



Chapter 1

Smoke

Flames licked at him, singeing his hair, yet he smiled. Ferro Torridan had no illusion that he would live through this, but at least the fire would alert the others. The villager next to him pulled at Ferro's arm. He saw the terror in the peasant's eyes as the man faced Ferro to address him. "Sir Knight, we cannot stay here any longer, we must leave."

Getting out of the burning house would be sensible, but outside, the marauders waited. Still, going down fighting and perhaps buying the other villagers time to escape would be better than staying and suffocating in the smoke. However, they could not leave just yet. "Wait," Ferro said. He held back the man from unbolting the door. "We must save the children. They're trapped upstairs."

Ferro looked at the stairs and saw that one of the flasks of flaming oil the bandits had thrown through the windows had landed on the steps. A wall of fire blocked the way. "I will get them. Guard the door, and try to wait for us for as long as you can."

The children did not belong to the man. He and Ferro had fled into this house when the marauders stormed into the village. For that reason, the peasant did not argue when Ferro shouldered that burden. The man positioned himself at the door as Ferro rushed through the curtain of flames that blocked the way to the upper floor. By now, thick, black smoke obscured his vision. The logical, detached part of his mind marveled at how much smoke one burning room generated and how fast it spread. Instinct urged Ferro to flee. Instead, he dashed forward, shielding his mouth with his sleeve, determined to find the children. A faint wailing noise originated from one of the rooms. Coughing, Ferro ran toward the noise. He did not stop to check whether the door was unlocked. Without wasting time, he kicked open the door. Inside, a young girl huddled with a smaller child, probably her brother. The girl tried to comfort him as the boy cried, but they both fell silent when Ferro entered the room. "Come with me. We must leave immediately."

The girl took her brother's hand and followed the knight back the way he had come. Just as they reached them, the stairs collapsed with a loud thud. The knight and the children pulled back as a waft of embers rose up.

"Oh no," the girl said. "What do we do? We cannot get out."

Ferro showed her a reassuring smile. "Follow me."

They ran back to the children's room, where Ferro opened the window. He paused for a moment to slip out of his chain shirt. Afterward, he climbed out on the tiles of the roof. Behind him, the children followed his lead. With small, deliberate steps, the knight inched his way to the edge of the house, close to where the next building stood. He heard shouts from below, and despite his fear of heights, he risked a glance. On the street, the bandits had spotted him. They ran over to the side,

so that they stood in the gap between the two houses. To his relief, he saw that the villager downstairs took the opportunity to slip out of the house and run off. Some of the marauders shouted, but the red-haired fellow, who seemed to be their leader, kept them in line. Ferro had the impression that they were out to get him as retribution for injuring one of their men when they first attacked the village. Looking down, he felt dizzy. Ferro pressed himself to the tiles of the roof, waiting for the queasy feeling to subside. The girl touched his arm. "Are you all right?"

The question renewed his resolve. He could not fail these children. They continued toward the side of the roof, but before reaching it, the bandits started throwing more flasks of burning oil onto the roof. Amidst the screams of the boy, Ferro navigated between these walls of fire until they stood close to the edge. "We need to jump across to the other roof."

"No, I can't," the boy said with a high-pitched voice.

"You must," the girl said. She squeezed both shoulders of the child. "It's easy. You can do this. Just watch me."

She ran down the slope of the roof, hurled herself across the distance, and landed on the other house.

For a moment, it looked as if the boy would snap out of his fright, but then he sank back. "I can't. I will fall."

Ferro felt the house beneath him wobble as more and more of its support was consumed by the fire. "Staying here isn't safe either. Take my hand."

Ferro grabbed the boy's wrist and ran down the roof with him. They both jumped, but midflight, he knew that they would not make it. He could not tell what hurt more: crashing down onto the hard tiles of the roof or having the boy's weight pull at his arm. It was a miracle that Ferro managed to hold on to the side of the roof with his left hand while not letting go of the child, who dangled down on his right side.

The kid's scream annoyed Ferro, but he conceded that, in a way, it was a good sign if the child was well enough to cry. Ferro tried to pull the boy up, when the smirking bandits appeared underneath them. One of them waved to get Ferro's attention. The marauder took a bottle from his pack, no doubt another one of the incendiaries. "Here's something to keep you warm," the man shouted.

