

The Sorcerer's Apprentice Apprentice

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EXCRETION is the better part of valor. I can hear the Ye Olde Farte bellowing that corny old line, clear as a bell down all these years. He'd take a drink out of his tankard, the suds would run down his gray and greasy beard and he'd bellow in that baritone and wake up all the roosters within earshot of the tavern. Ye Gods, the bastard could get drunk, Sir Harry Springraff. He taught me how to drink, eat, cheat, beat the retreat, and be merry.

Aye—get that spelling right there, Grompole, you lice-ridden dung-priest and take care not to spill that damned ink again. I'm trying to write me memoirs, not paint the solar floor black.

Where was I? Oh, right. Springraff. Yes, and I suppose I should just take the recollections as they roll, because at my creaky age you take what you get, Grompole—and if you want to see another wedge of wormcheese and bottle of wortwine, you'd best scribble this tale down correctly. Can't do damned much in my dotage, but I do enjoy taking out my royal execution ax, and it takes my shaking hands a few whacks to hit the neck...

Excretion! Aye, and this story of I, Vincemole Whiteviper, and Harry Springraff and how we plumbed the depths of Beyond and I lost what little innocence I had left to me.

So, yes! That better part of valor, excretion. This story starts with that fundamental product.

No... not the Harry saying it.

Harry in the latrine, making it.

* * *

"Zounds!" said Sir Harry.

"Are you all right, m'lord?" I said, obsequious little cur as usual. Springraff enjoyed these little niceties, even though he knew as well as I they were as packed with heated air as his own to superiors.

"Just freezin' my arse off. Hand me another wad."

I had a pile of daintily scribbled manuscript, complete with monkish illuminations on their margins. I crumpled one up and handed it through a window in the latrine to m'lord to aid him in his nether wipes.

There was a long silence.

"Zounds!" The bellow shook the wooden rafters of the outhouse.

"Another, m'lord," I said, teeth chattering. I was starting to feel like handing him a leaf of the prickly-pine trees growing behind the inn.

The door banged open. Sir Harry billowed out, surrounded by winds of less than glory. He clenched the manuscript page I'd just handed him and waved it toward the heavens as though in praise.

"Ah ha! Viper, we shed misfortune!"

I held my nose and grimaced.

Of course we had to depart the inn under the cloak of night, for we owed a week's worth of back rent to say nothing of Sir Harry's jug fees. However, Sir Harry was nothing but smiles and flashing teeth and comparative sobriety.

"What is it?" I had asked in a nasal voice as I backed away from the malignant outhouse.

"Prime pickings, Vincey Viper. An ancient doddering sorcerer lives some hundred leagues away in

a dilapidated manse filled with treasure," said Sir Harry, thumping the vellum with a forefinger.

"And you know, Vincey, I am a mongoose around sorcerers. A mongoose!"

I confess my own bowels felt a little loose at these words, for I'd heard many a dread tale about sorcerers' wrath, and those that I'd experienced had not left me with feelings of warmth and love. In fact, I rather loathed sorcerers—a feeling that had not diminished. However, in truth, we had no money and I had not allied myself to this thief and cutpurse to learn how to sit in a tavern all day and guzzle brew. It would seem that the next phase of my lessons were dawning.

We found a carriage in a livery outside of town which I stole with the burglary skills I'd learned the year before. Sir Harry boarded it like royalty and thumped into the back seat, immediately blessing me with his snores as we pulled off into the night toward the Southwestern Road. There were two close calls with whickersnipes along the way, but say this about Sir Harry, lazy as he is, when in a jam, he can toss knives or slash a sword better than any man I'd seen before. No better way to distract whickersnipes than to disembowel one and then send it back to its fellows to devour. A few changes of carriages later (and a gift of the last carriage to a final lucky livery) and we were in the town mentioned in the manuscript, one Ogretown. Sir Harry and I took lodgings at the local inn, The Plucked Rodent. Sir Harry employed his stately airs and Brick-in-the-Box scam to win the innkeeper over, and we were soon at our trenchers with a goodly amount of princely honey air and goose stew, relaxing from the journey.

"A day or two of bed rest for *moi*, Vincey, I think," said Sir Harry, mopping up a puddle of succulent grease with a bit of bread. "Nothing better to calm the nerves after a long journey. Meantime, you might employ some of the skills I have taught you to inquire about a certain manse near the Hellmouth Mountains."

I was happy for the rest but not happy about the name. Hellmouth Mountains? Springraff had not used that name before, but having glimpsed the jagged peaks and dark foreboding shadows of that mountain range as we neared this town, I could not argue with the appellation. Nor did the distant black clouds, nor the thunder and lightning grumbling and spitting like an angry demon. Nor the smell of dead leaves and touch of premature winter.

All this could have been a sunny day near a mild lake for all of Sir Harry's concern. He was simply principally interested in diving inside a tavern's keg. And he was well into one, as it happened, when who should make an appearance but none other than our sorcerer—along with that sorcerer's apprentice—making themselves known in a most magical, but alas, startling way that caused Sir Harry to nearly choke and his moon of a face to go purple as cheap wine.

Have I spoken yet of Sir Harry's appearance? Perhaps, perhaps not. Nevertheless, I should, as just considering him brings back those long lost days, and as I think of that moon face, I see the scene better. The Sir Harry Springraff I knew then was a tall, round bluff man with long curly hair that he took care to wash and groom even when the rest of him was unbathed and stained with food and drink. He was fat, but he was strong, too, as though for all his wasted days somehow he still got in enough adventure to exercise him—usually running away. He wore long leather boots that it was my chore, as apprentice, to black and buff to a shine, and he wore a uniform of the Northern Hussars, not because he was particularly proud of his days belonging to their number but because he liked the epaulets, the shiny buttons, the flummery. A large leather hat he wore was made to hold a feather. Sometimes it did. Sometimes it did not. Now, as it straddled the oaken table where we sat, it did not as the ostrich plume it had sprouted had been lost in the tussle with those whickersnipes on the Southwestern Road.

