

Payment Due

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by David J. Wright

Editor's Note: "Payment Due" continues the story of Jig, the omnipotent youngster, who was first introduced in "A Little Wager".

Mr. Wright says of himself...

I'm a 28 year old business drone (Advertising & Publishing) who's been writing for 15 years, mostly fantasy because I was under the mistaken impression that you didn't have to know anything to do it. I've since discovered it helps to know how magic works and what elves eat for dinner. I've been published twice before in print, in the magazines The Standard and Aberrations, and five times electronically, in the e-zines 2XS, The Outpost, and The CCC. Shocking that someone would print any of my work, actually.

Day 43, 322 days left

"Let's go back to your bar and get a drink, Jig," Dixon said. "It's thirsty work, this terrifying old wizards."

"No, not this time, Dix. Instead, let's go out to eat somewhere, somewhere nice, somewhere expensive. And this time, Astogoroth, you pay."

Astogoroth only stared silently at him, his eyes great circles of white.

"How did you know this would trick him?" Dixon asked.

Jig shook his head. "Oh, Dix, I didn't. I figured he'd be too scared to check if this was real, and even if he did think to check, my power looks just like Gantegor's. After all, what comes from the demon looks like the demon, right?" Jig glanced around at Astogoroth, who continued to stare. A tiny smile had crept up the corner of the wizard's mouth.

Had Jig an-Slopdale been a typical eleven year old, he would not have been standing in this para-dimensional council chamber, laying wagers against a thousand year old time traveling wizard to see who paid for dinner. No, had he been a typical eleven year old, he would have been playing "swords" with his friend Dixon, running around with brittle wooden planks, imagining that it was his thrust that pierced the dragon's heart and stole its life. Had he been a typical eleven year old, he would have expressed outraged disgust about every characteristic of his female peers, all the while wondering what it was like to kiss one of them. Had he been a typical eleven year old, one day to him would have seemed like a year, and one year an eternity.

But a little over six weeks ago, Jig an-Slopdale had ceased being typical, had shed, or more appropriately lost, all claim on the usual. Forty-three days ago, an accidentally freed demon had given Jig immeasurable power in exchange for the boy's soul, payment due after one year. Payment due in 322 days.

"What's wrong with Astogoroth?" Dixon asked. A soft coughing fluttered out of the wizard, his huge and fat and greasy body trembling with it.

"I - I don't know," Jig said. He placed a hand on Astogoroth's round shoulder and looked into monstrous, madman's eyes. "I really don't know," he repeated,

feeling a twinge of fear.

Astogoroth stared back, then convulsed in wild, racking, shrieking laughter. He shook with the laughter grotesquely, the horrid noise echoing and amplifying around the Coven Hall like a song of the damned. A yellow round-bottomed bottle, the ruined Crystal Cage, slipped from Astogoroth's fingers and shattered for the last time on the floor.

Dixon drew back from the screaming wizard and looked at Jig. "What's happening? What does this mean?"

Jig, his hand still on Astogoroth's shoulder, said, "I guess this means that I pay."

Amil came awake with a start, blinking in the darkness, confused and frightened. She gestured with one hand, and a candle beside her cot ignited. While she listened, she rubbed her other hand across the seared, puckered skin of her forehead, her cheeks.

Yes, there it was again, the booming, the awful crashing she had mistaken for thunder when it first jarred her out of sleep. Now she knew it was hammering at her cottage door. She rose, slowly, tentatively, moving with the care of the elderly or the infirm. Already she felt the skin tearing and seeping about her joints, around her neck, wherever she turned or flexed. Sludgy flares of pain burst in her body, but she gritted her teeth against them and took the candle, hobbled to the door.

The hammering continued, its desperation, its intensity growing with each passing moment. She threw the bolt and pulled the door open, and stared out into the murky night. The tangy stench of the surrounding bog crept into her cottage like green fog.

"What it is?" she asked in her leathery voice.

A boy stood there, twelve or thirteen years, no older. His thick blond hair was matted to his head by the moisture in the air, and his blue eyes were huge and terrified. A deep gash zigged over his right eye, and bled in intermittent droplets down his face. His entire body shook, from chill or fear, probably both.

"Are you," he began, then lost his words in gulps of the heavy air. "Are you Amil ul-Natalia?"

