I had gotten used to the idea of him being dead.

Apparently the neck muscles of a Pervect are considerably stronger than those of a human. Aahz had simply tensed those muscles and they provided sufficient support to keep the noose from cutting off his air supply.

As a point of information, Aahz had further informed me that his scales provided better armor than most chain-mail or plate armor available in this dimension. I had heard once that demons could only be destroyed by specially constructed weapons or by burning. It seemed the old legends may have actually had some root in fact.

"Okay, kid," Aahz whispered. "I guess we've waited long enough."

He eased himself out of the alley and led me in a long circle around the shop, stopping again only when we had returned to our original spot by the alley. "Well, what do you think, kid?"

"Don't know. What were we looking for?"

"Tell me again about how you planned to be a thief," Aahz sighed. "Look, kid. We're looking over a target. Right?"

"Right," I replied, glad to be able to agree with something. "Okay, how many ways in and out of that shop did you see?"

"Just one. The one across the street there."

"Right. Now how do you figure we're going to get into the shop?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "C'mon, kid. If there's only one way in..."

"You mean we're just going to walk in the front door?"

"Why not? We can see from here the door's open."

"Well... if you say so, Aahz. I just thought it would be harder than that."

"Whoa! Nobody said it was going to be easy. Just because the door's open doesn't mean the door's open."

"I didn't quite get that, Aahz."

"Think, kid. We're after a Deveel, right? He's got access to all kinds of magic and gimmicks. Now what say you close your eyes and take another look at that door."

I did as I was told. Immediately the image of a glowing cage sprang into my mind, a cage that completely enclosed the shop.

"He's got some kind of ward up, Aahz," I informed my partner. It occurred to me that a few short weeks ago I would have held such a structure in awe. Now, I accepted it as relatively normal, just another obstacle to be overcome.

"Describe it to me," Aahz hissed.

"Well. . . it's bright. . . whitish purple . . . there's a series of bars and crossbars forming squares about a hand-span across...."

"Is it just over the door, or all over the shop?"

"All over the shop. The top's covered, and the bars run right into the ground."

"Hmm, well, we'll just have to go through it. Listen up, kid. Time for a quick lesson."

I opened my eyes and looked at the shop again. The building looked as innocent as it had when we first circled it. It bothered me that I couldn't sense the cage's presence the way I could our own wards.

"What is it, Aahz?" I asked uneasily.

"Hmm? Oh. it's a ward, kind of like the ones we use, but a lot nastier."

"Nastier, how?"

"Well, the kind of wards I taught you to build are an early warning system and not much else. From the sounds of it, the stuff Frumple is using will do considerably more. Not only will it kill you, it'll knock you into pieces smaller than dust. It's called disintegration."

"And we're going to go through it?" I asked, incredulously.

"After you've had a quick lesson. Now, remember your feather drills? How you'd wrap your mind around the feather for control?"

"Yeah. "I said, puzzled.

"Well, I want you to do the same thing, but without the feather. Pretend you're holding something that isn't there. Form the energies into a tube."

"Then what?"

"Then you insert the tube into one of the squares in the cage and expand it."

"That's all?"

"That's it. C'mon now. Give it a try."

I closed my eyes and reached out with my mind.

Choosing a square in the center of the open doorway, I inserted my mental tube and began to expand it. As it touched the bars forming the square, I experienced a tingle and a physical pressure as if I had encountered a tangible object.

"Easy, kid," Aahz said softly. "We just want to bend the bars a bit, not break them."

I expanded the tube. The bars gave way slowly, until they met with the next set. Then I experienced another tingle and additional pressure.

"Remember, kid. Once we're inside, take your time. Wait for your eyes to adjust to the dark. We don't want to tip Frumple off by stumbling around and knocking things over."

I was having to strain now. The tube had reached another set of bars now, making it a total of twelve bars I was forcing outward.

"Have you got it yet?" Aahz's whisper Sounded anxious.

"Just a second ... Yes!"

The tube was now big enough for us to crawl through.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Lead the way, kid. I'll be right behind you."

Strangely enough, I felt none of my usual doubts as I strode boldly across the street to the shop. Apparently my confidence in my abilities was growing, for I didn't even hesitate as I began to crawl through the tube. The only bad moment I had was when I suddenly realized I was crawling on thin air about a foot off the ground. Apparently I had set the tube a little too high, but no matter. It held! Next time I would know better.

I eased myself out of the end of the tube and stood in the shop's interior. I could hear the soft sounds of Aahz's passage behind me as I waited for my eyes to adjust to the dark.

"Ease away from the door, kid," came Aahz's whispered advice in my ear as he stood behind me. "You're standing in a patch of moonlight. And you can collapse the tube now."

Properly notified, I shifted away from the moonlight. I was pleased to note, however, that releasing the tube did not make a significant difference in my mental energies. I was progressing to where I could do more difficult feats with less energy than when I started. I was actually starting to feel like a magician.

I heard a slight noise behind me and craned my neck to look. Aahz was quietly drawing the curtains over the door.

I smiled grimly to myself. Good! We don't want witnesses.

My eyes were nearly adjusted now. I could make out shapes and shadows in the darkness. There was a dark lump in the corner that breathed heavily. Frumple!

I felt a hand on my shoulder. Aahz pointed out a lamp on a table and held up four fingers. I nodded and started counting slowly to four. As I reached the final number, I focused a quick flash of energy at the lamp, and its wick burst into flame, lighting the shop's interior.

Aahz was kneeling beside Frumple, knife in hand. Apparently he had succeeded in finding at least some of our weapons in the dark.

Frumple sat up blinking, then froze in place. Aahz had the point of his knife hovering a hairsbreadth from the Deveel's throat.

"Hello, Frumple," he smiled. "Remember us?"

"You!" gasped the Deveel. "You're supposed to be dead!"

"Dead?" Aahz purred. "How could any harm befall us with our old pal Frumple helping us blend with the citizenry?"

"Gentlemen!" our victim squealed. "There seems to have been a mistake!"

"That's right," I commented. "And you made it."

"You don't understand!" Frumple persisted, "I was surprised and horrified when I heard about your deaths."

"Yeah, we weren't too happy about it ourselves."

"Later, kid. Look, Frumple. Right now we have both the ability and the motive to kill you. Right?"

"But I...."

"Right?"

Aahz moved the knife until the point was indenting the skin on Frumple's throat.

"Right!" the Deveel whispered.

"Okay, then." Aahz withdrew the knife and tucked it back in his waistband. "New let's talk business."

"I ... I don't understand," Frumple stammered, rubbing his throat with one hand as if to assure himself that it was still there.

"What it means," Aahz explained, "is that we want your help more than we want revenge. Don't relax too much, though. The choice wasn't that easy."

"I... I see. Well, what can I do for you?"

"C'mon, Frumple. You can honor our original deal. You've got to admit we've laid one heck of a false trail for your two fugitives. Now it's your turn. Just restore my powers and we'll be on our way."

The Deveel blanched, or at least he turned from red to pink.

"I can't do that!" he exclaimed.

"What?"

The knife appeared in Aahz's hand again as if by magik.

"Now look, you double-dealing refugee. Either you restore my powers or...."

"You don't understand," Frumple pleaded. "I don't mean I won't restore your powers. I mean I can't. I don't know what's wrong with you or how to counter it. That's why I set you up with the mob. I was afraid if I told you before, you wouldn't believe me. I've spent too much time establishing myself here to risk being exposed by an unsatisfied customer. I'm sorry, I really am, and I know you'll probably kill me, but I can't help you!"

Chapter Sixteen:

"Just because something doesn't do what you planned it to do doesn't mean it's useless."

-T. EDISON

"HMMM," Aahz said thoughtfully. "So you're powerless to restore my powers?"

"Does that mean we can kill him after all?" I asked eagerly. I had been hopeful of having Aahz's powers restored, but in lieu of that, I was still a bit upset over having been hung.

"You're a rather vicious child," Frumple looked at me speculatively. "What's a Pervect doing traveling with a Klahd, anyway?"

"Who's a clod?" I bristled.

"Easy, kid," Aahz said soothingly. "Nothing personal. Everyone who's native to this dimension is a Klahd. Klah ... Klahds... get it?"

"Well, I don't like the sound of it," I grumbled.

"Relax, kid. What's in a name, anyway?"

"Then it doesn't really matter to you if people call you a Pervect or a Pervert?"

"Watch your mouth, kid. Things are going bad enough without you getting cheeky."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Frumple interrupted. "If you're going to fight would you mind going outside? I mean, this is my shop."

"Can we kill him now, Aahz?"

"Ease up, kid. Just because he can't restore my powers doesn't mean he's totally useless. I'm sure that he'll be more than happy to help us, particularly after he failed to pay up on our last deal. Right, Frumple?"

"Oh, definitely. Anything I can do to make up for the inconvenience I've caused you."

"Inconvenience?" I asked incredulously.

"Steady, kid. Well, Frumple, you could start by returning the stuff we left here when we went off on your little mission."

"Of course. I'll get it for you." •

The Deveel started to rise, only to find Aahz's knife threatening him again.

"Don't trouble yourself, Frumple, old boy," Aahz smiled. "Just point out where they are and we'll fetch them ourselves . . . and keep your hands where I can see them."

"The . . . your things are over there ... in the big chest against the wall," Frumple's eyes never left the knife as he spoke.

"Check it out, kid."

I did and, surprisingly, the items were exactly where the Deveel said they would be. There was, however, an intriguing collection of other strange items in the chest also.

"Hey, Aahz!" I called. "Take a look at this!"

"Sure, kid."

He backed across the shop to join me. As he did, he flipped the knife into what I now recognized as a throwing grip. Apparently Frumple recognized it too, because he stayed frozen in position.

"Well, what have we here?" Aahz chortled.

"Gentlemen," the Deveel called plaintively. "I could probably help you better if I knew what you needed."

"True enough," Aahz responded, reclaiming his weapons.

"Frumple, it occurs to me we haven't been completely open with you. That will have to be corrected if we're going to be allies."

"Wait a minute, Aahz," I interrupted. "What makes you think we can trust him after he's tried so hard to get us killed?"

"Simple, kid. He tried to get us killed to protect himself, right?"

"Well. ..."

"So once we explain it's in his own self-interest to help us, he should be completely trustworthy."

"Really?" I sneered.

"Well, as trustworthy as any Deveel can be," Aahz admitted.

"I resent the implications of that. Pervert!" Frumple exclaimed. "If you want any help, you'd better. . . ." Aahz's knife flashed through the air and thunked into the wall scant inches from the Deveel's head.

"Shut up and listen, Frumple!" he snarled. "And that's Pervert!"

"What's in a name, Aahz?" I asked innocently.

"Shut up, kid. Okay, Frumple, does the name Isstvan mean anything to you?"

"No. Should it?"

"It should if you want to stay alive. He's a madman magician who's trying to take over the dimensions, starting with this one."

"Why should that concern me?" Frumple frowned. "We Deveels trade with anyone who can pay the price. We don't concern ourselves with analyzing politics or mental stability. If we only dealt with sane beings, it would cut our business by a third ... maybe more."

"Well, you'd better concern yourself this time. Maybe you didn't hear me. Isstvan is starting with this dimension. He's out to get a monopoly on Klah's energies to use on other dimensions. To do that, he's out to kill anyone else in this dimension who knows how to tap those energies. He's not big on sharing."

"Hmmm. Interesting theory, but where's the proof -I mean, who's he supposed to have killed?"

"Garkin, for one," I said, dryly.

"That's right," Aahz snarled. "You're so eager to know why the two of us are traveling together. Well, Skeeve here was Garkin's apprentice until Isstvan sent his assassins to wipe out the competition."

"Assassins?"

"That's right. You saw two of them, those Imps you teleported about a week back." Aahz flourished the assassin's cloak we had acquired.

"Where did you think we got this? In a rummage sale?"

"Hmmm," Frumple commented thoughtfully.

"And he's arming them with tech weapons. Take a look at this crossbow quarrel."

Aahz lobbed one of the missiles to the Deveel who caught it deftly and examined it closely.

"Hmmm. I didn't notice that before. It's a good camouflage job, but totally unethical."

"Now do you see why enlisting your aid takes priority over the pleasure of slitting your lying throat?"

"I see what you mean," Frumple replied without rancor. "It's most convincing. But what can I do?"

"You tell us. You Deveels are supposed to have wonders for every occasion. What have you got that would give us an edge over a madman who knows his magik?"

Frumple thought for several minutes. Then shrugged. "I can't think of a thing just offhand. I haven't been stocking weapons lately. Not much call for them in this dimension."

"Terrific," I said. "Can we kill him now, Aahz?"

"Say, could you put a muzzle on him?" Frumple said. "What's your gripe anyway, Skeeve?"

"I don't take well to being hung," I snarled.

"Really? Well, you'll get used to it if you keep practicing magik. It's being burned that's really a pain."

"Wait a minute, Frumple," Aahz interrupted. "You're acting awfully casual about hanging for someone who was so surprised to see us alive."

"I was. I underestimated your apprentice's mastery of the energies. If I had thought you could escape, I would have thought of something else. I was trying to get you killed, after all."

"He doesn't sound particularly trustworthy," I observed.

"You will notice, my young friend, that I stated my intentions in the past tense. Now that we share a common goal, you'll find me much easier to deal with."

"Which brings us back to our original question," Aahz asserted. "What can you do for us, Frumple?"

"I really don't know," the Deveel admitted. "Unless ... I know! I can send you to the Bazaar!"

"The Bazaar?" I asked.

"The Bazaar on Deva! If you can't find what you need there, it doesn't exist. Why didn't I think of that before? That's the answer!"

He was on his feet now, moving toward us.

"I know you're in a hurry, so I'll get you started...."

"Not so fast, Frumple."

Aahz had his sword out menacing the Deveel.

"We want a guarantee this is a round trip you're sending us on."

"I... I don't understand."

"Simple. You tried to get rid of us once. It occurs to me you might be tempted to send us off to some backwater dimension with no way to get back."

"But I give you my word that...."

"We don't want your word," Aahz grinned. "We want your presence."

"What?"

"Where we go, you go. You're coming with us, just to be extra sure we get back."

"I can't do that!" Frumple seemed honestly terrified. "I've been banned from Deva! You don't know what they'd do to me if I went back."

"That's too bad. We want a guaranteed return before we budge, and that's you!"

"Wait a minute! I think I've got the answer!"

The Deveel began frantically rummaging through chests. I watched, fascinated, as an astounding array of strange objects emerged as he searched.

"Here it is!" he cried at last, holding his prize aloft.

It appeared to be a metal rod, about eight inches long and two inches in diameter. It had strange markings on its sides, and a button on the end.

"A D-Hopper!" Aahz exclaimed. "I haven't seen one of those in years."

Frumple tossed it to him.

"There you go. Is that guarantee enough?"

"What is it, Aahz?" I asked, craning my neck to see. He seized the ends of the rod and twisted in opposite directions. Apparently it was constructed of at least two parts, because the symbols began to slide around the rod in opposite directions.

"Depending on where you want to go, you align different symbols. Then you just push the button and...."

"Wait a minute!" Frumple cried. "We haven't settled on a price for that yet!"

"Price?" I asked.

"Yeah, price! Those things don't grow on trees, you know."

"If you will recall," Aahz murmured, "you still owe us from our last deal."

"True enough," Frumple agreed. "But as you yourself pointed out, those D-Hoppers are rare. A real collector's item. It's only fair that our contract be renegotiated at a slightly higher fee."

"Frumple, we're in too much of a hurry to argue," Aahz announced. "I'll say once what we're willing to relinquish over and above our original deal and you can take it or leave it. Fair enough?"

"What did you have in mind?" Frumple asked, rubbing his hands together eagerly.

"Your life."

"My ... Oh! I see. Yes, that... urn ... should be an acceptable price."

"I'm surprised at you, Frumple," I chimed in. "Letting a collector's item go that cheap."

"C'mon, kid." Aahz was adjusting the settings on the D-Hopper. "Let's get moving."

"Just a second, Aahz. I want to get my sword."

"Leave it. We can pick it up on the way back."

"Say, Aahz, how long does it take to travel between dimensions any...." The walls of Frumple's hut suddenly dissolved in a kaleidoscope of color.

"Not long, kid. In fact, we're there." And we were.

Chapter Seventeen:

"The wonders of the ages assembled for your edification, education, and enjoyment-for a price."

-P. T. BARNUM

WHILE I knew my home dimension wasn't particularly colorful, I never really considered it drab ... until I first set eyes on the Bazaar at Deva.

Even though both Aahz and Frumple, and even the Imps, had referred to this phenomenon, I had never actually sat back and tried to envision it. It was just as well. Anything I could have fantasized would have been dwarfed by the real thing.

The Bazaar seemed to stretch endlessly in all directions as far as the eye could see. Tents and lean-tos of all designs and colors were gathered in irregular clumps that shoved against each other for more room.

There were thousands of Deveels everywhere of every age and description. Tall Deveels, fat Deveels, lame Deveels, bald Deveels, all moved about until the populace gave the appearance of being one seething mass with multiple heads and tails. There were other beings scattered through the crowd. Some of them looked like nightmares come to life; others I didn't recognize as being alive until they moved, but they all made noise.

The noise! Twixt had seemed noisy to me after my secluded life with Garkin, but the clamor that assailed my ears now defied all description. There were shrieks and dull explosions and strange burbling noises emanating from the depths of the booths around us, competing with the constant din of barter. It seemed no one spoke below a shout. Whether weeping piteously, barking in anger, or displaying bored indifference, all bartering was to be done at the top of your lungs.

"Welcome to Deva, kid," Aahz gestured expansively. "What do you think?"

"It's loud." I observed.

"What?"

"I said, 'it's loud!' " I shouted.

"Oh, well. It's a bit livelier than your average Farmer's Market or Fisherman's Wharf, but there are noisier places to be."

I was about to respond when a passerby careened into me. He, or she, had eyes spaced all around his head and fur-covered tentacles instead of arms.

"Wzkip!" it said, waving a tentacle as it continued on its way.

"Aahz!"

"Yeah, kid?"

"It just occurred to me. What language do they speak on Deva?"

"Hmm? Oh! Don't worry about it, kid. They speak all languages here. No Deveel that's been hatched would let a sale get away just because they couldn't speak the right tongue. Just drop a few sentences on 'em in Klahdish and they'll adapt fast enough."

"Okay, Aahz. Now that we're here, where do we go first?"

There was no answer. I tore my eyes away from the Bazaar and glanced at my partner. He was standing motionless, sniffing the air.

"Aahz?"

"Hey kid, do you smell that?" he asked eagerly.

I sniffed the air.

"Yeah!" I gagged. "What died?"

"C'mon, kid. Follow me."

He plunged off into the crowd, leaving me little choice but to trail after him. Hands plucked at our sleeves as we passed, and various Deveels leaned out of their stalls and tents to call to us as we passed, but Aahz didn't slacken his pace. I couldn't get a clear look at any of the displays as we passed. Keeping up with Aahz demanded most of my concentration. One tent, however, did catch my eye.

"Look. Aahz! "I cried.

"What?"

"It's raining in that tent!"

As if in answer to my words, a boom of thunder and a crackle of lightning erupted from the display.

"Yeah. So?" Aahz dismissed it with a glance.

"What are they selling, rain?"

"Naw. Weather-control devices. They're scattered through the whole Bazaar instead of hanging together in one section. Something about the devices interfering with each other."

"Are all the displays that spectacular?"

"That isn't spectacular, kid. They used to do tornados until the other booths complained and they had to limit their demonstrations to the tame stuff. Now hurry up!"

"Where are we going anyway, Aahz? And what is that smell?"

The repulsive aroma was growing noticeably stronger.

"That," proclaimed Aahz, coming to a halt in front of a dome-shaped tent, "is the smell of Pervish cooking!"

"Food? We came all this way so you could have a meal?"

"First things first, kid. I haven't had a decent meal since Garkin called me out of the middle of a party and stranded me in your idiot dimension."

"But we're supposed to be looking for something to use against Isstvan."

"Relax, kid. I haggle better on a full stomach. Just wait here. I won't be long."

"Wait here? Can't I go in with you?"

"I don't think you'd like it, kid. To anyone who wasn't born on Perv, the food looks even worse than it smells."

I found that hard to believe, but pursued the argument gamely.

"I'm not all that weak-stomached, you know. When I was living in the woods, I ate some pretty weird things myself."

"I'll tell ya, kid, the main problem with Pervish food is keeping the goo from crawling out of the bowl while you're eating it."

"I'll wait here," I decided.

"Good. Like I say, I won't be long. You can watch the dragons until I get back."

"Dragons?" I said, but he had already disappeared through the tent flap. I turned slowly and looked at the display behind me.

Dragons!

There was an enormous stall stocked with dragons not fifteen feet from where I was standing. Most of the beasts were tethered at the back wall which kept me from seeing them as we approached, but upon direct viewing there was no doubt they were dragons.

Curiosity made me drift over to join the small crowd in front of the stall. The stench was overwhelming, but after a whiff of Pervish cooking, it seemed almost pleasant.

I had never seen a dragon before, but the specimens in the stall lived up to the expectations of my daydreams. They were huge, easily ten or fifteen feet high at the shoulder and a full thirty feet long. Their necks were long and serpentine, and their clawed feet dug great gouges in the ground as they shifted their weight nervously.

I was surprised to see how many varieties there were. It had never occurred to me that there might be more than one type of dragon, but here was living proof to the contrary. Besides the green dragons I had always envisioned, there were red, black, gold and blue dragons. There was even one that was mauve. Some were winged and some weren't. Some had wide, massive jaws and others had narrow snouts. Some had eyes that were squinting and slanted, while others had huge moonlike eyes that never seemed to blink. They had two things in common, however: they were all big and they all looked thoroughly nasty.

My attention was drawn to the Deveel running the operation. He was the biggest Deveel I had ever seen, fully eight feet tall with arms like trees. It was difficult to say which was more fearsome in appearance, the dragons or their keeper.

He brought one of the red dragons to the center of the stall and released it with a flourish. The beast raised its head and surveyed the crowd with seething yellow eyes. The crowd fell back a few steps before that gaze. I seriously considered leaving.

The Deveel shouted a few words at the crowd in gibberish I couldn't understand, then picked up a sword from the rack by the wall.

Fast as a cat, the dragon arched his neck and spat a stream of fire at its keeper. By some miracle, the flame parted as it hit the Deveel and passed harmlessly on either side of him.

The keeper smiled and turned to shout a few more words at his audience. As he did, the dragon leapt at him with murderous intent. The Deveel dove to the ground and rolled out from under the attack as the beast landed with an impact that shook the tent. The dragon whirled, but the keeper was on his feet again, holding aloft a pendant before the beast's eyes.

I didn't understand his move, but apparently the dragon did, for it cowered back on its haunches. The Deveel pointed forcefully and it slunk back to its place at the back of the stall.

A small ripple of applause rippled through the crowd. Apparently they were impressed with the ferocity of the dragon's attack. Me, I was impressed by the pendant.

The keeper acknowledged the applause and launched into another spiel of gibberish, this time punctuated by gestures and exclamations.

I decided it was about time for me to go.

"deep!"

There was a tug at my sleeve.

I looked around. There, behind me, was a small dragon! Well, he was about four feet high and ten feet long, but after looking at the other dragons, he seemed small. He was green with big blue eyes and what appeared to be a drooping white mustache.

For a split second I was panicky, but that rapidly gave way to curiosity. He didn't look dangerous. He seemed quite content just standing there chewing on.... My sleeve! The beast was eating a piece of my sleeve! I looked down and confirmed that part of my shirt was indeed missing.

"Gleep," said the dragon again, stretching his neck out for another mouthful.

"Go away!" I said, and cuffed him before I realized what I was doing.

"Gleep?" it said, puzzled.

I started to edge away. I was unsure of what to do if he cut loose with a blast of fire and therefore eager to avoid it.

"Gleep," it said, shuffling after me.

"Gazabkp!" roared a voice behind me.

I spun and found myself looking at a hairy stomach. I followed it up, way up, and saw the dragon keeper's face looming over me.

"I'm sorry," I apologized readily. "I don't speak your language."

"Oh. A Klahd!" The Devel boomed. "Well, the Statement still stands. Pay up!"

"Pay up for what?"

"For the dragon! What do you think, we're giving away samples?"

"Gleep!" said the dragon, pressing his head against my leg.

"There seems to be some mistake," I said hastily.

"I'll say there is," the Deveel scowled. "And : making it. We don't take kindly to shoplifter Deva!"

"Gleep!" said the dragon.

Things were rapidly getting out of hand. If needed Aahz's help or advice, it was now. I shot perate glance toward the tent he was in, hoping b hope to see him emerge. He wasn't there. In fact, the tent wasn't there! gone, vanished into thin air, and so had Aahz!

Chapter Eighteen:

"No matter what the product or service might be, you can find it somewhere else cheaper!"

-E. SCROOGE

"WHERE did that tent go?" I demanded desperately.

"What tent?" The keeper blinked, looming behind me.

"That tent," I exclaimed, pointing at the now vacant space.

The Deveel frowned, craning his neck, which at his height, gave him considerable visibility.

"There isn't any tent there," he announced with finality.

"I know! That's the point!"

"Hey! Quit trying to change the subject!" The keeper growled, poking me in the chest with an unbelievably large finger. "Are you going to pay for the dragon or not?"

I looked around for support, but no one was watching. Apparently disputes such as this were common on Deva.

"I told you there's been a mistake! I don't want your dragon."

"Gleep!" said the dragon, cocking his head at me. "Don't give me that!" the keeper boomed. "If you didn't want him, why did you feed him?"

"I didn't feed him! He ate a piece of my sleeve!"

"Gleep!" said the dragon, making another unsuccessful pass at my shirt. "So you admit he got food from you?"

"Well ... in a manner of speaking . . . Yeah! So what?" I was getting tired of being shouted at.

"So pay up! He's no good to me anymore."

I surveyed the dragon. He didn't seem to be any the worse for having eaten the shirt. "What's wrong with him? He looks all right to me."

"Gleep!" said the dragon, and sidled up to me again.

"Oh! He's fine," the keeper sneered. "Except now he's attached. An attached dragon isn't any good except to the person or thing he's attached to."

"Well, who's he attached to?"

"Don't get smart with me! He's attached to you! Has been ever since you fed him."

"Well, feed him again and unattach him! I have pressing matters elsewhere."

"Just like that, huh?" the Deveel said skeptically, towering to new heights. "You know very well it doesn't work that way. Once a dragon's attached, it's attached forever. That's why they're so valuable."

"Forever?" I asked.

"Well. . . until one of you dies. But any fool knows not to feed a dragon unless they want it attached to them. The idiot beasts are too impressionable, especially the young ones like this."

I looked at the dragon again. He was very young. His wings were just beginning to bud, which I took as a sign of immaturity, and his fangs were needle-sharp instead of worn to rounded points like his brethren in the stall. Still, there was strength in the muscles rippling beneath those scales . . . yes, I decided, I'd back my dragon in a fight against any.... "Gleep!" said the dragon, licking both ends of his mustache simultaneously with his forked tongue.

That brought me to my senses. A dragon? What did I want with a dragon?

"Well." I said haughtily, "I guess I'm not just any fool, then. If I had known the consequences of allowing him to eat my sleeve, I would have..."

"Look, sonny!" The Deveel snarled, poking my chest again. "If you think you're going to...."

Something inside me snapped. I knocked his hand away with a fury that surprised me. "The name isn't 'Sonny,' " I hissed in a low voice I didn't recognize as my own. "It's Skeeve! Now lower your voice when you're talking to me and keep your dirty finger to yourself!" I was shaking, though whether from rage or from fear I couldn't tell. I had spent my entire burst of emotion in that tirade and now found myself wondering if I would survive the aftermath.

Surprisingly, the keeper gave ground a few steps at my tirade, and was now studying me with new puzzlement. I felt a pressure at the back of my legs and risked a glance. The dragon was now crouched behind me, craning his neck to peer around my waist at the keeper.

"I'm sorry." The keeper was suddenly humble and fawning. "I didn't recognize you at first. You said your name was ... ?"

"Skeeve." I prompted haughtily.

"Skeeve." He frowned thoughtfully. "Strange. I don't remember that name."

I wasn't sure who or what he thought I was, but if I had learned one thing traveling with Aahz, it was to recognize and seize an advantage when I saw one.

"The secrecy surrounding my identity should be a clue in itself, if you know what I mean," I murmured, giving him my best conspiratorial wink.

"Of course," he responded. "I should have realized immediately...."

"No matter," I yawned. "Now then, about the dragon...."

"Yes. Forgive me for losing my temper, but you can see my predicament." It seemed strange having someone that immense simpering at me, but I rose to the occasion.

"Well, I'm sure we can work something out," I smiled. As I spoke, a thought flashed through my head. Aahz had all our money! I didn't have a single item of any value on me except.... I reached into my pocket, forcing myself to make the move casual. It was still there! The charm I had taken from Quigley's statue-body that allowed the wearer to see through spells. I had taken it when Aahz wasn't looking and had kept it hidden in case it might be useful in some crisis. Well, this definitely looked like a crisis!

"Here!" I said, tossing the charm to him. "I believe this should settle our accounts."

He caught it deftly and gave it a fast, squinting appraisal.

"This?" he said. "You want to purchase a hatchling dragon for this?"

I had no idea of the charm's relative worth, but bluffing had gotten me this far.

"I do not haggle," I said coldly. "That is my first and final offer. If it is not satisfactory, then return the charm and see if you can get a better price for an attached dragon."

"You drive a hard bargain, Skeeve." The Deveel was still polite, but his smile looked like it hurt. "Very well, it's a deal. Shake on it." He extended his hand.

There was a sudden hissing noise and my vision was obscured. The dragon had arched his neck forward over my head and was confronting the Deveil eye-to-eye. His attitude was suddenly a miniature version of the ferocity I had seen displayed earlier by his larger brethren. I realized with a start that he was defending me!

Apparently the keeper realized it too, for he jerked back his hand as if he had just stuck it in an open fire.

"... if you could call off your dragon long enough for us to dose the deal?" he suggested with forced politeness.

I wasn't sure just how I was supposed to do this, but I was willing to give it a try.

"He's okay!" I shouted, thumping the dragon on the side of the neck to get his attention.

"Gleep?" said the dragon, turning his head to peer into my face.

I noticed his breath was bad enough to kill an insect in flight.

"It's okay," I repeated, edging out from under his neck.

Since I was already moving, I stepped forward and shook the keeper's hand. He responded absently, never taking his eyes from the dragon.

"Say," I said. "Confidentially, I'm rather new to the dragon game. What does he eat ... besides shirts. I mean."

"Oh, a little of this and a little of that. They're omnivorous, so they can eat anything, but they're picky eaters. Just let him alone and he'll choose his own diet ... old clothes, selected leaves, house pets."

"Terrific! "I mumbled.

"Well, if you'll excuse me I've got other customers to talk to."

"Just a minute! Don't I get one of those pendants like you used to control the big dragons?"

"Hmm? What for?"

"Well... to control my dragon."

"Those are to control unattached dragons. You don't need one for one that's attached to you and it wouldn't work on a dragon that's attached to someone else."

"Oh," I said, with a wisdom I didn't feel.

"If you want one, though, I have a cousin who has a stall that sells them. It's about three rows up and two rows over. It might be a good investment for you. Could save wear and tear on your dragon if you come up against an unattached dragon. It'd give junior there a better chance of growing up."

"That brings up another question," I said. "How long does it take?"

"Not long. It's just three rows up and...."

"No. I mean how long until my dragon reaches maturity?"

"Oh, not more than four or five centuries."

"Gleep!" I'm not sure if the dragon said that or I did.

Chapter Nineteen:

"By persevering over all obstacles and distractions, one may unfailingly arrive at his chosen goal or destination."

-C. COLUMBUS

"C'MON. Gleep," I said.

"Gleep," my dragon responded, falling in behind me.

Now that I was the not-so-proud owner of a permanently immature dragon, I was more eager than ever to find Aahz. At the moment, I was alone in a strange dimension, penniless, and now I had a dragon tagging after me. The only way things could be worse would be if the situation became permanent, which could happen if Aahz decided to return to Klah without me.

The place previously occupied by the Pervish restaurant tent was definitely empty, even at close examination, so I decided to ask the Deveel running the neighboring booth.

"Um ... excuse me, sir."

I decided I was going to be polite as possible for the duration of my stay on Deva. The last thing I needed was another dispute with a Deveel. It seemed, however, in this situation I needn't have worried.

"No excuses are necessary, young sahr." The proprietor smiled eagerly, displaying an impressive number of teeth.

"You are interested in purchasing a stick?"

"A stick?"

"Of course!" the Deveel gestured grandly around his stall. "The finest sticks in all the dimensions."

"Aah . . . thanks, but we have plenty of sticks in my home dimension."

"Not like these sticks, young sahr. You are from Klah, are you not?"

"Yes, why?"

"I can guarantee you, there are no such sticks as these in all of Klah. They come from a dimension only I have access to and I have not sold them in Klah or to anyone who was going there."

Despite myself, my curiosity was piqued. I looked again at the sticks lining the walls of the stall. They looked like ordinary sticks such as could be found anywhere. "What do they do?" I asked cautiously.

"Aah! Different ones do different things. Some control animals, others control plants. A few very rare ones allow you to summon an army of warriors from the stones themselves. Some of the most powerful magicians of any dimension wield staffs of the same wood as these sticks, but for most people's purposes the Smaller model will suffice."

"Gleep!" said the dragon, sniffing at one of the sticks.

"Leave it alone!" I barked, shoving his head away from the display.

All I needed was to have my dragon eat up the entire stock of one of these super-merchants.

"May I inquire, is that your dragon, young sahr?"

"Well... sort of."

"In that case, you might find a particular use for a stick most magicians wouldn't."

"What's that?"

"You could use it to beat your dragon."

"deep!" said the dragon, looking at me with his big blue eyes.

"Actually, I'm not really interested in a stick." I thought I'd better get to my original purpose before this conversation got out of hand.

"Ridiculous, young sahr. Everybody should have a stick."

"The reason I stopped here in the first place is I wondered if you knew what happened to that tent."

"What tent, young sahr?"

I had a vague feeling of having had this conversation before. "The tent that was right there next to your stall."

"The Pervish restaurant?" The Deveel's voice was tinged with horror.

"Gleep," said the dragon.

"Why would you seek such place, young sahr? You seem well-bred and educated."

"I had a friend who was inside the tent when it vanished."

"You have a Pervert for a friend?" His voice had lost its friendly tone.

"Well actually... urn ... it's a long story."

"I can tell you this much, punk. It didn't disappear, it moved on," the Deveel snarled, without the accent or politeness he had displayed earlier.

"Moved on?"

"Yeah. It's a new ordinance we passed. All places serving Pervish food have to migrate. They cannot be established permanently, or even temporarily at any point in the Bazaar."

"Why?" I asked.

"Have you ever smelted Pervish food? It's enough to make a scavenger nauseous. Would you want to man a stall downwind of that for a whole day? In this heat?"

"I see what you mean," I admitted.

"Either they moved or the Bazaar did, and we have them outnumbered."

"But what exactly do you mean, move?"

"The tents! All that's involved is a simple spell or two. Either they constantly move at a slow pace, or they stay in one place for a short period and then scuttle off to a new location, but they all move."

"How does anyone find one, then, if they keep moving around?"

"That's easy, just follow your nose."

I sniffed the air experimentally. Sure enough, the unmistakable odor was still lingering in the air.

"Gleep!" the dragon had imitated my action and was now rubbing his nose with one paw.

"Well, thank you ... for... your...."

I was talking to thin air. The Deveel was at the other end of the stall, baring his teeth at another customer. It occurred to me that the citizens of Deva were not particularly concerned with social pleasantries beyond those necessary to transact a sale.

I set out to follow the smell of the Pervish restaurant with the dragon faithfully trailing along behind. Despite my growing desire to reunite with Aahz, my pace was considerably slower than that Aahz had set when we first arrived. I was completely mesmerized by this strange Bazaar and wanted to see as much of it as I could. Upon more leisurely examination, there did seem to be a vague order to the Bazaar. The various stalls and booths were generally grouped by type of merchandise. This appeared to be more from circumstance than by plan. Apparently, if one Deveel set up a display, say, of invisible cloaks, in no time at all he had a pack of competitors in residence around him, each vying to top the other for quality of goods or prices. Most of the confused babble of voices were disputes between the merchants over the location of their respective stalls or the space occupied by the same.

The smell grew stronger as I wandered through an area specializing in exotic and magical jewelry, which I resisted the temptation to examine more closely. The temptation was even stronger as I traversed an area which featured weaponry. It occurred to me that I might find a weapon here we could use against Isstvan, but the smell of the Pervish food was even stronger now, and I steeled myself to finish my search. We could look for a weapon after I found Aahz. From the intensity of the stench, I was sure we would find our objective soon.

"C'mon, Gleep," I encouraged.

The dragon was hanging back now and didn't respond except to speed his pace a bit.

I expectantly rounded one last corner and came to an abrupt halt. I had found the source of the odor.

I was looking at the back of a large display of some alien livestock. There was a large pile of some moist green and yellow substance in front of me. As I watched, a young Deveel emerged from the display holding a shovel filled with the same substance. He glanced at me quizzically as he heaved the load onto the pile and returned to the display.

A dung heap! I had been following the smell of a dung heap!

"Gleep!" said the dragon, looking at me quizzically.

He seemed to be asking me what we were going to do next. That was a good question. I stood contemplating my next move. Probably the best chance would be to retrace our steps back to the stick seller and try again.

"Spare a girl a little time, handsome?"

I whirled around. A girl was standing there, a girl unlike any I had ever seen before. She was Klahdish in appearance and could have passed for another of my dimension except for her complexion and hair. Her skin was a marvelous golden-olive hue, and her head was crowned with a mane of light green hair that shimmered in the sun. She was a little taller than me and incredibly curvaceous, her generous figure straining against the confines of her clothes.

". . . or have you really got a thing about dung heaps?" she concluded.

She had almond cat-eyes that danced with mischief as she talked.

"Um ... are you talking to me?" I stammered.

"Of course I'm talking to you," she purred, coming close to me and twining her arms around my neck 'I'm certainly not talking to your dragon. I mean, he's cute and all, but my tastes don't run in those directions."

"Gleep!" said the dragon.

I felt my body temperature soar. The touch of her arms caused a tingling sensation which seemed to wreak havoc on my metabolism.

"Urn . . . actually I'm looking for a friend," I blurted.

"Well, you've found one," she murmured, moving her body against me.

"Aah ... I... urn." Suddenly I was having trouble concentrating. "What is it you want?"

"Hmm," she said thoughtfully, "Even though it's not my normal line, I think I'd like to tell your fortune ... free."

"Oh?" I said, surprised.

This was the first time since I reached the Bazaar that anyone had offered me anything for free. I didn't know if I should be happy or suspicious.

"You're going to have a fight," she whispered in my ear. "A big one."

"What?" I exclaimed. "When? With who?"

"Easy, handsome." she warned, tightening her grip around my neck. "When is in a very few minutes. With who is the rat pack over my shoulder . . . don't look right at them!"

Her final sharp warning checked my reflexive glance. Moving more cautiously, I snuck a peek out of the corner of my eye.

Lounging against a shop wall, watching us closely, were a dozen or so of the ugliest, nastiest looking characters I have ever seen.

"Them? I mean, all of them?" I asked.

"Uh-huh!" she confirmed, snuggling into my chest.

"Why?" I demanded.

"I probably shouldn't tell you this," she smiled, "but because of me."

Only her firm grip on me kept me from dislodging her with a shove.

"You? What about you?"

"Well, they're an awfully greedy bunch. One way or another, they're going to make some money from this encounter. Normally, you'd give the money to me and I'd cut them in for a share. In the unlikely event that doesn't work, they'll pretend to be defending my honor and beat it out of you."

"But you don't understand! I don't have any money."

"I know that. That's why you're going to get into a fight, see?"

"If you knew I didn't have any money, why did you...."

"Oh, I didn't know when I first stopped you. I found out just now when I searched you."

"Searched me?"

"Oh, come on, handsome. There's more ways to search a person than with your hands," she winked knowingly at me.

"Well, can't you tell them I don't have any money?"

"They wouldn't believe me. The only way they'd be convinced is searching you themselves."

"I'd be willing to let them if that's what it takes to convince them."

"I don't think you would," she smiled, stroking my face with her hand. "One of the things they'll look for is if you swallowed your money."

"Oh!" I said, "I see what you mean. But I can't fight them. I don't have any weapons."

"You have that little knife under your shirt at the small of your back," she pointed out.

I had forgotten about my skinning knife. I started to believe in her no-hands frisking technique.

"But I've never been in a fight before."

"Well, I think you're about to learn."

"Say, why are you telling me all this, anyway?" I asked.

"I don't know," she shrugged. "I like your act. That's why I singled you out in the first place. Then again, I feel a little guilty about having gotten you into this."

"Will you help me?"

"I don't feel that guilty, handsome," she smiled. "But there is one more thing I can do for you."

She started to pull me toward her.

"Wait a minute," I protested. "Won't that...."

"Relax, handsome," she purred. "You're about to get pounded for offending my honor. You might as well get a little of the sweet along with the bitter."

Before I could protest further, she kissed me. Long and warm and sweet, she kissed me. I had never been kissed by anyone except my mother. This was different! The fight, the dragon, Aahz, everything faded from my mind. I was lost in the wonder of that moment.

"Hey!"

A rough hand fell on my shoulder and pulled us apart.

"Is this shrimp bothering you, lady?"

The person on the other end of that hand was no taller than I was, but he was twice as broad and had short, twisted tusks protruding from his mouth. His cronies had fanned out behind him, effectively boxing me in against the dung heap. I looked at the girl. She shrugged and backed away. It looked like I was going to have to fight all of them. Me and the dragon. Terrific.

I remembered my skinning knife. It wasn't much, but it was all I had. As casually as I could, I reached behind me and tugged at my shirt, trying to pull it up so I could get at the knife. The knife promptly fell down inside my pants.

The wrecking crew started forward.

Chapter Twenty:

"With the proper consideration in choice of allies, victory may be guaranteed in any conflict."

-B. ARNOLD

"GET 'em, Gleep!" I barked.

The dragon bounded into action, a move which I think surprised me more than it did my assailants.

It leaped between me and the advancing rat pack and crouched there, hissing menacingly. His tail gave a mighty lash which neatly swept the legs out from under two of the flanking members of the party. Somehow, he seemed much bigger when he was mad.

"Watch out! He's got a dragon!" the leader called.

"Thanks for the warning!" one of the fallen men growled, struggling to regain his feet.

"I've got him!" came a voice from my left.

I turned just in time to see a foot-long dagger flashing through the air at the dragon's neck. My dragon!

Suddenly I was back at the practice sessions. My mind darted out and grabbed at the knife. It jerked to a halt in midair and hovered there.

"Nice move, handsome!" the girl called.

"Hey! The shrimp's a magician!"

The pack fell back a few steps.

"That's right!" I barked. "Skeeve's the name, magik's the game. What kind of clod did you think you were dealing with?"

With that, I brought the dagger down, swooping it back and forth through their formation. I was mad now. One of these louts had tried to kill my dragon!

"A dozen of you isn't enough!" I shouted. "Go back and get some friends... if you have any!"

I cast about desperately for something else to throw. My eyes fell on the dung heap. I smiled to myself despite my anger. Why not? In a moment I had great gobs of dung hurtling through the air

at my assailants. My accuracy wasn't the best, but it was good enough as the outraged howls testified.

"Levitation!" the leader bawled. "Quanto! Stop him!"

"Right, boss!"

One of the plug-uglies waved in affirmation and started rummaging through his belt pouch.

He had made a mistake identifying himself. I didn't know what he was about to come up with, but I was sure I didn't want to wait and find out.

"Stop him, Gleep!" I ordered, pointing to the victim.

The dragon raised his head and fixed his gaze on the fumbling brigand. With a sound that might have been a roar if he were older, he shot a stream of flame and charged.

It wasn't much of a stream of flame, and it missed to boot, but it was enough to get the brigand's attention. He looked up to see a mountain of dragon flesh bearing down on him and panicked. Without pausing to call to his comrades, he spun and ran off screaming with the dragon in hot pursuit.

"Okay, shrimp! Let's see you stop this!"

I jerked my attention back to the leader. He was standing now, confidently holding aloft a stick. Yesterday it wouldn't have fazed me, but knowing what I did now, I froze. I didn't know what model it was, but apparently the leader was confident its powers would surpass my own.

He grinned evilly and slowly began to level the stick at me.

I tried desperately to think of a defense, but couldn't. I didn't even know what I was supposed to be defending against!

Suddenly, something flashed across my line of vision and the stick was gone.

I blinked and looked again. The stick was lying on the ground, split by a throwing knife, a black-handled throwing knife.

"Any trouble here, Master Skeeve?" a voice boomed.

I spun toward the source of the voice. Aahz was standing there, cocked crossbow leveled at the pack. He was grinning broadly, which I have mentioned before is not that comforting to anyone who doesn't know him.

"A Pervert!" the leader gasped.

"What?" Aahz swung the crossbow toward him.

"I mean a Pervect!" the leader amended hastily.

"That's better. How about it, Skeeve? You want 'em dead or running?"

I looked at the rat pack. Without breaking their frozen tableau, they pleaded with me with their eyes.

"Um . . . running, I think," I said thoughtfully. "They smell bad enough alive. Dead they might give the Bazaar a bad name."

"You heard him," Aahz growled. "Move!"

They disappeared like they had melted into the ground.

"Aahz!"

The girl came flying forward to throw her arms around him.

"Tanda!" Aahz exclaimed, lowering the crossbow. "Are you mixed up with that pack?"

"Are you kidding? I'm the bait!" she winked bawdiy.

'Little low class for you, isn't it?"

"Aah ... it's a living."

"Why'd you leave the Assassins?"

"Got tired of paying union dues."

"Um ... harrumph...." I interrupted.

"Hmm?" Aahz looked around. "Oh! Sorry, kid. Say, have you two met?"

"Sort of," the girl acknowledged. "We . . . say, is this the friend you were looking for, handsome?"

"Handsome?" Aahz wrinkled his nose.

"Well, yes," I admitted. "We got separated back by the...."

"Handsome?" Aahz repeated.

"Oh, hush!" the girl commanded, slapping his stomach playfully. "I like him. He's got style."

"Actually, I don't believe we've met formally," I said, giving my most winning smile. "My name is Skeeve."

"Well, la-de-dah!" Aahz grumbled.

"Ignore him. I'm Tananda, but call me Tanda."

"Love to," I leered.

"If you two are quite through. . . ." Aahz interrupted, "I have a couple questions...."

"Gleep!" said the dragon, prancing up to our assemblage.

"What's that?" Aahz demanded.

"It's a dragon," I said helpfully.

Tanda giggled rudely.

"I know that," Aahz barked. "I mean what is he doing here?"

Suddenly I was hesitant to supply the whole story.

"There are lots of dragons at the Bazaar, Aahz," I mumbled, not looking at him. "In fact, there's a stall just down the way that...."

"What is that dragon doing here?!"

"deep!" said the dragon, rubbing his head against my chest.

"Urn ... he's mine," I admitted.

"Yours?" Aahz bellowed. "I told you to look at the dragons, not buy one!"

"But Aahz...."

"What are we going to do with a dragon?"

"I got a good deal on him," I chimed hopefully.

"What did you say. kid?"

"I said I got a good deal...."

"From a Deveel?"

"Oh. I see what you mean."

"C'mon. Let's have it. What were the terms of this fantastic deal?"

"Well... I... that is...."

"Out with it!"

"I traded Quigley's pendant for him."

"Quigley's pendant? The one that sees through spells? You traded a good magical pendant for a halfgrown dragon?"

"Oh, give him a break, Aahz," Tanda interrupted. "What do you expect letting him wander off alone that way? You're lucky he didn't get stuck with half the tourist crud on Deva! Where were you all this time, anyway?"

"Well... I was... urn...."

"Don't tell me," she said, holding up a hand. "If I know you, you were either chasing a girl or stuffing your face, right?"

"She's got you there, Aahz," I commented. "Shut up, kid."

"... so don't get down on Skeeve here. Compared to what could have happened to him, he didn't do half bad. How did you find us, anyway?"

"I listened for the sounds of a fight and followed it," Aahz admitted.

"See! You were expecting him to get into trouble. Might I point out he was doing just fine before you barged in. He and his dragon had those thugs treed all by themselves. He's pretty handy with that magik, you know."

"I know," Aahz responded proudly. "I taught him."

"Gee, thanks, Aahz."

"Shut up, kid."

"Gleep," said the dragon, craning his neck around to look at Aahz upside down.

"A dragon, huh?" Aahz said, studying the dragon more thoughtfully.

"He might help us against Isstvan," I suggested hopefully.

"Isstvan?" Tanda asked quizzically.

"Yeah," Aahz replied. "You remember him, don't you? Well, he's up to his old tricks, this time on Klah."

"So that's what's going on, huh? Well, what are we going to do about it?"

"We?" I asked, surprised.

"Sure," she smiled. "This racket is a bit low class, like Aahz says. I might as well tag along with you two for a while... if you don't mind, that is."

"Terrific!" I said, and meant it for a change.

"Not so fast, Tanda," Aahz cautioned. "There are a few details you haven't been filled in on yet."

"Such as?"

"Such as I've lost my powers."

"No fooling? Gee, that's tough."

"That means we'll be relying on the kid here to give us cover in the magik department."

"All the more reason for me to come along. I've picked up a few tricks myself."

"I know," Aahz leered.

"Not like that," she said, punching him in the side.

"I mean magik tricks."

"Even so, it's not going to be easy."

"C'mon, Aahz," Tanda chided. "Are you trying to say it wouldn't be helpful having a trained Assassin on your side?"

"Well ... it could give us a bit of an advantage,"

Aahz admitted.

"Good! Then it's settled. What do we do first?"

"There're some stalls just around the corner that carry weapons," I suggested. "We could..."

"Relax, kid. I've already taken care of that."

"You have?" I asked, surprised.

"Yeah. I found just what we need over in the practical jokes section. I was just looking for you before we headed back."

"Then we're ready to go?" Tanda asked. "Yep," Aahz nodded, fishing the D-Hopper out of his shirt.

"What about my dragon?"

"What about him?"

"Are we going to take him with us?"

"Of course we're going to take him with us. We don't leave anything of value behind."

"Gleep!" said the dragon.

". . . and he must be valuable to someone!" Aahz finished, glaring at the dragon.

He pressed the button on the D-Hopper. The Bazaar wavered and faded . . . and we were back in Frumple's shop... sort of.

"Interesting place you've got here," Tanda commented dryly. "Did you do the decor?"

All that was left of Frumple's shop was a burnt-out shell.

Chapter Twenty-One:

"One must deal openly and fairly with one's forces if maximum effectiveness is to be achieved."

-D. VADER

"WHAT happened?" I demanded of Aahz.

"Hey, kid. I was on Deva, too. Remember?"

"Urn ... hey, guys. I hate to interrupt," Tanda interrupted, "but shouldn't something be done about disguises?"

She was right. Being on Deva had made me forget the mundane necessities of our existence. I ignored Aahz's sarcastic reply and set to work.

Aahz returned to his now traditional Garkin disguise. Tanda was fine once I changed her complexion and the color of her hair. After a bit of thought, I disguised Gleep as the war unicorn. It

was a bit risky, but it would do as long as he kept his mouth shut. Me, I left as myself. I mean, what the heck. Tanda liked my looks the way they were. Fortunately the sun wasn't up yet, so there weren't any people around to witness the transformation.

"Say, handsome," Tanda commented, observing the results of my work, "you're a pretty handy guy to have around."

"His name's Skeeve," Aahz grumbled.

"Whatever." Tanda murmured. "He's got style."

She snuggled up to me.

"Gleep!" said the dragon, pressing his head against my other side.

I was starting to feel awfully popular.

"If you can spare a few minutes, kid," Aahz commented dryly, "we do have a mission, remember?"

"That's right," I said, forcing my attention away from Tanda's advances. "What do you think happened to Frumple?"

"Either the citizens of Twixt got wise to him, or he's off to tell Isstvan we're coming, would be my two guesses."

"Who's Frumple?" Tanda asked.

"Hmm? Oh, he's the resident Deveel," Aahz said. "He's the one who helped us get to the Bazaar."

"... at sword point," I added sarcastically.

"What's a Deveel doing here?"

"All we know is that rumor has it he was barred from Deva," I told her.

"Hmm ... sounds like a bit of a nasty character."

"Well, he won't win any popularity contests."

"It occurs to me," Aahz interrupted, "that if either of my two guesses are correct, we'd best be on our way. Time seems to be running out."

"Right," agreed Tanda. "Which way is Isstvan?"

"First, we've got to pick up Quigley," I inserted.

"Why?" asked Aahz. "Oh, I suppose you're right, kid. We're going to need all the help we can muster."

"Who's Quigley?" Tanda asked.

"Later, Tanda," Aahz insisted. "First help us see if there's anything here worth salvaging."

Unfortunately, there wasn't. In fact, there weren't even the charred remains of anything left for our discovery. Even the garish sword I had left behind seemed to have vanished.

"That settles it," Aahz commented grimly as we completed our search. "He's on his way to Isstvan."

"The natives might have taken the sword after they burned the place," I suggested hopefully.

"No way, kid. Even yokels like these wouldn't bother with a crummy sword like that."

"It was that bad?" Tanda asked.

"It was that bad," Aahz assured her firmly. "If it was that worthless, why would Frumple take it with him?" I asked.

"For the same reason we've been lugging it around," Aahz said pointedly. "There's always some sucker to unload it on for a profit. Remember Quigley?"

"Who's Quigley?" Tanda insisted.

"Well," sighed Aahz, "at the moment he's a statue, but in duller times he's a demon hunter."

"Swell," she commented sarcastically. "Just what we need."

"Wait until you meet him," Aahz rolled his eyes and sighed. "Oh well, let's go."

Our departure from Twixt was blissfully uneventful. On the road, we rehearsed our story until, by the time we finally dug up Quigley and sprinkled him with the restoring power, we were ready to present a united front.

"Really? Turned to stone, you say?" he said, brushing the dirt from his clothes.

"Yes," Aahz assured him. "They were looting your body when we launched our counterattack. It's lucky for you we decided to come back and fight at your side."

"And they took my magik sword and my amulet?" I felt a little uneasy on those subjects, but Aahz never batted an eye.

"That's right, the blackguards" he snarled. "We tried to stop them, but they eluded us."

"Well, at least they didn't get my war unicorn," muttered the demon hunter.

"Urn. ..." I said, bracing myself for my part in this charade. "We've got some bad news about that, too."

"Bad news?" Quigley frowned, "I don't understand. I can see the beast with my own eyes and he seems fit enough."

"Oh, he's fine physically," Aahz reassured him. "but before they disappeared, the demons put a spell on him."

"A spell?"

"Yes." I said. "Now he ... urn ... well... he thinks he's a dragon."

"A dragon?" Quigley exclaimed.

"deep!" said the dragon.

"And that's not all," Aahz continued. "The beast was so wild at first that only through the continued efforts of my squire here were we able to gentle him at all. Frankly, I was for putting the poor animal out of its misery, but he insisted he could tame it and you see before you the results of his patient teachings."

"That's wonderful!" exclaimed Quigley.

"No. That's terrible," corrected Aahz. "You see, in the process, your animal has formed a strong attachment for my squire ... stronger, I fear, than his attachment for you."

"Hah! Ridiculous," Quigley proclaimed. "But I do feel I owe you an additional debt of gratitude, lad. If there's ever anything I can ..."

He began to advance on me with his hand extended. In a flash, Gleep was between us, head down and hissing.

Quigley froze, his eyes bulging with surprise. "Stop that!" I ordered, cuffing the dragon.

"Gleep!" said the dragon, slinking back to his place behind me.

"See what I mean?" Aahz said pointedly.

"Hnun. . . ." Quigley mumbled thoughtfully. "That's strange, he never defended me that way."

"I guess we'll just have to buy him from you," I said eagerly.

"Buy him?" Quigley turned his attention to me again.

Aahz tried to catch my eye, shaking his head emphatically, but I ignored him.

"That's right," I continued. "He's no good to you this way, and since we're sort of to blame for what happened to him. ..."

"Think nothing of it, lad." Quigley drew himself up proudly. "I give him to you as a gift. After all, if it weren't for you he'd be dead anyway, and so would I, for that matter."

"But I..."

"No! I will hear nothing more." The demon hunter held up a restraining hand. "The matter is closed. Treat him well, lad. He's a good animal."

"Terrific," muttered Aahz.

"Gleep," said the dragon.

I felt miserable. It had occurred to me that our plans involved taking shameless advantage of Quigley's gullibility. As he was my only fellow Klahd in this adventure, I had wanted to force Aahz into giving him some money under the guise of buying the "war unicorn." It would have salved my conscience a bit, but Quigley's generosity and sense of fair play had ruined my plan. Now I felt worse than before.

"Actually, Quigley," Aahz smiled, "If there's anyone you should thank, it should be Tananda here. If it were not for her, we would be in dire straits indeed."

"It's about time," mumbled Tanda, obviously unimpressed with Aahz's rhetoric.

"Charmed, milady," Quigley smiled, taking her hand to kiss.

"She's a witch," added Aahz casually.

"A witch?" Quigley dropped her hand as if it had bitten him.

"That's right, sugar," Tanda smiled, batting her eyes at him.

"Perhaps I should explain," Aahz interrupted mercifully. "Tananda here has certain powers she has consented to use in support of our war on demons. You already noticed I have regained my normal appearance?"

Another blatant lie. Aahz was currently disguised as Garkin.

"Yes," the demon hunter admitted hesitantly.

"Tananda's work," Aahz confided. "Just as it was her powers that restored you after you had been turned to stone."

"Hmmm...." Quigley said, looking at Tanda again.

"Really, you must realize, Quigley, that when one fights demons, sometimes it is helpful to employ a demon's weapons," Aahz admonished gently.

"Tananda here can be a powerful ally . . . and frankly, I find your attitude toward her deplorable and ungrateful."

"Forgive me, milady," Quigley sighed, stepping up to her again. "I did not mean to offend you. It's just that . . . well . . . I've had some bad experiences with those who associate with demons."

"Think nothing of it, sugar," said Tanda the demon, taking his hand, "And call me Tanda."

While they were occupied with each other, I seized the opportunity and snagged Aahz's arm.

"Hm? What is it, kid?"

"Give him back his sword!" I hissed.

"What? No way, kid. By my count he's still got five pieces of gold left. I'll sell it to him."

"But he gave us his unicorn."

"He gave us a dragon . . . your dragon! I fail to see anything benevolent in that."

"Look, Aahz. Either you give him that sword or you can work your own magik! Get me?"

"Talk about ingratitude! Look kid, if you...."

"Aahz!" Tanda's voice interrupted our dispute. "Come help me convince Quigley to join our mission."

"Would that I could, milady," Quigley sighed, "but I would be of little help. This late misfortune has left me afoot, weaponless, and penniless."

"Actually," Aahz chimed, "you still have five...."

I interrupted him with an elbow in his ribs.

"What was that, Aahz?" Quigley asked.

"Aah . . . my . . . um . . . squire and I were just discussing that and we have reached a decision. So . . . um . . . so fine a warrior should not be left so destitute, so... um... we...."

"We've decided to give you back your sword," I announced proudly.

"Really?" Quigley's face lit up.

"I didn't know you had it in you, Aahz," Tanda smiled sweetly.

"I say, this is comradeship indeed." Quigley was obviously beside himself with joy. "How can I ever repay you?"

"By never mentioning this to anyone," Aahz growled.

"How's that again?"

"I said don't mention it," Aahz amended. "It's the least we can do."

"Believe him," I smiled.

"Now I will gladly assist you on your mission," Quigley answered. "Why, with a weapon and good comrades, what more could a warrior ask for?"

"Money," Aahz said bluntly.

"Oh Aahz." Tanda punched him a little too hard for it to be playful. "You're such a kidder."

"Don't you want to know what the mission is?" I asked Quigley.

"Oh, yes, I suppose you're right, lad. Forgive me. I was carried away by my enthusiasm."

"Tell him, Skeeve," prompted Tanda.

"Actually," I said, with a sudden flash of diplomacy, "Aahz explains it much better than I do."

"It's really quite simple," mumbled Aahz, still sulking a bit. "We're going after Isstvan."

"Isstvan?" Quigley looked puzzled. "The harmless old innkeeper?"

"Harmless? Harmless, did you say?" Aahz took the bait. "Quigley, as one demon hunter to another, you've got a lot to learn."

"I do all right for myself."

"Sure you do. That's why you got turned to stone, remember?"

"I got turned to stone because I put my faith in a magik sword that...."

Things were back to normal.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," I interrupted. "We were talking about the upcoming mission."

"Right, kid. As I was saying, Quigley, that harmless old innkeeper is working so closely with demons I wouldn't be surprised to learn he was one himself."

"Impossible!" scoffed Quigley. "Why, the man sent me out hunting for demons."

"Ahh!" smiled Aahz. "Therein lies the story." I caught Tanda's eyes and winked. She smiled back at me and nodded. This might take a while, but as of now Quigley was in the bag!

Chapter Twenty-Two:

This is another fine myth you've gotten me into!"

-LOR L. AND HAR D.

THERE was something there in the shadows. I could sense its presence more than see it. It was dark and serpentine ... and it was watching me. I was alone. I didn't know where the others had gone, but I knew they were counting on me. "Who's there?" I called. The voice that came back to me out of the darkness echoed hollowly.

"I am Isstvan, Skeeve. I've been waiting for you."

"You know who I am?" I asked, surprised. "I know all about you and your friends. I've known all along what you're trying to do." I tried to set wards about me, but I couldn't find a force line. I tried to run, but I was rooted to the spot. "See how my powers dwarf yours? And you expected to challenge me."

I tried to fight back a wave of despair. "Wait until the others come," I cried defiantly.

"They already have," the voice boomed. "Look!"

Two objects came rolling at me out of the darkness. I saw with horror that they were heads! Tanda's and Quigley's!

I felt ill, but clung to a shred of hope. There was still no sign of Aahz. If he was still at large, we might....

"Don't look to your Pervert for help," the voice answered my thoughts. "I've dealt with him too."

Aahz appeared, sheathed in fire. He staggered and fell, writhing on the ground as the flames consumed his body. "Now it's just you and me, Skeeve!" the voice echoed. "You and me."

"I'll go!" I shouted desperately. "You've won. Just let me go."

The darkness was moving closer.

"It's too late. I'm coming for you Skeeve . . . Skeeve...."

"Skeeve!" Something was shaking my shoulder. I bolted upright, blinking my eyes as the world swam back into focus. The camp was asleep. Aahz was kneeling beside me, the glow from the campfire's dying embers revealing the concerned expression on his face.

"Wake up, kid! If you keep thrashing around, you'll end up in the fire."

"It's Isstvan!" I explained desperately. "He knows all about us."

"What?"

"I was talking to him. He came into my dream!"

"Hmmm . . . sounds more like a plain old nightmare," Aahz proclaimed. "I warned you not to let Tanda season the food."

"Are you sure?" I said doubtfully.

"Positive," Aahz insisted. "If Isstvan knew we were coming, he'd hit us with something a lot more powerful than making faces at you in a dream."

I guess that was supposed to reassure me. It didn't. All it did was remind me I was thoroughly outclassed in the upcoming campaign.

"Aahz, can't you tell me anything about Isstvan?"

What he looks like, for instance."

"Not a chance, kid," Aahz grinned at me.

"Why not?"

"Because we won't both see him the same way, or at least we wouldn't describe him the same way. If I describe him to you, one of two things will happen when you first see him. If he looks scarier to you than I've described him, you'll freeze. If he looks more harmless than I've described him, you'll relax. Either way, it'll slow your reactions and give him the first move. There's no point in gaining the element of surprise if we aren't going to use it."

"Well," I persisted. "Couldn't you at least tell me about his powers? What can he do?"

"For one thing, it would take too long. Just assume that if you can imagine it, he can do it."

"What's the other?" I asked.

"The other what?"

"You said 'for one thing.' That implies you have at least one other reason."

"Hmm," Aahz pondered. "Well, I'm not sure you'll understand, but to a certain degree what he can do, I mean the whole list, is irrelevant."

"Why?"

"Because we're taking the initiative. That puts him in a reactive instead of an active role."

"You're right," I said thoughtfully. "I don't understand."

"Look kid, if we just sat here and waited for him, he could take his time and choose exactly what he wanted to do and when he wanted to do it. That's an active role and lets him play with his entire list of powers. Right?"

"I guess so."

"But we aren't doing that. We're carrying the attack to him. That should limit him as to what he can do. There are only a certain number of responses he can successfully use to each of our gambits, and he'll have to use them because he can't afford to ignore the attack. Most of all, we'll rob him of time. Instead of leisurely choosing what he's going to do next, he'll have to choose fast. That means he'll go with the option he's surest of, the one he does best."

I considered this for a few moments. It sort of made sense.

"Just one question, Aahz," I asked finally. "What's that, kid?"

"What if you've guessed wrong?"

"Then we drop back ten and punt," he answered lightly.

"What's a...."

"Then we try something else," he amended hastily.

"Like what?"

"Can't tell yet," Aahz shrugged. "Too many variables. We're going with my best guess right now. Beyond that we'll just have to wait and see."

We sat staring into the dying fire for a few minutes, each lost in our own thoughts.

"Say, Aahz?" I said at last.

"Yea, kid?"

"Do you think we'll reach Isstvan before Frumple does?"

"Relax, kid. Frumple's probably drinking wine and pinching bottoms in some other dimension by now."

"But you said...."

"I've had time to think about it since then. The only reason a Deveel does anything is for a profit or out of fear. As far as his sticking his head into this brawl goes, I figure the fear will outweigh the profit. Trying to sell information to a madman is risky at best. My bet is he's lying low until the dust settles."

I reminded myself again of my faith in Aahz's expertise in such matters. It occurred to me, however, there was an awful lot of guesswork in our planning.

"Um, Aahz? Wouldn't it be a little safer if we had invested in a couple of those jazzy weapons back in Deva?"

"We don't need them," he replied firmly. "Besides, they're susceptible to Gremlins. I'd rather go into a fight with a crude but reliable weapon than pin my hopes on a contraption that's liable to malfunction when you need it most."

"Where are Gremlins from?" I asked.

"What?"

"Gremlins. You said...."

"Oh, that. It's just a figure of speech. There are no such things as Gremlins."

I was only listening with half an ear. I suddenly realized that while I could see Quigley's sleeping form, there was no sign of Tanda or Gleep.

"Where's ... urn ... where's Gleep?" I asked abruptly.

Aahz grinned at me.

"Gleep is standing watch . . . and just in case you're interested, so's Tanda."

I was vaguely annoyed he had seen through me so easily, but was determined not to show it.

"When is... um... are they coming back?"

"Relax, kid. I told Tanda to leave you alone tonight. You need the sleep for tomorrow."

He jerked his head pointedly toward the assassin's robe I had been using for a pillow. I grudgingly resumed my horizontal position.

"Did I wake you up, Aahz?" I asked apologetically. "With the nightmare, I mean."

"Naw. I was still up. Just making a few last-minute preparations for tomorrow."

"Oh," I said drowsily.

"Say, uh, kid?"

"Yes, Aahz?"

"We probably won't have much time to talk tomorrow when Quigley's awake, so while we've got a few minutes alone I want to say however it goes tomorrow ... well... it's been nice working with you, kid."

"Gee, Aahz...." I said starting to sit up.

A rough hand interrupted me and pushed me back down.

"Sleep!" Aahz commanded, but there was a gentle note lurking in his gruff tone.

Chapter Twenty-Three:

"Since prehistoric man, no battle has ever gone as planned."

-D. GRAEME

WE crouched in a grove of small trees on a knoll overlooking the inn, studying our target. The inn was as Quigley had described it, an isolated two-story building with an attached stable squatting by a road overgrown with weeds. If Isstvan was relying on transients to support his business, he was in trouble, except we knew he was doing no such thing. He was mustering his strength to take over the dimensions, and the isolated inn was a perfect base for him to work from.

"Are you sure there are no wards?" Aahz whispered.

He addressed his question to Tanda. She in turn shot me a glance. I gave a small nod of my head.

"Positive," she whispered back.

It was all part of our plan. As far as Quigley was concerned, Tanda was the only one of our group that had any supernatural powers.

"Good," said the demon hunter. "Demon powers make me uneasy. The less we have to deal with, the better I like it."

"Don't get your hopes up," Aahz commented, not taking his eyes from the inn. "They're there all right.

The easier it is to get in, the harder it'll be to get out... and they're making it awfully easy for us to get in."

"I don't like it," said Tanda firmly.

"Neither do I," admitted Aahz. "But things aren't going to get any better, so let's get started. You might as well get into disguise now."

"Right, Aahz," she said.

Neither of them looked at me. In fact Aahz stared directly at Tanda. This kept Quigley's attention on her also, though I must admit it helped that she began to writhe and gyrate wildly. Unobserved, I shut my eyes and got to work.

I was getting pretty good at this disguise game, which was fortunate because I was going to be sorely tested today. With a few masterful strokes, I converted Tanda's lovely features into the dubious face of the Imp Higgens ... or rather Higgens's human disguise. This done, I opened my eyes again.

Tanda was still gyrating. It was a pleasant enough sight that I was tempted to prolong it, but we had work to do. I cleared my throat and Tanda acknowledged the signal by stopping.

"How do I look?" she asked proudly.

"Terrific!" I exclaimed with no trace of modesty.

Aahz shot me a dirty look.

"It's uncanny!" Quigley marveled. "How do you do that?"

"Professional secret." Tanda winked at him. "Off with you!" Aahz commanded. "And you too, Skeeve."

"But Aahz, couldn't I...."

"No you can't. We've discussed it before. This mission's far too dangerous for a lad of your inexperience."

"Oh all right, Aahz," I said, crestfallen.

"Cheer up, lad," Quigley told me. "Your day will come. If we fail, the mission falls to you."

"I suppose so. Well, good luck...."

I turned to Tanda, but she was already gone, vanished as if the ground had swallowed her up.

"I say!" exclaimed Quigley. "She does move quietly, doesn't she?"

"I told you she could handle herself," Aahz said proudly. "Now it's your turn, Skeeve."

"Right, Aahz!"

I turned to the dragon.

"Stay here, Gleep. I'll be back soon, and until then you do what Aahz says. Understand?"

"Gleep?" said the dragon, cocking his head.

For a minute I thought he was going to ruin everything, but then he turned and slunk to Aahz's side and stood there regarding me with mournful blue eyes.

Everything was ready.

"Well, good-bye. Good luck!" I called, and trudged slowly back over the knoll, hopefully a picture of abject misery.

Once out of sight, however, I turned and began to sprint as fast as I could in a wide circle around the inn.

On the surface, our plan was quite simple. Aahz and Quigley were to give Tanda enough time to circle around the inn and enter it over the stable roof. Then they were to boldly enter the front door. Supposedly this would create a diversion, allowing Tanda to attack Isstvan magically from the rear. I was to wait safely on the knoll until the affair was settled.

In actuality, our plan was a bit more complex. Unbeknownst to Quigley, I was also supposed to circle the inn and find a covert entrance. Then, at the appropriate moment, Tanda and I were to create a magical diversion, allowing Aahz to use the secret weapon he had acquired on Deva.

A gully blocked my path. I took to the air without hesitation and flew over it. I had to be in position in time, or Aahz would have no magical support at all.

Actually magik was quite easy here. The inn was sitting squarely on an intersection of two ground force lines, while a force line in the air passed directly overhead. Whatever happened in the upcoming battle of magik, we wouldn't suffer for a lack of energy. I wished I knew more about Aahz's secret weapon. He had been doggedly mysterious about it, and neither Tanda nor I had been able to pry any information out of him. He had said it had to be used at close range. He had said it couldn't be used while Isstvan was watching him. He had said it was our only hope to beat Isstvan. He had said it was supposed to be a surprise. Terrific!

Maybe when all this was over I would find a mentor who didn't have a sense of humor.

I slowed my pace. I was coming to the back of the inn now. The brush had grown right up to the wall, which made my approach easy.

I paused and checked for wards again.

Nothing.

Trying to force Aahz's "easy in, hard out" prophecy from my mind, I scanned the upper windows. None of them were open, so I chose the nearest one and levitated to it. Hovering there, I cautiously pushed, then pulled at the frame.

Locked!

Hurriedly, I pulled myself along the wall with my hands to the next window.

Also locked.

It occurred to me it would be ironic if, after all our magical preparations, we were stopped by something as mundane as a locked window.

To my relief, the next window yielded to my pressure, and in a moment I was standing inside the inn, trying to get my heartbeat under control.

The room I was in was furnished, but vacant. Judging from the dust on the bed, it had been vacant for some time. I wondered for a moment where demons slept, if they slept at all, then forced the question from my mind. Time was running out and I wasn't in position yet. I darted silently across the room and tried the door.

Unlocked! Getting down on my hands and knees, I eased the door open and crawled through, pushing it shut behind me.

After studying the inn's interior so often in Quigley's dirt sketches, it seemed strange to actually be here. I was on the long side of an L-shaped mezzanine which gave access to the upper-story rooms. Peering through the bars of the railing that lined the mezzanine, I could look down into the inn proper.

There were three people currently occupying a table below, I recognized the disguised features of Higgins and Brockhurst as two of them. The third was sitting hunched with his back to me and I couldn't make out his face.

I was debating shifting to another position to get a better view, when a fourth figure entered bearing an enormous tray with a huge jug of wine on it as well as an assortment of dirty flagons.

"This round's on the house, boys!" the figure chortled merrily. "Have one on old Isstvan."

Isstvan! That was Isstvan?

The waddling figure below did not seem to display any of the menacing features I had expected in a would be ruler of the dimensions.

Quickly I checked him for a magical aura. There was none. It wasn't a disguise. He really looked like that. I studied him carefully.

He was tall, but his stoutness kept his height from being imposing. He had long white hair and a longer white beard which nearly covered his chest with its fullness. His bright eyes were set in a face that seemed to be permanently smiling, and his nose and cheeks were flushed, though whether from drink or laughter I couldn't tell.

This was the dark figure of evil I had been dreading all these weeks? He looked to be exactly what Quigley said he was... a harmless old innkeeper.

A movement at the far end of the mezzanine caught my eye. Tanda! She was crouched behind the railing as I was on the other side of the stairs, and at first I thought I had just seen the movement of her easing into position. Then she looked my way and cautiously waved her hand again, and I realized she was signaling for my attention. I waved an acknowledgment, which she must have seen, for she stopped signaling and changed to another set of actions. Glancing furtively at the figures below to be sure she wasn't observed, she began a strange pantomime. First she made several repeated gestures around her forehead, then pointed urgently behind her. I didn't understand, and shook my head to convey this.

She repeated the gestures more emphatically, and this time I realized she was actually pointing down and behind her. The stables! Something about the stables.

But what about the stables?

I considered her first gesture again. She appeared to be stabbing herself in the forehead. Something had hit her in the stables? She had killed something in the stables? I shook my head again. She bared her teeth at me in frustration.

"Innkeep!"

I jumped a foot at the bellow.

Aahz and Quigley had just walked through the door. Whatever Tanda was trying to tell me would just have to wait. Our attack had begun.

"Two flagons of your best wine . . . and send someone to see to my unicorn."

Aahz was doing all the talking, of course. It had been agreed that he would take the lead in the conversation. Quigley hadn't been too happy about that, but in the end had consented to speaking only when absolutely necessary.

Their entrance had had surprisingly little impact on the assemblage below. In fact, Isstvan was the only one to even look in their direction.

"Come in. Come in, gentlemen," he smiled, spreading his arms wide in welcome. "We've been expecting you!"

"You have?" blurted Quigley, echoing my thoughts. "Of course, of course. You shouldn't try to fool old Isstvan." He shook a finger at them in mock sternness. "Word was just brought to us by ... oh, I'm sorry. I haven't introduced you to my new purchasing agent yet."

"We've met," came the voice of the hunched figure as he turned to face them.

Frumple!

That's what Tanda had been trying to tell me! The war unicorn, Quigley's unicorn, was down in the stable. For all our speed, Frumple had gotten here ahead of us.

"Who are you?" asked Quigley, peering at the Deveel.

For some reason this seemed to set Isstvan off into peals of laughter from his eyes. "We are going to have such fun this afternoon!"

He gestured absently and the inn door slammed shut. There was a sudden ripple of dull clunks behind me, and I realized the room doors were locking themselves. We were sealed in! All of us.

"I don't believe I've had such a good time since I made love to my week-dead sister."

Isstvan's voice was still jovial, but it struck an icy note of fear within me. I realized that not only was he a powerful magician, he was quite insane.

Chapter Twenty-Four:

"Ya gotta be subtle!"

-M. HAMMER

THERE was a tense, expectant silence as the foursome leaned forward to study their captives. It was as if two songbirds had tried to edge through a crowd of vultures to steal a snack only to find they were the intended meal.

I knelt, watching in frozen horror, fully expecting to witness the immediate demise of my two allies.

"Since Frumple's already announced us," Aahz said smoothly, "I guess there's no need to maintain this disguise."

The confident tone of his voice steadied my shattered nerve. We were in it now, and win or lose we'd just have to keep going.

Quickly, I shut my eyes and removed Aahz's Garkin disguise.

"Aahz!" cried Isstvan in delight. "I should have known it was you."

"He's the one who...." Brockhurst began.

"Do you two know each other?" Frumple asked, ignoring the Imp.

"Know each other?" Isstvan chortled. "We're old enemies. He and a couple other scalawags nearly destroyed me the last time we met."

"Well it's our turn now, right Isstvan?" smiled Higgens, leisurely reaching for his crossbow.

"Now, now!" said Isstvan, picking the Imp up by his head and shaking him gently. "Mustn't rush things."

"Seems to me," Aahz sneered, "that you're having trouble finding decent allies, Isstvan."

"Oh, Aahz," Isstvan laughed. "Still the sharp tongue, eh?"

"Imps?" Aahz's voice was scornful. "C'mon, Isstvan. Even you can do better than that."

Isstvan sighed and dropped Higgens back in his chair.

"Well, one does what one can. Inflation, you know."

He shook his head sadly, then brightened again.

"Oh you don't know how glad I am to see you, Aahz. I thought I was going to have to wait until we conquered Perv before I got my revenge, and here you just walk in. Now don't you dare pop off before we've settled our score."

"I told you before," Frumple interrupted. "He's lost his powers."

"Powers. Hmph! He never had any powers," Quigley chimed in, baited from his frightened silence at the insult of having been ignored.

"Well, who do we have here?" Isstvan smiled, looking at Quigley for the first time. "Have we met?"

"Say Isstvan," interrupted Aahz. "Mind if I have some of that wine? No reason to be barbaric about this."

"Certainly. Aahz." Isstvan waved him forward. "Help yourself."

It was eerie listening to the conversation: apparently civilized and friendly, it had a cat-and-mouse undercurrent which belied the casual tones.

"Watch him!" Frumple hissed, glaring at Aahz.

"Oh Frumple! You are such a wart," Isstvan scolded. "Why you were the one who assured me that he had lost his powers."

"Well, I think he makes sense," Brockhurst grumbled, rising and backing away as Aahz approached the table. "If you don't mind, Isstvan, I'll watch from over here."

He sat on the bottom steps of the flight of stairs heading up to the mezzanine where Tanda and I were hidden. His tone was conversational, but it was clear he was only waiting for Isstvan's signal to loose him on the helpless pair.

"Oh, you Imps are worse than the Deveels!" Isstvan scowled.

"That's a given," Frumple commented dryly. "Now look, Frumple...." Higgins began angrily. "As to who this figure is," Frumple pointed to Quigley, ignoring the Imps. "That is Garkin's apprentice. He's the one who's been handling the magik for our Pervert since he lost his powers."

"Really?" asked Isstvan eagerly. "Can you do the cups and balls trick? I love the cups and balls trick."

"I don't understand," mumbled Quigley vacantly, backing away from the assemblage.

Well, if we were ever going to have a diversion, it would have to be now. Closing my eyes, I changed Quigley's features. The obvious choice for his disguise was... me!

"See," said Frumple pointing proudly. "I told you so."

"Throckwoddle!" exclaimed the two Imps simultaneously.

"What?" said Frumple narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

I was ready for them. As the exclamations rose, I changed Quigley again. This time, I gave him Throckwoddle features.

"Why, it is Throckwoddle," cried Isstvan. "Oh that's funny."

"Wait a minute!" Brockhurst hissed. "How could you be Throckwoddle when we turned you into a statue before we caught up with Throckwoddle?"

This set Isstvan off into even greater peals of laughter.

"Stop," he called breathless. "Oh stop. Oh! My ribs hurt. Aahz, you've outdone yourself this time."

"It's nothing really," Aahz acknowledged modestly.

"There's something wrong here!" Frumple declared. He plunged a hand deep into his robe, never taking his eyes from Quigley. Almost too late I realized what he was doing. He was going for his crystal, the one that let him detect disguises. As the glittering bauble emerged, I swung into action.

A simple levitation, a small flick with my mind, and the crystal popped out of Frumple's grasp and plopped into the wine jug.

"Framitz!" Frumple swore, starting to fish for his possession.

"Get your hands out of the wine, Frumple!" Aahz chided slapping his wrist. "You'll get your toy when we finish the jug!"

As if to illustrate his point, he hefted the jug and began refilling the flagons around the table.

"Enough of this insanity!" Quigley exploded.

I winced at the use of the word "insanity," but Isstvan didn't seem to mind. He merely leaned forward to watch Quigley.

"I am neither Skeeve nor Throckwoddle," Quigley continued, "I am Quigley, demon hunter extraordinaire! Let any dispute who dare, and man or demon I'll show him who I am!"

This proved too much for Isstvan, who actually collapsed in laughter.

"Oh he's funny, Aahz," he gasped. "Where did you find this funny man?"

"You sent him to me, remember?" Aahz prompted.

"Why so I did, so I did," Isstvan mused, and even this fact he seemed to find hysterically funny.

The others were not so amused.

"So you're a demon hunter, eh?" Frumple snarled. "What's your gripe anyway?"

"The offenses of demons are too numerous to list,"

Quigley retorted haughtily.

"We aren't going anywhere for a while," Brockhurst chimed in from the stairs. "And neither are you. List us a few of these offenses."

"Well..." began Quigley, "you stole my magik pendant and my magik sword...."

"We don't know anything about a magik pendant." Higgs bristled. "And we gave your so-called magik sword to...."

"What else do demons do?" Frumple interrupted, apparently none too eager to have the discussion turn to swords.

"Well. .. you bewitched my war unicorn into thinking he's a dragon!" Quigley challenged.

"Your war unicorn is currently tethered in the stable," Higgs stated flatly. "Frumple brought him in."

"My unicorn is tethered outside the door!" Quigley insisted. "And he thinks he's a dragon!"

"Your unicorn is tethered in the stable," Higgs barked back. "And we think you're a fruitcake!"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Isstvan managed to hold up his hands despite his laughter. "All this is quite amusing, but... well, will you look at that!"

This last was said in such a tone of wonder that the attention of everyone in the room was immediately drawn to the spot he was looking at.

Suspended in midair, not two hand-spans from Isstvan's head, was a small red dart with gold and black fletchings.

"An assassin's dart!" Isstvan marveled, gently plucking the missile from where it was hovering. "Now who would be naughty enough to try to poison me from behind?"

His eyes slowly moved to Brockhurst sitting casually on the stairs.

Brockhurst suddenly realized he was the object of everyone's attention. His eyes widened in fright.

"No! I... Wait! Isstvan!" he half-rose holding out a hand as if to ward off a blow. "I didn't. . . No! Don't. Glaag!"

This last was said as his hands suddenly flew to his throat and began choking him violently. "Glaak ... eak ... urk...." He fell back on the stairs and began rolling frantically back and forth.

"Isstvan," Higgs began hesitantly, "normally I wouldn't interfere, but don't you think you should hear what he has to say, first? "

"But I'm not doing anything/" Isstvan blinked with hurt innocence. ~

My eyes flashed to the other end of the mezzanine. Tanda was crouched there, her eyes closed. She seemed to be choking an invisible person on the floor in front of her. With dawning realization, I began to appreciate more and more the subtleties of a trained assassin.

"You aren't doing anything?" Higgs shrilled, "Well, then do something! He's dying!"

I thought for a moment that the ludicrous statement would set Isstvan to laughing again, but riot this time.

"Oh," he sighed. "This is all so confusing. Yes, I guess you're right."

He clicked his fingers and Brockhurst stopped thrashing about and began breathing again in long, ragged breaths.

"Here, old boy," said Aahz. "Have some wine."

He offered Brockhurst a brimming flagon which the Imp began to gulp gratefully.

"Aahz," Isstvan said sternly. "I don't think you've been honest with us."

"Me?" Aahz asked innocently.

"Even you couldn't have caused this much havoc without assistance. Now where is it coming from?"

He closed his eyes and turned his face toward the ceiling for a moment.

"Aah!" he suddenly proclaimed. "Here it is."

There was a squawk from the other end of the mezzanine and Tanda was suddenly lifted into view by unseen hands.

"Higgs!" exclaimed Isstvan, "Another one! Well, well, the day is full of surprises."

Tanda held her silence as she was floated down to a chair on a level with the others.

"Now let's see." Isstvan mumbled to himself. "Have we missed anybody?"

I felt the sudden pressure of invisible forces and realized I was next. I tried desperately to think of a disguise, but the only thing that came to mind was Gleep ... so I tried it.

"A dragon!" cried Brockhurst as I floated into view.

"Gleep!" I said, rolling my eyes desperately.

"Oh now that's too much," Isstvan pouted. "I want to see who I'm dealing with."

He gave a vacant wave of his hand, and the disguises disappeared . . . all of them. I was me, Quigley was Quigley, Tanda was Tanda, the Imps were Imps, and the Deveel was a Deveel. Aahz, of course, was Aahz. Apparently a moratorium had been declared on disguises ... by a majority of one ... Isstvan.

I came drifting down to join the others, but my entrance was generally ignored in the other proceedings.

"Tanda!" Isstvan cried enthusiastically. "Well, well. This is a reunion, isn't it?"

"Bark at the moon, Isstvan," Tanda snarled defiantly.

Quigley was looking at everyone else with such speed I thought his head would fall off.

"I don't understand!" he whimpered plaintively.

"Shut up, Quigley," Aahz growled. "We'll explain later."

"That's assuming there is a later," Frumple sneered.

I tended to agree with Frumple. The atmosphere, in the room no longer had even the semblance of joviality. It was over. We had lost. We were all exposed and captured, and Isstvan was as strong as ever. Whatever Aahz's secret weapon was, it apparently hadn't worked.

"Well, I'm afraid all good things must come to an end," Isstvan sighed, draining his flagon. "Now I'm afraid I'll have to dispose of you."

He sounded genuinely sad, but somehow I couldn't muster any sympathy for his plight.

"Just one question before we begin, Aahz," he asked in surprisingly sane tones.

"What's that?" Aahz responded.

"Why did you do it? I mean, with as feeble a team as this, how did you possibly hope to beat me?"

Isstvan sounded genuinely sincere.

"Well, Isstvan," Aahz drawled, "that's a matter of opinion."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Isstvan asked suspiciously.

"I don't 'hope' we can beat you," Aahz smiled. "I know we can."

"Really?" Isstvan chuckled. "And upon what are you basing your logic?"

"Why, I'm basing it on the fact that we've already won," Aahz blinked innocently. "It's all over, Isstvan, whether you realize it or not."

Chapter Twenty-Five:

"Just because you've beaten a sorcerer, doesn't mean you've beaten a sorcerer."

-TOTH-AAMON

"AAHZ," Isstvan said sternly, "there comes a time when even your humor wears a little thin."

"I'm not kidding, Isstvan," Aahz assured him. "You've lost your powers. Go ahead, try something. Anything!"

Isstvan hesitated. He closed his eyes.

Nothing happened.

"You see?" Aahz shrugged. "You've lost your powers. All of them. And don't look to your associates for help. They're all in the same boat."

"You mean we've really won?" I blurted out, the full impact of what was transpiring finally starting to sink in.

"That's right, kid."

Aahz suddenly leaned forward and clapped Frumple on the shoulder.

"Congratulations, Frumple," he exclaimed. "I've got to admit I didn't think you could do it."

"What?" blinked the Deveel.

"I'm just glad this squares our debt with you," Aahz continued without pause. "You won't try to back out on it now, will you?"

"Frumple!" Isstvan's voice was dark with menace. "Did you do this to us?"

"I... I..." Frumple stammered.

"Go ahead, Frumple. Gloat!" Aahz encouraged. "He can't do anything to you now. Besides, you can teleport out of here anytime you want."

"No, he can't!" snarled Higgins, and his arm flashed forward.

I caught a glimpse of a small ball flying through the air before it exploded against Frumple's forehead in a cloud of purple dust.

"But..." began Frumple, but it was too late. In mid-gesture his limbs became rigid and his face froze. We had another statue on our hands. "Good move, Higgins," applauded Aahz. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble, Aahz," interrupted Isstvan. "Could you explain what's going on here?"

"Aah!" said Aahz, "therein lies the story."

"This sounds familiar," Quigley mumbled. I poked him in the ribs with my elbow. We weren't out of this yet.

"It seems that Frumple learned about your plans from Throckwoddle. Apparently he was afraid that if you succeeded in taking over the dimensions, you would implement price controls, thereby putting him out of business as a merchant. You know how those Deveels are."

The Imps snorted. Isstvan nodded thoughtfully. "Anyway, he decided to try to stop you. To accomplish this, he blackmailed the four of us into assisting him. We were to create a diversion while he effected the actual attack."

"Well, what did he do?" prompted Higgins. "He drugged the wine!" explained Aahz. "Don't you remember?"

"When?" asked Brockhurst.

"When he dropped that phony crystal into the jug. remember?"

"But he drank from the jug, too!" exclaimed Higgins.

"That's right, but he had taken an antidote in advance," Aahz finished with a flourish.

"So we're stuck here!" Brockhurst spat in disgust.

"You know, Aahz," Isstvan said slowly. "It occurs to me that even if everything happened exactly as you described it, you and your friends here played a fairly large part in the plot."

"You're right, Isstvan," Aahz admitted, "but I'm prepared to offer you a bargain."

"What kind of a bargain?" Isstvan asked suspiciously.

"It's in two parts. First, to clear Tanda and myself from having opposed you in your last bid for power, I can offer transportation for you and your allies out of this dimension."

"Hmm...." said Isstvan. "And the second part?"

"For the second part, I can give you the ultimate vengeance to visit on Frumple here. In exchange, I want your promise you'll bear no grudge against the four of us for our part in today's misfortune."

"Pardon for four in exchange for vengeance on one?" Isstvan grunted. "That doesn't sound like much of a deal."

"I think you're overlooking something, Isstvan," Aahz cautioned.

"What's that?"

"You've lost your powers. That makes it four of us against three of you."

"Look at your four," Brockhurst sneered. "A woman, a half-trained apprentice, a broken-down demon hunter and a Pervert."

"Broken-down?" Quigley scowled.

"Easy, Quigley . . . and you too. Tanda," Aahz ordered. "Your three are nothing to brag about either, Brockhurst. Two Imps who've lost their powers and a fat madman."

Surprisingly, this seemed to revive Isstvan's humor. The Imps were not amused. "Now look, Aahz," Higgins began, "if you want a fight...."

"You miss the point entirely, gentlemen," Aahz said soothingly. "I'm trying to avoid a fight. I'm merely trying to point out that if this comes to a fight, you'll lose."

"Not necessarily," Brockhurst bristled.

"Inescapably," Aahz insisted. "Look, if we fight and we win, you lose. On the other hand, if we fight and we lose, you lose."

"How do you figure that?" Higgins asked suspiciously.

"Simple!" said Aahz smugly, "If you kill us, you'll have lost your only way to get out of this dimension. You'll be stuck forever on Klah. By my figuring, that's losing."

"We're in agreement there," Brockhurst mumbled.

"Oh, stop this bickering!" Isstvan interrupted with a chuckle. "Aahz is right, as usual. He may have lost a couple of fights, both magical and physical, but I've never heard of anyone out-arguing him."

"Then it's a deal?" Aahz asked.

"It's a deal!" Isstvan said firmly. "As if we had any choice in the matter."

They shook hands ceremoniously.

I noticed the Imps were whispering together and shooting dark glances in our direction. I wondered if a deal with Isstvan was binding on the Imps. I wondered if a handshake was legally binding in a situation such as this. But most of all, I wondered what Aahz had up his sleeve this time. "Well, Aahz?" Isstvan asked, "Where is this escape clause you promised?"

"Right here!" Aahz said, fishing a familiar object from inside his shirt and tossing it to Isstvan.

"A D-Hopper!" Isstvan cried with delight. "I haven't seen one of these since...."

"What is it?" Higgens interrupted.

Isstvan scowled at him.

"It's our ticket off this dimension," he exclaimed grudgingly.

"How does it work?" Brockhurst asked suspiciously.

"Trust me, gentlemen." Isstvan's distasteful expression gave lie to the joviality of his words. "It works."

He turned to Aahz again.

"Imps!" he mumbled to himself.

"You hired 'em," Aahz commented, unsympathetically.

"So I did. Well, what is this diabolical vengeance you have in mind for Frumple?"

"That's easy," smiled Aahz. "Use the D-Hopper and take him back to Deva."

"Why Deva?" Isstvan asked.

"Because he's been banned from Deva," Higgins answered, the light dawning.

"... and the Deveels are unequaled at meting out punishment to those who break their laws," Brockhurst finished with an evil smile.

"Why was Frumple banned from Deva?" Tanda whispered to me.

"I don't know," I confided. "Maybe he gave a refund or something."

"I don't believe it," she snorted, "I mean he is a Deveel."

"Aahz," Isstvan smiled, regarding the D-Hopper, "I've always admired your sense of humor. It's even nastier than mine."

"What do you expect from a Pervert?" snorted Brockhurst.

"Watch your mouth. Imp," I snarled.

He was starting to get on my nerves.

"Then it's settled!" Isstvan chortled, clapping his hands together gleefully. "Brockhurst! Higgins! Come gather around Frumple here. We're off to Deva."

"Right now?" asked Brockhurst.

"With . . . things here so unsettled?" Higgins added, glancing at us again.

"Oh, we won't be long," Isstvan assured them.

"There's nothing here we can't come back and pick up later."

"That's true," admitted Brockhurst, staring at me thoughtfully.

"Umm ... Isstvan?"

It was Quigley.

"Are you addressing me?" Isstvan asked with mock formality.

"Yes." Quigley looked uncomfortable. "Am I to understand you are all about to depart for some place completely populated with demons?"

"That is correct," Isstvan nodded.

"Could . . . that is ... would you mind if I accompanied you?"

"What?" I exclaimed, genuinely startled. "Why?"

"Well . . ." Quigley said hesitantly, "if there is one thing I have learned this day, it's that I really know very little about demons."

"Hear, hear!" mumbled Aahz.

"I am undecided as to whether or not to continue in my chosen profession," Quigley continued, "but in any case it behooves me to learn more about demons. What better place could there be for such study than in a land completely populated with demons?"

"Why should we burden ourselves with a demon hunter of all things?" Brockhurst appealed to Isstvan.

"Maybe we could teach him a few things about demons," Higgins suggested in an overly innocent voice, giving his partner a covert poke in the side.

"What? Hmm . . . You know, you're right, Higgins." Brockhurst was suddenly smiling again. "Good!" exclaimed Isstvan. "We'll make a party of it."

"In that case," purred Tanda, "you won't mind if I tag along, too."

"What?" exclaimed Brockhurst.

"Why?" challenged Higgins.

"To help, of course," she smiled. "I want to be there when you teach Quigley about demons. Maybe I can help him learn."

"Wonderful, wonderful," Isstvan beamed, overriding the Imps' objections. "The more the merrier. Aahz? Skeeve? Will you be joining us?"

"Not this time, thanks," Aahz replied before I could open my mouth. "The kid here and I have a few things to go over that won't wait."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Shut up, kid," Aahz hissed, then smiled again at the group. "You all run along. We'll be here when you comeback."

"We'll be looking forward to it." Brockhurst smiled grimly.

"G'bye, Aahz, Skeeve!" Tanda waved. "I'll look for you next time around."

"But Tanda. . ." I began.

"Don't worry, lad," Quigley assured me. "I'll make sure nothing happens to her."

Behind him, Tanda shot me a bawdy wink.

"Aahz!" Isstvan chuckled. "I do enjoy your company. We must work together more often."

He adjusted the settings on the D-Hopper and prepared to trigger it.

"Good-bye, Isstvan." Aahz smiled and waved. "Remember me!"

There was a rippling in the air and they were gone. All of them.

"Aahz!" I said urgently. "Did you see how those Imps looked at us?"

"Hmm? Oh. Yeah, kid. I told you they were vicious little creatures."

"But what are we going to do when they get back?"

"Don't worry about it, kid."

"Don't worry about it!" I shrieked. "We've got to...."

". . . because they aren't coming back," Aahz finished.

That stopped me.

"But... when they get done on Deva...."

"That's the joke, kid," Aahz grinned at me. "They aren't going to Deva."

Chapter Twenty-Six:

"A woman, like a good piece of music, should have a solid end."

-F. SCHUBERT

"THEY aren't going to Deva?"

I was having a rough time dealing with the concept.

"That's right, kid," Aahz said, pouring himself some more wine.

"But Isstvan set the D-Hopper himself."

"Yeah!" Aahz grinned smugly. "But last night I made one extra preparation for this sortie. I changed the markings on the dials."

"Then where are they going?"

"Beats me!" Aahz shrugged, taking a deep draught of the wine. "But I'm betting it'll take 'em a long time to find their way back. There are a lot of settings on a D-Hopper."

"But what about Tanda and Quigley?"

"Tanda can take care of Quigley," Aahz assured me. "Besides, she has the powers to pull them out anytime she wants."

"She does?"

"Sure. But she'll probably have a few laughs just tagging along for a while. Can't say as I blame her. I'd love to see Quigley deal with a few dimensions myself."

He took another generous gulp of the wine.

"Aahz!" I cried in sudden realization. "The wine!"

"What about it? Oh. Don't worry kid," he smiled. "I've already lost my powers, remember? Besides, you don't think I'd drug my own wine, do you?"

"You drugged the wine?"

"Yeah. That was my secret weapon. You didn't really . believe all that bunk about Frumple, did you?"

"Ahh ... of course not," I said, offended.

Actually, even though I knew Frumple hadn't done it, I had completely lost track of actually who had done what and to whom.

"Here, kid." Aahz handed me his flagon and picked up the jug. "Have some yourself. You did pretty good this afternoon."

I took the flagon, but somehow couldn't bring myself to drink any.

"What did you put in the wine, anyway?" I asked.

"Joke powder," Aahz replied. "As near as I can tell, it's the same stuff Garkin used on me. You can put it in a drink, sprinkle it over food, or burn it and have your victim inhale the smoke."

I had a sudden flash recollection of the brazier billowing smoke as Aahz materialized.

"What does it do?"

"Weren't you paying attention, kid?" Aahz cocked his head at me. "It takes away your powers."

"Permanently?"

"Of course not!" Aahz scoffed. "Only for a century."

"What's the antidote?"

"There isn't one ... at least I couldn't get the stall proprietor to admit to having one. Maybe when you get a little better with the magik, we'll go back to Deva and beat an answer out of him."

I thought for a few minutes. That seemed to answer all my questions ... except one.

"Say... urn, Aahz?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"What do we do now?"

"About what?" Aahz asked.

"I mean, what do we do? We've been spending all the time since we met getting ready to fight Istvan. Well, it's over. Now what do we do?"

"What you do, apprentice," Aahz said sternly, "is devote your time to your magik. You've still got a long way to go before you're even close to Master status. As for me ... well, I guess most of my time will be spent teaching you."

He poured a little more wine down his throat. "Actually, we're in pretty good shape," he stated. "We've got a magik crystal courtesy of Frumple . . . and that crummy sword if we search his gear."

"And a malfunctioning fire-ring," I prompted. "Urn. . . ." said Aahz. "Actually, I .. ahh ... well, I gave the ring to Tanda."

"Gave?" I asked. "You gave something away?" Aahz shrugged.

"I'm a soft touch. Ask anybody."

"Hmm...." I said. "We've, um, also got a war unicorn if we want to go anywhere," Aahz hastened on, "and that stupid dragon of yours."

"Gleep isn't stupid!" I insisted hotly.

"Okay, okay," Aahz amended, "... your intelligent, personable dragon."

"That's better," I mumbled.

"... . Even though it beats me why we'd want to go anyplace," Aahz commented, looking around him. "This place seems sound enough. You'd have some good force lines to play with, and the wine cellar will be well stocked if I know Isstvan. We could do lots worse for a base of operations."

Another question occurred to me.

"Say, Aahz?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"A few minutes ago you said you wanted to see Quigley when he visited other dimensions . . . and you seem to have a weak spot for Tanda...."

"Yeah?" Aahz growled. "So?"

"So why didn't you go along with them? You didn't have to get stranded in this dimension."

"Isstvan's a fruitcake," Aahz declared pointedly, "and I don't like Imps. You think I'd like having them for traveling companions?"

"But you said Tanda could travel the dimensions by herself. Couldn't you and she have...."

"All right, all right," interrupted Aahz. "You want me to say it? I stayed here because of you."

"Why?"

"Because you're not up to traveling the dimensions yet. Not until you...."

"I mean, why stay with me at all?"

"Why? Because you're my apprentice! That's why."

Aahz seemed genuinely angry. "We made a deal, remember? You help me against Isstvan and I teach you magik. Well, you did your part and now I'm going to do mine. I'm going to teach you magik if it kills you . . . or me, which is more probable!"

"Yes, Aahz!" I agreed hastily.

"Besides," he mumbled, taking another drink. "I like you."

"Excuse me?" I said. "I didn't quite hear that."

"Then pay attention!" Aahz barked. "I said drink your wine, and give some to that stupid dragon of yours. I will allow you one... count it, one... night of celebration. Then bright and early tomorrow, we start working in earnest."

"Yes, Aahz," I said obediently.

"And kid," Aahz grinned, "don't worry about it being boring. We don't have to go looking for adventure. In our profession, it usually comes looking for us."

I had an ugly feeling he was right.

End of Another Fine Myth by Robert Asprin

MYTH CONCEPTIONS by Robert Asprin

Chapter One:

"Life is a series of rude awakenings."

-R. V. WINKLE

OF all the various unpleasant ways to be aroused from a sound sleep, one of the worst is the noise of a dragon and a unicorn playing tag.

I pried one eye open and blearily tried to focus on the room. A chair toppled noisily to the floor, convincing me the blurred images my mind was receiving were due at least in part to the irregular vibrations coming from the floor and walls. One without my vast storehouse of knowledge (hard won and painfully endured) might be inclined to blame the pandemonium on an earthquake. I didn't. The logic behind this conclusion was simple. Earthquakes were extremely uncommon in this area. A dragon and a unicorn playing tag wasn't.

It was starting out as an ordinary day . . . that is, ordinary if you're a junior magician apprenticed to a demon.

If I had been able to predict the future with any degree of accuracy and thus foresee the events to come, I probably would have stayed in bed. I mean, fighting has never been my forte, and the idea of taking on a whole army . . . but I'm getting ahead of myself.

The thud that aroused me shook the building, accompanied by the crash of various dirty dishes shattering on the floor. The second thud was even more spectacular.

I considered doing something. I considered going back to sleep. Then I remembered my mentor's condition when he had gone to bed the night before.

That woke me up fast. The only thing nastier than a demon from Perv is a demon from Perv with a hangover.

I was on my feet and headed for the door in a flash. (My agility was a tribute more to my fear rather than to any inborn talent.) Wrenching the door open, I thrust my head outside and surveyed the terrain. The grounds outside the inn seemed normal. The weeds were totally out of hand, more than chest high in places. Something would have to be done about them someday, but my mentor didn't seem to mind their riotous growth, and since I was the logical candidate to cut them if I raised the point, I decided once again to keep silent on the subject.

Instead, I studied the various flattened patches and newly torn paths in the overgrowth, trying to determine the location or at least the direction of my quarries' movement. I had almost convinced myself that the silence was at least semi permanent and it would be all right to go back to sleep, when the ground began to tremble again. I sighed and shakily drew myself up to my full height, what there was of it, and prepared to meet the onslaught.

The unicorn was the first to come into view, great clumps of dirt flying from beneath his hooves as he ducked around the corner of the inn on my right.

"Buttercup!" I shouted in my most authoritative tone.

A split second later I had to jump back into the shelter of the doorway to avoid being trampled by the speeding beast. Though a bit miffed at his disobedience, I didn't really blame him. He had a dragon chasing him, and dragons are not notoriously agile when it comes to quick stops.

As if acting on a cue from my thoughts, the dragon burst into view. To be accurate, he didn't really burst, he thudded, shaking the inn as he rebounded off the corner. As I said, dragons are not notoriously agile.

"Gleep!" I shouted. "Stop it this instant!"

He responded by taking an affectionate swipe at me with his tail as he bounded past. Fortunately for me, the gesture went wide of its mark, hitting the inn with another jarring thud instead.

So much for my most authoritative tone. If our two faithful charges were any more obedient, I'd be lucky to escape with my life. Still I had to stop them. Whoever came up with the immortal quote about waking sleeping dragons had obviously never had to contend with a sleeping demon.

I studied, the two of them chasing each other through the weeds for a few moments, then decided to handle this the easy way. Closing my eyes, I envisioned both of them, the dragon and the unicorn. Then I superimposed the image of the dragon over that of the unicorn, fleshed it out with a few strokes of my mental paintbrush, then opened my eyes.

To my eyes, the scene was the same, a dragon and a unicorn confronting each other in a field of weeds. But, of course, I had cast the spell, so naturally I wouldn't be taken in. Its true effect could be read in Gleep's reaction.

He cocked his head and peered at Buttercup, first from this angle, then that, stretching his long serpentine neck to its limits. Then he swiveled his head until he was looking backward and repeated the process, scanning the surrounding weeds. Then he looked at Buttercup again.

To his eyes, his playmate had suddenly disappeared, to be replaced by another dragon. It was all very confusing, and he wanted his playmate back.

In my pet's defense, when I speak of his lack of agility, both physically and mentally, I don't mean to imply he is either clumsy or stupid. He's young, which also accounts for his mere ten-foot length

and half-formed wings. I fully expect that when he matures-in another four or five hundred years- he will be very deft and wise, which is more than I can say for myself. In the unlikely event I should live that long, all I'll be is old.

"Gleep?"

The dragon was looking at me now. Having stretched his limited mental abilities to their utmost, he turned to me to correct the situation or at least provide an explanation. As the perpetrator of the situation causing his distress, I felt horribly guilty. For a moment, I wavered on the brink of restoring Buttercup's normal appearance.

"If you're quite sure you're making enough noise. ..."

I winced at the deep, sarcastic tones booming close behind me. All my efforts were for naught. Aahz was awake.

I assumed my best hangdog attitude and turned to face him.

Needless to say, he looked terrible.

If, perchance, you think a demon covered with green scales already looks terrible, you've never encountered one with a hangover. The normal gold flecks in his yellow eyes were now copper, accented by a throbbing network of orange veins. His lips were drawn back in a painful grimace which exposed even more of his pointed teeth than his frightening, reassuring smile. Looming there, his fists clenched on his hips, he presented a picture terrifying enough to make a spider-bear faint.

I wasn't frightened, however. I had been with Aahz for over a year now, and knew his bark was worse than his bite. Then again, he had never bitten me.

"Gee, Aahz," I said, digging a small hole with my toe. "You're always telling me if I can't sleep through anything, I'm not really tired."

He ignored the barb, as he so frequently does when I catch him on his own quotes. Instead he squinted over my shoulder at the scene outside.

"Kid," he said. "Tell me you're practicing. Tell me you haven't really scrounged up another stupid dragon to make our lives miserable."

"I'm practicing!" I hastened to reassure him.

To prove the point, I quickly restored Buttercup's normal appearance.

"Gleep!" said Gleep happily, and the two of them were off again.

"Really, Aahz," I said innocently to head off his next caustic remark. "Where would I find another dragon in this dimension?"

"If there was one to be found here on Klah, you'd find it," he snarled. "As I recall, you didn't have that much trouble finding this one the first time I turned my back on you. Apprentices!"

He turned and retreated out of the sunlight into the dim interior of the inn.

"If I recall," I commented, following him, "that was at the Bazaar on Deva. I couldn't get another dragon there because you won't teach me how to travel through the dimensions."

"Get off my case, kid!" he moaned. "We've been over it a thousand times. Dimension traveling is dangerous. Look at me! Stranded without my powers in a back-assward dimension like Klah, where the lifestyle is barbaric and the food is disgusting."

"You lost your powers because Garkin laced his special effects cauldron with that joke powder and then got killed before he could give you the antidote," I pointed out.

"Watch out how you talk about your old teacher," Aahz warned. "The old slime-monger was inclined to get carried away with practical jokes once in a while, true. But he was a master magician . . . and a friend of mine. If he wasn't, I wouldn't have saddled myself with his mouthy apprentice," he finished, giving me a meaningful look.

"I'm sorry, Aahz," I apologized. "It's just that I..."

"Look, kid," he interrupted wearily, "if I had my powers-which I don't-and if you were ready to learn dimension hopping-which you aren't-we could give it a try. Then, if you miscalculated and dumped us into the wrong dimension, I could get our tails out before anything bad happened. As things stand, trying to teach you dimension hopping would be more dangerous than playing Russian roulette."

"What's russian?" I asked.

The inn shook as Gleep missed the corner turn again.

"When are you going to teach your stupid dragon to play on the other side of the road?" Aahz snarled, craning his neck to glare out a window.

"I'm working on it, Aahz," I insisted soothingly. "Remember, it took me almost a whole year to housebreak him."

"Don't remind me," Aahz grumbled. "If I had my way, we'd..."

He broke off suddenly and cocked his head to one side.

"You'd better disguise that dragon, kid," he announced suddenly. "And get ready to do your 'dubious character' bit. We're about to have a visitor."

I didn't contest the information. We had established long ago that Aahz's hearing was much more acute than mine.

"Right, Aahz," I acknowledged and hurried about my task.

The trouble with using an inn for a base of operations, however abandoned or weather-beaten it might be, was that occasionally people would stop here seeking food and lodging. Magik was still outlawed in these lands, and the last thing we wanted was witnesses.

Chapter Two:

"First impressions, being the longest lasting, are of utmost importance."

-J. CARTER

AAHZ and I had acquired the inn under rather dubious circumstances. Specifically, we claimed it as our rightful spoils of war after the two of us (with the assistance of a couple of allies, now absent) had routed Isstvan, a maniac magician, and sent him packing into far dimensions along with all his surviving accomplices. The inn had been Isstvan's base of operations. But now it was ours. Who Isstvan had gotten it from and how, I didn't want to know. Despite Aahz's constant assurances, I lived in dread of encountering the inn's rightful owner.

I couldn't help remembering all this as I waited outside the inn for our visitor. As I said, Aahz has very good hearing. When he tells me he hears something "close by," he frequently forgets to mention that "close by" may be over a mile away.

I have also noted, over the course of our friendship, that his hearing is curiously erratic. He can hear a lizard-bird scratching itself half a mile away, but occasionally seems unable to hear the politest of requests no matter how loudly I shout them at him.

There was still no sign of our rumored visitor. I considered moving back inside the inn out of the late morning sun, but decided against it. I had carefully arranged the scene for our guest's arrival, and I hated to disrupt it for such a minor thing as personal comfort.

I had used the disguise spell liberally on Buttercup, Gleep, and myself. Gleep now looked like a unicorn, a change that did not seem to bother Buttercup in the slightest. Apparently unicorns are less discriminating about their playmates than are dragons. I had made them both considerably more disheveled and unkempt-looking than they actually were. This was necessary to maintain the image set forth by my own appearance.

Aahz and I had decided early in our stay that the best way to handle unwanted guests was not to threaten them or frighten them away, but rather to be so repulsive that they left of their own accord. To this end, I had slowly devised a disguise designed to convince strangers they did not want to be in the same inn with me, no matter how large the inn was or how many other people were there. In this disguise, I would greet wayward travelers as the proprietor of the inn.

Modestly, I will admit the disguise was a screaming success. In fact, that was the specific reaction many visitors had to it. Some screamed, some looked ill, others sketched various religious symbols in the air between themselves and me. None of them elected to spend the night.

When I experimented with various physical defects, Aahz correctly pointed out that many people did not find any single defect revolting. In fact, in a dimension such as Klah, most would consider it normal. To guarantee the desired effect, I adopted many of them.

When disguised, I walked with a painful limp, had a hump-back, and a deformed hand which was noticeably diseased. What teeth remained were twisted and stained, and the focus of one of my eyes had a tendency to wander about independently of the other. My nose-in fact, my entire face-was not symmetrical, and as a masterstroke of my disguise abilities, there appeared to be vicious-looking bugs crawling about my mangy hair and tattered clothes.

The overall effect was horrifying. Even Aahz admitted he found it disquieting, which, considering the things he's seen in his travels through the dimensions, was high praise indeed.

My thoughts were interrupted as our visitor came into view. He sat ramrod-straight astride a huge, flightless riding bird. He carried no visible weapons and wore no uniform, but his bearing marked him as a soldier much more than any outer trappings could have. His eyes were wary, constantly darting suspiciously about as he walked his bird up to the inn in slow, deliberate steps. Surprisingly enough, his gaze passed over me several times without registering my presence. Perhaps he didn't realize I was alive.

I didn't like this. The man seemed more the hunter than the casual traveler. Still, he was here and had to be dealt with. I went into my act.

"Does the noble sahr require a room?"

As I spoke I moved forward in my practical, rolling gait. In case the subtlety of my disguise escaped him, I allowed a large gob of spittle to ooze from the corner of my mouth where it rolled unhindered down to my chin.

For a moment the man's attention was occupied controlling his mount. Flightless or not, the bird was trying to take to the air.

Apparently my disguise had touched a primal chord in the bird's mind that went back prior to its flightless ancestry.

I waited, head cocked curiously, while the man fought the bird to a fidgety standstill. Finally, he turned his attention to me for a moment. Then he averted his eyes and stared carefully at the sky.

"I come seeking the one known as Skeeve the magician," he told me.

Now it was my turn to jump. To the best of my knowledge, no one knew who I was and what I was, much less where I was, except for Aahz and me.

"That's me!" I blurted out, forgetting myself and using my real voice.

The man turned horrified eyes on me, and I remembered my appearance.

"That's me master!" I amended hastily. "You wait... I fetch."

I turned and scuttled hastily into the inn. Aahz was waiting inside.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"He's ... he wants to talk to Skeeve ... to me!" I babbled nervously.

"So?" he asked pointedly. "What are you doing in here? Go outside and talk to the man."

"Looking like this?"

Aahz rolled his eyes at the ceiling in exasperation.

"Who cares what you look like?" he barked. "C'mon, kid. The man's a total stranger!"

"I care!" I declared, drawing myself up haughtily.

"The man asked for Skeeve the magician, and I think-"

"He what?" Aahz interrupted.

"He asked for Skeeve the magician," I repeated, covertly studying the figure waiting outside.

"He looks like a soldier to me," I supplied.

"He looks scared to me," Aahz retorted. "Maybe you should tone down your disguise a bit next time."

"Do you think he's a demon-hunter?" I asked nervously.

Instead of answering my question, Aahz turned abruptly from the window.

"If he wants a magician, we'll give him a magician," he murmured. "Quick, kid, slap the Garkin disguise on me."

As I noted earlier, Garkin was my first magik instructor. An imposing figure with a salt-and-pepper beard, he was one of our favorite and most oft-used disguises. I could do Garkin in my sleep.

"Good enough, kid," Aahz commented, surveying the results of my work. "Now follow close and let me do the talking."

"Like this?" I exclaimed.

"Relax, kid," he reassured me. "For this conversation I'm you. Understand?"

Aahz was already heading out through the door without waiting for my reply, leaving me little choice other than to follow along behind him.

"Who seeks an audience with the great Skeeve?" Aahz bellowed in a resonant bass voice.

The man shot another nervous glance at me, then drew himself up in stiff formality.

"I come as an emissary from his most noble Majesty, Rodrick the Fifth, King of Possiltum, who-"

"Where's Possiltum?" Aahz interrupted.

"I beg your pardon?" the man blinked.

"Possiltum," Aahz repeated. "Where is it?"

"Oh!" the man said with sudden understanding. "It's the kingdom just east of here . . . other side of the Ember River . . . you can't miss it."

"Okay," Aahz nodded. "Go on."

The man took a deep breath, then hesitated, frowning.

"King of Possiltum," I prompted.

"Oh yes! Thanks." The man shot a quick smile, then another quick stare, then continued, "King of Possiltum, who sends his respects and greetings to the one known as Skeeve the magician ..."

He paused and looked at Aahz expectantly. He was rewarded with a polite nod of the head. Satisfied, the man continued.

"His Majesty extends an invitation to Skeeve the magician to appear before the court of Possiltum that he might be reviewed for his suitability for the position of court magician."

"I don't really feel qualified to pass judgment on the king's suitability as a court magician," Aahz said modestly, eyeing the man carefully. "Isn't he content just to be king?"

"No, no!" the man corrected hastily. "The king wants to review your suitability."

"Oh!" Aahz said with the appearance of sudden understanding. "That's a different matter entirely. Well, well. An invitation from . . . who was it again?"

"Rodrick the Fifth," the man announced, lifting his head haughtily.

"Well," Aahz said, grinning broadly. "I've never been one to refuse a fifth!"

The man blinked and frowned, then glanced at me quizzically. I shrugged, not understanding the joke myself.

"You may tell His Majesty," Aahz continued, unaware of our confusion. "I shall be happy to accept his kind invitation. I shall arrive at his court at my earliest convenience."

The man frowned. "I believe His Majesty requires your immediate presence," he commented darkly.

"Of course," Aahz answered smoothly. "How silly of me. If you will accept our hospitality for the night, I and my assistant here will be most pleased to accompany you in the morning."

I knew a cue when I heard one. I drooled and bared my teeth at the messenger.

The man shot a horrified look in my direction. "Actually," he said hastily, "I really must be going. I'll tell His Majesty you'll be following close behind."

"You're sure you wouldn't like to stay?" Aahz asked hopefully.

"Positive!" The man nearly shouted his reply as he began backing the bird away from us.

"Oh, well," Aahz said. "Perhaps we'll catch up with you on the road."

"In that case," the man said, turning his bird, "I'll want a head . . . that is, I'd best be on my way to announce your coming."

I raised my hand to wave good-bye, but he was already moving at a rapid pace, urging his mount to still greater speeds and ignoring me completely.

"Excellent!" Aahz exclaimed, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "A court magician! What a soft job! And the day started out so miserably."

"If I can interrupt," I interrupted. "There's one minor flaw in your plan."

"Hmm? What's that?"

"I don't want to be a court magician!" As usual, my protest didn't dampen his enthusiasm at all.

"You didn't want to be a magician, either," he reminded me bluntly. "You wanted to be a thief. Well, here's a good compromise for you. As a court magician, you'll be a civil servant . . . and civil servants are thieves on a grander scale than you ever dreamed possible!"

Chapter Three:

"Ninety percent of any business transaction is selling yourself to the client."

-X. HOLLANDER

"Now let me see if I've got this right," I said carefully. "You're saying they probably won't hire me on the basis of my abilities?"

I couldn't believe I'd interpreted Aahz's lecture correctly, but he beamed enthusiastically.

"That's right, kid," he approved. "Now you've-

"No, I don't," I insisted. "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard!"

Aahz groaned and hid his face in his hand.

It had been like this ever since we left the inn, and three days of a demon's groaning is a bit much for anyone to take.

"I'm sorry, Aahz." I said testily, "but I don't believe it. I've taken a lot of things you've told me on faith, but this... this goes against common sense.

"What does common sense have to do with it?" he exploded. "We're talking about a job interview!"

At this outburst, Buttercup snorted and tossed his head, making it necessary for us to duck out of range of his horn.

"Steady, Buttercup!" I admonished soothingly.

Though he still rolled his eyes, the unicorn resumed his stoic plodding, the travois loaded with our equipment dragging along behind him still intact. Despite incidents such as had occurred back at the inn. Buttercup and I got along fairly well, and he usually obeyed me. In contrast, he and Aahz never really hit it off, especially when the latter chose to raise his voice angrily.

"All it takes is a little gentleness," I informed Aahz smugly. "You should try it sometime."

"While you're showing off your dubious rapport with animals," Aahz retorted, "you might call your dragon back. All we need is to have him stirring up the countryside."

I cast a quick glance about. He was right. Gleep had disappeared . . . again.

"Gleep!" I called. "Come here, fella!"

"Gleep!" came an answering cry.

The bushes off to our left parted, and the dragon's head emerged.

"Gleep?" he said, cocking his head.

"Come here!" I repeated.

My pet needed no more encouragement. He bounded into the open and trotted to my side.

"I still say we should have left that stupid dragon back at the inn," Aahz grumbled.

I ignored him, checking to be sure that the gear hung saddlebag fashion over the dragon's back was still secure. Personally, I felt we were carrying far too much in the way of personal belongings, but Aahz had insisted. Gleep tried to nuzzle me affectionately with his head, and I caught a whiff of his breath. For a moment, I wondered if Aahz had been right about leaving the dragon behind.

"What were you saying about job interviews?" I asked, both to change the subject and to hide the fact I was gagging.

"I know it sounds ridiculous, kid," Aahz began with sudden sincerity, "and it is, but a lot of things are ridiculous, particularly in this dimension. That doesn't mean we don't have to deal with them."

That gave me pause to think. To a lot of people, having a demon and a dragon for traveling companions would seem ridiculous. As a matter of fact, if I took time to think it through, it seemed pretty ridiculous to me!

"Okay, Aahz," I said finally, "I can accept the existence of ridiculousness as reality. Now try explaining the court magician thing to me again."

We resumed walking as Aahz organized his thoughts. For a change, Gleep trailed placidly along beside Buttercup instead of taking off on another of his exploratory side trips.

"See if this makes any sense," Aahz said finally. "Court magicians don't do much ... magically at least. They're primarily kept around for show, as a status symbol to demonstrate a court is advanced enough to rate a magician. It's a rare occasion when they're called upon to do anything. If you were a jester, they'd work your tail off, but not as a magician. Remember, most people are skittish about magik, and use it as seldom as possible."

"If that's the case," I said confidently, "I'm qualified. I'll match my ability to do nothing against any magician on Klah."

"No argument there," Aahz observed dryly. "But it's not quite that easy. To hold the job takes next to no effort at all. Getting the job can be an uphill struggle."

"Oh! "I said, mollified.

"Now to get the job, you'll have to impress the king and probably his advisors," Aahz continued. "You'll have to impress them with you, not with your abilities."

"How's that again?" I frowned.

"Look, kid. Like I said, a court magician is window dressing, a showpiece. They'll be looking for someone they want to have hanging around their court, someone who is impressive whether or not he ever does anything. You'll have to exude confidence. Most important, you'll have to look like a magician ... or at least, what they think a magician looks like. If you can dress like a magician, talk like a magician, and act like a magician, maybe no one will notice you don't have the abilities of a magician."

"Thanks, Aahz," I grimaced. "You're really doing wonders towards building my confidence."

"Now don't sulk," Aahz admonished. "You know how to levitate reasonably large objects, you can fly after a fashion, and you've got the disguise spell down pat. You're doing pretty well for a rank novice, but don't kid yourself into believing you're anywhere near full magician's status."

He was right, of course, but I was loath to admit it.

"If I'm such a bumbling incompetent," I said stiffly, "why are we on our way to establish me as a court magician?"

Aahz bared his teeth at me in irritation.

"You aren't listening, kid," he snarled. "Holding the job once you've got it will be a breeze. You can handle that now. The tricky part will be getting you hired. Fortunately, with a few minor modifications and a little coaching, I think we can get you ready for polite society."

"Modifications such as what?" I asked, curious despite myself.

Aahz made a big show of surveying me from head to foot.

"For a start," he said, "there's the way you dress."

"What's wrong with the way I dress?" I countered defensively.

"Nothing at all," he replied innocently. "That is, if you want people to see you as a bumpkin peasant with dung on his boots. Of course, if you want to be a court magician, well, that's another story. No respectable magician would be caught dead in an outfit like that."

"But I am a respectable magician!" I argued.

"Really? Respected by who?"

He had me there, so I lapsed into silence.

"That's specifically the reason I had the foresight to bring along a few items from the inn," Aahz continued, indicating Buttercup's burdens with a grand sweep of his hand.

"And here I thought you were just looting the place," I said dryly.

"Watch your mouth, kid," he warned. "This is all for your benefit."

"Really? You aren't expecting anything at all out of this deal?"

My sarcasm, as usual, was lost on him.

"Oh, I'll be around," he acknowledged. "Don't worry about that. Publicly, I'll be your apprentice."

"My apprentice?"

This Job was suddenly sounding much better.

"Publicly!" Aahz repeated hastily. "Privately, you'll continue your lessons as normal. Remember that before you start getting frisky with your 'apprentice.' "

"Of course, Aahz," I assured him. "Now, what was it you were saying about changing the way I dress?"

He shot me a sidelong glance, apparently suspicious of my sudden enthusiasm.

"Not that there's anything wrong with me the way I am," I added with a theatrical scowl.

That seemed to ease his doubts.

"Everything's wrong with the way you dress," he growled. "We're lucky those two Imps left most of their wardrobe behind when we sent 'em packing along with Isstvan."

"Higgins and Brockhurst?"

"Yeah, those two," Aahz grinned evilly at the memory. "I'll say one thing for Imps. They may be inferior to Deveels as merchants, but they are snappy dressers."

"I find it hard to believe that all that stuff you bundled along is wardrobe," I observed skeptically.

"Of course it isn't," my mentor moaned. "It's special effects gear."

"Special effects?"

"Don't you remember anything, kid?" Aahz scowled. "I told you all this when we first met. However easy magik is, you can't let it look easy. You need a few hand props, a line of patter... you know, like Garkin had."

Garkin's hut, where I had first been introduced to magik, had been full of candles, vials of strange powders, dusty books . . . now there was a magician's lair! Of course, I had since discovered most of what he had was unnecessary for the actual working of magik itself.

I was beginning to see what Aahz meant when he said I'd have to learn to put on a show.

"We've got a lot of stuff we can work into your presentation," Aahz continued. "Isstvan left a lot of his junk behind when he left. Oh, and you might find some familiar items when we unload. I think the Imps helped themselves to some of Garkin's equipment and brought it back to the inn with them."

"Really?" I said, genuinely interested. "Did they get Garkin's brazier?"

"Brazier?" My mentor frowned.

"You remember," I prompted. "You used it to drink wine out of when you first arrived."

"That's right! Yeah, I think I saw it in there.

Why?"

"No special reason," I replied innocently. "It was always a favorite of mine, that's all."

From watching Garkin back in my early apprentice days, I knew there were secrets to that brazier I was dying to learn. I also knew that, if possible, I wanted to save it as a surprise for Aahz.

"We're going to have to do something about your physical appearance, too," Aahz continued thoughtfully.

"What's-"

"You're too young!" he answered, anticipating my question. "Nobody hires a young magician. They want one who's been around for a while. If we-"

He broke off suddenly and craned his neck to look around.

"Kid," he said carefully, studying the sky. "Your dragon's gone again."

I did a fast scan. He was right.

"Gleep!" I called. "Here, fella!"

The dragon's head appeared from the depths of a bush behind us. There was something slimy with legs dangling from his mouth, but before I could manage an exact identification, my pet swallowed and the what-zit disappeared.

"Gleep!" he said proudly, licking his lips with his long forked tongue.

"Stupid dragon," Aahz muttered darkly.

"He's cheap to feed," I countered, playing on what I knew to be Aahz's tight-fisted nature.

As we waited for the dragon to catch up, I had time to reflect that for once I felt no moral or ethical qualms about taking part in one of Aahz's schemes. If the unsuspecting Rodrick the Fifth was taken in by our charade and hired us, I was confident the king would be getting more than he bargained for.

Chapter Four:

"If the proper preparations have been made and the necessary precautions taken, any staged event is guaranteed success."

-ETHELRED THE UNREADY

THE candle lit at the barest flick from my mind. Delighted, I snuffed it and tried again. A sidelong glance, a fleeting concentration of my will, and the smoldering wick burst into flame again. I snuffed the flame and sat smiling at the familiar candle.

This was the first real proof I'd had as to how far my magical powers had developed in the past year. I knew this candle from my years as Garkin's apprentice. In those days, it was my arch nemesis. Even focusing all my energies failed to light it then. But now . . .

I glanced at the wick again, and again it rewarded me with a burst of flame.

I snuffed it and repeated the exercise, my confidence growing as I realized how easily I could now do something I once thought impossible.

"Will you knock it off with the candle!"

I jumped at the sound of Aahz's outburst, nearly upsetting the candle and setting the blanket afire.

"I'm sorry, Aahz," I said, hastily snuffing the candle for the last time. "I just-"

"You're here to audition for court magician," he interrupted. "Not for town Christmas tree!"

I considered asking what a Christmas tree was, but decided against it. Aahz seemed uncommonly irritable and nervous, and I was pretty sure, however I chose to phrase my question, that the answer would be both sarcastic and unproductive.

"Stupid candle blinking on and off," Aahz grumbled half to himself. "Attract the attention of every guard in the castle."

"I thought we were trying to attract their attention," I pointed out, but Aahz ignored me, peering at the castle through the early-morning light.

He didn't have to peer far, as we were camped in the middle of the road just short of the castle's main gates.

As I said, I was under the impression our position was specifically chosen to attract attention to ourselves.

We had crept into position in the dead of night, clumsily picking our way through the sleeping buildings clustered about the main gate. Not wishing to show a light, unpacking had been minimal, but even in the dark, I had recognized Garkin's candle.

All of this had to do with something Aahz called a "dramatic entrance." As near as I could tell, all this meant was we couldn't do anything the easy way.

Our appearance was also carefully designed for effect, with the aid of the Imps' abandoned wardrobe and my disguise spells.

Aahz was outfitted in my now traditional "dubious character" disguise. Gleep was standing placidly beside Buttercup disguised as a unicorn, giving us a matched pair. It was my own appearance, however, which had been the main focus of our attentions.

Both Aahz and I had agreed that the Garkin disguise would be unsuitable for this effort. While my own natural appearance was too young, Garkin's would be too old. Since we could pretty much choose the image we wanted, we decided to field a magician in his mid to late thirties; young without being youthful, experienced without being old, and powerful but still learning.

To achieve this disguise involved a bit more work than normal, as I did not have an image in mind to superimpose over my own. Instead, I closed my eyes and envisioned myself as I appeared normally, then slowly erased the features until I had a blank face to begin on. Then I set to work with Aahz watching carefully and offering suggestions and modifications.

The first thing I changed was my height, adjusting the image until the new figure stood a head and a half taller than my actual diminutive stature. My hair was next and I changed my strawberry-blond thatch to a more sinister black, at the same time darkening my complexion several shades.

The face gave us the most trouble.

"Elongate the chin a little more," Aahz instructed. "Put on a beard . . . not that much, stupid! Just a little goatee! . . . That's better! . . . Now lower the sideburns . . . okay, build up the nose . . . narrow it... make the eyebrows bushier ... no, change 'em back and sink the eyes a little instead ... for crying out loud change the eye color! Make 'em brown . . . okay, now a couple of frown wrinkles in the middle of the forehead.... Good. That should do it."

I stared at the figure in my mind, burning the image into my memory. It was effective, maybe a bit more sinister than I would have designed if left to my own devices, but Aahz was the expert and I had to trust his judgment. I opened my eyes.

"Terrific, kid!" Aahz beamed. "Now put on that black robe with the gold and red trim the Imps left, and you'll cut a figure fit to grace any court."

"Move along there! You're blocking the road!"

The rude order wrenched my thoughts back to the present.

A soldier, resplendent in leather armor and brandishing an evil-looking pike, was angrily approaching our crude encampment. Behind him the gates stood slightly ajar, and I could see the heads of several other soldiers watching us curiously.

Now that the light was improving, I could see the wall better. It wasn't much of a wall, barely ten feet high. That figured. From what we had seen since we crossed the border, it wasn't much of a kingdom, either.

"You deaf or something?" the soldier barked drawing close. "I said move along!"

Aahz scuttled forward and planted himself in the soldier's path.

"Skeve the Magnificent has arrived," he announced. "And he-"

"I don't care who you are!" the soldier snarled, wasting no time placing his pike between himself and the figure addressing him. "You can't-"

He broke off abruptly as his pike leaped from his grasp and floated horizontally in mid-air until it was forming a barricade between him and Aahz.

The occurrence was my doing, a simple feat of levitation. Regardless of our planned gambit, I felt I should take a direct hand in the proceedings before things got completely out of hand.

"I am Skeeve!" I boomed, forcing my voice into a resonant bass. "And that is my assistant you are attempting to threaten with your feeble weapon. We have come in response to an invitation from Rodrick the Fifth, King of Possiltum!"

"That's right, Bosco!" Aahz leered at the soldier. "Now just run along like a good fellow and pass the word we're here... eh?"

As I noted earlier, all this was designed to impress the hell out of the general populace. Apparently the guard hadn't read the script. He did not cower in terror or cringe with fear. If anything, our little act seemed to have the exact opposite effect on him.

"A magician, eh?" he said with a mocking sneer. "For that I've got standing orders. Go around to the back where the others are."

This took us aback. Well, at least it took me aback. According to our plan, we would end up arguing whether we entered the palace to perform in the king's court, or if the king had to bring his court outside to where we were. Being sent to the back door was not an option we had considered.

"To the back?" Aahz glowered. "You dare to suggest a magician of my master's stature go to the back door like a common servant?"

The soldier didn't budge an inch.

"If it were up to me, I'd 'dare to suggest' a far less pleasant activity for you. As it is, I have my orders. You're to go around to the back like all the others."

"Others?" I asked carefully.

"That's right," the guard sneered. "The king is holding an open air court to deal with all you 'miracle workers.' Every hack charm-peddler for eight kingdoms is in town. Some of 'em have been in line since noon yesterday. Now get around to the back and quit blocking the road!"

With that he turned on his heel and marched back to the gate, leaving his pike hanging in mid-air.

For once, Aahz was as speechless as I was. Apparently I wasn't the only one the king had invited to drop by. Apparently we were in big trouble.

Chapter Five:

"... Eye of newt, toe of frog..." -Believed to be the first recipe for an explosive mixture ... The forerunner of gunpowder.

"WHAT are we going to do, Aahz?"

With the guard out of earshot, I could revert to my normal voice and speech patterns, though it was still necessary to keep my physical disguise intact.

"That's easy," he responded. "We pack up our things and go around the back. Weren't you listening, kid?"

"But what are we going to do about..."

But Aahz was already at work, rebinding the few items we had unpacked.

"Don't do anything, kid," he warned over his shoulder. "We can't let anyone see you doing menial work. It's bad for the image."

"He said there were other magicians here!" I blurted at last.

"Yeah So?"

"Well, what are we going to do?"

Aahz scowled. "I told you once. We're going to pack our things and-"

"What are we going to do about the other magicians?"

"Do? We aren't going to do anything. You aren't up to dueling, you know."

He had finished packing and stepped back to survey his handiwork. Nodding in satisfaction, he turned and shot a glance over my shoulder.

"Do something about the pike, will ya, kid?"

I followed his gaze. The guard's pike was still hanging suspended in mid-air. Even though I hadn't been thinking about it, part of my mind had been keeping it afloat until I decided what to do with it. The question was, what should I do with it?

"Say, Aahz ..." I began, but Aahz had already started walking along the wall.

For a moment I was immobilized with indecision. The guard had gone so I couldn't return his weapon to him. Still, simply letting it drop to the ground seemed somehow anticlimactic.

Unable to think of anything to do that would have the proper dramatic flair, I decided to postpone the decision. For the time being, I let the pike float along behind me as I hurried after Aahz, first giving it additional elevation so it would not be a danger to Gleep and Buttercup.

"Were you expecting other magicians to be here?" I asked, drawing abreast of my mentor.

"Not really," Aahz admitted. "It was a possibility, of course, but I didn't give it a very high probability rating. Still, it's not all that surprising. A job like this is bound to draw competition out of the woodwork."

He didn't seem particularly upset, so I tried to take this new development in stride.

"Okay," I said calmly. "How does this change our plans?"

"It doesn't. Just do your thing like I showed you and everything should come out fine."

"But if the other magicians-"

Aahz stopped short and turned to face me.

"Look, kid," he said seriously, "just because I keep telling you you've got a long way to go before you're a master magician doesn't mean you're a hack! I wouldn't have encouraged you to show up for this interview if I didn't think you were good enough to land the job."

"Really, Aahz?"

He turned and started walking again.

"Just remember, as dimensions go, Klah isn't noted for its magicians. You're no master, but masters are few and far between. I'm betting that compared to the competition, you'll look like a real expert."

That made sense. Aahz was quite outspoken in his low opinion of Klah and the Klahds that inhabited it, including me. That last thought made me fish for a bit more reassurance.

"Aahz?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"What's your honest appraisal of my chances?"

There was a moment of silence before he answered.

"Kid, you know how you're always complaining that I keep tearing down your confidence?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, for both our sakes, don't push too hard for my honest appraisal."

I didn't.

Getting through the back gate proved to be no problem ... mostly because there wasn't a back gate. To my surprise and Aahz's disgust, the wall did not extend completely around the palace. As near as I could see, only the front wall was complete. The two side walls were under construction, and the back wall was nonexistent. I should clarify that. My statement that the side walls were under construction was an assumption based on the presence of scaffolding at the end of the wall rather than by the observation of any activity going on. If there was any work being performed, it was being done carefully enough not to disturb the weeds which abounded throughout the scaffolding.

I was beginning to have grave doubts about the kingdom I was about to ally myself with.

It was difficult to tell if the court was being convened in a garden, or if this was a courtyard losing its fight with the weeds and underbrush which crowded in through the opening where the back wall should have been. (Having grown up on a farm, my basic education in plants was that if it wasn't edible and growing in neat rows, it was a weed.)

As if in answer to my thoughts. Buttercup took a large mouthful of the nearest clump of growth and began chewing enthusiastically. Gleep sniffed the same bush and turned up his nose at it.

All this I noted only as an aside. My main attention was focused on the court itself.

There was a small open-sided pavilion set against the wall of the palace sheltering a seated figure, presumably the king. Standing close beside him on either side were two other men. The crowd, such as it was, was split into two groups. The first was standing in a somewhat orderly line along one side of the garden. I assumed this was the waiting line ... or rather I hoped it was as that was the group we joined. The second group was standing in a disorganized mob on the far side of the garden watching the proceedings. Whether these were rejected applicants or merely interested hangers-on, I didn't know.

Suddenly, a young couple in the watching group caught my eye. I hadn't expected to encounter any familiar faces here, but these two I had seen before. Not only had I seen them, Aahz and I had impersonated them at one point, a charade which had resulted in our being hanged.

"Aahz!" I whispered urgently. "Do you see those two over there? "

"No," Aahz said bluntly, not even turning his head to look.

"But they're the-"

"Forget 'em," he insisted. "Watch the judges. They're the ones we have to impress."

I had to admit that made a certain amount of sense. Grudgingly, I turned my attention to the figures in the pavilion.

The king was surprisingly young, perhaps in his mid-twenties. His hair was a tumble of shoulder length curls, which combined with his slight build almost made him look effeminate. Judging from

his posture, either the interviews had been going on for some time, or he had mastered the art of looking totally bored.

The man on his left bent and urgently whispered something in the king's ear and was answered by a vague nod.

This man, only slightly older than the king but balding noticeably, was dressed in a tunic and cloak of drab color and conservative cut. Though relaxed in posture and quiet in bearing, there was a watchful brightness to his eyes that reminded me of a feverish weasel.

There was a stirring of the figure on the king's right, which drew my attention in that direction. I had a flash impression of a massive furry lump, then I realized with a start that it was a man. He was tall and broad, his head crowned with thick, black, unkempt curls, his face nearly obscured by a full beard and mustache. This, combined with his heavy fur cloak, gave him an animal-like appearance which had dominated my first impression. He spoke briefly to the king, then recrossed his arms in a gesture of finality and glared at the other advisor. His cloak opened briefly during his oration, giving me a glimpse of a glittering shirt of mail and a massive double-headed hand-axe hung on a belt at his waist. Clearly this was not a man to cross. The balding figure seemed unimpressed, matching his rival's glare with one of his own.

There was a sharp nudge in my ribs.

"Did you see that?" Aahz whispered urgently.

"See what? "I asked.

"The king's advisors. A general and a chancellor unless I miss my guess. Did you see the gold medallion on the general?"

"I saw his axe!" I whispered back. The light in the courtyard suddenly dimmed. Looking up, I saw a mass of clouds forming overhead, blotting out the sun.

"Weather control," Aahz murmured half to himself. "Not bad."

Sure enough, the old man in the red cloak currently before the throne gestured wildly and tossed a cloud of purple powder into the air, and a light drizzle began to fall.

My spirits fell along with the rain. Even with Aahz's coaching on presentation, my magik was not this powerful or impressive.

"Aahz ..." I whispered urgently.

Instead of responding, he waved me to silence, his eyes riveted on the pavilion.

Following his gaze, I saw the general speaking urgently with the king. The king listened for a moment, then shrugged and said something to the magician.

Whatever he said, the magician didn't like it. Drawing himself up haughtily, he turned to leave, only to be called back by the king. Pointing to the clouds, the king said a few more words and leaned back. The magician hesitated, then shrugged, and began gesturing and chanting once more.

"Turned him down," Aahz said smugly.

"Then what's he doing now?"

"Clearing up the rain before the next act goes on,"

Aahz informed me.

Sure enough, the drizzle was slowing and the clouds began to scatter, much to the relief of the audience who, unlike the king, had no pavilion to protect them from the storm. This further display of the magician's power, however, did little to bolster my sagging confidence.

"Aahz!" I whispered. "He's a better magician than I am."

"Yeah," Aahz responded. "So?"

"So if they turned him down, I haven't got a chance!"

"Maybe yes, maybe no," came the thoughtful reply. "As near as I can tell, they're looking for something specific. Who knows? Maybe you're it. Remember what I told you, cushy jobs don't always go to the most skillful. In fact, it usually goes the other way."

"Yeah," I said, trying to sound optimistic. "Maybe I'll get lucky."

"It's going to take more than luck," Aahz corrected me sternly. "Now, what have you learned watching the king's advisors?"

"They don't like each other," I observed immediately.

"Right!" Aahz sounded surprised and pleased. "Now that means you probably won't be able to please them both. You'll have to play up to one of them ... or better still insult one. That'll get the other one on your side faster than anything. Now, which one do you want on your side?"

That was easier than his first question.

"The general," I said firmly.

"Wrong! You want the chancellor."

"The chancellor!" I exclaimed, blurring the words out louder than I had intended. "Did you see the size of that axe the general's carrying?"

"Uh-huh," Aahz replied. "Did you hear what happened to the guy who interviewed before old Red Cloak here got his turn?"

I closed my eyes and controlled my first sharp remark.

"Aahz," I said carefully, "remember me? I'm Skeeve. I'm the one who can't hear whispers a mile away."

As usual Aahz ignored my sarcasm.

"The last guy didn't even get a chance to show his stuff," he informed me. "The chancellor took one look at the crowd he brought with him and asked how many were in his retinue. 'Eight,' the man said. 'Too many!' says the chancellor and the poor fool was dismissed immediately."

"So? "I asked bluntly.

"So the chancellor is the one watching the purse strings," concluded Aahz. "What's more, he has more influence than the general. Look at these silly walls. Do you think a military man would leave walls half-finished if he had the final say? Somebody decided too much money was being spent constructing them and the project was canceled or delayed. I'm betting that somebody was the chancellor."

"Maybe they ran out of stones," I suggested.

"C'mon, kid. From what we've seen since we crossed the border this kingdom's principal crop is stones."

"But the general..."

As I spoke, I glanced in the general's direction again. To my surprise and discomfort, he was staring directly at me. It wasn't a friendly stare.

I hesitated for a moment, hoping I was wrong. I wasn't. The general's gaze didn't waver, nor did his expression soften. If anything, it got uglier.

"Aahz," I hissed desperately, unable to tear my eyes from the general.

Now the king and the chancellor were staring in my direction too, their attention drawn by the general's to our rear, and floating serenely above them was the guard's pike. I guess it was kind of noticeable.

"You!"

I turned toward the pavilion and the sound of the bellow. The general had stepped forward and was pointing a massive finger at me.

"Yes, you!" he roared as our eyes met once more. "Where did you get that pike? It belongs to the palace guards."

"I think you're about to have your interview, kid," Aahz murmured. "Give it your best and knock 'em stiff."

"But-" I protested.

"It beats standing in line!"

With that, Aahz took a long leisurely step backward. The effect was the same as if I had stepped forward, which I definitely hadn't. With the attention of the entire courtyard now centered on me, however, I had no choice but to take the plunge.

-----Chapter Six:

"That's entertainment!"

-VLAD THE IMPALER

CROSSING my arms, I moved toward the pavilion, keeping my pace slow and measured.

Aahz had insisted I practice this walk. He said it would make me look confident and self-possessed. Now that I was actually appearing before a king, I found I was using the walk, not as a show of arrogance, but to hide the weakness in my legs.

"Well?" the general rumbled, looming before me. "I asked you a question! Where did you get that pike? You'd best answer before I grow angry!"

Something in me snapped. Any fear I felt of the general and his axe evaporated, replaced by a heady glow of strength.

I had discovered on my first visit to the Bazaar at Deva that I didn't like to be pushed by big, loud Deveels. I discovered now that I also didn't like it any better when the arrogance came from a big, loud fellow Klahd.

So the big man wanted to throw his weight around, did he?

With a twitch of my mind, I summoned the pike. Without turning to look, I brought it arrowing over my shoulder in a course destined to embed it in the general's chest.

The general saw it coming and paled. He took an awkward step backward, realized it was too late for flight, and groped madly for his axe.

I stopped the pike three feet from his chest, floating it in front of him with its point leveled at his heart.

"This pike?" I asked casually.

"Ahh ..." the general responded, his eyes never leaving the weapon.

"I took this pike from an overly rude soldier. He said he was following orders. Would those orders come from you, by any chance?"

"I ... urn. . . ." The general licked his lips. "I issued orders that my men deal with strangers in an expedient fashion. I said nothing about their being less than polite."

"In that case..."

I moved the pike ninety degrees so that it no longer threatened the general.

"... I return the pike to you so that you might give it back to the guard along with a clarification of your orders...."

The general hesitated, scowling, then extended his hand to grasp the floating pike. Just before he reached it, I let it fall to the ground where it clattered noisily.

"... and hopefully additional instructions as to how to handle their weapons," I concluded.

The general flushed and started to pick up the pike. Then the chancellor snickered, and the general spun around to glare at him. The chancellor smirked openly and whispered something to the king, who tried to suppress a smile at his words.

The general turned to me again, ignoring the pike, and glared down from his full height.

"Who are you?" he asked in a tone which implied my name would be immediately moved to the head of the list for public execution.

"Who's asking?" I glared back, still not completely over my anger.

"The man you are addressing," the king interceded, "is Hugh Badaxe, Commander of the Royal Armies of Possiltum."

"And I am J. R. Grimble," the chancellor added hastily, afraid of being left out. "First Advisor to His Majesty."

The general shot another black look at Grimble. I decided it was time to get down to business.

"I am the magician known as Skeeve," I began grandly. "I have come in response to a gracious invitation from His Most Noble Majesty, Rodrick the Fifth."

I paused and inclined my head slightly to the king who smiled and nodded in return.

"I have come to determine for myself if I should consider accepting a position at the court of Possiltum."

The phrasing of that last part had been chosen very carefully by Aahz. It was designed to display my confidence by implying the choice was mine rather than theirs.

The subtlety was not lost on the chancellor, who raised a critical eyebrow at my choice of words. "Now, such a position requires confidence on both sides," I continued. "I must feel that I will be amply rewarded for my services, and His Majesty must be satisfied that my skills are worthy of his sponsorship."

I turned slightly and raised my voice to address the entire court.

"The generosity of the crown of Possiltum is known to all," I declared. "And I have every confidence His Majesty will reward his retainers in proportion to their service to him."

There was a strangled sound behind me, from the general, I think. I ignored it.

"Therefore, all that is required is that I satisfy His Majesty . . . and his advisors . . . that my humble skills will indeed suffice his needs."

I turned to the throne once more, letting the king see my secret smile which belied the humility of my words.

"Your Majesty, my powers are many and varied. However, the essence of power is control. Therefore realizing you are a busy man, rather than waste time with mere commercial trickeries and minor demonstrations such as we have already seen, I shall weave but three spells and trust in your wisdom to perceive the depths behind them."

I turned and stretched forth a finger to point at Buttercup and Gleep.

"Yonder are my prize pair of matched unicorns," I said dramatically. "Would Your Majesty be so kind as to choose one of them?"

The king blinked in surprise at being invited to participate in my demonstration. For a moment he hesitated.

"Umm ... I choose the one on the left," he said, finally indicating Buttercup.

I bowed slightly.

"Very well, Your Majesty. By your word shall that creature be spared. Observe the other closely."

Actually, that was another little stunt Aahz had taught me. It's called a "magician's force," and allows a performer to offer his audience a choice without really giving them a choice. Had the king chosen Gleep, I would have simply proceeded to work on "the creature he had doomed with a word."

Slowly, I pointed a finger at Gleep and lowered my head slightly.

"Walla walla Washington!" I said somberly.

I don't know what the words meant, but Aahz assured me they had historic precedence and would convince people I was actually doing something complex.

"A lla kazam shazam," I continued, raising my other arm. "Bibbity bobbity ..."

I mentally removed Gleep's disguise.

The crowd reacted with a gasp, drowning out my final "goo-gleep."

My dragon heard his name, though, and reacted immediately. His head came up and he lumbered forward to stand docilely at my side. As planned, Aahz immediately shambled forward to a position near Gleep's head and stood watchful and ready.

This was meant to imply that we were prepared to handle any difficulty which might arise with the dragon. The crowd's reaction to him, however, overshadowed their horror at seeing a unicorn transformed to a dragon. I had forgotten how effective the "disreputable character" disguise was. Afraid of losing the momentum of my performance, I hurried on.

"This misshapen wretch is my apprentice Aahz," I announced. "You may wonder if it is within his power to stop the dragon should the beast grow angry. I tell you now ... it is not!"

The crowd edged back nervously. From the corner of my eye, I saw the general's hand slide to the handle of his axe.

"But it is within my power! Now you know that the forces of darkness are no strangers to Skeeve!"

I spun and stabbed a finger at Aahz.

"Bobbelty gook, crumbs and martyrs!"

I removed Aahz's disguise.

There was a moment of stunned silence, then Aahz smiled. Aahz's smile has been known to make strong men weak, and there were not many strong men in the crowd.

The audience half trampled each other in their haste to backpedal from the demon, and the sound of screeches was intermixed with hastily chanted protection spells.

I turned to the throne once more. The king and the chancellor seemed to be taking it well. They were composed, though a bit pale. The general was scowling thoughtfully at Aahz.

"As a demon, my apprentice can suppress the dragon if need be ... nay, ten dragons. Such is my power. Yet power must be tempered with gentleness ... gentility if you will."

I allowed my expression to grow thoughtful.

"To confuse one's enemies and receive one's allies, you need no open show of power or menace. For occasions such as those, one's powers can be masked until one is no more conspicuous than . . . than a stripling."

As I spoke the final words, I stripped away my own disguise and stood in my youthful unsplendor. I probably should have used some fake magik words, but I had already used up all the ones Aahz had taught me and was afraid of experimenting with new ones.

The king and the chancellor were staring at me intently as if trying to penetrate my magical disguise with willpower alone. The general was performing a similar exercise staring at Aahz, who folded his arms and bared his teeth in a confident smile.

For a change, I shared his confidence. Let them stare. It was too late to penetrate my magik because I wasn't working any more. Though the royal troupe and the entire audience was convinced they were witnessing a powerful spell, in actuality all I had done was remove the spells which had been distorting their vision. At the moment, all of us, Aahz, Buttercup, deep, and myself, were our normal selves, however abnormal we appeared. Even the most adept magical vision could not penetrate a nonexistent spell.

"As you see. Your Majesty," I concluded. "My powers are far from ordinary. They can make the gentle fearsome, or the mighty harmless. They can destroy your enemies or amuse your court, depending upon your whim. Say the word, speak your approval, and the powers of Skeeve are yours to command."

I drew myself up and bowed my head respectfully, and remained in that position awaiting judgment from the throne.

Several moments passed without a word. Finally, I risked a peek at the pavilion.

The chancellor and the general were exchanging heated whispers over the head of the king, who inclined his head this way and that as he listened. Realizing this could take a while, I quietly eased my head to an upright position as I waited.

"Skeeve!" the king called suddenly, interrupting his advisor's arguments. "That thing you did with the pike. Can you always control weapons so easily?"

"Child's play. Your Majesty," I said modestly. "I hesitate to even acknowledge it as a power."

The king nodded and spoke briefly to his advisors in undertones. When he had finished, the general flushed and, turning on his heel, strode off into the palace. The chancellor looked smug.

I risked a glance at Aahz, who winked at me. Even though he was further away, apparently his acute hearing had given him advance notice of the king's decision.

"Let all here assembled bear witness!" the chancellor's ringing voice announced. "Rodrick the Fifth, King of Possiltum, does hereby commend the magical skill and knowledge of one Skeeve and does formally name him Magician to the Court of Possiltum. Let all applaud the appointment of this master magician ... and then disperse!"

There was a smattering of halfhearted applause from my vanquished rivals, and more than a few glares. I acknowledged neither as I tried to comprehend the chancellor's words.

I did it! Court Magician! Of the entire selection of magicians from five kingdoms, I had been chosen! Me! Skeeve!

I was suddenly aware of the chancellor beckoning me forward. Trying to be nonchalant, I approached the throne.

"Lord Magician," the chancellor said with a smile. "If you will, might we discuss the matter of your wages?"

"My apprentice handles such matters," I informed him loftily. "I prefer not to distract myself with such mundane matters."

Again, we had agreed that Aahz would handle the wage negotiations, his knowledge of magik being surpassed only by his skill at haggling. I turned and beckoned to him. He responded by hurrying forward, his eavesdropping having forewarned him of the situation.

"That can wait, Grimble," the king interrupted. "There are more pressing matters which command our magician's attention."

"You need only command, Your Majesty," I said, bowing grandly.

"Fine," the king beamed. "Then report to General Badaxe immediately for your briefing."

"Briefing about what?" I asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Why, your briefing about the invading army, of course," the king replied.

An alarm gong went off in the back of my mind.

"Invading army?" I blurted, forgetting my rehearsed pompous tones. "What invading army?"

"The one which even now approaches our borders," the chancellor supplied. "Why else would we suddenly need a magician?"

Chapter Seven:

"Numerical superiority is of no consequence. In battle, victory will go to the best tactician."

-G. A. CUSTER

"CUSHY job, he said! Chance to practice, he said! Piece of cake, he said!"

"Simmer down, kid!" Aahz growled.

"Simmer down? Aahz, weren't you listening? I'm supposed to stop an army! Me!"

"It could be worse," Aahz insisted.

"How?" I asked bluntly.

"You could be doing it without me," he replied. "Think about it."

I did, and cooled down immediately. Even though my association with Aahz seemed to land me in an inordinate amount of trouble, he had also been unfailing in his ability to get me out ... so far. The last thing I wanted to do was drive him away just when I needed him the most.

"What am I going to do, Aahz?" I moaned.

"Since you ask"-Aahz smiled-"my advice would be to not panic until we get the whole story. Remember, there are armies and there are armies. For all we know, this one might be weak enough for us to beat fair and square."

"And if it isn't?" I asked skeptically.

"We'll burn that bridge when we come to it," Aahz sighed. "First, let's hear what old Badaxe has to say."

Not being able to think of anything to say in reply to that, I didn't. Instead, I kept pace with my mentor in gloomy silence as we followed the chancellor's directions through the corridors of the palace.

It would have been easier to accept the offered guide to lead us to our destination, but I had been more than a little eager to speak with Aahz privately. Consequently, we had left Buttercup and Gleep in the courtyard with our equipment and were seeking out the general's chambers on our own.

The palace was honeycombed with corridors to the point where I wondered if there weren't more corridors than rooms. Our trek was made even more difficult by the light, or lack thereof. Though there were numerous mountings for torches set in the walls, it seemed only about one out of every four was being used, and the light shed by those torches was less than adequate for accurate navigation of the labyrinth.

I commented on this to Aahz as further proof of the tightfisted nature of the kingdom. His curt response was that the more money they saved on overhead and maintenance, the more they would have to splurge on luxuries ... like us.

He was doggedly trying to explain the concept of an "energy crisis" to me, when we rounded a corner and sighted the general's quarters.

They were fairly easy to distinguish, since this was the only door we had encountered which was bracketed by a pair of matching honor guards. Their polished armor gleamed from broad shoulders as they observed our approach through narrowed eyes.

"Are these the quarters of General Badaxe?" I inquired politely.

"Are you the magician called Skeeve?" the guard challenged back.

"The kid asked you a question, soldier!" Aahz interceded. "Now are you going to answer or are you so dumb you don't know what's on the other side of the door you're guarding?"

The guard flushed bright red, and I noticed his partner's knuckles whitening on the pike he was gripping. It occurred to me that now that I had landed the magician's job, it might not be the wisest course to continue antagonizing the military.

"Um, Aahz ..." I murmured.

"Yes! These are the quarters of General Badaxe ... sir!" the guard barked suddenly.

Apparently the mention of my colleague's name had confirmed my identity, though I wondered how many strangers could be wandering the halls accompanied by large scaly demons. The final, painful, "sir" was a tribute to my performance in the courtyard. Apparently the guards had been instructed to be polite, at least to me, no matter how much it hurt ... which it obviously did.

"Thank you, guard," I said loftily, and hammered on the door with my fist.

"Further," the guard observed, "the general left word that you were to go right in."

The fact that he had withheld that bit of information until after I had knocked indicated that the guards hadn't completely abandoned their low regard for magicians. They were simply finding more subtle ways of being annoying.

I realized Aahz was getting ready to start a new round with the guard, so I hastily opened the door and entered, forcing him to follow.

The general was standing at the window, silhouetted by the light streaming in from outside. As we entered, he turned to face us.

"Ah! Come in, gentlemen," he boomed in a mellow tone. "I've been expecting you. Do make yourselves comfortable. Help yourselves to the wine if you wish."

I found his sudden display of friendliness even more disquieting than his earlier show of hostility. Aahz, however, took it all in stride, immediately taking up the indicated jug of wine. For a moment I thought he was going to pour a bit of it into one of the goblets which shared the tray with the jug and pass it to me. Instead, he took a deep drink directly from the jug and kept it, licking his lips in appreciation. In the midst of the chaos my life had suddenly become, it was nice to know some things remained constant.

The general frowned at the display for a moment, then forced his features back into the jovial expression he had first greeted us with.

"Before we begin the briefing," he smiled, "I must apologize for my rude behavior during the interview. Grimble and I have . . . differed in our opinions on the existing situation, and I'm afraid I took it out on you. For that I extend my regrets. Ordinarily, I would have nothing against magicians as a group, or you specifically."

"Whoa! Back up a minute. General," Aahz interrupted. "How does your feud with the chancellor involve us?"

The general's eyes glittered with a fierceness that belied the gentility of his oration.

"It's an extension of our old argument concerning allocation of funds," he said. "When news reached us of the approaching force, my advice to the king was to immediately strengthen our own army that we might adequately perform our sworn duty of defending the realm."

"Sounds like good advice to me," I interjected, hoping to improve my status with the general by agreeing with him.

Badaxe responded by fixing me with a hard glare.

"Strange that you should say that, magician," he observed stonily. "Grimble's advice was to invest the money elsewhere than in the army, specifically in a magician."

It suddenly became clear why we had been received by the guards and the general with something less than open-armed camaraderie. Not only were they getting us instead of reinforcements, our presence was a slap at their abilities.

"Okay, General," Aahz acknowledged. "All that's water under the drawbridge. What are we up against?"

The general glanced back and forth between me and Aahz, apparently surprised that I was allowing my apprentice to take the lead in the briefing. When I failed to rebuke Aahz for his forwardness, the general shrugged and moved to a piece of parchment hanging on the wall.

"I believe the situation is shown clearly by this-" he began.

"What's that?" Aahz interrupted.

The general started to respond sharply, then caught himself. "This," he said evenly, "is a map of the kingdom you are supposed to defend. It's called Possiltum."

"Yes, of course," I nodded. "Continue."

"This line here to the north of our border represents the advancing army you are to deal with."

"Too bad you couldn't get it to scale," Aahz commented. "The way you have it there, the enemy's front is longer than your border."

The general bared his teeth.

"The drawing is to scale," he said pointedly. "Perhaps now you will realize the magnitude of the task before you."

My mind balked at accepting his statement.

"Really, General," I chided. "Surely you're overstating the case. There aren't enough fighting men in any kingdom to form a front that long."

"Magician," the general's voice was menacing, "I did not reach my current rank by overstating military situations. The army you are facing is one of the mightiest forces the world has ever seen. It is the striking arm of a rapidly growing empire situated far to the north. They have been advancing for three years now, absorbing smaller kingdoms and crushing any resistance offered. All able-bodied men of conquered lands are conscripted for military service, swelling their ranks to the size you see indicated on the map. The only reason they are not advancing faster is that in addition to limitless numbers of men, they possess massive war machines which, though effective, are slow to transport."

"Now tell us the bad news," Aahz commented dryly.

The general took him seriously.

"The bad news," he growled, "is that their leader is a strategist without peer. He rose to power trouncing forces triple the size of his own numbers, and now that he has a massive army at his command, he is virtually unbeatable."

"I'm beginning to see why the king put his money into a magician," my mentor observed. "It doesn't look like you could have assembled a force large enough to stop them."

"That wasn't my plan!" the general bristled. "While we may not have been able to crush the enemy, we could have made them pay dearly enough for crossing our border that they might have turned aside for weaker lands easier to conquer."

"You know, Badaxe," Aahz said thoughtfully, "that's not a bad plan. Working together we might still pull it off. How many men can you give us for support?"

"None," the general said firmly.

I blinked.

"Excuse me. General," I pressed. "For a moment there, I thought you said-"

"None," he repeated. "I will not assign a single soldier of mine to support your campaign."

"That's insane!" Aahz exploded. "How do you expect us to stop an army like that with just magik?"

"I don't," the general smiled.

"But if we fail," I pointed out, "Possiltum falls."

"That is correct," Badaxe replied calmly.

"But-"

"Allow me to clarify my position," he interrupted. "In my estimation, there is more at stake here than one kingdom. If you succeed in your mission, it will establish that magik is more effective than military force in defending a kingdom. Eventually, that could lead to all armies being disbanded in preference to hiring magicians. I will have no part in establishing a precedent such as that. If you want to show that magicians are superior to armies, you will have to do it with magik alone. The military will not lift a finger to assist you."

As he spoke, he took the jug of wine from Aahz's unresisting fingers, a sign in itself that Aahz was as stunned by the general's words as I was.

"My feelings on this subject are very strong, gentlemen," Badaxe continued, pouring himself some wine. "So strong, in fact, I am willing to sacrifice myself and my kingdom to prove the point. What is more, I would strongly suggest that you do the same."

He paused, regarding us with those glittering eyes.

"Because I tell you here and now, should you emerge victorious from the impending battle, you will not live to collect your reward. The king may rule the court, but word of what happens in the kingdom comes to him through my soldiers, and those soldiers will be posted along your return path to the palace, with orders to bring back word of your accidental demise, even if they have to arrange it. Do I make myself clear?"

Chapter Eight:

"Anything worth doing, is worth doing for a profit."

-TERESIAS

WITH a massive effort of self-control, I contained myself not only after we had left the general's quarters, but until we were out of earshot of the honor guard. When I finally spoke, I managed to keep the telltale note of hysteria out of my voice which would have betrayed my true feelings.

"Like you said, Aahz," I commented casually, "there are armies and there are armies. Right?"

Aahz wasn't fooled for a minute.

"Hysterics won't get us anywhere, kid," he observed. "What we need is sound thinking."

"Excuse me," I said pointedly, "but isn't 'sound thinking' what got us into the mess in the first place?"

"Okay, okay!" Aahz grimaced. "I'll admit I made a few oversights when I originally appraised the situation."

"A few oversights?" I echoed incredulously. "Aahz, this 'cushy job' you set me up for doesn't bear even the vaguest resemblance to what you described when you sold me on the idea."

"I know, kid," Aahz sighed. "I definitely owe you an apology. This sounds like it's actually going to be work."

"Work!" I shrieked, losing control slightly. "It's going to be suicide."

Aahz shook his head sadly.

"There you go overreacting again. It doesn't have to be suicide. We've got a choice, you know."

"Sure," I retorted sarcastically. "We can get killed by the invaders or we can get killed by Badaxe's boys. How silly of me not to have realized it. For a moment there I was getting worried."

"Our choice," Aahz corrected sternly, "is to go through with this lame-brained mission, or to take the money and run."

A ray of hope broke through the dismal gloom that had burdened my mind.

"Aahz," I said in genuine awe, "you're a genius. C'mon, let's get going."

"Get going where?" Aahz asked.

"Back to the inn, of course," I replied. "The sooner the better."

"That wasn't one of our options," my mentor sneered.

"But you said-"

"I said 'take the money and run' not just 'run,' " he corrected. "We aren't going anywhere until we've seen Grimble."

"But Aahz-"

" 'But Aahz' nothing," he interrupted fiercely.

"This little jaunt has cost us a bundle. We're going to at least make it break even, if not show a small profit."

"It hasn't cost us anything," I said bluntly.

"It cost us travel time and time away from your studies," Aahz countered. "That's worth something."

"But-"

"Besides," he continued loftily, "there are more important issues at stake here."

"Like what?" I pressed.

"Well... like, urn ..."

"There you are, gentlemen!"

We turned to find Grimble approaching us rapidly from behind.

"I was hoping to catch you after the briefing," the chancellor continued, joining us. "Do you mind if I watch with you? I know you'll be eager to start off on your campaign, but there are certain matters we must discuss before you leave."

"Like our wages," Aahz supplied firmly.

Grimble's smile froze.

"Oh! Yes, of course. First, however, there are other things to deal with. I trust the general supplied you with the necessary information for your mission."

"Down to the last gruesome detail," I confirmed.

"Good, good," the chancellor chortled, his enthusiasm undimmed by my sarcasm. "I have every confidence you'll be able to deal with the riffraff from the North. I'll have you know you were my personal choice even before the interviews. In fact, I was the one responsible for sending you the invitation in the first place."

"We'll remember that," Aahz smiled, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

A thought occurred to me.

"Say . . . um, Lord Chancellor," I said casually, "how did you happen to hear of us in the first place?"

"Why do you ask?" Grimble countered.

"No special reason," I assured him. "But as the interview proved so fruitful, I would like to send a token of my gratitude to that person who spoke so highly of me to you."

It was a pretty flimsy story, but the chancellor seemed to accept it.

"Well . . . um, actually it was a wench," he admitted. "Rather comely, but I don't recall her name just offhand. She may have dyed her hair since you met her. It was green at the time we . . . er . . . met. Do you know her?"

Indeed I did. There was only one woman who knew of Aahz and me, much less our whereabouts. Then again, there was only one woman I knew who fit the description of being voluptuous with green hair. Tanda!

I opened my mouth to acknowledge my recognition, when Aahz dug a warning elbow into my rib.

"Glah!" I said intelligently.

"How's that again?" Grimble inquired.

"I... um, I can't place the person, just offhand," I lied. "But you know how absentminded we magicians are."

"Of course," the chancellor smiled, for some reason relieved.

"Now that that's settled," Aahz interrupted, "I believe you mentioned something about our wages."

Grimble scowled for a moment, then broke into a good-natured grin.

"I can see why Master Skeeve leaves his business dealings to you, Aahz," he conceded.

"Flattery's nice," Aahz observed, "but you can't spend it. The subject was our wages."

"You must realize we are a humble kingdom," Grimble sighed, "though we try to reward our retainers as best we can. There have been quarters set aside for the court magician which should be spacious enough to accommodate both of you. Your meals will be provided . . . that is, of course, assuming you are on time when they are served. Also, there is a possibility . . . no, I'd go so far as to say it is a certainty that His Majesty's generosity will be extended to include free stable space and food for your unicorns. How does that sound?"

"So far, pretty cheap," Aahz observed bluntly.

"What do you mean, 'cheap?'" the chancellor snarled, losing his composure for a moment.

"What you've offered so far," Aahz sneered, "is a room we won't be sleeping in, meals we won't be eating, and stable space we won't be using because we'll be in the field fighting your war for you. In exchange, you want Skeeve here to use his skills to save your kingdom. By my calculations, that's cheap!"

"Yes, I see your point," Grimble conceded. "Well, there will, of course, be a small wage paid."

"How small?" Aahz pressed.

"Sufficient to cover your expenses," the chancellor smiled. "Shall we say fifty gold pieces a month?"

"Let's say two hundred," Aahz smiled back.

"Perhaps we could go as high as seventy-five," Grimble countered.

"And we'll come down to two-twenty-five," Aahz offered.

"Considering his skills, we could pay . . . excuse me," the chancellor blinked. "Did you say two twenty-five?"

"Actually," Aahz conceded, "I misspoke."

"I thought so." Grimble smiled.

"I meant two-fifty."

"Now see here-" the chancellor began.

"Look, Grimble," Aahz met him halfway, "you had three choices. You could double the size of your army, hire a magician, or lose the kingdom. Even at three hundred a month, Skeeve here is your best deal. Don't look at what you're spending, look at what you're saving."

Grimble thought about it for a few moments.

"Very well," he said, grimacing. "Two-fifty it is."

"I believe the figure under discussion was three hundred," I observed pointedly.

That earned me a black look, but I stood my ground and returned his stare levelly.

"Three hundred," he said, forcing the words out through gritted teeth.

"Payable in advance," Aahz added.

"Payable at the end of the pay period," Grimble corrected.

"C'mon, Grimble," Aahz began, but the chancellor interrupted him, holding up his hand.

"No! On that point I must remain inflexible," he insisted. "Everyone in the Royal Retinue is paid at the same time, when the vaults are opened at the end of the pay period. If we break that rule and start allowing exceptions, there will be no end to it."

"Can you at least give us a partial advance?" Aahz pressed. "Something to cover expenses on the upcoming campaign?"

"Definitely not!" Grimble retorted. "If I paid out monies for services not yet rendered, certain people, specifically Hugh Badaxe, would suspect you intended to take the money and flee without entering battle at all!"

That hit uncomfortably close to home, and I found myself averting my eyes for fear of betraying my guilt. Aahz, however, never even blinked.

"What about bribes?" he asked.

Grimble scowled.

"It is unthinkable that one of the king's retainers would accept a bribe, much less count on it as part of his income. Any attempt to bribe you should be reported immediately to His Majesty!"

"Not taking bribes, Grimble," Aahz snarled. "Giving them. When we give money out to the enemy, does that come out of our wages, or does the kingdom pay for it? "

"I seriously doubt you could buy off the army facing you," the chancellor observed skeptically. "Besides, you're supposed to carry the day with magik. That's what we're paying you for."

"Even magik is aided by accurate information," Aahz replied pointedly. "C'mon Grimble, you know court intrigue. A little advance warning can go a long way in any battle."

"True enough," the chancellor admitted. "Very well, I guess we can give you an allowance for bribes, assuming it will be kept within reason."

"How much in reason?" Aahz inquired.

"Say ... five gold pieces."

"Twenty-five would-"

"Five!" Grimble said firmly.

Aahz studied his adversary for a moment, then sighed.

"Five," he said, extending his palm.

The chancellor grudgingly dug into his purse and counted out five gold pieces. In fact, he counted them twice before passing them to Aahz.

"You realize, of course," he warned, "I will require an accounting of those funds after your victory."

"Of course," Aahz smiled, fondling the coins.

"You seem very confident of our victory. Lord Chancellor," I observed.

Grimble regarded me with cocked eyebrow for a moment.

"Of course I am confident. Lord Magician," he said at last. "So confident, I have staked my kingdom, and more importantly, my reputation, on your success. You will note I rate my reputation above the kingdom. That is no accident. Kingdoms rise and fall, but a chancellor can always find employment. That is, of course, providing it was not his advice which brought the kingdom to ruin. Should you fail in your campaign to save Possiltum, my career is finished. If that should happen, gentlemen, your careers fall with mine."

"That has the sound of a threat to it, Grimble," Aahz observed dryly.

"Does it?" the chancellor responded with mock innocence. "That was not my intent. I am not threatening, I am stating a fact. I maintain very close contact with the chancellors of all of the surrounding kingdoms; in fact I am related to several. They are all aware of my position in this magik versus the military issue. Should I prove wrong in my judgment, should you fail in your defense of Possiltum, they will note it. Thereafter, any magician-and you specifically, Skeeve-will be denounced as a fraud and a charlatan should you seek further employment. In fact, as the chancellors frequently control the courts, I would not be surprised if they found an excuse or a trumped-up charge which would allow them to have you put to death as a favor to me. The method of death varies from kingdom to kingdom, but the end result is the same. I trust you will keep that in mind as you plan your campaign."

With that, he turned on his heel and strode away, leaving us standing in silence.

"Well, Aahz," I said finally, "do you have any sound advice on our situation now?"

"Of course," he retorted.

"What?" I asked.

"Now that we've got the whole story," he said solemnly, "now you can panic."

Chapter Nine:

"There is more at stake here than our hues."

-COL. TRAVIS Alamo Pep Talk

ON the third night after leaving Possiltum's capital, we camped on a small knoll overlooking the kingdom's main north-south trail.

Actually, I use the phrase "north-south" rather loosely in this instance. In three days' travel, our progress was the only northward movement we had observed on this particular strip of beaten dirt. The dearth of northbound traffic was emphasized by the high volume of people bound in the opposite direction.

As we traveled we were constantly encountering small groups and families picking their way steadily toward the capital in that unhurried yet ground eating pace that typifies people accustomed to traveling without means of transport other than their feet. They did not seem particularly frightened or panicky, but two common characteristics marked them all as being more than casual travelers.

First, the great amount of personal effects they carried was far in excess of that required for a simple pilgrimage. Whether bound in cumbersome backpacks or heaped in small, hand-pushed

carts, it was obvious the southbound travelers were bringing with them as much of their worldly possessions as they could carry or drag.

Second, no one paid us any heed other than a passing glance. This was even more noteworthy than the prior observation.

Currently, our party consisted of three: myself, Aahz, and Gleep. We had left Buttercup at the palace, much to Aahz's disgust. He would have preferred to leave Gleep and bring Buttercup, but the royal orders had been firm on this point. The dragon was not to remain at the palace unless one or both of us also stayed behind to handle him. As a result, we traveled as a trio—a youth, a dragon, and a grumbling demon—not exactly a common sight in these or any other parts. The peasants flowing south, however, barely noticed us other than to give us clear road space when we passed.

Aahz maintained that this was because whatever they were running from inspired such fear that they barely noted anything or anybody in their path. He further surmised that the motivating force for this exodus could only be the very army we were on our way to oppose.

To prove his point, we attempted to question several of the groups when we encountered them. We stopped doing this after the first day due to the similarities of the replies we received. Sample:

Aahz: Hold, stranger! Where are you going? Answer: To the capital!

Aahz: Why?

Answer: To be as near as possible to the king when he makes his defense against the invaders from the North. He'll have to try to save himself even if he won't defend the outlands.

Aahz: Citizen you need flee no more. You have underestimated your king's concern for your safety. You see before you the new court magician, retained by His Majesty specifically for the purpose of defending Possiltum from the invading army. What say you to that?

Answer: One magician?

Aahz: With my own able assistance, of course.

Answer: I'd say you were crazy.

Aahz: Now look Answer: No, you look, whoever or whatever you are. Meaning no disrespect to this or any other magician, you're fools to oppose that army. Magik may be well and good against an ordinary force, but you aren't going to stop that army with one magician ... or twenty magicians for that matter.

Aahz: We have every confidence-

Answer: Fine, then you go north. Me, I'm heading for the capital!

Though this exchange had eventually quelled our efforts to reassure the populace, it had given rise to an argument which was still unresolved as we prepared to sleep on the third night.

"What happened to your plan to take the money and run?" I grumbled.

"Big deal," Aahz shot back. "Five whole gold pieces."

"You said you wanted a profit," I pressed.

"Okay! We've got one. So it's small . . . but so was the effort we put into it. Considering we didn't spend anything-

"What about the unicorn?" Aahz countered. "While they're still holding the unicorn, we've lost money on the deal."

"Aahz," I reminded him. "Buttercup didn't cost us anything, remember? He was a gift from Quigley."

"It would cost money to replace him," Aahz insisted. "That means that we lost money on the deal unless we get him back. I've told you, I want a profit ... and definitely refuse to accept a loss."

"Gleep?"

Aahz's heated words had awakened my dragon, who raised his head in sleepy inquiry.

"Go back to sleep, Gleep!" I said soothingly. "Everything's all right."

Reassured, he rolled onto his back and laid back his head.

Ridiculous as he looked, lying there with his four legs sticking up in the air, he had reminded me of something.

I pondered the memory for a moment, then decided to change my tactics.

"Aahz," I said thoughtfully, "what's the real reason for your wanting to go through with this?"

"Weren't you listening, kid? I said-

"I know, I know," I interrupted. "You said it was for the profit. The only thing wrong with that is you tried to leave Gleep behind, who cost us money, instead of Buttercup, who didn't cost us anything! That doesn't ring true if you're trying to show a profit with the least possible effort."

"Um, you know how I feel about that stupid dragon-" Aahz began.

"And you know how I feel about him," I interrupted, "As such, you also know I'd never abandon him to save my own skin, much less for money. For some reason, you wanted to be sure I'd see this thing through . . . and that reason has nothing at all to do with money. Now, what is it?"

It was Aahz's turn to lapse into thoughtful silence.

"You're getting better at figuring things out, kid," he said finally.

Normally, I would have been happy to accept the compliment. This time, however, I saw it as what it was: an attempt to distract me.

"The reason, Aahz," I said firmly.

"There are several reasons, kid," he said with uncharacteristic solemnity. "The main one is that you're not a master magician yet."

"If you don't mind my saying so," I commented dryly, "that doesn't make a whole lot of sense. If I'm short on ability, why are you so eager to shove me into this mission?"

"Hear me out, kid," Aahz said, raising a restraining hand. "I made a mistake, and that mistake has dumped us into a situation that needs a master magician. More than a master magician's abilities, we need a master magician's conscience. Do you follow me?"

"No, "I admitted.

"Not surprising," Aahz sighed. "That's why I tried to trick you into completing this mission instead of explaining it. So far, all your training has been on physical abilities without developing your professional conscience."

"You've taught me to keep one eye on the profits," I pointed out defensively.

"That's not what I mean, kid. Look, for a minute forget about profits."

"Are you feeling okay, Aahz?" I asked with genuine concern. "You don't sound like yourself at all."

"Will you get off my back, kid," he snarled. "I'm trying to explain something important!"

I sank into a cowed silence. Still I was reassured. Aahz was definitely Aahz.

"When you were apprenticed to Garkin," Aahz began, "and even when you first met me, you didn't want to be a magician. You wanted to be a thief. To focus your energies behind your lessons, I had to stress how much benefit you could reap from learning magik."

He paused. I didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. He was right, both in his recollections and his interpretation of them.

"Well," he sighed, "there's another side to magik. There's a responsibility ... a responsibility to your fellow practitioners, and, more importantly, to magik itself. Even though we have rivals and will probably acquire more if we live that long, and even though we may fight with them or beat them out for a job, we are all bound by a common cause. Every magician has a duty to promote magik, to see that its use is respected and reputable. The greater the magician, the greater his sense of duty."

"What's that got to do with our current situation?" I prompted.

"There's an issue at stake here, kid," he answered carefully. "You heard it from Badaxe and Grimble both. More importantly, you heard it from the populace when we talked to the peasants. Rodrick is gambling his entire kingdom on the ability of magik to do a job. Now, no one but a magician can tell how reasonable or unreasonable a task that might be. If we fail, all the laymen will see is that magik failed, and they'll never trust it again. That's why we can't walk away from this mission. We're here representing magik ... and we've got to give it our best shot." I thought about that for a few moments.

"But what can we do against a whole army?" I asked finally.

"To be honest with you," Aahz sighed, "I really don't know. I'm hoping we can come up with an idea after we've seen exactly what it is we're up against."

We sat silently together for a long time after that, each lost in his own thoughts of the mission and what was at stake.

Chapter Ten:

"One need not fear superior numbers if the opposing force has been properly scouted and appraised."

-S.BULL

MY last vestige of hope was squashed when we finally sighted the army. Reports of its massive size had not been overstated; if anything, they had failed to express the full impact of the force's might.

Our scouting mission had taken us across Fossiltorn's northern border and several days' journey into its neighbor's interior. The name of this kingdom was inconsequential. If it was not already considered part of the new empire, it would be as soon as the news spread.

We weren't sure if we had just missed the last battle, or if the kingdom had simply surrendered. Whichever the case, there were no defending troops in evidence, just large encampments of the Empire's forces spread out in a rough line which disappeared over the horizon in either direction.

Fortunately, the army was not currently on the move, which made our scouting considerably easier.

There were sentries posted at regular intervals all along the front line, but as they were not more than a given distance from the encampments, we simply traversed the line without approaching them too closely, and thus escaped detection.

Periodically, we would creep closer to an encampment or climb a tree to improve our view. Aahz seemed very absorbed in his own thoughts, both when we were actually viewing the troops and as we were traveling to new locations. Since I couldn't get more than an occasional grunt or monosyllable out of him, I occupied myself making my own observations.

The soldiers were clothed roughly the same. Standard equipment seemed to include a leather helmet and breastplate, a rough knee-length cloth tunic, sandals, sword, two javelins, and a large rectangular shield. Apparently they were not planning to move immediately, for they had pitched their tents and spent most of their time sharpening weapons, repairing armor, eating, or simply lolling about. Occasionally, a metal-encrusted soldier, presumably an officer, would appear and shout at the others, whereupon they would listlessly form ranks and drill. Their practice would usually grind to a halt as soon as the officer passed from view.

There were occasional pieces of siege equipment designed to throw large rocks or spears long distances, though we never saw them in operation. The only pieces of equipment that seemed to be used with any regularity were the signal towers. Each encampment had one of these, a rickety affair of lashed together poles stretching roughly twenty feet in the air and surmounted by a small, square platform. Several times a day, one soldier in each encampment would mount one of these structures, and they would signal to each other with pennants or standards. The towers also did duty as clotheslines, and were periodically draped with drying tunics.

All in all, it looked like an incredibly boring existence. In fact, from my appraisal, the only thing duller than being a soldier of the Empire was spending days on end watching soldiers of the Empire!

I commented on this to Aahz as we lay belly-down on a grassy knoll, surveying yet another encampment.

"You're right, kid," he admitted absently. "Being a soldier is pretty dull work."

"How about us?" I probed, eager to keep him talking. "What we're doing isn't exactly exciting, you know!"

"You want excitement?" he asked, focusing on me for the first time in days. "Tell you what. Why don't you just stroll down there and ask the Officer of the Day for a quick rundown on how their army operates? I bet that'll liven things up for you."

"I'm not that bored!" I amended hastily.

"Then what say you just keep quiet and let me do this my way." Aahz smiled and resumed his studies.

"Do what your way?" I persisted. "Exactly what is it we're trying to accomplish anyway?"

Aahz sighed.

"We're scouting the enemy," he explained patiently. "We've got enough going against us on this campaign without rushing in uninformed."

"How much information do we need?" I grumbled. "This encampment doesn't look any different from the last five we looked at."

"That's because you don't know what you're looking for," Aahz scoffed. "What have you learned so far about the opposition?"

I wasn't ready for the question but I gamely rose to the challenge.

"Urn . . . there are a lot of them . . . they're well armed ... um ... and they have catapults..."

"That's all?" Aahz sneered. "Brilliant! You and Badaxe make a great team of tacticians."

"Okay, so teach me!" I shot back. "What have you learned?"

"You can spend years trying to learn military theory without scratching the surface," my mentor replied sternly. "But I'll try to give you the important parts in a nutshell. To appraise a force, such as we're doing now, remember two words: 'Sam' and 'Doc.' "

" 'Sam' and 'Doc,' " I repeated dutifully.

"Some folks prefer to remember 'Salute' but I like 'Sam' and 'Doc,' " Aahz added as an aside.

"Terrific," I said, grimacing. "Now tell me what it means."

"They're to help you remember an information checklist," Aahz confided. " 'Salute's stands for Size, Activity, Location, Unit, Time, and Equipment. That's fine as far as it goes, but it assumes no judgmental ability on the part of the scout. I prefer 'Sam' and 'Doc.' That stands for Strength, Armament, Movement, and Deployment, Organization, and Communications."

"Oh," I said, hoping he wasn't expecting me to remember all this.

"Now, using that framework," Aahz continued, "let's summarize what we've seen so far. Size: there are lots of them, enough so it's kind of pointless to try for an exact count. Movement: currently, they're just sitting there."

"I got that far all by myself," I pointed out sarcastically.

"The big key, however," Aahz continued, ignoring me, "is in their Armament and Equipment. When you look at this, consider both what is there and what isn't."

"How's that again?" I asked.

"What there is a lot of foot-schloggers, infantry, a little artillery in the form of catapults and archers, but nothing even vaguely resembling cavalry. That means they're going to go slow when they move, particularly in battle. We don't have to worry about any fast, flanking moves; it'll be a toe-to-toe slugfest."

"But, Aahz-" I began.

"As to the Deployment and Organization," he pushed on undaunted, "they're strung out all over the place, probably because it's easier to forage for food that way. Then again, it displays a certain confidence on their part that they don't feel it's necessary to mass their forces. I think we're looking at their Organization, a collection of companies or battalions each under the leadership of two or three officers, all under the guidance of a super-leader or general."

"Aahz-" I tried again.

"Communications seems to be their most vulnerable point," Aahz pushed on doggedly. "If an army this size doesn't coordinate its movements, it's in big trouble. If they're really using signal towers and runners to pass messages, we might be able to jinx the works for them."

"All of which means what?" I interrupted finally.

"Hmm? Oh, that's a capsule summary of what we're up against," Aahz replied innocently.

"I know. I know," I sighed. "But for days you've been saying you'll formulate a plan after you've seen what we're up against. Well, you've seen it. What's the plan? How can we beat 'em?"

"There's no way, kid," Aahz admitted heavily. "If I had seen one, I would have told you, but I haven't, and that's why I keep looking."

"Maybe there isn't one," I suggested cautiously.

Aahz sighed.

"I'm starting to think you're right. If so, that means we'll have to do something I really don't want to do."

"You mean give up?" I said, genuinely startled. "After that big speech you gave me about responsibility and-"

"Whoa," Aahz interrupted. "I didn't say anything about giving up. What we're going to do is-"

"Gleep!"

The unmistakable sound came to us from behind, rolling up the hill from the brush-filled gully where we'd left my pet.

"Kid," Aahz moaned, "will you keep that stupid dragon quiet? All we need now is to have him pull the army down our necks."

"Right, Aahz!" I agreed, worming away backward as fast as I could.

As soon as I was clear of the crest of the hill, I rose to a low crouch and scuttled down the slope in that position. Crawling is neither a fast nor comfortable means of travel for me.

As per our now normal procedure, we had tethered Gleep to a tree ... a large tree after he had successfully uprooted several small ones. Needless to say, he wasn't wild about the idea, but it was necessary considering the delicate nature of our current work.

"Gleep!"

I could see him now, eagerly straining at the end of his rope. Surprisingly, however, for a change he wasn't trying to get to me. In fact, he was trying his best to get at a large bush which stood some distance from his tree ... or at something hidden in the bush!

Cold sweat suddenly popped out on my brow. It occurred to me that Gleep might have been discovered by one of the enemy army scouts. That would be bad enough, but even worse was the possibility said scout might still be around.

I hurriedly stepped sideways into the shadow of a tree and reviewed the situation. I hadn't actually seen a scout. In fact, there was no movement at all in the indicated bush. I could sneak back and get Aahz, but if I were wrong he wouldn't be very happy over being called to handle a false alarm. I could set Gleep loose and let him find the intruder, but that would mean exposing myself.

As I stood debating my next course of action, someone slipped up behind me and put hands over my eyes.

"Surprise!" came a soft voice in my ear.

Chapter Eleven:

"Should old acquaintance tie forgot.... "

-COUNT OF MONTE CRISTO

I JUMPED!

Perhaps I should clarify. When I say "I jumped," I mean I really jumped. Over a year ago, Aahz had taught me to fly, which is actually controlled hovering caused by reverse levitation.

Whatever it was, I did it. I went straight up in the air about ten feet and stayed there. I didn't know what had snuck up behind me, and didn't want to know. I wanted help! I wanted Aahz!

I drew a mighty breath to express this desire.

"Kinda jumpy, aren't you, handsome?"

That penetrated my panic.

Stifling my shout before it truly began, I looked down on my attacker. From my vantage point, I was treated to a view of a gorgeous golden-olive complexioned face, accented by almond-shaped cat's eyes, framed by a magnificent tumble of light green hair. I could also see a generous expanse of cleavage.

"Tanda!" I crowed with delight, forcing my eyes back to her face.

"Do you mind coming down?" she called. "I can't come up."

I considered swooping down on her dramatically, but decided against it. I'm still not all that good at flying, and the effect would be lost completely if I crashed into her.

Instead, I settled for lowering myself gently to the ground a few paces from her.

"Gee, Tanda, I... slack!"

The last was squeezed forcefully from me as she swept me into a bone-crushing embrace.

"Gee, it's good to see you, handsome," she murmured happily. "How have you been?"

"I was fine," I noted, untangling myself briefly. "What are you doing here?"

The last time I had seen her, Tanda was part of the ill-fated group Aahz and I had seen off to dimensions unknown. Of the whole crowd, she had been the only one I was sorry to see go.

"I'm waiting for you, silly," she teased, slipping an affectionate arm around my waist. "Where's Aahz?"

"He's-" I started to point up the hill when a thought occurred to me. "Say . . . how did you know I had Aahz with me?"

"Oh! Don't get mad," she scolded, giving me a playful shake. "It stands to reason. Even Aahz wouldn't let you face that army alone."

"But how did you-"

"Gleep!"

My dragon had discovered his quarry was no longer hiding behind the bush. As a result, he was now straining at the end of his rope trying to reach us. The tree he was tethered to was swaying dangerously.

"Gleep!" Tanda called in a delighted voice. "How are ya, fella?"

The tree dipped to new lows as my dragon quivered with glee at having been recognized. I was quivering a little myself. Tanda had that affect on males.

Headless of her own safety, Tanda bounded forward to kneel before the dragon, pulling his whiskers and scratching his nose affectionately.

Gleep loved it. I loved it, too. In addition to her usual soft, calf-high boots, Tanda was wearing a short green tunic which hugged her generous curves and showed off her legs just swell. What's more, when she knelt down like that, the hem rode up until....

"What's wrong with that dragon?" Aahz boomed, bursting out of the brush behind me.

This time I didn't jump ... much.

"Gee, Aahz," I began. "It's..."

I needn't have bothered trying to explain.

Tanda uncoiled and came past me in a bound.

"Aahz!" she exclaimed, flinging herself into his arms.

For a change, my mentor was caught as flat-footed as I had been. For a moment, the tangle of arms teetered on the brink of collapse, then down it went.

They landed with a resounding thump, Aahz on the bottom and therefore soaking up most of the impact.

"Still impulsive, aren't you?" Tanda leered.

"Whoosh ... hah ... ah ..." Aahz responded urbanely.

Tanda rolled to her feet and began rearranging her tunic.

"At least I don't have to ask if you're glad to see me," she observed.

"Tanda!" Aahz gasped at last.

"You remembered?" Tanda beamed.

"She's been waiting for us, Aahz," I supplied brightly.

"That's right!" Aahz scowled. "Grimble said you set us up for this job."

Tanda winced.

"I can explain that," she said apologetically.

"I can hardly wait," Aahz intoned.

"I'm kind of curious about that myself," I added.

"Um . . . this could take a while, guys," she said thoughtfully. "Got anything around to drink?"

That was easily the most reasonable question asked so far today. We broke out the wine, and in no time were sitting around in a small circle quenching our thirst. Much to Aahz's disgust, I insisted we sit close enough to Gleep that he not be left out. This meant, of course, his rather aromatic breath flavored our discussion, but as I pointed out it was the only way to keep him quiet while we talked.

"What happened after you left?" I prodded. "Where are Isstvan and Brockhurst and Higgins? What happened to Quigley? Did they ever bring Frumple back to life, or is he still a statue?"

"Later, kid," Aahz interrupted. "First things first. You were about to explain about Grimble."

"Grimble," Tanda responded, wrinkling her nose. "Did you ever notice the 'crookeder' a person is, the more possessive he is? He's the main reason I didn't wait for you at Possiltum."

"From the beginning," Aahz instructed. "From the beginning." Tanda pursed her lips thoughtfully.

"Well, I picked him up in a singles bar ... he's married, but I didn't know that till later."

"What's a singles bar?" I interrupted.

"Shut up, kid," Aahz snarled.

"Well, it wasn't actually a singles bar," Tanda corrected. "It was more of a tavern. I should have known he was married. I mean, nobody that young is that bald unless he's got a wife at home."

"Skip the philosophy," Aahz moaned. "Just tell us the story, huh?"

Tanda cocked an eyebrow at him.

"You know, Aahz," she accused, "for someone as long-winded as you are when it comes to telling stories, you're awfully impatient when it comes to listening to someone else."

"She's right, you know," I commented.

"Enough!" Aahz bellowed. "The story!"

"Well, one of the things Grimble mentioned while he was trying to impress me with how important his job was, was that he was trying to find a court magician. He said he had convinced the king to hire one, but now he couldn't find one and was going to end up looking like an idiot."

"And when he mentioned idiots," I supplied, "naturally you thought of us."

"Now, don't be that way," Tanda scolded. "I thought it was a good way to help out a couple of friends. I knew you two were hanging out in this neck of the woods . . . and everybody knows what a cushy job being a court magician is."

"What did I tell you, kid," Aahz commented.

"We must be talking about different jobs," I retorted.

"Hey," Tanda interrupted, laying a soft hand on my arm. "When I gave him your names, I didn't know about the invading army. Honest!"

My anger melted away at her touch. Right then, she could have told me she had sold my head as a centerpiece and I would have forgiven her.

"Well ..." I began, but she persisted, which was fine by me.

"As soon as I found out what the real story was, I knew I had gotten you into a tight spot," she said with soft sincerity. "Like I said, I would have waited at Possiltum, but I was afraid what with your disguises and all, that you'd recognize me before I spotted you. If you gave me the kind of greeting I've grown to expect, it could have really queered the deal. Grimble's a jealous twit, and if he thought we were more than nodding acquaintances, he would have held back whatever support he might normally give."

"Big deal," Aahz grumbled. "Five whole gold pieces."

"That much?" Tanda sounded honestly surprised. "Which arm did you break?"

"Aahz always gets us the best possible deal," I said proudly. "At least, monetarily."

"Well," Tanda concluded, "at least I won't dig into your war funds. When I found out the mess I had gotten you into, I decided I'd work this one for free. Since I got you into it, the least I can do is help get you out."

"That's terrific," I exclaimed.

"It sure is!" Aahz agreed.

Something in his voice annoyed me.

"I meant that she was helping us," I snarled. "Not that she was doing it for free."

"That's what I meant, too, apprentice," Aahz glowered back. "But unlike some, I know what I'm talking about!"

"Boys, boys," Tanda said, separating us with her hands. "We're on the same side. Remember?"

"Gleep!" said the dragon, siding with Tanda.

As I have said, Gleep's breath is powerful enough to stop any conversation, and it was several minutes before the air cleared enough for us to continue.

"Before we were so rudely interrupted," Tanda gasped at last, "you were starting to say something, Aahz. Have you got a plan?"

"Now I do," Aahz smiled, chucking her under the chin. "And believe me, doing it without you would have been rough."

That had an anxious sound to it. Tanda's main calling, at least the only one mentionable in polite company, was Assassin.

"C'mon, Aahz," I chided. "Tanda's good, but she's not good enough to take on a whole army."

"Don't bet on it, handsome," she corrected, winking at me.

I blushed but continued with my argument. "I still say the job's too big for one person, or three people for that matter," I insisted.

"You're right, kid," Aahz said solemnly.

"We just can't... what did you say, Aahz?"

"I said you were right," Aahz repeated.

"I thought so," I marveled. "I just wanted to hear it again."

"You'd hear it more often if you were right more often," Aahz pointed out.

"C'mon, Aahz," Tanda interrupted. "What's the plan?"

"Like the kid says," Aahz said loftily, "we need more help. We need an army of our own."

"But Aahz," I reminded him, "Badaxe said-"

"Who said anything about Badaxe?" Aahz replied innocently. "We're supposed to win this war with magik, aren't we? Well, fine. With Tanda on our team, we've got a couple of extra skills to draw on. Remember?"

I remembered. I remembered Aahz saying he wasn't worried about Tanda leaving with Isstvan because she could travel the dimensions by herself if things got rough. The light began to dawn.

"You mean..."

"That's right, kid," Aahz smiled. "We're going back to Deva. We're going to recruit a little invasionary force of our own!"

Chapter Twelve:

"This is no game for old men! Send in the boys!"

-W. HAYS

I DON'T know how Tanda transported us from Klah to Deva. If I did, we wouldn't have needed her. All I know is that at the appropriate time she commenced to chant and shift her shoulders (a fascinating process in itself), and we were there.

"There," in this case, was at the Bazaar at Deva. That phrase alone, however, does not begin to describe our new surroundings as they came into focus.

A long time ago, the dimension of Deva had undergone an economic collapse. To survive, the Deveels (who I once knew as devils) used their ability to travel the dimensions and become merchants. Through the process of natural selection, the most successful Deveels were not the best fighters, but the best traders. Now, after countless generations of this process, the Deveels were acknowledged as the best merchants in all the dimensions. They were also acknowledged as being the shrewdest, coldest, most profit-hungry cheats ever to come down the pike.

The Bazaar at Deva was their showcase. It was an all-day, all-night, year-round fair where the Deveels met to haggle with each other over the wares fetched back from the various dimensions. Though it was originally established and maintained by Deveels, it was not unusual to find travelers from many dimensions shopping the endless rows of displays and booths. The rule of thumb was, "If it's to be found anywhere, you'll find it at the Bazaar at Deva."

I had been here once before with Aahz. At the time, we were searching for a surprise weapon to use against Isstvan. What we ended up with was Gleep and Tanda!... Distractions abound at the Bazaar.

I mention this in part to explain why, as unusual as our foursome must have appeared, no one paid us the slightest attention as we stood watching the kaleidoscope of activity whirling about us.

Gleep pressed against me for reassurance, momentarily taken aback at the sudden change of surroundings. I ignored him. My first visit to this place had been far too brief for my satisfaction. As such, I was rubbernecking madly, trying to see as much as possible as fast as possible.

Tanda was more businesslike. "Now that we're here, Aahz," she drawled, "do you know where we're going?"

"No," Aahz admitted. "But I'll find out right now."

Without further warning, he casually reached out and grabbed the arm of the nearest passerby, a short, ugly fellow with tusks. Spinning his chosen victim around, Aahz bent to scowl in his face.

"You!" he snarled. "Do you like to fight?"

For a moment my heart stopped. All we needed now was to get into a brawl.

Fortunately, instead of producing a weapon, the tusker gave ground a step and eyed our party suspiciously.

"Not with a Pervert backed by a dragon, I don't," he retorted cautiously.

"Good!" Aahz smiled. "Then if you wanted to hire someone to do your fighting for you, where would you go?"

"To the Bazaar at Deva," the tusker shrugged.

"I know that!" Aahz snarled. "But where at the Bazaar?"

"Oh," the tusker exclaimed with sudden understanding. "About twenty rows in that direction, then turn right for another thirty or so. That's where the mercenaries hang out."

"Twenty, then up thirty," Aahz repeated carefully. "Thanks."

"A finder's fee would be appreciated more than any thanks," the tusker smiled, extending a palm.

"You're right!" Aahz agreed, and turned his back on our benefactor.

The tusker hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and continued on his way. I could have told him that Perverts in general and Aahz specifically are not noted for their generosity. "We go twenty rows that way, then up thirty," Aahz informed us.

"Yeah, we heard," Tanda grimaced. "Why didn't you just ask him flat out?"

"My way is quicker," Aahz replied smugly.

"Is it?" I asked skeptically.

"Look kid," Aahz scowled. "Do you want to lead us through this zoo?"

"Well. .." I hesitated.

"Then shut up and let me do it, okay?"

Actually, I was more than willing to let Aahz lead the way to wherever it was we were going. For one thing, it kept him busy navigating a path through the crowd. For another, it left me with next to nothing to do except marvel at the sights of the Bazaar as I followed along in his wake.

Try as I might, though, there was just too much for one set of eyes to see.

In one booth, two Deveels argued with an elephant-headed being over a skull; at least, I think it was a skull. In another, a Deveel was putting on a demonstration for a mixed group of shoppers, summoning clouds of floating green bubbles from a tiny wooden box.

At one point, our path was all but blocked by a booth selling rings which shot bolts of lightning. Between the salesman's demonstrations and the customers trying out their purchases, the way was virtually impassable.

Aahz and Tanda never broke stride, however, confidently maintaining their pace as they walked through the thick of the bolts. Miraculously, they passed through unscathed.

Gritting my teeth, I seized one of Gleep's ears and followed in their footsteps. Again, the bolts of energy failed to find us. Apparently no Deveel would bring injury or allow anyone in his shop to bring injury to a potential customer. It was a handy fact to know.

The lightning rings brought something else to mind, however. The last time we parted company with Tanda, Aahz had given her a ring that shot a heat ray capable of frying a man-sized target on the spot. That's right ... I said he gave it to her. You might think this was proof of the depth of his feelings for her. It's my theory he was sick. Anyway, I was reminded of the ring and curious as to what had become of it.

Increasing my pace slightly, I closed the distance between myself and the pair in the lead, only to find they were already deeply engrossed in conversation. The din that prevails at the Bazaar stymies any attempt at serious eavesdropping, but I managed to catch occasional bits and pieces of the conversation as we walked.

". . . heard . . . awfully expensive, aren't they?" Tanda was saying.

"... lick their weight in . . ." Aahz replied smugly.

I moved in a little closer, trying to hear better.

"... makes you think they've got anyone here?" Tanda asked.

"With the number of bars here?" Aahz retorted. "The way I hear it, this is one of their main ..."

I lost the rest of that argument. A knee-high, tentacled mass suddenly scuttled across my boots and ducked through a tent flap, closely pursued by two very frustrated-looking Deveels.

I ignored the chase and the following screams, hurrying to catch up with Aahz and Tanda again. Apparently they were discussing mercenaries, and I wanted to hear as much as possible, both to further my education, and because I might have to lead them into battle eventually.

". . . find them?" Tanda was asking. "All we have is a general area."

"... easy," Aahz replied confidently. "Just listen for the singing."

"Singing?" Tanda was skeptical.

"It's their trademark," Aahz pronounced. "It also lands them in most of their..."

A Deveel stepped in front of me, proudly displaying a handful of seeds. He threw them on the ground with a flourish, and a dense black thornbush sprang up to block my path. Terrific. Normally, I would have been fascinated, but at the moment I was in a hurry.

Without even pausing to upbraid the Deveel, I took to the air, desperation giving wings to my feet . . . desperation assisted by a little levitation. I cleared the thornbush easily, touched down lightly on the far side, and was practically trampled by Gleep as he burst through the barrier.

"Gleep?" he said, cocking his head at me curiously.

I picked myself up from the dust where I had been knocked by his enthusiasm and cuffed him.

"Watch where you're going next time," I ordered angrily.

He responded by snaking out his long tongue and licking my face. His breath was devastating and his tongue left a trail of slime. Obviously my admonishment had terrified him.

Heaving a deep sigh, I sprinted off after Aahz with Gleep lumbering along in hot pursuit.

I was just overtaking them when Aahz stopped suddenly in his tracks and started to turn. Unable to halt my headlong sprint, I plowed into him, knocking him sprawling.

"In a hurry, handsome?" Tanda asked, eyeing me slyly.

"Gee, Aahz," I stammered, bending over him, "I didn't mean to-"

From a half sitting position, his hand lashed out in a cuff that spun me halfway around.

"Watch where you're going next time," he growled.

"Gleep!" said the dragon and licked my face.

Either my head was spinning more than I thought, or I had been through this scene before.

"Now quit clowning around and listen, kid."

Aahz was on his feet again, and all business.

"Here's where we part company for a while. You wait here while I go haggle with the mercenaries."

"Gee, Aahz," I whined. "Can't I-"

"No, you can't!" he said firmly. "The crew I'm going after is sharp. All we need is one of your dumb questions in the middle of negotiations and they'll triple their prices."

"But-" I began.

"You will wait here," Aahz ordered. "I repeat, wait. No fights, no window shopping for dragons, just wait!"

"I'll stay here with him, Aahz," Tanda volunteered.

"Good," Aahz nodded. "And try to keep him out of trouble, okay?"

With that, he turned and disappeared into the crowd. Actually, I wasn't too disappointed. I mean, I would have liked to have gone with him, but I liked having some time alone with Tanda even more . . . that is, if you can consider standing in the middle of the Bazaar at Deva being alone with someone.

"Well, Tanda," I said, flashing my brightest smile.

"Later, handsome," she replied briskly. "Right now I've got some errands to run."

"Errands?" I blinked.

"Yeah. Aahz is big on manpower, but I'd just as soon have a few extra tricks up my sleeve in case the going gets rough," she explained. "I'm going to duck over to the special effects section and see what they have in stock."

"Okay," I agreed, "Let's go."

"No, you don't," she said, shaking her head. "I think I'd better go this one alone. The kind of places I have in mind aren't fit for civilized customers. You and the dragon wait here."

"But you're supposed to be keeping me out of trouble!" I argued.

"And that's why I'm not taking you along," she said, smiling. "Now, what do you have along in the way of weaponry?"

"Well ..." I said hesitantly, "there's a sort of a sword in one of Gleep's packs."

"Fine!" she said. "Get it out and wear it. It'll keep the riffraff at a distance. Then ... um ... wait for me in there!"

She pointed at a strange-looking stone structure with a peeling sign on its front.

"What is it?" I asked, peering at it suspiciously.

"It's a 'Yellow Crescent Inn,' " she explained. "It's sort of a restaurant. Get yourself something to eat. The food's unappetizing, but vaguely digestible."

I studied the place for a moment.

"Actually," I decided finally, "I think I'd rather..."

Right about there I discovered I was talking to myself. Tanda had disappeared without a trace.

For the second time in my life I was alone in the Bazaar at Deva.

Chapter Thirteen:

"Hold the pickles, hold the lettuce."

-HENRY VIII

FASCINATING as the Bazaar is, facing it alone can be rather frightening.

Being particularly susceptible to fear, I decided to follow Tanda's advice and entered the inn.

First, however, I took the precaution of tethering Gleep to the inn's hitching post and unpacking the sword. We had one decent sword. Unfortunately, Aahz was currently wearing it. That left me with Garkin's old sword, a weapon which has been sneered at by demon and demon-hunter alike. Still,

its weight was reassuring on my hip, though it might have been more reassuring if I had known anything about how to handle it. Unfortunately, my lessons with Aahz to date had not included swordsmanship. I could only hope it would not be apparent to the casual observer that this was my first time to wear a sword.

Pausing in the door, I surveyed the inn's interior. Unaccustomed as I was to gracious dining, I realized in a flash that this wasn't it.

One of the few pieces of advice my farmer father had given me before I ran away from home was not to trust any inn or restaurant that appeared overly clean. He maintained the cleaner a place was, the more dubious the quality and origin of their food would be. If he were even vaguely right, this inn must be the bottom of the barrel. It was not only clean, it gleamed.

I do not mean that figuratively. Harsh overhead lights glinted off a haphazard arrangement of tiny tables and uncomfortable-looking chairs constructed of shiny metal and a hard white substance I didn't recognize. At the far end of the inn was a counter behind which stood a large stone gargoyle, the only decorative feature in the place. Behind the gargoyle was a door, presumably leading into the kitchen. There was a small window in the door through which I caught glimpses of the food being prepared. Preparation consisted of passing patties of meat over a stove, cramming them into a split roll, slopping a variety of colored pastes on top of the meat, and wrapping the whole mess in a piece of paper.

Watching this process confirmed my earlier fears. I do all the cooking for Aahz and myself, as I did before that for Garkin and myself, and before that just for myself. While I have no delusions as to the high quality of my cooking, I do know that what they were doing to that meat could only yield a meal the consistency and flavor of charred glove leather.

Despite the obvious low quality of the food, the inn seemed nearly full of customers. I noticed this out of the corner of my eye. I also noticed that a high percentage of them were staring at me. It occurred to me that this was probably because I had been standing in the door for some time without entering while working up my courage to go in.

Feeling slightly embarrassed, I stepped inside and let the door swing shut behind me. With fiendish accuracy, the door closed on my sword, pinning it momentarily and forcing me to break stride clumsily as I started forward. So much for my image as a swordsman.

Humiliated, I avoided looking at the other customers and made my way hurriedly to the inn's counter. I wasn't sure what I was going to do once I got there, since I didn't trust the food, but hopefully people would stop staring at me if I went through the motions of ordering.

Still trying to avoid eye contact with anyone, I made a big show of studying the gargoyle. There was a grinding noise, and the statue turned its head to return my stare. If wasn't a statue! They really had a gargoyle tending the counter!

The gargoyle seemed to be made of coarse gray stone, and when he flexed his wings, small pieces of crushed rock and dust showered silently to the floor. His hands were taloned, and there were

curved spikes growing out of his elbows. The only redeeming feature I could see was his smile, which in itself was a bit unnerving. Dominating his wrinkled face, the smile seemed permanently etched in place, stretching well past his ears and displaying a set of pointed teeth even longer than Aahz's.

"Take your order?" the gargoyle asked politely, the smile never twitching.

"Urn ..." I said taking a step back. "I'll have to think about it. There's so much to choose from."

In actuality I couldn't read the menu ... if that's what it was. There was something etched in the wall behind the gargoyle in a language I couldn't decipher. I assume it was a menu because the prices weren't etched in the wall, but written in chalk over many erasures.

The gargoyle shrugged.

"Suit yourself," he said indifferently. "When you make up your mind, just holler. The name's Gus."

"I'll do that . . . Gus," I smiled, backing slowly toward the door.

Though it was my intent to exit quietly and wait outside with Gleep, things didn't work out that way. Before I had taken four steps, a hand fell on my shoulder.

"Skeeve, isn't it?" a voice proclaimed.

I spun around, or started to. I was brought up short when my sword banged into a table leg. My head kept moving, however, and I found myself face to face with an Imp.

"Brockhurst!" I exclaimed, recognizing him immediately.

"I thought I recognized you when you . . . hey!" The Imp took a step backward and raised his hands defensively. "Take it easy! I'm not looking for any trouble."

My hand had gone to my sword hilt in an involuntary effort to free it from the table leg. Apparently Brockhurst had interpreted the gesture as an effort to draw my weapon.

That was fine by me. Brockhurst had been one of Isstvan's lieutenants, and we hadn't parted on the best of terms. Having him a little afraid of my "ready sword" was probably a good thing.

"I don't hold any grudges," Brockhurst continued insistently. "That was just a job! Right now I'm between jobs . . . permanently!"

That last was added with a note of bitterness which piqued my curiosity.

"Things haven't been going well?" I asked cautiously.

The Imp grimaced.

"That's an understatement. Come on, sit down. I'll buy you a milkshake and tell you all about it."

I wasn't certain what a milkshake was, but I was sure I didn't want one if they were sold here.

"Urn . . . thanks anyway, Brockhurst," I said, forcing a smile, "but I think I'll pass."

The Imp arched an eyebrow at me.

"Still a little suspicious, eh?" he murmured. "Well, can't say as I blame you. Tell you what we'll do."

Before I could stop him, he strolled to the counter.

"Hey, Gus!" he called. "Mind if I take an extra cup?"

"Actually..." the gargoyle began.

"Thanks!"

Brockhurst was already on his way back, bearing his prize with him, some kind of a thin-sided, flimsy canister. Plopping down at a nearby table, he beckoned to me, indicating the seat opposite him with a wave of his hand.

There was no gracious course for me to follow other than to join him, though it would later occur to me I had no real obligation to be gracious. Moving carefully to avoid knocking anything over with my sword, I maneuvered my way to the indicated seat.

Apparently, Brockhurst had been sitting here before, as there was already a canister on the table identical to the one he had fetched from the counter. The only difference was that the one on the table was three-quarters full of a curious pink liquid.

With great ceremony, the Imp picked up the canister from the table and poured half its contents into the new vessel. The liquid poured with the consistency of swamp muck.

"Here!" he said, pushing one of the canisters across the table to me. "Now you don't have to worry about any funny business with the drinks. We're both drinking the same thing."

With that, he raised his vessel in a mock toast and took a healthy swallow from it. Apparently he expected me to do the same. I would have rather sucked blood.

"Um . . . it's hard to believe things aren't going well for you," I stalled. "You look well enough."

For a change, I was actually sincere. Brockhurst looked good . . . even for an Imp. As Aahz had said, Imps are snappy dressers, and Brockhurst was no exception. He was outfitted in a rust-colored velvet jerkin trimmed in gold, which set off his pink complexion and sleek black hair superbly. If

he were starving, you couldn't tell it from looking at him. Though still fairly slender, he was as well muscled and adroit as when I had first met him.

"Don't let appearances fool you," Brockhurst insisted, shaking his head. "You see before you an Imp pushed to the wall. I've had to sell everything-my crossbow, my pouch of magic tricks-I couldn't even raise enough money to pay my dues to the Assassins Guild."

"It's that hard to find work?" I sympathized.

"I'll tell you, Skeeve," he whispered confidentially, "I haven't worked since that fiasco with Isstvan."

"Where is Isstvan, anyway?" I asked casually.

"Don't worry about him," Brockhurst said grimly. "We left him working concession stands on the Isle of Coney, a couple of dimensions from here."

"What happened to the others?"

I was genuinely curious. I hadn't had much of a chance to talk with Tanda since our reunion.

"We left Frumple under a cloud of birds in some park or other . . . figured he looked better as a statue than he did alive. The demon hunter and the girl took off for parts unknown one night while we were asleep. My partner, Higgens, headed back to Imper. He figured his career was over and that he might as well settle down. Me, I've been looking for work ever since, and I'm starting to think Higgens was right."

"Come on, Brockhurst," I chided. "There must be something you can do. I mean, this is the Bazaar."

The Imp heaved a sigh and took another sip of his drink.

"It's nice of you to say that, Skeeve," he smiled. "But I've got to face the facts. There's not a big demand for Imps anyway, and none at all for an Imp with no powers."

I knew what he meant. All the dimension travelers I had met so far-Aahz, Isstvan, Tanda, and even the Deveel Frumple-seemed to regard Imps as inferior beings. The nicest thing I had heard said about them was that they were styleless imitators of the Deveels.

I felt sorry for him. Despite the fact we had first met as enemies, it wasn't that long ago I had been a loser nobody wanted.

"You've got to keep trying," I encouraged. "Somewhere, there's someone who wants to hire you."

"Not very likely," the Imp grimaced. "The way I am now, I wouldn't hire me. Would you?"

"Sure I would," I insisted. "In a minute."

"Oh, well," he sighed. "I shouldn't dwell on myself. How have things been with you? What brings you to the Bazaar?"

Now it was my turn to grimace. "Aahz and I are in a bad spot," I explained. "We're here trying to recruit a force to help us out."

"You're hiring people?" Brockhurst was suddenly intense.

"Yeah. Why?" I replied.

Too late, I realized what I was saying.

"Then you weren't kidding about hiring me!" Brockhurst was beside himself with glee.

"Um.. ." I said.

"This is great," the Imp chortled, rubbing his hands together. "Believe me, Skeeve, you won't regret this."

I was regretting it already.

"Wait a minute, Brockhurst," I interrupted desperately. "There are a few things you should know about the job."

"Like what?"

"Well ... for one thing, the odds are bad," I said judiciously. "We're up against an army. That's pretty rough fare considering how low the pay is."

I thought I would touch a nerve with that remark about the pay. I was right.

"How low is the pay?" the Imp asked bluntly.

Now I was stuck. I didn't have the vaguest idea how much mercenaries were normally paid.

"We . . . um ... we couldn't offer you more than one gold piece for the whole job," I shrugged.

"Done!" Brockhurst proclaimed. "With the current state of my finances, I can't turn down an offer like that no matter how dangerous it is."

It occurred to me that sometime I should have Aahz give me a quick course in rates of exchange.

"Um . . . there's one other problem," I murmured thoughtfully.

"What's that?"

"Well, my partner, you remember Aahz?"

The Imp nodded.

"Well, he's out right now trying to hire a force, and he's got the money," I continued. "There's a good chance that if he's successful, and he usually is, there won't be enough money left to hire you."

Brockhurst pursed his lips for a moment, then shrugged.

"Well," he said, "I'll take the chance. I wasn't going anywhere anyway. As I said, they haven't exactly been beating my door down with job offers."

I had run out of excuses.

"Well--" I smiled lamely "-as long as you're aware--"

"Heads up, boss," the Imp's murmur interrupted me. "We've got company."

I'm not sure which worried me more, Brockhurst calling me "boss" or the specterlike character who had just stepped up to our table.

Chapter Fourteen:

"We're looking for a few good men."

-B. CASSIDY

FOR a moment I thought we were being confronted by a skeleton. Then I looked closer and realized there really was skin stretched over the bones, though its dusty-white color made it seem very dead indeed.

The figure's paleness was made even more corpselike by the blue-black hooded robe that enshrouded it. It wasn't until I noted the wrinkled face with a short, bristly white beard that I realized our visitor was actually a very old man ... very old.

He looked weak to the point of near collapse, desperately clutching a twisted black walking staff which seemed to be the only thing keeping him erect. Still, his eyes were bright and his smile confident as he stood regarding us.

"Did I hear you boys right?" he asked in a crackling voice.

"I beg your pardon?" Brockhurst scowled at him. The ancient figure sneered and raised his voice. "I said, 'Did I hear you boys right?!'" he barked.

"What's the matter? Are you deaf?"

"Urn . . . excuse me," I interrupted hastily. "Before we can answer you, we have to know what you thought we said."

The old man thought for a minute, then bobbed his head in a sudden nod.

"You know, yer right!" he cackled. "Pretty smart, young fella."

He began to list, but caught himself before he fell.

"Thought I heard you tell Pinko here you were looking for a force to take on an army," he pronounced, jerking a thumb at Brockhurst.

"The name's Brockhurst, not Pinko!" the Imp snarled.

"All right, Bratwurst," the old man nodded. "No need to get your dander up."

"That's Brockhurst!"

"You heard right," I interrupted again, hoping the old man would go away as soon as his curiosity was satisfied.

"Good!" the man declared. "Count me in! Me and Blackie haven't been in a good fight for a long time."

"How long is that in centuries?" Brockhurst sneered.

"Watch your mouth, Bratwurst!" the old man warned. "We may be old, but we can still teach you a thing or two about winnin' wars."

"Who's Blackie?" I asked, cutting off Brockhurst's reply.

In reply, the old man drew himself erect . . . well, nearly erect, and patted his walking staff.

"This is Blackie!" he announced proudly. "The finest bow ever to come from Archiah, and that takes in a lot of fine bows!"

I realized with a start that the walking staff was a bow, unstrung, with its bowstring wrapped around it. It was unlike any bow I had ever seen, lumpy and uneven, but polished to a sheen that seemed to glimmer with a life all its own.

"Wait a minute!" Brockhurst was suddenly attentive. "Did you say you come from Archiah?"

"That I did," the old man grinned. "Ajax's the name, fighting's my game. Ain't seen a war yet that could lay old Ajax low, and I've seen a lot of 'em."

"Um . . . could you excuse us for just a minute, sir?" Brockhurst smiled apologetically.

"Sure, son," Ajax nodded. "Take your time."

I couldn't understand the Imp's sudden change in attitude, but he seemed quite intense as he jerked his head at me, so I leaned close to hear what he had to say.

"Hire him, boss!" he hissed in my ear.

"What?" I gasped, not believing I had heard him right.

"I said hire him!" the Imp repeated. "I may not have much to offer you, but I can give you advice. Right now, my advice is to hire him."

"But he's-"

"He's from Archiah!" Brockhurst interrupted. "Boss, that dimension invented archery. You don't find many genuine Archers of any age for hire. If you've really got a war on your hands, hire him. He could tip the balance for us."

"If he's that good," I whispered back, "can we afford him?"

"One gold piece will be adequate," Ajax smiled toothily, adding his head to our conference. "I accept your offer."

"Excellent!" Brockhurst beamed.

"Wait a minute," I shrieked desperately, "I have a partner that-"

"I know, I know," Ajax sighed, holding up a restraining hand. "I heard when you told Bratwurst here."

"That's Brockhurst," the Imp growled, but he did it smiling.

"If your partner can't find help, then we're hired!" the old man laughed, shaking his head. "It's a mite strange, but these are strange times."

"You can say that again," I muttered.

I was beginning to think I had spoken too loud in my conversation with Brockhurst.

"One thing you should know, though, youngster," Ajax murmured confidentially. "I'm bein' followed."

"By who?" I asked.

"Don't rightly know," he admitted. "Haven't figured it out yet. It's the little blue fella in the corner behind me."

I craned my neck to look at the indicated corner. It was empty.

"What fella? I mean, fellow," I corrected myself.

Ajax whipped his head around with a speed that belied his frail appearance.

"Dang it," he cursed. "He did it again. I'm telling you, youngster, that's why I can't figure what he's after!"

"Ah . . . sure, Ajax," I said soothingly. "You'll catch him next time."

Terrific. An Imp with no powers, and now an old Archer who sees things.

My thoughts were interrupted by a gentle tap on my shoulder. I turned to find the gargoyle looming over me.

"Your order's ready, sir," he said through his perma-smile.

"My order?"

"Yes, if you'll step this way."

"There must be some mistake," I began, "I didn't..."

The gargoyle was already gone, lumbering back to his counter. I considered ignoring him. Then I considered his size and countenance, and decided I should straighten out this misunderstanding in a polite fashion.

"Excuse me," I told my charges. "I'll be right back."

"Don't worry about us, boss," Brockhurst waved.

I wasn't reassured.

I managed to make my way to the counter without banging my sword against anything or anyone, a feat that raised my spirits for the first time that afternoon. Thus bolstered, I approached the gargoyle.

"I... um ... I don't recall ordering anything," I stated politely.

"Don't blame you, either," the gargoyle growled through his smile. "Beats me how anyone or anything can eat the slop they serve here."

"But-"

"That was just to get you away from those two," the gargoyle shrugged. "You see, I'm shy."

"Shy about what?"

"About asking you for a job, of course!"

I decided I would definitely have to keep my voice down in the future. My quiet conversation with Brockhurst seemed to have attracted the attention of half the Bazaar.

"Look...urn..."

"Gus!" the gargoyle supplied.

"Yes, well, ah, Gus, I'm really not hiring-"

"I know. Your partner is," Gus interrupted. "But you're here and he isn't, so I figured I'd make our pitch to you before the second team roster is completely filled."

"Oh!" I said, not knowing what else to say.

"The way I see it," the gargoyle continued, "we could do you a lot of good. You're a Klahd, aren't you?"

"I'm from Klah," I acknowledged stiffly.

"Well, if my memory serves me correctly, warfare in that dimension isn't too far advanced technologically."

"We have crossbows and catapults," I informed him. "At least the other side does."

"That's what I said," Gus agreed. "Primitive. To stop that force, all you need is air support and a little firepower. We can supply both, and we'll work cheap, both of us for one gold piece."

Now I was sure I had underestimated the market value of gold pieces. Still, the price was tempting.

"I dunno, Gus," I said cagily. "Ajax there is supposed to be a pretty good Archer."

"Archers," the gargoyle snorted. "I'm talking about real firepower. The kind my partner can give you."

"Who is your partner?" I asked. "He isn't short and blue by any chance, is he?"

"Naw," Gus replied, pointing to the far corner. "That's the Gremlin. He came in with the Archer."

"A Gremlin?" I said, following his finger.

Sure enough, perched on a chair in the corner was a small, elfish character. Mischievous eyes danced in his soft blue face as he nodded to me in silent recognition. Reflexively, I smiled and nodded back. Apparently I owed Ajax an apology.

"I thought Gremlins didn't exist," I commented casually to Gus.

"A lot of folks think that," the gargoyle agreed. "But you can see for yourself, they're real."

I wasn't sure. In the split second I had taken my eyes off the Gremlin to speak with Gus, he had vanished without a trace. I was tempted to go looking for him, but Gus was talking again.

"Just a second and I'll introduce you to my partner," he was saying. "He's here somewhere."

As he spoke, the gargoyle began rummaging about his own body, feeling his armpits and peering into the wrinkles on his skin.

I watched curiously, until my attention was arrested by a small lizard that had crawled out of one of the gargoyle's wing folds and was now regarding me fixedly from Gus's right shoulder. It was only about three inches long, but glowed with a brilliant orange hue. There were blotchy red patterns which seemed to crawl about the lizard's skin with a life of their own. The overall effect was startlingly beautiful.

"Is that your lizard?" I asked.

"There he is!" Gus crowed triumphantly, snatching the reptile from his shoulder and cupping it in his hands. "Meet Berfert. He's the partner I was telling you about."

"Hello, Berfert," I smiled, extending a finger to stroke him.

The gargoyle reacted violently, jerking the lizard back out of my reach.

"Careful, there," he warned. "That's a good way to lose a finger."

"I wasn't going to hurt him," I explained.

"No, he was about to hurt you!" Gus countered. "Berfert's a salamander, a walking firebomb. We get along because I'm one of the few beings around that won't burn to a crisp when I touch him."

"Oh," I said with sudden understanding. "So when you said 'firepower'—"

"I meant firepower," Gus finished. "Berfert cleans 'em out on the ground, and I work 'em over from the air. Well, what do you say? Have we got a deal?"

"I'll... um ... have to talk it over with my partner," I countered.

"Fine," Gus beamed. "I'll start packing."

He was gone before I could stop him.

I sagged against the counter, wishing fervently for Aahz's return. As if in answer to my thoughts, my mentor burst through the door, following closely by Tanda.

My greeting died in my throat when I saw his scowl. Aahz was not in a good mood.

"I thought I told you to wait outside," he bellowed at me.

"Calm down, Aahz," Tanda soothed. "I thought he'd be more comfortable waiting in here. Besides, there's no reason to get upset. We're here and he's here. Nothing has gone wrong."

"You haven't been dealing with any Deveels?" Aahz asked suspiciously.

"I haven't even talked with any," I protested.

"Good!" he retorted, slightly mollified. "There's hope for you yet, kid."

"I told you he could stay out of trouble," Tanda smiled triumphantly. "Isn't that right, handsome?"

Try as I might, I couldn't bring myself to answer her.

Chapter Fifteen:

"Fit worry about it tomorrow."

-S. O'HARA

"UM . . . are the mercenaries waiting outside?" I asked finally.

"You didn't answer her question, kid," Aahz observed, peering at me with renewed suspicion.

"Don't strain your neck looking for your troops, handsome," Tanda advised me. "There weren't any. It seems our mighty negotiator has met his match."

"Those bandits!" Aahz exploded. "Do you have any idea what it would cost us if I had agreed to pay their bar bill as part of the contract? If that's a nonprofit group, I want to audit their books."

My hopes for salvation sank like a rock.

"You didn't hire them?" I asked.

"No, I didn't," Aahz scowled. "And that moves us back to square one. Now we've got to recruit a force one at a time."

"Did you try-" I began.

"Look, kid," Aahz interrupted with a snarl, "I did the best I could, and I got nowhere. I'd like to see you do better."

"He already has!" Brockhurst announced, rising from his seat. "While you were wasting time, Skeeve here has hired himself a fighting team."

"He what?" Aahz bellowed, turning on his critic. "Brockhurst! What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for orders in our upcoming campaign," the Imp replied innocently.

"What campaign?" Aahz glowered.

"The one on Klah, of course," Brockhurst blinked. "Haven't you told him yet, boss?"

"Boss?" Aahz roared. "Boss?"

"No need ta shout," Ajax grumbled, turning to face the assemblage. "We hear ya plain enough."

"Ajax!" Tanda exclaimed gleefully.

"Tanda!" the old man yelped back.

She was at him in a bound, but he smoothly interposed his bow between them.

"Easy, girl," he laughed. "None of your athletic greetings. I'm not as young as I used to be, ya know."

"You old fraud!" Tanda teased. "You'll outlive us all."

Ajax shrugged dramatically. "That kinda depends on how good a general the youngster there is," he commented.

"Kid," Aahz growled through gritted teeth, "I want to talk to you! Now!"

"I know that temper!" Gus announced, emerging from the back room.

"Gus!" Aahz exclaimed.

"In the stone!" the gargoyle confirmed. "Are you in on this expedition? The boss didn't say anything about working with Perverts."

Instead of replying, Aahz sank heavily into a chair and hid his face in his hands.

"Tanda!" he moaned. "Tell me again about how this kid can stay out of trouble."

"Um . . . Aahz," I said cautiously, "could I talk to you for a minute ... privately?"

"Why, I think that's an excellent idea . . . boss," he said.

The smile he gave me wasn't pleasant.

"Kid!" Aahz moaned after I had finished my tale. "How many times do I have to tell you? This is the Bazaar at Deva! You've got to be careful what you say and to whom, especially when there's money involved."

"But I told them nothing was definite until we found out if you had hired someone else," I protested.

"But I didn't hire anyone else, so now the deal is final," Aahz sighed.

"Can't we get out of it?" I asked hopefully.

"Back out of a deal on Deva?" Aahz shook his head. "That would get us barred from the Bazaar so fast it would make your head spin. Remember, the Merchants Association runs this dimension."

"Well, you said you wanted outside help," I pointed out.

"I didn't expect to go that far outside," he grimaced. "An Imp, a senile Archer, and a gargoyle."

"And a salamander," I added.

"Gus is still bumming around with Berfert?" Aahz asked, brightening slightly. "That's a plus."

"The only really uncertain factor," I said thoughtfully, "is the Gremlin."

"How do you figure that?" Aahz yawned.

"Well, he's been following Ajax. The question is, why? And will he follow us to Klah?"

"Kid," Aahz said solemnly, "I've told you before. There are no such things as Gremlins."

"But Aahz, I saw him."

"Don't let it bother you, kid," Aahz sympathized. "After a day like you've been through, I wouldn't be surprised if you saw a Jabberwocky."

"What's a-"

"Is everything set?" Tanda asked, joining our conversation.

"About as set as we'll ever be," Aahz sighed. "Though if you want my honest opinion, with a crew like this, we're set more for a zoo than a war."

"Aahz is a bit critical of my choice in recruits," I confided.

"What's your gripe, Aahz?" she asked, cocking her head. "I thought you and Gus were old foxhole buddies."

"I'm not worried about Gus," Aahz put in hastily. "Or Berfert either. That little lizard's terrific under fire."

"Well, I can vouch for Ajax," Tanda informed him. "Don't let his age fool you. I'd rather have him backing my move than a whole company of counterfeit archers."

"Is he really from Archiah?" Aahz asked skeptically.

"That's what he's said as long as I've known him," Tanda shrugged. "And after seeing him shoot, I've got no reason to doubt it. Why?"

"I've never met a genuine Archer before," Aahz said. "For a while I was willing to believe the whole dimension was a legend. Well, if he can shoot half as well as Archers are supposed to, I've got no gripes having him on the team."

I started to feel a little better. Unfortunately, Aahz noticed my smile.

"The Imp is another story," he said grimly. "I'm not wild about working with any Imp, but to hire one without powers is a waste of good money."

"Don't forget he's an Assassin," Tanda pointed out. "Powers or no powers, I'll bet we find a use for him. When we were talking with the Gremlin just now-"

"Now don't you start on that!" Aahz snarled.

"Start on what?" Tanda blinked.

"The Gremlin bit," Aahz scowled. "Any half-wit knows there are no such things as Gremlins."

"Do you want to tell him that?" Tanda smiled. "I'll call him over here and ... oh, rats! He's gone again."

"If you're quite through," Aahz grumbled, rising from his chair, "we'd best get moving. There's a war waiting for us, you know."

"Oops! That reminds me!" Tanda exclaimed, fishing inside her tunic.

"I know I shouldn't ask," Aahz signed, "but what-"

"Here!" Tanda announced, flipping him a familiar object.

It was a metal rod about eight inches long and two inches in diameter with a button on one end of it.

"A D-Hopper!" I cried, recognizing the device instantly.

"It's the same one you gave Isstvan," Tanda smiled proudly. "I lifted it from him when we parted company. You'll probably want to undo whatever you did to the controls before you use it, though."

"If I can remember for sure," Aahz scowled, staring at the device.

"I thought it might come in handy in case we get separated on this job and you need a fast exit,"

Tanda shrugged.

"The thought's appreciated," Aahz smiled, putting an arm around her.

"Does this mean you'll be able to teach me how to travel the dimensions?" I asked hopefully.

"Not now I won't," Aahz grimaced. "We've got a war to fight, remember?"

"Oh! Yes, of course."

"Well, get your troops together and let's go," Aahz ordered.

"Okay," I agreed, rising from my chair. "Ill get Gleep and . . . wait a minute! Did you say my troops?"

"You hired 'em, you lead 'em," my mentor smiled.

"But you're-"

"I'll be your military advisor, of course," Aahz continued casually. "But the job of Fearless Leader is all yours. You're the court magician, remember?"

I swallowed hard. Somehow this had never entered into my thinking.

"But what do I do?" I asked desperately.

"Well," Aahz drawled. "First, I'd advise you to move 'em outside so we can all head for Klah together . . . that is, unless you're willing to leave your dragon behind."

That didn't even deserve an answer. I turned to face the troops, sweeping them with what I hoped was a masterful gaze which would immediately command their attention.

No one noticed. They were all involved in a jovial conversation.

I cleared my throat noisily.

Nothing.

I considered going over to their table.

"Listen up!" Aahz barked suddenly, scaring me half to death.

The conversation stopped abruptly and all heads swiveled my way.

"Aah ..." I began confidently. "We're ready to go now. Everybody outside. Wait for me by the dragon."

"Right, boss!" Brockhurst called, starting for the door.

"I'll be a minute, youngster," Ajax wheezed, struggling to rise.

"Here, Gramps," Gus said. "Let me give you a hand."

"Name's not Gramps, it's Ajax!" the Archer scowled.

"Just trying to be helpfill," the gargoyle apologized.

"I kin' stand up by myself," Ajax insisted. "Just 'cause I'm old don't mean I'm helpless."

I glanced to Aahz for help, but he and Tanda were already headed out.

As I turned back to Ajax, I thought I caught a glimpse of a small, blue figure slipping out through the door ahead of us. If it was the Gremlin, he was nowhere in sight when I finally reached the street.

Chapter Sixteen:

"Myth-conceptions are the major cause of wars!"

-A. HITLER

FORTUNATELY, the army had not moved from the position it held when we left for Deva. I say fortunately because Aahz pointed out they might well have renewed their advance in our absence. If that had happened, we would have returned to find ourselves behind the enemy lines, if not actually in the middle of one of their encampments.

Of course, he pointed this out to me after we had arrived back on Klah. Aahz is full of helpful little tidbits of information, but his timing leaves a lot to be desired.

Ajax lost no time upon our arrival. Moving with a briskness that belied his years, he strung his bow and stood squinting at the distant encampments.

"Well, youngster," he asked, never taking his eyes from the enemy's formations, "what's my first batch of targets?"

His eagerness took me aback a bit, but Aahz covered for me neatly.

"First," he said loftily, "we'll have to hold a final planning session."

"We didn't expect to have you along, Ajax," Tanda added. "Having a genuine Archer on our side naturally calls for some drastic revisions of our battle plans."

"Don't bother me none," Ajax shrugged. "Just wanted ta let you know I was ready to earn my keep. Take yer time. Seen too many wars messed up 'cause nobody bothered to do any plannin'! If ya don't mind, though, think I'll take me a little nap. Jes' holler when ya want some shootin' done."

"Ah ... go ahead, Ajax," I agreed.

Without further conversation, Ajax plopped down and pulled his cloak a bit closer about him. Within a few minutes, he was snoring lightly, but I noticed his bow was still in his grip.

"Now there's a seasoned soldier," Aahz observed. "Gets his sleep when and where he can."

"You want me to do a little scouting, boss?" Gus asked.

"Um ..." I hesitated, glancing quickly at Aahz. Aahz caught my look and gave a small nod. "Sure, Gus," I finished. "We'll wait for you here."

"I'll scout in the other direction," Brockhurst volunteered.

"Okay," I nodded. "Aahz, can you give 'em a quick briefing?"

I was trying to drop the load in Aahz's lap, but he joined the conversation as smoothly as if we had rehearsed it this way.

"There are a couple of things we need specific information on," he said solemnly. "First, we need a battlefield, small with scattered cover. Gus, you check that out. You know what we're going to need. Brockhurst, see what details you can bring back on the three nearest encampments."

Both scouts nodded briskly.

"And both of you, stay out of sight," Aahz warned. "The information's no good to us if you don't come back."

"C'mon, Aahz," Gus admonished. "What have they got that can put a dent in the old rock?"

He demonstrated by smashing his forearm into a sapling. The tree went down, apparently without affecting the gargoyle's arm in the slightest.

"I don't know," Aahz admitted. "And I don't want to know, yet. You're one of our surprise weapons. No point in giving the enemy an advance warning. Get my meaning?"

"Got it, Aahz," Gus nodded, and lumbered off.

"Be back in a bit," Brockhurst said with a wave of his hand, heading off in the opposite direction.

"Now that we've got a minute," I murmured to Aahz as I returned Brockhurst's wave, "would you mind telling me what our final plan is? I don't even know what the preliminary plans were."

"That's easy," Aahz replied. "We don't have one ...yet."

"Well, when are we going to form one?" I asked with forced patience.

"Probably on the battlefield," Aahz yawned. "Until then it's pointless. There're too many variables until then."

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to have at least a general idea as to what we're going to do before we wander out on the battlefield?" I insisted. "It would do a lot for my peace of mind."

"Oh, I've already got a general idea as to what we'll be doing," Aahz admitted.

"Isn't he sweet?" Tanda grimaced. "Would you mind sharing it with us, Aahz? We've got a stake in this, too."

"Well," he began lazily, "the name of the game is delay and demoralize. The way I figure it, we aren't going to overpower them. We haven't got enough going for us to even try that."

I bit back a sarcastic observation and let him continue.

"Delay and demoralize we should be able to do, though," Aahz smiled. "Right off the bat, we've got two big weapons going for us in that kind of a fight."

"Ajax and Gus," I supplied helpfully.

"Fear and bureaucracy," Aahz corrected.

"How's that again?" Tanda frowned.

"Tanda, my girl," Aahz smiled, "you've been spoiled by your skylarking through the dimensions. You've forgotten how the man on the street thinks. The average person in any dimension doesn't know the first thing about magik, particularly about its limitations. If the kid here tells 'em he can make the sun stop or trees grow upside down, they'll believe him. Particularly if he's got a few strange characters parading around as proof of his power, and I think you'll have to admit, the crew he's got backing him this time around is pretty strange."

"What's bureaucracy?" I asked, finally getting a word in edgewise.

"Red tape ... the system," Aahz informed me. "The organization to get things done that keeps things from getting done. In this case, it's called the chain-of-command. An army the size of the one we're facing has to function like a well-oiled machine or it starts tripping over its own feet. I'm betting if we toss a couple of handfuls of sand into its gears, they'll spend more time fighting each other than chasing us."

This was one of the first times Aahz had actually clarified something he said. I wished he hadn't. I was more confused than I had been before.

"Um . . . how are we going to do all this?" I asked.

"We'll be able to tell better after you've had your first war council," Aahz shrugged.

"Aren't we having it now?"

"I meant with the enemy," Aahz scowled. "Sometime in the near future, you're going to have to sit down with one of their officers and decide how this war's going to be fought."

"Me?" I blinked.

"You are the leader of the defenses, remember?" Aahz grinned at me.

"It's part of the job, handsome," Tanda confirmed.

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "It just came to me. I think I have a better idea."

' This I've got to hear," Aahz grinned.

"Shut up, Aahz," Tanda ordered, poking him in the ribs. "Whatcha got, handsome?"

"We've got a couple of trained Assassins on our side, don't we?" I observed. "Why don't we just put 'em to work? If enough officers suddenly turn up dead, odds are the army will fall apart. Right?"

"It won't work, kid," Aahz announced bluntly.

"Why not?"

"We can bend the rules, but we can't break 'em," Aahz explained. "Wars are fought between the troops. Killing off the officers without engaging their troops goes against tradition. I doubt if your own force would stand still for it. Old troopers like Ajax would have no part of a scheme like that."

"He's right," Tanda confirmed. "Assassins take contracts on individuals in personal feuds, but not against the general staff of an army."

"But it would be so easy," I insisted.

"Look at it this way, kid," Aahz put in. "If you could do it, they could do it. The way things are now, you're exempt from Assassins. Would you really want to change that?"

"What do I say in a war council?" I asked.

"I'll brief you on that when the time comes," Aahz reassured me. "Right now we have other things to plan."

"Such as what?" Tanda asked.

"Such as what to do about those signal towers," Aahz retorted, jerking his head at one of the distant structures.

"We probably won't have time to break their code, so the next best thing is to disrupt their signals somehow. Now, you said you picked up some special effects items back at the Bazaar. Have you got anything we could use on the signal towers?"

"I'm not sure," Tanda frowned thoughtfully. "I wish you had said something about that before I went shopping."

"What about Ajax?" I suggested.

"What about him?" Aahz countered.

"How close would he have to be to the towers to disrupt things with his archery?"

"I don't know," Aahz shrugged. "Why don't you ask him."

Eager to follow up on my own suggestion, I squatted down next to the dozing bowman.

"Um ... Ajax," I called softly.

"Whatcha need, youngster?" the old man asked, coming instantly awake.

"Do you see those signal towers?" I asked, pointing at the distant structures.

Ajax rose to his feet and squinted in the indicated direction. "Sure can," he nodded.

"We ... um ... I was wondering," I explained, "can you use your bow to disrupt their signals?"

In response, Ajax drew an arrow from beneath his cloak, cocked it, and let fly before I could stop him.

The shaft disappeared in the direction of the nearest tower. With sinking heart, I strained my eyes trying to track its flight.

There was a man standing on the tower's platform, his standard leaning against the railing beside him. Suddenly, his standard toppled over, apparently breaking off a handspan from its crosspiece. The man bent and retrieved the bottom portion of the pole, staring with apparent confusion at the broken end.

"Any other targets?" Ajax asked.

He was leaning casually on his bow, his back to the tower. He hadn't even bothered watching to see if his missile struck its mark.

"Um ... not just now, Ajax," I assured him. "Go back to sleep."

"Fine by me, sonny," Ajax smiled, resettling him self. "There'll be plenty of targets tomorrow."

"How do you figure that?" I asked.

"According to that signal I just cut down," he grinned, "the army's fixin' to move out tomorrow."

"You can read the signals?" I blinked.

"Sure," Ajax nodded. "There're only about eight different codes armies use, and I know 'em all. It's part of my trade."

"And they're moving out tomorrow?" I pressed.

"That's what I said." The bowman scowled. "What's the matter, are you deaf?"

"No," I assured him hastily. "It just changes our plans is all. Go back to sleep."

Returning to our little conference, I found Aahz and Tanda engrossed in a conversation with Brockhurst.

"Bad news, kid," Aahz informed me. "Brockhurst here says the army's going to move out tomorrow."

"I know," I said. "I just found out from Ajax. Can you read the signal flags too, Brockhurst?"

"Naw," the Imp admitted. "But the Gremlin can."

"What Gremlin?" Aahz bared his teeth.

"He was here a minute ago," Brockhurst scowled, looking around.

"Well, handsome," Tanda sighed, eyeing me, "I think we just ran out of planning time. Better call your dragon. I think we're going to need all the help we can get tomorrow."

Gleep had wandered off shortly after our arrival, though we could still hear him occasionally as he poked about in the underbrush.

"You go get the dragon, Tanda," Aahz ordered.

"Though it escapes me how he's supposed to be any help. The 'boss' here and I have to discuss his war council tomorrow."

Any confidence I might have built up listening to Aahz's grand plan earlier fled me. Tanda was right. We had run out of time.

Chapter Seventeen:

"Diplomacy is the delicate weapon of the civilized warrior."

-HUN, A.T.

WE waited patiently, for our war council. The two of us, Aahz and me. Against an army.

This was, of course, Aahz's idea. Left to my own devices, I wouldn't be caught dead in this position.

Trying to ignore that unfortunate choice of words, I cleared my throat and spoke to Aahz out of the corner of my mouth.

"Aahz?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"How long are we going to stand here?"

"Until they notice us and do something about it."

Terrific. Either we'd rot where we stood, or someone would shoot us full of arrows.

We were standing about twenty yards from one of the encampments, with nothing between us and them but meadow. We could see clearly the bustle of activity within the encampment and, in theory, there was nothing keeping them from seeing us. This is why we were standing where we were, to draw attention to ourselves. Unfortunately, so far no one had noticed.

It had been decided that Aahz and I would work alone on this first sortie to hide the true strength of our force. It occurred to me that it also hid the true weakness of our force, but I felt it would be tactless to point this out.

At first, Brockhurst had argued in favor of his coming along with me instead of Aahz, claiming that as an Imp he had much more experience at bargaining than a demon. It was pointed out to him rather forcefully by Aahz that in this instance we weren't bargaining for glass beads or whoopie cushions, but for a war . . . and if the Imp wanted to prove to Aahz that he knew more about fighting....

Needless to say, Brockhurst backed down at that point. This was good, as it saved me from having to openly reject his offer. I mean, I may not be the fastest learner around, but I could still distinctly remember Aahz getting the best of Brockhurst the last time the two of them had squared off for a bargaining session.

Besides, if this meeting went awry, I wanted my mentor close at hand to share the consequences with me.

So here we stood, blatantly exposed to the enemy without even a sword for our defense. That was another of Aahz's brainstorm. He argued that our being unarmed accomplished three things. First, it showed that we were here to talk, not to fight. Second, it demonstrated our faith in my magical abilities to defend us. Third, it encouraged our enemy to meet us similarly unarmed.

He also pointed out that Ajax would be hiding in the tree line behind us with strung bow and cocked arrow, and would probably be better at defending us if anything went wrong than a couple of swords would.

He was right, of course, but it did nothing to settle my nerves as we waited.

"Heads up, kid," Aahz murmured. "We've got company."

Sure enough, a rather stocky individual was striding briskly across the meadow in our direction.

"Kid!" Aahz hissed suddenly. "Your disguise!"

"What about it?" I whispered back.

"It isn't!" came the reply.

He was right! I had carefully restored his "dubious character" appearance, but had forgotten completely about changing my own. Having our motley crew accept my leadership in my normal form had caused me to overlook the fact that Klahds are harder to impress than demons.

"Should I-" I began.

"Too late!" Aahz growled. "Fake it."

The soldier was almost upon us now, close enough for me to notice when he abandoned his bored expression and forced a smile.

"I'm sorry, folks," he called with practiced authority. "You'll have to clear the area. We'll be moving soon and you're blocking the path."

"Call your duty officer!" Aahz boomed back at him.

"My who?" the soldier scowled.

"Duty officer, officer of the day, commander, whatever you call whoever's currently in charge of your formation," Aahz clarified. "Somebody's got to be running things, and if you're officer material, I'm the Queen of the May."

Whether or not the soldier understood Aahz's allusion (I didn't), he caught the general implication.

"Yeah, there's someone in charge," he snarled, his complexion darkening slightly. "He's a very busy man right now, too busy to stand around talking to civilians. We're getting ready to move our troops, mister, so take your son and get out of the way. If you want to watch the soldiers, you'll have to follow along and watch us when we camp tonight."

"Do you have any idea who you're talking to?" I said in a surprisingly soft voice.

"I don't care who your father is, sonny," the soldier retorted. "We're trying to-"

"The name's not 'sonny,' it's Skeeve!" I hissed, drawing myself up. "Court magician to the kingdom of Possiltum, pledged to that kingdom's defense. Now I advise you to call your officer ... or do you want to wake up tomorrow morning on a lily pad?" The soldier recoiled a step and stood regarding me suspiciously.

"Is he for real?" he asked Aahz skeptically.

"How's your taste for flies?" Aahz smiled.

"You mean he can really-"

"Look," interrupted Aahz, "I'm not playing servant to the kid because of his terrific personality, if you know what I mean."

"I see ... um. ..." The soldier was cautiously backing toward the encampment. "I'll . . . um . . . I'll bring my commanding officer."

"We'll be here," Aahz assured him.

The soldier nodded and retreated with noticeably greater speed than he had displayed approaching us.

"So far, so good," my mentor said with a grin.

"What's wrong with my personality?" I asked bluntly.

Aahz sighed. "Later, kid. For the time being, concentrate on looking aloof and dignified, okay?"

Okay or not, there wasn't much else to do while we waited for the officer to put in his appearance.

Apparently, news of our presence spread through the encampment in record time, for a crowd of soldiers gathered at the edge of the camp long before we saw any sign of the officer. It seemed all preparations to move were suspended at least temporarily while the soldiers lined up and craned their necks to gawk at us.

It was kind of a nice feeling to have caused such a sensation, until I noticed several soldiers were taking time to strap on weapons and armor before joining the crowd.

"Aahz! "I whispered.

"Yeah, kid?"

"I thought this was supposed to be a peaceful meeting."

"It is," he assured me.

"But they're arming!" I pointed out.

"Relax, kid," he whispered back. "Remember, Ajax is covering us."

I tried to focus on that thought. Then I saw what was apparently the officer approaching us flanked by two soldiers, and I focused on the swords they were all wearing.

"Aahz! "I hissed.

"Relax, kid," Aahz advised me. "Remember Ajax."

I remembered. I also remembered we were vastly outnumbered.

"I understand you gentlemen are emissaries of Possiltum?" the officer asked, coming to a halt in front of us.

I nodded stiffly, hoping the abruptness of my motion would be interpreted as annoyance rather than fear.

"Fine," the officer smirked. "Then as the first representative of the Empire to contact a representative of Possiltum, I have the pleasure of formally declaring war on your kingdom."

"What is your name?" Aahz asked casually.

"Claude," the officer responded. "Why do you ask?"

"The historians like details," Aahz shrugged.

"Well, Claude, as the first representative of Possiltum to meet with a representative of your Empire in times of war, it is our pleasure to demand your unconditional surrender."

That got a smile out of the officer.

"Surrender?" he chortled. "To a cripple and a child? You must be mad. Even if I had the authority to do such a thing, I wouldn't."

"That's right." Aahz shook his head in mock self admonishment. "We should have realized. Someone in charge of a supply company wouldn't swing much weight in an army like this, would he?"

We had chosen this particular group of soldiers to approach specifically because they were a supply unit. That meant they were lightly armed and hopefully not an elite fighting group.

Aahz's barb struck home, however. The officer stopped smiling and dropped his hand to his sword hilt. I found myself thinking again of Ajax's protection.

"I have more than enough authority to deal with you two," he hissed.

"Authority, maybe," I yawned. "But I frankly doubt you have the power to stand against us."

As I mentioned, I did not feel as confident as I sounded. The officer's honor guard had mimicked his action, so that now all three of our adversaries were standing ready to draw their swords.

"Very well," Claude snarled. "You've been warned. Now we're going to bring our wagons across this spot, and if you're on it when we get here you've no one to blame but yourselves."

"Accepted!" Aahz leered. "Shall we say noon tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" the officer scowled. "What's wrong with right now?"

"Come, come, Claude," Aahz admonished. "We're talking about the first engagement of a new campaign. Surely you want some time to plan your tactics."

"Tactics?" Claude echoed thoughtfully.

"... and to pass the word to your superiors that you're leading the opening gambit," Aahz continued casually.

"Hmm," the officer murmured.

". . . and to summon reinforcements," I supplied. "Unless, of course, you want to keep all the glory for yourself."

"Glory!"

That did it. Claude pounced on the word like a Devel on a gold piece. Aahz had been right in assuming supply officers don't see combat often.

"I ... uh ... I don't believe we'll require reinforcements," he murmured cagily.

"Are you sure?" Aahz sneered. "The odds are only about a hundred to one in your favor."

"But he is a magician," Claude smiled. "A good officer can't be too careful. Still, it would be pointless to involve too many officers ... er ... I mean, soldiers in a minor skirmish."

"Claude," Aahz said with grudging admiration, "I can see yours is a military mind without equal. Win or lose, I look forward to having you as an opponent."

"And you, sir," the officer returned with equal formality. "Shall we say noon then?"

"We'll be here," Aahz nodded.

With that, the officer turned and strode briskly back to his encampment, his bodyguard trudging dutifully beside him.

Our comrades were bristling with questions when we reentered the tree line.

"Is it set, boss?" Brockhurst asked.

"Any trouble?" Tanda pressed.

"Piece of cake," Aahz bragged. "Right, kid?"

"Well," I began modestly, "I was a little worried when they started to reach for their swords. I would have been terrified if I didn't know Ajax was . . . say, where is Ajax?"

"He's up in that clump of bushes," Gus informed me, jerking a massive thumb at a thicket of greenery on the edge of the tree line. "He should be back by now."

When we found Ajax, he was fast asleep curled around his bow. We had to shake him several times to wake him.

Chapter Eighteen:

"Just before the battle, Mother, I was thinking most of you..."

-SONNY BARKER

A LONG, slimy tongue assaulted me from the darkness, accompanied by a blast of bad breath which could have only one source.

"Gleep!"

I started to automatically cuff the dragon away, then had a sudden change of heart.

"Hi, fella," I smiled, scratching his ear. "Lonely?"

In response, my pet flopped on his side with a thud that shook the ground. His serpentine neck was long enough that he managed to perform this maneuver without moving his head from my grasp.

His loyal affection brought a smile to my face for the first time since I had taken up my lonely vigil. It was a welcome antidote to my nervous insomnia.

I was leaning against a tree, watching the pinpoints of light that marked the enemy's encampment. Even though the day's events had left me exhausted, I found myself unable to sleep, my mind awash with fears and anticipation of tomorrow's clash. Not wishing to draw attention to my discomfort, I had crept to this place to be alone.

As stealthy as I had attempted to be, however, apparently Gleep had noted my movement and come to keep me company.

"Oh, Gleep," I whispered. "What are we going to do?"

For his answer, he snuggled closer against me and laid his head in my lap for additional patting. He seemed to have unshakable faith in my ability to handle any crisis as it arose. I wished with all my heart I shared his confidence.

"Skeeve?" came a soft voice from my right.

I turned my head and found Tanda standing close beside me. The disquieting thing about having an Assassin for a friend is that they move so silently.

"Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Sure, Tanda," I said, patting the ground next to me. "Have a seat."

Instead of sitting at the indicated spot, she sank to the ground where she stood and curled her legs up under her.

"It's about Ajax," she began hesitantly. "I hate to bother you, but I'm worried about him."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Well, the team's been riding him about falling asleep today when he was supposed to be covering you," she explained. "He's taking it pretty hard."

"I wasn't too wild about it myself," I commented bitterly. "It's a bad feeling to realize that we really were alone out there. If anything had gone wrong, we would have been cut to shreds while placidly waiting for our expert bowman to intercede!"

"I know." Tanda's voice was almost too soft to be heard. "And I don't blame you for feeling like that. In a way, I blame myself."

"Yourself?" I blinked. "Why?"

"I vouched for him, Skeeve," she whispered. "Don't you remember?"

"Well, sure," I admitted. "But you couldn't have known-"

"But I should have," she interrupted bitterly. "I should have realized how old he is now. He shouldn't be here, Skeeve. That's why I wanted to talk to you about doing something."

"Me?" T asked, genuinely startled. "What do you want me to do?"

"Send him back," Tanda urged. "It isn't fair to you to endanger your mission because of him, and it isn't fair to Ajax to put him in a spot like this."

"That isn't what I meant," I murmured, shaking my head. "I meant why are you talking to me? Aahz is the one you have to convince."

"That's where you're wrong, Skeeve," she corrected. "Aahz isn't leading this group, you are."

"Because of what he said back on Deva?" I smiled. "C'mon, Tanda. You know Aahz. He was just a little miffed. You noticed he's called all the shots so far."

The moonlight glistened in Tanda's hair as she shook her head.

"I do know Aahz, Skeeve. Better than you do," she said. "He's a stickler for chain of command. If he says you're the leader, you're the leader."

"But-"

"Besides," she continued over my protest, "Aahz is only one member of the team. What's important is all the others are counting on you, too. On you, not on Aahz. You hired 'em, and as far as they're concerned, you're the boss."

The frightening thing was she was right. I hadn't really stopped to think about it, but everything she said was true. I had just been too busy with my own worries to reflect on it. Now that I realized the full extent of my responsibilities, a new wave of doubts assaulted me. I wasn't even that sure of myself as a magician, and as a leader of men....

"I'll have to think about it," I stalled.

"You don't have much time," she pointed out. "You've got a war scheduled to start tomorrow."

There was a crackling in the brush to our left, interrupting our conversation.

"Boss?" came Brockhurst's soft hail. "Are you busy?"

"Sort of," I called back.

"Well, this will only take a minute."

Before I could reply, two shadows detached themselves from the brush and drew closer. One was Brockhurst, the other was Gus. I should have known from the noise that the gargoyle was accompanying Brockhurst. Like Tanda, the Imp could move like a ghost.

"We were just talking about Ajax," Brockhurst informed me, squatting down to join our conference. The gargoyle followed suit.

"Yeah," Gus confirmed. "The three of us wanted to make a suggestion to you."

"Right," Brockhurst nodded. "Gus and me and the Gremlin."

"The Gremlin?" I asked.

The Imp craned his neck to peer around him.

"He must have stayed back at camp," he shrugged.

"About Ajax," Tanda prompted.

"We think you should pull him from the team," Gus announced. "Send him back to Deva and out of the line of fire."

"It's not for us," Brockhurst hastened to clarify. "It's for him. He's a nice old guy, and we'd hate to see anything happen to him."

"He is pretty old," I murmured.

"Old!" Gus exclaimed. "Boss, the Gremlin says he's tailed him for over two hundred years . . . two hundred! According to him, Ajax was old when their paths first crossed. It won't kill him to miss this one war, but it might kill him to fight in it."

"Why is the Gremlin tailing him, anyway?" I asked.

"I've told you before, kid," a voice boomed in my ear, "gremlins don't exist."

With that pronouncement, Aahz sank down at my side, between me and Tanda. As I attempted to restore my heartbeat to normal, it occurred to me I knew an awful lot of light-footed people.

"Hi, Aahz," I said, forcing a smile. "We were just talking about-"

"I know, I heard," Aahz interrupted. "And for a change I agree."

"You do?" I blinked.

"Sure," he yawned. "It's a clear-cut breach of contract. He hired out his services as a bowman, and the first assignment you give him, he literally lies down on the job."

Actually, it had been the second assignment. I had a sudden flash recollection of Ajax drawing and firing in a smooth, fluid motion, cutting down a signal standard so distant it was barely visible.

"My advice would be to send him back," Aahz was saying. "If you want to soothe your conscience, give him partial payment and a good recommendation, but the way he is, he's no good to anybody."

Perhaps it was because of Tanda's lecture, but I was suddenly aware that Aahz had specifically stated his suggestion as "advice," not an order.

"Heads up, boss," Brockhurst murmured.

"We've got company."

Following his gaze, I saw Ajax stumbling toward us, his ghostlike paleness flickering in the darkness like... well, like a ghost. It occurred to me that what had started out as a moment of solitude was becoming awfully crowded.

"Evenin', youngster," he saluted. "Didn't mean to interrupt nothin! Didn't know you folks was havin' a meetin'."

"We ... ah ... we were just talking," I explained, suddenly embarrassed.

"I kin guess about what, too," Ajax sighed. "Well, I was goin' to do this private-like, but I suppose the rest o' you might as well hear it, too."

"Do what, Ajax?" I asked.

"Resign," he said. "Seems to me to be the only decent thing to do after what happened today."

"It could have happened to anyone," I shrugged.

"Nice of you to say so, youngster," Ajax smiled, "but I kin see the handwriting on the wall. I'm just too old to be any good to anybody anymore. 'Bout time I admitted it to myself."

I found myself noticing the droop in his shoulders and a listlessness that hadn't been there when we first met on Deva.

"Don't fret about payin' me," Ajax continued. "I didn't do nothin', so I figger you don't owe me nothin'. If somebody'll just blip me back to Deva, I'll get outta your way and let you fight your war the way it should be fought."

"Well, Ajax," Aahz sighed, rising to his feet and extending his hand. "We're going to miss you."

"Just a minute!" I found myself saying in a cold voice. "Are you trying to tell me you're breaking our contract?"

Ajax's head came up with a snap.

"I expected better from a genuine Archer," I concluded.

"I wouldn't call it a breach of contract, youngster," the old bowman corrected me carefully. "More like a termination by mutual consent. I'm jes' too old-"

"Old?" I interrupted. "I knew you were old when I hired you. I knew you were old when I planned my strategy for tomorrow's fight around that bow of yours. I knew you were old, Ajax, but I didn't know you were a coward!"

There was a sharp intake of breath somewhere nearby, but I didn't see who it was. My attention was focused on Ajax. It was no longer a defeated, drooping old man, but a proud, angry warrior who loomed suddenly over me.

"Sonny," he growled, "I know I'm old, 'cause in my younger days I would have killed you for sayin' that. I never ran from a fight in my life, and I never broke a contract. If you got some shootin' fer me to do tomorrow, I'll do it. Then maybe you'll see what havin' a genuine Archer on your side is all about!"

With that, he spun on his heel and stalked off into the darkness.

It had been a calculated risk, but I still found I was covered with cold sweat from facing the old man's anger. I also realized the rest of the group was staring at me in silent expectation.

"I suppose you're all wondering why I did that," I said, smiling.

I had hoped for a response, but the silence continued.

"I appreciate all your advice, and hope you continue to give it in the future. But I'm leading this force, and the final decisions have to be mine."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Aahz cock his eyebrow, but I ignored him.

"Everyone, including Ajax, said if I let him go, if I sent him back to Deva, there would be no harm done. I disagree. It would have taken away the one thing the years have left untouched ... his pride. It would have confirmed to him his worst fears, that he's become a useless old man."

I scanned my audience. Not one of them could meet my eye.

"So he might get killed. So what? He's accepted that risk in every war he's fought in. I'd rather order him into a fight knowing for certain he'd be killed than condemn him to a living death as a washed-up has-been. This way, he has a chance, and as his employer, I feel I owe him that chance."

I paused for breath. They were looking at me again, hanging on my next words.

"One more thing," I snarled. "I don't want to hear any more talk about him being useless. That old man still handles a bow better than anyone I've ever seen. If I can't find a way to use him effectively, then it's my fault as a tactician, not his! I've got my shortcomings, but I'm not going to blame them on Ajax any more than I'd blame them on any of you."

Silence reigned again, but I didn't care. I had spoken my piece, and felt no compulsion to blather on aimlessly just to fill the void.

"Well, boss" Brockhurst cleared his throat getting to his feet "I think I'll turn in now."

"Me, too," echoed Gus, also rising.

"Just one thing." The Imp paused and met my gaze squarely. "For the record, it's a real pleasure working for you."

The gargoyle nodded his agreement, and the two of them faded into the brush.

There was a soft kiss on my cheek, but by the time I turned my head, Tanda had disappeared.

"You know, kid," Aahz said, "you're going to make a pretty good leader someday."

"Thanks, Aahz," I blinked.

".. .if you live that long," my mentor concluded.

We sat side by side in silence for a while longer. Gleep had apparently dozed off, for he was snoring softly as I continued petting him.

"If it isn't prying," Aahz asked finally, "what is this master plan you have for tomorrow that's built around Ajax?"

I sighed and closed my eyes.

"I haven't got one," I admitted. "I was kind of hoping you'd have a few ideas."

"I was afraid you were going to say that," Aahz grumbled.

Chapter Nineteen:

"What if they gave a war and only one side came-"

-LUCIFER

"WAKE up, kid!"

I returned to consciousness as I was being forcefully propelled sideways along the forest floor, presumably assisted by the ready toe of my mentor.

After I had slid to a stop, I exerted most of my energy and raised my head.

"Aahz," I announced solemnly, "as leader of this team, I have reached another decision. In the future, I want Tanda to wake me up."

"Not a chance," Aahz leered. "She's off scouting our right flank. It's me or the dragon."

Great choice. I suddenly realized how bright it was.

"Hey!" I blinked. "How late is it?"

"Figure we've got about a minute before things start popping," Aahz said casually.

"How long?" I gasped.

Aahz's brow furrowed for a moment as he reflected on his words. Klahdish units of time still gave him a bit of trouble.

"An hour!" he smiled triumphantly. "That's it. An hour."

"That's better," I sighed, sinking back to a horizontal position.

"On your feet, kid!" Aahz ordered. "We let you sleep as late as we could, but now you're needed to review the troops."

"Have you briefed everybody?" I yawned, sitting up. "Is the plan clear?"

"As clear as it's going to be, all things considered," Aahz shrugged.

"Okay," I responded, rolling to my feet. "Let's go. You can fill me in on any new developments along the way."

Aahz and I had been up most of the night formulating today's plan, and I found I was actually eager to see it implemented.

"You should be thankful you aren't on the other side," Aahz chortled as we moved to join the others. "Old Claude's been making the most of the time we gave him."

"Keeping them busy, is he?" I smiled.

"Since sunup," Aahz confirmed smugly. "Drilling, sharpening swords, never a dull moment in the Empire's army, that's for sure."

I wasn't sure I shared Aahz's enthusiasm for the enemy's spending lots of time sharpening their swords. Fortunately, I was spared the discomfort of replying as Gus lumbered up to us.

"You just missed Brockhurst's report," he informed us. "Still nothing on the left flank."

"Wouldn't we be able to tell from their signals if they were moving up additional support?" I asked.

"If you believe their signals," Aahz countered. "It wouldn't be the first time an army figured out the enemy had broken their code and started sending misleading messages."

"Oh," I said wisely.

"Speaking of signals," Aahz said with a grin, "you know the messages they were sending yesterday? The ones that went 'encountered minor resistance'?"

"I remember," I nodded.

"Well, it seems Claude has decided he needs to up the ante if he's going to get a promotion out of this. Overnight we've become 'armed opposition ... must be subdued forcefully!' Neat, huh?"

I swallowed hard.

"Does that mean they'll be moving in reinforcements?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

"Not a chance, kid." Aahz winked. "Claude there has turned down every offer of assistance that came down the line. He keeps insisting he can handle it with the company he's commanding."

"I'd say he's got his neck way, way out," Gus commented.

"... and we're just the ones to chop it off for him," Aahz finished.

"Where's Ajax?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Down at the forest line picking out his firing point," Gus replied. "Don't worry, boss. He's awake."

Actually, that wasn't my worry concerning Ajax at all. In my mind's eye, I could still see his angry stance when I called him a coward the night before.

"Mornin', youngster," the bowman hailed, emerging from the bush. "Think I got us a place all picked out."

"Hi, Ajax," I replied. "Say . . . um . . . when you get a minute, I'd like to talk to you about last night."

"Think nothin' of it," Ajax assured me with a grin. "I've plum fergot about it already."

There was a glint in his eye that contradicted his words, but if he was willing to pretend nothing had happened, I'd go along with it for now.

"I hate to interrupt," Aahz interrupted, "but I think friend Claude's just about ready to make his move."

Sure enough, the distant encampment was lining up in a marching formation. The hand-drawn wagons were packed and aligned, with the escort troops arrayed to the front and sides. The signal tower, despite its appearance, was apparently also portable and was being pushed along at the rear of the formation by several sweating soldiers.

"Late!" Ajax sneered. "I tell ya, youngster, armies are the same in any dimension."

"Okay, kid," Aahz said briskly. "Do your stuff. It's about time we got into position."

I nodded and closed my eyes for concentration. With a few strokes of my mental paintbrush, I altered Gus's features until the gargoyle was the mirror image of myself.

"Pretty good," Ajax commented critically, looking from Gus to me and back again.

I repeated the process, returning Aahz to his "dubious character" disguise.

"Well, we're off," Aahz waved. "Confusion to the enemy!"

Today's plan called for Gus substituting for me. The logic was that should anything go wrong, his stone flesh would not only keep him from harm, but also serve as a shield to defend Aahz.

Somehow it didn't seem right to me, to remain behind in relative safety while sending someone else to take my risks for me. It occurred to me that perhaps I had called the wrong person "coward" last night when speaking with Ajax.

The bowman seemed to accept the arrangement without question, however.

"Follow me, youngster," he cackled. "I don't want to miss any of this!"

With that, he turned and plunged into the brush, leaving me little choice but to trail along behind.

Fortunately, Ajax's chosen vantage point wasn't far. Old or not, I found he set a wicked pace.

Stringing his bow, he crouched and waited, chuckling softly in anticipation.

Settling in beside him, I took a moment to check the energy lines, the invisible streams of energy magicians draw their power from. There were two strong lines nearby, one air, one ground, which was good. While Aahz had taught me how to store the energies internally, with the amount of action scheduled for the day, I wanted all the power I could get.

We could see Aahz and Gus striding with great dignity toward the selected combat point. The opposing force watched them in frozen silence as they took their places.

For a moment, everyone stood in tableau. Then Claude turned to his force and barked out an order. Immediately a half dozen archers broke from the formation and fanned out on either side of the

wagons. Moving with slow deliberation, they each drew and cocked an arrow, then leveled the bows at the two figures blocking the company's progress. I concentrated my energies.

Claude shouted something at our comrades. They remained motionless.

I concentrated.

The bowmen loosed their missiles. Gus threw up one hand dramatically.

The arrows stopped in mid-air and fell to the ground.

The bowmen looked at each other in amazement. Claude barked another order at them. They shakily drew and fired another barrage.

This one was more ragged than the first, but I managed to stop it as well.

"Nice work, youngster," Ajax exclaimed gleefully. "That's got 'em going."

Sure enough, the neat ranks of soldiers were rippling as the men muttered back and forth among themselves. Claude noted it, too, and ordered his bowmen back into the ranks.

Round one to us!

My elation was short-lived, though. The soldiers were drawing their swords now. The two groups assigned to guarding the sides of the wagon pivoted forward, forming two wings ready to engulf our teammates. As further evidence of Claude's nervousness, he even had the troops assigned to pulling the wagons leave their posts and move up to reinforce the center of his line.

That's what we were waiting for.

"Now, Ajax!" I hissed. "Arch 'em high."

"I remember, youngster," the archer grinned. "I'm ready when you are."

I waited until he raised his bow, then concentrated an intense beam of energy at a point a few inches in front of his bow.

It was like the candle-lighting exercise, and it worked as well now as it had when we had tried it last night.

As each shaft sped from Ajax's bow, it burst into flames and continued on its flight.

Again and again with incredible speed the bowman sent his missiles hissing through my ignition point. It required all my concentration to maintain the necessary stream of energy, moving it occasionally as his point of aim changed.

Finally, he dropped his bow back to his side. "That oughta do it, youngster," he grinned.

"Take a look."

I did. There in the distance, behind the-soldiers' lines, thin plumes of smoke were rising from the wagons. In a few moments, Claude's supply company would be without supplies.

If we had a few moments! As we watched, the men began to advance on Aahz and Gus, their swords gleaming in the sun, "Think we'd better do something about that!" Ajax muttered, raising his bow again.

"Wait a second, Ajax!" I ordered, squinting at the distant figures.

There had been a brief consultation between Aahz and Gus, then the gargoyle stepped back and began gesturing wildly at his companion.

It took me a moment, but I finally got the message. With a smile, I closed my eyes and removed Aahz's disguise.

Pandemonium reigned. The soldiers in the front ranks took one look at the demon opposing them and stampeded for the rear, half trampling the men behind them. As word spread through the formation, it became a rout, though I seriously doubt those in the rear knew what they were running from.

If anyone noticed the burning wagons, they didn't slow once.

"Whoeee!" Ajax exclaimed, thumping me on the back. "That did it. Look at 'em run. You'd think those fellers never seed a Pervert before."

"They probably haven't," I commented, trying to massage some feeling back into my shoulder.

"You know," the bowman drawled, squinting at the scene below, "I got me an idea. Them fellers ran off so fast they fergot to signal to anybody. Think we should do it for em?"

"How?" I asked.

"Well," he grinned. "I know the signals, and you're a magician. If I told you what signal to run up, could you do it? Without anybody holdin' it?"

"Sure could," I agreed. "What'll we need for the signal?"

"Lemme think," he frowned. "We'll have to get a skull, and a couple of pieces of red cloth, and a black ball, an-"

"Wait a minute, Ajax," I said, holding up a hand. "I think there's an easier signal they'll understand. Watch this."

I sent one more blast of energy out, and the tower platform burst into flames. "Think they'll get the message?" I smiled. Ajax stared at the burning tower for a moment. "Yer pretty good at that, youngster," he murmured finally. "Throwin' fire that far." "Well," I began modestly, "we magicians can-" " 'Course," he continued. "If you can do that, then you didn't really need me and Blackie to handle those wagons, did you?" Too late I realized my mistake.

"Ajax, I-"

"Kinda strange, you goin' to all that trouble jes' to convince me I'm not useless."

"You're not useless," I barked. "Just because sometimes you're not necessary doesn't mean you're useless. I may be young, but I'm old enough to know that."

Ajax regarded me for a moment, then he suddenly smiled.

"Danged if you aren't right, youngest. .. Skeeve," he laughed. "Guess I knew it, but plum fergot it there fer a while. Let's go get some wine from that cask strapped to your dragon. I'd like to thank you proper fer remindin' me."

We headed back to camp together.

Chapter Twenty:

"Chain of command is the backbone of military structure and must be strictly obeyed."

-F. CHRISTIAN

THE mood back at the camp was understandably celebratory. If I had had any hopes for joining in the festivities, however, they were dashed when Aahz hailed me.

"Over here, kid!" he waved. "We've got some planning to do!"

"That's the other side o' bein' a general, youngster," Ajax murmured sympathetically. "Taint all speeches and glory. You go on ahead. I'll do my drinkin' with the boys."

With a jerk of his head, he indicated Gus and Brockhurst who were already at the wine. Tanda was waiting for me with Aahz. That made my choice a little easier.

"Okay, Ajax," I smiled. "I'll catch up with you in a little bit."

"Congratulations, handsome!" Tanda winked as I joined them. "That was as neat a bit of work as I've seen in a long time."

"Thanks, Tanda," I blushed.

"I see you and Ajax are on speaking terms again," Aahz said, regarding me with cocked eyebrows. "That's not a bad trick in itself. How did you do it?"

"We ... um ... we had a long talk," I replied vaguely. "You said we had some planning to do?"

"More like a briefing." Aahz admitted. "Tanda here brought along a few special effects items I think you should know about."

I had completely forgotten about Tanda's errand which had left me alone at the Bazaar. Now that I had been reminded, my curiosity soared.

"Whatcha got, Tanda?" I asked eagerly.

"Nothing spectacular," she shrugged. "Knowing Aahz was involved, I figured we'd be on a tight budget so I stuck to the basics."

"Just show him, huh?" Aahz growled. "Spare us the editorial comments."

She stuck her tongue out at him but produced a small cloth sack from her belt.

"First off," she began, "I thought we could use a little flash powder. It never fails to impress the yokels."

"Flash powder," I said carefully.

"You set fire to it," Aahz supplied. "It burns fast and gives you a cloud of smoke."

"I've got about a dozen small bags of it here," Tanda continued, showing me the contents of her sack. "Various colors and sizes."

"Can I try one?" I asked. "I've never worked with this stuff before."

"Sure," Tanda said. She grinned, extending the sack. "They're yours to use as you see fit. You might as well know what you've got."

I took the sack and carefully selected one of the small bags from its interior.

"Better toss it to the ground, kid," Aahz cautioned. "Some folks can set it off in their hand, but that takes practice. If you tried it that way now, you'd probably lose a few fingers."

I obediently tossed the bag on the ground a few feet away. Watching it curiously, I focused a quick burst of energy on it.

There was a bright flash of light accompanied by a soft pop. Blinking my eyes, I looked at where the bag had been. A small cloud of green smoke hung in the air, slowly dissipating in the breeze.

"That's neat!" I exclaimed, reaching into the sack again.

"Take it easy," Aahz warned. "We don't have that much of the stuff."

"Oh! Right, Aahz," I replied, feeling a little sheepish. "What else do you have, Tanda?"

"Well," she said, smiling, "I guess this would be a piece-de-resistance."

As she spoke, she seemed to draw something from behind her back. I say "seemed" because I couldn't see anything. From her movements, she looked to be holding a rod about three feet long, but there was nothing in her grasp.

"What is it?" I asked politely.

For a response, she grinned and held whatever it was in front of her. Then she opened her grip and disappeared into thin air.

"Invisibility," Aahz exclaimed. "A cloak of invisibility!"

"Couldn't afford one," came Tanda's voice from somewhere in front of us. "I had to settle for one of these."

What "one of these" was, it turned out, was a sheet of invisibility. It was a sheet of stiff material about three feet by seven feet. Tanda had been carrying it rolled up in a tube, and her disappearance had been caused by the sheet unrolling to its full size.

As she and Aahz chatted excitedly about her new find, I had an opportunity to further my knowledge in the field of invisibility.

Invisible sheets, it seems, were made of roughly the same material as invisible cloaks. Since the sheets were carried, not worn, they did not require the flexibility and softness necessary for a cloak. Consequently, they were considerably cheaper than the cloaks.

The effect was sort of like one-way glass. When you were on the right side of an invisible sheet, you could see through it perfectly well to observe whatever or whoever was on the other side. They, however, could not see you.

We were still discussing the potential uses of the new tool when Brockhurst hastened up to our group.

"Hey, boss!" he called. "We've got company!"

"Who? Where?" I asked calmly.

"Down on the meadow," the Imp responded, pointing. "The Gremlin says there's some kind of group forming out there."

"What Gremlin?" Aahz snarled.

"C'mon, Aahz," Tanda called, starting off. "Let's check this out."

There was indeed a group on the meadow. Empire soldiers all. The puzzling thing was their activity, or specifically their lack of it. They seemed to be simply standing and waiting for something.

"What are they doing, Aahz?" I whispered as we studied the group from the concealment of the tree line.

"They're standing and waiting," Aahz supplied. "I can see that," I said. "But what are they waiting for?"

"Probably for us," my mentor replied.

"For us?" I blinked. "Why?"

"For a war council," Aahz grinned. "Look at it, kid. Aren't they doing the same thing we did when we wanted to talk? They're even standing in the same spot."

I restudied the group in this light. Aahz was right! The enemy was calling for a war council!

"Do you think we should go out there?" I asked nervously.

"Sure," Aahz replied. "But not right away. Let 'em sweat a little. They kept us waiting the first time, remember?"

It was nearly half an hour before we stepped from the tree line and advanced across the meadow to where the soldiers stood waiting. I had taken the precaution of outfitting Aahz in his "dubious character" disguise for the conference. Myself, I was bearing the invisibility sheet before me, so that though I was walking along beside Aahz, to the soldiers it appeared he was alone.

There were more soldiers at the meeting point than there had been at our first meeting with Claude. Even to my untrained eye, it was apparent that there were more than half a dozen officers present among the honor guard.

"You wish a meeting?" Aahz asked haughtily, drawing to a halt before the group.

There was a ripple of quick consultation among the soldiers. Finally one of them, apparently the leader, stepped forward.

"We wish to speak with your master!" he announced formally.

"He's kinda busy right now," Aahz yawned. "Anything I can help you with?"

The leader reddened slightly.

"I am the commander of this sector!" he barked. "I demand to see Skeeve, commander of the defense, not his lackey!"

I dropped one of the bags of flash powder on the ground at my feet.

"If you insist," Aahz growled, "I'll get him. But he won't be happy."

"I'm not here to make him happy," the leader shouted. "Now be off with you."

"That won't be necessary," Aahz leered. "He's a magician. He hears and sees what his servants hear and see. He'll be along."

That was my cue. I let drop the sheet of invisibility and simultaneously ignited the bag of flash powder.

The results were spectacular.

The soldiers, with the exception of the leader, fell back several steps. To them, it looked as if I had suddenly appeared from thin air, materializing in a cloud of red smoke.

For me, the effect was less impressive. As the bag of flash powder went off, it was made apparent to me that watching a cloud of smoke from a distance was markedly different from standing at ground zero.

As I was enveloped in the scarlet billows, my feeling was not of elated triumph but rather a nearly overwhelming desire to cough and sneeze.

My efforts to suppress my reactions caused me to contort my features to the point where I must have borne more than a faint resemblance to Gus.

"Steady, Master!" Aahz cautioned.

"Aahz. Ah!" I gasped.

"Do not let your anger overcome your reason," my mentor continued hastily. "They don't know the powers they trifle with."

"I ... I did not wish to be disturbed," I managed at last, regaining my breath as the smoke dissipated.

The leader of the group had held his ground through the entire proceedings, though he looked a bit paler and less sure of himself than when he had been dealing with just Aahz.

"We . . . um . . . apologize for bothering you," he began uncertainly. "But there are certain matters requiring your immediate attention . . . specifically the war we are currently engaged in."

I eyed him carefully. He seemed to be of a different cut than Claude had been.

"I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage, sir," I said cagily. "You seem to know me, but I don't recall having met you before."

"We have not met before," the officer replied grimly. "If we had, be assured one of us would not be here currently. I know you by reputation, specifically for your recent efforts to resist the advance of our army. For myself, I am Antonio, commander of the right wing of the left flank of the Empire's army. These are my officers."

He indicated the soldiers behind him with a vague wave of his hand. The men responded by drawing themselves more erect and thrusting out their chins arrogantly.

I acknowledged them with a slight nod.

"Where is Claude?" I asked casually. "I was under the impression he was an officer of this sector."

"You are correct," Antonio smirked. "He was. He is currently being detained until he can be properly court-martialed ... for incompetence!"

"Incompetence?" I echoed. "Come now, sir. Aren't you being a little harsh? While Claude may have overstepped his abilities a bit, I wouldn't say he's incompetent. I mean, after all, he was dealing with supernatural powers, if you know what I mean." As I spoke, I wiggled my fingers dramatically at Aahz and removed his disguise.

The jaws of the attending officers dropped, ruining their arrogant jut. Then Aahz grinned at them, and their mouths clicked shut in unison as they swallowed hard. Antonio was unimpressed. "Yes, yes," he said briskly, waving a hand as if at an annoying fly. "We have had reports, many reports, as to your rapport with demons. Claude's incompetence is in his disastrous underestimation of the forces opposing him. Be assured, I will not be guilty of the same error."

"Don't count on it, Tony," Aahz leered. "We demons can be a pretty tricky lot." The officer ignored him.

"However, we are not here for idle pleasantries," he said, fixing me with a stern gaze. "I believe we have a dispute to settle concerning right of passage over this particular piece of terrain."

"We have a dispute concerning your right of passage over the kingdom of Possiltum," I corrected.

"Yes, yes," Antonio yawned. "Of course, if you want to stop us from gaining Possiltum, you had best stop us here."

"That's about how we had it figured," Aahz agreed.

"Not to belabor the point, Antonio," I smiled, "but I believe we do have you stopped."

"Temporarily," the officer smiled. "I expect that situation to change shortly . . . shall we say, a few hours after dawn? Tomorrow?"

"We'll be here," Aahz nodded.

"Just a moment," I interrupted. "Antonio, you strike me as being a sporting man. Would you like to make our encounter tomorrow a little more interesting? Say, with a little side wager?"

"Such as what?" the officer scowled.

"If you lose tomorrow," I said carefully, "will you admit Claude's defeat had nothing to do with incompetence and drop the charges against him?"

Antonio thought for a moment, then nodded.

"Done," he said. "Normally I would fear what the reaction of my superiors would be, but I am confident of my victory. There are things even a demon cannot stand against."

"Such as?" Aahz drawled.

"You will see," the officer smiled. "Tomorrow."

With that, he spun on his heel and marched off, his officers trailing behind him.

"What do you think, Aahz?" I murmured.

"Think?" my mentor scowled. "I think you're going soft, kid. First Brockhurst, now Claude. What is this 'be kind to enemies' kick you're on?" "I meant about tomorrow," I clarified quickly. "I dunno, kid," Aahz admitted. "He sounded too confident for comfort. I wish I knew what he's got up his sleeve that's supposed to stop demons." "Well," I sighed, "I guess we'll see tomorrow."

Chapter Twenty-One:

"It takes a giant to fight a giant."

-H.PRYM

OUR pensiveness was still with us the next day.

Our opponents were definitely up to something, but we couldn't tell exactly what it was. Tanda and Brockhurst had headed out on a scouting trip during the night and had brought back puzzling news. The Empire's soldiers had brought up some kind of heavy equipment, but it was hidden from sight by a huge box. All our scouts could say for sure was that whatever the secret weapon was, it was big and it was heavy.

Gus offered to fly over the box to take a quick peek inside, but we vetoed the idea. With the box constantly in the center of a mass of soldiers, there was no way the gargoyle could carry out his mission unobserved. Even if he used the invisibility sheet, the army was so far flung that someone would see him. So far we had kept the gargoyle's presence on our team as a secret, and we preferred to keep it that way. Even if we disguised him as Aahz or myself, it would betray the fact that someone in our party was able to fly. As Aahz pointed out, it looked as if this campaign would be rough enough without giving the opposition advance warning of the extent of our abilities.

This was all tactically sound and irrefutably logical. Nonetheless, it did nothing to reassure me as Aahz and I stood waiting for Antonio to make his opening gambit.

"Relax, kid," Aahz murmured. "You look nervous."

"I am nervous," I snapped back. "We're standing out here waiting to fight, and we don't know who or what we're supposed to be fighting. You'll forgive me if that makes me a trifle edgy."

I was aware I was being unnecessarily harsh on my mentor. Ajax and Gus were standing by, and Brockhurst and Tanda were watching for any new developments. The only team member unaccounted for this morning was the Gremlin, but I thought it wisest not to bring this to Aahz's attention. I assumed our elusive blue friend was off somewhere with Gleep, as my pet was also missing.

Everything that could have been done in preparation had been done. However, I still felt uneasy.

"Look at it this way, kid," Aahz tried again. "At least we know what we aren't up against."

What we weren't dealing with was soldiers. Though a large number of them were gathered in the near vicinity, there seemed to be no effort being made to organize or arm them for battle. As the appointed time drew near, it became more and more apparent that they were to be spectators only in the upcoming fray.

"I think I'd rather deal with soldiers," I said glumly.

"Heads up, kid," Aahz retorted, nudging me with his elbow. "Whatever's going to happen is about to."

I knew what he meant, which bothered me. There was no time to ponder it, however. Antonio had just put in his appearance.

He strolled around one corner of the mammoth box deep in conversation with a suspicious-looking character in a hooded cloak. He shot a glance in our direction, smiled, and waved merrily.

We didn't wave back.

"I don't like the looks of this, kid," Aahz growled.

I didn't either, but there wasn't much we could do except wait. Antonio finished his conversation with the stranger and stepped back, folding his arms across his chest. The stranger waved some of the on looking soldiers aside, then stepped back himself. Drawing himself up, he began weaving his hands back and forth in a puzzling manner. Then the wind carried the sound to me and I realized he was chanting.

"Aahz!" I gasped. "They've got their own magician."

"I know," Aahz grinned back. "But from what I can hear he's bluffing them the same way you bluffed the court back at Possiltum. He probably doesn't have any more powers than I do."

No sooner had my mentor made his observation than the side of the huge box which was facing us slowly lowered itself to the ground. Revealed inside the massive container was a dragon.

The box had been big, better than thirty feet long and twenty feet high, but from the look of the dragon he must have been cramped for space inside.

He was big! I mean, really big!

Now I've never kidded myself about Gleep's size. Though his ten-foot length might look big here on Klah, I had seen dragons on Deva that made him look small. The dragon currently facing us, however, dwarfed everything I had seen before.

He was an iridescent bluish-green his entire length, which was far more serpentine than I was accustomed to seeing in a dragon. He had massive bat wings that he stretched and flexed as he clawed his way out of the confining box. There was a silver glint from his eye sockets which would have made him look machinelike were it not for the fluid grace of his powerful limbs.

For a moment, I was almost overcome by the beautiful spectacle he presented, emerging onto the battlefield. Then he threw his head back and roared, and my admiration turned icy cold within me.

The great head turned until its eyes were focused directly on us. Then he began to stalk forward.

"Time for the better part of valor, kid," Aahz whispered, tugging at my sleeve. "Let's get out of here."

"Wait a minute, Aahz!" I shot back. "Do you see that? What the keeper's holding?"

A glint of gold in the sunlight had caught my eye. The dragon's keeper had a gold pendant clasped in his fist as he urged his beast forward.

"Yeah!" Aahz answered. "So?"

"I've seen a pendant like that before!" I explained excitedly. "That's how he's controlling the dragon!"

The Deveel who had been running the Dragon stall where I acquired Gleep had worn a pendant like that. The pendant was used to control dragons . . . unattached dragons, that is. Attached dragons can be controlled by their owner without other assistance. A dragon becomes attached to you when you feed it. That's how I got Gleep. I fed him, sort of. Actually, he helped himself to a hefty bit of my sleeve.

"Well, don't just stand there, kid," Aahz barked, interrupting my reverie. "Get it!"

I reached out with my mind and took a grab at the pendant. The keeper felt it start to go and tightened his grip on it, fighting me for its possession, "I... I can't get it, Aahz," I cried. "He won't let go."

"Then hightail it outta here, kid," my mentor ordered. "Tell Ajax to bag us that keeper. Better tell Gus to stand by with Berfert just in case. I'll try to keep the dragon busy."

An image flashed in my mind. It was a view of me, Skeeve, court magician, bolting for safety while Aahz faced the dragon alone. Something snapped in my mind.

"You go!" I snapped.

"Kid, are you-"

"It's my war and my job," I shouted. "Now get going."

With that I turned to face the oncoming dragon, not knowing or caring if Aahz followed my orders. I was Skeeve!

But it was an awfully big dragon!

I tried again for the pendant, nearly lifting the keeper from his feet with my effort, but the man clung firmly to his possession, screaming orders at the dragon as he did.

I shot a nervous glance at the grim behemoth bearing down on me. If I tried to levitate out of the way, he could just....

"Look out, kid!" came Aahz's voice from behind me.

I half turned, then something barreled past me, positioning itself between me and the oncoming menace.

It was Gleep!

"Gleep!" I shouted. "Get back here!" My pet paid me no mind. His master was being threatened, and he meant to have a hand in this no matter what I said.

No longer a docile, playful companion, he planted himself between me and the monster, lowered his head to the ground, and hissed savagely, a six-foot tongue of flame leaping from his mouth as he did.

The effect on the big dragon was astonishing. He lurched to a stop and sat back on his haunches, cocking his head curiously at the mini-dragon blocking his path.

