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Opening extract from

Ruler of the Realm

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Published by

Bloomsbury

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Prologue

Outside the great metallic cities – spell-protected and weatherproof – the climate of Hell was extreme. Surface temperatures rose to 860°F in the carbon dioxide atmosphere, a greenhouse effect so intense that it melted lead. A fifteen-mile layer of sulphuric-acid cloud blanketed the world at a height of thirty miles, casting the surface into perpetual gloom.

Because of the conditions, each member of Beleth's entourage was forced to take traditional demonic form – squat, immensely strong, with leathery skin and stubby wings – while Beleth himself had shape-shifted into the towering, slab-muscled Prince of Darkness whose horned face was so familiar to black magicians everywhere.

The party sat in the Great Hall of Beleth's keep, a basalt-built structure that clung to its lonely cliff face like a giant toad. Acid rain lashed the translucent window, driven by a hurricane that seldom ceased. Their faceted, adaptive eyes penetrated the heavily scarred glass and the deepening gloom beyond to give them sight of a gently rolling plain strewn with flat wedges of rock and broken to the east by an active volcano.

'The special portals ...?' Beleth rumbled.

A smelly demon named Asmodeus said quickly, 'In place, Master.'

'All of them?'

'Yes, Master.'

'Troops?'

'On standby, Master.'

'Assault spells?'

'In place, Master.'

'Illusions?'

'In place, Master.'

'Blooms?'

'Matured, Master.'

The volcano to the east belched black smoke and erupted lava which flowed in a fiery river across the open plain. A small colony of steel-fanged niffs took fright and raced away.

Beleth leaned forward, his eyes dark. 'The boy?'

'In pl—' Asmodeus caught himself in time and changed his response. 'The boy, Master?'

Normally they would have communicated telepathically, with no chance of misunderstanding. But here, far from the amplifiers of the cities, it was easier to revert to speech.

Beleth growled impatiently, 'The boy! The boy! The stupid boy!'

Asmodeus licked his lips. 'Within days, Master.' He hoped fervently it was true. Beleth would have him flayed if anything went wrong.

But for the moment, Beleth seemed satisfied. He stood up and paced the length of the ancient hall. He turned. He glared. He smiled.

'So,' he said triumphantly, 'the conquest of the Faerie Realm may now begin!'

One

The smell of spice was overwhelming.

There were three open sacks just inside the door: one full of dried vanilla pods, one peppercorns, one golden-yellow *halud*, fine ground to release its perfume. Beyond the sacks were casks and chests, brimming with aromatics. Many glowed startling hues of orange, red and green. Behind them was the darkwood counter with its shelves packed with secrets – asafoetida for the control of demons, powdered lotus root, *tilosa* corms, cinnamon quills, cardamom pods, sesame seeds and mandragores specially compounded to open magical locks.

The Spicemaster was watching Blue from behind the counter. He was a small, thin man with a twisted spine who had either refused rejuvenation treatments or was so old now that nothing could colour his hair or take the wrinkles from his face. He had very pale, intelligent eyes.

Blue approached him warily, wondering if he could see through her disguise. No question of boy's clothes this time, of course – too much chance of a scandal. But the way she *did* look should have fooled anyone. The hand-crafted illusion spell had transformed her into a woman in her early thirties (more than twice her

actual age!) and she was dressed in the anonymous garments of a harassed housewife. She might have had a couple of children dragging at her skirts, although – Blue shuddered – thankfully she didn't. But she *looked* as if she might, which guaranteed no one would imagine they were in the presence of their Queen. Most of the time it guaranteed nobody noticed her at all.

The only problem was her hair. In a moment of vanity, she'd commissioned waist-length, sex-goddess, brushed blonde hair which – duh! – ruined the effect, so she'd had to tie it up. Illusion or not, that hair was *heavy.* She felt as if she was wearing a military helmet. Would the Spicemaster notice? He had a fearsome reputation. Would he be able to see through the illusion as easily as he was supposed to see ... other things? Not that it mattered. She was expected.

She half thought he might say something, offer her fennel or chilli or a twist of taste powder, but he only stared at her.

Blue said very quietly, 'I understand the Painted Lady approached you about me, Spicemaster.'

For a moment he looked blank. Then he murmured, '*Ah,*' and came slowly round the counter to shoot the bolt on the door. She heard magical securities tinkle into place. The display window dimmed. They were alone in the shop. No one could see in.

The Spicemaster turned towards her. 'Your Majesty ...' he exclaimed. There was just the barest hint of a question mark in his voice, but he bowed deeply all the same. The twist in his spine pitched him sideways.

'Can we be overheard?' Blue asked.

He straightened painfully and shook his head. 'The privacy spells came into play when I closed the door.'

'Good,' Blue said. 'Spicemaster, I –'

'Memnon,' he murmured. He caught her expression and added, 'Forgive me, Majesty, but it is not fitting that the Queen should have to address me by my title.' He cast his eyes down. 'My name is Memnon.'

Blue suppressed a smile. Memnon the Spicemaster was another Madame Cardui, a stickler for good manners and precise protocol. No wonder she'd spoken of him so highly.

'Master Memnon,' Blue said, granting him one honorific to replace the other, 'Madame Cardui has told you why I'm here?'

He nodded. 'Yes, Majesty.'

'You know this visit can never be spoken of?'

'Yes, Majesty.'

'And you can do the thing I wish of you?'

This time there was just the barest hesitation before he said, 'Yes, Majesty.'

'What's wrong?' Blue asked at once.

'Majesty, may I sit in your presence?'

Blue blinked, then realised what he was asking. Memnon was a very old man and that spinal problem must make standing difficult.

'Yes, yes, of course.'