Amil frowned suspiciously at the boy. "I ... was," she said reluctantly.

"Please," he said. "I need your help. The demon ... Gantegor ..." Then he collapsed before her, his eyes rolling back in his head.

Day 124, 241 days left

The Coven Hall was silent but for the soft gurgling from the sheet of water hanging over the council table. Jig sat in the throne at the head of the table, one leg over the arm, his chin in his palm. He had removed the twenty-nine statues of the Coven members, their staring presence disturbing him to the point of paranoia. His time was running out, he could feel it vanishing.

"And you," Jig said to his companion in the room. "What should I do with you?"

Chained to his own marble pedestal, Astogoroth ul-Time Demonbinder, the Crystal Wielder, laid naked and stinking in his own froth and squalor. Once the most

powerful mortal alive, Astogoroth had been transformed into a babbling fool. Astogoroth's screaming fit had lasted nineteen days, and then he fell into a drooling catatonia for another twenty-four. Now he lapsed into one or the other, interspersed with the barest moments of clarity. It was only through his magic that Jig managed to keep the wizard fed, who would have spat or vomited the food out, given the opportunity. For the first few days Jig also worked at keeping him clean, but finally gave up when it was clear Astogoroth was more intent on remaining filthy. With the passing time Jig grew more worried, until finally he telepathically peeked inside Astogoroth's mind and viewed the fractured maelstrom within, the red and black claws of madness like spider's legs which gripped the wizard's brain. Sections of that brain still functioned, yes, but other sections had been obliterated permanently.

"Jig."

It was a lifeless little croak from the wakened Astogoroth, whose eyes were open and bloodshot and watery. His head was lifted up off of the floor, but otherwise he hadn't moved.

"How are you, Astogoroth?" Jig spoke soothingly.

"Gantegor," the wizard said. "Gantegor approaches." This was a pronouncement Astogoroth had made quite a few times during the past three months.

"No, Astogoroth, Gantegor isn't coming here. You're safe from it."

"I feel it approaching. I feel its hunger." Tears tumbled down Astogoroth's face, but his voice didn't shake. "I have failed. I am doomed."

"You are not doomed," Jig said. "I have told you, Gantegor is not coming here. What you probably sense is me, because my power comes from Gantegor. Gantegor gave me all this power in exchange for my soul."

"You are wrong. I feel it. Gantegor was weak when it escaped the Crystal Cage, but now it grows stronger, and grows hungrier. Gantegor approaches. It will be here in 241 days."

Jig gaped. Two hundred forty-one days? How could Astogoroth possibly know how much time Jig had left?

"Gantegor comes for me, Jig," Astogoroth hissed. "And it comes for you. It comes for us all."

Amil watched the boy pick at his stew, shivering inside the blanket she had given him. By the drawn lines in his face and his sunken cheeks and eyes, it was clear he had been eating poorly, if at all, for some time now.

"How did you come here?" she asked. "And where did you come from? How did you find me?"

"I was sent here, to the swamp, a mile or two to the south," the boy answered.

"I was told to find Amil ul-Natalia. I was told what you looked like."

Amil wrestled with a strong desire to pull her robe hood across her scarred and oozing face. What she looked like, indeed! Seek the woman with skin like a boiled tomato.

The boy said, "I came because of Gantegor, because I need your help to stop him. I came from the Wizard's Coven. Astogoroth sent me."

"Astogoroth?" Amil almost barked the name. "Astogoroth ul-Time Demonbinder? Is he still alive?"

The boy shook his head. "Not anymore."

Day 254, 111 days left

"I can't destroy Gantegor?" Jig asked. "Even with all my power?"

Astogoroth tittered. "All your power? What power, but what Gantegor gives? Would it sow the seeds of its own destruction? No, I say, no no!"

The wizard was coherent so rarely that Jig had to proceed delicately. Jig dare not provoke Astogoroth into another screaming fit; he simply didn't have time for it.

Astogoroth raised his bound hands and the chain holding him chattered against the pedestal. "Release me, Jig. You said, you promised. Help and freedom, help and freedom, yes?"

"Yes," Jig said. "I promised and I will release you, but I still have some more questions, ones that only you can answer. Will you help me? Will you keep helping me?"

"I will help, I will, but freedom, freedom, promise me freedom," Astogoroth sang out the last words in a thin falsetto.

