

*The Apprentice to
Zdrell*

By
David K. Bennett

The Apprentice to Zdrell
Written by David K. Bennett
Copyright © 2018 by David K. Bennett
Published by Ergoface Imprints

Website Preview Copy

This website preview is provided for personal use only and may not be copied, linked, or used in any fashion without express permission from the author. All inquiries concerning this work should be directed to the author through the website:

www.zdrell.com, or by emailing the author at:

author@zdrell.com

Not for Sale

Prologue

Jelnick watched from his concealed position in the rocks of the mountainside as the wizard called Mlandress tiredly rounded the bend in the steep rocky path. Mlandress was walking instead of flying, that alone showed how tired the ancient zdrell master must be. Jelnick still smarted over the two failed attacks on Mlandress in the last four days, but today he would not fail.

Jelnick initially grinned in triumph as the three demons lords appeared and attacked the unsuspecting wizard. It had been a lot of work on his part to goad these three into attacking a zdrell master, but even Mlandress could not withstand alone three of the strongest demons.

His feeling of triumph turned to silent cursing as instead of being overwhelmed, Mlandress threw out a wave of energy, absorbing the forces from the demons' simultaneous attack. He invoked the power from a ring and cut the lifeline of the center demon, following immediately with a burst of energy, causing the now defenseless demon to explode in a cloud of dense orange vapor.

The other two demons paid no apparent heed to their companion's demise and again attacked from either side. Mlandress was only just able to deflect the energies of the demons' assault. Jelnick dove for additional cover as rocks on both sides of Mlandress exploded from the force of the diverted power.

Jelnick knew he had to act; Mlandress was readying another counterattack. The ancient wizard was so intent on the two demons that he did not notice the poisoned dart Jelnick shot at him until it was nearly to him. He attempted to divert it, but was too late to keep it from embedding in his side.

The poison was very fast acting. Jelnick knew Mlandress could neutralize it in the three seconds before it killed him. Unfortunately, for Mlandress, it would require his full attention. During his preoccupation, the demons struck again. This time he was not able counter their attack, and his body instantly charred from the force and heat of their attack.

Mlandress' body stood smoking for moment, and then fell over as another pair of explosive bolts impacted, causing it to rupture

and partially disintegrate. There was no question about it; Mlandress was dead.

§ § §

Emerging from his concealed position, Jelnick dusted himself off and addressed the two hovering demon lords.

“Well, that’s it then. Mlandress was the last of the zdrell masters. There isn’t another wizard left alive who can do more than the most trivial zdrell magic. Your position in this world is secure, Lord Kelf.”

“You are certain he was the last?” the demon called Kelf asked.

“Most certain,” Jelnick said firmly. “I have searched the world over, as have you. There are no others. The eventual dominance of demon magic is assured.”

“That is good, for now,” Kelf said. “But what about when other wizards arise in the future? My brothers have fought and died, for this cause. How can we know we will not soon have to fight it again?”

“I am most sorry for the loss of your brother, Lord Kelf. I had no idea Mlandress could counterattack so quickly. I thought three demon lords would be enough to put anyone, even him, on the defensive . . .,” Jelnick sounded much less sure of himself now.

“I care not for what you thought, *mortal!* You cannot even imagine what the loss is for one of my kind to die! You have still not answered my question,” the demon thundered. “How likely is it another zdrell master will arise?”

“Not likely at all,” Jelnick said regaining some of his composure. “At least not for several hundred if not several thousand years. The ability to directly manipulate the forces which bind the world as zdrell masters and you do is very, very rare in humankind. Less than one in a thousand can do any sort of magic at all and only one in a thousand wizards can do any real sort of zdrell magic. It is only because they are so long lived and have been cultivating new students that this crisis came at all. Did you know Master Mlandress was over two thousand years old?”

“Two thousand of your years are nothing to me and my kind. My brother was old before your sun began to shine. Now he is dead. Since you mortals cannot understand this, it will be left to

my kind to watch for another zdrell master, and stop him before we are threatened again.”

The demon lord, Kelf, turned in the air. He gestured and an opening appeared in the air before him. He entered the opening and disappeared, along with the opening.

Jelnick turned to address the second demon lord.

“Well, Karf,” the wizard began, “it looks as if the end of this war only means a long vigil to prevent another. Can your powers keep me alive two thousand years?”

The demon regarded Jelnick with sharp-toothed grin. “As long as you can keep your end of our contract, Master Jelnick, I can keep you alive till your sun grows cold.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary, but I do look forward to outliving all my contemporaries, to watch demon magic fill the world. The power that will be mine, now there are none of those pompous zdrell masters to interfere, is more than even my considerable ambition requires.”

“You still must destroy any remaining line cutters in existence,” Karf said.

“Yes, that will be my next task. That and ending all the petty wars on this continent, but with your assistance it shouldn’t be difficult.”

It took Jelnick nearly three hundred more years to find and destroy the last zdrell line cutter artifact. Demon magic grew unchallenged to eclipse all other magic the world over, for more than twelve hundred years.

Chapter 1 - The Reluctant Apprentice

Jashoc dunked his head again into the cold water of the fountain on the edge of the city bazaar. He still could not get the stink out of his stringy red hair. At least now it was not quite so greasy, and it helped cool the midday heat. He hated it when he had to clean the flues at the confectioner's shop. They were always filled with rancid grease that got all over his face and arms. He could wash those easily enough, but it never seemed to get out of his hair, and the smell, though rank, only made him hungrier.

The day was unseasonably warm, for early fall, and the head baker had been in a foul mood and had not even allowed him to take stale scraps. Usually, he or the other bakers allowed Jashoc to eat as much of the castoffs as he wanted, but not today. His stomach grumbled, reminding him he had eaten nothing since his scanty meal last night.

He wandered wearily along the edge of the bazaar, wondering how long he could stay out of sight before his master, the slave trader Murdoc, or one of his apprentices, found him and put him on the next assignment that needed a small boy.

As he passed the brass shop, the merchant's son, one of Jashoc's few friends in the market, gave him a half eaten, wormy, apple out of sympathy. Jashoc thanked him. As he turned to go, the boy told Jashoc that Gareselin, the slave trader's head apprentice, was looking for him.

Jashoc started jogging for the back alleys at the edge of the bazaar. The sun was now high, and the market bustled with activity. Jashoc could smell the heavenly scent of kabok cooking two shops over, causing his stomach to rumble again. The air was only slightly clouded with dust, not like the thick haze of mid-summer.

If Gareselin was looking for him this early, it could only mean he had another ugly job he wanted done today. Murdoc was usually content to get one job out of Jashoc a day. It meant Jashoc missed supper most days, but he felt that not working an extra six hours a day was worth it.

He tried to look in every direction as he headed for his new hidey-hole in a burned out stall at the edge of the market. His heart sank as he saw Foresel, another of Murdoc's apprentices moving through the crowd, clearly looking for someone. He ducked out of sight just in time, he hoped.

Things were going from bad to worse.

If Foresel was looking for him, Ryalor, the other apprentice slaver probably was too. They obviously wanted Jashoc for something, and every possibility he considered seemed worse than the previous. With all three apprentices looking for him, he had little hope of escape, but he would try anyway, he had almost gotten away twice before. He was nearly to his new hiding place, and he felt confident that once he got there they would never find him.

He moved through the crowd, alternately following close behind larger shoppers or merchants, and then crouching behind carts or the edges of stalls. He could easily have eluded one pursuer with these tricks and his small size, but with all three apprentices following, they would eventually find him unless he could get to his secret place.

He almost made it.

Just as he started down the back alleyway that led to his hiding place, he saw Foresel running after him.

Once again, he cursed the fates who seemed to have decreed that nothing go right for him. It was not his fault his parents had died and left him with almost nothing. It was not his fault that the judge had made him a ward of Murdoc, nor that Murdoc seemed to think Jashoc a slave, and not merely a ward. It might be his fault that he did not work as hard as Murdoc wanted, but who would? Why should he work hard for a man who fed him little and treated him like a worthless slave? He knew he was nothing, but he did not have to like it.

Jashoc moved faster, his breath burning in his lungs, only to see Ryalor turn into the alley at the other end. Trapped, but there was one chance left. The wall of the alley had a hole in it about midway down. It would slow his larger pursuers much more than him, and maybe give him a chance.

Jashoc ran hard for the hole. He could hear Foresel gaining on him from behind.

He dived through the hole and only just saw the wagon wheel before his head hit it and exploded with pain. The world spun. He tried to get up off the ground where he had fallen, beside a wagon parked just that side of the hole, but he could not seem to make his legs move.

Just as his vision cleared enough and he started to get up, he felt a hand grab his leg. Foresel pulled his leg out from under him and sent him sprawling. Jashoc felt a knee in his back as his arm was twisted up behind him. He heard Gareselin and Ryalor arrive while he lay contorted, his face pressed into the dirt and dung on the ground.

Gareselin was still puffing hard from running, and had a nasty sneer on his face, as he motioned for Foresel to let Jashoc up.

“I ought to pound you to a bloody pulp, you little nit-brain. You’ve had us running you down for the last hour. The Master is going to be very angry,” he huffed. “If he didn’t have a very important client who wants a look at you right now,” he paused for effect, and for another breath, “I’d kill you here myself. You’re not worth the effort of keeping. The Master is always saying that, and I more than agree.