At that range, they could not miss. Ferro strained himself to hoist the child onto the roof. The knight glanced back at the marauder, who stretched his arm back in preparation of the throw. However, the fiery death never came: before the man could throw the flask, a roof tile hit him square in the face. The bottle of flaming oil slipped from the man's hand, splashing flames on the street below as it shattered on the ground. The bandit danced around, trying to extinguish his

clothes, which were ignited by the fire. Ferro turned as far as he could to look at the girl, who pried another tile out of the roof. “Thank you for saving our lives,” he said.

He managed to haul the boy up onto the edge of the roof. “Let’s move while the bandits are distracted.”

The three of them climbed around on the roof until they reached a window. Ferro kicked the glass inward and helped the children enter the building. With the kids behind him, he made his way to the ground floor. The entrance door burst open just as he came down the stairs. In a fluid motion, Ferro drew his sword, whirling it around as he advanced on the bandits who tried to push through the opening. If he allowed them to get in, they would be able to surround him. He knew that if that happened, they would eventually overpower him. Ferro danced forward, fending off the first bandit’s attacks while stalling him with slashes of his own. The knight landed a blow on the man’s wrist. The marauder cried out. His weapon fell from his limp hand. When the marauder retreated, another filled the gap. No more than one attacker could stand in the narrow entrance, so Ferro felt comfortable that he could defend his position.

“You fools,” the red-haired man said. “Leave the knight be. Uluf will be here soon enough. He’ll personally want to smash the knight, but if we haven’t gathered all the valuables by then, we’ll be in deep trouble.”

“Gerrin, wait,” one of the marauders said. “If we don’t kill the knight, he’ll interfere.”

“He’s already a nuisance,” Gerrin said. “But I see your point. You two”—he pointed at a pair of his goons—“keep him cooped up in there.”

The remaining bandits started to run toward the other houses in the village. The two goons tasked with containing Ferro withdrew. Instead of one of them being stuck in the doorway, both of them would be able to attack him if he wanted to engage them. Through the door, he glared at Gerrin. “You won’t get away with this. Justice will be served—mark my words.”

The red-haired man sneered. “You’re delusional. Soon, the boss, big Uluf, will come to crack your pathetic skull.”

Ferro ground his teeth, feeling helpless, as he watched the marauders ransack the other buildings. Without taking his eyes off the door, he talked to the children. “Go upstairs, and barricade yourselves in one of the rooms.”

“What are you going to do?” the girl asked.

Ferro inhaled. Fighting meant certain death, but he could not sit by and violate his oath to protect the people. “I am going to arrest these bandits.”

He did not wait for a reply. Instead, charged up by rage and desperation, he rushed one of the marauders. The man backed away, surprised by the ferocious strike. Ferro spun around and slashed his sword in an arc, causing the other thug to abandon his attack and leap away to safety.

Ferro stood in the clear, the house and the two bandits in front of him. The two bandits eyed him warily. Due to their hesitation to engage, the knight realized he had a good chance of coming out of this unscathed. However, the spark of hope was smothered when he noticed a nine-foot-tall man tromping toward him. No, that thing was not human—it was one of those ogres: a humanoid creature that consisted of, in equal parts, muscle and fat. Pointed teeth like tusks grew from the ogre’s jaw. The creature dragged a short uprooted tree behind him.

Gerrin pointed at Ferro while whispering into the ogre’s ear when he was hunched over to listen. The bandits waited while the ogre took a step forward. “You!” He shook his fist at Ferro. “Gerrin say you make trouble. I, Uluf, will smash you. Come fight me.”

“You want to duel me?” Ferro asked. He never heard of ogres honoring the traditions of the knighthood. The notion seemed preposterous. Still, if this provided a chance to end this without further endangering the villagers, he had to take it. “Very well. Promise me that your men will leave if I defeat you, and I’ll gladly face you.”

Gerrin piped up at that suggestion. “Don’t do it, boss. You can fight him even without agreeing to his terms.”

Uluf shoved Gerrin out of his way. “Bah, you too scared. I can promise anything, ’cause I never lose.”

