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LEGACY OF KINGS AND THE BLACK WIDOW CURSE

By

Richard Berrigan Jr.

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2007

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## ABSTRACT

### LEGACY OF KINGS AND THE BLACK WIDOW CURSE

By

Richard Berrigan Jr.

This thesis is a combination of two tales of fiction: “Legacy of Kings” and “The Black Widow Curse.” These tales are pieces of genre fiction, specifically, Sword and Sorcery. The main character is Jack Windsword. These tales follow his encounters with a champion of righteousness whose power comes from the sacred relic the Legacy of Kings, and with the ghost of a long dead necromancer who places a curse on the princess of Ravina.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Manual and the Department of English.

Sword and Sorcery has been a favored genre of fantasy by fans for over seventy years.

Some of the most notable creators of the genre are Lord Dunsany, Fritz Leiber, L.

Sprague de Camp, Michael Moorcock and Robert E. Howard.

The specifics of the genre are a bit shady. Some critics have lumped the work of J.R.R.

Tolkien into the genre, while others argue that his work is better classified as “Epic

Fantasy.” Only a few characters in literature have been used to officially represent the

genre. Those characters are Leiber’s Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, Moorcock’s Elric, and above all, Howard’s Conan.

Conan was the most famous and commercially successful of all Sword and Sorcery

fiction, thus he has been imitated and parodied more than any other. The following tales

break away from the Howard tradition in a few key respects, but to explain them here

would spoil the plots.

The most popular and lasting work of the genre was produced in the pulp novels of the

1920’s. The following tales are a re-imagining of the genre in hopes of making it relevant

for a new breed of readers.

## Archivist Notes

My quest to chronicle the tales of Jack Windsword brought me to the country of Aluba. It amazes me that the tales of Jack Windsword have reached as far north as this. I happened across this tale one day while passing by a produce farm.

Sunlight drenched the fields. Mud caked in dirt tilled with shovels, rakes and hoes. Their sheepskin boots and kilts had been smudged a uniform brown in the hot afternoon. Several shirtless men with gruff beards hauled large wooden wheelbarrows full of turnips towards the edge of the field.

“Aveta on high,” muttered a younger man who leaned on his hoe to wipe his filthy brow with a rag. “I can’t remember when it was last this hot.”

Another older man stabbed his shovel into the ground while he unscrewed the cap on his water skin. “Aye. Been many a year since we’ve had such a hot autumn.”

The younger fellow grinned. “I wish Gorman MacAllister were here. With the power of the *Legacy of Kings*! Aye! Till this whole field in an hour.”

A few nearby men grunted in agreement.

The old man chuckled. “Ha! MacAllister would never waste his mighty powers to help the likes of *ye*! The Legacy of Kings is power reserved to defend the kingdom of Aluba!”

“Don’t be such a thorn, old timer,” the young man groaned as he stabbed his hoe into the mud. “When’s the last time our *hero* ever used his power for anything?”

Another man spoke up. “Aye! We’re taught to revere him when all he does is get fat in Longshanks’ house!” More hoots of agreement rose up.

The old man narrowed his eyes at the young men. “Do you lads even know what the Legacy of Kings *looks* like?”

Everyone looked at each other. “What, do *you*?” asked one.

The old man nodded and continued to chop dirt. “Aye. It’s a girdle.”

The men murmured amongst themselves. “I thought it was an ax,” said one. “I thought it was a *cape*,” said another. “Ye mean to tell us it’s just a *belt*?”

“More,” said the old man. “It’s a collection of all the essences of all the kings of the past that were mighty and good. The relic gets passed down through each generation to an anointed scion. That scion is then the champion of justice and truth for his generation.”

“Well then get MacAllister down here with his *belt*! Or better yet, loan it to me! I’ll clear this field in a heartbeat!” said one.

The old man scowled. “You have no idea what kind of power you’d get from that belt. None of ye’ve ever been to the castle. Never seen the great trophy hall. Ye have no idea.”

“Well,” said one smiling youth. “I know it’s never been *defeated*.”

The old man smiled. “Wrong, lad. It *has* been defeated. But only once. By *Jack Windsword*!”

“Who?” All the men within earshot set their tools down and turned a curious eye to the older farmer.

The old man grinned. “Have ye never heard the legend? The champion of Ravina! Wielded the Godblade!”

“Wait. Champion of the Autumn kingdom?” asked the younger man. “That’s miles to the *south*, old man.”

“Aye!” the old man continued. “He was a lost hero trying to find his way back home! They say he came from the lost kingdom of *Pennsylvania*!” The men furrowed their brows and exchanged curious glances.

“Where?”

“Nobody really knows!” The old man waved his hand at the horizon. “They say Pennsylvania is at the bottom of the Altean Sea. No one knows how he came to the Autumn kingdom. But he *came*. With *brown eyes*!” The green-eyed Alubans all exchanged skeptical glances.

“The old yak is tellin’ tall tales again.”

“Nay! His eyes were as brown as the mud on yer *spade*! And he had a great belly! He was the first hero in a thousand years ever to lift the *Godblade*! The Ravinian master sword.”

“I’ve heard of that,” said the younger man leaning on his hoe with a fascinated smirk. “They say it just sits in a temple somewhere in the Autumn kingdom. No man can lift it.”

“Of course! Jack Windsword was the last with the gift! Nobody knows how he came to Ravina, but they say he had been banished by a sorcerer to the *City of the Damned*. Made him stronger and more vicious than normal men. But he was *fat*. Not a handsome man. His *courage* was unmatched! Even by Magnus MacAllister!”

The men all scoffed. “Greater than the greatest hero in Aluban history? You’ve been in the heat too long, old timer!”

The old man nodded. “Oh? Then shut your lips and open your ears, and let me tell you a tale. The tale of Jack Windsword and the...”

## *Legacy of Kings*

\* \* \*

1

*“We got a name for people like that.”*

The wolves had picked up their scent a mile back. Jack Windsword had been outnumbered before, but not like this. The plump Ravinian woodsman had trailed Kimmara, the blonde priestess and keeper of the Godblade, from Ravina. He tried to stay out of sight, but when about nine wolves chased her into a maze of giant stones, he had to act.

Jack threw himself between Kimmara and nine sets of gnashing fangs. Sweat soaked the brim of his brown floppy cap, and the armpits of his thick brown shirt. Two hatchets strapped to his sides, he put them to use, skinning some wolves. Jack was a portly fellow, but with plenty of muscle in his arms and legs. Steel flashed and wolves yelped, but Jack couldn’t get control of the situation.

Kimmara pressed her back to one of the huge stones. Mud stained her red and green gown. A touch of fog in the moist air colored her panicked breath, and the Godblade, the most powerful weapon in Ravina, dangled by a strap over her shoulder.

The killers surrounded her on all sides, penning her in. Only Jack stood between her extinction. Jack's sudden appearance had startled her and filled her with a swarm of questions and outrages, but when he took a hatchet to a wolf that tried to bite her throat, she felt only gratitude.

These wolves were hungry and furious that something stood in their way. So they bore down on Jack. Their numbers overwhelmed him. He struck back; each wolf to take a bite at him received a bite of steel, but they endured the pain to bring down their foe. Fangs sank into his leg, his shoulder, his arm. Blood gushed over fur and skin, and sprinkled the white stones at his feet. The woodsman grunted and struggled. Several mangy killers hung on him tugging and pushing; Jack staggered, hacked and slashed. He had to stay on his feet. If they brought him to the ground, he'd be finished.

Jack started to give ground. "Jack!" Kimmara shrieked. For all her reservations about the woodsman, the last thing she wanted to see was him being devoured. But she had nothing of value to say. His fate was sealed. Unless...

She glanced at the sword over her shoulder. She had been entrusted to find the destined hero, the only man that could lift the Godblade from its sheath, as well as ensure that no one unworthy touched the holy sword. But Jack Windsword, for whatever reason, could lift the sword from its sheath too. Kimmara's family deemed him unworthy. They commanded her to keep the weapon from his reach. Jack had come to her after magic forces pulled him from his world into hers. He asked her to send him home. She didn't know how, so she felt guilty. She knew why he'd followed her; his ridiculous infatuation with her made him the biggest annoyance. And now he'd thrown himself to the wolves

for her. Literally. She couldn't just let the animals tear him asunder. If she put the Godblade in his hands...

Oh, with the Godblade, he'd make short work of the animals. But rules were rules. It was forbidden. The woodsman staggered to one knee, and another wolf dove on his head. Jack disappeared amidst a pile of growling, gnashing killers. She unstrapped the sword from her shoulder. Her bosom heaved; her blue eyes shifted between the sword in her white knuckles and the dying man in front of her.

She found herself staggering towards the huddle of feasting dogs. "Jack! Jack, take the—" One of the wolves pounced on her and pushed her to the ground, its paws on her shoulders. She froze at its snarling blood stained maw.

Then a voice from above startled the wolf and its victim. "Damned crotch sniffers." Above Kimmara and the wolf stood a towering, broad shouldered, black haired specimen. His plaid kilt hung from an ornate girdle fastened about his trim waist. Chiseled arms and pectorals hung bare in the moist cool air. His fiery green eyes burned down on the wolf. The beast snarled up at the stranger, but the highlander bellowed in a voice that startled all the feasting wolves, "*By the Legacy of Kings!*"

The girdle around his waist came to life with stunning blue light. A fierce wind blustered from the man's core. The surprised wolves all turned with blood stained maws to see what the commotion was. From the ground a hatchet flashed and took the head of one wolf clean off. Then another hatchet flashed and split the skull of another wolf. Jack sat up in the oppressive wind, his face splattered with blood and dirt.

The stranger basked in the glow of the artifact around his waist for a moment, before turning to the wolf at his feet. One mighty kick splattered the wolf against the face

of a nearby rock. What once had been a champion stalker of the highlands was now a pulpy mess of blood, gizzards and bone chips.

The glow and wind faded from the stranger, and he dove into the midst of the pack. He swatted them aside with his bare arms. One wolf skidded across the ground leaving a foot deep ditch behind it. He hurled one into the sky and its howl remained in earshot for only a moment as it became a speck on the horizon. He seized one by the throat, snapping its neck, and used it as a cudgel to crush the others that attacked him. Tossing aside his broken weapon, the last wolf made a suicide charge. Using untraceable speed, the man darted behind the lunging beast and grabbed it by the snout. He dug his fingernails under its lip and then with one tug, he peeled the entire fur pelt from the beast.

Afterwards, silence strangled the area. The man grinned, shook the blood from the inside out skin and pitched the dead hunk of muscle to the ground. “Hn!” he chuckled. “Found me some new boots.”

Jack and Kim laid on the ground. Kimmara panted, clutching the sword to her chest. Never had she seen such a display before in her life. The stranger’s calm green eyes fell on the priestess and a warm smile spread across his lips. He knelt down to help her up. “I hope you’re alright, lass,” he said, a thick Celtic brogue marked his voice.

Kimmara blushed. “I...I...” Her eyes bulged and she tore herself away from the hero’s pleasant features. “Jack!”

The woodsman struggled to sit up. Blood stained his clothes and hideous bite marks scarred his arms, chest, stomach and legs. The highlander glanced at the sight and winced. “Ooh!” he turned to Jack and knelt down beside him, digging something from a



pouch on his belt. “Hold fast, laddie. I’ve just the thing.” He retrieved a stone the size of his fist.

“What’s that?” asked Kimmara.

“This here’s a healing stone lass. There’s a special water inside it that can mend nearly any wound.”

Kimmara’s face scrunched. “Water? From a *stone*?”

The highlander grinned at her tone, and she couldn’t help but notice how beautiful a smile it was. “The *trick* is squeezing the water out.”

“You can’t *squeeze* water from a—” She froze as the highlander, using unimaginable strength crushed the stone in his palm. The thews in his forearm rippled under the effort. The rock crunched and mashed in his fist and a small trickle of water dripped from between his fingers onto Jack’s wounds.

“Now this stuff *hurts*,” he warned.

The water sizzled on the exposed meat of Jack’s body. A putrid scent of cooked fat reached Kimmara’s nostrils. Jack’s body tensed, and he sucked a pained breath through his teeth.

The stranger perked his eyebrows in amazement. “Does *nothing* hurt this lad?”

The wounds miraculously began to mend themselves. Jack grunted and forced himself to sit up. “I wouldn’t say that,” he said in a hoarse voice. “I got a wicked paper cut the other day. I wept like a *bitch*.” He turned to Kimmara with weary eyes. “You okay?”

She nodded, uncomfortably. In spite of his near fatal efforts, he hadn’t saved her. The stranger had. She glanced up at the dark-haired hulk and stared.

“Oh, forgive me,” said the highlander straightening up. “I’m Magnus MacAllister.”

Kimmara’s eyes swelled. “*You’re* Magnus MacAllister? The keeper of the Legacy of Kings?!”

Magnus smiled. “You’ve *heard* of me?”

“You’re...you’re...” she blushed and looked down bashfully. “You’re actually the person I came to Aluba to see.”

Magnus tipped his head. “Oh?”

Kimmara nodded. “King Tristinian of Ravina is en route as we speak to your capital to take part in a special ceremony tomorrow. I decided to tag along a day after they left.”

“Oh!” Magnus helped Kimmara to her feet. “That’s right! That *is* tomorrow, isn’t it? Your king’s essence is to be copied into the Legacy of Kings,” he said touching his girdle. “His wisdom will add handsomely to its power. I was out here tracking a werecat that’s been picking off farmers’ livestock.” He cocked an eyebrow. “You’re a ways off the trail if you’re following the Ravinian’s to Limerick.”

“I know I—“ She glanced down at Jack, still sitting in the soft grass. “We—um, were chased off the trail by those wolves.”

Magnus nodded. “The farther off the trail you go, the more dangerous it gets.” His charming smile spread across his lips. “If you don’t mind, how about I take you to Limerick, just to make sure you don’t run into anymore wolves.”

She blushed. “I...I would...yes, thank you.”

They started back up the hill without even turning to Jack. Kimmara started bombarding Magnus with questions about the Legacy of Kings, how it gave him such amazing powers, where it came from, and the like. Magnus found the questions a tad embarrassing, insisting it wasn't that big a deal.

Jack plodded behind them. He had offered to escort Kimmara from Ravina to Aluba to protect her from just such a scenario as the wolves, but the priestess adamantly refused and insisted it was unnecessary which forced him to follow her from a distance, just to make sure she arrived safely. She didn't want his help, but he nearly died helping her anyway. Now this highlander with sculpted muscles, towering height and fair features only had to smile at her, and she practically let him carry her there. Jack's shoulders drooped even lower, and he sighed.

"I have to ask," Magnus said to Kimmara as they traveled down the dirt road against the blue sky. "Why are you carrying that sword?"

"It's—" She froze at the off-put look in Magnus' eyes. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Well. Women aren't supposed to *carry* men's weapons. I just find it strange is all."

She blushed and took the sword off her shoulder. "Well its—it's only—oh" she waved him off with an awkward smile. Turning to Jack she thrust it into his arms. "Here," she murmured. "Hold this." She whipped back around and pointed an accusing finger in his face. "But don't you *dare* take it out of the sheath!"

Jack forced a smile. "Yes'um, miss Daisy. I be drivin'."

They traveled for a few hours up hills and into valleys, past crumbled ruins and primitive arrangements of stone. Vines and moss overtook most of the landscape and

shackled the remaining pieces of crumbled statues to the ground. Finally, they came upon the capital city of Aluba. A fierce wind blew cold air over the sea cliffs to the northeast, and brought with it terrible rains that had muddied many of the unpaved trails.

Magnus led them to the gates of the city, where a group of people and horses, and one ornate wooden carriage waited. Apparently, there was some mix up about clearance, and the gatekeepers weren't taking any chances until the mess was straightened out. "I'll go straighten this out," Magnus said pushing through to the gates. "Wait here a minute, Kimmara." They parted with a long, gazing smile. Jack came up behind Kimmara, and peered over the horses on his tip-toes to get a better look at the gates made of wooden stakes. A woman's voice sounded in outrage as the door to the carriage swung open.

Cursing and complaining, Princess Jetta of Ravina hopped out of the carriage. Her long red hair glittered in the afternoon air, her full pink lips pouted and her almond shaped violet eyes were fixed in a scowl. Her voluptuous curves were amplified by the pink dress that clung to her hips and her generous bosom. "Ugh! I don't care, papa. I have to stretch my legs!" She slammed the coach door. "Been sitting in there for *hours*," she griped. Jack admired her from a distance, but Kimmara sauntered forward to make her presence known.

Jetta paced with one hand on her lower back, and another on her neck, rubbing and wincing. "Hello, Jetta," said Kimmara with a certain taint to her voice.

Jetta turned and gave a catty sneer. "Hello *Kimmara*. Long way from your temple, aren't you?"

"I'm here on business."

"Huh. How funny. I'm here against my *will*."

“I understand you have an audience with Magnus MacAllister later today.”

“Yes. So?”

“I’d like to join you.”

Jetta furrowed her brow. “Why?”

“I’d have words with the Aluban champion. That’s all. I believe as the keeper of the Godblade, your father should grant my requests, yes?”

Jetta glared at her with eyes of disdain. “Yes,” she snipped. “I thought you *declined* the invitation to come.”

Kimmara crossed her arms. “I reconsidered.” The fact was, instead of staring at Jetta across a carriage for three days, she opted to walk.

Jetta leaned to the side and saw Jack, bashfully looking around the carriage at her. The princess grumbled and turned away. “Oh wonderful. You brought *him*.”

Kimmara looked back with a start. She almost retorted that she didn’t bring, nor ask him to come. But the image of Jack’s near demise still burned in her memory. “I wouldn’t be so mean to him, princess. He has saved your *life* a few times already, hasn’t he?”

“Only because he *stalks* me.”

“Oh he does not. He *likes* you.” Kimmara grinned. Let the snooty princess deal with the poor fellow. Kimmara had had her share of Jack’s foolish infatuation.

“Oh, how *adorable*.” Jetta made a gagging gesture.

Kimmara’s face tightened. “Though I’d advise him to look elsewhere for quality character in a woman.”

Jetta offered some hollow laughter wrought with spite. “Why’d you bring him, priestess? Just to make my life miserable?”

She froze, trying to stir up a suitable lie. “No. I needed someone to carry the Godblade for me.”

Jetta’s face came to life. “He has the Godblade?”

“Yes.”

“Right now?”

Kimmara’s eyes narrowed. “Yehhhhs. Why?” Jetta grinned. “For pity’s sake. Haven’t you given up your foolish little crusade to win the sword? Don’t go hurting his feelings just to get a taste of the Godblade, young lady. Do you understand me?”

Jetta gave her an offended look. “What, like *you don’t* hurt his feelings?” Immediately, Kimmara flushed red and looked away with heavy eyes. “You treat him just as badly as I do—just for different reasons. He’s a thorn in both our sides, and he does it to *himself*. So don’t preach to me. Just because you’re older than me doesn’t make you my *mother*. I’ll do as I please.” She said all this while leaning to the side to get a better look at Jack who stayed hidden from sight. He was behind the carriage, petting one of the horses. “Awfully bashful today, isn’t he?”

Kimmara cocked an eyebrow. “He’s not stupid, Jetta. Burn Jack once and he steers clear of the fire.”

Jetta’s cheeks flushed red. “Well. I’ve got the blood back in my legs.” She opened the carriage door. “Good day, priestess.” She slammed the door behind her.

Kimmara sighed. “Spoiled twit.”

The gates to the city creaked open. The procession pushed through the streets to Castle MacRueger. It was a lengthy estate, with round spires and long glass windows, but little by way of battlements or curtain walls. It wasn't a fortress castle; it was more of a summer retreat for the wealthy. The horses led to their stables, King Tristinian, his daughter Jetta, and their entourage including Jack and Kimmara entered the hallways of the castle, escorted by their own soldiers and a score of Aluban soldiers. They were greeted by King Longshanks, an old fellow with a gray beard, a long kilt and a walking cane. He was flanked by two muscular men. At his right side, Magnus slung the magic girdle over his shoulder with a warm smile aimed at Kimmara. The priestess approached him without a glance at anything else in the world. "Oh. Bye," Jack sighed.

The other man with Longshanks was a frightening fellow. His mane was tangled and black. His irises smoldered red. He brooded with no shirt, and a muscular build that rivaled Magnus'. A heavy cape hung from his shoulders and he leered at the Ravinian party.

"He's Draconian," Jetta blurted with no tact and obvious prejudice. The presence of a Draconian had made Tristinian uneasy as well, but he said nothing. There was an uncomfortable silence that followed Jetta's words, as soldiers, kings, and others looked at one another as if they weren't sure the other could be trusted.

Longshanks broke the silence with a laugh. "Well yes he is, young lady. I hope it doesn't upset you too much. I know the Ravinians and Draconians haven't always been the best of neighbors, but, well he came to us from the mountain country a few years ago and displayed great talent in the mystic arts. He proved himself to be trustworthy, so I

took him on as the court Vizier.” He patted King Tristinian on the shoulder. “Not to worry lad. This one’s dependable.”

Jetta muttered under her breath, “We got a name for people like that.”