"I promise you freedom, I promise. Now answer this: if I can't destroy Gantegor, can I recapture it? Can I rebuild the Crystal Cage and seal Gantegor inside?"

"A score and nine, a score and nine, that's what it took," Astogoroth said.

"Wizards all, to forge and force, to create the Cage and drive the demon. You have but one, and your power, borrowed. The Cage is gone, forever. Never recovered, never recovered."

"What about ..." Jig thought, remembering how Astogoroth traveled in time for one of his combatants for their wager. "What about going back in time to get the Cage, when it was whole and undamaged? Or what about taking it before it gets stolen, or saving it before it gets smashed? Why can't we -"

"Time!" Astogoroth shrieked, then yanked and yanked at his chains until his scabbed wrists were torn and bleeding again. "Time time time!"

Jig hammered a fist on the table, cracking the bluewood surface. He had lost Astogoroth again, possibly forever. Why had he pushed? He had made this mistake twice before, and had been lucky that Astogoroth had come back.

Astogoroth's contorted face relaxed suddenly and he slumped to the floor in a fat and foul heap. "Time," he said evenly. "Time. Time, our true enemy. Our time is running, our time, almost gone. The Crystal Cage, it was created, it existed, it was destroyed. We cannot change this. You may not remove the Cage from its time-line, because it had to be there, yes, because it was there. You may not protect it from being stolen, or save it from being smashed, for these events, they have already occurred. The past is written, the book is closed. The Crystal Cage is gone." Astogoroth laid his head down on the pedestal and closed his eyes. "Travel back if you must, do what you will, but you will fail. For time is more powerful than all of us."

The cave stunk of rotting flesh and feces, and the floor was paved with gray squelching muck streaked with brown. Amil breathed through her mouth as she made her way, holding her burning candle above her head and ducking under hanging webbing.

The boy, older now, his face grim and set, had stoically managed the long trip here, and did not hesitate at the entrance, even when the smell sliced past

them. He was driven, single-minded, dedicated to this madman's cause into which he had somehow wrangled her. Certainly he had a charisma to him, though it could be that she had been without a purpose for so long that she would follow anyone.

"Don't be afraid when you see him," Amil told the boy again.

"I know what to expect," he said steadily.

"Knowing and seeing are very different," she said. "It wouldn't help to convince him if upon first glance you bawl like a child and go dashing out of his cave."

He glared at her. "I didn't do that at your cottage when I saw you for the first time."

An ironic smile flickered across Amil's ravaged and dripping face. "That's true. You didn't." Then she stopped and touched a hand lightly on his arm. "Wait. I see him."

Ahead in the darkness, something uncurled, upwards and open like a multi-fingered hand. Something whispered, and clicked spasmodically.

"Ch-kin ul-Warrum," Amil said. "Ch-kin, we need your help."

The clicking continued a moment, then the something hulked forward into the faint light of the candle. It was a spider, a huge spider, as big as a horse, furry black with golden stripes on its bulbous body, with a man's eyes and two man arms where its front legs would be. It chittered and clicked at them with its long, poison-dripping fangs.

To his credit, the boy didn't even tense.

"Ch-kin ul-Warrum," the boy said. "I need your help to stop Gantegor. He destroyed your master. He may destroy us. But without you, I know we'll fail."

"Boy," came a grating voice from deep within the spider. "I ... will ... help."

Day 360, 5 days left

"The apprentices," Jig breathed. "The apprentices are still alive."

Giggling, Astogoroth said, "Yes, yes, all live, all but mine. You were mine, Jig. Yes, yes, you were mine."

"Then you think the apprentices will have enough power to create another Crystal Cage, to recapture the demon?" Jig made a fist with this last question.

"The apprentices?" Astogoroth laughed shrilly, and his chain clanked and clinked with his shaking. "The apprentices, no no! They wield no power, they could capture no demon, ha ha!"

"What then? Why tell me about them if they are useless?"

"Useless, no, useless, no no! The apprentices could not capture the demon, but each could train as his master trained him. Each has access to the knowledge, the power, the magic. The student becomes the teacher, the teachers all train one student. A score and nine wizards to create and capture, that is what is needed, remember, remember. But these score and nine could lay training into one master, one master could create and capture, yes yes YES!"

