



magdeborn:
the line
of illeniel

by
michael g. manning

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my father, who was the inspiration for Royce Eldridge. His contribution to my life over the years has been difficult to measure and only now that he is gone do I realize how much I have lost. This one is for you Dad.

Chapter 1

I moved quietly through the darkness, till I reached the door I sought. There was no ambient light, nor did I bring any with me; I preferred mage-sight for this task. Light would only increase the danger. Stretching out with my mind I explored the room beyond the door; my task would be easier if it was empty, but I felt a presence there already. A dangerous aura hovered around the form within, causing me to break out in a sweat as I considered my options. I checked my shield again; making sure the spell covered me fully. Briefly I considered my sword, but I knew it would be useless against this foe.

Carefully I reached for the handle, checking to see if it was locked. It wasn't, naturally enough... the being within the room was waiting for me. The huntress only locks the cage once her prey is inside. Slowly I eased the door open, hoping for darkness within. My foe needed light to see, while I didn't; it was perhaps my only advantage.

The room was brightly lit, dammit.

"Hey sweetie, I didn't expect to see you up this late. You weren't waiting on me were you?" I kept a cheerful tone in my voice, but I knew she wasn't fooled.

"Where the hell have you been?" Penny growled. She had that tired grumpy look on her face that people sometimes get when they have been sitting up half the night. I took it as a bad sign.

No one has ever accused me of being terribly bright around women, so I decided to try honesty. "I was sneaking around behind your back," I replied. Hmm, that sounded even worse out loud.

Penny was exasperated, "If you were doing that at least it would make sense!" Her eyes flicked upward, indicating a place above my forehead, "There's a twig in your hair by the way."

"I was sneaking around!" I protested. "There's this girl see... and she just wouldn't leave me alone! So, I went out..." This was a blatant attempt to make her laugh... she didn't.

"Please! There are several that have been making eyes at you, but you haven't the sense to even know who they are! Don't give me your stupid stories. You went out to the miller's house didn't you?" She had obviously been hanging around with Rose Hightower too long. The woman was a terrible influence. The house she was referring to had lost a child the previous night. It was the third disappearance in less than a week and people were starting to get panicky.

The first had been a young woman, Sadie Tanner, but no one had made much of it. She was a teenager and there were rumors she had run off with a fellow from a nearby village. They became more concerned when a small boy vanished two days later. Some claimed

he had been snatched from his bed, but I figured he had been taken while making a trip to the privy during the night; either way he was gone. The last one had been Rebecca, the miller's daughter. She was only thirteen, and no one believed any of it was coincidence anymore.

"To be perfectly honest," I began dishonestly, "I did not go to the miller's house, but I did happen to pass by there."

"Pretty damn close I'd imagine. You have mud on your boots." She gave my boots a disapproving stare. I was tracking mud on our dirt floor. Why she cared that mud might follow me in and get on a dirt floor I never understood. We were currently living in a small ramshackle cottage near the gutted remains of Castle Cameron. It was a step up from a wattle and daub hovel, but not a big enough step to have an actual floor. Ah, the luxurious life of a true aristocrat!

"Well I did in fact walk along the river bank for a while and..." I had already given up hiding my purpose, but Penny enjoys a good interrogation.

"You walked so far you got mud all over your rear end too!" She was standing close now, and looked worried. "Why did you think you had to sneak out?"

"I didn't want you to worry."

"So waking up to find you missing from the bed, after three other people have disappeared, and then waiting up until nearly dawn, hoping you would be back... that's not supposed to worry me?!" She seemed to be taking it well.

"Hmm... I hadn't thought of it from that perspective exactly. You see the idea was that you would not wake up and thus when I returned in the morning you would never have suffered from all the worrying and such." It had made perfect sense when I formed my plan the day before. I had waited until after nine in the evening, and once I heard Penny's distinctive snoring I eased my way out of bed. I spent most of the night walking through the woods near the outskirts of the village, or sitting on the bank near the miller's house, hence the mud on my pants.

Penny wrapped her arms around me and leaned her head against my chest. She was upset, but not the 'throw things at you' sort of mad I had expected. "I would have gone with you if you had just told me," she said softly.

Sure, I would take my fiancée out on dark nights to hunt for a bogey-man that was snatching people away... when pigs started flying. "Listen, Penny, I know you 'would' go with me, but I can't drag you into situations like this. If something happened to you, I don't know what it would do to me."