Tristinian took Longshank’s words on good faith. The old king was merry towards King Tristinian and swept him away to share the sights of the castle and have a drink together. After that, the Ravinian soldiers that escorted the king departed with Aluban soldiers to their barracks and to arrange guard post assignments for the night. From there, Magnus MacAllister fell into a deep and spirited conversation with Kimmara, and the two sought more private quarters to talk.

“Well I’m not going to stand around like a fool,” said Jetta. Jack listened to her clacking pink heels disappear into the bowels of the castle. Around him was blue stone, clean with lines of cream-colored mortar between them. Oil paintings of old kings and lords hung on the wall above a wooden bench. Long barred windows reached around the curved hallway and cast the gray afternoon light on Jack. He looked left; he looked right.

He sighed.

## 2

### *One’a Those Nights*

With Kimmara gone and the day getting late, Jack wandered the halls of castle MacRueger. The attendants bustled to and fro and paid him no mind except to



occasionally scowl at him for being in the way. Jack left the cold stone castle for the cooler night air.

A sweet moisture painted the air in the highlands. Jack meandered across the soft sward to the great reflection pond in front of the castle. It shimmered orange and light pink as the sun began to set on the horizon. He found his own reflection in the still water repulsive. Plopping down at the water's edge, he scooped up a handful of pebbles. Leisurely, he whipped each rock at the mirror surface and watched the reflection splinter into multi colored ripples that collided with each other. Jack sighed and took his sword off his back, setting it down at his side.

He found himself remembering a backwoods swimming hole in Pennsylvania. His mother told him to stay out of it because it was probably stagnant, but he and his sister never listened. On hot August days the water was brown and murky with insects that skimmed the surface like miniature figure skaters.

The pond before him was too clean, too perfect to be real. He glanced down at his bite wounds. They had almost completely healed. Jack thought back to that fight, how Magnus had burst in and saved the day, how he had squeezed water from a stone. From a *stone*. Jack shook his head. He was pretty strong, but compared to the highlander he was about as tough as a kitten.

"Enjoying the sunset?" A voice from behind startled him, and he jumped and craned his neck.

"Jetta!" The princess of Ravina stood over him in her beautiful pink dress, matching heels and satin red hair down to her waist. She squinted out on the horizon then looked down at him. She noted the sword at his side and perked a fiery eyebrow.

“Where’s your...”she illustrated a yapping mouth with her fingers and Jack chuckled.

“Aw, she’s with Magnus—“ He imitated a hard Celtic brogue. “Keeper of the Legacy of Kings.” Jetta nodded and looked back out at the water. “I’m surprised you’re not hangin’ on that guy. Kim seems pretty taken with him,” Jack continued.

“Huh. That’s what papa said. I don’t know why I’m supposed to swoon over every muscle bound hero.”

Jack cocked an eye brow. “Cuz if *I* swooned over him, that would be *weird*.”

Jetta pulled something off her shoulder then tossed it down on Jack’s sword. It was a towel. The woodsma’s heart started at the sight. “No,” she began with a bored tone. “I’d rather take in the Aluban country side. You know...” Jack’s eyes met hers and she smiled. “Go for a little *dip*.” Slowly, she undressed, starting with her sparkling earrings. She patiently dropped each one beside the nervous woodsman all the while periodically checking to see if he was watching. He was, wide eyed and slack jawed. He had completely forgotten himself in hopes that she would completely disrobe in front of him. It gave her a rush of pleasure to see him that way.

She turned her back to him and tugged the pink fabric down over one ivory shoulder, then the next. Her long sultry lashes batted at him as she slowly slipped the dress off her tight curves. She wiggled her hips to squeeze out of the garment and let it drop to her feet. She stepped out of the rumpled dress, her heels still on, and ran her fingers through her hair with a liberated sigh.

Only a skimpy pink body suit with lace edges covered her flesh now. It shimmered satin and clung to her curves like vacuum packaging. She treated him to a

little twirl and pose. Her bosom bounced under the thin spaghetti straps that struggled under gravity's pull.

"I *love* a sunset swim." She knelt down at the pond's edge, still in her heels, and swirled her fingers in the water. "Mmm," she moaned, smiling at Jack. "It's so warm."

Jack finally remembered to inhale. "Uhh...that's a...nice...bathing suit."

"It's not a bathing suit." She rubbed a wet finger over her ruby lips. "It's just a little teddy." She perked her eyebrows invitingly. "It's what I sometimes sleep in."

"You're...gonna...sleep—*swim!*...in your underwear?"

She shrugged and stepped out of her shoes. "Why not? It'll dry overnight. After all..." she slid her hands over her breasts, down her smooth belly and to regions beyond. "It's a *tiny* strip of cloth. I only sleep in these little teddies once in a while.." She tiptoed into the water and flashed a look over her shoulder. "I *prefer* to sleep *naked*." From her distance she could feel Jack's tension. Put anything in his hands, she wagered—steel even— and he could snap it in half. "You should *drop* in some night. I'll wager you'd *love* to see it..."

The lump in Jack's throat bobbed under a dry swallow and Jetta licked her teeth. She waded out up to her waist and traced her fingers over the surface of the water. "Join me?"

Jack seized up. His cheeks flushed crimson. His eyes darted to everyplace but her. He shifted his weight, jingled the stones he crushed in his grip, rubbed the back of his neck until he thought all the skin was gone.

Jetta relished in his discomfort and giggled. "What's wrong? Can't you swim?"

“Uh...er...” Jack could now only hear Kimmara’s verbal protests about his weight and all the times Jetta had called him names related to his weight in the past. “I got, uh...wicked swimmer’s ear.”

“Hm.” She dipped down to wet her chest then rose up again. The water cascaded off her breasts and her nipples hardened beneath the shrinking lace. “Ooo!” she shivered, massaging her chest with her hands. “The air is getting colder!” She beckoned him with a finger and a lusty smile. “Come feel.”

Jack accidentally let a moan slip through his teeth and tried to look away. Jetta swam towards him and crawled through the shallow water like a hungry panther. Her breasts skimmed the surface of the water and her rump wiggled in the air. She teased him on all fours just within his reach.

“Do you find me attractive?”

“*God*, yes.”

“Do you want me?” Jack was frozen. She crawled closer and brought her voice down to a hungry whisper. “Do you want my *body*?”

“Yeah.”

She giggled. “I *know*. Do you know what *I* want?” Her slender hand stroked the sheath of the Godblade.

Jack’s eyes narrowed. “Not *me*. Right?” he said bitterly.

Jetta looked away, biting her lip. “Why do you say that?”

“You haven’t been too civil towards me in the past. In fact, we never part ways without you wishing *death* on me, my house, my *pets*, my *lawn*—“

“Well,” she interrupted, sitting up on her knees. “Maybe I’ve changed my *mind*.”

Jack studied her with a practiced eye. “Okay, I’m gonna go for broke.” Jetta’s face lit up with eager anticipation. “Do you want *me* or something I *have*?”

Jetta took a breath. “Can’t it be *both*?”

Jack’s eyes fell half open. “What do you want?”

“Don’t say it like *that*.” She said with sincere concern and a hand on his leg. “Give me the chance to get to know you better.”

“Fine.” Jack crossed his arms. “Whaddaya wanna know?”

Jetta’s eyes jumped to his sword. “Tell me about your sword.”

“It’s not mine,” he said coldly.

“Well you always use it.”

He shrugged. “I’m just...borrowing it...I guess.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Kim’s pretty protective of it. It’s her baby. She’s hellbent on finding the chosen one.” Jetta heard the frustration in his voice.

“She hasn’t chosen you?”

“Nah.”

Jetta scooted closer and ran her hands over his boulder-shoulders and stone triceps. “But you’re so strong.”

“Stop,” he whispered. “Stop playing games with me.” He pulled her hands away. “Stop dangling yourself in front of me like this. I can’t *take* it.”

Jetta now matched his heavy and shaky breathing. “Then stop teasing *me*.”

“What are you talking about?”

“*This*.” She twisted her slender wrists in his iron grip. “Hurt me.”

“Wha--?”

“I like how strong you are. Squeeze me. Just a little.” Jack hesitated, so she pressed her forehead against his. “Please. Hurt me. Just a little.”

“Stop.”

“*Please*. You ache to feel my flesh, no? I ache to feel your *power*. Please!” Jack couldn’t help himself. Gradually he applied pressure, and gradually her face winced in pain. Their breathing increased in rhythm and volume. She showed him the pain in her eyes, and it gave him a rush unlike any he’d ever felt. He’d battled nameless horrors to the death, ripped their limbs off, spilled their blood in the dirt, carved their abominable bodies apart with his steel and his righteous fury, but nothing matched the excitement of seeing the look in her eyes. Nothing had ever made him feel powerful until her cool breath caressed his skin and she writhed helpless in his grip. What excited him most was the nigh imperceptible flicker of pleasure in the amethyst portals. Giving the princess physical pleasure was intoxicating. Eventually her body buckled and a pitiful whimper squeaked in her throat. Jack released her as if her skin had burnt his hands.

“I’m sorry! Oh God, I—” He panted and gasped just like her.

She smiled at him, while cradling her wrists that now had hot red hand prints pressed into them. “You shouldn’t have stopped,” she muttered. Tenderly, she started to caress his cheeks. “It’s alright, though. I can *teach* you how to—“

Jack slapped her hand off. “Stop it. You’re giving me bad ideas!”

Jetta scooted closer. “It’s okay. Get angry! I’m not afraid! Share your ideas with me! *Inflict* your ideas on me!”

“Dammit, Jetta! I said *stop* it!” Jack’s cheeks flushed red and his brown eyes burned like wrathful witch fire. The angrier Jack became, the more physically excited Jetta became.

“I meant it when I said I wasn’t afraid! I’m being honest and true with you Jack—no deceptions! I love the *danger*. Danger comes from *power* and you have more than *any* one! Look at what I’m wearing, Jack! There’s no one around! No witnesses! You could do whatever you wanted to me whether I wanted it or not and I couldn’t stop you! Doesn’t that *excite* you? It excites *me*. Tell me what you’d do if I—“ she reached for his belt.

“Get *away*!” Jack shoved her back into the water with a ferocious growl, more forcefully than he intended. Then they paused, panting in the night air.

“I’m sorry,” she whimpered, on the verge of tears. “I’m so sorry, Jack. I thought you wanted to—“

“No,” Jack trudged forward and waded into the knee deep water and helped up the delicate specimen. “*I’m* sorry. I shouldn’t have—“

“Don’t apologize. I *meant* it. I guess you find it strange, but I’ve always been this way. I don’t care much for body types—sex only excites me if it threatens my safety.” She sighed. “Well you know the naked truth now. You know what I’m after. So since it’s out in the open, what do you say? I know what you want and you know what I want. A trade? My flesh, your power?”

Jack squinted at the temptress. For a long beat he thought about her offer. Jetta could see the ache in his eyes. But he eventually clenched them shut and turned away. “No,” he muttered.

“Why not?”

“I can’t.”

“But you *want* to.”

“I *can* ’t!”

Jack snatched his sword and stood up. Jetta followed him out of the water. “Come back!” Jack tried not to look at her as he strapped his sword onto his back. “There’s no sense in torturing yourself, Jack! It’s a good deal. Hell, for you it’s a *steal*!” Jack shot hurt eyes over his shoulder and she balked. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have—wait! Come back!” Jack froze in his tracks and locked up.

“What’s wrong?” Jetta asked, unnerved by his behavior. She traced his eyes towards the castle to a large patch of shadow that was nearly indistinguishable in the fading twilight. “What is it?”

Jack’s keen eyes pierced that darkness and little beads of sweat formed on his temples. His breathing slowed from hyperventilation to a forced pace. A maddening calmness washed over his body and his visage became one of controlled panic. “Something *nasty* this way comes,” he muttered to himself. Instinctively, he pulled Jetta behind him by the bare flesh of her ivory hip. Slowly, his right hand reached up and his fingers slid around the hilt of his sword.

“Jack! Tell me what’s wrong!” Jetta’s untrained senses finally became aware of the danger she was in. Her skin tightened at the skittering shuffle of grass and an inhuman clicking sound. Jack bristled and glared his teeth like a cornered wolf at the putrid stench of carrion that reached his nostrils.

Then the thing revealed itself.



From out of the shadows rushed a great arachnid. It charged on its hind-legs, revealing the skeletal under carriage and hairy thorax. It fell down on all its ends, and its white fangs clicked and worked foul smelling green venom from its maw. The joints of its black limbs were bright red and the twilight glinted off the mounds of black eyes clustered above its mouth. It was big enough and fast enough to prey on a horse. Jetta looked up and a terrible shrill rang from her throat. With a heave, Jack shoved her back and stepped between her and the monster.

Jack's steel caromed off its iron fangs with hot sparks. Whirring slashes and nimble movements kept the creature at bay, though its defenses were near impenetrable. Its foremost legs seemed calcified like its fangs and were as effective as steel at fending off the woodsman's attacks. "No good!" he grunted.

Then the monster bounded overhead, across the starry sky, and pounced on Jetta. Immediately, the Godblade emitted a high pitched whine and enveloped him in a soft white glow. Thus was the protective mechanism of the Godblade activated when Jack protected others. Limitless strength, speed, and invulnerability, but only for the duration of his effort—*Godmode*. Jack backflipped over the monster and once again put himself between it and its intended victim. Enraged, it reared up on its hind legs, but Jack dove into its open arms and plunged his sword into its soft underbelly. It shuddered and rolled onto its back, rocking like a turtle. The white light faded.

Jack wheeled and screamed, "Get back in the pond! It won't—argh!" The monster pinned him down with its weight and its clicking fangs sank into his shoulder, tearing thew and skin.

The princess scrambled into the pond and swam out into the deepest part and treaded the water while the predator circled, hungrily clicking its fangs. She panted and whimpered, knowing she couldn't wait there for long. Jack remained completely still, prostrate in the grass. "Jack!" she cried. "Jack get—aaah!" Suddenly, she couldn't stay afloat. She thrashed and splashed trying to keep her head above the water. "Jack! Help me *please*!" The woodsman stirred. Groggy and hazy, the spider's toxin had done its damage. His left arm was numb. The rest of his body tingled. Vertigo weakened his perceptions and he fought back a wave of nausea. "Something has my leg! Help me!"

Jack shook the dizziness away and staggered into the water. Sword in hand, he dove below the surface to find living fungus and moss reaching for Jetta's body like the arms of starving peasants begging for a boon. His steel shredded the tendrils and the buoyant princess bobbed to the surface. Before Jack's head broke the crest, he heard Jetta scream again. He thrust his head up over the water and all around him, the surface of the pond burned like a hungry incinerator. Fire closed in on them from all around. Jetta shrieked and clung to Jack, which he found irritating. "Dammit!" he grouched.

Godmode activated once again. Jetta had seen this strange power before, but it still frightened and mystified her. Godmode abated the effects of the venom and granted him vigor. A burst of energy erupted from the sword and split the fire over the water, but slowly it started to mend itself. With Jetta in one arm, he propelled through the gap in the blaze. Jetta was overwhelmed. Jack had cited swimmer's ear earlier, but he moved through the water with the speed and instinct of a shark.

The woodsman led her out of the water and she sank into the grass, panting and coughing up water. Her red hair was soaked and stringy. For a moment, they regarded

the burning pond and wondered how it happened. Had someone laced it with oil? And if so, who lit the blaze? The questions had to wait.

The spider broke through the flames the way an attacking wolf parts between the bushes. Fed up with the monster, Jack threw himself at it, steel blazing. The protective light of Godmode surrounded him. With one mighty arm, he clutched it by the furry soft plate behind its fangs and hoisted it up. Its fangs clawed uselessly at his invincible skin. Jack stabbed the sword into its mouth longways—a good fit between the fangs. Then he slid the steel into its body up to the blade’s crescent crossguard with the ease of closing a greased drawer.

The monster would have shrieked had it possessed vocal chords. Its tremors of pain in Jack’s grip told him the attack had done its damage. Suddenly the fangs stopped clicking, the body stopped thrashing, and its legs slowly curled up. Jack yanked the Godblade free as Godmode disappeared. He snapped the gooey puss from the flawless steel and thrust it into his sheath, his intense grim eyes still fixed on the loser.

The spider’s body exploded in a puff of odorless smoke which cleared away just as fast as it had appeared. Red specks of rising light faded into the night air, and a chip of rock no bigger than a domino plopped into the soft grass. Both woodsman and princess gaped at the sight. Finally, Jetta stooped down to pick up the object while Jack cocked his head and said, “That isn’t supposed to happen.”

“It’s...a *rune*!” she exclaimed. Immediately, outrage and panic gripped her as she shoved the rune into Jack’s face and pointed at the mark on it. “That character! Do you see it?! It’s a Draconian character!”

“Draconian...you mean that sorcerer?”

“What other Draconian have we met?” She gasped. “Stars! *Papa!*” She snatched up her dress and started running for the castle. Jack overtook her. Jack charged through the torch lit corridors with his hand on the hilt of his sword. The guards in front of Tristinian’s door ordered him to stop and flung themselves in his way with the intention of lancing him.

Just before Jack drew his weapon, Jetta rounded the corner twenty steps behind Jack and bellowed, “Stand down!”

Jack shoulder plowed the vaulted double doors, and he somersaulted into the empty darkness, drawing his sword in one smooth motion. He checked right, looked ahead, then pivoted left just as Jetta caught up with him. They both spotted the king.

Tristinian stared back at them with bewildered eyes. Fire light illuminated his majestic frame and shimmered in the snifter of Brandy he held in his ring encrusted hand. “Papa!” Jetta called and padded across the floor.

“Jetta.” Jetta threw her arms around her towering father, and Jack relaxed his guard.

“You’re alright!”

“You’re naked.” Jetta recognized the irritation in his voice. “And you’re *drenched!* You’ll catch your death! What’s going on! And who’s *that?!!*” He pointed at the potbellied woodsman who dumped water from his scabbard onto the floor.

“Don’t remember me?” asked Jack.

“Should I?”

“Papa!” Jetta said holding up the Draconian rune. “We have a problem.” The king led her to his bed and wrapped a blanket around her, summoned for some warm tea, but

offered Jack nothing. For the next ten minutes, Jetta recounted their harrowing encounter with the giant spider, the animated pond scum and the burning water, all an elaborate attempt to assassinate her, though she excluded her and Jack's prior encounter from the tale. Afterwards, the king leaned back in his chair and sucked a long breath through his hawk-nose. He studied the rune in his fingers. The king conceded that the character was undeniably Draconian, but dismissed Jetta's charges for lack of evidence. "This proves nothing," he finally said, flicking it over his shoulder to Jack. The woodsman's palm reached out reflexively to catch the pebble, but Jack had never been good at catch. He fumbled with it as though trying to snatch a bouncing grasshopper out of the air, until he eventually had to scoop it off the ground.

Jetta sighed and shook her head while the king narrowed his eyes at him. "As for *you*," he growled standing up. Jack's eyes bulged at the towering figure before him. A veritable wall of seething muscle with a gilded battle ax strapped to his belt bristled at him. "I've never seen you before in my *life*." Jack knew that to be false, but he didn't argue the point. "And if I *ever*, catch you tromping around with my daughter dripping wet in her underwear—I'll *personally* smear you on my ax in trial by combat!" His massive arm waved through the air to point at the door. "Now get out of my room!"

Jack glanced at Jetta, who was now a pretty face poking out of a huge bundle of soft blankets, holding a steamy cup of tea. She shook her head at him and looked away, sipping her tea. The woodsman twirled his sword in his hand and slammed it into his sheath with a forceful thrust. Jack obeyed the order and left the bedroom of the king, sighing in disappointment.

*Where'd this guy come from?*

Magnus MacAllister was a paragon of heroism. Emerald eyes twinkled behind dark bangs. His thick black mane was restricted in a short ponytail. Kimmara couldn't stop ogling his angular muscles that were hard enough to break a chisel. A double-bladed battle ax hung on his back. His plaid kilt of green and red tapered at his knee, and hung from his ornate girdle. His boots were of animal skin.

Through the trophy hall he proceeded. She walked along side him, her arms clasped politely behind her back and listened intently to every word, every tale. The hall had a domed ceiling, and a mystic, blue, phosphorescent light gave everything an otherworldly glow. Magnus showed Kimmara weapons, dented pieces of armor, preserved body parts, stuffed animals, fangs from monsters and more. All of these trophies belonged to the thirty-four year old Aluban champion, and he displayed them and explained the stories behind them as a sort of resume'.

Even Magnus had heard stories of the fabled Ravinian master sword, though he was skeptical as to whether or not it was actually more powerful than his Legacy of Kings. "Ah, have a look at this piece here," he said, leading Kimmara to another spot on the museum floor.

Before them stood a sixteen foot warhammer that weighed around seven tons. "This belonged to the *Gallameyer*, one of the elemental giants who slumber in the earth," he explained. He recanted a battle with the towering terrors that had happened just a few

years earlier. At the climax of the battle, Magnus found himself stripped of his Legacy of Kings.

“Stars!” Kimmara gasped her eyes and mouth wide open. “What could you do stripped of your powers?”

Magnus grinned. “I had some help from Ogrim.”

“The vizier?”

“Aye. He proved to be a powerful ally that day. He preserved my life and aided me in battle with his Draconian might. Together we felled three of the giants with nothing more than our wits and our hands. “I still don’t know how we won the day.”

