

Dark Origins

Tales of the Scarlet Knight, #0

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Chapter 1

My Dinner with Merlin.

It was almost four thousand years ago, in what came to be known as Britain, when I first met Merlin. I had just been exiled from the village when my latest attempt at conjuring killed Bleeth's chickens. My woman, Beaux, had decided she'd rather share a bed with her grubby sheep than with me.

The only place I could take shelter was a cave out in the woods. It wasn't much of a cave, more like a hole in a rock. I didn't even have room enough to stand up without hitting my head.

I did manage to find enough dry wood to get a fire going. Not a great fire, but enough so I wouldn't freeze to death. I managed to catch a squirrel, which would have impressed Beaux; she never thought I was any good at hunting or gathering. The squirrel had accidentally fallen out of a tree and broken its leg, but I counted it as a victory.

As I sit by my fire and roast my squirrel, Merlin appears. These days everyone likes to depict Merlin as an old man with a long white beard and all that, which isn't true in the slightest. He has a neat black beard with short black hair. It has a little gray in it since he's nearly forty, ancient in those days, but he's in good shape. In the firelight I can see his skin is a bit darker, much tanner than anyone I've seen before.

"Greetings, stranger. May I partake of your hospitality?" He speaks my language perfectly, though with a bit of an accent.

"I'm afraid I don't have much to offer," I say. I gesture to the squirrel and my fire. "There's a village not far from here. You'd have better luck there."

"No, the time is not right for me to appear there. Not by myself. I need your help, Marlin."

"How do you know my name?"

"I know a great many things about you, Marlin. I know Beaux still loves you. She will return in time."

"Now see here—"

He sits down across the fire from me. He looks me in the eye and then says, "What you seek is a calling."

"What I seek is a roof over my head and some food in my belly."

"You've tried a great many things to prove your worth, but none have taken. Why is that?"

"Might be because I'm not very strong. Or very brave, if you must know. Can't be a coward if you want to be chief."

"You don't wish to be chief."

"I don't? Then what do I want to do?"

"You want to be a beacon of light."

I laugh at that. My squirrel has started to blacken, so I pluck it from the fire. I hold out the spit to him. "A pity I can't offer you any better, stranger."

"It will be enough," he says. He waves his right hand and instead of a tiny squirrel on the spit, there's a plump chicken. He pries a leg quarter off of it. "Go on, it's real."

"How did you do that?"

"You will learn, in time. What you must know for now is that a darkness is rising. I can fight against it, but I need help. Your help."

"Me? I don't see what good I'll be to someone who can turn a squirrel into a chicken. Care to teach me that trick? It'd make Old Greetha green with envy."

"I'm afraid not."

"Then what am I supposed to do for you?"

"I am a stranger to this land. I know nothing of its people or customs. I need a guide. I need someone who can clear the path for me."

"Me? You want me to do that?" I laugh again. "I'm sorry, my friend, but I'm the most hated man in the village. They exiled me."

"They don't hate you. They have no respect for you. We must give them a reason to respect you."

"How?"

"Behold." He waves his hand again and a pillar of flame shoots to the ceiling of the cave. I just about wet my skins when he walks through the flame. Yet when he emerges, there isn't a bit of him singed. I touch his hand; it's ice cold.

"If I am to save this world from darkness, I need your help."

I consider this for a few seconds. Mostly I think of the look on the chief's face—on all their faces—when they see him walk through fire with me at his side. Then they'll see who's a joke. "I'm in." We didn't shake hands back then. Instead, I hold up my left thumb. He presses his to it to seal our agreement.

"Say, stranger, I didn't get your name."

"You can call me Merlin."

Chapter 2

The Gift.

She ran through the forest with no idea where she was going. All she knew was she had to get away. There was a whole mob after her with torches and scythes and other farm implements. If they caught her, she was dead.

She still didn't have any idea what had happened to her. One moment she had been milking the goats as she always did and the next her entire body had begun to glow. Her biggest mistake had been to run to her mother for help. Instead of helping her, her mother tried to disembowel her with a knife.

"Demon!" her mother screamed.

"Mother, no," she pleaded.

It hadn't mattered. Her mother raised the alarm and soon the whole village had come after her. She had escaped them, but for the last two moons she had been on the run. It was the same wherever she went; something strange would happen and she'd be cast out as a demon, a herd of angry villagers on her trail.

She crashed into some brush and then felt her scalp blaze with pain. The rest of her body wasn't glowing or on fire, so this wasn't another fit as she had decided to call them. This was something far more ordinary: her wild black hair was caught in the brush.

She clawed frantically to clear the brush from her hair. She wished at that moment she'd brought a knife to cut it off, but she didn't have one. She didn't have anything but the animal skins on her back.

After a few minutes she had only gotten herself more tangled in the brush. She began to cry. What good was it? Even if she got out of this, where would she go? No one would ever accept her, not like this. She was cursed.

"You're not cursed," a voice hissed in her ear. "You have received a wonderful gift. You only need to control it, G'lyna."

She tried to turn her head, but she couldn't. "Who are you? How do you know me?"

A girl appeared before her. She wasn't much older than G'lyna and yet there was something regal and commanding in her brown eyes. "My name is Anybl. I was like you not long ago." To prove it, Anybl's hand started to glow. "You see?"

"You can control it?"

"Yes. So can you. I can help you."

"How?"

"You'll see. But first, we need to free you from this mess you've gotten into." The girl smiled and then began to help G'lyna get the brush from her hair. By the time they finished, G'lyna heard voices approaching.

"Oh no, they're going to find us."

Anybl only smiled again. "They won't find us. Take my hand."

G'lyna didn't see what she had to lose at this point. She took Anybl's hand. There was a flash of light—

G'lyna found herself atop a mountain. A cold wind chilled her through the animal skins. "Where are we?"

"Near where I grew up. I have a hut nearby. There's a fire and food. And some warmer clothes for you."

It turned out Anybl hadn't lied. There was a hut, the inside of which was warm as a summer day. A pair of birds roasted on spits. There were two bear pelts, one for Anybl and one for G'lyna.

"I can't thank you enough for this," G'lyna said.

"You don't need to thank me. You just need to listen to me. More of us will come soon. I'll need help to prepare them."

"I don't understand."

"We are only the first, G'lyna. Soon we will have many sisters, women just like you and I. They'll need someone to help them as I helped you. Together we will grow stronger."

"And then we can take our revenge on those who tried to kill us?"

"No. We will protect those people." Anybl took G'lyna's hand and squeezed it. "As I said, this is a gift. Very soon a terrible darkness will fall upon the land. We must stand against it or it will consume everything."

Right on cue, G'lyna heard something heavy crash to the ground outside. Another and another crash followed. Anybl held up a hand for G'lyna to stay quiet. She crept over to the door of the hut.

A moment later, a clawed hand reached through the flap to yank Anybl out of the hut. G'lyna screamed her name. She bolted through the door after Anybl. Outside, she found three creatures standing over Anybl.

These creatures were actual demons. Their skin was blacker than the night. Claws extended from their fingers and toes. Leathery bat wings were folded against their backs. And their eyes were a very unnatural gold color.

"G'lyna, run!" Anybl shouted.

One of the demons turned to G'lyna. It grinned, revealing rows of pointed teeth. "Another child to feast on," the demon hissed.

"G'lyna—"

"I'm not going anywhere," G'lyna growled. Her entire body began to glow as it had before. "You three get out of here."

"What will you do, child? Cry for your mother?"

G'lyna didn't answer; her body did that for her. The glow that had encompassed it fired three bolts of light. Each bolt incinerated a demon, leaving only ash in the snow.

Then G'lyna knelt down beside Anybl. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," Anybl said. She smiled. "You see now?"

"I see," G'lyna said. This ability of hers wasn't a curse; it was a gift.

Chapter 3

The Chieftain.

Our village didn't have many outsiders visit. Those outsiders who did show up, did not receive a warm welcome. That's why when we arrive, the chief's sons have their spears leveled at Merlin's throat. "Now see here," I say. "He's not dangerous. He's my friend."

"Your friend? Then we should kill him now," says Elgar, the uglier of the two.

"You kill him and you'll be making a big mistake."

Elgar turns away from Merlin to glare at me. “Why would that be?” He taps me on the chest with a finger the size of a kipper.

“Because he could turn you into something uglier than you already are,” I say. “He’s a conjurer, even better than Greetha.”

“Is that a fact, old man?” Elgar says to Merlin. “You can summon the dark powers?”

“Not dark powers,” Merlin says. “I summon the light.”

“Light, dark, it won’t save you from my spear.”

Merlin flicks one wrist and Elgar’s spear turns into a fish that wriggles out of his hand to plop onto the ground. Elgar cocks his fist back to pulverize Merlin’s face. His fist stops about two inches from Merlin’s nose. I stare at him for a moment, as does his brother, but Elgar doesn’t move. He doesn’t even breathe.

The chief’s other son, the gangly, pimple-faced Artr, lowers his spear. “You are a conjurer,” he says.

“I have come to see your father.”

“What for?”

“That is for us to discuss. Take us to him.”

Artr thinks about it for a moment, but then decides discretion is the better part of valor. He leads us to the chief’s hut. It’s not much better than the other huts, just a bit bigger than the rest. It contains all the treasures of the village, which at that time are mostly jars of food. The chief dips into those jars quite often, which is obvious from the gut hanging over his waist.

“Father, there is someone to see you.”

The chief pushes away his wife to glare up at us. “I thought I banished you.”

“You did, but I’ve come back. I’ve brought someone to meet you.”

“Get out of here. Both of you! Where is Elgar?”

“He’s taking a rest,” I say.

“Go and fetch him,” the chief tells Artr. “Then dispose of these two.”

“Yes, Father.”

We’re left alone with the chief and his unconscious wife. “I should have you know, Merlin here is a mighty conjurer. And he’s passed his skills on to me.” Just like that, my right arm begins to burn, but I don’t feel warm at all. I wish I could say I had conjured the flame, but it was all Merlin.

“Before you two die, tell me why you’ve come.”

“A darkness will soon wreak havoc on this land,” Merlin says. “To combat this evil, I will need help.”

“You want my warriors to fight for you?”

“Not all of them. Only one.”

“And what do I receive for this?”

“Only my favor.”

“What good is that to me?”

“You’ve seen the power Marlin and I wield. Imagine what good that can mean to your people.”

The chief smiles. “Yes, I imagine there is much good you could do.” The chief’s eyes gleam. I’m sure he’s thinking about how much food Merlin could conjure up for him. Maybe even another wife or two, wives who are younger and more attractive.

Merlin puts a hand on my shoulder. “We should go.”

“What? But he was going to agree—”

“The chief’s heart is seized by darkness. He would use my power to satisfy his greed.”

We start to back away. The chief gets to his feet, a knife in his hand. “Wait! You two shall not leave here!”