“So, you agree in front of your men that if I win, your people will leave without causing further trouble?” Ferro asked.

“Agree!” the ogre said.

Ferro looked at the tree that Uluf used as a makeshift club. One swipe could probably knock Ferro out. He gulped but stepped forward regardless. “You got it, ugly. Come get me.”

The ogre bared his teeth. “You die now, little man.”

The knight stepped around the ogre, desperate to stay clear of his reach. Every once in a while, Ferro jabbed at the ogre, but on the few occasions his blade connected, it did not even pierce the creature’s leathery skin.

Ferro contemplated his options, which did not look too bright. If he stayed to fight, fatigue would eventually get to him. After all, the ogre needed just one good blow, and Ferro would be down and out. If he ran, the villagers would be at the mercy of these bandits. After the trouble he had given Uluf’s gang, Ferro worried that they would take out their frustration on the people living here. Besides, he had agreed to duel the ogre, which meant that his honor demanded he would not run.

The knight and the ogre circled each other, testing their respective defenses. This went on for a while until Ferro noticed that his own movements slowed down. At the same time, he heard galloping horses in the distance, which hopefully meant that he needed to hold out just a little

longer until the knights arrived. As he caught a glimpse of approaching horses on the other side of the village, the ogre's club came down on him. The trunk did not hit him, but the branches and leaves grazed him. Ferro lost his balance and fell to the ground. The ogre lifted his club, towering over Ferro. There was an alternative to winning to end this duel. He tossed his blade to the side. "I give up. You win."

The ogre looked confused. "No. We fight. You die."

"But I already yielded," Ferro said. He stood up and dusted off his clothes, then he extended a hand to the ogre. "You won fair and square. I surrender. There is no need for violence."

The ogre looked at him, stupefied. "No. No. You fight."

Behind the ogre, the bandits ran around, trying to escape the dozen knights that rode into the village.

Ferro could not help but laugh. His whole body quivered at the release of tension. The ogre growled. "What so funny, human?"

"Well," Ferro said, "turn around and have a look."

Uluf began turning then spun back in midrotation. "Old trick. You no trick me."

Ferro laughed even harder. "Suit yourself, but you're missing all the fun."

When Ferro stepped past the ogre, the creature had no other option but to turn if he wanted to keep watching the knight. By now, the knights had rounded up the marauders. Half-a-dozen knights circled the ogre. One of the knights made the horse rear. The hooves crashed into the ogre's chest, knocking him off balance. The other knights dismounted. They swarmed the creature, hitting him with their hammers. The rider approached Ferro and dismounted. When the knight took off her helmet, long blond hair cascaded onto her shoulders. "Ferro Torridan, good to see you again."

Ferro felt his face light up. He crushed his friend in a hug. "Jarina! What are you doing here?"

She smiled at him when he released her. "Ah, well, I guess I fell out of favor with Sir Gunther."

"Sorry to hear that," Ferro said.

Jarina looked at the subdued ogre and the bandits. "What are we going to do with them?"

Ferro shrugged. "Our duty is done. We'll transfer them to the Evernight Exile and let them deal with these criminals."

He only had an inkling about what happened there. It was one aspect he did not like about his work, but that could not be helped.

"Come on, Jarina," he said. "Let's get back to Mountain Watch."

Chapter 2

Midnight Dealings

Leena strolled to the unmarked door in the dark side street. The citizens considered this section of Prosperity to be unsafe, but she knew these parts too well to be concerned. When she knocked on the door, a shutter opened. From the other side, a man eyed her. “What do you want?”

She did not know him, which made her cautious. Acting absent-minded, she played with the snow orchid in her hand. “I wish to enter, my good man.”

The shutter closed, and Leena heard footsteps behind the door, which indicated that the man went downstairs. After a while, she wondered whether Quiver, the somewhat eccentric front man of this thieves’ den, had set this up as a test for her. With some annoyance, she took out her lock picks from her pouch. Just as she knelt down to inspect the lock, the door opened. The man looked down at her. “You may come in now.”

She had to give him some credit for sneaking back up to the entrance without her hearing his approach.

“Thank you,” she said as she got up. She brushed past him then descended the stairs that lay beyond the door.

