

• CHAPTER ONE •

Warlock

*T*HE DEMON HOWLED ITS OUTRAGE.
Amirantha, Warlock of the Satumbria, reeled backwards from the unexpected explosion of mystic energy hurled at him. Had his protective wards not been firmly established, he would have died instantly. The demon responsible was powerful enough to force through the barrier and slam the magic user hard against the cave wall behind him. The blow Amirantha took on the back of the head was going to raise a nasty bump.

Demons always carried a large amount of mystic energies, enough to destroy any unprepared mortal standing nearby as the monsters entered this plane of reality. It was one of the reasons for erecting wards, beyond merely confining the demon to a specific location. This one had arrived with a much more impressive explosion than the Warlock anticipated, and had surprised him.

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Amirantha incanted a single word, a collection of otherwise meaningless syllables that together formed a key, a word of power that activated a much more complicated enchantment; a trick taught to him years before that had often meant the difference between controlling a summoned demon effectively and dismemberment at its hands. The word strengthened the ward spell that now confined the creature.

Amirantha regained his feet as the demon continued to howl at discovering itself summoned and confined. Experience had taught the Warlock that demons rarely objected to being summoned as they found this world easy to plunder, but they hated being trapped and controlled. Their hate was the one thing that made Amirantha's area of study problematic; his subjects kept trying to kill him.

He took a deep breath to calm himself and studied the enraged conjuration. The demon was not a type he recognized, though obviously a battle demon of some sort. Amirantha knew more about demons and their nature than any mortal on Midkemia, but still possessed only a tenth of the understanding he wished for. This specimen was new to him. He did not have exhaustive knowledge of every demon in the Fifth Circle, but he recognized its basic type: massive upper torso, roughly human in design, with a bull's head, or at least something that resembled a bovine; long, forward-arching horns, giving weight to its minotaur-like appearance. As he began to conjure a spell designed to immobilize any demon, Amirantha wondered if such a monster had been the basis for the ancient myth of the Minotaur.

Its legs were almost goat-like, but there anything remotely familiar about the creature ended. Its body was covered in some black substance up to its waist, though it was no wool, hair, or

fur that Amirantha recognized. Its upper body looked like it was made from black leather, but slick and shiny, as if its skin had been tanned, dyed, and highly polished. Its horns were blood red, and its eyes burned like hot coals.

From the howls shaking the cave, Amirantha could tell that the demon's disposition was getting nastier by the second. The creature even looked on the verge of rending its way through wards that should be impenetrable, though Amirantha knew better than to place too much stock in the world 'should' when a demon was involved.

He finished strengthening his spell of confinement and saw the demon step back a moment, shudder, then return to battering the wards, accompanying its renewed efforts with even louder bellowing.

Amirantha's eyes widened slightly, his only outward concession to surprise. The demon had just shrugged off a spell designed to immobilize any conjured entity. Looking at the raging demon, the Warlock of Satumbria stroked his chin whiskers and considered what he observed. He was a vain man by any measure, and had his servant trim his beard and hair weekly, knowing exactly how it should look each time. His receding hairline had caused him to let his dark hair fall to his shoulders, and his dark brows and pointed chin beard gave him an appropriate cast for his calling in life: a summoner of demons. Or at least made him look the part for those willing to pay gold for his services.

Adjusting his purple robe, covered with fine silver needlework at the collar and upon the sleeves, he muttered a reliable invocation and watched. The demon should have instantly knelt in abject obedience, but instead he could sense the summoned creature's rage intensifying at the command. Amirantha sighed in a

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mixture of frustration and confusion, and wondered what he had conjured this time.

Ignoring the ringing in his ears, the Warlock reached into a large belt pouch. He had sewn this pouch years ago, patiently weaving magic into the threads under the supervision of a master artificer named Leychona, in the great City of the Serpent River, his one and only attempt at fabricating magic cloth. He had been pleased with the results, the confining bag let him carry many stones of power without provoking disastrous consequences. He was proud of the needlework, but had found the entire process so tedious and exasperating, he now paid artificers and tailors to fashion what he needed in exchange for his skills or gold.

Amirantha's finger rubbed lightly against a series of embroidered knots, each indicating a pocket he had fashioned. Swiftly, he found the one he sought and withdrew the stone he had prepared for a time such as this. Holding it aloft, he incanted a spell that drew forth the power stored in the stone and directed it to the hastily reinforced barrier. As he did, he felt the shock reverberating through the ward as the demon hurled itself against the mystic defence.