“You’re coming with us now, and you’ll come quietly. If you try to run off, like you did last time, I will just have to forget myself and club you one. Bring you in like the sack of meat you are.”

Jashoc could tell by the look in the boy’s eye that Gareselin really wanted him to try to run so he would have a reason, with witnesses, for bringing him back damaged.

The three boys were all in their early teens and should easily have been a match for the ten-year-old, but they had been overconfident other times and allowed him to escape. The look on Gareselin’s face told him this would not be one of those times, so he went along without resistance.

§ § §

They arrived at the slave master’s quarters to find Murdoc pacing up and down the street with a panicked look on his face.

He caught sight of them and his look rapidly shifted from panic to relief, and then to an ugly rage. Before anyone had a chance to say anything, Murdoc shouted so the whole street could hear.

“Gareselin! You pitiful excuse for an apprentice! I sent you off over two hours ago to collect this little sewer rat. Where have you been amusing yourself all this time instead of doing your master’s bidding?”

“Please, Master, it’s not our fault,” Gareselin said in his most simpering tone. “This nit-headed snot brain knew we were looking for him and had us chasing him all through the market square and half of town trying to catch him.” As he spoke, his voice shifted from cringing and whining to anger.

“We just now caught the little carp and didn’t even give him the beating he deserves for making us chase him over half the town, since you said he was to be in the best shape possible. Here he is.” Gareselin finished the last with a flourish, to prove he had not disobeyed at all.

Murdoc looked at Gareselin and the nodding faces of Foresel and Ryalor, and seemed to come to the conclusion they were telling the truth, this time. He turned to Jashoc, his lip curling into a sneer as he regarded him. “So you’ve been up to your old tricks again. You finished the bakery job hours ago, and you just disappear. You are truly the most worthless slave I’ve ever owned!” Jashoc considered trying to correct him, since he was only a ward of the city, not a slave, but Murdoc over-rode him. “And I don’t care a flea’s whisker if you’re a real slave or not! You’ll soon no longer be my problem!”

This last statement made Jashoc’s head snap up. The effect was not lost on Murdoc, who barked out a short harsh laugh. “Yes, you heard me right, guttersnipe. I have a man here who is interested in acquiring a boy of your age, and if you do something which causes him not to take you,” he said with a leer and a nod towards Jashoc’s captors. “Then I might just let Gareselin and his friends here beat on you till you can’t walk, and see if you bring in more money as a crippled boy beggar than as a useless boy worker.”

Looking in his eyes, Jashoc could see Murdoc was dead serious. Gareselin smiled evilly at the prospect of turning Jashoc into a permanent cripple.

The ugly sneer on Murdoc's face slowly turned into a grimace of pleasure as he saw the color drain from Jashoc's face. He laughed. "That's right, boy, now you see how things really are. I've put up with more than I can stomach from you, and if I can't be rid of you one way, then I will another."

He pulled Jashoc roughly into his counting room and whispered to him. "Now mind, boy. This is one of the most important men in the land. You will do exactly as he says and answer any questions he puts to you with no back talk or other foolishness. If he likes you, he'll be taking you and that's what I want, so don't you dare be doing anything to mess this up."

As they came to the far side of the room, Jashoc saw the stranger standing there. He was tall, dark haired, and seemed to be middle aged. He was dressed in dark blue robes with gold brocade at the sleeves and collar, a sure sign of nobility. There was little expression on his face as he turned to face them, other than the intensity of his gaze.

Murdoc was exuding his "humble trader" persona, which Jashoc had seen him use any time he dealt with persons of position or authority. He practically groveled in front of the man. "Here he is, Lord Feldor. The boy, just as I promised. You can see for yourself he's in fine physical shape even if he is a little dirty," Murdoc said, bowing towards Lord Feldor. "He's just what you asked for, ten years old, and stronger than he looks."

Jashoc thought furiously. He had heard the name Lord Feldor before, but he could not remember where. This man was obviously important, the clothes alone told that. What could he want with Jashoc? He was a nobody, Murdoc and the last two years had taught him that.

Lord Feldor came closer and stared at Jashoc. He slowly circled around him, looking him up and down as though appraising the value of a piece of sculpture or horseflesh. "He looks like he does not get much to eat," Lord Feldor said with a tone of a trader in the bazaar trying to get a lower price. "I would wager you feed

him as little as possible, though . . . the red hair is nice. His parents were not from Alavar, were they?"

"No, no, my Lord, his parents seem to have been from the hills of Caravain, and only came here to try and better themselves. Instead, they had the misfortune of getting Farthigs blight and dying."

"So you said, so you said before, while I was waiting. Does he mind well?" Lord Feldor asked.

"No, my Lord, he minds abominably. Truth to tell, I'd be asking twice what I was for him if he minded any better. No, he's a quick little snipe, but only when he's avoiding work. But then again, he doesn't need to mind all that well for what you have in mind for him now, does he?" he said, with a nod and wink, as though he had just told a dirty joke. "A sorcerer's apprentice either learns his task or ends up feeding demons, isn't that the way of it?"

Jashoc flinched as he realized Lord Feldor was the chief steward for Master Magician Silurian, the ruler of Salaways, and reportedly one of the greatest wizards in the whole world. Lord Feldor was one of the most powerful men in the land, possibly second only to Master Silurian. Jashoc had seen him before at public events, but never up close and had not recognized him. Jashoc now understood just what was going on here.

He was being sold as a sorcerer's apprentice.

Chapter 2

Becoming an apprentice should have been an improvement over being a virtual slave, but it was not.

In other trades, if you showed some talent and worked hard you were very likely to make journeyman and eventually, after some years, become a master. Jashoc had heard that for every thirty or more apprentices to a sorcerer, only one was likely to become a journeyman wizard, let alone a master sorcerer. People said those who failed to become journeymen simply disappeared, and they were fed to the demons sorcerers used to do their magic. Jashoc was more afraid now than when Murdoc had threatened him in the courtyard.

If Murdoc's comment had caused Jashoc to flinch, the effect on Lord Feldor was nearly as dramatic. A dark shadow passed over his face and his eyes burned brightly as he rounded on Murdoc. "You ignorant stuffed pig!" he glared at Jashoc's now cowering master. "It is enough for foolish gossips to say such things, but to imply in front of him that you are selling the boy to be eaten by demons is intolerable! I am of a mind to recommend to the city council that we have one slave trader too many in Alavar!"

Murdoc retreated before his words as though struck by an invisible lash. "Oh no, my Master, my Lord, I meant nothing by it. It was only a jest, a poor one no doubt, but only a foolish jest. I know you and your master would not feed the boy to demons, else I couldn't possibly sell him to you, even as much as I loathe being his master." He cringed and stared at the floor, unwilling to meet the burning gaze of Lord Feldor.

Without taking his eyes off the floor, Murdoc said, "It truly was a poor jest, my Lord, and for my lack of manners, I'll gladly take another ten silver off the price we'd agreed on, just to show you how very sorry I am and to apologize for any insult, though none was meant."

Lord Feldor looked at Murdoc with undisguised loathing. They both knew that what Murdoc had said was no jest. It was his

true opinion of what would happen to Jashoc once he was “apprenticed.”

Lord Feldor looked up to the ceiling, sighed, and said shortly, “Well accepted. Done and done.” He reached into a pouch at his belt, counted out a number of coins, and slammed them onto the desk.

“Has he clothes or other possessions?” Feldor asked.

“Just what’s in his loft,” Murdoc replied. “Go and get your stuff, boy. Be quick about it, and don’t think about running off again. I’ve got Gareselin watching to make sure you don’t try.”

Jashoc did think fleetingly about running, but figured it would do no good, so he went to the loft and collected his few belongings. It took almost no time. He had so little, only a coat for the colder season he had owned since before his parents died, a brass coin from a far kingdom said to be of no value here, and a small plain dagger that had been his father’s. All of the other family possessions had been sold, before he became a ward of the city. Murdoc had bought him no more than one new shirt and set of trousers in the year and a half he had been his slave and then only bought those when all of Jashoc’s old clothes were too small, and worn to rags.

He gathered all his things quickly and came down from his loft to find Lord Feldor and his master, now his former master, already out on the street. Jashoc looked to Murdoc, who grunted and said, “Off with you now. And mind the lord here better than you’ve minded me. You’re his problem now.” So saying, he turned his back and walked back inside the shop and could be heard yelling for Gareselin.

Lord Feldor wasted no time and set off walking rapidly. Without looking back, he said over his shoulder, “Hurry on boy. We have no time to waste, and this distasteful errand has already cost me two hours I could ill afford to spare.”

Jashoc hurried to catch up with the Lord Feldor’s long strides, nearly having to run in order to keep up. Again, he thought of running away, but dismissed the idea quickly. Lord Feldor would just call out the city guard. That could only make things worse. He shivered as he thought about what Murdoc had said.

He desperately hoped Lord Feldor had been telling the truth that he was not going to his death.

Soon they had left the center part of Alavar and were moving to where the wealthy traders lived, a part of town Jashoc had rarely visited. When they turned into a small open plaza with a fountain in its center, he was certain he had never been there before.