Kimmara put her hands on his shoulder. “I think *you* were the element that tipped the scales.”

Magnus blushed. “You give me too much credit.”

“You don’t give yourself *enough* credit.”

Magnus shared a warm smile with the blushing priestess. “Aye, it’s strange. Tomorrow is set aside to honor the king of *your* land, but you make me feel as if it’s for me.”

“Born heroes like yourself are born rarely these days. I’m glad you’re around. You make the world a better place. You do more than any king or priest or *god* for that matter.”

“Now you’re *really* exaggerating.”

“I mean every word of it.”

Magnus looked down bashfully then gazed up at his trophies. “I’m glad you’ve been so accepting of Ogrim.”

“Why?”

“You’re Ravinian. I can tell by your blue eyes. Ravinians and Draconians have always been at each other since as long as humans had memories. Probably longer than *you* can remember.”

She nodded. “True. But, times are different. It’s been many, many years since the Ravinians and Draconians took up arms against each other.”

Magnus nodded. Together they moved through the hall, making small talk over the different trophies. Magnus prompted Kimmara to share some tales of the Godblade to explain the nature of its power, the kinds of heroes that wielded it and so on. The open interstices let the night highland air into the hall. Berries and wildflowers added to Kimmara’s already pleasant fragrance. Magnus leaned against a bronze pedestal and crossed his arms while he noted the fair curves of her face and body. Blonde hair was a rarity in Aluba. Her electric blue eyes hypnotized him.

For all his effort, Magnus had a hard time focusing on the words she spoke. The lips that spoke them interested him far more.

Could he, the scion of Alubas’ greatest heroes take up the master weapon of the Ravinian people? Was he truly worthy of such a power? If he could, that would guarantee a future with the fair priestess. The thought made his blood surge.

For the better half of the night, he listened to tales of heroism that rivaled his own. “Kimmara, your Godblade is truly a *marvel*. I wish the chosen one would show himself. I’d give anything for a chance to fight by such a hero’s side with the Legacy of Kings.”

Kimmara stepped closer. “Well...Magnus...I think the chosen one is in this room.”



Magnus' heart beat faster. "Are you sure?"

"Nearly certain. Nearly certain. There's a man in this room who has the heart, vigor, and righteous mind that make him worthy." She stepped closer. Her soft, warm flesh pressed against his body.

"Aye?" he said, breathless with anticipation. Magnus wanted her to declare him the chosen one. He ached to hold the Ravinian sword in his grip...and to hold her.

"Where is he?"

"He's right—"

The arched doors of the trophy hall slammed against the walls. Magnus and Kimmara whirled around startled, blushing and irritated. Jack stood in the doorway, with his arms still extended from carelessly flinging the doors back. He reeked of pond water and his entire body was soggy and dirty. Two round bleeding gashes in his shoulder trailed blood everywhere he went. His hurried eyes swept the hall from side to side before finally landing on the others. "*Kim!*" he shouted and broke into a run across the hall. Water squished in his boots with each gait and his clothes and thighs rubbed together with a wet 'shlop-shlop' sound.

Magnus looked to Kimmara, stunned. She couldn't look the champion in the eye and she covered her eyes with her hand. "Kim!" Jack came to a halt before her and panted to catch his breath, standing with the aid of his hands to his knees. "Man...am I...glad I...*found* you!"

"Catch your *breath*, Jack!" she snapped.

Magnus was taken aback, though he didn't show it. A moment earlier she was a sensual, benevolent figure of justice. Now she'd reverted to a catty moody nag. And who was this fat fellow? "Sorry," he huffed. "But...we got a...real *problem*."

"You're *embarrassing* me!" she growled through clenched teeth. "Can't this *wait* till later?"

Magnus ventured a guess. "Are you two brother and sister?"

"No!" they replied.

Magnus nodded uneasily. "I'm sorry, fellow; I didn't get your name..."

"Jack...Jack Windsword...man I'm tired..." He was too busy huffing between his knees to notice the Aluban's extended hand.

"So, you two *know* each other?"

Kimmara feigned a nervous giggle. "Well...you see...Jack here is...well he's um...he's my *assistant*." Jack could only flash a disagreeable look at her. "He um...he has some unique talents that make him a useful aid." She nodded, satisfied with her explanation. "Yes."

"What sort of talents?"

She flushed red. "He...he..."

Regaining his wind, Jack straightened up. "I refill the water cooler every *Tuesday*." He turned to Kim. "Kim, we gotta get the king and bounce."

"Bounce?" Magnus' brow scrunched.

Kimmara had been in Jack's company for months, and she had learned the meanings of all his bizarre...'isms.' "Uh...he means *leave*." She turned to Jack as a

Hydra. “You are *humiliating* me. Why must I drop what I’m doing to go speak with the *king*?”

“Cuz that Vizier guy just tried to bump off Jetta!”

“What?” asked Magnus. “What language is he speaking? It *sounds* like common tongue but...”

“He...he means *assassinate*,” she explained, though still a bit shaken by the news.

Magnus flared up. “He *can’t* be talking about Ogrim. Tell him he’s mistaken.” He glanced down at his boots. “And that he’s *bleeding* all over the floor.”

Jack waved his hands in a panic. “Nah, dude, there’s no *time* to bleed! That Draconian dude’s got a bead on the king and Jetta! We gotta *split*!” He looked back and forth at the two. “Is anyone *listening* to me? I just got done savin’ Jetta’s hot *ass* from bein’ spider food! And then the seaweed tried to get’er and then the *pond* caught on fire—“

“Have you been *drinking* little fellow?”

Jack sneered at Magnus. “Who’s *this* guy?”

“Jack, this is *Magnus MacAllister*. Remember? Keeper of the *Legacy of Kings*? The great hero of Aluba? We went over this before—are you *listening* to me?” Jack had been wringing water out of his soggy brown cap.

He looked up with a start. “Huh? I dunno quarter past eleven, I think.” He said tugging his cap over his soggy hair. “Listen. That guy’s like a *wizard* or somethin’. He sent this giant spider to get Jetta and when I *killed* it, it turned into—“

“*You* killed a giant spider?” asked an amused Magnus.

“Yeah. And when I killed it turned into this little rune thing and Jetta said the letter on it was a Draconian letter.”

“Your princess is a *liar*,” Magnus growled, his mood turning dark.

Jack ignored the Aluban. “We tried to explain it to the king, but he wasn’t buyin’ it. I don’t think he remembers me. He might listen to *you* though.”

“Jack, I...this is...” Kimmara couldn’t separate fact from fiction. All she knew is that any chance she had of getting Magnus to take her seriously had just been chucked over a cliff by the woodsman.

“Just a moment,” said Magnus stepping closer to Jack. His arms akimbo, he thrust his massive chest in Jack’s face. The woodsman stepped back, a bit surprised by the affront. “I’m sorry that you couldn’t get decent instruction on how to speak proper tongue, but I’ve been able to understand most of it. And you’ve accused a good man of a treacherous deed. I want you to apologize.”

“Magnus please,” Kimmara said obsequiously. “He doesn’t mean it. He—he has a dry sense of humor that comes off a bit wrong sometimes but—”

Jack’s brow hardened and he stepped toward the Aluban. “You tell *him* to apologize! It was *his* pet spider that damn near killed me!”

Magnus’ hackles stood on end. “You’ve got a crooked tongue, pup. I’ve killed better *men* for less than this. My patience is extended only for your fair companion. Now take it *back*.”

“Jack don’t—”

Jack ignored Kimmara. Here was his opportunity to put to rest his nagging doubt. Could Magnus squeeze *him* like a stone? He stood on his toes to get his nose right

beneath the Aluban's. "*No.*" Before he knew it, Magnus had hoisted him up by his shirt and sword strap and heaved him to the ground.

"Stop it! Magnus stop!"

"I'm sorry, Kimmara. But the honor of a good man is at stake here. I don't know how Ravinian's treat it—but in Aluba a man's name is as good as his friend. What friend would I be to let him slander Ogrim like that?"

Jack rose to his feet, nursing the still throbbing insect bite on his shoulder. His heart thundered, less from fear, and more from humiliation. He had to stand up to the Legacy of Kings. Kimmara was watching. He had to show her the highlander wasn't so tough.

Without a word, he snapped a hard cross that Magnus avoided with a lean of his head. His face betrayed his surprise, though. Jack didn't look to be half as fast as he really was. Magnus countered with a punch of his own that walloped Jack and sent him sprawling. Jack knew a handful of men in the world. And of them, the only one that could deck him like that was actually a talking grizzly bear. The Aluban had a contender's punch, and it took Jack a few moments to get his head in order so he could stand.

"Apologize, pup."

Jack's reply was a charging tackle. Normally, Jack could bring common opponents to the ground with his combined strength and weight. But tackling Magnus was like tackling a tree. He bounced off the hero and nursed his wounded shoulder. Magnus merely hoisted him up with an amused smirk. "Last chance, pup. Apologize."

“Last chance,” Jack said. He struggled against Magnus’ hand with his own and fired a few hard kicks into the Aluban’s bare chest. Magnus wouldn’t flinch. “Give up or...”

Magnus perked an eyebrow. “Or what?”

“Or...or...” His eyes shifted to Kimmara and a swell of humiliation washed over him.

Magnus smashed his fist into Jack’s face and the heavy woodsman fell limp in his iron grip. “No!” Kimmara cried.

“It’s alright,” Magnus said calmly. “He’ll be fine. I have to take him to Ogrim now.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s the one who was slandered. In my country if you can’t get a man to recant what he said about your friend, then you take him to your friend and let *him* deal with it.” He threw Jack over his shoulder. “Phew! This pup smells *horrible*! It’s like he really *was* swimming in the pond. Kimmara, why do you travel with such unkempt company?”

“I don’t know,” she said bashfully. “It’s embarrassing.”

4

*“She’s one of us.”*

They navigated the halls by torchlight. Kimmara followed Magnus MacAllister as he carried Jack Windsword on his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Her face hadn’t lost its

embarrassed hue of red for ten minutes. Past suits of armor, hanging blue tapestries and lapis lazuli frieze work he carried Jack. He climbed a set of twisting stairs into the keep where he approached only one door. It was not ornate like the others in the castle. It was a simple door of wood and iron with a ring for a doorknob.

It smelled of straw and rock like a barn. The vizier's keep overlooking the castle was like a bird's frazzled nest atop a grand statue. Magnus lifted his strong hand to rap on the door when it flung open. Magnus smiled and pointed at the man in the doorway. "Ah, *Ogrim*! You crafty rascal! You always *do* that!"

Ogrim stood just as tall as Magnus—a head and a half above normal men. A stark black mane drooped over his face, and cast a sinister shadow over his features. Ogrim was built more like a fighter and was dressed like one too. He had a stonewall chest and arms that were just as meaty as Magnus'. He wore a gold ornamental waistband that gave way to a red strip of cloth that dangled between his knees. Black cloth pants clung to his tightly muscled legs and his boots were heavy iron greaves. Gauntlets with jewels twinkled around his arms, and a heavy red cape hung from a gold strip of metal that guarded his chest and shoulders. "I'm a wizard, Magnus. What good would I be if I couldn't sense the comings and goings of my fellows?"

"Then you know why I'm here, I assume."

Ogrim pulled the door open wider. "Aye. I'll take the pup. Perhaps if I show him what I'm truly about, he'll change his mind."

"That's what I thought." Magnus handed the unconscious woodsman over and he bid farewell to the vizier, with an arm in arm salute.

"Take his sword," said Kimmara before the door was shut.

“His sword? What for?” asked Magnus.

“Because it’s not his.”

Jack awoke to a bright light over his eyes. He couldn’t see anything else for it.

“Ah!” he winced and covered his face perforce. Sitting up, he noticed he wasn’t on a bed. It was more of an examination table of some kind. The light that blinded him was a magic were light—an orb of intense light that bobbed in place in mid air.

He blinked the spots from his eyes and tried to get a good look at his surroundings. Magnus and Kimmara were gone, and he was no longer in the hall of trophies. The last thing he remembered was fighting Magnus over something stupid. Man, that guy was strong! Did he knock him out? Where was he now?

The loft was built of round brick and mortar. Bookshelves reached up to the wood and thatch ceiling. Across the room was a long table with books and parchments and spells. A crystal hand with clawed fingers sat on a pedestal next to a glass orb. Several smaller colored balls orbited around the crystal ball in mid air. Behind him a great eagle hunched in a small cage of wood. The creature had no room to stretch its wings, and its dark eyes brooded at him. There were large open windows behind the bird, it might have been a balcony. And the night sky glittered with stars and the wind howled past.

In another section of the loft, Jack found a different arrangement entirely. Practice dummies on wooden posts bore nicks and cuts and bled straw and fluff onto the floor. Battle axes hung on the wall and their blades were nicked from use. He also found an impressive collection of swords as well as panoply of other weapons. Someone had stacked weights in against the far wall.



Jack rubbed the back of his head as he surveyed the room. Slowly he turned when he smacked into a human wall. Bouncing off a set of pectorals, Jack bounded back, thinking Magnus had returned. But the grim looking spook before him was not Magnus. Jack balked and blinked a few times in surprise. “Who’re you?”

“Ogrim.” His voice was a growl.

Jack bristled. “*You*. You’re the one who sent that huge spider after Jetta! And you were probably responsible for all that other crazy stuff too.”

Ogrim remained still as a statue. “Aye. It was.”

“Okay,” Jack bounced uneasily, expecting the vizier to do something sudden. “I guess you’re pretty pissed that I foiled your assassination attempt!”

“Twas no assassination attempt.” Ogrim turned and plodded back to his study.

“Huh?”

Ogrim opened a small container and pulled a grey mouse up by its pink tail. It squeaked and thrashed to be free. Ogrim stuck it between the bars of the eagle’s cage, and the bird snatched it up in its beak, crunching its bones. Jack grimaced, and Ogrim turned to the balcony. “I wanted to *retrieve* her.”

“With a giant spider?”

“Its venom wasn’t lethal. It paralyzes.” He glanced at Jack over his armored shoulder. “I’m surprised you recovered from the venom as quickly as you did. In fact, I didn’t think you were capable of protecting her so well. You don’t *look* very strong.”

“Yeah well you don’t *look* like a...uh...crap.” Jack had no witty response. “Well what the hell did you want Jetta for anyway?”

“To speak with her. I wouldn’t be able to request an audience with the royal of Ravina directly. She would never have had it. She despises Draconians.”

Jack crossed his arms. “I wonder why? Oh wait. Cuz they send giant spiders after people. What did you want to talk to her about?”

“I was going to explain why I am going to murder her *father* tomorrow.” Jack’s blood flooded his muscles. He could tell by the mirthless Draconian’s tone that he was serious.

“What? Why? Why tell Jetta?”

“Because Jetta is one of *us*.” He clamped his hand over his chest. Jack waited with eager ears to hear the rest. “You see Jetta is not a pureblood. She is *half* Draconian.”

Jack perked an eyebrow. “Okay...”

“Her eyes are amethyst: half blue from her father’s blood, and half *red* from her mother’s.”

“Draconians only have red eyes?”

“And Ravinian’s have only *blue* eyes.”

“Well...why hasn’t anyone said anything to Jetta?”

Ogrim chuckled. “Because Ravinians are spineless! She’s lived in a lie for too long to question it. Besides, most people don’t notice eye color that well. Had they bothered to *count*, they’d see that Ravinian dregs only have blue eyes.” Jack still looked confused. “Think about it, boy. Doesn’t it make sense? Her lust for power? Her hunger for action? Conquest? That unquenchable thirst for *pain* and *danger* is her Draconian blood boiling hot.”

Jack shrugged. “If you say so.”

“You don’t *know* of the mountain men, do you?”

“Not really from around here.”

Ogrim squinted at Jack. “*That* might explain why your eyes are *brown*.”

“So?”

“You’re not Ravinian. Or Draconian. There is no race on this planet with eyes of brown. There’s something...*alien* about you. I suspected it from the moment I saw you *fight*. Who are you? Where do you hail from?”

“Jack Windsword. I’m from Pennsylvania.” Ogrim opened his mouth to speak, but Jack cut him off with, “Don’t bother. You’ve never heard of it. And you’ll never see it.”

“Hnh! It doesn’t matter. All that matters is how you answer my next question. And think hard, for your answer will decide your fate.”

“Oh goody. I *love* these questions.”

“Stay your tongue, cretin. My question is this: Will you bring Jetta to me so that I might explain my plan to her?”

“She’s not going to like you assassinating her father.”

“Answer my question.”

Jack furrowed his brow. “I can’t say *I* like it either. Jetta won’t help you kill her father whether she’s Ravinian or Draconian, and *I* won’t help you kill *anybody*!”

“Hrm. So your choice is to *die* then.”

Jack’s hackles stood on end, and a rush of panic filled his belly. He clenched his fists and squatted into a fighting stance, but when he reached for his sword...”What?!”

“They took your sword, if that’s what you’re looking for. That...*peculiar* sword.”

“It was the Godblade, asshole.”

Ogrim came to life with the first display of emotion he’d shown all night.

“Truly?! The Ravinian master sword is *active*? But how...how could *you* wield the Ravinian master sword if you’re not Ravinian?”

“Forget the Godblade! You still gotta contend with *me*!”

Ogrim grinned. “Think you capable of stopping me, boy?”

Jack grinned back. “Put some steel in my hand and find out.”

“You could have been a Draconian,” he chuckled. “You *think* like a mountain man. I like your spirit. But realistically, statistically, you haven’t got a prayer.”

“Says you.”

“I’m a *mountain* man, boy! I am one of the rare ones who have learned our ancient arts of magic, but I’m still a hot blooded warrior like any of my fellow mountaineers. Only they’re all much stronger than I.”

“So what? You say we should *duel*?”

“Ha!” Ogrim tipped his head back in laughter. “I was going to kill you, but I see that would be a colossal *waste*! But I can’t have you interfering any further.” He waved his hand, and suddenly, Jack found himself trapped by an invisible wall. He staggered back, and found that the wall rolled with him. It wasn’t a cage—it was a bubble. Addled, Jack pounded against the soft stretchy substance. He couldn’t pop it; its elasticity was nearly endless. “Don’t waste your strength, boy. I must set you aside where you can’t get in my way anymore. When the deed is done I’ll take you and Jetta southeast to Draconia.”

He waved his fingers, and Jack was whisked out the window in his bubble. He expended his lungs in an effort to scream for help, but no sound could escape the bubble. Across the night sky he moved, over the torch lit grounds of Castle MacRueger. The spires of the towers brushed inches below the bubble, and Jack gulped. If one of the spires popped the bubble, he'd plummet for almost two hundred feet to the ground.

Yet plummet he did. Into the pond. The pond was fairly deep at the center, and Jack sank into the darkness of the water where he shivered and screamed and pounded against the bubble, but could do nothing. The bubble was heavy as lead but elastic as putty. After a few minutes of trying to roll the bubble to one side or the other, he gave up, exhausted, and slouched down in his little prison. "Now I know how that *bird* feels," he moaned.

Jack spent the night in the frozen cold water, thinking about Jetta. He could have been having sex with her, but instead he was trapped at the bottom of a pond with no way to signal for help. Then he thought of Kimmara. She took the sword from him. She must have been ashamed of his behavior, and now he had no weapon to free himself with. What was worse, without the sword, Kimmara would have no reason to look for him. All she cared about was her magic steel. He stewed in his despair and his uselessness.

For the rest of the night, he wished he were the chosen one.

By this time, the farmers had all settled in for lunch. I was invited along, though I declined the dish. I kept out of the way to continue recording the old man's tale. He continued by exclaiming, "The royal procession hall is the grandest sight you've never seen!"

The building was ancient and cold, built from stone and nearly a thousand years old. Yet modern monarchs saw fit to add some improvements like ventilation ducts, carpets and padded backings for the seats. To this they also decorated the hall with great tapestries the size of entire walls, flowers of red blue and yellow, green ferns in squat pots on ledges, and suits of armor from different eras of their long heritage. The chamber was alive with chatter with occasional hoots and hollers from the more rowdy citizens. The stink was minimized by the magic air currents put in motion, and the house spellcasters added a blue tint to the ceiling for a surreal atmosphere. Nearly all of the Aluban capital city was there.

You already know how the rest of us dress. We highlanders prefer to go shirtless, and they still did even in those days. They wore died wools and sheepskin like dirty milk. The women stuck to tartan corsets and bustiers. The lords and ladies sat down front wearing softer kilts, waistcoats with sable and ermine trim, glengarries with blue and purple feathered plumes and walking canes. The ladies wore their best gowns and jewels for the king of Ravina, emeralds and sapphires to match their green eyes.

Jetta begged the king to back out. It wouldn't have been so difficult for a king to claim that urgent business had arisen in his homeland, or that he'd come down with a cold—or that Jetta had come down with a cold! She nearly did after her frolic in the cold pond water the night before.

But Tristinian wouldn't have it. "Draconia and Ravina have settled their differences," the king explained to Jetta. "Those rivalries are best left in paintings and carvings of the past when we both crawled around and wore wolf and bear skins. We don't build homes of sticks and rocks anymore, Jetta. We've become a nation of lumbermen, and they a society of miners. We've both crawled out of the mud into civilization. Let the past be."