Gleep was not content with stopping his opponent, however. Heedless of the fact that the other dragon was over four times his size he began to advance stiffly, challenging his rival's right to the field.

The large dragon blinked, then shot a look behind him. Then he looked down on Gleep again, drawing his head back until his long neck formed a huge question mark.

Gleep continued to advance.

I couldn't understand it. Even if the monster couldn't flame, which was doubtful, it was obvious he had the sheer physical power to crush my pet with minimal effort. Still he did nothing, looking desperately about him almost as if he were embarrassed.

I watched in spellbound horror. It couldn't last. If nothing else, Gleep was getting too close to the giant to be ignored. Any minute now, the monster would have to react.

Finally, after a final glance at his frantic keeper, the big dragon did react. With a sigh, one of his taloned front paws lashed out horizontally in a cuff that would have caved in a building. It struck Gleep on the side of his head and sent him sprawling.

My pet was game, though, and struggled painfully to his feet, shaking his head as if to clear it.

Before he could assume his aggressive stance, however, the big dragon stretched his neck down until their heads were side by side, and he began to mutter and grumble in Gleep's ear. My dragon cocked his head as if listening, then "whuffed" in response.

As the stunned humans and nonhumans watched, the two dragons conversed in the center of the battlefield punctuating their mutterings with occasional puffs of smoke.

I tried to edge forward to get a better idea of exactly what was going on, but the big dragon turned a baleful eye on me and let loose a blast of flame which kept me at a respectful distance. Not that I

was afraid, mind you; Gleep seemed to have the situation well in hand ... or talon as the case might be. Well, I had always told Aahz that Gleep was a very talon-ted dragon.

Finally, the big dragon drew himself up, turned, and majestically left the field without a backward glance, his head impressively high. Ignoring the angry shouts of the soldiers, he returned to his box and dropped his haunches, sitting with his back to the entire proceeding.

His keeper's rage was surpassed only by Antonio's. He screamed at the keeper with purpled face and frantic gestures until the keeper angrily pulled the control pendant from around his neck, handed it to the officer, and stalked off. Antonio blinked at the pendant, then flung it to the ground and started off after the keeper.

That was all the opening I needed. Reaching out with my mind, I brought the pendant winging to my hand.

"Aahz!" I began.

"I don't believe it," my mentor mumbled to himself. "I saw it, but I still don't believe it."

"Gleep!"

My pet came racing up to my side, understandably pleased with himself.

"Hi, fella!" I cried, ignoring his breath and throwing my arms around his neck in a hug. "What happened out there, anyway?"

"Gleep!" my pet said evasively, carefully studying a cloud.

If I had expected an answer, it was clear I wasn't going to get one.

"I still don't believe it," Aahz repeated.

"Look, Aahz," I said, holding the pendant aloft. "Now we don't have to worry about that or any other dragon. We've shown a profit!"

"So we did," Aahz scowled. "But do me a favor, huh, kid?"

"What's that, Aahz?" I asked.

"If that dragon, or any dragon, wanders into our camp, don't feed it! We already have one, and that's about all my nerves can stand. Okay?"

"Sure, Aahz," I smiled.

"Gleep!" said my pet, rubbing against me for more petting, which he got.

Chapter Twenty-Two:

"Hell hath no fury like a demon scorched."
-C. MATHER

OUR next war council made the previous ones look small. This was only to be expected, as we were dealing with the commander of the entire left flank of the Empire's army.

Our meeting was taking place in a pavilion constructed specifically for that purpose, and the structure was packed with officers, including Claude. It seemed Antonio was true to his word, even though he himself was not currently present.

In the face of such a gathering, we had decided to show a bit more force ourselves. To that end, Tanda and Brockhurst were accompanying us, while Gleep snuffled around outside. Gus and Ajax we were still holding in reserve, while the Gremlin had not reappeared since the confrontation of dragons.

I didn't like the officer we were currently dealing with. There was something about his easy, oily manner that set me on edge. I strongly suspected he had ascended to his current position by poisoning his rivals.

"So you'd like us to surrender," he was saying thoughtfully, drumming his fingers on the table before him.

". . . or withdraw, or turn aside," I corrected. "Frankly, we don't care what you do, as long as you leave Possiltum alone."

"We've actually been considering doing just that," the commander said, leaning back in his chair to study the pavilion's canopy.

"Is that why you've been moving up additional troops all day long?" Brockhurst asked sarcastically.

"Merely an internal matter, I assure you," the commander purred. "All my officers are assembled here, and they're afraid their troops will fall to mischief if left to their own devices."

"What my colleague means," Aahz interjected, "is we find it hard to believe you're actually planning to accede to our demands."

"Why not?" the commander shrugged. "That is what you've been fighting for, isn't it? There comes a point when a commander must ask himself if it won't cost him more dearly to fight a battle than to pass it by. So far, your resistance utilizing demons and dragons has shown us this battle could be difficult indeed."

"There are more where they come from," I interjected, "should the need arise."

"So you've demonstrated," the commander smiled, waving a casual hand at Tanda and Brockhurst. "Witches and devils made an impressive addition to your force."

I deemed it unwise to point out to him that Brockhurst was an Imp, not a Deveel.

"Then you agree to bypass Possiltum?" Aahz asked bluntly.

"I agree to discuss it with my officers," the commander clarified. "All I ask is that you leave one of your... ah ... assistants behind."

"What for?" I asked. I didn't like the way he was eyeing Tanda.

"To bring you word of our decision, of course," the commander shrugged. "None of my men would dare enter your camp, even granted a messenger's immunity."

There was a mocking tone to his voice I didn't like.

"I'll stay, Skeeve," Aahz volunteered.

I considered it. Aahz had demonstrated his ability to take care of himself time and time again. Still I didn't trust the commander.

"Only if you are willing to give us one of your officers in return as a hostage," I replied.

"I've already said none of-" the commander began.

"He need not enter our camp," I explained. "He can remain well outside our force, on the edge of the tree line in full view of your force. I will personally guarantee his safety."

The commander chewed his lip thoughtfully. "Very well," he said. "Since you have shown an interest in his career, I will give you Claude to hold as a hostage."

The young officer paled but remained silent. "Agreed," I said. "We will await your decision."

I nodded to my comrades, and they obediently began filing out of the pavilion. Claude hesitated, then joined the procession.

I wanted to tell Aahz to be careful but decided against it. It wouldn't do to admit my partner's vulnerability in front of the commander. Instead, I nodded curtly to the officers and followed my comrades.

Tanda and Brockhurst were well on their way back to the treeline. Claude, on the other hand, was waiting for me as I emerged and fell in step beside me.

"While we have a moment," he said stiffly, "I would like to thank you for interceding in my behalf with my superiors."

"Don't mention it," I mumbled absently.

"No, really," he persisted. "Chivalry to an opponent is rarely seen these days. I think-

"Look, Claude," I growled, "credit it to my warped sense of justice. I don't like you, and didn't when we first met, but that doesn't make you incompetent. Unpleasant, perhaps, but not incompetent."

I was harsher with him than I had intended to be, but I was worried about Aahz.

Finding himself thus rebuked, he sank into an uncomfortable silence which lasted almost until we reached the trees. Then he cleared his throat and tried again.

"Urn . . . Skeeve?"

"Yeah?" I retorted curtly.

"I ... um . . . what I was trying to say was that I am grateful and would repay your favor by any reasonable means at my disposal."

Despite my concern, his offer penetrated my mind as a potential opportunity.

"Would answering a few questions fall under the heading of 'reasonable'?" I asked casually.

"Depending upon the questions," he replied carefully. "I am still a soldier, and my code of conduct clearly states-

"Tell you what," I interrupted. "I'll ask the questions, and you decide which ones are okay to answer. Fair enough?"

"So it would seem," he admitted.

"Okay," I began. "First question. Do you think the commander will actually bypass Possiltum?"

The officer avoided my eyes for a moment, then shook his head briskly.

"I should not answer that," he said, "but I will. I do not feel the commander is even considering it as a serious possibility, nor does any officer in that tent. He is known as 'the Brute,' even among his most loyal and seasoned troops. May I assure you he did not acquire that nickname by surrendering or capitulating while his force was still intact."

"Then why did he go through the motions of the meeting just now?" I queried.

"To gain time," Claude shrugged. "As your assistants noted, he is using the delay to mass his troops. The only code he adheres to is 'Victory at all costs.' In this case, it seems it is costing him his honor."

I thought about this for a moment before asking my next question.

"Claude," I said carefully, "you've faced us in battle, and you know your own army. If your prediction is correct and the Brute attacks in force, in your opinion, what are our chances of victory?"

"Nil," the officer replied quietly. "I know it may sound like enemy propaganda, but I ask you to believe my sincerity. Even with the additional forces you displayed this evening, if the Brute sets the legions in motion, they'll roll right over you. Were I in your position, I would take advantage of the cover of night to slip away, and not fear the stigma of cowardice. You're facing the mightiest army ever assembled. Against such a force there is no cowardice, only self-preservation."

I believed him. The only question was what should I do with the advice.

"I thank you for your counsel," I said formally. "And will consider your words carefully. For now, if you will please remain here in the open as promised, I must consult with my troops."

"One more thing," Claude said, laying a restraining hand on my arm. "If any harm befalls your assistant, the one you left at the meeting, I would ask that you remember I was here with you and had no part in it."

"I will remember," I nodded, withdrawing my arm. "But if the Brute tries to lay a hand on Aahz, I'll wager he'll wish he hadn't."

As I turned to seek out my team, I wished I felt as confident as I sounded.

Tanda came to me readily when I caught her eye and beckoned her away from the others.

"What is it, Skeeve?" she asked as we moved away into the shadows. "Are you worried about Aahz?"

I was, though I didn't want to admit it just yet. The night was almost gone with no signs of movement or activity from the pavilion. Still, I clung to my faith in Aahz. When that failed, I turned my mind to other exercises to distract it from fruitless worry.

"Aahz can take care of himself," I said gruffly.

"There's something else I wanted your opinion on."

"What's that?" she asked, cocking her head.

"As you know," I began pompously, "I am unable to see the disguise spells I cast. Though everyone else is fooled, as the originator of the spell, I still continue to see things in their true form."

"I didn't know that," she commented. "But continue."

"Well," I explained, "I was thinking that if we actually have to fight the army, we could use additional troops. I've got an idea, but I need you to tell me if it actually works."

"Okay," she nodded. "What is it?"

I started to resume my oration, then realized I was merely stalling. Instead, I closed my eyes and focused my mind on the small grove of trees ahead.

"Hey!" cried Tanda. "That's terrific."

I opened my eyes, being careful to maintain the spell.

"What do you see?" I asked nervously. "A whole pack of demons . . . oops ... I mean Perverts," she reported gaily. "Bristling with swords and spears. That's wild!"

It worked. I was correct when I guessed that my disguise spell could work on any living thing, not just men and beasts.

"I've never seen anything like it," Tanda marveled. "Can you make them move?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I just-"

"Boss! Hey, Boss!" Brockhurst shouted, sprinting up to us. "Come quick! You'd better see this!"

"What is it?" I called, but the Imp had reversed his course and was headed for the tree line.

A sudden fear clutched at my heart. "C'mon, Tanda," I growled and started off.

By the time we reached the tree line the whole team was assembled there, talking excitedly among themselves.

"What is it?" I barked, joining them.

The group fell silent, avoiding my eyes. Brockhurst lifted a hand and pointed across the meadow.

There, silhouetted against a huge bonfire was Aahz, hanging by his neck from a crude gallows. His body was limp and lifeless as he rotated slowly at the end of the rope. At his feet, a group of soldiers were gathered to witness the spectacle.

Relief flooded over me, and I began to giggle hysterically. Hanging! If only they know!

Alarm showed in the faces of my team as they studied my reaction in shocked silence.

"Don't worry!" I gasped. "He's okay!"

Early in my career with Aahz, I had learned that one doesn't kill demons by hanging them. Their neck muscles are too strong! They can hang all day without being any the worse for wear. I had, of course, learned this the hard way one day when we....

"At least they have the decency to burn the body," Claude murmured from close beside me.

My laughter died in my throat.

"What?" I cried, spinning around.

Sure enough, the soldiers had cut down Aahz's "body" and were carrying it toward the bonfire with the obvious intention of throwing it in.

Fire! That was a different story. Fire was one of the things that could kill Aahz deader than....

"Ajax!" I cried. "Quick! Stop them from-"

It was too late.

With a heave from the soldiers, Aahz arched into the roaring flames. There was a quick burst of light, then nothing.

Gone! Aahz!

I stood staring at the bonfire in disbelief. Shock numbed me to everything else as my mind reeled at the impact of my loss.

"Skeeve!" Tanda said in my ear, laying a hand on my shoulder.

"Leave me alone!" I croaked.

"But the army..."

She let the word trail off, but it made its impact. Slowly I became conscious of the world around me.

The legions, having given us our answer, were massing for battle. Drums boomed, heralding the rising sun as it reflected off the polished weapons arrayed to face us.

The army. They had done this!

With deliberate slowness I turned to face Claude. He recoiled in fear from my gaze.

"Remember!" he cried desperately. "I had nothing to-"

"I remember," I replied coldly. "And for that reason only I am letting you go. I would advise, however, that you choose a path to follow other than rejoining the army. I have tried to be gentle with them, but if they insist on having war, as I am Skeeve, we shall give it to them!"

Chapter Twenty-Three:

"What is this, a Chinese fire drill?"

-SUN TZU

I DIDN'T see where Claude went after I finished speaking with him, nor did I care. I was studying the opposing army with a new eye. Up to now I had been thinking defensively, planning for survival. Now I was thinking as the aggressor.

The legions were in tight block formations, arrayed some three or four blocks deep and perhaps fifteen blocks wide. Together they presented an awesome impression of power, an irresistible force that would never retreat.

That suited me fine. In fact, I wanted a little insurance that they would not retreat.

"Ajax!" I called without turning my head.

"Here, youngster!" the bowman replied from close beside me.

"Can Blackie send your arrows out beyond those formations?"

"I reckon so," he drawled.

"Very well," I said grimly. "The same drill as the first battle, only this time don't go for the wagons. I want a half circle of fire around their rear."

As before, the bowstring set up a rhythmic "thung" as the bowman began to lose shaft after shaft. This time, however, it seemed the arrows burst into flame more readily.

"Ease off, youngster," Ajax called. "Yer burnin' em up before they reach the ground."

He was right. Either I was standing directly on a force line, or my anger had intensified my energies. Whatever the reason, I found myself with an incredible amount of power at my disposal.

"Sorry, Ajax," I shouted, and diverted a portion of my mind away from the ignition point.

"Tanda!" I called. "Run back and get Gleep!"

"Right, Skeeve," came the reply.

I had a hunch my pet might come in handy before this brawl was done.

The front row of the army's formation was beginning to advance to the rhythmic pounding of drums. I ignored them.

"Brockhurst!"

"Here, boss!" the Imp responded, stepping to my side.

"Have you spotted the commander yet?"

"Not yet," came the bitter reply. "He's probably buried back in the middle of the formation somewhere."

"Well, climb a tree or something and see if you can pinpoint him," I ordered.

"Right, boss! When I see him, do you want me to go after him?"

"No!" I replied grimly. "Report back to me. I want to handle him myself."

The front line was still advancing. I decided I'd better do something about it. With a sweep of my mind, I set fire to the meadow in front of the line's center. The blocks confronted by this barrier ground to a halt while the right and left wings continued their forward movement.

"Gleep!" came a familiar voice accompanied by an even more familiar blast of bad breath. "We're back!" Tanda announced unnecessarily. I ignored them and studied the situation. Plumes of white smoke rising from behind the Empire's formation indicated that Ajax was almost finished with his task. Soon, the army would find itself cut off from any retreat. It was time to start thinking about our attack. The first thing I needed was more information.

"Gus!" I said thoughtfully, "I want you to take a quick flight over their formations. See if you can find a spot to drop Berfert where he can do some proper damage."

"Right, boss," the gargoyle grunted, lumbering forward.

"Wait a minute," I said, a thought occurring to me. "Tanda, have you still got the invisibility sheet with you?"

"Right here!" she grinned.

"Good," I nodded. "Gus, take the sheet with you. Keep it in front of you as long as you can while you're checking them out. There's no sense drawing fire until you have to."

The gargoyle accepted the sheet with a shrug. "If you say so, boss," he muttered. "But they can't do much to me."

"Use it anyway," I ordered. "Now get moving."

The gargoyle sprang heavily into the air and started across the meadow with slow sweeps of his massive wings. I found it hard to believe anything that big and made of stone could fly, but I was seeing it. Maybe he used levitation.

"All set, youngster," Ajax chortled, interrupting my thoughts. "Anything else I can do for ya?"

"Not just now, Ajax," I replied. "But stand by." I was glad that portion of my concentration was free now. This next stunt was going to take all the energy I could muster.

I focused my mind on the grass in front of the advancing left wing. As testimony to the effectiveness of my efforts, that portion of the line ground to an immediate halt.

"Say!" Tanda breathed in genuine admiration.

"That's neat."

The effect I was striving for was to have the grass form itself into an army of Imps, rising from the ground to confront the Empire's troops. I chose Imps this time instead of demons because Imps are shorter, therefore requiring less energy to maintain the illusion.

Whatever my efforts actually achieved, it was enough to have the soldiers react. After several shouted orders from their officers, the troops let fly a ragged barrage of javelins at the grass in front of them. The weapons, of course, had no effect on their phantom foe.

"Say, youngster," Ajax said, nudging me lightly.

"You want me to do something about those jokers shootin' at our gargoyle?"

I turned slightly to check Gus's progress. The flying figure had passed over the center line troops, the ones my fire was holding in check. The soldiers could now see the figure behind the invisible sheet, and were reacting with enviable competence.

The archers in their formation were busy loosing their shafts at this strange figure that had suddenly appeared overhead, while their comrades did their best to reach the gargoyle with hurled javelins.

I saw all this at a glance. I also saw something else.

"Wait a minute, Ajax," I ordered. "Look at that!"

The various missiles loosed by the center line were falling to earth in the massed formations of the troops still awaiting commands. Needless to say, this was not well received, particularly as they were still unable to see the actual target of their advance force. To them, it must have appeared that by some magik or demonic possession, their allies had suddenly turned and fired on them.

Now a few blocks began to return the fire, ordering their own archers into action. Others responded by raising their shields and starting forward with drawn swords.

The result was utter chaos, as the center line troops tried to defend themselves from the attacks of their own reinforcements.

Mind you, I hadn't planned it this way, but I was quick to capitalize on the situation. If the presence of a gargoyle could cause this kind of turmoil, I thought it would be a good idea to up the ante a little.

With a quick brush of my mind, I altered Gus's appearance. Now they had a full-grown dragon hovering over their midst. The effect was spectacular.

I, however, did not allow myself the luxury of watching. I had learned something in this brief exchange, and I wanted to try it out.

I dissolved my Imp army, then reformed them, not in front of the troops, but in their midst!

This threw the formations into total disorder. As the soldiers struck or threw at the phantom figures, more often than not they struck their comrades instead.

If this kept up, they would be too busy fighting each other to bother with us.

"Boss!" Brockhurst called, darting up to my side. "I've got the commander spotted!"

"Where?" I asked grimly, trying not to take my concentration from the battle raging in the meadow.

The Imp pointed.

Sure enough! There was the Brute, striding angrily from formation to formation, trying to restore order to his force.

I heard the telltale whisper of an arrow being drawn.

"Ajax!" I barked. "Hold your fire. He's mine . . . all mine!"

As I said this, I dissolved all the Imps in the Brute's vicinity, and instead changed the commander's features until he took on the appearance of Aahz.

The dazed soldiers saw a demon appear in their midst brandishing a sword, a demon of a type they knew could be killed. They needed no further prompting.

I had one brief glimpse of the Brute's startled face before his troops closed on him, then a forest of uniforms blotted him from my view.

"Mission accomplished, boss!" Gus announced, appearing beside me. "What next?"

"What... did you ..." I stammered.

I had forgotten that on his return trip, the invisibility sheet would shield the gargoyle from our view. His sudden appearance had startled me.

"Berfert'll be along when he gets done with their siege equipment," Gus continued, waving toward the enemy.

I looked across the meadow. He was right! The heavy equipment which had been lined up behind the army was now in flames.

Then I noticed something else.

The army wasn't fighting each other anymore. I realized with a start that between settling accounts with the Brute and Gus's reappearance, I had forgotten to maintain the Imp army!

In the absence of any visible foe, the Empire troops had apparently come to their senses and were now milling about trying to reestablish their formations.

Soon now, they would be ready to attack again.

"What do we do next, boss?" Brockhurst asked eagerly.

That was a good question. I decided to stall while I tried to work out an answer.

"I'll draw you a diagram," I said confidently. "Somebody give me a sword."

"Here, kid. Use mine," Aahz replied, passing me the weapon.

"Thanks," I said absently. "Now, this line is their main formation. If we ... Aahz!?"

"Ready and able," my mentor grinned. "Sorry I'm late."

It was Aahz! He was standing there calmly with his arms folded as if he had been part of our group all along. The reactions of the others, however, showed that they were as surprised as I was at his appearance.

"But you ..." I stammered. "The fire . . ."

"Oh, that," Aahz shrugged. "About the time I figured what they were doing, I used the D-Hopper to blink out to another dimension. The only trouble was I hadn't gotten around to relabeling the controls yet, and I had a heck of a time finding my way back to Klah."

Relief flooded over me like a cool wave. Aahz was alive! More important, he was here! The prospects for the battle suddenly looked much better.

"What should we do next, Aahz?" I asked eagerly.

"I don't know why you're asking me," my mentor blinked innocently. "It looks like you've been doing a fine job so far all by yourself."

Terrific! Now that I need advice, I get compliments.

"Look, Aahz," I began sternly. "We've got a battle coming up that--"

"Boss!" Brockhurst interrupted. "Something's going on out there!"

With a sinking heart, I turned and surveyed the situation again.

A new figure had appeared on the scene, an officer from the look of him. He was striding briskly along the front of the formation alternately shouting and waving his hands. Trailing along in his wake was a cluster of officers, mumbling together and shaking their hands.

"What in the world is that all about?" I murmured half to myself.

"Brace yourself, kid," Aahz advised. "If I'm hearing correctly, it's bad news."

"C'mon, Aahz," I sighed. "How could things get worse than they already are?"

"Easy," Aahz retorted. "That is the supreme commander of the Empire's army. He's here to find out what's holding up his left flank's advance."

Chapter Twenty-Four:

' . . . and then I said to myself, 'Why should I split it two ways--'

-G. MOUSER

THE supreme commander's name was Big Julie, and he was completely different from what I had expected. For one thing, when he called for a war council, he came to us. Flanked by his entire entourage of officers, he came all the way across the meadow to stand just short of the tree line, and he came unarmed. What was more, all of his officers were unarmed, presumably at his insistence.

He seemed utterly lacking in the arrogance so prevalent in the other officers we had dealt with, inviting us into the large tent he had had erected in the meadow for the meeting. Introducing him to the members of my force, I noticed he treated them with great respect and seemed genuinely pleased to meet each of them, even Gleep.

Our whole team was present for the meeting. We figured that if there was ever a time to display our power, this was it.

In a surprising show of generosity, Aahz broke out the wine and served drinks to the assemblage. I was a little suspicious of this. Aahz isn't above doctoring drinks to win a fight, but when I caught his eye and raised an eyebrow, he responded with a small shake of his head. Apparently he was playing this round straight.

Then we got down to business.

Big Julie heard us out, listening with rapt attention. When we finished, he sighed and shook his head.

"Ah'm sorry," he announced. "But I can't do it. We've got to keep advancing, you know? That's what armies do!"

"Couldn't you advance in another direction for a while?" I suggested hopefully.

"Aie!" he exclaimed, spreading his hands defensively. "What do you think I got here, geniuses? These are soldiers. They move in straight lines, know what I mean?"

"Do they have to move so vigorously?" Aahz muttered. "They don't leave much behind."

"What can I say?" Big Julie shrugged. "They're good boys. They do their job. Sometimes they get a little carried away . . . like the Brute."

I had hoped to avoid the subject of the Brute, but since it had come up, I decided to face it head on.

"Say ... um ... Julie," I began.

"Big Julie!" one of the officers growled out of the corner of his mouth.

"Big Julie!" I amended hastily. "About the Brute. Um ... he was . . . well... I wanted . . ."

"Don't mention it," Julie waved. "You want to know the truth? You did me a favor."

"I did?" I blinked.

"I was getting a little worried about the Brute, you know what I mean?" the commander raised his eyebrows. "He was getting a little too ambitious."

"In that case. ..." I smiled.

"Still . . ." Julie continued, "that's a bad way to go. Hacked apart by your own men. I wouldn't want that to happen to me."

"You should have fed him to the dragons," Aahz said bluntly.

"The Brute?" Julie frowned. "Fed to the dragons? Why?"

"Because then he could have been 'et, too!'"

Apparently this was supposed to be funny, as Aahz erupted into sudden laughter as he frequently does at his own jokes. Tanda rolled her eyes in exasperation.

Big Julie looked vaguely puzzled. He glanced at me, and I shrugged to show I didn't know what was going on either.

"He's strange," Julie announced, stabbing an accusing finger at Aahz. "What's a nice boy like you doing hanging around with strange people? Hey?"

"It's the war," I said apologetically. "You know what they say about strange bedfellows."

"You seem to be doin' all right for yourself!" Julie winked, then leered at Tanda.

"You want I should clean up his act, Boss?" Brockhurst asked grimly, stepping forward.

"See!" Julie exploded. "That's what I mean. This is no way to learn warfare. Tell you what. Why don't you let me fix you up with a job, hey? What do you say to that?"

"What pay scale?" Aahz asked.

"Aahz!" I scowled, then turned back to Julie. "Sorry, but we've already got a job . . . defending Possiltum. I appreciate your offer, but I don't want to leave a job unfinished."

"What have I been telling you?" Julie appealed to his officers. "All the good material has been taken already. Why can't you bring me recruits like this, eh?"

This was all very flattering, but I clung tenaciously to the purpose of our meeting.

"Um . . . Jul. . . I mean. Big Julie," I continued. "About defending Possiltum. Couldn't you find another kingdom somewhere to attack? We really don't want to have to fight you."

"You don't want to fight?" Julie erupted sarcastically. "You think I want to fight? You think I like doing this for a living? You think my boys like killing and conquering all the time?"

"Well..." I began tactfully.

Big Julie wasn't listening. He was out of his seat and pacing up and down, gesturing violently to emphasize his words.

"What kind of ding-bat wants to fight?" he asked rhetorically. "Do I look crazy? Do my boys look crazy? Everybody thinks we got some kind of weird drive that keeps us going. They think that all we want to do in the whole world is march around in sweaty armor and sharpen swords on other people's helmets. That's what you think too, isn't it? Eh? Isn't it?"

This last was shouted directly at me. By now I was pretty fed up with being shouted at.

"Yes!" I roared angrily. "That's what I think!"

"Well," Julie scowled. "You're wrong because-"

"That's what I think because if you didn't like doing it, you wouldn't do it!" I continued, rising to my own feet.

"Just like that!" Julie shouted sarcastically. "Just stop and walk away."

He turned and addressed his officers.

"He thinks it's easy! Do you hear that? Any of you who don't like to fight, just stop. Eh? Just like that."

A low chorus of chuckles rose from his assembled men. Despite my earlier burst of anger, I found myself starting to believe him. Incredible as it seemed, Julie and his men didn't like being soldiers!

"You think we wouldn't quit if we could?" Julie was saying to me again. "I bet there isn't a man in my whole army who wouldn't take a walk if he thought he could get away with it."

Again there was a murmur of assent from his officers.

"I don't understand," I said, shaking my head.

"If you don't want to fight, and we don't want to fight, what are we doing here?"

"Did you ever hear of loan sharks?" Julie asked. "You know about organized crime?"

"Organized crime?" I blinked.

"It's like government, kid," Aahz supplied.

"Only more effective."

"You'd better believe 'more effective,' " Julie nodded. "That's what we're doing here! Me and the boys, we got a list of gambling debts like you wouldn't believe. We're kinda working it off, paying 'em back in land, you know what I mean?"

"You haven't answered my question," I pointed out. "Why don't you just quit?"

"Quit?" Julie seemed genuinely astonished. "You gotta be kidding. If I quit before I'm paid up, they break my leg. You know?" His wolfish grin left no doubt the thugs in question would do something a great deal more fatal and painful than just breaking a leg.

"It's the same with the boys here. Right, boys?" He indicated his officers with a wave of his hand.

Vigorous nods answered his wave.

"And you ought to see the collection agent they use. Kid, you might be a fair magician where you come from. But"-he shuddered-"this, believe me, you don't want to see."

Knowing how tough Big Julie was, I believed him.

Giving me a warm smile, he draped his arm around my shoulders.

"That's why it's really gonna break my heart to kill you. Ya know?"

"Well," I began, "you don't have to ... KILL ME?"

"That's right," he nodded vigorously. "I knew you'd understand. A job's a job, even when you hate it."

"Whoa!" Aahz interrupted, holding one flattened hand across the top of the other to form a crude T. "Hold it! Aren't you overlooking something, Jules?"

"That's 'Big Julie.' " one of the guards admonished.

"I don't care if he calls himself the Easter Bunny!" my mentor snarled. "He's still overlooking something."

"What's that?" Julie asked.

"Us." Aahz smiled, gesturing to the team. "Aside from the minor detail that Skeeve here's a magician and not that easy to kill, he's got friends. What do you think we'll be doing while you make a try for our leader?"

The whole team edged forward a little. None of them were smiling, not even Gus. Even though they were my friends who I knew and loved, I had to admit they looked mean. I was suddenly very glad they were on my side.

Big Julie, on the other hand, seemed unimpressed.

"As a matter of fact," he smiled, "I expect you to be dying right along with your leader. That is, unless you're really good at running."

"Running from what?" Gus growled. "I still think you're overlooking something. By my count, we've got you outnumbered. Even if you were armed-"

The supreme commander cut him short with a laugh. It was a relaxed, confident laugh which no one else joined in on. Then the laugh disappeared, and he leaned forward with a fierce scowl.

"Now, I'm only gonna say this once, so all'a ya listen close. Big Julie didn't get where he is today by overlooking nothin'. You think I'm outnumbered? Well, maybe you'd just better count again."

Without taking his eyes from us, he waved his hand in a short, abrupt motion. At the signal, one of his guards pulled a cord and the sides of the tent fell away.

There were soldiers outside. They hadn't been there when we entered the tent, but they were there now. Hoo boy were they. Ranks and ranks of them completely surrounding the tent, the nearest barely an arm's length away. The front three rows were archers, with arrows nocked and drawn, leveled at our team.

I realized with a sudden calm clarity that I was about to die. The whole meeting had been a trap, and it was a good one. Good enough that we would all be dead if we so much as twitched. I couldn't even kid myself that I could stop that many arrows if they were all loosed at once. Gus might survive the barrage, and maybe the others could blip away to another dimension in time to save themselves, but I was too far away from Aahz and the D-Hopper to escape.

"I... um . . . thought war councils were supposed to be off limits for combat." I said carefully.

"I also didn't get where I am today by playing fair," Big Julie shrugged.

"You know," Aahz drawled, "for a guy who doesn't want to fight, you run a pretty nasty war."

"What can I say?" the supreme commander asked, spreading his hands in helpless appeal. "It's a job. Believe me, if there was any other way, I'd take it. But as it is . . ."

His voice trailed off, and he began to raise his arm. I realized with horror that when his hand came down, so would the curtain.

"How much time do we have to find another way?" I asked desperately.

"You don't," Big Julie sighed.

"AND WE DON'T NEED ANY!" Aahz roared with sudden glee.

All eyes turned toward him, including my own. He was grinning broadly while listening to something the Gremlin was whispering in his ear.

"What's that supposed to mean?" the supreme commander demanded. "And where did this little blue fella come from? Eh?"

He glared at the encircling troops, who looked at each other in embarrassed confusion.

"This is a Gremlin," Aahz informed him, slipping a comradely arm around the shoulders of his confidant, "And I think he's got the answer to our problems. All our problems. You know what I mean?"

"What does he mean?" Julie scowled at me. "Do you understand what he's sayin'?"

"Tell him, Aahz," I ordered confidently, wondering all the while what possible solution my mentor could have found to this mess.

"Big Julie," Aahz smiled, "what could those loan sharks of yours do if you and your army simply disappeared?"

And so, incredibly, it was ended.

Not with fireworks or an explosion or a battle. But like a lot of things in my life, in as crazy and off-hand a way as it had started.

And when it had ended, I almost wished it hadn't. Because then I had to say good-bye to the team. Saying good-bye to the team was harder than I would have imagined. Somehow, in all my planning, I had never stopped to consider the possibility of emerging victorious from the war.

Despite my original worries about the team, I found I had grown quite close to each of them. I would have liked to keep them around a little longer, but that would have been impossible. Our next stop was the capital, and they would be a little too much to explain away.

Besides, as Aahz pointed out, it was bad for morale to let the troops find out how much their commander was being paid, particularly when it was extremely disproportionate to their own wages.

Following his advice, I paid each of them personally. When I was done, however, I found myself strangely at a loss for words. Once again, the team came to my aid.

"Well, boss," Brockhurst sighed. "I guess this is it. Thanks for everything."

"It's been a real pleasure working for you," Gus echoed. "The money's nice, but the way I figure it, Berfert and I owe you a little extra for getting us out of that slop chute. Anytime you need a favor, look us up."

"Youngster," Ajax said, clearing his throat, "I move around a lot, so I'm not that easy to track. If you ever find yourself in a spot where you think I can lend a hand, jes' send a message to the Bazaar and I'll be along shortly."

"I didn't think you visited the Bazaar that often," I asked, surprised.

"Normally I don't," the bowman admitted. "But I will now ... jest in case."

Tanda was tossing her coin in the air and catching it with practiced ease.

"I shouldn't take this," she sighed. "But a girl's gotta eat."

"You earned it," I insisted.

"Yea, well, I guess we'll be going," she said, beckoning to the others. "Take care of yourself, handsome."

"You will be coming back?" I asked hurriedly.

She made a face.

"I don't think so," she said wryly, "If Grimble saw us together..."

"I meant, ever," I clarified.

She brightened immediately.

"Sure," she winked. "You won't get rid of me that easily. Say good-bye to Aahz for me."

"Say good-bye to him yourself," Aahz growled, stepping out of the shadows.

"There you are!" Tanda grinned. "Where's the Gremlin? I thought you two were talking."

"We were," Aahz confirmed, looking around him. "I don't understand. He was here a minute ago."

"It's as if he didn't exist, isn't it, Aahz?" I suggested innocently.

"Now look, kid!" my mentor began angrily.

A chorus of laughter erupted from the team. He spun in that direction to deliver a scathing reply, but there was a blip of light and they were gone.

We stood silently together for several moments staring at the vacant space. Then Aahz slipped an arm around my shoulder.

"They were a good team, kid," he sighed. "Now pull yourself together. Triumphant generals don't have slow leaks in the vicinity of their eyes. It's bad for the image."

Chapter Twenty-Five:

"Is everybody happy?"

-MACHIAVELU

AAHZ and I entered the capital at the head of a jubilant mob of Possiltum citizens.

We were practically herded to the front of the palace by the crowd pressing us forward. The cheering was incredible. Flowers and other less identifiable objects were thrown at us or strewn in our path, making the footing uncertain enough that more than once I was afraid of falling and being trampled. The people, at least, seemed thoroughly delighted to see us. All in all, though, our triumphal procession was almost as potentially injurious to our life and limb as the war had been.

I was loving it.

I had never had a large crowd make a fuss over me before. It was nice.

"Heads up, kid," Aahz murmured, nudging me in the ribs. "Here comes the reception committee."

Sure enough, there was another procession emerging from the main gates of the palace. It was smaller than ours, but made up for what it lacked in numbers with the prestige of its members.

The king was front and center, flanked closely by Grimble and Badaxe. The chancellor was beaming with undisguised delight. The general, on the other hand, looked positively grim.

Sweeping the crowd with his eyes, Badaxe spotted several of his soldiers in our entourage. His dark expression grew even darker, boding ill for those men. I guessed he was curious as to why they had failed to carry out his orders to stop our return.

Whatever he had in mind, it would have to wait. The king was raising his arms, and the assemblage obediently fell silent to hear what he had to say.

"Lord Magician," he began, "know that the cheers of the grateful citizens of Possiltum only echo my feelings for this service you have done us."

A fresh wave of applause answered him.

"News of your victory has spread before you," he continued. "And already our historians are recording the details of your triumph ... as much as is known, that is."

An appreciative ripple of laughter surged through the crowd.

"While we do not pretend to comprehend the workings of your powers," the king announced, "the results speak for themselves. A mighty army of invincible warriors vanished into thin air, weapons and all. Only their armor and siege machines littering the empty battlefield mark their passing. The war is won! The threat to Possiltum is ended forever!"

At this, the crowd exploded. The air again filled with flowers and shouting shook the very walls of the palace.

The king tried to shout something more, but it was lost in the jubilant noise. Finally he shrugged and reentered the palace, pausing only for a final wave at the crowd.

I thought it was a rather cheap ploy, allowing him to cash in on our applause as if it were intended for him, but I let it go. Right now we had bigger fish to fry.

Catching the eyes of Grimble and Badaxe, I beckoned them forward.

"I've got to talk to you two," I shouted over the din.

"Shouldn't we go inside where it's quieter?" Grimble shouted back.

"We'll talk here!" I insisted.

"But the crowd ..." the chancellor gestured.

I turned and nodded to a figure in the front row of the mob. He responded by raising his right arm in a signal. In response, the men in the forefront of the crowd locked arms and formed a circle around us, moving with near military precision. In a twinkling, there was a space cleared in the teeming populace, with the advisors, Aahz, Gleep, myself, and the man who had given the signal standing alone at its center.

"Just a moment," Badaxe rumbled, peering suspiciously at the circle. "What's going on-"

"General!" I beamed, flashing my biggest smile. "I'd like you to meet the newest citizen of Possiltum."

Holding my smile, I beckoned the mob leader forward.

"General Badaxe," I announced formally, "meet Big Julie. Big Julie, Hugh Badaxe!"

"Nice to meet you!" Julie smiled. "The boy here, he's been tellin' me all about you!"

The general blanched as he recognized the Empire's top commander.

"You!" he stammered. "But you . . . you're-"

"I hope you don't mind, General," I said smoothly. "But I've taken the liberty of offering Big Julie a job ... as your military consultant."

"Military consultant?" Badaxe echoed suspiciously.

"What's the matter," Julie scowled. "Don't you think I can do it?"

"It's not that," the general clarified hastily. "It's just that.. .well-"

"One thing we neglected to mention. General," Aahz interrupted. "Big Julie here is retiring from active duty. He's more than willing to leave the running of Possiltum's army to you, and agrees to give advice only when asked."

"That's right!" Julie beamed. "I just wanna sit in the sun, drink a little wine, maybe pat a few bottoms, you know what I mean?"

"But the king ..." Badaxe stammered.

". . . doesn't have to be bothered with it at all," Aahz purred. "Unless, of course, you deem it necessary to tell him where your new battle plans are coming from."

"Hmm," the general said thoughtfully. "You sure you'd be happy with things that way, Julie?"

"Positive!" Julie nodded firmly. "I don't want any glory, no responsibility, and no credit. I had too much of that when I was workin' for the Empire, you know what I mean? Me and the boys talked it over, and we decided-"

"The boys?" Badaxe interrupted, frowning.

"Um . . . that's another thing we forgot to mention, General," I smiled. "Big Julie isn't the only new addition to Possiltum's citizenry."

I jerked my head at the circle of men holding back the crowd.

The general blinked at the men, then swiveled his head around noting how many more like them were scattered through the crowd. He blanched as it became clear to him both where the Empire's army had disappeared to, and why his men had been unsuccessful in stopping our return to the capital.

"You mean to tell me you-" Badaxe began.

"Happy Possiltum citizens all, General!" Aahz proclaimed, then dropped his voice to a more confidential level. "I think you'll find that if you should ever have to draft an army, these new citizens will train a lot faster than your average plow pusher."

Apparently the general did. His eyes glittered at the thought of the new force we had placed at his command. I could see him mentally licking his chops in anticipation of the next war.

"Big Julie!" he declared with a broad smile. "You and your ... er ... boys are more than welcome to settle here in Possiltum. Let me be one of the first to congratulate you on your new citizenship."

He extended his hand, but there was an obstruction in his way. The obstruction's name was J.R. Grimble.

"Just a moment!" the chancellor snarled. "There's one minor flaw in your plans. It is my intention to advise the king to disband Possiltum's army."

"What?" roared Badaxe.

"Let me handle this, General," Aahz said soothingly. "Grimble, what would you want to do a fool thing like that for?"

"Why, because of the magician, of course," the chancellor blinked. "You've demonstrated he is quite capable of defending the kingdom without the aid of an army, so I see no reason why we should continue to bear the cost of maintaining one."

"Nonsense!" Aahz scolded. "Do you think the great Skeeve has nothing to do with his time but guard your borders? Do you want to tie up your high-cost magician doing the job a low-cost soldier could do?"

"Well..." Grimble scowled.

"Besides," Aahz continued. "Skeeve will be spending considerable time on the road furthering his studies . . . which will of course increase his value to Possiltum. Who will guard your kingdom while he's away, if not the army?"

"But the cost is ..." Grimble whined.

"If anything," Aahz continued ignoring the chancellor's protests. "I should think you'd want to expand your army now that your borders have increased in size."

"What's that?" Grimble blinked, "What about our borders?"

"I thought it was obvious," Aahz said innocently. "All these new citizens have to settle somewhere . . . and there is a lot of land up for grabs just north of here. As I understand it, it's completely unguarded at the moment. Possiltum wouldn't even have to fight for it, just move in and settle. That is, of course, provided you have a strong army to hold it once you've got it."

"Hmm," the chancellor said thoughtfully, stroking his chin with his hand.

"Then again," Aahz murmured quietly, "there's all the extra tax money the new citizens and land will contribute to the kingdom's coffers."

"Big Julie!" Grimble beamed. "I'd like to welcome you and your men to Possiltum."

"I'm welcoming him first!" Badaxe growled. "He's my advisor."

As he spoke, the general dropped his hand to the hilt of his axe, a move which was not lost on the chancellor.

"Of course. General," Grimble acknowledged, forcing a grin. "I'll just wait here until you're through. There are a few things I want to discuss with our new citizens."

"While you're waiting, Grimble," Aahz smiled, "there are a few things we have to discuss with you."

"Such as what?" the chancellor scowled.

"Such as the Court Magician's pay!" my mentor retorted.

"Of course," Grimble laughed. "As soon as we're done here we'll go inside and I'll pay him his first month's wages."

"Actually," Aahz drawled. "What we wanted to discuss was an increase."

The chancellor stopped laughing.

"You mean a bonus, don't you?" he asked hopefully. "I'm sure we can work something out, considering--"

"I mean an increase!" Aahz corrected firmly. "C'mon, Grimble. The kingdom's bigger now. That means the magician's job is bigger and deserves more pay."

"I'm not sure I can approve that," the chancellor responded cagily.

"With the increase of your tax base," Aahz pressed, "I figure you can afford--"

"Now let's be careful," Grimble countered. "Our overhead has gone up right along with that increase. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if..."

"C'mon, Gleep," I murmured to my pet. "Let's go see Buttercup."

I had a feeling the wage debate was going to last for a while.

Chapter Twenty-Six:

"All's well that ends well.

-E. A. POE

I WAS spending a leisurely afternoon killing time in my immense room in the palace.

The bargaining session between Aahz and Grimble had gone well for us. Not only had I gotten a substantial wage increase, I was also now housed in a room which was only a little smaller than Grimble's, which in turn was second only to the king's in size. What was more, the room had a large window, which was nice even if it did look out over the stables. Aahz had insisted on this, hinting darkly that I might be receiving winged visitors in the night. I think this scared me more than it did Grimble, but I got my window.

When I chose, I could look down from my perch and keep an eye on Gleep and Buttercup in the stables. I could also watch the hapless stable boy who had been assigned to catering to their every need. That had been part of the deal, too, though I had pushed for it a lot harder than Aahz.

Aahz was housed in the adjoining room, which was nice, though smaller than mine. The royal architects were scheduled to open a door in our shared wall, and I had a hunch that when they did, the room arrangement would change drastically. For the moment, at least, I had a bit of unaccustomed privacy.

The room itself, however, was not what was currently commanding my attention. My mind was focused on Garkin's old brazier. I had been trying all afternoon to unlock its secrets, thus far without success. It stood firmly in the center of the floor where I had first placed it, stubbornly resisting my efforts.

I perched on my windowsill and studied the object glumly. I could levitate it easily enough, but that wasn't what I wanted. I wanted it to come alive and follow me around the way it used to follow Garkin.

That triggered an idea in my mind. It seemed silly, but nothing else had worked.

Drawing my eyebrows together, I addressed the brazier without focusing my energies on it.

"Come here!" I thought.

The brazier seemed to waiver for a moment, then it trotted to my side, clacking across the floor on its spindly legs.

It worked! Even though it was a silly little detail, the brazier's obedience somehow made me feel more like a magician.

"Hey, kid!" Aahz called, barging through my door without knocking. "Have you got a corkscrew?"

"What's a corkscrew?" I asked reflexively.

"Never mind," my mentor sighed. "I'll do it myself."

With that, he shifted the bottle of wine he was holding to his left hand, and inserted the claw on his right forefinger into the cork. The cork made a soft pop as he gently eased it from the neck of the bottle, whereupon the cork was casually tossed into a corner as Aahz drank deeply of the wine.

"Ahh!" he gasped, coming up for air. "Terrific bouquet!"

"Um . . . Aahz?" I said shyly, leaving my window perch and moving to the table. "I have something to show you."

"First, could you answer a question?" Aahz asked.

"What?" I frowned.

"Why is that brazier following you around the room?"

I looked, and was startled to find he was right! The brazier had scuttled from the window to the table to remain by my side. The strange part was that I hadn't summoned it.

"Um . . . that's what I was going to show you," I admitted. "I've figured out how to get the brazier to come to me all by itself ... no levitation or anything."

"Swell," Aahz grunted. "Now, can you make it stop?"

"Um ... I don't know," I said, sitting down quickly in one of the chairs.

I didn't want to admit it, but while we were talking I had tried several mental commands to get the brazier to go away, all without noticeable effect. I'd have to work this out on my own once Aahz had left.

"Say, Aahz," I said casually, propping my feet on the table. "Could you pour me some of that wine?"

Aahz cocked an eyebrow at me, then crossed the room slowly to stand by my side.

"Kid," he said gently, "I want you to look around real carefully. Do you see anybody here except you and me?"

"No," I admitted.

"Then we're in private, not in public . . . right?" he smiled.

"That's right, "I agreed.

"Then get your own wine, apprentice!" he roared, kicking my chair out from under me.

Actually, it wasn't as bad as it sounds. I exerted my mind before I hit the floor and hovered safely in thin air. From that position, I reached out with my mind and lifted the bottle from Aahz's hand, transferring it to my own.

"If you insist," I said casually, taking a long pull on the bottle.

"Think you're pretty smart, don't you!" Aahz snarled, then he grinned. "Well, I guess you are at that. You've done pretty well... for an amateur."

"A professional," I corrected with a grin. "A salaried professional."

"I know." Aahz grinned back. "For an amateur, you're pretty smart. For a professional you've got a lot to learn."

"C'mon, Aahz!" I protested.

"But that can wait for another day," Aahz conceded. "You might as well relax for a while and enjoy yourself... while you can."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I frowned.

"Nothing!" Aahz shrugged innocently. "Nothing at all."

"Wait a minute, Aahz," I said sharply, regaining my feet. "I'm Court Magician now, right?"

"That's right, Skeeve," my mentor nodded.

"Court Magician is the job you pushed me into because it's so easy, right?" I pressed.

"Right again, kid." He smiled, his nodding becoming even more vigorous.

"Then nothing can go wrong? Nothing serious?" I asked anxiously.

Aahz retrieved his wine bottle and took a long swallow before answering.

"Just keep thinking that, kid." He grinned. "It'll help you sleep nights."

"C'mon, Aahz!" I whined. "You're supposed to be my teacher. If there's something I'm missing, you've got to tell me. Otherwise I won't learn."

"Very well, apprentice." Aahz smiled, evilly emphasizing the word. "There are a few things you've overlooked,"

"Such as?" I asked, writhing under his smile.

"Such as Gus, Ajax, and Brockhurst, who you just sent back to Deva without instructions."

"Instructions?" I blinked.

"Tanda we don't have to worry about, but the other three-"

"Wait a minute, Aahz," I interrupted before he got too far from the subject. "What instructions?"

"Instructions not to talk about our little skirmish here," Aahz clarified absently. "Tanda will know enough to keep her mouth shut, but the others won't."

"You think they'll talk?"

"Is a frog's behind watertight?" Aahz retorted.

"What's a frog?" I countered.

"Money in their pockets, fresh from a successful campaign against overwhelming odds ... of course they'll talk!" Aahz thundered. "They'll talk their fool heads off to anyone who'll listen. What's more, they'll embellish it a little more with each telling until it sounds like they're the greatest fighters ever to spit teeth and you're the greatest tactician since Gronk!"

"What's wrong with that?" I inquired, secretly pleased. I didn't know who Gronk was, but what Aahz was saying had a nice ring to it.

"Nothing at all." Aahz responded innocently. "Except now the word will be out as to who you are, where you are, and what you are . . . also that you're for hire and that you subcontract. If there's any place in all the dimensions that folks will take note of information like that, it's the Bazaar."

Regardless of what my mentor may think, I'm not slow. I realized in a flash the implications of what he was saying . . . realized them and formulated an answer.

"So we suddenly get a lot of strange people dropping in on us to offer jobs, or looking for work," I acknowledged. "So what? All that means is I get a lot of practice saying 'No.' Who knows, it might improve my status around here a little if it's known that I regularly consult with strange beings from other worlds."

"Of course," Aahz commented darkly, "there's always the chance that someone at the Bazaar will hear that the other side is thinking of hiring you and decide to forcibly remove you from the roster. Either that, or some young hotshot will want to make a name for himself by taking on this unbeatable magician everyone's talking about."

I tried not to show how much his grim prophecy had unnerved me. Then I realized he would probably keep heaping it on until he saw me sweat. Consequently, I sweated ... visibly.

"I hadn't thought of that, Aahz," I admitted. "I guess I did overlook something there."

"Then again there's Grimble and Badaxe," Aahz continued as if he hadn't heard me.

"What about Grimble and Badaxe?" I asked nervously.

"In my estimation," Aahz yawned, "the only way those two would ever work together would be against a common foe. In my further estimation, the best candidate for that 'common foe' position is you!"

"Me?" I asked in a very small voice.

"You work it out, kid," my mentor shrugged. "Until you hit the scene there was a two-way power struggle going as to who had the king's ear. Then you came along and not only saved the kingdom, you increased the population, expanded the borders, and added to the tax base. That makes you the most popular and therefore the most influential person in the king's court. Maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think Grimble and Badaxe are going to just sigh and accept that. It's my guess they'll 'double team' you and attack anything you say or do militarily and monetarily, and that's a tough one-two punch to counter."

"Okay. Okay. So there were two things I overlooked," I said. "Except for that-"

"And of course there's the people Big Julie and his men owe money to," Aahz commented thoughtfully. "I wonder how long it will be before they start nosing around looking for an explanation as to what happened to an entire army? More important, I wonder who they'll be looking for by name to provide them with that explanation?"

"Aahz?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"Do you mind if I have a little more of that wine?"

"Help yourself, kid. There's lots."

I had a hunch that was going to be the best news I would hear for a long time.

End of MYTH CONCEPTIONS by Robert Asprin

Myth Directions By Robert Asprin

Chapter One:

"Dragons and Demons and Kings, Oh my!"
-THE COWARDLY KLAHD

"THIS place stinks!" my scaly mentor snarled, glaring out the window at the rain.

"Yes, Aahz," I agreed meekly.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he snapped, turning his demon's speckled gold eyes on me.

"It means," I gulped, "that I agree with you. The Kingdom of Possiltum, and the palace specifically, stink to high heaven-both figuratively and literally."

"Ingratitude!" Aahz made his appeal to the ceiling. "I lose my powers to a stupid practical joker, and instead of concentrating on getting them back, I take on some twit of an apprentice who doesn't have any aspirations higher than being a thief, train him, groom him, and get him a job paying more than he could spend in two lifetimes, and what happens? He complains! I suppose you think you could have done better on your own?"

It occurred to me that Aahz's guidance had also gotten me hung, embroiled in a magik duel with a master magician, and recently, placed in the unenviable position of trying to stop the world's largest army with a handful of down-at-the -heels demons. It also occurred to me that this was not the most tactful time to point out these minor nerve-jangling incidents.

"I'm sorry, Aahz," I grovelled. "Possiltum is a pretty nice kingdom to work for."

"It stinks!" he declared, turning to the window again.

I stifled a sigh. A magician's lot is not a happy one. I stole that saying from a tune Aahz sings off and on . . . key. More and more, I was realizing the truth of the jingle. As the court magician to my king I had already endured a great deal more than I had ever bargained for.

Actually the king of Possiltum isn't my king. I'm his royal magician, an employee at best.

Aahz isn't my demon, either. I'm his apprentice, trying desperately to learn enough magik to warrant my aforementioned lofty title.

Gleep is definitely my dragon, though. Just ask Aahz. Better still, ask anyone in the court of Possiltum. Anytime my pet wreaks havoc with his playful romping, I get the blame and J.R. Grimble, the king's chancellor, deducts the damages from my wages.

Naturally, this gets Aahz upset. In addition to managing my magik career, Aahz also oversees our finances. Well, that's something of an understatement. He shamelessly bleeds the kingdom for every monetary consideration he can get for us (which is considerable) and watches over our expenses. When it comes to spending our ill-gotten wealth, Aahz would rather part with my blood. As you might guess, we argue a lot over this.

Gleep is understanding though; which is part of the reason I keep him around. He's quite intelligent and understanding for a baby dragon with a one word vocabulary. I spend a considerable amount of time telling him my troubles, and he always listens attentively without interrupting or arguing or shouting about how stupid I am. This makes him better company than Aahz.

It says something about one's lifestyle when the only one you can get sympathy from is a dragon.

Unfortunately, on this particular day I was cut off from my pet's company. It was raining, and when it rains in Possiltum, it doesn't kid around. Gleep is too big to live indoors with us, and the rain made the courtyard impassable, so I couldn't reach the stables where he was quartered. What was more, I couldn't risk roaming the halls of the castle for fear of running into the king. If that happened, he would doubtless ask when I was going to do something about the miserable weather. Weather control was not one of my current skills, and I was under strict orders from Aahz to avoid the subject at all costs. As such, I was stuck waiting out the rain in my own quarters. That in itself wouldn't be so bad, if it wasn't for the fact that I shared those quarters with Aahz.

Rain made Aahz grouchy, or I should say grouchier than usual. I'd rather be locked in a small cage with an angry spider-bear than be alone in a room with Aahz when he's in a bad mood.

"There must be something to do," Aahz grumbled, begging to pace the floor. "I haven't been this bored since the Two Hundred Year Siege."

"You could teach me about dimension travel," I suggested hopefully.

This was one area of magik Aahz had steadfastly refused to teach me. As I mentioned earlier, Aahz is a demon, short for "dimension traveler." Most of my close friends these days were demons, and I was eager to add dimension traveling to my meager list of skills.

"Don't make me laugh, kid." Aahz laughed harshly. "At the rate you're learning, it would take more than two hundred years to teach it to you."

"Oh," I said, crestfallen. "Well-you could tell me about the Two Hundred Year Siege."

"The Two Hundred Year Siege," Aahz murmured dreamily, smiling slightly to himself. Large groups of armed men have been known to turn pale and tremble visibly before Aahz's smile.

"There isn't much to tell," he began, leaning against a table and hefting a large pitcher of wine. "It was me and another magician, Diz-Ne. He was a snotty little upstart... you remind me a bit of him."

"What happened?" I urged, anxious to get the conversation away from me.

"Well, once he figured out he couldn't beat me flat out, he went defensive," Aahz reminisced. "He was a real nothing magikally, but he knew his defense spells. Kept me off his back for a full two hundred years, even though we drained most of the magik energies of that dimension in the process."

"Who won?" I pressed eagerly.

Aahz cocked an eyebrow at me over the lip of the wine pitcher.

"I'm telling the story, kid," he pointed out. "You figure it out."

I did, and swallowed hard.

"Did you kill him?"

"Nothing that pleasant," Aahz smiled. "What I did to him once I got through his defenses will last a lot longer than two hundred years-but I guarantee you, he won't get bored."

"Why were you fighting?" I asked in a desperate effort to forestall the images my mind was manufacturing.

"He welshed on a bet," my mentor shrugged, hefting the wine again.

"That's all?"

"That's enough," Aahz insisted grimly. "Betting's a serious matter-in any dimension."

"Urn-Aahz?" I frowned. "Weren't Big Julie and his men running from gambling debts when we met them?"

That's the army I mentioned earlier. Big Julie and his men were currently disguised as happy citizens of Possiltum.

"That's right, kid," Aahz nodded.

"Then that's why you said the loan sharks would probably come looking for them," I declared triumphantly.

"Wrong," Aahz said firmly.

"Wrong?" I blinked.

"I didn't say they'd probably come looking," he corrected. "I said they would come looking. Bank on it. There are only two questions involved here: When are they coming, and what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know about the 'when,' " I commented with careful deliberation, "but I've given some thought to what I'm going to do."

"And you've decided-" Aahz prompted.

"To grab our money and run!" I declared. "That's why I want to learn dimension travel. I figure there won't be anywhere in this dimension we could hide, and that means leaving Klah for greener, safer pastures."

Aahz was unmoved.

"If push comes to shove," he yawned, "we can use the D-Hopper. As long as we've got a mechanical means of traveling to other dimensions, there's no need for you to learn how to do it magically."

"C'mon, Aahz!" I exploded. "Why won't you teach me? What makes dimension traveling so hard to learn?"

Aahz studied me for a long moment, then heaved a big sigh. "All right, Skeeve," he said. "If you listen up, I'll try to sketch it out for you."

I listened. With every pore, I listened. Aahz didn't call me by my given name often, and when he did, it was serious.

"The problem is that to travel the dimensions, even using pentacles for beacons-gateways-requires knowing your destination dimension . . . knowing it almost as well as your home dimension. If you don't, then you can get routed into a dimension you aren't even aware of, and be trapped there with no way out."

He paused to take another drink from the wine pitcher.

"Now, you've only been in one dimension besides Klah," he continued. "That was Deva, and you only saw the Bazaar. You know the Bazaar well enough to know it's constantly changing and rearranging. You don't know it well enough to have zeroed in on the few permanent fixtures you could use to home in on for a return trip, so effectively, you don't know any other dimensions well enough to be sure of your destination if you tried to jump magikally. That's why you can't travel the dimensions without using the D-Hopper! End of lecture."

I blinked.

"You mean the only reason I can't do it magikally is because I don't know the other dimensions?" I asked.

"That's the main reason," Aahz corrected.

"Then let's go!" I cried, leaping to my feet. "I'll get the D-Hopper and you can show me a couple new dimensions while we're waiting for the rain to stop."

"Not so fast, kid!" Aahz interrupted, holding up a restraining hand. "Sit down."

"What's wrong?" I challenged.

"Do you really think that possibility hadn't occurred to me?" he asked, an edge of irritation creeping into his voice.

I thought about it, and sat down again.

"Why don't you think it's a good idea?" I queried in a more humble tone.

"There are a few things you've overlooked in your enthusiasm," he intoned dryly. "First of all, remember that in another dimension, you'll be a demon. Now, except for Deva which makes its money on cross-dimension trade, most dimensions don't greet demons with flowers and red carpets. The fact is, a demon is likely to be attacked on sight by whoever's around with whatever's handy."

He leaned forward to emphasize his words. "What I'm trying to say is, it's dangerous! Now, if we went touring and ran into trouble; what do we have to defend ourselves? I've lost my powers and yours are still so undeveloped as to be practically non-existent. Who's going to handle the natives?"

"How dangerous is it?" I asked hesitantly.

"Let me put it to you this way, kid," Aahz sighed. "You spend a lot of time griping about how I keep putting your life in jeopardy with my blatant disregard for danger. Right?"

"Right." I nodded vigorously.

"Well, now I'm saying the trip you're proposing is dangerous. Does that give you a clue as to what you'll be up against?"

I leaned back in my chair and stretched, trying to make it look nonchalant.

"How about sharing some of that wine?" I suggested casually.

For a change, Aahz didn't ignore the request. He tossed the pitcher into the air as he rose and strode to the window again. Reaching out with my mind, I gently grabbed the pitcher and brought it floating to my outstretched hand without spilling a drop.

As I said, I am the court magician of Possiltum. I'm not without powers.

"Don't let it get you down, kid," Aahz called from the window. "If you keep practicing, someday we can take that tour under your protection. But until you reach that level, or until we find you a magikal bodyguard, it'll just have to wait."

"I suppose you're right, Aahz," I conceded. "It's just that sometimes..."

There was a soft BAMF! as the ether was rent asunder and a demon appeared in the room. Right there! In my private quarters in the Possiltum royal palace!

Before I could recover from my surprise or Aahz could move to intervene, the demon plopped itself onto my lap and planted a big, warm kiss full on my mouth.

"Hi, handsome!" it purred. "How's tricks?"

Chapter Two:

"When old friends get together, everything else fades to insignificance."
-WAR, FAMINE, PESTILENCE, AND DEATH

"TANDA!" I exclaimed, recovering from shock sufficiently to fasten my arms around her waist in an energetic hug.

"In the flesh!" she winked, pressing hard against me.

My temperature went up several degrees, or maybe it was the room. Tananda has that effect on me and rooms. Lusciously curvaceous, with a mane of light green hair accenting her lovely olive complexion and features, she could stop a twenty-man brawl with a smile and a deep sigh.

"He isn't the only one in the room, you know," Aahz commented dryly.

"Hi, Aahz!" my adorable companion cried, untangling herself from my lap and throwing herself into Aahz's arms.

The volume of Tananda's affections is exceeded only by her willingness to share them. I had a secret belief, though, that Tananda liked me better than she liked Aahz. This belief was tested for strength as their greeting grew longer and longer.

"Um . . . what brings you to these parts?" I interrupted at last.

That earned me a dark look from Aahz, but Tananda didn't bat an eye.

"Well," she dimpled, "I could say I was just in the neighborhood and felt like dropping by, but that wouldn't be true. The fact is, I need a little favor."

"Name it," Aahz and I declared simultaneously.

Aahz is tight-fisted and I'm chicken, but all bets are off when it comes to Tananda. She had helped us out of a couple of tight spots in the past, and we both figured we owed her. The fact she had helped us into as many tight spots as she had helped us out of never entered our minds. Besides-she was awfully nice to have around.

"It's nothing really," she sighed. "I have a little shopping to do and was hoping I could borrow one of you two to help me carry things."

"You mean today?" Aahz frowned.

"Actually, for the next couple days," Tananda informed him. "Maybe as long as a week."

"Can't do it," Aahz sighed. "I have to referee a meeting between Big Julie and General Badaxe tomorrow. Any chance you could postpone it until next week?"

"Ummm . . . you weren't the one I was thinking of, Aahz," Tananda said, giving the ceiling a casual survey. "I was thinking Skeeve and I could handle it."

"Me?" I blinked.

Aahz scowled.

"Not a chance," he declared. "The kid can't play step-and-fetch-it for you. It's beneath his dignity."

"No, it isn't!" I cried. "I mean, if it wouldn't be beneath you. Aahz, how could it be beneath me?"

"I'm not the court magician of Possiltum!" he argued.

"I can disguise myself!" I countered. "That's one of my best spells. You've said so yourself."

"I think your scaly green mentor is just a lee-tie bit jealous," Tananda observed, winking at me covertly.

"Jealous?" Aahz exploded. "Me? Jealous of a little ..." He broke off and looked back and forth between Tananda and myself as he realized he was being baited.

"Oh-I suppose it would be okay," he grumbled at last. "Go ahead and take him-even though it's beyond me what you expect to find in this backwater dimension worth shopping for."

"Oh, Aahz!" Tananda laughed. "You're a card. Shopping in Klah? I may be a little flighty from time to time, but I'm not crazy."

"You mean we're headed for other dimensions?" I asked eagerly.

"Of course," she nodded. "We have quite an itinerary ahead of us. First, we'll hop over to-"

"What's an itinerary?" I asked.

"Stop!" Aahz shouted, holding up a hand for silence.

"But I was just-"

"Stop!"

"We were-"

"Stop!"

Our conversation effectively halted, we turned our attention to Aahz. With melodramatic slowness, he folded his arms across his chest.

"No," he said.

"No?" I shrieked. "But, Aahz ..."

"'But, Aahz' nothing," he barked back. "I said 'No' and I meant it."

"Wait a minute," Tananda interceded, stepping between us. "What's the problem, Aahz?"

"If you think I'm going to let my apprentice go traipsing around the dimensions alone and unprotected-"

"I won't be alone," I protested. "Tananda will be there."

"-a prime target for any idiot who wants to bag a demon," Aahz continued, ignoring my outburst, "just so you can have a beast of burden for your shopping jaunt, well, you'd better think again."

"Are you through?" Tananda asked testily.

"For the moment," Aahz nodded, matching her glare for glare.

"First of all," she began, "as Skeeve pointed out, if you'd bothered to listen, he won't be alone. I'll be with him. That means, second of all, he won't be unprotected. Just because I let my membership with the Assassins Guild expire doesn't mean I've forgotten everything."

"Yeah, Aahz," I interjected.

"Shut up, kid," he snapped.

"Third of all," Tananda continued, "you've got to stop thinking of Skeeve here as a kid. He stopped Big Julie's army, didn't he? And besides, he is your apprentice. I assume you've taught him something over the last couple of years."

That hit Aahz in his second most sensitive spot. His vanity. His most sensitive spot is his money pouch.

"Well... " he wavered.

"C'mon, Aahz," I pleaded. "What could go wrong?"

"The mind boggles," he retorted grimly.

"Don't exaggerate, Aahz," Tananda reprimanded.

"Exaggerate!" my mentor exploded anew. "The first time I took Mr. Wonderful here off-dimension, he bought a dragon we neither need nor want and nearly got killed in a brawl with a pack of cutthroats."

"A fight which he won, as I recall," Tananda observed.

"The second time we went out," Aahz continued undaunted, "I left him at a fast-food joint where he promptly recruited half the deadbeats at the Bazaar for a fighting force."

"They won the war!" I argued.

"That's not the point," Aahz growled. "The point is, every time the kid here hits another dimension, he ends up in trouble. He draws it like a magnet."

"This time I'll be there to keep an eye on him," Tananda soothed.

"You were there the first two times," Aahz pointed out grimly.

"So were you!" she countered.

"That's right!" Aahz agreed. "And both of us together couldn't keep him out of trouble. Now do you see why I want to keep him right here in Klah?"

"Hmm," Tananda said thoughtfully. "I see your point, Aahz."

My heart sank.

"I just don't agree with it," she concluded.

"Damn it, Tananda ..." Aahz began, but she waved him to silence.

"Let me tell you a story," she smiled. "There was this couple see, who had a kid they thought the world of. They thought so much of him, in fact, that when he was born they sealed him in a special room. Just to be sure nothing would happen to him, they screened everything that went into the room; furniture, books, food, toys, everything. They even filtered the air to be sure he didn't get any diseases."

"So?" Aahz asked suspiciously.

"So-on his eighteenth birthday, they opened the room and let him out," Tanda explained. "The kid took two steps and died of excitement."

"Really?" I asked, horrified.

"It's exaggerated a bit," she admitted, "but I think Aahz gets the point."

"I haven't been keeping him sealed in," Aahz mumbled. "There've been some real touch-and-go moments, you know. You've been there for some of them."

"But you have been a little overprotective, haven't you, Aahz?" Tananda urged gently.

Aahz was silent for several moments, avoiding our eyes. "All right," he sighed at last. "Go ahead, kid. Just don't come crying to me if you get yourself killed."

"How could I do that?" I frowned.

Tananda nudged me in the ribs and I took the hint.

"There are a few things I want settled before you go," Aahz declared brusquely, a bit of his normal spirit returning.

He began moving back and forth through the room, gathering items from our possessions.

"First," he announced, "here's some money of your own for the trip. You probably won't need it, but you always walk a little taller with money in your pouch."

So saying, he counted out twenty gold pieces into my hands. Realizing I had hired a team of demons to fight a war for five gold pieces, he was giving me a veritable fortune!

"Gee, Aahz ..." I began, but he hurried on.

"Second, here's the D-Hopper." He tucked the small metal cylinder into my belt. "I've set it to bring you back here. If you get into trouble, if you think you're getting into trouble, hit the button and come home right then. No heroics, no jazzy speeches. Just hit and get. You understand me?"

"Yes, Aahz," I promised dutifully.

"And finally," he announced, drawing himself up to his full height, "the dragon stays here. You aren't going to drag your stupid pet along with you and that's final. I know you'd like to have him with you, but he'd only cause problems."

"Okay, Aahz," I shrugged.

Actually, I had figured on leaving Gleep behind, but it didn't seem tactful to point that out.

"Well," my mentor sighed, sweeping us both with a hard gaze, "I guess that's that. Sorry I can't hang around to see you off, but I've got more pressing things to do."

With that he turned on his heels and left, shutting the door behind him more forcefully than was necessary.

"That's funny," I said, staring after him. "I didn't think he had anything important to do. In fact, just before you showed up, he was complaining about being bored."

"You know, Skeeve," Tananda said softly, giving me a strange look, "Aahz is really quite attached to you."

"Really?" I frowned. "What makes you say that?"

"Nothing," she smiled. "It was just a thought."

Well. are you ready to go?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," I declared confidently. "What's our first stop? The Bazaar at Deva?"

"Goodness, no!" she retorted, wrinkling her nose. "We're after something really unique, not the common stuff they have at the Bazaar. I figure we're going to have to hit some out-of-the-way dimensions, the more out-of-the-way the better."

Despite my confidence, an alarm gong went off in the back of my mind at this declaration.

"What are we looking for, anyway?" I asked casually.

Tananda shot a quick glance at the door, then leaned forward to whisper in my ear.

"I couldn't tell you before," she murmured conspiratorially, "but we're after a birthday present. A birthday present for Aahz!"

Chapter Three:

"That's funny, I never have any trouble with service when I'm shopping."

-K. KONG

EVER since he took me on as an apprentice, Aahz has complained that I don't practice enough. He should have seen me on the shopping trip! In the first three days after our departure from Klah I spent more time practicing magik than I had in the previous year.

Tananda had the foresight to bring along a couple of translator pendants which enabled us to understand and be understood by the natives in the dimensions we visited. That was fine for communications, but there remained the minor detail of our physical appearance. Disguises were my job.

Besides flying Aahz had taught me one other spell which had greatly enhanced my ability to survive dubious situations; that was the ability to change the outward appearance of my own, or anyone else's, physical features. Tagging along with Tananda, this skill got a real workout.

The procedure was simple enough. We would arrive at some secluded point, then creep to a spot where I would observe a few members of the local population. Once I had laid eyes on them I could duplicate their physical form for our disguises and we could blend with the crowd. Of course, my nerves had to be calmed so I wouldn't jump out of my skin when catching a passing glance of the being standing next to me.

If from this you conclude that the dimensions we visited were inhabited by people who looked a little strange . . . you're wrong. The dimensions we visited were peopled by beings who looked very strange.

When Tananda decides to tour out-of-the-way dimensions, she doesn't kid around. None of the places we visited looked normal to my untraveled eyes but a few in particular stand out in my memory as being exceptionally weird.

Despite Tananda's jokes about rental agencies, Avis turned out to be populated with bird-like creatures with wings and feathers. In that dimension I not only had to maintain our disguises, I had to fly us from perch to perch as per the local method of transportation. Instead of traversing their market center as I had expected, we spent considerable time viewing their national treasures. These treasures turned out to be a collection of broken pieces of colored glass and bits of shiny metal which to my eye were worthless but Tananda studied them with quiet intensity.

To maintain our disguises, we had to eat and drink without hands-which proved to be harder than it sounded. Since the food consisted of live grubs and worms, I passed on any opportunity to sample the local cuisine. Tananda, however, literally dove into (remember-no hands!) a bowlful. Whether she licked her lips because she found the fare exceptionally tasty or if she was attempting to catch a few of the wriggly morsels that were trying to escape their fate was not important; I found the sight utterly revolting. To avoid having to watch her, I tried the local wine.

The unusual drinking style meant that I ended up taking larger swallows than I normally would, but that was okay as the wine was light and flavorful. Unfortunately, it also proved to be much stronger than anything I had previously sampled. After I had nearly flown us into a rather large tree Tananda decided it was time for us to move to another dimension.

As a footnote to that particular adventure, the wine had two side effects: first, I developed a colossal headache, and, second, I became violently nauseous. The latter was because Tananda gleefully told me how they make wine on Avis. To this day I can't hear the name Avis without having visions of flying through the air and a vague tinge of air-sickness. As far as I'm concerned, when rating dimensions on a scale of ten, Avis will always be a number two.

Another rather dubious dimension we spent considerable time in was Gastropo. The length of our stay there had nothing to do with our quest. Tananda decided, after relatively few stops, that the dimension had nothing to offer of a quality suitable for Aahz's present. What delayed us was our disguises.

Let me clarify that before aspersions are cast on my admittedly limited abilities, the physical appearance part was easy. As I've said, I'm getting quite good at disguise spells. What hung us up was the manner of locomotion. After flying from tree to tree in Avis, I would have thought I was ready to get from point A to point B in any conceivable way. Well, as Aahz has warned me, the dimensions are an endless source of surprises.

The Gastropods were snails-large snails, but snails none the less. Spiral shells, eyes on stalks-the whole bit. I could handle that. What I couldn't get used to was inching my way along with the rest of the local pedestrians-excuse me, pod-estians.

"Tanda," I growled under my breath. "How long are we going to stay in this god-awful dimension?"

"Relax, handsome," she chided, easing forward another inch. "Enjoy the scenery."

"I've been enjoying this particular hunk of scenery for half a day," I complained. "I'm enjoying it so much I've memorized it."

"Don't exaggerate," my guide scolded. "This morning we were on the other side of that tree."

I closed my eyes and bit back my first five or six responses to her correction. "How long?" I repeated.

"I figure we can split after we turn that corner."

"But that corner's a good twenty-five feet away!" I protested.

"That's right," she confirmed. "I figure we'll be there by sundown."

"Can't we just walk over there at normal speed?"

"Not a chance; we'd be noticed."

"By who?"

"Whom. Well, by your admirer, for one."

"My what?" I blinked.

Sure enough, there was a Gastropod chugging heroically along behind us. When it realized I was looking at it, it began to wave its eye-stalks in slow, but enthusiastic, motions.

"It's been after you for about an hour," Tananda confided. "That's why I've been hurrying."

"That does it!" I declared, starting off at a normal pace. "C'mon, Tanda, we're getting out of here."

Shrill cries of alarm were being sounded by the Gastropods as I rounded the corner, followed, shortly, by my guide.

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded. "We could-"

"Get us out-now!" I ordered.

"But-"

"Remember how I got my dragon?" I barked. "If I let an amorous snail follow me home, Aahz will disown me as his apprentice. Now, are you going to get us out of here, or do I use the D-Hopper and head for home?"

"Don't get your back up," she soothed, beginning her ritual to change dimensions. "You shouldn't have worried though, we're looking for cargo-not S-cargo."

We were in another dimension before I could ask her to explain why she was giggling. So it went, dimension after dimension until I gave up trying to predict the unpredictable and settled for coping with the constants. Even this turned out to be a chore. For one thing, I had some unexpected problems with Tananda. I had never noticed it before, but she's really quite vain. She didn't just want to look like a native-she wanted to look like an attractive native.

Anyone who thinks beauty is a universal concept should visit some of the places we did. Whatever grotesque form I was asked to duplicate Tananda always had a few polite requests for improving her appearance. After a few days of "the hair should be more matted," or "shouldn't my eye be a bit more bloodshot?" or "a little more slime under the armpits," I was ready to scream. It probably wouldn't have been so annoying if her attention to detail had extended just a little bit to my appearance. All I'd get was-"You? You look fine." That how I know she's vain; she was more interested in her own appearance than mine.

That wasn't the only thing puzzling about Tananda's behavior. Despite her claim that we were on a shopping trip, she steadfastly avoided the retail sections of the dimensions we visited. Bazaars, farmers' markets, flea markets and all the rest were met with the same wrinkled nose (when there was a nose) and "we don't want to go there." Instead she seemed to be content as a tourist. Her inquiries would invariably lead us to national shrines or the public displays of royal treasures. After viewing several of these we would retire to a secluded spot and head off for the next dimension.

In a way this suited me fine. Not only was I getting a running, flying, and crawling tour of the dimensions, I was doing it with Tananda. Tananda is familiar with the social customs of over a hundred dimensions and in every dimension she was just that-familiar. I rapidly learned that in addition to beauty, morality varied from dimension to dimension. The methods of expressing affection in some of the dimensions we visited defy description but invariably make me blush at the memory. Needless to say, after three days of this I was seriously trying to progress beyond the casual friendship level with my shapely guide. I mean, Tananda's interpretation of casual friendship was already seriously threatening the continued smooth operation of my heart-not to mention other organs.

There was a more pressing problem on my mind, however. After three days of visiting strange worlds, I was hungry enough to bite my own arm for the blood. They say if you're hungry enough you'll eat anything. Don't you believe it. The things placed before me and called food were un stomachable despite starvation. I know; I tried occasionally, out of desperation, only to lose everything else in my stomach along with the latest offering. Having Tananda sitting across from me, joyfully chewing tentacled things that oozed out of her mouth and wriggled didn't help.

Finally I expressed my distress and needs to Tananda.

"I wondered why you hadn't been eating much," she frowned. "But I thought maybe you were on a diet, or something. I wish you'd spoken up sooner."

"I didn't want to be a bother," I explained lamely.

"It isn't that," she waved. "It's just that if I had known two dimensions ago there were half a dozen humanoid dimensions nearby that we could have hopped over to. Right now, there's only one that would fit the bill without us having to go through a couple of extra dimensions along the way."

"Then let's head for that one," I urged. "The sooner I eat the better off we'll be." I wasn't exaggerating. My stomach was beginning to growl so loudly it was a serious threat to our disguises.

"Suit yourself," she shrugged, pulling me behind a row of hedges that tinkled musically in the breeze. "Personally, though, it's not a dimension I normally stop in."

Again the alarm sounded in the back of my head, despite my hunger. "Why not?" I asked suspiciously.

"Because they're weird there-I mean, really weird," she confided.

Images flashed across my mind of the beings we'd already encountered. "Weirder than the natives we've been imitating?" I gulped. "I thought you said they'd be humanoid?"

"Not weird physically," Tananda chided, taking my hand. "Weird mentally. You'll see."

"What's the name of the dimension?" I called desperately as she closed her eyes to begin our travels. The scenery around us faded, there was a rush of darkness, then a new scene burst brightly and noisily into view.

"Jahk," she answered, opening her eyes since we were there.

Chapter Four:

" 'Weird' is a relative, not an absolute term."

-BARON FRANK N. FURTER

You recall my account of our usual modus operandi on hitting a new dimension? How we would arrive inconspicuously and disguise ourselves before mingling with the natives? Well, however secluded Tananda's landing point in Jahk might be normally-it wasn't when we arrived.

As the dimension came into focus it was apparent that we were in a small park, heavily overgrown with trees and shrubs. It was not the flora of the place which caught and held my attention, however, it was the crowd. What crowd? you might ask. Why, the one carrying blazing torches and surrounding us, of course. Oh-that crowd!

Well, to be completely honest, they weren't actually surrounding us. They were surrounding the contraption we were standing on. I had never really known what a contraption was when Aahz had used the word in conversation, and being Aahz he wouldn't define the word when I asked him to. Now that I was here, however, I recognized one on sight. The thing we were standing on had to be a contraption.

It was some sort of wagon-in that it was large and had four wheels. Beyond that I couldn't tell much about it, because it was completely covered by tufts of colored paper. That's right, I said paper-light fluffy stuff that would be nice if you had a cold, runny nose. But this paper was mostly yellow and blue. Looming over us was some kind of monstrous, dummy warrior complete with helmet-also covered with tufts of blue and yellow paper.

Of all the things that had flashed across my mind when Tananda warned me that the Jahks were weird, the one thing that had not occurred to me was that they were blue-and-yellow-paper freaks.

"Get off the float!"

This last was shouted at us from someone in the crowd.

"I beg your pardon," I shouted back.

"The float! Get off of it!"

"C'mon, handsome," Tananda hissed, hooking my elbow in hers.

Together we leaped to the ground. As it turned out we were barely in time. With a bloodthirsty howl, the crowd surged forward and tossed their torches onto the contraption we had so recently abandoned. In moments it was a mass of flames the heat of which warmed the already overheated crowd. They danced and sang, joyfully oblivious to the destruction of the contraption.

Edging away from the scene, I realized with horror that it was being duplicated throughout the park. Wherever I looked there were bonfires set on contraptions, and jubilant crowds.

"I think we arrived at a bad time," I observed.

"What makes you say that?" Tananda asked.

"Little things," I explained, "like the fact they're in the middle of torching the town."

"I don't think so," my companions shrugged. "When you torch a town you don't usually start with the parks."

"Okay, then you tell me just what they're doing."

"As far as I can tell, they're celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

"Some kind of victory. As near as I can tell, everyone's shouting-we won! we won!"

I surveyed the blazes again. "I wonder what they'd do if they lost?"

Just then a harried-looking individual strode up to us. His no-nonsense, business-like manner was an island of sanity in a sea of madness. I didn't like it. Not that I have anything against sanity, mind you. It's just that up 'til now we had been pretty much ignored. I feared that was about to change.

"Here's your pay," he said brusquely, handing us each a pouch. "Turn in your costume at the Trophy Building." With that he was gone, leaving us openmouthed and holding the bags.

"What was that all about?" I managed to say.

"Beats me," Tananda admitted. "They lost me when they called that contraption a float."

"Then I'm right! It is a contraption," I exclaimed with delight. "I knew they had to be wrong; a float is airtight and won't sink in water."

"I thought it was made with ice cream and gingerale?" Tananda frowned.

"With what and what?" I blinked.

"Great costumes-really great!" someone shouted to us as they staggered by.

"Time to do something about our disguises," Tananda murmured as she waved to the drunk.

"Right," I nodded, glad we could agree on something.

The disguises should have been easy after my recent experience in other dimensions. I mean the Jahks were humanoid and I had lots of ready models to work from. Unfortunately I encountered problems.

The first was pride. Despite the teeming masses around us, I couldn't settle on two individuals whose appearance I wanted to duplicate. I never considered myself particularly vain; I've never considered myself as being in top physical condition-of course, that was before I arrived in Jakh.

Every being I could see was extremely off-weight- either over or under. If a specific individual wasn't ribs-protruding thin to the point of looking brittle, he was laboring along under vast folds of fat which bunched and bulged at waist, chin and all four cheeks. Try as I might, I couldn't bring myself to alter Tananda or myself to look like these wretched specimens.

My second problem was that I couldn't concentrate, anyway. Disguise spells, like any other magik, require a certain amount of concentration. In the past I've been able to cast spells in the heat of battle or embarrassment. In our current situation I couldn't seem to get my mind focused.

You see there was this song-well, I think it was a song. Anyway the crowd acted like it was singing a rhythmic chant; the chant was incredibly catchy. Even in the short time we'd been there I'd almost mastered the lyrics-which is a tribute to the infectious nature of the song rather than any indication of my ability to learn lyrics. The point is that every time I tried concentrating on our disguises, I found myself singing along with the chant instead. Terrific!

"Any time you're ready, handsome."

"What's that, Tananda?"

"The disguises," she prompted, glancing about nervously. "The spell will work better when you aren't humming."

"I-er, urn-I can't seem to find two good models," I alibi'd lamely.

"Are you having trouble counting up to two all of a sudden?" she scowled. "By my count you've got a whole park full of models."

"But none I want to look like-want us to look like," I amended quickly.

"Check me on this," Tananda said, pursing her lips. "Two days ago you disguised us as a pair of slimy slugs, right?"

"Yes, but-"

"And before that as eight-legged dogs?"

"Well, yes, but-"

"And you never complained about how you looked in your disguise then, right?"

"That was different," I protested.

"How?" she challenged.

"Those were-well, things! These are humanoids and I know what humanoids should look like."

"What they should look like isn't important," my guide argued. "What matters is what they do look like. We've got to blend with the crowd-and the sooner the better."

"But-" I began.

"Because if we don't," she continued sternly, "we're going to run into someone who's both sober and unpreoccupied-which will give us the choice between being guest-of-honor at the next bonfire they light or skipping this dimension before you've had anything to eat."

"I'll try again," I sighed, scanning the crowd once more.

In a desperate effort to comply with Tananda's order, I studied the first two individuals my eyes fell on, then concentrated on duplicating their appearance without really considering how they looked.

"Not bad," Tananda commented dryly, surveying her new body. "Of course, I always thought I looked better as a woman."

"You want a disguise, you get a disguise," I grumbled.

"Hey, handsome," my once-curved comrade breathed, laying a soft, but hairy, hand on my arm. "Relax, we're on the same side. Remember?"

My anger melted away at her touch-as always. Maybe someday I'll develop an immunity to Tananda's charms. Until then I'll just enjoy them. "Sorry, Tanda," I apologized. "Didn't mean to snap at you-log it off to hunger."

"That's right," she exclaimed, clicking her fingers, "we're supposed to be finding you some food. It completely slipped my mind again what with this racket going on. C'mon, let's see what the blue-plate special is today."

Finding a place to eat turned out to be more of a task than either of us anticipated. Most of the restaurants we came across were either closed or only serving drinks. I half-expected Tananda to suggest that we drink our meal, but mercifully that possibility wasn't mentioned.

We finally located a little sidewalk cafe down a narrow street and elbowed our way to a small table, ignoring the glares of our fellow diners. Service was slow, but my companion sped things up a bit by emptying the contents of one of our pouches onto the tabletop thus attracting the waiter's attention. In short order we were presented with two bowls of steaming whatever. I didn't even try to identify the various lumps and crunchies. It smelled good and tasted better and after several days of enforced fasting, that was all that mattered to me. I gluttoned myself and was well into my second bowl by the time Tananda finished her first. Pushing the empty dish away she began to study the crowd on the street with growing interest.

"Have you figured out yet what's going on?" she asked.

"Murppg!" I replied through a mouthful of food.

"Hmmm?" she frowned.

"I can't tell for sure," I said, swallowing hard.

"Everybody's happy because they won something, but darned if I can hear what they won."

"Well," Tananda shrugged. "I warned you they were weird."

Just then the clamor in the streets soared to new heights, drowning out any efforts at individual conversation. Craning our necks in an effort to locate the source of the disturbance, we beheld a strange phenomenon. A wall-to-wall mob of people was marching down the street, chanting in unison and sweeping along, or trampling, any smaller groups it encountered. Rather than expressing anger or resentment at this intrusion, the people around us were jumping up and down and cheering, hugging each other with tears of pure joy in their eyes. The focus of everyone's attention seemed to be sitting on a litter borne aloft by the stalwarts at the head of the crowd. I was fortunate enough to get a look at it as it passed by-fortunate in that I could see it without having to move. The crowds were such that I couldn't move if I'd wanted to, so it was just as well that it passed close by.

To say they carried a statue would be insufficient. It was the ugliest thing I had ever seen in my life and that included everything I'd just seen on this trip with Tananda. It was small, roughly twice the size of my head, and depicted a large, four-legged toad holding a huge eyeball in its mouth. Along its back, instead of warts, were the torsos, heads and arms of tiny Jahks intertwined in truly grotesque eroticism. These figures were covered with the warty protrusions one would expect to have found on the toad itself. As a crowning touch, the entire thing had a mottled gold finish which gave the illusion of splotches crawling back and forth on the surface.

I was totally repulsed by the statue, but it was obvious the crowd around me did not share these feelings. They swept forward in a single wave, joining the mob and adding their voices to the chant which could still be heard long after the procession had vanished from sight. Finally we were left in relative quiet on a street deserted save for a few random bodies of those not swift enough to either join or evade the mob.

"Well," I said casually, clearing my throat. "I guess we know what they won, now. Right?"

There was no immediate response. I shot a sharp glance at my companion and found her staring down the street after the procession.

"Tanda," I repeated, slightly concerned.

"That's it," she said with sudden, impish glee.

"That's what?" I blinked.

"Aahz's birthday present," she proclaimed.

I peered down the street, wondering what she was looking at. "What is?" I asked.

"That statue," she said firmly.

"That statue?" I cried, unable to hide my horror.

"Of course," she nodded, "it's perfect. Aahz will have never seen one, much less owned one."

"How do you figure that?" I pressed.

"It's obviously one-of-a-kind," she explained. "I mean, who could make something like that twice?"

She had me there, but I wasn't about to give up the fight. "There's just one little problem. I'm no expert on psychology, but if that pack we just saw is any decent sample, I don't think the folks around here are going to be willing to sell us their pretty statue."

"Of course not, silly," she laughed, turning to her food again. "That's what makes it priceless. I never planned to buy Aahz's present."

"But if it isn't for sale. how do we get it?" I frowned, fearing the answer.

Tananda choked suddenly on her food. It took me a moment to realize she was laughing. "Oh, Skeeve," she gasped at last, "you're such a kidder."

"I am?" I blinked.

"Sure," she insisted, looking deep into my eyes. "Why do you think it was so important for you to come along on this trip. I mean, you've always said you wanted to be a thief."

Chapter Five:

"Nothing is impossible. Anything can be accomplished with proper preparation and planning."
- PONCEDELEON

IT was roughly twelve hours later, the start of a new day. We were still in Jahk. I was still protesting. At the very least, I was sure this latest madcap project was not in line with Aahz's instructions to stay out of trouble.

Tananda, on the other hand, insisted that it would not be any trouble-or it might not be any trouble. We wouldn't know for sure until we saw what kind of security the locals had on the statue. In the meantime, why assume the worst?

I took her advice. I assumed the best. I assumed the security would be impenetrable and that we'd give the whole idea up as a lost cause.

So it was, with different but equally high hopes, we set out in search of the statue.

The town was deathly still in the early morning light. Apparently everyone was sleeping off the prior night's festivities-which seemed a reasonable pastime, all things considered.

We did manage to find one open restaurant, however. The owner was wearily shoveling out the rubble left by the celebrating crowds, and grudgingly agreed to serve us breakfast.

I had insisted on this before setting out. I mean, worried or not, it takes more than one solid meal to counterbalance the effects of a three-day stretch without food.

"So," I declared once we were settled at the table. "How do we go about locating the statue?"

"Easy," Tananda winked. "I'll ask our host a few subtle questions when he serves our food."

As if summoned by her words, the owner appeared with two steaming plates of food, which he plopped on the table in front of us with an unceremonious klunk.

"Thanks," I nodded, and was answered with an unenthusiastic grunt.

"Say, could we ask you a couple questions?" Tananda purred.

"Such as?" the man responded listlessly.

"Such as where do they keep the statue?" she asked bluntly.

I choked on my food. Tananda's idea of interrogation is about as subtle as a flogging. I keep forgetting she's a long standing drinking partner of Aahz's.

"The statue?" our host frowned.

"The one that was being carried up and down the streets yesterday," Tananda clarified easily.

"Oh! You mean the Trophy, the man laughed. "Statue. Hey, that's a good one. You two must be new in town."

"You might say that," I confirmed dryly. I had never been that fond of being laughed at-particularly early in the morning.

"Statue, trophy, what's the difference," Tananda shrugged. "Where is it kept?"

"It's on public display in the Trophy Building, of course," the owner informed us. "If you want to see it, you'd best get started early. After five years, everyone in the city's going to be showing up for a look-see."

"How far is it to-" Tananda began, but I interrupted her.

"You have a whole building for trophies?" I asked with forced casualness. "How many trophies are there?"

"Just the one," our host announced. "We put up a building especially for it. You two must really be new not to know that."

"Just got in yesterday," I confirmed. "Just to show you how new we are, we don't even know what the trophy's for."

"For?" the man gaped. "Why, it's for winning the Big Game, of course."

"What big game?"

The question slipped out before I thought. It burst upon the conversation like a bombshell, and our host actually gave ground a step in astonishment. Tananda nudged my foot warningly under the table, but I had already realized I had made a major blunder.

"I can see we have a lot to learn about your city, friend," I acknowledged smoothly. "If you have the time, we'd appreciate your joining us in a glass of wine. I'd like to hear more about this Big Game."

"Say, that's nice of you," our host declared, brightening noticeably. "Wait right here. I'll fetch the wine."

"What was that all about?" Tananda hissed as soon as he had moved out of earshot.

"I'm after some information," I retorted. "Specifically, about the Trophy."

"I know that," she snapped. "The question is 'Why?' "

"As a thief," I explained loftily, "I feel I should know as much as possible about what I'm trying to steal."

"Who ever told you that?" Tananda frowned. "All you want to know about a target item is how big it is, how heavy it is, and what it will sell for. Then you study the security protecting it. Learning a lot about the item itself is a handicap, not an advantage."

"How do you figure that?" I asked, my curiosity aroused in spite of myself.

My companion rolled her eyes in exasperation.

"Because it'll make you feel guilty," she explained. "When you find out how emotionally attached the current owner is to the item, or that he'll be bankrupt without it, or that he'll be killed if it's stolen, then you'll be reluctant to take it. When you actually make your move, guilt can make you hesitate, and hesitant thieves either end up in jail or dead."

I was going to pursue the subject further, but our host chose that moment to rejoin us. Balancing a bottle and three glasses in his hands, he hooked an extra chair over to our table with his foot.

"Here we go," he announced, depositing his load in front of us. "The best in the house-or the best that's left after the celebrations. You know how that is. No matter how much you stock in advance, it's never enough."

"No, we don't know," I corrected. "I was hoping you could tell us."

"That's right," he nodded, filling the glasses. "You know I still can't believe how little you know about politics."

"Politics?" I blinked. "What does the Big Game have to do with politics?"

"It has everything to do with politics," our host proclaimed mightily. "That's the point. Don't you see?"

"No," I admitted bluntly.

The man sighed.

"Look," he said, "this land has two potential capitals. One is Veygus, and this one, as you know, is Ta-hoe."

I hadn't known it, but it seemed unwise to admit my ignorance. I'm slow, but not dumb.

"Since there can only be one capital at any given time," our host continued, "the two cities compete for the privilege each year. The winner is the capital and gets to be the center of government for the next year. The Trophy is the symbol of that power, and Veygus has had it for the last five years. Yesterday we finally won it back."

"You mean the Big Game decides who's going to run the land?" I exclaimed, realization dawning at last. "Excuse my asking, but isn't that a bit silly?"

"No sillier than any other means of selecting governmental leadership," the man countered, shrugging his bony shoulders. "It sure beats going to war. Do you think it's a coincidence that we've been playing the game for five hundred years and there hasn't been a civil war in that entire time?"

"But if the Big Game has replaced civil war, then what-" I began, but Tananda interrupted.

"I hate to interrupt," she interrupted, "but if we're going to beat the crowds, we'd better get going. Where did you say the Trophy Building was, again?"

"One block up and six blocks to the left," our host supplied. "You'll know it by the crowds. I'll set the rest of the bottle aside and we can finish it after you've seen the Trophy."

"We'd appreciate that," Tananda smiled, paying him for our meal.

Apparently she had succeeded in using the right currency, for the owner accepted it without batting an eye and waved a fond farewell as we started off.

"I was hoping to find out more about this Big Game," I grumbled as we passed out of earshot.

"No, you weren't," my guide corrected.

"I wasn't?" I frowned.

"No. You were getting involved," she pointed out. "We're here to get a birthday present, not to get embroiled in local politics."

"I wasn't getting involved," I protested. "I was just trying to get a little information."

Tananda sighed heavily.

"Look, Skeeve," she said, "take some advice from an old dimension traveler. Too much information is poison. Every dimension has its problems, and if you start learning the gruesome details, it occurs to you how simple it would be to help out. Once you see a problem and a solution, you feel almost obligated to meddle. That always leads to trouble, and we're supposed to be avoiding trouble this trip, remember?"

I almost pointed out the irony of her advising me to avoid trouble while en route to engineer a theft. Then it occurred to me that if the theft didn't bother her, but local politics did, I might be wise to heed her advice. As I've said, I'm slow, but not dumb.

As predicted, the Trophy Building was crowded despite the early hour. As we approached, I marveled anew at the physique of the natives-or specifically, the lack thereof.

Tananda did not seem to share my fascination with the natives, and threaded her way nimbly through the throng, leaving me to follow behind. There was no organized line, and by the time we got through one of the numerous doors, the throng was thick enough to impede our progress. Tananda continued making her way closer to the Trophy, but I stopped just inside the door. My advantage of height gave me a clear view of the Trophy from where I was.

If anything, it was uglier seen plainly than it had been viewed from a distance.

"Isn't it magnificent?" the woman standing next to me sighed.

It took me a moment to realize she was speaking to me. My disguise made me look shorter, and she was talking to my chest.

"I've never seen anything like it," I agreed lamely.

"Of course not," she frowned. "It's the last work done by the great sculptor Watgit before he went mad."

It occurred to me that the statue might have been done after he went mad. Then it occurred to me that it might have driven him mad-especially if he had been working from a live model. I became so lost in the horrible thought that I started nervously when Tananda reappeared at my side and touched my arm.

"Let's go, handsome," she murmured. "I've seen enough."

The brevity of her inspection gave me hope.

"There's no hope, eh?" I sighed dramatically. "Gee, that's tough. I had really been looking forward to testing my skills."

"That's good," she purred, taking my arm. "Because I think I see a way we can pull this caper off."

I wasn't sure what a caper was, but I was certain that once I found out I wouldn't like it. I was right.

Chapter Six:

"Now you see it, now you don't."

-H. SHADOWSPAWN

"ARE you positive there-was no lock on the door?" I asked for the twenty-third time.

"Keep it down," Tananda hissed, laying a soft hand on my lips, though none too gently. "Do you want to wake everybody?"

She had a point. We were crouched in an alley across from the Trophy Building, and as the whole idea of our waiting was to be sure everyone was asleep, it was counterproductive to make so much noise we kept them awake. Still, I had questions I wanted answered.

"You're sure? " I asked again in a whisper. "Yes, I'm sure," Tananda sighed. "You could have seen for yourself if you had looked." "I was busy looking at the statue," I admitted. "Uh-huh," my partner snorted. "Remember what I said about getting over-involved with the target? You were supposed to be checking security, not playing art connoisseur."

"Well, I don't like it," I declared suspiciously, eager to get the conversation off my shortcomings. "It's too easy. I can't believe they'd leave something they prize as highly as that Trophy in an unlocked, unguarded building."

"There are a couple things you've overlooked," Tanda chided. "First of all, that statue's one of a kind. That means any thief who stole it would have some real problems trying to sell it again. If he even showed it to anyone here in Ta-hoe, they'd probably rip his arms off."

"He could hold it for ransom," I pointed out.

"Hey, that's pretty good," my guide exclaimed softly, nudging me in the ribs. "We'll make a thief of you yet! However, that brings us to the second thing you overlooked."

"Which is?"

"It's not unguarded," she smiled.

"But you said-" I began.

"Sshh!" she cautioned. "I said there would be no guards in the building with the Trophy."

I closed my eyes and regained control of my nerves, particularly those influenced by blind panic.

"Tanda," I said gently. "Don't you think it's about time you shared some of the details of your master plan with me?"

"Sure, handsome," she responded, slipping an arm around my waist. "I didn't think you were interested."

I resisted an impulse to throttle her.

"Just tell me," I urged. "First off, what is the security on the Trophy."

"Well," she said, tapping her chin with one finger, "as I said, there are no guards in the building. There is, however, a silent alarm that will summon guards. It's triggered by the nightingale floor."

"The what?" I interrupted.

"The nightingale floor," she repeated. "It's a fairly common trick throughout the dimensions. The wooden floor around the Trophy is riddled with deliberately loosened boards that creak when you step on them. In this case, they not only creak, they trip an alarm."

"Wonderful!" I grimaced. "So we can't set foot in the room we're supposed to steal something out of. Anything else?"

I was speaking sarcastically, but Tananda took me seriously.

"Just the magikal wards around the statue itself," she shrugged.

"Magikal wards?" I gulped. "You mean there's magik in this dimension?"

"Of course there is," Tananda smiled. "You're here."

"I didn't set any wards," I exclaimed. "That wasn't what I meant," Tanda chided. "Look, you tapped into the magikal force lines to disguise us. That means there's magik here for anyone trained to use it-not just us, anyone. Even if none of the locals are adept, there's nothing stopping someone from another dimension from dropping in and using what's here."

"Okay, okay," I sighed. "I guess I wasn't thinking. I guess the next question is, how are we supposed to beat the funny floor and the wards?"

"Easy," she grinned. "The wards are sloppy. Someone set up a fence instead of a dome when they cast the wards. All you have to do is levitate the Trophy over the wards and float it across the floor into our waiting arms. We never even have to set foot in the room."

"Whoa!" I cautioned, holding up a hand. "There's one problem with that. I can't do it."

"You can't?" she blinked. "I thought levitation was one of your strongest spells."

"It is," I conceded. "But that statue's heavy. I couldn't levitate it from a distance. It has something to do with what Aahz calls leverage. I'd have to be close, practically standing on top of it."

"Okay," she said at last. "We'll just have to switch to Plan B."

"You have a Plan B?" I asked, genuinely impressed.

"Sure," she grinned. "I just made it up. You can fly us both across the floor and over the wards. Then we latch onto the Trophy and fly back to Klah from inside the wards."

"I don't know," I frowned.

"Now what's wrong?" my guide scowled.

"Well, flying's a form of levitation," I explained. "I've never tried flying myself and someone else, and even if I can do it, we'll be pushing down on the floor as hard as if we were walking on it. It might set the alarm off."

"If I understand flying," Tanda pondered, "our weight would be more dispersed than if we were walking, but you're right. There's no point in taking the extra risk of flying us both across the floor."

She snapped her fingers suddenly.

"Okay. Here's what we'll do," she exclaimed, leaning forward. "You fly across to the Trophy alone while I wait by the door. Then, when you're in place, you can use the D-Hopper to bring yourself and the Trophy back to Klah, while I blip back magikally."

For some reason, the thought of dividing our forces in the middle of a theft bothered me.

"Say... um, Tanda," I said, "it occurs to me that even if we set off the alarm, we would be long gone by the time the guards arrived. I mean, if they haven't had war for over five hundred years, they're bound to be a little sloppy turning out."

"No," Tananda countered firmly. "If we've got a way to completely avoid alerting the guards, we'll take it. I promised Aahz to keep you out of trouble, and that means-"

She broke off suddenly, staring across the street. "What is it?" I hissed, craning my neck for a better look.

In response, she pointed silently at the darkened Trophy Building.

A group of a dozen cloaked figures had appeared from the shadows beside the building. They looked briefly up and down the street, then turned and disappeared into the building.

"I thought you said there wouldn't be any guards in the building!" I whispered frantically.

"I don't understand it," Tananda murmured, more to herself than to me. "It's not laid out for a guard force."

"But if there are guards, we can't-" I began, but Tananda silenced me with a hand on my arm.

The group had reemerged from the building. Moving more slowly than when we had first seen them, they edged their way back into the shadows and vanished from sight.

"That's a relief," Tananda declared, letting out a pent-up breath. "It's just a pack of drunks sneaking an after-hours look at the Trophy."

"They didn't act like drunks," I commented doubtfully.

"C'mon, handsome," my guide declared, clapping a hand on my shoulder. "It's time we got this show on the road. Follow me."

Needless to say, I didn't want to go, but I was even more reluctant to be left behind. This left me no choice but to follow as she headed across the street. As I went, though, I took the precaution of fumbling out my D-Hopper. I didn't like the feel of this, and wanted to be sure my exit route was at hand in case of trouble.

"In you go!" Tananda ordered, holding the door open. "Be sure to sing out when you're in position. I want to be there to see Aahz's face when you give him the Trophy."

"I can't see anything," I protested, peering into the dark building.

"Of course not!" Tananda snapped. "It's dark. You know where the Trophy is, though, so get going."

At her insistence, I reached out with my mind and pushed gently against the floor. As had happened a hundred times in practice, I lifted free and began to float toward the estimated position of the statue.

As I went, it occurred to me I had neglected to ask Tananda how high the wards extended. I considered going back or calling to her, but decided against it. Noise would be dangerous, and time was precious. I wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. Instead, I freed part of my mind from the task of flying and cast about in front of me, seeking the tell-tale aura of the magikal wards. There were none.

"Tanda!" I hissed, speaking before I thought. "The wards are down!"

"Impossible," came her response from the door. "You must be in the wrong spot. Check again."

I tried again, casting about the full extent of the room. Nothing. As I peered about, I realized my eyes were acclimating to the darkness.

"There are no wards," I called softly. "I'm right over the pedestal and there are no wards."

Something was tugging at my consciousness. Something I had seen was terribly wrong, but my attention was occupied scanning for the wards.

"If you're over the pedestal," Tananda called, "then drop down and get the Trophy. And hurry! I think I hear someone coming."

I lowered myself to the floor, gently as I remembered the creaky boards, and turned to the pedestal. Then it burst upon me what was wrong.

"It's gone! "I cried.

"What?" Tananda gasped, her silhouette appearing in the doorway.

"The Trophy! It's gone!" I exclaimed, running my hands over the vacant pedestal.

"Get out, Skeeve," Tananda called, suddenly full volume.

I started for the door, but her voice stopped me.

"No! Use the D-Hopper. Now!"

My thumb went to the activator button on the device I had been clutching, but I hesitated.

"What about you?" I called. "Aren't you coming?"

"After you're gone," she insisted. "Now get go-"

Something came flying out of the dark and struck her silhouette. She went down in a boneless heap.

"Tanda!" I shouted, starting forward.

Suddenly the doorway was filled with short silhouettes swarming all over Tananda's prone form.

I wavered for a moment in indecision.

"There's another one inside!" someone called.

So much for indecision. I hit the button.

There was the now familiar rush of darkness . . . and I was back in my quarters on Klah.

Aahz was seated at a table with his back to me, but he must have heard the KAMF of my arrival.

"It's about time!" he growled. "Did you enjoy your little-"

He broke off as he turned and his eyes took in the expression on my face.

"Aahz," I cried, stumbling forward. "We're in trouble."

His fist came down in a crash which splintered the table.

"I knew it!" he snarled.

Chapter Seven:

"A friend in need is a pest."

-FAFHRD

"Now let's see if I've got this straight," Aahz grumbled, pacing the length of the room. "You got away without a scratch, but Tanda got caught. Right?"

"I couldn't help it!" I moaned, shaking my head. "They were all over her and you said-"

"I know, I know," my mentor waved. "You did the right thing. I'm just trying to get a clear picture of the situation. You're sure this was in Jahk? The weird dimension with the short, pale guys? Skinny or overweight?"

"That's right," I confirmed. "Do you know it?" "I've heard of it," Aahz shrugged, "but I've never gotten around to visiting. It's talked around a bit on the gambling circuit."

"Must be because of the Big Game," I suggested brightly.

"What I can't figure," Aahz mused, ignoring my comments, "is what you two were doing there."

"Urn ... it was sort of because of me," I admitted in a small voice.

"You?" Aahz blinked, halting his pacing to stare at me. "Who told you about Jahk?"

"No one," I clarified hastily. "It wasn't that I asked to go to Jahk specifically. I was hungry, and Tanda said Jahk was the closest dimension where I could find something to eat."

"I know how that is," my mentor grimaced. "Eating is always a problem when you're traveling the dimensions-even the humanoid ones."

"It's even rougher when you aren't even visiting humanoid dimensions," I agreed.

"Is that a fact?" Aahz murmured, eyeing me suspiciously. "Which dimensions did you visit, anyway?"

"Um ... I can't remember all the names," I evaded. "Tanda-um-felt there would be less chance of trouble in some of the out of the way dimensions."

"What did the natives look like?" Aahz pressed.

"Aren't we getting off the subject?" I asked desperately. "The real issue is Tanda."

Surprisingly, the ploy worked.

"You're right, kid," Aahz sighed. "Okay. I want you to think hard. You're sure you don't know who jumped her or why?"

My conversational gambit had backfired. The question placed me in a real dilemma. On the one hand, I couldn't expect Aahz to come up with a rescue plan unless he knew the full situation. On the other, I wasn't particularly eager to admit what we were doing when Tananda was captured.

"Um ..." I said, avoiding his eyes. "I think I can remember a few things about those other dimensions after all. There was one where ..."

"Wait a minute," Aahz interrupted. "You were the one who said we should focus on Tanda's problem. Now don't go straying off..."

He stopped in mid-sentence to examine me closely. "You're holding out on me, kid," he announced in a cold voice that allowed no room for argument. "Now give! What haven't you told me about this disaster?"

His words hung expectantly in the air, and it occurred to me I couldn't stall any longer.

"Well..." I began, clearing my throat. "I'm not sure, but I think the ones who grabbed Tanda were the city guardsmen."

"Guardsmen?" Aahz frowned. "Why would they want to put the grab on Tanda? All you were doing was getting a bite to eat and maybe a little shopping."

I didn't answer, taking a sudden interest in studying my feet in close detail.

"That is all you were doing, wasn't it?"

I tried to speak, but the words wouldn't come.

"What were you doing?" Aahz growled. "Come on. Out with it. I should have known it wasn't just ... Hey! You didn't kill anyone, did you?"

Strong hands closed on my shoulders and my head was tossed about by a none too gentle shaking.

"We didn't kill anyone!" I shouted, the process difficult because my jaw was moving in a different direction than my tongue. "We were just stealing ..."

"Stealing!?!"

The hands on my shoulders released their grip so fast I fell to the floor. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind to break my fall with my rump.

"I don't believe it! Stealing!" Aahz made his appeal to the ceiling. "All this because you tried to steal something."

My rump hurt, but I had other more pressing matters to deal with. I was desperately trying to phrase my explanation when I realized with some astonishment that Aahz was laughing.

"Stealing!" he repeated. "You know, you really had me going for a minute there, kid. Stealing! And I thought it was something important."

"You mean, you aren't mad?" I asked incredulously.

"Mad? Naw!" he proclaimed. "Like the old saying goes, 'you can take the boy out of thieving' . . . Heck! Most demons are thieves. It's the only way to get something if you don't have any native coinage."

"I thought you'd really be upset," I stammered, still unwilling to believe my good fortune.

"Now, don't get me wrong, kid," my mentor amended sternly, "I'm not overjoyed with your venture into thievery. You're supposed to be studying magik . . . the kind that will get you a raise as a court magician, not the kind that ends up with you running down a dark alley. Still, all things considered, you could have done a lot worse on your first solo trip through the dimension."

"Gee, thanks, Aahz," I beamed.

"So, let's see it," he smiled, extending a palm.

"See what?" I blinked.

"What you stole," he insisted. "If you came here direct from the scene of the crime, I assume you still have it with you."

"Umm . . . actually," I gulped, avoiding his eyes again. "I-that is, we didn't get it. It's still back in Jahk somewhere."

"You mean to say you went through all this hassle, got Tanda captured, and came running back here with your tail between your legs, and you didn't even bother to pick up what you were trying to steal?"

The storm clouds were back in Aahz's face. I realized I was on the brink of being in trouble again.

"But you said ..." I protested.

"I know you aren't supposed to be a thief!" my mentor roared. "But once you set your hand to it, I expect you to at least be a successful thief! To think an apprentice of mine can't even put together a workable plan..."

"It was Tanda's plan," I offered weakly.

"It was?" Aahz seemed slightly mollified. "Well, you should have checked it over yourself before you joined in."

"I did," I protested. "As far as I can tell it should have worked."

"Oh, really?" came the sarcastic reply. "All right. Why don't you tell me all about this plan that didn't work after you okayed it."

He dragged up a chair and sat in front of me, leaving me little option but to narrate the whole story. I went over the whole thing for him; the plan, the nightingale floor, the magik wards, everything-except what we were trying to steal, and why. By the time I had finished, his jeering smile had faded to a thoughtful frown.

"You're right, kid," he admitted at last. "It should have worked. The only thing I can figure is that they moved your target somewhere else for safekeeping-but that doesn't make sense. I mean, why would they set up all the security arrangements if the target was going to be kept somewhere else? And that group hanging around the building before you went in sounds a bit suspicious."

He thought for a few more minutes, then sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, well," he proclaimed. "Nobody wins all the time. It didn't work and that's that. C'mon, kid. Let's get some sleep."

"Sleep?" I gasped. "What about Tanda?"

"What about her?" Aahz frowned.

"They're holding her prisoner in Jahk!" I exclaimed. "Aren't we going to try to rescue her?"

"Oh, that!" my mentor laughed. "Don't worry about her. She'll be along on her own in a little while."

"But they're holding her prisoner!" I insisted.

"You think so?" Aahz grinned. "Stop and think a minute, kid. How are they going to hold her? Remember, she can hop dimensions any time she wants. The only reason she didn't come back at the same time you did is that she got knocked cold. As soon as she wakes up, she'll be back. Mark my words."

Something about his logic didn't ring true, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

"What if they execute her before she wakes up?" I asked.

"Execute her-?" Aahz frowned. "For what? The heist didn't work, so they've still got their whatever. I can't see anyone getting upset enough to have her executed."

"I dunno, Aahz," I said. "The whole city seemed pretty worked up over the Trophy, and ..."

"Trophy?" Aahz interrupted. "You mean the Trophy from the Big Game? What does that have to do with anything?"

"That's . . . um, that's what we were trying to steal," I explained.

"The Trophy?" Aahz exclaimed. "You two didn't aim small, did you? What did you want with-no, on second thought don't tell me. That woman's logic always makes my head hurt."

"But now you see why I'm afraid they might execute her," I pressed, secretly relieved at not having to disclose the motive for our theft.

"It's a possibility," Aahz admitted, "but I still think they'd let her wake up first. Public trials are dramatic, especially for something as big as trying to steal the Big Game Trophy. Heck, Tanda's enough of a sport that she might even stick around for the trial before popping back here."

"You really think so?" I pressed.

"I'm sure of it," Aahz declared confidently. "Now let's get some sleep. It sounds like it's been a long day for you."

I grudgingly retired to my bed, but I didn't go to sleep immediately. There was still something eluding my mental grasp-something important. As I lay there, my mind began wandering back over my trip-the sights, the smells, the strange beings ...

"Aahz!" I shouted, bolting upright. "Aahz! Wake up!"

"What is it?" my mentor growled sleepily, struggling to rise.

"I just remembered! I was handling our disguises for the whole trip."

"So what?" Aahz growled. "It's good practice for you, but..."

"Don't you see?" I insisted. "If I'm here and Tanda's unconscious in Jahk, then she hasn't got a disguise! They'll be able to see she isn't one of them -that she's a demon!"

There was a frozen moment of silence, then Aahz was on his feet, looming over me.

"Don't just sit there, kid," he growled. "Get the D-Hopper. We're going to Jahk!"

Chapter Eight:

"Once more into the breach..."

-ZARNA, THE HUMAN CANNONBALL

FORTUNATELY, there was a setting for Jahk on our D-Hopper though Aahz had to search a bit to find it.

I wanted to go armed to the teeth, but my mentor vetoed the plan. Under cross-examination I had had to admit that I hadn't seen anyone in that dimension wearing arms openly except the city guards, and that was that. My ability to disguise things was weak when it came to metal objects, and swords and knives would have made us awfully conspicuous walking down the street. As Aahz pointed out, the one time you don't want to wear weapons is when they're more likely to get you into trouble than out of it.

I hate it when Aahz makes sense.

Anyway, aside from a few such minor squabbles and disputes, our departure from Klah and our subsequent arrival at Jahk was smooth and uneventful. In hindsight, I realize that was the last thing to go right for some time.

"Well, kid," Aahz exclaimed, looking about him eagerly, "where do we go?"

"I don't know," I admitted, scanning the horizon.

Aahz frowned. "Let me run this by you slowly," he sighed. "You've been here before, and I haven't. Now, even your limited brain should realize that that makes you the logical guide. Got it?"

"But I haven't been here before," I protested. "Not here! When Tanda and I arrived, we were in a park in Ta-hoe!"

At the moment, Aahz and I were standing beside a dirt road, surrounded by gently rolling meadows and a scattering of very strange trees. There wasn't even an outhouse in sight, much less the booming metropolis I had visited.

"Don't tell me, let me guess," Aahz whispered, shutting his eyes as if in pain. "Tanda handled your transport on the way in the first time. Right?"

"That's right," I nodded. "You made me promise to keep the D-Hopper set for Klah, and...."

"I know, I know," my mentor waved impatiently. "I must say, though, you pick the damndest times to be obedient. Okay! So the D-Hopper's set for a different drop zone than the one Tanda uses. We'll just have to dig up a native guide to get us oriented."

"Terrific!" I grimaced. "And where are we supposed to find a native guide?"

"How about right over there?" Aahz smirked, pointing.

I followed the line of his extended talon. Sure enough, not a stone's throw away was a small pond huddled in the shade of a medium sized tree. Seated, leaning against the tree, was a young native. The only thing that puzzled me was that he was holding one end of a short stick, and there was a string which ran from the stick's other end to the pond.

"What's he doing?" I asked suspiciously.

"From here, I'd say he's fishing," Aahz proclaimed.

"Fishing? Like that?" I frowned. "Why doesn't he just... "

"I'll explain later," my mentor interrupted. "Right now we're trying to get directions to Ta-hoe. Remember?"

"That's right!" I nodded. "Let's go."

I started forward, only to be stopped short by Aahz's heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Kid," he sighed, "aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?" I blinked.

"Our disguises, dummy," he snarled. "Your lazy old teacher would like to be able to ask our questions without chasing him all around the landscape for the answers."

"Oh .Right, Aahz."

Embarrassed by the oversight, I hastily did my disguise bit, and together we approached the dozing native.

"Excuse me, sir," I began, clearing my throat, "can you tell us the way to Ta-hoe?"

"What are you doing out here?" the youth demanded, without opening his eyes. "Don't you know the land between Veygus and Ta-hoe is a no-man's-land until the war's over?"

"What did he say?" Aahz scowled.

"What was that?" the youth asked, his eyes snapping open.

For a change, my mind grasped the situation instantly. I was still wearing my translator pendant from my travels with Tananda, but Aahz didn't have one. That meant that while I could understand and be understood by both Aahz and the native, neither of them could decipher what the other was

saying. Our disguise was in danger of being discovered by the first native we'd met on our rescue mission. Terrific.

"Umm. Excuse me a moment, sir," I stammered at the youth.

Thinking fast, I removed the pendant from around my neck and looped it over my arm. Aahz understood at once, and thrust his hand through the pendant, grasping my forearm with an iron grip. Thus, we were both able to utilize the power of the pendant.

Unfortunately, the native noticed this by-play. His eyes, which had opened at the sound of Aahz's voice, now widened to the point of popping out as he looked from one of us to the other.

"Fraternity initiation," Aahz explained conspiratorially, winking at him.

"A what?" I blinked.

"Later, kid," my mentor mumbled tensely. "Get the conversation going again."

"Right. Ummm ... what was that you were saying about a war?"

"I was saying you shouldn't be here," the youth replied, regaining some of his bluster, but still eyeing the pendant suspiciously. "Both sides have declared this area off-limits to civilians until after the war's over."

"When did this war start?" I asked.

"Oh, it won't actually start for a week or so," the native shrugged. "We haven't had a war for over five hundred years and everyone's out of practice. It'll take them a while to get ready-but you still shouldn't be here."

"Well, what are you doing here?" Aahz challenged. "You don't look like a soldier to me."

"My dad's an officer," the youth yawned. "If a Ta-hoer patrol finds me out here, I'll just tell 'em who my father is and they'll keep their mouths shut."

"What if a patrol from Veygus finds you?" I asked curiously.

"The Veygans?" he laughed incredulously. "They're even more unprepared than Ta-hoe is. They haven't even got their uniforms designed yet, much less organized enough to send out patrols."

"Well, we appreciate the information," Aahz announced. "Now if you'll just point out the way to Ta-hoe, we'll get ourselves off your battlefield."

"The way to Ta-hoe?" the youth frowned. "You don't know the way to Ta-hoe? That's strange."

"What's strange?" my mentor challenged. "So we're new around here. So what?"

The youth eyed him passively.

"It's strange," he observed calmly, "because that road only runs between Veygus and Ta-hoe. Perhaps you can explain how it is that you're traveling a road without knowing either where you're going or where you're coming from?"

There was a moment of awkward silence, then I withdrew my arm from the translator pendant.

"Well, Aahz," I sighed, "how do we talk our way out of this one?"

"Put your arm back in the pendant," Aahz hissed. "He's getting suspicious."

"He's already suspicious," I pointed out. "The question is what do we do now?"

"Nothing to it," my mentor winked. "Just watch how I handle this."

In spite of my worries, I found myself smiling in eager anticipation. Nobody can spin a lie like Aahz once he gets rolling.

"The explanation is really quite simple," Aahz smiled, turning to the youth. "You see, we're magicians who just dropped in from another world. Having just arrived here, we are naturally disoriented."

"My, what a clever alibi," I commented dryly.

Aahz favored me with a dirty look.

"As I was saying," he continued, "we have come to offer our services to the glorious city of Ta-hoe for the upcoming war."

It occurred to me that that last statement was a little suspicious. I mean, we had clearly not known about the war at the beginning of this conversation.

Fortunately, the youth overlooked this minor detail.

"Magicians?" he smiled skeptically. "You don't look like magicians to me."

"Show him, kid," Aahz instructed.

"Show him?" I blinked.

"That's right," my mentor nodded. "Drop the disguises, one at a time."

With a shrug, I slipped my arm back into the translator pendant and let my disguise fall away.

"I am Skeeve," I announced, "and this"-I dropped Aahz's disguise-"is my friend and fellow magician, Aahz."

The effect on the youth couldn't have been greater if we had lit a fire under him. Dropping his pole, he sprang to his feet and began backing away until I was afraid he'd topple into the pond. His eyes were wide with fright, and his mouth kept opening and shutting, though no sounds came forth.

"That's enough, kid," Aahz winked. "He's convinced."

I hastily reassembled the disguises, but it did little to calm the youth.

"Not a bad illusion, eh, sport?" my mentor leered at him.

"I ... I ..." the youth stammered. Then he paused and set his lips. "Ta-hoe's that way."

"Thanks," I smiled. "We'll be on our way now."

"Not so fast, kid," Aahz waved. "What's your name, son?"

"Griffin ... sir," the youth replied uneasily.

"Well, Griffin," Aahz smiled, "how would you like to show us the way?"

"Why?" I asked bluntly.

"Wake up, kid," my mentor scowled. "We can't just leave him here. He knows who and what we are."

"I know," I commented archly. "You told him."

"... and besides," he continued as if I hadn't spoken, "he's our passport if we meet any Army patrols."

"I'd rather not..." Griffin began.

"Of course," Aahz interrupted. "There is another possibility. We could kill him here and now."

"I insist you let me escort you!" the youth proclaimed.

"Welcome, comrade!" I beamed.

"See, kid?" my mentor smiled, clapping me on the shoulder. "I told you, you could settle things without my help."

"Ummm . . . there is one thing, though," Griffin commented hesitantly.

"And that is ..." Aahz prompted.

"I hope you won't hold it against me if your services aren't accepted," the youth frowned.

"You doubt our powers?" my mentor scowled in his most menacing manner.

"Oh, it's not that," Griffin explained quickly. "It's just that... you see ... well, we already have a magician."

"Is that all?" Aahz laughed. "Just leave him to us."

When Aahz says "us" in regard to magik, he means me. However bad things had gone so far, I had an uncomfortable foreboding they were going to get worse.

Chapter Nine:

"War may be Hell. .. but it's good for business!"

-THE ASSOCIATION FOR MERCHANTS, MANUFACTURERS, AND MORTICIANS

TA-HOE was a beehive of activity when we arrived. Preparations for the upcoming war were in full swing, and everybody was doing something. Surprisingly enough, most of the preparations were of a non-military nature.

"What is all this?" I asked our native guide.

"I told you," he explained. "We're getting ready for a war with Veygus."

"This is getting ready for a war?" I said, gazing incredulously about.

"Sure," Griffin nodded. "Souvenirs don't make themselves, you know."

There wasn't a spear or uniform in sight. Instead, the citizens were busily producing pennants, posters, and lightweight shirts with "Win the War" emblazoned across them.

"It's the biggest thing to hit Ta-hoe in my lifetime," our guide confided. "I mean. Big Game souvenirs are a stock item. If you design it right, you can even hang on to any overstock and sell it the following year. This war thing caught everybody flatfooted. A lot of people are complaining that they weren't given sufficient warning to cash in on it. There's a resolution before the council right now to postpone hostilities for another month. The folks who deal in knitted hats and stadium blankets are behind it. They claim that declaring war on such short notice will hurt their businesses by giving unfair advantage to the merchants who handle stuff like bumper stickers and posters that can be cranked out in a hurry."

I couldn't understand most of what he was talking about, but Aahz was enthralled.

"These folks really know how to run a war!" he declared with undisguised enthusiasm. "Most dimensions make their war profits off munitions and weapons contracts. I'll tell you, kid, if we weren't in such a hurry, I'd take notes."

It's a rare thing for Aahz to show admiration for anyone, much less a whole dimension, and I'd never before heard him admit there was anything he could learn about making money. I found the phenomenon unnerving.

"Speaking of being in a hurry," I interjected, "would you mind telling me why we're on our way to talk to Ta-hoe's magician?"

"That's easy," my mentor smiled. "For the most part, magicians stick together. There's a loyalty to others in the same line of work that transcends any national or dimensional ties. With any luck, we can enlist his aid in springing Tanda loose."

"That's funny," I observed dryly. "The magicians I've seen so far were usually at each other's throats. I got the definite impression they'd like nothing better than to see competing magicians, and us specifically, expire on the spot."

"There is that possibility," Aahz admitted, "but look at it this way. If he won't help us, then he'll probably be our major opponent and we'll want to get a fix on what he can and can't do before we make our plans. Either way, we want to see him as soon as possible."

You may have noticed Aahz's appraisals of a situation are usually far from reassuring. Some day I might get used to that, but in the meantime I'm learning to operate in a constant state of blind panic.

For a moment, our path was blocked by a crowd listening to a young rabble-rouser who spoke to them from atop a jury-rigged platform. As near as I could make out, they were protesting the war.

"I tell you, the council is withholding information from us!"

A growl arose from the assemblage.

"As citizens of Ta-hoe, we have the right to know the facts about this war!"

The response was louder and more fevered.

"How are we supposed to set the odds for this war, much less bet intelligently, if we don't know the facts?"

The crowd was nearing frenzied hysterics as we finally edged past.

"Who are these people?" I asked.

"Bookies," Griffin shrugged. "The council's better watch its step. They're one of the strongest lobbies in Ta-hoe."

"I tell you, it's awe-inspiring," Aahz murmured dreamily.

"We've got to stand up for our rights! Demand the facts!" the rabble-rouser was screaming. "We've got to know the lineups, the battle plans, the... "

"They're barking up the wrong tree," Griffin commented. "They haven't gotten the information because the military hasn't devised a plan yet."

"Why don't you tell them?" I suggested.

Our guide cocked an eyebrow at me. "I thought you were in a hurry to see the magician," he countered.

"Oh, that's right," I returned, a little embarrassed by the oversight.

"Say, Griffin," Aahz called. "I've been meaning to ask. What started the war, anyway?"

For the first time since we'd met him, our youthful guide showed an emotion other than boredom or fear.

"Those bastards from Veygus stole our Trophy," he snarled angrily. "Now we're going to get it back or know the reason why."

For a change, I didn't need an elbow in the ribs from Aahz to remember to keep quiet. I got one anyway.

"Stole your Trophy, eh?" my mentor commented innocently. "Know how they did it?"

"A pack of 'em pulled a hit-and-run raid the day after the Big Game," Griffin proclaimed bitterly. "They struck just after sundown and got away before the guardsmen could respond to the alarm."

The memory of the group entering and leaving the Trophy Building while Tananda and I waited flashed across my mind. That explained a couple questions that had been bothering me, like "where did the statue go?" and "how did the guards arrive so fast?" We hadn't triggered any alarms! The group from Veygus had-inadvertently set us up for the guards!

"I'd think you'd take better care of the Trophy, if it means so much to you," Aahz suggested.

Griffin spun on him, and I thought for a minute he was actually going to throw a punch. Then, at the last moment, he remembered that Aahz was a magician and dropped his arms to his side. I heaved a quiet sigh of relief. I mean, Aahz is strong! I was impressed with his strength in my own dimension of Klah, and here on Jahk, I looked strong compared to the natives. If Griffin had thrown a punch, Aahz would have ripped him apart ... literally!

"Our security precautions on the Trophy were more than adequate," our guide announced levelly, "under normal circumstances. The thieves had magikal assistance."

"Magikal assistance?" I said, finally drawn from my silence.

"That's right." Griffin nodded vigorously. "How else could they have moved such a heavy statue before the guards arrived?"

"They could have done it without magik," Aahz offered. "Say, if they had a lot of strong men on the job."

"Normally, I'd agree with you," our guide admitted, "but in this case, we actually captured the demon that helped them."

For a long moment there was silence. Neither Aahz nor I wanted to ask the next question. We were afraid of what the answer might be. Finally, Aahz spoke. "A demon, you say?" he asked, smiling his broadest. "What happened to it?"

His tone was light and casual, but there was a glint in his eye I didn't like. I found myself in the unique position of worrying about the fate of an entire dimension.

"The demon?" Griffin frowned. "Oh, the magician's holding it captive. Maybe he'll let you see it when you meet him."

"The magician? The one we're going to see?" Aahz pressed. "He's got the demon?"

"That's right," our guide answered. "Why do you ask?"

"Is she still unconscious?" I blurted.

The elbow from Aahz almost doubled me over this time, but it was too late. Griffin had stopped in his tracks and was studying me with a new intensity.

"How did you know it was unconscious?" he asked suspiciously. "And why do you refer to it as 'she'?"

"I don't know," I covered smoothly. "Must have been something you said."

"I said we'd captured a demon," he argued, "not how, and as far as its sex goes..."

"Look," Aahz interrupted harshly, "are we going to stand around arguing all day, or are you going to take us to the magician?"

Griffin stared at us hard for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders.

"We're here," he announced, pointing at a door in the wall. "The magician lives there."

"Well, don't just stand there, son," Aahz barked. "Knock on the door and announce us."

Our guide heaved a sigh of disgust, but obediently walked over and hammered on the indicated door.

"Aahz!" I hissed. "What are we going to say?"

"Leave it to me, kid," he murmured back. "I'll try to feel him out a little, then we'll play it by ear from there."

"What are we supposed to do with our ears?" I frowned.

Aahz rolled his eyes. "Kid ..." he began.

Just then, the door opened, exposing a wizened old man who blinked at the sunlight.

"Griffin!" he exclaimed. "What brings you here?"

"Well, sir," our guide stammered, "I-that is, there are two gentlemen who want to speak with you. They say... Well, they're magicians."

The old man started at this and shot a sharp glance in our direction before he covered his reaction with a friendly smile.

"Magicians, you say! Well, come right in, gentlemen. Lad, I think you'd better wait outside here. Professional secrets and all that, you know."

"Urn . . . actually, I thought I'd be on my way now," Griffin murmured uneasily.

"Wait here." There was steel in the old man's voice now.

"Yes, sir," our guide gulped, licking his lips.

I tried to hide my nervousness as we followed the magician into his abode. I mean, aside from the fact that we didn't have the vaguest idea of this man's power, and that we had no guarantee we'd ever get out of this place alive, I had nothing to worry about. Right?

"Aahz," I whispered. "Have you got a fix on this guy yet?"

"It's a little early to say," my mentor replied sarcastically. "In the meantime, I've got a little assignment for you."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like, check his aura. Now."

One of the first things I had learned from Aahz was how to check auras, the field of magik around people or things. It seemed a strange thing to do just now, but I complied, viewing our host with unfocused eyes.

"Aahz," I gasped. "He's got an aura! The man's actually radiating magik. I can't do anything against someone that powerful."

"It's possible there is another explanation, kid," Aahz murmured. "He could be wearing a disguise spell like we are."

"Do you think so?" I asked hopefully.

"Well," my mentor drawled, "he's wearing a translator pendant, the same as we are. That makes it a good bet that he's not from this dimension. Besides, there's something familiar about his voice."

Our conversation ground to a halt as we reached our destination, a small room sparsely furnished with a large table surrounded by several chairs.

"If you'll be seated, gentlemen," our host said, gesturing to the chairs, "perhaps you'll be good enough to tell me what it is you wish to speak to me about."

"Not so fast," Aahz challenged, holding up a hand. "We're used to knowing who we're dealing with. Could you do us the courtesy of removing your disguise before we start?"

The magician averted his eyes and began to fidget nervously. "You spotted it, eh?" he grumbled. "It figures. As you've probably guessed already, I'm relatively new to this profession. Not in your class at all, if you know what I mean."

An immense wave of relief washed over me, but Aahz remained skeptical.

"Just take off the disguise, huh?" he insisted. . "Oh, very well," our host sighed and began fumbling in his pocket.

We waited patiently until he found what he was looking for. Then the lines of his features began to waver ... his body grew taller and fuller . . . until at last we saw...

"I thought so!" Aahz crowed triumphantly.

"Quigley!" I gasped.

"This is embarrassing," the demon hunter grumbled, slouching down into his chair.

Chapter Ten:

"Old heroes never die; they reappear in sequels"

-M. MOORCOCK

PHYSICALLY, Quigley was unchanged from when we first met him. Tall, long-boned and muscular, he still looked as if he'd be more at home in armor swinging a sword than sitting around in magician robes sipping wine with us. However, here we were, gathered in a conference which bore little resemblance to the formal interview I had originally anticipated.

"I was afraid you two would be along when I realized it was Tanda the guards captured," the ex-demon hunter grumbled.

"Afraid?" I frowned, genuinely puzzled. "Why should you be afraid of us?"

"Oh, come now, lad," Quigley smiled bitterly. "I appreciate your efforts to spare my feelings, but the truth of the matter is plain. My magikal powers don't hold a candle next to yours. I know full well that now that you're here you'll be able to take my job away from me without much difficulty. Either that, or make me look silly in front of my employers so that they'll fire me outright."

"That's ridiculous," I cried, more than slightly offended. "Look Quigley, I promise you we'll neither steal your job nor make you look silly while we're here."

"Really?" Quigley asked, brightening noticeably.

"You're being a little hasty with your promises, aren't you, kid?" Aahz interrupted in a warning tone.

"C'mon, Aahz," I grimaced. "You know that isn't why we're here."

"But, kid... "

I ignored him, turning back to Quigley.

"I promise you, Quigley. No job stealing, and nothing that will endanger your position. The truth is, I've already got a magician's job of my own. I'm surprised Tanda hasn't told you."

Strangely enough, instead of relaxing, Quigley seemed even more ill at ease and avoided my gaze.

"Well, actually, lad," he murmured uncomfortably, "Tanda hasn't said anything since she was turned over to my custody."

"She hasn't?" I asked, surprised. "That's funny. Usually the trouble is getting her to stop talking."

"Quite right," Quigley laughed uneasily. "Except this time-well-she hasn't regained consciousness yet."

"You mean she's still out cold?" Aahz exclaimed, surging to his feet. "Why didn't you say so? Come on, Quigley, wheel her out here. This might be serious."

"No, no. You misunderstand," Quigley waved. "She hasn't regained consciousness because I've kept a sleep spell on her."

"A sleep spell?" I frowned.

"That's right," Quigley nodded. "Tanda taught it to me herself. It's the first spell I learned, actually. Really very simple. As I understand it, all members of the Assassins Guild are required to learn it."

"Why?" Aahz interrupted.

"I never really gave it much thought," Quigley blinked. "I suppose it would help them in their work. You know, if you came on a sleeping victim, the spell would keep him from waking up until after you'd finished the job. Something like that."

"Not that!" Aahz moaned. "I know how assassins operate better than you do. I meant, why are you using a sleep spell on Tanda?"

"Why, to keep her from waking up, of course," Quigley shrugged.

"Brilliant," I muttered. "Why didn't we think of that?"

"Shut up, kid," my mentor snarled. "Okay, Quigley, let's try this one more time. Why don't you want to wake her up? I thought you two got along pretty well last time I saw you."

"We did," Quigley admitted, blushing. "But I'm a working magician now. If I let her wake up ... well, I don't flatter myself about my powers. There would be nothing I could do to keep her from escaping."

"You don't want her to escape?" I blinked.

"Of course not. It would mean my job," Quigley smiled. "That's why I'm so glad you promised not to do anything that would jeopardize my position."

My stomach sank.

"Smooth move, kid," Aahz commented dryly. "Maybe next time you'll listen when! try to advise you."

I tried to say something in my own defense, but nothing came to mind, so I shut my mouth and used the time to feel miserable.

"Well, gentlemen," Quigley beamed, rubbing his hands together. "Now that that's settled, I suppose you'll be wanting to get on your way to wherever you're going."

"Not so fast, Quigley," Aahz declared, sinking back into his chair and propping his feet up on the table. "If nothing else, I think you owe us an explanation. The last time we saw you, you were a demon hunter, heading off through the dimensions with Tanda to learn more about magik. Now, I was under the distinct impression you intended to use that knowledge to further your old career. What brought you over to our side of the fence?"

Quigley thought for a moment, then shrugged and settled back in his own chair. "Very well," he said. "I suppose I can do that, seeing as how we were comrades-in-arms at one point." He paused to take a sip of wine before continuing. "Tanda and I parted company with the others shortly after we discovered your little joke. We thought it was quite amusing, particularly Tanda, but the others seemed quite upset, especially Isstvan, so we left them and headed off on our own."

The demon hunter's eyes went slightly out of focus as he sank back into his memories. "We traveled the dimensions for some time. Quite a pleasant time, I might add. I learned a lot about demons and a little about magik, and it set me to thinking about my chosen line of work as a demon hunter. I mean, demons aren't such a bad lot once you get to know them, and magik pays considerably better than swinging a sword."

"I hope you're paying attention, kid," Aahz grinned, prodding my shoulder.

I nodded, but kept my attention on Quigley.

"Then," the demon hunter continued, "circumstances arose that prompted Tanda to abandon me without money or a way back to my own dimension."

"Wait a minute," Aahz interrupted. "That doesn't sound like Tanda. What were these 'circumstances' you're referring to?"

"It was a misunderstanding, really," Quigley explained, flushing slightly. "Without going into lurid details, the end result involved my spending a night with a female other than Tanda."

"I can see why she'd move on without you," Aahz frowned, "but not why she'd take your money."

"Well, actually, it was the young lady I was with at the time who relieved me of my coinage," the demon hunter admitted, blushing a deeper shade of red.

"Got it," Aahz nodded. "Sounds like along with magik and demons, there are a few things you have to learn about women."

I wouldn't have minded a few lessons in that department myself, but I didn't think this was the time to bring it up.

"Anyway," Quigley continued hastily, "there I was, stranded and penniless. It seemed the only thing for me to do was to go to a placement service."

"A placement service?" Aahz blinked. "Just where was this that you were stranded?"

"Why, the Bazaar at Deva, of course," the demon hunter replied. "Didn't I mention that?"

"The Bazaar at Deva," my mentor sighed. "I should have known. Oh, well, keep going."

"There's really not that much more to tell." Quigley shrugged. "There were no openings for a demon hunter, but they managed to find me this position here in Jahk by lying about how much magik I knew. Since then, things have been pretty quiet-or they were before the guards appeared at my door carrying Tanda."

I was starting to wonder if any court magician was really qualified for his position.

"And you aren't about to let Tanda go. Right?" Aahz finished.

"Don't misunderstand," Quigley insisted, gnawing his lip. "I'd like to let her go. If nothing else it would do a lot for patching up the misunderstanding between Tanda and myself. Unfortunately, I just don't see any way I could let her escape without losing my job on grounds of incompetence."

"Say, maybe we could get you a job in Possiltum!" I suggested brightly.

"Kid," Aahz smiled, "are you going to stop that tongue of yours all by yourself, or do I have to tear it out by the roots?"

I took the hint and shut up.

"Thank you, lad," Quigley said, "but I couldn't do that. Unlike yourself, I'm still trying to build a reputation as a magician. How would it look if I left my first job in defeat with my tail between my legs?"

"You haven't got a tail," Aahz pointed out.

"Figure of speech," Quigley shrugged.

"Oh," my mentor nodded. "Well, if you think a hasty retreat from one's first job is unusual, my friend, you still have a lot to learn about the magik profession."

"Haven't I been saying that?" Quigley frowned.

I listened to their banter with only half an ear. The rest of me was floating on Quigley's implied compliment. I'm getting quite good at hearing indirect compliments. The direct ones are few and far between.

Come to think of it, I was getting a reputation as a magician. No one could deny we beat Isstvan at his own game-and I had actually recruited and commanded the team that stopped Big Julie's army. Why, in certain circles, my name must be ...

"Bullshit!" Aahz roared, slapping his hand down on the table hard enough to make the chairs jump. "I tell you she didn't steal the damn Trophy!"

I collected my shattered nerves and turned my attention to the conversation once more.

"Oh, come now, Aahz," Quigley grimaced. "I traveled with Tanda long enough to know she's not above stealing something that caught her eye-nor are you two, I'd imagine."

"True enough," Aahz admitted easily, "but you can bet your last baseball card that if any of us went after your Trophy, we wouldn't be caught afterward."

"My last what?" Quigley frowned. "Oh, no matter. Look, even if I believed you I couldn't do anything. What's important is the council believes Tanda was involved, and they wouldn't even consider releasing her unless they got the Trophy back first."

"Oh, yeah?" Aahz smiled, showing all his teeth.

"How many council members are there and how are they guarded?"

"Aahz!" Quigley said sternly. "If anything happened to the council, I'm afraid I'd see it as a threat to my job and therefore a direct violation of Master Skeeve's promise."

My mentor leaned back in his chair and stared at the ceiling. The heavy metal wine goblet in his hand crumpled suddenly, but aside from that there was no outward display of his feelings.

"Um . . . Quigley?" I ventured cautiously. I still had a vivid image in my mind of my tongue in Aahz's grasp instead of the wine goblet.

"Yes, lad?" Quigley asked, cocking an eyebrow at me.

"What did you say would happen if the Trophy were returned?"

Aahz's head swiveled around slowly until our gazes met, but his gold speckled eyes were thoughtful now.

"Well, I didn't say, actually," Quigley grumphed, "but that would change everything. With the Trophy back, the council would be ecstatic and definitely better disposed toward Tanda. . . . Yes, if the Trophy were returned, I think I could find an excuse to release her."

"Is that a promise?"

I may be ignorant, but I'm a fast learner.

Quigley studied me for a moment before answering. "Very well," he said at last. "Why do you ask?"

I shot a glance at Aahz. One eyelid slowly closed in a wink, then he went back to studying the ceiling.

"Because," I announced, relief flooding over me, "I think I've come up with a way we can free Tanda, protect your job, and stop the war in one fell swoop."

Chapter Eleven:

"What do you mean, 'You've got a little job for me?'"
-HERCULES

"STEAL the Trophy back from Veygus. Just like that," Aahz grumbled for the hundredth time.

"We're doomed," Griffin prophesied grimly.

"Shut up. Griffin," I snarled.

It occurred to me I was picking up a lot of Aahz's bad habits lately.

"But I keep telling you, I don't know Veygus," the youth protested. "I won't be any help at all. Please, can't I go back to Ta-hoe?"

"Just keep walking," I sighed.

"Face it, son," Aahz smiled, draping a casual arm over our guide's shoulder. "We aren't going to let you out of our sight until this job's over. The sooner we get to Veygus, the sooner you'll be rid of us."

"But why?" Griffin whined.

"We've gone over this before," my mentor sighed. "This heist is going to be rough enough without Veygus hearing about it in advance. Now the only way we can be sure you don't tell anyone is to keep you with us. Besides, you're our passport through the Ta-hoe patrols if we meet any."

"The patrols are easy to avoid," the youth insisted. "And I won't tell anyone about your mission, honest. Isn't there any way I can get you to trust me?"

"Well," Aahz drawled judiciously, "I guess there is one thing that might do the trick."

"Really?" our guide asked hopefully.

"What da ya think, Skeeve?" my mentor called. "Do you feel up to turning our friend here into a rock or a tree or something until the job's over?"

"A rock or a tree?" the youth gulped, wide-eyed.

"Sure," Aahz shrugged. "I wouldn't have suggested it myself. There's always a problem finding the right rock or tree to change back. Sometimes it takes years of searching. Sometimes the magician just gives up."

"Can't you guys walk any faster?" Griffin challenged, quickening his pace. "We'll never get to Veygus at this rate."

"I guess that settles that," I smiled, winking at Aahz to show I appreciated his bluff.

"Steal the Trophy from Veygus," my mentor replied, picking up his witty repartee where he had left it. "Just like that."

So much for changing the subject.

"C'mon Aahz, give me a break." I defended glibly. "You agreed to this before I proposed it."

"I didn't say anything," he argued.

"You winked," I insisted.

"How do you know I didn't just get something in my eye?" he countered.

"I don't," I admitted. "Did you?"

"No," he sighed. "I winked. But only because it looked like the only way out of the situation you got us into."

He had me there.

"How we got into this spot is beside the point," I decided. "The real question is how are we going to steal the Trophy."

"I see," Aahz grunted. "When you get us into trouble, it's beside the point."

"The Trophy," I prompted.

"Well..." my mentor began slowly, rising to the bait. "We won't be able to make any firm plans until we see the layout and size up the guards. How 'bout it. Griffin? What are we liable to be up against? How good are these Veygans?"

"The Veygans?" our guide grimaced. "I wouldn't worry about them if I were you. They couldn't guard a pea if they swallowed it."

"Really inept, uh?" Aahz murmured, cocking an eyebrow.

"Inept? They're a joke," Griffin laughed. "There isn't a Veygan alive who knows how to spell strategy, much less use it."

"I thought you said you didn't know anything about Veygus," I commented suspiciously.

"Well ... I don't actually," the youth admitted, "but I've seen their team play in the Big Game, and if that's the best they can muster ..."

"You mean everything you've been saying was speculation based on the way their team plays?" Aahz interrupted.

"That's right," Griffin nodded.

"The same team that's been beating the pants off Ta-hoe for the last five years?"

Our guide's head came up as if he had just been slapped. "We won this year!" he declared fiercely.

"Whereupon they turned around and stole the Trophy right out from under your noses," my mentor pointed out. "It sounds to me like they may not be as inept as you'd like to think they are."

"They get lucky once in a while," Griffin muttered darkly.

"You might want to think it through a bit," I advised. "I mean, do you really want to go around claiming your team was beaten by a weak opponent? If Ta-hoe is so good and Veygus is so feeble, how do you explain five losses in a row? Luck isn't enough to swing the Game that much."

"We got overconfident," our guide confided. "It's a constant danger you have to guard against when you're as good as we are."

"I know what you mean," Aahz nodded. "My partner and I have the same problem."

Well, modesty has never been Aahz's strong suit. Still it was nice to hear him include me in his brash statements. It made me feel like my studies were finally bearing fruit, like I was making progress.

"Aside from the military, what are we up against?" my mentor asked. "How about the magik you keep mentioning? Do they have a magician?"

"They sure do," Griffin nodded vigorously. "Her name's Massha. If you have any troubles at all, it will be with her. She's mean."

"Is that 'mean' in abilities, or in temperament?" Aahz cross-examined.

"Both," our guide asserted firmly. "You know, I've never been totally convinced our magician is as good as he claims to be, but Massha's a real whiz. I couldn't even start to count the fantastic things I've seen her do."

"Um . . . what makes you think her temperament is mean?" I asked casually, trying to hide my sagging confidence.

"Well, let me put it this way," Griffin explained. "If there was a messy job to be done, and you could think of three ways to do it, she'd find a fourth way that was nastier than the other three ways combined.

She has a real genius for unpleasantness."

"Terrific," I grimaced.

"How's that again?" our guide frowned.

"Skeeve here always likes a challenge," Aahz explained hastily, draping a friendly arm around my shoulders.

I caught the warning, even without him digging his talons in until they nearly drew blood. He did it anyway, making it a real effort to smile.

"That's right," I laughed to hide my gasp. "We've handled heavyweights before."

Which was true. What I neglected to mention and tried hard not to think about was that we survived the encounters by a blend of blind luck and bald-faced deceit.

"Good," Griffin beamed. "Even if you don't manage to steal the Trophy, if you can take Massha out of action, Ta-hoe can win the war easily."

"You know. Griffin," Aahz commented, cocking an eyebrow, "for someone who doesn't know Veygus, you seem to know an awful lot about their magician."

"I sure do," our guide laughed bitterly. "She used to be Ta-hoe's magician until Veygus hired her away. I used to run errands for her and ..." He suddenly stopped in mid-stride and mid-sentence simultaneously. "Hey! That's right," he exclaimed. "I can't go along with you if you're going to see Massha. She knows me! If the Veygans find out I'm from Ta-hoe, they'll think I'm a scout. I'd get torn apart."

"Don't worry," I soothed, "we aren't going anywhere near Massha."

"Yes, we are," Aahz corrected.

"We are?" I blinked.

"Kid, do I have to explain it to you all over again? We've got to check out the local magikal talent, the same as we did when we hit Ta-hoe."

"And look where that got us?" I muttered darkly.

"Look where who got us?" Aahz asked innocently. "I didn't quite hear that."

"All right! All right!" I surrendered. "We'll go see Massha. I guess I'll just have to whip up a disguise for Griffin so he won't be spotted."

"She'll recognize my voice," our guide protested.

"Don't talk!" I ordered, without clarifying if it was an immediate or future instruction.

"This time, I think he's right," Aahz interrupted thoughtfully. "It would probably be wisest to leave Griffin behind for this venture."

"It would?" I blinked.

"Hey! Wait a minute," Griffin interjected nervously. "I don't want to be a rock or a stone."

"Oh, I'm sure we can work out something a bit less drastic," my mentor smiled reassuringly. "Excuse us for a moment while we confer."

I thought Aahz was going to pull me aside for a private conversation, but instead he simply slipped off his translator pendant. After a bit of browbeating, Quigley had supplied us with an extra, so now we each had one. Removing them allowed us to converse without fear of being overheard, while at the same time keeping Griffin within arm's length. I followed suit and removed mine.

"What gives, Aahz?" I asked as soon as I was free of the pendant. "Why the change in plans?"

"The job's getting a little too complex," he explained. "It's time we started reducing our variables."

"Our what?" I puzzled.

"Look!" Aahz gritted. "We're going to have our hands full trying to elude the military and this Massha gal without trying to keep an eye on Griffin, too. He can't be any great help to us, and if he isn't a help, he's a hindrance."

"He shouldn't be too much trouble," I protested.

"Any trouble will be too much trouble," my mentor corrected firmly. "So far, he's an innocent bystander we've dragged into this. That means if we take him into Veygus, we should be confident

we can bring him out again. Now, are you that confident? Or don't you mind the thought of leaving him stranded in a hostile town?"

Aahz doesn't give humanitarian arguments often, but when he does, they always make sense.

"Okay," I sighed. "But what do we do with him? You know I can't turn him into a rock or a tree. Not that I would if I could."

"That's easy," Aahz shrugged. "You put a sleep spell on him. That should keep him out of mischief until we get back here."

"Aahz," I said gently, closing my eyes. "I don't know how to cast a sleep spell. Remember?"

"That's no problem," my mentor winked. "I'll teach you."

"Right now?" I questioned incredulously.

"Sure. Didn't you hear Quigley? It's easy," Aahz declared confidently. "Of course, you realize it isn't really a 'sleep' spell. It's more like suspended animation."

"Like what?" I blinked.

"It's a magikal slowing of the body's metabolism," he clarified helpfully. "If it were sleep as you perceive it, then you'd run into problems of dehydration and..."

"Aahz!" I interrupted, holding up a hand. "Is the spell easier than the explanation?"

"Well, yes," he admitted. "But I thought you'd like to know."

"Then just teach me the spell. Okay?"

Chapter Twelve:

"Out of the frying pan, into derfire."
-THE SWEDISH CHEF (Muppet)

FORTUNATELY, the sleep spell was as easy to learn as Aahz had promised, and we left Griffin snoozing peacefully in a patch of weeds along the road.

We took the precaution of circling Veygus to enter the city from a direction other than Ta-hoe. As it turned out it was a pointless exercise. Everyone in Veygus was too busy with their own business to even notice us, much less which direction we were coming from.

"This is really great!" Aahz chortled, looking about the streets as we walked. "I could develop a real fondness for this dimension."

The war activities in Veygus were the same as we had witnessed in Ta-hoe, except the souvenirs were being made in red and white instead of blue and gold. I was starting to wonder if anyone was ever going to get around to actually fighting the war, or if they were all too busy making money.

"Look at that, Aahz!" I exclaimed, pointing.

There was a small crowd gathered, listening to a noisy orator. From what I could hear, their complaint was the same one we heard back in Ta-hoe: that the government's withholding information about the war was hampering the odds-makers.

"Yeah. So?" my mentor shrugged.

"I wonder if they're bookies, too," I speculated.

"There's one way to find out," Aahz offered.

Before I could reply, he had sauntered over to someone at the back of the crowd and engaged him in an animated conversation. There was nothing for me to do but wait... and worry.

"Good news, kid," he beamed, rejoining me at last.

"Tell me," I pressed. "I could use some good news right about now."

"They're giving three-to-one odds against Ta-hoe in the upcoming war."

It took me a moment to realize that was the extent of his information. "That's it?" I frowned. "That's your good news? It sounds to me like we've badly underestimated Veygus's military strength."

"Relax, kid," Aahz soothed. "Those are the same odds they're offering in Ta-hoe against Veygus. Local bookies always have to weight the odds in favor of the home team. Otherwise no one will bet against them."

Puzzled, I shook my head. "Okay, so they're actually evenly matched," I shrugged. "I still don't see how that's good news for us."

"Don't you see?" my mentor urged. "That means the bookies are operating independently instead of as a combine. If we play our cards right, we could show a hefty profit from this mess."

Even though annoyed that Aahz could be thinking of money at a time like this, I was nonetheless intrigued with his logic. I mean, after all, he did train me.

"By betting?" I asked. "How would we know which side to bet for?"

"Not 'bet for,' bet against," Aahz explained. "And we'd bet equal amounts against both sides."

I thought about this a few moments, nodding knowingly all the while, then gave up. "I don't get it," I admitted. "Betting the same amount for-excuse me, against-both sides, all we do is break even."

Aahz rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Think it through, kid," he insisted. "At three-to-one odds we can't do anything but win. Say we bet a thousand against each team. If Ta-hoe wins, then we pay a thousand in Ta-hoe and collect three thousand in Veygus, for a net profit of two thousand. If Veygus wins, we reverse the process and still come out two thousand ahead."

"That's not a bad plan," I said judiciously, "but I can see three things wrong with it. First, we don't have a thousand with us to bet..."

"We could hop back to Klah and get it," Aahz countered.

"Second, we don't have the time..."

"It wouldn't take that long," my mentor protested.

"Third, if our mission's successful, there won't be a war."

Aahz's mouth was open for a response, and that's where it stayed-open, and blissfully noiseless as he thought about my argument.

"Got you there, didn't I, Aahz?" I grinned.

"I wonder what the odds are that there won't be a war," he mused, casting a wistful eye at the crowd of bookies.

"C'mon, Aahz," I sighed, tugging bravely at his arm, "we've got a heist to scout."

"First," he corrected firmly, "we have to check out this Massha character."

I had hoped he had forgotten, but then, this adventure was not being typified by its phenomenally good luck.

We picked our way across Veygus, occasionally stopping people to ask directions, and arrived at last outside the dwelling of the town magician. It was an unimposing structure, barely inside the eastern limits of the city, and exuded an intriguing array of aromas.

"Not much of a hangout for a powerful magician, eh, Aahz?" I commented, trying to bolster my sagging courage.

"Remember where you were living when we first met?" my mentor retorted, never taking his eyes from the building.

I did. The one-room clapboard shack where I had first studied magik with Garkin made this place look like a veritable palace.

"What I can't figure out is why Massha settled for this place," Aahz continued, talking as much to himself as to me. "If what Griffin said is true, she could have had any place in town to work from. Tell you what, kid. Check for force lines, will you?"

I obediently closed my eyes and stretched out my mind, searching for those invisible currents of magikal power which those in the profession tap for their own use. I didn't have to look hard.

"Aahz!" I gasped. "There are four . . . no, five . . . force lines intersecting here. Three in the air and two in the ground."

"I thought so," my mentor nodded grimly. "This location wasn't chosen by accident. She's got power to spare, if she knows how to use it."

"But what can we do if she's that powerful?" I moaned.

"Relax, kid," Aahz smiled. "Remember, the power's there for anyone to use. You can tap into it as easily as she can."

"That's right," I said, relaxing slightly, but not much. "Okay, what's our plan?"

"I don't really know," he admitted, heading for the door. "We'll just have to play this by ear."

Somehow that phrase rang a bell in my memory. "Say-urn-Aahz," I stammered. "Remembering how things went back in Ta-hoe, this time let's play it by your ear. Okay?"

"You took the words right out of my mouth," Aahz grinned. "Just remember to check her aura as soon as we get inside. It'll help to know if she's local or if we're dealing with imported help."

So saying, he raised his hand and began rapping on the door. I say "began" because between the second and third rap, the door flew open with alarming speed.

"What do you ... well, hel-lo there, boys."

"Are . . . um . . . are you Massha, the magician?" Aahz stammered, both taken aback and stepping back.

"Can you imagine anyone else fitting the description?" came the throaty chuckle in response.

She was right. I had not seen anyone in Jahk- heck, in several dimensions-who looked anything like the figure framed in the open door. Massha was immense, in girth if not in height. She filled the doorway to overflowing-and it wasn't that narrow a door. Still, size alone doth not a pageant make. Massha might have been overlooked as just another large woman were it not for her garments.

Purple and green warred with each other across her tent-like dress, and her bright orange hair draped across one shoulder in dirty strings did nothing toward encouraging an early settlement. And jewelry! Massha was wearing enough in the way of earrings, rings and necklaces to open her own store. She wasn't a sample case, she was the entire inventory!

Her face was nothing to write home about-unless you're really into depressing letters. Bad teeth were framed by fleshy chapped lips, and her pig-like eyes peering from the depths of her numerous smile wrinkles were difficult to distinguish from her other skin blemishes.

I've seen some distinctive looking women in my travels, but Massha took the cake, platter, and tablecloth.

"Did you boys just come to stare?" the apparition asked, "or can I do something for you?"

"We ... um ... we need help," Aahz managed.

I wasn't sure if he was talking about our mission or our immediate situation, but either way I agreed with him wholeheartedly.

"Well, you came to the right place," Massha leered. "Step into my parlor and we'll discuss what I've got that you want-and vice-versa."

Aahz followed her into the building, leaving me no choice but to trail along. He surprised me, though, by dropping back slightly to seek my advice.

"What's the word, kid?" he hissed.

"How about 'repulsive'?" I suggested.

That earned me another dig in the ribs.

"I meant about her aura. What's the matter, did you forget?"

As a matter of fact, I had. Now that I had been so forcefully reminded, though, I hurriedly checked for magikal emanations.

"She's got-no, wait a minute," I corrected. "It isn't her. it's her jewelry. It's magikal, but she isn't."

"I thought so," Aahz nodded. "Okay. Now we know what we're dealing with."

"We do?" I asked.

"She's a mechanic," my mentor explained hurriedly. "Gimmick magik with her jewelry. Totally different than the stuff I've been teaching you."

"You mean you think I could beat her in a fair fight?"

"I didn't say that," he corrected. "It all depends on what kind of jewelry she's got-and from what we've seen so far, she's got a lot."

"Oh," I sagged. "What are we going to do?"

"Don't worry, kid," Aahz winked. "Fair fights have never been my specialty. As long as she doesn't know you're a magician, we've got a big advantage."

Any further questions I might have had were forgotten as we arrived at our destination. Having just left Quigley's dwelling, I was unprepared for what Massha used for an office.

To say it was a bedroom would be an understatement. It was the gaudiest collection of tassels, pillows, and erotic statues I had seen this side of the Bazaar at Deva. Colors screamed and clawed at each other, making me wonder if Massha were actually colorblind. As fast as the thought occurred to me, I discarded it. No one could select so many clashing colors by sheer chance.

"Sit down, boys," Massha smiled, sinking onto the parade-ground-sized bed. "Take off your things and we'll get started."

My life flashed before my eyes. While I had secretly dreamed of a career as a ladies' man, I had never envisioned it starting like this! If I had, I might have become a monk.

Even Aahz, with his vast experience, seemed at a loss. "Well, actually," he protested. "We don't have much time..."

"You misunderstand me." Massha waved, fanning the air with a massive hand. "What I meant was, take off your disguises."

"Our disguises?" I blurted, swallowing hard.

In reply, she held aloft her left hand, the index finger extended for us to see. The third-no, it was the fourth-ring was blinking a brilliant purple.

"This little toy says you're not only magicians, you're disguised," she grinned. "Now, I'm as sociable as the next person but I like to see who I'm doing business with. In fact, I insist!"

As she spoke, the door behind us slammed shut and locked with an audible click.

So much for our big advantage.

Chapter Thirteen:

"If you can't dazzle them with dexterity, baffle them with bullshit!"

-PROF. H. HILL

THERE was a long silent moment of frozen immobility. Then Aahz turned to me with an exaggerated shrug.

"Well," he sighed, "I guess she's got us dead to rights. There's no arguing with technology, you know. It never makes mistakes."

I almost missed his wink, and even then I was slow to realize what he was up to.

"With your permission, dear lady ..." Making a half bow at Massha, he began making a series of graceful passes with his hand in the air in front of him.

It was all very puzzling. Aahz had lost all his magikal powers back when . . . Then it hit me. Massha thought we were both magicians! Aahz was trying to maintain the illusion and could very well pull it off-if I got busy and backed his move.

As inconspicuously as possible, I closed my eyes and got to work stripping away his disguise.

"A Pervert!" Massha crowed in tribute to my efforts. "Well, what daya know. Thought you walked funny for a Jahk."

"Actually," Aahz corrected smoothly, "as a native of Perv I prefer to be called a 'Pervect.' "

"I don't care what ya call yerself," she winked lewdly, "I'm more interested in how ya act."

I was just beginning to enjoy my mentor's discomfort when Massha turned her attentions on me.

"How 'bout you, sport?" she pressed. "You don't say much, let's see what yer hiding."

I resisted an impulse to clutch wildly at my clothes, and instead set about restoring my normal appearance.

"A Klahd-and a young one at that," Massha proclaimed, cocking her head as she examined me. "Well, no matter, by the time old Massha's through with you . . . say!"

Her eyes suddenly opened wide and her gaze darted to Aahz, then back to me.

"A Klahd traveling with a Pervert. . . your name wouldn't be Skeeve, would it?"

"You've heard of me?" I blinked, both startled and flattered.

"Heard of you?" she laughed. "The last time I dropped into the Bazaar, that's all anyone was talking about."

"Really? What were they saying?" I urged.

"Well, the word is that you put together a team of six and used 'em to stop a whole army. It's the most effective use of manpower anyone's pulled off in centuries."

"It was actually eight, if you include Gleep and Berfert," I admitted modestly.

"Who?" She frowned.

"A dragon and a salamander," I explained. "It was such a successful venture I'd like to be sure everyone involved gets some credit."

"That's decent of you," Massha nodded approvingly. "Most folks I know in the trade try to hog all the glory when their plans work and only mention the help if they need someone to blame for failure."

"If you know Skeeve, here," Aahz smiled, elbowing his way into the conversation, "then surely you know who I am."

"As a matter of fact, I don't," Massha shrugged. "I heard there was a loudmouthed Pervert along, but no one mentioned his name."

"Oh, really?" Aahz asked, showing a suspicious number of teeth. "A loudmouthed Pervert, eh? And just who did you hear that from?"

"Um ... in that case," I interrupted hastily, "allow me to introduce my friend and colleague, Aahz."

"Aahz?" Massha repeated, raising an eyebrow. "As in..."

"No relation," Aahz assured her.

"Oh," she nodded.

"Mind if I have some wine?" my mentor asked, gesturing grandly at the wine pitcher on a nearby table. "It's been a long dry trip."

This time I was ready, and covertly levitated the pitcher into his waiting hand. The thought of embarrassing him by leaving the wine where it was never entered my mind. We were still in a tight spot, and anything we could do to keep Massha off balance was a good gambit.

"So, what are a pair of big leaguers like you doing in Jahk?" Massha asked, leaning back into her silken pillows. "You boys wouldn't be after my job, would you?"

It occurred to me that all the employed magicians I was meeting shared a common paranoia about losing their jobs.

"I assure you," Aahz interjected quickly, "taking your job away from you is the furthest thing from our minds. If nothing else, we couldn't pass the physical."

I almost asked "The physical what?" but restrained myself. Verbal banter was Aahz's forte, and for the time being my job was to give him room to operate.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," Massha chuckled appreciatively, "except around a direct question-and you haven't answered mine. If you aren't looking for work, what are you doing here?"

That was a good question, and thankfully Aahz had an answer ready.

"We're just on a little vacation," he lied, "and dropped by Jahk to try to make some of our money back in the gambling set."

"Gambling?" Massha frowned. "But the Big Game is over."

"The Big Game," Aahz snorted. "I'll level with you. We don't know enough about spectator sports to bet on 'em, but we do know wars-and we hear there's one brewing. I figure if we can't bet more intelligently than a bunch of yokels who haven't seen a war in five hundred years, we deserve to lose our money."

"That explains what you're doing in Jahk," Massha nodded thoughtfully, "but it doesn't say what you're doing here-'in my office' here. What can I do for you, you can't do for yourselves?"

"I could give you a really suggestive answer," Aahz smirked, "but the truth is, we're looking for information. From where we sit, magik could swing the balance one way or the other in this war. What we'd like is a little inside information as to how much of a hand you expect to have in the proceedings, and if you expect any trouble with the opposition."

"The opposition? You mean Ta-hoe's magician?"

She threw back her head and laughed, "I guarantee you, boys, I can handle . . . what's his name . . . Quigley . . . with one hand. That is, of course, providing that one hand is armed with a few of my toys."

She wiggled her fingers to illustrate her point and the ring colors glittered and danced like a malevolent rainbow."

"That's fine for the war," Aahz nodded. "But how about here in town? What's to keep Ta-hoe from stealing the Trophy back before the war?"

"Oh, I've got a few gizmos over at the Trophy Building that'll fry anyone who tries to heist it-especially if they try to use magik. Any one of 'em alone is fallible, but the way I've got 'em set, disarming one means setting off another. Nobody's taking that Trophy anywhere without my clearing it."

"Sounds good," my mentor smiled, though I noticed it was a little forced. "As long as you have total control on the Trophy's security, it isn't likely anything will go wrong."

"Not total control," Massha corrected. "The army's responsible for it when it's on parade."

"Parade?" I blurted. "What parade?"

"I know it's dumb," she grimaced. "That's why I refuse any responsibility for it. In fact, I had it written into my contract. I don't give demonstrations and I don't do parades."

"What parade?" Aahz repeated.

"Oh, once a day they carry the Trophy through the streets to keep the citizens fired up. You'd think they'd get tired of it, but so far everyone goes screaming bonkers every time it comes in view."

"I assume it has a military escort," Aahz commented.

"Are you kidding? Half the army tags along when it does the rounds. They spend more time escorting that Trophy around than they do drilling for the war."

"I see," my mentor murmured. "Well, I guess that tells us what we need to know. We should be on our way."

Before he could move, Massha was at the end of the bed, clasping his leg. "What's the hurry?" she purred. "Doesn't Massha get a little something in return for her information?"

"As a matter of fact," Aahz said, struggling to extract his leg, "there is something that might be valuable to you."

"I know there is," Massha smiled, pulling herself closer to him.

"Did you know that Quigley has summoned up a demon to help him?"

"He what?"

Massha released her hold on Aahz's leg to sit bolt upright.

"That's right," Aahz nodded, moving smoothly out of reach. "From what we hear, he's holding it captive in his workshop. I can't imagine any reason for his doing that unless he plans to use it in the war."

"A demon, eh?" Massha muttered softly, staring absently at the far wall. "Well, well, what daya know. I didn't think Quigley had it in him. I don't suppose you've heard anything about its powers?"

"Nothing specific," Aahz admitted, "but I don't think he'd summon anything weaker than he is."

"That's true," Massha nodded. "Well, I should be able to handle them both."

I recognized her tone of voice. It was the way I sound when I'm trying to convince myself I'm up to handling one of Aahz's plans.

"Say, Massha," my mentor explained, as if a thought had just struck him. "I know we're supposed to be on vacation, but maybe we can give you a hand here."

"Would you?" she asked eagerly.

"Well, it's really in our own best interest if we're betting money on the war," he smiled. "Otherwise we wouldn't get involved. As it is, though, I think we can get the demon away from Quigley, or at least neutralize it so it won't help him at all."

"You'd do that for me? As a favor?" Massha blinked.

"Sure," Aahz waved. "Just don't be surprised at anything we do and whatever you do, don't try to counter any of our moves. I won't make any guarantees, but I think we can pull it off. If we do, just remember you owe us a favor someday."

Anyone who knew Aahz would have been immediately suspicious if he offered to do anything as a favor. Fortunately, Massha didn't know Aahz, and she seemed both solicitous and grateful as she waved goodbye to us at the door.

"Well, kid," Aahz grinned, slapping me on the back. "Not bad for an afternoon's work, if I do say so myself. Not only did we scout the opposition, we neutralized it. Big bad Massha won't move against us no matter what we do, for fear of disrupting our plans against Quigley."

As I had restored our disguises before we emerged onto the street, Aahz's back slap didn't arrive on my back-and it hit me with more force than I'm sure he intended. All in all, it did nothing to improve my already black mood.

"Sure, Aahz," I growled. "Except for one little detail."

"What's that?"

"We can't steal Tanda away from Quigley because he'd lose his job and we promised we wouldn't do anything to jeopardize his position. Remember?"

"Skeeve, Skeeve," my mentor chuckled, shaking his head. "I haven't overlooked anything. You're the one who hasn't thought things through."

"Okay," I snapped. "So I'm slow! Explain it to me."

"Well, first of all, as I just mentioned, we don't have to worry about Massha for a while."

"But-" I began, but he cut me off.

"Second of all," he continued, "I said 'free or neutralize.' Now, we already know Quigley isn't about to use Tanda in the war, so Massha's going to owe us a favor whether we do anything or not."

"But we're supposed to be rescuing Tanda," I protested, "and that means stealing the Trophy."

"Right!" Aahz beamed. "I'm glad you finally caught on."

"Huh?" I said intelligently.

"You haven't caught on," my mentor sighed. "Look, kid. The mission's still on. We're going to steal the Trophy."

"But I can't bypass Massha's traps at the Trophy Building."

"Of course not," Aahz agreed. "That's why we're going to steal it from the parade."

"The parade?" I blinked. "In broad daylight with half the army and the whole town watching?"

"Of course," Aahz shrugged. "It's the perfect situation."

It occurred to me that either my concept of a perfect situation was way out of line, or my mentor had finally lost his mind!

Chapter Fourteen:

"As any magician will tell you-Myth Directions is the secret of a successful steal."

-D. HEMMING

"DON'T you see, kid? The reason it's a perfect situation is that everyone's sure it can't be stolen!"

It was the same answer Aahz had given the last ten times I asked, so I gave him my usual rebuttal.

"The reason they're sure is because it can't be stolen. At least half the population of Veygus will be looking, Aahz, and they'll be looking right at the Trophy we're trying to steal! Someone's bound to notice."

"Not if you follow your instructions, they won't," my mentor winked. "Trust me."

I wasn't reassured. Not that I didn't trust Aahz, mind you. His ability to get me into trouble is surpassed only by his ability to bail me out again. I just had a hunch his bailing abilities were going to be tested to their limits this time.

I was about to express this to Aahz when a roar went up from the crowd around us, ending any hope for conversation. The Trophy was just coming into view.

We had chosen our post carefully. This point was the closest the procession came to the North wall of Veygus . . . and hence it was the closest the Trophy came to the gate opening onto the road to Ta-hoe.

In line with Aahz's plan, we waved our fists in the air and jumped up and down as the Trophy passed by with its military escort. It was pointless to shout, however. The crowd was making so much noise that two voices more or less went unnoticed, and we needed to save our lung power for the heist itself. Working our way to the back of the mob also proved to be no problem. By simply not fighting back when everyone else elbowed in front of us soon moved us to our desired position.

"So far, so good," Aahz murmured, scanning the backs in front of us to be sure we were unobserved.

"Maybe we should quit while we're ahead," I suggested hopefully.

"Shut up and start working," he snapped back in a tone that left no room for argument.

With an inward sigh, I closed my eyes and began making subtle changes in our disguises.

When I first learned the disguise spell, it was specifically to alter the facial features and body configurations of a being to resemble another. Later, after considerable practice, I learned to change the outward appearance of inanimate objects, providing they had once been alive. Aahz had seized this modification for a new application . . . specifically to change the configuration of our clothes. By the time I was done, we not only looked like Jahks, we were dressed in the uniforms of Veygan soldiers.

"Good enough, kid," Aahz growled, clapping me on the shoulder. "Let's go!"

With that, he plunged headlong into the crowd, clearing a path for me to emerge on the street behind the Trophy procession. Clearing paths through moveable objects, like people, is one of the things Aahz does best.

"Make way!" he bawled. "One side! Make way!"

Close behind him, I added my bellow to the din.

"Ta-hoers!" I called. "At the South wall! Ta-hoers!"

That's one of the things I do best-scream in panic.

For a moment, no one seemed to hear us. Then a few heads turned. A couple voices took up my call.

"Ta-hoers!" they cried. "We're being attacked."

The word spread through the crowd ahead of us like wildfire, such that when we reached the rearguard of the procession, it had ground to a halt. The soldiers milled about, tangling weapons with bodies around them as they tried simultaneously to scan the crowd, rooftops, and sky.

"Ta-hoers!" I shouted, pushing in among them.

"Where?"

"The South wall."

"Where?"

"The South wall."

"Who?"

"Ta-hoers!"

"Where?"

This nonsense might have continued endlessly, except for the appearance of an officer on the scene. He was noticeably more intelligent than the soldiers around him . . . which was to say he might have won a debate with a turnip.

"What's going on here?" he demanded, his authoritative voice silencing the clamor in the ranks.

"Ta-hoers, sir!" I gasped, still a bit out of breath from my performance. "They're attacking in force at the South wall!"

"The South wall?" the officer frowned. "But Tahoe is north of here."

"They must have circled around the city," I suggested hastily. "They're attacking the South wall."

"But Ta-hoe is north of here," the man insisted. "Why would they attack the South wall?"

His slow-wittedness was exasperating. It was also threatening to totally disrupt our plan, which hinged on momentum.

"Are you going to stand here arguing while those yellow and blue idiots take the city?" Aahz demanded, shouldering his way past me. "If everybody gets killed because of your indecision, the council will bust you back to the ranks."

That possibility wasn't very logical, so, of course, the fool took it to heart. Drawing his sword, he turned to the men around him.

"To the South wall," he ordered. "Follow me!" "To the South wall!"

The cry went up as the soldiers wheeled and dashed back down the street.

"To the South wall!" I echoed, moving with them. Suddenly, a powerful hand seized my shoulder and slammed me against a wall hard enough to knock the air out of my lungs.

"To the South wall!"

It was Aahz, leaning back to keep me pinned between him and the wall as he waved the soldiers past.

At last, he turned his head slightly to address me directly.

"Where ya going?" he asked curiously.

"To the South wall?" I suggested in a small voice.

"Why?"

"Because the Ta-hoers ... oh!" I felt exceptionally stupid. I also felt more than slightly squashed. Aahz is no featherweight.

"I think better when I can breathe," I pointed out meekly.

The ground slipped up and crashed into me as Aahz shifted his weight forward.

"Quit clowning around, kid," he snarled, hauling me to my feet. "We've still got work to do."

As I've said before, Aahz has an enviable grasp of the obvious. A dozen soldiers were still clustered around the Trophy, its litter now resting on the ground. There was also the minor detail of the crowd of onlookers still milling about arguing over this latest change in events.

"What are we going to do, Aahz?" I hissed. "Just leave everything to me," he retorted confidently.

"Okay," I nodded.

"Now here's what I want you to do ..." "What happened to 'leave everything to you'?" I grumbled.

"Shut up and listen," he ordered. "I want you to change my face and uniform to match that officer we talked to."

"But..."

"Just do it!"

In a moment the necessary adjustments were made and my mentor was on his way, striding angrily toward the remaining soldiers.

"What are you doing there?" he bawled. "Get to the South wall with the others!"

"But... we were . . . our orders are to guard the Trophy," the nearest soldier stammered in confusion.

"Defend it by keeping the Ta-hoers out of the city," Aahz roared. "Now get to the South wall! Anyone who tries to stay behind I'll personally charge with cowardice in the face of the enemy. Do you know what the punishment for that is?"

Apparently they did, even if I didn't. Aahz's question went unanswered as the soldiers sprinted off down the street toward the South wall.

So much for the Trophy's military escort. I did wonder, though, what my mentor planned to do about the milling crowd.

"Citizens of Veygus," Aahz boomed, as if in answer to my silent question. "Our fair city is under attack. Now, I know all of you will want to volunteer to help the Army in this battle, but to be effective you must be disciplined and orderly. To that end, I want all volunteers to line up here in front of me for instructions. Any who are unable to serve should return to their homes at this time, so the militia will have room to maneuver. All right, volunteers assemble!"

Within seconds, Aahz and I were left alone in the street. The crowd of potential volunteers had evaporated like water spilled on a hot griddle.

"So much for the witnesses," my mentor grinned, winking at me.

"Where'd they all go?" I asked, craning my neck to look around.

"Home, of course," Aahz smirked. "No one likes the draft-particularly when it affects them personally."

I wet my finger and tested the breeze. "There's not that much wind today," I announced suspiciously.

For some reason, this statement seemed to annoy my mentor. He rolled his eyes and started to say something, then changed his mind.

"Look, let's just grab the Trophy, okay?" he snarled. "That 'South wall' bit won't fool the Army forever, and I for one don't want to be here when they get back."

For once, we were in total agreement.

"Okay, Aahz," I nodded. "How do we get it out of the city?"

"That's easy," he waved. "Remember, I'm not exactly a weakling."

With that, he strode over to the Trophy and simply picked it up and tucked it under his arm, balancing it casually on his hip.

"But, Aahz ..." I began.

"I know what you're going to say," he admonished, holding up a hand, "and you're right. It would be easier to steal a cart. What you're overlooking is that a cart is personal property, while the Trophy belongs to the whole city."

"But, Aahz..."

"That means," he continued hastily, "that everyone assumes someone else is watching the Trophy, so we can walk away with it. If we stole a cart, the owner would spot it in a minute and raise the alarm. Now, having successfully liberated the Trophy, it would be really dumb to get arrested for stealing a cart, wouldn't it?"

"I didn't mean how are we going to move it!" I blurted. "I meant how are we going to get it past the guards at the North gate?"

"What's that?" Aahz frowned.

"They aren't going to let us just walk past them carrying that Trophy, and I can't disguise it. It's a metal!"

"Hmmm . . . you're right, kid," my mentor nodded thoughtfully. "Well, maybe we can . . . oh, swell!"

"What is it?" I asked fearfully.

"The soldiers are coming back," he announced, cocking his head to listen. Aahz has exceptionally sharp hearing. "Oh, well, we're just going to have to do this the fast way. Break out the D-Hopper."

"The what?" I blinked.

"The D-Hopper!" he insisted. "We'll just take this back to Klah with us."

I hurriedly fumbled the D-Hopper out of my pouch and passed it to Aahz for setting.

"What about Tanda?"

"We'll use this gizmo to bring the Trophy back later and spring her," Aahz mumbled. "I hadn't figured on using this just now. There's always a possibility that... oh, well. Hang on, kid. Here we go."

I crowded close to him and waited as he hit the button to activate the Hopper.

Nothing happened!

Chapter Fifteen:

"-Or was it unlock the safe then swim to the surface?"

-H. HOUDINI

"NOTHING happened."

"I know it," Aahz groaned, glaring at the DHopper. "That's the trouble with relying on mechanical gadgets. The minute you rely on them, they let you down."

"What's wrong?" I pressed.

"The damn thing needs recharging," Aahz spat. "And there's no way we can do it before the Army gets here."

"Then let's hide until..."

"Hide where?" my mentor snapped. "Do you want to ask one of the citizens to hide us? They might have a few questions about the Trophy we're lugging along."

"Okay, you suggest something!" I snarled.

"I'm working on it," Aahz growled, looking around. "What we need is... there!"

Before I could ask what he was doing, he strode into a nearby shop, tugged an animal skin off the wall, and began wrapping^ around the Trophy.

"Terrific," I observed dryly. "Now we have a furry Trophy. I don't think it will fool the guards."

"It will, once you disguise it," Aahz grinned.

"I told you, I can't," I insisted. "It's a metal!" "Not the Trophy, dummy!" he snapped. "The skin. Get to work! Change it to anything. No . . . make it a wounded soldier!"

I wasn't sure it would work, but I closed my eyes and gave it a try. One wounded soldier-complete with a torn, bloodstained uniform and trailing feet.

"Not bad, kid," Aahz nodded, sticking the bundle under his arm.

As usual, I couldn't see the effects of my work. When I looked, I didn't see an officer of the guard with a wounded comrade under his arm. I saw Aahz holding a suspiciously lumpy package.

"Are you sure it's okay?" I asked doubtfully.

"Sure," Aahz nodded. "Just. . . oops! Here they come. Leave everything to me."

That had a suspiciously familiar ring to it, but I didn't have many other options at the moment. The soldiers were in sight now, thundering down on us with grim scowls set fiercely on their faces.

"That way! Quick! They're getting away."

Aahz's bellow nearly startled me out of my skin, but I held my ground. I'm almost used to his unexpected gambits-almost.

"After them!" Aahz repeated. "Charlie's hit!"

"Who's Charlie?" I frowned.

"Shut up, kid," my mentor hissed, favoring me with a glare before returning his attention to the soldiers.

They had slowed their headlong dash and were looking down the side streets as they came, but they hadn't changed course. The only fortunate thing was that the officer Aahz was impersonating was nowhere in sight.

"Don't you understand?" Aahz shouted. "They've got the Trophy! That way!"

That did it. With a roar of animal rage, the soldiers wheeled and started off in the direction Aahz had indicated.

"Boy," I murmured in genuine admiration. "I wouldn't want to be holding that Trophy when they caught up with me."

"It could be decidedly unpleasant," Aahz agreed. "So if you don't mind, could we be on our way? Hmmm?"

"Oh! Right, Aahz."

He was already on his way, eating up great hunks of distance with his strong, hurried stride. As I hastened to keep up with him, I resolved not to ask about his plans for getting past the guards at the North gate. I was only annoying him with my constant questions, and besides, the answers only unsettled me.

As we drew nearer to the gate, however, my nervousness grew stronger and my resolve weaker.

"Ummm ... do you want me to change the disguise on the Trophy?" I asked tentatively.

"No," came the brusque reply. "But you could mess us up a little."

"Mess us up?" I blinked.

"A little dirt and blood on the uniforms," Aahz clarified. "Enough to make it look like we've been in a fight."

I wasn't sure what he had up his sleeve, but I hastened to adjust our disguises. That isn't as easy as it sounds, incidentally. Try closing your eyes and imagining dirty uniforms in detail while walking down a strange street at a near-trot. Fortunately, my life with Aahz had trained me to work under desperate conditions, so I completed my task just as we were coming up on the gate.

As a tribute to my handiwork, the guard didn't even bother to address us directly. He simply gaped at us for a moment, then started hollering for the Officer of the Guard. By the time that member appeared, we were close enough to count his teeth as his jaw dropped.

"What's going on here?" he demanded finally, recovering his composure.

"Fighting in the streets," Aahz gasped in a realistic imitation of a weary warrior. "They need your help. We're your relief."

"Our relief!" the officer frowned. "But that man's unconscious and you look like . . . fighting, did you say?"

"We're fit enough for gate duty," Aahz insisted, weakly pulling himself erect. "Anything to free a few more able-bodied men for the fighting."

"What fighting?" the officer screamed, barely suppressing an impulse to shake Aahz back to his senses.

"Riots," my mentor blinked. "The bookies have changed the odds on the war and won't honor earlier bets. It's awful."

The officer blanched and recoiled as if he had been struck. "But that means ... my life savings are bet on the war. They can't do that."

"You'd better hurry," Aahz insisted. "If the mobs tear the bookies apart, no one will get their money back."

"Follow me! All of you!" the officer bellowed, though it wasn't necessary. The guards were already on their way. Apparently the officer wasn't the only one with money in the bookies' care.

The officer started after them, then paused to sweep us with an approving stare.

"I don't know if you'll get a medal for this," he announced grimly, "but I won't forget it. You have my personal thanks."

"Don't mention it, turkey," Aahz murmured as the man sprinted off.

"You know, I bet he won't forget this . . . ever," I smiled.

"Feeling pretty smug, aren't you, kid?" Aahz commented, cocking a critical eyebrow at me.

"Yes," I confirmed modestly.

"Well, you should," he laughed, clapping me on the back. "I think, however, we'd best celebrate at a distance."

"Quite right," I agreed, gesturing grandly to the open gate. "After you."

"No, after you!" he countered, imitating my gesture.

Not wanting to waste additional time arguing, we walked side by side through the now unguarded North gate of Veygus, bearing our prize triumphantly with us.

That should have been it. Having successfully recaptured the Trophy, it should have been an easy matter to return to Ta-hoe, exchange the Trophy for Tananda, and relax in a celebration party back at Klah. I should have known better.

Any time things seem calm and tranquil, something happens to disrupt matters. If unforeseen outside complications don't arise, then either Aahz's temper flares or I open my big mouth. In this case, there were no outside complications, but there our luck ran out. Neither one of us was to blame—we both were. Aahz for his temper, me for my big mouth.

We were nearly back to the place where he had hidden Griffin, when Aahz made an unexpected request.

"Say, kid," he said, "how about dropping the disguises for a while?"

"Why?" I asked, logically.

"No special reason," he shrugged. "I just want to look at this Trophy that's caused everyone so much trouble."

"Didn't you see it back at Veygus?" I frowned.

"Not really," my mentor admitted. "At first I was busy chasing away the soldiers and the civilians, and after that it was something big and heavy to carry. I never really stopped to study it."

It took mere seconds to remove the disguises. They're easier to break down than to build, since I can see what the end result is supposed to look like.

"Help yourself," I announced.

"Thanks, kid," Aahz grinned, setting the Trophy down and hastily unwrapping it.

The Trophy was as ugly as ever; not that I had expected it to change. If anything, it looked worse up close, as Aahz was looking at it. Then he backed up and looked again. Finally he walked around it, studying the monstrosity from all angles.

For some reason, his silent scrutiny was making me uneasy.

"Well, what do you think?" I asked, in an effort to get the conversation going again.

He turned slowly to face me, and I noticed his scales were noticeably darker than normal.

"That's it?" he demanded, jerking a thumb over his shoulder at the statue. "That's the Trophy? You got Tanda captured and put us through all this for a dismal hunk of sculpture like that?"

Something clicked softly in my mind, igniting a small ember of anger. I mean, I've never pretended to admire the Trophy, but it had been Tananda's choice.

"Yes, Aahz," I said carefully. "That's it."

"Of all the dumb stunts you've pulled, this takes the cake!" my mentor raged. "You neglect your studies, cost us a fortune, not to mention putting everybody's neck on the chopping block, and for what?"

"Yes, Aahz," I managed.

"And Tanda! I knew she was a bit dippy, but this! I've got a good mind to leave her right where she is."

I tried to say something, but nothing came out.

"All I want to hear from you, apprentice, is why!"

He was looming over me now.

"Even feeble minds need a motive. What did you two figure to do with this pile of junk once you stole it? Tell me that!"

"It was going to be your birthday present!" I shouted, the dam bursting at last.

Aahz froze stock-still, an expression of astonishment spreading slowly over his face.

"My ... my birthday present?" he asked in a small voice.

"That's right, Aahz," I growled. "Surprise. We wanted to get you something special. Something no one else had, no matter how much trouble it was. Sure was stupid of us, wasn't it?"

"My birthday present," Aahz murmured, turning to stare at the Trophy again.

"Well, it's all over now," I snarled savagely. "Us feeble-minded dolts bit off more than we could chew and you had to bail us out. Let's spring Tanda and go home. Maybe then we can forget the whole thing-if you'll let us."

Aahz was standing motionless with his back to me. Now that I had vented my anger, I found myself suddenly regretful for having ground it in so mercilessly.

"Aahz?" I asked, stepping in behind him. "Hey! C'mon, we've got to give it back and get Tanda."

Slowly he turned his head until our gazes met. There was a faraway light in his eyes I had never seen before.

"Give it back?" he said softly. "What daya mean, 'Give it back'? That's my birthday present!"

Chapter Sixteen:

"... and then the fun began."

-N. BONAPARTE

I HAD attended war councils before. I hadn't been wild about it as a pastime even then, but I had done it. On those occasions, however, our side was the only one with the vaguest skills in magik. This time, all three sides would have magicians in attendance. My joy knew definite bounds; in fact, I didn't want to be there at all.

"Maybe they won't come," I suggested hopefully.

"With their precious Trophy on the line?" Aahz grinned. "Not a chance. They'll be here."

"If they got the messages," I corrected. "Griffin may have just headed for the horizon."

My mentor cocked an eyebrow at me. "Think back to the days before you were an apprentice, kid," he suggested. "If a magician gave you a message to deliver, would you try to get away?"

"Well..." I conceded.

"They'll be here," he concluded firmly. "I just hope Quigley gets here first."

My last hope gone, I resigned myself to the meeting and turned my attention to our immediate surroundings.

"Can you at least tell me why we're meeting here?" I asked. "Why not in the forest where we'd have some trees to duck behind if things get ugly? What's so special about this statatorium?"

"That's stadium, kid," my mentor corrected, rolling his eyes. "And there're three good reasons to set up the meeting here. First of all, both the Veygans and the Ta-hoers know where it is. Second, they both acknowledge it as neutral ground."

"And third?" I prompted.

"You said it yourself," Aahz shrugged. "There's no cover. Nothing at all to hide behind."

"That's good?"

"Think it through, kid," my mentor sighed. "If we can hide behind a tree, so could someone else. The difference is, they have more people to hide."

"You mean they might try to ambush us?" I blinked.

"It's a possibility. I only hope that having the meeting in the open like this will lower the probability."

One thing I have to admit about Aahz. Any time I'm nervous, I can count on him to say just the right thing to convert my nervousness to near-hysterical panic.

"Urn . . . Aahz," I began carefully. "Isn't it about time you let me in on this master plan of yours?"

"Sure," my mentor grinned. "We're going to have a meeting with representatives from both Veygus and Ta-hoe."

"But what are you going to say to them?" I pressed.

"You're missing the point, kid. The reason I'm meeting with both of them at once is because I don't want to have to repeat myself. Now, if I explain everything to you now, I'll only have to repeat myself at the meeting. Understand?"

"No," I announced bluntly. "I don't. I'm supposed to be your apprentice, aren't I? Well, how am I going to help out if I don't know what's going on?"

"That's a good point," Aahz conceded. "I wish you had raised it earlier. Because now it's too late. Our guests are arriving."

I turned to look in the direction he was pointing and discovered he was right. A small group had emerged from one of the entrances halfway up the side of the stadium and was filing down the stairs toward the field where we were waiting. Watching them descend, I was struck again by the enormity of the stadium. I had realized it was large when we first arrived and I saw the rows and rows of seats circling the field. Now, however, seeing how tiny the group looked in this setting made me all the more aware of exactly how large the stadium really was. As we waited, I tried to imagine the seats filled with thousands upon thousands of people all staring down at the field and the very thought of it made me uneasy. Fortunately, the odds of my ever actually seeing it were very, very low.

The group was close enough now for us to distinguish between individuals. This didn't do us much good, though, as we didn't know any of the individuals involved. I finally recognized Griffin in their ranks, and from that figured out it was the Ta-hoe delegation approaching. Once I realized that, I managed to spot Quigley bringing up the rear. I would have recognized him sooner, but he was disguised as a Jahk, which threw me for a moment; Actually, it made sense. I mean, Aahz and I were currently disguised as Jahks, so it was only logical that Quigley would also be hiding his extra-dimensional origins as well. Sometimes it bothers me that I seem to habitually overlook the obvious.

"That's far enough!" Aahz boomed.

The group halted obediently a stone's throw away.

It occurred to me it might be better if they were a little more than a stone's throw away, but I kept quiet.

"We're ready to discuss the return of the Trophy," one of the delegates called, stepping forward.

"We're not," my mentor retorted.

This caused a minor stir in the group and they began to mumble darkly among themselves.

"Aahz!" I urged.

"What I mean to say," Aahz added hastily, "is that what we have to say will wait until the other delegation arrives. In the meantime, I wish a word with your master magician."

There was a brief huddle, then Quigley came forward to join us. Even at a distance I could see he was upset.

"Hi. Quigley," Aahz grinned. "How's tricks?"

"I certainly hope you have an explanation for this," the ex-demon hunter snapped, ignoring the cordial greeting.

"Explanation for what?" my mentor countered innocently.

"You promised ... or rather, Master Skeeve did . . . that you two wouldn't do anything to endanger my job."

"And we haven't," Aahz finished.

"Yes, you have!" Quigley insisted. "The council expects me to use my magik to get the Trophy away from you at this meeting. If I don't, I can kiss my job goodbye."

"Don't worry," my mentor soothed. "We've taken that into account."

"We have?" I murmured in wonder.

Aahz shot me a black look and continued.

"I guarantee that by the end of the meeting the council won't expect you to perform any magik against us."

"You mean you'll give the Trophy back voluntarily?" Quigley asked, brightening noticeably. "I must say that's decent of you."

"No, it isn't," Aahz corrected, "and we're not going to give it back. All I said was they wouldn't expect you to get it for them with magik."

"But--"

"The reason I wanted to talk with you," Aahz interrupted, "was to clarify a little something from our previous conversation."

"What's that?" Quigley frowned.

"Well, you promised to release Tanda if the Trophy was returned. Now, if Ta-hoe has a chance to take the Trophy back, and then doesn't do it, is the deal still on? Will you let her go?"

"I ... I suppose so," the ex-demon hunter acquiesced, gnawing his lip. "But I can't imagine them not wanting it."

"Wanting something and being able to take it are two different things," Aahz grinned.

"But I'm supposed to be helping them with my magik!"

"Not this time, you aren't," my mentor corrected. "I've already told you that--"

"Is this a private chat, boys? Or can anybody join in?"

We all turned to find Massha lumbering towards us. The rest of the Veygus delegation waited behind her, having apparently arrived while we were talking to Quigley.

"Good God! What's that?" Quigley gasped, gaping at Massha's approaching bulk.

"That's Massha," I volunteered casually. "You know, the Veygans' magician!"

"That's Massha?" he echoed, swallowing hard.

"If you'll excuse us for a moment," Aahz suggested, "there are a few things we have to discuss with her before the meeting."

"Of course, certainly."

The ex-demon hunter beat a hasty retreat, apparently relieved at being able to avoid a face-to-face meeting with his rival.

"The council there tells me that was Quigley you were just talking to," Massha announced, tracking his flight with her eyes. "Is that true?"

"Umm ... yes," I admitted.

"You boys wouldn't be trying to double-cross old Massha, would you?" Her tone was jovial, but her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"My dear lady!" Aahz gasped. "You wound me! Didn't we promise to neutralize Quigley's demon for you?"

"You sure did."

"And it would be extremely difficult to engineer that without at least being on speaking terms with Quigley. Wouldn't it?"

"Well... yes."

"So no sooner do we start working on the project than you accuse us of double-crossing you! We should leave right now and let you solve your own problems."

I had to suppress a smile. Aahz looking indignant is a comical sight at best. Massha, however, swallowed it hook, line and sinker.

"Now, don't be that way," she pleaded. "I didn't mean to get ya all out of joint. Besides, do you blame me for being a little suspicious after you up and made off with the Trophy?"

Aahz sighed dramatically. "Didn't we say not to be surprised at anything we did? Geez! I guess it's what we should expect, trying to deal with someone who can't comprehend the subtlety of our plans."

"You mean stealing the Trophy is part of your plan to neutralize the demon?" Massha asked, wide-eyed with awe.

"Of course!" Aahz waved. "Or it was. You see, Quigley got the demon to help get the Trophy away from Veygus. Now, if Veygus doesn't have the Trophy, he doesn't need the demon, right?"

"Sounds a little shaky to me," the sorceress frowned.

"You're right," Aahz acknowledged. "That's why I was so glad when the k ... I mean, when Master Skeeve here came up with this new plan."

"I did?"

Aahz's arm closed around my shoulders in an iron grip which eliminated any thoughts of protest from my mind.

"He's so modest," my mentor explained. "You've heard what a genius tactician he is? Well, he's come up with a way to neutralize the demon . . . and give Veygus a good chance at retrieving the Trophy."

"I'm dying to hear it," Massha proclaimed eagerly.

"Me, too," I mumbled. Aahz's grip tightened threateningly.

"Then I guess we're ready to get started," he declared. "You'd better rejoin your delegation. Wouldn't want it to look like we're playing favorites. And remember . . . agree with us no matter what we say. We're on your side."

"Right!" she winked, and headed off.

"Say, um, Aahz," I managed at last.

"Yeah, kid?"

"If you're on Quigley's side and on Massha's side, who's on my side?"

"I am, of course."

I had been afraid he was going to say something like that. It was becoming increasingly clear that Aahz was going to come out of this in pretty good shape no matter how it ran. I didn't have much time to ponder the point, though.

Aahz was beckoning the groups forward to start the meeting.

Chapter Seventeen:

Im sure we can talk things out like civilized people."

-J. WAYNE

"I SUPPOSE you're all wondering why I called you here," my mentor began with a grin.

I think he intended it as a joke. I've gotten so I recognize his "waiting for a laugh" grin. Unfortunately, he was trying it on the wrong crowd. Jahks aren't generally noted for their sense of humor.

"I assume it's to talk about the Trophy," a distinguished individual from the Ta-hoe group observed dryly. "Otherwise we're wasting our time."

"Oh, it's about the Trophy," Aahz assured him hastily.

"Which you stole from us!" a Veygan contributed venomously.

"After you stole it from us!" the Ta-hoer speaker shot back.

"Only after you cheated us out of it at the Big Game."

"That call was totally legal! The rules clearly state...."

"That rule hasn't been enforced for three hundred years. There are four rulings on record which have since contradicted...."

"Gentlemen, please!" Aahz called, holding up his hands for order. "All that is water under the drawbridge, as well as being totally beside the point. Remember, neither of you currently have the Trophy. We do."

There was a moment of tense silence as both sides absorbed this observation. Finally, the Ta-hoer speaker stepped forward.

"Very well," he said firmly. "Name your price for its return. The Ta-hoe Council is prepared to offer..."

"Veygus will top any offer Ta-hoe makes."

"And Ta-hoe will double any offer that Veygus makes," the speaker shot back.

This was starting to sound pretty good to me. Maybe I've been hanging around with Aahz too long, but the potential financial benefits of our situation impressed me as being exceptionally good. The only foreseeable difficulty was Aahz's insistence that he was going to keep his birthday present.

"If you try anything, our magician will..."

"Your magician! We fired her. If she tries anything, our magician will..."

The raging debate forced its way into my consciousness again. That last bit sounded like it could get very ugly very quickly. I snuck a nervous glance at Aahz, but as usual he was way ahead of me.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" he admonished, raising his hands once more.

"Who are you calling a gentleman?"

"And ladies," my mentor amended, squinting at the source of the voice. "What-da-ya know. ERA strikes again."

"What's an eerah?" the Ta-hoe spokesman frowned, echoing my thoughts exactly.

"It seems," Aahz continued, ignoring the question entirely, "that our motives have been misconstrued.

We didn't appropriate the Trophy to ransom it. Quite the contrary. It has been our intention all along to see that it goes to its rightful owners." An ugly growl arose from the Veygans. "Excellent!" beamed the Ta-hoe spokesman. "If you won't accept a reward, will you at least accompany us back to town as our guests. There's sure to be celebrating and..."

"I said 'the rightful owner.' " Aahz smiled, cutting him off.

The spokesman paused, his smile melting to a dangerous scowl. "Are you saying we aren't the rightful owners?" he snarled. "If you thought Veygus had a better claim, why did you steal it in the first place?"

"Let me run it past you one more time," my mentor sighed. "The Trophy's going to its rightful owner. That lets Veygus out, too."

That took the spokesman aback. I didn't blame him. Aahz's logic had me a bit confused, too ... and I was on his side!

"If I understand it correctly," Aahz continued grandly, "the Trophy goes to the winning team-that wins the Big Game-as their award for being the year's best team. Is that right?"

"Of course," the spokesman nodded.

"Why do you assume the team that wins the Big Game is the best team?" Aahz asked innocently.

"Because there are only two teams. So it follows logically that.. ."

"That's where you're wrong," my mentor interrupted. "There is another team."

"Another team?" the spokesman blinked.

"That's right. A team that neither of your teams has faced, much less beaten. Now, we maintain that until that team is defeated, neither Ta-hoe nor Veygus has the right to declare their team the year's best!"

My stomach did a flip-flop. I was getting a bad feeling about this.

"That's ridiculous!" called the Veygus spokesman. "We've never heard of another team. Whose team is this, anyway?"

"Ours," Aahz smiled. "And we're challenging both your teams to a game, a three-way match, right here in thirty days ... Winner takes all."

Bad feeling confirmed. For a moment, I considered altering my disguise and sneaking out with one of the delegations. Then I realized that option was closed. Both groups had stepped back well out of ear-shot to discuss Aahz's proposal. That put them far away, so that I couldn't join them without being noticed. With nothing else to do, I turned on Aahz.

"This is your plan?" I demanded. "Setting us up to play a game we know absolutely nothing about against not one but two teams who've been playing it for five hundred years? That's not a plan, that's a disaster!"

"I figure it's our best chance to spring Tanda and keep the Trophy." my mentor shrugged.

"It's a chance to get our heads beaten in," I corrected. "There's got to be an easier way."

"There was," Aahz agreed. "Unfortunately, you eliminated it when you promised we wouldn't do anything to endanger Quigley's job."

I hate it when Aahz is right. I hate it almost as much as getting caught in my own stupid blunders. More often than not, those two phenomena occur simultaneously in my life.

"Why didn't you tell me about this plan before?" I asked to hide my discomfort.

"Would you have gone along with it if I had?"

"No."

"That's why."

"What happens if we refuse your challenge?" the Ta-hoe spokesman called.

"Then we consider ourselves the winners by default," Aahz replied.

"Well, Veygus will be there," came the decision from the other group.

"And so will Ta-hoe," was the spontaneous response.

"If I might ask," the Ta-hoe spokesman queried, "why did you pick a date thirty days from now?"

"It'll take time for you to lay out a triangular field," my mentor shrugged. "And besides, I thought your merchants would require more than a week to prepare their souvenirs."

There were nods in both groups for that reasoning. "Then it's agreed?" Aahz prompted.

"Agreed!" roared Veygus.

"Agreed!" echoed Ta-hoe.

"Speaking of merchandizing," the Ta-hoe spokesman commented, "what is the name of your team? We'll need it before we can go into production of the souvenirs."

"We're called 'The Demons'," Aahz said, winking at me. In a flash I saw that his plan really was. "Would you like to know why?"

"Well ... I would assume it's because you play like demons," the Ta-hoe spokesman stammered.

"Not 'like' demons!" my mentor grinned. "Shall we show them, partner?"

"Why not?" I smiled, closing my eyes.

In a moment, our disguises were gone, and for the first time the delegates had a look at what was opposing them.

"As I was saying," Aahz announced, showing all his teeth, "not 'like' demons."

It was a good gambit, and it should have worked. Any sane person would quake at the thought of taking on a team of demons. No sacrifice would be too great to avoid the confrontation. We had overlooked one minor detail, however. Jahks are not sane people.

"Excellent," the Ta-hoe spokesman exclaimed.

"What?" Aahz blinked, his smile fading.

"This should keep the odds even," the spokesman continued. "That's what we were discussing . . . whether you could field a good enough team to make a fight of it. But now . . . well, everyone will want to see us matchup."

"You . . . aren't afraid of playing against demons?" my mentor asked slowly.

Now it was the spokesman's turn to smile.

"My dear fellow," he chortled, "if you had ever seen our teams play, you wouldn't have to ask that question."

With that, he turned and rejoined his delegation as the two groups prepared to withdraw from the meeting.

"Didn't you listen in on their conversations?" I hissed.

"If you'll recall," Aahz growled back, "I was busy talking with you at the time."

"Then we're stuck," I moaned.

"Maybe not," he corrected. "Quigley! Could we have a word with you?"

The ex-demon hunter lost no time in joining us.

"I must say," he chortled. "You boys did an excellent job of getting me out of a tight spot there. Now it's a matter of pride for them to win the Trophy back on the playing field."

"Swell," Aahz growled. "Now how about your part of the deal? Ta-hoe has its chance, so there's no reason for you to keep Tanda."

"Mmm ... yes and no," Quigley corrected. "It occurs to me that if I release her now, then you'll have the Trophy and Tanda, and would therefore have no motive to return for the game. To fulfill your promise, to give Ta-hoe a chance for the Trophy, the game will have to take place. Then I'll release Tanda."

"Thanks a lot," my mentor spat.

"Don't mention it," the ex-demon hunter waved as he went to rejoin his group.

"Now what do we do?" I asked.

"We form a team," Aahz shrugged. "Hey, Griffin!"

"What is it now?" the youth growled.

"We have one more job for you," my mentor smiled. "All you have to do is help us train our team. There are ... a few points of the game that aren't very clear to us."

"No," said Griffin firmly.

"Now look, short stuff. . ."

"Wait a minute, Aahz," I interrupted. "Griffin, this time we aren't threatening you. I'm offering you a job at good wages to help us."

"What!?" Aahz shrieked.

"Shut up, Aahz."

"You don't understand," Griffin interrupted in turn. "Neither threats nor money will change my mind. I helped you steal the Trophy from Veygus, but I won't help you against my own team. I'd die before I'd do that."

"There are worse things than dying," Aahz suggested ominously.

"Let it drop, Aahz," I said firmly. "Thanks anyway, Griffin. You've been a big help when we needed you, so I won't fault you for holding back now. Hurry up. The others are waiting."

We watched as he trotted off to join his delegation.

"You know, kid," Aahz sighed at last, "sometime we're going to have to have a long talk about these lofty ideals of yours."

"Sure, Aahz," I nodded. "In the meantime, what are we going to do about this game?"

"What else can we do?" my mentor shrugged. "We put together a team."

"Just like that," I winced. "And where are we going to find the players, much less someone who can tell us how the game is played?"

"Where else?" Aahz grinned, setting the DHopper. "The Bazaar at Deva!"

Chapter Eighteen:

"What's the point-spread on World War III?"

-R.REAGAN

AT several other points in this tale, I've referred to the Bazaar at Deva. You may be wondering about it. So do I... and I've been there!

Deva is the home dimension of the Deveels, acknowledged to be the best traders anywhere. You may find references to them in your folklore. Deals with Deveels are usually incredible and frequently disastrous. I've dealt with only two Deveels personally. One got me hung (not hung-over from drink- but hung up by the neck!) and the other sold me my dragon, Gleep. I like to think that makes me even, but Aahz insists I'm batting zero-whatever that means.

Anyway, there is a year-round, rock-the-clock Bazaar in that dimension where the Deveels meet to trade with each other. Everything imaginable and most things that aren't are available there. All you have to do is bargain with the Deveels. Fortunately, the Bazaar is large enough that there is much duplication, and sometimes you can play the dealers off against each other.

I had been here twice before, both times with Aahz. This was, however, the first time I had been here when it was raining.

"It's raining," I pointed out, scowling at the overhanging clouds. They were a dark orange, which was quite picturesque, but did nothing toward making getting wet more pleasant.

"I know it's raining," Aahz retorted tersely. "C'mon. Let's step in here while I get my bearings."

"Here," in this case, was some sort of invisible bubble enveloping one stall which seemed to be doing an admirable job of keeping the rain out. I've used magik wards before to keep out unwelcome intruders, but it had never occurred to me to use it against the elements.

"Buying or looking, gentlemen?" the proprietor asked, sidling up to us.

I glanced at Aahz, but he was up on his tiptoes surveying the surroundings.

"Um... looking, I guess."

"Then stand in the rain!" came the snarling reply. "Force fields cost money, you know. This is a display, not a public service."

"What's a force field?" I stalled.

"Out!"

"C'mon, kid," Aahz said. "I know where we are now."

"Where?" I asked suspiciously.

"In the stall of the Bazaar's rudest dealer," my mentor explained, raising his voice. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't heard him with my own ears."

"What's that?" the proprietor scowled.

"Are you Garbelton?" Aahz asked, turning his attention on the proprietor.

"Well... yes."

"Your reputation precedes you, sir," my mentor intoned loftily, "and is devastatingly accurate. Come, Master Skeeve, we'll take our business elsewhere."

"But, gentlemen!" Garbelton called desperately, "if you'll only reconsider ..."

The rest was lost as Aahz gathered me up and strode off into the rain.

"What was that all about?" I demanded, breaking stride to jump a puddle. Aahz stepped squarely on it, splashing maroon mud all over my legs. Terrific. "That? Oh, just a little smokescreen to save face. It isn't good for your reputation to get thrown out of places . . . particularly for not buying."

"You mean you hadn't heard of him before? Then how did you know his name?"

"It was right there on the stall's placard," Aahz grinned. "Sure gave him a turn, though, didn't I? There's nothing a Deveel hates as much as losing a potential customer... except for giving a refund."

As much as I care for Aahz and appreciate the guidance he's given me, he can be a bit stomach turning when he starts gloating.

"We're still out in the rain," I pointed out.

"Ah, but now we know where we're going."

"We do?"

Aahz groaned, swerving to avoid a little old lady who was squatting in the middle of the thoroughfare chortling over a cauldron. As we passed, a large hairy paw emerged from the cauldron's depth, but the lady whacked it with her wooden spoon and it retreated out of sight. Aahz ignored the entire proceedings.

"Look, kid," he explained, "we're looking for two things here. First, we need to recruit some players for our team."

"How can we recruit for the team when we don't know the first thing about the game?" I interrupted.

"Second," my mentor continued tersely, "we have to find someone who can fill us in on the details of the game."

"Oh."

Properly mollified, I plodded along beside him in silence for several moments, sneaking covert glances at the displays we were passing. Then something occurred to me.

"Say ... ummmm, Aahz?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"You never answered my question. Where are we going?"

"To the Yellow Crescent Inn."

"The Yellow Crescent Inn?" I echoed, brightening slightly. "Are we going to see Gus?"

"That's right," Aahz grinned. "Gus is a heavy bettor. He should be able to put us in touch with a reliable bookie. Besides he owes us a favor. Maybe we can get him for the team."

"Good," I said, and meant it.

Gus is a gargoyle. He was part of the crew we used to stop Big Julie's army and I trust him as much as I do Aahz . . . maybe a little more. Anyone who's used the expression "heart of stone" to mean insensitive has never met Gus. I assume his heart is stone, the rest of him is, but he's one of the warmest, most sympathetic beings I've ever met. He's also without a doubt the stablest being that I've met through Aahz. If Gus joined our team, I'd worry a lot less . . . well, a little less. Then again, he might be too sensible to get involved in this madcap scheme. And as for the bookies...

"Hey, Aahz," I blinked. "What do we need a bookie for?"

"To brief us on the game, of course."

"A bookie from Deva is going to tell us how to play the game in Jahk?"

"It's the best we can do," Aahz shrugged. "You heard Griffin. Nobody in Jahk will give us the time of day, much less help us put a team together. Cheer up, though. Bookies are very knowledgeable in spectator sports, and the ones here in Deva are the best."

I pondered this for several moments, then decided to ask the question that had been bothering me since the meeting.

"Aahz? When you issued the challenge, did you really expect to play the game?"

My mentor stopped dead in his tracks and whirled to face me.

"Do you think I'd issue a challenge without intending to fight?" he demanded. "Do you think I'm a big-mouthed bluffer who'd rather talk his way out of trouble than fight?"

"It had crossed my mind," I admitted.

"Well, you're right," he grinned, resuming his stride. "You're learning pretty fast-for a Klahd. No, I really thought they'd back down when we dropped our disguises. That and I didn't think Quigley would see through the ploy and call our hand."

"He's learning fast, too," I commented. "I'm afraid he could become a real problem."

"Not a chance," my mentor snorted. "You've got him beat cold in the magik department."

"Except I've promised not to move against him," I observed glumly.

"Don't let it get you down," Aahz insisted, draping an arm around my shoulders. "We've both made some stupid calls on this one. All we can do is play the cards we're dealt."

"Bite the bullet, eh?" I grimaced.

"That's right. Say, you really are learning quick." I still didn't know what a bullet was, but I was picking up some of Aahz's pet phrases. At least now I could give the illusion of intelligence.

The Yellow Crescent Inn was in sight now. I expected Aahz to quicken his pace ... I mean, it was raining. Instead, however, my mentor slowed slightly, peering at a mixed group of beings huddled under a tent-flap.

"Hel-lo!" he exclaimed. "What have we here?"

"It looks like a mixed group of beings huddled under a tent-flap," I observed dryly, or as dryly as I could manage while dripping wet.

"It's a crap game," Aahz declared. "I can hear the dice."

Trust a Pervect to hear the sound of dice on mud at a hundred paces.

"So?" I urged.

"So I think we've found our bookie. The tall fellow, there-at the back of the crowd. I've dealt with him before."

"Are we going to talk to him now?" I asked eagerly.

"Not 'we,' " Aahz corrected me. "Me. You get in enough trouble in clean-cut crowds without my taking you into a crap game. You're going to wait for me in the Inn. Gus should be able to keep an eye on you."

"Oh, all right."

I was disappointed, but willing to get out of the rain.

"And don't stop to talk to anyone between here and there. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Aahz," I nodded, starting off at a trot.

"And whatever you do, don't eat the food!"

"Are you kidding?" I laughed. "I've been here before."

The food at the Yellow Crescent Inn is dubious at best. Even after dimension hopping with Tananda and seeing what was accepted as food elsewhere, I wouldn't put anything from that place in my mouth voluntarily.

As I approached, I could see through the door that the place was empty. This surprised me. I mean, from my prior experience, there was usually a good-sized crowd in there, and I would have expected the rain to increase the number of loiterers.

Gus wasn't in sight, either; but the door was open, so I pushed my way in, relieved to be somewhere dry again. I shouldn't have been.

No sooner had I gained entry when something like a large hand closed over the top of my head and I was hoisted bodily from my feet.

"Little person!" a booming voice declared. "Crunch likes little persons. Crunch likes little persons better than Big Macs. How do you taste, little person?"

With this last, I was rotated until I was hanging face to face with my assailant. In this case, I use the term "face" loosely. It had felt like I was being picked up by a big hand because I was being picked up by a big hand. At the other end of the big hand was the first and only troll it had been my misfortune to meet... and he looked hungry.

Chapter Nineteen:

"Why should I have to pay a troll just to cross a bridge?"

-B. G. GRUFF

WHILE I had never seen a troll before, I knew that this was one. I mean, he fit the description: tall, scraggly hair in patches, long rubbery limbs, misshapen face with runny eyes of unequal size. If it wasn't a troll, it would do until something better-or worse-came along.

I should have been scared, but strangely I wasn't. For some time now I had been ducking and weaving through some tight situations trying to avoid trouble. Now, Big Ugly here wanted to hassle me. This time, I wasn't buying.

"Why little person not answer Crunch?" the troll demanded, shaking me slightly.

"You want an answer?" I snarled. "Try this!"

Levitation is one of my oldest spells, and I used it now. Reaching out with my mind, I picked up a chair and slammed it into his face.

He didn't even blink.

Then I got scared.

"What's going on out here?!" Gus bellowed, charging out of the kitchen. "Any fights, and I'll... Skeeve!!"

"Tell your customer here to put me down before I tear off his arm and feed it to him!" I called, my confidence returning with the arrival of reinforcements.

I needn't have said anything. The effect of Gus's words on the troll was nothing short of miraculous.

"Skeeve?" my assailant gaped, setting me gently on my feet. "I say. Bloody good to make your acquaintance. I've heard so much about you, you know. Chumly here."

The hand which had so recently fastened on my head now seized my hand and began pumping it gently with each adjective.

"Ummm ... a pleasure, I'm sure," I stammered, trying vainly to retrieve my hand. "Say, weren't you talking differently before?"

"Oh, you mean Crunch?" Chumly laughed. "Beastly fellow. Still, he serves his purpose. Keeps the riffraff at a distance, you know."

"What he's trying to say," Gus supplied, "is that it's an act he puts on to scare people. It's lousy for business when he drops in for a visit, but it does mean we can talk uninterrupted. That's about the only way you can talk to Chumly. He's terribly shy."

"Oh, tosh," the troll proclaimed, digging at the floor with his toe. "I'm only giving the public what it wants. Not much work for a vegetarian troll, you know."

"A vegetarian troll?" I asked incredulously. "Weren't you about to eat me a minute ago?"

"Perish the thought," Chumly shuddered. "Presently I would have allowed you to squirm free and run . . . except, of course, you wouldn't. Quite a spirited lad, isn't he?"

"You don't know the half of it," the gargoyle answered through his perma-grin. "Why, when we took on Big Julie's army..."

"Chumly!" Aahz exclaimed, bursting through the door.

"Aahz," the troll answered. "I say, this is a spot of all right. What brings you ..."

He broke off suddenly, eyeing the Deveel who had followed Aahz into the inn.

"Oh, don't mind the Geek here," my mentor waved. "He's helping us with some trouble we're having."

"The Geek?" I frowned.

"It's a nickname," the Deveel shrugged.

"I knew it," Gus proclaimed, sinking into a chair. "Or I should have known it when I saw Skeeve. The only time you come to visit is when there's trouble."

"If you blokes are going to have a war council, perhaps I'd better amble along," Chumly suggested.

"Stick around," Aahz instructed. "It involves Tanda."

"Tanda?" the troll frowned. "What has that bit of fluff gone and gotten herself into now?"

"You know Tanda?" I asked.

"Oh, quite," Chumly smiled. "She's my little sister."

"Your sister?" I gaped.

"Rather. Didn't you notice the family resemblance?"

"Well... I, ah ... " I fumbled.

"Don't let him kid you," my mentor grinned. "Tanda and Chumly are from Trollia, where the men are Trolls and the women are Trollops. With men like this back home, you can understand why Tanda spends as much time as she does dimension hopping."

"That's quite enough of that," Chumly instructed firmly. "I want to hear what's happened to little sister."

"In a bit," Aahz waved. "First let's see what information the Geek here has for us."

"I can't believe I let you pull me out of a hot crap game to meet with this zoo," the Deveel grumbled.

"Zoo?" echoed Gus. He was still smiling, but then, he always smiled. Personally, I didn't like the tone of his voice.

Apparently Aahz didn't either, as he hastened to move the conversation along.

"You should thank me for getting you out," he observed, "before the rest of them figured out that you'd switched the dice."

"You spotted that?" the Geek asked, visibly impressed. "Then maybe it's just as well I bailed out. When a Pervert can spot me ..."

"That's a Pervert!" Aahz corrected, showing all his teeth.

"Oh! Yes ... of course," the Deveel amended, pinking visibly.

For his sake, I hoped he had some good information for us. In an amazingly short time he had managed to rub everyone wrong. Then again, Deveels have never been noted for their personable ways.

"So what can you tell us about the game on Jahk?" I prompted.

"How much are you paying me?" the Geek yawned.

"As much as the information's worth," Aahz supplied grimly. "Probably more."

The Deveel studied him for a moment, then shrugged.

"Fair enough," he declared. "You've always made good on your debts, Aahz. I suppose I can trust you on this one."

"So what can you tell us?" I insisted.

Now it was my turn to undergo close scrutiny, but the gaze turned on me was noticeably colder than the one Aahz had suffered. With a lazy motion, the Geek reached down and pulled a dagger from his boot and tossed it aloft with a twirl. Catching it with his other hand, he sent it up again, forming a glittering arch from hand to hand, never taking his eyes from mine.

"You're pretty mouthy for a punk Klahd," he observed. "Are you this mouthy when you don't have a pack of goons around to back your move?"

"Usually," I admitted. "And they aren't goons, they're my friends."

As I spoke, I reached out once more with my mind, caught the knife, gave it an extra twirl, then stopped it dead in the air, its point hovering bare inches from the Deveel's throat. Like I said, I was getting a little tired of people throwing their weight around.

The Geek didn't move a muscle, but now he was watching the knife instead of me.

"In case you missed it the first time around," Gus supplied, still smiling, "this 'punk Klahd's' name is Skeeve. The Skeeve."

The Deveel pinked again. I was starting to enjoy having a reputation.

"Why don't you sit down. Geek," Aahz suggested, "and tell the k . . . Skeeve . . . what he wants to know?"

The Deveel obeyed, apparently eager to move away from the knife. That being the case, I naturally let it follow him.

Once he was seated, I gave it one last twirl and set it lightly on the table in front of him. That reassured him somewhat, but he still kept glancing at it nervously as he spoke.

"I ... urn ... I really don't have that much information," he began uncomfortably. "They only play one game a year, and the odds are usually even."

"How is the game played?" Aahz urged.

"Never seen it, myself," the Geek shrugged. "It's one of those get-the-ball-in-the-net games. I'm more familiar with the positions than the actual play."

"Then what are the positions?" I asked.

"It's a five-man team," the Deveel explained. "Two forwards, or Fangs, chosen for their speed and agility; one guard or Interceptor, for power; a goaltender or Castle, who is usually the strongest man on the team; and a Rider, a mounted player who is used both for attack and defense."

"Sounds straightforward enough," my mentor commented.

"Can't you tell us anything at all about the play?" I pressed.

"Well, I'm not up on the strategies," the Geek frowned. "But I have a general idea of the action. The team in possession of the ball has four tries to score a goal. They can move the ball by running, kicking, or throwing. Once the ball is immobilized, the try is over and they line up for their next try. Of course, the defense tries to stop them."

"Run, kick, or throw," Aahz murmured. "Hmmm . . . sounds like defense could be a problem. What are the rules regarding conduct on the field?"

"Players can't use edged weapons on each other," the Deveel recited. "Any offenders will be shot down on the spot."

"Sensible rule," I said, swallowing hard. "What else?"

"That's it," the Geek shrugged.

"That's it?" Aahz exclaimed. "No edged weapons? That's it?"

"Both for the rules and my knowledge of the game," the Deveel confirmed. "Now, if we can settle accounts, I'll be on my way."

I wanted to cross-examine him, but Aahz caught my eye and shook his head.

"Would you settle for a good tip?" he asked.

"Only if it was a really good tip," the Geek responded dourly.

"Have you heard about the new game on Jahk? The three-way brawl that's coming up?"

"Of course," the Deveel shrugged.

"You have?" I blinked. I mean we had only just set it up!

"I have a professional stake in keeping up on these things."

"Uh-huh!" my mentor commented judiciously. "How are the odds running?"

"Even up for Ta-hoe and Veygus. This new team is throwing everyone for a loop, though. Since no one can get a line on them, they're heavy underdogs."

"If we could give you an inside track on this dark horse team," Aahz said, looking at the ceiling, "would that square our account?"

"You know about the Demons?" the Geek asked eagerly. "If you do, it's a deal. With inside info, I could be the only one at the Bazaar with the data to fix the real odds."

"Done!" my mentor declared. "We're the Demons."

That got him. The Geek sagged back in his chair for a moment, open mouthed. Then he cocked his head at us.

"You mean, you're financing the team?"

"We are the team ... or part of it. We're still putting it together."

The Deveel started to say something, then changed his mind. Rising silently, he headed for the door, hesitated with one hand on the knob, then left without saying a word.

Somehow, I found his reaction ominous.

"How 'bout that, kid," Aahz chortled. "I got the information without paying a cent!"

"I don't like the way he looked," I announced, still staring at the door.

"C'mon. Admit it! I just got us a pretty good deal."

"Aahz?" I said slowly. "What is it you always told me about dealing with Deveels?"

"Hmmm? Oh, you mean, 'If you think you've made a good deal with a Deveel...!'"

He broke off, his jubilation fading.

"First count your fingers, then your limbs, then your relatives!" I finished for him. "Are you sure you got a good deal?"

Our eyes met, and neither of us were smiling.

Chapter Twenty:

"What are friends for?"

-R. M. NIXON

WE were still pondering our predicament, when Chumly interrupted our thoughts.

"You blokes do seem to be having a bit of difficulty," he said, draping an arm around both of our shoulders. "But if it wouldn't be too much trouble, could you enlighten me as to what all this has to do with Tanda?"

Normally, this would sound like a casual request. When one pauses to consider, however, that the casual request was coming from a troll half again as tall as we were, and capable of mashing our heads like normal folks squash grapes, the request takes on a high priority no matter how politely it's phrased.

"Well, you know this game we're talking about?" Aahz began uneasily.

"Tanda's the prize," I finished lamely.

Chumly was silent. Then his grip on my shoulder tightened slightly.

"Forgive me," he smiled. "For a moment there I thought you said my little sister is the prize in some primitive, spectator brawl."

"Actually," Aahz explained hastily, trying to edge away, "the kid, here, was there when she was captured."

"But it was Aahz that got her involved in the game," I countered, edging in the other direction.

"You chaps got her into this?" the troll asked softly, his grip holding us firmly in place. "I thought you were trying to rescue her."

"Whoa! Everybody calm down!" Gus ordered, stepping into the impending brawl. "Nobody wrecks this place but me. Chumly, let's all sit down and hear this from the top."

I was pretty calm myself ... at least, I wasn't about to start a fight. Still, Gus's suggestion was a welcome change in direction from the one the conversation was headed in.

This time, I needed no prompting to let Aahz do the talking. While he gets trapped in oversights from time to time, if given free rein, he can and has talked us out of some seemingly impossible situations. This was no exception. Though he surprised me by sticking to the truth, by the time he was done, Chumly's frozen features had softened to a thoughtful stare.

"I must say," the troll commented finally, "it seems little sister has done it to herself this time. You seem to have tried everything you could to effect her release."

"We could give the Trophy back," I suggested.

Aahz kicked me under the table.

"Out of the question," Chumly snorted. "It's Aahz's gift fair and square. If Tanda got herself in trouble acquiring it, that's bloody well her problem. You can't expect Aahz to feel responsible."

"Yes, I can," I corrected.

"No," the troll declared. "The only acceptable solution is to trounce these blighters soundly at their own game. I trust you'll allow me to fill a position on your team?"

"I'd had my hopes," my mentor grinned.

"Count me in, too," Gus announced, flexing his stone wings. "Can't let you all go into a brawl like this without my steadying influence."

"See, kid?" Aahz grinned. "Things are looking up already."

"Say, Aahz," I said carefully. "It occurs to me . . . you know that Rider position? Well, it seems to me we'd have a big psychological advantage if our Rider was sitting on top of a dragon."

"You're right."

"Aw, c'mon, Aahz! Just because Gleep's a bit... Did you say 'you're right'?"

"Right. Affirmative. Correct," my mentor nodded. "Sometimes you come up with some pretty good ideas."

"Gee, Aahz..."

"But not that stupid little dragon of yours," he insisted. "We're going to use that monster we got with Big Julie's army."

"But, Aahz. ..."

"But, Aahz nothing! C'mon, Gus! Close up shop here. We're heading for Klah to pick up a dragon!"

Now, Klah is my home dimension, and no matter what my fellow dimension travelers say, I think it's a pretty nice one to live in. Still, after spending extensive time in some other dimensions, however pleasantly familiar the sights of Klah seem, they do look a little drab.

Aahz had surprised me by bringing us well north of Possiltum, instead of at our own quarters in the royal palace. I inquired about this, and for a change my mentor gave me a straight answer.

"It's all in how you set the D-Hopper," he explained. "You've got eight dials to play with, and they let you control both which dimension you're going to as well as where you are when you arrive."

"Does that mean we could use it to go from one place to another in the same dimension?" I asked.

"Hmmm," Aahz frowned. "I really don't know. It never occurred to me to try. We'll have to check into it sometime."

"Well then, why did you pick this arrival point?"

"That's easy," my mentor grinned, gesturing at our colleagues. "I wasn't sure what our reception at the palace would be like if we arrived with a troll and a gargoye."

He had me there. At the Bazaar disguises had been unnecessary, and I had gotten so used to seeing strange beings around me it had completely slipped my mind that our group would be a strange sight to the average Klahd.

"Sorry, Aahz," I flushed. "I forgot."

"Don't worry about it," my mentor waved. "If it had been important I would have said something to you before we left the Bazaar. I just wanted to shake you up a little to remind you to pay attention to details. The real reason we're here instead of at the palace is, we want to see Big Julie, and I'm too lazy to walk the distance if we could cover it with the D-Hopper."

Despite his reassurances, I got to work correcting my oversight. To redeem myself, I decided to show Aahz I had been practicing during my tour with Tananda. Closing my eyes, I concentrated on disguising Gus and Chumly at the same time.

"Not bad, kid," Aahz commented. "They're a little villainous looking, but acceptable."

"I thought it would help us avoid trouble if they looked a little mean," I explained modestly.

"Not bad?" Chumly snarled. "I look like a Klahd!"

"I think you look cute as a Klahd," Gus quipped.

"Cute? CUTE?" Chumly bristled. "Who ever heard of a cute troll? I say, Aahz, is this really necessary?"

"Unfortunately, yes," my mentor replied, his grin belying his expression of sympathy. "Remember, you aren't supposed to be a troll just now. Just a humble citizen of this lower than humble dimension."

"Why aren't you disguised?" the troll asked suspiciously, obviously unconvinced.

"I'm already known around here as the apprentice of the court magician," Aahz countered innocently. "Folks are used to seeing me like this."

"Well," Chumly grumbled, "there'll be bloody Hell to pay if anyone I know sees me looking like this."

"If anyone you know sees you like this, they won't recognize you," I pointed out cautiously.

The troll thought about that for a moment, then slowly nodded his head.

"I suppose you're right," he conceded at last. "Let's off to find this Big Julie, hmmm? The less time I spend looking like this, the better."

"Don't get your hopes too high," Aahz cautioned. "We're going to do our training in this dimension, so you might as well get used to being a Klahd for a while."

"Bloody Hell," was the only reply.

True to his plans for retirement. Big Julie was relaxing on the lawn of his cottage, drinking wine when we arrived. To the casual observer, he might seem nothing more than a spindly old man basking in the sun. Then again, the casual observer wouldn't have known him when he was commanding the mightiest army ever to grace our dimension. This was probably just as well. Julie was still hiding from a particularly nasty batch of loan sharks who were very curious as to why he and his men gave up soldiering . . . and hence their ability to pay back certain old gambling debts.

"Aye! Hello, boys!" he boomed, waving enthusiastically. "Long time no see, ya know? Pull up a chair and have some wine. What brings you out this way, eh?"

"A little bit of pleasure and a lot of business," Aahz explained, casually gathering to his bosom the only pitcher of wine in sight. "We've got a little favor to ask."

"If it's mine, it's yours," Julie announced. "What daya need?"

"Is there any more wine?" I asked hastily.

Long years of experience had taught me not to expect Aahz to share a pitcher of wine. One was barely enough for him.

"Sure. I got lots. Badaxe is inside now getting some."

"Badaxe?" Aahz frowned. "What's he doing here?"

"At the moment, wondering what you're doing here," came a booming voice.

We all turned to find the shaggy-mountain form of Possiltum's general framed in the doorway of the cottage, a pitcher of wine balanced in each hand. Hugh Badaxe always seemed to me to be more beast than man, though I'll admit his curly dark hair and beard when viewed in conjunction with his favorite animal skin cloak contributed greatly to the image. Of course, beasts didn't use tools, while Badaxe definitely did. A massive double-edged axe dangled constantly from his belt, at once his namesake and his favorite tool of diplomacy.

"We just dropped in to have a few words with Big Julie here," my mentor replied innocently.

"What about?" the general demanded. "I thought we agreed that all military matters would be brought to me before seeking Big Julie's advice. I am the Commander of Possiltum's army, you know."

"Now, Hugh," Julie soothed, "the boys just wanted to ask me for a little favor, that's all. If it involved the army, they would've come to you. Right, boys?"

Aahz and I nodded vigorously. Gus and Chumly looked blank. We had overlooked briefing them on General Badaxe and his jealousies regarding power.

"You see?" Julie continued. "Now, then, Aahz, what sort of favor can I do for you?"

"Nothing much," my mentor shrugged. "We were wondering if we could borrow your dragon for a little while."

"My dragon? What do you need my dragon for? You've already got a dragon."

"We need a big dragon," Aahz evaded.

"A big dragon?" Julie echoed, frowning. "It sounds like you boys are into something dangerous."

"Don't worry," I interjected confidently, "I'll be riding the dragon in the Game, so nothing ..."

"Game?" Badaxe roared. "I knew it. You're going into a war game without even consulting me."

"It's not a war game," I insisted.

"Yes, it is," Aahz corrected.

"It is?" I blinked.

"Think about it, kid," my mentor urged. "Any spectator sport with teams is a form of war gaming."

"Then why wasn't I informed?" Badaxe blustered. "As commander of Possiltum's armed forces, any war games to be held fall under my jurisdiction."

"General," Aahz sighed, "the game isn't going to be played in this kingdom."

"Any military . . . oh!" Badaxe paused, confused by this turn of events. "Well, if it involves any members of my army ..."

"It doesn't," my mentor interrupted. "This exercise only involves a five-man team, and we've filled it without drawing on the army's resources."

A bell went off in my mind. I ran a quick check, which only confirmed my fears.

"Um...Aahz..." I began.

"Not now, kid," he growled, "You see, general, all your paranoid fears were ..."

"Aahz!" I insisted.

"What is it?" my mentor snarled, turning on me.

"We haven't got five players, only four."

Chapter Twenty-One:

"We've got an unbeatable team!"

-SAURON

"FOUR?" Aahz echoed blankly.

"I count real good up to five," I informed him loftily, "and you, me, Gus and Chumly only make four. See? One, two, three..."

"All right! I get the message," my mentor interrupted, scowling at our two comrades. "Say Gus! I don't suppose Berfert's along, is he?"

"C'mon, Aahz," I chided, "we can't claim a salamander as a team member."

"Shut up, kid. How 'bout it, Gus?"

"Not this time," the gargoyle shrugged. "He ran into a lady friend of his, and they decided to take a vacation together."

"A lady friend?" Aahz asked, arching an eyebrow.

"That's right," Gus nodded. "You might say she's an old flame."

"An old flame," the troll grinned. "I say, that's rather good."

For a change, I got the joke, and joined Gus and Chumly in a hearty round of laughter, while Badaxe and Julie looked puzzled.

Aahz rolled his eyes in exasperation. "That's all I need," he groaned. "One member short, and the ones I've got are half-wits. When you're all quite through, I'm open to suggestions as to where we're going to find a fifth team member."

"I'll fill the position," Badaxe said calmly.

"You?" I gulped, my laughter forgotten.

"Of course," the general nodded. "It's my duty."

"Maybe I didn't make myself clear," Aahz interjected. "Possiltum isn't involved in this at all."

"But its magician and his apprentice are," Badaxe added pointedly. "You're both citizens of Possiltum, and rather prominent citizens at that. Like it or not, my duty is to protect you with any means at my disposal-and in this case, that means me."

I hadn't thought of that. In a way, it was kind of nice. Still, I wasn't wild about the general putting himself in danger on our account.

"Ummm ... I appreciate your offer, general," I began carefully, "but the game's going to be played a long way from here." "If you can survive the journey, so can I," Badaxe countered firmly.

"But you don't understand!"

"Kid," Aahz interrupted in a thoughtful tone, "why don't you introduce him to his potential teammates?"

"What? Oh, I'm sorry. General Badaxe, this is Gus, and that's Chumly."

"No," my mentor smiled. "I mean introduce him." "Oh!" I said. "General, meet the rest of our team."

As I spoke, I dropped the disguise spell, revealing both gargoyle and troll in their true forms.

"Gus!" Big Julie roared. "I thought I recognized your voice."

"Hi, Julie!" the gargoyle waved. "How's retirement?"

"Pretty dull. Hey, help yourself to some wine!"

"Thanks."

Gus stepped forward and took the two pitchers of wine from the general's nerveless grip, passing one to Chumly. It occurred to me that I was the only one of the crew who wasn't getting a drink out of this.

The general was transfixed, his eyes darting from gargoyle to troll and back again. He had paled slightly, but to his credit he hadn't given ground an inch.

"Well, Badaxe," Aahz grinned, "still want to join the team?"

The general licked his lips nervously, then tore his eyes away from Gus and Chumly.

"Certainly," he announced. "I'd be proud to fight alongside such . . . worthy allies. That is, if they'll have me."

That dropped it in our laps.

"What do you think, Skeeve?" Aahz asked. "You're the boss."

Correction. That dropped it in my lap. Aahz had an annoying habit of yielding leadership just when things got sticky. I was beginning to suspect it wasn't always coincidence.

"Well, Lord Magician?" Badaxe rumbled. "Will you accept my services for this expedition?"

I was stuck. No one could deny Badaxe's value in a fight, but I had never warmed to him as a person. As a teammate ...

"Gleep!"

The warning wasn't soon enough! Before I could brace myself, I was hit from behind by a massive force and sent sprawling on my face. The slimy tongue worrying the back of my head and the accompanying blast of incredibly bad breath could only have one source.

"Gleep!" my pet announced proudly, pausing briefly in his efforts to reach my face.

"What's that stupid dragon doing here?" Aahz bellowed, unmoved by our emotional reunion.

"Ask Badaxe," Julie grinned. "He brought him."

"He did?" my mentor blinked, momentarily stunned out of his anger.

I was a bit surprised myself. Pushing Gleep away momentarily I scrambled to my feet and shot a questioning glance at the general.

For the first time since and including our original confrontation, Hugh Badaxe looked uncomfortable. The fierce warrior who wouldn't flinch before army, magician, or demon couldn't meet our eyes.

"He was . . . well, with you two gone he was just moping around," the general mumbled. "No one else would go near him and I thought.. . well, that is ... it seemed logical that..."

"He brought him out to play with my dragon," Julie explained gleefully. "It seems the fierce general here has a weak spot for animals."

Badaxe's head came up with a snap. "The dragon served the Kingdom well in the last campaign," he announced hotly. "It's only fair that someone sees to his needs-as a veteran."

His bluster didn't fool anyone. There was no reason why he should feel responsible for my dragon. Even if he did, it would have been easy for him to order some of his soldiers to see to my pet rather than attending to it personally as he had done. The truth of the matter was that he liked Gleep.

As if to confirm our suspicions, my pet began to frolic around him, wagging head and tail in movements I knew were reserved for playmates. The general stoically ignored him . . . which is not that easy to do.

"Um . . . general?" I said carefully.

"Yes?"

I was fixed by a frosty gaze, daring me to comment on the dragon's behavior.

"About our earlier conversation," I clarified hastily. "I'm sure I speak for the rest of the team when I say we're both pleased and honored to have you on our side for the upcoming war game."

"Thank you. Lord Magician," he bowed stiffly. "I trust you will find your confidence in me is not misplaced."

"Now that that's settled," Aahz chortled, rubbing his hands together. "Where's the big dragon? We've got some practicing to do."

"He's asleep," Julie shrugged.

"Asleep?" Aahz echoed.

"That's right. He got into the barn, ate up over half the livestock in the place. Now he's sleepin' like a rock, you know? Probably won't wake up for a couple of months at best."

"A couple of months!" my mentor groaned. "Now what are we going to do? The kid's got to have something to ride in the game!"

"Gleep!" my pet said, rolling on the ground at my feet.

Aahz glared at me.

"He said it, I didn't," I declared innocently.

"Don't think we've got much choice, Aahz," Gus pointed out.

"If you aren't used to them, any dragon would seem rather frightening," Chumly supplied.

"All right! All right!" Aahz grimaced, throwing up his hands in surrender. "If you're all willing to risk it, I'll go along. As long as he doesn't drive me nuts by always saying ..."

"Gleep?" my pet asked, swiveling his head around to see what Aahz was shouting about.

"Then we're ready to start practicing?" I asked hastily.

"As ready as we'll ever be, I guess," Aahz grumbled, glaring at the dragon.

"I know this isn't my fight," Big Julie put in, "but what kinda strategies have you boys worked up?"

"Haven't yet," my mentor admitted. "But we'll think of something."

"Maybe I can give you a hand. I used to be pretty good with small unit tactics. You know what I mean?"

The next few weeks were interesting. You notice I didn't say "instructive," just interesting. Aside from learning to work together as a team, there was little development among the individuals of our crew.

You could argue that with the beings we had on the team, there was little development to be done. That was their opinion. Nor was it easy to argue with them. With the exception of myself, their physical condition ranged from excellent to unbelievable. What was more, they were all seasoned veterans of countless battles and campaigns. From what we had seen of the Jahks, any one of our team was more than a match for five of our opponents-and together ...

Maybe that's what bothered me: the easy assurance on everyone's part that we could win in a walk. I know it bothered Big Julie.

"You boys are over-confident," he'd scold, shaking his head in exasperation. "There's more to fighting than strength. Know what I mean?"

"We've got more than strength," Aahz yawned. "There's speed, agility, stamina, and with Gus along, we've got air cover. Then again, Skeeve there has a few tricks up his sleeve as a magician."

"You forgot 'experience,'" Julie countered. "These other guys, they've been playing this game for what? Five hundred years now? They might have a trick or two of their own."

With that stubborn argument, Julie would threaten, wheedle, and cajole us into practicing. Unfortunately, most of the practice centered around me.

Staying on Gleep's back was rough enough. Trying to keep my seat while throwing or catching a ball proved to be nearly impossible. Gleep was no help. He preferred chasing the ball himself or standing stock still while scratching himself with a hind leg to following orders from me. I finally had to cheat a little, resorting to magik to keep me upright on my mount's back. A little levitation, a little flying, and suddenly my riding skills improved a hundred fold. If Aahz suspected I was using something other than my sense of balance, he didn't say anything.

The problem of catching and throwing the ball was solved by the addition of a staff to my argument. Chumly uprooted a hefty sized sapling, and the general used his ever-present belt axe to trim away branches and roots. The result was an eleven foot club with which I could either knock the ball along the ground or swat it out of the air if someone had thrown or kicked it aloft. The staff was a bit heavier than I would have liked, but the extra weight moved the ball farther each time I hit it. Of course, I used a little magik to steer the ball, too, so I didn't miss often and it usually went where I wanted it to go.

Gleep, on the other hand, went where he wanted to go. While my club occasionally helped both to set him in motion and to institute minor changes in his direction once he was moving, total control had still eluded me when the day finally arrived for our departure.

The five of us (six including Gleep) gathered in the center of our practice meadow and said our goodbyes to Julie.

"I'm sorry I can't come with you, boys," he declared mournfully, "but I'm not as young as I used to be, you know?"

"Don't worry," Aahz waved, "we'll be back soon. You can come to our victory celebration."

"There you go again," Julie scowled, "I'm warning you, don't celebrate until after the battle. After five hundred years..."

"Right, Julie," Aahz interrupted hastily. "You've told us before. We'd better get going now or we'll miss the game. Wouldn't want to lose by default."

With that, he checked to see we were all in position and triggered the D-Hopper.

A moment later, we were back in Jahk.

Chapter Twenty-Two:

"No matter what the game, no matter what the rules, the same rules apply to both sides!"
-HOYLE'SLAW

THE stadium had undergone two major changes since the last time Aahz and I were here.

First, the configuration of the field had been changed. Instead of a rectangle, the chalk lines now outlined a triangle with netted goals at each corner. I assumed that was to accommodate a three-way instead of a two-way match.

The second change was people. Remember how I said I didn't even want to imagine what the stadium would be like full of people? Well, the reality dwarfed anything my imagination could have conjured up. Where I had envisioned neat rows of people to match the military precision of the seats, the stands were currently a chaotic mass of color and motion. I don't know why they bothered providing seats. As far as I could tell, nobody was sitting down.

A stunned hush had fallen over the crowd when we appeared. This was understandable. Beings don't appear out of thin air very often, as we had assembled.

At Aahz's instruction, I had withheld any disguises from our team in order to get maximum psychological impact from our normal appearance. We got it.

The crowd gaped at us, while we gaped at the crowd. Then they recovered their composure and a roar trumpeted forth from a thousand throats simultaneously. The bedlam was deafening.

"They don't seem very intimidated," I observed dryly.

I didn't expect to be heard over the din, but I had forgotten Aahz's sharp ears.

"Ave Caesar. Salutes e moratorium. Eh, kid?" he grinned.

I didn't have the foggiest what he was talking about, but I grinned back at him. I was tired of staring blankly every time he made a joke.

"Hey, boss. We've got company," Gus called, jerking his head toward one side of the stadium.

"Two companies, actually," Chumly supplied, staring in the opposite direction.

Swiveling my head around, I discovered they were both right. Massha was bearing down on us from one side, while old Graybeard was waddling forward from the other. It seemed both Veygus and Ta-hoe wanted words with us.

"Hell-o boys," Massha drawled, arriving first. "Just wanted to wish you luck with your . . . venture."

This might have sounded strange coming from a supporter of the opposition. It did to me. Then I remembered that Massha thought we were out to neutralize Quigley's "demon." Well, in a way we were.

Aahz, as usual, was way ahead of me.

"Don't worry, Massha," he grinned. "We've got everything well in hand."

It never ceases to amaze me the ease with which my mentor can lie.

"Just be sure you stay out of it," he continued smoothly. "It's a rather delicate plan, and any miscellaneous moving parts could foul things up."

"Don't worry your green little head about that," she winked. "I know when I'm outclassed. I was just kinda hoping you'd introduce me to the rest of your team."

I suddenly realized that throughout our conversation, she hadn't taken her eyes off our teammates. Specifically, she was staring sideways at Hugh Badaxe. This didn't change as Aahz made the proper introductions.

"Massha, this is Gus."

"Charmed, madam," the gargoyle responded.

"And Chum-er-Crunch."

"When fight? Crunch tikes fighting," Chumly declared, dropping into his troll act.

Massha didn't bat an eye. She was busy running both of them up and down the general's frame.

"And this is Hugh Badaxe."

With a serpentine glide, Massha was standing close to the general.

"So pleased to meet cha, Hugh ... you don't mind if I call you Hugh, do you?" she purred.

"Harmmph ... I... that is," Badaxe stammered, visibly uncomfortable.

I could sympathize with him. Having Massha focus her attention on one was disquieting to say the least. Fortunately, help arrived just then in the form of the Ta-hoe delegate.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he chortled, rubbing his hands together gleefully. "Hello, Massha."

"Actually," she returned icily, "I was just leaving."

She leaned forward and murmured something in the general's ear before departing for her seat in the stands. Whatever it was, Badaxe flushed bright red and avoided our eyes.

"We were afraid you wouldn't arrive in time,"

Graybeard continued, ignoring Massha's exit. "Wouldn't want to disappoint the fans with a default, would we? When are you expecting the rest of your team?"

"The rest of our team?" I frowned. "I thought the rules only called for five players plus a riding mount."

"That's right," Graybeard replied, "but ... oh, well, I admire your confidence. So there're only the five of you, eh? Well, well. That will change the odds a bit."

"Why?" I demanded suspiciously.

"Are the edges on that thing sharp?" the spokesman asked, spying the general's axe.

"Razor," Badaxe replied haughtily.

"But he won't use it on anyone," I added hastily, suddenly remembering the "no edged weapons" rule. I wasn't sure what the general's reaction would be if anyone tried to take his beloved axe away from him.

"Oh, I have no worries on that score," Graybeard responded easily. "As with all games, the crossbowmen will be quick to eliminate any player who chooses to ignore the rules."

He waved absently at the sidelines. We looked in the indicated direction, and saw for the first time that the field was surrounded by crossbowmen, alternately dressed in the blue and yellow of Ta-hoe and the red and white of Veygus. This was a little wrinkle the Geek had neglected to mention. He had told us about the rules, but not how they were enforced.

At the same time, I noticed two things which I had previously missed while scanning the stands.

The first was Quigley, sitting front and center on the Ta-hoe side. What was more important was that he had Tananda with him. She was still asleep, floating horizontally in the air in front of him. Apparently he didn't want to miss the game, and didn't trust us enough to leave her unguarded back at his workshop.

He saw me staring and waved. I didn't wave back. Instead, I was about to call Aahz's attention to my find when I noticed the second thing.

Griffin was at the edge of the field, jumping up and down and frantically waving his arms to get my attention. As soon as he saw I was watching him, he began vigorously beckoning to me. Aahz was engrossed in conversation with the Tahoe spokesman, so I ambled off to see what Griffin wanted.

"Hello, Griffin," I smiled. "How've you been?"

"I just wanted to tell you," he gasped, breathless from his exertions, "I've changed sides. If there's anything I can do to help you, just sing out."

"Really?" I drawled, raising an eyebrow. "And why the sudden change of heart, not to mention allegiances?"

"Call it my innate sense of fair play," he grimaced. "I don't like what they're planning to do to you. Even if my old team is involved, I don't like it."

"What are they planning to do to us?" I demanded, suddenly attentive.

"That's what I wanted to warn you about," he explained. "The two teams had a meeting about this game. They decided that however much they hated each other, neither side wanted to see the Trophy go to a bunch of outsiders."

"That's only natural," I nodded, "but what..."

"You don't understand!" the youth interrupted hastily. "They're going to double-team you! They've declared a truce with each other until they've knocked you off the field. When the game starts you'll be up against two teams working together against your one!"

"Kid! Get back here!"

Aahz's bellow reminded me there was another conference going on.

"I've got to go. Griffin," I declared. "Thanks for the warning."

"Good luck!" he called. "You're going to need it."

I trotted back onto the field, to find the assemblage waiting for me with expectant expressions.

"They want to see the Trophy," Aahz informed me with a wink.

"As per our original agreement," the Ta-hoe spokesman added stiffly. "It should be here to be awarded to the victorious team."

"It is here," I announced firmly.

"I beg your pardon?" Graybeard blinked, looking around.

"Show him, kid," my mentor grinned.

"All right," I nodded, "everybody stand back."

In many ways it was harder to produce the statue using magik than it would have been to do it with physical labor. I had to agree with Aahz, though, that this way was far more dramatic.

Stretching my levitation capacities to their utmost, I went to work. A large hunk of turf was lifted from the center of the field and set aside. Then the exposed dirt was shoved aside, and finally the Trophy rose into view. I let it hover in midair while I rearranged the dirt and replaced the turf, then let it settle majestically to rest in all its magnificent, ugly splendor.

The crowd roared its approval, though whether for my magik or the Trophy itself I wasn't sure.

"Pretty good," Aahz exclaimed, slapping me gently on the back.

"Gleep," my pet exclaimed, adding his slimy tongue to the offered congratulations.

"Very clever," Graybeard admitted. "We never thought to look there. A little rough on the field, though, isn't it?"

"It'll get torn up this afternoon anyway," my mentor shrugged. "Incidentally, when's game time?"

As if in answer to his question, the stands exploded in bedlam. I hadn't thought the stadium could get any noisier, but this was like a solid wall of sound pressing in on us from all sides.

The reason for the jubilation was immediately obvious. Two columns of figures had emerged from a tunnel at the far end of the stadium and were jogging onto the field.

The blue and yellow tunics of one column contrasted with the scarlet and white tunics of the other, but served nicely to identify them as our opponents. This, however, was not their most noteworthy feature.

The Ta-hoe team was wearing helmets with long, sharp spikes on the top, while their counterparts from Veygus had long, curved horns emerging from either side of their helmets giving them an animalistic appearance. Even more noticeable, all the players were big. Bigger than any Jahk I had

encountered to date. Easily as big as Chumly, but brawnier with necks so short their heads seemed to emerge directly from their shoulders.

As I said earlier, I count real good up to five, and there were considerably more than five players on each team.

Chapter Twenty-Three:

"Life is full of little surprises."

-PANDORA

AS I was prone to do in times of crises, I turned to my mentor for guidance. Aahz, in turn, reacted with the calm level headedness I've grown to expect.

Seizing the Ta-hoe spokesman by the front of his tunic, Aahz hoisted him up until his feet were dangling free from the ground. "What is this!!"

he demanded. Glaah ... sakle..." the fellow responded.

"Urn . . . Aahz?" I intervened. "He might be a little more coherent if he could breathe."

"Oh! Right," my mentor acknowledged, lowering the spokesman until he was standing once more. "All right. Explain!"

"Ex . . . explain what?" Graybeard stammered, genuinely puzzled. "Those are the teams from our respective cities. You can tell them apart by their helmets and..."

"Don't give me that!" Aahz thundered. "Those aren't Jahks. Jahks are skinny or overweight!"

"Oh! I see." the spokesman said with dawning realization. "I'm afraid you've been misled. Not all Jahks are alike. Some are fans, and some are players-athletes. The fans are ... a little out of shape, but that's to be expected. They're the workers who keep the cities and farms running. The players are a different story. All they do is train and so on. Over the generations, they've gotten noticeably larger than the general population of fans."

"Noticeably larger?" Aahz scowled, glaring down the field. "It's like they're another species!"

"I've seen it happen in other dimensions," Gus observed, "but never to this extent."

"Well, Big Julie warned us about over-confidence," Chumly sighed.

"What was that?" Graybeard blinked.

"Want fight," Chumly declared, dropping back into character. "Crunch likes fight."

"Oh," the spokesman frowned. "Very well. If there's nothing else, I'll just..."

"Not so fast," I interrupted. "I want to know why there are so many players. The game is played by five-man teams, isn't it?"

"That's right." Graybeard nodded. "The extra players are replacements . . . you know, for the ones who are injured or killed during the game."

"Killed?" I swallowed.

"As I said," the spokesman called, starting off, "I admire your confidence in only bringing five players."

"Killed?" I repeated, turning desperately to Aahz.

"Don't panic, kid," my mentor growled, scanning the opposition. "It's a minor setback, but we can adapt our strategies."

"How about the old 'divide and conquer' gambit?" Badaxe suggested, joining Aahz.

"That's right," Gus nodded. "They're not used to playing a three-way game. Maybe we can play them off against each other."

"It won't work," I declared flatly.

"Don't be so negative, kid," Aahz snapped. "Sometimes old tricks are the best."

"It won't work because they won't be playing against each other... just us."

I quickly filled them in on what Griffin had told me earlier. When I finished, the team was uncomfortably silent.

"Well," Aahz said at last, "things could be worse."

"How?" I asked bluntly.

"Gleep?" My dragon had just spotted something the rest of us had missed. The other teams were bringing their riding beasts onto the field. Unlike the players, the beasts weren't marked with the team colors . . . but then, it wasn't necessary. There was no way they could be confused with each other.

The Veygus beast was a cat-like creature with an evilly flattened head-nearly as long as Gleep, it slunk along the ground with a fluid grace which was ruined only by the uneven gait of its oversized hind legs. Though its movements were currently slow and lazy, it had the look of something that could move with blinding speed when it wanted to. It also looked very, very agile. I was sure the

thing could corner like ... well, like a cat. The Ta-hoe mount was equally distinctive, but much more difficult to describe. It looked like a small, armored mound with its crest about eight feet off the ground. I would have thought it was an oversized insect, but it had more than six legs. As a matter of fact, it had hundreds of legs which we could see when it moved, which it seemed to do with equal ease in any direction. When it stopped, its armor settled to the ground, both hiding and guarding its tiny legs. I couldn't figure out where its eyes were, but I noticed it never ran into anything... at least accidentally.

"Gleep?"

My pet had pivoted his head around to peer at me. If he was hoping for an explanation or instructions, he was out of luck. I didn't have the vaguest idea of how to deal with the weird creatures. Instead, I stroked his mustache in what I hoped was a reassuring fashion. Though I didn't want to admit it to my teammates, I was becoming less and less confident about this game . . . and I hadn't been all that confident to begin with.

"Don't look now," Gus murmured, "but I've spotted Tanda."

"Where?" Chumly demanded, craning his neck to see where the gargoyle was pointing.

Of course, I had seen Tananda earlier and had forgotten to point her out to the others. I felt a little foolish, but then, that was nothing new. To cover my embarrassment, I joined the others in staring towards Tananda's floating form.

Quigley noticed us looking his way and began to fidget nervously. Apparently he was not confident enough in his newfound powers to feel truly comfortable under our mass scrutiny. His discomfort affected his magik ... at least his levitation. Tananda's body dipped and swayed until I was afraid he was going to drop her on her head.

"If that magician's all that's in our way," Gus observed, "it occurs to me we would just sashay over there and take her back."

"Can't," Aahz snapped, shaking his head. "The kid here promised we wouldn't do anything to make that magician look bad."

"That's fine for you two," the gargoyle countered, "but Chumly and I didn't promise a thing."

"I say, Gus," Chumly interrupted, "we can't go against Skeeve's promise. It wouldn't be cricket."

"I suppose you're right," Gus grumbled. "I just thought it would be easier than getting our brains beaten out playing this silly game."

I agreed with him there. In fact, I was glad to find something I could agree with. Chumly's argument about crickets didn't make any sense at all.

"It occurs to me. Lord Magician," Badaxe rumbled, "that the promise you made wasn't the wisest of pledges."

"Izzat so?" Aahz snarled, turning on him. "Of course, general, you speak from long experience in dealing with demons."

"Well... actually..."

"Then I'd suggest you keep your lip buttoned about Lord Skeeve's wisdom and abilities. Remember, he's your ticket back out of here. Without him, it's a long walk home."

Chastised, the general retreated, physically and verbally.

"Gee, thanks, Aahz."

"Shut up, kid," my mentor snarled. "He's right. It was a dumb move."

"But you said..."

"Call it reflex," Aahz waved. "A body's got to earn the right to criticize my apprentice ... and that specimen of Klahdish military expertise doesn't qualify."

"Well... thanks, anyway," I finished lamely.

"Don't mention it."

"Hey, Aahz," Chumly called. "Let's get this . . . Trophy out of the center of the field and put it somewhere safe."

"Like where?" my mentor retorted. "We're the only ones in the stadium I trust."

"How about in our goal?" Gus suggested, pointing to the wide net at our corner of the triangle.

"Sounds good," Aahz agreed. "I'll be back in a second, kid."

I had gotten so used to the bedlam in the stadium that I barely noticed it. As my teammates started to move the Trophy, however, the chorus of boos and catcalls that erupted threatened to deafen me. My colleagues responded with proper aplomb, shaking fists and making faces at their decriers. The crowd loved it. If they loved it any more, they'd charge down onto the field and lynch the-lot of us.

I was about to suggest to my comrades that they quit baiting the crowd, when General Badaxe beckoned me over for a conference.

"Lord Magician," he began carefully, "I hope you realize I meant no offense with my earlier comments. I find that I'm a trifle on edge. I've never fought a war in front of an audience before."

"Forget it, Hugh," I waved. "You were right. In hindsight it was a bad promise. Incidentally . . . it's Skeeve. If we're in this mess together, it's a little silly to stand on formality."

"Thank you . . . Skeeve," the general nodded. "Actually I was hoping I could speak with you privately on a personal matter."

"Sure," I shrugged. "What is it?"

"Could you tell me a little more about that marvelous creature I was just introduced to earlier?"

"Marvelous creature?" I blinked. "What marvelous creature?"

"You know . . . Massha."

"Massha?" I laughed. Then I noticed the general's features were hardening. "I mean, oh, that marvelous creature. What do you want to know?"

"Is she married?"

"Massha? I mean . . . no, I don't think so." The general heaved a sigh of relief. "Is there a chance she'll ever visit us in Possiltum?"

"I doubt it," I replied. "But if you'd like I could ask her."

"Fine," the general beamed, bringing a hand down on my shoulder in a bone-jarring display of friendship. "I'll consider that a promise."

"A what?" I blinked. Somehow the words had a familiar ring to them.

"I know how you honor your promises," Badaxe continued. "Fulfill this pledge, and you'll find I can be a friend to prize . . . just as I can be an enemy to be feared if crossed. Do we understand each other?"

"But I..."

"Hey, kid," Aahz shouted. "Hurry up and get on that stupid dragon! The game's about to start!"

I had been so engrossed in my conversation with Badaxe I had completely lost track of the other activities on the field.

The teams from Ta-hoe and Veygus had retired to the sidelines, leaving five players apiece on the field. The cat and the bug each had riders now, and were pacing and scuttling back and forth in nervous anticipation.

At midfield, where the Trophy had been, a Jahk stood wearing a black and white striped tunic and holding a ball. I use the word ball rather loosely here. The object he was holding was a cube of

what appeared to be a black, spongy substance. A square ball! One more little detail the Geek had neglected to mention.

Without bothering to take my leave from the general, I turned and sprinted for Gleep. Whatever was about to happen, I sure didn't want to face it afoot.

Chapter Twenty-Four:

"This contest has to be the dumbest thing I've ever seen."

-H. COSELL

I WAS barely astride Gleep when the Jahk at midfield set the ball down and started backing toward the sidelines.

"Hey, Aahz!" I called. "What's with the guy in the striped tunic?"

"Leave him alone," my mentor shouted back. "He's a neutral."

Actually, I hadn't planned on attacking him, but it was nice to know he wasn't part of the opposition.

I was the last of the team to get into place. Aahz and Chumly were bracketing me as the Fangs, Gus was behind me, waiting to take advantage of his extra mobility as Guard; and Badaxe was braced in the mouth of the goal as Castle. We seemed about as ready as we would ever be.

"Hey, kid!" Aahz called. "Where's your club?"

I was so engrossed in my own thoughts it took a minute for his words to sink in. Then I panicked. For a flash moment I thought I had left my staff back in Klah. Then I spotted it lying in the grass at our entry point. A flick of my mind brought it winging to hand.

"Got it, Aahz!" I waved.

"Well, hang onto it, and remember..."

A shrill whistle blast interrupted our not-so-private conference and pulled our attention down-field. The cat and the bug were heading for the ball at their respective top speeds, with the rest of their teammates charging along in their wakes.

The game was on, and all we were doing was standing around with our mouths open.

As usual, Aahz was the first to recover.

"Don't just stand there with your mouth open!" he shouted. "Go get the ball."

"But I..."

"GLEEP!"

What I had intended to point out to Aahz was that the cat was almost at the ball already. Realizing there was no way I could get there first, I felt we should drop back and tighten our defense. My pet, however, had other ideas.

Whether he was responding to Aahz's command to "get the ball" (which was unlikely), or simply eager to meet some new playmates (which was highly probable), the result was the same. He bounded forward, cutting me off in mid-sentence and setting us on a collision course with the cat.

The crowd loved it.

Me, I was far less enthusiastic. The cat's rider had the ball now, but he and his mount were holding position at midfield instead of immediately advancing on our goal. Presumably this was to allow his teammates to catch up, so he could have some cover. This meant he wouldn't have to venture among us alone.

That struck me as being a very intelligent strategy.

I only wished I could follow it myself. Gleep's enthusiasm was placing me in the position I had hoped to avoid at all costs—facing the united strength of both of the opposing teams without a single teammate to support me. For the first time since our opponents had taken the field, I stopped worrying about surviving until the end of the game. Now I was worried about surviving until the end of the first play!

My hopes improved for a moment when I realized we would reach the cat and its rider well ahead of their teammates. The feeling of hope faded rapidly, however, as my rival uncoiled his weapon.

Where I was carrying a staff, he had a whip ... a long whip. The thing was twenty feet long if it was an inch. No, I'm not exaggerating. I could see its length quite clearly as the rider let it snake out toward my head.

The lash fell short by a good foot, though it seemed much closer at the time. Its sharp crack did produce one result, however. Gleep stopped in his tracks, throwing me forward on his neck as I fought to keep my balance. An instant behind the whip attack, the cat bounded forward, its teeth bared and ears flat against its skull, and one of its forepaws darted out to swat my dragon on the nose.

Though never noted for his agility, Gleep responded by trying to jump backwards and swap ends at the same time. I'm not sure how successful he was, because somewhere in the middle of the maneuver, he and I parted company.

Normally such a move would not have unsettled me. When Gleep had thrown me in practice, I had simply flown clear, delicately settled to the ground at a distance. This time, however, I was already off balance and the throw disoriented me completely. Realizing I was airborne, I attempted to fly ... and succeeded in slamming into the turf with the grace of a bag of garbage. This did nothing toward improving my orientation. Lying there, I wondered calmly which parts of me would fall off if I moved. There was a distant roaring in my ears, and the ground seemed to be trembling beneath me. From far away, I could hear Aahz shouting something. Yes, just lying here seemed like an excellent idea.

"Up, kid!" came my mentor's voice. "Run!" Run? He had to be kidding. My head was clearing slowly, but the ground was still shaking. Rolling over, I propped one eye open to get my bearings, and immediately wished I hadn't.

It wasn't in my head! The ground really was shaking! The bug was bearing down on me full tilt, displaying every intention of trampling me beneath its multiple tiny feet. It didn't even occur to me that this would be a ridiculous way to go. All that registered was that it was a way to go, and somehow that thought didn't appeal to me.

I sprang to my feet and promptly fell down again. Apparently I hadn't recovered from my fall as much as I thought I had. I tried again and got as far as my hands and knees. From there I had a terrific view of my doom thundering down on me, and there was nothing I could do about it!

Then Aahz was there. He must have jumped over me in mid-stride to get into position, but he was there, half-way between the charging bug and me. Feet spread and braced, knees bent to a crouch, he faced the charge unflinching. Unflinching? He threw his arms wide and bared his teeth in challenge. "You want to fight?" he roared. "Try me." The bug may not have understood his words, but it knew enough about body language to realize it was in trouble. Few beasts or beings in any dimension have the courage or stupidity to try to face down a Pervect when it has a full mad on, and Aahz was mad. His scales were puffed out until he appeared twice his normal breadth, and they rippled dangerously from the tensed muscles underneath. Even his color was a darker shade of green than normal, pulsing angrily as my mentor vented his emotions.

Whatever intelligence level the bug might possess, it was no fool. It somehow managed to slow from a full charge to a dead stop before coming within Aahz's reach. Even the frantic goadings from its rider's hooked prod couldn't get it to resume its charge. Instead, it began to cautiously edge sideways, trying to bypass Aahz completely.

"You want to fight?" my mentor bellowed, advancing toward the beast. "C'mon! I'm ready."

That did it! The bug put it into reverse, scuttling desperately backward despite the frantic urgings of its rider and the hoots from the crowd.

"I say, you lads seem to have things in hand here."

A powerful hand fastened on my shoulder and lifted. In fact, it lifted me until my feet were dangling free from the ground.

"Um ... I can walk now, Chumly," I suggested.

"Oh, terribly sorry," the troll apologized, setting me gently on the ground. "Just a wee bit distracted is all."

"Gleep!"

A familiar head snaked into view from around Chumly's hip to peer at me quizzically.

"You were a big help!" I snarled, glad for the chance to vent my pent-up nervous energy.

"Gleep," my pet responded, hanging his head.

"Here, now," the troll chided. "Don't take it out on your mate, here. He got surprised, that's all. Can't blame him for getting a little spooked under fire. What?"

"But if he hadn't..." I began.

"Now are you ready to get rid of that stupid dragon?" Aahz demanded, joining our group.

"Don't take it out on Gleep," I flared back. "He just got a little spooked under fire is all."

"How's that again?" my mentor blinked.

"Gleep!" proclaimed my pet, unleashing his tongue in one of his aromatic, slimy licks. This time, to my relief Aahz was the recipient.

"Glaah!" my mentor exclaimed, scrubbing at his face with the back of his hand. "I may be violently sick!"

"The beast's just showing his appreciation for your saving his master," Chumly laughed.

"That's right," I agreed. "If you hadn't..."

"Forget it," Aahz waved. "No refugee from a wine-making festival's going to do his dance on my apprentice while I'm around."

For once, I knew what he was talking about. " 'Refugee from a wine-making festival'-that's pretty good, Aahz," I grinned.

"No, it wasn't," my mentor snarled. "In fact, so far this afternoon, nothing's been good. Why are we standing around talking?"

"Because the first play's over," Chumly supplied. "Also, I might add, the first score."

We all looked down field toward our goal. The field was littered with bodies, fortunately theirs, not ours. Whatever had happened, we had given a good accounting of ourselves. Stretcher bearers and trainers were tending to the fallen and wounded with well practiced efficiency. The players still on their feet, both on the field and on the sidelines, were dancing around hugging each other and holding their index fingers aloft in what I supposed was some sort of religious gesture to the gods. Badaxe was sagging weakly against one of our four goalposts while Gus fanned him with his wings.

"The score," the troll continued casually, "is nothing to nothing to one ... against us. Not the best of starts, what?"

For one instant I thought we had scored. Then I remembered that in this game, points are scored against a team. Therefore "nothing to nothing to one" meant we were behind by a point.

"Don't worry," Aahz snarled. "We'll get the point back, with interest! If they want to play rough, so can we. Right?"

"Quite right," Chumly grinned.

"Ummm ..." I supplied hesitantly.

"So let's fire up!" my mentor continued. "Chumly, get Gus and Badaxe up here for a strategy session. Kid, get back on that dragon-and this time try to stay up there, huh?"

I started to obey, then turned back to him. "Ummm ... Aahz?" "Yeah, kid?"

"I didn't say it too well a minute ago, but thanks for saving me."

"I said forget it."

"No, I won't," I insisted defiantly. "You could have been killed bailing me out, and I just wanted you to know that I'll pay you back someday. I may not be very brave where I'm concerned, but I owe you my life on top of everything else and it's yours anytime you need it."

"Wait a minute, kid," my mentor corrected. "Any risks I take are mine, understand? That includes the ones I take pulling your tail out of the fire once in a while. Don't mess up my style by making me responsible for two lives."

"But, Aahz..."

"If I'm in trouble and you're clear, you skedaddle. Got it? Especially in this game. In fact, here..."

He fumbled in his belt pouch and produced a familiar object.

"Here's the D-Hopper. It's set to get you home.

You keep it and use it if you have to. If you see a chance to grab Tanda and get out of here, take it! Don't worry about me."

"But..."

"That's an order, apprentice. If you want to argue it, wait until we're back in Klah. In the meantime, just do it! Either you agree or I'll send you home right now."

Our eyes locked for long moments, but I gave ground first.

"All right, Aahz," I sighed. "But we're going to have this out once we get home."

"Fine," he grinned, clapping me on the shoulder. "For now though, get on that stupid dragon of yours and try to keep him pointed in the right direction. We've got some points to score!"

Chapter Twenty-Five:

"If you can't win fair, just win!

-U. S. GRANT

WE needed to score some points, and to do that, we needed the ball.

That thought was foremost in my mind as we lined up again. One way or another, we were going to get that ball.

When the whistle sounded, I was ready for it. Reaching out with my mind, I brought the ball winging to my grasp. Before our team could form up around me, however, the whistle sounded again and the Jahk in the striped tunic came trotting toward us waving his arms.

"Now what?" Aahz growled. Then aloud, he called, "What's wrong, Ref?"

"There's been a protest," the referee informed him. "Your opponents say you're using magik."

"So what?" my mentor countered. "There's no rule against it."

"Well, not officially," the ref admitted, "but it's been a gentleman's agreement for some time."

"We're not gentlemen," Aahz grinned. "So get out of our way and let us play."

"But if you can use magik, so can your opponents," the striped tunic insisted.

"Let 'em," Aahz snarled. "Start the game."

A flash of inspiration came to me. "Wait a minute, Aahz," I called. "Sir, we're willing to allow the use of magik against us if, and only if, the magicians do it from the field."

"What?" the ref blinked.

"You heard him," Aahz crowed. "If your magicians join the team and take their lumps like our magician does, then they're free to use whatever skills and abilities they bring onto the field with them. Otherwise they can sit in the bleachers with the spectators and keep their magik out of it."

"That seems fair," the Jahk nodded thoughtfully. "I'll so inform the other teams."

"I say," Chumly commented as the referee trotted off. "That was a spot of clear thinking." "Tactically superb," Badaxe nodded. "That's the kind of generalship that beat Big Julie's army," Gus supplied proudly.

I waved modestly, but inside I was heady from the praise.

"Let's save the congratulations until after the game, shall we?" Aahz suggested icily.

It was an annoyingly accurate observation. There was still a long battle between us and the end of the game, and the other teams were already lining up to pit their best against our clumsy efforts. In grim silence, we settled down to go to work.

I won't attempt to chronicle the afternoon play by play. Much of it I'm trying to forget, though sometimes I still bolt upright out of a sound sleep sweating at the memory. The Jahks were tough and they knew their business. The only thing holding them at bay was the sheer strength and ferocity of my teammates and some inspired magik by yours truly.

However, a few incidents occurred prior to the game's climax which would be criminal neglect to omit from my account.

Gleep came of age that afternoon. I don't know what normally matures dragons, but for my pet adulthood arrived with the first play of the afternoon. Gone was the playfulness which led to my early unseating. Somewhere in that puzzling brain of his, Gleep thought things over and arrived at the conclusion that we had some serious business on our hands.

I, of course, didn't know this. When the ball ended up in my hands, I was counting on my other teammates for protection. Unfortunately, our opponents had anticipated this and planned accordingly. Three players each swarmed over Aahz and Chumly, soaking up incredible punishment to keep them from coming to my support. The two Riders converged on me.

I saw them coming and panicked. I mean, the cat was faster than us and the bug seemed invulnerable. Frantically, I looked around for some avenue of escape. I needn't have worried.

Instead of bolting, Gleep stood his ground, his head lowered menacingly. As the cat readied itself for a pounce, my pet loosed a jet of fire full in its face, singeing its whiskers and setting it back on its haunches.

I was so astonished I forgot to watch the bug moving up on our flank. Gleep didn't. His tail lashed out to intercept the armored menace. There was a sound like a great church bell gonging, and the bug halted its forward progress and began wandering aimlessly in circles.

"Atta boy, Gleep!" I cheered, balancing the ball on his back for a moment so I could thump his side.

That was a mistake. No sooner had I released the hold on the ball when one of the Jahks leaped high to pluck it from its resting spot. I took a wipe at him with my staff but he dodged to one side and I missed. Unfortunately for him, the dodge brought him within Chumly's reach.

The troll snaked out one of his long arms over the shoulder of a blocker, picked up the ball carrier by his head, and slammed him violently to the ground.

"Big Crunch catch," he called, winking at me.

The ball carrier lay still, and the stretcher team trotted onto the field again. The lineup of players on the sideline had decreased noticeably since the game started. In case you haven't noticed things were pretty rough on the field.

"Tell me I didn't see that," Aahz demanded, staggering to my side.

"Um . . . Chumly's tackle or Gleep stopping the two Riders?" I asked innocently.

"I'm talking about your giving the ball away," my mentor corrected harshly. "Now that the dragon's coming through for us, you start..."

"Do you really think he's doing a good job?" I interrupted eagerly. "I always said Gleep had a lot of potential."

"Don't change the subject," Aahz growled. "You..."

"C'mon, you two," Gus called. "There's a game on."

"Got to go," I waved, guiding my pet away from my sputtering mentor. "We'll talk after the game."

Our defense finally solidified, and we meted out terrible punishment to any Jahk foolish enough to head for our goal with the ball in his arms. We even managed to score some points, though it took a little help from my magik to do it.

The first point we scored was against the Veygans. It was a variation of Aahz's original "divide and conquer" plan. The Veygans had the ball and were bringing it down-field when we plowed into

them at midfield. As per my instructions, I waited until the brawl was getting heated, then used a disguise spell on Gus, altering his appearance so he looked like one of the Ta-hoe players, complete with a spiked helmet. Having been forewarned, the change didn't startle him at all. Instead, he started dancing around, waving his arms wildly.

"Here!" he shouted. "I'm open! Over here!"

The ball carrier was zig-zagging desperately with Aahz in hot pursuit. He saw an ally in a position to score and lobbed the ball to him without breaking stride. Gus gathered the ball in and started for the Veygus goal.

"Double-cross!"

The first shout was from Chumly, but the Veygus players quickly picked it up. Spurred by indignation, they turned on the Ta-hoe players who a moment ago had been their allies. The Ta-hoers were understandably surprised, but reacted quickly, defending themselves while at the same time laying down a blocking pattern for Gus.

The Veygan Castle had been up-field when the play broke, but the goal-tender braced himself as Gus swept down on him. The only pursuit close enough to count was Chumly, who appeared intent on hauling down the ball carrier from behind. At the crucial moment, however, he charged past the gargoyle and piled into the goal-tender. Gus scored untouched. "That's zero to one to one now!" I crowed. "Before you get too caught up in celebrating," Aahz advised, "you'd better do something about that'."

I followed his finger and realized that fights were breaking out throughout the stands. It seemed the fans didn't like the double-cross any more than the players had.

To avert major bloodshed, I removed Gus's disguise as he came back up the field. Within seconds, the fans and the opposing teams realized they had been had. Hostilities between the rival factions ceased immediately. Instead, they focused their emotions on us. Terrific.

The uniform change bit had been effective, but with the new attentiveness in the opposition, I was pretty sure it wouldn't work twice.

I'm particularly proud of our second goal, in that it was my idea from start to finish. I thought it up and executed it without the help or consultation of my teammates. Of course, that in itself caused some problems ... but I'm getting ahead of myself.

The idea occurred to me shortly after my staff broke. I was swinging at the ball when one of the Tahoe players somehow got his head in the way. He was sidelined, but I was left with two pieces of what used to be a pretty good club. As we waited for play to resume, I found myself marveling anew at the sheer size of our opponents and wishing we had bigger players on our side. It occurred to me, too late of course, that I could have used disguise spells to make our team seem bigger when we first appeared. Now our rivals already knew how big, or to be specific, how small we were, so that trick wouldn't work.

I was starting to berate myself for this oversight, when the idea struck. If a disguise spell could make us look bigger, it could also make us look smaller. It was almost a good idea, but not quite. If one or all of us "disappeared" our opponents would notice immediately. What we needed was a decoy.

I found myself considering the two pieces of broken staff I was holding. There was a stunt I pulled once when we were fighting Big Julie. Then it had been a desperation gambit. Of course, we weren't exactly cruising along now.

"Get the ball to me!" I called to my teammates. "I've got an idea."

"What kind of an idea?" Aahz asked.

"Just get me the ball," I snapped back.

I didn't mean to be short with him, but if this plan was going to work, I needed all my concentration, and Aahz's banter wasn't helping.

Closing my eyes, I began to draw and focus power. At the same time, I began forming the required images in my mind.

"Head's up, kid!" Aahz shouted with sudden urgency.

My eyes popped open . . . and the ball was there. I wasn't quite as ready as I would have liked to have been but the time was now and I had to go for it.

I'll detail what happened next so you can appreciate the enormity of my accomplishment. In live time, it took no longer than an eye blink to perform.

Dropping the two halves of the staff, I caught the ball with my hands. Then, I cast two spells simultaneously. (Four, actually, but I don't like to brag.)

For the first, I shrank the images of Gleep and myself until we were scant inches high. Second, I changed the appearance of the two staff halves until what was seen was full sized reproductions of me astride my pet.

Once that was accomplished, I used my remaining energy to fly us toward the Ta-hoe goal. That's right, I said "fly." Even in our diminutive form, I wanted us well above the eye-level of our opponents.

Flying both Gleep and myself took a lot of effort. So much, in fact, that I was unable to animate the images we left behind. I had realized this before I started, but figured that suddenly stationary targets would only serve as a diversion for our real attack.

It seemed to work. We were unopposed until we reached the Ta-hoe goal. Then my mischievous sense of humor got the better of me. Landing a scant arm's length from the goalie, I let our disguises drop.

"Boo!" I shouted.

To the startled player, it appeared that we suddenly popped out of thin air. A lifetime of training fell away from him in a second, and he fainted dead away.

With a properly dramatic flourish, I tossed the ball into the goal.

One to one to one! A tie game!

The team was strangely quiet when Gleep and I triumphantly returned to our end of the field.

"Why the long faces?" I laughed. "We've got 'em on the run now!"

"You should have told us you had a gambit going," Gus said carefully.

"There wasn't time," I explained. "Besides, there's no harm done."

"That's not entirely accurate," Chumly corrected, pointing up field.

There was a pile of Jahks where I had left the staff pieces. The stretcher teams were busy untangling the bodies and carting them away.

"He was trying to protect you ... or what he thought was you," Badaxe observed acidly.

"What..."

Then I saw what they were talking about. At the bottom of the pile was Aahz. He wasn't moving.

Chapter Twenty-Six:

"Winning isn't the most important thing; it's the only thing!

-J. CAESAR

"HE'LL be all right," Gus declared, looking up from examining our fallen teammate. "He's just out cold."

We were gathered around Aahz's still form, anxiously awaiting the gargoyle's diagnosis. Needless to say, I was relieved my mentor was not seriously injured. General Badaxe, however, was not so easily satisfied.

"Well, wake him up!" he demanded. "And be quick about it."

"Back off, general," I snarled, irritated by his insensitivity. "Can't you see he's hurt?"

"You don't understand," Badaxe countered, shaking his head. "We need five players to continue the game. If Aahz doesn't snap out of it..."

"Wake up, Aahz!" I shouted, reaching out a hand to shake his arm.

It was bad enough that my independent scoring drive had resulted in Aahz getting roughed up. If it cost us the game. ..

"Save it, Skeeve," Gus sighed. "Even if he woke up, he wouldn't be able to play. That was a pretty nasty pounding he took. I mean, I don't think there's anything seriously wrong with him, but if he tried to mix it up with anyone in his current condition ..."

"I get the picture," I interrupted. "And if we wake him up, Aahz is just stubborn enough to want to play."

"Right," the gargoyle nodded. "You'll just have to think of something else."

I tried, I really did. The team kept fussing over Aahz to stall for time, but nothing came to me in the way of a plan. Finally the referee trotted over to our huddle.

"How's your player?" he asked.

"Ah . . . just catching his breath," Badaxe smiled, trying to keep his body between the official and Aahz.

"Don't give me that," the stripe-tunicked Jahk scowled. "I can see. He's out cold, isn't he?"

"Well. sort of," Gus admitted.

"Sort of nothing," the ref scowled. "If he can't play and you don't have a replacement, you'll have to forfeit the game."

"We're willing to play with a partial team," the gargoyle suggested hastily.

"The rules state you must have five players on the field. No more, no less," the official declared, shaking his head.

"All right," Badaxe nodded. "Then we'll keep him on the field with us. We'll put him off to one side where he won't get hurt and then we'll play with a four-man team."

"Sorry," the ref apologized, "but I can't let him stay on the field in that condition. It's a rough game, but we do have some ethics when it comes to the safety of the players."

"Especially when you can use the rules to force us out of the game." Gus spat.

I thought the slur would draw an angry response from the official, but instead the ref only shook his head sadly.

"You don't understand," he insisted. "I don't want to disqualify your team. You've been playing a hard game and you deserve a chance to finish it. I hate to see the game stopped with a forfeit . . . especially when the score's tied. Still, the rules are the rules, and if you can't field a full team, that's that. I only wished you had brought some replacements."

"We've got a replacement!" I exploded suddenly.

"We do?" Gus blinked.

"Where?" frowned the ref.

"Right there!" I announced, pointing to the stands.

Tananda was still floating in plain sight in front of Quigley.

"The captive demon?" the official gasped.

"What do you think we are? Muppets?" Gus snarled, recovering smoothly.

"Muppets? What ... I don't think ..." the ref stammered.

"You don't have to," I smiled. "Just summon the Ta-hoe magician and I'm sure we can work something out."

"But... Oh, very well."

The official trotted off toward the stands while the rest of the team crowded around me.

"You're going to have a woman on the team?" Badaxe demanded.

"Let me explain," I waved. "First of all, Tanda isn't..."

"She's not actually a woman," Chumly supplied.

"She's my sister. And when it comes to the old rough and tumble, she can beat me four out of five times."

"She isn't? I mean, she is?" Badaxe struggled. "I mean, she can?"

"You bet your sweet axe she can," Gus grinned.

"Gleep," said the dragon, determined to get his two cents worth in.

"If you're all quite through," I said testily. "I'd like to finish. What I was about to say was that Tanda isn't going to play."

There was a moment of stunned silence as the team absorbed this.

"I don't get it," Gus said at last. "If she isn't going to play, then what..."

"Once she's here and revived, we're going to grab her and the Trophy and head back for Klah," I announced. "The ref's about to hand us the grand prize on a silver platter."

"But what about the game?" Badaxe scowled.

I closed my eyes, realizing for a moment how Aahz must feel when he has to deal with me.

"Let me explain this slowly," I said carefully. "The reason we're in this game is to rescue Tanda and grab the Trophy. In a few minutes we're going to have them both, so there'll be no reason for us to keep getting our heads beaten in. Understand?"

"I still don't like quitting the field before the end of a battle," the general grumbled.

"For crying out loud!" I exploded. "This is a game, not a war!"

"Are we talking about the same field?" Chumly asked innocently.

Fortunately, I was spared having to formulate an answer to that one as Quigley chose that moment to arrive, Tananda floating in his wake.

"What's this the ref says about using Tanda in the game?" he demanded.

"That's right," I lied. "We need her to finish the game. Now if you'll be so good as to wake her up, we'll just..."

"But she's my hostage," the magician protested.

"C'mon, Quigley," I argued. "We aren't taking her anyplace. She'll be right here on the field in full sight of you and everybody else."

"And you can all skip off to another dimension any time you want," Quigley pointed out. "No deal."

That was uncomfortably close to the truth, but if there's one thing I've learned from Aahz, it's how to bluff with a straight face.

"Now, look, Quigley," I snarled. "I'm trying to be fair about this, but it occurs to me you're taking advantage of my promise."

"Of course," the magician nodded. "But tell you what. Just to show you I'm a sport, I'll let you have Tanda."

"Swell," I grinned.

"If. . . and I repeat, if you let me keep Aahz in exchange."

"What?" I exclaimed. "I mean, sure. Go ahead. He's already out cold."

"Very well," he nodded. "This will just take a few seconds."

"What does this do to our plans?" Gus asked, drawing me aside.

"Nothing," I informed him through gritted teeth. "We go as soon as it's clear."

"What?" the gargoyle gaped. "What about Aahz?"

"It's his orders," I snarled. "Before the game started he made me promise that if he got in trouble I wouldn't endanger myself or the team trying to save him."

"And you're going to skip out on him?" Gus sneered. "After all he's done for you?"

"Now don't you start on me, Gus!" I grimaced. "I don't want to... "

"Hi, handsome," Tananda chirped, joining our discussion. "If it isn't too much trouble, could someone fill me in as to why this august assemblage has assembled, why we're standing in the middle of a pasture, and what all these people are doing staring at us? And where's Quigley going with Aahz?"

"There's no time," I declared. "We've got to get going."

"Get going where?" she frowned.

"Back to Klah," Gus grumbled. "Skeev here is in the middle of abandoning Aahz."

"He's what?" Tananda gasped.

"Gus ..." I warned.

"Save it, handsome. I'm not budging until someone tells me what's going on, so you might as well start now."

It took surprisingly little time to bring her up to date once I got started. I deliberately omitted as many details as possible to keep from getting Tananda riled. I had enough problems on my hands without fighting her, too! It seemed to work, as she listened patiently without comment or frown.

"... and so that's why we've got to get out of here before play resumes," I finished.

"Bull feathers," she said firmly.

"I'm glad you . . . how's that again?" I sputtered.

"I said 'Bull feathers,' " she repeated. "You guys have been knocked around, trampled, and otherwise beaten on for my sake and now we're going to run? Not me! I say we stay right here and teach these bozos a lesson."

"But..."

"I don't know if your D-Hopper can move the whole team," she continued, "but I'll bet it can't do the job if we aren't cooperating."

"That's telling him," Gus chortled.

"... so retreat is out. Now, if you're afraid of getting hurt, just stay out of our way. We aren't leaving until we finish what you and Aahz started."

"Well said," Badaxe nodded.

"Count me in," the gargoyle supplied.

"You'll be the death of me yet, little sister," Chumly sighed.

I managed to get a grip on Gleep's nose before he could add his vote to the proceedings.

"Actually," I said slowly, "Aahz had always warned me about how dangerous it is to travel dimensions alone. And if I'm going to stay here, it occurs to me the safest place would be surrounded by my teammates."

"All right, Skeeve!" Gus grinned, clapping me on the back.

"Then it's decided," Tananda nodded. "Now, then, handsome, what's the plan?"

Somehow, I had known she was going to say that.

"Give me a minute," I pleaded. "A second ago the plan was to just split, remember? These plans don't just grow on trees, you know."

I plunged into thought, considering and discarding ideas as they came to me. That didn't take long. Not that many ideas were occurring to me.

I found myself staring at Chumly. He was craning his neck to look at the stands.

"What are you doing?" I asked, irritated by his apparent lack of concern with our situation.

"Hmmm? Oh. Sorry, old boy," the troll apologized. "I was just curious as to how many Deveels were in the crowd. There's a lot of them."

"There are?" I blinked, scanning the crowd. "I don't see any."

"Oh, they're disguised, of course," Chumly shrugged. "But you can see their auras if you check. With the odds that were being given on this bloody game, it was a sure thing they'd be here."

He was right. I'd been so preoccupied with the game I had never bothered to check the stands. Now that I looked, I could see the auras of other demons scattered throughout the crowd.

"It's too bad we can't cancel their disguises," I muttered to myself.

"Oh, we could do that easy enough," the troll answered.

"We could?"

"Certainly. Deveels always use the cheapest, easiest disguises available. I know a spell that would restore their normal appearance quick enough."

"You do?" I pressed. "Could it cover the whole stadium?"

"Well, not for a terribly long time," Chumly said, "but it would hold for a minute or two. Why do you ask?"

"I think I've got an idea," I explained. "Be back in a minute."

"Where are you going?" the troll called after me as I started for the sidelines.

"To talk to Griffin," I retorted, not caring that the explanation didn't really explain anything.

Chapter Twenty-Seven:

"Ask not for whom the bell tolls-"

-M. ALI

THE ball carrier was "somewhere under Gleep when the whistle blew. That wouldn't have been too bad, if it weren't for the fact that Chumly had already thrown the ball carrier to the ground and jumped on him prior to my pet joining in the fracas. As I said before, Gleep had really gotten into the spirit of things.

"I say," came an agonized call from the troll, "do you mind?"

"Sorry!" I apologized, backing the dragon onto more solid footing.

"Say, Skeeve," Gus murmured, sliding up beside me, "how much longer until we're set for the big play?"

"Should be any minute now," I confided. "Why do you ask?"

"He's afraid of additional casualties you and that dragon will inflict on the team while we're stalling for time," Badaxe chimed in sarcastically.

"Gleep," my pet commented, licking the general's face.

"You might as well forget the hard guy act, Hugh," the gargoyle observed. "The dragon's got you pegged as a softie."

"Is that so?" Badaxe argued, gasping a bit on Gleep's breath. "Well, allow me to point out that with the master plan about to go into effect, we don't have the ball!"