“We will return, when your heart is clearer.”

The chief tries to stop Merlin, but with a wave of Merlin’s hand the dagger turns into a lizard. While the chief swats at the lizard, Merlin and I show ourselves out.

Then it’s back to our little cave in the forest to wait.

Chapter 4

Plague.

The hole in the rock isn’t all that comfortable for me but it’s even less comfortable to accommodate two people. I ask Merlin if he can conjure us up a hut, but he shakes his head. “Magic can’t be used for everything. Some things a man should do with his own muscles.”

It takes us a week to build a makeshift hut out of logs and branches. We build it on a bed of moss so we have the old world’s version of carpeting. The finished product isn’t much to look at, but at least Merlin and I can stand up all the way.

We’re putting the finishing touches on the hut when I hear a familiar voice say, “I never knew you were such a carpenter.”

I turn and see Beaux in her mangy sheepskin, armed with the bloody club she uses to protect the sheep from predators. Her blond hair has more leaves in it than usual and her face is stained with more dirt. “You been sleeping in a mud puddle?”

“It’s better than this place.”

Merlin emerges from the hut. He claps my shoulder. “Ah, I told you Beaux would return.”

“Just once it would be nice if you were wrong,” I grumble. “What brings you back here, woman? Get tired of only sheep for comfort?”

“The sheep are better companions than you’ll ever be,” she says. “I’ve come to see your friend the conjurer.”

“What do you want him for? He don’t know nothing about sheep.”

“There’s plague in the village. People are dying. They say your friend is more powerful than even Greetha.”

“Of course he is. He’s the greatest conjurer in all the land.”

“Then will he help us?”

“Why should he? The chief tried to kill us before. So did that ugly son of his. We ought to let the lot of you—”

“Hold,” Merlin says. “I will help. But I will require Beaux’s assistance.”

“What? I’m your apprentice, not this... this *woman*.”

“No one knows this land quite like a shepherdess. I will require some special herbs to cure the plague.”

We venture deep into the forest with Beaux leading the way. As Merlin said, she knows the area better than anyone from all that tramping around with her

bloody sheep. I follow after her and decide this is as close to some alone time as we'll get.

"I've missed you," I say.

"The bed's not quite the same with Merlin, is it?"

"Better him than sheep."

"Better sheep than *you*."

"I said I've missed you. Am I supposed to get on my hands and knees to beg?"

"That might be a good start."

"Well too bad, because I did nothing wrong."

"Nothing wrong? You killed Bleeth's chickens! And before that, you ruined a whole basket of apples with that conjuring of yours."

"Maybe I wasn't a great conjurer then, but now—" I hold up my hand to pull the same trick as in the chief's hut. Nothing happens.

"Now what?"

"Just wait a minute." I look over my shoulder, but Merlin is on his knees to study some leaves. I clear my throat and he looks up. "I said I might not have been a great conjurer, but now—"

The moment Merlin nods, my hand lights on fire again. I turn triumphantly to Beaux. "You see that? Let's see your precious Greetha do that."

"Merlin is the conjurer, not you," Beaux says. She stomps off. I wait until the fire's died out to follow after her.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I only did that because you won't seem to listen to reason."

"Reason? What reason could there be to let you back into my bed?"

"What do you want from me?"

"I want you to be *something!* Do you think I want a husband who's a laughingstock?"

"Maybe I haven't had much success so far, but this time it's different. Merlin saw something in me. He said I would be instrumental in combating the darkness that threatens the land. *Instrumental!*"

"You don't seem very instrumental so far. All you've done is blunder after me like usual."

"Is that so?" I grab her by the arm and pull her into a kiss. As always her mouth tastes like old berries; I get a couple seeds caught in my teeth. Still, it's the sweetest thing I've tasted in weeks.

The kiss is interrupted by Beaux clubbing the back of my left leg. I stagger back a few steps. "What was that for?"

"How dare you! Did you think that would impress me?"

"I don't know!"

We glare at each other for a few moments, until Merlin clears his throat. "Excuse me, but I have what I need. We should go back to the hut so I can prepare the potion."

"Fine," I grumble. I trudge after him with Beaux picking up the rear.

Merlin boils the leaves and other ingredients in the sole cracked pot I took from the village. "You're sure this will work?" Beaux asks.

"It will," he says.

I get the honor of lugging the pot into the village. That no one stops us is a testament to how bad things are. Beaux leads the way to the chief's hut. Before she can open the flap, it lifts on its own. I nearly spill the pot of medicine when I see a bear rising from the hut.

“Outsiders!” the bear shouts. I realize then it’s not an actual bear but Old Greetha, clad in the skin of a bear. “Leave this place!”

“We will do nothing of the kind, woman,” I say.

“You will leave here or you will die,” she growls. The bear’s head she wears like a cap lifts enough so I can see the madness in her eyes. The next thing I know, there’s a dagger in my midsection.

I manage to set the pot on the ground before I collapse next to it.

Chapter 5

War of Magic.

There’s not much worse of a feeling than lying on the ground with a dagger in your midsection. The only thing worse is when the one who stabbed you stands over you, chanting a bunch of nonsense to make sure your soul goes to the darkest corner of the underworld. I’d tell her to shut up, but I’m too busy trying not to scream at the moment.

“What did you do that for?” Beaux shouts. “We came to help.”

“You came to infect them with *his* dark magic,” Greetha says. She points a finger, its nail half a foot long, at Merlin, who thus far has done nothing but stand there. “This I will not allow.”

“I mean no harm to the village or yourself,” Merlin says. “The shepherdess said there was a plague. I brewed a potion to cure it.”

Greetha bends down to snatch the pot away. Though half my blood is on the ground, I try to stop her. “Let her have it,” Merlin says.

Greetha opens the lid of the pot and sniffs at it. “What dark magic is this?”

“It’s the magic of the forest,” Merlin says. “Just a simple brew of herbs to treat the plague.”

“This is no ordinary brew. You’ve infected it somehow.”

“I’ve done nothing to it. Go on and try it on one of the infected. See what it does.”

“I will do no such thing. You will leave and take this wretch with you. He does not deserve to die here.”

I mutter a curse. Beaux kneels down beside me. “We can’t let him die anywhere. One of you, please, help him.”

“I will not help one in league with an outsider.”

“Marlin is not in league with me. He is my friend.” Merlin bends down. He puts his hand on my midsection. The pain disappears. I look down to see the cut has healed; even the rent in my animal skin is gone. Only the blood on the ground is a reminder that anything’s happened.

Merlin and Beaux help me to my feet. “Take him to rest. Greetha and I will settle this.”

“There’s nothing to settle. You and your minions will leave and never come back. And take your vile potion with you!”

Greetha hurls the pot at Merlin. He holds up a hand. The pot stops in midair. He pulls it out of the air to set on the ground again. Greetha lets out a cry of rage. “You dare to defy me?”

When she reaches beneath the bear pelt I brace for her to take out another dagger. Instead, she takes out some yellowed bones. From the size and thickness, they probably came from a deer. She levels the bones at Merlin and then begins to chant in her strange language.

Nothing happens. She chants louder and then begins a shuffling dance while she does it. Still Merlin stands there, impassive. She hurls the bones at his feet. From inside the pelt she takes out the heavy artillery: a wolf's skull.

All the chanting and screaming has drawn a crowd. The red boils on some faces indicate those with the plague. They all stare wide-eyed at Greetha, waiting for her to destroy Merlin. Though I always knew Greetha's "magic" was bollocks, I can't help but feel a nervous flutter when she raises that wolf's skull.

With the skull poised over her head, she shrieks some of her nonsense words. She dances within an inch of Merlin's face. I'm sure she's getting spit in his beard from all her screaming. He remains impassive, to the point I think he might have turned to stone.

It takes only a flick of his hand to end it. That flick sends Greetha back at least twenty feet, through the flap of the chief's hut. Merlin says nothing to celebrate his victory. He simply picks up the pot and then carries it over to the nearest infected villager, my old friend Bleeth.

"Take some of this and apply it to your sores," Merlin says. "In the morning, you will feel better."

"No!" Greetha roars. "Do not trust him! He's an outsider!"

She recovers herself, but the head of the bear's pelt is crooked. She looks smaller to me, her power diminished. She gathers up the bones and skull to continue her chanting, but no one pays her any mind. They flock around the pot to take some of Merlin's potion.

In the morning, the village is cured and Greetha is gone.

Chapter 6

Darkness Rising.

In the land not yet known as Egypt, a beautiful woman rested on a couch and stared into a pool of dark water. She was the most beautiful woman in perhaps the whole world at that point; she certainly thought so. As she looked into the water, she didn't ask it who was the fairest in the land; she had something much larger on her mind.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a scream. A pair of young men crashed to the stone floor in front of her couch. They quivered there while their attacker stood over them. Their attacker was a man clad in a black loincloth and an equally black headdress in the shape of a dog's head—the symbol of the god Anubis. On each hand the monster wore a gauntlet made of the paws of a bear, an animal quite exotic for Egypt of the time.

The claws on the gauntlets were even sharper than those of a normal bear; the monster proved this when he sliced open the chest of one man. With the precision of a surgeon, he cut out the man's heart. The organ was still beating when he presented it to his mistress.

She cupped it in her hands to watch it beat. “This is all you bring me? This is hardly worthy of my dogs,” she growled.

“I am sorry, my master,” the monster said. “I will go find others to serve you.”

“No, these will do. I have another use for your talents.”

The monster cut out the second heart while his master devoured the first. She didn’t eat it the way one would eat an apple. Instead, she held the heart up to her mouth and it simply dematerialized. She let out a sigh as if she’d just eaten a joint of mutton.

She motioned to her servant for the second heart. She devoured it in the same way. Then she leaned back on the couch while a couple of slaves scurried in to take the bodies away. They worked quickly and silently so they wouldn’t be next up on the menu.

Once she and the monster were alone, the woman gestured to the pool of water. “Several moons ago we lost something important,” she said.

“Forgive me, master. He was more cunning than I anticipated.”

“Of course he was,” she said. “He was my most gifted student.”

“You wish for me to find him?”

“There’s no need to find him. I know exactly where he is. He’s in a land far to the north. He hopes to avoid my gaze there. The fool doesn’t realize he can’t go anywhere to escape *my* notice.”

“Then I will go there and kill him.”

“No, you will not *kill* him. Bring him back to me. But be warned, he’s preparing for your arrival.”

“I won’t fail you again, master.”

“I should hope not.”

The monster bowed to her. “I will make ready to leave at once. If I may be so bold, though, what will you do while I am gone? Who will harvest your sustenance?”

“I can take care of myself for a few moons.” She shook her head. “I hate to have to dirty my hands with this rabble, but it’s necessary.”