In the room below, several men played dice and card games. In the alcoves to the side, some addicts smoked spirit herbs with ornate pipes. Leena looked around to see whether there were any profitable tables, but of course, the ones with inexperienced players had filled out completely. She found a seat at a table with many regulars, but she felt confident that she could outplay them. Leena tossed a silver coin into the middle of the table and picked up her cards. Her hand consisted of a single knave and several militia-men. She wondered whether it would be worth it to keep recruiting, but when she looked at the other players, she noticed one person’s carotid pulsing after he peeked at his cards. She did not know the man, so she could not know with certainty what that meant. He shoved his cards back to the table, making sure nobody could see them. Leena guessed that he had picked up a strong hand, but he would let the other players keep paying tribute to the dragon, whose hoard was represented by the pile of money in the middle, in hopes of recruiting better troops. When it was her turn to act, Leena discarded her hand. “I am out. Deal me in on the next round.”

She moved over to the bar. Like any professional dragon hoard player, she did not drink anything alcoholic during her work. Instead, she filled a mug with water then leaned with her back to the counter, watching the room. Her focus remained on the table, but something disturbed her. It felt as if someone had his eyes on her. Leena kept observing the table, trying to pick up physical tells and map them to the hands the players revealed. Sure enough, the man whom she suspected to

have a strong holding showed the table that he held the dragon slayer. He picked up the dice, but with the extra points the card provided, it was not surprising that he rolled the target number.

“When did you pick up that dragon slayer?” asked one of the regulars.

The player scooped up the pile of coins. “Oh, on one of the last recruitment drives. I can’t remember.”

Leena snorted at the obvious lie. These people were easy to read after all. She walked back to her seat, shooting a glance at the side of the room. In the midst of the addicts, a lone person occupied one of the alcoves. The person, who was dressed in dark clothes, his face obscured by a polished mask made of metal, watched her. Leena frowned at that, but she could not worry about it now as the next round began. This time, luck shone on her as she picked up the only dragon slayer in the deck. Mirroring the winner of the previous round, she kept recruiting, picking up knights and a mage to assist her slayer in the eventual attempt at killing the dragon. Just as she decided that it was time to reap, the player before her tossed a coin into the pile that represented the house’s share. “I am charging the dragon.”

Leena looked at him. “Well, what do you have?”

The man turned over a knight, a knave, and a militia-man.

Leena suppressed a smile. This game would be easier than it looked if people kept throwing away money with terrible odds.

The man picked up the six-sided dice and rolled only sixes. Sometimes a lucky roll like that would make up for the piddly extra points the weaker cards provided.

“Unbelievable,” some of the other players said. The man looked a bit flustered but raked in the money with a smile.

Inside, Leena seethed, but outwardly she remained calm. Some of the regulars taunted the man for attempting such an unlikely attack and getting away with it, but she did not see the point. Either they would alienate the newcomer so that he would not come back, or he would wise up and not commit mistakes like that. Granted, this time the bad play worked out, but that did not make it profitable in the long run. Right now, he appeared to be happy, so Leena forced herself to calm down again. It was only a matter of time until she won more than what she lost.

However, the next couple of rounds provided no reprieve. People kept getting away with incorrect moves until Leena got so annoyed that she started to play equally foolishly in addition to having bad luck. After losing an amount that made her physically ill, she stepped away from the table to cool down. When she looked around, she noticed that the creepy person still sat there after all the hours she had played. Leena felt that this might provide an outlet for her anger, so she walked over to the alcove. “What are you staring at?”

“Ah, Leena,” the man said. “You are wasting your time and talent in this place.”

She narrowed her eyes. "How do you know my name?"

"I know many things," he said. "Please have a seat."

She stood there, arms crossed. "I don't sit with strangers unless it's a game of dragon hoard."

He leaned back into the cushions of his arm-chair. "Considering tonight's session, you might want to avoid that as well."

Leena felt her cheeks flush at that. "What do you know? Those gremlins just got lucky."

The man shook his head. "When you win, it's because you're an amazing player, but when you lose, the other players are gremlins who don't know how to play and just managed to catch a lucky break. Is that how it is?"