"Skeeve'll get it for us when we need it," Tananda protested, rising to my defense. "He always comes through when we need him. You've just never followed him into battle before."

"I believe I can testify," Chumly growled, limping back to join us, "that it's safer to be following him than in front of him."

"Sorry about that, Chumly," I winced. "It's just that Gleep..."

"I know, I know," the troll interrupted. "'Spooked under fire' . . . remember, I gave you that excuse originally. He seems to have recovered admirably."

"I hate to interrupt," Gus interrupted, "but isn't that our signal?"

I followed his gaze to the sidelines. Griffin was there waving his arms wildly. When he saw he had my attention, he crossed the fingers on both hands, then crossed his forearms over his head. That was the signal.

"All right," I announced. "Fun time is over. The messages have been delivered. Does everyone remember what they're supposed to do?"

As one, the team nodded, eager grins plastered on their faces. I don't know what they were so cheerful about. If any phase of this plan didn't work, some or all of us would be goners.

"Tanda and Chumly make one team. Badaxe, you stick with Gus. He's your ticket home," I repeated needlessly.

"We know what to do," the general nodded.

"Then let's do it!" I shouted, and wheeled Gleep into position.

This time, as the ball came into play, we did not swarm toward the ball carrier. Instead, our entire team back-pedaled to cluster in the mouth of our goal.

Our opponents hesitated, looking at each other. We had emptied over three quarters of their reserve teaching them to respect our strength, and now that lesson was bearing fruit. No one seemed to want to be the one to carry the ball into our formation. They weren't sure what we were up to but they didn't want any part of it.

Finally, the ball carrier, a Ta-hoe player, turned and threw the ball to his Rider, apparently figuring the bug had the best chance of breaking through to the goal. That's what I had been waiting for.

Reaching out with my mind, I brought the ball winging, not to me, but to Hugh Badaxe. In a smooth, fluid motion, the axe came off the general's belt and struck at the missile. I had never seen Hugh use his axe before, and I'll admit I was impressed. Weapon and ball met, and the weapon won. The ball fell to the ground in two halves as the axe returned to its resting place on the general's belt.

The crowd was on its feet, screaming incoherently. If they didn't like that, they didn't really get upset over our next move.

"Everybody, mount up!" I shouted.

On cue, Tananda jumped on Chumly's back and Badaxe did the same with Gus. I levitated half the ball to each twosome, then did a fast disguise spell.

What our opponents saw now was three images of me astride three images of Gleep. Each image of me had half a ball proudly in its possession.

The more mathematically oriented of you might realize that that adds up to three halves. Very good. Fortunately for us, Jahks aren't big on math. The question remains, however, where did the third half come from?

You don't think I was standing by idly while all this was going on, do you? While my teammates were mounting up, I took advantage of the confusion to do one more levitation/disguise job. As a result, the Trophy was now resting in front of me on Gleep's back disguised as half a ball. It was the same stunt I had pulled in Veygus, but this time I draped my shirt over it.

"Chumly!" I called. "Start your spell!"

"Done!" he waved back.

"We meet back in Klah!" I shouted.

"Now go for it!"

My teammates started up opposite sidelines, heading for both our opponents' goals simultaneously. I waited a few beats for them to draw off the tacklers, then started for my objective. Gleep and I were going for Aahz.

With all due modesty, my plan worked brilliantly. The appearance of Deveels throughout the crowd sent the Jahks into a state of panic. The crossbowmen were too busy trying to get a shot of these new invaders to pay any attention to me, but they were poorly aimed. For some reason the beings shooting at me seemed a bit rattled.

I caught sight of Quigley, standing on his seat and waving his arms. Catchy phrases like "Be gone foul spirits!" and "I vanquish thee!" were issuing from his lips as he did his routine.

This didn't surprise me. Not that I felt Quigley was particularly quick thinking in a crisis. It had to do with the messages I had sent to both him and Massha before the play started.

The messages were simple:

STAND BY TO REPEL AN INVASION OF DEMONS!
P.S. GO THROUGH THE MOTIONS. I'LL
TAKE CARE OF THE DEMONS.
..... SKEEVE

I caught his eye and winked at him. In return, one of his "demon dispelling" waves got a little limp wristed as he nodded slightly, bidding me adieu. In the middle of saving his employers from an invasion of demons, who could blame him if a few departed who were supposed to stay put.

Aahz's unconscious body came wafting toward us in response to my mental summons. Gleep stretched out his long neck and caught my mentor's tunic in his mouth as he floated by.

It wasn't quite the way I planned it but I was in no position to be choosy. Tightening my legs around Gleep's middle, I hit the button on the D-Hopper, and...

The walls of my room were a welcome change from the hostile stadium.

"We did it!" I exclaimed, then was startled by the volume of my voice. After the din of the stadium, my room seemed incredibly quiet.

"Kid," came a familiar voice, "would you tell your stupid dragon to put me down before I die from his breath?"

"Gleep?" my pet asked, dropping my mentor in an undignified heap.

"Aahz?" I blinked. "I thought you were..."

"Out cold? Not hardly. Can you think of a better way to get Tanda out on the field? For a while there I was afraid you wouldn't figure it out and call for a replacement."

"You mean you were faking all along?" I demanded. "I was scared to death! You could have warned me, you know."

"Like you warned me about your vanishing act?" he shot back. "And what happened to my orders to head for home once Tanda was in the clear?"

"Your orders?" I stammered. "Well..."

There was a soft BAMF and Gus and Badaxe were in the room. Gus was holding the general cradled in his arms like a babe, but they both seemed in good spirits.

"Beautiful!" Hugh chortled, hugging the gargoyle around the neck. "If you ever need a back-up man..."

"If you ever need a partner." Gus corrected, hugging him back. "You and I could..."

BAMF!

Chumly and Tananda appeared sprawling on the bed. Both her nostrils were bleeding, but she was laughing uproariously. Chumly was panting for breath and wiping tears of hilarity from his big moon eyes.

"I say," he gasped. "That was a spot of fun. We haven't double-teamed anyone like that since the last family reunion, when Auntie Tizzie got Tiddley and..."

"What happened?" I bellowed.

"We won!" Gus cheered. "One and a half to one and a half to one! They never knew what hit 'em."

"It's one for the record book," Tananda agreed, dabbing at her nose.

"For the record book?" Gus challenged. "This game'll fill a book by itself."

"Aahz, old bean," Chumly called. "Do you have any wine about? The assemblage seems up for a celebration."

"I know where it is," Badaxe waved, starting for the barrels we had secreted under the work table.

"Hold it!" Aahz roared. "Halt, stop, desist, and TIMEOUT!!!"

"I think he wants our attention," Tananda told the group.

"If you're all quite through," my mentor continued, shooting her a black look. "I have one question."

"What's that?" Tananda asked in her little girl voice.

"Quit bleeding on the bed," Aahz scowled. "It lacks class. What I want to know is, did any of you superstars think to pick up the Trophy? That was the objective of this whole fiasco, you know."

The team gestured grandly at me. With a grin, I let the disguise drop away from the Trophy.

"Ta-da!" I warbled. "Happy birthday, Aahz."

"Happy birthday!!" the team echoed.

Aahz looked at their grins, then at the Trophy, then at their grins again.

"All right," he sighed. "Break out the wine."

The roar of approval for this speech rivaled anything that had come from the stands that afternoon as the team descended on the wine barrels like a swarm of hungry humming mice.

"Well, Aahz," I grinned, levitating the Trophy to the floor and sliding from Gleep's back. "I guess that just about winds it up."

I was starting for the wine barrels when a heavy hand fell on my shoulder.

"There are a few loose ends to be tied up," my mentor drawled.

"Like what?" I asked fearfully.

"Like the invitation you gave Massha to drop by for a visit."

"Invitation?" I echoed in a small voice.

"Badaxe told me about it," Aahz grimaced. "Then there's a little matter of a quick trip to Deva."

"To Deva?" I blinked. "What for? I mean, swell, but..."

"I've got to pick up our winnings," my mentor informed me. "I took the time to place a few small bets on the game while we were there. Profits don't just happen, you know."

"When do we start?" I asked eagerly.

"We don't." Aahz said firmly. "This time I'm going alone. There's something about you and the Bazaar that just don't mix well."

"But Aahz..."

"And besides," he continued, grinning broadly, "there's one more loose end from this venture that will be occupying your time. One which only you can handle."

"Really?" I said proudly. "What's that?"

"Well," my mentor said, heading for the wine, "you can start thinking about how we're going to get that stupid dragon out of our room. He's too big to fit through the door or window."

"Gleep!" said my pet, licking my face.

End Of Myth Directions By Robert Asprin

Myth-ion Improbable By Robert Asprin

Author's Note

If this book is your first exposure to the Myth-Adventures of Aahz and Skeeve, there is no reason for you to read this note. Proceed directly to the main body of the work and enjoy.

If, however, you have been following this series for some time, some explanations are in order.

Specifically, as to why you are now holding this volume instead of the long-awaited, long-promised episode titled Something M.Y.T.H. Inc.

As was noted in Author's Note of the previous volume, Sweet Myth-tery of Life (which was also late in being written), I have been going through some difficult times in my life. Since that volume was released in 1994, most of those difficulties revolved around a five-to-six-year death duel with the IRS over back taxes. The less said about that, the better.

When that matter was resolved in April of 2000, I re-applied myself to writing the two overdue MYTH novels, only to find myself in a dilemma. The first problem was that it had been over seven years since I had written Aahz and Skeeve, and it was extremely difficult after that long a hiatus to recapture the style and rhythm of the narration and dialogue that had made the series unique. To complicate things, the story I was attempting to convey, Something M.Y.T.H. Inc., was the most complex tale I had attempted in the MYTH series, as it not only involves multiple viewpoints, but also occurs simultaneously with events contained in Sweet Myth-tery of Life.

After nearly half a year of wrestling with these difficulties, a friend of mine made a suggestion. Specifically, why not write another, simpler story first... something from Skeeve's earlier days with Aahz. That would enable me to relearn the MYTH writing style, after which I could tackle the more convoluted story of Something M.Y.T.H. Inc.

The result is the volume you are currently holding. Sequentially, it occurs between volumes three-Myth-Direction-and four-Hit or Myth. (They will be republished in the combined omnibus Myth Adventures Two in February 2002 from Meisha Merlin Publishing, Inc.) If the plan holds, Something M.Y.T.H. Inc. will follow it VERY shortly.

As always, thank you for your loyalty and patience.

Robert Lynn Asprin February 2001

Chapter One

"Here we go again!"

C-3PO

When my teacher/mentor Aahz grumbles or rants about my being stupid or having done something stupid, I make a big show of being apologetic, but it really doesn't bother me all that much. I figure it goes with the territory and is part of the price of learning magik.

I mean, first of all, there's the point that Aahz is older than I am and has been around more. A lot more. He's an experienced dimension traveler, or 'demon' for short, and compared to his knowledge and experience I really am stupid and naive.

Then, too, the dimension he hails from, Perv, is noted for its short-tempered, hostile inhabitants. Other dimension travelers tend to avoid Perv whenever possible, and give the green, scaly Pervects a wide berth when encountering them in other dimensions.

To cap it all off, while he was once an accomplished magician himself, Aahz lost his powers when we met (See Another Fine Myth). Watching me fumble and stutter while learning what are, to him, some of the simplest, most rudimentary spells, all the while being aware that, at least for the time being, he's dependent on me in the magik department, is bound to make him a bit testy from time to time.

I can understand and accept it when I do something he thinks is stupid. When I do something that, in hindsight, I think is stupid.. .that's another matter entirely.

We were ensconced in the Royal Palace of the Kingdom of Possiltum, enjoying my cushy position as the Royal Court Magician, a job that Aahz had coached me through the auditions for. That is, Aahz was enjoying it. For him it was comfortable surroundings and a steady, generous salary. For me, it was living in constant close contact with a grouchy demon who seemed determined that I practice my magik lessons night and day.

Needless to say, this gets boring after a while. The few adventures I had been on since I had apprenticed myself to Aahz had whetted my appetite for travel, and I was eager for more.

Unfortunately, Aahz steadfastly refused to even start teaching me how to dimension-travel on my own, saying it was far too dangerous for someone with my meager magikal abilities.

That's when I decided to try something really stupid. I decided to try to outwit Aahz and trick him into taking me dimension traveling again.

An item had come to hand that I thought might be just the ticket, so one afternoon when he seemed a bit bored himself, I sprang it on him.

"Aahz," I said, holding out a folded piece of parchment to him, "I think you should take a look at this."

Aahz glared at the paper in my hand as if it might bite him. And when someone from Perv glares, it is really something to see.

"And just what is that?" "It looks like a map." I shrugged. Actually, I knew it was a map. While Tanda and I had been jumping dimensions, shopping for a birthday present for Aahz, I had been offered this map by a beggar on a street corner. Since Tanda had been, at that moment, off talking to some sort of businessmen of that dimension, I had bought the map for a few coins, thinking it would be a fun small gift. I had stuck the map in my belt pouch, and then proceeded to forget about it because of all the problems with the Big Game three dimensions later. Actually, forgetting about

the map was entirely understandable, since Tanda ended up captured and our main focus was on freeing her. And the only way we could free her was by winning the game. So forgetting the map was reasonable. I had had enough on my mind.

But today, while searching through my pouch for something else, I found the map. While I honestly didn't know what it was, I thought it might be what I needed to bait Aahz into taking me dimension traveling again.

Aahz still wasn't about to touch the parchment. He motioned to the fire.

"Throw it in there and then get back to your practice."

"I'm done with my practice," I said.

"You're never done with your practice."

I ignored him and pushed on.

"Besides, I paid good coins for this map."

That was my trump card. If there's anything Aahz hates, it's wasting money. He got angry with me every time my dragon, Gleep, tore up something while playing, and the cost of repairs were taken from my wages. When it came to my money, Aahz was in complete control. And by the way he talked, we were always broke and about to go hungry.

"A scam, I'm sure," Aahz said, turning away. "Just like you to waste money."

I frowned. This was going to be harder than I thought. Normally, if there was any chance of making money at anything, he jumped at it.

Then it dawned on me I hadn't told him what the map led to.

"Aahz," I said to his back.

He didn't move. Instead he just kept staring out the window at the courtyard.

"Aahz, you might really want to look at this. It's a map to a creature called a cow."

"So?" Aahz said, shaking his head. "Remember the last time we were at the Bazaar at Deva? Where do you think that steak you ate came from?"

I stared at him. I had no idea steaks came from creatures called cows. I had just assumed they came from creatures called steaks. Trout came from trout, salmon came from salmon, and duck came from duck. It was logical. Besides, there were no cows in this dimension. At least, none that I had ever met.

"Well," I said, glancing at the parchment in my hand, "this is a map to a golden cow that lives in a golden palace and gives gold-laced milk."

Aahz slowly turned to stare at me, his eyes slit as if he were trying to figure out if I was actually joking or not. Then, in two steps, he was in front of me, snatching the map from my grasp.

"So there really is such a golden beast?" I asked while he studied the paper.

He didn't respond, so I stood and watched him stare at the map. The writing on it was odd, actually. It didn't show roads, but more like dimensions, energy points, and vortexes. Most of it I didn't understand, and almost none of the map had any names on it, but there was a massive amount about jumping from dimension to dimension that I didn't understand.

Aahz had told me once there were so many dimensions, no one knew the total number, and it was easy to get lost and never make it back when jumping from dimension to dimension. After my shopping trip with Tanda to thirty or forty different dimensions, I was starting to believe him. Finally he looked down at me, a frown on his ugly face. And when Aahz frowned, which was a great deal of the time, he looked like an animal snarling. His green skin and bright eyes and sharp teeth could be very intimidating if a person wasn't used to it. Luckily, I was.

"So where exactly did you get this?" He fluttered the parchment in my face as he asked the question.

"Bought it from a man on a street corner," I said. "I think it might have been some beggar." "What dimension?"

"Not a clue." I shrugged. "One of the many Tanda and I visited. You could ask her."

Aahz frowned even more at that.

"What made you buy it?"

Again I shrugged.

"I honestly don't know. I thought you'd have fun with it for your birthday, and the guy said I was the first traveler he'd seen in a long time who might be able to use it and live to tell the tale."

"Could he see through your disguises?" Aahz asked, staring at me.

I tried to remember back to the day. I had used my standard disguise spell, and on that dimension, the spell had not been hard. Most of the residents stood four feet tall, and had two feet. Compared to disguising Tanda and me as slugs on one of the previous dimensions, that had been easy. But the beggar had clearly picked me out of a crowd, and he seemed out of place among the short people, being almost five feet tall.

I looked at Aahz and nodded.

"Maybe. But I don't know how he could have."

Aahz waved his hand in disgust.

"Apprentice, there are a thousand ways, especially with someone so unpracticed as you."

I said nothing. No point in even trying to defend my talents. Aahz always won those conversations by making me try something I couldn't yet do. And that was just about everything when it came to magik. But making disguises is my best ability.

Aahz spun around and moved back to the window, keeping the map with him. He stood there, staring out over the courtyard, letting the silence in the room just build and build. And if there was one thing I hated more than anything, it was the sound of someone thinking, without telling me what they were thinking about.

"So, is there such a golden cow?" I asked, moving over and standing beside him in the big window so he couldn't ignore me.

In the courtyard below the window, Gleep was running in circles chasing his tail. Thank heavens he wasn't near anything, because when a dragon started chasing his tail, things got knocked down, trampled, and just flat destroyed. Especially when it was young dragon.

What was even more amazing was that Aahz didn't seem to be noticing what Gleep was doing. Clearly the map meant something to him.

"The golden cow?" I asked again, "Is it real?"

Aahz slowly turned and looked at me.

"A myth. There are a lot of them in the different dimensions."

"You're kidding! You mean there is more than one golden-milk-giving-cow myth?" Considering that I had never heard of a cow before today, I found that a little hard to imagine. I'm not sure exactly why I thought even one golden cow was easy to imagine, but dozens of them were just too much. Maybe there was an entire dimension with a race of them.

Aahz sighed. When he sighed like that, it usually meant I was being extra stupid or dense.

"Every tenth dimension has a myth about an animal or person doing something with gold. One has a goose laying golden eggs, another has a fish touching things and turning them to gold, another has a duck with golden feathers."

"One heavy bird," I said, trying to imagine the duck covered in gold.

Aahz sighed again.

"The feathers become gold when they fall off."

"Got you," I said. "You ever been near or seen one of these golden animals?"

Aahz laughed, his demon-sound shaking the room.

"If I had, would I be here, in this dump of a palace, with an apprentice as stupid as you?"

I had to admit he had a good point, but I didn't really want to agree with him.

"So that is a sham map," I said.

"Most likely," Aahz said, staring out at the courtyard where Gleep had now managed to catch his tail. He bit it so hard, the poor dragon jumped and looked around, startled. Gleep was smart in many ways, but not about his own tail.

I glanced over at Aahz. When he said 'most likely,' and didn't look at me, it meant he thought there might be a slight chance the map was real.

"Why only most likely?" I asked.

"Because," Aahz said, "I saw a golden deer-dropping once."

"Deer dropping?" Again I had no idea what he meant.

"Deer poop," Aahz said, his voice showing he was getting very tired of my stupid questions. "Deer turds. Deer crap. Deer excrement. One dimension has a myth about a deer that drops gold. I saw one of the droppings. And..."

He stopped, still not looking at me. In all the time we had been together, I had never seen him like this before.

"And what?" I asked.

"And I saw part of a solid-gold elk antler at the Bazaar at Deva."

I was stunned. A deer that pooped gold and an elk that had golden antlers.

"So the map might actually be real?"

"I doubt it," Aahz said, glancing at it.

"But you don't know for sure, do you?"

He shook his head.

"Not for sure."

"So we're going to check it out?"

He looked down at the map in his hand, then folded it and stuffed it in his pocket.

"I'll be back in an hour."

He pulled out the D-Hopper and twisted it to a setting. Back before he met me and lost his powers, he used to be able to jump through the dimensions without the use of a D-Hopper. Now he needed the help and he hated it.

"Wait!" I shouted. "You can't go looking for it without me."

"I'm not," Aahz said. "And get that dragon of yours under control before he breaks something again and we have to pay for it. Be ready to go. One hour. And the dragon doesn't come with us."

With that Aahz was gone, vanished off to another dimension with a faint BAMF.

By the time Aahz got back I had Gleep in his stall in the stables and had arranged for someone to feed and walk him until I returned from wherever we were going.

I was standing near the foot of the bed in my room when suddenly the air next to me sort of went BAMF again. Not

real loud, but startling when it happened two feet from you. I jumped. Aahz was back, and he had my favorite demon in the entire universe of demons with him.

"Tananda!" I shouted, stepping toward the beautiful creature with the long green hair and a body that, with a deep breath, could stop a parade.

"Skeeve!" she shouted back, laughing.

Then she pulled me into a hug that I hoped would never, ever stop. Now, granted, it had only been a month since I had last seen her, drunk as a skunk at Aahz's birthday party. But every time I saw her I figured it was a great excuse for a very long hug. And she sure didn't seem to mind, either. Tanda was a former assassin and member of the guild. I wasn't sure what she did now besides shop and go on adventures. What's more, I didn't really want to know. We were friends, and that was enough for me.

Aahz cleared his throat after far too short a time in her wonderful hug. He did seem to mind that she didn't mind. Oh, well. I still believed she liked me better than him, and that was all that mattered.

She pushed me back and looked at me sternly, her wonderful eyes glaring at me with mock anger. "Why didn't you tell me you had bought a treasure map?"

"Actually, I was going to when we stopped for the night," I said with a shrug, "but then the game and you getting captured and everything sort of pushed the map out of my mind."

"So do you remember how many dimensions before Jahk you bought it?" she asked.

I knew exactly how many, since I had done the disguises in every dimension on the trip. "Three," I said.

"You're absolutely sure?" Aahz asked, his golden eyes staring at me like they were about to shoot daggers.

I held up my hand.

"Jahk, the dimension with the Big Game."

I pointed at my thumb.

Tanda nodded and Aahz just glared, his expression of annoyance making me take my time.

"Counting backwards," I said, pointing at my index finger, "the dimension before that was where we had to look like a form of a three-nosed pig."

I wiggled my index finger at both of them. Tanda nodded. "Yeah, fun place." "Not really," I said.

Aahz's glare got deeper, so I went on. "Before that was the dimension where we had to be eight feet tall and have three legs." I pointed at my middle finger. Tanda laughed. "That was a fun dimension, too. Wasn't it?" It hadn't been, since walking on three legs is something that is a factor harder than trying to fly by flapping your arms and jumping off a cliff. But I ignored her this time and went on. I pointed to my next finger.

"Dimension where we had to be four feet tall and where I bought the map." I held up the three fingers. "That many in front of the game dimension."

I wanted to add that I could go over them again if Aahz wanted, but he was clearly not happy with me, so I didn't offer.

Tanda smiled. "I thought so. Mini." "So what's so special about that dimension?" I asked. It hadn't seemed like much to me, although Tanda had not wanted to stay there long on our shopping trip.

"Actually," Aahz said, "it makes this map more likely to be real."

"Almost certain." Tanda laughed.

"You're kidding?" I asked. "You really think there is a golden cow out there?"

"I didn't say that," Aahz said. "I just said the map was likely to be real."

I frowned and Tanda laughed.

"Mini is populated by Minikins, who have this awful power of never telling a lie about anything. They do not do well at the Bazaar at Deva, for obvious reasons."

"But what happens if the guy who sold it to me wasn't a Minikin?"

"If he had been there for more than a day, he had to tell the truth about the map as well. That's why we got out of there so fast. Truth is not a good influence when you are shopping."

At that I had no firsthand knowledge, but I figured Tanda was the expert.

"Come on," she said to Aahz. "Dig out the map. We're wasting time. Let's do this."

"Why do I have a bad feeling about this?" Aahz asked as he pulled out the parchment, unfolded it, and put it on the bed so all three of us could look at it.

I had no idea what I was looking at, but Tanda seemed to. She pointed at the upper left corner.

"That's Minikins' Dimension."

Even I knew that, since it was labeled Mini.

"So we start there?"

Aahz nodded. So did Tanda, for which I was grateful. If they both agreed, at least we had something solid.

Tanda ran her finger along the only line leading from Minikin. It ended at a dot that was labeled Vortex #1. She studied that for a moment, then glanced at Aahz.

"You have any idea what that means? Or where it's at?"

"Not a clue," he said.

Now I was stunned. It wasn't often that my mentor admitted he didn't know something. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time that it had happened, if ever. I wanted to point that out to him, but this just didn't seem to be the right time, so I went back to studying the map.

I could see that on the map Vortex #1 had six lines leading off to six unlabeled points on the paper. And lines led off of each of those points to other vortex dots. There were seven more vortexes listed, and a big "X" marking the cow in the lower right corner of the map. Only one line led from Vortex #8 to the cow.

It was clear that there was no straight line from Mini to the cow. And no right path. From the looks of it, we could go any of a dozen different ways, through different points labeled vortexes, taking different lines. If nothing else, this was going to be an interesting puzzle.

Aahz had told me that dimension-hopping was dangerous because a person could hop to an unknown dimension and never get back. I wondered now how safe it was going to be following a map through some of these dimensions, especially when even the map was confusing.

"Well," Tanda said, turning to Aahz. "It looks like we're going to need some more help if we're going to find this golden beast."

Aahz looked at her and then slowly shook his head. "You can't be thinking what I think you're thinking." "I'm thinking it," she said.

"No!" Aahz said, his voice firm. I knew for a fact that when he said no like that there was no changing his mind.

"Yes," Tanda said, smiling at him with a smile that could melt a belt-buckle right off a guy's pants. She reached up and touched one of the green scales on his cheek.

"No," Aahz said, but this time it wasn't as firm. Not even a Pervect could stand up against Tanda's charms.

"Yes," she said, turning the smile up one more notch and stroking Aahz's green neck just below his ear.

I was glad she wasn't doing that to me. As it was, just watching I was almost a puddle on the floor. And I didn't even know what they were arguing about.

Aahz wasn't faring much better. He shook his head, then said, "It's a mistake."

"How else are we going to find what dimension to jump to from Minikin?"

She stroked his cheek and then moved right up against him.

No sentient male being could have withstood that attack. Aahz didn't.

I was sweating hard just watching. Much more and I would need to change into one of my clean shirts.

"All right," he said, his voice so soft I could almost not hear it. "But trust me, this is a mistake."

"Oh, we're not showing anyone the map," Tanda said, moving away from Aahz and turning down her convincing body language and smile to a normal level.

Both Aahz and I took a deep breath.

"Then why?" Aahz asked.

"We're just going to find out what, or where a vortex is," Tanda said.

I couldn't stand it any longer.

"Would someone please tell me what this is all about?"

"No," Aahz said.

He picked up the map, then took me by the arm and stepped over beside Tanda. A moment later we were in the Bazaar at Deva.

Chapter Two

"How bazaar!"

RIPLEY

The Bazaar at Deva was like no other place in the universe, or at least that's what Aahz kept telling me. And from my few times in the Bazaar, and what little of the different dimensions I had seen, I was beginning to agree with him.

The Deevels, the residents of Deva, were known as the best traders and negotiators. Now, granted, Aahz, as a Pervect, could be tight with a penny, but as Aahz had warned, a Deevel could trade you out of the penny and the pocket you kept it in, and leave you naked and thinking you were better off for the deal.

The Bazaar was the logical extension of that ability. They had set up the trading capital of all the dimensions, a bazaar that now stretched seemingly forever. Demons, which was a catchphrase for Dimension Travelers, were allowed to set up booths and try to make a living doing whatever it was they did best.

I don't think anyone really knew how far the Bazaar extended, since the tents and booths seemed to always be changing and moving. When I asked how long Aahz thought it would take me to walk across the Bazaar, he said if I was lucky, only five or six months, but he doubted I would make it alive.

It seems that the Bazaar at Deva was also a very dangerous place, which was why I was doing my best to keep up with Tananda and Aahz as they headed through the crowds. I had no idea why this area was so jammed with Demons. It smelled like someone was boiling old shoes, and most of the demons in this area were covered in white and red scales that flaked at the slightest touch. And in my hurry I was bumping into a lot of them. By the time we came to a stop in front of a blank-looking tent with the flap closed, I was sweating like it was a hot summer day, and scales were stuck all over me.

"Might want to brush those off," Aahz said, glancing at me and shaking his head.

Neither he or Tanda seemed to have any on them at all. I had no idea how they had managed that and still moved so fast.

"Why?" I asked, half-heartedly pushing the white and red scales off my sleeve.

"They're acid," Tanda said, reaching over and flicking a scale off my forehead with a polished nail. I picked up the speed of my brushing, working at getting every one of the hundreds of scales stuck to me.

Tanda and Aahz just laughed.

"Little help with the back?" I asked, shaking my entire body as hard as I could.

Tanda laughed even harder as I turned around and her hands worked over my shoulders, down my back, and across my rear. Any other circumstances I would have enjoyed the feel, but standing in the middle of a crowd with acid scales all over me sort of deflated any thoughts of enjoyment.

Aahz just stood and shook his head, staring at the tent, until I was finished and Tanda had inspected my hair and neck and other areas for a stray scale. I didn't know that we had both missed one in my left shoe until I looked down and saw that my shoe was smoking. It was one of my best pairs, too. As I kicked off the shoe and emptied the acid scale onto the ground, Aahz looked at me and bared his teeth in a grin.

"Just count your blessings it didn't go down your pants."

I looked at the hole the scale had burnt into my shoe and shuddered.

"Want me to check you to make sure?" Tanda asked, smiling.

"Thanks," I said, putting my shoe back on. "Maybe later."

"I still don't like this idea," Aahz said, turning to stare at the tent, which was clearly why we were on Deva.

Tanda shrugged. "Neither do I, but we don't have much of a choice, do we? You know anyone who might know what or where a vortex is?"

Aahz shook his head, obviously trying to think of someone.

"I just don't like the price we're going to pay."

"It doesn't have to be that bad," she said.

Aahz said nothing.

I finished one more last check for scales and glanced at the tent we were standing in front of. There was no sign, no indication that anyone was even in it. The crowd in the street seemed to give it a wide berth as well.

"I just wish I knew what we were walking into," I said. "A little hint would be nice."

"You're staying out here," Aahz said.

I glanced around at the flowing crowds of white-and red-scaled acid demons and shook my head.

"Not a chance."

"We need to stick together," Tanda said, taking my side. "We may have to move quickly."

"That doesn't sound good," I said.

Aahz made his disgusted noise, then looked me right in the eyes.

"Not a word comes from your mouth in there. Understand?"

"Sure," I said, making a motion across my mouth that I had sealed it.

"Here," Tanda said, smiling at me. "Let me help you with that."

She put her wonderful hand against my mouth. The smell of her skin was that of distant flowers; her touch was soft. She ran her hand along my mouth as I had done, then patted my shoulder.

"That was-"

My mouth wouldn't open!

I tried again.

The words sort of jumbled inside and the only noise that reached my ears was "Thrrrgggg wgggggeeee."

I tried to shout "What did you do?"

What got to my ears was "Wggggggghhh dggggggghhh yggggggghhh dggggggghhh"

My lips were completely glued together. And the harder I tried to force them apart, the more painful it became.

"I didn't know you knew that one," Aahz said to Tanda, completely ignoring my struggle. "I've wanted to use it a hundred times."

She smiled at my mentor. "There are a lot of things you don't know about me."

Well, as far I was concerned, sealing my lips wasn't something I had ever wanted Tanda to do with anything except maybe a kiss. I tried to tell her so, but again nothing sounded like a word.

"Let's do this," Aahz said, nodding in satisfaction at my condition, then stepping toward the tent.

"Don't worry," Tanda said, smiling at my struggle as she took my arm and followed Aahz. "It's just temporary. Trust me, it's for your own good. And ours as well."

Not for the first time, it occurred to me that for someone who claimed not to have enough magikal talent to be a magician, Tanda occasionally displayed a lot more knowledge and skill than I had as the Royal Magician of Possiltum.

At the tent flap Aahz didn't even hesitate or knock, if knocking was possible on a big tent. He just stepped inside and Tanda led me right behind him.

The place was huge.

No, huge didn't describe it. On either side of us the tent seemed to fade off into the distance. This was the first time I had seen one of the Bazaar tents that had bigger insides than outsides. Aahz had mentioned them, but until I stepped into the massive room on the other side of the tent flap, I had no idea that such a thing was really possible. I was going to have to have Aahz teach me the magik involved so I could do that with our rooms back at the palace.

The tent was dimly lit and had a polished marble floor and dark, wooden-looking walls. There was almost no furniture. A simple wooden desk sat on the side of the room facing where we had come in. A massive map of what looked like dimensions filled the wall behind it.

A woman sat at the desk, not looking at us at all. Whatever had Aahz and Tanda so worried about being here wasn't clear on first glance. The room felt odd, but not threatening, besides it being a hundred times larger than the tent holding it. We all stopped a few feet in front of the desk, with Aahz clearly in the position to do the talking.

The woman looked up at him and smiled. She had deep orange eyes and a pug nose that looked more like a hog's nose than anything like Tanda's. I had never seen a demon like her before.

"Yes?" she asked.

I almost fell over backwards. Her voice was deep, rough, and clearly that of a man. It was with the voice that I actually looked at her. Or him, as I was coming to realize. I had no idea why I had thought he was a woman. His arms and shoulders were built like a man's, and his brownish hair was cut short. Yet I had sworn, until he spoke, that he was a woman. Just thinking about it was getting me confused. Aahz got right to the point.

"We are looking for directions to a dimension called Vortex." The man who sort of looked like a woman smiled at Aahz. Now he was back to being a woman again. And his pig nose had vanished, leaving a wonderful pointed nose and red lips. And as I watched her face shifted slowly. The transformation was amazing. Her eyes changed color, from orange to blue, her skin darkened, her cheeks rose, and her hair grew to her shoulders.

"How the-" I started to ask how she changed like that, but my sealed lips stopped me cold. Aahz and Tanda said nothing. Clearly they had expected to meet a shape-shifting demon in here. It was as if she were constantly working through disguise spells. Interesting trick, that was for sure.

"Well," she said, her voice now soft and rich and alluring, "which Vortex are you looking for?"

Aahz seemed to struggle for a moment with the answer. I wanted to blurt out that we needed the first eight of them, but

luckily my mouth was glued shut. I had no idea why I wanted to blurt that out.

"Vortexes #1 through #8," Aahz said.

The demon behind the desk was slowly shifting to look like a stone statue, her clothes vanishing into her body as she changed into a rock-like demon with scales for skin and arms as thick as trees. I also noticed that the chair it was on changed with the size of the creature at the moment. More than likely the chair was part of its body as well.

"What is the nature of your reason for wanting the location of these places?" the shifting creature asked, its voice rumbling like thunder inside the massive room.

Again Aahz struggled with the answer. I had no doubt in my mind I wanted to blurt out that we had a treasure map. Something about this creature clearly forced demons standing in front of it to tell the truth. Now I was grateful that Tanda had closed my mouth. I had no idea how they were keeping quiet. What I was feeling was clearly very powerful magik or mind control.

"We are searching for a treasure," Aahz said, his words measured and slow, "and our path leads us through the Vortex dimensions, starting with Vortex #1."

"Logical," the creature said as it shifted toward a pig-body shape.

"The price is 10% of your find."

I could see the anger growing in Aahz's body, his green scales stiff on his neck. Giving away anything to do with money was beyond something Aahz could do without undue stress.

Tanda put her hand on his arm and stepped forward.

"Your price is high for simple directions. We will give you 5% of anything we acquire on this venture, no matter what the value. Otherwise we will look elsewhere for help."

The creature now looked like a quatra-piggy, a type of demon I had seen in the street on an earlier trip here. But that body was quickly changing to a new shape.

"You will not find help elsewhere," the shifting demon said. "But your offer is fair and I will accept. I assume you need to go to Vortex #1 first?"

"Yes," both Aahz and Tanda said at the same time. The creature, now shifting back into a beautiful woman again, nodded. "That can be arranged."

She looked at Aahz and Tanda with a serious look. Her voice was firm and very solid. "Since I have a financial stake now in what you are attempting, I must warn you that a Vortex dimension is not a place to take lightly. It is a very dangerous, and sometimes tempting, place. It will be very easy to miss your path and become lost."

Then she looked at me, her beautiful blue eyes boring into my heart. In my best dreams I would remember what this creature looked like forever. She had transformed into the most striking female I could have ever imagined. Every part of my body wanted to move to her, to touch her, to never leave her. Her gaze seemed to bore deeper and deeper into me as my legs got weak and my stomach did flip-flops. I desperately wanted my lips to be free to tell her how much I loved her.

"You must take care of your friends," she said, her wonderful voice melting every thought I had.

"Understand?" I managed to nod.

"Good," she said, winking at me. "I will know if you succeed or fail. Good luck to you."

With that the tent and the beautiful woman were gone. Around us a wind whipped over the plains, driving dirt and dust into my face.

"Vortex #1," Aahz shouted over the blowing wind. "Here we go," Tanda shouted back.

I just wish someone had warned me we were jumping dimensions.

"Pggghhhh ugghhhh mggghhhh mggghhhh" was all I managed to say.

The dust blew around my head, reducing visibility to near zero. The changing demon back in the big tent on Deva had said the Vortex dimensions were dangerous and full of temptations. The only temptation I had about this place was an instant desire to go home.

"This way! Hurry!"

Tananda motioned that we should follow her. Since there was nothing to be seen but swirling dust, I figured I had nothing to lose.

It seemed that my closed-lip problem was as temporary as Tanda had promised it would be. By the time she had led us a hundred staggering paces through the storm to what looked to be an old log cabin, my lips were again free.

The old cabin that Tanda had led us to had been made of cut-together logs and had to be a hundred years old. She shoved the door open and we stomped inside. Wind blew in through at least a hundred cracks in the walls and the only things that now lived in the place was rodents.

"What was the big rush?" Aahz said, brushing dust from his clothes after shoving the door closed.

"Didn't you see it?" Tanda said. "There was something moving out there. Moving toward us."

"I must have missed it," Aahz said, and looked at me.

All I could do was shake my head and shrug. I hadn't seen anything either, but Tanda seemed a bit spooked.

I got a pretty decent fire in the middle of the dirt floor, using nothing but my mind and a bunch of wood, as Tanda put a containment field around the room to keep out the wind.

As it turned out, both Tanda and Aahz had expected something to happen when we went into that tent. They were pretty much prepared. I just wish they had warned me to get ready.

After I finished the fire, Tanda hung a translation pendant around my neck, then another around Aahz's neck, just in case we ran into someone we couldn't understand when we jumped from here.

"So," I said, holding my hands out to warm them over the fire, "could you please explain just what happened, who the shifting demon was, how we got here, and where 'here' is?"

"You know," Aahz said to Tanda, ignoring me, "I think I liked him better with his mouth sealed."

"Sealing a guy's lips isn't a nice thing to do," I said. Then I thought back to what I had wanted to say while in the tent and luckily hadn't been able to. "But I understand why you did it. A compulsion spell, right?"

Aahz now looked at me with a shocked expression as Tanda laughed.

"I think your apprentice is starting to learn," she said, smiling at Aahz. "Might as well answer his questions."

Aahz just sighed and sat down on the floor.

"The tent we went into was a Shifter's tent. The person we had talked to was a Shifter. The Shifter moved us here, and my guess is this wonderful place is the Vortex #1 dimension."

I had to admit that he had answered my questions, but not very well.

"So why were you so reluctant to go see a Shifter for help?" Tanda laughed at that as she too sat down on the floor. "It wasn't just Aahz. I didn't want to either, but we had no choice, if we really were going to follow the map." "Why?"

"Because," Aahz said, "Shifters have made it their business to know where dimensions are.

Remember I told you that when jumping to a dimension you need to have a clear image of that dimension in mind, as well as a solid place in the dimension?"

I nodded. Every time I asked Aahz to start teaching me how to dimension-hop he brought that problem up.

"I might be able to jump to a few hundred," Aahz said, "if I had my powers back and I was close enough to them. Maybe between Tanda and me we could find three or four hundred. With a really

expensive D-Hopper we might find another few hundred on top of that. But there are thousands and thousands of dimensions. Maybe even millions, for all I know. The Shifters are the travel agents of dimensions."

"What's a travel agent?"

I looked at Tanda, then at Aahz. Both were just shaking their heads.

"Never mind," Aahz said, waving the question away with his hand. Every time he did that, I knew he considered the question too stupid for an answer.

"So they charge for the information and the jump," I said, going on. "Sounds reasonable to me."

"Well, it is and it isn't," Tanda said. "No one knows where the Shifters come from. They are masters of disguise, and if you try to double-cross them you will disappear, never to be seen again."

"More than likely off to some deadly dimension," Aahz said, shaking his head.

"So we make sure they get their five percent of the golden cow if we find it."

That seemed logical enough to me.

"I hope that's all it will take," Aahz said.

Tanda just nodded.

I didn't like that at all. Disappearing was not something I considered in my possible future. I had plans. Better, bigger plans. Yet now I was risking my life chasing a cow. Not smart at all as far as I was concerned. I tried to think about something else besides a future where someone made me vanish.

"How do the Shifters keep changing like that one did?"

"Disguise spells, maybe. I don't know." Tanda shrugged. "I've never seen one really stay the same for very long."

I considered myself good at disguises, but I was a long way from being able to do what that Shifter had been doing. Which meant that if they were that good, it was possible that one of the shifters was with us right now, disguised as something around the room.

The thought almost made me jump. I glanced around, trying to see anything odd about the old log cabin. There was nothing but a dirt-littered floor and old logs. Yet I now had a feeling we were being watched.

"So let's see if we can figure out where we are and how to take the next step," Tanda said, scooting over beside Aahz.

I walked once around the small room, then moved over to where Aahz had pulled out the map and spread it on the floor.

"Would you look at that?" Tanda said, pointing.

I saw instantly what she was talking about. The map had changed. I studied what was there now, comparing it to what had been there before. Now the lines from Vortex #1 were different, and the points at the end of each were labeled. And the upper corner of the map had Deva listed, with a direct line from Deva to Vortex #1.

"Amazing," Aahz said, his voice just a whisper. "A true treasure map."

"How did it do that?" I asked. Aahz laughed.

"Just as everything is done," he said. "Magik." "It's a magik map, a true treasure map of the dimensions," Tanda said. "I've only heard of such things."

She reached over and gave me a big hug, something I was more than willing to continue as long as she wanted it to. Finally, far too quickly, she let go and looked at me. "This was a great purchase on your part." I shrugged. "Not unless it leads somewhere." "True," Aahz said, not looking up from the map. I went back to studying the map as well. As far as I was concerned, it was just lines and points and a few names. I couldn't use it to find my way back to where we had appeared here on

Vortex #1, let alone to jump dimensions. "So the map changes. What does that mean?" Tanda pointed at the point labeled Vortex #1. "Thanks to the Shifter, we're here. From this point we have five choices of dimension jumps."

She pointed to the five names the lines lead to from this place. "The one called Bumppp looks the most promising." Aahz nodded. "And the straightest line through the map as well."

"You know this Bumppp world?" I asked. "Or any of those places?"

She slowly shook her head.

"Aahz?"

"No, I don't."

I looked at him, then at Tanda, remembering what Aahz had told me about dimension hopping.

You had to know exactly where you were going, or you couldn't jump.

"So we're stuck here?" I asked. "That's the end of the trip?"

"No," Aahz said, reaching into his belt pouch and pulling out a D-Hopper.

He quickly scrolled through the listing of dimensions on the Hopper, checking them with the names on the map. Finally, he sighed and put it back.

And with that sigh I knew we were done. The five possible places we could jump to from this place was not on the D-Hopper either.

"Damn," Tanda said. "I was afraid this might happen."

She pushed herself to her feet and brushed off her pants.

"I hate this," Aahz said, standing. He carefully folded the map and put it in his belt pouch.

"What are we doing now?"

Tanda motioned that I should come closer. Then she reached up, and before I could stop her, she sealed my lips again.

"Sorry," she said. "Can't take the chance."

I tried to object, but the only thing that came out was "Wggghhh."

This was getting old. Too much more of this kind of treatment and my lips were going to be sore for a week.

A moment later, without a warning from either Tanda or Aahz, we were back standing in front of the Shifter in the big tent.

Chapter Three

"There's no such thing as a free ride."

M.T.A.

"Ten percent for your solution," the Shifter said, its voice deep and strong as it studied Tanda and scratched what seemed to be part of its neck.

I stared at it, not really looking at what it was at the moment, but more studying how it was changing constantly. It was as if there was always a part of it moving, morphing into the next character. The hair shifted, the skin changed, the arms lengthened, nothing really staying complete for more than a few seconds before starting to change into the next shape or color. Its voice, its chair, its eyes all changed as well. That really impressed me. When I did a disguise spell, I could do clothing and size and shape, but never the quality of the eyes. From this Shifter's eyes it looked as if it was actually fifty or a hundred different beings all melding together. For all I knew, it was. I wanted to ask it how it did what it did, but then remembered my lips were again sealed.

"Ten percent!" Aahz said through his teeth, his voice barely under control.

"On top of the first five percent, bringing the total to fifteen percent."

I thought I could see a blood vessel in Aahz's neck trying to break out from under the green scales. Any moment Tanda was going to have to seal his mouth as well, from the looks of it. I wanted to tell the Shifter how greedy it was being, but luckily I couldn't.

"No," Tanda said. "We will give you another five percent, and five percent more for each time we require your help in this journey, but not one bit above that."

The Shifter had become a tall creature with a very thin face and hundreds of tiny teeth crammed into a very ugly mouth. And at that moment the mouth smiled, or at least did something I thought was a smile.

"Agreed," it said.

Aahz looked like he might have a small fit right there, but somehow he managed to contain himself. I was impressed. It wasn't often that large percentages of a possible fortune were taken from him and he didn't destroy something. Aahz and money were not easily parted, and if we did find this golden cow, there was no doubt in my mind that Aahz would not want to part with much of the golden milk. But now he would have no choice, for at least ten percent of the find.

And I had no doubt we were going to be back here a number more times before this little venture was over.

"What is your destination now?" it asked.

"Bumppp," Tanda said.

For a moment the creature hesitated, and I thought I saw the morphing hesitate as well. Then it said, almost sadly, "Very well."

A moment later we ended up in the middle of a wide meadow filled with thick plants and orange flowers. The sky overhead was a faint blue and pink. Dark-green trees surrounded the meadow, and in the distance there were pink mountains. I had been ready to use my disguise spell on us to protect us from any storm, but the air was warm and humid, just the way I liked it.

Actually, all in all, this was one of the most beautiful dimensions I had visited. I wondered what kind of lucky people lived here.

Tanda turned a full circle, her sharp eyes taking in things I knew I didn't see.

"Ten percent?" Aahz said, his teeth still grinding.

Tanda put her finger to her mouth for Aahz to be silent. I instantly started searching the tree-line for any sign of danger. There was nothing that I could see. No natives with weapons, no crouching tigers, no charging bears.

Nothing.

But clearly from Tanda's actions and the attitude and hesitation of the Shifter, this wasn't a friendly place. Beautiful, but not friendly.

"The map," she whispered to Aahz. "Quickly."

Then she motioned that we should all crouch down.

The weeds and flowers covering the meadow were no more than knee-high and would give us no cover at all. They smelled like my dragon when he got wet.

I figured we should move to the edge of the trees. At least there we might have a fighting chance if something came at us. But Tanda was the ex-assassin among us. She knew what she was doing. Or at least I hoped she did.

Aahz opened the map and laid it out carefully on top of the weeds. It was clear instantly that the map had again changed. Bumppp, the dimension we were in, showed clearly, with only one path leading from this world toward the dream of our very own golden cow. And that path led to Vortex #4.

Not #2, as I would have expected, or even #3, but #4.

Tanda nodded and motioned for Aahz to quickly fold up the parchment and put it away. Then she stood.

I stood right with her, and the moment I did I saw movement. Not just some movement, but all around the edges of the meadow the weeds and flowers were jerking and swaying as if something was running under them at us.

Then a head poked up about a hundred paces from us. A massive snake head that was larger than my head, with yellow, swirling slits for eyes and huge fangs. There was no telling how long the snake's body was, and I really didn't want to wait around and find out.

And then another stuck its head up to the right of the first one. And another and another.

I spun like a dancer. We were surrounded by giant snakes with very nasty-looking fangs. If we didn't do something quickly we were going to end up the main course for lunch.

"Nice place," Aahz said as the moving grass got closer and closer around us.

"Any time now," I tried to suggest, but the only thing that came out of my still sealed mouth was "Agggghh tggghhhh."

What's the matter?" Tanda asked, smiling at me. "Afraid Of a little snake?"

I nodded vigorously as another monster snake head popped up not more than fifty paces from us. It looked not only hungry, but angry.

"Yeah," she said, "me, too."

With that we were back in the dust storm on Vortex #1.

"Skeeve!" Aahz yelled as the dust pounded into us.

Before I could even act, Tanda said, "Don't bother."

Then we were back in the Shifter's tent, staring at the creature who now looked just a little too much like the snakes we had just left.

"I am glad for my percentage to see that you have returned," it said.

"I'll bet," Aahz said.

"Vortex #4 please," Tanda said, getting right to business.

"The total is now fifteen percent."

"I understand our agreement," Tanda said before Aahz could say a word. "Vortex #4 please."

The snakelike-shaped Shifter nodded, and again we were whisked through to another dimension.

And right back into the same stupid dust storm.

Okay, I have to admit that when we dimension-hopped back into the dust storm, I was shocked.

Tanda motioned that we should follow her. It took me almost all the way to our destination before I realized where we were. Now granted, I had the excuse that it was blowing heavily. And to me, one dust storm looks just like another. But it wasn't until the old log cabin loomed up out of the dust like a ship in the fog that it dawned on me that we were back in the same place.

Only it wasn't the same place. This was supposed to be Vortex #4, not Vortex #1.

Inside the old building it became clear that we were in a slightly different place. This time, instead of being bare, the

inside of the log cabin was filled with branches and some old furniture, and there was no sign of the fire I had built.

"Did you see them this time?" Tanda demanded.

"See what?" Aahz frowned.

"Out there in the storm." she said. "This time I got a good look at them."

"What was it?"

"Dust bunnies. A whole pack of them." She wrapped her arms tightly around herself and shuddered.

Aahz and I looked at each other and shrugged. Again we seemed to be oblivious to whatever it was that was setting Tanda on edge.

By the time I got a new fire going and Tanda had put a containment protection around the cabin to keep the wind out, my lips had unsealed. They were chapped and sore, but at least they were loose.

"So Vortex #4 is a lot like Vortex #1," I said.

"Makes sense," Tanda said. "Otherwise, why give them the same names with only different numbers?"

"Any other dimensions so similar that they could be numbered like this?"

"More than likely," Tanda said, "but I've never seen or heard about any."

"So we paid another five percent to that thief for this?" Aahz said, dearly disgusted. "We could have found this on our own."

I had no idea how he thought we could have done that, but since I didn't know much about dimension-hopping, I said nothing.

"Not likely," Tanda said. "We are a long, long way from Vortex #1. We're farther away in number of dimensions from the Bazaar at Deva than I have ever been before."

"Oh," Aahz said.

"And you know that how?" I asked. "Is there some sort of mileage marker I keep missing in the blink of eye it takes to hop to a new dimension?"

Tanda laughed. "Don't we wish."

"When a person is dimension-hopping," Aahz said, "and they have powers to do it, like Tanda does, you get a sense of

how many dimensions away you have jumped. Not precise, but just a sense of distance."

Tanda nodded. "And the farther away in number of dimensions, the harder the jump. And the greater the chance of missing the target and getting lost."

"So that's why you took us back through Vortex #1 from Bumppp?"

"Safer that way," she said.

"And each of our jumps following this map is getting us farther and farther away from home?" I didn't much like the idea of that happening. My job as the Royal Court Magician wasn't much, but at the moment it was better than this place.

"So far," Tanda said. "But this is a treasure map we're following. It isn't supposed to be so easy that just anyone could do it."

I didn't like the sound of that, either.

Aahz pulled off his gloves and took out the map, spreading it on the floor so we could all see it by the light of the fire. As expected, the map had changed again. There were now six lines leading from Vortex #4, all to points that now had names. All six lines headed in the general direction of the point marked as the treasure, but none directly. This map wasn't making anything easy, that was for sure.

The names on each dimension this time were stranger than normal. All were combinations of the same five letters. Starting from the left, the names were Et, Cet, Era, Etc, Etc, and Ra.

"You know any of those dimensions?" Aahz asked.

"No," Tanda said. "You?"

"No," Aahz said. "There goes another five percent."

Tanda shrugged. "Can't be helped. I suggest we head for the center one."

"Etc it is, then," I said.

All Aahz did was growl deep inside his throat as he stood and put the map away.

"I hope this means we're going back to Vortex #1 again." I said. "Tell me we're not visiting the snakes again."

"It would be safer if we hit Bumppp again," she said. "No point in taking the chance."

"You can't be serious," I said. Just at the mention of those snakes my stomach clamped up into a knot.

She laughed. "Don't worry. From here I can hit Vortex #1. No snakes needed."

She made sure Aahz was ready, then we hopped.

The dust pounded at me for all of five seconds while Tanda made sure we were there and all right, then she hopped us again right back into the tent of the Shifter.

He was now shaped like a sofa with eyes on the arms and pillows where the ears would be. A massive, orange tongue hung out of the face, forming the seating area. From that moment onward, sitting on a sofa was going to take on a whole new meaning for me.

"We need the Etc dimension," Tanda said.

"Your total is now twenty percent," the creature said, its massive tongue moving as if someone was fluffing the pillows.

"We are aware of that," Tanda said.

The next moment we found ourselves standing on a wide and, mercifully, empty street. Plain-looking wooden buildings framed both sides of the street.

The sky overhead was cloudy and gray, the air was cold and crisp, but at least it wasn't blowing. I was glad I still had our heavy coats and hats on as disguises.

I turned slowly around. There was no doubt there were some strange dimensions in this universe.

The road seemed to go off into the distance in both directions from where we were standing, framed by exactly the same types of buildings on both sides, all the same height. Each building had a strange shape to it as well, with two doors, and matching windows. There was no way to tell what was on the other side of the buildings, since it was like we were standing in a canyon.

I had no idea how anyone living in this place found his or her way home. Every building was exactly like the one it butted against, with no numbers or colors or any kind of distinguishing marks.

"Wonder where the people are?" I asked.

"Let's check the map and not wait to find out the answer to that," Aahz said as he headed for the side of the street.

"Yeah," Tanda said as she looked around, dearly on guard. "I don't like the looks of this."

Aahz pulled the map out as he got near the edge of the road and opened it. On the map the dimension we were in was now marked clearly, with only one path leading away from it. Vortex #6 was our next stop. At least we had jumped over Vortex #5 just like we had over #2 and #3.

Tanda glanced at the map and shook her head.

For a moment I thought Aahz was going to wad the thing up and toss it away, but then he folded it and put it back in his jacket.

Suddenly, in the window of the building closest to us, a creature appeared.

"We have company," I said softly.

Tanda and Aahz both looked up as another creature appeared in the window beside the first one.

I glanced around. Every window of every building now had someone standing in it. And every one of them looked exactly alike. Gray suit, gray hair, gray face, two arms. They were all the same shape and same height.

And when one of them moved, every other creature I could see moved the same way.

"This is creeping me out," Tanda said.

The next instant the dust smashed into my face.

"Warning next time," Aahz said.

"This is Vortex #4," she shouted over the wind. "We're hopping again before the bunnies find us."

For an instant there was no dust, then it hit again.

I knew this had to be Vortex #1. I mean, with the dust and all, what else could it be?

Then we were back in the tent with the Shifter. And right at that moment what I really wanted to do more than anything else was just walk out of the tent and forget this entire thing.

"Vortex #6 please," Tanda said to the Shifter, who had lost his couch shape and now looked more like a cross between a cat and a table.

"Twenty-five percent."

Aahz ground his teeth, the sound filling the tent.

"You're making my friend angry by repeating that," I said.

Then I realized I had spoken my mind. Tanda hadn't sealed my lips for this visit. Aahz glared at me and I shrugged.

"It is a bargain at twice the price," the Shifter said.

I was about to tell him that dealing with a Deveel was a bargain as well, but Tananda put her hand over my mouth and spoke to the Shifter. "Vortex #6 please. We have agreed to twenty-five percent total to this point."

The Shifter nodded, which looked a lot like a table lifting its leg, then we were back in the dust storm.

It seemed like the same dust, and was as hard to walk in as the last two Vortex dimensions. But as we got near the old cabin, I noticed a very large and very important difference.

This time there was a light in the window.

Someone was home.

Chapter Four

"Don't pick up hitchhikers!"

D. ADAMS

The yellow light coming from the cabin window was like a warning sign. We all stopped about twenty paces short of the door and stared through the blowing dust at the light. I know I was annoyed. After using the cabin in two other dimensions, I was starting to feel like it was an extension of home. How dare anyone actually live in it? "Now what do we do?" I shouted to Aahz over the sound of the storm whipping around us.

"Anything else close by?" Aahz asked Tanda. His green scales on his face were plastered in dust. I knew for a fact he hated being dirty, and after giving away so much of an as-yet-unfound fortune to a travel guide, or agent, or whatever he had called the Shifter, the dust and wind couldn't be helping his mood any. Tanda shook her head.

"No dust bunnies and nothing else I know of. The Shifter only put directions to this place in my mind on the first hop." "So we knock," I said over the wind. Tanda and Aahz seemed to have no other idea, so I slogged through the deep dust to the door and rapped on it.

Tanda moved over to my left and Aahz stayed five steps away in the background, his face covered. If I had to, I would disguise him quickly. His green scales and looks tended to frighten a lot of people.

The door opened suddenly and I found myself facing a girl. She was wearing a long-sleeved shirt, dark pants, and had her hair pulled back off her face. She had a smile that lit

up her deep brown eyes and warmed every nerve in my body. I figured her to be about my age. Her face brightened when she saw me.

"You must be Skeeve," she said. "Come on in. My dad said you'd be along eventually."

I stood in the dust, staring at her. In all my life I had never been so surprised at anything anyone said.

She knew my name.

She had been expecting me.

God knew how many dimensions from home and in the middle of a raging dust storm, she had been expecting me!

My first thought was to back slowly away before turning and running into the storm. But my legs remained frozen in place, my mind too stunned to even try to reason out anything.

"Come on," the girl said. "It's windy out there!"

Nothing on me was moving.

Tanda finally pushed me forward and the girl stepped back, holding the door for all of us to go inside.

If I hadn't known this was the same cabin as we had seen in the other dimensions, I would have never have recognized it. Now it had a wooden floor, the cracks in the walls were all filled, and it was warm and comfortable.

There was a table with a bowl of fruit on it, four chairs, and kitchen counter with cabinets on one side of the room. A fire was burning in a baking stove, keeping the cabin comfortable. A bed was against the far wall, with a beautiful blue and gold quilt neatly covering it and a pillow.

The young lady didn't seem to be at all surprised to see Aahz, which worried me even more.

Pervects tended to scare people, either by their looks or their reputations.

I finally managed to find the words I needed to ask.

"How do you know me?"

"She knows you?" Aahz asked.

Clearly he had been too far out in the dust storm to hear her over the blowing wind.

The girl laughed and I got even more afraid of her. The laugh was perfect, sort of gentle, yet free and high, like a soft breeze on a summer's afternoon. The exact laugh I would expect from a young lady as beautiful as she was, yet never got, at least from the few I had met.

"I doesn't really know him," she said, again laughing. "At least not in the traditional sense, or any other sense for that matter. Although I must say, I wouldn't mind, if you know what I mean."

I had no idea what she meant. I wanted to ask just how many senses of 'know' there were, but figured I'd wait to do that later.

Aahz snorted and Tanda laughed.

She went on. "My father said I should expect a young, good-looking man named Skeeve to come here. I just assumed you were Skeeve, since you are the first person to visit this place in the two weeks I've been here."

I think I was staring at her, stunned. At least that was how it felt. I didn't know her and I had no idea who her father might be.

She smiled at me and then turned to Tananda.

"You must be the one Skeeve was traveling with before," she said. "Don't worry. I've taken care of the dust bunnies. You know, don't you, that they're completely invisible to guys."

Then she glanced at Aahz and frowned slightly.

"But I don't know you and your connection to this, big guy"

I was so shocked, I couldn't say anything. She had called Aahz 'big guy,' and knew I had traveled with Tanda.

No one said anything.

Clearly Tanda and Aahz were shocked as well. From what Tanda had said, we were a lot of dimensions away from our homes. Yet in the middle of a dust storm, in a strange dimension, we had found someone waiting for us. Someone who knew my name.

"Cat's got your tongues, I see," she said, laughing. She turned around and motioned that we should sit down at the table. "I bet you're getting hungry by now, after all the dimension-hopping you've been doing."

I wanted to ask why she thought a cat had my tongue, and how she knew what we had been doing, then decided

against asking that, in exchange for what I thought was a better question.

"Are you a Shifter?"

Again she laughed, the wonderful sound filling the cabin and blending in with the faint crackling of the fire in the oven.

"Not hardly. But my father said you might be getting a little tired of their costs by now. How much of the treasure have you given away so far? Thirty-five percent? Forty percent?"

"Only twenty-five percent," I said.

Then it dawned on me that she knew about the treasure as well. And that we had been negotiating with the Shifters. How much did she know, and how did she know it?

Aahz gave me a stern look and I shrugged. He always thought I talked too much, and clearly this was one of those times he just might be right.

"Wow, you must be a great negotiator," she said, smiling at me.

"Not hardly," Tanda said, moving over and sitting down at the table.

Aahz and I did the same.

"So you know our friend Skeeve here," Tanda said. "Could you please tell us what your name is, and how you know him?"

The girl smiled at me, holding my gaze in her beautiful brown eyes.

"My name is Glenda. My father sold Skeeve the map you are using to search for the golden cow." Glenda turned back to the counter and opened a cabinet that contained what looked to be a freshly baked loaf of bread.

Tanda glared at me and I just shrugged. I had told her and Aahz everything that had happened when I bought the map. This young lady had been nowhere around. That much I was sure of. I would have remembered seeing her.

Now I was even more confused. Why had the guy who sold me the map sent his daughter here to meet us? For what reason?

"So the map was a scam after all," Aahz said, scowling at her, "and you've been waiting here to collect something from us. Is that it?"

Glenda laughed and smiled at Aahz. "The cynic of the group, I see."

Then she smiled at me again.

I smiled right back at her.

"He does tend to look at what could go wrong a lot."

"He would make a great lawyer," she said.

I wanted to ask what a lawyer was, but just nodded instead.

She turned to look directly at Aahz.

"No, I assure you that, as far as I know, or anyone knows, the map is real."

"So what are you doing here, then?" Tanda asked.

Glenda shrugged. "My father thought you might need some help about now. And when my father told me about Skeeve after he bought the map, I thought he might be cute. I was right."

I think I blushed from the ends of my toes to the top of my head. Luckily the only thing visible to her was my face.

Aahz snorted even louder, an ugly sound that seemed to just hang in the warm cabin like a bad smell.

"Why would your father think we need help?" Tanda asked.

Glenda went back to cutting the fresh bread as she answered. "Because no one has ever made it past this point before, and returned alive."

"Ohhhhh," Aahz said, "now I understand. Your father keeps selling the map over and over and your job is to get it back."

"Actually, he's tired of selling it," Glenda said. "And getting it back has never been a problem. He usually just pops in here every spring and takes it off the bodies."

The faint crackling of the fire and the wind against the eaves of the cabin were the only noises. I didn't want to think about the fact that a map I had carried around for a week had been on dead bodies.

"Why does that happen?" Tanda asked, but I noticed that she wasn't really putting as much anger into her voice as before.

Glenda smiled at her. "You're the one with the ability to dimension-hop. You tell me."

Tanda's eyes seemed to fade out for a moment, then she looked up at Glenda and said softly, "We're too far away from any place I know, including the last place we jumped to."

"Exactly," Glenda said, putting the cut bread on the table in front of us. "The Shifters have done that to six groups of treasure-seekers that my father sold the map to. Vortex #6, this place, is just too far from any known dimension, and any other dimension on the map, for almost anyone but the most traveled dimension-hopper. And until I fixed this cabin up a few weeks ago, there was nothing here but a shell of old logs."

"We would have starved to death," I said.

"Given time, you would have starved, or jumped to some other dimension and gotten lost," Glenda said, pulling out the chair and sitting down beside me. "My father tracked two groups with the map who did that. Both met very ugly ends at the hands of creatures they never should have faced."

My memory of the snakes was clear enough to understand exactly what she was saying.

She took a piece of the wonderful-smelling fresh bread and bit into it, never taking her gaze from mine.

"And your price to rescue us is...?" Aahz asked.

I glanced at him. Typical Aahz, always leading with the pocketbook first.

Glenda smiled at my green-scaled mentor.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Aahz," he said. "And you haven't answered my question yet."

"I want to go with you," she said. "And for helping you find the golden cow and getting us all back to a dimension near the Bazaar at Deva, I want the same share as each of you are getting, after paying off the Shifter."

It still wasn't making sense.

"So why haven't you just gone after the cow on your own, before now?"

"Honestly," she said, looking directly into my eyes while answering, "my father thought you, Skeeve, were the first one he had ever sold the map to that had a chance of actually getting to the cow."

"You didn't answer his question either," Aahz said. "And why should we give you such a large share of the treasure?"

She laughed. "Besides getting you out of this place? This is only one of the problems you face. My father tried a number of times to go the distance before he sold the map the first time, but he always had to turn back. There are many problems ahead. I know what they are. You need me."

"And your father thinks Skeeve can make it?" Tanda asked. I would have been unhappy with the sound of disbelief in Tanda's voice if I didn't feel exactly the same way.

Glenda reached over and touched my hand on the table. Electric shocks went up my arm and I am sure my face again turned a bright shade of red. I couldn't even begin to think about moving my hand away from hers. And I didn't want to. She was doing things to me I had only dreamed about, all with a single touch of her hand.

"My father has the ability to see the true nature of people," Glenda said, "and their true strengths."

She rubbed the top of my hand and it was everything I could do to not let out a long, loud sigh.

"If he thinks Skeeve can get to the golden cow and win over the problems that lie ahead, then I believe in Skeeve as well."

I just smiled at Aahz, giving him my widest grin. In all our time together, I had never seen him look so disgusted.

It felt wonderful.

And so did Glenda's hand on mine.

Okay, so there was tension in the small cabin. Lots of it, of all kinds. I have to admit that having a girl my age along on this crazy quest sounded just fine by me. Especially one that thought I was special without really knowing me, and could make my entire body tingle at the touch of a hand. I liked the advantage of that. With her, I didn't have any past mistakes to climb over or make up for. Aahz and Tanda, on the other hand, weren't so certain about taking Glenda along and cutting her in on the possible prize. And that wasn't good tension at all. And since none of us knew her, there was that tension as well.

But the way I figured it, there really wasn't much choice. Tanda couldn't hop us back to any dimension she knew of. It was just too far, and we didn't dare just risk hopping dimensions trying to get close enough. We would end up lost, or more likely dead from something like those snakes or creepy identical-people on that street.

We needed Glenda. And besides, I wanted her along. It would be fun getting to know her.

"So now there's four of us," I said, smiling across the table at Glenda and ignoring the scowls coming from my mentor.

"Great," Glenda said. "You won't regret it."

I doubted I would either.

"We split the treasure four ways," Aahz said, making the deal clear.

"After the Shifter's part is taken out," I reminded him.

"Yeah, after the Shifter's twenty-five percent."

He almost spat the last few words of the sentence as he glared at Tanda.

"There'll still be more than enough for everyone," Glenda said as she offered everyone some fresh bread. "If we can get to the golden cow and make it ours."

I took a large piece and then some of the wonderful apple jelly she had on the table. After one bite I knew that fresh bread and jelly was the best-tasting thing I remembered having in a long, long

time. It more than melted in my mouth as it turned my taste-buds into a wonderful world of flavors. Man, if Glenda could make all the food she cooked do that, I was never leaving her side.

After we were all eating-and I noticed that even Tanda and Aahz enjoyed the bread-Glenda looked at me. "Dig out the map and let's figure out where we're headed next."

I pointed to Aahz. "I'm letting the big guy carry it."

I thought Aahz would choke on the bread.

Tanda laughed, and the tension in the room eased a little.

Aahz took out the map and unfolded it on the table.

Glenda moved around so that she stood beside Tanda. I scooted over to get a better look as well.

Again the map had changed.

No surprise there. We were on Vortex #6, which was now clearly highlighted on the map. There were four lines from our dimension headed to four different places. I didn't like the sounds of the four dimensions at all.

Febrile was the one on the right, Hostile the next one, Durst the next, and Molder the farthest left.

Tanda shook her head. "I don't know any of them." "Neither do I," Aahz said.

"No way that you could," Glenda said. "They are even farther removed from Deva than this place."

She glanced at me to make sure I was listening, then pointed to Febrile.

"That place's coolest temperature is over one hundred and twenty. We wouldn't last five minutes there."

"Nice that the map designer put it on the map," I said.

"Traps," she said. "The Cartograms loved to make these sorts of things."

"Cartograms?" I asked.

She gave me another of her wonderful smiles.

"They are an entire race who explore and map dimensions, and any time they find a treasure, they do one of these treasure maps to the location of the treasure, and then sell the map."

"I'd heard about them," Tanda said. "Never bothered to buy a map from one of them, though."

"They have booths in the Bazaar at Deva," Aahz said. "Never had the need to use their services."

"Did they do the map on the wall in the Shifter's tent?" I asked.

Glenda nodded. "I'd bet that any kind of map that shows different dimensions was done by a Cartogram. Every treasure map they do is magik and often contain puzzles and traps just like this one."

"Good to know," I said, glancing at Aahz. It was clear he hadn't known about the traps when we started out after this golden cow.

My mentor just frowned at me.

Glenda went on. She pointed at the dimension with the name Hostile.

"We don't even want to think about going there. Makes Febrile look cool."

Aahz nodded.

Glenda pointed to the next one. "Durst no longer exists. Something destroyed the entire dimension thousands of years ago."

"That leaves Molder," I said. "What's it like?"

"Only been there for a few moments with my father, tracking what happened to this map three buyers ago," Glenda said, shaking her head. "It's a dark, damp place where everything always seems to be changing. Even the ground seems to grow and move under your feet."

"So tell me," Tanda said to Glenda. "You've gone after this treasure with your father, and seen others do it. You must know the path at least a few steps ahead. Why can't we just jump over this step. Don't you know where the map will lead us?"

I had to admit that Tanda had a good point there. It would sure be a lot easier.

Glenda sighed, and even the sigh was a wonderful sound to my ears. She could sigh at me all she wanted.

"I wish I could," Glenda said.

"The map is magik," Aahz said. "It's never the same. Right?"

"Exactly," Glenda said. "Except for going through these Vortex locations at one point or another, the map changes the correct path with every user, and every attempt."

"Hmmm." Aahz said, staring at the piece of parchment. "Too bad we can't just take the magik out of the map and have it tell us the only true path to the dimension with the golden cow."

That gave me an idea. It was so simple it was probably stupid, so I didn't say anything aloud. Still, the thought kept rattling around in my head as the others continued their conversation.

What if I tapped into the magikal energy of the map, just like I did with the energy lines when I was casting a spell? Wouldn't that draw off the magik?

I made myself relax, then reached out with my mind and touched the map Aahz was holding, working at absorbing energy as I did.

At first nothing happened. Then the parchment began to tremble and an energy line sprang into being, running from the map to me.

It was a cool, tingly sensation, but strong, almost too strong, and getting stronger and stronger. I quickly opened up, letting the energy channel through me and into the ground, just as Aahz had taught me in some of our earliest lessons.

"What the..." Aahz exclaimed, letting go of the map.

Instead of falling, it hovered in midair.

"Skeeve!" Tanda shouted, but I ignored her, keeping my attention on what I wanted to happen.

Finally the energy flow slowed and ebbed until it was merely a trickle. I released my mental contact, and the parchment fluttered to the floor.

"Try looking at it now," I said.

All three of them were looking at me as if I had suddenly grown another head.

"Someone want to explain to me what just happened?" Glenda said, taking her gaze away from me to look back at the map.

Aahz frowned as he did the same.

Tanda laughed. "Master Magician Skeeve here just solved a whole bunch of our problems."

I stared at the map, not believing what I was seeing.

Now there was only one line from Vortex #6 to Molder, then a line from Molder to Vortex #5, then a line to a dimension called Baasss, then a line back to here, Vortex #6, then one final line to our cow dimension.

And the cow dimension now had a name.

Kowtow.

We could jump directly from here to Kowtow.

Glenda laughed and gave me the best hug I could ever remember. Her entire body pressed into mine, and I tingled in more places than I ever wanted to admit.

"My father was right," she said as she squeezed me even harder. "You really are special."

The sound of Aahz snorting didn't take away one bit of my enjoyment of the moment.

Chapter Five

"That's wild!"

J. WEST

"What kind of name is Kowtow?" I asked, pointing at our destination on the map after Glenda released me from the hug of the century.

No one answered me.

"How did you do that?" Glenda asked, staring at me. "I've never heard of anyone taking the magik out of a treasure map before."

Her beautiful brown eyes were huge and there was a look of what I took to be slight worry. Then I realized that what I was seeing wasn't worry. She was in awe of me. And having someone in awe of me was not a circumstance that often happened.

"Honestly," I said to her, "I'm not sure."

"Why is that no surprise?" Aahz said, his eyes rolling in disgust.

"Aahz said something about taking the magik out of the map," I said, going on, explaining to her what had happened while ignoring Aahz, "So I gave it a try. I tapped into its energy like I would a force line and just let it flow through me and into the ground. That's all I did. Honest."

Tanda looked as if she understood, but was saying nothing.

"The vortex dimensions are known to be powerful places for magik," Glenda said. "That's why no one lives here very long."

"So while we're here," Aahz said, glaring at me, "be careful!"

I pointed at the map. "What? Didn't I help?"

"I think you did," Tanda said. "Glenda, do you know this Kowtow dimension? Or do we have to go back to the Shifter to get there?"

Aahz moaned at the mention of the Shifter.

"I've been there a number of times," Glenda said. "Never thought of it as a place with a great treasure, though."

"Are there cattle there?" Aahz asked.

"More than you could ever imagine," Glenda said.

"So our next adventure," I said, smiling at Glenda, "is finding a single cow in a proverbial haystack of cows."

A puzzled frown came over her face, telling me clearly she had no idea what I had just said, and since I had no idea what a cow looked like, I didn't want to try to explain a haystack of them to her.

"What our young friend there was trying to say," Tanda added, "is that if there are a lot of cows, how are we going to find the one that gives golden milk?"

Glenda shrugged. "I have no idea. No one has ever gotten this far with this map before. It would have never occurred to me that the map led to Kowtow."

Aahz wasn't adding anything, so I figured it was safe to say what I was thinking.

"Wouldn't a cow that gave golden milk live in a golden palace?"

Again they just all three stared at me.

"More than likely," Tanda said, nodding slowly.

Silence again filled the small cabin. At that point I figured it was better to just eat more bread and leave the thinking up to them.

After an hour of planning and talking, at Aahz's suggestion, Glenda dimension-hopped us to Kowtow, to a location isolated enough that we wouldn't be seen by anyone. He figured that way we would have time for me to get us in disguises so that we looked like the local residents.

Before we hopped, Aahz made real sure that either Glenda or Tanda could hop back to this cabin.

And he had Glenda help him set his D-Hopper so he could as well. It seemed I was the only one

who didn't have an emergency getaway. I planned on making sure I was always close to one of them. Preferably Glenda.

After the hop, we ended up standing near a large rock cliff face. The air was warm and dry, and the sun was high overhead at the moment.

The area around us looked like desert, but the ground sloped away from us down to a lush, green valley. A road came over the hill beside the cliff, wound past where we were, and down the hill to what looked to be a small town built out of wood. From what I could tell there was no building over two stories tall. The buildings seemed to be centered around the main street.

"That town is called Evade," Glenda said. "Mostly cowboys and bars."

"Cowboys?" I asked. Since I had no idea what a cow looked like, I couldn't imagine what a boy cow would be, or why they would build a town.

"Cowboys are men who take care of the cows," Glenda said. "For some reason they're called that in just about every dimension there are cows or cattle."

I wanted to ask her what a woman who took care of cows was called.

"In this dimension," Glenda said, "the cowboys are a strange bunch, let me tell you."

Aahz stood, staring at the town in the valley below them.

"In what way?"

Glenda shrugged. "They seem to treat the cattle almost like they were sacred. They never hurt a cow, they never push a cow too hard, and they always talk nice to the cattle. And they protect them against anything."

"Now that is weird," Tanda said.

"Why?" I asked.

Aahz looked at me with one of his looks that said I was asking too many questions. I knew that look well, since I saw it two or three times a day.

"Because, in most dimensions, cows are nothing but food. Here, killing a cow is a hanging offense."

"So what do these cowboys look like?" I asked. For once, courtesy of my earlier adventures, I knew what a hanging offense was. In fact, I knew about it intimately enough to not want to dwell on the memory.

"Actually, in this dimension, they look a lot like the three of us." Glenda laughed. She glanced at Aahz. "We're going to have to do something about you, though, big boy. They don't know about demons here, let alone Pervects."

Aahz said nothing. I think he was just glad she didn't call him a Pervert, as so many did.

Suddenly, over the hill behind us, along the road, there was the sound of something coming. Glenda had us move back behind some rocks at the base of the cliff and watch. I made sure I had a pretty good view of the road so that I could disguise us all in the right clothes.

A minute later, two men appeared at the top of the rise. They were on horses and were headed slowly down the hill toward the town below. They both were dressed pretty much the same. They had on plaid shirts, jeans-like pants, high boots, and wide belts. Their skin was tan from a long time in the sun, and they wore wide-brimmed brown hats on their heads. One was a little older than the other and both had short hair and mustaches. They rode side-by-side in silence. After they got a distance down the hill, Tanda turned to me. "Get what they look like?" "Easy," I said.

Pulling in the energy I needed, I changed all of us into our local disguises. I gave us all black hats, and basically similar plaid shirts. Since I couldn't see beyond the clothes what my magik did when I disguised someone, I glanced at Glenda. "How do we look?"

"Perfect," she said. "Even Aahz's tan is red instead of green."

"Are we going to need horses?" I asked. "I can't do them."

"We might," Glenda said, looking frustrated. "Especially if the golden cow isn't close by. We might have to do some traveling, and, from what I remember, horses are the only means of travel here."

"Money?" Aahz asked. "We're going to need money as well."

"I don't think so," Glenda said. "This place doesn't use money."

I thought Aahz was going to have a heart attack. It was like telling him the sun would never come up again.

"So what do they use to trade and buy things with?" Tanda asked, also shocked at the very idea.

"Work," Glenda said. "Work is their capital."

Now I was just as lost as Aahz and Tanda looked.

Glenda went on. "You work for someone when you want something from them. They keep everything on IOU's. So if you want a drink or some food, you sign an IOU and then later you have to work off the debt."

"This is a strange place."

Glenda agreed and we started off down the hill, four strangers walking into a town full of cowboys. I just hope my disguises worked. Just in case, I stayed real close to Glenda. Not that that was a hardship or anything.

The town of Evade was active and primitive. The only street was appropriately enough called Main Street. It was dirt and hardened mud and very rough. It split two rows of wooden buildings with covered wooden sidewalks in front of them. Outside the main street were houses scattered through the farmlands, tucked into groves of strange-looking trees.

Music and laughter were coming from a number of the doors along Main Street. Bright-colored signs were over some of the doors, with names like Battlefield, Wild Horse, and Audrey's. I had no idea what any of those names meant.

Horse-drawn wagons and single horses were tied up on rails along the wooden sidewalks, and the entire town smelled like horse droppings, of which there were some pretty good-sized piles spaced along the road.

A man with a white hat and a big shovel was slowly picking up fresh horse leavings and tossing them onto the piles. I wanted to ask him what debt he was trying to pay off, or what he was trying to buy, because whatever it was, the price was too high.

When we reached the main area of town we stepped up on the sidewalk on the left side and into the shade. Suddenly I realized just how hot our walk from the cliff had been, and how lucky it was these people wore hats. The sun hadn't seemed that hot at first, after coming from Vortex #6, but now that we were in the shade, I realized how bad it was.

We strolled along the wooden sidewalk, trying to look as if we belonged. Of course, in a town that couldn't have more than a few hundred full-time residents, four newcomers stood out like a bad blister in new shoes.

"Howdy," the first man we passed said to us. He tipped his hat and just kept right on moving.

By the time I tipped my hat back, he was past us.

A woman in long skirts and a flower-patterned blouse walked past us a few moments later.

"Howdy," she said.

I tipped my hat, as did Aahz.

She smiled at us, showing some pretty strange-looking teeth.

After she was past us I glanced down at my neck to make sure the Translator Pendant that Tanda had given me was still there. It was, but it couldn't be working, because I had no idea what "howdy" meant.

I glanced at Tanda who just shrugged.

About a quarter of the way up the street into the town we stopped and leaned against a wooden wall and tried to look as if we were relaxed. No one was bothering us, or even paying us much attention. Across the street, high-energy music was coming out of the door labeled Audry's. I could see a number of people through the open door sitting at tables. It looked like a bar or restaurant of some sort.

"Now what?" Glenda asked, studying the man in the street who was picking up horse droppings.

"We're going to need information," Tanda said.

"And we just can't come out and ask for it," I said.

Everyone agreed.

"We're also going to need horses," Glenda said. "Unless you want to do more walking in this heat."

I glanced down the street at the open countryside beyond the limits of the small town. Walking back out into that for any distance would be a very bad idea.

We all agreed that we didn't want to do that as well.

"Well, we need two things," I said. "Information about the golden cow, and horses to get us to the treasure."

"Skeev and I will try the place across the street," Glenda said. "You two head for another one farther along."

"All right," Aahz said, surprising me by agreeing to Glenda's plan. "We meet back in the cabin on Vortex #6 in one hour."

I made sure Glenda understood, since she was my ride out of here. Then we stepped into the street, making a wide turn around one of the large piles of horsepoop the guy was collecting.

He just smiled at us and said, "Howdy."

I tipped my hat at him and he seemed satisfied enough to go back to work.

I was right in all fashions about Audry's Place. It was clear as we went through the door that it was both a restaurant and a bar. The bar was wooden and long, stretching the entire length of the left wall as we entered. A hatless guy wearing a white apron stood behind the bar, a rag in his hands. Three of the tables were occupied with a total of ten patrons, all of them eating what looked to be large plates of vegetables. The music was loud and had a pretty good beat to it. It seemed like it was coming from a piano in the back, only there was no one sitting at the piano.

Every person in the place glanced up at us as we entered, then went back to eating and talking as if they saw strangers every day and just didn't care. I considered that a good sign.

"Howdy, folks," the guy behind the bar said, wiping a spot off the wood surface in front of him.

"What's your pleasure?"

I had no idea what the guy meant. I sort of understood the words, but standing in the middle of a bar, I sure didn't understand why he was asking me about pleasure. Just a little too personal a question for someone I didn't know.

I glanced at Glenda, who seemed confused for a moment as well. Then she indicated I should follow her lead as she stepped toward the guy.

Glenda nodded her head at the bartender, sort of like tipping her hat as we reached the wide bar.

"A little something to drink, a little food, and a decent way to work off the debt." Clearly it had been the right thing to say, since the guy smiled like he had just hit the jackpot.

"Strangers are always welcome in my place," he said, reaching behind him and getting two glasses off the counter on the back wall. He put them on the bar and looked at Glenda, then me. "What'll wet your whistle?"

At that moment I was really glad that Glenda was doing the talking. I was fairly certain he was asking what we wanted to drink, but I wasn't totally certain, and I had no idea what he had to offer that could do that to a whistle.

"Oh," she said, "whatever you have will be fine with us."

The guy grabbed a large bottle of orange liquid and filled both glasses to the top. Then he slid them to the edge of the bar in front of us.

"Thank you, kind sir," Glenda said.

Again the guy beamed.

"Just grab a seat and I'll rustle you up some of my best grub."

At that moment I wanted to bang my translator pendant on the bar to make it work right.

"Nothing special," she said, smiling at the guy and winking.

He beamed again, his face red as he turned and headed for a back room. It seemed Glenda could charm just about any guy, no matter what dimension. I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

She picked up her orange drink, indicated that I do the same, and then headed for a table in the corner, a little ways away from the rest of the patrons. I followed her, taking a chair with my back to the wall so I could see everything going on.

After we were both seated I whispered to her, "You can understand him?"

She shrugged. "Mostly going with the flow."

"So we're going to have to eat grubs," I whispered, "to go with the flow?"

I had never eaten a grub, and wasn't excited about having my first now.

She laughed and patted my hand. "I think 'grub' means food in this dimension."

"Well, that's a relief."

"Yeah, isn't it."

I took a tentative sip of my drink and damn near spat it all over the table. It wasn't orange juice at all. It tasted like pulped carrots. Sour-tasting carrots.

"Interesting," Glenda said after taking a drink. Then she turned to me and made a face that only I could see. She didn't much like it either.

I glanced around at the other patrons in the place. Everyone had a glass of the carrot drink in front of them. It looked as if it was the only drink the place served.

At that moment the guy came out of the back room carrying two plates. With a smile and a flourish he slid them in front of us. Vegetables. Asparagus, carrots, celery, a few sliced tomatoes, and part of a cucumber, artfully arranged on a bed of what looked like grass.

"Wonderful," Glenda said, smiling at the man with her biggest and most alluring smile. "I hope we can find a way to repay you for this feast."

The guy had the common decency to blush. "I'm sure we will work something out." At that he beat a hasty retreat to the bar. Fingers seemed to be the preferred method of getting the food from the plate to the mouth, so I picked up one piece of celery and bit into it. It was soft, not fresh, and had a faint taste of horsedung.

I hope I managed to swallow it without looking too insulting to anyone who could see me.

Glenda tried a piece of cucumber. I could tell it wasn't good either from how slowly she chewed and then forced herself to swallow.

"We're in a vegetarian dimension," I whispered as Glenda gave the bartender an okay sign that the food was good. "What do they do with all the cattle you claim are here?"

"I have no idea," Glenda whispered. "But if I have to eat or drink any more of this garbage I think I'm going to be sick."

"Yeah, me too."

"Pretend to eat and I'll see if I can get some answers" she said.

She stood and moved over to where the man stood behind bar. I couldn't tell what she was saying, but after a moment he laughed and looked at me as if I were the brunt of a joke. I pretended to bite and chew on an asparagus spear and just smiled back.

At that moment Aahz and Tanda came in. They glanced first at Glenda, then saw me and came over and sat down in the other two chairs, their backs to the main part of the room.

"Started without us, I see," Tanda said.

"Couldn't resist," I said loud enough for the bartender guy to hear. Then I whispered, "This stuff is awful."

"What is she doing?" Aahz asked, his voice a barely audible whisper.

I pretended to eat a tiny bit of grass, covering my mouth as I answered him.

"Getting information. And for heaven's sake, don't order the food. You have any luck?"

"None," Tanda said.

A few seconds later the bartender pointed down the street in the opposite direction from where we had entered the town. Glenda smiled and came back over.

"Horses are sold down at a stable just outside the edge of town," she said. "I told him we'd clean the kitchen for our food and drink."

"I wonder what we'll have to do for horses?" Aahz asked, shaking his head.

Glenda shrugged and kept pretending to eat.

"Besides," I said. "We don't know where we're going yet."

"True," she said.

"That's our biggest problem," Aahz said.

Suddenly it dawned on me that we should know where we were going. What kind of magik map would simply lead to a dimension without giving directions to the location of the treasure in the dimension? After all, a world was a very large place to be looking for one cow.

I had taken the magik out of the map as far as getting to this crazy dimension. But it hadn't occurred to us to check the map once we were here.

"Aahz," I whispered. "Check the map."

He frowned at me. "Why would I?"

He must have had the same thought I had. Maybe, just maybe, the magik was back for local directions.

He reached into his pouch and pulled out the parchment. Since his back was to the bar, he kept the map in front of him so no one else in the place could see it. Then, slowly, he opened it.

It was instantly clear to me, as I pretended to love a hunk of cucumber, that the map had again changed. It was no longer a dimension map, but now a map of Kowtow.

The customers closest to us finished off their veggie plate and got up to leave. That left only two other tables and the guy behind the bar. And at the moment he wasn't looking.

"Open it all the way and see where we are," Glenda said. "It's clear."

Aahz, much to his credit, didn't turn around to check to see if she was right. He simply opened the map and spread it out over our plates of bad food.

No one paid any attention.

The golden cow palace was marked on the map. Well, at least we knew where that was.

Evade, the town we were in now was also marked. The road between them was marked as the lines between dimensions had been marked. There were a lot of other towns along the way, and one thing was very, very clear. We were still a long way from the golden cow.

Glenda studied the map hard, almost as if she were memorizing it.

"See anything that will help?" Tanda asked.

"If we go back to Vortex #6 I can get us a lot closer."

"Thank heavens," I said.

"Don't be thanking anyone yet," she said, staring at the map. "It's still going to be too far to walk."

Aahz folded up the map, put it back in his pouch, and stood.

"Tanda and I will go find a secluded place to hop back," he whispered, leaning forward so only the three of us could hear him. "Think you two can get out of here without being noticed?"

"Easy," Glenda said.

"See you there," Tanda said, standing and moving toward the front door.

After we had pretended to eat more of our lunch, pushing the stuff into a pile on one side of the plate like I used to do as a kid, Glenda got up and went back over to the guy behind the bar.

I kept pretending, wishing the stuff tasted good, since the idea of eating had made me hungry.

After a moment the guy in charge nodded to Glenda, smiling as if she had promised him more than I wanted to think about.

She motioned that I should join her and I did, carrying our plates. The guy led us through the door and into what might be called a kitchen. There were barrels of the different veggies against one wall, and some dirty plates and glasses stacked near a water barrel. No wonder everything tasted so bad. I didn't want to even think about the fact that I had eaten a bite of some of the stuff from this room.

"Wash water is in the barrel," he said. He tossed me a dirty towel. "Dry the dishes before wiping down everything else."

Glenda put her hand on his shoulder and eased him around toward the door.

"Don't worry," she said. "We'll get everything all cleaned up."

"I know you will," he said. The guy was more putty in her hands than I was, and for some reason that thought just annoyed me.

He went back out through the door and Glenda turned to face me.

"Well, handsome, my father was right. You are special." I could feel myself blushing. "Thanks."

"No, thank you," she said, "for everything. In all the years of trying to find the silly treasure on that map, I never thought I'd know exactly where it was at."

"Well, now we do, and we can get there pretty soon," I said. "Jump us back to Vortex #6."

She smiled and shook her head.

"Sorry, my prince in a white hat. Maybe next time."

With a slight wave and a kiss motion, she vanished in a slight POOF!

"That's not funny," I shouted, staring at where she had been.

The guy came in, looking puzzled.

"What's not funny? And where is your beautiful friend?"

I glanced around, then pointed at the back door.

"I told her I'd get started on the dishes. She'll be right back, I'm sure."

"Good," he said. "Let me know when she returns. She said she had a surprise for me."

He headed back out into the main room, leaving me standing there alone in a strange kitchen.

In a strange dimension.

It seemed he wasn't the only one Glenda had planned a surprise for.

Chapter Six

"Alone again...naturally."

R. CRUSOE

Now I have to admit that my first reaction after Glenda left me standing there in that restaurant kitchen was to scream and shout and call out her name, along with Aahz and Tanda's names. Screaming would have covered up the panic I felt, but I knew for a fact that screaming would have done no good. But I still wanted to, more than anything.

I didn't.

My second reaction was to run like crazy out the back door, but then I would be a wanted man for skipping out on the lunch bill, and considering I might be stuck here for some time, I managed to not run either.

But I sure wanted to.

The third reaction I had was to go into automatic to give my poor mind time to sort through what had just happened. That was as good as anything I could do, so I turned and started washing off the dishes, dumping the garbage in a big pail, and dipping the plates enough in the dirty barrel water that they pretended to be clean.

I could imagine that on the outside I looked calm and collected, but on the inside I was a mess.

"Don't panic. Don't panic. Don't panic," I kept saying to myself, timing the phrase with deep breaths and the dipping of the dishes in the water.

Finally I got myself under enough control to ask a few questions.

Why had she left me?

No easy answer. At least none that I wanted to really admit, yet there was nothing else that made sense. She had left. That simple. She had seen the location of the golden cow treasure and that was the last thing she needed from me or Aahz or Tanda. On the first opportunity she had headed off on her own.

Leaving me alone in a kitchen in a strange dimension. "Don't panic," I said to myself, dipping more dishes. I dumped more half-eaten food into the bucket, dipped another plate, and asked the next question. Had I been a fool?

The answer to that one came clearly in Aahz's voice. Yes.

He would also say it was nothing new or unusual. She had played me, and Aahz and Tanda, like a finely tuned musical instrument, using my heart and my emotions as the strings.

"What a fool," I said aloud.

There was no one in there to agree with me, but I didn't need anyone to agree. I knew I had been a fool.

I scraped, dipped, and went on to the next question.

What do I do now?

I had no idea.

Nothing. I was stuck here for the moment. Maybe forever if something happened to Aahz and Tanda, or if they couldn't find me.

The thought made me panic, so I kept washing dishes.

After a few minutes the guy came back in with more dirty plates. He was clearly disappointed that Glenda was not back yet, but he said nothing. He put the plates down and then left.

I dumped the awful food and dipped the plates, doing my best to keep calm. But pretty soon I was out of dishes to wash. I used the dirty rag to wipe off all the plates and stack them, then I wiped off the counter as well. After I was done I couldn't think of anything else to do, so I went back out to the bar.

"My friend came in a few minutes ago," I said. He looked as if he might cry, so I went quickly on with my lie.

"She said she will be back in about an hour with your surprise."

That brightened him right up again.

"You want to check what I have done back there?"

"Nope," he said, smiling. "Everything is even with you as far as I'm concerned."

"Great grub you got here," I said, patting my stomach and then tipping my hat.

"Thanks, partner," he said, smiling and showing me the same ugly-looking teeth the woman had.

"Anytime. You come back now, ya hear?"

"Sure will," I said, and headed out into the street.

The sun was still cooking the hard center of the street, so I stayed on the sidewalk, tipping my hat and saying "Howdy" to anyone who passed me. The guy with the shovel must have finished cleaning up the street, leaving only the big piles of horse droppings as evidence of his work. It hadn't been much longer than fifteen minutes since Glenda had left me, even though it felt like an eternity. There was no sign of her or Aahz or Tanda.

I kept moving, fighting down the desire to shout out Aahz's name. And the desire to just run. I didn't know where I would run, but for some reason running was a massive desire.

I reached the edge of town and stood on the last board of the covered sidewalk looking up the road that wound toward the cliff where we had hopped into this dimension. I was sure Tanda and Aahz would come back for me.

Unless, of course, Glenda had done something to them on Vortex #6.

I didn't want to think about that. If that happened, I was going to be stuck right here for a very long time.

There was no sign of anyone on the road coming down the hill. I turned and headed back up the sidewalk, doing my "Howdy" bit to anyone who passed, with the hat-tipping routine added in. When I reached the other end of town and the end of the shaded sidewalk, I stared off into the distance to where the road vanished into some low hills.

Then I turned around and started back.

At the moment there was nothing else left for me to do.

I managed to walk the entire length of the town six times before I decided that my behavior might attract attention I didn't want. When I reached the end of the sidewalk again, on the end of town where we had first entered, I sat down with my back to the wall.

Overhead the sun was slowly dropping. It didn't look like it would be more than a few hours before it set. Then what would I do?

I didn't have a clue.

The question as to why Aahz and Tanda hadn't come back for me yet bothered me a lot. I figured that with my washing dishes and pacing the length of the town, a good two hours had gone by. The pacing had helped me some, allowing me to work off some of the panic and fear. For the moment it felt as if my mind was working pretty clear again, and I was proud of myself for how well I had done so far. I just hoped I would have a chance to tell Aahz and Tanda and let them be proud of me. I stared out at the empty road. The last thing I wanted was to be stuck on a vegetarian planet with some weird, hat-tipping people who didn't believe in money.

Down the street a couple people looked at me, seeming almost shocked because I was sitting on the sidewalk. I stood, tipped my hat at them, and leaned against the building instead. They smiled as if I were now suddenly all right, and went about their business. For the next few minutes I stared out at the empty road leading off toward the rock cliffs, trying to decide what to do. Should I walk back up there or stay right where I was?

What would I do if I got to the cliff face and they weren't there, which was likely? It would be almost dark by then and I would have to spend the night out in the wild. And, for some reason, that idea didn't sit well.

And what would I do if they never came back here? Should I head for the city with the golden cow in it? I remembered enough from the map that the city's name was Dodge. I could work my way there, given time.

I'd make that decision if Aahz and Tanda didn't come back, Right now I just needed to make sure Aahz and Tanda could find me when they did get here. This little town was where they had left me; this was where I was going to stay. At least for the immediate future, however long that might be. If Glenda had managed to do something awful to Aahz and Tanda, I would face that problem later. Much later. And somehow make sure Glenda paid for her sins.

With one last look at the empty road, I turned and headed back to Audry's. At least there I could sit in the window and watch the street without being obvious.

The music was still coming from what looked like a piano, even though the place was empty. The guy behind the bar smiled at me, then frowned when Glenda didn't follow me in the door.

I decided I needed to have him on my side. I walked up to the bar.

"Has my friend been back here yet?"

"No," he said. "You ain't found her?" There was instant worry in his question.

"Haven't seen her since I left here earlier," I said. "Been walking the length of your fine town looking for her."

"I was a wonderin' what you were doin'," he said. "Can't imagine what might have happened to her, though. The full moon is still a few days off, so the round-up couldn't have taken her. At least not yet."

I desperately wanted to ask him what the full moon had to do with anything, and what a round-up was, but he said both so matter-of-factly that I knew I would blow my cover if I asked.

"Yeah, couldn't be that." I said instead.

"She was askin' about horses," he said. "Maybe she got one and headed down the road?"

I shook my head. "I checked. She didn't. Mind if I just sit over there and wait?"

"Not at all," he said, reaching down and grabbing a glass. Before I could think of a reason to stop him that sounded good, he poured me another glass of the carrot juice.

"On me," he said, sliding the glass toward me across the bar. "Just tell your friend when you see her that she still owes me a surprise."

"Oh, trust me," I said. "When she promises a surprise, she always pays off."

He didn't know how truthful that statement was.

He beamed at that and I took my glass of juiced carrots and went over and sat down so I could see out the window. The shadows were growing long and the heat was leaving the main street of Evade. It looked as if the nights in this area were pretty chilly. I was glad I hadn't decided to go up to the cliffs just for that reason.

Let alone whatever a round-up was.

I took a sip of the carrot juice just to quench my thirst, than sat back and watched the few people still out on the street. They all seemed to have tasks and walked purposefully, tipping their hats to each other.

An hour later I had managed to sip down almost half a glass of the juice.

My bartender friend was looking a little worried, and the shadows were almost completely across the street. I figured there wasn't much more than a half-hour until sunset.

"I'm afraid I got to close up, you know," he said finally after pacing back and forth a few times near the bar. "You got a place to bunk for the night?"

I assumed bunk meant sleep, so I said, "No, haven't given it much thought."

He looked shocked. It was as if I'd told him I'd killed his mother. His mouth opened, then closed, then opened again, but no words came out.

One of the main buildings right in the center of town had a sign on it that said Hotel Evade, so I tried to cover.

"Just figuring on stopping in the hotel. Sure hope they got rooms, now that you mention it."

He looked relieved. "I'm sure they do," he said. "That's the law."

He laughed and I laughed with him, even though I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Thanks for the drink," I said, sliding the glass across the

table to him and standing. "I guess it is getting dark enough for me to get going." The promise of me leaving had him back to his old happy self.

"I'm sure your friend will get inside all right," he said, "Maybe she's already at the hotel. When you see her tomorrow, bring her by here for breakfast." "It'll be my pleasure," I said. "And your surprise." He laughed. I laughed.

Then I stepped out onto the sidewalk. He slammed and latched the door behind me, bolting it as if a thousand thugs were going to try to break it down. Then the shutters on the inside of the window closed.

The shadows were long on the street and there wasn't a person in sight anywhere. Every window was shuttered, every door closed. The sound of music that had come from a few different establishments was now replaced by the silence of the coming darkness. My stomach started to clamp up, not from the little bit of carrot juice, but from worry. Something very major happened at night on this dimension. I didn't know what it might be, but it was something that made this town bolt its doors and get off the street before the sun went down. And if I was smart, I would do the same thing.

I walked to the end of town and looked up the road toward the rock cliffs. In the fading light there wasn't a soul on the road. Finding Aahz and Tanda would have to wait until tomorrow.

But I had a feeling that, with every hour, finding them was going to become less and less likely.

I turned and headed down the sidewalk toward the hotel. The door was closed and shutters were covering the windows, but when I pounded a very nice woman behind the desk let me in. She didn't ask for anything, or even suggest something I could do to pay for my room. She just said it was lucky I got it when I did, then showed me a comfortable room on the second floor with a window that was bolted closed and the shutters drawn tight.

There was a bed, a small water basin on a dresser, and an indoor toilet down the hall.

I thanked her and she went away.

I checked to see if I could open the shutters, but they were secured solidly. Whatever was going to happen tonight, I wasn't going to be able to see it from this window.

I lay down on the fairly comfortable bed, not even bothering to take off my clothes.

Images of Tanda and Aahz floated through my mind. If Glenda had done something to them on Vortex #6 there wasn't a darn thing I could do to help. I was stuck here, without the ability to hop dimensions, in a world where everyone ate vegetables and was afraid to go out at night.

Even though there wasn't a sound from outside, it was a very long and sleepless night in that little room.

Chapter Seven

"You can't go home again."

PRINCESS LEIA

At the first sign of light through the shutters, I went downstairs. The sun was barely up, the shadows still long in the street, yet the front door to the hotel was wide open and all the shutters on the windows had been retracted. These people didn't like the night, that was for sure. I desperately wanted to ask them what they were afraid of, but there just wasn't a way to ask the question without giving away the fact that I didn't belong here, in this dimension. And at the moment I had enough problems to face without bringing more down on my head. Aahz had always told me to solve one thing at a time.

The problem I had right now was that I wasn't sure I could solve any of my problems.

I went down the street to Audry's, tipping my hat to the guy with the shovel who was back in the street picking up after the horses. My old bartender friend and employer from yesterday had the door to Audry's open and the shutters retracted. I was the first customer.

"Didn't find her, huh?" he asked as I entered.

"She must have got sidetracked and stayed with a friend," I said. "She'll show up pretty soon, I bet." He winked. "Yeah, pretty women can lose track of time."

I didn't want to think about how he came up with that.

I had decided about halfway through the night that I was so hungry, I could even eat old veggies.

"Mind if I have a small breakfast and a glass of your wonderful beverage?"

"You bet," he said, pouring me some of the carrot juice.

I looked at the glass of orange liquid. Given enough time I might actually only loathe the stuff.

"You're lucky this morning," he said. "Just got a fresh wagon-load of the best from the fields."

"Terrific," I said.

He vanished back into the kitchen and I took up my seat at the window, taking a sip of the juice. It wasn't as bad as I remembered it from yesterday, but I was sure that was because I was another day hungry. From my seat at the table I could see the entire street and all the activity along a part of it. If Aahz and Tanda came down the Main Street, I'd know it.

The bartender brought me a small plate of veggies that were actually hard and fresh. I was shocked and managed to eat them all over the next three hours, plus finish the entire glass of carrot juice. Surprisingly enough, after that I was no longer hungry.

But I was a lot more worried about ever seeing Aahz and Tanda again.

After another hour I decided that I was going to head back up to the cliffs. I offered to wash the plates and clean up the kitchen to pay for my breakfast, but my bartender friend told me to come back later, have some dinner, and do it then. I agreed, hoping I'd never see him or his kitchen again. It took just over an hour in the mid-day heat to walk up the road to where we had first arrived in this dimension. I didn't meet anyone on the road, and the air was so hot and silent near the cliffs, it felt as if I was walking through my own tomb.

I shook myself off and tried not to let my thoughts go to the dark side of this.

I moved over to the rocks where we had hidden to watch the two guys go by. My head was sweating under my hat so that when I reached the shade near the cliff I took it off.

I was setting my hat on a rock when I saw the glint of metal tucked down in a crack in the rock. I glanced around, but no one was watching, so I leaned down and looked closer, not believing my eyes. There, tucked into an opening in one rock, was a short metal cylinder, like nothing I had seen in this dimension so far. It was the D-Hopper.

I carefully pulled it out, noticing that a folded piece of paper came with it. The map!

For some reason Aahz and Tanda had left me the D-Hopper and the map. More than likely they had suspected Glenda, while I had been too blind with lust or love to see anything.

I looked at the D-Hopper to make sure I wasn't hallucinating in the heat. It was real. I held it up like an idol and did a little dance of joy right there behind the rock. For the first time I had some options. I could do something instead of just waiting and hoping. The relief was almost more than I could take.

"Slow down and think," I said to myself, hearing Aahz's voice in my head as clearly as if he were standing beside me.

I took a few deep breaths of the hot air and looked out over the valley toward the town below. If Aahz and Tanda had walked up here to hide this for me, Glenda had beat them back to Vortex #6. And more than likely she had gotten the jump on them, which was what had kept them from coming back for me.

That thought took all the excitement out of the moment. I just hoped they were still alive. Glenda didn't strike me as being bloodthirsty, but I had been wrong about her before. More than likely if she considered Aahz and Tanda competition in getting the treasure, she would do something to stop them. She hadn't considered me a problem.

But something had stopped them from coming back, that much was clear. They were the ones that now needed rescuing, not me. The tables had turned and I needed to make sure I did this right. The life of my friends might depend on it.

I tucked the map in my pouch and sat on the rock with the D-Hopper on my lap, trying to make myself think what I needed to do next. The D-Hopper was set for Vortex #6. That was good, but if I went there, and couldn't find Aahz and Tanda, could I get back here? At least here I could live on carrot juice and bad veggies. I didn't give myself much of a chance on Vortex #6, even with increased magik powers in that dimension.

I had a slight working knowledge of the D-Hopper from carrying one on the shopping trip with Tanda. There was a place on the D-Hopper that set the current dimension as a return point. I carefully looked over the cylinder, then without changing the setting for Vortex #6, I set the current dimension as a return point.

I double, then triple-checked myself. If I triggered the D-Hopper I would jump to Vortex #6. If I triggered it again, I would jump back to this spot.

Okay, that problem was solved.

I stood and was about to hop when I remembered what I might be going into.

"Stop and think," I said aloud, again with Aahz's voice echoing through my head.

With luck, the D-Hopper would put me back into the cabin, but in case it didn't, I needed to be ready.

What happened if Glenda was still there with them? I needed something to fight her with. I picked up a good-sized rock that fit nicely in my hand. It wasn't much, but it might be enough if it came to a fight.

"Okay," I said aloud. "Anything else?"

I couldn't think of anything. And in the heavy coat I was starting to sweat more than I had before.

"Think, then act," I said, repeating what Aahz had said a hundred times. "It's time to act."

With one last look at the town of Evade down in the valley, I took a deep breath and triggered the D-Hopper.

The storm slammed into me like a hammer. I tucked the D-Hopper into my shirt and focused on how Tanda had led us the other three times to the cabin. The dust didn't let me see anything around me, but I knew there were some scattered trees. We had passed them the last two times.

Tanda had gone slightly downhill and to the right, so I figured out what I thought was directly downhill, then angled a little to the right, counting my steps to make sure that if I was on the wrong path, I could get back. After twenty steps could see the faint shape of a tree. I was sure that had been there the last time, so I kept going.

Another thirty slogging steps and another tree loomed out of the blowing dust. I thought that had been there as well. So far so good.

I kept moving for fifty more steps before I saw the faint light in the window of the cabin below me. I had almost missed it, walking too high-along the hillside.

I eased my way down to the cabin and tried to look in the window, but the dirt and shades made it so that I couldn't see anything.

It looked as if I was going to have to go in, hard and fast, like a soldier going after a dangerous outlaw.

I got to the door, braced myself, and eased open the door latch then shoved hard, the rock from Kowtow ready in my hand as I stumbled in.

My momentum pushed me three steps into the room before I caught my balance and stopped. I had the rock raised to hit at Glenda, who I expected to be standing there, ready to fight me.

She wasn't there.

The cabin was warm and comfortable, just like the last time I had seen it.

Tananda and Aahz were sitting at the table, eating what smelled like beef stew with slices of homemade bread.

"Nice entrance," Tanda said, smiling at me. "What took you so long?"

Aahz just shook his head.

"Shut the door, would you?"

I stood there with the rock in the air over my head, not really believing what I was seeing. I had so convinced myself that Aahz and Tanda were in trouble that I couldn't believe that they were simply having lunch and waiting for me. Why had they let me stay the entire day and night in Kowtow?

Why had they chanced that I would even find the D-Hopper where they had left it?

"Door!" Aahz said. "You born in a barn or something?"

Behind me the storm was raging, blowing dust into the cabin. I lowered the rock, tossed it out into the dust, and then closed the door.

Tanda stood and came up to me, smiling. "Aahz, I told you he'd make it just fine," she said, giving me a hug that convinced me that she was just fine, and I wasn't dreaming all this.

Aahz snorted. "After all the mooning over our friend Glenda, I didn't think his brain would ever work again."

I asked the one question I wanted to know most of all.

"Why didn't you come back?"

"We couldn't," Tanda said, patting me on the back and leading me to the table, where she slid some bread toward me as I sat down.

I stared at my mentor, who was just eating and not paying much attention to me at the moment. He did that when he was very angry or very happy, and at the moment I honestly didn't know which it was.

"Stew?" she asked, holding up a pot of what was making the room smell so good. "Glenda left us enough food to last for a few weeks at least."

"Nice of her," Aahz said, the anger clearly there.

"When you didn't come back for me I thought you were both dead."

"We would have been dead in four or five weeks," Aahz said. "When the food ran out."

Tanda served me up a dish of the stew and then sat down next to me after patting my shoulder. "So why couldn't you come back?" I asked, not wanting to eat until I had some answers. "What happened?"

"Well," Aahz said, still not looking at me, "we both knew Glenda was up to something, and was going to try to double-cross us."

"And we expected her to leave you on Kowtow," Tanda said.

"You expected that?" I was stunned and suddenly angry. "Why didn't you at least warn me?"

Aahz looked me directly in the eye. "Would you have listened, apprentice?"

"Yes," I said defensively.

Now they both laughed.

Clearly they thought I had been too much under Glenda's spell. And the more I thought about it, the more I saw that they were right, at least to a point. When Glenda started her act on the bartender, I started to get suspicious, but not enough to think it through.

"You were the closest to her, apprentice," Aahz said, his voice stern and in lecture mode. "You should have been warning us about her, not the other way around."

As normal, Aahz was right.

"So what happened here?" I asked, trying to not admit I had been wrong, even though we all knew I had been.

"We headed up to the rocks and left the D-Hopper and the map," Tanda said, "then I jumped us here."

"And right into Glenda's waiting arms," Aahz said. "Just as she had been planning."

"She used a dimension-blocking spell on me," Tanda said. "She searched us for the D-Hopper, wished us both luck when she couldn't find it or the map, and hopped out."

"I assume she's going after the treasure," Aahz said. "And now she's got a full day's start on us." So what I had been feeling from Aahz was anger, both at me and at the fact that we might lose the treasure, after getting so close.

"So what's a dimension block?"

"A spell that keeps another person from jumping out of a dimension," Aahz said. "Some cultures use it to imprison people. It's a pretty basic spell."

"That you haven't taught me yet," I said.

He shrugged. "There's a lot I haven't taught you. And after falling so easily for this Glenda's charms and smooth talk, I'm not sure if I ever will."

Tanda patted Aahz's green hand across the table.

"Easy on your apprentice. He's young and full of hormones. He did get back here, didn't he?"

I wanted to ask what a hormone was, but figured I'd get that information from Tanda later, when Aahz wasn't around to make fun of my stupidity. He was disgusted enough with me as it was. And this time around I agreed with him. I shouldn't have been so easily taken with Glenda. She'd given me a couple of compliments and I'd been putty in her hands.

I looked at Tanda. "So once you jump out of here with the D-Hopper, the spell is broken?"

"Exactly," she said.

"Finish up," Aahz said. "We've given her enough of a head start as it is."

"So how do we get the treasure home once we find it?" I asked, then instantly realized just how stupid my question was. It had been Glenda who had told us we were too far from any of our known worlds to dimension-hop safely. That had been another of Glenda's lies.

Tanda shook her head. "I think that's where Glenda got me. She blocked my sense of dimensions when we got near her. When we jumped back here from Kowtow, into the storm, I could sense Vortex #4 and Vortex #2. We can get home any time we want."

My relief at that, combined with my relief at finding Aahz and Tanda all right, was more than I could handle. I stared at my stew, trying to make myself eat as much of it as I could. Doing anything else and I just might fall apart completely.

"So what did you do when she left you?" Tanda asked.

I shrugged, making myself focus on what I had managed to do right.

"Paid our bill by doing the dishes so no one would be chasing me, then explored the town to see what I could see, then sat and waited, staying in the open so that you could find me."

"And slept?" Aahz said, his voice sounding disgusted.

"Not really," I said. "I got a hotel room because those people are deathly afraid of being outside at night. And of something called a round-up."

"Really?" Tanda asked.

I glanced up from my stew. Even Aahz was now showing interest.

"Yeah, they bolt their doors and shutter every window, every night," I said. "I couldn't think of a way to ask them what they were afraid of without tipping my hand that I was a demon. And at that point I had other problems to figure out, like what to do next if you two didn't come back."

Aahz nodded. "So we need to be careful at night."

"The bartender guy said the round-up was still a few days off, since it wasn't the full moon yet."

"I wonder what they're rounding up?" Tanda asked.

"Or who's doing the rounding?" Aahz added. "There's a lot to Kowtow we don't know. You have the map?"

"I sure do," I said, taking it out of my pocket and handing it to him.

As I did I had another realization. The map was magik. It hadn't shown us the right path to Kowtow until I took the magik out of it, but back on Kowtow the magik had returned to the map.

"Aahz," I said, smiling at my mentor, "you know, don't you, that the magik returned to the map when we reached Kowtow?"

"Yeah," he said, almost sneering at me. "So? Glenda saw it as well."

"Exactly," I said, smiling at my green mentor, "Glenda looked at the map while we were in Evade. Right?"

Suddenly Tanda burst out laughing, long and hard and so loud I thought she might hurt herself.

I smiled at the puzzled expression on my mentor's face. Considering how stupid I had been lately, getting back on top and giving him some good news felt good.

"The map is a puzzle," I said. "That basic nature of the map won't change just because we reached Kowtow."

Suddenly the light in Aahz's eyes brightened and slowly a smile crept over his green-scaled face.

"Glenda has the wrong location."

"Exactly," I said. "The map changes every time we get closer, just as it did with dimensions. I'm betting it will do that on Kowtow as well."

Aahz put the folded map back in his belt pouch and stood, suddenly in a hurry.

"Great thinking, Skeeve," he said. "Let's get back to Kowtow. Glenda is going to come looking for us to get the map when she discovers she has wrong information. And when she does, I want to be ready for her this time."

I liked that idea a lot.

Chapter Eight

"Flying. It's the only way to travel!"

B. HOLLY

We arrived back at the cliff face on Kowtow with less than two hours of daylight left. The day was still hot and dry, and nothing had changed in the general area since I had left a few hours before. I quickly disguised all three of us again in the standard wear of the people of this dimension.

We had packed some food and containers of water. Aahz didn't much like the idea of eating vegetables. Pervects were mostly meat-eaters. Aahz checked over the D-Hopper and then reset the dimension and hid it in his shirt.

"Ahh, that feels good," Tanda said, stretching toward the sun, her white hat tipped back, her large belt buckle glistening in the sun.

"The heat?" I asked.

"Nope. The dimension block being lifted. Amazing how much you miss the ability to hop after you've had it and then it's taken away."

"Yeah, I know," Aahz said.

"Oh, sorry, big guy," she said.

"Gotten used to it," he said.

I couldn't even imagine how Aahz felt, once being a powerful magician and then having his powers taken away from him because of a practical joke by my previous mentor. My mentor had been killed before he could lift the joke. Now Aahz just had to wait for the joke to wear off and his powers to come back, which he said would take more time than I wanted to think about.

Aahz unfolded the magik map and laid it on the top of a rock so we could all study it.

The town of Evade was clearly marked as our starting point, with a road leading from it to a town called Baker. In Baker two roads split off to two other towns, then two roads left each of those towns. Eventually a few of the roads led to Dodge, where it was marked that the treasure was. Where Glenda was heading.

But was the golden-milk-giving cow there? I was betting it wasn't. I was betting the map would change when we reached Baker. And then keep on changing with every city after that until we finally found the right city.

Glenda was going to be angry, and it served her right. I didn't want to see what Aahz would do to her the next time he saw her. Pervects are not to be messed with, and she had left him to die on a frozen planet. What he would do to her wasn't going to be pretty.

"So we're back needing horses," Aahz said, tracing along the distances between the towns. Then he looked at me. "Unless you think your flying spell is good enough here to work for us."

Flying wasn't the strongest of my magik, but it was one of the things Aahz had trained me to do first. It had saved us from a hanging and a few other tight spots in our last few adventures. But I wasn't sure if I could lift all three of us and carry us any distance.

"I can try," I said, wishing I hadn't said those words the moment I heard them come out of my mouth.

"Concentrate," Aahz said, going into teacher mode. "Search for your lines of power and use them, pull them in, let them flow through you."

"You can do it, Skeeve," Tanda said.

I wasn't so sure. Each place had power lines, invisible things that all magicians got their energy from. Some places, like the area of the cabin in Vortex #6 were jam-packed with power. Back at the cabin I could have flown fifty people, but here there wasn't much magik power. In fact, it seemed almost empty.

I stretched out my mind, holding onto the power that I could feel, and then concentrating on bringing it in and using it to lift all three of us. A moment later we all were off the ground and into the hot air.

"Not too high," Aahz warned. "Keep us just three or four paces off the ground."

I was glad to do that, because it was easier. And much safer to boot. I lowered all three of us back to a position just above the top of the boulders and held us there for a few moments to make sure I could do it, then I lowered us back to where we had started.

When I let us go I could feel the energy drain away. I was sweating and short of breath and needed a drink of water, but at least I had done it.

"Nice job," Tanda said, handing me a canister of water. "How long do you think you could keep that up?" Aahz asked, watching me with a look that I knew meant he could see through any extra bragging I might try.

"Honestly, I don't know," I said after I took a long drink of the wonderfully cold liquid. "With rests, and touching each of you as I do it, maybe fifteen minutes at a time. The lines of power are weak in this area. They may be stronger in other areas and then I could last longer."

Aahz nodded, seemingly satisfied with my answer. He turned to Tanda.

"Can you do a cushion spell, in case he drops us?" "Not a problem," Tanda said.

"What do we do if someone sees us?" I asked. "I'm not sure that I can do a bird disguise spell as well as keeping us flying."

"We're not going to worry about that," Aahz said. Clearly he didn't think I could either.

"We'll walk when we see someone," Tanda said, staring at the town below us in the valley. "Just keep us close to the ground and over a road."

I nodded. "Whenever you're ready." "Good," Aahz said. "Take us down to Evade, we'll walk through town and out the other side."

I nodded, glancing at how low the sun was getting in the sky. We'd have to deal with where we were going to stay later.

I doubted that Aahz would want to stay in Evade. With luck we'd reach Baker, and they'd have a hotel there as well.

I moved over and stood between Aahz and Tanda, putting a hand on each of their arms. Then I concentrated on taking in what power I could find and lifting us about a pace off the ground.

"Hold on to your hats," I said as we lifted into the air.

I floated us down to the road and then picked up speed, skimming us toward Evade a lot faster than even a running horse could take us. To an outsider we must have looked very strange. Three strangers seeming to be just standing, but moving along the road at a very fast clip.

After only two minutes I was starting to feel the wear, but before I had to stop Aahz said, "I think we're close enough now."

What had cost me an hour of walking earlier had only taken two or three minutes of flying. Why hadn't I thought of that this morning?

I slowed and put us down at a normal walking pace. The moment I let go of the power I stumbled, but Tanda kept me from falling on my face. It was as if every bit of energy had been drained from my muscles, leaving them weak and noodle-like. "You'll be fine in a moment," Aahz said, keeping us walking at a good pace toward the now close edge of town.

He was right. A few more steps and I was sweating like a dam had broken, but I was able to walk. Tanda gave me some more water, and that brought even more of my energy back. I was starting to believe that I could do this. And flying, even though it tired me out, was a lot better than riding horses, let alone doing the job it would take to pay for one.

We got into town as people were starting to close up their businesses and shutter the windows. "You weren't kidding, were you?" Tanda said as we walked down the now mostly deserted sidewalk.

"They're afraid of something that comes out at night," I said. "I have no idea what it might be." As we passed in front of Audry's, my friend the bartender waved from inside the window. I tipped my hat back at him. These people might be strange vegetarians who were afraid of the dark, but they sure were nice. We passed the hotel without Aahz even hesitating. And I didn't say anything either. The last thing I wanted to let my mentor know was that the fear the locals felt had gotten to me as well during my one-night stay here. On the other side of town we stepped off the sidewalk and just kept walking, past a few homes with the shutters already drawn and bolted. Ten minutes later, with the sun still not touching the tops of the hills to the west, Aahz gave the all-clear. Again I touched each of them, pulled in the power, and lifted us, sending us down the road as fast as I dared take us, considering I had to make sharp corners and steep hills.

This time I lasted ten minutes before I had to stop. Water and a quick rest got me going again, just as the sun started to set. From what I could tell, we were a long way yet from Baker. It was getting noticeably cooler, which was also helping me.

"Can you keep going?" Tanda asked as I stopped for a second time and sat down on a rock beside the road.

"We're making good speed," Aahz said, clearly satisfied with our progress.

"We are," Tanda said, "but this is hard on Skeeve."

"I can keep going," I said, taking one more drink and then standing. "I just need to rest every ten minutes or so."

"Understandable," Aahz said. "For someone of your level of skill."

"For someone of any level," Tanda said, stepping to my defense. "There's not much power in this area. He's having to pull from a ways off."

"That true?" Aahz asked me.

"It is," I said. "But I said I can keep going and I can."

"Then we go when you're ready," Aahz said. "We don't have much light left and we won't be able to make the speed we are making now at night."

It was clear we were going to spend a night outside on Kowtow and face what an entire population was afraid to face.

Aahz didn't seem to be worried.

Tanda had said nothing.

I was just the apprentice. What place was it for me to say anything?

In the west the sun was slowly setting. In the east an almost full moon was starting to come up over the horizon. In a few days the full moon would signal another fear in the people who lived here: the round-up.

I pushed the thoughts and fears from my mind, focused on bringing in as much power as I could, then lifted us knee-high off the ground and headed down the road as fast as I could take us.

The sun had almost set completely by the time I stopped for my next break. There was still no sign of the town of Baker.

Okay, I'm the first to admit when I'm being stupid, if it's pointed out to me. Luckily I had had enough common sense to not tell Aahz and Tanda how worried I was about the darkness, so they didn't get the chance to point any of my stupidity when we ran into no problems at all after it turned dark.

The first part of the trip was fairly easy. It took me three more rest stops, and, it was well after the sun had set by the time we got to Baker. The town was buttoned up tighter than anything I had ever seen. In the moonlight the buildings looked haunted and strange, more like monster-boxes than structures. Very little light got past any of the shutters, but the almost-full moon was giving us enough light to see by to stay on the road.

Baker looked to be about twice the size of Evade, and was spread out over more than just a Main Street. It was tucked into a small valley, with flat farmland going off in both directions from it. We walked into town, following the road and staying off the wooden sidewalks so that we wouldn't make any noise. The town was just flat empty. Not even a horse had been left outside. Nothing was moving, and as far as we could tell, nothing lived here, even though we knew better.

"This is very strange," Tanda said as we got near the center of town. "How boring would it be to go to bed when the sun set every night? I'd go stark-raving crazy in a matter of days."

Tanda was the kind of person that always had to be doing something: going on adventures, shopping, or partying. I had no doubt that it wouldn't take her days to go crazy here.

"I just wonder what they are afraid of," Aahz said. He pointed to one building. "Those shutters look as if they could take a pretty good pounding and still hold."

"It was the same way in Evade," I said. "But I was awake all night and never heard a sound from outside."

"More than likely this is just an old custom," Tanda said, "and we're still so far out in the sticks, away from any larger cities, that the custom remains."

"Are there larger cities in this dimension?" I asked.

"Who knows?" Aahz said. "Just stay alert and watch for anything unusual."

He didn't have to tell me to do that, since I was already on full alert. And even though flying, combined with no sleep the night before, had me exhausted, I doubted I could sleep now even if I wanted to try.

Aahz found a sliver of light coming from the shutters of one store and stopped. He unfolded the map and we gathered around, trying to be as quiet as we could while we looked for our next destination.

"You were right, Skeeve," Aahz whispered, patting me on the back.

The map had changed.

Baker, the city we were standing in, was now the focal point of the map, and two roads led toward two other towns from Baker. The treasure was now marked in a town called Silver City. Dodge City wasn't even on the map. Glenda was going to be mad. I wished I could be there when she discovered how stupid she had been.

"So which way do we go?" Tanda asked.

The two towns next in line from Baker were named Bank and Keep. Both looked to be about the same distance from here, but Bank was to the right in the north and Keep was to the left in the south.

"Bank," I said, before I even realized the word was out of my mouth.

"Why?" Aahz asked, staring at me, his intense eyes scary in the semi-dark.

"I don't know," I said. "It just seems right, and starts with the same letter as Baker."

Tanda laughed, but had the decency to not say anything.

Aahz just shook his head, folded up the map and put it away.

"Bank it is," he said, moving out into the middle of the street and walking on toward the west end of town.

"I could be wrong," I said, walking between him and Tanda.

"More than likely," Aahz said.

"So why go with my suggestion?"

"Because I have none better to offer."

"Neither do I," Tanda said. "Besides, if you're wrong, we can blame you."

"Terrific!" I said. "As if I don't get in enough trouble as it is."

Both Aahz and Tanda chuckled, but said nothing the rest of the way to the edge of town.

It was easy to find the road to Bank. At a fork in the road a hundred paces outside of the main part of town there was a sign, clear and readable even in the moonlight, pointing to the right.

Aahz glanced around, then turned to me. "Ready?"

"Sure," I said.

"Keep it slower than before," Aahz said. "We don't want to run into anything out here."

I concentrated on the power coming into my body, easier here than back near Evade. When I had enough I lifted us slightly off the ground and headed down the road. Outside of town the road was straight, running between what looked like pastures, and even in the moonlight I could get us up to a pretty decent speed.

In the pastures along both sides of the road animals were grazing. When I finally had to stop to rest, a number of the grazing animals looked up at us, big eyes glowing in the moonlight. They almost looked surprised to see us.

"Cows," Tanda said, pointing at the large creatures staring at us from the field.

They looked fat and heavy, with white and dark areas over their bodies. In the half-darkness, they seemed almost sinister with their big eyes and long ears.

"So how come they aren't inside like everything else?" I asked as Tanda gave me more water and a little bit of a snack to eat.

"You're asking me?" she said. "Maybe they're not bothered by whatever worries the people around here."

That made sense, in an odd sort of way.

"Maybe they are what worries the residents," I said, staring into the deep pits of eyes of the closest cow.

Both Aahz and Tanda laughed as if that was the funniest thing I had ever said.

I didn't see what was so funny. Cows looked nasty to me, and I couldn't imagine trying to get milk, golden or not, from any of the ones I could see.

By the time I was rested enough to get us farther down the road, a bunch of the nearby cows had sauntered over and were gathering near the road watching what we were doing. It was creepy, and I was glad to get on the way.

From that point onward there were cattle along the road watching us, as if something had told them we were coming. When I asked Aahz what made them do that, he said he didn't know. He'd never seen cattle act that way.

Tanda said she hadn't either.

That answer didn't comfort me at all.

I kept us going longer and longer, not wanting to rest and have all the cows gather close to us. By the time the sun came up I had flown us to the edge of Bank City. I was exhausted and was going to have to get a few hours sleep before we went on.

At first light, the moment the sun peeked over the edge of the nearby mountains, the cows stopped watching us and went back to grazing.

For some reason that bothered me a lot more than them staring at us.

Chapter Nine

"It's an acquired taste."

H. LECHTER

I was so tired that even the short walk into the center of the town of Bank darned near killed me. All I wanted to do was fall down and sleep, at least for a few hours. Aahz promised me that was going to be possible very soon, so I limped along with them.

The merchants were opening up the stores and the shutters had all disappeared from the windows. Horses pulling wagons were lined up outside a few stores, and, just like in Evade, a guy wearing a hat and carrying a shovel was going around cleaning up after the horses. Clearly that was a standard job in every town. I couldn't imagine a kid wanting to be the horse-poop cleaner when he grew up. But maybe in this culture, that was the top job.

Bank looked a lot like Evade, just bigger. The buildings were all the same size, and there were wooden sidewalks.

We found a small establishment like the one Glenda had left me in, and sat down at a table near the front window. We were the only ones in the place. It felt great to be off my feet and not moving. I might be able to sleep right there in the chair if they let me.

As I looked around I realized this place was almost identical to Audry's in Evade, with the bar down the left side and wooden tables and chairs.

"What can I get for ya, folks?" A man asked as he came out from the back room.

He was just like the guy in Evade, right down to the white apron and the dirty towel.

"Could we trouble you for just one glass of your best juice?" I asked.

"Not a problem at all," he said, smiling. "You want some breakfast, I just got a fresh load in this very morning. Good and crisp."

"Sounds great," I said, "maybe later. But I think first we just want to sit a spell."

The guy came back with the carrot juice drink and slid it onto the table with a smile before he headed back into the kitchen area.

"You've picked up the lingo pretty well," Tanda said. "A night alone in a place do that for you?"

"I suppose," I said, taking a sip of the juice. "Isn't it creepy how all these people seem the same from town to town?"

"I was noticing that as well," Tanda said. "The guy shoveling dung looks just like every other guy I've seen shoveling dung."

Aahz laughed and I just stared at her, too tired to even try to figure out what she had just said.

"I wonder why there's no milk," Aahz said, staring at the carrot juice with a look of disgust on his face.

"I don't think you want to ask, even if they had any," I said. "I was in a kitchen of one of these places, and there was nothing there but veggies, and not a clean surface in the room."

"Ughh," Tanda said. "More than likely you could get us arrested for even thinking of drinking milk in a dimension full of cows."

"You two have far too active an imagination," Aahz said as he pulled out the map and opened it. Again it had changed.

I kept sipping my carrot juice as I studied the parchment. Bank, the town we were in, was the main town on the map now. And the treasure was now located in a city called Placer. Three roads left

Bank and headed off in three directions, all, in one fashion or another, getting to Placer after a few more towns.

"Now which way?" I asked, staring at our options.

They were towns called Chip, Pie, and Biscuit. Weird names. Everything about this dimension was starting to seem weird to me.

Tanda pointed to one of the towns. "Following Skeeve's plan of going to towns that start with the letter B, we head for Biscuit."

"Sounds good to me," I said.

Aahz just shook his head in amazement.

"As good as any, I suppose."

He studied the map for a moment more and then folded it up and put it away.

Biscuit was on the road that stayed north going out the west side of Bank. I doubted it would be hard to find. I took another sip while Tanda wrinkled her nose at my drink and me.

"It's an acquired taste," I said, realizing what I was doing. I had finished almost half the glass.

I offered the rest to her, but she shook her head.

"No, thanks. Not in a million years."

I shrugged and took another drink. The stuff wasn't bad at all, once you got past the initial taste of smashed and juiced carrots.

"So how you feeling?" Aahz asked.

"He's going to have to rest," Tanda said, not letting me answer.

"I know that," Aahz said. "I was just wondering how we were going to do that. We don't dare go back to the cabin because Glenda might be there. I don't want to deal with her just yet. So we have to find some private spot."

"Actually," I said, stopping the fight before it got started, "I'm feeling pretty good. A little juice here and some time sitting down and I think I can go again for a while."

Tanda looked into the orange liquid.

"What did they put in there?"

"You know," I said, looking at the juice, "I don't know, but it really is helping."

We sat for another ten minutes while I finished off the carrot juice, then I went over and asked how I could pay the man for the drink.

"Come back for a dinner," he said. "That's payment enough."

I thanked him for his hospitality. I had no idea how this bartering system in this dimension worked, but it sure made everyone friendly.

We headed toward the west end of town, walking down the sidewalk and tipping our hats at the smiling people we met. I felt great again. Drinking that juice was like getting a good night's sleep. I had no idea what was in one besides carrots, but I could easily get hooked on them.

It wasn't going to be a problem taking the wrong road because there was a sign saying Biscuit and a big arrow at the fork in the roads. Around us were buildings and homes and several hundred of head of cattle grazing, so we started off walking, going slow and steady as the sun got hotter.

Finally, after maybe a mile, we were far enough out in the country to not chance being seen flying.

"You sure you're all right?" Aahz asked.

"Never felt better," I said.

"You know, at the next town, I'm trying some of that juice," Tanda said.

As I reached out with my mind searching for power, it became clear that we were in an area much more powerful than where we had started. It was easy for me to get enough to lift the three of us knee-high off the ground and whisk us along.

We had to stop flying and walk a half dozen times over the next few hours when we saw people coming, or a house was too close to the road. And we must have passed at least a million cows along the way. Not one had actually looked at us. And not once did I have to actually sit down and rest.

Amazing juice.

By the time we reached Biscuit, it was mid-afternoon and I was starting to get tired again. We found a place to sit in a bar that looked just like Audry's and the one in Bank. Now all of us were growing bothered by the similar nature of the places. I wanted to run from the bar when a man who looked a lot like

the previous two, down to wearing a white apron and carrying a dirty rag, came out of the kitchen and asked us what we wanted.

"Just two glasses of your finest," I said.

"Sure you all don't want an early dinner?" he asked. "I just got a fresh load from the fields. Really crisp. We all need our energy, you know, with the round-up coming."

I glanced at Aahz, then Tanda, then answered the guy's question.

"After we sit awhile we just might."

He smiled real big, like I had said the right thing, then went and brought us our juice. He had disappeared into the back room before any of us said anything.

"So someone want to explain to me what's going on?" Tanda asked.

"I've never seen anything like this," Aahz said. "I thought you two were just imagining things at the last stop. But these three places are almost identical."

"Are we going in circles or something?" I asked. "Is it possible that all these towns are the same one?"

"No, there're different sizes and shapes and in different countryside," Tanda said.

"No doubt we're in different towns," Aahz said, "all built, it seems, off the same pattern, with the same kind of people living in them."

"Okay," Tanda said, "now I can safely say I've seen it all."

"Not yet," I said. "We've still got the round-up, whatever that is. And a golden cow."

Tanda nodded and looked at Aahz with a serious face.

"I'm starting to think this treasure isn't worth what we're risking."

Aahz looked at her as if she had gone crazy.

"Are you kidding? We've come this far. Only a few more towns to go."

She nodded, but I could tell as I sipped my juice that this entire dimension was bothering Tanda a great deal. And in the time I had known Tanda, I had never seen anything bother her.

Aahz glanced to make sure the guy was still in the kitchen, then opened up the map and spread it on the table. As every other time, it had changed again.

This time, we had four roads to pick from, and all the towns started with the letter "B". Brae was the southern most, then there was Brawn, then Bent, and finally, to the north, Bethel. The golden treasure was marked as being in a place called Donner.

"Well, so much for that system," I said.

"And it was working, too," Aahz said.

"You know, maybe I could drain off the magik from the map again." I had just finished my entire glass of carrot juice and was feeling really, really alive and well.

Aahz glanced at the kitchen door again, then asked me, "You feel up to it?"

"I feel like I'm getting stronger the farther we come," I said.

"Let him try," Tanda said. "Might save us a lot of back-tracking."

Aahz looked at me, then nodded. "Give it a shot."

I took a deep breath and let my mind search out the power in the map. For an instant I didn't think anything was going to happen. Then I felt it. The power rushed through me from the map as I hastily directed it into the ground. My head spun for a second, and it was done. The power was gone and the map was normal...for now. I took a deep breath, again feeling the strain. I needed more carrot juice.

"It worked," Aahz said. "Nice job, Skeeve."

It wasn't often that I got a compliment from my mentor, so I savored the moment. Tanda patted me on the arm and gave me a kiss on the cheek for a reward. Nothing like doing a job and doing it well.

I took her glass of carrot juice and sipped from it while we studied the map.

Only one road led from Biscuit where we were, through Bethel and then to Donner. Donner actually was the place with the golden cow. We had been closer than we thought.

But from the look of the map, it was a long way to Bethel, and even farther to Donner. Just getting to the first place was going to take to the middle of the night. I just hoped the cows didn't watch us.

"You rested enough to get going?" Aahz asked me.

I downed half of the glass of carrot juice and nodded.

"Put this in one of our water containers, would you?"

Tanda nodded as I stood and moved to the door into the back room. I knocked and the guy came out.

"What can we do for you in exchange for the wonderful drinks you served?"

He smiled, as if I had again said some magik words.

"Just come back for food sometime soon."

"I promise we will," I said. I tipped my hat at him.

"Thanks."

He stood there smiling, watching us leave like we were his children headed off to school.

We went through Bethel in the middle of the night. The town looked like all the others, and, even though it was locked up tight and shuttered, I recognized the Audry's-place-look-alike as we passed it.

For the past few hours, since a stop we made right after dark, the cows had again watched us. We were the cow entertainment for the night as we sped past pasture after pasture. Thousands and thousands of cows lined the road, ready for us to come flashing past. I had no idea why they did it, or how they knew we were coming, but there wasn't a stretch of road that didn't have cows lined up beside it all night long. And even though there were no fences, none of them came into the road to stop us.

After a while I stopped looking at them as well. Their big eyes, shining in the moonlight, just unnerved me.

My flying was getting better and better as the trip went on, and since the moon was almost full the road was easy to see. I could manage almost an hour of nonstop flying before I had to rest, and, because of the mostly flat land, we were making great time.

Even though I wanted to drink it earlier because I was feeling tired, I forced myself to wait until we were walking through Bethel to finish the last of the carrot juice I had had Tanda save.

Just that half a glass gave me enough energy to keep on going, as if I had slept a full night. It seemed to allow me to use every bit of the power around me to keep us above the road and speeding toward the treasure.

At sunrise the cows stopped watching again, going back to grazing as if we didn't matter at all. For a while I felt almost insulted, before I realized what I was thinking. How could a cow not wanting to watch me fly past ever insult me? Made no sense.

About halfway through the morning, still a long distance from Donner, we came on a small town. It couldn't have been half the size of Evade, and not more than a dot on the map. The juice I had drunk in the middle of the night had long ago worn off and I was so tired that I was just about falling down.

As I had hoped when I saw the little town, right in the middle was a place that looked a lot like Audry's. It was empty and we went in, taking what I was starting to think of as our normal table. I slouched in a chair in front of the window, glad to still be alive.

There was only one thing bad about the carrot juice. When you came down off of it, you came down hard. Right now, if we were going to get to Donner by the middle of the night, I needed another fix or two of the golden liquor.

This place didn't just look like Audry's; it could have been Audry's. And when the guy with the white apron and dirty rag came out of the back room, I wasn't surprised in the slightest.

"What can I get for you, strangers?"

"If you wouldn't mind," I said before either Tanda or Aahz could speak, "could I trouble you for three glasses of your best?"

The guy beamed, wiped his hands with the towel, and said the words I was expecting.

"Not a problem. Sure I couldn't interest you folks in some lunch as well? Just got a fresh wagon-load in. Everything's really crisp. You all need your strength, what with the round-up coming."

"Thanks, partner," I said. "That sounds really good, but I think we'll just start with the juice right now, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," he said.

A few moments later he came back with three glasses of the carrot juice, smiled at us as he put them down, then headed off into the kitchen.

"Okay, that does it," Tanda said, staring at where the guy had gone. "I'm officially completely creeped out."

"What?" Aahz asked. "All the staring cows last night didn't do it for you?"

"Okay, double creeped out," Tanda said.

I downed about a half a glass of carrot juice and sat back, letting the wonderful flavor warm me. How I had ever lived without the stuff was beyond me.

"I think you might want to go easy on that juice," Aahz said. He was looking as tired as I had felt a few minutes ago.

"I think you might want to try some," I said, "if you're expecting to get to the treasure tonight." He shook his head.

"I think one of us hooked on carrot juice is enough."

"Your loss," I said.

He just frowned and pulled out the map.

This time the map hadn't changed. My magik had worked. We were still headed for Donner, which looked to be a good distance from here. I was going to need all the energy I could get. I downed another quarter of the glass.

By the time we left the place, with me running through the same routine with the guy in the apron, promising we might be back for dinner, I had downed a glass and a half of the juice, and had the rest in the water containers. I was good to go through the night. As far as I was concerned, Tanda and Aahz could sleep while I flew. They weren't doing anything, so why not?

Later that afternoon I think they both did actually fall asleep while flashing along knee-high off the road. It was lucky for all of us I had my carrot juice.

As it happened, we were approaching another tiny little town along the road to Donner as the sun set. On the map this place wasn't even listed. It had maybe twenty buildings, all of them boarded up and shuttered. Still, Aahz figured there was no point in taking any chances, so we walked into the tiny town.

We were just about through the town when, at once, every door in the town slammed open. It was a dark and quiet night, with the sun down and the moon not yet up. That much sudden noise and movement darned near scared me right out of my skin.

"What's happening?" Tanda asked.

I didn't have a clue. From what I could tell, every person in the town, all dressed in different clothing, some in nightshirts, walked into the street like zombies, turned, and in a line headed out of town to the west.

We quickly stepped up onto the sidewalk to get out of the way as the chain of people moved past down the center of the road. There was no life in any of their eyes or fighting against what was happening to them.

"Be ready to take us back to Vortex #6," Aahz whispered to Tanda.

"Oh, I've been ready for days," she said.

The last person moved past us, leaving the town empty and every door standing wide open. I had no idea what we should do. I took the canister out of my pouch and downed the last of the second glass of carrot juice, just to be ready for whatever was coming.

Aahz motioned that we should follow them, so, moving slowly about thirty steps behind the last person, we followed the line of people out into the countryside, along the very same road we had planned on traveling.

The farther out we got, the more I expected to see the cows waiting for us, watching the zombie townspeople now. But there were no cows to be seen.

But there were a lot of naked people, yawning and stretching scattered around the fields, as if they were just waking up from a long nap.

The townspeople kept doing the zombie march as the naked people in the fields moved toward them. The first naked guy to reach the line near us grabbed an old man in a nightshirt, tipped back the old guy's head, and bit into his neck.

"Vampires," Tanda whispered.

Behind us the full moon was easing up over the edge of the hill, shining light on the feast as more and more vampires picked a meal and bit in. So this was what the round-up was all about? I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

The cows were vampires, and their feeding stock was the people. No wonder all the people in all the towns all ate vegetables and were afraid of the night. The people who lived in the towns were nothing more than cattle, being fattened for slaughter every month.

It was the cows that were the masters.

"You are not in the round-up line," a deep and pleasant voice said from behind us.

All three of us spun around as one to face two naked people. One was a man, one a woman. Their bodies were perfectly formed, their muscles toned, their eyes large and brown, like the cow's eyes along the road every night.

The woman was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen without clothes on. No, make that the most beautiful. And with one glance into her eyes, I wanted to give myself to her. I didn't care if she bit me or not.

The next instant the dust storm on Vortex #6 slammed into me, snapping me out of my desire to make a fool of myself with a beautiful woman for the second time in a week.

Chapter Ten

"I can quit anytime."

S. HOLMES

The hundred slogging steps through the dust storm to the cabin seemed to get longer and longer every time I had to do it. I had no idea why we just couldn't D-Hop right into the cabin and skip all this dust and wind. I was going to ask Tanda that, as soon as things settled down.

As we got near the cabin, Tanda held up her hand for us to stop. I could barely see the dark shape of the building in the storm. There was no light in the window this time.

She did something with both arms I assumed was some sort of scanning magik that assassins knew, then motioned that it was clear and we should move forward. Therefore, Glenda wasn't here waiting for us.

I had the sudden image of one of the cow-vampires bending her over and sucking on her neck in the middle of some road somewhere. Considering what she had done to me, it was one of the nicer thoughts I had had about her in days.

We got inside and the door closed against the storm.

"Are we shielded?" Aahz asked Tanda.

"Up and solid," she said. "Skeev was right; there is powerful energy here. I can hold the shield for as long as we need it."

"So Glenda can't pop in and surprise us?" I asked, moving to the stove to get it started before I took off my coat.

"Not a chance," Tanda said. "She hops back here, she's going to get awful dirty standing out there in the dust."

Aahz laughed. "Couldn't happen to a nicer demon."

"Want something to eat?" Tanda asked, working around in the cabinets as I sat at the table.

"Just more carrot juice," I said.

I could feel my body starting to get really tired, as if someone had pulled the energy plug and what I had left was draining onto the floor.

I dug into my pouch for the canister that I had been carrying. It was gone. I checked again and it was still not there. I couldn't remember doing anything with it, but I might have dropped it in the excitement of watching cows become vampires and bite on people.

"You have the other canister of juice?" I asked Aahz. "Afraid not, apprentice," he said. "Left it back on Kowtow when we hopped out of there."

My first reaction was not to believe him. Then it became clear that he had left the rest of my carrot juice, and my reaction was anger.

"How could you do that?" I shouted. "Easy," he said.

He showed me by reaching into his pouch, taking out an invisible canister, and dropping it to the floor. "But what am I going to do without it?" Again I shouted. I needed that carrot juice; right down to the very bottom of my soul I needed it.

"You're going to sleep for a long time," Tanda said, smiling at me.

Just her mention of sleep made me sleepy. I couldn't believe they had done this to me.

"Taking a guy's carrot juice isn't nice." "I know," Tanda said. "But we're doing it for your own good. You haven't slept in at least three days. You need to stop moving and just lie down."

The tiredness was washing up over me like a wave on the beach. It was everything I could do to even think about saying I didn't need sleep.

How dare she tell me what I needed? How dare Aahz leave my juice behind? Hadn't I trusted him with that juice?

"I don't need to rest," I said, my voice sounding funny to my ears.

"How about you just lie down for a few minutes and then we'll talk about it," Tanda said, helping me to my feet and moving me over to the soft-looking bed against one wall.

"Well, maybe just a minute," I said.

What could a minute hurt? I'd get back some of my energy, and then convince Tanda to hop me back to get my juice.

"Only one minute," I said.

Or at least I think I said that. I might not have, because from the moment my head touched the pillow, I don't remember another thing.

I woke up with a blinding headache and a taste in my mouth that was a cross between horse droppings and stale carrots. I rolled over and the pain hit me even harder, smashing into my head like someone was taking a hammer and pounding me right between the eyes.

"Ohhh," I said, putting both hands to my head trying to stop the agony.

"The sleeping apprentice awakes," Aahz said, his voice far too loud for the size of the space between my ears.

"And in pain, it seems," Tanda shouted.

"Please whisper," I said, but my throat was so dry the words didn't really come out.

I wanted to die. Why hadn't they just killed me as I slept? Or maybe they had tried, which was why I hurt so much.

I also wanted to be sick, but that wasn't possible since there wasn't anything left in my stomach.

But my stomach still felt like it wanted to twist inside out and come up through my throat. And the world spinning didn't help that feeling at all.

And, most of all, I really wanted to forget all the nightmares I'd had about cows turning into vampires, and the people of a dimension being nothing more than food stock. What an awful nightmare. That was the last time I had carrot juice if it caused those kind of visions.

Tanda came over and knelt beside me. I could feel her hand on my forehead, then a soft energy flowing through me, washing the pain and nausea with it. Whatever she did, it was nice.

After a moment she moved away and I opened my eyes. My head didn't hurt as much, and the world that felt as if it was smashing down on me from all sides had retreated.

I also realized that what I had thought were carrot-juice-induced nightmares had actually happened.

"That help?" Tanda asked.

I nodded, wishing I hadn't almost at once. She had taken away the pain, but the rest of the problems-upset stomach and spinning world-were still with me.

She brought me a glass of water, helping me sit up to drink it.

"Well, hangovers are sure fun, aren't they, apprentice?" Aahz asked.

"No," I managed to croak out after I took a small drink, "they are not."

"Good thing to remember next time you go bingeing."

The thought of even seeing another carrot made my stomach twist.

"Was there alcohol in the carrot juice?"

"No, but it had other stuff in it," Aahz said, "Stuff I'm guessing make the people of those towns good eating for the vampires."

My stomach twisted.

"And maybe help keep them under control," Tanda said, looking at me. "Think you can come to the table and try to eat a little something?"

"I can try," I said, "but no promises."

"Good enough. You need to eat."

"How long was I sleeping?" I asked as I stood and shuffled my way to the table.

I dropped into a chair and then tried to remain still while the world spun for a moment.

"About twelve hours," Aahz said. "We were just getting ready to head back to Kowtow when you started to wake up."

"Without me?" I asked, staring into the eyes of my mentor.

He smiled at what must have been my shocked expression.

"Just to explore and get a little closer to Donner while the vampires were back being cows. We would have left you shielded and been back in a few hours."

"You still want to see if you can get to the treasure?" I asked, not believing that Aahz would even want to go back to the place again, let alone try to get a golden-milk-giving cow that turned into a vampire.

"Sure," he said. "We're too close to turn back now."

"And just what are you going to do when you find this golden cow?"

"I asked him the same thing," Tanda said.

"I'll figure that out when we find it," Aahz said.

I nodded. "Glad I woke up then."

"I doubt you're going to be up for coming along just yet," Tanda said, putting a little sandwich and another glass of water in front of me.

"I'll be fine," I said. "Just a little carrot juice and I can fly a long ways."

The silence in the cabin was intense.

I looked at Aahz, then at Tanda and smiled. "Just kid-ding."

For some reason, neither of them laughed.

Along the way there were more and more cattle, bigger herds than we had seen at any other place. I was just glad that none of them were lined up along the road watching us.

The countryside was becoming pretty hilly, and the road looked like it was headed right at a fairly large mountain range. I hoped Donner was on this side of the range and not the other. My question was answered almost at once as we topped a slight ridge and could see off ahead.

I somehow managed to bring us to a stop and lower us to the ground. Considering what we were facing, I thought that was pretty good concentration.

From the top of this hill we could see Donner. It had been built going up the side of a gentle hill. From here it looked as if the buildings down low were all like the ones in the towns we had already seen, but the farther up the hill you went, the larger the buildings, the more ornate.

At the top was the palace. Only this wasn't like anything on this planet. It was made of stone and inlaid with gold that shimmered in the afternoon sun. It was like a second sun, only golden.

"Oh, my," Tanda said softly.

"No wonder there's a treasure map to this place," Aahz said. "I've never seen anything like that."

"Neither have I," Tanda said.

Well, if the two experienced dimension travelers in the group had never seen anything like the golden palace we were staring at, I sure hadn't either.

After a moment I asked what I thought was the obvious next question.

"So now what do we do?"

"We go take a closer look," Aahz said, laughing. "See what we can see."

I glanced at my mentor. He was always happy when there was a chance we might end up with a lot of money. I didn't want to ask him how he thought we were going to get any of the gold we could see from here, but clearly he had ideas, and the ideas were enough to make him smile.

All his smile did was worry me.

I flew us two more small hills closer to the city before Aahz said we had better walk the rest of the way. There was so much energy in this area that I didn't even feel tired from the effort of flying. It had come easy, which meant that all magik was easy in this place. That was both good and bad.

Ahead of us on the road were some walkers, plus a wagon full of vegetables being pulled by two horses. Cows filled the fields, paying no attention to anything.

Up closer, the town of Donner was even bigger than I had first thought, with a very wide, boulevard-like main road heading straight through everything. The golden castle on the top of the hill was massive. It looked like it could swallow the entire royal palace and courtyard of Possiltum and not even burp. I wonder if this place had a royal magician. Maybe I could apply for the job, but I doubted I would pass the cow physical.

We had just crested the last small hill and were starting down toward the edge of the city when a dozen men on horseback came galloping out of the city, kicking up a cloud of dust behind them. A few people ahead of us on the road stepped out of the way. And the wagonload of veggies had to move almost off the road and into a small ditch.

The thundering horses came on, riding hard, the men's black hats pulled down tight on their heads. I didn't have a good feeling about this, but at the same time there was no reason to think they were after us.

We moved to the side of the road as they neared, but instead of riding past, then stopped, sort of forming a circle around us, pinning us against a pasture full of cows. I clearly should have trusted my bad feeling.

"You are under arrest," a man sitting on a big black horse said. "Please come with us into the city."

"It's a posse," Tanda said, the surprise in her voice clear. "Never thought I'd ever see one."

"A what?" I asked.

"Never mind," she said.

"Under arrest for what?" Aahz demanded of the guy on the big horse.

The guy, whose face looked very similar to the guy who had been the bartender in Audry's, smiled. I didn't like the look of his little teeth at all.

"You have been charged with not complying with round-up procedures," he said, "and the unlawful use of magik."

I glanced at Aahz, then at Tanda. Now we knew for sure that this dimension knew about magik. As far as I was concerned, right about now would be a great time to beat a hasty retreat to the wonderful dust of Vortex #6. But it seemed Aahz had other ideas.

"We demand to be taken to your leader," Aahz said, stepping toward the man. "We are powerful magicians from another dimension with important information your leader will want."

The guy actually laughed, which rocked Aahz back on his heels. Not too many people actually laughed at my mentor and got away with it.

"Drop my disguise," Aahz said, whispering to me.

I shrugged. At this point, it couldn't get any worse, so I did as he asked.

Not a one of the men on the horses even seemed to notice that there was now a green-scaled ugly Pervect standing in front of them. Not even their horses cared.

That was not what Aahz was expecting.

The guy again just laughed.

"You can drop the act," he said. "Our leader knows exactly why you are here."

Then the guy did something that just flat scared me to death. He pointed a finger at Aahz and a moment later the map came floating out of Aahz's belt pouch, unfolded in midair, and fluttered there. Then it refolded and returned to the pouch.

"Now please come with us," he said.

He turned his horse and started at a slow pace toward the city.

I glanced at Aahz, who was looking almost stunned, then at Tanda.

"Don't you think this might be a good time to head for home?" I asked.

"I wish we could," Tanda said.

Sweat dripped off her forehead as we all stepped back onto the road to follow the guy who had done the talking. The rest of his group of riders waited and fell in behind us.

"Excuse me?" I said. "How about jumping us to the dust storm?"

"Trust me," she said, "I tried."

"You what?" I couldn't believe she couldn't get us out of this mess.

"We're blocked?" Aahz asked.

"Tighter than a vault," she said. "Best block I've ever run up against."

"How about I try to fly us out of here?"

"Won't work either," Tanda said. "At the moment there's a block over all our magik."

"Oh," was all I could say.

Ahead, just over the head of the horse in front of me I could see the golden palace. It was the place, the treasure, we had been working and fighting so hard to reach. Right now it was the last place in any dimension I wanted to go.

Chapter Eleven

"Who are those guys?"

B. CASSIDY

No one in the city seemed to pay us any attention at all as we were marched into Donner and right up the wide Main Street of the city toward the golden palace on the hill. I saw at least a dozen Audry's-like places along the road, and this town had three guys in white hats and shovels cleaning up after the hundreds of horses. As we passed, all three of them tipped their hats and said, "Howdy."

What really made this town different from all the others we had gone through, besides the golden palace towering over it, were the pastures between the buildings. About halfway up to the palace, on the right side of the road, was a beautiful, green pasture about the size of one building.

It had one lone cow in it, grazing on the perfectly tended grass.

A little farther up the hill there were more small pastures between buildings on both sides of the street, each with just one cow. And the higher we went, the more beautiful the pastures became, with ornate decorations and well-trimmed grass.

Just under the palace were five pastures on both sides of the main boulevard, and in each of those manicured and ornately decorated lawns was one cow, and off to one side a guy wearing a white hat and carrying a shovel. Waiting. Now I knew what all the other shovel-carrying guys working the streets of all the towns were trying to advance their way up to.

The guys on horses dismounted at a massive gate made of stone pillars and gold bars. The palace itself was surrounded by a tall stone wall that looked too high to even try to climb.

The stone was highly polished and there looked to be gold lining the top.

The guy in charge pointed us at the gate, but didn't follow us in. Instead, five other men in white robes with gold trim met us just inside the gate and indicated we should follow. Each carried a

golden shovel like a cane, using it to walk. It was clear that a person who worked outside the palace and didn't have a golden shovel couldn't get into the palace. Why were we so lucky?

"Would you look at all the gold!" Aahz said, his head whipping back and forth as he tried to take it all in.

"Amazing," Tananda said, her voice soft and carrying the awe she felt.

I couldn't say anything. The sight that greeted us inside that gate was beyond anything I had ever imagined. There was nothing but beautiful-trimmed lawns, gold ornaments, strangely shaped shrubs, and guys in white robes and white hats with golden shovels. Maybe a dozen different cows grazed on the beautiful lawns, clearly without a care in the world, all tended by guys in white robes with golden shovels.

Our robed jailers herded us up the stone staircase, climbing through manicured lawn after manicured lawn, all surrounded by gold statues of different animals and gold artwork. The walls of the castle itself towered over us, the white stone and shining gold walls higher than anything I had ever seen before.

We were finally taken through a big double door and headed down flights of stone steps. From there I got completely lost as we went through tunnels, down steps, around corners, down more tunnels, down more steps, all the time going deeper and farther under the castle. I didn't much like the idea of being trapped down under such a massive building, but the idea that we were being held prisoner by cows controlling guys with golden shovels bothered me even more. Especially since they were vampire cows.

Finally we were herded into a big room with stone walls and left, a golden-barred door slamming closed behind us. There were five others in the big room, all looking tattered and exhausted. Ten beds were spaced around the walls and all the previous prisoners were lying on the beds, sleeping.

"Glenda," Aahz said.

It took me a second to recognize the figure on the bed across the room. It was Glenda all right, but not the alive, beautiful, and powerful woman I had remembered from just a few days before. This woman wore tattered clothing, had dirt and deep circles under her eyes, and a huge red mark on her neck.

All three of us moved over to her. As we did her eyes fluttered open and she saw Aahz, then Tanda and me.

"Found the treasure, I see," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

Then she was back asleep, her breathing heavy, and her mouth hanging open. The red marks on her neck pulsed with the beat of her heart.

"I don't like the looks of this," I said.

"Any chance we can get out of here?" Aahz asked, glancing around the room.

I did the same. None of the other prisoners in the place looked to be in any better shape than Glenda. And all of them had the red marks on their necks and were sleeping heavily, almost dead. Tanda shook her head.

"Not a chance at all. The energy is back flowing to us, but the dimension hopping is still blocked completely. I've been trying to D-hop ever since we were captured."

"Well," Aahz said, "we're just going to have to find another way out, and grab a little gold along the way."

"How about the D-Hopper?" I asked. "They didn't search us. Maybe it would work."

Aahz pulled the D-Hopper out, made sure the setting was right, then triggered it.

We stayed right where we were.

"Worth a try," I said as he put it back in his shirt.

"I think we need some answers," Aahz said.

He sat down on the edge of Glenda's bunk and then not so gently shook her awake.

"No! No!" she said as she woke.

Her hands went to her neck and then flinched away. Again it took a moment for her to recognize us. She blinked, then said, "Go away," and closed her eyes again.

"We need some answers," Aahz said.

He grabbed her by the shoulders, twisted her around, and sat her upright on the bed, her back against the wall.

"Easy there, big fella," Glenda said, her voice hoarse. "We're all in this together."

"I'm not in anything with you," Aahz said.

Looking at the wreck she had become, it was hard for me to even remember why I had been interested in her in the first place. Could I be that superficial that she had to remain beautiful for me to care? Or did I no longer find her attractive or have any interest in her because she had betrayed us? It was an interesting question I'd have to talk to Aahz about once we were safely back home.

"Oh," Glenda said, "trust me. If you're here, in this cell, then we're all in this together."

"How'd you end up here?" Aahz asked. "How'd you find the place without the map?"

She laughed. "I went to Dodge City, didn't find anything, so I asked this guy running a bar where the golden cow was, and he told me here."

I shook my head. How simple that would have been. Why hadn't we thought of it?

"Then what happened?" Tanda asked.

"Didn't even make it into town," she said. "Got picked up by a bunch of guys on horses yesterday and tossed in here. Then last night I got hauled out to be a snack at the big party upstairs."

Her hand again went to her neck and she flinched. The red marks there didn't look like they were healing very well. And I didn't much like the sound of being a snack like those people lined up on the road had been.

"It was like a bad dream," Glenda said, her eyes distant. "They kept forcing glass after glass of carrot juice down me while taking turns sucking oh my neck. By morning I couldn't even walk. I don't remember how I got back down here."

The thought of carrot juice ripped my stomach into a knot.

"Who were they?" Tanda asked.

Glenda shrugged. "Hundreds of beautiful naked people in this gold-covered ballroom way up in the castle somewhere."

Aahz nodded. "Vampire cows."

"What?" Glenda asked.

"We saw a field of cows change into beautiful naked people last night," I said, "and snack on the townspeople who were waiting to be used."

She looked at me, then at Aahz. "The kid's not kidding, is he?"

Aahz shook his head.

Glenda shook her head and then closed her eyes.

"Drunk dry by bovine vampires. How ironic."

She didn't say anything else, and Aahz didn't push her. She looked as if she had lost twenty pounds in one night. She had managed to outsmart us, find her way to the castle, and still get captured. If she couldn't get away, how were we going to do it before we became a full-moon snack?

"We've got to get out of here before the sun goes down," Aahz said, standing and moving to the door.

He gave it a couple hard hits, but it didn't move, and no one came because of the noise. Clearly none of the golden-shoveled guards were worried about a prisoner escape.

"Even if we did get out," Tanda said, "it would take a map to find our way back through the castle."

"Map," I said. "That's the key."

Aahz turned and looked at me, giving me one of those I-don't-understand-how-you-can-be-so-stupid looks.

I moved over to him and stuck out my hand.

"Can I have the map, please?"

"Why would you want it?" Aahz asked.

I didn't want to tell him my idea without first seeing if I was right.

"Just give it to him," Tanda said.

Aahz shrugged and took out the map, handing it to me still folded.

I opened it up, laying it flat on the nearest empty bunk so that we could all look at it. The map looked as I had expected. It had gained its magik back once we got inside the castle. It showed where we were, fifteen levels down and under a lot of rock and gold. It also showed the room where the golden cow was, far above us.

And better yet, it showed us a path from where we were being held to what the map called a large ballroom. Clearly the map's designers had planned on continuing the game right to the very last room. It sort of made sense. Dimension to dimension until we found the right one, then town to town until we found the right one, now room to room until we found the right one. I didn't much like the game, but I understood the thinking.

"Well, would you look at that?" Aahz said, stunned.

Tanda studied the map, then looked at the wall near Glenda's bunk, then studied the map again.

It didn't take me long to see what she was doing. The map showed a way out of this room that wasn't the main door. Maybe, just maybe, we had a chance. If we could escape the cell, then avoid hundreds of men with white robes and golden shovels, and then outrun the posse on horseback, we might be able to get far enough away from the castle to dimension-hop back to Vortex #6.

It sounded impossible, but it was more than we'd had a moment ago.

I folded up the map and put it in my pouch, then headed for the wall where Glenda was still sitting on a bunk. Her eyes were closed, and if her chest hadn't been moving I would have thought she was dead.

"Wait," Tanda said as I started to get down on my knees to look for an opening in the wall under the bunk beside Glenda's, where the map indicated it would be. "We need to protect ourselves, not let anyone know what we're doing."

"And how do you suggest we do that?" I asked.

Aahz glanced around at the bunks and the blankets on them.

"Skeeve, when Tanda gives the word, I want you to make the blankets on those three bunks look like the three of us."

"Four of us," Glenda said, opening her eyes and looking clearly at Aahz. "If you've found a way to leave, I'm leaving with you."

"Yeah," Aahz said, laughing, "like you took us with you on Vortex #6? I don't think so."

"I don't go, I alert the guards," she said, staring at him. "And I've got enough power left to easily break an apprentice's disguise spell."

For a moment I thought Aahz was going to strangle her, and I wanted to help. Then Tanda stepped between them, facing Aahz.

"She's powerful and can help. Let her, or we might never get out of here."

My mentor looked like he was about to explode. He hated doing anything he didn't want to do, and taking Glenda along was something he really didn't want to do. But Tanda was right; maybe Glenda could help.

"All right," Aahz said, taking a deep breath and letting it slowly out.

He stepped past Tanda and looked down at Glenda.

"You work with us or we dump you faster than you dumped my apprentice in that bar. Understand?"

She nodded, clearly very weak. "Let me help Tanda with the cover spell," she said. "I'm good at them."

"I'm an ex-assassin," Tanda shot back. "I'm better."

"I know you are," Glenda said. "I can just add some depth on the cover. And help support Skeeve's disguises. We're dealing with some good magicians here. Let's make sure they don't see us coming, or leaving as the case may be."

For a moment Tanda stared at Glenda, then she nodded. "Follow my lead."

"Completely," Glenda said. She took a deep, shuddering breath and braced herself against the wall, her eyes closed.

I glanced around. The other three prisoners hadn't woken up. They looked to be in much worse shape than Glenda.

Aahz turned to me. "Get ready. On Tanda's count, one at a time, disguise the four bunks."

I took a deep breath and reached out for the energy it was going to take.

Energy here wasn't a problem. It flowed all around us like a massive river, wider and stronger than I had ever experienced. I let it flow inside me, giving me strength.

"Aahz first," Tanda said. "Now."

On the farthest empty bunk I pictured Aahz lying there, sleeping, his mouth open.

On the bunk Aahz appeared, just as I had pictured.

I gathered more energy.

"Glenda now," Tanda said.

I imagined Glenda on the second bunk, sleeping in the same way we had seen her sleeping when we came in, red mark on her neck and all.

Glenda appeared there.

"Now me," Tanda said.

I reached out and took the energy and put the image of Tanda sleeping in the next bunk

"Now you," Tanda said.

I did the same, although I had never seen myself asleep, I had an image of what I must look like, and I used that.

It was strange to see myself sleeping there. Really strange.

"All shielded," Tanda said.

Glenda nodded. "Very strong. It should hold. And good job, Skeeve."

I just nodded. I didn't need compliments from a woman who left me to rot in a town full of cow food.

"Okay, Skeeve," Tanda said, "see if you can find that opening."

I got down on my stomach and crawled partway under the bunk next to where Glenda sat. It looked like a stone wall, just like all the rest of the room. But when I went to touch the wall, my hand went through as if nothing was there.

"A disguised opening," I said.

I crawled under the bunk and right on through the wall, coming out on the other side. It was pitch black, so I tore a

little piece off the bottom of my shirt and used a magik spell to light it. I was in a tunnel that had been cut out of stone. It was just tall enough for me to stand, and not much wider than my shoulders. It clearly hadn't been used in a long time, if ever. There was an unused torch stuck in a crack in the rocks, so I lit it, tossing to one side my burning piece of shirt.

A moment later Aahz followed, coming through what looked to be solid stone near the floor of the tunnel. Then Glenda, breathing hard, pulled herself into the tunnel and sat with her back against the sidewall, followed almost instantly by Tanda.

"This tunnel is shielded as well," Tanda said, looking around as she stood. "A shield so old, it might have been here before the castle."

"I'm impressed," Glenda said, still sitting on the floor. "How'd you know this was here?"

I pulled the map out of my pouch and held it up in the faint torchlight. She saw it and nodded. "Of course."

I opened the map and Aahz, Tanda, and I stood under the torch studying it.

It now showed the tunnel we were in as center, and the location of the golden cow had changed.

Now it was in a dining room ten floors above us. I didn't believe it for a moment.

The map showed that we had to follow the tunnel for as far as we could, then climb up a ladder and through the floor of what was called a morgue.

"Seems we don't have much choice," Aahz said, staring at the map. He pointed to the fact that the map didn't show a way back into the room we had just left.

I moved over and touched the wall we had just crawled through. It was solid rock. Weird.

I moved back over to where they were standing under the light.

"We're going to be chasing the cow until we find an exit," Aahz said.

"We could always kill the magik in the map one more time," I said.

"No," Tanda said. "We may end up in a room that we need the map to help us get out of."

"She's right," Glenda said. "For all we know, the map may be the magik source that created this tunnel. From the looks of how that wall turned back to stone, it just might be."

I stared at the paper in my hand, then at Glenda sitting on the floor. If she was right, and I had killed the magik in the map again, we might have ended up trapped in stone. I didn't want to think about that at all.

"So we follow the magik," Aahz said.

I folded the map and put it away in my pouch, then took the torch out of the crack and held it in front of me so that I could see where I was going. Then, doing my brave routine, I started off down a tunnel so old, or so magical, that it didn't look as if anyone had ever been in here.

The tunnel sloped upward like a fairly steep ramp. I moved at a steady pace, making sure that each step was on solid ground. I didn't trust my eyes at this point, after crawling through solid rock.

After about a hundred paces I looked back. Tanda was right behind me, Aahz behind her, and Glenda was managing to stay up with us, only because I was moving so slowly. I didn't feel the slightest bit sorry for her. She had left me to die, and gotten herself into the mess she faced last night. And without us, she wouldn't have this chance to escape. As far as I was concerned, she would either keep up or go out on her own again.

I went back to working my way up the tunnel, testing each step, until finally I reached the end. A rock ladder had been carved into the stone, leading straight up through a very narrow hole.

As Aahz stopped beside me I pointed up at the hole.

"Can you squeeze through there?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"I suppose not," I said. I handed him the torch. "Let me get up through the opening so I can brace my back against the wall, then hand me the torch."

Without waiting for another idea from my mentor, I started up. The hole in the roof of the tunnel was big enough that my shoulders touched on both sides, but not so small that I had to squeeze. Aahz might be able to make it, but it was going to take some work.

Once I got through the hole, the space got bigger. I stopped and Aahz handed me the torch, passing it up past me quickly so I wouldn't get burned.

Above I could see the ladder climbing at least twenty or so of my body lengths before reaching what looked to be a wooden trapdoor in a floor.

"Send Tanda up second," I whispered down to Aahz below me. "We need to make sure no one is in the room above the trap door up here."

"Good thinking," Tanda said, climbing up under me as I went higher. She got up just under me, paused, and then nodded. "No one up there at the moment."

"Good," I said.

"You go next," I heard Aahz say to Glenda down in the tunnel.

"No," Glenda said, her voice firm. "You get stuck in that opening it's going to take both Tanda pulling and me shoving to get you through."

I couldn't hear what Aahz said, but a moment later his green-scaled head came through the hole below Tanda.

"No, both arms ahead of you," Tanda said.

Aahz backed down a step, put both his arms over his head, and climbed back up into the hole. From what I could see, his shoulders were wedged pretty good in the rock.

Tanda braced herself, grabbed one of his hands, and then said, "Ready to push, Glenda?"

"Ready," Glenda said, her voice muffled as if she were a long ways away.

"Now," Tanda said, pulling on Aahz's arm as he pulled on the rock surface with the other. With a rip of his shirt, he came through.

Tanda let go and moved up under me. Aahz had his shoulders through the hole, but he wasn't climbing any higher at the moment.

"Glenda," he said. "Grab a hold of my leg and I'll pull you up."

"I think I can make it," she said.

"Just do it and quit arguing with me," Aahz said.

I stared down at the top of my mentor's head. The old green-scaled guy had a soft spot after all.

Always knew it was there, just hadn't seen it that often.

As Aahz helped Glenda up the stone ladder, Tanda and I went on up to the trap door. Since Aahz hadn't taught me a spell yet that could sense if something was on the other side of a wall, or a floor in this case, I was leaving that up to Tanda.

"We still in the clear?" I asked.

"We are," Tanda said.

I eased up to the wooden trapdoor and pushed slowly. The wood scraped as it went up, then the door seemed to catch on something. It took me a moment to realize it was a rug. From the looks of it, a very old rug.

I pushed even harder, and the rug lifted and pulled aside enough so that I could get through. I went halfway up through the trapdoor and stood, torch in the air, lighting the dark room.

Tanda had been right. From what I could see, no one was around. Just a bunch of tables and a wooden door leading off to the left. But the minute I stepped up and stood, I knew that Tanda and I had both been wrong. No one alive was around.

But the place was filled with dead people. Tables full of them.

Chapter Twelve

"There's gotta be a way out of this dungeon."

G. GYGAX

Okay, this was another first for me. I had never had the luck, opportunity, or bad timing to be in a room full of dead people. And these weren't just any dead people, but people who had clearly had the life sucked out of them through their necks just the night before. There had to be at least fifteen or twenty bodies, all naked, with ugly marks on their necks, and eyes staring at the ceiling.

I stood, holding the torch in the air, not really wanting to move in any direction until the others were beside me. Not that I thought the dead could do anything to me, or that I was superstitious about dead spirits. I wasn't, I was sure. I just didn't want to make a wrong move until I had someone beside me, or at least that was what I told myself.

"Looks like you were lucky to survive last night," Aahz said to Glenda as helped her through the trap door and onto her feet.

"Does seem that way, doesn't it," she said, leaning against a table with a dead guy on it.

The guy looked a lot like the guy who ran Audry's. I was starting to think that most of the men on this planet looked like him.

"So much for thinking they didn't kill their food source," Tanda said.

"I don't think most do," Aahz said. "But this is the castle, the royalty of the planet. I would imagine in here all rules are off."

"Wonderful," I said. "Now we have naked killer vampire cows, one of which is rumored to give golden milk."

"Strange place, isn't it?" Aahz said.

"You could say that, but you just did."

"We need to put that rug back and close the trap," Tanda said. "Make sure we cover our tracks as best we can."

I handed Tanda the torch and Aahz and I sat to work. In a few seconds the room looked like it had before we came up out of the floor.

"Now where?" Glenda asked.

I pulled out the map and opened it, holding it up to the light for Aahz and Tanda to see. The morgue, the room we were in, was now central on the map. The golden cow had moved to the kitchen. And our path out of here was through a panel in the back of the room, not the door. The map showed the panel leading to a secret passageway that led for a long ways up through the castle.

"You know," I said, pointing at where the passageway led, "that we are getting deeper and deeper into the castle and farther from an escape exit."

"Looks that way, doesn't it?" Aahz said, staring at the map.

"That doesn't matter and you know it, Aahz," Glenda said. "At least you could tell your apprentice the truth."

We all turned and looked at where she was leaning on a table with a naked dead guy right behind her.

"How's that?" Aahz asked, clearly not happy at Glenda's tone.

"We can't escape this place without beating this map," she said. "And beating the map means capturing the golden cow, who I assume, is the leader of this entire dimension. That golden cow is the only one who is going to let us go, and you know it."

At that point I was convinced that all the blood loss had gotten to her mind. The only thing I wanted to do was find a way out and run or fly as fast as we could until we were far enough away that we could hop dimensions and get away from this insane place.

"Come on," I said, smiling at her. "That would be crazy. Going after the head of all the cow vampires would be suicide. We'd end up like all these fine food products around us. Glenda, it's clear you need to rest."

No one said anything. Glenda just kept staring at me and slowly I realized that neither Aahz or Tanda were telling her how crazy she was either.

I turned to my mentor, who had a sheepish look on his face.

"She's right," he said. "We wouldn't stand a chance of getting out of here, against the kind of magik we are facing, without the help of the map."

I looked at Tanda.

She smiled at me. "They're right. I can barely, with Glenda's assistance, keep us hidden. The magik around here is so powerful, we wouldn't stand a chance without help from the top. And the map is leading us to that help."

At that moment I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that I was as dead as any of the bodies in the room with us. I just wasn't smart enough yet to lie down and stop breathing like they had all done. With one more look at my mentor, then at Glenda, I shrugged and tried to put on my best death-mask face.

"Why not? Let's get moving before someone comes in and stops our fun treasure hunt before it really gets started."

With one more look at the map, I folded it and put it back in my pouch.

Then I headed through the tables of bodies to the back wall. As I went I wanted to talk to the bodies, tell them I'd be right back, tell them to wait, to reserve a table for me. But I kept my morbid thoughts to myself.

There was a large cabinet of medical supplies filling the back wall and no hidden panel that I could see. From what the map had shown, the panel was right behind the cabinet.

I took hold of the back edge of the cabinet and pulled outward. I expected it to be too heavy for me to move, but it swung easily and silently, opening up into a passageway behind the panel.

I glanced back at Tanda and Aahz and Glenda, who were silently watching me.

"Give me the torch and follow me," I said. "We'll check the map again when we get a ways inside. And pull this closed behind you."

Aahz nodded.

It felt good to be leading, even if I wasn't going in a direction I wanted to go. At least I'd get to the wrong place first, and more than likely be killed first.

Tanda handed me the torch and I slipped behind the cabinet.

The passageway was as wide as a small hallway back in the Possiltum palace. It was mostly made of wood, with some stone walls along the way. Unlike the passageway cut out of the rock below the morgue, this looked like it had had regular traffic over the years.

I stayed in the faint path in the dust and moved ten steps down the secret passageway, then stopped.

Aahz pulled the cabinet closed and motioned that he was ready. I wondered if we could go back that way if we had to, but I didn't want Aahz to check, simply for the fear of finding out we couldn't.

About a hundred paces along the secret passageway branched into two. One went to the right and up slightly, while the other went seemingly straight as far as the light from our torch would show. Tanda was behind me and I handed her the light, again pulling out the map.

It had changed again, showing the passageway we were in and the intersection. The map now wanted us to go right. And up.

I remembered being in front of this castle and looking up as it towered over us. I had never seen anything so big before. Now it seemed that if this map had its way, which Aahz and Tanda were determined to give it, we would end up at the top.

Maybe up there I'd have a good view when all the life was sucked out of me.

The passageway sloped upwards, sometimes stairs, sometimes just a ramp. It bent to the right, then in twenty paces to the right again, as if going around a room. From that point on it just kept turning and twisting and climbing. After twenty minutes I was so turned around and lost, I couldn't even begin to tell you what part of the castle we were in. All I knew was that we had gone up a great deal. Finally the corridor ended at the top of a short flight of stairs.

I stopped and waited as Tanda caught up. Then, ten steps behind her, came Aahz helping Glenda. He sure was being nice, for some reason, to a woman who had betrayed him. That wasn't like Aahz at all. Clearly he needed her for something, and I was never far enough away from Glenda to ask what it was.

When they caught up, Glenda slumped to the ground and closed her eyes and I pulled out the map and looked at where it was taking us. It showed the end of the secret passageway where we were standing, and a secret door into a giant ballroom was right in front of me. I glanced at the wall. I couldn't see where it was, but I assumed that when I needed it, it would be there.

I went back to studying the map again. We had to go into the ballroom and to the far wall where there was another panel into another passageway. The golden cow treasure was now marked as being in the throne room a number of floors above us.

"Looks like we get to go out in the open for the first time," Aahz said, studying the map.

"There's no one out there at the moment," Tanda said.

"So we need to do it and quickly," I said, folding up the map.

"Keep the map handy," Aahz said. "When we get into the ballroom, you need to check it again."

"Of course," I said, nodding and acting as if I had known that, even though I hadn't yet thought of it.

"Can you make it a little farther, Glenda?" Aahz asked.

Glenda jerked and pushed herself to her feet, leaning against the wall.

"I can make it as far as I need to make it."

Aahz just nodded. "Then let's go."

Tanda had the torch, so I went to the wall and pushed where the secret panel was supposed to be and surprise,

surprise, the wall opened. I slid through. At first I thought there was nothing on the other side of the panel, that the map had lied to us. Then I realized that the secret door was pushing out a massive drape or tapestry of some type.

I ducked to the right under the cloth and out into the open, with Tanda and the torch right behind me.

At the moment we didn't need the light. The room had massive, two-story-high windows along one side that let in the natural sunlight. The hills in the distance were like old friends calling to me. I so much wanted to be out there instead of in here. The sun, from what I could tell, was within an hour

of setting on the other side of the castle. We needed to pick up speed if we were going to find the golden cow before it became the golden vampire.

"Wow," Tanda said, looking around at the gold-inlaid panels and golden ceilings of the massive ballroom.

The floor was a highly polished white stone with streaks of gold running through it. In my wildest imaginings I could have never come up with a ballroom as fancy or beautiful as this one.

Aahz and Glenda stopped beside us in the huge room. I bet at least five hundred people could've danced in this room without even bumping into one another.

"I remember being in this room last night," Glenda said softly.

The thought of her being here with a bunch of naked vampires chewing on her neck made me shudder.

"Then let's not wait for the music to start," I said.

I opened up the map and looked at it. Again, just coming through the secret door had caused the map to change. Now the way out of here wasn't across the room, but up on what looked like a stage near the back of the room, directly across from the windows.

"This way," I said, leading the way up a short staircase and onto a massive wooden stage.

On the back wall was nothing but wood slats. I glanced at the still-open map in my hand, then moved to what looked to be about the right area, putting the map back into my pouch as

I went. After just a few seconds of trying, I found the loose boards, pulled them aside, and we were back out of the light and into what I thought was another dark passageway.

Tanda came in behind me, holding the torch up so that we could both see what was ahead.

I froze like a statue at what I saw.

"Well I'll be a grave-digger's monkey," Tanda said.

Ahead of us wasn't another passageway, but a massive, low-ceilinged room. Rows and rows and rows of shelves lined the walls, and down the middle of the room, side-by-side, packed close on every inch of every shelf, were skulls.

Cow skulls.

Thousands and thousands and thousands of white, empty-eyed cow skulls.

Aahz finished making sure the slats were back in place behind us, then turned and stopped cold beside me. I was glad to see he had the same reaction I did. It was always good to know my mentor could be shocked.

"Someone want to explain this to me?" Glenda asked, her voice echoing through the remains of an entire herd.

"Maybe it's a thousand years of former royal family?" Aahz said. "Look at that one."

He pointed at one skull hung on the wall, ornately decorated with gems.

I knew that wasn't exactly right. I could feel it in the energy in this place. After a moment I turned to Tanda.

"Can you feel anything odd in here?"

"Power," she said.

"An energy focus?" Aahz asked.

"Sure seems that way," Tanda said. "Or maybe there's something special about these skulls, something in them that magnifies the magikal power of this area and turns it into something different."

I found myself, to my own amazement, moving forward toward the closest shelf of skulls. I reached out and lightly touched the smooth, cool surface of one. It did have energy, but not energy like I

had been taught by Aahz to use. There was different energy in it, used for something more than just magik.

"Vampire energy," I said.

Tanda and Glenda came up beside me, each carefully reaching out and touching a skull.

"He's right," Tanda said. "These skulls seem to take magical energy and change it, radiating the new energy needed to turn cows into vampires."

"Are you kidding me?" Aahz asked, standing off to one side.

"No, she's not," Glenda said. She waved her hand at the thousands and thousands of skulls.

"Welcome to the energy source of the vampire rulers of this world."

"And the energy is starting to get stronger," Tanda said. "I can feel it."

"The sun is going down," I said. "We need to get out of here."

I opened up the map and looked at it. Through the room, against the far wall, was the door we needed to go through. And on the other side of that door was something I hadn't expected us to get so close to this fast.

The golden cow.

The treasure we had come so far to find. It was one secret door away, in a room called the Meadow.

"Take a look at this," I said, spreading the map out for everyone to see.

"Now what do we do?"

Aahz looked at the map and smiled.

"We go capture us a leader as a hostage and make sure we get our freedom."

"Sounds good to me," Tanda said.

"Why don't I think it's going to be that easy?" I said.

"Because it never is." Glenda said.

Around me the empty-eyed cow skulls started to hum faintly and vibrate a little, filling the room with a noise that ate at my very soul.

"Whatever we're going to do," Tanda said, her hands over her ears, "let's do it fast."

Again I stuffed the map in my pouch and, with my hands over my ears as well, I headed through the middle of thousands of humming skulls toward the secret panel in the far wall.

By the time I got there the sound from the skulls in my head was so painful I didn't even stop. I just went right on through and out onto a thick carpet of beautiful grass.

Aahz, Tanda, and Glenda followed me, with Aahz shutting the secret panel behind us, instantly stopping the painful energy pounding at my head. I would have been relieved if I hadn't been so stunned at what faced me.

There was a guy, sitting in a lounge chair on the other side of the field of grass, reading a newspaper. If he had had on a white apron, he would have looked almost exactly like the guy who had waited on us in Audry's.

The setting sun was pouring through one of the room's giant windows and turning the nearby hills to a wonderful shade of gold and pink and red.

I glanced around. Except for the patch of grass we were standing on, the room looked like a large suite, with a big bed, a kitchen against one wall, and a private bathroom area off to one side.

The guy was sitting in what looked like a livingroom area, except that there was only one chair. He looked over at us, then shook his head as if not believing what he was seeing. Then he looked at us again and jumped to his feet, an expression of sheer joy and happiness on his face.

"My wonderful heavens!" he shouted. "You've finally come!"

"I think he's happy to see us," Tanda whispered.

The guy came toward us, his face almost breaking from the smile filling it.

"Really happy," I whispered back.

"My friends, my friends, come in," he said, motioning us to come toward his living area. "Don't be afraid. I'm just so happy you have arrived."

"You are?" Aahz asked.

The guy laughed.

"I am. I honestly am. I can't believe after all this time the map has finally brought someone to rescue me!"

Chapter Thirteen

"You can't always get what you want."

M. JAGGER

The guy led us off the grass and into what was clearly his home.

"Sorry for the mess," he said, scampering about picking up a book here, a notebook there, some dishes which he quickly put in the sink. We all just sort of stood in a group watching him. "My name is Harold. I'm sorry I don't have enough chairs for you all." "

He looked like a Harold. The name fit him, and all the other guys who looked a lot like him in all the Audry's-like places we had been in. Harold pulled his one kitchen chair away from the small table and set it out, then indicated that one of us should take it and another should take his recliner. It was beyond clear that he never got guests of any kind—at least the type of guests he wanted to sit down with. I think at that point we were all so stunned by what he had said, we really weren't reacting well. I know I wasn't. I have no real idea what I thought I was going to find when we got to the "treasure," but a guy waiting to be rescued sure wasn't it. And a guy who had used the map to bring his rescuers would have never occurred to me. Only Glenda took his offer of the recliner and settled into it with a deep sigh. The guy looked at her, worried.

"You were captured and taken last night, were you not?"

"I was," she said.

Harold looked sincerely upset. "I'm so sorry. You're so lucky you survived it."

"We saw a room full of people who didn't," Aahz said.

The poor guy looked like he might just faint away right there. He was wringing his hands, shaking his head, and pacing.

"It's all my fault, you know. All my fault."

"Okay," Aahz said, trying to calm the guy a little. "You want to explain to us what's going on?"

"Actually start from the beginning," I said, leaning against the kitchen counter.

From where I stood I could see out the two-story-tall windows that flanked one side of the big room. The valley below was in complete shadow, but the sun still covered the mountains and streamed in through the window onto the grass. If this was a prison, it was the nicest jail cell I had seen in a long time.

Harold nodded. "I'm sorry, I am just so shocked you are here, that the map worked."

"The beginning," Aahz reminded him.

"Please?" Tanda said. "Right now you are looking at four of the most confused people you have ever seen."

"Okay," Harold said, his head nodding like it was on a spring. He glanced at the window and then took a deep breath. "I've only got a half-hour until sunset and this is a long story. I might have to continue it in the morning."

"No problem," Aahz said, clearly doing his green-scaled best to calm the guy. "Just start and we'll go from there."

Again Harold did the nodding routine, his head going up and down so hard I was sure he was going to have a neck ache. "First off, you're standing in what centuries ago used to be called Count Bovine's Castle."

Okay, I have to say that I wasn't the one who started the snickering. Tanda was, with her snort. Then Aahz started shaking his head, clearly trying to contain himself, and I just couldn't keep the laugh inside anymore. Thank heavens the guy was so lost in trying to tell us the story he didn't notice.

"For as long as history recorded," Harold said, gathering speed on his tale, "Bovine's type and our people lived in an uneasy balance. They fed off of us; we killed them when we discovered them. Everything was in balance. The legends go

that Count Bovine, a very long-lived and smart vampire, found this area and took it over. He enslaved the people of Donner and built this castle."

Harold waved his arms in both directions to make sure, I guess, that we knew he meant the castle we were sitting in.

"Then Count Bovine led his people in a revolt against my people, using the power that came from this castle. Over a period of a hundred years he swept out over everything and was on the verge of wiping my kind from the face of this planet."

The guy glanced at the window. The sun was on the tops of the mountains. Sunset was close.

Harold went on. "Of course, during that time Bovine's people also wiped out almost all other living creatures here as well with their blood thirsty ways. Day in and day out, they just couldn't get enough blood to satisfy themselves."

It suddenly dawned on me, that except for horses, we hadn't seen any other creatures since we had gotten here. No dogs or wild animals. Nothing but cows, horses, and people.

"Okay, a quick question," I said. Harold nodded with a glance at the window. "You're saying that Bovine's people were not cows at that point, but were people like you, just vampires?"

"Yes," Harold said. "In fact, it is rumored that vampires originally came from our species, but that fact is lost in time, if true."

"It's that way on other dimensions," Aahz said, "so it is more than likely it was that way here as well."

Harold nodded. "I had heard that as well."

"So what happened?" I asked.

"Count Bovine, who was not a stupid individual, understood that something had to be changed or his people would wipe out my people, who were his people's only remaining food source."

"Makes sense," Tanda said. "You lose your food, you die as well."

"Exactly," Harold said. "So he struck a deal with the few remaining of my people to take his people away for all but the nights of the full moon, if my people would serve his kind during that time as food."

"And your people agreed?" Glenda asked, sounding as stunned as I was feeling.

"I don't think my ancestors had a choice," Harold said. "Using the magik of this area, Count Bovine put a spell on the rest of my people. Then, using an even more powerful magik spell, he changed his people to cows."

"So while they were cows," Aahz asked, "why didn't your people just kill them all? Seems like it would have been easy."

"It would have been," Harold said, "if not for the magik that keeps us from doing just that, and keeps us from advancing. The magik allows us to do nothing but prepare for the round-up. Month in and month out, for centuries now, we have done nothing else." Harold just shook his head and

went on. "Bovine's people became contented cows, careful how they treated us during the full-moon nights when they regained their normal form and had parties. We became the feed animals, content to do nothing but prepare constantly to serve our cow masters. It was survival for us, but not much of one."

Harold glanced once more out the window. The sun was just a minute from leaving the top of the distant mountaintop. "Quickly, follow me," he said, moving toward the bathroom area of his living quarters.

"What happens now?" Tanda asked.

"I become a cow for the night, the vampires roam the castle feeding and killing like the history says happened, and if you don't hide in a magically protected area, they will find you."

I was right behind him when Harold led us into his bathroom, opened a cabinet on the wall, touched a place inside the cabinet, and stepped back as a wall behind a toilet started moving inwards.

"This is the most magically protected room in all the castle," Harold said. "Stay in there until I open the door. Under no circumstances come out. Understand?"

"We understand," Aahz said.

I was the first one through the door, with Tanda and Glenda right behind me. Aahz took a moment longer, talking about something with Harold for a moment, then he joined us.

Behind the wall the space had been carved out of solid stone that was streaked in gold. It was warm and lit by the golden glow of the gold from the walls. The entire room was

filled with old books, scrolls, desks, chairs, and more antiques than I had ever seen in one place.

We were all inside when the guy slid the wall panel closed behind us without another word.

"Not even a wave goodnight," Tanda said.

Glenda moved inside and right to an antique couch against one wall.

"If you don't mind," she said, lying down and closing her eyes. "I think I need a nap."

"Good idea," Aahz said. Then he looked at me and held up a gold-threaded rope that he had gotten somewhere. He put his finger to his mouth to indicate that we should all be quiet. Then he moved over and took an old blanket from another antique.

"I got a blanket here to cover you," Aahz said to Glenda. "Keep you warm for the night."

"Thanks," Glenda murmured, clearly almost asleep.

Aahz moved over to her, motioning for Tanda and me to follow silently. I had no idea what he wanted me to do. Aahz put the blanket over her, wrapping the rope over her as well. Smooth move. She would never know it was there.

He pointed that I should pull the end of the rope that had dropped down against the wall under the couch.

I got on my knees and did just that, then gave the end to him as Aahz pretended to tuck the blanket around her. With a quick knot he tied the rope and stepped back.

Tanda and I both stepped back with him. I didn't know how one loop would hold someone like Glenda, or why she even needed to be held. But clearly Aahz had known something I hadn't, which was normal.

Glenda started thrashing, back and forth, back and forth, clearly trying to get out of the bind, yet the golden rope never seemed to tighten or strain in holding her. Then her eyes opened as if seeing a terror I sure didn't want to see.

"What's happening?" I whispered.

Aahz motioned for me to be silent as Glenda's mouth opened into a scream that never really came.

Her back arched her up against the blanket and rope, and she held that pose for a good thirty seconds.

It was the longest thirty seconds I had experienced. I couldn't take my eyes off of her and the look of pure terror on her face. Then whatever she was going through was over. She slumped back, closed her eyes, and began to snore.

Aahz motioned that we should move away through the books and old papers and scrolls.

"Okay, what just happened there?" Tanda asked a half-second before I asked the same question.

"Harold gave me the rope to save her from becoming a vampire," Aahz said. "It seems that those left alive last night were the ones they liked."

"So that was why Glenda's body wasn't in that morgue with the others," I said.

"Exactly," Aahz said. "They were trying to turn her, have her join them."

I glanced back at where Glenda was snoring. "So she's not going to be a vampire now?"

Aahz shrugged. "We'll keep the rope on her until morning just to make sure."

"How about for two days?" Tananda asked.

Aahz laughed and said, "Maybe."

As far as I was concerned, we could keep the rope on her for the next month. When it came to Glenda, my motto was better safe than sorry.

Spending the night trapped in the middle of a culture's entire history, afraid that at any moment I might get taken and have my blood sucked, is an experience I would not wish on my worst enemy.

The room we were trapped in was huge, with a high, domed ceiling and row after row of shelves full of old books alternating with piles of ancient furniture. Unlike Aahz and Tanda, I was not the scrounge-through-old-things kind of person. Old stuff was dusty and usually boring, as far as I was concerned. I thumbed through a few books and blew the dust off some old scrolls that looked like cookbooks. I decided I didn't want to know what they were trying to tell me about how to cook, so I wandered over to another aisle, found an antique couch tucked off to one side of a pile of furniture, managed to get most of the dust off of it, and lay down.

Tanda and Aahz were reading, whispering to each other about their finds, clearly excited about what they were seeing. I was beyond being excited about anything at this point. I was just tired. Yet for some strange reason (namely vampire cows and fear of getting my blood drained and ending up naked on a metal table in a morgue), I couldn't get to sleep. Instead I lay there, finally turning onto my back and staring at the high ceiling.

Maybe an hour into the attempt at sleep, it finally dawned on me what I was looking at every time I opened my eyes. On the smooth, stone ceiling surface someone had painted something a long, long time ago. Now, in the weird light from the glowing walls, and all the dust of the years, it was faded and almost invisible. But it was still there.

And the more I lay on my back staring at it, the more I realized that what I was seeing was the most important thing in the room as far as we were concerned. It was a map of the entire castle, only it wasn't a map of the current castle, but the layout of Count Bovine's castle.

The more I studied the drawing, the more I could see in the faint outlines. I found Harold's living area, which at one point must have been Bovine's royal suite.

The room we were now in was shown as a private library. And the skull room was there as well, labeled as "royal storage." But what was really interesting was the passageway that led from this room down into the mountain, away from the Royal Suite, down to a point that seemed to show an energy focal point of some sort in a large room. The energy point was drawn on the very center of the dome, which I also found interesting.

After another hour I was sure I had the important areas of the map pretty well memorized, including some escape routes from the castle I didn't think any vampire cow would know about.

I stood and moved over to where Aahz and Tanda were sitting at desks pouring over books. Glenda was still asleep on her couch, the golden rope tied around her.

"Have a good nap?" Aahz asked.

"A productive one," I said.

He looked at me with his normal puzzled frown and then pointed at the book he had open in front of him.

"Says here that this area around the castle is the magik focal area of the entire dimension. Before Count Bovine took it over, it was a spa area where demons from all the dimensions nearby came to soak up the concentrated magik forces and become rejuvenated."

"Powerful stuff," I said.

"More than anything I've seen before," Aahz said.

Tanda pointed at what she had been reading. "This book says that the war between the vampires and the normal folks lasted for over two hundred years and killed almost everything. This was one of the last books put in here before the exodus."

"Exodus?" I asked.

Aahz nodded. "It seems, from what we can gather, that when the compromise was reached to save both sides, Count Bovine and his people left this area, this castle, putting a shield up around it to keep everyone out of the magik."

"It seems the count didn't trust his own people with this kind of power," Tanda said.

"So what became of this count?" I asked.

Aahz shrugged. "Maybe Harold will tell us in the morning."

"Well, before that I've got something to show you."

I had them follow me back to my couch.

"I really don't feel like a nap," Aahz said.

"Just trust me," I said, pointing to a pile of furniture ten paces away. "Pull that other couch over here."

He shook his head, but did as I suggested.

"Now both of you lie on that couch," I said, dropping onto the one I had been on for hours earlier.

"And lie on your backs."

Neither of them moved, and both looked annoyed. "What, can't trust me for five seconds?" I asked, smiling up at them.

Aahz snorted and then lay down, scooting over enough to give Tanda a little room as well.

I pointed upward. "What do you see?"

"A dark ceiling and a lot of dust," Tanda said.

"I see myself wasting my time," Aahz said. "There's a lot of information here that we need to-" Silence filled the old library. After a few long seconds I said, "Interesting, isn't it?"

"What?" Tanda demanded. "Would you stop playing games and just tell me what is going on?"

To me the map was now as clear as if it were printed on a white piece of parchment. "It's a drawing," I said, pointing to the clearest lines to Tanda's right.

"It's a map," Aahz said.

"Exactly," I said. "And if you study it long enough, you can see where we are."

"Oh, my heavens," Tanda said to herself, now clearly seeing the drawing of the castle.

"After a few minutes of looking at it, the lines become clearer," I said. "Take a look to the right of the room we're in."

I didn't say anything else, giving them both time to study what I had been looking at for hours.

Then finally Aahz said, "It looks like there's a corridor there."

"Where?" Tanda demanded.

"Off the room shown as a private library," I said. "On the opposite side from the royal suite."

"And it leads downward," Aahz said.

"To this area's power," I said. "Do you have any idea what standing in the middle of that kind of energy focal point would feel like?"

Both Tanda and Aahz looked at me.

"Like nothing you could ever imagine, apprentice," Aahz said.

"True," Tanda said, going back to staring at the drawings on the ceiling, "but Skeeve might be the only one who can go down there."

"I know," Aahz said, also going back to studying the roof over his head.

"Exactly what do you mean by that?" I asked, not liking the idea that I might have to take that old corridor alone into the middle of the mountain.

Aahz sighed. "I've lost my powers; Tanda is an assassin, not a magician, and we can't trust Glenda. You're it, apprentice. If one of us has to go down there, it has to be you."

I stared at the roof, following the ancient corridor down into the center of the mountain to a place of unimaginable power. For the moment, the idea of getting my blood sucked by a vampire cow didn't seem so bad.

Chapter Fourteen

"Things are looking up."

MICHELANGELO

The rest of the night just crawled past. Aahz and Tanda stayed on the couches with me for the longest time, studying the map and trying to figure out how we were going to get out of here. I noticed that, once Aahz discovered there was no golden cow, and that the map had been a sham to get someone to save Harold, he became very interested in just leaving. I supposed that was better late than never.

Aahz was sitting at one of the desks while Tanda and I stood beside him when the wall opened up and Harold stepped in. Through the opening I could see daylight flooding into the main area beyond the bathroom. It seemed we had survived another full-moon night in the land of cow vampires.

Harold stepped in and glanced at where Glenda was still sleeping. She hadn't moved at all during the night.

"Did she try to get away?" Harold asked.

"Only when the sun went down, and only for a few seconds," Aahz said. "The rope held her."

"Then she's safe," Harold said.

"What did the rope do?" I asked, not really clear on the concept that a simple rope like that could hold even a child, let alone a person who wanted to be a vampire.

"Basically, the magik in the rope stopped her from changing," Harold said. "And leaving it on her all night cleaned her system of any chance of it ever happening. Check her neck if you want to make sure."

I moved over to Glenda. Drool had run out of her mouth and formed a wet spot on the blanket. And she was snoring

lightly. I put a finger on her temple and eased her head over so I could see the vampire bite marks on her neck. Where her skin had been red and inflamed, it had now returned to normal. Only a few faint marks that looked more like freckles were left of the infection.

"Amazing," I said.

Aahz had moved up behind me. "It sure is."

"Leave the rope on her for a while longer and let her sleep," Harold said. "It will do her good, give her body time to replace the blood drained from it."

I glanced at Glenda again. For a moment I almost felt sorry for her. Almost. Then I remembered she had stranded me in this world with no thought of ever coming back for me, and the feeling-sorry emotion left quickly.

"So how did you survive the night?" Tanda asked.

Harold just shrugged. "The same way I have survived every full-moon night for more years than I want to think about. I turned into a cow, ate grass, and slept standing up."

"Oh," Tanda said. "You going to explain that to us in the rest of your story?"

Harold laughed. "It's a part of it." Then he looked around. "This is a pretty amazing room, isn't it?"

"It is," Aahz said. "We learned some interesting history from some of these books."

I noticed that Aahz didn't say anything about the ceiling map, and I sure wasn't going to either. I wondered if Harold even knew about it.

"Good," Harold said. "That will give you some more background on what happened with me, and how we got like this. Shall we go back out into the sunlight?"

"What about her?" I asked, motioning toward the sleeping Glenda.

Harold shrugged. "She won't wake up as long as the rope is on her. She'll be fine right there."

We followed him out into the main room. It felt great to see light again. Spending the night in a dusty room worrying about what might happen at any moment wasn't my ideal evening.

"Anyone like something to eat?" he asked, moving into the kitchen area. We stood around the counter, watching him.

"Anything but carrot juice," Aahz said, smiling at me.

"Not funny," I said.

Harold looked at both of us and shrugged, clearly having no idea what we were talking about. "I can make you a horse-steak sandwich, a cucumber sandwich, or a salad with fresh tomatoes. And I've got either orange juice or water to drink."

"Wow, you eat better than the rest of your people," Tanda said.

"I do?" he asked, surprised. "It's been so long since I've been out of these rooms, I wouldn't know."

"A lot better," I said, "but at the moment I'd just like a glass of water."

Aahz and Tanda agreed and as he got the water Aahz prompted him to start his story again. "You got up to the point where your people and Count Bovine's people had come to an agreement, his people were changed to cows for most of the month, and this place was sealed off. What changed?"

"Actually," Harold said, "I changed it."

"Why?" Aahz asked, a fraction of a second before I could.

"Because I thought I knew better, knew what was best for my people, knew how to change things back to a better world."

"Better back up and tell us how that kind of thinking got started," Tanda said.

Harold nodded. "I met a dimension traveler named Leila. I was running this little restaurant and bar just down the road from here when Leila walked in. We got talking, she told me about the big world outside of this dimension, and then offered to let me be her apprentice. She said I had great magical potential."

I glanced at Aahz, who ignored me. Not once had Aahz ever said I had great magical potential, and I certainly wasn't going to ask him if I did. He'd just say no and laugh. Mostly laugh.

"Leila took me dimension-hopping with her, showed me hundreds of different places, taught me some basics of magik, then got killed by an assassin."

I could tell from the look in Harold's eyes that even though that had been some time ago, he still missed her. And might even have been in love with her.

"So after she was killed I got a D-Hopper and came back here. The magik block over this old castle was pretty basic, intended to just keep Count Bovine and my people out. But I had been trained in some magik, so I got in, knocking the block down.

"A little knowledge can be dangerous," Aahz said, glancing at me.

It was my turn to ignore him.

"It sure can be," Harold said. "I sat up house right here and found the room you stayed in last night, and started learning about what had happened to my people. And the more I read, the more convinced I became to try to save my people and wipe out the vampires once and for all."

"In other words," Tanda said, "you started the war again."

Harold nodded at Tanda's blunt statement. "Basically, I did. Yes."

"So what went wrong?" Aahz asked.

"Count Bovine came back," Harold said.

"What?" I said. "How could he? He'd have to be thousands and thousands of years old."

"He is," Harold said.

Aahz stared at me. "When are you going to get it through your head that powerful vampires, like powerful magicians, live a very long time?"

"Okay, okay," I said. "Go on with your story."

"I actually didn't know that Count Bovine could be alive either," Harold said. "Since I was free from the magical spell that kept the cows safe, I started gathering up help. One by one, I gathered a gang, broke the spell over them, and started planning. When there were about fifty of us, all trained and on horseback, we set about rounding up cows and killing them."

No one said a word, so Harold went on. "As we went, on our army got bigger and bigger, and more and more cows died. Every skull of every cow we brought back here to make us stronger. It was a heady time."

Harold looked like an old man, thinking back to his party days.

"When did Count Bovine show up?"

"Oh, about four months into our little war. He and five of his most powerful vampires walked in here one night and killed every one of my men without so much as a fight."

"Bet you thought you had it shielded, didn't you?" Aahz said.

"I did," Harold said. "I was so confident of the shielding that I didn't even have guards posted."

"Wouldn't have done any good," Aahz said. Tanda nodded. I didn't have a clue why he said that, but Harold seemed to agree as well.

"Needless to say, Count Bovine was angry. He imprisoned me up here, and put a spell on me so that every month, when he and his people are dining on my people, I'm a cow eating grass."

"How long ago was that?" I asked.

"I don't know exactly," Harold said. "No real reason to keep track. At least thirty years, maybe more."

"And Bovine and his people have been killing your people ever since?" Aahz asked, looking puzzled.

"Actually, no," Harold said. "That just started a few years back, when Count Bovine was killed and his second-in-command, Ubald, took over."

"Ubald's not one for keeping things in balance, is he?" Tanda asked.

"Not worried about it at all," Harold said. "He told me that there were enough of my kind around for his people to party for centuries."

"At least he didn't undo the cow spell," I said.

"Neither he nor Count Bovine could," Harold said. "Ubald keeps trying, though. He's using the cow skulls in the other room there to funnel energy into breaking it."

"Makes sense," Aahz said. "A spell that major, in place for that long, would be almost impossible to remove. But not completely impossible."

"He's got time," Harold said.

"So how did the map come about?" I asked.

"When Count Bovine was still alive, and had me locked up here, none of them lived anywhere near here. One day, this cartographer showed up. I wanted him to help me escape and he said he couldn't."

"He can't," Tanda said.

"Why?" I asked.

"He told me that, as long as he didn't involve himself in any activity in any dimension," Harold said, "he was free to use his magik to move anywhere he wanted, map anything he wanted, including through the magik that Count Bovine had put up to hold me here in this castle."

"I'm puzzled," Aahz said, "How did you get him to lie that there was a cow here who gave gold milk and draw a treasure map to it?"

"It never says anything about a cow giving gold milk," Harold said, laughing. "I'm the cow the map leads to, and I was willing to give anyone a lot of gold if they found me."

"Makes sense to me," Tanda said, laughing.

I was enjoying the different emotions playing over my mentor's face. We had deciphered the map, found the cow, and were entitled to the gold. That made Aahz's mouth water, I could tell. But, at the same time, getting the gold out of here, with all our blood still inside our bodies, was going to be another matter.

Harold noticed Aahz's face. "You're a Pervert, right?"

"Pervert," Aahz said, showing all his teeth.

He hated being called a Pervert, and often was, since that was the reputation of the demons from his dimension.

"Sorry," Harold said. "But you love money and gold, don't you?"

Now it was Tanda's and my turn to laugh. Aahz just gave us both a dirty look and then said, "Of course."

"You are welcome to all the treasure-gold if you want- you can carry from here," Harold said.

"There's tons of the stuff in the back. The rocks of this mountain are full of it. All you have to do is help me escape."

I knew there wasn't a sunbeam's chance on Vortex #6 that Aahz would turn down that offer. But I didn't really mind. I

sort of liked Harold. And besides, I'd lost a mentor once myself, and we apprentices needed to stick together.

"You know of a way to escape from here?" Tanda asked Harold, staring at how Aahz's eyes had glazed over at just the idea of a lot of gold.

"If I did, would I still be here?" he said, his voice sad.

Aahz looked at me and I shrugged. "Why not?"

Aahz looked at Tanda. Tanda sighed. "Sure. As you've been saying all along, we've come this far."

"Great," Aahz said. "We'll help you."

I knew for a fact that Aahz didn't have a clue how we were going to help Harold escape, but the promise sure cheered up our host.

After another hour of talking with Harold to make sure we hadn't missed anything important, I knew enough about this Ubald vampire guy to make me want another shot of carrot juice. The guy was just plain mean, almost as old as Count Bovine had been, and not at all happy with the situation as it stood.

On top of that, he liked to party, and party hard. By the time the sun was ready to come up on the last morning of the full moon, Harold said, Ubald and his group were stumbling idiots. Still very dangerous, but stumbling, and it often took the men with the golden shovels days to round up all the cattle from the different rooms of the castle and take them back to their private pastures.

The idea of coming into a huge bedroom suite to find two cows standing on a rumpled bed was too much for me. Tonight was that night, the most dangerous night of the full moon according to Harold. I could hardly wait.

Finally Aahz decided we had talked enough and we all headed back into the library area. Aahz wanted to have Harold show us the books about the spells put over this castle, the spells put on everyone by Count Bovine, and what Harold knew of the magik energy surrounding this castle. But first we had to wake up Glenda. Snoring, drooling Glenda. As far as I was concerned, she could just stay right there, sleeping for the next hundred years, or until she died of hunger in her sleep, whichever came first.

But it seemed that Harold and Aahz had other ideas for her which they were not sharing with me.

"Are you confident she's cured?" I asked Harold as we stood staring at her.

"Completely," Harold said. "The magik rope there does the trick."

"Well, just to be sure," I said, "can we put the rope around her again tonight, before the sun sets?"

Aahz laughed. "Trust me, she'll have the rope on tonight. You can count on it."

I stared at him as he moved to her and untied the knot in the golden rope, then pulled it free, wrapping it in his hand.

After what Glenda had done to us, I figured it would have served her right to become a cow for most of every month for the rest of her life. She was already a self-centered bloodsucker; why shouldn't she have the entire cow package?

After Aahz pulled the rope off of her, she awoke, groaned and somehow managed to sit up, her face pale and her eyes glazed. "What happened?"

"You slept through the night just fine," Aahz said.

"Snoring like a horse," Tanda said.

I wanted to ask her how she knew horses snored, but figured this wasn't the time to push too much into her personal life.

Glenda's hand went to her neck, where there was now no sign of the vampire bites. I could tell that she was surprised when she touched her neck and it didn't hurt. Surprised and confused. Then she noticed the gold laced rope Aahz was holding. For a moment she looked into his eyes. Then she asked, "Was I going to turn?"

"You were," Harold said. "It was why Ubald and his vampire friends let you live."

"And the rope is what I think it is?" Glenda asked, not taking her eyes from Aahz.

Aahz held it up. "Just to be safe, you're going to wear it tonight as well. I promised my apprentice there for his peace of mind."

She stared at the rope for a moment, then nodded. "I suppose I should thank you."

"Just help us all get out of here and we can call it even," Aahz said.

"I'll do what I can," she said, "but first, can I have a glass of water?"

Harold laughed. "You are cured. I'll get it for you."

I had no idea why Harold thought that Glenda getting a glass of water meant she was cured. Seemed like a somewhat silly sign to me. Or maybe vampires were only thirsty for blood? Harold headed out the panel toward his kitchen area. When he was safely gone Glenda looked up at Aahz, the anger clear and at full force in her eyes.

"Why didn't you just stake me when you had the chance?"

I was stunned by the question. And her anger at Aahz for not killing her.

"I thought about it," Aahz said.

He pointed to a sharp stake on top of an antique dresser beside the couch she was sitting on. I hadn't noticed it before. Again I was stunned. Aahz went on.

"I figure you can be of help to all of us, something you haven't done much of up to now."

"You know I'm going to have to wear that rope for the rest of my life," she said, "on every full moon, every time I hop dimensions, every night?"

"I know," Aahz said, his voice cold and low and sounding just about as mean as I had ever heard him sound. "And if you don't help us, I'm going to free you into the countryside here, in this dimension, without the rope. You'll be a cow for most of the rest of your life."

I stared at him, seeing a side of my mentor I didn't often see. It seemed that, as always, he had known more than he was telling me, and that helping her had just been a ruse to keep her with us and under his control. He tucked the rope into his pouch and crossed his arms.

"And if you want the rope to stay alive tonight, you're going to work with us and not pull any of your tricks. Understand?"

Glenda glared at him, then slowly nodded. "I understand." Well, I didn't, but I didn't want anyone trying to explain it to me with all the anger flowing around at the moment.

Chapter Fifteen

"Go with the flow."

M. TWAIN

Sometimes in grand adventures, there are times when just nothing happens. The rest of the third day of the full-moon cycle was one of those times.

Aahz, Tanda, Harold, and Glenda spent the entire day poring over books and old scrolls, trying to find answers on how to get out. I mostly sat and listened, falling asleep every few minutes until my head bobbed enough to wake me up enough to listen until I fell asleep again.

And over and over that pattern went. My neck was sore by the time the day was over.

About thirty minutes before the sun set Aahz had Glenda lie down on a couch, and then he tied the gold-laced magikal rope around her. She fell asleep instantly. That rope was the best sleep aid I had ever seen. Aahz should take it back with us to Possiltum to make money. On bad nights, I bet the king would pay a ransom for it.

If it had been up to me, I'd have sent Glenda out into the hallway to be a cow, eating grass and being followed around by a guy in a white hat with a shovel. But it wasn't up to me, so Aahz put her to sleep.

About twenty minutes before the sun set Harold shut us into the library again and went to his grass to become a cow for the night.

I slept off and on all night. Aahz and Tanda did as well, reading while they were awake. By morning, when Harold opened the door and let in a few wonderful rays of sunlight from the living area, I was well-rested and bored to tears.

Aahz untied Glenda to wake her up, pouched the rope, and we all went out into the kitchen area to have Harold cook us horse steaks covered in tomatoes. He called it his celebration breakfast. He said he had it every month after the last full moon night.

I had to admit, it was surprisingly good. After breakfast the talk turned to escape, which, after the boring day and the fear of cow vampires all night, was the most interesting topic I could imagine.

Aahz took charge of the discussion and ticked off our options. "First chance we have is to lower the dimension-hopping screen. If we could do that for even an instant, we'd be out of here."

"I've never run into a screen like it," Tanda said, "even in all my years of being an assassin. It's more solid than a rock."

"More than likely coming from the energy in the mountain," Aahz said.

I thought about the map on the ceiling, and how Aahz hadn't mentioned it to either Harold or Glenda. I had no idea what he was thinking, but I sure didn't want to mess up what he was doing by blurting something out. I'd done enough of that in the past.

"Our second option is to just find a way out of the castle."

"Right," I said, "and sneak all the way through Donner and past the posse."

"Posse?" Harold asked.

"Mounted riders who knew we were coming far outside of town."

"They picked me up as well," Glenda said.

"So they have some magik that tells them enemies are coming," Aahz said. "We could be screened against that."

"If we knew what kind of magik it was," Tanda said.

"I'm stuck here anyway," Harold said. He pointed to what I had assumed was the front door to the suite. "It's like walking into a wall trying to go through there."

"And the same for how we came in?" Tanda asked.

"Oh, I can go all the way to the entrance into the ballroom through the skull room," Harold said.

"Then I hit the screen."

"How about through the floor, or the window?" I asked.

"Haven't tried either," he said.

"I doubt it would work," Aahz said.

"Yeah," Tanda said, "captive spells, which I think this sounds like, are all-around prisons. It's like being in an invisible, unbreakable bubble."

"So to get Harold out with us," I said, "we have to break that spell as well."

"You're coming with us?" Glenda asked.

"I'm going to try," Harold said. He didn't add that there was gold for getting him out, and none of the rest of us filled her in either.

"So, old mentor," I said to Aahz, "how do we go about breaking the spells, since it seems to me that both our main ways of escape are blocked by them?"

He looked at me with a harsh look, then answered my question. "A couple of ways to break a spell. Either put a counter-spell on it, or cut off the source of power to the spell."

"Since this place is flowing with energy, the second doesn't sound likely. How does a counter-spell work?"

"I've tried every one I know," Harold said.

I glanced at Aahz. "My mentor hasn't even taught me any yet."

"When you gain enough self-control to use them," Aahz said, "I might think about it."

"I tried a number of them the first day I was here," Glenda said. "Didn't even dent the dimension-hopping shield."

"I tried all the ones I knew as well," Tanda said, frowning. Since we were all still here, I assumed she had had the same result as Glenda.

"And I saw nothing in any of the books back there to give us any help either," Aahz said. "In fact, I think it's worse than we are assuming. I think the spell that keeps all the vampires as cows, and your people under their spell and not killing the cows every month, is tied up with the very spells we are trying to break."

"If that's the case," Harold said, sounding defeated, "to free me, I must release all my people from the spell that has

held them for centuries, and free all the vampires to kill them at the same time. I can't do that."

"Actually," Aahz said, smiling, "there might be a way that it would work, if we could shut everything down at once and at an exact time."

"How?" Harold asked.

"I wouldn't mind knowing the same thing," I said.

Tanda laughed with Aahz. "Do it during the middle of the day."

I frowned and looked at Aahz, who was nodding and laughing at me. Harold was frowning as well. Glenda was laughing, but not very much.

"All the cows are out in pastures," Aahz said, his voice taking on the tone he got when I was being so stupid he couldn't believe I could be that stupid.

"Daylight," Tanda said. "Vampires?"

"Oh," Harold said. "Of course. Sunlight kills vampires."

"Of course," I said out loud, pretending I had just forgotten, even though I had never known that fact about vampires. Why would I have? Until I came to this stupid dimension, I had never seen or even heard of a vampire. I just figured they had something to do with full moons.

"So if we shut off the power to the big spell somehow," Harold said, "all the vampires on one half of the planet would die."

"Exactly," Aahz said, "And the ones on the night side would have to find shelter by sunrise, giving your people time to kill many of them."

"Aahz, I just have one question."

He looked at me and said nothing.

"How do you propose to shut off the energy flowing in this area?"

Aahz smiled. "That's our problem, isn't it?"

"Why do I think I'm not going to like what you're thinking at this moment?"

"Oh, maybe because I'm thinking that's where you're going to come in."

Tanda laughed.

"It's not funny," I said.

"Sure it is," Tanda said.

I just stared at Aahz. Someday I'd love to figure out a way to get him his powers back so I wasn't the one doing the dirty work all the time. I had a hunch, from the look on his face, that this was going to get really dirty for me. Center-of-the-mountain-kill-the-energy-at-its-source dirty.

"Before we can figure out how to block the energy for the spells," Aahz said, "we have to know how it flows through the castle."

He said that and I just shuddered.

I could feel how much of the energy flowed in this place any time I opened my mind to it. It came from down in the mountain, flowing up and out. Usually energy for magik was in lines flowing through the sky that I had to reach up and tap to work a disguise spell, or a flying spell. Or, if there was no air energy, I went for ground energy flowing deep under the surface and rocks. Air energy was easier to get, and Aahz had taught me to always go for it first.

But this castle was built right on a place where energy flowed up from below and out into the sky in all directions. Mapping meant someone who could read energy lines had to somehow get above the castle and look down at it all.

"So what do we do?" Tanda asked. "How do we start doing that?"

"First," Aahz said, "we try to figure out how the energy flows into that skull room. It was strong and getting stronger in there right before all the cows turned to vampires the other night."

"Really?" Harold asked.

I was surprised that Aahz had wanted to start there, but it made sense. We had to map the energy patterns, and starting where we knew a lot was being tapped seemed logical.

Suddenly I realized what I had been thinking about.

"Map," I said aloud.

Everyone sort of turned and stared at me.

"Map," I said again, smiling at them. I reached into my pouch and pulled out the magik map we had used so often to

get into this fix. If it got us here, it just might be able to get us out.

"Oh, heavens, yes," Aahz said, smiling at me. "Great thinking, Skeeve."

That was the third time he had complimented me on something to do with the map. I was going to have to keep this parchment with me at all times. Aahz hadn't given me that many compliments in the last year.

I opened up the map. It was completely blank. Nothing on it at all. For some reason, that wasn't what I was expecting. I'm not sure exactly what I was expecting, but a blank parchment just flat wasn't it.

"Perfect," Aahz said, looking at the empty sheet.

I handed it to him, flashing it so the others could tell it was blank as well. If he liked a map with no lines, he could have a map with no lines.

"Was that the map the cartographer did?" Harold asked. "The one that got you here?"

"Sure was," I said.

"What happened to it?" Harold asked.

"It got us here," Tanda said.

"Oh," Harold said.

"Tanda," Aahz said, "do you know how to do a mapping spell?"

Tananda shook her head. "Beyond me, I'm afraid."

"Glenda?"

"Nope," she said. "When I needed a map I went to a cartographer's booth on Deva and bought one."

"Same with me," Harold said.

Aahz turned and looked at me. "Guess it's up to you, apprentice."

"Okay," I said, "but don't you think I need a little practice at this spell first?"

Aahz held up the paper. "This is the only piece of magik paper we have. You only get one shot at it."

"No pressure," I said.

"If I didn't believe you could do it," Aahz said, "would I be wanting you to try?"

I didn't think I should remind him he had offered the job to everyone but me to start with. No point in ruining the mood when he was trying to boost my confidence. He did that less often than he complimented me.

"We'll be back shortly," Aahz said to everyone as he motioned for me to follow him, "I hope with a map."

"Yeah, me too," I said.

Aahz headed us across the carpet of grass. We had to sidestep around a pile of cow droppings on the way. I guess that Harold didn't have a man with a golden shovel standing behind him at night. At the hidden entrance to the skull room Aahz stopped and turned back to Tanda.

"Are we going to be shielded out there?"

"Doing magik?" Tanda asked. "Some, but it might show through."

I didn't like the sound of that. The last thing we needed up here was the posse.

Aahz stopped and thought for a minute. "How about in the back library area?"

"That's so shielded, nothing could get out," Tanda said.

"I agree," Harold said. "It would be much safer to do spells back there."

Aahz indicated I should follow him and again we went around the pile of cow droppings, across the room and through the bathroom to the old library. I had spent so much time in this room already, I really didn't want to be in here again. Aahz pushed the door closed behind him, then laid the empty paper on top of the desk he had sat at last night.

"This is going to work even better in here," he said. "I want you to do this in two parts."

"Give it to me clearly and I'll try."

My mentor nodded. "First, we're going to imprint that ceiling map on this paper."

I glanced up, then back at Aahz. "Good idea. How do I do that?"

"This part is going to be pretty easy," Aahz said. "Simpler than flying or doing disguise spells."

I nodded. I liked the sound of simple at this point. Since I was only getting one try, simple was the best.

"Open your mind, take in the energy as you have practiced, controlling the flow to a medium level." "Now?" I asked. "Now," he said.

I did as he instructed. Since we had been together I had practiced this so much it had become almost second nature to me. I could do it almost instantly when needed. When we first left my old mentor's cabin, Aahz had told me that would happen, but back then it had been so hard to do I didn't believe him.

Now, reaching out with my mind and getting energy was easy, and with this much energy flowing around me, the trick was getting only enough so that I could control what I was doing.

"Got it," I said after a moment. The energy flow was moving through me, ready to power anything I told it to.

"Now, in one motion," Aahz said, "without a break, picture the map on the ceiling and then picture the same map on the paper."

I did it, letting the energy help me get a clear image of the ceiling map, then a clear image of the same lines and shapes and words on the magik paper.

I let go of the energy and opened my eyes. "Perfect," Aahz said, actual excitement in his voice. I glanced at the roof. The map was still there. Good, I hadn't harmed it.

Then I looked at the paper, almost afraid of what I might see. The same map was reproduced there, only the lines were much clearer, and there were words on the paper that I didn't remember even seeing on the ceiling. And none of the dust and dirt obscured it either. I couldn't believe it. I had done a new spell perfectly the first time!

"Now don't go getting a swollen head," Aahz said, as if he could read my thoughts. "That was the easy part."

I didn't care. I had done it, and done it right the first time. For the moment that was all that mattered.

"So what's next?"

"We do the same spell with energy lines," Aahz said, "imprinting them on this map of the castle." I knew that was what he was going to want, but doing that meant stepping out of my mind to look down on the energy lines through the entire area. And the last time I had tried that I almost hadn't made it back inside my own mind. Of course, Aahz didn't know I had even tried. I didn't want to tell him because I knew he'd be angry.

"This is" going to take some preparation," Aahz said.

"I'd hoped it would."

He put the map on the floor and had me stand right over it. "See the images there?"

I nodded, staring down at the map I had just created. It was a beautiful thing indeed. "Now, when we start," Aahz said, "I want you to imagine yourself floating above the energy lines, above the castle if you have to, in the same fashion you use to reach out for the energy lines in a spell."

"Okay," I said, still staring down at the map at my feet, "but isn't there a risk I will just float away?" Standing above the map like this, it almost felt as if I was already floating.

"Good question, apprentice," Aahz said. "Just put a string on your foot."

"A what?" I looked up into my mentor's eyes. I could tell he was concerned with me even trying this. I didn't know if the concern was for me, or for what would happen if I failed, but at least he was concerned.

"A string, like a kid's balloon string," he said. "Imagine one tied from the foot of your real body to the foot of your imaginary body as it floats upward. Then when you want to return, just go back down the string."

I nodded. That was such a simple image, even I might be able to handle it.

"When you get a good view of all the flowing energy lines over and through the castle," Aahz said, "just do what you did with this map. Imagine them as you see them; then in one motion imagine them on the paper."

"Okay," I said. "I think I can do that."

"When you're ready," Aahz said, stepping back. "Just do it."

I looked at the map at my feet, putting the image clearly in my head. Then I let myself go.

That is what it actually felt like. I was letting go of what was holding me down. I was floating upward. I checked to make sure I had a string attached to my foot. It was there, so I relaxed and just kept going, floating upward.

I went above the energy line I had used to create the other map, through the roof of the castle, and then stopped, floating right over the top of the golden castle in the beautiful sunshine.

Below me rivers of blue energy flowed, coming up out of the middle of the castle like a well, splitting and flowing off in dozens of directions over the mountains and valleys.

I let my mind accept all the different levels of energy flow, all the way down into the deepest area of the castle. I could see all the streams, all the different places they branched, and all the places they were tapped.

Then, when I had them all, I held the image, imprinted it on my mind, and then imagined it being overlaid in blue lines on the map at my feet.

It only took an instant. Then, with one last look at the beautiful colors of the energy and the surrounding countryside, I tugged on the string attached to my foot and I was back in my body, just like that.

I opened my eyes and glanced at Aahz. My mentor was smiling like he had just won all the riches of the Bazaar at Deva.

"Amazing," he said. "Sometimes you just flat amaze me."

I was afraid to look down, so instead I stepped back.

Aahz picked up the map and held it for me to see. There, in black lines, was the first map of the castle I had done from the ceiling.

And over it were flowing lines of energy. The magik of the map was keeping the lines flowing in the image, just as I had seen it from above.

I didn't know what to say. He was holding something I had created, and it was beautiful and working as it should.

Better than it should. I had never expected the energy lines to keep moving, but they were.

"Come on, apprentice. Let's go show the rest what you did. Amazing, simply amazing."

He turned and headed for the door.

For the first time in all our time together, I had sensed a little pride in Aahz's voice. I might have been imagining it, but this time I didn't think so.

It was pride, and it made me feel good.

Chapter Sixteen

"Put your name on the map."

A. VESPUCCI

Everyone made great noises about the map I had created. And Tanda gave me a long and very nice hug. I didn't say much, since I was so proud of what I had done, I was afraid I'd ruin the moment by saying something stupid.

Finally, Aahz laid the map out on the table and said, "Let's get to work. We need to find on here where the spell Count Bovine placed over this dimension is drawing its power."

I studied the moving blue lines with everyone else, watching how they seemed to come up out of the floor plan of the castle and into the air.

The map was magik, so it even showed the different levels of the castle, like looking into a fishbowl. It was both beautiful and disconcerting at the same time.

"Look in the sub-level of the castle," Tanda said, pointing.

I let my eyes adjust so that I could see the plan of the castle that far down. I instantly saw what she was pointing at. The wide, thick river of energy that was pouring up from the ground suddenly thinned, like a good part of it had been drained away into an unseen drain. That unseen drain, using that much energy, could only be a spell large enough to control an entire dimension.

"I think you have it," Aahz said, nodding.

"I agree," I said, remembering what the energy below that point felt like while I had been floating, and what it felt like above that point.

"Where did you get this floor plan?" Harold asked, staring at it. "I've never seen anything like this before. That corridor isn't there, and I have no idea what that tunnel goes to."

I glanced at Aahz, who only smiled.

"You've seen this before," I said. "It's painted on the ceiling of the library in there."

"No, it's not," Harold said, shaking his head. "This is a picture of the castle during Count Bovine's first days."

"Go look for yourself," Tanda said. "It took me a while to see it as well. Skeeve spotted it first."

Harold stared at us as if we had all gone nuts. I didn't blame him. If I had been living in a place for as many years as he had been trapped here, and a stranger had pointed something this important out, I wouldn't believe him either.

He huffed and stormed off toward the library.

"Okay," I said, "we know where Count Bovine tapped into the energy stream. How do we untap it?"

"We have to get down there," Aahz said. "Then we have to divert it for just an instant to break the link. That's all it will take."

I looked at the massive flow of energy rushing up out of the ground. I could tap into small energy streams, but I had no idea how a person would go about blocking something this large. And I wasn't sure I wanted to ask.

Harold came back in, looking stunned and embarrassed.

"If we manage to block this," Tanda said, "what do you think will happen?"

Aahz looked at the map. "Probably every spell ever put up by any of Count Bovine's people will be broken."

"My people will have their minds and free will back," Harold said.

"Yeah," I said, "and every vampire will suddenly be around every day of every month."

"Half of the population of vampires will be dead moments after they turn from cows," Aahz said.

"And all the others will be without resources, clothes, shelter, and food, with the sun coming quickly."

"Do you think my people will remember all the years of having to submit to the round-up?" Harold asked.

"I have no doubt," Aahz said. "You still remember it before you were rescued from here, don't you?"

Harold nodded. "My people will hunt down and kill most of the remaining vampires."

"And you'll be free to leave," I said.

"If we can break the vampire hold on my world, I won't want to leave," Harold said. "I'll stay here and help my people rebuild."

I shook my head. It was all fine and good to plan what people would do if we succeeded, but I sure didn't see that happening any time soon.

"So no one has answered the question yet of how we stop that flow."

I didn't even want to try to bring up the point of getting down to that spot in the castle. We were way up at the top, and that breach in the main flow was way down in a sub-basement, where I doubted anyone had been in centuries.

"Gold," Glenda said, her voice sounding tired and worn. "Gold would stop the flow, if you could focus enough of it."

Aahz seemed to be off somewhere inside his head, thinking. Tanda was doing the same thing.

Harold and I looked at each other. Clearly, as apprentice magicians, neither of us even had a clue what the other three were considering.

"I think it might be done," Aahz said, nodding. He looked at Glenda. "Good idea."

She said nothing in return. It seemed that as the closer we got to a possible answer, the more sullen and reserved she became. I was still so angry at her for what she did to me that I didn't care enough to even ask what was happening.

"Okay, to the next problem," I said. "How do we get down there with enough gold to stop the energy stream?"

"We won't need much gold," Tanda said. "Just enough, with a good connection spell, to hook other nearby gold into the blockage. Maybe something gold-plated and flat."

"A golden shovel?" I asked.

Tanda nodded. "That would do it, I'm sure."

Harold moved over toward the front door of the suite, near where the grass was planted. He tapped a spot on the wall and a closet door opened. He reached inside and pulled

out a golden shovel, just like the ones the palace guys had. It seemed that, in the palace, no cow droppings could be picked up with anything but a golden shovel.

"Okay, we're set for the gold part," Aahz said. "Tanda, when we're ready to try this, can you do the connection spell to hook enough gold into the shovel?"

She nodded. "I've done a number of them over the years to build shields and walls."

"So back to my problem," I said. "How do we get down there without being run over by the mounted posse?"

Aahz pointed to a spot on the map. At first I couldn't see what he was pointing at, then I saw it. The very same tunnel I had been afraid I was going to end up down in.

"Follow where it leads," Aahz said. "Starting with the secret opening back in the library."

I did as he suggested, focusing on the map as it changed, showing me the different levels of the secret passageway as it dropped through the mountain behind the castle, curved under everything, and came out in the very room where the big energy flow had been taken off for the spell.

"Looks like there was a reason that tunnel was built," Aahz said, smiling at me.

"Count Bovine used it to get to his main power source when he lived here full-time," Harold said.

"What do you know?"

"So we're going underground," I said, reaching over and taking the heavy shovel from Harold. "I just hope I don't have to dig my way out."

"You and me both," Aahz said, staring at the map.

My mentor had a way of making everything seem so positive that it was a wonder I could even move most mornings.

It took a little longer than I had expected to find the hidden passageway into the tunnel in the old library. We had to move pile of furniture, old books, and more rolled-up scrolls than I could count. The scrolls were the hardest, since Harold wouldn't let us just kick them aside. Finally, we got to the spot where the passage should be and faced a stone wall.

"I didn't think there was anything back here," he said. "After all these years, I know this room."

I didn't want to mention to him that he really didn't, since he hadn't even noticed the map painted on the ceiling.

"Oh, it's here all right," Aahz said.

All five of us were standing there in the dusty place. I had the shovel, Tanda had the map.

"Glenda?" Aahz said.

She stepped up to him.

Quicker than I had seen my mentor move in a long, long time, Aahz had the rope out of his pouch, over her head, and tied.

She dropped to the ground, sound asleep, before she could even get a complaint out of her mouth. I was stunned.

"Harold," Aahz said, "pick up her feet and let's move her to a couch."

Harold looked as stunned as I felt. Tanda seemed to again know exactly what was happening.

Aahz moved Glenda to the couch, made sure the rope was tied, then looked at Harold. "No matter what you do, what you think, what happens around you, do not untie her until we get back.

Understand?"

Harold nodded. "But I don't see why."

"The map," Aahz said.

Tanda held it up and pointed to a spot on it.

"Right here," she said. "See this tiny thin line coming up out of the basement and into this suite?"

I looked real close. For a moment I thought she was making it up, then I saw the blue line. It went right to a spot in the suite where the chair was, where Glenda had been sitting when I did the map. "Glenda's hooked up somehow," Aahz said. "I didn't see that until we had already made our plans."

"You mean they might know we're coming?"

"Possible," Aahz said.

"Oh, that's nice," I said. I wondered how many of that posse I could hit with the golden shovel before they took it away from me.

"Are you ready?" Aahz asked.

"You want me to lead?" I asked, still not seeing where we were going to go.

"I've got it for the moment," Aahz said. He picked up the torch we had brought with us from the first tunnel, held it out and said to me, "A light might help."

I eased some energy out of the stream, just enough to start the torch on fire. Not long ago I had had trouble with that spell as well. And a year ago I might have set the entire library on fire trying to light that torch.

"Follow me," Aahz said, and stepped at the stone wall.

And right through it.

"This place could give a guy a headache," I said, moving at the stone wall behind him. I had the shovel slightly in front of me in case the stone decided to be stone for me.

I went right through, just as Aahz had done.

Tanda came through behind me.

The tunnel was narrow and carved out of solid rock. Steps led down into the bowels of the earth. More steps than I could see in the torchlight. The place was cold and very dusty. It was clear that no one had been in here in a very, very long time, as our footsteps kicked up a cloud of dust that swirled in the flickering light of the torch.

"Are we shielded?" Aahz asked Tanda.

"Same as in the library," Tanda said. "Count Bovine didn't want this tunnel found, that's for sure."

"That helps us," I said.

Aahz nodded, made sure we were both ready, then, holding the torch up so that we could see the steps as well as he could in the dust, he started down.

And we went down for a very, very long time, kicking up thick clouds of dust with every step. I could not imagine how anyone could have carved the tunnel. I could barely walk the steps, and we were going down. Climbing this must be next to impossible for anyone not in top shape.

Finally, after what seemed like a nightmarish eternity, we reached an area of the tunnel that flattened out.

"Map," Aahz said.

Tanda moved up and the two of us crowded with Aahz so that we could see the map in the torchlight and swirling dust. It showed that we had reached the bottom of the tunnel. I glanced around at the rock walls and ceiling. We were under thousands and thousands of body-lengths of rock. I couldn't imagine how much weight was pressing down on the ceiling of the tunnel above us right at that moment.

The thought sent a shiver through me, and a touch of panic. "Can we keep going?" I asked.

Tanda took the map and Aahz smiled at me, his green scales covered in dust, his eyes yellow holes in the dirt. I must have looked as bad as he did, maybe worse. "A little claustrophobia?" he asked.

"I don't know about that," I said, not having a clue what the big word meant. Sometimes Aahz just didn't remember what a backward part of a backward world I came from.

"Feeling the pressure of all this weight over us?" Tanda asked.

"Yeah," I said, "more than I want to think about right now, thank you very much."

Aahz laughed. "We don't have that much farther to go." "Then let's go," I said, fighting against the panic at the walls closing in.

Aahz gave me a long look, then turned and headed along the flat part of the tunnel. I kept the golden shovel clutched in front of me. At least if the tunnel came down, I'd be buried with something worth digging up. After a hundred paces the tunnel started back up. Stair after stair after stair. Up and up and up.

I forgot to be afraid of the tunnel coming down on me because I was so tired from the climbing.

"Wait," Aahz said, stopping to pant for a moment. "The air's bad in here."

I realized when he said that that I was also having trouble getting enough air. Now not only was the roof about to fall and crush me, I was going to die from lack of air.

"Almost there," Tanda said from behind me. I could hear the rustling of the map. Aahz nodded and pushed upward, taking one step at a time.

I used the shovel as a sort of crutch. Step. Clunk. Step. Clunk.

The sound echoed down the tunnel behind us. If this plan didn't work, I couldn't imagine having to go back to the suite using this tunnel. I'd try it if I had to, but I sure didn't want to.

Step. Clunk. Step. Clunk.

We kept climbing. Forever. How could this be? Had we gotten turned around and were headed back to the suite?

My lungs burned like the time I had stayed underwater too long in the pond when I was a kid. My eyes stung with the dust, and I could feel the grit in my mouth.

"We're here," Aahz said, his voice barely a whisper. I glanced back. Tanda was a few steps behind me, her face covered in dust, mud caked around her mouth and nose. She looked as if she was about to pass out.

Ahead of me Aahz slid back a wooden panel and stepped through.

Cool, fresh air hit me like a hammer as I stepped up to follow him. In all my life I couldn't remember anything feeling that good before.

We were in a good-sized room, at least fifty paces across, that was completely empty of every stick of furniture. It was simply four walls of stone, a stone floor, and a stone ceiling. From the looks of it, the door we had come through was the only door in the place. And there were no windows.

Where the wonderful fresh air was coming from I had no idea.

"Oh, my," Tanda said, coming up out of the tunnel and taking big gulping breaths of air. I gulped right along with her.

Aahz came over and took the map from Tanda, studying it as we caught our breath. After a moment he moved around the room, staying to the outside.

I knew why he stayed to the outside. In the center of the room was a massive energy flow coming up through the floor and going out through the ceiling. It wouldn't hurt him to walk through it, but Aahz was taking no chances.

About halfway around the room he stopped, studied the map again, and then came back toward us a few steps.

"Right here," he said, pointing into the empty air. "Right here is where the energy flow is diverted."

He pointed in the direction of the empty wall beside him, indicating how the energy flow moved off the main one.

I took a deep breath and let my mind open slightly to see the flow.

"Wow!" I said, staggering backwards from the sight.

Beside me Tanda did the same.

"It's huge!" she said.

Not more than a few paces in front of me was a torrent of pure blue energy, flowing like a fast-moving river up out of the ground and through the ceiling. It was a good forty or more paces across. I could see Aahz through it, but just barely. About halfway up, in the center of the room about head high, the flow seemed to decrease in size significantly, from forty paces across to less than thirty. I could see where the other energy was going sideways and then vanishing in the direction that Aahz had pointed. That energy was powering the spell that held this dimension in the strange state it was in. How Count Bovine had managed to divert so much energy into one spell was also beyond my apprentice's level of understanding. I glanced down at the little gold shovel I held in my hand, then back at the raging torrent of blue energy in front of me. The silliness of even thinking of trying to change that torrent with my little shovel made me laugh.

Aahz, staying to the outside, came back around to where we were standing.

"This isn't possible," I said, holding up the shovel.

"It fills this room, Aahz," Tanda said, the awe in her voice clear. "I've never seen an energy stream anything like it."

"We can do it," Aahz said. Again I looked at my little gold shovel, then at the torrent of blue energy and just shook my head. Sometimes my mentor was smart, sometimes angry, but right now he was just plain crazy.

Chapter Seventeen

"I've heard of goldbricking, but this is ridiculous"

MIDAS REX

"Skeeve," Aahz said, "can you see where the flow for Count Bovine's spell leaves the main energy?"

We had moved around to the side of the room where Count Bovine's spell took its energy from the river of flowing energy pouring out of the ground.

"Yes, right in front of us," I said.

I pointed out where it left and how high it was to Aahz, who nodded.

I was using a part of my mind that allowed me to reach out for energy and do spells myself. That part allowed me to see the energy, where Aahz, who had lost his powers, could not.

Where the energy for Count Bovine's spell left the main stream was like a branch on a big tree. It sort of cut it off of one side of the main flow, moving up and sideways. The moment the secondary flow was sideways to the main one, it vanished into the spell it was being used for. We had about a body length, right above where I stood, to cut that side-flow off and send it along in the main flow. At least, that was the theory on what we were going to try. Sort of like trying to dam up the side branch of a river in one quick move, without getting wet. But even that side-branch of this energy, where I could see it, had to be ten paces across. Far, far wider than my little gold shovel. Yet from what I understood, Aahz wanted me to try to divert or even stop that energy with my shovel. Not a chance in a Bovine hell.

Aahz moved over behind me. "We're going to have to do this together," he said. "Tanda, when I say 'ready' you

connect the gold in this shovel to whatever gold you can sense nearby. Pull in as much as you can."

"Oh, so you're going to make the shovel bigger?" I asked, starting to understand his plan.

"Exactly," he said.

Tanda nodded. "I'm going to have to make the gold wide, at least ten feet around."

Tanda could see the giant flow of energy as well as I could. She also knew how insane this attempt was.

"I know," Aahz said, nodding.

"Can you hold that much?" I asked. "I sure can't."

"We're both going to try," Aahz said. "You steer, I'll lift. I'm going to get under the shovel. When Tanda connects other gold to it and starts expanding it, it's going to get really, really heavy very quickly, so be ready the moment I say go. I don't want to drop it."

I nodded. This gold-plated shovel wasn't that light as it was. I couldn't imagine how Aahz and I could even try to hold up a gold block ten feet across, even a thin one.

"We have to keep it out of the flow until it's big enough," Aahz said.

"Okay," I said. "Let's do this and get on to the next life."

Aahz laughed. "That's what I like about you, apprentice. Always a good mental attitude."

"Give me something to be positive about," I said.

Aahz moved around and got under me, bracing himself solidly as I held the shovel up in position next to the side-flow of energy. When the gold got big enough for what Tanda was going to do, we were going to simply let the shovel fall to our right and cut off the side-flow to the spell. However, if we let the shovel fall forward into the main flow, there was no telling what would happen.

Aahz said he wasn't even sure what was going to happen when we cut the side-flow. He hoped nothing, but he didn't know for sure when I had asked him.

"Ready!" Aahz shouted, even though the room was empty and there were only the three of us in it.

To an outsider watching us who couldn't see the energy flow, we would have looked darned silly.

Aahz crouched in front of me, holding onto the shovel I was holding in the air. Tanda beside us, her head tilted back, staring up into nothingness.

"Ready," she said.

I knew she was sending her mind out, linking gold, pulling it in to add to our shield.

"Now!" Aahz shouted again.

Instantly the shovel started growing in size and in weight. I braced myself as Aahz did the same. I was stunned at how heavy it got so quickly.

The shovel grew and I strained against dropping it, trying to do my job of just holding it steady.

"About half!" Aahz said, his voice strained from holding up the ever-heavier shovel. Aahz was one of the strongest demons I knew, and he was having problems. I did my best to help lift at the same time as holding the shovel in position. I doubted I was doing much good, but I knew for a fact the effort was going to cost me later.

The shovel was getting bigger and bigger, growing quicker and quicker.

"Almost!" Aahz said, his voice barely a croak under the weight. Above me the shovel looked like a massive gold coin.

"Now!" Aahz said.

I pushed sideways, letting the shovel fall toward the side-flow of energy as Tanda kept adding more and more gold to it.

Like a gold knife, the shovel cut through the blue energy.

At that moment everything in the room seemed to explode.

I was smashed back against the stone, banging my head hard.

Tanda tumbled across the floor toward the door, coming to rest pressed against the wood. Her eyes were closed and I couldn't tell if she was hurt or not.

Aahz was pressed against the stone wall beside me.

Forces like I had never felt before held me in position as the gold cut through the flow just as we had planned. So far it was working. I couldn't believe it.

But then the shovel kept growing and growing as more and more gold poured into it. Something was wrong. Tanda should have unlinked the gold in the shield we built from the other gold around the area when the shield hit the energy. But there was clearly still more and more gold pouring into that shield. It had cut the side-flow, but now it was falling slowly toward the main flow, cutting into it as well as it kept growing.

Then the room seemed to expand outward and the pressure of my head against the stone sent me down into a blackness I didn't much like.

"Skeeve!"

"Skeeve! Can you hear me?"

The voice sounded far off, like it was coming from over a hill. I didn't care. It was still dark out and I wanted to sleep some more.

"Skeeve!"

The voice was getting closer, or so it seemed. I was in blackness. Pitch-black blackness. I tried to open my eyes, but everything still remained black. Every muscle in my body ached, and somehow I seemed to have fallen out of bed.

"Skeeve, if you can hear me, light the torch."

Now I understood the blackness, but I still couldn't remember where I was. I could hear something moving around, but it was so dark, I couldn't see a thing. More than likely it was Aahz trying to figure out what had happened to the lights.

I felt around on the floor beside me, but I couldn't find a torch. There wasn't one near me. I'm not sure why I expected there to be on the floor, but still I couldn't find it. The floor I was on was cold, like stone, and hard as a rock.

"Skeeve, some light."

Aahz was starting to get on my nerves. It was dark out. Why couldn't he just let me sleep? I reached down and ripped off a little piece of my shirt. I seemed to remember that some time in the past I had done that same thing. But the memory was foggy.

Holding the piece of cloth up in front of me, I focused my mind, trying to find some energy to take and light the cloth. It

was hard, but I finally found enough to catch the cloth and start a small flame.

The room around me flickered into being. Aahz was sitting against a stone wall with Tanda's head on his lap about ten paces from me. There was nothing else in the room except a big hunk of thin, gray metal covering the center of the room.

"I was worried about you, apprentice," Aahz said. "Glad to see you alive."

"I was worried about me as well," I said.

Slowly I was remembering. We were here to cut the energy from a big spell done a long time ago by a Count Bovine, and the big pancake-like gray thing in the middle of the floor was my shovel, or what was left of it.

Tanda moaned on Aahz's lap and tried to sit up.

"Take it easy," Aahz said. "You got a nasty bump on the head."

"I can feel that," Tanda said. Then she looked around and smiled at me. "Good to see you made it as well."

"I'll tell you in the morning if I made it," I said as more memories flooded back in.

She laughed and then clutched her head from the pain.

"I told you to go slow," Aahz said.

"Well," Tanda said after a moment. "Did we succeed?"

"I don't know," Aahz said. "Skeeve, did we succeed?"

It took me a moment of sitting there with my back against the wall and the cloth burning in my hand to understand what he wanted me to do. Then it dawned on me. Look to see if the energy flow to the Bovine spell had stopped.

I could do that. Or at least I thought I could do that. I opened up my mind, searching for the blue energy stream that had filled this room just a short time ago. Nothing. The side stream and the main stream were now gone completely. The room was as empty energy-wise as it was furniture-wise.

"Oh, yeah," I said. "We succeeded. Maybe a little too well."

"All gone?" Tanda asked, not moving her head.

"All gone, main stream and all."

"Well, that's going to be interesting," Aahz said.

The cloth was starting to get close to burning my fingers, so I scooted slowly over on the floor to where the torch lay and lit it. Then I held it up and looked around. On the other side of the room, where I was fairly sure there hadn't been a door before, was now an open archway. A breeze blew in from the archway, through the room, and into the tunnel we had come out of.

"I think we'd better go see what we've done," Aahz said. "Can you both walk?"

I tested my legs as Tanda tested hers. It seemed that, besides a lot of bumps and bruises, we had all come out of everything pretty well. It was going to be interesting to see how the rest of the inhabitants of this castle fared.

"Do we have to go back up the tunnel?" I asked, trying to imagine making that climb in the condition I was in.

Aahz shook his head. "If this didn't work to stop Bovine's spell, nothing is going to, and that means we're never getting out of here, so why bother continuing to hide?"

"I thought I had the positive attitude," I said.

"I can learn from an apprentice," Aahz said.

We limped our way toward the door with the wonderful fresh breeze blowing in. It led us into a corridor that turned after about fifty paces. After the turn there was a flight of stairs. Painful stairs, but at least stairs that had fresh air blowing down them.

At the top, the corridor turned again and went out an archway covered in a mass of flowering plants. Aahz pushed through the plants and I helped Tanda follow.

We stepped out into the beautiful sunshine of a wonderful afternoon. After being under tons of rock, getting knocked out by an energy explosion, and waking up in pitch darkness, the sunshine was beyond words.

There was a shovel lying on the lawn in front of us. It was the same shape as the golden-plated shovel we had used, only there was no gold left on it.

"Would you look at that," Aahz said.

On the corner of the lawn was a smoking pile of what looked like a cow.

"Looks like we broke Bovine's spell," I said.

"Sure does," Tanda said, pointing to the shovel. "On both sides of it. Whoever had that shovel has left. And the front gates of the castle are standing wide open."

She was right, but what I also noticed was that the gold trim that had decorated the gate was gone, and the gold along the top of the walls was gone. I looked slowly around. There wasn't a speck of gold in sight. Tanda's spell must have used it all around this area.

We walked across the soft grass toward the burning pile until the smell stopped us twenty feet away. It had been a vampire cow all right, but now its legs were sticking straight up in the air and

its skin was burnt to a crisp. It looked as if had burst into flames and died almost instantly, before even turning completely back into its vampire form.

"What a waste," Aahz said, staring at the burning creature.

"What are you talking about?" I asked. "That was a bloodsucking vampire."

"No," Aahz said, shaking head. "I mean what a waste of good meat. No one eats their steak well-done these days."

He turned and smiled at me. "What was the chef thinking?"

"That it will be years before I eat another steak," I said.

Chapter Eighteen

"So where's the profit?"

TERECTUS

Victorious or not, we were still pretty tired by the time we made our way back to where we had left Harold and Glenda. Something I've noticed in the past about playing with channeling energies: when it's over, what you feel is drained.

The first thing that was noticeable was that apparently Harold had untied Glenda, as she was conscious and perched in a chair across the table from him. The second was that Harold himself seemed far more composed as he rose to greet us.

"Ah, my friends! It seems that congratulations are in order," he said, smiling broadly. "All indications are that you were successful in your efforts to shut down the spells."

"That's not all that's in order," Aahz said darkly, folding his arms across his chest. "I think, at this point, we're due a few explanations. Beyond the tale you told us originally, that is."

"But of course," Harold said, gesturing for us to pull up chairs. "I take it that you have already determined that my story was not quite complete."

"Let's just say that the facts as they were presented to us don't quite add up," Tananda said through tight lips.

Harold nodded. "It is true that there were a few minor points that I omitted or altered slightly when I explained the situation you."

"Why don't you just fill us in on those points now," Aahz said, "and let us decide for ourselves how minor they are."

"Very well. First, perhaps things will be clearer if I admit that my name is not Harold. In truth, I am Count Bovine himself."

Hit or Myth By Robert Asprin

Chapter One:

"There's something to be said for relatives
. . . it has to be said because it's unprint-
able!"

—A. EINSTEIN

PERHAPS if I hadn't been so preoccupied with my own thoughts when I walked into my quarters that day, I wouldn't have been caught unawares. Still, who expects to get caught in a magikal attack just walking into their own room?

Okay, okay! So I am the Court Magician of Possil-
tum, and maybe I have been getting a bit of a reputation lately. I still should be able to walk into my own room without getting jumped! I mean, if a magician isn't safe in his own quarters, can he be safe anywhere?

Scratch that question!

It's the kind of thing my teacher says to convince me that choosing magic for a career path is not the best way to insure living out one's normal life span. Of course, it doesn't take much convincing. Actions speak louder than words, and the action since I signed on as his apprentice has been loud enough to convince me that a magician's life is not particularly quiet. I mean, when you realize that within days of meeting him, we both got lynched by an angry mob ... as in hung by the neck ...

But I digress.

We started out with me simply walking into my room. Yeah, simple! There was a demon waiting for me, a Pervect to be exact. This in itself wasn't unusual. Aahz, the teacher I mentioned earlier, is a Pervect. In fact, he

shares my quarters with me. What was unusual was that the demon waiting for me wasn't Aahz!

Now I haven't met many Pervects . . . heck, the only one I know is Aahz . . . but I know Aahz very well, and this Pervect wasn't him!

This demon was shorter than my mentor, his scales were a lighter shade of green, and his gold eyes were set closer together. What's more, he wasn't smiling ... and Aahz always smiles, even when he's mad . . . especially when he's mad. To the average eye Aahz and this stranger might look alike, but to me they were as different as a Deveel and an Imp. Of course, there was a time when I couldn't tell the difference between a Deveel and an Imp. It says something about the company I've been keeping lately.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"You Skeeve?"

"Yeah. Me Skeeve. Who you?"

For an answer, I suddenly felt myself snatched into the air by an invisible hand and spun end over end until I finally stopped dangling head down four feet off the floor.

"Don't get smart with me, punk. I understand you're holding a relative of mine in some kind of bondage. I want him back. Understand?"

He emphasized his point by lowering me to within a few inches of the floor, then using that surface to rap my head sharply.

I may not be the greatest magician ever, but I knew what he was doing. He was using his mind to levitate me about the room. I've done it myself to small objects from time to time. Of course, it occurred to me that I wasn't a small object and that I was dealing with someone a bit better versed in the magikal arts than myself. As such, I deemed it wiser to keep my temper and my manners.

"You know Aahz?"

"Sure do. And I want him back."

The latter was accompanied by another head rap. So much for holding my temper.

"Then you should know him well enough to know that nobody holds him against his will!"

My head started for the floor again, but stopped short of its target. From my inverted position I could get a partial view of the demon tapping himself thoughtfully on the chin.

"That's true," he murmured. "All right...."

I was turned into an upright position once more.

". . . Let's take it from the top. Where's Aahz, and what's keeping him in this backwater dimension?"

"I think and talk better with my feet on the ground."

"Hmm? Oh! Sorry."

I was lowered into a normal standing position. Now that I was self-supporting again, I realized the interrogation had left me with a splitting headache.

"He's back in General Badaxe's quarters arguing military tactics," I managed. "It was so boring I came back here. He should be along soon. They were almost out of wine when I left."

"Tactics and wine, eh?" my visitor grimaced. "That sounds like Aahz. What's the rest of it? Why is he staying around a nowhere dimension like Klah and how did he get mixed up with the Great Skeeve?"

"You've heard of me?"

"Here and there around the dimensions," the demon acknowledged. "In some circles they think you're pretty hot stuff. That's why I started wondering if you'd managed to cage Aahz somehow. I was braced for a real

battle royale when you walked in."

"Well, actually I'm not all that good," I admitted.
"I've only really started making headway in the last couple years since I started studying under Aahz. I'd still be a total nothing if he hadn't lost his powers and taken me on as an apprentice."

"Bingo!" my visitor declared, holding up his hand.
"I think you just explained everything. Aahz lost his powers and took on a new apprentice! No wonder he hasn't been home in a while. And all this talk about the Great Skeeve is just a standard Aahz-managed hype job for a new talent. Right?"

"We have taken on a few rough assignments," I said defensively.

"In which Aahz choreographed, then set you up to take the credit. Right?"

"What's 'choreographed'?" I asked. Obviously the family similarity was more than scale deep.

"Well, I hope you're up to operating on your own, Skeeve, 'cause I'm taking your mentor back to Perv with me."

"But you don't have to rescue him from me!" I protested. "He's free to come and go as he wants;"

"Ym not saving him from you, I'm saving him from Aahz. Our colleague has an overblown sense of responsibility that isn't always in his own best interest. Do you know how lucrative a practice he's letting fall apart on Perv while he clowns around with you?"

"No," I admitted.

"Well, he's losing money every day he's gone... and that means the family is losing money."
Right there I gave up the argument. Early on in my association with Aahz I learned the futility of trying to talk a Pervect out of money. The fact that Aahz was willing to sacrifice a steady income to work with me was an incredible tribute to our friendship ... or his sense of duty. Of course, there's more than one way to win an

argument.

"Well, as I said before, I can't keep him here," I said innocently. "If you can convince him he's not needed anymore...."

"No way, punk," the demon sneered. "We both know that won't get him to desert an apprentice. I'm going to lure him back to Perv with a blatant lie. And you're going to keep your mouth shut."

"But..."

". . . Because if you don't, I'll make sure there's nothing left to keep him in Klah . . . meaning you! Now before you even think about trying to match magik with me, remember something. You've been studying under Aahz for a couple years now. / graduated after over three hundred years of apprenticeship. So far, I'm willing to live and let live. You should be able to earn a living on what you've learned so far, maybe even pick up a few new tricks as you go along. However, if you cross me now, there won't be enough of you to pick up with a sponge. Do we understand each other?"

I was suddenly aware why nobody we met in su?

dimension-crawling ever wanted to tangle with a Perfect. I was also aware that someone had just walked into the room behind me.

"Rupert!"

"Uncle Aahz!"

The two pounded each other on the back. I gave them lots of room.

"Hey kid, this is my nephew Rupert . . . but I see you've already met."

"Unfortunately," I grumbled.

That earned me a black look from Rupert, but Aahz missed it completely.

"So what brings you to Klah, nephew? A bit off your normal prowling pattern, isn't it?"

"It's Dad. He wants you."

"Sorry," Aahz was suddenly his normal self again. "I've got too many irons in the fire here to get drawn into some family squabble."

"But he's dying."

That stopped Aahz for a moment.

"My brother? Nonsense. He's too tough to kill. He could even beat me in an unfair fight."

"He got into a fight with Mom."

A look of concern crossed Aahz's face. I could see he was wavering.

"That serious, huh? I don't know, though. If he's really dying, I don't see what I can do to help."

"It shouldn't take long," Rupert urged. "He said something about his will."

I groaned inwardly. Trust a Pervect to know a Pervect's weaknesses.

"Well, I guess my business here can keep for a few days," Aahz declared with false reluctance. "Stay out of trouble, kid. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Let's get going," Rupert suggested, hiding his triumphant grin. "The sooner we get to Perv, the sooner you can be back."

"But Aahz..."

"Yeah, kid?"

I saw Rupert's brow darken.

"I... I just wanted to say 'goodbye.' "

"Hey, don't make a big thing of this, kid. It's not like I was going forever."

Before I could respond, Rupert clapped an arm around Aahz's shoulder and they both faded from view.

Gone.

Somehow I couldn't make myself believe it had happened. My mentor had been spirited away . . . permanently. Whatever I had learned from Aahz would have to do, because now I was totally on my own.

Then I heard a knock at my door.

Chapter Two:

"When things are blackest, I just tell myself 'cheer up, things could be worse!' And sure enough, they get worse!"

—SKEEVE

I DECIDED that as Court Magician of Possiltum, my response should be gracious.

"Go away!"

That was gracious. If you knew what my actual thoughts were, you'd realize that. Very few people ever visited me in my chambers, and I didn't want to see any of them just then.

"Do you know who you're talking to?" came a muffled voice from the other side of the door.

"No! And I don't care! Go away!"

"This is Rodrick the Fifth. Your King!"

That stopped me. Upset or not, that title belonged to the man who set and paid my wages. As I said earlier, I have learned a few things from Aahz.

"Do you know who you're talking to?" I called back, and hoped.

There was a moment's pause.

"I assume I'm talking to Skeeve the Magnificent, Court Magician of Possiltum. At best, he'll be the one to bear the brunt of my wrath if I'm kept waiting outside his chambers much longer."

So much for hoping. These things never work in real life the way they do in jokes.

Moving with undignified haste, I pounced on the door handle and wrenched it open.

"Good afternoon. Lord Magician. May I come in?"

"Certainly, Your Majesty," I said, standing aside. "I never refuse a fifth."

The King frowned.

"Is that a joke? If so, I don't get the point."

"Neither do I," I admitted calmly. "It's something Aahz my apprentice says."

"Ah, yes. Your apprentice. Is he about?"

Rodrick swept majestically into the room, peering curiously into the corners as if he expected Aahz to spring forth from the walls.

"No. He's... out."

"Good. I had hoped to speak with you alone. Hmmm . . . these are really quite spacious quarters. I don't recall having been here before."

That was an understatement. Not only had the King never visited my room in his palace, I couldn't recall having seen him when he wasn't either on the throne or in its near vicinity.

"Your Majesty has never graced me with his presence since I accepted position in his court," I said.

"Oh. Then, that's probably why I don't recall being here," Rodrick responded lamely.

That in itself was strange. Usually the King was quite glib and never at a loss for words. In fact, the more I thought about it, the stranger this royal visit to my private chambers became. Despite my distress at Aahz's unplanned and apparently permanent departure, I felt my curiosity beginning to grow.

"May I ask the reason for this pleasant, though unexpected audience?"

"Well. . ." the King began, then shot one more look about the room. "Are you sure your apprentice isn't about?"

"Positive. He's ... I sent him on a vacation."
"A vacation?"

"Yes. He's been studying awfully hard lately."

The King frowned slightly.

"I don't remember approving a vacation."

For a moment, I thought I was going to get caught in my own deception. Then I remembered that in addition to the various interdimensional languages, Aahz had also been teaching me to speak 'bureaucrat."

"I didn't really feel your authorization was necessary," I said loftily. "Technically, my apprentice is not on your Majesty's payroll. I am paying him out of my wages, which makes him my employee, subject to my rules including vacations ... or dismissal. While he is subject to your laws, as is any subject of Possiltum, I don't feel he actually is governed by Subparagraph G concerning palace staff!"

My brief oration had the desired effect: it both confused and bored my audience. Aahz would have been proud of me. I was particularly pleased that I had managed to sneak in that part about dismissals. It meant that when Aahz didn't return, I could claim that I had

dismissed him without changing the wage paid me by the crown.

Of course, this got me brooding again about Aahz not coming back.

"Well, whatever. I'm glad to see your philosophy regarding vacations mirrors my own. Lord Magician. Everyone should have a vacation. In fact, that's why I

That opened my eyes. Figuratively and literally. "You, your Majesty? But Kings don't take vacations."

"That's the whole point."
Rodrick began pacing the floor nervously as he spoke.

"The pressures of being a King mount up like they do on any other job. The difference is that as a King you never get a break. No time to rest and collect your thoughts, or even just sleep late. From the coronation when the crown hits your head until it's removed by voluntary or forcible retirement, you are the King."

"Gee, that's tough. Your Majesty. I wish there was something I could do to help."

The King stopped pacing and beamed at me again.

"But you can! That's why I'm here!"

"Me? I can't approve a vacation for you! Even if it were in my power, and it isn't, the kingdom needs a king on the throne all the time. It can't spare you, even for one day!"

"Exactly! That's why I can't leave the throne unattended. If I wanted a vacation, I'd need a stand-in."

An alarm bell went off in my mind.

Now, however much Aahz may have nagged me about being a slow student, I'm not stupid. Even before I met Aahz . . . heck, before I learned my letters ... I

knew how to add two and two to get four. In this case, one two was the king's need for a stand-in; the second two was his presence in my quarters, and the four was....

"Surely your Majesty can't mean me!"

"Of course I mean you," Rodrick confirmed. "The fact is, Lord Magician, I had this in mind when I hired you to your current position."

"You did?"

I could feel the jaws of the trap closing. If this was indeed why the King had hired me, I would be ill-advised to refuse the assignment. Rodrick might decide my services were no longer needed, and the last thing I needed with Aahz gone was to get cut off from my source of income. I wasn't sure what the job market was like for ex-court magicians, but I was sure I didn't want to find out first hand.

"As you said earlier, the powers of the Court Magician are at my disposal, and one of the powers you demonstrated when we first met was the ability to change your own shape, or the shape of others, at will."

The disguise spell! It was one of the first spells Aahz had taught me and one of the ones most frequently used over our last several adventures. After all the times it's bailed me out of tight spots, who would have guessed it would be the spell to get me into trouble? Well, there was the time it had gotten me hung....

"But, your Majesty, I couldn't possibly substitute for you. I don't know how to be a King!"

"Nothing to it," Rodrick smiled. "The nice thing about being a King is that even when you're wrong, no one dares to point it out."

"But...."

"And besides, it will only be for one day. What could possibly go wrong in one day?"

Chapter Three:

"Once a knight, always a knight,
But once a King is once too often!"

—SIR BELLA OF EASTMARCH

Now, I don't want you to think I'm a pushover. I drove a hard bargain with the King before giving in. I not only managed to get him to agree to a bonus, but to cough up a hefty percentage in advance before accepting the assignment. Not bad for a fledgling magician who was over a barrel.

Of course, once I accepted, I was no longer over a barrel, I was in over my head!

The more I thought about it, the worse the idea of standing in for the King seemed. The trouble was, I didn't have a choice ... or did I? I thought about it some more and a glimmer of hope appeared.

There was a way out! The only question was, how far could I run in a day? While not particularly worldly (or off-worldly for that matter) I was pretty sure that double-crossing kings wasn't the healthiest of pastimes.

It was going to be a big decision, definitely the biggest I ever had to make on my own. The King (or to be exact, his stand-in) wasn't due to make an appearance until noon tomorrow, so I had a little time to mull things over. With that in mind, I decided to talk it out with my last friend left in the palace.

"What do you think, Gleep? Should I take it on the lam, or stick around and try to bluff it out for one day asking?"

The response was brief and to the point.

"Gleep!"

For those of you who've tuned in to this series late,

Gleep is my pet. He lives in the Royal Stables. He's also a twenty-foot long blue dragon ... half grown. (I shudder to think what he'll be like when he's fully grown!

Groan!) As to his witty conversation, you'll have to forgive him. He only has a one-word vocabulary, but he makes up for it by using that word a lot. Wordy or not, I turned to him in this moment of crisis because with Aahz gone, he was the only one in this dimension who would be even vaguely sympathetic to my problem. That in itself says a lot about the social life of a magician.

"Come on, Gleep, get serious. I'm in real trouble. If I

try to stand in for the King, I might make a terrible mistake . . . like starting a war or hanging an innocent man. On the other hand, if I double-cross the King and disappear, you and I would spend the rest of our lives as hunted fugitives."

The unicorn in the next stall snorted and stamped a foot angrily.

"Sorry, Buttercup. The three of us would be hunted fugitives."

War unicorns aren't all that common, even in Royal Stables. That particular war unicorn was mine. I acquired him as a gift shortly after I acquired Gleep. As I said before, this life-style is more than a little zooish.

"In a kingdom with a bad king, a lot of people would get hurt." I reasoned, "and I'd be a terrible king. Heck, I'm not all that good a magician."

"Gleep," my pet argued sternly.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, but it's true. I don't want to hurt anybody, but I'm not wild about being a hunted fugitive, either."

Tired of verbalizing his affection, Gleep decided to demonstrate his feelings by licking my face. Now, aside from leaving a slimy residue, my dragon's kisses have one other side effect. His breath is a blast of stench exceeded only by the smell of Pervish cooking.

"G . . . Gleep, old boy," I managed at last, "I love you dearly, but if you do that twice a week, we may part

company ... permanently!"

"Gleep?"

That earned me a hurt expression, which I erased simply enough by scratching his head. It occurred to me that dragons had survived because each of them only became emotionally attached to one being in its lifetime. If their breath reached the entire population instead of a single individual, they would have been hunted into extinction long ago. No, it was better that only one person should suffer than ...

Another part of my mind grabbed that thought and started turning it over.

"If I run, then I'll be the only one in trouble, but if I try to be king, the whole kingdom suffers! That's it! I have to leave. It's the only decent thing to do. Thanks, Gleep!"

"Gleep?"

My pet cocked his head in puzzlement.

"I'll explain later. All right. It's decided. You two stock up on food while I duck back to my room to get a few things. Then it's 'Goodbye, Possiltum!' "

I've had pause to wonder what would have happened if I'd followed my original plan: just headed for my room, gathered up my belongings, and left. The timing for the rest of the evening would have changed, and the rest of this story would have been totally different. As it was, I made a slight detour. Halfway to my room, Aahz's training cut in. That is, I started thinking about money.

Even as a hunted fugitive, money would come in handy . . . and the King's advance would only last so long. With a little extra cash, I could run a lot farther, hide a lot longer ... or at the very least live a lot better. ...

Buoyed by these thoughts, I went looking for J. R. Grimble.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer and I had never been what you would call close friends. Blood enemies would be a better description. Aahz always maintained that this was because of my growing influence in court. Not so. The truth was that my mentor's greed for additional funding was surpassed only by Grimble's reluctance to part with the same. Literally the same, since my wages came out of those coffers so closely guarded by the Chancellor.

I found him, as expected, in the tiny cubicle he used for an office. Scuttlebutt has it he repeatedly refused larger rooms, trying desperately to impress the rest of the staff by setting an example of frugality. It didn't work, but he kept trying and hoping.

His desk was elbow deep in paper covered by tiny little numbers which he alternately peered at and changed while moving various sheets from stack to stack. There were similar stacks on the floor and on the only other available chair, leading me to believe he had been at his current task for some time. Seeing no available space for sitting or standing, I elected to lean against the door frame.

"Working late, Lord Chancellor?"

That earned me a brief, dark glare before he returned to his work.

"If I were a magician, I'd be working late. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, these are my normal hours. For your information, things are going rather smoothly. So smoothly, in fact, I may be able to wrap up early tonight, say in another three or four hours."

"What are you working on?"

"Next year's Budget and Operating Plan, and it's almost done. That is, providing someone doesn't want to risk incurring my permanent disfavor by trying to change a number on me at the last minute."

The last was accompanied by what can only be described as a meaningful stare.

I ignored it.

I mean, what the heck! I was already on his bad side, so his threats didn't scare me at all.

"Then it's a good thing I caught you before you finished your task," I said nonchalantly. "I want to discuss something with you that will undoubtedly have an impact on your figures. Specifically, a change in my pay scale."

"Out of the question!" Grimble exploded. "You're already the highest paid employee on the staff, including myself. It's outrageous that you would even think of asking for a pay increase."

"Not a pay increase. Lord Chancellor, a pay cut."

That stopped him.

"A pay cut?"

"Say, down to nothing."

He leaned back in his chair and regarded me suspiciously.

"I find it hard to believe that you and your apprentice are willing to work for nothing. Forgive me, but I always distrust noble sacrifice as a motive. Though I dislike greed, at least it's a drive I can understand."

"Perhaps that's why we've always gotten along so well," I purred. "However, you're quite right. I have no intention of working for free. I was thinking of leaving the court of Possiltum to seek employment elsewhere."

The chancellor's eyebrows shot up.

"While I won't argue your plan, I must admit it surprises me. I was under the impression you were quite enamored of your position here in 'a soft job,' I believe is how your scaly apprentice describes it. What could possibly entice you to trade the comforts of court life

for an uncertain future on the open road?"

"Why, a bribe, of course," I smiled. "A lump sum of a thousand gold pieces."

"I see," Grimble murmured softly. "And who's offering this bribe, if I might ask?"

I stared at the ceiling.

"Actually, I was rather hoping that, you would."

There was a bit of haggling after that, but mostly on the terms of our agreement. Grimble really wanted Aahz and me out of his accounts, though I suspect he would have been less malleable if he had realized he was only dealing with me. There was a bit of name calling and breast beating, but the end result is what counts, and that end result was my heading for my quarters, a thousand gold pieces richer in exchange for a promise that it was the last money I would ever receive from Grimble. It was one more reason for my being on my way as soon as possible.

With light heart and heavy purse, I entered my quarters.

Remember the last time I entered my quarters? How there was a demon waiting for me? Well, it happened again.

Now don't get me wrong. This isn't a regular occurrence in my day-to-day existence. One demon showing up unannounced is a rarity. Two demons . . . well, no matter how you looked at it, this was going to be a red-letter day in my diary.

Does it seem to you I'm stalling? I am. You see, this demon I knew, and her name was Massha!

"Well hel-lo, high roller! I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by and say 'Hi!' "

She started forward to give me a hug, and I hastily moved to put something immobile between us. A 'hi!' and a hug might not sound like a threat to you. If not,

you don't know Massha!

I have nothing against hello hugs. I have another demon friend named Tananda (yes, I have a lot of demon friends these days) whose hello hugs are high points in my existence. Tananda is cute, curvaceous, and cuddly. Okay, so she's also an assassin, but her hello hugs can get a rise out of a statue.

Massha, on the other hand, is not cute and cuddly. Massha is immense . . . and then some. I didn't doubt the sincere goodwill behind her greeting. I was just afraid that if she hugged me, it would take days to find my way out again ... and I had a getaway to plan.

"Um ... Hi, Massha. Good to see you ... all of you."

The last time I had seen Massha, she was disguised as a gaudy circus tent, except it wasn't a disguise. It was actually the way she dressed. This time, though, she had apparently kicked out the jams ... along with her entire wardrobe and any modicum of good taste. Okay, she wasn't completely naked. She was wearing a leopard-skin bikini, but she was showing enough flesh for four normal naked people. A bikini, her usual wheelbarrow full of jewelry, light green lipstick that clashed with her orange hair, and a tattoo on her bicep. That was Massha. Class all the way.

"What brings you to Klah? Aren't you still working Jahk?" I asked, mentioning the dimension where we met.

"The boys will just have to work things out without me for a while. I'm on a little... vacation."

There was a lot of that going around.

"But what are you doing here?"

"Not much for small talk, are you? I like that in a man."

My skin started to crawl a little on that last bit, but she continued.

"Well. . . while I'm here, I thought I'd take another little peek at your General Badaxe, but that's not the real reason for my visit. I was hoping you and me could talk a little... business."

My life flashed before my eyes. For a moment, neither Aahz's departure nor the King's assignment was my biggest problem ... pun intended.

"Me?" I managed at last.

"That's right, hot stuff. I've been giving it a lot of thought since you and your scaly green sidekick rolled through my territory, and yesterday I made up my mind. I've decided to sign on as your apprentice."

Chapter Four:

"Duty: A fee paid for transacting in good(s)."

—U.S. DEPT. OF COMMERCE

"BUT your Majesty, he promised me he'd pay the other half before spring, and ..."

"I did not."

"Did too."

"Liar!"

"Thief!"

"Citizens," I said, "I can only listen to one side at a time. Now then, you! Tell me what you remember being said."

That's right. / said. There I was, sitting on the very throne I had decided to avoid at all cost.

Actually, this king business wasn't all that rough. Rodrick had briefed me on basic procedure and provided me with a wardrobe, and from there it was fairly simple. The problems paraded before me weren't all

that hard to solve, but there were lots of them.

At first I was scared, then for a while it was fun. Now it was just boring. I had lost count of how many cases I had listened to, but I had developed a new sympathy for Rodrick's desire to get away for a while. I was ready for a vacation before lunch rolled around. It was beyond my comprehension how he had lasted for years of this nonsense.

You may wonder how I went from talking with Massha to sitting on the throne. Well, I wonder myself from time to time, but here's what happened as near as I can reconstruct it.

Needless to say, her request to work as my apprentice caught me unprepared.

"M ... my ... but Massha. You already have a job as a court magician. Why would you want to apprentice yourself to me?"

In response, Massha heaved a great sigh. It was a startling phenomenon to watch. Not just because there was so much of Massha moving in so many different directions, but because when she was done, she seemed to have deflated to nearly half her original size. She was no longer an imposing figure, just a rather tired looking fat woman.

"Look, Skeeve," she said in a low voice that bore no resemblance to her normal vampish tones. "If we're going to work together, we've got to be honest with each other. Court magician or not, we both know that I don't know any magik. I'm a mechanic ... a gimmick freak. I've got enough magik baubles to hold down a job, but any bozo with a big enough bankroll could buy the same stuff at the Bazaar at Deva.

"Now, mind you, I'm not complaining. Old Massha's been kicked around by some of the best and nobody's ever heard her complain. I've been happy with what I have up to now. It's just when I saw you and your rat pack put one over on both city-states at the Big Game with some real magik, I knew there was something to learn besides how to operate gimmicks. So

whattaya say? Will you help me learn a little of the stuff I really got into the magik biz for?"

Her honesty was making me more than a little uncomfortable. I wanted to help her, but I sure didn't want an apprentice right now. I decided to stall.

"Why did you choose magik for a profession, anyway?"

That got me a sad smile.

"You're sweet, Skeeve, but we were going to be honest with each other, remember? I mean, look at me. What am I supposed to do for a living? Get married and be a housewife? Who would have me? Even a blind man could figure out in no time flat that I was more than he had bargained for ... a lot more. I resigned myself to the way I look a long time ago. I accepted it and covered up any embarrassment I felt with loud talk and flamboyant airs. It was only natural that a profession like magik that thrives on loud talk and flamboyant airs would attract me."

"We aren't all loud talk," I said cautiously.

"I know," she smiled. "You don't have to act big because you've got the clout to deliver what you promise. It impressed me on Jahk, and everyone I talked to at the Bazaar on Deva said the same thing. 'Skeeve doesn't strut much, but don't start a fight with him.' That's why I want you for my teacher. I already know how to talk loud."

Honesty and flattery are a devastating one-two punch. Whatever I thought about her before, right now Massha had me eating out of the palm of her hand. Before I committed myself to anything I might regret later, I decided to try fighting her with her own weapons.

"Massha . . . we're going to be honest with each other, right? Well, I can't accept you as an apprentice right now for two reasons. The first is simple. I don't know that much magik myself. No matter what kind of scam we pull on the paying customers, including the

ones on Deva, the truth is that I'm just a student. I'm still learning the business myself."

"That's no problem, big bwana," Maasha laughed, regaining some of her customary composure. "Magik is like that: the more you learn, the more you find there is to know. That's why the really big guns in our business spend all their time closeted away studying and practicing. You know some magik, and that's some more than I know. I'll be grateful for anything you're willing to teach me."

"Oh." I said, a bit surprised that my big confession hadn't fazed her at all. "Well, there's still the second reason."

"And that is?"

"... That I'm in a bit of trouble myself. In fact, I was just getting ready to sneak out of the kingdom when you showed up."

A small frown wrinkled Massha's forehead.

"Hmm . . ." she said, thoughtfully. "Maybe you'd better give me some of the details of this trouble you're in. Sometimes talking it out helps, and that's what apprentices are for."

"They are?" I countered skeptically. "I've been apprenticed twice, and I don't remember either of the magicians I studied under confiding in me with their problems."

"Well, that's what Massha's for. Listening happens to be one of the few things I'm really good at. Now give. What's happened to put a high-stepper like you on the run?"

Seeing no easy alternative, I told her about the King's assignment and my subsequent deal with Grimble. She was right. She was an excellent listener, making just enough sympathetic noise to keep me talking without actually interrupting my train of thought.

When I finally wound down, she sighed and shook

her head.

"You're right. You've got a real problem there. But I think there are a few things you've overlooked in reaching your final decision."

"Such as...?"

"Well, first, you're right. A bad king is worse than a good king. The problem is that a bad king is better than no king at all. Roddie Five is counting on you to fill his chair tomorrow, and if you don't show up, the whole kingdom goes into a panic because the king has disappeared."

"I hadn't thought about it that way," I admitted.

"Then there's the thing with Grimble. We all pick up a little extra cash when we can, but in this case if it comes out that Grimble paid you to skip out when the King was counting on you, his head goes on the chopping block for treason."

I closed my eyes.

That did it. It was bad enough to hurt the faceless masses, but when the mass had a face, even if it was Grimble's, I couldn't let him face a treason charge because of my cowardice.

"You're right," I sighed. "I'm going to have to sit in for the King tomorrow."

'With me as your apprentice?"

"Ask me after tomorrow ... if I'm still alive. In the meantime, scurry off and say 'Hello' to Badaxe. I know he'll be glad to see you."

"Your Majesty?"

I snapped back to the present, and realized the two arguers were now looking at me, presumably to render a decision.

"If I understand this case correctly," I stalled, "both

of you are claiming ownership of the same cat. Correct?"

Two heads bobbed in quick agreement.

"Well, if the two of you can't decide the problem between you, it seems to me there's only one solution. Cut the cat in two and each of you keep half."

This was supposed to inspire them to settle their difference with a quick compromise. Instead they thanked me for my wisdom, shook hands, and left smiling, presumably to carve up their cat.

It occurred to me, not for the first time today, that many of the citizens of Possiltum don't have both oars in the water. What anyone could do with half a dead cat, or a whole dead cat for that matter, was beyond me.

Suddenly I was very tired. With an offhanded wave I beckoned the herald forward.

"How many more are waiting out there?" I asked.

"That was the last. We deliberately kept the case load light today so your Majesty could prepare for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

The question slipped out reflexively. Actually, I didn't really care what happened tomorrow. My assignment was done. I had survived the day, and tomorrow was Rodrick's problem.

"Yes, tomorrow ... when your bride arrives."

Suddenly I was no longer tired. Not a bit. I was wide awake and listening with every pore.

"My bride?" I asked cautiously.

"Surely your Majesty hasn't forgotten. She specifically scheduled her arrival so that she would have a week to prepare for your wedding."

Case load be hanged. Now I knew why dear Rodrick wanted a vacation. I also knew, with cold certainty, that he wouldn't be back tonight to relieve me of my duties. Not tonight, and maybe not ever.

Chapter Five:

"The only thing worse than a sorcerer is a sorcerer's apprentice."

—M. MOUSE

FOR once, I successfully suppressed the urge to panic. I had to! Without Aahz around to hold things together until I calmed down, I couldn't afford hysterics.

Instead, I thought. ... and thought.

I was in a jam, and no matter how I turned it over in my mind, it was going to take more than just me to get out of it.

I thought of Massha.

Then I thought about suicide.

Then I thought about Massha again.

With firm resolve and weak knees, I made my decision. The question was, how to locate Massha? The answer came on the heels of the question. Standing in for the king had been nothing but a pain so far. It was about time I started making it work for me for a change.

"Guard!"

A uniformed soldier materialized by the throne with impressive speed.

"Yes, your Majesty?"

31

32

"Pass the word for General Badaxe. I'd like to see

him."

"Umm . . . begging your Majesty's pardon. He's with a lady just now."

"Good. I mean, bring them both."

"But..."

"Now."

"Yes, your Majesty!"

The guard was gone with the same speed with which he had appeared.

I tried not to grin. I had never gotten along particularly well with the military of Possiltum. Of course, the fact that my first exposure to them was when Aahz and I were hired to fight their war for them might have something to do with it. Anyway, the thought of some poor honor guard having to interrupt his general's tete-a-tete was enough to make me smile, the first in several days.

Still, sending a guard to fetch the person I wanted to see was certainly better than chasing them down myself. Perhaps being a king did have its advantages.

Two hours later, I was still waiting. In that time, I had more than ample opportunity to reconsider the benefit of issuing kingly summons. Having sent for Badaxe, I was obligated to wait for him in the throne room until he appeared.

At one point I considered the horrible possibility that he had taken Massha riding and that it might be days before they were located. After a little additional thought, I discarded the idea. There wasn't a steed in the Kingdom, including Gleep, who could carry Massha more than a few steps before collapsing.

I was still contemplating the image of Massha, sitting indignant on the ground with horse's legs protruding

grotesquely from beneath her rump, when the herald sprang into action.

"Now comes General Badaxe ... and a friend."

With that, the man stood aside. Actually, he took several sideways steps to stand aside.

I've already described Massha's bulk. Well, Hugh Badaxe wasn't far behind her. What he lacked in girth, he made up for in muscle. My initial impression of the General remained unchanged; that he had won his rank by taking on the rest of the army . . . and winning. Of course, he was wearing his formal bearskin, the clean one, which made him appear all the larger. While I had been there when they met, I had never actually seen Badaxe and Massha standing side by side before. The overall effect was awe-inspiring. Together, they might have been a pageant of a barbarian invasion gone decadent ... if it weren't for the General's axe. His namesake, a huge, double-bitted hand axe, rode comfortably in its customary place on the General's right hip, and the glitter from it wasn't all decorative. Here, at least, was one barbarian who hadn't let decadence go to his sword arm.

"Your Majesty."

Badaxe rumbled his salutation as he dropped to one knee with an ease that denied his size. One could almost imagine the skull of a fallen enemy crackling sharply beneath that descending knee. I forced the thought from my mind.

"Greetings, General. Won't you introduce me to your . . . companion?"

"I ... certainly, your Majesty. May I present Massha, Court Magician of Ta-hoe, and friend of both myself and Lord Skeeve, Magician to your own court here at Possiltum."

34

"Charmed, your Majesty."

I realized with a start that Massha was about to attempt to imitate Badaxe by dropping to one knee. Even if she were able to execute such a maneuver, it would require sufficient effort as to invite ridicule from the other court retainers present . . . and somehow I didn't want that.

"Ah . . . there is no need for that," I asserted hastily.
"It was not our intention to hold formal court here, but rather an informal social occasion."

That caused a minor stir with the court, including the general who frowned in slight puzzlement. Still, I was already committed to a line of conversation, so I blundered on.

"In fact, that was the only reason for the summons. I wished to meet the lady dazzling enough to lure our general from his usual position by my side."

"Your Majesty gave his permission for my absence today," the general protested.

"Quite right. As I said, this is a social gathering only. In fact, there are too many people here for casual conversation. It is our wish that the court be adjourned for the day and the room cleared that I might speak freely with this visiting dignitary."

Again there was a general ripple of surprise, but a royal order was a royal order, and the various retainers bowed or curtsied to the throne and began making their way out.

"You too. General. I would speak with Massha alone."

Badaxe began to object, but Massha nudged him in the ribs with an elbow, a blow which would have been sufficient to flatten most men, but was barely enough to gain the general's attention. He frowned darkly, then gave a short bow and left with the others.

"So, you're a friend of our lord Magician," I asked after we were finally alone.

"I have that . . . honor, your Majesty," Massha replied cautiously. "I hope he's... well?"

"As a matter of fact, he's in considerable trouble right now."

Massha heaved a great sigh.

"I was afraid of that. Something to do with his last assignment?"

I ignored the question.

"General Badaxe seems quite taken with you. Are you sure you want to stay in the magik biz? Or are you going to try your hand at a new lifestyle?"

Massha scowled at me.

"Now how did you hear that? You haven't been torturing your own magician, have you?"

I caught the small motion of her adjusting her rings, and decided the time for games was over.

"Hold it, Massha! Before you do anything, there's something I have to show you."

"What's that?"

I had already closed my eyes to remove my disguise spell... faster than I ever had before.

"Me," I said, opening my eyes again.

"Well, I'll be ... you really had me going there, hot stuff."

"It was just a disguise spell," I waved off-handedly.

"Nice. Of course, it almost got you fried. Why didn't you let me know it was you?"

"First of all, I wanted to see if my disguise spell was good enough to fool someone who was watching for it. This is my first time to try to disguise my voice as well as my appearance. Secondly . . . well, I was curious if you had changed your mind about being my apprentice."

"But why couldn't you have just asked me ... I see."

36

"You're really in trouble, aren't you? Bad enough that you didn't want to drag me into an old promise. That's nice of you, Skeeve. Like I said before, you run a class act."

"Anybody would have done the same thing," I argued, trying to hide my embarrassment at her praise.

She snorted loudly.

"If you believed that, you wouldn't have survived as long as you have. Anyway, apprentice or not, a friend is a friend. Now out with it. What's happened?"

Sitting on the steps to the throne, I filled her in about the forthcoming wedding and my suspicions about the king's conveniently scheduled vacation. I tried to sound casual and matter-of-fact about it, but towards the end my tone got rather flat.

When I was done, Massha gave a low whistle of sympathy.

"When you big leaguers get in trouble, you don't kid around, do you? Now that you've filled me in, I'll admit I'm a little surprised you're still here."

I grimaced.

"I'm a little slow from time to time, but you only have to lecture me once. If one day without a king is bad for a kingdom, a permanent disappearance could be disastrous. Anyway, what I need right now is someone to track down the real king and get him back here, while I keep bluffing from the throne."

Massha scowled.

"Well, I've got a little trinket that could track him, if you've got something around that he's worn, that is...."

"Are you kidding? You think court magicians dress this way in Possiltum? Everything I'm wearing and two more closetsful in his quarters belong to the king."

37

"... But what I can't figure out is why you need me? Where's your usual partner ... whasisname ... Aahz? It seems to me he'd be your first choice for a job like this. Wherever he is, can't you just pop over to that dimension and pull him back for a while?"

Lacking any other option, I decided to resort to the truth, both about Aahz's permanent departure and my own lack of ability to travel the dimensions without a D-Hopper. When I was done, Massha was shaking her head.

"So you're all alone and stranded here and you were still going to give me an out instead of pressuring me into helping? Well, you got my help, mister, and you don't have to bribe me with an apprenticeship, either. I'll get your king back for you ... before that wedding. Then we'll talk about apprentices."

I shook my head.

"Right idea, but wrong order. I wasn't going to bribe you with an apprenticeship, Massha. I told you before I don't know much magik, but what I know I'll be glad to teach you ... whether you find the King or not. I'm not sure that's an apprenticeship, but it's yours if you want it."

She smiled, a smile quite different from her usual vamp act.

"We'll argue about it later. Right now, I've got a king to find."

"Wait a minute! Before you go, you're pretty good with gadgets, right? Well, I've got a D-Hopper in my quarters. I want you to show me two settings: the one for Deva, and the one for Klah. You see, I'm not all that noble. If things get too rough or it takes you longer than a week to find the king, I want a little running room. If I'm not here when you get back, you can look for your

38

'noble' Skeeve at the Yellow Crescent Inn at the Bazaar at Deva."

Massha snorted.

"You're putting yourself down again. Hot Stuff. You're going to try before you run, which is more than I can say for most in our profession. Besides, whatever you think your motives are, they're deeper than you think. You just asked me to show you two settings. You only need one to run."

Chapter Six:

"Good information is hard to get. Doing anything with it is even harder!"

—L. SKYWALKER

I HAD long since decided that the main requirement for Royalty or its impersonators was an immunity to boredom. Having already chronicled the true tedious nature of performing so-called "duties of state," I can only add that waiting to perform them is even worse.