“Would it not be easier for you to go to the traitor? With your power, you could be upon him in seconds.”

“Are you questioning my wisdom?”

“Not at all, my master.”

“Good. Now go. Find Merlin and bring him back to me. Let no one stand in your way.”

The monster bowed again and then backed out of the room. He set out on foot to the north, to where Merlin—and me—waited. In her palace, the beautiful woman leaned back on her couch and sighed. She had made a mistake in underestimating Merlin once, but she wasn’t going to make that mistake again. This time she would make certain to destroy him—and anyone else who got in her way.

Chapter 7

Training Camp.

Not quite so far south, in what will become France, G'lyna watches her new recruits and sighs. Anybl had warned her the other girls would need guidance; G'lyna had hoped it wouldn't require this much guidance. The youngest, Syva, is almost feral, to the point she tried to eat a spoon on the first night.

The beautiful Agga on the other hand can't stop herself from complaining about every little thing. "Why do we have to stand out here in the cold?" she whines.

"In order to learn control, you need to get in touch with the world around you."

"Can't I do that in front of the fire?"

"No," G'lyna snaps. She supposes this is the problem with trying to manage a bunch of teenagers. She wasn't this bad when she first began to quicken, was she? If she was, it was because she had to fear for her life, until Anybl found her. Girls like Agga were just spoiled brats used to having everything their own way.

"Patience," Anybl whispers in her ear. Her friend has a talent for appearing out of thin air the moment G'lyna needs her. "It's a big adjustment."

At that moment there's a scream. G'lyna turns to see Syva on top of Sofe, the brightest of their recruits. The younger girl shrieks something in her native tongue while trying to claw Sofe's eyes out. G'lyna is going to intervene until Anybl puts a hand on her shoulder.

A moment later, Syva goes flying and lands at G'lyna's feet. Sofe stands up, her hands glowing. Anybl hurries over to her to put a hand on her shoulder. "It's all right, Sofe. You can relax now. No one will hurt you."

"You should send that *thing* back to the woods where it belongs."

"I want to go home," Agga whines.

Most of the others seem to share that feeling, all except the stoic Hise, who just stands there with her arms crossed. She hasn't said more than five words that G'lyna can remember since she arrived from the farthest end of the world a week ago. And yet she's already the second-best student besides Sofe.

"Hise, take the others inside to warm up," G'lyna says. She grabs Syva by the arm. The girl struggles to free herself, but can't. "Syva and I are going to have a little talk."

She drags the girl into the forest, where no one else will be able to see or hear them. At first Syva continues to struggle, but eventually she stops and plods along with G'lyna. At a thicket, G'lyna motions to a log. Syva sits down.

G'lyna brushes the wild dark red hair from Syva's face to look into her green eyes; they're the eyes of a frightened child, not an animal. With a spell Anybl helped her with, G'lyna speaks in Syva's native tongue. "You don't have to be afraid. No one is going to hurt you."

The girl only grunts at this. G'lyna takes her hand. "What happened? What did Sofe say?"

"She said I was a dirty savage," Syva says.

"And you thought that was a good reason to kill her?"

"I wasn't going to kill her. I just wanted to scare her."

"I understand, but that was wrong. Sofe is your sister and you should never, ever hurt your sister."

"She's not my sister. My sisters are back home. I should be with them, not out here."

Now G'lyna began to understand. Most of them had left family behind when they began to quicken, but for Syva it was different. She had cared for her sisters like a mother, but then she had been forced to leave them behind so they wouldn't be marked as demons and executed.

G'lyna sat next to Syva on the log. She put an arm around the girl's shoulder. "I'm sure your sisters will be fine. You taught them to take care of themselves, didn't you?"

"They're still so young. Emba is just two summers old. I should be with her."

"I know, but you can't. None of us can be with our families. But we have a new family now. We're all sisters: you, me, and even Sofe. And we have something very important to do."

"We do?"

"Yes. Anybl and I haven't told the others yet, but very soon a darkness will descend upon the land. We have been chosen to fight it."

"Why?"

"I don't know, but I do know when the time comes, we will all need to work together. It will take our combined strength to destroy this evil. If we don't, then it'll overtake the whole world—including your sisters."

Syva considers this for a few minutes. She finally nods. "Then I will do what I must to help," she says.

"Good. You can start by apologizing to Sofe. But first, let's get you a bath. You do stink a little."

Syva grins at this and gives G'lyna's hand a squeeze. Then they go to the stream to wash up. G'lyna helps Syva clean her clothes as well and ties her hair back so it no longer covers her face. "Now you look very pretty," G'lyna says.

"Thank you," Syva says. The girl leans against G'lyna as they trudge back to the camp, where their sisters await them.

Chapter 8

Fight & Flee.

The two girls battle in the snow. Hise, the older of the two, moves with supernatural grace to duck under the swing of the other girl's staff. Syva, the youngest of all the girls, curses in her native tongue. She groans when Hise's stick hits her in the back and sends her tumbling to the ground.

Hise looks down on Syva and bows slightly. "You fight well," she says, "but you lack patience."

Syva jumps to her feet. "Let's do it again."

"That's enough," G'lyna says from up in a tree. She drops to the ground, between the combatants. "Let's go inside and get some dinner."

"I don't need to eat," Syva insists. "I can beat her."

"I'm sure you can, but I'm hungry. Let's go."

Syva looks ready to argue, but then drops her staff. She follows after G'lyna and Hise into the main hut, where the others await them. It's a tight squeeze for fifty girls, but they've learned to manage over the past six moons.

As if reading her thoughts, Anybl touches G'lyna's arm. "We need to talk."

They go outside, back into the cold. Anybl asks, "How are they doing?"

"I'm sure Hise could beat any man and Syva isn't far behind."

"Good. We'll need them soon."

"How soon?"

"A few days. The Black Demon is almost here."

"We won't be ready in a couple of days for something like that."

"I know, but we don't have a choice."

* * * * *

Agga, who has the best foresight of any of the girls, keeps track of the Demon's movements. As Anybl said, he's coming straight for them, marching through the mountains without pause to rest. He walks even through the night.

"If we can lure him into the pass then we can trap him," says Sofe, the most intelligent of them. She lays out their strategy. Hise and Syva will draw the Demon into the pass, where the others will fire down upon him. G'lyna doesn't like it, but she can't argue with the logic either.

"Just one thing," G'lyna says. "I'm going with Hise and Syva."

"G'lyna—"

"It's my decision."

Anybl looks into her eyes for a moment and then nods. "How soon should he be in the area?"

"By dawn, I think," Agga says.

"Good. Then let us prepare."

* * * * *

G'lyna huddles with Hise, Syva, and Agga behind an outcropping of rock. Agga has her eyes closed to watch the Demon's movements. As she foresaw, the Demon will be near the pass in less than an hour, as the sun rises.

Beside G'lyna, Syva sharpens a dagger. "I can't wait to slit his throat."

"We're not to fight him," G'lyna says.

"But—"

"We won't fight him except as a last resort. Understand?"

Like a scolded child, Syva looks down at the snow and nods. "I understand."

The sun is beginning to rise when G'lyna sees the Demon for herself. Despite the cold he's bare-chested and his legs are mostly bare as well. He wears a black headdress shaped like a dog and a pair of bear paws on his hands. The claws on his hands look much sharper than those of a normal bear.

Before G'lyna can say anything, Syva charges out from hiding. She screams the war cry of her village as she lunges at the Demon. He lets her plunge the dagger into his chest. The dagger shatters in Syva's hand. Without a word, the Demon backhands Syva with one clawed hand. She slams into a rock and goes limp.

The Demon starts towards her. G'lyna stands up and puts up a hand. The snow around the Demon begins to swirl. "Agga, get Syva back to camp. Hise and I will deal with the Demon."

Agga nods. She vanishes herself across the gap to where Syva lays; with a flash of light, both are gone. Meanwhile, Hise trots towards the Demon with far more caution than Syva. G'lyna continues to swirl the snow around the Demon, not that it seems to faze him.

Hise is the best warrior G'lyna has seen, but even she is no match for the Demon. She ducks under his claws a few times. Unlike Syva, she tries her

dagger on the Demon's left hamstring. Again the dagger shatters. Then he plunges a clawed hand into her right leg. With a scream, Hise collapses.

G'lyna vanishes herself across the gap to scoop Hise up. G'lyna vanishes her and Hise back a few feet. "Come and get us."

Then she runs.

* * * * *

The Demon follows them into the pass without a care. G'lyna plants herself in the middle of the pass with Hise still in her arms. She stares back at the Demon. "It's time to end this," she says.

At that moment Anybl and the others reveal themselves on either side of the pass. G'lyna vanishes herself and Hise up to meet them as they begin to rain down ice, static energy, and fireballs at the Demon. He stands in the middle of the pass, absorbing the punishment without flinching.

"It's not working!" G'lyna says.

Anybl nods. "Then we have to go to the backup plan."

G'lyna is going to ask what this is, but then she feels the ground tremble. Snow and rock at the end of the pass begin to collapse. Before long, an avalanche descends upon the Demon. Several feet of snow and stone entomb the monster.

G'lyna lets out a sigh of relief, until she sees the snowy tomb shake. A clawed hand appears through the snow, followed by another. Then the dog-shaped headdress bursts through. The Demon glares up at them. "I am not here to trifle with children. Return to your homes and you will be spared."

"What do we do now?" Sofe asks.

"We retreat," Anybl says. "I hope Merlin has better luck."

Chapter 9

The Messenger.

After he saved the village from the plague, Merlin could have taken over as chief. Of course he refused that honor. He might have at least consulted me first to see if I wanted to be chief. That would surely have reconciled Beaux and I.

He refuses to even accept a hut in the village. Instead, he goes back to our makeshift hut in the forest with its floor of moss. He does allow the villagers to give us some good pelts to sleep on.

"I don't see why you won't live in the village. I thought that's what you wanted," I say.

"I only wished the villagers to accept me." He pulls his bear pelt tighter around him. "I prefer to stay out here, close to the world."

"That's all well and good, but I prefer to be someplace where I don't have to worry about being eaten by wolves."

"No harm will come to us here."

"I suppose." As I curl up beneath my bear pelt, I put a hand on my midsection, where Greetha cut me. Merlin healed the wound with a wave of his

hand, but I can still feel some pain every now and then. We didn't have psychology back then to understand the concept of "phantom pain."

"I don't suppose with all that power of yours, you could make Beaux decide she doesn't want to stay with those sheep anymore?"

"I could, but then she wouldn't be the woman you love, would she?"

"Curse your damnable logic," I grumble.

I've just fallen asleep when a flash of white light wakes me up. I open my eyes to see the glowing form of a young woman. "What are you?" I blurt out.

My master is far calmer. He looks up at the woman and nods. "Hello, Anybl. I expected to see you soon."