It was upon this grand hat that Sir Harry spewed his mouthful of ale. Fortunately, I was not eating or drinking, but to tell you the truth, with the event, I was looking not to vomit up the victuals of which I had just partaken.

We had not noticed the sorcerer and his apprentice when they entered. After all, it being the dinner hour, many locals and travelers had entered and were enjoying the repast with us.

Actually, come to think of it, that was not entirely true. I had noticed the apprentice, for she was a beautiful young girl and though only age fourteen, what Harry hadn't taught me about attractive females I

sensed with the baser parts of my nature which even then already offered a wide arena.

She had long corn-silk hair, immaculately combed and aflow down perfect shoulders, bowing a bit over comely breasts, and framing a soft and perfect complexion, a perfect home for azure eyes, full mouth, and a diminutive nose. It was I who first noted the beginning of the events that nearly sent me straight to hell.

The man she was with seemed old and bent and wore a dark hood and robe, so I could not see his features. The two had taken seats so that I had no view of the old man, but saw enough of the girl to keep my interest piqued. They were supping and speaking in quiet voices when a drunk approached them, weaving and slopping a goblet of brandy. I did not hear the discourse, but I did notice that the drunk leered at the girl as coarsely as did my heart. He wobbled and hovered and wobbled and hovered for some time and then he made a grab for the girl's beautiful breasts. She shrieked and pushed him away, prompting M'Lord Harry's attention—

Then the man in the robe hoisted a wizened finger, aimed it at the man—and let forth a blast of dazzy white energy that crackled and cracked like a flaming whip. The bolt bored straight through the man's cuirass, through his chest, and out his back. The drunk stood there for a moment with a hole so big in him I could see through to the wall—then he keeled over leaving only a ghost of smoke in his wake and the rapidly spreading smell of charred flesh and magic.

I turned away, the image of the mage-blasted spine stump and cauterized heart half burned into my eyes. I looked up to Sir Harry—and he was grinning.

"I believe, my friend, that we have found our sorcerer," Sir Harry took another drink while I digested this information and looked back at the scene of destruction. The man in the cowl barked a quick order to his beautiful assistant, and they immediately settled back to finish their supper, the man speaking urgently to the girl in soft tones. The room returned to its general conversational hum while the innkeep and a barman pulled the dead drunk off the floor and dragged him outside.

I could not eat or drink. I could only think, *This is the individual who is going to provide us with treasure*. The thought made me so frightened I wanted to run up to my room and take to my bed—but I saw again the beautiful face of the girl and again I was transfixed.

"Hmm. You like that lass, eh?"

I sighed. I turned back to the mug of ale, which I sipped. "She has beauty and grace, Sir Harry. She is angelic."

"Pah! The sap in you sings pretty songs. She's just a woman, no better or worse than any other—with a fetching face and form perhaps. You're a young strap though, Vincey. You'll come to understand soon enough." I saw dazzles of thoughts dancing in his eyes. "But I see she is very young. And you, Viper, you are not without your charm."

Now, Grompole, you must understand—was up to dastardly deeds already at age fourteen—but I was still wet behind the ears at that time and my experience with women had been limited to the tramps and whores that hung about Sir Harry and diddled with me from time to time for nothing. The sight of such astonishing beauty made me quite weak about the knees and between the ears.

"What! Sir Harry, I could never approach such a fair maiden without falling on my face with clumsiness!"

The dazzles in Sir Harry's eyes paraded into a calculation, procured a sum. "Oh, you are filled with inspiration, sirrah. We must act fast, however, before they take their leave... and Vincemole... please do not take these next moments personally."

"Pardon—" I began, but before I could say one more word, Sir Harry slapped me across the face. I was hurled back out of my chair, and I rolled arse over elbow onto the floor.

"Knave!" bellowed Sir Harry. "Scoundrel!"

My lord got up and bellied toward me. He bent over and he hoisted me up and put his face to mine, his voice trumpeting all over the room so that not one ear could have ignored it.

"You'll listen to me and take orders, you pile of worthless skee-crunk's dung." He dragged me a few

yards. "And I'll get some honor and craft and intelligence into you if I have to kick it up your bum!"

Thereupon, Sir Harry turned my dazed self around, bent me over in a particular direction and kicked me in the backside with great power. I was still in a state of shock, and the added impact sent me deeper. The next thing I knew I was windmilling forward, trying to keep my balance—and then, the next moment, I was crashing into a wooden table. Plates of stew and containers of drink dashed all about, but mostly onto me. I was flung over the table and onto the ground, where I lay on my back, staring up mutely, gasping. I found myself staring up into a dark cowl and into the red eyes of a bald man who looked none too happy about all this. It was when I recognized him as the sorcerer who had just tunneled a wide channel in the drunken pest that I started to beg.

"Oh, sir! Don't blast me! I'm so sorry. Please accept my ardent apologies!"

"Uncoordinated sprout!" grumbled the sorcerer, squinting down at me through his dark and wrinkled face.

"Bah!" crowed Sir Harry. "Apologies, apologies. Send him to hell if you like, Sir Magician—but take my word, he's not worth the effort."

The sorcerer sniffed. "Good help is hard to find." He seemed to be glowering toward the young girl.

"Aye. Here—let me take you to the barman. We'll clean you off, I'll buy you a drink—and get you a fresh plate of stew."

The sorcerer nodded slowly. "You are lucky to have a good-hearted master, young worm."

With that, he lifted his robe like a dainty skirt and followed the friendly face of M'Lord Sir Harry Springraff, whose Hail and Well Met Demeanor always put men and women and even sorcerers at ease.