"Turn that around and look at it from my perspective," was her reply. The conversation didn't go anywhere productive from there

but eventually we gave up and went to bed. She hadn't had any more sleep than I had, despite my clever plan, so we both slept late the next morning.

As you might guess already, being the revered Count Cameron had not turned out to be quite the 'happily ever after' I had expected. Actually it was looking more and more like a lot of work. Since my grandfather's untimely demise the estate had fallen into disrepair. The old castle had been gutted by fire; my father's doing I am told. My uncle, the Duke of Lancaster, had taken over the rents and done his best to maintain the basic services required, but he had seen no need to restore the castle himself.

Now the Cameron lands consisted of one small village, and it was quite a stretch calling it a village. Mainly it was a collection of dwellings... most of the farmers traveled to Lancaster to sell their goods and barter. Penny and I had moved there shortly after I had received my title and we were currently in the most exalted building to be found. Luckily the good Duke had been keeping the rents and taxes for the past sixteen years, minus his portion of course. In practical terms that meant he had given me a sum amounting to slightly over nine hundred gold marks.

At first this had seemed a princely sum, especially on top of the two hundred I had won from the late Devon Tremont. How naive I had been! It truly was a lot of money, but the cost of restoring a feudal keep is considerable. I would have been quite happy just upgrading our cottage to a more traditional half-timbered, wattle and daub home with a field-stone foundation. Stone floors and solid walls; who could ask for more? But to my dismay, Penny had been taking lessons from Rose Hightower, who convinced her that this absolutely would not be satisfactory.

There had been a number of positives though, my parents had moved to Washbrook, which was the name of our village. They resisted my attempts to give them money but were more than willing to help in the restoration of Castle Cameron. Having a full time blacksmith in the area had been a boost to the economy all by itself. I had also hired a number of stone masons and carpenters, though I tried not to think about how much it cost.

Penny's father had also moved to Washbrook and I had spent considerable time exploring my new talents repairing the injury to his back, so he was back at work again. The money I was paying to the various workers also seemed to have sparked a boom in Washbrook's fortunes.

Over the past sixteen years the people's taxes had largely vanished with nothing returning to stimulate the economy. Now that I had returned, most of the money that had been paid over those years was now being spent to rebuild and people had new hope. At least until some of those people started vanishing.

One of my responsibilities, as their liege, was protection. Ordinarily that would mean a place to hide in time of war, the castle, and guards to patrol the roads and keep the king's peace. I had neither. The castle was a work in progress, but it was still uninhabitable. Guards? Ha! I could barely afford to pay the workmen I had already employed.

That's not to say I was broke. I still had a sizable sum stored away in a hidden strongbox, more than half of what I had received. Yet my calculations had shown me already what the restoration would cost by the time it was done, and I would have to be frugal to avoid running short before the end.

While we're on the subject, the strongbox was a work of stout craftsmanship. My father, Royce Eldridge had constructed it. Rather than being an 'iron-bound' box, this one was literally an iron strongbox. All kidding aside, he had actually made the entire thing of solid iron. In addition I had been studying magical wards, and my attempt to make it sounder had been successful. I pitied anyone that tried to steal from me. The whole thing, loaded, weighed over six hundred pounds. Breaking it open would require a team of men and with good tools and plenty of time; warded iron is amazingly strong. If someone did manage to force it, everyone in a large radius would wind up sleeping soundly for some time. Being a wizard did have its benefits.

Back to the matter at hand, protection, without guards or keep the only one left to handle our current situation was yours truly. I had no idea what might be behind the disappearances, but I was fairly confident that if I could find the perpetrators I would be able to handle them. My powers had grown during the past year. I spent several hours each day studying the books I had found, and much of the rest of my time was spent applying that knowledge.

I know, you're wondering how? With a castle to rebuild and all the other projects going on you might think I should have been pitching in... lending my back etc... The Mordecai of a year ago would have done just that, but things were different now. Every time I got involved helping with something I found more ways in which magic could assist.

Take the carpenters for example, one of their biggest time consuming tasks was drilling holes for dowels. That took a lot of time with a traditional brace and bit. I had been helping them for less than an hour before I tried applying Devon's spell to the drill bit. The one he had used to cut through my shield during our battle in Lancaster Castle. It worked brilliantly and soon I was drilling holes as quickly as you could slice butter.

