

ONE

Oberon!”

Over a roaring wind, I heard a distant calling of my name. I had been dreaming of sailing a small boat across a churning, wind-swept sea; the dream clung to me, and I could not easily shake its tendrils away.

Where was I? My eyes were closed, but I sensed no light beyond them. Could it be nighttime, or was I in a dark room? I heard what might have been either the rush of wind or the beating of a thousand wings around me. My skin prickled all over with goosebumps, and I felt at once cold and hot, wet and dry.

When I tried to sit up and open my eyes, however, I could not. I found my lack of strength vaguely troubling. But it was so easy not to care, to let myself slide back into the dreaming—

*“Oberon! Wake up!”*

Ships. I had just begun to dream of ships for a second time when that nagging voice broke in again. The motion around me—a gentle rocking as from waves—reminded me of a ship’s deck...but there came no susurrant lap from the waves, no cries of gulls nor smell of briny sea.

No, not a ship, I decided, trying to focus my attention on the problem. Also not a horse; no stamping hooves nor neighs nor smells of dung and horse-sweat. A moving carriage, perhaps? That almost made sense. My father had a magnificent carriage, like a giant pumpkin made of spun glass. I remembered my first and only ride in it; we had passed through dozens, maybe hundreds of nightmare worlds. But that didn’t explain why I felt both hot and cold. It didn’t explain a lot of things.

What *was* that roaring noise?

And why couldn’t I open my eyes?

*“Oberon!”*

I tried to turn my head toward that distant voice but couldn’t quite figure out where it came from. Above me? Below? I had gotten turned around; every direction felt wrong, as though I teetered on the edge of a cliff, about to fall. I shivered, and an impulse to flee came over me. I didn’t like this place. I didn’t like the sensations of being here. I had to get out, now, before something horrible happened.

Once more I tried to rouse myself from sleep. With that effort, colors suddenly pulsed in my head; lights sang and danced before my closed eyelids, and strange tastes and smells and textures flooded my senses. The flavors of lemon and salt and roast chicken and straw all mixed together, the smells of mud and sweat and honey—

If I dreamed, I dreamed strangely. Yet, somehow, I knew I was *not* dreaming...not *quite*, anyway. This was something else, something strange and unnatural and unpleasant.

*“Oberon!”* that distant voice bellowed. *“Get your lazy ass out of bed! The king needs you! Now!”*

The king. Yes, King Elnar needed me. I was one of his lieutenants. I tried to reach for my sword. It must be time to muster the men—

No, that was wrong. King Elnar had died a long time ago...it now seemed a lifetime past. A sour, discordant note crept into the sounds in my head; the dancing lights pulsed, bright and dark, dark and bright. I reached for the memory, found it, shuddered at the sudden chill it brought. Yes, I

remembered too well...remembered how King Elnar fell at the hands of hell-creatures in Ilerium. I had seen his severed head stuck on a pole in the mud outside of Kingstown, a warning and a trap for me when I returned there unexpectedly.

“You killed me!” I had heard his accusing voice say, impossibly coming from that severed head on the pole. “Traitor!” it called. “Traitor...!”

I’d opened my mouth to argue, but the words disappeared in a sudden roar of wind. In my mind, I pressed my eyes shut, refusing to see, but the image lingered. And I knew he had been right.

King Elnar, the entire population of Kingstown, and countless thousands of soldiers—all had died because of me. Hell-creatures had invaded Ilerium to find and kill me because my father was a Lord of Chaos, commanding powers I could barely begin to understand.

Now, with King Elnar gone, I no longer served anyone but myself. I didn’t have to listen to his accusing voice. I didn’t have to wake up. I didn’t have to do anything I didn’t choose to do.

*“Oberon! On your feet!”*

I tried to answer, to tell the voice to go to hell, but I could not make my body obey. That vaguely bothered me. Had I been drugged? Had I been sick or grievously injured? Everything I remembered—could it all have been some nightmare or wild fever-dream?

It all seemed so clear. I remembered my Uncle Dworkin, who had swept back into my life after ten years’ absence. Dworkin had saved me from a band of hell-creatures, announced himself as my true father, and carted me off to a magnificent castle on another world...a castle full of people who claimed to be my half-brothers and half-sisters. Aber and Freda...Locke and Davin and Blaise...too many for me to take them all in at once.