I groaned and tried to get up, even as the rest of the room, laughing derisively, went about their business.

"Are you all right?"

I blinked. It was the beautiful girl, kneeling beside me. This close I could see that she was a few years older than me, perhaps eighteen, wearing young womanhood perfectly on her chest and hips. This close I could also smell her—cherry blossoms and rose hips and ginger and femininity—and her beauty and warm eyes were so intense I could barely breathe.

"Not really. Bit winded, I confess," I said, and I realized that Harry's blows had put me in that respiratory dilemma—not my new friend.

"Here. Let me help you up."

I took her hand and managed to get to my feet.

"I'm drinking ginger beer—very bracing. Would you like some?"

She held a glass forward to me that she'd managed to save from my plunge. "Thank you."

I sipped it.

"You have a harsh master—just as I do," she stated simply. "There must be some sympathy for such as us occasionally—or we go mad or become as harsh and nasty as our employers."

"Thank you."

"You are a servant?" she asked.

"An apprentice, actually," I said. "Same difference, I suppose."

She smiled. "Yes, I can agree with that. I am an apprentice myself, and it is no easy position." She sighed and looked away wistfully as if gazing into dreams grown murky and distant. I felt a richness, a depth to her soul—a beauty about this young woman so much deeper than just her earthly shell. I wanted to rip off her clothes right there and have her!

Or did I? Was there a soft spot that blossomed in Vincemole Whiteviper's heart then? Of course not, you nincompoop. It was in his head!

Aye! She was a looker, all right and I was all aquiverty just being close to her. But even at fourteen I knew what was up about sex—and what was up in my nethers! Treasure is all very well, but there's nothing like pleasure.

"We both have hard taskmasters," I said sorrowfully. "But I just study to be a knight! Yours is a sorcerer. Do you study, then, to be a magician of some sort?"

"Yes. I am an apprentice to the lore of magic. I cannot hope to become as great as my master—but I have my reasons to be as good as I can be." Again, those eyes seemed shielded in mystery and regret. Suddenly, though, they came alive, flickering with interest. "You, though. A knight! How exciting. You must have many more adventures than I could ever dream of!"

"Adventures! Oh, yes! Lord Harry and I have great adventures in lands far and near!"

"Yes! What sort of adventures? What do you do? Quest for the Holy Quail? Destroy evil punsters preying on innocent peasants?"

"Oh, yes," I said, already my master's student. "And we regularly save fair maidens from their prisons, under the control of evil ogres—and take them out for picnics in the sunshine. In fact, I would do a good deed now as a knight's apprentice and take you out tomorrow by the river!"

She shook her head. "That is very kind of you, but my ogre would never allow it. You are a sweet young man, though. I enjoy talking with you..."

Damn, I thought. The fish was on the hook—and who should be approaching now but the sorcerer, glowering at me as though he'd like to be able to see the wall through my smoking chest.

"Relfalyn," he said. "Do not consort with this baggage. He is below you!"

"What's your name?" she whispered, smiling apologetically at me.

"Vincemole."

"You are sweet, Vincemole. I shall always remember you."

She squeezed my hand, and then she got up and moved obediently to the sorcerer's side.

"Stay away from him," said the sorcerer. "And his master as well. They are thieves. I caught the bastard with his hand in my purse!" The sorcerer took hold of Relfalyn's arm and guided her toward the door in a flurry of robes and mutters of curses in a language I'd never heard.

Still bemused, still hurting from the boot I'd taken and unable to get up for fear of showing off the length of my arousal for Relfalyn, I remained on the bench. Just at the door the young woman turned around, looked at me, and bade a faint good-bye with a gesture of her fingers.

A moment after the door slammed, Sir Harry strode up, looking pleased with himself. He set the table up in front of me, waved at a barkeep for a couple of flagons of drink and then set beside me. I sulked a bit.

"You talked to her, then, eh? A pretty piece—wish I'd got a peek down her robe!" he said jovially.

"You're lucky, m'lord, you're not on the floor burned to a crisp!" I said. We'd known each other well enough after these years that I could speak my mind.

"Pah! He shot his stuff with the drunk," said Sir Harry. "Didn't mean to try a pilfer but couldn't help meself. Did get the information I needed—as well as a doubloon." He flashed me a shiny gold coin. "Chap's name is Beeulberdun the Visage, Sorcerer Rank Aqua. He's got that pile near the mountains, all right, and he's cookin' something up, I feel it in these wizened bones. 'Course that's neither here nor there for us, then, is it? We're after more of this!" The coin flashed as he flipped it, caught it, and placed it safely in a hidden sealed bag where he kept his valuables. "Aqua's the sorcerer claque that explore the Scintillant Dimensions."

"After a pickpocketing, you think he's going to let you within a league of his castle?" I said.

"Oh, I should think not, which is a shame. However, I don't think I had any intention of going." He winked at me and nudged me with a chunky elbow. "She's a beauty all right. Do I espy the mopey adolescent pangs of ardor in my apprentice's face! Why, I approve. We shall be here for as long as we like. I showed the innkeep my doubloon, so he knows we have money." He smiled evilly. "Plenty of time for a man of the world to teach his young crony the Way of the Woo!" He eagerly grabbed his flagon and drank deeply. He licked his lips clean. "Plenty of time, dear Vincey Whiteviper, for a young pair of pants to chase a young skirt!"

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I confess I was a roil of emotion, and therefore most likely did not use my head. Although the danger was quite clear and I would have very much liked to simply leave this place, I could not get the lovely face of Relfalyn out of my mind. And so, the next thing I knew, a new day had dawned. Sir Harry was sleeping off his keg of spirits, and I was legging up the pathways through a forest which led to the mountains and a certain sorcerer's castle—my head teeming with beery instructions on pursuing true love's ardorous whatever.