That caught the eye of one of the carpenter's apprentices, who promptly asked me to do the same for him. It wasn't long before they all had me spelling their tools. The problem was that it didn't

last very long, so back to the books I went. Some additional research and I was soon learning to make wards. Wards involve creating a written sort of spell, using Lycian of course. The results last much longer than magic cast with words, but they still fade over time. There are some advantages to being self-taught however. I didn't know that the art of enchanting, the crafting of permanent magical items, had been lost several hundred years previously.

Hell, I didn't know what enchanting was, even though it was what I was attempting. Enchanting is similar to making wards, but it takes more effort, and it lasts forever. You should be familiar with the concept, magical swords, legendary goblets, unbreakable armor, that sort of thing. The problem was no one had known how to manage it for a long time.

Being a complete novice, and unaware of the possible dangers of experimentation, I had forged ahead anyway. My first attempts were simple. I affixed wards to things and made them as strong as I could. One of the kitchen knives I did is still quite sharp, but after a few weeks I could sense the gradual weakening of the magic within it.

My next idea was to make them with a secondary ward that drew energy from the world around it, from sunlight or heat for example. That worked even better, but still the spell to draw the energy showed signs of weakening over time. Once it had worn out the primary spell that depended on it would eventually fail. The spell to use heat had a wonderful side effect though; it made anything near it cold. When I had time I planned to try it on a large box for storing food... but I digress.

The solution, when I hit on it, was surprisingly simple. The wards had to be designed in a circular pattern, such that the beginning and the end were connected. Properly done it held the magic involved within the pattern indefinitely. I did make a serious mistake at one point; once I understood how to seal magic within a ring of symbols I tried it with a spell to draw energy from heat. The combination turned out to be a bad idea. After a day the item had stored more energy than the enchantment could contain and exploded spectacularly. Fortunately the object, a small paring knife, wasn't being used at the time and no one was injured, but it still gave me chills to think what might have happened.

Anyway, I've made my point, I had been learning a lot over the past year. With each new idea came better ways of doing things and more ideas. The carpenter's tools were better than ever now and I spent a considerable amount of time at the new smithy with my father. He was a wealth of ideas regarding how things could be improved and soon we had provided the stone masons with better tools for cutting and dressing stone.

So when I had ventured out last night, I had not been unarmed. I

carried the same sword my father had made for me, though I had enchanted it. The thing was so damn sharp it scared me; it could easily slice through thick wood and even metal. Dorian had tutored me some in its use and between that and my own magical protections I was reasonably sure I had little to fear from bandits or night-time kidnappers.

I had spent the better part of the night being still. Not sleeping, though I was tempted a few times. Rather I was still the way a hunter is, waiting for his prey. In the dark my eyes were largely useless but my hearing became acute, and I had other senses. I had spread my awareness as widely as possible, feeling for anything unusual in the night. I could sense animals sleeping in their dens and nighttime hunters like owls finding their food in the dark. Trees moving softly in the wind soothed my watchful spirit, while the sound of the river moving slowly by the miller's house was a balm to my ears.

I hadn't found a thing. Whether that meant the culprit was waiting for another night, or that they suspected I was watching, I had no clue.

Noon came bright and early. Surprisingly Penny still lay sleeping beside me, and I felt a twinge of guilt that she had lost so much sleep over me. She wore a soft linen sleeping gown, much to my annoyance; still it was only a small barrier. A brilliant thought occurred to me; perhaps I could make up for my misdeeds of the night before?

Her eyes popped open as my hand ran over her posterior. "What do you think you're doing?" she asked.

That was a damn stupid question, but I had learned a few things about how to talk to women since last year, "Well when I first woke I thought I must be dreaming to find such a lovely woman beside me, but now my senses tell me that you must be real." I ran my hand up the small of her back.

"Don't think you'll have me that easy," she said as she rose from the bed and started putting on her clothes. She did do me the service of letting me watch her dress... pure evil that woman.

"I still don't understand the point... we're getting married in a few months anyway, and it isn't as though we have never... well you know," I said. Since the events a year ago Penny had instituted a new policy regarding our physical relations, namely that there wouldn't be any.