Let the past be. He should have explained that to *Ogrim*. The Draconian took the entire congregation by surprise when he arrived with a wolf pelt masking his eyes. His rippling chest bore scars of mountain life, and a necklace of tiger teeth and superstitious rocks jingled like a dog collar. He gripped a dirty double-bladed battle ax. A man ready for war.

Tristinian at last suspected his daughter told the truth. But he could do nothing about it now. He met the challenging stare of his foe with steady blue eyes; his ringed fingers smoothed his black beard, fearless. But Jetta couldn't sit still, couldn't stop sweating.

Longshanks, with one arm on his shoulder sash, stood up with the aid of his cane and hobbled up to the stage. "Er, um...different attire today Ogrim?"

Without taking his red eyes off Tristinian, he answered, "I thought it best to meet the king of Ravina in a garb that better reflected *our* shared heritage, not Aluba's."

Longshanks could only look back at Tristinian, unsure of what to do.

Ravina's king nodded.

"Next time...let me know in *advance* so we might *prepare* for it," Longshanks shot back in an effort to feel like he still had some control.

Then Magnus arrived. Ah, no hero has ever been met with such love as he. He carried the girdle over his shoulder through a sea of smiles and applause. Kimmara clapped for him too, while standing at his side. And he was a humble champion. His cheeks were redder than a sunburn.

Though, no one noticed that the Godblade dangled from Magnus' left hip.

Longshanks began his oration, Magnus beaming proud on his right and Ogrim brooding to his left. Jetta squirmed. She imagined the wolfish mountain man spitting more giant spiders from his mouth. About then she noticed that Jack wasn't around. She craned her neck to scour the audience for brown—he'd be the only one in Aluba wearing it. He was nowhere.

Kimmara thought of Jack too. She thought of his scuffle with Magnus and a great swell of pity filled her heart. If only he hadn't tried to run with dogs that were bigger than him. If only he'd recognized his own limitations. If only he'd just respected the superior man, he wouldn't have gotten hurt.

When the ceremony began, Tristinian took the stage beside the rest, never taking his intense eyes off the suspicious Draconian. Magnus handed the girdle to Ogrim so he could begin the incantation that would move Tristinian's essence into its power store. Instead the wolf holstered his ax, cast an ominous glare at Tristinian, and KER-CHAK! He fastened the belt around his *own* waist.

Magnus' smile flipped around. "Ogrim? Ogrim what are you doing?"

He held up his ax and yelled, "*By the Legacy of Kings!*" The girdle flared up. Blue sparkling lights exploded with wind and sound. Everyone fell to the ground, covering their eyes. The stage beneath Ogrim's feet cracked as if he had grown a thousand pounds



heavier. They could *feel* the power coming from the belt. Verily, the stars look small at night, but when you stand *next* to one, you suddenly realize just how pitiful you really are. The Legacy of Kings would be no aid in tilling a field. It would turn the field into a *pit*.

“Ogrim! Stop! What are you doing?!” Magnus shouted.

“Aside with you, Magnus! This is between me and the forester!” Ogrim began to weave incantations with dynamic flexing and flowing of his chiseled arms.

Tristinian took up his own ax. “This is treachery on a towering scale! Not only have you been sullied by pitiful rivalries of the past but you would betray your own—“

“Don’t call them my *countrymen*, Tristinian! They are not my people! Mine dwell in the mountains of Draconia. You live in a dream! Our rivalry has always been! The peace between our lands is only *political*. The mountaineers curse Ravinian scum just as I’ve heard the murmurs that stain the lips of your people.” He turned to Jetta. “Just like your daughter.”

“Your conflict is with *me*!” Tristinian hacked with his battle ax. For an old king who hadn’t swung steel in nearly twenty years, he still moved with surefooted swiftness.

Ogrim caught the blade with his bare hand.

Tristinian pushed and tugged, but he was like a babe trying to pull a stick from his father’s hands. Ogrim smiled. “The Legacy of Kings flows in my veins now. I’m stronger than a hundred men.” He punched the king in the stomach, and that blow hurled him across the room. People in the stands scrambled over one another to get clear, and Tristinian crashed into chunks of wood, rock, plaster, dust and smoke.

“*Papa!*” Jetta shrieked.

Magnus bounded into the fray swinging his own ax. Ogrim dodged one slice, then another. Magnus roared through his clenched teeth and his eyes were flaring pits of green flame. “You *bastard!*” He chopped his ax into the ground as Ogrim stepped aside. “You *traitor! We trusted you!*” Magnus swung at Ogrim’s chest, but cut only air, for the Draconian had already darted behind him.

“Some bloods run deeper than others,” explained Ogrim as he kicked the hero off the stage and into the stands beyond. “That’s why I won’t use my blade on you.”

Kimmara fluttered across the arena to Magnus’ side. Ogrim turned to face Jetta. “No need to fear *me*, princess.”

“You’re a *monster!* You killed my *father!*”

“He’s not dead yet. I have a special fate planned for him. But as for you. We’ve waited many, many years for your coming, fair princess.”

“What?”

“Draconia has too long been without her princess. But now, as was promised by the god Crut, you’ve come to us.”

“No!” Jetta waved her hands and backed away. “I am *not* your princess!”

Ogrim laughed. “You *are!* You just don’t know it yet! You see—“

From behind, Magnus lodged his battle ax in Ogrim’s back. “I won’t forgive you!” Stunned, Ogrim fell forward a few steps and roared in pain.

“You *wretch!*” He plucked the weapon from his back, then, making sure Magnus was watching, he crumpled the ax in his bare hands.

Even the great Magnus MacAllister knew fear that day. Kimmara scrambled to his side. “Magnus!”

“This is hopeless, lass. My ax should have rendered him asunder. But it was like chopping a stump! I’ve been without the Legacy of Kings before, but I’ve never had to *face* it! Damn him!”

Ogrim chanted a spell from his primitive past and summoned an arctic gale and covered everything between the walls with snow. Jetta squat down with a shriek and shivered in the rising snow. “Let’s see how you handle the frigid winds of the Draconian mountain peaks!”

Magnus shuddered. Even a highlander like himself had never experienced such frigid winds. “Legacy and life! That’s *cold*!”

A squeak popped from Kimmara’s lips and she grabbed Magnus’ shoulder to keep from being blown away by the fierce winds. “Magnus!” she grunted. “Magnus! The sword at your hip! It’s—“

Suddenly, a heavy hand clamped onto Magnus’ shoulder. King Tristinian grinned while bleeding from the mouth. Magnus helped the wounded monarch to stand. Tristinian grunted. “We’ve a hard battle, lad.”

“Nay, king! You’ve no battle to fight. Leave this to me.”

“Without your powers you’re on the same footing as I. He’s already sealed the doors with sheets of ice hard as steel. Here—“ He handed Magnus an ax and shield he’d taken from one of the display suits. “We take him together, or he takes us.”

Magnus nodded grimly.

Kimmara protested. “But Magnus! You don’t have to—“

“Later, lass!” Magnus said as he and Tristinian stalked Ogrim like wolves. They walked on the balls of their feet, against the harsh arctic winds.

Ogrim noticed them over his shoulder but said nothing. He lifted his hands and the ground rumbled beneath their feet. Ogrim barked a six-word incantation, and the ground split. Tall crags burst from fissures. One rose beneath Ogrim lifting he and Jetta up, almost to the forty foot ceiling. The stone cliffs were stained brown with dirt and age. Ogrim stood at the top of his mountain and looked down with his ax in hands. He crouched and growled like a real wolf.

“You’re *mad!*” Jetta shivered.

Ogrim’s magic powers had also increased thanks to the Legacy of Kings. He managed to harness the very cold itself and use it as a weapon against his foes. He focused it to a point—on the pike of his ax—and it whistled cold blue through the air. This tiny beam crawled along the ground, and turned anything it touched to solid ice, including Tristinian. He tried his best to fend the blast off with his shield. It worked, but instead of freezing him solid, the ice became walls on all sides that imprisoned him.

“Papa!” Jetta shouted.

“King Tristinian!” Magnus could have taken his ax to the ice to free the Ravinian, but he went after Ogrim instead. Again the Draconian hurled the arctic blasts at Magnus, but MacAllister proved far too agile. He bounded from cliff to cliff like a mountain lion. Several leaps put him at the base of Ogrim’s crag. “Meet me with *steel*, Ogrim!” he challenged.

Magnus battled, but not his best. For he knew there was nothing he could do against the Legacy of Kings. There was no point in giving his all when his ax could never touch his opponent. Ogrim danced circles around the champion, and shattered his bronze

shield into confetti, along with all the bones of his arm. Having only one good arm to wield steel, Magnus resigned himself to death.

“Magnus!” Kimmara pleaded. “The sword at your hip! It’s the Godblade!”

Magnus’ eyes swelled and his jaw fell open. “You *lie*! I’ve carried your legendary weapon all this time?!”

“There’s no time! This is the test! Draw it from its sheath and defeat the vizier!”

Magnus rose to his feet with renewed viciousness in his eyes. Ogrim’s back remained erect and defiant. Magnus locked eyes with his foe, and wrapped his fingers around the hilt at his hip. Ogrim tipped his head curiously.

The Aluban nearly tugged his belt off.

“Ngh! It’s stuck!” Magnus tugged and yanked, but the sword wouldn’t come out of its sheath.

“No! No this can’t be right!” Kimmara skittered across the snow and collapsed to her knees in the snow. She grabbed hold of the sword and pulled along with Magnus.

“It’s...it’s because you can’t grip the scabbard! Here let me—now try! Pull! *Pull!*”

Magnus strained the muscles in his arm and chest, but could not move the Godblade a bit.

“Oh gods and stars, this isn’t *happening*! You have to be the one! You *have* to! I was so sure of it!”

Ogrim stabbed Magnus in the stomach with the pike of his ax.

“No! Magnus!” Kimmara cried.

“Irritating little—“ Ogrim backhanded her to the ground. She lay still.

Ogrim hoisted Magnus over his head. “You were too great a warrior to waste like this, Magnus. You should have listened to me.”

He wheeled and hurled Magnus through one of the great long windows of the hall. The crashing glass split Jetta's eardrums, and Magnus fell from sight in the afternoon sun.

It was just Jetta and the Draconian. "Don't touch me," she whispered, crawling to the ledge of the crag. "I'll *throw* myself off before a Draconian cur gets his way with *me!*"

Ogrim kept his distance, but squatted on his haunches, and put his hands—still gripping his ax—on the ground. He looked and moved like a real wolf. "The destiny before you will be difficult to grasp at first. But you'll come to accept it."

"What *destiny*? Why do you keep thrusting your mad delusions on me?!"

"Because you are *half* Draconian."

Jetta's face contorted in outrage and astonishment. "Now I know you truly are mad."

"Think about it. Are you not the only Ravinian with violet eyes?"

Jetta paused as the fact clicked in her brain. "Y...I...so?"

"That is the Draconian side of your blood, child. The same is the—"

"Shut your mouth, wolf man! *Shut* your *mouth*! Had I weapon I'd tear your tongue from your filthy—" Ogrim started to laugh.

"Of course! You see? That fighting spirit is the raw essence of Draconia! The life's blood of your homeland! It's true. You unfortunately share blood also with the scum of Ravina."

“You’re lying. You’re a wizard—a *trickster*. Who knows what sort of spells you’ve woven on me? This...this *cliff* may not even be here! This cold, this snow. It’s not real is it?”

“*It is. I am. You are.* What else is there?” Jetta had no reply. Ogrim extended his hand. “Take my hand. And welcome your destiny, Jetta, Princess of Draconia.” Jetta felt madness picking at her mind. In fifteen swift minutes her entire world had been shaken so badly she couldn’t be sure if this man who looked like a wolf was right. Before she could reach any decision at all, the world started to quake. She looked up at Ogrim with a start, ready to tell him to stop his foul magic. But looked just as bewildered as she.

He rose to his feet and peered through the snow, like a wolf sniffing the wind. Pieces of his magically raised crag crumbled and fell to the ground. “What’s happening?” he finally said.

At that moment, a horrible explosion rocked him onto his back. Jetta screamed and fell forward. Rock mortar and wood showered her. A thick cloud of dust and smoke mixed with the snow, leaving Ogrim coughing and waving his hands. “What happened?!” Jetta screamed.

“I don’t know!” said Ogrim crawling cautiously to the edge of the cliff. “It wasn’t *I* that—*YOU!*” Jetta dove forward and peered over the edge. An enormous hole had been blown through the south wall. Piles of debris lay amidst settling dust, wind and snow blew through the hole. Jetta gasped at who stood there. “*Jack!*”

Kimbara stirred. “J-Jack?” she muttered, too dizzy to see straight.

Jack stepped down into the snow. He was completely drenched, with an angry glower in his eyes. In one arm hung the unconscious Magnus, bleeding from the gut and

coughing up water. In the other hand he gripped the Godblade. Jack set Magnus down gently in the rocks.

“Stop,” Magnus grunted as Jack walked away. The woodsman paused and turned sidelong over his shoulder. “You’re...going to...*die*...” Jack said nothing. “That girdle...is...the Legacy of Kings...he’s too powerful.” Jack didn’t heed the warrior’s warning and turned away.

Ogrim was astonished. He rose up, and the girdle flared. Energy pulsed around his body and pushed the snow out from under his feet. Using the power of the girdle, Ogrim bounded into the air, completely encased in a bubble of crackling energy. He landed hard a few feet away from Jack; his weight splintered the rocks at his feet.

Jack and Ogrim stared at each other in grim silence. Ogrim was fearsome. Energy particles swirled around him like glowing gnats in the hot sun. He squeezed his ax in his grip; flared more light from his body, and another burst of wind hit Jack in the face. Ogrim saw the sword in Jack’s hand and knew how he freed himself from the bubble. He beckoned Jack with outstretched arms. “Make your move, then!”

To hell with impressing Kimmara, he thought to himself. Ogrim must be stopped. Jack took the sword in both hands. His head dropped beneath his collar bone, like he was pressing all his weight on the blade. His biceps swelled, and a different wind began to stir at his feet. Then the air became thicker; Ogrim felt the world pressing down on his skin. Pieces of broken rock began to levitate all around them, and white licks of lightning sparked all around Jack’s body. Then, there was a burst of light and wind. Ogrim covered his face with his arm, and when he looked again, Jack’s body was on fire. White tongues of flame licked the air all around him but did not burn him, nor give off heat. This was



magic fire from the Godblade, and Jack called it, “Godwrath!” It was different than *Godmode*. Godmode was automatic and limitless. Godwrath was when he *forced* the power on command. It wasn’t infinite and did not make him invincible. It multiplied his strength, speed and power for brief durations. Since Ogrim had not put any innocent lives in direct peril, Godmode would not trigger.

Ogrim held his ax aloft and cried, “By the Legacy of Kings!” A swell of dark blue light enveloped his ax, and the two lunged forward. Steel met steel; aura met aura. This is how thunderbolts are made! The explosion of Jack’s sword against Ogrim’s ax was the same that deafens your ears and lances the dark clouds on a summer afternoon. The surge shook the ice and dirt loose from the ceiling, and broke the walls open like an eggshell. Glass either exploded or cracked on all the buildings for a mile, and they reported that the water rippled as far away as the loch.

A blur of blue and white, they darted around the entire hall, trampling everything to rubble. The ring of steel matched sudden sparks of light and bursts of energy, but they moved so fast, no one could say for sure what exactly was happening. Eventually, one loud pop brought that scuffle to an end, and hurled Jack across the room where he skidded on his back through the snow. He grunted and tried to pick himself up, but Ogrim was upon him, a wolf going for the kill. He brought his ax down with enough blue light behind it to fill the entire hall.

Jack blocked with his sword.

Have you ever seen a meteor fall from the heavens? Have you ever seen the crater it leaves behind? That’s what became of the ground beneath the two warriors. The ground caved under the force of the strike. Jack grunted and put all his energy into holding off

the razor edge of the ax, but it was barely enough. Blood rolled from nose over his lips and stained his teeth. His muscles trembled, forced to their limits. Ogrim's mad smile loomed over him. The wizard knew the advantage of power was his, and it was a matter of time before Jack's arms gave out and the ax fell on his throat.

"Godwrath, was it?" he vexed. "It seems to have limits."

But what Ogrim didn't know, was that Jack knew how to multiply his Godwrath ability—something even Kimmara didn't know about. A wry grin crept across Jack's bloody lips. "Ass. These speakers go all the way to *eleven!*"

"Speakers?"

"And I'm only at level *one!*" Then a ferocious hoarse growl like stones ground on a milling stone grew in his throat. The white light that was so small beneath Ogrim's blue aura swelled brighter. "Godwrath *two!*"

"Two?!"

Jack kicked Ogrim across the room with a hard boot to the stomach. Ogrim crashed into some crags with all the grace of a sack of turnips. But immediately, he shrugged all the mountains off and cleared his path to Jack with one stroke of his blade. Ogrim bounded out of the rubble, enraged. He found Jack waiting again, the white fire burning fiercer on his body. Ogrim thrust his ax into the air. "Enough of this! *By the Legacy of Kings!*" The entire building seemed to rise up off the ground. The hall filled with blue light, and mystic sparkles surrounded Ogrim. The sparkles grew in girth and vividness, and the blue aura became darker until it was almost a swirl of clouds hovering over head. Then gold bolts of lightning sparked on his ax blade. It got harder for him to

hold onto it. Think of holding a wagon over your head with one arm while people keep climbing into it, and it's also getting hotter in your grip.

"Okay..." Jack grit his teeth and snapped his sword out to his side. "*Triple Godwrath!*" The white fire flared even brighter as if someone had tossed oil on it. Then he grunted in pain. Godwrath was a great strain on his body. Like tensing a muscle, he couldn't keep it up for very long, but he knew Ogrim was wagering his whole farm on his next attack. With his power up three times over, he focused his energy on the Godblade, and the weapon started to hum. Just like Ogrim, more and more people piled into his hot wagon, and Jack's arm trembled so violently he appeared to be flapping his arm. Both men glared at each other with pained expressions. Chunks of debris levitated between them both, and portions of the enormous walls crumbled loose and started to rise into the sky. The entire roof nearly drifted away.

Jetta had scrambled down the cliff as soon as the battle had started. She wanted to escape, but she had to hide for most of the battle to keep from being trampled to death. Now as the two stored up for a final exchange, she tried to escape. But the air had changed. It was hot, and milky. Each breath was a wheezing labor. She staggered over the uneven ground. She stumbled right into Magnus' bloody stomach. She looked up at the wounded hero with astonished eyes. Magnus gripped her shoulders in his mighty grasp. "Get down, princess," he grunted. "The world is about to end." Pushing her to the snow, he glanced around. Kimmara had vanished.

Taxed to his limits of pain, Ogrim challenged, "*Face the full power of the Legacy of Kings!*" He and Jack pointed their weapons at each other and tremendous blasts of blue

and white energy collided. Ogrim's energy burst had the girth of the entire hall. It scooped up the ground and decimated the mountains that he had erected earlier.

Jack's stream was mighty as a river, but Ogrim's was like the ocean itself. The blue surrounded him on all sides and erased the world behind him. Jack was just a small bubble of white energy under the oppressive force. Jack groaned; he had nothing left to give. He was finished, so he decided it was better to blow himself up than give his enemy the satisfaction. "*God-wrath-times-FOUR!*"

The sword whined.

Then the hall exploded. The blast hurled Magnus and Jetta through the air and back into the pond outside. Jack's energy blast multiplied to nightmarish size. Where Ogrim's full effort had been the size of the entire hall, Jack's became the size of the entire castle. It no longer resembled a line or stream; it was just a jagged curtain of white light that erased three fourths of the castle and reached into space beyond the clouds. It lasted for a few brief moments, then all was quiet.

Rocks rained from the sky. Pieces of armor, glass, brick, all sizzled in what little was left of the snow. Jack crouched on one knee and leaned on his sword. His brown shirt hung from his shoulders in shreds. He gasped and panted, wincing in pain. In the distance, the girdle fell to the ground, blackened by fire and sizzled in the snow. Then in front of that, Ogrim's char-black ax sank into the ground. Ogrim was gone.

Jack pushed himself up on his sword, and took a step with shaky legs, then collapsed to his knee again. He seized up, then doubled over and threw up at least a gulp of blood, probably more. It froze on the snow. He gave a sickly chuckle. "I've never...gone higher ...than *two*..." Jack struggled up for one more step, but he was like a

newborn calf trying out his legs for the first time. He fell face first into the snow. And there he laid still.

6

*I forgot to mention*

Sunlight spilled through the windows. Magnus crossed his arms over his bandaged belly and glared at the priestess who sat on the edge of the bed shamefully. Jack lay unconscious under the covers, breathing steadily. Magnus hadn't bothered to ask how Kimmara escaped from the hall where the battle raged. She likely used some kind of magic, shrank to the size of a mouse, or maybe sprouted wings to fly away. Magnus didn't care. "Were you just hoping that Jack would *go away* if I could lift the Godblade?"

"It's not like that," she said softly.

Magnus erupted. "Oh no?! Well please tell me what it *is* like, woman! Tell me!"

"Magnus," she whimpered. "I just...I wanted to find...someone...that wasn't..."