The forest thinned, giving way to a field of boulders as the path narrowed. As I passed a hill that hid my view of the town, daintily tucked away down in the valley, I was given a good view of my destination.

The castle looked like a copse of mushroom trees, with ragged canopies, balustrades, balconies, and crenellations more like nature's bumps and lumps than the work of mankind. Cupolas angled out at jagged junctures, connected by webs of spun rock and mineral. I would not have been surprised to see giant spiders hanging down, waiting for innocent prey—although, come to think of it, I was soon to encounter much worse than giant spiders. As I approached the castle, the air seemed to thicken with cold and the very nature of the atmosphere seemed to distort the angles of the structure. Or perhaps, I thought as I puffed along, perhaps it was clearing up the true view of this monstrosity.

It was all I could do not to simply turn tail, scurry back, and inform Sprigraff that ferocious dragons guarded the gates to the castle and it was a hopeless cause. However, though already cowardly, I was also much younger and dumber at that age, and also my master well knew how to motivate all three legs of an apprentice. In truth, I could not get Relfalyn out of my mind.

No dragons or any other unearthly guardians were here, I noted. There were, however, several doors. One grand gothic entrance stood central. However, so imposing was this that some instinct told me to try another. Around the side I went and found another door of oak, set against the stone. I knocked, and when there was no reply, I knocked again.

With a sigh, I was about to leave and try another door when a spy hole opened. "Vincemole!" said a voice. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you. We barely had a chance to speak, and I thought we should talk. It is a heavy burden to be an apprentice. I thought, for a short while, Relfalyn, I might help you and be your apprentice!"

It was a speech that Sir Harry had given me and it worked. She laughed. "Oh, but you shouldn't be here."

"Is your master about?"

"Up in his tower. I'm doing some chores down here."

"When will he descend?"

"At dusk."

"Then there is plenty of time. I can help you at your chores!"

There was a moment of silence. Then the door opened.

"Very well, Vincemole. I hope you enjoy being an apprentice sweeper."

She was wearing a simple dress and had her hair tied up by a kerchief, trying her very best to look like a maid. However with her perfect complexion and her slender and yet vital figure, she still looked like a princess to me.

"You are a funny one, Vincemole," she said as she found me a broom, "but I confess I am rather lonely and you are not hard to look at." She giggled. "Besides you are rather sweet."

She led me to a room which appeared to be a large dining hall. She gave me a broom, which was made of straw tied around a long stick. We swept and we chatted. I soon learned that Relfalyn was an orphan and the castle was all she knew. There was an older servant woman who lived in the castle who had helped raise her. Now she was away for a few months, visiting distant relatives. So far, she informed me, she hadn't learned very much at all about magic and felt frustrated, although she had been very well schooled, could read and write, and knew a number of languages. Now she served as Beeulderdun's

secretary as well as maid and cook, positions which she did very well at, though she was becoming bored and wished to see more of the world than the occasional jaunts to the village.

Sir Harry had said that there was no hurry and that I should not be aggressive about anything upon the first visit, which was to start gaining her trust. However, upon finishing sweeping and putting the brooms back in a large closet, I soon found out that Relfalyn was not as shy as she'd seemed at the inn.

"Dear Vincey, do not think me coarse and awful. I know that you are young, but we must all grow up," she said, putting her arms around me. "Kiss me, Vincey. I would know what it is like to kiss a boy!"

The next thing I knew her lips were on mine, and her tongue was in my mouth and I wasn't doing the kissing. In truth, I'd stolen kisses before from a very young age, at the instruction of my master, so I knew what was what, although it took me a moment to get my bearings. Soon enough, I had my elder youth moaning and sighing and breathing hard, and although now I realize I was quite clumsy, the girl acted as though she'd been gifted with a godling's lovemaking. As I have mentioned, I had my share of diddling with drunken whores, but let me tell you, I was a virgin to pure youthful ardor. Relfalyn whispered things she'd read in books and was delighted to discover that once we'd accomplished one of these and lay naked on the closet floor in each other's arms, once a few minutes of rest had elapsed, the necessary bits of me were ready for other activities. By the time she set me back on the path for home, I was exhausted—but my head was spinning with love.

Later, Sir Harry held his nose when he beheld me and bought me a hot bath. Then we had a man-to-boy talk and I knew a little more about what I needed to know to delight young maidens. "Aye, Vincemole. You'll have her wrapped around your little Whiteviper!"

The next day I returned to the castle. Relfalyn advised me that Beeulderdun was in the tower again, but that there were floors to be mopped. If I helped her to mop, we might have time together in the broom closet again.

I mopped. We mopped another large room, this one some kind of .function room empty of furniture save for a great couch and two chairs by a fireplace, so it was easy enough. I asked about the other rooms, for Sir Harry had suggested that I explore for caches of treasure. However, she told me I shouldn't go anywhere she wasn't, for there were "shadow-gasms" in the castle that could be dangerous to strangers. We then went to the closet and found some other sorts of "gasms."

I attempted the maneuver Sir Harry had suggested. For a moment I thought I had killed Relfalyn, for she screamed and then she passed out. She revived, however, but was too exhausted for further play, which gave me the opportunity to inquire about the sorcerer and the castle. I learned soon enough that Sir Harry had been right... Beeulderdun the Visage was the sort of sorcerer who explored different "dimensions"—that is, worlds unlike ours that are somehow connected to ours by membranes impermeable to normal beings, but accessible through various levels of the proper magic. She herself had been utilized as a youngster to squeeze into small apertures, obtain objects, gems, and gee-gaws according to the instruction of her master. I suggested that there must be much of interest that had been obtained by Beeulderdun over the years and she said that he indeed kept much of it, and she supposed by her reading that it was worth many fortunes. The sorcerer from time to time would journey away with a box, cash it in, trade for what he needed, and then return. In fact, as it happened, he was leaving the very next day—which, she suggested, would give us much time not only to clean the castle but also to perfect our maneuvers. In fact, she said, she knew of a book she might study this very night—

When I returned to the village inn, I tingled all over, as much because of what would happen tomorrow as what had happened today. Sir Harry was overjoyed to hear that the sorcerer was leaving and that indeed there was treasure to be had.