That decided Jig. He stood and said, "I'll need to leave right away. Do you know where the apprentices are?"

Astogoroth's eyes gleamed with insane mirth. "You? You? No, it cannot be you, Jig, no, you are dead already. Years, or decades, a century perhaps, of travel and training, these are necessary. Your time is over, you cannot go. No, no, it cannot be you."

"But ..." Jig shook his head, confused. "If not me, who then?"

He was no longer a boy, Amil saw that now. Of course he had been aging all along as they traveled from hut to hovel to castle to pit, gathering the apprentices, rallying their support, gaining their trust and respect. But it wasn't until he stood straight and unafraid before the shaggy giant Golt ul-Cain that she realized this was a man.

How long had they been together now, how long had they been crossing the littered paths, traversing the grassy plains, piercing the inky caverns? Had it really been nine years? He had, imperceptibly but irrefutably, gently but irresistibly, become their leader, commanding them from place to place. There were twenty and eight behind him now, including her, and only Golt remained. And predictably, he reacted as his master had before.

"Begone!" Golt roared down at the man with a voice that shook the trees. "Begone from my valley or I shall rain boulders down on your heads. I will not oppose the demon that destroyed my master. It is folly!" He turned on the man's entourage. "All of you, it is folly!"

The man said softly, "If you don't join us against Gantegor, it will be able to come for you. Already we may be hunted, if the demon has realized that the power to stop it still exists. Have you felt its attention pulled toward you when the night is its darkest? And if it does come for you, how long will you last alone?"

"No!" Golt bellowed. "No, no, no! You have deceived the others, but not me."

"I ask only for your time, your patience, your training, your knowledge. You needn't face Gantegor directly. But it is necessary that each of you, all twenty-nine, train me, teach me what you know, give me access to everything that your masters knew. These twenty-eight behind me have agreed to accompany me, to assist in the creation of a new Crystal Cage, to stand beside me when I battle the demon Gantegor, Devourer of Flesh, Eater of Souls, Scourge of Humanity, prisoner of the Crystal Cage. If you choose not to fight, then you will not be forced. But if you choose not to teach, then you are dooming everyone."

The rage drained out of Golt, and his massive shoulders sagged. "I need not fight?" he asked in a petulant growl. "I won't face the demon?"

"If that is your choice," the man answered.

A moment passed, two. Then Golt said, "Then let us stand together to begin your training."

Day 363, 2 days left

Jig stood outside of his inn for the first time in almost eleven months. Had it been that long? He had been aware of the passing days during his time in the Coven Hall, learning all he could from Astogoroth, but being aware does not necessarily mean knowing. The inn was still perfect, as he had left it, untouched, undamaged. And empty.

He gestured, and in a swirl of purple-black energy, Dixon stood before him. His friend jumped, startled and disoriented by his new surroundings.

"Sorry, Dix, I needed to talk to you."

Dixon glanced around, then at Jig. His expression of surprise changed into one of irritation. "Where have you been? It's been forever since I've seen you. I

thought about you again and again, thought hard like you told me to, but you never called me. I thought maybe ... you know, the demon got you."

"No," Jig said, then added, "not yet."

"So why call me all of a sudden like this? Is something wrong? How's Astogoroth, is he okay?"

Jig shrugged. "He's as good as he's ever going to be, still raving but at least he's answering my questions. Actually, he may have figured out a way to save me from the demon."

"Really?" Dixon asked, grinning as bright as sunshine. "That's wonderful. How? What do you have to do?"

"It's not what I have to do, Dix." Jig stared hard at his friend. "It's what you have to do. This is a favor beyond anything you'll ever be asked. If you don't think you can do it, I'll understand, because I'm not sure I could do it for you, if our places were switched. But you're the only one I'll ask, because you're the only one I trust."

Dixon thought a moment, his boyish face very serious. Then he nodded gravely and said, "Am I going to say no to you on your birthday? Tell me what you need."

The boy who had come to her cottage in the bog those years and years ago was now an ancient and withered old man, his blond hair long wisps of yellow-white, his remaining blue eye faded and weak, his face a craggy fist of wrinkles, his one hand bunched and knotted, his body crooked and feeble. Over his right brow was a jagged bolt of pink scar.