"Wasn't what?! Fat?!" He threw his hands in the air. "Bah! I'll grow a belly *twice* his size if it would make me *half* as brave! You shallow tart!" Offended, Kimmara gasped and looked up. "I meant every word of it! You already *had* your chosen one—"

"No!" she argued. "No I—he's not the chosen one!"

Magnus stomped forward, put his nose to her face, and screamed at the top of his lungs, "*He BEAT the Legacy of Kings!*" He paused as Kimmara sobbed quietly. "Don't tell me he's not the chosen one, woman. After what he did—" he winced. "After what *I* did. I don't even deserve the girdle anymore. I sucker punched a hero."

"Don't say that!" she cried.

“He could have destroyed me. He had the Godblade the entire time. He could have *erased* me. But he didn’t use it. He had the power, but he wouldn’t waste it over a petty squabble.” He shook his head. “You already had the chosen one. The only reason you came here was to trade up for a prettier face.”

“No! I don’t—You—“ Kimmara couldn’t see Magnus through her own tears anymore.

Magnus shook his head despondently and gazed out the window. “They’ll be rebuilding this castle for *years*. I had a whole room of trophies that took a lifetime of hard battles to acquire. He vaporized them in a *second*—and rightly so. I’d gotten used to my strength. I’m glad Jack showed me just how vulnerable I really am.” Kimmara convulsed in a harder fit of tears when she heard his words. She felt as if she’d destroyed Aluba’s greatest champion. “Longshanks’ll erect a new trophy hall. I’m going to see to it that the first trophy put in there is a statue of Jack. At the base of the trophy will be Ogrim’s burnt ax, and there’ll be a plaque commemorating his bravery.” He glanced down at Jack. “Jack is welcome to come see it any time he wants. But you...I’d better not see your face anywhere *near* it.” With that, Magnus stormed out of the room.

\* \* \*

I was so intrigued by this tale that I ventured to the city of Limerick to see if I could verify it. The castle was open to the public and I found the hall of trophies and just as the old farmer had said, there was a statue of Jack Windsword, with the char-black ax of Ogrim. Now the statue was a bit inaccurate, displaying Jack in a kilt and all, but the tale

behind the statue matched exactly to what the old farmer had described. This one can safely be deemed verified.

### Archivist Notes

I happened across a man lecturing his son in a pub one evening. Apparently the lad had a promiscuous night life and the father didn't approve. The man had warned the lad that the next girl he slipped between the sheets with could have the Black Widow curse. It's common for fathers to warn their sons about the Black Widow curse; the curse that feeds on the lust energies of young men and kills them. What interested me was his reference to Jack Windsword. As an archivist trying to document the existence of this figure who I once thought was a fairytale, I had to record his story. I cannot verify this man's tale, but it was a fascinating account nonetheless.

I was surprised by this fellow's tale. He knew plenty of the particulars about Jack: He was the brown-eyed stranger from the undiscovered land of Pennsylvania. He was a heavy set man but still well-muscled. A woodsman clad in buckskin pants, a heavy brown shirt, floppy brown cap, he carried dual hatchets strapped to each leg. He even knew the source of Jack's remarkable strength and combat prowess—the realm of the damned where Jack had been held prisoner by demons and tormented under extreme gravity. It made him “strong as a grizzly bear,” as this fellow put it.

Jack Windsword could lift the mighty Godblade, the sword that no other man had the power to move. The father related Jack to his son by explaining that in spite of such an indicator to greatness, Jack had troubles with women. Most girls that he approached just turned the other way, and the ones that didn't showed him no kindness, and he was too scrupulous to buy a whore. The only women that actually *knew* him were out of his league.



Princess Jetta was the fairest in the land. Scarlet silk hair rolled off the dip of her lower back and hung over her twinkling violet eyes. Her bee-stung lips and a voluptuous bosom had the power to put men under spells. The most aloof woman in the kingdom, she was the one responsible for tearing Jack from the land of Pennsylvania and depositing him here in the Autumn kingdom of Ravina. Their destinies were intertwined, but he was of no stature in appearance or pedigree, thus, in this realm, he had no right to approach, much less speak to the fair princess. Jetta had no desire to see him either.

The other woman that knew him well was Kimmara, the eternal priestess and keeper of the Godblade. Also a fair specimen, smooth blonde curtains of hair framed her heart shaped face. Her slender waist and dancer's legs gave her curves that slipped into Jack's daydreams more than once.

There weren't many people Jack could talk to about his problems, either. Being from Pennsylvania, his brown eyes were stigmata that drove not only women away, but most men. All Ravinians have blue eyes, and there are other eye colors for other peoples. But there are no people in the world that have brown eyes. There were once, eons ago. They were a dangerous, primitive tribe, so the civilized world eventually hunted them to extinction. If anyone remembered such a race even in Jack Windsword's day, I cannot say, but the innate prejudice against brown eyes still existed.

Of the few that did not shun him were Alusus, the blonde squire that Kimmara had once thought to be the chosen one. Vaughn, the enormous barkeep of the Crow's Feet pub also welcomed Jack's company.

## *The Black Widow Curse*

### 1

#### Roundhouse

Jack slouched over a cold dinner at the bar next to Alusus who swam in a jack of ale. Jack brushed some more woodchips off his shoulder. Vaughn grimaced. “Can’t you brush yourself off *before* you come into my pub, Jack?”

“I *do*!” he argued. “You can never get it all! Let’s see *you* chop wood all day long and walk away clean an’ wholesome!”

Vaughn shrugged and wiped a glass with a bar rag. “Prob’ly get cleaner than *you*,” he mumbled.

The Crow’s Feet stank of tobacco and stale booze. An old building, the wood beams on the walls and the cobwebbed joists on the lofty ceiling swelled from too many years of water absorption. Not many patrons came to the Crow’s Feet. Alusus and Jack were the only regulars. Jack sighed and poked at his food. “Look, I’m *sorry*,” Vaughn began.

Jack waved off the barkeep. “Nah, dude. It’s not you.”

“Then what is it?”

Alusus staggered into the conversation. “Needs a *woman*!”

Jack and Vaughn glanced at the squire. “You’re cut off,” Jack said.

Alusus sneered.

“You don’t have one?” asked Vaughn.

“Course’ he doesn’t!” replied Alusus. “He’s been here what...a *year* now?”

Jack nodded solemnly. “Pretty much.”

Alusus wobbled and leaned closer, pointing an accusing finger under Jack's nose. "An' he's *still* never gotten his stud polished!" He hiccupped and turned to Vaughn. "An' I figured out *why*! Cuz the Roundhouse only sells *girls*!"

Jack's hackles stood on end. "Oh you can kiss the *fattest* part of my ass!"

"I know! I know! See? That's what you *want*! *Man* kisses!"

"I am not *gay*!" Jack pounded his fist on the bar.

"I *know*!" Alusus slurred. "And ya *won't* be till you get yourself a good man."

"I hate you," said Jack.

"Alright, alright," Vaughn began. "You're cut off."

"I'm not *gay*," Jack repeated to no one in particular.

Vaughn furrowed his brow at Jack's strange use of the word gay. "Well there are two ways to find yourself a woman," he instructed. "The first is with looks and charm. Use those two right and you can get yourself a woman free of charge. *Usually*. The other way is to go to the Roundhouse and pay for one."

"Get real, Vaughn," Alusus retorted. "*Look* at'im. Only way *he's* gettin' a woman is if he *pays* for one."

"That's not fair, lad," Vaughn shot back.

"What?! I'm bein' *honest*! Guys like us have looks and charm to get women when we're broke! Guys like *him* aren't equipped with those...those...uh...*tools*. So he's gotta *pay*." Alusus shrugged and slouched on the bar. "We gotta be realistic. I mean—" he turned and slapped Jack on the arm and addressed him directly. "What girls do you *know*?"

Jack looked at his plate in deep thought. "Well I know *Jetta*."

Alusus slapped Jack on the arm and erupted in a madman's guffaw, stirring the woodsman's ire. "No no, someone *mortal*."

Jack slapped Alusus' hand away. "The only other girl I know is *Kim*!"

Alusus' mirth vanished, for the squire had long pined for the priestess too. With a sigh, he turned back to his drink. "Well she's not entertaining *any* men," he groaned. This they both knew from experience. They both stared ahead for a long beat. Palpable silence stifled any words the barkeep tried to speak. Then Alusus nodded and nudged Jack. "I got it," he said standing up. He plunked a few coins on the bar and nodded his head towards the door. "C'mon. I got just the thing."

Jack turned hesitantly. "It's not a gay bar is it?"

"Just *come on*," Alusus groaned.

Alusus led Jack through the cool night air. Different denizens walked the streets of capital city after the sun went down. Street performers replaced street vendors. They juggled torches and axes and swallowed daggers and swords. The dice men set up games on street corners and in alleys between pubs. Anything one could want existed somewhere on those streets. They passed by a group of men shouting and cheering around a lion chained to a post, that fought for its life against five starving wolves. Smelly, toothless brusque men cast lots on the winner. In the wealthier portion of town, Ravina's youth prowled the streets in cliques, determined to win the same nightly battle over who was the most beautiful. Young nobles who had spent the long hard day spending their parents' money to buy better clothes and better jewelry, now put their purchases to the test, ever raising the bar, ever trying to best one another.

Past all the drama, Alusus pulled Jack into a great domed building. The walls within were spotless alabaster and ivory trimmed. Green ferns floated in white space amidst lavish animal skin rugs and divans and couches. The two young men in dark gear seemed like walking dirt stains. Alusus approached the front desk and a woman in a gown of airy fabric and her hair pulled into a bun greeted them. “*Hel-lo!* Welcome to the Roundhouse! Are you a first time visitor?”

Alusus leaned on the countertop. His breath reached the girl’s nostrils and she pulled back, trying not to scrunch her nose. “I’m not, but *he* is.” Alusus pointed with his thumb at the woodsman who gazed absently at the pristine environment around him. The girl noted how he looked lost and nodded. Alusus continued. “He’s got some special needs if y’know what I *mean*.” He hiccupped and the girl shook her head. “I wanna set him up with your princess package.”

The girl nodded and started shuffling through some papers.

Jack stepped up behind Alusus and whispered, “Dude. What is this place?” Alusus ignored him and focused on the girl scribbling on parchment with a fountain pen. Jack continued, “Those girls over there, lounging on those chairs.”

“I know,” Alusus grinned. “Thinkin’ bout gettin’ one m’self.”

“Dude, are they...?”

Alusus turned his half-open eyelids to Jack. “Yeah,” he answered.

Jack’s brow hardened into a straight line. “I’m not going to buy a *prostitute*.”

Alusus smiled and slapped him on the arm. “Relax. First one’s on me.”

Jack waved his hands. “No, man, you don’t get it. I’m not—“

“*Jack*,” Alusus interrupted. “I heard what you said. They got something here that’s right up your alley. Trust me.”

“What?” Jack asked.

The girl behind the counter said, “Here she comes now.”

A girl in a blue satin teddy stepped into the lobby. An open robe hung open and her shiny high heels clicked with each step. Jack forgot to keep breathing. “This is *Violet*,” the girl behind the counter explained. “She’s running our princess package this evening. Will this be a full night stay or will you need an hourly rate?”

Jack’s jaw bounced up and down. “Wha?” he sputtered. “She...she looks just like...”

The girl behind the counter nodded. “Princess Jetta.” Jack turned his stunned eyes to the receptionist. She explained, “The princess package is a very popular model. One of our girls wear enchanted earrings that create an illusion of the princess. She’ll take you to the princess suite where you two will lounge in luxury just like you were sleeping with the real princess.”

Violet perked an eyebrow at Jack. The illusion was perfect. Red bangs hung over deep violet eyes. Pouty lips puckered and tiny spaghetti straps strained under the weight of her ample breasts. She stepped up to Alusus and pressed her chest against his. Her hands slid over his shoulders and she gave a little moan of approval. “I’m ready to be your princess,” she said.

Alusus grinned. “Not for me, Violet. I’m treating a friend tonight.”

She followed his thumb to the red-cheeked woodsman and she started. A fearful look crept over her. “His *eyes*,” she whispered.

“Birth defect,” Alusus retorted as he peeled the girl off himself and shooed her in Jack’s direction. “Show him a good time.” He slapped her bum, and she squealed and rose up on her toes. Nervous, Violet approached Jack, trying to force a sincere smile.

“Alright,” she said taking a breath as if she were about to plunge her arm into a cow’s arse. She didn’t wrap her arms around Jack’s neck. Instead she merely took his arm to lead him away. “Let’s get to it,” she groaned.

She took one step then lurched backward. Jack wouldn’t move from his spot. It was like tugging on a tree. His face became a mirthless glare. Jack pulled his arm back and said, “I’m *not*...going to do this.”

Alusus turned his palms up. “Why not? You said you had a flame for Jetta—this is the closest you’ll ever get. Trust me.”

“Yeah, well...” Jack blushed, and his lips twisted in frustration. He couldn’t come up with any good reasons not to share a bed with the woman that magically made herself up to look like Jetta. There didn’t seem to be any words he could use in his defense. Jack glanced around. Different rules applied here. Even after a year in Ravina, this world still felt like a fantasy or a dream. Prostitution was legal, and some of the girls working at the Roundhouse were as young as fourteen. Did the virtues he’d learned in Pennsylvania even apply to him anymore? Did being in Ravina exempt him from his own moral code? Who would he have to answer to? This was their world. Jack looked at Alusus and Violet, the staggered expressions on their faces. How could he tell them their way of life was wrong?

“Well what?” Alusus said. “You don’t even have to *pay* for this one, Jack. My treat. What’s the problem?”

As Jack looked into the tempting eyes of the girl made up to live out his fantasy, he thought of Kimmara for some reason. “What would Kimmara say?” he said.

Alusus sighed and looked at his feet. “Kimmara’s a *priestess*,” Alusus replied. “Voice of the gods of light. This...” He shook his head. “She doesn’t understand.”

Jack fixed his gaze on the squire. “She thinks it’s wrong, doesn’t she?”

“She doesn’t understand. Men have *needs*. She *doesn’t*.”

Jack shook his head. He looked Violet up and down; his body ached; his heart thundered; his imagination swan dived into the dark place. Oh, the things he wanted to do to her. Jack slapped himself, drawing addled expressions from everyone. “No!” he said. “I can’t do this. I can’t.” Embarrassed, he hurried out of the building.

“What’s wrong with *him*?” asked Violet. “Tiny stud?”

Alusus shrugged. “Who knows? I just hope he’s not holding out for the real thing. Even if Jetta offered to sleep with every man in the *kingdom*, he wouldn’t stand a chance.”

## 2

### Nice Teeth

Not long after, Jetta came about the curse. It happened as she sat on a plush red divan in her lofty keep. In those days, Mile High tower, the tallest keep in the castle, was her bedroom. Open windows on her walls were large enough to give her a full view of the blue sky, cotton clouds, and the miniscule bustling capitol city beneath. A cool breeze drifted through into her room and her ivory skin tightened into gooseflesh.



Humming softly, she turned the page of a dusty tome. A specialty item she'd retrieved from a caravan bazaar that had set up in town, it had ragged leather edges, a nearly non-existent spine, and the pages were curled and shredded from centuries of use. Where she obtained the tome, none could say. The guards outside the heavy wooden circular door stood erect with pikes at the ready, and witnessed her frequent comings and goings but never questioned her about her packages or guests.

"Hm," she mused at one page. "'Speak to summon herein set entity'," she read aloud with a snide snicker. "Zaro-tharo-rathomus," she dictated in a mocking manner with a deep vexing tone. She helped herself to a laugh and turned the page with a grumble. "Call these *spells*? They're dull little—" Suddenly the light breeze that drifted through the windows picked up into a hard wind. She blinked in the face of the rushing air currents and panicked. "What? What's happening?" The wind brushed her off her seat and she landed with a light squeak.

Her pink gossamer dress that clung to her supple curves rippled violently in the wind, and her red hair whipped around, slapping her in the face a few times. She huffed and brought her hair under control by gripping it in a hardy handful. She pulled herself back onto her divan, squinting at the rushing wind.

The wind brought with it a whirl of yellow light that gave her room a surreal glow. Her own skin and clothes seemed no longer to be the same but rather counterparts of the ones she knew to be real. The light grew brighter, until she could not behold its radiance any longer and looked away, shielding her face with her arms. Heat from the light tingled on her skin and drove her back a few steps. Suddenly, the heat faded, and she pulled her arm away from her eyes to peek at the phenomenon.

Surely, she saw an apparition hovering in the midst of her room, giving off a light yellow glow. She stifled a shriek and fell on her bum. Wild violet eyes blinked rapidly at the sight.

The phantom was of a man. He had a long, brown beard that reached past his navel. His head was locked in a torture device that resembled stocks, but with nails driven through his skull. An eerie pallor marked his visage and contrasted with his orange smock. Dried blood stained the wounds in his skull and wrists, and he gazed on Jetta with starving eyes, rimmed in black. “Gods!” she finally managed.

“Nay!” replied the spirit with a resounding voice, as if he spoke into an empty flagon. “Not a god, but the entity that thou has summoned. “Zarotharorathomus! Have you business with me, girl?”

“I...you—what? Who...” she pulled herself to her feet, but her balance was poor. Her jaw bounced up and down at the ghost in her midst and she struggled to gather her wits.

The spirit had little patience. “Need you help to *speak*, child?! Why have you summoned me?! Every moment I spend in the world of flesh causes my spirit pure agony! Speak your desire!”

“I’m sorry!” she blurted. “This—I—I made a *mistake*! I’m sorry!”

“Mistake?! Have you truly bungled the incantation to summon me from damnation? What word could you possibly have *tried* to say that when mispronounced would summon Zarotharorathoums?!”

“No! I’m sorry, I—I read it in a *book*! I didn’t know anything would actually *happen*!”

“Then you are a fool too stupid to draw breath!” the spirit scorned. “You have summoned me from damnation to the world of flesh for no reason. What for my troubles then? I should think you owe me a *boon*.”

“A *wha*?”

He smirked at the princess and revealed his black tongue and crooked yellow teeth like those of a rodent. “Come here, child. Surely you are the fairest thing I’ve seen in 4400 years! Come give me a kiss.”

“A *kiss*?!”

He continued to grin, and waved her forward with a flick of his wrist that was nailed to the stock. “On my cheek.”

Jetta huffed an insulted laugh, and her balance returned. She scooped up the magic tome and slammed the covers closed, kicking up a cloud of dust. Stuffing it under her arm, she lolled her head at the spirit. “No. There will be no kisses today.” His smile slid from his ashen face and broke on the floor like a clay mask. “I’ve made a mistake summoning some ornery old spirit of yesteryear. For that I am *sorry*. But as I’ve said, I have no use for you. You may take your leave now.”

“You wretched nymph!” growled the spirit. “You would have done better to spit in the devil’s eye than cross me, girl! I am *Zarotharorathomus*! Grand summoner of the nine hells!”

“You’re a *sorcerer*?”

“I am a *necromancer* of the highest order! If my lust is such a burden for you *now*, let’s see how you fare when a portion of it is bestowed on you!” With his last word, two bolts of yellow energy blasted from his soulless eyes and struck Jetta’s body. She

seized up in pain, her red hair flew back in a crimson arc, and she collapsed to her knees, clutching her ribs.

“Ah!” she whimpered. “What...what have you *done* to me?!”

“Behold! The *Black Widow Curse*! The pain that claws at your body is merely a *fraction* of the pain that torments me! You now carry a piece of me in you. A piece of my lust! Hungry! Ravenous! Painful! It will be a *curse* on your head until the day you die! For every *day*, the beast must be fed; else he will feed on *you* until nothing remains. And you will *die*!”

“What?!”

“Even now, it’s devours you. It starves. You have a choice. Feed it now, or resign to death.”

“Feed it *how*?!”

“What do you *think* lust hungers for, girl?”

Jetta’s eyes nearly popped from her skull. The ancient spellcaster threw his head back and laughed. Jetta crawled on her hands and knees, wincing from the pain in her body. She coughed up a few drops of blood. “Gods and Fates!”

“There’s only one man in this room, child.” His toothy grin returned as he watched Jetta debate suicide in her mind. She looked around, huffing in a panic. For an instant, she thought of throwing herself out the great window to splatter in the gardens several stories below. Then an idea sprang to her mind, and she wheeled for the door.

“What are you doing? We’re too high up, girl! The hunger will kill you half way down the stairs! Either mate with me or die with—“

“Guards!” she hollered. The large door rolled open and two muscular pikemen charged into the room, armor clanking with each hurried step. They skidded to a halt at the sight of the apparition and gasped.

“Feh!” The wizard opened his disgusting mouth and mists of blackness puffed into the air like vile clouds of smoke. Instantly, they took shape and became like a dozen swords that stabbed forward in the blink of an eye. One of the spearmen was run through as if by a dozen charging lancers. His blood spilled onto the hardwood floor beneath his feet, and when the spears were yanked from his body with a sickening wet sound, his lifeless corpse fell with a thud.

Jetta had tackled the other guard to the ground, and they fell on the floor just outside the door. “Princess!” exclaimed the guard, gripping his spear. “I’m taking command! I hereby order you to—“

“Take me!” she demanded with a breathless huff, tearing ravenously at his body armor.

“What?!”