And I *was* one of them; I had known it the moment I saw them. We all shared many traits with Dworkin; clearly he had sired us, though with different mothers. I had never suspected my true heritage, but now I recognized the truth of it: Dworkin really *was* my father.

In Juniper Castle I had learned I was born to a noble line of sorcerers. My family had its roots in a place called the Courts of Chaos, the center of the universe, where magic was real. As I understood it, all other worlds were mere Shadows cast by the Courts.

These sorcerers used something called the Logrus, which was a kind of shifting pattern or maze—I wasn’t quite clear on how it worked or what it looked like, since different people described it in different ways. All I knew was it granted them miraculous powers, including the ability to move between Shadows and summon objects from distant places. I hoped to be able to travel through it myself, but it seemed I didn’t have the ability to do so. I was a magical cripple as far as my family was concerned...even though I had already learned to do a little bit of magic on my own. I could change my appearance for short periods of time when I tried.

Unfortunately, our family was at war with an unknown enemy. This mysterious foe had been tracking down and murdering all of Dworkin’s offspring, and when he (whoever he was) discovered me in Ilerium, I had become his next target. That was why Dworkin returned and rescued me. My father had gathered all his surviving children together in Juniper, his castle stronghold, guarded by a hundred thousand soldiers under the command of his eldest son, Locke.

Unfortunately, an even larger army of hell-creatures showed up to wipe us all out, and an epic battle ensued. We carried the first day, but at a terrible cost. Our army was decimated, Locke died,

and dark sorceries had cut off everyone's access to the Logrus. With no magical means of escape remaining, it seemed we were about to lose. Home, fortune, life; everything.

Fortuitously, it turned out I had a different sort of magic within myself...a Pattern—different from the Logrus and yet related to it. Calling on its power, and with Dworkin's guidance, my siblings fled into other Shadows, scattering like dust in the wind, hopefully to places where they would remain safe from harm...at least for now. With our enemy's attention and troops focused on Juniper, we had at least a short time to be safe.

Dworkin decided to return to the Courts of Chaos to seek help. Who had attacked Juniper? Who was trying to destroy Dworkin's bloodline? We needed to find the answers.

I had accompanied him, along with my half-brother, Aber. I liked Aber best of all my siblings; he was the only one who seemed to have a sense of humor, and he had been the only one to really take me in and make me feel like I belonged. Aber had been the one who most helped me understand how everything and everyone in our family worked.

A voice broke in on me again, over the sounds of wind:

*"Oberon! The king! Rally to the king!"*

"He's dead," I tried to say, but it came out a faint mumble.

"Did you hear that?" the voice asked. I did not think its owner was talking to me. "He tried to say something."

"Oberon!" said another voice, lower in pitch, stronger. I recognized it instantly. It belonged to my father. "Listen to me carefully, my boy. You must wake up now— *right now!* Don't hesitate. *Do it!*"

I was mad at my father, I decided. He had dragged me from my safe, cozy life in Ilerium, where I'd known my place and my duty. I had been one of King Elnar's lieutenants, and I had been happy. This whole nightmare—armies attacking, people trying to murder me and destroy our whole family—it was all Dworkin's fault. Before his death, my brother Locke told me the truth of it: Dworkin brought all of this down upon himself through an unfortunate affair with King Uthor of Chaos's daughter.

*"Oberon! Look at me!"*

Something hit me in the face. I heard the slap, felt it like a white-hot brand across my right cheek. Rage crystallized within me. I forgot the rush of wind in my ears, the darkness and the confusion. Nobody hits me and gets away with it.

I was like a drowning man struggling up through thick, heavy waters. Rage buoyed me upwards. Distantly, I heard a groan. It was an awful, pitiful sound, not the sound a man—a warrior—should have made. When I realized it came from my lips, I tried to stifle it.

And at that moment I opened my eyes.

Dworkin, my father, loomed over me, a short, almost dwarfish man of indeterminate years. He had a look of intense concentration on his face, as though studying some specimen of scientific interest rather than his own son.

I tried to speak, but no sound came out. The breath wheezed in my throat.

"Wake up, I said!"

My father slapped me a second time, hard. My head whipped back from the force.

Both cheeks stinging, I gritted my teeth and turned my head back to face him. My ears rang.

