

One

Grayness surrounded me. Gray the color of morning twilight. Hours and days and years and centuries of gray. A featureless, all-consuming, all-encompassing gray that sucked the strength from your limbs and the will to live from your heart. So much gray that you couldn't take it all in no matter how hard you tried.

I fell through that gray, thinking of my crazy brother Aber, who had run out on me. Then I thought about my crazy father, Dworkin, who had left me guarding his back while he destroyed the universe.

For a while I wanted to kill them both. That lasted a long, long time. Then I wanted to hurt them. That lasted even longer.

Finally I didn't care.

And still I fell.

* * *

Uncountable ages passed. My mind wandered; I dreamed unhappy dreams. Now and again my father's voice spoke to me.

"Be patient," it would say. "The end has come, and the beginning lies ahead."

"What's in it for me?" I asked warily.

"Nothing," he said. "You were a tool, nothing more, used and discarded."

"No!"

I jerked around and tried to grab him, but my arms windmilled through nothingness. He hadn't really been here. I had imagined it.

Dreams, nightmares, hallucinations, imaginings. Call them what you will. They were one and the same.

And still I plunged through that gray, a never-ending sea of it.

Forever passed. At least twice.

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The end came with no sense of motion. Had I really been falling? Aber would know, some distant part of me remarked. Aber knew everything about magic.

Frowning, I tried to remember something important. Something about having to kill someone...

I couldn't recapture the thought. My head hurt. My muscles seemed to groan and my bones to creak, as though they hadn't been used in a long, long time.

Lurching, I almost fell. Suddenly I had direction again: a clear sense of up and down, left and right, forward and back. Thick, impenetrable grayness still surrounded me, but something had definitely changed. Something big.

"Aber!" I shouted. The air seemed to swallow my words.

"Aber! Where are you?"

No reply.

Besides, I knew my brother hadn't done anything to save me. He would have gone... where? I frowned. Back to the Courts of Chaos, probably. Who else could help me, then?

A face, a name on the tip of my tongue...

"Dworkin?" I whispered. That sounded right. "Dad?"

Memories suddenly flooded back. Our flight from Juniper to the strange Courts of Chaos.

Someone named Lord Zon trying to kill my whole family. My half-brother Aber, who painted magical cards called Trumps that could be used to travel between worlds... my half-sister Freda, who saw the future... and most especially our father, the dwarf I'd grown up calling Uncle Dworkin. It turned out he'd been lying to protect me. He really *was* my father, and he commanded magical powers I had only just begun to understand. Someday soon I too would command those magics. I knew it.

Dworkin had created his own universe, a huge sprawling place of Shadow-worlds, and in so doing had weakened the powers of the sorcerers who lived in the Courts of Chaos. So someone from Chaos — probably Lord Zon — had sent hell-creatures to kill our whole family and destroy the Shadows, along with the magical Pattern that cast them.

My head hurt just thinking about it.

Fleeing the Courts of Chaos, Dworkin, Aber, and I came to a secret place that contained the Pattern at the center of the new universe. Unfortunately, Dworkin hadn't understood the Pattern fully when he'd created it, and its very essence held a flaw. To fix things, he had destroyed the old Pattern and retraced it from scratch using his own blood. He had collapsed after finishing it, and I had fallen into a void.

Had it worked? Did a new and correct Pattern really exist now? I didn't know. How could I find out?

First things first. I needed a plan. Mentally, I made a list:

1. Get out of the fog.
2. Find the rest of my family.
3. Stop everyone from trying to kill us.

If I had time, I'd add:

4. Beat my father to a bloody pulp for getting us all into this mess in the first place.

The air flickered around me, brighter then darker, brighter then darker. Stretching out my hands, I squinted into grayness, trying to see my fingertips. Nothing. Was I imagining things?

The light flickered again, subtly. I couldn't tell whether I had dreamed it, but somehow it felt different. *Real*.

I fought back a rush of excitement; no sense in raising my hopes. I had been disappointed too often. And yet a small part of me wondered — could dawn finally be approaching? Had something else happened?

Anything would be better than this gray fog.

Slowly I inched my hands closer to my face. Dim shadows appeared. I wiggled my fingers; the shadows wiggled. The gray really *had* begun to lift. I could see again, if poorly. There's nothing more useless than a blind swordsman.