"You knew she was coming and you didn't tell me?"

"I saw no reason to worry you." Merlin waves his hand to restart the fire. The girl's unearthly glow fades. She sits down across from us by the fire. To my surprise, she starts to sob.

"What's the matter, woman? I didn't mean anything—"

"We've failed you, my lord!" Anybl wails.

Merlin goes over to the girl to wrap her in a hug. She looks so much younger now, practically a child. He strokes her brown hair and says, "It's all right. You did what you could."

"It wasn't enough. I'm sorry."

"The fault is mine. I underestimated his power."

"What are you two talking about?"

"The Black Demon is on the march. She's sent him to take me back."

"That doesn't make it any clearer."

Merlin sighs. "My former master is a woman named Isis. She believes herself to be a goddess and indeed her powers are as strong as any god, so long as she maintains her strength. She does this by feeding on the souls of the living. The Black Demon is her servant. She created him to retrieve sacrifices for her."

"And she was *your* master?"

"Yes. I studied under her for a time, until I realized the darkness in her heart. Then I fled to this place. Now she wants me back."

"You must stop this demon," Anybl says. "Only you have the power—"

"Not even I can destroy her creation." Merlin shakes his head. In that instant he looks like just a normal man, not the greatest conjurer in the land. "To defeat the Demon, we need a warrior, one who is brave, strong, and most importantly pure of heart."

"How do we do that?"

Merlin claps me on the shoulder. "Go to the village and search among the warriors there."

"What about you?"

"I have other business to attend to."

"What of me, my lord?" Anybl asks.

"Go back to your coven. They will continue to grow and flourish. When the time comes, I may call on you again."

"Yes, my lord," Anybl says. She gets unsteadily to her feet. "We will be ready next time. I swear it."

Merlin nods to her. The girl disappears in another flash of light. I turn to Merlin. "What is this business you're attending to?"

"You will find out, in time. For now, we must rest. Tomorrow we have much work to do."

I want to argue, but Merlin puts his hand to my forehead. I'm asleep before I even hit the ground. That's the trouble with having a conjurer as your roommate.

Chapter 10

The Trial, Part 1.

By the time I wake up the next morning, Merlin has gone. I have no idea where he's gone, but his instructions from last night come back to me. With a groan I sit up and then look around for some dried meat to snack on for breakfast.

I'm still eating when Beaux shows up. She doesn't bother to announce herself; she just dives right through the door. "Figures you wouldn't be up and about yet," she says.

"Care for a bite?" I ask.

"I've already eaten."

"I'm sure you have, but this is better than some berries and nuts."

"I haven't time and neither do you. You're supposed to be in the village."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he told me before he left. Now get moving. You can finish eating on the way."

I grumble to myself, but soon enough we're on our way. I try to make small talk, but she has none of that. She's more concerned about those sheep of hers. By the time she gets back, they'll probably all have run off or gotten themselves eaten by wolves.

"I don't know why you bother with them. They're just stupid sheep."

"At least I'm good at *something*."

"There you go again. I'm the apprentice to the most powerful conjurer in the whole land. What more do you want from me?"

"You're his assistant. Or his *manservant* is more like it."

"Manservant? I don't change his bloody robe for him, woman. I am indispensable to him."

"Is that why he left without you?"

"Bah. There's no reasoning with you." I'd like to stomp away from her, but she can easily keep up with me. "Why don't you just let me handle this?"

"Because you'll botch the whole thing, is why."

"And what would you know about finding a warrior?"

"More than you. The only thing you ever fought were Gren's kittens—and you lost. Just look what happened with Greetha—"

"Bloody witch took me by surprise is all."

Beaux brandishes her club. "I'm a lot closer to a warrior than you'll ever be."

"Fine, you can come along, but I'm the one in charge."

She gives me a nasty look, but holds her tongue the rest of the way into the village. Though Elgar is still sore about the last time we met, he escorts us to his father's hut. "Where is the conjurer?" the chief asks.

"He's attending to other business. He's asked me to come in his stead."

"For what? Have you come to claim my title, little man?"

“Not at all. My master has asked me to seek out the village’s bravest warrior for a special mission.”

“What sort of mission?”

“There is a very nasty bloke on his way here. A black demon. He’s going to lay waste to everything unless we find a warrior who can stop him.”

The chief gets to his feet with a groan. He stands beside Elgar and puts a hand on his shoulder. “You need look no further than my son. He is without equal.”

“The master has made it very clear I’m supposed to find someone who is brave, strong, and *pure of heart*. I’m not sure Elgar meets all those qualifications.”

“What are you saying, old man? My heart is purer than anyone’s in this village!”

Beaux puts a hand on my arm. “What Marlin is saying is that we want to make sure.”

“Yes, exactly.” I clap my hands together. “I suppose the simplest way to make sure would be to have a tournament.”

“What sort of tournament?” the chief asks.

“We’ll have every able-bodied man in the village duel to determine who is the best.”

Elgar grins at us. “That sounds amusing. Then you will see without a doubt that I am the best warrior in this village.”

“What about being pure of heart?” Beaux asks me once we’re outside.

“We’ll worry about that later,” I say. I just hope the master is done by that time, because I have no idea what he means; I only know Elgar can’t be what he has in mind.

The chief makes the announcement to the rest of the village. There are twenty men in total; the chief does not include himself. Only after the announcement does young Artr pull his father aside. “Father, what about me?”

“What about you? He said able-bodied *men*.”

“But, I’m sixteen. I’m old enough to go to war.”

The chief stares at his son for a moment and then sighs. “Very well. Add the boy to your list.”

I nod at the chief, though I know the boy has no chance. He’ll be lucky if one of the others doesn’t snap him in half. Well, it’s his funeral.

I turn to Beaux and say, “Now that that’s settled, how about we get some decent food?”

“You and your stomach,” she grumbles, but she follows me to get a joint of mutton. We eat it together beneath a tree. Maybe there’s a good side to this job after all.

Chapter 11

Into the Fire.

The volcano isn’t on any maps. It doesn’t exist in this world; you can only find it on another plane of existence, one where mortal man can never go. But

Merlin is no mortal man, so it's as easy for him to enter this realm as walking to the local pub.

He steps through the opening from one world to another and enters a field of daisies. He remembers the last time he saw a field of daisies, on his long trip from Egypt to Britain. Such a sight was unlike anything in Egypt with all that sand and heat that made it impossible for wildflowers to grow.

A horse nibbles on some grass in the field. It's not a normal horse, though; it's got feathered wings like those of a giant bird. In modern parlance it's a Pegasus. The winged horse looks up from its feeding to glare at Merlin. It whinnies a challenge.

"I've come to see your master," Merlin says.

The horse continues to glare. It allows Merlin to get close enough to put a hand on its neck. "I promise you have nothing to fear from me."

The horse snorts. Still, it allows Merlin to swing onto it. The moment Merlin steadies himself, the Pegasus extends its wings. It flaps the wings as it runs across the field. After a few moments, it achieves enough lift to take flight.

Though he's been from one end of the earth to the other and beyond, he still can't help but grab the horse's mane as it gets airborne. He grabs it even tighter as the Pegasus sails past the land and over the ocean. Merlin is dignified enough not to get airsick, though he does feel a bit queasy.

After what feels like hours, the volcano appears. There's nothing around it, just a twenty-story volcano that seems to rise straight out of the water. Merlin takes a deep breath as the Pegasus dives into the opening of the volcano. Not even Merlin can help but scream as the horse plunges into a lake of molten rock.

The lava is just an illusion. The horse comes through the other side of it without a hair singed, as does Merlin. He lets out a sigh as the horse begins a gentler descent into a temple of white marble.

Waiting for him is a man at least ten feet tall with biceps bigger around than Merlin's waist. His thick sandy beard has dried and scorched patches indicative of someone who spends a lot of time near an open flame. Indeed he does spend a lot of time near an open flame, as he is the world's greatest blacksmith.

"I should have known it would be you," the giant growls.

"Forgive my intrusion, Heph. I've come on a matter of great importance."

"It had better be. Odin keeps badgering me to finish this hammer for his no-account son. The last thing a spoiled princeling needs is a magic weapon, if you ask me, but it's not my place to interfere. Come, we can discuss what you need along the way."

Heph's house is sized to fit him, which made any mortal man feel like a mouse scurrying about. Most of the house is deserted, a layer of dust covering the furniture. "I heard what happened with Aphrodite—"

"Do not speak her name!" Heph roars. "Traitorous wench. She dares to leave me for that preening fool Ares? God of war. Hah! He wouldn't know what to do with a sword if it bit him in the arse."

"Very true. I'm afraid I have a bit of woman trouble myself."

"Ah, yes, the false goddess. *Isis*. I knew that would go badly. Why Anubis ever thought to give her such power is beyond me. And that demon of hers with those claws. If she wanted *real* weapons, she should have come to me. But I suppose that's what brings you here. You want me to design something to kill her?"

“I’m afraid such a thing is beyond even your skill, not with the protection of a god of the underworld.”

“You could let me at least try. I would enjoy the challenge.”

“For now I only need something to slay her servant, the demon.”

Heph snorts at that. “And I thought you had a real challenge for me.”

“There are a few other items I will require. Do you have boots around here? Perhaps a spare tunic and loincloth?”

“I’m sure I can find something. What else do you need?”

“I’ll need a helmet.”

“Well, that’s still not much of a challenge, but it’ll have to do.” Heph bends down to tap Merlin on the shoulder with one huge finger. “Come, let us see what we can find.”

Chapter 12

The Trial, Part 2.

The tournament is held in a field outside the village. Everyone capable of dragging themselves out there attends. We don’t have currency, but people make wagers with food and livestock. If I weren’t in charge of the thing, I would put Beaux’s entire herd of sheep on Elgar.

By random lot we pair the men up, all except young Artr. He gets what in modern terminology would be called a “bye.” I see him off by himself, practicing his skills, such as they are. He doesn’t have a prayer.

The chief, his wife, Beaux, and I sit together to oversee the tournament. There aren’t much in the way of rules except to forbid killing anyone; the village can’t afford to lose all its able-bodied men in a contest like this. Instead, the opponents will try to beat each other into submission, until one finally yields.

I munch on a half of chicken while the combat begins. As you would expect, it’s not a civilized affair. There’s a lot of bruising and blood. Elgar of course draws the most amount of blood; his opponent will probably never walk properly again, not unless Merlin uses magic to fix both of his legs.

I have to look away as Elgar finishes his match. The poor man he fought is dragged away screaming and crying. If he’s lucky, he’ll survive the night. “Bring me another!” Elgar roars.

For the sake of the rest of the village, I award Elgar a bye for the next round while his brother gets into it. Artr is much scrawnier than his brother, but he’s quick. Apparently he’s been practicing with his spear as well. He draws a cut on Bleeth’s left pectoral before Bleeth can even move. Then Artr whips the end of the spear around to bash the other man in the stomach. Bleeth crumples to the ground. While he gasps for air, he pleads for mercy.