Then the creature paused, and looked at the space in the air where the barrier stood *as if it could see it*. Pulling back its massive right fist it unleashed a blow that could shatter a bull-hide shield. Amirantha imagined that he felt the shock from it travel through the air to strike him. Then the demon struck the wards even harder, and Amirantha raised his hand to reinforce the barrier with even more power. To his astonishment, this time he could feel the demon's energy translated into a blow that ran up his arm. He stepped back, until he stood hard against the wall. 'What do I do now?' he muttered absently.

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Again the demon hurled itself at the barrier and Amirantha, Warlock of the Satumbria, decided it was going to get through. Pushing aside a sudden urge to laugh – the unexpected and dangerous often affected him this way – he drew another object from his belt pouch and smashed it on the floor.

A noxious gas erupted from its ruin and as it spread, Amirantha fled from the deep cave in which he had conjured the monster. It was a summoning area he had especially prepared for this ritual, protected by multiple wards and other safeguards he had erected against such a mishap. He hurried along a narrow tunnel, muttering, ‘What next?’

Reaching a large open cavern, closer to the entrance of the stone warren, he cursed himself for a fool. All of his most powerful items had been stored in the smaller cave. He had been so surprised by the conjuration, that he had left them on the floor. He had thought himself ready for any eventuality surrounding demon summoning; it never occurred to him that one he hadn’t summoned might appear unexpectedly.

Shaking his head at his own stupidity, he stopped. He had at least stored a lantern here; although such forethought had simply been intended to indicate the way out, rather than in anticipation that he might be forced to flee for his life, having abandoned his other lantern. Muttering to himself, he said, ‘Sometimes I wish I was as clever as I claim to be.’

Amirantha turned back towards the tunnel, realizing that if he didn’t stop the demon here, the creature would be free to choose from exits. Not only would that be bad for anyone living within the demon’s reach, almost ten thousand people by the last census, it would also prove disastrous for Amirantha’s reputation.

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The Governor of Lanada waited for him near a particular cave mouth, accompanied by a sizeable retinue of soldiers, but nothing that could stop this monster should it come their way. Not only would the Maharajah's Court look down upon an itinerant Warlock responsible for the disembowelment of a regional governor, he was almost certainly not going to be paid for performing this banishment.

Pulling a long wand of ash from his belt, the Warlock readied himself. The device had been commissioned from the finest wand maker in the Kingdom of Muboya, and was capable of seven effective theatrical stunts, each designed to illicit 'oohs' and 'aahs' of wonder from onlookers. But it also possessed four very powerful enchantments that could inflict significant damage should the need arise. Amirantha was fairly certain the need had arisen.

He was greeted by the stench of the gas moving through the corridor from the summoning cave. It was designed to weaken and eventually incapacitate demons, and was not at all pleasant for humans to inhale. He knew that probably meant the demon was through the wards and coming towards him. Then Amirantha winced.

It wasn't the odour that made him shudder, but a sudden cave-rattling sound; a combination of tones and vibrations that made his heart jump and cringe at the same time. The angry shriek made his skin crawl, as if he were listening to a smith sharpen a sword on a turning wheel. If nothing else, the Governor of Lanada was receiving a better performance than the one Amirantha had originally planned for him.

Then the demon came straight at him.

A voice from behind Amirantha said, 'Need any help?'

'It would be appreciated,' the Warlock said to Brandos. His

companion had been waiting outside the cave mouth, reinforcement for eventualities such as this, and to make sure that the Governor became curious enough to send in his guards to ‘help’ the Warlock banish the demon.

Amirantha gripped his ornately carved wand and spoke a single word in a language known to very few men. A searing burst of heat washed over the two men as a massive fireball exploded away from them through the tunnel, sweeping over the demon and forcing it back.

‘I’m going to need a few moments to banish it.’

The old fighter was still powerful, though nearing fifty years of age, and he had more experience in confronting demonic opponents than he wished for. This creature looked as if it might be the most dangerous he had faced so far. ‘Where are the rest of your toys?’

‘Back in the summoning cave.’

‘In the cave?’

‘Yes,’ said Amirantha quietly. ‘I realized that myself, just a moment ago.’

‘Well then, we’ll have to do this the difficult way, won’t we?’ He wore a buckler, a small round shield, on his left arm, and he pulled a broadsword from its scabbard that hung from his hip. ‘It’s times like this I wish I had taken up baking.’

Brandos knew he did not need to defeat the demon, only delay it long enough for Amirantha to banish it back to the demon realm. It was only a matter of gaining a minute or two, but the old fighter knew that even a few seconds could be a very long time. ‘Let’s go in before it comes back here. I don’t welcome trying to keep it from those side tunnels. Best to keep it confined.’