She tugged her dress down, revealing her lacy pink bra and bountiful, bouncing bosom. “Take me *now*, damn you!” She forced a passionate kiss on his lips, and the guard slipped into a spell.

Back in the room, the sorcerer chuckled at the crumpled warrior on the floor. He congratulated himself for still being able to recall one of his favorite disembowelment spells after all those years. Then he realized the princess had eluded him. He heard the sounds and cries of violent passion not far from his position, and drifted to the side so he might better peer through the open door. There on the ground, he found the princess and

the guard locked in passion's embrace. Red hair whipped back in cries of ecstasy, and young, sweating muscles crushed her soft form in rapture.

The sorcerer snarled at the sight, and sighed with disdain. He knew the guard would spend himself quickly, and he did. Jetta's beauty was a challenge even for those who were trained to have stamina. Jetta broke the embrace immediately and fell back on the floor. She yanked a corner of her dress back up and thrust her arm through the sleeve. She scooted away from the soldier, her tousled bangs in her eyes and her disheveled dress still hanging in some places. She huffed and panted and stared ahead in stunned alarm. She couldn't believe what she had just done. Emotions within her battled for the right to rise to the surface. She felt violated and wanted to cry; she was outraged and wanted to pick up the guard's spear and plunge it through his heart. She also knew the young man was just as much a victim of circumstance as she. It was no more personal than eating, drinking or breathing. She did it to survive.

The guard's head hung between his shoulders as he crawled on all fours, gasping for breath. "Pri...princess," he gasped. His face was flushed red and he cast a lazy smile at the woman. She instinctively scooted away until her back touched the wall, as if he were an attacker. "I...I never knew you...that is...I've wanted you too...I just wish we might have—have--!" Just then, his body seized up. Now *this* is the fate that befalls the victims of the curse! Some unseen force sucked the flesh from under his skin until the hard edges of his skeleton jutted against the empty sack of skin. His eyes grew hideously large and strained until the thin membranes burst and pulp spilled from their sockets.

Jetta screamed.

The once ruddy and meaty body of the young guard shriveled into a brittle husk like paper under flame. He collapsed on the ground and his flesh sounded like an empty helmet falling to the floor. She covered her head with her arms and continued to shriek in horror. “Gods and Fates!” she bellowed. “Is this a nightmare?! Why won’t I wake up?!” Her voice crackled hoarse under her cries, and torrents of tears streamed down her face.

“Ho *ho*! This is certainly a nightmare. But make no mistake, child. This is not a *dream*,” explained the spirit. She shivered against the wall, holding her arms over her body and sobbing hysterically. “You’ve successfully fed the lust within you. It will remain docile. But only for a time. You have only a few hours before it grows hungry again.”

“What...happened...to him?!” she finally stammered.

“That’s the other half of the curse, child. The Black Widow is notorious amongst predators for devouring even her mate after consummating with him. So does the raging lust within you. If you find a man willing to feed the lust, he will surely die just as this soul has. But fear not! Every drop of his life is sucked from reality, including his very semen that swam through your loins—“ Jetta’s shoulders convulsed in a heaving sob, and she leaned over to bury her head in her arms. “So there is no chance of producing any offspring. That will not be a penalty to your future promiscuity.”

“Take this curse away!” She shrieked hysterically. “Take it away! I can’t live like this! I *can’t*!”

“What’s this? You can no longer be selfish with your love so now you shed tears over it? This will teach you to—“

“You’re a monster! Either kill me or take this curse away, but don’t try to reason your madness with me!”

“Then suffer with this curse for eternity.” The ghost turned his back on Jetta and drifted away towards a gathering portal of yellow light and wind deeper in her room.

“Wait!” She screamed, scrambling towards the spirit on her hands and knees. “Don’t just *leave* me like this!”

“Surely you think you can order *anyone*, don’t you?”

“Isn’t there an option?! Isn’t there somehow I can defeat this curse once and for all?! I’m only twenty-two! I can’t live like this forever! *Please!* Have *mercy!*”

The wizard’s lips writhed in thought. His dark eyes narrowed after a space, and he whirled around to face her. The portal behind him disappeared. “Very well then. Methinks you’ve learned your lesson—“

“Oh I *have*, sir! You’ve humbled me—sure as the sun sets!”

“Stop! False flattery only insults me. I know you bear no respect for me. You’d say anything to be free of this curse. Verily I tell you, it won’t be so simple. You have once chance.” The ancient wizard summoned a portal of light. An image like the reflection in a mirror met Jetta’s astonished eyes. Before her sprawled a foreboding landscape of darkness. Forest-locked hills choked life from the land, and the rumbling black clouds with erratic pulsations of lightning eternally blotted the sun away. These mountains rose up and gave way to a towering castle enshrouded in shadow. Its towers, edges and spires were sharp like teeth on a saw. It stabbed through the storm clouds to heights unknown. The brief flashes of light revealed its cold, gray abandoned walls and broken columns, yet some spots of darkness remained even in the light and seemed to



crawl over the castle's face. Huge wings of indiscernible creatures rose and fell from behind the castle walls but did not take flight. Atop the towers, blazing red eyes of enormous, shapeless terrors leered back at the quivering princess as if they could see her too.

Jetta turned a frightened inquisitive face to the sorcerer.

“Behold! The castle of Zarotharorathomus!”

“Y-you?”

“Quite so. My remains lay here in my home. In the rugged hills of Southern Ravina my eternal servants stand guard over me. They protect my glimmering treasures from the greed of invaders until the day I return.”

“From the dead?!”

The wizard only smiled his disgusting crooked smile at her. “The terrain is perilous, the traps many, my protectors zealous, ruthless and such as you have never seen before. They are beautiful, but I am of a single mind in my opinion. Mortals called them terrors and demons in my day, and I’m certain the same holds true now.

“Your only chance to remove the curse of the Black Widow is to retrieve a relic from my grave.”

Jetta could only stare slack jawed and bug-eyed.

“A bone. A shred of cloth. Another affect from my person. Only it can cleanse the magic that I cast from the grave as I have now.”

“You want me...to enter that *castle*...and steel a bone from your coffin?”

“If you wish to remove the curse. Or, you can learn to understand and even appreciate what it’s like as a man—any man—to make peace with the burning hunger inside of you.”

“I...*can’t*...do that!” she argued, pointing at the portal. “I would need an *army* to siege your castle in hell or wherever you keep it.”

“No armies. Only *one* soul may pass through the gates. It will close behind that soul—but fear not! Once the task is completed, my magic will return you.”

She shook her head again and crawled forward on her knees. “Please! There must be another way!”

Again, the wizard smiled. “There is no other way.”

### 3

This is a job for...

Some guy

King Tristinian sent out the call. To all knights, all soldiers, all bounty hunters, all swashbucklers, any sword for hire—a brave hero was needed to serve the princess. Tristinian was careful not to release any specific details about the situation other than to say that Princess Jetta “was in dire straits.” He disclosed the location of the castle, and explained that a piece of the necromancer’s remains must be retrieved.

No one answered the call.

Tristinian hand selected his most able knight, and sent him on the quest  
Zarotharorathomus had explained to Jetta.

Secretly, Tristinian summoned the greatest mystics from across the Autumn kingdom. Wizards, soothsayers, sorcerers, anyone with special magic talent, and put them to work on his daughter to analyze his daughter's condition. He offered a king's ransom for anyone who could break the Black Widow curse. No mystic, no matter how gifted, was capable of such a task.

Jetta was placed in a special quarantine tent erected in one of the conference halls. The hall was cleared of citizens, and the castle was barred down like it was under siege. A black veil made up the tent, and a soft bed was placed at the center.

"How goes the procedure?" asked Tristinian tall and thick with ermine cloak, jeweled rings and a glimmering gold crown. "Time is short."

"Shorter than you think," replied one of the mystics. An older man with nearly ten glittering charms hanging from his neck, he shook his head. "This is a *strange* curse indeed, m'lord. At first I thought she was jesting that Zarotharorathomus had placed a curse upon her—for he's been dead for *centuries*—but surely, this is the work of a master spellcaster."

"Then I need you to be *better*, Metius. You and all your men. I've assembled the finest minds in my kingdom, and every second that slips through your fingers is one more second closer to someone's *death* sentence." The burly black-bearded king bristled at the mystic who was an entire head shorter. His red cloak matched the color of his face, and his royal tunic nearly rent over his straining muscles. A natural warrior, he fingered the hilt of his gilt double-bladed battle ax that hung from a fastener at his hip. He pined for the blood of the man who cursed his only daughter, but who could spill the blood of a dead man? Tristinian needed a foe to fight, a head to chop, an army to draw plans against.

He only had a victimized daughter and no way to help her. “On your hands, man!” he snapped. “The next victim’s blood will be on *your* hands!”

The mystic blocked out the angry king’s rants. He worked with his peers, clad in shimmering blue and purple silks. They carried the thickest tomes. Bubbling red, green and blue elixirs coursed through glass tubes and churned over beakers. Tables and tables displayed such alchemy. They had conjured neon light displays that monitored Jetta’s condition, the pattern of the magic flux, the interlocking time vertices. All of them were baffled. They analyzed her with special charms and runes that swept her body with green and blue rays of light. They used cleansing incantations and subjected her to energy scrubs. Nothing worked.

Sand slipped through the narrow neck of an hourglass that rested on one of the tables. Tristinian wrung his hands together as only minutes remained within the glass jar. Jetta watched the sand disappear, helplessly sitting on her bed. Her face was a permanent mask of apprehension and desperation. “Damn you bunglers!” roared Tristinian as he pointed at the hourglass. “Nary minutes are left! Does my daughter’s purity mean nothing to you?!”

Soon, Jetta started to convulse. She lurched over and terrible pain seized her insides, drawing horrible cries from her lungs. The mystics could only shake their heads at one another and throw their hands up helplessly. They had tried to remove the curse; they had tried to slow it. Nothing worked. The time was upon her. As Jetta bellowed in pain and begged her father for help, the mystics put down their tomes and charts and beakers and turned to the king. With their eyes, they asked the only remaining question: Who would resign his life to mate with his fair daughter?

Bodyguards were stationed all around the room to keep out any interlopers. One young man stepped forward to the king, sword in hand and a steady gaze in his eye. “My *lord*,” he began with a bow. “I volunteer.”

Jetta watched with strained eyes. A flood of ambivalent emotions overcame her. At first, she was repulsed. Who was this man to *volunteer* his body to join with hers as one flesh? And who was her father to make such decisions? Was not her body her own? Wasn’t it her choice to decide who she gave her flesh to? Yet, a great swell of pity came over her for the man. He was giving his very life to her. She felt a red wave of hate rush over her, and she considered letting the curse devour her from the inside, and just be done with it. Who was she to take the lives of men? Was her one life truly worth the half dozen she’d already taken to preserve it?

“You, soldier?” said the king slowly. He too was ambivalent to the young soldier. He placed one powerful hand on the young man’s shoulder and squeezed. Part of him wanted to rip the lad to shreds for asking to mate with his daughter. Were it up to him, he’d have locked a chastity belt around her waist years ago. Here was this young soldier in heat, looking only for a good time. But such thoughts he quickly shook from his mind. The soldier knew what was at stake. To sleep with his daughter was to sleep forever. Part of him wanted to hug the young man, and pin a medal to his chest. “Such is not your duty. You do not have to—“

“My *king*,” said the young man, taking off his helmet. “I joined the army to serve the royal family that gave *my* family a place to live and work. I vowed, when I took up my sword, that I would give my life to protect you and my fair princess.” A smile crossed his lips. “Honestly, I’d rather do so this way than take an arrow to the heart.”

Tristinian refused to let his soldiers walk into any situation that he wasn't prepared to walk into himself. Yet, as Jetta's father, he could only watch. He exhaled a sullen sigh. "You and your family will be honored for your sacrifice."

The man of barely twenty five stepped through the curtain and pulled it closed behind him. Jetta stood at the foot of the bed with her hand over her mouth. Tears rolled down her cheeks from her puffy eyes. She gazed on the disrobing soldier with great pity. Yet, like a soldier truly devoted to his cause, he met his fate with a smile. "I'm so sorry," she blubbered.

He stepped toward her and put his hands on her shoulders. " 'Tis better to die between your legs, than amongst the carnage of a battlefield. My only wish is that you let my passing be an enjoyable one."

She tried to resist bawling, but couldn't. "Of course," she said, sliding her dress off her shoulders. The pink fabric fell to the floor. Breasts squeezed into a violet satin bra and a thin strip of satin cloth for panties met the soldier's eyes. The soldier had no regrets. Hers was a body worth dying for.

Tristinian and the mystics waited outside the tent and listened to the passion erupt behind the cloak. The king's teeth grinded together at the cries of ecstasy from his own daughter's lips, and he was further outraged that others were privy to the experience. Jetta didn't sound like she was faking it. Her coos and yelps and her sensual, even trashy words proved she either veraciously enjoyed her lover's performance or was being manipulated by some unexplored aspect of the curse.

Each word that Jetta flung from her lips carved the scowl on her father's face deeper into his skin. His head and neck trembled in fury as he resisted the urge to rip the

tent away and snap the lad's neck. He crushed the wood of the table that he leaned against as words like "Deeper," "Please," "Tell me what you want," and "Touch me here," stabbed his ears.

The rhythmic creaking of the bed got louder and faster, and the king bit on his own knuckles, unable to bear it. Finally, his daughter and her lover both cried out for one last time, and the racket fizzled into sweaty huffs and dizzied "Wows."

Tristinian raged inwardly as he knew that the worst was actually yet to come. "That was wonderf—" Jetta began but her voice silenced under a choke of terror.

The king closed his eyes.

Jetta's scream ripped through the tense air and men scrambled around the statuesque king. Soldiers ripped the curtain back. Jetta backed away from the bed, clutching a white sheet to her sweaty naked body. The dried husk of a dead man rocked lifelessly on the bed sheets, and the soldiers stifled curses and oaths under their breaths.

"He's dead," declared one of the mystics.

Tristinian's thunderous lungs shook the castle as an arc of gold flashed over his head. Jetta shrieked and covered her ears with her arms when the king's ax split a massive table in half, spilling the chemicals over the floor. "*Someone must die for this!*" he raged. "Why shouldn't I gather together my knights that we might ride together into *hell* under the flag of Ravina to *find* Zarotharorathomus, that I might *flay* him with my ax?!"

The mystics and soldiers gathered around him, but kept a cautious distance as he had become like a seething madman, frothing at the lips. But Jetta broke through their

ranks and flung herself on his massive chest where she bawled hysterically, stunning the king into a stupor. “Papa! Please, papa! I can’t do this anymore! I can’t! Please help me!”

The stupefied king put his fumbling hands around his daughter, and then he broke into tears of his own. “Jetta,” he sobbed. “Tell me how, and I’ll dispose my entire kingdom to see that it’s done.” Jetta could only cry in response. She knew of no course to take either. “What can be *done*?!” he begged to the mystics.

“Oh king,” began Metius. “Nothing can be done. Even if you *could* ride into hell to drag out the soul of Zarotharorathomus, you’d surely be met with a swift demise. There was a *reason* he was executed so long ago. That sorcerer’s power was unmatched, and his use of it was inhuman. He was no man, but a devil. And the devil’s hand is now around your daughter’s throat.”

In their midst, a mighty wind stirred between the walls. Rumbles of thunder sounded under the roof and the floor shifted violently. A roaring scream ripped through the air, and that scream became a madman’s guffaw. A portal of swirling blue light appeared before the king and his daughter. The roaring laughter vexed Tristinian and his efforts.

“Is this the best you can do, Tristinian?”

The king stepped towards the blue light and shouted, “Who speaks my name? ‘rathomus?! Show your face you—“

“*Don’t* you take that tone with me, Tristinian. You may be king, but you exist only because I allow it.” Through the portal bloody, sloppy chunks of carnage clattered onto the floor. First a leg, then an arm, followed by a torso (still wrapped in a steel cuirass) and then a few dozen gallons of hot blood splashed over the carnage. Jetta



shrieked and hid her face in her father's shoulder. Tristinian could only scowl in revulsion and astonishment. Rathomus continued, "Sir *Dorian*, was it? Feh. Fought very bravely he did, and died very quickly. T'would have been a more pleasant fate for him to die in service to your slutty little daughter."

"You scum! I'll have your black heart on a *truncheon*!"

"You'll have nothing but piles of dead men. Sooner or later, one must realize, are all the lives given to keep that little whore alive worth it? It matters not to me. The little slut will *die*. Either you'll run out of lives to feed to her, or you'll come to your senses and put her down yourself. Either way, I win. But *please*, feel free to send more fools to their fate in my castle. I do love good *sport*."

With that, the commotion disappeared; the wind faded, the voice silenced, and the portal vanished. All that remained were the mutilated remains of one of Tristinian's most loyal knights.

Metius sighed and watched the servants mop up the blood of the fallen and toss his entrails in a wheelbarrow like kindling. "I think you'll need to put out another call to the public if we're to buy the time we need."

Tristinian frowned. But, he issued another call. The fatal side of the curse was something that Tristinian kept secret, but word got out that Jetta had been cursed to constantly need sex.

Nearly every man in the city responded to the call.

Men lined up throughout the castle, and that line spilled out into the streets of the city. Thousands of "applicants," as Tristinian called them. He begrudgingly began a screening process. The only thought that put his mind at ease was that whoever got to

sleep with his daughter, would die for it. Ah, but these were young, horny, desperate men. They cared not whether they died, only that they got to taste the paragon of loveliness. They would buy his daughter time to live. But who, he wondered, had enough courage and strength to see this curse brought to an end? Anyone could feed her, but who could *save* her?

4

Heeding the Call

The door to the Temple of Eternity crunched and rolled aside. Kimmara's temples flared and she bit down hard as she turned. "What—did—I—*tell*—*you* about that door?!"

"Jeez! Sor-*ree*!"

"Why don't you care?! You're going to *ruin* that door!"

He shrugged. "So get another door."

"I *swear*. You are so..." She turned back to the reflection pool.

"You've heard about Jetta?"

"Yes. Regrettable." She looked at him. "I'm surprised you're not in line to get *your* turn."

Jack sighed ruefully. "Eh. Just doesn't sit well with me. I'm kinda into one-man-women. Know what I mean?"

"Tuh! Well you're wasting your time with *that* harlot."

Jack rubbed the back of his neck nervously. "Yeah...well...I have an idea on how to fix that."

"Fix what?"

“All the guys in line to sleep with her.” Kimmara waited. “See, she’s cursed to like...have sex all the time or somethin’ yeah? So...if the curse went away...she wouldn’t *need* all those other guys anymore.”

Kimmara held an even stare. “Sure about that? I’m almost certain that she wasn’t a virgin before this whole fiasco happened. The only one who doesn’t know is her *father*.”

Jack ignored her. “Yeah but...people can *change*.”

Kimmara studied the hopeful eyes of the woodsman and she felt a great wave of pity wash over her. “Oh, Jack, stop this. She’s not the right girl for you, alright? You’re only going to hurt yourself.”

Jack shook his head. “No, but...like...I can *save* her!”

“How?” Jack’s eyes flashed at the sword, and Kimmara erupted. “*No!*”

Jack shrank away. “Aw *come on!* No one’s goin’ out to that—what’s it—Castle Rathomus! They’re all in line to bone Jetta! I can get in there, kill some monsters or whatever, snatch a ring off a dead guy’s finger and *boom!*” He held his hands out. “She’ll be *beggin’* to sleep with me!”

Kimmara shook her head vehemently. Her voice took on a sinister authority, like a grouchy librarian. “*You* are not the chosen one, Jack. We’ve been over this. You don’t have the authority to come in here and take the master sword for every little jaunt or errand you want to run.”

“Come on!”

“*No!* Go to Castle Rathomus if you must, but you are not taking the Godblade! It’s not something you can use to get *lucky* with the princess! Do you understand me?!”

Jack's features soured and he slowly stepped away from the reflection pool. "Forget it, then." He slid his hands in his pockets and turned to the door. "I'll just go get in line, then. Sheesh."

"*No!*" she cried.

"Hey, *bite* me, Kim! You can tell me what sword I can or can't use for whatever reason but you sure as hell can't tell me what to do with myself!"

"Stop! You'll *die!*"

Jack froze and shot a mirthless look over his shoulder. "The *hell*'re you talkin' about?"

Kimmara sighed. "Jetta's curse. It will kill you. Don't sleep with her, alright?"

"I wasn't *gonna* sleep with her."

"Oh."

Jack turned back to Kimmara, this time with intense eyes that made her a bit nervous "Now what's all this crap about *dyin*?"

"It's Jetta's curse. The Black Widow curse." Jack waited. "You see the Black Widow curse demands a woman...um...*mate* a number of times a day. Each time she does, the curse drains the life force of her partner and kills him."

Jack's eyes swelled in revulsion. The color drained from his face and he glanced down at the ground, lost in contemplation. Then he turned back to the door, towards the line of men elsewhere in the castle. "Jesus," he mumbled. "She'll kill half the city."