“Perhaps the boy is more ready than I thought,” the chief says.

By the time we’ve winnowed it down to two, there’s no doubt Artr can handle himself. There’s also no doubt for a fat slob the chief has some good DNA; only his sons remain. The chief’s wife—and mother to Artr—takes her husband’s arm. “You can’t let them fight each other.”

“Why not? It was bound to happen eventually. It might as well be now.”

“But Elgar will kill Artr. You must know that.”

“He won’t kill him. He’ll just break a few bones.”

The chief’s wife wails at this and then runs off, unable to watch. “She’s right,” Beaux whispers into my ear. “You know what will happen.”

“What am I supposed to do about it?” I ask. “The boy wants to be a warrior. This is what it means to be one.”

“As if you would know.”

“It’s out of my hands. Let the boys decide it for themselves.”

They march into the circle, each armed with a club similar to Beaux’s. “You might as well scurry back to Mother’s bosom,” Elgar says. “You’ll save yourself a lot of pain that way.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Artr says, though his voice quivers.

Without further preamble, they have at it. Elgar presses his advantage in height, weight, and strength by charging right at Artr, swinging his club. The more nimble Artr dances out of the way. He manages hit Elgar in the back of the leg, but the blow doesn’t faze him. He spins around to hit Artr in the back with his club; the boy sprawls on the ground.

Artr is quick enough to roll out of the way before Elgar’s club can cave in his skull. Artr hits Elgar in the back of the leg again, this time in that sweet spot behind the knee. Elgar shouts with pain and staggers. Artr hits him in the back, but it’s too late.

Elgar spins around with his club. He swings it from underneath to knock the club from his brother’s hands. Another blow sends Artr to the ground, on his back. Elgar lands a flurry of blows that leave Artr bloodied and bruised.

“That’s enough,” I say. “The fight is over.”

“It’s over when I say it is,” Elgar growls.

“It is over, son,” the chief says. “You have won.”

“It’s over when I say it is, old man.” He resumes beating on his brother, who by now should be unconscious and yet somehow the lad is still trying to fetch his club. The chief and I should try to stop Elgar, but neither of us has the courage for it.

Beaux gets to her feet. “If you won’t stop him, then I will!”

Before she can try, I see our salvation on its way. It’s a streak of gold light whizzing towards us from the south. As it gets closer, I see it’s a spear made entirely of gold. Like a cruise missile nowadays, it circles over the battlefield, where Elgar continues to pummel his brother. Then the spear dives straight to the ground to land within Artr’s reach.

The boy is no dummy; he immediately grabs the spear. He whips the end of the spear around to hit his brother in the side of the head. Elgar staggers to the ground. A kick to the midsection and Elgar ends up on his back. Artr holds the spear point at his throat. “It is finished. Yield.”

“I will not.” Elgar spits blood and then grins. “You’ll have to kill me.”

Artr stares at him for a moment. He pulls the spear back. Everyone watches with anticipation. Then Artr brings the end of the spear around to slap his brother on the side of the head again. Elgar passes out.

Beside me, Merlin says, “We’ve found our warrior.”

Chapter 13

The Trial, Part 3.

We don't have gymnasiums or even weights to lift, so I have to rely on more primitive methods to train young Artr's body. As he runs, he carries two baskets of rocks on a yoke around his neck. Just watching him makes me tired.

"Keep at it, boy. It's not time to quit yet," I shout at him.

"I don't see why I need to do this," Artr says. "I beat Elgar, the strongest man in the village. Haven't I proven myself?"

"That's not for me to say. The master says you need to get stronger and faster if you're going to fight the demon, so that's what we're going to do. Now come on, no loafing."

"Why can't I fight him now? I'm ready."

"That not for me to say either. I'm sure when the master thinks you're ready, he'll let you go. Me, I would be grateful. No sense hurrying to your execution."

"You think he's going to kill me?"

"I would almost guarantee it. Now, keep those legs moving. We still have a lot of work ahead of us."

The boy shuts up and runs with the makeshift weights. I expect him to collapse any minute, but he keeps going. Maybe the master is right about the strength of the boy's heart. "It is the strongest muscle in the body," Merlin said. He was the first to figure that out.

"Still seems on the scrawny side to me," I said.

"That is why you must train him. Prepare his body for the Demon."

"I'll try."

Once I decide I've tormented the boy enough for a little bit, we rest beside a creek. I give him some bread and dried mutton to snack on. We didn't have all those protein shakes and so forth back then either.

"What's this demon like?" Artr asks.

"Can't say. I've never met him."

"But Merlin has. Didn't he say anything?"

"He only said the demon is someone you don't want to trifle with. That's why we need to make sure you're ready."

"How will you know I'm ready if you don't know who he is?"

"We'll let the master decide that. For now you just keep at it."

We work at it for two weeks. I can see the results in the boy's muscles. It's not much difference, but he's definitely lost the baby fat, his body lean and hard. At night he stays in my hut in the forest, in large part so he won't have to be near his parents. Things have been a bit tense since the tournament, after which the chief banished Elgar from the village. The brute swore revenge on his way out.

I can tell this weighs heavily on Artr as he pretends to sleep. He finally rolls over to look at me. "What do you suppose will happen to Elgar?"

"He'll find himself some other village. The master says there are plenty of them around these parts."

"He promised he'd take revenge. What if he tries to hurt Mother or Father?"

"Then you'll have to stop him."

"What if I don't survive against this demon? Then who will take care of them?"

"If you lose against the demon, then none of us will be safe. Now go to sleep, lad. We have a lot of work ahead of us."

When I wake up in the morning, he's not in the hut. I don't find him outside either. I call his name, but he doesn't answer. I curse at myself and try to think of what to tell Merlin now that I've lost our great warrior. I should have known from the way he was talking last night he had started to get second thoughts.

I head to the lean-to Beaux keeps for her and the sheep. I hear her voice as I get close. She's laughing. This is followed by a man's laughter. That backstabbing wench! As I stomp towards the lean-to, I wish I'd brought a dagger to slice this man's throat.

"Now see here—" I begin, but stop when I see it's Artr with Beaux. They've both got their clothes on. Artr has a lamb in his lap; he's trying to get the animal to drink some milk from a bowl.

"Oh, hello, Marlin. I went out for a walk and ran into Beaux. She's showing me how to care for the lambs."

"We're supposed to be training you as a warrior, not a shepherd."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes, well, give that mangy creature back to Beaux and then we can get to work."

"Hold on," Beaux says. "He's almost finished with it. In the meantime, let's go outside to talk."

We wander off into the forest so Artr can't hear us. Then I say, "Are you daft, woman? Why are you teaching him about shepherding? You know what he needs to do."

"He's scared, that's why. Can't say as I blame him. That master of yours has put the whole world on this boy's shoulders, all because he won't do his fighting for himself."

"He can't destroy the Demon on his own. If he could, I'm sure he would."

"I'm sure," Beaux says and rolls her eyes. "Or maybe he's a coward like his apprentice."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you two are using this poor boy to do your dirty work."

"There's nothing I can do about it. He won the tournament. If he wasn't ready, then he shouldn't have insisted upon entering."

Beaux sighs. "Fine. But for his sake, don't push him so hard."

"In a few weeks it'll be over. Then he can come out here and play with lambs."

I brush past Beaux and stomp back to the lean-to. The lamb is finishing the last of the milk. Artr sets it on the ground and then pats its head. He looks up at me. "I suppose we should get back to work."

Chapter 14

Demon Army.

In those days there wasn't much in the way of roads. The Romans wouldn't come along to start paving things for nearly two thousand years. Since there wasn't much in the way of trade between villages, there weren't even dirt paths to follow. The closest thing to roads were paths carved by wild animals during their migration.

Elgar had become another wild animal. When his father had banished him, he had been allowed to take his spear, his club, and a pelt for warmth. That was more than he allowed me to take, I might add.

For weeks Elgar wandered the countryside and plotted his revenge. He knew he couldn't simply charge back into the village. He might be able to sneak in at night, but that wasn't how he wanted to do things. He didn't want to obtain power by crawling into the village on his hands and knees in the darkness. He wanted everyone to see him seize power.

To do that, he would need an army. In order to find such an army, he needed to locate another village. That was easier said than done.

He survived by drinking what water he could find in creeks, streams, and rivers and killing any game that crossed his path. It should be no surprise that for an exile, Elgar lived pretty high off the hog. He didn't have to dine on squirrels he scavenged from the ground. Though my tiny cave was better than sleeping on the ground, especially when it rained.

As luck would have it, he didn't need to find a village. One evening as he sought a place to rest, he saw a group of fires. Elgar wasn't stupid enough to run over and introduce himself. He crept up on the camp and watched it from afar.

There were about forty men, most of them as big as Elgar. They all had the hairy, scarred look of ruffians, just the sort Elgar would gravitate to. He couldn't understand what they said around their fire, but he did recognize the one in the dog-shaped headdress. From what I had told him, he knew this was the Black Demon. You remember that expression, "An enemy of my enemy is my friend?"

Elgar decided to announce his presence in dramatic fashion. He crept up behind one of the ruffians and then seized him by the shoulders. Before anyone could react, Elgar snapped the man's neck. Then he tossed the man aside and stared at the Demon. "I know you," Elgar said. "I also know who it is you seek."

The Demon's eyes blazed red. "Indeed? Who are you?"

"I am Elgar, son of Uthr. I know you seek Merlin. I can take you to him."

"Why do you think I need your help to find him? Long have I traveled at my master's bidding. Many are the men I've slain along the way. Perhaps I will add you to their number," the Demon said. He flexed his hands so Elgar could see the bear claws.

"Merlin is preparing for you. I can tell you his plan."

"He is a feeble creature. His plans do not concern me."

"He has fashioned a weapon to kill you. A spear. I know the man—the *boy*—who will carry it against you."

"You still have not told me why I should let you live."

"I want revenge on the village, on my brother, and on Merlin. If you will have me, I know I can have all three."

"And what do you want in return?"

"I ask nothing but the chance to cut out my father's heart and show it to him while he still lives."

The Demon stared at Elgar for a moment. Then he nodded. "You may join us. You will lead me to Merlin and then you will have your vengeance. And I will have my prize."

Elgar took his place at the fire. The other men glared at him, but they said nothing. Now that he had the Demon's favor, none would dare to cross him. With a smile, Elgar envisioned his revenge.

Chapter 15

Baptism by Fire.

Once Merlin deems Artr ready, he gives the boy the golden spear again. "This is the Spear of Justice. With it you can smite your enemies. Nothing from this world can stand in its way."

"Including the Demon?"