Hunkering down, I waited impatiently. The grayness seeped away slowly, like a morning fog lifting as the sun grows high. A long time later, I could see my hands clearly. A heartbeat later, and I could see all the way down to my boots. Another heartbeat, and I could see ten feet in every direction, then twenty, then fifty—

Rising, I looked around, but saw nothing but rock and sand and sky. No trees, no bushes, no blades of grass broke the desolation. Not even lichen grew here.

Gray fog continued to rush away from me in all directions, an outgoing tide revealing hills and

valleys and distant mountains, all as barren as the land around me. I had never seen a place as dry and dead before.

The staff I had been carrying when I fell lay a few feet away, mostly hidden by rocks. Strolling over, I picked it up and leaned heavily on it, feeling old and tired. All I needed was a long gray beard and I'd be set.

The last of the gray vanished, but it didn't leave a promising world behind. Even on the distant mountains I saw no trees, bushes, or even grass — not a single living thing of any size, shape, or kind. No birds chirped or winged past; no insects *brred*. Not even a breeze stirred the dust on the ground.

I had never felt so alone in my life. Where *was* I? Where had my fall left me?

The sky overhead turned blue, the deepest, purest azure I had ever seen, without a single wisp of cloud. I gaped up into the vastness of it all.

At last, forcing my gaze back down to land, I sighed and resigned myself to work. My first job would be rescuing myself. I had to get off this Shadow — if Shadow it proved to be. If nothing else, I had begun to feel the first gnawing pangs of hunger.

I took a quick inventory. Sword, knife, boots, deck of Trumps — all where they belonged. All my limbs; all my fingers. I had not so much as a single bruise. My mental faculties seemed as sharp as ever.

If the Trumps still worked, I could use them to call any of my half-brothers or half-sisters for a way out. Or I could use one of the Trumps that showed a place, such as the Beyond or the Courts of Chaos, and bring myself directly there. The only problem was, I didn't know how safe any of those places would be. Too many people were trying to kill me right now to go blundering off to unknown destinations. At least, not without taking proper precautions — an army, for instance.

Removing the deck of Trumps from the pouch at my belt, I flipped through them until I came to the image of 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 as though I belonged. I hesitated. Should I contact him and ask to be rescued?

No... not Aber, not yet. I liked him, but I didn't quite trust him. He had his own problems and his own agenda. He had betrayed us to King Uthor of Chaos, though under duress. I could forgive him for that... but my trust would have to be earned back.

Moving his card to the bottom of the deck, where I could find it again easily, I kept going. My dead brother Locke... he couldn't be of any help now. My brother Conner... my sister Blaise...

Then I came to our father's card. It showed a dwarf dressed in a ridiculous jester's outfit, with bells on the toes of his pointy purple slippers and an idiotic grin on his face. Aber had painted Dad this way on purpose. He never missed a chance to secretly mock anyone who slighted him, our father most especially.

Raising Dad's Trump, I concentrated, envisioning him before me. But his image failed to come to life. I didn't sense so much as a flicker of consciousness when I concentrated on it. Dead? Unconscious? Just ignoring me? All seemed equally likely, and I had no way of finding out the truth right now.

It also could be that my Trumps no longer worked. Dad had destroyed the Pattern they were based on, after all. No, I'd have to assume they worked. Dad could easily be unwilling or unable to

respond. I'd try another card.

Who was left? Just my other siblings, and I didn't know most of them well enough to decide how much I could rely on them. Any of them could be in Lord Zon's employ. Someone in Juniper had deliberately let an assassin into the castle to kill me. The plot had failed, but I still didn't know who the traitor had been.

Putting Dad's card on the bottom of the deck, next to Aber's, I pulled out my sister Freda's Trump. I trusted her more than most of the family. She might be a mystic and have visions of the future, but she had always been honest about her scheming: she wanted to be in charge of the family.

As painted by Aber, Freda looked gorgeous and sexy, with her red hair up, accentuating her high cheekbones and pale skin. Her shimmering reddish-purple evening gown accentuated her dark eyes. She had a cat-with-bird-in-mouth expression, which I found somewhat intriguing.

As I stared down at her, the stars behind her began to twinkle, and I felt a stirring consciousness. Good — the Trumps still worked. Then her picture moved, but oddly, with jerky movements. I couldn't quite see her face clearly. A veil seemed to hang between us.