Kimmara sighed and turned back to the water to close her eyes and continue her meditations. "As I said. Regrettable. But fate will eventually punish—" Jack waded into the reflection pool with a noisy splash. Kimmara exploded like a cat getting water

dumped on her. “*What the deuce are you doing?!* ” Jack plucked the Godblade out of its pedestal and slammed it into the empty sheath over his right shoulder. “Put that back! You can’t have it! I said put it *back* right—“ She reached out and grabbed Jack by the shoulder, and when he turned his eyes to her, she almost turned to stone. She backed away with a slight gasp. His oafishness had vanished. A new man stood in his place. A confident, determined man who would move mountains and rivers to see his goals accomplished. Who could challenge those eyes? She couldn’t. He was taking it. It wasn’t a request. “You can’t take that sword.”

“I can when innocent lives are at stake.” She bristled. Oh how she *hated* when he used the good of the innocent as his license to shirk the rules. No one did it better than him.

“Stop!”

“You can’t be serious!” He turned sharply on his heel. “You’ve got the sword with all this holy power—you won’t *do* anything about this?!”

“The sword has not been *called* upon for this!”

“So?!”

“So it’s not my concern! The champion must only heed the *call*. There has been no call!”

Jack adjusted the strap on his shoulder. “Welp. Good thing I’m not the champion.” He turned away. “I don’t gotta wait for no damn *call*.”

She couldn’t just watch him walk away. She had to maintain some bit of control. “I’m coming with you!” She transformed into a familiar—seven inches tall with dove wings; she fluttered after him.

“Whatever,” he said.

Through the better half of the night, Jack rode on one of the royal steeds that he stole out of the stables. The deeper into the Southeast he went, the rougher the terrain became. Hills and streams gave way to crags and cliffs. The forest ceased to smell pleasant; it became potent with rot. The forest-locked terrain pinned in its own decay. Dead trees could not fall to the ground as they could in the northern forests; they leaned against the living ones. Dead animals slain by fiercer predators festered along the sides of the road. Jack could tell the sky was darker, even at night. No stars twinkled in the sky.

Jack drew close to the Ravinian border. Scarcely a mile away was an even darker land than the ground he stood on. According to his map, the land beyond the border had no interior boundary lines, no villages or cities within it. Either it was uninhabited or it was uncharted. The only word sprawled across the dark patch on the map was “Draconia.”

They came upon the castle of Zarotharorathomus without any obstacles. Thunder rumbled heavy from the sky and flashes of lightning illuminated certain spots of the rushing dark clouds. Jack dismounted at the foot of the hill and braved the rugged terrain on foot. Dense trees and rough footing made the uphill journey a difficult one. By the time he reached the castle itself, he already had a number of scratches and cuts from passing by jagged branches.

As lightning cast light on the shadows of the jagged spires, certain shapeless patches of black remained, and seemed to move from place to place in between the flashes. Jack stepped across the long wooden drawbridge. Once he was past the hinge, the

drawbridge rose up quickly with a moan and clasped shut as a startling boom. Jack pivoted on his heel and looked up at the new wall of wood and iron.

Kimmara was spooked. “Ohhhhh, I think this was a bad idea,” she whined. “We should have just let Jetta make peace with her new demon and just surrender to death.”

“Well that’s mighty charitable of you.” Jack turned away from the door, unable to figure out what could have moved such a great mass so quickly.

“Better *her* to die than us.”

“What’s this *we* stuff?”

“I said *us*.”

“You’re just a familiar. As soon as things get hairy you just run back to your little temple up north and watch me get my butt kicked in the reflection pool.”

Jack moved with ease through the vaulted stone corridors. Torches separated by wide spaces offered little light to see the walls of cobwebs and rust. “Well I can’t very well die along *side* you. Who will guide the *chosen* one when he finally appears?”

“Just leave him an ‘instruction manual of destiny.’ He’ll figure it out.” He moved into the main hall. Dim light from an unidentifiable source lit the chamber. It looked nothing like a castle or manor—it was built like a dungeon. Dank stone glowed pale blue and grey in the strange lighting. Hanging lanterns cast a demonic red light on nearby objects: chains, hanging cages, Scavenger’s Daughters, Garrottes, Knee splitters, Skull splitters and Iron spiders. The ghastly devices rotted with dried blood and rust along their jagged metal edges. They had been strewn about haphazardly, as if the torturers employing them were suddenly startled in the middle of their tasks. Decayed flesh dangled from the rotting bones in the hanging cages like moss covered vines. Some of the

devices still had bones and corpses in their eternal grips. The entire chamber was stuffy and rank with rot. Sulfur and other metallic scents wafted through the black passageways that reached into the castle.

“Bleeding stars!” Kimmara gasped. Her mouth twisted into a petrified O shape, and she clamped one hand over it. “What have we stumbled into?”

“Medievallllllll...*beauty* parlor?”

“That’s not funny! Why would you say something like that?!” His humor was dry as bone, and it was just one more reason Kimmara did not like him using the sword that she reserved for a righteous champion.

Jack snooped around in the den of death and squinted at the devices. He poked at some jagged teeth, rattled the neck of a Garrotte, and picked up an Iron spider to judge its weight. “What are you *doing*?” Kimmara snapped impatiently. “Are you *shopping* for something?!” Jack sighed and tossed the metal device. It clanged on the hard rock floor and echoed throughout the castle. “Fool! You’ve just alerted the entire castle to your presence.”

“Kim! Would you *relax*? Geez! You’re worse than a—“ A trap door gave way under his footfall. His arm snapped out like a striking serpent and gripped the edge of the floor. Startled, he grunted and his breathing came heavy. His legs dangled over darkness, and inhuman whoops and yelps called out to him. He gripped the ledge with both hands and slowly pulled himself up with a grunt of effort. But some dark thing grabbed his ankle and dragged him down into the emptiness. Kimmara fluttered above the oubliette and peered into the darkness. “Jack! *Jack!*” There was no answer.



### The Black Widow Curse

Another terror the size of a mangonel smashed through a solid stone wall. It laid still, gnarled flesh, muscles tight as drawbridge cables, legs like a crustacean, and teeth that could bite through solid oak, all bleeding on the cold floor amidst settling dust.

Jack Windsword stepped through the hole in the wall with Godblade in hand. His bicep swelled, ready to continue the struggle that had put three deep gashes on the side of his body; but the monster was dead, it's guts hacked out like a botched dissection. He scanned the new chamber he'd opened up.

Kimmara fluttered through the hole after the woodsman. "Jack! A hidden compartment is revealed in here! There's a small treasure chest with a *key* inside it! You can open that door to—"

"No need," he said nonchalantly. The woodsman tore up a flight of steps to an upper level of the lofty chamber.

Confused, Kimmara glanced around. "Oh," she said, blinking. "You're already in here."

"When faced with a locked door, hurl a monster through the wall to make *another* door!" he said with a grin. At the top of the steps he found a solid wall with a long heavy chain attached to it. The chain bore a wide handle. Jack slammed the Godblade into its sheath over his shoulder and hoisted up the handle. The chain looked too heavy for one man to move, but Jack exuded a strange vigor beyond his normal abilities whenever he used the Godblade's power. Grunting, he dragged a square block of wall back in five

tugs. This revealed a small passageway; it deposited him into a small alcove with a ladder that reached up into the dark beyond his sight.

Without a pause, Jack swung up on the ladder and scrambled up into the darkness. The familiar could hardly keep up with him. She was still inspecting the huge block he moved in only five tugs. It was at least half a ton and had no wheels, was set on no tracks. She couldn't believe he had the strength for such a thing after his exhausting battle with the dead terror at the bottom of the stairs.

At the top of the grimy metal ladder, Jack heaved up with his spare hand and slid a slab of stone aside like a manhole lid. He hoisted himself out of the hole. More pointed arches, corbels and tribunes met his surveying glance, but almost immediately an inhuman cackle brought him around. A long hall lay before him with vaulted double doors at the very end. A great harvest table filled up most of the room with Windsor chairs and tarnished bronze candelabras. Plates and silverware aligned the table; it could have recently been set. Red tapestries hung from the tribunes.

The woodsman noted these things mechanically as his eye was drawn to a tall nightmare that stalked around the table. Seven feet tall it walked on ostrich legs of tar-black flesh. Its head was ant eater in shape with a crocodile's maw. Rows of jagged teeth glistened and slavered. A hump grew out of the back of its head, and reached down over its squat back. The hump gave way to a claw that protruded between its legs, just beneath its mouth. It stomped like a hunting dinosaur. It charged after Jack and chomped its jaws.

Jack somersaulted out of the way and wheeled around, drawing the Godblade in one swift motion. It snapped at his head. Jack ducked and hewed through its slender leg, but the monster jumped back in time to keep its leg from being completely severed. Jack

hopped up on the table, breaking plates and empty snifters under his boots. “Who the hell sets a table in an abandoned castle?!” With that, he bounded from the table’s surface, brandishing his sword over his head. He accompanied the leap with a furious roar and cleft the monster’s skull wide open. It shrieked and collapsed on its side. Its long legs twitched and thrashed, and its bottom jaw quivered in a death rattle. Jack spared one moment to regard his vanquished foe before twirling the Godblade in his hand. The heavy steel whooshed in the air and rang as he slammed it into its sheath. Then he turned and ran for the door.

Kimmara finally caught up to him and looked around the room. “Jack? Jack where are—“ She gasped and drew back from the ghastly terror that lay dying on the ground. A stream of blood splatter on the wall was proof that his head had been rent savagely. She couldn’t identify the monster or reconcile what dark imagination could have conceived of it. Then she heard the doors creaking open accompanied by a grunt of effort. “Jack!” she fluttered to him. “Jack what *is* that thing?”

Jack started running down the winding corridor past torches and ornamental suits of armor. “What *was* it? Dunno.”

“You killed it?”

“Who else?”

“How...I mean...didn’t...”

Jack jumped across a gap in the floor and came to a round door. It was like the one in Kimmara’s temple. He threw himself against it and with both hands he wrenched it loose. Dirt and sediment from centuries of neglect rained on his head, but he muscled it aside into an alcove. Kimmara glanced to the wall nearby and found a round panel,

chiseled from stone. She cast an irritated glare at his back, but said nothing. Three quick strides brought him into the chamber. Immediately, a rusty portcullis slid in place over the doorway. He whipped his head around to note the obstruction, and then turned his suspicious eyes to the chamber before him.

Darkness swallowed him. His boots echoed on hard stone, though he couldn't see it. A ring of light shone down from above onto the ground a dozen yards ahead. Jack cautiously approached. Specks of dust danced in the bright light. Silence rang in his ears.

Then a strident echo boomed in his ears. "You've come far." The voice chuckled like a hissing cobra. "Never have I seen anyone with such resolve to press this deep into my fortress. What seek ye?"

Jack set his teeth together. A foul energy tingled his skin and made his hackles rise. "Scavenger hunt, asshole. All I need is a human bone and a license plate and I win a free rental at the Vid Hut." He stopped short of the ring of light in the darkness. "What's it to you?"

"I think I know what you're *really* after."

"Oh I'll bet. Y'know the whole creepy voice in the dark chamber thing is *way* passé. If want to *scare* me, try *clowns*."

"I have no reason to *scare* you. Such a powerful warrior like yourself deserves a *reward*. I know why you're here. It's for *her*." Jack had no reply. He only scowled at the darkness. "She's waiting for you. She wants to thank you for the brave work you've done on her behalf this day."

Jack instinctively glanced back at Kimmara only to find that she had disappeared. In fact, she was right next to him, telling him not to fall for the sorcerer's trick, but the

old ghost had blotted her from his mind. Jack turned around, panning the darkness.

“Kim? Where’d ya go?”

“Step into the light, young man,” tempted the necromancer.

Jack turned back to the light. “Kiss my fat—“ Jack’s heart leapt into his throat. His every muscle locked up and he forgot how to breathe.

In the light, lounging on a couch, Princess Jetta batted her eyelashes at him. She sat up off the sofa. A vision from a lazy afternoon fantasy! Lacy purple stockings clung to her supple thighs. Her high heels echoed in the vast chamber with each slinky step she took towards the stunned woodsman. Her red hair glittered in the light, and the tightest corset pushed up her voluptuous powdery soft bosom. Ah, what man could breathe before such a sight? Not Jack.

She stopped just before the ring of light, and her plump lustrous lips spread, and she said, “I’ll do more than *kiss* you. Come sit down with me.”

Jack froze. “I...I...Jetta?”

She playfully bit her bottom lip and batted her lashes some more and clasped her hands behind her back. “Come here.”

Jack shook his head a bit. “What...wait...how did you...aren’t you...?”

She beckoned him with a teasing finger. Jack took one step into the light and paused. What was that? He looked back over his shoulder, as if he could hear Kimmara shouting at him in a panic. It was more like a distant echo in his mind, an old memory. In his dazzled state, he couldn’t figure out she was right next to him, tugging on his arm, trying to stop him from entering the light.

Jetta's fingers gently touched his chin and pulled his eyes back around. She slipped her hand back into the light, but wait. What did he just see? Was her hand...decayed? She hungrily bit her finger and it was smooth and clean and glowing. Jack shook the notions from his head. He must have been delusional. Too much blood to his head. Or perhaps not enough.

Jack stepped into the middle of the circle with her, and lost himself in her amethyst eyes. She smelled better than he'd imagined. Her hot moist breath made his skin tighten as she breathed deep wanting breaths on his cheek and neck. She nuzzled her smooth cheek against his like a cat. Jack could hear the thunder of his pulse against his eardrums, and feel it throbbing in his temples and loins. "You look...*gorgeous*," he stammered.

She smiled. "Thank you." She slid the thin robe she wore off her shoulders and let it crumple around her polished shoes. She slid her arms around his neck and nibbled his chin. Jack's explored her body with his hands. He found a vast ocean of tender ivory flesh. His fingers sailed up and down the arch of her back, and combed through the satin strands of her hair. His palms slid over her soft buttocks and down to her hips. A delicious moan hummed in her throat. "It feels good when you touch me," she said.

Jack noticed an electric tingle on his flesh. A wall of wind chimes shimmered all around him. A strange energy pulsed in the air. Oh, how exciting! Was this true passion?

Jetta began to untie the lacings on the back of her corset. "I want you to touch *these*." She pressed her chest against his.

Jack grinned. The tingle became a prickle. A single drop of sweat fell from an eyebrow and he said, "This...this isn't...quite how I pictured this happening."

She perked her eyebrows as she let two more lace straps fall to her side.

Jack gazed drunkenly at her bosom, and he clumsily mashed her breasts with unskilled hands, though the princess seemed to enjoy it. “I thought you didn’t *like* me.”

She snickered and lolled her head to one side. “I don’t have to like you to *want* you.”

Jack furrowed his brow, and his hands ceased their kneading. “Wait...what?”

Jetta snatched his wrists and led his hands back to her breasts the way she might secure a life line to keep herself from floating away. “Just let me get this corset off and you’ll see what I mean.”

Jack took his hands back. “No. Wait.” He blinked a few times and glanced around. “You’re not even supposed to *be* here.” Jetta put a tender hand on his cheek and cooed softly. Jack battled his enjoyment and tried to pull away. “No...stop it...”

“Touch me,” she begged. “Kiss my—“

Jack pushed her hands back. “*Stop*. What are you doing here?! Aren’t you supposed to be in the castle? And isn’t something supposed to be wrong with you? Isn’t that the whole reason I’m here?”

Jetta seized and a piteous whimper squeaked from her lips. She clutched her abdomen and whined. “Oh no, it’s *time*!”

“What’s time? Time for what? What’s wrong?!”

She fell into his arms and pleaded up into his eyes. “It’s...the *curse*, Jack! The Black Widow *curse*!”

“That’s right! I was supposed to help you with the curse!”

She squeezed him tighter, determined not to release him from her grip. “No! No! There’s no more time! The curse will kill me unless a man *beds* me!” She slammed her hips against his. “You *came* to me! You came to *save* me! Came to have sex with me! That’s why I sent you!”

“That’s crazy! I could have—“

She forced a passionate kiss on him that he didn’t resist. “Papa would never let us give in to our desires under his roof, Jack. But here, we can give in to our hearts’ content! Give in!”

“But...but...you *hate* me! And I’m supposed to be searching for something to save you from this—“

“No!” she moaned. “No there’s no time! You have to sleep with me! Now! Please, sleep with me! Don’t let me die! I’ll die of *loneliness*. *Rejection*!” She kissed him up and down his neck and cheek. “You know what *loneliness* is like, don’t you?”

“I...”

“You don’t want to be *lonely* any more do you?”

“No...” He started to slip into a trance.

She tenderly massaged his crotch while she blew her warm breath in his ear. “You won’t ever have to be lonely again,” she tempted and led him over to the couch. “Now...you have me all to yourself. Tell me what you want.”

“I want...”

“Tell me,” she repeated. “Whatever it is, I’ll do it for you.”

“I want...you...to...” Jetta panted with eagerness. “To *want me*.”

She started. “What?”



He couldn't silence the nagging voice in the back of his mind. He knew she wasn't supposed to be here. He knew it wasn't really Jetta, and no matter how pleasant this illusion was, he couldn't hand himself over to something that wasn't true. His conscience slapped him in the back of the head. Jack blinked free of the trance and looked her hard in the eyes. "Cheap Trick."

"Trick?!" She said defensively. "What makes you say this is a trick?!"

Jack turned and scanned the darkness. "This is a *trick* y'say? Where's Kimmara?"

"There's no one here but us."

Jack's narrow eyes studied the voluptuous vixen. "You're lying."

"No."

"And you're *hiding* something as well."

"No!" Jack turned away. "Don't go! Come back! You can't leave!"

"Watch me."

Jetta lingered doubtfully for a moment then lunged at Jack from behind. Her fingernails dug into his shoulder and Jack felt the prickling sensation from before, amplified a hundred fold. He cried out and fell to one knee. His vision dimmed, and his breathing stiffened. Jack reached for the darkness beyond the wall of light, but it seemed to pull away from him. "You can't *leave*," Jetta's voice had lost its musical quality. It now grated on his ears like stones ground on a mill.

Streaks of yellow energy sparked from her fingers into the air, and her eyes glowed. Desperate, Jack heaved his weight forward and tore free from her grasp. He staggered into the edge of the ring of light and slammed into a fiery wall that sparked and flung him back. He landed with a cry and wheeled around. The princess was no longer a

vision of loveliness. Her eyes and fingers glowed with energy and a vengeful scowl covered her face. “Damn you to hell, *boy!*”

Jack drew the Godblade. “I’ve *been*. It’s underrated.” Jack thrust the sword behind him and it pierced the veil of light. A rush of wind slapped his ears and the brightness faded to darkness. He collapsed to one knee and his head swam through seven different colors. The wind chimes in his ears became gongs. His skin burned and his breath was hot and labored. The dim world met his eyes now, and the princess had become a hunching shadow that lumbered towards him. Jack tried to stand, but had no strength, no vitality. His bones felt like hollow reeds. “J...Jetta,” he muttered. “Stop this...this is...this is...”

Jetta was gone. In her stead stood a grotesque abomination. Char black limbs had wrinkled like sun-dried leather and stank of rot. It had empty cavities for eyes and mouth and it shrieked at its escaped victim.

The sight startled him. Jack stumbled backwards, still reeling with weakness. “Wha?! What—what?!”

It pounced on him, and its talons tore into his chest ripping chunks of red flesh from his body and screams of anguish from his lungs. Desperate, he swatted the monster off, and it hovered in the air, chittering in a way that could *marginally* be described as laughter. Jack rolled forward and crawled on his arms over cold stone. His heart thundered in fear as the monster hovered overhead. Had Jetta been this monster all along? If not, what happened to her? Did Jetta try to lure him into her bed to *kill* him?!

It cackled and created sounds that mimicked Jetta’s sweet voice, cooing to him, tempting him, begging him to come back to her. Jack scrambled forward and lumbered in

a sort of limp. All he could do was try to escape. It dove at him once more, and Jack fell forward into a sloppy somersault, and narrowly avoided a decapitating stroke. It shrielled as it soared up into the air like an eagle, turning around in the clouds to make another pass.

Jack tried to heft his weapon, but he hadn't the muscle to lift it past his hip. He let out a small cry, a gasp. He couldn't lift his weapon, much less find the strength to *swing* it! The monster dove at him once more, and he tried to dodge, but his movements were too sluggish. It smashed into him like a battering ram and spilled his hot breath into the stale air. Jack sprawled onto his back, and had only enough power to hold the sword in his fingers.

The monster straddled him. It paused to hiss at his sword, then its crunchy hips ground into his pelvis. It started to moan like the damned in the pits of lava, but its features changed. Like a shadow cast by a flickering candle, glimpses of the sultry princess crossed over the monster, and its grating switched to Jetta's cooing voice. It begged him to finish what they had started, to give in to what they both wanted so badly. Its fingers, smooth as the top of a cat's tongue, caressed his face and chest. The woodsman groaned and struggled, but his skin burned and his vision faltered and dimmed.

Then its fingers pressed into his temples and injected images, sensations of sexual bliss with the princess into his brain. Jack's spine arched, his body convulsed and a tortured scream ripped from his throat, as he felt over and over again, the feeling of taking Jetta, in the moonlight painted sheets of her bed at night, under a tropical waterfall, in a cool swimming pool, on the sunny grass of an open field. He knew how her body

felt, inside and out every smooth, quivering, slippery inch of it. It forced its way into his memories and trampled other memories he had, real memories, fond memories, into blackness.