He had endured their brutal training with vigor, absorbing the lessons with a masochistic diligence, sacrificing flesh for power as each of the now-ageless apprentices had for their masters. He had given an eye at thirty years, learning from Carrek ul-Jal. He had lost his hand at forty years, learning from Haraeth ul-Mira. To each apprentice he would sacrifice a little more, he would die a little more. But he never complained. He would work as he was directed, do what he was told, read everything he was given. He studied voraciously, recited accurately, learned perfectly. He was driven by a demon.

Golt came to Amil one day in the man's fiftieth year and said, "Already he exceeds his teachers, and we are just past the first half of his training. How is it that this man is so adept at magic?"

"When we came to learn from our masters, we did so out of a hunger for the power," Amil told him. "When he came to learn from us, he did so for much larger reasons: to defeat a demon, to save a friend." She paused. "To save us all. His motives have always been higher, purer, better, than ours' ever could have been."

That was just over fifty years ago. Now Amil watched the man where he sat, watched him as he read the last page of the last tome, and watched him as he closed it.

"Finished," he rasped, and turned on his stool with tiny hitching motions to face her. "It is finished."

She rose, painfully, and hobbled to stand beside him. Her burned flesh ached more than it ever had, and she longed for sleep. "Are you ready?" she asked him.

"Can we capture Gantegor?"

His head bobbed. "Gather the crystal, and the apprentices. Tell them we begin creating the second Crystal Cage tonight, under the full moon." A ghost of a

smile appeared on his face. "We are running out of time."

Day 364, shortly before midnight

"But how will I get there?" Dixon asked Jig, who was seated in the Coven throne.

"And how will I get back?"

"I will, I will send you," Astogoroth said, rubbing his newly freed wrists.

"There is, I think, yes, there is enough magic left in this body for me to send you, yes. Jig cannot, Jig cannot, no. The demon will hear, will feel, will suspect. I must, I must send you."

"And getting back is," and Jig let out a little humorless laugh, "easy enough.

If you succeed, you'll be able to come back yourself. If you fail, it really won't matter."

"You must, you must, you must leave," Astogoroth said, a spike of urgency in his voice. "I will send you on, on to Amil, as we have told you, on as close as I can get you, as close as I can get you. I cannot promise a safe trip, I cannot promise, no, no. It will be dangerous, deadly. But I will try, and you will try, and we will try." He nodded. "You must hurry, you must hurry."

Jig stood. "Astogoroth, send him, now, before the demon gets here. I can hear it approaching. It's very close."

Astogoroth gripped Dixon's shoulders and said, "Do what I couldn't do. Redeem me. Yes, yes."

Then a roil of yellow energy erupted out of the wizard, poured out of him like water from a shattered bottle, emptied him of all of his remaining magic. Even as it washed over Dixon, even as it wrapped around him and consumed him, Astogoroth collapsed, dead.

Dixon was gone, and Jig heard the soft puff of the demon.

Dixon held up the round-bottomed bottle of faceted yellow crystal in his shaking hand. He looked at it, turning it over as Jig had many years ago. It was plugged with a golden cork, and stylused into the cork, and carved into the crystal, were the imprisonment sigils that would hold Gantegor. The bottle glowed with a pale light.

"Are you prepared?" Amil asked him from over his shoulder.

He looked up at her from his stool and nodded. "I am, thank you. There are a few things I would like to say. To you. To everyone." Dixon struggled to his feet, bowed by age and exhaustion. He lifted the bottle, displaying it to the gathered apprentices. "I offer you our triumph. I show you what you have done together, what we have done together."

"Let us go forward and imprison this demon again," Golt roared, spreading his great arms wide.

The apprentices cheered their support, and Amil nodded at Dixon. "We are behind you as one body, nine and twenty, and you as our leader," she said. "As Golt says, let us go forward."

Dixon smiled, a young boy's smile in an old man's face. "Many will fall when we challenge the demon, many will die, but what we are doing is right and just. I say to those who survive our attack, remain together as the new Wizard's Coven and become guardians of the Crystal Cage. Don't let this ever be repeated." He

looked into each face, and ended staring into Amil's eyes. "You will lead them when I am gone, as your master did before you."

Amil bowed slightly. "Dixon ul-Cage, the Wizard's Coven stands ready."

"Let us go then," Dixon said, and a shimmering silver light burst from him, engulfing them all.