"I told ye! I told ye, lad!" He patted his bulbous nose. "The nose knows!"

He restrained his drinking that night, and arose the same time as I did and accompanied me to the castle. Relfalyn was startled to see him, but I explained that Sir Harry was particularly good at polishing furniture, the task for much of the sorcerer's period of absence, and that he had volunteered to help us so that we could spend much time together. Sir Harry's charm and smile quickly allayed other suspicions,

and her own eagerness to apply her own book discoveries to our persons overcame any trepidation. Sir Harry fortunately had charms, he said, that would protect him against any "shadow-gasms" while he went about the task of polishing furniture.

I confess, Relfalyn did not do much of that. Her breast was heaving so with eagerness, and I responded with ardent glances to the degree that when Sir Harry suggested over his pot of polish and cloth that he had things under control and we should take a break, we dashed for the closet.

Relfalyn's discoveries involved a great deal of exercise and contortions on my part, but they were not without reward. I thought at times I would burst with passion—and other times I was sure exactly that was happening. It was betwixt the one and the other when the closet door suddenly opened and an amazingly bright light fell upon parts of me where light usually never shone.

Relfalyn gasped—but not for the right reason. I scrambled off her and stood up, embarrassing myself further, shielding the light with a hand.

"How dare you!" I cried. "I'll have you know," I said, "I am skilled in both fighting and magical techniques!"

"Oh, excellent!" said the sorcerer. "You'll be needing both where you'll be going soon!"

I managed to get some clothes on, as did Relfalyn, and we followed Beeulderdun out to the kitchen, per *his* terse instructions. There we found Sir Harry in a chair, tied securely by a number of ropes.

The sorcerer looked remarkably different from what I remembered. Instead of old and craggy and sour, he seemed spry and strong and vital. His glower was becoming a satisfied smirk as he told me to sit in another chair. The moment my rear touched wood, ropes rose up and tied themselves around me, fastening unnecessarily tightly. Relfalyn looked confused and embarrassed and fearful—but withdrawn once more, as she had looked when I first saw her.

"Relfalyn," said the sorcerer. "Go and prepare for a Crossing."

Her eyes filled with alarm.

"But you said..."

"And bring sufficient supplies for two companions who will be joining you."

She looked about to object, but the eyes of the sorcerer held such anger and force, she did not bother. She turned and scurried away. To think that one moment I was in her arms—and now I was in the arms of coarse hemp!

"I am still confused, sir!" said Sir Harry, his tone and demeanor bluff and dignified. "As I told you, I was here merely to help my young friend polish furniture."

"You were here to steal, villain!" said the sorcerer. "I caught you in my treasure room."

"There was much to polish there, sir!" said Sir Harry haughtily. "And as for my companion—clearly your apprentice seduced him. Have you no shame! He is barely into puberty. Abuse! I say. You are lucky if I do not bring this before a court of law somewhere. Now let us both go and I shall not make an issue of it—although a small monetary remuneration would not be amiss, under the circumstances."

The sorcerer actually smiled. "Oh, I have bagged exactly what I need. I knew it! I sensed it." His gaze slashed across us both. "You an old tub of cowardly lard—but with cunning and experience." The eyes stopped on me. "And you—more of the same, yet with a remarkable potential destiny. I knew I could make good use of you. Alas, you may well die in the process, but at least you'll know it was in an excellent cause."

"Die?" said Springraff in a high-pitched squeak. He cleared his throat and went for another stab at his usual imposing tenor. "Die? I'll have you know, sirrah, that as servants of the King of Hubbubnia, should we not report, a garrison of soldiers will be dispatched with orders to execute instantly anyone who has visited harm upon us."

"Indeed!" I said, trying to appear as bluff and haughty but withering again under that serpentine stare.

"Save your nonsense. I know who you are! Do you forget I am a master of arts dark and light and

magical? Do you not think that even without my many years of experience I cannot see into your larceny, your chicanery. Why, you stink not just of ale, Sir Harry—you stink of theft. You, you scoundrel, perhaps have even stolen your personality from your betters."

"Nonsense," said Sir Harry. "You merely shake your spear!"

"In any case, let me give you the bright side of this situation you are in. We might all benefit. You see, you could well come out of this with your pockets bulging with jewels if you do as I say and follow directions. I knew I could never get you up here to help me without your greed leading you, but I knew, you see, that treasure tasted best with treachery—and you, Sir Harry, run in the opposite way of danger."

"I take it," said Sir Harry, not without a gulp in his voice.

"That we have a task ahead of us. And danger to our persons is involved."

"Danger to your persons, danger to your souls—" said the sorcerer. "And that seems too mild a word for what awaits you."

Sir Harry turned to me. "I should never have followed your dastardly plan, evil midget. But I am stupid and helpless under the thumb of your power!"

Beeulderdun the Visage smiled and shook his head.

My legs ached, and the rope around my arms itched. I leaned against a wall watching as the sorcerer leaned against the opposite wall, running a hand over the surface of a stone wall opposite. Beside him was an open window with a view of distant jagged mountains, dark and filled with spurts of lightning.

Relfalyn stood beside the still half-tied Sir Harry and myself. She had changed into leather jerkin and boots and looked every inch a strong adventurer. Only her face revealed a reluctance and a fear as though she well knew what was ahead, and was not confident of the future.