He screamed so loud, such pain, such anguish. His skin reddened from the strain, veins bulged in his forehead and neck. His throat hoarsened and he tried so hard to remove the monster's grip that his fingers broke under the crispy flesh into the gooey rot and stink beneath. But the demon rocked back and forth on top of him. It shrilled in horrid ecstasy and threw its head back, sprinkling a mist of filth and ash into the air. Jack's convulsions wrenched his body around, and one arm lashed out and belted the monster across the face. It fell on its side as Jack continued to flop violently like a dying fish in hot sand. He ground his head into the hard stone, unable to clear the sensory overload that raped his mind. This was the true power of the Black Widow Curse.

The monster turned back to its victim and prowled around him, looking for another opportunity to return to feeding on the carcass when, "Stop!" a voice called out. Kimmara, not the familiar, the *woman*, stepped between Jack and the monster with her arms spread. Drying tears stained her cheeks, but a strong resolve set her jaw. "Get away from him!"

It hissed at her and pounced on the priestess. Kimmara shrieked as the monster tried to dig its talons into her soft flesh.

As Jack rolled and writhed, he forced an eye open, and caught a glimpse of the monster attacking the priestess; the woman that had put herself in harms way to help him; the woman that hadn't a fraction of his strength, his power; it was killing her.

Jack's mask shattered into raw seething rage. The Godblade at his side whined with energy, and a mystic glow of white power consumed his body. Jack hoisted up his sword like it was weightless and bounded forward in an explosion of white energy (so fierce it destroyed the ground he had just quit). A startling bolt of white steel flashed before Kimmara's eyes and she fell back on the ground, somehow free of the monster's grasp. All she saw was disintegrating ash fluttering around Jack, who's shoulder dipped towards the ground; the fully extended Godblade sat in a smoking grout in the stone. Jack panted slowly, his face scarred by wrath and hate. The biceps on his arm pulsed, and a single drop of sweat rolled off his nose and sizzled on the stone beneath him.

Seeing Kimmara in danger had triggered the Godblade's special feature: Godmode. It completely renewed his body with righteous vigor, and blessed him with the holy light of invulnerability.

Jack ripped the sword out of the ground (it made a CHUNK sound). He stumbled backwards, as the glow faded, his fatigue returned and he collapsed to his rump. The sword clattered on the ground next to him.

Jack sat on the ground, with his elbows on his knees and his forehead pressed against his folded arms. He sat very quiet, very still. "Jack?" asked Kimmara as she crept closer to him. A sense of fear found her that she had never felt around him. Jack never needed to take a breather after dispatching a monster. He'd faced creatures that gave her waking nightmares and always walked away making some bad joke. "Jack, are you alright?" she asked with gravity in her voice.

Jack's eyes rose up, but he did not look at her. Her blood turned cold as the river when she saw his red rimmed eyes, and the tears that rolled out of them. He pressed his

lips against his arm so they wouldn't quiver. His mind and heart were a wreck. He couldn't believe he'd been fooled so easily. He couldn't believe he'd come that close to death. The tingle on his skin, the prickling sensation. The monster had been sapping his life energy all along. A little more foreplay and it wouldn't have even *needed* to sleep with him to finish him off. The ring of light—it created the illusion, just like the earrings on the prostitute from a few nights before. He'd seen that trick once already, there was no excuse to have missed it. It had reached through once and Jack saw its true form. He *saw* it! But he chose to see only what he *wanted* to see. The princess.

Jack tugged his floppy cap off his head and ran his frustrated fingers through his hair and sniffled.

She *looked* so real. She *smelled* so real. She *tasted*...wonderful. It only made more tears fall from his eyes. Jack hoped there was a special place reserved for Zarotharorathomus in hell. He was so weak now. Not just from having his strength sapped through his skin. He'd never felt so exposed, so vulnerable. Jack had gotten used to the Godblade's power. It gave him power and (especially when innocent lives were threatened) it made him invincible. He'd slain rogue gods and savage monsters. He was unbent, unbowed, unbroken. But against a beautiful woman? Ah. He was finished.

Then he felt a warm hand brush through his hair.

Jack looked up with a start. Kimmara crouched over him and gently stroked his hair. Their eyes met. She could feel his pain and heartache, and he knew she could. She pulled him to her. She felt his hand trembling; he couldn't make it stop. His head twitched; he couldn't shake the images, the sensations the monster had forcefully planted in his mind. Tears welled in her eyes and she cursed the monster.

Jack felt the most wonderful, most calming sensation of all in her arms; the one the illusion had lacked, the one the necromancer for all his power could never duplicate—warmth. Kimmara was so warm. Jack listened to her heart beating steadily in her chest.

“What happened...?” was all Jack could manage.

“An illusion.”

“Jetta...?”

“No, Jack. It wasn’t her. That monster was the manifested energy of the Black Widow curse. The purest essence of it. Lust, desire, temptation, and death.” As she heard her own words it dawned on her just how formidable the foe truly was. She glanced down at Jack in her lap, still breathing. Such strength! He resisted the very energy of the curse itself!

“Why...why did it look...like...?”

“That’s what it does, Jack. When a woman is cursed, that energy, that—*thing*, writhes and snarls in their souls and hurts them, it kills them unless they feed it. Feed it flesh. Sex.”

“But that...wasn’t *in* her...it...*was* her?”

“Like I said. It feeds on your lust. It took the shape that would ignite your lust the most. It took Jetta’s shape.”

Jack rose with a growl. “*Rathomus!*” He scooped up his sword and thrust it furiously into his sheath. His burning eyes darted back and forth in the chamber until they rested on the double doors far at the end of the domed room.

“What are you going to do?”

Jack wiped his mouth on his leather vambrace, and he sucked a hard breath through his nose. “I’m gonna dig up the bastard and kill’im all over again!”

6

“I would have had dinner with you”

Jetta felt the pangs in her chest and stomach. The demon within churned and slurped and demanded to be fed. Jetta beheld the bed and shuddered. Three men had met their deaths in this bed, and the court mystics could do nothing to stop those deaths.

For hours, the king had engaged in the unsavory task of interviewing soldiers, men who had volunteered to pacify Jetta’s demon to keep her alive, at the cost of their lives. Tristinian was thoroughly irritated—nearly all the young men in service to him had volunteered. He had to hold his tongue, for each time he interviewed a candidate, he almost said, “If you really want to die for my daughter, my ax will be quicker.”

Behind a dark curtain, a young soldier passed. Sweat beaded on his brow, and the king had taken down his last words and prepared a statement to read to his family. Yet, the young man couldn’t help but grin.

Jetta waited next to the bed with a gloomy visage. The soldier’s heart thundered.

“My princess,” he said, breathlessly. “I’m ready. Is it time?”

“It’s time,” she murmured, and mechanically slipped her robe to the ground. As she slid her hands over the soldier’s shoulders and drew her lips to his, a potent wind blustered the curtains. Soldiers outside the tent scrambled, and the mystics all took special notice.

“What’s happening, Metius?” barked the king.



“A planar disturbance my lord!”

“What?”

“Someone or something is trying to open a *door*!” As soon as the mystic explained the condition, the air opened up like a hungry mouth. A portal of swirling light hovered in their midst, and soldiers all gathered around Tristinian with weapons and shields raised, prepared to fight hellspawn to their bloody deaths in service to their king. *These* were good soldiers.

Black mists bobbed and pushed through the vortex. “Specters!” said Metius.

“Well what do they want?”

“I can’t say, my lord, perhaps—“ Suddenly, a large form emerged from the portal. All the soldiers tensed up in one motion.

Across the floor, Jack Windsword somersaulted to his feet and looked left and right with a wily glare. He rose to his feet quickly. “Made it!” he exclaimed.

Kimmara fluttered next to him. “Thank the stars! I’d had enough of that place. I never want to see another specter again!”

“Really? Those specters weren’t so bad. Some of ‘em were kinda cute. I think I’d like one as a pet.”

“You’re sick.”

“Who the deuce are you?!” roared Tristinain.

Jack held up a rib bone in his hand. He had torn it from the still decaying corpse of the necromancer. “Witchdoctor! Where’s the patient?” he clomped confidently across the floor, past the trained soldiers. Jack shoved the black curtain aside and saw Jetta in the arms of the soldier.

“Jack!” she chirped in elation and ran to him.

“Am I interrupting something?” he grinned with a raised eyebrow.

“Not at all!” she said putting her arms around him with a grateful smile.

“But...I...” said the young man.

“Your services are no longer required, thank you,” she said.

“Wait. We were supposed—” he walked up to Jack and tried to separate him from Jetta.

Jack side kicked him onto the bed. “Scram, meatball.” He held up the rib bone and presented it to Jetta. “One piece of a dead guy as requested.”

“Wonderful! Now dooooo...whatever it is you have to do.”

Jack blinked. “I thought...*you* knew what I was supposed to do.”

“I thought *you* knew!”

“I was just supposed to *find* the damn thing!”

Metius stepped through the curtain, while Tristinan yanked the curtain down. “No one sleeps with my daughter tonight!” he declared. A collective groan from nearly eighty men in the outer wings sounded.

“Might I have a look at the artifact?” asked Metius.

Jetta buckled and moaned. “Ughn! There’s no more time! I have to mate *right now*!”

“We need time to analyze the artifact!” cried Metius.

“Someone do something! My daughter is dying!”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Oh fer Godsake.” He grabbed Jetta by the shoulder and smacked the rib against her forehead. It came to life with light and hissed. She hollered in

pain and tried to pull away, but Jack's iron grip held her fast. She writhed and pulled away, but he moved with her, until he had her pinned to the bed beneath him.

"What's he doing?!" cried Metius.

"You're killing her!" Tristinian roared raising his ax.

Kimmara fluttered in front of them. "Wait! Wait! I think he knows what he's doing!" Jack's hard eyes were merciless to her cries of anguish and he held the rib fast to her forehead. She clawed at his face, his arms, punched at his chest and pounded on him with her fists. Jack showed no mercy. Eventually the light faded, the hissing disappeared, and Jetta was overcome with a startled sense of calmness and peace. She blinked at Jack with wide, surprised eyes.

Jack pulled the bone away, glanced at it, and chucked it over his shoulder. "You okay?"

"Uh huh," she said timidly.

"You can stop *straddling* her now," said both Tristinian and Kimmara.

Jack sat up off her and helped her to her feet. Tristinian bull rushed Jack aside and wrapped the curtain around her, all while flashing an angry glare at Jack for touching his daughter while exposed. Before anyone could speak another word, more wind kicked up in the room. All present wheeled towards the source of the disturbance. "Was there another of you?" asked Metius.

Jack gave no answer; he peered with narrow-eyed apprehension. Jetta noted Jack's posture. His head was low, his back arched, his fists clenched tight. "Something's wrong!" she shouted, pressing herself against the king.

Metius was baffled. "What is it?"

“There!” Jack pointed at the bone on the ground. It was still glowing. Unfelt winds picked up the bone high into the air and danced with it. The light grew brighter, and the bone spun quicker and quicker, until it grew in mass. Many of the soldiers witnessing the sight turned and ran, tripping over one another to get clear. They were willing to sleep with Jetta but not face an arcane disturbance.

Before long rotten cackles met their ears, and before them hovered the old sorcerer in dark robes with a pointed hat on his head. He inspected his mottled hands and wrinkled flesh. A grin spread across his crooked yellow teeth. “It worked.”

Jetta shrilled at the sight of him and cowered behind her father. “It’s him! It’s him! Don’t let him hurt me! Papa!” Tristinian tucked her behind himself.

The sorcerer reveled. “Of *course* it worked! Stupid little slut! It was a masterstroke! I am once again given flesh! As a spirit, I placed a portion of my magic with you. Then *this* dimwit—“ he pointed to Jack, who flicked his middle finger back at the sorcerer along with a curt *up yours*. “Retrieved a piece of my remains and forced that magic back into my bones. And behold! I have revived myself! Praise me!”

“This...” growled Tristinian stepping forward, shouldering past Jack. “This is the mongrel that’s inflicted such unbearable grief on my daughter?” He raised his ax. “’Tis glorious, sorcerer! I rejoice along side you! Now there is *flesh* that I can spat on my blade!”

Zarotharorathomus cast a condescending eye on the charging king. “Feh.” From his mouth emerged a black cloud of death, the same that had slain guardsmen in Jetta’s room days before.

“*Lookout!*” Jetta shrieked, recognizing the attack. “*Papa!*”

The strange mist jutted hard lethal spikes in all directions like a porcupine rolling into a ball. Jack sprang into action. The Godblade surrounded him with the soft white glow of invulnerability, and the black pikes that lanced at the king snapped off his indestructible frame. “Whoa!” Jack had never seen such a thing, even in the City of the Damned.

The necromancer snarled at Jack. “I don’t know how you did that, but I can see you’ll be a problem.” Without a word or a glance, a portal revealed itself in their midst. The necromancer waved his hand and Jack was flung with a yell through it. “You can sit in my crypt and guard over the rest of me.” He tightened his fist, and the portal closed up.

“Oh no! *No!*” Jetta cried. “Jack!”

Zarotharorathomus beckoned Jetta forward with a finger. His magic lifted her off the ground; she thrashed helplessly as he drew her near him. “Damn you, Metius! Do something!” ordered Tristinian.

Metius clasped his hands together and began to chant an incantation at the necromancer. Exasperated, Zarotharorathomus spat on Metius’ head. Immediately, the saliva inflicted a strange spell on him that thrust him into a terrible seizure. He locked up, gasped, and coughed up foam from his lips. He gurgled as tremors rattled his bones until he transformed into stone. “Metius!” gasped Tristinian.

The king took up his ax and leapt up at the sorcerer. His ax struck clean and cleft a portion of the sorcerer’s arm from his body. The old crone noticed his amputated limb but didn’t seem to think much of it. Tristinian chuckled at the feat, because he hadn’t right away noticed that the severed arm moved on its own. Levitating on its own accord,

the hand drifted towards the confident king and slipped its bony fingers around his throat. Tristinian tossed his ax down so he could try to pull the tenacious limb from his neck.

“Papa!” Jetta cried.

“Don’t mind him, child. That spell’s unbreakable—just like the arm. Just let it work its course.” Jetta started to cry hovering before the old man. She was paralyzed and to her horror he sprouted a new arm that he used to peel the curtain from her body. “Ah,” he marveled. “Now that I have my *flesh* back, I intend to capitalize on that kiss you owe me.” Jetta heaved great sobs. “With interest of course.” He ran his fingers over her powdery flesh and inhaled her sweet scent. “Even with all the magic at my disposal, I cannot duplicate pleasures such as this, child. Such as your *skin*.” He traced his rawboned finger over her quivering breast. Her bra shimmered in his eyes, and he slipped his clammy hand beneath it, and felt her warm nipple. “Ohhhhhhhh girl. You—“

BOOM.

A horrendous burst of air blew the sorcerer and his ensnared prey to the ground. The fiercest winds yet roared through the hall. He winced and covered his face. “What? What’s happening?” Beams of light lanced the air, all emerging from a single point. The floor below it splintered and caved from an increase in gravity. “Planar shift? But...I haven’t cast any such—“ A slim glint of steel thrust through the light burst and slid down to the ground, leaving a trail of burning light behind it, and then it disappeared. “That’s impossible!”

Above the deepening crater in the ground and amidst the raucous rays of light and gusts of wind, the strip of burning light widened, slowly. Within it, Jack Windsword, aglow with the Godblade’s power, pulled the tear apart like rending a curtain.

“He’s tearing the threshold with his *bare hands*!” Zarotharorathomus scrambled to his feet in astonishment. “I have no spell in my entire corpus that can do such a thing! He’d have to be a *god*!”

Jack grunted, baring his teeth. The white energy flared around him as he pulled the rip apart even farther. His muscles strained to their maximum output. His cheeks flushed red and his body trembled beneath the effort. Finally, he stepped through, and the tear closed behind him. The glow remained on his countenance, however.

“How?!” roared the sorcerer. “How did you—“

Jack smirked and lifted up a glass eye. “I stole your eyes y’old fart! You never should have sent me back to your crypt! With these, I could see where the stitch in space was. Then all I had to do was tear it open with the Godblade.”

“Godblade?!” Darkness fell over the necromancer as he drifted into the air. “You’ve made a grave enemy. Zarotharorathomus can inflict torments on you that do not stop at death. For I can reach beyond that threshold to the realm of the dead and hurt you even—“ An alabaster blast of power from Jack’s sword exploded in his face and rocked him back. When the smoke cleared, a bare skull remained. But maggots crawled across the bones and regenerated the monster’s flesh. His eyes, however, remained hollow. Glaring pits of yellow fire burned in their stead. “I will have your—“ Jack bounded across the chamber, bolstered by the Godblade’s power and clobbered the sorcerer in the mouth.

They tumbled to the ground together, and as Jack poised his sword to plunge it into the fiend, Zarotharorathomus dissolved beneath him. A cloud of small black insects

skittered away from him and reassembled into the sorcerer. Jack's eyes popped. "Ah ha," he said to himself.

This time, Zarotharorathomus had become an inhuman terror. His arms and face were rotten carrion, exposed pale purple muscle and dripping flesh. His voice became like glass bottles ground under a plank of wood. He decreed an incantation that was older than language itself, a sound that seemed not so much to summon the eternal horrors it was connected to, but to express them. Yet, to the necromancer's dismay and disbelief, Jack pounced on him once more. Glowing with white energy, the old fiend found he could do nothing to strike fear in his hard eyes. Jack reared back with his bare left hand. No one anticipated what he would do next. He plunged his open hand into the necromancer's side. Zarotharorathomus gasped and shrieked. He staggered around in pain, and Jack staggered with him. He tugged and wrenched his hand within the chest cavity, completely hardened to the disgusting task. Maggots and other insects spilled from the open wound, and the decaying fiend gasped and shrilled mere inches from his face, but could not deter him. Jack apparently was practiced at this sort of thing.

Finally, he tore his hand free of the wound with a wet snap. Jack jumped away from the fiend and the Godblade's light abated. He clutched the rib bone in his hand. The monster's hollow eyes grew wider. It recognized the bone and gasped with horrid fear. The necromancer reached for his life force rib.

Jack crushed it in his bare hand.

Immediately, shafts of light ruptured from the fiend's body, splintering him into shards of flame. There was no grand death for the necromancer. He simply fell into pieces of flame and dissolved into nothing on the floor. Satisfied that all was safe, Jack



tossed the broken rib to the ground and stomped it beneath his boot. “Yuck,” he said.

“That was *nasty*. I swear I felt something *lick* my hand in there.”

The wind settled. A collective sigh of relief rattled throughout the room. Soldiers helped their king to his feet, and Jack approached the bewildered half-dressed princess sitting on the cold hardwood floor. He offered her a hand and a smile.

She blushed and he gently helped her to her feet. She allowed him to put his hands on her hips. Jack’s heart raced. He remembered the forced feelings the demon had given him, and he longed to feel them again, but this time with the real princess. “So,” he said. “I guess you’re not going to be sleeping with all those dudes out in the hall anymore.”

She shook her head. “How did you...*win* that fight? Isn’t...? I mean, I thought Rathomus was invincible.”

“I noticed when he turned himself into a swarm of bugs that the only thing he couldn’t dissolve was that one rib bone. I figured it was the source of his power. I was right.”

“So you guessed?”

Jack sighed and smiled softly. “Are okay, Jetta?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “Cool, cool. Uh...so you uh...wanna go get somethin’ to eat?”

She laughed.

His smile faded. “Wha—what’s so funny?”

She shook her head, clamping her hand over her mouth. “You actually asked me out. That was cute.” Jack waited intently for a moment. “No, Jack. I don’t want to have dinner with you.”

Jack practically grimaced. “Wh—why? I mean...I thought...”

Jetta sighed and patted his cheek. “I appreciate it. Really I do. But I can’t court with someone like you.” She patted his belly. “I can do *much* better. Thank you anyway.”

She gathered up her robe and trotted away, beaming and free.

Tristinian clamped his large hand on Jack’s drooping shoulder. “*You*, are a hero, lad. A king’s ransom. Just as I promised. Now I—“ He tipped his head and studied Jack, who still hadn’t looked up yet. “I say...you look familiar. Don’t I know you from somewhere?” The fact was that Jack had rescued the king and his entire house from certain doom once.

But Jack turned away and left, never looking at the king, and grumbled, “No.”

Jack plodded down the halls of the castle, past all the disappointed men that scowled and cursed him for ruining their once in a lifetime chances. One fellow even spit on him. Jack dragged himself through the open door of the Temple of Eternity. It was stuck.

Kimmara waited by the reflection pool, her hands clasped in front of her, and a pained look of pity on her face. Jack shuffled up to the reflection pool, unable to look the priestess in the eye. “I’m sorry,” she said tenderly. Jack managed a quick glimpse at her eyes, and he sighed.

“You were right.”

Kimmara reached for him, but stopped herself.

Jack sloshed through the water and stabbed the Godblade back into its pedestal.

“Thanks for lettin’ me use the sword.”

Kimmara reached out for him and touched his shoulder. Her face flushed dark red and she stammered nervously, “I—I—I would have...had dinner with you...”

Jack turned to her, and she tingled all over.

He grinned.