"Especially the Demon." Then Merlin brings out the rest of the outfit: a tunic, loincloth, and leather helmet all dyed the color of dried blood. "This is your armor. I'm afraid not even my power can make it invulnerable to the Demon's claws. It will protect you from any mortal weapons."

"That's something, I suppose," Artr mumbles.

"The helmet will also allow you to see the darkness as clear as day."

Merlin takes out a pair of golden boots, something unheard-of in that day and age. The boots had belonged to Heph, who wore them while he worked at the forge to avoid burning his feet. He had an extra pair that along with the tunic and loincloth he could donate to Merlin, who did the enchantments on them.

"These will protect your feet and allow you to walk great distances without discomfort or fatigue. They will help you move faster and jump farther than any mortal man."

"They're beautiful."

We take the whole outfit into the forest so Artr can practice with it. He has trouble with the boots; he keeps tripping over them, unused to such footwear. We stay out one night so he can use the helmet. "This is amazing! It really is clear as day. You have to try this—"

"No!" Merlin says. "No one else may wear the armor of the Scarlet Warrior."

"Scarlet Warrior?"

"That is what you will be called," Merlin says.

"Why scarlet?"

"It was the only color available," Merlin says and for once he sounds testy. "Anyone unworthy who tries to wear the armor will forfeit his life."

"That includes me?" I ask.

"I'm afraid so. Only Artr may use any part of the armor."

Artr is practicing with his spear when Merlin closes his eyes. "Is something wrong, my master?" I ask.

"I fear the Demon has arrived."

* * * * *

Merlin vanishes us to the village, where we find his fears realized. Except it's not just the Black Demon; he's got a whole army of ruffians with him. They run about, screaming and butchering the men of the village, who were caught unawares.

I barely duck in time to avoid an axe taking off my head. Artr brings the Spear of Justice around to run it through the man's midsection. He collapses to the ground; he won't be getting up again.

I don't have a weapon or magic powers, so I crawl into the nearest hut to hide. I watch as Artr and Merlin dispatch the invaders. With the Spear of Justice and the augmented strength and quickness from the armor, Artr is more than a match for the ruffians. Merlin focuses on getting the villagers to safety.

Nowhere do I see the Black Demon. What is he up to? Why have his minions attack the village if he's not here to kill Merlin? Unless they aren't his minions.

I hear a scream and then see the chief's wife fly out of his hut. A moment later, Elgar stomps out of the hut, dragging his father behind him. The chief has already been beaten senseless, his face and chest stained with blood.

Artr kicks aside another of the ruffians and then turns to his brother. "What are you doing, Brother?" he shouts.

"I have come for my revenge. You will not stop me."

"I must. It is my duty to protect these people. I am the Scarlet Warrior."

"You are a fool. The conjurer saved you the first time, but this time I will destroy you. Though I will make sure you live long enough to watch me cut out our father's heart."

Artr lunges forward. Elgar manages to bat aside the Spear of Justice and then hit Artr with a haymaker. It hurts Elgar more than Artr. The Scarlet Warrior brings the spear back around to whack Elgar in the side. He tumbles to the ground. As in the tournament, he levels the spear at his brother's neck. The point of it begins to glow.

"The glow means his heart is evil," Merlin explains.

"Is there no hope for my brother?"

"That is for you to decide, Artr. The responsibility is yours."

Artr looks down at his brother and then over at his parents. His mother has crawled over to his father to cradle his broken body. "I'm sorry, Mother. I must deprive you of a son."

He jams the spear through Elgar's neck.

From the top of a hill, we hear the sound of laughter. Even without a magic helmet, I can see the glow of the Demon's eyes. "This is only the beginning, Merlin. If you want the rest of the villagers alive, you will have to return to your master."

We do an inventory of the villagers and find seventeen missing—all women and children. Merlin pats my arm and then adds, "I'm afraid Beaux is among them."

Chapter 16

Aftermath.

Though I should trust Merlin—he is my master, after all—I run into the forest to make sure. Her lean-to is unoccupied. I find some of the sheep wandering around, untended. She really must be gone. What was she doing in the village?

“She wasn’t in the village,” Merlin says. “He came here on his own to take her.”

“Why?”

“Because he knows you’ll come after her.”

“You’re damned right I will! I’ll follow her to the underworld itself.”

He puts a hand on my shoulder to steady me. “That won’t be necessary. Not if we’re careful. He’s not going to kill her until he has to.”

“Then let’s go! Vanish us to wherever he’s keeping her.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Of course you can! You’re Merlin! Wave your hand and let’s go!”

He smiles at me like I’m a small child who’s done something amusing. “I misspoke. I could vanish us there, but that would be foolish. We saw only a portion of his army. The rest are with the prisoners. If we simply vanish into their midst, things will get bloody. We must take our time, wait for the right opportunity to strike.”

“That’s all well and good, but it’s not your woman he’s got, is it?”

“That’s very true, which is why you must trust me. You aren’t thinking clearly.”

“Why shouldn’t I be? I love her!” It’s at that point I realize I haven’t said that to Beaux in a long time. I really ought to have. “I’m sorry, master. I’ll do what you ask.”

“Good, my friend. Gather some supplies. We will head out after them as soon as possible.”

“Can’t you just conjure us up some food?”

“I could, but Artr needs a few moments. His father is dying.”

“The chief is dying? Can’t you save him?”

“His soul has already crossed into the underworld. Only a shell of his body remains.”

“Oh, I see. I suppose I’ll go gather some supplies then.”

* * * * *

Artr takes off his helmet so he can watch his father die with his own eyes. Though it’s not very warriorly, he starts to cry. He leans against his mother for support. “I’m sorry, Father. I couldn’t save you.”

His mother squeezes his shoulder. “You did what you could, son.”

“It wasn’t enough. I should have been here. I should have protected him.” Artr looks down at the ground.

“Your father was proud of you. He knew what a strong and wise ruler you will become.”

“I don’t deserve to be chief. A man who can’t protect his family shouldn’t rule.”

“There’s no way you could have known what would happen. You’re not a conjurer—”

“You see!” Greetha shrieks. She gestures to the fallen bodies with one of her dried bones. “This is what happens when you consort with outsiders! See what this Merlin has brought you! Ruin!”

Artr gets to his feet. He clutches the Spear of Justice. “Leave this place, old woman. You are not welcome here.”

“But she’s right,” Bleeth’s wife says. She squats beside her dead husband. “This never would have happened if we hadn’t allowed that outsider here.”

“If we hadn’t, then we all would have died of plague,” Artr says. “This woman isn’t a conjurer or a healer. She’s a fraud!”

But more of the villagers join in with Bleeth’s wife and voice support for Greetha. “The chief was a fool to trust Merlin,” one says.

Artr turns on the woman. “How dare you speak ill of my father before his body is even cold! My father was a wise and noble ruler. He allowed Merlin to stay because he knew this fraud wouldn’t save us.”

“Maybe he caused the plague,” someone else says. “He brought it here with him from the outside.”

“Nothing like this ever happened before he showed up.”

“You see, Artr, your own people have seen the truth. They see that we need to return to the old ways.”

Artr tightens his grip on the Spear of Justice. He holds it inches from Greetha. The point doesn’t glow the way it did around Elgar. She’s not evil, just misguided. With a sigh, he lowers the spear.

“I swear I will return those the Demon has taken captive. Then, if you wish Merlin and I to leave this place, we will.”

“Son, no!”

“I am sorry, Mother. Now, I must go.” Artr stalks out of the village, perhaps for the last time.

Chapter 17

The Pursuit.

Between the three of us, I have the hardest time with our pursuit of the Black Demon. Artr has the Scarlet Warrior’s armor and Merlin has magic to keep him from getting too tired. By contrast I’m just an out-of-shape, elderly—for that time period—conjurer’s assistant. If it weren’t for Beaux, I’d have probably dropped over a long time ago.

“I could carry you on my back,” Artr suggests.

“Oh, how lovely,” I grumble. “Carry me around like a pelt.”

“It was just a thought.”

“Don’t start thinking now.”

Merlin pats my shoulder. “There’s no need to worry. Beaux is safe.”

“How do you know that?”

“I have some assistance,” Merlin says. He points up at the sky.

“A god is helping us?”

“Not a god. A bird. An owl to be exact. I can see with his eyes. For now Beaux and the others are safe.”

“Wonderful, an owl says they’re safe. What happens when the owl goes off to eat a mouse?”

“It won’t.” Merlin gestures ahead of us. “Come, let’s keep going.”

“Couldn’t you make Marlin faster? Or lighter?” Artr suggests.

“Shut up,” I snap and muster the strength to run ahead of him for a few paces.

* * * * *

We have to keep going all through the night and the next day. Merlin's owl continues its vigil, though it should have gone to sleep long ago. From what the owl indicates, there's no danger for Beaux or the others. The greatest danger for Beaux is that she'll anger the Demon enough he'll decide to kill her before we can arrive.

"That must be some face you've got to keep it beneath that headdress all this time. How do you eat with that on?"

"I do not require food. Or sleep. Or conversation." The way he glares at her should tell her to shut her mouth, but Beaux's always had a problem with that.

"You must be very tough to take a bunch of women and children captive. You know what will happen when Merlin finds you."

"I do not fear Merlin."

"Is that why you're running?"

"I will face him at a time of my choosing."

"That's convenient."

"If you do not remain silent, I will slice open your throat." He brandishes his claws for effect. Of course Beaux ignores this.

"Some brave warrior you are. You let half your men get slaughtered while you stood by and did nothing." She raises her voice so the rest of the Demon's minions can hear her. "He'll probably let the lot of you die the same way if it suits his purposes."

"They do not understand you, foolish girl," the Dragoon growls.

"Girl? I'll have you know I gave birth to a child." She did many years ago, before she met me. The child died from a fever shortly after birth. Since then, Beaux has remained barren. Modern science would probably have an explanation; I assumed it was through sheer force of will she never got pregnant again to risk losing another child. Of course that might explain why she prefers to be around those sheep all the time.

"You try my patience. That will make it all the more glorious when I feed your heart to my master."

"I'd like to see you try. If I still had my crook I'd teach you a thing or two."

"Your puny weapon would not hurt me."

"We'll never know, will we?" Beaux stomps ahead a few paces. Though she'd never admit it, I'm sure she thinks of me and looks forward to us being reunited.

* * * * *

Night falls by the time they finally stop. The owl stops in a tree. It's still there when we arrive. We huddle in the darkness to stare down at the Demon's camp. Artr and Merlin can see in the dark while I can only squint and make out a few vague shapes in the light of the Demon's army's fires.

"They're down there," Merlin says. "They're still alive."

"So let's go down and rescue them," I say.

"Have patience."

"What about the Demon?" Artr asks.

"He will need distracted," Merlin says.

"I'll do it," Artr says without hesitation. "You and Marlin can rescue the prisoners then."