Lord Feldor looked back at Jashoc and said, "Wait here, boy. I have some business to conduct and then we will be off shortly."

Jashoc stood alone for several moments, unsure what to do. Just as he decided he would take his chances running, Lord Feldor came out again. As he walked out, another set of gates swung wide and a closed carriage pulled by two horses emerged. The driver got down and opened the door. Lord Feldor motioned for him to get in and he followed. Jashoc noticed the crest of the kingdom of Salaways was on the door. Jashoc looked up at the sky as he climbed into the carriage and wondered if he would live to see it tomorrow. He wished he had run.

Chapter 3

“So is Jashoc the name you were presented with?” Lord Feldor asked, after they had settled, facing one another in the carriage.

Jashoc thought it an odd question, but answered as best he could. “I don’t know I was ever presented, my Lord, but Jashoc is what my parents always called me. It’s the only name I’ve ever had.”

“Well, we will have to change that, right here and now,” Lord Feldor said with a thoughtful look on his face. “Yes, we must have a new name for you now if you are to be an apprentice. It would not do for you to be known by your true name. Even you must understand that.”

Jashoc did understand, or thought he understood, what Lord Feldor meant. It was common knowledge in the markets wizards were never known by their true names. Knowing a wizard’s true name was necessary for another wizard to be able to cast certain spells, which would have a hold upon him. So Jashoc reasoned that if he were really to be an apprentice sorcerer, he would need to be known by a new name. That the lord was attending to this detail made Jashoc believe being an apprentice might not be as bad as he feared.

Lord Feldor sat and stared out the window for a time as the carriage reached the edge of town and started on the road that led to the great castle. Suddenly, he turned and looked down at Jashoc and smiled and said, “We will call you Jonny. Yes, that is your name from now on. Do you like the name well enough?”

“I suppose,” Jashoc, now Jonny, replied. “I’ve never heard it before as a name, but I guess I can get used to it.”

“Good. That is settled then. Only you, Master Silurian, and I will know your true name in the castle, and you will not be going back to Alavar any time soon. Do not respond to any other, and do not let the other apprentices trick you into revealing your true name. It is the most important thing you possess right now, outside of life itself.”

This thought was more than a little unsettling to Jonny. It brought home to him how he had absolutely no idea what he was getting into. If even half of the stories he had heard in the market were true, he had just gone from one form of misery to one infinitely worse.

By the way Lord Feldor had reacted to Murdoc's insinuations, he knew he was not going to be the first course in a demon's meal this evening, but, he was still scared and unsure. He desperately wanted to ask Lord Feldor questions, but at the same time, he was scared of the possible answers.

Lord Feldor must have seen his discomfort, "You really must not believe anything you have heard in the markets about being a sorcerer's apprentice. All the people there know are lies and rumors."

Jonny knew Lord Feldor was trying to put him at ease, but he could not keep from asking the question that had been tormenting him. "But sir, my Lord, um, ah, . . . isn't it true thirty boys become apprentices for every one who makes it to journeyman?"

Jonny could see this question had not been what Lord Feldor had been expecting. He said "Well of course, my boy, there are at least thirty apprentices who fail for every one who makes it to being a journeyman wizard. It is very difficult to become a wizard, and only a very few have what it takes to be able to perform magic consistently. Much of it cannot be learned; you must be born with the talent for it."

This answer did not help Jonny at all. In fact, it made him even more nervous than he had been before, he was no one, he could not possibly be the one out of thirty, but he felt he had to ask the question burning inside him. "So, so, um, ah . . . what, ah, . . . what happens . . . what happens to the, the thirty who, ah, um, . . . don't, um, become journeymen?" There he said it.

The whole time he had been asking the question, Lord Feldor had been scowling as though he was going to have to say something unpleasant, but when Jonny got to the end of his question, he smiled and laughed.

“So that is what you are worried about?” he said with a chuckle. “You are still worried about being killed and offered on some altar to a demon?”

“When you say it that way it does sound a little simpleminded. But, what does happen to the apprentices who don't make it? Everyone says they never come back to town. What happens to them?”

“Well,” Lord Feldor began, “they are right about that. Any of the boys who apprentice here are almost never sent back into town. Their failure would mark them for life. So, after they have served a sufficient time to show no aptitude for magic at all, they are sent to other cities to apprentice in other trades. Many of our former apprentices have gone on to become quite prosperous tradesmen, traders, and scholars. All apprentices can read and write before they leave, that alone is a great benefit to them.”

Lord Feldor had looked a little uncertain, as he had begun his response, but looked increasingly confident as he finished. “In fact,” he said with enthusiasm, “one of the reasons sorcerer’s apprentices start so young is so that if they fail to show aptitude for The Arts, they will still be able to be sent off to apprentice at a useful age. Usually, we send them off at around thirteen or fourteen, which is only a year or so later than they would be apprenticed normally.”

Jonny sensed he was not being told everything, but he also thought Lord Feldor was telling the truth. It made him feel better, but he was still far from being at ease.

§ § §

The carriage turned as it left the flat of the valley and headed up the winding road leading to the castle, and Jonny got his first close look at it. In the past, he had only seen it as a clump of buildings on the hill. Now he could see it clearly and appreciate just how very large it was.

Jonny had heard Castle Salaways had protected this part of the country for at least five hundred years, maybe more. For the last ninety years it had been the home of the master wizard and ruler of Salaways. He had united the cities of Alavar, Kenton to the north, and Sharafleg to the south and created the land of

Salaways by driving off the competing armies from the three adjacent lands.

The three cities lay in the long valley of Sharafleg, bordered on the south by Lake Sharafleg, and on the north by the Crags of Glondor. The land of Salaways had known mostly peace for the last ninety years, but had been a prize fought over for centuries. The castle was heavily fortified, and well positioned for defense.

Salaways' location, and its relative peace since Master Silurian united it, made it a prosperous trading nation. Though far from the sea, its fertile fields and open society made it a crossroads for the trading routes of the continent of Skryla.

The road wound back and forth up the hill. As they climbed higher, Jonny saw both the castle grow ahead of them, and the city of Alavar, his home for the last two years, spreading out below them. He had never seen the city from this height and was amazed at how big it really was, though the buildings were looking smaller and smaller.

The closer they got, the more ominous the castle seemed. Its huge walls of dark stone were covered with gray-green moss that made it appear as if the whole structure had somehow grown out of the ground. There were six tall towers in the outer walls with arrow slits evenly spaced up them and the tops of all the walls had crenellations, the square toothed top that allowed defenders to take refuge while raining down death on their attackers. Jonny had heard the castle was big enough for half the town of Alavar to be housed there in case of a serious attack. He had never believed it, until now.

From the top of the tallest tower flew a single white flag bearing the same seal that adorned the door of the carriage, the Seal of Salaways. The seal was a circle of red. In the center of the circle was a smaller gold circle, a book, lightning bolt, and a sword, all done in black, were arranged in a triangle within the circle. Jonny thought it looked like a large demonic eye as the flag waved in the strong breeze.

Lord Feldor had been content to allow them to ride in silence until they entered the outer gate of the castle. Jonny had

been so intent on the panorama unfolding as they climbed that he had not paid attention to the time it took.

It had been early afternoon when he was caught and this whole adventure had begun. Now he noticed it was getting late. The hillside already blocked the sun from the castle as the carriage took them into the main courtyard.

Jonny was struck by just how dark and foreboding a place this was. His fear, which had nearly left him for the last hour, now redoubled. What would become of him?

Chapter 4

Lord Feldor leaned close to Jonny just before they exited the carriage and reminded him, "Do not forget what I said about your name, Jonny. From now on, that is your only name. The old name, and the person it belonged to, are gone. You are Jonny, the newest apprentice sorcerer, understand?"

"I guess so," Jonny replied. "Will they really try to get me to tell them my real, I um, mean my true name?"

"Oh yes, it is a game the apprentices all play at. But remember, it is a deadly game. If even one of them finds out your true name, he could cause you considerable harm. Some of the most powerful spells are easily done if you know your victim's true name, so keep a watch out."

Jonny wondered how all the people in town would be kept from telling his true name, but he dared not ask. Besides, he thought, he would not be one of the lucky ones who made journeyman; he was no one, so it would not matter.

They were met at the carriage not by liveried servants, as Jonny had expected, but by three boys, two of them looked hardly older than Jonny. The third looked to be around twelve, and addressed Lord Feldor directly. "My Lord, The Master wishes for you and the new boy to proceed directly to the north study. He desires to see him before dinner. I am to ask you if there are any urgent matters you need communicated to the staff."

"No, that is all right," Feldor said. "Any information I have for the staff can wait till after dinner, or I will discuss it directly with Master Silurian. Just make certain the horses and carriage are seen to. I will almost certainly need to leave early tomorrow." He turned to Jonny and said, "Let us not keep Master Silurian waiting."

As they headed off, Jonny looked over his shoulder and saw the two younger boys leading the horses and carriage off while the older boy spoke with the driver. He felt terrified to think he was about to meet the ruler of the land, but even more terrified at what might happen after. He turned and ran to catch up with Lord

Feldor, who was disappearing through a door up the stairs from the courtyard.