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Amirantha stayed behind his friend as Brandos moved up the tunnel, stopping only a few yards from where the demon had retreated. The stench of the gas filling the cave was nearly overwhelming, but it had the desired effect. The demon approached them cautiously, halted and then stood motionless for a moment, regarding the two humans.

Then it opened its mouth and issued sounds; not the inarticulate sounds of rage and anger, for they seemed meaningful, with rhythm and distinct pronunciation.

Brandos said, 'Is it casting a spell?'

Amirantha hesitated, his curiosity overwhelming his need to rid this realm of the demonic visitor. He listened for only an instant before he realized that Brandos was correct: the demon was a spell caster!

'We should interrupt that, I think,' said Amirantha. He uttered a single word, another cantrip release he had prepared for such dangerous encounters. The word acted as a mystic placeholder for a long, complicated spell, and its utterance instantly released the full force of the enchantment. As a result, the raging demon was suddenly unable to speak. The efficacy of the spell was dependent on several factors, but most importantly upon how powerful the targeted magic user was compared to Amirantha. The average village enchanter could be rendered silent until Amirantha chose to lift the spell. A powerful magician would be silenced only for a minute or two. A more powerful magician could shrug off the spell with little effort. This demon was an unknown quantity.

Amirantha began the spell of banishment and was only halfway through the incantation when the demon again found its voice, and resumed its own incantation.

‘Bloody hell,’ muttered Brandos as he darted forward, starting a slow, looping overhand strike at the demon’s head; at the last moment, he moved his blade, dropped to one knee and unleashed the blow upon the demon’s left leg. Shock ran up his arm as if he had struck the trunk of a massive tree, but even so, the demon howled in pain and retreated back up the tunnel, its spell casting interrupted. The creature was injured and it knelt for a moment, nursing its leg. Years before, Amirantha had paid a magician in Maharta to enchant the sword, to inflict additional pain on demons. Now he wished that he had paid for the spell to cause real injury, instead of a mere distraction.

As Amirantha finished his spell, the air seemed to come alive with hissing energy. The demon screamed defiantly, and the stone beneath their feet vibrated for a moment.

‘It’s still here,’ observed Brandos.

‘I can see that,’ countered the Warlock. ‘It’s using its own magic to remain here.’

‘What next?’ asked Brandos.

‘A more powerful spell of banishment, obviously. But we’re going to have to wear it out.’

‘Wonderful,’ said Brandos shaking his head. ‘So I bleed and you chatter.’

‘Try not to bleed too much.’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ said Brandos as Amirantha drew a large gem-like object from his pouch and smashed it on the floor.

A hazy curtain of ruby-coloured energy sprang up, bisecting the tunnel. ‘Back through the wards!’ commanded Amirantha, and Brandos did not hesitate. He had been through too many of these confrontations to ignore the Warlock’s instructions.

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The magic user's deep voice resonated in the narrow confines of the tunnel as he quickly strengthened the new wards with a cantrip and reached into his pouch once more. A tiny light pulsed on his palm as he held out his hand. He cradled the light as it quickly grew into a throbbing crimson orb, and threw it at the demon just as the creature moved purposefully towards the two men.

The demon was instantly engulfed in a scintillating web of crimson threads, which caused tiny explosions of white heat as they touched its skin. It howled and the stone tunnel shook from the sound, dislodging fine soil and small rocks that fell on Amirantha and Brandos.

Brandos took a quick look around, to see if the entire hillside was about to come down on them, but satisfied that things were relatively stable, returned his attention to the enraged demon. 'I think it's annoyed,' he said dryly.

'What made you notice that?' asked the Warlock.

Brandos swung again as the creature advanced, giving Amirantha a moment longer to prepare the complex spell of banishment. As a safeguard, the Warlock quickly placed another set of wards behind the first, as an emergency measure. The demon recoiled from the blow, but Brandos wasn't trying to attack it, only slow it down. 'Back!' commanded Amirantha, and the old fighter retreated behind the next invisible threshold.

The Warlock uttered an invoking word and a wall of pulsing violet-coloured energy sprang up to encircle the demon in the tunnel. The sizzling cylinder of light was shot through with rose and golden colours, and when the demon struck its surface, it recoiled as if it had hit a stone wall. Smoke coiled from its flesh and its wounds were charred.

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Brandos knew that demons expended energy to heal themselves, so each time they were injured they were weakened. But demons also had an exasperating ability to feed off other sources of energy given the chance, so it was wiser to weaken them as fast as possible so that the summoner could quickly banish them back to the demonic realm. 'Do I need to hit it a few more times?'