"Mordecai Eldridge!" she exclaimed. Penny often used my old name when she was lecturing me. "Do you think I want to show up to my wedding in a dress sized to fit a pregnant mare?"

"I told you, I'm fairly sure I can keep that from happening, if

you'll just let me..."

"Don't you dare! I don't want you experimenting with... with... that! What if I became barren?" she declared.

"No, no... I wouldn't do anything to you! It would be purely a mechanical thing, a sort of shield to keep..."

"Don't mess with that either! I like your tools as they are and I don't trust you not to mess something up. I do want to have children after all." Clearly we had some trust issues concerning my magic.

"Fine, fine, I can wait," I replied. I wasn't really sure about that, but the argument was old. No need to go over it all again, I'd just have to bide my time and catch her at an opportune moment. Hope springs eternal. "I'm going back out tonight," I added. I figured I'd go ahead and get that out in the open ahead of time.

"I know," she answered easily, which set off a warning in my head.

"I understand your feelings, but I'm responsible for these people and I can't just sit around and do nothing," I said defensively.

"You're right."

"I'll take every precaution, and I'll be armed so I don't think I'll be in any real danger," I continued.

"I'm sure you will do everything you can."

I glared at her suspiciously, "Something tells me that your words and your intentions are two different things."

"Nope," she said, "I realize I can't keep you here when there's something dark prowling the night." She did her best to make her voice sound deep and ominous.

"Well... good then," I said. Unusual as it was, it felt good to win one now and then. After dressing we went our separate ways. She had been busy with the architect lately; overseeing the construction of the kitchens and living quarters. I spent the afternoon helping my father. He had been working to produce a serviceable portcullis for the gatehouse.

The day passed quickly and that evening I calmly got ready for my night out. I didn't have anything resembling proper armor but I hardly needed it with my magical shields. Instead I wore dark hunting leathers, buckling my sword on over them. I also carried a staff.

The staff warrants special attention. After discovering the secret of permanently enchanting things I thought I would try to recreate something I had read about in Vestrius' journal. The specific details regarding what sort of staves wizards carried long ago was lost, along with the art of enchanting. Still I was drawn to the idea and I decided to try and create something similar to the descriptions I had read in Vestrius' journal.

Supposedly the ancients had used them to channel and focus their powers to greater effect. I had no idea how they accomplished

it but I tried a few things of my own anyway. The first was to enchant the head of the staff so that it would hold any spell I put there indefinitely, sort of a flexible enchantment. I could light it and not worry about maintaining the spell. Potentially I could do other things as well, but that was all I had thought of so far. The second thing I had done was encircle the entire length with a sort of hollow shell of wards and runes. I found that if I channeled my strength along the shaft I could direct my power out to much greater distances, or focus it more powerfully at short range.

Honestly I hadn't had a need to do either so far, but I had great hopes that it would prove useful eventually. Plus it looked pretty nifty. "I'm off to save the village honey!" I shouted toward our bedroom, hoping to provoke a laugh.

"Ok, be careful," she yelled back calmly, not even bothering to step out and give me a good-bye kiss. Obviously she had resigned herself to the situation. I stepped outside, looking around and trying to decide which way to head first. Penny showed up a moment later, walking around from the other side of the house.

She was wearing a soft gambeson and a long chain shirt. She also carried a bow and a slender sword. "Um... Penny, what are you doing?" I inquired.

"I'm going out to hunt for evil-doers," she answered casually.

"You're not coming with me," I said firmly. Once in a while a man just has to put his foot down.

"That's fine, you go that way, I'll work my way south." The smile on her face was positively diabolical.

I rephrased myself, "No... I mean you're staying here."

"Nope," she replied.

She was missing the subtleties of my argument so I decided to try something more direct, "Shibal" I said, using a spell that should put her soundly to sleep.

Penny held up the amulet I had made her a few months previously, "Forget about something?" I had made it to protect her from mental assaults such as she had endured previously... such as I had just attempted.

"Goddammit, you're not going out there alone!"

"Fine, you can come with me, but try not to make noise, I don't want to scare them off," she answered. Her attitude was one of indifference.

"This isn't your job Penny," I said stubbornly.