There was certainly no rush on my part to meet the king's bride-to-be, much less marry her. After word had come that her arrival would be delayed by a full day, however, and as the day waxed into late afternoon waiting for her "early morning" reception, I found myself wishing that she would get here so we could meet and get it over with already.

All other royal activity had ground to a halt in an effort to emphasize the importance of Possiltum's greeting their queen-to-be. I hardly thought it was necessary,

though, as the citizens decked the street with flowers and lined up three deep in hopes of catching a glimpse of this new celebrity. The wait didn't seem to dampen their spirits, though the flowers wilted only to be periodically replaced by eager hands. If nothing else, this

39

40

reception was going to put a serious dent in Possiltum's flower crop for awhile. Of course, it might also put a dent in all our crops, for the streets remained packed with festive people who showed not the slightest inclination to return to their fields or guild shops when word was passed of each new delay.

"Haven't the citizens anything better to do with their time than stand around the streets throwing flowers at each other?" I snarled, turning from the window. "Somebody should be keeping the kingdom during all this foolishness."

As usual, J. R. Grimble took it on himself to soothe me.

"Your Majesty is simply nervous about the pending reception. I trust his wisdom will not allow his edginess to spill over onto his loyal subjects?"

"I was assured when she crossed the border that she would be here this morning. Morning! Ever see the sun set in the morning before?"

"Undoubtedly she was delayed by the condition of the roads," General Badaxe offered. "I have told your Majesty before that our roads are long overdue for repair. In their current state, they hinder the passage of travelers . . . and troops should our fair land come under attack."

Grimble bared his teeth.

"And his Majesty has always agreed with me that

repairing the roads at this time would be far too costly . . . unless the General would be willing to significantly reduce the size of his army that we might use the savings from wages to pay for the road work?"

The General purpled.

"Reduce the size of the army and you'll soon lose that treasury that you guard so closely, Grumble."

"Enough, gentlemen," I said, waving them both to

41

silence. "As you've both said, we've discussed this subject many times before."

It had been decided that rather than having the King of Possiltum sit and fidget in front of the entire populace, that he should sweat it out in private with his advisors until his bride actually arrived. Royal image and all that. Unfortunately this meant that since morning I had been confined in a small room with J. R. Grumble and Hugh Badaxe for company. Their constant bickering and sniping was sufficient to turn my already dubious mood into something of record foulness.

"Well, while we're waiting, perhaps you can each brief me on your opinions of my future bride and her kingdom."

"But your Majesty, we've done that before. Many times."

"Well, we'll do it again. You're supposed to be my advisors, aren't you? So advise me. General Badaxe, why don't you start?"

Badaxe shrugged.

"The situation is essentially unchanged from our last briefing. Impasse is a small kingdom; tiny really—less than a thousand citizens altogether. They claim the entire Impasse mountain range, from which the kingdom gets its name, and which is the bulk of their military defense. Their claim stands mostly because the moun-

tains are treacherous and there is little or no reason to venture there. At least ninety-five percent of their population is concentrated along the one valley through the mountains. They have no formal military, but rather a militia, which suffices as there are no less than five passes in the main valley where a child with a pile of rocks could hold off an army . . . and they have plenty of rocks. Their main vulnerability is food. The terrain is such that they are unable to support even their small

42

population, and as they are still at odds with the kingdom at the other end of the valley who originally owned it, they are forced to buy all their food from us ... at prices even a generous man would call exorbitant."

"Supply and demand," Grimble said with a toothy smile.

"Wait a minute, General," I interrupted. "If I understand this right. Impasse is not a threat to us militarily because of its size. If anything, it guards our flank against attack from the pass. Right?"

"Correct."

"Which it is already doing."

"Also correct."

Seeing an opening, I hurried on.

"We can't attack them, but from what you say they don't have anything we want. So why are we bothering with this marriage/alliance?"

The General looked pointedly at Grimble.

"Because even though Impasse is people-few and crop-light, they are sitting on the largest deposit of precious metal on the continent," The Chancellor of the Exchequer supplied.

"Precious met... oh! You mean gold."

"Precisely. With the alliance, Possiltum will become the richest kingdom ever."

"That hardly seems like sufficient reason to get married," I mumbled.

"Your Majesty's opinions on the subject are well known to us," Grimble nodded. "You have expressed them often and long every time the possibility of this marriage was broached. I am only glad that you finally gave your consent when the citizens of Possiltum threatened to revolt if you didn't accept the betrothal offer."

"That was only after you spread the word that such

43

an alliance would significantly lower taxes, Grimble," Badaxe scowled.

"I said it might lower taxes," the Chancellor corrected innocently. "Can I help it if the common folk jumped to conclusions?"

Now that I had a clearer picture of the situation, I might have mustered a bit of sympathy for the King's predicament, if he hadn't stuck me in it in his stead.

"Enough about Impasse. Now give me your opinions of my bride-to-be."

There was a brief moment of uncomfortable silence.

"Impasse doesn't have a monarchy," Grimble said carefully. "That is, until recently. It was more a tribal state, where the strongest ruled. When the last king died, however, his daughter Hemlock somehow managed to take over and maintain the throne, thereby establishing a royal line of sorts. Exactly how she did it is unclear."

"Some say that prior to the king's death she managed to gain the . . . loyalty of all the able-bodied fighters in the kingdom, thereby securing her claim from challenge," Badaxe supplied.

I held up a restraining hand.

"Gentlemen, what you're telling me are facts. I asked for your opinions."

This time, there was a long uncomfortable silence.

"That good, eh?" I grimaced.

"Your Majesty must remember," Grimble protested, "we are being asked to express our hidden feelings about a woman who will soon be our Queen."

"Not until the marriage," I growled. "Right now, I am your king. Get my drift?"

They got it, and swallowed hard.

"The words 'cold-blooded' and 'ruthless' come to

44

45

mind," the general said, "and that's the impression of a man who's made a career of the carnage of war."

"I'm sure the rumors that she murdered her father to gain control of the kingdom are exaggerated," Grimble

argued weakly.

"... But your Majesty would be well advised to insist on separate sleeping quarters, and even then sleep lightly ... and armed," the general concluded firmly.

"No difficulty should be encountered with separate quarters," Grimble leered. "It's said Queen Hemlock has the morals of an alley cat."

"Terrific," I sighed.

The Chancellor favored me with a paternal smile.

"Oh, there's no doubt that the entire kingdom, myself included, admires your Majesty for the sacrifices he is willing to make for his people."

The trouble was, only / knew who the King was willing to sacrifice!

I studied Grimble's smile through hooded eyes, seeking desperately through my mind for something to disrupt his smug enjoyment of the situation. Suddenly, I found it.

"I've been meaning to ask, does anyone know the current whereabouts of our Court Magician?"

Grimble's smile disappeared like water on a hot skillet.

"He's ... gone, your Majesty."

"What? Out on another of his madcap adventures?"

The Chancellor averted his eyes.

"No, I mean, he's . . . gone. Tendered his resignation and left."

"Tendered his resignation to whom?" I pressed. "On whose authority has he quit his post during this, my darkest hour?"

"Ahh ... mine, your Majesty."

"What was that, Grimble? I couldn't quite hear you."

"Mine. I told him he could go."

Grimble was sweating visibly now, which was fine by me. In fact, an idea was beginning to form in my mind.

"Hmm . . . knowing you, Lord Chancellor, I would

suspect money is behind the Great Skeeve's sudden departure."

"In a way," Grimble evaded, "you might say that."

"Well, it won't do," I said firmly. "I want him back . . . and before this accursed marriage. What's more, since you approved his departure, I'm holding you personally responsible for his return."

"B-ut your Majesty! I wouldn't know where to start looking. He could be anywhere by now."

"He can't have gone far," Badaxe volunteered casually. "His dragon and unicorn are still in the Royal Stables."

"They are?" the Chancellor blinked.

"Yes," the General smiled, "as you might know if you ever set foot outside your counting house."

"See, Grimble," I said. "The task I set before you should be easy for a man of your resources. Now off with you. The longer you tarry here, the longer it will be before you find our wayward magician."

The Chancellor started to say something, then shrugged and started for the door.

"Oh, Grimble," I called. "Something you might keep in mind. I heard a rumor that the Great Skeeve has recently been disguising himself as me for an occasional prank. Like as not the scamp is parading around somewhere with the royal features on his face. That tid-bit alone should help you locate him."

"Thank you, your Majesty," the Chancellor responded glumly, reminded now of the shape-changing

I wasn't sure, but I thought General Badaxe was stifling a laugh somewhere in the depths of his beard as his rival trudged out.

"How about you, General? Do you think your men could assist in passing word of my royal summons to the Great Skeeve?"

"That won't be necessary, your Majesty."

With sudden seriousness he approached me, laid a hand on my shoulder, and stared into my eyes.

"Lord Magician," he said, "the King would like to see you."

Chapter Seven:

"There is no counter for a spirited woman except spirited drink."

—R. BUTLER

"YOU'VE known for some time that I'm a fighting man. What you don't seem to realize is what that implies."

We were sitting over wine now, in a much more relaxed conversation than when I had been pretending to be King Rodrick.

"Fighting men recognize people as much by movement and mannerism as they do by facial feature. It's a professional habit. Now, you had the appearance and voice of the King, but your carriage and gestures were that of the Great Skeeve. not Rodrick the Fifth."

"But if you knew I was an imposter, why didn't you say something?"

The General drew himself up stiffly.

"The King had not taken me into his confidence in this matter, nor had you. I felt it would have been rude to intrude on your affairs uninvited."

"Weren't you afraid that I might be a part of some plot to murder the King and take his place?"

"Lord Magician, though we met as rivals, prolonged exposure to you has caused my respect for you to grow

48

to no small matter. Both in your convincing Big Julie and his army to defect from the Mob and join Possiltum as honest citizens, and in fighting at your side in the Big Game when you risked life and limb to rescue a comrade in peril, you have shown ingenuity, courage, and honor. While I may still speak of you from time to time in less than glowing terms, my lowest opinion of you does not include the possibility of your having a hand in murdering your employer."

"Thank you. General."

"... And besides, only a total idiot would want to assume Rodrick's place so soon before his marriage to Queen Hemlock."

I winced.

"So much for your growing respect."

"I said 'ingenuity, courage, and honor.' I made no mention of intelligence. Very well, then, a total idiot or someone under orders from his king."

"How about a bit of both?" I sighed.

"I suspected as much." Badaxe nodded. "Now that we're speaking candidly, may I ask as to the whereabouts of the King?"

"Good question."

In a few depressing sentences, I brought him up to date on my assignment and Rodrick's disappearance.

"I was afraid something like this would happen," the General said when I concluded. "The King has been looking desperately for some way out of this marriage,

and it looks like he's found it. Well, needless to say, if there's anything I can do to help, just ask."

"Thanks, General. As a matter of fact, I..."

"... As long as it doesn't go against the good of the kingdom," Badaxe amended. "Like helping you to escape. Possiltum needs a king, and for the time being, you're it!"

49

"Oh. Well... how about using your men to help find the king?"

Badaxe shook his head.

"Can't do it. Massha has that assignment. If I sent my men to back her up, she'd think I didn't have any faith in her."

Terrific! I had an ally, if I could get around his loyalties and amorous entanglements.

The General must have noticed my expression.

"Anything else I'll be willing to do."

"Like what?"

"Well . . . like teaching you to defend yourself against your bride-to-be."

That actually sounded promising.

"Do you think we'll have enough time?"

With that, there was a heavy knocking at the door.

"Your Majesty! The carriage of Queen Hemlock is approaching the palace!"

"No," said the General, with disheartening honesty.

We barely made it to our appointed places ahead of the Queen's procession. The throne of Possiltum had

been temporarily moved to a position just inside the doors to the palace, and only by sprinting through the corridors with undignified abandon were Badaxe and I able to reach our respective positions before the portals were thrown open.

"Remind me to have a word with you about the efficiency of your army's early warning system," I said to the General as I sank into my seat.

"I believe it was the Court Magician who complained about the excessive range of the military spy system," Badaxe retorted. "Perhaps your Majesty will see fit now to convince him of the necessity of timely information."

Before I could think of a sufficiently polite response,

50 51

the Queen's party drew to a halt at the foot of the stairs.

The kingdom of Impasse had apparently spared no expense on the Queen's carriage. If it was not actually fashioned of solid gold, there were sufficient quantities of the metal in the trim and decorations as to make the difference academic. I took secret pleasure that Grimble was not present to gloat at the scene. The curtains were drawn, allowing us to see the rich embroidery upon them, but not who or what was within. A team of eight matched horses completed the rig, though their shaggy coats and short stature suggested that normally the mountainfolk put them to far more practical use than dragging royalty around the countryside.

With the carriage, however, any semblance of decorum about the Queen's procession vanished.

Her escort consisted of at least twenty retainers, all mounted and leading extra horses, though whether these were relief mounts or the bride's dowry I couldn't tell. The escort was also all male, and of a uniform appearance; broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted, and musclebound. They reminded me of miniature versions of the opposing teams Aahz and I had faced during the Big Game, but unlike those players, these men were armed to the teeth. They fairly bristled with swords and

knives, glittering from boot-tops, arm sheaths, and shoulder scabbards, such that I was sure the combined weight of their weapons offset that of the golden coach they were guarding. These weren't pretty court decorations, but well handled field weapons worn with the ease fighting men accord the tools of their trade.

The men themselves were dressed in drab tunics suited more for crawling through thickets with knives clenched in their teeth than serving as a royal escort. Still, they wrinkled their broad, flat features into wide smiles as they alternately gawked at the building and waved at the

crowd which seemed determined to unload the earlier noted surplus of flowers by burying the coach with them. The escort may have seemed sloppy and undisciplined in the eyes of Badaxe or Big Julie, but I wouldn't want to be the one to try to take anything away from them; Queen, coach, kingdom, or even a flower they had taken a fancy to.

Two men in the procession were notable exceptions to the rule. Even on horseback they looked to be head and shoulder taller than the others and half again as broad. They had crammed their massive frames into tunics which were clean and formal, and appeared to be unarmed. I noted, however, that instead of laughing or waving, they sat ramrod stiff in their saddles and surveyed their surroundings with the bored, detached attention to detail I normally associated with predators . . . big predators.

I was about to call Badaxe's attention to the pair when the carriage door opened. The woman who appeared was obviously akin to most of the men in the escort. She had the same broad, solid build and facial features, only more so. My first impression was that she looked like the bottom two-thirds of an oak door, if the door were made of granite. Unsmiling, she swept the area with a withering stare, then nodded to herself and stepped down.

"Lady in waiting," Badaxe murmured.

I'm not sure if his comment was meant to reassure me, but it did. Only after did it occur to me that the

General had volunteered the information to keep me from running, which I had been seriously considering.

The next figure in view was a radical departure from the other Impassers in the party. She was arrow thin and pale with black stringy black hair that hung straight past her shoulders. Instead of the now expected round, flat

52

face, her features looked like she had been hung up by her nose to dry. She wasn't unpleasant to look at, in fact, I guessed that she was younger than I was, but the pointed nose combined with a pair of dark, shiny-alert eyes gave her a vaguely rodent appearance. Her dress was a long-sleeved white thing that would have probably looked more fetching on a clothes-hanger. Without more than a glance at the assembled citizens she gathered up what slack there was in the skirt, hopped down from the carriage, and started up the stairs toward me with the athletic, leggy grace of a confirmed tom-boy.

"That is Queen Hemlock," the General supplied.

I had somehow suspected as much, but having received confirmation, I sprang into action. This part, at least, I knew how to handle, having had it drilled into me over and over again by my advisors.

I rose to my feet and stood regally until she reached the throne, then timed my bow to coincide with her curtsey ... monarch greeting monarch and all that.

Next, I was supposed to welcome her to Possiltum, but before I could get my mouth open, she came up with her own greeting.

"Sorry I didn't curtsey any lower, but I'm not wearing a thing under this dress. Rod, it's beastly hot here in the lowlands," she said, giving me a wide but thin-lipped smile.

"Aahh....." I said carefully.

Ignoring my response, or lack thereof, she smiled and waved at the throng, which responded with a roar of approval.

"What idiot invited the rabble?" she asked, the smile never leaving her face.

"Aahh.... "I repeated.

General Badaxe came to my rescue.

53

"No formal announcement was made, your Majesty, but word of your arrival seems to have leaked out to the general populace. As might be expected, they are very eager to see their new Queen."

"Looking like this?" she said, baring her teeth and waving to those on the rooftops. "Six days on the road in this heat without a bath or a change of clothes and instead of a discreet welcome, half the kingdom gets to see me looking like I was dragged along behind the coach instead of riding in it. Well, it's done and we can't change it. But mind you, if it happens again ... General Badaxe, is it? I thought so. Anyway, as I was saying, if it happens again, heads will roll. . . and I'm not speaking figuratively."

"Welcome to Possiltum," I managed at last.

It was a considerably abbreviated version of the speech I had planned to give, but it was as much as I could remember under the circumstances.

"Hello, Roddie," she said without looking at me, still waving at the crowd. "I'm going to scamper off for my quarters in a second. Be a love and try not to get underfoot during the next week . . . there's so much to do. Besides, it looks like you're going to have your hands full with other business."

"How's that?"

"You've got a wee bit of trouble coming your way, at least, according to the gentleman I met on the road. Here he comes now. Bye."

"But..."

Queen Hemlock had already disappeared, vanishing into the depths of the palace like a puff of smoke. Instead, I found myself focusing on the man who had stepped from the carriage and was currently trudging up the stairs toward my throne. I observed that he had the same weasel features and manners of J. R. Grimble.

54

Mostly, though, I noticed that the two broadshouldered predators previously assumed to be part of the Queen's escort, had suddenly materialized at his side, towering over him like a pair of bookends . . . mean looking bookends.

I sat down, in part because the approaching figure did not seem to be royalty, but mostly because I had a feeling I wanted to be sitting down for this next interview.

The man reached my throne at last, drew himself up, and gave a curt nod rather than a bow. This, at least, looked polite, since his flankers didn't acknowledge my presence at all.

"Forgive me for intruding on such a festive occasion, your Majesty," the man said, "but there are certain matters we need to discuss."

"Such as...?"

"My name is Shai-ster, and I represent a ... consortium of businessmen. I wish to confer with one of your retainers concerning certain employees of ours who failed to report in after pursuing our interests in this region."

As I mentioned earlier, I was getting pretty good at speaking "bureaucrat." This man's oration, however,

lost me completely.

"You want to what about who?"

The man sighed and hung his head for a moment.

"Let me put it to you this way," he said at last. "I'm with the Mob, and I want to see your Magician, Skeeve. It's about our army, Big Julie's boys, that sort of disappeared after tangling with him. Now do you understand

7"

me7

Chapter Eight:

"Choose your friends carefully. Your enemies will choose you!"

—Y. ARAFAT

WITHIN a few days of Queen Hemlock's arrival, the palace of Possiltum had the happy, relaxed air of a battlefield the night before the battle. The Queen's party and the mob representatives were housed in the palace as "royal guests," giving me a two-front war whether I wanted it or not.

Queen Hemlock was not an immediate problem; she was more like a time bomb. With specific orders to "stay out of her way," I didn't have to deal with her much, and even General Badaxe admitted that if she were going to try to kill me, it wouldn't be until after the wedding when she was officially Queen of Possiltum. Still, as the wedding day loomed closer, I was increasingly aware that she would have to be dealt with.

The Mob representatives, however, were an immediate problem. I had stalled them temporarily by telling them that the Court Magician was not currently in the palace, but had been sent for, and as a token of good faith had given them the hospitality of the palace. They didn't drink much, and never pestered me with

questions about "Skeeve's" return. There was no doubt in my mind, however, that at some time their patience would be exhausted and they would start looking for the Court Magician themselves. I also had a felling that "some time" would be real soon.

Needing all the help I could get, I had Badaxe send one of his men for Big Julie. With minimal difficulty we smuggled him into the palace, and the three of us held a war council. On Badaxe's advice, I immediately dropped my disguise and brought our guest up to date on the situation.

"Ah'm sorry," Julie said to open the meeting, "but I don't see where I can help you, know what I mean?"

Terrific. So much for Big Julie's expert military advice.

"I'd like to help," he clarified. "You've done pretty good by me and the boys. But I used to work for the Mob, you know? I know what they're like. Once they get on your trail, they never quit. I tried to tell you that before."

"I don't see what the problem is," General Badaxe rumbled. "There are only three of them, and their main spokesman's a non-combatant to boot. It wouldn't take much to make sure they didn't report anything to anybody ... ever again."

Big Julie shook his head.

"You're a good man, Hugh, but you don't know what you're dealing with here. If the Mob's scouting party disappears, the Big Boys will know they've hit paydirt and set things in motion. Taking out their reps won't stop the Mob ... it won't even delay them. If anything, it will speed the process up!"

Before Badaxe had a chance to reply, I interrupted with a few questions of my own.

"Wait a minute. Big Julie. When we first met, you

T

57

were commanding the biggest army this world had ever seen. Right?"

"That's right," he nodded. "We was rolling along pretty good until we met you."

". . . And we didn't stop you militarily. We just gave you a chance to disappear as soldiers and retire as citizens of Possiltum. You and your boys were never beaten in a fight."

"We were the best," Big Julie confirmed proudly. "Anybody messed with us, they pulled back a bloody stump with no body attached, know what I mean?"

"Then why are you all so afraid of the Mob? If they try anything, why don't you and your boys just hook up with General Badaxe's army and teach 'em a lesson in maneuvers?"

The ex-commander heaved a deep sigh.

"It don't work that way," he said. "If they was to march in here like an army, sure, we could send 'em packing. But they won't. They move in a few musclemen at a time, all acting just as polite as you please so there's nothing you can arrest 'em for. When enough of 'em get here, though, they start leaning on your citizens. Little stuff, but nasty. If somebody complains to you, that somebody turns up dead along with most of their family. Pretty soon, all your citizens are more afraid of the Mob than they are of you. Nobody complains, nobody testifies in court. When that happens, you got no more kingdom. The Mob runs everything while you starve. You can't fight an invasion like that with an army. You can't fight it at all!"

We all sat in uncomfortable silence for a while, each avoiding the other's gaze while we racked our brains for a solution.

"What I don't understand," Badaxe said at last,
"is if the system you describe is so effective and so un-

58

59

stoppable, why did they bother having an army at all?"

"I really hate to admit this," Big Julie grimaced,
"but we was an experiment. Some of the Mob's bean-
counters got it into their heads that even though an
army was more expensive, the time savings of a fast
takeover would offset the additional cost. To tell you
the truth, I think their experiment was a washout."
That one threw me.

"You mean to say your army wasn't effective?"

"Up to a point we were. After that, we were too big.
It costs a lot to keep an army in the field, and toward the
end there, it was costing more to support my boys for a
week than we were getting out of the kingdoms we were
conquering. I think they were getting ready to phase us
out . . . and that's why it's taken so long for them to
come looking for their army."

I shook my head quickly.

"You lost me on that last loop. Big Julie. Why did

they delay their search?"

"Money," he said firmly. "I'll tell you, nothing
makes the Big Boys sit up and take notice like hard cash.
I mean, they wrote the book when it came to money

motivation."

"Sounds like Grimble," Badaxe muttered. "Doesn't
anybody do anything for plain old revenge anymore?"

"Stow it, General," I ordered, leaning forward.

"Keep going. Big Julie. What part does money have in

this?"

"Well, the way I see it, the Mob was already losing

money on my army, you know? To me, that means they weren't about to throw good gold after bad. I mean, . why spend more money looking for an army that, when you find it, is only going to cost you more money?"

"But they're here now."

"Right. At the same time Possiltum's about to

become suddenly rich. It looks to me like the Big Boys have found a way to settle a few old scores and turn a profit at the same time."

"The wedding!" I said. "I should have known. That means that by calling off the wedding, I can eliminate two problems at once; Queen Hemlock, and the Mob!"

Badaxe scowled at me.

"I thought we had already discarded that option. Remember Grimble and the citizenry of Possiltum?"

Without thinking, I slammed the flat of my hand down on the table with a loud slap.

"Will you forget about Grimble and the citizenry of Possiltum? I'm tired of being in a box, General, and one way or another I'm going to blast a way out!"

From the expressions of my advisors, I realized I might have spoken louder than I had intended. With a conscious effort, I modulated my tone and my mood.

"Look, General . . . Hugh," I said carefully. "You may be used to the pressures of command, but this is new to me. I'm a magician, remember? Forgive me if I get a little razzled trying to find a solution to the problem that your ... I mean, our King has dropped in my lap. Okay?"

He nodded curtly, but still didn't relax.

"Now, your point has merit," I continued, "but it overlooks a few things. First, Grimble isn't here. When and ;/ he does get back, he'll have the king in tow, and friend Rodrick can solve the problem for us... at least the problem with the Queen. As for the citizenry of Possiltum . . . between you and me I'm almost ready to face their protests rather than have to deal with Queen Hemlock. Now if you weigh the disappointment of our people over having to continue the status quo against having both the Queen and the Mob move in on a permanent basis, what result do you get? Thinking of the

60

welfare of the kingdom, of course!"

The General thought it over, then heaved a great sigh.

"I was never that much in favor of the wedding, anyway," he admitted.

"Just a minute, boys," Big Julie said, holding up a weary hand. "It's not quite that easy. The money thing may have slowed up their search a bit, but now that the Mob is here, there are a couple other matters they're gonna want to settle."

"Such as?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"Well, first off, there's me and my boys. Nobody just walks away from the Mob, you know. Their pay scale is great, but their retirement plan stinks."

"I thought you said they didn't want their army anymore," Badaxe grumbled.

"Maybe not as an army, but they can always use manpower. They'll probably break us up and absorb us into various positions in the organization."

"Would you be willing to go back to work for them?."

Big Julie rubbed his chin with one hand as he considered the General's question.

"I'd have to talk to the boys," he said. "Like I said, this kingdom's been pretty good to us. I'd hate to see anything happen to it because we were here . . . especially if we'd end up working for them again anyway."

"No," I said flatly.

"But..."

"I said 'No!' You've got a deal with Possiltum, Big Julie. More important, you've got a deal with me. We don't turn you over to the Mob until we've tried everything we can do to defend you."

"And how do you propose to defend them from the Mob?" Badaxe asked, sarcastically.

"I don't know. I'm working on it. Maybe we can buy

61

them off. Offer them Queen Hemlock to hold for ransom or something."

"Lord Magician!"

"Okay, okay. I said I was still working on it, didn't I? What's next. Big Julie? You said there were a couple things they wanted besides money."

"You," he said bluntly. "The Mob isn't going to be happy until they get the Great Skeeve, Court Magician of Possiltum."

"Me?" I said in a small voice.

"The Mob didn't get to the top by ignoring the competition. You've made some pretty big ripples with your work, and the biggest as far as they're concerned is making their army disappear. They know you're big. Big enough to be a threat. They're gonna want you neutralized. My guess is that they'll try to hire you, and failing that, try for some sort of non-aggression deal."

"And failing that. . . ?" Badaxe asked, echoing my thoughts.

Big Julie shrugged.

"Failing that, they're gonna do their best to kill you."

Chapter Nine:

"/ don't know why anyone would be nervous about going to see royalty."

—P. IN BOOTS

"BUT why do / have to come along?" Badaxe protested, pacing along at my side as we strode towards the Queen's chambers.

"Call it moral support," I growled. "Besides, I want a witness that I went into the Queen's chambers ... and came out again, if you get my drift."

"But if this will only solve one of our problems...."

"... Then it will be one less problem for us to deal with. Shh! Here we are."

I had switched back to my Rodrick disguise. That combined with the General's presence was enough to have the Honor Guards at the Queen's chambers snap to rigid attention at our approach. I ignored them and hammered on the door, though I did have a moment to reflect that not long ago, I thought the biggest problem facing a king was boredom!

"For cryin' out loud!" came a shrill voice from within. "Can't you guards get anything right? I told you I didn't want to be disturbed!"

One of the guards rolled his eyes in exasperation. I

avored him with a sympathetic smile, then raised an eyebrow at Badaxe.

"King Rodrick the Fifth of Possiltum seeks an audience with Queen Hemlock!" he bellowed.

"I suppose it's all right," came the reply. "How about first thing in the morning?"

"Now," I said.

I didn't say it very loud, but it must have carried. Within a few heartbeats the door flew open, exposing Queen Hemlock . . . literally. I can't describe her clothing because she wasn't wearing any. Not a stitch!

"Roddie!" she chirped, oblivious to the guards and Badaxe, all of whom gaped at her nakedness. "Come on in. What in the world are you doing here?"

"Wait for me," I instructed Badaxe in my most commanding tone.

"C-certainly, your Majesty!" he responded, tearing his eyes away from the Queen long enough to snap to attention.

With that, I stepped into the Queen's lair.

"So, what have you got for me?" She shut the door and leaned back against it. The action made her point at me, even though her hands were behind her back.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The audience," she clarified. "You wanted it, you got it. What's up?"

Somehow under the circumstances, I found that to be another embarrassing question.

"I ... urn ... that is ... could you please put something on? I'm finding your attire, or lack thereof, to be quite distracting."

"Oh, very well. It is beastly hot in here, though."

She flounced across the room and came up with a flimsy something which she shrugged into, but didn't close completely.

65

"Right after the wedding," she declared, "I want that window enlarged, or better yet, the whole wall torn out. Anything to get a little ventilation in this place."

She plopped down in a chair and curled her legs up under her. It eased my discomfort somewhat, but not much.

"Ahh ... actually, that's what I'm here to talk to you about."

"The window?" she frowned.

"No. The wedding."

That made her frown even more.

"I thought it was agreed that I would handle all the wedding arrangements. Oh, well, if you've got any specific changes, it isn't too late to...."

"It isn't that," I interrupted hastily. "It's . . . well, it's come to my attention that the high prices Possiltum is charging your kingdom for food is forcing you into this marriage. Not wishing to have you enter into such a bond under duress, I've decided to cut our prices in half, thereby negating the need for our wedding."

"Oh, Roddie, don't be silly. That's not the reason I'm marrying you!"

Rather than being upset, the Queen seemed quite amused at my suggestion.

"It isn't?"

"Of course not. Impasse is so rich that we could buy your yearly crop at double the prices if we wanted to

and still not put a dent in our treasury."

My stomach began to sink.

"Then you really want this marriage? You aren't being forced into it for political reasons?"

The Queen flashed all her teeth at me in a quick smile.

"Of course there are political reasons. I mean, we are royalty, aren't we? I'm sure you're a pleasant enough fellow, but I can get all the pleasant fellows I want with-

66

out marrying them. Royalty marries power blocks, not people."

There was a glimmer of hope in what she was saying, and I pounced on it with all fours.

"... Which brings us to the other reason we should call off the wedding," I said grandly.

The Queen's smile disappeared.

"What's that?" she said sharply.

For my reply, I let drop my disguise spell.

"Because I'm not Royalty. I'm people."

"Oh, that," the Queen shrugged. "No problem. I knew that all along."

"You did?" I gulped.

"Sure. You were embarrassed ... twice. Once when I arrived at the palace, and again just now when I opened the door in my all-together. Royalty doesn't embarrass. It's in the blood. I knew all long you weren't Rodrick. It's my guess you're the Great Skeeve, Court Magician. Right? The one who can shape change?"

"Well, it's a disguise spell, not shape changing, but except for that, you're right."

Between Badaxe and Queen Hemlock, I was starting to wonder if anyone was really fooled by my disguise spells.

The Queen uncoiled from her seat and began pacing back and forth as she spoke, oblivious to her nakedness which peeked out of her wrap at each turn.

"The fact that you aren't the king doesn't change my situation, if anything it improves it. As long as you can keep your disguise up enough to fool the rabble, I'll be marrying two power blocks instead of one."

"Two power blocks," I echoed hollowly.

"Yes. As the 'king' of Possiltum, you control the first block I was after: land and people. Impasse by itself isn't large enough to wage an aggressive war, but unit-

67

ing the respective powers of the two kingdoms, we're unstoppable. With your armies backed by my capital, I can sweep as far as I want, which is pretty far, let me tell you. There's nothing like growing up in a valley where the only view is the other side of the valley to whet one's appetite for new and unusual places."

"Most people content themselves with touring," I suggested. "You don't have to conquer a country to see it."

"Cute," Queen Hemlock sneered. "Naive, but cute. Let's just say I'm not most people and let it ride, okay? Now then, for the second power base, there's you and your magic. That's a bonus I hadn't expected, but I'm sure that, given a day or two, I can expand my plans to take advantage of it."

At one time, I thought I had been scared by Massha. In hindsight, Massha caused me only faint discomfort. Talking with Queen Hemlock, I learned what fear was all about! She wasn't just a murderess, as Badaxe

suspected. She was utter mayhem waiting to be loosed on the world. The only thing between her and the resources necessary to act out her dreams was me. Me, and maybe....

"What about King Rodrick?" I blurted out. "If he shows up, the original wedding plans go into effect."

"You mean he's still alive?" she exclaimed, arching a thin eyebrow at me. "I've overestimated you, Skeeve. Alive he could be a problem. No matter. I'll alert my escort to kill him on sight if he appears before the wedding. After we're married, it would be a simple matter to declare him an imposter and have him officially executed."

Terrific. Thanks to my big mouth, Massha would be walking into a trap if she tried to return the King to the castle. If Queen Hemlock's men saw him, then ...

68

69

"Wait a minute!" I exclaimed. "If I'm walking around disguised as the King, what's to keep your men from offing me by mistake?"

"Hmm. Good thing you thought about that. Okay! Here's what we'll do."

She dove into her wardrobe and emerged with a length of purple ribbon.

"Wear this in full view whenever you're outside your chambers," she instructed, thrusting it into my hands. "It'll let my men know that you're the man I want to marry instead of their target."

I stood with the ribbon in my hand.

"Aren't you making a rather large assumption, your

Majesty?"

"What's that?" she frowned.

"That I may not want to marry you?"

"Of course you do," she smiled. "You've already got the throne of Possiltum. If you marry me, you not only have access to my treasury, it also rids you of your other problem."

"My other problem?"

"The Mob, silly. Remember? I rode in with their representative. With my money, you can buy them off. They'll forget anything if the price is high enough. Now, isn't being my husband better than running from their vengeance and mine for the rest of your life?"

I had my answer to that, but in a flash of wisdom kept it to myself. Instead, I said my goodbyes and left.

"From your expression, I take it that your interview with the Queen was less than a roaring success," Badaxe said dryly.

"Spare me the 'I told you so's,' General," I snarled. "We've got work to do."

Shooting a quick glance up and down the corridor, I cut my purple ribbon in half on the edge of his axe.

"Keep a lookout for Massha and the King," I instructed. "If you see them, be sure Rodrick wears this. It'll make his trip through the palace a lot easier."

"But where are you going?"

I gave him a tight smile.

"To see the Mob representatives. Queen Hemlock has graciously told me how to deal with them!"

Chapter Ten:

"Superior firepower is an invaluable tool when entering into negotiations."

—G. PATTON

THE Mob representatives had been housed in one of the less frequented corners of the palace. In theory, this kept them far from the hub of activity while Badaxe and I figured out what to do with them. In fact, it meant that now that I was ready to face them, I had an awfully long walk to reach my destination.

By the time I reached the proper door, I was so winded I wasn't sure I'd have enough breath to announce my presence. Still, on my walk I had worked up a bit of a mad against the Mob. I mean, who did they think they were, popping up and disrupting my life this way? Besides, I was too unnerved by Queen Hemlock to try anything against her, which left the Mob as the only target for my frustration.

With that in mind, I drew a deep breath and knocked on the door.

I needn't have worried about announcing myself. Between the second and third knocks, the door opened a crack. My third knock hit the door before I could stop it, but the door remained unmoved by the impact.

71

72

"Hey, Shai-ster! It's the King!"

"Well, let him in, you idiot!"

The door opened wide, revealing one of Shai-ster's massive bodyguards, then a little wider to allow me

entry space past him.

"Come in, come in. your Majesty," the Mob's

spokesman said, hurrying forward to greet me. "Have a drink . . . Dummy! Get the King something to drink!"

This last was addressed to the second hulking muscleman who heaved himself off the bed he had been sprawled upon. With self-conscious dignity he picked up the end of the bed one-handed, set it down again, then picked up the mattress and extracted a small, flat bottle from under it.

I wondered briefly if this was what Big Julie meant

when he referred to the Mob tradition of "going to the mattresses." Somehow the phrase had always brought another image to mind ... something involving women. Accepting the flask from his bodyguard, Shai-ster opened the top and offered it to me, smiling all the while.

"Am I correct in assuming that your Majesty's visit indicates news of the whereabouts of his court magician? Perhaps even an estimated time as to when he is expected back?"

I accepted the flask, covertly checking the locations of the bodyguards before I answered. One was leaning against the door, while the other stood by the bed. "Actually, I can do better than that. The Great

Skeeve..."
I closed my eyes and dropped my disguise spell.

"...is here."
The bodyguards started visibly at my transformation, but Shai-ster remained unmoved except for a narrowing of the eyes and a tightening of his smile.

"I see. That simplifies things a bit. Boys, give the

Great Skeeve here a chair. We have some business to discuss."

His tone was not pleasant, nor were the bodyguards smiling as they started for me.

Remember how Rupert jumped me so easily? Well, he took me by surprise, and had three hundred years plus of magical practice to boot. Somehow, I was not particularly surprised by the bodyguards' action ... in fact, I had been expecting it and had been gathering my powers for just this moment.

With a theatric wave of my hand and a much more important focusing of my mental energies, I picked the two men up and spun them in midair. Heck, I wasn't adverse to stealing a new idea for how to use levitation ... even from Rupert. I did like a little originality in my work, though, so instead of bouncing them on their heads, I slammed them against the ceiling and held them pinned there.

"No, thanks," I said as casually as I could, "I'd rather stand."

Shai-ster looked at his helpless protectors, then shot a hard stare at me.

"Perhaps this won't be as simple as I thought," he admitted. "Say, you've got a unicorn, don't you?"

"That's right," I confirmed, surprised by the sudden change in topic.

"I don't suppose you'd be particularly scared if you woke up in the morning and found him in your bed ... not all of him, just his head?"

"Scared? No, not particularly. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'd be mad enough to quit playing games and get down to serious revenge."

The Mob spokesman sighed heavily.

"Well, that's that. If we can't make a deal, we'll just

have to do this the hard way. You can let the boys down now. We'll be heading back in the morning."

This time, it was my turn to smile.

"Not so fast. Who said I didn't want to make a

deal?"

For the first time since I met him, Shai-ster's poise

was shaken.

"But... I thought... if you can ..."

"Don't assume, Shai-ster. It's a bad habit for businessmen to get into. I just don't like to get pushed around, that's all. Now then, as you said earlier, I believe we have some business to discuss."

The spokesman shot a nervous glance at the ceiling.

"Um . . . could you let the boys down first? It's a bit distracting."

"Sure."

I closed my eyes and released the spell. Mind you, unlike the disguise spell, I don't have to close my eyes to remove a levitation spell. I just didn't want to see the results. .

The room shook as two loud crashes echoed each other. I distinctly heard the bed assume a foolproof disguise as kindling.

I carefully opened an eye.

One bodyguard was unconscious. The other rolled about, groaning weakly.

"They're down," I said, needlessly.

Shai-ster ignored me.

"Big bad bodyguards! Wait'll the Big Boys hear how good dumb muscle is against magik!"

He paused to kick the groaner in the side.

"Groan quieter! Mister Skeeve and I have some talking to do."

Having already completed one adventure after an-

75

tagonizing the military arm of a large organization, I was not overly eager to add another entire group of plug-uglies to my growing list of enemies.

"Nothing personal," I called to the bodyguard who was still conscious. "Here! Have a drink."

I levitated the flask over to him, and he caught it with a weak moan I chose to interpret as "thanks."

"You said something about a deal?" Shai-ster said, turning to me again.

"Right. Now, if my appraisal of the situation is correct, the Mob wants three things: Big Julie's army back, me dead or working for them, and a crack at the new money coming into Possiltum after the wedding."

The Mob spokesman cocked his head to one side.

"That's a bit more blunt than I would have put it, but you appear to have captured the essential spirit of my clients' wishes. My compliments on your concise summation."

"Here's another concise summation to go with it. Hands off Big Julie and his crew; he's under my protection. By the same token, Possiltum is my territory. Stay away from it or it will cost you more than you'll get. As

to my services, I have no wish to become a Mob employee. I would consider an occasional assignment as an outside contractor for a specific fee, but full-time employment is out."

The Mob spokesman was back in his element, face stony and impassive.

"That doesn't sound like much of a deal."

"It doesn't?"

I reviewed the terms quickly in my mind.

"Oh! Excuse me. There is one other important part of my offer I neglected to mention. I don't expect your employers to give up their objectives without any return

76

at all. What I have in mind is a swap: an army and maybe a kingdom for an opportunity to exploit an entire world."

Shai-ster raised his eyebrows.

"You're going to give us the world? Just like that? Lord Magician, I suspect you're not bargaining with a full deck.*"

"I didn't say I would give you the world, I said I would give you access to a world. Brand new territory full of businesses and people to exploit; one of the richest in the universe."

The spokesman frowned.

"Another world? And I'm supposed to take your word as to how rich it is and that you can give us access?"

"It would be nice, but even in my most naive moments I wouldn't expect you to accept a blind bid like that. No, I'm ready to give you a brief tour of the proposed world so that you can judge for yourself."

"Wait-a minute," Shai-ster said, holding up his hands. "This is so far beyond my negotiating parameters that-even if I liked what I saw, I couldn't approve the deal. I need to bring one of the Big Boys in on this decision."

This was better than I had hoped. By the time he could bring one of the Mob's hierarchy to Possiltum, I could deal with some of my other problems.

"Fine. Go and fetch him. I'll hold the deal until your return."

The spokesman gave one of his tight-lipped smiles.

"No need to wait," he said. "My immediate superior is on call specifically for emergencies such as this."

Before I could frame a reply, he opened the front of his belt-buckle and began rubbing it, all the while mumbling under his breath.

77

There was a quick flash of light, and an old, hairy-jowled man appeared in the room. Looking round, he spied the two bodyguards sprawled on the floor and gripped the sides of his face with his open hands in an exaggerated expression of horror.

"Mercy!" he wheezed in a voice so hoarse I could barely understand him. "Shai-ster, you bad boy. If there was trouble, you should have called me sooner. Oh, those poor, poor boys."

The Mob spokesman's face was once again blank and impassive as he addressed me.

"Skeeve, Lord Magician of Possiltum, let me introduce Don Bruce, the Mob's fairy godfather."

Chapter Eleven:

Te// you what. Let me sweeten the deal a bit for you...."

—BEELZEBUB

"OH! This is simply war-velous! Who would have ever thought... another dimension, you say?"

"That's right," I said off-handedly. "It's called Deva."

Of course, I was quite in agreement with Don Bruce. The Bazaar on Deva was really something, and every time I visited it, I was impressed anew. It was an incredible tangle of tents and displays stretching as far as the eye could see in every direction, crammed full of enough magikal devices and beings to defy anyone's imagination and sanity. It was the main crossroads of trade for the dimensions. Anything worth trading money or credits for was here.

This time, however, I was the senior member of the expedition. As much as I wanted to rubberneck and explore, it was more important to pretend to be bored and worldly... or other-worldly as the case might be.

Don Bruce led the parade, as wide-eyed as a farm-kid in his first big city, with Shai-ster, myself, and the two

79

80

bodyguards trailing along behind. The bodyguards seemed more interested in crowding close to me than in protecting their superiors, but then again, they had just had some bad experiences with magik.

"The people here all look kinda strange," one of them muttered to me. "You know, like foreigners."

"They are foreigners ... or rather you are," I said. "You're on their turf, and a long way from home. These are Deveels."

"Devils?" the man responded, looking a little wild-eyed. "You're tellin' me we're surrounded by devils?"

While it was reassuring to me to see the Mob's bully-boys terrified by something I had grown used to, it also occurred to me that if they were too scared, it might ruin the deal I was trying to set up.

"Look ... say, what is your name, anyway?"

"Guido," the man confided, "and this here's my cousin Nunzio."

"Well look, Guido. Don't be thrown by these jokers. Look at them. They're storekeepers like storekeepers anywhere. Just because they look funny doesn't mean they don't scare like anybody else."

"I suppose you're right. Say, I meant to thank you for the drink back there at the castle."

"Don't mention it," I waved. "It was the least I could do after bouncing you off the ceiling. Incidentally, there was nothing personal in that. I wasn't trying to make you two look bad, I was trying to make myself look good ... if you see the difference."

Guido's brow furrowed slightly.

"I ... think so. Yeah! I get it. Well, it worked. You looked real good. I wouldn't want to cross you, and neither would Nunzio. In fact, if we can ever do you a favor . . . you know, bend someone a little for you . . . well, just let us know."

81

"Hey, what's that?"

I looked in the direction Don Bruce was pointing. A booth was filled with short painted sticks, all floating in midair.

"I think he's selling magic wands," I guessed.
"Oh! I want one. Now, don't go anywhere without me."

The bodyguards hesitated for a moment, then followed as Don Bruce plunged into negotiations with the booth's proprietor, who gaped a bit at his new customer.

"Does he always dress like that?" I asked Shai-ster.

"You know, all in light purple?"
The Mob spokesman raised an eyebrow at me.
"Do you always dress in green when you travel to

other dimensions?"

Just to be on the safe side, I had donned another disguise before accompanying this crew to Deva. It occurred to me that if I were successful in my negotiations, it wouldn't be wise to be known at the Bazaar as the one who introduced organized crime to the dimension.

Unfortunately, this had dawned on me just as we were preparing to make our departure, so I hadn't had much time to choose someone to disguise myself as. Any of my friends were out, as were Massha, Quigley, Garkin ... in desperation I settled on Rupert ... I mean, there was one being I owed a bad turn or two. Consequently, I was currently parading around the Bazaar as a scaly green Pervert... excuse me, Pervert.

"I have my reasons," I dodged loftily.

"Well, so has Don Bruce," Shai-ster scowled. "Now if you don't mind, I've got a few questions about this place. If we try to move in here, won't language be a problem? I can't understand anything these freaks are saying."

82

"Take a look," I instructed, pointing.

Don Bruce and the Devel proprietor were haggling earnestly, obviously having no difficulty understanding

each other, however much they disagreed.

"No Deveel worth his salt is going to let a little thing like language stand in the way of a sale."

"Hey, everybody! Look what I got!"

We turned to find Don Bruce bearing down on us, proudly waving a small rod the same color as his clothes.

"It's a magic wand!" he exclaimed. "I got it for a song."

"A song plus some gold, I'd wager," Shai-ster observed dryly. "What does it do?"

"What does it do?" Don Bruce grinned. "Watch this."

He swept the wand across the air with a grand gesture, and a cloud of shiny dust sparkled to the ground.

"That's it?" Shai-ster grimaced.

Don Bruce frowned at the wand.

"That's funny. When the guy back there did it, he got a rainbow."

He pointed the wand at the ground and shook it... and three blades materialized out of thin air, lancing into the dust at our feet.

"Careful!" Shai-ster warned, hopping back out of range. "You'd better read the instructions on that thing."

"I don't need instructions," Don Bruce insisted. "I'm a fairy godfather. I know what I'm doing."

As he spoke, he gestured emphatically with the wand, and a jet of flame narrowly missed one of the bodyguards.

"... But this can wait," Don Bruce concluded, tuck-

Hrr OR MYTH

83

ing the wand into his waistband. "We've got business to discuss."

"Yes. We were just..." Shai-ster began.

"Shuddup! I'm talking to Skeeve here."

The force behind Don Bruce's sudden admonishment, combined with the Shai-ster's quick obedience, made me hastily revise my opinion of the Mob leader. Strange or not, he was a force to be recognized.

"Now then, Mister Skeeve, what's the police situation around here?"

"There aren't any."

Shaister's eyebrows shot up.

"Then how do they enforce the laws?" he asked, forgetting himself.

"As far as I can tell, there are no laws either."

"How 'bout that, Shai-ster?" Don Bruce laughed.

"No police, no laws, no lawyers. You'd be in trouble if you were born here."

I started to ask what a lawyer was, but the godfather saved me from my own ignorance by plunging into the next question.

"How about politicians?"

"None."

"Unions?"

"None."

"Bookies?"

"Lots," I admitted. "This is the gambling capital of

the dimensions. As near as I can tell, though, they all operate independently. There's no central organization."

Don Bruce rubbed his hands together gleefully. "You listening to this, Shai-ster? This is some world Mister Skeeve is givin' us here."

"He's not giving it to us," Shai-ster corrected. "He's offering access to it."

84

"That's right," I said quickly. "Exploiting it is up to your organization. Now, if you don't think your boys can handle it. ..."

"We can handle it. A layout like this? It's a piece of cake."

Guido and Nunzio exchanged nervous glances, but held their silence as Don Bruce continued.

"Now if I understand this right, what you want in return for letting us into this territory is that we lay off Big June and Possiltum. Right?"

I count real good up to three.

"And me," I added. "No 'getting even with the guy who thrashed our army plans,' no 'join the Mob or die' pressure. I'm an independent operator and happy to stay that way."

"Sure, sure," Don Bruce waved. "Now that we've seen how you operate, no reason we can't eat out of the same bowl. If anything, we owe you a favor for opening up a new area to our organization."

Somehow, that worried me.

"Dm . . . tell you what. I don't want any credit for this . . . inside the Mob or outside. Right now, nobody but us knows I had a hand in this. Let's keep it that way,

okay?"

"If that's what you want," Don Bruce shrugged.

"I'll just tell the Big Boys you're too rough for us to tangle with, and that's why we're going to leave you alone. Anytime our paths cross, we go ahead with your approval or we back off. Okay?"

"That's what I want."

"Deal?"

"Deal."

We shook hands ceremoniously.

"Very well," I said. "Here's what you need to travel between here and home."

85

I fished the D-Hopper out of my sleeve.

"This setting is for home. This one is for here. Push this button to travel."

"What about the other settings?" Shai-ster asked.

"Remember the magic wand?" I countered. "Without instructions, you could get lost with this thing. I mean, really \ost."

"Come on, boys," Don Bruce said, setting the D-Hopper. "We gotta hurry home. There's a world here to conquer, so we gotta get started before somebody else beats us to it. Mister Skeeve, a pleasure doin' business with you."

A second later, they were gone.

I should have been elated, having finally eliminated one set of problems from my horizon. I wasn't.

Don Bruce's last comment about world conquering reminded me of Queen Hemlock's plans. Now that the Mob was neutralized, I had other problems to solve. As soon as I got back to the palace, I would have to ...

Then it hit me.

The Mob representatives had taken the D-Hopper with them when they left. That thing was my only route back to Klah! I was stranded at the Bazaar with no way back to my own dimension!

Chapter Twelve:

"I'm making this up as I go along!"

—I.JONES

BUT I didn't panic. Why should I?

Sure, I was in a bit of a mess, but if there was one place in all the dimensions I could be confident of finding help, it was here at the Bazaar. Anything could be had here for a price, and thanks to Aahz's training, I had made a point of stocking my pouch with money prior to our departure from Klah.

Aahz!

It suddenly occurred to me that I hadn't thought about my old mentor for days. The crises that had erupted shortly after his departure had occupied my mind to an extent where there was no time or energy left for brooding. Except for the occasional explanation of his absence, Aahz was playing no part in my life currently. I was successfully handling things without him.

Well...

Okay. I had successfully handled some things without him ... the Mob, for example. Of course, the training he had gotten me into earlier in our relationship had also provided me with confidence under fire... another

87

88

much-needed commodity these days.

"Face it, kid," I said to myself in my best imitation of Aahz. "You owe a lot to your old mentor."

Right. A lot. Like not making him ashamed of his prize pupil... say by leaving a job half done.

With new resolve, I addressed my situation. First, I had to get back to Klah ... or should I look for a solution right here?

Rather than lose time to indecision, I compromised.

With a few specific questions to the nearest vendor, I set a course for my eventual destination, keeping an eye out as I went for something that would help me solve the

Queen Hemlock problem.

This trip through the Bazaar was different from my

earlier visits. Before, my experience had been of wishing for more time to study the displays at leisure while hurrying to keep up with Aahz. This time, it was me that was pushing the pace, dismissing display after display with a casual "interesting, but no help with today's problem." Things seemed to have a different priority when responsibility for the crisis was riding on my

shoulders.

Of course, I didn't know what I was looking for. I

just knew that trick wands and instant thunderstorms weren't it. Out of desperation, I resorted to logic.

To recognize the solution, I needed to know the prob-

lem. The problem was that Queen Hemlock was about to marry me instead of Rodrick. Scratch that. Massha was bringing Rodrick back, and I couldn't help her. I just had to believe she could do it. The problem was

Queen Hemlock.

Whether she married me or Rodrick, she was determined to use Possiltum's military strength to wage a war of expansion. If her husband, whoever it was, tried to

89

oppose her, he would find himself conveniently dead.

Killing the Queen would be one solution, but somehow I shrank from cold-blooded murder ... or hot-blooded murder for that matter. No. What was needed was something to throw a scare into her. A big scare.

The answer walked past me before I recognized it. Fortunately, it was moving slowly, so I turned and caught up with it in just a few steps.

Answers come in many shapes and sizes. This one was in the form of a Deveel with a small tray display hung by a strap around his neck.

"What you just said, was it true?"

The Deveel studied me.

"I said, 'Rings. One size fits all. Once on, never off.' "

"That's right. Is it true?"

"Of course. Each of my rings are pre-spelled. Once you put it on, it self-adjusts so that it won't come off, even if you want it to."

"Great. I'll take two."

". . . Because to lose a ring of such value would be tragedy indeed. Each one worth a king's ransom...."

I rolled my eyes.

"Look," I interrupted. "I know it's a tradition of the Bazaar to bargain, but I'm in a hurry. How much for two? Bottom price."

He thought for a moment and named a figure. My training came to the fore and I made a counteroffer one-tenth of his.

"Hey! You said 'no haggling,' " he protested. "Who do you think you are?"

Well, it was worth a try. According to Massha, I was getting a bit of a reputation at the Bazaar.

"I think I'm the Great Skeeve, since you asked."

90

". . . And the camel you rode in on," the vendor sneered. "Everyone knows the Great Skeeve isn't a

Pervert."

The disguise! I had forgotten about it completely.

With a mental wave, I restored my normal appearance.

"No, I'm a Klahd," I smiled, "And for your information, that's Pervect!"

"You mean you're really ... no, you must be. No one else would voluntarily look like a Klahd ... or defend Perverts ... excuse me, Pervects."

"Now that that's established," I yawned, "how

much for two of your rings?"

"Here," he said, thrusting the tray forward. "Take your pick, with my compliments. I won a bundle betting on your team at the Great Game. All I ask is permission to say that you use my wares."

It was with a great deal of satisfaction that I made my selection and continued on my way. It was nice to have a reputation, but nicer to earn it. Those two little baubles now riding in my pouch were going to get me out of the Possiltum dilemma ... if I got back in time . . . and if

Massha had found the King.

Those sobering thoughts brought my hat size back to normal in a hurry. The time to gloat was after the battle, not before. Plans aren't victories, as I should be the first to know.

With panic once again nipping at my heels, I quickened my pace until I was nearly running by the time I reached my final destination: the Yellow Crescent Inn.

Bursting through the door of the Bazaar's leading fast food establishment, I saw that it was empty of customers except for a troll munching on a table in the corner.

Terrific.

91

I was expecting to deal with Gus, the gargoyle proprietor, but I'd settle for the troll.

"Skeeve!" the troll exclaimed. "I say, this is a surprise. What brings you to the Bazaar?"

"Later, Chumly. Right now I need a lift back to Klah. Are you busy with anything?"

The troll set his half-eaten table to one side and raised the eyebrow over one mismatched moon eye.

"Not to be picky about formality," he said, "but what happened to 'Hello, Chumly. How are you?' "

"I'm sorry. I'm in a bit of a hurry. Can we just..."

"Skeeve! How's it going, handsome?"

A particularly curvaceous bundle of green-haired loveliness had just emerged from the ladies' room.

"Oh. Hi, Tananda. How 'bout it, Chumly?"

Tananda's smile of welcome disappeared, to be replaced by a puzzled frown.

"'Oh. Hi, Tananda?' " she repeated, shooting a look at the troll. "Does anything strike you as strange about that rather low-key greeting, big brother?"

"No stranger than the greeting I just got," Chumly confided. "Just off-hand, I'd say that either our young friend here has forgotten his manners completely, or he's gotten himself into a spot of trouble."

Their eyes locked and they nodded.

"Trouble," they said together.

"Cute," I grimaced. "Okay, so I'm in a mess. I'm not asking you to get involved. In fact, I think I've got it worked out myself. All I want is for you to pop me back to Klah."

Brother and sister stepped to my side.

"Certainly," Chumly smiled. "You don't mind if we tag along, though, do you?"

"But I didn't ask you to ..."

92

"When have you had to ask for our help before, handsome?" Tananda scolded, slipping an arm around my waist. "We're your friends, remember?"

"But I think I've got it handled ..."

". . . In which case, having us along won't hurt," the

troll insisted.

"Unless, of course, something goes wrong," Tananda supplied. "In which case, we might be able to lend a hand."

"... And if the three of us can't handle it, we'll be there to pull you out again," Chumly finished.

I should have known better than to try to argue with the two of them when they were united.

"But... if ... well, thanks," I managed. "I didn't really expect this. I mean, you don't even know what the trouble is."

"You can tell us later," Tananda said firmly, starting her conjuring to move us through the dimensions. "Incidentally, where's Aahz?"

"That's part of the problem," I sighed.

And we were back!

Not just back on Klah, back in my own quarters in the palace. As luck would have it, we weren't alone. Someday I'll have time to figure out if it was good luck

or bad.

The King was trussed up hand and foot on my bed,

while Massha and J. R. Grimble were each enjoying a goblet of wine, and apparently each other's company. At least, that was the scene when we arrived. Once Massha and Tananda set eyes on each other, the mood changed dramatically.

"Slut," my new apprentice hissed.

"No-talent mechanic," Tananda shot back.

"Is that freak on our payroll?" Grimble interrupted, staring at Chumly.

"Spoken like a true bean-counter," the troll sneered.

I tried to break it up.

"If we can just..."

That brought Grimble's attention to me.

"You!" he gasped. "But if you're Skeeve, then who's...."

"King Rodrick of Possiltum," I supplied, nodding to the bound figure on the bed. "And now that everybody knows each other, can you all shut up while I tell you what our next move is?"

Chapter Thirteen:

"Marriage, being a lifelong venture, must be approached with care and caution."

—BLUEBEARD

THE wedding went off without a hitch.

I don't know why I had been worried. There were no interruptions, no missed lines, nobody protested or even coughed at the wrong time. As was previously noted, Queen Hemlock had handled the planning to the last minute detail . . . except for a few surprises we were holding back.

That's why I was worried! My cronies and I knew that as gaudy and overdone as the Royal Wedding was, it was only the warm-up act for the main event. There was also the extra heat on me of knowing that I hadn't shared all of my plans with my co-conspirators. It seemed that was another bad habit I had picked up from Aahz.

Grimble and Badaxe were at their usual places as mismatched bookends to the throne, while Chumly, Tananda, Massha, and I, courtesy of my disguise spells and Badaxe's pull as general, were lined up along the foot of the throne as bodyguards. Everything was set to go ... if we ever got the time!

95

96

As dignitary after dignitary stepped forward to offer his or her congratulations and gifts, I found little to occupy my thoughts except how many things could go wrong with my little scheme. I had stuck my neck out a long way with my plan, and if it didn't work, a lot of people would be affected, starting with the king and

subjects of Possiltum.

The more I thought, the more I worried until, instead of wishing the dignitaries would hurry, I actually found myself hoping they would take forever and preserve this

brief moment of peace.

Of course, no sooner did I start hoping things would last than they were over. The last well-wisher was filing out and the Queen herself rising to leave when Grimble and Badaxe left their customary positions and stepped

before the throne.

"Before you go, my dear," Rodrick said, "our retainers wish to extend their compliments."

Queen Hemlock frowned slightly, but resumed her seat.

"The Chancellor of the Exchequer stands ready to support their majesties in any way," Grimble began. "Of course, even with the new influx of wealth into the treasury, we must watch needless expenses. As always, I

stand ready to set the example in cost savings, and so have decided that to purchase a present for you equal to my esteem would be a flagrant and unnecessary expense, and therefore..."

"Yes, yes, Grimble," the King interrupted. "We understand and appreciate your self-sacrifice. General Badaxe?"

Grimble hesitated, then yielded the floor to his rival. "I am a fighting man, not a speechmaker," the General said abruptly. "The army stands ready to support

97

the kingdom and the throne of Possiltum. As for myself ... here is my present."

He removed the axe from his belt and laid it on the stairs before the throne.

Whether he was offering his pet weapon or his personal allegiance, I found the gesture eloquent beyond words.

"Thank you. General Badaxe, Grimble," Queen Hemlock said loftily. "I'm sure I can ..."

"My dear," the King interrupted softly. "There is another retainer."

And I was on.

Screwing up my courage, I dropped my disguise and stepped before the throne.

"Your majesties, the Great Skeeve gives you his congratulations on this happy event."

The Queen was no fool. For one beat her eyes popped open and on the next she was staring at the King. You could almost hear her thoughts: "If the Magician is there, then the man I just married is..."

"That's right, your majesty. As you yourself said in our earlier conversations, 'Royalty has married royalty.' "

While it might have been nice dramatically to savor that moment, I noticed the Queen's eyes were narrowing thoughtfully, so I hurried on.

"Before you decide how to express your joy," I warned, "perhaps I should explain my gift to the throne."

Now the thoughtful gaze was on me. I expressed my own joy by sweating profusely.

"My gift is the wedding rings now worn by both king and queen. I hope you like them, because they won't come off."

98

Queen Hemlock made one brief attempt to remove her ring, then her eyes were on me again. This time, the gaze wasn't thoughtful.

"Just as the fate of the kingdom of Possiltum is linked to the throne, as of the moment you donned those rings, your fates are linked to each other. By the power of a spell so simple it cannot be broken or countered, when one of you dies, so does the other."

The Queen didn't like that at all, and even the King showed a small frown wrinkle on his forehead, as if contemplating something he had not previously considered. That was my signal to clarify things for him . . . that there was an implication to the rings that I hadn't mentioned to him.

"This is not intended as a 'one-sided' gift, for just as Queen Hemlock must now protect the health and well-being of her king, so must King Rodrick defend his queen against all dangers ... a// dangers."

The King was on his feet now, eyes flashing.

"What is that supposed to mean. Lord Magician?"

As adept as I was at becoming at courtly speech, there were things which I felt were best said in the vernacular.

"It means if you or anybody else kills her, say, on your orders, then, you're dead. Now SIT DOWN AND

LISTEN!!!"

All the anger and frustration I had felt since figuring

out the King was trying to double-cross me, but had been too busy to express, found its vent in that outburst.

It worked. The King sank back into his chair, pale and

slightly shaken.

I wasn't done, though. I had been through a lot, and

a few words weren't enough to settle my mind.

"Since I accepted this assignment, I've heard nothing but how ruthless and ambitious Queen Hemlock is. Well, that may be true, BUT SHE ISN'T GETTING

99

ANY PRIZE EITHER! Right now. King Rodrick, I have more respect for her than I have for you. She didn't abandon her kingdom in the middle of a crisis."

I began to pace back and forth before the thrones as I warmed to my topic.

"Everybody talks about 'our duty to the throne.' It's the guiding directive in the walk-a-day life of commoners. What never gets mentioned is 'the throne's duty to the people.' "

I paused and pointed directly at the King.

"I sat in that chair for a while. It's a lot of fun, deciding people's lives for them. Power is heady, and the fringe benefits are great! All that bowing and scraping, not to mention one heck of a wardrobe. Still, it's a job like any other, and with any job you sometimes have to do things you don't like. Badaxe doesn't just parade and review his troops, he has to train them and lead them into battle . . . you know, as in 'I could get killed

out here' battle. Grimble spends ungodly hours poring over those numbers of his for the privilege of standing at your side.

"Any job has its pluses and minuses, and if the minuses outweigh the pluses, you screw up your courage and quit... unless, of course, you're King Rodrick. Then, instead of abdicating and turning the pluses and minuses over to someone else, you stick someone else with doing the job in your name and sneak out a back door. Maybe that's how people do their jobs where you were raised, but I think it's conduct a peasant would be ashamed of."

I faced them, hands defiantly on my hips.
"Well, I've done my job. The kingdom has been protected from the immediate threat. With any luck, you two will learn to work together. I trust King Rodrick can dilute the queen's ambition. I only hope that Queen

100

Hemlock's fiery spirit can put a little more spine and courage into the King."

This time it was Queen Hemlock who was on her feet.
"Are you going to let him talk to you like that. Roddie? You're the king. Nobody pushes a king around."
"Guards!" Rodrick said tightly. "Seize that man."
It had worked! King and Queen were united against a common foe ... me! Now all I had to do was survive it.

One more mind pass, and my comrades stood exposed as the outworlders they were.

Queen Hemlock, unaccustomed to my dealings with demons, dropped into her seat with a small gasp. The King simply scowled as he realized the real reason for

the presence of my friends.

"Your Majesties," Badaxe said, stepping forward. "I am sworn to protect the throne and would willingly lay

down my life in your defense. I do not see a physical threat here, however. If anything, it occurs to me both throne and kingdom would be strengthened if the Great Skeeve's words were heard and heeded."

"I am not a fighting man," Grimble said, joining Badaxe, "so my duty here is passive. I must add, though, that I also feel the Lord Magician's words have merit and should be said to every ruler."

His eyes narrowed and he turned to face me.

"I challenge, though, whether they should be said by a retainer to the court. One of our first duties is to show respect to the throne, in word and manner."

"That much we agree on, Grimble," Badaxe nodded, adding his glare to the many focused on me.

"Strange as it may sound," I said, "I agree, too. For that reason, I am hereby tendering my resignation as Court Magician of Possiltum. The kingdom is now secure militarily and financially, and in my opinion there is no point in it bearing the expense of a full-time

101

magician ... especially one who has been insolent to the throne. There is no need to discuss severance pay. The King's reward for my last assignment, coupled with the monies I have already received from the Exchequer, will serve my needs adequately. I will simply gather my things and depart."

I saw Grimble blanch slightly when he realized that I would not be returning his bribe. I had faith in his ability to hide anything in his stacks of numbered sheets, though.

With only the slightest of nods to the throne, I gathered my entourage with my eyes and left.

Everything had gone perfectly. I couldn't have asked for the proceedings to have turned out better. As such, I was puzzled as to why I was sweat-drenched and shaking like a leaf by the time I reached my own quarters.

Chapter Fourteen:

"Some farewells are easier than others."

—P. MARLOWE

"So, where do you go from here?" Tananda asked.

She and Chumly were helping me pack. We had all agreed that having incurred the combined wrath of the King and Queen, it would be wisest to delay my departure as little as possible. Massha was off seeing to deep and Buttercup as well as saying her goodbyes to Badaxe.

"I don't really know," I admitted. "I was serious when I said I had accumulated enough wealth for a while. I'll probably hole up someplace and practice my magic for a while . . . maybe at that inn Aahz and I used to use as a home base."

"I say, why don't you tag along with little sister and me?" Chumly suggested. "We usually operate out of the Bazaar at Deva. It wouldn't be a bad place for you to keep your hand in, magik-wise."

It flashed through my mind that the Mob must have started its infiltration of the Bazaar by now. It also occurred to me that, in the pre-wedding rush, I hadn't told Tananda or Chumly about that particular portion of the caper. Having remembered, I found myself reluctant to admit my responsibility for what they'd find on their return.

103

104

"I dunno, Chumly," I hedged. "You two travel pretty light. I've got so much stuff, I'd probably be better off settling down somewhere permanent."

It was a pretty weak argument, but the troll seemed to accept it... maybe because he could see that mountain

of gear we were accumulating, trying to clear my quarters.

"Well, think it over. We'd be glad to have you.

You're not a bad sort to have around in a tight spot."

"I'll say." Tananda agreed with a laugh. "Where did you find those rings, anyway?"

"Bought them from a street vendor at the Bazaar."

"On Deva?" Chumly said with a frown. "Two spelled rings like that must have set you back a pretty penny. Are you sure you have enough money left?"

Now it was my turn to laugh.

"First of all, they aren't spelled. That was just a bluff I was running on their royal majesties. The rings are plain junk jewelry ... and I got them for free."

"Free?"

Now Tananda was frowning.

"Nobody gets anything for free at the Bazaar."

"No, really. They were free . . . well, the vendor did get my permission to say that I use his wares, but that's the same as free, isn't it? I mean, I didn't pay him any money."

As I spoke, I found myself suddenly uncertain of my "good deal." One of my earliest lessons about dealing with Deveels was "If you think you've made a good deal with a Deveel, first count your fingers, then your limbs, then your relatives...."

"Permission to use your name?" Tananda echoed. "For two lousy rings? No percentage or anything? Didn't Aahz ever teach you about endorsements?"

There was a soft BAMPH in the air.

"Is someone taking my name in vain?"

105

And Aahz was there, every green scaly inch of him, making his entrance as casually as if he had just stepped out.

Of the three of us, I was the first to recover from my surprise. Well, at least I found my voice.

"Aahz!"

"Hi, kid. Miss me?"

"But, Aahz!"

I didn't know if I should laugh or cry. What I really wanted to do was embrace him and never let go. Of course, now that he was back, I would do no such thing. I mean, our relationship had never been big in the emotional displays department.

"What's the matter with everybody?" my mentor demanded. "You all act like you never expected to see me again."

"We... Aahz!I..."

"We didn't," Tananda said flatly, saving me from making an even bigger fool of myself.

"What little sister means," Chumly put in, "is that it was our belief that your nephew, Rupert, had no intention of letting you returnYrom Perv."

Aahz gave a derisive snort.

"Rupert? That upstart? Don't tell me anybody takes him seriously."

"Well, maybe not if "your powers were in full force," Tananda said, "but as things are..."

"Rupert?" Aahz repeated. "You two have known me a long time, right? Then you should get it through your heads that nobody holds me against my will."

Somehow that quote sounded familiar. Still, I was so glad to have Aahz back, I would have agreed to anything just then.

"Yeah!" I chimed in eagerly. "This is Aahz! Nobody pushes him around."

"There!" my mentor grinned. "As much as I hate to

106

agree with a mere apprentice, the kid knows what he's talking about... this time."

Chumly and Tananda looked at each other with that special gaze that brother and sister use to communicate

non-verbally.

"You know, big brother," Tananda said, "this

mutual admiration society is getting a bit much for my stomach. How about you?"

"Ectually," the troll responded. "I wasn't hearing all that much mutual admiration. Somehow the phrase 'mere apprentice' sticks in my mind."

"Oh, come on, you two," Aahz waved. "Get real, huh? I mean, we all like the kid, but we also know he's a trouble magnet. I've never met anyone who needs looking after as badly as he does. Speaking of which ..."

He turned his yellow eyes on me with that speculative look of his.

"... I notice you're both here . . . and I definitely heard my name as I phased in. What I need more than fond 'hellos' is a quick update as to exactly what kind of

a mess we have to bail the Great Skeeve out of this time."

I braced myself for a quick but loud lesson about

"endorsements," whatever that was, but the troll surprised me.

"No mess," he said, leaning back casually. "Little sister and I just dropped by for a visit. In fact, we were just getting ready to leave."

"Really?" my mentor sounded both surprised and suspicious. "Just a visit? No trouble?"

"Well, there was a little trouble," Tananda admitted. "Something to do with the King...."

"I knew it!" Aahz chortled, rubbing his hands together.

"... But Skeeve here handled it himself," she fin-

107

ished pointedly. "Currently, there are no problems at all."

"Oh."

Strangely, Aahz seemed a bit disappointed.

"Well, I guess I owe you two some thanks, then. I really appreciate your watching over Skeeve here while I was gone. He can..."

"I don't think you're listening, Aahz," Chumly said, looking at the ceiling. "Skeeve handled the trouble. We just watched."

"Oh, we would have pitched in if things got tight," Tananda supplied. "You know, the way we do for you, Aahz. As it turned out, we weren't needed. Your 'mere apprentice' was more than equal to the task."

"Finished the job rather neatly, you know?" the troll added. "In fact, I'm hard pressed to recall when I've seen a nasty situation dealt with as smoothly or with as little fuss."

"All right, all right," Aahz grimaced. "I get the message. You can fill me in on the details later. Right now, the kid and I have some big things to discuss . . . and I mean big."

"Like what?" I frowned.

"Well, I've been giving it a lot of thought, and I figure it's about time we left Possiltum and moved on."
"Urn. Aahz?" I said.

"I know, I know," he waved. "You think you need practice. You do, but you've come a long way. This whole thing with the trouble you handled only proves my point. You're ready to..."

"Aahz?"

"All right. I know you've got friends and duties here, but eventually you have to leave the nest. You'll just have to trust my judgment and experience to know when the time is right to..."

108

"I've already quit!"

Aahz stopped in midsentence and stared at me.
"You have?" he blinked.

I nodded and pointed at the pile of gear we had been packing. He studied it for a moment as if he didn't believe what he was seeing.

"Oh," he said at last. "Oh well, in that case, I'll just duck over to talk to Grimble and discuss your severance pay. He's a tight-fisted bird, but if I can't shake five hundred out of him, I'll know the reason why."
"I know the reason why," I said carefully.
Aahz rolled his eyes.

"Look, kid. This is my field of expertise, remember? If you go into a bargaining session aiming low, they'll walk all over you. You've got to..."
"I've already negotiated for a thousand!"
This time, Aahz's "freeze" was longer . . . and he didn't look at me.
"A thousand?" he said finally. "In gold?"
"Plus a hefty bonus from the King himself," Tananda supplied helpfully.

"We've been trying to tell you, Aahz old boy," Chumly smiled. "Skeeve here has been doing just fine without you."
"I see."

Aahz turned away and stared silently out the window. I'll admit to being a bit disappointed. I mean, maybe I hadn't done a first-rate job, but a little bit of congratulations would have been nice. The way my mentor was acting, you'd think he....

Then it hit me. Like a runaway war-chariot it hit me. Aahz was jealous! More than that, he was hurt!

I could see it now with crystal clarity. Up until now I had been blinded by Aahz's arrogant self-confidence, but suddenly the veil was parted.
Aahz's escape from Perv wasn't nearly as easy as he

bal, or magikal—some hard feelings, and some heavy promises made or broken. He had forced his way back to Klah with one thing on his mind: his apprentice . . . his favorite apprentice, was in trouble. Upon returning, what was his reception? Not only was I not in trouble, for all appearances, I was doing better without him!

Tananda and Chumly were still at it, merrily chattering back and forth about how great I was. While I appreciated their support, I wished desperately I could think of a way of getting it through to them that what they were really doing was twisting a knife in Aahz.

"Umm . . . Aahz?" I interrupted. "When you've got a minute, there are a few things I need your advice on."

"Like what?" came the muffled response. "From the sound of things, you don't need anybody, much less a teacher with no powers of his own."

Tananda caught it immediately. Her gadfly manner dropped away like a mask and she signaled desperately to Chumly. The troll was not insensitive, though. His reaction was to catch my eye with a pleading gaze.

It was up to me. Terrific.

"Well, like... urn."

And Massha exploded into the room.

"Everything's ready downstairs, hot stuff, and . . . oh! Hi there, green and scaly. Thought you were gone for good."

Aahz spun around, his eyes wide.

"Massha?" he stammered. "What are you doing here?"

"Didn't the man of the hour here tell you?" she smiled, batting her expansive eyelashes. "I'm his new apprentice."

"Apprentice?" Aahz echoed, his old fire creeping into his voice.

"Um . . . that's one of the things I wanted to talk to

110

you about, Aahz," I smiled meekly.

"Apprentice?" he repeated, as if he hadn't heard.

"Kid, you and I have got to talk ... NOW!"

"Okay, Aahz. As soon as I..."

"Now!"

Yep. Aahz was back.

"Urn, if you'll excuse us, folks, Aahz and I have to..."

For the second time, there was a BAMPH in the room.

This one was louder, which was understandable, as there were more beings involved. Specifically, there were now four Deveels standing in the room . . . and they didn't look happy.

"We seek the Great Skeeve," one of them boomed.

My heart sank. Could my involvement with the Mob have been discovered so fast?

"Who's asking?"

Aahz casually placed his bulk between me and the intruders. Tananda and Chumly were also on their feet, and Massha was edging sideways to get a clear field of fire. Terrific. All I needed to complete my day was to have my friends soap up the trouble I had started.

"We are here representing the merchants of the Bazaar on the Deva, seeking an audience with the Great Skeeve."

"About what?" my mentor challenged.

The Deveel fixed him with an icy glare.

"We seek the Great Skeeve, not idle chit-chat with a Pervert."

"Well, this particular Per-vert happens to be the Great Skeeve's business manager, and he doesn't waste his time with Deveels unless/clear them."

I almost said something, but changed my mind. Concerned or not, this was not the time to take a conversation away from Aahz.

111

The Deveel hesitated, then shrugged.

"There is a new difficult at the Bazaar," he said. "A group of organized criminals has gained access to our dimension threatening to disrupt the normal flow of business unless they are paid a percentage of our profits."

Tananda and Chumly exchanged glances, while Massha raised an eyebrow at me. I studied the ceiling with extreme care. Aahz alone was unruffled.

"Tough. So what does that have to do with the Great Skeeve?" he demanded.

Anticipating the answer, I tried to decide whether I should fight or run.

"Isn't it obvious?" the Deveel frowned. "We wish to retain his services to combat this threat. From what we can tell, he's the only magician around up to the job."

That one stopped me. Of all the strange turns events could have taken, this had to be the most unanticipated and ... well, bizarre!

"I see," Aahz murmured, a nasty gleam in his eye. "You realize, of course, that the Great Skeeve's time is valuable and that such a massive undertaking would require equally massive remuneration?"

Every alarm in my system went off.

"Urn . . . Aahz?"

"Shut up, k . . . I mean, be patient. Master Skeeve. This matter should be settled in a moment."

I couldn't watch.

Instead, / went to the window and stared out. Listening over my shoulder, I heard Aahz name an astronomical figure, and realized there might be a way out of this yet. If Aahz was greedy enough, and the Deveels stingy enough...

"Done!" said the spokesman.

". . . Of course, that's only an advance," Aahz

112

pressed. "A full rendering will have to wait until the job is completed."

"Done," came the reply.

"... And that is the fee only. Expenses will be reimbursed separately."

"Done! The advance will be awaiting your arrival.

Anything else?"

In tribute to the Deveel's generosity, Aahz was unable to think of any other considerations to gouge out of

them.

There was another BAMPH, and the delegation was

gone.

"How about that!" Aahz crowed. "I finally put one

over on the Deveels!"

"What's that thing you always say about anyone who thinks they've gotten a good deal from a Deveel, Aahz?" Tananda asked sweetly.

"Later," my mentor ordered. "Right now we've got to get our things together and pop over to the Bazaar to scout the opposition."

"We already know what the opposition is."

"How's that, kid?"

I turned to face him.

"The opposition is the Mob. You remember, the organized crime group that was sponsoring Big Julie's

army?"

A frown crossed Aahz's face as he regarded me

closely,

"And how did you come by that little tidbit of information, if I may ask?"

I regarded him right back.

"That's the other little thing I wanted your advice on."

Chapter Fifteen:

"In a war against organized crime, survived is a proposition."

—M. BOLAN

"Now let me see if I've got this right," Aahz scowled, pacing back and forth in front of our worried gazes.

"What we've got to do is keep the Mob from taking over the Bazaar, without letting them know we're opposing them or the Deveels know we were the ones who loosed the Mob on the Bazaar in the first place. Right?"

"You can do it, Aahz," I urged eagerly.

This time, it required no false enthusiasm on my part. While I had done an adequate job operating on my own, when it came to premeditated deviousness, I was quick to acknowledge my master. There might be someone out there in the multitude of dimensions better than Aahz at finding under-handed ways out of dilemmas, but I haven't met them yet.

"Of course I can do it," my mentor responded with a confident wink. "I just want everyone to admit it isn't going to be easy. All this talk about the Great Skeeve has made me a little insecure."

"A little?" Tananda smirked.

"I think it's a bit of all right," Chumly said, nudging

113

114

his sister with an elbow. "I've always heard how formidable Aahz is when he swings into action. I, for one, am dying to see him handle this rather sticky situation all by himself."

Aahz's shoulders sagged slightly as he heaved a small

sigh.

"Whoa! Stop! Perhaps in my enthusiasm I over-spoke. What I meant to say is that my slimy but agile mind can provide a plan to pull off this assignment. Of course, the execution of said plan will rely upon abilities and goodwill of my worthy colleagues. Is that better, Chumly?"

"Quite," the troll nodded.

"Now that that's settled," Gus interrupted impatiently, "can we get on with it? This is my place of business, you know, and the longer I keep the place closed, the more money I lose."

For those of you who missed the earlier references, Gus is a gargoyle. He is also the owner/proprietor of the

Yellow Crescent Inn, the Bazaar's leading fast-food establishment and our current field headquarters. Like Chumly and Tananda, he's helped me out of a couple scrapes in the past and, as soon as he heard about our current crisis, volunteered again. Like anyone who earns their living at the Bazaar, however, he habitually keeps one eye on the cash register. Even though he had closed his doors to give us a base of operations for the upcoming campaign, there was still a reflexive bristling over missed profits.

An idea struck me.

"Relax, Gus," I ordered. "Come up with a daily figure for your normal trade, bump it for a decent profit, and we'll reimburse you when this thing's over."

"What!" my mentor screeched, losing momentary control. "Are you out of your mind, kid? Who do you

115

think is paying for this, anyway?"

"The merchants of Deva," I answered calmly. "We're on an expense account, remember? I think renting a place while we're on assignment isn't an unreasonable expense, do you?"

"Oh. Right. Sorry, Gus. Old reflexes."

Aahz's confusion was momentary. Then his eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"In fact, if we put all of you on retainer, your help will fall under the heading of 'consultant fees' and never come near our own profits. I like it."

"Before you get too carried away," Tananda put in quickly, "I think big brother and I would rather work for a piece of the action than on a flat fee."

"But, honey," Massha blinked, "You haven't even heard his plan yet. What makes you think a percentage

will net you more than a fee? . . . just between us girls?"

"Just between us girls," Tananda winked, "you've never worked with Aahz before. I have, and while he may not be the pleasantest being to team with, I have unshakeable faith in his profit margins."

"Now that we're on the subject," Aahz said, staring hard at Massha, "we never have worked together before, so let's get the rules straight early on. I've got my own style, see, and it usually doesn't allow much time for 'please' and 'thank you' and explanations. As long as you do what you're told, when you're told, we'll get along fine. Right?"

"Wrong!"

My reply popped out before Massha could form her own response. I was vaguely aware that the room had gotten very quiet, but most of my attention was on Aahz as he slowly cranked his head around to lock gazes with me.

"Now look, kid...." he began dangerously.

116

"No, you look, Aahz," I exploded. "I may be your apprentice, but Massha is mine. Now if she wants to dump that agreement and sign on with you, fine and dandy. But until she does, she's my student and my responsibility. If you think she can help, then you suggest it to me and / decide whether she's up to it. There's one lesson you've drummed into my head over and over, mentor mine, whether you meant to or not. Nobody leans on your apprentice but you . . . nobody! If you didn't want to teach that lesson, then maybe you'd better be more careful with the example you set the next time you take on an apprentice."

"I see," Aahz murmured softly. "Getting pretty big for your britches, aren't you, kid?"

"Not really. I'm very much aware of how little I

know, thank you. But this is my assignment, or at least it was accepted in my name, and I mean to give it my best shot . . . however inadequate that might be. Now for that assignment, I need your help, Aahz . . . heck, I'll always probably need your help. You're my teacher and I've got a lot to learn. But, I'm not going to roll over and die without it. If getting your help means turning my assignment and my apprentice over to you, then forget it. I'll just have to try to handle things without you."

"You'll get your brains beat out."

"Maybe. I didn't say I'd win, just that I'd try my best. You bring out my best, Aahz. You push me into things that scare me, but so far I've muddled through somehow. I need your help, but I don't have to have it. Even if you don't want to admit it to me, I think you should admit it to yourself."

With that, we both lapsed into silence.

Me, I couldn't think of anything else to say. Up until now, I had been carried along by my anger and Aahz's responses. All of a sudden, my mentor wasn't respond-

117

ing. Instead, he stared at me with expressionless yellow eyes, not saying a thing.

It was more than a little unnerving. If there is one characteristic of Aahz's I could always count on, it was that he was expressive. Whether with facial expression, gestures, grunts, or verbal explosions, my mentor usually let everyone in the near vicinity know what he felt or thought about any event or opinion expressed. Right now, though, I didn't know if he was about to explode or just walk away.

I began having regrets over instigating this confrontation. Then I toughened up. What I had said was right and needed to be said. It flashed across my mind that I could lose Aahz over this argument. My resolve

wavered. Right or not, I could have said it better . . . gentler. At least I could have picked a time when all our friends weren't watching and listening. Maybe....

Aahz turned away abruptly, shifting his stance to face Tananda and Chumly.

"Now I'm ready to believe you two," he announced. "The kid here really did handle that mess on Klah all by himself, didn't he?"

"That's what we've been trying to tell you, old boy," the troll winked. "Your apprentice is growing up, and seems to us more than capable of standing on his own two feet lately."

"Yeah, I noticed."

He looked at me again, and this time his eyes were expressive. I didn't recognize the expression, but at least there was one.

"Kid . . . Skeeve," he said. "If I've ever wondered why I bothered taking you under my wing, you just gave me the answer. Thanks."

"Um . . . Thanks. I mean, you're welcome. No. I mean..."

As always, I was very glib in the face of the unex-

118

peeled. I had gotten used to weathering Aahz's tirades, but this I didn't know how to handle. Fortunately my pet came to my rescue.

"Gleep?" he queried, shaking his head in through the door.

". . . But if you take anything I've showed you, I mean spell one, and teach it to that dragon," my mentor roared, "you and I are going to go a couple rounds. Do we understand each other, apprentice?"

"Yes, Aahz."

Actually, I didn't. Still, this didn't seem like the time to call for a clarification.

"Butt out, Gleep," I ordered. "Go play with Buttercup or something."

"Gleep!" and my dragon's head was gone as fast as it had appeared.

"Say, hot stuff," Massha drawled. "As much as I appreciate your standing up for me, I'm kinda curious to hear what Big Green has for a plan."

"Right!" I nodded, glad to be off the hot seat. "Sorry, Aahz, I didn't mean to interrupt. What's the plan?"

"Well, first," Aahz said, taking his accustomed place as center of attention once more, "I've got a question for Gus. What's the Mob been doing so far to move in?"

"Judging from what I heard," the gargoyle responded, "a bunch of them move in on a merchant and offer to sell him some 'insurance.' You know, 'pay us so much of your revenue and nothing happens to your business.' If anyone's slow to sign up, they arrange a small demonstration of what could go wrong: some 'accidental' breaking of stock or a couple plug-uglies standing outside hassling customers. So far it's been effective. Deveels don't like to lose business."

119

"Good," my mentor grinned, showing every last one of his numerous pointed teeth. "Then we can beat them."

"How?"

If nothing else, I've gotten quite good at feeding Aahz straight lines.

"Easy. Just ask yourselves this: If you were a Deveel and paid the Mob to protect your business, and things started going wrong anyway, what would you do?"

"I can answer that one," Massha said. "I'd either demand better protection, scream for my money back, or both."

"I don't get it," I frowned. "What's going to happen to a Mob-protected business?"

"We are," Aahz grinned.

"What our strategist is trying to say," Chumly supplied, "is that the best defense is a good offense. Not terribly original, but effective nonetheless."

"You're darn right it's effective," my mentor exclaimed. "Instead of us defending against the Mob, we're going to start a crime wave right here at the Bazaar. Then let's see how good the Mob is at defending against us!"

Chapter Sixteen:

"It's always easier to destroy than to create."

—ANY GENERAL, ANY ARMY, ANY AGE.

"HEY, Guido! How's it going?"

The big bodyguard spun around, scanning the crowd to see who had hailed him by name. When he saw me, his face brightened.

"Mister Skeeve!"

"Never expected to run into you here!" I lied.

From Gus's description, I had known that both Guido and his cousin Nunzio were part of the Mob's contingent at the Bazaar. This "chance meeting" was the result of nearly half a day's worth of searching and following rumors.

"What are you doing here?" he asked confidentially.
"Shopping for a few little items to wow 'em with back at Possiltum?"

"Just taking a bit of a vacation. That new queen and I don't get along so well. I thought things might ease up if I disappeared for a while."

"Too bad. If you was shoppin', I could line you up with some 'special deals,' if you know what I mean."

"You guys are really moving in, then?" I marveled.

122

123

"How is it going? Any problems?"

"Naw," the bodyguard bragged, puffing out his chest. "You was right. These Deveels are like shopkeepers anywhere. Lean on 'em a little and they fall in line."

"Don't tell me you're handling this all by yourself! I mean I know you're good, but..."

"Are you kiddin'? I'm an executive now . . . well, at least a team leader. Both Nunzio and me have a dozen men to order around, courtesy of our 'extensive knowledge of the Bazaar.' Pretty good, huh?"

"You mean you're running the whole operation?"

"That's Shai-ster's job. Me and Nunzio report to him, but it's us gives the orders to the boys."

I looked around expectantly.

"Is your team around? I'd like to meet them."

"Naw. We worked this area a couple days ago. I'm on my way to meet 'em and give out today's assignments. We're going after the area by the livestock pens today." '

"How about Nunzio's team?"

"They're about three hours west of here. You know, this is a really big place!"

I put on my most disappointed face.

"Too bad, I would have liked to have met some of the ones who do the real work."

"Tell ya' what," Guido exclaimed, "why don't you drop by Fat's Spaghetti Parlor sometimes? That's where we're all hanging out. If we're not there, they can tell you where we are."

"I'll do that. Well, don't work too hard . . . and be careful. These guys can be meaner than they look."

"Piece of cake," he laughed as he headed off.

I was still waving merrily at his retreating figure as the rest of my "gang" faded out of the crowd around me.

"Did you get all that?" I asked out of the corner of my mouth.

"Two teams, neither one in this area. Shai-ster's running the show and therefore holding the bag," Tananda recited. "This area is both clear and under protection."

"Fat's Spaghetti Parlor is their headquarters, which is where we can find Shai-ster," Chumly completed. "Anything else?"

"Yeah," Aahz grinned. "Skeeve has a standing invite to drop by, and when he does, they're ready to tell him which team is working what area that day. Nice work."

"Lucky," I admitted with no embarrassment. "Well, shall we start?"

"Right," Aahz nodded. "Just like we planned, Tannya and Chumly are a team. Gus, you're with me. Skeeve and Massha, you start here. We all move out in different directions and space our hits so there's no pattern. Okay?"

"One more thing," I added. "Keep an eye on your disguises. I'm not sure of the exact range I can hold that spell at. If your disguise starts to fade, change direction to parallel mine."

"We meet back at the Yellow Crescent Inn," Gus finished. "And all of you watch your backs. I don't stock that much first aid gear."

"Good thought," I said. "Okay. Enough talk. Let's scatter and start giving the Mob a headache."

The other two teams had melted into the crowd of shoppers before I had even turned to Massha.

"Well, anything catch your eye for us to have a go at?"

"You know. you're starting to sound a bit like that troll."

That sounded a bit more abrupt than was Massha's normal style. I studied her curiously.

124

"Something bothering you?"

"Just a little nervous, I guess," she admitted. "Has it occurred to you all this plan has a major flaw? That to implement it potentially means getting the entire Bazaar after us, as well as the Mob?"

"Yes, it has."

"Doesn't it scare you?"

"Yes, it does."

"Well, how do you handle it?"

"By thinking about it as little possible," I said flatly. "Look, apprentice, aside from doing shtick in court for the amusement of the masses, this profession of ours is pretty dangerous. If we start dwelling on everything that can go wrong in the future, we'll either never move or blunder headlong into the present because our minds aren't on what we're doing right now. I try to be aware of the potential danger of a situation, but I don't worry about trouble until it happens. It's a little shaky, but it's worked so far."

"If you say so," she sighed. "Oh, well, gear me up and let's get started."

With a pass of my mind, I altered her features. Instead of being a massive woman, she was now a massive man . . . sort of. I had been experimenting with color lately, so I made her purple with reddish sideburns that ran all the way down her arms to her knuckles. Add some claw-like horns at the points of the ears and rough-textured, leathery skin on the face and hands, and you had a being/wouldn't want to mess with.

"Interesting," Massha grimaced, surveying what she could see of herself. "Did you make this up yourself, or is there a nasty dimension I haven't visited yet?"

"My own creation," I admitted. "The reputation you're going to build I wouldn't wish on any dimension I know of. Call it a Hoozit from the dimension Hoo."

125

"Who?"

"You've got it."

She rolled her eyes in exasperation.

"Hot stuff, do me a favor and only teach me magik, okay? Keep your sense of humor for yourself. I've already got enough enemies."

"We still need a target," I said, slightly hurt.

"How about that one? It looks breakable."

I looked where she was pointing and nodded.

"Good enough. Give me a twenty count head start. If they're not protected, I'll be back out. If you don't see me in twenty, they're fair game. Do your worst."

"You know," she smiled rubbing her hands together, "this could be fun."

"Just remember that I'm in there before you decide exactly what today's 'worst' is."

The display she had chosen was a small, three-sided tent with a striped top. It was lined with shelves that were crowded with an array of stoppered bottles of all sizes and colors. As I entered, I noticed there was something in each of the bottles—smoky things that shifted as if they were alive.

"May I help you, sahr?" The Deveel proprietor asked, baring what he doubtless thought was a winning smile.

"Just browsing," I yawned. "Actually, I'm seeking refuge from gossip. All anyone can talk about is this pack of ruffians that's selling insurance."

The Deveel's face darkened and he spat out the door.

"Insurance! Extortion I call it. They ruined two of my treasures before I could stop them long enough to subscribe to their services. It was a dark day when they first appeared at the Bazaar."

"Yes, yes. Believe me, I've heard it before."

Having established that this shop was indeed under

126

the protection of the Mob, I turned my attention to the

displays.

With studied nonchalance, I plucked up a small bottle, no more than a hand's-width high, and peered at the contents. Murky movement and a vague sparkle met my gaze.

"Be careful," the proprietor cautioned. "Once a Djin is released, it can only be controlled if you address it by name."

"A Djin?"

The Deveel swept me with a speculative gaze. Since I wasn't doing the heavy work, I wasn't in disguise and looked like ... well, me.

"I believe in Klah, they're referred to as Genies."

"Oh. You have quite a collection here."

The Deveel preened at the praise.

"Do not be fooled by the extent of my poor shop's selection, young sahr. They are extremely rare. I personally combed the far reaches of every dimension . . . at great personal expense, I might add ... to find these few specimens worthy of...."

I had been wondering when Massha was going to make her entrance. Well, she made it. Hoo-boy, did she make it. Right through the side of the tent.

With an almost musical chorus, the stand along the wall went over, dumping the bottles onto the floor. The released Djin rose in a cloud and poured out the open tent side, shrieking with inhuman joy as they went.

The Deveel was understandably upset.

"You idiot!" he shrieked. "What are you doing?"

"Pretty weak shelves," Massha muttered in a gravelly-bass voice.

"Weak shelves?"

"Sure. I mean, all I did was this ..."

She shoved one of the remaining two shelves, which

127

toppled obligingly into the last display.

This time the Djin didn't even bother using the door. They streaked skyward, taking the top of the tent with them as they screamed their way to freedom.

"My stock! My tent! Who's going to pay for this?"

"That's Hoozit," Massha retorted, "and I'm certainly not going to pay. I don't have any money."

"No money?" the proprietor gasped.

"No. I just came in here to get out of the rain."

"Rain? Rain? But it isn't raining!"

"It isn't?" my apprentice blinked. "Then, good-bye."

With that she ambled off, making a hole in yet another tent side as she went.

The Deveel sank down in the shattered remains of his display and cradled his face in his hands.

"I'm ruined!" he moaned. "Ruined!"

"Excuse me for asking," I said. "But why didn't you call out their names and get them under control?"

"Call out their names? I can't remember the name of every Djin I collect. I have to look them up each time I sell one."

"Well, at least that problem's behind you."

That started him off again.

"Ruined!" he repeated needlessly. "What am I going to do?"

"I really don't know why you're so upset," I observed. "Weren't you just saying that you were insured?"

"Insured?"

The Deveel's head came up slowly.

"Certainly. You're paying to be sure things like this don't happen, aren't you? Well, it happened. It seems to me whoever's protecting your shop owes you an explanation, not to mention quite a bit of money."

128

"That's right!" the proprietor was smiling now. "Mor^the latter than the former, but you're right!"

I had him going on now. All that was left to be done was the coup de grace.

"Tell you what. Just so your day won't be a total washout, I'll take this one. Now you won't have to stay open with just one Djin in stock."

I flipped him the smallest coin in my pouch. True to his heritage, he was sneering even as he plucked it out of the air.

"You can't be serious," he said. "This? For a Djin? That doesn't even cover the cost of the bottle!"

"Oh come, come, my good man," I argued. "We're both men of the world ... or dimensions. We both know that's clear profit."

"It is?" he frowned.

"Of course," I said, gesturing at the broken glass on the floor. "No one can tell how many bottles were just broken. I know you'll just include this one on the list of lost-stock and collect in full from your insurance in addition to what I just gave you. In fact, you could

probably add five or six to the total if you were really feeling greedy."

"That's true," the Deveel murmured thoughtfully. "Hey, thanks! This might not turn out so bad after all."

"Don't mention it," I shrugged, studying the small bottle in my hand. "Now that we're in agreement on the price, though, could you look up the name of my Djin?"

"I don't have to. That one's new enough that I can remember. It's name is Calvin."

"Calvin?"

"Hey, don't laugh. It's the latest thing in Djins."

Chapter Seventeen:

The best laid plans often go fowl."

—WILE E. COYOTE

"WELL, except for that, how are things going?"

"Except for that?" Shai-ster echoed incredulously. "Except for that? Except for that things are going rotten. This whole project is a disaster."

"Gee, that's tough," I said, with studied tones of sympathy.

I had gotten to be almost a permanent fixture here at Fat's Spaghetti Palace. Every night I dropped by to check the troops' progress . . . theirs and mine.

It was nice to be able to track the effectiveness of your activities by listening to the enemy gripe about them. It was even nicer to be able to plan your next move by listening to counter-attacks in the discussion stage.

"I still don't get it," Guido protested, gulping down another enormous fork-full of spaghetti. "Everything was goin' terrific at first. No trouble at all. Then

BOOM, it hits the fan, know what I mean?"

"Yeah! It was like someone was deliberately workin' to put us out of business."

That last was from cousin Nunzio. For the longest

129

130

^

time I thought he was physically unable to talk. Once he

got used to having me around, though, he opened up a little. In actuality, Nunzio was shy, a fact which was magnified by his squeaky little voice which seemed out of place coming from a muscleman.

"I warned you that Devels can be a nasty lot," I said, eager to get the subject away from the possibility of organized resistance. "And if the shopkeepers are sneaky, it only stands to reason that the local criminal element would have to have a lot on the ball. Right, Guido?"

"That's right," the goon nodded vigorously, strands of spaghetti dangling from his mouth. "We criminal types can beat any honest citizen at anything. Say, did I ever tell you about the time Nunzio and me were..."

"Shut up, dummy!" Shai-ster snapped. "In case you haven't noticed, we're footing the bill for these local amateurs. We're getting our brains beat out financially, and it's up to you boys to catch up with the opposition and return the favor. ... physically."

"They're scared of us," Guido insisted. "Wherever we are, they aren't. If we can't find 'em, they can't be doin' that much damage."

"You know, brains never were your long suit, Guido," Shai-ster snarled. "Let me run this past you once real slow. So far, we've paid out six times as much as we've taken in. Add all our paychecks and expenses to that, and you might have a glimmer as to why the Big

Boys are unhappy."

"But we haven't been collecting very long. After we've expanded our clientele..."

"Well be paying claims on that many more businesses," Shai-ster finished grimly. "Don't give me that 'we'll make it up on volume' guff. Either an operation is

131

self-supporting and turning a profit from the beginning, or it's in trouble. And we're in trouble so deep, even if we could breathe through the tops of our heads we'd still be in trouble."

"Maybe if we got some more boys from back home. ..." Nunzio began.

Shai-ster slapped his hand down on the table, stopping his lieutenant short.

"No more overhead!" he shouted. "I'm having enough trouble explaining our profit/loss statement to the Big Boys without the bottom line getting any worse. Not only are we not going to get any more help, we're going to start trimming our expenses, and I mean right now. Tell the boys to ... what are you grinning at?"

This last was directed at me.

"Oh, nothing," I said innocently. "It's just that for a minute there you sounded just like someone I know back on Klah . . . name of Grimble."

"J.R. Grimble?" Shai-ster blinked.

Now it was my turn to be surprised.

"Why, yes. He's the Chancellor of the Exchequer back at Possiltum. Why, do you know him?"

"Sure. We went to school together. Chancellor of the Exchequer, huh? Not bad. If I had known he was working the court of Possiltum, I would have stuck around and said 'hi' when I was there."

Somehow, the thought of Shai-ster and Grimble knowing each other made me uneasy. There wasn't much chance of the two of them getting together and comparing notes, and even if they did, Grimble didn't know all that much about my modus operandi. Still, it served as a grim reminder that this was a very risky game I was playing, with some very dangerous people.

"I still think there's another gang out there some-

132

where," Nunzio growled. "There's too much going down for it to be independent operators."

"You're half right," Shai-ster corrected. "There's too much going down for it to be a gang. Nobody's into that many things... not even us!"

"You lost me there, Shai-ster," I said, genuinely curious.

The mobster favored me with a patronizing smile.

"That's right. As a magician, you don't know that much about how organized crime works. Let me try to explain. When the Mob decides to move in, we hit one specialty field at a time... you know, like protection or the numbers. Like that. Focusing our efforts yields a better saturation as well as market penetration."

"That makes sense," I nodded, not wanting to admit he had lost me again.

"Now you take a look at what's happening here. We're getting all sorts of claims; vandalism, shoplifting, armed robbery, even a couple cases of arson. It's too much of a mix to be the work of one group. We're dealing with a lot of small-time independents, and if we can make an example of a few of them, the others will decide there are easier pickings elsewhere."

In a way, I was glad to hear this. I owed Aahz one more back-pat. He was the one who had decided that the efforts of our team were too limited. To accelerate

our "crime wave," he had introduced the dubious practice of "insurance fraud" to Deva . . . and the Deveels were fast learners.

Is your stock moving too slow? Break it yourself and turn in a claim for vandalism. Trying to sell your shop, but nobody wants to buy, even at a discount? Torch the place and collect in full. Better still, want to fatten up your profit margin a little? Dummy up a few invoices and file a claim for "stolen goods." All profit, no cost.

133

The Deveels loved it. It let them make money and harass the Mob at the same time. No wonder Shai-ster's table was fast disappearing under a mountain of claims and protests.

It was terrific ... except for the part about making an example out of everyone they caught. I made a mental note to warn the team about being extra careful.

"If it's not a gang, and they aren't working against us," Nunzio scowled, "why is everything happening in our areas? My dad taught me to be suspicious of coincidences. He got killed by one."

"How do you know it's just happening in our area?" Shai-ster countered. "Maybe we picked a bad area of the Bazaar to start our operation. Maybe the whole Bazaar is a bad area. Maybe we should have been suspicious when Skeeve here told us there were no police. You get this much money floating around with no police, of course there'll be crooks around."

"So what are we supposed to do?" Guido snarled, plucking his napkin from under his chin and throwing it on the table. "My boys can't be two places at once. We can't watch over our current clients and sign on new accounts, too."

"That's right," Shai-ster agreed, "so here's what we're going to do. First, we split up the teams. Two-thirds of the boys patrol the areas we've got under protection. The others go after new clients. . .but we don't just take anybody. We investigate and ask questions.

We find out how much trouble a new area or a new shop has had before we take them as a client. Then we know who the bad risks are, and if we protect them at all, they pay double. Capish?"

Both Guido and Nunzio were thinking, and it was obvious the process hurt.

"I dunno," Nunzio squeaked at last. "Sumpin'

134

sounds kinda funny about that plan."

"Crime wouldn't pay if the government ran it," I murmured helpfully.

"What's that?" Shai-ster snapped.

"Oh, just something my teacher told me once." I shrugged.

"Hey! Skeeve's right," Guido exclaimed.

"What you're sayin' is that we're going to be policemen and insurance investigators."

"Well, I wouldn't use those words...."

" 'Well'nothin'. Weain'tgonnadoit!"

"Why not?"

"C'mon, Shai-ster. We're the bad guys. You know, crooks. What's it going to do to our reputation if it gets back to the Mob that we've turned into policemen?"

"They'll think we're valuable employees who are working hard to protect their investment."

"Yeah?" Guido frowned, unconvinced.

"Besides, it's only temporary," Shai-ster soothed. "Not only that, it's a smoke screen for what we'll really be doing."

"What's that?" I asked blandly.

Shai-ster shot a quick look around the restaurant, then leaned forward, lowering his voice.

"Well, I wasn't going to say anything, but remember that I was telling you about how the Mob focuses on one field at a time? The way I see it, maybe we picked the wrong field here at Deva. Maybe we shouldn't have tried the protection racket."

"So you're going to change fields?" I urged.

"Right," Shai-ster smiled. "We'll put the protection racket on slow-down mode for a while, and in the meantime start leaning on the bookies."

"Now you're talking," Guido crowed. "There's always good money to be made at gambling."

135

"Keep your voice down, you idiot. It's supposed to be a secret."

"So who's to hear?" Guido protested.

"How about them?"

Shai-ster jerked his thumb toward a table of four enormous beings, alternately stuffing their faces and laughing uproariously.

"Them? That's the Hutt brothers. They're in here about once a week. They're too busy with their own games to bother us."

"Games? Are they gamblers?"

"Naw ... well, except maybe Darwin. He's the leader of the pack. But he only gambles on businesses."

"Which one is he?"

"The thinnest one. I hear his fiancée has him on a diet. It's making him mean, but not dangerous to us."

Shai-ster turned back to our table.

"Well, keep your voice down anyway. How about it, Skeeve? The gambling, I mean. You've been here at the Bazaar before. Do you know any bookies we can get hold of?"

"Gee, the only one I know of for sure is the Geek," I said. "He's a pretty high-roller. If you boys are going to try to pull a fast one on him, though, don't tell him I was the one who singled him out."

Shai-ster gave me a broad wink.

"Gotcha. But anything we get from him, you're in for a percentage. You know, a finder's fee. We don't forget our friends."

"Gee, thanks," I managed, feeling more than a little guilty. "Well, I'd better be going. C'mon, Gleep."

"Gleep!" echoed my dragon, pulling his head up out of a tub of spaghetti at the sound of his name.

Fats had taken an instant liking to my pet, founded I suspect on Gleep's newfound capacity for the maggot-

136

like stuff barely hidden by blood-red sauce that was the parlor's mainstay.

I had never been able to screw up my courage enough to try spaghetti, but my dragon loved it. Knowing some of the dubious things, edible and in, living and non, that also met with Gleep's culinary approval, this did little toward encouraging me to expand my dietary horizons to include this particular dish. Still, as long as I had Gleep along, we were welcome at Fats, even though my pet was starting to develop a waddle reminiscent of the parlor's proprietor.

"Say, Skeeve. Where do you keep your dragon during the day?"

I glanced over to find Shai-ster studying my pet through narrowed, thoughtful eyes.

"Usually he's with me, but sometimes I leave him with a dragon-sitter. Why?"

"I just remembered an 'interruption of business' claim we had to pay the other day . . . had to pay! Heck, we're" still paying it. Anyway, this guy sells dragons, see, except for over a week now he hasn't sold a one. Usually sells about three a day and says since he paid us to be sure nothing happens to his business, we should make up the difference in his sales drop . . . and, you know, those things are expensive'."

"I know," I agreed, "but what does that have to do with Gleep?"

"Probably nothing. It's just that this guy swears that just before everything went to pot, some little dragon came by and talked to his dragons. Now they won't roar or blow fire or nothing. All they do is sleep and frolic . . . and who wants to buy a dragon that frolics, you know?"

"Talked to his dragons?" I asked uneasily.

137

For some reason, I had a sudden mental image of Gleep confronting Big Julie's dragon, a beast that dwarfed him in size, and winning.

"Well . . . they didn't exactly talk, but they did huddle up and put their heads together and made mumbly puffy noises at each other. Wouldn't let this guy near 'em until it was over. The only thing he's sure of is the little one, the one he says messed up his business, said something like 'Peep!' Said it a couple of times."

"Peep?" I said.

"Gleep!" answered my dragon.

Shai-ster stared at him again.

"C'mon, Shai-ster," Guido said, giving his superior a hearty shove. "Talking dragons? Somebody's pullin' your leg. Sounds to me like he got a bad shipment of dragons and is trying to get us to pay for them. Tell him to take a hike."

"It's not that easy," Shai-ster grumbled, "but I suppose you're right. I mean, all dragons look pretty much alike."

"True enough," I called, heading hastily for the nearest exit. "C'mon, Peep ... I mean, Gleep!"

Maybe Shai-ster's suspicions had been lulled, but I still had a few of my own as we made our way back to the Yellow Crescent Inn.

"Level with me, Gleep. Did you do anything to louse up somebody's dragon business?"

"Gleep?" answered my pet in a tone exactly like my own when I'm trying too hard to sound innocent.

"Uh-huh. Well, stay out of this one. I think we've got it in hand without you getting in the line of fire."

"Gleep."

The answer was much more subdued this time, and I

138

realized he was drooping noticeably.

"Now don't sulk. I just don't want anything to happen to you. That's all."

I was suddenly aware that passers-by were staring at us. As strange as the Bazaar was, I guess they weren't used to seeing someone walking down the street arguing with a dragon.

"Let's hurry," I urged, breaking into a trot. "I don't know what we can do about the Mob moving in on the

bookies, but I'm sure Aahz will think of something."

Chapter Eighteen:

"Life can be profitable, if you know the odds."

—RIPLEY

THE sports arena we were in was noticeably smaller than the stadium on Jahk where we had played in the Big Game, but no less noisy. Perhaps the fact that it was indoors instead of being open-air did something to the acoustics, but even at half-full the crowd in the arena made such a din I could barely hear myself think.

Then again, there was the smell. The same walls and ceiling that botched up the acoustics did nothing at all for ventilation. Even a few thousand beings from assorted dimensions in these close quarters produced a blend of body odors that had my stomach doing slow rolls ... or maybe it was just my nerves.

"Could you explain to me again about odds?"

"Not now," the Geek snarled, nervously playing with his program. "I'm too busy worrying."

"I'll give it a try, hot stuff," Massha volunteered from my other side. "Maybe I can say it in less technical jargon than our friend here."

"I'd appreciate it," I admitted.

139

140

That got me a black look from the Geek, but Massha was already into it.

"First, you've got to understand that for the most part, bookies aren't betting their own money. They're acting as agents or go-betweens for people who are bet-

ting different sides of the same contest. Ideally, the money bet on each side evens out, so the bookie himself doesn't have any of his own money riding on the contest."

"Then how do they make their money?"

"Sometimes off a percentage, sometimes . . . but that's another story. What we're talking about is odds. Okay?"

"I guess so," I shrugged.

"Now, the situation I described is the ideal. It assumes the teams or fighters or whatever are evenly matched. That way, some people bet one side, some the other, but overall it evens out. That's even odds or 1-1."

She shifted her weight a bit, ignoring the glares from our fellow patrons when the entire row of seats wobbled in response.

"But suppose things were different. What if, instead of an even match, one side had an advantage . . . like say if Badaxe were going to fight King Rodrick?"

"That's easy," I smiled. "Nobody would be on the King."

"Precisely," Massha nodded. "Then everybody would bet one side, and the bookies would have to cover all the bets with their own money . . . bets they stood a good chance of losing."

"So they don't take any bets."

"No. They rig things so that people will bet on the king."

141

I cocked an eyebrow at her.

"They could try, but I sure wouldn't throw my gold away like that. I'd back Badaxe."

"Really?" Massha smiled. "What if, instead of betting one gold piece to win one gold piece, you had to bet ten gold pieces on Badaxe to win one back?"

"Well..."

"Let me make it a little harder. How about if you bet one gold piece on the King, and he won, that instead of getting one gold piece back, you got a hundred?"

"I... urn ... might take a long shot on the King," I said, hesitantly. "There's always a chance he could get lucky. Besides, if I lose, I'm only out one gold piece."

"... And that's how bookies use odds to cover themselves. Now, how they figure out how many bets they need on the King at 'x' odds to cover the bets they have on Badaxe at 'y' odds is beyond me."

I looked at the Deveel next to me with new respect.

"Gee, Geek. I never really realized how complicated your work is."

The Deveel softened a bit. They're as susceptible to flattery as anyone else.

"Actually, it's even more complicated than that," he admitted modestly. "You've got to keep track of several contests at once, sometimes even use the long bets from one to cover the short bets on another. Then there are side bets, like who will score how often in which period in the Big Game. It isn't easy, but a sharp being can make a living at it."

"So what are the odds tonight?"

The Deveel grimaced.

"Lousy. It's one of those Badaxe and the King matchups, if I was following your example right. In this case, the team you'll see in red trunks are Badaxe."

They're hotter than a ten dollar laser and have won their last fifteen bouts. The weak sisters ... the King to you . . . will be in white trunks and haven't won a bout in two years. When the Mob put their bet down, the odds were running about two hundred to one against the whites."

I whistled softly.

"Wow. Two hundred in gold return on a one-gold-piece bet. Did you remember to act surprised when they put their money down?"

"I didn't have to act," the Geek said through tight lips. "Not with the size bet they came up with. Being forewarned, I had expected they wouldn't be going small, but still..."

He shook his head and lapsed into silence.

I hadn't really paused to consider the implication of the odds, but I did now. If betting one piece could get you two hundred back, then a bet of a thousand would have a potential payback of two hundred thousand! And a ten thousand bet...

"How big was their bet?" I asked fearfully.

"Big enough that if I lose, I'll be working for the Mob for the rest of my life to pay it off... and Deveels don't have short life-spans."

"Wait a minute. Didn't Aahz tell you that if you lost, we'd cover it out of our expense money?"

"He did." the Deveel said. "And he also pointed out that if you were covering my losses, you'd also take all winnings if things went as planned. I opted to take the risk, and the winnings, myself."

Massha leaned forward to stare.

"Are you that confident, or that greedy?"

"More the latter," the Geek admitted. "Then again, I got burnt rather badly betting against Skeeve here in

the Big Game. I figure it's worth at least one pass backing the shooter who's working a streak."

I shook my head in puzzlement.

"Aren't you afraid of losing?"

"Well, it did occur to me that it might be me and not the Mob who's being set up here. That's why I'm sitting next to you. If this turns out to be a double cross ..."

"You're pretty small to be making threats. Geek," Massha warned.

". . . And you're too big to dodge fast if I decide I'm being had," the Deveel shot back.

"Knock it off, both of you," I ordered. "It's academic anyway. There won't be any problems ... or if there are, I'll be as surprised as you are, Geek."

"More surprised, I hope," the Deveel sneered. "I'm half expecting this to blow up, remember?"

"But Aahz has assured me that the fix is in."

"Obviously. Otherwise, the Mob wouldn't be betting so heavily. The question is, which fix is going to work, theirs or yours?"

Just then a flurry of activity across the arena caught my eye. The Mob had just arrived ... in force. Shai-ster was there, flanked by Guido and Nunzio and backed by the remaining members of the two teams currently assigned to the Bazaar. Seen together and moving, as opposed to individually feeding their faces at Fats', they made an impressive group. Apparently others shared my opinion. Even though they were late, no one contested their right to prime seats as they filed into the front row. In fact, there was a noticeable bailing out from the desired seats as they approached.

It was still a new enough experience for me to see other beings I knew in a crowd at the Bazaar that I stood

up and waved at them before I realized what I was do-

144

Robert Asprtn

145

ing. Then it dawned on me! If they saw me sitting with the Geek and then lost a big bet, they might put two and two together and get five!

I stopped waving and tried to ease back into my seat, but it was too late. Guido had spotted my gyrations and nudged Shai-ster to point me out. Our eyes met and he nodded acknowledgement before returning to scanning

the crowd.

Crestfallen, I turned to apologize to the Geek, only to

find myself addressing a character with a pasty complexion and hairy ears who bore no resemblance at all to the Deveel who had been sitting beside me.

I almost. .. almost! . . . looked around to see where the Geek had gone. Then I did a little mental arithmetic and figured it out.

A disguise spell!

I'd gotten so used to fooling people myself with that spell that when someone did the same to me, I was completely taken in.

"Still kinda new at this intrigue stuff, aren't you?" he

observed dryly from his new face.

Fortunately I was saved the problem of thinking up a suitable response by the entrance of the contestants. With the scramble of planning and launching our counter-offensive, I hadn't really been briefed on what the Mob was betting on except that it would be a tag-

team wrestling match. No one said what the contestants would be like, and I had assumed it would be like the matches I had seen back on Klah. I should have known

better.

The two teams were made up of beings who barely

stood high enough to reach my waist! I mean they were small! They looked like kids ... if you're used to having kids around with four arms each.

"What are those?" I demanded.

"Those are the teams," the Geek said helpfully.

"I mean, what are they? Where are they from?"

"Oh. Those are Tues."

"And you bet on them? I mean, I've heard of midget wrestling, but this is ridiculous!"

"Don't knock it," the Deveel shrugged. "They're big on the wrestling circuit. In fact, teams like this are their dimension's most popular export. Everyone knows them as the Terrible Tues. They're a lot more destructive than you'd guess from their size."

"This is a put-on, right?"

"If you really want to see something, you should catch their other export. It's a traveling dance troupe called the Tue Tours."

Massha dropped a heavy hand on my shoulder.

"Hot stuff, remember our deal about my lessons?"

"Later, Massha. The match is about to start."

Actually, it was about to finish. It was that short, if you'll pardon the expression.

The first member of the favored red trunk team simply strolled out and pinned his white-trunked rival. Though the pin looked a bit like someone trying to wrap a package with tangled string, the red-trunker made it

seem awfully easy. All efforts of his opponent's partner to dislodge the victor were in vain, and the bout was over.

"Well, that's that," the Geek said, standing up. "A pleasure doing business with you, Skeeve. Look me up again if you tie on to a live one."

"Aren't you going to collect your bet?"

The Deveel shrugged.

"No rush. Besides, I think your playmates are a little preoccupied just now."

I looked where he was pointing and saw Shai-ster storming toward the dressing rooms with Guido and

146

Nunzio close behind. None of them looked particularly happy, which was understandable, given the circumstances.

"Whoops. That's my cue. See you back at the Yellow

Crescent, Massha."

And with that, I launched myself in an interceptor

course with the angry mobsters.

Chapter Nineteen:

"These blokes need to be taught to respect their superiors."

—GEN. CORNWALUS

I ALMOST missed them. Not that I was moving slow, mind you. It's just that they had a real head of steam on.

"Hi guys!" I called, just as Shai-ster was raising a fist to hammer on the dressing room door. "Are you going to congratulate the winners, too?"

Three sets of eyes bored into me as my "friends" spun around.

"Congratulate!" Guido snarled. "I'll give 'em congratulate."

"Wait a minute," Shai-ster interrupted. "What did you mean, 'too'?"

"Well, that's why I'm here. I just won a sizable bet on the last match."

"How sizable?"

"Well, sizable for me," I qualified. "I stand to collect fifty gold pieces."

"Fifty," Guido snorted. "You know how much we lost on that fiasco?"

147

148

149

"Lost?" I frowned. "Didn't you know the Reds were favored?"

"Of course we knew," Shai-ster snarled. "That's why we were set to make a killing when they lost."

"But what made you think they were going to ...

Oh! Was that what you were talking about when you said you were going into gambling?"

"That's right. The red team was supposed to take a graceful dive in the third round. We paid them enough ... more than enough, actually."

He sounded so much like Grimble I couldn't resist taking a cheap shot.

"Judging from the outcome, it sounds to me that you paid them a little less than enough."

"It's not funny. Now, instead of recouping our losses, we've got another big loss to explain to the Big

Boys."

"Oh come on, Shai-ster," I smiled. "How much can it cost to fix a fight?"

"Not much," he admitted. "But when you figure in the investment money we just lost, it comes to...."

"Investment money?"

"He means the bet," Guido supplied.

"Oh. Well, I suppose that's the risk you take when you try to make a killing."

An evil smile flitted across Shai-ster's face.

"Oh, we're going to make a killing, all right," he said. "It's time the locals at this Bazaar learned what it means to cross the Mob."

With that, he nodded at Guido who opened the dressing room door.

All four wrestlers were sharing the same room, and they looked up expectantly as we filed in. That's right. I said we. I kind of tagged along at the end of the procession and no one seemed to object.

"Didn't you clowns forget something out there?"

Shai-ster said for his greeting. "Like who was supposed to win?"

The various team members exchanged glances. Then the smallest of the red team shrugged.

"Big deal. So we changed our minds."

"Yeah," his teammate chimed in. "We decided it would be bad for our image to lose . . . especially to these stumblebums."

That brought the white team to its feet.

"Stumblebums?" one of them bellowed. "You caught us by surprise, that's all. We was told to take it easy until the third-round,"

"If you took it any easier, you'd be asleep. We were supposed to be wrestling, not dancing."

Shai-ster stepped between them.

"So you all admit you understood your original instructions?"

"Hey, get off our backs, okay? You'll get your stinking money back, so what's your beef, anyway?"

"Even if you gave us a full refund," Shai-ster said softly, "there's still a matter of the money we lost betting on you. I don't suppose any of you are independently wealthy?"

"Oh, sure," one of the reds laughed. "We're just doin' this for kicks."

"I thought not. Guido. Nunzio. See what you can do about squaring accounts with these gentlemen. And take your time. I want them to feel it, you know?"

"I dunno, Shai-ster," Guido scowled. "They're awfully small. I don't think we can make it last too long."

"Well, do your best. Skeeve? Would you join me out-

side? I don't think you're going to want to see this."

He was closer to being right than he knew. Even

150

151

though I had been through some rough and tumble times during recent years, that didn't mean I enjoyed

it—even to watch.

The door was barely shut behind us when a series of thuds and crashes erupted inside. It was painful just to

listen to, but it didn't last long.

"I told them to take their time," Shai-ster said,

scowling at the silence. "Oh well, I guess ..."

The door opened, revealing one of the white team.

"If you've got any more lessons out there, I suggest

you send them in. These two didn't teach us much at

all."

He shut the door again, but not before we caught a

glimpse of the two bodyguards unconscious on the floor. Well, Guide was on the floor. Nunzio was kind of standing on his head in the corner.

"Tough little guys," I remarked casually. "It must be the four arms. Think you could find work for them in

the Mob?"

Shai-ster was visibly shaken, but he recovered

quickly.

"So they want to play rough. Well, that's fine by

me."

"You aren't going in there alone, are you?" I asked,

genuinely concerned.

He favored me with a withering glance.

"Not a chance."

With that, he put his fingers in his mouth and blew a loud blast. At least, that's what it looked like. I didn't

hear a thing.

Before I could ask what he was doing, though, a thunder of footsteps announced the arrival of two

dozen Mob reinforcements.

Neat trick. I guess the whistle had been too high for

me to hear... or too low.

"They got Guido and Nunzio," Shai-ster shouted before the heavies had come to a complete halt. "Let's show 'em who's running things around here. Follow me?"

Jerking the door open, he plunged into the dressing room with the pack at his heels.

I'm not sure if Shai-ster had ever actually been in a fight before, much less led a team into a fight. I am, however, sure he never tried it again.

The screams of pain and anguish that poured out of that room moved me to take action. I walked a little further down the hall and did my waiting there. It turned out my caution was needless. The wall didn't collapse, nor did the ceiling or the building itself. Several hunks of plaster did come loose, however, and at one point someone poked a hole in the wall... with his head.

It occurred to me that if the fight fans in the arena really wanted to get their money's worth, they should be down here. Additional thought made me decide it was just as well they didn't. There were already more than enough beings crowded into that dressing room . . . which was as good a reason as any for my staying in the hall.

Eventually the sounds of battle died away, leaving only ominous silence. I reminded myself that I had every confidence in the outcome. As the length of silence grew, I found it necessary to remind myself several times.

Finally the door opened, and the four Tues filed out laughing and chatting together.

"Cute," I called. "Don't hurry or anything. I can worry out here all day."

One of the white team ran up and gave me a hug and a kiss.

152

"Sorry, handsome. We were having so much fun we forgot about you."

"Urn . . . could you do something about the disguises before you kiss me again?"

"Whoops. Sorry about that!"

The taller red team member closed his eyes, and the Tues were gone. In their places stood Aahz, Gus, Tananda, and Chumly. That's why I hadn't been worried . . . much.

"Nice work, Gus," I said, nodding my approval. "But I still think I could have handled the disguises myself."

"Have you ever seen a Tue before?" Aahz chal-

lenged.

"Well... no."

"Gus has. That's why he handled the disguises. End of discussion."

"Used to have a secretary named Etheyl," the gargoyle explained, ignoring Aahz's order. "She was a big fan of the wrestling circuit."

"A secretary?" I blinked.

"Sure, haven't you ever heard of a Tue Fingered Typist?"

"Enough!" Aahz insisted, holding up his hand. "I vote we head back to the Yellow Crescent Inn for a little celebration. I think we've thwarted the Mob enough for one night."

"Yeah," Tananda grinned. "That'll teach 'em to pick on someone their own size."

"But you are their size," I frowned.

"I know," she winked. "That's the point."

"I say, are you sure, Aahz?" Chumbly interjected. "I mean, we gave them a sound thrashing, but will it hold them until morning?"

"If they're lucky," my mentor grinned. "Remember,

153

once they wake up, they're going to have to report in to their superiors."

"Do you think they'll try to recoup their losses with another stab at gambling?" I asked.

"I hope so," Aahz said, his grin getting broader. "The next big betting event oh the docket is the unicorn

aces, and we've got that covered easily."

"You mean Buttercup? You can't enter him in a race. He's a war-unicorn."

"I know. Think about it."

Chapter Twenty:

"Figure the last thing you would expect the enemy to do, then count on him doing precisely that!"

—RICHEUEU

THE Mob did not try another gambit right after their disastrous attempt to move in on Deva's bookies. In fact, for some time afterward, things were quiet... too quiet, as Aahz put it.

"I don't like it," he declared, staring out the front window of the Yellow Crescent Inn. "They're up to something. I can feel it."

"Fats says they haven't been around for nearly a week," I supplied. "Maybe they've given up."

"Not a chance. There's got to be at least one more try, if for nothing else than to save face. And instead of getting ready, we're sitting around on our butts."

He was right. For days now, the team's main activity had been hanging around Gus's place waiting for some bit of information to turn up. Our scouting missions had yielded nothing, so we were pretty much reduced to relying on the normal Bazaar gossip network to alert us to any new Mob activity.

"Be reasonable, Aahz." Chumly protested. "We can't plan or prepare without any data to work with."

155

156

You've said yourself that action in an absence of in-

formation is wasted effort, eh what? Makes the troops edgy."

Aahz stalked over to where the troll was sprawled.

"Don't start quoting me at me! You're the one who usually argues with everything I say. If everybody starts agreeing with me, we aren't using all the mental resources we can."

"But you're the one saying that we should be planning," I pointed out.

"Right," my mentor smiled. "So we might as well get started. In absence of hard facts, we'll have to try to second-guess them. Now, where is the Bazaar most vulnerable to Mob takeover? Tananda, have you seen

... Tananda?"

She abandoned her window-gazing to focus on the discussion.

"What was that, Aahz? Sorry. I was watching that Klahd coming down the street dressed in bright purple."

"Purple?"

Massha and I said it together.

I started to race her for the window, then changed my mind. What if I won? I didn't want to be between the window and her mass when she finally got there. Instead, I waited until she settled into position, then eased in beside her.

"That's him all right," I said out loud, confirming my unvoiced thoughts. "That's Don Bruce. Well, now we know what the Mob's been doing. They've been whistling up the heavy artillery. The question is, what is he doing here at the Bazaar? When we get the answer to that, we'll be able to plan our next move."

"Actually, the question should be what is he doing here at the Yellow Crescent Inn," Gus commented dryly from my elbow. "And I think we're about to get the answer."

157

Sure enough, Don Bruce was making a beeline for the very building we were watching him from. With his walk, it had taken me a minute to zero in on his direction.

"All right. We know who he is and that he's coming here. Now, let's quit gawking like a bunch of tourists."

Aahz was back in his familiar commander role again. Still, I noticed he was no quicker to leave the window than any of the rest of us.

"Everybody sit down and act natural. Skeeve, when he gets here, let me do the talking, okay?"

"Not a chance, Aahz," I said, sinking into a chair. "He's used to dealing with me direct. If we try to run in a middleman he'll know something's up. Sit at this table with me, though. I'm going to need your advice on this one."

By the time Don Bruce opened the door, we were all sitting. Aahz and I at one table, and two others accommodating Massha and Gus, and the Chumly-Tananda team respectively. I noticed that we had left two-thirds of the place empty to sit at adjoining tables, which might have looked a little suspicious. I also noticed we had reflexively split up into two-person teams again, but it was too late to correct either situation.

"Hi there," Don Bruce called, spotting me at once. "Thank goodness I found you here. This Bazaar is great fun to wander, but simply beastly at finding what or who you're looking for."

"You were looking for me?"

This was not the best news I had heard all day.

Despite his affected style of speech, I had a healthy respect for Don Bruce. From what I had seen of the Mob, it was a rough group, and I figured no one could hold down as high a position as Don Bruce did, unless there was some real hard rock under that soft exterior. Friendly greeting or not, I began to feel the fingers of

158

cold fear gripping my stomach.

"That's right. I've go? to have a meet with you, you know? I was hoping I could speak with you in private."

The last thing in the world I wanted right now was to be alone with Don Bruce.

"It's all right," I said expansively. "These are my friends. Any business I have with your . . . organization we're in on together . . . I mean, can be discussed in

front of them."

"Oh, very well."

The Mob chieftain flounced onto a chair at my table.

"I didn't mean to be rude, and I do want to meet you

all. It's just that, first thing, there are some pressing

matters to deal with."

"Shoot," I said, then immediately wished I had

chosen another word.

"Well, you know we're trying to move in on this

place, and you know it hasn't been going well . . . no, don't deny it. It's true. Shai-ster has mentioned you often in his reports, so I know how well informed you

are."

"I haven't seen Shai-ster lately, but I do know he's been working hard at the project."

"That's right." Aahz chimed in. "From what Skeeve's been telling us, Shai-ster is a good man. If he can't pull it off, you might as well pack up and go home."

"He's an idiot!" Don Bruce roared, and for a moment we could see the steel inside the velvet glove. "The reason you haven't seen him is that I've pulled him from the project completely. He thought we should give up, too."

"You aren't giving up?" I said, fearfully.
"I can't. Oh, if you only knew what I go through on the Council. I made such a thing out of this Deva proj-

159

ect and how much it could do for the Mob. If we pulled out now, it would be the same as saying I don't know a good thing when I see it. No sir. Call it family politics or stubborn pride, we're going to stay right here."

My heart sank.

"But if the operation is losing money—" I began, but he cut me off with a gesture.

"So far ... but not for long. You see, I've figured out for myself what's going wrong here."

"You have? How? I mean, this is your first visit here since the project started."

I was starting to sweat a bit. Don Bruce was regarding me with an oily reptilian smile I didn't like at all.

"I saw it in the reports," he declared. "Clear as the nose on your face. That's why I know Shai-ster's an idiot. The problem was right here in front of him and he

couldn't see it. That problem is you."

My sweat turned cold. At the edge of my vision I saw Tananda run her fingers through her hair, palming one of her poison darts in the process, and Massha was starting to play with her rings. Chumly and Gus exchanged glances, then shifted in their chairs slightly. Of our entire team, only Aahz seemed unconcerned.

"You'll have to be a little clearer for the benefit of us slow folks," he drawled. "Just how do you figure that Skeeve here is a problem?"

"Look at the facts," Don Bruce said, holding up his fingers to tick off the count.

"He's been here the whole time my boys were having trouble; he knows the Bazaar better than my boys; he knows magik enough to do things my boys can't handle;

and now I find out he's got a bunch of friends and contacts here."

"So?" my mentor said softly.

"So? Isn't it obvious? The problem with the opera-

160

tion is that he should have been working for us all along."

By now I had recovered enough to have my defense ready.

"But just because I... what?"

"Sure. That's why I'm here. Now I know you said before you didn't want to work for the Mob full time. That's why I'm ready to talk a new deal with you. I want you to run the Mob's operation here at the Bazaar ... and I'm willing to pay top dollar."

"How much is that in gold?"

Aahz was leaning forward now.

"Wait a minute! Whoa! Stop!" I interrupted. "You can't be serious. I don't have the time or the know-how to make this a profitable project."

"It doesn't have to be profitable," Don argued. "Break even would be nice, or even just lose money slower. Anything to get the council to look elsewhere for things to gripe about at our monthly Meetings. You could do it in your extra time."

I started to say something, but Aahz put a casual hand on my shoulder. I knew that warning. If I tried to interrupt or correct him, that grip would tighten until my bones creaked.

"Now let me see if I've got this right," he said, showing all his teeth. "You want my man here to run your operation, but you don't care if it doesn't show a profit?"

"That's right."

"Of course, with things as shaky as they are now, you'd have to guarantee his salary."

Don Bruce pursed his lips and looked at me.

"How much does he cost?"

"Lots," Aahz confided. "But less than the total salary of the force you've got here now."

"Okay. He's worth it."

"Aahz ..." I began, but the grip on my shoulder tightened.

". . . And you aren't so much concerned with the Mob's reputation here on Deva as you are with how the Council treats you, right?"

"Well... yeah. I guess so."

". . . So he'd have free rein to run the operation the

way he saw fit. No staff forced on him or policies to follow?"

"No. I'd have to at least assign him a couple body-guards. Anybody running a Mob operation has got to have a couple of the Family's boys to be sure nothing happens to him."

Aahz scowled.
"But he's already got..."

"How about Guido and Nunzio?" I managed, through gritted teeth.

Abruptly the grip on my shoulder vanished.
"Those losers?" Don Bruce frowned. "I was going to have a severe talk with them after this disaster, but if you want 'em, they're yours."

". . . But since you're the one insisting on them, they don't show up on our overhead. Right?" Aahz said firmly.

I leaned back, working my shoulder covertly, and tried to ignore the horrified stares my friends were exchanging. I didn't know for sure what Aahz was up to, but knew better than to get in his way when he smelled money.

I could only cross my fingers and hope that he knew what he was doing ... for a change.

Chapter Twenty-One:

"Stayin' alive! Stayin aKve!"

—V. DRACULA

THE representatives of the Bazaar Merchants didn't look happy, but then Deveels never do when they're parting with money.

"Thank you gentlemen," Aahz beamed, rubbing his hands together gleefully over the substantial pile of gold on the table.

"You're sure the Mob is gone?" the head spokesman asked, looking plaintively at the gold.

"Positive. We've broken their reign of terror and sent them packing."

The Deveel nodded.

"Good. Now that that's settled, we'll be going."

". . . Of course," Aahz yawned, "there's no guarantee they won't be back tomorrow."

That stopped the delegation in their tracks.

"What? But you said..."

"Face it, gentlemen. Right now, the only thing between the Mob and the Bazaar is the Great Skeeve here, and once he leaves ..."

The Deveels exchanged glances.

"I don't suppose you'd consider staying," one said

hopefully.

I favored him with a patronizing smile.

"I'd love to, but you know how it is. Expenses are high, and I've got to keep moving to eke out a living."

"But with your reputation, clients will be looking for you. What you really need is a permanent location so

you can be found."

"True enough," Aahz smiled. "But to be blunt, why

should we give you for free what other dimensions are willing to pay for? I should think that if anybody could understand that, you Deveels would."

"Now we're getting to the heart of the matter," the lead spokesman sighed, pulling up a chair. "Okay. How much?"

"How much?" Aahz echoed.

"Don't give me that," the Deveel snapped. "Innocence looks ridiculous on a Pervert. Just tell us what kind of retainer would be necessary to keep the Great Skeeve around as the Bazaar's magician in residence."

Aahz winked at me.

"I'm sure you'll find his fee reasonable," he said. "Well, reasonable when you stop to think what you're getting for your money. Of course, the figure I'm thinking of is just for making the Bazaar his base of operations. If any specific trouble arises, we'll have to negotiate that separately."

"Of course," the Deveel winced.

I settled back to wait patiently. This was going to take a while, but I was confident of the eventual outcome. I also knew that whatever fee Aahz was thinking of originally just got doubled when the Deveel made that 'Pervert' crack. As a Pervert, Aahz is very sensitive

165

about how he's addressed . . . and this time I wasn't about to argue with him.

"I love it!" Aahz crowed, modestly. "Not only are we getting a steady income from- both the Mob and the Deveels, we don't have to do a thing to earn it! This is even better than the setup we had at PossHtum."

"It's a sweet deal, Aahz."

"And how about this layout? It's a far cry from that shack you and Garkin were calling home when we first met."

Aahz and I were examining our new home, provided as an extra clause in our deal with the Bazaar merchants. It was huge, rivaling the size of the Royal Palace at Possiltum. The interesting thing was that from the outside it looked no bigger than an average Bazaar stall.

"Of course, holding out for a lifetime discount on anything at the Bazaar was a stroke of genius, if I do say so myself."

"Yeah, Aahz. Genius."

My mentor broke off his chortling and self-congratulations to regard me quizzically.

"Is something bothering you, Skeeve? You seem a little subdued."

"It's nothing, really."

"Come on. Out with it," he insisted. "You should be on top of the world right now, not moping around like you just heard that your dragon has a terminal illness or something."

"Well, it's a couple of things," I admitted grudgingly. "First, I've got a bad feeling about those deals you just put together."

"Now wait a minute," my mentor scowled. "We talked all this out before we went after the merchants

166

and you said that double-dealing wouldn't bother you."

"It doesn't. If anything, I'm glad to see both the Mob and the Deveels getting a little of their own back for a change."

"Then what's wrong? I got you everything I could think of!"

"That's what's wrong."

My mentor shook his head sharply as if to clear his vi-

sion.

"I've got to admit, this time you lost me. Could you run that one past again, slow?"

"Come on, Aahz. You know what I'm talking about. You've gotten me more money than I could spend in a lifetime, a beautiful house ... not just anywhere, mind you, but at the Bazaar itself . . . steady work anytime I want it ... in short, everything I need to not only survive, but prosper. Everything."

"So?"

"So are you setting me up so you can leave? Is that what this is all about?"

I had secretly hoped that Aahz would laugh in my face and tell me I was being silly. Instead, he averted his eyes and lapsed into silence.

"I've been thinking about it," he said finally.

"You're doing pretty well lately and, like you say, this latest deal will insure you won't starve. The truth of the matter is that you really don't need me anymore."

"But Aahz!"

"Don't 'but Aahz' me! All I'm doing is repeating what you shoved down my throat at the beginning of this caper. You don't need me. I've been giving it a lot of thought, and you're right. I thought you always wanted to hear me say that."

"Maybe I don't like being right," I said plaintively.

"Maybe I wish I did need you more and things could go on forever like they have in the past."

"That's most of growing up, kid," Aahz sighed.

"Facing up to reality whether we like it or not. You've been doing it, and I figure it's about time I did the same. That's why I'm going to stick around."

"But you don't have to ... what?"

My mentor's face split in one of his expansive grins.

"In this case, the reality that I'm facing is that whether you need me or not, I've had more fun since I took you on as an apprentice than I've had in centuries. I'm not sure exactly what's going to happen to you next, but I wouldn't miss it for all the gold on Deva."

"That's great!"

"... Of course, there's still a lot I can teach you, just like there's a lot I have to learn from you."

"From me? "I blinked.

"Uh huh. I've been learning from you for some time now, kid. I was just never up to admitting it before. You've got a way of dealing with people that gets you respect, even from the ones who don't like you. I haven't always been able to get that. Lots of folks are afraid of me, but not that many respect me. That's why I've been studying your methods, and have every intention of continuing."

"That's . . . umm . . . interesting, Aahz. But how come you're telling me this now?"

"Because if I stay around, it'll be on one condition:

that you wake up and accept the fact that you're a full partner in our relationship. No more of this 'apprentice' crud. It's getting too rough on my nerves."

"Gee, Aahz... I..."

"Deal?"

"Deal."

We shook hands solemnly, and I remembered he had refused this simple act when he first accepted me as an apprentice. A full partner. Wow!

"Now what's the other thing?"

"Hmm, excuse me?"

"If I recall correctly, you said there were a couple of things bothering you. What's the other?"

"Well... it's this house."

"What about the house?" Aahz exploded, slipping easily back into his old patterns. "It's got enough room for us and our friends and your bodyguards when they show up and Buttercup and Gleep and anyone else who

wanders by."

"That's true."

"What's more, we got it for free. It's a good deal."

"Say that again, Aahz."

"I said, 'it's a good ...'Oh."

"From the Deveels, right?"

. "Oh come on, Skeeve. It's just a house. What could

be wrong?"

"To use your phrase, 'The mind boggles.' I've been trying to spot the-catch, and I want you to check me to see if my facts and logic are correct."

"Okay."

"Now. Deveels are experts at dimension travel. If I understand it right, they manage these 'bigger inside than outside' houses by offsetting the dimensions just a bit. That is, if we numbered the dimensions, and Deva was one, then our door is in dimension one and the rest of our house is in dimension one point four or something."

"Now that's one I hadn't thought about before," Aahz admitted. "The Deveels have been pretty tight-lipped about it. Makes sense, though. It would be rough

to play the poverty-stricken shopowner with a place like this just over your shoulder. If I had thought about it I

would have realized a Deveel needs someplace secret to keep his wealth."

"So we've effectively been given our own dimension," I continued; "An unlisted dimension that's all ours. For free, no less."

"That's right," Aahz nodded, but there was a note of doubt in his voice now.

"What I wonder about is how many of these offset dimensions do the Deveels have access to, and why is this particular one standing vacant? What's in this dimension?"

"Our house?" my mentor suggested tentatively.

"And what else?" I urged. "I've noticed there are no windows. What's outside our back door that the Deveels were so eager to give away?"

"Backdoor?"

I pulled away the tapestry to reveal the door I had spotted during our first tour. It was heavy wood with strange symbols painted on it. It also had a massive beam guarding it, and several smaller but no less effective-looking locks around the edge.

"I tried to say something at the time, but you kept telling me to shut up."

"I did, didn't I."

We both stared at the door in silence for several minutes.

"Tell you what," Aahz said softly. "Let's save investigating this for another day."

"Right," I agreed, without hesitation.

". . . And until we do, let's not mention this to the others."

"My thoughts precisely."

"...And, partner?"

"Yes, Aahz?"

"If anyone knocks at this door, don't answer unless I'm with you."

Our eyes met, and I let the tapestry fall back into place.

Myth-Ing Persons By Robert L Asprin.

Chapter One:

"Reputations are fine up to a point. After that they become a pain!"

-D.JUAN

THERE is something sinfully satisfying about doing something you know you aren't supposed to. This was roughly my frame of mind as I approached a specific nondescript tent at the Bazaar at Deva with my breakfast under my arm ... guilty, but smug.

"Excuse me, young sahr!"

I turned to find an elderly Deveel waving desperately at me as he hurried forward. Normally I would have avoided the encounter, as Deveels are always selling something and at the moment I wasn't buying, but since I wasn't in a hurry I decided to hear what he had to say.

"I'm glad I caught you in time," he said, struggling to catch his breath. "While I don't usually meddle, you really don't want to go in there!"

"Why not? I was just...."

"Do you know who lives there?"

"Well, actually I thought...."

"That is the dwelling of the Great Skeeve!"

Something about this busybody irritated me. Maybe it was the way he never let me finish a sentence. Anyway, I decided to string him along for a while."

"The Great Skeeve?"

"You never heard of him?" The Deveel seemed genuinely shocked. "He's probably the most powerful magician at the Bazaar."

My opinion of the busybody soared to new heights, but the game was too much fun to abandon.

"I've never had too much faith in magicians," I said with studied casualness. "I've found for the most part their powers are overrated."

The oldster rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"That may be true in most cases, but not when it comes to the Great Skeeve! Did you know he consorts with Demons and has a dragon for a familiar?"

I favored him with a worldly smile.

"So what? Deva is a crossroads of the dimensions. Dimension travelers, or Demons as you call them, are the norm around here. As a Deveel, your main livelihood comes from dealing with Demons. As for the dragon, there's a booth not eight rows from here that sells dragons to anyone with the price."

"No, no! You don't understand! Of course we all deal with Demons when it comes to business. The difference is that this Skeeve is actually friends with them . . . invites them into his home and lives with them. One of his permanent house guests is a Pervert, and I don't know of a single Deveel who would stoop that low. What's more, I've heard it said that he has underworld connections."

The game was growing tiresome. Any points the Deveel had made with his tribute to the Great Skeeve had been lost with interest when he started commenting on Demons.

"Well, thank you for your concern," I said, holding out my hand for a handshake. "I promise you I'll remember everything you've said. What was your name again?"

The Deveel grabbed my hand and began pumping it vigorously.

"I am Aliman, and glad to be of assistance," he said with an ingratiating smile. "If you really want to show your gratitude, remember my name. Should you ever be in need of a reputable magician, I have a nephew who's just getting started in the business. I'm sure we could arrange some discount prices for you. Tell me, what is your name so I can tell him who to watch for?"

I tightened my grip slightly and gave him my widest smile. "Well, my friends call me Skeeve."

"I'll be sure to tell... SKEEVE?"

The Deveel's eyes widened, and his complexion faded from red to a delicate pink.

"That's right," I said, retaining my grip on his hand. "Oh, and for your information Demons from Perv are called Pervects, not Perverts . . . and he's not my house guest, he's my partner."

The Deveel was struggling desperately now, trying to free his hand.

"Now then, how many customers have you scared away from my business with your tales about what a fearsome person I am? "

The Deveel tore loose from my grip and vanished into the crowds, sounding an incoherent scream of terror as he went. In short, Aliman left. Right?

I watched him go with a certain amount of mischievous satisfaction. I wasn't really angry, mind you. We literally had more money than we could use right now, so I didn't begrudge him the customers. Still, I had never really paused to consider how formidable our operation must look from the outside. Viewing it now through a stranger's eyes, I found myself more than a little pleased. Considering the dubious nature of my beginning, we had built ourselves quite a reputation over the last few years.

I had been serious when I told Aliman that I didn't have much faith in magicians. My own reputation was overrated to say the least, and if I was being billed as a powerful magician, it made the others of my profession more than a little suspect in my eyes. After several years of seeing the inside of the magic business, I was starting to wonder if any magician was really as good as people thought.

I was so wrapped up in these thoughts as I entered our humble tent that I had completely forgotten that I was supposed to be sneaking in. I was reminded almost immediately.

The reminder came in the form of a huge man who loomed up to block my path. "Boss," he said in a squeaky little voice that was always surprising coming from such a huge body, "you shouldn't ought to go out alone like that. How many times we got to tell you...."

"It's all right, Nunzio," I said, trying to edge around him. "I just ducked out to get some breakfast. Want a bagel?"

Nunzio was both unconvinced and undaunted in his scolding.

"How are we supposed to be your bodyguards if you keep sneaking off alone every chance you get? Do you know what Don Bruce would do to us if anything happened to you?"

"C'mon, Nunzio. You know how things are here at the Bazaar. If the Deveels see me with a bodyguard, the price of everything goes through the ceiling. Besides, I like being able to wander around on my own once in a while."

"You can afford the higher prices. What you can't afford is to set yourself up as a target for every bozo who wants the rep of bagging the Great Skeeve."

I started to argue, but my conversation with Aliman flashed across my mind. Nunzio was right. There were two sides to having a reputation. If anyone believed the rumors at the Bazaar and still meant me harm, they would muster such firepower for the attempt that my odds for survival would be nonexistent.

"Nunzio," I said slowly, "you may be right, but in all honesty what could you and Guido do to stop a magical attack on me?"

"Not a thing," he said calmly. "But they'd probably try to knock off your bodyguards first, and that might give you time to get away or hit them yourself before they could muster a second attack."

He said it easily, like you or I might say "The sun rises in the east," but it shook me. It had never really occurred to me how expendable bodyguards are, or how readily they accept the dangers of their profession.

"I'll try to remember that in the future," I said with a certain degree of grave humility. "What's more, I think I owe you and Guido an apology. Where is Guido, anyway?"

"Upstairs arguing with His Nibbs," Nunzio grinned.

"As a matter of fact, I was looking for you to break it up when I found you had snuck out again."

"Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"What for? There's no rush. They'll be arguing until you get there. I figured it was more important to convince you to quit going out alone."

I groaned a little inside, but I had learned long ago the futility of arguing priorities with Nunzio. "Well, thanks again for the advice, but I'd better get upstairs before those two kill each other."

With that I headed across the courtyard for the fountain stairs to our offices....

Courtyard? Fountain stairs?

What happened to the humble tent I was walking into a minute ago?

Weelll... I said I was a magician, didn't I? Our little stall at the Bazaar is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. Lots bigger. I've lived in royal palaces that weren't as big as our "humble tent." I can't take any credit for this particular miracle, though, other than the fact that it was my work that helped earn us our current residence. We live here rent-free courtesy of the Devan Merchants Association as partial payment for a little job we did for them a while back. That's also how I got my bodyguards ... but that's another story, Devan Merchants Association, you ask? Okay. For the uninitiated, I'll go over this just once. The dimension I'm currently residing in is Deva, home of the shrewdest deal-drivers in all the known dimensions. You may have heard of them. In my own home dimension they were called devils, but I have since learned the proper pronunciation is Deveels. Anyway, my gracious living quarters are the result of my partner and I beating the Deveels at their own game ... which is to say we got the better of them in a deal. Don't tell anyone, though. It would ruin their reputation and maybe even cost me a cushy spot. You see, they still don't know they've been had.

Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes. Heading for the offices. Normally after sneaking out I would stop by the stables to share breakfast with Gleep, but with a crisis on my hands I decided to forgo the pleasure of my pet's company and get to work. Gleep. He's the dragon Aliman was talking about. . . and I'm not going to try to condense that story. It's just too complicated.

Long before I reached the offices I could hear their voices raised in their favorite "song." The lyrics changed from time to time, but I knew the melody by heart.

"Incompetent bungler!"

"Who are you calling an incomplete bungler?"

"I stand corrected. You are a complete bungler!"

"You better watch your mouth! Even if you are the boss's partner, one more word and I'll...."

"You'll what? If you threw a punch the safest place to be would be where you're aiming."

"Izzatso?"

It sounded like I had arrived in the nick of time. Taking a deep breath, I casually strolled into the teeth of the fracas.

"Hi, guys." I pretended to be totally unaware of what was going on. "Anyone want a bagel?"

"No, I don't want a bagel!" came the sneering response from one combatant. "What I want is some decent help."

"... and while you're at it see what you can do about getting me a little respect!" the other countered.

The latter comment came from Guido, senior of my two bodyguards. If anything, he's bigger and nastier than his cousin Nunzio.

The former contribution came from Aahz. Aahz is my partner. He's also a demon, a Pervect to be exact, and even though he's slightly shorter than I am, he's easily twice as nasty as my two bodyguards put together.

My strategy had worked in that I now had their annoyance focused on me instead of each other. Now, realizing the potential devastation of their respective temperaments individually, much less collectively, I had cause to doubt the wisdom of my strategy.

"What seems to be the trouble?"

"The trouble," Aahz snarled, "is that your ace bodyguard here just lost us a couple of clients."

My heart sank. I mentioned earlier that Aahz and I have more money than we know what to do with, but old habits die hard. Aahz is the tightest being I've ever met when it comes to money, and, living at the Bazaar at Deva, that's saying something! If Guido had really lost a potential customer, we'd be hearing about it for a long time.

"Ease up a minute, partner," I said more to stall for time than anything else. "I just got here, remember? Could you fill me in on a few of the details?" Aahz favored Guido with one more dark stare.

"There's not all that much to tell," he said. "I was in the middle of breakfast..."

"He was drinking another meal," Guido translated scornfully.

"... when mush-for-brains here bellows up that there are some customers waiting downstairs in reception. I called back that I'd be down in a few, then finished my meal."

"He kept them waiting at least half an hour. You can't expect customers to...."

"Guido, could you hold the editorial asides for one round? Please?" I interceded before Aahz could go for him. "I'm still trying to get a rough idea of what happened, remember? Okay, Aahz. You were saying?" Aahz took a deep breath, then resumed his account. "Anyway, when I got downstairs, the customers were nowhere to be seen. You'd think your man here would be able to stall them or at least have the sense to call for reinforcements if they started getting twitchy."

"C'mon, Aahz. Guido is supposed to be a bodyguard, not a receptionist. If some customers got tired of waiting for you to show up and left, I don't see where you can dodge the blame by shifting it to...."

"Wait a minute. Boss. You're missing the point. They didn't leave!"

"Come again?"

"I left 'em there in the reception room, and the next thing I know Mr. Mouth here is hollerin' at me for losing customers. They never came out! Now, like you say, I'm supposed to be a bodyguard. By my figuring we've got some extra people wandering the premises, and all this slob wants to do is yell about whose fault it is."

"I know whose fault it is," Aahz said with a glare. "There are only two ways out of that reception room, and they didn't come past me!"

"Well they didn't come past me!" Guido countered.

I started to get a very cold feeling in my stomach.

"Aahz, "I said softly.

"If you think I don't know when...."

"AAHZ!"

That brought him up short. He turned to me with an angry retort on his lips, then he saw my expression.

"What is it, Skeeve? You look as if...."

"There are more than two ways out of that room."

We stared at each other in stunned silence for a few moments, then we both sprinted for the reception room, leaving Guido to trail along behind.

The room we had selected for our reception area was one of the largest in the place, and the only large room with easy access from the front door. It was furnished in a style lavish enough to impress even those customers spoiled by the wonders of the Bazaar who were expecting to see the home office of a successful magician. There was only one problem with it, and that was the focus of our attention as we dashed in.

The only decoration that we had kept from the previous owners was an ornate tapestry hanging on the north wall. Usually I'm faster than Aahz, but this time he beat me to the hanging, sweeping it aside with his arm to reveal a heavy door behind it. Our worst fears were realized. The door was unlocked and standing ajar.

Chapter Two:

"Success often hinges on choosing a reliable partner."

-REMUS

"WHAT'S that?" Guido demanded, taking advantage of our stunned silence.

"It's a door," I said.

"An open door, to be specific," Aahz supplied.

"I can see that for myself!" the bodyguard roared. "I meant what is it doing here?"

"It would look pretty silly standing alone in the middle of the street now, wouldn't it?" Aahz shot back.

Guido purpled. As I've said, these two have a positive talent for getting under each other's skins.

"Now look, all I'm askin'...."

"Guido, could you just hang on for a few minutes until we decide what to do next? Then we'll explain, I promise."

My mind was racing over the problem, and having Aahz and Guido going at each other did nothing for my concentration.

"I think the first thing we should do, partner," Aahz said thoughtfully, "is to get the door closed so that we won't be... interrupted while we work this out."

Rather than answer, I reached out a cautious toe and pushed the door shut. Aahz quickly slipped two of the bolts in place to secure it.

That done, we leaned against the door and looked at each other in silence.

"Well? What do you think?" I asked at last.

"I'm in favor of sealing it up again and forgetting the whole thing."

"Think it's safe to do that?"

"Don't know, really. Not enough information."

We both turned slowly to level thoughtful stares at Guido.

"Say, uh, Guido, could you tell us a little more about those customers who came in this morning?"

"Nothing doin'." Guido crossed his arms. "You're the guys who insist on 'information for information. Right? Well, I'm not telling you anything more until somebody tells me about that door. I mean, I'm supposed to be your bodyguard and nobody bothers to tell me there's another way into this place?"

Aahz bared his teeth and started forward, but I caught him by the shoulder.

"He's right, partner. If we want his help, we owe him an explanation."

We locked eyes again for a moment, then he shrugged and retreated.

"Actually, Guido, the explanation is very simple. ..."

"That'll be a first," the bodyguard grumbled.

In a bound, Aahz was across the room and had Guido by the shirt front.

"You wanted an explanation? Then SHUT UP AND LET HIM EXPLAIN!"

Now Guido is no lightweight, and he's never been short in the courage department. Still, there's nothing quite like Aahz when he's really mad.

"O-Okay! Sorry! Go ahead. Boss. I'm listening." Aahz released his grip and returned to his place by the door, winking at me covertly as he went.

"What happened is this," I said, hiding a smile.

"Aahz and I found that door when we first moved in here. We didn't like the looks of it, so we decided to leave it alone. That's all."

"That's all!? A back door that even you admit looks dangerous and all you do is ignore it? And if that wasn't bad enough, you don't even bother to tell your bodyguards about it? Of all the lame brained, half..."

Aahz cleared his throat noisily, and Guido regained control of himself... rapidly.

"Aahh . . . what I mean to say is ... oh well. That's all behind us now. Could you give me a little more information now that the subject's out in the open? What's on the other side of that door, anyway?"

"We don't know," I admitted.

"YOU DON'T KNOW?" Guido shrieked.

"What we do know," Aahz interrupted hastily, "is what isn't on the other side. What isn't there is any dimension we know about."

Guido blinked, then shook his head. "I don't get it. Could you run that past me again ... real slow?"

"Let me try," I said. "Look, Guido, you already know about dimensions, right? How we're living in the dimension Deva, which is an entirely different world than our own home dimension of Klah? Well, the people here, the Deveels, are masters of dimension travel to a point where they build their houses across the dimension barriers. That's how come this place is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside. The door is in Deva, but the rest of the house is in another dimension. That means if we go through that door, the back door that we've just shown you, we'd be in another world ... one we know nothing about. That's why we were willing to leave it sealed up rather than stick our noses out into a completely unknown situation."

"I still think you should have checked it out," the bodyguard insisted stubbornly.

"Think again," Aahz supplied. "You've only seen two dimensions. Skeeve here has visited a dozen. I've been to over a hundred myself. The Deveels you see here at the Bazaar, on the other hand, know over a thousand different dimensions."

"So?"

"So we think they gave us this place because it opens into a dimension that they don't want. . . 'don't want as in 'scared to death of. Now, you've seen what a Deveel will brave to turn a profit. Do you want to go exploring in a world that's too mean for them to face?"

"I see what you mean."

"Besides." Aahz finished triumphantly, "take another look at that door. It's got more locks and bolts than three ordinary bank vaults."

"Somebody opened it," Guido said pointedly. That took some of the wind out of Aahz's sails.

Despite himself, he shot a nervous glance at the door. "Well... a good thief with a lock pick working from this side...."

"Some of these locks weren't picked, Aahz."

I had been taking advantage of their discussion to do a little snooping, and now held up one of my discoveries for their inspection. It was a padlock with the metal shackle snapped off. There were several of them scattered about, as if someone had gotten impatient with the lock pick and simply torn the rest of them apart with his hands.

Guido pursed his lips in a silent whistle. "Man, that's strong. What kind of person could do that?"

"That's what we've been trying to get you to tell us," Aahz said nastily. "Now, if you don't mind, what were those customers like?"

"Three of them . . . two men and a woman . . . fairly young-looking, but nothing special. Klahds by the look of 'em. Come to think of it, they did seem a bit nervous, but I thought it was just because they were coming to see a magician."

"Well, now they're on the other side of the door." Aahz scooped up one of the undamaged locks and snapped it into place. "I don't think they can pick locks, or break them if they can't reach 'em. They're there, which is their problem, self-inflicted I might add, and we're here. End of puzzle. End of problem."

"Do you really think so, Aahz?"

"Trust me."

Somehow that phrase struck a familiar chord in my memory, and the echoes weren't pleasant. I was about to raise this point with Aahz when Nunzio poked his head in the door.

"Hey, Boss. You got visitors."

"See?" my partner exclaimed, beaming. "I told you things could only get better! It's not even noon and we've got more customers."

"Actually," Nunzio clarified, "it's a delegation of Deveels. I think it's the landlord."

"The landlord?" Aahz echoed hollowly.

"See how much better things have gotten?" I said with a disgusted smirk. "And it's not even noon."

"Shall I run 'em off, Boss?" Guido suggested.

"I think you'd better see 'em," Nunzio advised. "They seem kind'a upset. Something about us harboring fugitives."

Aahz and I locked gazes in silence, which was only natural as there was nothing more to be said. With a vague wave that bordered on a nervous tick, I motioned for Nunzio to show the visitors in.

As expected, it was the same delegation of four from the Devan Chamber of Commerce who had originally hired us to work for the Bazaar, headed by our old adversary, Hay-ner. Last time we dealt with him, we had him over a barrel and used the advantage mercilessly. While he had agreed to our terms, I always suspected it had hurt his Devan pride to cut such a generous deal and that he had been waiting ever since to pay us back. From the smile on his face as he entered our reception room, it appeared he felt his chance had finally come.

"Aahh, Master Skeeve," he said. "How good of you to see us so promptly without an appointment. I know how busy you are, so I'll come right to the point. I believe there are certain individuals in residence here that our organization is most anxious to speak with. If you would be so kind as to summon them, we won't trouble you further."

"Wait a minute, Hay-ner," Aahz put in before I could respond. "What makes you think the people you're looking for are here?"

"Because they were seen entering your tent less than an hour ago and haven't come out yet," said the largest of Hay-ner's back-up team.

I noticed that unlike Hay-ner, he wasn't smiling. In fact, he looked down-right angry.

"He must mean the ones who came in earlier," Nunzio suggested helpfully. "You know. Boss, the two guys with the broad."

Aahz rolled his eyes in helpless frustration, and for once I was inclined to agree with him.

"Umm, Nunzio," I said, staring at the ceiling, "why don't you and Guido wait outside while we take care of this?"

The two bodyguards trooped outside in silence, though I noticed that Guido glared at his cousin with such disdain that I suspected a stern dressing-down would take place even before I could get to him myself. The Mob is no more tolerant than magicians of staff members who say more than they should in front of the opposition.

"Now that we've established that we all know who we're talking about and that they're here," Hay-ner said, rubbing his hands together, "call them out and we'll finish this once and for all."

"Not so fast," I interrupted. "First of all, neither of us have laid eyes on those folks you're looking for, because, second of all, they aren't here. They took it on the lam out the back door before we could meet them."

"Somehow, I don't expect you to take our word for it," Aahz added. "So feel free to search the place."

The Deveel's smile broadened, and I was conscious of cold sweat breaking out on my brow.

"That won't be necessary. You see, whether I believe you or not is of little consequence. Even if we searched, I'm sure you would be better at hiding things than we would be at finding them. All that really matters is that we've established that they did come in here, and that makes them your responsibility."

I wasn't sure exactly what was going on here, but I was sure that I was liking it less and less with each passing moment.

"Wait a minute, Hay-ner," I began. "What do you mean 'We're responsible'? Responsible for what?"

"Why, for the fugitives, of course. Don't you remember? When we agreed to let you use this place rent-free, part of the deal was that if anyone of this household broke any of the Bazaar rules, and either disappeared off to another dimension or otherwise refused to face the charges, that you would personally take responsibility for their actions. It's a standard clause in any Bazaar lease."

"Aahz," I said testily, "you cut the deal. Was there a clause like that in it?"

"There was," he admitted. "But I was thinking of Tananda and Chumley at the time . . . and we'll stand behind them anytime. Massha, too. It never occurred to me that they'd try to claim that anyone who walked through our door was a member of our household. I don't see how they can hope to prove...."

"We don't have to prove that they're in your household," Hay-ner smiled. "You have to prove they aren't."

"That's crazy," Aahz exploded. "How can we prove...."

"Can it, Aahz. We can't prove it. That's the point.

All right, Hay-ner. You've got us. Now what exactly have these characters done that we're responsible for and what are our options? I thought one of the big sales points of the Bazaar was that there weren't any rules here."

"There aren't many," the Deveel said, "but the few that do exist are strictly enforced. The specific rule your friends broke involves fraud." He quickly held up a hand to suppress my retort. "I know what you're going to say. Fraud sounds like a silly charge with all the hard bargaining that goes on

here at the Bazaar, but to us it's a serious matter. While we pride ourselves in driving a hard bargain, once the deal is made you get the goods you were promised. Sometimes there are specific details omitted in describing the goods, but anything actually said is true. That is our reputation and the continued success of the Bazaar depends on that reputation being scrupulously maintained. If a trader or merchant sells something claiming it to be magical and it turns out to have no powers at all, that's fraud ... and if the perpetrators are allowed to go unpunished, it could mean the end of the Bazaar as we know it."

"Actually," I said dryly, "all I was going to do was protest you billing them as our friends, but I'll let it go. What you haven't mentioned is our options."

Hay-ner shrugged. "There are only three, really. You can pay back the money they took falsely plus a twenty-five percent fine, accept permanent banishment from the Bazaar, or you can try to convince your fr-aahh, I mean the fugitives to return to the Bazaar to settle matters themselves."

"I see . . . Very well. You've had your say. Now please leave so my partner and I can discuss our position on the matter."

Aahz took care of seeing them out while I plunged into thought as to what we should do. When he returned, we both sat in silence for the better part of an hour before either of us spoke. "Well," I said at last, "what do you think?"

"Banishment from the Bazaar is out!" Aahz snarled. "Not only would it destroy our reputations, I'm not about to get run out of the Bazaar and our home over something as idiotic as this!"

"Agreed," I said grimly. "Even though it occurs to me that Hay-ner is bluffing on that option. He wants us to stick around the Bazaar as much as we want to stay. He was the one who hired us in the first place, remember? I think he's expecting us to ante up and pay the money. That way he gets back some of the squeeze he so grudgingly parted with. Somehow the idea of giving in to that kind of pressure really galls me." Aahz nodded.

"Me too."

There followed several more minutes of silence.

"Okay," Aahz said finally, "who's going to say it?" "We're going to have to go after them." I sighed. "Half right," Aahz corrected. "I'm going to have to go after them. Partner or not, we're talking about hitting a totally new dimension here, and it's too dangerous for someone at your level of magical skill."

"My level? How about you? You don't have any powers at all. If it's too dangerous for me, what's supposed to keep you safe?"

"Experience," he said loftily. "I'm used to doing this, and you aren't. End of argument."

" 'End of argument' nothing! Just how do you propose to leave me behind if I don't agree?"

"That's easy," Aahz grinned. "See who's standing in the corner?"

I turned to look where he was pointing, and that's the last thing I remembered for a long time.

Chapter Three:

"Reliable information is a must for successful planning."

-C. COLUMBUS

"HEY! Hot stuff! Wake up!! You okay?"

If I led a different kind of life, those words would have been uttered by a voluptuous vision of female loveliness. As it was, they were exclaimed by Massha.

This was one of the first things that penetrated the fogginess of my mind as I struggled to regain consciousness. I'm never at my best first thing in the morning, even when I wake up leisurely of my own accord. Having wakefulness forced upon me by someone else only guarantees that my mood will be less than pleasant.

However groggy I might be feeling, though, there was no mistaking the fact that it was Massha shaking me awake. Even through unfocused eyes, her form was unmistakable. Imagine, if you will, the largest, fattest woman you've ever met. Now expand that image by fifty percent in all directions, top it off with garish orange hair, and false eyelashes and purple lipstick, and adorn it with a wheelbarrow load of gaudy jewelry. See what I mean? I could recognize Massha a mile away on a dark night... blindfolded.

"Of course I'm okay, apprentice'." I snarled. "Don't you have any lessons you're supposed to be practicing or something?"

"Are you sure? she pressed mercilessly.

"Yes, I'm sure. Why do you ask? Can't a fellow take a little nap without being badgered about it?"

"It's just that you don't usually take naps in the middle of the reception room floor."

That got my attention, and I forced my eyes into focus. She was right! For some reason I was sprawled out on the floor. Now what could have possessed me to....

Then it all came back! Aahz! The expedition into the new dimension!

I sat bolt upright. . . and regretted it immediately. A blinding headache assaulted me with ice pick intensity, and my stomach flipped over and landed on its back with all the grace of a lump of overcooked oatmeal.

Massha caught me by the shoulder as I started to list.

"Steady there, High Roller. Looks like your idea of 'okay' and mine are a little out of synch."

Ignoring her, I felt the back of my head cautiously and discovered a large, tender lump behind my ear. If I had had any doubts as to what had happened, they were gone now.

"That bloody Pervert!" I said, flinching at the new wave of pain brought on by the sound of my own voice. "He must have knocked me out and gone in alone!"

"You mean Aahz? Dark, green, and scaly himself? I don't get it. Why would your own partner sucker-punch you?"

"So he could go through the door without me. I made it very clear that I didn't want to be left behind on this caper."

"Door? What door?" Massha said with a frown. "I know you two have your secrets, Boss, but I think you'd better fill me in on a few more details as to exactly what's going on around here."

As briefly as I could, I brought her up to date on the day's events, including the explanation as to why Aahz and I had never said anything about the house's mysterious back door. Being a seasoned dimension traveler herself, she grasped the concept of an unlisted dimension and its potential dangers much more rapidly than Guide and Nunzio.

"What I don't understand is even if he didn't want you along, why didn't he take someone else as a backup?"

"Like who?" I said with a wry grimace. "We've already established that you're my apprentice and he doesn't give you orders without clearing them through me. He's never been impressed with Guido and Nunzio. Tananda and Chumley are off on their own contracts and aren't due back for several days. Even Gus is taking a well-earned vacation with Berfert. Besides, he knows good and well that if he started building a team and excluded me, there'd be some serious problems before the dust settled. I wouldn't take something like that lying down!"

"Don't look now, but you just did," my apprentice pointed out dryly, "though I have to admit he sort of forced it on you."

With that, she slid a hand under each of my armpits and picked me up, setting me gently on my feet.

"Well, now what? I supposed you're going to go charging after him with blood in your eye. Mind if I tag along? Or are you bound and determined to be as stupid as he is?"

As a matter of fact, that was exactly what I had been planning to do. The undisguised sarcasm in her voice combined with the unsettling wobbliness of my legs, however, led me to reconsider.

"No," I said carefully. "One of us blundering around out there is enough ... or one too many, depending on how you count it. While I still think I should have gone along, Aahz has dealt this hand, so it's up to him to play it out. It's up to me to mind the store until he gets back."

Massha cocked an eyebrow at me.

"That makes sense," she said, "though I'll admit I'm a little surprised to hear you say it."

"I'm a responsible businessman now." I shrugged. "I can't afford to go off half-cocked like a rash kid anymore. Besides, I have every confidence in my partner's ability to handle things."

Those were brave words, and I meant them. Two days later, however, this particular 'responsible businessman' was ready to go off fully cocked. Guido and Nunzio ceased to complain about my sneaking off alone . . . mostly because I didn't go out at all! In fact, I spent most of my waking hours and all of my sleeping hours (though I'll admit I didn't sleep much) in the reception room on the off-chance that I could greet Aahz on his triumphant return.

Unfortunately, my vigil went unrewarded. I did my best to hide my concern, but I needn't have bothered. As the hours marched on, my staff's worries grew until most of my time was spent telling them, "No, he isn't back yet. When he gets here, I'll let you know." Even Guido, who never really got along with Aahz, took to stopping by at least once an hour for a no-progress report.

Finally, as a salve for my own nerves, I called everyone into the reception room for a staff meeting.

"What I want to know is how long are we just going to sit around before we admit that something's gone wrong?" Guido muttered for the fifth time.

"How long do you figure it takes to find a fugitive in a strange dimension?" I shot back. "How long would it take you to find them if they were on Klah, Guido? We've got to give him some time."

"How much time?" he countered. "It's already been two days...."

"Tananda and Chumley will be back any time now," Massha interrupted. "Do you think they'll just sit around on their hands when they find out that Aahz is out there all alone?"

"I thought you were the one who thought that going after him was a stupid idea?"

"I still do. Now do you want to know what I think of the idea of doing nothing!"

Before I could answer, a soft knock sounded at the door ... the back door!

"See!" I crowed triumphantly. "I told you he would be back!"

"That doesn't sound like his knock," Guido observed suspiciously.

"And why should he knock?" Massha added. "The door hasn't been locked since he left."

In my own relief and enthusiasm, their remarks went unnoticed. In a flash I was at the door, wrenching it open while voicing the greeting I had been rehearsing for two days.

"It's about time, part... ner."

It wasn't Aahz.

In fact, the being outside the door didn't look anything at all like Aahz. What was doubly surprising, though, was that I recognized her!

We had never really met. . . not to exchange names, but shortly after meeting Aahz I had been strung up by an angry mob while impersonating her, and I had seen her in the crowd when I successfully "interviewed" for the job of court magician at Possletum.

What I had never had a chance to observe first-hand was her radiant complexion framed by waves of sungold hair, or the easy grace with which she carried herself, or the....

"It's the Great Skeeve, right? Behind the open mouth?"

Her voice was so musical it took me a few moments to zero in on what she had said and realize that she was expecting an answer.

"Aahh ... yes. I mean, at your service,"

"Glad to finally meet you face-to-face," she said briskly, glancing at Guido and Massha nervously. "I've been looking for an excuse for a while, and I guess this is it. Got some news for you . . . about your apprentice."

I was still having problems focusing on what she was saying. Not only was her voice mesmerizing, she was easily the loveliest woman I had ever met. . . well, girl actually. She couldn't have been much older than me. What's more, she seemed to like me. That is, she kept smiling hesitantly and her deep blue eyes never left mine. Now, I had gotten respect from my colleagues and from beings at the Bazaar who knew my reputation, but never from anyone who looked like Then her words sank in. "My apprentice?"

I stole an involuntary glance at Massha before I realized the misunderstanding.

"Oh, you mean Aahz. He's not my apprentice any more. He's my partner. Please come in. We were just talking about him."

I stood to one side of the door and invited her in with a grand sweeping gesture. I'd never tried it before, but I had seen it used a couple of times while I was working the court at Possletum, and it had impressed me.

"Umm-Boss? Could I talk to you for a minute?"

"Later, Guido."

I repeated the gesture, and the girl responded with a quick smile that lit up the room.

"Thanks for the invite," she said, "but I'll have to take a rain check. I really can't stay. In fact, I shouldn't be here at all. I just thought that someone should let you know that your friend . . . Aahz is it? Anyway, your friend is in jail."

That brought me back to earth in a hurry.

"Aahz? In jail? For what?"

"Murder."

"MURDER!" I shrieked, dropping all attempts to be urbane. "But Aahz wouldn't. . ."

"Don't shout at me! Oh, I knew I shouldn't have come. Look, I know he didn't do it. That's why I had to let you know what was going on. If you don't do something, they're going to execute him . . . and they know how to execute demons over here."

I spun around to face the others.

"Massha! Go get your jewelry case. Guido, Nunzio! Gear up. We're going to pay a little call on our neighbors."

I tried to keep my voice calm and level, but somehow the words came out a bit more intense than I had intended.

"Not so fast. Boss," Guido said. "There's something you oughta know first."

"Later. I want you to...."

"NOW, Boss. It's important!"

"WHAT IS IT!"

Needless to say, I was not eager to enter into any prolonged conversations just now.

"She's one of 'em."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The three that went out through the back door. The ones your partner is chasing. She's the broad."

Thunderstruck, I turned to the girl for confirmation, only to find the doorway was empty. My mysterious visitor had disappeared as suddenly as she had arrived.

"This could be a trap, you know," Massha said thoughtfully.

"She's right." Guido nodded. "Take it from someone who's been on the lam himself. When you're running from the law and there are only a couple of people who can find you, it gets real tempting to eliminate that link. We've only got her word that your partner's in trouble."

"It wouldn't take a mental giant to figure out that you and Aahz are the most likely hunters for the Deveels to hire. After all, they knew whose house they were cutting through for their getaway," Massha added. Guido rose to his feet and started pacing. "Right," he said. "Now suppose they've got Aahz. Can you think of a better way to bag the other half of the pair than by feeding you a line about your partner being in trouble so you'll come charging into whatever trap they've laid out? The whole set-up stinks, Boss. I don't know about strange dimensions, but I do know about criminals. As soon as you step through that door, you're gonna be a sitting duck."

"Are you quite through?"

Even to my ears my voice sounded icy, but for a change I didn't care.

Guido and Massha exchanged glances, then nodded silently.

"Very well. You may be right, and I appreciate your concern for my well-being. HOWEVER ..."

My voice sank to a deadly hiss.

". . . what if you're wrong? What if our fugitive is telling the truth? You've all been on my case about not doing anything to help Aahz. Do you really think I'm just going to sit here while my partner AND friend burns for a crime he didn't commit ... on the off chance that getting involved might be dangerous to me?"

With great effort I forced my tones back to normal.

"In ten minutes I'm going through that door after Aahz . . . and if I'm walking into a trap, it had better be a good one. Now do any of you want to come with me, or am I going it alone?"

Chapter Four:

"It's useless to try to plan for the unexpected ... by definition!"

-A. HITCHCOCK

ACTUALLY, it was more like an hour before we were really ready to go, though for me it seemed like a lot longer. Still, even I had to admit that not taking the proper preparations for this venture would not only be foolish, it would be downright suicidal!

It was decided that Nunzio would stay behind so there would be someone at our base to let Tananda and Chumley know what was going on when they returned. Needless to say, he was less than thrilled by the assignment.

"But I'm supposed to be your bodyguard!" he argued. "How'm I supposed to guard you if I'm sittin' back here while you're on the front lines?"

"By being sure our support troops get the information they need to follow us," I said.

As much as I disliked having to argue with Nunzio, I would rather dig in my heels against half a dozen Mob type bodyguards than have to explain to Tananda and Chumley why they weren't included in this rescue mission.

"We could leave a note."

"No."

"We could...."

"NO! I want you here. Is that plain enough?"

The bodyguard heaved a heavy sigh. "Okay, Boss. I'll hang in here until they show up. Then the three of us will...."

"No!" I said again. "Then Tananda and Chumley will come in after us. You're going to stay here."

"But Boss...."

"Because if Hay-ner and his crew show up again, someone has to be here to let them know we're on the job and that we haven't just taken off for the tall timber. Assuming for the moment that we're going to make it back, we need our exit route, and you're going to be here making sure it stays open. All we need is for our hosts to move in a new tenant while we're gone . . . say, someone who decides to brick up this door while we're on the other side."

Nunzio thought this through in silence.

"What if you don't come back?" he asked finally.

"We'll burn that bridge when we come to it," I sighed. "But remember, we aren't that easy to kill. At least one of us will probably make it back."

Fortunately, my mind was wrenched away from that unpleasant train of thought by the arrival of Guido.

"Ready to go. Boss."

Despite the desperateness of the situation and the haunting time pressures, I found myself gaping at him.

"What's that?" I managed at last.

Guido was decked out in a long dark coat and wearing a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses.

"These? These are my work clothes," he said proudly. "They're functional as well as decorative."

"They're what?"

"What I mean is, not only do people find 'em intimidating, the trench coat has all these little pockets inside, see? That's where I carry my hardware."

"But...."

"Hi, Hot Stuff. Nice outfit, Guido."

"Thanks! I was just telling the Boss here about it."

Massha was dressed ... or should I say undressed in her work clothes. A brief vest struggled to cover even part of her massive torso, while an even briefer bottom was on the verge of surrendering its battle completely.

"Ummm ... Massha?" I said carefully. "I've always meant to ask. Why don't you ... ummm ... wear more?"

"I like to dress cool when we're going into a hot situation," she winked. "You see, when things speed up, I get a little nervous ... and the only thing worse than havin' a fat broad around is havin' a sweaty fat broad around."

"I think it's a sexy outfit," Guido chimed in. "Reminds me of the stuff my old man's moll used to wear."

"Well thanks. Dark and Deadly. I'd say your old man had good taste ... but I never tasted him."

I studied them thoughtfully as they shared a laugh over Massha's joke. Any hope of a quiet infiltration of this unknown dimension was rapidly disintegrating. Either Guido or Massha alone was eye-catching, but together they were about as inconspicuous as a circus parade and an army maneuver sharing the same road. Then it occurred to me that, not knowing what things were like

where we were heading, they might fit in and I would stand out. It was a frightening thought. If everybody there looked like this....

I forced the thought from my mind. No use scaring myself any more than I had to before there was information to back it up. What was important was that my two assistants were scared. They were trying hard not to show it, but in doing so, each was dropping into old patterns, slipping behind old character masks. Guido was playing his "tough gangster" bit to the hilt, while Massha was once more assuming her favorite "vamp" character with a vengeance. The bottom line, though, was that, scared or not, they were willing to back my move or die trying. It would have been touching, if it weren't for the fact that it meant they were counting on me for leadership. That meant I had to stay calm and confident... no matter how scared I felt myself. It only occurred to me as an afterthought that, in many ways, leadership was the mask I was learning to slip behind when things got tight. It made me wonder briefly if anyone ever really knew what they were doing or felt truly confident, or if life was simply a mass game of role-playing.

"Okay. Are we ready?" I asked, shrugging off my wandering thoughts. "Massha? Got your jewelry?"

"Wearing most of it, and the rest is right here," she said, patting the pouch on her belt.

While I will occasionally make snide mental comments about my apprentice's jewelry, it serves a dual purpose. Massha's baubles are in reality a rather extensive collection of magical gimmicks she has accumulated over the years. How extensive? Well, before she signed on as my apprentice to learn real magic, she was holding down a steady job as the magician for the city-state of Ta-hoe on the dimension of Jahk solely on the strength of her collected mechanical "powers." While I agreed with Aahz that real magic was preferable to mechanical in that it was less likely to malfunction (a lesson learned from first-hand experience) I sure didn't mind having her arsenal along for back-up.

"You know that tracking ring? The one you used to find the king? Any chance there's an extra tucked away in your pouch?"

"Only have the one," she said, wagging the appropriate finger.

I cursed mentally, then made the first of what I feared would be many unpleasant decisions on this venture.

"Give it to Nunzio. Tananda and Chumley will need it to find us."

"But if we leave it behind, how are we going to find your partner?"

"We'll have to figure out something, but we can't afford to divide our forces. Otherwise, even if we get Aahz, we could still end up wandering around out there trying to find the other half of the rescue team."

"If you say so. Hot Stuff," she grimaced, handing over the ring, "but I hope you know what you're doing."

"So do I, Massha, so do I. Okay, gang, let's see what our backyard is really like!"

From the outside, our place looked a lot more impressive than the side that showed in the Bazaar. It really did look like a castle ... a rather ominous one at that, squatting alone on a hilltop. I really didn't study it too close, though, beyond being able to recognize it again for our trip out. As might be expected, my main attention was focused on the new dimension itself.

"Kinda dark, ain't it."

Guide's comment was more statement than question, and he was right.

Wherever we were, the lighting left a lot to be desired. At first I thought it was night, which puzzled me, as so far in my travels all dimensions seemed to be on the same sun-up and sun-down schedule. Then my eyes adjusted to the gloom and I realized the sky was simply heavily overcast... to a point where next to no light at all penetrated, giving a night-like illusion to the day.

Aside from that, from what I could see, this new land seemed pretty much like any of the others I had visited:

Trees, underbrush, and a road leading to or from the castle, depending on which way you were facing. I think it was Tananda who was fond of saying "If you've seen one dimension, you've seen them all." Chumley, her brother, argued that the reason for the geologic similarities was that all the dimensions we traveled were different realities off the same base. This always struck me as being a bit redundant . . . "They're all alike because they're the same? C'mon Chumley!", but his rebuttals always left me feeling like I'd been listening to someone doing readings in another language, so of late I've been tending to avoid the discussions.

"Well, Hot Stuff, what do we do now?"

For a change, I had an answer for this infuriating question.

"This road has to go somewhere. Just the fact that it exists indicates we aren't alone in this dimension."

"I thought we already knew that," Guido said under his breath. "That's why we're here."

I gave him my best dark glare.

"I believe there was some debate as to whether or not we were being lied to about Aahz being held prisoner. If there's a road here, it's a cinch that neither my partner nor the ones he was chasing built it. That means we have native types to deal with . . . possibly hostile."

"Right," Massha put in quickly. "Put a sock in it, Guido. I want to hear our plan of action, and I don't like being kept waiting by hecklers."

The bodyguard frowned, but kept his silence.

"Okay. Now, what we've got to do is follow this road and find out where it goes. Hug the side of the road and be ready to disappear if you hear anybody coming. We don't know what the locals look like, and until I have a model to work from, it's pointless for me to try to disguise us."

With those general marching orders, we made our way through the dark along the road, moving quietly to avoid tipping our hand to anyone ahead of us. In a short time we came up to our first decision point. The road we were on ended abruptly when it met another, much larger thoroughfare. My assistants looked at me expectantly. With a shrug I made the arbitrary decision and led them off to the right down this new course. As we went, I reflected with some annoyance that even though both Massha and Guido knew that I was as new to this terrain as they were, it somehow fell to me to choose the path.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of voices ahead, coming our way. The others heard it too, and without word or signal we melted into the underbrush. Squatting down, I peered through the gloom toward the road, anxious to catch my first glimpse of the native life forms.

I didn't have long to wait. Two figures appeared, a young couple by the look of them, talking and laughing merrily as they went. They looked pretty normal to me, which was a distinct relief, considering the forms I had had to imitate in some of the other dimensions. They were humanoid enough to pass for Klahds... or Jahks, actually, as they were a bit pale. Their dress was not dissimilar from my own, though a bit more colorful. Absorbing all this in a glance, I decided to make my first try for information. I mean, after all my fears, they were so familiar it was almost a letdown, so why not bull ahead? Compared with some of the beings I've had to deal with in the past, this looked like a piece of cake.

Signaling the others to stay put, I stepped out onto the road behind my target couple.

"Excuse me!" I called "I'm new to this area and in need of a little assistance. Could you direct me to the nearest town?"

Translation pendants were standard equipment for dimension travel, and as I was wearing one now, I had no fear of not being understood.

The couple turned to face me, and I was immediately struck by their eyes. The "whites" of their eyes glowed a dark red, sending chills down my spine. It occurred to me that I might have studied the locals a bit longer before I tried to pass myself off as a native. It also occurred to me that I had already committed myself to this course of action and would have to bluff my way through it regardless. Finally, it occurred to me that I was a suicidal idiot and that I hoped Massha and Guido were readying their back-up weapons to save me from my own impatience.

Strangely enough, the couple didn't seem to notice anything unusual about my appearance.

"The nearest town? That would be Blut. It's not far, we just came from there. It's got a pretty wild night life, if you're into that kind of thing."

There was something about his mouth that nagged at the edges of my mind. Unfortunately, I couldn't look at it directly without breaking eye contact, so, buoyed by my apparent acceptance, I pushed ahead with the conversation.

"Actually, I'm not too big on night life. I'm trying to run down an old friend of mine I've lost touch with. Is there a post office or a police station in Blut I could ask at?"

"Better than that," the man laughed. "The one you want to talk to is the Dispatcher. He keeps tabs on everybody. The third warehouse on your left as you enter town. He's converted the whole second floor into an office. If he can't help you, nobody can."

As vital as the information was, I only paid it partial attention. When the man laughed, I had gotten a better look at his mouth. His teeth were....

"Look at his teeth!" the girl gasped, speaking for the first time.

"My teeth?" I blinked, realizing with a start that she was staring at me with undisguised astonishment.

Her companion, in the meantime, had paled noticeably and was backing away on unsteady legs.

"You ... you're ... Where did you come from?"

Trying my best to maintain a normal manner until I had figured out what was going on, I moved forward to keep our earlier conversational distance.

"The castle on the hill back there. I was just...."

"THE CASTLE!?!"

In a flash the couple turned and sprinted away from me down the road.

"Monster!! Help!! MONSTER!!!"

I actually spun and looked down the road behind me, trying to spot the object of their terror. Looking at the empty road, however, it slowly began to sink in. They were afraid of me? Monster?

Of all the reactions I had tried to anticipate for our reception in this new land, I had never in my wildest imaginings expected this.

Me? A monster?

"I think we've got problems. High Roller," Massha said as she and Guido emerged from the brush at my side.

"I'll say. Unless I'm reading the signs all wrong, they're afraid of me."

She heaved a great sigh and shook her head.

"That's not what I'm talking about. Did you see their teeth?"

"I saw his," I said "The canines were long and pointed. Pretty weird, huh?"

"Not all that weird, Hot Stuff. Think about it. My bet is that you were just talking to a couple of vampires!"

Chapter Five:

"To survive, one must be able to adapt to changing situations."
-TYRANNOSAURUS REX

"VAMPIRES," I said carefully.

"Sure. It all fits." Massha nodded. "The pale skin, the sharp fangs, the red eyeliner, the way they turned into bats...."

"Turned into bats?"

"You missed it. Boss," Guido supplied. "You were lookin' behind you when they did it. Wildest thing I ever saw. One second they was runnin' for their lives, and the next they're flutterin' up into the dark. Are all the other dimensions like this?"

"Vampires...."

Actually, my shock wasn't all that great. Realizing the things Aahz and I had run into cruising the so-called "known and safe" dimensions, I had expected something a bit out of the ordinary in this one. If anything, I was a bit relieved. The second shoe had been dropped . . . and it really wasn't all that bad! That is, it could have been worse. (If hanging around with Aahz had taught me anything, it was that things could always be worse!) The repetitive nature of my conversational brilliance was merely a clever ploy to cover my mental efforts to both digest this new bit of information and decide what to do with it.

"Vampires are rare in any dimension," my apprentice replied, stepping into the void to answer Guido's question. "What's more, they're pretty much feared universally. What I can't figure out is why those two were so scared of Skeeve here."

"Then again," I said thoughtfully, "there's the question of whether or not we can safely assume the whole dimension is populated with beings like the two we just met. I know it's a long shot, but we might have run into the only two vampires in the place."

"I dunno. High Roller. They acted pretty much at home here, and they sure didn't think you'd find anything unusual about their appearance. My guess is that they're the norm and we're the exceptions around here."

"Whatever," I said, reaching a decision at last, "they're the only two examples we have to work with so far, so that's what we'll base our actions on until proven different."

"So what do we do against a bunch of vampires?"

As a bodyguard, Guido seemed a bit uneasy about our assessment of the situation.

"Relax," I smiled. "The first order of business is to turn on the old reliable disguise spell. Just a few quick touch-ups and they won't be able to tell us apart from the natives. We could walk through a town of vampires and they'd never spot us."

With that, I closed my eyes and went to work. Like I told the staff, this was going to be easy. Maintain everyone's normal appearance except for paler skin, longer canines, and a little artful reddening of the eyes, and the job was done.

"Okay," I said, opening my eyes again. "What's next?"

"I don't like to quote you back at yourself. Hot Stuff," Massha drawled, "but didn't you say something about disguises being the first thing before we went any further?"

"Of course. That's why I just... wait a minute. Are you trying to say we still have the same appearance as before I cast the spell?"

One of the problems with casting a disguise spell is that as the caster, I can never see the effects. That is, I see people as they really are whether the spell is on or not. I had gotten so used to relying on the effects of this particular spell that it had never occurred to me that it might not work.

Massha and Guido were looking at each other with no small degree of concern.

"ymmm ... maybe you forgot."

"Try again."

"That's right! This time remember to...."

"Hold it, you two," I ordered in my most commanding tone. "From your reactions, I perceive that the answer to my questions is 'yes.' That is, that the spell didn't work. Now just ease up a second and let me think. Okay?"

For a change they listened to me and lapsed into a respectful silence. I might have taken a moment to savor the triumph if I wasn't so worried about the problem.

The disguise spell was one of the first spells I had learned, and until now was one of my best and most reliable tools. If it wasn't working, something was seriously wrong. Now I knew that stepping through the door hadn't lessened my knowledge of that particular spell, so that meant that if something was haywire, it would have to be in the....

"Hey, Hot Stuff! Check the force lines!"

Apparently my apprentice and I had reached the conclusion simultaneously. A quick magical scan of the sky overhead and the surrounding terrain confirmed my worst fears. At first I thought there were no force lines at all. Then I realized that they were there, but so faint that it took nearly all of my reserve power just to detect them.

"What's all this about force lines?" Guido demanded.

Massha heaved an impatient sigh.

"If you're going to run with this crowd. Dark and Deadly, you'd best start learning a little about the magic biz ... or at least the vocabulary. Force lines are invisible streams of energy that flow through the ground and the air. They're the source of power we tap into when we do our bibbity-bobbity-boo schtick. That means that in a land like this one, where the force lines are either non-existent or very weak...."

". . . you can't do squat," the bodyguard finished for her. "Hey, Boss! If what she says is true, how come those two you just met could still do that bat-trick?"

"By being very, very good in the magic department. To do so much with so little means they don't miss a trick . . . pardon the pun ... in tapping and using force lines. In short, they're a lot better than either Massha or me at the magic game."

"That makes sense." Massha nodded. "In any dimension I've been in that had vampires, they were some of the strongest magic-slingers around. If this is what they have to train on, I can see why they run hog-wild when they hit a dimension where the force lines are both plentiful and powerful."

I rubbed my forehead, trying desperately to think and to forestall the headache I felt coming on. Right on schedule, things were getting worse!

"I don't suppose you have anything in your jewelry collection that can handle disguises, do you?"

Despite our predicament, Massha gave a low laugh.

"Think about it. High Roller. If I had anything that could do disguises, would I walk around looking like this?"

"So we get to take on a world of hot-shot magic types with our own cover fire on low ammo," Guido summarized.

"Okay. So it'll be a little tougher than I thought at first. Just remember my partner has been getting along pretty well these last few years without any powers at all."

"Your partner is currently sitting in the hoosegow for murder," Guido said pointedly. "That's why we're here in the first place. Remember?"

"Besides," I continued, ignoring his comment (that's another skill I've learned from Aahz), "it's never been our intention 'to take on the whole world.' All we want to do is perform a quick hit and run. Grab Aahz and get back out with as little contact with the natives as possible. All this means is that we've got to be a little more careful. That's all."

"What about running down the trio we started out to retrieve?"

I thought briefly about the blonde who had warned us of Aahz's predicament.

"That's part of being more careful," I announced solemnly. "If ... I mean, when we get Aahz out of jail, we'll head for home and count ourselves as lucky. So we ... pay off the Deveels. It's a ... cheap price to ... pay for...."

I realized the staff was looking at me a little askance. I also realized that my words had been gradually slowing to a painful broken delivery as I reached the part about paying off the Deveels.

I cleared my throat and tried again.

"Ummm, let's just say we'll reappraise the situation once we've reached Aahz. Okay?"

The troops still looked a little dubious, so I thought it would be best if I pushed on to the next subject.

"As to the opposition, let's pool our knowledge of vampires so we have an idea of what we're up against. Now, we know they can shape change into bats or dogs...."

"... or just into a cloud of mist," Massha supplied.

"They drink blood," Guido said grimly.

"They don't like bright light, or crosses...."

"... and they can be killed by a stake through their heart or...."

"They drink blood."

"Enough with the drinking blood! Okay, Guido?"

I was starting to get more than a little annoyed with my bodyguard's endless pessimism. I mean, none of us was particularly pleased by the way things were going, but there was nothing to be gained by dwelling on the negatives.

"Sorry, Boss. I guess looking on the dark side of things gets to be a habit in my business."

"Garlic!" Massha exclaimed suddenly.

"What's that?"

"I said 'garlic'," she repeated. "Vampires don't like garlic!"

"That's right! How about it, Guido? Do you have any garlic along?"

The bodyguard actually looked embarrassed.

"Can't stand the stuff," he admitted "The other boys in the Mob used to razz me about it, but it makes me break out in a rash."

Terrific. We probably had the only Mob member in existence who was allergic to garlic. Another brilliant idea shot to hell.

"Well," I said, heaving a sigh, "now we know what we're up against."

"Ummm . . . say. Hot Stuff?" Massha said softly. "All kidding aside. Aren't we a little overmatched on this one? I mean, Dark and Deadly here can hold up his end on the physical protection side, but I'm not sure my jewelry collection is going to be enough to cover us magically."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence," Guido smiled sadly, "but I'm not sure my hardware is going to do us a lick of good against vampires. With the Boss out of action on the magic side...."

"Don't count me out so fast. My magic may not be at full power, but I can still pull off a trick or two if things really get rough."

Massha frowned. "But the force lines...."

"There's one little item I've omitted from your lessons so far, apprentice," I said with a smug little grin. "It hasn't really been necessary what with the energy so plentiful on Deva ... as a matter of fact, I've kind of gotten out of the habit myself. Anyway, what it boils down to is that you don't always tap into a force line to work magic. You can store the energy internally like a battery so that it's there when you need it. While we've been talking, I've been charging up, so I can provide a bit of magical cover as needed. Now, I won't be able to do anything prolonged like a constant disguise spell, and what I've got I'll want to use carefully because it'll take a while to recharge after each use, but we won't be relying on your jewelry completely."

I had expected a certain amount of excitement from the staff when they found out I wasn't totally helpless. Instead, they looked uncomfortable. They exchanged glances, then looked at the sky, then at the ground.

"Ummm . . . does this mean we're going on?" Guido said at last.

"That's right," I said, lips tight. "In fact, I probably would have gone on even if my powers were completely gone. Somewhere out there my partner's in trouble, and I'm not going to back away from at least trying to help him. I'd do the same if it was one of you, but we're talking about Aahz here. He's saved my skin more times than I care to remember. I can't just...."

I caught myself and brought my voice back under control.

"Look," I said, starting again. "I'll admit we never expected this vampire thing when we started out, and the limited magic handicap is enough to give anyone pause. If either or both of you want to head back, you can do it without hard feelings or guilt trips. Really. The only reason I'm pushing on is that I know me. Whatever is up ahead, it can't be any worse than what I would put myself through if I left Aahz alone to die without trying my best to bail him out. But that's me. If you want out, go ahead."

"Don't get your back up. Hot Stuff," Massha chided gently. "I'm still not sure how much help I'm going to be, but I'll tag along. I'd probably have the same problem if anything happened to you and I wasn't there, that you'd have if anything happened to Aahz. I am your apprentice, you know."

"Body guarding ain't much, but it's all I know," Guido said glumly. "I'm supposed to be guardin' that body of yours, so where it goes, I go. I'm just not wild about the odds, know what I mean?"

"Then it's settled," I said firmly. "All right. As I see it, our next stop is Blut."

"Blut," Massha echoed carefully.

"That's right. I want to look up this Dispatcher character and see what he has to say. I mean, a town is a town, and we've all visited strange towns before. What we really need now is information, and the nearest source seems to be Blut."

"The Dispatcher," Massha said without enthusiasm."

"Blut," Guido repeated with even less joyful anticipation.

It occurred to me that while my assistants were bound and determined to stay with me on this caper, if I wanted wholehearted support, I'd better look for it from the natives... a prospect I didn't put much hope in at all.

Chapter Six:

"An agent is a vampire with a telephone!"
-ANY EDITOR

REMEMBER how I said that if you've seen one town, you've seen 'em all? Well, forget it. Even though I've visited a lot of dimensions and seen a lot of towns, I had to admit that Blut looked a little strange.

Everything seemed to be done to death in basic black. (Perhaps "done to death" is an unfortunate turn of a phrase. Whatever.) Mind you, when I say everything, I mean everything. Cobblestones, walls, roof tiles, everything had the same uninspired color scheme. Maybe by itself the black overtones wouldn't have seemed too ominous, if it weren't for the architectural decorations that seemed to abound everywhere you looked. Stone dragons and snakes adorned every roof peak and ledge, along with the inescapable gargoyles and, of course, bats. I don't mean "bats" here, I mean "BATS"!!! Big bats, little bats, bats with their wings half open and others with their wings spread wide . . . BATS!!! The only thing they all seemed to have in common (besides being black) was mouths full of needle-sharp teeth . . . an image which did nothing to further the confidence of my already nervous party. I myself felt the tension increasing as we strode down the street under the noses of those fierce adornments. One almost expected the stone figures to come to life and swoop down on us for a pint or two of dinner.

"Cheerful sort of place, isn't it?" Massha asked, eyeing the rooftops, "I don't like to complain, Boss," Guido put in, lying blatantly, "but I've been in friendlier-looking graveyards."

"Will you both keep your mouths shut!" I snarled, speaking as best I could through tightly pressed lips. "Remember our disguises."

I had indeed turned on my disguise spell as we entered town, but in an effort to conserve magical energy, I had only turned our eyes red. If any of the others on the street, and there were lots of them, happened to spot our non-vampirish teeth, the balloon would go up once and for all. Then again, maybe not. We still hadn't figured out why the couple we met on the road had been so afraid of me, but I wasn't about to bank the success of our mission on anything as flimsy as a hope that the whole town would run at the sight of our undisguised features.

Fortunately, I didn't have to do any magical tinkering' with our wardrobe. If anything, we were a little drab compared to most of the vampires on the street. Though most of them appeared rather young, barely older than me, they came in all shapes and sizes, and were decked out in some of the most colorful and outrageous garb it has ever been my misfortune to encounter as they shouted to each other or wove their way in and out of taverns along the street.

It was night now, the clouds having cleared enough to show a star-studded night sky, and true to their billing, vampires seemed to love the night life.

"If everybody here is vampires," Guido said, ignoring my warning, "how do they find anybody to bite for blood?"

"As far as I can tell," Massha answered, also choosing to overlook the gag order, "they buy it by the bottle."

She pointed to a small group of vampires sitting on a low wall merrily passing a bottle of red liquid back and forth among themselves. Despite our knowledge of the area, I had subconsciously assumed they were drinking wine. Confronted by the inescapable logic that the stuff they were drinking was typed, not aged, my stomach did a fast roll and dip to the right.

"If you two are through sightseeing," I hissed, "let's try to find this Dispatcher character before someone invites us to join them for a drink."

With that, I led off my slightly subdued assistants, nodding and waving at the merrymaking vampires as we went. Actually, the goings on looked like a lot of fun, and I might have been tempted to join in, if it weren't for the urgency of our quest. . . and, of course, the fact that they were vampires.

Following the instructions I had gleaned from the couple on the road before their panicky flight, we found the Dispatcher's place with no problem. Leaving Guido outside as a lookout, Massha and I braved the stairs and entered the Dispatcher's office.

As strange as Blut had appeared, it hadn't prepared me for the room we stepped into.

There were hundreds of glass pictures lining the walls, pictures which depicted moving, living things much like looking into a rack of fishbowls. What was more, the images being displayed were of incredible violence and unspeakable acts being performed on seemingly helpless victims. The overall effect was neither relaxing nor pleasant . . . definitely not something I'd want on the wall at home.

I was so entranced by the pictures, I almost missed the Dispatcher himself until he rose from his desk. Perhaps "rose" is the wrong description. What he actually did was hop down to the floor from his chair which was high to begin with, but made higher by the addition of a pillow to the seat.

He strode forward, beaming widely, with his hand extended for a handshake.

"Hi there Vilhelm's the name Your problem is my problem. Don't sit down Standing problems I solve for free Sitting problems I charge for Reasonable rates Just a minor percentage off the top What can I do for you?"

That was sort of all one sentence in that he didn't pause for breath. He did, however, seize my hand, pump it twice, then repeated the same procedure with Massha, then grabbed my hand again ... all before he stopped talking.

All in all, it was a little overpowering. I had a flash impression of a short, stocky character with plump rosy cheeks and a bad case of the fidgets. I had deliberately tried not to speculate on what the Dispatcher would look like, but a cherub vampire still caught me a little off-guard.

"I... ummm . . . how did you know I have a problem?"

That earned me an extra squeeze of the hand and a wink.

"Nobody comes in here unless they've got a problem," he said, finally slowing down his speech a bit. "I mean, I could always use a bit of help, but does anyone leap forward to lend a hand? Fat chance. Seems like the only time I see another face in the flesh is when it means more work for me. Prove me wrong . . . please! Tell me you came in here to take over for an hour or so to let me duck out for a bit to drink."

"Well, actually, we've got a problem and we were told....,"

"See! What did I tell you? All right. What have you got? A standing or a sitting problem? Standing problems I handle for...."

He was off again. In a desperate effort to keep our visit short, I interrupted his pitch.

"We're looking for a friend who...." "Say no more! A friend! Just a second!"

With that he vaulted back into his chair, grabbed the top off a strange-looking appliance on his desk, diddled with it briefly, then started talking into it.

"Yea Darwin? Vilhelm. I need ... sure...."

Leaning back in his chair, he tucked the gadget under one side of his head and grabbed another.

"This is Vilhelm, Is Kay around? ... Well, put her on when she's done...."

The second gadget slid in under the same ear as the first and he reached for yet another.

"I know I shouldn't ask this," I murmured to Massha, "but what's he doing?"

"Those are telephones," she whispered back as a fourth instrument came into play. "You talk into one end of it and whoever's at the other end can hear you and talk back. It beats running all over town to find an answer."

By this time, the little vampire had so many instruments hung from his shoulders and arms he looked like he was being attacked by a nest of snakes. He seemed to be handling it well, though, talking first into one, then another, apparently keeping multiple conversations going at once like a juggler handles a basket full of balls.

"Gee, that's kind of neat!" I exclaimed. "Do you think we could get some of these for our place at the Bazaar?"

"Believe me, they're more trouble than they're worth," Massha said. "In nothing flat you find you're spending all your time on the phone talking to people and not accomplishing anything. Besides, ever since they broke up the corporation...."

"I think I've got it!" Vilhelm announced, jumping down to floor-level again. "I've got one friend for you definite, but to be honest with you he's only so-so. I've got call-backs coming on two others, so let's see what they're like before you commit on the definite. Okay?"

"Ummm ... I think there's some kind of mistake here," I said desperately, trying to stop the madness before it progressed any further. "I'm not trying to find a new friend. I'm trying to locate a friend I already have who may be here in town."

He blinked several times as this news sank in. He started to turn back to his phones in an involuntary motion, then waved a hand at them in disgusted dismissal.

"Heck with it," he said with a sigh. "If they can come up with anything, I can always fob 'em off on someone else for a profit. Now then, let's try this again. You're looking for someone specific. Are they a townie or a transient? It would help if you gave me a little something to go on, you know."

He seemed a little annoyed, and I would have liked to do or say something to cheer him up. Before I could think of anything, however, my apprentice decided to join the conversation.

"This is quite a layout you've got, Fast Worker.

Mind if I ask exactly what it is you do?"

As always, Massha's "people sense" proved to be better than mine. The little vampire brightened noticeably at the compliment, and his chest puffed out as he launched into his narration.

"Well, the job was originally billed as Dispatcher . . . you know, as in Dispatcher of Nightmares. But anyway, like any job, it turned out to involve a lot of things that aren't on the job description. Now it's sort of a combination of dispatcher, travel agent, lost and found, and missing persons bureau."

"Nightmares?" I questioned, unable to contain myself.

"Sure. Anything that comes out of Limbo, be it dreams or the real thing, comes through here. Where're you from that you didn't know that?"

Obviously, I wasn't wild about continuing on the subject of our place of origin.

"Ahhh, can you really help us find our friend? He's new in town, like us."

"That's right. You're looking for someone. Sorry. I get a little carried away sometimes when I talk about my work. New in town, hmmm? Shouldn't be that hard to locate. We don't get that many visitors."

"He might be in jail," Massha blurted out before I realized what she was going to say.

"In jail?" The vampire frowned. "The only outsider in jail right now is. ... Say! Now I recognize you! The eyes threw me for a minute. You're Skeeve, aren't you?"

"Screen 97B!" he declared proudly, gesturing vaguely over his shoulder. "There's someone a dozen dimensions over from here, runs a hot dog stand, who features you in his most frequent nightmares. You, a dragon, and a Pervert. Am I correct in assuming that the current resident in our fair jail is none other than your sidekick Aahz?"

"To be correct, that's Pervect, not Pervert... but except for that you're right. That's my partner you've got locked up there, and we aim to get him out."

I was probably talking too much, but being recognized in a dimension I'd never heard of had thrown me off balance. Then again, the Dispatcher didn't seem all that hostile at the discovery. More curious than anything else.

"Well, well. Skeeve himself. I never expected to meet you in person. Sometime you must tell me what you did to that poor fellow to rate the number-one slot on his hit parade of nightmares."

"What about Aahz?" I said impatiently.

"You know he's up for murder, don't you?"

"Heard it. Don't believe it. He's a lot of things, but a murderer isn't one of them."

"There's a fair amount of evidence." Vilhelm shrugged. "But tell me. What's with the vampire getup. You're no more a vampire than I'm a Klahd."

"It's a long story. Let's just say it seemed to be the local uniform."

"Let's not," the dispatcher grinned. "Pull up a chair . . . free of charge, of course. I've got time and lots of questions about the other dimensions. Maybe we can trade a little information while you're here."

Chapter Seven:

"I don't see anything thrilling about it!"

-M. JACKSON

"I really don't see how you can drink that stuff," I declared, eyeing Vilhelm's goblet of blood.

"Funny," he smiled in return, "I was about to say the same thing. I mean, you know what W. C. Fields said about water!"

"No. What?"

"Now let me get this straight," Guido interrupted before I could get any answer. "You're sayin' you vampire guys don't really drink blood from people?"

"Oh, a few do," the Dispatcher said with a shrug. "But it's an acquired taste, like steak tartare. Some say it's a gourmet dish, but I could never stand the stuff myself. I'll stick with the inexpensive domestic varieties any night."

We were all sprawled around the Dispatcher's office at this point, sipping our respective drinks and getting into a pretty good rap session. We had pulled Guido in off door watch and I had dropped our disguises so my energy reserve wasn't being drained.

The Dispatcher had played with his phones, calling from one to the other. Then he put them all down and announced that he had them on "hold," a curious expression since it was the first time in half an hour he hadn't been holding one.

Vilhelm himself was turning out to be a priceless source of information, and, as promised, had a seemingly insatiable curiosity about otherworldly things.

"Then how do you account for all the vampire legends around the other dimensions," Massha said skeptically.

The Dispatcher made a face.

"First of all, you've got to realize who you're dealing with. Most of the ones who do extensive touring outside of Limbo are 'old money' types. We're talking about the idle rich ... and that usually equates to bored thrill seekers. Working stiffs like me can't afford to take that kind of time away from our jobs. Heck, I can hardly manage to get my two weeks each year. Anyway, there are a lot more of us around the dimensions than you might realize. It's just that the level-headed ones are content to maintain a low profile and blend with the natives. They content themselves with the blood of domestic livestock, much the way we do here at home. It's the others that cause the problems. Like any group of tourists, there's always a few who feel that just because they're in another world or city, the rules don't apply . . . and that includes common manners and good taste. They're the ones who stir up trouble by getting the locals up in arms about 'bloodsucking monsters.' If it makes you feel any better, you human types have a pretty bad rep yourselves here in Limbo."

That caught my attention.

"Could you elaborate on that last point, Vilhelm?"

What problem could the locals have with us?"

The Dispatcher laughed.

"The same one you humans have with us vampires. While humans aren't the leading cause of death in vampires any more than vampires are a leading cause of death in humans, it's certainly one of the more publicized and sensational ways to go."

"Is that why the first locals we met took off like bats out of hell... if you'll pardon the expression?" Massha asked.

"You've got it. I think you'll find that the citizens of Blut will react the same way to you that you would if you ran into a vampire in your home dimension."

"I don't notice you bein' particularly scared of us," Guido said suspiciously.

"One of the few advantages of this job. After a few years of monitoring the other dimensions, you get pretty blasé about demons. As far as I can tell, most of 'em are no worse than some of the folks we've got around here."

This was all very interesting, but I was getting a little fidgety about our mission.

"Since you know we aren't all evil or on a permanent vampire hunt, what can you tell us about the mess Aahz is in? Can you give us any help there?"

"I dunno," the Dispatcher said, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. "Until I found out who he was, I was ready to believe he was guilty as sin. There's an awful lot of evidence against him."

"Such as?" I pressed.

"Well, he was caught with a stake and mallet in his hand, and there are two eyewitnesses who say they saw him kill one of our citizens and scatter his dust to the winds."

"Wait a minute. You mean you ain't got no corpus delecti?" Guido said, straightening in his chair. "Sorry to interrupt. Boss, but you're playin' in my alley now. This is somethin' I know a little about. You can't go on trial for murder without a corpse, know what I mean?" "Maybe where you come from," Vilhelm corrected, "but things get a little different when you're dealing with vampires. If we had a body, or even just the pile of dust, we could revive him in no time flat. As it is, the problem is when there's no body . . . when a vampire's been reduced to dust and the dust scattered. That's when it's impossible to pull 'em back into a functional mode."

"But if there isn't a body, how do you know the victim is dead at all?" I asked.

"There's the rub," Vilhelm agreed. "But in this case, there's a matter of two eyewitnesses."

"Two of 'em, eh?" Massha murmured thoughtfully. "Would you happen to have descriptions of these two peepers?"

"Saw 'em myself. They were both off-worlders like yourselves. One was a young girl, the blonde and innocent type. The other was a pretty sleazy-looking guy. It was her who sold us on the story, really. I don't think anyone would have believed him if he said that were wolves were furry."

My heart sank. I had wanted very badly to believe the girl who had warned us of Aahz's danger was somehow an innocent bystander in the proceedings. Now it looked as if...

"Do the descriptions sound familiar, Hot Stuff? Still think Guido and I were being paranoid when we said this might be a set-up? Sounds like they framed your partner, then came back after you to complete the set."

I avoided her eyes, staring hard at the wall monitors. "There might be another explanation, you know."

My apprentice gave out a bark of laughter.

"If there is, I'm dying to hear it. Face it, High Roller, any way you look at it the situation stinks. If they cooked up a frame that tight on Green and Scaly on such short notice, I'm dying to see what kind of a trap they've got waiting for you now that they've had time to get ready before inviting you to step in."

It occurred to me that I had never been that mouthy when I was an apprentice. It also occurred to me that now I understood why Aahz had gotten so angry on the rare occasions when I had voiced an opinion ... and the rarer times when I was right.

"I think I missed a lap in this conversation somewhere." Vilhelm frowned. "I take it you know the witnesses?"

Massha proceeded to bring the Dispatcher up to date, with Guido growling counterpoint to the theme. For once I was glad to let them do the talking. It gave me a chance to collect my scattered thoughts and try to formulate a plan. When they finished, I still had a long way to go on both counts.

"I must admit, viewed from the light of this new information, the whole thing does sound a little suspicious," the vampire said thoughtfully.

"A little suspicious!" Massha snorted. "It's phonier than a smiling Deveel!"

"Tell ya what," Guido began, "just give us a few minutes alone with these witnesses of yours and we'll shake the truth out of 'em."

"I'm afraid that will be a little difficult," the Dispatcher said, eyeing the ceiling. "You see, they haven't been around for a while. Disappeared right after the trial."

"The trial!?" I snapped, abandoning my efforts to collect my wits. "You mean the trial's already been held?"

The vampire nodded.

"That's right. Needless to say, your friend was found guilty."

"Why do I get the feeling he didn't get a suspended sentence for a first offense?" Guido growled under his breath.

"As a matter of fact, he's been slated for execution at the end of the week," Vilhelm admitted.

That got me out of my seat and pacing.

"We've got to do something," I said needlessly. "How about it, Vilhelm? Can you help us out at all? Any chance of getting the verdict reversed or at least a stay of execution?"

"I'm afraid not. Character witnesses alone wouldn't change anything, and as for new evidence, it would only be your word against the existing witnesses . . . and you've already admitted the defendant is a friend of yours. Mind you, I believe you, but there are those who would suspect you'd say anything or fabricate any kind of tale to save your partner."

"But can you personally give us a hand?"

"No, I can't," the vampire said, turning away. "You all seem like real nice folks, and your friend is probably the salt of the earth, but I have to live here and deal with these people for a long time. If I sided with outsiders against the town legal system, my whole career would go down the drain whether I was right or not. It's not pretty and I don't like it, but that's the way things are."

"We could fix it so you like it a lot less!" Guido said darkly, reaching into his coat.

"Stop it, Guido," I ordered. "Let's not forget the help Vilhelm's already given us. It's a lot more than we expected to get when we first came into this dimension, so don't go making enemies out of the only friend we've got locally. Okay?"

The bodyguard sank back into his chair, muttering something I was just as glad I didn't hear, but his hand came out of his coat empty and stayed in sight.

"So what do we do now. Hot Stuff?" Massha sighed.

"The only thing I can think of is to try to locate those witnesses before the execution date," I said. "What I can't figure is how to go about looking without getting half the town down on our necks."

"What we really need is a bloodhound," Guido grumbled.

"Say, that's not a bad idea!" Vilhelm exclaimed, coming to life. "Maybe I can help you after all!"

"You got a bloodhound?" the bodyguard said, raising his eyebrows.

"Even better," the vampire declared. "I don't know why I didn't think of it before. The ones you need to get in touch with are the Woof Writers."

I studied him-carefully to see if this were some kind of joke.

"The Woof Writers?" I repeated at last.

"Well, that's what we in Blut call them behind their backs. Actually, they're a husband-wife team of werewolves who are on a big crusade to raise sympathy for humans."

"Werewolves," I said carefully.

"Sure. We got all kinds here in Limbo. Anyway, if anyone in this dimension will be willing to stick their necks out for you, they're the ones. They do their own thing and don't really give a hang what any of the other locals think about it. Besides, werewolves are second to none when it comes to sniffing out a trail."

"Werewolves." I repeated.

Vilhelm cocked his head at me curiously.

"Am I imagining things, Skeeve, or didn't you just say that?"

"What's more," Massha smiled sweetly, "he'll probably say it again. It bears repeating."

"Werewolves," I said again, just to support my apprentice.

"Boss," Guido began, "I don't want to say this, but nobody said anything about werewolves when we...."

"Good," I interrupted brusquely. "You don't want to say it, and I don't want to hear it. Now that we're in agreement, let's just pass on it and...."

"But Boss! We can't team up with werewolves."

"Guido, we just went over this. We're in a tight spot and in a strange dimension. We can't afford to be choosy about our allies."

"You don't understand. Boss. I'm allergic to 'em!"

I sank down into a chair and hid my face in my hands.

"I thought you were allergic to garlic," I said through my fingers.

"That. too," the bodyguard said. "But mostly I'm allergic to furry things like kitties or fur coats or...."

". . . or werewolves," Massha finished for him. "Frankly, Dark and Deadly, one starts to wonder how you've been able to function effectively all these years."

"Hey, it doesn't come up all that often, know what I mean?" Guido argued defensively. "How many times have you been attacked by somethin' furry?"

"Not as often as I'd like!" Massha leered.

"Enough, you two," I ordered, raising my head. "Guido, have you ever actually been near a werewolf?"

"Well, no. But...."

"Then until we know for sure, we'll assume you're not allergic to them. Okay? Vilhelm, exactly where do we find these Woof Writers of yours?"

Chapter Eight:

"First, let's decide who's leading and who's following."
-F. ASTAIRE

"BOSS, just where the hell is Pahkipsee?"

I found myself wondering if all bodyguards spent most of their time complaining, or if I had just gotten lucky.

"Look, Guido. You were there and heard the same instructions I did. If Vilhelm was right, it should be just up the road here a couple more miles."

"... 'a rather dead bedroom community, fit only for those not up to the fast-lane life-style of the big city,' " Massha quoted in a close imitation of the vampire's voice.

Guido snickered rudely.

"Why do I get the feeling you didn't particularly warm to Vilhelm, Massha?" I suppressed a grin of my own.

"Maybe it's because he's the only guy we've met she hasn't made a pass at?" Guido suggested.

Massha favored him with an extended tongue and crossed eyes before answering.

"Oh, Vilhelm's okay," she said. "Kinda cute, too ... at least the top of his head was. And he did admit that in general vampires were more partial to cities and parties while werewolves preferred the back-to-nature atmosphere of rural living. I just didn't like the crack, that's all. I grew up on a farm, you know. Country breakfasts have a lot to do with my current panoramic physique. Besides, something inside says you shouldn't trust a smiling vampire. ... or at least you shouldn't trust him too far."

I had been about to mention the fact that I had grown up on a farm, too, but withheld the information. Obviously, farm food hadn't particularly affected my physique, and I didn't want to rob my apprentice of her excuse.

"If he had wanted to do us harm, all he would have had to do was blow the whistle on us while we were still in town," I pointed out. "Let's just take things at face value and assume he was really being as nice as he seemed ... for all our peace of minds."

I wished I was as confident as I sounded. We were a long way out in the boondocks, and if Vilhelm had wanted to send us off on a wild goose chase, he couldn't have picked a better direction to start us off in.

"Yeah, well I'd feel a lot better if we weren't being followed," Guido grumbled.

I stopped in my tracks. So did Massha ... in her tracks, that is. The bodyguard managed to stumble into us before bringing his own forward progress to a halt.

"What is it, Boss? Something wrong?"

"For a minute there, I thought I heard you say that we were being followed."

"Yeah. Since we left the Dispatcher's. Why does. .. you mean you didn't know?"

I resisted an impulse to throttle him.

"No, Guido. I didn't know. You see, my bodyguard didn't tell me. He was too busy complaining about the road conditions to have time to mention anything as trivial as someone following us."

Guido took a few shaky steps backward.

"Hey! C'mon, Boss. Don't be like that. I thought you knew! Honest. Whoever's back there isn't doin' such a hot job of hiding the fact that they're dogging our trail. Any idiot could've spotted ... I mean...."

"Keep going, Dark and Deadly," Massha urged. "You're digging yourself in further with every word, in case you hadn't noticed."

With great effort I brought myself back under control.

"Whatever," I said. "I don't suppose you have any idea who it is?"

"Naw. There's only one of 'em. Unless..."

His voice trailed off into silence and he looked suddenly worried.

"Out with it, Guido. Unless what?"

"Well, sometimes when you're getting really tricky about tailing someone, you put one real clumsy punk out front so's they can be spotted while you keep your real ace-hitter hidden. I hadn't stopped to think of that before. This turkey behind us could be a decoy, know what I mean?"

"I thought you used decoys for ducks, not turkeys," Massha scowled.

"Well, if that's what's happening, then we're sitting ducks, if it makes you feel any better."

"Could both of you just be quiet for a few minutes and let me think?" I said, suddenly impatient with their banter.

"Well, maybe it isn't so bad," Guido said in a doubtful voice. "I'm pretty sure I would have spotted the back-up team if there was one."

"Oh sure," Massha sneered. "Coming out of a town full of vampires that can change themselves into mist whenever they want. Of course you'd spot them."

"Hey. The Boss here can chew on me if he wants, but I don't have to take that from you. You didn't even spot the turkey, remember?"

"The only turkey I can see is... ."

"Enough!" I ordered, having arrived at a decision despite their lack of cooperation. "We have to find out for sure who's behind us and what they want. This is as good a place as any, so I suggest we all retire into the bushes and wait for our shadow to catch up with us. ... No, Massha. I'll be over here with Guido. You take the other side of the road."

That portion of my plan had less to do with military strategy than with an effort on my part to preserve what little was left of my nerves. I figured the only way to shut the two of them up was to separate them.

"I'm sorry, Boss," Guido whispered as we crouched side by side in the brush. "I keep forgettin' that you aren't as into crime as the boys I usually run with."

Well, I had been half right. Massha on the other side of the road was being quiet, but as long as he had someone to talk to, Guido was going to keep on expressing his thoughts and opinions. I was starting to understand why Don Bruce insisted on doing all the talking when the bodyguards were around. Encouraging employees to speak up as equals definitely had its drawbacks.

"Will you keep your voice down?" I tried once more. "This is supposed to be an ambush."

"Don't worry about that. Boss. It'll be a while before they catch up, and when they do, I'll hear 'em before. ..."

"Is that you Skeeve?"

The voice came from the darkness just up the road.

I gave Guido my darkest glare, and he rewarded it with an apologetic shrug that didn't look particularly sincere to me.

Then it dawned on me where I had heard that voice before.

"Right here," I said, rising from my crouch and stepping onto the road. "We've been waiting for you. I think it's about time we had a little chat."

Aside from covering my embarrassment over having been discovered, that had to be my best understatement in quite a while. The last time I had seen this particular person, she was warning me about Aahz's imprisonment.

"Good." She stepped forward to meet me. "That's why I've been following you. I was hoping we could..."

Her words stopped abruptly as Guido and Massha rose from the bushes and moved to join us.

"Well, look who's here," Massha said, flashing one of her less pleasant smiles.

"If it isn't the little bird who sang to the vampires," Guido leered, matching my apprentice's threatening tone.

The girl favored them with a withering glance, then faced me again.

"I was hoping we could talk alone. I've got a lot to say and not much time to say it. It would go faster if we weren't interrupted."

"Not a chance, Sweetheart," Guido snarled. "I'm not goin' to let the Boss out of my sight with you around."

". . . besides which, I've got a few things to tell you myself," Massha added, "like what I think of folks who think frames look better on people than on paintings."

The girl's eyes never left mine. For all her bravado, I thought I could detect in their depths an appeal for help.

"Please," she said softly.

I fought a brief skirmish in my mind, and, as usual, common sense lost.

"All right."

"WHAT! C'mon, Boss. You can't let her get you alone! If her pals are around...."

"Hot Stuff, if I have to sit on you. you aren't going to...."

"Look!" I said, wrenching my eyes away from the girl to confront my mutinous staff. "We'll only go a few steps down the road there, in plain sight. If anything happens you'll be able to pitch in before it gets serious."

"But...."

". . . and you certainly can't think she's going to jump me. I mean, it's a cinch she isn't carrying any concealed weapons."

That was a fact. She had changed outfits since the last time I saw her, probably to fit in more with the exotic garb favored by the party-loving vampires. She was wearing what I've heard referred to as a "tank top" which left her midsection and navel delightfully exposed, and the open-sided skirt (if you can call two flaps of cloth that) showed her legs up past her hips. If she had a weapon with her, she had swallowed it. Either that, or....

I dragged my thoughts back to the argument.

"The fact of the matter is that she isn't going to talk in front of a crowd. Now, am I going to get a chance to hear another viewpoint about what's going on, or are we going to keep groping around for information with Aahz's life hanging in the balance?"

My staff fell silent and exchanged glances, each waiting for the other to risk the next blast.

"Well, okay," Massha agreed at last. "But watch yourself, Hot Stuff. Remember, poison can come in pretty bottles."

So, under the ever-watchful glares of my assistants, I retired a few steps down the road for my first words alone with....

"Say, what is your name, anyway?"

"Hmmm? Oh. I'm Luanna. Say, thanks for backing me up. That's a pretty mean-looking crew you hang around with. I had heard you had a following, but I hadn't realized how nasty they were."

"Oh, they're okay once you get to know them. If you worked with them on a day-to-day basis, you'd find out that they . . . heck, none of us are really as dangerous or effective as the publicity hype cuts us out to be."

I was suddenly aware of her eyes on me. Her expression was strange ... sort of a bitter half-smile.

"I've always heard that really powerful people tended to understate what they can do, that they don't have to brag. I never really believed it until now."

I really didn't know what to say to that. I mean, my reputation had gotten big enough that I was starting to get used to being recognized and talked about at the Bazaar, but what she was displaying was neither fear nor envy. Among my own set of friends, admiration or praise was always carefully hidden within our own brand of rough humor or teasing. Faced with the undiluted form of the same thing, I was at a loss as to how to respond. "Ummm, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?"

Her expression fell and she dropped her eyes.

"This is so embarrassing. Please be patient with me, Skeeve ... is it all right if I call you Skeeve? I haven't had much experience with saying 'I'm sorry'. . . heck, I haven't had much experience with people at all. Just partners and pigeons. Now that I'm here, I really don't know what to say."

"Why don't we start at the beginning?" I wanted to ease her discomfort. "Did you really swindle the Deveels back at the Bazaar?"

Luanna nodded slowly without raising her eyes.

"That's what we do. Matt and me. That and running, even though I think sometimes we're better at running than working scams. Maybe if we were better at conning people, we wouldn't get so much practice at running."

Her words thudded at me like a padded hammer. I had wanted very badly to hear that she was innocent and that it had all been a mistake. I mean, she was so pretty, so sweet, I would have bet my life that she was innocent, yet here she was openly admitting her guilt to me.

"But why?" I managed at last. "I mean, how did you get involved in swindling people to begin with?"

Her soft shoulders rose and fell in a helpless shrug.

"I don't know. It seemed like a good idea when Matt first explained it to me. I was dying to get away from the farm, but I didn't know how to do anything but farm work for a living . . . until Matt explained to me how easy it was to get money away from people by playing on their greed. 'Promise them something for nothing,' he said, 'or for so little that they think they're swindling you.' When he put it that way, it didn't seem so bad. It was more a matter of being smart enough to trick people who thought they were taking advantage of you."

". . . by selling them magical items that weren't." I finished for her. "Tell me, why didn't you just go into the magic trade for real?"

Her head came up, and I caught a quick flash of fire in her sad blue eyes.

"We didn't know any magic, so we had to fake it. You probably can't understand that, since you're the real McCoy. I knew that the first time I saw you at Possletum. We were going to try to fake our way into the Court Magician spot until you showed up and flashed a bit of real magic at the crown. Even Matt had to admit that we were outclassed, and we kind of faded back before anyone asked us to show what we could do. I think it was then that I..."

She broke off, giving me a startled, guilty look as if she had been about to say something she shouldn't.

"Go on," I urged, my curiosity piqued.

"It's nothing, really," she said hastily. "Now it's your turn. Since I've told you my story, maybe you won't mind me asking how you got started as a magician."

That set me back a bit. Like her, I had been raised on a farm. I had run away, though, planning to seek my fortune as a master thief, and it was only my chance meeting with my old teacher Garkin and eventually Aahz that had diverted my career goals toward magic. In hindsight, my motives were not discernibly better than hers, but I didn't want to admit it just now. I kind of liked the way she looked at me while laboring under the illusion that I was someone noble and special.

"That's too long a tale to go into just now," I said brusquely. "There are still a few more answers I'd like from you. How come you used our place as a getaway route from Deva?"

"Oh, that was Vic's idea. We teamed up with him just before we started working our con at the Bazaar. When it looked like the scam was starting to turn sour, he said he knew a way-off dimension that no one would be watching. Matt and I didn't even know it was your place until your doorman asked if we were there to see you. Matt was so scared about having to tangle with you that he wanted to forget the whole thing and find another way out, but Vic showed us the door and it looked so easy we just went along with him."

"Of course, it never occurred to you that we'd get stuck with the job of trying to bring you back."

"You better believe it occurred to us. I mean, we didn't think you'd have to do it. We expected you'd be mad at us for getting you involved and come after us yourself. Vic kept saying that we shouldn't worry, that if you found us here in Limbo he could fix it so you wouldn't be able to take us back. I didn't know he was thinking about setting up a frame until he sprang it on your partner."

I tried to let this console me, but it didn't work.

"I notice that once you found out that Aahz was being framed, you still went along with it."

"Well... I didn't want to, but Vic kept saying that if you two were as good as everyone said, that your partner could get out of jail by himself. We figured that he'd escape before the execution, but with the whole dimension hunting him as a fugitive that he'd be too busy running for home to bother about catching us."

I was starting to get real anxious to meet this guy Vic. It also occurred to me that of all the potential problems our growing reputation could bring down on us, this was one we had never expected.

"And you believed him?"

Luanna made a face, then shrugged.

"Well . . . you're supposed to be able to do some pretty incredible things, and I don't want you to think I don't believe in your abilities, but I was worried enough that I sneaked back to let you know what was going on . . . just in case."

It was almost funny that she was apologizing for giving us the warning. Almost, but not quite. My mind kept running over what might have happened if she had believed in me completely.

"I guess my only other question is who is this citizen that Aahz is supposed to have killed?"

"Didn't anybody tell you?" she blinked. "It's Vic. He's from this dimension . . . you know, a vampire. Anyway, he's hiding out until the whole thing's resolved one way or another. I don't think even Matt knows where he is. Vampires are normally suspicious, and after I sneaked out the first time, he's even gotten cagey around us. He just drops in from time to time to see how we're doing."

Now I knew I wanted to meet friend Vic. If I was lucky, I'd meet him before Aahz did.

"Well, I do appreciate you filling me in on the problem. Now, if you'll just come back to Blut with us and explain things to the authorities, my gratitude will be complete."

Luanna started as if I had stuck her with a pin.

"Hold on a minute! Who said anything about going to the authorities? I can't do that! That would be double crossing my partners. I don't want to see you or your friends get hurt, but I can't sacrifice my own to save them."

An honest crook is both incongruous and infuriating. Aahz had often pointed this out to me when some point in my ethic kept me from going along with one of his schemes, and now I was starting to understand what he was talking about.

"But then why are you here?"

"I wanted to warn you. Vic has been thinking that you might come into Limbo after your partner, and he's setting up some kind of trap if you did. If he was right, I thought you should know that

you're walking into trouble. I figured that if you came, you'd look up the Dispatcher, so I waited there and followed you when you showed up. I just wanted to warn you is all. That and...."

She dropped her eyes again and lowered her voice until I could hardly hear her.

"... I wanted to see you again. I know it's silly, but...."

As flattering as it was, this time I was unimpressed.

"Yeah, sure." I interrupted. "You're so interested in me you're willing to let my partner sit on a murder rap just so you can watch me go through my paces."

"I already explained about that," she said fiercely, stepping forward to lay a hand on my arm.

I stared at it pointedly until she removed it.

"Well," she said in a small voice. "I can see that there's nothing more I can say. But, Skeeve? Promise me that you won't follow me when I leave? You or your friends? I took a big risk finding you. Please don't make me regret it."

I stared at her for a long moment, then looked away and nodded.

"I know you're disappointed in me, Skeeve," came her voice, "but I can't go against my partners. Haven't you ever had to do something you didn't want to do to support your partner?"

That hit home ... painfully.

"Yes, I have," I said, drawing a ragged breath. "I'm sorry, Luanna. I'm just Worried about Aahz, that's all. Tell you what. Just to show there're no hard feelings, can I have a token or something? Something to remember you by until I see you again?"

She hesitated, then pulled a gossamer-thin scarf from somewhere inside her outfit. Stepping close, she tucked it into my tunic, then rose on her tiptoes and kissed me softly.

"It's nice of you to ask," she said. "Even if I don't mean anything to you at all, it's nice of you to ask."

With that, she turned and sprinted off down the road into the darkness.

I stared after her.

"You're letting her go!?"

Suddenly Massha was at my side, flanked by Guido.

"C'mon, Boss. We gotta catch her. She's your partner's ticket off death row. Where's she goin'?"

"To meet up with her partners in crime," I said. "Including a surprisingly lively guy named Vic ... surprising since he's the one that Aahz is supposed to have killed."

"So we can catch 'em all together. Nice work, Hot Stuff. Okay, let's follow her and...."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Because I promised her."

There was a deathly silence as my assistants digested this information.

"So she walks and Green and Scaly dies, is that it?"

"You're sellin' out your partner for a skirt? That musta been some kiss."

I slowly turned to face them, and, mad as they were, they fell silent.

"Now listen close," I said quietly, "because I'm not going to go over it again. If we tried to follow her back to their hideout, and she spotted us, she'd lead us on a wild goose chase and we'd never catch up with them ... and we need that so-called corpse. I don't think her testimony alone will swing the verdict."

"But Boss, if we let her get away...."

"We'll find them," I said. "Without us dogging her footsteps, she'll head right back to her partners."

"But how will we...."

In answer, I pulled Luanna's scarf from my tunic. "Fortunately, she was kind enough to provide us with a means to track her, once we recruit the necessary were wolf."

Guido gave my back a slap that almost staggered me. "Way to go, Boss," he crowed. "You really had me goin' for a minute. I thought that chickie had really snowed you."

I looked up to find Massha eyeing me suspiciously. "That was quite a kiss. Hot Stuff," she said. "If I didn't know better, I'd think that young lady is more than a little stuck on you . . . and you just took advantage of it."

I averted my eyes, and found myself staring down the road again.

"As a wise woman once told me," I said, "sometimes you have to do things you don't like to support your partner. ... Now, let's go find these Woof Writers."

Chapter Nine:

"My colleagues and I feel that independents like Elf Quest are nothing but sheep in wolves' clothing!"

-S.LEE

THE Woof Writers turned out to be much more pleasant than I had dared hope, which was fortunate as my werewolf disguises were some of the shakiest I'd ever done. Guido was indeed allergic to werewolves as feared (he started sneezing a hundred yards from their house) and was waiting outside, but even trying to maintain two disguises was proving to be a strain on my powers in this magic-poor dimension. I attempted to lessen the drain by keeping the changes minimal, but only succeeded in making them incredibly unconvincing even though my assistants assured me they were fine. No matter what anyone tells you, believe, me, pointy ears alone do not a wolf make.

You might wonder why I bothered with disguises at all? Well, frankly, we were getting a little nervous. Everyone we had talked to or been referred to in this dimension was so nice! We kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. All of our talks and discussions of possible traps had made us so skittish that we were now convinced that there was going to be a double-cross somewhere along the way. The only question in our minds was when and by whom.

With that in mind, we decided it would be best to try to pass ourselves off as werewolves until we knew for sure the Woof Writers were as well-disposed toward humans as Vilhelm said they were. The theory was that if they weren't, the disguises might give us a chance to get out again before our true nature was exposed. The only difficulty with that plan was that I had never seen a werewolf in my life, so not only was I working with a shortage-of energy, I was unsure as to what the final result should look like. As it turned out, despite their knowledgeable advice, my staff didn't know either.

While we're answering questions from the audience, you might ask, if neither I nor my assistants knew what a werewolf looked like, how I knew the disguises were inadequate? Simple. I deduced the fact after one look at real werewolves. That and the Woof Writers told me so. Didn't I tell you they were great folks? Of course, they let us sweat for a while before admitting that they knew we were poorly disguised humans all along, but I myself tend to credit that to their dubious sense of humor. It's Massha who insists it was blatant sadism. Of course, she was the one who had to eat a bone before they acknowledged the joke.

Anyway, I was talking about the Woof Writers. It was interesting in that I had never had much opportunity to watch a husband-wife team in action before (my parents don't count). The closest thing to the phenomenon I had witnessed was the brother-sister team of Tananda and Chumley, but they spent most of their conversational time trying to "one-down" each other.

The Woof Writers, in contrast, seemed to take turns playing "crazy partner-sane partner." They never asked my opinion, but I felt that she was much better at playing the crazy than he. He was so good at playing the straight that when he did slip into crazy mode. it always came as a surprise.

"Really, dear," Idnew was saying to Massha, "wouldn't you like to slip out of that ridiculous disguise into something more comfortable? A werewolf with only two breasts looks so silly."

"Idnew," her husband said sternly, "you're making our guests uncomfortable. Not everyone feels as easy about discussing their bodies as you do."

"It's the artist in me," she returned, "And besides, Drahcir, who was it that set her up to eat a bone?- and an old one at that. If you were a little more conscientious when you did the shopping instead of stocking up on junk food...."

"Oh, don't worry about me. Hairy and Handsome," Massha interceded smoothly, dropping into her vamp role. "I've got no problems discussing my body, as long as we get equal time to talk about yours. I've always liked my men with a lot of facial hair, if you get my drift."

I noticed Idnew's ears flatten for a moment before returning to their normal upright position. While it may have been nothing more than a nervous twitch, it occurred to me that if we were going to solicit help from these two, it might not be wise to fan any embers of jealousy that might be lying about.

"Tell me," I said hastily, eager to get the subject away from Massha's obvious admiration of Drahcir, "What got you started campaigning for better relationships between humans and werewolves?"

"Well, there were many factors involved," Drahcir explained, dropping into the lecturer mode I had grown to know so well in such a short time. "I think the most important thing to keep in mind is that the bad reputation humans have is vastly overrated. There is actually very little documented evidence to support the legends of human misconduct. For the most part, werewolves tend to forget that, under the proper conditions, we turn into humans. Most of them are afraid or embarrassed and hide themselves away until it passes, but Idnew and I don't. If anything we generally seize the opportunity to go out and about and get the public used to seeing harmless humans in their midst. Just between us, though, I think Idnew here likes to do it because it scares the hell out of folks to be suddenly confronted by a human when they aren't expecting it. In case you haven't noticed, there's a strong exhibitionist streak in my wife. For myself, it's simply a worthy cause that's been neglected for far too long."

"The other factor, which my husband has neglected to mention," Idnew put in impishly, "is that there's a lot of money in it."

"There is?" I asked.

My work with Aahz had trained me to spot profit opportunities where others saw none, but this time the specific angle had eluded me.

"There . . . umm ... are certain revenues to be gleaned from our campaign," Drahcir said uneasily, shooting a dark glance at his wife. "T-shirts, bumper stickers, lead miniatures, fan club dues,

greeting cards, and calendars, just to name a few. It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it. Lest my wife leave you with the wrong impression of me, however, let me point out that I'm supporting this particular cause because I really believe in it. There are lots of ways to make money."

"... and he knows them all, don't you dear?" Idnew said with a smile.

"Really?" I interrupted eagerly. "Would you mind running over a few? Could I take notes?"

"Before you get carried away, High Roller," Massha warned, "remember why we came here originally."

"Oh! Right! Thanks, Massha. For a minute there I ... Right!"

It took me a few seconds to rechannel my thoughts. While Aahz's training has gotten me out of a lot of tight spots and generally improved my standard of living, there are some unfortunate side effects.

Once I got my mind back on the right track, I quickly filled the werewolves in on our current problem. I kept the details sketchy, both because I was getting tired of going back and forth over the same beginning, and to keep from having to elaborate on Luanna's part in causing our dilemma. Still, the Woof Writers seemed quite enthralled by the tale, and listened attentively until I was done.

"Gee, you're really in a spot," Idnew said when I finally ground to a halt. "If there's anything we can do to help...."

"We can't," Draheir told us firmly. "You're behind on your deadlines, Idnew, and I've got three more appearances this month . . . not to mention answering the mail that's piled up the last two weekends I've been gone."

"Draheir...." Idnew said, drawing out his name.

"Don't look at me like that, dear," her husband argued before she had even started her case, "and don't cock your head, either. Someone's liable to shove a gramophone under it. Remember, you're the one who keeps pointing out that we have to put more time into our work."

"I was talking about cutting back on your personal appearances," Idnew argued. "Besides, this is important."

"So's meeting our deadlines. I'm as sympathetic to their problem as you are, but we can't let the plight of one small group of humans interfere with our work on the big picture."

"But you're the one who insists that deadlines aren't as important as...."

She broke off suddenly and semaphored her ears toward her husband.

"Wait a minute. Any time you start talking about 'big pictures' and 'grand crusades'. . . is our bank account low again?"

Drahcir averted his eyes and shifted his feet uncomfortably.

"Well, I was going to tell you, but I was afraid it might distract you while you were trying to work. . ."

"All right. Let's have it," his wife growled, her hackles rising slightly. "What is it you've invested our money in this time?"

I was suddenly very uncomfortable. Our little discussion seemed to be dissolving into a family fight I felt I had no business being present for. Apparently Massha felt the same thing.

"Well, if you can't help us, that's that," she said, getting to her feet. "No problem. A favor's not a favor if you have to be argued into it. C'mon, Hot Stuff. We're wasting our time and theirs."

Though in part I agreed with her, desperation prompted me to make one last try.

"Not so fast, Massha. Drahcir is right. Time's money. Maybe we could work out some kind of a fee to compensate them for their time in helping us. Then it's not a favor, it's a business deal. Face it, we really need their help in this. The odds of us finding this Vic character on our own are pretty slim."

Aahz would have fainted dead away if he had heard me admitting how much we needed help before the fee was set, but that reaction was nothing compared to how the Woof Writers took my offer.

"What did you say?" Drahcir demanded, rising to all fours with his ears back.

"I said that maybe you'd help us if we offered to pay you," I repeated, backing away slightly. "I didn't mean to insult you...."

"You can't insult Drahcir with money," his wife snapped. "He meant what did you say about Vic?"

"Didn't I mention him before?" I frowned. "He's the vampire that Aahz is supposed to have...."

There was a sudden loud flapping sound in the rafters above our heads, like someone noisily shaking a newspaper to scare a cat off a table. It worked . . . not on the cat (I don't think the werewolves owned one) but on Massha and me. My apprentice hit the floor, covering her head with her hands, while I, more used to sudden danger and being more svelte and agile, dove beneath the coffee table.

By the time we recovered from our panicky . . . excuse me, our shrewd defensive maneuvers, there was nothing to see except the vague shape of someone with huge wings disappearing out the front door.

"This one's all yours, dear," Drahcir said firmly, his posture erect and unmoved despite the sudden activity.

"Come on, honey," his wife pleaded. "You're so much better at explaining things. You're supposed to help me out when it comes to talking to people."

"It's a skill I polished at those personal appearances you're so critical of," he retorted stiffly.

"Would somebody tell me what's going on?" I said in tones much louder than I usually use when I'm a guest in someone's home.

Before I could get an answer, the door burst open again utterly destroying what little was left of my nervous system.

"Hey, Boss! Did you s-se-Wha-wa...."

"Outside, Guido!" I ordered, glad to have someone I could shout at without feeling guilty. "Blow your nose ... and I'm fine, thanks! Nice of you to ask!"

By the time my bodyguard had staggered back outside, his face half buried in a handkerchief, I had managed to regain most of my composure.

"Sorry for the interruption," I said as nonchalantly as I could, "but my colleague does raise an interesting question! What was that?"

"Scary?" Massha suggested.

Apparently she had recovered her composure a little better than I had. I closed my eyes and reflected again on the relative value of cheeky apprentices.

"That," Drahcir said loftily, barely in time to keep me from my assistant's throat, "was Vic . . . one of my wife's weird artist friends who dropped in unannounced for a prolonged stay and, unless I miss my guess, the criminal you're looking for who framed your partner."

"He wasn't really a friend of mine," Idnew put in a small voice. "Just a friend of a friend, really. Weird artist types tend to stick together and pass around the locations of crash spaces. He was just another charity case down on his luck who...."

"... who is currently winging his way back to his accomplice with the news that we're on their trail," I finished with a grimace.

"Isn't that 'accomplices' as in plural?" Massha asked softly.

I ignored her.

"Oh, Drahcir," Idnew said, "now we have to help them. It's the only way we can make up for having provided a hideout for the very person they were trying to find."

"If I might point out," her husband replied, "we've barely met these people. We don't really owe them an explanation, much less any help. Besides, you still have a deadline to meet and...."

"Drahcir!" Idnew interrupted. "It could get real lonely sleeping in the old kennel while I work day and night on a deadline, if you catch my meaning."

"Now, dear," Drahcir said, sidling up to his wife, "before you go getting into a snit, hear me out. I've been thinking it over and I think there's a way we can provide assistance without biting into our own schedules. I mean, we do have a friend . . . one who lives a little north of here . . . who's temporarily between assignments and could use the work. I'm sure he'd be willing to do a little tracking for them at a fraction of the fee that we'd charge for the same service."

He was obviously talking in the veiled references partners use to communicate or check ideas in front of strangers, as his words went completely over my head, but drew an immediate reaction from Idnew.

"Oh, Drahcir!" she exclaimed excitedly, all trace of her earlier anger gone. "That's perfect! And he'll just love Massha."

"There's still the question of whether or not we can get him here in time," her husband cautioned. "And of course I'll want a percentage off the top as a finder's fee...."

"WHAT!" I exclaimed.

"I agree," Idnew said firmly. "A finder's fee is totally. ..."

"No! Before that," I urged. "What did you say about there not being enough time? I thought the execution wasn't scheduled until the end of the week!"

"That's right," Drahcir said. "But the end of the week is tomorrow. Your friend is slated to be executed at high midnight."

"C'mon, Massha," I ordered, heading for the door. "We're heading back to Blut."

"What for?" she demanded. "What can we do without a tracker?"

"We've tried being nice about this, and it isn't working," I responded grimly. "Now we do it the other way. You wanted action, apprentice? How do you feel about giving me a hand with a little jailbreak?"

Chapter Ten:

"What's wrong with a little harmless crime once in a while?"

-M. BLAISE

"BUT I'm telling you, Boss, jailbreak is a bad rap. With you operating at only half power in the magic department, there's no tellin' what can go wrong, and then...."

"Before we get all worked up about what can go wrong, Guido," I said, trying to salvage something constructive out of the conversation, "could you give me a little information on exactly how hard it is to break someone out of jail? Or haven't you been involved in any jailbreaks, either?"

"Of course I've been along on some jailbreaks," the bodyguard declared, drawing himself up proudly. "I've been an accomplice on three jailbreaks. What kind of Mob member do you take me for, anyway?"

With a heroic effort I resisted the temptation to answer that particular rhetorical question.

"Okay. So how about a few pointers? This is my first jailbreak, and I want it to go right."

I was all set to settle in for a fairly lengthy lecture, but instead of launching into the subject, Guido looked a bit uncomfortable.

"Umm . . . actually, Boss, I don't think you'd want to use any of the plans I followed. You see, all three of 'em were busts. None of 'em worked, and in two of the capers, the guy we were tryin' to save got killed. That's how I know about what a bad rap a jailbreak is, know what I mean?"

"Oh, swell! Just swell! Tell me. Mister bodyguard, with your allergies and zero-for-three record at jailbreak, did you ever do anything for the Mob that worked?"

A gentle hand fell on my shoulder from behind.

"Hey! Ease up a little. High Roller," Massha said softly. "I know you're worried about your partner, but don't take it out on Guido ... or me, either, for that matter. We may not be much, but we're here and trying to help as best we can when we'd both just as soon be back at the Bazaar. You're in a bad enough spot without starting a two-front war by turning on your allies."

I started to snap at her, but caught myself in time. Instead, I drew a long ragged breath and blew it out slowly. She was right. My nerves were stretched to the breaking point.. . which served me right for not following my own advice.

We were currently holed up at the Dispatcher's, the only place I could think of for an in-town base of operations, and as soon as we had arrived, I had insisted that both Massha and Guido grab a bit of sleep. We had been going nonstop ever since stepping through the door into Limbo, and I figured that the troops would need all the rest they could get before we tried to spring Aahz. Of course, once I had convinced them of the necessity of racking out, I promptly ignored my own wisdom and stayed up thinking for the duration.

The rationalization I used for this insane action was that I wanted some extra time uninterrupted to recharge my internal batteries, so whatever minimal magic I had at my disposal would be ready for our efforts. In actuality, what I did was worry. While I had indeed taken part in several criminal activities since teaming up with Aahz, they had all been planned by either Aahz or Tananda. This was my first time to get involved in masterminding a caper, and the stakes were high. Not only Aahz's but Massha's and Guide's futures were riding on my successful debut, and my confidence level was at an all-time low. After much pondering, I had decided to swallow my pride and lean heavily on Guide's expertise, which was why it hit me so hard when I discovered that he knew even less about successful jailbreaks than I.

"Sorry, Guido," I said, trying to restructure my thinking. "I guess I'm more tired than I realized. Didn't mean to snap at you."

"Don't worry. Boss," the bodyguard grinned. "I've been expectin' it. All the big operators I've worked with get a little crabby when the heat's on. If anything, your temper gettin' short is the best thing I've seen since we started this caper. That's why I've been so jumpy myself. I wasn't sure if you weren't taking the job seriously, or if you were just too dumb to know the kind of odds we were up against. Now that you're acting normal for the situation, I feel a lot better about how it's goin' to come out in the end."

Terrific! Now that I was at the end of my rope, our eternal pessimist thought things were going great.

"Okay," I said, rubbing my forehead with one finger, "we haven't got much information to go on, and what we do know is bad. According to Vilhelm, Aahz is being held in the most escape-proof cell they have, which is the top floor of the highest tower in town. If we try to take him from the inside, we're going to have to fool or fight every guard on the way up and down. To me, that means our best bet is to spring him from the outside."

My assistants nodded vigorously, their faces as enthusiastic as if I had just said something startlingly original and clever.

"Now, with my powers at low ebb. I don't think I can levitate that far and spring the cell. Massha, do you have anything in your jewelry collection that would work for rope and climbing hooks?"

"N-no," she said hesitantly, which surprised me. She usually had a complete inventory of her nasty pretties on the tip of her tongue.

"I saw a coil of rope hangin' just inside the door," Guido supplied.

"I noticed it, too," I acknowledged, "but it isn't nearly long enough. We'll just have to use up my power getting up to the cell and figure some other way of opening the window."

"Ummm . . . you don't have to do that. High Roller," Massha said with a sigh. "I've got something we can use."

"What's that?"

"The belt I'm wearing with all my gear hung on it. It's a levitation belt. The controls aren't horribly reliable, but it should do to get us to the top of the tower."

I cocked an eyebrow at my apprentice.

"Wait a minute, Massha. Why didn't you mention this when I asked?"

She looked away quickly.

"You didn't ask about a belt. Only about rope and climbing hooks."

"Since when do I have to ask you specific questions ... or any questions, for that matter, to get your input?"

"All right," she sighed. "If you really want to know, I was hoping we could find a way to do this without using the belt."

"Why?"

"It embarrasses me."

"It what?"

"It embarrasses me. I look silly floating around in the air. It's okay for skinny guys like you and Guido, but when I try it, I look like a blimp. All I'd need is Goodyear tattooed on my side to make the picture complete."

I closed my eyes and tried to remember that I was tired and that I shouldn't take it out on my friends. The fact that Massha was worried about appearances while I was trying to figure out a way to get us all out of this alive wasn't really infuriating. It was . . . flattering! That was it! She was so confident of my abilities to get us through this crisis that she had time to think about appearances! Of course, the possibility of betraying that confidence set me off in another round of worrying. Wonderful.

"You okay. Boss?"

"Hmmm? Yeah. Sure, Guido. Okay. Now Massha floats up to the window, which leaves you and me free to...."

"Hold it, Hot Stuff," Massha said, holding up a hand. "I think I'd better explain a little more about this belt. I bought it in an 'as-is' rummage sale, and the controls are not all they should be."

"How so?"

"Well, the 'up' control works okay, but the 'altitude' is shaky so you're never sure how much you can lift or how high it will go. The real problem, though, is the 'down' control. There's no tapering-off effect, so it's either on or off."

I was never particularly good at technical jargon, but flying was something I knew so I could almost follow her.

"Let me see if I've got this right," I said. "When you go up, you aren't sure how much power you'll have, and when you land. ..."

". . .it ain't gentle," she finished for me. "Basically, you fall from whatever height you're at to the ground."

"I don't know much about this magic stuff," Guido commented dryly, "but that doesn't sound so good. Why would you use a rig like that, anyway?"

"I don't ... at least not for flying," Massha said. "Remember, I told you I think it makes me look silly? All I use it for is a utility belt . . . you know, like Batman? I mean, it's kind of pretty, and it isn't easy to find belts in my size."

"Whatever," I said, breaking into their fashion discussion. "We're going to use it tonight to get up to the cell even if it means rigging some kind of ballast system. Now all we need to figure out is how to open the cell window and a getaway plan. Guido, it occurs to me that we might pick up a few lessons on jailbreaks from your experiences even if they were unsuccessful. I mean, negative examples can be as instructive as positive examples. So tell me, in your opinion what went wrong in the plans you followed in the past?"

The bodyguard's brow furrowed as it took on the unaccustomed exercise of thought.

"I dunno, Boss. It seems that however much planning was done, something always came up that we hadn't figured on. If I had to hang our failures on any one thing, I'd say it was just that . . . over planning. I mean, after weeks of lectures and practice sessions, you get a little overconfident, so when something goes wrong you're caught flatfooted, know what I mean?"

Nervous as we were, that got a laugh from both Massha and me.

"Well, that's one problem we won't have to worry about," I said. "Our planning time is always minimal, and for this caper we're going to have to put it together in a matter of hours."

"If you take hours, you'll never pull it off," Vilhelm said, entering our planning room just in time to hear my last comment.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Massha growled.

"Say, are you sure you guys are on the level?" the vampire said, ignoring my apprentice. "It occurs to me that I've only got your word on all this . . . that Vic is still alive and all. If you're taking advantage of my good nature to get me involved in something crooked..."

"He's alive," I assured him. "I've seen him myself since we were here last . . . but you didn't answer the question. What was that you were saying about what would happen if we took hours to plan the jailbreak?"

The Dispatcher shrugged.

"I suppose you guys know what you're doing and I should keep my mouth shut, but I was getting a little worried. I mean, it's sundown already, and if you're going to make your move before the execution, it had better be soon."

"How do you figure that?" I frowned. "The action isn't slated until high midnight. I had figured on waiting a while until it was dark and things quieted down around town a little."

"Are you kidding?" the vampire said with a start, his eyebrows going up to his hairline. "That's when ... oh, I get it. You're still thinking in terms of your off dimension timetables. You've got to ... umm, you might want to be sitting down for this, Skeeve."

"Lay it on me," I said, rubbing my forehead again. "What have I overlooked now? Even without the blindfold and the cigarette I'd just as soon take the bad news standing up."

"Well, you've got to remember that you're dealing with a city of vampires here. Sundown is the equivalent of dawn to us. That's when things start happening, not when they start winding down! That means...."

"... that high midnight is a major traffic time and the longer we wait, the more people there will be on the street," I said, trying to suppress a groan.

Once the basic oversight had been pointed out, I could do my own extrapolations . . . with all their horrible consequences. Trying to fight back my own panic, I turned to my assistants.

"Okay, troops. We're on. Guido, grab that rope you saw. We may need it before this is over."

The bodyguard's eyes widened with astonishment.

"You mean we're going to start the caper right now? But Boss! We haven't planned... ."

"Hey, Guido," I said, flashing a grin that was almost sane. "You were the one who said that over planning was a problem. Well, if you're right, this should be the most successful jailbreak ever!"

Chapter Eleven:

"Nice jail. Looks strong."

-H. HOUDINI

VILHELM was right about one thing. The streets were nowhere nearly as crowded as they had been the times we navigated their length well after sundown. Only a few stray beings wandered here and there, mostly making deliveries or sweeping down the sidewalks in front of their shops prior to opening. Except for the lack of light, the streets looked just like any town preparing for a day's business... that and the red eyes of the citizens.

We hugged the light as we picked our way across town....

That's right. I said "hugged the light." I try to only make the same mistake a dozen times. In other dimensions, we would have "hugged the dark" to avoid being noticed or recognized. Here, we "hugged the light." Don't laugh. It worked.

Anyway, as we picked our way through the streets of Blut, most of my attention was taken up with the task of trying to map a good getaway route. Getting Aahz out of jail I would deal with once we got there. Right now I was worried about what we would do once we had him out... a major assumption, I know, but I had so little optimism that I clung to what there was with all fours.

The three of us looked enough like vampires in appearance to pass casual inspection. There was no way, however, that we could pass off my scaly green partner as a native without a disguise spell, and I wasn't about to bet on having any magical energy left after springing Aahz. As such, I was constantly craning my neck to peer down side streets and alleys, hoping to find a little traveled route by which we could spirit our fugitive colleague out of town without bringing the entire populace down on our necks. By the time we reached our destination, I was pretty sure I could get us back to the Dispatcher's by the route we were following, and positively sure that if I tried to take us there by the back routes, I would get us totally and helplessly lost.

"Well, Boss. This is it. Think we can crack it?"

I don't think Guido really expected an answer. He was just talking to break the silence that had fallen over us as we stood looking at our target.

The Municipal Building was an imposing structure, with thick stone walls and a corner tower that stretched up almost out of sight into the darkness. It didn't look like we could put a dent in it with a cannon ... if we had a cannon, which we didn't. I was used to the tents of the Bazaar or the rather ramshackle building style of Klah. While I had been gradually getting over being overawed by the construction prevalent here in Blut, this place intimidated me. I'd seen shakier looking mountains!

"Well, one thing's for certain," I began, almost under my breath.

"What's that?"

"Staring at it isn't going to make it any weaker."

Neither of my assistants laughed at my joke, but then again, neither did I.

Shaking off a feeling of foreboding, I turned to my staff.

"All right, Guido. You stay down here and keep watch. Massha? Do you think that belt of yours can lift two? It's time I went topside and took a good look at this impregnable cell."

My apprentice licked her lips nervously and shrugged.

"I don't know, Hot Stuff. I warned you that the controls on this thing don't work right. It could lift us right into orbit for all I know."

I patted her shoulder in what I hoped was a reassuring way.

"Well, give it a try and we'll find out."

She nodded, wrapped one arm around my chest, and used her other hand to play with the jewels on her belt buckle.

There was a sparkle of light, but beyond that nothing.

"Not enough juice," she mumbled to herself.

"So turn it up already," I urged. - Even if the vampires tended to avoid light, we were lit up like a Christmas tree and bound to attract attention if we stayed at ground level much longer.

"Cross your fingers," she said grimly and touched the jewels again.

The light intensified and we started up fast ... too fast.

"Careful, Boss!" Guido shouted and grabbed my legs as they went past him.

That brought our progress to a halt. . . well, almost. Instead of rocketing up into the night, we were rising slowly, almost imperceptibly.

"That's got it, High Roller!" Massha exclaimed, shifting her grip to hang onto me with both arms. "A little more ballast than I had planned on, though."

I considered briefly telling Guido to let go, but rejected the thought. If the bodyguard released his grip, we'd doubtless resume our previous speed . . . and while a lot of folks at the Bazaar talked about my meteoric rise, I'd just as soon keep the phrase figurative. There was also the minor detail that we were already at a height where it would be dangerous for Guido to try dropping back to the street. There was that, and his death-grip on my legs.

"Don't tell me, let me guess," I called down to him. "You're acrophobic, too?"

The view of Blut that was unfolding beneath us was truly breathtaking. Truly! My life these days was so cluttered with crisis and dangers that a little thing like looking down on buildings didn't bother me much, but even I was finding it hard to breathe when confronted up close with sheer walls adorned with stone creatures. Still, until I felt his fingernails biting into my calves, it had never occurred to me that such things might upset a rough-and-tumble guy like Guido.

"Naw. I got nothin' against spiders," he replied nervously. "It's heights that scare me."

I let that one go. I was busy studying the tower which could be viewed much more clearly from this altitude. If anything, it looked stronger than the portion of the building that was below us. One feature captured my attention, though. The top portion of the tower, the part I assumed was Aahz's cell, was shaped like a large dragon's head. The window I had been expecting was actually the creature's mouth, with its teeth serving as bars.

I should have anticipated something like that, realizing the abundance of stone animals on every other building in town. Still, it came as a bit of a surprise . . . but a pleasant surprise. I had been trying to figure a way to get through iron bars, but stone teeth might be a bit easier. Maybe with Aahz working from the inside and us working from the outside, we could loosen the mortar and....

I suddenly realized that in a few moments we would be level with the cell . . . and that a few moments after that we'd be past it! Unless something was done, and done fast, to halt our upward progress, we'd only have time for a few quick words with Aahz before parting company permanently. With time running out fast, I cast about for a solution.

The wall was too far away to grab onto, and there was no way to increase our weight, unless. . .

When Aahz first taught me to fly, he explained the process as "levitation in reverse." That is, instead of using the mind to lift objects, you push against the ground and lift yourself. Focusing my reservoir of magical energy, I used a small portion to try flying in reverse. Instead of pushing up, I pushed down!

Okay. So I was desperate. In a crisis, I'll try anything, however stupid. Fortunately, this stupid idea worked!

Our upward progress slowed to a halt with me hanging at eye-level with the cell's dragon mouth.

Trying not to show my relief, I raised my voice.

"Hey, Aahz! When are visiting hours?"

For a moment there was no response, and I had a sudden fear that we were hanging a hundred feet in the air outside an empty cell. Then my partner's unmistakable countenance appeared in the window.

"Skeeve?" he said in a skeptical voice. "Skeeve! What are you doing out there?"

"Oh, we were just in the neighborhood and thought we'd drop in," I replied in my best nonchalant voice. "Heard you were in a bit of trouble and thought we'd better get you out before it got serious."

"Who's we?" my partner demanded, then he focused on my assistants. "Oh no! Those two? Where are Tananda and Chumley? C'mon, Skeeve. I need a rescue team and you bring me a circus act!"

"It's the best I could do on short notice," I shot back, slightly annoyed. "Tananda and Chumley aren't back from their own work yet, but I left a message for them to catch up with us if they could. Of course, I'm not sure how much help they'll be. In case you're wondering why I'm being carried by my apprentice instead of flying free, this particular dimension is exceptionally low on force lines to tap in to. If anything, I think I'm pretty lucky that I brought 'these two' along instead of ending up with a whole team of for-real magicians who are too proud to use gimmicks. It's thanks to 'these two' that I made it this far at all. Now, do you want our help, or do you want to wait for the next team to float past? I mean, you're in no rush, are you?"

"Now don't get your back up, partner," Aahz said soothingly. "You caught me a little off-guard is all. So tell me, just how do you figure to get me out of here?"

That brought me back to earth ... or as close to it as I could get while suspended in mid-air.

"Umm . . . actually, Aahz, I was kinda hoping you might have a few ideas on the subject. You're usually pretty good at coming up with plans to get us out of tight spots."

"What I want to know," Guido snarled, turning slightly in the wind, "is how come your partner hasn't figured a way out of there all by himself, if he's so all-fired smart?"

I started to rebuke my bodyguard, but slowly his words sank in. That was a good question! Aahz was strong ... I mean **STRONG!** By rights he should have been able to rip the stone teeth out of the window all by himself. What was keeping him here?

"Oh, I'm having so much fun in here I just couldn't bear to leave," Aahz barked back. "I'm in here because I can't get out, that's why. What's more, if any of you have any ideas about how to get me out, I think now's a real good time to share them with the rest of us."

"Wait a minute, Aahz," I said. "Why can't you get out... and how did they catch you in the first place?"

"I was framed," my partner retorted, but I noticed his voice was a bit more subdued.

"We already know that." Impressed. "What I want to know is why you didn't just bust a few heads and sprint for home? You've never been particularly respectful of local authority before."

To my surprise, Aahz actually looked embarrassed.

"I was drugged," he said in a disgusted tone. "They put something in my drink, and the next thing I knew I had a stake and mallet in my hands and a room full of officials. Whatever it was they used, it kept me groggy all the way through the trial... I mean I couldn't walk straight, much less defend myself coherently, and after that I was in here!"

"The old Mickey Finn trick!" Massha snorted, rocking our entire formation. "I'm surprised someone as off-worldly as you could get caught by such a corny stunt."

"Yeah. It surprised me, too!" Aahz admitted. "I mean, that gag is so old, who would really expect anyone to try it at all?"

"Only if you figured the mark was louder than he was smart," Guido sneered.

"Is that so!" my partner snapped, ready to renew their old rivalry. "Well, when I get out of here, you and me can...."

"Stop it, you two," I ordered. "Right now the problem is to get us all out of here before the balloon goes up ... no offense, Massha. Now spill, Aahz. What's so special about this cell that's keeping you bottled up?"

My partner heaved a great sigh.

"Take another look at it, Skeeve. A close look."

I did. It still looked the same to me: a tower room in the shape of a dragon's head.

"Yeah. Okay. So?"

"So remember where we are. This thing was built to hold vampire criminals. You know, beings with superhuman strength that can change into mist?"

My gaze flew back to the dragon's head.

"I don't get it," I admitted. "How can any stone cell hold beings like that?"

"That's the point." Aahz winced. "A stone cell can't! This thing is made of living stone. If whoever's inside tries to bust out, it swallows them. If they try to turn into mist, it inhales them."

"You mean...."

"Now you're getting the picture."

He flashed his toothy grin at me despite his obvious depression.

"The cell is alive!"

Startled by this revelation, I looked at the tower top cell again. As if it had been waiting for the right cue, the dragon's head opened its eyes and looked at me.

Chapter Twelve:

"For the right person, the impossible is easy!"
-DUMBO

To everyone's surprise, particularly my own, I didn't find the revelation about the true nature of Aahz's confinement at all discouraging. If anything, I was doubly pleased. Not only did I have an immediate idea for how to beat the problem, I had arrived at it before my knowledgeable partner . . . well before, as a matter of fact, as he had been pondering his dilemma for days whereas I had only just received the information. Of course, he was probably not in a position to see the easy solution that I could.

"What are you grinning at?" he demanded. "If there's anything funny about this, it eludes me completely."

Unlike my own amiable self, Aahz tends to show his worry by getting mad. Come to think of it, he tends to express almost any emotion by getting mad. Well, at least he's consistent.

"Tell me," I said, eyeing the dragon's head, "you say this thing's alive. How alive is it?"

"What do you mean, 'how alive is it'?" Aahz scowled. "It's alive enough to swallow me if it gets it into it's head. That's alive enough for me.

"I mean, can it hear and see?"

"Who cares?" my partner said, in a dazzling display of charm and curiosity that makes him so lovable. "I hadn't planned on asking it out for a date."

I stared thoughtfully at the beast.

"I was just wondering if it could hear me ... say, if I said that I thought it was the ugliest building decoration I've seen here in town?"

The dragon's head rewarded me by narrowing its eyes into an evil glare.

"I think it can hear you, Boss," Guido said, shifting his grip nervously. "It doesn't look like it liked that last comment."

"Oh, swell!" Aahz grumbled. "Tell you what, partner. Why don't you come in here and sit on this thing's tongue instead of me before you start getting it all riled Up?"

"I was just checking." I smiled. "To tell the truth, I think it's the most incredible thing I've seen since I started traveling the dimensions. I just said that other to test its reactions."

The dragon stopped glaring, but it still looked a little bit suspicious and wary.

"Well, find some other reaction to test, okay?" my partner snapped. "For some obscure reason, I'm a little nervous these days, and every time this thing moves its tongue I age a few centuries."

I ignored his grumbling and shook one of my legs.

"Hey, Guido! Are you still paying attention down there?"

His grip tightened fiercely.

"Of course I'm paying attention, you little ... I mean, yeah, Boss. There's not much else to do while we're hangin'. here, know what I mean? And quit jerking your leg around . . . please?"

I found his verbal slip rather interesting, but now wasn't the time to investigate further.

"Well, listen up," I said. "Here's what I want you to do. I want you to let go with one hand and pass the rope up to me. ..."

"No way, Boss! Have you seen how far down it is? I'm not lettin' go no matter what you. ..."

"... because if you don't," I continued as if he hadn't interrupted, "I'm going to start squirming around until either you lose your grip with both hands or Massha loses her grip on me. Whichever way it goes, you'll fall. Get my drift? Now for once could you just follow orders without a lot of back-talk? We don't have much time to pull this off."

There was a stricken silence below as Guido absorbed my ultimatum and weighed the possibilities.

"Pull what off?" Aahz demanded. "Why doesn't anybody tell me anything? If this master plan of yours is riding on that sorry excuse for a bodyguard, you might as well give up right now. I've told you all along that he was too lily-livered to be any good at. ..."

"Who's lily-livered?!" Guido shouted. "Look, Big Mouth, as soon as we get you out of there, you and me are going to settle this once and. ..."

"First, we've got to get him out, Guido," I interrupted. "The rope."

"Right, Boss. One rope coming up. We'll see who's lily-livered. The last person who called me that was my mom, and by the time I got done with her...."

Our whole formation began to rock dangerously as he fumbled through his coat one-handed in search of the rope. For a minute, I was afraid he was mad enough to let go with both hands to speed his search.

"Easy there, Guido," I cautioned. "We can.... ."

"Here it is, Boss!" he said, flipping the rope up so violently that it almost whacked me in the face. "I hope you can use it to hang the son of a...."

"Hanging isn't enough!" Aahz taunted. "It takes more than a piece of rope to do me in."

"Yeah. It takes a little girl with blue eyes and a spiked drink," my bodyguard sneered back. "If you think I'm going to let you live that one down...."

I forced myself to ignore them. While it was tempting to rally to Luanna's defense, there were other more pressing matters to attend to.

Moving as carefully as I could, I looped one end of the rope up and around Massha's waist. It took a couple of tries and a lot more rope than I would have liked, but finally I managed to catch the dangling end and tie it off securely.

"What's with the rope, Hot Stuff?" Massha said calmly, the only one of our group who had managed to keep her cool through the entire proceedings.

"Well, with any luck, in a little while we're going to be heading down . . . with Aahz," I explained. "Even though I know you're strong, I don't think your hands are strong enough to keep a grip on all three of us while we make the trip. This is to be sure we don't lose anyone after we spring the cell."

"Speaking of that," Aahz called, "I'm still waiting to hear how you're going to get me out of this thing. You might even say I'm dying to find out."

He wasn't the only one. The dragon's head was watching my every movement through slitted eyes. I'm not sure how much pride it took in its job, but it was obvious the beast wasn't getting ready to overwhelm us with its cooperation.

Everything was as ready as I could make it, so I decided it was time to play my trump card.

"There's nothing to it, really," I told my partner with a smile. "Talk to me."

It isn't often I catch my old mentor totally by surprise ... I get him upset on a fairly regular basis, but total surprise was a real rarity. This was one of those golden times.

"Say WHAT?" Aahz exclaimed loudly.

"Trust me, Aahz," I insisted. "I know what I'm doing. Just talk to me. Tell me a story. How did you first meet Garkin?"

"Oh, that," he said, rolling his eyes expressively. "Well, we were at the same boring cocktail party, see . . . you know, one of those dreary affairs where the crowd has you pinned against the wall and

you get stuck talking to whatever the tide washes up against you? Anyway, he was trying to impress some little bit of fluff with his magic, which really wasn't all that hot in those days ... let me tell you, partner, anytime you start getting depressed with your lack of progress in the magic business, remind me to tell you what your old teacher Garkin was like when we first met. But, as I was saying, out of respect for the craft, I just had to wander over and show them what the real stuff looked like . . . not that I had any interest in her myself, mind you...."

I felt Guido tugging on my pantleg.

"Say, Boss," he complained. "What is this? I thought we were in a hurry."

"This is what we needed the time for," I whispered back.

"For this he grumbled. "But Boss, if we don't get started. ..."

"We're started," I answered. "Now pay attention to what he's saying."

I was afraid our side comments might have distracted Aahz, but I needn't have worried. As per normal, once my partner got on a verbal roll, he wasn't that easy to stop.

". . .so there we were, just the three of us, mind you, and remember, our clothes were five floors away at this point...."

"What's going on, Hot Stuff?" Massha hissed from her position above me. "I know you've heard this story before. Heck, I've heard it four times myself."

"Keep your eye on the dragon," I advised her. "And be ready to act fast."

I was going through the motions of reacting to Aahz's story and fielding the impatient questions of my assistants as best I could, but my real attention was focused on the dragon's head. My strategy was already working. Aahz's droning account of past glories was starting to take effect.

The dragon's eyes were definitely starting to glaze.

". . .of course, after all that, I just had to take her home with me. It was the least I could do for the poor thing under the circumstances."

Aahz was winding up his story already! I had to keep him going just a little bit longer.

"Was that the party where you met Tananda?" I said, deliberately feeding him another cue.

"Tananda? No. That's another story completely. I met her when I was sitting in on a cut-throat game of dragon poker over at the Geek's. We had a real pigeon on the line, the kind of idiot who would bet a busted Corp's a' Corp's into a Unicorn Flush showing, you know? Well, I was a little low on funds just then, Guido was getting restless again. "Boss, how much longer are we gonna...."

"Not much longer," I interrupted. "Get hold of the rope. We're about to move."

"... now I was holding Ogres back-to-back ... or was it Elves? No, it was Ogres. I remember because Tananda had Elves wrapped up. Of course, we didn't know that until the end of the hand. Anyway, as soon as the Geek opened, I bumped him back limit, and Tananda ..."

That did it. I should have known a hand-by-hand, bet-by-bet description of dragon poker would do the trick.

Without any warning at all, the dragon yawned . . . long and wide.

Aahz broke off his narration, a momentous event in itself, and blinked his surprise.

"Quick, Aahz! Jump for it!"

Bewildered as he was, there was nothing wrong with my partner's reflexes. He was out of the dragon's mouth in a flash, diving through the air to catch the rope below Guido.

As soon as his hands closed on our lifeline, several things happened at the same time.

With the extra weight on Massha's levitation belt, our whole formation started to sink at an alarming rate . . . my apprentice lost her grip on me, giving me minor rope burns as I clutched madly for the rope, almost too late to follow the advice I had been so freely giving to everyone else ... and the dragon closed his mouth.

I caught one last glimpse of the beast before we sank from sight, and I honestly don't think he even knew we were gone. His eyelids were at half-mast, and the eyes themselves were out of focus from boredom. Aahz's stories tended to have that effect on even vaguely-intelligent beings. I had simply found a practical application for the phenomenon.

"I've gotta change the controls, Hot Stuff!" Massha called, alerting me once more to our current situation.

The ground was rushing up to meet us with frightening speed.

I remembered the faulty controls that held all of us at their mercy.

"No! Wait, Massha! Let me try...."

Exerting my last ounce of reserve power, I worked at levitating our whole crew. Under normal circumstances, I could lift three people easily and four or five in a pinch. Here in Limbo, using everything I had with Massha's belt assisting me, I barely managed to slow our descent to a moderate crawl.

"What happened there, partner?" Aahz called. "How did you know that thing was going to yawn?"

"Call it a lucky guess," I grunted, still concentrating on keeping us from crashing. "I'll explain later."

"Check the landing zone," Guido warned.

I sneaked a peak.

We had been at our task longer than I thought. The sidewalk below was crowded with vampires strolling here and there as Blut's legendary nightlife fired up.

"I don't think we can bluff our way through this one," Aahz said calmly. "Any chance you can steer us around the corner into the alley? There doesn't seem to be as much of a crowd there."

Before I could answer, something flashed past us from above with a flutter of leather wings.

"JAILBREAK!" it screamed, banking around the corner. "Murderer on the loose! JAILBREAK!"

Chapter Thirteen:

"I've never seen so damn many Indians."

-G. A. CUSTER

THE words of alarm had an interesting effect on the crowd below. After a brief glance to see us descending into their midst, to a man they turned and ran. In a twinkling, the street was empty.

"What's going on?" I called to Aahz, unable to believe our good fortune.

"Beats me!" my partner shouted back. "I guess none of the normal citizenry want to tangle with an escaped murderer. Better get us down fast before they figure out how badly outnumbered we are."

I didn't have to be told twice. Our escape had just gotten an unexpected blessing, but I wasn't about to make book on how long it would last. I cut my magical support, and we dropped swiftly toward the pavement.

"What was that that blew the whistle on us?" Massha said, peering up into the darkness where our mysterious saboteur had disappeared.

"I think it was that Vic character," Guido answered from below me. "I got a pretty good look at him when he bolted past me back at the Woof Writers."

"Really?" I asked, half to myself, twisting around to look after the departed villain. "That's one more we owe him."

"Later," Aahz commanded, touching down at last. "Right now we've got to get out of here."

Guido was beside him in a second. I had to drop a ways, as with the extra weight removed from the rope, we had ceased to sink.

"C'mon, Massha!" I called. "Cut the power in that thing. It's not that far to fall."

"I'm trying!" she snapped back, fiddling with the belt buckle once more. "The flaming thing's malfunctioning again!"

The belt setting had changed. Holding the rope, I could feel that there was no longer an upward pull. Unfortunately, Massha wasn't sinking, either. Instead, she hovered in mid-air about fifteen feet up.

"Hey, Boss! We got company!"

I followed my bodyguard's gaze. There was a mob forming down the street to our left, and it didn't look happy. Of course, it was hard to tell for sure, but I had the definite impression that their eyes were glowing redder than normal, which I was unable to convince myself was a good sign.

"Maasshhha!" I nagged, my voice rising uncontrollably as I tugged on the rope.

"It's jammed!" she whimpered. "Go on, take off, Hot Stuff. No sense in all of us getting caught."

"We can't just leave you here," I argued.

"We don't have time for a debate," Aahz snarled. "Guido! Get up there ahead of us and keep the street open. We can't afford to get cut off. Okay, let's go!"

With that, he snatched the rope out of my hand and took off running down the street away from the crowd with Guido out front in point position and Massha floating over his head like a gaudy balloon. For once, I didn't object to him giving orders to my bodyguard. I was too busy sprinting to keep up with the rest of my group.

If the watching mob was having any trouble deciding what to do, the sight of us fleeing settled it. With a howl, they swarmed down the street in pursuit.

When I say "with a howl," I'm not speaking figuratively. As they ran, some of the vampires transformed into large, fierce-looking dogs, others into bats, presumably to gain more speed in the chase. While Aahz and I had been chased by mobs before, this was the first pack of pursuers who literally bayed at our heels. I must say I didn't care much for the experience.

"Where are we going, Aahz?" I panted.

"Away from them!" he called back.

"I mean, eventually," I pressed. "We're heading the wrong way to get back to our hideout."

"We can't hole up until we've shaken our fan club," my partner insisted. "Now shut up and run."

I had certain doubts about our ability to elude our pursuers while towing Massha overhead to mark our position, but I followed Aahz's instructions and pumped the pavement for all I was worth. For one thing, if I pointed out this obvious fact to my partner, he might simply let go of the rope and leave my apprentice to fend for herself. Then again, the option to running was to stand firm and face the mob. All in all, running seemed like a real good idea.

Guido was surprisingly good at clearing a path for us. I had never really seen my bodyguard in action, but with his constant carping and allergy problems throughout this venture, I was tending to discount his usefulness. Not so. The vampires we encountered in our flight had not heard the alarm and were unprepared for the whirlwind that burst into their midst. Guido never seemed to break stride as he barreled into victim after victim, but whatever he did to them was effective. None of the fallen bodies which marked his progress attempted to interfere with Aahz or I ... heck, they didn't even move.

"River ahead. Boss!" he called over his shoulder.

"What's that?" I puffed, realizing for the first time how out of shape I had grown during my prosperous stay at the Bazaar.

"A river!" he repeated. "The street we're on is going to dead-end into a river in a few blocks. I can see it from here. We're going to have to change direction or we'll get pinned against the water."

I wondered whether it wouldn't be a good idea for us to just plunge into the river and put some moving water between us and the vampires, as I seemed to recall a legend that that was one of the things that could stop them. Then it occurred to me that my bodyguard probably couldn't swim.

"Head right!" Aahz shouted. "There! Up that alley."

Guido darted off on the indicated course with my partner and I pounding along about fifteen paces behind him. We had built up a bit of a lead on our pursuers, though we could still hear their cries and yelps a block or so back, and for the first time I started to have the hope that we might actually elude them. Now that we were out of their line of sight....

"Lookout. ..."

There was a sudden cry from above, and Massha came crashing to the ground, gaming the dubious distinction of being the first person I've ever witnessed doing a belly-flop on dry land. I'm sure the ground didn't actually shake, but the impact was enough to leave that impression. I experienced a quick flash of guilt, realizing that my first thought was not for the well-being of my apprentice, but rather unbridled relief that she hadn't landed on one of us.

"I think the controls just came unstuck," Aahz said, rather unnecessarily to my thinking.

"Are you all right, Massha?" I said, crouching over her.

"Wha-ha ..." came the forced reply.

"Of course, she's not all right," Aahz snapped, assuming translator duties. "At the very least she's got the wind knocked out of her."

Whatever the exact extent of the damages suffered from her fall, my apprentice wasn't even trying to rise. I would have liked to give her a few minutes recovery time, but already the sounds of our pursuers were drawing closer.

"Can you carry her, Aahz?"

"Not on my best day," my partner admitted, eyeing Massha's sizable bulk. "How about you? Have you got enough juice left to levitate her?"

I shook my head violently.

"Used it all supervising our aerial maneuvers back at the jail."

"Hey. Boss!" Guido hissed, emerging from the shadows behind us. "The alley's blocked. This is the only way out!"

And that was that. Even if we got Massha up and moving, all it meant was that we'd have to retrace our steps right back into the teeth of the mob. We had run our race . . . and were about to lose it rather spectacularly.

The others knew it, too.

"Well, it's been nice working with you, Guido," Aahz said with a sigh. "I know I've gotten on your case a couple of times, but you're a good man to have around in a pinch. You did some really nice crowd work getting us this far. Sorry about that last turn call."

"No hard feelings," my bodyguard shrugged. "You gave it your best shot. This alley would have been my choice, too, if I'd been workin' alone. Boss, I warned you I was a jinx when it came to jailbreaks. I gotta admit, though, for a while there I really thought we were goin' to pull this one off."

"It was a long shot at best." I grinned. "At least you can't say that this one suffered from over-planning."

Aahz clapped a hand on my shoulder.

"Well, partner?" he said. "Any thoughts on how to play this one? Do we try to surrender peacefully, or go down swinging?"

I wasn't sure the crowd would give us a choice. They were almost at our alley, and they didn't sound like they cared much for talking.

"NOT THIS WAY! THEY'RE DOUBLING BACK TOWARD THE JAIL!"

This unexpected cry came from the street near the mouth of our alley.

I couldn't believe it, but apparently the mob did. There were curses and shouted orders, but from their fast-fading manner it was plain that the crowd had turned and was now heading back the way they had come.

"What was that?" Massha managed, her voice returning at last.

I motioned her to be silent and cocked an eyebrow at Aahz, silently asking the same question.

He answered with an equally silent shake of the head. Neither of us knew for sure what was going on, but we both sensed that the timely intervention was neither accidental nor a mistake. Someone had deliberately pulled the crowd off our backs. Before we celebrated our good fortune, we wanted to know who and why. A pair of figures appeared at the mouth of the alley. "You can come out now," one of them called.

"Sorry to interfere, but it looked like so much fun we just had to play, too."

I'd know that voice anywhere, even if I didn't recognize the figure as well as the unmistakable form of her brother.

"Tananda! Chumley!" I shouted, waving to pinpoint our position. "I was wondering when you'd show up."

The sister-brother team of Trollop and Troll hastened to join us. For all their lighthearted banter, I can think of few beings I'd rather have on or at my side when things get tight.

"Are you all right?" Tananda asked, stopping to help Massha to her feet.

"Really never had much dignity," my apprentice responded, "and what little I did have is shot to hell. Except for that I'm fine. I'm starting to see why you Big Leaguers are so down on mechanical magic."

Chumley seized my hand and pumped it vigorously.

"Now don't be too rough on your little gimmicks, ducks," he advised. "That little ring you left us was just the ticket we needed to get here in time for the latest in our unbroken string of last-minute rescues. Except for the typical hash you've made of your end-game, it looks like you've done rather well without us. We've got all present and accounted for, including Aahz, who seems remarkably unscathed after yet one more near-brush with disaster. Seems like all that's left is a hasty retreat and a slow celebration ... eh, what?"

"That's about the size of it," I agreed. "It's great having the two of you along to ride shotgun on our exit, though. Speaking of which, can you find the castle from here? I've gotten a little turned around...."

"Hold it right there!" Aahz broke in. "Before we get too wrapped up in congratulating each other, aren't there a few minor details being overlooked?"

The group looked at each other.

"Like what?" Tananda said at last.

"Like the fact that I'm still wanted for murder, for one," my partner glared. "Then again, there's the three fugitives we're supposed to be bringing back to Deva with us."

"Oh, come on, Aahz," the Trollop chided, poking him playfully in the ribs. "With the reputation you already have, what's a little thing like a murder warrant?"

"I didn't do it," Aahz insisted. "Not only didn't I kill this Vic character, nobody did. He's still around somewhere laughing down his sleeve at all of us. Now while I'll admit my reputation isn't exactly spotless, it doesn't include standing still for a bum rap ... or letting someone get away with making a fool of me!"

"Of course, saving the money for paying the swindlers' debts plus the fines involved has nothing to do with it, eh, Aahz?" Chumley said, winking his larger eye.

"Well . . . that, too," my partner admitted. "Isn't it nice that we can take care of both unpleasant tasks at the same time?"

"Maybe we could settle for just catching Vic and let the others go," I murmured.

"How's that again, partner?"

"Nothing, Aahz," I said with a sigh. "It's just that . . . nothing. C'mon everybody. If we're going to go hunting, it's going to require a bit of planning, and I don't think we should do it out here in the open."

Chapter Fourteen:

"Relax, Julie. Everyone will understand."
-ROMEO

FORTUNATELY, Massha's elevated position during our flight had given her an excellent view of our surroundings, and we were able to find our way back to the Dispatcher's without being

discovered by the aroused populace. Now that our numbers had increased, however, Vilhelm's greeting was noticeably cooler.

"I'm starting to believe what everybody says," the little vampire complained. "Let one demon in, and the next thing you know the neighborhood's crawling with them. When I decided to talk to you folks instead of blowing the whistle on you, I didn't figure on turning my office into a meeting place for off-worlders."

"C'mon, Vilhelm," I said, trying to edge my foot into the doorway. "We don't have any place else to go in town. There aren't that many of us."

"We could always just wait out on the street until the authorities come by," Aahz suggested. "I don't imagine it would take much to convince them that this guy has been harboring fugitives."

"Can it. Green and Scaly," Massha ordered, puffing herself up to twice her normal size. "Vilhelm's been nice to us so far. and I won't listen to anyone threaten him, even you. Just remember that you'd still be cooling your heels in the slammer if it weren't for him. Either he helps of his own free will, or we look elsewhere." Aahz gave ground before her righteous indignation.

"Are you going to let your apprentice talk to me that way?" he demanded.

"Only when she's right." I shrugged.

"I say, Aahz," Chumley intervened. "Could you possibly curb your normally vile manners for a few moments? We don't really need one more enemy in this dimension, and I, for one, would appreciate the chance to extend my thanks to this gentleman before he throws us out."

When he's working, Chumley goes by the name of Big Crunch and does a Neanderthal that's the envy of half the barbarians at the Bazaar. On his own time, however, his polished charm has solved a lot of problems for us ... almost as many as Aahz's bluster has gotten us into.

"Oh, come on in," the Dispatcher grumbled. "Enter freely and of your own accord and all that. I never could turn my back on somebody in trouble. Guess that's why I've never traveled the other dimensions myself. They'd eat me alive out there."

"Thanks, Vilhelm," I said, slipping past him into the office before he could change his mind. "You'll have to forgive my partner. He really isn't always like this. Being on death row hasn't done much for his sense of humor."

"I guess I'm a little edgy myself," the vampire admitted. "Strange as it sounds, I've been worried about you folks . . . and your motor-mouthed friend who's been keeping me company hasn't helped things much."

I did a quick nose count of our troop.

"Wait a minute," I frowned. "Who's been waiting for us?"

Now it was Vilhelm's turn to look surprised.

"Didn't one of you send out for a werewolf? He said he was with you."

"Aahh! But I am! My friends, they do not know me yet, but I shall be their salvation, no?"

With that, I was overwhelmed by a shaggy rug. Well, at least that's what I thought until it came off the floor and threw itself into my arms with the enthusiasm of a puppy ... a very large puppy.

"What's that?!" Aahz said, his eyes narrowing dangerously. "Skeeve, can't I leave you alone for a few days without you picking up every stray in any given dimension?"

"That," in this case, was one of the scroffiest-looking werewolves I'd ever seen . . . realizing, of course, that until this moment I'd only seen two. He had dark bushy eyebrows (if you'll believe that on a werewolf) and wore a white stocking cap with a maple leaf on the side. His whiskers were carefully groomed into a handlebar mustache, and what might have been a goatee peered from beneath his chin. Actually, viewed piecemeal, he was very well-groomed. It's just when taken in its entirety that he looked scroffy. Maybe it was the leer... .

"Honest, Aahz," I protested, trying to untangle myself. "I've never seen him before in my life!"

"Oh, but forgive me," the beast said, releasing me so suddenly I almost fell. "I am so stupeed, I forget to introduce. So! I am an artist extraordinaire, but also, I am ze finest track-air in ze land. My friends, the Woof Writers, they have told me of your problem and I have flown like ze wind to aid you. No? I am Pepe Le Garou A. and I am at your service."