'Wouldn't be a bad idea,' said the Warlock as he readied another set of wards.

Brandos feinted high and wide, causing the demon to raise his hands above his head; then the fighter crouched and thrust, taking the creature's left leg out from under it again. With another stone-rattling bellow the huge monster fell back, crashing onto the floor as its dark blood spurting into the air. It smoked and emitted a foul sulphur stench as it splashed onto the stones. Brandos pulled back.

'That was a good strike,' observed the Warlock.

'I strive for the greatest result obtained from the least effort; I'm getting old, you know,' said the fighter as he retreated back to where Amirantha had erected the next set of confounding wards. Taking a deep breath, as perspiration flowed down his face, he added, 'One day you're going to get one of us killed.'

'More than likely,' agreed the Warlock.

'Or both of us,' added Brandos, raising his buckler and holding his sword ready against any new, unexpected problem.

The demon healed its latest wound slowly, and both men took that as a good sign. It required time without distractions to repair itself, and the more damaged it was, the more time it required. Lacking that space, it consumed its own magic essence to heal faster, leaving it less magic to use against Amirantha and Brandos.

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‘We’re wearing it down,’ observed Brandos.

‘Good,’ said Amirantha, ‘because it’s wearing us down, too.’

‘Can you banish him?’

‘Just a minute more, perhaps two.’

‘Very well,’ said Brandos, and he stepped forward again, reading the boundary of the wards and striking hard at the demon. It was an easily anticipated blow, and the creature raised its hand to sweep Brandos’s blade aside. But the old fighter had expected such a move, demons were predictable when it came to non-magical combat. In their realm, the bigger, stronger demon almost always triumphed simply by physically overpowering their smaller, weaker opponent. Rarely did demons of similar stature confront one another. In the mortal realm their size and savage nature gave them a decided advantage against any but the most powerful creatures. A greater dragon would make short work of such a foe, but a simple swordsman would have to overcome brute strength with intelligence. Brandos turned his wrist as the demon tried to brush aside his blow, and let his blade slide along the creature’s raised left arm, inflicting a series of cuts and causing the demon to retreat half a step. Then the demon lashed out with its uninjured right arm, almost dislocating Brandos’s shoulder from the blow taken on his buckler.

Brandos retreated across the ward threshold again and braced himself for another onslaught. The demon hesitated for only a moment, then charged. As it crossed the ward barrier, it shrieked in agony, but continued towards Brandos and Amirantha. Three strides from where the old fighter stood ready, the demon paused to gather magic. Amirantha felt a spell of some consequence begin to manifest.

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‘Damn,’ said Brandos. ‘More magic.’ He lowered his shoulder and charged.

The demon’s spell casting was interrupted as Brandos drew his buckler up against his left shoulder and rammed it into the creature’s chest. It felt like hitting a stone wall, but it threw the demon backwards a few feet and allowed Brandos just enough time to pull away before a massive clawed hand decapitated him.

Brandos lashed out with his sword, striking the demon’s exposed arm. Again, the touch of enchanted steel caused a smoking wound and the demon cried out in rage. As he pulled back to stand before Amirantha, Brandos shouted, ‘It’s a first-time visitor to Midkemia; no protection spell in place to prevent harm from cold metal.’

With practised fluidity, Brandos let go of the hand-grip on his buckler, and allowed it to dangle on his arm; then he tossed his sword from his right hand to his left, catching it with his now free hand, as he drew a dagger from his right hip. He threw the blade with as much force as possible, impaling the demon’s right foot and pinning it to the floor. Black smoke and a sulphurous stench filled the cave and the conjured creature screamed. Then it fell silent, regarding the two humans with its glowing red eyes, and calmly resumed its incantation.

‘Now would be a good time to finish,’ said Brandos, flipping his sword back into his right hand as he slipped his left back into the strap on his buckler. ‘This fellow is bloody determined!’

Amirantha had less than a moment to make his choice; he could continue his spell of banishment and risk Brandos being struck with a potentially lethal blast of magic, or abandon it and employ a spell he had prepared against such dangers.

His affection for his friend overcame the desire to finish in

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an orderly fashion and he ceased his conjuration, shouting, 'Close your eyes!'

Brandos did not need to be told twice. He immediately crouched behind the small protection of his buckler as well as he could, and covered his eyes.

Amirantha closed his eyes as he incanted a five-syllable word, and unleashed a very powerful and destructive energy bolt. The warlock knew, from painful experience, that the energy carried within the crimson bolt, which flew out of his upraised hand to strike the demon, would pour into the creature through its skin, and set it alight from within.