"Like hell it's not! You may be the damned Count, but I'm about to be your wife. If you are responsible then I'm in this just as deeply as you are. Now you can go your own way or we can go together... what's it going to be?" she said with resolve. She could be really beautiful when she was determined, but don't tell her that, she's hard enough to deal with already.

In the end I let her come with me. There really wasn't any alternative, other than tying her up, which I did briefly consider. We headed north of the village, since all the missing persons had lived on that side, and found a nice quiet spot in the forest. Once we got under the trees the darkness intensified; neither moon nor the stars could be seen.

"Oof!" Penny had just tripped over a root and almost went down in a sprawl. I stifled the urge to laugh. I could have provided light but I had the wonderful excuse that we were trying to avoid tipping off our quarry. My magesight gave me a distinct advantage in the dark.

"Stop it," she said.

"What?"

"You're laughing at me... I can tell," she answered.

"I was just wondering how you're going to see to shoot that bow if something happens." It was so dark there weren't even shadows. She declined to answer so I dropped the subject and we kept walking. Soon enough we had reached my spot.

It was a location without anything to recommend it. There was nothing particularly comfortable about it, but it was in a place where, by stretching my senses I could cover most of the area that had lost people. We sat down, back to back and I began to relax. The art of sensing a large area requires a lot of effort, but most of that goes into not tensing up. I had to calm myself and let my mind expand, feeling as much as I could around me.

The first hour was the worst, after that we both gave up thinking about our daily lives and it got easier. I wasn't sure but Penny might have gone to sleep. There really wasn't anything else for her to do, and nothing could sneak up on us as we were. I could feel a field mouse moving around half a mile away.

Another hour drew slowly by and I began to wonder if this would be a repeat of the previous night. My thoughts were drifting, but my mind was still alert. If anything had moved I would have felt it, but I had no idea what I was looking for... I would learn that later. Penny had begun snoring, which probably hid the sound of its approach. Even if she had been silent I'm not sure I would have noticed. It was very quiet.

The first indication things were not as they seemed was the sound of a twig snapping not five feet behind me. The sound would not have been so surprising, except I knew there was nothing there, no animals, no life at all. I came awake suddenly and then I felt it, an absolute emptiness. It was as if something had carved a void in the air behind me, a place where nothing existed.

I stood and whirled about, the darkness was absolute so my eyes were useless; yet I could feel the empty place with my extra senses. I reached for my sword but a hand grabbed my arm. It went

through my shield as if it didn't exist and when it touched me the world changed. Everything vanished... my sight was gone, and I could sense nothing but a vast void drawing me in. It was absorbing the light within me, and crushing the light from the world as well. A few moments longer and I would have been lost.

Something knocked me sideways, breaking the contact, and the world rushed back in at me. I could sense Penny there, grappling with something so black my mind could not reveal it, something that was sapping her energy. Her life force wavered in front of me, being drawn rapidly away, like a candle guttering in a strong wind.

"Lyet," I spoke, conjuring a ball of light, and then I could see it. In the stark light I saw Penny struggling with Sadie Tanner. Ordinarily Penny would have easily overpowered the smaller girl, but now her strength was waning quickly. Whatever this thing was, it was a mockery of the girl we had known. It looked like Sadie, but the emptiness revealed by my magesight made it clear that she was nowhere within the creature we faced now.

"Sadie?" Penny exclaimed.

"I don't know what that is... but it isn't Sadie," I yelled back, and then I continued in Lycian, "Stirret ni Pyrenn!" A line of fire lanced from my outstretched hand. I had learned to focus my power in such a way that it would burn a hole through the thing... yet my fire disappeared the moment it touched the thing.

Sadie, the thing, whatever it was... looked at me then, a hideous grin on its face. With a shove it threw Penny back six or seven feet, to strike a tree, and then it reached for the ball of light I had created. As it touched my spell the light vanished, winking out as suddenly as it had appeared. I felt a sense of shock. This thing, whatever Sadie had become, consumed my magic as quickly as I had summoned it.

I drew my sword and lashed out at her even as the light disappeared. I hoped cold steel would do what magic could not. I felt the blade meet resistance and then it passed onward. Stepping back I conjured more light. My eyes were wide now; fear had replaced my confidence.

The new light showed a hideous scene; Sadie Tanner's body lay in two parts upon the ground, both still moving, struggling to reach me. I tried another fire spell and it disappeared as quickly as the first. The moment my magic touched the grotesque thing on the ground the fire winked out of existence. "Penny! Are you ok?" I called.