Leena had had this discussion many times with people she cared for. Did she really want to go over it with a stranger? "Look, all the decisions I made had a positive expected value in the long run. Of course it's possible to lose, even when you're a favorite. Otherwise, it wouldn't be much of a game."

"So, you're saying it's a skill game?" the man asked.

With the way he said it, she knew that he was goading her. "I'm done with this. Have fun with whatever you're doing, but I won't entertain you any longer."

"Leena, wait." The man sounded worried all of a sudden. "There is something important I need to tell you."

Even though the man sat in a smokers' alcove, she did not see any pipe or spirit herbs. In fact, he even appeared to be completely sober. Unusual as that was, something else bothered her about him, but she could not quite place it. "Very well, I'm listening."

"I guess I should introduce myself first. I have decided to call myself 'the wise man.'"

"The wise man? That's not even a name." The anger she had felt when she confronted the man had evaporated. Right now, the fatigue from playing too long and losing too much set in. "It's been a long day, so just tell me what you're going to say, and then I'll be on my way."

"I understand that you're tired," the man said. "My message can wait. I should not have bothered you like this. Please forgive me."

Leena wondered what had scared the man away like that. Before, he was eager to talk to her, and now he did not want to speak with her any longer. All of a sudden, she realized what had bothered her earlier. This wise man was the only person inside the hideout who did not wear a snow orchid on his clothes.

Leena jumped back, bumping into one of the patrons and spilling his drink. To the others in the room, she said, "Quiver! There's a rat in your den."

For all the bad reputation these folks had, she admired how efficient they were. Within the blink of an eye, three of Quiver's guards surrounded the alcove with swords drawn. With the guards at her back, Leena approached the wise man once more.

The man chuckled. "Whatever happened to our friendly conversation?"

She slammed both hands on the table and leaned in. "We're still having one, and I have a few questions. Depending on your answers, these men behind me might not stay friendly, though."

The wise man did not spare the guards a glance. He kept looking at Leena. "What do you wish to know?"

The man's gall surprised her. "For starters, who are you, and how do you know my name?"

For a moment, she thought that he was going to answer her, but then he shook his head. "Time is running out, Leena," the man said. "In fact, I must be going."

"You're not going anywhere," Leena said. "Guards, seize him, and pry off that mask."

Before anyone could react, the man turned into a swirling cloud of darkness. The guards pierced the mist with their swords, but no cry of pain came. In mere moments, the darkness dissolved, leaving the alcove empty.

"What was that?" one of the guards asked Leena.

"I don't know," she said. "But I'm not staying here to find out. If I were you, I'd abandon this place and find a new meeting spot."

Chapter 3

Prosperity

The heels of her boots pounded the stone floor, filling the corridor with the sound of her approach. The rough stone wall to her left stood in contrast to the view into the castle's inner garden on the right. From a door in the middle section of the wall, a young man stumbled into her path. With both arms, he carried a stack of documents. He paled when he saw her. Somehow, he managed to balance the stack with one arm, freeing his right hand to snap to his head in a military salute. "Lady Custodian, can I have a minute of your time?"

Without stopping, Shari appraised him. Her hand drew circles into the air. "Talk, talk."

The man escorted her to the door at the far end. "I'm starting my assignment in northern Thoralia next week, and there are still a few issues that need to be clarified..."

They reached the door, and the man extended a sheet of paper. She took the paper, skimmed it, and then signed it with her fountain pen. "Don't worry—it's all being taken care of."

She handed back his paper before leaving through the door. *Off to more important matters*, she thought. Shari stood in the war room of her castle. A table occupied its center. A model landscape, depicting Prosperity and its surrounding areas—all the way to the far reaches of the neighboring kingdom, Thoralia—had been arranged on the tabletop. Small flags dotted the landscape. Several men in gray uniforms moved around, updating charts and placing additional markers on the terrain.

She picked up a particularly large flag from the model that represented Fondston. Shari looked at the person next to her. "Ah, there you are, Invoker"—she glanced at his name tag—"Brent. What happened to the little flags?"

The man cleared his throat. "In the last few months, the netherworld magic activity has dramatically increased in Fondston. There wasn't enough space to track individual incidents, so we've decided to catalogue them and use a single marker to indicate this."