"A very sound strategy," Merlin says. "First you must locate the Demon. Once you do and you have his attention, Marlin and I will rescue the prisoners."

“What about the rest of his soldiers?” I ask. “They could kill Beaux and the others.”

“I can deal with them,” Merlin says.

With a hoot, the owl in the trees takes off. It swoops down over the Demon’s camp. A couple of the ruffians make note of it; one even tries to hit it with a spear. The owl glides away to search through the camp.

Through its eyes, Merlin locates the Demon. Though he doesn’t require sleep, the Demon is in a tent. He has a prisoner in there with him: Beaux, of course. She’s tied up at his feet. “It’s a pity I won’t get the chance to bring you to my master, but I can’t abide any more of your yammering. The time has come to put an end to it.”

Beaux screams.

Chapter 18

Angel & Devil, Part 1.

Artr and I get to our feet at the same time. Since he has on the magic armor, he gets to the Demon’s camp much quicker. He shoves aside any of the ruffians who try challenge him. Once he’s reached the center of the camp, he shouts, “Show yourself, Demon! I’ve come for your head!”

I stop at the edge of the camp, having no wish to get my throat slit along with Artr. I have my doubts that even the Scarlet Warrior can take on twenty warriors plus the Black Demon. Merlin puts a hand on my shoulder. “Everything will be fine,” Merlin says. “The boy knows what he’s doing.”

“It doesn’t look like it.”

“Watch and see.”

The Demon’s minions have gathered around Artr, but none are brave enough to come forward. Then I see a large, dark shape emerge from a tent. It’s the Black Demon. He doesn’t have Beaux with him. Did he already cut her throat?

The Demon barks a command and his henchmen fall back. The Demon steps through their ranks. “You would challenge me, boy?” The Demon brandishes his claws. “I’ve killed many times your number, men much bigger than you.”

“Then you have nothing to fear by fighting me.”

“Very well, boy. If you wish to die then I will help you.”

The Demon makes as if to attack. Artr puts up a hand. “Not here. I wouldn’t want you to trip on this fire pit or these tents. We’ll go to the top of the ridge.”

“As you wish.” The Demon turns to his minions. “Stay and guard the prisoners. I will not be gone long.”

Merlin motions for the two of us to hide behind a tree as the Demon and Artr climb up towards the hill. “You see now?”

“See what?”

“The boy has lured the Demon away. Now we can rescue the others.”

“You forget there’s still twenty of them. Or are you going to wave your hand and make them disappear?”

“Nothing so drastic.”

I'm about to ask what he is going to do when I see the mist roll in. It's no ordinary mist; it's a fog the color of egg yolks. It smells worse than a couple of dozen rotten eggs too. I can hear the ruffians cough, but I can't see them.

Merlin starts to walk into the fog. "Go and find Beaux. The mist won't harm you."

I want to argue, but it is Merlin we're talking about. So I walk into the fog. The mist might not kill me, but the smell of it is enough to make my eyes water. I have to continually wipe them as I stumble into the camp.

I trip over something. I look down and see a ruffian on the ground. I can't tell if he's dead or not; at this point I'm not much concerned either way.

I try to remember which tent the Demon had appeared from. But with the fog it's impossible to tell. So I try a more aggressive approach. "Beaux? Where are you, woman?"

"I'm over here, you daft fool!" she shouts back.

"Keep shouting, love. I'll find you."

"You couldn't find your arse if it were sewn to your face."

She goes on like that until I locate the tent. I open the flap and there she is, unharmed. I take advantage of her being tied up to kiss her on the lips. "Now let's get you out of here."

* * * * *

Artr makes it to the top of the ridge first. He hefts the Spear of Justice. "There's still time to surrender," he says, full of heroic bluster.

"You talk much. Let's see how you fight."

The Demon breaks into a run. He has both sets of claws up to slice Artr to ribbons. For his part, the boy isn't stupid. He ducks and rolls away. While still on his knees, he brings the spear around to smack the Demon on the back of the leg.

The Demon tumbles forward onto the ground. For his part, the Demon isn't stupid enough to wait for Artr to run him through with the spear. He does his own roll to end up on his knees. "That was clever, boy, but it will not be enough to save you."

Artr breaks into a run. He uses the augmented strength and speed of the armor to jump over the Demon. Or rather, he tries to; he doesn't quite get enough height, so that the Demon rakes his claws across Artr's left thigh.

The boy lands hard on the ground, blood streaming from the wound. He rolls onto his back. The Demon stands over him with claws ready to strike. Artr tries to stab the Demon in the gut with the spear, but the Demon swats it away. He tries to pick it up with one hand, but the spear begins to glow; the Demon hisses with pain and then drops the spear.

"One of the conjurer's tricks," the Demon growls. "They cannot save you. Now you will die."

The Demon strikes.

Chapter 19

Angel & Devil, Part 2.

With the Demon's claws about to tear open his throat, young Artr does the only thing he can: he kicks the Demon. Not between the legs, which probably wouldn't have done any good. No, he kicks the Demon in the left knee.

It's just enough to throw the Demon's aim off. The claws meant for Artr's throat hit the dirt instead. The Demon crashes down to the ground beside Artr. The Scarlet Warrior punches him in the side of the head. The Demon rolls a couple feet away.

Artr scrambles to grab the spear. He's able to grab it by the head, not caring if it cuts his hand. As the Demon regains his feet, Artr sits up. He jabs at the Demon with the Spear of Justice.

The Black Demon screams as the spear rams through his midsection. As Artr gets to his feet, he transfers more of his weight onto the spear to press it in farther. It finally comes out the other side of the Demon. The monster drops to his knees.

He takes one last swipe at Artr with his claws. The boy blocks the Demon with one arm and then delivers a solid punch with his other. The Demon collapses to the ground, where he bleeds to death like any normal man.

Artr yanks the Spear of Justice free with some effort. He stares down at the Demon in shock. It's not the first time he's killed a man, but this was no ordinary man. The realization of what Artr's accomplished begins to dawn on him.

With the butt of the spear, he pushes off the Demon's headdress. The face isn't as ugly as Artr had imagined. There are no scars or boils or birthmarks. It's the face of a normal man, not a monster. Artr shakes his head at the thought of an ordinary person unleashing such horror.

Behind him, someone applauds. "Very good, child. Merlin chose well."

Artr turns around and it's a good thing his loincloth isn't too snug as the woman is gorgeous. She has dark copper skin with glossy black hair down to waist. Her svelte, well-endowed body is clad in only a thin linen dress. Around her neck she wears a silver amulet with a symbol like a stick figure with its arms curving down. Her eyes are the most unnatural part of her, the irises so black they seem to pull in the light.

Since he's only fifteen and never bedded a woman before, Artr finds himself tongue-tied. "W-who are y-you?" he stammers.

"I am Isis."

She takes a step forward to put a hand on Artr's shoulder. She gently massages his muscles there. "Such a strapping lad. You most certainly are the mightiest warrior in all the land, aren't you?"

"I don't know about that."

"Don't be so modest. No ordinary man could kill the Black Demon."

"I-I guess so."

"Now that you've killed him, this world is yours for the taking. None can stand against you, not even the gods themselves." She leans forward to whisper into his ear, "Not even Merlin."

"What? B-but Merlin is my friend."

Isis' laugh chills Artr to his marrow. "Friend? That schemer has no friends, only pawns he commands. Don't let yourself be another of them."

"I don't understand."

"He made you kill the Black Demon. Then he will tell you to kill me. What do you suppose he'll do next?"

"I don't know."

"Merlin talks to you of darkness and light, but he confuses one with the other. I am the light, not him."

"B-but the D-demon?"

"I sent him to bring Merlin back to me to stand trial for his crimes. Instead, the coward fled so he could recruit you to stop me."

"No. Your Demon killed my father. He made my brother a monster."

"Did he? None of this would have happened if he had not come to your village with that toady of his."

"You're lying." Artr finally tightens his grasp on the spear. He's going to ram it through Isis, but she's no longer there.

Her laughter comes from a few yards away. "You fool. You can't kill a *god!*"

The ground around Artr begins to shake. He has to use the Spear of Justice to steady himself as the ground heaves. Isis hovers in the air, her eyes burning red. "Now you will pay for your impudence."

There's a flash of light between Isis and Artr. "Isis!" Merlin roars. "Leave the boy alone."

The ground stops shaking. Isis' eyes return to their normal black. She laughs again. "Tired of letting others fight for you?"

"No one else will die because of our war," Merlin says. "Let us finish it."

"Very well. Let us finish it."

"Not here. We will go to the Hunting Grounds. No harm will come to anyone there."

Isis glares at Artr. "I will dispose of your master and then I will return for you." She disappears without even a flash of light.

"Who was that?" Artr asks.

"She is the woman of darkness," Merlin says.

"And you're going to fight her?"

"There's no choice. I can either go there or she'll fight me here. It will be far safer on the Hunting Grounds." Merlin puts a hand on Artr's shoulder. "You've fought well, Artr. If I do not survive, use your wisdom and strength to guide your people. Make sure they stay in the light."

"I will."

Beaux and I are outside the camp with the rest of the villagers. Merlin appears before me in a flash. "It's time for me to go and face Isis."

"By yourself? Let me go with you—"

"This isn't your fight, Marlin. You're needed here. Help Artr. He's still young."

"I will, my master."

He smiles at Beaux. "Make sure Marlin doesn't run into any trouble."

"I'm the only one he needs to worry about," Beaux says, but she smiles.

"Farewell, my friends."

Then he's gone.

Chapter 20

The Temptation of Merlin.

The Hunting Grounds are reserved only for Isis and her minions. As you might guess, they don't hunt rabbit, deer, or even boars there. Most of the time they hunt that most elusive target: men. Other times, Isis conjures some horrific beast for the Black Demon to practice on.

Merlin had witnessed enough of these hunts to realize his master was a psychotic monster. He had vowed not to return to the Hunting Grounds again. Yet now he stands on the central plain, surrounded by the scrubby forests and mountains of Isis' playground.

The woman herself stands in front of him with a haughty grin. "Welcome back," she says.

"I won't be here long."

"No, of course not. It won't take long to destroy you." Her grin widens. "But why bother with such destruction? Why not rejoin me? Then we can finish what we began."

"Enslaving the world? I have no interest in that."

"Come now, Merlin, what do you think this will accomplish? It was a worthy attempt, but we both know you can't kill a god."

"You're not a god. You're only a vain woman who sold her soul to satisfy her lust for beauty and power."

"After all this time you still pine for Nephthys? How pathetic."

"She was a beautiful girl, much more so than her mother. That's why you had to kill her. You couldn't stand the thought she might eclipse you."

Isis' eyes narrow. "That hook-nosed little wretch could never have eclipsed me. But she did bewitch you, didn't she?" Isis's smirk returns. "I can bring her back, just the way you remember. You can be reunited."