They felt a sudden flash of searing heat, lasting mere seconds, but hot enough to scorch the hair on Brandos's arm. The stench of something foul cooking filled the tunnel and assaulted their nostrils. Then it was silent.

Brandos let his arms drop to his side as he let out a long sigh. 'I wish you didn't have to do that.'

'So do I,' returned Amirantha. 'An orderly banishment is so less taxing—'

'—And painful,' interrupted the fighter, as he inspected his singed arm.

'And less painful,' agreed Amirantha, 'than destroying the demon.'

Shaking his head and letting out another long sigh, Brandos said, 'Have you ever considered that conjuring demons so you can be paid to banish them might not be the best use of your talents?'

Smiling ruefully, Amirantha said, 'Occasionally, but how else can I earn the coin necessary to broaden my knowledge of the demon realm? I've learnt as much as I can from those creatures we're more familiar with.'

‘Speaking of which, why didn’t one of them show up?’

Amirantha shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I sought to conjure Kreegrom . . . He’s almost my pet now.’

Brandos nodded. ‘Ugly as sin. Have him chase you a bit where the Governor’s men can see him. Let him follow you back inside, give him a treat and send him back. Good plan.’ He fixed his friend with a scowling gaze. ‘If it had worked!’

‘I didn’t think I was conjuring a battle demon.’

‘A magic-using battle demon,’ corrected Brandos, as he sheathed his sword.

‘A magic-using battle demon,’ echoed Amirantha. He looked into the tunnel, now filled with noxious, oily black smoke. Charred demon flesh decorated the walls and floor of the tunnel and the smell was enough to make a battle-tested veteran vomit. The creature’s left leg lay on the floor only a few feet away from them. ‘Let us collect our fee from the Governor, remove ourselves from this quaint province and return home.’

‘Home?’ asked Brandos. ‘I thought we’d head north for a bit, first.’

‘No,’ said Amirantha. ‘There’s something about this that is both familiar and troubling, something I need ponder in my own study, with my own volumes for reference. And it’s the safest place for us to be right now.’

‘Since when did you concern yourself with safety?’ asked the old fighter.

‘Since I recognized a familiar . . . presence behind that demon.’

Brandos closed his eyes for a moment, as if weighing what he had just heard. ‘I’m not going to like this next part, am I?’

‘Probably not,’ said Amirantha inspecting the contents of his belt bag to note what would have to be replaced. ‘When the

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demon exploded, a series of magic . . . call them signatures, hallmarks of spellcraft, tumbled away. Most were my own, from the wards and spells I had fashioned, save two. One was the demon's, which I expected, alien and unfamiliar, but the last belonged to another player.' He was silent for a moment, then said, 'A player with a signature as familiar to me as my own.'

Brandos had been with Amirantha for most of his life and had heard many stories from the Warlock. He could easily anticipate what was coming next. Softly, Brandos asked, 'Belasco?'

Amirantha nodded. 'Belasco.'

'Bloody hell,' the old fighter swore quietly. His face was a map of sun-brown leather, showing years of privation and struggle. His hair, once golden blond, had been grey for more than two decades, but his startling blue eyes were still youthful. Shaking his head, he said, 'The one thing about travelling with you, Amirantha, is that things are always interesting.'

'You find the oddest things interesting,' said Amirantha.

'Comes from the company I keep,' said Brandos.

Amirantha could only nod. They had been together for a long time. He had found Brandos as a street urchin in the city of Khaipur, nearly forty-two years ago. Now, despite being years older than his companion, the warlock looked twenty years his junior. Both men knew that the magic user would outlive the fighter by a generation, yet they never spoke of it, except upon occasion when Brandos quipped that Amirantha's proclivities would end up getting him killed before his time. Despite appearances, Brandos looked upon Amirantha as a father.

How a practitioner of a particularly dark form of magic had come to play the role of foster father to an illiterate street boy

was still a bit of a mystery to Amirantha, but somehow Brandos had insinuated his way into the magic user's affections and they had been together ever since.

Amirantha led Brandos past the charred remains of the demon to the summoning cave and picked up two large leather bags, handing one to the fighter. Both men shouldered their burdens. Looking around at the overturned ward stones, the burning pots of incense, and the other accoutrements of demon summoning, the Warlock said, 'I'm not criticizing, but what brought you into the cave?'

'You were taking a bit longer than normal and the Governor was getting restless. Then that noise erupted so I thought I'd best go and see what had gone awry.'

Shaking his head slightly, the Warlock said, 'Good thing you did.'