With that, he swept into a low bow with a flourish that if I hadn't been so flabbergasted I would have applauded. It occurred to me that now I knew why the Woof Writers had snickered when they told us they knew of someone who could help.

"Boss," Guido said, his voice muffled by his hand, which he was holding over his nose and mouth. "Shall I wait outside?"

Tananda cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Allergy problems? Here, try some of this. No dimension traveler should be without it."

She produced a small vial and tossed it to my bodyguard. "Rub some onto your upper lip just below your nose."

"Gee, thanks," Guido said, following her instructions. "What is it?"

"It's a counter-allergenic paste." She shrugged. "I think it has a garlic base."

"WHAT?" my bodyguard exclaimed, dropping the vial.

Tananda favored him with one of her impish grins. "Just kidding. Nunzio was worried about you and told us about your allergies ... all of them." Her brother swatted her lightly on the rump. "Shame on you, little sister," he said, smiling in spite of himself. "After you get done apologizing to Guido, I suggest you do the same for our host. I think you nearly gave him a heart attack with that last little joke."

This was, of course, just what I needed while stranded in a hostile dimension. A nervous vampire, a melodramatic werewolf, and now my teammates decide it's time to play practical jokes on each other.

"Ummm . . . tell me, Mr. A.," I said, ignoring my other problems and turning to the werewolf. "Do you think you can...."

"No, non," he interrupted. "Eet is simply Pepe, eh?"

"Pepe A.," I repeated dutifully.

"Zat's right," he beamed, apparently delighted with my ability to learn a simple phrase. "Now, before we ... how you say, get down to ze business, would you do me ze hon-air of introducing me to your colleagues?"

"Oh. Sorry. This is my partner, Aahz. He's...."

"But of course! Ze famous Aahz! I have so long wished to meet you."

If there's anything that can coax Aahz out of a bad mood, it's flattery . . . and Pepe seemed to be an expert in that category.

"You've heard of me?" he blinked. "I mean . . . what exactly have you heard? There have been so many adventures over the years."

"Do you not remem-bair Piere? I was raised from a pup on his tales of your fight with Isstvan."

"Piere? You know Piere?"

"Do I know him? He is my uncle!"

"No kidding. Hey, Tananda! Did you hear that? Pepe here's Piere's nephew. Wait'll we tell Gus."

I retired from the conversation, apparently forgotten in the reunion.

"Say, Skeeve," Vilhelm said, appearing at my side. "It looks like this could take a while. Should I break out the wine?"

That got my attention.

"Wine? You've got wine?"

"Stocked up on it after your last visit," the vampire admitted with a grin. "Figured it might come in handy the next time you came through. I may gripe a bit, but talking to you and your friends is a lot more fun than watching the tubes."

"Well bring it out... but I get the first glass. Unless you've got lots there won't be much left after my partner there gets his claws on it."

I turned back to the proceedings just in time to see Pepe kissing my apprentice's hand.

"Do not be afraid, my little flow-air," he was saying. "Here is one who truly appreciates your beauty, as well as ... how should I say it, its quantity?"

"You're kinda cute," Massha giggled. "But I never did go in much for inter-species dating, if you get my drift."

I caught Aahz's attention and drew him away from the group.

"Could you take over for a while here, partner?" I said. "I've been running nonstop since the start of this thing and could use a little time by myself to recharge my batteries before we fire up again."

"No problem," he nodded, laying a hand on my shoulder. "I figure we won't be moving before sunup . . . and Skeeve? I haven't had a chance to say it, but thanks for the bail-out."

"Don't mention it," I grinned weakly. "Tell me you wouldn't do the same for me."

"Don't know," he retorted. "You've never suckerpunched me at the beginning of a caper."

"Now that I still owe you for."

Just then, Vilhelm appeared with the wine, and Aahz hurried away to rejoin the group.

I managed to snag a goblet and retired to a secluded corner while the party went into high gear. Pepe seemed to be fitting in well with the rest of the team, if not functioning as a combination jester and spark plug, but somehow I felt a bit distant. Sipping my wine, I stared off into the distance at nothing in particular, letting my thoughts wander.

"What's the trouble, handsome?"

"Hmmm? Oh. Hi, Tananda. Nothing in particular. Just a little tired, that's all."

"Mind if I join you?" she said, dropping to the floor beside me before I could stop her. "So. Are you going to tell me about it? Who is she?"

I turned my head slowly to look at her directly.

"I beg your pardon?"

She kept her eyes averted, idly running one finger around the rim of her goblet.

"Look," she said, "if you don't want to talk about it, just say so ... it's really none of my business. Just don't try to kid me or yourself that there's nothing bothering you. I've known you a long time now, and I can usually tell when there's something eating you. My best guess right now, if I'm any judge of the phenomenon, is that it's a girl."

Ever since I'd met Tananda, I'd had a crush on her. With her words, though, I suddenly realized how badly I wanted someone to talk to. I mean, to Guido and Massha I was an authority figure, and I wasn't about to open up to Aahz until I was sure he'd take the problem seriously and not just laugh, and as for Chumley . . . how do you talk about woman problems with a troll?

"Okay. You got me," I said, looking back into my wine. "It's a girl."

"I thought so," Tananda smiled. "Where have you been keeping her? Tell me, is she beautiful and sensitive?"

"All that and more." I nodded, taking another drink from my goblet. "She's also on the wrong side."

"Woops," Tananda said, straightening up. "You'd better run that one past me again."

I filled her in on my encounters with Luanna. I tried to keep it unbiased and informative, but even I could tell that my tones were less controlled than I would have liked.

Tananda sat in silence for a few moments after I'd finished, hugging her legs and with her chin propped up on her knees.

"Well," she said at last, "from what you say, she's an accomplice at best. Maybe we can let her go after we get them all rounded up."

"Sure."

My voice was flat. Both Tananda and I knew that once Aahz got on his high horse there was no telling how merciful or vicious he would be at any given point.

"Well, there's always a chance," she insisted. "Aahz has always had a soft spot where you're concerned. If you intercede for her, and if she's willing to abandon her partners. ..."

"... and, if a table had wings, we could fly it back to the Bazaar." I frowned. "No, Tananda. First of all, she won't give up her partners just because they're in a crunch. That much I know. Besides, if I put that kind of pressure on her, to choose between me and them, I'd never know for sure if she really wanted me or if she was just trying to save her own skin." Tananda got to her feet.

"Don't become so wise that you're stupid, Skeeve," she said softly before she left. "Remember, Luanna's already chosen you twice over her partners. Both times she's risked her life and their getaway to pass you a warning. Maybe all she needs is what you haven't yet given her-an invitation for a chance at a new life with a new partner. Don't be so proud or insecure that you'd throw a genuine admirer to the wolves rather than run the risk of making a mistake. If you did, I don't think I'd like you much . . . and I don't think you would either."

I pondered Tananda's advice after she'd gone. There was one additional complication I hadn't had the nerve to mention to her. Whatever Luanna's feelings for me were, how would they change when she found out I'd used her scarf . . . her token of affection, to guide a pack of hunters to their target?

Chapter Fifteen:

"Everybody needs a career manager!"
-LADY MACBETH

"So where is he?" Aahz grumbled for the hundredth time ... in the last five minutes.

The sun had been up for hours, or at least as up as it seemed to get in this dimension. Since my arrival in Limbo, I had never seen what I am accustomed to thinking of as full sunlight. Whether the constant heavy overcast condition which seemed to prevail during daylight hours was the result of magic or some strange meteorologic condition I was never sure, but it did nothing to alleviate the air of gloom that clung to the town of Blut like a shroud.

The whole team was impatient to get started, but Aahz was the only one who indulged himself in expressing his feelings as often ... or as loudly. Of course, it might have been simply that he was making so much of a fuss that the others were willing to let him provide the noise for all of them rather than letting their own efforts get constantly upstaged.

"Just take it easy, partner," I said soothingly, struggling to keep from snapping at him in my own nervous impatience. "There aren't that many all-day stores in this dimension."

"What do you expect, dealing with a bunch of vampires," he snapped. "I still don't like this idea. Nonmagical disguises seem unnatural somehow."

I heaved a quiet sigh inside and leaned back to wait, propping my feet up on a chair. This particular quarrel was old before Vilhelm had left on his shopping trip, and I was tired going over it again and again.

"Be reasonable, Aahz," Tananda said, taking up the slack for me. "You know we can't wander around town like this . . . especially you with half the city looking for you. We need disguises, and without a decent power source, Skeeve here can't handle disguises for all of us. Besides, it's not like we're using mechanical magic. We won't be using magic at all."

"That's what everybody keeps telling me," my partner growled. "We're just going to alter our appearances without using spells. That sounds like mechanical magic to me. Do you know what's going to happen to our reputations if word of this gets back to the Bazaar? Particularly with most of the competition looking for a chance to splash a little mud on the Great Skeeve's name? Remember, we're already getting complaints that our prices are too high, and if this gets out...."

The light dawned. I could finally see what was eating at Aahz. I should have known there was money at the bottom of this.

"But Aahz," I chimed in, "our fees are overpriced. I've been saying that for months. I mean, it's not like we need the money...."

". . . and I've been telling you for months that it's the only way to keep the riff-raff from draining away all your practice time," he shot back angrily. "Remember, your name's supposed to be the Great Skeeve, not the Red Cross. You don't do charity."

Now we were on familiar ground. Unlike the disguise thing, this was one argument I never tired of.

"I'm not talking about charity," I said. "I'm talking about a fair fee for services rendered."

"Fair fee?" my partner laughed, rolling his eyes. "You mean like that deal you cut with Watzisname? Did he ever tell you about that one, Tananda? We catch a silly bird for this Deveel, see, and my partner charges him a flat fee. Not a percentage, mind you, a flat fee. And how much of a flat fee? A hundred gold pieces? A thousand. No. TEN. Ten lousy gold pieces. And half an hour later the Deveel sells his 'poor little bird' for over a hundred thousand. Nice to know we don't do charity, isn't it?"

"C'mon, Aahz," I argued, writhing inside. "That was only five minutes' work. How was I supposed to know the silly bird was on the endangered species list? Even you thought it was a good deal until we heard what the final sale was. Besides, if I had held out for a percentage and the Deveel had been legit and never sold the thing, we wouldn't have even gotten ten gold pieces out of it."

"I never heard the details from your side," Tananda said, "but what I picked up on the streets was that everybody at the Bazaar was really impressed. Most folks think that it's a master-stroke of PR for the hottest magician at the Bazaar to help bring a rarity to the public for a mere fraction of his normal fees. It shows he's something other than a cold-hearted businessman ... that he really cares about people."

"So what's wrong with being a cold-hearted businessman?" Aahz snorted. "How about the other guy? Everybody thinks he's a villain, and he's crying all the way to the bank. He retired on the profit from that one sale alone."

"Unless Nanny misled me horribly when she taught me my numbers," Chumley interrupted, "I figure your current bankroll could eat that fellow's profit and still have room for lunch. Any reason you're so big on squirreling away so much gold, Aahz? Are you planning on retiring?"

"No, I'm not planning on retiring," my partner snapped. "And you're missing the point completely. Money isn't the object."

"It isn't?"

I think everybody grabbed that line at the same time ... even Pepe, who hadn't known Aahz all that long.

"Of course not. You can always get more gold. What can't be replaced is time. We all know Skeeve here has a long way to go in the magic department. What the rest of you keep forgetting is how short a life span he has to play with . . . maybe a hundred years if he's lucky. All I'm trying to do is get him the maximum learning time possible . . . and that means keeping him from using up most of his time on nickel-and-dime adventures. Let the smalltime operators do those. My partner shouldn't have to budge away from his studies unless the assignment is something really spectacular. Something that will advance his reputation and his career."

There was a long silence while everybody digested that one, especially me. Since Aahz had accepted me as a full partner instead of an apprentice, I tended to forget his role as my teacher and career manager. Thinking back now, I could see he had never really given up the work, just gotten sneakier. I wouldn't have believed that was possible.

"How about this particular nickel-and-dime adventure?" Tananda said, breaking the silence. "You know, pulling your tail out of a scrape? Isn't this a little lowbrow for the kind of legend you're trying to build?"

The sarcasm in her voice was unmistakable, but it didn't phase Aahz in the least.

"If you'll ask around, you'll find out that I didn't want him along on this jaunt at all. In fact, I knocked him cold trying to keep him out. A top-flight magician shouldn't have to stoop to bill collecting, especially when the risk is disproportionately high."

"Well, it all sounds a little cold-blooded for my taste, Aahz," Chumley put in. "If you extend your logic, our young friend here is only going to work when the danger is astronomically high, and conversely if the advancement to his career is enough, no risk is too great. That sounds to me like a sure-fire way to lose a partner and a friend. Like the Geek says, if you keep bucking the odds, sooner or later they're going to catch up with you."

My partner spun to confront the troll nose-to-nose.

"Of course it's going to be dangerous," he snarled. "The magic profession isn't for the faint of heart, and to hit the top he's going to have to be hair-triggered and mean. There's no avoiding that, but I can try to be sure he's ready for it. Why do you think I've been so deadset against him having bodyguards? If he starts relying on other people to watch out for him, he's going to lose the edge himself. That's when he's in danger of walking into a swinging door."

That brought Guido into the fray.

"Now let me see if I've got this right," my bodyguard said. "You don't want me and my cousin Nunzio around so that the Boss here can handle all the trouble himself? That's crazy talk, know what I mean? Now listen to me, 'cause this time I know what I'm sayin'. The higher someone gets on the ladder, the more folks come huntin' for his head. even if they don't do nothin' they got people gunning for them, 'cause they got power and respect and there's always somebody who thinks they can steal it. Now I've seen some of the Big Guys who try to act just like you're sayin' . . . they're so scared all the time they don't trust nothin' or nobody. The only one they can count on is themselves, and everybody else is suspect. That includes total strangers, their own bodyguards, their friends, and their partners. Think about that for a minute."

He leaned back and surveyed the room, addressing his next comments to everyone.

"People like that don't last long. They don't trust nobody, so they got nobody. Ya can't do everything alone and sooner or later they're lookin' the wrong way or asleep when they should be watchin' and it's all over. Now I've done a lot of jobs as a bodyguard, and they were just jobs, know what I mean? The Boss here is different, and I'm not just sayin' that. He's the best man I've met in my whole life because he likes people and ain't afraid to show it. More important, he ain't afraid to risk his neck to help somebody even if it isn't in his best interest. I work double hard for him because I don't want to see anything happen to him ... and if that means comin' along on weird trips like this, then that's the way it is. Anybody that wants to hurt him is gonna have to come through me ... and that includes fightin' any of you if you want to try to turn him into somethin' he isn't and doesn't want to be." Massha broke in with a loud clapping of her hands.

"Bravo, Guido," she said. "I think your problem, Green and Scaly, is that your idea of success is out of step with everyone else's. We all want to see good things happen for Skeeve, here, but we also like him just the way he is. We've got enough faith in his good sense to back him in whatever move he makes in his development . . . without trying to frog-march or trick him up a specific path."

Aahz not only gave ground before this onslaught of protest, he seemed to shrink in a little on himself.

"I like him too," he mumbled. "I've known him longer than any of you, remember? He's doing fine, but he could be so much more. How can he choose a path if he can't see it? All I'm trying to do is set him up to be bigger than I ... than we could ever think of being ourselves. What's wrong with that?"

Despite my irritation at having my life discussed as if I weren't in the room, I was quite touched, by my friends' loyal defense of me, and most of all by Aahz.

"You know, partner," I said softly, "for a minute there, you sounded just like my father. He wanted me to be the best... or more specifically, to be better than he was. My mom always tried to tell me that it was because he loved me, but at that time it just sounded like he was always being critical. Maybe she was right. . . I'm more inclined to believe it today than I was then, but then again, I'm

older now. If nothing else, I've had to try to tell people I love them when the words just won't come . . . and gotten upset with myself when they couldn't see it when I tried to show them.

"Aahz, I appreciate your concern and I want your guidance. You're right, there are paths and options I can't even comprehend yet. But I also have to choose my own way. I want to be better eventually than I am today, but not necessarily the best. I think Guide's right, there's a big price tag attached to being at the top, and I'd want to think long and hard if I wanted to pay it ... even if I was convinced I could, which I'm not. I do know that if it means giving up the trust I have in you and everybody else in this room, I'll settle for being a nickel-and-dime operator. That price I'll never pay willingly."

Silence started to descend again as each of us retreated into his or her own thoughts, then the werewolf bounded into the middle of the assemblage.

"But what is this, eh?" he demanded. "Surely this cannot be ze great team of Aahz and Skeeve, ze ones who can laugh at any dan-gair? "

"You know, Pepe," Aahz said warningly, "you've got a great future as a stuffed head."

"My head?" The werewolf blinked. "But she is not . . . oohh. I see now. You make ze joke, eh? Good. Zat is more like it."

"... and as far as laughing at danger goes," I joined in, determined to hold up my end of the legend, "the only danger I see here is dying of boredom. Where is Vilhelm anyway?"

"I know you and Aahz are fond of each other, Skeeve," Chumley yawned, "but you've got to spend more time with other people. You're starting to sound like him. Maybe you can tag along the next time I have an assignment."

"Over my dead body," my partner said. "Besides, what could he learn from a troll that I couldn't teach him myself?"

"I could teach him not to catch birds for Deveels for ten gold pieces," the troll grinned, winking at his sister. "That seems to be a part of his education you've neglected."

"Izzat so!" my partner bristled. "You're going to teach him about price setting? How about the time you set your own sister up to steal an elephant without bothering to check...."

. And they were off again. As I listened, I found myself reflecting on the fact that while it was nice to know the depths of my friends' feelings about me, it was far more comfortable when they managed to conceal it under a cloak of banter. For the most part, open sincerity is harder to take than friendly laughter.

Chapter Sixteen:

"Don't be fooled by appearances."

-MALLOY

THINGS were pretty much back to normal by the time Vilhelm returned with our disguises . . . which was a good thing as the process of masking-up proved to be a test of everybody's sense of humor.

Until I had hooked up with Aahz, I had never had occasion to pretend I was anyone but myself. As such, I had no way of knowing how long it took to don a physical disguise without resorting to magic. By the time we were done, I had a new respect for the skills I had learned, not to mention a real longing for a dimension ... any dimension with a strong force line to work with.

Tananda was a major help, her experiences with the assassin's guild came into play and she took the lead in trying to coach us into our new roles.

"Guido, straighten up!" she commanded, exasperation creeping into her voice. "You walk like a gangster."

"I am a gangster!" my bodyguard snarled back.

"Besides, what's wrong with the way I walk? It got us to the jail, didn't it?"

"Half the town wasn't looking for you then," Tananda argued. "Besides, then you could pick your own route. We don't know where the opposition's holed up. We're going to have to walk through crowds on this hunt, and that walk just doesn't make it. Ninety percent of costuming is learning to move like the character you're trying to portray. Right now you move like you're looking for a fight."

"Try walking like Don Bruce," I suggested. "He's a gangster, too."

That earned me a black look, but my bodyguard tried to follow my instructions, rising up on the balls of his feet and mincing along.

"Better," Tananda said, leaving Guido prancing up and down the room with a scowl on his face.

"How are we doing?"

"Lousy," she confided in me. "This is taking a lot longer, than it should. I wish there were more mirrors in this place... heck, any mirrors would be nice."

It hadn't been until we started gearing up that we realized the Dispatcher had no mirrors at all. He claimed they weren't popular or necessary among vampires. This left us with the unenviable job of checking each others' make-up and costumes, a chore which would have been Homeric even if less sensitive egos were involved.

"How're my teeth?" Massha demanded, sticking her head in front of me and opening her mouth.

It was like staring into the depths of an underground cave.

"Umm ... the left side is okay, but you're still missing a few on the right. Hang on a second and I'll give you a hand."

Teeth were turning out to be a special problem. We had hoped to find some of the rubber fangs so prevalent in the Bazaar novelty stores to aid in our disguises. Unfortunately, none of the shops in Blut had them. The closest thing they had in stock, according to Vilhelm, were rubber sets of human teeth designed to fit over fangs. The vampire assured us that locally they were considered quite frightening. Faced by this unforeseen shortage, we were resorting to using tooth-black to blacken all our teeth except the canines for a close approximation of the vampires we were trying to imitate. When we tried it out, it wasn't a bad effect, but the actual application was causing countless problems. When one tried to apply the stuff on oneself without a mirror, it was difficult to get the right teeth, and if one called on one's friends for assistance, one rapidly found that said friend was soon possessed by an overpowering impulse to paint one's tongue black instead of the teeth.

"I don't like this cloak," Guido announced, grabbing my arm. "I want to wear my trench coat."

"Vampires don't wear trench coats," I said firmly. "Besides, the cloak really looks great on you. Makes you look ... I don't know, debonair but menacing."

"Yeah?" he retorted skeptically, craning his neck to try to see himself.

"You think you've got problems?" Massha burst in. "Look at what I'm supposed to wear! I'll trade your cloak for this rig any day."

As you might have noticed, the team was having more than a little difficulty adapting to their disguises. Massha in particular was rebelling against her costume.

After having been floated over our escape like a balloon over a parade, we feared that she would be one of the most immediately recognizable of our group. As such, we not only dyed her garish orange hair, we insisted that her new costume cover as much of her as possible. To this end, Vilhelm had found a dress he called a "moo-moo," a name which did nothing toward endearing the garment to my apprentice.

"I mean, really. High Roller," she said, backing me toward a corner. "Isn't it bad enough that half the town's seen me as a blimp? Tell me I don't have to be a cow-cow now."

"Honest, Massha," Vilhelm put in. "The style is fairly popular here in Blut. A lot of the ladies wear it who are ... that is, are a bit...."

"Fat!?"

She loomed over the little vampire.

"Is that the word you're groping for, Short and About To Become Extinct?"

"Let's face it, dear," Tananda said, coming to the rescue. "You are carrying a little extra weight there. Believe me, if there's one time you can't kid yourself about your body, it's when you're donning costumes. If anything, that outfit makes you look a little slimmer."

"Don't try to kid a kidder, sweetie," Massha sighed. "But you're right about the costuming thing. This thing is so drab, though. First I'm a blimp, and now I'm an army tent."

"Now that I'll agree with," Tananda nodded. "Trust a man to find a drab mu-mu. Tell you what. There's a scarf I was going to use for a belt, but maybe you could wear it around your neck."

I was afraid that last crack would touch off another explosion, but Massha took it as a helpful suggestion and the two of them went off in search of other possible adornments.

"Got a minute, partner?"

From the tone of Aahz's voice, I knew the moment I had been dreading had arrived.

Chumley didn't have to worry about a disguise at all, as trolls were not uncommon in this dimension. Tananda also insisted that she looked enough like a vampire to pass with only minimal modifications. I hadn't seen any vampires with green hair, but she claimed that she had, so, as always, I yielded to her greater experience in these matters. I was also on the "minimal disguise" list, everyone agreeing that no one in Blut had gotten enough of a look at me to fix the image in their mind. While I wasn't wild about being so unmemorable, I went along with it ... especially when I saw what Guido and Massha were going through. The problems with those two notables have already been mentioned troublesome, but not insurmountable. Then there was Aahz....

"Is there something wrong?" I asked innocently.

"You bet your dragon there's something wrong!" my partner snarled. "And don't try to play innocent with me! It didn't work when you were my apprentice, and it sure isn't going to work now."

Aahz's disguise had presented us with some knotty problems. Not only was he the most wanted member of our party, he was also easily the most distinctive. After the trial and his time in jail, it was doubtful that there was a single citizen of Blut who wouldn't recognize him on sight. I mean, there just aren't that many scaly green demons wandering around any dimension . . . except possibly his home dimension of Perv. It was therefore decided . . . almost unanimously . . . that not only would we change my partner's color with make-up, but that it would also be necessary to change his sex.

"Does this, perchance, have something to do with your disguise?" I inquired, trying to keep a straight face.

"Yes, it has something to do with my disguise," he mimicked, "and, so help me, partner or no, if you let that smile get away, I'll punch your lights out. Understand?" With a great effort I sucked my cheeks in and bit my lower lip.

"Seriously, though," he said, almost pleading, "a joke's a joke, but you don't really expect me to go out in public looking like this, do you?"

In addition to the aforementioned make-up, Aahz's disguise required a dress and a wig. Because of the size of his head (a problem Vilhelm had wisely down-played as much as possible) the selection of wigs available had been understandably small. In fact, the only available in his size was a number called "Lady Go-GoDiva," which involved a high blonde beehive style offset by a long ponytail that hung down to his knees. Actually, the ponytail turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as the dark blue dress Vilhelm had selected for my partner turned out to have an exceptionally low neckline, and the hair draped over his shoulder helped hide the problem we had finding ample or suitable material to stuff his bosom with.

"As my wise old mentor once told me when I was faced with a similar dilemma," I said sagely, "what does it matter what people think of you? They aren't supposed to know it's you, anyway. That's the whole idea of a disguise."

"But this get-up is humiliating!"

"My words precisely when someone else I could name deemed it necessary for me to dress up as a girl, remember?"

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Aahz glowered, peering at me suspiciously.

"Well, there are a couple of other options," I admitted.

"That's more like it!" he grinned, reaching for his wig.

"You could stay behind. ..."

His hand stopped just short of its mission.

"... or we could forget the whole thing and pay the fine ourselves."

The hand retreated as my partner's shoulders sagged in defeat. I felt no joy at the victory. If anything, I had been half hoping he would be embarrassed enough to take me up on my suggestion of abandoning the project. I should have known better. When there's money involved, it takes more than embarrassment to throw Aahz off the scent.. . whether the embarrassment is his own or someone else's.

"All right, everybody,"- I called, hiding my disappointment. "Are we ready to go?"

"Remember your sunglasses!" Tananda added.

That was the final touch to our disguises. To hide our non-red eyes, each of us donned a pair of sunglasses. Surveying the final result, I had to admit that aside from Tananda and Chumley, we didn't look like us. Exactly what we did look like I wouldn't venture to say, but we sure didn't look like us!

"Okay," Aahz chimed in, his discomfort apparently behind him. "Does everyone have their marching orders? Vilhelm? Are you sure you can track us on that thing?"

"No problem," the little vampire nodded. "When things get slow around here I use this rig to do a little window peeking right here in town. Covering the streets is even easier."

"Remember," I told him, "watch for our signal. When we catch up with this Vic character, we're going to want you to get some responsible local witnesses there chop-chop."

"Well now," Aahz grinned evilly, "you don't have to be too quick about it. I wouldn't mind having a little time alone with him before we turn him over to the authorities."

My heart sank a little. Aahz sounded determined to exact a bit of vengeance out of this hunt, and I wasn't at all sure he would restrict himself to Vic when it came time to express his ire. I think Tananda noticed my concern.

"Ease up a little, Aahz," she said casually. "I don't mind helping you out of a tight spot, but count me out when it comes to excessive force for the sake of vengeance. It lacks class."

"Since when did you worry about excessive violence?" Aahz growled, then shrugged his acceptance. "Okay. But maybe we'll get lucky. Maybe he'll resist arrest."

I was still worried, but realized that that was about the most restraint I would get out of my partner.

"Now that that's settled," I said, producing Luanna's scarf, "Pepe, take a whiff of this."

"Enchanting," he smiled, nuzzling the piece of cloth. "A young lady, no? Eef ze body is as good as ze aroma, I will follow her to the end of ze world whether you accompany me or not."

I resisted an impulse to wrap the scarf around his neck and pull.

"All right, everybody," I said, retrieving the scarf and tucking it back into my tunic in what I hoped was a casual manner. "Let's go catch us a renegade vampire."

Chapter Seventeen:

"The trail's got to be 'round here somewhere!"

-D. BOONE

IT was only a few hours short of sunset as we set out on our quest, a nagging reminder of exactly how long our efforts at physical disguise had taken. We had agreed to avoid following Pepe as a group so as not to attract attention. Instead, we moved singly or in groups of two, using both sides of the street and deliberately walking at different paces. The faster walkers averaged their progress with the slower by occasionally stopping to look into shop windows, thereby keeping our group together without actually appearing to. Tananda pointed out that not only would this procedure lessen our chances of being noticed, but also that it would maximize our chances for at least some of the group's escape if one of us should be discovered ... a truly comforting thought.

Even though Luanna had claimed to have been watching for us at the Dispatcher's, it had been so long ago I fully expected her scent would have long since dissipated or at least been masked by the passage of numerous others. As such, I was moderately surprised when the werewolf signaled almost immediately that he had found the trail and headed off with a determined air. Either her scent was stronger than I had thought, or I had grossly underestimated Pepe's tracking ability.

The trail wound up and down the cobblestoned streets, and we followed as quickly as we could without abandoning our pretense of being casual strollers who did not know each other. For a while, our group made up the majority of the beings visible, causing me to doubt the effectiveness of our ruse, but soon the vampires began to emerge to indulge their taste for the nightlife and we became much less obvious.

I was paired up with Chumley, but the troll was strangely quiet as we made our way along. At first I thought he was simply concentrating on keeping the werewolf in sight, but as time wore on, I found the silence somehow unnerving. I had always respected Chumley as being one of the saner, leveler heads among our motley assemblage, and I was starting to have an uneasy impression that he was not wholeheartedly behind this venture.

"Is there something bothering you, Chumley?" I asked at last.

"Hmmm? Oh. Not really, Skeeve. I was just thinking."

"About that?"

The troll let out a small sigh.

"I was just contemplating our adversary, this Vic fellow. You know, from what's been said, he's quite resourceful in a devious sort of way."

That took me a little aback. So far I had considered our vampire foe to be everything from an annoyance to a nemesis. The idea of studying his methods had never entered my mind.

"What leads you to that conclusion?"

The troll pursed his lips as he organized his thoughts.

"Consider what he's accomplished so far. The entire time we've known of him, he's been on the run . . . first from the Deveels, and then from Aahz, who's no slouch 'Stalling people once he sets his mind to it. Now, assuming for the moment that Vic is actually the brains of the group, he was quick enough to take advantage of being left alone in your waiting room to escape out the back door. He couldn't have planned that in advance, even knowing about the door. He probably had some other plan in mind, and formulated this new course of action on the spot."

We paused for a moment to let a small group of vampires cross the intersection in front of us.

"Now, that would have sufficed for an escape in most instances, but they happened to pick an exit route that left you and Aahz responsible, which set your partner on their trail," Chumley continued. "With nothing to go on but your reputations. Vic not only correctly deduced that he would be followed, but he also managed to spot Aahz's weakness and exploit it to frame him and make it stick . . . again, not the easiest task, particularly realizing it involved convincing and coaching his two accomplices in their roles."

All of this was doing nothing for my peace of mind. I was having enough difficulty forcing myself to believe that we were really hunting a vampire, the sort of creature I normally avoid at all costs, without having to deal with the possibility that he was shrewd and resourceful as well. Still, I had learned that ignoring unpleasant elements of a caper was perhaps the worst way to prepare for them.

"Keep going," I urged.

"Well," the troll sighed, "when you stumbled on his hiding place at the Woof Writers, he didn't panic. He waited to hear as much of your plans as possible, all the while taking advantage of the opportunity to assess you first-hand, then timed his escape so as to catch you all flat-footed."

I digested this distasteful addition to the rapidly growing data file. "Do you really think he was sizing me up?"

"There's no doubt in my mind. Not only was he gauging your skills and determination, he was successful enough at second-guessing you, based on the results of his studies, to be waiting to sound the alarm when you busted Aahz out of jail. . . . a particularly bold move when one realizes that he was running the risk of being recognized, which would have blown his frame-up of your partner."

"Bold or desperate," I said thoughtfully. "That's probably why he waited until we had actually sprung Aahz and were on the way down before he blew the whistle. If we had gotten away unscathed, then the frame would be useless, so at that point he really wasn't risking anything."

"Have it your way," the troll shrugged. "The final analysis remains that we have one tough nut to crack. One can only wonder what he will do when we catch up with him this time."

"If he's performing up to par, it could be rough on us."

Chumley shot me a sidelong glance.

"Actually, I was thinking it could be rough on your lady fair ... if he has managed to observe the feelings you have for her."

I started to protest, then the impact of his theory hit me and my embarrassment gave way to concern.

"Is it really that apparent? Do you think he could spot it? If so, he might already have done something to Luanna for having contacted us."

"It stands out all over you to anyone who knows you," Chumley said, shaking his head. "As for someone watching you for the first time ... I just don't know. He'd be more likely to deduce it from the information you had . . . such as his name. That kind of data had to come from somewhere, though there's an outside chance that with your current reputation he'll assume that you gleaned it by some magical source."

I barely heard him. My mind was focused on the possibility that Luanna might be hurt, and that I might indirectly have been the cause. A black well of guilt was rising up to swallow me, when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Don't tune out now, Skeeve," Chumley was saying, shaking me slightly. "First of all, we're going to need you shortly. Secondly, even if Vic's figured out that you're in love with her, I don't think he'll have hurt her. If anything, he'll save her for a trump card to use against us."

I drew a deep ragged breath.

"... and he'll be just the bastard to do it, too," I said. "I don't know what I'll be able to do, for us or for her, but I'll be ready to try. Thanks, Chumley."

The troll was studying me closely.

"Actually, I wasn't thinking that he was such a blighter," he said. "More like a clever, resourceful person who's gotten in over his head and is trying his best to ad-lib his way out. Frankly, Skeeve old boy, in many ways he reminds me of you. You might think about that when attempting to appraise his likely courses of action and how to counter them."

I tried again to weigh what he was saying, but all I could think about was what the consequences of this hunt could mean to Luanna. It was difficult enough for me to accept that we would have to force Luanna and her cohorts to answer to the authorities for their indiscretions, but the thought of placing her in physical danger was unbearable.

I looked around for Aahz, fully intending to put an end to this hunt once and for all. To my surprise, the rest of the group was assembled on the corner ahead, and my partner was beckoning us to join them. "What's going on?" I asked, almost to myself. "Just off-hand," Chumley replied, "I'd say we've reached our destination."

A cold wave of fear washed over me, and I hurried to the rendezvous with Chumley close behind.

"We're in luck," Aahz announced as I arrived. "Guido here says he saw Vic entering the building just as we got here. It's my guess they're all inside right now."

"Aahz, I-I want us to quit right now," I blurted, painfully aware of how weak it sounded.

"Oh?" my partner said, cocking an eyebrow at me. "Any particular reason?"

I licked my lips, feeling the eyes of the whole group on me. "Only one. I'm in love with one of the fugitives . . . the girl."

"Yeah. Now tell me something I didn't know," Aahz smirked, winking at me.

"You knew?"

"All of us knew. In fact, we were just discussing it. Remember, we all know you . . . and me probably best of all. It's already been pretty much decided to let your love-light go. Think of it as a present from us to you. The other two are ours." Five minutes ago, that would have made me deliriously happy. Now, it only seemed to complicate things.

"But Chumley was just saying that there's a chance they might hurt her if they find out she helped us," I explained desperately. "Can't we just let them all go?"

"Not a chance, partner," Aahz said firmly. "In addition to our original reasons, you've just mentioned the new one. Your girlfriend could be in trouble, and the only way to be sure she's safe is to remove her partners . . .Fast."

"Believe him, Skeeve," Tananda urged. "It may not be nice, but it's the best way."

"Really, Boss," Guido said quietly. "Unless we finish this thing here and now, you're never goin' to know if she's safe, know what I mean?"

That almost made sense, but I was still worried. "I don't know, Aahz. ..."

"Well I do," my partner snapped. "And the longer we stand down here, the more chance there is that they'll either get away or set up a trap. If you're uncertain, stay down here . . . in fact, that's not a bad idea. Massha, you stay down here with him in case they try to bolt out this way. While you're waiting, watch for the witnesses that Vilhelm's supposed to be sending along. Tananda, you and Chumley and Guido come along with me. This is a job for experienced hard-cases. Pepe, we appreciate your help, but this isn't really your fight."

"But of course." The werewolf grinned. "Besides, I am a lo-var, not a figh-tar. I will wait here to see the finale, eh?"

"But Aahz... .."

"Really, partner, you'll be more help down here. This isn't your kind of fight, and we need someone to deal with the witnesses. You're good at that kind of thing."

"I was going to ask if you had given the signal to Vilhelm."

"Signal?" Aahz blinked. "How's this for a signal?!"

With that, he tore off his wig and threw it on the ground, followed closely by his dress.

"Think he'll get the message? Besides, no way am I going to try to fight in that get-up."

"Now you're talkin'!" Guido crowed.

In a flash he had discarded his cloak and was pulling on his now-familiar trench coat.

"Where did that come from?" I demanded.

"Had it with me all the time," the bodyguard said smugly. "It would have been like leaving an old friend behind."

"Well, if you and your old friend are ready," Tananda murmured, "we'd better get started."

"Itching for action?" Aahz grinned.

"No. More like eager to get off the street," she said. "Since you boys have shown your true colors, we're starting to draw a crowd."

Sure enough, the vampires on the street had ceased whatever they had been doing before and were gathering in knots, whispering together and pointing at our group.

"Umm . . . we'd better finish this fast," Aahz said, shooting a nervous glance around. "All right, gang."

Let's go for the gusto!"

"Go for the what?" I asked, but they were already on their way into the building.

I noticed they were all moving faster than normal. I also noticed that Massha, Pepe, and I were the only ones left on the street. . . and now the crowd was pointing at us!

Chapter Eighteen:

"I didn't come all this way to sit out the fight!"

-R. BALBOA

"WHAT'S going on?"

I looked around to find that one of the vampires had detached himself from his group of friends and was addressing me directly.

"Beats me," Massha interceded. "A bunch of offworlder types just took off into that building with blood in their eyes. I'm waiting to see what happens next."

"Far out," the vampire breathed, peering toward the structure. "I haven't seen that many off-worlders in one place except in the flickers. Wasn't one of them that escaped murderer, Aahz?"

I really didn't want this character to join our little group. While our disguises seemed to be holding up under casual inspection, I was pretty sure that prolonged close scrutiny would reveal not only the nonlocal nature of Massha and myself, but also the fact that we were trying to hide it.

"You may be right," I said, playing a hunch. "If so, it's a good thing you happened along. We're going to need all the help we can get."

"Help? Help for what?"

"Why to catch the murderer, of course. We can't let him get away again. I figure it's our duty to stop him ourselves or at least slow him up until the authorities arrive."

"We? You mean the three of you? You're going to try to stop a murderer all by yourselves?"

"Four of us now that you're here."

The vampire started backing away.

"Ummm . . . actually I've got to get back to my friends. We're on our way to a party. Sorry I can't help, but I'll spread the word that you're looking for volunteers, okay?"

"Hey, thanks," I called as if I believed him. "We'll be right here."

By the time I had finished speaking, he had disappeared into the crowd. Mission accomplished.

"Nicely done, my friend," Pepe murmured. "He does not, how you say, want to get involved, no?"

"That's right," I said, my eyes "on the building again. "And to tell you the truth, I'm not too wild about the idea either. What do you think, Massha? It's awfully quiet in there."

"I'll say," my apprentice agreed. "I'm just trying to figure out if that's a good or a bad sign. Another ten minutes and I'm heading in there to check it out myself."

I nodded my consent, even though I doubted she saw it. We both had our eyes glued to the building, memorizing its every detail. It was a four-story structure ... or it would be if it weren't for the curved peak that jutted out from the roof fully half-again as high as the main building. It looked as if the builder had suddenly added the adornment in a last-minute attempt to have his work stand as tall or taller than its neighbors. From the number of windows in the main structure, I guessed it was an apartment building or a hotel or something. In short, it looked like it had a lot of little rooms. I found myself wondering exactly how our strike force was supposed to locate their target without kicking in every door in the place ... a possibility I wouldn't put past Aahz.

I was about to express this fear to Massha when a loud crash sounded from within.

"What was that?" I demanded of no one in particular.

"Sounded like a loud crash," my apprentice supplied helpfully.

I forced myself to remember that no one out here knew any more about what was going on inside than I did.

After the crash, everything was quiet once more. I tried to tell myself that the noise might have nothing at all to do with the strike force, but I didn't believe it for a minute. The crowd was talking excitedly to each other and straining to see the various windows. They seemed quite confident that something else would happen soon, much more than I, but then again, maybe as city dwellers they were more accustomed to such vigils than I. Suddenly, Tananda appeared in the doorway. "Did they come out this way?" she called. "No one's been in or out since you went in," I responded.

She swore and started to re-enter the building. "What happened?" I shouted desperately. "We nailed one of them, but Vic got away. He's loose in the building somewhere, and he's got the girl with him."

With that, she disappeared before I could make any further inquiries.

Terrific.

"Exciting, eh?" Pepe said. "I tell you, I could watch such a chase for hours."

"Well, I can't," I snapped. "I've had it with sitting on the sidelines. Massha? I'm going in there. Want to come?"

"I dunno. Hot Stuff. I'd like to, but somebody should be here to plug this escape route."

"Fine. You wait here, and I'll..."

I turned to enter the building and bumped headlong into Wilhelm.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded, not really caring.

The Dispatcher shook his head slightly to clear it. Being smaller, he had gotten the worse of our collision.

"I'm here with the witnesses, remember? I was supposed to bring them."

"You were supposed to send them. Oh well, where are they?"

"Right here," he said, gesturing to a sullen group of vampires standing behind him. "This is Kirby, and Paul, and Richard, and Adele, and Scott . . . some of the most respected citizens in town. Convince them and you're home free."

Looking at the group, I suddenly realized how Aahz had ended up on death row. If the jury had been anything like these specimens, they would have hung their own mothers for jaywalking. While I didn't relish the thought of trying to convince them of anything, I found myself being very glad I didn't have to deal with them on a regular basis.

"Okay. So we're here," the one identified as Kirby growled. "Just what is it we're supposed to be witnessing? If this is one of your cockamamie deals, Vilhelm...."

I interrupted simply by taking my sunglasses off and opening my eyes wide, displaying their whites. The bad reputation of humans in this dimension was sufficient to capture their undivided attention.

"Perhaps you recall a certain murder trial that took place not too long ago?" I said, trying to work the toothblack off with my tongue. "Well, the convicted murderer who escaped is my partner, and right now he's inside that building. He and a few of our friends are about to show you one surprisingly lively corpse . . . specifically the fellow that my partner is supposed to have killed. I trust that will be sufficient to convince you of his innocence?"

While the vampires were taken aback by my presence in their midst, they recovered quickly. Like I said, they were real hard cases and didn't stay impressed very long.

"So how much time is this going to take?" Kirby said impatiently. "I'm giving up my sleep for this, and I don't get much of it."

That was a good question, so, not having an answer, I stalled.

"You sleep nights? I thought...."

"I'm a day owl," the vampire waved. "It's easier to get my work done when the phone isn't ringing every five minutes . . . which usually means waiting until everyone else is asleep. But we're getting off the subject. The bottom line is that my time is valuable, and the same holds true for my colleagues. If you think we're going to just stand around here until...."

There was a sudden outcry from the crowd, and we all looked to find them talking excitedly and pointing up at the roof.

A figure had emerged, fighting to pick his way across the steeply sloped surface while dragging a struggling girl by one arm.

Vic!

This was the first time I had gotten a clear look at my foe, and I was moderately surprised. He was younger than I had expected, barely older than myself, and instead of a menacing cloak, he was sporting a white turtleneck and sunglasses. It suddenly occurred to me that if sunglasses enabled me to pass for a vampire, that they would also let a vampire pass undetected among humans.

The vampire suddenly stopped as his path was barred by Tananda, who appeared as if by magic over the edge of the roof. He turned to retrace his steps, only to find that the trio of Aahz, Guido, and Chumley had emerged behind him, cutting off his retreat.

"I believe, gentlemen and lady, that up there is the elusive body that started this whole thing," I heard myself saying. "If you can spare a few more moments, I think my colleagues will have him in custody so that you might interrogate him at your leisure."

"Don't be too sure of that. High Roller," Massha cautioned. "Look!"

His chosen routes of escape cut off. Vic was now scrabbling up the roof peak itself, Luanna hanging in his grip. While I had to admire his strength, I was at a loss to understand what he was trying to accomplish with the maneuver. It was obvious that he had been exposed, so why didn't he just give it up?

The answer became apparent in the next few moments. Reaching the apex of the roof, the vampire underwent a chilling metamorphosis. Before the strike force could reach him, he hunched forward and huge batwings began to grow and spread from his back. His plans gone awry, he was getting ready to escape.

In immediate response to his efforts, Tananda and Guido both produced projectile weapons and shouted something to him. Though the distance was too great to make out the words clearly, it was obvious to me that they were threatening to shoot him down if he tried to take to the air.

"We may have a murder case yet," Kirby murmured, squinting to watch the rooftop drama unfold.

"Murder?" I exclaimed, turning on him. "How can you call it murder if they're only trying to keep from escaping your justice? "

"That wasn't what I meant," the vampire said, never taking his eyes from the action. "Check it out."

I looked ... and my heart stood still.

Aahz had been trying to ease up the roof peak closer to Vic and his hostage. Vic must have seen him, because he was now holding Luanna out over the drop as he pointed an angry finger at my partner. The threat was unmistakable.

"You know, eet is people like zat who give ze vampires a bad name, eh?" Pepe said, nudging me.

I ignored him, lost in my own anxiety and frustration at the stalemated situation. A noticeably harder jab from Massha broke my reverie, however.

"Hey, Hot Stuff. Do you see what I see?"

I tore my gaze away from the confrontation and shot a glance her way. She was standing motionless, her brow furrowed with concentration and her eyes closed.

It took me a few moments to realize what she was doing, then I followed suit, scarcely daring to hope.

There it was! A force line! A big, strong, beautiful, glorious force line.

I had gotten so used to not having any magical energy at my disposal in this dimension that I hadn't even bothered to check!

I opened myself to the energy, relished it for a fleet moment, then rechanneled it.

"Excuse me," I said with a smile, handing my sunglasses to Kirby. "It's about time I took a hand in this directly."

With that, I reached out with my mind, pushed off against the ground, and soared upward, setting a course for the cornered vampire on the roof.

Chapter Nineteen:

"All right, pilgrim. This is between you and me!"
-A. HAMILTON

I had hoped to make my approach unobserved, but as I flew upward, the crowd below let out a roar that drew the attention of the combatants on the roof. Terrific! When I wanted unobtrusive, I got notoriety.

Reaching a height level with that of the vampire, I hovered at a discreet distance.

"Put away the nasties," I called to Tananda and Guido. "He's not getting away by air."

They looked a bit rebellious, but followed the order.

"What's with the Peter Pan bit, partner?" Aahz shouted. "Are you feeling your Cheerioats, or did you finally find a force line?"

"Both." I waved back, then turned my attention to Vic.

Though his eyes were obscured by his sunglasses, I could feel his hateful glare burning into me to the bone. "Why don't you just call it quits?" I said in what I hoped was a calm, soothing tone. "It's over. We've got you outflanked."

For a moment he seemed to waiver with indecision. Then, without warning, he threw Luanna at Aahz.

"Why can't you all just leave me alone!" he screamed, and dove off the roof.

Aahz somehow managed to snag the girl's hurtling form, though in the process he lost his balance and tumbled backward down the roof peak, cushioning the impact with his own body.

I hesitated, torn between the impulse to check on Luanna's welfare and the desire to pursue Vic.

"Go get him!" my partner called. "We're fine!"

That was all the encouragement I needed. Wheeling to my right, I plunged after the fleeing vampire, What followed was one of the more interesting experiences of my limited magical career. As I mentioned before, my form of flying magically isn't really flying . . . it's controlled levitation of oneself. This made enthusiastic pursuit a real challenge to my abilities. To counterbalance the problem, however, Vic couldn't really fly either'. . . at least he never seemed to flap his wings. Instead, he appeared content to soar and bank and catch an occasional updraft. This forced him to continually circle and double back through roughly the same area time and time again. This suited me fine, as I didn't want to wander too far away from my energizing force line now that I had found it. The idea of running out of power while suspended fifty feet in the air did not appeal to me at all.

Anyway, our aerial duel rapidly became a curious matching of styles with Vic's swooping and circling in his efforts to escape and my vertical and horizontal maneuverings to try to intercept him. Needless to say, the conflict was not resolved quickly. As soon as I would time a move that came close enough to an interception to justify attempting it again. Vic would realize his danger and alter his pattern, leaving me to try to puzzle out his new course. The crowd loved it.

They whooped and hollered, their words of encouragement alternately loud and faint as we changed altitude. It was impossible to tell which of us they were cheering for, though for a while I thought it was me, considering the approval they had expressed when I first took off to join the battle. Then I noticed that the crowd was considerably larger than it had been when I entered the fray, and I realized that many of them had not been around to witness the beginning of the conflict. To them, it probably appeared that a monster from another dimension was chasing one of their fellow beings through the sky.

That thought was disquieting enough that I spared some of my attention to scan the surrounding rooftops on the off-chance that a local sniper might be preparing to help his fellow countryman. It turned out to be the wisest decision I had made.

As I was looking over my shoulder, I plowed full force into Vic, who had doubled back on his own path. The feint would have probably worked if I had seen it, but as it was we collided at maximum speed, the impact momentarily stunning us both. I managed to grab a double handful of the vampire's turtleneck as we fell about ten feet before I adjusted my levitation strength to support us both.

"What's the matter with you!" I demanded, trying to shake him, which succeeded only in moving us both back and forth in the air. "Running away won't help."

Then I realized he was crying.

Somehow, this struck me as immensely unfair. I mean, how are you supposed to stay mad at a villain that cries? Okay. So I'm a soft tough. But the crying really did make a difference.

"I can't fight you all!" he sobbed, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Maybe if I knew some magic I could take one of you with me ... but at least you're going to have to work for your kill!"

With that he tore loose from my grasp and swooped away.

His words stunned me so much I almost let him escape. Fortunately, I had the presence of mind to call out to him.

"Hey, dummy! Nobody's trying to kill you!"

"Yeah, sure," he shouted back. "You're up here just for the fun of it."

He was starting to bank toward the street, and I knew I'd only have time for one more try.

"Look! Will you stop running if I quit chasing you? I think there's a major misunderstanding here."

He glanced back over his shoulder and saw that I was still where I was when we collided. Altering his course slightly, he flared his wings and landed on a carved gargoyle ornament jutting out from the side of the building.

"Why should you want to talk?" he called, wiping his face with one hand. "I thought nothing I could say would change your mind."

"You'd be surprised," I shouted back. "Say, do you mind if I land on that ledge near you? I feel pretty silly just hanging here."

He glanced at the indicated ledge, and I could see his wings flex nervously.

"C'mon," I urged. "I'll be further away from you there than I was when we started this chase back on the roof. You'll still have a clean shot at getting away if I try anything."

He hesitated, then nodded his consent.

Moving slowly so as not to alarm him, I maneuvered my way to my new perch. Truth to tell, I was glad to get something solid under my feet again. Even using magic, flying can take a lot out of you, and I was relieved to get a chance to rest. Now that I was closer, I could see that Vic was breathing heavily himself. Apparently his form of flying was no picnic either.

"All right," I said in a much more conversational tone. "Let's take this thing from the top. Who says we're trying to kill you?"

"Matt does," the vampire responded. "He's the one who filled me in on you and your pet demon. To be honest with you, I had never even heard of you until Matt explained whose home we had stumbled into."

"Matt?" I frowned.

Then I remembered. Of course. The third member of the fugitive party. Luanna's old con artist partner who nobody had been paying attention to at all. A germ of an idea began to form in my head.

"And he says we're out to kill you?"

"That's right. According to him nobody crosses the Great Skeeve or makes a fool of him and lives . . . and using your house as an escape route definitely qualifies."

The reputation thing again. I was beginning to realize why so many magicians preferred to lead the lives of recluses.

"That's crazy, Vic." I said. "If I tried to kill everybody who's made a fool of me, I'd be armpit-deep in corpses."

"Oh yeah?" he shot back. "Well. if you aren't out to kill me, why did you send your pet demon after us?"

Despite my resolve to settle this thing amicably, I was starting to get annoyed.

"First of all, he's not my pet demon. He's my partner and his name is Aahz. Secondly, I didn't send him. He knocked me out cold and came himself. Third and final, he was never out to kill you. He was trying to bring you and your cohorts back to Deva so we wouldn't get stuck paying off the people you swindled plus a hefty fine. Are you getting all this, or am I going too fast for you?"

"But I didn't swindle anybody," the vampire protested. "Those two offered me a job helping them sell magic charms. I didn't know they weren't genuine until Matt said the customers were mad and we had to run. I suggested we hide out here because it's the only place I know besides the Bazaar."

"Uh-huh," I said, studying the sky. "Next you'll be saying you didn't frame my partner or sound the alarm on us when we tried to spring him." Vic's wings dropped as he hung his head.

"That much I can't deny . . . but I was scared! I framed the demon because it was the only way I could think of to get him off our trail for a while. I really thought he could get loose on his own, and when I saw you at the Woof Writers', I knew he was going to get away. I sounded the alarm hoping you would all get caught and be detained long enough to give us a head start. Looking back on it, they were pretty ratty things to do, but what would you do if you had a pack of killer demons on your trail?"

Now that I could identify with. Chumley's words about Vic and I being alike echoed in my ears. I had had to improvise in some pretty hairy situations myself. "Wait a minute!" I growled. "Speaking of killer demons, what was that bit with you dangling Luanna over the edge of the building back there?"

"I was bluffing," the vampire shrugged. "Your friends were threatening to shoot me if I tried to fly away, and it was the only thing I could think of to try to get them to back off. I wouldn't deliberately hurt anyone . . . especially Luanna. She's sweet. That's why I was trying to help her escape with me after they caught Matt."

That brought me to the question that had been nagging at my mind since I started this wild chase.

"If you don't mind me asking, why didn't you just change into mist and drift away? We could never have caught you then."

Vic gave a short, bitter laugh.

"Do you know how rough it is to turn into mist? Well, you're a magician. Maybe you do know. Anyway, you might as well know the truth. I'm not much in the magic department... in fact, I'm pretty much a bust as a vampire. I can't even change all the way into a bat! These wings are the best I've been able to do. That's why I was looking for a new life in the Bazaar. I'd rather be a first-class anything than a third-rate vampire. I mean, I don't even like blood!"

"You should meet my bodyguard." I grinned despite myself. "He's a gangster who's allergic to garlic."

"Garlic? I love garlic."

I opened my mouth to offer him Guido's job, then shut it rapidly. If this character was half as desperate as he sounded, he'd probably take the offer seriously and accept, and then where would I be? All we needed to complete our menagerie was a magic-poor vampire.

"Well," I said instead, "I guess that answers all my questions except one. Now that you know we aren't trying to kill you, are you ready to quit running and face the music?"

The vampire gnawed his lower lip as he thought.

"You're sure it will be all right?"

"I can't say for sure until I talk to my partner," I admitted, "but I'm pretty sure things will be amenable. The main problem is to get the murder charges against him dropped . . . which I think we've already accomplished. As for you, I think the only thing they could have against you is false arrest, and there's no way Aahz will press charges on that one."

"Why not?"

I gave him my best grin.

"Because if he did, we couldn't take you back to Deva to deal with the swindling charge. Believe me, if given a chance between revenge and saving money, you can trust Aahz to be forgiving every time."

Vic thought about it for a few more moments, then shrugged.

"Embarrassment I'm used to dealing with, and I think I can beat the swindling rap. C'mon, Skeeve. Let's get this thing over with."

Having finally reached a truce, however temporary, we descended together to face the waiting crowd.

Chapter Twenty:

"There's no accounting for taste!"
-COLONEL SANDERS

"BUT Skeeve...."

BANG!

"...I told you before...."

BANG! BANG!

"... I could never abandon Matt...."

BANG!

"... he's my partner!"

BANG .'BANG!

"But Lu..."

BANG!

". . . excuse me. HEY, PARTNER! COULD YOU KNOCK OFF THE HAMMERING FOR A MINUTE? I'M TRYING TO HAVE A CONVERSATION HERE!"

"Not a chance," Aahz growled around his mouthful of nails. "I'm shutting this door permanently before anything else happens. But tell you what, I'll try to hammer quietly."

If you deduce from all this that we were back at our place on Deva, you're right. After some long, terse conversations with the citizens of Blut and fond farewells to Vilhelm and Pepe, our whole crew, including our three captives, had trooped back to the castle and through the door without incident.

I had hoped to have a few moments alone with Luanna, but, after several attempts, the best I had been able to manage was this conversation in the reception room under the watchful eyes of Aahz and Matt.

Matt, incidentally, turned out to be a thoroughly unpleasant individual with a twisted needle-nose, acne, a receding hairline, and the beginnings of a beer-belly. For the life of me, I couldn't figure out what Luanna saw in him.

"But that was when you thought he was in a jam," I said, resuming the argument. "Aahz and I have already promised to help defend him and Vic when they go before the Merchants Association. There's no need to stand by him yourself."

"I don't understand you, Skeeve," Luanna declared, shaking her head. "If I wouldn't leave Matt when he was in trouble, why should I leave him when things look like they're going to turn out okay? I know you don't like him, but he's done all right by me so far ... and I still owe him for getting me away from the farm."

"But we're making you a good offer," I tried again desperately. "You can stay here and work for Aahz and me, and if you're interested we could even teach you some real magic so you don't have to...."

She stopped me by simply laying a hand on my arm.

"I know it's a good offer, Skeeve, and it's nice of you to make it. But for the time being I'm content to stay with Matt. Maybe sometime in the future, when I have a little more to offer you in return, I'll take you up on it ... if the deal's still open." "Well," I sighed, "if that's really what you want...."

"Hey! Don't take it so hard, buddy," Matt laughed, clapping his hand on my shoulder. "You win some, you lose some. This time you lost. No hard feelings. Maybe you'll have better luck with the next one. We're both men of the world, and we know one broad's just like any other."

"Matt, buddy" I said through clenched teeth, "get that hand off my shoulder before it loses a body."

As I said, even on our short trip back from Limbo I had been so underwhelmed by Matt that I no longer even bothered trying to be polite or mask my dislike for him. He could grate on my nerves faster than anyone I had ever met. If he was a successful con artist, able to inspire trust from total strangers, then I was the Queen of May.

"Matt's just kidding," Luanna soothed, stepping between us.

"Well I'm not," I snarled. "Just remember you're welcome here any time you get fed up with this slug."

"Oh, I imagine we'll be together for quite some time," Matt leered, patting Luanna lightly on her rump. "With you big shots vouching for us we should be able to beat this swindling rap . . . and even if we lose, so what? All it means is I'll have to give them back their crummy twenty gold pieces."

Aahz's hammering stopped abruptly ... or maybe it was my heart.

I tried vainly to convince myself that I hadn't heard him right.

"Twenty gold pieces?" I said slowly.

"Yeah. They caught on to us a lot quicker here at the Bazaar than I thought they would. It wasn't much of a haul even by my standards. I can't get over the fact that you big shots went through so much trouble to drag us back here over a measly twenty gold pieces. There must be more to this principle thing than I realized."

"Ummm . . . could I have a word with you, partner?" Aahz said, putting down his hammer.

"I was about to ask the same thing," I admitted, stepping to the far side of the room.

Once we were alone, we stared at each other, neither wanting to be the first to speak.

"You never did get around to asking Hay-ner how much was at stake, did you?" Aahz sighed absently.

"That's the money side of negotiations and I thought you covered it," I murmured. "Funny, we both stood right there the whole time and heard every word that was said, and neither of us caught that omission."

"Funny. Right. I'm dying." My partner grimaced.

"Not as much as you will if word of this gets out," I warned. "I vote that we give them the money to pay it off. I don't want to, but it's the only way I can think of to keep this thing from becoming public knowledge."

"Done." Aahz nodded. "But let me handle it. If Matt the Rat there gets wind of the fact that the whole thing was a mistake on our part, he'd probably blackmail us for our eyeteeth."

"Right," I agreed.

With that, we, the two most sought-after, most highly-paid magicians at the Bazaar, turned to deal with our charges, reminded once more why humility lies at the core of greatness.

End of Myth-Ing Persons By Robert L Asprin.

Little Myth Marker By Robert Asprin

Chapter One:

"The difference between an inside straight and a blamed fool is callin' the last bet!"
-B. MAVERICK

"CALL!"

"Bump."

"Bump again."

"Who're you trying to kid? You got elf-high nothing!"

"Try me!"

"All right! Raise you limit."

"Call."

"Call."

"Elf-high nothing bumps you back limit."

"Fold."

"Call."

For those of you starting this book at the beginning (Bless you! I hate it when readers cheat by reading ahead!), this may be a little confusing. The above is the dialogue during a game of dragon poker. What is dragon poker, you ask? Well, it's reputed to be the most complicated card game ever invented ... and here at the Bazaar at Deva, they should know.

The Bazaar is the biggest shopping maze and haggling spot in all the dimensions, and consequently gets a lot of dimension travelers (demons) passing through. In addition to the shops, stalls, and restaurants (which really doesn't do justice to the extent or variety of the Bazaar) there is a thriving gambling community in residence here. They are always on the lookout for a new game, particularly one that involves betting, and the more complicated the better. The basic philosophy is that a complicated game is more easily won by those who devote full time to its study than by the tourists who have dabbled in it or are trying to learn it as the game goes on. Anyway, when a

Deveel bookie tells me that dragon poker is the most complicated card game ever, I tend to believe him.

"Fold."

"Call."

"Okay, Mr. Skeeve the Grater. Let's see you beat this! Dragons full!"

He exposed his hole cards with a flourish that bordered on a challenge. Actually, I had been hoping he would drop out of the hand. This particular individual (Grunk, I think his name was) was easily two heads taller than me and had bright red eyes, canines almost as long as my forearm, and a nasty disposition. He tended to speak in an angry shout, and the fact that he had been losing steadily had not mellowed him in the slightest.

"Well? C'mon! What have you got?"

I turned over my four hole cards, spread them next to the five already face up, then leaned back and smiled.

"That's it?" Grunk said, craning his neck and scowling at my cards. "But that's only ..."

"Wait a minute," the player on his left chimed in.

"It's Tuesday. That makes his unicorns wild."

"But it's a month with an 'M' in it!" someone else piped up. "So his ogre is only half of face value!"

"But there's an even number of players...."

I told you it was a complicated game. Those of you who know me from my earlier adventures (blatant plug!) may wonder how it is I understand such a complex system. That's easy. I don't! I just bet, then spread the cards and let the other players sort out who won.

You may wonder what I was doing sitting in on a cutthroat game of dragon poker when I didn't even know the rules. Well, for once, I have an answer. I was enjoying myself on my own for a change.

You see, ever since Don Bruce, the Mob's fairy godfather, supposedly hired me to watch over the Mob's interests at the Bazaar and assigned me two bodyguards, Guido and Nunzio, I've rarely had a moment to myself.

This weekend, however, my two watchdogs were off making their yearly report to Mob Central, leaving me to fend for myself. Obviously, before they left, they made me give my solemn promise to be careful. Also obviously, as soon as they were gone, I set out to do just the opposite.

Even aside from our percentage of the Mob's take at the Bazaar, our magic business had been booming, so money was no problem. I filched a couple thousand in gold from petty cash and was all set to go on a spree when an invitation arrived to sit in on one of the Geek's dragon poker games at this club, the Even-Odds.

As I said before, I know absolutely nothing about dragon poker other than the fact that at the end of a hand you have five cards face up and four face down.

Anything I've tried to get my partner, Aahz, to teach me more about the game, I've been lectured about "only playing games you know" and "don't go looking for trouble." Since I was already looking for mischief, the chance to defy both my bodyguards and my partner was too much to resist. I mean, I figured the worst that could happen was that I'd lose a couple thousand in gold. Right?

"You're all overlooking something. This is the forty-third hand and Skeeve there is sitting in a chair facing north!"

I took my cue from the groans and better-censored expressions of disgust and raked in the pot.

"Say, Geek," Grunk said, his red eyes glittering at me through half-lowered eyelids. "Are you sure this Skeeve fellow isn't using magic?"

"Guaranteed," responded the Deveel who was gathering the cards and shuffling for the next hand. "Any game I host here at the Even-Odds is monitored against magic and telepathy."

"Weelll, I don't normally play cards with magicians, and I've heard that Skeeve here is supposed to be pretty good in that department. Maybe he's good enough that you just can't catch him at it."

I was starting to get a little nervous. I mean, I wasn't using magic . . . and even if I was going to, I wouldn't know how to use it to rig a card game. The trouble was that Grunk looked perfectly capable of tearing my arms off if he thought I was cheating. I began racking my brain for some way to convince him without admitting to everyone at the table just how little I knew about magic.

"Relax, Grunk. Mr. Skeeve's a good player, that's all. Just because he wins doesn't mean he's cheating."

That was Pidge, the only other human-type in the game. I shot him a grateful smile.

"I don't mind someone winning," Grunk muttered defensively, "But he's been winning all night."

"I've lost more than you have," Pidge said, "and you don't see me griping. I'm tellin' you Mr. Skeeve is good. I've sat in on games with the Kid, and I should know."

"The Kid? You've played against him?" Grunk was visibly impressed.

"And lost my socks doing it," Pidge admitted wryly.

"I'd say that Mr Skeeve here is good enough to give him a run for his money, though."

"Gentlemen? Are we here to talk or to play cards?" the Geek interrupted, tapping the deck meaningfully.

"I'm out," Pidge said, rising to his feet. "I know when I'm out-classed even if I have to go in the hole before I'll admit it. My marker still good. Geek?"

"It's good with me if nobody else objects."

Grunk noisily slammed his fist down on the table, causing several of my stacks of chips to fall over.

"What's this about markers?" he demanded. "I thought this was a cash-only game! Nobody said anything about playing for IOUs."

"Pidge here's an exception," the Geek said. "He's always made good on his marker before. Besides, you don't have to worry about it, Grunk. You aren't even getting all of your money back."

"Yeah. But I lost it betting against somebody who's betting markers instead of cash. It seems to me..."

"I'll cover his marker," I said loftily. "That makes it personal between him and me, so it doesn't involve anyone else at the table. Right, Geek?"

"That's right. Now shut up and play, Grunk. Or do you want us to deal you out?"

The monster grumbled a bit under his breath but leaned back and tossed in another chip to ante for the next hand.

"Thanks, Mr. Skeeve," Pidge said. "And don't worry. Like the Geek says, I always reclaim my marker."

I winked at him and waved vaguely as he left, already intent on the next hand as I tried vainly to figure out the rules of the game.

If my grand gesture seemed a little impulsive, remember that I'd been watching him play all night, and I knew how much he had lost. Even if all of it was on IOUs, I could cover it out of my winnings and still show a profit.

You see, Grunk was right. I had been winning steadily all night ... a fact made doubly surprising by my ignorance of the game. Early on, however, I had hit on a system which seemed to be working very well: Bet the players, not the cards. On the last hand, I hadn't been betting that I had a winning hand, I was betting that Grunk had a losing hand. Luck had been against him all night, and he was betting wild to try to make up for his losses.

Following my system, I folded the next two hands, then hit them hard on the third. Most of the other players folded rather than question my judgment.

Grunk stayed until the bitter end, hoping I was bluffing.

It turned out that I was (my hand wasn't all that strong), but that his hand was even weaker. Another stack of chips tumbled into my hoard.

"That does it for me," Grunk said, pushing his remaining chips toward the Geek. "Cash me in."

"Me too."

"I should have left an hour ago. Would have saved myself a couple hundred."

The Geek was suddenly busy converting chips back to cash as the game broke up.

Grunk loitered for a few minutes after receiving his share of the bank. Now that we were no longer facing each other over cards, he was surprisingly pleasant.

"You know, Skeeve," he said, clapping a massive hand on my shoulder, "it's been a long time since I've been whipped that bad at dragon poker. Maybe Pidge was right. You're slumming here. You should try for a game with the Kid."

"I was just lucky."

"No, I'm serious. If I knew how to get in touch with him, I'd set up the game myself."

"You won't have to," one of the other players put in as he started for the door. "Once word of this game gets around, the Kid will come looking for you."

"True enough," Grunk laughed over his shoulder.

"Really, Skeeve. If that match-up happens, be sure to pass the word to me. That's a game I'd like to see."

"Sure, Grunk," I said. "You'll be one of the first to know. Catch you later."

Actually, my mind was racing as I made my goodbyes. This was getting out of hand. I had figured on one madcap night on my own, then calling it quits without anyone else the wiser. If the other players started shooting their mouths off all over the Bazaar, there would be no hope of keeping my evening's adventure a secret... particularly from Aahz! The only thing that would be worse would be if I ended up with some hotshot gambler hunting me down for a challenge match.

"Say, Geek," I said, trying to make it sound casual.

"Who is this 'Kid' they keep talking about?"

The Deveel almost lost his grip on the stack of chips he was counting. He gave me a long stare, then shrugged.

"You know, Skeeve, sometimes I don't know when you're kidding me and when you're serious. I keep forgetting that as successful as you are, you're still new to the Bazaar... and to gambling specifically."

"Terrific. Who's the 'Kid'?"

"The Kid's the current king of the dragon poker circuit. His trademark is that he always includes a breath mint with his opening bet for each hand . . . says that it brings him luck. That's why they call him the 'Sen-Sen Ante Kid.' I'd advise you to stay away from him, though. You had a good run tonight, but the Kid is the best there is. He'd eat you alive in a head-to-head game."

"I hear that." I laughed. "I was only curious. Really."

Just cash me in and I'll be on my way."

The Geek gestured at the stacks of coins on the table.

"What's to cash?" he said. "I pulled mine out the same time I cashed the others' out. The rest is yours."

I looked at the money and swallowed hard. For the first time I could understand why some people found gambling so addictive. There was easily twenty thousand in gold weighing down the table. All mine. From one night of cards!

"Urn . . . Geek? Could you hold on to my winnings for me? I'm not wild about the idea of walking around with that much gold on me. I can drop back by later with my bodyguards to pick it up."

"Suit yourself," the Geek shrugged. "I can't think of anyone at the Bazaar who would have nerve enough to jump you, with your reputation. Still, you might run into a stranger...."

"Fine," I said, heading for the door. "Then I'll be..."

"Wait a minute! Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What's that?"

"Pidge's marker. Hang on and I'll get it."

He disappeared before I could protest, so I leaned against the wall to wait. I had forgotten about the marker, but the Geek was a gambler and adhered more religiously to the unwritten laws of gambling than most folks obeyed civil law. I'd just have to humor him and...

"Here's the marker, Skeeve," the Deveel announced. "Markie this is Skeeve."

I just gaped at him, unable to speak. Actually, I gaped at the little blond-headed moppet he was leading by the hand. That's right. A girl. Nine or ten years old at the most.

I experienced an all-too-familiar sinking feeling in my stomach that meant I was in trouble... lots of it.

Chapter Two:

"Kids? Who said anything about kids?"

-CONAN

THE little girl looked at me through eyes that glowed with trust and love. She barely stood taller than my waist and had that wholesome, healthy glow that young girls are all supposed to have but so few actually do.

With her little beret and matching jumper, she looked so much like an oversized doll that I wondered if she'd say "Mama" if you turned her upside down, then right-side up again.

She was so adorable that it was obvious that anyone with a drop of paternal instinct would fall in love with her on sight. Fortunately, my partner had trained me well; any instincts I had were of a more monetary nature.

"What's that?" I demanded.

"It's a little girl," the Geek responded. "Haven't you ever seen one before?"

For a minute, I thought I was being baited. Then I remembered some of my earliest conversations with Aahz and controlled my temper.

"I realize that it's a little girl, Geek," I said carefully.

"What I was really trying to ask is -a) who is she? -b) what is she doing here? and -c) what has this got to do with Pidge's marker? Do I make myself clear?"

The Deveel blinked his eyes in bewilderment.

"But I just told you. Her name is Markie. She's Pidge's marker . . . you know, the one you said you would cover personally?"

My stomach bottomed out.

"Geek, we were talking about a piece of paper. You know, 'IOU, etc.'? A marker! Who leaves a little girl for a marker?"

"Pidge does. Always has. C'mon, Skeeve. You know me. Would I give anyone credit for a piece of paper? I give Pidge credit on Markie here because I know he'll be back to reclaim her."

"Right. You give him credit. I don't deal in little girls. Geek."

"You do now," he smiled. "Everyone at the table heard you say so. I'll admit I was a little surprised at the time."

"... But not surprised enough to warn me about what I was buying into. Thanks a lot, Geek old pal. I'll try to remember to return the favor someday."

In case you didn't notice, that last part was an open threat. As has been noted, I've been getting quite a reputation around the Bazaar as a magician, and I didn't really think the Geek wanted to be on my bad side.

Okay. So it was a rotten trick. I was getting desperate.

"Whoa. Hold it," the Deveel said quickly. "No reason to get upset. If you don't want her, I'll give you cash to cover the marker and keep her myself..."

"That's better."

"... at the usual terms, of course."

I knew I was being suckered. Knew it, mind you. But I had to ask anyway.

"What terms?"

"If Pidge doesn't reclaim her in two weeks, I sell her into slavery for enough money to cover her father's losses."

Check and mate.

I looked at Markie. She was still holding the Geek's hand, listening solemnly while we argued out her fate.

As our eyes met, she said her first words since she had entered the room.

"Are you going to be my new daddy?"

I swallowed hard.

"No, I'm not your daddy, Markie. I just..."

"Oh, I know. It's just that every time my real daddy leaves me with someone, he tells me that they're going to be my pretend daddy for a while. I'm supposed to mind them and do what they tell me just as if they were my real daddy until my real daddy comes to get me. I just wanted to know if you were going to be my new pretend daddy?"

"Ummm..."

"I hope so. You're nice. Not like some of the scumbags he's left me with. Will you be my new daddy?"

With that, she reached out and took hold of my hand.

A small thrill ran through me like an autumn shiver. She was so vulnerable, so trusting. I had been on my own for a long time, first alone, then apprenticed to Garkin, and finally teamed with Aahz. In all that time, I had never really been responsible for another person. It was a funny feeling, scary and warming at the same time.

I tore my eyes away from her and glared at the Geek again.

"Slavery's outlawed here at the Bazaar."

The Deveel shrugged. "There are other dimensions."

As a matter of fact, I've had a standing offer for her for several years. That's why I've been willing to accept her as collateral. I could make enough to cover the bet, the cost of the food she's eaten over the years, and still turn a tidy profit."

"That's about the lowest..."

"Hey! The name's 'the Geek,' not 'the Red Cross'!"

I don't do charity. Folks come to me to bet, not for handouts."

I haven't thrown a punch at anyone since I started practicing magic, but I was sorely tempted to break that record just this one. Instead, I turned to the little girl.

"Get your things, Markie. Daddy's taking you to your new home."

My partner and I were currently basing our operations at the Bazaar at Deva, which is the home dimension of the Deveels. Deveels are reputed to be the sharpest merchants, traders, and hagglers in all the known dimensions. You may have heard of them in various folk tales in your own home dimension. Their fame lingers even in dimensions they have long since stopped trading in.

The Bazaar is the showcase of Deva ... in fact, I've never seen a part of Deva that wasn't the Bazaar. Here the Deveels meet to trade with each other, buying and selling the choicest magics and

miracles from all the dimensions. It's an around-the-clock, over-the-horizon sprawl of tents, shops, and barter blankets where you can acquire anything your imagination can conjure as well as a lot of things you never dreamed existed ... for a price. Many inventors and religious figures have built their entire career from items purchased in one trip to the bazaar. Needless to say, it is devastating to the average budget... even if the holder of the purse strings has above-average sales resistance.

Normally I enjoy strolling through the booths, but tonight, with Markie beside me, I was too distracted to concentrate on the displays. It occurred to me that, fun as it is for adults, the Bazaar is no place to raise a child.

"Will we be living by ourselves, or do you have a girlfriend?"

Markie was clinging to my hand as we made our way through the Bazaar. The wonders of the stalls and shops dispensing magic reached out to us as they always do, but she was oblivious to them, choosing instead to ply me with questions and hanging on my every word.

"No's to both questions. Tananda lives with me, but she isn't my girlfriend. She's a free-lance assassin who helps me out on jobs from time to time. Then there's Chumley, her brother. He's a troll who works under the name of Crunch. You'll like them. They're nice... in a lot of ways they're nicer than I am."

Markie bit her lip and frowned. "I hope you're right."

"I've found that a lot of nice people don't like little kids."

"Don't worry," I said, with more confidence than I felt. "But I'm not done yet. There's also Guido and Nunzio, my bodyguards. They may seem a little gruff, but don't let them scare you. They just act tough because it's part of their job."

"Gee. I've never had a daddy who had bodyguards before."

"That's not all. We also have Buttercup, who's a war unicorn, and Gleep, who's my very own pet dragon."

"Oh, lots of people have dragons. I'm more impressed by the bodyguards."

That took me aback a little. I'd always thought that having a dragon was rather unique. I mean, nobody else I knew had a dragon. Then again, nobody else I knew had bodyguards, either.

"Let's see," Markie was saying. "There's Tananda, Chumley. Guido, Nunzio, Buttercup, and Gleep. Is that all?"

"Well, there's also Massha. She's my apprentice."

"Massha. That's a pretty name."

Now, there are lots of words to describe my apprentice, but unfortunately 'pretty' isn't one of them.

Massha is huge, both in height and breadth. There are large people who still manage to look attractive, but my apprentice isn't one of them. She tends toward loud, colorful clothes which invariably clash with her bright orange hair, and wears enough jewelry for three stores.

In fact, the last time she got into a fight here at the Bazaar was when a nearsighted shopper mistook her for a display tent.

"Aahh . . . you'll just have to meet her. But you're right. Massha is a pretty name."

"Gee, you've got a lot of people living with you."

"Well... umm ... there is one more."

"Who's that?"

"His name is Aahz. He's my partner."

"Is he nice, too?"

I was torn between loyalty and honesty.

"He . . . aah . . . takes getting used to. Remember how I told you not to be scared of the bodyguards even if they were a little gruff?"

"Yes."

"Well, it's all right to be scared of Aahz. He gets a little upset from time to time, and until he cools down it's best to give him a lot of room and not leave anything breakable-like your arm-within his reach."

"What gets him upset?"

"Oh, the weather, losing money, not making money . . . which to him is the same as losing money, any one of a hundred things that I say ... and you! I'm afraid he's going to be a little upset when he meets you. so stay behind me until I get him calmed down. Okay?"

"Why would he be upset with me?"

"You're going to be a surprise to him, and he doesn't like surprises. You see, he's a very suspicious person and tends to think of a surprise as a part of an unknown plot against him ... or me."

Markie lapsed into silence. Her brow furrowed as she stared off into nothingness, and it occurred to me that I was scaring her.

"Hey, don't worry," I said, squeezing her hand.

"Aahz will be okay once he gets over being surprised.

Now tell me about yourself. Do you go to school?"

"Yes. I'm halfway through Elemental School. I'd be further if we didn't keep moving around."

"Don't you mean Elementary School?" I smiled.

"No. I mean..."

"Whoops. Here we are. This is your new home, Markie."

I gestured grandly at the small tent that was our combination home and headquarters.

"Isn't it a little small for all those people?" she frowned, staring at the tent.

"It's bigger inside than it is outside," I explained. "C'mon. I'll show you."

I raised the flap for her and immediately wished I hadn't.

"Wait'll I get my hands on him!" came Aahz's booming voice from within. "After all the times I've told him to stay away from dragon poker!"

It occurred to me that maybe we should wait for a while before introducing Markie to my partner. I started to ease the flap down, but it was too late.

"Is that you, partner? I'd like to have a little chat, if you don't mind!"

"Remember. Stay behind me," I whispered to Markie, then proceeded to walk into the lion's den.

Chapter Three:

"I'm doing this for your own good!"

-ANY ESTABLISHMENT EXECUTIONER ... OR ANY PARENT

As I told Markie, our place at the Bazaar was bigger on the inside than on the outside ... lots bigger! I've been in smaller palaces ... heck, I've lived and worked in smaller palaces than our current domicile. Back when I was court magician at Possletum, to be exact.

Here at the Bazaar, the Deveels think that any display of wealth will weaken their position when they haggle over prices, so they hide the size of their homes by tucking them into 'unlisted

dimensions.' Even though our home looked like just a humble tent from the street, the inside included multiple bedrooms, a stable area, a courtyard and garden, etc., etc. You get the picture.

Unfortunately for me, at the moment it also included my partner, Aahz.

"Well, if it isn't the Bazaar's own answer to War, Famine, Death, and Pestilence! Other dimensions have the Four Horsemen, but the Bazaar at Deva has the Great Skeeve!"

Remember my partner, Aahz? I mentioned him back in Chapter One and again in Chapter Two. Most of my efforts to describe him fail to prepare people for the real thing. What I usually forget to mention to folks is that he's from the dimension Perv. For those of you unfamiliar with dimension travel, that means he is green and scaly with a mouth big enough for any other three beings and teeth enough for a school of sharks ... if shark's teeth got to be four inches long, that is. I don't deliberately omit things from my descriptions. It's just that after all these years I've gotten used to him.

"Have you got anything at all to say for yourself? Not that there's any acceptable excuse, mind you. It's just that tradition allows you a few last words."

Well... I've almost gotten used to him.

"Hi, Aahz. Have you heard about the card game?"

"About two hours ago," Massha supplied from a nearby chair where she was entrenched with a book and a huge box of chocolates. "He's been like this ever since."

"I see you've done your usual marvelous job of calming him down."

"I'm just an apprentice around here," she said with a shrug. "Getting between you two in a quarrel is not part of my game plan for a long and prosperous life."

"If you two are quite through," Aahz growled, "I'm still waiting to hear what you have to say for yourself."

"What's to say? I sat in on a game of dragon poker...."

"WHO'S BEEN TEACHING YOU TO PLAY DRAGON POKER? That's what there is to say! Was it Tananda? Chumley? How come you're going to other people for lessons all of a sudden? Aren't I good enough for the Great Skeeve any more?"

The truth of the situation suddenly dawned on me.

Aahz was my teacher before he insisted that I be elevated to full partner status. Even though we were theoretically equals, old habits die hard and he still considered himself to be my exclusive teacher, mentor, coach, and all-around nudge. What the real problem was that my partner was jealous of someone else horning in on what he felt was his private student!

Perhaps this problem would be easier to deal with than I thought.

"No one else has been teaching me, Aahz. Everything I know about dragon poker, I learned from you."

"But I haven't taught you anything."

"Exactly."

That stopped him. At least, it halted his pacing as he turned to peer suspiciously at me with his yellow eyes.

"You mean you don't know anything at all about dragon poker?"

"Well, from listening to you talk, I know about how many cards are dealt out and stuff like that. I still haven't figured out what the various hands are, much less their order ... you know, what beats what."

"I know," my partner said pointedly. "What I don't know is why you decided to sit in on a game you don't know the first thing about."

"The Geek sent me an invitation, and I thought it would be sociable to ..."

"The Geek? You sat in at one of the Geek's games at the Even-Odds to be sociable?" He was off again.

"Don't you know that those are some of the most cutthroat games at the Bazaar? They eat amateurs alive at those tables. And you went there to be sociable?"

"Sure. I figured the worse that could happen would be that I lost a little money. The way things have been going, we can afford it. Besides, who knows, I might get lucky."

"Lucky? Now I know you don't know anything about dragon poker. It's a game of skill, not luck. All you could do was throw your money away . . . money we've both risked our lives for, I might add."

"Yes, Aahz."

"And besides, one of the first things you learn playing any kind of poker is that the surest way to lose is to go in expecting to lose."

"Yes, Aahz."

Out of desperation, I was retreating behind my strongest defense. I was agreeing with everything he said. Even Aahz has trouble staying mad at someone who's agreeing with him.

"Well, what's done is done and all the shouting in the world won't change it. I just hope you've learned your lesson. How much did it cost you, anyway?"

"I won."

"Okay. Just to show you there're no hard feelings, we'll split it. In a way it's my fault. I should have taught you..."

There was a sudden stillness in the room. Even Massha had stopped with a bonbon halfway to her mouth. Very slowly, Aahz turned to face me.

"You know, Skeeve, for a minute there, I thought you said..."

"I won," I repeated, trying desperately not to smile.

"You won. As in 'better than broke even' won?"

"As in 'twenty thousand in gold plus' won," I corrected.

"But if you didn't know how the game was played, how could you..."

"I just bet the people, not the cards. It seemed to work out pretty well."

I was in my glory now. It was a rare time indeed that I managed to impress my partner, and I was going to milk it for all it was worth.

"But that's crazy!" Aahz scowled. "I mean, it could work for a while, but in the long run ..."

"He was great!" Markie announced, emerging from behind me. "You should have seen it. He beat everybody."

My "glory" came tumbling down around my ears.

With one hand I shoved Markie back behind me and braced for the explosion. What I really wanted to do was run for cover, but that would have left Markie alone in the open, so I settled for closing my eyes.

Nothing happened.

After a few moments, I couldn't stand the suspense any more and opened one eye to sneak a peek. The view I was treated to was an extreme close-up of one of Aahz's yellow eyes. He was standing nose to nose with me, apparently waiting until I was ready before launching into his tirade. It was obvious that he was ready. The gold flecks in his eyes were shimmering as if they were about to boil... and for all I knew, they were.

"Who ... is... that?"

I decided against trying to play dumb and say "Who is what?" At the range he was standing, Aahz would have bitten my head off... literally!

"Umm . . . remember I said that I won twenty thousand plus? Well, she's the plus."

"YOU WON A KID IN A CARD GAME!?!!"

The force of my partner's voice actually knocked me back two steps. I probably would have gone farther if I hadn't bumped against Markie.

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?? DON'T YOU KNOW THE PENALTY FOR SLAVERY IS..."

He disappeared in mid-sentence behind a wall of flesh and tasteless color. Despite her earlier claims of valuing self-preservation, Massha had stepped between us.

"Just cool down a minute. Green and Scaly."

Aahz tried to get around her.

"BUT HE JUST..."

She took a half step sideways and blocked him by leaning against the wall.

"Give him a chance to explain. He is your partner, isn't he?"

From the sound of his voice, Aahz reversed his field and tried for the other side.

"BUT HE ..."

Massha took two steps and leaned against the other wall, all the while talking as if she wasn't being interrupted.

"Now either he's an idiot . . . which he isn't, or you're a lousy teacher . . . which you aren't, or there's more to this than meets the eye. Hmmm? "

There were several moments of silence, then Aahz spoke again in a voice much more subdued.

"All right, partner. Let's hear it."

Massha relinquished her spot and I could see Aahz again . . . though I almost wished I couldn't. He was breathing hard, but whether from anger or from the exertion of trying to get around Massha I couldn't tell. I could hear the scales on his fingers rasp as he clenched and unclenched his fists, and I knew that I'd better tell my story fast before he lost control again.

"I didn't win her," I said hastily. "I won her father's marker. She's our guarantee that he'll come back and make his losses good."

Aahz stopped making with the fists, and a puzzled frown creased his features.

"A marker? I don't get it. The Geek's games are always on a cash-and-carry basis."

"Well, he seems to have made an exception in Pidge's case."

"Pidge?"

"That's my daddy," Markie announced, stepping from behind me again. "It's short for Pigeon. He loses a lot... that's why everyone is always so happy to let him sit in on a game."

"Cute kid," Aahz said dryly. "It also might explain why you did so well in the game tonight. One screwball can change the pace of an entire game. Still, when the Geek does take markers, he usually pays the winners in cash and handles the collecting himself."

"He was willing to do that."

"Then why..."

"... and if Markie's father didn't show up in two weeks, he was going to take her off-dimension and sell her into slavery himself to raise the money."

From her chair. Massha gave a low whistle.

"Sweet guy, this Geek."

"He's a Deveel." Aahz waved absently, as if the statement explained everything. "Okay, okay. I can see where you felt you had to accept custody of the kid here instead of leaving her with the Geek. Just answer me one question."

"What's that?"

"What do we do with her if her father doesn't show up?"

Sometimes I like it better when Aahz is ranting than when he's thinking.

"Aahh ... I'm still working on that one."

"Terrific. Well, when you come up with an answer, let me know. I think I'll stay in my room until this whole thing blows over."

With that he strode out of the room, leaving Massha and me to deal with Markie.

"Cheer up. Hot Stuff," my apprentice said. "Kids aren't all that much of a problem. Hey, Markie. Would you like a piece of chocolate?"

"No, thank you. It might make me fat and ugly like you."

I winced. Up until now, Massha had been my ally on the subject of Markie, but this might change everything. She was very sensitive about her weight, so most of us tended to avoid any mention of it. In fact, I had gotten so used to her appearance that I tended to forget how she looked to anyone who didn't know her.

"Markie!" I aid sternly. "That wasn't a very nice thing to say."

"But it's true!" she countered, turning her innocent eyes on me.

"That's why it's not nice," Massha laughed, though I noticed her smile was a little forced. "C'mon, Markie. Let's hit the pantry and try to find you something to eat ... something low-calorie."

The two of them trooped out, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Aahz had raised a good question. What were we going to do if Markie's father didn't come back? I had never been around kids before. I knew that having her around would cause problems, but how many problems? With everything else we had handled as a team, surely Aahz and I could handle a little girl. Of course, Aahz was ...

"There you are. Boss! Good. I was hopin' you were still up."

I cleared my mind to find one of my bodyguards entering the room.

"Oh. Hi, Guido. How did the report go?"

"Couldn't be better. In fact, Don Bruce was so happy he sent you a little present."

In spite of my worries, I couldn't help smiling. At least something was going right.

"That's great," I said. "I could use a little cheering up just now."

"Then I've got just the thing. Hey, Nunzio! Bring her in here!"

My smile froze. I tried desperately not to panic. After all, I reasoned, people refer to a lot of things as "her."

Boats, for example, or even...

"Boss, this is Bunny. Don Bruce sends her with his compliments on a job well done. She's going to be your moll."

The girl they were escorting into the room bore no resemblance at all to a boat.

Chapter Four:

"A doll is a doll is a doll."

-F. SINATRA

BUNNY was a top-heavy little redhead with her hair in a pixie cut and a vacant stare a zombie would envy. She was vigorously chewing something as she rubbernecked, trying to take in the entire room at once.

"Gee. This is quite a place you guys's got here. It's a lot nicer than the last place I was at, ya know?"

"This is just the waitin' room," Nunzio said with pride. "Wait'll you see the rest of the layout. It's bigger'n any hangout I've ever worked, know what I mean?"

"What'sa matter with you two?" Guido barked.

"Ain't ya got no manners? First things first. Bunny, this is the Boss. He's the one you're goin' to be workin' under."

Bunny advanced toward me holding out her hand.

From the way her body moved under her tight-fitting clothes, there was little doubt what she was wearing under them ... or not wearing, as the case may be.

"Pleased ta meetcha. Boss. The pleasure's mutual," she said brightly.

For once, I knew exactly what to say.

"No."

She stopped, then turned toward Guido with a frown.

"He means not to call him 'Boss' until you get to know him," my bodyguard assured her. "Around here he's just known as Skeeve."

"Gotcha," she winked. "Okay, Skeeve ... ya know, that's kinda cute."

"No," I repeated.

"Okay. So it's not cute. Whatever you say. You're the Boss."

"NO!"

"But..."

I ignored her and turned directly to Guido.

"Have you lost your marbles? What are you doing bringing her in here like this?"

"Like I said. Boss, she's a present from Don Bruce."

"Guido, lots of people give each other presents.

Presents like neckties and books ... not girls!"

My bodyguard shrugged his shoulders helplessly. "So Don Bruce ain't lots of people. He's the one who assigned us to you in the first place, and he says that someone with your standin' in the Mob should have a moll."

"Guido ... let's talk. Excuse us a minute. Bunny."

I slipped an arm around my bodyguard's shoulders and drew him off into a corner. That may sound easy until you realize I had to reach up to get to his shoulders. Both Guido and Nunzio are considerably larger than me.

"Now look, Guido," I said. "Remember when I explained our setup to you?"

"Sure, Boss."

"Well, let's walk through it again. Don Bruce hired Aahz and me on a non-exclusive basis to watch over the Mob's interests here at the Bazaar. Now, he did that because the ordinary methods he employs weren't working... Right?"

"Actually, he hired you and included your partner.

Except for that... right."

"Whatever. We also explained to you that the reason the Mob's usual methods weren't working was that the Bazaar merchants had hired us to chase the Mob out. Remember?"

"Yea. That was really a surprise when you told us.

You really had us goin', know what I mean?"

"Now that brings us to the present. The money we're collecting from the Bazaar merchants and passing on to Don Bruce, the money he thinks they're paying the Mob for protection, is actually being paid to us to keep the Mob away from the Bazaar. Get it?"

"Got it."

"Good. Then, understanding the situation as you do, you can see why I don't want a moll or anyone else from the Mob hanging around. If word gets back to Don Bruce that we're flim-flamming him, it'll reopen the whole kettle of worms. That's why you've got to get rid of her."

Guido nodded vigorously. "No," he said.

"Then all you have to ... what do you mean, 'no'?"

Do I have to explain it all to you again?" My bodyguard heaved a great sigh.

"I understand the situation, Boss. But I don't think you do. Allow me to continue where you left off."

"But I..."

"Now, whatever you are, Don Bruce considers you to be a minor chieftain in the Mob running a profitable operation. Right?"

"Well..."

"As such, you are entitled to a nice house, which you have, a couple of bodyguards, which you have, and a moll, which you don't have. These things are necessary in Don Bruce's eyes if the Mob is to maintain its public image of rewarding successful members . . . just as it finds it necessary to express its displeasure at members who fail. Follow me?"

"Public image," I said weakly.

"So it is in the interests of the Mob that Don Bruce has provided you with what you have failed to provide yourself ... namely: a moll. If you do not like this one, we can take her back and get another, but a moll you must have if we are to continue in our existing carefree manner. Otherwise..." He paused dramatically.

"Otherwise...?" I prompted.

"If you do not maintain the appearance of a successful Mob member, Don Bruce will be forced to deal with you as if you were unsuccessful. . . know what I mean?"

I suddenly felt the need to massage my forehead. "Terrific."

"My sentiments exactly. Under the circumstances, however, I thought it wisest to accept his gift in your name and hope that you could find an amicable solution to our dilemma at a later date."

"I suppose you're . . . Hey! Wait a minute. We already have Massha and Tananda in residence. Won't they do?"

Guido gave his sigh again. "This possibility did indeed occur to me as well. Then I said to myself: 'Guido, do you really want to be the one to hang the label of moll on either Massha or Tananda, knowing those ladies as you do? Even if it will only be bantered around the Mob?' Viewed in that light, it was my decision to go along with Don Bruce's proposal and leave it to you to make the final decision ... Boss."

I shot a sharp glance at him for that last touch of sarcasm. Despite his affected speech patterns and pseudo-pompous explanations, I occasionally had the impression that Guido was far more intelligent than he let on. At the moment, however, his face was a study in innocence, so I let it ride.

"I see what you mean, Guido. If either Massha or Tananda are going to be known as 'molls,' I'd rather it was their choice, not mine. Until then, I guess we're stuck with . . . what's her name? Bunny? Does she wiggle her nose or something?"

Guido glanced across the room at the other two, then lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Just between you and me, Boss, I think you would be well advised to accept this particular moll that Don Bruce has personally selected to send. Know what I mean?"

"No, I don't." I grimaced. "Excuse me, Guido, but the mind's working a little slow just now. If you're trying to tell me something, you're going to have to spell it out."

"Well, I did a little checkin' around, and it seems that Bunny here is Don Bruce's niece, and ..."

"HIS N..."

"Sssh. Keep it down. Boss. I don't think we're supposed to know that."

With a supreme effort, I suppressed my hysteria and lowered my voice again. "What are you trying to do to me? I'm trying to keep this operation under wraps and you bring me Don Bruce's niece?"

"Don't worry."

"DON'T W..."

"Sssh! Like I said. I've been checking around. It seems the two of them don't get along at all. Wouldn't give each other the time of day. The way I hear it, he doesn't want her to be a moll, and she won't go along with any other kind of work. They fight over it like cats and dogs. Anyway, if you can trust any moll to not feed Don Bruce the straight scoop, it's her. That's why I was sayin' that you should keep this one."

My headache had now spread to my stomach.

"Swell. Just swell. Well, at least..."

"The one thing I couldn't find out, though," Guido continued with a frown, "is why he wants her with you.

I figure that it's either that he thinks that you'll treat her right, or that he expects you to scare her out of bein' a moll. I'm just not sure which way you should play it."

This was not turning out to be a good night for me. In fact, it had gone steadily downhill since I won that last hand of dragon poker.

"Guido," I said. "Please don't say anything more. Okay? Please? Every time I think that things might not be so bad, you drag out something else that makes them worse."

"Just tryin' to do my job," he shrugged, obviously hurt, "but if that's what you want. . . well, you're the Boss."

"And if you say that one more time, I'm liable to forget you're bigger than me and pop you one in the nose. Understand? Being the 'Boss' implies a certain degree of control, and if there's one thing I don't have right now, it's control."

"Right, B . . . Skeeve," my bodyguard grinned.

"You know, for a minute there you sounded just like my old B ... employer. He used to beat up on Nunzio and me when he got mad. Of course, we had to stand there and take it...."

"Don't give me any ideas," I snarled. "For now, let's just concentrate on Bunny."

I turned my attention once more to the problem at hand, which was to say Bunny. She was still staring vacantly around the room, jaws working methodically on whatever it was she was chewing, and apparently oblivious to whatever it was Nunzio was trying to tell her.

"Well, uh . . . Bunny," I said, "it looks like you're going to be staying with us for a while."

She reacted to my words as if I had hit her "on" switch.

"Eeoooh!" she squealed, as if I had just told her that she had won a beauty pageant. "Oh, I know I'm just goin' to love workin' under you, Skeevie."

My stomach did a slow roll to the left.

"Shall I get her things, Boss?" Nunzio said. "She's got about a mountain and a half of luggage outside."

"Oh, you can leave all that," Bunny cooed. "I just know my Skeevie is going to want to buy me a whole new wardrobe."

"Hold it! Time out!" I ordered. "House rules time Bunny, some things are going to disappear from your vocabulary right now. First, forget 'Skeevie.' It's Skeeve ... just Skeeve, or if you must, the Great Skeeve in front of company. Not Skeevie."

"Gotcha," she winked.

"Next, you do not work under me. You're . . . you're my personal secretary. Got it?"

"Why sure, sugar. That's what I'm always called." Again with the wink.

"Now then, Nunzio. I want you to get her luggage and move it into ... I don't know, the pink bedroom."

"You want I should give him a hand, Boss?" Guido asked.

"You stay put." I smiled, baring all my teeth. "I've got a special job for you."

"Now just a darn minute!" Bunny interrupted, her cutie-pie accent noticeably lacking. "What's this with the 'pink bedroom'? Somehow you don't strike me as the kind that sleeps in a pink bedroom. Aren't I moving into your bedroom?"

"I'm sleeping in my bedroom," I said. "Now isn't it easier for you to move into one of our spares than for me to relocate just so you can move into mine?"

As I said, it had been a long night, and I was more than a little slow. Lucky for me, Bunny was fast enough for both of us.

"I thought we was goin' to be sharin' a room, Mr. Skeeve. That's the whole idea of my bein' here, ya know? What's wrong? Ya think I got bad breath or sumpin'?"

"Aahh ... ummm ..." I said intelligently.

"Hi, Guido ... Nunzio. Who's ... oh wow!"

That last witty line didn't come from me. Massha had just entered the room with Markie in tow and lurched to a halt at the sight of Bunny.

"Hey. Boss! What's with the kid?"

"Guido, Nunzio, this is Markie . . . our other house guest. Massha, Markie, this is Bunny. She's going to be staying with us for a while ... in the pink bedroom."

"Now I get it!" Bunny exclaimed. "You want we should play it cool because of the kid! Well, you can count on me. Discretion is Bunny's middle name. The pink bedroom it is!"

I could cheerfully have throttled her. If her meaning was lost on Markie, it certainly hadn't gotten past Massha, who was staring out at me from under raised eyebrows.

"Whatever!" I said rather than take more drastic action. "Now, Nunzio, you get Bunny set up in the pink bedroom. Massha, I want you to get Markie settled in the blue bedroom next to mine ... and knock it off with the eyebrows. I'll explain everything in the morning."

"That I want to hear," she snorted. "C'mon, kid."

"I'm not tired!" Markie protested.

"Tough!" I countered. "I am."

"Oh," she said meekly and followed Massha.

Whatever kind of a crumb her father might be, somewhere along the line she had learned when adults could be argued with and when it was best to go with the flow.

"What do you want me to do. Boss?" Guido asked eagerly.

I favored him with my vilest grin.

"Remember that special assignment I said I had for you?"

"Yea, Boss?"

"I'll warn you, it's dangerous."

That appealed to his professional pride, and he puffed out his chest. "The tougher the better. You know me!"

"Fine," I said. "All you have to do is go upstairs and explain Bunny to Aahz. It seems my partner isn't talking to me just now."

Chapter Five:

"Such stuff dreams are made of."

-S. BEAUTY

LUANNA was with me. I couldn't remember when she arrived or how long she had been here, but I didn't care.

I hadn't seen her since we got back from the jailbreak on Limbo, and I had missed her terribly. She had left me to stay with her partner. Matt, and a little piece of me went with her. I won't be so

cornball as to say it was my heart, but it was in that general vicinity. There was so much I wanted to tell her ... wanted to ask her, but it didn't really seem necessary. We just lay side by side on a grassy hill watching the clouds, enjoying each other's company in silence. I could have stayed like that forever, but she raised herself on one elbow and spoke softly to me.

"If you'll just scootch over a little, Skeeve, we can both get comfy."

This was somehow jarring to my serenity. She didn't sound like Luanna at all. Luanna's voice was musical and exciting. She sounded like ...

"BUNNY!"

I was suddenly sitting bolt upright, not on a grassy knoll, but in my own bed.

"Sssh! You'll wake up the kid!"

She was perched on the edge of my bed wearing something filmy that was even more revealing than the skintight outfit she had had on last night.

"What are you doing in my room!?"

I had distinct memories of stacking several pieces of furniture in front of the door before I retired, and a quick glance confirmed that they were still in place.

"Through the secret passageway," she said with one of her winks. "Nunzio showed it to me last night."

"Oh, he did, did he?" I snarled. "Remind me to express my thanks to him for that little service."

"Save your thanks, sugar. You're goin' to need them when I get done with you."

With that she raised the covers and slid in next to me.

I slid out the other side of the bed as if a spider had just joined me. Not that I'm afraid of spiders, mind you, but Bunny scares me stiff.

"Now what's wrong?" she whined.

"Um ... ah ... look. Bunny. Can we talk for a minute?"

"Sure," she said, sitting up in bed and bending forward to rest her elbows on her knees. "Anything you say."

Unfortunately, her current position also gave me an unrestricted view of her cleavage. I promptly forgot what I was going to say.

"Aaah. . . I... urn . . ."

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" I said, grateful for the interruption.

That is beyond a doubt the dumbest thing I have ever said.

The door opened, sweeping the stacked furniture back with amazing ease, and Chumley walked in.

"I say, Skeeve, Aahz has just been telling me the most remarkable ... Hal-lo?"

I mentioned before that Chumley is a troll. What I didn't say was that he could blush ... probably because I didn't know it myself until just now. Of all the sights I've seen in several dimensions, a blushing troll is in a category all its own.

"You must be Chumley!" Bunny chirped. "The boys told me about you."

"Umm . . . quite right. Pleased to make your acquaintance and all that," the troll said, trying to avert his eyes while still making polite conversation.

"Yeah. Sure, Chum. Don't you have somethin' else to do.. . like leavin'?"

I clutched at his arm in desperation.

"No! I mean . . . Chumley always comes by first thing in the morning."

"Ahh ... Yes. Just wanted to see if Skeeve was ready for a spot of breakfast."

"Well, I got here first," Bunny bristled. "If Skeeve wants something to nibble on, he can..."

"Good morning. Daddy!"

Markie came bounding into the room and gave me a hug before any of us knew she was around.

"Well, well. You must be Skeeve's new ward, Markie," the troll beamed, obviously thankful to have something to focus on other than Bunny.

"And you're Chumley. Hi, Bunny!"

"Hiya, kid," Bunny responded with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm as she pulled the covers up around her neck.

"Are you up, Skeeve?"

The voice wafting in from the corridor was immediately identifiable as Tananda.

Chumley and I had rarely worked together as a team, but this time no planning or coordination was necessary. I scooped Markie up and carried her into the hall while Chumley followed, slamming the door behind him with enough force to crack the wood.

"Pip pip, little sister. Fine day, isn't it?"

"Hi, Tananda! What's new?"

Our cordial greetings, intended to disarm the situation, succeeded only in stopping our colleague in her tracks.

Tananda is quite attractive-if curvaceous, olive skinned, green-haired women are your type. Of course, she looks a lot better when she isn't pursing her lips and narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

"Well, for openers, I'd say the little girl under your arm is new," she said firmly. "I may not be the most observant person, but I'm sure I would have noticed her if she had been around before."

"Oh. Well, there are a few things I've got to debrief you on," I smiled weakly. "This is one of them. Her name is Markie, and ..."

"Later, Skeeve. Right now I'm more curious about what my big brother's up to. How 'bout it, Chumley?"

"I've seen you slam doors on the way into bedrooms before, but never on the way out."

"Ummm . . . that is ..." the troll mumbled awkwardly, "Actually," I assisted, "It's more like . . . you see..."

"Exactly what I had in mind," Tananda declared, slipping past us and flinging the bedroom door open.

My room was mercifully empty of occupants. Apparently Bunny had retreated through whatever secret panel she had emerged from. Chumley and I exchanged unnoted glances of relief.

"I don't get it." Tananda frowned. "You two acted like you were trying to hide a body. There's nothing here to be so secretive about."

"I think they didn't want you to see the girl in my daddy's bed," Markie supplied brightly.

I wanted to express my thanks to Markie but decided that I had enough problems without adding murder to the list.

"Well, Skeeve?" Tananda said, her eyebrows almost reaching her hairline.

"Ummm . . . actually, I'm not really her daddy. That's one of the things I wanted to debrief you about."

"I meant about the girl in your room!"

"That's the other thing I wanted to ..."

"Cut him some slack! Huh, Tananda? It's uncivilized to beat up on someone before breakfast."

That was Aahz, who for once had approached our gathering without being seen ... or heard. He's usually not big on quiet entrances.

For that matter, I had never known him to be at all reluctant about beating up on someone-say, for example, me-before breakfast. Still, I was grateful for his intervention.

"Hi, Aahz. We were just..."

"Do you know what your partner is doing!?" Tananda said in a voice that could freeze wine. "He seems to be turning our home into a combination daycare center and. . ."

"I know all about it," Aahz interrupted, "and so will you if you'll just cool down. We'll explain everything over breakfast."

"Well. . ."

"Besides," Markie piped up, "It's not your home. It's my daddy's. He just lets you live here. He can do anything he wants in his house!"

I released my hold on her, hoping to dump her on her head. Instead she twisted in midair and landed on her feet like a cat, all the while sneering smugly.

Tananda had stiffened as if someone had jabbed her with a pin.

"I suppose you're right, Markie," she said through tight lips. "If the 'Great Skeeve' wants to romp with some bit of fluff, it's none of my business. And if I don't like it, I should just go elsewhere."

She spun on her heel and started off down the hall.

"What about breakfast?" Aahz called after her.

"I'll be eating out... permanently!"

We watched her departure in helpless silence.

"I'd better go after her," Chumley said at last. "In the mood she's in, she might hurt someone."

"Could you take Markie with you?" Aahz requested, still staring after Tananda.

"Are you kidding?" the troll gaped.

"Well, at least drop her off in the kitchen. I've got to have a few words with Skeeve in private."

"I want to stay here!" Markie protested.

"Go," I said quietly.

There must have been something in my voice, because both Markie and Chumley headed off without further argument.

"Partner, you've got a problem."

"Don't I know it. If there was any way I could ship her back to Don Bruce, I'd do it in a minute, but..."

"I'm not talking about Bunny!"

That stopped me.

"You aren't?"

"No. Markie's the problem, not Bunny."

"Markie? But she's just a little girl."

Aahz heaved a small sigh and put one hand on my shoulder . . . gently, for a change.

"Skeeve, I've given you a lot of advice in the past, some of it better than others. For the most part, you've done pretty well at winging it in unfamiliar situations, but this time you're in over your head. Believe me, you don't have the vaguest idea of the kind of havoc a kid can cause in your life ... especially a little girl."

I didn't know what to say. My partner was obviously sincere in his concern, and for a change expressing it in a very calm, low-key manner. Still, I couldn't go along with what he was saying.

"C'mon, Aahz. How much trouble can she be? This thing with Tananda happened because of Bunny..."

"... after Markie started mouthing off at the wrong time. I already had Tananda cooling off when Markie put her two cents in."

It also occurred to me that Markie was the one who had spilled the beans to Tananda in the first place. I shoved that thought to the back of my mind.

"So she doesn't have enough sense to keep her mouth shut. She's just a kid. We can't expect her to ..."

"That's my point. Think about our operation for a minute, partner. How many times in one day can things go sour if someone says the wrong thing at the right moment? It's taken us a year to get Guido and Nunzio on board . . . and they're adults. Bringing a kid into the place is like waving a torch around a fireworks factory."

As much as I appreciated his efforts to explain a problem to me, I was starting to weary a bit of Aahz's single-minded pursuit of his point.

"Okay. So I haven't had much experience around kids. I may be underestimating the situation, but aren't you being a bit of an alarmist? What experience are you basing your worries on?"

"Are you kidding?" my partner said, laughing for the first time in our conversation. "Anyone who's been around as many centuries as I have has had more than their share of experience with kids. You met my nephew Rupert? You think he was born an adult? And he's only one of more nieces, nephews, and grandchildren than I can count without being reduced to a nervous wreck by the memories."

And I thought I couldn't be surprised by Aahz any more.

"Really? Grandchildren? I never even knew you had kids."

"I don't like to talk about it. That in itself should be a clue. When someone who likes to talk as much as I do totally avoids a subject, the memories have got to be less than pleasant!"

I was starting to get a bit worried. Realizing that Aahz usually tends to minimize danger, his warnings were starting to set my overactive imagination in gear.

"I hear what you're saying, Aahz. But we're only talking about one kid here. How much trouble can one little girl be?"

My partner's face suddenly split into one of his infamous evil grins. "Remember that quote," he said.

"I'm going to be tossing it back at you from time to time."

"But..."

"Hey, Boss! There's someone here to see you!"

Just what I needed! I had already pretty much resolved not to take on any more clients until after Markie's father had reclaimed her. Of course, I didn't want to say that in front of Aahz, especially considering our current conversation.

"I'm in the middle of a conference, Guido!" I called.

"Tell them to come back later."

"Suit yourself, Boss!" came the reply. "I just thought you'd want to know, seein' as how it's Luanna..."

I was off like a shot, not even bothering to excuse myself. Aahz would understand. He knew I'd had a thing for Luanna since our expedition into Limbo.

On my way to the waiting room, I had time to speculate as to whether or not this was one of my bodyguard's little pranks. I decided that if it was, I would study hard until I knew enough magic to turn him into a toad.

My suspicions were groundless. She was there. My beautiful blond goddess. What really made my heart leap, though, was that she had her luggage with her.

"Hi, Luanna. What are you doing here? Where's Matt? How have things been? Would you like something to drink? Could I..."

I suddenly realized that I was babbling and forced myself to pause.

"Aahh . . . what I'm trying to say is that it's good to see you."

That got me the slow smile that had haunted my dreams. "I'm glad, Skeeve. I was afraid you'd forgotten about me."

"Not a chance," I said, then realized I was leering.

"That is, no, I haven't forgotten about you."

Her deep blue eyes locked with mine, and I felt myself sinking helplessly into their depths.

"That's good," she said in that musical voice of hers.

"I was worried about taking you up on your offer after all this time."

That got through the fog that was threatening to envelop my mind. "Offer? What offer?"

"Oh, you don't remember! I thought... oh, this is embarrassing."

"Wait a minute!" I cried. "I haven't forgotten! It's just that... let me think ... it's just..."

Like a beam of sunlight in a swamp the memory came to me. "You mean when I said that you could come to work for Aahz and me? That's it? Right?"

"That's what I was talking about!" The sun came from behind the clouds as she smiled again. "You see, Matt and I have split, and I thought..."

"Do you want any breakfast. Daddy? You said . . . oh! Hello."

"DADDY!!??"

Markie and Luanna stared at each other.

I revised my plans rapidly. I would study hard and turn myself into a toad.

"I can explain, Luanna ..." I began.

"I think you should keep this one, Daddy," Markie said, never taking her eyes off Luanna. "She's a lot prettier than the other one."

"THE OTHER ... Oh! You mean Tananda."

"No, I mean..."

"MARKIE!" I interrupted desperately. "Why don't you wait for me in the kitchen. I'll be along in a minute after I finish talking to ..."

"Skeevie, are we going to go shopping?" Bunny slithered into the room. "I need ... who's that!?"

"Me? I'm nobody." Luanna responded grimly. "I never realized until just now how much of a nobody I am!"

"Well, the job's already taken, if that's what you're here for," Bunny smirked.

"Wait a minute! It's a different job! Really! Luanna, luanna . . . Luanna??"

Sometime during my hysteria, the love of my life had gathered up her bags and left. I was talking to empty air.

"Gee, Skeevie. What're you talkin' to her for when you got me? Aren't I..."

"Daddy. Can I..."

"SHUT UP! BOTH OF YOU! Let me think!"

Try as I might, the only thought that kept coming to me was that maybe Aahz was right. Maybe kids were more trouble than I thought.

Chapter Six:

"Bring the whole family . . . but leave the kids at home!"
-R. McDONALD

"REALLY, Hot Stuff. Do you think this is such a great idea?"

"Massha, please! I'm trying to think things out. I couldn't get my thoughts together back at Chaos Central with Aahz nattering at me, and I won't be able to do it now if you start up. Now, are you going to help or not?"

My apprentice shrugged her massive shoulders.

"Okay. What do you want me to do?"

"Just keep an eye on those two and see that they don't get into any trouble while I think."

"Keep them out of trouble? At the Bazaar at Deva? Aren't Guido and Nunzio supposed to ..."

"Massha!"

"All right. All right. I want it noted, though, that I'm taking this assignment under protest."

I'm sure I didn't give Aahz this much back talk when I was apprenticed to him. Every time I say that out loud, however, my partner bursts into such gales of laughter that now I tend to keep the thought to myself, even when he isn't around.

After some resistance, I had agreed to take Bunny and Markie on a stroll through the Bazaar. As I said to Massha, this was more to get a bit of time away from Aahz than it was giving in to Bunny's whining, though that voice was not easy to ignore.

In acknowledgement of Aahz's repeated warnings of trouble, I had recruited my apprentice to accompany us so I'd have a backup if things went awry. Guido and Nunzio were along, of course, but they were more concerned with things coming at me than with anything anyone in our party might do to the immediate environment.

All in all, we made quite a procession. Two Mob bodyguards, a woman-mountain disguised as a jewelry display, a moll, a kid, and me! For a change, I wasn't the "kid" of the party. There was something to be said for having an honest-to-goodness child traveling with you. It automatically made one look older and somehow more responsible.

We had been in residence at the Bazaar for some time now, and the neighborhood merchants were pretty much used to us. That is, they knew that if I was interested, I'd come to them. If I wasn't, no amount of wheedling or cajoling would tempt me into buying. That might seem a little strange to you, after all my glowing accounts of the wonders for sale at the Bazaar, but I had fallen into the

pattern quite naturally. You see, if you just visit the Bazaar once in a while, it's all quite impressive, and you feel compelled to buy just to keep from losing out on some really nifty bargains. If you live there, on the other hand, there's no real compulsion to buy anything right now. I mean, if I need a plant that grows ten feet in a minute, I'll buy it... when I need it.

Until then, the plant can stay in its shop three doors from our tent, and my money can stay in my pocket.

That's how things were, normally. Of course, my situation today was anything but normal. I had known this all along, of course, but I hadn't really stopped to think through all the ramifications of my current state of affairs.

Okay. So I was dumb. Remember, I was taking this stroll to try to get a chance to think. Remember?

Maybe I hadn't zeroed in on what my party looked like, but the Deveels spotted the difference before we had gone half a block.

Suddenly every Deveel who hadn't been able to foist off some trinket on me for the last two years was out to give it one more try.

"Love potions! Results guaranteed!"

"Snake necklaces! Poisonous and non!"

"Special discounts for the Great Skeeve!"

"Special discounts for any friend of the Great Skeeve!"

"Try our..."

"Buy my. ..."

"Taste these..."

Most of this was not aimed at me, but at Bunny and Markie. The Deveels swarmed around them like . . . well, like Deveels smelling an easy profit. This is not to say that Guido and Nunzio weren't doing their jobs. If they hadn't been clearing a path for us, we wouldn't have been able to move at all. As it was, our progress was simply slowed to a crawl.

"Still think this was a good idea, High Roller?"

"Massha! If you..."

"Just asking. If you can think in this racket, though, you've got better concentration than I do."

She was right, but I wasn't about to admit it. I just kept staring forward as we walked, tracking the activity around me out of the corners of my eyes without turning my head.

"Skeevie.'Can I have..."

"No."

"Look at..."

"No."

"Couldn't we..."

"No!"

Bunny was getting to be a pain. She seemed to want everything in sight. Fortunately, I had developed the perfect defense. All I had to do was say "No!" to everything.

"Why did we go shopping if we aren't going to buy anything?"

"Well..."

So much for my perfect defense. Not to be stymied, I switched immediately to Plan B, which was simply to keep our purchases at a minimum. I didn't seem to be too successful at that, either, but I consoled myself by trying to imagine how much junk we would have gotten loaded down with if I hadn't been riding the brake.

Surprisingly enough, despite all of Aahz's dire predictions, Markie wasn't much trouble at all. I found her to be remarkably well mannered and obedient, and she never asked me to buy her anything. Instead, she contented herself with pointing out to Bunny the few booths that individual overlooked.

There weren't many.

My only salvation was that Bunny did not seem interested in the usual collection of whiz-bangs and wowers that most visitors to the Bazaar find irresistible.

She was remarkably loyal to her prime passion-apparel. Hats, dresses, shoes, and accessories all had to pass her close scrutiny.

I'll admit that Bunny did not indulge in random purchases. She had a shrewd eye for fabric and construction, and better color sense than anyone I have ever known. Aahz always said that Imps were flashy dressers, and I had secretly tried to pattern my own wardrobe after their example. However, one afternoon of shopping with Bunny was an education in itself. Imps have nothing on molls when it comes to clothes sense.

The more I watched Bunny pursue the fashions available at the Bazaar, the more self-conscious I became about my own appearance. Eventually, I found myself looking over a few items for myself, and from there it was a short step to buying.

In no time flat, we had a small mountain of packages to cart along with us. Bunny had stocked up on a couple of outfits that changed color with her mood, and was now wearing an intriguing blouse which had a transparent patch that migrated randomly around her torso. If the latter sounds distracting, it was. My own indulgences were few, but sufficient to add to the overall bulk of merchandise we had to transport.

Guido and Nunzio were exempt from package-carrying duties, and Massha flatly refused on the basis that being a large woman trying to maneuver through the Bazaar was difficult enough without trying to juggle packages at the same time. Realizing the "you break it, you bought it" policies of the Bazaar, I could scarcely argue with her cautious position.

The final resolution to our baggage problem was really quite simple. I flexed my magic powers a bit and levitated the whole kit and kaboodle. I don't normally like to flaunt my powers publicly, but I figured that this was a necessary exception to the rule. Of course, having our purchases floating along behind us was like having a lighthouse in tow; it drew the Deveels out of their stalls in droves.

To my surprise, I started to enjoy the situation. Humility and anonymity is well and good, but sometimes its nice to be made a fuss over. Bunny hung on my arm and shoulder like a boneless falcon, cooing little endearments of appreciation ... though the fact that I was willing to finance her purchases seemed to be making as much as or more of an impression on her than my minor display of magic.

"Can't say I think much of her taste in clothes,"

Massha murmured to me as we paused once more while Bunny darted into a nearby booth.

To say the least, I was not eager to get drawn into a discussion comparing the respective tastes in clothes of Bunny and my apprentice.

"Different body types look better in different styles,"

I said, as tactfully as I could.

"Yeah? And what style looks best on my body type?"

"In all honesty, Massha, I can't picture you dressing any differently than you do."

"Really? Say, thanks, Skeeve. A girl always likes to hear a few appreciative noises about how she looks."

I had narrowly sidestepped that booby-trap and cast about frantically for a new subject before the other interpretation of my statement occurred to her.

"Umm ... hasn't Markie been well-behaved?"

"I'll say. I'll admit I was a little worried when you first brought her in, but she's been an angel. I don't think I've ever known a kid this patient and obedient."

"Undemanding, too," I said. "I've been thinking of getting her something while we're out, but I'm having trouble coming up with anything appropriate. The Bazaar isn't big on toy shops."

"Are you kidding? It's one big toy shop!"

"Massha..."

"Okay, okay. So they're mostly toys for adults. Let me think. How old is she, anyway?"

"I'm not really sure. She said she was in the third grade at Elementary School. . . even though she calls it Elemental School... so that would make her..."

I realized that Massha was staring at me in wide-eyed horror.

"Elemental School!?"

"That's what she called it. Cute, huh? Why, what does..."

My apprentice interrupted me by grabbing my arm so hard that it hurt. "Skeeve. We've got to get her back home... QUICK!!"

"But I don't see..."

"I'll explain later! Just get her and go! I'll round up Bunny and get her back, but you've got to get moving!"

To say the least, I found her manner puzzling. I had never seen Massha so upset. This was obviously not the time for questions, though, so I looked around for Markie.

She was standing, fists clenched, glaring at a tent with a closed flap.

All of a sudden everyone was getting uptight. First Massha, and now Markie.

"What's with the kid?" I said, tapping Guide on the shoulder.

"Bunny's in trying on some peek-a-boo nighties, and the owner chased Markie out," my bodyguard explained. "She don't like it much, but she'll get over it."

It's part of bein' a kid, I guess."

"I see. Well, I was just going to take her back home anyway. Could one of you stay here with ..."

"SKEEVE! STOP HER!!"

Massha was shouting at me. I was turning toward her to see what she was talking about when it happened, so I didn't see all the details.

There was a sudden WHOOSH followed by the sounds of ripping canvas, wood splintering, and assorted screams and curses.

I whipped my head back around, and my jaw dropped in astonishment.

The booth that Bunny was in was in tatters. The entire stock of the place was sailing off over the Bazaar, as was what was left of the tent. Bunny was trying to cover herself with her hands and screaming her head off. The proprietor, a particularly greasy-looking Deveel, was also screaming his head off, but his emotions were being vented in our general direction instead of at the world in general.

I would say it was a major dilemma except for one thing. The displays on either side of Bunny's tent and for two rows behind it were in a similar state. That is a major dilemma, making the destruction of a single booth pale in comparison.

A voice sprang into my head, drowning out the clamor of the enraged merchants. "If you break it, you bought it!" the voice said, and it spoke with a Devan accent.

"What happened?" I gasped, though whether to myself or to the gods, I wasn't sure.

Massha answered.

"What happened was Markie!" she said grimly. "She blew her cork and summoned up an air elemental . . . you know, like you learn to do at Elemental School? It appears that when the kid throws a tantrum, she's going to do it with magic!"

My mind grasped the meaning of her words instantly, just as fast as it leaped on to the next plateau. Aahz! I wasn't sure which was going to be worse: breaking the news to Aahz, or telling him how much it had cost us to learn about it!

Chapter Seven:

"There's a time to fight, and a time to hide out!"
-B. CASSIDY

I'VE heard that when some people get depressed, they retire to their neighborhood bar and tell their troubles to a sympathetic bartender. The problem with the Bazaar at Deva (a problem I had never noticed before) is that there are no sympathetic bartenders!

Consequently, I had to settle for the next best thing and holed up in the Yellow Crescent Inn.

Now, a fast-food joint may seem to you to be a poor substitute for a bar. It is. This particular fast-food joint, however, is owned and managed by my only friend at the Bazaar who isn't living with me. This last part was especially important at the moment, since I didn't think I was apt to get much sympathy in my own home.

Gus is a gargoyle, but despite his fierce appearance he's one of the friendliest beings I've ever met. He's helped Aahz and me out on some of our more dubious assignments, so he's less inclined to ask "How did you get yourself into this?" than most. Usually, he's more interested in "How did you get out of it?"

"How did you get yourself into this one?" he said, shaking his head.

Well, nobody's perfect... especially friends.

"I told you, Gus. One lousy card game where I expected to lose. If I had known it was going to backfire like this, so help me I would have folded every hand!"

"You see, there's your problem," the gargoyle said, flashing a grin toothier than normal. "Instead of sitting in and losing, you'd be better off not sitting in at all!"

I rewarded his sound advice by rolling my eyes.

"It's all hypothetical anyway. What's done is done. The question is, 'What do I do now?'"

"Not so fast. Let's stick with the card game for a minute. Why did you sit in if you were expecting to lose?"

"Look. Can we drop the card game? I was wrong.

Okay? Is that what you want to hear?"

"No-o-o," Gus said slowly. "I still want to hear why you went in the first place. Humor me."

I stared at him for a moment, but he seemed perfectly serious.

I shrugged. "The Geek sent me an invitation.

Frankly, it was quite flattering to get one. I just thought it would be sociable to ..."

"Stop!" the gargoyle interrupted, raising his hand.

"There's your problem."

"What is?"

"Trying to be sociable. What's the matter? Aren't your current round of friends good enough for you?"

That made me a little bit nervous. I was having enough problems without having Gus get his nose out of joint.

"It isn't that, Gus. Really. The whole crew-yourself included-is closer to me than my family ever was. It's just... I don't know ..."

"... you want to be liked. Right?"

"Yeah. I guess that's it."

"And that's your problem!"

That one threw me. "I don't get it," I admitted.

The gargoyle sighed, then ducked behind the counter. "Have another milkshake," he said, shoving one toward me. "This might take a while, but I'll try to explain."

I like to think it's a sign of my growing *savoir-faire* that I now enjoy strawberry milkshakes. When I first visited the Bazaar, I rejected them out of hand because they looked like pink swamp muck. I was now moderately addicted to them, though I still wouldn't eat the food here. Then again, maybe it was a sign of something else completely if I thought a taste for strawberry milkshakes was a sign of *savoir-faire*!

"Look, Skeeve," Gus began, sipping at a milkshake of his own, "you're a nice guy . . . one of the nicest I've ever known. You go out of your way to 'do the right thing'. . . to be nice to people. The key phrase there is 'go out of your way.' You're in a 'trouble-heavy' profession anyway. Nobody hires a magician because things are going well. Then you add to that your chosen lifestyle. Because you want to be liked, you place yourself in situations you wouldn't go near if it was for your own personal satisfaction. Case in point: the card game. If you had been out for personal gain, i.e., wealth, you wouldn't have gone near it, since you don't know the game. But you wanted to be friendly, so you went expecting to lose. That's not normal, and it resulted in a not-normal outcome, to wit, Markie. That's why you get into trouble."

I chewed my lip slightly as I thought over what he was saying.

"So if I want to stay out of trouble, I've got to stop being a nice guy? I'm not sure I can do that, Gus."

"Neither am I," the gargoyle agreed cheerfully.

"What's more, if you could, I don't think I or any of your other friends would like you any more. I don't even think you'd like yourself."

"Then why are you recommending that I change?"

"I'm not! I'm just pointing out that it's the way you are, not any outside circumstances, that keeps getting you into trouble. In short, since you aren't going to change, get used to being in trouble. It's going to be your constant state for a long while."

I found myself massaging my forehead again.

"Thanks, Gus," I said. "I knew I could count on you to cheer me up."

"Don't knock it. Now you can focus on solving your current problem instead of wasting time wondering why it exists."

"Funny. I thought I was doing just that. Someone else wanted to talk about what was causing my problems."

My sarcasm didn't faze the gargoyle in the least.

"Right," he nodded. "That brings us to your current problem."

"Now you're talking. What do you think I should do, Gus?"

"Beats me. I'd say you've got a real dilemma on your hands."

I closed my eyes as my headache hammered anew. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Gus."

"Hey. Don't mention it. What are friends for? Whoops! Here comes Tananda!"

The other disadvantage to holing up at the Yellow Crescent Inn, besides the fact that it isn't a bar, is that it's located right across the street from my home. This is not good for someone who's trying to avoid his housemates.

Fortunately, this was one situation I could handle with relative ease.

"Don't tell her I'm here, Gus," I instructed.

"But..."

Not waiting to hear the rest of his protest, I grabbed my milkshake, slipped into a chair at a nearby table, and set to work with a fast disguise spell. By the time Tananda, hit the door, the only one she could see in the place besides Gus was a potbellied Deveel sipping on a strawberry milkshake.

"Hi, Gus!" she sang. "Have you seen Skeeve around?"

"He . . . aahh . . . was in earlier." The gargoyle carefully avoided the lie.

"Oh, well. I guess I'll just have to leave without saying goodbye to him. then. Too bad. We weren't on particularly good terms the last time I saw him."

"You're leaving?"

Gus said it before the words burst out of my own mouth, saving me from blowing my disguise.

"Yea. I figure it's about time I moved on."

"I ... umm . . . have been hearing some strange things about my neighbors, but I've never been sure how much to believe," the gargoyle said thoughtfully.

"This sudden departure wouldn't have anything to do with the new moll that's been foisted off on Skeeve, would it?"

"Bunny? Naw. I'll admit I was a bit out of sorts when I first heard about it, but Chumley explained the whole thing to me."

"Then what's the problem?"

Gus was doing a terrific job of beating me to my lines.

As long as he kept it up, I'd be able to get all my questions answered without revealing myself.

It had occurred to me to confront Tananda directly as soon as I heard what she was up to, but then I realized that this was a rare chance to hear her thoughts when she didn't think I was around.

"Well, it's something Markie said..."

Markie again. I definitely owed Aahz an apology.

"... She made some crack about her daddy, that's Skeeve, letting me live there, and it got me to thinking.

Things have been nice these last couple years ... almost too nice. Since we haven't had to worry about overhead, Chumley and I haven't been working much. More important, we haven't been working at working. It's too easy to hang around the place and wait for something to come to us."

"Getting fat and lazy, huh?" Gus grinned.

"Something like that. Now, you know me, Gus. I've always been footloose and fancy free. Ready to follow a job or a whim at the drop of a hat. If anyone had suggested to me that I should settle down, I would have punched their lights out. Now all of a sudden, I've got a permanent address and family . . . family beyond Chumley, I mean. I hadn't realized how domestic I was getting until Skeeve showed up with Markie. A kid, even. When I first saw her, my first thought was that it would be nice to have a kid around the place! Now I ask you, Gus, does that sound like me?"

"No, it doesn't."

The gargoyle's voice was so quiet I scarcely recognized it as his.

"Right then I saw the handwriting on the wall. If I don't start moving again, I'm going to take root . . . permanently. You know, the worst thing is that I don't really want to go. That's the scariest part of all."

"I don't think Aahz or Skeeve want you to go either."

"Now don't you start on me, Gus. This is hard enough for me as it is. Like I said, they're family, but they're stifling me. I've got to get away, even if it's only for a little while, or I'm going to lose a part of me ... forever."

"Well, if you've made up your mind ... good luck."

"Thanks, Gus. I'll be in touch from time to time. Keep an eye on the boys in case they buy more trouble than they can sell."

"I don't think you have to worry about Chumley. He's pretty levelheaded."

"Chumley's not the one I'm worried about."

I thought that was going to be her parting shot, but she paused with one hand on the door.

"You know, it's probably just as well that I couldn't find Skeeve. I'm not sure I could have stuck to my guns in a face-to-face ... but then again, maybe that's why I was looking for him."

I could feel Gus's eyes on me as she slipped out. "I suppose it's pointless to ask why you didn't say something. Mister Skeeve."

Even though I had worried earlier about getting Gus angry with me, somehow it didn't matter anymore.

"At first it was curiosity," I said, letting my disguise slip away. "Then, I didn't want to embarrass her."

"And at the end there? When she flat-out said that you could talk her out of going? Why didn't you speak up then? Do you want her to disappear?"

I couldn't even manage a spark of anger. "You know better than that, Gus," I said quietly. "You're hurting and lashing out at whoever's handy, which happens to be me. I didn't try to get her to stay for the same reason you didn't try harder. She feels we're stifling her, and if she wants out, it'd be pretty small of us to try to keep her for our own sakes, wouldn't it?"

There was prolonged silence, which was fine by me. I didn't feel much like talking anymore. Rising, I started for the door.

"You were looking the other way when she left," the gargoyle said. "You might like to know there were tears in her eyes."

"Mine too," I replied without turning. "That's why I was looking the other way."

Chapter Eight:

"What did I do wrong?"
-LEAK, REX

WITH a heavy heart, I headed back home. I was no longer worried about Aahz yelling at me. If anything, I was rather hoping he would. If he did, I decided that for a change I wouldn't argue back. In short, I felt terrible and was in the mood to do a little penance.

Sliding through the tent flap, I cocked an ear and listened for Aahz. Actually, I was a little surprised that I couldn't hear him from the street, but I was sure I would be able to locate his position in the house with no difficulty. As I've said before, my partner has no problem expressing his moods, particularly anger.

The house was silent.

From the lack of reverberations and/or falling plaster, I assumed that Aahz was out... probably looking for me with blood in his eye. I debated going out to look for him, but decided that it would be better to wait right here. He'd be back eventually, so I headed for the garden to make myself comfortable until he showed up.

What I call the garden is actually our courtyard. It has a fountain and an abundance of plants, so I tend to think of it as a piece of the outdoors rather than as an enclosed area. I had been spending more and more time there lately, especially when I wanted time to think. It reminded me of some of the quieter spots I would find from time to time back when I was living on my own in the woods . . . back before I met Garkin, and, through him, Aahz.

That memory led me to ponder a curious point: Were there other successful beings, like myself, who used their new prosperity to recreate the setting or atmosphere of their pre-success days? If so, it made for a curious cycle.

I was so preoccupied with this thought as I entered the garden that I almost missed the fact that I wasn't alone. Someone else was using my retreat . . . specifically, Aahz.

He was sitting on one of the stone benches, chin in his hands and elbows on his knees, staring blankly into the water as it flowed through the fountain. To say the least, I was surprised. Aahz has never been the meditative type, particularly in times of crisis. He's more the "beat on someone or something until the problem goes away" type. Still, here he was, not agitated, not pacing, just sitting and staring. It was enough out of character for him to un-nerve me completely.

"Umm ... Hi, Aahz," I said hesitantly.

"Hello, Skeeve," he replied without looking around.

I waited for a few moments for him to say something else. He didn't. Finally I sat down on the bench next to him and stared at the water myself a bit.

We sat that way for a while, neither of us saying anything. The trickling water began to have a tranquilizing, hypnotic effect on me, and I found my mind starting to relax and drift.

"It's been quite a day, hasn't it, partner?"

My mind reflexively recoiled into a full defensive posture before it dawned on me that Aahz was still speaking quietly.

"Y . . . Yes."

I waited, but he seemed off in his own thoughts again.

My nerves shot, I decided to take the initiative.

"Look, Aahz. About Markie ..."

"Yes?"

"I knew about the Elemental School thing. She told me on the way back from the Geek's. I just didn't know enough to realize it was important."

"I know," Aahz sighed, not looking at me. "I hadn't bothered to teach you about elemental magic . . . just like I hadn't taught you about dragon poker."

No explosion! I was starting to get a little worried about my partner.

"Aren't you upset?"

"Of course I'm upset," he said, favoring me with a fleeting glimpse of bared teeth, a barely recognizable smile. "Do you think I'm always this jovial?"

"I mean, aren't you mad?"

"Oh, I'm past 'mad.' I'm all the way to 'thoughtful.' "

I arrived at the startling conclusion that I liked it better when Aahz was shouting and unreasonable. That I knew how to deal with. This latest mood of his was a total unknown.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Parenthood."

"Parenthood?"

"Yeah. You know, that state of total responsibility for another being? Well, at least, that's the theory."

I wasn't sure I was following this at all.

"Aahz? Are you trying to say you feel responsible for what happened with Markie because you hadn't taught me more about magic and poker?"

"Yes. No. I don't know."

"But that's silly!"

"I know," he replied, with his first honest grin since I had entered the garden. "That's what got me thinking about parenthood."

I abandoned any hope of following his logic.

"You'll have to explain it to me, Aahz. I'm a little slow today."

He straightened up a bit, draping one arm around my shoulders.

"I'll try, but it isn't easy," he said in a tone that was almost conversational. "You see, regardless of what I said when I was ranting at you about how much of a problem Markie was going to be, it's been a long time since I was a parent. I've been sitting here, trying to remember what it was like. What's so surprising to me is the realization that I've never really stopped. Nobody does."

I started to shift uncomfortably.

"Hear me out. For once I'm trying to share some of my hard-won lessons with you without shouting. Forget the theories of parenthood! What it's really all about is taking pride in things you

can never be sure you had a hand in, and accepting the responsibility and guilt for things you either didn't know or had no control over. Actually, it's a lot more complicated than that, but that's the bare bones of the matter."

"You don't make it sound particularly attractive," I observed.

"In a lot of ways, it isn't. Your kid expects you to know everything ... to be able to answer any question he asks and, more important, to provide a logical explanation of what is essentially an illogical world. Society, on the other hand, expects you to train your kid in everything necessary for them to become a successful, responsible member of the community . . . even if you aren't yourself. The problem is that you aren't the only source of input for the kid. Friends, schools, and other adults are all supplying other opinions, many of which you don't agree with. That means that if your kid succeeds, you don't really know if it was because of or in spite of your influence. On the other hand, if the kid goes bad, you always wonder if there was something else you could have said or done or done differently that could have salvaged things before they hit the wall."

His hand tightened slightly on my shoulder, but I don't think he did it consciously.

"Now, I wasn't a particularly good parent. . . which I like to think places me in the majority. I didn't interact much with my kids. Business was always a good excuse, but the truth was that I was glad to let someone else handle their upbringing as much as possible. I can see now that it was because I was afraid that if I tried to do it myself, that in my ignorance and uncertainty I would make some terrible mistake. The end result was that some of the kids turned out okay, some of them... let's say less than okay. What I was left with was a nagging feeling that I could have done better. That I could have-should have-made more of a difference."

He released his hold on my shoulders and stood up.

"Which brings us to you."

I wasn't sure if I should feel uncomfortable because he was focusing on me, or glad because he was pacing again.

"I've never consciously thought of you as a son, but in hindsight I realize that a lot of how I've treated you has been driven by my lingering guilt from parenthood. In you, I had another chance to mold someone ... to give all the advice I felt I should have given my own kids. If at times I've seemed to overreact when things didn't go well, it's because deep inside I saw it as a personal failure. I mean, this was my second chance. A time to show how much I had learned from my earlier perceived failures, and you know what? Now I'm giving it my full attention and my best shot, and things are still going wrong!"

This was doing nothing to brighten my mood. On top of everything else, now I had the distinct feeling I had somehow let Aahz down.

"I don't think you can say it's your fault, Aahz. I mean, you've tried hard and been more patient with me than anyone I've ever known. Nobody can teach someone else everything, even if they could

remember what should be taught. I've got a certain saturation point. After that, I'm not going to learn anything new until I've digested what I've got. Even then, I've got to be honest and say there are some things I don't believe no matter how often you tell me. I've just got to find out for myself. A craftsman can't blame his skill if he has defective material."

"That's just what I've been thinking," Aahz nodded. "I can't keep blaming myself for everything. It's very astute of you to have figured this out at your age ... without going through what I have."

"It's no big thing to figure out that I'm a dummy," I said bitterly. "I've known it all along."

Suddenly, I felt myself being lifted into the air. I looked past Aahz's hand, which was gripping my shirt by the collar, down the length of his arm, and into his yellow eyes.

"Wrong lesson!" he snarled, sounding much like his old self. "What you're supposed to be learning isn't that you're dumb. You're not, and if you were listening, I just complimented you on that fact."

"Then what ..." I managed, with what little air I had left.

"The point is that what's happened in the past isn't my fault, just like what's happening now isn't your fault!"

"Aaggh ... urk ..." was my swift rebuttal.

"Oh! Sorry."

My feet hit the floor and air flooded back into my lungs.

"All a parent, any parent, can do is give it their best shot, right or wrong." Aahz continued as if there had been no interruption. "The actual outcome rests on so many variables, no single person can assume responsibility, blame, or praise for whatever happens. That's important for me to remember in my dealings with you . . . and for you to remember in your dealings with Markie. It's not your fault!"

"It isn't?"

"That's right. We both have strong paternal streaks in us, though I don't know where you got yours from, but all we can do is our best. We've got to remember not to try to shoulder the blame for what other people do .. like Tananda."

That sobered me up again. "You know about that, huh?"

"Yeah. She told me to tell you goodbye if she didn't see you, but I guess you already know."

I simply nodded, unable to speak.

"I was already worried about how you were going to react to the problems with Markie, and when Tananda left I knew you were going to take it hard. I've been trying to find a way to show you that you aren't alone. Right or wrong, what you're feeling has been around for a long time."

"Thanks, Aahz."

"Has it helped at all?"

I thought for a moment. "A bit."

My partner heaved another sigh.

"Well," he said, "I tried. That what's important...I think."

"Cheerio, chaps. How's every little thing?"

I glanced up to find Chumley striding toward us, beaming merrily. "Oh. Hi, Chumley."

"I thought you'd like to know," the troll announced, "I think I've figured out a way to charge the damage Markie caused this afternoon back to the Mob as a business expense!"

"That's swell, Chumley," Aahz said dully.

"Yeah. Terrific."

"'Allo, 'allo?" he said, cocking his head at us. "Any time the two biggest hustlers at the Bazaar fail to get excited over money, there's got to be something wrong. Out with it now. What's troubling you?"

"Do you want to tell him, Aahz?"

"Well..."

"I say, this wouldn't be about little sister leaving the nest, would it? Oh, there's a giggle."

"You know?" I blinked.

"I can see you're all broken up over it," Aahz said in a dangerous tone.

"Tish tosh!" the troll exclaimed. "I don't see where it's anything to get upset about. Tananda's just settling things in her mind, is all. She's found that she likes something that goes against her self-image. It might take a few days, but eventually she'll figure out that it's not the end of the world. Everybody goes through it. It's called 'growing up.' If anything, I think it's bloody marvelous that she's finally having to learn that things don't stay the same forever."

"You do?" I was suddenly starting to feel better.

"Certainly. Why, in just the time we've been chumming around together, Aahz has changed, you've changed, so have I, though I don't tend to show it as dramatically as you two or little sister. You blokes have just got a bad case of the guilts. Poppycock! You can't take the blame for everything, you know."

"That's good advice," I said, standing up and stretching. "Why can't you ever give me good advice like that, partner?"

"Cause any fool can see it without being told," Aahz snarled, but there was a twinkle in his eye. "The problem is that Pervects aren't just any fool."

"Quite right," Chumley grinned. "Now how about joining me in a little Happy Hour spot of wine while I tell you how clever I am at saving you money."

"I'd rather you impressed us with a solution to our baby-sitting problems." my partner said grimly, heading for the lounge.

I followed in their wake, strangely happy. Things were back to normal... or as normal as they ever get around here. Between us, I was sure we could find a positive course of action. I mean, after all, how much trouble could one little girl...

That thought crumbled in front of an image of elemental-blown tents.

I resolved to do more listening than talking in the upcoming war council.

Chapter Nine:

"They never let you live it down. One little mistake!"
-NERO

RELAXING over drinks with Aahz and Chumley, I felt the tensions and depressions of the day slipping away. It was nice to know that when things really got tough, I had friends to help me solve my problems, however complex or apparently hopeless.

"Well, guys," I said, pouring another round of wine for everyone. "Any ideas as to what we should do?"

"Beats me." Chumley said, toying with his goblet.

"I still think it's your problem," Aahz announced, leaning back in his chair and grinning evilly. "I mean, after all, you got into it without our help."

Like I said, it's great to have friends.

"I can't say I go along with that, Aahz old boy," the troll said with a wave. "Although I'll admit it's tempting. The unfortunate reality is that as long as we're living and working as closely as we are, his problems are out problems, don't you know?"

As much as I appreciated the fact that Chumley's logic was moving them closer to lending me assistance, I felt the need to defend myself a little.

"I'd like to think it's a two-way street, Aahz. I've gotten dragged into a few of your problems as well."

He started to snap back, then pursed his lips and returned his attention to his wine. "I'll avoid comparing lists of how often which of us has gotten us in how much trouble and simply concede the point. I guess that's part of what a partnership is all about. Sorry if I seem a little snorky from time to time, but I've never had a partner before. It takes getting used to."

"I say! Well said, Aahz!" Chumley applauded. "You know, you're getting more civilized every day."

"Let's not get too carried away just yet. How about you, Chumley? You and your sister have helped us out often enough, but I don't recall either of you bringing your problems home with you. Isn't that a little lopsided?"

"I've always figured it's our way of kicking in on the rent," the troll said casually. "If our problems ever start interfering with your work, then I'll figure we've overstayed our welcome."

This came as a total surprise to me. I realized with a start, that I was usually so busy with my own life and problems that I never got around to asking much about the work Chumley and Tananda were doing.

"Whoa up a minute here," I said. "Are you two having problems I don't know about?"

"Well, it isn't all beer and skittles," the troll grimaced briefly. "The subject at hand, however, is your problems. There's nothing on my plate that has a higher priority just now, so let's get to work on the latest crisis, shall we? I suggest we all put on our thinking caps and brainstorm a little. Let's just stare at the ceiling and each toss out ideas as they occur to us."

I made myself a little promise to return to the subject of Tananda and Chumley's problems at a later date, then joined the others in staring thoughtfully at the ceiling. Time crawled along, and no one said anything.

"Well, so much for brainstorming," Aahz said, reaching for the wine again. "I'll admit I'm coming up blank."

"Perhaps it would help if we started by defining the problem," Chumley urged. "Now, as I see it, we have two problems: Markie and Bunny. We're going to have trouble figuring out what to do

about Bunny until we find out what Don Bruce has up his sleeve, and we've got to come up with a way to keep Markie from totally disrupting our lives until her father comes to pick her up."

"If he picks her up," my partner corrected helpfully.

"I'll admit, I still don't know how you did so well in that game to end up with Markie in the first place," the troll said, cocking one outsized eye at me and ignoring Aahz.

"Dumb luck ... with the emphasis on dumb."

"That's not the way I heard it," Chumley smirked.

"Whatever your method was, it was successful enough to make you the talk of the Bazaar."

"What!?" Aahz said, sitting up in his chair again.

"You would hear it yourself if you weren't spending all your time sulking in your room," the troll winked.

"When I went out after little sister today, it seemed that all I was hearing about was the new dragon poker champion of Deva. Everybody's talking about the game, or what they've heard about the game. I suspect they're embellishing upon the facts, from some of the description of the hands, but there are those who are taking it all as gospel."

I remembered then that when the game broke up, the other players had been very enthusiastic about my playing. At the time, I had been worried about the secret of my night out reaching Aahz (which, you'll recall, it did before I got home). The troubles with Markie and Bunny had occupied my mind and time ever since, so I hadn't stopped to think of other potential repercussions of the game gossip. Now, however ...

Aahz was out of his seat, pacing back and forth.

"Chumley, if what you're saying is true ... are you following this, partner?"

"Too bloody well," I growled.

That got my partner to pause momentarily to roll his eyes.

"Watch yourself," he warned. "You're starting to talk like Chumley now."

"You want I should talk like Guido instead, know what I mean?"

"I don't understand," the troll interrupted. "Is something amiss?"

"We don't have two problems," Aahz announced.

"We've got three! Markie, Bunny, and the rumor mill!"

"Gossip? How can that be a problem?"

"Think it through, Chumley," I said. "All I need right now is to have a bunch of hotshot dragon poker players hunting me up to see if I'm as good as everybody says."

"That's only part of it, partner," Aahz added. "This could hurt our business and public images as well."

I closed my eyes and sighed.

"Spell it out for me, Aahz. I'm still learning, remember?"

"Well, we already know your reputation at magic has been growing fast. . . almost too fast. The competition hates you because you're taking all the prime assignments. No big deal! Professional jealousy is the price of success in any field. There comes a time, however, when you can get too big too fast. Then it isn't just your rivals you worry about. Everybody wants you taken down a peg or two if for no other reason than to convince themselves that your success is abnormal . . . that they don't have to feel bad for not measuring up."

He paused to stare at me hard.

"I'm afraid this dragon poker thing just might push you into the second category. A lot of beings excel here at the Bazaar, but they're only noted in one field. The Geek, for example, is a recognized figure among the gamblers, but he doesn't have any reputation to speak of as a magician or merchant. People can accept that . . . work hard and you rise toward the top of your group. You, on the other hand, have just made a strong showing in a second profession. I'm afraid there's going to be some backlash."

"Backlash?" I echoed weakly.

"It's like I've been trying to tell you: people aren't going to want you to get too much above them. At the very least they might start boycotting our business. At most. . . well, there are ways of sabotaging other people's success."

"You mean they're going to ..."

"That's enough!" Chumley declared, slapping his palm down on the table loudly.

It suddenly occurred to me that I had never seen Chumley mad. It also occurred to me that I was glad our furniture was strong enough to withstand even Aahz's tirades. If not, the troll would have destroyed the table just stopping the conversation.

"Now listen up, both of you!" he ordered, leveling a gnarled finger at us. "I think the current crisis has gone to your heads. You two are overreacting ... snapping at shadows! I'll admit we've got some problems, but we've handled worse. This is no time to get panicky."

"But..."

"Hear me out, Aahz. I've listened to you bellow often enough."

I opened my mouth to make a witty comment, then, for once, thought better of it.

"Markie is a potential disaster, but the key word there is potential. She's a good kid who will do what we say . . . if we learn to watch what we say to her. The same goes for Bunny. She's smart as a whip and..."

"Bunny?" I blurted, forgetting myself for a moment.

"Yes, Bunny. It's been a long time since there's been anyone around here I could discuss literature and theater with. She's really quite intelligent if you bother to talk to her."

"We are talking about the same Bunny, aren't we?" Aahz murmured. "The one who comes across dumb as a stone,"

Chumley confirmed firmly. "Just remember how I come across when I'm putting on my Big Crunch act... but we're wandering. The subject is problems, and I maintain with a little coaching Bunny won't be one."

He paused to glare at us.

"As to the rumor of Skeeve's abilities at dragon poker, I've never in my life heard anyone get as alarmed as you, Aahz. Sure, there are negative sides to any rumor, but you have to get pretty extreme to do the projections that have been voiced just now."

"Hey, Boss!" Guido called, sticking his head in the door. "The Geek's here to see you."

"I'll handle this," Aahz said, heading for the reception area. "You stay here and listen to what Chumley has to say. He's probably right. I have been edgy lately ... for some unknown reason."

"If I am right, then you should hear it, too," the troll called after him.

"Talk to me, Chumley," I said. "That's probably the closest you'll ever hear to an apology from Aahz, anyway."

"Quite right. Where was I? Oh, yes. Even if Aahz's appraisal of the reaction to your success is correct, it shouldn't have too much impact on your work. The small fry may go to other magicians, but you've been trying to cut down on unimportant jobs anyway. When someone is really in

trouble, they're going to want the best available magician working on it... and right now, that means you."

I thought about what he was saying, weighing it carefully in my mind.

"Even if Aahz is just a little right," I said, "I'm not wild about having any ill feeling generated about me at the Bazaar. Admiration I don't mind, but envy makes me uneasy."

"Now that you'll just have to get used to," the troll laughed, clapping a hand lightly on my shoulder.

"Whether you know it or not, that's been building for some time ... long before this dragon poker thing came up. You've got a lot going for you, Skeeve, and as long as you do, there will be blokes who envy it."

"So you really think the dragon poker rumors are harmless?"

"Quite right. Really, what harm can come from idle gossip?"

"You know, Chumley, you aren't wrong very often. But when you miss, you really miss."

We looked up to find Aahz leaning in the doorway.

"What's wrong, Aahz? You look like someone just served you water when you were expecting wine."

My partner didn't even smile at my attempted humor.

"Worse than that," he said. "That was the Geek downstairs."

"We know. What did he want?"

"I was hoping he had come to pick up Markie for her father...." Aahz's voice trailed off to nothing.

"I take it he didn't?" I prompted.

"No, he didn't. In fact, the subject never came up."

Almost without thinking, my partner's hand groped for his oversized goblet of wine.

"He had an invitation ... no, make that a challenge. The Sen-Sen Ante Kid has heard about Skeeve here. He wants a showdown match of head-to-head dragon poker. The Geek is making the arrangements."

Chapter Ten:

"A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down!"

-L. BORGIA

"JUST let the energy flow."

"That's easy for you to say!"

"Did I stutter?"

"You know, Hot Stuff, maybe it would be better if I..."

"Quit talking and concentrate, Massha."

"You started it."

"And I'm finishing it. Focus on the candle!"

If some of that sounds vaguely familiar, it should. It's the old 'light the candle' game. Theoretically, it builds a student's confidence. In actuality, it's a pain in the butt.

Apprentices hate the candle drill. I did when I was an apprentice. It's a lot more fun when you're on the teaching end.

"Come on, Skeeve. I'm getting too old to learn this stuff."

"And you're getting older the longer you stall, apprentice. Remember, you came to me to learn magic."

Just because we've gotten distracted from time to time doesn't mean I've forgotten completely. Now light the candle."

She turned her attention to the exercise again with a mutter I chose to ignore.

I had been thinking hard about my conversations with Aahz and Chumley. The whole question of what to do about the challenge from the Kid was touchy enough that for once I decided to seek the counsel of my advisors before making a commitment I might later regret.

Wiser heads than mine were addressing the dilemma at this very moment. Unfortunately, aforesaid wiser heads were in total disagreement as to what course of action to follow.

Aahz was in favor of refusing the match, while Chumley insisted that a refusal would only inflame the situation. He maintained that the only sane way out would be to face the Kid and lose (no one seriously thought I would have a chance in such a game), thereby getting me off the hot seat once and for all. The main problem with that solution was that it involved voluntarily giving up a substantial amount of money . . . and Aahz wouldn't hear of it.

As the battle raged on, I thought about the earlier portions of our conversations. I thought about parenthood and responsibility. Then I went looking for Massha.

When we first met, Massha was holding down a job as court magician for one of the city-states in the dimension of Jahk . . . that's right. Where they hold the Big Game every year. The problem was that she didn't really know any magic. She was what is known in the field as a mechanic, and all her powers were purchased across the counter in the form of rings, pendants, and other magical devices. After she saw us strut our stuff in the Big Game, she decided to try to learn some of the non-mechanical variety of magic . . . and for some unknown reason picked or picked on me to provide her with lessons.

Now, to say the least, I had never thought of Massha as a daughter, but she was my apprentice and therefore a responsibility I had accepted. Unfortunately, I had dodged that responsibility more often than not for the very reasons Aahz had listed: I was unsure of my own abilities and therefore afraid of making a mistake. What I hadn't done was give it my best shot, win or lose. That realization sparked me into a new resolve that if anything happened to Massha in the future, it wouldn't be because I hadn't at least tried to teach her what she asked.

I was also aware that I wanted to learn more about any problems Chumley and Tananda were having, as well as getting a better fix on just who or what Bunny was. At this moment, however, Tananda was absent and Chumley was arguing with Aahz, putting that objective on hold. Bunny was around somewhere, but given a choice between her and Massha, I opted for addressing old obligations before plunging into new ones.

Ergo, I roused out Massha for a long-overdue magic lesson.

"It's just not working, Skeeve. I told you I can't do it."

She sank back in her chair dejected and scowled at the floor. Curious, I reached over and felt the candle wick.

It wasn't even warm.

"Not bad," I lied. "You're showing some improvement."

"Don't kid a kidder." Massha grimaced. "I'm not getting anywhere."

"Could you light it with one of your rings?"

She spread her fingers and made a quick inventory.

"Sure. This little trinket right here could do the job, but that's not the point."

"Bear with me. How does it work? Or, more important, how does it feel when it works?"

She gave a quick shrug.

"There's nothing to it. You see, this circle around the stone here moves, and I rotate it according to how tight a beam I want. Pressing the back of the ring activates it, so all I have to do is aim it and relax. The ring does all the work."

"That's it!" I exclaimed, snapping my fingers.

"What's it?"

"Never mind. Keep going. How does it feel?"

"Well," she frowned thoughtfully. "It sort of tingles. It's like I was a hose and there was water rushing through me and out the ring."

"Bingo!"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Listen, Massha. Listen closely."

I was speaking carefully now, trying hard to contain my excitement over what I hoped was a major breakthrough.

"Our problem with teaching you non-mechanical magic is that you don't believe in it! I mean, you know that it exists and all, but you don't believe that you can do it. You're working hard at overcoming that every time you try to cast a spell, and that's the problem: You try ... You work hard. You know you've got to believe, so you work hard at overcoming that disbelief every time you ..."

"Yeah. So?"

"It means you tense up instead of relaxing the way you do when you're working your rings. Tensing blocks the flow of the energies, so you end up with less power at your disposal than you have when you're just walking around. The idea of casting a spell isn't to tense up, it's to relax ... if anything, it's an exercise in forced relaxation."

My apprentice bit at her lower lip. "I don't know. That sounds too easy."

"On the one hand it's easy. Viewed a different way, one of the hardest things to do is relax on cue, especially if there's a crisis raging around you at the time."

"So all I have to do is relax?" she asked skeptically.

"Remember that 'hose' feeling you get when you use the ring? That's the energies being channeled through you and focused on your objective. If you pinch off a hose, how much water gets through?"

"I guess that makes sense."

"Try it ... now. Reach out your hand and focus on the candle wick as if you were going to use your ring, only don't activate it. Just tell yourself that the ring is working and relax."

She started to say something, then changed her mind.

Instead, she drew a deep breath, blew it out, then pointed a finger at the candle.

"Just relax," I urged softly. "Let the energies flow."

"But. . ."

"Don't talk. Keep your mind on the candle and hear me like I'm talking from a long way off."

Obediently, she focused on the candle.

"Feel the flow of energies . . . just like when you're using the ring. Relax some more. Feel how the flow increases? Now, without tensing up, tighten that flow down to a narrow beam and aim it at the wick."

I was concentrating on Massha so much I almost missed it. A small glow of light started to form on the candle wick.

"That's it," I said, fighting to keep my voice calm.

"Now. . ."

"Daddy! Guido says..."

"Ssshh!!!!" he hissed. "Not now, Markie! We're trying to light the candle."

She paused in the doorway and cocked her head quizzically.

"Oh, that's easy!" she beamed suddenly and raised her head.

"MARKIE!! DON'T..."

But I was too late.

There was a sudden flash of light in the room, and the candle lit. Well, it didn't exactly light, it melted like a bag of water when you take away the bag. So did the candle holder. The table lit, though... briefly. At least one corner of it did. It flared for a moment, then the fire died as abruptly as it had appeared. What was left was a charred quarter-circle of tabletop where the corner used to

be. That and a table leg standing alone like a burnt out torch. The fire had hit so fast and smooth the leg didn't even topple over.

I don't remember reaching for Markie, but somehow I had her by the shoulders shaking her.

"WHAT DID YOU DO THAT FOR??" I said in my best paternal tones.

"You . . . you said . . . you wanted the candle lit."

"That's lighting a candle?!?"

"I still have a little trouble with control. . . but my teacher says I'm doing better."

I realized I was having a little trouble with control, too. I stopped shaking her and tried to calm myself.

This effort was aided by the fact that I noticed Markie's lip was quivering and she was bunking her eyes rapidly.

It suddenly dawned on me that she was about to cry. I decided that, not knowing what would happen when she cried, I would do my best to stay ignorant by heading her off at the pass.

"Umm . . . that was a Fire Elemental, right? Did you learn that at Elemental School?"

Getting someone to talk often serves to stave off tears ... at least, it had always worked on me.

"Y . . . Yes," she said meekly. "At Elemental School, we learn Fire for starters."

"It's... ummm ... very impressive. Look, I'm sorry if I barked at you, Markie, but you see, I didn't just want the candle lit. I wanted Massha to light it. It was part of her magic lesson."

"I didn't know that."

"I know. I didn't think to tell you. That's why I'm apologizing. What happened here was my fault. Okay?"

She nodded her head, exaggerating the motion until it looked like she had a broken neck. It was an interesting illusion, one that I vastly preferred to the idea of her crying . . . especially in the mood I was in. The thought of Markie with a broken neck ...

"Aahh . . . you did interrupt Massha's lesson, though," I said, forcing the other concept from my mind. "Don't you think it would be nice if you apologized to her?"

"That's a great idea, Daddy," she beamed. "I'll do that the next time I see her. Okay?"

That's when I realized my apprentice had slipped out of the room.

"What do you think you're doing, Massha?"

Leaning casually in the doorway of Massha's bedroom, I realized my voice lacked the intimidating power of Aahz's, but it's the only voice I've got.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" she snarled, carrying a massive armload of clothes from her closet to dump on the bed.

"I'd say, offhand, that it looks like you're packing. The question is, why?"

"People usually pack because it's the easiest way to carry their things when they travel. Less wear and tear on the wardrobe."

Suddenly, I was weary of the banter. Heaving a sigh, I moved in front of her, blocking her path.

"No more games, Massha. Okay? Tell me straight out, why are you leaving? Don't you owe your teacher that much at least?"

She turned away, busying herself with something on her dresser. "C'mon, Skeeve," she said in a tone so low I could barely hear it. "You saw what happened downstairs."

"I saw you on the verge of making a major breakthrough in your lessons, if that's what you mean. If Markie hadn't come in, you would have had the candle lit in another few seconds."

"Big deal!"

She spun to face me, and I could see that she was trying not to cry. There seemed to be a lot of that going around.

"Excuse me, Skeeve, but big fat hairy deal. So I can light a candle. So what?! After years of study, Massha can light a candle . . . and a little girl can blow the end off the table without even trying! What does that make me? A magician? Ha ha! What a joke."

"Massha, I can't do what Markie did downstairs . . . or what she did in the Bazaar either, for that matter. I told you when you first approached me to be my apprentice exactly how little magic I knew. I'm still learning, though . . . and in the meantime we're still holding our own in the magic business . . . and that's here at the Bazaar. The Magic Capital of the dimensions."

That seemed to settle her a bit, but not much.

"Tell me honestly. Hot Stuff," she said, pursing her lips. "How good do you think I could ever be with magic ... really?"

"I don't know. I'd like to think that with work and practice you could be better than you are now, though. That's really all any of us can hope for."

"You may be right, Skeeve, and it's a good thought. The fact still remains that in the meantime, I'll always be small potatoes around here . . . magically, of course. The way things are going, I'm destined to be a hanger-on. A leech. You and Aahz are nice guys, and you'd never throw me out, but I can't think of one good reason why I should stay."

"lean."

My head came around so fast I was in momentary danger of whiplash. Framed in the doorway was ...

"TANANDA!"

"In the flesh," she said with a wink. "But that's not the subject here. Massha, I can't speak for long-term conditions but I've got one good reason why you shouldn't leave Just now. It's the same reason I'm not.

"What's that?"

"It involves the Great Skeeve here. C'mon downstairs. I m going to brief everybody at once at a war council. We've got a full-blown crisis on our hands "

Chapter Eleven:

"I believe we're under attack."
-COL. TRAVIS

ONE of the rooms in our extra-dimensional palace had a large oval table in it surrounded by chairs. When we moved in, we dubbed it the Conference Room, since there didn't seem to be any other practical use for it. We never used it for conferences, mind you, but it's always nice to have a conference room.

Tonight, however, it was packed to capacity. Apparently Tananda had rounded up the whole household, including Markie and Bunny, before locating Massha and me, and everyone was already seated as we walked in.

"Can we get started now?" Aahz asked caustically.

"I do have other things to do, you know."

"Really?" Chumley sneered. "Like what?"

"Like talking to the Geek about that invitation," my partner shot back.

"Without talking to your partner first?"

"I didn't say I was going to refuse or accept. I just want to talk to him about..."

"Can we table the argument for the moment?" I interrupted. "I want to hear what Tananda has to say."

"Thanks, Skeeve," she said, flashing me a quick smile before dropping back into her solemn manner. "I guess you all know I was moving out of here. Well, poking around the Bazaar, I heard a rumor that's changed my mind. If it's true, we're all going to have our hands full dealing with it."

She paused, but no one else said anything. For a change, we were all giving her our undivided attention.

"I guess I should drop the shoe first, then we can all go on from there. The talk on the street is that someone's hired the Ax to do a number on Skeeve."

There was a few heartbeats of silence; then the room exploded.

"Why should anyone..."

"Who's hired the Ax?"

"Where did you hear..."

"Hold it! HOLD IT!" Tananda shouted, holding up her hands for silence. "I can only answer one question at a time . . . but I'll warn you in advance, I don't have that many answers to start with."

"Who's hired him?" Aahz demanded, seizing first position.

"The way I heard it, a group of magicians here at the Bazaar is none too happy with Skeeve's success. They feel he's taking all the choice assignments these days . . . getting all the glory work. What they've done is pool their money so they can hire the Ax to do what they're all afraid to do themselves . . . namely, deal with Skeeve."

"Do you hear that, Chumley? Still think I'm being melodramatic?"

"Shut up, Aahz. Where'd you hear this, little sister?"

"Remember Vic? The little vampire that relocated here from Limbo? Well, he's opened his own magic practice here at the Bazaar. It seems that he was approached to contribute to the fund. He's new enough here that he didn't know any of them by name, but they claim to have the support of nearly a dozen of the smalltime magicians."

"Why didn't he warn us as soon as he heard?"

"He's trying to stay neutral. He didn't contribute, but he also didn't want to be the one to blow the whistle to Skeeve. The only reason he said anything to me was that he was afraid that anyone close to Skeeve might get caught in the crossfire. I must admit, he seems to have a rather exaggerated idea of how much Skeeve here can handle on his own."

"Can I ask a question?" I said grimly. "As the intended victim?"

"Sure, Skeeve. Ask away."

"Who's the Ax?"

At least half the heads at the table swiveled toward me while the faces attached to them dropped their jaws.

"You're kidding!"

"Don't you know who ..."

"Aahz, didn't you teach him any..."

"Whoa! Hold it!" I shouted over the clamor. "I can only take so much of this informative babbling at one time. Aahz! As my friend, partner, and sometimes mentor, could you deign to tell me in simple terms who the Ax is?"

"Nobody knows."

I closed my eyes and gave my head a small shake in an effort to clear my ears. After all this 'Gee, why don't you know that?' brouhaha, I could swear he said ...

"He's right, handsome," Tananda chimed in. "The Ax's real identity is one of the most closely guarded secrets in all the dimensions. That's why he's so effective at what he does."

"That may be true," I nodded. "But from the reaction in this room when you dropped the name, I'd guess that somebody knows something about him. Now, let me rephrase the question. If you don't know who the Ax is, could someone enlighten me as to what he is?"

"The Ax is the greatest Character Assassin in all the dimensions," Aahz said with a snarl. "He works freelance and charges fees that make ours look like pocket change. Once the Ax is on your tail, though, you might as well kiss it goodbye. He's ruined more careers than five stock-market crashes. Haven't you ever heard the expression 'take the ax to someone'? Well, that's where it comes from."

I felt that all-too-familiar "down elevator" sensation in my stomach.

"How does he do it?"

"It varies," my partner shrugged. "He tailor-makes his attack depending on the assignment. The only constant is that whatever you were when he started, you're not when he's done."

"I wish you'd quit saying 'you' all the time. I'm not dead yet."

"Sorry, partner. Figure of speech."

"Well, that's just swell!" Guido exploded. "How're Nunzio 'n' me supposed to guard the Boss when we don't know what's comin' at him?"

"You don't," Aahz shot back. "This is out of your category, Guido. We're talking about character assassination, not a physical attack. It's not in your job description."

"Izzat so!" Nunzio said in his squeaky voice. "Don Bruce says we should guard him. I don't remember him sayin' anything about physical or non-physical attacks. Right, Guido?"

"That's right! If the Boss has got someone after his scalp, guardin' him is our job ... if that's all right with you, MISTER Aahz!"

"I wouldn't trust you two to guard a fish head, much less my partner!" Aahz roared, surging to his feet.

"Stop it, Aahz!" Tananda ordered, kicking my partner's chair so that it cut his legs out from under him and plopped him back into his seat. "If we're up against the Ax, we're going to need all the help we can get. Let's stop bickering about the 'who' and concentrate on the 'how.' Okay? We're all scared, but that doesn't mean we should turn on each other when it's the Ax that's our target."

That cooled everybody down for the moment. There were a few glares and mutters exchanged, but at least the volume level dropped to where I could be heard.

"I think you're all overlooking something," I said quietly.

"What's that?" Tananda blinked.

"Aahz came close a minute ago. This is my problem . . . and it's not really in any of your job descriptions.

We're all friends, and there are business ties between Aahz and me, as well as Guido and Nunzio, but we're talking about reputations here. If I get hit, and everyone seems to be betting against me right now, anyone standing close to me is going to get mud splashed on them, too. It seems to me that the best course of action is for the rest of you to pull back, or, better still, for me to move out and present a solo target. That way, we're only running the risk of having one career ruined . . . mine. I got where I am by standing on your shoulders. If I can't maintain it on my own, well, maybe it wasn't much of a career to start with."

The whole room was staring at me as I lurched to a halt.

"You know, Skeeve old boy," Chumley said, clearing his throat, "As much as I like you, some times it's difficult to remember just how intelligent you are."

"I'll say," Tananda snarled. "That's about the dumbest. . . Wait a minute! Does this have anything to do with my leaving?"

"A bit," I admitted. "And Massha leaving and Aahz's talking about responsibility, and ..."

"Stop right there!" Aahz ordered, holding up his hand. "Let's talk about responsibility, partner. It's funny that I should have to lecture you about this, but there are all sorts of responsibilities. One of the ones that I've learned about from you is the responsibility to one's friends: helping them out when they're in trouble, and letting them help you in return. I haven't forgotten how you came into a strange dimension to bust me out of prison after I'd refused your help in the first place; or how you signed us on to play in the Big Game to bail Tananda out after she was caught thieving; or how you insisted that Don Bruce assign Guido and Nunzio here to you when they were in line for disciplinary action after botching their assignment for the Mob. I haven't forgotten it, and I'll bet they haven't either, even if you have. Now, I suggest you shut up about job descriptions and let your friends help you ... partner."

"A-bloody-men." Chumley nodded.

"You could have left me with the Geek for the slavers," Markie said thoughtfully, in a surprisingly adult voice.

"So, now that that's settled," my partner said, rubbing his hands together, "let's get to work. My buddy Guido here has raised a good point. How do we defend Skeeve when we don't know how or when the Ax will strike?"

We hadn't really settled it, and Aahz wasn't about to give me a chance to point it out. I was just as glad, though, since I really didn't know what to say.

"All we can do is be on the lookout for anyone or anything strange showing up." Tananda shrugged.

"Like a showdown match of dragon poker with the Sen-Sen Ante Kid," Chumley said, staring into the distance.

"What's that?"

"You missed it, little sister. It seems our boy Skeeve has drawn the attention of the king of dragon poker. He wants a head-to-head showdown match, and he wants it soon."

"Don't look at me like that, Chumley." Aahz grimaced. "I'm changing my vote. If we want to preserve Skeeve's reputation, there's no way he can refuse the challenge. Now I'm willing to admit it'll be money well spent."

"My daddy can beat anybody at dragon poker,"

Markie declared loyally.

"Your daddy can get his brains beaten out royally," my partner corrected gently. "I just hope we can teach him enough between now and game time that he can lose gracefully."

"I don't like it," Tananda growled. "It's too convenient. Somehow this game has the Ax's fingerprints all over it."

"You're probably right," Aahz sighed. "But there's not much else we can do except accept the challenge and try to make the best of a bad situation."

"Bite the bullet and play the cards we're dealt. Eh, Aahz?" I murmured.

I thought I had spoken quietly, but everyone around the table winced, including Markie. They might be loyal enough to risk their lives and careers defending me, but they weren't going to laugh at my jokes.

"Wait a minute!" Nunzio squeaked. "Do you think there's a chance that the Kid is actually the Ax?"

"Low probability," Bunny said, speaking for the first time in the meeting. "Someone like the Ax has to work a low profile. The Sen-Sen Ante Kid is too noticeable. If he were a character assassin, people would notice in no time flat. Besides, when he wins, nobody thinks it's because his opponents are disreputable . . . it's because the Kid is good. No, I figure the Ax has got to be like the purloined letter . . . he can hide in plain sight. Figure the last person you'd suspect, and you'll be getting close to his real identity."

The conversation swirled on around me, but I didn't listen very closely. For some reason, a thought had occurred to me while Bunny was talking. We had all been referring to the Ax as a "he," but if no one knew his real identity, he could just as easily be a "she." If anything, men were much less defensive and more inclined to brag about the details of their careers when they were with a woman.

Bunny was a woman. She had also appeared suddenly on our doorstep right around the time the Ax was supposed to be getting his assignment. We already knew that she was smarter than she let on . . . words like "purloined" didn't go with the vacant stare she so carefully cultivated. What better place for the Ax to strike from than the inside?

I decided that I should have a little chat with my moll as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

Chapter Twelve:

"No one should hide their true self behind a false face."

-L. CHANEY

IT was with a certain amount of trepidation that I approached Bunny's bedroom. In case you haven't noticed, my experience with women is rather limited . . . like to the fingers of one hand limited.

Tananda, Massha, Luanna, Queen Hemlock, and now Bunny were the only adult females I had ever had to deal with, and thus far my track record was less than glowing. I had a crush on Tananda for a while, but now she was more of a big sister to me. Massha was ... well, Massha. I guess if anything I saw her as a kid sister, someone to be protected and sometimes cuddled.

I've never really understood her open admiration of me, but it had stood firm through some of my most embarrassing mishaps and made it easy for me to confide in her. Even though I still thought of Luanna as my one true love, I had only spoken to her on four occasions, and after our last exchange I wasn't sure there would ever be a fifth meeting. The only relationship I had had with a woman which was more disastrous than my attempt at love was the one I had with Queen Hemlock. She might not shoot me on sight, but there was no doubt in anyone's mind that she would like to ... and she's the one who wanted to marry me!

Of course, none of the women I had dealt with so far was anything like Bunny, though whether this was good or bad I wasn't entirely sure. The fact still remained, however, that I was going to have to learn more about her, for two reasons: first, if she was going to be a resident of our household, I wanted to get a better fix on where she was coming from so I could treat her as something other than a mad aunt in the cellar; and second, if she was the Ax, the sooner I found out, the better. Unfortunately, the only way I could think of to obtain the necessary information was to talk to her.

I raised my hand, hesitated for a moment, then rapped on her door. It occurred to me that, even though I had never been in front of a firing squad, now I knew how it felt.

"Who is it?"

"It's Skeeve, Bunny. Have you got a minute?"

The door flew open and Bunny was there, grabbing my arm and pulling me inside. She was dressed in a slinky jumpsuit with the neck unlaced past her navel, which was a great relief to me. When I called on Queen Hemlock in her bedroom, she had received me in the altogether.

"Geez! It's good to see you. I was startin' to think you weren't ever comin' by!"

With a double-jointed shift of her hips she bumped the door shut, while her hands flew to the lacings in her outfit. So much for being relieved.

"If you just give me a second, hon, I'll be all set to go. You kinda caught me unprepared, and ..."

"Bunny, could you just knock it off for a while?"

Huh?"

For some reason the events of the last few days suddenly rested heavy on my shoulders, and I just wasn't in the mood for games.

She stared at me with eyes as big as a Pervect's bar bill, but her hands ceased their activity. "What's the matter, Skeevie? Don't you like me?"

"I really don't know. Bunny," I said heavily. "You've never really given me a chance, have you?"

She drew in a sharp breath and started to retort angrily. Then she hesitated and looked away suddenly, licking her lips nervously.

"I... I don't know what you mean. Didn't I come to your room and try to be friendly?"

"I think you do know what I mean," I pressed, sensing a weakening in her defenses. "Every time we see each other, you're hitting me in the face with your 'sex-kitten' routine. I never know whether to run or applaud, but neither action is particularly conducive to getting to know you."

"Don't knock it," she said. "It's a great little bit. It's gotten me this far, hasn't it? Besides, isn't that what men want from a girl?"

"I don't."

"Really?"

There was a none-too-gentle mockery in her voice.

She took a deep breath and pulled her shoulders back.

"So tell me, what does cross your mind when I do this?"

Regardless of what impression I may have left on you from my earlier exploits, I do think fast. Fast enough to censor my first three thoughts before answering.

"Mostly discomfort," I said truthfully. "It's impressive, all right, but I get the feeling I should do something about it and I'm not sure I'm up to it."

She smiled triumphantly and let her breath out, easing the tension across her chest and my mind. Of the two, I think my mind needed it more.

"You have just hit on the secret of the sex kittens. It's not that you don't like it. There's just too much of it for you to be sure you can handle it."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"Men like to brag and strut a lot, but they've got egos as brittle as spun glass. If a girl calls their bluff, comes at them like a seething volcano that can't be put out, men get scared. Instead of fanning a gentle feminine ember, they're faced with a forest fire, so they take their wind elsewhere. Oh, they keep us around to impress people. 'Look at the tigress I've tamed,' and all that. But when we're alone they usually keep their distance. I'll bet a moll sees less actual action than your average coed ... except our pay scale is a lot better."

That made me think. On the one hand, she had called my reaction pretty close. Her roaring come-on had scared me a bit... well, a lot. Still, there was the other hand.

"It sounds like you don't think very much of men," I observed.

"Hey! Don't get me wrong. They're a lot better than the alternatives. I just got a little sick of listening to the same old lines over and over and decided to turn the tables on 'em. That's all."

"That wasn't what I meant. A second ago you said 'That's what men want from a girl.' It may be true, and I won't try to argue the point. It's uncomfortably close to 'That's all men want from a girl,' though, and that I will argue."

She scowled thoughtfully and chewed her lower lip.

"I guess that is over-generalizing a bit," she admitted.

"Good." .

"It's more accurate to say 'That's all men want from a beautiful girl.'"

"Bunny..."

"No, you listen to me, Skeeve. This is one subject I've had a lot more experience at than you have. It's fine to talk about minds when you look like Massha. But when you grow up looking good like I did-no brag, just a statement of fact-it's one long string of men hitting on you. If they're interested in your mind, I'd say they need a crash course in anatomy!"

In the course of our friendship, I had had many long chats with Massha about what it meant to a woman to be less than attractive. However, this was the first time I had ever been made to realize that beauty might be something less than an asset.

"I don't recall 'hitting on you,' Bunny."

"Okay, okay. Maybe I have taken to counterpunching before someone else starts. There's been enough of a pattern that I think I'm justified in jumping to conclusions. As I recall, you were a little preoccupied when we met. How would you have reacted if we ran into each other casually in a bar?"

That wasn't difficult at all to imagine . . . unfortunately.

"Touche!" I acknowledged. "Let me just toss one thought at you, Bunny. Then I'll yield to your experience. The question of sex is going to hang in the air over any male-female encounter until it's resolved. I think it lingers from pre-civilization days when survival of the species hinged on propagation. It's strongest when encountering a member of the opposite sex one finds attractive . . . such as a beautiful woman, or, I believe the phrase is, a 'hunk.' Part of civilization, though I don't know how many other people think of it this way, is setting rules and laws to help settle that question quickly: siblings, parents, and people under age or married to someone else are off limits . . . well, usually, but you get my point. Theoretically, this allows people to spend less time sniffing at each other and more time getting on with other endeavors . . . like art or business. I'm not sure it's an improvement, mind you, but it has brought us a long way."

"That's an interesting theory, Skeeve," Bunny said thoughtfully. "Where'd you hear it?"

"I made it up," I admitted.

"I'll have to mull that one over for a while. Even if you're right, though, what does it prove?"

"Well, I guess I'm trying to say that I think you're focusing too much on the existence of the question.

Each time it comes up, resolve it and move on to other things. Specifically, I think we can resolve the question between us right now. As far as I'm concerned, the answer is no, or at least not for a long time. If we can agree on that, I'd like to move on to other things . . . like getting to know you better."

"I'd say that sounds like a pass, if you weren't saying 'no' in the same breath. Maybe I have been a little hypersensitive on the subject. Okay. Agreed. Let's try it as friends."

She stuck out her hand, and I shook it solemnly. In the back of my mind was a twinge of guilt. Now that I had gotten her to relax her guard, I was going to try to pump her for information.

"What would you like to know?"

"Well, except for the fact that you're smarter than you let on and that you're Don Bruce's niece, I really don't know much about you at all!"

"Whoops," she giggled, "You weren't even supposed to know about the niece part."

It was a much nicer giggle than her usual brain-jarring squeal.

"Let's start there, then. I understand your uncle doesn't approve of your career choice."

"You can say that again. He had a profession all picked out for me, put me through school and everything. The trouble was that he didn't bother to check with me. Frankly, I'd rather do anything else than what he had in mind."

"What was that?"

"He wanted me to be an accountant."

My mind flashed back to my old nemesis J. R. Grimble back at Possletum. Trying to picture Bunny in his place was more than my imagination could manage.

"Umm ... I suppose accounting is okay work. I can see why Don Bruce didn't want you to follow his footsteps into a life of crime."

Bunny cocked a skeptical eyebrow at me. "If you believe that, you don't know much about accounting."

"Whatever. It does occur to me that there are more choices for one's livelihood than being an accountant or being a moll."

"I don't want to set you off again," she smirked, "but my looks were working against me. Most legitimate businessmen were afraid that if they hired me their wives, or partners, or board of directors, or staff would think they were putting a mistress on the payroll. After a while I decided to go with the flow and go into a field where being attractive was a requirement instead of a handicap. If I'm guilty of anything, it's laziness."

"I don't know," I said, shaking my head. "I'll admit I don't think much of your career choice."

"Oh, yeah? Well, before you start sitting in moral judgment, let me tell you ..."

"Whoa! Time out!" I interrupted. "What I meant was there isn't much of a future in it. Nothing personal, but nobody stays young and good-looking forever. From what I hear, your job doesn't have much of a retirement plan."

"None of the Mob jobs do," she shrugged. "It pays the bills while I'm looking for something better."

Now we were getting somewhere.

"Speaking of the Mob, Bunny, I'll admit this Ax thing has me worried. Do you know off hand if the Mob ever handles character assassination? Maybe I could talk to someone and get some advice."

"I don't think they do. It's a little subtle for them. Still, I've never known Uncle Bruce to turn down any kind of work if the profit was high enough."

It occurred to me that that was a fairly evasive no answer. I decided to try again.

"Speaking of your uncle, do you have any idea why he picked you for this assignment?"

There was the barest pause before she answered.

"No, I don't."

I had survived the Geek's dragon poker game watching other people, and I'm fairly good at it. To me, that hesitation was a dead giveaway. Bunny knew why she was here, she just wasn't telling.

As if she had read my thoughts, a startled look came over her face.

"Hey! It just dawned on me. Do you think I'm the Ax? Believe me, Skeeve, I'm not. Really!"

She was very sincere and very believable. Of course, if I were the Ax, that's exactly what I would say and how I would say it.

Chapter Thirteen:

"Your Majesty should pay attention to his appearance."

-H.C. ANDERSON

THERE are many words to describe the next day's outing into the Bazaar. Unfortunately, none of them are 'calm', 'quiet', or 'relaxing'. Words like 'zoo', 'circus', and 'chaos' spring much more readily to mind.

It started before we even left our base... specifically, over whether or not we should go out at all.

Aahz and Massha maintained that we should go to ground until things blew over, on the theory that it would provide the fewest opportunities for the Ax to attack. Guido and Nunzio sided with them, adding their own colorful phrases to the proceedings. "Going to the mattresses" was one of their favorites, an expression which never ceased to conjure intriguing images to my mind. Like I told Bunny, I'm not totally pure.

Tananda and Chumley took the other side, arguing that the best defense is a solid offense. Staying inside, they argued, would only make us sitting ducks. The only sane thing to do would be to get out and try to determine just what the Ax was going to try. Markie and Bunny chimed in supporting the brother-sister team, though I suspect it was more from a desire to see more of the Bazaar.

After staying neutral and listening for over an hour while the two sides went at each other, I finally cast my vote ... in favor of going out. Strangely enough, my reasons aligned most closely with those of Bunny and Markie: while I was more than a little afraid of going out and being a moving target, I was ever more afraid of being cooped up inside with my own team while they got progressively more nervous and short-tempered with each other.

No sooner was that resolved than a new argument erupted, this time over who was going along. Obviously, everyone wanted to do. Just as obviously, if everybody did, we would look like exactly

what we were: a strike force looking for trouble. I somehow didn't think this would assist our efforts to preserve my reputation.

After another hour of name-calling, we came up with a compromise. We would all go. For discretion as well as strategic advantage, however, it was decided that part of the team would go in disguise. That is, in addition to making our party look smaller than it really was, it would also allow our teammates to watch from a short distance and, more important, listen to what was being said around us in the Bazaar. Aahz, Tananda, Chumley, Massha, and Nunzio would serve as our scouts and reserve, while Markie, Bunny, Guido, and I would act as the bait ... a role I liked less the more I thought about it.

Thus it was that we finally set out on our morning stroll... early in the afternoon.

On the surface the Bazaar was unchanged, but it didn't take long before I began to notice some subtle differences. I had gotten so used to maintaining disguise spells that I could keep our five colleagues incognito without it eating into my concentration . . . which was just as well, because there was a lot to concentrate on.

Apparently word of our last shopping venture had spread, and the reaction among the Deveel merchants to our appearance in the stalls was mixed and extreme.

Some of the displays closed abruptly as we approached, while others rushed to meet us. There were, of course, those who took a neutral stance, neither closing nor meeting us halfway, but rather watching us carefully as we looked over their wares. Wherever we went, however, I noticed a distinct lack of enthusiasm for the favorite Bazaar pastime of haggling. Prices were either declared firm or counteroffers stacked up with minimum verbiage. It seems that, while they still wanted our money, the Deveels weren't eager to prolong contact with us.

I wasn't sure exactly how to handle the situation. I could take advantage of their nervousness and drive some shameless bargains, or grit my teeth and pay more than I thought the items were worth. The trouble was that neither course would do much to improve my image in the eyes of the merchants or erase the memory of our last outing.

Of course, my life being what it is, there were distractions.

After our talk, Bunny had decided that we were friends and attacked her new role with the same enthusiasm she brought to playing the vamp. She still clung to my arm, mind you, and from a distance probably still looked like a moll. Her attention, however, was now centered on me instead of on herself.

Today she had decided to voice her opinion of my wardrobe.

"Really, Skeeve. We've got to get you some decent clothes."

She had somehow managed to get rid of her nasal voice as well as whatever it was she had always been chewing on. Maybe there was a connection there.

"What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

I had on what I considered to be one of my spiffier outfits. The stripes on the pants were two inches wide and alternated yellow and light green, while the tunic was a brilliant red and purple paisley number.

"I wouldn't know where to start," she said, wrinkling her nose. "Let's just say it's a bit on the garish side."

"You didn't say anything about my clothes before."

"Right. Before. As in 'before we decided to be friends.' Molls don't stay employed by telling their men how tacky they dress. Sometimes I think one of the qualifications for having a decorative lady on your arm is to have no or negative clothes sense."

"Of course, I don't have much firsthand knowledge, but aren't there a few molls who dress a little flamboyantly themselves?" I said archly.

"True. But I'll bet if you checked into it, they're wearing outfits their men bought for them to dress up in. When we went shopping, you let me do the selecting and just picked up the bill. A lot of men figure if they're paying the fare, they should have the final say as to what their baby-doll wears. Let's face it, molls have to pay attention to how they look because their jobs depend on it. A girl who dresses like a sack of potatoes doesn't find work as a moll."

"So you're saying I dress like a sack of potatoes?"

"If a sack looked like you, it would knock the eyes out of the potatoes."

I groaned my appreciation. Heck, if no one was going to laugh at my jokes, why should I laugh at theirs? Of course, I filed her comment away for future use if the occasion should arise.

"Seriously though, Skeeve, your problem is that you dress like a kid. You've got some nice pieces in your wardrobe, but nobody's bothered to show you how to wear them. Bright outfits are nice, but you've got to balance them. Wearing a pattern with a muted solid accents the pattern. Wearing a pattern with a pattern is trouble, unless you really know what you're doing.

More often than not, the patterns end up fighting each other . . . and if they're in two different colors you've got an all-out war. Your clothes should call attention to you, not to themselves."

Despite my indignation, I found myself being drawn into what she was saying. If there's one thing I've learned in my various adventures, it's that you take information where you find it.

"Let's see if I'm following you, Bunny. What you're saying is that just buying nice items, especially ones that catch my eye, isn't enough. I've got to watch how they go together ... try to build a coordinated total. Right?"

"That's part of it," she nodded. "But I think we'd better go back to step one for a moment if we're going to educate you right. First, you've got to decide on the image you want to project. Your clothes make a statement about you, but you've got to know what that statement should be. Now, bankers depend on people trusting them with their money, so they dress conservatively to give the impression of dependability. No one will give their money to a banker who looks like he spends his afternoons playing the ponies. At the other end of the scale, you have the professional entertainers.

They make their money getting people to look at them, so their outfits are usually flashy and flamboyant."

This was fascinating. Bunny wasn't telling me a thing I hadn't seen for myself, but she was defining patterns that hadn't registered on me before. Suddenly the whole clothes thing was starting to make sense.

"So what kind of image do I project?"

"Well, since you ask, right now you look like one of two things: either someone who's so rich and successful that he doesn't have to care what other people think, or like a kid who doesn't know how to dress. Here at the Bazaar, they know you're successful, so the merchants jump to the first conclusion and drag out every gaudy item they haven't been able to unload on anyone else and figure if they price it high enough, you'll go for it."

"A sucker or a fool," I murmured. "I don't really know what image I want, but it isn't either of those."

"Try this one on for size. You're a magician for hire, right? You want to look well off so your clients know you're good at what you do, but not so rich that they'll think you're overcharging them. You don't want to go too conservative, because in part they're buying into the mystique of magic, but if you go too flashy you'll look like a sideshow charlatan. In short, I think your best bet is to try for 'quiet power.' Someone who is apart from the workaday crowd, but who is so sure of himself that he doesn't have to openly try for attention."

"How do I look like that?"

"That's where Bunny comes in," she said with a wink. "If we're agreed on the end, I'll find the means. Follow me."

With that, she led me off into one of the most incredible shopping sprees I've ever taken part in. She insisted that I change into the first outfit we bought: a light blue open-necked shirt with cream-colored slacks and a matching neck scarf. Markie protested that she had liked the pretty clothes better, but as we made our way from stall to stall, I noticed a change in the manner of the proprietors. They still seemed a little nervous about our presence, but they were bringing out a completely different array of clothes for our examination, and several of them complimented me on what I was wearing ... something that had never happened before.

I must admit I was a little surprised at how much some of these "simple and quiet" items cost, but Bunny assured me that the fabric and the workmanship justified the price.

"I don't understand it," I quipped at one point. "I thought that accountants were all tightfisted, and here you are: the ultimate consumer."

"You don't see me reaching for my bankroll, do you?" she purred back. "Accountants can deal with necessary expenses, as long as it's someone else's money. Our main job is to get you maximum purchase power for your hard-earned cash."

And so it went. When I had time to think, it occurred to me that if Bunny was the Ax, she was working awfully hard to make me look good. I was still trying to figure out how this could fit into a diabolical plan when I felt a nudge at my elbow. Glancing around, I found Aahz standing next to me.

Now, when I throw my disguise spell, I still see the person as they normally are. That's why I started nervously before I remembered that to anyone else at the Bazaar he looked like a fellow shopper exchanging a few words.

"Nice outfit, partner," he said. "It looks like your little playmate is doing some serious work on your wardrobe."

"Thanks, Aahz. Do you really like it?"

"Sure. There is one little item you might add to your list before we head for home."

"What's that?"

"About five decks of cards. While he might be impressed by your new image, I think it'll make a bigger impact on the Kid if you spend a little time learning how to play dragon poker before you square off with him."

That popped my bubble in a hurry. Aahz was right.

Clothes and the Ax aside, there was one thing I was going to have to face up to soon, and that was a showdown with the best dragon poker player in all the dimensions.

Chapter Fourteen:

"Sometimes luck isn't enough."

-L. LUCIANO

"OGRE'S high, Skeeve. Your bet."

'Oh! Umm... I'll go ten."

"Bump you ten."

"Out."

"Twenty to me? I'll go twenty on top of that."

"Call."

By now, you should know that sound. That's right.

Dragon poker in full gallop. This time, however, it was a friendly game between Aahz, Tananda, Chumley, and me. Of course, I'm using the phrase "friendly" rather loosely here.

Aside from occasional shouting matches, I had never been in a fight with these three before. That is, when there had been trouble, we formed our circle with the horns out, not in. For the first time, I found myself on the opposite side of a conflict from my colleagues, and I wasn't enjoying it at all. Realizing this was just a game, and a practice game at that, I was suddenly very glad I didn't have to face any one of them in a real life-and-death situation.

The banter was still there, but there was an edge on it.

There was a cloud of tension over the table as the players focused on each other like circling predators. It had been there at the game at the Even-Odds, but then I was expecting it. One doesn't expect support or sympathy from total strangers in a card game. The trouble was that these three who were my closest friends were turning out to be total strangers when the chips were down .. if you'll pardon the expression.

"I think you're bluffing, big brother. Up another forty."

I gulped and pushed another stack of my diminishing pile of chips into the pot.

"Call."

"You got me," the troll shrugged. "Out."

"Well, Skeeve. That leaves you and me. I've got an elf-high flush."

She displayed her hand and looked at me expectantly.

I turned my hole cards over with what I hoped was a confident flourish.

Silence reigned as everyone bent forward to stare at my hand.

"Skeeve, this is garbage," Tananda said at last.

"Aahz folded a better hand than this without his hole cards. I had you beat on the board."

"What she's trying to say, partner," Aahz smirked, "is that you should have either folded or raised. Calling the bet when the cards she has showing beat your hand is just tossing away money."

"Okay, okay! I get the point."

"Do you? You've still got about fifty chips there. Are you sure you don't want to wait until you've lost those, too? Of maybe we should redivide the chips and start over ... again."

"Lighten up, Aahz," Tananda ordered. "Skeevie had a system that had worked for him before. Why shouldn't he want to try it out before being force-fed something new?"

What they were referring to was my original resistance to taking lessons in dragon poker. I had pretty much decided to handle the upcoming game the same way I had played the game at the Even-Odds rather than try to crash-learn the rules. After some discussion (read as: argument) it was agreed that we should play a demonstration game so that I could show my coaches how well my system worked.

Well, I showed them.

I could read Aahz pretty well, possibly because I knew him so intimately. Chumley and Tananda, though, threw me for a loop. I was unable to pick up any sort of giveaway clues in their speech or manner, nor could I manage to detect any apparent relationship between their betting and what they were holding. In a depressingly short period of time I had been cleaned out of my starting allotment of chips. Then we divvied the stacks up again and started over . . . with the same results. We were now closing in on the end of the third round, and I was ready to throw in the towel.

As much as I would have liked to tell myself that I was having a bad run of cards or that we had played too few hands to set the patterns, the horrible truth was that I was simply out-classed. I mean, usually I could spot if a player had a good hand. Then the question was "how good," or more specifically, if his was better than mine.

Of course, the same went for weak hands. I depended on being able to detect a player who was betting a hand that needed development or if he was simply betting that the other hand in the round would develop worse than his. In this "demonstration game," however, I was caught flatfooted again and again. Too many times a hand that I had figured for guts-nothing turned out to be a powerhouse.

To say the least, it was depressing. These were players who wouldn't dream of challenging the Sen-Sen Ante Kid themselves, and they were cleaning my clock without half trying.

"I know when I'm licked, Aahz," I said. "Even if it does take me a little longer than most. I'm ready to take those lessons you offered ... if you still think it will do any good."

"Sure it will, partner. At the very least, I don't think it can hurt your game, if tonight's been an accurate sample."

Trust a Pervect to know just what to say to cheer you up.

"Come on, Aahz old boy," Chumley interrupted.

"Skeeve here is doing the best he can. He's just trying to hang on in a bad situation . . . like we all do. Let's not make it any rougher for him. Hmmm?"

"I suppose you're right."

"And watch comments like that when Markie's around," Tananda put in. "She's got a bad case of hero-worship for her new daddy, and we need him as an authority figure to keep her in line."

"Speaking of Markie," my partner grimaced, peering around, "where is our portable disaster area?"

The tail end of our shopping expedition had not gone well. Markie's mood seemed to deteriorate as the day wore on. Twice we were saved from total disaster only by timely intervention by our spotters when she started to get particularly upset. Not wishing to push our luck, I called a halt to the excursion, which almost triggered another tantrum from my young ward. I wondered if other parents had ever had shopping trips cut short by a cranky child.

"She's off somewhere with Bunny and the bodyguards. I thought this session would be rough enough without the added distraction of Markie cheering for her daddy."

"Good call," Chumley said. "Well, enough chitchat.

Shall we have at it?"

"Right!" Aahz declared, rubbing his hands together as he leaned forward. "Now, the first thing we have to do is tighten up your better strategy. If you keep ..."

"Umm . . . Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself, Aahz?" Tananda interrupted.

"How so?"

"Don't you think it would be nice if we taught him the sequence of hands first? It's a lot easier to bet when you know whether or not your hand is any good."

"Oh. Yeah. Of course."

"Let me handle this part, Aahz," the troll volunteered. "Now then, Skeeve. The ascending sequence of hands is as follows:

High Card

One Pair

Two Pair

Three Of A Kind

Three Pair

Full House (Three Of A Kind plus a Pair)

Four Of A Kind

Flush

Straight (those last two are ranked higher and reversed because of the sixth card)

Full Belly (two sets of Three Of A Kind)

Full Dragon (Four Of a Kind plus a Pair)

Straight Flush

Have you got that?"

Half an hour later, I could almost get through the list without referring to my crib sheet. By that time, my teachers' enthusiasm was noticeably dimmed. I decided to push on to the next lesson before I lost them completely.

"Close enough," I declared. "I can bone up on these on my own time. Where do we go from here? How much should I bet on the hands?"

"Not so fast," Aahz said. "First, you've got to finish learning about the hands,"

"You mean there are more? I thought..."

"No. You've got all the hands ... or will have, with a little practice. Now you've got to learn about conditional modifiers."

"Conditional modifiers?" I echoed weakly.

"Sure. Without 'em, dragon poker would be just another straightforward game. Are you starting to see why I didn't want to take the time before to teach you?"

I nodded silently, staring at my list of card hands that I somehow had a feeling was about to become more complex.

"Cheer up, Skeeve," Chumley said gaily, clapping me on the shoulder. "This is going to be easier than if we were trying to teach you the whole game."

"It is?" I blinked, perking up slightly.

"Sure. You see, the conditional modifiers depend on certain variables, like the day of the week, the number of players, chair position, things like that. Now since this match is prearranged, we know what most of those variables will be. For example, there will only be the two of you playing, and as the challenged party you have your choice of chairs . . . pick the one facing south, incidentally."

"What my big brother is trying to say in his own clumsy way," Tananda interrupted by squeezing my arm softly, "is that you don't have to learn all the conditional modifiers. Just the ones that will be in effect for your game with the Kid."

"Oh. I get it. Thanks, Chumley. That makes me feel a lot better."

"Right-o. There can't be more than a dozen or two that will be pertinent."

The relief I had been feeling turned cold inside me.

"Two dozen conditional modifiers?"

"C'mon, big brother. There aren't that many."

"I was going to say I thought he was underestimating," Aahz grinned.

"Well, let's bloody well count them off and see."

"Red dragons will be wild on even-numbered hands...."

"... But unicorns will be wild all evening...."

"... The corps-a-corps hand will be invalid all night, that's why we didn't bother to list it, partner...."

"... Once a night, a player can change the suit of one of his up cards...."

"... Every five hands, the sequence of cards is reversed, so the low cards are high and vice-versa...."

"... Threes will be dead all night and treated as blank cards...."

"... And once a four-of-a-kind is played, that card value is also dead...."

"... Unless it's a wild card, then it simply ceases to be wild and can be played normally...."

"... If there's a ten showing in the first two face-up cards in each hand, then sevens will be dead...."

"... Unless there is a second ten showing, then it cancels the first...."

"... Of course, if the first card turned face up in a round is an Ogre, the round will be played with an extra hole card, four face up and five face down...."

"... A natural hand beats a hand of equal value built with wild cards...."

"Hey-that's not a conditional modifier. That's a regular rule."

"It will be in effect, won't it? Some of the conditional modifiers nullify standing rules, so I thought we should..."

"ARE YOU PUTTING ME ON?!!"

The conversation stopped on a dime as my coaches turned to stare at me.

"I mean, this is a joke. Right?"

"No, partner," Aahz said carefully. "This is what dragon poker is all about. Like Chumley said, just be thankful you're only playing one night and get to learn the abbreviated list."

"But how am I supposed to stand a chance in this game? I'm not even going to be able to remember all the rules."

An awkward silence came over the table.

"I ... uhh . . . think you've missed the point, Skeeve," Tananda said at last. "You don't stand a chance. The Kid is the best there is. There's no way you can learn enough in a few days or a few years to even give him a run for his money. All we're trying to do is teach you enough so that you won't embarrass yourself-as in ruin the reputation of the Great Skeeve-while he whittles away at your stake. You've got to at least look like you know what you're doing.

Otherwise you come across as a fool who doesn't know enough to know how little he knows."

I thought about that for a few.

"Doesn't that description actually fit me to a 'T'?"

"If so, let's keep it in the family. Okay?" my partner winked, punching me playfully on the shoulder. "Cheer up, Skeeve. In some ways it should be fun. There's nothing like competing in a game without the pressure to win to let you role-play to the hilt."

"Sure, Aahz."

"Okay, so let's get back to it. Just listen this time around. We'll go over it again slower later so you can write it all down."

With that, they launched into it again.

I listened with half an ear, all the while examining my feelings. I had gone into the first game at the Even-Odds expecting to lose, but I had been viewing that as a social evening. It was beyond my abilities to kid myself into believing this match with the Kid was going to be social.

As much as I respected the views of my advisors, I was having a lot of trouble accepting the idea that I would help my reputation by losing. They were right, though, that I couldn't gracefully refuse the challenge. If I didn't stand a chance of winning, then the only option left was to lose gracefully. Right?

Try as I might, though, I couldn't still a little voice in the back of my mind that kept telling me that the ideal solution would be to take the Kid to the cleaners. Of course, that was impossible. Right? Right?

Chapter Fifteen:

"I need all the friends I can get."
-QUASIMODO

WHILE my life may seem convoluted and depressing at times, at least there is one being who never turns from me in my hours of need.

"Gleep!"

I've never understood how a dragon's tongue can be slimy and sandpaper at the same time, but it is. Well, at least the one belonging to my dragon is.

"Down, fella . . . dow . . . hey! C'mon, Gleep. Stop it!"

"Gleep!" my pet declared as he deftly dodged my hands and left one more slimy trail across my face.

Obedient to a fault. They say you can judge a man's leadership ability by how well he handles animals.

"Darn it, Gleep! This is serious!"

I've often tried to convince Aahz that my dragon actually understands what I say. Whether that was the case here or if he was just sensitive to my tone, Gleep sank back on his haunches and cocked his head attentively.

"That's better," I sighed, daring to breathe through my nose again. Dragons have notoriously bad breath (hence the expression "dragon mouth"), and my pet's displays of affection had the unfortunate side effect of making me feel more than slightly faint. Of course, even breathing through my mouth, I could still taste it.

"You see, I've got a problem . . . well, several problems, and I thought maybe talking them out without being interrupted might..."

"Gleep!"

The tongue slicked out again, this time catching me with my mouth open. While I love my pet, there are times I wish he were . . . smaller. Times like this . . . and when I have to clean out his litter box.

"You want I should lean on the dragon for you, Boss?"

I looked around and discovered Nunzio sitting on one of the garden benches.

"Oh. Hi, Nunzio. What are you doing here? I thought you and Guido usually made yourself scarce when I was exercising Gleep."

"That's usually," the bodyguard shrugged. "My cousin and me, we talked it over and decided with this Ax fella on the loose that one of us should stick with you all the time, know what I mean? Right now it's my shift, and I'll be hangin' tight... no matter what you're doin'."

"I appreciate that, but I don't think there's any danger of getting hit here. I already decided not to take Gleep outside until the coast is clear. No sense tempting fate."

That was at least partially true. What I had really decided was that I didn't want to give the Ax a chance to strike at me through my pet. Aahz already complained enough about having a dragon in residence without adding fuel to the fire. Of course, if my suspicions were correct and Bunny was the Ax...

"Better safe than sorry ... and you didn't answer my question. You want I should lean on the dragon?"

Sometimes the logic of bodyguards eluded me completely.

"No. I mean, why should you lean on Gleep? You look comfortable where you are."

Nunzio rolled his eyes. "I don't mean 'lean on him' like really lean on him. I mean, do you want me to bend him a little? You know, rough him up some. I stay outta things between you and your partner, but you shouldn't have to put up with that kind of guff from a dragon."

"He's just being friendly."

"Friendly, schmendly. From what I've seen, you're in more danger from getting knocked off by your own pet than by anyone else I've seen at the Bazaar. All I've ever asked is that you let me do my job ... I am supposed to be guardin' your body, ya' know. That's how my position got its lofty title."

Not for the first time, I was impressed by Nunzio's total devotion to his work. For a moment I was tempted to let him do what he wanted. At the last minute, though, an image flashed through my mind of my outsized bodyguard and my dragon going at it hammer and tongs in the middle of the garden.

"Umm . . . thanks, but I think I'll pass, Nunzio. Gleep can be a pain sometimes, but I kind of like him jumping all over me once in a while. It makes me feel loved. Besides, I wouldn't want to see him get hurt. . . or you either, for that matter."

"Jumpin' up on you is one thing. Doin' it when you don't want him to is sompin' else. Besides, I wouldn't hurt him. I'd just... here, let me show you!"

Before I could stop him, he was on his feet, taking a straddle-legged stance facing my dragon.

"C'mere, Gleep. C'mon. fella."

My pet's head snapped around, then he went bounding toward what he thought was a new playmate.

"Nunzio. I..."

Just as the dragon reached him, my bodyguard held out a hand, palm outward.

"Stop, Gleep! Sit! I said SIT!!"

What happened next I had to reconstruct later from replaying my memory, it happened so fast.

Nunzio's hand snaked out and closed over Gleep's snout. With a jerk he pulled the nose down until it was under my pet's head, then pushed up sharply.

In mid-stride the dragon's haunches dropped into a sitting position and he stopped, all the while batting his eyelashes in bewilderment.

"Now stay. Stay!!"

My bodyguard carefully opened his hand and stepped back, holding his palm flat in front of my pet's face.

Gleep quivered slightly but didn't budge from his sitting position.

"See, Boss? He'll mind," Nunzio called over his shoulder. "Ya just gotta be firm with him."

I suddenly realized my jaw was dangling somewhere around my knees. "What... that's incredible, Nunzio!

How did you ... what did you ..."

"I guess you never knew," he grinned, "I used ta be an animal trainer . . . mostly the nasty ones for shows, know what I mean?"

"An animal trainer?"

"Yeah. It seemed like a logical extension of bein' a schoolteacher . . . only without the parents to worry about."

I had to sit down. Between the demonstration with Gleep and the sudden insight to his background, Nunzio had my brain on overload.

"An animal trainer and a schoolteacher."

"That's right. Say, you want I should work with your dragon some more now that he's quieted down?"

"No. Let him run for a while. This is supposed to be his exercise time."

"You're the Boss."

He turned toward Gleep and clapped his hands sharply. The dragon bounded backwards, then crouched close to the ground, ready to play.

"Get it, boy!"

Moving with surprising believability, the bodyguard scooped an imaginary ball from the ground and pretended to throw it to the far end of the garden.

Gleep spun around and sprinted off in the direction of the "throw," flattening a bench and two shrubs as he went.

"Simply amazing," I murmured.

"I didn't mean to butt in," Nunzio said, sinking into the seat beside me. "It just looked like you wanted to talk and your dragon wanted to frolic."

"It's all right. I'd rather talk to you, anyway."

I was moderately astounded to discover this was true.

I'd always been a bit of a loner, but lately it seemed I not only was able to talk to people, I enjoyed it. I hoped it wouldn't seriously change my friendship with Gleep.

"Me? Sure, Boss. What did you want to talk about?"

"Oh, nothing special. I guess I just realized we've never really talked, just the two of us. Tell me, how do you like our operation here?"

"It's okay, I guess. Never really thought about it much. It's not your run-of-the-mill Mob operation, that much is for sure. You got some strange people hangin' around you . . . but they're nice. I'd give my right arm for any one of them, they're so nice. That's different right there. Most outfits, everybody's tryin' to get ahead ... so they spend more time watchin' each other than they do scopin' the opposition. Here, everybody covers for each other instead of nudging the other guy out."

"Do you want to get ahead, Nunzio?"

"Yes and no, know what I mean? I don't want to be doin' the same thing the rest of my life, but I'm not pushy to get to the top. Actually, I kinda like workin' for someone else. I let them make the big decisions, then all I gotta do is figure out how to make my part happen."

"You certainly do your part around here," I nodded. "I never knew before how hard a bodyguard works."

"Really? Gee, it's good to hear you say that. Boss.

Sometimes Guido and me, we feel like dead weight around here. Maybe that's why we work so hard to do our jobs. I never thought much about whether I do or don't like it here. I mean, I go where I'm assigned and do what I'm told, so it doesn't matter what I think. Right? What I do know, though, is that I'd be real sorry if I had to leave. Nobody's ever treated me like you and your crew do."

Nunzio might not be an intellectual giant or the swiftest with I've known, but I found his simple honesty touching ... not to mention the loyalty it implied.

"Well, you've got a job here as long as I've got anything to say about it." I assured him.

"Thanks, Boss. I was startin' to get a little tired of how the Mob operates, know what I mean?" That rang a bell in my mind.

"Speaking of that, Nunzio, do you think the Mob would ever get involved with something like this character assassination thing?"

The bodyguard's brow furrowed with the effort of thinking.

"Naw!" he said at last. "Mostly people pay us not to do things. If we do have to do a number on someone, it's usually to make an example of them and we do something flashy like burn down their house or break their legs. Who would know it if we wrecked their career? What Tananda was sayin' about the Ax was interesting, but it's just not our style."

"Not even for the right price?" I urged. "How much do you think it would take to get Don Bruce to send someone in here after us?"

"I dunno. I'd have to say at least. . . wait a minute! Are you askin' if Bunny's the Ax?"

"Well, she did..."

"Forget it. Boss. Even if she could handle the job, which I'm not too sure she could, Don Bruce would never send her after you. Heck, you're one of his favorite chieftains right now. You should hear him ..."

Nunzio suddenly pressed his palms against his cheeks to make exaggerated jowls as he spoke. ". . . Dat Skeeve, he's really got it on the ball, know what I mean? Mercy! If I had a hundred like him I could take over dis whole organization."

His imitation of Don Bruce was so perfect I had to laugh.

"That's great, Nunzio. Has he ever seen you do that?"

"I'm still employed and breathin', aren't I?" he winked. "Seriously, though. You're barkin' up the wrong tree with Bunny. Believe me, you're the apple of her uncle's eye right now."

"I suppose you're right," I sighed. "If you are, though, it leaves me right back where I started. Who is the Ax and what can..."

"Hi guys! Is that a private conversation, or can anyone join?"

We glanced up to find Bunny and Markie entering the garden.

"C'mon over. Bunny!" I waved, nudging Nunzio slightly in the ribs. "We were just going to ..."

"GLEEP!!!"

Suddenly my dragon was in front of me. Crouching and tense, he didn't look playful at all. I had only seen him like this a couple of times before, and then ...

"STOP IT, GLEEP! GLEEP!!!" I screamed, realizing too late what was about to happen.

Fortunately, Nunzio was quicker than I was. From his sitting position he threw himself forward in a body check against my pet's neck, just as the dragon let loose with a stream of fire. The flames leapt forward to harmlessly scorch a wall.

Bunny swept Markie behind her with one arm.

"Geez! What was..."

"I'll get him!" Markie cried, balling up her fists.

"MARKIE!! STOP!!"

"But Daddy..."

"Just hold it. Okay? Nunzio?"

"I've got him, Boss," he called, both hands wrapped securely around Gleep's snout as the dragon struggled to get free.

"Bunny? You and Markie get inside! Now!!!"

The two of them hurried from sight, and I turned my attention to my pet.

Gleep seemed to have calmed down as fast as he had exploded, now that Bunny and Markie were gone. Nunzio was stroking her neck soothingly while staring at me in wide-eyed amazement.

"I dunno what happened there, Boss, but he seems okay now."

"What happened," I said grimly, "was Gleep trying to protect me from something or someone he saw as a threat."

"But Boss..."

"Look Nunzio, I know you mean well, but Gleep and I go back a long way. I trust his instincts more than I do my own judgment."

"But..."

"I want you to do two things right away. First, put Gleep back in his stable ... I think he's had enough exercise for one day. Then get word to Don Bruce. I want to have a little talk with him about his 'present!'"

Chapter Sixteen:

"I thought we were friends!"
-BANQUO

"I TELL you, partner, this is crazy!"

"Like heck it is!"

"Bunny can't be the Ax! She's a space cadet."

"That's what she'd like us to think. I found out different!"

"Really? How?"

"By ... well, by talking to her."

I spotted the flaw in my logic as soon as I said it, and Aahz wasn't far behind.

"Skeeve," he said solemnly, "has it occurred to you that if she's the Ax and you're her target, that you would probably be the last person she would relax around? Do you really think you could trick her into giving away her I. Q. in a simple conversation?"

"Well . . . maybe she was being clever. It could be that it was her way of trying to throw us off the track."

My partner didn't say anything to that. He just cocked his head and raised one eyebrow very high.

"It could be," I repeated lamely.

"C'mon, Skeeve. Give."

"What?"

"Even you need more evidence than that before you go off half-cocked. What are you holding back?"

He had me. I was just afraid that he was going to find my real reason even less believable than the one I had already stated.

"Okay," I said with a sigh. "If you really want to know, what finally convinced me was that Gleep doesn't like her."

"Gleep? You mean that stupid dragon of yours? That Gleep?"

"Gleep isn't st..."

"Partner, your dragon doesn't like me! That doesn't make me the Ax!!"

"He's never tried to fry you, either!"

That one stopped him for a moment. "He did that?

He really let fly at Bunny?"

"That's right. If Nunzio hadn't been there ..."

As if summoned by the mention of his name, the bodyguard stuck his head into the room.

"Hey, Boss! Don Bruce is here."

"Show him in."

"I still think you're making a mistake," Aahz warned, leaning against a wall.

"Maybe," I said grimly. "With luck I'll get Don Bruce to confirm my suspicions before I show my cards."

"This I've got to see."

"There you are, Skeeve. The boys said you wanted to see me."

Don Bruce is the Mob's fairy godfather. I've never seen him dressed in anything that wasn't lavender, and today was no exception. His ensemble included shorts, sandals, a floppy brimmed hat, and a sports shirt with large dark purple flowers printed all over it. Maybe my wardrobe sessions with Bunny were making me overly sensitive on the subject of clothes, but his attire hardly seemed appropriate for one of the most powerful men in the Mob.

Even his dark glasses had violet lenses.

"You know, this is quite a place you got here. Never been here before, but I heard a lot about it in the yearly report. It doesn't look this big from the outside."

"We like to keep a low profile," I said.

"Yeah, I know. It's like I keep tellin' 'em back at Mob Central, you run a class operation. I like that. Makes us all look good."

I was starting to feel a little uncomfortable. The last thing I wanted to discuss with Don Bruce was our current operation.

"Like some wine?" Aahz chimed in, coming to my rescue.

"It's a little early, but why not? So! What is it you wanted to see me about?"

"It's about Bunny."

"Bunny? Oh yeah. How's she workin' out?"

Even if I hadn't already been suspicious, Don Bruce's response would have seemed overly casual. Aahz caught it too, raising his eyebrow again as he poured the wine.

"I thought we should have a little chat about why you sent her here."

"What's to chat about? You needed a moll, and I figured. . ."

"I mean the real reason."

Our guest paused, glanced back and forth between Aahz and me a couple of times, then shrugged his shoulders. "She told you, huh? Funny, I would have thought that was one secret she would have kept."

"Actually, I figured it out all by myself. In fact, when the subject came up, she denied it."

"Always said you were smart, Skeeve. Now I see you're smart enough to get me to admit to what you couldn't trick out of Bunny. Pretty good."

I shot a triumphant glance at Aahz, who was suddenly very busy with the wine. Despite my feeling of victory over having puzzled out the identity of the Ax, I was still more than a little annoyed.

"What I can't figure out," I said, "is why you tried it in the first place. I've always played it pretty straight with you."

At least Don Bruce had the grace to look embarrassed. "I know, I know. It seemed like a good idea at the time, is all. I was in a bit of a spot, and it seemed like a harmless way out."

"Harmless? Harmless! That's my whole life and career we're talking about."

"Hey! C'mon, Skeeve. Aren't you exaggerating a little bit there! I don't think..."

"Exaggerating??"

"Well, I still think you'd make a good husband for her..."

"Exaggerating? Aahz, are you listening to..."

As I turned to appeal to my partner, I noticed he was laughing so hard he was spilling the wine. Of all the reactions I might have expected from him, laughing wasn't...

Then it hit me.

"Husband?!?!?"

"Of course. Isn't that what we've been talkin' about?"

"Skeev here thinks that your niece is the Ax and that you turned her loose on him to destroy his career," my partner managed between gasps.

"The Ax???"

"HUSBAND????"

"Are you crazy??"

"One of us is!!"

"How about both?" Aahz grinned, stepping between us. "Wine, anyone?"

"But he said..."

"What about..."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen. It's clear that communications have gotten a little fouled up between the two of you. I suggest you each take some wine and we'll start all over again from the top."

Almost mechanically, we both reached for the wine, eyeing each other all the while like angry cats.

"Very good," my partner nodded. "Now then, Don Bruce, as the visiting team I believe you have first serve."

"What's this about the Ax!?!!" the mobster demanded^ leaning forward so suddenly half the wine sloshed out of his glass.

"You know who the Ax is??"

"I know what he is! The question is, what does he have to do with you and Bunny?"

"We're heard recently that someone's hired the Ax to do a number on Skeev," Aahz supplied.

"... Right about the same time Bunny showed up," I added.

"And that's supposed to make her the Ax?"

"Well, there has been some trouble since she arrived."

"Like what?"

"Welll . . . Tananda left because of things that were said when she found out that Bunny was in my bedroom one morning."

"Tananda? The same Tananda that said 'Hi' to me when I walked in here today?"

"She... ummm ... came back."

"I see. What else?"

"She scared off my girlfriend."

"Girlfriend? You got a girlfriend?"

"Well, not exactly ... but I might have had one if Bunny wasn't here."

"Uh-huh. Aahz, haven't you ever told him the 'bird in the hand' story?"

"I try, but he isn't big on listening."

I can always count on my partner to rally to my defense in times of crisis.

"What else?"

"Ummm..."

"Tell him!" Aahz smiled.

"Tell me what?"

"My dragon doesn't like her."

"I'm not surprised. She's never gotten along with animals ... at least the four-footed kind. I don't see where that makes her the Ax, though."

"It's . . . it's just that on top of the other evidence ..."

My voice trailed off in front of Don Bruce's stony stare.

"You know, Skeeve," he said at last. "As much as I like you, there are times, like now, I wish you was on the other side of the law. If the D.A.s put together a case like you do, we could cut our bribe budget by ninety percent, and our attorney's fees by a hundred percent!"

"But..."

"Now listen close, 'cause I'm only goin' to go over this once. You're the representative for the Mob, and me, here at the Bazaar. If you look bad, then we look bad. Got it? What possible sense would it make for us to hire someone to make you, and us, look bad?"

On the ropes, I glanced at Aahz for support.

"That was going to be the next question I was going to ask, partner."

Terrific.

"Well," Don Bruce announced, standing up. "If that's settled, I guess I can go now."

"Not so fast," my partner smiled, holding up a hand.

"There's still the matter of the question that Skeeve asked: if Bunny isn't the Ax, what's she doing here? What was that you were saying about a husband?"

The mobster sank back into his chair and reached for his wine, all the while avoiding my eyes.

"I'm not gettin' any younger," he said. "Some day I'm goin' to retire, and I thought I should maybe start lookin' around for a replacement. It's always nice to have 'em in the family ... the real family, I mean, and since I got an unmarried niece ..."

"Whoa! Wait a minute," Aahz interrupted. "Are you saying that you're considering Skeeve as your eventual replacement in the Mob?"

"It's a possibility. Why not? Like I said, he runs a class operation and he's smart ... at least I used to think so."

"Don Bruce I ... I don't know what to say," I said honestly.

"Then don't say nothin'!" he responded grimly.

"Whatever's goin' to happen is a long way off. That's why I didn't say anything to you direct. I'm not ready to retire yet."

"Oh." I didn't know whether to feel disappointment or relief.

"About Bunny?" my partner prompted.

The mobster shrugged. "What's to say that hasn't already been said? She's my niece, he's one of my favorite chieftains. I thought it would be a good idea to put 'em close to each other and see if anything happened."

"I ... I don't know," I said thoughtfully. "I mean, Bunny's nice enough ... especially now that I know she isn't the Ax. I just don't think I'm ready to get married yet."

"Didn't say you were," Don Bruce shrugged. "Don't get me wrong, Skeeve. I'm not tryin' to push you into this. I know it'll take time. Like I said, I just fixed it so you two could meet and see if anything develops ... that's all. If it works out, fine. If it doesn't, also fine. I'm not about to try to

force things or kid myself that you two will make a pair if you won't. If nothing else, you've got a pretty good accountant while you find out . . . and from lookin' over your financial figures you could use one."

"Izzatso?"

He had finally tweaked Aahz close to home ... or his wallet, which in his case is the same thing.

"What's wrong with our finances? We're doing okay."

"Okay isn't soarin'. You boys got no plan. The way I see it, you've spent so much time livin' hand-to-mouth you've never learned what to do with money except stack it and spend it. Bunny can show you how to make your money work for you."

Aahz rubbed his chin thoughtfully. It was interesting to see my partner caught between pride and greed.

"I dunno," he said at last. "It sounds good, and we'll probably look into it eventually, but we're a little tight right now."

"The way I hear it, you're tight all the time," Don Bruce commented dryly.

"No. I mean right now we're really tight for finances.

We've got a lot of capital tied up in the big game tonight."

"Big game? What big game?"

"Skeev is going head to head with the Sen-Sen Ante Kid at dragon poker tonight. It's a challenge match."

"That's why I wanted to talk to you about Bunny," I said. "Since I thought she was the Ax, I didn't want her around to cause trouble at the game."

"Why didn't anyone tell me about this game?" Don Bruce demanded. "It wasn't in your report!"

"It's come up since then."

"What are the stakes?"

I looked at Aahz. I had been so busy trying to learn how dragon poker was played that I had never gotten around to asking about the stakes.

For some reason, my partner suddenly looked uncomfortable.

"Table stakes," he said.

"Table stakes?" I frowned. "What's that?"

I half-expected him to tell me he'd explain later, but instead he addressed the subject with surprising enthusiasm.

"In a table stakes game, each of you starts with a certain amount of money. Then you play until one of you is out of chips, or..."

"I know what table stakes are," Don Bruce interrupted. "What I want to know is how much you're playing for."

Aahz hesitated, then shrugged. "A quarter of a million each."

"A QUARTER OF A MILLION???"

I hadn't hit that note since my voice changed.

"Didn't you know?" the mobster scowled.

"We hadn't told him," my partner sighed. "I was afraid that if he knew what the stakes were, he'd clutch. We were just going to give him the stack of chips to play without telling him how much they were worth."

"A quarter of a million?" I repeated, a little hoarser this time.

"See?" Aahz grinned. "You're clutching."

"But, Aahz, do we have a quarter of a million to spare?"

My partner's grin faded and he started avoiding my eyes.

"I can answer that one, Skeeve," Don Bruce said.

"No one has a quarter of a million to spare. Even if you've got it, you don't have it to spare, know what I mean?"

"It's not going to take all our money," Aahz said slowly. "The others have chipped in out of their savings, too: Tananda, Chumley, Massha, even Guido and Nunzio. We've all got a piece of the action."

"Us too," the mobster declared. "Put the Mob down for half."

I'm not sure who was more surprised, Aahz or me.

But Aahz recovered first.

"That's nice of you, Don Bruce, but you don't understand what's really happening here. Skeeve here is a rank beginner at the game. He had one lucky night, and by the time the rumor mill got through with it, he had drawn a challenge from the Kid. He can't refuse without looking foolish, and with the Ax on the loose we can't afford any bad press we can avoid. That's why we're pooling our money, so Skeeve can go in there and lose gracefully. The actual outcome is preordained. The Kid's going to eat him alive."

"... And maybe you weren't listening earlier," the mobster shot back. "If Skeeve looks bad, we look bad."

The Mob backs its people, especially when it comes to public image. Win or lose, we're in for half, okay?"

"If you say so," Aahz shrugged.

"... And try to save me a couple seats. I'm gonna want to see my boy in action-firsthand."

"It'll cost!"

"Did I ask? Just... "

I wasn't really listening to the conversation any more.

I hadn't realized before just how solidly my friends were behind me.

A quarter of a million ...

Right then something solidified in my mind that had been hovering there for several days now. Whatever the others thought, I was going to try my best to win this game!

Chapter Seventeen:

"Shut up and deal!"

-F.D.R.

THERE was an aura of expectation over the Bazaar that night as we set out for the Even-Odds. At first I thought I was just seeing things differently because of my anticipation and nervousness. As we walked, however, it became more and more apparent that it was not simply my imagination.

Not a single vendor or shop shill approached us, not a Deveel hailed us with a proposed bargain. On the contrary, as we proceeded along the aisles, conversation and business ground to a halt as everyone turned to watch us pass. A few called out their wishes of "good luck" or friendly gibes about seeing me after the game, but for the most part they simply stared in silent fascination.

If I had ever had any doubts as to the existence or extent of the rumor mill and grapevine at the Bazaar, that night put them to rest forever. Everybody and I mean everybody knew who I was, where I was going, and what was waiting for me.

In some ways it was fun. I've noted earlier that I generally kept a low profile in the immediate neighborhood and have gotten used to walking around unnoticed. My recent shopping trips had gained me a certain notoriety, but it was nothing compared to this. Tonight, I was a full-blown celebrity! Realizing the uncertainty of the game's outcome, I decided to seize the moment and play my part to the hilt.

To a certain degree it was easy. We already made quite a procession. Guido and Nunzio were decked out in their working clothes of trench coats and weapons and preceded us, clearing a path through the gawkers.

Tananda and Chumley brought up the rear looking positively grim as they eyeballed anyone who seemed to be edging too close. Aahz was walking just ahead of me, carrying our stake money in two large bags. If anyone entertained the thought of intercepting us for the money, all they had to do was look at Aahz's swagger and the gleam in his yellow eyes, and they would suddenly decide there were easier ways to get rich . . . like wrestling dragons or panning for gold in a swamp.

We had left Markie back at our place over her loud and indignant protests. I had stood firm, though. This game was going to be rough enough without having her around as a distraction. Massha had volunteered to stay with her, claiming she was far too nervous about the game to enjoy watching it anyway.

Bunny was decked out in a clinging outfit in brilliant white and hung on my arm like I was the most important thing in her life. More than a few envious eyes darted from her to me and back again.

No one was kidding anyone, though, as to who the center of attention was. You guessed it. Me! After all, I was the one on my way to lock horns with the legendary Sen-Sen Ante Kid on his own terrain . . . a card table.

Bunny had chosen my clothes for me, and I was resplendent in a dark maroon open-necked shirt with light charcoal gray slacks and vest. I felt and looked like a million . . . well, make that a quarter of a million. If I was going to have my head handed to me tonight, I was at least going to be able to accept it in style . . . which was the whole point of this exercise anyway.

I didn't even try to match Aahz's strut, knowing I would only suffer by comparison. Instead, I contented myself with maintaining a slow, measured, dignified pace as I nodded and waved at the well-wishers. The idea was to exude unhurried confidence. In actuality, it made me feel like I was on the way to the gallows, but I did my best to hide it and keep smiling.

The crowds got progressively thicker as we neared the Even-Odds, and I realized with some astonishment that this was because of the game. Those without the clout or the money to get space

inside were loitering around the area in hopes of being one of the first to hear about the game's outcome. I had known that gambling was big at the Bazaar, but I never thought it was this popular.

The assemblage melted away before us, clearing a path to the door. I began to recognize faces in the crowd, people I knew. There was Gus waving enthusiastically at me, and over there...

"Vic!"

I veered from our straight line and the whole procession ground to a halt.

"Hi, Skeeve!" the vampire smiled, clapping me on the shoulder. "Good luck tonight!"

"I'm going to need it!" I confided. "Seriously, though, I've been meaning to stop by and thank you for your warning about the Ax."

Vic's face fell. "You might have trouble finding me.

I'm about to lose my office."

"Really? Is business that bad?"

"Worse. There's an awful lot of competition here."

"Well, tell you what. Why don't you stop by my place tomorrow and we'll talk. Maybe we can work out a small loan or maybe even subcontract some assignments until you're established."

"Gee. Thanks, Skeeve!"

A sudden inspiration hit me. "Come by around noon. We'll do lunch!"

It seemed like a really good idea to me. I wondered why businessmen hadn't thought of talking out ideas over lunch before! For some reason. Vic winced before returning my smile.

"Lunch it is," he said.

"Umm ... I hate to interrupt, partner, but you do have an appointment you're supposed to be at."

"Right, Aahz. Vic! Tomorrow!"

With that, I allowed myself to be ushered into the Even-Odds.

A ripple of applause broke out as I entered the main bar and gaming room, and I barely caught myself from turning to look behind me. For me or against me, the people were here to watch the game and if nothing else were grateful to me for providing the evening's entertainment.

Terrific. I was about to risk a quarter of a million in gold so that folks wouldn't have to watch summer reruns.

The club had been rearranged since the last time I was there. One card table stood alone in the center of the room, while scores of people lined the walls. While the crowd outside might have been larger, the group inside the club made up with clout what they lacked in numbers. While I didn't begin to recognize everyone, the ones I did spot led me to believe that the 'Who's Who' of Deva was assembled to watch the game. Hayner, my landlord and leader of the Devan Chamber of Commerce was there along with his usual clutch of cronies. He nodded politely when our eyes met, but I suspected he was really hoping to see me lose.

Don Bruce was there as promised, and raised his hands over his head, clenched them together, and gave them a brief shake, smiling all the while. I guessed it was some sign of encouragement. At the very least, I hoped I wasn't being hailed with some secret Mob death sign. Of course, that didn't occur to me until after I had waved back.

"Skeeve. SKEEVE! Have you got a moment?"

I glanced around to find the Geek standing at my elbow.

"Sure, Geek," I shrugged. "What can I do for you?"

The Deveil seemed extremely nervous, his complexion several shades off its normal hue. "I ... you can promise not to hold a grudge. I promise you that tonight was none of my doing. All I did was make the arrangements after the Kid issued the challenge. I didn't give him your name... honest."

To say the least, I found his attitude surprising.

"Sure, Geek. I never thought you ..."

"If I had known it would lead to this, I never would have invited you to my game in the first place, much less..."

I was suddenly very alert.

"Wait a minute. Geek! What are you talking about? "

"You're out-classed!" the Deveil explained, glancing around fearfully. "You don't stand a chance against the Kid. I just want you to understand, if you lose all your money tonight, that I didn't mean to set you up. I don't want you or your crew looking for me with blood in your respective eyes."

Now, as you know, I knew that I was out-classed. What intrigued me was that the Geek knew it, too. "Geek, I think we'd better..."

A loud burst of applause and cheers interrupted me.

By the time I got through craning my neck to see what was going on, the Geek had disappeared into the crowd.

With that discussion closed, I turned my attention again to the subject at hand.

"Who's that?" I said, nodding toward the figure that had just entered the club.

Aahz slid a comforting arm around my shoulders.

"That's him. That's the Sen-Sen Ante Kid."

"THAT'S the Kid????!!!"

The man in the door was enormous, he was huge . . . that is to say, he was Massha's size. For some reason, I had been expecting someone closer to my own age. This character, though, was something else.

He was totally hairless, no beard, no eyebrows, and completely bald. His skin was light blue in color, and that combined with his fat and wrinkles gave the overall impression of a half-deflated blue bowling ball. His eyes were extremely dark, however, and glittered slightly as they fixed on me.

"That's the Kid?" I repeated.

Aahz shrugged. "He's had the title for a long time."

The man-mountain had two bags with him which looked very similar to the ones Aahz had carried for us.

He handed them casually to one of the onlookers.

"Cash me in!" he ordered in a booming voice. "I hear there's a game here tonight."

For some reason, this brought a loud round of laughter and applause from the audience. I didn't think it was all that funny, but I smiled politely. The Kid's eyes noted my lack of enthusiasm and glittered with increased ferocity.

"You must be the Great Skeeve."

His voice was a dangerous purr, but it still reverberated off the walls. He moved toward me with a surprisingly light tread, holding out his hand in welcome.

The crowd seemed to hold its breath.

"... And you must be the one they call the Sen-Sen Ante Kid." I responded, abandoning my hand into his grip.

Again I was surprised . . . this time by the gentleness of his handshake.

"I just hope your magic isn't as good as your reputation."

"That's funny, I was just hoping your luck is as bad as your jokes."

I didn't mean to be offensive. The words just kind of slipped out before I could stop them.

The Kid's face froze.

I wished someone else would say something to change the subject, but the room echoed with deathly quiet.

Suddenly, my opponent threw his head back and laughed heartily. "I like that!" he declared. "You know, no one else has ever had the nerve to tell me my jokes stink. I'm starting to see where you had the guts to accept my little challenge."

The room came to life, everybody talking or laughing at the same time. I felt like I had just passed some kind of initiation ritual. A wave of relief broke over me ... but it was tinged with something else. I found myself liking the Kid. Young or not, he was definitely not the boogey-man I had been expecting.

"Thanks, Kid," I said quietly, taking advantage of the cover noise. "I must admit, I appreciate someone else who can laugh at themselves. I have to do it so often myself."

"Ain't that the truth," he murmured back, glancing around to be sure no one else was listening in. "If you let it, all this stuff can go to your head. Say, would you like a drink or something before we get started?"

"That confident I'm not," I laughed. "I want to have a clear head when we square off."

"Suit yourself," he shrugged.

Before I could say anything else, he turned to the crowd and raised his voice again. "Can you keep it down?" he roared. "We're ready to play cards up here!"

Like magic, the noise stopped and all eyes turned to the two of us again.

I found myself wishing I had accepted the drink.

Chapter Eighteen:

"Cast your fate to the winds."

-L.BERNSTEIN

THE table was waiting for us. There were only two chairs with chips stacked neatly in front of them.

I had a sudden moment of panic when I realized I didn't know which chair was facing south, but Aahz came to my rescue. Darting out of the crowd, he pulled out one chair and held it for me to sit in. To the crowd it looked like a polite gesture, but my friends knew I had come dangerously close to changing the rules I had labored so hard to memorize.

"Cards!" the Kid ordered, holding out one hand as he eased into the chair facing me.

A new deck materialized in his hand. He examined it like a glass of fine wine, holding it up to the light to be sure the wrapping was intact and even sniffing the seal to be sure the factory glue was the same.

Satisfied, he offered the deck to me. I smiled and spread my hands to show I was satisfied. I mean, heck!

If he hadn't found anything wrong, it was a cinch that I wouldn't be able to detect any foul play.

The gesture seemed to impress him though, and he gave me a small bow before opening the deck. Once the cards were out of the box, his pudgy fingers seemed to take on a life of their own. Moving swiftly, they removed the jokers and cast them aside, then began peeling cards off the deck two at a time, one from the top and one from the bottom.

Watching the process, I began to realize why his handshake had been so gentle. Large as they were, these fingers were graceful, delicate, and sensitive as they went about their task. These were not the hands of a rough laborer, or even a fighter. They existed to do one thing: to handle a deck of cards.

By now the deck had been rough mixed. The Kid scooped up the pile, squared it, then gave it several quick shuffles. His moves were so precise he didn't even have to re-square the deck when he was done... just set it on the center of the table.

"Cut for deal?" he asked.

I repeated my earlier gesture. "Be my guest."

Even this seemed to impress the Kid . . . and the crowd. A low murmur rippled around the room as the pluses and minuses of my move were discussed. The truth of the matter was that after watching the Kid handle the deck, I was embarrassed to show my own lack of skill.

He reached for the deck, and the cards sprang to life again. With a hypnotic rhythm he began cutting the deck and riffing the cards together, all the while staring at me with unblinking eyes. I knew I was being psychéd out, but was powerless to fight the effect.

"For the ante, shall we say one thousand?"

"Let's say five thousand." I returned.

The rhythm faltered. The Kid realized he had slipped and moved swiftly to cover it. Setting the cards aside for a moment, he reached for his chips.

"Five thousand it is," he said, tossing a handful into the center of the table. "And ... my trademark."

A small white breath mint followed the chips into the pot.

I was counting out my own chips when something occurred to me.

"How much is that worth?" I said, pointing at the mint.

That surprised my opponent.

"What? The mint? One copper a roll. But you don't have to..."

Before he had finished speaking I added a small coin to my chips, pushed them into the center of the table, grabbed his mint, and popped it into my mouth.

This time the audience actually gasped before lapsing into silence. For several heartbeats there was no sound in the room except the mint crunching between my teeth. I almost regretted my bold move. The mint was incredibly strong.

Finally the Kid grinned.

"I see. You eat my luck, eh? Good. Very good. You'll find, though, that it takes more than that to disturb my game."

His tone was jovial, but his eyes darkened even more than they had been and his shuffling took on a sharper, more vengeful tone. I knew I had scored a hit.

I stole a glance at Aahz, who winked at me broadly.

"Cut!"

The deck was in front of me. Moving with forced nonchalance, I cut the deck roughly in half, then leaned back in my chair. While I tried to appear casual, inside I was crossing my fingers and toes and everything else crossable. I had devised my strategy on my own and hadn't discussed it with anyone ... not even Aahz. Now we got to see how it worked.

One card . . . two cards . . . three cards came gliding across the table to me, face down. They slid to a stop neatly aligned, another tribute to the Kid's skill, and lay there like land mines.

I ignored them, waiting for the next card.

It came, coasting to a stop face up next to its brethren. It was the seven of diamonds and the Kid dealt himself. . .

The ten of diamonds. A ten!

The rules came back to me like a song I didn't want to remember. A ten face up meant my seven was dead ... valueless.

"So much for eating my luck, eh?" the Kid chuckled, taking a quick glance at his hole cards. "My ten will go ... five thousand."

"...And up five."

The gasp from the crowd was louder this time . . . possibly because my coaches had joined in. I heard Aahz clear his throat noisily, but wouldn't look in his direction. The Kid was staring at me in undisguised surprise. Apparently he had either expected me to fold or call. . . possibly because that would have been the sane thing to do.

"You're awfully proud of that dead card," he said thoughtfully. "All right. I'll call. Pot's right."

Two more cards floated onto the table face up. I got a ten! The ten of clubs, to be specific. That canceled his ten and made my seven live again.

The Kid got the unicorn of hearts. Wild card! Now I had ten-seven high against his pair of tens showing.

Terrific.

"I won't try to kid you." My opponent smiled. "A pair of tens is worth ... twenty thousand."

"... And up twenty."

The Kid's smile faded. His eyes flicked quickly to my cards, then he nodded. "Call."

No comment. No witty banter. I had him thinking.

The next cards were en route. The three of hearts slid into my lineup. A dead card. Opposing it, the Kid got...

The ten of hearts!

I was now looking at three tens against my ten-seven high! For a moment my resolve wavered, but I shored it up again. I was in too far to change now.

The Kid was eyeing me thoughtfully. "I don't suppose you'd go thirty on that?" he said.

"I'll not only go it, I'll raise you thirty."

There were muffled exclamations of disbelief in the room . . . and some not so muffled. I recognized the voices of some of the latter.

The Kid just shook his head and pushed the appropriate number of chips into the pot without a word.

The crowd lapsed into silence and craned their necks to see the next cards.

The dragon of spades to me, and the ogre of hearts to the Kid.

No apparent help for either hand . . . except that now the Kid had three hearts face up.

We both studied each other's cards for a few moments.

"I'll admit I can't figure out what you're betting, Skeeve," my opponent sighed. "But this hand's worth fifty."

"...And up fifty."

Instead of responding, the Kid leaned back in his chair and stared at me.

"Check me on this," he said. "Either I've missed it completely, or you haven't looked at your hole cards yet."

"That's right."

The crowd started muttering again. At least some of them had missed that point.

"So you're betting blind?"

"Right."

"... And raising into me to boot."

I nodded.

"I don't get it. How do you expect to win?"

I regarded him for a moment before I answered. To say the least, I had the room's undivided attention.

"Kid, you're the best there is at dragon poker. You've spent years honing your skills to be the best, and nothing that happens here tonight is going to change that. Me, I'm lucky ... if you can call it that. I got lucky one night, and that somehow earned me the chance to play this game with you tonight. That's why I'm betting the way I am."

The Kid shook his head. "Maybe I'm slow, but I still don't get it."

"In the long run, your skill would beat my luck. It always does. I figure the only chance I've got is to juice the betting on this one hand ... go for broke. All the skill in the dimensions can't change the outcome of one hand. That's luck . . . which puts us on an equal footing."

My opponent digested this for a few moments, then threw back his head and gave a bark of laughter.

"I love it!" he crowed. "A half million pot riding on one hand. Skeeve, I like your style. Win or lose, it's been a pleasure matching wits with you."

"Thank you. Kid. I feel the same way."

"In the meantime, there's this hand to play. I hate to keep all these people hanging in suspense when we already know how the betting's going to go."

He swept the rest of his chips into the pot. "I'll call your raise and raise you back . . . thirty-five. That's the whole stake,"

"Agreed," I said, pushing my chips out.

"Now let's see what we got," he winked, reaching for the deck.

The two of diamonds to me ... the eight of clubs to the Kid ... then one more card each face down.

The crowd pressed forward as my opponent peered at his last card.

"Skeeve," he said almost regretfully. "You had an interesting strategy there, but my hand's good . . . real good."

He flipped two of his down cards over.

"Full Dragon ... four Ogres and a pair of tens."

"Nice hand," I acknowledged.

"Yeah. Right. Now let's see what you've got."

With as much poise as I could muster, I turned over my hole cards.

Chapter Nineteen:

"Can't you take a joke?"
-T. EULENSPIEGEL

MASSHA looked up from her book and bon-bons as we trooped through the door.

"That was quick," she said. "How did it go?"

"Hi, Massha. Where's Markie?"

"Upstairs in her room. After the second time she tried to sneak out, I sent her to bed and took up sentry duty here by the door. What happened at the game?"

"Well, I still say you were wrong," Aahz growled.

"Of all the dumb stunts you've pulled ..."

"C'mon, partner. What's done is done. Okay?"

You're just mad because I didn't check with you first."

"That's the least of..."

"WILL SOMEBODY TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED?"

"What? Oh. Sorry, Massha. I won. Aahz here is upset because..."

I was suddenly swept up in a gargantuan hug and kiss as my apprentice expressed her delight at the news.

"I'll say he won. In one hand he won," Tananda grinned. "Never seen anything like it."

"Three unicorns and the six of clubs in the hole,"

Aahz raged. "Three wild cards, which, when used with the once-a-night suit shift rule on the seven of diamonds, yields..."

"A straight-bloody-flush!" Chumley sang. "Which took the Kid's Full Dragon and the largest pot that's ever been seen at the Bazaar."

"I knew you could do it, Daddy!" Markie shrieked, emerging from her hiding spot on the stairs.

So much for sending her to bed early.

"I wish you could have seen the Kid's face, Massha," the troll continued merrily. "I'll bet he wishes now that he carries antacids instead of breath mints."

"You should have seen the crowd. They're going to be talking about this one for years!"

Massha finally let me down and held up a hand.

"Hold it! Wait a minute! I get the feeling I've missed a lap here somewhere. Hot Stuff here won. Right? As in walked away with all the marbles?"

The brother and sister team nodded vigorously. I just tried to get my breath back.

"So how come Green and Scaly is breathing smoke? I should think he'd be leading the cheering."

"BECAUSE HE GAVE THE MONEY AWAY! THAT'S WHY!!!"

"Yes. That would explain it." Massha nodded thoughtfully.

"C'mon, Aahz! I didn't give it away."

As I've discovered before, it's a lot easier to find your breath when you're under attack.

"Whoa! Wait!" my apprentice said, stepping between us. "Before you two get started again, talk to Massha. Remember, I'm the one who wasn't there."

"Well, the Kid and I got to talking after the game.

He's really a nice guy, and I found out that he had pretty much been betting everything he had ..."

"That's what he claimed," Aahz snorted. "I think he was making a play for our sympathies."

"... and I got to thinking. I had worked hard to be sure that both the Kid's and my reputations would be intact, no matter how the game came out. What I really wanted to do was to retire from the dragon poker circuit and let him take on all the hotshot challengers ..."

"That much I'll agree with."

"Aahz! Just let him tell it. Okay?"

"... But he couldn't keep playing if he was broke, which would leave me as the logical target for the up-and-comings, so I let him keep the quarter of a million he had lost..."

"See! SEE!!! What did I tell you?"

"... as a LOAN so he could use it as a stake in future games...."

"That's when I knew he had... a loan??"

I grinned at my partner.

"Uh-huh. As in 'put your money to work for you instead of stacking it,' a concept I believe you found very interesting when it was first broached. Of course, you had already gone off half-cocked and stomped away before we got to that part."

Any sarcasm I had managed to load into my voice was lost on Aahz, which is not surprising when you realize we were talking about money.

"A loan, eh?" he said thoughtfully. "What were the terms?"

"Tell him. Bunny."

"BUNNY??"

"Hey! You weren't there, remember? I decided to see what our accountant could do. Bunny?"

"Well, I've never dealt with stake money before, no pun intended, so I had to kind of feel my way along. I think I got us a pretty good arrangement, though."

"Which was..."

"Until the Kid pays us back ... and it's got to be paid back in full, no partial payments, we get half his winnings."

"Hmmm," my partner murmured. "Not bad."

"If you can think of anything else I should have asked for, I'm open to ..."

"If he could think of anything else," I said, winking at her, "you can believe he would have roared it out by now. You did great. Bunny."

"Gee. Thanks, Skeeve."

"Now then, if someone would be so kind as to break out the wine, I feel like celebrating."

"Of course, Boss" you realize that now a lot of people know that you've got a lot of cash on hand," Guido pointed out, edging close to me. "As soon as Nunzio gets back, I think we'd better take a look at beefin' up security on the place, know what I mean?"

"Where is Nunzio, anyway?" Massha said, peering around.

"He'll be along in a bit," I smiled. "I had a little errand for him after the game."

"Well, here's to you, Skeeve!" Chumley called, lifting his goblet aloft. "After all our worrying about whether your reputation could survive a match with the Kid, I dare say you came out of it well ahead of where you were before."

"That's right," his sister giggled. "I wonder what the Ax thinks about what happened."

That was the cue I had been waiting for. I took a deep breath and a deeper drink of wine, then assumed my most casual manner.

"Why bother speculating, Tananda? Why not ask direct?"

"What's that, Skeeve?"

"I said, why not ask the Ax directly? After all, she's in the room right now."

The gaiety of the mood vanished in an eyeblink as everybody stared at me.

"Partner," Aahz murmured, "I thought we settled this when we talked to Don Bruce."

I cut him off with the wave of a hand.

"As a matter of fact, I'm a little curious about what the Ax is thinking myself. Why don't you tell us ... Markie?"

My young ward squirmed under the room's combined gaze.

"But, Daddy ... I don't. . . you ... oh, heck! You figured it out, huh?"

"Uh-huh." I nodded, not feeling at all triumphant.

She heaved a great sigh. "Oh, well. I was about to throw in the towel anyway. I had just hoped I could beat a retreat before my cover was blown. If you don't mind, I'd like to join you in some of that wine now."

"Help yourself."

"MARKIE?!?"

Aahz had finally recovered enough to make noise. Of course, it comes reflexively to him. The others were still working on it.

"Don't let the little-girl looks fool you, Aahz," she winked. "Folks are small and soft on my dimension. In the right clothes, it's easy to pass yourself off as being younger than you really are... lots younger."

"But...but..."

"Think about it for a minute, Aahz," I said. "You had all the pieces the first day. Kids, particularly little girls, are embarrassing at best, trouble at worst. The trick is that you expect them to be trouble, so you don't even consider the possibility that what they're doing could be premeditated and planned."

I paused to take a sip of wine, and for once no one interrupted me with questions.

"If you look back on it, most of the problems we've been having have originated directly or indirectly from Markie. She mouthed off about Bunny being in my bed to get Tananda upset, and when that didn't work she made a few digs about her living here free that got her thinking about leaving . . . just like she deliberately made Massha look bad in the middle of her magic lesson for the same reason, to get her to leave."

"Almost worked, too," my apprentice observed thoughtfully.

"The business in the Bazaar was no accident, either,"

I continued. "All she had to do was wait for the right opportunity to pretend to get mad so we wouldn't suspect she was blasting things deliberately. If you recall, she even tried to convince me that I didn't need to take dragon poker lessons."

"Of course," Markie put in, "that's not easy to do when people think you're a kid."

"The biggest clue was Gleep. I thought he was trying to protect me from Bunny, but it was Markie he was really after. I keep telling you that he's smarter than you think."

"Remind me to apologize to your dragon," Aahz said, still staring at Markie.

"It was a good plan," she sighed. "Ninety-nine percent of the time it would have worked. The problem was that everyone underestimated you, Skeeve . . . you and your friends. I didn't think you'd have enough money to pay off the irate merchants after I did a number on their displays, and your friends ..." She shook her head slowly. "Usually if word gets out that I'm on assignment, it makes my work easier. The target's associates bail out to keep from getting hit in the crossfire, and trying to get them to stay or come back only makes things worse. Part of sinking someone's career is cutting them off from their support network." She raised her wine in a mock toast to me.

"Your friends wouldn't run ... or if they did, they wouldn't stay gone once they heard you were in trouble. That's when I started to have second thoughts about this assignment. I mean, there are some careers that shouldn't be scuttled, and I think yours is one of them. You can take that as a compliment . . . it's meant as one. That's why I was about to call it quits anyway. I realized my heart just wasn't in my work this time around."

She set down her wine and stood up.

"Well, I guess that's that. I'll go upstairs and pack now. Make you a deal. If you all promise not to tell anyone who the famous Ax is, I'll spread the word that you're so invincible that even the Ax couldn't trip you up. Okay?"

Watching her leave the room, I realized with some surprise that I would miss her. Despite what Aahz had said, it had been kind of nice having a kid around the place.

"That's it?" my partner frowned. "You're just going to let her walk?"

"I was the target. I figure it was my call. Besides, she didn't do any real damage. As Chumley pointed out a second ago, we're further ahead than we were when she arrived."

"Of course, there's the matter of the damages we had to pay for her little magic display at the Bazaar."

For once, I was ahead of my partner when it came to money.

"I haven't forgotten that, Aahz. I just figure to recoup the loss from another source. You see, what finally tipped me off was ... wait. Here they are now."

Nunzio was just coming into the room, dragging the Geek with him.

"Hello, Skeeve," the Deveel said, squirming in my bodyguard's grasp. "Your ... ah, associate here says you wanted to see me?"

"He tried to sneak out after I told him. Boss," Nunzio squeaked. "That's what took me so long."

"Hello, Geek," I purred. "Have a seat. I want to have a little chat with you about a card game."

"C'mon, Skeeve. I already told you ..."

"Sit!"

The Geek dropped into the indicated chair like gravity had suddenly trebled. I had borrowed the tone of voice from Nunzio's dragon-training demonstration. It worked.

"What the Geek was starting to say," I explained, turning to Aahz, "is that before the game tonight he warned me that I was overmatched and asked me not to have any hard feelings . . . that the game with the Kid wasn't his idea."

"That's right," the Deveel interjected. "Word just got out and..."

"What I'm curious about, however, is how he knew I was out-classed."

I smiled at the Geek, trying to show my teeth the way Aahz does. "You see, I don't want to talk about tonight's game. I was hoping you could give us a little more information about the other game . . . you know, the one where I won Markie?"

The Deveel glanced nervously around the group of assembled scowls.

"I... I don't know what you mean."

"Let me make it easy for you. At this point I figure the game had to be rigged. That's the only way you would know in advance what a weak dragon poker player I am. Somehow you were throwing hands my way to be sure I won big, big enough to include Markie.

I'm just curious how you did it without triggering the magic or telepathy monitors."

The Geek seemed to shrink a little in his chair. When he spoke, his voice was so low we could barely hear him.

"Marked cards," he said.

The room exploded.

"MARKED CARDS??"

"But how..."

"Wouldn't that..."

I waved them back to silence.

"It makes sense. Think about it," I instructed.

"Specifically, think back to our trip to Limbo. Remember how hard it was to disguise ourselves without using magic? Everybody at the Bazaar gets so used to things being done magically, they forget there are non-magical ways to do the same things . . . like false beards, or marked cards."

The Geek was on his feet now.

"You can't hold that against me! So someone else paid me to throw the game your way. Heck, I should think you'd be happy. You came out ahead, didn't you?"

What's to be mad about?"

"I'll bet if I try real hard I could think of something."

"Look, if it's revenge you want, you already got it. I lost a bundle tonight betting against you. You want blood, I'm bleeding!"

The Deveel was sweating visibly now. Then again, he's always been a little nervous around me for some reason.

"Relax, Geek. I'm not going to hurt you. If anything, I'm going to help you ... just like you helped me."

"Yeah?" he said suspiciously.

"You say you're short of cash, we'll fix it."

"What!!!?" Aahz roared, but Tananda poked him in the ribs and he subsided into sullen silence.

"Bunny?"

"Yeah, Skeeve?"

"First thing tomorrow I want you to run over to the Even-Odds. Go over the books, take inventory, and come up with a fair price for the place."

The Geek blinked.

"My club? But I..."

"... Then draw up an agreement for us to take it off the Geek's hands... at half the price you arrive at."

"WHAT!!!?" the Deveel screeched, forgetting his fear. "Why should I sell my club for..."

"... More than it will be worth if the word gets out that you're running rigged games?" I finished for him.

"Because you're a shrewd businessman, Geek. Besides, you need the money. Right?"

The Geek swallowed hard, then licked his lips before he spoke. "Right."

"How was that, Geek?" Aahz frowned. "I didn't quite hear you."

"I did," I said firmly. "Well, we won't keep you any longer, Geek. I know you'll want to get back to your club and clean up a bit. Otherwise we'll have to reduce the amount of our appraisal."

The Deveel started to snarl something, then thought better of it and slunk out into the night.

"Do you think that will make up for what we had to pay in damages, partner?" I said innocently.

"Skeeve, sometimes you amaze me," Aahz said, lifting his wine in a salute. "Now if there are no more surprises, I'm ready to party."

It was tempting, but I was on a roll and didn't want to let the moment slip away.

"There is one more thing," I announced. "Now that we've taken care of the Ax and the Kid, I think we should address the major problem that's come up ... while everyone is here."

"Major problem?" my partner scowled. "What's that?"

Taking a deep breath, I went for it.

Chapter Twenty:

"So what else is new?"

-W. CRONKITE

THE whole crew was staring at me as I rolled my goblet of wine back and forth in my hand, trying to decide where to start.

"If I've seemed a little distracted during this latest crisis," I said at last, "it's because I've been wrestling with another problem that's come to my attention ... a big one. So big that, in my mind, the other stuff took a lower priority."

"Whatever you're talking about, partner," Aahz frowned, "I've missed it."

"You just said it, Aahz. The magic word is 'partner.'"

Things have been going real well for you and me, but we aren't the only ones in this household. When we were talking to Chumley and he said that his life wasn't all beer and skittles, it took me a while to puzzle out what he was talking about, but it finally came clear."

I looked at the troll.

"Business is off for you, isn't it, Chumley?"

"Well, I don't like to complain ..."

"I know, but maybe you should once in a while, I had never stopped to think about it before, but you've been getting fewer and fewer assignments since you moved in with us, haven't you?"

"Is that true, Chumley?" Aahz said. "I never noticed ..."

"No one's noticed because the attention has always been on us, Aahz. The Aahz and Skeeve team has been taking priority over everything and everyone else. We've been so busy living up to our big-name image that we've missed what it's doing to our colleagues, the ones who have to a large extent been responsible for our success."

"Oh, come now, Skeeve old boy," Chumley laughed uneasily. "I think you're exaggerating a bit there."

"Am I? Your business is off, and so is Tananda's. I hate to say it, but she was right when she left, we are stifling her with our current setup. Guido and Nunzio knock themselves out trying to be super-bodyguards because they're afraid we'll decide we don't really need them and send them packing. Even Massha thinks of herself as a non-contributing team member. Bunny's our newest arrival, and she tried to tell me that the only way she could help us is as an ornament!"

"I feel better about that after tonight, Skeeve," Bunny corrected. "Between negotiating with the Kid and getting the assignment to price out the Even-Odds, I think I can do something for you besides breathe heavy."

"Exactly!" I nodded. "That's what's giving me the courage to propose the plan I've cooked up."

"Plan? What plan?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Aahz. Actually, what I wanted to talk to all of you about. What we're dealing with in this household isn't really a partnership . . . it's a company. Everybody in this room contributes to the success of our group as a whole, and I think it's about time we restructured our setup to reflect that. What we really need is a system where all of us have a say as to what's going on. Then clients will be able to approach us as a group, and we quote prices, hand out assignments or subcontract, and share the profits as a group. That's my proposal, for what it's worth. What do the rest of you think? "

The silence stretched on until I started to wonder if they were trying to think of a tactful way to tell me I belonged in a rubber room.

"I don't know, Skeeve," Aahz said at last.

"What aren't you sure of?" I urged.

"I don't know if we should call ourselves Magic, Inc., or Chaos, Ltd."

"Magic, Inc., has already been used," Tananda argued. "Besides, I think the name should be a little more dignified and formal."

"You do that, then the clients are goin' to be surprised when they actually see us, know what I mean?"

Guido put in. "We ain't exactly dignified and formal ourselves."

I leaned back in my chair and took a deep breath. If that was their only concern, my idea was at least deemed worthy of consideration.

Massha caught my eye and winked.

I toasted her back, feeling justifiably smug.

"Does this company accept new applicants?"

We all turned to find Markie in the door, suitcase in her hand.

"I don't think I have to tell you all about my qualifications," she continued, "but I admire this group and would be proud to be a part of it."

The crew exchanged glances.

"Well, Markie.. "

"It's still nebulous..."

"You've got the Elemental stuff down cold ..."

"What do you think, Skeeve?" Aahz said. "You're the one who's usually big on recruiting old enemies."

"No, "I said firmly.

They were all looking at me again.

"Sorry to sound so overbearing right after claiming I wanted everybody to have a say in things," I continued, "but if Markie's in, I'm out."

"What's the problem. Skeeve?" Markie frowned. "I thought we were still on pretty good terms."

"We are," I nodded. "I'm not mad at you. I won't work against your career or hit you or hold a grudge. You were just doing your job."

I raised my head and our eyes met.

"I just can't go along with how you work, is all. You say you admire our group-well, the glue that holds us together is trust. The way you operate is to get people to trust you, then betray it. Even if you stayed loyal to our group, I don't think I want to be associated in business with someone who thinks that's the way to turn a profit."

I stopped there, and no one else raised a voice to contradict me.

Markie picked up her suitcase and started for the door. At the last moment, though, she turned back to me and I could see tears in her eyes.

"I can't argue with what you're saying, Skeeve," she said, "but I can't help wishing you had settled for hitting me and let me join."

There was total silence as she made her departure.

"The young lady has raised a valid point," Chumley said at last. "What is our position on new members?"

"If we're open, I'd like to put Vic's name up for consideration," Massha chimed in.

"First we've got to decide if we need anyone else," Tananda corrected.

"That raises the whole question of free-lance vs. exclusive contracts," Nunzio said. "I don't think that it's realistic to have all our shares equal."

"I've been doodling up a plan on just that point, Nunzio," Bunny called, waving the napkin she had been scribbling on. "If you can hold on for a few minutes, I'll have something to propose officially."

As interested as I was in the proceedings, I had trouble concentrating on what was being said. For some reason, Markie's face kept crowding into my mind.

Sure, what I said was rough, but it was necessary. If you're going to run a business or a team, you've got to set a standard and adhere to it. There's no room for sentimentality. I had done the right thing, hadn't I?

Hadn't I?

End Of Little Myth Marker By Robert Asprin

M.Y.T.H. Inc. Link By Robert Asprin

Chapter One:

"Petty crime is the scourge of business today."

-D. LOREAN

I ACTUALLY LIKED our new office facilities better than the old. Even though Aahz had argued hard to keep the Even Odds as a bar (read "money-making venture"), the rest of us ganged up on him and insisted that since we had an extra building it would make more sense to remodel it into offices than to keep trying to do business out of our home. I mean, who really needs a lot of strangers traipsing in and out of your private life all the time? That practice had already landed us in trouble once, and the memory of that escapade was what finally convinced my old mentor to go along with the plan.

Of course, remodeling was more of a hassle than I had expected, even after getting one of the local religious temples to do the carpentry. Even working cheap they were more expensive than I had imagined, and the hours they kept . . . but I digress.

I had a large office now, with a desk, "in" basket, Day-Timers Scheduler, visitor chairs, the whole nine yards. As I said, I liked it a lot. What I didn't like was the title that went with it ... to wit, President.

That's right. Everybody insisted that since incorporating our merry band of misfits was my idea, I was the logical choice for titular head of the organization. Even Aahz betrayed me, proclaiming it was a great idea, though to my eye he was hiding a snicker when he said it. If I had known my suggestion would lead to this, believe me I would have kept my mouth shut.

Don't get me wrong, the crew is great! If I were going to lead a group, I couldn't ask for a nicer, more loyal bunch than the one currently at my disposal. Of course, there might be those who would argue the point with me. A trollop, a troll, two gangsters, a moll, and a Pervert . . . excuse me, Pervect ... an overweight vamp, and a baby dragon might not seem like the ideal team to the average person. They didn't to me when I first met them. Still, they've been unswerving in their support of me over the years, and together we've piled up an impressive track record. No, I'd rather stick with the rat-pack I know, however strange, than trust my fate to anyone else, no matter how qualified they might seem. If anything, from time to time I wonder what they think of me and wish I could peek inside their heads to learn their opinions. Whatever they think, they stick around . . . and that's what counts.

It isn't the crew that makes me edgy ... it's the title. You see, as long as I can remember, I've always thought that being a leader was the equivalent of walking around with a large bulls-eye painted on

your back. Basically the job involves holding the bag for a lot of people instead of just for yourself. If anything goes wrong, you end up being to blame. Even if someone else perpetrated the foul-up, as the leader you're responsible. On the off chance things go right, all you really feel is guilty for taking the credit for someone else's work. All in all, it seems to me to be a no-win, thankless position, one that I would much rather delegate to someone else while I had fun in the field. Unfortunately, everyone else seemed to have the same basic opinion, and as the least experienced member of the crew I was less adept at coming up with reasons to dodge the slot than the others. Consequently, I became the President of M.Y.T.H. Inc. (That's Magical Young Trouble-shooting Heroes. Don't blame me. I didn't come up with the name), an association of magicians and trouble-shooters dedicated to simultaneously helping others and making money.

Our base of operations was the Bazaar at Deva, a well-known rendezvous for magic dealing that was the crossroads of the dimensions. As might be imagined, in an environment like that, there was never a shortage of work.

I had barely gotten settled for the morning when there was a light rap on the door of my office and Bunny stuck her head in.

"Busy, Boss?"

"Well . . ."

She was gone before I could finish formulating a vague answer. This wasn't unusual. Bunny acted as my secretary and always knew more about what I had on the docket than I did. Her inquiries as to my schedule were usually made out of politeness or to check to be sure I wasn't doing something undignified before ushering a client into the office.

"The Great Skeeve will see you now," she said, gesturing grandly to her charge. "In the future, I'd suggest you make an appointment so you won't be kept waiting."

The Deveel Bunny was introducing seemed a bit slimy, even for a Deveel. His bright red complexion was covered with unhealthy-looking pink blotches, and his face was contorted into a permanent leer, which he directed at Bunny's back as she left the room.

Now, there's no denying that Bunny's one of the more attractive females I've ever met, but there was something unwholesome about the attention this dude was giving her. With an effort, I tried to quell the growing dislike I was feeling toward the Deveel. A client was a client, and we were in business to help people in trouble, not make moral judgments on them.

"Can I help you?" I said, keeping my voice polite.

That brought the Deveel's attention back to me, and he extended a hand across the desk.

"So you're the Great Skeeve, eh? Pleased to meet you. Been hearing some good things about your work. Say, you really got a great setup. I especially like that little number you got working as a receptionist. Might even try to hire her away from you. The girl's obviously loaded with talent."

Looking at his leer and wink, I somehow couldn't bring myself to shake his hand.

"Bunny is my administrative assistant," I said carefully. "She is also a stockholder in the company. She earns her position with her skills, not with her looks."

"I bet she does," the Deveel winked again. "I'd love to get a sample of those skills someday."

That did it. "How about right now?" I smiled, then raised my voice slightly. "Bunny? Could you come in here for a moment?"

She appeared almost at once, ignoring the Deveel's leer as she moved to my desk.

"Yes, sir?"

"Bunny, you forgot to brief me on this client. Who is he?"

She arched one eyebrow and shot a sideways glance at the Deveel. We rarely did our briefings in front of clients. Our eyes met again and I gave her a small nod to confirm my request.

"His name is Bane," she said with a shrug. "He's known to run a small shop here at the Bazaar selling small novelty magic items. His annual take from that operation is in the low six figures."

"Hey! That's pretty good," the Deveel grinned.

Bunny continued as if she hadn't heard.

"He also has secret ownership of three other businesses, and partial ownership of a dozen more. Most notable is a magic factory which supplies shops in this and other dimensions. It's located in a sub-dimension accessible through the office of his shop, and employs several hundred workers. The estimated take from that factory alone is in the mid seven figure range annually."

The Deveel had stopped leering.

"How did you know all that?" he demanded. "That's supposed to be secret!"

"He also fancies himself to be a lady-killer, but there is little evidence to support his claim. The female companions he is seen in public with are paid for their company, and none have lasted more than a week. It seems they feel the money is insufficient for enduring his revolting personality. Foodwise, he has a weakness for broccoli."

I turned a neutral smile on the deflated Deveel.

"... And that, sir, is the talent that earns Bunny her job. Did you enjoy your sample?"

"She's wrong about the broccoli," Bane said weakly. "I hate broccoli."

I raised an eyebrow at Bunny, who winked back at me. "Noted," she said. "Will there be anything else, Boss?"

"Stick around. Bunny. I'll probably need your help quoting Mr. Bane a price for our services . . . that is, if he ever gets around to telling us what his problem is."

That brought the Deveel out of his shocked trance. "I'll tell you what the problem is! Miss Bunny here was dead right when she said my magic factory is my prize holding. The trouble is that someone's robbing me blind! I'm losing a fortune to pilferage!"

"What percentage loss?" Bunny said, suddenly attentive.

"Pushing fourteen percent... up from six last year."

"Are we talking retail or cost value?"

"Cost."

"What's your actual volume loss?"

"Less than eight percent. They know exactly what items to go after . . . small, but expensive." I sat back and tried to look wise. They had lost me completely about two laps into the conversation, but Bunny seemed to know what she was doing, so I gave her head.

"Everybody I've sent in to investigate gets tagged as a company spy before they even sit down," Bane was saying. "Now, the word I get is that your crew has some contacts in organized crime, and I was figuring ..."

He let his voice trail off, then shrugged as if he was embarrassed to complete the thought.

Bunny looked over at me, and I could tell she was trying to hide a smile. She was the niece of Don Bruce, the Mob's Fairy Godfather, and it always amused her to encounter the near-superstitious awe outsiders felt toward her uncle's organization..

"I think we can help you," I said carefully. "Of course, it will cost."

"How much?" Bane countered, settling back for what was acknowledged throughout the dimensions as a Deveel's specialty . . . haggling.

In response, Bunny scribbled something quickly on her notepad, then tore the sheet off and handed it to Bane. The Deveel glanced at it and blanched a light pink.

"WHAT!! That's robbery and you know it!"

"Not when you consider what the losses are costing you," Bunny said sweetly. "Tell you what. If you'd rather, we'll take a few points in your factory . . . say, half the percentage reduction in pilferage once we take the case?"

Bane went from pink to a volcanic red in the space of a few heartbeats.

"All right! It's a deal ... at the original offer!" I nodded slightly.

"Fine. I'll assign a couple of agents to it immediately."

"Wait a minute! I'm paying prices like these and I'm not even getting the services of the head honcho? What are you trying to pull here? I want ..."

"The Great Skeeve stands behind every M.Y.T.H. Inc. contract," Bunny interrupted. "If you wish to contract his personal services, the price would be substantially higher . . . like, say, controlling interest?"

"All right, all right! I get the message!" the Deveel said. "Send in your agents. They just better be good, that's all. At these rates, I expect results!"

With that, he slammed out of the office, leaving Bunny and me alone.

"How much did you charge him?"

"Just our usual fees."

"Really?"

"Well ... I did add in a small premium 'cause I didn't like him. Any objections?"

"No. Just curious is all."

"Say, Boss. Would you mind including me in this assignment? It shouldn't take too long, and this one's got me a little curious."

"Okay . . . but not as lead operative. I want to be able to pull you back here if things get hairy in the office. Let your partner run the show."

"No problem. Who are you teaming me with?"

I leaned back in my chair and smiled.

"Can't you guess? The client wants organized crime, he gets organized crime!"

Guido's Tale

"Guido, are you sure you've got your instructions right?"

That is Bunny talkin'. For some reason the Boss has deemed it wise to delegate to me her company for this job. Now this is okay with me, as Bunny is more than enjoyable to look at and a swell head to boot, which is to say she is smarter than me, which is a thing I do not say about many people, guys or dolls.

The only trepidation with which I view this pairin' is that as swell as she is. Bunny also has a marked tendency to nag whenever a job is on. This is because she is handicapped with a problem, which is that she has her cap set for the Boss. Now we are all aware of this, for it was apparent as the nose on your face from the day they first encountered. Even the Boss could see this, which is sayin' sumpin', for while I admire the Boss as an organizer, he is a little thick between the ears when it comes to skirts. To show you what I mean, once he was aware that Bunny did indeed entertain notions on his bod, his response was to half faint from the nervousness. This is from a guy I've watched take on vampires and werewolf types, not to mention Don Bruce himself, without so much as battin' an eye. Like I say, dolls is not his strong suit.

Anyway, I was talkin' about Bunny and her problem. She finally managed to convince the Boss that she wasn't really tryin' to pair up with him, but was just interested in furtherin' her career as a business type. Now this was a blatant lie, and we all knew it... even though it seems to have fooled the Boss. Even that green bum, Aahz, could see what Bunny was up to. (This surprised me a bit, for I always thought his main talent was makin' loud noises.) All that Bunny was doin' was switchin' from one come-on to another. Her overall motivational goal has never changed.

The unfortunate circumstances of this is that instead of wooin' the Boss with her bod, which as I have said is outstandin', she is now tryin' to win his admiration with what a sharp cookie she is. This should not be overly difficult, as Bunny is one shrewd operator, but like all dolls she feels she has limited time in which to accomplish her objective before her looks run out, so she is tryin' extra hard to make sure the Boss notices her.

This unfortunately can make her a real headache in the posterior regions to work with. She is so afraid that someone else will mess up her performance record that she can drive a skilled worker such as myself up a proverbial tree with her nervous double-check chatter. Still, she is a swell doll and we are all pullin' for her, so we put up with it.

"Yes, Bunny," I sez.

" 'Yes, Bunny' what?"

"Yes, Bunny, I'm sure I got my instructions right."

"Then repeat them back to me."

"Why?"

"Guido!"

When Bunny gets that tone in her voice, there is little else to do but to humor her. This is in part because part of my job is to be supportive to my teammate when on an assignment, but also because Bunny has a mean left hook when she feels you are givin' her grief. My cousin Nunzio chanced to discover this fact one time before he was informed that she was Don Bruce's niece, and as he had a jaw like an anvil against which I have had occasion to injure my fist with noticeable results, I have no desire to confirm for myself the strength of the blow with which she decked him. Consequently I decided to comply with her rather annoying request.

"The Boss wants us to find out how the goods of a particular establishment is successfully wanderin' off the premises without detection," I sez. "To that end I am to intermingle with the workers as one of them to see if I can determine how this is bein' accomplished."

"And . . ." she sez, givin' me the hairy eyeball.

"... And you are to do the same, only with the office types. At the end of a week we are to regroup in order that we may compare observations and see if we are perhaps barkin' up the wrong tree."

"And ..." she sez again, lookin' a trifle agitated.

At this point I commence to grow a trifle nervous, for while she is obviously expectin' me to continue in my oration, I have run out of instructions to reiterate.

". . . And . . . ummm ..." I sez, tryin' to think of what I have overlooked.

". . . And not to start any trouble!" she finishes, lookin' at me hard-like. "Right?"

"Yeah. Sure, Bunny."

"Say it!"

"... And not to start any trouble."

Now I am more than a little hurt that Bunny feels it is necessary to bring this point to my attention so forceful like, as in my opinion it is not in my nature to start trouble under any circumstances. Both Nunzio and me go out of our way to avoid any unnecessary disputes of a violent nature, and only bestir ourselves to bring such difficulties to a halt once they are thrust upon us. I do not, however, bring my injured feelings to Bunny's attention as I know she is a swell person who would not deliberately inflict such wounds upon the self-image of a delicate person such as myself. She is merely nervous as to the successful completion of the pending job, as I have previously orated, and would only feel bad if I were to let on how callous and heartless she was behavin'. There are many in my line of work who display similar signs of nervousness when preparin' for a major assignment. I once worked with a guy what had a tendency to fidget with a sharp knife when waitin' for a job to commence, usually on the bods of his fellow caperers. One can only be understandin' of the motivational of such types and not take offense at their personal foibles when the heat is on. This is one of the secrets of success learned early on by us executive types. Be that as it may, I am

forced to admit I am more than a little relieved when it is time for the job to begin, allowin' me to part company with Bunny for a while.

As a worker type, I report to work much earlier than is required for office types like Bunny. Why this is I am not sure, but it is one of those inescapable inequities with which life is fraught. . . like your line always bein' the longest when they are broken down by alphabet.

To prepare for my undercover maneuverin's, I have abandoned my normally spiffy threads in order to dress more appropriate for the worker types with which I am to intermingle. This is the only part of the assignment which causes me any discomfort. You see, the more successful a worker type is, the more he dresses like a skid-row bum or a rag heap, so that he looks like he is either ready to roll in the mud or has just been rolled himself, which is in direct contradiction to what I learned in business college.

For those of you to whom this last tidbit of knowledge comes as a surprise, I would hasten to point out that I have indeed attended higher learnin' institutes, as that is the only way to obtain the master's type degree that I possess. If perchance you wonder, as some do, why a person with such credentials should choose the line of work that I have to pursue, my reasons are twofold:

First-us, I am a social type who prefers workin' with people; and second, I find my sensitive nature is repelled by the ruthlessness necessitated by bein' an upper management type. I simply do not have it in me to mess up people's lives with layoffs and plant shut-downs and the like. Rather, I find it far more sociable to break an occasional leg or two or perhaps rearrange a face a little than to live with the more long-term damage inflicted by upper management for the good of their respective companies. Therefore, as I am indeed presented with the enviable position of havin' a choice in career paths, I have traditionally opted to be an order taker rather than an order giver. It's a cleaner way to make a livin'.

So anyway, I reports for work bright and early and am shown around the plant before commencin' my actual duties. Let me tell you I am impressed by this set-up like I have seldom been impressed by nothin' before. It is like. Santa's North Pole elf sweatshop done up proper.

When I was in grad school, I used to read a lot of comics. Most particularly I was taken by the ads they used to carry therein for X-Ray Glasses and Whoopie Cushions and such, which I was unfortunately never able to afford as I was not an untypical student and therefore had less money than your average eight-year-old. Walkin' into the plant, however, I suddenly realized that this particular set of indulgences had not truly passed me by as I had feared.

The place was gargantuan, by which I mean it was really big, and jammed from wall to wall to ceilin' with conveyor belts and vats and stacks of materials and boxes labeled in languages I am not privileged to recognize, as well as large numbers of worker types strollin' around checkin' gauges and pushin' carts and otherwise engaged in the sorts of activities one does when the doors are open and there's a chance that the management types might come by on their way to the coffee machine and look in to see what they're doin'. What was even more impressive was the goods in production. At a glance I could see that as an admirer of cheap junk gimmicks, I had indeed died and gone to pig heaven. It was my guess, however uneducated, that what I had found was the major supplier for

those ads which I earlier referenced, as well as most of the peddlers in the Bazaar who cater to the tourist trade.

Now right away I can see what the problem is, as most of the goods bein' produced are a small and portable nature, and who could resist waltzin' off with a few samples in their pockets? Merchandise of this nature would be enough to tempt a saint, of which I seriously doubt the majority of the work force is made up of.

At the time I think that this will make my job substantially easier than anticipated. It is my reasonin' that all I need do is figure out how I myself would liberate a few choice items, then watch to see who is doin' the same. Of course, I figure it will behoove me to test my proposed system myself so as to see if it really can be done in such a manner, and at the same time acquire a little bonus or two I can gloat about in front of Nunzio.

First, however, I had to concentrate on establishin' myself as a good worker so that no one would suspect that I was there for anythin' else other than makin' an honest wage.

The job I was assigned to first was simple enough for a person of my skills and dexterity. All I had to do was sprinkle a dab of Pixie Dust on each Magic Floating Coaster as it came down the line. The major challenge seemed to be to be sure to apply as little as possible, as Pixie Dust is expensive even at bulk rates and one definitely does not want to give the customer more than they paid for.

With this in mind, I set to work . . . only to discover that the job was actually far more complex than I had originally perceived. You see, the Pixie Dust is kept in a large bag, which floats because that is what the Pixie Dust within does. The first trick is to keep the bag from floatin' away while one is workin' with it, which is actually harder than it sounds because the Pixie Dust is almost strong enough to float the bag and whoever is attemptin' to hold it down. There is a safety line attached to the bag as an anchor, but it holds the bag too high to work with. Consequently one must wrestle with the bag while applyin' the Pixie Dust, a feat which is not unlike tryin' to hold a large beach ball under water while doin' needlepoint, and only rely on the safety line to haul the bag down into position again should it get away, which it often does. One might ask why fore the line is not made shorter to hold the bag in the proper position and thereby make the job simpler. I suppose it is the same reason that working-type mothers will drown their children at birth if they feel there is the slightest chance they will grow up to be production engineers.

The other problem I encountered was one which I am surprised no one saw to fit to warn me about. That is that when one works with Pixie Dust, it must be remembered that it floats, and therefore pours up instead of down.

When first I attempted to sprinkle a little Pixie Dust on a Magic Floating Coaster, I was puzzled as to why the coaster would not subsequently float. On the chance that I had not applied a sufficient quantity of the substance in question, I added some more . . . and then a little more, not realizin' that it was floatin' up toward the ceilin' instead of down onto the coaster. Unfortunately, I was bent over the coaster at the time, as I was tryin' to keep the bag from floatin' away, and unbeknownst to me the dust was sprinklin' onto me rather than the coaster in question. The first admissible evidence I

had that things was goin' awry was when I noticed that my feet were no longer in contact with the floor and that indeed I had become as buoyant as the bag which I was tryin' to hold down. Fortuitously, my grip is firm enough to crumble bricks so I managed to maintain my hold on the bag and eventually pull myself down the safety line instead of floatin' to the ceilin' in independent flight. Further, I was able to brush the Pixie Dust off my clothes so as to maintain my groundward orientation as well as my dignity.

The only thing which was not understandable about this passing incident was the uninvolvedness of the other worker types. Not only had they not come over to assist me in my moment of misfortune, they had also refrained from making rude and uproarious noises at my predicament. This second point in particular I concerned myself with as bein' unusual, as worker types are notorious jokesters and unlikely to pass up such an obvious opportunity for low amusement.

The reason for this did indeed become crystalline when we finally broke for lunch, I was just settlin' in to enjoy my midday repast, and chanced to ask the worker type seated next to me to pass me a napkin from the receptice by him as it was not within my reach. Instead of goin' along with this request as one would expect any civilized person to do, this joker mouths off to the effect that he won't give the time of day to any company spy, much less a napkin. Now if there is one thing I will not tolerate it is bein' called a fink, especially when I happen to be workin' as one. I therefore deem it necessary to show this individual the error of his assumptions by bendin' him a little in my most calm, friendly manner. Just when I think we are startin' to communicate, I notice that someone is beatin' me across the back with a chair. This does nothin' to improve my mood, as I am already annoyed to begin with, so I prop the Mouth against a nearby wall with one hand, thereby freein' the other which I then use to snag the other cretin as he winds up for another swing. I am just beginnin' to warm up to my work when I hear a low whistle of wamin' from the crowd which has naturally gathered to watch our discussion, and I look around to see one of the foremen ambling over to see what the commotion's about.

Now foremen are perhaps the lowest form of management, as they are usually turncoat worker types, and this one proves to be no exception to the norm. Without so much as a how-do-you-do, he commences to demand to know what's goin' on and who started it anyway. As has been noted, I already had my wind up and was seriously considerin' whether or not to simply expand our discussion group to include the foreman when I remember how nervous Bunny was and consider the difficulty I would have explainin' the situation to her if I were to suffer termination the first day on the job for roughin' up a management type. Consequently I shift my grip from my two dance partners to my temper and proceed to explain to the foreman that no one has started anythin' as indeed nothin' is happenin' . . . that my colleagues chanced to fall down and I was simply helpin' them to their feet is all.

My explanations can be very convincing, as any jury can tell you, and the foreman decides to accept this one without question, somehow overlookin' the fact that I had helped the Mouth to his feet with such enthusiasm that his feet were not touchin' the floor when the proceedin's were halted. Perhaps he attributed this phenomenon to the Pixie Dust which was so fond of levitatin' anything in the plant that wasn't tied down. Whatever the reason, he buys the story and wanders off, leavin' me to share my lunch with my two colleagues whose lunch has somehow gotten tromped on during playtime.

Apparently, my display of masculine-type prowess has convinced everyone that I am indeed not a company spy, for the two guys which jumped me in such an unprofessional manner is now very eager to chat on the friendliest of terms. The one I have been referrin' to as the Mouth turns out to be named Roxie, and his chairswingin' buddy is Sion. Right away we hit it off as they seem to be regular-type guys, even if they can't throw a punch to save their own skins, and it' seems we share a lot of common interests . . . like skirts and an occasional bet on the ponies. Of course, they are immediately advanced to the top of my list of suspects, as anyone who thinks like me is also likely to have little regard for respectin' the privacy rights of other people's property.

The other thing they tell me before we return to our respective tasks is that the Pixie Dust job I am doin' is really a chump chore reserved for new worker types what don't know enough to argue with their assignments. It is suggested that I have a few words with the foreman, as he has obviously been impressed with my demeanor, and see if I can't get some work more in keepin' with my obvious talents. I am naturally grateful for this advice, and pursue their suggestion without further delay.

The foreman does indeed listen to my words, and sends me off to a new station for the balance of the day. Upon arrivin' at the scene of my reassignment, however, it occurs to me that perhaps I would have been wiser to keep my big yap in a closed position.

My new job really stinks . . . and I mean to tell you this is meant as literal as possible. All I had to do, see, was stand at the end of a conveyor belt and inspect the end product as it came off the line. Now, when I say "end product," this is also meant to be interpreted very literal-like. The quicker of you have doubtlessly perceived by now the product to which I am referrin', but for the benefit of the slower readers and sober editors, I will clarify my allusions.

What I am inspectin' is rubber Doggie Doodle, which comes in three sizes: Embarrassing, Disgusting, and Unbelievable. This is not, of course, how they are labeled, but rather how I choose to refer to them after a mere few moments' exposure. Now since, as I have mentioned before, this is a class operation, it is to be expected that our product has to be noticeably different than similar offerin's on the market. It is unfortunate that as the Final Inspector, I must deal with the finished product, which means before it goes into the boxes, but after the "Realistic, Life-like Aroma that Actually Sticks to Your Hands" is added.

It is also unfortunate that I am unable to locate either the foreman or the two jokers who had advised me for the rest of the afternoon. Of course, I am not permitted the luxury of a prolonged search, as the conveyor belt continues to move whether the inspector is inspectin' or not, and in no time at all the work begins to pile up. As I am not particularly handy with a shovel, I deem it wisest to continue workin' and save our discussion for a later, more private time.

Now mind you, the work doesn't really bother me all that much. One of the chores me and Nunzio toss coins over back home is cleanin' up after the Boss's dragon, and after that. Doggie Doodle really looks like a bit of an understatement, if you know what I mean. If anything, this causes me to chuckle a bit as I work, for while I am on assignment Nunzio must do the honors all by himself, so by comparison my end of the stick looks pretty clean. Then too, the fact that Roxie and Sion is now

playin' tricks on me is a sign that I am indeed bein' accepted as one of the worker types, which will make my job considerably easier.

The only real problem I have with my assignment is that, considerin' the product with which I am workin', I feel it would be unwise to test the security-type precautions when I leave work that night. Even if I wished to liberate a few samples, which I was not particularly desirous of doin' since as I have noted we already have lots at home of a far superior quality, the "Realistic, Life-like Aroma that Really Sticks to Your Hands," would negate its passin' unnoticed by even the densest security-type guard.

As it turns out, this was a blessin' incognito. When closin' time finally rolls around, I discover that it would not be as easy to sneak stuff out of this plant as I had originally perceived. Everything the worker types took out of the plant with 'em was given the once and twice over by hard-eyed types who definitely knew what they were doin', and while we didn't have to go through a strip search, we did have to walk one at a time through a series of alarm systems that used a variety of rays to frisk us for objects and substances belongin' to the company. As it was, I almost got into trouble because there were still lingerin' specks of Pixie Dust on me from my morning duties, but Roxie stepped forward and explained things to the guards that was rapidly gatherin' and they settled for reclaimin' the Pixie Dust without things gettin' too personal.

This settled things between me and Roxie for the Doggie Doodle joke, and after I bounced Sion against the wall a few times to show my appreciation for his part in the prank, we all went off in search of some unprintable diversions.

Now if this last bit seems, perchance, a little shallow to you, you must first consider the whole situational before renderin' your verdict. I think it's been referenced before that the factory under investigation is located in one of those unlisted dimensions the Deveels specialize in. As the only way into this dimension from the Bazaar is through the owner's front-type operation, and as he is not wild about the notion of hundreds of worker types traipsin' through his office each shift, part of the contract for workin' in said factory is that one has to agree to stay in this unlisted dimension for a week at a time. To this end, the owner has provided rooms for the worker types, but as he is cheap even for a Deveel, each room is shared by bein's workin' different shifts. That is to say, you only have your room for one shift, and the rest of the time you're either workin' or hangin' out. Just so's we don't get bored between workin' and sleepin', the owner has also provided a variety of bars, restaurants, movies, and video joints for our amusement, all of which cost but can be charged back against our paychecks. If this seems like a bit of a closed economy to you, I would hasten to remind you that no one has ever accused the Deveels of bein' dumb when it comes to tumin' a profit. Anyway, all of this is to explain why it is that I am forced to go carousin' with Roxie and Sion instead of retirin' to my room to re-read the classics as would be my normal bent.

Now to be truthful with you, this carryin' on is not nearly so bad as I am lettin' on. It is simply that it is embarrassin' to my carefully maintained image to admit how really dull these evenings was, so's I reflexively sort of try to build them up more than I should. I mean, you'd think that off hours with a bunch of guys what work at a magic joke and novelty factory would be a barrel of laughs. You know, more fun than callin' in phony heist tips to the cops. Well, they surprised me by contentin' themselves to drinkin' and gamblin' and maybe a fistfight or two for their amusements . .

. like I say, the same old borin' stuff any good-natured bunch of guys does. Mostly what they do is sit around and gripe about the work at the plant and how underpaid they are . . . which I do not pay much attention to as there is not a worker type alive that does not indulge in this particular pastime. In no time flat I determines that nobody in the work force is well enough versed in the finer points of non-backer entrepreneurmanship, which is to say crime, to converse with me on my own level. This is not surprisin' in the age of specialization, but it does mean I don't get nobody to talk to.

What I am gettin', though, is depressed ... a feelin' which continues to grow as the week rolls on. It is not the work or the company of the worker types which is erodin' at my morale, but rather the diminishin' possibility of puttin' a wrap on this job.

It seems the more I observe in my undercover-type investigation, the more puzzled I become as to how the pilferage is bein' accomplished. The better I get to know my fellow worker types, the more I am convinced that they are not involved in any such goin's on, even in a marginal manner. This is not to say that they are lackin' in the smarts department, as they are easily as quick on the uptake as anyone I ever worked with in school or the business. Rather, I am makin' a tribute to the tightness of the plant security which must necessarily be penetrated in order to perpetrate such an activity.

As I have earlier said, this is an age of specialization, and none of the worker types I meet have adequately applied themselves to be able to hold a candle to me in my particular field of endeavor. Now realizin' that after a week of intense schemin', I have not yet come up with a plan for samplin' the merchandise that I feel has enough of a chance of succeedin' as to make it worthwhile to try, I cannot convince myself that the security can be cracked by any amateur, however talented.

Considerin' this, I am edgin' closer to the unpleasant conclusion that not only is it long odds against us findin' a fast answer, there is a chance we might not be able to crack this case at all. Such thoughts cause me great anxieties, which lead to depression as I am as success oriented as the next person.

My mood truly bottoms out at the end of the week, specifically when I am presented with my paycheck. Now, I am not countin' on the money I earn as a worker type, as I am already bein' well subsidized by the Boss. Nonetheless I am surprised to see the amount my week's worth of toil has actually brought me. To be truthful, I have again yielded to the temptation of understatement. I was not surprised, I was shocked . . . which is not a good thing for, as anyone in the Mob can tell you, when I am shocked I tend to express the unsettlement of my nerves physically.

The fact that I am not needin' the money in question means that I was only a little shocked, so it only took three of my fellow worker types to pull me off the payroll type what slipped me the bad news. Of course, by that time I had also been hit by a couple of tranquilizer darts which I am told is standard issue for most companies in the Bazaar to ease personnel relations. If, perchance, your company does not already follow this policy, I heartily give it my recommend, as it certainly saves depreciation on your payroll types and therefore minimizes the expense of trainin' new ones.

Anyway, once I am calmed down to a point where I am merely tossin' furniture and the payroll type has recomposed himself, which is to say he has received sufficient first aid to talk, he explains the realities of life to me. Not only has the cost of the aforementioned carousin' been deducted from my

earnin's, but also charges for my room which, realizin' the figure quoted only represents a third of the take on that facility, puts it several notches above the poshest resort it has ever been my decadent pleasure to patronize. Also there is an itemized bill for every bit or scrap of waste that has occurred at my duty station durin' the week, down to the last speck of Pixie Dust. Normally I would be curious as to how this accountin' was done, as it indicates a work force in the plant even more efficient than the security types which have been keepin' me at bay, but at the time I was too busy bein' outraged at bein' charged retail instead of cost for the materials lost.