"Whatever you conjure might look like Nephthys, but it will not *be* her. It will only be another of your soulless abominations."

"Perhaps. But I'm certain if we combine our power, we can bring her back."

People nowadays especially like to think of my master as this otherworldly person, some kind of demigod. It's true he does have the power of a demigod, but his heart is just like any man's. He thinks of Nephthys, the beautiful young daughter of Isis.

He remembers when they first met. He was just a young acolyte of Horus back then. He heard someone by the entrance to the temple. He turned and his jaw dropped.

As an acolyte, he had mostly stayed away from women during his adolescence. So it's no surprise he just about fainted away at the sight of Nephthys. She stood in the sun, her smooth skin seeming to glow and her black hair shimmering. He thought this must be one of the goddesses come to visit him.

She carried a basket in her arms. He hurried forward to take it from her. "Are you one of the priests?" she asked in a musical voice.

He was tempted to answer yes so he could be the one to help her. The penalty for that was a lashing that would leave his back bloody and sore for days. The pain would be worth it so he could remain close to her.

"I'm the priest," the actual priest said. "What brings you here, young one?"

"I've come to ask for Horus' blessing for my father. He's very ill."

"Yes, of course. This way." The priest took the basket from Merlin and guided Nephthys away.

But she hesitated for a moment. She nodded to Merlin. “Thank you for your assistance, acolyte.”

“It was no trouble, my lady.”

It was more or less love at first sight. Nephthys’ father died from a fever, but she still found excuses to come to the temple. Eventually, she and Merlin started to rendezvous away from prying eyes. They found a little oasis in the desert where they could be alone. There, on the grass, next to a pool of water, they made love for the first time.

Fate was cruel to them. On the day they were going to elope to Thebes, Nephthys disappeared. My master waited in the marketplace for her for hours, but she never showed up. He returned to the temple, certain she had rejected him.

He feels her soft touch as she takes his hand. Her silky hair brushes against his cheek. “You can bring me back,” she whispers. “I know you can. With the strength of you and my mother, you can’t fail. Then we can be together again.”

Her lips press against his. They feel real enough, like those he had kissed back in the oasis. Then he opens his eyes and looks into hers. But something is wrong; her eyes are *black*, like those of her mother.

He holds up a hand. The shape of Nephthys is hurled away. When it hits the ground, it shatters into black dust. Isis laughs. “You are still weak. Far too weak to face me.”

“Vile temptress! I will put an end to your evil once and for all.”

And so the battle begins.

Chapter 21

The Duel.

From afar, a war of magic looks like a thunderstorm. At least that’s what the nearest people to the Hunting Grounds think. Except instead of only white flashes, those of green, blue, purple, and other colors light up the sky. There are booms like thunder while other times loud screeches like someone screaming.

The reason my master insisted on facing Isis in the Hunting Grounds was because a war of magic is also terribly destructive. Not so much to those with the magic; it’s the landscape and those who happen to be nearby who suffer the most. Stray bolts of energy evaporate whole stands of trees in an instant. A pool of water turns to ash in a heartbeat.

Anyone stupid enough to be close to ground zero wouldn’t see Merlin or Isis. At best they would see two vague shapes glowing with light. The figure made of white light would be Merlin while the dark smear with red eyes would be Isis.

Bolts of energy erupt from the two figures. They absorb these before generating new ones. When a bolt misses, the ground shakes and a good chunk of it disappears. On it goes for hours and then days.

Merlin is losing. While for now he’s managed to hold his own against Isis’ power, he knows he can’t last much longer. She might have usurped her god powers, but they are still the powers of a god. His own are more limited.

When another bolt strikes him, he feels the pain. His glow fades a bit. A few more hits like that and he'll be dead. Isis senses her advantage and presses the attack. It's as if Merlin is at the center of an electrical storm from all the bolts of lightning raining down on him.

He does the smartest thing: he flees. He zips away at supersonic speed, *into* a mountain. He merges his molecules with those of a vein of crystal while he gathers his strength. Isis will probably find him in a few minutes, but at least it will give him some time.

Back in the village, I'm sleeping next to Beaux when I see my master. He looks sadder than I've ever seen him. "I've failed you," he says.

"That's impossible," I say. "You can't fail."

"Her power is too great, even for my own."

"Bollocks," I say. I put a hand on his shoulder. Though it's a dream, it feels real enough. "You've always told me the real power doesn't come from Anubis or any of them blokes. It comes from the heart. There's no one I know with a stronger, purer heart than you. Look at all you've done here for me, Artr, and the whole village. If not for you that brute Elgar would have taken over. But now we have Artr. That boy is really going to be something, you wait and see."

Merlin nods to me. "You speak wisely, my friend." He pats my shoulder. "If I don't see you again, know that you've been a great apprentice and an even better friend."

"Thank you, my master."

"Farewell."

Then he's gone. I wake up, but all I see is the hut Beaux and I share. She groans and then sits up. "What was that?"

"Nothing," I say and then go back to sleep, unsure if I'll ever see him again.

* * * * *

Spurred by my words, Merlin leaves the mountain. He finds Isis waiting for him outside. She probably knew he was there; she just wanted to give him more time to suffer. "Are you ready to finish this?" she rumbles.

He doesn't give her the satisfaction of a reply. Instead, he zips right *into* her. I know a certain young scientist who could explain the chemical reaction of positive and negative charges. All I know is when Merlin merges with Isis, it generates an explosion greater than anything the planet has seen since that big asteroid wiped out the dinosaurs.

Merlin had chosen the Hunting Grounds because of its distance away from any population centers. That didn't prove to be enough distance. The explosion of white light eradicates first the Hunting Grounds and then spreads across much of northern Africa. Thousands of people, their homes, possessions, and livestock disintegrate in moments. There's no trace left of them.

All that remains are miles and miles of sand. Later on someone would decide to call it the Sahara. A desert. That's all that's left of Merlin and Isis' war. In time, even the legends of it would fade away, except for me.

And yet in all that desert, a man gets to his feet. Much of his skin is red and steaming, as if he's just survived the electric chair. He staggers around to see what he's done. Then he screams.

Hundreds of miles away, there's another figure in the sand. This one is of a beautiful woman. She appears to be carved entirely out of glossy black stone, but the level of detail surpasses anything possible in that time.

She lies there in the sand, in that shell, and waits for her time to come again.

Chapter 22

The Order Begins.

Even someone as powerful as Merlin can't recover from an epic battle like that in a day. After waiting months for his return, I finally concede to myself that my master has died. He had given his life to stop Isis.

On the first anniversary of his death, I'm sitting out in the hut Merlin and I shared for a short time. It seems appropriate. Beaux offered to come with me, as did Artr, but I refused. This is a day I should remember on my own.

As I roast a squirrel over the fire, there's a flash of white light. "Master?"

"I'm afraid not," a girl's voice says. It's the same girl who visited us before, Anybl. She invites herself to sit by the fire.

"To what do I owe this honor?" I ask.

"I wanted you to know, we've searched everywhere for him. There's no sign of Merlin."

I nod to the girl. "Thank you."

She clears her throat and then adds, "There's no sign of Isis either. Or the Demon. He did it. He killed her."

A shiver runs through me, though it's not cold by the fire. "No, I don't think he killed her," I say. "Maybe I'm just paranoid in my old age, but I don't think we've seen the last of her. She is a god, after all."

"Then what are we to do?"

"What he would want us to do. We remain vigilant. We snuff out the darkness wherever we find it. We spread the light."

She nods. "I'll tell my sisters. What of the boy?"

"I'll keep an eye on him." I motion to the squirrel on its spit. "Now that we've settled that, would you care for a bite?"

"No, thank you."

But before she vanishes, she turns the squirrel into a plump chicken, just as he did the first time he visited me. Show-off.

* * * * *

Nine more years go by. Under my tutelage, Artr is a good and decent chieftain. The boy even takes a wife named Gwniver. She's not the brightest girl in the village, but she makes a rabbit stew to die for.

At this point you might wonder if she is faithful to him. From what Beaux tells me, she is. They are fairly close; they go out into the forest to hunt rabbits together, leaving Artr and I to train for the Demon's return, or any other dark threats to the village.

Beaux and Gwniver are out hunting rabbits one day when an old man walks into the village. I'm the first to see him as Artr and I work on his spearcraft on the tournament grounds. The man limps towards us, leaning on a gnarled stick.

"Ho there, friends," the old man says. "May a weary traveler partake of your hospitality?"

“Of course. I am Artr, chief of this village. You are welcome to stay the night with me and my wife.”

“That’s very generous of you, my lord. Thank you.”

Artr shows the man into the village. He doesn’t suspect anything. Neither do I until the old man turns to me and winks. Then I know my master has returned at last.

It’s tempting to run over and embrace him. I manage to restrain myself. If the master wants Artr and the rest of the village to know he is here, he would have said so.

I keep his secret the rest of the day. To the other villagers he’s just an old man who’s wandered into our village. Most don’t pay attention to him. Artr is courteous, as he is to anyone who shows up in the village in need of lodging and a meal.

After a dinner of rabbit stew, the old man gets up. “Thank you for such a wonderful meal, my lady,” he says. “If you will forgive this old man for leaving so abruptly, I have business to attend to.”

He hobbles off, presumably to piss. I wait a few minutes before I excuse myself as well. I find Merlin out on the tournament grounds. He’s no longer wearing the old man disguise; he looks just as he did the first time we met.

This time I do embrace him. “You’re back! I had feared—”

“I did not die, but I’m afraid I can’t stay here long.”

“Why not? You know the village would be honored to have you here, especially Artr and I.”

“I know you would, my friend, but I’m afraid the time has come for me to leave this world.”

“You came here to kill yourself? Master—”

“No, my friend. I am not going to kill myself. But I must leave this world for another. It’s not safe here.” He explains to me about the battle with Isis and the destruction left in its wake.

“It wasn’t your fault. You didn’t know—”

“Regardless, I have always sought the light. I have sought to protect people, not destroy them. Yet this power of mine makes me a danger to this world. That’s why I must go.”

“But what are we supposed to do without you?”

“As you’ve been doing. You, Artr, Anybl, and her sisters. You must continue to carry on in my stead.”

“What if we can’t? What if Isis returns?”

He closes his eyes. “There will be a final reckoning to come. On that day, when the darkness is too strong for any others, then I will return. In the meantime, I will leave this place and slumber until needed.”

“No, you can’t. You can’t abandon us!”

“I’m sorry, my friend. I wish things could be different, but the danger is too great.” He pats my shoulder. “Fear not. You’ll see me again. When it’s your time to leave this place, we’ll meet again.”

With that, he disappears. I do see him again, much sooner than I’d have liked. But that’s another story.