"Hopefully, this isn't the only reason you called me down here. You know full well that I have no patience for trivialities." Shari let her eyes wander across the tabletop.

"Certainly, my lady," the invoker said. "These are not mere fluctuations. The number and size of the events are troubling."

Invoker Brent flipped through the notes on his clipboard. "There are a few more things you might find worrying. We've had occurrences of netherworld magic appear all over Thoralia. The rune stones are disappearing from our scrying grid." The man lowered his gaze and swallowed. "However, the most alarming bit is..."

“I see it.” Shari took a flag from the middle of the table. “A spike of netherworld magic right here in Prosperity. When did you notice this?”

He wiped sweat from his brow, drenching the sleeve of his uniform. “About half an hour ago. After double checking, we immediately sent a runner to call you and then started organizing the data.”

“Very good.” She put the marker back before snatching the notes out of Brent’s hands. “Let’s see... low-level activity... just one incident so far... have we pinpointed the location?”

The man’s face became even paler as if he had forgotten to do that. “Not yet, but we are working on it.”

“Keep me updated. I want to know if there are any developments. Another thing—please assemble the senior staff. I need a second opinion on this.” Shari returned the clipboard.

“Lady Custodian,” the invoker said. “In light of these events, shall we cancel the ball?”

“No.” She shook her head. “These matters are not as serious as you make them out to be. The celebrations shall go ahead as planned. By the way, good work all around. I’ll be in the library.”

As soon as she was back in the corridor, her posture changed. She worried about these new developments, but there was no need to upset her wizards. *Does the rise of netherworld magic suggest a new Age of Carnage and Sorrow? And why are these occurrences happening all over the place? Why here in Prosperity? I need to find this out, and quickly.*

She crossed the conservatory as it was the shortest way to the library. On any other day, she might have paused for a moment to enjoy the sight of the blooming flowers. Today, however, she did not have time to spare.

Inside the library, she beelined to the Supernatural section. She picked up a few books on demonology. Shari dumped the stack of books on one of the tables before moving on to the History section. Her index finger trailed along the backs of the books while she strode down the corridor formed by the shelves. Her pace was too fast for her mind, so she had to go back a few books. “Aha. *Chronicles of the Age of Carnage and Sorrow*—just what I was looking for!”

Shari hoisted the tome from the shelf. She held it in both hands and sat down at the table. The book contained many illustrations, which became darker in tone with every page. She flipped to the last quarter of the book. The page showed a battle between the forces of the living and the demonic hordes, which kept pouring out of a hole in the horizon. Every race—humans, protoelves, soilcrawlers, a few dragons, and others—had contributed to this effort against the netherworld. Shari already knew how this chapter in history had ended. The people of the world had prevailed. However, they did not win by superior tactics or heroism or even strength. They won because their

opposition became too greedy. With every death, someone who had believed in the world order—which included the demonic presence of the netherworld—ceased to contribute to that belief.

The demons had choked their own lifelines by killing most of those whose belief fueled the demons' existence. In the end, all races were reduced to a fraction of their original numbers. The dragons were hit the worst. They were almost extinct at the end of the Age of Carnage and Sorrow. Humans, who were minor actors before, recovered the fastest and became the dominant force in this new age. As for the dragons, to the best of Shari's knowledge, a mere five of them remained. Well, six if you counted Sulphurmaw, the undead dragon king of the quarantined lands.

Shari refused to read on. It upset her too much. Besides, she needed to know something else. *Let's find out how it all started. What portents are we going to see?* She flipped back to an earlier part of the book.

She identified the signs that her task force of wizards had observed—netherworld energy springing up in seemingly random places and demons manifesting themselves in the world. According to the historians, all of those random places contained a physical and magical link between the world and the netherworld. The consensus of the scholars at that time was that several humans had been lured by the promise of power and entered into a pact with demons. Ultimately, this allowed the demons to pry open the seams that separated dreams from reality. Their endless numbers flooded into the world, and nobody had the strength to stop them.

Shari shook her head. She started turning pages, mostly concentrating on the pictures. *There's got to be some information in here about how to stop this before it reaches the critical point. But first things first: somewhere in Prosperity, there is someone who struck a bargain with demons.* Without a shadow of a doubt, she decided that anyone collaborating with demons had to die. By her own decree, the death penalty had been abolished in Prosperity. However, given what was at stake, she had no qualms about making an exception. Anyone collaborating with demons would not be tried in court but would face judgment at her hands.