All that keeps me from truly expressin' my opinion of the situation is that Roxie explains that I am not bein' singled out for special treatment, but that this is indeed a plant-wide policy which all the worker types must suffer. He also points out that the cost of the first aid for the payroll type is gonna be charged against my paycheck, and that what I have left will not be sufficient for me to indulge myself in another go 'round.

Thus it is that I am doubly disheartened when I hook up with Bunny for our weekly meetin' and debriefin', bein' as how I am not only a failure but -a poor failure which is the worst kind to be.

"Guido, what's wrong?" she sez when we meet. "You look terrible!"

As I have said, Bunny is a swell head, but she is still a skirt, which means she has an unerring instinct for what to say to pick a guy up when he's under the weather.

"I am depressed," I sez, since she wasn't around when I explained it to you. "The workin' conditions at the plant are terrible, especially considerin' the pay we aren't gettin'."

At this. Bunny rolls her eyes and groans to express her sympathy.

"Oh, Guido! You're talking just like a ... what is it that you call them? Oh, yes. Just like a worker type."

"That's 'cause I am a worker type!"

This earns me the hairy eyeball.

"No, you're not," she sez real hard-like. "You're an executive for M.Y.T.H. Inc. here on an investigation. Now quit being negative and let's talk about the job."

It occurs to me that she has a truly unusual concept of how to avoid negative thinkin'.

"Suit yourself," I sez, givin' her my best careless shrug like I usually save for court performances. "As far as the job goes, I am truly at a dead end. After a week I have discovered nothin' and don't have the foggiest where to look next."

"Good!" she sez, breakin' into a smile which could melt an iceberg, of which there are very few at the Bazaar with which I could test my hyperbole. Naturally I am surprised.

"Perhaps my small-but-normally-accurate ears are deceivin' me. Bunny. Did I understand you to say that it's a good thing that I am gettin' nowhere in my investigations?"

"That's right. You see, I think I'm on to something at my end, and if you're coming up empty in the plant, maybe you can help me with my theories! Now here's what I want you to do."

Followin' Bunny's suggestion, I start out the next week by bracin' the foreman to reassign me to work in the warehouse on inventory. At first he is reluctant as he does not like worker types tellin' him his job, but after I point out to him how small the hospitalization benefits provided by the owner really are, he becomes far more reasonable.

All I have to do to give Bunny the support she requests is to double-check the materials comin' into the plant, and send her an extra copy of each day's tally in the inter-office mail. This pleases me immensely, as it is not only easy work, it also gives me substantial amounts of free time with which I can pursue a project of my own.

You see, I am still more than a little steamed over the hatchet job which was performed upon my paycheck. I therefore take it upon myself to commence conductin' my own unofficial survey as to workin' conditions around the plant, and since my eye has the benefit of business school trainin', which most of the workin' types have not bothered with, it becomes rapidly apparent that the situational stinks worse than the Doggie Doodle did.

Just as an example, the plant has made a practice of hirin' all sorts of bein's, many of which is extremely difficult to describe without gettin' vulgar. Now this is not surprisin' considerin' the Bazaar is the main source for their recruitin', but it makes for some teeth-grindin' inequalities in the pay scales.

Before the wrong idea is given, let me elucidate for a moment on the point of view I am comin' from. I personally don't care much who or what is workin' next to me as long as they can carry their share of the job. You will notice I have not even mentioned that Roxie is bright orange and Sion is mauve, as I feel this has nothin' to do with my assessment of their personalities or their abilities. I will admit to bein' a little uneasy around bein's what got more arms or legs than I do, but this is more a professional reaction, since should the occasion arise that we might have a difference of opinion, my fightin' style is intended for opposition what can throw the same number of punches and kicks per side as I can, and a few extra fists can make a big difference. But, as I say, this is more a professional wariness than any judgment on their overall worth as bein's. I only mention this on the off chance that some of my remarks about strange bein's might be taken as bein' pergerdous, a rap of which I have never been convicted. I am not that sort of person.

As I was say in', though, the plant has lots of strange bein's workin' the line. The indignity of the situation, however, is that even though they got these extra arms and in some cases is doin' the work of several worker types, they is gettin' paid the same as anyone else. While to some this might seem unfair to the ones bein' so exploited, I see it as a threat to the worker types with the usual count of arms and legs, as it will obviously save the company significant cost if they can hire as many of the former as possible, whilst layin' off a disproportionate number of the latter.

Another inequality I observe concerns the security types which I have been unable to circumvent. Now this has been a source of curiosity to me since I first arrived at the plant, since it doesn't take an accountin' whiz to figure out that if the plant is payin' the security types what they're worth, their cost should be substantially more than would seem economically wise. I chance across the answer one time when I happen to eavesdrop on a couple off-duty lunchin' security types who are gripin' about their jobs. It seems that they are underpaid as much as us workin' types, despite the fact that they are safeguardin' stuff worth millions! While this is doubtlessly unfair, I do not include it in my notes because I have found that it is not only not unusual, but is actually customary for plants or societies to underpay their guardian types. I suppose that as bonkers as it seems, this is in actuality the way things should be. If guardian types made a decent wage, then criminal types like me would go into that line of work as it has better hours and better retirement benefits than the career path I am currently pursuin', and if there was no crime there would be no need for guardian types and we would all end up unemployed. Viewin' it that way, the status quo is probably for the best.

Anyway, I continues to keep my eyes and ears open until I feel I have gathered sufficient injustices to make my point, then I wait for the right moment to present my findin's. This proves to be no great test of my patience, since, as I have noted, the worker types love to gripe about their jobs and tonight proves to be no exception to this rule.

"What do you think, Guido?" Roxie sez, tumin' to me. "Do the guys workin' the Dribble Toilets have it worse than the ones workin' the Battery-Operated Whoopie Cushions?"

I make a big show of thinkin' hard before I give my answer.

"I think," I sez carefully, "that if brains was dynamite, the whole plant wouldn't have the powder to blow its nose."

It takes him a minute to get my drift, but when he does, his eyes go real mean.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean I've been sittin' here listenin' to you guys bellyache for nearly two weeks now, and ain't none of youse heard a thing that's goin' on."

"All right, Mr. Doggie Doodle, if you're so smart why don't you tell all of us who have been workin' here for years what it is you've learned in a whole two weeks."

I choose to ignore the Doggie Doodle crack, as there are now several tables of worker types listenin' to our conversation and I'm afraid I'll lose their attention if I take the time to bust Roxie's head.

"Youse guys spend all your time arguin' about who's gettin' honked the worst, and in the meantime you're missin' the point. The point is that you're all gettin' the Purple Shaft."

With that I commences to itemize a dozen or so of the more reprehensible examples of the exploitation of worker types I have noted in my investigation. By the time I am done, the whole bar is listenin', and there is an ugly murmur goin' around.

"All right, Guido. You've made your point," Roxie sez, tryin' to take another swallow of his drink before he realizes that it's empty. "So what are we supposed to do about it? We don't set company policy."

I shows him the smile that makes witnesses lose their memories.

"We don't set company policy, but we do decide whether or not we're gonna work for the wages offered in the conditions provided."

At this, Roxie lights up like he just won the lottery.

"That's right!" he sez. "They control the plant, but without us workers there won't be no Doggie Doodle to ship!"

The crowd is gettin' pretty worked up now, and there's a lot of drink buyin' and back slappin' goin' on when someone just has to raise a discouragin' word.

"So what's to stop 'em from just hiring a new work force if we hold out?"

That is Sion talkin'. As you may have noticed, he don't mouth off near as much as Roxie does, but when he opens up, the other worker types are inclined to listen. This time is no exception, and the room starts to quiet down as the worker types try to focus on this new problem.

"C'mon, Sion," Roxie sez, tryin' to laugh it off. "What idiots would work for these wages under these conditions?"

"Roxie, we've been doing just that for years! I don't think they'll have any more trouble finding a new work force than they had finding the old one."

I decided it was time I took a hand in the proceedin's.

"There are a few things you are overlookin', Sion," I sez. "First off, it will take time to hire and train a new work force, and durin' that time the plant ain't producin' Doggie Doodle to sell, which means the owner is losin' money which he does not like to do."

Sion just shrugged at that one.

"True enough, but he'd probably rather take the shortterm loss of a shutdown than the long-term expense of giving us higher wages."

"Which brings up the other thing you're overlookin'."

"Which is?"

"There is one intolerable workin' condition a new work force would have to endure that we haven't . . . to wit, us! We don't have to get past us to come to work each mornin', and whilst the security types are aces at guardin' a plant, it is my best appraisal that they would not be able to provide bodyguard service for an entire new work force."

This seemed to satisfy the objection in question, and we then got down to workin' out the details, for while from the outside it may seem simple to organize a labor movement, there is much to be planned before anythin' can actually be set into motion. The other two shifts had to be brought on board and a list of demands agreed upon, not to mention the buildin' of a contingency fund in case the other side wanted to try starvin' us out.

A lot of the guys wanted me to run the thing, but I felt I could not accept in clear consciousness and successfully proposed Roxie for the position. The alibi I gave is that the worker types should be represented by someone who has more than two weeks' experience on the job, but in reality I wasn't sure hew much longer I had before the Boss pulled me back to my normal duties and I did not want the movement to flounder from havin' its leader disappear sudden like. The chore I did volunteer for was givin' lessons in how to handle any outsiders the plant tried to hire, as most of the current worker types did not know a sawed-off pool cue from a tire iron when it came to labor negotiations.

Between workin' in the warehouse and helpin' with the movement, I was so busy I almost missed my weekly meetin' with Bunny. Fortuitously I remembered, which is a good thing as Bunny is a doll and no doll likes to be forgotten.

"Hi, Babe!" I sez, givin' her one of my seediest winks. "How's it goin'?"

"Well, you're sure in a chipper mood," she sez, grinnin' back at me. "I thought I'd have good news for you, but I guess you already heard."

"Heard? Heard what?"

"The assignment's over. I've cracked the case."

Now this causes me a little guilt and embarrassment, as I have not thought about our assignment for days, but I cover for it by actin' enthusiastic instead.

"No foolin'? You found out how the stuff is bein' liberated?"

"Well, actually it turns out to be a case of embezzlement, not pilferage. One of the Deveels in Accounting was tinkering with the receiving records and paying for more than was coming in at the shipping dock."

"Bunny," I sez, "try to remember that my degree is not in accounting. Could you perhaps try to enlighten me in baby talk so's I can understand the nature of the heist?"

"Okay. When we buy the raw materials, each shipment is counted and a tally sent to Accounting. That tally determines how much we pay our supplier, as well as alerting us as to how much raw material there is in inventory. Now our embezzler had a deal going with the suppliers to bill us for more material than we actually received. He would rig the receiving tallies to tie out to the overage, pay the supplier for goods they never shipped, then split the extra money with them. The trouble was that since the same numbers were used for the inventories, the records showed that there were more goods in inventory than were actually there, so when the plant came up short, the owner thought the employees were stealing from him. The missing goods weren't being pilfered, they were never in the plant at all!"

I gave a low whistle of appreciation.

"That's great. Bunny! The Boss'll be real proud of you when he hears."

That actually made her blush a little.

"I didn't do it all by myself, you know. I wouldn't have been able to prove anything if you hadn't been feeding me duplicate records on the side."

"A mere trifling," I sez expansively. "I for one am goin' to make sure the Boss knows just what a gem he has workin' for him so's you get your just esteem in his eyes."

"Thanks, Guido," she sez, layin' a hand on my arm. "I try to impress him, but sometimes I think ..."

She breaks off and looks away, and it occurs to me that she is about to commence leakin' at the eyes. In an effort to avert this occurrence which will undoubtedly embarrass us both, I wrench the conversation back to our original topic.

"So what are they goin' to do with this bum now that you caught him?"

"Nothing."

"Say what?"

"No, that's not right. He's going to get a promotion."

"Get outta here!"

She turns back, and I can see she's now got an impish grin on, which is a welcome change.

"Really. It turns out he's the owner's brother-in-law. The owner is so impressed with the smarts it took to set up this scam that he's giving the little creep a higher position in the organization. I guess he wants him stealing for the company instead of from it."

It takes me several moments to realize that my normally agile mouth is stuck in the open position.

"So where does that leave us?" I manage at last.

"With a successful investigation under our belts along with a fat bonus for resolving the thing so fast. I've got a hunch, though, that part of that bonus is gag money to ensure we don't spread it around that the owner was being flimflammed by his own brother-in-law."

Now I am indeed glad that we have resolved the pilferage assignment without implicatin' any of the worker types I have been buddies with, but at the same time I am realizin' that with the job over, I will not be around to help them out when the Doggie Doodle hits the fan.

"Well, that's that, I guess. We'd better report in to the Boss and see what's been happenin' while we've been gone."

"Is something wrong, Guido? You seem a little down."

"Aaah! It's nothin'. Bunny. Just thinkin' that I'll miss some of the guys back at the plant, is all."

"Maybe not," she sez, real mysterious like.

Now it's my turn to give her the hairy eyeball.

"Now, Bunny," I sez, "if you've got sumpin' up your sleeve other than lint, I would suggest you share it with me. You know I am not good when it comes to surprises."

"Well, I was going to wait until we got back home, but I suppose it won't hurt to give you a preview."

She looks around like there might be someone listenin' in, then hunches forward so I can hear her whisper.

"I picked up a rumor back at the plant office that there may be a union forming at the magic factory. I'm going to suggest to Skeeve that we do a little prospecting . . . you know, put in a bid. Can you imagine what we could charge for breaking up a union?"

I develop a sudden interest in the ceiling.

"Uh, Bunny?" I sez. "I know you want to impress the Boss with how good you are at findin' work for us, but I think in the longer run that it would be in the best interests of M.Y.T.H. Inc. to pass on this particular caper."

"But why? The owner stands to lose ten times as much if a union forms than he was dropping to embezzlement. We could make a real killing here. He already knows our work."

In response, I lean back and give her a slow smile. "When it comes to makin' a killin', Bunny, I would advise you not to try to teach your grandmother, which in this case is me, how to steal sheep."

Furthermore, there are times when it is wisest not to let the client know too much about your work . . . and trust me, Bunny, this is one such time!"

Chapter Two:

"It all hinges on your definition of 'a good time!'"
-L. BORGIA

. . . AN OUTSIDE AGITATOR and a union organizer! And to think I was paying him to slit my throat!!"

I somehow managed to keep a straight face, which was harder than it sounds.

"Actually, Mr. Bane, I was paying him to help uncover the source of your inventory leak, which he did, and you were paying him to work in your factory, which he also did. I'm not sure exactly what it is that you're complaining about."

For a moment I thought the Deveel was going to come across the desk at my throat.

"What I'm complaining about is that your so-called agent organized a union in my factory that's costing me a bundle!"

"There's no proof he was involved"

"So how come his name comes up every time...."

"... And even if he was, I'm not sure what concern it is of mine. I run a business, Mr. Bane, with employees, not slaves. What they do on their off hours is their affair, not mine."

"But he was acting as your agent!!!"

". . . To investigate the pilferage problem, which, I'm told, has been settled."

As we were speaking, Chumley poked his head into my office, saw what was going on, and came in all the way, shifting to his big bad troll persona as he did. In case you are wondering, I was working without a receptionist at the time, having deemed it wise to have both Bunny and Guido lie low for a while after finding out what had really happened on their last assignment. As an additional precaution, I had insisted that they hide out separately, since I was afraid that Bunny would kill Guido if they were alone within an arm's reach of each other. For some reason my secretary seemed to take Guido's labor activities very personally.

"... Now, if you'll excuse me, Mr. Bane, I'm rather busy at the moment. If you wish to pursue the matter further, I suggest you take it up with Big Crunch here. He usually handles the complaints for our company."

The Deveel started to speak angrily as he glanced behind him, then did a double-take and swallowed whatever it was he was about to say as his gaze went up ... and up! As I can testify from firsthand experience, trolls can look very large when viewed from up close.

"Little Deveel want to fight with Big Crunch? Crunch likes to fight!"

Bane pinked slightly, then turned back to me.

"Now look, Sk . . . Mr. Skeeve. All that's in the past, right? What say we talk about what your outfit can do to help me with this labor thing."

I leaned back in my chair and put my hand behind my head.

"Not interested, Mr. Bane. Labor disputes are not our forte. If you'd like a little free advice, though, I'd advise you to settle. Prolonged strikes can be very costly."

The Deveel started to bare his teeth, then glanced at Chumley again and twisted it into a smile. In fact, he didn't say another word until he reached the door, and even then he spoke with careful respect.

"Um ... if it ain't asking too much, could you send this Guido around, just to say hi to the workers? What with him disappearing the way he did, there are some who are saying that I had him terminated. It might make things a little easier for me in the negotiations."

"I'll ask him . . . next time I see him."

The Deveel nodded his thanks and left.

"Bit of a sticky wicket, eh, Skeeve?" Chumley said, relaxing back into his normal self.

"Just another satisfied customer of M.Y.T.H. Inc. stopping by to express his gratitude," I sighed. "Remind me not to send Guido out on assignment again without very explicit instructions. Hmmmm?"

"How about a muzzle and leash?"

I shook my head and sat forward in my chair again, glancing over the paperwork that seemed to breed on my desk whenever Bunny was away.

"Enough of that. What can I do for you, Chumley?"

"Hnun? Oh, nothing, really. I was just looking for little sister to see if she wanted to join me for lunch. Has she been about?"

"Tananda? As a matter of fact, I just sent her out on an assignment. Sorry."

"No matter. What kind of work are you giving the old girl, anyway?"

"Oh, nothing big," I said, rummaging through the paper for the letter I had been reading when Bane burst in. "Just a little collection job a few dimensions over."

"ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR BLOODY MIND??!!!" Chumley was suddenly leaning over my desk, his two moon eyes of different sizes scant inches from my own. It occurred to me that I had never seen the troll really angry. Upon viewing it, I sincerely hoped I would never see it again. That is, of course, assuming I could survive the first time.

"Whoa! Chumley! Calm! What's wrong?"

"YOU SENT HER OUT ON A COLLECTION JOB ALONE?"

"She should be all right," I said hastily. "It sounded like a pretty calm mission. In fact, that's why I sent her instead of one of our heavy hitters ... I thought the job called for finesse, not muscle. Besides, Tananda can take care of herself pretty well."

The troll groaned and let his head fall forward until it thudded on my desk. He stayed that way for a few moments, breathing deeply, before he spoke.

"Skeeve . . . Skeeve . . . Skeeve. I keep forgetting how new you are to our little family."

This was starting to get me worried.

"C'mon, Chumley, what's wrong? Tananda will be okay, won't she?"

The troll raised his head to look at me.

"Skeeve, you don't realize ... we all relax around you, but you never see us when you aren't around."

Terrific.

"Look, Chumley. Your logic is as enviable as ever, but can't you just say what the problem is? If you think Tananda's in danger ..."

"SHE'S NOT THE ONE I'M WORRIED ABOUT!"

With visible effort, Chumley composed himself.

"Skeeve ... let me try to explain. Little sister is a wonderful person, and I truly love and admire her, but she has a tendency to ... overreact under pressure. Mum always said it was her competitive reaction to having an older brother who could tear things apart without trying, but some of the people she's worked with tend to simply describe it as a mean streak. In a nutshell, though, Tananda

has a bigger flair for wanton destruction than I do ... or anyone else I've ever met. Now, if this job you're describing calls for finesse ..."

He broke off and shook his head.

"No," he said with a ring of finality to his voice. "There's no other way to handle it. I'll just have to catch up with her and try to keep her from getting too out of hand. Which dimension did you say she was headed for again?"

The direct question finally snapped me out of the mindfreeze his explanation had put me in.

"Really, Chumley. Aren't you exaggerating just a little? I mean, how much trouble could she cause?"

The troll sighed. "Ever hear of a dimension called Rinasp?"

"Can't say that I have."

"That's because there's no one there anymore. That's the last place little sister went on a collection job."

"I've got the name of the dimension here somewhere!" I said, diving into my paperwork with newfound desperation. Chumley's Tale

DASH IT ALL TO BLAZES anyway! You'd think by now that Skeeve would have the sense to look a bit before he leaped ... especially when his leaping tends to involve others as it does! If he thinks that Tananda can't ... If he can't figure out that even I don't . . . Well, he has no idea of the way our Mum raised us, is all I've got to say.

Of course, one cannot expect wonders from a Klahd raised by a Pervert, can one . . . hmmm?? Well, Chumley old boy, time to muddle through one more time, what?

I must admit this latest collection assignment for Tananda had me worried. At her best little sister tends to lack tact, and lately . . .

As near as I can tell, there was bad blood building between her and Bunny. They had never really hit it off well, but things had gotten noticeably sticky since Don Bruce's niece set her cap for Skeeve. Not that little sister had any designs on the lad herself, mind you. If anything, her feelings toward him are more sisterly than anything else . . . Lord help him. Rather it seems that it's Bunny's tactics that are setting Tananda's teeth on edge.

You see, what with Bunny trying to be so spit-spot efficient on the job to impress Skeeve, little sister has gotten it into her head that it's making her look bad professionally. Tananda has always been exceedingly proud of her looks and her work, and what with Bunny strutting around the office going on about how well the last assignment went, she feels a wee bit threatened on both counts. As near as I could tell, she was bound and determined to prove that what she had picked up in the

Guttersnipe Survival School was more than a match for the education Bunny had acquired at whatever finishing school the Mob had sent her to. Combined with her normal tendency for over-exuberance, it boded ill for whoever it was she was out to collect from.

I was also underwhelmed by the setting for this pending disaster. I mean, really, what kind of name is Arcadia for a dimension? It sounds like one of those confounded video parlors. I probably would have been hard-pressed to even find it if I hadn't gotten directions along with the name. The coordinates dropped me at the edge of a town, and since they were the same ones little sister had used, I could only assume I wasn't far behind her.

At first viewing, Arcadia seemed pleasant enough; one might almost be tempted to call it quaint-the kind of quiet, sleepy place where one could relax and feel at home. For some reason, I found myself fervently hoping it would be the same when we left.

My casual inspection of the surroundings was cut short by a hail from nearby.

"Welcome to Arcadia, Stranger. Can I offer you a cool glass of juice?"

The source of this greeting was a rather gnomish old man who was perched on the seat of a tricycle vending cart. He seemed to take my appearance, both my physical makeup and my presence at this time and place, so casually I almost replied before remembering that I had a front to maintain. It's a bit of a bother, but I've found no one will hire a well-mannered troll.

"Good! Good! Crunch thirsty!"

With my best guttural growl, I grabbed two of the offered glasses and popped them in my mouth, rolling my eyes as I chewed happily. It's a good bit ... one that seldom fails to take folks aback. The gnome, however, never batted an eye.

"Don't think I've seen you before. Stranger. What brings you to Arcadia?"

I decided to abandon any further efforts at intimidating him and instead got right to the point.

"Crunch looking for friend. Seen little woman . . . so high . . . with green hair?"

"As a matter of fact, she was just by a little bit ago. She a friend of yours?"

I nodded my head vigorously and showed my fangs.

"Crunch likes little woman. Pulled thorn from Crunch's foot once. Where little woman go?"

"Well, she asked me where the police station was, then took off in that direction . . . that way."

An awfully nice chap, really. I decided I could afford to unbend a little.

"Crunch thanks nice man. If nice man needs strong friend, call Crunch, okay?"

"Sure thing. And if I can help you any more, just give a holler."

I left then before we got too chummy. I mean, there are precious few people who will be civil, much less nice, to a troll, and I was afraid of getting more interested in continuing my conversation with him than with finding Tananda. For the good of Arcadia, that would never do.

As it was, I guess my little chat had taken longer than I had realized, for when I found Tananda she was sitting dejectedly on the steps of the police station, her business inside apparently already concluded. Things must have gone better than I had dared hope, as she was not incarcerated, and the building was still standing.

"What ho, little sister," I called, as cheerily as I could manage. "You look a little down at the mouth. Problems?"

"Oh. Hi ... Chumley? What are you doing here?"

Fortunately, I had anticipated this question and had my answer well rehearsed. "Just taking a bit of a holiday. I promised Aahz I would stop by this dimension and check out a few potential investments, and when Skeeve said you were here as well, I thought I would stop by and see how you were doing."

"That can be summarized in one word," she said, resting her chin in her hands once more. "Lousy."

"Run into a spot of trouble? Come, come. Tell big brother all about it."

She gave a little shrug.

"There's not all that much to tell. I'm here on a collection assignment, so I thought I'd check with the local gendarmes to see if this guy had a record or if they knew where he was."

"And . . ." I prompted.

"Well, they know who he is all right. It seems he's a wealthy philanthropist. . . has given millions for civic improvements, helps the poor, that kind of stuff."

I scratched my head and frowned.

"Doesn't sound like the sort of chap to leave a bill unpaid, does he?"

"The real problem is going to be how to check it out. It seems he's also a bit of a recluse. No one's seen him for years."

I could see why she was depressed. It didn't sound like the kind of chore that could be finished in record time, which is, of course, what she wanted to do to make a good showing.

"Could be a bit of a sticky wicket. Who is this chap, anyway?"

"The name is Hoos. Sounds like something out of Dr. Seuss, doesn't it?"

"Actually, it sounds like a bank."

"How's that again?"

Instead of repeating myself, I simply pointed. Across the street and three doors down was a building prominently labeled Hoos National Bank.

Tananda was on her feet and moving in a flash.

' "Thanks, Chumley. This may not be so bad after all."

"Don't forget. We're terribly close to the police station," I cautioned, hurrying to keep up.

"What do you mean, 'we'?" she said, stopping abruptly. "This is my assignment, big brother, so don't interfere or get underfoot. Capish?"

Realizing I was here to try to keep her out of trouble, I thought it ill-advised to start a brawl with Tananda in the middle of a public street, much less in front of a police station.

"Perish the thought. I just thought I'd tag along . . . as an observer. You know I love watching you work. Besides, as Mums always said, 'You can never tell when a friendly witness can come in handy.' "

I'm not sure if my words assured her, or if she simply accepted that a confirming report wouldn't hurt, but she grunted silently and headed into the bank.

The place was pretty standard for a bank: tellers' cages, tables for filling out deposit or withdrawal slips, etc. The only thing that was at all noteworthy was a special window for Inter-Dimensional Currency Exchange, which to me indicated that they did more demon business than might be expected for such an out-of-the-way dimension. I was going to point this out to Tananda, but she apparently had plans of her own. Without so much as a glance at the windows, she marched up to the manager's office.

"May I help you. Miss?" the twitty-looking fellow seated there said with a notable lack of sincerity.

"Yes. I'd like to see Mr. Hoos."

That got us a long, slow once-over with the weak eyes, his gaze lingering on me for several extra beats. I did my best to look innocent . . . which is not that easy to do for a troll.

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible," he said at last, returning his attention to the work on his desk.

I could sense Tananda fighting with her temper and mentally crossed my fingers.

"It's extremely urgent."

The eyes flicked our way again, and he set his pencil down with a visible sigh.

"Then perhaps you'd better deal with me."

"I have some information for Mr. Hoos, but I think he'd want to hear it personally."

"That's your opinion. If, after hearing it, I agree, then you might be allowed to repeat it to Mr. Hoos."

Stalemate.

Tananda seemed to recognize this as well.

"Well, I don't want to start a panic, but I have it on good authority that this bank is going to be robbed."

I was a little surprised by this, though I did my best not to show it. The bank manager, however, seemed to take it in stride.

"I'm afraid you're mistaken, young lady," he said with a tight smile.

"My sources are seldom wrong," she insisted.

"You're new to Arcadia, aren't you?"

"Well . . ."

"Once you've learned your way around, you'll realize that there isn't a criminal in the dimension who would steal from Mr. Hoos, much less try to rob his bank."

This Hoos chap was starting to sound like quite a fellow. Little sister, however, was not so easily deterred.

"What about a criminal from another dimension? Someone who isn't so impressed with Mr. Hoos?"

The manager raised an eyebrow.

"Like who, for example?"

"Well... what if I and my friend here decided to..."

That was as far as she got.

For all his stuffiness, I had to admit the manager was good. I didn't see him move or signal, but suddenly the bank was filled with armed guards. For some reason, their attention seemed to be centered on us.

I nudged Tananda, but she waved me off irritably.

". . . Of course, that was simply a 'what if.' "

"Of course," the manager smiled, without humor. "I believe our business is concluded. Good day."

"But ..."

"I said 'Good day.' "

With that he returned to his work, ignoring us completely.

It would have been bordering on lunacy to try to take on the whole room full of guards. I was therefore startled to realize little sister was starting to contemplate that very action. As casually as I could, I started whistling Gilbert and Sullivan's "A Policeman's Lot Is Not a Happy One" as a gentle reminder of the police station not half a block away. Tananda gave me a look that would curdle cream, but she got the message and we left without further ado.

"Now what, little sister?" I said, as tactfully as I could manage.

"Isn't it obvious?"

I thought about that for a few moments.

"No," I admitted frankly. "Seems to me you've come up against a dead end."

' "Then you weren't listening in there," she said, giving me one of her smug grins. "The manager gave me a big clue for where to try next."

"... And that was?"

"Don't you remember he said no criminal would rob this Hoos guy?"

"Quite. So?"

". . . So if there's a criminal connection here, I should be able to get some information out of the underworld."

That sounded a tad ominous to me, but I have long since learned not to argue with Tananda when she gets her mind set on something. Instead, I decided to try a different approach.

"Not to be a noodge," I noodged, "but how do you propose to find said underworld? They don't exactly list in the yellow pages, you know."

Her pace slowed noticeably.

"That's a problem," she admitted. "Still, there must be a way to get information around ..."

"Can I offer you a glass of cold juice. Miss?"

It was my friend from the morning with his vending cart. A part of me wanted to wave him off, as interrupting little sister in mid-scheme is not the healthiest of pastimes, but I couldn't think of a way to do it without breaking character. Tananda surprised me, however. Instead of removing his head at the waist for breaking into her thought process, she turned her most dazzling smile on him.

"Well, hi there!" she purred. "Say, I never did get a chance to thank you for giving me directions to the police station this morning."

Now, little sister's smiles can be devastating to the nervous system of anyone of the male gender, and this individual was no exception.

"Don't mention it," he flushed. "If there's anything else I can do to be of assistance ..."

"Oh, there is one teensy-tiny favor you could do for me."

Her eyelashes fluttered like mad, and the vendor melted visibly.

"Name it."

"Wellll . . . could you tell me where I could find a hardened criminal or five? You see, I'm new here and don't know a soul I could ask."

I thought this was a little tacky and fully expected the vendor to refuse the information in a misdirected attempt to shelter the pretty girl from evil influences. The old boy seemed to take it in stride, however.

"Criminals, eh?" he said, rubbing his chin. "Haven't had much dealings with that sort for a while. When I did, though, they could usually be found down at the Suspended Sentence."

"The what?"

"The Suspended Sentence. It's a combination tavern/ inn. The owner opened it after getting off a pretty sticky trial. It seems the judge wasn't wrong in letting him go, since he's gone straight, as far as I can tell, but there's a bad element that hangs out there. I think they figure some of the good luck might rub off on them."

Tananda punched me lightly in the ribs and winked. "Well, that sounds like my next stop. Where'd you say this place was, old timer?"

"Just a couple of blocks down the street there, then turn left up the alley. You can't miss it."

"Hey, thanks. You've been a big help, really." "Don't mention it. Sure you wouldn't like some juice?"

"Maybe later. Right now I'm in a hurry." The old man shook his head at her retreating back.

"That's the trouble with folks today. Everybody's in such a hurry. Don't you agree, big fella?"

Again I found myself torn between entering a conversation with this likable chap and watching over little sister. As always, family loyalty won out.

"Ahh . . . Big Crunch in hurry too. Will talk with little man later."

"Sure. Anytime. I'm usually around."

He waved goodbye, and I waved back as I hurried after Tananda.

Little sister seemed quite preoccupied when I caught up with her, so I deemed it wisest to keep silent as I fell in beside her. I assumed she was planning out her next move ... at least, until she spoke.

"Tell me, big brother," she said, without looking at me. "What do you think of Bunny?"

Now Mums didn't raise any stupid children. Just Tananda and me. It didn't take any great mental gymnastics to figure out that perhaps this was not the best time to sing great praises of little sister's rival. Still, I would feel less than truthful, not to mention a little disloyal, if I gave false testimony when queried directly.

"Um . . . well, there's no denying she's attractive."

Tananda nodded her agreement.

". . . In a cheap, shallow sort of way, I suppose," she acknowledged.

"Of course," I said carefully, "she does have a little problem with overachievement."

"A little problem! Chumley, you have a positive talent for understatement. Bunny's one of the pushiest bitches I know."

I was suddenly quite glad I had not verbalized my thought comparing Bunny's overachievement problem with little sister's. I somehow doubted Tananda was including herself in her inventory of pushy bitches. Still, there was one more point I wanted to test the ice with.

"Then again, her performance may be influenced by her infatuation with Skeeve."

At this, Tananda lashed out with her hand at a signpost we were passing, which took on a noticeable tilt. Though she isn't as strong as yours truly, little sister still packs a wallop . . . especially when she's mad.

"That's the part that really grinds me," she snarled. "If she thinks she can just waltz in out of left field and take over Skeeve ... I was about to say she'd have to do it over my dead body, but it might give her ideas. I don't really want to have tasters munching on my food before I enjoy it. She's got another think coming, is all I've got to say!"

I gave her my longest innocent stare.

"Why, little sister!" I said. "You sound positively jealous. I had no idea you entertained any romantic designs on Skeeve yourself."

That slowed her pace a tad.

"Well, I don't, really. It's just that. . . blast it, Chumley, we helped raise Skeeve and make him what he is today. You'd think he could do better than some primping gold digger from Mobdom."

"And just what is he? Hmmm?"

Tananda shot me a look.

"I'm not sure I follow you there, big brother."

"Take a good look at what it is we've raised. Right now Skeeve is one of the hottest, most successful magician/businessmen in the Bazaar. Who exactly do you expect him to take up with for female companionship? Massha? A scullery maid? Maybe one of the vendors or come-on girls?"

"Well, no."

I had a full head of steam now. Tananda and I rarely talk seriously, and when we do it usually involves her dressing me down for some indiscretion or other. I wasn't about to let her slip away on this one.

"Of course Skeeve is going to start drawing attention from some pretty high-powered husband hunters. Whether we like it or not, the lad's growing up ... and others are bound to notice, even if you haven't. In all honesty, little sister, if you met him today for the first time instead of having known him for years, wouldn't you find him a tempting morsel?"

"He's still a little young for me, but I see your point . . . and I don't tumble for just anybody."

"Since when?" I said, but I said it very quietly.

Tananda gave me a hard look, and for a moment I thought she had heard me.

"To hear you talk," she frowned, "I'd almost think you were in favor of a Bunny/Skeeve match-up."

"Her or somebody like her. Face it, little sister, the lad isn't likely to tie onto some nice, polite, 'girl-nextdoor' sort with his current life-style . . . and if he managed to, the rest of us would eat her alive in crackerjack time."

Tananda's pace slowed to almost a standstill.

"You mean that hanging around with us is ruining Skeeve's social life? Is that what you're trying to say?"

I wanted to take her by her shoulders and shake her, but even my gentlest shakes can be rather violent and I didn't want to get arrested for an attempted mugging. Instead, I settled for facing her with my sternest expression.

"Now, don't go all maudlin on me. What I'm trying to say is that Skeeve is used to associating with heavy hitters, so it's going to take a tougher-than-average lady fair to be comfortable around him, and vice versa. He'd be miserable with someone like that Luanna person."

"What's wrong with Luanna?"

I shrugged and resumed our stroll, forcing Tananda to keep up.

"Oh, she's pretty enough, I suppose. But she's a smalltime swindler who's so shortsighted she'd sell him out at the first hint of trouble. In short, she'd be an anchor around his neck who would keep him from climbing and potentially drag him down. If we're going to fix the lad up with a swindler, she should at least be a big-league swindler . . . like, say, a certain someone we know who has the Mob for a dowry."

That at least got a laugh out of Tananda, and I knew we had weathered the storm.

"Chumley, you're incredible! And I thought women were manipulative matchmakers. I never realized it before, but you're a bit of a snob, big brother."

"Think yew," I said in my best clipped accent. "I accept that observation with pride . . . when I consider the alternatives. I feel everyone would prefer to be snobs if they ever really had the choice."

"Why are we stopping?"

"Well, if we're done deciding Master Skeeve's future for the moment, I believe we have a spot of business to attend to."

She looked where I was pointing and found we were indeed standing in front of a dubious-looking establishment, embellished with a faded sign which proclaimed it to be the Suspended Sentence. The windows that weren't painted over were broken or gone completely, revealing a darkened interior. It might have been an abandoned building if it weren't for the definite sounds of conversation and laughter issuing forth from within.

Tananda started forward, then halted in her tracks.

"Wait a minute, big brother. What did you mean 'we'?"

"Well, I thought that since I was here, I'd just..."

"Wrong," she said firmly. "This is still my assignment, Chumley, and I'm quite capable of handling it by myself."

"Oh, I wouldn't breathe a word."

"No, you'd just loom over everybody with that snaggletoothed grin of yours and intimidate them into cooperating with me. Well, you can just wait out here while I go in alone. I'll do my own intimidating, if you don't mind."

This was exactly the sort of thing I was afraid of.

"It would be less brutal if I were along," I argued weakly.

"Why, big brother," she said with a wink. "A little brutality never bothered me. I thought you knew that."

Outflanked and outmaneuvered, I had no choice but to lean against the wall and watch as she marched into the tavern.

"Oh, I know, little sister," I sighed. "Believe me, I know."

Though forbidden to take active part in the proceedings, I was understandably curious and kept one ear cocked to try to ascertain what was happening from the sound effects. I didn't have long to wait.

The undercurrent of conversation we had noted earlier ceased abruptly as Tananda made her entrance. A pregnant pause followed, then there was a murmured comment prompting a sharp bark of laughter.

I closed my eyes.

What happened next was so preordained as to be choreographed. I recognized little sister's voice raised in query, answered by another laugh. Then came the unmistakable sound of furniture breaking. No, that's not quite right. Actually, the noise indicated the furniture was being smashed,

as in swung quickly and forcefully until an immovable object was encountered . . . like a head, for example.

The outcries were louder now, ranging from indignation to anger, punctuated by breaking glass and other such cacophonies. Years of hanging around with Tananda had trained my ear, so I amused myself by trying to catalogue the damage by its sound. That was a table going over, . . . Another chair, . . . A mirror (wonder how she missed the glasses?), . . . That was definitely a bone breaking, . . . Someone's head hitting the bar, the side, I think, . . . There go the glasses, . . . A body hurtled through the plate-glass window next to me and bounced once on the sidewalk before coming to a halt in a limp heap... a fairly good-sized one, too.

Unless I was mistaken, little sister was resorting to magic in this brawl or else she wouldn't have gotten that extra bounce on a horizontal throw. Either that or she was really annoyed! I debated whether or not to chide her for breaking our unwritten rules regarding no magic in bar-room brawls, but decided to let it slide. On the off chance that she was simply overly perturbed, such comment would only invite retaliation, and Tananda can be quite a handful even when she isn't steaming.

By this time, the din inside had ceased and an ominous stillness prevailed. I figured it was jolly well time I checked things out, so I edged my way along the wall and peeked through the door.

With the exception of one lonely chair which seemed to have escaped unscathed, the place was a wreck with everything in splinters or tatters. Bodies, limp or moaning, were strewn casually about the wreckage, giving the overall effect of a battlefield after a hard fight. . . which, of course, it was.

The only surprising element in the scene was Tananda. Instead of proudly surveying the carnage, as was her normal habit, she was leaning against the bar chatting quietly with the bartender. This puzzle was rapidly solved, as the individual in question glanced up and saw my rather distinctive features in the doorway.

"Hey, Chumley! Come join us in a drink to my long over due remodeling."

Tananda glanced my way sharply, then nodded her approval.

"Come on in, big brother. You'll never guess who owns this dive."

"I think I just figured it out, actually," I said, helping myself to a drink from a broken bottle that was perched on the bar. "Hello, Weasel. Bit of a ways from your normal prowling grounds, aren't you?"

"Not anymore," he shrugged. "This is home sweet home these days. Can't think of anyplace else I've been that would let me operate as a respectable businessman."

Tananda gagged slightly on her drink.

"A respectable businessman? C'mon, Weasel. This is Tananda and Chumley you're talking to. How long have we known you? I don't believe you've had an honest thought that whole time."

Weasel shook his head sadly.

"Look around you, sweetheart. This is my place . . . or at least it used to be. Been running it fair and square for some time now. It may not be as exciting as my old lifestyle, but it's easily as profitable since I never lose any time in the slammer."

Little sister was opening her mouth to make another snide remark when I elbowed her in the ribs. While I'm not above a bit of larceny myself from time to time, I figured that if Weasel genuinely wanted to go straight, the least we could do is not give him a hard time about it.

"So tell me, old chap," I said. "What brought about this amazing reform? A good woman or a bad caper?"

"Neither, actually. The way it was, see, was that I was framed ... no, really, this time. I hadn't done a thing, but all the evidence had me pegged for being guilty as sin. I thought I had really had it, but this guy pops up and backs me hard. I mean, he springs for a really good mouthpiece, and when the jury finds me guilty anyway, he talks to the judge and gets me a suspended sentence. As if that weren't enough, after I'm loose again, he spots me the cash I need to start this place ... a nice no-interest loan. 'Pay it back when you can,' he sez. I'll tell you, I ain't never had anybody believe in me like that before. Kinda made me think things over about how I was always saying that I had to be a crook 'cause no one would give me a fair shake. Well, sir, I decided to give the honest life a try... and haven't regretted it yet."

"This mysterious benefactor you mentioned ... his name wouldn't happen to be Hoos, would it?"

"That's right, Chumley. Easily the finest man I've ever met. You see, I'm not the only one he's helped out. Most of the people in this dimension have had some kind of hand up from him at one time or another. I'm not surprised you've heard of him."

Tananda trotted out her best smile.

"That brings us to why I'm here. Weasel. I'm trying to find this Hoos character, and so far the locals haven't been very helpful. Can you give me an introduction, or at least point me in a direction?"

The smile that had been on Weasel's face disappeared as if he had just been told he was left out of a rich uncle's will. His eyes lost their focus, and he licked his lips nervously.

"Sorry, Tananda," he said. "Can't help you there."

"Wait a minute, old buddy." Tananda's smile was a little forced now. "You must know where to find him. Where do you make your payments on this place?"

"Made the last payment half a year ago. Now if you'll excuse me ..."

Tananda had him by the sleeve before he could take a step.

"You're holding out on me. Weasel," she snarled, abandoning any attempt at sweetness. "Now either you tell me where I can find this Hoos character or I'll..."

"You'll what? Wreck the place? You're a little late there, sweetheart. You want the last chair, be my guest. It doesn't match the rest of the decor now, anyway."

From little sister's expression, I was pretty sure what she was thinking of destroying wasn't the chair, so I thought I'd better get my oar in before things got completely out of hand.

"If you don't mind my asking, old chap, is there any particular reason you're being so obstinate over a simple request?"

Tananda gave me one of her "stay out of this" looks, but Weasel didn't seem to mind the interruption.

"Are you kidding?" he said. "Maybe you weren't listening, but I owe this guy ... a lot more than just paying back a loan. He gave me a chance to start over when everybody else had written me off. I'm supposed to show my appreciation by setting a couple of goons on his trail?"

"Goons?"

She said it very softly, but I don't think anyone in the room mistook Tananda's meaning. In fact, a few of her earlier playmates who were still conscious started crawling toward the door in an effort to put more distance between themselves and the pending explosion.

Weasel, however, remained uncowed.

"Yeah, goons. What happened in here a few minutes ago? An ice-cream social?"

"He's got you there, little sister."

That brought her head around with a snap.

"Shutup, Chumley!" she snarled. "This is my assignment. Remember?"

"Wouldn't have it any other way. I do think Weasel has a point, though. You really don't give the impression of someone who wants a peaceful chat."

At first I thought she was going to go for my throat. Then she took a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

"Point taken," she said, releasing her grip. "Weasel, I really just want to talk to this guy Hoos. No rough stuff, I promise."

The bartender pursed his lips.

"I don't know, Tananda. I'd like to believe you. I suppose if Chumley says it's on the up-and-up ..."

That did it. Tananda spun on her heel and headed for the door.

"If it takes Chumley's say-so, then forget it. Okay? I'll do this my way, without help, even if it kills someone."

"Hey, don't go away mad," Weasel called after her. "Tell you what I'll do. When the police ask what happened here, I'll keep your name out of it, okay? I'll just play dumb and collect from the insurance. It'll kill my rates, but ..."

"Don't ruin your new record on my account. Total up the damages and I'll cover the cost personally."

With that she slammed out into the street, cutting off any further conversation.

"Is she kidding?" Weasel said. "It's gonna cost a bundle to fix this place up again."

"I really don't know, old boy. She's really mad, but by the same token, she's mad enough that I wouldn't cross her. If I were you, I'd start totaling up the damages. Eh, what?"

"I hear that," he nodded. "Well, you'd better get after her before she gets into trouble. Sorry to be such a hard case, but ..."

"Tut, tut," I waved. "You've been more than generous, all things considered. Well, cheerio."

I had expected to have to repeat my earlier performance of catching up with little sister, but instead I found her sitting on the curb just outside the bar. Now, she's not one to cry, either from anger or frustration, but seeing her there with her shoulders hunched and her chin in her hands, I realized that this might be one of those rare times.

"I say, you're really taking this quite hard, aren't you?" I said, as gently as I could.

She didn't look around.

"It's just that ... oh, pook! Weasel's right, and so are you. I've been charging around like a bull in a china shop, and all that's been accomplished is that even my friends won't help me out. Bunny'll never let me forget it if I can't even pull off a simple collection assignment."

Squatting beside her, I put a reassuring arm around her shoulders.

"I think that may be your problem, little sister. You're trying so hard to set a speed record to impress Bunny that you're rushing things . . . even for you. Now, I suggest that we retire someplace

and think things through a bit, hmmm? Forget about getting the Job done fast and just concentrate on getting it done."

That perked her up a bit, and she even managed a weak smile.

"Okay," she said. "Even though I still want to handle this on my own, I suppose there's nothing wrong with using you for a consultant since you're here. What I really feel like right now is a stiff drink to settle me down. I don't suppose you've spotted anyplace besides the Suspended Sentence where we could ..."

"Care for a glass of juice?"

We looked up to find the old boy with his vending cart smiling down on us. For a moment I was afraid that Tananda would snap at him, but she gave him a grin that was far more sincere than her earlier smile.

"Thanks, but I had something stronger in mind. And while we're on the subject of thanks, I appreciate the information you gave me earlier ... the second time, that is. I guess I was in too much of a hurry before to remember my manners."

"Don't mention it. It seems like most folks are in a hurry these days. Me, I always felt you should take your time and enjoy things. We've all got so little time, the least we should do is savor what time we have."

Tananda smiled at him with genuine warmth instead of her usual manipulative heat.

"That's good advice," she said. "I'll try to remember it. Come on, Chumley. We've got some planning to do . . . slow and careful planning, that is."

"Well, just holler if I can be of any help."

"Thanks, but what we really need is someone who can put us in touch with Mr. Hoos. I don't suppose you'd happen to know where I could find him?"

"Oh, that's easy."

"It is?"

I think we said it simultaneously. It was that kind of a surprise.

"Sure. Just stand up, blink three times, and he'll be right here."

That sounded a bit balmy to me, and for the first time I started doubting the old boy's sanity. Little sister, however, seemed to take him seriously. She was on her feet in the blink of an eye, blinking furiously.

"Well?" she said, peering around.

"Pleased to meet you. Missy. My name's Hoos. What's yours?"

We gaped at him ... it seemed to be the logical thing to do at the time.

"You!?" Tananda managed at last. "Why didn't you say something before?"

"Didn't know until now it was me you were looking for."

It was really none of my business, but I had to ask.

"Just out of curiosity, why was it necessary for little sister to blink three times?"

As I spoke, I realized I had forgotten to use my Big Crunch speech patterns. Hoos didn't seem to notices

"Wasn't, really. It's just you've been working so hard to find me, I thought I should throw in a little something to keep the meeting from being too anti-climactic. So, what can I do for you?"

There was a gleam of mischievousness in the old boy's eye that led me to believe he wasn't as daft as he would like people to believe. Tananda missed it, though, as she fumbled a battered sheet of paper out of her tunic.

"Mr. Hoos," she said briskly. "I'm here representing a client who claims you owe him money on this old account. I was wondering when he could expect payment, or if you would like to set up a schedule for regular submissions?"

Hoos took the paper from her and studied it casually.

"Well, I'll be ... I could have sworn I wrote him a check on this the next day."

"He did say something about a check being returned," Tananda conceded.

"Must of held onto it until I closed out. Dam! I thought I had covered everything."

"You closed out the account with the bank?"

Hoos winked at her.

"No, I closed out the bank. That was back when I was consolidating my holdings."

"Oh. Well, as I was saying, if you'd like to set up a payment schedule ..."

He waved a hand at her and opened the top of his vending cart. From my height advantage, I could see that the bottom of it was filled with gold coins.

"Why don't we just settle up now?" he said. "I've got a little cold cash with me ... get it? Cold cash? Let's see, you'll be wanting some interest on that..."

"MR. HOOS!"

We turned to find the bank manager striding rapidly toward us.

"I thought we agreed that you'd handle all your transactions through the bank! Carrying cash is an open invitation to the criminal element, remember?"

"What kind of a shakedown is going on here?" Weasel demanded, emerging from the door behind us. "This sure doesn't look like a friendly chat to me!"

A crowd was starting to form around us as people on the street drifted over and shopkeepers emerged from their stores. None of them looked particularly happy . . . or friendly.

"I know you want to handle this yourself, little sister," I murmured. "Would you mind if I at least showed my fangs to back some of this rabble off a ways? I want to get out of here alive, too."

"NOW JUST HOLD ON, EVERYBODY'!"

Hoos was standing on the seat of his vending cart holding up restraining hands to the mob.

"This little lady has a legitimate bill she's collecting for. That's all. Now just ease off and go back to whatever you were doing. Can't a man do a little business in private any more?"

That seemed to placate most of the onlookers, and they began to disperse slowly. Weasel and the bank manager didn't budge.

"Let me see that bill," the manager demanded. "Do you recall incurring this debt, Mr. Hoos?"

"Yes, I recall incurring this debt, Mr. Hoos," Hoos said, mimicking the manager's voice. "Now, if you don't mind, I'll just pay it and the matter will be settled."

"Well, this is most irregular. I don't know why they didn't simply follow regular channels and present their claim at the bank."

"We did stop by the bank," Tananda snapped. "All we got was a runaround." The manager peered at her. "Oh, yes. I remember," he drawled. "What I don't recall is your saying anything about submitting a claim for payment. There was some mention made of a bank robbery, though. Wasn't there?"

"You were moving a bit fast there, little sister," I chided gently.

"You mean to say you were working legit, Tananda?" Weasel chimed in. "Why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"I did! What's going on here, anyway. Weasel?"

"Mr. Hoos is a very rich man," the bank manager said. "He is also quite generous . . . sometimes too generous for his own good."

"It's my money, ain't it?" Hoos retorted. "Now, where were we? Oh, yes."

He started shoveling handfuls of coins into a paper bag.

"... We were talking about interest on this bill. What do you think would cover the trouble I've caused missing payment the way I did?"

"See what we mean?" Weasel said. "Mr. Hoos, any interest due should have been set at the time of the debt. Paying any more would be just giving your money away."

The bank manager gave us a weak excuse for an understanding smile.

"As you can see, many of us in this dimension who owe our good fortune to Mr. Hoos have taken it upon ourselves to protect him from unnecessary expense . . . not to mention from those who would seek to take advantage of his generosity."

"... After you've benefited from that generosity yourself," I added innocently.

That got a cackle of laughter out of Hoos.

"That's right. Big Fella," he said. "Don't think too harshly of the boys. though. There's nothing quite as honest as a reformed criminal. Would you like me to tell you what the manager here was doing before I bailed him out?"

"I'd rather you didn't," the manager huffed, but there was a pleading note in his voice.

I saw that mischievous glint in the old boy's eyes again and found myself wondering for the first time who had really framed Weasel just before he decided to reform. I think little sister caught it too.

"I don't think any interest will be necessary, Mr, Hoos," she said, taking the bag from him. "I'm sure my client will be happy with the payment as is."

"Are you sure? Can't I give you a little something for your trouble?"

"Sorry. Company policy doesn't allow its agents to take tips. Weasel, you'll send me a bill for the damages to your place?"

"You got it, sweetheart," the bartender waved.

"There, now," Hoos said, reaching into his cart. "I can cover that expense for you, at least."

Tananda shook her head.

"It's baked into our operating budget. Really, Mr. Hoos, I'm already working legit. I really don't need any extra boosts. C'mon, Chumley. It's time we were going."

Waving goodbye to the others, I took my place beside her as she started the gyrations to blip us through to our home base on Deva.

"Perhaps I shouldn't mention it, little sister," I said softly, "but unless my eye for damage has deserted me completely, isn't that bill going to come to more than our company's share of the collection?"

"I said I'd cover it personally, and I will," she murmured back. "The important thing is that I've completed this assignment in record time . . . and if you say anything to Bunny about the damages, I'll make you wish you had never been born. Do we understand each other, big brother?"

Chapter Three:

"It's all a matter of taste."
-B. MIDLER

"I REALLY HAVE to compliment you, dear. It never ceases to amaze me how much you do with so little."

That was Bunny's comment following Tananda's report on her last assignment. I had asked her to sit in to take notes, and I had to admit she had been extremely attentive while Tananda was speaking . . . which was more than I managed to do. From the report, the assignment was so routine as to be dull, though I personally wanted to hear Chumley's side of it before I made any final judgments on that score. That particular troll, however, was nowhere to be found . . . a fact which made me more than a little suspicious. Bunny was as efficient as ever, though, covering for my wandering thoughts by providing compliments of her own.

"Why, thank you. Bunny," Tananda purred back. "It really means a lot to me to hear you say that, realizing how much you know about operating with minimal resources."

It occurred to me that it was nice that these two were getting along as well as they did. Our operation could be a real mess if the two of them took to feuding.

It also occurred to me that there were an awful lot of teeth showing for what was supposed to be a friendly meeting. I decided it was time to move on to other subjects before things got too friendly.

"Things have been pretty quiet around here while you've been gone, Tananda," I said. "Not much new at all. How about it. Bunny? Any new prospects we should know about?"

Bunny made a big show of consulting her note pad.

Right away, this alerted me. You see, I know that Bunny keeps flawless notes in her head, and the only time she consults her pad is when she's stalling for time trying to decide whether or not to bring something to my attention. I may be slow, but I do learn.

"Welll..." she said slowly. "The only thing I show at all is an appointment with somebody named Hysterium."

"Hysterium? Why does that name sound familiar? Wait a minute. Didn't I see a letter from him about a week back?"

"That's right. He's a land speculator and developer who's been trying to get in to see you for some time now."

"That shouldn't be a problem. What time is the appointment for?"

Bunny was staring at her notes again.

"Actually, I was thinking of postponing the meeting, if not canceling it altogether," she said.

"Why would we want to do that?"

I was annoyed, but curious. I really wasn't wild about Bunny trying to make my decisions for me. Still, she had a good head for business, and if this guy made her hesitate, I wanted to know why.

"It's like I was trying to tell you before, Skeeve. Your time is valuable. You can't just give it away to any fruitcake who wants an appointment."

". . . And you figure this guy's a fruitcake?"

"He must be," she shrugged. "What he wants to talk about simply isn't our kind of work. As near as I've been able to make out, he wants us to serve as interior decorators."

That brought Tananda into the conversation.

"You're kidding. Interior decorators?"

Bunny actually giggled and turned to Tananda conspiratorially.

"That's right. It seems he started building a motel complex counting on the fact that his would be the only lodging available in the area. Since he's started construction, though, four others have

either announced their intentions to build or have started construction themselves . . . right on his doorstep. Of course, since his original plan didn't include any competition, the design is more utilitarian than decorative. It's going to make his place look real shabby by comparison, and he's afraid of losing his shirt."

"That's bad," Tananda winced. "So what does he want us to do about it?"

"Well, apparently our outfit is getting a bit of a rep for being miracle workers . . . you know, 'If you're really up against a wall, call THEM!?' Anyway, he wants us to come up with an alternate design or a gimmick or something to catch people's attention so that his place will fill up before the competition rents out room one."

"Us? The man must be crazy."

"Crazy or desperate," Bunny nodded. "I know we'd have to be crazy to take the job."

I waited until they were done laughing before I ventured my opinion.

"I think we should take it," I said at last.

I suddenly had their undivided attention.

"Really? Why should we do that?"

I steepled my fingers and tried to look wise.

"First off, there's the fee ... which, if I remember the letter correctly, was substantial even by our standards. Then again, there's the very point you were raising: we've never done anything like this before. It'll give us a chance to try something new . . . diversify instead of staying in a rut doing the same types of jobs over and over again. Finally ..."

I gave them both a lazy smile.

"... As you said, it's an impossible job, so we won't guarantee results. That means if we fail, it's what's expected, but if we succeed, we're heroes. The beauty of it is that either way we collect our fee."

The women exchanged quick glances, and for a moment I thought they were going to suggest that I take an extended vacation . . . like, say, at a rest home.

"Actually," Bunny said slowly, "I did have a course in interior decorating once in college. I suppose I could give it a shot. It might be fun designing a place on someone else's money."

"But, dear," Tananda put in, "you're so valuable here at the office. Since there's no guaranteed success on this one, it might be better if I took it on and left you free for more important assignments."

Bunny started to say something in return, then glanced at me and seemed to change her mind.

"I suppose if your heart's set on it, there's no reason we couldn't both work on it together. Right, Skeeve?"

Now that had to be the dumbest idea I had heard all day. Even if the two of them were getting along fine now, I was sure that if they started butting heads over design ideas, any hope of friendship would go right out the window. Fortunately, I had a solution.

"Sorry," I said carefully, "I actually hadn't planned on using either one of you on this assignment."

That hung in the air for a few moments. Then Tananda cleared her throat.

"If you don't mind my asking, if you aren't going to use either of us, who are you giving the assignment to?"

I came around my desk and perched on the edge so I could speak more personally.

"The way I see it, the new design will have to be attention-getting, a real showstopper. Now when it comes to eye-catching displays, I think we've got just the person on our staff."

Massha's Tale "ARE YOU SURE the great Skeeve sent you?"

Now I'll tell ya, folks, I'm used to people over reactin' to me, but this guy Hysterium seemed to be gettin' a little out a hand. I mean, Deveels are supposed to be used to dealin' with all sorts of folks without battin' an eye. Still, he was the client, and business is business.

"What ya sees is what ya gets. Cute, Rich, and Desperate."

It never hurts to spread a little sugar around, but this time the customer just wasn't buyin'.

"The Great Skeeve? The one who runs M.Y.T.H. Inc.?"

This was startin' ta get redundant, so I decided it was time ta put a stop to it once and for all. I heaved a big sigh... which, I'll tell you, on me is really something.

"Tell ya what . . . Hysterium, is it? Never was much good with names. If you want I'll go back and tell the Prez that you decided not to avail yourself of our services. Hmmm?"

All of a sudden, he got a lot more appreciative of what he was gettin'.

"No! I mean, that won't be necessary. You ... weren't quite what I was expecting, is all. So you're agents of M.Y.T.H. Inc., eh? What did you say your names were again?"

I don't know what he was expecting, but I was willin' ta believe we weren't it ... at least, I wasn't. Even when I'm just lazin' around I can be quite an eyeful, and today I decked myself out to the nines just ta be sure to make an impression. Of course, in my case it's more like out to the nineties.

No one has ever called me petite . . . not even when I was born. In fact, the nurses took ta calling my mom the "Oooh-Ahh Bird," even though I didn't get the joke until I was older. The fact of the matter is, folks, that I'm larger than large . . . somewhere between huge and "Oh, my God," leaning just a teensy bit toward the latter. Now I figure when you're my size there's no way to hide it, so you might as well flaunt it... and, believe me, I've become an expert on flauntin' it.

Take for example my chosen attire for the day. Now a lot of girls moan that unless you got a perfect figure, you can't wear a bare midriff outfit. Well, I've proven over and over again that that just isn't so, and today was no exception. The top was a bright lime green with purple piping, which was a nice contrast to the orange-and-redstriped bottoms. While I feel there's nothing wrong with going barefoot, I found these darling turquoise harem slippers and couldn't resist addin' them to the ensemble. Of course, with that much color on the bod, a girl can't neglect her makeup. I was usin' violet lipstick accented by mauve eye shadow and screaming yellow nail polish, with just a touch of rouge to hide the fact that I'm not gettin' any younger. I'd thought of dyein' my hair electric blue instead of its normal orange, but decided I'd stick with the natural look.

Now, some folks ask where I find outfits like that. Well, if ya can keep a secret, I have a lot of 'em made especially for me. Face it, ya don't find clothes like these on the rack ... or if ya do, they never fit right. Be sure ta keep that a secret, though. The designers I patronize insist that no one ever find out... probably afraid they'll get swamped with orders. They never put their labels in my clothes for the same reason. Even though I've promised not to breathe a word to anybody, they're afraid someone might find out by accident ... or was that in an accident? Whatever.

Oh, yes. I was also wearin' more than my normal allocation of jewelry, which, for anyone who knows me, means quite a lot. Ta save time, I won't try to list the whole inventory here. Just realize I was wearin' multiples of everything: necklaces, dangle bracelets, ankle bangles, earrings, nose rings ... I went especially heavy on rings, seein' as how this was for work. You see, not only are my rings a substantial part of my magical arsenal. Mom always said it wasn't ladylike to wear brass knuckles, and my rings give me the same edge in a fight, with style thrown in for good measure.

Anyway, I really didn't blame the client for bein' a little overwhelmed when we walked in. Even though he bounced back pretty well, all things considered, I think it took the two of us ta prove ta him just how desperate he really was.

"Well, I'm Massha," I said, "and my partner over there is Vic."

Hysterium nearly fell over his desk in his eagerness to shake Vic's hand. My partner was dressed stylishly, if sedately by my standards, in a leisure suit with a turtleneck and ankle-high boots. His whole outfit was in soft earth tones, and it was clear the Deveel had him pegged as the normal member of the twosome. Call it a mischievous streak, but I just couldn't let it stand at that.

"Actually, Vic isn't one of our regular staff. He's a free-lancer we bring in occasionally as a specialist."

"A specialist?" Hysterium noted, still shakin' Vic's hand. "Are you an interior decorator?"

My partner gave him a tight smile.

"No, I'm more of a night-life specialist. That's why I'm wearing these sunglasses. I'm very sensitive to the light."

"Night life? I'm not sure I understand."

I hid a little smile and looked at the ceiling.

"What Vic here is tryin' to say," I told the Deveel, as casually as I could, "is that he's a vampire."

Hysterium let go of the hand he had been pumpin' like it had bitten him.

"A vampire?!"

Vic smiled at him again, this time lettin' his outsized canines show.

"That's right. Why? Have you got something against vampires?"

The client started edgin' away across the office.

"No! It's just that I never . . . No. It's fine by me. Really."

"Well, now that that's settled," I said, takin' command of the situation again, "let's get down to business. If I understand it right, you've got a white elephant on your hands here and we're supposed to turn it into a gold mine by the first of the month."

Hysterium was gingerly seatin' himself behind his desk again.

"I... Yes. I guess you could summarize the situation that way. We're scheduled to be ready to open in three weeks."

"... And what kind of budget have we got to pull this miracle off with?" Vic said, abandoning his "looming vampire" bit to lean casually against the wall.

"Budget?"

"You know. Big Plunger. As in 'money?'" I urged. "We know what our fees are. How much are you willin' to sink into decorations and advertisin' to launch this place properly?"

"Oh, that. I think I've got the figures here someplace. Of course, I'll be working with you on this."

He started rummagin' through the papers on his desk.

"Wrong again. High Roller," I said firmly. "You're going to turn everything over to us and take a three-week vacation."

The Deveel's rummagin' became a nervous fidget. I was startin' ta see how he got his name.

"But... I thought I'd be overseein' things. It is my project, after all."

"You thought wrong. Mister," Vie said. "For the next three weeks it's our project."

"Don't you want my input and ideas?"

Fortunately, Vic and I had talked this out on the way over, so I knew just what to say.

"Let me put it to you this way, Hysterium," I said. "If you had any ideas you thought would work, you'd be tryin' them yourself instead of hirin' us. Now, three weeks isn't a heck of a lot of time, and we can't waste any of it arguin' with you over every little point. The only way to be sure you don't yield to the temptation of kibitzin' and stay out from underfoot is for you not ta be here. Understand? Now make up your mind. Either you let us do the job without interference, or you do it yourself and we call it quits right now."

The Deveel deflated slightly. It's always a pleasure doin' business with desperate people.

"Don't you at least need me to sign the checks?" he asked weakly.

"Not if you contact the bank and tell 'em we're cleared to handle the funds," I smiled.

"While you're at it," Vie suggested, "let the contractor know we'll be making a few changes in the finishing work his crew will be doing. Say that we'll meet him here first thing in the morning to go over the changes. Of course, we'll need to see the blueprints right away."

Hysterium straightened up a little at that, glancin' quickly from one of us to the other.

"Can you at least let me in on your plans? It sounds like you have something specific in mind."

"Not really. Sugar," I winked. "We're just clearin' the decks so we can work. The marchin' orders are to turn a third-rate overnight hotel into the biggest tourist trap Deva has ever seen. Now will you get movin' so we can get started?"

It took us quite a while to go over the blueprints. You see, buildin' things had never been a big interest of mine, so it took a while to understand what all the lines and notes meant. Fortunately, Vic had studied a bit of architecture at one point when he was thinkin' of givin' up magic, so he could explain a lot of it to me . . .or at least enough so I could follow what he was talkin' about.

"Let's face it, Massha," he said at last, leanin' back in his chair. "No matter how long we stare at the drawings, they aren't going to change. What he's built here is a box full of rooms. The place has about as much personality as an actuary . . . which is to say, a little less than an accountant."

"You gotta admit, though," I observed, "the setup has a lot of space."

I could see why our client was nervous. The place was plain, but it was five floors of plain spread over a considerable hunk of land. There was a lot of extra land for expansion, which at the moment seemed unlikely. Hysterium had obviously sunk a bundle into puttin' this deal together, money he would never see again if nobody rented a room here.

"Tell me. Vie. Your home dimension is entertainment oriented enough so that the competition for crowds has to be pretty heavy. What's packin' 'em in these days, anyway?"

The vampire frowned for a few moments as he thought over my question.

"Well, it depends on what kind of clientele you're after. You can go after the family groups or folks who have already retired. My favorite is the young professionals. They usually haven't started their families yet or are passing on them completely, which means they've got both money and time. For that set, clubs are always big. If I really wanted to pull crowds into a new place, I'd probably open a good disco."

"Now we're talkin'. Do you think you could put one together in three weeks?"

My partner shook his head and laughed.

"Hold on a second, Massha. I was just thinking out loud. Even if I could come up with a plan for a club, there's no room for it."

Now it was my turn ta laugh.

"Vic, honey, if there's one thing we've got it's room. Look here ..."

I flipped the blueprints to the drawin's of the first floor.

"... What if we knocked out the inside walls here on the ground level? That'd give us all the space we'd ever need for your disco."

"Too much space," the vampire said, studyin' the plans. "The key to one of these clubs is to keep it fairly small so people have to wait to get in. Besides, I'm afraid if we knocked out all the internal walls, there wouldn't be enough support for the rest of the structure."

An idea was startin' ta form in my head.

"So try mis. We keep the whole outer perimeter of rooms . . . turn 'em into shops or somethin'. That'll give extra support and cut back on your club space. And if that's still too big . . ."

"About four times too big."

"Uh huh. What would you say ta a casino? I haven't seen one yet that didn't draw tourists by the droves."

Vic expressed his admiration with a low whistle.

"You don't think small, do you? I'm surprised you aren't thinking of a way to make money off the grounds as well."

"I can't make up my mind between a golf course and an amusement park." I said. "That can wait for a while until we see how the rest of this works out."

Right about then, I noticed Vic babes had his cheaters off and was studyin' me. Now, I'm used to bein' stared at, but there was somethin' kinda unsettlin' about his expression that was outside the norm, if ya know what I mean. I waited for him ta speak his mind, but after a while the silence started gettin' to me.

"What're you lookin' at me that way for. Young and Bloodthirsty? Did I grow another head sudden-like when I wasn't lookin'?"

Instead of answerin' right away, he just kept starin' until I was thinkin' a bustin' him one just ta break the suspense.

"You know, Massha," he said finally, "for-a-so-called apprentice, you're pretty savvy. With the way you dress and talk it's easy to overlook, but there's quite a mind lurking behind all that mascara, isn't there?"

Now if there's one thing I have trouble handlin' it's praise . . . maybe 'cause I don't hear that much of it. To keep my embarrassment from bein' too noticeable, I did what I always do and ducked behind a laugh.

"Don't let the wrappin' fool ya. Fangs. Remember, I used ta be an independent before I signed on with Skeeve's gang. Magician for the city-state of Ta-hoe and then Veygus over on Jahk, that was me."

"Really? I didn't know that."

Just goes to show how rattled I was. I couldn't even remember how little Vic knew about our operation and the people in it.

"That was when I first ran into the Boy Wonder. He was in trouble then, too ... in fact, Skeeve seems to have a knack for trouble. Remind me sometime to tell you about the spot he was in when I did loom up."

"Why not now?" he said, leanin' back in his chair. "I'm not going anywhere, and there's no time like the present for learning more about one's business associates."

As you've probably noticed, I was eager to get off the spot, and talking' about Skeeve seemed to be just the ticket I was lookin' for.

"Well, at the time his big green mentor had taken off for Perv, see ... some kinda family problem. Anyway, the king puts me touch on Skeeve to stand in for him, supposedly so's his royalness could take a bit of a vacation . . . say, for a day or so. What the Man neglected to mention to our colleague was that his bride-to-be, a certain Queen Hemlock, was due ta show up expectin' ta tie the knot with whoever was warmin' the throne just then."

"Queen Hemlock?"

"Let me tell you, she was a real sweetheart. Probably would have ended up on the gallows at an early age if she hadn't been the daughter of a king. As it was, she ended up runnin' the richest kingdom in that dimension and was out to merge with me best military force around . . . which turned out to be the kingdom that Skeeve was babysittin'."

Vic frowned.

"If she was already in a position to buy anything she wanted; what did she need an army for?"

"For those doodads that weren't for sale. You see, we all have our little dreams. Hers was to rule the world. That was Queen Hemlock for you. The morals of a mink in heat and the humble aspirations of Genghis Khan."

"And the two of you stopped her?"

"To be truthful with you, Skeeve did. All I did was round up the king so we could put him back on the throne where he was supposed to be. Skeeve set 'em up with a pair of wedding rings that never come off which also link their lives. That meant if Queenie wanted to off Kingie and clear the path for a little world-conquering, she'd be slitting her own throat at the same time."

"Where'd he find those? I never heard of such a thing."

I gave him a chuckle and a wink.

"Neither has anyone else. What they got was some junk jewelry from a street vendor here at the Bazaar along with a fancy story concocted by one Skeeve the Great. What I'm sayin' is that he sold 'em a line of hooley, but it was enough to cool Hemlock's jets. Smooth move, wasn't it?"

Instead of joinin' in with my laughter, the vampire thought for a few moments, then shook his head. "I don't get it," he said. "Now, don't mistake me ... I think Skeeve's a swell guy and all that. It's just that from all I can find out, he doesn't use all that much magik, and what he does use is pretty weak

stuff. So how has he built up an organization of top-flight talent around him like you and the others?"

"I'll tell ya. Vic, there's magik and there's magik. Skeeve has ... how can I explain it? He may not be strong in the bibbity-bobbity-boo department, and he hasn't got the woman sense of a Quasimodo, but he's got enough heart for three normal folks."

I punched him lightly on the arm.

"Remember when I said he has a knack for gettin' into trouble? Well, the truth is that more often than not he's bailin' someone else out who really deserves to get what's comin' to 'em. In that Hemlock caper I was just tellin' you about, he could have headed for the horizon once he figured out that he'd been had . . . but that would have left a whole kingdom without a leader, so he stuck it out. When I met him, he was workin' at gettin' Tananda loose after she got pinched tryin' ta steal a birthday present for Aahz. Heck, as I recall, the first time we crossed paths with you we were settin' up a jailbreak for his old mentor. That's Skeeve, if ya see what I mean. He's always gettin' in over his head tryin' ta do what he thinks is right, and a body gets the feelin' ... I don't know, that if you stand beside him he just might be able to pull it off. Even if it don't work out, you feel you've been doin' somethin' good with your life instead of just hangin' in there for the old number one. Am I makin' any sense at all?"

"More than you know," Vie said. "If I'm understanding you properly, he sets a high personal standard, and consequently draws people to him who are impressed by the sincerity of his actions . . . who in turn try to match the proportionate output they perceive in him. It's an interesting theory. I'll have to think about it."

I couldn't help but notice that once old Fangs got wrapped up in somethin', he started soundin' more like a college prof than a night-lovin' partygoer. It made me a little curious, but since I don't like people tryin' to peek at more of me than I'm willin' to show, I decided to let it go.

"Speakin' a theories," I said, "we got one that isn't goin' to work itself out without a lotta pushin' from us." The vampire stretched his arms and yawned. "All right. I'll take care of the disco and the architect if you can start checking into the casino and the shops. Okay?"

I had to admit I was a little taken aback by his enthusiasm.

"You mean right now? It's pretty late." He showed me his fangs in a little grin. "For you, maybe. Us night people are just starting to wake up, which means it's just the right time for me to start scouting around for a band and bar staff. Since we're on different missions anyway, though, I've got no problem if you want to catch a few Z's before you do your rounds. What say we meet here same time tomorrow for an update?"

Now, folks, I may strut a bit and loud-talk even more, but I'll also be the first to admit that little Massha doesn't know everythin'. One of the many things I know next ta nothin' about is how ta run a casino. Considerin' this, it was easy ta see I was goin' ta require the services of an expert ... in casinos, that is. It took me a while to locate him, but I finally ran my mark to ground. He was

slouched at a back table in a dingy bar, and from the look of him things hadn't been goin' real good. I was glad ta see that ... not that I wished him ill, mind you; it just made my sales pitch a little easier.

"Hiya, Geek," I said, easin' up to his table. "Mind if I join ya?"

He blinked his eyes a couple times tryin' ta focus 'em before he realized that the person talkin' to him really was that big.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't one of the M.Y.T.H. Inc. hotshots. What brings you to this neck of the woods, Massha? Slumming?"

I pulled up a chair so's I could sit close to him. I mean, he hadn't said no, and that's about as close to an invitation as I usually get.

"I know you're busy. Geek, so I'll give it to ya straight. We're cookin' up a little deal and I'd like you to be a part of it. Interested?"

"Well, whaddaya know. After making me sell my club and putting me out on the street, the Great Skeeve has a deal for me. Isn't that just ducky!"

Now I may not know casinos, but I know drunk when I see it. Seein' as how it was just sunset, which for the Geek is like early morning, he was in pretty bad shape. The trouble was, I needed him sober. Normally I'd a taken him off someplace and let him sleep it off, but I was in a hurry. This called for drastic action.

Glancin' around the place to be sure there were no witnesses, I leaned forward, wrapped my arms around his neck, and gave him the biggest, juiciest kiss I knew. One of the other things I know more than a little about is kissin', and this particular sample lasted a fairly long time. When I felt him startin' ta struggle for air, I let go and leaned back.

"Wha . . . Who . . . Massha!" he said, gaspin' like a fish out of water. "What happened?"

I batted my eyelashes at him.

"I don't think I catch your drift. Big Red."

The Geek just sat there blinkin' for a few seconds, one hand on the top of his head like he was afraid it was goin' ta come off.

"I... I don't know," he managed at last. "I've been drunk for ... what day is it? Never mind! ... for a long time. Now all of a sudden I'm wide awake and stone cold sober. What happened? How long have you been here?"

I smiled ta myself and mentally accepted a pat on the back. My record was still intact. I've been told more times than you can count that nothin' sobers a body up as completely or as fast as a little hug and a kiss from Massha.

"Just long enough to catch the curtain goin' up," I said. "Now that we're all present and accounted for, though, I want ya ta listen close to a little proposition."

The Geek used ta be one of the biggest bookies at the Bazaar. At one point, he had his own club, called the Even Odds. Of course, that was before Skeeve caught him usin' marked cards and suggested strongly that he sell us his club. I wasn't sure how the Prez would react to my cuttin' the Geek in on this new project, but he was the only one I could think of who had the necessary knowledge to set up a casino and was currently unemployed.

"I don't know, Massha," he said after I had explained the situation. "I mean, it sounds good ... but a casino's a big operation. I'm not exactly rolling in investment capital right now."

"So start small and build. Look, Geek, the house is going ta be providin' the space and decor rent free. All you have ta do is set up security and round up some dealers to work the tables."

"Did you say 'rent free'?"

It occurred ta me that maybe I shouldn't have sobered him up quite so much. Now he was back ta thinkin' like a Deveel bookie.

"Well . . . practically. The way I figure it, the house will take a piece of the action, which means you'll only have ta pay rent if you lose money."

"That's no problem," the Geek said with a smile. "With the dealers I'm thinking of, there's no way we'll end up in the red."

Somehow, I didn't like the sound of that.

"I hope it goes without sayin' that we expect you ta run a clean operation. Geek," I warned. "I don't think the Great Skeeve would like ta be part of settin' up a crooked casino. Content yourself with the normal winnings the odds throw the house. Okay?"

"Massha! You wound me! Have I ever run anything but a clean game?"

I gave him a hard stare, and he had the decency to flush slightly.

"Only once that I know of," I said, "and if I recall correctly it was Skeeve who caught you at it that time. If I were you, I'd keep my nose clean . . . unless you want ta wake up some morning on a scratchy lily pad."

The Geek sat up a little straighter and lost his smug grin. "Can he really do that?"

"It was just a figure of speech, but I think you catch my meanin'. Just remember, the only times you've lost money on our crew is when you got suckered into bettin' against us."

"That's true," the Deveel said with a thoughtful nod. "Speaking of Skeeve, are you sure there won't be a problem there? The last time I saw him we weren't on the best of terms."

"You worry about the casino and leave Skeeve ta me," I smiled confidently, hopin' I knew what I was talkin' about. "Anyway, Skeeve's not one ta hold a grudge. If memory serves me correctly, Aahz was all set ta tear your throat out that last meeting, and it was Skeeve who came up with the suggestion that let you off the hook with your skin intact."

"True enough," the Geek nodded. "The Kid's got class."

"Right. Oh! Say, speakin' a class, you might try to run down the Sen-Sen Ante Kid and offer him a permanent table of his own."

The Deveel cocked his head at me. "No problem, but do you mind my asking why?"

"Well, the last time he was in the vicinity for that match-up with Skeeve, I got stuck baby-sitting that character assassin you fobbed off on us. That means I'm the only one on our team who didn't get a chance ta meet him . . . and, from what I hear, he's my kinda guy. Besides, he might appreciate settlin' down instead of hoppin' from game to game all the time. Aren't any of us gettin' any younger, ya know."

"Ain't that the truth," the Geek said with a grimace. "Say, that might not be such a bad idea. Having the best Dragon Poker player at the Bazaar as a permanent player at the casino would be a pretty good draw."

We talked a while more, but it was all detail stuff. The Geek was on board, and the casino was startin' ta take shape.

Casinos may not be my forte, but nobody knows retail stores like yours truly. Bunny may be aces when it comes ta findin' class outfits at decent prices, and Tananda sure knows her weapons, but when it comes ta straight-at-ya, no-holds-barred shoppin', they both take a back seat ta Massha.

I had noticed this place long before the assignment came up, but it stuck in my mind so I thought I'd check it out. There were big "Going Out Of Business" and "Everything Must Go" sale signs all over the window, but they had been there for over a year, so I didn't pay 'em much heed.

For a storefront shop, the place was a disaster. Their stock could only be described as "stuff" . . . and that's bein' generous. There were T-shirts and ash trays and little dolls all mixed in with medications and magazines in no particular order. The shelves were crammed with a small selection of the cheap end of everything. They didn't have as many clothing items as a clothing store, as many hardware items as a hardware store . . . I could go on, but you get the point. If you wanted selection or quality in anything, you'd have ta go somewhere else. In short, it was just the sort of place I was lookin' for.

"Can I help you, lady?"

The proprietor was perched behind the counter on a stool readin' a newspaper. He didn't get up when he talked ta me, so I decided ta shake him up a little.

"Well, yes. I was thinkin' a buyin' a lot of ... stuff. Can you give me some better prices if I buy in volume?"

That brought him out from behind the counter with a pad and pencil which had materialized out of thin air.

"Why, sure, lady. Always ready to deal. What was it you were thinking of?"

I took my time and looked around the place again.

"Actually, I was wonderin' if you could quote me a price on everything in the store."

"Everything? Did you say everything?"

"Everything.. including your sweet adorable self."

"I don't understand, lady. Are you saying you want to buy my store?"

"Not the store, just what's in it. I'm thinkin' this place could do better in a new location. Truthfully now, how has business been going for you lately?"

The owner tossed his pad and pencil back onto the counter.

"Honestly? Not so hot. My main supplier for this junk just raised his prices . . . something about a new union in his factory. I either gotta raise my prices, which won't help, since this stuff is hard enough to move as it is, or go out of business, which I've seriously been considering."

I thought it would be best not to comment on the union he'd mentioned.

"You don't think a new location would help?"

"New location ... big deal! This is the Bazaar at Deva, lady. One row of shops is like any other for pedestrian traffic. On any one of those rows you can find better stuff than I got to sell."

This was turnin' out ta be even better than I had hoped.

"Just suppose," I said, "just suppose the new location was in a hotel, and suppose that hotel had a casino and disco. That would give you a captive clientele, since nobody wants ta leave the building and wander around to find somethin' they can buy right where they are."

"A hotel and casino, eh? I dunno, though. Junk is still junk."

"Not if you had an exclusive to print the name of the place on everythin' you sell. Junk with a name on it is souvenirs, and folks expect ta pay more for them. Right?"

The proprietor was startin' ta get excited.

"That's right! You got a place like this, lady? How much ya asking for rent?"

"Minimal, with a piece of the action goin' ta the house. How does that sound?"

"How much floor space do you have available? If I can expand, I can get a volume discount from my supplier and still raise my prices. Say, do you have a printer lined up yet?"

"Hadn't really thought about it."

"Good. I got a brother-in-law who does good work cheap . . . fast, too. How about a restaurant? All those folks gotta eat."

Now that was one that had slipped by both Vic and me.

"A restaurant?"

". . . 'Cause if you don't, I know a guy who's been looking to move his deli since they raised the rent on the place he's got."

I had a feelin' my problems with the storefronts was solved.

"This is the pits, you know?"

"How about that? The Pitts?"

"No. How about the Funny Farm?"

"Uh-uh. The Snake Pit?"

"Will you get off pits?"

"Well, then, how about ..."

What we finally settled on was The Fun House. Our judgment was influenced a bit by the fact that I managed to locate a down-at-the-heels carnival. We let 'em set up on our grounds, and they gave us our pick of their displays for decorations.

The best of the lot was the outsized figures they had on top of their rides . . . and particularly The Fun House. These figures were of bein's from all over the dimensions and were animated to move

their arms and heads while hidden speakers went "Ho Ho Ho" at passersby. I thought they were terrific and had them installed all over the outside of the hotel. . . except for the Fat Lady. Her I had installed in the men's John off the lobby.

Once we had that, the rest of the decorations fell into place. There wasn't much we could do to make the shape of the building excitin', so I had it painted with wide stripes ... like a circus tent, only with more colors.

Vic did the disco, and it was a beaut. He did the whole place in black: floors, walls, ceiling, furniture, everything. He also attached chairs and tables to the walls and ceiling at different angles with life-sized dummies in evening attire. The overall effect was one of disorientation, so that when the band was goin' and the lights flashin', you weren't really sure which way was up. To add to the effect, the dance floor was slanted a bit and rotated slowly. It was like bein' suspended in space and bein' buffeted by cosmic winds and gravity at the same time. He even named the club "The Pit" in appreciation of me and to apologize for comin' down so hard on the name when I suggested it for the hotel.

The casino was all mine, and I decided ta go for broke. I found a painter with a sense of humor, and we did the place in camouflage . . . except instead of usin' greens and browns, we leaned heavy on the basic colors in day-glo shades. For a crownin' touch, we spaced mirrors all around the place, but we used the distortion mirrors from the carnival Fun House. This not only gave the place the illusion of bein' larger, but when the customers glanced at themselves in the mirrors, they had the same kind of meltin' lines as the decor. It definitely raised questions in the mind as to exactly which reality we were operatin' in.

Vic was afraid the impact of the whole operation was a bit bright, but I argued that the whole idea was ta stand out from the crowd and let people know we were there. I did, however, unbend enough to agree that we should have Skeeve on hand for our meetin' with Hysterium the night before our opening. I mean, negotiatin' never was my strong suit, and I had no idea how the client was going to react to our rather innovative ideas.

"You've ruined me! That's what you've done! Ruined me!"

That was our client speakin'. You may guess from the sound of it that he was less than pleased with our work. When you realize that that was how he was soundin' after we had spent an hour calmin' him down, you've got an idea of exactly how unhappy he was.

"I'm not sure I understand what your problem is, Mr. Hysterium," Vic said. "If you have a complaint . . ."

"A complaint?" the Deveel shrieked. "I wouldn't know where to start! What did you people think you were doing, anyway?"

"We were tumin' your dump into a profit-makin' hotel. That's what we were supposed to do."

I was tryin' to stay out of this 'cause a my temper, but I had to get a word or two in here somewhere.

"A hotel? A hotel? This isn't a hotel! What I left you with was a hotel! What I came back to is a sideshow! And what do you mean by profitable? All the rooms on the first floor are gone! That cuts my rental earnings by twenty percent!"

"Twenty percent of an empty hotel is still nothing!" I shot back.

"Massha's right," Vic said, stepping between us. "We needed that space for attractions to draw in some customers. Besides, everything we put in there generates revenues for the hotel."

"Not if they don't sell anything!" Hysterium argued. "Have you been in any of those places? Have you seen the junk they're selling? And the prices . . . they're charging more for a cup of coffee in that club you put in than I'm used to paying for a whole meal!"

"Not everybody eats as cheap as you do," I muttered under my breath.

"What?"

"I said you stand ta clear a heap when they do ... sell stuff to the customers, that is."

"But there aren't going to be any . . . Ohhh! I'm ruined!"

The Deveel sank into a chair and hid his face in his hands.

"Of course, if you had wanted design approval, you should have stayed around. As it was, Massha and Vic had no recourse but to use their own judgment." That was Skeeve speakin' from his chair in the comer. So far, he hadn't done much more than listen to the rantings.

"Stayed around?" Hysterium's head came up with a snap. "They made me go! They said I'd have to trust them if I wanted to use your outfit's services."

"Precisely," Skeeve nodded, changin' tactics without batting an eye. "You wanted our services, you trusted us, and we serviced you. I don't see what the complaint is."

"What the complaint is, is that you charged me an arm and a leg ... in advance ... to put me out of business! If I had lost money on a regular hotel it would have been bad enough, but to lose money and be made a laughing-stock to boot. . . ." There were tears formin' in the developer's eyes. "That was my wife's family money I invested. I could turn a profit if I only had the capital, I told them. Now ..."

His voice broke and his head sank again.

"If that's the only problem, maybe we can work something out."

"Forget it! Cutting your fee wouldn't help. I need to make money, not lose less."

"Actually, I was thinking more of taking the hotel off your hands. Buying it outright."

I shot a glance at Skeeve. He was leanin' back in his chair studyin' the ceiling.

"Are you serious?" the Deveel said hopefully.

"Why not? That way you turn a profit of ... say, fifteen percent over cost? ... for the building and land, and making the place work, much less dealing with its reputation, will be our problem. That's what we agreed to do in the first place . . . sort of."

Hysterium was on his feet pumpin' Skeeve's hand almost before the Prez had stopped talkin'.

"I'll tell you, Skeeve . . . Mr. Skeeve . . . you're, a real gent. This is terrific! Just when I thought... I can't tell you how much I appreciate ..."

"Don't mention it," Skeeve said, retrievin' his hand. "Why don't you go on over to my office right now? My secretary is still there. Just explain everything to her, and she'll start drawing up the papers. I want to have a few words with my agents, then I'll be along to sign off on the deal."

"On my way," the Deveel waved. "Gee. I can't get over ..."

"Now, you realize, of course, we don't have that kind of cash on hand. We'll have to give a down payment and arrange some kind of payment schedule."

"Fine. Fine. As long we get a contract guaranteeing my profit."

Then he was gone, leavin' us ta stare at each other in silence. Finally, Skeeve gathered us up with his eyes.

"The placed is booked solid?" he said, confirmin' what we had told him in our debriefing.

"... For three weeks, with a waiting list for cancellations," Vic confirmed. "We're taking reservations for as much as a year and a half in advance."

"... And Hysterium doesn't know?"

"He never asked, and we never got the chance to tell him," I shrugged. "You saw how he was."

Skeeve nodded thoughtfully.

"That means, if my calculations are correct, we'll be able to pay him off in full in less than three months . . . not including the take from the casino and the shops."

He rose and stretched, then gave us a wink.

"C'mon, you two," he said. "I think I'll invest an arm and a leg and buy you both a drink!"

Chapter Four:

"If you're too busy to help your friends, you're too busy!"

-L. IACOCCA

ACTUALLY, I WASN'T all that wild over The Fun House. I mean, it was making us money hand over fist, but I somehow never figured on owning a hotel/casino. In particular, I didn't think it was a good idea to set the precedent of buying out dissatisfied customers, no matter how profitable the deal turned out to be. As it was, Hysterium's relatives (on his wife's side) were trying to get the deal invalidated on the basis that he must have been out of his mind, or at least not in his right mind, to sell such a lucrative business at the price he did. I wasn't particularly worried, as this was still the Bazaar at Deva, and if everyone who signed off on a bad deal here was declared insane, the economy would collapse.

The part that really bothered me about the deal was that it meant associating with the Geek again. In past dealings with him, he had consistently proven to be primarily concerned with lining his own pockets without much regard for anyone else, and I felt it was dangerous to place him in a position where he had such temptingly easy access to our money, or even a piece of it.

Still, I couldn't argue with Massha's logic in including him in the scheme, and at the time she approached him she had no idea he was going to end up reporting to us. Bunny assured me that she was personally auditing the financial reports for the casino that the Geek turned in along with our share of the take, but I found that in spite of that I tended to spend inordinate amounts of time studying the spreadsheets myself, half expecting to find some indication that he was somehow skimming a little off the top for his personal accounts.

That's what I was doing this particular afternoon, setting aside the countless letters and chores that were pressing on my time to take one more pass at auditing the Geek's financial reports. Bunny had told me once that a hefty percentage of accountants and financial analysts operated more out of spite than from any instinctive or learned insight. That is, rather than detecting that there's anything wrong from the figures they study, they single out some 'department that's been giving them grief or a manager who made snide comments about them at the company party, then go over their reports very carefully. She maintains that anyone's reports will come up flawed or suspicious if reviewed closely enough.

That may well be, if one is a skilled numbers cruncher. All I discovered was that prolonged periods of time spent staring at rows of little numbers are a pain . . . literally and figuratively. Specifically, after a few hours hunched over the reports, I was feeling cramps and stabbing pain in my eyes, my neck, my back, and regions lower.

Leaning back to ease the strain and stretching a bit, my eye fell on the pencil I had tossed down on my desk from disgust and frustration. With a smirk, I reached out with my mind, grabbed it, and

flipped it into the air. What do magicians do when they get bored or depressed? Tinker around with magik, natch!

Remember once upon a time when I used to sweat and groan to levitate a feather? Well, those days are long gone. Nothing like a few years of using the basics like levitation to save your skin to increase one's confidence . . . and, as Aahz always told me, confidence is the key to magik.

I took the pencil up to the ceiling, paused, then took it on a tour of the room, stopping cold at each corner to give it a right-angle turn. I realized I was humming a little tune under my breath as I put it through its paces, so I brought it down over the desk and started using it like a conductor's baton, cueing the drums and the horns as the tune built.

"Nice to see you're keeping your hand in."

I glanced over at the door, and discovered my old mentor leaning against the frame watching me work.

"Hi, Aahz," I said, keeping the pencil moving smoothly. "Well, things have been so busy I haven't had much time to practice, but I do still turn a spell now and then."

As offhand as I sounded, I was secretly very pleased that the pencil hadn't wavered when Aahz surprised me. Not breaking concentration on a spell, or, rather, maintaining a spell once concentration was broken, had been one of the harder lessons Aahz had taught me, and I thought I finally had it down pat. I only hoped he noticed.

"Got a few minutes for your old partner?"

"Sure, pull up a chair."

I decided it would be rude to keep playing with the pencil while I was talking to Aahz, so I brought it down to where I could pluck it smoothly from the air as I leaned forward. Aahz didn't seem to notice, though. He was craning his neck slightly to look at the papers scattered across my desk.

"What's all this?"

"Oh, just going over the financials from The Fun House. I still don't trust the Geek completely."

Aahz settled back in his chair and cocked his head at me.

"The Fun House, eh? Haven't really had a chance to talk with you much about that one. That was quite a coup you pulled off there."

I felt warmed and flattered by his comment. While we were technically equals . . . had been for some time . . . he was still my old teacher, and I couldn't help but react to praise from him.

"It seemed like the best route out of a bad situation," I said offhandedly.

"That's right," he nodded. "It's always easier to solve a problem by throwing money at it than by thinking your way out."

Suddenly this no longer sounded particularly complimentary. I felt my pride turning to defensiveness with the speed of a snuffed candle.

"I believe the financial returns to the company have more than justified the wisdom of the investment."

It sounded a little stuffy, even to me. I had noticed that more and more these days I was retreating into stuffiness for defense in situations where I used to whine about my inexperience or lack of working data.

"Well, I've never been one to complain about clearing a profit," Aahz said, flashing one of his ear-to-ear displays of teeth. "Even when it means acquiring a casino we neither want nor need."

This was definitely sounding like a lecture shaping up instead of a testimonial as to what a fine job I had been doing. While I could make time for a chat and would always take time for "atta boys," I was in no mood to have my shortcomings expounded upon.

"What's done is done, and hindsight is academic," I said briskly, cutting short the casino conversation. "What was it you wanted to see me about?"

I almost started fidgeting with the paper on my desk to press the point home that I was busy, but remembered in time that they were the casino financial reports . . . definitely not the way to draw conversation away from that particular subject.

"Oh, nothing much," Aahz shrugged. "I was just heading out on a little assignment and thought you might want to tag along."

"An assignment? I haven't given you an assignment."

I regretted the words as soon as I said them. Not only did they sound bureaucratic, they underscored the fact that I hadn't been finding any work for Aahz, despite our heavy work load.

My old mentor never batted an eye at the faux pas.

"It's not really an assignment. More a busman's holiday. I was going to do a little work on my own time. A favor for a friend who can't afford our normal fees."

I should have been suspicious right then. If I'm at all money-grubbing, it rubbed off from Aahz during our association. Anytime Aahz starts talking about giving something away that we could sell, like our time, I should know there's something afoot.

"Gee, Aahz, I don't think I could take the time. I've been really busy."

"... Levitating pencils and checking for embezzlement of funds that are all gravy anyway?"

His attempt at an innocent smile was short enough of the mark to be a deliberate botch.

"C'mon, Aahz. That's not fair. I have been working hard. I just need a break once in a while. That's all."

"My point precisely," my partner said, springing his trap. "It's about time you got out of this office and out in the field before you become a permanent part of that chair. You don't want to get too far out of touch with the troops, you know, and this little chore is just the thing to remind you what it's like to be on assignment."

I could feel myself being outflanked the longer he talked. In desperation, I held up a hand.

"All right, all right. Tell me about it. Who is this friend of yours?"

"Actually, he's more of an acquaintance. You know him too. Remember Quigley?"

"Quigley? Demon hunter turned magician? That Quigley?"

Aahz nodded vigorously.

"That's the one. It seems he's got a problem he's not up to handling himself. . . which isn't surprising, somehow. I thought you might be interested in lending a hand, since we were the ones who set him up for it."

Check and mate.

"Okay, Aahz," I said, looking mournfully at the unfinished work on my desk. "Just let me clear a few things with Bunny, and I'll be right with you."

Aahz's Tale

JAHK HADN'T CHANGED MUCH from our last visit, but then these off-the-beaten-track dimensions seldom do. We were traveling in disguise, which we Pervects have gotten into the habit of doing when visiting a dimension we've been to before, and the Kid picked up the trick from me. You see, contrary to popular belief, Pervects don't like to fight all the time, and the second time through a dimension we usually end up in a fight with anyone who recognizes us and figures they're better prepared than the first meeting. This only confirms the belief we hold on Perv that the rest of the dimensions are antisocial and we'd best swing first to get the surprise advantage, not to mention doing our best to discourage off-dimension visitors whenever possible. Our dimension is unpleasant enough without having strange riffraff drifting through stirring up trouble.

Of course, being a Pervect wasn't the only reason certain citizens of Jahk might want to hang our scalps out to dry. The last time we passed through here, we stirred things up pretty well with our

surprise entry into their Big Game. As old and cynical as I may be, I have to smile when I think of the havoc we wreaked then.

"How long do you think this problem of Quigley's is going to take, Aahz?" Skeeve said, breaking into my wandering thoughts.

"I really don't know," I shrugged. "I imagine we'll have a better idea once he fills us in on exactly what the problem is."

The Kid stopped in his tracks and scowled at me.

"You mean you agreed to help without knowing what you were volunteering for? Then how did you know we set him up for it?"

Even though Skeeve's proved himself many times over to be a fast learner, there are still times when he can be dense to the point of being exasperating.

"What was Quigley doing when we first met him?"

"He was a demon hunter. Why?"

"And what's he doing now?"

"Last thing we heard, he was holding down a job as Court Magician for Ta-hoe."

"Now what do you suppose prompted him to take up magik for a living instead of sword-swinging?"

"Oh."

He looked a bit crestfallen for a few moments but rallied back gamely.

"I still think you should have found out what the problem was. Once we're in there, there's no telling how long it's going to take, and I can't be away from the office too long. I'm really busy these days."

"Well, then," I smiled, "we should probably be hooking up with him ASAP instead of standing here in the street arguing."

The Kid rolled his eyes melodramatically and set off marching down the road again.

Skeeve has changed a lot in the years I've worked with him. When we first met, he was a kid. Now, he's a young man . . . even though I still tend to think of him as "the Kid." Old habits die hard. He's grown from a gangly boy into a youth who has to shave . . . even though it's only necessary occasionally, so he tends to forget until Bunny reminds him. Even more astonishing is how much he's gained in confidence and poise to a point where he's acquired a certain amount of style. All in

all, it's been interesting watching my young charge develop over the last few years. I just wish I felt better about the directions he's been developing in.

You see, Skeeve's most endearing trademark has always been that he cared for people . . . really cared. Whether it was his feeling for Garkin when his old teacher died, even though my colleague never really gave the Kid a fair shake as a student, or the lengths he went to to bolster Ajax's sagging ego when the old Archer was doubting his own value in a fight, Skeeve has always had an unerring ability to see the good in people and act accordingly. That's a lot of why I stuck around to work with him ... as much to learn as to teach.

Lately, however, things seem to be changing. Ever since he has taken the slot as president of our corporation, Skeeve seems to be worrying more and more about business and less and less about people. The others may not have noticed it. Bunny and Tananda have been so busy trying to one-up each other they wouldn't notice if a brass band marched through the room, and Chumley's had his hands full just keeping them apart. Massha and the hoods are big on blind loyalty. They'd probably follow Skeeve right off a cliff without thinking twice or asking question one. Then again, they haven't known him as long or as well as I have and may simply think his current behavior is normal. To me, however, it represents a major change.

This whole casino purchase thing is just one example. The Skeeve I've known would have insisted that Hysterium know all the facts before signing the contract, or at least given him a more generous price for his efforts. Instead, we were treated to a display of opportunism that would make a hardened Deveel haggler envious.

Now, you all know that I have nothing against making a profit, especially a sinfully large one . . . but that's me. Skeeve is supposed to be the counterbalancing humanitarian. While I've been learning about people from him, I'm afraid he's been absorbing the wrong lessons from me ... or the right one too well.

Anyway, that's why I didn't chuck Quigley's letter in the wastebasket when it got forwarded to us at the Bazaar. I figured it would give me some time alone with Skeeve to find out whether I was just being a Nervous Nelly, or if there was really something to worry about.. So far, I was leaning toward the latter.

Fortunately, Quigley hadn't moved. As impatient as the Kid was being, I was afraid he'd back out of the whole deal if we had to take extra time just to run him down. Our knock was answered with a cautious eye appearing at the crack of the door as it opened slightly.

"Oh! I was hoping . . . that is, I was expecting . . . Can I help you gentlemen?"

We had seen the "old man" disguise before, so there was no doubt that it was really Quigley peering out at us.

"It's us, Quigley," the Kid said briskly before I could even say "Hi." "Will you let us in, or should we just go home?"

"Skeeve? Oh, thank goodness. Certainly . . . come right in."

I personally thought Skeeve was being a bit abrupt, and Quigley's fawning over him wasn't going to improve his manners at all.

"Sorry for the reception," the magician said, herding us inside, "but I was afraid it might be, one of my creditors."

As he closed the door, Quigley let his disguise spell drop ... too much effort to maintain, I guess. Viewing his true appearance, I was slightly shocked.

The years had not been kind to our old ally. There were strain marks etched deeply into his face that hadn't been there when we were here before. The place itself seemed the worse for wear. The walls needed painting badly ... or at least washing, and the furnishings showed signs of being repaired instead of replaced.

"This place is a dump!" Skeeve observed with his newfound lack of diplomacy. "Really, Quigley. If you won't think of yourself, think of the profession. How are people supposed to respect magicians if they see one of them living like this?"

"Ease up, partner," I said softly. "We can't all own casinos. Some of us have had to live in broken-down shacks in the forest... or even sleep under trees on the open road."

That earned me a sharp glance, but Quigley intervened.

"No, Skeeve's right. All I can say is that I've tried. That's part of what's gotten me into the mess I'm in. I've overextended my credit trying to keep up a good front, and now it's catching up with me."

"Gee, Quigley, if that's your only problem we can take care of it in no time at all. We can arrange a quick consolidation loan to get the wolves off your back . . . with a slight interest charge, of course. Right, Aahz?"

The possibility of a fast resolution of the problem seemed to brighten Skeeve's mood immensely. I was almost tempted to go along with it, but I had the feeling there was more to the situation than was meeting the eye.

"I dunno, Skeeve. I think I'd like to hear a little more about exactly what the problem is, if it's all right with you."

"C'mon, Aahz. Let's just settle his accounts and split. If we hurry, we can be back at the office by lunch."

While I had tried to be patient, even promised myself to be, his wheedling tones finally got to me.

"Look, Kid," I said, using the phrase deliberately. "If you're so all-fired eager to get back, then go! I'm going to give a shot at trying to solve the real problem here, if I can ever find out what it is, maybe even without just throwing money at it. Okay?"

It was a cheap shot, but Skeeve had been asking for it. For a minute I thought he was going to take me up on my suggestion and leave, but instead he sank onto a sofa and sulked. Terrific. I turned my back on him and switched my attention to Quigley.

It seemed funny after all these years to take the lead in what was essentially a "people" situation. Usually I handled the tactics . . . okay, and occasionally the money . . . and left the people-handling to Skeeve. It was his part of the partnership to keep my abrasive personality from alienating too many people, particularly our friends. With him off in a blue funk, however, the task fell to me, and I was badly out of practice. Heck, I'll be honest, I was never in practice for this sort of thing. Ironically, I found myself trying to think of what Skeeve would say and do at a time like this.

"So, Quigley," I said, trying to smile warmly, "what exactly seems to be the problem?"

He fidgeted uncomfortably. "Well, it's a long story. I ... I'm not sure where to begin."

I suddenly remembered that non-Pervecks tend to get nervous at the sight of Pervect teeth and dumped the smile.

"Why don't you start at the beginning? How come you're having money problems? You seemed to be doing all right the last time we were here."

"That's when it started," he sighed, "the last time you were here. Remember how they used to settle who was going to be the government around here? With the Big Game?"

Actually I hadn't thought about it for years, but it was starting to come back to me as he talked.

"Uh-huh. The Big Game between Ta-hoe and Vey-gus each year would decide who would get the Trophy and be the capital for the next year."

Quigley nodded vaguely.

"Right. Well, that's all changed now. When you guys won the game and took off with the Trophy, it stood the whole five-hundred-year-old system on its ear. For a while there was a faction that maintained that since you had the Trophy in Possiltum, that's where the capital should be for a year. Fortunately, wiser heads won out."

It was nice to know that there were some hassles that passed us by. I noticed that in spite of himself, Skeeve had perked up and was listening as Quigley continued.

"What they finally decided was that a Common Council should run the government. The plan was put into action with equal representation from both city-states, and for the first time in five hundred years the government of the dimension stabilized."

It actually sounded like some good had come out of our madcap caper. That made me feel kind of good. Still...

"I don't get it, Quigley. How is that a problem?"

The magician gave a wry smirk.

"Think about it, Aahz. With the feud over between the two city-states, there was no reason to maintain two magicians. It was decided that one would do just fine."

"Whoops," I said.

" 'Whoops' is right. Massha was their first choice. She had served as magician for both city-states at one time or another, and, frankly, they were more impressed with her than with me ... especially after I let their hostage demon escape at the Big Game. When they went to tell her, though, she had disappeared. That left them with me."

I found myself wondering if Massha had signed on as Skeeve's apprentice before or after she knew about the organizational change and Quigley getting the boot.

"She's working with us over on Deva," Skeeve commented, finally getting drawn into the conversation.

"Really? Well, I suppose it makes sense. After you've gone as far as you can go on the local level, it's only natural to graduate into the big time."

"I still don't see how you ended up behind the eight ball financially," I said, trying to steer the conversation back on course.

Quigley made a face.

"It's my contract. I ended up having to take a substantial pay cut under the new situation. My salary before was adequate, but nothing to cheer about. Now ..."

His voice trailed off.

"I don't get it," Skeeve said. "How can you be making less money for serving two city-states than you made working for one?"

"Like I said, it's my contract. There are clauses in there I didn't even know about until the council hit me with them."

"What kind of clauses?" I frowned.

"Well, that the employer has the right to set my pay scale is the biggest one I remember. ' . . . According to the need of the community,' and they pointed out that with no feud, my workload, and therefore my pay, should be reduced accordingly. Then there's the 'No Quit' clause ..."

"The what?"

"The 'No Quit' clause. In short, it says that they can fire me, but I can't quit for the duration of my contract. If I leave, I have to pay my replacement, 'sub-contractor' I think they call it, myself . . . even if they pay him more than they were paying me. That's why I'm stuck here. I can't afford to quit. By the time I got done deducting someone else's wages out of whatever I was earning on my new job, I'd be making even less than I am now. I can't believe I could land a position making more than double what I'm currently earning. Not with my track record."

For a moment I thought Skeeve was going to offer him a position with our company, but instead he groaned and hid his face in his hands.

"Quigley! How could you sign a contract with those kind of terms in it? Heck, how could you sign any contract without knowing for sure what was in it?"

"Frankly, I was so happy to find work at all I didn't think to ask many questions."

"... There's also the minor fact," I put in, "that when he was getting started in this game, he was all alone. He didn't have a teacher or a bunch of friends to look over his contracts or warn him off bad deals."

It was getting harder and harder to keep the Kid from getting too intolerant of other people's mistakes. Even that not-too-subtle admonishment only had partial success.

"Well, he could have asked me," he grumbled. "I could have at least spotted the major gaffes."

"As I recall," I tried again, staring at the ceiling, "at the time you were working as the Court Magician at Possiltum . . . without any kind of written agreement at all. Would you have come to you for contract advice?"

"All right, all right. I hear you, Aahz. So what is it you want me to do, Quigley?"

I caught the use of "me" instead of "us," but let it go for the time being.

"Well, it's a little late, but I'd like to take you up on your offer. I was hoping you could look over the contract and see if there's a way out of it. My time is almost up, but I'm afraid they're going to exercise their renewal option and I'll be stuck here for another three years."

"Don't tell me, let me guess," I winced. "It's their option whether or not to renew your contract. You have no say in the matter. Right?"

"Right. How did you know?"

"Lucky guess. I figured it went nicely with the 'No Quit' clause. And I thought slavery had been outlawed"

"Just exactly what are your duties these days, Quigley?"

Skeeve had been maintaining a thoughtful silence on the sofa until he interrupted me with his question.

"Not much, really," Quigley admitted. "More entertainment than anything else. As a matter of fact, I'm going to have to be leaving soon. I'm due to put on an appearance at the game this afternoon."

"The game?" I said. "They're still playing that?"

"Oh, certainly. It's still the major activity for entertainment and betting around here. They just don't play it for the Trophy, is all. It's been a much less emotional game since you guys trounced the locals, but they still get pretty worked up over it. I'll be putting on the after-game entertainment. Nothing much, just a few ..."

I glanced at him when he failed to finish his sentence, only to discover he was snoring quietly in his chair, sound asleep. Puzzled, I shifted my gaze to Skeeve.

"Sleep spell," he said with a wink. "I figured it was only appropriate. After all, I learned that spell on our last trip here after our friend here used it on Tananda."

"Don't you want to hear more about the contract we're supposed to be breaking for him, or at least take a look at it?"

"Don't need to. I've already heard enough to rough out a plan."

". . . And that is . . . ?"

His smile broadened.

"I'll give you a hint."

His features seemed to melt and shift . . . and I was looking at the "old man" disguise Quigley favored for his work.

"We don't want two Quigleys attending the game, do we? The way I see it, the best way to get him out of the contract is to take his place this afternoon." I didn't like the sound of that.

"You're going to get him fired? Isn't that a bit drastic? I mean, how's it going to look on his resume?"

"Look, Aahz," he snarled. "I was the one who wanted to take the easy out and buy him out of his troubles. Remember? You're the one who said there had to be another way. Well, I've got another way. Now are you coming, or do you just want me to tell you how it went after it's over?"

The stadium was impressive no matter how you looked at it. Of course, any time you get nearly 100,000 people together all screaming for blood, it's bound to be impressive. I was just glad that this time they weren't screaming for our blood.

There was one bad moment, though. It seems that Quigley/Skeev as a City-State Official got in free, whereas I, in disguise as an ordinary Joe, had to get a ticket to get past the fences. This was well and good, except that it meant we were separated for a bit. During that time, it suddenly dawned on me that if Skeev got a little lax or wandered out of range, my disguise spell would disappear, revealing my true identity. As one of the team that trounced the locals and made off with their beloved Trophy, it occurred to me that there could be healthier pastimes than being suddenly exposed in the middle of thousands of hopped-up Game fans. Fortunately, I never had to find out for sure. Skeev loitered about until I gained admission, and we pushed on together. It did give me pause, however, to realize how much I had grown to depend on the Kid's skills since losing my own powers.

Quigley/Skeev was apparently well known, and many of the fans called to him as we entered the stadium proper. The salutations, however, were less than complimentary. "Quigley! How's it going, you old fart?" "Hey, Quigley! Are you going to do the same trick again?"

"Yeah! Maybe you can get it right this time!" Each of these catcalls was, of course, accompanied by the proper "Haw, haw, haw!" brays, as can only be managed by fans who have started drinking days before in preparation for their role in the game. Maybe Quigley was used to this treatment, but it had been a long time since anyone had spoken to the Great Skeev like that, and I noticed a dangerous glint developing in his eye that boded ill for whoever he finally decided to focus his demonstration on.

The game itself was actually rather enjoyable. It was a lot more fun to watch when we weren't the ones getting our brains beaten out on the field. I found myself cheering for the occasional outstanding play and hooting the rare intervention of the officials, along with the rest of the crazed mob.

Quigley/Skeev, on the other hand, maintained an ominous silence. I found this to be increasingly unnerving as the afternoon wore on. I knew him well enough to tell he was planning something. What I didn't know were the specifics of "what" and "when." Finally, as the end of the game loomed close, I could contain myself no-longer.

"Say, uh, Skeev," I said, leaning close so he could hear me over the din of the crowd. "Have you got your plan worked out?"

He nodded without taking his eyes off the field.

"Mind telling me about it?"

"Well, remember how I got fired from Possiltum?" he said, glancing around to see if anyone was eavesdropping.

"Yeah. You told the King off. So?"

". . . So I don't see any reason why the same thing shouldn't work here. I don't imagine that City-State Officials are any less pompous or impressed with themselves than the monarch of a broken-down kingdom was."

That made sense. It was nice to see the Kid hadn't completely lost his feel for people.

"So what are you going to chew them out over? Their treatment of Quigley?"

He shook his head.

"Out of character," he said. "Quigley isn't the type to make a fuss over himself. No, I figured to make the fight the key issue."

"Fight? What fight?"

"The one that's about to break out on the field," Quigley/Skeeve grinned. "The way I see it, these two teams have been rivals for over five hundred years. I can't believe all their old grudges have been forgotten just because the government's changed."

"I dunno, partner. It's been a pretty clean game so far. Besides, it's already a rough contact sport. What's going to start a fight?"

"Most of the contact is around the ball ... or cube, or whatever they call it. Never did get that straight. This late in the game, all the players are hyped up but not thinking too clearly from butting heads all afternoon. Now watch close."

He leaned forward to hide his hands, as one finger stretched out and pointed at the field.

There were two particularly burly individuals who had been notably at each other's throats all day, to the delight of the crowd. At the moment, they were jogging slowly side by side along the edge of the main action of the field, watching for the ball/cube to bounce free. Suddenly, one player's arm lashed out in a vicious backhand that smashed into his rival's face, knocking his helmet off and sending him sprawling onto the turf. The move was so totally unexpected and unnecessary that the crowd was stunned into silence and immobility. Even the player who had thrown the punch looked surprised; which he undoubtedly was. Nothing like a little tightly focused levitation to make someone's limbs act unpredictably, unless they're expecting it and braced against the interference.

The only one who didn't seem immobilized by the move was the player who had been decked. Like I said, the actual players of the game, unlike their out-of-shape fans, are built like brick walls-with roughly the same sense of humor. The felled player was on his feet with a bounce and launched

himself at his supposed attacker. While that party was unsure about the magik that had momentarily seized his arm, he knew what to do about being pummeled, and in no time at all the two rivals were going at it hammer and tongs.

It might have worked, but apparently the teams took whatever truce had been called seriously. Amid the angry shouts from the stands and the referee's whistle, they piled on their respective teammates and pried them apart.

"Too bad, Skeeve," I said. "I thought you had them there."

When there was no response, I glanced at him. Brow furrowed slightly now, he was still working.

The player who had been attacked was free of his teammates. Though obviously still mad, he was under control as he bent to pick up his helmet. At his touch, however, the helmet took off through the air like a cannonball and slammed into the rival team member who had supposedly thrown the first punch. Now helmets in this game are equipped with either horns or points, and this one was no exception. The targeted player went down like a marionette with its strings cut, but not before losing a visible splatter of blood.

That did it.

At the sight of this new attack on their teammate, this time when the ball wasn't even in play, the fallen player's whole team went wild and headed for the now unhelmeted attacker . . . whose teammates in turn rallied to his defense.

Both benches emptied as the reserves came off the sidelines to join the fray ... or started to. Before they had a chance to build up any speed, both sets of reserves were imprisoned by the glowing blue cages of magikal wards, an application I'll admit I had never thought of. Instead of the fresh teams from the benches, Quigley/ Skeeve took the field.

I hadn't realized he had moved from my side until I saw him vault the low railing that separated the spectators from access to the playing field. The move was a bit spry for the "old man" guise he was using, but no one else seemed to notice.

It was a real pleasure to watch the Kid work . . . especially considering the fact that I taught him most of what he knows. I had to admit he had gotten pretty good over the years.

"STOP IT!! THAT'S ENOUGH!!!" he roared. "I SAID, STOP IT!!!"

Still shouting, he waded into the players on the field who were locked in mortal combat. The ones who were standing he crumpled in their tracks with a gesture . . . a gesture which I realized as a simple sleep spell. The others he easily forced apart with judicious use of his levitational abilities. Two players who were grappling with each other he not only separated, but held aloft some twenty feet off the ground. As swiftly as it had started, the fight was stopped, and right handily, too.

As could have been predicted, no sooner had the dust settled than a troop of officious-looking individuals came storming out onto the field, making a beeline for Quigley/ Skeeve. While I may have lost my powers, there's nothing wrong with my hearing, and I was easily able to listen in on the following exchange, unlike the restless fans in the stands around me.

"Quigley, you . . . How dare you interrupt the game this way?"

"Game?" Quigley/Skeeve said coolly, folding his arms. "That wasn't a game, that was a fight . . . even though I can see how you could easily confuse the two."

"You have no right to ... Put them down!"

This last was accompanied by a gesture at the suspended players. Skeeve didn't gesture, but the two players suddenly dropped to the turf with bone-jarring thuds that drew the same "Ooooo's" from the crowd as you get from a really good hit during actual play.

"... As to my rights," Quigley/Skeeve intoned, not looking around, "I'm under contract to use my magikal powers to help keep the peace in Vey-gus and Ta-Hoe. The way I see it, that includes stopping brawls when I happen across them . . . which I've just done. To that end, I'm declaring the game over. The current score stands as final."

With that, the cage/wards began migrating toward their respective tunnels, herding the players within along with them. Needless to say, the crowd did not approve.

"You . . . you can't do that!" the official's spokesman screamed over the rising tide of boos from the stands. "The most exciting plays happen in the last few minutes!"

As a final flourish, Quigley/Skeeve levitated the fallen players on the field down the tunnels after their teammates.

"I've done it," he said. "What's more, I intend to do it at every scheduling of this barbaric game when things get out of hand. My contract is up for renewal soon, and I realized I've been a bit lax in my duties. Consequently, I thought I'd remind you of exactly what it is you're keeping on the payroll. If you don't like it, you can always fire me."

I smiled and shook my head in appreciation. I had to hand it to the Kid. If attacking the dimension's favorite pastime didn't get Quigley canned, I didn't know what would.

"You shut down the game?"

That was Quigley expressing his appreciation for Skeeve's help.

We were back at his place with our disguises off and the magician revived. Apparently our assistance wasn't quite what he had been expecting.

"It seemed like the surest way to get you out of your contract," Skeeve shrugged. "The locals seem rather attached to the game."

"Attached to . . . I'm dead!" the magician cried with a groan. "I won't just get fired, I'll be lynched!"

The Kid was unmoved.

"Not to worry," he said. "You can always use a disguise spell to get away, or if it'll make you feel better, we'll give you an escort to . . ."

There was a knock on the door.

"Ah. Unless I miss my guess, that should be the Council now. Get the door, Quigley."

The magician hesitated and glanced around the room as if looking for a way to escape. Finally he sighed and trudged toward the door.

"Speaking of disguises, Skeeve . . ."I said.

"Oh, right. Sorry, Aahz."

With an absent-minded wave of his hand we were disguised again, this time in the appearances we used when we first arrived.

"Oh! Lord Magician. May we come in? There are certain matters we must ... oh! I didn't realize you had guests."

It was indeed the Council. Right on schedule. I snuck a wink at Skeeve, who nodded in encouragement.

"These are ... friends of mine," Quigley said lamely, as if he didn't quite believe it himself. "What was it you wanted to see me about?"

Several sets of uneasy eyes swept us.

"We... urn... hoped to speak with you in private."

"We'll wait outside, Quigley," Skeeve said, getting to his feet. "Just holler if you need us."

"Well, that's that," I sighed after the door closed behind us. "I wonder what Quigley's going to do for his next job?"

Skeeve leaned casually against the wall.

"I figure that's his problem," he said. "After all, he's the one who asked us to spring him from his contract. I assume he has something else lined up."

"... And if he doesn't? Quigley's never been big in the planning-ahead department. It won't be easy for him to find work with a termination on his record."

"Like I said, that's his problem," Skeeve shrugged. "He can always ..."

The door opened, and the Council trooped silently out. Quigley waited until they were clear, then beckoned us inside frantically.

"You'll never guess what happened," he said excitedly.

"You were fired, right?" Skeeve replied. "C'mon, Quigley, snap out of it. Remember us? We're the ones who set it up."

"No, I wasn't fired. Once they got over being mad, they were impressed by the show of magik I put on at the game. They renewed my contract."

I found myself looking at Skeeve, who was in turn looking back at me. We held that pose for a few moments. Finally Skeeve heaved a sigh.

"Well," he said, "we'll just have to think of something else. Don't worry, Quigley. I haven't seen a contract yet that couldn't be broken."

"Ummm . . . actually, I'd rather you didn't."

That shook me a bit.

"Excuse me, Quigley. For a moment there I thought you said . . ."

"That's right. You see, the Council was impressed enough that they've given me a raise ... a substantial raise. I don't think I'll be able to do better anywhere else, especially if they ask for a demonstration of my skills. There have been some changes in the contract, though, and I'd really appreciate it if you two could look it over and let me know what I'm in for."

"I'm sorry about that, Skeeve," I said as we trudged along. "All that work for nothing."

We had finally finished going over the contract with Quigley and were looking for a quiet spot to head back to Deva unobserved.

"Not really. We solved Quigley's problem for him, and that new contract is a definite improvement over the old one."

I had meant that he had done a lot of work for no pay, but decided not to push my luck by clarifying my statement.

"You kind of surprised me when we were talking outside," I admitted. "I half expected you to be figuring on recruiting Quigley for our crew, once he got free of his contract."

The Kid gave a harsh bark of laughter.

"Throw money at it again? Don't worry, Aahz. I'm not that crazy. I might have been willing to spot him a loan, but hire him? A no-talent, do-nothing like that? I run a tight ship at M.Y.T.H. Inc, and there's no room for deadwood . . . even if they are old friends. Speaking of the company, I wonder if there's any word about..."

He rambled on, talking about the work he was getting back to. I didn't listen too closely, though. Instead, I kept replaying something he had said in my mind.

"A no-talent do-nothing ... no room for deadwood, even if they are old friends ..."

A bit harsh, perhaps, but definitely food for thought.

Chapter Five:

"What fools these mortals be."

-SMAUG

I NEVER REALLY REALIZED how easy it was to buy something until I tried my hand at selling. I'm not talking about small, casual purchases here. I'm talking about something of size . . . like, say, a casino/hotel. Of course buying it had been simplified by the fact that the developer . . . what was his name? No matter . . . was desperate. Trying to offload it, however, was an entirely different matter.

Leaning back in my chair, I stared at the sea of paper on my desk, trying to mentally sort out the various offers, only to discover they were starting to run together in my head. I've noticed that happening more and more after midnight. With a muttered curse, I cast about for my notes.

"Working late, Skeeve?"

"What?" I said, glancing up. "Oh. Hi, Bunny. What are you doing here at this hour?"

"I could say I was worried about you, which I am, but truthfully I didn't even know you were still here till I saw the light on and poked my head in to check. No, I was just fetching a few things I had stored in my desk. Now, I can return the same question: what are you doing here?"

I stretched a bit as I answered, grateful for the break.

"Just trying to organize my thoughts on selling The Fun House. I'm going to have to make my recommendations to the Board as to which of these offers to accept when we discuss it at our monthly meeting."

She came around the desk and stood behind me, massaging the knots out of my shoulders. It felt wonderful.

"I don't see why you have to make a presentation to the Board at all," she said. "Why don't you just go ahead and make the decision unilaterally? You made the decision to sell without clearing it with anyone else."

Something in what she said had a ominous ring to it, but I was enjoying the backrub too much to pin it down just then.

"I made the decision unilaterally to open our door to offers ... not to sell. The actual final call as to whether or not to sell, and, which, if any, of the offers to accept, is up to the Board."

"Then if it's up to them, why are you killing yourself getting ready to make a pitch?"

I knew where she was coming from then. It was the old "you're working too hard" bit. It seemed like I was hearing that from everybody these days, or often enough that I could sing it from memory.

"Because I really want this motion to carry," I said, pulling away from her. "If there's going to be any opposition, I want to be sure I have my reasons and arguments down pat."

Bunny wandered back around the desk, hesitated, then plopped down into a chair.

"All right, then rehearse. Tell me why you want to sell, if you don't mind giving a preview."

I rose and began to pace, rubbing my lower lip as I organized my thoughts.

"Officially, I think it's necessary for two reasons. First, pretty soon now the novelty of the place is going to wear off, and when it does the crowds . . . and therefore our revenues . . . will decline. That will make it harder to sell than right now, when it's a hot spot. Second, the place is so successful it's going to generate imitators. From what I've been hearing at my 'businessman's lunches,' there are already several plans underway to construct or convert several of the nearby hotels into casinos. Again, it will dilute the market and lower our price if we wait too long."

Bunny listened attentively. When I was done, she nodded her head.

"... And unofficially?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said, 'Officially, etc., etc.' That implies there are reasons you haven't mentioned."

That's when I realized how tired I was getting. A verbal slip like that could be costly in the wrong company. Still, Bunny was my confidential secretary. If I couldn't confide in her, I was in trouble.

"Unofficially, I'm doing it for Aahz."

"Aahz?"

"That's right. Remember him? My old partner? Well, when we were taking care of that little favor for Quigley, he kept needling me about The Fun House. There was a fairly constant stream of digs about 'throwing money at a problem' and bow 'we never planned to run a casino' . . . stuff like that. I don't know why, but it's clear to me that the casino is a burr under his saddle, and if it will make him happy, I've got no problems dumping it. It just doesn't mean that much to me."

Bunny arched an eyebrow.

"So you're selling off the casino because you think it will make your old partner happy?"

"It's the best reason I can think of," I shrugged. "Bunny, he's been a combination father, teacher, coach, and Dutch uncle to me since Garkin was killed. I've lost track of the number of times he's saved my skin, usually by putting his own between me and whatever was incoming. With all I owe him, disposing of something that's bothering him seems a pretty small payback, but one I'll deliver without batting an eye."

"You might try to give him an assignment or two," she said, pursing her lips. "Maybe if he were a bit busier, he wouldn't have the time to brood and fault-find over the stuff you're doing without him."

I waited a heartbeat too long before laughing.

"Aahz is above petty jealousy, really," I said, wishing I was more sure of it myself. "Besides, I am trying to find an assignment for him. It's just that Perverts . . . excuse me, Perverts . . . aren't noted for their diplomacy in dealing with clients."

Not wishing to pursue the subject further, I gathered up a handful of proposals.

"Right now, I've got to go through these proposals a couple more times until I've got them straight in my mind."

"What's the problem? Just pick the best one and go with it."

I grimaced bitterly.

"It's not that easy. With some of these proposals, it's like comparing apples and oranges. One offers an ongoing percentage of profits . . . another is quoting a high purchase price, but wants to pay in

installments . . . there are a handful that are offering stock in other businesses in addition to cash . . . it's just not that easy to decide which is actually the best offer."

"Maybe I can help," Bunny said, reaching for the stack of proposals. "I've had a fair amount of experience assessing offers."

I put my hand on the stack, intercepting her.

"Thanks for the offer. Bunny, but I'd rather do it myself. If I'm going to be president, I've got to learn to quit relying on others. The only way I'll learn to be self-reliant is to not indulge in depending on my staff."

She slowly withdrew her hand, her eyes searching mine as if she weren't sure she recognized me. I realized she was upset, but, reviewing what I had said, couldn't find anything wrong with my position. Too tired to sort it out just then, I decided to change the subject.

"While you're here, though, could you give me a quick briefing of what's on the dockets for tomorrow? I'd like to clear the decks to work on this stuff if I can."

Whatever was bothering her vanished as she became the efficient secretary again.

"The only thing that's pressing is assigning a team to a watchdog job. The client has a valuable shipment we're supposed to be guarding tomorrow night."

"Guard duty?" I frowned. "Isn't that a little low-class for our operation?"

"I thought so," she smiled sweetly, "but apparently you didn't when you committed us to it two weeks ago.

A favor to one of your lunch buddies. Remember?"

"Oh. Right. Well, I think we can cover that one with Gleep. Send him over . . . and have Nunzio go along to keep an eye on him."

"All right."

She started to leave, but hesitated in the door.

"What about Aahz?"

I had already started to plunge into the proposals again and had to wrench my attention back to the conversation.

"What about him?"

"Nothing. Forget I asked."

There was no doubt about it. The staff was definitely starting to get a bit strange. Shaking my head, I addressed the proposals once more.

Gleep's Tale

INEVITABLY, WHEN CONVERSING WITH my colleagues of the dragon set, and the subject of pets was raised, an argument would ensue as to the relative advantages and disadvantages of humans as pets. Traditionally, I have maintained a respectful silence during such sessions, being the youngest member in attendance and therefore obligated to learn from my elders. This should not, however, be taken as an indication that I lack opinions on the subject. I have numerous well-developed theories, which is the main reason I welcomed the chance to test them by acquiring a subject as young and yet as well traveled as Skeeve was when I first encountered him. As my oration unfolds, you will note . . . but I'm getting ahead of myself. First things first is the order of business for organized and well-mannered organisms. I am the entity you have come to know in these volumes as...

"Gleep! C'mere, fella."

That is Nunzio. He is neither organized nor well-mannered. Consequently, as is so often the case when dealing with Skeeve and his rather dubious collection of associates, I chose to ignore him. Still, an interesting point has been raised, so I had probably best address it now before proceeding.

As was so rudely pointed out, I am known to this particular batch of humans, as well as to the readers of these volumes, simply as Gleep. For the sake of convenience, I will continue to identify myself to you by that name, thereby eliminating the frustrating task of attempting to instruct you in the pronunciation of my real name. Not only am I unsure you are physically able to reproduce the necessary sounds, but there is the fact that I have limited patience when it comes to dealing with humans. Then, too, it is customary for dragons to adopt aliases for these cross-phylum escapades. It saves embarrassment when the human chroniclers distort the facts when recording the incidents . . . which they invariably do.

If I seem noticeably more coherent than you would expect from my reputed one-word vocabulary, the reason is both simple and logical. First, I am still quite young for a dragon, and the vocal cords are one of the last things to develop in regard to our bodies. While I am quite able to converse and communicate with others of my species, I have another two hundred years before my voice is ready to attempt the particular combination of sounds and pitches necessary to converse extensively with humans in their own tongue.

As to my mental development, one must take into consideration the vast differences in our expected lifespan. A human is considered exceptional to survive for a hundred years, whereas dragons can live for thousands of years without being regarded as old by their friends and relations. The implications of this are too numerous to count, but the one which concerns us here is that, while I am perhaps young for a dragon, I am easily the oldest of those who affiliate themselves with Skeeve. Of course, humans tend to lack the breeding and upbringing of my kind, so they are far less inclined to heed the older and wiser heads in their midst, much less learn from them.

"Hey, Gleep! Can you hear me? Over here, boy."

I made a big show of nibbling on my foot as if troubled by an itch. Humans as a whole seem unable to grasp the subtleties of communication which would allow them to ascertain when they are being deliberately ignored, much less what it implies. Consequently, I have devised the technique of visibly demonstrating I am preoccupied when confronted with a particularly rude or ignorant statement or request. This not only serves to silence their yammerings, it slows the steady erosion of my nerves. To date, the technique yields about a twenty percent success ratio, which is significantly better than most tactics I have attempted. Unfortunately, this did not prove to be one of those twenty percenters.

"I'm talkin' ta you, Gleep. Now are ya gonna go where I tell ya or not?"

While I am waiting for my physical development to enable me to attempt the language of another species, I have serious doubts that Nunzio or Guido will master their native tongue, no matter how much time they are allowed. Somehow it reminds me of a tale one of my aunts used to tell about how she encountered a human in a faraway land and inquired if he were a native. "I ain't no native!" she was told. "I was born right here!" I quite agree with her that the only proper response when confronted by such logic was to eat him.

Nunzio was still carrying on in that squeaky little-boy voice of his which is so surprising when one first hears it, except now he had circled around behind me and was trying to push me in the direction he had indicated earlier. While he is impressively strong for a human, I outweighed him sufficiently that I was confident that there was no chance he could move me until I decided to cooperate. Still, his antics were annoying, and I briefly debated whether it was worth trying to improve his manners by belting him with my tail. I decided against it, of course. Even the strongest humans are dangerously frail and vulnerable, and I did not wish to distress Skeeve by damaging one of his playmates. A trauma like that could set my pet's training program back years.

Right about then I observed that Nunzio's breathing had become labored. Since he had already demonstrated his mental inflexibility, I grew concerned that he might suffer a heart attack before giving up his impossible task. Having just reminded myself of the undesirability of his untimely demise, I decided I would have to humor him.

Delaying just long enough for a leisurely yawn, I rose and ambled in the indicated direction . . . first sliding sideways a bit so that he fell on his face the next time he threw his weight against me. I reasoned that if he wasn't sturdy enough to survive a simple fall, then my pet was better off without his company.

Fortunately or un-, depending on your point of view, he scrambled rapidly to his feet and fell in step beside me as I walked.

"I want you'se to familiarize yourself with the shipment which we are to be protectin'," he said, still breathing hard, "then wander around the place a little so's yer familiar with the layout."

This struck me as a particularly silly thing to do. I had sized up the shipment and the layout within moments of our arrival, and I had assumed that Nunzio had done the same. There simply wasn't all that much to analyze.

The warehouse was nothing more than a large room... four walls and a ceiling with rafters from which a scattered collection of lights poured down sufficiently inadequate light as to leave large pockets of shadows through the place. There was a small doorway in one wall, and a large sliding door in another, presumably leading to a loading dock. Except for the shipment piled in the center of the room, the place was empty.

The shipment itself consisted of a couple dozen boxes stacked on a wooden skid. From what my nose could ascertain, whatever was inside the boxes consisted of paper and ink. Why paper and ink should be valuable enough to warrant a guard I neither knew nor cared. Dragons do not have much use for paper . . . particularly paper money. Flammable currency is not our idea of a sound investment for a society. Still, someone must have felt the shipment to be of some worth, if not the human who had commissioned our services, then definitely the one dressed head to foot in black who was creeping around in the rafters.

All of this had become apparent to me as soon as we had entered the warehouse, so there was no reason to busy oneself with make-work additional checks. Nunzio, however, seemed bound and determined to prod me into rediscovering what I already knew. Even allowing for the fact that the human senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell are far below those of dragons, I was nonetheless appalled at how little he was able to detect on his own. Perhaps if he focused less of his attention on me and more on what was going on around us, he would have fared better. As it was, he was hopeless. If Skeeve was hoping that Nunzio would learn something from me, which was the only reason I could imagine for including him on the assignment, my pet was going to be barely disappointed. Other than the fact that he seemed to try harder than most humans to interact positively with dragons, however crude and ignorant his attempts might be, I couldn't imagine why I was as tolerant of him as I was.

Whoever it was in the rafters was moving closer now. He might have been stealthy for a human, but my ears tracked him as easily as if he were banging two pots together as he came. While I was aware of his presence two steps through the door, I had been uncertain as to his intentions and therefore had been willing to be patient until sure whether he were simply an innocent bystander, or if he indeed entertained thoughts of larceny. His attempts to sneak up on us confirmed to me he was of the latter ilk, however incompetent he might be at it.

Trying to let Nunzio benefit from my abilities, I swiveled my head around and pointed at the intruder with my nose.

"Pay attention, Gleep!" my idiot charge said, jerking my muzzle down toward the boxes again. "This is what we're suppose to be guardin'. Understand?"

I understood that either humans were even slower to learn than the most critical dragons gave them credit for, which I was beginning to believe, or this particular specimen was brain-damaged, which was also a possibility. Rolling my eyes, I checked on the intruder again.

He was nearly above us now, his legs spread wide supporting his weight on two of the rafters. With careful deliberation, he removed something from within his sleeve, raised it to his mouth, and pointed it at us.

Part of the early training of any dragon is a series of lessons designed to impart a detailed knowledge of human weapons. This may sound strange for what is basically a peace-loving folk, but we consider it to be simple survival . . . such as humans instructing their young that bees sting or fire is hot. Regardless of our motivations, let it suffice to say that I was as cognizant of human weapons as any human, and considerably more so than any not in the military or other heroic vocations, and, as such, had no difficulty at all identifying the implement being directed at us as a blowgun.

Now, in addition to having better sense, dragons have armor which provides substantially more protection than humans enjoy from their skin. Consequently, I was relatively certain that whatever was set to emerge from the business end of the blowgun would not pose a threat to my well-being. It occurred to me, however, that the same could not be said for Nunzio, and, as I have said before, I have qualms about going to some lengths to ensure my pet's peace of mind by protecting his associates.

Jerking my head free from Nunzio's grasp, I took quick aim and loosed a burst of #6 flame. Oh, yes. Dragons have various degrees of flame at their disposal, ranging from "toast a marshmallow" to "make a hole in rock." You might keep that in mind the next time you consider arguing with a dragon.

Within seconds of my extinguishing the pyrotechnics, a brief shower of black powder drifted down on us.

"Dam it, Gleep!" Nunzio said, brushing the powder from his clothes. "Don't do that again, hear me? Next time you might do more than knock some dust loose . . . and look at my clothes! Bad dragon!"

I had been around humans enough not to expect any thanks, but I found it annoying to be scolded for saving his life. With as much dignity as I could muster, which is considerable, I turned and sat with my back to him.

"GLEEP! UP, BOY! GOOD DRAGON! GOOD DRAGON!"

That was more like it. I turned to face him again, only to find him hopping around holding his foot. Not lacking in mental faculties, I was able to deduce that, in making my indignant gesture, I had succeeded in sitting on his lower extremities. It was unintentional, I assure you, as human feet are rather small and my excellent sense of touch does not extend to my posterior, but it did occur to me in hindsight (no pun intended) that it served him right.

"Look, you just sit there and I'll sit over here and we'll get along fine. Okay?"

He limped over to one of the cartons and sat down, alternately rubbing his foot and brushing his clothes off.

The powder was, of course, the remains of the late intruder/assassin. #6 flame has a tendency to have that effect on humans, which is why I used it. While human burial rights have always been a source of curiosity and puzzlement to me, I was fairly certain that they did not include having one's cremated remains brushed onto the floor or removed by a laundry service. Still, considering my difficulty in communicating a simple "look out" to Nunzio, I decided it would be too much effort to convey to him exactly what he was doing.

If my attitude toward killing a human seems a bit shocking in its casualness, remember that to dragons humans are an inferior species. You do not flinch from killing fleas to ensure the comfort of your dog or cat, regardless of what surviving fleas might think of your callous actions, and I do not hesitate to remove a bothersome human who might cause my pet distress by his actions. At least we dragons generally focus on individuals as opposed to the wholesale slaughter of species humans seem to accept as part of their daily life.

"You know, Gleep," Nunzio said, regarding me carefully, "after a while in your company, even Guido's braggin' sounds good . . . but don't tell him I said that."

"Gleep?"

That last sort of slipped out. As you may have noticed, I am sufficiently self-conscious about my one-word human vocabulary that I try to rely on it as little as possible. The concept of my telling Guido anything, however, startled me into the utterance.

"Now, don't take it so hard," Nunzio scowled, as always interpreting my word wrong. "I didn't mean it. I'm just a little sore, is all."

I assumed he was referring to his foot. The human was feeling chatty, however, and I soon learned otherwise.

"I just don't know what's goin' on lately, Gleep. Know what I mean? On the paperwork things couldn't be goin' better, except lately everybody's been actin' crazy. First the Boss buys a casino we built for somebody else, then overnight he wants to sell it. Bunny and Tananda are goin' at each other for a while, then all of a sudden Bunny's actin' quiet and depressed and Tananda ... did you know she wanted to borrow money from me the other day? Right after she gets done with that collection job? I don't know what she did with her commission or why she doesn't ask the Boss for an advance or even what she needs the money for. Just 'Can you spot me some cash, Nunzio? No questions asked?', and when I try to offer my services as a confidential type, she sez 'In that case, forget it. I'll ask someone else!' and leaves all huffy-like. I'll tell ya, Gleep, there's sumpin' afoot, and I'm not sure I like it."

He was raising some fascinating points, points which I'll freely admit had escaped my notice. While I had devoted a certain portion of my intellect to deciphering the intricacies of human conduct, there was much in the subtleties of their intraspecies relationships which eluded me ... particularly

when it came to individuals other than Skeeve. Reflecting on Nunzio's words, I realized that my pet had not been to see me much lately, which was in itself a break in pattern. Usually he would make time to visit, talking to me about the problems he had been facing and the self-doubts he felt. I wondered if his increased absences were an offshoot of the phenomenon Nunzio was describing. It was food for thought, and something I promised myself I would consider carefully at a later point. Right now, there were more immediate matters demanding my attention . . . like the people burrowing in under the floor.

It seemed that, in the final analysis, Nunzio was as inept as most humans when it came to guard duty. They make a big show of alertness and caution when they come on duty, but within a matter of hours they are working harder at dealing with their boredom than in watching whatever it is they're supposed to be guarding. To be honest, the fact that dragons have longer lives may explain part of why we are so much better at staving off boredom. After a few hundred years, days, even weeks shrink to where they have no real time value at all. Even our very young have an attention span that lasts for months . . . sometimes years.

Whatever the reason, Nunzio continued to ramble on about his concerns with the status quo, apparently oblivious to the scratching and digging sounds that were making their way closer to our position. This time it wasn't simply my better hearing, for the noise was easily within the human range, though admittedly soft. By using my hearing, I could listen in on the conversations of the diggers.

"How much farther?"

"Sshhh! About ten feet more."

"Don't 'sshhh' me! Nobody can hear us."

"I can hear you! This tunnel isn't that big, yaknow."

"What are you going to do with your share of the money after we steal the stuff?"

"First we gotta steal it. Then I'll worry about what to do with my share."

That was the part I had been waiting to hear. There had always been the chance they were simply sewer diggers or escaping convicts or something equally nonthreatening to our situation. As it was, though, they were fair game.

Rising from where I had been sitting, I moved quietly to where they were digging.

"... unless Don Bruce wants to ... Hey! Where are you goin'? Get back here!"

I ignored Nunzio's shouting and listened again. On target. I estimated about four feet down. With a mental smirk, I began jumping up and down, landing as heavily as I could.

"What are you doin'? Stop that! Hey, Gleep!"

The noise Nunzio was making was trivial compared to what was being said four feet down. When I mentioned earlier that I was too heavy for Nunzio to move unassisted, I was not meaning to imply that he was weak. The simple poundage of a dragon is a factor to be reckoned with even if it's dead, and if it's alive and thinking, you have real problems. I felt the floor giving way and hopped clear, relishing the sounds of muffled screams below.

"Jeez. Now look what you've done! You broke the floor!"

Again I had expected no thanks and received none. This did not concern me, as at the moment I was more interested in assessing the damage, or lack of damage, I had inflicted on this latest round of potential thieves.

The floor, or a portion of it, now sagged about a foot lower, leading me to conclude that either the tunnel below had not been very high, or that it had only partially collapsed. Either way, there were no more sounds emanating from that direction, which meant the thieves were either dead or had retreated emptyhanded. Having accomplished my objective of removing yet another threat to the shipment, I set my mind once again on more important things. Turning a deaf ear to Nunzio's ravings, I flopped down and pretended to sleep while I indulged in a bit of leisurely analysis.

Perhaps Nunzio was right. It was possible that my pet was reacting adversely to the change in his status from free-lance operator to the head of a corporation, much the same as tropical fish will suffer if the pH of the water in their aquarium is changed too suddenly. I was very much aware that an organism's environment consisted of much more than their physical surroundings . . . social atmosphere, for example, often influenced a human's well-being. If that were the case, then it behooved me to do something about it.

Exactly how I was to make the necessary adjustments would be a problem. Whenever possible, I tried to allow my pet free will. That is, I liked to give him the illusion of choosing his own course and associates without interference from me. Occasionally I would stray from this stance, such as when they brought that horrible Markie creature into our home, but for the most part it was an unshakeable policy. This meant that if I indeed decided that it was time to winnow out or remove any or all of Skeeve's current associates for his own good, it would have to be done in a manner which could not be traced to me. This would not only preserve the illusion that I was not interfering in his life, but also save him the angst which would be generated if he realized I was responsible for the elimination of one or more of his friends. Yes, this would require considerable thought and consideration.

"Here, fella. Want a treat?"

This last was uttered by a sleazy-looking Deveel as he held out a hand with a lump of some unidentifiable substance in it.

I realized with a guilty start that I had overindulged, sinking too far into my thoughts to maintain awareness of my surroundings. After the unkind thoughts I had entertained about Nunzio's attention

span, this was an inexcusable lapse on my part. Ignoring the offered gift, I raised my head and cast about desperately to reassess the situation.

There were three of them: the one currently addressing me, and two others who were talking to Nunzio.

"I dunno," the latter was saying. "I didn't get any instructions about anyone pickin' up the shipment early."

Something was definitely amiss. From his words and manner, even Nunzio was suspicious . . . which meant the plot had to be pretty transparent.

"C'mon boy. Take the treat."

The Deveel facing me was starting to sound a little desperate, but I continued ignoring him and his offering. It was drugged, of course. Just because humans can't smell a wide range of chemicals, they assume that no one else can either. This one was no problem. I was more concerned as to whether or not Nunzio would require assistance.

"I can't help it if your paperwork is fouled up," the smaller Deveel with Nunzio snarled, with a good imitation of impatience. "I've got a schedule to keep. Look. Here's a copy of my authorization."

As Nunzio bent to look at the paper the Deveel was holding, the one standing behind him produced a club and swung it at his head. There was a sharp "CRACK" ... but it was from the club breaking, not from Nunzio's head, that latter being, as I have noted, exceptionally dense.

"I'm sorry, I can't let you have the shipment," Nunzio said, handing the paper back to the short Deveel who took it without losing the astounded expression from his face. "This authorization is nothin' but a blank piece of paper."

He glanced over his shoulder at the larger Deveel who was standing there staring at his broken club.

"Be with you in a second, fella. Just as soon as we get this authorization thing cleared up."

I decided that he would be able to handle things in his own peculiar way and turned my attention to the Deveel with the drugged treat.

He was looking at the conversation across the room, his mouth hanging open in amazement. I noticed, however, that he had neglected to withdraw his hand.

There are those who hypothesize that dragons do not have a sense of humor. To prove that that is not the case, I offer this as a counterexample.

Unhinging my jaw slightly, I stretched out my neck and took the treat in my mouth. Actually, I took his hand in my mouth ... all the way to the shoulder. This was not as hazardous as it sounds. I simply took care not to swallow and therefore avoided any dangerous effects which might be generated by the drugged treat.

The Deveel glanced back when he heard my jaws crash together, and we looked into each others' eyes from a considerably closer range than he had anticipated. For effect, I waggled my eyebrows at him. The eyebrows did it, and his eyes rolled up into his head as he slumped to the floor in a dead faint.

Funny, huh? So much for not having a sense of humor.

Relaxing my jaws, I withdrew my head leaving the treat and his arm intact, and checked Nunzio's situation again.

The larger Deveel was stretched out on the floor unconscious while Nunzio was holding the other by the lapels with one hand, leisurely slapping him forehand and backhand as he spoke.

"I oughtta turn you'se over to da authorities! A clumsy hijack like this could give our profession a bad name. Know what I mean? Are you listenin' ta me? Now take your buddies and get outta here before I change my mind! And don't come back until you find some decent help!"

I had to admit that Nunzio had a certain degree of style . . . for a human. If he had been fortunate enough to be born with a brain, he might have been a dragon.

While he was busy throwing the latest batch of attackers out the door, I decided to do a little investigating. After three attempts to relieve us of our prize, though Nunzio was only aware of one of them, I was beginning to grow a bit suspicious. Even for as crime-prone a lot as humans tend to be, three attempts in that close succession was unusual, and I wanted to know more about what it was we were guarding.

The cases still smelled of paper and ink, but that seemed an inadequate reason for the attention they had been drawing. As casually as I could, I swatted one of the cases with my tail, caving it in. Apparently I had not been casual enough, for the sound brought Nunzio sprinting to my side.

"Now what are you doin'? Look! You ruined . . . Hey! Wait a minute!"

He stooped and picked up one of the objects that had spilled from the case and examined it closely. I snaked my head around so I could look over his shoulder.

"Do you know what dis is, Gleep?"

As a matter of fact, I didn't. From what I could see, all it was some kind of picture book . . . and a shoddily made one at that. What it didn't look like was anything valuable. Certainly nothing that would warrant the kind of attention we had been getting.

Nunzio tossed the book back onto the floor and glanced around nervously.

"This is over my head," he murmured. "I can't . . . Gleep, you keep an eye on this stuff. I'll be right back.

I've gotta get the Boss . . . and Guido! Yea. He knows about this stuff."

Admittedly perplexed, I watched him go, then studied the book again.

Very strange. There was clearly something in this situation that was escaping my scrutiny.

I rubbed my nose a few times in a vain effort to clear it of the smell of ink, then hunkered down to await my pet's arrival.

"Comic books?"

Skeeve was clearly as perplexed as I had been.

"The 'valuable shipment' we're guarding is comic books?"

"That's what I thought, Boss," Nunzio said. "Screwy, huh? What do you think, Guido?"

Guido was busy prying open another case. He scanned the books on top, then dug a few out from the bottom to confirm they were the same. Studying two of them intently, he gave out with a low whistle.

"You know what these are worth. Boss?"

Skeeve shrugged.

"I don't know how many of them are here, but I've seen them on sale around the Bazaar at three or four for a silver, so they can't be worth much."

"Excuse me for interruptin'," Guido said, "but I am not referrin' to yer everyday, run-of-the-mill comic. I am lookin' at these, which are a horse from a different stable."

"They are?" my pet frowned. "I mean ... it is? I mean . . . these all look the same to me. What makes them special?"

"It is not easy to explain, but if you will lend me your ears I will attempt to further your education. Boss. You too, Nunzio."

Guido gathered up a handful of the books and sat on one of the cases.

"If you will examine the evidence before you, you will note that while all these comics are the same, which is to say they are copies of the same issue, they each have the number 'one' in a box on their cover. This indicates that it is the first issue of this particular title."

I refrained from peering at one of the books. If Guido said the indicator was there, it was probably there, and looking at it wouldn't change anything.

"Immediately that 'one' makes the comic more valuable, both to someone who is tryin' to obtain a complete set, and especially to a collector. Now, certain titles is more popular than others, which makes them particularly valuable, but more important are titles which have indeed grown in popularity since they made their first debutante. In that situational, there are more readers of the title currently than there were when it began, and the laws of supply and demand drive the price of a first-issue copy through the roof."

He gestured dramatically with one of the books.

"This particular title premiered several years ago and is currently hotter than the guy what swiped the crown jewels. What is more, the print run on the first issue was very small, makin' a first-issue copy exceedingly valuable ... with the accent on 'exceedingly.' I have with my own eyes seen a beat-up copy of the comic you are currently holding on a dealer's table with an askin' price of a hundert-fifty gold on it. Mind you, I'm not sayin' he got it, but that's what he was askin'."

Now it was Skeeve's turn to whistle. I might have been tempted myself, but whistling is difficult with a forked tongue.

"If that's true, this shipment is worth a fortune. He's got enough of them here."

"That is indeed the puzzlement. Boss," Guido said, looking at the cases. "If my memory is not seriously in error, there were only two thousand copies of this issue printed ... yet if all these cases are full of the same merchandise, there are considerably more copies than that in this shipment to which we are referrin'. How this could be I am uncertain, but the explanation which occurs to me is less than favorable to the owner."

"Forgeries!" Nunzio squeaked. "The guy's a multicolored paper hanger!"

"A multi . . . never mind!" Skeeve waved. "What good would forged comics be?"

"The same as any other forgery," Guido shrugged. "You pass 'em off as originals and split with the money before anyone's the wiser. In some ways it's better'n phony money, since it isn't as hard to duplicate comics and, as you'se can see, they're worth more per pound. The paper's cheaper, too."

My pet surveyed the shipment.

"So we've been made unwitting accomplices to a comic-forging deal, eh?"

"... And without even gettin' a piece of the action," Nunzio snarled.

"That wasn't what I was thinking about," Skeeve said, shaking his head. "I was thinking of all the collectors who are going to plunk down their money to get a genuine collector's item, only to have the bottom drop out of the market when it's discovered that it's been flooded with forgeries."

He rubbed his lower lip thoughtfully. "I wonder how much my lunch buddy has insured this shipment for?"

"Probably not much, if at all," Guido supplied. "To do so would necessitate the fillin' out of documents declarin' the contents of said shipment, and any insurance type knowledgeable enough to give him full value would also know the discrepancy between the shipment count and what was originally printed. You see. Boss, the trouble with runnin' a fraud is that it requires runnin' additional frauds to cover for it, and eventually someone is bound to catch on."

Skeeve wasn't even listening by the time Guido finished his oration. He was busy rubbing the spot between my ears, a strange smile on his face.

"Well, I guess nobody wins all the time."

"What was that. Boss?"

My pet turned to face them.

"I said that M.Y.T.H. Inc. fumbled the ball this time. Sorry, Nunzio, but this one is going into the records as a botched assignment. I can only assure you that it will not be reflected on your next performance review."

"I don't get it," Nunzio frowned. "What went wrong?"

"Why, the fire of course. You know, the fire that destroyed the entire shipment due to our inattentiveness and neglect? Terribly careless of us, wasn't it?"

"Fire? What fire?"

Skeeve stepped to one side and bowed to me, sweeping one hand toward the cases.

"Gleep? I believe this is your specialty?"

I waffled briefly between using a #4 or a #6, then said "to heck with it" and cut loose with a #9. It was a bit show-offy, I'll admit, but with Guide and Nunzio watching, not to mention my pet, it was pointless to spare the firepower.

They were impressed, which was not surprising, as #9 is quite impressive. There wasn't even any afterburn to put out, since by the time I shut down the old flamethrower, there was nothing left to burn.

For several moments we all stood staring at the charred spot on the warehouse floor.

"Wow!" Guido breathed at last.

"You can say that double for me," Nunzio nodded, slipping an arm around my neck. "Good dragon, Gleep. Good dragon."

"Well, gentlemen," Skeeve said, rubbing his hands together, "now that that's over I guess we can head . . . What's that?"

He pointed to the collapsed portion of the floor, noticing it for the first time.

"That?" Nunzio squeaked innocently. "Beats me, Boss. It was like that when we got here."

I didn't bother to return his wink, for I was already starting to retreat into heavy thought. I only hoped that in the final analysis I wouldn't decide that either Guido or Nunzio was an unsettling influence on my pet. Time would tell.

Chapter Six:

"Not everything in life is funny."

-R. L. ASPRIN

THE CREW SEEMED to be in high spirits as they gathered in my office for our monthly board meeting. Congratulations and jibes were exchanged in equal portions, as was the norm, and they began to settle in for what promised to be a marathon session.

I was glad they were in a good mood. It might make what I had to say a little easier, though I doubted it. I was still reeling from the one-two punch I had just received, and now it was my job to pass it on to them.

My own view of the pending session was a mixture of dread and impatience. Impatience finally dominated, and I called the meeting to order.

"I know you all came prepared to discuss the sale of The Fun House," I said, looking around at the team members sprawled hither and yon, "but something has come up that I think takes priority over that. If no one objects, I'll temporarily table the casino discussion in favor of new business."

That caused a bit of a stir and an exchange of puzzled glances and shrugs. Not wanting to be sidetracked by a round of questions or comments, I hurried on.

"There's an assignment ... no, I can't call it that. There's no payment involved and no client. It's just something I think M.Y.T.H. should get involved in. I don't feel I can order anyone to take part ... in fact, I don't even see putting it to a vote. It's got to be on an individual volunteer basis."

Tananda raised her hand. I nodded at her.

"Do we get to hear what it is? Or are we supposed to volunteer blind?"

I searched for the words for a moment, then gave up. Instead of speaking, I pushed the little oblong box that was on my desk toward her. She frowned at it, glanced at me, then picked it up and raised the lid.

One look inside was all it took for her to get the message. Sinking back in her seat, we locked eyes for a moment; then she shook her head and gave a low whistle.

"I say, is this a private horror, or can any number play?" Chumley grumbled from across the office.

In response, Tananda held up the box, tilting it so everyone could see the contents. Inside was a severed finger, a woman's finger, to be exact. It was wearing a particularly gaudy ring.

There was a long silence as the assemblage stared at the missive. Then Massha cleared her throat.

"How much for just the ring?" she quipped, but from the tone of her voice she wasn't expecting anyone to laugh.

Nobody did.

"I don't get it. Boss," Guido scowled. "Is this supposed to be a joke or sumpin'?"

"You and Nunzio weren't around for the big finale, Guido," I said. "Remember Queen Hemlock? Back on my home dimension of Klah?"

"Sure," he nodded. "She was an okay skirt ... a little creepy, though."

"I guess it depended on which side of her favor you were on," Tananda commented wryly, tossing the box back onto the table.

I ignored her.

"Bunny, you weren't around for any of this, so..."

"I've picked up some of it talking to Chumley," she waved.

"Well, Queen Hemlock had an interesting plan she wanted to put into effect after she married Rodrick: to combine Possiltum's military strength with the wealth of her own kingdom of Impasse and fulfill her lifelong dream of conquering the world. Of course, she also planned to kill Rodrick if he opposed the idea."

I picked up the box and toyed with it idly.

"I thought I had stopped her by giving Rodrick wedding rings that they thought linked their lives, rings that wouldn't come off. The one in the box here is hers . . . of course, she had to cut off her finger to get rid of it. I hadn't anticipated that."

"I rather suspect she wanted her dream more than her finger," Chumley said with a grimace.

"So it would seem," I nodded. "Now she's on the loose, with an army we inadvertently supplied her with back when I was Court Magician of Possiltum. I'm not the greatest military appraiser around, but I don't think there's anything on Klah that can stop her ... unless M.Y.T.H. Inc. takes a hand in the game."

"What I don't understand," Chumley said, "is why she informed us of the situation via that missive. Wouldn't she be better off unopposed?"

"Don't you know a challenge when you see one, big brother?" Tananda sighed. "Gauntlets are out of style, so she's giving us the finger."

"You all seem ta have a higher opinion of Queenie than I do," Massha spoke up. "Ta me, it looks more like an invitation to a trap. As I recall, old Hemlock wasn't too well disposed toward us when we split. For all we know, her plan may have already run its course ... in which case we get to be the featured entertainment at the victory celebration."

That hadn't occurred to me. I seemed to be missing a lot lately.

"You may be right, Massha," I said. "Under the best of circumstances, I'm not sure there's anything that can be done. That's why I'm putting it up for discussion. It's my home dimension, and I was the one who contributed to the problem, so my judgment is biased. In many ways, it's a personal problem. I can't expect anyone else to . . ."

"You're talking it to death, Hot Stuff," Massha interrupted. "You're our peerless leader, for better or worse. Just go for it. We'll be right behind you."

I shook my head and held up a restraining hand.

"It's not that simple. First of all, I don't want this to be a group commitment where a dissenting individual has to be an exception or go along with something they don't agree with. That's why I was calling for individual volunteers . . . with no stigma attached to anyone who doesn't want to sign up. Second ..."

This was the hard part. Taking a deep breath, I plunged into it.

"Second, I won't be along for this one. Something else has come up that takes priority over Queen Hemlock. Now, if she's not that important to me . . ."

"Whoa. Stop the music!" Tananda exclaimed. "I want to hear what this hot deal is you've got going on the side. What's more important to you than defending your own home dimension?"

I avoided her eyes.

"It's not a deal or a job, really. It ... It's personal. Something I can't delegate. I've got to handle it myself."

"So tell us," she demanded, crossing her arms. "We're family. If nothing else, don't you think we have a right to know what the head man is going to be doing while we're off fighting a war for him?"

I had had a feeling I wouldn't be able to slip this by unnoticed. With a sigh, I dropped the other shoe.

"Look around the room," I said. "Notice anything missing?"

There was a pause as everyone complied. It took a distressingly long time for them to figure it out.

"Aahz!" Chumley said at last. "Aahz isn't here."

"Say, that's right," Massha blinked. "I thought the meeting was a little quiet. Where is old Green and Scaly?"

"Gone."

It took a moment for it to sink in. Then the team stared at each other in shocked silence.

"The note was on my desk this morning," I continued. "It's his letter of resignation from M.Y.T.H. Inc. Apparently he feels that without his powers he's deadwood . . . taking up space without earning his pay. He's packed up and gone, headed back to Perv."

I dropped the paper back on my desk.

"That's why I'm not going after Queen Hemlock myself. I'm going to Perv . . . after Aahz."

The room exploded.

"To Perv?"

"You've got to be kidding. Hot Stuff."

"But, Boss ..."

"Skeeve, you can't ..."

"I say, Skeeve. What if he won't come back?"

I homed in on that last comment. As usual, Chumley managed to hit the heart of the matter.

"If he won't come back . . . well, I'll have tried. I've got to at least talk to him. We've been together too long to let it go with a letter. I'm going to Perv to talk with him face to face . . . and I'm going alone."

A new wave of protest rose in the room, but I cut it off.

"When you go after Queen Hemlock... excuse me... if you go after Queen Hemlock, you're going to need all the manpower you can muster. It's bad enough that I can't be there; don't divide your strength more than it already is. Besides ..."

My voice faltered a little here.

"This is my problem ... I mean really my problem. I've been doing a lot of thinking since I read this note, and the problem is bigger than Aahz."

I swept the assemblage slowly with my eyes.

"I've gotten pretty wrapped up with being president lately. It's been hard to ... I've been trying to justify the faith you all have in me by making the business go. In the process, it's gotten so I'm pretty sparse with my 'thank yous' and 'atta boys,' and I've all but lost contact with all of you outside of a business context. Aahz has been my best friend for years, and if he ... Let's just say I'll be looking for myself as much as for Aahz."

There was dead silence as my oration ground to a halt.

If I had been hoping for any protests over my analysis, I was playing to the wrong audience. Suddenly, I wanted the meeting to be over with.

I cleared my throat.

"I'm taking a leave of absence to find Aahz. No discussion is required or allowed. Now, the subject at hand is whether or not M.Y.T.H. inc. is going to attempt to stop Queen Hemlock's assumed attempt to take over Klah. Are there any volunteers?"

End of M.Y.T.H. Inc. Link By Robert Asprin

Myth-Nomers and Im-Pervections By Robert Asprin

Chapter One:

"Nobody's seen it all!"

—MARCO POLO

THOSE OF YOU who have been following my mishaps know me as Skeeve (sometimes Skeeve the Great) and that I grew up in the dimension Klah, which is not the center of culture or progress for our age no matter how generously you look at it. Of course, you also know that since I started chronicling my adventures, I've knocked around a bit and seen a lot of dimensions, so I'm not quite the easily impressed bumpkin I was when I first got into the magik biz. Well, let me tell you, no matter how sophisticated and jaded I thought I had become, nothing I had experienced to date prepared me for the sights that greeted me when I dropped in on the dimension Perv.

The place was huge. Not that it stretched farther than any other place I had been. I mean, a horizon is a horizon. Right? Where it did go that other places I had visited hadn't, was up!

None of the tents or stalls I was used to seeing at the Bazaar at Deva were in evidence here. Instead, massive

2 Robert Asprin

buildings stretched up into the air almost out of sight. Actually, the buildings themselves were plainly in sight. What was almost lost was the sky! Unless one looked straight up, it wasn't visible at all, and even then it was difficult to believe that little strip of brightness so far overhead was really the sky. Perhaps this might have been more impressive if the buildings themselves were pleasanter to look at. Unfortunately, for the most part they had the style and grace of an oversized outhouse . . . and roughly the same degree of cleanliness. I wouldn't have believed that buildings so high could give the impression of being squat, but these

did. After a few moments' reflection, I decided it was the dirt.

It looked as if soot and grime had been accumulating in layers on every available surface for generations, give or take a century. I had a flash impression that if the dirt were hosed from the buildings, they would collapse from the loss of support. The image was fascinating and I amused myself with it for a few moments before turning my attention to the other noteworthy feature of the dimension: The People.

Now there are those who would contest whether the denizens of Perv qualified as "people" or not, but as a resident of the Bazaar I had gotten into the habit of referring to all intelligent beings as "people," no matter what they looked like or how they used their intelligence. Anyway, whether they were acknowledged as people or not, and whether they were referred to as "Per-vects" or "Per-verts," there was no denying there were a lot of them!

Everywhere you looked there were mobs of citizens, all jostling and snarling at each other as they rushed here and there. I had seen crowds at the Big Game that I thought were rowdy and rude, but these teeming throngs won the prize hands down when it came to size and rudeness.

The combined effect of the buildings and the crowds

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 3

created a mixed impression of the dimension. I couldn't tell if I was attracted or repelled, but overall I felt an almost hypnotic, horrified fascination. I couldn't think of anything I had seen or experienced that was anything like it.

"It looks like Manhattan . . . only more so!"

That came from Massha. She's supposed to be my apprentice . . . though you'd never know it. Not only is she older than me, she's toured the dimensions more than I have. Even though I've never claimed to be a know-it-all, it irritates me when my apprentice knows more than I do.

"I see what you mean," I said, bluffing a little. "At least, as much as we can see from here."

It seemed like a safe statement. We were currently standing in an alley which severely limited our view. Basically, it was something to say without really saying anything.

"Aren't you forgetting something, though. Hot Stuff?"
Massha frowned, craning her neck to peer down the street.

So much for bluffing. Now that I had admitted noticing the similarities between Perv and Man-hat-tin . . . wherever that was, I was expected to comment on the differences. Well, if there's one thing I learned during my brief stint as a dragon poker player, it's that you don't back out of a bluff halfway through it.

"Give me a minute," I said, making a big show of looking in the same direction Massha was. "I'll get it."

What I was counting on was my apprentice's impatience. I figured she would spill the beans before I had to admit I didn't know what she was talking about. I was right.

"Long word . . . sounds like disguise spell?"

She broke off her examination of the street to shoot me a speculative glance.

"Oh! Yeah. Right."

My residency at the Bazaar had spoiled me. Living at the trading and merchandising hub of the dimensions had gotten

Robert Asprin

me used to seeing beings from numerous dimensions shopping side by side without batting an eye. One tended to forget that in other dimensions, off-world beings were not only an oddity, occasionally they were downright unwelcome.

Of course, Perv was one of those dimensions. What Massha had noticed while I was gawking at the landscape was that we were drawing more than a few hostile glares as passersby noticed us at the mouth of the alley. I had attributed that to two things: the well-known Pervish temperament (which is notoriously foul), and Massha.

While my apprentice is a wonderful person, her appearance is less than pin-up-girl caliber . . . unless you get calendars from the local zoo. To say Massha would look more natural with a few tick-birds walking back and forth on her would be an injustice . . . she's never tried to look natural. This goes beyond her stringy orange hair and larger-than-large stature. I mean, anyone who wears green lipstick and turquoise nail polish, not to mention a couple of tattoos of dubious taste, is not trying for the Miss Natural look.

There was a time when I would get upset at people for staring at Massha. She really is a wonderful person, even if her taste in clothes and makeup would gag a goat. I finally reached peace with it, however, after she pointed out that she expected people to look at her and dressed accordingly.

All of this is simply to explain why it didn't strike me as unusual that people were staring at us. Similarly, Pervish citizens are noted for not liking anyone, and off-worlders in particular, so the lack of warmth in the looks directed at us did not seem noteworthy.

What Massha had reminded me of, though it shouldn't have been necessary, is that we were now on Perv, their home dimension, and instead of an occasional encounter we would be dealing with them almost exclusively. As I

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS

said I should have realized it, but after years of hearing about Perv, it was taking a while for it to sink in that I was actually there.

Of course, there was no way we could be mistaken for natives. The locals here had green scales, yellow eyes, and pointed teeth, while Massha and I looked . . . well, normal. In some way, I think it goes to show how unsettling the Pervects look when I say that, by comparison, Massha looks normal.

However, Massha was correct in pointing out that if I hoped to get any degree of cooperation from the locals, I was going to have to utilize a disguise spell to blend with them. Closing my eyes, I got to work.

The disguise spell was one of the first spells I learned,

and I've always had complete confidence in it ... after the first few times I used it, that is. For those who are interested in technical details, it's sort of a blend of illusion and mind control. Simply put, if you can convince yourself that you look different, others will see it as well. That may sound complicated, but it's really very simple and easy to learn. Actors have been using it for centuries. Anyway, it's quite easy, and in no time at all my disguise was in place and I was ready to face Perv as a native.

"Nice work, Spell-slinger," Massha drawled with deceptive casualness. "But there's one minor detail you've overlooked."

This time I knew exactly what she was referring to, but decided to play it dumb. In case you're wondering, yes, this is my normal *modus operandi* ... to act dumb when I know what's going on, and knowledgeable when I'm totally in the dark.

"What's that, Massha?" I said, innocently.

"Where's mine?"

There was a lot loaded into those two words, everything

6 Robert Asprin

from threats to a plea. This time, however, I wasn't going to be moved. I had given the matter a lot of thought and firmly resolved to stand by my decision.

"You aren't going to need a disguise, Massha. You aren't staying."

"But, Skeeve ..."

"No!"

"But ..."

"Look, Massha," I said, facing her directly, "I appreciate your wanting to help, but this is my problem. Aahz is my partner, not to mention my mentor and best friend. What's more, it was my thoughtlessness that got him so upset he resigned from the firm and ran away. No matter

how you cut it, it's my job to find him and bring him back."

My apprentice regarded me with folded arms and tight lips.

"Agreed," she said.

"... So there's no point in your trying to ... what did you say?"

"I said agreed," she repeated. "... As in, I agree it's your job to bring Aahz back!"

That took me by surprise. I had somehow expected more of an argument. Even now, it didn't look to me like she had really given up the fight.

"Well, then ..."

"... And it's my job as your apprentice to tag along and back your moves. By your own logic, Chief, I'm obligated to you the same way you're obligated to Aahz."

It was a good argument, and for a moment I was tempted to let her stay.

"Sorry, Massha," I said finally with real regret, "I can't let you do it."

"But ..."

"... Because you're going to be my stand-in when the

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 7

rest of the team takes on Queen Hemlock."

That stopped her, as I thought it would, and she bit her lip and stared into the distance as I continued.

"It's bad enough that the rest of the crew is going to fight my battle for me, but to have both of us sit it out is unthinkable. They're going to need all the help they can get. Besides, part of the reason for having an apprentice is so that I can be two places at once . . . isn't it?"

I figured that would end the discussion, but I underestimated Massha's determination.

"Okay, then you lead the fight against Hemlock and fetch the Scaly Wonder."

I shook my head.

"C'mon, Massha. You know better than that. It was my thoughtlessness that made him leave in the first place. If anyone should, if anyone can make him come back it's got to be me."

She muttered something under her breath that it's probably just as well I didn't hear, but I was pretty sure it wasn't wholehearted agreement. With one problem already at hand from my lack of attentiveness to my associates' moods, I thought it ill-advised to ignore the fact my apprentice was upset.

"Look, can we take a few minutes and discuss what it is that's really bothering you?" I said. "I'd just as soon we didn't part company on an off note."

Massha pursed her lips for a few moments, then heaved a great sigh.

"I just don't like the idea of your taking on this chore alone, Skeeve. I know you know more magik than I do, but this is one of the meanest of the known dimensions. I'd feel better if you had a backup is all ... Even if it's just a mechanic like me. These little toys of mine have helped us out more than once in the past."

8 Robert Asprin

What she was referring to, of course, was her jewelry. Nearly all the magik Massha used was of the gimmick variety . . . magik rings, magik pendants, magik nose studs . . . hence the nickname within the trade of "mechanic." She was, however, polite enough to not stress too hard the fact that her toys were often more effective and reliable than my own "natural" form.

"You're right, Massha, and I'd love to have you along . . . but you're needed more against Hemlock. Before you get

too worried, though, just remember I've handled some pretty tough situations in the past."

"Those weren't on Perv and you usually had your partner along to handle the rough stuff," she said bluntly. "You don't even have a D-hopper along."

"I'll get it back from Aahz when I find him. If I'm successful, we'll be along together. If not, I figure he'll give me the D-hopper and set it for Klah just to be rid of me."

"... And if you can't find him at all?" Massha gestured pointedly at the crowds on the street. "In case you haven't noticed, this isn't going to be the easiest place to locate someone."

For a change, I was confident when I answered.

"Don't worry about that. I'll find him. I've got a few tricks up my sleeve for that chore. The trick is going to be getting him to change his mind."

"Well, can you at least do one thing? As a favor to your tired old apprentice?"

She tugged a ring off her left pinkie and handed it to me.

"Wear this," she said. "If you haven't shown up by the end of the week, I'll come looking for you. This'll help me locate you if you're still in this dimension ... or do you want to run the risk of being stranded here?"

The ring fit loosely on my right thumb. Any larger, and I would have had to wear it like a bracelet. Staring at it, a

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS

9

sudden suspicion flitted through my mind.

"What else does it do?"

"Beg pardon?" Massha replied with such innocence I knew I was right.

"You heard me, apprentice. What does it do besides provide a beacon?"

"Welllll ... it does monitor your heartbeat and alert me if there's a sudden change in your physical condition, like say if you were injured. If that happens, I might just drop in a little early to see what's wrong."

I wasn't sure I liked that.

"But what if my heartbeat changed for normal reasons . . . like because I met a beautiful girl close up?"

That earned me a bawdy wink.

"In that case, High Roller, I'd want to be here to meet her. Can't have you running around with just anybody, can we?"

Before I could think of a suitable reply, she swept me into a bone-crushing hug.

"Take care of yourself, Skeeve," she whispered with sudden ferocity. "Things wouldn't be the same without you."

There was a soft pop in the air, and she was gone. I was alone in Perv, the nastiest of the known dimensions.

Chapter Two:

"They don't make 'em like they used to!"

—H. FORD

ACTUALLY, I WASN'T as worried as you might think I'd be from the situation. Like I'd told Massha, I had an ace up my sleeve . . . and it was a beaut!

A while back, I was part . . . heck, I was the instigator of a plan to force the Mob out of the Bazaar at Deva. I felt it was only fair, since I was the one who had given them access to the Bazaar in the first place, and besides, the Devan Merchants' Association had paid me well to get the Mob off their backs. Of course that was before the Mob hired me to run their interests at the Bazaar, and the Bazaar

agreed to give me a house and pay me a percentage of the profits to keep the Mob at bay. Sound confusing? It was . . . a little. Fortunately, Aahz had shown me how the two assignments weren't mutually exclusive and that it was ethically possible to collect money from both sides . . . well, possible, anyway. Is it any wonder that I prize his counsel so highly? However, I digress.

During the initial skirmishes of that campaign, I had ac-

11

12

Robert Asprin

quired a little souvenir that I had almost forgotten about until I was getting ready for this quest. It wasn't much to look at, just a small vial with its stopper held in place by a wax seal, but I figured it just might mean the difference between success and failure.

I probably could have mentioned it to Massha, but frankly I was looking forward to taking the credit for having pulled off this chore by myself. Smirking confidently, I glared around to be sure I was unobserved, then broke the seal and removed the stopper.

Now to really appreciate the full impact of this next bit, you have to realize what I was expecting. Living at the Bazaar, I had gotten used to some really showy stuff . . . lightning bolts, balls of fire . . . you know, special effects like that. It's a tight market, and glitz sells. Anyway, I was braced for nearly anything, but I was expecting a billowing cloud of smoke and maybe a thunderclap or a gong for

emphasis.

What I got was a soft pop, the same as you get pulling a cork out of a bottle of flat soda, and a small puff of vapor that didn't have enough body to it to make a decent smoke ring. End of show. Period. Das ist alles.

To say I was a little disappointed would be like saying Devels dabbled in trade. Understatement to the max. I was seriously considering whether to throw the bottle away in

disgust or actually try to get a refund out of the Deveel who sold it to me, when I noticed there was something floating in the air in front of me.

Actually, I should say it was someone floating in the air, since it was clearly a figure ... or to be accurate, half a figure. He was bare to the waist, and possibly beyond. I couldn't tell because the image faded to invisibility below his navel. He was wearing a fez low on his forehead so it hid his eyes, and had his arms folded across his chest. His

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 13

arms and torso were pretty muscular, and he might have been impressive ... if he weren't so small! I had been expecting something between my height and that of a three-story building. What I got would have been maybe six to eight inches high if all of him was visible. As it was, head and torso only measured about three inches. Needless to say, I was underwhelmed. Still, he was all I had and if nothing else, over my various trials and adventures, I had learned to make do with what was available.

"Kalvin?" I said, unsure of the proper form of address.

"Like, man, that's my name. Don't wear it out," the figure replied without emerging from under his hat.

Now, I wasn't sure what our exact relationship was supposed to be, but I was pretty sure this wasn't it, so I tried again.

"Ummm ... do I have to point out that I am your Master and therefore Ruler of your Destiny?"

"Oh, yeah?"

The figure extended one long finger and used it to push the fez back to a point where he could look at me directly. His eyes were a glowing blood red.

"Do you know what I am?"

The question surprised me, but I rallied gamely.

"Ah, I believe you're a Djinn. Specifically a Djinn named

Kalvin. The Deveel I bought you from said you were the latest thing in Djins."

The little man shook his head.

"Wrong."

"But ..."

"What I am is drunk as a skunk!"

This last was accompanied by a conspiratorial wink.

"Drunk?!" I echoed.

Kalvin shrugged.

"What do you expect? I crawled into the bottle years

14 Robert Asprin

ago. I guess you could say I'm a Djin Rummy."

Whether my mouth was open from astonishment or to say something, I'm not sure but I finally caught the twinkle in his eye.

"Djin rummy. Cute. This is a gag, right?"

"Right as rain!" the Djin acknowledged, beaming at me with a disarming smile. "Had you going for a minute, didn't I?"

I started to nod, but he was still going strong.

"Thought we might as well get started on the right foot. I figure anyone who owns me has got to have a sense of humor. Might as well find out first thing, ya know? Say, what's yer name, anyway?"

He was talking so fast I almost missed the opening. In fact, I would have if he hadn't paused and looked expectantly at me.

"What? Oh! I'm Skeeve. I ..."

"Skeeve, huh? Funny name for a Pervert."

My response was reflexive.

"That's Per-vect. And I'm not. I mean, I'm not one."

The Djin cocked his head and squinted at me.

"Really? You sure look like one. Besides, I've never met anyone who wasn't a Perver . . . excuse me, Pervect . . . who would argue the difference."

It was sort of a compliment. Anyway, I took it as one. It's always nice to know when your spells are working.

"It's a disguise," I said. "I figured it was the only way to operate on Perv without getting hassled by the natives."

"Perv!"

Kalvin seemed genuinely upset.

"By the gods, Affendi, what are we doing here?"

"Affendi?"

"Sure. You're the Affendi, I'm the Offender. It's tradition among Djins. But that's beside the point. You haven't

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 15

answered my question. How did an intelligent lad such as yourself end up in this godforsaken dimension?"

"Do you know Perv? Have you been here before?" I said, my hopes rising for the first time since I opened the bottle.

"No, but I've heard of it. Most Djins I know avoid it like the plague."

So much for getting my hopes up. Still, at least I had Calvin talking seriously for a change.

"Well, to answer your question, I'm here looking for a friend of mine. He ... well, you might say he ran away

from home, and I want to find him and bring him back.
The trouble is, he's . . . a bit upset at the moment."

"A bit upset?" The Djin grimaced. "Sahib, he sounds positively suicidal. Nobody in their right mind comes to Perv voluntarily . . . present company excepted, of course. Do you have any idea why he headed this way?"

I shrugged carelessly.

"It's not that hard to understand. He's a Pervect, so it's only natural that when things go wrong, he'd head for..."

"A Pervect?"

Kalvin was looking at me as if I'd just grown another head.

"You have one of these goons for a friend? And you admit it? And when he leaves you try to get him back?"

Now, I couldn't speak for any of the other citizens of Perv, but I knew Aahz was no goon. That's fact, not idle speculation. I knew the difference because I had two goons, Guido and Nunzio, working for me. I was about to point this out when it occurred to me that I wasn't required to give Calvin any kind of explanation. I was the owner, and he was my servant.

"I rather think that's between my friend and me," I said stiffly. "As I understand it, your concern is to assist me in any way you can."

16 Robert Asprin

"Right-o," the Djin nodded, not seeming to take offense at my curtness. "Business it is. So what chore brings you

to summon one of my ilk?"

"Simple enough. I'd like you to take me to my friend."

"Good for you. I'd like a pony and a red wagon, myself."

It was said so smoothly it took a moment for me to register

what he had said.

"I beg your pardon?"

Kalvin shrugged.

"I said, 'I'd like a pony and . . .'"

"I know. I mean, I heard what you said," I interrupted.
"I just don't understand. Are you saying you won't help me?"

"Not won't . . . can't. First of all, you've never even gotten around to telling me who your friend is."

"Oh, that's easy. His name is Aahz, and he's ..."
"... And second of all, it's not within my powers.

Sorry."

That stopped me. I had never paused to consider the extent of a Djin's power.

"It's not? But when I summoned you, I thought you were supposed to help me."

"... Any way I can," Calvin finished. "Unfortunately for you, that doesn't cover a whole lot. How much did you pay for me, anyway?"

"A silver . . . but that was a while ago."
"A silver? Not bad. You must be pretty good at bargaining to get a Deveel to part with a registered Djin for that price." I inclined my head at the compliment, but felt obliged to explain.

"He was in a state of shock at the time. The rest of his stock had been wiped out."

"Well, don't feel too proud," the Djin continued. "You

were still overcharged. I wouldn't pay a silver for my services."

This was sounding less and less assuring. My easy solution to the problem seemed to be disappearing faster than a snowball on Deva.

"I don't get it," I said "I always thought Djins were supposed to be heavy hitters in the magik department."

Kalvin shook his head sadly.

"That's mostly sales hype," he admitted regretfully. "Oh, some of the big boys can move mountains . . . literally. But those are top-of-the-line Djins and usually cost more than it would take to do the same things non-magikally. Small fry like me come cheaper, but we can't do whole bunches, either."

"I'm sorry, Calvin. None of this makes any sense. If Djins actually have less power than, say, your average magician for hire, why would anybody buy them at all?"

The Djin gestured grandly.

' 'The mystique . . . the status ... do you know anything at all about Djinger?"

"Ginger? As in ginger beer?"

"No, Djin-ger . . . with a 'D' . . . As in the dimension where Djins and Djeanees come from."

"I guess not."

"Well, once upon a time, as the story goes, Djinger had a sudden disastrous drop in its money supply."

This sounded a little familiar.

"An economic collapse? Like on Deva?"

The Djin shook his head.

"Embezzlement," he said. "The entire Controller's office for the dimension disappeared, and when we finally found someone who could do an audit, it turned out most of the treasury was gone too."

18 Robert Asprin I

"There was a great hue and cry, and several attempts to track the culprits, but the immediate problem was what to do for money. Manufacturing more wouldn't work, since it would simply devalue what we did have. What we really needed was a quick influx of funds from outside the dimension."

"That's when some marketing genius hit on the 'Djin In

A Bottle' concept. Nearly everyone in the dimension who had the least skill or potential for magik was recruited for service. There was resistance, of course, but the promoters insisted it called for temporary contracts only, so the plan went into effect. In fact, the limited contract thing became a mainstay of the sales pitch . . . the mystique I was mentioning. That's why most Djins have conditions attached . . . three wishes only or whatever, though some are more ethical than others about how the wishes are fulfilled."

A thought suddenly occurred to me.

"Um, Calvin? How many wishes do I get from you? Like I said, the Deveel was a bit shell-shocked and never said anything about limitations."

"... On wishes or powers, eh?" the Djin winked. "Not surprising. Shell-shocked or not, Deveels still know how to sell. In their own way they're truly amazing."

"How many?"

"What? Oh. I'm afraid my contract only calls for one wish, Skeeve. But don't worry, I'll play it clean. No tricks, no word traps. If you're only going to get one for your money, it's only fair that it's legit."

"I see," I said. "So what can you do?"

"Not much, actually. What I'm best at is bad jokes."

"Bad jokes?"

"You know, like 'How do you make a djin fizz?'"

"I don't think ..."

"Drop him in acid. How do you ..."

19

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS

"I get the picture. That's it? You tell bad jokes?"

"Well, I give pretty good advice."

"That's good. I think I'm going to need some."

"I'll say. Well, the first piece of advice I've got for you

is to forget about this and head for home before it's too late."

For a moment the thought was almost tempting, but I

shook it off.

"Not a chance," I said firmly. "Let's go back to my original request. Can you advise me on how to find Aahz?"

"I might have a few ideas on the subject," the Djin admitted.

"Good."

"Have you tried a phone book?"

By now suspicion had grown into full-blown certainty. My hidden ace had turned out to be a deuce ... no, a joker. If I was counting on Kalvin for the difference between success and failure, I was in a lot of trouble.

Until now I had taken finding Aahz for granted, and had only been worrying about what to say once we were face-to-face. Now, looking at the streets and skyscrapers of Perv, I was painfully aware that just finding Aahz was going to

be harder than I thought . . . a lot harder!

Chapter Three:

'It's not even a nice place to visit!'

—FODOR'S Guide To Perv

EVEN AFTER GETTING used to the madness that was the Bazaar at Deva, the streets of Perv were something to behold. For one thing, the Bazaar was primarily geared for pedestrian traffic, the Merchants' Guild being strong enough to push through ordinances that favor modes and speed of travel that almost forced people to look at every shop and display they passed. My home dimension of Klah was a pretty backward place, and I had rarely seen a vehicle more advanced or faster than an oxcart.

Perv, on the other hand, had thoroughfares split between foot and vehicle traffic, and, for an unsophisticated guy like me, the vehicle traffic in particular was staggering. Literally hundreds of contraptions of as many descriptions jostled and snarled at each other at every intersection as they clawed for a better position in the seemingly senseless tangle of streets through which the torrent surged. Almost as incredible as the variety of vehicles was the collection of beasts which provided the locomotive power, pushing or pulling

22 Robert Asprin

their respective burdens while adding their voices to the cacophony which threatened to drown out all other sounds or conversation. Of course, they also added their contribution to the filth in the streets and smells in the air. It might be the metropolitan home of millions of beings, but Perv had the charm and aroma of a swamp.

What concerned me most at the moment, however, was the traffic. Walking down the street on Perv was a little like trying to swim upstream through a logjam. I was constantly

having to dodge and slide around citizens who seemed intent on walking through the space I was already occupying. Not that they seemed to be trying to hit me deliberately, mind you. It's just that nobody except me seemed to be looking where they were going. In fact, just making eye contact was apparently a rare occurrence.

"This friend of yours must really be something for you to put up with this," Calvin commented drily.

He was hovering in the vicinity of my shoulder, so I had no difficulty hearing him over the din. I had worried about how it would look having a Djin tagging along with me, but it seems that while they're under control Djins can only be seen and heard by their owner. It occurred to me that this was fairly magikal and therefore in direct contrast to the line Calvin was selling me about how powerless he was. He in turn assured me that it was really nothing, simply part of a Djin's working tools that would be no help to me at all. I wasn't assured. Somehow I had the feeling he wasn't telling me everything about his abilities or lack thereof, but having no way to force additional information out of him, I magnanimously decided to let it ride.

"He's more than a friend," I said, not realizing I was slipping into the explanation I had decided earlier not to give. "He was my teacher, and then my business partner

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 23

as well. I probably owe him more than any other person in my life."

"... But not enough to respect his wishes," the Djin supplied carelessly.

That brought me to a dead stop, ignoring the crush and jostling of the other pedestrians.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, it's true, isn't it? This guy Aahz obviously wants to be left alone or he wouldn't have walked out on you, but you're determined to drag him back. To me that doesn't

sound like you really care much about what's important to

him."

That hit uncomfortably close to home. As near as I could tell Aahz had left because I had been rather inconsiderate in my dealings with him. Still, I wasn't going to turn back

now. At the very least I wanted a face-to-face talk before I let him disappear from my life.

"He was a bit upset and throwing a snit-fit at the time," I muttered, avoiding the question of my motives completely.

"I just want him to know that he's welcome if he wants to come back."

With that I resumed my progress down the street. Half a

dozen steps later, however, I realized the Djin was laughing ruefully.

"Now what?"

"Skeeve, you're really something, you know?" Calvin said, shaking his head. "Perverts . . . excuse me, Pervects . . . are feared throughout the dimension for their terrible, violent tempers. But you, you not only describe it as a snit-fit, you're willing to show up on Perv itself just to make a point. You're either very good or an endangered species."

It suddenly occurred to me that I wasn't making as much use of my Djin as I might. I mean, he had said that one of

24 Robert Asprin

the things he was good at was advice, hadn't he?

"I don't know, Calvin. I've never had much trouble with them. In fact, one of the things Aahz told me was that Pervects manufacture and spread a lot of the bad rumors about themselves just to discourage visitors."

"Oh, yeah?"

The Djin seemed unconvinced.

"Well, let's see then. Could you share some of the things

you've heard about this dimension with me?"

Kalvin shrugged.

'If you want. I remember hearing about how one of your buddy's fellow citizens ripped off some guy's head and spit down his throat . . . literally!"

I ducked around a heavysset couple who were bearing down on me.

"Uh-huh. I heard the same rumor, but the one doing the ripping was a Troll, not a Pervect. Nobody actually saw that one, either. Besides, right now I'm more interested in information about the dimension than hearing tales of individual exploits."

I thought I lost Calvin for a moment when I flattened against a wall to avoid a particularly muscular individual and the Djin didn't make the move with me, but when I stepped out again he was back in his now-accustomed place.

"Well, why didn't you say so, if that's what you wanted to hear?" he said as if there had been no interruption." About Perv itself. Let me think. There's not that much information floating around, but what there is ... Ah! Got it!"

He plucked a thick book out of thin air and started leafing through it. I was so eager to hear what he had to say that I didn't comment on that little stunt at the moment, but I also vowed anew to inquire further into Calvin's "meager powers" when the opportunity presented itself.

"Let's see . . . Parts . . . P'boscus . . . Perv! You want

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 25

the statistics or should I skip to the good part?"

"Just give me the meat for now."

"Okay. It says here, and I quote, 'Perv: One of the few dimensions where magik and technology have advanced equally through the ages. This blend has produced a culture and lifestyle virtually unique in the known dimensions. Perverts are noted for their arrogance, since they strongly believe that their dimension possesses the best of everything, and they are extremely vocal in that belief wherever they go. This is despite ample proof that other dimensions which have specialized in magik or technology exclusively have clearly surpassed Perv in both fields. Unfortunately, Perverts are also disproportionately strong and are notorious for their bad tempers and ferocity, so few care to argue the point with them.' End quote."

Coming from Klah, a dimension which excelled at neither magik nor technology, I found the writeup to be pretty impressive. Calvin, on the other hand, seemed to find endless amusement in it.

"... 'Despite ample proof . . . ' I love it!" he chortled.
"Wait! I'll see that blowhard."

For some reason, I found this vaguely annoying.

"Say, Calvin," I said, "what does your book say about Djinger?"

"What book?"

"The one you ..."

I took my eyes off the foot traffic and glanced at him. He was dusting his hands innocently. The book was nowhere in sight.

I was opening my mouth to call him on his little disappearing act when something piled into me and sent me careening into a wall hard enough to make me see stars.

"Where do you think you're goin'. Runt?"

This last came from the pudgy individual I had just col-

lided with. He had stopped to confront me and stood with his fists clenched, leaning slightly forward as if being held back by invisible companions. Fat or not, he looked tough

enough to walk through walls.

"Excuse me . . . I'm sorry," I mumbled, shaking my head slightly to try to clear the spots that still danced in

front of my eyes.

"Well . . . watch it next time," he growled. He seemed

almost reluctant to break off our encounter, but finally spun on his heel and marched on down the sidewalk.

"You shouldn't let that fat lug bluff you like that," Calvin

advised. "Stand up to him."

"What makes you think he was bluffing?" I said, resuming my journey, taking care to swerve around the other Pervects crowding the path. 'Besides, there's also the minor detail that he was big enough to squash me like a bug."

"He raised a good point, though," the Djin continued as if I hadn't spoken. "Just where are we going, anyway?"

"Down the street."

"I meant, 'what's our destination?' I thought you said

the phone book was no help."

Despite its millions of inhabitants, the Pervish phone book we found had turned out to have less than a dozen pages. Apparently unlisted phone numbers were very big in this dimension, just one more indication of the social nature of the citizens. Of course, leafing vainly through it, it had occurred to me that Aahz had been with me off-dimension for so long that it was doubtful he would have been in the book even if it contained a full listing.

"I repeat, we're going down the street," I repeated.

"Beyond that, I don't know where we're going. Is that what

you wanted to hear?"

"Then why are we moving at all?" the Djin pressed.

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 27

"Wouldn't it be better to wait until we decided on a course of action before we started moving?"

I dodged around a slow-moving couple.

"I think better when I'm walking. Besides, I don't want to draw unnecessary attention to us by lurking suspiciously in alleys while I come up with a plan."

"Hey, you! Hold it a minute!"

This last was blasted with such volume that it momentarily dominated the street noise. Glancing behind me, I saw a uniformed Pervect who looked like a giant bulldog with scales bearing down on me with a purposeful stride.

"What's that?" I said, almost to myself.

Of course, unlike the direct questions I had put to him, Calvin decided to answer this one.

"I believe it's what you referred to as 'unnecessary attention' . . . also known in some dimensions as a cop."

"I can see that. I just can't understand what he wants with me."

"What did you say?" the cop demanded, heaving to a halt in front of me.

"Me? Nothing," I replied, barely remembering in time that he couldn't see or hear Calvin. "What's the trouble, officer?"

"Maybe you are. We'll see. What's your name?"

"Don't tell him!" Calvin whispered in my ear.

"Why?" I said, the words slipping out before I had a chance to think.

"Because it's my job to keep track of suspicious characters," the cop growled, taking my question as being directed

at him.

"Me? What have I done that's suspicious?"

"I've been following you for a couple of blocks now, and I've seen how you keep swervin' around folks. I even

Robert Asprin

28

saw you apologize to someone and . . . say, I'll ask the questions here. Now, what's your name?"

"Tell him to bag it!" Calvin advised. "He doesn't have a warrant or anything."

"Skeeve, sir," I supplied, desperately trying to ignore the Djin. All I needed now was to get in trouble with the local authorities. "Sorry if I'm acting strange, but I'm . . . not from around here and I'm a little disoriented."

I decided at the last moment to try to keep my off-dimension origins a secret. The policeman seemed to be fooled by my disguise spell, and I saw no point in enlightening

him unless asked directly.

"You're being too polite!" the Djin whispered insistently. "That's what made him suspicious in the first place, remember?"

"Not from around here, eh?" the cop snarled. "So

tell me, Mr. Can't-Walk-Like-Normal-Folks-Skeeve, just where is it you're from . . . exactly^"

'So much for keeping my origins a secret.

"Well, I was born on Klah, but lately I've been living

at the Bazaar at Deva where I ..."

"From off-dimension! I might have known. I suppose comin' from Deva that you're going to try to tell me you're

here on business."

"Well, sort of. I'm here looking for my business partner."

"Another one from off-dimension! Any more and we'll have to fumigate the whole place."

The cop's mouth was starting to get on my nerves, but I thought it wise to keep a rein on my temper, despite the warning from Calvin.

"Actually, he's from here. That is, he's a Pervect."

"A Pervect? Now I've heard everything. A fellow from off-dimension who claims to have a Pervect for a business partner!"

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 29

That did it.

"That's right!" I barked. "What's more, he happens to be my best friend. We had a fight and I'm trying to find him and get him to rejoin the company. What's it to you, anyway?"

The cop gave ground a little, then scowled at me.

"Well, I guess you're tellin' the truth. Even someone from off-dimension could come up with a better lie than that. Just watch your step, fella. We don't like outsiders much on Perv."

He gave me one last hard glare, then wandered off, glancing back at me from time to time. Still a little hot under the collar, I matched him glare for glare.

"That's better," Calvin chortled, reminding me of his presence. "A Klahd, huh? That explains a few things.."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?"

Like I said, I was still a little miffed.

'Like why we've been wandering around without a plan. You aren't used to metropolises this size, are you?'

Mad as I was, I couldn't argue with that.

"Well ..."

"If you don't mind, could I offer you a little advice without your asking for it?"

I shrugged non-committally.

"It's obvious to me this little search of yours could take some time. It might be a good idea if we hunted up a hotel to use for a base camp. If that cop had asked where you were staying on Perv, things might have gotten a little awkward."

That made sense. It also brought home to me just how much of a stranger in a strange land I was. On most of my adventures I had either slept under the stars or had housing provided by friends or business associates. Consequently, I had remarkably little experience with hotels. .. like none.

30 Robert Asprin

"Thanks, Calvin," I said, regaining a bit of my normal composure. " So how do you recommend we find a hotel?"

"We could hail a cab and ask the driver."
Terrific. The Djin was being his normal, helpful self. I was beginning to feel some things weren't going to change.

Chapter Four:

"Taxis are water soluble."

-G. KELLY

"I'LL TELL YA, this would be a pretty nice place, if it weren't for all the Perverts."

The taxi driver said this the same way he had made all his comments since picking us up: over his shoulder while

carelessly steering his vehicle full tilt through the melee of traffic.

I had ignored most of his chatter, which didn't seem to bother him. He apparently didn't expect a response, but this last comment caught my interest.

"Excuse me, but aren't you a Pervert ... I mean, a Pervect?"

The driver nodded vigorously and half turned in his seat to face me.

"There. See what I mean?"

Frankly, I didn't. If there was logic in his statement, it escaped my comprehension. What I did see, however, was that we were still plunging forward without slacking our speed. There was a tangle of stopped vehicles ahead which

31

32 Robert Asprin

the driver seemed obliivious to as he tried to make his conversational point. A collision seemed inescapable.

"Look out!" I shouted, pointing frantically at the obstructions.

Without losing eye contact, the driver's hand lashed out

and smashed down on the toy stuffed goose that was taped down in front of him. The thing let out a harsh, tremendous "HONK!!" that would have gotten it named king of the

geese if they ever held an election.

"Anyway, that's what I'm talkin' about." The driver finished and turned his attention forward again.

The traffic jam had miraculously melted away before he had finished speaking, and we sailed through the intersection

unscathed.

"Relax, Skeeve," Calvin laughed. "This guy's a professional."

"A professional what?" I muttered.

"How's that?" the driver said, starting to turn again.

"NOTHING! I ... nothing."

I had been unimpressed with the taxi since it had picked us up. Actually, 'picked us up' is much too mild a phrase and doesn't begin to convey what had actually happened.

Following Calvin's instructions, I had stepped to the curb and raised my hand.

"Like this?" I said, making the mistake of turning my head to ask him directly.

Facing away from the street, I missed what happened next, which is probably just as well. The normal traffic din suddenly erupted with shrieks and crashes. Startled, I jerked my hand back and jumped sideways to a spot a safer distance from the street. By the time I focused on the scene, most of the noise and the action had ceased.

Traffic was backed up behind the vehicle crouched at the curb beside us, and blocked drivers were leaning out to

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 33

shout and/or shake their fists threateningly. There may have been a few collisions, but the condition of most of the vehicles on the street was such that I couldn't be certain which damages were new and which were scars from earlier skirmishes.

"That's right," Calvin said, apparently unruffled by the mayhem which had just transpired. "Get in."

"You're kidding!"

The vehicle which had stopped for us was not one to inspire confidence. It was sort of a box-like contraption | hanging between two low-slung, tailless lizards. The reptiles | had blindfolds wrapped around their head obscuring their | eyes, but they kept casting from side to side while their | tongues lashed in and out questing for data on their surround- | ings. Simply put, they looked powerful and hungry enough | for me to want to keep my distance.

"Maybe we should wait for another one," I suggested hopefully.

"Get in," the Djin ordered. "If we block traffic too long the cop will be back."

That was sufficient incentive for me, and I bravely entered the box and took a seat behind the driver, Calvin never leaving my shoulder. The interior of the box seemed safe | enough. There were two seats in the rear where I was sitting, | and another beside the driver, although the latter seemed | filled to overflowing with papers and boxes that would oc- | casionally spill to the floor when we took a corner too fast | ... which was always. There were notes and pictures pinned | and taped to the walls and ceiling in a halo around the | driver, and a confusing array of dials and switches on the | panel in front of him. Basically, one had the suspicion the | driver lived in his vehicle, which was vaguely reassuring. |;I mean, the man wouldn't do anything to endanger his own | phome, would he?

34 Robert Asprin

"Where to?" the driver said, casually forcing his vehicle back into the flow of traffic.

"Urn, just take me to a hotel."

"Expensive . . . cheap . . . what?"

"Oh, something moderate, maybe a bit on the inexpensive side."

"Right."

I was actually pretty well set financially. A money belt around my waist had over two thousand in gold I had brought along to cover expenses on my search. Still, there was no sense throwing it away needlessly, and I figured since didn't plan to spend much time in my room, I wouldn't need anything particularly grand.

Within the first few blocks, however, I had pause to reconsider the wisdom of my choice of vehicles. As far as I could tell, the lizards were blindfolded to prevent their animal survival instinct from interfering with the driver's orders. I couldn't figure out how he was controlling them but he seemed determined to maintain a breakneck pace regardless of minor considerations like safety and common sense.

"So, have you two been on Perv long?"

The driver's voice dragged me back to the present my mind had been trying so desperately to ignore.

"Just got here today. In fact."

Suddenly, I zeroed in on what he had said.

"Excuse me, did you say 'you two'T'

The driver bobbed his head in acknowledgment.

"That's right. It isn't often I get a Klahd or a Djin, much less one of each in the same fare."

He not only knew how many we were, he had spotted! what we were! Needless to say, the news was not welcome. \

"What the ..." Calvin started, but I silenced him with a gesture. |

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECHONS 35

"Before I answer, do you mind my asking how you knew?" I said, casually glancing around to see if there was a way we could exit rapidly if necessary.

"Scanned you when you got in," the driver said, pointing briefly to a small screen amidst the clutter of his other devices. "A cabbie can't be too careful these days . . . not with the crime rate the way it is. We're moving targets for every amateur stick-up artist or hijacker who needs a quick bankroll. I had that baby installed so I'd know in advance what was sittin' down behind me."

He shot me a quick wink over his shoulder.

"Don't worry, though. I won't charge you extra for the Djin. He don't take up much space. So far as I can tell, you two are harmless enough."

That reassured me, at least to a point where I no longer considered jumping from the moving vehicle.

"I take it you don't share the general low opinion of folks from off-dimension?"

"Don't make no never mind to me, as long as you pay your way," the driver waved. "As far as I can tell, you got enough money on ya that I don't think you'll try to welch on anything as piddling as a cab fare. Keep up the disguise, though. Some of the merchants around here will raise their prices at the sight of someone from off-dimension

just to make you feel unwelcome . . . and things are already priced sky-high."

"Thanks for the warning."

"... And you might be careful carrying so much cash. Everything you've heard about crime on the streets in this place is true. In fact, you'd probably be best off hiring yourself a bodyguard while you're here. If you want, I can recommend a couple good ones."

"You know, that might not be a bad idea," Calvin said.

"In case I hadn't mentioned it, Djinger is a pretty peaceful

I ignored him as the cabbie continued, apparently unable to hear the Djin despite his various devices. Remembering some of the dangers I had faced in my adventures, the idea of hiring someone to guard me just to walk down the street seemed a little ludicrous.

' I appreciate your concern, but I'm pretty good at looking out for myself."

"Suit yourself, it was just a suggestion. Say, you want something to eat? I sell snack packs."

He used one hand to pick up a box from the seat beside him and shove it in my direction. It was filled with small bags with stuff oozing through the sides.

"Uh . . . not just now, thanks," I said, trying to fight down the sudden queasiness I felt. The driver was not to be daunted. He tossed the box back onto the seat and snatched up a booklet.

"How about a guidebook, then? I write and print 'em myself. It's better'n anything you'll find on the stands . . . and cheaper, too."

That might have come in handy, but glancing at it I could see the print was a series of squiggles and hieroglyphics that were meaningless to me. I always travel with a translator pendant to get around the language barrier, but unfortunately its powers don't extend to the written word. "I don't suppose you have a Klahdish translation, do you?"

"Sorry," he said, tossing the booklet in the same general direction the box had gone. "I'm takin' a few courses to

try to learn some other languages, but Klahdish isn't one ;
of them. Not enough demand, ya know?" I

Despite my continuing concern over his attention to his driving, the cabbie was beginning to interest me.

"I must say you're enterprising enough. Cab driver, pub-

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 37

lisher, cook, translator... is there anything else you do?"

"Oh, I'm into a lot of things. Photography, tour guide . . . I even draw a little. Some of these drawings I did. I'd be willing to part with them for the right price."

He gestured at some of the sheets adorning the interior, and the cab veered dangerously to the right.

"Ah . . . actually, I was interested in something else you said just now."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Tour guide."

"Oh, that. Sure. I love to when I get the chance. It's sweet money. Beats the heck out of fighting the other hacks for fares all day long."

I glanced at Calvin and raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Go ahead," he said. "We could use a guide, and you seem to be getting along with this guy pretty well. You know what they say, 'Better the Deveel you know.' "

Obviously the Djin's knowledge did not extend to De-veels, but this wasn't the time or place to instruct him. I turned my attention back to the driver.

"I was thinking of hiring you more as a guide than a tour guide. How much do you make a day with this cab?"

' 'Well, on a good day I can turn better than a hundred."

"Uh-huh," I said. "How about on an average day?"

That earned me another over-the-shoulder glance.

"I gotta say, fella, you sure don't talk like a Klahd."

"I live at the Bazaar at Deva," I smiled. "It does wonders for your bargaining skills. How much?"

We haggled back and forth for a few minutes, but eventually settled on a figure. It seemed fair, and I wasn't exactly in a position to be choosy. If the device the cabbie had used was widespread in his profession, my disguise would be blown the second I stepped into a cab, and there was no guarantee the next driver would be as well disposed toward

Robert Asprin

38

off-dimensioners as our current junior entrepreneur.

"Okay, you've got yourself a guide," the driver said at last. "Now, who am I working for?"

"I'm Skeeve, and the Djin with me is Kalvin."

"Don't know about the Djin," the cabbie shrugged. "Either he don't talk much or I can't hear him. Pleased to meetcha, though, Mr. Skeeve. I'm Edvik."

He extended a hand into the back seat, which I shook cautiously. I had encountered Pervish handshakes before and could still feel them in my joints in wet weather.

"So, where do you want to go first?"

That seemed like a strange question to me, but I answered it anyway.

"To a hotel, same as before."

"Uh-uh."

"Excuse me?" I said, puzzled.

"Hey, you hired a guide, you're going to get one. You're about to check into a hotel, right?"

"That's right."

"Well, you try to check into a Pervish hotel the way you are, without luggage, and they're going to give you a rough time whether they figure you're from off-dimension or not. They'll be afraid that you're trying to get access to a room to steal the furniture or maybe to try to break into other rooms on the same floor."

That was a new concept to me. While I had a fairly extensive wardrobe at home, I usually traveled light when I was working . . . like with the clothes I was wearing and money. It had never occurred to me that a lack of luggage would cause people to be suspicious of my intentions.

"What do you think, Calvin?"

"Beats me," the Djin shrugged "I've never run into the problem. Of course, I travel in a bottle and people can't see me anyway."

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 39

"Well, what do you recommend, Edvik?"

"Let me take you by a department store. You can pick up a small bag there and maybe some stuff to put in it. Believe me, it'll pay in the long run in dealing with a hotel."

I pondered the point for a moment, then decided it was senseless to hire a guide, then not listen to his advice.

"All right," I said at last. "How far is it to this store you were talking about?"

"Oh, not far at all. Hang on!"

This last warning was a bit late, as he had already thrown the cab into a tight U-turn which scrambled the traffic around us and sent me tumbling across the seat. Before I could recover my balance we were well on our way back in the direction we had come from.

As accustomed as I was to madcap excursions, it occurred to me that this one was quickly becoming more complex than anything I had previously experienced. I hoped the education would prove to be more enjoyable and beneficial than it had been so far.

Chapter Five:

"I just need to pick up a few things."

—I. MARCOS

I'VE MADE NUMEROUS references to the Bazaar at Deva, where I make my home. For the benefit of those who do not travel the dimensions or read these books, it's the largest market center in the known dimensions. Anything you can imagine, as well as many an item you can't, is for sale there. Competition is stiff, and the Devel merchants will turn themselves or their customers inside out before they'll let a sale get away.

I mention this so that everyone following this adventure will realize what a shock shopping on Perv was to me. The differences were so many, it was almost hard to accept that the same activity was underway in both instances.

For openers, there was the basic layout. The Bazaar is an endless series of stalls and shops that stretch over the horizon in all directions. There are various concentrations of specialty shops, to be sure, but no real pattern and, more important, no way of finding anything without looking. In direct contrast, Pervish shopping is dominated by what Edvik

referred to as "department stores." One store could take up an entire city block with as many as six stories crammed full of merchandise. The goods are organized into sections or "departments" and carefully controlled so as not to be in competition with each other. Signs are prominently displayed to tell shoppers where everything is-, though it is still relatively easy to get lost in the maze of aisles and counters. Of course, it also helps if you can read Pervish.

Perhaps the biggest difference, however is in the general attitude toward customers. This was apparent when I made my first stop in the luggage department.

There was a good selection of bags and cases there, and the displays were laid out well enough so that I could distinguish between the magikal and non-magikal bags without being able to read the signs. It wasn't even that hard to make my selection. There was a small canvas suitcase roughly the size of a thick attache case which caught my eye both from the simplicity of the design and the fact that it was magikally endowed. That is, it had a permanent spell on it which made it about three times as large on the inside as it showed on the exterior. It occurred to me it might be a handy item to have, and if I was going to buy something to check into a hotel with, it might as well be something I could actually get some use out of later. The difficulties

started when I was ready to make my purchase.

Up to this point, I had been pleasantly surprised that the

sales help had left me alone. On Deva, I would have been approached by the proprietor or one of his assistants as soon as I set foot in the display area, and it was kind of nice for a change to browse leisurely without being pressured or having whatever overstock was on sale that day touted to the heavens. Once I had made my selection, however, I found that getting the attention of one of the salesmen was astoundingly difficult.

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS

Standing by the display which featured the bag I wanted, I looked toward the cash register where two salesmen were engrossed in conversation. On Deva, this would have been all that was necessary to have the proprietor swoop down on me, assuming he had given me any room to start with. Here, they didn't seem to notice. Slightly puzzled, I waited a few moments, then cleared my throat noisily. It didn't even earn me a glance.

"Are you coming down with something, Skeeve?" Calvin said anxiously. "Anything contagious, I mean?"

"No, I'm just trying to signal for one of the salesmen."

"Oh."

The Djin floated a few feet higher to peer toward the cash register.

"It doesn't seem to be working."

"I can see that, Calvin. The question is, what will?"

We waited a few more moments and watched the salesmen in their discussion.

"Maybe you should go over there," the Djin suggested at last.

It seemed strange to pursue a salesman to get him to take my money, but lacking a better idea I wandered over to the sales counter.

. . . And stood there.

The salesmen finished their discussion of sports and started on dirty jokes.

. . . And stood there.

Then the subject was the relative merits of the women they were dating. It might have been interesting, not to mention instructional, if I hadn't been getting so annoyed.

"Do you get the feeling I'm not the only one who's

invisible?" Calvin muttered sarcastically.

When a Djin who's used to sitting in a bottle for years starts getting impatient, I figure I'm justified in taking action.

44 Robert Asprin

"Excuse me," I said firmly, breaking into the conversation. "I'd like to look at that bag over there? The small magik one in green canvas?"

"Go ahead," one of the salesmen shrugged and returned to his conversation.

I stood there for a few more moments in sheer disbelief, then turned and marched back over to the bag.

"Now you're starting to move like a Pervect," the Djin observed.

"I don't care, '- I snarled. "And that's Pervect! I've tried to be nice . . . didn't want to mess up their display . . . but, if they insist ..."

For the next several minutes I took my anger out on the bag, which was probably the safest object to vent my spleen on. I hefted it, swung it over my head, slammed it against the floor a couple times, and did everything else to it I could think of short of climbing inside. I've got to admit the thing was sturdily made. Then again, I was starting to see why goods on Perv had to be tough. The salesmen never favored me with so much as a glance.

"Check me on this, Calvin," I panted, my exertions finally starting to wear on my endurance. "The price tag on this bag does say 125 gold, doesn't it?"

I may not be able to read many written languages, but numbers and prices have never given me any trouble. I guess it comes from hanging around with Aahz as long as

I have . . . not to mention Tananda and Bunny.
"That's the way I read it."

"I mean, that's not exactly cheap. I've seen clerks treat 10-copper items with more concern and respect than these guys are showing. Don't they care?"

"Not so's you'd notice," the Djin agreed.
"Do you think they'd notice if I tried to just tuck it under my arm and walk out without paying? It would be nice to

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 45

know something can get to these guys."
The Djin glanced around nervously.
'I really don't know, but I don't think you should try."
That cooled me down a bit. I was still in strange territory

on a mission, and it was no time to start testing security systems.

"Okay," I growled. "Let's try this again."
This time, when I approached the sales counter, I figured I had learned my lesson. No more Mr. Nice Guy. No more waiting around for them to end their discussion.
"I'd like to buy that green magik bag, the small canvas

one," I said, bursting into their conversation in mid-sentence.

"All right."

The salesman I had first spoken with was halfway to the display before I realized what he was doing. Now that I had his attention, my normal shopping instincts cut in.

"Excuse me. I'd like a new case rather than the floor display... and is there any chance you have it in black?"

The salesman gave me a long martyred look.

"Just a moment, I'll have to check."

He went slouching off while his partner began wandering aimlessly through the section straightening displays.

"If you don't mind my saying so, Skeeve, I think you're pushing your luck," Calvin observed.

"Hey, it's worth asking," I shrugged. "Besides, however inconsiderate the help is, this is still a store. There's got to be some interest in giving the customer what he wants."

Fifteen minutes later, the salesman still hadn't reappeared and I found my temper was starting to simmer again.

"Um ... is it time to say 'I told you so' yet?" the Djin smirked.

Ignoring him, I intercepted the second salesman.
"Excuse me, how far is it to the storeroom?"

Robert Asprin

46

"Why do you ask?" he blinked.
"Well, your partner was checking on something for me,
and it's been a while."

The salesman grimaced. I
"Who? Him? He's gone on break. He should be back in
an hour or so if you'd like to wait."

"What??"
"I suppose I could go look for you, if you'd like. What
was it you wanted?"

As I've said before, I may be slow, but I do learn. This
was the last salesman in the section and I wasn't about to
let him out of my sight.

"Forget it. I'll take the small green magik bag over there.
The one in canvas."

"Okay. That'll be 125 in gold. Do you want to carry it

or shall I give you a sack?"

Before I could think, my Bazaar reflexes cut in.
"Just a second. That's 125 for a new bag. How much

will you knock off the price for one that's been used for a
floor display?"

Kalvin groaned and covered his eyes with one hand.

"I don't set the prices," the salesman said, starting to
turn away. "If you don't like it, shop somewhere else."
The thought of starting this fiasco all over again defeated
me.

"Wait a minute," I called, fumbling with my money
belt. "I'll take it. But can I at least get a receipt?"

Shopping for clothes turned out to be a trial of a different
sort. There were magik lifts that carried me up two floors
to the clothing section, which fortunately gave me time to
think things through.

The trouble was that I was disguised as a Pervect. Because
of their build, this made me appear much more heavysset

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS

47

than I really was. If I bought clothes to fit my disguised
form, they'd hang on the real me like a tent. If I went for
my real size, however, it would be a dead giveaway when
I asked to try them on.

What I finally decided to do was to shop in the kids'
section, which would be the best bet for finding my real
size anyway, and say I was buying them for my son. I had
gotten pretty good at eyeballing clothes for size, so the fit
probably wouldn't be too bad.

I needn't have worried.

It seems a lot more people shop for clothes than shop for luggage. A lot more.

Not being able to read the signs, I couldn't tell if there was a sale on or if this was the normal volume of customers the section got. Whatever the case, the place was a madhouse. Throngs of shoppers, male and female, jostled and clawed at each other over tables heaped with various items of apparel. To say angry voices were raised fails to capture the shrieks and curses which assaulted my ears as I approached the area, but I- could make out the occasional sounds of cloth tearing. Whether this was from items on sale being ripped asunder by rival shoppers; or the rival shoppers themselves being ripped asunder I could never tell for sure. It was like watching a pileup at the Big Game, but without teams and without breaks between plays.

"Don't tell me you're going into that!" Calvin gasped.
"Without armor or artillery?"

It seemed a strange question for someone from a supposedly peaceful dimension to ask, but I was busy concentrating on the task ahead.

"This shopping thing is already taking too long," I said grimly. "I'm not going to lose any more time by having Edvik hunt us up another store . . . especially since there's

48 Robert Asprin

no guarantee it will be any better than this one. I'm going to wade in there, grab a couple of outfits, and be done with it once and for all."

Good taste and a queasy stomach at the memory prevent me from going into detail on how the next half hour went. Suffice it to say that Calvin abandoned me and hovered near the ceiling to watch and wait until I was done. Now I've knocked around a bit, and been knocked around more times than I care to recall, but if there's any memory that compares to holding my own against a mob of Pervish

shoppers, my mind has successfully suppressed it. I elbowed and shoved, used more than a little magik when no one was looking and called on most of the dirty tricks I learned in the Big Game, and in the end I had two outfits I wasn't wild about but was willing to settle for rather than enter the fracas anew in search of something better. I also had a lingering fondness for the fat Pervish lady I hid behind from

time to time to catch my breath.

Having sat out the battle, Calvin was in good shape to

guide me back to the exit. That was fortunate, since the adrenalin drop after emerging from the brawl was such that I could barely see straight, let alone walk steadily.

I don't know where Edvik was waiting, but his cab materialized out of the traffic as soon as we emerged from the store and in no time we were back in the safety of the back seat. It wasn't until later that I realized what a commentary it was on department stores that the cab now seemed

safe to me.

"Can we go to the hotel now?" I said, sinking back in the seat and shutting my eyes.

"Like that? Don't you want to change first?"

"Change?" Somehow I didn't like the sound of that.

"You know, into a conservative suit. Business types always get the best service at hotels."

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 49

Calvin groaned, but he needn't have worried. If there was one thing I knew for sure, it's that I wasn't heading back to that store.

"Tell you what, Edvik. Describe a suit to me."

The cabbie rubbed his chin as he plotted his way through the traffic.

"Well, let's see. They're usually dark grey or black . . . three piece with a vest . . . thin white pinstripes closely

spaced . . . and, you know, the usual accessories like a white shirt and a striped tie."

Just as I thought. The same as was worn on Deva . . . and every other dimension I've met businessmen on. I closed my eyes again and made a few adjustments to my disguise spell.

"Like this?"

The cabbie glanced over his shoulder, then swiveled around to gape openly.

"Say! That's neat!" he exclaimed.

"Thank you," I said smugly. "It's nothing really. Just a disguise spell I use."

"So why didn't you use that to fake the new outfits and the luggage instead of hassling with the stores?"

'I was about to ask the same thing," Calvin murmured.

For the life of me, I couldn't think of a good answer.

Chapter Six:

There's no place like home!"

—H. JOHNSON

ONCE WE FINALLY arrived at the hotel Edvik had chosen to recommend, I was a bit put off by the sight. It had a sign that declared it to be The New Inn, but it looked like most of the other buildings we had seen so far, which is to say it was old, dilapidated, and covered with soot. Then again, even if its appearance had been better, the neighborhood it was in would have given me pause. Between the garbage in the streets and the metal shutters on the store windows, it wasn't an area in which I would normally be inclined to get out of the cab, much less rent a room. I was about to comment on this to my driver/guide, when I noticed the

uniformed doorman and decided to make my inquiry a bit more gentle.

"Ah . . . , this is the low-price hotel you've been figuring on?"

"It's about as low as you can go without ending up in a real dive," the cabbie shrugged. "Actually, it's a little nicer than most in the same price range. They've had to lower

51

52 Robert Asprin

their prices because of the trouble they've been having."

"Trouble?"

"Yeah. There's an ax murderer loose around here that

the police haven't been able to catch. He's been killing about one a week . . . last week he got one right in the

lobby."

"Ax murderer??!"

"That's right. You don't have to worry about it, though."

"How do you figure that?"

"Well, it's been going on for a month now, and since you're just checking in, and you've never been here before, there's not much chance they'll try to blame you for it."

Actually, that hadn't been my worry. I had been more concerned with my odds on being the next victim. Before I could clarify this to Edvik, however, the doorman had jerked open the door of the cab and snatched up my bag.

"You'd better follow your bag and keep an eye on it," the driver advised. "I'll be by in the morning to pick you up. Oh, and be sure to tip the baggage handler. Otherwise it may not be recognizable by the time you get it back."

The lizards were already starting to move as he imparted this last piece of wisdom, so I dove for the door before the vehicle gathered too much momentum and I ended up permanently separated from my luggage. Needless or not, I had gone through far too much to get it to lose it now. Before I had pause to think that I was losing touch with my guide and advisor for this dimension, the cab had turned a corner and disappeared.

"I think this guy wants a tip," Calvin said, gesturing

toward the doorman. At least I still had the Djin with me. I had to acknowledge his point. The uniformed Pervect was standing stuffily, with his palm up and a vague sneer on his face that would probably pass for a smile locally. I only hesitated a second before slipping him some loose

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 53

change. Normally, I would expect someone to wait until after he had performed a service before hinting for a tip, but obviously things differed from dimension to dimension. This was probably what Edvik had been warning me about . . . that the doorman would want money before moving my bag, and that if the juice wasn't big enough, it was "Goodbye luggage!" In a way, it made sense.

My speculation on this philosophy was cut short when I noticed another person, a bellhop this time, picking up my bag and heading inside with it, leaving the doorman outside weighing the tip I had just given him in his hand. I began to smell a rat.

"Where is he going?" I said to the smug doorman, as casually as I could manage.

"To the front desk, sir."

"But he has my bag."

"Yes. I suggest you follow him closely. He's not to be trusted, you know."

"But . . . Ohhh . . .!"

I knew when I had been outmaneuvered. Apparently, all the doorman did was open cab doors and off-load the baggage . . . not carry the bags inside. Of course, the fact that I had tipped him assuming he would perform that service was my fault, not his. Defeated, I trailed after the bellhop, who was waiting inside with his hand out in the now all-too-familiar gesture that means "Pay or you'll never see the end of me." This time, however, I was more than happy to pay him off. Whatever Edvik had said, I had decided I would be better off handling my own luggage from here on out.

Kalvin muttered something in my ear about not paying the help until they had finished their work, but the bellhop seemed to understand what it was all about, since he disappeared as soon as I paid him. Ignoring Calvin's grumbles,

54 Robert Asprin

I turned my attention to the hotel interior.

The reception area wasn't much larger than the space we used for similar purposes back at M.Y.T.H. Inc., except the furnishings were dominated by a huge counter which I assumed was what the doorman had referred to as the front desk. Of course, to my mind this made the lobby rather small since, as a hotel, this place was supposed to get more public traffic than our consulting offices did. Personally, I felt it boded ill for the size of the rooms. Then again, I had told Edvik to take us somewhere inexpensive. I supposed I couldn't expect low rates and stylish accommodations, and given a choice ...

"May I help you?"

This last came from the Pervect behind the front desk. It might read polite, but the tone of his voice was that of one addressing someone who just walked through the front door with a box of garbage.

"Yes," I said, deciding to give pleasant one last try.
"I'd like a room, please. A single."

The desk clerk looked as if I had just spat on the floor.

"Do you have reservations?"

The question surprised me a little, but I decided to stick with honesty.

"Well, I'm not wild about the neighborhood . . . and then there's the rumor about the ax murderer ..."

"Skeeve . . . SKEEVE!!" Calvin hissed desperately. "He means, 'Do you have a reservation for a room?'"

So much for honesty. I shot a look at the desk clerk, who was staring at me as if I had asked him to sell his first-born into slavery.

"... But, um, if you're asking if I reserved a room in advance, the answer is no," I finished lamely.

The clerk stared at me for a few more moments, then ran a practiced finger down a list on the desk in front of him.

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 55

"I'm afraid that all we have available at this time is one of our Economy Rooms. You really should reserve in advance for the best selection."

"An Economy Room will be fine," I assured him. "I'll need it for about a week."

"Very well," the clerk nodded, pushing a form at me across the desk, "If you'll just fill this out, the rate will be a hundred in gold."

I was glad I had been warned about prices on Perv. A hundred in gold seemed a bit steep to me, but having been forewarned I managed to hide my surprise as I reached for the form.

"... A day. Payable in advance, of course."

My hand stopped just short of the form.

"'A hundred in gold a day?'" I said as carefully as I could.

"Skeeve!" Calvin yipped in my ear. "Remember, you were warned things were expensive here! This is a low-

priced hotel, remember?"

"Payable in advance," the clerk confirmed.

I withdrew my hands from the desk.

"How much time do you want to spend looking for a room, Skeeve?" the Djinn continued desperately. "The cab won't be back until morning and it's getting dark out. Do you really want to walk these streets at night?"

I took a hundred in gold from my money belt and dropped it on the desk, then started filling out the form.

"I assumed that each day is payable in advance, considering the interest rates," I said calmly. "Oh, yes, I'd like a receipt for that, as well."

The desk clerk whisked the form from under my pen and glanced at it almost before I had finished signing it.

"Quite right, Mr. . . . Skeeve. I'll have a receipt for you in a moment."

It was nice to know some Pervects were efficient, once

56 Robert Asprin

you had met their price. The hundred in gold had already disappeared.

The desk clerk slipped the receipt across the desk, a key held daintily in his other hand. I claimed the receipt and was starting to go for the key when he casually moved it back out of my reach, slapping his palm down on a small bell that was on the desk.

"Front!"

Before I could ask what this little declaration was supposed to mean, a bellhop had materialized at my side . . . a different one than before.

"Room 242," the desk clerk declared, handing the bellhop my key.

"Yessir. Is this your luggage?"

"Well, yes. It's ..."

Without waiting for me to finish, the bellhop snatched up my bag and started for the stairs, beckoning me to follow. I trailed along in his wake. At this point, I had had it with Pervects and hotels and tips. If this clown thought I was ...

"Going to tip him?" Calvin asked, floating around to hang in the air in front of me. Fortunately, he was translucent enough for me to see through him.

I gave him my toothiest smile.

"If that means 'No' like I think it does, you'd better reconsider."

Whether I needed to hear this or not, I definitely didn't want to. I deliberately let my gaze wander to the ceiling and promptly tripped over a step.

"Remember what Edvik said," the Djin continued insistently. "You need all the allies you can get. You can't afford to get vindictive with this guy."

Slowly, my irritation began to give way to common sense. Calvin was right. If nothing else, I had heard that bellhops were prime sources of local information, and if being nice

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 57

to this character would speed my search for Aahz, thereby shortening my stay on Perv, then it would definitely be worth at least a decent tip. Taking a deep breath, I caught the Djin's eye and gave a curt nod, whereupon he subsided. It occurred to me it was nice to deal with someone who would let an argument drop once he'd won it.

The bellhop unlocked a door and ushered me into my room with a flourish. The first view of my temporary headquarters almost reversed my mind all over again.

The room was what could only be politely referred to as a hole . . . and I wasn't in a particularly polite mood. For openers, it was small . . . smaller than most of the closets

in my place back at the Bazaar. There was barely enough space to walk around the bed without scooting sideways, and what little room there was was cramped further by a small bureau which was missing the knob on one of the two drawers, and a chair which looked about as comfortable as a bed of nails. The shade of the bedside lamp was askew, and the wallpaper was torn with one large flap hanging loose except where it was secured by cobwebs. I couldn't tell if the texture of the carpet was dust or mildew, though from the smell I suspected the latter. The ceiling had large water-stains on it, but you couldn't tell without looking hard because the light in the place was dim enough to make a vampire feel claustrophobic. All this for a mere hundred in gold a night.

"Great view, isn't it?" the bellhop said, pulling the shades aside to reveal a window that hadn't been washed since the discovery of fire. At first I thought the curtain rod was sagging, but closer examination showed it had actually been nailed in place crooked.

"This is what you call a great view?"

That comment kind of slipped out despite my resolve. I had just figured out that it wasn't that the window was so

58 Robert Asprin

dirty I couldn't see out of it. Rather, the view consisted of a blank stone wall maybe an arm's length away. The bellhop didn't seem the least put out by my rhetorical question.

"You should see the view from the first floor," he

shrugged. "All the rooms there look out onto the courtyard, which includes the garbage dump. At least this view doesn't have maggots."

My stomach tilted to the left and sank. Swallowing hard,

I resolved not to ask any more questions about the room. "Could you lay off about the view?" Calvin whined

desperately.

"Way ahead of you," I replied.

"How's that again?" the bellhop said, turning to face me.

"I said, 'I'll settle for this view,' " I amended hastily.

"Thought you would. No, sir, you don't see many rooms

this good at these prices."

I realized he was looking at me expectantly for confirmation.

"I . . . I've never seen anything like it."

He kept looking at me. I cast about in my mind for something vaguely complimentary to say about the room.

"The tip, Skeeve! He's waiting for a tip!"

"Oh! Yes, of course."

I fumbled a few more coins out of my money belt.

"Thank you, sir," the bellhop nodded, accepting my offering. "And if you have any more questions, the name's

Burgt."

He was heading for the door when it occurred to me I

might make further use of his knowledge.

"Say . . . um, Burgt."

"Yes, sir?"

"Is there someplace around here I can get a bite to eat? Maybe someplace that specializes in off-dimension food?"

59

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS

"Sure. There's a little place about half a block to your left as you come out of the main entrance. It's called Bandi's. You can't miss it."

That was worth a few extra coins to me. It also gave me an idea.

"Say, Burgt, I've heard you bellhops have a bit of an information network. Is that true?"

The bellhop eyed the coins I was pouring back and forth from hand to hand.

"Sort of," he admitted. "It depends on what kind of information you're looking for."

"Well, I'm looking for a guy, name of Aahz. Would have hit town in the last couple of days. If you or any of your friends should find out where he is and let me know, I'd be real appreciative. Get me?"

I let the coins pour into his uniform pocket.

"Yes, sir. Aahz, was it? I'll spread the word and see what we can turn up."

He departed hastily, shutting the door firmly but quietly behind him.

"You did that very well, Skeeve," Calvin said.

"What? Oh. Thanks, Calvin."

"Really. You looked just like a gangster paying off an informant."

I guess my work with the Mob had influenced me more than I had realized. It wasn't a line of conversation I wanted to pursue too far, though.

"Just something I picked up," I said casually, pocketing the room key. "Come on. Let's try to find something eatable in this dimension."

Chapter Seven:

"... On the street where you live."

-QUOTE FROM AN ANONYMOUS EXTORTION NOTE

I HAD THOUGHT the streets of Perv were intimidating walking or riding through them by day. At night, they were a whole new world. I didn't know if I should be frightened or depressed, but one thing I knew I wasn't was comfortable.

It wasn't that I was alone. There were a lot of Pervects on the street, and of course Calvin was still with me. It's just that there is some company to which being alone is preferable. Calvin's company was, of course, welcome . . . which should narrow it down for even the most casual reader as to exactly what the source of my discomfort was.

The Pervects. (Very good! Move to the head of the class.) Now, saying one felt uncomfortable around Pervects may sound redundant. As has been noted, the entire dimension is not renowned for its sociability, much less its hospitality. What I learned on the streets that night, however, is that there are Pervects and there are Pervects.

Most of the natives I had dealt with up to this point had been just plain folk . . . only nasty. In general, they seemed

61

Robert Asprin

64

"If my mother cooked like that, we would have gotten rid of her . . . even earlier than we did," Calvin declared

bluntly.

Curious comment, that.

"You can't tell me you like this," he insisted. "I mean, you may be a little strange, but you're still a sentient being."

"So are the Pervects."

"I'm willing to debate that. . . more than ever, now that I'm getting a feel for what they eat. You're avoiding the question, though. Are you really going to eat any of this stuff?"

I decided the joke had gone far enough.

"Not on a bet!" I admitted in a whisper. "If you watch closely, you'll see that some of the food actually crawls out of the bowl."

"I'd rather not!" Calvin said, averting his eyes. "Seriously, Skeeve, if you aren't going to eat anything, why are we here?"

' 'Oh, I'm going to try to get something to eat. Just nothing they would prepare for the natives. That's why I was hunting for a place that served food from—and therefore, hopefully, stomachable by—off-world and off-worlders."

The Djin was unimpressed.

"I don't care where the recipe comes from. You're telling me you're going to take something that's been prepared in this kitchen and been in proximity with other dishes that stink the way these do, and then put it in your mouth? Maybe we should debate your qualifications as an intelligent being."

Looking at it that way, he had a point. Suddenly I didn't feel as clever as I had a few moments before.

"Cahn I help you, sirT'

The Pervect who materialized at my elbow was as stiffly formal as anything I'd seen that wasn't perched on a wedding

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 65

cake. He had somehow mastered the technique of being

subservient while still looking down on you. And they say that waiters can't be trained!

"Well, we ... that is, I . . ."

"Ah! A Tah-bul for one!"

Actually, I had been preparing to beat a retreat, but this guy wasn't about to leave me that choice.

Chairs and tables seemed to part in his path as he swept off through the diners like a sailing ship through algae, drawing me along in his wake. Heads turned and murmurs started as we passed. If they were trying to figure out where they had seen me before, it could take a lot of talking.

"I wish I had thought to dress," I murmured to Calvin.
"This is a pretty classy place. I'm surprised they let me in without a tie."

The Djin shot me a look.

"I don't know how to say this, Skeeve, but you are dressed, and you are wearing a tie."

"Oh! Right."

I had forgotten I had altered my disguise spell in the taxi. One of the problems with the disguise spell is that I can't see the results myself. While I've gotten to a point where I can maintain the illusion without giving it a lot of conscious thought, it also means I occasionally forget what the appearance I'm maintaining really is.

I plopped down in the chair being held for me, but waved off the offered menu.

"I understand you serve dishes from off-dimension?"

The Pervect gave a little half-bow.

"Yas. Ve haff a wide selection for the most discriminating taste."

I nodded knowingly.

"Then just have the waiter bring me something Klahdish . . . and a decent wine to go with it."

66

Robert Asprin

"Very good. Sir."

He faded discreetly from view, leaving me to study our fellow diners. It was too much to hope that coincidence would lead Aahz to the same dining room, but it didn't hurt to look.

"You handled that pretty smoothly."

"What's that, Calvin? Oh. The ordering. Thank you."

"Are you really that confident?"

I glanced around at the nearby tables for eavesdroppers before answering.

"I'm confident that I couldn't even read the menu," I said quietly. "Trying to fake it would only have made me look like a bigger fool. I just followed the general rule of 'When in doubt, rely on the waiter's judgment.' It usually works."

"True enough," Calvin conceded. "But the waiter's not usually Pervish. It's still braver than I'd feel comfortable with, personally."

The Djinn had a positive talent for making me feel uneasy about decisions that had already been made.

Fortunately, the wine arrived just then. I fidgeted through the tasting ritual, then started in drinking with a vengeance. A combination of nerves and thirst moved me rapidly through the first three glasses with barely a pause for breath.

"You might go a little easy on that stuff until you get some food in you," Calvin advised pointedly.

"Not to worry," I waved. "One thing Aahz always told me: If you aren't sure of the food on a dimension, you can

always drink your meals."

"He told you that, huh? What a buddy. Tell me, did it ever work?"

"Howzat?"

"Drinking your meals. Did it ever do you any good, or just land you in a lot of trouble?"

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 67

"Oh, we've had lots of trouble. Sometime lemme tell you about the time we decided to steal the trophy from the Big Game.

"You and Aahz?"

"No. Me and ... um ... it was ..."

For some reason, I was having trouble remembering exactly who had been with me on that particular caper. I decided it might be wisest to get the subject of conversation off me until my meal arrived.

"Whoever. Speaking of bottles, though, how long had you been waiting before I pulled the cork on that one of yours?"

"Oh, not long for a Djin. In fact, I'd say it hadn't been more than ..."

"Tananda!"

"Excuse me?"

"It was Tananda who was with me when we tried for the trophy ... the first time, anyway."

"Oh."

"Glad that's off my back. Now, what was it you were saying, Calvin?"

"Nothing important," the Djin shrugged.

He seemed a little distracted, but I thought I knew why.

"Kalvin, I'd like to apologize."

He seemed to relax a little.

"Oh, that's okay, Skeeve. It's just that . . ."

"No, I insist. It was rude of me to order without asking if you wanted something to eat, too. It's just that it would have been awkward trying to order food for someone no one else could see. Understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Of course."

I seemed to be losing him again.

"It wasn't that I had forgotten about you, really," I pressed. "I just thought that as small as you are, you

68 Robert Asprin

wouldn't eat much and we could probably share my order. Now I can see that that's rather demeaning to you, so if you'd like your own order ..."

"Sharing your meal will be fine. Okay? Can we drop the subject now?"

Whatever was bothering the Djin, my efforts to change his mood were proving woefully inadequate. I debated letting it go for the moment, but decided against it. Letting things go until later was how the situation with Aahz had gotten into its current state.

"Say ... um ... Kalvin?"

"Now what?"

"It's obvious that I've gotten you upset, and my trying to make amends is only making things worse. Now, it wasn't my intent to slight you in any way, but it seems to have happened anyway. If I can't make things better, can you at least tell me what it was I did so that I don't fall into the

same trap again?"

"The wine doesn't help."

I nodded at Calvin's terse response. He was right. The wine was hitting me harder than I had expected, making it difficult to focus on him and what he was saying.

"It doesn't help . . . but that's not the whole problem," I said. "All alcohol does is amplify what's there already. It may make my irritating habits more irritating, but it isn't causing them."

"True enough," he admitted grudgingly.

"So lay it on me," I urged. "What is it about me that's so irritating? I try to be a nice guy, but lately it hasn't been working so well. First with Aahz, and now with you."

The Djin hesitated before answering.

"I haven't really known you all that long, Skeeve. Anything I could say would be a snap judgment."

"So give me a snap judgment. I really want to . . ."

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 69

"Your dinner. Sir!"

The Pervect who had first seated me was hovering over my table again, this time with the waiter in tow. That latter notable was staggering under a huge covered platter which had steam rising from it enticingly.

I was desperately interested in hearing what Calvin had to say, but the sight of the platter reminded me that I was desperately hungry as well. Apparently the Djin sensed my dilemma.

"Go ahead and eat, Skeeve," he said. "I can hold until you're done."

Nodding my thanks, I turned my attention to the waiting Pervect.

"It smells delicious," I managed, honestly surprised.
"What is it?"

"Wan uf ze House Specialties," he beamed, reaching for the tray cover. "From Klah!"

The tray cover disappeared with a flourish, and I found myself face-to-face with someone else from my home dimension of Klah. Unfortunately, he wasn't serving the meal. . . he was the meal! Roasted, with a dead rat in his mouth as a garnish.

I did the only sane thing that occurred to me.

I fainted.

Chapter Eight:

"There's never a cop around when you need one!"

—A. CAPONE

"SKEEVE!"

The voice seemed to come from far away.
"C'mon, Skeeve! Snap out of it! We've got trouble!"
That caught my attention. I couldn't seem to get oriented, but if there was one thing I didn't need it was more trouble. More trouble? What . . . later! First, deal with whatever^ going on now!
I forced my eyes open.

The scene which greeted me brought a lot of the situation back with a rush. I was in a restaurant ... on the floor, to be specific ... a Pervish waiter was hovering over me . . . and so was a policeman!

At first I thought it was the same one we had encountered earlier, but it wasn't. The similarities were enough that they could have come out of the same litter ... or hatching. They both had the same square jaw, broad shoulders and potbelly, not to mention a very hard glint in their otherwise bored-looking eyes.

71

72

Robert Asprin

I struggled to sit upright, but wobbled as a wave of dizziness washed over me.

"Steady, Skeeve! You're going to need your wits about you for this one!"

Kalvin was hovering, his face-lined with concern.

"W . . . what happened?" I said.

Too late I remembered that I was the only one who could see or hear the Djin. Ready or not, I had just opened the conversation with the others.

"It seems you fainted, boyo," the policeman supplied.

"I theenk he just does not vant to pay for zee food he ordered."

That was from the Pervect who had seated me, but his words brought it all back to me. The special dish from Klah!

"He served me a roast Klahd on a platter!" I said, leveling a shaky but accusing finger at the Pervect.

"Is that a fact now?"

The policeman cocked an eye at the Pervect, who became quite agitated.

'Non-sense! Eet is against the law to serve sentient beings without a li-cense. See for yourself, Offi-sair! Thees is a replica on-ley."

Sure enough, he was right! The figure on the platter was actually constructed on pieces of unidentifiable cuts of meat with what looked like baked goods filling in the gaps. The rat seemed to be authentic, but I'll admit I didn't look close. The overall effect was, as I can testify, horrifyingly real.

The policeman studied the dish closely before turning his attention to the waiter once more.

"Don't ya think it was a trifle harsh, servin' the lad with what seemed to be one of his own?"

"But he deed not look like thees when he came in! I on-ley served heem what he asked for . . . sometheeng from Klah!"

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 73

That's when I became aware of the fact that my disguise spell was no longer on. I must have lost control of it when I fainted. When it disappeared, however, was not as important as the fact that it was gone! I was now seen by one and all as what I really was ... a Klahd!

The policeman had now turned his gaze on me and was studying me with what I felt was unhealthy interest.

"Really, now," he said. "Perhaps you could be tellin' how it is you come to be wearin' a disguise in such a fine place? It couldn't be that you were plannin' to skip out without payin' fer yer meal, could it?"

"No. It's just that..." I paused as a wave of dizziness passed. "Well, I've heard you can get better service and prices on Perv if folks don't know you're from off-dimension."

"Bad answer, Skeeve," Calvin hissed, but I had already figured that out.

The policeman had gone several shades darker, and his head almost disappeared into his neck. Though his tone was still cordial, he seemed to be picking his words very carefully.

"Are ya tryin' to tell me you think our whole dimension is full of clip joints and thieves? Is that what yer sayin'?"

Too late I saw my error. Aahz had always seemed to be proud of the fact that Pervects were particularly good at turning a profit. It had never occurred to me that to some,

this might sound like an insult.

"Not at all," I said hastily. "I assumed it was like any other place,, . . . that the best prices and services were reserved for locals and visitors got what was left. I was just trying to take advantage of normal priorities, that's all."

I thought it was a pretty good apology. The policeman, however, seemed unimpressed. Unsmiling, he produced a notepad and pencil.

74

Robert Asprin

"Name?"

His voice was almost flat and impersonal, but managed to still convey a degree of annoyance.

"Look. I'll pay for the meal, if that's what the problem

is."

"I didn't ask if you were payin' for the meal. I asked you what your name is. Now are you going to tell me here, or should we be talkin', down at the precinct station?"

Kalvin was suddenly hovering in front of me again.

"Better tell him, Skeeve," he said, his tone matching his worried expression. "This cop seems to have an Eath up his Yongie."

That one threw me.

"A what up his what?"

The policeman looked up from his notepad.

"And how are ya spellin' that, now?"

"Umm . . . forget it. Just put down 'Skeeve.' That's my name."

His pencil moved briskly, and for a moment I thought I had gotten away with my gaffe. No such luck.

"... And what was that you were sayin' before?"

"Oh, nothing. Just a nickname."

Even to me, the explanation sounded weak. Calvin groaned as the policeman gave me a hard look before scribbling a few more notes on his pad.

"An alias, is it?," he murmured under his breath.

This was sounding worse all the time.

"But ..."

"Residence?"

"The New Inn."

My protests seemed to be only making things worse, so I resolved to answer any other questions he might have as simply and honestly as possible.

"A hotel, eh?" The pencil was moving faster now. "And

T

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 75

where would your regular residence be?"

"The Bazaar at Deva."

The policeman stopped writing. Raising his hand, he peered at me carefully.

"Now I thought we had gotten this matter of disguises settled," he said, a bit too casually. "So tell me, Mr. Skeeve, are you a Klahd ... or a Deveel masquerading as one?"

"I'm a Klahd . . . really!"

"... Who lives on Deva," the policeman finished grimly. "That's a pretty expensive place to be callin' home,

boyo. Just what is it you do for a livin' that you can afford such an extravagant address ... or to pay for expensive meals you aren't going to eat, for that matter?"

"I uh, work for a corporation . . . M.Y.T.H. Inc. . . . It's a co-op of magik consultants."

"Is that a fact?" The policeman's skepticism was open. "Tell me, boyo, what is it you do for them that they had to hire a Klahd instead of one of their local lads?"

Maybe I was recovering from passing out, or maybe his sarcasm was getting to me, but I started to get a bit annoyed with the questions.

"I'm the president and founder," I snapped, "and since I personally recruited the staff, they didn't have whole bunches to say about my qualifications."

Actually, they had had a lot to say. Specifically, they were the ones who railroaded me into my current lofty position. Somehow, though, this didn't seem to be the time to try to point that out.

"Really?" The policeman was still pushing, but he seemed a lot more respectful now. "It's clear that there's more to you than meets the eye, Mister Skeeve."

"Steady, Skeeve," the Djin said quietly. "Let's not get too aggressive with the representatives of the local law."

76

Robert Asprin

It was good advice, and I tried to get a handle on my temper.

"You can check it out if you like," I said stiffly.

"Oh, I intend to. Would you mind tellin' me what the president of a corporation from Deva is doin' in our fair dimension? Are you here on business?"

"Well ... I guess you could say that."

"Good. Then I'm sure you won't mind givin' me the names of our citizens you're dealin' with."

Too late I saw-the trap. As a businessman, I should have local references. This may seem like a silly oversight to you, but you'll have to remember my background up to this point. Most of my ventures into the various dimensions have been more of the raider or rescue mission variety, so it never occurred to me there was another way of doing business. Of course, admitting this would probably do little toward improving the impression I was making on this stalwart of the law.

I considered my alternatives. I considered trying to lie my way out of the predicament. Finally, I decided to give the truth one last try.

"There isn't anyone specifically that I'm dealing with." I said carefully. "The fact of the matter is that I'm looking for someone."

"Oh? Then you're hirin' for your corporation? Out to raid some of our local talent?"

That didn't sound too good either.

"It's not a recruiting mission, I assure you. I'm trying to find my ... one of our employees."

The policeman straightened a bit, looking up from his notebook once more. .

"Now, that's a different matter entirely," he said. "Have you been by a station to fill out a missing person report?"

I tried to imagine Aahz's reaction if I had the police pick

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 77

him up. Mercifully, my mind blocked the image.

"Are you kidding? I mean ... no, I haven't."

"... Or do you think you're better at locatin' folks than the police are?"

I was getting desperate. It seemed that no matter what I said, it was getting twisted into the worst possible interpretation.

"He's not really missing. Look, officer, I had a falling out with my old partner, who happens to also be the co-founder of the corporation and a Pervect. He left in a huff, presumably to return here to Perv. All I want to do is locate him and try to convince him to come back to the company, or at least make amends so we can part on more agreeable terms. In short, while it's business related, it's more of a personal matter."

The policeman listened intently until I had finished.

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place, lad?" he scowled, flipping his notebook shut. "I'll have you know my time's too valuable to be wastin' chattin' with everybody who wants to tell me his life story."

"Nice going, Skeeve!" Calvin winked, flashing me a high sign. "I think we're off the hook."

I ignored him. The policeman's comment about wasting his time had reignited my irritation. After all, he had been the one who had prolonged the interrogation.

"Just a moment," I said, as he started to turn away. "Does this mean you won't be running that check on me?"

"Skeeve!" the Djin warned, but it was too late.

"Is there any reason I shouldn't?" the policeman said, turning back to me again.

"It's just that you've taken up so much of your valuable time asking questions about a simple fainting, I'd hate to see you waste any more."

' Now don't go tryin' to tell me how to do my job. Mister

Skeeve," he snarled, pushing his face close to mine. "Per yer information, I'm not so sure this is as simple as you try to cut it out to be."

"It isn't?"

That last snappy response of mine was sort of squeaked out. I was suddenly aware that I was not as far out of the woods as I had believed.

"No, it isn't. We have what seems to be a minor disturbance in a public restaurant, only the person at the center of it turns out to be travelin' in disguise. What's more, he's from off-dimension and used to usin' aliases, and even though he claims to be an honest businessman, there doesn't seem to be anyone locally who can vouch for him, or any immediate way of confirmin' his story. Now doesn't that strike you as bein' a little suspicious?"

"Well, if you put it that way ..."

"I do! However, as I was sayin', we're pretty busy down at the station, and for all yer jabberin' you seem harmless enough, so I don't see much point to pursuin' this further. Just remember, I've got you down in my book, boyo, and if there's any trouble you'll find I'm not so understandin'

next time!"

With that, he turned on his heel ,and marched out of the restaurant.

' 'That was close," Calvin whistled.' 'You shouldn't have mouthed off that last time."

I had arrived at much the same conclusion, but nodded my agreement anyway.

The waiter was still hovering about, so I signaled him for our check. The last thing I needed to do now would be

to forget and try to walk out without paying.

"So where do we go from here?" the Djin asked.

"I think we'll settle up here and head back to the hotel for some sleep. Two run-ins with the police in one day is about all the excitement I can handle."

"But you haven't eaten anything."

"I'll do it tomorrow. Like I said, I don't relish the thought of risking another brush with the law... even accidentally."

Despite his advice to go easy with the police, the Djin seemed unconcerned.

"Don't worry. So far it's been just talk. I mean, what can they do to you? There's no law against being polite on the sidewalk or fainting in a restaurant."

"They could run that check on me. I'm not wild about having the police poking around in my affairs."

The Djin gave me a funny look.

"So what if they do? I mean, it's annoying, but nothing to worry about. It's not like you have a criminal record or have connections with organized crime or anything."

I thought about Don Bruce and the Mob. Suddenly, my work with them didn't seem as harmless as it had when I first agreed to take the position as the Mob's representative on Deva. Fortunately, no one on Deva except my own crew was aware of it, and they weren't likely to talk. Still, with the way my luck had been running lately, there was no point in risking a police check. Also, I could see no point in worrying Calvin by letting him know what kind of a powder keg I might be sitting on.

Chapter Nine:

"... You gotta start somewhere."

-S. MCDUCK

I HAD PLANNED to sleep late the next morning. I mean, I was eager to locate Aahz and all that, but it was rare that I had the opportunity to lounge in bed a couple extra hours. Business had been brisk enough that I usually headed into the offices early to try to get some work done before the daily parade of questions and problems started. Even when I did decide to try to sleep in, the others would be up and about, so I felt pressured to rise and join in for fear I might be excluded from an important or interesting conversation. Consequently, now that I had a chance to laze about I fully intended to take advantage of it. Besides, between the restaurant and the police it had been a rough night.

Unfortunately, it seemed the rest of the world had different ideas about my sleeping habits.

I had had trouble dozing off anyway, what with the unaccustomed traffic noise and all. When I did finally manage to get to sleep, it seemed I had barely closed my eyes when there was a brisk knocking at the door of my room.

81

82 Robert Asprin

"Wazzit?" I called, struggling to get my eyes open far enough to navigate.

In response, the door opened and the bellhop who had brought my luggage up the day before came bustling into , the room.

"Sorry to bother you so early, Mr. Skeeve, but there's ..."

He stopped abruptly and peered around the room. I was still trying to figure out what he was looking for when he returned his attention to me once more.

"Mr. Skeeve?" he said again, his voice as hesitant as

his manner.

"Yes?" I responded, trying to hold my annoyance in check. "You had something to tell me? Something I assume couldn't wait until a decent hour?"

If I had hoped to rebuff him, I failed dismally. At the sound of my voice his face brightened and he relaxed visibly.

"So it is you. You had me going there for a minute. You've changed since you checked in."

It took me a second to realize what he was talking about. Then I remembered I hadn't renewed my disguise spell since I had my run-in with the law the night before. I suppose it could be a little jarring to expect to find a Pervect and end up talking to a Klahd instead. I considered casting the spell again, then made a snap decision to leave things the way they were. The Pervect disguise seemed to be causing me more trouble than it was averting. I'd try it for a day as a Klahd and see how things went.

"Disguise," I said loftily. "What is it?"
'Well, there's... Is this the disguise or was the other?"
"This is the real me, if it matters. Now what is it?"
"Oh, it doesn't matter to me. We get folks from all sorts of strange dimensions here at the hotel. I always say, it

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 83

doesn't matter where they're from, as long as their gold is ..."

"WHAT IS IT??"

I have found that my tolerance for small talk moves in a direct ratio to how long I've been awake, and today was proving to be no exception.

"Oh, sorry. There's a cabbie downstairs in the loading zone who says he's waiting for you. I thought you'd like to know."

I felt the operative word there was "waiting," but it seemed to have escaped the bellhop entirely. Still, I was

awake now, and my search wasn't going to get any shorter if I just sat around my room.

"Okay. Tell him I'll be down in a few minutes."

"Sure thing. Oh . . . the other thing I wanted to ask you ... Is it okay if this guy Aahz finds out you're looking for him?"

I had to think about that for a few moments. Aahz had left without talking to me, but I didn't think he was avoiding me to a point where he'd go into hiding if he knew I was on Perv.

"That shouldn't be a problem. Why?"

"I was thinking of running an ad in the personal section of the newspaper, but then it occurred to me that he might owe you money or something, so I thought I'd better check first."

"The personal section?"

"It's a daily bulletin board the paper prints," Calvin supplied as he joined us in mid-yawn. "Notes from people to people . . . birthday greetings, messages from wives to wayward husbands, that sort of thing. A lot of people read them faithfully."

Somehow that didn't sound like Aahz's cup of tea, but

84 Robert Asprin

there was always a chance that someone who knew him would see it and pass on the information. In any case, it couldn't hurt.

"Oh, right. The personal ads. Sorry, I'm still waking up. Sounds like a good idea," I said, rummaging around for some loose change. "How much does it cost?"

To my surprise, the bellhop held up a restraining hand., "I'll go the cost on my own if you don't mind, Mr. Skeeve."
"Oh?"

"Sure. That way, if it works, there won't be any doubt who gets that reward you mentioned."

With that, he flashed me a quick grin and left. It occurred to me that I should start watching my spending to be sure I'd have enough to actually pay a reward if the bellhop or one of his friends managed to locate Aahz for me.

"So what's the plan for today, Skeeve?"

Kalvin followed me into the bathroom and asked his question as I was peering at my face in the mirror. Things were getting to a point where I had to shave, but only occasionally . . . and I decided today wasn't one of those occasions. It's funny, when I was younger I used to look forward to shaving, but now that it was fast upon me I tended to see it as the nuisance it was. I began to understand why some men grew beards.

"Well, I don't think we should just sit around here waiting for Aahz to answer the bellhop's personal ad," I said. "Besides, it won't produce any results today, anyway. I figure we should do a little looking on our own."

As soon as I said it, I realized how simplistic that sounded. Of course we were going to go looking for Aahz. That's what we would have done if the bellhop hadn't come up with his "personal ad" idea. If Calvin noticed, however, he let me get away with it.

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 85

"Sounds good to me. Where do we start?"

I had been giving that some thought. Unfortunately, the end result was that I was embarrassed to realize how little I knew about Aahz's background . . . or the background of any of my other colleagues, for that matter.

' 'The main things Aahz seems to specialize in are magik and finances. I thought we'd poke around those circles a while and see if anyone can give us a lead."

As it turned out, however, there was one small episode which delayed the start of our quest.

We had just stepped out of the doors of the hotel and were looking around for Edvik when I noticed the street

vendors. They had been there the day before when we checked in, but I had failed to really notice or comment on them. Today, however, they caught my attention, if for no other reason than their contrast to the hustlers who populated the same area at night.

The night hustlers were an intense, predatory lot who seemed willing to trade for some of your money only if they felt like they couldn't simply knock you down and take it all directly. The day people, on the other hand, seemed to be more like low-budget retailers who stood quietly behind their makeshift briefcase stands or blankets and smiled or made their pitches to any passersby who chanced to pause to look at their displays. If anything, their manner was furtive rather than sinister, and they kept glancing up and down the street as if they were afraid of being observed at their trade.

"I wonder what they're watching for?" I said, almost to myself. I say almost because I forgot for the moment that Calvin was hovering within easy hearing.

"Who? Them? They're probably watching for the police."

"The police? Why?"

86 Robert Asprin

"For the usual reason ... what they're doing is illegal."

"It is?"

I had no desire to have another run-in with the police, but I was genuinely puzzled. Maybe I was missing something, but I couldn't see anything untoward about the street vendors' activities.

"I keep forgetting. You're from the Bazaar at Deva," the Djin laughed. "You see, Skeeve, unlike the Bazaar, most places require a license to be a street vendor. From the look of them, these poor souls can't afford one. If they could, they'd probably open a storefront instead of working the street."

"You mean this is it for them? They aren't distributing

for a larger concern?"

On Deva, most of the street vendors were employees of larger businesses who picked up their wares in the morning and returned what was unsold at the end of their shift. Their specific strategy was to look like a small operation so that tourists who were afraid of dickering at a storefront or tent would buy, assuming they knew more and could get better prices from a lowly street peddler. It never occurred to me that the street vendors I had been seeing really were small, one-person operations.

"That's right," Calvin was saying. "What you see is what you get. Most of those people have their life savings tied up in ... Hey! Where are you going?"

I ignored him, stepping boldly up to one of the vendors I had noticed the day before. He was in the same spot as yesterday, squatting behind a blanket full of sunglasses and cheap bracelets. What had caught my eye yesterday was that he was young, even younger than I was. Considering the longevity of Perverts, that made him very young indeed.

"See anything you like?" he said, flashing an expanse

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 87

of pointed teeth I would have found unnerving if I hadn't gotten used to Aahz's grins.

"Actually, I was hoping you could answer a few questions for me."

The smile disappeared.

"What are you? A reporter or something?"

"No. Just curious."

He scowled and glanced around.

"I suppose it's all right, as long as it doesn't interfere with any paying customers. Time's money, ya know."

In response, I tossed a gold coin into his blanket.

"So call me a customer who's buying some of your time. Let me know when that's used up."

He made a quick pass with his hand and the coin disappeared as his smile emerged from hiding.

'Mister, you just got my attention. Ask your questions."

"Why do you do this?"

The smile faded into a grimace.

"Because I'm independently wealthy and get my kicks sitting in the rain and running from the cops . . . why do you think? I do it for the money, same as everybody else."

"No. I meant why do you do this for money instead of getting a job?"

He studied me for a moment with his Pervish yellow eyes, then gave a small shrug.

"All right," he said. "I'll give you a straight answer. You don't get rich working for someone else . . . especially not at the kind of jobs I'd been qualified for. You see, I don't come from money. All my folks gave me was my name. After that I was pretty much on my own. I don't have much school to my credit, and, like I say, my family isn't connected. I can't get a good job from an old pal of my dad's. That means I'd start at the bottom . . . and

88 Robert Asprin

probably end there, too. Anyway, I gave it a good long think, and decided I wanted more out of life."

I tried to think of a tactful way of saying that this still looked pretty bottom of the barrel to me.

"... So you think this is better than working at an entry-level job for someone else?"

His head came up proudly.

"I didn't say that. I don't figure to be doing this forever. This is just a way to raise the capital to start a bigger

business. I'm risking it all on my own abilities. If it works, I get all the profits instead of a wage and I can move on to better things. What's more, if it works well enough, I've got more to pass on to my kids than my parents did. If it doesn't . . . well, I'm no worse off than when I started."

"You've got kids?"

"Who, me? No ... at least, not yet. Maybe someday. Right now, the way things are going. I can't even afford a steady girlfriend, if you know what I mean."

Actually, I didn't. I had plenty of money personally, but no girlfriend. Therefore, I didn't have the vaguest idea what the upkeep on one would be.

"Well, I'd say it's a noble cause you have there . . . wanting to build something to leave for your kids."

At that he laughed, flashing those teeth again.

"Don't try to make me sound too good," he said. "I won't kid you. I'd like a few of the nicer things in life myself . . . like staying at fancy hotels and driving around in cabs. I'd use up some of the profits before I passed them on to my kids."

I was suddenly aware of the differences in our economic standing . . . that what he was dreaming about I tended to take for granted. The awareness made me uncomfortable.

"Yeah . . . well, I've got to be going now. Oh! What was it, anyway?"

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 89

"What was what?"

"The name your parents gave you."

"It wasn't that hot, really," he said, making a face. "My friends just call me J. R."

With that, I beat a hasty retreat to my waiting cab.

"What was that all about?" Edvik said as I sank back

into my seat.

"Oh, I was just curious about what made the street vendors tick."

"Them? Why bother? They're just a bunch of low-life hustlers scrabbling for small change. They're never going to get anywhere."

I was surprised at the sudden vehemence in his voice. There was clearly no love lost there.

It occurred to me that Edvik's appraisal of the street vendors pretty much summed up my initial reaction to his own enterprising efforts with his cab and self-publishing company.

It also occurred to me, as I reflected on my conversation with J. R., that I had been even more lucky than I had realized when I had taken to studying magik . . . first with Garkin and then with Aahz. It didn't take the wildest stretching of the imagination to picture myself in the street vendor's place... assuming I had that much initiative to begin with.

All in all, it wasn't a particularly comforting thought.

Chapter Ten:

"All financiers are not created equal!"

—R.CORMAN

"So WHERE ARE we off to today, Mr. Skeeve?"

Edvik's words interrupted my thoughts, and I fought to focus my attention on the problem at hand.

"Either to talk with the magicians or some financial types," I said. "I was hoping that as our trusty native guide you'd have some ideas as to which to hit first . . . and it's just 'Skeeve,' not 'Mr. Skeeve.' "

The "Mr. Skeeve" thing had been starting to get to me with the bellhop, but it hadn't seemed worth trying to correct. If I was going to be spending the next few days traveling with Edvik, however, I thought I'd try to set him straight

before he got on my nerves.

"All right. Skeeve it is," the cabbie agreed easily. "Just offhand, I'd say it would probably be easier to start with the financial folks."

That hadn't been what I had hoped he'd say, but as I've noted before, there's no point in paying for guidance and then not following it.

91

92 Robert Asprin

"Okay. I'll go along with that. Any particular reason, though?"

"Sure. First of all, there are a lot of people in the magik business around here. We got schools, consultants, co-ops, entertainers, weather control and home defense outfits . . . all sorts. What's more, they're spread out all over. We could spend the next year trying to check them out and still have barely scratched the surface. There aren't nearly as many financiers, on the other hand, so if they're on your list I figured we could start with them. Maybe we'll get lucky and not have to deal with the magik types."

I was a little staggered by his casual recitation. The enormity of what I was trying to do was just starting to sink in. I had only allowed a week to find Aahz and convince him to come back. At the moment, it seemed next to impossible to accomplish that in so short a time, yet I couldn't take any longer with the rest of the crew taking on Queen Hemlock without me. With an effort, I tried to put my doubts out of my mind. At the very least, I had to try. I'd face up to what to do next at the end of the week . . . not before.

"What's the other reason?"

"Excuse me?"

"You said 'First of all. . . .' That usually implies there's more than one reason."

The cabbie shot me a glance over his shoulder.

"That's right. Well, if you must know, I'm a little uncomfortable around magicians . . . current company excepted, of course. Never had much call to deal with 'em and just as happy to keep it that way. I've got a buddy, though, who's a financier. He just might be able to help you out. Most of these finance types know each other, you know. Leastwise, I can probably get you in to see him without an appointment."

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 93

Kalvin was waving a hand at me, trying to get my attention.

"I probably don't have to remind you of this," he said, "but your time is rather limited. I didn't say anything about your chatting with that scruffy street vendor, but are you really going to blow off part of a day talking to a supposed financier who hangs out with cab drivers?"

"How did you meet this guy?" I queried, trying desperately to ignore the Djin's words ... or, to be exact, how closely they echoed my own thoughts.

"Oh, we sort of ran into each other at an art auction."

"An art auction?"

I didn't mean to let my incredulity show in my voice, but it kind of slipped out. In response, Edvik twisted around in his seat to face me directly.

"Yeah. An auction. What's the matter? Don't you think I can appreciate art?"

Left to their own devices, the lizards powering our vehicle began veering toward the curb.

"Well . . . no. I mean, I've never met an art collector before. I don't know much about art, so it surprised me, that's all. No offense," I said hurriedly, trying not to tense as the cab wandered back and forth in our lane.

"You asked. That's where we met."

The cabbie returned his attention to the road once more,

casually bringing us back on course.

"Were you both bidding on the same painting?"

"No. He offered to back half my bid so I could stay in the running . . . only it wasn't a painting. It was more what you would call literary."

Now I was getting confused.

"Literary? But I thought you said it was an art auction."

"It was, but there was an author there who offered to

94 Robert Aspirin

auction off an appearance in his next book. Well, I knew the author ... I had done an interview with him in one of the 'zines I publish ... so I thought it would be kind of neat to see how he would do me in print. Anyway, it came down to two of us, and the bidding got pretty stiff. I thought I was going to have to drop out."

"That's when the financier offered to back your bid?"

"Actually, he made the offer to the other guy first. Lucky for me the other bidder wanted the appearance for his wife, so he wouldn't go along with the deal. That's when the Butterfly turned to me."

"Wait a minute. The Butterfly?"

"That's what he calls himself. It's even on his business cards. Anyway, if he hadn't come in on the bid, you'd be spending a couple chapters talking to some guy's winsome but sexy wife instead of ..."

At that point I was listening with only half an ear as Edvik prattled on. A financier named Butterfly who backs cabbies' bids at auctions. I didn't have to look at Calvin to tell the Djin was rolling his eyes in an anguished "I told you so." Still, the more I thought about it, the more hopeful I became. This Butterfly just might be offbeat enough to know something about Aahz. I figured it was at least worth a try.

Strange as it may sound, I was as nervous about meeting the Butterfly as Edvik claimed to be about dealing with magicians. Magicians I had been dealing with for several years and knew what to expect ... or if my experiences were an accurate sample, what not to expect. Financiers, on the other hand, were a whole different kettle of fish. I had no idea what I was getting into or how to act. I tried to reassure myself by remembering that this particular financier had dealt with Edvik in the past, and so could not be

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS

95

too stuffy. Still, I found myself straightening my disguise spell nervously as the cabbie called up to the Butterfly from the lobby. I was still traveling as a Klahd, but had used my disguise spell to upgrade my wardrobe a bit so that I at least looked like I was comfortable in monied circles.

I needn't have worried.

The Butterfly did not live up to any of my preconceived notions or fears about what a financier was like. First of all, instead of an imposing office lined with shelves full of leatherbound books and incomprehensible charts, it seemed he worked out of his apartment, which proved to be smaller than my own office, though much more tastefully furnished. Secondly, he was dressed quite casually in a pair of slacks and a pastel-colored sweater, that actually made me feel uncomfortably overdressed in my disguise-spell generated suit. Fortunately, his manner itself was warm and friendly enough to put me at my ease almost immediately.

"Pleased to meet you . . . Skeeve, isn't it?" he said, extending a hand for a handshake.

"Yes. I ... I'm sorry to impose on your schedule like this ..."

"Nonsense. Glad to help. That's why I'm self-employed ... so I can control my own schedule. Please. Have a seat and make yourself at home."

Once we were seated, however, I found myself at a loss as to how I should begin the conversation. But, with the

Butterfly watching me with attentive expectation, I felt I had to say something.

"Um . . . Edvik tells me you met at an art auction?"

"That's right . . . though I'll admit that for me it was more of a whim than anything else. Edvik is really much more the collector and connoisseur than I am."

The cabbie preened visibly under the implied praise.

"No. I just dropped by out of curiosity. I had heard that

96

Robert Asprin

this particular auction had a reputation for being a lot of fun, so I pulled a couple thousand out of the bank and wandered in to see for myself. The auctioneers were amusing, and the bidding was lively, but most of the art being offered didn't go with my current decor. So when that one particular item came up . . ."

I tried to keep an interested face on, but my mind wasn't on his oration. Instead, I kept pondering the easy way he had said "... so I pulled a couple thousand ...". Clearly this was a different kind of Pervect than Aahz was. My old partner would have been more willing to casually part with a couple pints of his blood than with gold.

"... But in the long run it worked out fine."

The Butterfly was finishing his tale, and I laughed dutifully along with him.

"Tell him about your friend, Skeeve."

"That's right. Here I've been rattling on and we haven't even started to address your problem," the financier nodded, shifting forward on his chair. "Edvik said you were trying to locate someone who might have been active in our financial circles."

"I'm not sure you'll be able to help," I began, grateful for not having to raise the subject myself. "He's been off-

dimension for several years now. His name is Aahz."

The Butterfly pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"The name doesn't ring any bells. Of course, in these days of nesting corporations and holding companies, names don't really mean much. Can you tell me anything about his style?"

"His style?"

"How would you describe his approach to money? Is he a plunger? A dabbler?"

I had to laugh at that.

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 97

"Well, the words 'tight-fisted' and 'penny-pinching' are the first that come to mind."

"There's 'tight-fisted' and there's 'cautious,' " the Butterfly smiled. "Perhaps you'd better tell me a little about him, and let me try to extract and analyze the pertinent parts."

So I told him. Once I had gotten started, the words seemed to come rushing out in a torrent.

I told him about meeting Aahz when he got stranded on my home dimension of Klah after a practical joke gone awry robbed him of his magikal powers, and how he took me on as an apprentice after we stymied Isstvan's plan to take over the dimensions. I told him about how Aahz had convinced me to try out for the position of Court Magician for the kingdom of Possiltum, and how that had led to our confrontation with Big Julie's army as well as introducing me to the joys of bureaucratic in-fighting. He clucked sympathetically when I told him about how Tananda and I had tried to steal the trophy from the Big Game as a birthday present for Aahz. and how we had had to put together a team to challenge the two existing teams after Tananda got caught. He was amused by my rendition of how I got stuck masquerading as Roderick, the king, and how I got Massha as an apprentice, though he seemed most interested in the part about how we broke up the Mob's efforts to move into the

Bazaar at Deva and ended up working for both sides of the same brawl. I even told him about our brief sortie into Limbo when Aahz got framed for murdering a vampire, and my even briefer career into the arena of professional Dragon Poker which pitted my friends and me against the Sen-Sen Ante Kid and the Ax. Finally, I tried to explain how we expanded our operation into a corporation, ending with how Aahz had walked out, leaving a note behind stating that,

98

Robert Asprin

without his powers, he felt he was needless baggage to the group.

The Butterfly listened to it all, and, when I finally ground to a halt, he remained motionless for many long minutes, apparently digesting what he had heard.

"Well, one thing I can tell you," he said at last. "Your friend isn't a financier . . . here on Perv, or anywhere else, for that matter."

"He isn't? But he's always talking about money."

"Oh, there's more to being a financier than talking about money," the Butterfly laughed. "The whole idea is to put one's money to work through investments. If anything, this Aahz's hoarding techniques would indicate that he's pretty much an amateur when it comes to money. You, on the other hand, by incorporating and diversifying through holdings in other businesses, show marked entrepreneurial tendencies. Perhaps sometime we might talk a bit about mutual investment opportunities."

I suppose it was all quite flattering, and under other circumstances I might have been happy to chat at length with the Butterfly about money management. Unfortunately, I couldn't escape the disappointment of the bottom line . . . that he wouldn't be able to give me any information that would help me locate Aahz.

"Thanks, but right now I think I'd better focus on one thing at a time, and my current priority is finding my old

partner."

"Well, sorry I couldn't have been of more assistance," the financier said, rising to his feet. "One thing, though, Skeeve, if you don't mind a little advice?"

"What's that?"

"You might try to take a bit more of an active role in your own life. You know . . . instead of reactive?"

That one stopped me short as I was reaching for the door.

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 99

"Excuse me?"

"Nothing. It was just a thought."

"Well, could you elaborate a little? C'mon, Butterfly! Don't drop a line like that on me without some kind of an explanation to go with it."

"It's really none of my business," he shrugged, "but I couldn't help but notice during your story that you seemed to be living your life reacting to crisis rather than having any real control over things. Your old partner and mentor got dropped in your lap and the two of you teamed up to stop someone who might try to assassinate either of you next. It was Aahz who forced you to try for the job as court magician, and ever since then you've been yielding to pressure, real or perceived, from almost everybody in your life:

Tananda, Massha, the Mob, the Devan Chamber of Commerce . . . even whatzisname, Grimble and that Badaxe have leaned on you. It just seems to me that for someone as successful as you obviously are, you really haven't shown much gumption or initiative."

His words hit me like a bucket of cold water. I had been shouted out by experts, but somehow Butterfly's calm criticism cut me deeper than any tonguelashing I had ever received from Aahz.

"Things have been kind of scrambled ..." I started, but the financier cut me off.

"I can see that, and I don't mean to tell you how to run your life. You've had some strong-willed, dominating people who have been doing just that, though, and I'd have to say the main offender has been this fellow, Aahz. Now, I know you're concerned about your friendship, but if I were you, I'd think long and hard about inviting him back into my life until I had gotten my own act together."

Chapter Eleven:

"How come I get all the hard questions?"

—0. NORTH

"SKEEVE! HEY, SKEEVE! Can ya ease up for a bit?"

The words finally penetrated my self-imposed fog and I slackened my pace, letting Calvin catch up with me.

"Whew! Thanks," the Djin said, hovering in his now-accustomed place. "I told you before I'm not real strong. Even hovering takes energy, ya know. You were really moving there."

"Sorry," I responded curtly, more out of habit than anything else.

In all honesty, the Djin's comfort was not a high priority item in my mind just then. I had had Edvik drive us back to the hotel after we left the Butterfly's place. Instead of going on up to my room, however, I had headed off down the sidewalk. The street vendor I had spoken to earlier waved a friendly greeting, but I barely acknowledged it with a curt nod of my head. The Butterfly's observations on my life had loosed an explosion of thoughts in my mind, and I figured maybe a brisk walk would help me sort things out.

101

102 Robert Asprin

I don't know how long I walked before Calvin's plea snapped me out of my mental wheel-spinning. I had only vague recollections of shouldering my way past slower-moving pedestrians and snarling at those who were quick

enough to get out of my path on their own. The police would have been pleased to witness it ... only on Perv two days and already I could walk down the street like a native.

"Look, do you want to talk about this? Maybe some place sitting down?"

I looked closer at the Djin. He really did look tired, his face streaked with sweat and his little chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath. Strange, I didn't feel like I had been exerting myself at all.

"Talk about what?" I said, realizing as I spoke that the words were coming out forced and tense.

"Come on, Skeeve. It's obvious that what the Butterfly said back there has you upset. I don't know why, it sounded like pretty good advice to me, but maybe talking it out would help a bit."

"Why should I be upset?" I snapped. "He only challenged all the priorities I've been living by and suggested that my best friend is probably the worst thing in my life. Why should that bother me?"

"It shouldn't," Calvin responded innocently, "unless, of course, he's right. Then I could see why it would bother you."

I opened my mouth for an angry retort, then shut it again. I really couldn't think of anything to say. The Djin had just verbalized my worst fears, ones I didn't have any answers for.

"... And running away from it won't help! You're going to have to face up to it before you're any good to yourself ... or anyone else, for that matter."

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 103

Kalvin's voice came from behind me, and I realized I had picked up my pace again. At the same moment, I saw that he was right, I was trying to run away from the issues, both figuratively and literally. With that knowledge, the fatigue of my mental and physical efforts hit me all at once

and I sagged, slowing to a stop on the sidewalk.

"That's better. Can we talk now?"

"Sure. Why not? I feel like getting something in my stomach, anyway."

The Djin gave a theatrical wince.

"Ootch! You mean we're going to try to find a restaurant again? Remember what happened the last time?"

In spite of myself I had to smile at his antics.

"As a matter of fact, I was thinking more on the order of getting something to drink."

While I spoke, I was casting about for a bar. One thing about Perv I had noticed, you never seemed to be out of sight of at least one establishment that served alcoholic beverages. This spot proved to be no exception, and now that I was more attuned to my environment, I discovered just such a place right next to where we were standing.

"This looks like as good a spot as any," I said, reaching for the door. "C'mon, Calvin, I'll buy the first round."

It was meant as a joke, because I hadn't seen the Djin eat or drink anything since I released him from the bottle. He seemed quite agitated at the thought, however, hanging back instead of moving with me.

"Wait, Skeeve, I don't think we should ..."

I didn't dally to hear the rest. What the heck, this had been his idea... sort of. Fighting a sudden wave of irritation, I pushed on into the bar's interior.

At first glance, the place looked a little seedy. Also the second and third glances, though it took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim light. It was small, barely big

104 Robert Asprin

enough to hold the half-dozen tiny tables that crowded the floor. Sagging pictures and clippings adorned the walls,

though what they were about specifically I couldn't tell through the grime obscuring their faces. There was a small bar with stools along one wall, where three tough-looking patrons crouched hunched forward in conversation with the bartender. They ceased talking and regarded me briefly with cold, unfriendly stares as I surveyed the place, though whether their hostility was because I was a stranger or because I was from off-dimension I wasn't sure. It did occur to me that I was still wearing my disguise spell business suit which definitely set me apart from the dark, weather-beaten outfits the other patrons wore almost like a uniform. It also occurred to me that this might not be the wisest place to have a quiet drink.

"I think we should get out of here, Skeeve."

I don't know when Calvin rejoined me, but he was there hovering at my side again. His words echoed my own thoughts, but sheer snorkiness made me take the opposite stance.

"Don't be a snob, Calvin," I muttered. "Besides, sitting down for a while was your idea, wasn't it?"

Before he could answer, I strode to one of the tables and plopped down in a seat, raising one hand to signal the bartender. He ignored it and returned to his conversation with the other drinkers.

"C'mon, Skeeve. Let's catch a cab back to the hotel and have our conversation there," Calvin said, joining me. "You're in no frame of mind to start drinking. It'll only make things worse."

He made a lot of sense. Unfortunately, for the mood I was in, he made too much sense.

"You heard the Butterfly, Calvin. I've been letting too many other people run my life by listening to their well-

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 105

meaning advice. I'm supposed to start doing what I want to do more often . . . and what I want to do right now is have a drink . . . here."

For a moment I thought he was going to argue with me, but then he gave a sigh and floated down to sit on the table itself.

"Suit yourself," he said. "I suppose everyone's entitled to make a jackass out of themselves once in a while."

"What'll it be?"

The bartender was looming over my table, saving me from having to think of a devastating comeback for Calvin's jibe. Apparently, now that he had established that he wouldn't come when summoned, he wanted to take my order.

"I'll have ..."

Suddenly, a glass of wine didn't feel right. Unfortunately, my experience with drinks was almost as limited as my experience with members of the opposite sex.

"... Oh, just give me a round of whatever they're drinking at the bar there."

The bartender gave a grunt that was neither approving nor disapproving and left, only to return a few moments later with a small glass of liquid which he slammed down on the table hard enough for some- of the contents to slop over the edge. I couldn't see it too clearly, but it seemed to be filled with an amber fluid with bubbles in it that gathered in a froth at the top.

"Ya gotta pay by the round," he sneered, as if it were an insult.

I fished a handful of small change out of my pocket and tossed it on the table, reaching for the glass with the other hand.

Now, some of you might be wondering why I was so willing to experiment with a strange drink after everything

I've been saying about food on Perv. Well, truth to tell, I was son of hoping this venture would end in disaster. You see, by this time I had cooled off enough to acknowledge that Calvin was probably right about going back to the hotel, but I had made such a big thing out of making an independent decision that changing my mind now would be awkward. Somewhere in that train of thought, it occurred to me that if this new drink made me sick, I would have an unimpeachable reason for reversing my earlier decision. With that in mind, I raised the glass to my lips and took a sip.

The icy burst that hit my throat was such a surprise that I involuntarily took another swallow . . . and another. I hadn't realized how thirsty I was after my brisk walk until I hit the bottom of the glass without setting it down or taking a breath. Whatever this stuff was, it was absolutely marvelous, and the vaguely bitter aftertaste only served to remind me I wanted more.

"Bring me another of these," I ordered the bartender, who was still sorting through my coins. "And can you bring it in a larger container?"

"I could bring you a pitcher," he grumbled.

"Perfect... and pull a little extra there for your trouble."

"Say . . . thanks."

The bartender's mood and opinion of me seemed to have improved as he made his way to the bar. I congratulated myself for remembering what Edvik had said about tipping.

"I suppose it would be pushy to try to point out that you're drinking on an empty stomach," the Djin said drily.

"Not at all," I grinned.

For once I was ahead of him and raised my voice to call the bartender.

"Say! Could you bring me some of that popcorn while you're at it?"

Most of the bar snacks that were laid out seemed to be

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 107

in mesh-covered containers to keep them from crawling or hopping away. Amidst these horrors, however, I had spotted a bin of popcorn when I came in, and had made special note of it; thinking that at least some forms of junk food appeared to be the same from dimension to dimension.

"Happy now?"

"I'd be happier if you picked something that was a little less salty," Calvin grimaced, "but I suppose it's better than nothing."

The bartender delivered my pitcher along with a basket of popcorn, then wandered off to greet some new patrons who had just wandered in. I tossed a handful of the popcorn into my mouth and chewed it while I refilled my glass from the pitcher. It was actually more spicy than salty, which made me revise some of my earlier thoughts about the universality of junk food, but I decided not to mention this discovery to Calvin. He was fussing at me enough already.

"So, what do you want to talk about?" I said, forcing myself not to immediately wash down the popcorn with a long drink from the glass.

The Djin leaned back and cocked an eyebrow at me.

"Well, your mood seems to have improved, Imt I was under the impression you might want to talk about the Butterfly's advice this afternoon."

As soon as he spoke, my current bubble of levity popped and my earlier depression slammed into me like a fist. Without thinking I drained half the contents of my glass.

"I don't know, Calvin. I've got a lot of respect for the Butterfly, and I'm sure he meant well, but what he said has raised a lot of questions in my mind . . . questions I've never really asked myself before."

I topped off my glass casually, hoping the Djin wouldn't notice how fast I was drinking the stuff.

"Questions like . . . ?"

108 Robert Asprin

"Well, like . . . What are friends . . . really? On the rare occasions the subject comes up, all people seem to talk about is the need to be needed. All of a sudden I'm not sure

I know what that means."

Somehow, my glass had gotten empty again. I refilled it as I continued.

"The more I look at it, the more I think that if you really

need your friends, it's either a sign of weakness or laziness. You either need or want people to do your thinking for you, or your fighting for you, or whatever. Things that by rights you should be able to do for yourself. By rights, that makes you a parasite, existing by leeching off other people's

strength and generosity."

I started to take a drink and realized I was empty. I suspected there was a leak in the glass, but set it aside, resolving to let it sit there for a while before I tried refilling

it again.

"On the other hand, if you don't need your friends, what

good are they? Friends take up a big hunk of your time and cause a lot of heartache, so if you don't really need them, why should you bother? In a sense, if they need you, then you're encouraging them into being parasites instead of developing strength on their own. I don't know. What do you

think, Calvin?"

I gestured at him with my glass, and realized it was full

again. So much for my resolve. I also realized the pitcher

was almost empty.

"That's a rough one, Skeeve," the Djin was saying, and

I tried to focus on his words. "I think everybody has to reach their own answer, though it's a rare person who even thinks to ask the question. I will say it's an over-simplification to try to equate caring about someone with weakness, just as I think it's wrong to assume that if we can learn from our friends, they're actually controlling our thinking."

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 109

He stopped and stared at my hand. I followed his gaze and realized I was trying to fill my empty glass from an empty pitcher.

"I also think," he sighed, "that we should definitely head back to the hotel now. Have you paid the tab? Are we square here?"

"Thass another thing," I said, fighting to get the words out past my tongue, which suddenly seemed to have a mind of its own. "What he said about money. I haven't been using my money right."

"For cryin' out loud, Skeeve! Lower your voice!"

"No, really! I've got all thish money ..."

I fumbled my moneybelt out and emptied the gold onto the table.

"... And has it made ME happy? Has it made ANY-BODY happy?"

When no answer came, I blinked my eyes, trying to get Calvin back into focus. When he finally spoke, he seemed to be very tense, though his voice was very quiet.

"I think you may have just made someone happy, but I don't think it'll be you."

That's when I noticed the whole bar was silent. Looking around, I was surprised to see how many people had come in while we were talking. It was an ugly-looking crowd, but no one seemed to be talking to each other or doing

anything. They just stood there looking at me . . . or to be more exact, looking at the table covered with my money.

Chapter Twelve:

"HOLY BATSHIT, FATMAN! I mean . . ."

—ROBIN

"I ... THINK I'VE made a tactic . . . tad ... an error,"
I whispered with as much dignity as I could muster.

"You can say that again," Calvin shot back mercilessly.
"You forgot the first rule of survival: Don't tease the animals. Look, Skeeve, do you want to get out of here, or do you want to get out with your money?"

"Want . . . my money." I wasn't that drunk ... or maybe I was.

The Djinn rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"I was afraid of that. That's going to be a little rougher. Okay, the first thing you do is get that gold out of sight. I don't think they'll try anything in here. There are too many witnesses, which means too many ways to split the loot."

I obediently began to pick up the coins. My hands seemed to lack the dexterity necessary to lead them back into my moneybelt, so I settled for shoving them into my pockets as best I could.

III

112 Robert Asprin

The bar was no longer silent. There was a low murmur going around that sounded ominous even in my condition as various knots of patrons put their heads together. Even without the dark looks they kept shooting in my direction it wasn't hard to guess what the subject of their conversation was.

"The way I see it, if there's going to be trouble, it will

hit when we leave. That means the trick is to leave without their knowing it. Order another pitcher."

That's when I realized how much I'd already had to drink. For a moment there, I thought the Djin had said . . .

"You want me to ..."
"... Order another pitcher, but whatever you do, don't drink any of it."

That made even less sense, but I followed his instructions and gestured at the bartender who delivered another pitcher with impressive speed.

I paid him from my pocket.
-"I don't get it," I said. "Why should I order a pitcher when you say I shouldn't ..."

"Shut up and listen," Calvin hissed. "That was so everybody watching you will think you're planning to stick around for a while. In the meantime, we move."

That made even less sense than having some more to drink.

"But, Calvin . . . most of them are between us and the door! They'll see me ..."

'Not out the front door, stupid! You see that little hallway in back? That leads to the restrooms. There's also an exit back there which probably opens into an alley. That's the route we're taking."

"How do you know there's an exit back there?" I said suspiciously.

"Because one of the things I do when I come into a new bar is count the exits," the Djin retorted. "It's a habit I suggest you develop if you're going to keep drinking."

' "Don't want any more to drink," I managed, my stomach suddenly rebelling at the thought.

"Good boy. Easy now. Nice and casual. Head for the restrooms."

I took a deep breath in a vain effort to clear my head, then stood up ... or at least I tried to. Somewhere in the process, my foot got tangled in my chair and I nearly lost my balance. I managed not to fall, but the chair went over on its side noisily, drawing more than a few snickers from the roughnecks at the bar.

"That's all right," Calvin soothed, his voice seeming to come from a great distance. "Now just head down the hallway."

I seemed to be very tall all of a sudden. Moving very carefully, I drew a bead on the opening to the hallway and headed in. I made it without touching the walls on either side and felt a small surge of confidence. Maybe this scheme of Calvin's would work after all! As he had said, there was an exit door in the wall just short of the restrooms. Without being told, I changed course and pushed out into the alley, easing the door shut behind me. I was out!

"Oops."

I frowned at the Djin.

"What do you mean, 'Oops!'? Didn't you say I should ..."

"Nice of you to drop by, mister!"

That last was said by a burly Pervect, one of six actually who were blocking our path down the alley. Apparently our little act hadn't fooled everybody.

"Skeeve, I ..."

Robert Asprin

114

"Never mind, Calvin. I just figured out for myself what 'Oops' means."

"Of course, you know this here's what you'd call a toll-alley. You got to pay to use it."

That was the same individual talking. If he noticed me talking to Calvin, which to him would look like talking to thin air, he didn't seem to mind or care.

"That's right," one of his cronies chimed in. "We figure what you got in your pockets ought to just about cover it."

"Quick! Back inside!" Calvin hissed.

"Way ahead of you," I murmured, feeling behind myself for the door.

I found it ... sort of. The door was there, but there was no handle on this side. Apparently the bar owners wanted it used for exits only. Terrific.

"... The only question is: Are you gonna give it to us quietly, or are we gonna have to take it?"

I've faced lynch mobs, soldiers, and sports fans before, but a half-dozen Pervish plug-uglies was the most frightening force I've ever been confronted with. I decided, all by myself, that this would be an excellent time to delegate a problem.

"C'mon, Calvin! Do something!"

"Like what? I told you I'm no good in a fight."

"Well, do SOMETHING! You're supposed to be the Djin!"

I guess I knew deep inside that carping at Calvin wouldn't

help matters. To my surprise, however, he responded. "Oh, all right!" he grimaced. "Maybe this will help." With that, he made a few passes with his hands and... . . . And I was sober! Stone-cold sober!

I looked at him.

"That's all I can do for you," he shrugged. "From here,

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 115

you're on your own. At least now you won't have to fight 'em drunk."

The thugs were starting to pick up boards and pieces of brick from the alley.

"Time's up!" their leader declared, starting for me.

I smiled at Calvin.

"I think your analysis of friendship was only a little short of brilliant," I said, "There are a couple of points I'd like to go over, though."

"NOW?" the Djin shrieked. "This is hardly the time to . . . Look out!"

The leader of the pack was cocking his arms to take a double-handed swing at me with a piece of lumber he had acquired somewhere along the way. As the wood whistled toward its target, which is to say, my head, I made a circular gesture in the air between us with my hand ... and the board rebounded as if it had struck an invisible wall!

"Magikal ward," I informed the gape-mouthed Djin. "It's like a force field, only different. I did mention I was a magician, didn't I!"

The gang stopped dead in their tracks at this display; a few had even retreated a few steps.

"Oh, before I forget, thanks for the sobering-up job, Calvin. You're right. It does make it a lot easier to focus the mind. Anyway, as I was saying, I've gotten a lot of

mileage out of wards. They can be used like I just did,- as a shield, or . . ."

I made a few quick adjustments to the spell.

"... You can widen them out into a wall or a bubble. Coming?"

I had expanded the ward and was now starting to push the gang back down the alley ahead of us. It was a minor variant of the trick I used to break up a fight at the Big

Robert Asprin

116

Game a while back, so I had reason to have confidence in it. I figured we would just walk out of the alley keeping the thugs at a respectful distance, then hail a cab to get us

the heck out of there.

The gang leader had turned and trotted out ahead of the

others a few paces.

"Cute. Real cute," he called, turning to face me again.

"Hadn't figured you for magik. Well, let's see how you handle this, wise guy!"

With that, he pulled what looked like a couple of blackboard erasers from the pocket of his jacket. At first, I thought he was going to try to throw them at me, but instead he clapped them together over his head, showering himself with what appeared to be white chalk dust. It would have been funny ... if he hadn't looked so grim as he

started for me again.

Just to be on the safe side, I doubled up on the ward in front of him . . . and he walked right through it!