"Who... *it?*" she asked. Words seemed to be missing. "*I... see—*"

"It's me — Oberon," I said.

"Who?" she cried. "... *again!*"

Before I could reply, the ground trembled underfoot. An earthquake? I leaned on my staff for support and tried not to lose my balance. The vibrations grew stronger. Pebbles on the ground began to hop and jiggle. Rocks slid, and when the ground gave a sharp convulsion, I almost fell.

Freda was saying: "— swer...! Who is...?"

"Not now," I said to Freda. I covered her card with my hand and abruptly lost contact. I would try again once the earthquake passed. Before I could lose my deck of Trumps, I shoved them back into their pouch.

A distant rumbling began at the very edge of my hearing and grew steadily louder. Not thunder — it reminded me of stampeding horses. But there were no horses here... were there?

I turned slowly, hunting for the source of the noise. There — coming up from the valley — raising a cloud of dust — it really *was* horses!

No, not horses... *unicorns*. Dozens of them, a hundred or more, all running at breakneck speed toward me. Their silvery-white coats flashed in the sunlight, shiny with sweat. The horns on their heads bobbed up and down in rhythm to their strides. Their hooves blurred with the speed of their movement. I had never seen anything so magnificent before. What could they be doing here?

They swept across the land like a wildfire. Behind them came a tide of color: greens and browns and pinks and yellows, flowing across the mountains and valleys. Oceans of grass surged from the earth. Trees sprang from the ground; first seedlings, then towering oaks and maples and pines and so many more. Bushes heavy with ripe berries sprang full-grown from the ground. Meadows — forests — green from trees and grass; pinks, yellows, and purples from flowers; reds and golds from ripening fruit—

The herd approached my position rapidly. The jarring force of their stampede made everything loose bounce across the landscape like so many children's toys. I staggered but, with the help of the staff, kept to my feet.

Still the unicorns rushed forward — hooves pounding like hammers on anvils, the sound of their passage growing to a deafening roar. A hundred yards away, and I saw the wild, fierce looks in their eyes. They ran with a mad abandon, savage, fierce, unstoppable.

Panicking suddenly, I looked around for cover but found none. If the whole herd ran me down, I'd never survive their hooves. Where could I go? What could I do? My thoughts raced through the possibilities.

Fifty yards—

I'd never get a Trump out in time, even if I could contact someone to save me.

Thirty yards—

Taking a deep breath, I raised my staff and faced the unicorns. I could never hope to outrun them. What if I treated them like a real herd of horses?

Bellowing a war-cry, though they never could have heard me over their own deafening noise, I twirled my staff and stomped my feet. If I could spook the leaders enough to make them shy away —

Ten yards — five—

It wasn't going to work. I saw it now. Their nostrils flared. Their jaws snapped. Their eyes rolled wildly. They ran with no thought or reason; a terrible madness seemed to have come over them all.

I steeled myself. My heart hammered in my chest, but I set my feet and held my ground.

Three yards — one—

At the last instant, the lead unicorns veered aside, one to my left and one to my right, and the others followed right in their paths. Like a river flowing around an island, they separated just enough to avoid hitting me.

The rushing, pounding noise of their passage deafened me. The heat of their bodies washed across me in a burning wind. The cloud of dust raised by their hooves filled my eyes and mouth. Flecks of foamy sweat hit my face and arms.

Coughing and choking, half blind, I held as still as I could. They would pass me safely. I could live through it if I just kept still—

And then they were gone. The sudden silence and stillness was overwhelming.

But before I could relax, the ground underfoot seethed and churned. What now? I teetered, off balance. A moment later, thick blades of grass popped out under my boots, growing rapidly to waist height. I braced myself with my staff, trying desperately to keep my balance.

As my staff touched the ground, it ripped free from my hands and took root. Branches burst out along its length, several almost skewering me. Then a hideous, tortured face appeared in the center of the trunk. Two orbs flickered, then opened... showing familiar blue eyes... eyes I had looked on with admiration and respect a thousand times before.

Now, though, they glared down at me. I had seldom seen such hate and loathing. It wanted me dead.

"No...!" I whispered. My heart seemed to skip several beats. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't tear my gaze away. "No...!"

Those eyes — that face — belonged to King Elnar of Ilerium. King Elnar had died because I abandoned him, despite my oath to serve both king and country for all my life. He had died —