They exited the cave, a deep recess in the hillside a few miles away from the village of Kencheta. Waiting astride his ornately saddled horse was the Governor of Lanada, who said, 'Is the demon dead?'

Raising his hand in an indifferent salute to the ruler of the region, Amirantha said, 'Most efficiently dead, Your Excellency. You will find his remains scattered around the tunnel about a hundred yards within.'

The Governor nodded once and signalled to one of his junior officers, 'See that it is so.'

Amirantha and Brandos exchanged glances. Local rulers were usually content with their word. On the other hand, they usually caught a glimpse or two of the monster, and not just heard howls and bellowing from within a dark cave.

A short time later, the young officer returned, his face pale

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and sweating. Amirantha said, 'I should have mentioned the peculiar stench—'

'You should have,' agreed Brandos.

'—takes some getting used to.'

'Well?' asked the Governor.

Nodding, the officer said, 'It is so, Your Excellency. Most of the creature was strewn around the tunnel, bits here and there, but one leg was intact, and it was . . . nothing of this world.'

'Bring it to me,' instructed the Governor.

Again, Brandos and Amirantha exchanged questioning looks.

This time the officer motioned to two of his older soldiers and said, 'You heard the Governor. Go and get the leg.'

Eventually the two soldiers emerged from the cave carrying the huge charred limb between them. The reek caused even the strongest stomach to weaken and the Governor backed his mount off slightly, holding up his hand. 'Stay,' he instructed.

From his distant vantage point he could see the top of a thigh covered in burned hair, down to the foot with its three massive toes ending in razor-sharp claws. Whatever it might be, it was not of this world, and at last satisfied, the Governor nodded. 'We had word from the Maharajah's Court of charlatans preying on the gullible, promising to rid outlying villages of non-existent demons, dark spirits, and other malefactions. Had you been such, we would have hanged you from that tree,' he said, pointing to a stout elm a few yards away. 'As this is without doubt a demonic limb, I am now convinced that your timely arrival so soon after word reached us of this demon, is but a lucky coincidence, and shall convey my opinion to my lords and masters in the city of Maharta.'

Amirantha bowed his most courtly bow, and Brandos followed suit. 'We thank His Excellency,' said the Warlock.

As the Governor began to turn his mount,' Amirantha said, 'Excellency, as to the matter of payment?'

Over his shoulder, the Governor said, 'Come to my palace and see my seneschal. He will pay you.' With that, he rode off, followed closely by his men-at-arms.

'Well, at least it's on the way home,' the Warlock said.

Shrugging, the warrior picked up his companion's shoulder bag. 'There are times one must settle for small benefits, my friend. At least this time we get paid.'

'Maybe it was a good thing that new demon showed up. Kreegrom is fairly hideous, but for a demon he's about as menacing as a puppy. If that Governor had caught on that he was only playing "chase me" and not really trying to kill you . . . well, I don't particularly relish ending my days hanging from an elm.' He glanced at the tree as they walked past it. 'Though, I must confess it's a handsome enough tree.'

'You do always see the good in a situation, don't you?'

'Someone must,' said Brandos, 'given the usual nature of our trade.'

'There is that,' agreed Amirantha as they started down the road that would take them to the Governor's Palace in Lanada, and then on to their distant home.

The village had been the only home Amirantha had known in the last thirty years. For about five months each year, he resided in a stone tower on top of a tor a mile north of the village. The rest of the time he and Brandos would travel.

His tower was on top of an ancient hill, Gashen Tor, highest of the hills overlooking the village of Talumba, two days' ride east of the city of Maharta. The small farming community had come to appreciate the presence of such a powerful magic user,

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even if his area of mastery was considered to border on evil by most people. They believed that the warlock had wandered to Talumba from another land, and had come to his lonely hill to avoid persecution. It had been said that he built the single tower in which he resided using demons for the labour, and that he had placed wards about the tor to prevent intruders from troubling him.

The truth was far more prosaic; Amirantha had used magic, though not his own, to build the simple tower. A pair of magicians, masters of geomancy, had used their arts to manoeuvre rocks in such a design that when they were done, Amirantha had only to employ a local carpenter to install the two wooden floors, hang doors, and build some furniture; including the large table now before the magician and the heavy chair in which he sat.

He examined an old text he had written nearly a century before, letting out a long sigh of regret as he pushed it aside. Looking out of the window of his study, at the village below, now caught in the reddish glow of sunset, he considered how almost idyllic his life had become during the last twenty years – if he didn't give too much thought to the occasional mishap like the one three days ago, near Lanada.