"Yeah, I just hit my head," she answered, sounding tired and disoriented.

I moved toward her, making a wide circle around the creature still writhing on the earth. "I think we found it," I said. What an understatement... it had found us. A thought occurred to me and I

checked my blade. To my relief the magic within it still glowed in my sight. Why hadn't it been extinguished as well? This shit just keeps getting weirder, I thought.

I reached Penny and ran my hand over her, making sure she was still in one piece. As a precaution I examined the landscape around us with my mind, and this time I was looking for holes, empty places where nothing existed. Finding none I began to relax. "I think this is the only one," I said to Penny.

"You don't sound so sure of yourself," she replied.

"I'm not. That thing walked up on us without me sensing anything." I created several more globes of light, spacing them around us at a distance of ten yards each. We wouldn't be surprised again, and then I started thinking.

I took a moment to methodically cut Sadie's body into several more parts, separating arms and legs from the rest of her. There was very little blood, and what did seep forth from the severed pieces was thick and black, like old blood that has already begun to congeal. My sword still showed no sign of being affected by her ability to consume magic. I tried my staff as well, poking the torso, and its enchantments were unaffected as well, yet when I conjured a light globe near the body it went out like a lamp that had been doused. Maybe it has something to do with the structure of enchantments, I thought. To test my theory I set a light within the head of my staff, where it would be held by my variable enchantment, and then I touched the torso with it.

Nothing happened, the light persisted; whatever it was, it could eat magic, but not enchantments. I could only guess that the rigid structure that contained their magic also protected them from being absorbed like my normal spells had been.

Penny spoke up, "As interesting as this thing is, we can't leave a bunch of twitching body parts lying around here." I loved her pragmatic nature.

"Alright, I have an idea," I replied. I gathered up some dead wood and leaves, piling them around the still moving body parts. Using my power I set the makeshift pyre ablaze, till the wood was burning brightly. The fire consumed the flesh that lay among the wood, and what magic couldn't accomplish normal fire did. We continued to add fresh wood until there was nothing left of Sadie Tanner's body. I learned an interesting lesson that night... it takes a lot of wood to burn a body completely to ash.

"What was it?" Penny asked while we watched, but I didn't have an answer. With more questions than answers we headed back home, too tired to do more that night.

Chapter 2

The sun rose entirely too early. I wish I could have found the fellow who arranged that, he obviously had a poor sense of humor. Despite our late night Penny and I both woke not long after the sun came up. I think we were both anxious.

Sleep and some early morning thinking convinced me that there had to be more of those things out there. To begin with, Sadie hadn't been like that before she disappeared, and something had to have taken her. If something similar had happened to the others that meant there were at least three more of those things out there... that we knew of. It was a chilling thought.

The only good news was that no one else had been taken, though I felt sure that there would have been, if we hadn't encountered the creature first. Penny and I discussed what had happened but neither of us could understand it. In the end we decided to keep it to ourselves to avoid a panic.

I wrote two letters, one to the Duke of Lancaster, detailing everything that had happened, the second I addressed to Dorian. I hoped he would be free to come stay with us for a while, if magic wasn't effective against this new creature his sword would certainly be more useful. After that I went looking to see if I could find a farmer or someone heading toward Lancaster.

As things worked out there wasn't anyone planning a trip that day, but I ran across Joe McDaniel and he offered to go if it was urgent. Joe was a transplant from Gododdin, the neighboring kingdom. He didn't talk much about his past, or his reasons for leaving, but I gathered it must involve the change in government there.

Technically Gododdin wasn't a kingdom anymore. The royal family had been thoroughly exterminated some time before I was born and the country was now a theocracy, controlled by a cult known as the Children of Mal'goth. Joe had never had anything good to say about them.

"I don't mind going for ya Lord Cameron," he told me, "I was planning to go in a few days anyway, to order a new cask of ale." Joe was working to build a tavern, the first Washbrook had ever seen. At the moment it consisted of a few benches scattered around his house where he sold beer in the evenings. Being a beer enthusiast myself I had thoroughly supported his efforts.