Just as Jonny passed through the door, he thought he heard something that sounded like a child screaming in pain coming faintly from the opposite side of the courtyard. A shiver ran up his back, how he wished he had run away when he had the chance. Now, instead, he had to run just to catch up with Lord Feldor. He felt as if he was going to vomit.

§ § §

He caught up with Feldor just as he knocked on a door at the end of the corridor. Jonny heard nothing, but apparently, Feldor did, for he opened the door and stepped in. Jonny followed slowly.

They entered a large room, easily as big as the home he had been born in, with a high ceiling, which nevertheless felt crowded. The walls on three sides of the room had bookshelves that reached nearly to the ceiling, all filled with books, small wooden boxes, gleaming silver orbs, and other strange objects. The fourth wall had a large window that reached the ceiling, flanked by two smaller bookshelves that were, if anything, more crammed than the others with books, papers and writing implements. The faint glow from the nearly dark sky cast an eerie light over the unlit parts of the room.

Two large candelabras stood with squat candles burning to either side of the large desk that sat in front of the window. Behind the desk littered with papers and large books, one of which he was studying, sat the legend Jonny had never seen before, the ruler of Salaways, Master Magician Silurian.

The Master looked up from the book and said, "Ah good, Feldor, you're here. And you have the new boy with you. Excellent. What are we calling him?"

"I have decided to call him Jonny, Master Silurian," Lord Feldor replied. "Unless you have something else in mind."

"No, Jonny, Jonny, that will do just fine. Bring him up closer where I can look at him better and see if the feeling I have had the last couple of days is right, or if it is just indigestion."

As Jonny stepped forward at Feldor's urging, he got his first look at the legendary ruler of Salaways. He had stood as Jonny approached, and Jonny saw a tall thin man, well over six feet. He had a fringe of pure white hair that ringed his mostly bald head and came together into a long ponytail going down his back. His mustache and closely trimmed beard were white as well.

Master Silurian's piercing blue eyes seemed to bore right through him. Jonny was surprised to see Master Silurian did not have the lines and wrinkles Jonny associated with older people. In fact, Jonny had seen many men in their forties who had faces that looked older than this man, who he had heard was at least a hundred and fifty years old, and was possibly much older. But for the hair, Jonny would have assumed him to be a man in his early thirties, the age Jonny's father had been when he died.

The Master motioned for both Feldor and Jonny to sit in two chairs set in front of the desk. He turned to Lord Feldor. "Were there any problems finding the boy and securing his release?"

"Not really. That odious swine of a slaver kept me waiting for over an hour, but I understand I have young Jonny here to thank for that," he said motioning towards the boy, who was now trying to shrink into non-existence in his chair.

Silurian raised an eyebrow. "Don't be afraid. I am not mad at you. I am sure you had good reason for making it hard for that rogue, Murdoc, to track you down."

Jonny was surprised the Master was not upset. His fears eased slightly, but he said nothing.

Master Silurian turned back to Lord Feldor.

"If you do not need me further," Feldor said, "I have several matters I would like to address before dinner."

"Well, go then. Jonny and I can have our chat here, just the two of us. And he can show me all the magic tricks he knows," Master Silurian said with a twinkle in his eye.

Feldor got up to leave, and Jonny wanted to beg to go with him. His heart was pounding wildly, while his chest was so tight, he felt he could hardly breathe. He did not know any magic. He did not know much of anything. He could just barely read, and

that only because his father had started teaching him at a very young age.

Jonny pulled his legs up to his chest and said in a small voice, "But I don't know any magic tricks."

The Master smiled as he then got up and came around the desk and sat in the chair Feldor had just left.

"There is no need to be afraid. I know you have not been doing any real magic tricks or things you think of as such, or I would already have heard of it. But don't you have something you can do, something you would do to amuse the other boys when you had time to play in the bazaar?"

For some reason he could not explain, Jonny relaxed a little. This man seemed to be truly a kindly sort, and Jonny sensed no threat behind his words. Unlike his time with Murdoc, Jonny did not think he would be punished if he failed.

He thought for a moment and said, "Well, there was this one game we sometimes played in the bazaar that I could always win," Jonny began. "Till no one would play me any more. It's not much . . ."

"Show it to me, Jonny. I am most anxious to see it."

"Well, first you have to have a big coin, like this one."

Jonny dug in his bundle for his old brass coin. "This one's not worth anything here, but it works great for this game."

Jonny got off his chair, knelt down on the floor, and set the coin on its edge, holding it upright with his left index finger. "First you take a coin, like this . . ., and you set it spinning," he said as he flicked the edge of the coin with his right index finger. "Then you see who can keep the coin from falling over the longest."

As he spoke, the coin spun, winking in the light from the candles. After a few seconds, the spinning slowed and it fell to the floor.

"My trick," Jonny continued, "is that I can keep it spinning longer than anyone else."

He set the coin up again and flicked it as before. Only this time he hit it harder and spun it faster. Jonny put his hands on his knees as he knelt before the coin and stared at it with intense

concentration. Initially, the coin slowed as it had before, but then the spin stabilized. The coin continued to spin, and it neither sped up nor slowed down, but stayed spinning in the same place, at the same rate, for a long time.

After several minutes had passed, the Master said, "That is enough, Jonny. That is a very good trick. You can let it fall down now."

Jonny let out a sigh of relief. He had not moved a muscle since he placed his hands on his knees, and there were beads of sweat on his forehead. As soon as he relaxed, the coin began to slow and wobble. Within seconds, it fell to the floor.

"Wow, that was hard. I don't think I've ever kept one going that long before."

"That was very good, Jonny," the Master said. "May I see the coin you used?"

"Sure. Everyone says it isn't worth anything here. That's the only reason I've got it."

The master picked up the coin and examined it carefully. "Can you do it with other coins, or only this one?"

"Uh, I can do it with just about any coin," said Jonny. "But it's easier the bigger and heavier the coin is. I did a gold piece once. It was really easy, but I only got to do that once."

"Well Jonny, you may not know it, but you have just made me a very happy man."

"Why?"

"You have just proven to me that my feelings were right. You can do magic. And if you can do this with no training, I have great hopes for what you can do once you have received some."

"You mean I just did magic?" Jonny stared at Master Silurian with disbelief.

"Yes you did, Jonny. Not only that, but you did it in a way I never would have thought to do. I could not have done it the way you did, until I saw you do it just now. You have already shown me something new. I thank you."

Jonny was stunned. He had done magic. He had also done something the greatest wizard in the land said he could not have done.

“You really mean you couldn’t have done that trick I just did?”

“Jonny, I could have made that coin spin. However, the type of magic I would have used to do it would have been completely different from the way you did it. It would have taken me more to get set up to do. Of course, the way I would have set it up, it would still be spinning there now. Once I started it spinning, I would not have had to concentrate on it as you did, but, as I say, that would have been a different kind of magic. What you did, I have never seen done that way before. You truly are a natural magician.”

Jonny sat back on his heels, amazed and confused. He had no idea he had been doing magic. It made him feel the best he had felt since before his parents died. It made him, for once, feel happy.

The Master got up from his chair and headed for the door. “Come, it is time for dinner. We will eat and see if we can’t put some flesh on those bones of yours. I will also introduce you to the other apprentices and journeymen.”

With that, he held the door for Jonny. The Master locked the door behind them. They walked down the corridor towards the sounds of many voices and the smell of food made Jonny’s mouth water.

Chapter 5

As hungry as he was, Jonny was only barely aware of the path they took to get to the great hall where several tables were already piled high with food. He had actually done magic! He felt as if he were floating. He hoped this would not all turn out to be a dream where he woke up to the reality of life as a slave.

As they entered the hall, the babble of conversation died down and all heads turned in their direction.

“I want you all to look over here and pay special attention,” The Master began. “This is our new apprentice, Jonny. He has just showed me a magic trick the likes of which I have never seen before.”

As he said this last part, the attention of everyone in the room focused on Jonny. He could feel their eyes examining him. Not all the attention was friendly.

“He will be under my special tutelage,” The Master continued. “And . . .” he paused, sweeping his gaze around the room, “He is not to be bothered or molested in any way. He has just been freed from slavery. I will not countenance *any* improper behavior from any of you towards him. I am sure you all know what I mean. You are all warned, so you will be without excuse.”

As he delivered these words, Master Silurian glared meaningfully towards certain of the older boys. His look was fearsome, not the kindly look Jonny remembered at all.

The Master scanned the assembled faces, nodded, then the fierce look left his face as it relaxed into a smile. “Jonny, let me introduce you to the boys and staff,” The Master said, pointing to various people and naming them, and what they did.

It was all too much for Jonny to take in; there were over seventy people in the room. He smiled and returned the nods of the boys and young men who were introduced to him, but their names simply did not register. He was still too giddy. The Master introduced him as if he was some visiting wizard from a far country, to be given special care and consideration. Only The Master, Lord Feldor, Jonny and one other Journeyman wizard were

seated at the head table. There were three other long trestle tables with at least twenty boys at each.

Several of the boys looked at him with barely concealed hostility and resentment. He had seen the look before. Many of these boys were not going to be his friends. Some of them might already be enemies. If he were not already feeling so disconnected, their looks might have scared him.

He knew in the back of his mind that this would not all be easy, but he also knew The Master had extended his special protection to him. He hoped it would be enough.