He remembered when he had first come here, with a young Brandos and his wife, and how he had decided, almost on a whim, to take up residence. He looked above the village at the distant sunset and wondered how much of his decision came from his affection for these views. A sunset was, he thought, an odd thing to be drawn to, but then so much of his life had been a series of choices that seemed arbitrary, even capricious, at times; such as giving a home to an uncouth street boy who had tried to rob him more than thirty years ago.

This village was the only home he had known since his childhood, a time so distant he often had to concentrate to remember much about it. The villagers had at first been frightened of the Warlock on the Hill, as they called him, but he had since then protected the village from marauders on more than one occasion, and had even kept the army of the ambitious Maharajah of Muboya from occupying the settlement when the region was annexed into that burgeoning nation. He took pride in having used only ruse and guile with no loss of life. While absent of the everyday concerns of most people, Amirantha did scruple over crossing certain boundaries.

Some of his dilemmas were practical in nature, dabbling in the darker arts brought scrutiny that could lead to persecution. However, most of his moral concerns were for his own well-being; often he had seen that travelling down a certain dark road to knowledge cost a magician far more than the disapproval of others. Although not a pious man, Amirantha still wished to face Lims-Kragma, certain that he had no major stains on his escutcheon; he could accept having to explain a minor blemish here and there. Some, because of his chosen art, might not consider him a good man, but he had his principles. Besides, he had seen better men fall prey to the lure of the dark arts. It was a drug to most magicians.

He moved slightly in his seat and determined, as he had almost every day for the last two years, that he needed to take a trip to the city and purchase new cushions. He glanced around his study. The fire burned as it always did during the cold weather, casting a warm glow across the room. The sleeping quarters below were often draughty in the winter, and the Warlock often slept up here next to the fire. He was convinced the problem

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had something to do with the way the chimney was fashioned, but never could find the time to have anyone look at it, so for three months each year he endured blankets on the floor.

Brandos trudged heavily up the circular stone staircase, which hugged the interior of the round building, and entered the room. 'What did you find?' he asked without preamble.

'What I feared,' said the Warlock, standing up. With a wave of his hand he indicated the old tomes on the table. 'I think we need to undertake a journey.'

'Going shopping in Maharta, are we?'

Amirantha regarded his oldest friend. At nearly fifty years old, the warrior was still a powerful looking man, even if his grey hair was now bordering on white. His sun-worn, leathery face spoke of years of campaigning, and he bore an impressive number of scars. 'Well, yes, for I do need a new seat cushion, but that will have to wait.' He gazed at his old tomes and said, 'I think something very bad is happening, and we need to speak to someone about it.'

'Anyone specific in mind?'

'Tell me about this Kaspar.'

Brandos smiled and nodded. He sat down on a small stool near the fire and said, 'Here's what I know: About a month or so after General Alenburga disappeared, which was ten years ago now, this Kaspar of Olasko arrived at the Maharajah's Court along with a small army of soldiers from the Tsurani world. The young ruler of Muboya gave Kaspar the title of General of the Army, announced that Alenburga had retired to some distant place, and turned his attention to consolidating his territory and preparing to conquer more.'

'But, this is where it gets interesting. Kaspar seems to have

earned the Maharajah's trust, and has come up with diplomatic solutions for two conflicts, set up a very difficult relationship with some of the clans ruling the City of the Serpent River, and has annexed two city states to the north without bloodshed. After a long war, he's also achieved an alliance with Okanala through a couple of well-crafted royal marriages, effectively ensuring that his and the King of Okanala's grandchildren will eventually rule a combined empire. He helped Okanala put down two rebellions, and now Okanala and Muboya will combine to move against those murderous little dwarves who live in the grasslands to the west.'

'A prodigious list of accomplishments for so short a period of employment.' Amirantha tapped his chin with his right index finger, a nervous gesture that Brandos had seen since childhood. 'Now, what else?'

'Speculation and rumour. Kaspar is an outlander, from far across the sea to the northwest, a nation called Olasko, so I have been told. He was a ruler there, before being deposed, and has been absent for some years. Somehow he became close to General Alenburga, but little is known of that. It is also rumoured that he often vanishes from Muboya's new capital city of Maharta for a week or so, simply to show up again as if he had always been there.'

'Magic,' said Amirantha. 'He goes somewhere, but no one sees him leave or return.'

'Or he enjoys very long naps in the privacy of his quarters,' quipped the old fighter. 'Perhaps with friends; he's reputed to have quite an eye for the ladies.'

Tapping his chin as he weighed his options, Amirantha was silent for a long time. Brandos knew his foster father preferred

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silence when he was reflecting, so the old fighter got up and left the study, trudging down the stairs.