"Need I explain?" the sorcerer said as he worked. "Perhaps not, but I shall exercise my tongue anyway. You are quite correct, Sir Harry Springraff. I am a Dimension Diver. I quest for the secrets of neighboring dimensions. Oh, the riches in knowledge and power that therein lie! Alas, I do not often venture into many of the dimensions, for to do so would be possible doom for myself. And so I employ assistants to do my work for me—and engage freelancers for special tasks. And every once in a while I come across a scintillant dimension in time and space congruent with our own that even the bravest, the boldest, the heartiest of adventurers cannot or will not explore properly." He raised an eyebrow significantly. "I have found one such!"

I looked over to Sir Harry. His usual red complexion had become the color of a drowned earthworm. "I fear, Sir Sorcerer," he said, "that I am allergic to other dimensions. I fall into catatonic states the moment I step into one and am of no use to anyone. The medallion around my neck indicates this and other allergies, if you care to look."

"Pah. Stuff and nonsense." The sorcerer found the space he was looking for. From his robes he took out a small crooked dagger. The pointed end of this he inserted into a chink in the stones. He twisted. He turned. He dug. He then extracted from his voluminous robes a crowbar. This he pushed halfway into the crack. He applied pressure. Suddenly, a door-shaped shiver of sparkles spread out upon the wall. A ghost door opened and I could see through it and through the solid rock into another world.

That it was another world, another dimension if you will, I did not doubt, as I noted profound differences betwixt here and there. However, much more immediate was the sight that stretched directly in front of us. Between this world and on the cusp of the other there appeared to be an antechamber. Of marble were its arches and full filigreed were dazzling tapestries picturing amazing elongated representations of fantastic beasts. On the floor were a number of human corpses in various stages of decomposition. Flung about were shattered swords, shields, and armor.

"You will be given weaponry and supplies to last for two days as we count time," said the sorcerer.

"You will have better luck than these hapless fellows, be sure, for not only have you more cunning and talent—you shall be accompanied by my apprentice, Relfalyn, who is well versed in the odd angles of the Outer Scintillants, having survived many herself."

I looked at my darling one. She looked back blankly, gnawing on a lip. She did not look particularly self-confident despite all that experience and the thought of spending two days with me clearly did not excite her one jot.

As for Sir Harry, the bastard son of a bar-sponge looked as though he were about to faint. Nor could I much blame him. Not only was the smell of the dead adventurers in this antechamber a bit much for those who favored the easy life, but the angles and textures and colors of this dimension were askew. I would call it somewhat of a double-vision effect, only at once more subtle and more outrageous. The immediate sense, however, was of the oblique, the obtuse, the alien, containing a heavy malignant element.

Sir Harry's mouth was quivering. I asked the question that he was doubtless attempting to ask.

"Just what is it that you want us to procure from this place?"

The sorcerer's smile increased. "Intelligent lad! I almost forgot the most important part! Well, now, this dimension seems to be a series of boxes. Boxes connected to boxes. Boxes within boxes and boxes without boxes. In fact, a maze of boxes. Now somewhere—and not all that far by my instruments and reckoning, there is a chamber wherein there will be an altar. Now upon this altar will be a book, and its printing is done in the blood of the Eldest Ones. It is this volume I seek and nothing more. Any baubles or oddments that you pick up along the way, you shall be free to keep. The book, however, you shall bring to me."

"And once we bring it to you, you will let us be on our way."

"Oh, yes. You must only promise to pay in full your innkeeper, for he is my friend. Then you may go spend your money far away—and the farther away, mostly likely the better. In the meantime, good luck."

He pulled Sir Harry up to the entrance of the dimension and pushed him over the edge with his foot. Then he dragged me into the same position and I rolled in. As soon as I hit the floor, the ropes came loose and limp. By the time I was able to kick myself up and free, however, Relfalyn stepped through, our supplies were tossed in, and the door began to close again.

"You are hasty, sir!" said Sir Harry. "There are many other questions we need to ask to effectively complete this vital mission. Perhaps over dinner and a bottle of port—"

"Ask Relfalyn. She is my apprentice and she will speak to me," said the sorcerer. With that, the portal shut tight, with the sound very much like the sticking of a cork in a wine bottle.

At my age now, it seems foolish to lie about the past. However of all the things I've done over the years, the vile things, the nasty things, the deliriously awful things—I'd much rather blather about them than this.

So what are you looking at, you miserable excuse for a cretin? Very well! I cried, Grompole. Mind you, I didn't blubber. And you have to remember I was still just a boy, only fourteen years old. Standing there amongst those rotting bodies and skeletons with Gods know what kind of horrors awaiting me in this box dimension, I was upset. I felt trapped and betrayed. All I had wanted to do was to get close to another human being—not another damned world!

"Oh, Vincey," said Relfalyn. "I'm so sorry." She put her sweet arms around me, and I could feel her warm tears touch my cheek. I felt a touch of comfort assuage my vulnerable heart.

The next thing I heard was a loud honk. I looked up and who should be blowing their nose into a handkerchief but Springraff. Springraff had sprung a leak himself and now was sobbing away pitifully. "We're going to die. We're all going to die." He came and put his arms around us in a miserable little huddle of boo-hoos.

This lasted perhaps one full second. The next thing I knew, Relfalyn put a hard elbow into Sir Harry's midriff and he backed off. "Keep your hands to yourself, lecher!" she said.

She stepped back, suddenly dry-eyed and starchy. "And get yourselves together. What sort of successful thieves and cutpurses are you? Take it from me," she said, her voice as steely as the sword she drew. "We'll have plenty of time to bawl if we make it to the end of this nonsense. We all have talents for survival. You think we brought you up here because you were total losers?"