There was more food at this meal than Jonny had seen in the last two years: meats, breads, potatoes, apples, pastries, pies. He was sitting next to his new master, being offered all he wanted.

He ate so much he thought he would burst. Twice Master Silurian had to caution him to slow down the speed he was stuffing food in his mouth. The last two years had taught him to eat fast, before someone bigger came and took the food he had. In the end, when he could eat no more, he sat back. He was so full, he was not sure whether it felt good, or if he was going to be sick.

Smiling, the master turned to him and said, "So, you can be filled." He laughed. "For a moment I was unsure of whether you would ever stop. I have seen boys twice your size not able to eat as much as you have. I just hope this is only because of how little you've eaten recently."

Jonny happily nodded his agreement and blinked and yawned.

"Ah, I see the food has got you feeling sleepy," Master Silurian chuckled. "Well then, it's best if we get you a place to sleep." He looked over to one of the other tables where several boys were talking. "Roald, is there a place for Jonny in your room?"

"Yes, Master," replied the tall, thin shyly smiling boy.

"Good, show young Jonny here the room and the privy while you're at it so he can get to bed. He has had a long day, and he will need his strength for tomorrow." The Master turned to Jonny and said, "Go with Roald. He will show you where things

are and what to do. I will see you tomorrow, and we will see if you have any more tricks you can show me.”

With that, The Master stood up and started walking toward a different door than the one by which he and Jonny had entered. Just before he left the room, he turned and smiled back at Jonny, shook his head and then said to Feldor, “Come, Feldor, we have much to discuss.” Feldor, who had been talking with two of the young men in the room, immediately got up and followed him.

“Wow,” began Roald. “I’ve never seen The Master treat a newcomer like that. You must be something special.” Roald looked amazed and impressed. “I mean, really, The Master usually doesn’t even see new boys for a few days after they arrive. After they’ve, uh, um, . . . been broken in. But you, he might as well have said if anyone even touches you, he’ll flay them alive.

Prodigious.”

This whole outburst only puzzled Jonny. He knew what The Master had done must have been unusual, but Roald’s reaction made it seem like it was a once in a lifetime event. The confusion on his face must have been evident.

“But you don’t know what I’m talking about, do you?” Roald said. Then talking more to himself he said, “Of course you don’t, and it’s really better you don’t.” A calculating look came on his face, and he brightened. “I bet that’s why The Master put you with me. I’ll show you how to stay out of trouble. Yes I will,” he said, now looking at Jonny again. “And we’ll be the best of friends! Come on. I’ll show you where the privies are and then get you set up for bed.”

They left the great hall heading down a corridor and out and across into the main courtyard to where the privies were located. As soon as they had been mentioned, Jonny knew he very badly needed to relieve himself and was glad they stopped there first.

After they finished in the privies, they walked to the opposite side of the cobbled courtyard and climbed a winding set of stairs that opened out onto a narrow corridor. They walked past several doors, until Roald opened one and said, “Here we are, my own little home.”

The large room looked like it had seen better days. At some point in the castle's history, it had probably been officer's quarters. It had two racks of solid bunk style beds with posts extending to the ceiling with three beds in each stack. There were clothes and other items strewn on the floor and dust coated nearly everything. Of the six available beds, only one looked to be in use. The others were without bedclothes. Two tall dusty and mostly empty bookshelves stood along opposite walls, with two large scarred wooden tables each with two chairs in the middle of the room.

"There used to be three others in here with me," Roald began. "One made Journeyman, Diego he's now called, and the other two, they, uh finished their apprenticeships and, um, left. So, I've had the place all to myself for the last two weeks. It's been great." Jonny could see what Roald considered great. It certainly was not cleanliness.

Just then there was a sound behind them, and they both turned to see another boy coming in with blankets, sheets, and a pillow. "Feldor said you would be needing these things," the blond-haired, freckled boy, said as he walked into the room, working to balance his load. "Where do you want me to put them?"

Roald said, "Just set them anywhere. Jonny hasn't decided where he's going to sleep yet."

The new boy ignored Roald's remark, snorted, and gave Jonny a questioning glance. "Uh, just set them on that empty bunk over there," Jonny said, indicating the one across from the one Roald was occupying.

"That's probably best," the new boy said. "If you sleep over here there's a chance Roald's screams in the night won't wake you." He laughed. "That's why he's been in this room alone. No one else can get any sleep around him."

"You didn't need to tell him that, Larin," Roald muttered.

"Yes I did. He might have thought there was something really wrong, when you woke him up with your screaming. Now, he'll know that's just what you do most nights."

"Do not!"

“Do too,” Larin replied, not at all put off by Roald’s protest. “Only you don’t know it, because you sleep right through them, not that anyone else can.”

Jonny found the whole conversation amusing, but was already too tired to care. “I think right now I could sleep through just about anything.”

“Yeah, well that’s a good thing. And don’t let Roald’s screams worry you. They don’t mean anything,” Larin said. He had been working on putting the covers on Jonny’s bed the whole time the conversation had been going on. “There, I think you’re set. They didn’t give me a nightshirt for you, but I’m sure there’s one in the cupboard,” he said pointing to a cabinet beyond the bed. Jonny had failed to notice it earlier. “Have a good night. I’ll see you at breakfast.” With that, Larin smiled at Jonny and left, closing the door behind him.

“He didn’t have to tell you about that,” Roald said, scowling at the closed door. “I’d have told you. But he is right. That’s why I’ve had the room to myself. I hope it doesn’t bother you too much.” He stared at the floor.

“Naw, I doubt I’ll even notice,” Jonny said. “I’m so tired right now, I doubt a stampede would wake me up.”

Jonny went to the cupboard and found there indeed was a nightshirt, as well as other clothes, inside it. It also looked like Roald did not use this cupboard, because aside from the dust it was orderly inside. He changed and got into bed. Roald, who had been hunting around on the floor for his nightshirt, put it on and went over to the candle on one of the tables.

“Are you ready?”

Jonny said, “Sure,” and Roald blew out the light.

Chapter 6

Jonny woke to the sound of screaming.

It was still dark. At first Jonny was not sure where he was or what was going on, but it soon all came back to him. He rolled over and looked towards Roald's bed. The moon was shining in through the window and Jonny could see Roald was sitting up in bed and screaming. It was a piercing wail without words. It seemed like he would go on forever, and Jonny wondered if he was ever going to breathe. Roald paused just long enough to pull in a deep breath and then continued.

After a few minutes, though it felt like years, the sounds coming from Roald changed. Now he was sobbing, and muttering something between the sobs. Jonny had known there was no way he could go back to sleep while Roald was wailing. Eventually, the sobs were quiet enough he thought he might be able to get to sleep. Then the words Roald was saying started to register with Jonny, and he was suddenly more scared than he had been waking up to the screams.

"Please, oh please . . . don't do that again . . . not again. I can't take it," Roald moaned. "Isn't that enough, please, oh please, not again, no . . . no. I'll do anything, no, no, nooooooo." He kept crying and repeating the same things over and over. Then he began again.

Now Jonny was scared, not of something that would happen, but scared of whatever had happened to Roald. He was obviously reliving something very bad that had happened to him. Jonny had been beaten, starved, lost his family, and had experienced other horrible things in the last two years, but nothing gave him such terrible dreams or made him feel the kind of pain Roald was dreaming now. Jonny trembled at the thought of the horror Roald had been through, whatever it was.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, Roald simply stopped screaming, lay down, and was quiet except for the sound of his rhythmical breathing.

Jonny however, was too upset to get back to sleep. He lay there for a long while before he finally started to relax. He

deliberately avoided thinking about anything that might have caused Roald that pain. Instead, he thought of how he was no longer a slave. Tomorrow he was going to eat well and learn magic brought him some peace, and he finally relaxed. Just as he was drifting off to sleep, he thought he heard what might have been someone screaming in the distance, but the sound was too faint. Jonny wondered muzzily, as sleep claimed him, if this was just his imagination, or the wind or if maybe Roald wasn't the only boy here who screamed at night.

Chapter 7

“Feldor, we are going to have to make some changes in the arrangements here,” Master Silurian said, as he and Feldor sat in his north study. The pre-dawn light faintly illuminated the window. The candles were once again alight.

“How so, Master?” Feldor said, still writing down the items they discussed would be secured on the next supply run into Alavar.

“I want to isolate Jonny, especially from the normal routine of apprentice and journeyman demon summonings.”

“Is that wise?”

“I believe it is essential.” He paused, glanced around and then continued. “Jonny has no need to go through the standard initiation to magic by being a demon offering. The process is so injurious, not just to the body, but the soul. If there were any other way to identify those with the talent, I would dispense with it altogether. Jonny has already proved his talent. I do not wish for him to be warped unnecessarily.”

“Won’t that alienate him from the other boys?”

“Yes, that can’t be helped. In some ways, I believe it will be best if he becomes accustomed to the isolation. I fear he will bear it much of his life.”

“What exactly is it that makes him so special? You seemed so excited about him last night. I cannot recall when I’ve seen you so affected.”

“Feldor, I believe he has the native talent to be a zdrell master.”

“But I thought all the zdrell masters were killed in the Great War?”

“They were. There were a few wizards left who could do some of the simpler zdrell manipulations, but those true masters were always rare, and they were all killed in the war.