"Thanks Joe," I said, clapping him on the shoulder. Once he had gone I began walking toward my father's smithy. Someday soon I was going to have to start hiring a staff of some sort, such as regular messengers. It was quickly becoming apparent that I could no longer do everything myself anymore.

"You looked troubled son," my father commented after I came in.

He was a quiet man, which might be why he was so perceptive.

"There was trouble last night," I explained, and then I told him what had occurred the previous evening. I also described the creature's effect on my magic. Dad didn't have any magical talent of his own but he was very intelligent and I had come to appreciate his advice when I had been testing different ways to enchant things.

My story alarmed him, but you would have had to know him to tell. He had always been a difficult man to read. Rather than spend his time talking about his worries, he moved on to practical matters. "Looks like we have a lot of work to do," he said and then he walked over and drew out the stack of sheets he used when he was planning a design for something.

Naturally I was curious. "You've already got an idea?"

"You said when it touched you everything went black right?" he replied.

"Yes."

"But... Penny was still able to fight it," he reminded me.

Damn! I hadn't thought of that. The merest touch had rendered me insensible, but although it had been steadily drawing her life out she had retained the ability to struggle.

He went on, "And it wasn't able to draw the magic out of your enchantments, like the sword."

At last it came clear to me. "The amulet! It must have protected her mind even while the creature was sucking the life out of her." That thought had a lot of implications; it meant I had a way to protect people, at least partially. Penny's amulet wouldn't have saved her life, but people would be much more difficult to prey upon if they weren't immediately paralyzed at the first touch of these creatures.

"Not just the amulet Mordecai, you could enchant your clothes, or armor, to more fully protect yourself. Anything to keep them from touching you," he replied.

"There's no way I could enchant enough armor or whatnot for everyone in the village, it would take years!" I argued, for the thought was daunting.

"Not them! For you boy! If something happens to you, none of us will be able to protect ourselves." He gave me a look that spoke volumes, "You've got to start thinking like a lord and less like a footman, you're important now."

I didn't completely agree with him on that, but in any case there was no way we could afford to produce armor for everyone. Besides, no one could work, farm, cook or anything else while wearing armor all day. The idea was ludicrous, but I still wouldn't give up on the idea that we could do something for them. "Alright, I agree with you to a point, but we've still got to do something for the people."

"If I could make enough amulets..."

"You did that in silver and I'm not really set up for that sort of thing, not if you plan to make dozens," he responded.

"It doesn't have to be silver; we could do them in iron."

"That makes it easier, still it will take quite a bit of time, and the shape of it was very intricate. Could you change the shape?" Royce asked.

"Only if we engraved it instead, the symbols are the important part. When I made Penny's I made the entire pendant from the symbols before I infused it," I replied. I knew my father didn't have the right tools to do intricate engraving.

"Hah! I have it," he exclaimed. My hopes went up, for when my father set his mind to something he always found a way.

"What?" I asked.

"If you can borrow Penny's amulet, we'll make a mold, then we can cast as many as we need. How long does it take for you to do your magicking?" Royce waved his hands around comically while swaying side to side as he said this.

I gave him a hard stare, but inwardly he had me smiling, "Not long, maybe half an hour each if they're already formed." After that we got busy, though I had to do some talking to get Penny's necklace away from her, she seemed to think I planned to take advantage of her. I had no clue where she would have gotten an idea like that.

Dad set things up and assured me he would have the molds ready in another day or two, after that he would be able to make them faster than I could enchant them. I worried it might not be soon enough.

I left after that, he didn't need me so I got out of his way. I spent the morning helping the carpenters again but I was interrupted in mid-afternoon when Dorian arrived. "Ho! Mordecai!" he called up to me. At that moment I was standing on some scaffolding on the exterior of the keep.

I was relieved to see him but I hadn't expected him to arrive so soon. I yelled down to him, "How did you get here so quickly?" I began climbing down so we could speak more easily.

"I left as soon as I got your message this morning." Dorian was the most reliable of friends, the sort of man who would walk through fire if he thought it would help someone. He had already saved my life at least once before. "The description in your letter was a bit vague, but I got the impression you're dealing with some sort of monster?"

I hadn't known what to write so I hadn't been very specific, "Yeah, let's not talk about it out here. I haven't figured out what to tell the people yet and I don't want to start a panic."