The whole room seemed to be whirling around.

As he raised his hand to strike me again, I grabbed his wrist and held it back.

“Don’t—” I growled, “or I’ll—break your—arm!”

He smiled toothily. “Ah. About time.”

I released him and he lowered his arm.

Moving my head made the room swim drunkenly around me. I spotted my half-brother Aber standing behind and to the side of Dworkin, studying me with clear concern. He seemed to be swaying like a tree in a windstorm.

Turning my head farther, I discovered I lay on my back on a high, narrow bed. Slowly, half groaning, I shifted to the other side. It seemed to take forever. The bed sat in a small, dimly lit room. My eyes didn’t want to focus on the far wall. It appeared to be made of blocks of red stone flecked with green. A phosphorescent yellowish green light oozed from between the stones and trickled up toward the ceiling, where it pooled.

I pressed my eyes shut, then rubbed them with my fists. No, I definitely was not ready to see yet. But Dad wanted me awake, and I assumed he had a damn good reason. He’d better, or I really *would* break his arm. And maybe his neck.

Sucking in a deep breath, using every ounce of my strength, I managed to sit up. That was a huge mistake. The room pinwheeled around me, doing its best imitation of a drunkard’s stagger. My insides convulsed in response, but disgorged nothing. I had no idea of how long it had been since I’d last eaten.

“Where am I?”

“Home,” Aber said. “Our family’s estates in the Beyond.” At my puzzled look, he went on. “Close to the Courts of Chaos. You know.”

I didn’t know, but my head felt ready to explode, and I couldn’t muster much enthusiasm to care. The roar in my ears returned. Groaning, I pressed my eyes shut and willed everything back to normal. It didn’t work.

We must have been out on some drinking binge last night: too much ale, maybe a fistfight or two, hopefully a pair of comely barmaids well bedded. I had awakened from many worse things over the years.

The only thing was, I didn’t remember any of it.

“How do you feel?” Dworkin asked me.

I hesitated. “Not quite dead.”

“Do you know where you are?”

The last thing I remembered—

“The Courts of Chaos,” I whispered.

“The Beyond is a Shadow of the Courts,” said Dworkin, “so close to Chaos that the...ah, *atmospherics* are almost identical.”

I had hated the Courts of Chaos even before I’d come here with my father and Aber. I’d seen the Courts distantly, through one of my sister Freda’s Trump cards. Trumps had the power to open doorways to other worlds. Just gazing at the Courts—strangely shaped buildings, lightning-filled sky, stars that moved and whirled around like fireflies—made me physically ill. Looking back, I should have known coming here would be a mistake. I should have refused to go when my father



told me he planned to go to the Courts of Chaos for help.

But I hadn't refused. I hadn't said a word. I'd gone with him because, despite a lifetime of lies and deceptions, he was still my father, and I felt the full weight of my responsibility as his son. Duty and honor had been drilled into me since I was old enough to know what they meant. He'd made sure of that.

Before Juniper could fall, we had used his Trump to get away. In the Courts of Chaos, blood dripped up, stones moved like sheep across the ground, and somewhere, a serpent in a tower made of bones worked dark sorceries to destroy our family.

If the Beyond truly was like the Courts of Chaos, that explained the walls, which now seemed to pulsate gently as they wept their phosphoric light. Overhead, the high-beamed wooden ceiling began to flicker like candles seen through a paper lantern.

Unbidden, a moan welled up from deep in my chest.

"Steady," said Aber.

"Keep him talking," Dworkin said to Aber, then turned and crossed to the other side of the room. I couldn't see what he was doing at the table, nor did I particularly care at that point. I wanted to curl up and go back to sleep.

Aber sat beside me on the edge of the bed. He had been my one true friend in Juniper, and I had immediately sensed a real camaraderie between us. Now he seemed to drift in and out of focus as I gazed up at him. The brown of his hair began to drip like the walls, colors running down his face. I hesitated. It was him—but not quite. He had horns. His features were heavier, thicker, almost a parody of the young man I knew. And yet...the other Aber...the Aber I knew in Juniper...seemed to be there as well, superimposed on this one. He seemed to flicker back and forth between the two.

Quickly I looked away. Hallucinations? Madness? Maybe it was an effect of being so close to the Courts of Chaos. Maybe it was me and not him at all. I had no way of knowing.