Day 365

The power Jig had felt for so long whispered out of him at the instant Gantegor arrived. It pulled out of the boy like a hooked blade, both a relief and a terrible pain at its loss, and it left Jig gasping and leaning on the council table.

Jig an-Slopdale, Gantegor boomed. I have come for what is mine. Surrender your soul to me.

"Before he does," said a laughing voice, "I think I'd like a word with you first." There was a flash of brilliant light behind the throne, and Jig spun around to see a man appear, ancient and maimed but with a lively grin on his face. Upheld in his remaining hand was a yellow crystal bottle.

The Cage! Gantegor roared, reeling its impossible bulk backward, raising its thorn-covered arms to its purple-black face. But it was destroyed!

Another silvery flash, and another, and another, and as Jig watched, the chairs around the council table filled with otherworldly beings which were similar to, but not duplicates of the statues he had removed from the Hall those months ago. A spider, a giant, a living skeleton, an amorphous scarlet mass, all the strange and terrible beasts which haunted a child's nightmares appeared in the chairs and then rose as one.

Beside the old man there was a final flash, and a woman with bloody and melting skin was there, gripping the man's arm and lifting her other. "Attack!" she cried.

And attack they did. Jig sprang away from the fusillade of hellish magical energy which tore into the demon from every creature in the room. It was every color and all consistencies, blue and thick and yellow and soupy and red and watery and green and foggy. It was a rainbow of magic, a blasting flood of power, which blistered reality and ripped existence.

Gantegor staggered, then swept his clawed hands open and unleashed a wave of purple-black fire-fangs into the attacking creatures. The fangs sizzled through the air, a few blasting chunks out of the table where Jig cowered, screaming in fright. Jig covered his head with his arms, weeping and shaking with each attack and counter-attack, crying out for this to stop, stop, STOP!

Then the old man was beside him, looking into Jig's eyes with his blurry blue one and saying, "You will be fine, Jig, you will be fine. I have returned, you will be fine." And Jig knew that this was Dixon, his friend, and that Dixon had succeeded, and that Dixon would save him. Dixon gave him a one-armed hug, showed the Crystal Cage and said, "I'll take care of it, as I promised."

And then Dixon was gone, charging back into battle with the spryness and recklessness of an eleven year old. Over the crashing thunder of the fight, Dixon's voice rose, intoning a spell as old as all the worlds, wrapping one arm around the bottle and pulling out the stylused cork with his one hand.

Gantegor let out an ear-rending shriek, a shriek of terror and impotence, and gushed out a blaze of purple-black energy over Dixon, who spoke the final word

of his incantation and held the bottle aloft. The demon's awful energy was sucked up into the bottle, backward-wrapping its evil tendrils around Gantegor itself and dragging it roaring and screaming into the Crystal Cage. There was a soft puff, and Dixon fell to the floor. With his one hand, with his last breath, he pushed the cork back into the bottle, then Dixon ul-Cage shuddered, and died.

The statue they had created of Dixon was of him as a boy, as Jig remembered him. Dixon was carved with a weary smile on his face, and with a perfect copy of the Crystal Cage hugged to his chest by both arms.

"Are you ready to leave?" Amil ul-Natalia Coven Master, of the Crystal Cage, asked him.

Jig looked about the restored Coven hall, at the nineteen statues which now stood on pedestals, including the one for Dixon and the one for Astogoroth ul-Time Demonbinder, the Crystal Wielder. "And go where?" Jig asked. "What do I do now?"

"Dixon gave his life to save you not for fame, or for adulation, or for this statue," Amil said, and indicated the carving, "but because he was your friend. We were together for some time, Dixon and I, and he told me about all the adventures you went on together, the sights you saw, the wonders you imagined. He said that he'd never had as good a friend before, and he would never have one again. He did this because he loved you, not to hurt you, not to leave you alone in the world."

"But how am I supposed to forget him?" Jig asked, feeling tears sting his eyes.

"You aren't supposed to forget him. You mustn't. The reason you're alive is so that the memory of that friendship will live on." She paused. "Dixon lives in you, for as long as you remember him."

Jig looked at Dixon's statue then, looked for a long time, then reached out and touched one of the marble hands and said, "Good-bye, my friend. And thank you."

The End