"That's what I thought!" he called to his cronies, pausing once he had penetrated my defenses. "Real low level stuff. Go to Class Two or heavier, guys ... in fact, the heavier

the better!"

I should have seen it coming . . . maybe would have if I had more time to think. In a dimension that used both magik and technology, there were bound to be counter-magik spells and weapons available. Unfortunately, it seemed I was about to learn about them first hand!

The other gang members were all reaching into their pockets and producing charms or spray cans. I had a bad • feeling that my magikal ward wasn't going to protect me much longer. Apparently Calvin was of the same opinion.

"Quick, Skeeve! Have you got any other tricks up your sleeve?"

"I've always figured that, in times of crisis, it's best to

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 117

play through your strongest suit. Still hoping to avoid any actual violence, I pulled my energy out of the wards and threw it into a new disguise: an over-muscled Pervect easily half again as tall as I really was.

"Do you boys really want me to get rough?" I shouted, trying as best as I could to make my voice a threatening bass.

I had thought of making myself look like a policeman, but had discarded the idea. With my luck they probably would have surrendered, and then what would I have done with them? I wanted them to run ... as far out of my life as possible!

It didn't work.

I had barely gotten the words out when a large chunk of brick ripped through the air just over my head . . . passing through what would have been the chest of the disguised me.

"Disguise spell!" the thrower called. "Go for him like we saw him before!"

To say the least, I figured it was time for the better part of valor. Trying to keep my mind under control, which is harder to do than it sounds with half a dozen bully-boys

charging down on you, I slapped on a levitation spell and took to the skies.

... At least, I tried to.

I was barely airborne when a vise-like grip closed on my ankle.

"I've got him!"

The grip hurt, which made it difficult to concentrate on my spell. Then, too, it seemed the day had taken a lot more out of me than I had realized. Normally, I can, and have, levitated as many as two people besides myself . . . count that as three since one of them was Massha. In the scramble of the moment, however, I was hard pressed to lift myself and the guy who was holding my ankle. I struggled to get him into the air, then something bounced off my head and...

118

Robert Asprin

The ground slammed into me at an improbable angle, and for a moment, I saw stars. The pressure seemed to be gone from my ankle, but when I opened my eyes, the leader was standing over me with his trusty board in his hands.

"Nice try, wise guy!" he sneered. "But not good enough. Now give me the ..."

Suddenly he went sprawling as someone piled into him from behind.

"Quick, Mr. Skeeve! Get up!"

It took me a moment to realize it was the street vendor I had spoken to that morning. He crouched over me, facing down the circling gang.

"Hurry up! I can't hold these guys off by myself!"

I wasn't sure I could get up if I wanted to, but at this point I was willing to abandon any hopes of a non-violent solution to our problems. Propping myself up on one elbow, I reached out with my mind, grabbed a garbage can, and

sent it sailing through the gang's formation.

"What the . . ."

"Look out!"

If they wanted physical, I'd give it to them. I mentally grabbed two more trash cans and sent them into the fray, keeping all three flying back and forth in the narrow confines of the alley.

"Cripes! I'm on your side! Remember?" the street vendor cried, ducking under one of my missiles.

I summoned up a little more energy and threw a ward over the two of us. Somehow, I didn't think anyone had thought to use their anti-magik stuff on a garbage can.

A few more swings with the old trash cans, and it was all over.

Heaving a ragged breath, I dropped the ward and brought my makeshift weapons to a halt. Four of my attackers lay

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 119

sprawled on the ground, and the other two had apparently taken to their heels.

"Nice work, Skeeve," Calvin crowed, appearing from wherever it was he had taken cover when the fracas started.

"Are you all right, Mr. Skeeve?" the street vendor asked, extending a hand to help me to my feet.

"I think so... yes... thanks to you ... J.R., isn't it?"

"That's right. I was walkin' home when I saw these jokers pilin' into you. It looked a little uneven, so I thought I'd lend a hand. Cheez! I didn 't know you wuz a magician!"

"A mighty grateful magician right now," I said, digging into my pocket. "Here, take this. Consider it my way of saying thank you."

"Excuse me," the Djinn drawled, "but didn't we just get into this whole brawl so you could keep your money?"

He needn't have worried. J.R. recoiled from the gold as if I had offered him poison.

"I didn't help you for money!" he said through tight lips. "I know you don't mean . . . Cripes! All you rich guys are the same. You think your money . . . Look! I work for my money, see! I ain't no bum lookin' for a handout!"

With that he spun on his heel and marched away, leaving me with an outstretched hand full of gold.

It would have been a beautiful exit, if the alley hadn't suddenly been blocked by a vehicle pulling in ... a vehicle with blue and red flashing lights on top.

Chapter Thirteen:

"Who? Me, Officer?"

—J. DILLINGER

"I STILL DON'T see why we should be detained."

It seemed like hours that we had been at the police station, we being myself, J.R., and, of course, Calvin, though the police seemed unaware of the latter's existence and I, in turn, was disinclined to tell them. Despite our protests, we had been transported here shortly after the police had arrived. The thugs had been revived and placed in a separate vehicle, though I noticed they were handled far less gently than we were. Still, it was small consolation to being held against our will.

"You don't? Well, then we'll have to go over it all again slowly and see if you can get a hint."

This was spoken by the individual who had been conducting our interrogation since we arrived. From the deferential way the other policemen treated him, I assumed he was a

ranking officer of some sort. He possessed bad breath, a foul disposition, and what seemed to be an endless tolerance

121

122 Robert Asprin

for repetition. As he launched into his oration, I fought an

impulse to chant along with the now-familiar words.

"We could charge you with Being Drunk in Public."

"I'm stone cold sober," I interrupted, thanking my lucky

stars for Calvin's assistance. "If you don't believe it, test

me."

"There are a lot of witnesses who said you were falling

down drunk in the bar."

"I tripped over a chair."

"Then there's the minor matter of Assault . . ."

"I keep telling you, they attacked me! It was self-defense!"

"... And Destruction of Private Property ..."

"For cryin' out loud, it was a garbage can! I'll pay for

a new one if that's ..."

"... And, of course, there's Resisting Arrest."

"I asked them where we were going. That's all."

"That's not the way the arresting officers tell it."

Realizing I was getting nowhere in this argument, I did

the next most logical thing: I took out my frustration on an

innocent bystander. In this case, the nearest available target

happened to be J.R., who seemed to be dozing off in his

chair.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" I demanded.

"You're in this too, you know."

"There's no need," the street vendor shrugged. "It's not like we were in trouble or anything."

"That's funny. I thought we were in a police station."

"So what? They aren't really serious. Are you. Captain?"

The Pervect who had been arguing with me shot him a dark look, but I noticed he didn't contradict what had been said.

"I'll bite J.R.," I said, still watching the captain. "What are you seeing that I'm not in this situation?"

*»

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 123

"It's what isn't happening that's the tip-off," he winked.

"What isn't happening is we aren't being booked. We've been here a long time and they haven't charged us with any crimes."

"But the Captain here said ..."

"He said they could charge us with etc., etc. You notice he hasn't actually done it. Believe me, Mr. Skeeve, if they were going to jail us, we'd have been behind bars an hour ago. They're just playing games to stall for a while."

What he said seemed incredible considering the amount of grief we were being put through, yet I couldn't find a

hole in his logic. I turned to the captain and raised an eyebrow.

"Is that true?" I said.

The policeman ignored me, leaning back in his chair to stare at J.R. through half-closed eyes.

"You seem to know a lot about police procedure, son."

Almost as if you've been rousted before."

A sneer spread across the street vendor's face as he met the challenge head on.

"Anyone who works the streets gets hassled," he said.
"It's how you police protect the upstanding citizens from merchants like me who are too poor to afford a storefront. I suppose it is a lot safer than taking on the real criminals who might shoot back. We should be grateful to our defenders of the law. If it wasn't for them, the dimension would probably be overrun with street vendors and parking violators."

I should have been grateful for the diversion after being on the hot seat myself for so long. Unfortunately, I had also logged in a fair amount of time as the Great Skeeve, and as such was much more accustomed to being hassled than I was to being overlooked.

"I believe the question was 'Are we or are we not being

124 Robert Asprin

charged with any crimes?" " I said pointedly. "I'm still

waiting for an answer."

The captain glowered at me for a few moments, but when

I didn't drop my return gaze, he heaved a sigh.

"No. We won't be bringing any charges against you at

this time."

"Then we're free to go?"

"Well, there are a few more questions you'll have to

answer first. After that, you're free to ..."

"That's 'more' as in new questions, not the same ones

all over again. Right?"

The policeman glared at me, but now that I knew we

were in the clear, I was starting to have fun with this.
"That's right," he said through gritted teeth.

"Okay. Shoot."

I suddenly realized that was an unfortunate use of words

in a room full of armed policemen, but it escaped unnoticed.

The captain cleared his throat noisily before continuing.

"Mister Skeeve," he began formally, "do you wish to

press charges against the alleged attackers we currently have

in custody?"

"What kind of a silly question is that? Of course I want

to."

Kalvin was waving frantically at me and pointing to J.R.

The street vendor was shaking his head in a slow, but firm,

negative.

"... Um . . . before I make up my mind on that,

Captain," I hedged, trying to figure out what J.R. was
thinking, "could you tell me what happens if I don't press

charges?"

"We can probably hold onto them until tomorrow morn-
ing for questioning, but then we'll let them go."

That didn't sound like particularly satisfying treatment
for a gang that had tried to rob me. Still, J.R. seemed to

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 125

know what he was doing so far, and I was disinclined to
go against his signaled advice.

"... And if I DO press charges?" I pressed, trying to
sort it out.

"I'm not a judge," the captain shrugged, "so I can't say

for sure ... but I can give you my best guess."

"Please."

"We'll charge them with Attempted Robbery and Assault with Intent To Do Great Bodily Harm ... I don't think we could make Attempted Murder stick."

That sounded pretty good to me, but the policeman wasn't finished.

"... Then the court will appoint a lawyer—if they don't already have one—who will arrange for bail to be set. They'll probably raise the money from a bondsman and be back on the streets before noon tomorrow."

"What? But they ..."

' It'll take a couple of months for the trial to be scheduled, at which point it'll be your word against theirs . . . and they're not only locals, they have you outnumbered."

I was starting to see the light.

"... That is, if it gets to trial. More than likely there'll be some plea bargaining, and they'll plead guilty to a lesser charge, which means a smaller sentence with an earlier parole—if the sentence isn't suspended as soon as it's handed down ..."

"Whoa! Stop! I think I'll just pass on pressing charges."

"Thought you would," the captain nodded. "It's probably the easiest way for everybody. After all, you weren't hurt, and you've still got your money."

"Of course, the next person they jump may not be quite so lucky" I said drily.

"I didn't say it was the best way to handle it, just the easiest."

Robert Asprin

Before I could think of a witty answer to that one, a uniformed policeman rapped at the doorframe, entered the room, and passed a sheet of paper to the captain. Something about the way the latter's lips tightened as he scanned the sheet made me nervous.

"Well, well, Mis-tet Skeeve," he said at last, dropping the paper onto the desk in front of him. "It seems this isn't the first time you've dealt with the police since arriving in this dimension."

"Uh-oh," Calvin-exclaimed, rolling his eyes, "here it comes!"

"What makes you say that, Captain?"

I had a hunch it wouldn't do any good to act innocent. Unfortunately, I didn't have any other ideas about how to act.

"What makes me say that is the report I just received. I thought I should check with the other precincts to see if they had heard of you, and it seems they have."

"That's why they've been stalling," J.R. put in. "To wait until the reports came in. It's called police efficiency."

The captain ignored him.
"According to this, you've had two run-ins with the police already. First for acting suspicious on the public streets ..."

"I was being polite instead of barreling into people!" I broke in, exasperated. "I'm sorry, I was new here and didn't know 'rude' was the operative word for this dimension. You should put up signs or something warning people that being polite is grounds for harassment on Perv!"
The captain continued as if I hadn't spoken.
"... And later that same day, you tried to get out of paying for a pretty expensive meal."

"I fainted, for Pete's sake! As soon as I came to, I paid

for the meal, even though I hadn't eaten a bite."

"Now that in itself sounds a little suspicious," the captain

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 127

said, pursing his lips. "Why would you order a meal you couldn't, or wouldn't, eat?"

"Because I didn't know I couldn't eat it when I ordered it, obviously. I keep telling you . . . I'm new here!"

"Uh huh," the policeman leaned back and studied me through slitted eyes. "You've got a glib answer for everything . . . don't you. Mister Skeeve."

"That's because it's true! Would I be less suspicious if I didn't have answers for your questions? Tell me, Captain, I really want to know! I know I'm not a criminal, what does it take to convince you?"

The captain shook his head slowly.

"Frankly, I don't know. I've been on the force for a long time, and I've learned to trust my instincts. Your story sounds good, but my instinct tells me you're trouble looking for a place to happen."

I could see I was playing into a stacked deck, so I abandoned the idea of impressing him with my innocence.

"I guess the bottom line is the same as before that sheet came in, then. Are you going to press charges against me . . . or am I free to go?"

He studied me for a few more moments, then waved his hand.

"Go on. Get out of here . . . and take your little street buddy with you. Just take my advice and don't carry so much cash in the future. There's no profit in teasing the animals."

If I had been thinking, I would have let it go at that. Unfortunately, it had been a long day and I was both tired

and annoyed ... a dangerous combination.

"I'll remember that, Captain," I said, rising to my feet.
"I had been under the impression that the police were around to protect innocent citizens like me . . . not to waste every-

Robert Asprin

128

body's time harassing them. Believe me, I've learned my lesson."

Every policeman in the room suddenly tensed, and I realized too late that there was also no profit in critiquing the police.

"... And if we don't check on suspicious characters before they make trouble, then all we're good for is filling out reports AFTER a crime had been committed," the captain spat bitterly. "Either way, 'innocent citizens' like you can find something to gripe about!"

"I'm sorry. Captain. I shouldn't have . . ."

I don't know if he even heard my attempted apology. If he did, it didn't make a difference.

"You see, I've learned my lesson, too. When I first joined the force, I thought there was nothing better I could do with my life than to spend it protecting innocent citizens . . . and I still believe that. Even then I knew this would be a thankless occupation. What I hadn't realized was that 'innocent citizens' like you are not only ungrateful, the tendency is to treat the police like they're enemies!"

I decided against trying to interrupt him. He was on a roll, lecturing about what seemed to be his favorite subject. Opening my mouth now would probably be about as safe as getting between my pet dragon, Gleep, and his food dish.

"Everybody wants the crooks to be in jail, but nobody wants a prison in their community ... or to vote in the

taxes to build new jails. So the prisons we have are overcrowded, and the 'innocent citizens' scream bloody murder every time a judge suspends a sentence or lets an offender

out on parole."

He was up and pacing back and forth now as he warmed to his subject.

"Nobody sees the crimes that aren't committed. We can reduce the crime rate 98%, and the 'innocent citizens' blame

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 129

US for that last 2% ... as if we were the ones committing the crimes! Nobody wants to cooperate with the police or approve the tax allocations necessary to keep up with inflation, so we can't even keep abreast of where we are, much less expand to keep up with the population growth."

He paused and leveled an accusing finger at J.R.

"Then there are 'innocent citizens' like your buddy here, who admits he's running an illegal, unlicensed business. What that means, incidentally, is that he doesn't have to pay any taxes, even the existing ones, although he expects the same protection from us as the storekeepers who do, even though most of them cheat on their taxes as well."

"So we're supposed to keep the peace and apprehend criminals while we're understaffed and using equipment that's outdated and falling apart. About all we have to work with is our instincts . . . and then we get hassled for using that!"

He came to a halt in front of me, and pushed his face close to mine, treating me to another blast of his breath. I didn't point it out to him.

"Well this time we're going to see just how good my instincts are. I'm letting you go for now, but it occurs to me it might be a good idea to run a check on you on other dimensions. If you're just an innocent businessman like you claim, we won't find anything ... but if I'm right," he gave me a toothy grin, "you've probably tangled with the law before, and we'll find that too. I'm betting you've left a trail of trouble behind you, a trail that leads right to here."

If so, we'll be talking again . . . real soon. I don't want you to switch hotels or try to leave the dimension without letting me know, understand? I want to be able to find you again, MISTER Skeeve!"

Chapter Fourteen:

'Parting is such sweet sorrow.'

—FIGARO

THE POSSIBILITY OF an extensive check on my off-dimension background worried me, but not so much that I forgot my manners. J.R. had saved my skin in the alley fight, and, throughout the police grilling, a part of my mind had been searching for a way to repay him. As we left the police station, I thought I had the answer.

"Say, J.R.," I said, turning to him on the steps, "about that business you want to start . . . how much capital would you need to get started?"

I could see his neck stiffening as I spoke.

"I told you before, Mr. Skeeve, I won't take a reward for saving your life."

"Who said anything about a reward? I'm talking about investing in your operation and taking a share of the profits."

That one stopped him in his tracks.

"You'd do that?"

"Why not? I'm a businessman and always try to keep an eye open for new ventures to back. The trickiest thing is

131

Robert Asprin

132

finding trustworthy principals to manage the investments. In your case, you've already proved to me that you're trustworthy. So how much would you need for this plan of

yours?"

The street vendor thought for a few moments.

"Even with backing I'd want to start small and build. Figuring that. . . yeah. I think about five thousand in gold would start things off right."

"Oh," I said, intelligently. I wasn't about to question his figures, but the start-up cost was higher than I had expected. I only had a couple thousand with me, and most of that was going to cover Edvick's services and the hotel bill. So much for a grand gesture!

"I'll ... uh ... have to think about it."

J.R.'s face fell.

"Yeah. Sure. Well, you know where to find me when you make up your mind."

He turned and strode off down the street without looking back. It was silly to feel bad about not fulfilling an offer I didn't have to make, but I did.

"Well, I guess it's time for us to head back to the hotel . . . right Skeeve?" Calvin chimed in.

I had botched the job with J. R., but I resolved that this one I was going to do right.

"No," I said.

"No?" the Djin echoed. "So where are we going instead?"

"That's the whole point, Calvin. We aren't going anywhere. I'm going back to the hotel. You're going back to

Djinger."

He floated up to eye level with me, frowning as he cocked his head to one side.

"I don't get it. Why should I go back to Djinger?"
"Because you've filled your contract. That means you're

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 133

free to go, so I assume you're going."

"I did?"

"Sure. Back in the alley. You used a spell to sober me up before I had to fight those goons. To my thinking, that fulfills your contract."

The Djin stroked his beard thoughtfully.

"I dunno," he said. "That wasn't much of a spell."

"You never promised much," I insisted. "As a matter of fact, you went to great lengths to impress me with how little you could do."

"Oh, that," Calvin waved his hand deprecatingly.
"That's just the standard line of banter we feed to the customers. It keeps them from expecting too much of a Djin. You'd be amazed at some of the things folks expect us to do. If we can keep their expectations low, then they're easier to impress when we strut our stuff."

"Well it worked. I'm impressed. If you hadn't done your thing back there in the alley, my goose would have been cooked before J.R. hit the scene."

"Glad to help. It was less dangerous than trying to lend a hand in the fight."

"Maybe, but by my count it still squares things between us. You promised one round of minor help, and delivered it at a key moment. That's all your contract called for . . . and more."

The Djin folded his arms and stared, frowning into the distance for several moments.

"Check me on this, Skeeve," he said finally, "I've been helpful to you so far, right?"

"Right," I nodded, wondering what he was leading up to.

"And I've been pretty good company, haven't I? I mean, I do tend to run off at the mouth a bit, but overall you haven't seemed to mind having me around."

"Right again."

134 Robert Asprin

"So why are you trying to get rid of me?"

Suddenly, the whole day caught up with me. The well meant advice from the Butterfly, the drinking, the fight, the head-butting with the police all swelled within me until my mind and temper burst from the pressure.

"I'M NOT TRYING TO GET RID OF YOU!!" I shrieked at the Djin, barely aware my voice had changed. "Don't you think I want to keep you around? Don't you think I know that my odds of finding Aahz on my own in this wacko dimension are next to zip? Damn-lit, Calvin, I'M TRYING TO BE NICE TO YOU!!!"

"Um . . . maybe you could be a little less nice and quit shouting?"

I realized that I had backed him across the sidewalk and currently had him pinned against the wall with the force of my "niceness." I took a long, deep breath and tried to bring myself under control.

"Look," I said carefully, "I didn't mean to yell at you. It's just ..."

Something trickled down my face and it dawned on me that I was on the verge of tears. On the verge, heck! I was starting to cry. I cleared my throat noisily, covertly wiping away the tear as I covered my mouth, hoping Calvin wouldn't notice. If he did, he was too polite to say anything.

"Let me try this again from the top."

I drew a ragged breath.

"You've been a big help, Calvin, more than I could have

ever hoped for when I opened your vial. Your advice has been solid, and if I've been having trouble it's because I didn't listen to it enough."

I paused, trying to organize my thoughts.

"I'm not trying to get rid of you . . . really. I'd like nothing better than to have you stick around at least until I found Aahz. I just don't want to trade on our friendship. I

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 135

got your services in a straightforward business deal. . . one you had no say in, if your account of how Djinger works is accurate. If I sounded a bit cold when I told you I thought our contract was complete, it's because I was fighting against begging you to stay. I was afraid that if I did, it would put you in a bad position . . . actually, it would put me in a bad position. If I made a big appeal to you and you said no, it would leave us both feeling pretty bad at the end of what otherwise has been a mutually beneficial association. The only thing I could think of that would be worse would be if you agreed to stay out of pity. Then I'd feel guilty as long as you were around, knowing all the while that you could and should be going about your own business, and would be if I weren't so weak that I can't handle a simple task by myself."

The tears were running freely now, but I didn't bother trying to hide them. I just didn't care anymore.

"Mostly what you've done," I continued, "is to keep me company. I've felt scared and alone ever since I hit this dimension ... or would have if you hadn't been along. I'm so screaming afraid of making a mistake that I'd probably freeze up and do nothing unless I had somebody in tow to applaud when I did right and to carp at me when I did wrong . . . just so I'd know the difference. That's how insecure I am ... I don't even trust my own judgment as to whether I'm right or not in what I do! The trouble is, I haven't been doing so well in the friendship department lately. Aahz walked out on me, the M.Y.T.H. team thinks I've deserted them . . . heck, I even managed to offend J.R. by trying to say thanks with my wallet instead of my mouth."

It occurred to me I was starting to ramble. Making a feeble pass at my tear-streaked face with my sleeve, I forced a smile.

Robert Asprin

136

"Anyway, I can't see imposing on you, either as a friend or a business associate, just to hold my hand in troubled times. That doesn't mean I'm not grateful for what you've done or that I'm trying to get rid of you. I'd appreciate it if you stuck around but I don't think I have any right to ask you to."

Having run out of things to say, I finished with a half-hearted shrug. Strangely enough, after bearing my soul and clearing my mind of the things which had been troubling me, I felt worlds better.

"Are you through?"

Kalvin was still hovering patiently with his arms folded. Perhaps it was my imagination, but there seemed to be a terse edge to his voice.

"I guess so. Sorry for running on like that."

"No problem. Just as long as I get my innings."

"Innings?"

"A figure of speech," he waved. "In this case, it means it's my turn to talk and your turn to listen. I've tried before, but it seems like every time I start, we get interrupted . . . or you get drunk."

I grimaced at the memory.

"I didn't mean to get drunk. It's just that I've never..."

"Hey! Remember? It's my turn," the Djin broke in. "I want to say . . . just a second."

He made a sweeping gesture with his hand and . . . grew!

Suddenly he was the same size I was.

"There, that's better!" he said, dusting his hands together. "It'll be a littler harder to overlook me now."

I was about to ask for a full accounting of his "meager" powers, but his last comment had stung me.

"I'm sorry, Calvin. I didn't mean to . . ."

"Save it!" he ordered, waving his hand. "Right now it's my turn. There'll be lots of time later for you to wallow in

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 137

guilt. If not, I'm sure you'll make the time."

That had a nasty sound to it, but I subsided and gestured for him to continue.

"Okay," he said, "first, last, and in between, you're wrong, Skeeve. It's hard for me to believe such a right guy can be so wrong."

It occurred to me that I had already admitted my confidence in my perception of right and wrong was at an all time low. I didn't verbalize it, though. Calvin had said he wanted a chance to have his say, and I was going to do my best to not interrupt. I owed him that much.

"Ever since we met, you've been talking about right and wrong as if they were absolutes. According to you, things are either right or they're wrong . . . period. 'Was Aahz right to leave?' . . . Are you wrong to try to bring him back? . . . Well, my young friend, life isn't that simple. Not only are you old enough to know that, you'd better learn it before you drive yourself and everyone around you absolutely crazy!"

He began to float back and forth in the air in front of me with his hands clasped behind his back. I supposed it was his equivalent of pacing.

"It's possible for you, or anyone else to not be right and still not be wrong, just as you can be right from a business standpoint, but wrong from a humanitarian viewpoint. The

worlds are complex, and people are a hopeless tangle of contradictions. Conditions change not only from situation to situation and person to person, but from moment to moment as well. Trying to kid yourself that there's some master key to what's right and wrong is ridiculous . . . worse than that, it's dangerous, because you'll always end up feeling incompetent and inadequate when it eludes you."

Even though I was having trouble grasping what he was saying, that last part rang a bell. It described with uncom-

138 Robert Asprin

fortable accuracy how I felt about myself more often than not! I tried to listen more closely.

"You've got to accept that life is complicated and often frustrating. What's right for you may not be right for Aahz. There are even times when there is no right answer . . . just the least objectionable of several bad choices. Recognize that, then don't waste time and energy wondering why it is or railing that it's unfair . . . accept it."

"I ... I'll try," I said "but it's not easy."

"Of course it's not easy!" the Djin shot back. "Who ever said it was easy? Nothing's easy. Sometimes it's less difficult than at other times, but it's never easy. Part of your problem is that you keep thinking things should be easy, so you assume the easy way is the right way. Case in point:

You knew it would be hard to ask me to stay on after I had fulfilled the contract, so you decided the right thing to do was not to ask . . . ignoring how hard it would be for you to keep hunting for Aahz without me."

"But if it would be easier for me if you stayed ..."

"That's right. It's a contradiction," Calvin grinned. "Confusing, isn't it? Forget right and wrong for a while. What do you want?"

That one was easy.

"I'd like you to stay and help me look for Aahz," I said firmly.

The Djin smiled and nodded.

"Not a chance," he replied.

"What?"

"Did I stutter? I said ..."

"I know what you said!" I cut him off. "It's just that you said ... I mean before you said ..."

"Oh, there's no problem in your asking me ... or in your terms. I'm just not going to stay."

By now my head was spinning with confusion, but I tried

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 139

to maintain what little poise I had left.

"... But I thought... Oh, well. I guess I was mistaken."

"No you weren't. If you had asked me in the first place, I would have stayed.

"Then why . . ." I began, but the Djin waved me into silence.

"I'm sorry, Skeeve. I shouldn't tease you with head games at a time like this. What changed my mind was something you said while you were explaining why you didn't ask. You said you were scared and insecure, which is only sane, all things considered. But then you added something about how you were afraid to trust your own judgment and therefore needed someone else along to tell you whether you were right or not."
He paused and shook his head.

"I can't go along with that. I realized then that if I stayed, I'd fall into the same trap all your other colleagues have . . . of inadvertently doing your thinking for you when we express our own opinions. The sad thing is that we aren't, really. You decide yourself what advice you do and don't

listen to. The trouble is, you only remember when you go against advice and it goes wrong . . . like when you got drunk tonight. Any correct judgment calls you assume were made by your 'advisors.' Well, you've convinced me that you're a right guy, Skeeve. Now all you have to do is convince yourself. That's why I'm going to head on back to Djinger and let you work this problem out on your own. Right or wrong, there'll be no one to take the credit or share

the blame. It's all yours. I'm betting your solution will be right."

He held out his hand. I took it and carefully shook hands with this person who had been so much help to me.

"I ... well, thanks, Calvin. You've given me a lot to think about."

140

Robert Asprin

"It's been a real pleasure, Skeeve . . . really. Good luck in finding our friend. Oh, say ..."

He dug something out of his waistband and placed it in my hand. As he released it, it grew into a full-sized business card.

"That's my address on Djinger. Stay in touch . . . even if it's just to let me know how this whole thing turns out."

"I will," I promised. "Take care of yourself, Calvin . . . and thanks again!"

"Oh, and one more thing . . . about your having problems with your friends? Forget trying to be strong. Your real strength is in being a warm, caring person. When you try to be strong, it comes across as being cold and insensitive. Think about it."

He gave one last wave, folded his arms, and faded from view.

I stared at the empty space for a few moments, then

started the walk back to my hotel alone. I knew where it was . . . what I didn't know was where Djinger was.

Chapter Fifteen:

"Easy credit terms available ..."

—SATAN

"I HEAR YOU got jumped last night."

I paused in mid-move of easing myself into the cab's back seat to give the cabbie a long stare.

"... And good morning to you, too, Edvick," I said drily. "Yes, thank you, I slept very well."

My sarcasm was not lost on the driver ... a fact for which I was secretly grateful. Sometimes I have cause to wonder about my powers of communication.

"Hey! Nothing personal. It's just that people talk, ya know?"

"No, I don't . . . but I'm learning."

It seemed that however large and populated Perv appeared to be, there was a thriving network of gossip lurking just out of sight.

I had come down early, hoping to have a chance to talk with J.R., but between my room and the front door I had been stopped by two bellhops and the desk clerk, all of whom knew that I had been in a fight the night before. Of

Robert Asprin

142

course, they each expressed their sympathies ... in varying

degrees. As I recall, the desk clerk's sympathy went something like "You're, welcome to use the hotel safe for your valuables, sir ... but we can't accept responsibility for any

losses."

Terrific!!

I had rapidly discovered that I wasn't wild about the idea of my escapade being discussed by the general populace. Especially not since it ended with a session with the police.

Even though he had noted my displeasure at discussing the prior night's incident, Edvick seemed determined not to let the subject die as we started on our way.

"I told you you should have gotten a bodyguard," he lectured. "Carrying that kind of cash around is just askin'

for trouble."

"Funny, the police said the same thing . . . about the

cash, I mean."

"Well they're right... for a change. Things are dangerous enough around here without drawing unnecessary attention to yourself."

I leaned back in the seat and closed my eyes. I hadn't slept well, but the brief time I had spent in a horizontal position had allowed my muscles to tighten, and I ached all

over.

"So, I discovered," I said. "Oh well, it's over now. Besides, I didn't do such a bad job of taking care of myself."

"The way I heard it, someone showed up to help bail you out," Edvick pointed out bluntly, "and even then it was touch and go. Don't kid yourself about it being over, though. You'd just better hope your luck holds the next

time."

Suddenly, my aching muscles were no longer the main

claim to my attention.

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 143

"Next time?" I said, sitting up straight. "What next time?"

"I don't want to sound pessimistic," the cabbie shrugged, "but I figure it's a given. Those guys you messed up are going to be back on the street today, and will probably devote a certain amount of their time and energy trying to find you for a rematch."

"You think so?"

"Then again, even if I'm wrong, the word is out that you're carrying a good sized wad around with you. That's going to make you fair game for every cheap hoodlum looking to pick up some quick cash."

I hadn't stopped to consider, it, but what Edvick was saying made sense. All I needed to make my mission more difficult was to have to be watching my back constantly at the same time!

"I'm sorry, what was that again?" I said, trying to concentrate on what the driver was saying.

"Huh? Oh, I was just sayin' again that what you should really do is hire a bodyguard . . . same as I've been sayin' right along."

He had been saying that all along, and Calvin had agreed with him. I had poo-pooed the idea originally, but now I was forced to reexamine my stance on the matter.

"Nnnno," I said, finally, talking to myself. "I can't do it."

"Why not?" Edvick chimed in, adding his two cents to the argument drawing to a close in my mind.

"Well, the most overpowering reason is that I can't afford one."

The cabbie snorted.

"You've got to be kidding me. With the money you've got?"

144 Robert Asprin

"It may seem like a lot, but nearly all of it is already committed to you and the hotel."

The cab swerved dangerously as Edvick turned in his seat to stare at me.

"You mean that's all the money you have? You're carrying your whole bankroll?"

As upset as I was, that thought made me laugh.

"Not hardly," I said. "The trouble is that most of my money is back on Deva. I only brought some of it along for pocket expenses. Unfortunately I badly underestimated what the prices would be like here, so I have to keep an eye on my expenses."

"Oh, that's no problem," the cabbie retorted, turning his attention to the road again. "Just open a line of credit here."

"Do what?"

"Talk to a bank and borrow what you need against your assets. That's how I came up with the money for this cab . . . not to mention my other ventures. Sheese! If everybody tried to operate on a cash basis, it would ruin the dimension's economy!"

"I don't know," I hesitated. "Nobody on this dimension really knows me. Do you really think a bank would be willing to trust me with a loan?"

"There's only one way to find out," Edvick shrugged. "Tell you what . . . there's a branch of my bank not far from here. Why don't you pop in and talk to them. You

might be surprised."

The bank itself was not particularly imposing; a medium-sized storefront with a row of teller windows and a few scattered desks. Some doors in the back wall presumably led to offices and the vault, but they were painted assorted bright colors and in themselves did not appear particularly ominous. Still, I realized I felt no small degree of nervous-

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 145

ness as I surveyed the interior. There were small clues here and there which bespoke a seriousness which belied the studied casualness of the decor. Little things, like the machines mounted high in the corners which constantly swept the room as if monitoring the movements of both tellers and customers. The tellers themselves were secure behind high panes of innocent-looking glass, doing business through an ingenious slot and drawer arrangement at each station. An observant person such as myself, however, could not help but notice that if the degree of distortion were any indication, the glass was much thicker than it might first appear. There were also armed guards scattered around the room draped with an array of weapons which did not look at all ceremonial or decorative. There was a great deal of money here, and an equally great effort was being made to be sure no one decided to simply help themselves to the surplus.

I had a hunch the kind of business I had in mind would not be handled over the counter by a teller, and, sure enough when I inquired, I was ushered immediately through one of

- the brightly painted doors into a private office.

The individual facing me across the desk rose and extended a hand in greeting as I entered. He was impeccably dressed in a business suit of what could only be called, a conservative cut. . . particularly for a Pervect, and he oozed a sincere warmth that bordered on oily. Green scales and yellow eyes notwithstanding, he reminded me of Grimble, the Chancellor of the Exchequer I had feuded with back at Possiltum. I wondered briefly if this was common with professional money guardians, everywhere . . . maybe it was something in a ledger paper. If so, it boded ill for my dealing today . . . Grimble and I never really got along.

"Come in, come in," the individual purred. "Please, have a seat Mister . . . ?"

146 Robert Asprin

"Skeeve," I said, sinking into the indicated chair. "And it's just 'Skeeve,' not Mr. Skeeve."

I had never been wild about the formality of "Mister" title, and after having it hissed at me by the police the night before, I was developing a positive aversion to it.

"Of course, of course," he nodded, reseating himself. "My name is Malcolm."

Perhaps it was his similarity to Grimble, but I was finding his habit of repeating himself to be a growing annoyance. I reminded myself that I was trying to court his favor and made an effort to shake the feeling off.

"... And how can we be of service to you today?"

"Well, Malcolm, I'm a businessman visiting here on Perv," I said, aware as I spoke that I was unconsciously falling into a formal speech pattern. "My expenses have been running a bit higher than I anticipated, and frankly my ready cash supply is lower than I find comfortable. Someone suggested that I might open a line of credit with your bank, so I stopped in to see if there was any possibility we might work something out."

"I see."

He ran his eyes over me, and much of the warmth went out of the room. I was suddenly acutely aware of how I was dressed.

After overdressing for my interview with the Butterfly, I had decided to stick with my normal, comfortable, informal appearance. I had anticipated that bankers would be more conservative than financiers, and that a bank would probably be equipped to detect disguise spells, so it would be wisest if I was as open and honest as possible. Courtesy of a crash

course by Bunny, my administrative assistant, on how to dress, my wardrobe was nothing to be embarrassed about, but I probably didn't look like most of the businessmen Malcolm was used to dealing with. His visual assessment

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 147

of me reminded me of the once-over I would get when encountering a policeman . . . only more so. I had a feeling the banker could tell me how much money I had in my pockets down to the loose change.

"What line of work did you say you were in. Mister Skeeve?"

I noted that the "Mister" had reappeared, but wasn't up to arguing over it.

"I'm a magician . . . Well, actually I'm the president of an association of magicians ... a corporation."

I managed to stop there before I started babbling. I've noticed a tendency in myself to run on when I'm nervous.

"... And the name of your corporation?"

"Um . . . M.Y.T.H. Inc."

He jotted the information down on a small notepad.

"Your home offices are on Klah?"

"No. We operate out of Deva ... At the Bazaar."

He glanced up at me with his eyebrows raised, then caught himself and regained his composure.

"Would you happen to know what bank you deal with on Deva?"

"Bank? I mean, not really. Aahz and Bunny . . . our financial section usually handles that end of the business."

Any hope I had of a credit line went out the window. I didn't know for sure we did any banking. Aahz was a stickler for keeping our funds readily available. I couldn't imagine

a bank wanting to deal with someone who didn't trust banks, or to take my word for what our cash holdings were . . . even if I knew what they were.

The banker was studying his notes.

"Of course you understand, we'll have to run a check on this."

I started to rise. At this point all I wanted was out of his office.

Robert Asprin

148

"Certainly," I said, trying to maintain a modicum of poise. "How long will that take, just so I'll know when to contact you again?"

Malcolm waved a casual hand at me as he turned to a keyboard at the side of his desk.

"Oh, it won't take any time at all. I'll just use the computer to take a quick peek. I should have an answer in a couple of seconds."

I couldn't make up my mind whether to be astonished or concerned. Astonished won out.

"... But my office is on Deva," I said, repeating myself unnecessarily.

"Quite right," the banker responded absently as he hammered busily on the keys. "Fortunately, computers and cats can see and work right through dimensional barriers. The trick is to get them to do it when you want them to instead of when they feel like it."

Of the assorted thoughts which whirled in my mind at this news, only one stood out.

"Do the police have computers?"

"Not of this quality or capacity." He favored me with a smug, tight-lipped smile. "Civil services don't have access to the same financial resources that banks do ... Ah! Here we go."

He leaned forward and squinted at the computer's screen, which I couldn't see from where I sat. I wondered if it was coincidence that the view was blocked from the visitor's chair, then decided it was a silly question.

"Impressive. Very impressive indeed." He shot a glance at me. "Might I ask who handles your portfolio?"

"My portfolio? I'm not an artist. I'm a magician . . . like I told you."

"An artist. That's a good one, Skeeve . . . you don't mind if I call you Skeeve, do you?" The banker laughed as

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 149

if we shared a mutual joke. "I meant your portfolio of stocks and investments."

His original warmth had returned . . . and then some. Whatever he had seen on the screen had definitely improved his opinion of me.

"Oh. That would be Bunny. She's my administrative assistant."

"I hope you pay her well. Otherwise some other outfit might be tempted to swoop down and hire her away from you."

From his tone, I could make a pretty good guess as to which outfit might be interested in doing just that.

"Among other things, she holds stock in our operation." I said pointedly.

"Of course, of course. Just a thought. Well Mis . . . Skeeve, I'm sure we can provide you with adequate financial support during your stay on Perv. What's more I hope you'll keep us in mind should you ever want to open an office

here and need to open a local account."

Pervects have an exceptional number of teeth, and Malcolm seemed determined to show all of his to me without missing a syllable. I was starting to get impressed myself. I had known our operation was doing well, but had never stopped to assess exactly how well. If the banker's reaction was an accurate gauge, however, we must have been doing very well indeed!

"If you'll give me just a moment here, Skeeve," he said, lunging out of his seat and heading for the door, "I'll get the staff started while we fill out the necessary paperwork. We should be able to have some imprinted checks and one of our special, solid gold credit cards ready for you before you leave."

"Hold it, Malcolm!"

Things were suddenly starting to move uncomfortably

150 Robert Asprin

fast, and I wanted a bit of clarification before they went much further.

The banker stopped as if he had hit the end of an invisible leash.

"Yes?"

"As you can probably tell, I'm not as at home with financial terms as I should be. Would you mind defining 'adequate financial support' to me ... in layman's terms?"

The smile vanished as he licked his lips nervously.

"Well," he said, "we should be able to cover your day-to-day needs, but if you were to require substantial backing ... say, over seven figures, we'd probably appreciate a day's warning."

Seven figures! He was saying the bank was ready to supply me with up to ten million . . . more if I gave them warning. I resolved that when I got back to the office, I was going to have Bunny go over our exact financial condition with me!

Chapter Sixteen:

"You can judge the success of a man by his bodyguards!"

—PRINCE

EDVIK WAS VISIBLY impressed by my success with the bank. That was all right. I was impressed, too.

"Gee! A solid gold card! I've heard about those, but I've never really seen one before," he exclaimed as I proudly displayed my prize. "Not bad for a guy who didn't think the bankers would want to even talk to him."

"It's my first time to deal with a bank," I said loftily. "To be honest with you, I didn't even know about credit cards until Malcolm explained them to me."

A cloud passed over the cabbie's face.

"You've never had a credit card before? Well, watch your step is all I can say. They can be a dangerous habit, and if you get behind, bankers can be worse than Deveels to deal with."

"Worse than Deveels?"

I didn't like the sound of that. Deveels were a devil I knew ... if you'll pardon the pun. Now I was starting to wonder if I should have asked a few more questions before

151

Robert Asprin

152

accepting the bank's services.

"Don't worry about it," Edvick said, giving my back a hearty slap. "With your money, you can't go wrong. Now then, let's see about finding you a bodyguard."

"Urn ... excuse me, but something just occurred to me."

"What's that?"

"Well, now that I have checks and a credit card, I don't have to carry a lot of cash around."

"Yeah. So?"

"So if I'm not carrying a lot of cash, what do I need a bodyguard for?" The cabbie rubbed his chin thoughtfully before answering.

"First of all, just because you and I and the bank know you aren't carrying a big wad anymore doesn't mean the muggers know it."

"Good point. I ..."

"Then again, there's the gang that might still be after you for roughing them up last night ..."

"Okay. Why don't we ..."

"... And there's still an ax murderer loose somewhere around your hotel ..."

"Enough! I get the picture! Let's go find a bodyguard."

It occurred to me that if I listened to Edvick long enough, I'd either want more than one bodyguard or decide not to set foot outside my room at all.

"Good," my guide declared, rubbing his hands together as the cab commenced its now familiar swerving. "I think I know just the person."

Settling back in my seat, it occurred to me that Edvick would probably get a kickback from this bodyguard he was lining me up with. That would explain his enthusiasm to get us together. I banished the thought as a needless suspicion.

The alert reader may have noticed that with the exception

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 153

of a vague reference to the fat lady in the department store, I have said absolutely nothing about female Perverts. There's a reason for that. Frankly, they intimidate me.

Now don't get me wrong, male Perverts are quite fearsome, as can be ascertained by my accounts of my friend and partner, Aahz. On the whole, they are big and muscular and would just as soon break you in two as look at you. Still, they possess a certain rough and tumble sense of humor, and are not above blustering a bit. All in all, they remind me of a certain type of lizard: the kind that puffs itself up and hisses when it's threatened ... it can give a nasty bite, but it would probably prefer you to back down.

Female Perverts seem to be cut from a whole different bolt of cloth. Their eyes are narrower and set further back on the head, making them look more . . . well, reptilian. They never smile or laugh, and they don't ever bluff. In short, they look and act more dangerous than their male counterparts.

Some of you may wonder why I am choosing this point of the narrative to expound on the subject of female Perverts. The rest of you have already figured it out. For the former, let it suffice to say that the bodyguard Edvick introduced me to was a female.

We found her in a bar, a lounge, actually, which the cabbie informed me she used as an office between jobs. She didn't move or blink as we approached her table, which I came to realize meant she had been watching us from the moment we walked through the door. Edvick slid into a vacant chair at her table without invitation and motioned me into another.

"This is Skeeve ... the Klahd I was telling you about," he announced, then fumed to me. "Skeeve, this here's the bodyguard I'd recommend for you. There may be some better at doing what she does, but if so, I don't know 'em.

154 Robert Asprin

For protection against physical or magikal attacks, she's top of the line."

With that, he leaned back in his chair, letting us size each other up like two predators meeting over a fresh kill.

Female Pervects seem to come in two body types. I'll tell you about the other type later, but the kind the bodyguard was was the lean, wiry variety. Even sitting down I could tell she was tall, taller than me, anyway. Where Pervish males, as typified by Aahz, were generally built like walls, she was as slender and supple as a whip ... a rapier to their ax. I've mentioned that the men reminded me of lizards, well, she made me think of a poisonous snake . . . graceful and beautiful without being attractive. She was wearing a dark waist-length cape that was almost a poncho except it was open in front, revealing a form-fitting jumpsuit underneath. Even a violence know-nothing like me could tell the cape would be perfect for producing and vanishing weapons with unsettling ease. Overall, she impressed me as being the most deadly woman I had ever met . . . realizing I haven't met that many green, bald, scaly women.

"I hear you drink," she said bluntly, breaking the silence.

"Not well... and, after last night, not often," I returned.

That earned me a curt nod.

"Good. A girl's got to watch her reputation."

It never even occurred to me that she might be referring to her way with me. She was stating quite simply that if anything happened to me while she was on guard, her professional status would suffer. What's more, she didn't want to risk that reputation on a fool. As one inclined to talk too much, I was impressed with how much she could communicate with so few words.

"Ever work with a bodyguard before?"

"Yes. I have two back on Deva. They were . . . busy

elsewhere, so I came to Perv alone."

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 155

There was a flicker in her eye and a slight tightening of her lips, which was as close as she came to expressing her opinion of bodyguards who let their principal come to Perv unescorted, then she continued with the subject at hand.

"Good. That means you already know the basic drill. The way I work, I go where you go and sleep where you sleep. I go through any door ahead of you unless I'm covering your exit, and I taste everything before you put it in your mouth. Clear?"

"I don't think you have to worry about poison on this one," Edvick said, "just muggers and ..."

She cut him off with a glance.

"If he pays for the full treatment, he gets the full treatment. Clear, Skeeve?"

"On covering my exit . . . how do we handle it if we don't know what's on the other side of the door?"

I was thinking of how I got mousetrapped sneaking out of the last bar I was in.

"I cover you as far as the door, then you stand beside me while I check the exit. If there's trouble, I'll tell you which way to move . . . in or out."

"Clear."

"Any other questions?"

"Just if you'll be available for anywhere from a few days to a week, "I said. "If so, I'd like to retain your services."

"Don't you want to know what I charge?"

I shrugged. "Why? I'm impressed. I'm ready to pay whatever it costs." I paused, then smiled. "Besides, you don't strike me as the type to either up the cost for a well-heeled client or to haggle over prices."

That earned me a brief, flat stare.

"I'll take the job," she said finally. "And you're right. I don't haggle or pad the bill. Those are two of my more endearing traits."

Robert Asprin

156

I wasn't sure if that last was intended as a joke or not, but decided it was as close as she was apt to get, and chuckled appreciatively.

"One more thing . . . what's your name?"

"Pookanthimbusille."

"Excuse me?" I blinked.

She gave a small shrug.

"Just call me Pookie. It's easier."

"Pookie?"

At first it struck me as a ridiculously silly name for her. Then I ran my eyes over her again, and allowed as how she could be called anything she wanted to be called. If anyone laughed, it wouldn't be me.

"Pookie it is then . . . just checking to be sure I had the pronunciation right. Shall we go?"

I had Edvick drive us back to the hotel. While I hadn't gotten a lot accomplished today toward finding Aahz, what I had done had left me feeling a little drained. Besides, there was another little matter I wanted to take care of.

For a change, luck seemed to be with me. As the cab pulled up in front of the hotel I could see J.R. at his usual place by the entrance. I figured that was fortunate since I wouldn't have known where to find him otherwise. I caught his eye through the window and waved him over. Unfortunately, Pookie didn't see me wave. All she saw was a street

vendor moving to intercept us as we emerged from the cab.

"Pookie! NO!"

I was barely in time.

My bodyguard had a sinister looking weapon out and was drawing a bead on J.R. almost before I could say anything. At the sound of my warning, however, all movement froze and she shot me a vaguely quizzical look.

"It's all right," I said hastily. "He's a friend of mine. He's coming over because I waved at him as we pulled up."

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 157

The weapon vanished as she gave the street vendor a hard, appraising look.

"Interesting friends you have."

"He was the one who saved my bacon in last night's encounter with the local wildlife. Hang on a few ... I've got a little business to transact with him."

Pookie nodded and began scanning the immediate area with a watchful eye as I turned to J.R.

"Interesting friends you've got," he said, staring at my bodyguard.

"Funny, she was just saying the same thing about you. She's my new bodyguard. After last night, it seemed like a good idea. Incidentally, sorry about that welcome. I forgot to warn her you were coming over."

"No problem. What's up?"

"I paid a little visit to the bank today," I explained, holding up my checkbook. "Now I've got the funding for that little venture of ours."

"Hey! That's terrific! That's all I need to start making us some real money."

"Not so fast," I cautioned. "Let's settle the details and

paper this thing first."

. "What for? You've already said you trust me and I sure trust you."

"It's cleaner this way. Contracts are the best way to be sure we're both hearing the same thing in this arrangement ... not to mention it documents the split at the beginning instead of waiting until we're arguing over a pile of profits."

He was still a bit-reluctant, but I managed to convince him and we scribbled down the details in duplicate on some pieces of paper he produced from one of his many pockets. I say 'we' because I couldn't read or write Pervish, and he was equally ignorant of Klahdish, so we each had to make two copies of the agreement in our own language. To say

Robert Asprin

158

the least, I didn't drive a particularly hard bargain . . . 25% of the profits after expenses. I figured he would be doing all of the work, so he should get the bulk of the reward. All I was doing was funding him. I even put in a clause where he could buy out-my share if things went well. When it was done, we each signed all the copies and shook hands.

'Thanks, Skeeve," the vendor beamed, stuffing one copy of each translation into a pocket. "Believe me, this is a sure money maker."

"Any idea yet where your storefront is going to be?"

"No. Remember I said I was going to start out small? Well, I figure to start by supplying the other street vendors, then using the profits from that to lease and stock the storefront. It'll probably be three weeks to a month before I'm ready for that move."

A month wasn't too bad for start-up time. I admired his industry and confidence.

"Well, good luck!" I said sincerely. "Be sure to leave word for me at the bank when you have a permanent address. I'll be in touch."

He gathered his wares and headed off down the street as I joined Pookie once more.

"I'd like to apologize for that mix-up," I said. "I should have let you know he was coming over."

"I figured he was okay," the bodyguard replied, still watching the street. "He didn't move like a mugger. It just seemed like a good time for a little demonstration, so I did my thing."

"You really didn't have to put on a demonstration for me. I don't have any doubts about your abilities."

Pookie glanced at me.

"Not for you," she corrected. "For them . . . the folks watching here on the street. It was my way of announcing

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 159

that you're covered now and they should keep their distance."

That possibility had never occurred to me.

"Oh," I said. "Well, I guess I should stick with my business and let you handle yours."

"Agreed," she nodded, "though I'll admit the way you do business puzzles me a bit. Sorry, but I couldn't help but overhear your dealings there."

"What? You mean my insisting on a contract? The reason I pushed for it there and not for our deal is that it was a long-term investment as opposed to a straight-forward purchase of services."

"That isn't it."

"What is it then .

little more generous
is ..."

the contract terms? Maybe I was a
than I had to be, but the situation

I broke off as I realized the bodyguard was staring hard
at me.

"What I meant," she said flatly, "was that before I put
money into a business, I'd want to know what it was."

"You heard him. It's a wholesale/dealer operation."

"Yes, but what's he selling?"

I didn't answer that one because I didn't have an answer.
In my eagerness to do J.R. a good turn, I had completely
forgotten to ask what kind of business he was starting!

Chapter Seventeen:

"Bibbity . . . bobbity ..."

—S. STRANGE, M.D.

BRIGHT AND EARLY the next morning, I launched into the
next phase of my search for Aahz. The Butterfly had con-
vinced me it was unlikely I'd find him traveling in financial
circles. That left the magicians.

As Edvick had warned, the sheer volume of Pervects in
the magik business made the task seem almost impossible.
It was my last idea, though, so I had to give it a try and
hope I got lucky. By the time I had visited half a dozen or
so operations, however, I was nearly ready to admit I was
licked.

The real problem facing me was that the market glut had
made the magicians extremely competitive. No one was
willing to talk about any other magicians, or even acknowl-
edge their existence. What I got was high-powered sales
pitches and lectures on "the layman's need for magikal
assistance in his day-to-day life". Once I admitted I was in
the business myself, I either got offered a partnership or
was accused of spying and thrown out of the office. (Well,

162 Robert Asprin

a couple of them threatened, but thanks to Pookie's presence I got to walk out with dignity.) What I didn't get was any leads or information about Aahz.

Despite my growing despair of succeeding with my quest, it was interesting to view magikal hype as an outsider. Calvin had admonished me for being too insecure and downplaying my abilities. What I learned that day after sitting through several rounds of bragging in close succession, was that the louder someone blew his own horn, the less impressed the listener, in this case, me, was apt to be. I thought of the quiet confidence exuded by people such as the Butterfly and Pookie, and decided that, in general, that was a much wiser way to conduct oneself in business situations . . . or social ones for that matter. As far as I could tell, the goal was not to impress people, but rather to be impressive. In line with that, I resolved to not only discourage the "Mister Skeeve" title, but to also drop "The Great Skeeve" hype. I had never really believed it anyway. What I was was "Skeeve," and people could either be impressed or not by what I was, not by what I called myself.

If this seems like a sudden bolt from the blue to you, it isn't. The area of Perv I was covering was large enough that I was spending considerable time riding back and forth in Edvick's taxi, and it gave me lots of time to think and reflect on what I was seeing and hearing. What's more, the advice given me by the Butterfly and Calvin, not to mention the questions I had to ask myself about trying to fetch Aahz, had given me cause to reexamine my own attitudes and priorities, so I had plenty to think about.

Dealing with what seemed to be an endless parade of people who had never heard of me before, much less met me, gave me a unique chance to observe how people interacted. More and more I found myself reflecting on how I reacted to them and they reacted to me.

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 163

Pervects had a reputation for being nasty and vicious, not

to mention arrogant. There was also ample evidence that they could be more than slightly rude. Still, I had also encountered individuals who had been helpful and gentle, such as the Butterfly, and even those like J.R. who would risk themselves physically for a near stranger who was in trouble. Clearly there was danger in stereotyping people, though it was interesting to observe the behavior patterns which had developed to deal with a crowded, competitive environment. Even more interesting was noting those who seemed immune to the environmental pressure that ruled the others about them.

The more I thought about it, the more I began to see pieces of myself reflected in the Pervish behavior. Calvin had commented on my actively trying to be strong ... of being cold and ruthless in an effort to hide my own feared weaknesses. Was it all that different with the blustering Pervects who would rather shout than admit they might be wrong? Were my own feelings of insecurity and inadequacy making me insensitive and closed to the very people who could help me?

The thought was enough to inspire me to voice my frustrations to Edvick and ask if he had any thoughts as to alternate methods of searching the magikal community.

"I was just thinking about that, Skeeve," he said over his shoulder, "but I didn't figure it was my place to say anything unless you asked."

"Well, I'm asking. After all, there's no shame in admitting you know this dimension better than I do."

That last was said as much to myself as to Edvick, but the cabbie accepted it in stride.

"Too true. Well, what I was thinking was that instead of working to get magicians to talk about potential competitors, maybe you should try checking the schools."

164 Robert Asprin

"The schools?"

"Sure. You know, the places that teach these spell-slingers their trade. They should have some kind of records showing who's learned what. What's more, they should be willing to share them since you're not a competitor."

That made sense, but it seemed almost too easy.

"Even if that's true, do you think they would bother to keep current addresses on their old students?"

"Are you kidding?" the cabbie laughed. "How else could the old Alma Mater be able to solicit donations from their alumni? This may not be Deva, but do you think a Pervect would lose track of a revenue source?"

I felt my hope being renewed as he spoke.

"That's a great idea, Edvick! How many magik schools are there, anyway?"

"Not more than a dozen or so of any note. Nowhere near the number of businesses. If I were you, I'd start with the biggest and work your way down."

"Then that's what we'll do. Take me to the top Of the list and don't spare the lizards... and Edvick? Thanks."

The grounds of the Magikal Institute of Perv (MIP) occupied an entire city block. I say grounds because much of it was well trimmed lawns and bushes, a marked contrast to the closely packed buildings and alleys that seemed to compose the majority of Perv. Stately old buildings of brick or stone were scattered here and there, apparently oblivious to the bustling metropolis that screeched and honked scant yards from their tranquility. Looking at them, one could almost read their stoic thoughts: that if they ignored it long enough, maybe the rest of the world would go away.

There was an iron fence surrounding the school in token protection from intrusion, but the gate stood wide open. I peered out the windows of the cab in curiosity as we drove

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 165

up to what Edvick said was the administration building,

hoping to catch a glimpse of the students practicing their lessons, but was disappointed. The people I saw were much more interested in being young—skylarking and flirting with each other—than in demonstrating their learning to a casual visitor. I did, however, notice there were more than a few students from off-dimension in their number. Either the school was much more tolerant of off-worlders than the rest of the dimension, or they simply weren't as picky about who they accepted money from. I never did get a chance to find out which it really was.

After a few inquiries, I was shown into the office of the head record keeper. That individual listened carefully to my story, though he was so still and outwardly calm that I found myself fighting a temptation to make a face at him in mid-sentence just to see if he was really paying attention. I have a hunch I would not do well in a formal educational environment.

"I see," he said, once I had ground to a halt. "Well, your request seems reasonable. Aahz . . . Aahz ... I don't recall the name off-hand, but it does ring some sort of a bell. Oh well, we can check it easily enough. GRETТА!?"

In response to his call, a young female Pervect appeared in the office door. She glanced quickly at Pookie who was leaning against the wall behind me, but except for that ignored my bodyguard as completely as the record keeper had.

"Yes sir?"

"Gretta, this is Mr. Skeeve. He's trying to locate someone who might have been a student here. I'd like you to help him locate the appropriate file in the archives . . . if it exists. Mr. Skeeve, this is Gretta. She's one of the apprentices here who helps us ... is something wrong?"

166 Robert Asprin

I had suddenly drawn back the hand I had been extending to shake hands with Gretta, and the record keeper had noted the move.

"Oh, nothing . . . really," I said embarrassed. I quickly reached out and shook the offered hand. "It's a ... bad habit I learned from Aahz. I really should break it. You were saying?"

The record keeper ignored my efforts to cover the social gaff.

"What bad habit is that?"

"It's silly, but ... Well, Aahz, back when he was my teacher, wouldn't shake hands with me once I became his apprentice. When we first met and after we became partners it was okay, but not while I was his student. I don't shake hands with apprentices he used to say ... only louder. I hadn't realized I had picked it up until just now. Sorry, Gretta. Nothing personal."

"Of course . . . Aahzmandius!"

The record keeper seemed suddenly excited.

"Excuse me?" I said, puzzled.

"Gretta, this won't require a file search after all. Bring me the file on Aahzmandius ... it will be in the dropout file ... three or four centuries back if I recall correctly."

Once the apprentice had scampered off, the record keeper returned his attention to me once more.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Skeeve. I just managed to recall the individual you're looking for. Refusing to shake hands with apprentices was the tipoff. It was one of his least objectionable quirks. Aahzmandius! After all these years I can still remember him."

After searching so long I was reluctant to believe my luck.

"Are you sure we're talking about the same person? Aahz?"

"Oh my, yes. That's why the name rang a bell. Aahz

was the nickname Aahzmandius would use when he was exercising his dubious love of practical jokes ... or doing anything else he didn't want reflected on his permanent record, for that matter. There was a time when that name would strike terror into the hearts of any under-classman on campus."

"I take it he wasn't a particularly good student?" I said, trying to hide my grin.

"Oh, on the contrary, he was one of the brightest students we've ever had here. That's much of why the faculty and administration were willing to overlook the . . . um, less social aspects of his character. He was at the head of his class while he was here, and everyone assumed a bright future for him. I'm not sure he was aware of it, but long before he was slated to graduate, there was a raging debate going on about him among the faculty. One side felt that every effort should be made to secure him a position with the institute as an instructor after he graduated. The other felt that with his arrogant distaste for inferiors, placing him in constant contact with students would . . . well, let's just say they felt his temperament would be better suited to private practice, and the school could benefit best by simply accepting his financial contributions as an alumni . . . preferably mailed from far away."

I was enthralled by this new insight into Aahz's background. However, I could not help but note there was something that didn't seem to fit with the record keeper's oration.

"Excuse me," I said, "but didn't I hear you tell Gretta to look in the dropout file for Aahz's records? If he was doing so well, why didn't he graduate?"

The Pervect heaved a great sigh, a look of genuine pain on his face.

"His family lost their money in a series of bad investments. With his financial support cut off, he dropped out

168 Robert Asprin

of school . . . left quietly in the middle of a semester even though his tuition had been paid in full for the entire term.

We offered him a scholarship so that he could complete his education . . . there was even a special meeting held specifically to get the necessary approvals so he wouldn't be kept dangling until the scholarship board would normally convene. He wouldn't accept it, though. It's a shame, really. He had such potential."

"That doesn't sound like the Aahz I know," I frowned. "I've never known him to refuse money. Usually, he wouldn't even wait for it to be offered ... not nailing it down would be considered enough of an invitation for him to help himself. Did he give any reason for not accepting the scholarship?"

"No, but it was easy enough to understand at the time. His family had been quite well off, you see, and he had lorded his wealth over the less fortunate as much or more than he had harassed them with his superior abilities. I think he left school because he couldn't bear to face his old cronies, much less his old victims, in his new cash poor condition. Basically, he was too proud to be a scholarship student after having established himself as a campus aristocrat. Aahzmandius may not refuse money, but I think you'll find he has an aversion to charity ... or anything that might be construed as such."

It all made sense. The portrait he was painting of Aahz, or as he was known here, Aahzmandius, seemed to confirm the Butterfly's analysis of my old mentor's financial habits. If he had suffered from embarrassment and seen his plans for the future ruined because of careless money management, it stood to reason that he would respond by becoming ultra-conservative if not flat out miserly when it came to accumulating and protecting our cache of hard cash.

"Ah! Here we are."

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 169

I was pulled out of my musings by the record keeper's exclamation at Gretta's return. I felt my anticipation rise as he took the offered folder and began perusing its contents. For the first time since arriving on Perv, I was going to have a solid lead on how to find Aahz. Then I noticed he was frowning.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Skeeve," the record keeper said, glancing up from the folder. "It seems we don't have a current address for your associate. The note here says Traveling.' I guess that, realizing his financial situation, we haven't been as diligent about keeping track of him as we've been with our other alumni."

I fought against a wave of disappointment, unwilling to believe that after everything I had been through, this was going to turn out to be another dead end.

"Didn't he have a school or business or something? I met one of his apprentices once."

The Pervect shook his head.

"No. That we would have known about. He may have been willing to instruct a few close friends or relatives . . . that's not uncommon for someone who's studied here. But I think I can say for sure that he hasn't been doing any formal teaching here or on any other dimension. We would have heard, if for no other reason than his students would have contacted us to confirm his credentials."

Now that he mentioned it, I did recall that Rupert, the apprentice I had met, had specifically been introduced as Aahz's nephew. Overcome with a feeling of hopelessness, I almost missed what the record keeper said next.

"Speaking of relatives. We do have an address for his next of kin ... in this case, his mother. Perhaps if you spoke to her, you might find out his current whereabouts."

Chapter Eighteen:

" 'M' is for the many things she taught me..."

—OEDIPUS

THE SEARCH FOR the address the record keeper had given me led us onto some of the dimension's side streets which made up the residential areas. Though at first Perv seems to be composed entirely of businesses, there is also a thriving neighborhood community just a few steps off the main busi-

ness and transportation drags.

I'll admit to not being thrilled by the neighborhood Aahz's mother lived in once we found it. Not that it looked particularly rough or dirty ... at least no dirtier than the rest of the dimension. It's just that it was . . . well, shabby. The buildings and streets were so run-down that I found it depressing to think anyone, much less the mother of a friend of mine, would live there.

"I'll wait for you here on the street," Pookie announced as I emerged from the taxi.

I looked at her, surprised.

"Aren't you coming in?"

"I figure it's more important to guard your escape route,"

171

Robert Asprin

172

she said. "I don't think there's any danger inside, unless the place falls down when you knock on the door ... and I couldn't help there anyway. Why? Are you expecting more trouble than you can handle from one old lady?"

Since I didn't have a snappy retort for that, I proceeded up the porch steps to the door. There was a list of names with a row of buttons beside them. I found the name of Aahz's mother with no difficulty, and pressed the button next to it.

A few moments later, a voice suddenly rasped from the wall next to my elbow.

"Who is it?"

It only took a few seconds for me to figure out that it "was some kind of speaker system.

"It's . . . I'm a friend of your son, Aahz... Aahzmandius, that is. I was wondering if I might talk to you for a few

moments?"

There was a long pause before the reply came back.

"I suppose if you're already here I might as well talk to you. Come right up."

There was a sudden raucous buzzing at the door. I waited patiently, and in a few moments it stopped. I continued waiting.

"Are you still down there?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Why?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why didn't you open the door and come in when I buzzed you through?"

"Oh, is that what that was? I'm sorry, I didn't know. Could you . . . buzz me through again?"

"What's the matter, haven't you ever seen a remote lock before?"

I suppose it was meant as a rhetorical question, but my

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 173

annoyance at being embarrassed prompted me to answer.

"As a matter of fact, I haven't. I'm just visiting this dimension. We don't have anything like it back on Klah."

There was a long silence, long enough for me to wonder if it had been a mistake to admit I was from off-dimension. The buzzer went off, somehow catching me unaware again even though I had been expecting it.

This time, I managed to get the door open before the buzzing stopped, and stepped through into the vestibule. The lighting was dim, and got downright dark after I let the door shut. I started to open it again to get my bearings, but

pulled my hand back at the last minute. It might set off an alarm somewhere, and if there was one thing I didn't need right now it was more trouble.

Slowly my eyes adjusted to the shadowy dimness, and I could make out a narrow hall with an even narrower flight of stairs which vanished into the gloom above. "Come right up" she had said, so I took her literally and started up the stairs . . . hoping all the while I was right.

After ascending several flights, this hope was becoming fervent. There was no sign of habitation on any of the halls I passed, and the way the stairs creaked and groaned under me, I wasn't at all sure I wasn't heading into a condemned area of the building.

Just when I was about to yield to my fears and retreat to the ground floor, the stairs ended. The apartment I was looking for was right across the hall from where I stood, so I had little choice but to proceed. Raising my hand, I knocked gently, afraid that anything more violent might trigger a catastrophic chain reaction.

"Come in! It's open!"

Summoning my courage, I let myself in.

The place was both tiny and jammed with clutter. I had the impression one could reach out one's arms and touch

174 Robert Asprin

the opposing walls simultaneously. In fact, I had to fight against the impulse to do exactly that, as the walls and their contents appeared to be on the brink of caving in. I think it was then I discovered that I was mildly claustrophobic.

"So you're a friend of that no-account Aahzmandius. I knew he'd come to no good, but I never dreamed he'd sink so low as to hang around with a Klahd."

This last was uttered by what had to be Aahz's mother. . . it had to be because she was the only person in the room

besides myself! My eye had passed over her at first, she was so much a part of the apartment, but once she drew my attention, she seemed to dominate the entire environ . . . if not the whole dimension.

Remember when I said that Pookie was one of two types of females I had noted on Perv? Well, Aahz's mother was the other type. While Pookie was sleek and muscular in an almost serpentine way, the figure before me resembled nothing so much as a huge toad ... a green, scaly, reptilian toad. (I have since had it pointed out to me that toads are amphibians and not reptiles, but at the time that's what she made me think of.)

She was dressed in a baggy housecoat which made her seem even more bloated than she really was. The low, stuffed chair she was sitting in was almost obscured from view by her bulk, which seemed to swell over the sides of the chair and flow onto the mottled carpet. There was a tangle of white string on her lap which she jabbed at viciously with a small, barbed stick she was holding. At first, it gave the illusion she was torturing string, but then I noticed there were similar masses draped over nearly every available flat surface in the apartment, and concluded that she was involved in some kind of craft project, the nature of which was beyond my knowledge or appreciation.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. ..."

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 175

"Call me Duchess," she snapped. "Everyone does. Don't know why, though . . . haven't had royalty on this dimension for generations. Beheaded them all and divvied up their property . . . those were the days!"

She smacked her lips at the memory, though of royalty or beheadings I wasn't sure, and pointed vaguely at the far wall. I looked, half expecting to see a head mounted on a plaque, then realized she was pointing at a faded picture hanging there. I also realized I couldn't make it out through the dust and grime on its surface.

"It's the maid's day off," the Duchess said sharply, noting my expression. "Can't get decent work out of domestics since they outlawed flogging!"

I have seldom heard such an obvious lie ... about the maid, I mean, not the flogging. The cobwebs, dust, and litter which were prevalent everywhere could not have accumulated in a day ... or in a year for that matter. The shelves and cases throughout the room were jammed with the tackiest collection of bric-a-brac and dustcatchers it had ever been my misfortune to behold, and every dustcatcher had caught its capacity and more. I had no idea why the Duchess felt it necessary to imply she had servants when she obviously had little regard for me, but there was no point in letting her know I didn't believe her.

"Yes. Well . . . Duchess, I've been trying to locate your son, Aahz . . . mandius, and was hoping you might have some information as to his whereabouts."

"Aahzmandius? That wastrel?" Her narrow yellow eyes seemed to glow angrily. "If I had any idea where he was, do you think I'd be sitting here?"

"Wastrel?"

I was starting to wonder if we were talking about the same Aahz.

"What would you call it?" she snapped. "He hasn't sent

176 Robert Asprin

me a cent since he left school. That means he's spending so much on himself there's nothing left to share with the family that nurtured him and raised him and made him what he is today. How does he expect me to maintain the lifestyle expected of our family, much less keep up my investing, if he doesn't send me any money?"

"Investing?" I said, the light starting to dawn.

"Of course. I've been doing all the investing for our family since my husband passed on. I was just starting to get the hang of it when Aahzmandius quit school and disappeared without a cent ... I mean a trace. I'm sure that if

I just had a few million more to work with I'd get it right this time."

"I see."

"Say, you wouldn't by any chance have access to some venture capital, would you? I could invest it for you and we could split the profits . . . except it's best to put your money to work by reinvesting it as soon as you get it."

t was suddenly very aware of the weight of the checkbook in my pocket. The conversation was taking a decidedly uncomfortable turn.

"Um . . . actually I'm a little short right now," I hedged. "In fact, I was looking for . . . Aahzmandius because he owes me money."

"Well, don't you have any friends you could borrow a million or two from?"

"Not really. They're all as poor as I am. In fact, I've got to go now. Duchess. I've got a cab waiting downstairs and every minute I'm here is costing more than you'd imagine."

I suppose I should have been despairing as Edvick drove Pookie and me back to the hotel. My last hope for finding Aahz was gone. Now that tracking him down through the magicians had proved to be futile, I had no idea how to

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 177

locate him other than knocking on every door in the dimension . . . and I just didn't have the energy to attempt that even if I had the time. The mission was a bust, and there was nothing to do but pay off Edvick and Pookie, check out of the hotel, and figure out how to signal Massha to pick me up and take me to Klah. I hoped that simply removing the ring she had given me would bring her running, but I wasn't sure. Maybe I would be more effective at stopping Queen Hemlock than I had been in finding Aahz. I should have been despairing as I wrote out the checks for my driver and bodyguard in preparation for our parting, but I wasn't. Instead, I found myself thinking about the Duchess.

My first reaction to her was that she was a crazy old lady trying to live in the past by maintaining an illusion of wealth that nobody believed except her. Ideally, someone who cared should give her a stem talking to and try to bring her back into contact with reality so she could start adjusting to what was instead of what had been or should be. I guess, on reflection, I found her situation to be more sad than irritating or contemptible.

Then, somehow, my thoughts began wandering from her case to my own. Was I as guilty as she was of trying to run my life on was and should be instead of accepting and dealing with reality? I had been an untraveled, untrained youth, and that self-image still haunted me in everything I said and did. I felt I should be a flawless businessman and manager, and treated both myself and others rather harshly pursuing that goal. What was my reality?

Even before coming to Perv, many of my associates, including Aahz, had tried to convince me I was something more than I felt I was. Time and time again, I had discounted their words, assuming they were either trying to be nice to 'the Kid', or, in some cases, trying to badger me into growing up faster than I was ready to.

178 Robert Asprin

Well, maybe it was time I decided I was ready to grow up, mentally at least. The physical part would take care of itself. One by one, I started knocking down the excuses that had been my protective wall for so long.

Okay, I was young and inexperienced. So what? "Inexperienced" wasn't the same as "stupid." There was no reason to expect myself to be adept or even familiar with situations and concepts I had never encountered before. It was crucial not to dwell on my shortcomings. What was important was that I was learning, and learning fast . . . Fast enough that even my critics and enemies showed a certain degree of grudging admiration for what I was. They, like the Pervects I had encountered on this mission, didn't care what I didn't know last year or what I still had to learn, they reacted to what I was now. Shouldn't I be doing the

same thing?

Speaking of 'learning, I had always been self-conscious about what I didn't know, yet I planned to keep on learning my whole life. I always figured that if I ever stopped learning, it would either mean that I had closed my mind, or that I was dead. Putting those two thoughts together, it occurred to me that in being ashamed of what I didn't know, I was effectively apologizing for being alive! Of course there were things I didn't know! So what? That didn't make me an outsider or a freak, it gave me something in common with everyone else who was alive. Instead of wasting my energy bemoaning what I didn't know, I should be using what I did know to expand my own horizons.

The phrase "Today is the first day of the rest of your life" was almost a cliché across the dimensions. It occurred to me that a better phrasing would be "Your whole life to date has been training for right now!" The question wasn't what I had or didn't have so much as what I was going to do with it!

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 179

I was still examining this concept when we pulled up to the curb in front of the hotel.

"Here we are, Skeeve," Edvick said, swiveling around in his seat. "Are you sure you aren't going to need me anymore?"

"There's no point," I sighed, passing him his check. "I've run out of ideas and time. I'd like to thank you for your help, though. You've been much more than a driver and guide to me during my stay here. I've added a little extra onto the check as a bit more tangible expression of my gratitude."

Actually I had added a lot more onto it. The cabbie glanced at the figure and beamed happily.

"Hey, thanks, Skeeve. I'm sorry you couldn't find your friend."

"That's the way it goes sometimes," I shrugged. "Take care of yourself, Edvick. If you ever make it to Deva, look

me up and I'll show you around my dimension for a change."

"I just might take you up on that," the cabbie waved as I let myself out onto the street.

Pookie had popped out of the taxi as soon as we stopped, so it seemed I was going to have to settle accounts with her out in the open.

"Pookie, I ..."

"Heads up, Skeeve," she murmured, not looking at me. "I think we've got problems."

I followed her gaze with my eyes. Two uniformed policemen were bracketing the door to my hotel. At the sight of me, they started forward with expressions of grim determination on their faces.

Chapter Nineteen:

"I am not a crook!"

—ANY CROOK

"ZAT EES HEEM! Ze third from ze right!"

Even with the floodlights full in my face, I had no difficulty recognizing the voice which floated up to me from the unseen area in the room beyond the lights. It was the waiter I had clashed with the first night I was on Perv. The one who claimed I had tried to avoid paying for my meal by fainting.

I wasn't surprised by his ability to identify me in the lineup. First of all, I had no reason to suspect his powers of observation and recall were lacking. More important, of all the individuals in the line up, I was the only one who wasn't a Pervect. What's more, all the others were uniformed policemen! Nothing like a nice, impartial setup, and this was just that . . . nothing like a nice, impartial setup.

What did surprise me was that I didn't seem to be the

least bit upset by the situation. Usually, in a crisis like this, I would either be extremely upset or too angry to care. This time, however, I simply felt a bit bemused. In fact, I felt

182 Robert Asprin MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 183

so relaxed and in control of myself and the situation, I decided to have a bit of fun with it ... just to break the monotony.

"Look again, sir. Are you absolutely sure?"

I knew that voice, too. It was the captain who had given J.R. and me so much grief the last time I had the pleasure of enjoying police hospitality. Before the waiter could respond, I used my disguise spell and switched places with the policeman standing next to me.

"I am sure. He ees the third . . .no, the second from the right!"

"What?"

Resisting the urge to grin, I went to work again, this time changing everyone in the lineup so they were identical images of me.

"But . . . but thees ees imposs-ible!"

"MISTER Skeeve. If you don't mind?"

"Excuse me, captain?" I said innocently.

"We'd appreciate it a lot if you'd quit playing games with the witnesses!"

"That makes us even," I smiled. "I'd appreciate it if you quit playing games with me! However, I think I've made my point."

I let the disguise spell drop, leaving the policemen in the lineup to glare suspiciously at each other as well as at me.

"What point is that?"

"That this whole lineup thing is silly. We'll ignore the

bit with putting all of your colleagues up here with me for the moment and assume you were playing it straight. My point is that I'm not the only one who knows how to use a disguise spell. Anyone who's laid eyes on me or seen a picture of me could use a disguise spell well enough to fool the average witness. That invalidates the lineup identification as evidence. All you've established is that someone

with access to my image has been seen by the witness . . . not that I personally, was anywhere near him."

There was a long silence beyond the lights.

"You're denying having had any contact with the witness? I take "it you recognize his voice."

"That's a rather transparent catch question. Captain," I laughed. "If I admit to recognizing his voice, then at the same time I'm admitting to having had contact with him. Right?"

I was starting to actually enjoy myself.

"As a matter of fact, I'm willing to admit I've had dealings with your witness there. Also with the doorman and bellhop, as well as the other people you've dragged in to identify me. I was just questioning the validity of your procedure. It seems to me that you're putting yourself and everyone else through a lot of trouble that, by itself, won't yield any usable results. If you want information about me and my movements, why don't you just ask me directly instead of going through all this foolishness?"

The floodlights went out suddenly, leaving me even more blinded than when they had been on.

"All right. Mister Skeeve. We'll try it your way. If you'll be so good as to follow me down to one of our 'interview' rooms?"

Even "trying it my way" was more hassle than I expected or liked. True, I was out from in front of the floodlights, but there were enough people crowded into the small "interview room" to make me feel like I was still on exhibition.

"Really, Captain," I said, sweeping the small crowd

with my eyes. "Is all this really necessary?"

"As a matter of fact, it is," he retorted. "I want to have witnesses to everything you say as well as a transcript of our little conversation. I suppose I should inform you that anything you say can and may be used against you in court."

184 Robert Asprin MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 185

What's more, you're entitled to an attorney for advice during this questioning, either one of your choice or one of those on call to the court. Now, do we continue or shall we wait for a legal advisor?"

My feeling of control dimmed a bit. Somehow, this seemed much more serious than my last visit.

"Am I being charged with anything?"

"Not yet," the captain said. "We'll see how the questioning goes."

I had been thinking of trying to get in touch with Shai-ster, one of the Mob's lawyers. It occurred to me, however, that just having access to him might damage the image I was attempting to project of an innocent, injured citizen.

"Then I'll give the questioning a shot on my own," I said. "I may holler for legal help if it get's too rough, though."

"Suit yourself," the policeman shrugged, picking up the sheaf of papers he had brought in with him.

Something in his manner made me think I had just made the wrong choice in not insisting on having a lawyer. Nervously, I began to chatter, fishing for reassurance that things really weren't as bad as they were starting to seem.

"Actually, Captain, I'm a little surprised that I'm here. I thought we had covered everything pretty well my last visit."

The police who had picked me up in front of my hotel and delivered me to the station had been extremely tight-lipped. Beyond the simple statement that 'The captain wants to see you,' they hadn't given the slightest indication of why I was being pulled in.

"Oh, the IDs were just to confirm we were dealing with the right person," the captain smiled. "A point you have very generously conceded. As to why you're here, it seems

there are one or two minor things we didn't cover the last time we chatted."

He picked up one of the sheets, holding it by his fingertips as if it were extremely fragile or precious.

"You see, just as I promised, we've run a check on you through some of the other dimensions."

My confidence sank right along with my heart . . . deep into the pit of my stomach.

"For the record," the captain was saying, "you are Skeeve, sometimes known as 'the Great Skeeve' . . . originally from Klah with offices on Deva?"

"That's right."

"Now it seems you were somehow involved in a war a while back , . . somewhere around Possiltum?"

There was nothing for me to duck there.

"I was at that time employed as Court Magician of Possiltum. Helping to stop an invading army was simply a part of my duties."

"Really? I also have a report from Jahk that says you were part of a group that stole the Trophy from the Great Game. Was that part of your duties, too?"

"We won that fair and square in a challenge match," I flared. "The Jahks agreed to it in advance . . . and darn near beat our brains out before we won."

"... Which you did with much the same team as you

used to stop the aforementioned invading army," the captain commented drily.

"They're friends of mine," I protested. "We work together from time to time, and help each other out when one of us gets in a jam."

"Uh-huh. Would you describe your relationship with the Mob the same way? You know, friends who work together and help each other out of jams from time to time?"

186 Robert Asprin

Whoops! There it was. Well, now that the subject was on the table, it was probably best to deal with it openly and honestly.

"That's different," I dodged.

"I'll say it is!" the captain snarled. "In fact, I don't think different begins to describe it! In all my years on the force I've never heard of anything like it!"

He scooped up a handful of paper and held it up dramatically.

"From Klah, we have conflicting reports. One source says that you were instrumental in keeping the Mob from moving in on Possiltum. Another has you down as being a sub-chieftan in the Mob itself!"

He grabbed another handful.

"That's particularly interesting, seeing as how Deva reports that you stopped the Mob from moving into that dimension. What's more, you're being paid a fat retainer to maintain the defenses against the Mob, even though it seems that much of that retainer is going toward paying off your staff . . . which includes two bodyguards from the Mob and the niece of the current head of the Mob! All of which, of course, has nothing to do with the fact that you own and operate a combination hotel and casino and are known to associate with gamblers and assassins. Just what kind of

game are you playing, MISTER Skeeve? I'm dying to hear just how you define 'different!' "

I considered trying my best to explain the rather tangled set of relationships and circumstances that define my life just now. Then I considered saving my breath.

"First, let me cheek something here. Captain. Does your jurisdiction extend to other dimensions? To put it another way, is it any of your business what I do or don't do away from Perv, or did you just pull me in here to satisfy your curiosity?"

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 187

Pursing his lips, the Pervect set the papers he was holding back on the table and squared them very carefully.

"Oh, I'm very' curious about you. Mister Skeeve," he said softly, "But that's not the reason I sent for you."

"Well then, can we get down to what the problem really is? As much as I'd like to entertain you with my life story, there are other rather pressing demands on my time."

The policeman stared at me stonily.

"All right. We'll stick to cases. Do you know a street vendor named J.R.?"

The sudden change of subject threw me off-stride.

"J.R.? Sure I know him. Don't you remember? The last time I was here he was sitting ..."

"How would you describe your relationship with the individual in question?" the captain interrupted.

"I guess you'd say we're friends," I shrugged. "I've been chatting with him off and on since I arrived on Perv, and, as you know, he helped me out that time I got into a fight."

"Anything else?"

"No . . . except we're going into business together. That

is, I've put up the money for a venture of his."

The captain seemed taken aback.

"You mean you admit it?" he said.

A little alarm started to ring in the back of my head.

"Sure. I mean, what's so unusual about a businessman investing in a new enterprise?"

"Wait a minute. What kind of an enterprise did you think you were buying into?"

"He said he was going to open a retail storefront," I said uneasily. "But he did say something about supplying the other street vendors for a while to build up his operating capital. Exactly what he was supplying I was never really sure."

188 Robert Asprin

"You weren't sure?"

"Well, the truth is I was in a hurry and forgot to ask. Why? What was he ..."

"We just picked him up for smuggling! It seems your buddy and business partner was using your funds to buy and sell contraband!"

Needless to say, the news upset me. It had occurred to me that, in his enthusiasm, J.R. would go outside the law for the sake of quick profits.

"How serious is it. Captain? Can I post bail for him . . . or arrange for a lawyer?"

"Don't worry about him," the Pervect advised. "It turns out he has some information on the ax murderer we've been looking for and is willing to share it with us if we drop the smuggling charges. No, you should be more worried about yourself."

"ME?"

"That's right. You've admitted you're his partner in this, which makes you just as guilty as he is."

' 'But I didn't know what he was going to do! Honest!"

Now I was worried. The whole thing was absurd, but I was starting to think I should have insisted on having a lawyer after all.

"That's what you say," the captain said grimly. "Would you like to see what he was smuggling?"

He gestured at one of the other policemen in the room who held up several plastic bags with small items in them. I recognized them at a glance, a fact which did nothing for my peace of mind.

' 'Those are all products of the Acme Joke and Novelty Company," the captain intoned. "A company I believe you've worked with in the recent past?"

"A team of my employees did some work there on a pilferage case," I mumbled, not able to take my eyes off

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 189

the items in the bags. "Are those things really illegal on Perv?"

"We have a lot of ordinances that try to keep the quality of life on Perv high. We haven't been able to stop pom, but we have managed to outlaw trashy, practical joke items like Rubber Doggie Doodle with Realistic Life-Like Aroma that Actually Sticks to Your Hand."

It seemed like a very minor achievement to me, considering the crime on the streets I had already been exposed to. I didn't think that it was wise to point this out just now, though.

"Okay, Captain, let me rephrase my question," I said, looking at the floor. "How much trouble am / in? I mean, what's really involved here... a fine, a jail term, what?"

The Pervect was so silent I finally raised my head to meet his gaze directly. He was looking at me with a flat, appraising stare.

"No charges. I'm letting you go," he sighed, finally, shaking his head.

"But I thought ..."

"I said it depended on how the questioning went! Well, I just can't believe you'd be stupid enough to get involved in this smuggling thing knowingly. If you had, you'd have protected yourself better than you did. What you did was dumb . . . but just dumb enough to ring true."

"Gee, thanks, Captain. I . . ."

"No thanks necessary. Just doing my job. Now get outta here . . . and Mister Skeeve?"

"I know," I smiled, "don't change hotels or leave the dimension without ..."

"Actually," the captain said drily without a trace of warmth in his voice. "I was going to suggest the exact opposite . . . that you leave the dimension . . . say, by tomorrow morning?"

190 Robert Asprin

"What?"

"I still think you smell of trouble, and these reports confirm it. The smuggling thing just seems like too much small potatoes for you to bother with. I'd rather see you gone than put you in jail on a piddling charge like that . . . but it's going to be one or the other, get me?"

I couldn't believe it! Perv was the nastiest, roughest dimension around and / was being thrown off as an undesirable!!

Chapter Twenty:

"Were you looking for me?"

—DR. LIVINGSTONE

I WAS SURPRISED to find Pookie waiting for me when I got back to the hotel. The police had been nice enough to wait until I had given her her check before hauling me off, so I had thought I'd never see her again.

"Hello, Pookie. What brings you here?"

"I wanted to talk a little business with you," she said.
"It didn't seem the right time before, so I waited."

"I.see."

After my last experience, I wasn't wild about the idea of doing business with Pervects . . . especially ones who didn't want to talk in front of the police. Still, Pookie had given me no reason to distrust her.

"Okay. Come on upstairs and say what's on your mind.
It seems I'm leaving ... on request."

If my statement seemed at all strange to her, she never let on. Instead, she fell in step with me as I entered the hotel.

"Actually, what I have to say shouldn't take too long.
If I understand correctly, you're on your way off-dimension

191

192 Robert Asprin

to rejoin your regular crew in a campaign against someone named Queen Hemlock. Right?"

"That's a fair summation," I nodded. "Why?"

"I thought I'd offer my services to you for the upcoming brawl. I can give you a special discount for work away from

Perv because off-dimension prices are lower. That keeps my overhead down."

She flashed me a smile that was gone almost as soon as it appeared.

For some reason, it had never occurred to me to hire her for the Hemlock campaign. Still, the idea had merit.

"I don't know, Pookie," I said, trying to weigh the pluses and minuses without taking too much time. "I've already got a couple of bodyguards waiting for me."

"I know," she nodded. "I can do more than bodyguard, and from the sound of the odds you can probably use a little extra help."

"I can use a lot of help!" I admitted.

"Well, even though you couldn't find your friend, it does show that you and yours don't mind working with Pervects. Besides, I can travel the dimensions well enough to get us to Klah directly."

That settled it. I had been unsure that my plan to simply remove my monitor ring would be an effective way to signal Massha for a pickup, and Pookie had just come up with a good way to get there. Whatever Massha was doing right now, I wasn't wild about her dropping everything just to provide me with transport.

"All right. You've got yourself a job," I announced. "Just give me a minute to get things together and we'll be off."

That was my original plan, but as I opened the door to my room, I realized I had a visitor.

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 193

"Well, don't just stand there with your mouth open. Are you coming or going?"

If there was any doubt in my mind as to who my visitor was, that greeting banished it.

"AAHZ!"

After all my searching—and soul-searching—I couldn't believe my mentor, friend, and partner was finally in front of my eyes, but there he was!

"That's right. I heard you wanted to talk to me ... so talk."

"I suppose it's reassuring to know that some things never change, Aahzmandius . . . like you."

That last came from Pookie as she slipped past me into the room.

"Pookie!? Is that you?"

For the moment, Aahz seemed to be as dumbstruck as I was.

"You two know each other?"

Surprised and off-stride, I returned to familiar patterns and asked a redundant question.

"Know each other?" Aahz laughed. "Are you kidding? We're cousins!"

"Distant cousins," Pookie corrected without enthusiasm.

"Really? Why didn't you say anything, Pookie?"

"You never asked."

"But . . . you knew I was looking for him!"

"Actually, it took me a while to put it together, and when I did, I didn't know where he was either. Besides, to tell you the truth, from what I recall, I figured you'd be better off without him."

"Well, well. Little Pookie! Still have the razor tongue, I see."

"Not so little any more, Aahzmandius," the bodyguard

194 Robert Asprin

said, a dangerous note creeping into her voice. "Try me sometime and you'll see."

It was clear the two of them weren't on the best of terms. I felt it best to intercede before things got ugly.

"How did you get into my room?"

"Bribed the bellhop," my old partner said, returning his attention to me. "Those guys would sell the key to their mother's store if there was a big enough tip in it for them.

An awkward silence followed. Desperately, I cast about for something to say.

"So how have you been, Aahz?" I ventured, realizing how lame it sounded. "You look great."

"Oh, I've been swell . . . just swell," he spat. "As a matter of fact, it's a good thing I saw your ad in the personals when I did. I was about to head off-dimension. I had forgotten how high the prices are around here."

I made a mental note to pay off the bellhop. It looked like his idea of placing an ad had paid off better than all my running around.

"You can say that again," I agreed. "I sure got ambushed by the cost. Of course, I've never been here before, so I couldn't know ..."

I broke off, realizing he was staring at me.

"Which brings us back to my original question, Skeeve. What are you doing here and why do you want to talk to me?"

My moment had come, and if Aahz's mood was any indication, I had better make my first pitch good. I probably wouldn't get a second chance. Everything I had considered saying to him the next time we met face to face whirled

through my head like a kaleidoscope, mixing randomly with my recent thoughts regarding myself.

My search had given me new insight into Aahz. Seeing

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 195

the dimension that spawned and shaped him, having learned about his schooldays, and having met his mother, I had a much clearer picture of what made my old partner tick. While I was ready to use that information, I resolved never to let him know how much I had learned. Someday, when he was ready, he might share some of it with me voluntarily, but until then I felt it was best to let him think his privacy was still unbroached. Of course, that still left me groping for what to say here and now. Should I beg him to come back with me? Should I play on our friendship ... or use the campaign against Queen Hemlock to lure him back for just one more job?

Suddenly, Calvin's advice came back to me. There was no right or wrong thing to say. All I could do was try, and hope that it was good enough to reach my alienated friend. If not ...

Taking a deep breath, I gave it my best shot.

"Mostly, I came to apologize, Aahz."

"Apologize?"

My words seemed to startle him.

"That's right. I treated you rather shabbily . . . back before you left. I've got no right to ask you to come back, but I did want to find you to offer my apology and an explanation, for what it's worth. You see ..."

Now that I had started, my words poured out in a rush, popping out without conscious thought on my part.

"I was so afraid in my new position as head of M.Y.T.H. Inc. that I went overboard trying to live up to what I thought everybody expected of me. I tried to cover up my own weaknesses ... to appear strong, by doing everything without any help from anybody. I wouldn't even accept the same

help that had been given to me before I accepted the position, and either ignored or snapped at any offers of advice or

196 Robert Asprin

assistance because I saw them as admissions of my own shortcomings."

I looked at him steadily.

"It was a dumb, immature, jackass way to act, but worst of all it hurt my friends because it made them feel useless and unwanted. That was bad enough for Tananda and Chumley and the others, and I'll be apologizing to them, too, but it was an unforgivable way to treat you."

Licking my lips, I went for it.

"I've never been all that good with words, Aahz, and I doubt I'll ever be able to tell you how much you mean to me. I said I couldn't ask you to come back, and I won't. but I will say that if you do come back, you'll be more than welcome. I'd like a chance to show you what I can't find the words to say ... that I admire you and value the wisdom and guidance you've always given me. I can't promise that I'll be able to change completely or immediately, but I'm going to try ... whether you come back or not. I do know it'll be easier if you're there to box my ears when I start to slip. I wish . . . well, that's all. It doesn't start to even things out, but you've got my apology."

I lapsed into silence, waiting for his response.

"You know, Skeeve, you're growing up. I think we both forget that more often than we should."

Aahz's voice was so soft I barely recognized it as his.

"Does this mean you'll come back?"

"I . . . I'll have to think about it." he said, looking away. 'Let me get back to you in a couple of days. Okay?'"

"I'd like to, but I can't," I grimaced. "I've got to leave tonight."

"I see," Aahz's head snapped around. "You could only allow so much time for this little jaunt, huh? Work piling up back at the office?"

An angry, indignant protest rose to my lips, but I fought

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 197

back. From what he knew, Aahz's assumption wasn't only not out of line, it was a logical error.

"That's not it at all," I said quietly. "If you must know, the local police have told me to be off-dimension by morning."

"What!?!? You've been tossed off Perv?"

My old partner's eyes fixed on Pookie with cold fury.

"What have you two been up to that could get you tossed off a dimension like this?"

"Don't look at me, cousin! This is the first I've heard of it. The last thing I knew he was heading off-dimension because he couldn't find you."

"That was before my last interview with the police," I supplied. "Really, Aahz, Pookie had nothing to do with it. It's a little mess I got into on my own over ... the details aren't really important right now. The bottom line is that I can't hang around while you make up your mind."

"Well some day I want to hear those 'unimportant details,'" Aahz growled. "In the meantime, I suppose you can go on ahead and I'll catch up with you after I've thought things out."

"Um . . . actually, if you decide to come, I'll be over on Klah, not Deva."

I tried to make it sound casual, but Aahz caught it in a flash.

"Klah? What would take you back to that backwater dimension?"

There was no way around the direct question. Besides, my old mentor's tone of voice called for a no-nonsense answer.

"Well, there's a problem I've got to deal with there. Remember Queen Hemlock? It seems she's on the move again."

"Hemlock?" Aahz frowned. "I thought you cooled her

198 Robert Asprin

jets with a ring that wouldn't come off."

I decided it wasn't the time to ask what a jet was.

"I did," I acknowledged. "She sent it back to me ... finger and all. It looked like a pretty clear announcement and a warning that she was all set to launch her world conquest plans again . . . and wasn't about to put up with any interference."

"... And you're about to go up against her alone? Without even mentioning it to me?"

"I ... I didn't think it would be fair to try to pressure you with it, Aahz. Face it, the way things seem to go there will always be some kind of trouble cropping up. You can't be expected to spend your life covering my tail every time I get in a scrape. Besides, I'm not going to try to take her on myself. In fact, the rest of the team is already there. I sent them on ahead while I came back to look for you."

I was expecting an explosion and a lecture. Instead, Aahz seemed to be studying my face.

"Let me see if I've got this right," he said, finally. "Your home dimension is under attack . . . and instead of leading the team in the campaign, you put it all on hold to come looking for me?"

When he put it that way, it did sound more than a little irresponsible.

"Well . . . yes," I stammered. "But I told Massha to come pick me up at the end of a week. I figured that I'd have to go and pitch in at that point, whether I had found you or not."

Aahz started to say something, then shook his head. Heaving a great sigh, he tried again. •

"Skeeve . . . don't worry about not being able to find the right words. I think you've given me a pretty good idea of what I really mean to you."

MYTH-NOMERS AND IM-PERVECTIONS 199

"I did?"

He nodded.

"Enough that I've decided I don't need any more time to make up my mind. Grab your stuff, partner. Let's get going. Are you square with the hotel, or do you still have to settle accounts?"

"I'm all set on that front," I said. "There's no balance . . . since they made me pay in advance."

"That figures," Aahz grumbled. "Unless you're a VIP or something, everybody gets the same treatment."

It was just too good an opening to pass up, and I yielded to the temptation.

"Of course, it'll probably be easier for me next time around. .. now that I have a line of credit and a credit card."

"What next time around? I thought you said the police ..."

His train of thought stopped abruptly as he turned to loom over me.

"CREDIT CARD? What credit card? Who's been teaching you about credit cards?"

That wasn't exactly the reaction I had been expecting.

"The bank suggested it, actually," I explained. "They said ..."

"What bank? How did you know what to look for in a bank?"

"Well, it was recommended to me by Edvick, he's the cabbie I hired while I was here, and ..."

"That you hired? Why didn't you . . ." He paused and seemed to regain a bit of control. "It sounds like you've got quite a bit to discuss with me ... when we have the time. Right, partner'1.'"

"Right, Aahz," I said, glad to be off the hook for the moment.

200 Robert Asprin

'Is there anything that has to be done before we leave?"

"Well, I've got to get some money to the bellhop. I promised him ..."

"Spare me the details . . . for the moment anyway. Anything else?"

"No, Aahz."

"All right. Finish packing while I hunt up this bellhop for you. Then, we're off for Klah ... if I can find the settings on the D-hopper, that is. It's been a while, and..."

"Save the batteries, cousin," Pookie said. "I think I can handle getting us all there without help."

"You? Since when were you coming along?" Aahz gaped.

"Since I hired on with Skeeve here," the bodyguard countered. "While we're on the subject, since when did you need a D-hopper to travel through the dimensions?"

"Um ... if the two of you don't mind," I said, stuffing my dirty clothes into my new bag, "could we save all that until later? Right now, we've got a war to catch!"

M.Y.T.H. Inc in Action By Robert Asprin

Author's Note:

I am not a fast writer,
I am not a slow writer,
I am a half fast writer!
R. L. ASPRIN

THE FAN MAIL I've received has been pretty much split on the subject of my last Introduction; some found it interesting and insightful, while others thought it was boring and a waste. If you are of the latter group, please feel free to jump ahead directly into the story, since there is nothing in this message you need to know to understand (and, hopefully, enjoy) the book.

For the rest of you, this note is mostly an apology ... or, more accurately, a string of apologies.

Back in M. Y. T.H. Inc. Link, I optimistically stated that I would be trying to write two Myth episodes a year . . . and things have not been the same since. I, my publishers, and many bookstores and dealers have been flooded with queries and demands for "the next Myth book," with each reader being sure the books were in existence somewhere because of the schedule I had so foolishly "committed to" in that introduction.

To belabor the obvious, I haven't been able to write at the speed I anticipated at the time. While the popularity of the series and the loyalty of its readers is both gratifying and profitable, any publisher can tell you that trying to get a book out of an author when "it isn't happening" is like pushing on a rope. You see, when I made my writing "guesstimate," I had just finished writing MIL, and the speed with which the prose goes onto the page when I'm closing on the end of a book was

still fresh in my mind. That is, when it's flowing, it flows very fast. What I had overlooked was the months of outlining and false starts that go on before things get flowing (These books only look spontaneous and easy to write. Honest!) Anyway, the cruel realities of the situation surfaced when I tried to meet my promised schedule, and I fell far behind my anticipated timetable. As the queries and demands from the readers grew, the tolerance of the publishers for late delivery grew less and less, and the pressures on me increased "to get the manuscript in" with, less and less time for rewrites and polish.

Finally, in 1988, things blew up. I got into a dispute with Donning/Starblaze (the prime Myth publisher . . . the mass market [small paperback] editions from Ace are subcontracted reprints) over royalties. The dispute has been settled, and the only reason I mention it here is that it lasted the better part of a year . . . delaying my writing that much more.

In addition to the negotiated terms of that settlement, however, there is an additional apology that I owe the management of Donning. You see, part of the settlement was that the next book (the one you're holding) would not be advertised nor orders taken until the manuscript had been delivered. This was an effort to take some of the "deadline" pressure off my writing as I tried to get back into stride. There were two unfortunate side effects of that condition, however. First, I was unable to reply to the many readers and fans asking when the next book would be out ... as it would be less than fair to insist that Donning not advertise a release date, then banter it about myself. Secondly, at one point I gave my assurance to Donning on the phone as to when the manuscript would be completed . . . then promptly forgot that I had done so. This meant that when I encountered problems with my writing, I neglected to warn Donning of the delay, and in that absence of revised information, they launched an extensive and expensive advertising campaign for the release of the book in late '89 ... only to

suffer embarrassment and loss of credibility when the manuscript failed to appear for production.

While I am not in a position to repair the financial damage caused by the "false start" advertising campaign, I feel it only honorable to offer public apology to Donning for the professional embarrassment which my memory lapse caused. For the record, the late appearance of this volume is due to delays at the author's end, not the publisher, distributor, bookstore, or dealer. Writers are often quite loud in voicing horror stories about having their works mishandled by the publishing industry, yet not so vocal when it comes to admitting their own shortcomings. Folks, this time the confusion and delays were my fault, and the distress I feel because of that will only be compounded if I allow others to take the blame by remaining silent.

While I'm prattling, let me try to head off another potential round of misunderstanding and confusion. In July of '90, another humor series of mine, science fiction this time, will premiere with the publishing of Phule's Company. Please do not panic. This new series is in addition to, not replacing, the MYTH novels. As promised back in MIL, the MYTH novels will continue at least through #12.

(More than) Enough said. While this intro hasn't been as much fun as the last, look at it as a different sort of insight into the "carefree life of an author" and the frustrating complexities of the publishing industry. Enjoy the book. I only hope it justifies the wait.

ROBERT LYNN ASPRIN
February 1990

"What am I doing here?"

ANY RECRUIT, ANY ARMY

"NAME?"

Now, in those circles within whose company I am accustomed to travelin', it is considered impolite to ask questions in general . . . and that question in specific. Unfortunately, I was currently well outside those circles, and as such felt compelled to answer the inquiry, however rude.

"Guido."

"Home address?"

"The Bazaar at Deva."

"What?"

"The Bazaar at ... Oh! Uh . . . just say . . . 'varies.'"

The joker what was takin' down this information gives me a hard look before continuing with his questions. I give him my best innocent look back,

1

2 Robert Asprin

which as any jury can tell you is most convincing though deep down inside I am more than a little annoyed with myself. Bein' a smarter than average individual, I should have recalled that even though my travels and adventures with the Boss have accustomed me to other dimensions, to most folks here on Klah such places as the Bazaar at Deva are unheard of, and therefore suspicious. As I am makin' a specific effort to be inconspicuous, this is not the wisest answer to have given.

"Height and weight?"

This question makes me feel a bit better, as it

serves to remind me that whatever I say or do, I will never be totally inconspicuous. You see, I am what is politely referred to as "a large person" . . . or less politely as "a knuckle-dragging monster." While this is of invaluable assistance considerin' my chosen profession, it does, however, make it difficult to blend with any given crowd. In fact, I would be the largest person in the line if it were not for Nunzio who is maybe an inch shorter, but a bit bulkier.

I can see the guy with the questions has noticed this all by himself, since he keeps glancin' back and forth between the two of us as he jots down my responses.

"Next of kin?"

"I guess that would be Nunzio, here," I sez, jerkin' a thumb at my colleague.

"You two are related?"

"He's my cousin."

"Oh."

For a second I think he's about to say somethin'

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION 3

more, but then he just shrugs and scribbles a little more on his pad.

"Do you have a criminal record?"

"Beg pardon?"

"A criminal record. Have you ever been arrested?"

"No convictions."

That earns me another hard look.

"I didn't ask about convictions. I asked if you've ever been arrested."

"Well . . . yeah. Hasn't everybody?"

"What for?"

"Which time?"

"How many times have you been arrested?"

"Oh, three . . . maybe four dozen times . . .
but no convictions."

The joker has his eyebrows up now.

"You've been arrested nearly fifty times with no convictions?"

"No witnesses," I say, showin' him my teeth.

"I see," the guy sez, lookin' a little nervous, which is one of the customary side effects of my smiles. "Well . . . lefs try it this way ... are you currently wanted by the authorities?"

"No."

"Good . . . good," he nods, fillin' in that blank on the form in front of him.

"Okay . . . one final question. Do you know of any reason why you should not be allowed to enlist in the army of Possiltum?"

In the actualities of the siruational, I knew of several reasons not to enlist . . . startin' with the

4 Robert Asprin

fact that I didn't want to and endin' with the godawful wardrobe that I would be forced to wear as a soldier-type.

"Naw."

"Very well/' he sez, pushin' the form across the table at me. "Just sign or make your mark here,

please."

"Is that all?" I ask, scribblin' my name in the indicated spot.

"Is that all, sergeant," the joker smiles, pickin' up the paper and blowin' on the signature.

Another reason for not joinin' the army occurs to me.

"Is that all, sergeant?" I sez, bein' careful not to let my annoyance show.

"No. Go to the next tent now and you'll be issued a uniform. Then report back here and you'll be assigned to a group for your training."

"Training?"

This is indeed somethin' what had never occurred to me or Nunzio, and could put a serious crimp in our projected timetable. I mean, how much trainin' does it take to kill people?

"That's right . . . training," the sergeant sez with a tight-lipped smile.

"There's more to being a soldier than wearing a uniform, you know."

Bein' a survival oriented individual, I refrain from speculatin' out loud as to what this might entail. Fortunately, the sergeant does not seem to expect an answer or additional comment. Rather,

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION 5

he waves me out the door as he turns his attention to the next unfortunate.

"Name?"

"Nunzio."

Now, those of youse what have been followin'

dese books all along may be wonderin' just why it is that Nunzio and me is signin' onto Possiltum's army instead of performin' our normal duties of bodyguardin' the Boss . . . who you probably think of as the Great Skeeve, as you is not employed by him and therefore have no reason to think of him as the Boss.

This confusion is understandable, as this book is happenin' right after the book before the last one, (M.Y.T.H. Inc. Link) . . . and at the same time as the one before this (Myth-Nomers and Im-Pervections). Add to that the fact that this is one of the M.Y.T.H. Inc. volumes, and is therefore bein' told from my viewpoint instead of the Boss's, and it becomes clear why your eyes is perhaps crossed at this point in the narrative. The only consolin' I can offer youse, is that if youse think my life whilst workin' for the Boss is confusin' to read, youse should try livin' it for a month or five!

Actually, to be totally honest with youse, dis book is not startin' where I was the last time you saw me, so let me refer youse back to the meetin' which started us on this particular chain of events . . .

Chapter One:

"What do you mean
my characters talk funny?"
D. RUNYON

IT is INDEED a privilege to be included in a war-type council, regardless of what war it is or who in specific is also attendin'. Only the very elite are involved, which is to say those who will be furthest from the actual fightin', as such gatherin's are usually concerned with which portions of one's forces are expendable, and exactly how and when they are to be expended. Since it is demoralizin' for those who are to be dropped into the meat grinder to know they have been chosen as "designated receivers," they are logically excluded from the proceeding, seein' as how if they are made aware of their roles in advance, they are apt to take it on

the lam rather than dutifully expiring on schedule, thereby botchin' up many hours of plannin' on both sides of the dispute in question. From this, it

7

8

Robert Asprin

is easy to see that attendin' these borin' but necessary plannin' sessions is not only an honor, it greatly improves one's chances of bein' alive at the end of the fracas. To get killed in a battle one has had a hand in settin' the strategies for is an indication that one's plannin' abilities are sorely lackin' and will count heavily against youse when bein' considered for future engagements.

In this particular circumstantial, however, it was no special honor to be included in the plannin' session, as our entire force consisted of a mere five personages ... six if you count the Boss's dragon. Needless to say, none of us was inclined to think of ourselves as fallin' into the "expendable" category. Realizin', however, that we was supposed to be trying to stop a renegade queen with a sizable mob of army-types at her disposal, one was not inclined to make book on our chances for survival . . . unless, of course, one was offered irresistible odds and maybe a decent point spread.

While there wasn't all that many of us, I, for one, had no complaints with the quality of our troops.

Tananda and Chumley are a sister and brother, Trollop and Troll team. While they are some of the nicest people it has ever been my pleasure to encounter, either of them is also as capable as any five knee-breakers ever employed by the Mob if they find it necessary to be unpleasant. In the Boss's absence, they have taken it on themselves to

be the leaders of our expedition ... an arrangement which suits me fine.

You see, my cousin Nunzio and me is far more comfortable takin' orders than givin' them. This is a habit we have acquired workin' for the Mob, where the less you know about why an order is bein' givin', the better off you are ... particularly if at a later point you should be called upon to explain your actions under oath. (For those of youse who have failed to read about our activities in the earlier books in this series and are therefore ignorant as to our identities and modus operandi, our job description refers to us as "collection specialists" . . . which is a polite way of sayin' we're kneecappers.)

The fifth member of our little strike force is Massha . . . and if that name alone is not sufficient to summon forth an identifyin' image in your mind, then it is obvious you have not yet met this particular individual in the flesh. You see, Massha has a singularly unique appearance which is unlikely to be mistaken for anyone else, though she might, perhaps, be mistaken for some-thing else . . . like maybe a dinosaurous if said saurous was bein' used as a travelin' display for a make-up and jewelry trade show. What I am tryin' to say is that Massha is both very big and very colorful, but in the interest of brevity I will spare you the analogous type comparisons. What is important is that as big and as tough as she is, Massha has a heart even bigger than her dress size.

We had been holdin' the start of our meetin'

L

10

Robert Asprin

until she got back from droppin' the Boss off on Perv, which she had just done, so now we are ready to commence the proceedin's.

"So you're tellin' me you think King Rodrick was whacked by Queen Hemlock? That's why Skeeve sent you all here?"

This is Big Julie talkin'. While me and Nunzio have never met this particular individual before, we have heard of his reputation from the days when he also worked for the Mob, and it seems he and the Boss are old friends and that he's one of our main sources for information and advice in this dimension. In any case, we are usin' his villa as a combination meerin' point and base of operations for this caper.

"That's right," Tananda sez. "Hemlock's always been big on world conquest, and it looks like her new husband wouldn't go along with her schemes."

"Realizing she now has the combined power of her kingdoms' money and the military might of your old army," Chumley adds, "it occurred to Skeeve that she might be tempted to try to . . . shall we say, expand her holdings a bit. Anyway, he asked us to pop over and see first hand what was happening."

"I see," Big Julie nods, sippin' thoughtfully at his wine. "To tell you the truth, it never occurred to me that the king's dyin' was a little too convenient to be accidental. I'm a little surprised, though, that Skeeve isn't checkin' this out himself. Nothin' personal, but he never used to be too good at delegatin'."

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

11

"He's busy," Massha sez, cuttin' it short like a casino pit boss.

Tananda shoots her a look then leans forward, puttin' a comfortin' hand on her knee.

"He'll be all right, Massha. Really."

Massha makes a face, then heaves one of her big sighs.

"I know. I'd just feel a lot better if he let a couple of us tag along, is all. I mean, that is Perv he's wandering around in. They've never been noted for their hospitality."

"Perv?" Big Julie scowls. "Isn't that where that weirdo Aahz is from?"

"Where he's from, and where he's gone," Chumley supplies. "He and Skeeve had a falling out, and friend Aahz has quit the team. Skeeve has gone after him to try to bring him back . . . which leaves us to deal with Queen Hemlock. So tell us, Jules, what's the old girl been up to lately?"

"Well, I'll admit there's been a lot of activity since the king died," Julie admits. "The army's been on the move almost constantly, and both they and the kingdom are getting noticeably bigger . . . know what I mean? It's kinda like the old days when I was running the army, only on a bigger scale. I get a postcard from one of the boys sayin' how they're visitin' a new country, than ga-bing-ga-bang that country's suddenly a new part of Possiltum."

"I see," the troll sez thoughtfully. "Well, what do you think, little sister? You're the only one here who was along the last time Skeeve stopped this particular army."

12 Robert Asprin

"Not quite. You're forgetting that Gleep was there . . . and, of course, Bigjulie."

She winks at that notable who responds with a gracious half bow. Gleep, the Boss's dragon, raises his head and looks around at the mention of his name, then sighs and goes back to sleep.

"Course, I was on the other side last time," Big Julie sez, "but it occurs to me that you got your

work cut out for you this time around."

"How so?"

"Well, last time we was the invaders, you know? The locals didn't like us, even though they didn't take much of a hand in the resistance Skeeve organized. This time, though, the army is the home team, and folks in the kingdom are pretty much behind 'em all the way."

"You mean the kingdomers are in favor of the queen's new expansion moves?" Tananda frowns.

"That's right," Big Julie nods, "and when you think about it, it stands to reason. The bigger the kingdom gets, the more people there are to share the cost, so the taxes get smaller. With their taxes goin' down with each new conquest, the citizens are positively ecstatic about the way things are going. If that weren't enough, unemployment is at an all time low what with so many goin' into the army, so pay scales are sky high."

"So Hemlock's running a popular war, eh?"

Tananda sez, pursing her lips thoughtfully.

"Maybe that's the route for us to go. What do you think, big brother?"

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

13

This last she directs at Chumley, who just shrugs.

"I suppose it's as good a place as any to start. Something about that analysis of the tax structure bothers me, though."

I tended to agree with Chumley, but Tananda is on a roll.

"Save it for the financial heavyweights," she

waves. "For the time being, let's focus on doing what we're good at."

"And just what do you figure that is?" Massha interrupts. "Excuse me, but could you two run that by again slowly for the benefit of those of us who aren't used to your brother/sister shorthand?"

"Well, the way I see it, our best bet is to work on making Hemlock's expansion program unpopular. I mean, there's not much the five of us can do about stopping the army by ourselves, but if we can get the populace worked up maybe the queen will have to reconsider ... or at least slow down."

"We could try to kill her," Massha sez pointedly. "True," Tananda acknowledges, "and don't think I haven't given that option some serious thought. I think it's a little more drastic than Skeeve had in mind when he sent us on this mission, though. Anyway, I think I'd like to hold that option in reserve for now, or at least until Skeeve catches up with us and we have a chance to clear it with him."

"Well, if you don't mind, there's another possibility I'd like to try."

14 Robert Asprin

"What's that, Massha?"

"Tell me, Big Julie, is General Badaxe still running the army?"

"Hugh? Sure is. He's a fast learner, that one. Remembers mostly everything I've taught him about runnin' an army."

"Well," Massha sez, heaving herself to her feet, "I think I'll just wander off and try to find his headquarters. He had quite a thing for me the last time I was through. Maybe if I look him up again, I can get his mind off running the army for a while, or at least distract him enough that they won't be

quite so efficient."

"I say, that's a good idea, Massha," Chumley sez. "Speaking of the army, Guido, do you think you and Nunzio can manage to sign up for a hitch? Remembering how you stirred things up at the Acme magik factory by getting the workers to unionize, you're the logical choice for demoralizing the troops, and that's best done from the inside."

"Yeah, sure," I sez with a shrug. "Why not?"

"Are you okay, Guido?" Tananda asks, peering at me sudden-like. "You and Nunzio have been awfully quiet since we started out on this venture."

"We're all right," Nunzio puts in quick. "We're just a little worried about the Boss . . . like Massha. Joinin' the army is fine by us, if you think it will help things. Right, Guido?"

"I said it was okay, didn't I?" I snaps back at him.

M.Y.T.H. INC. DM ACTION

15

"So what are you and Chumley going to be doin' while we're playing solider?" Nunzio sez. It is obvious to me that he is out to divert the attention of the meetin' away from the two of us, but no one else seems to notice . . . except maybe Big Julie who gives me the hairy eyeball for a minute before turnin' his attention back to the conversation.

"We're going to see what we can do about stirring up the citizens," Tananda shrugs. "Tax reductions are nice, but there are bound to be some irritating things about life under Hemlock's new programs. AH we have to do is root them out and be sure that folks see them as irritating."

"Do you blokes want Gleep, or shall we take

him?" Chumley asked.

"Gleep?" sez the dragon, raisin' his head again.

"Aahh . . . why don't you and Tananda take him," Nunzio sez quick-like. "Truth to tell, he made me a little nervous the last time we was workin' together."

"Who? Gleep?" Tananda sez, reaching over to pet the dragon. "There's nothing to be nervous about with him. He's just a big sweetie and a snugglebug . . . aren't you, fellow?"

"Gleep!" the dragon sez again innocently while leanin' against Tananda.

"Good. Then you won't mind havin' him with you," Nunzio smiles. "That's settled."

"I suppose," Chumley sez absently, studyin' the dragon as he talks. "Well, I guess we might as well get started. Big Julie, do you mind if we relay messages to each other through you? Otherwise

16 Robert Asprin

we're going to have trouble keeping track of things."

"No problem," the retired general shrugged. "To tell the truth, I figure you're all going to have enough on your hands, so you shouldn't be worryin' about communications. I'll be here."

After sayin' our goodbyes to the others, Nunzio and I head off to try to find a recruiter for the army.

For a long time, neither of us sez anything. Finally, Nunzio clears his throat.

"Well, what do you think?"

"I think we got big trouble comin' our way," I sez, tight-lipped, "and I don't mean with communications or even with Queen Hemlock."

"I know what you mean," Nunzio sighs, not lookin' around as he trudges along. "You want to talk about it?"

"Not just yet. I want a little more time to think things through. In the meantime ..." I aims a playful punch at him which, bein' Nunzio, he takes without so much as blinkin'. "... let's occupy ourselves with somethin' easy ... like disruptin' an army."

Chapter Two:

"We want to make you feel at home!"

L. BORGIA

"AH'D LIKE TO welcome you all to this man's army! The first thing you should know is that we're on a first name basis here ... and my first name is ser-geant ... Do I make myself clear?"

At dis, the individual so addressin' our group pauses and glares at us. Naturally, there's no answer, as no one is particularly eager to call attention to themselves under dese circumstan-tials. It seems, however, dis was not the response the sergeant had in mind.

"Ah asked you a question!! Do you think Ah'm up here running my mouth 'cause Ah like the sound of mah own voice?"

It is clear that dis is a ploy to induce us new recruits into makin' a mistake which will further anger the sergeant, as at this point he has asked

17

18

Robert Asprin

not one, but two questions callin' for opposite

answers, and whatever answer is given is bound to be wrong. The other unfortunates in line with Nunzio and me seem to be unaware of this and blunder headlong into the trap.

"YES, SERGEANT!" they bleat eagerly.

"WHAT??!! Are ya'll tryin' to be funny?"

The sergeant, who I am glad I never had to compete against for a part in my old drama troupe, gives every impression of bein' on the verge of foammin' at the mouth and becomin' violent to the point of injurin' himself and anyone else in the near vicinity. Almost unnoticed, he has also asked a third question, placin' the odds of comin' up with an acceptable response well out of reach of the intellects in line with us.

"No . . . Ahh" . . . "Yes, Sergeant" . . . "Ahh . . . No?"

The attempt to shout an answer dissolves in a babble of confusion as the new recruits glance at each other tryin' to sort out what they're supposed to be sayin'.

"YOU!"

The sergeant's voice silences the group's efforts as he homes in on one unfortunate in the front row.

"What are you lookin at him for? Do you think he's cute??"

"No!"

"What?"

"Ahh ... No, Sergeant?"

"Ah can't hear you!"

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

"No, Sergeant!"

"Louder! Sound off like you got a pair!"

'WO, SERGEANT!!'

"Thaf s better!"

The sergeant nods curtly, then turns his attention to the rest of the formation again.

Viewed correctly, dis is a fascinatin' study in group-type dynamics. By focusin' on one individual, not only has the sergeant let the rest of the group off the hook of tryin' to come up with an acceptable response to his questions, he has impressed on them that they really don't want to ever be singled out by him.

"My name is Sergeant Smiley, and Ah will be your drill instructor for the next few days. Now, right away Ah want you to know that there are three ways of doing things in this man's army: the Right Way, the Army way, and My Way . . . we will do things My way! Do I make myself clear?"

"YES, SERGEANT!!"

The group is gettin' into the swing of things now, bellowin' out their responses like a convention of beat cops goin' after a jaywalker.

"AH right now, listen up! When I call out your name, sound off loud and clear so's I know you're here and not off wandering around somewhere. Understand?"

"YES,. SERGEANT!"

"Bee!:"

"Here!"

"HERE WHAT?"

The kid what has just answered is so skinny it

20

Robert Asprin

is surprisin' he can stand without assistance, but he licks his lips nervously and takes a deep breath.

"HERE, SERGEANT!" he shouts, but his voice cracks in the middle of it, makin' his declaration less than impressive.

"That's better," the sergeant nods, apparently satisfied with the youngster's effort. "Flie, Hynam!"

"Here, Sergeant!"

"Flie, Shubert!"

"Here, Sergeant!"

The sergeant looks up from his roster with a scowl.

"Bee? Flie? What is this, a freaking Bug Convention?"

"We're brothers, Sarge/' one of the two Flies supplies unnecessarily, as the physical similarities between the two broad-shouldered individuals would be obvious even if their names didn't link them.

"That's right," the other put in. "You can call me Hy for short, and Shubert there would rather be called Shu, 'cause otherwise . . ."

"DID I ASK?"

"No, sir."

"Sorry, sir."

". . . AND DONT CALL ME SIR!!! I ain't no

freakin' officer* It didn't take a grant from the crown to make me a gentleman . . . I was born one!! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME???"

"YES, SERGEANT!!"

"Drop down and give me twenty pushups just so you won't forget!"

M.Y.T.H. INC. DM ACTION

21

"Umm ... is that ten from each of us, Sarge, or . . ."

"TWENTY EACH!" Smiley roared. ". . . AND ANOTHER FIVE EACH FOR CALLIN' ME 'SARGE'! MY NAME IS SERGEANT SMILEY OR SERGEANT, NOT SARGE OR SIR! YOU GOT THAT, TROOPER??"

"YES, SERGEANT!!"

"THEN HIT IT!!"

The two brothers drop down and start pumpin' out pushups as the sergeant turns his attention back to his list.

"Shu Flie and Hy Flie! My aching back! My God! here's another one! Spyder!"

"Here . . . Sarge."

Smiley's head comes up with a snap like he has been poked in the ribs . . . which, of course he has. The use of the improper address so soon after it was forbidden might have either been by mistake or from stupidity were it not for the deliberateness with which it was uttered. As it was, however, there was no mistaking it for what it was: A challenge to the sergeant's authority . . . which is to say, stupidity.

The challenger is a sight to behold. She probably

would have stood out in the line in any case, bein' the only female-type in our group, though one might have had to look a couple times to notice, as she stood in a habitual slouch. Her hair, however, made her a real showstopper. Cropped to a medium, mane-type length, it was dyed . . . somethin' I do not normally speculate on regardin'

22

Robert Asprin

a skirt until we is on very close acquaintances, after which time I am too much of a gentleman to share such information with anyone who is not. In this circumstantial, however, I feel free to make said assumption, as hair, whether attached to a male or female-type bod, does not naturally come in that color ... or, to be entirely accurate, colors. Stripes of pink, white, blue, and green run across this broad's head from front to back . . . and not in subtle tones. These colors glow with electric-type vibrancy like they are bein' fueled by her glower, which would be truly intimidatin' if it were, perhaps, pasted on a homelier mug . . . like, say my own. It has been some time since Nunzio and I hung out on the streets, but it is clear the type of punks they are currently breedin' is a strain mutated noticeably from our early days when "colorful" referred to our language, not our hair!

"Well, well," the sergeant sez, lickin' his chops a bit, "what have we here? It seems we are to be a part of the army's experimental program which is specifically testing the truth in the saying that the only thing meaner than a fighting man of Fossil-turn is a woman! Now I want all you men to watch your language during training. We have a laaaa-dyyyy in our midst."

From the way the skirt bristles, it is clear she is not used to bein' referred to as a lady . . . and doesn't care much for the idea. Smiley isn't through with her, however.

"Tell me, little lady, what is that you've got on

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

23

your head? If it's something that crawled up there and died, I hope you've had your shots 'cause it doesn't look like it was any too healthy!"

"It's called 'hair,' Surge! What do you have on your head?"

"It isn't what I've got on my head that's important, 'emit," the sergeant smiles, "it's what's on my sleeve!"

He taps the stripes that mark his rank.

"Three up, three down. You know what that means?"

"That you're a Master Sergeant, Sarge."

"Close, but no cigar. It means you owe me fifteen pushups, 'emit, five for each time you've called me 'Surge.' Hit it!"

I expect the skirt to give him an argument at this, but instead she just drops down and starts pumpin' out pushups like it's what she has been after all along . . . and maybe it was. I don't know what kind of breakfast-type cereal this broad patronizes, but she is doin' a notably better job of rackin' up her pushups than the Flie brothers.

"One . . . Two . . . Three . . ."

Smiley watches her for a few moments, then turns his attention to the other figures on the ground.

"YOU TWO! I said give me twenty-five!"

This last was, of course, directed to the Flie brothers.

"We're . . . trying . . . sergeant!"

"WELL I CAN'T HEAR YOU! COUNT 'EM OFF/."

24 Robert Asprin

"Seventeen . . . eighteen ..."

"YOU DON'T START COUNTING AT SEVENTEEN!! YOU START COUNTING AT ONE!!! DO YOU THINK I'M DUMB?!!!"

"No . . . sergeant! . . . One . . . two . . ."

"Now listen up 'cause I'm only gonna say this once!" the sergeant barks, turnin' his attention back to the rest of us. "When I'm talking, your ears are open and your mouths are shut! You don't say nothin' 'less I ask you a question, whereupon you answer it briefly then shut up! When I want questions from you, I'll say 'Any questions?! Do / make myself clear!"

"YES, SERGEANT!"

"All right then." He started to look at his roster again, then glanced at the struggling figures on the ground. "That's enough, you three. Get back in line. Now then, where was I? Guido!"

"Here, Sergeant!" I sez, 'cause I was.

"That's it? Just 'Guido?' No nickname like Cricket or anything?"

"No, Sergeant!"

He waited for a few seconds to see if I was gonna add anything, but I didn't, as I've always been a fast study. Finally he gives a little nod and moves on.

"Juney!"

"Here, Sergeant! ... but folks call me 'June-bug.'"

Some people, on the other hands, never seem to learn.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

25

"Twenty!" the sergeant sez without even lookin' up from the roster.

And so it went. By the time the sergeant is through checkin' off the list of names, over half of our group has been called upon to demonstrate their physical prowess, or lack thereof, by performin' a number of pushups, the exact count of which varies dependin' upon the sergeant's mood and their ability to remember to count out loud whilst performin' this exercise. This raises some serious questions in my mind as to the average IQ of the individuals who have chosen to enlist in the army, a rather disquietin' thought realizin' that I am one of said individuals. In an effort to maintain a positive-type frame of mind, I reassure myself that my enlistin' was a matter of followin' orders rather than any idea of my own.

"All right, LISTEN UP!" the sergeant bellows, havin' finished with his roll call. "In about half an hour. Corporal Whittle will take you across camp and get your hair cut to conform with army standards."

The little shrimp who has been lurkin' in the background draws himself up to his full insignificant height and smiles at this. Now Sergeant Smiley is a rather imposin' dude, though a touch out of shape around the middle, but the corporal looks like he would fail the entrance requirements to be a meter-type maid. That is, he looks to be the unpleasant kind of wimp who only pulls wings off flies when he has enough rank to back him up.

Lookin' at his smile, I begin to have serious mis-givin's about these haircuts.

"In the meantime," the sergeant continues, "you have a period of unstructured time, during which you may talk, sleep, or get to know each other. I suggest you take maximum advantage of this, as it will in all probability be the last time you will have to yourself until your training is completed. Now, before I dismiss you, are there any questions?"

To my surprise, two individuals raise their hands. This is a surprise first of all because I thought that most individuals would be cowed into silence by the sergeant's performance thus far, and secondly because one of the hands belongs to none other than my cousin Nunzio!

"You!" Smiley says, pointin' at the closest questioner. "State your name and question."

"Bee, Sergeant. I ... I think there's been a mistake on my enlistment."

The sergeant shows all his teeth.

"The army doesn't make mistakes, son . . . except, maybe one." He shoots a glance at Spyder, who ignores him this time. "What's your problem?"

"Well ... I shouldn't be here. I enlisted as a magician, and my recruiter said that ..."

The sergeant's smile widens sufficiently to stop the recruit in mid-sentence.

"Son," he sez, in a voice that's more like a purr, "it's time you learned one of the harsh truths about the army. Recruiters lie! Whatever that sorry soul told you, son, unless you got it in writing signed

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

27

by the queen herself, it don't mean squat! Now I'm

telling you that every 'emite that signs onto this man's army will learn' basic infantry skills before receivin' his first assignment before active duty. You might get assigned as a magician, or you might not ... it all depends on whether they need magicians or cooks when your number comes up for assignment, but you aren't gonna get assigned anywhere until I say your basic training is complete. Next question!"

"Nunzio, Sergeant! How long does it take to complete basic training?"

"That depends on how long it takes you unfortunates to learn the minimal skills required for you to wear the uniform of Possiltum. Usually it takes a week to ten days . . . but from the looks of you sorry souls, I figure you'll have the pleasure of my company for at least a month."

"You mean none of us gets assigned until everyone in this group completes their training?"

"That's right. Any other questions?"

My cousin glances down the lines at me, but I keep my eyes straight forward, hopin' his action isn't noticed. Luckily the sergeant misses this little blip in the formation, and as soon as he dismisses us Nunzio and I go into a huddle.

"What do you think?" he sez, worried-like.

"Same as you," I shrug. "We sure can't take no month gettin' trained if we're gonna by any help upsettin' the regular troops."

"That's for sure," he nods. "Looks like we're gonna have to push these recruits a little ourselves

to be sure they pick up this training in double-quick time."

This realization puts my mood at an all-time low. It was bad enough that I was gonna have to do time as a soldier-type, but now I was gonna have to play nursemaid and coach to a bunch of raw recruits as well!

Chapter Three;

"Just a little off the top!"

A. BOLEYN

THE HAIRCUT TURNED out even more ghastly than I had feared in my worst nightmare-type dreams. I would be tempted to lay in wait and inflict a little instructional-type revenge upon the individual what laid said haircut on me, but it would probably do no good as he was obviously brain damaged at birth and can't help bein' like he is. Instead, I should be thankful that society has found a place for a person what has only learned one style of haircut where he can serve a useful purpose. Further, I suppose it is only logical that that place is in the army, where his "customers" have no choice but to put up with whatever haircut they are given. My only puzzlement is where they managed to find an entire room full of mental

29

30 Robert Asprin

deficients who have all only learned the same haircut.

The haircut under discussion is unique in its lack of imagination and style, consistin' of simply removin' as much hair from the victim as possible through the vigorous application of a pair of clippers. If they lowered their aim another quarter inch or so, the job would qualify as a scalpin' rather than as a haircut. Now, I have nothin' against baldness, and know a couple hard-type wise guys in the Mob what shave their heads to look especially mean. What we ended up with,

however, was not enough hair to look stylish, but too much to look tough.

Now this in itself was annoyin', but the haircut in conjunction with the uniforms which was foisted off on us bordered on bein' intolerable. For those of youse which are fortunate enough not to have viewed the Possiltum army uniforms first hand, they consist of somethin' like a short-sleeved flannel nightshirt, which is worn under a combination breastplate and skirt made of hardened leather. That's right, a skirt. At least, I can't think of any other way to describe a bunch of leather strips hangin' down to about knee length with no semblance of legs built in. As a final insult, we was each issued a pair of sandals, which to my opinion did not even come close to replacin' the spiffy wing-tipped black and white shoes I normally favor.

The overall impression of our trainin' group once we had been shorn and uniformed, was that

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

31

we looked like a pack of half-dressed department store mannequins waitin' to be fitted for wigs.

"Nunzio," I sez, surveyin' the damage what has been done to my hitherto head-turnin' image, "tell me again about how nothin' is too desperate when it comes to guardin' the Boss or carryin' out his orders."

Now, this is a mistake. While my cousin is a first-rate partner when it comes to rough and tumble, lurkin' in the depths of his sordid resume is the fact that he did time as a schoolteacher for a while, and the lingerin' effect of that experience is that he has a tendency to deliver lectures on nearly any subject at the drop of a hat or a straight-type line.

"You just don't understand the psychology in-

volved in converting civilians to soldiers, Guido," he sez in that squeaky voice of his that can be so irritatin' at times . . . like now. "Hair styles, like fashions in clothing, are distinctive marks of one's previous social and financial standing. The whole idea of the haircuts and uniforms is to reduce everyone to a common denominator, as well as giving them a traumatic, but harmless, experience to share, thereby encouraging bonding."

Normally, I would not dream of arguin' with Nunzio, as I not only am inclined to lose, it only gives him an excuse to prolong and embellish upon whatever half-baked theory he is emotin' upon. This time, however, I feels compelled to take umbrage with his assertions.

"Cousin," I sez, "can you look around at our

32 Robert Asprin

fellow unfortunates and tell me honestly that you can't tell who comes from where without committin' such blatant perjury that even the most bought judge would have to call youse on it?"

I mean, shorn and frocked as we are, it is still pretty easy to spot who the players are and where they're comin' from. The Flie brothers have that well muscled, robust glow of health what only comes from puttin' so many hours a day into farm work that doin' time in the army has to look like a resort vacation to them. Bee, with or without hair, looks like a fledgling geek, and as for the Spyder broad . . . well, givin'a wolf a poodle cut doesn't make it look like a show dog, just like a pissed off wolf! It was clear to me that wherever that junior sociopath went to school, it couldn't have been more than a block or two from the alma mother what gave Nunzio and me our head start on the other head bashers in the Mob.

As usually occurs, however, just when it looks like I'm gonna finally win an argument with Nunzio, somethin' intervenes to change the subject.

"Do you believe this?" the tough broad spits . . .
literally . . . lettin' fly with an impressive jet of
fluid from between her teeth to punctuate her anger.
"Military Law! It's bad enough that we have to put
up with these haircuts and flaky uniforms, but now
we have to sit through lectures on crud like Military
Law! When are they gonna get around to teaching us
something about fighting?"

This does not come as a particularly startlin'
revelation to me, as I have long suspected that

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

33

Spyder did not enlist for the cultural-type benefits
that the army offers. I am, however, more than a
little taken with the distance she gets with her
spittin'. It occurs to me that I haven't tried spittin'
that way since Don Bruce promoted us and hinted
strongly that we should class up our act a little,
and, realizin' this, decide not to try to match her
performance, as distance spittin' such as hers
requires constant practice if one is to remain in
form. For the educatin' of those of youse what has
been raised too proper and upright to have ever
experimented with this particular form of self-
expression, let me caution youse against tryin' this
for the first time in front of a critical audience. If
your technique is anythin' less than flawless, the
odds are that your effort will dribble down your
chin and onto your shirt rather than arcin' away in
the picturesque display you are expectin', leavin'
the viewers with an impression of youse as a
chump rather than whatever it was youse was
tryin' to pass yourself off as.

All of this passes through my mind in a flash, as
I am a fairly quick thinker despite the impression
given by my size, whilst I am tryin' to think of an
appropriate response to Spyder's kvetchin'. Nun-
zio comes up with somethin' before I do, however,
as he is no slouch himself when it comes to
thinkin' . . . particularly when there is a skirt
involved,

"I think you should listen real close to what they tell us about Military Law, Spyder," he sez, "it'll pay some solid benefits in the long run."

34 Robert Asprin
"How so?"

"Well," he smiles, settlin' into his lecture voice again, "speaking from long personal experience, it is often much easier to continue doing exactly what you want to do right under the noses of authority if one is aware of exactly what those authorities consider to be antisocial behavior. When you stop to think about it, it's real nice of the army to give us official advance warning of exactly what rules they plan to enforce and, by exclusion, what is fair game. If they didn't, or we were dumb enough to sleep through this particular lecture, the only way to figure out what activities can be done openly and which should be performed in ... shall we say, a less public manner, would be to act blindly, then wait to see what they came down on us for."

"Just how long is that 'personal experience/fellah?" one of the Flie brothers pipes up.

"Yeah, I was just wondering the same thing," the other chimes in. "Aren't you two a little old to be joining the army?"

Now, it is clear to me what is goin' on. The two farm boys have been hopin' to put some moves on Spyder, but then Nunzio gets in the way. Rather than backin' off like any sane person would do, they was rryin' to score their points by pickin' a fight with him. To say the least, I have seen better plans to continue one's good health.

Of course, Nunzio can spot it too, and he knows that we should be avoidin' any kind of trouble if we want to complete our training quick instead of

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

sittin' in the stockade for a few days. He also knows, however, that he is bein' made to look like a fool in front of the only skirt we is likely to be associatin' with for a while, and while he has considerable tolerance at soakin' up abuse from a boss what is payin' our wages and expenses, his ability to put up with bein' hassled without blowin' his cool drops in direct proportion to the standin' of the hassler in the peckin' order, and the Flie brothers don't stand very high at all.

"Are you boys sayin' you think we're too old to be any good in a fight?" he sez, turnin' to face his critics while flexin' his hands slightly.

If I didn't recognize the dangerous tone in his voice, I could sure recognize that flexin' action of his as I was the one who taught it to him in the first place, and figure I had better step in before things get too messy.

"Before proceedin' with the discussion at hand," I sez, "I think youse should all perhaps take notice of the attention which is bein' paid to our intellectual-type conversation by the corporal who is standin' not twenty yards behind youse."

"Intellectual-type discussion'?" Shu brays, punchin' his brother on the arm. "What kind of talk is that, Old Man?"

"Paw told us big city folk talked kinda funny/" Hy grinned, "but I ain't never heard nobody who sounds as weird as this guy."

"He's talked that way ever since he played one of the leads in 'Guys and Dolls' while we was in

36 Robert Asprin

college," Nunzio sez, quick-like. "Beyond that, I strongly suggest you drop the subject."

That's when I realize that I have commenced to

flex my own hands a bit . . . an action which has the tendency to make Nunzio nervous. While I am not particularly sensitive to callous or ignorant remarks about my size or how I'm gettin' older, I can get a little touchy if anyone tries to poke fun at how I talk. You see, I have spent considerable time perfectin' this particular style of expression as I feel it enhances my believability as a rough and tumble leg-breaker, thereby minimizing the number of times I have to actually partake of the violent-type actions which so offend and depress my sensitive soul. Therefore, anyone who tries to state or imply that talkin' like dis is easy or stupid is issuin' an invitation to waltz with me which would best be withheld unless his or her hospitalization insurance is substantial, detailed, and paid up. This is, of course, the very button the Flie brothers is tinkerin' with, and I find their efforts sufficiently clumsy as to require immediate instruction as to the error of their ways and perhaps a little behavioral adjustment. The fact that I am still annoyed over the haircuts and uniforms and sorta lookin' for someone to take it out on has completely nothin' to do with my reactions.

"Were you in that musical, too?" Junebug sez, unwittingly steppin' between us in his eagerness to start a conversation. He is a good-lookin' kid with the kind of soft, unblemished features usually associated with male fashion-type models. "I got

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

37

to play Sky Masterson, myself. What was your major, anyway? I got my Bachelor's in Dance."

"BusAd ... a Master's," I sez, try in to ease around him.

Unfortunately he has given the Flie brothers a face-savin' out from the buildin' confrontation with Nunzio and me. Whether motivated by any native intelligence or simply saved by animal survival instinct, they switch their harassment to this

new target without so much as pausin' for breath."

"A college man? . . . And a dancer! Ooooo!
Did you hear that, Hy?"

"Sure did," his brother responds and commences to make kisse noises at Junebug. "No wonder he's so purdy."

"Leave him alone, you guys!"

This last comes from Spyder, who for some reason has seen fit to deal herself into the situational.

"Oh yeah?" Shu sneers, turnin' his attention toward this new front. "And who's going to make me?"

"If I have to, I will," Spyder shoots back.

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!"

"Well then, why don't you show us ... OW!"

By now I have cooled off enough to take advantage of the situational as it presents itself. As they puff up and start to strut toward Spyder, the two brothers have thoughtlessly and rudely turned their backs on me. Before they can close on her, I

38 Robert Asprin

have stepped in behind and between them, and dropped a friendly arm around their shoulders.

"Excuse me, Spyder," I sez with a smile, "but I need to have a few words with these boys in private whilst they are still able to stand and walk without the aid of crutch-type assistance. Right boys?"

"OW! . . . Right!"

"Yeah . . . Aaah! . . . Sure!"

The sudden cooperative nature of the Flie brothers is in no small way influenced by the fact that I have casually dug a thumb into the hollow of a collarbone on each of them and tend to tighten my grip another notch each time I asks them a question . . . regardless of how rhetorical it might be. The real trick to this maneuver, in case any of youse is interested in technical-type details, is not to loosen your grip once you start tightenin' it. That is, it isn't squeeze . . . release . . . squeeze . . . release . . . , it's squeeze . . . tighten . . . tighter . . . grind. . . . See what I mean? Now if, perhaps, youse have developed your grip to a point where you can crumble bricks with it ... like I have . . . this will prove to be a most convincin' punctuation to the weakest of logic durin' a difference of opinion.

Anyhoo, returnin' to my oration, I draws the two brothers aside for a little chat, all the while keepin' a wary eye on the hoverin' corporal.

"Now, don't you think it would be a good idea for you boys to lighten up a little? (squeeze)" I sez softly so's we are the only ones who can hear.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

39

"There are two things you should be considerin' here. First, dis collection of individuals we is goin' through trainin' with constitutes a group, and within a group it is always better to be nice than nasty. With nice, you got friends who will cover your back in a fight . . . with nasty, youse gotta watch your back from them. You got that? (tighten)"

"Right, Guido!"

"OW! Sure Guido!"

"Good. Now second, I want youse to keep in

mind that if you does not abandon your querulous habits, and those habits slow or otherwise interfere with this group completin' its trainin' in the shortest possible time . . ." I sneak a glance at the corporal, then lower my voice while takin' great pains to keep a smile on my face. ". . . then I will personally rip off each of youse guy's heads and spit down your neck! (tighter) You got that?"

"Gaah! Yeah! Got it!"

"Anything you . . . Owww . . . say, Guido!"

"Oh yeah. Just one more thing. I don't talk funny. (grind) Agreed?"

"Aaaahhh ..."

"God ..."

I noticed the corporal is comin' our way, thereby signalin' an end to our playtime.

"I'll take that as a 'yes,'" I sez, and releases my grip all at once.

I have neglected to mention durin' my previous instructional oration that if youse relaxes the aforementioned grip suddenly and completely, the re-

40 Robert Asprin

sultin' rush of blood to the area which has been assaulted by said grip causes additional discomfort to a point where some subjects have been known to faint dead away. The advantage of this is obvious, in that you are not actually even touching them at the moment the effect takes hold.

The Flie brothers are in exceptionally good shape, as I have noted before, so they merely stagger a bit. It is clear to them, however, as it is to me, that for a while they will have extreme difficulty movin' their arms with any degree of speed or strength . . . like say, in a fight. This, of course, has the originally desired effect of mel-

lowin' their previously bully in', swaggerin' behavior noticeably.

"What's going on here?" the corporal demands, burstin' in on our little group.

I blinks innocent-like and gave him a helpless shrug like he was a DA during cross examination.

"We was just discussin' the logical-type benefits of social over antisocial behavior in a group situational."

"Oh yeah? Is that right, you two?"

The Flies try to match my shrug, but wince halfway through the gesture and have to resort to nods.

The corporal glares at us suspiciously for a few, then turns to the rest of the group.

"All right, everybody form up in two lines!" he hollers in a poor imitation of the sergeant. "It's time we move out for the classrooms!"

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

41

"Did our agitators respond properly to applied logic?" Nunzio murmurs, easin' up beside me.

"Sure did," I nods. "What's more, I think they got it in one lesson. I don't know why you keep sayin' that youth today is slow learners."

He rolls his eyes at this and fakes a mock swing at me.

"Maybe we should start calling you 'Fly Swatter,'" he grins.

Some of the other recruits laugh at this, which makes me a tad nervous, as I know from the Mob just how easy it is to get saddled with a screwball

nickname after some dumb incident or other. The corporal saved me the trouble of havin' to change the subject, however, as he chose that moment to start hollerin' and wavin' for us to get together for the next round of trainin'.

"Come on," I sez, bouncin' a punch off his arm that was notably harder than the one he had taken at me. "We gotta go learn how to be effective fighters."

Chapter Four:

"Squeeze, don't jerk, the trigger."
R. ROGERS

UNFORTUNATELY, THE "Fly Swatter" moniker Nunzio hung on me stuck ... or at least the "Swatter" part did. What was even more discomfortin' was the fact that I got tagged by the sergeant to be Actin' Squad Leader for the little group of recruits I have already named, which is much of why I named them. This position consisted of nothin' more than playin' sheepdog for the 'Bugs,' as everyone seemed to take great delight in callin' 'em, while they was bein' herded from one trainin' session to another. Still, it was a leadership position, which, as I have earlier noted, I tend to avoid like I would a subpoena.

The stuff we had to learn as part of our basic-type trainin' wasn't really too bad, though. Most of the information they passed along was indeed

43

44
Robert Asprin

necessary when considered as an overview, and it was presented simply, but with a real effort toward makin' it interestin' enough to hold the attention of us recruits. This was a pleasant change from my college profs, most of whom seemed to feel they was the greatest experts on the most interestin' subjects and that the students should feel lucky to

pay substantial hunks of money for the privilege of worshipin' at their feet. What's more, they tested the loyalty of said students on a regular basis by the simple process of makin' the presentation dull enough to bore a stone and seein' who managed to stay awake long enough to absorb sufficient data to pass their finals.

The army, in direct contrast, started with the basic assumption that recruits would be totally ignorant and couldn't care less about the subject at hand, unless it was made interestin' enough to hold their predictably short attention, often by graphically demonstratin' at a personal level how vital said subject was to the continued functioning of their bodies.

(Out of courtesy to those of youse who are currently investin' large hunks of your or your kid's time in college, I will refrain on commentin' on which system I think is better for passin' information, much less the actual life value of that information which is bein' passed, and confine myself to the simple observation that instruction in the army is neither mindless nor lackin' in value. What's more, they pay you while you're learnin'. Of course, things might be quite a bit different if

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

45

corporations other than fast food franchisers took it upon themselves to take an active hand in the trainin' of their employees . . . but that is a whole 'nother subject and a definite digression from the subject at hand, which is army trainin'.)

For the most part, Nunzio and I had no complaints with the lessons, and even found them uniquely informational. As youse are probably aware, the Mob is big on individual tactics or free-for-all-type brawls such as is usually the case in ambushes, so learnin' to fight from formations was a genuinely new experience for us. Of course, we had some difficulty acceptin' that this would

ever be of actual use to us.

Firstus, as I have just so previously mentioned, bodyguardin' usually involves ambushes and what is known in sports as "scramble defense," raisin' serious doubts in our mind that formation fightin' would be utilizable in our civilian life after the service, seein' as how we would lack the warm-type bodies for such maneuvers, and it is doubtful those throwin' the surprise party would give us sufficient time to gather the necessary quantities of warm bodies, as the entire purpose of their ambush is to catch us with our tactical pants around our ankles.

Secondous, and more to the point, however, it was unclear how we was supposed to use these tactics while in the army. You see, at this point it was no secret that the army of Possiltum was the largest, best equipped force around, so few kingdoms or towns chose to buck the long odds by

46

Robert Asprin

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

47

confrontin' them in the field where formation-type tactics would come into play. Consequentially, there was little actual fightin' goin' on when they moved into a new neighborhood, an any opposition offered was more on the order of covertous resistance of the stab-em-in-the-back or slit-their-throats-while-they're-asleep-type variety. As formations were of absolutely no use in dealin' with this kind of petty harassment, it was hard for us to understand why we was havin' to spend so much time learnin' about them.

Somehow, however, Sergeant Smiley neglects to ask our advice as to the content of his trainin' program, so we are spared the discomfort of havin' to figure out how to share our views with him

without hurtin' his feelin's.

Similarly, when it is explained to us that we has to learn marchin' as it is "the best way to move a group of soldiers from one point to another in the shortest period of time," we are not given a chance to ask if the army in general or the sergeant in specific has considered the benefits of rapid transit.

While there are numerous points like this of dubious logic throughout our trainin' there is only one point which we take serious exception to. While we take great pains to keep this variation from army thinkin' from becomin' obvious, it finally escapes into the light of public notice one day while we are at the firin' range.

The army is havin' us train with crossbows . . . which is understandable, as the trainin' time nec-

essary for usin' a longbow with any degree of proficiency in a combat situational is considerable, thereby makin' it a dubious subject of study for basic trainin'. Slings is even worse, as until one has reached near expert familiarity with one, the best odds of inflicrin' injury with this weapon is that of hangin' oneself with said weapon whilst tryin' to get the rock to fly somewhere near the general direction of the target. The most physically inept of klutzes, however can attain a minimal level of effectiveness with a crossbow in a single afternoon, which is doubtlessly why the army chose this particular weapon to introduce the recruits to the intricacies of projectile combat.

"You will notice that you will be firing at full sized, man-shaped targets for this exercise," Sergeant Smiley says, havin' already bellowed at length on range safety and proper handlin' of the weapons. "The army has chosen to have you train on these as opposed to bull's-eyes, as it will better prepare you mentally and emotionally to fire your weapon at a live opponent. At all times during this exercise, you will fix it in your minds that the dummy facing you is a live enemy who wants to

kill you, and conduct yourselves accordingly. Do I make myself clear?"

"YES, SERGEANT.!"

The crew has this response down pat now . . . and it only took 'em a few days of trainin' to master it. Nunzio and me joins in at the proper cue, though there are some questions which could have been raised at this point.

48

Robert Asprin

For example, while the idea behind usin' these targets was interestin' and maybe even admirable, in all my years with the Mob I have never seen an opponent who would do you the favor of standin' rock-still, in the open, upright, with his shoulders square to you while he was tryin' to shoot you. They are more inclined to be crouched or flattened behind cover and movin' around whilst sendin' you the message, specifically to minimize the chances of your cancelin' their stamp before they reach the final salutation. In light of this, thinkin' you can shoot because you can pump arrows or quarrels into a straw dummy of any shape struck me as a dangerous case of overconfidence and not to be encouraged. I kept quiet about this, though, figurin' that this was only the first round to familiarize everybody with their weapons, and that the serious trainin' would be covered at a later date.

Soon, the crew is scattered along the firin' line, takin' turns sprayin' quarrels downrange whilst the sergeant and corporal prowl back and forth behind them, qualifyin' some and hollerin' at the slow learners. This is one managerial style I have noticed the army and the Mob have in common, which is to say the belief that if you shout loud enough at someone who is doin' somethin' wrong, they will respond by doin' it right,

Nunzio and me hang back from the first bunch of shooters, as we have little fear of passin' this

particular test. We focus instead on how the rest of the crew is doin' so's we can help out the ones what is havin' trouble.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION 49

The Flie brothers are surprisingly good shots, each of them not only hittin' the target with every shot, but holdin' a shot group you can cover with a double handspan. Realizin' that the targets are close enough to hit with a rock, however, this display of marksmanship fails to impress me a great deal. Sergeant Smiley, on the other hand, seems genuinely pleased with their performance.

"Now that's how the army likes to see you handle those weapons!" he sez loud so's everyone can hear him. "Who taught you boys to shoot like that, anyway?"

"Our dad did," Shu Flie grins. "You may have heard of him. They call him Horse Flie."

"Mom can outshoot him, though," Hy Flie adds. "They call her Dragon Flie."

At this point, I stopped followin' the conversation, both because it was makin' my stomach hurt, and because Nunzio was beckonin' me to huddle up with him.

"We got problems," he sez, which wasn't surprisin', as knowin' him as well as I do I could see he was worried.

"Like what?"

"It's Spellin' Bee," he sez, which is what we've taken to callin' our junior magician. "I don't think he could hit the broadside of a barn if he was inside it."

I snuck a look over his shoulder, just in time to see Bee loose a quarrel which misses the target by fifteen feet, give or take a mile. The corporal was

right there beside him, offering helpful suggestions at the top of his lungs.

"I see. Well, it's not like he's gonna do much shootin', what with him bein' a magician."

"Maybe not," Nunzio shrugs, "but we're all supposed to qualify today or the whole group gets held back . . . remember?"

"That could be a problem," I nods. "Doesn't he have a spell or somethin' that could help him out?"

My cousin rolls his eyes and snorts, disgusted-like.

"Are you kidding? He only knows two spells, and neither of them are gonna be of any help to him on the firing line."

"Two spells? What are they?"

"Let's see, he knows Dispell, which lets him see through disguise spells."

"Thafs not much help," I admits. "What's his other spell?"

"Datspell," Nunzio grimaces, "which is nothing more than the disguise spell the Boss uses with a silly name."

"So all he can do is disguise himself and see through other disguises," I sez, turnin' it over in my mind.

"That's it, Nothin' that's gonna help him qualify today."

"Maybe . . . maybe not," I sez, thoughtfully. "Tell you what. Is there any chance you can get him alone for a few minutes?"

"No problem. When he finishes blowin' this

round, he'll have to wait to take another turn. I can get him then. Why? You got an idea?"

"Uh-huh," I grins. "Just convince him to use his disguise spell . . . what does he call it? Oh yeah, Datspell . . . so's you can change places. Then you qualify for him, you switch back, and no one will be any the wiser."

"I dunno," Nunzio sez, rubbin' his chin. "We might be able to fool the corporal, but the sergeant there's a pretty sharp cookie. He might spot there's somethin' different about the Bee."

"I'll take care of distractin' the sergeant when the time comes. Just be careful not to shoot too good . . . just good enough to qualify. Got it?"

Then there isn't much to do whilst waiting for the plan to unfold. Finally the corporal gets fed up with shoutin' at our young magician and sends him off the line for a "break" until he has rested his voice a bit.

Tryin' not to pay too much attention, I watch out of the corner of my eye while Nunzio drapes an arm around Bee's shoulder and begins to talk to him in an earnest-type fashion, all the while leadin' him casually behind the weapon storage tent and out of general sight. After what seems like an intolerably long time, "Bee" re-emerges, walkin' in a rollin' stride that is very familiar to me, and I know the power of reason and logic has triumphed again. I wait until he is steppin' up to the firin' line for yet another try, then commence to create a diversion.

"You're tryin' too hard, Spyder," I sez, loud-like,

steppin' up behind that notable where she is standin' at the far end of the firin' line from "Bee." Both Spyder and Junebug are sporadic in their marksmanship, keepin' their shots in the vicinity of the target, but only hittin' it occasionally.

"You're keepin' your left arm way too tense . . . you gotta loosen up a little and just cradle the weapon in your hand. Ease up on the trigger, too. Just use the tip of your finger instead of tryin' to wrap it all the way around the trigger. Otherwise, you'll pull your shot off to the left every time you squeeze off a round."

"Like this?"

"Yeah, only ..."

"WHAT THE HECK YA THINK YOU'RE DOIN??!!!"

It should have been gratifyin' to know that I was correct in my appraisal of Sergeant Smiley's boilin' point. Up until now, Nunzio and me have been real careful to do our coachin' of the other recruits out of his sight and hearin', so's not to conflict with the authority-type image he is workin' so hard to maintain. I figure that this open display will not sit well with him, and this figurin' proves to be dead on target. I should be glad, but as he comes stompin' toward me I have to fight off the sneakin' feelin' that this has not been the wisest tactic to pursue.

"Guido was just giving me some pointers on handling this thing. Sergeant," Spyder sez, innocent-like, her polite manners a testimony to

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

53

her hard learned lessons that Smiley is not someone to hassle unnecessarily.

"Oh, so now the Bug Swatter's an expert on crossbows, is he?" the sergeant snarls, puttin' the cross hairs on me. 'Thinks he's better'n me or the

range instructors at teaching marksmanship, does he?"

While trackin' this with great attention, I nonetheless see over his shoulder that Nunzio, disguised as Bee, is firin' his qualifyin' round . . . right under the nose of the corporal, who is more interested in watchin' the sergeant and me than in payin' attention to what's happenin' at his end of the range.

"Why don't you just show us how good you are with this weapon, acting Squad Leader Guido," Smiley sez, snatchin' the crossbow away from Spyder and thrustin' it at me. "// you can qualify, then maybe I won't bust you back into the ranks."

Now I have been threatened by experts . . . literally ... so this effort by the sergeant fails to generate in me the obviously desired nervousness. If anything, I am tempted to deliberately blow these shots, thereby gettin' myself off the leadership-type hook which, as I have noted earlier, I am not particularly happy to be danglin' from. Still, my professional abilities have been openly challenged . . . and in front of a skirt, even if it's just Spyder. Besides, Nunzio has now finished qualifyin' for Bee, so there is no incentive to prolong this diversion any longer.

I spare the crossbow no more than a cursory

54

Robert Asprin

glance, havin' a weak stomach when it comes to substandard weapons. It is obviously the work of government contractors, and bears the same resemblance to the custom weapons from lolo that I normally use that a plow horse bears to a thoroughbred. Ignorin' this, I holds a quarrel in my mouth while cockin' the crossbow by puttin' the butt in my stomach and jerkin' the string back with both hands (which is quicker*n usin' the foot stirrup to do the same thing), drop the quarrel into

the groove ahead of the drawn string, and squeeze off a quick shot down range.

Not surprisin'ly, the missile thwacks into the dummy's right shoulder.

"A bit lucky, but not bad," Smiley sez, grudgin'-like. "You'd get better accuracy, though, if you shot from the shoulder instead of the hip. Trying to show off will only . . ."

By the time he gets this far in his critique, I have recocked, reloaded, and loosed a second shot . . . again workin' from the hip.

This shot hisses into place not more than two finger widths from the first.

The sergeant shuts his mouth so fast you can hear his teeth click together, which is fine by me, and watches in silence whilst I snap a third shot off that makes a neat triangle with the first two.

"Pretty sloppy," comes the sneerin' squeak of Nunzio, as he joins our group, free of his disguise now. "I warned you that crushing stuff with your hands was gonna ruin your touch for a trigger!"

"Izzat so!!??" I snaps, more than a little annoyed

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

55

at havin' my handiwork decried. "Let's see you do better with this thing!"

I lob the crossbow to him, which he catches with one hand, then squints at the bindings.

"Government contractors," he sez in the same tone he uses to announce he's stepped in some-thin' organic and unpleasant. "It sure ain't lolo's work!"

"The quarrels are about as straight as a barroom

pool cue, too," I sez, givin' him the rest of the bad news. "But like the Boss sez: 'Ya does the best ya can with what ya got.' Right?"

He makes a face at me, then snaps off his three shots, also shootin' from the hip. I notice that even though he works the dummy's other shoulder to avoid confusion, his groupin' is not a noticeable improvement over mine.

"Okay, if s the weapon . . . this time," he admits, handin' the crossbow back to Spyder. "If we were working a longer range, though, I still think ..."

"Just a minute, you two!"

We turns our attention to the sergeant, both because he sounds upset over somethin', and because we've been havin' this particular argument for years, so it's doubtful we would have resolved anythin' even if we had continued the discussion uninterrupted.

"What are you trying to pull, here?"
"What's wrong. Sergeant?" Nunzio sez, expressin' the puzzlement we both is feelin'. "Two out of three hits qualifies, right?"

56 Robert Asprin

"Whafs wrong?" Smiley smiles, showin' too many teeth for comfort. "Shot groupings like those mean you've both got excellent control of your weapons. Now, correct me if I'm mistaken, but doesn't that also mean you could have put those groupings anywhere on the target you wanted?"

"Well, sure . . . Sergeant."

"So how come you shot the dummy in the shoulders instead of in the head or chest?"

"That would kill him," I sez before I've had a chance to think it through.

"YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO KILL HIM! THAT'S WHAT BEIN' A SOLDIER IS ALL ABOUT!!!"

Now, in hindsight I know I shoulda' gone along with him, but he caught me by surprise, and my old Mob-type habits cut in.

"What kinda cheap barroom shooters do you take us for??" I barks right back at him. "Me and Nunzio is professionals!! Any jerk can kill somebody, but it takes SKILL to leave 'em in a condition where they can still pay protection . . . OR give you information . . . OK ..."

"What my cousin means to say," Nunzio sez, steppin' between us quick-like, "is that wounding an enemy takes three opponents out of the action instead of just one, since someone's got to help him get back to ..."

It was a good try, but too late. The sergeant was still into takin' me on.

"Are you calling the trained soldiers of Possiltum jerks?" he hollers, steppin' around Nunzio to come

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

57

at me again. "What are you? Some kind of PACIFIST?"

"What. . . did . . . you . . . call . . . me . . . ?" I sez in my softest voice, which I only use on special occasions.

The trainin' area around us suddenly got real quiet and still . . . except for Nunzio who gave a disbelievin' whistle through his teeth as he stepped back.

Somethin' in my voice or the way I was drawin' myself up to my full height must have triggered the sergeant's survival instinct, 'cause all of a sudden he looked around nervous-like as if he

were tryin' to find an emergency exit door.

"WHAT ARE YOU ALL DOING JUST STANDING AROUND??!!!" he bellows, rurnin' his attention from me to the crowd which has gathered around us. "YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE QUALIFYING!! MOVE IT!!! NOW!!!"

This interruption gives me time to get my temper under control, and, after coolin' down a bit, I decide it is just as well the episode has drawn to a close. It seems, however, that the sergeant has a few last words for me.

"Guido!" he sez, just loud enough for me to hear, not lookin' me in the face.
"Yeah, Sergeant?"

"This isn't the time or the place, but we will continue this discussion . . . later."

The way he said it, it wasn't a challenge or a threat . . . just a statement.

Chapter Five:

"When I travel, nobody knows me . . . and I like it that way!"

S. KING

NUNZIO AND ME was tryin' to figure out what it was they had put on our plates under the laughin' title of "dinner," when Spyder plops down next to us. We're a little surprised at this, as we're normally left to ourselves when dinin', but the reason for her forwardness is not long in cornin'.

"You guys are with the Mob, aren't you," she sez, without so much as a "Hello" or "Nice evening."

Now, way back in the intro, I mentioned that we are not real big on bein' asked questions in general, and this specific question is a definite no-no.

"Are you a cop?" Nunzio shoots back, automa-

tic-like.

This is a 'Must Learn' question for anyone whose livelihood depends on extra-legal activities, as if one asks it of a cop, however undercover they

59

60 Robert Asprin

might be, they have to acknowledge their profession. Otherwise, any attempt to use the followin' conversation as evidence is dismissed as entrapment.

"Me? Are you kidding? No, I'm not a cop. Why do you ask?"

"Why do you want to know if we're in the Mob?" Nunzio shoots back.

You will notice that at this point, Spyder has answered our question, but we have not yet given a "yea" or "nay" to hers. Like I say, one has an inclination towards caginess in our line of work. Maybe it's a habit resultin' from our regular and prolonged discussions with DAs and Grand Juries. "I've been thinking of trying to join up with them once I get out of the army," she sez with a shrug. "I thought maybe you guys could give me a little information about what it's like workin' for the Mob, if not give me a recommendation or at least a contact."

"Connection."

"What's that. Swatter?"

"I said 'Connection.' In normal business you have contacts. In the Mob, the first step is to get 'connected.'"

". . . Or so we've heard," Nunzio sez quick-like, givin' me one of his dirty looks. "I dunno. We might be able to share a few rumors with you. What do you want to know?"

As you can see, my cousin is still bein' cautious, havin' less faith than I do in a "hearsay" defense.

With his "rumor" gambit, however, he has opened

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

61

the door for us to answer a few questions bout the Mob without actually admittin' to any affiliation on our part.

"Well, what's it like?"

"The hours are lousy," I sez.

"... And the retirement plan leaves a lot to be desired," Nunzio adds.

". . . But the pay's good. Right?" Spyder urges.

I have mentioned before that my cousin has few loves greater than the desire to lecture, and this chick has just pushed one of his favorite buttons. While he does not relax completely, he defrosts a bit.

"Not as good as you'd think from what the media says," he squeaks. "You see . . . remember what Guido said a second ago about being connected? Well, for a long time, when you first join the Mob, you actually have to pay us ... strike that . . . them instead of the other way around."

"How's that again?"

"It's easier to understand if you think of it as a franchise system. The Mob gives you permission or license to operate, and you give them a share of your profits. You have to give a percentage, say half, to the guy over you, who in turn has to split with the guy over him, and so on right up to the top. Of course, the guys at the top pull down a bundle, since there's a whole pyramid under them feeding 'em percentages."

"Wait a minute!" Spyder frowns. 'The last time I heard something like this, they were trying to get

62

Robert Asprin

me to sell cosmetics ... or was it cleaning products?"

"There are similarities," Nunzio agrees. "But there are some major differences, too."

"Like what?"

"Like the cosmetic pyramids don't break your face or your legs if you try to operate independently," I sez.

"What I was going to say," Nunzio sez, glarin' at me, "was that the cosmetic chains don't supply you with lawyers, much less alibis, if the authorities take offense at your activities ... or your tax reports."

"Oh yeah?" I bristles, gettin' a little fed up with Nunzio's know-it-all attitude. "Well the soapsy folks don't whack you if they think you're shortin' them on their take, either!"

"Well what do you expect 'em to do?" he snaps right back at me. "Have 'em arrested?"

"What's with you, Swatter?" Spyder sez, cockin' her head at me. "You sound like you're really down on the Mob."

"He's just a little edgy," Nunzio puts in quick before I can answer myself. "We were having a bit of an argument when you joined us."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she blinks, poppin' to her feet. "I didn't know I was interrupting anything. I can catch you guys later. Just think about what I was asking, okay?"

We watch her walk away, which is a real treat, as feminine company has been notably lackin' since we started our trainin'. Then Nunzio turns to me.

M.Y.T.H. INC. m ACTION

63

"Okay. What's eating you?"

"The same thing that's been eatin' me since the Boss sent us on this assignment," I sez. "Talkin' about the Mob makes it harder than usual to ignore. Know what I mean?"

"We wasn't assigned, we volunteered."

"We was asked to volunteer by the Boss, which for us is the same as bein' ordered."

Nunzio heaves one of his big sighs and droops a little.

"I guess we might as well have this out right now," he grimaces. "You're talking about us being here in Possiltum right?"

"I'm talkin' about us declarin' war on the Mob," I corrects. "Seein' as how we're currently holdin' the bag at ground zero, this is of some concern to me. Sorry, but I tend to get a bit nervous about overwhelmin'-type firepower when it is apt to be directed at me . . . especially when all we've got is government issue crossbows . . . and leather skirts for armor!"

» * *

If, perhaps, this concern of mine has taken youse by surprise, allow me to enlighten youse, startin' with a brief history lesson. For those of youse already aware of the danger cousin Nunzio and I are in, however, feel free to skip to the next asterisk-type punctuation mark.

Nunzio and me first met the Boss about five books back [Hit or Myth (Myth Adventures #4)] when we was assigned to tag along with one of the Mob's mouthpieces whilst he was looking for the

64 Robert Asprin

same Big Julie we was conversin' with in the first chapter. To be more precise, he was lookin' for the army which Big Julie was supposed to have been leadin' in a little fund raisin' venture for our organization, and which, accordin' to reports, had disappeared into thin air after encounterin' a bit of resistance led by the Boss. Of course, in those days we didn't cail him the Boss as we weren't workin' for him at the time. All we knew was that there was some bad news-type sorcerer named Skeeve the Great givin' the Mob grief and we was supposed to keep him off Shyster's back whilst the investigation progressed.

In the interest of brevity not to mention the preservin' of our royalty income from the backlist of this series, I will refrain from narratin' all the intriguin' details of that assignment. What is crucial that you understand, however, is that at the conclusion of that first encounter, a deal was struck between the Great Skeeve and Don Bruce, the Mob's Fairy Godfather. By the terms of that agreement, Don Bruce and the Mob was to lay off the Kingdom of Possiltum in general and Big Julie and his boys specifically, in exchange for the Great Skeeve givin' the Mob access to another dimension ... to wit, Deva, complete with its rather famous bazaar.

Shortly thereafter, Don Bruce hired the Great Skeeve to oversee the Mob's interests on Deva, and assigned Nunzio and me to him as bodyguards . . . which is when we we started callin' him Boss.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

65

me so far?

Okay, now review the circumstantial with me again, and see if youse can understand the dilemma facin' us.

First of all, the Boss is working for the Mob.

Second, he has sent us to deal with the situation in Possiltum while he goes after Aahz.

Now, as he works for the Mob and we all work for him, the entire strike force which is currently movin' on Queen Hemlock can be considered to be in the employment of the Mob.

Unfortunately, there is a deal in effect, one personally negotiated by Don Bruce himself, which says that no one in the Mob is to move against Possiltum! This means that our current operation is in direct violation of Don Bruce's sworn word . . . and while I can't say that notable has never gone back on his word, to do so is a decision he usually reserves for himself personally and tends to get more than a little peeved when someone else undertakes to break his word for him.

As you may have noted from followin' whatever type of media is in vogue where you're readin' this, when someone of Don Bruce's level in the Mob gets peeved, it is not usually expressed by an angry memo. If he feels his position or authority in the Mob is bein' challenged by some overly frisky underling, his usual response is to squash said underling like a bug. Of course, in our position as bodyguards to the Boss, this places us between the Squasher and the Squashee, resultin' in the edgi-

66 Robert Asprin

ness I was referrin' to a couple pages back which necessitated this explanation.

Understand now? If not, just trust me that I know more about these things than youse, and

that our whole crew will be in trouble with the Mob when and if Don Bruce finds out what we're

doin'.

* * *

"I've been giving it a lot of thought," Nunzio sez like he never left the conversation, which of course, he hadn't, "and I'm not sure the Boss knows he's crossing Don Bruce by sending us back here."

Now this set me back on my heels a bit. I had been assumin' all along that Skeeve sendin' us here was a premeditated move. The idea that he might be ignorant of the consequential of this action had never occurred to me.

"How do you figure that?"

"Well, the way I see it, the Boss is a real sharp cookie . . . except in two areas: the Mob, and broads."

"That's true," I sez, 'cause it was. While I have nothin' but the highest regard for the Boss overall, in those two areas he tends to be what we refer to in the Mob as "dumb as a stone."

"Also," Nunzio continues, "there's the fact that he didn't consult with us about the advisabilities of startin' a ruckus with the Mob, or even warn us to be careful of anything except Hemlock . . . which is not like him at all if he was expecting trouble from Don Bruce."

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

67

Again he has hit on a valid point. Skeeve has easily been the most considerate Boss we have ever worked with and has always been sensitive to our feelin's . . . especially those which is attached to parts of us which bleed or break. This

has a lot to do with the loyalty and genuine affection we hold for him . . . along with his pay scale which is both generous and dependable.

"Now that you mention it," I sez, "it wouldn't make much sense for the Boss to get into a power struggle or try to take over from Don Bruce, as he has never expressed any interest in or desire to elevate his standin' in the Mob."

Nunzio shrugged. "If that were his inclination, all he'd have to do is marry Bunny and let Don Bruce hand him the whole organization on a platter as an inheritance."

He is referrin' to the fact that not only is Bunny Don Bruce's niece, she is head over heels in love with the Boss . . . somethm' which seems to have escaped his notice entirely. Like we said earlier . . . The Mob and broads . . . Stone stupid.

"You may be right ..."

"Of course I'm right! It all fits!"

". . . But even if you are, I'm not sure what difference it makes," I finish, ignoring his rude interruption. "Whether we're breakin' Don Bruce's word by accident or on purpose, we will still be in the line of fire when that notable decides to put things right."

"The difference is that if we assume the Boss

68

Robert Asprin

doesn't want trouble with Don Bruce, we aren't obligated to stand and fight. More specifically, we're free to try to act as peace-makers between the two of them before blood starts to flow."

This reasonin' has a certain appeal to it, particularly as if said blood does indeed begin to flow,

the odds are that it will be the two of us at the source of said flow.

"Okay," I sez. "Assumin' that you're right about the Boss not wantin' trouble, and assumin' that Don Bruce lets you get a word in edgewise before the shootin' starts, what are you gonna say to cool him down?"

"That part," Nunzio hesitates, ". . . that part I'm still working on."

It occurs to me that until my cousin comes up with a surefire sales pitch to settle things, all that takin' a peace-maker role is accomplishin' is committin' us not to shoot back when the trouble starts!

Chapter Six:

"Boards don't hit back!"

B. LEE

PRE-INHABITED AS I was with my worries about Don Bruce and the Mob, the altercation between Sergeant Smiley and myself slipped my mind completely. As it turned out, however, this did not matter, as the sergeant took steps to remind me of it, and the way it was sprung on me, it wouldn't have done me no good to have used up a lot of time and energy thinkin' about it.

We had reached the portion of our trainin' in which we was to learn how to relate to the enemy at close quarters . . . preferably without surrenderin'. That is to say, hand-to-hand type combat.

Sergeant Smiley was teachin' this section himself, which did not strike me as odd until later, as he obviously had more than passin' familiarity with the techniques we was to learn. He homed in

69

70

Robert Asprin

on the Flie brothers as his demonstrator/victims, and had great fun showin' us all that size was not a factor in hand-to-hand combat by tossin' and punchin' 'em both around with impressive ease ... or, put differently, he really made them

fly-

While all this was great fun to watch, I could not help thinkin' that the lesson he was attemptin' to drive home stank higher than the "Realistic Doggie Doodle with Lifelike Aroma that Actually Sticks to Your Hands" that I was so familiar with. I mean, I wonder if he really thought he was foolin' anyone with his "size doesn't make a difference" spiel. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that size can make a considerable difference in a physical-type difference of opinion, as one honest to goodness fight will usually demonstrate this fact clearly enough to convince even the dimmest of wits. The only time skill triumphs over size is if the little guy is very skillful and the big guy is very unskillful ... not to mention slow and maybe has a glass jaw. If they are at all matched for skill, the big guy is a good bet to make strawberry jam of the little guy if he is so inclined. This is why professional contact, sport-type athletes, not to mention kneecappers like Nunzio and me, are on the extra-large side. It isn't because our employers figure we are cheaper if cost justified on a "by the pound" rate, it's because we tend to win.

Of course, even if one accepts the "skill over size" concept, there is still a glarin' flaw in the sergeant's logic. Remember how long I said it

M.Y.T.H. INC, IN ACTION

71

would take to train someone with a longbow? (No, this isn't gonna be a test ... I was just askin'.) Well, it takes even longer to train someone to be skillful at Hand-To-Hand. A lot longer. The idea that someone like the Spellin' Bee could absorb enough skill in one afternoon to be effective

against one of the Flie brothers, however unskilled, is laughable. Realizin' this, it was clear to me that even though he said we was bein' prepared for combat with the enemy, all he was doin' was showin' us a few tricks to help us survive the inevitable barroom type brawls which seem to naturally gravitate toward people in uniform who are tryin' to have a quiet drink around civilians durin' their off-duty hours. Simply put, we was bein' trained to deal with unskilled civilian-type fighters, preferably blind staggerin' drunk, rather than against skilled soldier-type fighters in the field.

". . . Of course, these are techniques which will enable you to dispatch an unarmed opponent!" Sergeant Smiley was sayin', which was again misleadin' as none of the countermoves he was demonstratin' were lethal enough to "dispatch" anyone, confirmin' my belief that someone was figurin' we'd only use them on civilians.

". . . To deal with an ARMED opponent, however, is a different matter entirely! Fortunately, we have an EXPERT with us to demonstrate how that is done! GUIDO! Front and center!"

"Me, Sergeant?" I blinks, as I had not expected to be called upon.

72

Robert Asprin

"That's right," the sergeant sez, showin' some extra teeth in his smile. "At the firing range you made a big point that only jerks have to kill people, Well, here's your chance to show everybody how to 'gentle' an enemy into submission when he's trying to kill you."

Needless to say, I don't care for the sounds of this, but as I have been summoned, I have little choice but to step forward into the clear space bein' used for the demonstrations. My discomfort grows as the sergeant gestures to Corporal Whittle, who

tosses him a short sword. That's right, a real short sword . . . with a point and sharpened edges.

"What's with the sword, Sergeant?" I sez.

"I said this was going to be a demonstration against an armed opponent," he grins. "What we're going to do is I'm going to try to kill you, and you're going to try to stop me without killing me."

"... And if I don't?"

"Then I guess we'll have us a little 'training accident' . . . unless, of course, you'd rather just back out now and admit you can't do it."

Needless to say, I did not obtain my current lofty position as bodyguard by backin' away from fights. What's more, the sword wasn't my real worry as it is nothin' more than a long knife, and I've dealt with knives often enough.

"Oh, I can do it," I shrugs. "The trouble is it might involve striking a non-commissioned officer . . . which I seem to recall from our Military Law lesson is a no-no."

The sergeant's smile fades a bit, and I realize he

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

73

has been expectin' me to withdraw from this exercise when he feeds me the cue. Unfortunately for both of us, this realization comes a little late to do us any good.

"Don't worry about that, 'Cruit/ " he sez, though I notice his voice has gotten tighter. "Even if you get real lucky and tag me, you're acting under orders so no charges will be brought."

That was all I needed to hear. As a last precaution, I glance back at Nunzio where he's standin' in line, and he gives me a little nod with his head.

"Your cousin can't help you now. Guide," Smiley snaps, regainin' a bit of confidence. "This is between you and me."

That wasn't why I was checkin' with Nunzio, but I have no trouble goin' with the flow, bein' real adaptable when the music is startin' and I am one of the designated dancers.

"I was just wonderin'," I sez with a shrug. "It's nice to know you know I'd be under orders. The question is whether or not that officer knows it."

Now the sergeant is no dummy and I really don't expect him to fall for the old "there's someone behind you" gag . . . but he does. It isn't until much later that I find out non-coms have a real thing about officers. That is, they are comfortable runnin' the army . . . unless there is an officer somewhere in witnessin' range. Anyway, Smiley starts cranin' his neck around tryin' to spot the officer to which I am referrin', and when his head is turned away from me, I glide in on him.

If this tactic sounds a little strange to you, realize

74

Robert Asprin

that if someone waves a sharpened hunk of metal at you, the last thing they are expectin' is for you to charge them. What you are supposed to do is freeze up, or better yet run, thereby givin' them ample leisure time to carve their initials on whatever portion of your anatomy is handiest. When you move forward instead of back, it tends to startle them, and they usually react by pokin' at you with their weapon to try to get you to back off like the script says. This is really what you want, as it has put you in control of their attack and lets you bring it in where and when you want it instead of just standin' and hopin' they'll go away while they play around on their own timetable.

The sergeant sees me comin' out of the corner of his eye, and, just like I expect, he sticks his sword out like he's hopin' I'll run into it and save him the trouble of havin' to plan and execute an attack of his own. This makes it easy for me to weave past his point and latch onto the wrist of his sword arm with my left hand, which keeps the weapon out of mischief and me, whilst I give him a medium strength pop under the ear with my right fist.

It was my genuine hope that this would end the affair without further waltzin', but the sergeant is still a pretty tough old bird and it only crosses his eyes and drops him to one knee. I realize the situation has just become dangerous, as he still has hold of his sword and in his dazed condition may not remember that this is only an exercise ... if that was his original intention at all.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

75

"Give it up, Sarge," I hisses quiet-like, steppin' in close so's only he can hear me. "It's over."

Just to be on the safe side I wind his arm up a little as I am sayin' this to prove my point. Unfortunately, he either doesn't hear me or chooses to ignore what you must admit is excellent advice, and starts strugglin' around tryin' to bring his sword into play.

"Suit yourself," I shrugs, not really expectin' a response, as at that moment he faints, mostly because I have just broken his arm ... for safety sake, mind you. (For the squeamish readers, I will hasten to clarify that this is a clean break as opposed to the messier compound variety, and that it probably wouldn't have put the sergeant out if he hadn't been woozy already from the clout I have just laid on him. As I have noted before, controlled violence is my specialty . . . and I'm very good at it.)

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING TO . . ."

These last words come from Corporal Whittle who has come alive far too late and tries to intervene after the dance is already done. The incomplete nature of his question is due to the fact that, as he is steppin' forward, he runs into a high swing from Nunzio's elbow goin' in the opposite direction, which effectively stretches him out on his back and turns his lights out . . . and also stops his annoyin' prattle. For the record, this is what the earlier exchange between Nunzio and me was all about . . . my makin' sure he was in

76

Robert Asprin

position and willin' to cover my back while I dealt with the sergeant.

There is a moment's silence, then someone in the ranks lets out a low, surprised whistle, which seems to cue everyone to put in their two cents worth.

"Wow!"

"Nice goin', Swatter!!"

" 'Bout time someone taught him to . . . ,"

Hy Flie starts nudgin' the corporal's nappin' form with his toe.

"They don't look so big lying down, do they, Swatter?" he grins, like he took the two of 'em out all by himself.

"AT EASE! ALL OF YOUSEH" I bellows, cuttin' the discussion off short, "If you touch that man again, Hy, you and I are gonna go a couple rounds. YOU UNNERSTAND ME??"

He looks surprised and hurt, but nods his agreement.

"/ can't hear you!!!"

"YES, SAR . . . I mean, GUIDOM"

"THAT GOES FOR THE REST OF YOUSE TOO!" I snarls. "I DON'T WANT TO SEE YOU KICKIN' EITHER OF THESE TWO, OR MAKIN' FUN OF THEM UNLESS YOU'RE WILLIN' TO DO THE SAME THING WHEN THEY'RE AWAKE AND ABLE TO HIT BACK. DO / MAKE MYSELF CLEAR??"

"YES, GUIDOW."

As might be noticed in my manner, I am a bit annoyed at this point, but mostly with myself. I

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

77

am genuinely irked that I was unable to squelch the sergeant's move without havin' to break his arm, and am quite willin' to take my anger out on the crew. If my speech pattern when addressin' my colleagues seems uncharacteristic, it is because I discovered quickly that the army's non-coms have a point ... it is the easiest way to shout at an entire formation at the same time.

"Okay, now LISTEN UP!! As Actin' Squad Leader, I am the rankin' individual present until such time as the sergeant and corporal regain consciousness. I want one volunteer to get a medic for these two, while the REST OF US CONTINUE WITH THE TRAININ' EXERCISE!!"

This strikes me as the logical course to follow, as I am not eager to lose a day's trainin' whilst waitin' for our non-coms to wake up. At this point, however, I notice my cousin has raised his hand politely for my attention.

"Yes, Nunzio? Are you volunteerin' to go for a medic?"

"Not really, Acting Squad Leader Guide, sir," he sez, sarcastic-like. "I was just thinking that, before you assumed command, it might be wise for you to check in with the officer over there who is the ranking individual present."

Now, as youse will recall, when I pulled this gag on the sergeant, it was a ploy to divert his attention. I've played Dragon Poker with Nunzio though, and I can tell when he's bluffin' . . . and this time he wasn't. With a sinkin' feelin' in my stomach, I turn to look in the direction he is

78 Robert Asprin

pointin'. Sure enough, there is an officer there, the first I have seen outside of our lectures. What is worse, he is comin' our way with a real grim look on his face.

"Stand easy, Guido."

I switch from Attention to At Ease, which is not to say I am at ease at all. I have been summoned to the Officer's Tent, which is not surprisin' as it is obvious I am gonna take some kinda flack for the afternoon's skirmish. What does take me off guard is that Sergeant Smiley is there as well, sportin' a sling for his arm and a deadpan expression.

"Sergeant Smiley here has given me his version of what's been going on with your training group that led up to the event I witnessed this afternoon. Would you like to tell me your side of the story?"

"I'm sure the sergeant's account is complete and accurate . . . sir," I sez, crisp-like.

Normally, I would have just clammed up until I had a lawyer, but so far no charges have been mentioned, and I somehow don't think this is a good time to make waves.

"Very well," the officer nods. "In that case I feel compelled to follow the sergeant's recommendation in this case."

It occurs to me that maybe I should have offered up some defense, but it is too late now, as the officer has already swung into action. Pickin' up a quill, he scribbles his name across the bottom of a series of papers that have been sittin' on his desk.

"Do you know what an army that's been grow-

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

79

ing as fast as ours needs the most, Guido?" he sez as he's writin'.

I start to say "Divine Intervention," but decide to keep my mouth shut . . . which is just as well as he proceeds to answer his own question.

"Leadership," he sez, finishin' his signin' with a flourish of his quill. "We're always on the lookout for new leaders . . . which is why I'm so pleased to sign these orders."

For a change, I have no difficulty lookin' innocent and dumb, as he has totally lost me with his train of thought.

"Sir?"

"What I have here are the papers promoting you to sergeant and Nunzio . . . he's your cousin, isn't he? ... to corporal."

Now I am really lost.

"Promotions, sir?"

"That's right. Sergeant Smiley here has told me how the two of you have taken it on yourselves to lead your squad during training . . . even to the point of giving them extra training during off duty hours. After seeing for myself how you took command after . . . that mishap during training today, I have no problem approving your promo-

tion. That's the kind of leadership and incentive we like to see here in the army. Congratulations."

"Thank you, sir," I sez, not bein' able to think of anything else to say.

"Oh yes . . . and one other thing. I'm pulling your entire unit out of training and assigning them to active duty. Ifs only garrison duty, but it's the

80 Robert Asprin

only thing available right now. I figure that anything more they need to learn, you can help them pick up on the job. That's all ... Sergeant Guido."

It takes me a minute to register he is addressin' me by my new rank, but I manage to come to attention and salute before turnin' to go.

"If I may, sir," I heard Sergeant Smiley say, "I'd like to have a word outside with Sergeant Guido before he rejoins his unit."

I am half-expectin' Smiley to try to jump me, bad arm and all, once we get outside, or at least lay some heavy threats on me about what would happen the next time our paths cross. Instead, he is all grins and holds out his good hand for me to shake.

"Congratulations, Guido . . . sorry, I mean Sergeant Guido," he sez. "There was one thing I wanted to say to you away from the other recruits."

"What's that, Sergeant?"

"I wanted to tell you that you were right all along ... it does take more skill to handle a combat situation without killing . . . and I'm glad to see we're getting men of your abilities enlisting on our side. Just remember, though, that we only have limited time to train the recruits . . . which is why we focus on getting

them to think in terms of 'kills.' If they're at all squeamish about killing, if they think they can get by by disarming the enemy, they'll try to do that instead . . . and they don't have the skill and we

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

81

don't have the time to teach it to them, so they end up dead themselves and we end up placing second in a two army fight. Try to keep that in mind the next time you're working with a group of raw recruits. In the meantime, good luck! Maybe we'll get a chance to serve together again sometime."

I am so surprised by the sergeant turnin' out to be a good Joe, not to mention givin' careful consideration to the thoughts he laid on me, that I am nearly back to the unit before the full impact of my promotion sinks in.

Then, I feel depressed. My entire career has been geared toward avoidin' bein' an authority-type figure, and now I am saddled with what is at least a supervisory post . . . permanent this time instead of temporary. My only consolations are that a) I can potentially do more damage havin' a higher rank, and b) Nunzio has to suffer the burden of extra stripes right along with me.

Perkin' up a little from these thoughts, I go lookin' for Nunzio, wantin' to be the first to slip him the bad news.

1

Chapter Seven:

"To Serve and Protect ..."

TRADITIONAL MOTTO OF PROTECTION RACKETS

As EAGER AS we are to get on with our assignment, which is to say demoralizin' and disruptin' the

army, both Nunzio and me are more than a little nervous about doin' garrison duty.

Not that there is anything wrong with the town, mind you. Twixt is a bigger'n average military town, which means there is lots of stuff to keep us amused during our off-duty hours. The very fact that it is a sizable burg, however, increases the odds of our presence bein' noticed and reported to Don Bruce . . . which, as we have mentioned before, was not high on our list of desirable occurrences.

The duty itself was annoyin'ly easy, annoyin' in that it's hard to stir up the troops when the worst thing facin' them is boredom. The situation is
83

84

Robert Asprin

readily apparent even when I put Nunzio to work settlin' our crew in whilst I report in to the garrison commander.

"Our only real job here is to maintain a military presence . . . show the flag so's folks remember why they're paying their taxes."

The individual deliverin' this speech is average height, about a head shorter than me, and has dark tight-curly hair with a few wisps of grey showin' in spots . . . which might have made him look dignified if he didn't move like a dock worker tryin' to finish early so's he can go on a heavy date. He has a rapid-fire kinda speech pattern and rattles off his orders without lookin' up from the papers he is scribblin' on. I can't help but notice, however, that what he is workin' on so hard looks a lot like poetry . . . which I somehow don't think is covered by his official orders.

"All you and your boys gotta do is spend a certain number of hours a day patrolling the streets in uniform so's folks can see the army is

here. The rest of the time, you're on your own."

"You mean like policemen?"

The words just sorta popped outta my mouth, but they must'a had a note of horror in them, as the commander broke off what he was doin' to look at me direct.

"Not really," he sez, quick-like. "We used to be responsible for patrolling the streets, but the town's grown to a point where it has its own police force, and we try not to interfere with their authority. They watch the citizens, and our own Military

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

85

Police watches our troops. Clear and separate. See?"

"Yes sir."

"... which brings us to another point," the commander continues, startin' to scribble on his papers again. 'There's a non-fraternization rule in effect for our troops. We don't enforce it too strictly, so you don't have to worry if one of the . . . ah, ladies makes advances toward you or your men, but let them come to you. Don't start messing around with the ordinary civilian women. It's liable to get the civilian men upset however it goes, and our main directive here is to not incite any trouble with the civilians. Be nice to them . . . show them we're just plain folks, like they are. If you can do that, then they're less inclined to believe any wild stories they might hear about what our troops are doing on the front lines. Got that?"

I didn't think it would really matter what I said or did, as the commander is rattlin' all this off like it is memorized while he fiddles with his writin'. I didn't think it would be wise to test this theory, however.

"Yes sir," I sez. "No fraternizin' with the women . . . No fightin' with the men. Got it."

"Very well, report back to your unit and see that they're properly settled in. Then take the rest of the day to familiarize yourselves with the town, and report here for assignment tomorrow morning."

"Yes sir." I draw myself up and give him a

86

Robert Asprin

snappy salute, which he returns without even lookin' up.

I can't help but I feel I have kinda gotten the bum's rush on my briefin', so on the way out I pause to have a few words with the commander's clerk ... a decision which I'll admit is in part due to the factual that she is the only skirt I have seen in uniform except for Spyder, and I am beginnin' to feel a little desperate for the sound of a female-type voice. Besides, I outrank her, and figure it is about time my new stripes work a little for me instead of against me.

"What's the deal with the commander?" I sez, friendly-like, givin' her one of my lesser used non-intimidatin' smiles.

Instead of respondin', however, this chick just stares at me blankly like she's still waitin' for me to say somethin'. Now, she is a tiny little thing, a bit on the slender side, so her starin' at me with those big eyes starts makin' me feel a little uncomfortable . . . like she's a praying mantis tryin' to decide if she should eat me before or after we mate.

"I mean, how come he's writin' poetry?" I add, just to get some kinda conversation flowin'.

"Lyrics," she sez, in a flat sort of voice.

"Excuse me?"

"I said 'lyrics' ... as in 'words for songs/ He likes to perform in the local clubs at their open stage nights, and he writes his own material . . . constantly."

"Is he any good?"

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

87

This gets me a small shrug.

"I suppose he's not bad . . . but he doesn't play guitar, so mostly he has to sing a cappella. That makes his performance sound a little thin after listening to an evening of singers with instrumental accompaniments."

I notice that for all her apparent disinterest, this chick seems to know a lot about what the commander does on his off hours . . . even to the point of sittin' through a whole evenin' of amateur singers to listen to his set when she doesn't really like his singin'. From this I deduce that I am not likely to get much of anywhere with her as a sergeant, so I settle for bein' friendly.

"Maybe he should try keyboards," I sez.

"Try what?" she blinks, suddenly takin' more interest in the conversation.

"Key . . . Oh! Nothin'. Hey, I got to be goin' now. Nice talkin' with you."

With that I beat a hasty retreat, a little annoyed with myself. Again my time on Deva has almost gotten me in trouble. For a second there, I forgot that this dimension not only doesn't have keyboards, it does not have the electricity necessary for the pluggin' in of said instrument.

"Hey Guido!" comes a familiar voice, interruptin' my thoughts. "What's the word?"

I looked around to find Nunzio and the rest of the crew bearin' down on me.

"No big deal," I shrugs. "We don't even go on duty until tomorrow. The commander's given us

88 Robert Asprin

the rest of the day to settle in and check out the town."

"Sounds good to me," Hy Flie sez, rubbin' his hands together like . . . well, like a fly. "What say we get something to eat . . . and at the same time see if we can find a place to hang out on our off-duty hours."

"How about the spaghetti place we passed on the way here?" Spyder sez, jerkin' her head back in the direction they had come from.

I shoot a quick glance at Nunzio, who is already lookin' at me. As so often happens when we're workin' together, we are thinkin' the same thing at the same time, and this time we're both thinkin' that the best way to avoid runnin' into someone with Mob connections is by not usin' a spaghetti place for a base of operations.

"Ah . . . let's see if we can find someplace less likely ... I mean, closer." I suggest, casual-like.

"Well, how 'bout we try right here?" Nunzio chimes in, pickin' up on my general train of thought.

I look where he is pointin', and have to admit that it is probably the last place someone from the Mob would think of lookin' for us. The sign over the door of the joint reads, ABDUL'S SUSHI BAR AND BAIT SHOP.

"Sushi?" Shu Flie scowls. "You mean like raw

fish?"

"At least we know it's fresh," Junebug sez, gesturin' at the second part of the sign.

"Oh, don't be a bunch of babies" Spyder grins,

M.Y.T.H. INC, m ACTION

89

givin' Shu a poke in the ribs. "Wait 'til you've tried it. It's good! Come on."

Now, I am no more enthusiastic than the Flie brothers about eatin' this stuff, even though Nunzio has been after me for some time to give it a try. I mean, I'm used to fish in a tomato sauce or somethin', served with pasta—not rice. Still, there seems little option than to follow Spyder and Nunzio as they merrily lead the way into the place.

"Ah! Members of our noble fighting forces!" the proprietor sez, slitherin' up out of the dim depths to greet us. "Please, come right in. We give special discounts for our men . . . and ladies ... in uniform!"

"Can we have a table close to the window so's there's more light?" Nunzio sez, giving me a wink.

I know what he is thinkin' and normally would approve. The proprietor is makin' me feel a little uneasy, however. Despite his toothy smile, I have a strong feelin' he can tell within a few pieces of small change how much money our crew is carryin' . . . and is already tryin' to figure how much of it he can glom onto before we escape. In short, I haven't felt this sized up by a merchant since we left the Bazaar at Deva.

Despite my growin' discomfort, I join the crew as the proprietor ushers us to a window table and distributes menus. Everybody gives their drink orders, then start porin' over the menus with Spyder and Junebug servin' as interpreters . . .

everyone except Nunzio, that is.

90

Robert Asprin

Ignorin' his menu completely, my cousin starts fishin' around his belt pouch.

"While we're here, anyone care for a couple quick hands of Dragon Poker?" he sez innocent-like, producin' a deck of cards and a battered, dog-eared book.

The whole crew groans at this, a sure indication of their familiarity with the game, which is not surprisin' as Nunzio and me have been takin' great pains to teach it to 'em. Despite their apparent reluctance, however, I notice that their stakes money appears on the table in a quick ripple of movement, which is in itself a testimony to the addictin' nature of this particular pastime. I can speak from my own experience in sayin' that there is nothin' like watchin' a pot you've built on a nice hand disappear into someone else's stack because of some obscure-type Conditional Modifier to convince a new player that it is definitely in his best interest to learn more about the game as it is his only chance of winnin' some of his money back, much less show a profit. That is, you play your first game of Dragon Poker for the fun of it, and after that youse is playin' for revenge.

"Okay . . . ante up!" Nunzio sez, givin' the cards a quick shuffle and offerin' the deck for a cut.

"Not so fast, cousin," I interrupts, fishin' my own copy of the rulebook out. "First, let's settle what the Conditional Modifiers are."

"Why bother?" Shue Flie grimaces. "They change every day."

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

91

"Every day? You mean every hour!" his brother sez.

"Whatever," Spyder shrugs. "Start dealing Nunzio. Swatter here can fill us in on the high points."

For those of youse unfamiliar with Dragon Poker, it is a very popular means of redistributin' wealth throughout the dimensions. You can think of it as nine card stud poker with six card hands . . . that is, if you don't mind gettin' your brains beat out financially. You see, on top of the normal rules of card playin', there are Conditional Modifiers which can change the value of a card or hand dependin' on the dimension, hour of the day, number of players, position at the table, or any one of a multitude of other factors, makin' Dragon Poker the most difficult and confusin' card game in all the dimensions.

Nunzio and me got fascinated by dis game whilst everyone was tryin' to teach it to the Boss in time for his big match with the Sen-Sen Ante Kid, and it isn't really all that hard . . . providin' one had a copy of the rules applicable to the dimension youse is in at the time. (Of course, the Boss couldn't use a book durin' the big match, as he was supposed to be an expert already.) Before leavin' the Bazaar for this particular caper, both Nunzio and me included pickin' up copies of the rulebook for Klah (our home dimension where dis narration is takin' place) as part of our preparations. If youse perhaps think that buying two copies of the rulebook is a needless expense, let me give youse a free tip about playin' Dragon Poker: Your best

92

Robert Asprin

defense at the table is havin' your own copy of the rules. Youse see, one of the standin' rules in any Dragon Poker game is that the players are individually responsible for knowin' the Conditional Modifiers. Put simply, this means that if you don't

know a particular modifier which would turn your nothin' hand into a winner, no one is obligated to announce it to you. This is a tradition of the game and has nothin' to do with the honesty of them what plays it. If anything, it avoids accusations that a player deliberately withheld information to win a hand rather than a particular modifier simply bein' overlooked amidst the multitude of modifiers in effect at any given time. In short, as much as I trust my cousin Nunzio to cover my back in a brawl, I feel it wisest not to count on him lookin' out for my interest at a Dragon Poker table, and therefore figure havin' my own copy of the rule-book is a necessary expense, not a luxury or convenience.

"Lefs see," I sez, thumbin' through the book, "the sun is out . . . and we're playin' indoors . . ."

". . . and there's an odd number of players . . ."
Spyder supplies, showin' she's gettin' the hang of the modifyin' factors.

"... and one of them is female . . . sort of ..." Junebug adds, winkin' at Spyder.

"Sorry to take so long with your drinks, my friends," the proprietor sez, announcin' his presence as he arrives back at the table with a tray of potables. "Now, who has the . . . HEY! WHAT IS THIS???!!!!" .

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

93

It suddenly occurs to me that there may be some local ordinance against gamblin' . . . which would explain why the proprietor is suddenly so upset.

"This?" I sez, innocent-like. "Oh, we're just havin' a friendly little game of cards here. Don't worry, we're just usin' the coins to keep score and . . ."

"Don't give me that!" our host snarls, with no

trace of his earlier greasy friendliness. "Thafs Dragon Poker you're playing! No one plays that game unless . . ."

He breaks off sudden-like and starts givin' each of us the hairy eyeball.

"All right, which one of you is a demon? Or is it all of you? Never mind! I want you all out of here . . . RIGHT NOW!!!"

I

Chapter Eight:

"It takes one to know one!"
JACK D. RIPPER

L

To SAY THE proprietor's accusation caused a stir at our table is like sayin' it would cause raised eyebrows to have Don Bruce as the guest speaker at a Policeman's Banquet. Unfortuitously, everyone had different questions to ask.

"What's he mean 'demon'?" Spyder demanded.

I started to answer her, as I knew from my work with the Boss that a demon is the commonly accepted term for a dimension traveler, but there was too much cross-talk for rational-type conversation.

"Are we supposed to leave?" Spellin' Bee sez, scared-like as he peered at the retreatm' figure.

"What's wrong with Dragon Poker?" Shu Flie put in.

"Nothin'/" I sez to him. "You see, Spyder . . ."

96 Robert Asprin

"Then what put the burr under his saddle?" Shu

pressed, startin' to get under my skin.

Fortunately, in rrainin' I have discovered there is one way to shut this particular individual up when he gets on a roll.

"Shu Flie," I sez, "don't bother me."

It was an old joke by this time, but it still got a laugh . . . which is not surprisin' as I have found that the vast majority of army humor pivots on old jokes.

"Watch yourself, brother," Hy Flie sez, pokin' Shu in the ribs. "The Swatter there is lookin' to squash a fly again . . . and he might not be too picky about which of us he swats."

Under the cover of this new round of laughs, Nunzio leans forward to talk to me direct. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking, cuz?" "That, of course, depends upon what it is you are thinkin', Nunzio," I sez, reasonable-like. "If, perchance, you are thinkin' that you can color our cover 'blown,' then we are, indeed, thinkin' along the same lines,"

To my surprise, instead of agreein' he rolls his eyes like he does when I'm missin' something which to him is obvious.

"Think it through, Guido," he sez. "He thinks we're from off-dimension, because we know about Dragon Poker . . . right?" "Yeah. So?"

"So how does he know about it?" To me, this question is as trivial as wonderin' how a cop happens to know about a particular

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

97

ordinance . . . which is to say it is beside the point, totally overlookin' the immediate dilemma

of dealin' with the aftermath of us gettin' caught breakin' it.

"I dunno. I guess someone showed it to him. So what?"

For some reason, this seems to get Nunzio even more upset.

"Guido," he sez, clenchin' his teeth, "sometimes I wonder if all those knocks on the head you've taken have . . . oops! He's coming back. Quick . . . Bee?"

"Yes, Nunzio?" our junior magician sez, blinkin' with surprise at havin' been suddenly included in our discussion.

"Get your Dis-spell ready, and when I give you the nod . . . throw it on the proprietor."

"The proprietor? Why?"

"Bee . . . just do it. Okay?" I interrupts, havin' learned from experience that the only thing that takes longer than listenin' to one of Nunzio's lectures is tryin' to pry a straight answer out of him when he's tryin' to let you discover the point yourself.

Bee starts to say somethin', then shuts his mouth, shrugs, startin' to mumble and mutter like he does when he's gettin' ready to use magik.

The others at the table look at Nunzio expectant-like, but he just leans back in his chair lookin' confident and smug. I, of course, imitate his action, though I have no more idea what he is about to pull than the rest of the crew. You see, past

98 Robert Asprin

experience has taught me that one of the best times to act confident is when youse is totally in the dark . . . but would just as soon no one else is aware of your ignorance.

"Are you still here?" the proprietor demands, materializin' beside our table again. "I don't want to have to tell you again! Now get out before I call the cops!"

"I don't think so," Nunzio sez, starin' at the ceilin'.

"WHAT??!!!"

". . . In fact, I was thinkin' we might want to make your place our home away from home ... If you know what I mean."

"Izzat so?! Think just 'cause you're in the Army you can do anything you want, do you? Well, let me tell you something, soldier-boy. I happen to be a tax paying member of this community in good standing with the authorities, and soldiers or not they don't take too kindly to demons in these parts. In fact, I can't think of one good reason why I shouldn't call the police right now and have them drag you all right out of here!"

"I can," Nunzio smiles, and nods at Bee.

At the cue, Spellin' Bee squares his shoulders, purses his lips, and lets fly with his Dis-Spell, and . . .

"What the . . ."

"MY GOD!!!"

"Lookit ..."

The reason for this outpourin' of surprise and disbelief on the part of our crew is that, despite our

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

99

time with them, Nunzio and me has failed to brief or otherwise prepare them for acceptin' the con-

cept of demons . . . which is what they're suddenly confronted with. That is, as soon as Bee completed his spell, there was a ripplin' in the air around the proprietor, and instead of a greasy local type, he now looked just like . . .

"A Deveel!" I sez, hidin' my own surprise.

Actually, I am a little annoyed at myself for not havin' figured it out on my own. I mean, no matter what he looked like, I had been thinkin' that he was actin' like a Deveel since I first set eyes on him.

The reaction of our crew to this discovery, however, is nothin' compared to the reaction we gets from the proprietor.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING!!??" he screeches, lookin' around the place desperately, only to find we are the only ones present. "YOU TRYIN' TO GET ME LYNCHED???"

With that, he goes scuttlin' off, leavin' Nunzio and me to deal with the confusion caused by the removal of his disguise.

"THAT WAS A DEVIL!!!"

I miss who exactly it is who observes this particular utterance, as it is said behind me and the choked, gargley nature of the voice makes positive identification no easy task. Still, I have no difficulty comin' up with a response.

"I know. That's what I said before," I explain.

"No, you said he was a Da-veel," Junebug sez frownin'.

100

Robert Asprin

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

"Same difference," I shrugs.

"Look," Spyder sez, holdin' up a hand to the others for them to be quiet. "Are you guys going to tell us what's goin' on here or not?"

"Guido," Nunzio sez, jerkin' his head in the direction the proprietor has gone. "Why don't you go do a little negotiating with our host before he gets too recovered from our little surprise, whilst I try to explain the facts of life to our colleagues."

This is fine by me, as I do not share my cousin's love of lengthy and confusin' explanations and am glad to be excused from what promises to be a classic opportunity for him to pontificate. Besides, it is not often that one has a chance to really stick it to a Deveel, and as in those few occasions I have been present for, I have usually had rank pulled on my by the financial types of the M.Y.T.H. Inc. team, I am lookin' forward to a rare opportunity to demonstrate my own negotiatin' talents. Of course, it occurs to me that the only witness I will have for this exercise will be the individual upon whom I am turnin' the screws, and he will doubtless be less than appreciative of my finesse. Doin' one's best work in the absence of witnesses is, however, one of the unfortunate and unjust realities of my chosen profession, and I have long since resigned myself to the burden of anonymity . . . teliin' myself that if I had wanted to be a well-known crook, I should have gone into politics.

The proprietor has vanished like a cat burglar at the sound of a bell, but I soon discover him in a

small office behind the bar. He is holdin' one of those small foldin' cases with a mirror in it like broads use to check their makeup, only instead of powder and colored goop, his just seems to have a couple dials in it. Starin' into the mirror, he twiddles with the dials a bit ... and slowly the disguise he was wearin' before came into focus

again, leadin' me to conclude that it is some kind of magik device. If it seems to youse that it took me a long time to reach this conclusion, you are makin' the mistake of underestimatin' my speed of thinkin'. Included in my observational analysis was a certain amount of speculation of whether such a device might be handy to have for my own use ... as well as whether it would be better to obtain one on my own or simply include this one in my negotiations.

Apparently the gizmo also functions as a normal mirror, as the proprietor suddenly shifts the angle he is holdin' it at so's we are starin' at each other in the glass, then he snaps it shut and turns to face me.

"What do you want?!" he snarls. "Haven't you done enough to me already?"

I do not even bother tryin' to point out that I am not the one what stripped him of his disguise speil, as I have learned durin' my residence on Deva that unless they are actively sellin', which fortunately is most of the time, Deveels are extremely unpleasant and unreasonable folks who do not accept that simple logic is sufficient reason

102 Robert Asprin

to stop complainin'. They do, however, respond to reason.

"I have come as a peace emissary," I sez, "in an effort to reach an equitable settlement of our differences."

The Deveel simply makes a rude noise at this, which I magnanimously ignore as I continue.

"I would suggest you meet our offer with equal enthusiasm for peace . . . seein' as how continued hostilities between us will doubtless result in my colleagues and me trashin' this fine establishment of yours . . ."

"What? My place?" the proprietor blinks, his mouth continuin' to open and close like a fish out of water.

". . . As well as spreadin' the word about your bein' a Deveel to the authorities you was so ungraciously threatenin' us with . . . and anyone else in this town who will listen. Know what I mean?"

Now, I have this joker cold, and we both know it. Still he rallies back like a punch-drunk boxing champ on the downslide, fightin' more from guts and habit than from any hope of winnin'.

"You can't do that!" he sez, gettin' his mouth workin' well enough to at least sputter. "If you turn me in as a demon, then I'll incriminate you, too! We'll all end up getting killed, or at least run out of town."

"There is one major difference in our circumstances which you are overlookin'," I sez, grin-nin' at him. "While I will admit that my cousin and

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

103

me have done some dimension travelin', this particular dimension of KJah happens to be our home territory. The appearances you see are legit and not disguises, so any attempt to accuse us of bein' from off-dimension would be difficult to prove, as we are not. On the other hand, you, bereft of disguise, would encounter extreme difficulty in convincin' a jury or lynch mob that you was from around here."

I thought this would bring any resistance on the proprietor's part to an end, but instead he straightens up and frowns, his eyes takin' on a mean glitter.

"You're from this dimension? You wouldn't happen to know a local magician and demon by the

name of Skeeve, would you?"

As I have said before, I have not reached my current age and position by panicking under cross-type examination or by overratin' the necessity for voicin' the whole truth. I can see that this Deveel has some kind of grudge against the Boss, so while habitually avoidin' any false statement which could lead to perjury charges, I am careful not to acknowledge my actual relationship with the individual in question.

"Skeeve?" I sez, frownin' dramatically like I learned to do in theater. "I think I may have heard the name while I was workin' at the Bazaar, but I ain't heard it recently."

"Too bad," the Deveel mutters, almost to himself. "I owe that Klahd a bad turn or two. I spent a couple of years as a statue under a cloud of

104 Robert Asprin

pigeons because of him. In fact I'd still be there if it weren't for ... but that's another story, if you know what I mean."

Of course, from workin' with the Boss, I knew exactly what he meant . . . that the story of his escape was gonna be marketed separately sometime as a short story to generate additional revenue whilst promotin' these books at the same time. Of course, admittin' this understandin' would have been a dead giveaway, so I decide to change the subject instead.

"Yeah, sure. Say, speakin' of names, what's yours, anyway? I mean your real name, not this Abdul alias."

"What? Oh! It's Frumple ... or it used to be back when I was welcome in my own dimension of Deva."

That had a familiar sound to it, but I decide enough is enough, and take a firm grip on the

subject at hand.

"Well, I'm Guido and my cousin what was talkin' to you back at the table is Nunzio . . . and I believe we was discussin' the terms of our peaceful coexistence with youse?"

Frumple cocked his head to one side, studyin' me close-like.

"You know," he sez, "you sound like you work for the Mob. In fact, now that I think about it, I seem to recall hearing something about the Mob trying to move in on the Bazaar."

"Yeah? So?"

"So I'm already making yearly protection pay-

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

105

ments to the Mob, and I don't see why I should stand for being shaken down for anything extra."

This information that the Mob is operatin' in these parts is disquietin' to say the least, but I manage not to show any surprise or nervousness.

"Really?" I sez. "Tell me, does your local Mob sales rep know that you're a Deveel?"

"Okay, okay! I get the point," Frumple says, throwin' up his hands. "What do you want to keep that information quiet?"

"Well, since we're lookin' to make this our hangout for a while, I figure we can protect your little secret as a courtesy."

"Really?"

"Sure," I smiles. "Of course, in return, it would be nice if you extended the hospitality of your establishment to us and our friends ... as a courtesy."

"I see," he sez, tightenin' his lips to a crooked line. "All right, I guess I don't have much choice. It'll be cheaper to give you free drinks than to have to relocate and start building a business up from scratch. I'll give you free drinks, and maybe an occasional meal. The rooms upstairs are out, though. If I start letting you use those for free, I'll go out of business anyway. They're the profit margin that keeps this place afloat."

"Rooms?"

"Yeah. I've got a few rooms upstairs that I rent to the customers by the hour so they can . . . have some privacy with any interesting people they happen to meet here. You see, this

L

106

Robert Asprin

place gets pretty lively evenings. It's one of the more popular singles bars in town."

"You mean you got broads workin' the joint at night?"

"Certainly not! The women who hang out here have regular high-paying jobs and wouldn't dream of charging for their company."

"So the customers pay you for the rooms, but not the broads," I sez. "Sounds like a sweet setup to me."

"Not that sweet," Frumple amends, hastily.

"Still, it helps pay the rent."

"Okay. I think we can settle for drinks and food," I shrugs. "Come on out front, Frumple, and

I'll let you buy me a drink to show there's no hard feelin's."

"You're too kind," the Deveel grumbles, but he follows me out of the office.

"I think champagne would be appropriate to seal our agreement, don't you?" I sez. "White champagne."

"White champagne?"

"Of course," I smiles, glad for a chance to show off my knowledge and culture. "This here is a sushi bar, ain't it? You think I don't know what color champagne to have with fish?"

Chapter Nine:

"Manners are acquired, not inherited!"

S. PENN

THINGS ARE PRETTY sweet for a while after I make our arrangement with Frumple. The reduced costs of our off-hour drinkin' are a real boon on the scut wages the army is payin' us, and the Deveel sure had the right of it when he said his sushi bar was a happy huntin' grounds when it came to broads. Of course, 'broads' is perhaps a mis-nomenclature for the type of women what hang out at this establishment evenings. These was not the usual gum-snappin, vacant-eyed skirts we are used to assoriatin' with, but rather the classy, fashion-wise young female executive with a lot on the ball what normally wouldn't give lunks like us the time of day. It seems that once we invaded the sanctuary of these upwardly mobile females, however, they was open-minded enough to give us

107

108 Robert Asprin

serious consideration in their own deliberations. While I will not try to comment on which of these two types of females actually makes for better

companions, there are things to be said for each . . . though not all those things are complimentary.

There are two flies which mar our enjoyment of this ointment, however, and here I am not referrin' to the Flie brothers. First, there is the ever-present danger of runnin' into someone from the Mob, as Frumple's comments have confirmed our suspicion that they maintain some kind of presence here. Second, there is the annoyin' detail that we are supposed to be working on an assignment, not havin' a good time. Naturally, this is the subject of no small amount of conversation between Nunzio and me.

"The trouble is, we can't really do a good job of disruptin' without movin' around town," I was sayin' durin' one such discussion, "and if we move around town, then the odds of our runnin' into someone from the Mob goes way up!"

"Then we'll have to see what we can stir up from right here," my cousin sez. "When you stop to think about it, this is a pretty good setup for it ... makin' trouble, I mean. Most of these women have husbands at home, and even the ones that don't have sufficient standing in the community that if it comes to an altercation, the local authorities will have to take her side of it."

"Why do you say that? I mean, why should

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

109

messin' with these broads cause any more hassle than any others?"

Instead of answerin' right away, Nunzio leans back and gives me the hairy eyeball for a few minutes.

"Guido," he says at last, "Are you tryin' to be stupid just to get a rise out of me?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you yourself said that our commander told us that it was okay if we messed with bimbos, but to leave the respectable women alone. Yet now that I am tryin' to put together a specific course of action, you are actin' like it is a brand-new concept to you."

"It just seems to me that it is a revoltin' form of class bias and bigotry," I sez, "assumin' that a woman's respectability is a matter of her financial standin' and education. Wouldn't it be better if it were the other way around? I mean, if a woman's respectability determined where she stood in the financial order instead of the other way around?"

"There are two problems with that," Nunzio sez. "First of all, the same unfair standard is applied to men as well . . . meanin' it holds for everyone, not just women. Them what is rich and educated is always deemed more respectable ... if for no other reason than they wield more power and pay more taxes."

"That's true," I sez, noddin' thoughtful-like. "The second problem is that it's completely off the subject of what we was discussin' . . . which is to say how to cause disruption."

110

Robert Asprin

"It is?"

"What is more, any time you try to start a philosophical discussion with me, it is to be taken as a sure sign that you are deliberately tryin' to divert my attention ... as normally you avoid such conversations like a subpoena."

I say nothin' when he pauses, as he seems to have me cold. I had been tryin' to change the subject.

"All of this, the attempt at stupidity and the

lame effort at philosophical discussion, leads me to believe that for some reason you are stalling and do not wish to commence working on our assignment. Am I right?"

I avoid his eyes and shrug kinda vague-like.

"Come on, Cuz, talk to me," Nunzio urges. "Are you really havin' so much fun playing soldier that you want to prolong the experience?"

"That is not only silly, it is insultin'!" I sez, my annoyance overcomin' my embarrassment at havin' been caught.

"Then what is it? ... If you don't mind my asking?"

"Well ... to be honest with youse, Nunzio, I feel a little funny stirrin' up trouble at this particular location, seein' as how it was me what did the negotiatin' with Frumple to not cause him any grief."

Nunzio throws back his head and gives a bark of laughter . . . which to me is a dubious way to express his sympathy at my plight.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

111

"Let me get this straight," he sez. "You're worrying about dealing fair with a Deveel?"

"You may laugh," I sez, "though I suggest you not do it often when I am the subject of your amusement. Allow me to remind youse, however, that even though Deveels are notoriously hard bargainers, it is also true that once a deal has been struck, they are equally scrupulous about stickin' to the letter of said agreement. As such, it occurs to me that failin' to honor one's own end of such an agreement is to place oneself in a position of bein' even less trustworthy than a Deveel . . . which is not a label I relish hangin' upon myself."

"Okay . . . let's examine the letter of said agreement," Nunzio shrugs. "What you agreed to was that we would neither trash his establishment, nor would we reveal the true nature of his identity as a Deveel. Correct?"

"Well . . . yeah."

". . . Neither of which conditions is broken by us directing our attentions to the lovelies which have taken to making this establishment their after-hours habitat . . . even if our attentions should turn out to be unwelcome."

"I suppose . . . but don't you think that such activity would violate at least the spirit of our agreement, by which I mean the implication that we would not make trouble for our host?"

"That is the portion of your discomfort which I find the most amusing," Nunzio sez with an infuriatin' grin. "Realizing that Deveels make their living as well as their reputation by honoring the

i

112

Robert Asprin

letter rather than the spirit of their agreements, I think it is ironic that you are recoiling from dealing with them with the same ethic that they deal with others."

I consider this for a few minutes, then take a deep breath and blow it out noisily.

"You know, cousin," I sez. "You're right. I mean, when you're right, you're right . . . know what I mean?"

"I do," Nunzio frowned, "which is in itself a little disturbing."

"So . . . when do you think we should start?"

"Well . . . how about right now?"

While my cousin has convinced me that it would be within the bounds of ethical behavior to launch our campaign, such an accelerated-type timetable catches me unawares.

"Excuse me?"

"I said how about starting right now. Opportunity should be seized when it presents itself . . . and right now there is a young lady at the bar who has been checking you out for the last several minutes."

I sneak a peek in the direction he is lookin', and sure enough . . . there is one of those classy broads I have been tellin' you about, a blonde to be specific, perched on a bar stool and starin' right at me. I know this to be true, 'cause though for a minute I thought she was lookin' at someone else, as soon as our eyes meet, she closes one eye in a broad wink and smiles.

"Nunzio," I sez, duckin' my head and turnin'

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

113

my back on her. "There is one more problem I have neglected to mention to you."

"What's that?"

"Well, though my manners with broads are perhaps not as polished as they should be, they are nonetheless the best I have managed to acquire over the years. That is to say, I am normally on my best behavior with females, so the idea of tryin' to act so offensive that they call for help is not particularly comfortable to me. Mind you, I am sayin' I would have difficulty doin' this with the ordinary broads I am accustomed to dealin' with, and to tell you the truth, I find the kind of classy

broads that hang out here more than a little intimidatin'. I'm not sure I can start a conversation with one, much less summon the courage to try to be offensive."

"Well, I don't think that starting a conversation is going to be a problem," Nunzio sez.

"Why not?"

"Because the lady in question is on her way over to our table already."

Surprised, I swing my head back around to check things out for myself . . . and come dangerously close to plantin' my nose in the broad's cleavage, as she is much closer to our table than Nunzio had indicated.

"Oops . . . Sorry!" I sez, though it occurred to me as I said it that it was not a great start to bein' offensive.

"No problem," she sez. "A girl likes to feel appreciated. Mind if I join you?"

114 Robert Asprin

Somethin' about the way she grins while sayin' this is familiar ... or at least, decidedly unladylike. Before I can comment, however, Nunzio has taken over.

"Certainly. In fact, you can have my chair . . . I was just leaving anyway. Catch you later, Guido . . . and remember what we were talking about."

With that, he gives me a big wink and wanders off, leavin' me alone with the skirt . . . who wastes no time plantin' her curvaceous bottom on the chair my cousin has so graciously vacated.

"So ... I haven't seen you in here before."

"What?"

I have been so busy thinkin' about what I am goin' to do to Nunzio to repay him for his "graciousness" that I nearly miss the broad's openin' gambit.

"Oh. No, we just got into town this week. This seems to be turnin' out to be our main hangout, though."

"Hey, that's terrific! This is one of my favorite spots. It's my first time in this week, though. Girl's got to do the rounds to keep up with what's going on in town . . . like when new soldiers arrive."

Although I have been feelin' self-conscious about meetin' one of these high class skirts, this one seems real easy to talk to ... like I'd known her for years. Whafs more, she is certainly not at all hard on the eyes, if you know what I mean.

"Say," I sez, "can I get you somthin' to drink? A wine spritzer, maybe?"

M.Y.T.H. INC. m ACTION

115

"Bourbon. Rocks. Water back."

"Say what?"

I mean, it isn't just that she drinks stronger hootch than I would have expected, it is the way she rattled it off. I decide it is not this chick's first time into a bar ... a decision made easier by the fact she has already told me as much.

"Better still," she sez, "isn't there somewhere else we can go?"

This is a rough one. Abdul's is the only joint in town I have frequented so far.

"Ummmm ..." I sez, thinkin' fast, "I have heard of some place around here where there's

open stage entertainment."

Mind you, I am not wild about takin' this skirt somewhere where I might run into my commandin' officer, but I figure she'll be impressed with my willingness to spring for a good time.

"I was thinking someplace more like the rooms upstairs," she sez, leanin' forward to smile at me real close.

I am taken a little aback by the forwardness of this suggestion, though I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. When a high-class babe like this approaches a low-brow Joe like me in a bar, she is not usually after witty conversation . . . which, in my case, is fortunate.

(AUTHOR'S NOTE: It has been brought to my attention by some of my test readers that the concepts in this chapter and those that immediately follow are a marked change of pace from the

L

116 Robert Asprin

normal MYTH content. In this, I fear it may be my sad duty to introduce to some readers for the first time the horrifying reality that there are a few sick, twisted, perverted individuals who approach members of the opposite sex in singles bars for purposes other than pleasant conversation! I feel free to identify them as such in this book, since it is a well known fact that such blots on the shining history of mankind do not read, making me relatively safe from legal action. Incidentally, this is also why the question "Read any good books lately?" has become such a popular way of screening whom one does or doesn't talk to under such circumstances. I will leave it to you how to answer if the question is ever addressed to you. Meanwhile, back to the story . . .)

As I was sayin' before I was so rudely interrupted, I am at a bit of a loss as to how to respond to this

advance.

"Right now?" I sez. "Don't you want to talk for a while first?"

"What's wrong? Don't you like me?" she sez, startin' to pout a little. "Should I go peddle my wares somewhere else?"

"Peddle?"

"Watch it," she sez, flat and nasty. "It's a figure of speech."

"Oh."

I am vastly relieved to hear this. The only thing more depressin' to a sensitive guy like me than learnin' that a female is interested in him for his

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

117

body and not his mind is learnin' that her real interest is in his wallet.

"Well?" she sez, cockin' an eyebrow at me.

Though I am, perhaps, a little dense at pickin' up cues from a skirt, let it never be said I am slow once the message has gotten through. Scant seconds later I have acquired the key to a room from Frumple and am leadin' this vision of loveliness up the narrow stairs . . . well, followin' her, actually, as experience has taught me that this gives one an excellent view of the sway of her hips, which is to me still one of the most beautiful and hypnotic sights in any dimension.

In a masterful display of control, I manages not to fumble with the key whilst unlockin' the door, and even stand aside to let her enter first.

Bein' a broad, she whips out one of those foldin' mirrors and starts checkin' her makeup even be-

fore I finish lockin' the door behind us.

"So," I sez, over my shoulder, "What do you want to do first?"

To be honest with youse, at this point I have no interest at all in creatin' a hassle. Instead, I am thankin' my lucky stars that a skirt like this would give a lug like me a second look, and hopin' we can get on with things before she changes her mind.

"Well," she sez, "You could start by bringing me up to date on how you and Nunzio have been doing."

It takes a moment for this to sink in, but when it does, I knows just what to say.

"Say what?" I sez, spinnin' around.

118 Robert Asprin

The skirt what I come upstairs with is nowhere to be seen. Instead, I've got a different broad in the room with me. One with green hair and . . .

"Hi, Guido!" she sez. "Great disguise, huh?"

Chapter Ten;

"Now, here's my plan!"
R. BURNS

"TANANDA? Is that you?"

My surprise is not entirely due to my not havin' spotted who it is what has been cadgin' drinks from me all evening . . . though I hadn't. Rather I am more than a little startled by her appearance, which has changed considerably since we parted company at the beginnin' of this mission.

Tananda is normally a spectacular lookin' skirt with an impressive mane of green hair. While she has never chosen to present the formal, every-hair-in-place-self-presentation favored by most of the

broads what hang out at the sushi bar, optin'
instead for a casual wind-blown look, I am suffi-
ciently versed in the secrets of the female gender to
be aware that the latter look is as, or more, difficult
to establish and maintain as the former, and often
119

120

Robert Asprin

harder to carry off. All of which is to say Tananda
is usually very attractive to and careful of her
looks.

What I am currently seein', however, is someone
who looks like she has been on the wrong end of a
bad accident. Most of the hair is missin' from one
side of her head, along with the correspondin'
eyebrow, and the other side of her face is marred
by a big bruise which seems to be fadin', but still
looks painful. Havin' both given and received
more than my share of the latter type of injury, I
can estimate with fair accuracy the force of the
blow necessary to produce such spectacular
results . . . and it must have been a doozey.

"Sorry for the horror show," she sez, puttin'
away her disguise mirror after takin' one last peek,
as if to see whether things have changed since the
last time she looked, "but it's been a rough assign-
ment so far."

"What . . . What happened to you?" I sez,
findin' my voice at last. "Who did this to you?"

I mean, we had all known there might be some
trouble associated with this mission, but nobody
likes to see a beautiful skirt get worked over.

"Would you believe it was our own team?" she
sez, flashin' a quick smile, though I knew it hurt.
"Come again?"

"The hair is courtesy of Gleep," she explained.
"I guess it was an accident. I must have gotten

between him and dinner or something. Anyway, it's not as bad as it looks ... or could have been, Chumley saw it coming even if I didn't and got me

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

121

out of the way of the worst of it ... which is both where the bruise came from and why I'm not complaining about it. Honestly, you should see what happened to the wall that was behind me at the time."

"Speakin' of which, where are Chumley and Gleep?"

For the first time in our conversation, Tananda starts lookin' uncomfortable.

"They've ... ah ... headed back to Big Julie's. Actually, big brother's in a bit worse shape than I am, so rather than have him trying to work with his arm in a sling, I told him to take Gleep somewhere out of the action and stay with him for awhile. It's funny, you know? I still can't figure what set Gleep off ... but until we can get a handle on it, I figure he's more of a danger than a help on this assignment. Anyway, I decided to stay on and use this disguise gizmo to see if I could do anything to help the cause on my own. I sure couldn't do much worse than we were doing as a team."

Somethin' was tuggin' at the back of my mind . . . somethin' that Nunzio had said about his last assignment and bein' nervous about workin' with Gleep again. I couldn't put my finger on it, though, and seein' as how the discussion was makin' Tananda uncomfortable, I decided not to pursue the subject. I did, however, make a mental note to talk with Nunzio about it when we had a chance.

"Sounds like things weren't goin' too well even

before the accident," I sez, pickin' up on her last aside.

"You can say that again," Tananda sez, heavin' a little sigh. "We were trying to work a variation on the old badger game . . . you know, where I give a soldier the come on, then Chumley bursts in and raises a ruckus because the guy's compromising his sister's honor?"

"I know the scam," I sez, 'cause I do ... though I've never run it or been victimized by it myself. Still, it's a time-tested, classic gambit.

"Well, it wasn't working anywhere near as well as we would have hoped. Most of the soldiers around here are under orders to keep their hands off the local women, and if I upped the voltage to make them forget their orders, then the locals would spot what I was doing and take the position that I was asking for whatever attentions I got."

"Gee, that's tough," I said. "It musta been hard on you . . . particularly if you was workin' injured."

I still didn't like the way that bruise was healin', and it must have shown in my voice 'cause Tananda leans forward and puts a hand on my arm.

"I'm all right, Guido, really . . . though it's sweet of you to be worried. I've gotten a lot worse just rough-housing with Chumley . . . honest."

Realizin' that her big brother is a troll, I can well believe that Tananda is used to gettin' dinged up a

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

bit in family squabbles. Right now, however, there

is somethin' else weighin' on my mind.

You see, Tananda's touch was real soft and warm when she laid her hand on my arm, and it gets me to thinkin' again about the original reason I had for bringin' her up to this room. As I said before, it has been a long time since I have been alone with a skirt on anythin' resemblin' an intimate basis . . . But Tananda is still a business associate, and as with any profession, it is unwise at best to allow oneself to become intimately involved with a fellow worker. Besides, she has never indicated to me any interest beyond friendship ... or maybe a big sister. Still it was real nice to have woman touchin' me . . .

"Umm ... All right. If you say so," I sez, movin' slightly to break the physical contact between us. "We was just assigned here ourselves, so we haven't had a chance to do much of anythin'. I think maybe we should try to figure out how Nunzio and me can work the same area as you without us gettin' in each other's way."

"Don't be silly, Guido. Since you're here, we can all work together!"

"Come again?"

"Think about it," she sez, gettin' all bouncy in her eagerness. "I've been having trouble finding soldiers to take the bait on my little routine, but you're soldiers, so it can make both our jobs easier. If we're working both sides of the game, we can control exactly how we want things to go."

I make a sincere effort to ignore her bouncin'

124

Robert Asprin

whilst I try to think of a good reason not to go along with her suggestion. Somehow I am not sure my actin' skills are up to pretendin' to be physically forward with Tananda . . . but I am even less

enthusiastic about havin' Nunzio take the part.

"I dunno, Tananda," I sez, reluctant-like. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea. I mean, we might pull it off once . . . but if we're successful in our play-actin', then Nunzio and me end up in the stockade and out of action for the duration."

"Oh yeah?" she sez, cockin' her remamin' eye-brow at me. "So what were you thinking would happen when you brought me up here this evening?"

"Ummm ..." I sez, recallin' that, unfortunatously, takin' the Fifth Amendment only works in court.

"Never mind, Guido," she grins. "I withdraw the question. Tell you what, though. If being directly involved makes you uneasy, just line me up with one of your army buddies. You've been in long enough that you should have a pretty good idea of who we can sucker."

I find that I am not wild about this idea either; first, because it seems like a dirty trick to play on any of the crew what's been workin' with Nunzio and me the last few weeks, and second, because I find I am not overjoyed with the idea of anybody pawin' Tananda. Still, I had to accept that we was gonna have to break somebody's eggs to get this omelette made, and that Tananda is right, it would

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

125

be easier and quicker to do if we set the thing up ourselves.

"Okay, Tananda," I sez. "We'll try it that way."

"Are you okay, Guido?" she sez, peerin' at me concemed-like. "You sound a little flat."

"I'm all right. I'll tell youse though, Tananda,

this assignment is gettin' me down a little."

"Well cheer up, things may have been rocky so far, but working together, we should be able to make some progress. Tell you what, find Nunzio and fill him in what we're doing. Then we'll meet back here and give it a try ... say, tomorrow night?"

"Sure, why not?"

"In the meantime," she sez, openin' her disguise mirror again and startin' to fiddle with the knobs, "come on downstairs and /// buy you a drink or two."

For a minute that sounds like a good idea. Then I remember Frumple.

"I think we'd better cool it, Tananda. We gotta be careful about how much we're seen together here."

"What do you mean?"

"The reason we're hangin' out here is we found out that the proprietor's a Deveel. The trouble is, he seems to know the Boss and has some kind of grudge against him. So far, he doesn't know we're connected with the Boss, but if he gets suspicious ..."

"A Deveel?"

"Yeah. Says his name is Frumple."

126

Robert Asprin

"Frumple? So he's back in operation again, is he?"

"You know him?"

"Sure. He teamed up with Isstvan against us

back when I first met Skeeve . . . and you're right, if he gets suspicious, a disguise spell wouldn't keep him from figuring out who I am." "Maybe we should wait and try to run our gambit somewhere other than here," I sez, tryin' to keep the hope out of my voice.

"No need," Tananda grins. "As long as he doesn't make the connection between us beforehand, we should still be able to pull it off tomorrow night. In fact, it'll be killing two birds with one stone, in a manner of speaking. I don't mind doing Frumple a bit of dirt in the course of action, but it ' looks like his place will be at ground zero when the fireworks start. By the time he puts it together, we'll be long gone."

"Swell," I sez, with more enthusiasm than I am feelin'. "Then we're all set. Youse go ahead and leave first. I'll stay up here awhile and give youse a head start."

As soon as she is gone, I settle myself to try to sort out my misgivin's about how things are goin' on this assignment. It doesn't take long to figure out that I am sufferin' under a burden of conflictin'

loyalties.

Youse may find this surprisin' from someone in my line of work, but loyalty and betrayin' trust counts very high up in my books . . . which is

M.Y.T.H. INC, IN ACTION

127

one of the things I have always admired about the M.Y.T.H. Inc. crew as they all seem to value the same thing.

In the past, I've managed to balance my loyalties between the Boss and the Mob, as the strange approach the Boss takes to things has not directly threatened any of the Mob's interests. This current situational, however, is tumin' out to be a horse of

a different caliber.

In plannin' to stir up trouble between the civilians and the army, I am violatin' the trust placed in me as a representative of the army . . . but I have managed to rationalize this as it is my reason for joinin' the army in the first place, so in this matter I am actin' kinda like a spy with my loyalty clearly with the Boss.

Nunzio has convinced me that I am not violatin' my deal with Frumple by usin' his place as a site for our mischief, as it falls outside the agreement we made. This strikes me as a little shaky, but I can be flexible when the occasion calls for it.

This latest plan, though, of settin' up someone in your squad to be the fall guy is real hard to see as any thin' except betrayin' a friend. Still, Tananda is right ... it is the best way to be sure that things go the way we want 'em to.

Thinkin' it over real hard, I finally come up with an answer: What I gotta do is think of it as a joke on a buddy. Okay, maybe it's a dubious joke . . . like poppin' a paper bag behind someone who's gettin' ready to blow a safe . . . but as long as the notable in question does not end up

128 Robert Asprin

permanently damaged or incarcerated as a result, it can be passed off as a joke.

Now, my only concern is tryin' to make sure that whoever we pick has a sense of humor ... a real good sense of humor!

Chapter Eleven:

"That's why the lady is a tramp!"

B. MIDLER

"HOOOO-EY! THE PLACE is sure jumpin' tonight!" Shu Flie exclaims, leanin' back in his chair to survey the room.

"You kin say that again, Shu," his brother sez.
"Hey! Lookit that one over there!"

Any way youse look at it, the Flie brothers run a class act ... though politeness will forbid my commentin' on which class. For a change, however, I am inclined to agree with them.

This is our first weekend in Twixt, much less here at Abdul's, and the bar is packed to overflowin'. In fact, if we hadn't been drinkin' here since early afternoon, it's doubtful we would have a table at all. As it is, we are entrenched at our regular table with a good view of the bar ... or, to be more specific the de-rears arrayed along the

129

130

Robert Asprin

bar ... as well as the de-fronts when they turn around. Believe me, speakin' as a well-traveled demon, youse don't get scenery like this just anywhere!

Unfortunately, my enjoyment of the view is marred by my distraction over the comin' events.

"Whatdaya think Swatter?" Shu sez, turnin' his attention to me. "You ever see women like this before?"

"Oh, they're not bad/' I sez, cranin' my neck to scan the crowd.

It has occurred to me that Tananda will probably be in disguise when she arrives, and it will therefore be difficult for me to recognize her unless she gives me some kind of signal,

"Not bad? Listen to this, guys! All this beautiful

woman-flesh, and all Swatter can say is They're not bad'!"

"Really, Swatter," Junebug sez. "You just don't see beautiful women like this in the army!"

This earns him a dangerous scowl from Spyder, but he misses it completely as he is feelin' his drinks more than a little at this point.

"Nice crowd for a fight. Know what I mean, cuz?" Nunzio murmurs in my ear low enough so no one else can hear.

"I dunno," I sez, scannin' the crowd again. "I don't see a single one of these white collar types that even Bee couldn't take without half tryin'."

"That's what I mean," Nunzio grins, and helps himself to another swallow from his drink.

As you can maybe tell from his behavior, the

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

131

hesitations I have been experiencin' about settin' up one of our buddies has not bothered my cousin in the least. If anything, he seems to be lookin' forward to a bit of trouble.

"Watch my chair," I sez, standing up. "I'm goin' to the bar for a refill."

Like I said, the place is mobbed, and in typical tightfisted Deveel type fashion, Frumple has not incurred the added overhead of puttin' on extra help, so if youse wants to get a drink sometime before the next Ice Age, it is necessitated that youse belly up to the bar to get your refill directly from the bartender. If youse is wonderin' why someone as greedy as Frumple is willin' to miss the extra income generated by a higher turnover of drinks, let me restore your faith by explainin' that he makes it up both by waterin' the hootch and by

increasin' his unit revenue . . . which is to say he raises his prices as the crowds get bigger.

Strangely enough, neither the weaker drinks nor the sky-high prices seem to faze this crowd in the least. I figure this is because they feel that payin' three times the normal goin' fare for a drink will screen out the rabble one usually has to tolerate when drinkin' in a public place, thereby insurin' that they are makin' their passes at folks of an equal or higher income bracket, and as to the watered drinks . . . well, the only reason I can come up with that they aren't complainin' about this is that they probably figure that booze is unhealthy, so a weak drink is somehow healthier than a strong one.

132

Robert Asprin

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

133

You see, I have ascertained through eavesdroppin' that health, and specifically healthy consumables, is a very big issue with these upwardly mobile folks. It's like they're used to thinkin' that you can get anythin' with enough money . . . and they've gotten it into their heads that by spendin' more for health foods and health drinks, they is never gonna die. Of course, they spend so much time worryin' and naggin' each other about good health, that they tend to generate sufficient stress to keel over and croak from heart attacks . . . but this seems to be an acceptable, if not desirable, option as it is generally viewed as "the high pressure which is the mark of a successful career person" and therefore has become somethin' of a badge of status. What is somehow overlooked in all this is that much of the stress is needless anxiety they inflict upon themselves by worryin' about such things as status and health foods.

Perhaps it is because of the high-risk nature of

my chosen profession, but I personally have no illusions of my own immortality. The way I see it, there are enough unpredictable things in life that can kill you that the only rational approach to life is to take what little pleasures youse can as they presents themselves, so that when your number comes up, you can at least die knowin' you've had a full and happy life. I think that life should be more than an exercise in self-denial, and even if I was guaranteed that I could live forever by abstainin', I'd probably continue my occasional indulgences. I mean, who wants to live forever . . .

particularly if that life has been designed to be borin' and devoid of pleasure?

I am reflectin' on this when a broad elbows her way in next to me at the bar. At first I think she is just really desperate for a drink, which as I said is understandable considerin' the slow service, and step aside, usin' my not inconsiderable bulk to make room for her.

"Got my target picked out for me?"

It takes a second for me to realize that I am the one this question is bein' addressed to, as she sez it casual without lookin' at me direct.

"Tananda?" I sez, lookin' at her hard.

She is jvearin' a different disguise tonight . . . a shoulder length cloud of dark curls and a dress made of some clingy fabric that . . . well, shows off everything she's got underneath it.

"Don't look at me!" she hisses, quietly grindin' a heel onto my toe to emphasize her point while glancin' at the ceilin'. "We aren't supposed to know each other . . . remember?"

"Oh, right . . . sorry."

I go back to starin' into my glass, doin' my best

to ignore her presence . . . which is not easy as the crowd is pressin' a considerable amount of her against me as we're standin' there.

"Okay, who's our pigeon?"

"You see the two broad-shouldered guys at our table? The loud ones? I figure the one on the left will do you just fine."

Guide and I have decided on Shu Flie for our victim. Of the crew, we're probably the least fond

134

Robert Asprin

of the Flie brothers, and while either of them would probably serve our purposes, Shu is the more dominant and might start trouble if Tananda made a play for his brother instead of him. As our objective is to cause trouble between the army and the civilians, fightin' within our own ranks would be counter-productive.

"Who's the yummy one across the table from the animals?"

I sneak a peek behind me to be sure who she's talkin' about.

"That? That's Junebug. He used to be an actor or a dancer or somethin'."

"He'll do," she sez firmly, a predatory note creepin' into her voice.

I refrain from lookin', but have a strong suspicion she is lickin' her lips . . . mentally, if not physically.

"I don't think that's such a hot idea. Tananda," I sez. "There's sort of a thing goin' between him and Spyder. At least, she's got a thing for him."

"Who?"

"Spyder. The chick in uniform sittin' next to him."

"That's female?"

While, as you know, I had much the same reaction the first time I met Spyder, for some reason it bothers me hearin' it from Tananda.

"Don't let the hair fool you/' I sez, "She's pretty tough."

"That's sweet of you, Guido," Tananda sez, misunderstandin' what I was sayin', "but the day

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

135

I can't hold my own against that, I'll hang it up. Well, off to work."

"What I mean is . . ." I try to say, but Tananda is already gone, slitherin' after Junebug like some kind of feline snake sidlin' up to a drunk canary.

This is just swell! While I suppose our "army vs. civilians" objective could be achieved by a cat fight between Tananda and Spyder, it wasn't exactly what we had in mind when we planned this scenario.

As it turns out, though, I needn't have worried. Watchin' from the bar, I see Junebug respond to Tananda's come-on like a first offender latchin' onto his lawyer, and instead of startin' a fight, Spyder just stands up and stomps out of the place with a scowl on her face and her ears laid back in her multicolored hair.

"Who's that talking to your buddy?" Frumple sez, materializin' in front of me.

I make a big show of lookin' back at our table.

"Just a broad/ I shrug casual-like, signallin' for a refill. "Why?"

"No reason. For a minute there I thought she looked familiar is all."

He heads off down the bar to fetch my drink, leavin' me a little uneasy. I tell myself there is no reason why the Deveel should recognize Tananda, as her current disguise bears no resemblance to her regular appearance. Still, he is an unstable element in the current equation, and I would just as soon keep him out of it entirely, if possible.

"I thought we were targeting Shu Flie/' Nunzio

136

Robert Asprin

sez, easin' in beside me at the bar. It may have been crowded where we were, but people usually manage to make room for someone Nunzio's size, especially if he's talkin' to someone my size.

"We were," I sez. "But Tananda has her own ideas on the subject."

"Well it sure put Spyder's nose out of joint. I don't think I've ever seen her so mad. Unless it was the time ..."

"Hey . . . Abdul!"

It was Junebug, standin' right behind us tryin' to get Frumple's attention. He has his arm draped around Tananda's shoulders, but if you look real close youse can see that she is actually holdin' up most of his weight.

"Yeah? What do you want?"

Though he wasn't particularly pleasant about it, the speed with which any of our crew could get the Deveel's attention was evidence that he hadn't forgotten we all knew his secret.

"I ... we need ... a room."

"There aren't any available."

Frumple starts to turn away, only to find his movement is restricted . . . specifically by my cousin who has reached across the bar and taken hold of his shoulder.

"Give him a room," Nunzio sez, soft-like.

Now, when Nunzio talks quiet like that, it usually means he is about to lose his temper . . . which, in this case, is understandable. I mean, we have put an awful lot of trouble into this setup to have it thwarted by anything silly like room availability.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

137

"But there aren't any ..."

"Give him the room you keep for yourself. You're going to be too busy down here to use it for awhile."

"I'm not that busy," the Deveel argues, tryin' to twist out of Nunzio's grip. "And if . . ."

"You could be a lot busier ... if you know what I mean," Nunzio sez, startin' to tighten his hand.

"All right! Okay! Here!" Frumple sez, producin' a key from his pocket and passin' it to Junebug. "Last door on the right!"

"Thanks, Nunzio," Junebug calls over his shoulder as he and Tananda weave their way toward the stairs.

My cousin waits until they are out of sight before he bothers to release his grip on Frumple.

"Now, see how nice it makes you feel to bring a little happiness into someone else's life?"

The Deveel bares his teeth in a silent snarl, then heads off down the bar to tend to the growin' number of shouters.

"Well, that didn't take long," I sez, lookin' at the stairs where Tananda and Junebug have vanished.

"Not surprising, really," Nunzio sez with a leer. "I mean, how long would you dawdle around if Tananda invited you into her room?"

If you surmise from this that I have not given my cousin a complete account of my meetin' with Tananda, you are correct. I decide to change the subject.

"One question, cousin/' I sez, takin' a sip of my

138

Robert Asprin

drink. "How are we supposed to know when to intrude on the proceedin's?"

"I dunno, I guess we wait until we hear Tananda start callin' for help."

I swivel my head around and stare at him.

"Nunzio," I sez, "has it occurred to you that with the racket goin' on down here, she can shoot off a cannon and we won't be able to hear her?"

This brings a scowl to his face.

"Good point," he sez, borrowin' a sip from my drink.

"Good point? Is that all you got to say?" I am startin' to get worked up now. "What do you think is gonna happen if we miss our cue and don't break things up?"

"Hmmm . . . well, if we don't rescue her, then Tananda's gonna have to deal with Junebug herself."

". . . Which means one of our squad ends up in the hospital," I finishes for him. "Either that or Tananda takes a bunch of lumps waitin' for us to show up like we said we would."

"Like I said . . . good point."

"Well, I'm not gonna just sit here," I sez, standin' up. "You comin' with me?"

"You mean bust in on 'em right now?"

"That's just what I mean. Why not? They've already been up there for awhile."

At this point, I am besieged by mental images of Tananda bein' pawed by Junebug ... all the while callin' vainly for us to help her.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

139

"Just a second, Guido," Nunzio sez, then raises his voice. "Hey! Bee!"

Our junior magician comes scuttlin' over to us.

"What is it, Nunzio?"

"I want you to go out and find some police and bring them back here."

"Police? But why ..."
- "Just do it! Okay?"

"Sure Nunzio. City police or Military Police?"

"Both, if you can manage it. Now get going."

He turns to me as Bee goes sprintin' out into the

night.

"All right, Guido. It's party time!"

Chapter Twelve:

"It sure looks to me like a big night tonight!"

ARTHUR, REX

IN OUR PLANNIN', we had neglected to establish a means by which Tananda was to let us know which room they was gonna be in. (Oversights such as this is why I am usually willin' to let someone else . . . like the Boss ... do our plannin' for us!) Fortuitously, the Devel had given them directions loud enough for us to hear at the same time as he was handin' them the key, so we have no trouble findin' where we are supposed to be.

"I don't hear anything ... do you?" Nunzio sez, cockin' his head outside the door.

By now, however, I am gettin' a head of steam up and am in no mood to quibble over details.

"Maybe you should have thought of that before

'ou sent Bee for the cops," I sez, backin' up to get
141

142

Robert Asprin

a runnin' start. "But since you did, we are kinda committed to be there when the waltz starts . . . , know what I mean?"

"Well, just remember that the key to this work-
ing is to try to promote confusion whenever possible."

"That shouldn't be hard," I snarl, and launch

myself at the door.

I have specifically mentioned our objective of "confusion" so that youse folks readin' this will not think your brains have suddenly gone Fruit Loops while tryin' to sort out this next series of events . . . that is, it's supposed to be confusion!

Anyway, the door goes down, as doors are inclined to do when I hit them goin' full tilt, and the two of us pile into the room . . . which I am not too busy to notice is considerably nicer than the room Frumple gave me yesterday.

To our startlement, there is no altercation occurin' in the room ... at least, not until we arrive. Tananda and Junebug are in a huddle on the sofa, but any noise she is makin' is not screams of outrage. Still, as we have made our entrance, my cousin and me have little choice but to continue with the script as originally planned.

Nunzio latches on to Junebug, liftin' him clear of the sofa whilst I turns my attentions to Tananda. "Are you okay, lady??" I sez in my loudest voice, which projects pretty well thanks to my old drama coach. "Just take it easy!!"

"Damn it, Guido! Not yet!!" she hisses, glarin' at me as she struggles into a sittin' position.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

143

Now, this is not part of our planned dialogue, and I glance over at Junebug quick-like to see if he has noticed that Tananda has let it slip that we know each other. I need not have concerned myself.

Nunzio is holdin' Junebug high enough that his feet are not touchin' the floor, hangin' onto him by the front of his uniform while shakin' him hard. Of course, on the out-stroke, he is also slammin' our colleague into the wall in a repeated manner

solidly enough to shake the buildin'. He has done this to me on a couple of occasions, so I can state from personal experience that while it may look like he is tryin' to help you clear your head, the actualities of the situational is that after hittin' the wall a few times, you're lucky to remember your name, much less why he is carryin' on in this manner.

"Calm down, Junebug!" my cousin is shoutin'.
"She isn't worth it!! We don't want no trouble!!!"

Seein' as how Junebug is distracted, which I can tell by the way his eyes are rollin' around independent-like in his head, I turn my attention to Tananda once more.

"Look, Tananda," I growl, lowerin' my voice so's only she can hear me, "I apologize if our timin' is less than exact. You can beat on me for it later. In the meantime, might I point out that the curtain is already up and you have been entrusted with a rather important role in our performance?"

"But we were just starting to . . ." she pauses

144

Robert Asprin

here and draws a long, ragged breath. "Oh . . . All right!"

With this, she reaches up, takes hold of the shoulder of her dress, and rips it diagonally across her body down to the hip ... in doin' so givin' me a quick glimpse of a lot more of Tananda than it has previously been my privilege to view.

"He was going to . . . Oh, it was just awful! What kind of people are you, anyway?"

She pauses in her hysterics.

"Guido!" she sez, urgent-like.

I am still starin' at the portion of the dress she is now tryin' to hold together with one hand.

"Hmmm? Oh ... Yeah! Just take it easy, lady!!"
I sez, avertin' my eyes as I am a little embarrassed.
"He didn't mean nothin'H"

"Get him away from me!!! Just get him away!!!"

That cue I can remember.

"Come on Nunzio," I sez. "Let's get him out of here!"

With that, we each grab Junebug by one arm and usher him out of the room through the crowd that's startin' to gather. I look back at Tananda and give her a wink, but she just sticks her tongue out at me quick-like before continuin' her hysterics.

"WHAT KIND OF A PLACE IS THIS?" she screams after us. "Letting animals like that mix with decent people ..."

I lose the rest of her performance as we are carryin' Junebug down to the main floor by now.

The crowd what has been outside the room was nothin' compared to what was waitin' for us in the

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

145

bar. Everybody in the place is crowdin' around to see what is goin' on ... well, crowdin' at a distance like folks do when they don't want to be right up dose to the action. Toward the back, I can see the uniforms of some of the local constabulary, though they are havin' trouble reachin' us through the heavy traffic. Of the Military Police there is no sign ... so I figure we will just have to start without them.

"What's going on up there?" Frumple demands, appearin' at my side.

"Here," I sez out of the side of my mouth, pushin' some money into his hand. "Take this."

"What's this for?" he sez, scowlin' at my offerin'.

"That should cover the bar bill for our table since this afternoon."

"Your bar bill?" he frowns. "I don't get it. We had a deal. I give you free drinks, and you don't bust up my place or tell anyone . . . my secret."

"Don't worry," I sez, showin' him a few teeth. "Your secret is safe."

"Then what . . . Hey! Wait a minute! You aren't going to . . ."

Just then, the police reach us.

Now, earlier Nunzio and me was commentin' how there wasn't anyone in the bar who could give us a run for our money. This situational changes when these cops roll in. There are four of them, and while none of them looks particularly tough physically bein' uniformly soft around the middle, there is a steadiness in their eyes that anyone in

146

Robert Asprin

the business can spot as the mark of someone what don't get particularly rattled when trouble starts.

"All right!" the biggest one of 'em says, steppin' up to us. "What's going on here?"

As you might guess, people of Nunzio's and my profession are not overly fond of the authorities of the law, particularly the street variety, and we usually give them wide berth. So in actual confrontation such as this, it is not too difficult for us to act unpleasant.

"What kind of town is this?" Nunzio bellows, glarin' around at the crowd. "A man in uniform tries to have a quiet drink . . . and the next thing you know, some bimbo is trying to set him up for a bum rap!!"

"Just take it easy, soldier," the cop sez, friendly-like. "You're among friends now. There are a couple of us who were in the service ourselves once."

This is somethin' we hadn't counted on. The last thing we need right now is for the cops to act reasonable. I figure it is about time I take a hand in the proceedin's personally.

"Oh, yeah?" I sneers. "What happened? You chicken out when it looked like there might actually be some fightin' to be done? Figured it was safer hasslin' drunks than gettin' shot at?"

"Cool down, soldier," the cop smiles, but I can see his lips are real tight. "Let's just step outside and discuss this."

"You hear that?" Nunzio shouts to the Flie brothers who are still holdin' down our table. "They don't mind taking our money for drinks . . . but when we

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

147

catch 'em tryin' to roll one of our boys, THEN they try to send us packing!"

"Oh yeah?" Shu Flie bristles and stands up, crowdin' toward us followed close by his brother. "Well if they want us out of here, they're gonna have to throw us out!"

Caught between us on one side and the Flie brothers on the other, the cops start gettin' nervous, swivelin' their heads back and forth tryin' to keep an eye on all of us.

"Now hold on a minute!" the cop we was talkin' to sez. "Who are you saying was trying to roll you?"

"That floozie upstairs!" Nunzio snarls, jerkin' a thumb back over his shoulder. "She gave our buddy the big come on . . . crawlin'all over him, you know? Then when we go up to see if he's all right 'cause he's been drinkin', she's goin' through his pockets!"

"That's right!" Hy Flie sez. "We were sittin' right over there when this bombshell starts playing up to Junebug here!"

"Of course, they stick up for each other!" one of the guys in the front of the crowd snorts to the fellow next to him.

I don't think he meant to be heard, but Shu Flie was standin' right beside him and caught it.

"Are you callin' my brother a liar?" he sez, startin' for the loudmouth.

I'm thinking we got the fight in the bag, but one of the cops gets between 'em holdin' them apart with a hand on each of their chests.

148

Robert Asprin

"Back off! Both of you!" he orders. "We're going to get to the bottom of this ..."

"GET YOUR HANDS OFF THAT SOLDIER!!"

The Military Police have arrived and come pushin' through the crowd to join our discussion group.

"Military personnel are to be handled by the MPs and not pushed around by some cop with a chip on his shoulder!"

The sergeant in charge of the MPs is a real

bruiser and just the kind of Joe I wanted to see . . . not too bright and dog-stubborn. He has three of his buddies with him, so we really outnumber the cops. Then I see some more police uniforms comin' through the door and have to revise my count again. It looks like a real party shapin' up.

"We weren't pushing him around!" the first cop sez, steppin' in nose to nose with the MP sergeant. "What's more, this investigation involves a civilian, so until we find out what happened ..."

"We caught some bimbo tryin' to roll one of our boys!" Shu Flie shouts at the MP. "And now they're all tryin' to cover up for her!"

"Is that so!" the MP scowls, glarin' around at the bar. "These soldiers risk their lives to keep things safe for you, and this is the thanks they get?"

What a great guy, I think. What a great, gullible, thick-headed guy. He could probably get this fight started all by himself . . . if we let him.

"/ resent that remark!" our cop snarls, finally startin' to lose it. "We risk our lives too, you know!"

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

149

"Oh excuse me! I forgot!" the MP smiles nasty-like. "You're in constant danger of choking to death on a doughnut!"

"Doughnut, is it?" the cop sez, lookin' around slow at the other cops . . . maybe to count heads and check the odds before decidin' what to do or say next.

I turned my head to sneak a wink at Nunzio, just in time to see Tananda make her entrance from the stairs.

"THERE THEY ARE!!!" she shrieks, "Those are

the soldiers that attacked me!!"

It would seem that she has been busy with her disguise gizmo, because the bruise I have earlier commented on is now clearly in evidence . . . although to an experienced eye such as my own, it is obvious that it is not a recent injury. Of course, bein' Tananda and havin' a flair for the dramatic, she has not stopped there. While the dress she is wearin' is the same color as the one she had on earlier, its hemline and fit are a lot more modest than the hot outfit she used to get Junebug's attention ... a /of more. On top of that, her wild, sexy hairdo now looks more like some librarian's maidenly bun what has been pawed to pieces. The real beauty of all this, however, is that she is standin' where the cops can see her, but the MPs can't! Of course, the crowd can see her, too.

"That's no floozie!" the guy what mouthed off earlier sez.

"Hey! I think she works with me!" someone else chimes in.

150

Robert Asprin

"See what happens when they let soldiers in here?"

The crowd is startin' to get ugly, but to give the cop credit, he tries to calm things down.

"Just relax, everybody!" he hollers. "We're handling this!"

Then he turns back to the MP, his face all grim-like.

"We've got to get to the bottom of this, sergeant," he sez. "I want you to hold those three men . . ."

As he's sayin' this, he raises his hand to point in our direction.

Now there is a gag that Nunzio and I have pulled so often that we don't even have to look at each other now to know what to do. We are still holdin' Junebug up by his arms, and the cop is close enough that when he tries to point at us, it's an easy matter for us to move Junebug sideways in front of his hand . . . then let go!

Unless you are watchin' real close at the right moment, this looks exactly like the cop took a poke at Junebug and decked him!

Realizin' the already tense nature of the situational, this is a little like beatin' on a blastin' cap with a hammer.

The MP starts to reach for the cop, but I get there first . . . mostly 'cause I know what is comin' and have a head start.

"Let me!" I sez, then I do somethin' I've been waitin' to do all my life.

I lay my best punch on a cop ... in front of witnesses!

Chapter Thirteen:

"Weren't you expecting me?"

J. RAMBO

ME AND NUNZIO have a bit of a wait before the company commander shows up at his office. This is fine by me, as it gives me a chance to stop my nose from bleedin' quite so much, and we even talk the MPs guardin' us into gettin' some disinfectant to put on our knuckles.

If from this youse infers that it was quite a brawl, youse is correct. It was . . . and what's more we are the dear winners. Now, the civilian cops may have different opinions regardin' this, but we was still standin' at the end of it and they wasn't so I feel we are justified in claimin' the victory.

As I mentioned, our guards are okay guys and in a pretty good mood to boot, which is understandable as they was fightin' on our side in the fracas under discussion. We have a pretty good time with
151

152

Robert Asprin

them while we are waitin', swapptn' tales from the fight that were at least partially true, interruptin' each other all the time with comments of "Did you see it when I . . . ?" and "Yeah, what about when that big cop. . . ." In fact, we are gettin' downright chummy with 'em, but then the captain walks in.

AH our talkin', stops when he appears, though he musta heard us long before we saw him, so there isn't really any point tryin' to pretend we have been this quiet all the time. Still, he doesn't look happy, so without any kind of spoken agreement we all drop back into our appointed roles. By this I mean the guards stand at parade rest and look stern, whilst me and Nunzio just sit and look uncomfortable . . . which isn't too hard since, as I said, we have not emerged from the fracas unscathed.

We watch in total silence as the captain sits down at his desk and starts studyin' the report which has been placed there. I suppose I could of looked at it myself when we was talkin' with the guards, but to tell you the truth it hadn't occurred to me until I see the captain readin' it and realize the fates of Nunzio and me might well be decided by what is in it.

Finally, the captain looks up as if seein' all of us for the first time.

"Where are the others?" he sez to one of the guards.

"At the infirmary tent, sir," the guard sez.

The captain raises his eyebrows.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

153

"Anything serious?"

"No sir. Just a few bumps and bruises.
Besides ..."

"The guard hesitates and glances at me, and I
knew I was on.

"I told 'em they should get patched up and let
me talk to you first, captain . . . sir," I sez. "You
see, it was Nunzio and me what started the fight,
and the squad just pitched in later to help us
out ... so I figured that . . . well, since we
was responsible . . ."

"Can you verify this?" the captain sez to the
guard, cuttin' my oration short.

"Yes sir."

"Very well. Send word over to the infirmary. Tell
the rest of the squad they are free to return to their
quarters after their wounds are treated. Sergeant
Guido and Corporal Nunzio are taking full respon-
sibility for their actions."

"Yes sir," the guard sez, then salutes and leaves.

This is a bit of a load off my mind, as I have been
worryin' a bit about gettin' the crew into trouble
with our gambit. A bit, but not all ... as there
remains the question of what the captain is gonna
do about me and Nunzio. This is a for real ques-
tion, as the stare the captain is levelin' at us is real
noncommittal, which is to say he neither looks
happy nor upset . . . though I'm not sure what
he would have to be happy about in this situa-
tional.

"Are you aware," he sez finally, "that I was

154

Robert Asprin

called off stage to deal with this matter? One song into my final set, no less?"

"No sir," I sez, 'cause I hadn't been.

This simple statement did, however, settle two things in my mind. First, there is the matter of his rather flashy outfit . . . which while it is indeed quite spiffy, is decidedly non-regulation. Second, it removed any doubts I might be havin' as to the level of benevolence the captain is feelin' toward us ... noncommittal stare or not.

"According to this," he sez, lookin' at the report again, "you two were involved in, if not the actual instigators of a barroom brawl, not only with civilians, but with the local police as well. Is there anything you'd like to add to that?"

"One of those civilians tried to roll one of our squad," I sez.

I figure that now we have accomplished our mission, it is time to start lookin' out for ourselves.

"Then, when we try to get him out, the others try to say he has assaulted her. As far as the cops ... I mean, the local police go, well, they was tryin' to arrest us all, even though our own military police were right there on the scene of the alleged crime, and we was taught in basic trainin' . . ."

"Yes, yes, I know," he waves. "Soldiers are to be tried in military, not civilian court, so you two took on a whole room full of civilians over a point in the Military Code. Is that it?"

"Yes sir. That and to try to help one of our squad."

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

155

"Very well," he sez, and looks over at the guards. "You men can go now. I'll handle this from here."

We wait quiet-like until the MPs file out of the room, then a little longer as the captain is studyin' our files again.

"You two have only been assigned to me for about a week . . . and only enlisted a few weeks before that. Is that correct?"

"Yes sir."

"So you're fresh out of Basic and already a sergeant . . . and corporal. And now this."

He goes back to starin' at our files, but I am startin' to feel a little less anxious. While there is no question of us beatin' the rap, as we have confessed, it's startin' to sound like we might get off with nothin' more than losin' our stripes ... a possibility which does not distress me overly much. Not bad for not havin' a mouthpiece to do our plea bargainin'.

"The civilian authorities are recommending you be disciplined severely . . . that you be made an example of to discourage other soldiers from following your example."

I start feelin' anxious again. This does not sound so encouragin', and after a career unblemished by a single conviction, I am not eager to spend time in an army stockade. I wonder if it is too late to withdraw our confession . . . and whether the MPs are still outside.

"Very well," the captain sez finally, lookin' up from our files. "Consider yourselves disciplined."

Robert Asprin

We wait for him to say more, then realize that's all there is.

"Sir?"

The captain gives a tight little smile at our reactions.

"Do you men know what an army that's growing as fast as ours needs the most?"

I experience a sinkin' feelin' in my stomach, as I have heard this speech before. Nunzio, however, was not present the last time it was run past me.

"A better tailor," he sez.

The captain blinks in surprise, then erupts in a quick bark of laughter.

"That's pretty good," he sez. "A better tailor. You've got a point there, Corporal Nunzio . . . but that wasn't what I was referring to."

He drops his grin and gets back on track.

"What we need are leaders. You can train men to shoot, but you can't train them to lead. Not really. We can show them the procedures and tell them the principles so they can at least go through the motions, but real leadership . . . the charisma to inspire loyalty and the guts to act in a crisis . . . that can't be taught."

He picks up the report and tosses it back down careless-like.

"Now, publicly we have to discourage our soldiers from fighting with civilians, whatever the provocation. Any other position would endanger our welcome in the community . . . such as it is. We are aware, however, that there are those who

try to exploit our men at any opportunity, and

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

157

many who frankly resent us ... though I never could understand why."

I am willin' to let this pass, but Nunzio doesn't.

"Maybe it's because the army is the major recipient of their tax money," he sez.

"But their taxes are being lowered, not increased by our campaigns," the captain frowns.

Just as it did the first time I heard it, this statement strikes an impure note in my mind. Again, however, I am not allowed time to pursue it.

"Whatever," the captain sez, shakin' his head. "The truth of the matter is, that while we cannot publicly condone incidents such as the one you were involved in, there are far worse things in the army's eyes than to be willing to fight for your men and the Military Code. The fact that you were willing to take this stand against civilians, police even . . . and after only three weeks in the army too . . . Tell me, have you men given any thought to going Career? Of making the army your permanent occupation?"

This takes us a little aback, as we have given this idea about the same consideration we would give pokin' ourselves in the eye with a sharp stick.

"Ummm ... to be honest with you, sir," I manage at last, "we was gonna see how things worked out in our first tour of duty before tryin' to reach any decision."

This struck me as a diplomatic answer, as it is not wise to tell a man you think his career choice

Robert Asprin

stinks on ice ... especially when he is in a position of control over your immediate future. For some reason, however, the captain seems to take my response as an encouragin' sign.

"Perhaps I can make the decision a little easier for you," he sez, startin' to scribble in our files. "I'm promoting you both. Nunzio, you're a sergeant now . . . and Guido, you're getting another stripe. Of course, we can't have you wandering around town now ... or your squad either, for that matter. It might get our civilian hosts upset. Tell you what. I'm going to transfer you and your squad to Headquarters Staff. There's always opportunity for advancement there. That's all, men. You can go now . . . and congratulations!"

I would like nothin' more than a little time to think over this latest development, but it is not to be. Nunzio barely waits until we are clear of the commander's office before he starts on me.

"Guido," he sez, "am / crazy, or is the army?"

"Probably both," I sez, "though I'll admit I think the army has an edge on you in the 'foo-foo land' department."

"I don't get it. I just don't get it," he continues like I hadn't said anythin'. "I mean, we disobeyed standing orders . . . even roughed up the cops for cryin' out loud. And we get promoted for that!"

"It would seem," I sez carefully, "that we're bein' rewarded for 'action against the enemy.' I

M.Y.T.H. INC, IN ACTION

guess we just miscalculated who the army sees as

'the enemy/ is all."

We walk on in silence for a few, each of us reflectin' on what has occurred.

"I guess there is a good side to this," I sez at last. "If we are gonna continue our attempts to disrupt the army, headquarters is probably the best place to do it from."

"True enough," Nunzio sighs. "Well, Guido, let me be the first to congratulate you."

"On what?"

"Why, on your promotion, of course," he sez, glancin' sideways at me. "I know exactly how much it means to you."

I think of hittin' him, but he has deliberately stepped out of range as he lays this on me.

"Nunzio," I sez, "let us not forget your own . . ."

"Hey guys!! Wait up!!"

We look around to find Spyder comin' up behind us.

"Oh, hi Spyder."

"So what happened?" she sez, tryin' to get her wind back as she catches up to us.

"Well, there was a bit of a fight after you left, and . . ."

"I know that," she interrupts. "I heard. Sorry I missed it. I meant afterward. Are you guys in trouble?"

"Naw," Nunzio shrugs casual-like. "In fact, we're all being transferred to Headquarters

Robert Asprin

Staff ... oh yeah, and Guido and me got promoted."

He sez this real easy, expectin' her to be as surprised as we was. Strangely enough, however, she lets it skate on by her.

"What about the civilian authorities? What are you gonna do about them?"

"Nothin'," I sez. "Why should we?"

"Are you kidding? The way I heard it you punched out a cop! They aren't gonna just ignore that!"

"They're gonna have to," I shrugs. "As soldiers, we are subject to discipline by the military, not civilian courts."

"We are?" she frowns, stoppin' in her tracks.

"Sure. Don't you remember? They told us about that back in Basic."

"I told you you should pay attention to the Military Law lectures," Nunzio sez, grinnin' at her.

"Gee," she sez, chewin' her lip. "Then I guess you don't need the help I brought you."

"Help? What help?"

"Well, I thought you were gonna be in trouble with the civilian authorities, and since I knew you guys was connected, I figured I should find somebody to pass the word to so . . ."

Until now I had only been listenin' casually. As Spyder spoke, however, a loud alarm began to sound in the back of my mind ... a very loud alarm.

"Connected?" I sez, interruptin'. "You mean like with the Mob?"

M.Y.T.H. INC, m ACTION

161

"Of course," she sez.

"You went lookin' for the Mob?" Nunzio sez, catchin' on at last.

"That's right. Found 'em too."

"Wait a minute," I frowns. "When youse said you 'brought back help,' were you sayin' you've got somebody along now?"

"That's right," she sez, lookin' around. "He was with me when I spotted you a second ago. I may have gotten a little ahead of him, but he should ..."

"Hello Guido . . . Nunzio . . . long time no see."

The owner of this new voice melts out of the shadows close to us ... too close.

"Hello, Snake," I sez, edgin' a little away from Nunzio so we both have lots of room for whatever is gonna happen next.

"You remember me!" he sez, though his mockin' smile makes it clear he is not surprised. "I wasn't sure you would."

I don't think anyone would have trouble rememberin' Snake . . . except for maybe, witnesses . . . as he is what you would call highly memorable. He is tall and real thin, and has a habit of dressin' all in black like he is now, which is why he was able to ease up on us in the shadows.

"You guys know each other?" Spyder sez, hesitant-like lookin' back and forth between us.

"Oh, we're old friends," Snake sez in that smooth, purrin' voice of his.

162 Robert Asprin

"Actually, it's more like 'associates,'" Nunzio corrects, easin' even further apart from me.

While both Nunzio and me know Snake, we have never pretended to like him. He is one of the top enforcers for the Mob, but tends to like his work a little too much for our tastes. You have perhaps noticed that when the occasion calls for it, neither Nunzio nor me are adverse to the judicious application of violence, but as it goes against our delicate natures we have trained ourselves to terminate such encounters in the briefest possible time. Snake, on the other hand, likes to prolong and drag out his work as much as possible . . . and he works with a knife. He can be as fast as his moniker when the situation calls for it, however, and though Nunzio and me had been confident about roustin' a room full of normal people earlier this evening, there is a serious question in my mind as to whether both of us workin' together can take Snake if things get ugly.

"Why don't you head on back to the barracks, Spyder," I sez, not takin' my eyes off Snake. "Our colleague here probably has some things he wants to discuss with us ... privately."

"Not me!" Snake says, holdin' up his hands palms out in what to my eye is an exaggerated show of innocence. ". . . Though I'll admit I think a conversation between us would be ... interesting. No, I'm just here to escort you to another old friend."

"And who would that be?" Nunzio sez.

M.Y.T.H. INC, IN ACTION

163

Snake's smile slips away and his voice drops a dozen degrees.

"Don Brace wants to talk to you ... he wants to talk to you real bad."

Chapter Fourteen:

"You countermanded me on whose authority?"

POPE JOHN

"THAT'S QUITE SOME babe you got there."

I shoot a sideways glance at Snake when he sez this, but his manner seems as respectful as his tone, so I decide he is sincere and not tryin' to be sarcastic.

"She's okay/" I sez, noncommittal-like.

Realizin' we are in trouble with the Mob, it does not seem like the best idea to seem too close to Spyder.

"So what happened to her hair?"

"I think she likes it that way," I shrugs. "Who knows with broads. Of course, it looked better before the army cropped it short."

"That reminds me of a joke I heard once," Nunzio sez. "It seems this guy takes an alligator, then cuts off its nose and tail, and paints it yellow ..."

165

166

Robert Asprin

"You know," Snake interrupts, "while we were looking for you, she was asking me about joining the Mob after her enlistment is over."

I realize now why Snake is bein' so talkative. He is checkin' politely to see if either Nunzio or me has any claim on Spyder . . . professionally or personally. This is understandable, for while I do not think he is afraid of us, every guy knows that messin' with another guy's moll—or, in the Mob, his recruit—is apt to be considered a challenge, so it is wisest to check things out carefully before proceedin'. While it is not exactly gettin' permission, havin' the courtesy to ask is a good way to avoid blunderin' into somethin'; thereby avertin' hurt feelin's, not to mention needless bloodshed.

"She's got her own mind," I sez cautious-like. "Of course, she was askin' me and Nunzio the same thing a week ago, so we was kinda figurin' to sponsor her if it came to that."

"Okay, got it," Snake nods. "Of course, that depends on where you guys are going to be in the future."

He sez this easy enough, but it is a cold reminder of the realities of our situarional. He is actin' friendly, like has no grudge against us other than, perhaps, professional rivalry. There is no doubt in our minds, however, that if Don Bruce gives him the word to whack us, he will do his best to carry out that order.

"Speaking of our future," Nunzio sez, "where are we going?"

I have a pretty good idea of the answer from the

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

167

direction we have been walkin', and Snake confirms it.

"Back to Abdul's Sushi Bar and Bait Shop," he sez. "Or, as Guido here would say, the scene of the perpetration."

"Snake," I sez, drawin' myself up a little, "are you tryin' to make fun of the way I talk?"

"Me?" he sez, all innocent-like. "Heavens no. I've always admired your command of the language, Guido, as does everyone else in the Mob I know. Besides . . ."

We have reached the doorway of our goal, but he pauses briefly to finish his sentence.

"I ... certainly wouldn't want to offend anyone as tough as you ... or you either, Nunzio. By the way, I love your new outfits. They really show off your legs, know what I mean?"

Now, I have been expectin' some kinda wisecrack about our uniforms ever since Snake stepped out of the shadows. It is oblivious to me, however, why he has waited until now to mouth off, as it allows him to duck through the door before we can reply by beatin' his head in ... which is exactly what he does, leavin' us little choice but to follow him in.

"There they are now. Come in, boys! Come in!"

The scene which greets us can be taken in at a glance, but what that glance shows is none too promisin'.

The place is a wreck, with overturned and broken tables and chairs scattered everywhere. I had known we made a bit of a mess in the course of the altercation I mentioned earlier, but whilst it

168

Robert Asprin

was in progress my attention was much more occupied with inflictin' damage on people whilst avoidin' receivin' damage from the same, so I had not been takin' close note of what was happenin' to the place itself. Lookin' at it now without the distractin' activity, however, it is clear that house-keepin' is gonna have their work cut out for them.

Don Bruce is leanin' against the bar drinkin' wine from one of the few remainin' bottles . . . drinkin' directly from the bottle as there are no unbroken glasses remainin' that I can see. Though his greetin' was real friendly, there is no pretendin' that this is a social call, as scattered around the room, leanin' against the wall in the absence of chairs, is no less than half a dozen Mob goons.

"Hi guys! Come join us!"

This comes from Tananda who is standin' on one side of Don Bruce. She has dumped her disguise for the occasion, but is wrapped in Don Bruce's lavender coat. While he maybe doesn't care for females the way Nunzio and me do, Don Bruce is always the finest of gentlemen when it comes to dealin' with them. Standin' next to him on the other side, is ...

"That's the ones! Those are the guys that busted up the place! I thought I was paying you for protection!!"

Frumple is there. For a minute I think he's dropped his disguise as well, but then I realize that he's still disguised as a local and that his face is bright red 'cause he's hoppin' mad.

"All right, all right!" Don Bruce sez, soundin' a

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

169

little annoyed. "We'll consider that a firm identification. Just get your place fixed up and send us the bill . . . better still, give us a list of what you need in supplies and repairs. We can maybe get you some discounts from the distributors and contractors . . . know what I mean?"

"I should think so," Frumple snorts, reachin' for the wine bottle.

"In the meantime," Don Bruce sez, movin' the bottle out of his reach, "why don't you take a little walk or something. There are a few things I want to discuss with the boys here."

The Deveil hesitates for a second, then nods his agreement.

"All right," he sez, but he shoots us a black look as he starts for the door. "I should have known that double-crossing Skeeve was behind you two ... I suspected it from the start. Him and this floozie of his ..."

"Hold it!!"

Don Bruce's voice cracked through the place like a whip, and I knew Frumple had made a mistake ... a bad mistake.

"What did you just say about Skeeve? . . . And Miss Tananda here?"

The goons have come off the wall and are startin' to drift forward.

"I ... um . . . that is . . ." the Deveil sez, lookin' around desperate-like.

"Perhaps you should consider being a bit more careful in your selection of words when describing

170

Robert Asprin

an associate of mine ... or a lady who is a personal friend and present at the time."

"Well . . . you see . . ." Frumple tries, but the Don isn't finished yet.

"I've reconsidered my settlement offer," he sez. "I don't think that fixin' this place up again will do ... considering the damage to your reputation. I think we'll have to set you up in a whole

new place."

This confuses the Deveel, but he is scared enough to remember his manners.

"Thafs nice of you," he sez. "But I don't think . . ."

". . . On Deva!" Don Bruce sez, droppin' the other shoe.

For a second Frumple's eyes snap wide open. Then he turns on us like a cornered rat.

"You . . . you gave me your word!" he screeches. "You said you wouldn't tell anyone . . ."

"They didn't have to tell me nothin'!" Don Bruce snaps. "I got ears in a lot of places . . . indudin' the Bazaar."

"But I can't go back there!"

"I know that, too," Don Bruce sez cold-like. "Still, that's our offer. Either we set you up on Deva ... or you stay right here and pay for your own repairs. Take it or leave it."

Now, I hadn't known that Don Bruce knew that Frumple was a Deveel, just like I was unaware that the Deveel was unwelcome in his own dimension for some reason. My surprise, however, was

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

171

nothin' compared to Frumple's reaction. He looks like he's in shock.

"I ... I can't go back there," he manages to repeat, finally.

"Good. Then it's settled." Don Bruce is suddenly friendly again. "Now why don't you go ahead and take that walk . . . and by the way ..."

The Deveei turns to find the Don starin' at him real hard-like.

"... Remember what I said ... I got ears in a lot of places. If you start runnin' off at the mouth, or do anything to give Skeeve, Miss Tananda, or the boys here any grief, I'll hear about it. Remember that. Now, get outta here."

Frumple slinks off, and as soon as he's gone. Don Bruce jerks his head at the goons.

"You boys take a walk, too," he sez. "What we got to talk about is private . . . and Snake?"

"Yes, Boss?"

"Keep an eye on that joker, will you? Make sure he doesn't talk to anyone . . . 'cause if he tries, I'm afraid he might have a little accident. Know what I mean?"

"Got it, Boss," Snake says, and follows the others out into the night.

"Well, boys," Don Bruce sez, turnin' to us at last. "Now that we're alone, I think it's about time we had us a little talk."

He is real friendly as he says this, but as you yourselves can see from the preceedin' incident with Frumple, this is not as reassurin' as it would appear. It occurs to me that I would not like to sit

172

Robert Asprin

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

173

in on a Dragon Poker game with Don Bruce, as he would doubtless make you a friendly loan so's you could keep playin' while at the same time havin' a

whole extra deck of cards hidden in his lap.

"Miss Tananda here was just tellin' me about your current operation . . ."

"That's right," Tananda sez. "Don Bruce didn't . . ."

. . . and realizing, as you have just heard, that I pride myself in being informed/' the Don continues, talkin' right over Tananda . . . which is a bad sign, "it was a little embarrassing to have to admit my ignorance until your little friend came to me this evening for help. Now, what I want to know is . . ."

"What are you doing operating in the kingdom of Possiltum . . . especially considering the agreement we made?"

"Agreement?" Tananda sez in a small voice.

"That's right," Don Bruce sez, turnin' to her. "You weren't around at the time, but way back when I first met Skeeve, we made a deal and I gave him my personal word that the Mob wouldn't move on the kingdom of Possiltum."

"But what does that . . ."

"... and since Skeeve . . . and through him, all of you . . . are now on the Mob's payroll as employees, your presence here is breakin' my word. Capish?"

"I see," Tananda sez, glancin' over at us with new understandin'. "But tell me, Don Bruce, if the Mob isn't operating in this kingdom, then what are

you doing taking protection money from merchants like Frumple? In fact, what are you doing here at all?"

This is a good question, and one which has not occurred to me . . . though I suspect I know the answer. The Don has enough grace to look a little

embarrassed, though, when he gives it.

"All this is from before I gave my word," he sez. "I never said we was going to give up the operations we already had in place."

"Hmmm ..." Tananda frowns, "it sounds like a pretty fine distinction to me."

Of course, the Mob makes a lot of money from such fine distinctions . . . but this does not seem like the time to bring it up.

"That may be," Don Bruce sez, his voice harden- in' up again. "But it's beside the point. I'm still waiting to hear what you're doing here!"

"Oh that," Tananda smiles. "Well, you see . . . umm . . ."

Though Tananda is no slouch at Dragon Poker and is actin' very confident, I can see she is stuck and trying to bluff.

"Relax, Tananda," Nunzio sez, speakin' for the first time since we came in. "I can explain it."

"You can?" I sez, slippin' a bit in my surprise.

"Sure," my cousin insists, lookin' at me hard like he does when I'm supposed to be ready to provide him with an alibi.

"All right, Nunzio," Don Bruce sez, settlin' back against the bar, "start talking."

"Well, you see, Don Bruce," Nunzio sez, "the

,L

174

Robert Asprin

Boss is unhappy with the agreement you refer- enced regarding the Mob's relationship with Pos-

siltum."

"Oh he is, is he?" the Don snarls, but Nunzio holds up a hand and continues.

"The way it is/" he sez, "is the Boss figures that circumstances have arisen which neither of you took into account in the original negotiation . . . specifically, the new expansion policy that's pushing the borders out."

"Go on," Don Bruce sez, but he's nodding now.

"The spirit of your agreement was that the Mob wouldn't infringe on the kingdom's territory, but the way it's going, the kingdom is pushing into the Mob's territory. What's more, the letter of your agreement is keeping the Mob from protecting what's ours."

"So I noticed," the Don sez, sarcastic-like.

"Now, the Boss doesn't think this is right. What's more, he feels personally responsible since it was his sloppy negotiating for the kingdom that has placed you in this predicament. The problem is that as he is now working for the Mob and not for the kingdom, he is not in a position to renegotiate the terms to make things right again."

"Yeah," Don Bruce sez thoughtful-like, "I can see that."

"Now, you may not know it, Don Bruce," Nunzio continues, "but the Boss thinks the world of you and would never do anything to hurt you or your reputation. Because of this, and because he feels responsible for your current difficulties, he has taken it upon himself to correct the situation

M.Y.T.H. INC, IN ACTION

175

by mounting a covert operation to halt the kingdom's expansion. In fact, the reason he has been keeping this secret from you is for a little extra

insurance. This way, if anything goes wrong, you can swear under oath that you knew nothing about it, and certainly never took a hand or gave an order against Possiltum. What he's doing, Don Bruce, is setting himself up to be a scapegoat . . . all to take the pressure off you!"

While I am occasionally less than complimentary when referrin' to Nunzio's long-winded tendencies, there are times when I am truly grateful for his talent for shovelin' . . . like now. Even bein' as aware as I am of the truth of the matter, that the Boss has probably overlooked his agreement with Don Bruce completely when givin' us this assignment, I am not sure I could separate fact from guff in my cousin's rendition, even with the aid of a pry bar.

"That Skeeve!" Don Bruce laughs, hittin' the bar with his fist in his enthusiasm. "Can you see why I love him? He's really trying to do all this on his own . . . just for me? I'll tell you, boys ..."

He glances around, then hunches forward before continuin'.

"You have no idea how much grief the other Mob bosses have been giving me because of that agreement. Especially the boss of the Island Mob."

"You mean Don Ho?" I sez.

"Thafs right," Don Bruce nods. "Even the boss of the senior citizens' Mob . . . Don Amechie! They've all been on my case. I'm just surprised

176

Robert Asprin

that Skeeve was aware of it. I keep telling you, that boy's got real promise. You know what an organization as big as ours needs the most?"

"Leadership," Nunzio and me answer at the same time.

"Lead . . . Hey! That's right!" the Don sez, blinkin' at us in surprise. "You know, you boys have been shaping up pretty well yourselves since you started working for Skeeve. Maybe I should start giving some thought to setting you up with your own operations."

It occurs to me that this promotion thing is gettin' totally out of hand.

"Ummm . . . We're pretty happy with things the way they are, Don Bruce/' I sez, quick-like.

"Yeah," Nunzio chimes in. "We figure the way things are going, the Boss is gonna need all the help we can give him."

"Hmmm ... I suppose you're right," the Don sez, makin' us both a little uncomfortable with how unwillin' he seems to give up the idea of advancin' us in the ranks. "Tell you what, though, like Skeeve says, I can't taken an open hand in this thing you got going, but if you want I can assign a few boys to give you a hand!"

A picture flits across my mind. A picture of me tryin' to sleep, much less operate, with Snake loiterin' about in the near vicinity.

"I ... don't think so," I sez. "we're pretty used to workin' with the crew we got already. Besides, any of the boys you assigned to us would have to enlist . . . and there's no guarantee where they'd get assigned."

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

177

"... And most of them would quit before they'd be seen in public in those outfits you're wearing," Don Bruce laughs, wirtkin' at Tananda. "Yeah. You got a point."

Me and Nunzio force smiles, which is as close as

we can manage to joining in the merriment.

"Well, be sure to let me know if there's anything I can do to help."

"Sure, Don Bruce."

"Thanks, Don Bruce."

"Oh yeah! One more thing. How's Bunny doing?"

"Bunny?" Tananda sez, comin' off the bar like a prizefighter. "That little ..."

"Sure! You remember Bunny," I interrupts quick-like. "Don Bruce's niece who's workin' with us?"

"Oh! Right!" Tananda blinks, and settles back again.

"She's working out real well, Don Bruce," Nunzio supplies hurriedly. "In fact, right now she's holding down our office while we're out in the field."

"Yeah, right," Don Bruce waves. "But how is she getting along with Skeeve?"

Even though we can maybe snow him from time to time, the Don is pretty quick, and he catches our hesitation and glances at Tananda.

"Say . . . you aren't interested in Skeeve yourself, are you. Miss Tananda?"

Tananda thinks for a second, then wrinkles her nose.

"Not really," she sez. "I guess he's kind of like a kid brother to me."

"I see," Don Bruce nods. "Well, as a favor to me, could you take Bunny under your wing, too? She

178

Robert Asprin

likes to talk tough and comes on like she's real experienced and worldly, but inside she's still just a kid. Know what I mean?"

In response, Tananda just nods slow-like. To my

eye, she seems less than thrilled with the idea . . . especially after hearin' how serious Don Bruce takes promises.

"You know how the Boss is when it comes to dames," I sez, quick-like. "Slower'n a bail bondsman what's been stung three times runnin'."

I am tryin' to draw attention away from Tananda, but the Don is ignorin' me and starin' at her instead.

"Say . . . are you okay?" he sez, misreadin' her signals. "It looks like you've been takin' more than your share of lumps in this operation."

"I'm just a little tired," she sez, flashin' a quick smile. "You're right, though. I'm not getting any younger, and I'm not sure how many more nights like this I can take."

"Why don't you head on back to Big Julie's and hook up with Chumley?" I sez. "We're gettin' transferred out of here, and there's not much you'll be able to do on your own realizin' the shape you're in."

'Transferred?'

"Thafs right," Nunzio sez. "We've been promoted and transferred to headquarters. It seems the Mob isn't the only ones who can spot leadership potential."

As an indication of the physical and nervoi stress of the night we have been through, I do n< have the energy to even think about throttiin' him

Chapter Fifteen:

"An army travels on its paperwork!"

J. CARLSON

"WELL, SERGEANT GUIDO, you and your squad come highly recommended. Yes, highly recommended indeed!"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Okay, so I am layin' it on a little thick. Considerin' the number of officers I'm seein' here at headquarters, however, it seems like the wisest attitude for an enlisted type like me to assume . . . which is to say one step up from grovelin'.

"Well," he sez, settin' our files to one side and startin' to rummage through the other stacks of paper on his desk, "let's see what we can find for you in the way of assignments."

Actually, I would be surprised if he can find his feet in this office. It has only been a few times that

179

180

Robert Asprin

I have seen so much paper stuffed into as little space as there is in this office . . . and most of the other times was in the offices I poked into while lookin' for this one. There is paper stacked everywhere, on the chairs and on the floor, on the window ledges and on the tops of file cabinets . . . not to mention the stacks set on the top of already filed paper in the open drawers of said cabinets. There are also, of course, assorted piles of paper on the desktop of the officer I am speakin' to, and it is through these stacks he is currently rummagin'.

"Ah! Here's something," he sez, pausin' to peer at one of the sheets he has been rifflin' through. "What would you say to my assigning you and your crew as sanitation engineers."

"As what?"

"You know/" he sez, "digging and filling latrines."

It occurs to me that while there might be some potential for disruptin' the army from such a

position, it is not a route I would be particularly eager to take. You see, Nunzio still ribs me about my work with the Realistic Doggie Doodle with Lifelike Aroma that Actually Sticks to Your Hands on my last assignment for M.Y.T.H. Inc., and I would therefore prefer to avoid workin' with variations on the real thing this time around.

"It sounds like a stinkin' detail . . . sir," I sez, the words sort of slippin' out.

I try to recover by addin' ". . . if you'll forgive the play on words . . . sir."

Thaf s so he'll know I read.

M.Y.T.H. INC, m ACTION

181

I expect him to get a bit upset at my forthrightness, but instead he just gives a little shrug.

"Of course it is," he sez with refreshin' honesty. "But remember where you are, Sergeant. This is Headquarters . . . the brains of the army. It only stands to reason that most of that brain power is devoted to finding nicer, cushier assignments for the owners of those brains . . . which is to say the place is armpit deep in politics ... if I make myself clear."

"Not really, sir."

The officer sighs.

"Let me try to explain it this way. Here, everybody knows somebody, and uses their connections to get the best jobs. The higher the connections, the better the jobs. You and your squad, on the other hand, have just arrived and consequently know nobody . . . which means that for a while, you'll have to content yourselves with the jobs no one else wants. I expect that as you make connections, you'll get better duties, but for the time being that's the way it is."

I consider mentionin' my connections with the Mob, but decide they will be of little value in this circumstantial and may even be construed as a threat. Then something else occurs to me.

"Is General Badaxe available, sir?"

This gets the officer's attention.

"You know General Badaxe?" he sez from under sky-high eyebrows.

"Not to any great extent, sir/ I admit. "We just met once in passin'."

182

Robert Asprin

"Oh. Well, he is here at Headquarters, of course. I think you'll find that he's indisposed, however ... at least he has been for the last couple of weeks."

"Would that indisposition by any chance be female, sir? Extra, extra large . . . a lot of makeup and jewelry?"

This earns me a lot harder look from the officer before he answers.

"As a matter of fact, yes," he sez at last. "Youi seem remarkably well informed for someone who has just arrived at Headquarters ... or do you' know the . . . young lady as well?"

For several reasons I figure it would be wisest not to admit the true relationship Nunzio and me has with Massha.

"She was with the general when I met him at court, sir," I sez, sorta truthfully.

"You've been to the Royal Court?"