The tower was a simple cylindrical keep with three levels, the middle held two large rooms, one for the Warlock and one for Brandos and his wife, Samantha. Brandos crossed the tiny hallway separating the two sleeping rooms and moved down the stairs to the bottom floor, where the kitchen, storage room, and guarderobe were housed. The kitchen smelled of freshly baked bread and something bubbling in a cauldron above the fire, Samantha's well-regarded chicken stew if Brandos guessed correctly.

Brandos paused for a moment to observe his wife. A stout woman, she could still spark a fire in her husband with just a whisper in his ear, though the years had taken their toll on the former tavern girl from the Eastlands. She wore a simple green dress with a blue cloth head covering, arranged in her native style. Brandos had met her in the huge tavern at Shingazi's Landing, on the Serpent River where it bends near the Eastern Coast, less than a mile west of the Great Cliffs, overlooking the Blue Sea. With the aid of a lot of flirtation, and a lot of good wine, she had eventually agreed to come to his bed.

But rather than forget her, as he had so many before her, his mind kept returning to the pleasant-looking, plump young woman from the Eastlands. After months of incessant mooning over her, Amirantha had given his foster son leave to visit her.

He had returned a month later with his new wife. Despite Amirantha's original reservations, he had come to understand that Brandos had found something very rare with his tavern wench from the Eastlands. Brandos knew the Warlock envied them, even though he had never spoken a word.

Brandos knew his foster father better than any man alive, and

knew that only once in his life had the old magic user succumbed to a woman's guiles. Remembering the encounter still made him smile; if it weren't for Amirantha's genuine pain over how that liaison had ended, it would have been worthy of a bard's most ribald tale.

Samantha looked up at her husband and smiled. 'Ready to eat?' 'Yes,' he said returning the smile.

As he sat at the table, her smile turned to a frown. 'Very well, when are you two leaving?'

Brandos shook his head and smiled ruefully. She could read him like a proclamation posted on a wall in the city square. 'Soon, I think. Amirantha is very troubled by what happened up in Lanada.'

She only nodded. One of her talents was ignoring how her husband and his foster father made their living, by summoning demons in distant lands, then banishing them for a fee. They did occasionally do real work, dangerous work, for those willing to pay, but those were rare callings, the rest of the time the pair behaved little better than a pair of confidence tricksters.

Still, there were some matters that she and Brandos were willing to argue about, and some things best left unspoken; it was why their marriage had lasted for twenty-three years.

'Is there any point to me asking why?' she said coolly. 'It's not like it was when the children lived here.' She stopped and looked at her husband accusingly. 'Bethan is at sea, sailing who knows where. Meg lives with her husband up in Khaipur.'

'Donal is down in the village with the grandchildren. You can walk down to visit them any time you wish,' he quickly countered. He knew where this was heading.

'And his wife just loves having me around,' she said.

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‘What is it about two women under the same roof?’ asked Brandos rhetorically.

‘She’ll come around when the new baby is born and she needs another pair of hands, but until then, she sees me as an intruder.’ He was about to speak, but she cut him off, her vivid blue eyes fixed on him as she absently pushed back a strand of grey hair trying to escape from under her head covering. ‘It’s lonely here, Brandos, with you gone for weeks, even months at a time . . .’ She let out a theatrical sigh. ‘When you returned early, I can’t tell you how happy that made me.’

‘When are you going to stop all this travelling? I know how wealthy we are. You don’t need to do this any more.’

‘That would be true if Amirantha wasn’t always worried about what he might have to spend on one of his . . . devices, or an old libram of spells, or whatever else takes his fancy,’ countered her husband. ‘Besides, it is his wealth, isn’t it?’

‘Yours, too,’ she shot back. ‘It’s not as if you sat around doing nothing.’

He knew there was no avoiding the subject. ‘Look, most times I would argue with him on your behalf, I would agree with what you’re saying: We just got home, we’ve been gone over a month; but this time, well, we have to go.’

Samantha put her hands on her hips and said, ‘Why?’ Her tone was defiant and bordering on anger, and Brandos knew he must tell her.

‘It’s Amirantha’s brother.’

She looked stunned. She blinked and then asked, ‘Belasco?’

He nodded once.

She said, ‘I’ll prepare a travel bag. Enough food to take you to the city. You can buy the rest as you go.’

RIDES A DREAD LEGION

Her sudden change in mood and manner were entirely understandable. Over the many years they had been together, she had listened to the same stories as Brandos while Amirantha chatted over supper. She knew that Belasco was a magician of mighty arts, easily Amirantha's equal, and that he had been trying to kill Amirantha since before Brandos or Samantha had been alive.