“It has always been my suspicion, though I know of no way to prove it, that eliminating the zdrell masters was the reason for the war. The Grimoridans withdrew after the last zdrell master was killed and they made no serious attempt to keep the lands they conquered.”

“The histories make no mention of that connection.”

“No, they do not. They claim the Grimoridans could no longer maintain their troops against constant attacks from the varied forces here. Nevertheless, they make no mention why after nearly ninety years of continuous struggle the Grimoridans would simply give up and withdrew. None of the traditional explanations can give reason for the timing. However, the death of the last zdrell master occurred just prior to the withdrawal.

“If they had been fully committed to conquering Skryla, it would have made more sense for them to have pressed the attack. Without the zdrell masters, our continent of Skryla was much more vulnerable. But what did they do instead? They withdrew.”

“I see your point, Master. But how does this involve young Jonny?”

“Only those with great power in zdrell could reportedly do it without training. If Jonny is the first new zdrell master in over a thousand years, he could become as great as some of the legendary ones in the sagas. I do not want him spoiled. Not all the zdrell masters were good. I need him to become a good, honorable man. I can not have him twisted by whole demon initiation process, just so the other apprentices’ sense of fair-play is upheld.”

“So what do you want changed?”

“I’ve already talked with some of the journeymen. I need you to talk to all of them and all the apprentices. Jonny is not be involved in any way in summonings. He is not to know the secret of how apprentices are used, nor to know any other part of demon magic.”

“That could be difficult, Master. You know only those who have known the secret have been allowed to stay in the castle for more than a pair of days, for that very reason.”

“I know, I know, but I believe it is essential.”

“How long will we have to keep him from learning the truth?”

“I am not sure, but it should be months, if not years, until he is ready.”

“It will be difficult to keep him from being able to hear the screams,” Feldor said, shaking his head.

“Yes, we will have to make certain the doors to the dungeons are closed whenever a summoning is in progress. The boys are too careless with that as it is.”

“Have you spoken to Jonny’s roommate, Roald?”

“No, but I will have you do that at lunch. I doubt Roald has said anything to Jonny yet. He is too embarrassed by his reaction to his own initiation.”

“Indeed. I will talk to Roald, the apprentices, and the journeymen. Is there anything else?”

“No. I need to begin my morning exercises. Once I have completed them, get Eleander to bring Jonny and Roald to me.”

“As you wish, Master.”

Chapter 8

As Jonny awoke in the sunlit room, his first thought was he had overslept and if he did not move fast, he would be beaten. Then he remembered where he was. The fright left, only to return when he remembered the previous night. He looked over to the other side of the room just as Roald began to stir. Jonny got up and looked through the cupboard, where he had found his nightshirt the previous evening, to see if he could find some clothes that fit. He did not know what clothes were there, but they could not be worse than the ones he had been wearing non-stop for the last year.

He found a plain, but clean tan shirt that fit, a brown woven vest that was a bit large and a pair of black trousers that were too long, but otherwise fit well enough. As he was putting them on, Roald woke up and started to search the floor near his bed for something to wear.

He sat to put on his trousers and looked at Jonny and said, "Did I . . . Did I scream much last night?" As soon as he asked, he looked down and was very intent on the task of putting on his shoes and socks.

Jonny waited for a second, and then said, "Yeah, I guess you did, uh scream, a bit."

"I woke you up?" Roald asked, still not looking up.

"Uh, yeah . . . But, but I was able to get right back to sleep after," Jonny lied.

"I'm sorry," Roald said looking up. "I really can't help it, and I never even remember I do it, but everyone says I scream really loud. I hope I didn't keep you awake long."

"Not long. No, uh, not long, really," Jonny said. Now, he was the one who did not want to make eye contact. "But, Roald," Jonny continued. "What *happened* to you? I mean, you were begging someone to stop something. That part was worse than the screams."

"Happened?" Roald asked. "Nothing . . . Nothing *happened*. I just, I just have bad dreams, that's all. That's all, really. You'll probably understand soon enough." Roald said all this while

staring at the floor. He had finished dressing and was deliberately looking away. Jonny was sure he was lying.

“Anyway,” Roald looked up brightening. “It doesn’t matter, and I really need to get to the privy fast.” Roald jumped up and headed out the door. Jonny figured he had until at least that evening before he had to worry about how he was going to sleep through those screams again.

§ § §

Jonny got down to the main courtyard and after visiting the privy himself headed back into the main building where they had eaten the night before to look for breakfast. When he finally found the great hall, he found it empty and cleaned. He was just coming back out to the courtyard when he saw Roald running up to him.

“There you are. Where did you go?” Roald asked.

“Well, I just thought we would be eating in the same place as last night.”

“No, we only eat there on special occasions, and never for breakfast.”

“Oh, so where do we eat breakfast, and what was the special occasion last night?” Jonny asked.

“You, you were the special occasion last night. The Master said he’d be bringing a new boy, and we were all to be there to greet him,” Roald answered, as they walked through a doorway going back into the part of the castle where their room was located.

They turned down a corridor and entered a room with a long table going down the center with benches on either side. It was not a particularly large room and the table nearly filled all of it. There was another doorway at the far end.

Jonny dimly recognized several boys from the previous night sitting at the table. They glanced at Jonny and Roald as they entered but quickly returned to their conversations and eating. Roald led him down to the opposite doorway that led into a kitchen.

“This is the kitchen and the servant’s mess. This is where all the apprentices eat normally. We eat in shifts because we can’t all fit in at one time,” Roald said, pointing at the cramped space.

That's why we had to be in the main hall last night, so everyone could be together."

"How many apprentices are there?"

"I think there's about forty five right now," Roald replied, moving over to a large pot. "This is the morning porridge. You can get some of it, and there should be bread over there," he said, indicating a table to the side where several large loaves sat.

Roald scooped himself a bowl of porridge and Jonny did likewise, then Roald cut them both large pieces of bread and motioned for them to head back out into the mess. He paused just as he was about to go out through the doorway and pointed with his bread at a large slate board on the wall beside the door.

"That's the chore list. I doubt they have you on it yet, but that's where they post what chores you're assigned to each week. This week I have to clean out the stables. See there," Roald pointed to a box labeled stables. Roald's and three other names were listed there. "That tells you what you have to do. You'll find out what you're assigned to soon, I'm sure. C'mon, let's eat." With that, he went into the other room.

Jonny lingered and studied the board. He quickly saw why he had not seen any servants last night. Looking at the board, he could see that the apprentices handled nearly all operations of the castle. They were not only there to learn magic, but to act as the serving staff that kept the place running. It made sense, but Jonny had thought being a magician's apprentice would be more, well, magical.

He asked Roald as he sat down beside him, "So the apprentices do pretty much all of the dirty work around here?"

"Yeah, you've got that right," Roald said, with food in his mouth. "If there's a nasty job that needs doing, you can bet it will be an apprentice doing it."

"So how much of your time do you actually spend learning to do magic?" It seemed like a simple question, but as soon as he asked, he could tell Roald did not want to answer.

"Well, in the beginning," Roald said, suddenly very intent on finishing his porridge, "we spend a lot of time watching others do magic and, uh, assisting them. You have to spend a fair amount

of time around magic before you can really start doing it. But maybe it won't be that way for you," Roald said, his look of wariness lifting. "The Master last night said you had already shown him some magic tricks. Is that true?"

"Well," Jonny began, feeling more than a little embarrassed by the question. "I only showed The Master one trick, but he seemed really excited about it. I don't know why. It's really no big thing." Now he was looking down.

By this point, several of the other boys at the table were listening to their conversation. One of the older ones turned to Jonny and said, "Show us the trick, Jonus. We want to see what the master's new pet can do."

"My name's not Jonus, it's J—."

Jonny suddenly stopped. He was about to use his old name, his true name.

Jonny's ears burned red with shame. The mocking tone in the boy's voice said clearly he did not think Jonny could do any sort of magic. And now he had nearly tricked Jonny into giving away his true name. He wanted to sink under the table, out of sight, but knew he could not get away with that. The other boys joined in, "Yeah, c'mon, Jonny, show us all," they taunted. It was just like when Jonny was a slave.

The boy's comments had the opposite effect on Roald. Jonny could see him getting mad.

"You all just better watch out," Roald said, challenging the other boys. "I bet Jonny can do more magic now than any one of you stinking dulls!"

Jonny had no idea what a dull was, but it was obvious the other boys did not like being called that. Two of them started to get up, but the boy who had made the first comment, who seemed to be some kind of leader, motioned them to stay put.

"Well, if he's so powerful good, then he should prove it," the boy sneered.

"No problem. Go on, Jonny, show them your trick," Roald said, with the confidence of someone introducing a talking dog.

Jonny did not feel half as confident in himself as Roald seemed to be, but he figured the only way out of this situation was to show his trick. "It's not much," he began, as he dug his coin out of the pocket in his new trousers. "I just take a coin like this," he said, placing the coin on its edge on the table. "Then I set it spinning," he said, while flicking the edge of it to start it rapidly spinning on the table.

"That's your trick?" asked the boy who had started it all. "Anyone can do that."