"Yes sir ... but it was a while back . . . just before the king married Queen Hemlock."

"I see," the officer sez, thoughtful-like, then sets the paper he was holdin' aside and starts rummagin' again.

"Well in that case, perhaps I can find something a bit more pleasant in the way of an assignment."

"Take your time sir," I sez. "I can understand how things can be a bit disorganized with the general gone so much."

"Not really," the officer sez, absentminded-like. "If anything, they're going smoother."

"Excuse me? . . . sir?"

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

183

"What? Oh," he sez, returnin' his concentration to the situational at hand. "Well, I probably shouldn't say anything, but since you already know some of the personalities involved ..."

He pauses to glance around like someone might be loiterin' among the stacks of paper . . . which considerin' their height is a real possibility.

"If you know General Badaxe, then you probably already know that while he is a more than adequate leader, he is rather inflexible in his attitudes as to how things should be done. That is, he wants things done his way, whether there is a better way of doing things or not."

This description sounds like everyone in the army I've met above the rank of corporal, but I content myself with noddin' in agreement.

"Well, a lot of us officers who came on board during the current expansion drive originally served under Big Julie back when he led the

invasion of Possiltum. In some ways it's nice because it guaranteed us rank in the Possiltum army, but it also means we know there are other ways of doing things than the way General Badaxe wants . . . lots better ways. The trouble is, until now we haven't been able to implement any changes or improvements without disobeying orders from the general."

"And now?" I urge, not even botherin' to add a "sir" to it.

"Now, with the general 'indisposed,'" the officer smiles, gettin' a little lost in his own thoughts, "we're left pretty much on our own, Which means

184

Robert Asprin

we get to do things our way for a change. If Badaxe stays out of our hair for another few weeks, we should have this army whipped into shape so we can really get down to business. I'll tell you, serving under Big Julie might have been a pain from time to time, but that man sure knows how to run an army. I wonder how he's doing now that he's retired?"

"Last time I saw him, he was doin' great."

If I had said God himself was walkin' through the door I couldn't have gotten a bigger reaction from the officer. He sits up straight sudden-like, and his eyes lose their dreamy focus and center on me . . . though I notice they are buggin' out a little.

"You know Big Julie?" he sez in kind of a reverent whisper. "When was the last time you talked with him?"

"A couple weeks back," I sez. "Just before Nunzio and me enlisted. We was sippin' some wine with him and some friends over at his villa."

"You were a guest at his villa? Tell me, is it . . ."

The officer breaks off and shakes his head like a dog.

"Excuse me, sergeant," he sez, in much more normal tones. "I didn't mean to pry. It's just that . . . well, Big Julie is something of a legend around Headquarters. I was a junior officer when I served under him, and never met him personally . . . just saw him a couple of times during reviews and inspections."

"That's too bad," I sez, with real sympathy.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

185

"He's really a great guy. You'd like him . . . sir." I finally remembers I was talkin' to an officer, and my "sir" seemed to remind him of why I was in his office in the first place.

"Now that I think of it," he sez, pullin' some papers off the top of one of his stacks, "there is something here that I could assign you and your crew to. Would you like to take over running one of our supply depots?"

This sounds like just what we need to do the most damage to the army's attempts to reorganize. I also notice that the officer is now askin' me about which assignment I want.

"That sounds fine, sir."

"Good," he sez, startin' to scribble on the sheets. "We have a whole supply crew in the infirmary right now—got a bad batch of chili or something. Anyway, I'll just put you and your squad in there as replacements, and when they get out, they can take the sanitation engineer slots."

It occurs to me that these other guys are gonna be less than thrilled with their new assignment,

but that, of course, is not my problem. Still, it will be a good idea if for a while we keep a lookout for anyone tryin' to sneak up on us from the downwind side.

"Thank you sir," I sez, and mean it.

"Just report to Supply Depot Number Thirteen and you'll be all set."

"Yes sir ... ummm ... is it far? I mean, I got my crew outside and we got all our gear with us . . ."

186

Robert Asprin

"Just flag down one of the wagons going your way and hitch a ride," he sez. "One of the nicer things about working at Headquarters . . . with the supply depots right here is that there are lots of wagons around. You'll rarely have to walk anywhere."

"Yes sir. Thank you again, sir."

"Oh . . . Sergeant Guido?"

"Sir?" I sez, turning' back to him.

He is pushin' a stack of papers across his desk toward me that must weigh more than twenty pounds.

"Since you'll be riding, you might as well take this with you instead of waiting for it to be delivered by courier."

"I ... I don't understand, sir," I sez, eyein' this mountain of dead weight suspiciously like it was a distant relative arrivin' unannounced. "Do you want I should store this for you over at the depot?"

"Of course not," the officer sez, givin' a little

laugh. "This is for your requisition and inventory forms."

I am likin' this less and less the more I hear.

"You mean we gotta fill all this out just to move somethin' in or out of the depot . . . sir?"

"You misunderstand me, sergeant," he sez quick-like. "These aren't the forms themselves."

I experience a quick flood of relief.

". . . These are just the instructions for filling out the forms!"

The relief I had been feelin' disappears like a

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

187

single shot of whiskey in a big bowl of watered-down punch.

"The instructions," I echoes weakly, starin' at the pile.

All of a sudden this assignment is not lookin' as good as it had a few minutes ago.

The officer notices the expression on my face.

"Come, come now, sergeant," he sez, givin' me what I guess is supposed to be a fatherly smile. "It's not as bad as it looks."

"It isn't?"

"No. It's really quite simple once you get the hang of it. Just read these instructions all the way through, then follow everything they say to the letter, and everything will be fine."

"If you say so, sir," I sez, unconvinced.

"Yes, I do say so ... sergeant," he sez, givin' up his sales effort. "I told you we were going to get things under control and to do that, proper documentation is vital. It may look like a lot of needless hassle, but believe me, unless all the paperwork for supplies is filled out correctly, the best of armies will bog down and become ineffective."

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir."

With that, I salute and get out of his office quick . . . takin' the stack of paper with me, of course. All of a sudden, my depression over seein' the massive list of instructions disappears. Instead, I am feelin' a degree of optimism I have not felt since the Boss sent us on this assignment without realizin' what he was doin', the officer has just made our job a lot easier.

I

188 Robert Asprin

"Without proper paperwork," he had said, "the army will bog down and cease to be effective . . ." and, as you know, the effectiveness of the army was a matter of no small concern to me and Nunzio.

Chapter Sixteen:

"So what's wrong with following established procedures?"

M. GORBACHEV

THE WAREHOUSE WHICH was Supply Depot Number Thirteen was truly immense, which is to say it was big. In fact, it was so huge that youse got the feelin' that if the weather turned bad, they could move all the stuff out of here and have the war indoors. The only trouble with that idea was that by the time they got everythin' moved out, odds are they would have forgotten what it was they •was fightin' about in the first place . . . but even if they could remember, they'd probably be too tired to want to fight about it.

There was racks of stuff everywhere, with aisles big enough to drive a wagon down scattered around so as to carve everythin' into a series of islands, and lots of tunnels and crawlspaces twist-in' their way into each of the islands. It occurred to

189

190 Robert Asprin

me upon first viewin' this expanse that it was gonna be a perfect base of operation for us, as when and if anythin' went wrong, it would make one whale of a hideout. This thought was amplified when we discovered that the crew what had worked here before us had apparently opted to live on-site, as there were a lot of "nests" and hole-ups around the warehouse furnished with cots and hammocks and pillows and other stuff obviously filched from the piles of supplies.

In short, it was a sweet setup, and the crew loses no time settlin' in, after some of them scattered and went explorin' to find out just what sort of stuff we have inherited to ride herd on while a couple of us tried to make sense out of the paperwork and charts heaped up on the desks.

"Hoo-ey!" Shu Flie sez, emergin' from the stacks with his brother at his side. "I've never seen so much stuff in one place! They got everything here!"

"A lot of it's pretty old, though," Hy Flie sez. "We had newer stuff than some of this junk back on the farm . . . and most of that stuff is still around from Pop Flie."

"Pop Flie?" I sez before I has a chance to think about whether or not I really wants to hear the answer.

"That's our grandpa," Shu explains. "Course, sometimes we call him . . ."

"I get the picture," I sez, interruptin' before he

can explain any more.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

191

It occurs to me to make a point of not ever visitin' the Flie residence.

"What I can't figure," Junebug sez, joinin' our discussion, "is how they keep track of all this stuff. I mean, there doesn't seem to be any order or scheme to how things are stored. It's like they just keep pushing the old pile further back and stack the new stuff in front as it comes in without any effort to group things by category."

This sounds uncomfortably like the beginnin' of an idea which could improve our efficiency . . . which is, of course, the last thing my cousin and me want to see happen. Sneakin' a glance at Nunzio, I can see he's thinkin' the same thing, and catchin' my eye he gives a little shake of his head to confirm that observational.

"Ummm ... I don't guess it is such a bad system, Junebug," I sez, thinkin' fast. "I mean, would you want to rearrange all this stuff to make room for each new shipment as it comes in?"

"You could get around that by leaving extra room in each storage category," he sez, not backin' off from his idea. "We gotta do something to organize this mess. Otherwise, we'll be spending all our time just trying to locate each item when we have to fill an order. I can't see how they've been operating around here without some kind of system."

"They've got a system all right," Spellin' Bee sez, lookin' up from the Forms Instruction Manual he was readin'. "The problem is, they've got so much duplicate paperwork to fill out they probably

192

Robert Asprin

never had any time left over to try to organize the warehouse itself! I can't believe they expect us to fill out all these forms for every item in and out of inventory."

What the officer told me flashes across my mind, and it gives me an idea.

"Do you think you can come up with a better trackin' system. Bee?" I sez.

"Probably," he sez, shuttin' the instruction manual. "Let's see . . . we'd need some sort of floor map . . . two of them actually, one so we know what's already here and where it is, and a second to establish the redefined areas . . . and then a simple In/Out Log so we could track the movement of items ..."

"Okay," I interrupts, "get started on it. Figure out what we're gonna have to do and what you'll need in the way of information."

This, of course, earns me a hard look from Nunzio.

"I ... If you say so, Guido," Bee sez, hesitantly, glancin' at the instruction manual. "But shouldn't we be following the established procedures?"

"Just go ahead and work up your plan," I sez. "We'll worry about fillin' out the army paperwork after we get this place functionin' the way we think it should."

"Okay," Bee shrugs. "Come here a second, guys, and I'll show you what I need. If you can start mapping out what's already here, I can start roughing out an In/Out Log, and ..."

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

"Excuse me, Sergeant Guido," Nunzio sez. "Can I have a word with you ... in private?"

"Why certainly, Sergeant Nunzio," I smile, givin' it right back to him, and follow him as he moves a little ways away from where the crew is huddlin'.

"What are you trying to do?" he hisses, as soon as we are alone. "Maybe I missed a loop, but I was under the impression that improving efficiency was the last thing we wanted to do here!"

"It is," I sez, "except everyone on the crew is thinkin' just the opposite. I'm just stallin' for a little time by insistin' that Bee come up with a complete plan before we actually have to implement any changes."

"Okay," Nunzio nods, "but what happens after he finishes comin' up with a new setup?"

"Then we either stall some more ... or see if things will actually get fouled up more if we go ahead and try to go against army procedures. The officer what was briefin' me seemed pretty certain that the whole army will grind to a halt if all that paperwork Bee is talkin' about doesn't get filled out. At the very least we should have a chance to find out whether or not he is right."

"I dunno," my cousin frowns. "It seems to me that . . ."

"Guido! Nunzio!!"

We turn to find an apparition bearin' down on us. At first, I think it is one of those new armored wagons the army has been experimentin' with . . . only done up as a parade float. Then I look again, and see that it's . . .

"Massha!"

By the time I get this out, our associate has reached us, wrappin' one meaty arm around each of us in a humongous hug.

"I heard you guys were here and just had to come by and say 'Hi!'"

Because I am sorta to one side of her instead of directly in front of her, I can see past her to where our crew has stopped what they are doin' to gape at us ... which is the normal reaction of folks what is seein' Massha for the first time.

"H . . . Hi, Massha," Nunzio sez, managin' to squirm loose. "How are things going? Any word from the Boss?"

"Not a peep," Massha sez, lettin' go of me. "There were some funny signs coming through a while back on the monitor ring I gave him, but they settled down and since then everything seems to be normal."

"Do you think he's okay?" I sez. "He's been gone nearly three weeks now."

"Maybe . . . maybe not," she shrugs. "Remember that time doesn't flow at the same speeds on all dimensions. It may only have been a few days where he is."

"I get it," Nunzio nods solemn-like. "Like in Moorcock's Eternal Champion books."

"That's right," Massha beams. "As to your other question, things couldn't be going better, Hugh and I are hitting it off like a house afire. I'll tell you boys, I don't like to brag, but I've got him so lovesick, I don't think he remembers that he's in

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

the army . . . much less that he's supposed to be running it."

Now, I haven't read the book they was chattin' about a second ago, but this is somethin' I can comment on.

"Ummm . . . Massha?" I sez. "That may not be such a good thing."

"What do you mean?" she sez, her smile fadin' as she looks back and forth between Nunzio and me. "That was my assignment, wasn't it?"

"Tell her, Guido," Nunzio sez, dumpin' the job of givin' Massha the bad news in my lap.

"Well, the way I'm hearin' it," I sez, wishin' I was dead or otherwise preoccupied, "the army is functionin' better without him."

"But that doesn't make sense!"

"It does when you consider that the layer of officers directly under him trained and served under Big Julie," Nunzio sez, redeemin' himself by comin' to my rescue. "The more you keep him away from his troops, the more those officers get to run things their way . . . and it seems they're better at this soldierin' than General Badaxe is."

"So you're saying that the best thing I could do to louse up things is to let Hugh go back to commanding the army?" Massha sez, chewin' her lower lip thoughtful-like. "Is that it?"

"So it would seem," I sez, relieved at not havin' to be the first to voice this logical conclusion. "I'm really sorry, Massha."

She heaves a hugh sigh, which on her is reaily somethin', then manages a wry grin.

196 Robert Asprin

"Oh well," she sez. "It was fun while it lasted."

Nice to know I can still distract a man when I set my mind to it, though."

Politeness and self-preservation convince me to refrain from makin' any editorial additions to this comment.

"I guess I'll just say my goodbyes and head back to Big Julie's," she continues. "Any word from the other team?"

"They've called it quits, too," Nunzio sez. "You'll probably see them when you get to Big Julie's and they can fill you in on the details."

"So it's all riding on the two of you, huh?" she sez, cocking an eyebrow at us. "Well, good luck to you. I'd better get moving and let you get back to work. It looks like your friends are waiting for you."

I glance over where she is lookin' and sure enough, the whole crew is standin' there, alternately glancin' at us and mutterin' together.

Wavin' goodbye to Massha, we ambles over to join them.

"Who was that?" Spyder sez, kinda suspicious-like.

"Who, that?" I sez, tryin' to make it casual. "Oh, just an old friend of ours."

"Scuttlebutt has it that she's the general's girlfriend," Junebug sez in a flat voice.

"Where'd you hear that?" Nunzio sez, innocent-like.

"Here and there," Junebug shrugs. "Face it,

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

there can't be many people around Headquarters who would fit her description."

He had us there.

"Isn't it about time you guys told us exactly what is going on?" Spellin' Bee sez.

I realize, far too late, that we have been seriously underestimat' the intelligence of our crew.

"What do you mean by that?" Nunzio sez, still tryin' to bluff his way out of it.

"Come on, Nunzio," Junebug sighs, "it's been pretty obvious since Basic that you and Guido here don't really belong in the army. You've got too much going for you to pass yourselves off as average recruits."

"You fight too good and shoot too good for someone who's supposed to be learnin' all this for the first time," Shu Flie sez.

". . . And you've got too many connections in high places," Spyder adds, "like with the Mob."

". . . And with devils," Bee supplies.

". . . And now with the general's girlfriend," Junebug finishes. "All we want to know is, what are you guys really doing in the army? I mean, I suppose it's none of our business, but as long as we're servin' together, what affects you affects us."

"Bee here thinks you're part of some secret investigation team," Hy Flie sez, "and if that's what's going on we'll try to help . . . unless it's us you're supposed to be investigating."

"Well, guys," Nunzio sez, shakin' his head, "I guess you found us out. Bee's right. You see, the army wants us to . . ."

Robert Asprin

"No," I sez, quiet-like.

Nunzio shoots me a look, but keeps goin'.

"What Guido means is we aren't supposed to talk about it, but since you've already ..."

"I said 'No,' Nunzio!" I sez, squarin' off with him. "The crew's been play in' it straight with us all along. / say it's time we told them the truth . . . the real truth."

Nunzio hesitates, as he is not real eager to go head to head with me, then glances back and forth between me and the crew.

"Okay," he sez finally. "It's your funeral . . . go ahead and tell them."

Then he leans against the desk with his arms folded while I fill the crew in on our assignment . . . startin' with how the Boss's plan to keep Queen Hemlock from tryin' to take over the world fell apart when King Rodrick died, right up to our current plans to try to use our position in the supply depot to mess up the army's progress. They're all real quiet while I'm talkin', and even when I'm done no one sez anythin' for a long time.

"Well," sez Spyder, breakin' the silence, "the way I see it, we can't mess up every shipment or the army will just jerk us out of here. We'd better hold it down to one in five for a while."

"One in ten would be better," Junebug sez.
"Otherwise ..."

"Wait a minute! Stop the music!" Nunzio explodes, interruptin' the conversation. "Are you guys sayin' you're willin' to help us screw things up?"

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

"Sure. Why not?" Shu Flie sez, puttin' a hand on my shoulder. "You and the Swatter here have been lookin' out for us since Basic. It's about time we did something for you for a change."

"Besides," his brother chimes in, "it's not like you're trying to bring down the kingdom or destroy the army. You're just out to slow things up a little . . . and that's fine by us."

"What it boils down to," Spyder smiles, "is that after working with you two all this time, we know you well enough to trust you to not hurt us ... or anyone else for that matter . . . unless it's absolutely necessary. I think I speak for all of us when I say we've got no problem putting our support behind any plan you think is right. Am I right, guys?"

There is a round of nods and affirmative grunts, but I am only half payin' attention. It is occurin' to me that I am buildin' a better understandin' of what the Boss means when he sez he's nervous about commandin' more loyalty than he deserves. While the crew is sayin' they don't believe we would do anythin' to hurt them, I am thinkin' about how we set them up for the barroom fight in Twixt ... a detail I omitted when I was testifyin' about our recent activities. This makes me feel a little low, and while I am not about to refuse their help, I find it strengthens my resolve to avoid such leadership and decision makin' positions in the future.

"What about you. Bee?" Nunzio is sayin'. "You aren't lookin' too happy. You want out?"

Robert Asprin

"N . . . No. It isn't that," Bee sez, quick-like. "I'm willing to help as much as I can. It's just that . . . well, I was sort of looking forward to

trying to get this place organized."

"You can still do that, Bee," Junebug sez, winkin' at him. "We still need to know what's going on, even if we only use the information to slow things up."

"It's just too bad we don't have our own teamsters," Shu Flie sez. "Then we could really mess things up."

"What was that, Shu?" Nunzio sez, suddenly lookin' real attentive.

"What? Oh. Well, I was thinking that if we could have our own drivers to do the delivering instead of using army wagons, we could scatter our shipments all across the kingdom."

"No ... I mean what did you say about teamsters?"

"Teamsters," Shu repeats. "You know. The guys that drive freight wagons ... at least, that's what we called 'em back on the farm."

I look at Nunzio and he looks at me, and I realize from our smiles we is thinkin' the same thing.

"Spyder," I sez, "you found the Mob once in Twixt ... do you think you could do it again?"

"Sure," she shrugs. "Why?"

"I got a message I want you to get to Don Bruce," I smiles. "I think we just found somethin' he can do to help us."

Chapter Seventeen;

"Ya gotta speak the language."

N. WEBSTER

"HEY, SWATTER/' Shu Flie sez, lookin' out one of the warehouse windows, "do you know there are a buncha wagons and drivers sitting outside?"

"No," I sez, "but if you hum a couple bars, I'll fake it."

Okay, so it's an old joke. Like I've said before, the army runs on old jokes. Unfortuitously, this particular joke is apparently a little too old for our farm-raised colleague.

"Say what?" he sez, lookin' kinda puzzled.

"Strike that," I sez. "Are they army or civilian?"

While it is procedure to have army wagons and drivers take shipments out of the supply depot, deliveries from suppliers is done by the supplier's own transports, and are therefore civilian.

"Civilian," Shu sez.

201

202

Robert Asprin

"Are the wagons full or empty?"

"They look empty from here."

I look over at Nunzio.

"Think it might be the teamsters we're expectin'?"

"Easy enough to check," he shrugs. "Hey Shu! What are they doing?"

"Nothing," the Flie brother reports. "They're just sitting around and talking."

"Sounds like them," Nunzio smirks. "I think it's your deal, Junebug."

As you might be able to detect from this last comment, we're all occupied with our favorite

pastime, which is to say, Dragon Poker.

"Shouldn't one of you go out and talk to them or something?" Shu sez, wanderin' over to our table.

"It wouldn't do any good," I sez, peekin' at my hole cards. "They'll talk to us when they're good and ready . . . and not before. Pull up a chair and relax."

As it turns out, it is several hours before there is any contact with the drivers. When it finally comes, it takes the form of a big, potbellied individual with a tattoo on his arm who comes waddlin' through the door and over to our game.

"Hey, hey!" he snarls, "is somebody gonna talk to us or what?"

Now, just because Nunzio and me is big guys what get our way by tossin' our weight around does not mean we are particularly tolerant of anyone else who does the same thing.

"We figured you guys would talk to us when

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

203

you were good and ready and not before," Nunzio sez, gettin' to his feet. "You got a problem with that?"

"Oh yeah?" the guy hollers, goin' nose to nose with Nunzio. "Well for your information, we'll talk when we're good and . . . and . . . oh. Yeah."

It takes a little doin', but I manage to hide my smile. This guy is already at a disadvantage in the negotiations, as my cousin has beaten him to his own punch line. Havin' lost the edge in the bluster department, he retreats to his secondary defense of indifference.

"We ... ah ... heard around that you guys was lookin' for some civilian transport, so we thought we'd drop by and see what the score was for ourselves."

"The stuff's over there on the loadin' dock/' I sez, jerkin' a thumb in the appropriate direction. "And here's the list of where it's supposed to go. Bill us."

I nod to Bee, who hands the guy the papers for the shipments we have selected. Like I say, we'd been expecting them.

The guy looks at the list he's holdin' like if s a road kill.

"Just like that, huh?" he sneers. "Don't you wanna talk about our haulin' rates?"

"No need for that," I shrugs. "I'm sure you'll charge us a fair price."

"You are?" he sez, squintin' suspicious-like.

"Sure," I sez, givin' him my best collection

204

Robert Asprin

agent's smile, "especially seein' as how the rates is gonna be reviewed . . . and if they look outta line, there's gonna be an investigation,"

"An investigation," the driver sneers. "We get Royal investigations all the time . . . and we ain't changed nothin' yet. If they give us too much grief, we just threaten to shut down haulin' all over the kingdom."

"We wasn't talkin' about fc Royal Investigation," Nunzio sez. "We was thinkin' of another judgmental body."

"Oh yeah? Like who?"

Nunzio winks at me, and I take a deep breath and give it my best shot.

"Don . . . de don don. Don . . . de don don Bruuuuuce!"

Though my singin' voice is not what you would call a real show stopper, the guy gets the message. His smile droops, and he swallows hard . . . but he's a fighter and tries to rally back.

"Yeah, okay, so you get our 'special' rates. Just don't expect any express delivery."

Now it's Nunzio's turn to show off his grin.

"Friend," he sez, "if we wanted efficiency, we wouldn't have sent for the teamsters."

"What's that supposed to mean?" the guy bellows, gettin' back some of the color he lost when we mentioned Don Bruce.

"Just that your normal delivery schedules will suit us fine," I sez, innocent-like. "Know what I mean?"

"Yeah . . . well ... I guess that's settled,"

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

205

the guy sez, lookin' back and forth between Nunzio and the men. "We'll go ahead and get started."

As he is goin', I find I cannot resist takin' one last dig at him.

"Say, Nunzio," I sez in a loud voice. "What do you call a teamster in a three piece suit?"

"The defendant!" Nunzio shoots back just as loud.

This humor goes right past the others in the crew, but the driver gets it. He breaks stride, and for a second I think he's gonna come back to "discuss" it with us at length. Instead, he just keeps on goin' and contents himself with slammin' the door for his witty response.

"You know, Guide," Nunzio sez, goin' back to studyin' his cards, "special rates or not, eventually we're going to have to pay these jokers . . . and we do not currently have access to the funds we are accustomed to operating with in M.Y.T.H. Inc."

"Relax, cuz," I sez, seein' the current bet and raisin' it, "I got an idea for that, too."

I have a chance to try out my plan that afternoon when a shipment arrives from one of our suppliers. I wait until the unloadin' is almost complete, then amble over to the driver.

"Say . . . you got a minute?" I sez, friendly-like.

"Okay," the driver shrugs. "Whaf's up?"

"Well," I sez, lookin' around like I'm expectin' a

206

Robert Asprin

cop, "I got some information you should pass back to your outfit."

"What's that?"

"There's a rumor goin' around that the queen is callin' for an audit on military spendin'," I sez. "Somethin' about a lot of our suppliers chargin' us more for supplies than they do civilians."

"An audit?" he repeats, suddenly lookin' real nervous.

"Yeah, scuttlebutt has it that any outfit caught gougin' extra profits out of army contracts is gonna get shut down and their entire inventory confiscated by the government."

"Is that legal?"

"Hey, we're talkin' the queen here. If she sez it's legal, it's legal."

"When is this gonna happen?"

"Not until next month, the way I hear it," I sez. "I just thought you might like to know a little in advance. You know, so just in case any of youse guys' prices should need some quick readjusting youse could do it before the audit started."

"Hey thanks! I appreciate that."

"Yeah? Well, let your management know about it and see if they appreciate it, too. If they do, then maybe it would be a good think if in addition to adjustin' their prices, they made a little refund to postdate the price change . . . like maybe you could drop it off here when you make your next delivery?"

"I'll do that," he sez, noddin' vigorously. "And thanks again. We won't forget you."

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

207

Things went pretty smooth after that. We only had to plant our audit rumor a couple times for the word to spread through the suppliers, and soon there was a steady arrival of "refunds" . . . more than enough to pay off the teamsters. What's more, Bee's plan for reorganizin' the warehouse worked well enough that we ended up havin' a fair amount of leisure time each day, which we devoted to sharpenin' our Dragon Poker skills . . . as well as to our new hobby: Creative

Supplyin'.

This pastime proved to be a lot more fun than any of us had anticipated, mostly because of the rules we set for ourselves. Since we agreed to only botch up one out of every ten orders, we have a lot of time to decide exactly which orders will get botched up and how. You see, to keep ourselves covered, we decide that it is best to switch items that either had identification numbers close enough to each other that the error would seem like a simple misreadin', like a 6 for an 8 ... or that were of a similar nature or appearance so it would just look like we pulled the wrong item, like sendin' summer weight uniforms to an outfit requestin' winter weight gear.

My personal favorite was when we sent several cases of Propaganda Leaflets to an outfit that was desperately askin' for toilet paper. It seemed somehow appropriate to me.

Like I say, it was a lot of fun ... so much fun,

208 Robert Asprin

in fact, I had a sneaky feelin' that it couldn't last. As it turned out, I was right.

The end of the festivities came when I got an order to report to our commandin' officer.

"Stand easy, Sergeant Guido. I've just been reviewing your unit's efficiency rating, and from what I'm seeing, it looks like it's time we had a talk."

I am more puzzled than nervous at this, as we have not been forwardin' the required copies of our paperwork . . . mostly because we have not been fillin' out the required paperwork at all. This is confirmed by the officer's next words.

"It seems your squad is not overly fond of filling out the supply forms required by regulations, sergeant."

"Well, sir, we've been pretty busy tryin' to learn the routine. I guess we've gotten a little behind in our reports."

"A little behind' hardly describes it," he sez, tightenin' his lips a little. "I can't seem to find a single form from your supply depot since you took over. No matter, though. Fortunately there is sufficient cross-reporting to give me an idea of your progress."

This makes me a little uneasy, as we have figured there would be several rounds of requests and admonishments on our negligent paperwork performance before any attention was paid to the actual performance of our jobs. Still, as I am not totally unaccustomed to havin' to explain my ac-

M.Y.T.H. INC, IN ACTION

209

dons to assorted authority figures, I have my alibis ready to go.

"Are you aware, sergeant, that your squad is performing at ninety-five percent efficiency?"

"Ninety-five percent?" I sez, genuinely surprised, as our one-in-ten plan should be yieldin' an even ninety percent.

"I know it sounds high," the officer sez, misunderstandin' my reaction, "especially considering that sixty-five percent is the normal efficiency rating, even for an experienced supply crew. Of course, a practiced eye can read between the lines and get a pretty good idea of what's happening."

"Sir?"

"Take this one shipment, for example," he sez, tappin' one of the sheets in front of him. "It took a shrewd eye with attention to detail to spot that this request for winter weight uniforms was actually

several months old, and to realize that substituting summer weight uniforms would be more appropriate."

A small alarm started goin' off in the back of my head, but the officer was still talkin'.

". . . or take this item, when you substituted cases of these propaganda leaflets for toilet paper. Everybody's heard about the morale problem of that unit, but it seems you not only had an idea about what to do, you acted on it. It's worked, incidentally . . . word is, their esprit de corps is at an all-time high since receiving your shipment."

As he is speakin' I am starin' at the leaflet he has shoved across the desk. Now understand, we had

210

Robert Asprin

sent this stuff out without openin' the cartons, so this is the first time I am seein' one of the actual leaflets. It features a large picture of Queen Hemlock, who is not a bad lookin' broad normally, but looks particularly good in this picture as she is wearin' little more than a suggestive smile. Underneath the picture in large letters is the question: WOULD'N'T YOU RATHER BE ON MY SIDE? Though I do not pretend to be a sociology expert like my cousin Nunzio, I can see where this would perk up a depressed soldier.

". . . But I'm getting bogged down in details," the officer is sayin'.

"In addition to your shipping efficiency, are you aware that the turnaround time for an order at your depot is less than a third the time it takes to get an order through any other depot?"

I am startin' to see the direction this interview is goin', and needless to say I am not enthused with it.

"That's mostly Private Bee's doin' sir," I sez, tryin' to get the focus off me. "He's been experimentin' with a new organization system in our warehouse ... as well as a new 'reduced paper-work' trackin' system."

"Private Bee, eh?" the officer sez, makin' a note on his pad. "Tell him I'd like to see him when you get back to your unit. I'd like a bit more information about this experimental system of his . . . and speaking of experiments ..."

He looks up at me again.

"I understand you've been using civilian trans-

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

211

ports for some of your deliveries. Is that another experiment?"

"Yes, sir," I sez.

I figure he'll be upset about this, so I am willin' to take the blame. It seems, however, that once again I have misjudged the situational.

"You know, sergeant," he sez, leanin' back in his chair, "the army considered using civilian transports for the disbursement of supplies, but abandoned the idea as being too expensive. From the look of things, though, you may have just proved them wrong. Of course, you should have cleared it with me before implementing such an experiment, just as it was beyond your authority to authorize Private Bee to change established procedure, but it's hard to argue with your results. Besides, it's a rare thing these days to find a soldier, especially an enlisted man, who's not afraid to show a little initiative."

I experience a sinkin' feelin' in my stomach.

". . . And if there's one thing an organization

that's growing as fast as ours needs ..."

I close my eyes.

". . . it's leadership. That's why it gives me such great pleasure to approve your promotion to lieutenant, and ..."

My eyes snap open.

"Wait a minute!" I sez, forgettin' all about the proper modes of addressin' a superior. "You're makin' me an officer??"

My reaction seems to take the officer by surprise.

"Well . . . yes," he sez. "Normally we'd re-

212 Robert Asprin

quire your attending officers' school, but in this situation ..."

"That does it!" I snarl, losin' my temper completely. "/ QUIT!!"

Chapter Eighteen:

"Has anybody got a plan?"

G.A. CUSTER

To SAY THE least, our reunion with the rest of the M.Y.T.H. Inc. team at Big Julie's was somethin' less than a celebration.

Oh, we are all glad to see each other, and our host is more than generous with the wine from his vineyard, but contrary to popular belief, drinkin' does not necessarily improve one's mood. To my experience, what it does is to amplify whatever mood youse is already in ... so if youse is happy, youse gets very happy, and if youse happens to be depressed, youse gets very depressed . . . and the unfortuitous circumstantial was that we was not very happy.

There is no gettin' around the fact that we have failed dismally in our efforts to stop Queen Hemlock, and while we could try to convince ourselves
213

214

Robert Asprin

that it was an impossible task for five individuals and a dragon to achieve, this is the first time since we incorporated that we have failed to come through on an assignment. Realizin' that it wasn't a real job, as in one we had been commissioned for, but just a favor for the Boss didn't help much ... as, if anythin', we felt worse about lettin' the Boss down than we would about refundin' a client's fee.

"Did you have much trouble getting out of your enlistment?" Tananda was sayin' after we finish explainin' why we are back.

"Not really," Nunzio sez, reh'llin' his goblet from a pitcher of Big Julie's wine. "Oh, eventually we had to call in General Badaxe to approve it, but after we told him we were on a special assignment for Skeeve, he signed the papers without asking any more questions. The only problem we had was that they really wanted us to stay . . . right. Lieutenant?"

He starts to grin at me, then notices from the look on my face that I am not in a mood to be kidded.

"Fortunately," he continues hastily, "the bait they kept offering was to promote us even higher . . . which, to say the least, was a temptation we had no difficulty resisting."

What my cousin is carefully omittin' from his report is that the real problem we had with leavin' wasn't with the army ... it was with our crew. Speakin' for myself, I hadn't realized how much they all meant to me until our discharges had been

approved and we was ready to say goodbye. I guess it wasn't until then that it hit me that I'd probably never see any of them again.

"Goodbye, Guido," Spellin' Bee had said, shakin' my hand solemnly. "I really appreciate the help you've given me with my magik. I guess I've been so caught up learning the techniques that I've never stopped to think of all the ways it can actually be applied."

"That's nothin'," I sez, feelin' a little embarrassed. "When you get out, look us up and I'll introduce you to the Boss. He knows a lot more about that magik stuff than I do, and I don't think he'll mind givin' you a few pointers."

"Do you really think that would be all right?" Bee sez. "I haven't said anything before, but the Great Skeeve has always been sort of an idol to me. I ... I'm not sure I can learn enough about magik here in the army to where he'd want to bother with me."

"There's magik and there's magik," Nunzio sez, puttin' a hand on Bee's shoulder. "I think he'd like to meet you even if you don't get any more magik training than you've got right now. That was a pretty impressive system you came up with for organizing the warehouse, and our outfit is always on the lookout for . . . ah, administrators."

I roll my eyes and he shrugs at me, apologetic-like.

The commandin' officer had been impressed with Bee's system ... so much, in fact, that he was bein' promoted and transferred into the task

force assigned to improvin' the army's efficiency. Consequently, there was some question in the minds of Nunzio and me if he would ever actually see any further magik trairiin' . . . which was, I guess, why Nunzio said what he did.

Personally, I wasn't sure we could use Bee if he did show up, as the M.Vf H. Inc. operation is service-oriented and therefore doesn't have any warehouses, but I kept this thought to myself.

"Gee, thanks guys," Bee sez, biinkin' a bit more than usual. "Well . . . see you around, I guess."

"You guys take care of yourselves . . . you hear?" Spyder sez, standin' on her tiptoes to give each of us a big hug.

"Sure, Spyder," I sez, biinkin' a little myself. "And listen . . . when you get out ... if you're still interested in joinin' the Mob, you come see us first . . . got that?"

"Got it," she sez, noddin' vigorous-like,

". . . and stay away from Snake," Nunzio sez, "you want help . . . you come to us!"

"Sure thing . . . and you guys remember, if you need any help . . . well, if there's anything you think I can help you with, you let me know and I'll be there. Okay?"

"That goes for the rest of us too, Swatter," Shu Flie sez, grabbin' my hand and pumpin' it once. "You give the word, and we'll come runnin'."

"I'll remember," I sez. "Just let us know when you all get out. We wouldn't want to interfere with your army duties."

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

217

I meant this as a kind of a joke, but they all

seemed to take it serious.

"Don't worry about that," Junebug sez, lookin' me in the eye hard-like. "We know where our first loyalties lie ... and you do, too."

Like I said, it wasn't an easy partin'. The hardest part, though, was knowin' that whatever we said about them lookin' us up, the odds were that if they did try, they probably wouldn't be able to find us. As soon as this assignment is over, we'll be headin' back to our headquarters at the Bazaar, and unless they learn how to dimension-travel . . .

"So what do we do now?" Tananda sez, pullin' my mind away from my memories and bringin' it back to the present. "Pack it up and head for home?"

"I believe there is one more option which I brought up at the beginning of this assignment," Massha sez slowly, starin' into her wine.

It takes me a second to remember, but finally it comes back to me.

"You mean, whackin' the queen?" I sez.

She nods. Then there is a long time when no one sez anything as each of us thinks it through.

"Well," Nunzio sez finally. "I suppose we should give it a shot ... at least then we can say we tried everything before we gave up."

I hesitate a second longer, then nod my agreement.

"All right, cuz," I sez, "you're on. Big Julie, if

218 Robert Asprin

you can find that gear we stored here before we enlisted, Nunzio and me can ..."

"Whoa . . . stop . . . HOLD IT!!" Massha sez, holdin' up a hand. "Who said you two were going to be the ones to go after the queen?"

"Well . . . it's oblivious, ain't it?" I sez, a little annoyed that my attempt to grab the assignment has been thwarted, but willin' to try to bluff my way through. "I mean, this is right up our alley . . . seein's as how it is what we are trained to do."

"... And from what you've said about your disagreements with your drill instructor, that training is geared more toward enforcing than killing."

"Don't you worry about that," Nunzio sez, givin' her a tight little smile. "We're just against unnecessary killing. In this case, it seems that it's necessary."

"Well, when I suggested it, I figured that / was going to be the one to go after her," Massha sez, with no trace of her normal "happy-fat-lady-vamp" act.

"You?" I sez. "Excuse me for pointin' it out, Massha, but though you're more than a little intimidatin' physically, I don't think that physical acts are your forte."

"Who said anything about getting physical?" she sez, holdin' up her ring-laden hands. "You think I wear all this stuff for decoration ... or ballast? I've got a few toys here that should take care of things just fine."

Although she is still a beginner in the natural

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

219

magjk department, Massha held her own as a city magician for a long time before she signed on as the Boss's apprentice on the strength of the mechanical magikal gear she has collected . . . most

of which is in the form of jewelry. While I have suspected as much ever since we first met, this is the first time that she has confirmed that at least some of her baubles are of a lethal variety.

"Besides," she finishes, crossin' her arms decisively. "I'm Skeeve's apprentice ... so the job falls to me."

"... And we're his bodyguards who are specifically supposed to eliminate any threats to the Boss's well being," Nunzio snaps back. "While I don't doubt your sincerity or the reliability of your toys, Massha, whackin' somebody takes experience . . . and Guido and I are the only ones on the team with experience in that area."

"Aren't you forgetting something, boys?"
Tananda purrs, breakin' into the argument.

"What's that, Tananda?"

"While you two may be trained and experienced as generalists in controlled violence, part of my background is specifically as an assassin. By your own logic, then, it looks like the unpleasant task falls to me."

"Not to spoil your fun, little sister," Chumley sez, "but I was rather counting on giving it a go myself."

"You?" Tananda laughs. "Come on, big brother, you've still got your arm in a sling."

220

Robert Asprin

"What . . . this?" the troll sez, glancin' down at his arm. "It's hardly worth mentioning, really."

He pulls his arm out of the sling and wiggles his fingers, then sets his elbow on the table beside him.

"Do any of you want to try arm wrestling with me? Or will you concede the point?"

"Really, Chumley," Tananda sez, ignorin' the challenge, "just because that thick hide of yours is hard to get through ..."

"... Is the exact reason why I'm the logical choice for the assignment," the troll finishes with a smile.

". . . Except for the minor detail of your appearance/' Massha adds. "Sorry, Chumley, but you're the last of us I'd figure for the assignment. Any of the rest of us could pass for natives, but you'd stand out like a sore thumb without a disguise spell."

"So I borrow little sister's makeup mirror."

"Not a chance," Tananda sez, stubborn-like.

". . . Or I simply borrow a hooded cloak or something for a disguise," Chumley continues smoothly as if she hasn't spoken. "How about it, Big Julie? Have you got anything lying around in an extra-extra large?"

"As a matter of fact," the retired general sez, "I was thinking of doing the job myself."

"What?"

"You?"

"That's ..."

"... BECAUSE," Big Julie continues, silencing

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

221

us all with the simple technique of raisin' that voice of his to an authoritative level, "because I'm an old man and therefore the most expendable."

We all sink back into our chairs, too embarrassed to look at each other. With these few words, he has gotten to the heart of what was prompting our apparently bloodthirsty argument.

"I've been listening to all of you," he sez, takin' advantage of our uneasy silence, "and what nobody seems to want to say out loud is that trying to assassinate the queen is pretty much a suicide mission. Political leaders . . . and particularly royalty ... are the best guarded folks in any nation. Even if you can get to them, which is uncertain at best, the odds of getting away afterward are so small they aren't even worth considering."

He looks around the gatherin'.

"Of course, I don't have to tell you this because you all know it already. That's why each of you is so eager to take the job ... to let the others off the hook by nobly sacrificing yourself. Well, my advice, as your tactical advisor, is to forget the whole thing and go home . . . since I don't believe Skeeve ever intended for things to go this far ... or, if you're determined to have the queen killed, then to let me do it. Like I said before, I'm an old man who's doing nothing but idling away my retirement with petty self-indulgences. All of you are contributing more to life, and are therefore more valuable, than I am. Besides," he lets a little grin play across his face, "it

222 Robert Asprin

might be kinda fun to see a little action just one more time. I never really figured on dying in bed."

"That's sweet of you, Big Julie," Tananda sez, "but it's totally out of the question. Even though you've worked with us as an advisor, you're not really part of the team . . . and I'm sure this is one job Skeeve wouldn't want us to subcontract."

"I think we're agreed at least on that," Massha

sez, glancin' around our assemblage. "If it's going to be done, it's going to be done by one of us."

"Then you still figure to try for Hemlock?" the ex-general frowns.

"I think," Chumley announces, standin' up and stretchin', "I think that we're all too tired and have been drinking far too much to make a rational decision. I suggest we all retire for now and pick up this discussion in the morning when our heads are clearer."

"You know, that's the first sensible idea I've heard in the last half hour," Tananda sez, stretchin' a bit herself . . . which would be fun to watch if I wasn't still thinkin' about the problem at hand.

"Good thinking, Chumley," Nunzio sez.

"Right."

"Sounds good to me."

With everyone in agreement, the party breaks up and we all start to drift off to our rooms.

"Nunzio," I sez, as soon as the others are out of hearin' range. "Are you thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

"That we should figure on getting up a little early tomorrow?" he sez.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

223

". . . Because if anyone goes for the queen, it's gonna be us," I declare.

". . . And if we leave it to the group to decide, someone else might get the job . . ." he adds.

". . . Whereas if we simply present them with a fait accompli, it'll be too late to argue," I finish.

"Right?"

"Right," he answers.

Like I say, though Nunzio and I sometimes have our differences, we work together pretty well when the stakes are high . . . which is why we are both smilin' as we wave good night to the others.

Chapter Nineteen:

"We must hurry . . . it's almost over!"

P. FOGG

As I MENTIONED, Nunzio and me have brought along a few accessories on this assignment which we stored at Big Julie's for fear the army might be less than appreciative if we showed up to enlist already equipped . . . especially as our personal gear tends to be of a much better quality than that which the army issues.

Bein' true professionals, we spend considerable time sortin' through our travelin' kits for items which would be of specific use for the job at hand. The knuckle dusters, sawed-off pool cues, lead pipes and such we set aside , . . as they would normally be used for much more subtle ventures, and attemptin' to apply them in a fatal manner would be both time-consumin' and messy. Though it broke our hearts, we also decide to leave behind

225

226

Robert Asprin

our lolo crossbows. While they are great in an open confrontation, they are a bit bulky to be considered as concealable weapons which counts against them as whatever we use will have to be carried in under the noses of the queen's guards. While these deletions shorten our equipment list somewhat, we are still left with a fair assortment of

tools from which to make our final selection.

Nunzio finally settles on a pocket, pistol-grip crossbow and a length of piano wire . . . just in case . . . while I opt for a blowgun and a nice set of throwin' knives. For those of youse who may be surprised by the latter choice, I would note that while I might not be as good as Snake is, I am still no slouch when it comes to shivs. Unfortunately I cannot provide youse with references to this fact, as those who would be in a position to testify on the degree of my skill from firsthand experience are, un fortuitously, no longer with us ... but I digress.

"You know, Guido," Nunzio sez, startin' to stash his gear in the spiffy civilian clothes we're now wearin' again, "there is one problem with us taking this contract on ourselves."

"What's that?"

"Well, if we get caught afterwards, which as Big Julie points out is a definite possibility if not a probability, then we are again faced with a situation where it looks like the Mob is interfering with the kingdom of Possiltum."

"Come on, Nunzio," I sez. "We have been workin' for the Mob for a number of years now."

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

227

and in all that the time the authorities have not even come close to provin' there is any direct connection between ourselves and that august organization."

"I wasn't thinking about the authorities," my cousin sez, grim-like. "I was thinking about Don Ho and the other Mob bosses to which Don Bruce referred."

"Oh . . . Yeah."

I had not considered this, but it is definitely a point worth reflectin' upon. However, I am still unwillin' to let one of the others on the M.Y.T.H. Inc. team take the fall instead of us.

"Tell you what," I sez. "Chances are, only one of us will do the actual whackin' . . . right?"

"Well, yeah. So?"

"So if it looks like he's gonna get caught, then the other one whacks him. Then the survivor can say that the one what whacked the queen was a renegade, and was eliminated for violatin' the Boss's orders."

"Sounds good to me," Nunzio sez. "Let's get going."

If, perhaps, our attitude toward dyin', not to mention the possibility of maybe whackin' each other, sounds a little callous, I would suggest youse consider anew what it is Nunzio and me do for a livin'. We is bodyguards . . . which means that along with our jobs, we accept the possibility that at some point one or both of us might have to die so that the person what we are protectin' does not. I repeat, it is part of the job . . . and we'd be

228

Robert Asprin

pretty dumb bunnies if that part of the job description came as a surprise to us after all this time.

As to the possibility of one of us havin' to whack the other . . . well, I don't relish the thought of droppin' Nunzio any more than I like the idea of him droppin' me. Still, once one has accepted the above referenced possibility of dyin' on the job to protect the Boss's body or reputation, then it requires little additional justification to accept that dead is dead and afterwards it doesn't really matter exactly who it was what did the number on

youse. If anythin', if Nunzio did me or vice versa, then at least we would be assured of it bein' a neat, professional job with a minimum of fuss and bother.

Anyhow, it is just after dawn as we sneak out of the villa, openin' the door an inch at a time in case it squeaks, then easin' onto the patio as soon as it's open far enough for us to slip through. At this point seein' as how it seems we have effected our exit without arousin' the others on the team, I pause to give Nunzio a wink and a thumbs up sign.

"Morning, boys!" comes a familiar voice from the far side of the patio. "Care for a bit of breakfast?"

Bigjulie is sprawled on a recliner, soakin' up the morning sun as he picks at the food laid out on the table next to him.

"Shhh! Could you keep it down?" Nunzio hisses, puttin' a finger to his lips as he hurries over to our host.

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

229

"What for?" Big Julie sez, still speakin' in that loud, projectin' voice of his.

"Well . . . ummm . . ." I sez, shootin' a glance at Nunzio who just shrugs. "To tell you the truth, Big Julie, we are takin' it on ourselves to bring yesterday's argument to a close by goin' after the queen before there is any further discussion. This effort will, of course, go to waste if the others hear you and emerge before we have made our departure."

"Oh . . . it's too late to worry about that," he sez, casual-like.

"Excuse me?"

"They've already gone . . . one at a time, of course."

"They did? When?"

"Well, let's see ... Tananda was the first . . . she left last night . . . then Chumley took off when he woke up and realized she was gone. Massha . . . well, she lit out about an hour ago when she found out the others had gone . . . you know, that woman moves pretty fast considering the weight she's carrying."

"So they're all ahead of us," Nunzio sez, disgusted-like. "And here we thought we were being clever getting an early start."

"Well, there is one detail I notice your teammates neglected to mention yesterday," Big Julie sez. "You see, today is the day the queen holds her public court and hears cases and complaints from anybody . . . first come first served. That makes it perfect for the kind of questionable deed you

230 Robert Asprin

were discussing . . . but the lines form early, both for those seeking an audience and those who simply want to be in the audience."

"Oh that's just swell!" I sez. "Tell me, Big Julie, if you don't mind my askin', why didn't you try to stop them?"

"Me?" he blinks, innocent-like. "I had my say yesterday . . . and as I recall was unanimously told to butt out. That makes it none of my business . . . though I'll admit I'd be no more eager to try stopping any of the others than I'd be to try to stop you two. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I guess I see your point," Nunzio sez quick-like, lookin' grimmer than I've seen him in a long time. "Well, come on, Guido! We've gotta hurry if we're gonna be in this game at all!"

Just as Big Julie predicted, the palace throne room was packed to the walls with even more folks waiting outside to get in if anyone left early. As I have mentioned before, however, Nunzio and me is of sufficient size that most folks give ground when we crowd them, so we are able to eventually elbow our way in to where we can at least see.

The crowd what has shown up just to watch is linin' the walls about twenty deep or jammed into the balconies, leavin' the center of the room open for those havin' business with the queen. Seein' as how that pack is standin' in a line which stretches back out the door, we have little choice but to join the audience . . . which hides our presence to a

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

231

certain extent, but greatly reduces our chances of a quick withdrawal after we finishes workin'.

"There's Massha," I sez, though it's kinda needless, as she is standin' in the line waitin' to go before the queen and is very noticeable in that company. "Can you see the others?"

Nunzio just shakes his head and keeps scannin' the audience on our right, so I start doin' the same for the crowd on the left.

Of course, I realize it is unlikely I will be able to spot Tananda, since with that disguise mirror of hers she can look like anyone she wants. I suspect though, knowin' her to be more than a little vain, that even disguised she will be both female and attractive.

Chumley, however, is another matter entirely. All I gotta do is look for a good sized figure in an outfit that hides its face, and . . .

Nunzio gives me a quick elbow in the ribs to get my attention, then jerks his head up toward the

ceilin'. It takes me a minute to figure out what he's tryin' to point out to me, but then somethin' moves in the shadows of the rafters and I see her. It's Tananda, and she's flat on one of the heavy timbers easin' her way closer to the throne. At first, I'm afraid she'll fall, but then I realize that she's . . .

"Quit looking at her/" Nunzio hisses in my ear. "Do you want the guards to spot her?"

I realize I have been starin' up at her like some kind of a tourist, and that if I keep doin' it, other people . . . like the guards . . . are gonna start

232

Robert Asprin

wondering what I'm lookin' at and start checkin' the rafters themselves.

"So what do we do now?" I whispers back, tearin' my eyes away from Tananda's progress.

"We move," Nunzio sez, ". . . And fast, if we're gonna score before she makes her try. With this crowd, though . . . tell you what. You try easin' up on the left there and I'll go up this side."

"Got it!" I sez, and put a gentle elbow into the kidney of the guy ahead of me, thereby openin' up a route to the other side of the throne room.

Sayin' we'll get close to the throne, however, proves to be considerably easier than actually gettin' there. At first I am worried about movin' too fast and catchin' the guards' eyes as someone tryin' too hard to get close to where the queen will be. After a few minutes of fightin' with the crowd, though, I am more concerned with bein' able to move at all. It seems like the closer to the front of the room I gets, the more determined the people are to not give up their place.

By the time I am halfway to the throne, I am

startin' to get desperate over how long it's takin' and look around to see where Nunzio is. As it turns out, he is havin' even more trouble than me, havin' progressed a mere six steps before gettin' boxed in behind a gaggle of old biddies. They are not about to give ground for anyone, and it appears that short of punchin' his way through them, he isn't gonna make it to the front at all.

Of course, this leaves it to me to beat the others to the queen . . . which suits me just fine. Re-

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

233

doublin' my efforts, I sneak a peek upward to check Tananda's progress, only to find I can no longer see her at all.

Just then, someone lets loose with a blast of brass horns . . . and the queen appears.

For a moment, I am too stunned to keep pushin' forward ... in fact, I lose a couple steps.

You see, I met Queen Hemlock back at the same time I met the Boss, and more recently had a chance to refresh my memory while gazin' at a propaganda leaflet. While she is not what you would call a knockout, neither is she exactly plain. The woman easin' herself onto the throne, however, looks so much different than those images that if they hadn't hollered out her name as she walked in, I probably wouldn't have recognized her. Of course, even just passin' her on the street, the crown would have been a pretty strong clue.

She looks like she hasn't been sleepin' very well, as there are big dark circles under her eyes, and it looks like she's been off her feed . . . well, more so than normal as she's always been a bit on the scrawny side. Then the first guy in line starts yammerin' about how he thinks his business is payin' too much taxes, and for a minute I think she's gonna burst into tears.

It occurs to me that however successful her expansion may look from the outside, it doesn't look like it's makin' Queen Hemlock any too happy.

just then I spot Chumley ... or at least a big figure in a hooded cloak . . . edgin' along the

234 Robert Asprin

wall behind the guards not ten feet from where the queen is sittin', and know I have run out of time. Slidin' one of the throwin' knives down my sleeve, I start eyeballin' the distance between me and Hemlock. It's gonna be one heck of a throw, but it won't get any easier by my starin' at it, so I step back for balance and . . .

. . . And all hell breaks loose at the back of the room!

At first I think the guards have jumped Nunzio, but when I look his way he is standin' clear of the action, lookin' right back at me and pointin' desperately out the door, mouthin' somethin' I can't make out over the hubbub. I crane my neck tryin' to figure out what he's pointin' at, but all I can see is the crowd outside the throne room is partin' . . . makin' way for something or somebody.

There's a ripple of noise spreadin' forward from the back of the crowd, buildin' in volume as more and more voices join in. Abandonin' my efforts to see what's goin' on, I bend an ear to try to sort out what it is they're sayin'.

"... magician ..."

"He's back!"

"HE'S COMING!"

". . . COURT MAGICIAN!!!"

"LOOK!! THERE HE IS!! IT'S ..."

"THE GREAT SKEEVEH!"

. . . And it was!!

Just as I make out the words, the crowd at the back of the throne room parts, and the Boss comes

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

235

walkin' in ... and Aahz is with him!! They seem to be arguin', of course, and are totally ignorin' the crowd around them which first surges back, then presses forward like a wall.

I am out of the audience before I am aware that I have trampled several of Possiltum's citizens in my haste, and pass Massha who is always a little slow off the line because of her size. I see Nunzio comin' through the crowd, knockin' people down like duckpins, and am vaguely aware that I am doin' the same . . . but I don't care. I am just happy to see the Boss here and in one piece.

"SKEEVEH"

I hear someone shout in a voice that sorta sounds like the queen's, but by now I am six steps out and closin' fast.

Now, I have never been fond of the Mob tradition of men huggin' each other, but this time I figure to make an exception.

"BOSS!!" I hollers, and throws my arms wide and . . .

. . . And the room spins . . . then everythin' goes black!

Chapter Twenty:

"/ want a rematch!"

M. TYSON

"GuiDo! HEY! COME on! Wake up!"

I can hear Nunzio's voice, but decide to keep my eyes closed a little while longer. Havin' had numerous similar experiences in the past, I have no difficulty figurin' out what has happened . . . which is to say I have been knocked cold. The difficult part is recallin' the circumstantialia which led to this condition, a task which is not made any simpler by the fact that my brain is still a little scrambled from the experience . . . which is why I have chosen to pretend I am still out to lunch whilst I composes myself.

We were in the throne room . . . then the Boss walked in with Aahz ... I started over to greet him . . . Nunzio was comin' over to do the same thing . . . then . . .

237

238 Robert Asprin

I get a fix on Nunzio's location from his voice, then open my eyes and sit up quick-like, grabbin' him by the throat as I do so.

"Did you just sucker punch me, cousin?" I sez, curious-like.

The world starts to spin again a little, makin' me reconsider the wisdom of havin' tried to move so fast so soon after regainin' consciousness, but I blink a couple times to clear my vision and it settles down. I also notice that Nunzio is turnin' a little purple, so I loose my grip on his throat so's he can answer me.

"It . . . wasn't me!" he squeaks.

Seein' as how Nunzio is usually very proud of his work . . . particularly on those occasions when he has just worked on me ... I figure he is tellin' the truth and open my grip the rest of the

way.

"Well if you didn't do it," I frowns, still blinkin' a little, "then who ..."

"Meet Pookie," he sez, pointin' over my shoulder with his left thumb, as his right hand is busy rubbin' his throat. "She's the Boss's new bodyguard."

"New bodyguard?" I sez, takin' a look behind me and . . .

The world stops ... as does my heart and lungs.

Now, when I say this chick is stunnin', it has nothin' to do with the fact that she just knocked me cold. She has the smooth, strong lines of a panther . . . except for a few pleasant roundin's

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

239

one does not normally find on a cat of any size. She also has green scales and yellow eyes which are regardin' me levelly.

"Sorry about the mix-up," she sez, not soundin' at all sorry, "but you came in so fast that Skeeve didn't have a chance to tell me you were on our side. Anyway, pleased to meet you ... I guess. Here's your knife back."

I look at the throwin' knife she is holdin' out and realize it is indeed one of mine. I musta still been holdin' it in my hand when I went to greet the Boss, which is an embarrassin' oversight. One of the troubles with havin' big hands is that sometimes one forgets one is holdin' things.

"New bodyguard, huh?" I sez, not bein' able to think of anythin' wittier to say as I accepts the knife and stashes it.

"We met on Perv," she sez, a little frosty.
"Skeeve needed a bodyguard . . . and it seems
he didn't have one with him."

Now I am not so far gone that I can't spot a
professional rebuke when I hear one.

"We didn't like it, either," I growl, "but the Boss
ordered us not to go along with him and asked us to
lend a hand here instead."

Pookie thinks about this for a second, then gives
a small nod.

"That explains a few things," she sez, unthawin'
a little. "Skeeve's being alone had me wondering
about you two, but I guess you really didn't have
much choice in the matter."

240 Robert Asprin

There is no reason why her approval should
mean anything to me ... but it does.

"So, you're from Perv, huh?" I sez, tryin' to
prolong the conversation.

"She's my cousin," Aahz sez, and for the first
time I become aware that he is standin' nearby.

In fact, the whole team is standin' here, and
I ...

"Your cousin!" I sez, the words finally sinkin' in.

"Don't worry," Pookie sez, givin' me a small
smile and a wink. "We aren't at all alike."

"Can you guys keep it down?" Tananda hisses at
us. "I'm trying to eavesdrop on this!"

Wrenchin' my attention away from Pookie, I
finally start to focus in on what's goin' on.

We are still in the throne room, but the crowds
are gone. In fact, the whole place . . . floor and

balconies . . . are empty of people and guards except for us. Well, us and the Boss, who is sittin' on the throne steps chattin' with Queen Hemlock.

". . . so everything was going pretty well, until Roddie caught some bug or other and died," she is sayin'. "When I didn't die, too, I realized those rings you gave us didn't really link our lives . . . incidentally, I'd get my money back on those if I were you ..."

"You mean the King really did die of natural causes?" I whispers.

"So it seems," Tananda murmurs back. "Now put a sock in it. I want to hear this."

". . . and you know I've always wanted to ex-

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

241

pand our borders just a teensy tiny bit, so I figured, 'Why not give it a try?' ..."

"From what I hear," the Boss interrupts, "the expansion goes way past 'teensy tiny' in anyone's definition."

"I know," the queen sighs, deflatin' a little. "It just seems to have gotten away from me. My advisors • - • you remember Grimble and Badaxe? . . . well, they keep assuring me that everything is fine . . . - that as long as I keep lowering the taxes, the people will support me . . . but I keep having this feeling that I've lost control of . . ."

"Lowering the taxes while you expand your borders?" the Boss breaks in. "But that can't be done! A bigger kingdom means more expense, not less! You still have the cost of local government, plus the cost of extra layers of bureaucracy to manage the local bureaucracies."

It finally dawns on me what has been botherin'

me about this "lower taxes" thing every time I hear about it. I also remember that I had to take Econ. 101 three times.

"I know," the queen sez. "I've been covering the extra cost from my old kingdom's treasury, but that's almost gone. Grimble keeps saying that things will level off eventually when the kingdom gets big enough, but ..."

"It's not going to happen," the Boss sez, shakin' his head. "You can't beat the mathematics of the situation. You're either going to have to raise the taxes or pull your borders back ... or go bankrupt."

242 Robert Asprin

"Oh Skeeve!" Hemlock sez, givin' him a quick hug. "I knew you could figure it out. That's why I sent for you."

"Sent for me?"

"Of course, silly. The ring. Didn't you get it?"

"Well, yes. But . . ."

"I never was much good with letters," the queen continues, "but I was sure you'd get the message when I sent you Roddie's ring ... of course, I had to send a little of him along with it ... you were right about the rings not coming off, by the way."

"That was Rodrick's ring?"

"Of course. You don't think I'd cut off my finger, do you?"

She holds up her hand and waggles her fingers at him ... all of them, includin' the one with her ring on it. The skin on the finger we had gotten had been so soft and smooth, we had all assumed it as a woman's finger. Of course, stoppin' to think about it, kings don't work much with their hands,

either.

"Anyway, you got the message, and you're here now ... so everything's going to be all right."

"The message," the Boss sez, lookin' a little confused . . . which to my mind is understandable. "Umm . . . just to be sure we understand each other, would you mind saying what you wanted to tell me in words instead of using . . . graphic communications?"

"Isn't it obvious?" the queen sez. "I need your

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

243

help to manage things, so I'm offering you a position."

"Well . . . I'm kind of busy these days," the Boss sez, "but I guess I can spare a little time to help you straighten things out as your advisor ..."

". . . as my consort," the queen corrects.

The whole team flinches at this, and we swap a few worried looks back and forth between us.

The Boss, however, is a little slower on the uptake.

". . . of course, the first thing you'll have to do is to order the army to stop advancing until we figure out what to do next."

"Consider it done . . . and then Grimble and I will . . . CONSORT??!!!"

As I have said, the Boss can be a bit slow from time to time, but eventually he catches on.

"Of course," Hemlock beams at him. "I figure we can get married, then if we diwy up some of these bothersome duties, we'll still have time

to . . ."

"CONSORT???"

The Boss seems to be stuck on the word.

"That's right," the queen says, cocking her head at him. "Why? Have you got a problem with that?"

The temperature in the throne room seems to drop along with the chilly tone in her voice.

". . . Because if you do, there is another option. I can do what you suggested back when Roddie and I got married."

"Which was . . . ?" The Boss sez in a small voice.

244 Robert Asprin

"Abdicate." Somehow the queen manages to make the one word sound like a sentence ... a death sentence. "I can step down from the throne and name you my successor. Then you can try to run this whole mess all by yourself!"

Check and mate.

This whole conversation is makin' me more than a little uneasy . . . but that is nothin' compared to what it is doin' to the Boss. He looks absolutely panicky . . . not to mention sorta green around the gills.

"I . . . I . . ."he stammers.

". . . But don't you think it'll be so much nicer if you just go along with my original idea?" Hemlock sez, all kittenish again. "That way, you get the whole kingdom and me!"

"I ... I don't know," the Boss manages at last. "I've never thought about getting married."

"Well think about it," the queen sez, gettin' a bit

of an edge on her voice.

"No ... I mean, I'll need some time to think about it."

"Okay," Hemlock nods. "That's fair."

"Maybe in a year ..."

". . . I'll give you a month," the queen sez, actin' like the Boss hadn't said anythin'. "Then I'll expect your answer one way or the other. In the meantime, /'// order the army to stop and you can start going over the books with Grimbie. I mean, that will be a good idea whatever decision you make, won't it?"

"I ... I guess so."

M.Y.T.H. INC. IN ACTION

245

This is not lookin' good. The Boss has never been good with skirts, and it looks like Hemlock is gonna be able to lead him around by the nose.

"I think I've heard enough," Tananda sez. "I'll see you guys later."

"Where are you going, little sister?" Chumley sez, voicin" the question for all of us. "It looks like Skeeve is going to need all the help we can give him . . . and then some."

"Actually," she sez, "I was going to head back to the home office. I figure I need a little break, so I thought I'd tend the home fires while my hair grows back."

"Really?" Chumley frowns.

"Of course," she purrs, flashin' a wide smile, "that will free Bunny from her duties. I think I'll send her back here to lend a hand."

"Bunny?"

"Well you can't expect Skeeve to straighten things out here without his administrative assistant, can you?" she sez, innocent-like. "Besides, Bunny's a lot better at dealing with figures than I am."

She pauses and sends one last dark look at the queen.

". . . at least, I figure in this situation she will be."

NEXT: Skeeve tries to unravel the puzzle of the opposite sex in ...

Sweet Myth-tery Of Life.

Sweet Myth-tery of Life By Robert Asprin

Chapter One:

"Is it just me, or does it seem to you I get more than my share of troubles?"

JOB

"... AND so, TO recap, the situation is this ..."

I ticked the points off on my fingers, giving my audience a visual image to reinforce my words.

"First, Queen Hemlock wants me to be her consort. Second, she's given me a month to think it over before I reach my decision. Third ..."

I tapped the appropriate finger for emphasis.

"If I decide not to marry her, she says she'll abdicate, naming me her successor and sticking me with the whole mess. Got that?"

Despite my concern over my predicament, I was nonetheless proud of my ability to address the problem head on, summarizing and analyzing it as I sought a solution. There was a time in the not too distant past when I simply would have lapsed into blind panic. If nothing else, my adventures over the years had done wonders for my confidence in my abilities to handle nearly any crisis.

"Gleep!" my audience responded.

Okay ... so I wasn't all that confident.

While I knew I could muddle through most crises, the one situation I dreaded the most was making a fool of myself in front of my friends and

colleagues. While they had always been unswerving in their loyalty and willingness to bail me out of whatever mess I blundered into, that didn't mean I was particularly eager to tax our friendships yet another time, even if it was just for advice. At the very least, I figured that when I did approach them, I should be as level-headed and mature about it as possible, rather than babbling hysterically about my woes. Consequently, I decided to rehearse my appeal in front of the one member of our crew I felt truly comfortable with . . . my pet dragon.

I've always maintained that Gleep is quite bright, despite the one-word vocabulary that gave him his name. According to my partner and mentor, Aahz, my pet's limited vocal range was merely a sign of his immaturity, and it would expand as he edged toward adulthood. Of course, realizing dragons live several centuries, the odds of my ever having a two-way conversation with Gleep were slim. At times like this, however, I actually appreciated having someone to talk to who could only listen . . . without helpful asides regarding my inability to walk across the street without landing myself and the crew in some kind of trouble.

"The trouble is," I continued, "what with all the problems and disasters I've had to cope with over the years, not to mention trying to be president of M.Y.T.H. Inc., I haven't had much time for a love life, like, none at all ... and I sure haven't given any thought to getting married] I mean, I haven't ever really reached a decision on whether or not I want to get married at all, much less when or to who."

Gleep cocked his head to one side, to all appearances hanging on my every word.

"Of course, I do know I'm not wild about the alternative. I had a chance to play king once . . . and that was twice too often, thank you. It was bad enough when I was just being a stand-in for Roderick, but the idea of trying to run the king-

dom by myself, as myself, and forever, not just for a few days, well, that's flat out terrifying. The question is, is it more or less terrifying than the idea of being married to Queen Hemlock?"

My pet responded to my dilemma by vigorously chewing at an itch on his foot.

"Thanks a lot, Gleep old boy," I said, smiling wryly despite my ill humor. While I obviously hadn't really expected any glowing words of advice from my dragon, I had at least thought my problems were serious enough to hold his attention. "I might as well be talking to Aahz. At least he looks at me while he's chewing me out."

Still smiling, I picked up the goblet of wine I had brought with me for moral support and started to take a sip.

"Oh, Aahz isn't so bad."

For a startled moment, I thought Gleep had answered me. Then I realized the voice had come from behind me, not from my pet. A quick glance over my shoulder confirmed my worst fears. My partner, green scales, pointed teeth and all, was leaning against the wall not ten feet from where I stood, and had apparently been listening to my whole oration.

"Hi, Aahz," I said, covering my embarrassment with a forced smile. "I didn't hear you come in. Sorry about that last comment, but I've been a little ..."

"Don't worry about it, Skeeve," he interrupted with a wave of dismissal. "If that's the worst you've had to say about me over the years, I figure we've been doing pretty well. I do lean on you kinda hard from time to time. I guess that's gotten to be my way of dealing with stress."

Aahz seemed calm enough ... in fact, he seemed to be suspiciously calm. While I wasn't wild about his shouting at me, at least it was

consistent. This new display of reasonability was making me uneasy . . . rather like suddenly noticing the sun just rose in the west.

"So . . . what are you doing here, partner?" I said, trying to sound casual.

"I was looking for you. It occurred to me that you might need a sympathetic ear while you figured out what to do next."

Again, a small warning gong went off in the back of my mind. Of all the phrases that might occur to me to describe Aahz's interaction with me in the past, "a sympathetic ear" wasn't one of them.

"How did you know where I was?"

I was dodging the issue, but genuinely curious as to how Aahz found me. I had taken great pains to slip down to the Royal Stables unnoticed.

"It wasn't hard," Aahz said, flashing a grin as he jerked his thumb at the door. "You've got quite a crowd hanging around outside."

"I do?"

"Sure. Pookie may be a bit mouthy for my taste, but she knows her stuff as a bodyguard. I think she's been tailing you from the time you left your room."

Pookie was the new bodyguard I had acquired during my recent trip to Perv . . . before I knew she was Aahz's cousin.

"That's funny," I scowled. "I never saw her."

"Hey, I said she was good," my partner winked. "Just because she respects your privacy and stays out of sight doesn't mean she's going to let you wander around unescorted. Anyway, I guess Guido spotted her and decided to tag along . . . he's been following her around like a puppy ever since

they met . . . and, of course, that meant Nunzio had to come, too, and . . . Well, the end result is you've got all three of your bodyguards posted outside the door to see to it that you aren't disturbed."

Terrific. I start out looking for a little privacy and end up leading a parade.

"So, what do you think, Aahz?" I asked.

I knew I was going to get his opinion sooner or later, and figured I might as well ask outright and get it over with.

"About what?"

"About my problem," I clarified.

"What problem?"

"Sorry. I thought you had been listening when I explained it to Gleep. I'm talking about the whole situation with Queen Hemlock."

"I know," my partner said. "And I repeat, what problem?"

"What problem!" I was starting to lose it a little, which is not an unusual result of talking to Aahz. "Don't you think . . ."

"Hold on a second, partner," Aahz said, holding up his hand. "Do you remember the situation when we first met?"

"Sure."

"Let me refresh your memory, anyway. Your old mentor, Garkin, had just been killed, and there was every chance you were next on the hit list. Right?"

"Right. But . . ."

"Now that was a problem," He'continued as if

I hadn't spoken. "Just like it was a problem when you had to stop Big Julie's army with a handful of misfits . . . realizing that, if you were successful, Grimble was threatening to have you killed or worse when you returned to the palace."

"I remember."

"And when you decided to try to clear me of that murder rap over on Limbo, a dimension which just happens to be filled with vampires and werewolves, I'd say that was a problem, too."

"I don't see what . . ."

"Now, in direct contrast, let's examine the current situation. As I understand it, you're in danger of getting married to the Queen, which, I believe, includes having free run of the kingdom's treasury. The other option is that you decide not to marry her, whereupon she abdicates to you . . . leaving you again with a free hand on the treasury, only without the Queen." He showed me his impressive array of teeth. "I repeat, what problem?"

Not for the first time, it occurred to me that my partner had a tendency to appraise the pluses and minuses of any situation by the simple technique of reducing everything to monetary terms and scrutinizing the bottom line.

"The problem is," I said tersely, "that in order to get that access to the treasury, I have to get married or become king. Frankly, I'm not sure I'm wild about either option."

"Compared to what you've been through in the past to scrape together a few coins, it's not bad," Aahz shrugged. "Face it, Skeeve. Making a bundle usually involves something unpleasant. Nobody . . . and I mean nobody . . . is going to fork over hard cash for your having a good time."

Of course, those "few coins" we had scraped together over the past years added up to enough to make even a Pervish banker sit up and take

notice, but I knew the futility of trying to convince Aahz that there was ever such a thing as enough money.

"Maybe I could just write about having dubious adventures instead of actually doing anything," I muttered. "That always sounded to me like a pretty cushy job to cash in on the good life."

"You think so? Well, let me educate you to the harsh realities of the universe, partner. It's one thing to practice a skill or a hobby when you feel like it, but whether it's writing, singing, or playing baseball, when you've got to do something whether you're up for it or not, it's work."

I could see this conversation was going nowhere. Aahz simply wasn't going to see my point of view, so I decided to play dirty. I switched to his point of view.

"Maybe I'd be more enthusiastic," I said, carefully, "if the kingdom's finances weren't at rock bottom. Doing something unpleasant to acquire a stack of debts doesn't strike me as all that great a deal."

Okay. It was hitting below the belt. But that just happens to be where Pervects such as Aahz are the most sensitive . . . which is to say where they keep their wallets.

"You've got a point there," my partner said thoughtfully, wavering for the first time in the conversation. "Still, you managed to finagle a whole month before you have to make a decision. I figure in that time we should be able to get a pretty good fix on what the real financial situation around here is . . . end if it can be turned around."

"There's just one problerr with i:hat," I pointed out. "I know even less about money than I know about magik."

"Just off hand, I'd say you were doing pretty

well in both departments."

I caught the tidge in my partner's voice, and realized that he was on the brink of taking my comment personally . . . which is not surprising as he was the one who taught me nearly everything I know about magik and money.

"Oh, I'm okay when it conies to personal finances and contract negotiations . . . more than okay, in fact . . . and I have you to thank for that." I said hastily. "What we're looking at now, though, is high finance ... as in trying to manage the funds for a whole kingdom! I don't think that was covered in my lessons, or if it was, it went over my head."

"Okay. That's a valid concern," Aahz conceded. "Still, it's probably the same thing you've been doing for M.Y.T.H. Inc., but on a larger scale."

"That's fine, except Bunny's been doing most of the heavy financial work for M.Y.T.H. Inc.," I grimaced. "I only wish she were here now."

"She is," Aahz exclaimed, clicking his fingers. "That's the other reason I was looking for you."

"Really? Where is she?"

"Waiting in your room. I wasn't sure what kind of sleeping arrangements you wanted set up."

One of the changes from my previous stay at the palace was that instead of sharing a room with Aahz, I had a room of my own. It's a tribute to how worried I was, however, that the implications of what he said went right over my head.

"Same as always," I said. "See if we can find a room for her that's at least in the same wing of the palace as ours, though."

"If you say so," Aahz shrugged. "Anyway, we'd better get going. She seemed real anxious to see you."

I only listened to this last with half an ear, as something else had momentarily caught my attention.

I had turned away from Aahz to give Gleep one last pat before we left, and for the barest fraction of a second saw something I had never noticed before. He was listening to us!

Now, as I noted earlier, I've always maintained that Gleep was bright, but as I turned, I had a fleeting impression of intelligence in his expression. To clarify, there is a difference between "bright" and "intelligent." "Bright," as I'd always applied it to my pet, means that he is alert and quick to learn. "Intelligent," on the other hand, goes beyond "monkey see, monkey do" tricks, all the way to "independent thought."

Gleep's expression as I turned was one of thoughtful concentration, if not calculation. Then he saw me looking at him and the look disappeared, to be replaced with his more familiar expression of eager friendliness.

For some reason, this gave me a turn. Perhaps it was because I found myself remembering reports from the team about their efforts to disrupt the kingdom in my absence. Specifically, I was recalling the claim that Gleep had nearly killed Tananda . . . something I had dismissed at the time as being an accident that was being blown out of proportion in their effort to impress me with the difficulties of their assignment. Now, however, as I stared at my pet, I began to wonder if I should have paid closer attention to what they were saying. Then again, maybe it had just been the light playing tricks on me. Gleep certainly looked innocent enough now.

"Com'on, partner," Aahz repeated testily. "You can play with your dragon some other time. I still think we should try to sell that stupid beast off before he eats his way through our bankroll. He really doesn't add anything to our operation . . .

except food bills."

Because I was already watching, I caught it this time. For the briefest moment Gleep's eyes narrowed as he glanced at Aahz, and an almost unnoticeable trickle of smoke escaped from one nostril. Then he went back to looking dopey and innocent.

"Gleep's a friend of mine now, Aahz," I said carefully, not taking my eyes off my pet. "I like you and the rest of the crew are. I wouldn't want to lose any of you."

My dragon seemed to take no notice of my words, craning his neck to look around the stable. Now, however, it seemed to me his innocence was exaggerated . . . that he was deliberately avoiding looking me in the eye.

"If you say so," Aahz shrugged, heading for the door. "In the meantime, let's go see Bunny before she explodes."

I hesitated a moment longer, then followed him out of the stables.

Chapter Two:

"It's good to see you, too."
H. LJVINGSTON, M.D.

As AAHZ HAD predicted, my three bodyguards were waiting for me outside the stables. They seemed to be arguing about something, but broke off their discussion and started looking vigilant as soon as I appeared.

Now, you may think it would be kind of fun to have your own bodyguards. If so, you've never actually had one.

What it really means is that you give up any notion that your life is your own. Privacy becomes a vague memory you have to work at recalling, as "sharing" becomes the norm . . .

starting with the food on your plate and ending with going to the John. ("Geez, Boss! You know how many guys got whacked because someone was hiding in the can? Just pretend we ain't here.") Then, too, there's the constant, disquieting reminder that, however swell a fellow you may think you are, there are people out there waiting for a chance to bring your career to a premature conclusion. I had to keep telling myself that this latter point didn't apply to me, that Don Bruce had insisted on assigning me Guido and Nunzio more as status symbols than anything else. I had hired Pookie on my own, though, after getting jumped during my recent trip to Perv, so I couldn't entirely discount the fact that bodyguards were occasionally necessary and not just an inconvenient decoration.

"Got a minute, Skeeve?" Pookie said, stepping forward.

"Well, I was on my way to say hello to Bunny ..."

"Fine. We can talk as we walk."

She fell in step beside me, and Aahz graciously fell back to walk with my other two bodyguards.

"What it is," Pookie said, without preamble, "is I'm thinking of cashing in and heading back to Perv."

"Really? Why."

She gave a small shrug.

"I can't see as how I'm really needed," she said. "When I suggested I tag along, we thought you were coming back to a small war. The way I see it now, it seems like the crew you've already got can handle things."

As she spoke, I snuck a glance back at Guido. He was trudging along, his posture notably more hangdog than usual. It was clear both that he was

infatuated with Pookie, and that he wasn't wild about the idea of her moving on.

"Umm . . . Actually, I'd prefer it if you stuck around for a while, Pookie," I said. "At least, until I've made up my mind what to do about this situation with Queen Hemlock. She's been known to be a bit nasty when things don't go her way."

"Suit yourself," Pookie said, giving another shrug. "I just wanted to give you an easy out if you were looking to trim the budget."

I gave a smile at that.

"Just because we're going to be working on the kingdom's finances doesn't mean there's anything wrong with our treasury. You should know your cousin well enough to have faith in his money managing."

"I know Aahz, all right," she said, shooting a dark look at that individual, "enough to know that before he'd part with money unnecessarily, he'd cut off his arm ... or, more likely, someone else's."

"He's mellowed a bit over the last few years," I smiled, "but I know what you mean. If it makes you feel any better, though, I hired you, so I figure you're reporting directly to me and not to him."

Pookie cocked an eyebrow at me.

"If that wasn't the case," she said, "I wouldn't have come along in the first place."

I could have let it go, but my curiosity was aroused.

"What's the problem between you two, anyway? More specifically, what's your problem with Aahz? He has nothing but the highest praise for you and your work."

Pookie's features hardened, and she broke eye

contact to stare straight ahead.

"That's between him and me," she said stonily.

Her attitude puzzled me, but I knew better than to pursue the subject further.

"Oh. Well . . . anyway, I'd like you to stick around if that's okay."

"No problem from my end," she said. "Just one thing ... to ease my mind. Could we adjust my pay scale? The prices you've been paying are my premium rates for short term work. For long term employment, I can give you a discount."

"How much?" I said quickly. As I noted before, Aahz had taught me most of what I know about money, and I had picked up some of his reflexes along the way.

"Why don't we knock it down to the same rate as you're paying those two/" she said, jerking a thumb at Guido and Nunzio. "If nothing else, it might avoid some hard feelings between us professionally."

"Umm . . . fine."

I didn't have the heart to tell her that Guido and Nunzio were actually earning more than her premium rates. Realizing she was not only from the same dimension, but the same family as Aahz, I wasn't sure how she'd take the news. With everything else on my mind, I decided to sort it out at a later date . . . like, payday.

"Well, that takes care of me," Pookie said.

"Any general orders for us?"

"Yes. Tell Nunzio I'd like to have a word with him."

One thing about living in a palace is that it takes a long time to walk from anywhere to anywhere, giving us lots of time to have confer-

ences on the way to other conferences. Hey, I didn't say that it was a nice thing about living in a palace . . . just a thing.

"So what's the word, Boss?" Nunzio said, falling in step at my side.

"Is she stayin' or goin'?"

"What? Oh. Staying, I guess."

"Whew! That's a relief!" he said, rolling his eyes briefly. "I'll tell you, I don't think Guido would be livable if she left right now . . . know what I mean?"

"Uh huh," I said, glancing back at his cousin . . . who, judging by the grin on his face, had already heard the news. "He seems quite taken with her."

"You don't know the half of it," Nunzio grimaced. "So, what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Well, you know how you've been saying that Gleep has been acting strange lately?"

"Yeah. So?" he said, his squeaky voice taking on a cautious note.

"I want you to try to spend more time with him. Talk to him . . . maybe take him out for some exercise."

"Me, Boss?"

"Sure. You get along with him better than anyone . . . except, maybe, me . . . and I'm going to be tied up with the kingdom's finances for a while. If there's anything wrong with Gleep, I want to find out about it before anyone else gets hurt."

"If you say so."

I couldn't help but notice an extreme lack of

enthusiasm in his voice.

"Yes. I say so/" I repeated firmly. "It's important to me, Nunzio, and I can't think of anyone I'd trust more to check things out for me."

"Okay, Boss," he said, thawing a little. "I'll get right on it."

I wanted to give him a bit more encouragement, but just then we arrived at the door to my quarters.

"I'll wait out here, Boss, and make sure nobody else comes in for a while," Nunzio said with a faint smile as he stepped back.

This surprised me a little, as the crew usually followed me into my room without missing a step or a syllable of conversation. Then I noticed that the others of our group had also halted short of the door and were watching me with a smile.

I couldn't figure what was going on. I mean, so Bunny was waiting inside. So what? It was just Bunny.

Nevertheless I took my cue, nodding at them vaguely as I opened the door.

"SKEEVE!!"

I barely turned around from shutting the door when Bunny charged across the room, slamming into me with a huge hug that took my breath away . . . literally.

"I was so worried about you!" she said, her voice muffled by my chest.

"Ahh . . . ack!"

That last comment was mine. Actually, it wasn't so much a comment as a noise I made while trying to force some air into my lungs. This proved easier said than done . . . and it wasn't all that easy to say!

"Why didn't you come by the office on your way back from Perv?" Bunny demanded, squeezing even harder and shaking me slightly. "I was going out of my mind, thinking about you all alone in that terrible dimension ..."

By ignoring what she was saying and focusing my entire consciousness on moving, I managed to slowly force one hand . . . then an arm . . . inside her embrace. Summoning my fast fading strength, I levered my arm sideways, breaking her grip and allowing myself a desperately needed rush of air.

Okay. So it wasn't particularly affectionate, or even polite. It's just that I've picked up some annoying, selfish habits over the years . . . like breathing.

"What's the matter, Skeeve?" Bunny said in a concerned voice, peering at me closely. "Are you all right?"

"UUUUH hah ... UUUUH hah . . . ," I explained, realizing for the first time how sweet plain air could taste.

"I knew it!" she snarled. "Tananda kept saying you were all right . . . every time I asked she kept saying the same thing . . . that you were all right. The next time I see that little . . ."

"I'm . . . fine . . . Really, Bunny. I'm ... fine."

Still trying to get my lungs working on their own, I reached out a tentative finger and prodded her biceps.

"That was . . . quite a'Hello," I said. "I never realized . . . you were so ... strong."

"Oh, that," she shrugged. "I've been working out a little while you were gone . . . like every night. Not much else to do evenings. It's an easier way to stay in shape than dieting."

"Working out?"

My breathing was almost back to normal, but my head still felt a little woozy.

"Sure. You know, pumping iron?"

I had never realized that simple ironing could build up a woman's arms that much. I made a mental note to start sending our laundry out.

"I'm sorry I didn't think to check in with you," I said, returning to the original subject. "It's just that I assumed you were okay there at the office, and was in a hurry to see if the crew was okay."

"Oh, I know. It's just that . . ."

Suddenly she was hugging me again . . . gentler, this time.

"Don't be mad at me, Skeeve," she said softly from the depths of my chest. "I just get so worried about you sometimes."

I was surprised to realize she was trembling. I mean, it just wasn't that cold here in my room. Especially not huddled together the way we were, "I'm not mad at you, Bunny," I said. "And there was nothing to worry about . . . really. Everything went fine on Perv."

"I heard that you nearly got killed in a fight," she countered, tightening her grip slightly. "And wasn't there some kind of trouble with the cops?" That annoyed me a little. The only way she could have found out about the trouble I ran into on Perv would be from Tananda . . . except I hadn't told Tananda anything about it before she headed back to the Bazaar to relieve Bunny. That meant that either Aahz or Pookie was telling people about my escapades . . . and, to say the least, I wasn't wild about that.

"Where did you hear that?" I said casually.

"It's all over the Bazaar," Bunny explained, burrowing further into my chest. "Tananda said you were fine, but I had to see for myself after everything I heard."

Com'on, Bunny," I said soothingly, mentally apologizing to Aahz and Pookie. "You know how everything gets exaggerated at the Bazaar. You can see I'm fine."

She started to say something, then turned her head as sounds of an argument erupted through the closed door.

"I don't know," I admitted. "Guido and Nunzio said they were going to keep everybody out for a while. Maybe someone ..."

The door burst open, and Queen Hemlock stood framed in the entryway. Behind her my bodyguards stood, and as they caught my eye gave exaggerated shrugs. Apparently royalty was harder to stop than your average assassin ... a thought that did little to cheer me realizing some of the rumors surrounding the current matriarch of Possiltum.

"There you are, Skeeve," the Queen exclaimed striding into my room. "I was looking all over for you when I saw those thugs of yours loitering about outside and . . . Who's this?"

"Your Majesty, this is Bunny. Bunny, this is Queen Hemlock."

"Your Majesty," Bunny said, sinking into a deep bow.

It occurred to me that as worldly as she was in some ways, Bunny had never met a member of royalty before, and seemed to be quite awed by the experience.

Queen Hemlock, on the other hand, was not at all overawed by meeting another commoner.

"Why Skeeve! She's lovely!" she said, cupping Bunny's chin in her hand and raising her head to view her face. "I was starting to wonder a bit about you, what with that monstrous apprentice

of yours, not to mention that lizard thing you brought back with you from wherever, but this . . . It's nice to know you can find a yummy morsel when you set your mind to it."

"Bunny's my administrative assistant!" I said, a bit stiffly.

"Why of course!" the Queen smiled, giving me a broad wink. "Just like my young men are bodyguards ... on the kingdom budget, anyway."

"Please, Your Majesty, don't misunderstand," Bunny said. "Skeeve and I are really just ..."

"There there, my dear," Hemlock interrupted, taking Bunny by the hands and drawing her to her feet. "There's no need to worry about me being jealous. I wouldn't dream of interfering in Skeeve's personal life before or after we're married, any more than I'd expect him to interfere in mine. As long as he does the heir thing to keep the rabble happy, it doesn't really matter to me what he does with the rest of his time."

I really didn't like the way this conversation was going, and hastened to change the subject.

"You said you were looking for me, Your Majesty?"

"Oh yes," the Queen said, releasing her hold on Bunny's hands. "I wanted to tell you that Grimble was waiting to see you at your earliest convenience. I told him that you'd be giving him a hand straightening out the kingdom's finances, and he's ready to give you whatever information or assistance you need.

Somehow, that didn't sound like the J. R. Grimble I knew, but I let it slide for the moment.

"Very well. We'll be along presently."

"Of course." The Queen smiled, winking at me again. "Well, I'll just be running along then."

As she reached the door, she paused to sweep Bunny once more with a lingering gaze. "Charming," she said. "You really are to be congratulated, Skeeve."

There was an uncomfortable silence after the Queen left. Finally, I cleared my throat.

"I'm sorry about that, Bunny. I guess she just assumed ..."

"That's the woman you're supposed to marry?" Bunny said as if I hadn't spoken.

"Well, it's what she wants, but I'm still thinking it over."

"And if somebody kills her, you'd feel you had to take over running the kingdom?"

"Uh . . . well, yes."

There was something in Bunny's voice I didn't like. I also found myself remembering that while she had never met royalty before, her uncle was none other than Don Bruce, the Mob's Fairy

Godfather, and that she was used to an entirely different brand of power politics.

"I see/" Bunny said thoughtfully, then she broke into her usual smile. "Well, I guess we'd better go and see Grimble and find out what kind of a mess we're really in."

"Okay. Sure," I said, glad that the crisis had passed ... if only for the moment.

"Just one question, Skeeve."

"Yes, Bunny?"

"How do you feel about 'the heir thing' as her majesty so graciously put it?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I guess I don't mind."

"You don't?"

"Not really. I just don't understand what having a haircut has to do with being a royal consort."

Chapter Three:

"A good juggler can always find work."

L. PACCIOLI*

J. R. GRIMBLE, CHANCELLOR of the Exchequer for the kingdom of Possiltum, had changed little since I first met him. A little more paunch around the waist, perhaps, though his slender body could stand the extra weight and then some, and his hairline had definitely progressed from the "receding" to the "receded" category, but aside from that the years had left him virtually unmarked. Upon reflection, I decided it was his eyes that were so distinctive as to render his other features inconsequential. They were small and dark, and glittered with the fervent light of a greedy rodent ... or of someone who spent far too many hours pouring over the tiny scribbled figures which noted the movement of other peoples' money.

[I'll give you this one . . . Luca Paccioli — inventor of double-entry accounting, "Father of Bookkeeping"—R.L.A.]

"Lord Skeeve!" he exclaimed, seizing my hand and pumping it enthusiastically. "So good to have you back. And Aahz! Couldn't stay away, eh?" He gave a playful wink at my partner. "Just kidding. Glad to see you again, too."

"Have you been drinking, Grumble?" Aahz said bluntly.

In all honesty, I had been wondering the same thing myself, but had been at a loss as to how to ask the question diplomatically. Fortunately, my partner's characteristic tactlessness came to my

rescue.

"Drinking?" the Chancellor blinked. "Why, no. Why do you ask?"

"You seem a lot more cheerful than normal, is all. As a matter of fact, I don't recall your ever being happy to see either of us before."

"Now now, let's let bygones be bygones, shall we? Though I'll admit we've had our differences in the past, we're going to be working together now . . . and frankly, gentlemen, I can't think of anyone I'd rather have in my corner during our current financial crisis. I never felt at liberty to admit it before, but I've always secretly admired your skills when it came to manipulating monies."

"Uh . . . thanks, Grimble," I said, still unsure of exactly how to take his new attitude.

"And who do we have here?"

He turned his attention to Bunny, devouring

I suddenly recalled that Aahz and I had first become embroiled in the workings of Possiltum after Grimble had picked Tananda up in a singles bar. It also occurred to me that I didn't like Grimble much.

"This is Bunny," I said. "She's my administrative assistant."

"Of course," Grimble shot me a sidelong, reptilian glance, then went back to leering at Bunny. "You always did have exquisite taste in ladies, Skeeve."

Still annoyed at Bunny's treatment by Queen Hemlock, I wasn't about to let the Chancellor get away with this.

"Grimble," I said, letting my voice take on a bit of an edge. "Watch my lips. I said she's my

administrative assistant. Got it?"

"Yes. I ... Quite."

The Chancellor seemed to pull in on himself a bit as he licked his lips nervously, but he rallied back gamely.

"Very well. Let me show you our expanded operation."

While Grimble might have been essentially unchanged, physically or morally, his facilities were another matter entirely. He had formerly worked alone in a tiny, cramped cubicle filled past capacity with stacks and piles of paper. The paper was still there, but that's about all that remained the same. Instead of the cubicle, it seemed he was now working out of a spacious, though still windowless, room ... or, at least, a room that would have been spacious if he had it to himself.

Instead, however, there were over a dozen individuals crammed into the space, apparently preoccupied with their work, which seemed to entail nothing more than generating additional stacks of paper, all covered by columns and rows of numbers. They didn't look up as we came in, and Grimble made no effort to halt their work or make introductions, but I noticed that they all had the same fevered glint to their eyes that I had originally assumed to be unique to Grimble.

"It seems that the current financial crisis hasn't caused many cutbacks in your operation," Aahz said dryly.

"Of course not/" Grimble replied easily. "That's only to be expected."

"How's that?" I said.

"Well, Lord Skeeve," the Chancellor smiled, "you'll find that accountants are pretty much like vultures ... we thrive when things are worse

for other people. You see, when a kingdom or company is doing well, no one wants to be bothered with budgets, much less cost savings. As long as there's money in the coffers, they're happy. On the other hand, when the operation is on the skids, such as is currently the case with Possiltum, then everyone wants answers ... or miracles . . . and it's up to us irritating bean-counters to provide them. More analysis means more man-hours, which in turn means a larger staff and expanded facilities."

"Charming/" Aahz growled, but Grimble ignored him.

"So," he said, rubbing his hands together like a blow-fly, "what would you like to address first? Perhaps we could discuss our overall approach and strategy over lunch?"

"Umm . . ."I said intelligently.
The horrible truth was that, now that I was actually confronted by Grimble and his paper mountains, I didn't have the foggiest notion of how to proceed.

"Actually, Grimble," Bunny said stepping forward, "before we think about lunch, I'd like to see your Operating Plan for the current year, the calendarized version, as well as the P and L's and Financial Statements for the last few months . . . oh yes, and your Cash Flow Analysis, both the projections and the actuals, if you don't mind."

The Chancellor blanched slightly and swallowed hard.

"Certainly. I ... of course," he said, giving Bunny a look which was notably more respectful than his earlier attentions. "I'll get those for you right now."

He scuttled off to confer with a couple of his underlings, all the while glancing nervously back at our little group.

I caught Aahz's eye and raised an eyebrow, which he responded to with a grimace and a shrug. It was nice to know my partner was as much in the dark as I was regarding Bunny's requests.

"Here we are," Grimble said, returning with a fistful of paper which he passed to Bunny. "I'll have the Cash Flow for you in a moment, but you can get started with these."

Bunny grunted something non-committal, and began leafing through the sheets, pausing to scrutinize each page intently. More for show than anything, I eased over to where I could look over her shoulder. In no time flat, my keen eye could tell without a doubt that the pages were filled with rows and columns of numbers. Terrific.

"Um ... I do have some spread sheets to support some of those figures if you'd like to see them/" Grimble supplied uneasily.

Bunny paused in her examinations to favor him with a dark glance.

"Maybe later," she said. "I mean, you do know the origin of spreadsheets, don't you?"

"Umm . . ." the Chancellor hedged.

"They were named after the skins used by trappers," Bunny continued with a faint smile. "You know, the things they dragged after them to hide their tracks?"

For a moment Grimble stared at her, bewildered, then he gave a sudden bark of laughter, slapping her playfully on the shoulder.

"That's good!" he exclaimed. "I'll have to remember that one."

I glanced at Aahz.

"Accountant humor, I guess," he said with a

grimace. "Incomprehensible to mere mortals. You know, like 'We'll make it up on volume' jokes?"

"Now that's not funny," Grimble corrected with mock severity. "We've had that line dumped on us all too often ... in complete sincerity. Right Bunny?"

I couldn't help but notice that he was now treating Bunny with the deference of a colleague. Apparently her joke, however nonsensical it had been to me, had convinced the Chancellor that she was more than my arm ornament.

"Too true," my assistant said. "But seriously, Grimble, getting back to the problem at hand, we're going to need complete, non-camouflaged figures if we're going to get the kingdom's finances back on course. I know the tradition is to pretty things up with charts and studies of historic trends, but since we'll be working with insiders only, just this once let's try it with hard, cold data."

It sounded like a reasonable request to me, but the Chancellor seemed to think it was a radical proposal . . . and not a particularly wise one, at that.

"I don't know, Bunny," he said, shooting a look at Aahz and me one normally reserves for spies and traitors. "I mean, you know how it is. Even though we usually get cast as the villains of bureaucracy, we don't have any real power to implement change. All we do is make recommendations to those who can change things. If we don't sugarcoat our recommendations, or slant them so they're in line with what the movers and shakers wanted to hear all along, or clutter them up until the Gods themselves can't understand what we're really saying, then there's a risk that we end up being what gets changed."

"Nobody really wants to hear the truth, eh?" Aahz said, sympathetically. "I suppose that's typical. I think you'll find it's different this time

around. Grimble. If nothing else, Skeeve here has full power to implement whatever changes he thinks are necessary to bring things in line."

"That's right," I said, glad to finally be able to contribute to the proceedings. "One of the things I think we should do as soon as possible is cut back on the size of the army . . . say, maybe, by one-half?"

Knowing the Chancellor's long-time feud with military spending, I thought he'd leap at this suggestion, but to my surprise, he shook his head.

"Can't do it," he said. "It would cause a depression."

"I don't care if they're happy or not!" Aahz snarled. "Let's get 'em off the payroll. The Queen's agreed to stop her expansionist policies, so there's no reason we should keep paying for an army this size."

Grimble gave my partner a look like he was something unpleasant on the bottom of his shoe.

"I was referring to an economic depression," he said tersely. "If we dump that many ex-soldiers on the job market at the same time we're cutting back on military spending, it would create massive unemployment. Broke, hungry people, particularly those with prior military training, have a nasty tendency to revolt against those in power . . . which, in this case, happens to be us. I think you'll agree, therefore, that, in the long run, huge cutbacks in the military force is not the wisest course to follow."

I was rapidly developing a greater respect for Grimble. Obviously there was more to this bean-counting game than I had ever imagined.

"We might, however, achieve some savings through attrition," the Chancellor continued.

"Attrition?" I said. I had decided that, if I was

going to be any help at all in this effort, it was time I admitted my ignorance and started learning some of the basic vocabulary.

"In this case, Lord Skeeve," Grimble explained with surprising patience, "the term refers to cutting manpower by not rehiring as people terminate at the normal rate ... or, for the army, that we stop adding new recruits to replace those whose term of enlistment is up. It will still cut the size of the army, but at a slower rate more easily absorbed by the civilian work force."

"Can we afford to do it slowly?" Aahz said, seemingly unfazed by his earlier rebuke. "I was under the impression the kingdom was in dire straits financially."

"I believe I had heard some rumor that we might be raising our tax rate?" The Chancellor made the statement a question as he looked at me pointedly.

"I'm not sure that will do any good," Bunny said from where she was reviewing the figures Grimble had passed her.

"Excuse me?" the Chancellor frowned.

"Well, from what I'm seeing here, the big problem isn't income, it's collections," she said, tapping one of the sheets she was holding.

Grimble sighed, seeming to deflate slightly.

"I'll admit that's one of our weak suits," he said, "But ..."

"Whoa! Time out!" I interrupted. "Could someone provide a translation?"

"What I'm saying is that the kingdom actually has a fair amount of money," Bunny said, "but it's all on paper. That is, people owe us a lot on back taxes, but it isn't being collected. If we could make some inroads into converting these receiv-

ables . . . that's debts owed to us . . . into cash. which we can spend, the kingdom would be in pretty good shape. Not stellar, mind you, but enough to ease the current crisis."

"The problem is," Grimble said, picking up the thread of her oration, "the citizens are extremely un-cooperative when it comes to taxes. They fight us every inch of the way in admitting how much they owe, and when it comes to actually paying their tax bill . . . well, the variety of excuses they invent would be amusing, if we weren't going bankrupt waiting for them to settle their accounts."

"I can't argue with them there," Aahz smirked.

"It's the duty of every citizen to pay their fair share of the cost of running the kingdom through taxes," the Chancellor said testily.

"And it's the right of every individual to pay the lowest possible amount of taxes they can justify legally," my partner shot back.

For a moment, it sounded like old times, with Aahz and Grimble going head to head. Unfortunately, this time, we all had bigger fish to fry.

"Check me on this," I said, holding up a hand to silence them. "What if we see if we can kill two birds with one stone?"

"How's that?" Grimble frowned.

"Well, first, we implement your suggestion of reducing the army by attrition . . . maybe hurrying it along a little by offering shortened enlistments for anyone who wanted out early ..."

"That might help," the Chancellor nodded, "but I don't see ..."

"And," I continued quickly, "convert a portion of those remaining in the service into tax collectors. That way they can be helping to raise the

cash necessary to cover their own pay."

Grimble and Bunny looked at each other.

"That might work," Grimble said, thoughtfully.

"It can't do much worse than the system that's already in place," Bunny nodded.

"Tell you what," I said loftily. "Kick it around between the two of you and maybe rough out a plan for implementing it. Aahz and I will go discuss it with the Queen."

Actually, I had no intention of visiting Hemlock just now, but I figured it was as good a time as any to escape from this meeting . . . while I had at least a small victory to my credit.

Chapter Four:

"I'm getting paid how much?"

M. JORDAN

THE NEXT SEVERAL days were relatively uneventful. In fact, they seemed so much alike that I tended to lose track of which day was which.

If this sounds like I was more than a little bored, I was. After years of adventuring and narrow escapes, I found the day to day routine of regular work to be pretty bland. Of course, the fact that I didn't know what I was doing contributed greatly to my mood.

I mean, within my own areas of specialization . . . such as running from angry mobs or trying to finagle a better deal from a client . . . I was ready to admit that I was as good or better than anyone. At things like budgets, operating plans, and cash flows, however, I was totally out of my depth.

It was more than a little spooky when I realized that, even though I didn't know what I was doing, the recommendations I was making or approving, like converting part of the army into tax collectors, were becoming law nearly as fast as I spoke. Still, it had been impressed on me that we had to do something to save the kingdom's finances, so I repeatedly crossed my fingers under the table and went with whatever seemed to be the best idea at the time.

Before I get too caught up in complaining about my situation, however, let me pause to give credit where credit is due. As bad as things were, I would have been totally lost without Bunny.

Though I didn't plan it that way, my administrative assistant ended up doing double duty. First, she would spend long hours going over numbers and plans with Grimble in their high speed, abbreviated jargon while I sat there nodding with a vacant look on my face, then an equal or greater amount of time with me later patiently trying to explain what had been decided. As mind numbing as it was, I found it preferable to my alternate pastime, which was trying to figure out what to do about Queen Hemlock's marriage offer.

Every so often, however, something would pop up that I felt I DID know something about. While it would usually turn out in the long run that I was (badly) mistaken, it would provide a break from the normal complacency. Of course, I wasn't that wild about being shown to be specifically stupid as well as generally ignorant, but it was a change of pace.

One conversation in particular springs to mind when I think back on those sessions.

"Wait a minute, Bunny. What was that last figure again?"

"What?" she said, glancing up from the piece of paper she was reciting from. "Oh, that was your

budget."

"My budget for what?"

"For your portion of the financial operation, of course. It covers salaries and operating expense."

"Whoa! Stop the music!" I said, holding up my hand. "I officially retired as Court Magician. How did I end up back on the payroll?"

"Grimble put you back on the same day you came back from Perv," Bunny said patiently. "But that has nothing to do with this. This is your budget for your financial consulting. Your magical fees are in a whole separate section."

"But that's ridiculous!"

"Oh Skeeve," she grimaced, rolling her eyes slightly. "I've explained all this to you before. We have to keep the budgets for different kingdom operations on separate records to be able to track their performance accurately. Just like we have to keep the types of expenses within each operation in separate accounts. Otherwise . . ."

"No, I didn't mean that it was ridiculous to keep them in separate sections," I clarified hastily, before she could get settled into yet another accounting lesson. "I meant the budget itself was ridiculous."

For some reason, this seemed to get Bunny even more upset rather than calming her down.

"Look, Skeeve," she said stiffly. "I know you don't understand everything Grimble and I are doing, but believe me, I don't just make these numbers up. That figure for your budget is a reasonable projection, based on estimated expenses and current pay scales . . . even Grimble says it's acceptable and has approved it. Realizing that, I'd be very cautious to hear the exact basis by which you're saying it's ridiculous."

"You don't understand, Bunny/" I said, shaking my head. "I'm not saying the number is ridiculous or inaccurate. What I mean is that it shouldn't be there at all."

"What do you mean?"

I was starting to feel like we were speaking in different languages, but pressed on bravely.

"Com'on, Bunny. All this work is supposed to be saving money for the kingdom. You know, turning the finances around?"

"Yes, yes," Bunny nodded. "So what's your point?"

"So how does it help things to charge them anything for our services, much less an outrageous rate like this. For that matter, I don't think I should charge them for my magical services, either, all things considered."

"Um, Partner?" Aahz said, uncoiling from his customary seat in the corner. If anything, I think he was even more bored by these sessions than I was. "Can I talk to you for a minute? Before this conversation goes any further?"

I knew what that meant. Aahz is notorious when it comes to pushing our rates higher, operating under the basic principle that earning less than possible is the same as losing money. As soon as I started talking about not only reducing our fees, but eliminating them completely, it was only to be expected that Aahz would jump into the fray. I mean, talk about money in general, and about our money specifically, would bring Aahz out of a coma.

This time, however, I wasn't about to go along with him.

"Forget it, Aahz," I said, waving him off. "I'm not going to back off on this one."

"But Partner," he said menacingly, reaching

out his hand casually for my shoulder.

"I said 'No!'" I insisted, ducking out of his reach. I've tried to argue with him before when he has gotten a death grip on my shoulder, and was not about to give him that advantage again. "This time I know I'm right."

"What's right about working for FREE!" he snarled, abandoning all subtlety. "Haven't I taught you ANYTHING in all these years!"

"You've taught me a lot!!" I shot back at him. "And I've gone along with a lot ... and it usually turned out for the best. But there's one thing we've never done, Aahz, for all our finagling and scrambling. To the best of my knowledge, we've never gouged money out of someone who couldn't afford it. Have we?"

"Well, no. But . . ."

"If we can beat Deveels or the Mob out of some extra money, well and good," I continued. "They have lots of money, and I got most of it swindling other people. But with Possiltum we're talking about a kingdom that's on the ropes financially. How can we say we're here to help them when at the same time we're kicking them in the head with inflated fees?"

Aahz didn't answer at once, and after a moment, he dropped his eyes.

"But Grimble's already approved it," he said finally, in a voice that was almost plaintive.

I couldn't believe it! I had actually won an argument with Aahz over money! Fortunately, I had the presence of mind to be magnanimous in my victory.

"Then I'm sure he'll approve of cutting the expense even more," I said, putting my hand on Aahz's shoulder for a change. "Aside from that, it's just a clerical adjustment. Right, Bunny?"

"No."

She said it softly, but there was no mistaking her answer. So much for my victory.

"But Bunny ..." I began desperately, but she cut me off.

"I said 'No' and I meant it, Skeeve," she said. "Really, Aahz. I'm surprised you've let this go on for as long as it has. There are greater principles at stake here than basic greed!"

Aahz started to open his mouth, then closed it without speaking. It's probably the only time I've seen Aahz agree, even by silence, that there existed any higher principles than greed. Still, Bunny was arguing his side of the fight, so he let it ride.

"Your heart may be in the right place, Skeeve," she said, turning back to me, "but there are factors here you're overlooking or don't understand."

"So explain them to me," I said, a little miffed, but nonetheless willing to learn.

Bunny pursed her lips for a moment, apparently organizing her thoughts.

"All right," she said, "let's take it from the beginning. As I understand it, we're supposed to be helping the kingdom get out of its current financial crisis. What Grimble and I have been doing, aside from recommending emergency expense cuts, is to come up with a reasonable budget and operating plan to get things back on an even keel. The emphasis here is on 'reasonable.' The bottom line is that it is not reasonable to expect anyone . . . you, me, or Grimble . . . to provide such a crucial service for nothing. Nobody works for free. The army doesn't, the farmers don't, and there's no reason we should."

"But because of that very crisis, the kingdom can't afford to pay us!" I protested.

"Nonsense," Bunny snapped. "First of all, remember that the Queen got the kingdom into this mess all by herself by pouring too much money into the army. We're not the problem. We're the imported experts who are supposed to get them out of the hole they dug for themselves."

"Second," she continued before I could interrupt, "as you can see from the sheets I'm showing you, we can save enough in expenses and generate sufficient revenues from taxes to pay our own fees. That's part of the job of a bean-counter . . . to show their employer how to afford to pay themselves. Not many professions do that!"

What she was saying made sense, but I was still unconvinced.

"Well, at the very least can't we cut our fees a bit?" I said. "There's no real reason for us to charge as much as you have us down for."

"Skeeve, Skeeve, Skeeve," Bunny said, shaking her head. "I told you I didn't just make up these numbers. I know you're used to negotiating deals on what the client will bear, but in a budget like this, the pay scale is almost dictated. It's set by what others are getting paid. Anything else is so illogical, it would upset the whole system."

I glanced at Aahz, but he had his eyes fixed on Bunny, hanging on her every word.

"Okay. Let's take it from the top," I said. "Explain it to me in babytalk, Bunny. Just how are these pay scales fixed?"

She pursed her lips for a moment while organizing her thoughts.

"Well, to start with, you have to understand that the pay scale for any job is influenced heavily by supply and demand." she began. "Top dollar

jobs usually fall into one of three categories. First, is if the job is particularly unpleasant or dangerous . . . then, you have to pay extra just to get someone to be willing to do it. Second are the jobs where a particular skill or talent is called for. Entertainers and athletes fall into this category, but so do the jobs that require a high degree of training, like doctors."

"And magicians!" my partner chimed in. "Bear with me, Aahz," Bunny said, holding up a restraining hand to him. "Now, the third category for high pay are those who have a high degree of responsibility . . . whose decisions involve a lot of money and/or affect a lot of people. If a worker in a corporation makes a mistake, it means a day's or a week's work may have to be redone ... or, perhaps, a client is lost. The president of the same corporation may only make three or four decisions a year, but those decisions may be to open or close six plants or to begin or discontinue an entire line of products. If that person makes a mistake, it could put hundreds or thousands of people out of work. Responsibility of that level is frightening and wearing, and the person willing to hold the bag deserves a higher degree of compensation. With me so far?"

"It makes sense ... so far," I nodded.

"Moving along then, within each profession, there's a pecking order with the best or most experienced getting the highest rates, while the newer, lower workers settle for starting wages. Popular entertainers earn more than relative unknowns who are still building a following. Supervisors and managers get more than those reporting to them, since they have to have both the necessary skills of the job plus the responsibility of organizing and overseeing others. This is the natural order of a job force, and it provides incentive for new workers to stick with a job and to try to move up in the order. Got it?"

"That's only logical," I agreed.

"Then you understand why I have you down in the budget for the rather substantial figure you've been protesting," she concluded triumphantly.

"I do?" I blinked.

I thought I had been following her fine, step by step. Somewhere along the way, however, I seemed to have missed something.

"Don't you see, Skeeve?" she pressed. "The services you're providing for Possiltum fall into all three of the high pay requirements. The work is dangerous and unpleasant, it definitely requires special skills from you and your staff, and, since you're setting policy for an entire kingdom, the responsibility level is right up there with the best of them!"

I had never stopped to think about it in those terms, mostly to preserve my nerves and sanity, but she did have a point. She wasn't done, however.

"What's more," she continued, "you're darn-near at the top of your profession and the pecking order. Remember, Grimble's reporting to you now, which makes your pay scale higher than his. What's more, you've been a hot magical property for some time now . . . not just here on Klah, but at the Bazaar on Deva which is pretty big league. Your Queen Hemlock has gotten the kingdom in a major mess, and if she's going to hire the best to bail her out, she's bloody well going to pay for it."

That last part had an unpleasant sound of vindictiveness to it, but there was something that was bothering me even more.

"For the moment, let's say I agree with you . . . at least on the financial side," I said. "I still don't see how I can draw pay as a financial consultant and a court magician.

"Because you're doing both jobs," Bunny in-

sisted.

". . . But I'm not working magikally right now,"
I shot back.

"Aren't you?" she challenged. "Come on, Skeeve.
Are you trying to tell me that if some trouble arose
that required a magikal solution, that you'd just
stand by and ignore it?"

"Well, no. But ..."

"No 'buts,'" Bunny interrupted. "You're in resi-
dence here, and ready to throw your full resources
into any magikal assignment that arises . . . just
like you're doing at the Bazaar. They're paying
you a hefty percentage just to be on standby. If
anything, you're giving Possiltum a break on
what you're charging them. Make no mistake,
though, you are doing the job. I'm just making
sure they pay you for it. If they want a financial
consultant and a court magician, then it's only
fair that it shows in their budget and is part of the
burden they have to raise money to pay."

She had me. It occurred to me, however, that if
this conversation lasted much longer, she'd have
me believing that black was white.

"I guess it's okay then/" I said, shrugging my
shoulders. "It still sounds high to me."

"It is," Bunny said, firmly. "You've got to
remember though, Skeeve, that whole amount
isn't just for you. It's M.Y.T.H. Inc. the kingdom is
paying for. The fees have to cover the expense of
your entire operation, including overhead and
staff. It's not like you're taking the whole amount
and putting it in your pocket."

I nodded casually, but my mind was racing.
What Bunny had just said had given me an idea.

If nothing else, I had learned in these sessions
that there was a big difference between a budget
or operating plan and the actual money spent. Just

because I was allowed to spend an astronomic figure didn't mean I was compelled to do it!

I quietly resolved to bring my sections in well under budget . . . even if it meant trimming my own staff a bit. I loved them all dearly, but as Bunny had just pointed out, part of my own job was to be highly responsible.

Chapter Five:

"What you need is a collection agency."

D. SHULTZ

MY SESSION WITH Bunny had given me food for thought. Retreating to the relative privacy of my room, I took time to reflect on it over a goblet of wine.

Usually, I assigned people to work on various assignments for M.Y.T.H. Inc. on a basis of what I thought it would take to get the job done and who I thought would be best to handle it. That, and who was available.

As Bunny had pointed out, our prices were usually set on a basis of what the traffic would bear. I suppose I should have given more thought in the past to whether or not the income from a particular job covered the expense of the people involved, or if the work warranted the price, but operating the way we had been seemed to generate enough money to make ends meet . . . more than enough, actually.

The recent two projects, my bringing Aahz back from Perv and the rest of the team trying to stop Possiltum's army, were notable exceptions. These were almost personal missions, undertaken on my own motivations or suggestions, without an actual client or revenue.

Now, however, I was confronted by an entirely new situation.

Everyone in the crew was hanging around the castle . . . with the exception of Tananda, who was minding the offices back on Deva. The question was, did they have to be here?

I had a hunch that they were mostly staying here because they were worried about me . . . not without some justification. They all knew I was in a spot, and wanted to be close at hand if I needed help.

While I appreciated their concern, and definitely wanted the moral support, I also had to admit that there wasn't whole bunches they could do. Bunny was invaluable in turning the kingdom's finances around, but aside from holding my hand through this crisis, there was relatively little the others could do.

The trouble was, by simple arithmetic, while they were here on Possiltum, they weren't out working other assignments, making money for M.Y.T.H. Inc. and therefore for themselves . . . for a whole month! On top of the work time they missed while stopping Hemlock's army as a favor to me. If this organization was going to be a functioning, profit-making venture and not a huge back our bottom-line orientation. What's more, both as president and the one who had led us off on this side trip, I had to seize the initiative in setting things right again. That meant that I either had to trim the force, or go along with Bunny's plan of charging the kingdom for all our time.

The question was, who to trim?

Aahz had to stay. Not only had I just gone through a lot of trouble to get him back from Perv, but I genuinely valued his advice and guidance. While I had gotten into immeasurably more trouble since we first met, I had also become very aware that he was unequaled at getting us out of trouble as well.

Bunny was a must. Even though it had been

Tananda's idea originally to deal her in on this mess, I was very aware that without her expertise and knowledge, we didn't have a chance at bailing out the kingdom financially. Besides, judging by her greeting when we were reunited, I wasn't sure she'd be willing to go back to the Bazaar and leave me to face this dilemma alone.

As to my three bodyguards . . . after a moment's thought I decided to hold judgment on that one. First of all, I had just convinced Pookie to stay, which would make me look like a fool if I suddenly changed my mind. Second, I wasn't altogether sure I wouldn't need them. When I went off to Perv, I did it without Guido and Nunzio . . . over their strong protests . . . and ended up having to hire Pookie in their absence. Before I thought seriously about sending them all away again, I'd want to have a long talk about how they viewed my prospective danger here. While I wanted to save the kingdom money, I wasn't so generous as to do it if it meant putting myself in danger.

That left Massha and Chumley.

Massha came to me as an apprentice, and though I hadn't been very diligent in teaching her magik, I still had a responsibility to her that couldn't be filled if she were on Deva and I was here. Despite the fact I hadn't let her accompany me to Perv, I knew full well from my own experience that an apprentice's place is with his or her teacher.

I was suddenly confronted by the fact that the only one remaining on the list to be trimmed was Chumley . . . and I didn't want to do it. Despite the hairyknuckled, muscle-bound illiterate act the troll liked to put on when he was working, Chumley was probably the levelest head in our entire M.Y.T.H. Inc. crew. Frankly, I trusted his judgment and wisdom a lot more than I did Aahz's fiery temper. The idea of trying to make up my mind about Queen Hemlock's proposal without Chumley's wisdom was disquieting at best.

Maybe after I had reached my decision . . .

As much as I had tried to avoid thinking about it, the problem popped into my head and the potential ramifications hit me with a chilling impact.

Nervously, I gulped down the remaining wine in my goblet and hastily refilled it.

After I reached my decision . . . ,

All my thoughts and energies were focused on the immediate problems and short term plans. What was going to happen after I made my decision, whatever that decision was?

Things were never going to be the same for me.

Whether I married Queen Hemlock or, if refused, she abdicated and left me to run the kingdom on my own, I was going to be committed to stay in Possiltum a long time. A very long time.

I couldn't do that and maintain an office on Deva!

Would we have to move our operation here to Klah?

For that matter, could I be either a consort or a king and still do a responsible job as the president of M.Y.T.H. Inc.?

If I was uneasy about charging the kingdom for my crew for a month, how could I justify putting them all on the payroll permanently!

What about our other commitments? if we moved to Klah, it would mean giving up our juicy contract with the Devan Merchant's Association as magicians in residence. Could I charge Possiltum enough to make up for that kind of an income loss?

... Or would I have to step down as president

of M.Y.T.H. Inc. entirely? Despite my occasional complaining, I had grown to like my position, and was reluctant to give it up ... particularly if it meant losing all my friends like Aahz and . . .

AAHZI

However it went, would Aahz want to hang around as a partner constantly standing in the shadow of my being consort or king? Having just recently dealt with his pride head to head, I doubted it very much.

Whatever my decision, the odds were that, once I reached it, I was going to lose Aahz!

A soft rap on my door interrupted my thoughts.

"Say, Boss. Can you spare a minute?"

Not only could I spare it, I was glad for the break.

"Sure Guido. Come on in. Pour yourself some wine."

"I never drink when I'm workin', Boss," he said with a hint of reproach, "but thanks anyway. I just need to talk to you about something."

My senior bodyguard took a chair and sat fidgeting with the roll of parchment he was holding. It occurred to me how seldom I just sat and talked with my bodyguards. I had rather gotten accustomed to their just being there.

"So, what can I do for you?" I said, sipping my wine casually, trying to put him at his ease.

"Well, Boss," he began hesitantly, "it's like this. I was thinkin' . . . You know how Nunzio and me spent some time in the army here?"

"Yes, I heard about that."

"Bein' on the inside like that, I get the feelin' I

probably know a little more'n you do about the army types and how they think. The truth is, I'm a little worried about how they're gonna handle bein' tax collectors. Know what I mean?"

"Not really," I admitted.

"What I mean is," Guido continued earnestly, "when you're a soldier, you don't have to worry much about how popular you are with the enemy, 'cause mostly you're tryin' to make him dead and you don't expect him to like it. It's different doin' collection work, whether it's protection money or taxes, which is of course just a different kind of protection racket. Ya gotta be more diplomatic 'cause you're gonna have to deal with the same people over and over again. These army types might be aces when it comes to takin' real estate away from a rival operation, but I'm not sure how good they are at knowin' when to be gentle with civilian types. Get my drift?"

While I had never shared Guido's experience of being in an army, I had faced one once during my first assignment here at the court of Possiltum, and even earlier had been lynched by some soldiers acting as city guardsmen. Now, suddenly, I had visions of army troops with crossbows and catapults advancing on helpless citizens.

"I hadn't really thought about it," I said, "but I see your point."

"Well, you know I don't care much for meddlin' in management type decisions," Guido continued, "but I have a suggestion. I was thinkin' you could maybe appoint someone from the army to specifically inspect and investigate the collectin' process. You know, to be sure the army types didn't get too carried away with their new duties."

I really appreciated Guido's efforts to come up with a solution, particularly as I didn't have one of my own. Unfortunately, there seemed to be a bit of a flaw in his logic.

"Um ... I don't quite understand, Guido," I said. "Isn't it kind of pointless to have someone from the army watching over the army? I mean, what's to say our inspector will be any different from the one's he's supposed to be policing?"

"Two things/' my bodyguard replied, flashing his smile for the first time since he entered the room. "First, I have someone specific in mind for the inspector . . . one of my old army buddies. Believe me, Boss, this person is not particularly fond or tolerant of the way the army does things. As a matter of fact, I've already had the papers drawn up to formalize the assignment. All you gotta do is sign 'em."

He passed me the scroll he had been clutching and I realized he had actually been thinking out this suggestion well in advance.

"Funny name for a soldier," I said, scanning the document. "Spyder."

"Trust me, Boss," Guido pressed. "This is the person for the job."

"You said there were two things?" I stalled. "What's the other?"

"Well, I thought you could have a couple personal envoys tag along. You know, reportin' directly to you. That way you could be doubly sure the army wasn't hidin' anything from you."

"I see," I said, toying with the scroll. "And I suppose you have a couple specific people in mind for the envoys, as well?"

"Um ... As a matter of fact . . ."

"I don't know, Guido," I said, shaking my head. "I mean, it's a good idea, but I'm not sure I can spare both you and Nunzio. If nothing else, I want Nunzio to do a little work with Gleep. I want to find out for sure if there's anything wrong with

him."

"Ah . . . Actually, Boss," my bodyguard said, carefully studying his massive hands, "I wasn't thinkin' of Nunzio. I was thinkin' maybe Pookie and me could handle it."

More than anything else he had said, this surprised me. Guido and his cousin Nunzio had always worked as a team, to a point where I practically thought of the two of them as one person. The fact that Guido was willing to split the team up was an indication of how concerned he was over the situation. Either that, or a sign of how far he was willing to go to get some time alone with Pookie.

"Really, Boss," he urged, sensing my hesitation. "There ain't a whole lot to do here for three bodyguards. I mean, the way I see it, the only one here in the castle who might want to do you any bodily harm is the Queen herself, and I don't think you have to worry about her until after you've made up your mind on the marriage thing. I'm just lookin' for a way that we can earn our keep . . . something useful to do."

That did it. His point about reassigning my bodyguards played smack into my current thinking about trimming the team or expanding their duties. Then, too, I wasn't eager to prolong any discussion which involved my making up my mind about what to do about Hemlock.

"Okay, Guido," I said, scribbling my signature across the bottom of the scroll. "You've got it. Just be sure to keep me posted as to what's going on."

"Thanks, Boss," he grinned, taking the scroll and looking at the signature. "You won't regret this."

It hadn't occurred to me at all that I might regret it ... until he mentioned it. I mean, what could go wrong?

Chapter Six:

"Money is the root of all evil. Women need roots."

D. TRUMP

THOUGH THE VARIOUS administrative hassles of trying to straighten out Possiltum's finances weighed heavily on my mind, there was another, bigger worry that ran like an undercurrent through my head whenever I was awake.

Should I or shouldn't I marry Queen Hemlock?

Aahz kept saying that I should go along with it, become the royal consort with an easy (not to mention well-paying) job for life. I had to admit, in many ways it looked more attractive than having her abdicate and ending up holding the bag for running the kingdom all by myself. I had that "opportunity" once before courtesy of the late King Roderick, and really didn't want to repeat the experience.

So why was I dragging my feet on making my decision?

Mostly, my indecision was due to my reluctance to accept the obvious choice. As much as I was repelled by the known quantity of being king, I was as much or more terrified of the unknown factors involved in marriage.

Time and time again, I tried to sort out if it was the idea of getting married that scared me, or if it was Queen Hemlock specifically that I couldn't picture as my wife.

My wife!

Every time that phrase crossed my mind, it was like an icy hand grabbed my heart hard enough to make it skip a beat.

Frankly, I was having trouble picturing anyone I knew in that role. In an effort to get a handle on my feelings, I forced myself to review the women of my acquaintance in that light.

Massha, my apprentice, was out of the question. While we were close enough as friends, as well as teacher/student, her sheer size was intimidating. The truth was, I had trouble thinking of her as a woman. Oh, I knew she was female all right, but I tended to see her as a friend who was female . . . not as a female, if you can see the difference.

Bunny . . . well, I supposed that she could be considered a candidate. The problem there was that she was the first woman who had made a solid pass at me, and it had scared me to death. When her uncle, Don Bruce, first dumped her on me, she was all set to play a gangster's moll. Once I got her straightened out, however, she had settled into being my administrative assistant like a duck takes to water, and the question of anything intimate developing between us never came up again. Thinking of her in terms of a life partner would mean completely restructuring how I viewed her and worked with her, and right now she was far too valuable as my assistant for me to rock the boat.

Tananda ... I had to smile at the thought of the Trollop assassin as my wife. Oh, she was friendly enough, not to mention very attractive, and for a long time I had a crush on her. It eventually became apparent, however, that the hugs and kisses she bestowed on me were no different than those she gave the rest of the team . . . including her brother Chumley. She was just a physically friendly person, and the affection she showed me was that shown for a co-worker, or maybe a kid brother. I could accept that, now. Besides, I somehow couldn't see her giving up her own career to settle down keeping house for me. No, as much as I loved her, Tananda would never fit as my wife. She was . . . well, Tananda.

That left Queen Hemlock, who I had no real feeling for at all except, perhaps a sense of uneasiness every time she was around. She always seemed extremely sure of herself and what she wanted . . . which made her almost my exact opposite. Of course, that in itself was an interesting thought. Then, too, she was the only one who had ever expressed a desire to be paired with me . . . and seemed to want it badly enough to fight for it. Even Bunny had backed off once I rebuffed her. I had to admit that it did something to a man's ego to have a woman determined to bag him . . . even if he wasn't all that drawn to the woman in the first place.

Unfortunately, that was pretty much it for my list of female acquaintances. Oh, there were a few others I had come into contact with over the years, like Markie . . . and Luanna . . .

Luanna!!

She had almost slipped my mind completely, but once I thought of her, her face sprang into focus as if she were standing in front of me. Luanna. Lovely Luanna. Our paths had only crossed a couple times, most notably during my adventure in the dimension of Limbo, and the last time we met the parting hadn't been pleasant. In short, I really didn't know her at all. Still, in many ways, she epitomized everything that was feminine in my mind. Not only did she radiate a soft, vulnerable beauty, her manner was demure. That may not seem like much to you, but it was to me. You see, most of the women I work with can only be called aggressive ... or, less politely, brassy. Even Hemlock, for all her regal blood, was very straightforward about stating her mind and wishes. Bunny had cooled it a bit, once I got her off her moll kick, but had replaced her blatant suggestiveness with a brusque efficient manner that, at times, could be every bit as intimidating as her old sex kitten routine.

In contrast, Luanna always seemed very shy and hesitant in my presence. Her voice was usu-

ally quiet to a point I sometimes had to strain to hear her, and she had a habit of looking down, then peering up at me through her lashes ... as if she felt I could bully her physically or verbally, but trusted me not to. I can't speak for other men, but it always made me feel ten feet tall . . . very powerful and with an overwhelming urge to use that strength to protect her from the hardships of the world.

Thinking of her while trying to appraise what I would want in a wife, I found myself dwelling on the image of finding her waiting for me at the close of each day . . . and realized the image wasn't all that objectionable. In fact, once she surfaced in my memory, I found myself thinking of her quite a bit whenever I tried to sort out my current position, and more than occasionally wished I could see her again before I had to make my final decision.

As it turned out, I got my wish.

I was in my room, making another of my feeble attempts to make head or tail of the stack of spreadsheets that Bunny and Grimble kept passing me on an almost daily basis. As those of you who have been following these adventures from the beginning may recall, I can read ... or, at least, I had thought that I could. Since undertaking the task of sorting out the kingdom's finances, however, I had found out that reading text, which is to say, words, is a lot different than being able to read numbers.

I mean, we were all in agreement as to our goal, which was to eliminate or lessen the kingdom's debt load without either placing a staggering tax burden on the populace or cutting so much off the operating budget that the necessary administrative operations became non-functional. As I say, we were all in agreement . . . verbally . . . with words. Any time there was a disagreement between Grimble and Bunny on particulars, however, and they came to me to cast the deciding vote or make a decision, they would each invari-

ably support their side of the argument by passing me one or more of those cryptic sheets covered with numbers and not much else, then wait expectantly as I scanned it, as if their case had just become self-explanatory.

Now, for those of you who have never been placed in this situation, let me offer a little clarification. When I say I can't read numbers, I don't mean that I can't decipher the symbols. I know what a two is and what it stands for and how it differs from, say, an eight. The problem I was confronted with in these arguments was trying to see them in relation to each other. To do a "word analogy," if the numbers were words, both Bunny and Grimble could look at a page full of numbers and see sentences and paragraphs, complete with subtleties and innuendos, whereas I would look at the same page and see a mass of unrelated, individual words. This was particularly uncomfortable when they would pass me two pages of what to them was a mystery novel, and ask my opinion on who the killer was.

Even though I knew they knew I was a numeric illiterate, I had gotten awfully tired of saying "Duh, I don't know" in varying forms, and, in an effort to salvage a few shreds of my self-respect, had taken to saying instead "Let me look these over and get back to you." Unfortunately, this meant that at any specific point in time, I had a batch of these "mystery sheets" on my desk that I felt obligated to at least try to make sense of.

Anyhoo, that's what I was doing when a knock came at my door. In short, I was feeling inept, frustrated, and desperately in need of diversion.

"Yes?" I called eagerly, hoping beyond hope that it was news of an earthquake or attacking army or something equally disastrous that would require my immediate attention. "Who is it?"

The door opened, and Massha's head appeared.

"You busy, Hot Stuff?" she said with the re-

spect and deference she always shows me as my apprentice. "You've got a visitor."

"Nothing that can't wait," I replied, hastily stacking the offensive spreadsheets and replacing them in their customary spot on the corner of my desk. "Who's the visitor?"

"It's Luanna. You remember, the babe who almost got us killed over in Limbo."

In hindsight, I can see that Massha was both expressing her disapproval and trying to warn me with her description of Luanna, but at the time it didn't register at all.

"Luanna?" I said, beaming with delight. "Sure, bring her in. Better yet, send her in."

"Don't worry," Massha sniffed, disdainfully. "I wouldn't dream of intruding on your little tete-a-tete."

Again, her reaction escaped my notice. I was far too busy casting about the room quickly to be sure it was presentable . . . which, of course, it was. If nothing else, the maid service in the castle was stellar.

And she was there . . . standing in my room, as lovely and winsome as I remembered.

"Uh ... Hi, Luanna," I said, suddenly at a loss for words.

"Skeeve," she said in that soft, low voice that seemed to make the simplest statements an exercise in eloquence.

We looked at each other in silence for a few moments.

Then, suddenly, it occurred to me that the last time we saw each other, she had left in a huff under the misapprehension that I was married and had a kid.

"About the last ..." I began.

"I'm sorry about . . ." she stated simultaneously.

We both broke off abruptly, then looked at each other and laughed.

"Okay. You first," I said finally, with a half bow.

"I just wanted to apologize for the way I acted the last time we were together. What I heard later from the rumor mill at the Bazaar convinced me that things weren't what they seemed at the time, and I felt terrible about not having given you a chance to explain. I should have looked you up sooner to say how sorry I was, but I wasn't sure you'd even want to talk to me again. I ... I only hope you can forgive me . . . even though there's no real reason you should ..."

Her voice trailed off as she dropped her eyes.

Looking the way she did, so demure, so defenseless, I could have forgiven her for being a mass murderess, much less for any minor misunderstanding between us.

"Don't worry about it," I said, in what I hoped was an offhand manner. "Truth to tell, Luanna, I was about to apologize to you. It must have been terrible for you . . . coming to me for help and walking into the ... ah ... situation you did. I've been thinking that I should have handled it a lot better than I did."

"That's so sweet of you, Skeeve," Luanna said, stepping forward to give me a quick hug and a peck of a kiss. "You don't know how glad I am to hear you say that."

Not surprisingly, her brief touch did strange things to my mind . . . and metabolism. It was only the second time she had kissed me and the other time I had been in the middle of conning her

out of a handkerchief so I could get Aahz out of jail. All of which is to say I was far from immune to her kisses, however casual.

"So ... ah ... What brings you to Possiltum?" I said, fighting to keep my reactions from showing.

"Why, you of course."

"Me?"

Despite my feigned surprise, I felt my pulse quicken. I mean, I could have assumed that she was here to see me, but it was nice to have it confirmed that I was the sole purpose of her visit rather than a polite afterthought.

"Sure. I heard about your new position here, and figured it was too good a chance to pass up."

That didn't sound quite so good.

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, I'm getting it all turned around," she said, cutely annoyed with herself. "What I'm trying to say is that I have a proposal for you."

That was better. In fact, it was a little too good to be true. While I had been indulging my fantasies about Luanna as a possible wife, I never dared to think that she might be thinking the same thoughts about me ... as a husband, I mean, not a wife.

"A proposal?" I said, deliberately stalling to organize my thoughts.

"That's right. I figure that you've probably got a bit of discretionary funds available now that you're on the kingdom payroll, and the kind of scams I run have a good return on investment, so I was hoping that I could get a little start-up money from you and ..."

"Whoa! Stop the music!"

It had taken a few beats for what she was saying to sink in, obsessed as I was with my own expectations of the conversation. Even now, with my pretty dream-bubble exploding around me, I was having trouble changing gears mentally to focus on what she was actually getting at.

"Could you back up and take it from the top? You're here to ask for money?"

"Well . . . Yes. Not much really . . . maybe fifty or seventy-five in gold should do." she clarified hastily. "The nice thing with scams is they don't really need much up-front capital."

"You mean you want to borrow money from me so you can run a swindle? Here, in Possiltum?"

The look she leveled on me was, to say the least, cold and appraising. Not at all the coy, shy, averted gaze I was used to from her.

"Of course. That's what I do," she said levelly. "I thought you knew that when you offered me a job. Or are you just miffed because I prefer to operate independently? I suppose this is pretty small potatoes to you, but it's the best I can do."

As she spoke, my mind was racing back over the previous times I had seen or spoken with her. While I was aware then that she was always involved in or running from the results of some swindle or other, I had always assumed that she was a sweet kid who was going along with her partner, Matt. I realized now that I had no basis on which to make that assumption, other than her innocent looks. In fact, beyond her looks, I really didn't know her at all.

"Is it?" I said. "Is it really the best you can do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, couldn't you do as well or better trying your hand at something legitimate? What if I passed you enough money to start and run a normal business?"

The last vestige of my idealized fantasies regarding Luanna died as her lip curled in a sneer.

"You mean run a little shop or grocery store? Me? No thanks. That's way too much like work. Funny, I always thought that if anyone would understand that, you would. You didn't get where you are today by hard work and sweat, you did it by fleecing the gullible and flim-flamming the ignorant, just like Matt and I did . . . just on a larger scale. Of course, we didn't have a demon helping us along, like you did. Even now, as rich and respectable as you're supposed to be, I'll bet you're pulling down a healthy skim from this kingdom. It's got to be real easy, what with having the Queen in your pocket and everybody doing myself in for a piece of the action . . . and a little piece, at that."

I was silent for a few moments. I thought of trying to tell her about the long hours and work I and my team were putting in trying to straighten out the kingdom's finances. I even considered showing her some of the cryptic spreadsheets on my desk . . . but decided against it. She might be able to decipher them, and if she could would doubtless ask some embarrassing questions about the hefty fee I was taking for my services. I was having trouble justifying that to myself, much less to her.

The inescapable conclusion, however, was that no matter what I had thought lovely Luanna was like, we were worlds apart in our views of people and how they should be treated.

Reaching into our petty cash drawer, I started counting some coins.

"Tell you what, Luanna," I said, not looking up. "You said you needed fifty to seventy-five in gold?"

Well I'm going to give you a hundred and fifty . . . double to triple what you asked for ... not as a loan or an investment, just as a gift."

"But why would you ..."

". . . There are two conditions, though," I continued, as if she hadn't spoken. "First, that you use some of the extra money for travel. Go off dimension or to another part of Klah ... I don't care. Just so long as when you start to run your swindle, it's not in Possiltum."

"Okay, but . . ."

"And second," I said, setting the stack of coins on the edge of the desk near her, "I want you to promise that you will never see or speak to me . . . ever again . . . starting now."

For a moment, I thought she was going to speak. She opened her mouth, then hesitated, shrugged, and shut it again. In complete silence she gathered up the coins and left, shutting the door behind her.

I poured myself another goblet of wine and moved to the window, staring out at the view without really seeing anything. Dreams die hard, but whatever romantic thoughts I had ever had involving Luanna had just been squashed pretty thoroughly. I couldn't change that, but I could mourn their passing.

There was a soft knock at the door, and my heart took a sudden leap. Maybe she had changed her mind! Maybe she had thought it over and decided to return the money in favor of a legitimate business loan!

"Come in," I called, trying not to sound to eager.

The door opened, and a vampire walked in.

Chapter Seven:

"You just don't know women."

H. HEFNER

"WINE? No THANKS. Never touch the stuff."

"Oh. That's right. Sorry, Vie," I said, refilling my own goblet.

"You know," my guest said, settling himself more comfortably in his seat, "it's women like Luanna that give vampires a bad name. They're the ones who will mercilessly suck someone dry, and the concept sort of slopped over onto us!"

In case you're wondering (or have neglected to read the earlier books in this series), Vie is the one who walked into my room at the end of the last chapter, and yes he is a vampire. Actually, he's a pretty nice guy . . . about my age and a fairly successful magician in his own right. He just happens to come from Limbo, a dimension that's primarily "peopled" by vampires, werewolves, and the like.

Apparently he had stopped by our office on Deva looking to invite me out for lunch. When Tananda, who was currently minding the fort for us, told him where I was, he decided to pop over for a visit. (As an aside, one of his Limbo-born talents is the ability to travel the dimension without mechanical aid . . . something I've always envied and wanted to learn.)

Truth to tell, I was more than a little glad to see Vie. He was one of the few in my acquaintance who was familiar with the trials and tribulations of being a professional magician, yet wasn't an actual member of our crew. Not meaning any disrespect or criticism of my colleagues, mind you, but . . . well . . . they were more like family and my actions and future definitely affected them, whereas Vie was a bit more able to stand apart and view things objectively. This made it a lot easier to express my feelings and problems to him, which I had proceeded to do, starting with

Queen Hemlock's proposal and running it right up through my recent rather disheartening meeting with Luanna.

Until he brought it up, I had forgotten that he had met Luanna. In fact, he had worked with her and Matt, and consequently gone on the lam with them . . . which was when I met him in the first place. As such, he knew the lady under discussion far better than I did, and my new analysis of her seemed more in line with his earlier formed opinions than with my own cherished daydreams.

"I can't say much about what you're doing with the kingdom's budgets and stuff," the vampire said with an easy shrug. "That's out of my league. It does occur to me, though, that you're having more than your share of woman problems."

"You can say that again," I agreed, toasting him with my goblet.

"I'll admit I'm a bit surprised," Vie continued. "I would have thought that someone with your experience would have been able to side-step some of these tangles . . . and definitely spotted a gold-digger like Luanna a mile away."

I hesitated for a moment, then decided to level with him.

"To be honest with you, Vie, I haven't had all that much experience with women."

"Really?" The vampire was gratifyingly surprised.

"Let's just say that while Aahz and the others have been fairly diligent about teaching me the ins and outs of business and magik, there have been certain areas of my education that have been woefully and annoyingly neglected."

"Now that I might be able to help you with."

"Excuse me?"

I had been momentarily lost in my own thoughts, and had somehow missed a turn in the conversation.

"It's easy," Vie said with a shrug. "You're having trouble making up your mind whether or not you should get married at all ... much less to Queen Hemlock. Right?"

"Well ..."

"Right?" he pressed.

"Right."

"To me, the problem is that you don't have enough information to make an educated decision."

"You can say that again," I said heavily, gulping at my wine. "What's more, between the workload here and Queen Hemlock's timetable, I don't figure I'm going to get any, either."

"That's where I think I can help you," my guest smiled, leaning back in his chair again.

"Excuse me?" I said, fighting off the feeling that our conversation was caught in an unending loop.

"What would you say to a blind date?"

That one caught me totally off guard.

"Well . . . the same thing I'd say to a date that could see, I imagine," I managed at last. "The trouble is, I haven't had any experience with either ..."

"No, no," the vampire interrupted. "I mean, How would you like me to fix you up with a date? Someone you've never seen before?"

"That would have to be the case," I nodded. "I don't recall ever having met a blind person . . ."

male or female. Not that I've consciously avoided them, mind you ..."

"Hold it! Stop!" Vie said, holding up one hand while pressing the other to his forehead.

It occurred to me that, in that pose, he looked more than a little like Aahz.

"Let's try this again . . . from the top. We were talking about your needing more experience with women. What I'm suggesting is that I line you up with a date . . . someone I know ... so you can get that experience. Got it?"

"Got it," I nodded. "You know someone who's blind. Tell me, should I act any different around her?"

"No. ... I mean, yes! NO!"

Vie seemed to be getting very worked up over the subject, and more than a little confused . . . which made two of us.

"Look, Skeeve," he said finally, through clenched teeth. "The girl I'm thinking about is not blind. She's perfectly normal. Okay?"

"Okay," I said, hesitantly, looking for the hook. "A perfectly normal, average girl."

"Well . . . not all that normal, or average," the vampire smiled, relaxing a bit. "She's a lot of fun ... if you get what I mean. And she's a real looker . . . knock your eyes out beautiful."

"You mean I'll go blind?"

Out of my merciful nature and in the interest of brevity (too late), I'll spare you the blow by blow account of the rest of the conversation. Let it suffice to say that, by the time Vie departed, it had been established that he would arrange for me to step out with a lovely lady of his acquaint-

tance . . . one who was in full command of her senses . . . sort of (that part still confused me a little) . . . and who would not adversely affect my health or senses, but would, if Vie were to be believed, advance my education regarding the opposite sex to dizzying heights.

It sounded good to me. Like any healthy young man, I had a normal interest in women . . . which is to say I didn't think of them more than three or four times a day. My lack of first hand experience I attributed to a dearth of opportunity, which apparently was about to be remedied. To say I was looking forward to my date would be an understatement ... a VAST understatement.

However the events of the day weren't over yet.

There was a knock at the door, but this time I wasn't going to get caught making any assumptions.

"Who is it?" I called.

"General Badaxe," came the muffled response. "I was wondering if you could spare me a moment?"

I was more than a little surprised. The General and I had never been on particularly good terms, and it was rare if ever that he called on me in my personal quarters. Casting about for an explanation, it occurred to me that he was probably more than a little upset at the cutbacks I had made in the army and military budget. In the same thought, it occurred to me that he might be out to murder me in my own room ... or, at least, mess me up a little. As fast as the idea surfaced, however, I discarded it. Whatever else the General was, he was as straightforward and non-scheming as anyone I had ever met. If he meant to do me harm, it would doubtless be on the spur of the moment when we encountered each other in the halls or courtyard of the castle . . . not by stealth in my room. In short, I felt I could rule out premeditated mayhem. If he were going to kill me, it would be

spontaneous ... a thought that didn't settle my mind as much as I hoped it would.

"Come in," I called . . . and he did.

It was, indeed, the General of Possiltum's army, and without his namesake massive axe, for a change. Not that it's absence made him noticeably less dangerous, mind you, as Badaxe was easily the largest man I had ever met. Upon viewing him, however, I was a bit embarrassed by my original worries. Rather than the stern, angry countenance I was accustomed to, he seemed very ill at ease and uncomfortable.

"Sorry to interrupt your work, Lord Magician," he said, nervously looking about the room, "but I find it necessary to speak to you on ... a personal matter."

"Certainly, General," I said, trying to put him at his ease. Strangely, I found that his obvious discomfort was making me uneasy. "Have a seat."

"Thank you, I'd rather stand."

So much for putting him at ease.

"As you wish," I nodded. "What is it you wanted to see me about?"

I realized with some chagrin that I was falling into a formal speech pattern, but found that I couldn't help it. Badaxe seemed bound and determined to be somber, and I felt obligated to respond in kind.

"Well ... I'd like to speak to you about your apprentice."

"Aahz?" I said. As far as the kingdom was concerned, Aahz was my loyal student.

"What's he done now?"

"No . . . not Aahz." the General clarified hast-

ily. "I was referring to Massha."

"Massha?" I blinked. This was truly a surprise. As far as I knew, Massha and the General had always gotten along fine. "Very well. What's the problem?"

"Oh, don't misunderstand me, Lord Magician. There's no problem. Quite the contrary. I wanted to speak to you taking her hand in marriage."

On a day of surprises, this announcement caught me the most off guard.

"Why?" I sputtered, unable to think of anything else to say.

The General's brow darkened noticeably.

"If you're referring to her less than slender appearance, or perhaps the difference in our age . . ." he began in a deep growl.

"No, you misunderstand me," I said hastily, cutting him off ... though once he mentioned them, both points were worth reflecting on. "I meant, why should you want to speak to me about such a matter?"

"Oh. That."

For the moment, at least, Badaxe seemed mollified. I mentally made a note to table any discussion of the two points he had raised until another time.

"It's really rather simple, Lord Magician," the General was continuing. "Though I suppose it's rather old fashioned of me, I felt I should follow proprieties and establish my good intentions by stating them in advance. Normally I'd speak to her father, but, in this case, you seem to be the closest thing to a father she has."

Now I was truly flabbergasted. Mostly because, try as I might, I couldn't find a hole in his logic.

He was right. Even though she was older than me, Massha had never spoken of her family at all ... much less a father. What was more, this was one I couldn't even fob off on Aahz. Since she was my apprentice, I was responsible for her care and well-being as well as her training. If there was anyone the General should speak to on matters regarding Massha's future, it was me!

"I see," I said, stalling for time to think. "And what does Massha have to say about this?"

"So far, I haven't spoken to her directly on the subject," Badaxe admitted uneasily, "though I have reason to believe the idea wouldn't be totally unwelcome to her. Frankly, I felt that I should attempt to gain your approval first."

"And why is that?"

I was getting better at this stalling game, and questions were a handy weapon.

The General eyed me levelly.

"Come, come, Lord Magician," he said. "I thought that we had long since agreed there was no need to bandy words between us. You know as well as I that Massha has a great deal of affection for you. What's more, there is the added loyalty of an apprentice to her teacher. While I have never shied from either battle or competition, I would prefer to spare her any unnecessary anguish. That is, I feel it would aid my case immensely if, at the same time I asked her to be my wife, I could state that I had spoken with you and that you had no personal or professional objections to such a match. That is, of course, assuming you don't."

I was silent for a few moments, reflecting on what he had said. Specifically, I was berating myself for being so selfish in my thinking, of only considering the consequences to me in my decision of whether or not to marry Queen Hemlock. Even when I had been thinking of my friends and colleagues, I had been looking at it in terms of my

loss of their friendship, not what it might mean to them.

"Then again, perhaps I was wrong in my assumption."

The General's words interrupted my thoughts, and I was suddenly aware that he had been waiting for a response from me.

"Forgive me, General . . . Hugh," I said hastily. I had to think quickly to recall his first name. "I was simply lost in thought for a moment. Certainly I have no objections. I've always held you in the highest regard, and, if Massha is amenable, I would be the last to stand between her and happiness. Feel free to proceed with my approval . . . and best wishes."

Badaxe seized my hand and pumped it hard . . . unfortunately before I could pull it away in alarm.

"Thank you, Lord . . . Skeeve," he said with an intensity I had only seen him express in battle planning. "I ... Thank you."

Releasing my hand, he strode to the door, opened it, then paused.

"Were it not for the fact that, assuming she agrees, of course, I expect Massha will ask you to give the bride away, I'd ask you to honor me by standing as my best man."

Then he was gone . . . which was just as well, as I had no idea what to say in response.

Massha and Badaxe. Married.

Try as I might, I couldn't get my mind around the concept . . . which is a comment on the limits of my imagination and NOT on their respective physical sizes, individually or as a twosome.

Finally, I abandoned the effort completely. In-

stead, I poured myself another goblet of wine and settled back for the far more pleasant exercise of speculating on my own upcoming date.

Chapter Eight:

"Loue is blind. Lust isn't!"

D. GIOVANI

I FOUND MYSELF experiencing mixed feelings as I prepared for my date that evening. On the one hand, I wasn't real sure about how much fun it would be spending an entire evening with a woman I had never met before. While I had a certain amount of faith in Vie not to stick me with a real loser, it occurred to me that it would be nice to have some vague idea of what she was going to look like. Heck, if she turned out to be a lousy conversationalist, the evening could still turn out okay if she was at least fun to look at.

Despite my nagging concerns, however, there was no denying I felt a certain measure of excitement as the time drew near. As Vie had observed, I didn't really have a lot of experience with dating. Specifically, this was going to be my first date . . . ever. Now don't get me wrong, I knew a fair number of women, but I had met all of them in the course of business. Before I met Aahz, I had been living alone with Garkin in a shack in the woods . . . which is not the greatest way to meet females. Since tying on with Aahz, my life had gotten noticeably more exciting, but there was little time for a social life. What off time I did have was usually spent with other members of our crew, and while they were good company for the most part, it left little room for outsiders. Consequently, the idea of spending an entire evening with a strange woman just to be spending time together was a real treat . . . and more than a little scary.

The one variable in the whole situation I could control was me, and I was bound and determined that if anything went wrong with the evening, it wouldn't be because I hadn't put enough effort

into my preparations. Money was easy. While I wasn't sure where we would be going, I figured that two or three hundred in gold would cover our expenses . . . though I made a note to bring along my credit card from Perv just to be on the safe side.

Wardrobe was another matter. After changing my outfit completely a dozen times, I finally settled on the same clothes I had worn when I had my match with the Sen-Sen Ante Kid . . . the dark maroon open-necked shirt with the charcoal gray slacks and vest. I figured that if it had impressed people on Deva, it should be impressive no matter where we went. Of course, on Deva, I had also been traveling with an entourage of bodyguards and assistants . . . not to mention a quarter of a million in gold.

I was just considering changing my clothes one more time, when there was a knock at the door. This surprised me a little, as I had somehow expected that my date would simply appear in the room. As soon as that thought occurred to me, however, it also occurred to me that there had been an excellent chance that she would have appeared while I was changing outfits. Slightly relieved at having escaped a potentially embarrassing situation, I opened the door.

"Hi, Skeeve," Bunny said, sweeping past me into the room. "I thought I'd stop by and brief you on the latest budget developments and maybe do dinner and . . . Hey! You look nice."

Needless to say, this was an unexpected . . . and unpleasant . . . surprise.

"Urn . . . Actually I was just getting ready to go out." I managed politely.

She took it well. In fact, she seemed to brighten at the news.

"That's a great idea!" she said. "Hang on a few and I'll duck back to my room and change and we can go out together!"

"Urn . . . Bunny . . ."

"To tell you the truth, I've been starting to go up the walls a little myself. It'll be wonderful to get out for a while, especially with you, and ..."

"BUNNY!"

She stopped and cocked her head at me.

"What is it, Skeeve?"

"I ... actually . . . well . . . I have a date."

The words hung in the air as she stared at me with eyes that had suddenly gotten very large.

"Oh," she said finally in a small voice. "I ... Then I guess I'd better be moving along."

"Wait a minute, Bunny," I said, catching her as she started for the door. "Maybe tomorrow we can . . ."

There was a soft bampf in the room behind us, and we turned to discover that my date had arrived ... at least, I assumed she was my date. I could think of no other reason for a creature appearing in my room that looked like that.

She was pale, even paler than Queen Hemlock, which only served to accent the deep red lipstick she wore. She was short, though her hair nearly made up for it as it rose from the top of her head in a thick dark wave before cascading all the way down her back well past her rump. Her body was heart-stopping, abundant to the point of exaggeration on top, narrowing to an unbelievably tiny waist before flaring into her tidy hips. It would have been noticeable in any situation, but her dress made sure it wouldn't be overlooked.

It was sparkly black, and hugged her curves like it was tattooed on. The neckline plunged daringly nearly to her navel, actually lower than the slit up

the side of her dress, which in turn displayed one of the shapeliest legs it's ever been my privilege to view first hand. To say the least it was a revealing outfit, and most of what it revealed was delectable.

About the only thing that wasn't visible or easily imaginable were her eyes, which were hidden by a pair of cats-eye sunglasses. As if in response to my thoughts, she removed them with a careless, graceful motion, setting them carefully atop her hairdo. I would have watched the action more carefully if I hadn't been staring at her eyes. It wasn't the heavy purple eye shadow that held my attention, it was the fact that the whites of her eyes were, in fact, blood red.

My date was a vampire.

I guess I should have expected it. I mean, what with Vie being a vampire, it was only predictable that he would line me up with another vampire for a date. It just hadn't been predicted by me!

"Hi!" the vision of loveliness smiled, showing a pair of sharp canine teeth. "I'm Cassandra. You must be Vic's friend."

"Good God!" Bunny said, the words escaping from her in a gasp as she stared at my visitor.

"And who's this?" Cassandra said, sweeping Bunny with a withering gaze. "The warm-up act? You must be quite a tiger to book two dates, one after the other ... or is she coming along with us?"

"Cassandra, this is Bunny . . . my administrative assistant," I intervened hastily. "We were just going over some office matters."

This seemed to mollify Cassandra somewhat. At least enough so that she stepped forward and coiled around my arm, pressing close against me. Very close.

"Well, don't wait up for him, Sugar," she said with a wink. "I figure on keeping him up for a long time ... if you get what I mean."

"Don't worry. I won't."

Chumley had once tried to describe something called "dry ice" to me. At the time, I had trouble imagining something cold enough to burn. Bunny's tone and manner as she spun on her heel and marched out of the room went a long way toward clarifying the concept for me. I might not be the most perceptive person in all the dimensions when it comes to women, but it didn't take a real genius to realize that she didn't approve of my choice of dates . . . even though I hadn't really made the choice.

"Alone at last," Cassandra purred, pressing even closer against me. "Tell me, Tiger, what are your thoughts for the evening?"

As I said, I hadn't really settled on anything. Still, I had an overwhelming urge to get this particular bombshell out of the castle, or, at least, out of my bedroom, and as far away from Bunny as possible.

"I don't know," I said. "I was thinking of maybe doing dinner or getting a couple of drinks and kind of letting the evening take care of itself."

"Sounds good to me," my date declared, giving a little shiver that seemed to take her entire body. "Are there any good clubs on this dimension?"

It only took me a second to realize she was talking about nightclubs, not the kind of club you beat people across the head with. I DO catch on eventually.

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "My work doesn't leave me much time to check out the nightlife."

"Hey! When it comes to nightlife, I'm your girl. I know some GREAT places over on Limbo."

Limbo! The dimension of werewolves and vampires. I had only been there once, and the memory wasn't all that pleasant.

"Urn, I'd rather not if you don't mind."
"Really? Why not?"

"Well ... if you must know, my dimension traveling skills aren't all they could be," I said, blurting out the first thing that came into my mind. Actually, my ability to travel the dimensions without the mechanical aid of a D-Hopper was non-existent, but I saw no need to be too honest.

"If that's the only hitch, no problem," Cassandra said. "Just leave the driving to me, Tiger."

So saying, she hooked one arm in mine, did something I couldn't see with her other hand, and, before I had the chance to protest further, we were there!

Now, for those of you who have never been there (which, I assume, includes most of my readers), Limbo isn't much of a dimension to look at. That is, it's hard to see much of anything because it's DARK. Now, I don't mean "dark," I mean DARK!! Even when the sun is up, which it currently wasn't, it doesn't push much light through the perpetually overcast sky. Then, too, the predominant color of the architecture, roads, etc. is black, which does nothing toward brightening up the landscape. That in itself might make things look bleak, but when you added in the decorative flourishes the place looked positively grim.

Everywhere you looked there were gargoyles, dragons, and snakes . . . stone ones, fortunately . . . peering back at you from rooftops, balconies, and window ledges. Normally I don't mind such creatures. Heck, as you know I have a dragon of my own, and Gus is one of my best friends even though he is a gargoyle. It should be noted, however, that

those individuals manage to maintain their relationship with me without constantly displaying their teeth in bloodthirsty glee, a courtesy which their stone counterparts here in Limbo did NOT extend.

Then, too, there were the bats.

For every one of the aforementioned frightful creatures, there must have been ten or twenty bat decorations on display. They came in all sizes, shapes, and poses, and seemed to have only one characteristic in common . . . none of them looked friendly. It was an unnerving reminder that a goodly proportion of the dimension's inhabitants were vampires.

"Umm ... Is this Blut, by any chance?" I said, ostensibly studying the buildings around us while, in actuality, sneaking sideways peeks at Cassandra, trying to get another peek at her teeth.

"As a matter of fact, it is!" my date confirmed. "Don't tell me you've heard of it?"

"Actually, I've been here before."

"Really? That's strange . . . but then again, Vie did say that you were better traveled and informed than most off-worlders." Cassandra seemed genuinely impressed. "So, what did you think of the place?"

"I didn't really get to see much of it," I admitted. "I was sort of here on business and didn't have much time for socializing or sightseeing."

Again, this was a bit of an understatement. I had been here trying to bust Aahz out of jail before they executed him for murder. It occurred to me, however, that it might not be wise to go into too many details of my previous visit. Fortunately, I needn't have worried.

"Well we can fix that right now," Cassandra declared, grabbing my hand and pulling me along

behind her as she started off. "There's a little club around the corner here that's all the rage currently. It's as good a place as any to start our expedition."

"Wait a minute," I said, digging in my heels a bit. "What about me? I mean, if I recall correctly, off-worlders in general and humans specifically aren't all that welcome here. In fact, don't most vampires consider us humans to be monsters?"

"Oh, that's just the superstitious old fuddy-duddies," my date insisted, continuing to tow me along. "The kind of folks that hang out at the clubs are pretty open-minded. You'll see."

Somehow, the phrase "pretty open-minded" didn't suffice to calm all my fears. I was all too aware that I was a long way from home with no independent means to get back there if anything went wrong and I got separated from my date. Just to be on the safe side, I started casting about for force lines . . . the energy source I was trained to tap into for my magik. Limbo was notoriously short on them, which had caused me no small amount of problems during my last visit, and if I was going to have to do anything on "reserve power," I'd be wise to start mustering it well in advance of any trouble.

"There it is now!" Cassandra chirped, interrupting my concentration.

The place she had selected was easy to spot. It had a line of customers out front that stretched to the corner and around it. It also, however, had a made me much more willing to agree to it as a relaxing stop on our tour.

"Darn it!" my date said, slowing slightly. "I was afraid this would happen, what with us showing up so late atid all. How are you fixed for cash, Tiger? A little palm grease could cut our wait time a bit."

"Well, all I have is a couple hundred in gold," I

said hesitantly. "If that's not enough, we can always ..."

"Whoa!" Cassandra stopped in her tracks. "Did you say a couple hundred!"

"That's right," I nodded, letting go of her hand to reach for my belt pouch. "I wasn't sure how much ..."

"Don't show it around here!" my date gasped, quickly stopping my hand with her own. "Geez! Do you want to get mugged? What are you doing, carrying your whole bankroll around with you? Don't you believe in banks?"

"Sure I do," I said, a little hurt. "This is just mad money. I wasn't sure how much this evening was going to cost, so I brought a long a couple hundred . . . that and a credit card."

"Really?" she said, obviously impressed. "How much do you . . . never mind. None of my business. Vie never said you were rich, though. I've never even known someone with a credit card before."

I had only recently acquired my credit card while looking for Aahz on Perv, and hadn't had a chance to use it yet. (Frankly, except for a few dimension travelers like my colleagues and me, I don't think anyone on my home dimension of Klah has even heard of a credit card. I know I hadn't until I hit Perv.) If anything, I had tended to downplay it, since it seemed to upset Aahz. My partner wasn't here, though, and my impressionable date was. If nothing else over the years, I've learned to go with the flow.

"Oh, it comes in handy," I said loftily, producing the item under discussion with a flourish. "Keeps me from having to carry too much cash, you know."

The card disappeared from my fingertips as Cassandra seized it and gaped at it in open awe.

"A solid gold card!" she exclaimed breathlessly.
"Wow! You sure know how to show a girl a good time, Tiger. Are we going to party tonight!!!"

Before I could stop her, she had grabbed my hand again and plunged into the crowd, holding the card aloft like a banner.

"Excuse us! Coming through!"

The people in line who we were elbowing our way past didn't like it. A few went so far as to bare their fangs in annoyance. The card seemed to have some magik effect, though, because, after one glance, they all stepped back and cleared a passage for us ... or, rather, for Cassandra. I just trailed along in her wake.

There was a velvet rope barring the door, and a big guy beside it whose only function seemed to be to admit people a few at a time as others left . . . that, and be intimidating. I mean, he was BIG . . . and that's coming from someone who has his own bodyguards. As soon as he spotted the card, however, he snatched the rope from the door, shoving a few of the line people back to open a path for us, and actually tried to twist his features into a smile as we swept past.

It was occurring to me that there might be more to this credit card business than I imagined. This didn't seem to be the time to ask, however, and a moment later we were in the club . . . and I lost all ability to think of anything else.

Chapter Nine;

"I love the nightlife."
V. DRACULA

I DON'T KNOW what I had expected for the interior of a vampire nightclub, probably because it never occurred to me that I might visit one someday, but this definitely wasn't it.

First and foremost, it was bright. I don't mean bright, I mean BRIGHT!!!

The lighting level was so intense the glare was almost blinding, particularly coming in from the darkness outside. Even squinting, it was so bright I could barely make out the features of the room and even had to grope a bit to keep from tripping over things.

"Whatdaya think?" Cassandra shouted over the music as she clung to my arm.

"Hard to tell!" I called back. "It's kinda bright!"

"I know! Isn't it great!" she said, flashing a smile that shone through the light. "Real spooky, isn't it?"

For some reason, that made sense. In fact, suddenly the whole club did. Humans were primarily daylight lovers. When they wanted to feel daring or be scared, they went to dark places. Vampires on the other hand, normally tended to shun the light. As such, I supposed it was only natural that a place lit up like a flare would be scary to them.

"Oh, it's not too bad . . . once your eyes adjust to it," I said loftily.

It was the truth. My eyes were slowly getting used to the glare, allowing me to look around the place.

What it lacked in size, it made up for in noise and customers.

What seemed like hundreds of people were packed around an expanse of tiny tables, each table having a small umbrella to provide limited relief from the bright lights like . . . well, like candles on tables in a dark room back where I came from.

The only portion that seemed even more

crowded than the tables was a small space I took for a dance floor. I made this assumption based on the fact that the customers packed in there cheek to jowl were all moving rhythmically in unison to the music which was blaring through the place at a volume level to match the Big Game. I couldn't see a source for the music, unless it was from the one weird-looking guy who was ensconced behind a table overlooking the dance floor. Every so often, there would be a break in the music and he would shout something, whereupon the crowd would shout back at him and a new tune would start. From this, I guessed that he had something to do with the entertainment, but exactly what I couldn't be sure, as there was no sign of an instrument. Just stacks and stacks of shiny discs he kept feeding into a machine in front of him.

The music itself was beyond description . . . unless that description is "loud." Mostly, it sounded like jarring crashes of noise repeated endlessly to a driving beat. I mentioned that there would be pauses and new tunes, but in truth they seemed remarkably alike to me. I mean, whether one is repeatedly hitting a sackful of tin cans or a sackful of pots and kettles, or alternating between the two, the overall sound effect is the same for all intents and purposes. The crowd seemed to enjoy it, though, or, at least, it was sufficient to keep them cheering and gyrating with apparently limitless energy.

With all the noise and activity that was going on, I was almost surprised that I managed to notice the decorations hanging on the walls. Perhaps they caught my eye with their sheer incongruity.

There were strings of garlic—fake, to look at it—as well as vials of water and strings of beads, all marked with various religious symbols. Not exactly what I'd pick to have around while I was trying to relax ... if I were a vampire. Then to provide relaxation.

"Interesting decor," I said, still looking at the

stuff on the walls. "What's the name of this place, anyway?"

"It's called The Wooden Stake," Cassandra supplied, giving a mock shudder as she hugged my arm even tighter. "Isn't it a gas?"

"Uh-huh," I managed noncommittally.

Actually, her little shudder was quite distracting . . . particularly crowded as close to me as she was.

"Quite a crowd here," I added, forcibly pulling my eyes away from her to look around again.

"I told you it was the hottest club around," she said, giving my arm a small shake. "Look. Everybody's here."

If it seems that I've been dwelling on the physical description of the club, it's because I've been hesitant to tackle the job of describing the patrons. They were like something out of your worst nightmare . . . literally.

As might be expected, there were vampires. If their red eyes and flashy clothes didn't give them away, there was always the minor detail that they tended to float above the dance floor and along the ceiling to get away from the crush of the other dancers.

The list didn't stop there, however.

There were 'weres' around. Not just werewolves, but were-tigers, were-bears, and were-snakes as well. There were also mummies, lizard men, a night-shambler or two, and even a couple ghosts. At least, you could see through them so I supposed they were ghosts.

Just your average, run of the mill, neighborhood bar crowd ... if your neighborhood happens to be the intersection of half a dozen horror movies.

"I don't see the Woof Writers anywhere," I said, just to be cantankerous. I didn't know many people here on Limbo, but the few I knew weren't here, so obviously everybody wasn't in attendance.

"Oh, Idnew is probably around somewhere," Cassandra said absently, scanning the crowd. "Don't expect to see Drachir, though. He's usually holed up somewhere quieter talking business or . . ."

She broke off suddenly and looked at me sharply.

"You know the Woof Writers?"

"Like I said!" I smiled, squeezing her arm for a change. "I've been on Limbo before."

"Look! There's a table!" She grabbed my wrist and took off through the crowd, towing me along behind. If I had been hoping to impress her, I'd have to work more on my timing.

We barely beat out a vampire couple for the table, who favored us with dark glares before continuing their search. I watched their departure with a vague sense of relief. I really didn't want to get into a fight tonight . . . and especially not here in The Wooden Stake. I hadn't felt so much like an outsider since I returned from Perv.

The view from our table was notably much more restricted than the one we had when we were standing, due to the crush of people around us. The only real advantage to having a table, that I could see, was that we didn't have to hold our drinks . . . except we didn't have any drinks.

"What'll you have?"

For a moment, I thought the question had come telepathically in answer to my thoughts. Then I realized there was a ghost hovering next to me, nearly translucent, but carrying a solid enough tray. I supposed it made sense. A ghost to pass

ethereally through the crowds, and a solid tray to carry the drinks on. Maybe if other bars and restaurants used the same idea, service would be faster.

"Hi, Marley. I'll have a Bloody Mary," Cassandra said. "What do you want, Tiger?"

I'll spare you the image which my mind came up with to associate with the name of her ordered drink. While I knew from my earlier visits that vampires don't necessarily drink human blood exclusively, the idea of imbibing any kind of blood was pretty low on my list for taste treats.

"Urn . . . What all do they have?" I stalled. "I'm pretty much just used to wine."

"Don't worry, it's a full service bar," she informed me brightly. "They've got pretty much . . . Oh! I get it!"

She threw back her head and laughed, then gave my arm a playful slap.

"Don't get uptight, Tiger. They do have drinks for off-worlders."

Again I was relieved, but at the same time, I wasn't wild about being laughed at. I seemed to be losing ground in the "impress your date" department.

"No, I'm serious, Cassandra/" I said. "I really don't have much experience drinking except for wine."

"Hey. No problem. I'll order for you."

That wasn't exactly what I had in mind, but she had turned to our waiter before I could stop her.

"Bring him a Bloody Mary, too, Marley. A regular one, not the local version," she said. "Oh, and we'll be running a tab. Here's his credit card so you can make an imprint."

The waiter accepted the card without batting an eye . . . apparently waiters are harder to impress with credit cards than doormen . . . and moved off through the crowd. And I do mean through the crowd.

Truth to tell, I had been so busy ogling the club, I had completely forgotten that Cassandra still had my card until she handed it to the waiter. Inexperienced though I was with credit cards, I was aware that losing track of one's card is not the wisest idea, and I resolved to reclaim it when the waiter brought it back.

In the meantime, there was one minor matter I wanted to take care of ... to wit, my outfit.

As you may recall, I spent a certain amount of time choosing my ensemble for this date, but that was before I knew we were headed for Limbo. The clothes I was wearing were fine for Klah, or even Deva, but here on Limbo they were conservative to the point of looking drab. Normally, I wouldn't squander my magik on something so trivial, particularly on Limbo, but I had already scouted a strong force line directly over the club and . . . what the heck, I was still trying to impress my date.

At the moment, she was busy chatting with some friends of hers who had stopped by the table, so I figured now was as good a time as any. Closing my eyes, I went to work on my outfit courtesy of my good old trusty standby . . . the disguise spell.

Since I wasn't really all that dissatisfied with the outfit I was wearing, I didn't go for any radical change, just a few adjustments here and there. I deepened the neckline on both my shirt and vest to show a bit more of my chest . . . such as it was. Then I lengthened the points of my collar and added a bit more drape to the sleeves to be more in line with some of the more billowy outfits the other men in the club were wearing.

As a final touch, I added a sparkly undertone to my shirt so that it would match my date's dress . . . in texture, at least.

Like I said, not much of a change. Just enough so I wouldn't look dowdy sitting in a club with flashy vampires. I couldn't see the changes myself, of course, which is one of the few drawbacks of a disguise spell, but I had enough confidence in this, one of my oldest spells, to know it was effective. I knew my date would be able to see the changes. The only question was, would she notice?

I needn't have worried.

Not that she noticed right away, mind you. Cassandra's friends had moved on, but she was still quite busy waving and calling to others in the crowd. Apparently she was quite a popular young lady. Not surprising, really.

The fun started when the waiter brought our drinks to the table. Setting them them carefully in front of us, he leaned over to speak directly into

"This first round is compliments of the manager, sir," he said, with notably more deference than he had shown when taking the order originally. "He asked me to tell you he's honored you're visiting our club, and hopes you enjoy it enough to make it a regular stop."

"What?" I said, genuinely taken aback. "I don't understand."

"/ said, the manager ..." the ghost started to repeat, but I cut him off.

"No. I mean, why is he buying us a round of drinks?"

"He saw your name on the credit card," the ghost said, handing the item in question back to me. "I didn't recognize you on sight, myself . . . I hope you aren't offended."

"No. It's . . . no. No offense," I managed, still trying to figure out what was going on.

"What was that all about?" Cassandra said, leaning close again. She had noticed my conversation with the waiter, but hadn't been able to hear the exact words over the music.

"It's nothing," I explained. "The manager just bought us a round of drinks."

"Really?" she frowned. "That's odd. They don't usually do that here ... at least, not for the first round. I wonder who's on duty?"

She started craning her neck trying to get a clear look at the bar. While she was doing that, I turned my attention to our drinks.

They appeared innocent enough. Basically an opaque red fluid over ice cubes with some kind of greenery sticking out of it. Hers was a darker red than mine, but aside from that, they looked the same. Cautiously, I took a sip ... and discovered, to my relief, it tasted sort of like tomato juice.

"Hey! This is pretty good," I declared. "What's in it, anyway?"

"Hmm?" Cassandra said, turning her attention to me again. "Oh. Yours is just tomato juice and vodka."

I didn't know what vodka was, but tomato juice I could handle. The first sip had reminded me how thirsty I was after all our running around, so I downed most of the glass with my next swallow.

"Hey! Take it easy, Tiger," my date admonished. "Those things can pack a wallop if you aren't used to them . . . and it can leave a stain, so don't drip any on your ..."

She stopped in mid-sentence and stared at my

outfit.

"Say. Weren't you wearing a different shirt before?"

"Oh, it's the same shirt," I said, as casually as I could. "I just changed it a little bit. I think this is more appropriate for this place, don't you?"

"But how could you ... I get it! Magik!"

Her reaction was everything I could have hoped for ... except she wasn't done.

"Wait a minute. You're a friend of Vic's from Klah, and you know magik . . . right?" she said, eagerly. "Do you know a magician there named the Great Skeeve?"

This really surprised me, but the pieces were starting to fall into place. The picture was incredible, but I managed to keep my cool.

"As a matter of fact, I know him rather well," I said with a faint smile.

"Whatdaya know!" Cassandra declared, slapping the table with her palm. "I thought Vie was just trying to impress me when he said he knew him. Tell me, what's he like?"

That one threw me.

"Vie? He's a nice enough guy. I thought you . . ."

"No, silly. I mean Skeeve! What's he like as a person?"

This was just getting better.

"Oh, he's a lot like me," I said. "I'm just surprised you heard of him."

"You've got to be kidding!" she declared, rolling her eyes. "He's about the hottest thing going as far as magicians go. Everybody's talking about

him. You know, he engineered a jailbreak right here on Limbo!"

"I think I heard about that," I admitted.

"And just a while back, he got barred from the Dimension of Perv. Can you believe that? Perv?"

"So you really do know him! Come on, tell me more. When you say he's like you, do you mean he's young or what?"

As much fun as this was, I figured it was time to stop before it got out of hand.

"Cassandra," I said, carefully. "Watch my lips. He's a lot like me. Get it?"

She frowned, then shook her head.

"No. I don't. You make it sound like you're twins or something. Either that, or . . ."

She suddenly stared at me, her eye's widening.

"Oh, no," she gasped. "You don't mean you're . . ."

I held my credit card up in front of her so she could read the name on it, then favored her with my widest smile.

"Oh no!" she shrieked, loud enough to draw attention from the neighboring tables. "You're him!!! Why didn't you tell me!!!"

"You never asked," I shrugged. "Actually, I thought that Vie ..."

But by that time, I was speaking to her back ... or, to be more specific, her rump. She was on her feet calling triumphantly to the other patrons.

"Hey, everybody! You know who this is! This is

SKEEVE THE GREAT!!!"

Now, at different times, various people have tried to tell me that I was building a rep through the dimensions. Most recently, Bunny had brought it up when explaining how she set the prices for the services of M.Y.T.H. Inc. I guess I was sort of aware of it, and had even kind of accepted it, but for the most part I didn't really see where it made any difference in my normal day to day life. Sitting in The Wooden Stake in the dimension of Limbo, however, was not part of my normal day to day life . . . and neither was the reaction of the crowd when it learned who r was.

At first, heads turned, then drew together in whispered conversation as the whole room stared at me as if I had grown another head.

"I hope I didn't embarrass you, Skeeve . . . can I call you Skeeve? . . . but I'm just so excited." Cassandra was back in her seat, focusing all her the Great Skeeve!"

"Umm . . . that's all right, Cassandra," I assured her, but now my attention was elsewhere.

Over her shoulder . . . heck, from all around us ... I could see people starting to make their

way towards our table. Now, as I've mentioned, I've been chased by mobs before, but never starting surrounded! Still, they didn't look particularly hostile or angry. If anything, they all seemed to have exaggerated smiles on their faces . . . which considering the array of teeth in the room, wasn't all that pleasant to behold.

"Excuse me, Cassandra," I said, eyeing the incoming people, "but I drink ... I mean, I think we're about to have company."

The slip of the tongue was because I had just tried to take another sip of my drink, only to find the glass was empty except for the ice cubes . . . strange, because I didn't remember finishing it.

Then the first person reached the table.

It was a male vampire, all decked out in a fine set of evening clothes which he wore with enviable grace.

"Excuse me for interrupting, Mr. Skeeve," he said with a smile, "but I wanted to shake your hand. Always wanted to meet you, but never thought I'd get the opportunity."

"Uh, sure," I said, but he had already seized my hand and was pumping away.

"I was wondering . . . could I have your autograph?" a young lady said, trying to edge around the first gentleman.

"What? I suppose so ..."

Unfortunately I couldn't seem to get my hand loose from the vampire who was still shaking it, though he seemed to be looking elsewhere at the moment.

"Hey! Waiter!" I heard him call. "Another round of whatever Mr. Skeeve and his guest are drinking . . . and put it on my tab!"

"Umm . . . thank you," I said, extracting my hand and turning to the girl who had asked for an autograph. "Do you have a pen?"

"Gosh no!" she exclaimed. "But I'll go get one. Don't go away, I'll be right back."

I really didn't know what to think. I had been nervous about coming back to Limbo because of my near criminal activities during my last visit, and here they were treating me like a celebrity!

"Mr. Skeeve. If you don't mind. It's for my little girl."

This last was from a were-tiger who thrust both

paper and pen at me. Fortunately, after the last visitor, I knew what he was after, and hastily scribbled my signature on the page.

Our ghost waiter materialized through the growing crowd and set our drinks on the table . . . except there were three of them! From the color, one for Cassandra, and two for me.

"What's with the extra?" I said.

"Compliments of the table over there, sir," the waiter said, pointing somewhere off to my left.

I tried to look where he was indicating, and almost put my nose in the navel of another young lady who was crowding up beside me. Actually, she was one of three, any one of whom would be eye-catching under normal circumstances, but were just part of the crowd here.

"Where are you going from here, Mr. Skeeve?" the taller one purred. "There's going to be a party at our place later if you want to come by."

"Wipe your chin, Sweetheart," Cassandra smiled, slipping her arm around my shoulder. "He's my date . . . and I plan to keep him busy all night."

That had an intriguing sound to it, but just then someone else started tugging on my sleeve.

"Excuse me, Mr. Skeeve," said an awesome set of teeth from a point too close to focus on. "I was wondering if I might interview you sometime at your convenience?"

"Well . . . I'm kind of busy right now," I hedged, trying to lean back far enough to get a better look at my questioner . . . which unfortunately pressed the back of my head up against one of the party girls.

"Oh, I don't mean now," the teeth said, matching my retreat with a move forward so I still couldn't see what or who was talking. "If you can

stop by our table over there later, we'll set up an appointment. I'll have a drink waiting for you . . . Bloody Mary, right?"

"Right. I mean, okay. But . . ."

But by that time the person was gone. I only hoped that they'd recognize me if I got into the general vicinity. Right now, my attention was caught by the fact that whoever I was pressing backward against was now pressing forward against the back of my head ... far too insistently for it to be an accident.

"Say, Skeeve," Cassandra said, giving me an excuse to break contact, which I took, pausing only to take a gulp of my drink before I leaned toward her.

"Yes, Cassandra?"

"If you don't mind, can we head out of here after you finish your drink? There are a couple other places I'd like to hit tonight . . . you know, to show you off a little?"

"No problem/" I said, "but it might take a while."

Somehow, during the last flurry of discussions, my two drinks had multiplied into four.

"Oh, I'm in no hurry/" she said, giving me a quick kiss. "I know you've got to deal with some of these people now that they know who you are. It goes with the notoriety. It may be old hat to you, but I'm having a blast!"

To say the least, it wasn't old hat to me. Maybe if it was, I would have handled it better.

I remember signing my name a lot ... and some more drinks being delivered . . . and kissing Cassandra . . . and, I think, another club . . . or two other clubs . . . and more drinks . . .

Chapter Ten:

"Happiness is defined by one's capacity for enjoyment."

BACCHUS

OPENING MY EYES, I suffered a brief moment of disorientation, then things started swimming into focus.

I was in my room ... in my own bed, to be specific, though the covers seemed to be twisted and disheveled. I was naked under the covers, though I had no recollection of getting undressed. I assumed it was morning, as there was sunlight streaming through the window. In short, everything looked normal.

So why did I feel there was something wrong?

I was lying on my side, and I realized my sinuses had flooded, making it impossible to breathe out of the nostril on the "downhill" side. In an effort to alleviate this situation, I rolled over and . . .

It hit me!!!

A pounding headache ... a nauseous stomach . . . the works!

There had been times in the past when I had gotten sick, but nothing like this! At first I was afraid I was going to die. Then I was afraid I'd live. Misery such as I was feeling should have a finite end.

Groaning slightly and burrowing into my pillow, I tried to gather my thoughts.

What was going on here? What happened to make me feel . . .

Suddenly, the memory of the previous night flashed across my mind ... or, at least, the

beginning of it.

The blind date . . . The Wooden Stake . . .
the admiring crowds . . . Cassandra!

I sat bolt upright and . . .

Big mistake. BIG mistake.

Every pain and queasiness I had been feeling slammed into me threefold. With a moan, I fell limply back onto my pillow heedless of the new unpleasant sensations this move caused. You could only feel so miserable, and I had bottomed out. Nothing could make me feel worse. Forget any effort at rational thought. I was just going to lie there until my head cleared or I died . . . whichever came first.

A knock sounded at the door.

Disoriented as I was, I had no difficulty deciding what to do: I was going to ignore it. I was certainly in no condition to see or talk to anyone!

The knock came again, a little louder this time.

"Skeeve? Are you awake?"

It was Bunny's voice. From what I could recall of the beginning of last evening, I really didn't want to talk to her right now. All I needed to make my misery complete was to have her carp- ing on me about my taste in dates.

"Go away!" I called, not even bothering to try to make it sound polite.

As soon as I uttered the words, however, I realized I would have been better off just staying quiet. Not only had the effort increased the pound- ing in my head, I had inadvertently let her know I was awake.

As if in response to my afterthought, the door opened and Bunny came in, a big tray of food in

her hands.

"When I didn't see you at breakfast or at lunch, I figured you might be a little worse for wear from last night," she said crisply, setting the tray on my desk. "I had the kitchen put together a tray for you to help you back to the land of the living."

Food was definitely low on my list of priorities at the moment. If anything, I was more concerned with things going the other way through my digestive tract. It did however, suddenly occur to me that I was thirsty. In fact, VERY thirsty.

"Have you got any juice on that tray?" I managed weakly, not wanting to sit up far enough to look myself.

"Do you want orange or tomato?"

The mention of tomato juice brought memories of last night's Bloody Marys to mind, and my stomach did a slow roll and dip to the left.

"Orange will be fine," I said through gritted teeth, trying hard to talk, keep my mouth shut, and swallow at the same time.

She favored me with a speculative glance.

"Well, it wasn't Screwdrivers or Mimosas."

"Excuse me?"

"Never mind. Orange juice, coming up."

I could have done without the "coming up" comment, but the juice tasted fine. I downed it in two long swallows. Strangely enough, it left me even more thirsty. Not that the juice wasn't a welcome input of cool moisture, but it made me realize just how dehydrated I was.

"Any more of that?" I said hopefully.

"Got a whole pitcher here," Bunny replied,

gesturing toward the tray. "I had a hunch you were going to need more than one glass. Take it slow, though. I don't think it would be a good idea to gulp down a lot of cold liquid just yet."

I resisted the urge to grab the entire pitcher from her, and instead simply held out my glass for a refill. With a major effort, I did my best to comply with her suggestion and sipped it slowly. It lasted a little longer that way, and did seem to have a greater effect.

"That's better," she said, refilling the glass again without being asked. "So. Did you have a good time last night?"

I paused in mid-sip, trying to force my brain to function.

"To be honest with you, Bunny, I don't know," I admitted at last.

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"What I remember was okay," I said, "but after a certain point in the evening, everything's a blank. I'm not even sure exactly when that point was, for that matter. Things are a bit jumbled in my mind still."

"I see."

For a moment, Bunny seemed about to say something else, but instead she pursed her lips and wandered over to the window where she stood staring out.

My head was clearing now, to a point where I felt almost alive, and I decided it was time to try to set things right.

"Um . . . Bunny? About last night . . . I'm sorry I left you standing like that, but Vie had set up the date for me, and there was no real way to back out gracefully."

"Of course, the fact that she was quite a dish had nothing to do with it," Bunny commented with a grimace.

"Well ..."

"Don't worry about it, Skeeve," she said quickly, waving off my reply. "That's not what's bothering me, anyway."

"What is?"

She turned to face me, leaning back on the windowsill.

"It's the same thing that's been bothering me ever since I arrived for this assignment," she said. "I haven't wanted to say anything, because it's really none of my business. But if what you say about last night is true ..."

She broke off, biting her lip slightly.

"Go on," I said.

"Well . . . Simply put, I think you're developing a drinking problem."

That one caught me off guard. I had been half expecting her to make some comment about how little I was helping on the kingdom's finances, or even the parade of women I seemed to be suddenly confronted with. It had never occurred to me that she might be taking affront at my personal habits.

"I . . . I don't know what to say, Bunny. I mean, sure, I drink. But everybody drinks a little from time to time."

"A little?"

She came off the windowsill in one easy motion and came to perch on the edge of my bed.

"Skeeve, every time I see you lately you've got

a goblet of wine in your hand. It's gotten so that your idea of saying 'Hello' to someone is to offer them a drink."

I was really confused now. When she first mentioned my drinking, my immediate reaction was that she was being an alarmist. The more she talked, however, the more I found myself wondering if she might have a point.

"That's just being hospitable," I said, stalling for time to think.

"Not when you're making the offer first thing in the morning," she snapped. "Definitely not when you go ahead and have a drink yourself, whether they join you or not."

"Aahz drinks," I countered, starting to feel defensive. "He says the water on most dimensions isn't to be trusted."

"This is your home dimension, Skeeve. You should be used to the water here. Besides, Aahz is a Pervect. His whole metabolism is different from yours. He can handle drinking."

"And I can't. Is that what you're trying to say?"

The misery I had been feeling since I awoke was now taking the form of anger and annoyance.

"Check me on this," she said. "From what I've heard, during your recent trip to Perv, you got into a fight didn't you? After you'd been drinking?"

"Well . . . Yes. But I've been in fights before."

"From what I hear, if Calvin, the Djinn, hadn't sobered you up, you might not have survived this one. True?"

She had a point there. The situation had been a bit hairy. I had to admit that my odds of surviving the brawl would have gone way down if I hadn't been jerked back to sobriety by Calvin's spell.

I nodded my agreement.

"Then there's last night," she continued. "You really wanted to make a good impression on someone. You dressed up in one of your spiffiest outfits, probably dropped a fair hunk of change, and then what? From the sounds of it, you got carried away with the drinking until you can't even remember what happened. You don't even know what went on, much less whether or not your date had a good time. That doesn't sound like you ... at least, the you that you'd like people to remember."

I was starting to feel really low, and not just from the aftereffects of the night before. I had always thought my drinking was a harmless diversion . . . or, more lately, a way to ease the pressures of the problems confronting me. It had never occurred to me how it might look to others. Now that I was thinking about it, the picture wasn't very pleasant.

Unfortunately, I was still a little reluctant to admit that to Bunny.

"One of the things I do remember about last night is that people kept buying me drinks," I said defensively. "It kind of caught me by surprise, and I thought it would be rude to refuse."

"Even if you have to accept drinks to be social, there's nothing that says what you drink has to be alcoholic," Bunny shot back. "There are other things to drink, you know. You could always just have a soft drink or some fruit juice."

Suddenly, I was very tired. Between my hang-over and the new thoughts that had been thrust upon me, what little energy I had when I awoke was now depleted.

"Bunny," I said, "I'm really not up to arguing with you right now. You've raised some interesting points, and I appreciate your bringing them to my attention. Give me some time to think about

them. Okay? At the moment, all I want to do is curl up and die for a while."

To her credit, Bunny didn't continue to push her case. Instead, she became extremely solicitous.

"I'm sorry, Skeeve," she said, laying a hand on my arm. "I didn't mean to jump you like that while you were still drying out. Is there anything I can get you? A cold washrag, maybe?"

Actually, that sounded like a wonderful idea.

"If you would, please. I'd really appreciate it."

She hopped off the bed and made for the washstand while I tried to find a more comfortable position.

After rearranging the pillows, I glanced over to see what was keeping her, only to find her standing stock still, staring at the wall.

"Bunny? Is there something wrong?" I called.

"I guess I was wrong," she said in a strange tone, still staring at the wall.

"How's that?"

"When I said you probably left a bad impression on your date ... I think I should have kept my mouth shut."

"What makes you say that?"

"I take it you haven't seen this."

She gestured at the wall over the washstand. I squinted slightly and focused my still-bleary eyes on the spot she was indicating.

Written on the wall, in bright red lipstick, was a note.

Skeeve,

Sorry to go, but I didn't want to wake you.
Last night was magic. You're as good as your rep.
Let me know when you want to play some more.

Cassandra

I found myself smirking as I read the note.

"Well, I guess she wasn't too upset with my
drinking. Eh, Bunny?"

There was no answer.

"Bunny?"

I tore my eyes away from the message and
glanced around the room. The tray was still there,
but Bunny wasn't. With the door standing open,
the only logical conclusion was that she had left
without saying a word.

Suddenly, I didn't feel so smug anymore.

Chapter Eleven:

"If labor and management communi-
cated better, there would be fewer
terminations."

J. HOFFA

"Hi, BUTTERCUP, How's it going, fellah?"

The war unicorn raised his head and stared at
me for a moment, then went back to eating from
his feed bin.

"Com'on, fellah. You know me," I urged.

The unicorn continued eating, ignoring me
completely.

"Don't worry, Boss/" came a squeaky voice
from behind me. "Unicorns are like that."

I didn't have to look to see who the voice belonged to, but turned to face my bodyguard anyway.

"Hi, Nunzio," I said. "What was that about unicorns?"

"They're temperamental," he explained with a shrug. "War unicorns like Buttercup are no exception. He's just giving you a rough time because you haven't been visiting him much."

One of the assorted things I had learned about Nunzio's past was that at one time he had been an animal trainer, so I tended to believe him. I was a little disappointed, however. I had been hoping that Buttercup's reaction to me would provide a confirmation as to what did or didn't happen between Cassandra and me the night before, but it seemed there were other, more rational, possible reasons for his standoffishness.

Of course, fast on the heels of my disappointment came a surge of guilt. I had been neglecting my pets badly . . . along with a lot of other things.

"That reminds me, Nunzio," I said, eager to shift the guilt, "how are you doing with Gleep?"

My bodyguard frowned and wiped a massive hand across his mouth and chin in thought.

"I dunno, Boss," he said. "I can't quite put my finger on it, but there's somethin' wrong there. He just don't feel right lately."

Strangely enough, that made sense. In fact, Nunzio had managed to put into words my own nebulous concerns about my pet ... he didn't feel right.

"Maybe we're going about this wrong," I said. "Maybe instead of trying to pin down what's wrong with him now, we should try to backtrack

a bit."

"I don't quite follow you," my bodyguard scowled.

"Think back, Nunzio," I urged. "When did you first notice that Gleep wasn't acting normal?"

"Well ... he seemed okay when Markie was around," he said thoughtfully. "In fact, if you think about it, he was the first of us to figure she wasn't on the up and up."

Something flitted across my mind along with that memory, but Nunzio kept talking and it disappeared again.

"I'd have to say it was right after that job when him and me was guarding that warehouse. You remember? With the forged comic books?"

"Was he all right on that assignment?"

"Sure. I remember talkin' with him quite a bit while we was sittin' around doin' nothin'. He was fine then."

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "You were talking with Gleep?"

"I guess it was more like talkin' to him, since he doesn't really answer back." Nunzio corrected himself easily. "You know what I mean, Boss. Anyway, I spent a lot of time talkin' to him, and he seemed okay then. In fact, he seemed to listen real close."

"What did you talk to him about?"

My bodyguard hesitated, then glanced away quickly.

"Oh . . . this and that," he said with an exaggerated shrug. "I really can't remember for sure."

"Nunzio," I said, letting a note of sternness

creep into my voice, "if you can remember, tell me. It's important."

"Well ... I was goin' on a bit about how worried I was about you, Boss," Nunzio admitted hesitantly. "You remember how you was right after we decided to incorporate? How you was gettin' so wrapped up in work that you didn't have much time for anything or anyone else? I just unloaded on Gleep a bit about how I didn't think it was healthy for you, is all. I didn't think it would hurt nothin'. That's why I did my talkin' in front of him and not anyone else on the team . . . even Guido."

There were clear images dancing in my head now. Pictures of Gleep breathing fire at Markie . . . who only escaped narrowly when Nunzio intervened . . . and of my pet throwing himself in front of me when another, larger dragon was on the brink of making me extinct.

"Think carefully, Nunzio/" I said slowly. "When you were talking to Gleep, did you say anything . . . anything at all ... about the possibility of Tananda or anyone else on the team being a threat to me?"

My bodyguard frowned thoughtfully for a moment, then shook his head.

"I don't remember sayin' anything like that, Boss. Why do you ask?"

Now it was my turn to hesitate. The idea that was taking shape in my mind seemed almost too silly to voice. Still, since I was turning to Nunzio for advice and expertise, it was only fair to share my suspicions with him.

"It may be crazy," I said, "but I'm starting to get the feeling that Gleep is a lot more intelligent than we ever suspected. I mean, he's always been kind of protective of me. If he were intelligent and got it into his head that someone on the team was a threat to me, there's a chance he might try to

kill them . . . just like he went after Markie."

My bodyguard stared at me, then gave a short bark of laughter.

"You're right, Boss," he said. "That does sound crazy. I mean, Gleep's a dragon! If he was to try to whack someone on the team, we'd know it pretty fast, know what I mean?"

"Like when he tried to burn Tananda?" I pressed. "Think about it, Nunzio. If he were intelligent, wouldn't part of his conclusions be that I would be upset if anything happened to anyone on the team? In that case, wouldn't he do his best to make any mishap look like an accident rather than a direct attack? I'll admit it's a wild theory, but it fits the facts."

"Except for one thing," my bodyguard countered. "For him to be doin' what you say, puttin' pieces together and comin' up with his own conclusions, much less organizing a plan and executing it, would make him more than intelligent. It would make him smarter than us! Remember, for a dragon he's still real young. It would be like sayin' a baby that could hardly walk was planning a bank heist."

"I suppose you're right," I sighed. "There must be another explanation."

"You know, Boss," Nunzio smiled, "folks say that, after a while, pets start takin' on the traits of their masters and vice verses. Takin' that into consideration, I think it's only logical that Gleep here acts a bit strange from time to time."

For some reason, that brought to mind my earlier conversation with Bunny.

"Tell me, Nunzio, do you think I've been drinking too much lately?"

"That's not for me to say, Boss," he said easily. "I'm just a bodyguard, not a babysitter."

"I was asking what you thought."

"And I'm sayin' I'm not supposed to think . . . at least, not about whoever it is I'm supposed to be guardin'," he insisted. "Bodyguards that comment on their clients's personal habits don't last long. What I'm supposed to be doin' is guardin' you while you do whatever it is you do ... not tellin' you what to do."

I started to snap at him, but instead took a long breath and brought my irritation under control.

"Look, Nunzio," I said carefully, "I know that's the normal bodyguard/client relationship. I like to think, though, that we've progressed a little past that point. I like to think of you as a friend as well as a bodyguard. What's more, you're a stockholder in M.Y.T.H. Inc., so you have a vested interest in my performance as president. Now, this morning Bunny told me that she thought I was developing a drinking problem. I don't think that I am, but I'm aware that I may be too close to the situation to judge properly. That's why I'm asking your opinion ... as a friend and fellow worker whose opinions and judgment I've grown to value and respect."

Nunzio rubbed his chin thoughtfully, obviously wrestling with a mental dilemma.

"I dunno, Boss," he said. "It's kinda against the rules . . . but then again, you're right. You do treat Guido and me different from any other boss we've had. Nobody else ever asked our opinion on nothin'."

"Well I'm asking, Nunzio. Please?"

"Part of the problem is that it's not that easy a question to answer," he shrugged. "Sure, you drink. But do you drink too much? That's not as clear-cut. You've been drinking more since you brought Aahz back from Perv, but 'more' doesn't necessarily mean the same as 'too much.' Know

what I mean?"

"As a matter of fact, no I don't."

He sighed heavily. When he spoke again, I couldn't help but notice that his tone had the patient, careful note that one takes, or should, when one is explaining something to a child.

"Look, Boss," he said. "Drinkin' affects the judgment. Everybody knows that. The more you drink, the more it affects your judgment. Sayin' how much is too much isn't easy, though, seein' as how it varies from individual to individual depending on such factors as weight, temperament, etc."

"But if it affects your judgment," I said, "how can you tell whether or not your judgment is right when you say it's not too much?"

"That's the rub," Nunzio shrugged. "Some say if you have the sense to question it, you aren't drinkin' too much. Others say that if you have to ask, then you ARE drinkin' too much. One thing I do know is that a lot of people who drink too much are sure they don't have a problem."

"So how do you tell?"

"Well," he said, rubbing his chin, "probably the best way is to ask a friend whose judgment you trust."

I closed my eyes and fought for patience.

"That's what I THOUGHT I was doing, Nunzio. I'm asking YOU. Do YOU think I'm drinking too much?"

"That isn't important," he said, blandly. "It isn't a question of if I think you're drinkin' too much, it's if YOU think you're drinkin' too much."

"NUNZIO," I said through gritted teeth. "I'm asking what YOUR opinion is."

He averted his eyes and shifted uncomfortably.

"Sorry, Boss. Like I say, this isn't easy for me."

He rubbed his chin again.

"One thing I WILL say is that I think you're drinkin' at the wrong time . . . and I don't mean too early or late in the day. I mean at the wrong time in your life."

"I don't understand," I frowned.

"Ya see, Boss, drinkin' usually acts like a magnifyin' glass. It exaggerates everything. Some people drink tryin' to change their mood, but they're kiddin' themselves. It don't work that way. It don't change what is, it emphasizes it. If you drink when you're happy, then you get REAL happy. Know what I mean? But if you drink when you're down, then you get REAL down, REAL fast."

He gave another heavy sigh.

"Now, you've been goin' through some rough times lately, and have some tough decisions to make. To me, that's not a real good time to be drinkin'. What you need right now is a clear head. What you DON'T need is somethin' to exaggerate any doubts you've got about yourself or your judgment."

It was my turn to rub my chin thoughtfully.

"That makes sense/" I said. "Thanks, Nunzio."

"Hey. I just had an idea," he said brightly, apparently buoyed by his success. "There's a real easy way to tell if you're drinkin' too much. Just lay off the sauce for a while. Then see if there's any big change in your thinkin' or judgment. If there is, then you know it's time to back off. Of course, if you find out that quittin' is harder than you thought, then you'll have another signal that

you've got trouble."

A part of me bristled at the thought of having to ease up on my drinking, but I fought it down . . . along with my flash of fear at what that bristling might imply.

"Okay, Nunzio," I said. "I'll do it. Thanks again. I appreciate how hard that was for you."

"Don't mention it, Boss. Glad I could help you."

He reached out and laid a hand on my shoulder in a rare display of comradeship.

"Personally, I don't think you have that much to worry about. If you've got a drinkin' problem, it's marginal at best. I mean, it's not like you've been blackin' out or anything."

Chapter Twelve:

"Let's see the instant replay on that!"

H. COSSELL

"HEY/ PARTNER! How's it going?"

I had been heading back toward my room with the vague thought of getting a little more sleep. The hail from Aahz, however, reduced my odds of success noticeably.

"Hi Aahz/" I said, turning toward him. That put the sun in my eyes, so I stepped back slightly to find some shade.

He drew up close to me and peered at me carefully. I, in turn, tried my best to look relaxed and puzzled.

Finally he nodded to himself.

"You look okay," he declared.

"Shouldn't I?" I said, innocently.

"I heard you had quite a time last night," he explained, shooting me another sidelong glance. "Thought I'd better look you up and survey the damage. I'll admit you seem to have weathered the storm well enough. Resilience of youth, I guess."⁷

"Maybe the reports were exaggerated," I suggested hopefully.

"Not bloody likely," he snorted. "Chumley said he saw you and your date when you rolled back into the castle and, as you know, if anything, he's prone to understatement."

I nodded mutely. When he wasn't in his working persona of Big Crunch, the troll was remarkably accurate in his reports and observations.

"Whatever," Aahz waved. "Like I say, you seem to have survived pretty well."

I managed a weak smile.

"How about a Hair of the dog? A quick drink to perk you up," he suggested. "Com'on partner. My treat. We'll duck into town for a change of pace."

A moment's reflection was all it took to realize that a stroll through the town around the castle sounded good. Real good if Bunny was on the war-path.

"Okay, Aahz. You're on," I said. "But as to the hair of the dog . . . I'll stick to regular stuff if you don't mind. I had enough of strange drinks last night."

He gave off one of those choking noises he used to make during my days as an apprentice when I said something really dumb, but when I glanced at him, there wasn't a trace of a smile.

"Aren't you forgetting something, partner?" he

said without looking at me.

"What?"

"If we're heading out among the common folk, a disguise spell would be nice."

He was right of course. Even though I was used to seeing him as he actually was, a Pervect with green scales and yellow eyes, the average citizen of Possiltum still tended to react to his appearance with horror and fear . . . which is to say much the same way I reacted when I first met him.

"Sorry, Aahz."

Closing my eyes, I quickly made the necessary adjustments. Manipulating his image with my mind, I made him look like an ordinary castle guard. If anything, I made him a bit more scrawny and undernourished than average. I mean, the idea was not to intimidate people, wasn't it?

Aahz didn't even bother checking his reflection in any of the windows we passed. He seemed much more interested in prying details of my date out of me.

"Where did you find to go on this backwater dimension, anyway?" he said.

"Oh, we didn't stick around here," I said loftily.

"We ducked over to Limbo. Cassandra knew a couple clubs there and we ..."

I suddenly noticed Aahz was no longer walking beside me. Looking back, I realized he had stopped in his tracks. His mouth was working, but no sound came out.

"Limbo?" he managed at last. "You went bar crawling on Limbo? Excuse me, partner, but I was under the impression we were persona non grata in that neck of the woods."

"I was a little worried at first," I admitted casually, which was only a little lie. As you'll recall, I had been a LOT worried. "Cassandra said she could blip us back out fast if there was any trouble, though, so I figured what the heck. As it turned out, nobody seems to be holding a grudge there. In fact, it seems I'm ... I mean, we're . . . minor celebrities over there. That's partly why the evening ran as long as it did. Half the people we ran into wanted to buy me a drink for putting one over on the local council."

"Is that a fact?" Aahz said darkly, starting to move again. "Just who is this Cassandra person, anyway? She doesn't exactly sound like a local."

"She's not," I confirmed. "Vie set me up with her. She's a friend of his."

"Nice to know he didn't set you up with an enemy," my partner quipped. Still in all, it seems to me . . ."

He broke off and did another double take.

"Wait a minute. Vie? The same vampire Vie that you hang around with over at the Bazaar? You mean this Cassandra babe is . . ."

"A vampire," I said with a careless shrug. The truth was, I was starting to get a bit of a kick out of shocking Aahz. "Oh, she's okay. No one you'd want to take home to mother, but . . . what's wrong?"

He was craning his head around to peer at my neck from different angles.

"Just checking for bite marks," he said.

"Com'on, Aahz. There wasn't any danger of that. She was drinking her blood out of a glass last night."

"Those weren't the kind of bite marks I was checking for," he grinned. "Vamps have a rep of

being pretty wild women."

"Um . . . speaking of destinations," I said eager to change the subject, "where are we going?"

"No place special," my partner said. "These local bars and inns are pretty much all the same. This one should do us fine."

With that, he veered through the door of the place we were passing, leaving me to follow along behind.

The inn was refreshingly ordinary compared to what I could remember of the surreal clubs I had been to on Limbo. Ordinary, and more than a little dull.

Dark wooden tables and chairs were the main feature of the decor, with occasional candles scattered here and there to supplement the light which streamed in through windows and the open door.

"What'll you have, Skeeve?" Aahz called, heading for the bar.

I started to say 'Wine/ but changed my mind. Whether or not Bunny was right about my drinking getting out of hand, it wouldn't hurt to ease up a bit. Besides, Nunzio's comment about blacking out had me more than a little uneasy.

"Just some fruit juice for me," I waved.

Aahz paused, cocking his head at me.

"Are you sure you're all right, partner?" he said.

"Sure. Why do you ask?"

"A while back you were talking about looking forward to having your usual, and now you're switching drinks."

"All right. Have it your way," I grimaced. "A

goblet of wine, then. No need to make a big thing of it."

I leaned back and looked around the room, though it was mostly to break eye contact with Aahz before he realized I was upset. It was funny, but I found myself somehow reluctant to tell my partner my worries about my drinking. Still, it was difficult to change my drinking patterns around him without raising questions that would require an explanation. I figured that, for the moment, the easiest thing to do would be to go on as before ... at least, while I was around Aahz. Later, more privately, I'd start tapering off.

One thing I noticed about the inn was that there seemed to be a lot of young people hanging around. Well, to be honest, they were about my age, but I spend so much time with the team, I tend to think of myself as older.

One table of girls in particular caught my attention, mostly because they seemed to be talking about me. At least, that was my guess, as they kept glancing my way, then putting their heads together and giggling, then glancing over again.

Not long ago, this would have made me nervous. My recent excursion to Limbo, however, had gotten me a bit more used to notoriety.

The next time they glanced over, I looked directly back at them, then gave a brief, polite nod of acknowledgment with my head. This, of course, caused another hurried huddle and burst of giggles.

Ah, fame.

"What are you smiling at?" Aahz said as he set my wine in front of me and slid onto the bench across the table, cradling his own oversized drink.

"Oh, nothing," I smiled. "I was just watching that table of girls over there."

I indicated the direction with a tilt of my head, and he leaned sideways to scope them out himself.

"Kind of young for you, aren't they, partner?"

"They're not that much younger than I am," I protested, taking a long swallow of wine.

"Don't you have enough problems already?" Aahz said, settling back. "Last time I checked, you were suffering from an overabundance of women . . . not a shortage."

"Oh, relax," I laughed. "I wasn't figuring to do anything with them. Just having a little fun, is all. They were looking at me, so I let them see me looking back."

"Well don't look now," he grinned back, "but at least one of them is doing more than looking."

Needless to say, I looked.

One of the girls had stood up and was approaching our table. When she saw me looking in her direction, she seemed to gather her courage and closed the distance in a rush.

"Hi," she said brightly. "You're him, aren't you? The wizard from the castle?"

"That's right," I nodded. "How did you know that?"

"I thought I heard him call you Skeeve when he

"Probably because that's my name," I smiled.

Okay, so it wasn't the wittiest thing I'd said. In fact, it was pretty lame compared to the usual banter that goes on within the team. You'd never tell it, though, from her reaction.

She covered her mouth with one hand and shrieked with laughter loud enough to draw the

attention of everyone in the room ... in the town, for that matter.

"Oh! That's priceless," she declared.

"That's where you're wrong," I corrected. "Actually, my rates are rather high."

This, of course, set off another gale of laughter. I caught Aahz's gaze and winked. He rolled his eyes in disgust and turned his attention to his drink. That seemed like a good idea, but when I went to sip my wine, the goblet was empty. I started to ask Aahz to get me another, but changed my mind. That first one had disappeared with disturbing speed.

"So, what can I do for you?" I said, as much to take my mind off the wine as to get an answer.

"Well, everyone in town has been talking about you," the girl chirped, "and my girlfriend . . . the cute one over there . . . has a real thing for you since she saw you in court when you first came back. Anyway, it would just make her whole incarnation if you'd come over to our table so she could meet you personally."

"I don't know," I said. "There are things to be said for meeting people im-personally as well."

"Huh?" she said, giving me a blank look, and I realized I had pushed beyond her sense of humor.

"Just tell her I'll be over in a few moments, as soon as I finish my conversation here."

"Great! She'll die!"

I watched her scamper off to tell her friends, then turned back to Aahz.

"I may throw up," he announced.

"You're just jealous," I grinned. "Keep an eye on my drink for me, will you?"

With that I rose and headed for the girls' table.
At least, I started to.

There was a gangly youth blocking my way. I started to move around him, but he stepped sideways, deliberately putting himself in my path again.

I stopped and looked at him.

I'd been in fights before. Sometimes against some pretty tough customers when I wasn't sure I would survive it. This joker, however, was different.

He couldn't have been more than my age. Probably a few years younger. What's more, he didn't hold himself with the confident poise of a brawler or even a soldier. In fact, if anything, he looked scared.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said leave them alone!" he repeated, his voice gaining a bit of strength.

I let the ghost of a smile play across my face.

"Young man," I said gently, "do you know who I am?"

"Oh, I know all right," he nodded. "You're Skeeve. The big bad wizard from the castle. What's more, I know you can make me sorry I ever breathed, much less got in your way. You can turn me into a toad or make my hair burst into flame, or even whistle up some nasty creature to tear me apart if you don't want to get your own hands dirty. You can squash me or anyone else you want just to get your way . . . but it doesn't make it right. Maybe it's about time someone stood up to you even if it means getting killed just for trying."

I couldn't help but notice there were some nods

and mutterings of support for the youth at the other tables in the inn, and no few dark looks cast in my direction.

"All right," I said levelly. "You're standing up to me. Now make your point."

"The point is you can't just waltz in here and put moves on our women. What's more, if you try, you'll be sorry."

To emphasize his words, he reached out and gave me a shove that knocked me back. I had to take a step to recover my balance.

It was suddenly very quiet in the inn. The moment seemed to hang in the air as everyone tensed and waited to see what would happen next.

Blood was pounding in my ears.

I heard the bench behind me slide as Aahz started to get up, and I signaled behind me with my hand for him to stay out of it.

"I have no intention of putting any 'moves' on these women either now or in the future," I said carefully. "The young lady there came to my table and said that her friend wanted to meet me. I was about to comply. Period. That's it. It was an effort on my part to be polite. If, as it seems, it is somehow offensive to you or anyone else here, I'll forego the pleasure."

I looked past him to where the girls were watching.

"Ladies," I nodded. "Another day, perhaps."

With that, I turned on my heel and marched out of the place . . . angry and embarrassed, but confident that I had correctly handled a dubious situation.

It didn't help, however, that as I passed through

the door, a shout from the youth came wafting after me.

"And don't come back!"

Chapter Thirteen:

"The secret of popularity Is confidence. "

W. ALLEN

"HOLD UP A minute, partner. We're still together,

I slowed my pace a bit, and Aahz caught up with me, falling in step beside me.

"If you don't mind the observation," he said, "that little scene back there seems to have gotten you a little upset."

"Shouldn't it have?" I snapped.

"Don't let it bother you," my partner said easily. "Locals always get upset with outsiders . . . especially when their women start flirting with them. It's a problem as old as the hills. Just ask any soldier or carny person. Don't take it personally."

He gave me a playful punch on the arm, but, for a change, I wasn't reassured.

"But they weren't reacting to an outsider, Aahz. They were reacting to me. I live here, too. What's more, they knew it. They knew who I was and that I work at the castle, but they still treated me like an outsider."

"As far as they're concerned, you are."

That one stopped me.

"How's that again?"

"Take a look at the facts, Skeeve," Aahz said, more serious now. "Even ignoring your travels through the dimensions, you aren't the same as them. Like you say, you work at the castle . . . and not as a chambermaid or a kitchen worker, either. You're one of the main advisors to the Queen, not to mention a possible consort . . . though I doubt they know that. Things you do and say on a daily basis affect everyone in this kingdom. That alone puts you on a different social . . . not to mention economic . . . level from the folks here in town."

That made me pause and think.

My new life and lifestyle had sort of grown up around me over the years. Socializing and/or clashing with kings or mayors had become pretty commonplace, though I had never stopped to consider it. Rather, I had always assumed that it sort of went with the territory when one was a magician. Then again, how many magicians had I met while I was growing up?

Aahz was right. My work with the team had cocooned me away from the rest of society to a point where I took things for granted. The extraordinary had become so ordinary to me, that I had ceased to be aware of, or even consider, how it must seem to the ordinary citizens.

I shook my head abruptly.

"No. There's more to it than that, Aahz. Those people back there didn't like me."

"Uh-huh," my partner nodded. "So what's your point?"

"What's my point*" I echoed a little shrilly. "Maybe you didn't understand me. I said ..."

". . . They didn't like you," Aahz finished. "So what?"

"What do you mean 'So what?'" I said. "Don't

you want to be liked?"

My old mentor frowned slightly, then gave a shrug.

"I suppose it would be nice," he said. "But I really don't give it much thought."

"But ..."

"And neither should you."

There was a levelness and firmness, almost a warning, in his tone that brought me up short.

Instead of protesting, I struggled for several moments trying to understand what he was trying to tell me, then surrendered with a shake of my head.

"I don't get it, Aahz. Doesn't everyone want to be liked?"

"Maybe at some level," my partner said. "But most people realize it's a wistful hope at best . . . like it would be nice if it only rained when we want it to. The reality is that it rains when it bloody well feels like it, and that some people aren't going to like you no matter what you do. The up side is that there are also people who will like you no matter what you do."

"I can't accept that," I said, shaking my head.

"It's too fatalistic. If you're right, then there's no point in trying at all."

"Of course there is," Aahz snapped. "Just don't take everything to extremes. Okay? Reality always lies somewhere between the extremes. Not trying at all to have people like you is as silly as trying too much."

"Is that what I've been doing? Trying too much?"

My partner waggled his hand in front of him in

a so-so gesture.

"Sometimes you drift dangerously close," he said. "I think that sometimes you let your desire to be liked get out of proportion. When that happens, it starts to warp your perception of yourself and the world."

"Could you give me an example or two?"

"Sure," he said easily. "Let's start with an easy one . . . like taxes. Part of your job right now is to be a consultant on the taxes being levied on the citizens. Right?"

I nodded.

"... Except that people don't like to pay taxes. If they had their druthers, they would get the protection and services of the kingdom without paying a cent. Of course, they also realize that something for nothing is an unrealistic situation, so they accept the necessary evil of taxes. They accept it, but they don't like it. Because they don't like it, there is going to be an ongoing level of resentment and grumbling. Whatever the tax assessment is, it's too high, and whatever the level of services is, it's too low. That resentment is going to be forced on anyone involved with setting the taxes, which includes you and everyone else who works at the castle."

He shook his head.

"What I'm saying is that if you're in a position of decision making and power, such as you are now, you can forget about being liked by the people who are affected by your decisions. The best you can hope for is respect."

"Wait a minute," I said, "are you saying that people can respect you without liking you?"

"Sure," Aahz said easily. "That one I can give you dozens of examples on. Since we're on the subject of taxes and finances, consider Grimble."

You respect his skill and dedication even though you don't particularly like him as a person. Right?"

I had to admit that he was right there.

"Better still," he continued, "think back to when you and I first paired up. I was pretty rough on you with the magik lessons, and made you practice even when you didn't feel up to it. You didn't like me for drilling you constantly, but you did respect me."

"Um . . . Well, I didn't know you as well then as I do now/" I said uneasily. "At the time, though, I guess I had to believe that you knew what you were doing, and that what you were putting me through was necessary for the learning process . . . whether I liked it or not."

"Precisely," Aahz nodded. "Don't feel bad. It's the normal reaction to an authority figure, whether it's a parent, a teacher, a boss, or a government representative. One doesn't always like what they make us do, but even in the midst of disliking being forced to do something, one can still admire and respect the fairness and expertise with which they do their job."

He shrugged easily.

"I guess that's it in a nutshell," he said. "You're a likeable young man, Skeeve, but sometimes I think you should worry less about being liked and more about being respected. If nothing else, it's a more realizable goal."

I thought about what he had said for a few minutes.

"You're right, Aahz," I said finally. "Being respected is more important than being liked."

With that, I veered off to head in a different direction than the one we had been walking.

"Where are you going, partner?"

"I'm going to see Bunny," I called back. "There's a conversation we started this morning that I think we should finish."

I had a fair amount of time to think about what I wanted to say before I reached Bunny's room. It didn't help. When I got there, I was still as much at a loss of how to express my thoughts as when I started out.

I paused for a few moments, then rapped lightly on her door before I lost my nerve. Truth to tell, I was half hoping she was out or asleep, which would let me off my self-imposed hook.

"Who is it?"

So much for half-hopes. Maybe next time I should try a whole one.

"It's me, Bunny. Skeeve."

"What do you want?"

"I'd like to talk to you, if it's all right."

There was a silence that lasted just long enough for me to both get my hopes up, and to start seriously worrying.

"Just a minute."

As I waited, I could hear occasional sounds of metallic clanking, as if someone was moving stacks of iron plates . . . heavy iron plates, from the sound of it. This puzzled me, as I could think of no reason why Bunny would have metal plates in her room.

Then it occurred to me that she might have someone else in there with her.

"I can come back later, if this is a bad time," I called, shutting my mind on trying speculate who might be in my assistant's quarters at this hour . . . and why.

In response, the door flew open, and Bunny stood framed in the doorway.

"Come on in, Skeeve," she said, rather breathlessly. "This is a surprise."

It certainly was.

Silhouetted against the light, at first I thought she was stark naked. Then she turned, and I realized she was actually wearing a brightly colored outfit that was skin tight and hugged her body like it was painted on.

"Umm . . ." I said smoothly, unable to tear my eyes from her form.

"Sorry I'm such a mess," she said, grabbing up a towel and beginning to dab the sweat from her face and throat. "I was just working out."

Now, as you know, I've gotten pretty intense while working out my own problems in the past, but I've never felt the need to wear a special outfit while doing it. Then again, I've never worked up the kind of sweat doing it that Bunny seemed to. Whatever her problems were, they must be dillies.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I said, genuinely concerned.

"No thanks," she smiled. "I was pretty much done when you knocked. Maybe sometime you can come in and spot for me, though."

Now she had lost me completely. Spot what? And how would spotting anything help her work things out?

"So what's up?" she said, perching on the edge of her bed.

Whatever her problems were, they didn't seem to have her particularly upset. I decided to hold

off on trying to sort them out, at least, until I had settled what I came here to do.

"Basically, Bunny," I said, "I wanted to apologize to you."

"For what?" she seemed genuinely puzzled.

"For how I acted this morning ... or whenever it was that I woke up."

"Oh that," she said, looking away. "There's no need to apologize. Everyone gets a bit out of sorts when they have a hangover."

It was nice of her to say that, but I wasn't about to let it slide.

"No, there's more to it than that, Bunny. You tried to raise some valid concerns about my health and well being, and I gave you a rough time because I wasn't ready to hear what you were saying. I guess I didn't want to hear it. With everything else I've been trying to sort out, I really didn't want one more problem to complicate things."

I paused and shook my head.

"I just wanted you to know that since then, I've been thinking about what you said. I've decided that you may be right about my having a drinking problem. I'm not sure, mind you, but there's enough doubt in my mind that I'm going to try to ease up for a while."

I sat down on the bed beside her, and put my arm around her shoulders.

"Whether you were right or not, though, I wanted to thank you for your caring and concern. That's what I should have said this morning instead of getting defensive."

Suddenly, she was hugging me, her face buried in my chest.

"Oh Skeeve," came her muffled voice. "I just get so worried about you. I know you're in the middle of making some rough decisions, and I try not to add to your problems. I just wish there was something more I could do to ease things for you, but it seems that when I try to help, I just make things worse for you."

Gradually, I became aware that she was crying softly, though I wasn't sure why. Also, I became very aware that there weren't many clothes between me and the body she was pressing against me . . . and that we were sitting on a bed . . . and . . .

I shut the door on that portion of my thoughts, vaguely ashamed of myself. Bunny was obviously upset and concerned for me. It was ignoble of me to taint the moment by entertaining thoughts

of ...

I shut the mental door again.

"Come on, Bunny," I said softly, stroking her hair with one hand. "You are a big help to me. You know and I know that I'd be lost trying to straighten out the kingdom's finances without your knowledge. You've take that whole burden on yourself."

I took her by the shoulders and held her away from me so that I could look into her eyes.

"As to doing more," I continued, "you're already trying harder which is probably wise. Like this morning when you talked to me about my drinking problem. I appreciate it ... I really do. Some things I just have to work out for myself, though. That's the way it should be. Nobody else can or should make my decisions for me, since I'm the one who is going to have to live with the repercussions. All that you can do ... all that anyone can do ... to help me right now is to be patient with me. Okay?"

She nodded and wiped her eyes.

"Sorry about the waterworks," she said wryly.
"Gods. The first time you come to my room, and I look like a mess."

"Now that is silly," I smiled, touching my finger to the end of her nose in mock severity.
"You look terrific . . . like you always do. If you don't know that, you should."

After that, it was only natural to kiss her . . . a short, friendly kiss. At least, that's the way it started out. Then it started to last longer, and longer, and her body seemed to melt against mine.

"Well, I better say good night now," I said, pulling away from her, "Big day tomorrow."

That was a blatant lie, as tomorrow promised to be no more or less busy for me than any other day. I realized, however, that if I didn't break things up, and our physical involvement grew, I'd have trouble convincing myself that the reason I had come to Bunny's room was to apologize and thank her for her concern.

For a mad moment, I thought she was going to protest my leaving. If she had, I'm not sure the strength of my resolve would have been sufficient to get me out the door.

She started to say something, then stopped and drew a deep breath instead.

"Good night, Skeeve," she said finally. "Come and see me again sometime . . . soon."

To say the least, there were many distracting thoughts dancing in my head as I made my way back to my room.

Bunny had come on to me pretty strong when we first met, and I had backed her off. Having made such a big thing out of keeping our relationship on a professional basis, could I now reverse

my stance without making a complete fool of myself? Would she let me? She seemed to still be interested, but then again I might simply be kidding myself.

Then, too, there was the question of whether or not I had any right to be shopping around for a new relationship while I was still making up my mind on Queen Hemlock's proposal. The night with Cassandra had been an adventure and a learning experience, but even I couldn't kid myself that getting involved with Bunny would be a brief fling.

What was it exactly that I wanted . . . and from who?

Still lost in thought, I opened the door to my room . . . and found a demon waiting for me.

Chapter Fourteen:

"Take a walk on the wild side."

G. GEBEL-WILLIAMS

Now, THOSE OF you who have been following my adventures are aware that there is nothing new about my finding a demon in my room. It's not all that unusual these days, though I still have trouble from time to time getting used to it.

Of course, some demon visitors are more welcome than others.

This one was a cute little number. She had close-cropped brown hair which framed a round face with big, wide-set almond-shaped eyes, a pert little nose, and small, heart-shaped lips. She also had a generous number of curves in all the right places, which the harem outfit she was wearing showed off with distracting clarity. The only trouble was, she was tiny. Not "small," mind you . . . tiny.

The figure in front of me, delectable as it might be, was only about four inches high and floated in

midair.

"Hi!" the diminutive lady chirped in a musical voice. "You must be Skeeve. I'm Daphnie."

There was a time when I would have found the effect unsettling. Courtesy of my recent travels, however, I had seen it before.

"Don't tell me, let me guess," I said in my most off-worldly, casual manner. "You're a Djin. Right? From Djinger?"

"Well ... a Djeanie, actually. But if we're going to be friends, no wisecracks about the Djeanie with the light brown hair. Okay?"

I stared at her for a moment, waiting for her to provide the rest of what was obviously supposed to be a joke. Instead of continuing, though, she simply looked back at me expectantly.

"Okay," I agreed finally. "That shouldn't be hard."

She peered at me for a moment longer, then shook her head.

"You must be the only one in the known dimensions who doesn't know that song/' she said. "Are you sure you're Skeeve? The Great Skeeve?"

"Well . . . yes. Do we know each other?"

Realizing how stupid the question was, I hastened to modify it before she could answer.

"No. I'm sure I would have remembered if we had met before."

For some reason, my clumsy recovery seemed to please her.

"That's sweet," she said, floating forward to run a soft hand along my cheek, light as a butter-

fly's touch. "No. I haven't had the pleasure. We have a mutual acquaintance, though. Do you remember a Djin named Calvin?"

"Calvin? Sure. He gave me a hand a while back when I was on Perv."

"On Perv, eh?" she said, looking lost in thought for a moment, but then she brightened. "Well he mentioned you and said that if I was ever out this way, I should drop in and say 'Hi' for him."

"Really? That's nice of him . . . I mean, you."

I was pleasantly surprised by Calvin's thoughtfulness. I don't get many social visitors from off world, mostly just those who are looking for help on one thing or another. It also occurred to me that I had never thought of dropping in to pay social calls to any of the various people I had met on my many adventures, and made a mental note to correct that situation.

"So, how's Calvin doing? Is he fitting back into life on Djinger okay after being gone so long?"

"Oh. He's okay," the Djeanie said shrugging her shoulders . . . which had an interesting effect on a shapely body in a harem outfit. "You know how it is. It always takes a while to get back in stride after a sabbatical."

"Say ... if we're going to be talking for a while, would you mind enlarging to my size? It would make conversation easier."

To be honest with you, after having watched what happened when she shrugged her shoulders, I was interested in seeing her body on a larger scale. If nothing else, it would get rid of the uncomfortable feeling that I was getting physically interested in a talking doll.

"No problem," she said, and waved her arms.

The air rippled and shimmered, and she was

standing in front of me at my size. Well, actually, a little less than a head shorter than me, which placed me in the tantalizing position of looking down at her.

"Say, is this a monastery or something?"

"What? Oh. No, this is the Royal Palace of Possiltum." I said. "Why? Do I look like a monk?"

That was, of course, supposed to be a trick question. I was really rather proud of my wardrobe these days, and any monk who dressed the way I did was way out of line with his vows of poverty.

"Not really," she admitted. "But you seem to be showing an awful lot of interest in my cleavage for someone who's supposed to be as well traveled as the Great Skeeve, Don't they have women on this dimension?"

I guess I had been staring a bit, but hadn't expected her to notice ... or, if she did, to comment on it. However if there's one thing my years with Aahz have taught me, it's how to cover my shortcomings with words.

"Yes, we have women here," I said with an easy smile. "Frankly, though, I think your cleavage would be stared at no matter what dimension you visited."

She dimpled and preened visibly.

"As starable as it is, however," I continued casually, "my actual interest was professional. Aside from Calvin, you're the only native of Djinger that I've met, and I was wondering if that stunt you do changing size is a disguise spell, or if it's true shape shifting."

Not bad for a quick out from an embarrassing situation, if I do say so myself. Anyway, Daphnie seemed to accept it.

"Oh that," she said, shrugging her shoulders again. This time, however, I managed to maintain eye contact. No sense pushing my luck. "It's the real thing . . . shape shifting, that is. It's one of the first things a Djin . . . or, especially a Djeanie . . . has to learn. When your whole dimension is in the wish biz, you've got to be able to cater to all kinds of fantasies."

My mind went a little out of focus for a moment as it darted across several unprintable fantasies I could think of involving Daphnie, but she was still going.

"It's not just size either . . . well, height, I mean. We can shift to any proportions necessary for the local pinup standards. Check this out."

With that, she proceeded to treat me to one of the most impressive arrays of female bodies I've ever seen . . . except they were all her! In quick succession, she became willowy, then buxom, then long-legged, while at the same time changing her hair length and color, as well as changing her complexion from delicately pale to a darker hue than her normal cinnamon hue. I decided then and there that where ever this pinup dimension was, I should make a point of dropping in for a visit . . . soon.

My other reaction was far less predictable. Maybe it was because I had been thinking so much about women and marriage lately, but, while watching her demonstrating her shape shifting skills, it popped into my head that she would be an interesting wife. I mean, think of it: a woman who could assume any size, shape, or personality at will! It would certainly ease the fears of being bored living with one woman for the rest of your life.

"Very impressive," I said, forcing my previous train of thought to a halt. "Tell me, have you ever considered a career in modeling?"

Daphnie's eyes narrowed for a moment, then

her face relaxed again.

"I'll assume that was meant as a compliment. Right?" she said.

That one had me really confused.

"Of course," I said. "Why? Isn't it?"

"I'm so attractive, I could make a living at it. Is that what you were thinking?"

"Well . . . Yes. Even though when you put it that way, it does sound a little dubious."

"You don't know the half of it," the Djeanie said, rolling her eyes.

"Look, Skeeve. I tried that game once . . . and it. It's what goes with it that's a pain."

"I don't understand," I admitted.

"First of all, even though the job may look glamorous from the outside, it isn't. It's long hours in uncomfortable conditions, you know? I mean, it's fun for most people to go to the beach, but try sitting in the same spot for six hours while waves break over you so the jerk photographer can get 'just the right look and -lighting' . . . and

I nodded sympathetically, all the while wondering what a photographer was and why she would hold still while he shot at her.

"Then again folks think there's a lot of status attached to being a model." she continued. "There's about as much status as being a side of beef on a butcher's block. You may be the center of attention, but to the people working with you, you're just so many pounds of meat to be positioned and marketed. Now mind you, I like having my body touched as much as the next woman, but I like to think that while it's going on, whoever's doing it is thinking of me. The way it is, it's like you're a mannequin or a puppet being maneuvered for

effect."

"Uh-huh," I said, thinking that if I ever got a chance to touch her body, I'd certainly be keeping my mind on her in the process.

"Of course, there's always the job of keeping the equipment in shape. Most women feel they'd look better if they lost a couple pounds or firmed up the muscle tone . . . and they even work at it occasionally. Well, let me tell you, when your livelihood depends on your looks, keeping the bod in shape is more than a leisure-time hobby. It's a full-time project. Your whole life is centered around diets and exercise, not to mention maintaining your complexion and hair. Sure, I have an advantage because I can shape shift, but believe me, the less you have to do magikally, the less strain you put on the system and the longer the machine lasts.

"Which brings up another point: Whatever you do to maintain your looks, it's a losing fight with time. Djeanies may have a longer life span than some of the women from other dimensions, but eventually age catches up with everyone. Strategic features that once used to catch the eye start to droop and sag, the skin on the neck and hands starts to look more and more like wet tissue paper, and faster than you can say 'old crone/ you're back out the door and they've replaced you from the bottomless pool of young hopefuls. Terrific, huh?"

That one made me think a bit. One thing about being a magician was that age wasn't a prime factor. Heck, for a while when I was starting out, I used my disguise spell to make myself look older because no one would believe that a young magician would be any good. The idea of losing one's job simply because one had grown older was a terrifying concept. I found myself being glad that most jobs didn't have the age restrictions that modeling seemed to.

"Then, just to top things off," the Djeanie said,

"there's the minor detail of how people treat you. Most men are intimidated by your looks and won't come near you on a bet. They'll stare and drool, and maybe fantasize a little, but they won't try to date you. Unless they have stellar looks themselves or an iron-clad ego, they're afraid of creating a 'Beauty and the Beast' comparison. The ones who do come on to you usually have a specific scenario in mind . . . and that doesn't involve you either talking or thinking at all. They want an ornament, and if there's actually a person inside that glamorous package, they're not only surprised, they're a little annoyed."

She sighed and shook her head.

"Sorry to ramble like that, but it's a pet peeve of mine. When you stop to think about it, it's a little sad to think of women who feel that all they have to offer the world is their looks. Personally, I like to think I have more to offer than that."

Taking a deep breath, she blew it all out noisily, then smiled and cocked her head at me.

"Um . . . How about if I just say that I think you look fantastic, and forget about speculating on your potential as a model?" I said cautiously.

"Then I'd say 'Thank you, kind sir'. You aren't so bad looking yourself."

She smiled and made a small curtsy. I successfully resisted an impulse to bow back to her.

Mostly, I was trying to think of what we could talk about next, having exhausted the subject of beauty.

"So, how do you know Calvin?" Daphnie said, solving the problem for me. "He made it sound like the two of you were old buddies."

Now we were back on familiar footing.

"Actually, I bought him over at the Bazaar at

Deva. Well, to be accurate, I bought his bottle. I only was entitled to one wish from him . . . but I don't need to explain that to you. You probably know the drill better than I do. I didn't get to know him until a couple years later when I got around to opening the bottle."

"I don't understand," she said, frowning prettily. "Why did you buy his bottle if you weren't going to use it for several years?"

"Why I bought it in the first place is a long story," I said, rolling my eyes comically. "As to why I didn't use it for so long, I'm part of a fairly impressive team of magik users . . . the head of it, actually. We do a pretty good job of handling most problems that come up on our own without calling on outside help."

Okay. So I was blowing my own trumpet a bit. Even though I didn't know if anything would ever develop between us, she was cute enough that I figured that it couldn't hurt to impress her a little.

"So he was with you the whole time? From when you purchased his bottle until his discharged his duty on Perv? When was that, exactly?"

She didn't seem very impressed. If anything, it was as if she was more interested in asking questions about Calvin than in learning about

"Oh, it wasn't all that long ago," I said. "Just a couple weeks back, in fact. Of course, time doesn't advance at the same rate on all the dimensions ... as I'm sure you know."

"True," she said, thoughtfully. "Tell me, did he say he was going straight back to Djinger? Or was he going to stop somewhere along the way, first?"

"Let me think. As I recall, he didn't . . . Wait a minute. Didn't he make it back to Djinger? I thought you said that he was the one who told you to look me up."

I was both concerned and confused. If Daphnie was looking for Calvin, then how had she found out about me? I didn't know any other Djins . . . or anyone who traveled to Djinger on a regular basis.

"Oh, he made it back all right," she shrugged. "I was just a little curious about ..."

There was a soft BAMF, and a second Djin materialized in the room. This one I recognized immediately as Calvin, who I had just been speaking to Daphnie about. I could tell at a glance, though, that something was wrong.

Chapter Fifteen:

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall take flack from both sides."

UNOFFICIAL UN MOTTO

I HAD GOTTEN to know Calvin pretty well during my trip to Perv, and all through that adventure he had been as unshakable in a crisis as anyone I had ever known. Now, however, he was exhibiting all the classic symptoms of someone who was about to lose control of his temper . . . clenched teeth, furrowed brow, tight expression, the works.

Fortunately, his anger seemed to be directed at my guest rather than at me.

"I should have known!" he snarled, without so much as a nod to acknowledge my presence. "I should have checked here first as soon as I found out you were gone."

It occurred to me that, as little as I knew about Djins, that it could be markedly unhealthy to have one upset with you. Realizing that magik,

like a knife, could be used both benevolently or destructively, my first instinct probably would have been to try to calm him down quickly . . . or to vacate the premises.

To my surprise, however, the Djeanie spun around and leveled what seemed to be an equal amount of anger back at him.

"Oh, I see," she spat back. "It's all right for you to disappear for years at a time, but as soon as I step out the door, you've got to come looking for me!"

The interest I had been feeling in Daphnie came to a screeching halt. In the space of a few seconds her personality had changed from a flirtatious coquette to a shrill shrew. Then, too, there seemed to be more to her relationship with Calvin than just an "acquaintance" as she had billed it.

"That was business," the Djin was saying, still nose to nose with my visitor. "You know, the stuff that puts food on the table for our whole dimension? Besides, if you were just going out to kick up your heels a bit I wouldn't care. What I DO mind is your sneaking off to check up on me."

"So what? It shouldn't bother you . . . unless you haven't been telling me everything, that is."

"What bothers me is that you can't bring yourself to believe me," Calvin shot back. "Why do you even bother asking me anything if you aren't going to believe I'm telling you the truth?"

"I used to believe everything you told me. YOU taught me how stupid that was. Remember?"

This seemed to be going nowhere fast, so I summoned my courage and stepped forward to intervene.

"Excuse me, but I thought you two were friends."

Kalvin broke off his arguing to spare me a withering look.

"Friends? Is that what she told you?"

He rounded on the Djeanie again.

"You know, babe, for someone who keeps accusing me of lying, you play pretty fast and loose with the truth yourself!"

"Don't be silly," the Djeanie said. "If I had told him I was your wife, he would have just covered for you. You think I don't know how you men lie to protect each other?"

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "Did you say 'wife'? Are you two married?"

Whatever was left of my interest in Daphnie died without a whimper.

"Sure," Calvin said with a grimace. "Can't you tell by the loving and affection we shower on each other either of us would put up with this abuse from a stranger?"

He gave a brief shake of his head, and for a moment seemed to almost return to normal.

"By the way, Skeeve, good to see you again," he said, flashing a tight smile. "Sorry to have forgotten my manners, but I get ... Anyway, even though it may be a bit late, I'd like to introduce you to my wife, Daphnie."

"Well, at least now I know what it takes to be introduced to one of your business friends."

And they were off again.

There was a knock on the door.

I answered it, thinking as I did that it was nice to know at least a few people who came into my room the normal way . . . which is to say, by

the door . . . instead of simply popping in unannounced.

"Is everything okay, Boss? I thought I heard voices."

"Sure," I said, "it's just . . . Guido?"

My mind had to grapple with several images and concepts simultaneously, and it wasn't doing so hot. First was the realization that Guido was back from his mission as a special tax envoy. Second, that he had his arm in a sling.

The latter probably surprised me more than the former. After all our time together, I had begun to believe that my bodyguards were all but invulnerable. It was a little unsettling to be reminded that they could be hurt physically like anyone else.

"What are you doing back?" I said. "And what happened to your arm?"

Instead of answering, he peered suspiciously past me at the arguing Djins.

"What's goin' on in there, Boss?" he demanded. "Who are those two jokers, anyway?"

I was a little surprised that he could hear and see my visitors, but then I remembered that it's only while a Djin is under contract that he or she can only be seen and heard by the holder of their bottle.

"Oh, those are just a couple friends of mine," I said. "Well . . . sort of friends. I thought they were dropping by to say 'Hi,' but, as you can see, things seem to have gotten a little out of hand. The one with the beard is Calvin, and the lady he's arguing with is his wife, Daphnie."

I thought it was a fairly straightforward explanation, but Guido recoiled as if I had struck him.

"Did you say 'his wife'?"

"That's right. Why?"

My bodyguard stepped forward to place himself between me and the arguing couple.

"Get out of here, Boss," he said quietly.

"What?"

At first I thought I had misunderstood him.

"Boss," he hissed with aggravated patience. "I'm your bodyguard. Right? Well, as your bodyguard and the one currently responsible for the well bein' of your continued health, I'm tellin' you to get out of here!"

"But ..."

Apparently Guido wasn't willing to debate the point further. Instead, he scooped me up with his good arm and carried me out the door into the corridor, where he deposited me none too gently against the wall beside the doorway.

"Now stay here," he said, shaking a massive finger in my face. "Got that? Stay here!"

I recognized the tone of his voice. It was the same as when I tried to give Gleep a simple command ... for the third or fourth time after he had been steadfastly ignoring me. I decided I would try to prove that I was smarter than my pet by actually following orders.

"Okay, Guido," I said, with a curt nod. "Here it is."

He hesitated for a moment, eyeing me as if to see if I was going to make a break for the door. Then he gave a little nod of satisfaction, turned, and strode into my room, closing the door behind him.

While I couldn't make out the exact words, I

heard the arguing voices cease for a moment. Then they were raised again in angry chorus, punctuated by Guido's voice saying something. Then there was silence.

After a few long moments of stillness, the door opened again.

"You can come in now, Boss," my bodyguard announced. "They're gone."

I left my post by the wall and re-entered my room. A quick glance around was all it took to confirm my bodyguard's claim. The Djins had departed for destinations unknown. Surprisingly enough, my immediate reaction was to be a little hurt that they hadn't bothered to say goodbye.

I also realized that I wanted a goblet of wine, but suppressed the desire. Instead, I perched on the side of the bed.

"All right, Guido," I said. "What was that all about?"

"Sorry to barge in like that, Boss," my bodyguard said, not looking at all apologetic. "You know that's not my normal style."

"So what were you doing?"

"What I was doin' was my job," he retorted. "As your bodyguard, I was attemptin' to protect you from bein' hurt or maybe even killed. It's what you pay me for, accordin' to my job description."

"Protecting me? From those two? Com'on, Guido. They were just arguing. They weren't even arguing with me. It was a family squabble between the two of them."

"Just arguing!" my bodyguard said, looming over me. "What do you think ..."

He broke off suddenly and stepped back, breath-

ing heavy.

I was genuinely puzzled. I couldn't recall having seen Guido more upset, but I really couldn't figure out what was bothering him.

"Sorry, Boss," he said finally, in a more normal tone. "I'm still a little worked up after that close call. I'll be all right in a second."

"What close call?" I pressed. "They were just . . ."

"I know, I know," he said, waving me to silence. "They were just arguing."

He took a deep breath and flexed his arms and hands.

"You know, Boss, I keep forgettin' how inexperienced you are. I mean, you may be tops in the magik department, but when it comes to my specialty, which is to say rough and tumble stuff, you're still a babe in the woodwork."

A part of me wanted to argue this, since I had been in some pretty nasty scrapes over the years, but I kept my mouth shut. Guido and his cousin Nunzio were specialists, and if nothing else over the years I've learned to respect expertise.

"You see, Boss, people say that guys like me and Nunzio are not really all that different from the cops . . . that it's the same game on different sides of the line. I dunno. It may be true. What I am sure of, though, is that both we and our counterparts agree on one thing: The most dangerous situation to stick your head into . . . the situation most likely to get you dead fast . . . isn't a shoot-out or a gang war. It's an ordinary D&D scenario."

"D&D," I frowned. "You mean that game you were telling me about with the maps and the dice?"

"No. I'm takin' about a 'domestic disturbance.'
A family squabble . . . just like you had goin' on
here when I came in. They're deadly, Boss. Espe-
cially one between a husband and wife."

I wanted to laugh, but he seemed to be utterly
serious about what he was saying.

"Are you kidding, Guido?" I said. "What could
happen that would be dangerous?"

"More things than you can imagine," he re-
plied. "That's what makes them so dangerous. In
regular hassles, you can pretty much track what's
going on and what might happen next. Argu-
ments between a husband and wife are unpredict-
able, though. You can't tell who's gonna swing at
who, when or with what, because they don't
know themselves."

I was beginning to believe what he was saying.
The concept was both fascinating and frightening.

"Why do you think that is, Guido? What makes
fights between married couples so explosive?"

My bodyguard frowned and scratched his head.

"I never really gave it much thought," he said.
"If I had to give an opinion, I'd say it was due to
the motivationals."

"The motives?" I corrected without thinking.

"That too," he nodded. "You see, Boss, the
business-type disputes which result in violence
like I am normally called upon to deal with
have origins that are easily comprehended . . .
like greed or fear. That is to say, either Boss A
wants somethin' that Boss B is reluctant to part
with, as in a good-sized hunk of revenue genera-
tin' territory, or Boss B is afraid that Boss A is
gonna try to whack him and decides to beat him
to the punch. In these situationals, there is a
clear-cut objective in mind, and the action is
Know what I mean?"

"I think so," I said. "And in a domestic disturbance?"

"That's where it can get ugly," he grimaced. "It starts out with people arguin' when they don't know why they're arguin'. What's at stake there is emotions and hurt feelin's, not money. The problem with that is that there is no clear-cut objective, and as a result, there is no way of tellin' when the fightin' should cease. It just keeps escalatin' up and up, with both sides dishin' out and takin' more and more damage, until each of 'em is hurt so bad that the only important thing left is to hurt the other one back."

He smacked his fist loudly into his other hand, wincing slightly when he moved his injured arm.

want to be anywhere near ground zero. One will go at the other, or they'll go at each other, with anything that's at hand. The worst part is, and the reason neither us or the cops want to try to mess with it, is that if you try to break it up, chances are that they'll both turn on you. You see, mad as they are, they'll still reflexively protect each other from any outside force . . . into which category will fall you or anyone else who tries to interfere. That's why the best policy, if you have a choice at all, is to get away from them and wait until the dust settles before venturin' close again."

This was all very interesting, particularly since I was in the middle of contemplating marriage myself. However, my bodyguard's wince had reminded me of the unanswered question originally raised by his appearance.

"I think I understand now, Guido," I said.
"Thanks. Now tell me, what happened to your arm? And what are you doing back at the palace?"

Guido seemed a little taken aback at the sudden change of topic.

"Sorry I didn't check in as soon as I got back,

Boss," he said, looking uncomfortable. "It was late and I thought you were already asleep . . . until I heard that argument in process, that is. I would have let you know first thing in the morning."

"Uh-huh," I said. "No problem. But since we're talking now, what happened?"

"We ran into a little trouble, is all," he said, looking away. "Nothin' serious."

"Serious enough to put your arm in a sling," I observed. "So what happened?"

"If it's okay with you, Boss, I'd rather not go into details. Truth is, it's more than a little embarrassing."

I was about to insist, then thought better of it. Guido never asked for much from me, but it seemed right now he was asking that I not push the point. The least I could do was respect his privacy.

"AH right," I said slowly. "We'll let it ride for now. Will you be able to work with that arm?"

"In a pinch, maybe. But not at peak efficiency," he admitted. "That's really what I wanted to talk to you about, Boss. Is there any chance you can assign Nunzio to be Pookie's backup while I take over his duties here?"

Realizing how infatuated Guido was with Pookie, it was quite a request. Still, I was reluctant to go along with it.

"I don't know, Guido," I said "Nunzio's been working with Gleep to try to figure out what's wrong with him. I kind of hate to pull him off that until we have some answers. Tell you what. How about if I talk to Chumley about helping out?"

"Chumley?" my bodyguard frowned. "I dunno, Boss. Don't you think that him bein' a troll would

tend to scare folks in these parts?"

heavily on intimidation in their work, this was an interesting objection. Still, he had a point.

"Doesn't Pookie have a disguise spell or something that could soften Chumley's appearance?" I suggested. "I was assuming that she wasn't wandering around the countryside showing the green scales of a Pervect."

"Hey! That's right! Good idea, Boss," Guido said, brightening noticeably. "In that case, no problem. Chumley's as stand up as they come."

"Okay, I'll talk to him first thing in the morning."

"Actually, Chumley's a better choice than Nun-

180 Robert Asprin

zio," my bodyguard continued, almost to himself. "Pookie's still kinda upset over shootin' me, and Nunzio would probably ..."

"Whoa! Wait a minute! Did you say that Pookie shot you?"

Guido looked startled for a moment, then he drew himself up into a wall of righteous indignation.

"Really, Boss/" he said. "I thought we agreed that we wasn't gonna talk about this. Not for a while, anyway."

Chapter Sixteen:

"Marriage is a fine institution . . .
if one requires institutionalizing."

S. FREUD

"Hi, CHUMLEY. MIND if I come in?"

The troll looked up from his book, and his enormous mouth twisted into a grin of pleasure.

"Skeeve, old boy!" he said. "Certainly. As a matter of fact, I've been expecting you."

"Really?" I said, stepping into his room and looking around for somewhere to sit.

"Yes. I ran into Guido this morning, and he explained the situation to me. He said you were going to be calling on me for a bit of work. I was just killing time waiting for the official word, is all."

I wondered if the briefing my bodyguard had given Chumley was any more detailed than what he had told me.

"It's all right with you, then?" I said. "You don't mind?"

"Tish tosh. Think nothing of it," the troll said. "Truth to tell, I'll be glad to have a specific assignment again. I've been feeling a bit at loose ends lately. In fact, I was starting to wonder why I was staying around at all."

That touched a nerve in me. It had been some time since I had even stopped by to say 'Hello' to Chumley.

"Sorry if I've been a bit distant," I said guiltily. "I've been . . . busy . . . and . . ."

"Quite right," Chumley said with a grin and a wink. "Caught a glimpse of your workload when you rolled in the other night. Bit of all right, that."

I think I actually blushed.

"No really," I stammered. "I've been . . ."

"Relax, old boy," the troll waved. "I was just pulling your leg a bit. I know you've been up

against it, what with the Queen after you and all. By the by, I've got a few thoughts on that, but I figured it would be rude to offer advice when none had been asked for."

"You do? That's terrific," I said, and meant it. "I've been meaning to ask your opinion, but wasn't sure how to bring it up."

"I believe you just have, actually," Chumley grinned. "Pull up a chair."

I followed his instructions as he continued.

"Advice on marriage, particularly when it comes to the selection of the partner to be, is usually best kept to oneself. The recipients usually already have their minds made up, and voicing any opinion contradictory to their decision can be hazardous to one's health. Since you've actually gotten around to asking, however, I think you might find my thoughts on the matter to be a tad surprising."

"How's that?"

"Well, most blokes who know me . . . the real me, that is, rather than Big Crunch . . . think of me as a bit of a romantic."

I blinked, but kept a straight face.

While I have the utmost respect for Chumley, I had never thought of him as a romantic figure . . . possibly something to do with his green matted hair and huge eyes of different sizes. While I suppose that trolls have love lives (otherwise, how does one get little trolls?) I'd have to rate their attractiveness in relation to dwellers of other dimensions to be way down near the bottom. Their female counterparts, the trollops, such as his sister Tananda, were a whole different story, of course, but for the trolls themselves . . . on a scale of one to ten, I'd generously score them around negative eighteen.

This particular troll, however, old friend though he might be, was currently sitting within an arm's length of me . . . his arm, not mine . . . and as that arm was substantially stronger than two arms of the strongest human . . . which I'm not ... I decided not to argue the point with him. Heck, if he wanted to say he was the Queen of May I'd probably agree with him.

"For the most part, they'd be right," Chumley was continuing, "but on the subject of marriage, I can be as coldly analytical as the best of them."

"Terrific," I said. "That's what I was really hoping for. ... An unemotional, unbiased opinion."

"First, let me ask you a few questions," the troll said.

"All right."

"Do you love her?"

I paused to give the question an honest consideration.

"I don't think so," I said. "Of course, I really don't know all that much about love."

"Does she love you?"

"Again, I don't think so," I said.

I was actually enjoying this. Chumley was breaking things down to where even I could understand his logic.

"Well, has she said she loves you?"

That one I didn't even have to think about.

"No."

"You're sure?" the troll pressed.

"Positive," I said. "The closest she's come is to say she thinks we'd make a good pair. I think she meant it as a compliment."

"Good," my friend said, settling back in his chair.

"Excuse me?" I blinked. "For a moment there, I thought you said ..."

"I said 'Good/ and I meant it/' the troll repeated.

"You lost me there," I said. "I thought marriages were supposed to be . . ."

"... Based on love?" Chumley finished for me. "That's what most young people think. That's also why so many of their marriages fall apart."

Even though he had sort of warned me in advance, I found the troll's position to be a bit unsettling.

"Urn, Chumley? Are we differentiating between 'analytical' and 'cynical'?"

"It's not really as insensitive as it sounds, Skeeve," the troll said with a laugh, apparently unoffended by my comment. "You see, when you're young and full of hormones, and come in close contact for the first time with someone of the opposite sex who isn't related to you, you experience feelings and urges that you've never encountered before. Now since, despite their bragging to the contrary, most people are raised to think of themselves as good and decent folks, they automatically attach the socially correct label to these feelings: Love. Of course, there's also a socially correct response when two people feel that way about each other . . . specifically, marriage."

"But isn't that ..." I began, but the troll held up a restraining hand.

"Hear me out," he said. "Now, continuing with

infatuation has run its course. It might take years, but eventually they find that 'just being together' isn't enough. It's time to get on with life. Unfortunately, right about then they discover that they have little if anything in common. All too often they find that their goals in life are different, or, at the very least, their plans on how to achieve them don't coincide. Then they find, instead of the ideal partner to stand back to back with while taking on the world, they've actually opened a second front. That is, they have to spend as much or more time dealing with each other as they do the rest of the world."

Despite myself, I found I was being drawn in, almost mesmerized, by his oration.

"What happens then?" I said.

"If they are at all rational . . . notice I said 'rational/ not 'intelligent' . . . they go their separate ways. AH too often, however, they cling to the concept of 'love' and try to 'make it work.' When that happens, the result is an armed camp living an uneasy truce . . . and nobody's happy ... or actually achieving their full potential."

I thought about the bickering I had recently witnessed between Calvin and Daphnie, and about what Guido had told me about domestic disturbances and how they can explode into violence. In spite of myself, I shuddered involuntarily.

"That sounds grim," I said.

"Oh, it is," the troll nodded. "Trying to 'make it work' is the most frustrating, depressing pastime ever invented. The real problem is that they've each ended up with the wrong person, but rather than admit that, they try to gloss things over with cosmetics."

"Cosmetics?"

"Surface changes. Things that really don't matter."

"I don't get it."

"All right," the troll said. "I'll give you an example. The wife says she needs some new clothes, so her husband gives her some money to go out shopping. That's a rather simple and straight forward exchange, wouldn't you say?"

"Only on the surface," Chumley explained. "Now look at it a little deeper ... at what's really going on. The husband has been getting caught up in his work . . . that's a normal reaction feeling 'responsible,' by the way . . . and his wife is feeling unhappy and ignored. Her solution is that she needs some new clothes to make her more attractive so her husband will pay more attention to her. A surface solution to her unhappiness. Now, when she says she needs new clothes, the husband is annoyed because she seems to have a closet full of clothes that she never wears, but rather than argue with her, he gives her some money for shopping . . . again, a surface solution. You'll notice that he simply gives her the money. He doesn't take her shopping and help her find some new outfits."

The troll leaned back in his chair and folded his arms.

"From there, it goes downhill. She gets some new clothes and wears them, but the husband either doesn't notice or doesn't comment . . . possibly because he still resents having to pay for what he thinks is a needless purchase. Therefore, buying new clothes . . . her surface solution . . . doesn't work because she still feels ignored and unhappy . . . and a little angry and frustrated that her husband doesn't seem to appreciate her no matter how hard she tries. Her husband, in the meantime, senses that she's still unhappy so that giving her money . . . his surface solution . . . didn't work. He feels even more bitter and resentful because now it seems that his wife is going to be upset and unhappy even if he 'gives her everything she's asked for.' You see, by trying to deal

with the problem with surface, cosmetic gestures without acknowledging to themselves the real issues, they've actually made things worse instead of better."

He smiled triumphantly as I considered his thesis.

"So you're saying that marriages don't work," I said carefully, "that the concept itself is flawed."

"Not at all," the troll corrected, shaking his head. "I was saying that getting married under the mistaken impression that love conquers all is courting disaster. A proper match between two people who enter into a marriage with their eyes open and free of romantic delusions can result in a much happier life together than they could ever have alone."

"All right," I said. "If love and romance are bad bases for deciding to marry someone because it's too easy to fool yourself, what would you see as a valid reason to get married."

"There are lots of them," Chumley shrugged. "Remember when Hemlock first arrived here? Her marriage to Roderick was a treaty and a merger between two kingdoms. It's common among royalty, but you'll find similar matches in the business world as well. In that case, both sides knew what they wanted and could expect, so it worked out fine."

"Sorry, but that seems a bit cold to me," I said, shaking my head.

"Really?" the troll cocked his head. "Maybe I'm phrasing this wrong. What you don't want is a situation where there is a hidden agenda on either or both sides. Everything should be up front and on the table . . . like with the Hemlock/Roderick marriage."

"What's a hidden agenda?"

"Hmmm . . . That one's a little hard to ex-

plain. Tell me, if you married Queen Hemlock, what would you expect?"

That one caught me totally unprepared.

"I don't know . . . nothing, really," I managed, at last. "I guess I figure that it would pretty much be a marriage in name only, with her going her way and me going mine."

"Good," the troll said emphatically.

"Good?" I echoed. "Com'on, Chumley."

"Good in that you aren't expecting anything.

You aren't going into it with the notion of reforming her, or that she'd give up her throne to hover around you adoringly, or any one of a myriad of other false hopes or assumptions that most grooms have on the way to the altar."

"I suppose that's good," I said.

"Good? It's vital," the troll insisted. "Too many people marry the person they think their partner will become. They have some sort of idea that a marriage ceremony is somehow magical. That it will eliminate all the dubious traits and habits their partner had when they were single. That's about as unrealistic as if you had expected Aahz to stop being a money-grubber or to shed his temper just because you signed on as an apprentice. Anyway, when their partner keeps right on being the person he or she has been all along, they feel hurt and betrayed. Since they believe that there should have been a change, the only conclusion they can reach is that their love wasn't enough to trigger it ... or, more likely, that there's something wrong with their partner. That's when marriages start getting bloody. At least with Queen Hemlock's proposal, nobody's kidding anybody about what's going to happen."

I mulled over his words for a few moments.

"So you're saying that you think I should marry Queen Hemlock," I said.

"Here now. Hold on," the troll said, leaning back and holding up his hands. "I said no such thing. That's the kind of decision that only you can make. I was just commenting on what I see as

the more common pitfalls of marriage, is all. If you do decide to marry the Queen, there are certain aspects that would weigh in favor of it working . . . but you're the one who has to decide what you want out of a marriage and whether or not this is it."

Terrific. I had been hoping that Chumley's analytic approach would simplify things for me. Instead, he had simply added a wagon load of other factors to be considered. I needed that like Deva needed more merchants.

"Well, I appreciate the input, Chumley," I said, rising from my seat. "You've given me a lot to think about."

"Think nothing of it, old boy. Glad to help."

"And you're all set with the assignment? Guido told you how to hook up with Pookie?"

"Right-o."

I started to go, but paused for one more question.

"By the way, Chumley. Have you ever been married yourself?"

"Me?" the troll seemed genuinely surprised. "Gracious no. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," I said, and headed out the door.

Chapter Seventeen:

"What am I supposed to do with all this gold?"

MIDAS, REX

AT THIS POINT, I had to admit that I was more confused than ever. It seemed that everyone I talked to had a different view of marriage, which

wasn't making my decision any easier. One thing everyone seemed to agree on, though: A bad marriage could be a living Hell.

Of course, defining what a good marriage was and how to avoid a bad one seemed to defy simple explanation ... or, at least, one simple enough that I could grasp.

The problem was, as limited as my experience with the opposite sex was, my knowledge of marriages, good or bad, was even sketchier. I could barely remember my own family, I had left home so long ago. The only married couple I had met on my adventures was the Woof Writers, and realizing they were werewolves I somehow didn't think they were a valid role model for me. Then again, Massha and Badaxe were talking about getting married. Maybe they could provide some insight for me.

I was considering this possibility as I wandered across the palace courtyard, when a voice interrupted my thoughts.

"Hey, Partner!"

I had to look around for a moment before I spotted Aahz waving at me from one of the palace's upper windows.

"Where were you this morning? We missed you at the session with Grimble."

"I had to talk to Chumley," I called back.
"Guido got hurt, and I had to ask Chumley to

"Whatever," my partner waved. "Go see Grimble. It's important!"

That sounded vaguely ominous, but Aahz seemed chipper enough.

"What's up?"

"Day of the eagle," he yelled, and disappeared

from sight.

Terrific!

As I redirected my steps toward Grimble's office, I couldn't help but feel a little annoyed. I mean, with all the other problems plaguing me, I really didn't need the added distraction of talking to Grimble about some bird sanctuary.

"Hi, Grimble. Aahz said you wanted to see me?"

The Chancellor glanced up to where I was leaning against the doorway.

"Ah. Lord Skeeve," he nodded. "Yes. Come in. This shouldn't take long."

I eased into the room and plopped down in the offered chair.

"What's the problem? Aahz said something about eagles?"

"Eagles? I wonder what he was referring to. No, there's no problem," Grimble said. "If anything, quite the contrary. In fact, the new tax collection process is working well enough that we're now in a positive cash flow situation. What's more, I think that except for dotting a few I's and crossing a few T's we've got the new budget pretty well nailed down."

He leaned back and favored me with one of his rare smiles.

"Speaking of 'tease/ that's quite a little assistant you have there. I'll admit I'm very impressed with all her qualifications. Take my advice and don't let her go ... as if I had to tell you that."

This was, of course, accompanied by a smirk and a wink.

While I had grown to expect this sort of com-

ment from Grimble whenever the subject of Bunny came up, I found I was no more fond of it than when they had first met. At least now, he was refraining from such behavior in her presence . . . which was a victory of sorts, I suppose. Still, I was annoyed and decided to take another shot at it.

"I'm surprised to hear you talk that way, Grimble," I said. "Are you really so hung up on hormones that you can't just acknowledge her worth as a colleague without adding sexual innuendos?"

"Well ... I ..." the Chancellor began, but I cut him off.

". . . Especially realizing that the Queen . . . you know, your employer? ... is also female. I wonder if she's aware of your slanted views regarding her gender, or, if she isn't, how she'd react if she found out. Do you think she'd just fire you, or would she want to see if you were bluffing, first? From what I can tell, she's as interested in playing around as you claim to be."
Grimble actually blanched which, realizing how pale his complexion was to start with, was quite a sight.

"You wouldn't tell her, would you, Lord Skeeve?" he stammered. "I meant no disrespect to Bunny. Really. She has one of the best financial minds it's been my privilege to work with . . . male or female. I was just trying to make a little joke. You know, man to man? It's one of the rituals of male bonding."

"Not with all males," I pointed out. "Relax, though. You should know me well enough by now to realize it's not my style to go running to the Queen with reports or complaints. Just don't push it so hard in the future. Okay?"

"Thank you, Lord Skeeve. I ... Thanks. I'll make a point of it."

"Now then," I said, starting to rise, "I assume

we're done here? That the report on the collections and budget was what you wanted to see me about?"

"No, that was just a casual update," Grimble corrected, back on familiar ground now. "The real reason I had to see you was this."

He reached somewhere on the floor behind him and produced a large bag which jingled as he plopped it onto his desk.

"I don't understand," I said, eyeing the bag. "What is it?"

"It's your wages," he smiled. "I know that normally you let your assistants handle these matters, but realizing the amount involved due to your promotion, I thought you might like to deal with it personally."

I stared at the bag uncomfortably. It was a very big bag.

Even though I had been persuaded by Aahz and Bunny to accept a sizable wage for my services, looking at a number on a piece of paper was a lot different than actually seeing the equivalent in hard cash.

Perhaps it wouldn't seem like so much after I had paid the others their share . . .

"Your assistants have already picked up their wages," Grimble was saying, "so this is the last payment to complete this round of payroll. If you'll just sign here?"

He pushed a slip of paper across the desk at me, but I ignored it and kept staring at the money bag.

It was a very large bag. Especially considering how little I was actually doing.

"Is something wrong, Lord Skeeve?"

For a moment, I actually considered telling him what was bothering me, which is a sign of how upset I was. Grimble is not someone you confide in.

"No. Nothing," I said instead.

"Would you like to count it?" he pressed, apparently still unconvinced.

"Why? Didn't you?"

"Of course I did," the Chancellor bristled, his professional pride stung. I forced a smile.

"Good enough for me. Checking your work would be a waste of both our time, don't you agree?"

I quickly scribbled my name on the receipt, gathered up the bag, and left, carefully ignoring the puzzled look Grimble was leveling at me.

"You gonna need us for anything, Boss? You want we should hang around out here?"

"Whatever, Guido," I waved absently as I shut the door. "I'm going to be here for a while, though, if you want to get something to eat. I've got a lot to think over."

"Oh, we already ate. So we'll just . . ."

The door closed and cut off the rest of whatever it was he was saying.

Guido and Nunzio had materialized at my side somewhere during my walk back from Grimble's. I wasn't sure exactly when, as I had been lost in thought and they hadn't said anything until we reached my room. If I had realized they were there, I probably would have had one of them carry the bag of gold for me. It was heavy. Very heavy.

Setting the burden down on my desk, I sank

into a chair and stared at it. I had heard of bad pennies coming back to haunt someone, but this was ridiculous.

I had been so absorbed in trying to make up my mind about Queen Hemlock that I hadn't gotten around to my self-appointed task of trying to cut back on my staff or otherwise reduce the M.Y.T.H. Inc. bill to the kingdom. Now, I had the money in hand, and all I felt was guilty.

No matter what Aahz and Bunny said, it still felt wrong to me. Here we were, cutting corners on the budget and squeezing taxes out of the populace to try to shore up the kingdom's financial woes, while I siphoned money out of the treasury that I didn't really need. What was more, since it was my procrastinating on staff cuts that had resulted in the inflated payday, I certainly didn't think I should be rewarded for it.

The more I thought about it, the more determined I became to figure out some way to give the money back. Of course, it would have to be done quietly, almost secretly, or I'd suffer the wrath of both Aahz and Bunny. Still, to me it was necessary if I was going to be able to live with myself.

Then, too, there was the problem of how to reduce our payroll. Actually, if what Grimble had just told me was accurate, that situation might take care of itself. If the budget was coming into balance, and if the collection process was now flowing smoothly, then I could probably send Bunny back to Deva, as well as one or more of my bodyguards. What was more, I could then insist on removing my own payment as financial counselor. All that should reduce the M.Y.T.H. Inc. bill substantially.

That still left me with the problem of how to deal with the disproportionate payment I had already received.

Then an idea struck me. I'd do what any other

executive would do when confronted with a problem: I'd delegate it to someone else!

Striding to the door, I opened it and looked into the hall. Sure enough, my two bodyguards were still there, apparently embroiled in conversation with each other.

"Guido! Nunzio!" I called. "Come in here for a second."

I re-entered the room and returned to my desk without waiting to see if they were responding. I needn't have worried.

By the time I had re-seated myself, they were standing in front of me.

"I have a little assignment for you boys," I said, smiling.

"Sure, Boss," they chimed in chorus.

"But first, I want to check something. As long as I've known you, you've both made it clear that, in the past, you've had no qualms about bending the rules as situations called for it, working outside the law as it were. Is that correct?"

"That's right."

"No problem."

I noticed that, though to the affirmative, their answers were slower and less enthusiastic than before.

"All right. The job I have for you has to be done secretly, with nobody knowing that I'm behind it. Not even Aahz or Bunny. Understand?"

My bodyguards looked even more uncomfortable than before, but nodded their agreement.

"Okay, here's the job," I said, pushing the bagol money towards them. "I want you to take this

money and get rid of it."

The two men stared at me, then exchanged glances.

"I don't quite get you, Boss," Guido said at last. "What do you want us to do with it?"

"I don't care and I don't want to know," I said. "I just want this money back in circulation within the kingdom. Spend it or give it to charity."

Just then an idea hit me.

"Better still, figure out some way of passing it around to those people who have been complaining that they can't pay their taxes."

Guido frowned and glanced at his cousin again.

"I dunno, Boss," he said carefully. "It don't seem right, somehow. I mean, we're supposed to be collectin' taxes from people . . . not givin' it to them."

"What Guido means," Nunzio put in, "is that our speciality is extracting funds from people and institutions. Givin' it back is a little out of our line."

"Well then I guess it's about time you expanded your horizons," I said, unmoving. "Anyway, that's the assignment. Understand?"

"Yes, Boss," they chorused, still looking uneasy.

"And remember, not a word about this to the rest of the team."

"If you say so, Boss."

As I've said, the bag was heavy enough to have given me trouble carrying it, but Guido gathered hefting it for a moment.

"Umm . . . Are you sure you want to do this, Boss?" he said. "It don't seem right, somehow. Most folks would have to work for a lifetime to earn this much money."

"That's my point," I muttered.

"Huh?"

"Never mind," I said. "I'm sure. Now do it. Okay?"

"Consider it done."

They didn't quite salute, but they drew themselves up and nodded before they headed for the door. I recalled they had been working with the army for a while, and guessed that it had rubbed off on them more than they realized.

After they had gone, I leaned back and savored the moment.

I actually felt good! It seemed that I had found a solution to at least one of my problems.

Maybe that had been my difficulty all this time. I had been trying to focus on too many unrelated problems at once. Now that the whole money thing was off my back, I could devote my entire attention to the Queen Hemlock situation without interruptions or distractions.

For the first time in a long while, I actually felt optimistic about being able to arrive at a decision.

Chapter Eighteen:

"It's so easy, a child could do it!"

THE LEGAL DISCLAIMER FOUND ON

THE INSTRUCTION SHEET OF ANY

"ASSEMBLE IT YOURSELF" KIT

"BLAH BLAH BLAH flowers, blah blah blah protocol. Understood?"

"Uh-huh," I said, looking out the window.

When I had agreed to hear the plans for the upcoming marriage between Massha and General Badaxe, I had done it without realizing how long it would take or how complex the ceremony would be. After several hours of this/ however, I realized that my own part was going to be minimal, and was having a great deal of difficulty paying attention to the myriad of details.

"Of course, blah blah blah . . ."

And they were off again.

A bird landed on a branch outside the window and began gobbling down a worm. I found myself envying him. Not that I was particularly hungry, mind you. It was just that the way my life had been going lately, eating a worm seemed like a preferable alternative.

"Have you got that? Skeeve?"

I jerked my head back to the task at hand, only to find my massive apprentice peering at me intently. Obviously, I had just missed something I was supposed to respond to.

"Umm . . . Not really, Massha. Could you summarize it again briefly so I can be sure I have it right?"

I didn't mean to emphasize the word 'briefly/' but she caught it anyway.

"Hmmm," she said, fixing me with a suspicious stare. "Maybe we should take a break for a few minutes," she said. "I think we could all do

with a good stretch of the legs."

"If you say so, my dear," the General said, rising obediently to his feet.

I admired his stamina . . . and his patience. I was sure that this was as tedious for him as it was for me, but you'd never tell it to look at him.

I started to rise as well, then sank back quickly into my seat as a wave of dizziness hit me.

"Hey Skeeve! Are you all right?"

Massha was suddenly more concerned than she had been a moment before.

"I'm fine," I said, trying to focus my eyes.

"Would you like some wine?"

"No!! I mean, I'm all right. Really. I just didn't get much sleep last night is all."

"Uh-huh. Out tom-cattin' again, were you, Hot Stuff?"

Normally, I kind of enjoyed Massha's banter. Today, though, I was just too tired to play.

"Actually, I went to bed fairly early," I said, stuffily- "I just had a lot of trouble getting to sleep. I guess there was just too much on my mind to relax."

That was a bit of an understatement. Actually, I had tossed and turned most of the night . . . just as I had for the two previous nights. I had hoped that once I had dealt with the money problems I had been wrestling with, I could concentrate on making up my mind about whether or not to marry Queen Hemlock. Instead, all the factors and ramifications kept dancing in my head, jostling in my head, jostling each other for importance, until I couldn't focus on any of them. Unfortunately, I couldn't put them aside, either.

"Uh-huh," she said, peering at me carefully.

Whatever she saw, she didn't like. Pushing two chairs together, she sat down next to me and put a motherly hand on my shoulder.

"Come on, Skeeve," she said. "Tell Massha all about it. What is it that's eating you up lately?"

"It's this whole thing about whether or not to marry Queen Hemlock," I said. "I just can't seem to make up my mind. As near as I can tell, there isn't a clear cut right answer. Any option I have seems to be loaded with negatives. Whatever I do is going to affect so many people, I'm paralytic for fear of doing the wrong thing. I'm so afraid of doing something wrong, I'm not doing anything at all."

Massha heaved a great sigh.

"Well, I can't make that call for you, Skeeve. Nobody can. If it's any help, though, you should know that you're loved, and that your friends will stand by whatever decision you reach. I know it's rough right now, but we have every faith that you'll do the right thing."

I guess that was supposed to be reassuring. It flashed across my mind, however, that I really didn't need to be reminded of how much everyone was counting on me to reach the right decision . . . when after weeks of deliberation I still didn't have the foggiest idea of what the right decision was! Still, my apprentice was trying to help the only way she knew how, and I didn't want to hurt her for that.

"Thanks, Massha," I said, forcing a smile. "That does help a bit."

"Ahem."

I glanced up to see General Badaxe stepping forward. He had been so quiet I had forgotten he

was in the room until he cleared his voice.

"Will you excuse us, my dear? I'd like to have a word with Lord Skeeve."

Massha glanced back and forth between the General and me, then shrugged.

"Sure thing, Hugh. Gods know I've got enough to keep me busy for a while. Catch you later, Hot Shot."

The General closed the door behind her, then stood regarding me for several moments. Then he came over to where I was standing and placed both of his hands on my shoulders.

"Lord Skeeve," he said. "May I be permitted the privilege of speaking to you, of treating you for a few moments as if you were my own son ... or a man under my command in the Army?"

"Certainly, General," I said, genuinely touched.

"Fine," he smiled. "Turn around."

"Excuse me?"

"I said 'Turn around.' Face in the other direction, if you will."

Puzzled, I turned my back on him and waited.

Suddenly, something slammed into my rear end, propelling me forward with such force that I nearly fell, saving myself only by catching my weight with my hands and one knee.

I was shocked.

Incredible as it seemed, I had every reason to believe the General had just kicked me in the rump!

"You kicked me!" I said, still not quite believing it.

"That's right," Badaxe said calmly. "Frankly, it's long overdue. I had considered hitting you over the head, but it seems that lately your brains are located at the other end."

Grudgingly, I began to believe it.

"But why?" I demanded.

"Because, Lord Skeeve, with all respect and courtesies due your station and rank, it is my studied opinion that you've been acting like the north end of a south-bound horse."

That was clear enough. Surprisingly poetic for a military man, but clear.

"Could you be a bit more specific?" I said, with as much dignity as I could muster.

"I'm referring to your possible marriage to Queen Hemlock, of course," he said. "Or, more specifically, your difficulty in making up your mind. You're agonizing over the decision, when it's obvious to the most casual observer that you don't want to marry her."

"There are bigger issues at stake here than what I want, General," I said wearily.

"Bullshit," Badaxe said firmly.

"What?"

"I said 'Bullshit,'" the General repeated, "and I meant it. What you want is the only issue worth considering."

I found myself smiling in spite of my depression.

"Excuse me, General, but isn't that a little strange coming from you?"

"How so?"

"Well, as a soldier, you've devoted your life to the rigors of training and combat. The whole military system is based on self-sacrifice and self-denial, isn't it?"

"Perhaps," Badaxe said. "Has it occurred to you, though, that it's simply a means to an end? The whole idea of being prepared for combat is to be able to defend or exert what you want against what someone else wants."

I sat up straight.

"I never thought of it that way."

"It's the only way to think of it," the General said, firmly. "Oh, I know a lot of people see a soldier's life as being subservient. That it's the role of a mindless robot subject to the nonsensical orders and whims of his superior officers . . . including Generals. The fact is that an army has to be united in purpose, or it's ineffectual. Each man in it voluntarily agrees to follow the chain of command because it's the most effective way to achieve a common goal. A soldier who doesn't know what he wants or why he's fighting is worthless. Even worse, he's a danger to anyone and everyone who's counting on him."

He paused, then shook his head.

"For the moment, however, let's consider this on a smaller scale. Think of a young man who trains himself so that he won't be bullied by older, larger men. He lifts weights to develop his muscles, studies various forms of armed and unarmed combat, and practices long hard hours with one objective in mind: To harden himself to where he won't have to knuckle under to anyone."

The General smiled.

"What would you say, then, if that same young man subsequently let every pipsqueak and bravo shove him around because he was afraid he'd hurt

them if he pushed back?"

"I'd say he was a bloody idiot."

"Yes," Badaxe nodded. "You are."

"Me?"

"Certainly," the General said, starting to look a little vexed. "Didn't you recognize yourself in the picture I just described?"

"General," I said, wearily, "I haven't gotten much sleep for several days now. Forgive me if I'm not tracking at my normal speed, but you're going to have to spell it out for me."

"Very well. I spoke about a young man building himself up physically. Well, you, my young friend, are probably the most formidable man I know."

"I am?"

"Beyond a doubt. What's more, like the young man in my example, you've built yourself up over the years . . . even in the time I've known you. With your magikal skills and wealth, not to mention your allies, supporters, and contacts, you don't have to do anything you don't want to. What's more, you've proved that time and time again against some very impressive opposition."

He smiled and laid a surprisingly gentle hand on my shoulder.

"And now you tell me that you have to marry Hemlock even though you don't want to? I don't believe it."

"Well, the option is that she abdicates and I'm stuck with being king," I said, bitterly. "I want that even less."

"Then don't do that, either," the General shrugged. "How is anyone going to force you to do either if you don't voluntarily go along with it? I

know I wouldn't want the job."

His simple analysis gave me a thread of hope, but I was still reluctant to grab for it.

"But people are counting on me," I protested.

"People are counting on you to do what is right for you." Badaxe said firmly. "Though it's hard for you to see, they're assuming that you'll do what you want to do. You should have listened more closely to what my bride to be was saying to you. If you want to marry Queen Hemlock, they'll support you by not standing in the way or giving you grief. Do you really think, though, that if you firmly state that you want to continue working with them, that they won't support that with as much or more enthusiasm? That's what Massha was trying to say, but I think she was saying it too gently for you to hear. Everyone's been too gentle with you. Since you don't seem to know what you want, they've been walking on eggshells around you to let you sort it out. In the meantime, you've been straining to hear what everyone else wants rather than simply relaxing and admitting what you want."

I couldn't suppress my smile.

"Well, General," I said, "if there's one thing no one could accuse you of, it would be of not treating me overly gently."

"It seemed appropriate."

"That wasn't a complaint," I laughed. I was feeling good now, and didn't bother trying to hide it. "It was admiration . . . and thanks."

I extended my hand. He gathered it into his own and we exchanged a single, brief shake that sealed a new level in our friendship.

"I take it that you've reached your decision then?" Badaxe said, cocking an eyebrow at me.

"Affirmative," I smiled. "And your guess as to what it is would be correct. Thank you, sir. I hope it goes without saying that I'd like to return the favor sometime, should the opportunity present itself."

"Hmmm ... If you could, perhaps, show a little greater interest in the plans for the wedding," the General said. "Particularly if you could come up with a way to shorten the planning procedure?"

"I can shorten today's session," I said. "Give Massha my apologies, but I feel the need to meet with Queen Hemlock. Perhaps we can continue the session tomorrow."

"That isn't shortening the process/' Badaxe scowled. "It's prolonging it."

"Sorry, General/' I laughed, heading out the back door. "The only other suggestion I'd have is to convince her to elope. I'll hold the ladder for you."

Chapter Nineteen:

"There must be fifty ways to leave your lover!"

P. SIMON

MY MIND FINALLY made up at last, I set out to give the news to Queen Hemlock. I mean, since she was waiting for a decision from me, it wouldn't be right to delay sharing it once it had been made. Right? The fact that if I waited too long, I might chicken out entirely had nothing to do with it. Right?

Suddenly, I was very aware of the absence of my bodyguards. When I had given them their assignment to distribute my unwanted cash, it had been under the assumption that I was in no particular danger while here at the palace.

Now, I wasn't so sure.

I had noticed back when we first met, when I was masquerading as King Rodrick, that Queen Hemlock had a nasty, perhaps even a murderous streak in her. There had been no evidence of it lately, but then again, I wasn't aware of her having received any bad news of a degree such as I was bringing her, either.

I shook my head and told myself I was being silly. At her worst, the Queen was not taken to open, unpremeditated violence. If it looked like she was taking the news badly, I could simply gather the crew and skip off to another dimension before she could get around to formulating a plan for revenge. There was absolutely no reason for me to need bodyguards to protect me from her. Right?

I was still trying to convince myself of this when I reached the Queen's chambers. The honor guard standing outside her door snapped to attention, and it was too late for a graceful retreat.

Moving with a casualness I didn't feel, I knocked on her door.

"Who is it?"

"It's Skeeve, Your Majesty. I was wondering if I might speak to you if it's not inconvenient?"

There was a pause, long enough for me to get my hope up, and then the door opened.

"Lord Skeeve. This is a pleasant surprise. Please, come right in."

Queen Hemlock was dressed in a simple orange gown, which was a pleasant surprise. That she was dressed, that is, not the color of it. The first time she had entertained me in her quarters, she

had been naked when she opened the door, and it had put me at an uncomfortable disadvantage for that conversation. This time around, I figured I was going to need all the advantages I could muster.

"Your Majesty," I said, entering the room. I looked about quickly as she was shutting the door, and, when she turned, gestured toward a chair. "Please, if you could take a seat?"

She raised a questioning eyebrow at me, but took the indicated seat without argument.

"What's this all about, Skeeve?" she said. "You look so solemn."

There was no way of stalling further, so I plunged in.

"I wanted to let you know that I've made my decision regarding marrying you," I said.

"And that is?"

"I ... Your Majesty, I'm both honored and flattered that you would consider me worthy of being your consort. I had never dreamed that such a possibility existed, and, when it was suggested, had to take time to examine the concept."

"And . . ." she urged.

I realized that no amount of sugar coating would change the basic content of my decision, so I simply went for it.

"My final conclusion," I said, "is that I'm not ready for marriage at this time ... to you or anyone else. To try to pretend otherwise would be a vast disservice to that person . . . and to myself. Between my work and studies as a magician, and my desire to travel and visit other dimensions, I simply have no time or interest in settling down right now. If I did, I would doubtless end up resenting whoever or whatever had forced me to

do so. As such, I fear I must decline your kind offer."

Having said it, I braced myself for her reaction.

"Okay," she said.

I waited for a moment for her to continue, but when she didn't, I felt compelled to.

"As to your abdicating the throne to me . . . Your Majesty, I beg you to reconsider. I have no qualifications or desire to be the ruler of a kingdom. At best, I'm a good advisor . . . and even that's only with the considerable help of my colleagues and friends. I fear that if I were to attempt to undertake such a responsibility, the kingdom would suffer badly ... I know I would . . . and . . . and . . ."

My oration ground to a halt as I saw that she was laughing.

"Your Majesty? Excuse me. Did I say something funny?"

"Oh Skeeve," she gasped, coming up for air. "Did you really think ... Of course I'm not going to give up the throne. Are you kidding? I love being Queen."

"You do? But you said . . ."

"Oh, I say lots of things," she said, waving a negligent hand. "One of the nice things about being royalty is that you get to decide for yourself which of the things you say are for real and which should be ignored."

To say the least, I was confused.

"Then why did you say that if you didn't intend to follow through?" I said. "And how about your marriage proposal? Didn't you mean that, ei-

"Oh, I meant it all right," she smiled. "But I

didn't really expect you to want to marry me. I mean, why should you? You've already got wealth and power without being tied down to a throne or a wife. Why should you want to stay here and play second banana to me when you could be off hopping around the world or wherever it is that you go as the one and only Great Skeeve? It would have been fabulous for me and the kingdom to have you tied into us permanently, but there weren't any real benefits for you. That's why I came up with that abdication thing."

"Abdication thing?" I echoed weakly.

"Sure. I knew you didn't want to be a king. If you had, you would have kept the throne back when Roddie had you pose as him. Anyway, I figured that if you didn't want it bad enough, it just might make a big enough threat to lure you into playing consort for me instead."

She made a little face.

"I know it was weak, but it was the only card I had to play. What else could I do? Threaten you? With what? Even if I managed to come up with something that would present a threat to you and that menagerie of yours, all you'd have to do is wave your hands and blink off to somewhere else. It simply wouldn't be worth the effort and expense to keep tracking you down ... no offense. Going with the abdication thing, I at least had a chance of getting you to consider marrying me . . . and if nothing came of it, no harm done."

I thought of the days and nights I had been spending agonizing over my decision. Then I thought about throttling the Queen.

"No harm done," I agreed.

"So," she said, settling back in her chair, "that's that. No marriage, no abdication. At least we can still be friends, can't we?"

"Friends?" I blinked.

Even though I had met her some time back, I had never really thought of Queen Hemlock as a friend.

"Why not?" she shrugged. "If I can't have you as a consort, I'm willing to give it a try as a friend. From what I've seen, you're pretty loyal to your friends, and I'd like to have some tie to you."

"But why should that be important to you? You're a Queen, and the ruler of a fairly vast kingdom to boot."

Hemlock cocked her head at me curiously. "You really don't know, do you Skeeve? You're quite a powerful man yourself, Skeeve. I'd much rather have you as an ally, to the kingdom and for myself, than as an enemy. If you check around, I think you'll find a lot of people who would."

That sounded remarkably like what Badaxe had pointed out to me earlier.

"Besides," the Queen added, "you're a nice guy, and I don't really have many friends. You know, people I can talk to as equals who aren't afraid of me? I think in the long run, we have more problems in common than you realize."

"Except I'm in a better position to still be able to do what I want," I finished thoughtfully.

"Don't rub it in," Hemlock said, wrinkling her nose. "Well, what do you say? Friends?"

"Friends," I smiled.

On an impulse, I took her hand and kissed it lightly, then stood holding it for a few moments.

"If I may, Your Majesty, let me add my personal thanks to you for taking my refusal so well? Even if you more than half expected it, it still must have stung your pride a bit. It must have been tempting to make me squirm a little in return."

The Queen threw back her head and laughed again.

"It wouldn't be real smart of me to give you a rough time, now, would it?" she said. "As I said before, you can be a real help to the kingdom, Skeeve, even if it only means hiring you occasionally as an independent contractor. If I made you feel too bad about not marrying me, then you wouldn't ever want to see me or the kingdom again."

"I really don't know," I admitted. "The court of Possiltum gave me my first paying job as a magician. I'll probably always have a bit of a soft spot for it. Then, too, Your Majesty is not without charm as a woman."

That last bit sort of slipped out, but the Queen didn't seem to mind.

"Just not quite charming enough to settle down with, eh?" she smiled. "Well, let me know when you have some leisure time on your hands, and maybe we can explore some alternatives together."

That really took me aback.

"Ahh . . . certainly, Your Majesty. In the meantime, however, I fear it's nearly time for my colleagues and I to take our leave of Possiltum. From what Grimble tells me, the kingdom is nearly back on solid financial footing, and there are pressing matters which require our attention elsewhere."

"Of course," she said, rising to her feet. "Go with my personal gratitude, as well as the fees you so richly deserve. I'll be in touch."

I was so uncomfortable about the reference to our fees, that I was nearly to the door before her last comment sank in.

"Umm . . . Your Majesty?" I said, turning back

to her. "One more thing. Next time you need me, could you just write a note like everyone else instead of sending me a finger? It was a bit unnerving when it arrived."

"No problem," she said. "By the way, could I have the finger back? If nothing else, I'd like to have the ring to remember Roddie by."

"I thought you had it." I frowned. "I haven't seen it since our conversation when I first got back here."

"Hmm ... I wonder where it's gotten to. Oh well, I'll put the maids to work looking for it. If you happen to come across it in your things, be a dear and send it back to me?"

"Certainly, Your Majesty. Goodbye."

With that, I gave her my deepest bow and left.

Chapter Twenty:

"Meanwhile, back at reality ..."

G. LUCAS

I FELT AS if a huge weight had been lifted from my back! For the first time since my return from Pery, I was in control of my own destiny!

No more wondering about what I should or shouldn't do about marrying Queen Hemlock for the good of the kingdom, or the good of the team ... or the good of civilization, for that matter. Things were back in perspective! My future was mine to do with as I wished, without the pressure of trying to sort out what was best for others.

I found myself whistling to myself as I strode through the castle corridors, something I hadn't done in a long while, and had to fight the temptation to break into a jig.

As soon as that realization hit, that I was resisting a temptation, I immediately did a little hop-skip.

I was through trying to judge everything I did on whether or not other people thought it was proper ... or, more specifically, whether I thought other people would think it was proper. From now on, I was going to do what / wanted to do ... and the rest of the world, or the dimensions at large, could just bloody well adapt!

With that decision, I threw in an extra high kick. It may not have been classic dance, but it felt good. Heck! / felt good. Better than I could ever remember feeling.

I became aware of a couple people staring at me from afar, and a few more craning their necks for a better look. Rather than feeling embarrassed or self-conscious, I waved at them gaily and continued my prancing.

I had to tell someone! Share my new-found happiness with my friends. They had all stood by me through the bad times. Now I wanted to be with them when I felt good!

I'd tell Bunny ... no, Aahz! I'd tell Aahz first and then Bunny. My partner deserved to be the first to know.

"Hey Boss! Skeeve!"

I turned to see Nunzio beckoning me from the other end of the corridor. I was surprised to see him, and started to wave. Then it dawned on me that this was the first time he had ever called me to join him instead of the other way around. A

"Come quick, Boss! It's important!"

My fears were confirmed. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

I hurried to join him, but he moved off down

corridor ahead of me, looking back from time
:o time to see if I was following.

"Wait for me, Nunzio!" I called.

"Hurry, Boss!" he replied, not slackening his
pace.

I was starting to get a bit winded trying to catch
up with him, but if anything he seemed to be
increasing his speed. Then he ducked down a
flight of stairs, and an idea came to me.

When I reached the stairs, instead of descending
normally, I vaulted over the railing and used my
magik to fly (which is really levitation in reverse)
after him. This seemed to be a bit faster than
running, and certainly a lot easier on the lungs, so
I kept it up. I managed to catch my breath and
catch up with my bodyguard just as we were
emerging into the palace courtyard.

"What's this all about, Nunzio?" I said, slowing
my speed to match his pace.

Instead of answering, he pointed ahead.

There was a group of people gathered in the
courtyard. Some were guards or other people I had
seen around the palace, but there also seemed to
be a batch of costumed characters with them.
Then I saw Guido and Pookie in the group . . .
and Aahz!

"Hey Aahz! What's happening?" I called.

At the sound of my voice, the whole group
looked in my direction, then fell back slightly
and . . .

And then I saw what they were gathered around.

"GLEEP!"

My pet dragon was lying on his side, showing
no sign of his usual energy and life.

I don't recall landing ... or of moving at all. I just remember crouching at my pet's side and gathering his head into my lap.

"What's wrong, fellah?" I said, but got no response. "Aahz? What's the matter with him?"

"Skeeve, I ..." my partner began, but then I saw it.

Protruding from Gleep's side, just behind his leg, was an arrow!

At that moment, I felt my pet stir in my arms, weakly trying to raise his head.

"Take it easy, fellah," I said, trying to sound soothing.

Gleep's eyes found mine.

"Skeeve?" he said faintly, then went limp, his head falling back on my lap.

He had said my name! The first thing he had ever said other than the sound that had given him his name.

I carefully eased his head onto the ground and rose. I stood looking down at him for several moments, then raised my eyes to the surrounding crowd. I don't know what my expression was, but they all gave ground several steps as my gaze passed over them.

When I spoke, I tried to keep my voice soft and level, but it seemed to come from far away.

"All right," I said. "I want to know what's been going on here . . . and I want to know now!!"

Indeed, what has been going on while Skeeve was preoccupied? Here is an advance peek at the next MythAdventure!

SOMETHING M.Y.T.H. INC.

Robert Asprin
Prologue

Like wildfire, word spread throughout the land . . .
from town to village, from peddler to peasant. . .
that their once idyllic kingdom was now under the
control of a mighty magician who held the Queen
in thrall

Though it was customary for the common folk
to pay little attention to who it was that ruled
them, much less the antics and machinations of
palace politics, this time it was different.

It was clear to even a casual observer that the
magician dabbled in the Black Arts. He openly
associated with and sought counsel from de-
mons, who even now roamed the corridors of the
palace. As further evidence of his other-worldly
nature and preferences, the magician kept a fierce
dragon as a pet . . . a rarity that even the ani-
mal-loving ecologists of the land found disquiet-