One of her aides rushed to her side. For a moment, he stood there with a red face, pressing his arms against his sides, torso bent and gasping for air. She appreciated the haste but would have preferred a more dignified entrance. Fortunately, she had a hunch about what he wanted to report. "You're here to tell me that the senior staff is ready."

The man nodded. Shari pointed at the desk. "Good. See to it that nobody takes or reshelves these books. Also, please collect all the books about the Age of Carnage and Sorrow, as well as all books about demonology from Prosperity's main library, and bring them here."

Shari found the nearest staircase and descended into the basement. Two guards opened a reinforced door for her. She stood in front of another door, but by her own procedure, she had to wait until the entrance behind her was closed. When she heard the thud of the door behind her, she

started pulling a chain on the side. The leaden barrier in front of her jerked upward with every pull until it disappeared into the ceiling. Shari stepped inside. The invoker who had briefed her earlier stood in the room. He was clad in a patchwork of protective gear—metal greaves, chain gloves, a lead vest, and a helmet with a transparent visor.

“Good to see you again...” Shari said.

She chose to ignore the disappointment that flashed in the man’s eyes. If he wanted her to remember his name, he needed to do something memorable.

“And likewise you, Lady Custodian,” the invoker said. He pointed at three lead boxes in the otherwise empty room. “The pieces have arrived, and I shall now assemble them.”

From the first box, he took a five-foot pole. He fixed a four-pronged iron claw on top of it, which came out of the second box. Finally, from the last box he gathered an emerald that pulsed with energy. Even though this was the smallest piece, he moaned with exertion when he lifted it. His face lost all color, and sweat ran down his forehead. As soon as he lodged the gem in place within the claw, it radiated even more brightly.

The invoker staggered back. He would have fallen over if Shari had not caught him. “Well, done, Invoker Bran,” she said.

“Brent...” His voice—a whisper.

She hated being corrected, but considering that the man had just shaved off a few years of his life expectancy to serve her, she elected to let it slide. “Good work, Invoker Brent. Take a well-earned rest.”

Shari helped him reach the exit. The invoker sealed off the chamber, locking her inside. She sat down at the edge of room, as far away from the staff as possible. Shari crossed her legs. She concentrated to unleash some of her magic to enhance her senses. It allowed her to see the magical forces around her. Before her stood the avatar of the staff—a green, glowing, naked man who was held in place by a series of chains. His burning eyes locked onto her. The man opened his mouth and revealed rows of razor-sharp teeth. “Greetings, Mistress Shari. You haven’t called on me in a long time.”

“And for good reason, Mandor. I don’t particularly enjoy dealing with you,” Shari said.

“You wound me, dearest Shari. But that confirms my suspicions—you are here because you are facing a problem that might be beyond your abilities,” Mandor said. He struggled against the shackles without flexing his muscles. It was probably just an attempt at a dramatic gesture, cut short by the chains.

“Thanks for stating the obvious, Mandor. I hope your advice is slightly more useful.” Shari flared her nostrils.

“My advice is indeed useful. But it doesn’t come cheap.” He turned slightly, showing Shari one of the padlocks securing the chains.

“Out of the question. You have to think of something else,” she said.

“You disappoint me, Shari. The menace you are facing could spell the end of the world, no? And here you are, haggling over a minor concession.” Mandor hopped back to face her. He shook his head and clicked his tongue in disapproval.

Shari wanted to claw Mandor to pieces, but doing so would only hurt her. “How about I simply disintegrate you and be done with it?”

“Resorting to threats of violence already? You completely bypassed the stage of appealing to my conscience and pleading,” he said and chuckled.

Shari suppressed the urge to hurt him. “I’m not joking.”

“Neither am I. If you are indeed right, and a new Age of Carnage and Sorrow is upon us, then what do a few lives matter? I want a male host body and two female servants a day.”

Shari roared and flung herself at him. She ripped a chunk of flesh out of his chest. After the attack, she withdrew to lick her hand. Smoldering blisters formed on her fingers.