I confess, I was stunned. I was a stranger to the quixotic in women and how fast their emotions can flash from disintegration to cold resolve. I also admit that I had fallen for the impression that Relfalyn was an innocent party to this tender trap.

"You—you knew Beeulderdun would be back!"

"I thought it a possibility." She shrugged. Then she smirked a bit. "We had our fun. Perhaps there'll be more. But I was raised for this kind of thing, Vincey." Her eyes glinted with a diamond hardness beyond her age. "And there are rewards. This is a difficult dimension, however. Look at the fools who never even made it out of this room."

"Why is that?" said Sir Harry, his voice quavering.

"Survival skills afore," said the suddenly soldierly maiden in leather. "Here comes the reason, Sir Harry. And the first barrier to our goal."

Through the door stepped a giant woman with long silver hair, carrying a double-edged ax. "Halt!" she said.

"We're going nowhere," said Sir Harry.

"Who dares to enter our world from the riffraff quadrants?" snarled the woman.

Sir Harry put his handkerchief away. His chest puffed out. "Riffraff? You see before you scholars. We journey for enlightenment. Is there a crime in that!"

"Scholars?" The giant woman seemed confused.

"We seek *The Book of the Eldest*."

Her eyes narrowed. "Ah. Not scholars then in search of knowledge for its own sake or for the sake of selfless enlightenment. No, the usual trash in search of power and riches as viewed through your particular perspective. Right! You shall then have to answer a riddle. Give me the correct answer and you will gain entry.

"What rises when the head is taken away?"

"Oh, yes! I have the answer," said Sir Harry approaching the woman. "I can only think it must be a sword. Yes, that would seem to be the only solution."

Before the giant woman could think to even raise her ax, with a snicker-snack Sir Harry jumped up and cut off her head. Such was the suddenness of this fat and normally torpid, slothful man that it caught the Guardian of the Dimension totally off guard.

"Hmm," said Sir Harry. "Not you, 'twould seem."

"A pillow," said the head. "That's the answer. You didn't have to get literal."

Then it died.

"Now, madam," said Sir Harry. "Would you care to direct us onward?"

Relfalyn was looking at Sir Harry in an odd and perhaps newly appreciative way. "Your guile and cunning has a ruthlessness about it!"

"Ale is sweet and life is sweeter," said Sir Harry. "Stand not in my way blocking me from either."

Respectfully, Relfalyn gestured and we were on our way, stepping over the cooling giantess.

The next room looked much the same as the other, save that there were no bodies upon the floor. Alas, there were no treasures either. Each of the walls held a door. Relfalyn guided us to the one on the right and bade me open it. I did and immediately regretted it. I found myself staring pupils to pupil with the eye of some gigantic lizard. A roar reverberated through the room.

I hastily slammed the door shut.

"Wrong door," said Relfalyn apologetically. We tried another, and this led us down a corridor to another room. Somehow I had imagined these supernatural rooms to be strewn with rubies and

diamonds and alien jewels that would dazzle my eyes. No such luck. It was a most curious journey. We entered one doorway and found ourselves coming up through a trapdoor. We went through another doorway and found ourselves dropping down from a vent in the ceiling. All these rooms were bare of furniture and contained tapestries featuring different scenes of cavorting alien beings. Finally we came upon a room without a room. Or was it a room containing a room? In any case, it was a room not unlike the other room with a wooden cube floating in the middle. The closer we got, the larger it got. It contained doors in its side.

"This is a difficulty," said Relfalyn. "This, I believe, is as far as warriors get. They are too big to squeeze through the door. I would, but I lack defensive skills."

It would be a squeeze, but I could see that at age fourteen I was still runty enough—smaller than Relfalyn—to just be able to make it through the small door. I was not thrilled at the notion at all, but then I was informed that this was the point where horrible monsters showed up and consumed strangers within the half hour. Needless to say, this motivated Sir Harry to motivate me.

"Aye," he said. "Perhaps there was some sort of other entrance. Look for a lever or switch or somesuch, lad. Now be off with ye!"

I pushed my sword through the door and wiggled it about. Then I pushed myself through as well. A small drop, a small konk on my head, and I was through. I was surprised to find myself in a very large chamber, filled with shadows and flickering torches. As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I discovered that I was in a room with a large altar, laden with necklaces, crowns, and bracelets, all agleam with precious gems. On the very top of this altar there was a large leather-bound vellum book, bracketed by two dripping candles. The pages were gilt-edged and all around this marvelous tome hovered the aroma of rare and mysterious magic.

"I think I've got it!" I said.

"Would you pass it through, then?" said Sir Harry. "Yes, pass it through, so we'll be done with this and be on our way."

If I smelled magic here, I also smelled danger. I was young and stupid, yes, but not so unintelligent as to think that I could just jump up onto that dais, whip that book shut, and haul it away with no consequences. What could a fourteen-year-old lad with a sword do though against any sort of ancient trap or invisible guardian?

There was no time to muse on the subject, so I pulled a trick that Sir Harry had taught me, a simple feint with the point of my sword. I patted the dais with the sword where I had to stand to pick up the book. I touched the book itself with the sword blade. When nothing undue occurred, I stepped up, grabbed the book, and hustled it off the shelf. It was when the eyes opened in the cover of the book that I realized exactly what I was holding on to. The eyes were joined by a nose and a wide set of razor sharp teeth that snapped where my hand had been. I let the book flop onto the floor. Cowardice is not all flight with no fight, and so I took my sword and instinctively jabbed it down into one of the eyes. Blood and a white serum squirted. An unholy yowl let me know that I had struck home. Cowardice also takes immediate advantage, and so I immediately pulled my sword out and stabbed down again into the other eye. The yowling grew outrageously loud, and a wind from between the stars blew through the room, snuffing the candles. Shadows about me began to converge, black and ominous.