Jonny was staring intently at the coin, not letting it slow down. In fact, he wanted to show the boy up so much he tried to see if he could make it spin faster, and it did. After a few seconds, all the boys were staring intently at the coin as they could see it was not slowing down as they had expected it to. Instead, defying logic, the coin was spinning faster and faster. It slowly traveled across the table and stopped in front of the boy whose jaw was hanging open in amazement where it continued to spin.

"Anyone can do that," Roald mocked, sarcasm dripping from his words, "Can't they, Frank? Why, I'm sure you could show Jonny here a thing or two about how it's done, right?"

Jonny heard his cue and stopped concentrating on the coin, which immediately began to slow down. "Sure," Jonny said, trying to make it sound sincere. "Uh, Frank, could you please show me how I could do it better?"

Now it was Frank's turn to have his ears burn. He stammered for a moment then finally said, "You both just better watch out, especially you, screamer boy." He glared at Roald. "I know you and where to find you. Maybe I'll see if I can't find a reason for you to scream some more." He turned from them and got up, ears and face still bright red and headed for the door, as the coin rattled to a stop on the table. He nodded at his friends and said, "C'mon, let's go," and he left the room.

After Frank and the other boys left, Roald could not contain his happiness. "Well, you sure showed them, didn't you," he said, pounding Jonny on the back. "Did you see their faces? You'd have thought they saw a demon coming to eat them. They never believed you could do that, but I knew you could. I knew."

Roald bubbled on in this vein for several minutes while Jonny ate in silence. He was still embarrassed by the whole thing, and even more embarrassed by Roald's reaction to it. It was as if Roald had done the magic, not Jonny. Finally, he had enough.

"Look. It was no big thing," Jonny said, putting his coin back in his pocket. "It was just a trick. I didn't move a mountain, or blow up a castle wall, or something. I just made a coin spin. That's all. Now leave it alone."

"You just don't get it, do you?" Roald said, shaking his head. "That was serious magic. And, you did it without any props, or a demon, or anything. You made that coin spin just by looking at it. I doubt if there's anyone besides The Master in this castle who could do that the way you did."

"But what good is it?" Jonny sighed. "It's just a stupid little trick."

"Jonny. If you can do that, there are probably all sorts of other things you can do once Master Silurian shows you how. Most of the guys here will never do any magic on their own. Only a few can make it work at all. I can't. You can already do it, and you haven't even been taught. No wonder The Master made such a big deal about it."

It still did not seem all that amazing to Jonny, but he now saw a little of what Roald was getting at. Big or small, he had already proved he could do magic. He was just starting to believe it might be something special. But it felt so much like he wasn't doing anything strange. He just made a coin spin. No big thing.

Maybe.

Chapter 9

Roald and Jonny were just getting up to leave when a young man poked his head in the room. Jonny recognized him as one of the journeymen from the dinner the previous evening. He saw Jonny and Roald and said, "There you are. The Master just got back from his morning exercises and wants to see you both in his north study. Hurry up, and I'll go with you."

Jonny looked at Roald to see if he had any idea why he was being called back to The Master so soon. Roald just shrugged, and they both quickly put their dishes back in the kitchen and hurried out to walk with the journeyman, Eleander, over to the same study where Jonny had first met The Master.

When they got there, the door was open and Eleander walked right in and called, "Master, I found them, right where I should have looked in the first place, eating breakfast."

"Yes, yes, well that's fine, Eleander," The Master replied distractedly from his desk where there were several more books piled than Jonny had seen the previous evening. The Master was reading from a passage in one of the large dusty volumes and looked up towards Jonny.

"My boy, I have spent a good deal of time thinking and reading about that trick you showed me last night, and I believe I finally understand just what was going on."

Jonny was once again feeling embarrassed over the large fuss from his simple bit of magic.

"Jonny," The Master continued. "I need you to do your trick again for me while Eleander and I observe you, and you too, Roald. I am fairly certain what I will see, but I need to have this confirmed. It could change the way I do quite a number of things." He looked at Jonny, smiling, "Can you spin the coin and have it stay in a certain place on the table?"

Jonny nodded.

"Good, good, then please do it." He motioned for Jonny to place the coin on a large table Jonny did not remember being in the study the night before.

Jonny placed the coin and flicked it to start it spinning, but hit it wrong. It shot across and off the table. He was so nervous at having everyone watching, he was not sure he would be able to do the trick. He muttered, "Sorry, sorry," and went to pick up the coin.

Master Silurian looked at Jonny and smiled, "It's okay, Jonny. We know you can do your trick. We just want to see how it is done. You are fine. Just go ahead."

Jonny set the coin on the table again and deliberately did not look at anyone as he started it spinning. Seeing the coin spin was enough to allow Jonny to go back to the task.

He stared at the coin, and felt the familiar feeling he associated with the trick and focused on making it spin well. After a few seconds, when he was feeling more confident, he did as he had done earlier; he concentrated on making the coin speed up. It was easier the second time. The coin was soon spinning so rapidly that it looked like a golden ball.

"That's excellent, Jonny," The Master said. "That's even better than what you showed me yesterday. Can you make it move around the table and still keep it under control?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Jonny replied, and started thinking about having the coin move across the table, as he had earlier. Slowly the coin edged to the side of the table. Once it got close to the edge, Jonny willed it back to the center.

"Wonderful, Jonny, perfect, just perfect," The Master exclaimed. "It is just as I understood, though I'd never have figured this out without seeing it. Eleander, do you see it?" he asked, turning to the journeyman.

"Alas, no, Master," Eleander said, sadly. "I see he is bending force lines, but I can't see how he is doing it. He has no tools or props, uses no gestures, and makes no incantation. I don't understand it, but I see it happening," he said, frustration in his voice.

"His mind is the tool, my boy. Don't you see? He is moving the force lines with his mind. It is phenomenal. He is using the lost magic of Zdrell. And now that I see how he is doing it, I think I could do the same."

Jonny had been listening to this exchange while still keeping the coin spinning. When he heard the last thing The Master had said, he momentarily stopped focusing on the coin and it flew across the room and bounced on the floor, rebounding off of books and chairs before it finally came to rest.

“You really didn’t believe me when I said you had taught me something new, did you, Jonny?” The Master asked, chuckling. “Yes, it is true. Even one as old as I, still feel like I have so much to learn. And you, yes you, will be my teacher, as I will be yours.”

“But, Master, it is only a coin, a trick . . .” Jonny pleaded.

“Only a trick?” Master Silurian snorted. “Jonny, Eleander here is one of the more talented journeymen I’ve had in the last several years, and he could not duplicate your *trick*. He has enough talent to see what you are doing, but he has no idea how he would go about doing it himself, do you, Eleander?” The Master said, turning to look at the journeyman.

Eleander bowed his head and said softly, “No, my master. I could not do this myself and can see no value in creating an incantation or invoking a demon to do it for me.”

“You see?” The Master said turning back to Jonny.

“Eleander is a competent wizard, nearly ready to become a master, and he can’t do what you already can. This is most significant.”

“Roald,” The Master called to Jonny’s friend who had been sitting at the side of the room. “Fetch Jonny’s coin from the floor over there. It is time I put my enlarged understanding to a test.” He turned and winked at Jonny. “We’ll see if the old man can do as well as his apprentice. Maybe I can even teach you a thing or two,” he said laughing.

He was laughing, but Jonny sensed there was an edge under the joviality, and it worried him.

“Now set it up on the table and get it spinning like Jonny did,” The Master said to Roald.

“I can start it, Master, but I don’t know anything about keeping it going,” Roald said, with a quaver in his voice.

“That’s all I ask, boy. I should be the one to keep it spinning this time,” The Master said. He paused as Roald set the

coin up. "Start it spinning, boy. Spin it fast," The Master said, excitement in his voice.

Roald flicked the edge of the coin and it spun true. Suddenly without warning, the coin slued sideways and shot off the table as if it had been kicked.

"Arrgh, I almost had it," said The Master, with disgust in his voice. "Well, I suppose it wasn't a bad first try." He grunted. "Roald, set it up and let's try it again."

Jonny was awe struck. Here was the greatest wizard in the land, and he was having trouble with Jonny's trick. Not only that, but he did not get it on the second or the third tries either. On the fourth attempt, it spun for a moment and then fell. Finally, on the fifth attempt the coin spun in place for over a minute.

"There, I believe I've got it now," The Master said, panting slightly. "Yes, I think I have this now. Let me rest a moment and we'll see if I can repeat it." He got up from his chair, walked to the window, and stared out for a moment.

"Jonny, I foresee great things for you, and great danger as well," The Master said, still looking out the window. "Yes, I will have to train you as I've not trained anyone in over one hundred years. There is no time to waste, none at all."

He turned from the window and sat in his chair again. "All right, Roald," The Master sighed. "Let's do it once again." Roald started the coin spinning and The Master closed his eyes. "Yes," he said. "I should have thought of this earlier." He smiled. "Yes, I do have it now."

The coin, which had been spinning, now began to speed up. It initially stayed in the same spot then slowly started moving around the table. First, it moved in a circle. Then it described a square. Then it started to move in a figure eight. Master Silurian chuckled. "Watch this, boys." As he said this, the coin continued spinning as it left the table. It moved slowly higher and higher until it was more than four feet above the table.