He blinked at me, "Seriously, a monster?" I could see the gears in

his head turning, conjuring up creatures from childhood fairy tales. I also noted that he had come geared for war. He wore chainmail, not just the hauberk... but the leggings as well, complete with a steel cap and aventail. He had also brought both his sword and a long spear.

"I see you took me at my word. Did you really need the barding though? That must be a real pain for your horse." Barding was the term for the armor that partially covered his steed, a great black destrier.

"How should I know? I'd rather come to the party overdressed than arrive and find out later that I should have worn my chainmail knickers!" he answered. As usual his joke wasn't that funny, but I felt a bit less burdened seeing him in full armor. Dorian was the deadliest man I had ever known, and I was glad he was my friend.

Since his horse was tired (wouldn't you be after carrying all that?), we walked him over to the makeshift stables and I helped him clean and groom the massive beast. It wasn't a chore for me as I loved horses almost as much as people. While we combed him down I had a thought, "Take your armor off too, if you're going to help there are some things I can do to improve your chances."

"I'm afraid to ask," he replied, but he started shucking the armor. Once it was off he handed me a very heavy pile of mail. Luckily I was still in good shape from helping Dad now and then at the smithy. As big a man as Dorian Thornbear was the armor probably weighed around eighty pounds or more.

"Bring your sword and spear too," I added.

"I wasn't planning on leaving them behind." He gave me a look that indicated I was crazy to think he would walk about unarmed. "What are you planning to do to my armor? It's very expensive you know." He eyed me suspiciously. I never understood why he didn't trust me.

"I won't hurt your precious mail, never fear. I'm just going to improve it." I tried to give him my best 'wise and mysterious wizard' look, but he merely shook his head.

We had reached my house at this point, although according to Penny it barely deserves the name. I took him around to the back where a small shed served as my workshop. It didn't have all the neat toys Dad kept around his smithy, but I didn't need most of them for my work. My skill with magic allowed me to do a lot of things without recourse to tools. I stretched his hauberk out flat on the table.

"Just be careful, Dad gave me that," Dorian said. His father had died the year before, a fact neither of us liked to remember. I had loved Gram Thornbear too.

"When I'm done I doubt you'll ever have to worry about anyone damaging it again," I assured him. "Would you mind fetching some

water? This will take a while and I'm thirsty already." He set off to find a pitcher and I got to work. My request was half to get him out of the way so I could get started. I wasn't sure how he would react.

I took down the papers I had my notes written on, though I had done a lot of enchanting lately the designs were complicated and I didn't want to make a mistake. This one I had tested once before so I was fairly confident that it would perform as intended. Leaning over the mail I extended a finger and began tracing it along the metal rings; as it went the metal changed color, from dull grey to gold.

Dorian returned with the water, but he didn't interrupt me since he knew I was concentrating. A long while later I looked up from my work, "Still got that water?"

"Sure. For a thirsty man you took long enough to stop for a drink," he handed me a cup.

"How long has it been?" I asked.

"You've been talking to yourself and stroking my armor for about three hours now. It'll be getting dark soon," he replied.

"Damn! I didn't even realize. I'm sorry Dorian I've been poor company."

"Don't worry about it, whatever you're doing must be important. I just hope my mail still works properly." He was looking at it over my shoulder.

"Well I'm done with the hauberk now, take a look," I gestured to the table. The mail coat was gleaming. I had removed the gold coloring, which had been a temporary measure to keep from losing track of where I was in the process. The entire coat glimmered now, as though each ring had just been polished while to my eyes patterns of symbols and words still covered it. Dorian wouldn't be able to see those.

"Well it's really pretty, but battle isn't about beauty. Will it still stop a sword?"

"My friend, it will stop everything short of a ballista. It won't rust and you'll never need to oil it again," mentally I hoped that it would improve the smell as well. If you've ever been around men wearing chain armor you know what I mean, rust and sweat are not a good combination. "More importantly, it should also prevent the thing I ran into last night from sucking the life out of you."

A voice came from the doorway, "Aren't you boys getting hungry?" Penny had returned and she carried a basket. I was pretty sure it held food of some sort.

"In a little while, I still have to finish here." I motioned toward Dorian's weapons, his steel cap, and the chain leggings.

"I'm certainly hungry... I haven't eaten since lunch," Dorian answered. It was rare for him to miss a meal.

"At least one of you has some sense then. How much longer are