"The book!" cried Relfalyn.

I pulled the book, streaming with blood, up and pushed it through the door. I felt a claw scratch at my back. I followed and rolled out the door, slipping in the gore.

"Close the door!"

I could have saved my breath, for Sir Harry was already in the act of shutting it. A nasty clawed hand was caught in the closure. Sir Harry lopped it off at the wrist, and it flew off somewhere, disappearing.

Relfalyn held the bloody book in her hand. It was rising and expanding, breathing heavily, stunned but not dead. "Oh, yes, this must be it. We must leave this room before—"

Before the monsters arrived, but already I could see we were too late to avoid a sighting. I knew it was Sir Harry who spotted them first, for it was he who let go a squeal.

And well he should, for they were frightful things, collections of fangs on stalky legs slashing the air like clockwork mechanisms. Relfalyn spared no time going through the door. Sir Harry squeezed through. I tossed my sword at one and followed. The door slammed shut behind me, only to sprout a garden of blades.

"Onward!" said Relfalyn.

For such a mass of blubber, Sir Harry moved quite fast, easily keeping pace with Relfalyn. Once I thought I even saw him try and trip her to get ahead—but surely that must have been an optical illusion. It seemed a long scramble back, but soon enough we were again in the stench-filled room with the decomposing questers. No sooner had I stepped in, closing the door behind me, stomping on the dead giantess with a "squosh" than the door to our dimension opened with a sparkling. There stood Beeulderdun the Visage, eyes twinkling.

"Give the book to me!" he said, holding out his hand into the room with eagerness.

"Do nothing of the sort," piped Sir Harry. "He can easily close the door and we'll be trapped. Stand aside, sorcerer, for our job is done and we would be removed from this place."

Sir Harry bellied through, and though the sorcerer frowned heavily, he did not try and stop him. I took the opportunity to leap myself, for I heard the distant banging of doors, signaling pursuit by unpleasant beings. This left Relfalyn alone in the room with the bleeding book.

"It is alive," she said. "Can it survive in a separate dimension, though wounded?"

"Give it here. I know how to heal it," said the sorcerer.

Relfalyn did so, then casually brushed past him.

In truth, I was more than happy to be back, but that door still made me nervous. "Perhaps you can close that door up," I said. "I believe there are things pursuing us."

"Terrible draft as well," said Sir Harry.

The sorcerer waved his staff, and it was done. I breathed a little easier and in truth was happy to be breathing at all. The sorcerer then set the ailing book down in front of him. He intoned an alien language and set the end of his staff to it. A rippling coruscation spread over the pages. The seeping of blood ceased. The ruined eyes drew back into the body as did the other facial features. And the book was again just a book.

"The task is done!" said Sir Harry. "We only ask for our reward and we are gone."

"We found no gems or baubles along the way," I said.

The sorcerer smiled grimly. "No matter. You would not leave with them anyway, I do not need tongues as busy as yours are to wag about the world. Therefore I will still them."

I was alarmed to see the man's hands pulsing with a fulsome light the exact shade of the bolt that killed the drunk in the tavern. That pointed fingers were headed my way did not make me feel better.

However before any kind of deathblow could be dealt in my direction or I could even start to duck, the sorcerer gasped. From his breastbone emerged the end of a sword, bloody. Blood bloomed from his mouth. He turned, aghast, and got one glimpse of his attacker before he crumpled onto the stone floor.

Relfalyn stood before us, looking down at her handiwork.

"That felt good," she whispered.

She stepped over and picked up the book, which she tucked under her arm, stroking it. She smiled at us. "I'm not certain how losers of your ilk helped me accomplish this—but I thank you."

"Any kind of reward would be helpful in that communication," said Sir Harry.

She waved her hand. "Plunder what you like from here, now that it is vacant of its ruler. However, I would warn you that the sorcerer's traps are still armed."

I could not help but notice that she was changing, her face first. From a creamy complexion, a picture of feminine beauty it became mottled and full of suckerlike appendages. Her back twisted, and

the arms that held the book became tentacles. A rancid smell began to exude from her, and I noticed that buboes, like plague polyps began to grow on every bare bit of flesh.

"You're not... not a... woman!" I gasped, and I will tell you right now, not without horror.

She puckered her lips and blew me a kiss. "Oh, I quite assure you Vincey—I'm all woman... I'm just not human." She leered. "Do you still love me, Vincey? I hope so."

She drew some sort of wand from her robes and described a circle in the air. She inserted a set of fingernails into the air and drew back the edge of this circle like a bit of backdrop scenery in a play. Beyond I could see geometric designs and sparklings abuzz in crazy quilt patterns.

"You're... you're from a different dimension yourself!" I cried.

"You think?" She chuckled throatily and started to step through the aperture, holding the book closely to lumpy breasts.

"I hope we meet again, Vincey. You were a most enjoyable lover."

Then she was gone and the hole in this world was sealed again.

But alas—not the hole in Vincemole Whiteviper's heart.

* * *

What are you staring at, fool? Yes, of course your master once had a heart, and I'll happily eat yours for supper if you don't get these words down correctly.

The castle? Full of rubbish, absolutely nothing much to plunder at all. The "treasure room" turned out to mostly contain gems of cut glass and fool's gold. There was enough of the stink of evil magic to make us both want to depart quickly. We'd found some coins in the sorcerer's purse. With these we paid our bills and bought passage on a coach to a seaside port where I could learn to pick the pockets of drunken sailors, a sport at which I became quite adept.

Now pour yourself some wine. And refill my chalice again. I'm not drunk enough.

Did I ever encounter Relfalyn again? Not in person, I confess. But with every woman I've ever entered, and I've entered many, I think of her eventually, for always, always I find myself in strange and dangerous and alien dimensions!