He staggered backward, his breathing accelerated. His shoulders sagged forward, and the look he gave her was a mixture of surprise and terror. Yet his voice remained as it had been before. “Impressive. But even if you are serious about killing me, it won’t help your situation, so...”

She would have liked to let him stew for a few days, but time was a luxury she could not afford. “I can’t just give you human sacrifices, that’s for sure. Here’s what I can offer you: I can see whether there are any volunteers to act as hosts.”

He was panting as fluorescent red blood dripped out of the claw marks on his chest. “Not good enough. I want something solid before I give you any information.”

“Hmmm. How about this: You exercise some restraint and get a host body for two hours each day. That way, I might find people who are willing to trade life time for gold. The same goes for the women. We’ll pay them for their time, but you have to tone down your... shall we say *aggressive tendencies*, to ensure that people are coming back. Oh, and I expect your continued support for this. Once a year, we’ll have a meeting to renegotiate the contract.”

Mandor snarled at her. “This is unacceptable! I ask for wine, and you’re giving me water! Brackish water, at that.”

“Considering that your options are thirst or water, it is a good offer. In fact, it’s a fantastic offer. Take it or leave it. I won’t be making another one.” Shari turned toward the door behind her.

Mandor smacked his lips. “Very well, your terms are... well, to be frank, they are less than desirable, but given the circumstances, I’m inclined to accept nonetheless. I would shake on it, but... you know.” He rattled his chains.

“No need for a handshake. I tend to keep my word. Now, what do you know about the recent rise in netherworld magic?” Shari asked.

“Your problems can be traced back to one man. His name is Ferro Torridan. Locate him, and you will find the source of the netherworld magic.” While his wounds were still oozing blood, Mandor’s stance conveyed strength again.

“Ferro Torridan, hmmm?” Shari said. “Where do I find him?”

“I am.... uncertain. It is very difficult to divine. From my confinement and with limited resources...”

“Don’t push your luck, Mandor. Just tell me!” Shari eyed him with arms folded, while tapping her foot.

He remained silent for a moment that seemed to last forever. “Even I have limits. The last piece of information I can give you is that you don’t need to seek out Ferro Torridan at all. Eventually, he is going to come to you.”

Mandor’s words sent a shiver down her spine. “Thank you, Mandor. I’m not one for letting things happen to me, but I appreciate the information nonetheless. It’s good to be prepared when that man seeks me out. I have to go now. We shall discuss this further once I’ve found a temporary host for you.”

His eyes twinkled. “No. We won’t.”

For a moment, she stood transfixed, mesmerized by his grinning face. How could he have known that she did not intend to heed her promise? Shari shivered at that. She extinguished her magic, letting the green figure disappear from view. She looked around the chamber and glared at the staff with the glowing emerald in front of her as she rubbed her injured hand. From her attack, the wood of the shaft was splintered, and a crack ran across the gem. To Invoker Brent, she said, “I take it you observed with your dragon sight?”

“Dragon sight, Custodian?” The man looked at her with a puzzled expression.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I meant spirit sight. Pardon me for using an archaic term.”

“I see,” Invoker Brent said while raising the chamber door. “Yes, Custodian, I witnessed your negotiation with the staff. I shall ask around for volunteers to serve the staff.”

“Absolutely not,” Shari said. “I want you to disassemble Mandor. When you’re done with that, hand over the pieces to the smithy, and have them melted down.”

“But Custodian, you gave him a promise!” A hint of shock crept into the invoker’s voice.

Shari frowned at him. “Listen. That thing is dangerous. It cannot be allowed to roam free ever again. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, Custodian. I just... I just wish you didn’t have to lie—that is all.”

Shari sighed. “I needed the information, so I gave in to its demands. That didn’t mean anything. You can’t break a promise when talking to an object, Brent.”

Shari dragged herself back to the war room. She waved over one of her aides. “I need all the information you can find on Ferro Torridan. I’m assuming that he is a Thoralian, but do not limit your inquiries.”

The man eyed her burned hand. “Lady Custodian, shall I call for a healer as well?”

“No. It’s all right, thank you. I just need some rest. I shall be in my quarters and wish not to be disturbed.”

Closing Remarks

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