"Hah," The Master chuckled, now obviously enjoying himself. "I told you I could show you a trick or two there, Jonny." The coin now moved in the air until it stopped in front of Jonny. "Hold out your hand."

Jonny slowly reached out his hand and held it palm up in front of him. The coin, which had been spinning in front of him abruptly stopped spinning but continued to hang suspended as if by some invisible wire. Then, suddenly, the coin dropped into Jonny's hand. He nearly dropped it he was so startled.

"There you have your coin back, Jonny," The Master said, opening his eyes and smiling warmly at him. "I would have paid many gold coins to have learned that trick years ago. Ah well, better now than never, right?"

No one said anything. The three young men seemed stunned by what they had witnessed. The Master looked at each of them and laughed. "You are all so solemn. You look as if someone died. This is a time to celebrate. It's not every day I come across something this wonderful," he said with real feeling.

"No, I know what you need. You need to get out and play a bit, yes that is it," The Master said to Roald. "Roald, you and Jonny are released from any duties for the rest of the day. Go and show Jonny all the places you boys play when you should be doing your lessons or chores. Get out now, the both of you. Eleander and I have things to discuss."

He motioned for them to leave. Roald did not hesitate, and Jonny followed.

Chapter 10

“Was that really zdrell, you and Jonny did, Master?”

Eleander asked, after the younger boys had left.

“It was indeed, Eleander.” The Master stared off into space.

“But, I thought it was a lost art.”

“It is, or was until now.”

“How is it, you can do it now, Master, when you couldn’t before with all your studies and experience?”

The Master chuckled, tiredly. “I can do it, because I’ve seen it. It is not so terribly hard, once you see it, but you are mistaken if you think I can really do it.”

“But that coin, it just flew.”

“The coin was nothing, Eleander. With no training, Jonny could do nearly as well, and I doubt those boys know how much energy it cost me to do that. I shall have to rest the remainder of the day, just to recuperate. I doubt Jonny felt tired by it at all.”

“So what does this mean, Master?”

“What indeed? This changes many things, and it could not have come at a better time. Yes, it changes many things,” he said, still staring into space.



“Did you see that?” Roald said excitedly as soon as they left the room. “The way that coin just flew up off the table like it had wings. And then, the way it stopped spinning right there in front of you and dropped. Wow!”

“Yeah,” Jonny said, though not with the enthusiasm Roald had. “That was really great.”

Jonny was not thinking about the last part. He was still thinking about the four times The Master had tried before he got the hang of Jonny’s trick. It still amazed him that The Master had needed to work to learn the trick.

In a way, it scared him.

Roald was oblivious to Jonny’s discomfort. “This is the best, Jonny,” he began. “Not only do we get to spend the morning watching some of the most prodigious magic I’ve ever seen, but we

get the rest of the day to play!” He practically danced down the steps out into the main courtyard. Then he suddenly stopped. “We better go tell Lord Feldor The Master’s given us the day off, or we’ll be put to work.”

They went to the steward’s office where Feldor sat at his desk. He looked skeptical as Roald told him what The Master had said. Then he looked at each of them for a moment and said, “Very well, I accept your story, Roald. But you know what the penalty will be if you are making any of this up.”

Roald started to look a little worried, but then he brightened. “Sir, I swear to you, The Master truly did give us the day off. You can check with him if you want.”

“I shall not trouble Master Silurian with this now. He has other concerns. Nevertheless, that does not mean I will not talk to him about it eventually. You have both been warned,” he said, with a stern stare at each of them. “Go on, both of you. Get out before I change my mind,” he said as he looked down to the papers he had been reading when they entered.

“C’mon, let’s go,” Roald said, and they both ran out of the office.

They spent the rest of the day, with Roald showing Jonny all the different parts of the castle and then the woods up the hill from the west side of the walls. Twice older apprentices, who obviously wanted to put them to work, challenged them. Roald clearly loved telling them how they were at liberty on The Master’s order and that Feldor would verify this. Both times when The Master and Feldor’s names were invoked, the boys backed down. The two had a thoroughly fun time all afternoon and into the evening. Feldor only required Roald to run some errand without Jonny at lunch time. Jonny took the opportunity to take a nap.

Finally, Jonny asked, “Don’t you think we’d better get back or we’ll miss dinner, won’t we?”

“Nah,” Roald replied. “Dinner’s not usually a formal affair like last night. Unless you get invited, you eat in the mess just like we did for breakfast. That means scut boys like us eat last, after the big fellows have eaten and cleared out. It’s easier to avoid trouble if you wait till later.”

“Do you get into trouble very often?” Jonny asked. He was still curious about some of Roald’s dark hints.

“Not very often now,” Roald replied. “When I first got here, I swear that was all I got into. I didn’t have anyone to tell me what to do or anything and it was . . . bad, for a while,” he said with a shudder. “But that’s all past now. And I’ll make sure things go well for you, Jonny. Friends?” he asked, grabbing Jonny lightly by the forearm.

“Friends forever,” Jonny replied, grabbing Roald’s forearm as well.

“Let’s go eat,” Roald said. “I’ll make sure no one messes with you.”

“Sure,” Jonny laughed. “You can do the fighting for us both,” he joked as they walked slowly back into the castle.

§ § §

Dinner was uneventful. The food was mostly gone, but there were more than enough scraps for them to eat their fill. For Jonny, even these scraps were wonderful. For the last two years, he could not recall two days in a row when he went to bed with a full stomach.

As they headed up to their room, Jonny’s thoughts turned again to trying to sleep with Roald’s screams. “Do you, um, scream, ah, every night, Roald?” he asked as they entered the room.

Roald did not look happy to have to talk about it. “Really, I don’t know. I know I wake everybody else up, but I almost never wake up myself. As a matter of fact, it’s usually when I don’t scream that I wake up.” He turned away and looked at the floor. “On the nights when I don’t scream that’s usually because I’m having nightmares, and they wake me up, but I usually don’t scream.”

“Roald, what happened to you?” Jonny asked, unable to contain the question any longer. “I mean, you don’t just scream. You beg for someone not to do something to you. What happened?”

Roald spun around and looked at Jonny for just a moment with hate in his eyes, then the look faded, replaced by some kind of shame. When he spoke, Jonny could tell he was holding back tears,

and the effort made him sound mad at Jonny. “I—don’t—want—to—talk about it! I, . . . there’s nothing anyone can do about it now. It’s in the past. Just leave it alone.”

“Alright,” Jonny said, holding up his hands. “If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s Okay. I just thought, since we were friends, we could talk about those kinds of things. But if you don’t want to, okay. I didn’t mean to get you mad.”

Now Roald did begin to cry, not loud, just little shuddering gasps. “I’m sorry, Jonny. I didn’t mean to get mad at you, but I can’t even think about it. It just hurts too much.”

“That’s all right,” Jonny said, unsure what to do. “If I’d have known it would get to you so much, I wouldn’t have brought it up.” He sighed, “But if you ever do feel like talking about it, I’ll listen.”

“Thanks, Jonny,” Roald said, now mostly over his tears. “You’re the best friend I’ve ever had. Someday, I probably will tell you. Some other time, yeah.” He started throwing off his clothes. “I guess we better get to bed. Who knows what tomorrow will be like? I doubt it will be half as much fun as today.”

“Yeah, that’s probably true,” Jonny said as he started to change his clothes. “I sure hope we get to see more magic tomorrow. That was great.”

“Well, don’t get your hopes up, Jonny. Today we saw more magic than I’ve seen in a single day except for once when one of the apprentices was performing to become a journeyman. Most days you’re lucky if you see any magic at all,” he said as he got into bed.

“Huh. I never thought of it before exactly, but I thought wizards went around doing magic all the time. I mean, they’re wizards, that’s what they do, right?”

“Maybe the master wizards do stuff all the time, but not from what I’ve seen,” Roald said scrunching down in his bed. He yawned. “After all, magic takes effort and there’s a price to pay to do anything by magic. So you’re not going to run around just doing it for no reason, are you?”

Jonny was puzzled. “What do you mean, a price to pay? There’s no price I pay when I spin a coin,” Jonny said with an exasperated tone.

“Well, that’s different,” Roald said, clearly not wanting to talk about it right then. “Your magic’s different, not like most others, but I’m sure there’s some way you pay.” He rolled over in bed. “You’ll see what I mean soon enough. Now I *really* want to go to sleep. Good night.”

Jonny lay there very puzzled by the whole conversation since dinner. It seemed every time he asked a simple question Roald got upset and did not want to talk about it. So far, his whole experience here had been as if he was living a dream. He felt like at any moment he would wake up and find himself back as a slave again.

On the other hand, there was much here he just did not understand. He guessed that was to be expected. After all, he had never even thought about what it must be like to be a wizard. Now, he was training to be one.

Nevertheless, there were all those stories in the market place. After the way Feldor had reacted, he had first thought they must all be just stories made up to frighten people. Now, he was not so sure. What if there was some truth to the stories and, they had just been exaggerated. How do you exaggerate being eaten alive by a demon? Every question he asked just left him with two more questions. He guessed he would just have to wait and watch.

By the time he had finally come to this conclusion, Roald had been asleep for some time. Jonny decided he would just wrap his pillow around his head and hope he could get more sleep this night than he had the last. As soon as he had made up his mind to do this, he fell asleep.