He moved even more slowly this time. 'I have a stool behind the counter, Majesty.' When he had perched, he said, 'I can do what you wish, but the Painted Lady has told me I must work without assistants.'

Blue said, 'The matter is confidential. No one must know but you and me.' *And even you won't know*, she thought, *if what Madame Cardui told me is true.*

He looked away as if embarrassed. 'Then *you* must assist me, Majesty,' he murmured.

She'd been warned this would most likely be the case.

'That will not be a problem, Master Memnon,' she said firmly. 'Just tell me what to do and I'll do it.'

'Yes, Majesty.'

There was something else: she could tell by his tone. 'What is it?'

The Spicemaster raised his head to look her directly in the eyes. 'Majesty, to stay with me alone in the labyrinth may prove dangerous.' He hesitated, then added, 'Very dangerous indeed.'

Two

Henry felt nervous visiting his dad.

He hadn't figured out why. You'd think he'd be glad to get away from Mum for a while. Which he was. But that still didn't stop him feeling nervous. Once he was inside the flat, Dad would give him the glad hand and the big grin and say, *'Come in, old man, come in!'* (Dad called him 'old man' all the time now since the split with Mum.) But for all that, Henry still felt nervous.

Maybe it was the area. Up to a year ago, you took your life in your hands going down by the canal. Now it was trendy. He hated to think what his dad had paid to live here. (He'd showed him the brochure once. It was a fat, expensive Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production with tissue paper over a full-colour photo. And they didn't call it a brochure. They called it a *prospectus*.) At least he didn't have to stay long. He had the Hodge excuse ready. He was heading out to feed Mr Fogarty's cat.

Henry thumbed the bell and waited. After a minute, he thumbed it again. With a peculiar feeling of relief, he began to think his father might be out. He thumbed the bell a third time, deciding that if nobody came inside ten seconds, he was heading for the hills. He'd phone later, say he'd called, and collect the Brownie

points with none of the hassle. Not that Dad meant to hassle. It was just that he kept asking about Mum. It wasn't the questions that upset Henry. It was the way his dad's eyes filled up when he asked them.

... Nine ... ten ... eleven ... twelve ... thirteen ... fourteen ... There was definitely nobody home. He was free and clear, duty done. He could go now. It was like being let out of school.

For some reason his hand reached out and pushed the door.

The door was off the latch. It swung open a few inches. Henry stared at it stupidly, wondering what that was all about. Nobody went out and left their door open, not when the flat was empty. It was asking for trouble. Even his dad must know that. This stretch of the canal might be trendy now, but the area around it was still pretty rough. The new waterside apartments had to be a target for every scumbag in the district.

Henry pushed the door again and it opened even further. A horrible thought occurred to him. Suppose Dad *hadn't* left the door unlocked when he went out. Suppose he'd locked it the way he always did. Suppose a scumbag came along and *picked the lock*! A scumbag who was inside now, rifling every drawer in sight ...

The nerves in Henry's stomach turned to a sick fear. He'd watched far too many horror movies. You pushed an open door and walked into an empty flat and something in a *Scream* mask lurched out of the shadows to smash your head in with a poker. But not all of the fear was for himself. He kept thinking maybe his dad might have come back and the thing in the *Scream* mask loomed up behind *him*. He kept seeing a body on the floor and blood staining the pale carpet.

Heart pounding, Henry pushed the door right back and slid into the flat.

The front door opened on to a postage-stamp hall with a coat rack, a wall mirror and a silly little polished table that was supposed to look eighteenth century. There were two doors off the hall. The far one led into what the prospectus called the 'Master Bedroom', which had shag-pile carpet, a double bed – what would Dad want with a double bed now he wasn't living with Mum? – and mean little French windows leading on to a tiny balcony with a fire escape. There was also, Henry knew, a connecting door to the living room and an en-suite bathroom. The closer door in the hallway led into the living room as well. The prospectus called it the 'Lounge'.

Henry cautiously turned the handle of the living-room door.

He was trying to move quietly, but his heart was thumping so loudly now you could hear it halfway down the street. It was making him feel sick in his throat as well as his stomach. The worst of it was he knew, he positively *knew*, he was going to find his father dead or dying on the floor. He wished he'd brought a weapon of some sort, but it was too late now.

The lounge was the largest room in the flat, furnished in poncy white leather with a squat spiral staircase winding up to a nun's cell the prospectus called a guest bedroom. There was a door to a kitchen, a door to a second bathroom, a door to a study his father never used (possibly because it was designed for a dwarf), a door to the master bedroom. There were windows that opened up to another balcony, this time

without a fire escape, overlooking the canal. The carpet, he saw at once, was clean and bodiless.

Henry sighed and felt his heart wind down. 'Dad ...?' he called, frowning. But the frown was just a habit – there was no body on the floor, no blood on the carpet. Maybe best of all, the whole place was bright and cheerful, without shadows for characters in *Scream* masks to lurk in. 'Dad ...?' There was no reply. The place was empty.

It was a relief, except it didn't explain why his dad had left the door open. Maybe he was just getting forgetful. God knows he had enough on his mind these days. First there was Henry's mum having an affair with his secretary. Then there was Henry's mum kicking him out of his own home. (They claimed it was 'by agreement', but Henry knew better.) Then there was Henry's mum insisting both children – Henry being the reluctant one – stay with her. When you started to think about it, Henry's mum had a lot to answer for.

Henry supposed he'd better hang around for a bit. He couldn't very well just wander off now and leave the front door open. But he couldn't lock it either, in case his dad had gone out without his key, maybe just slipped down to the corner shop for a minute, taking his chances with Scumbags Anonymous. So the thing to do was make a cup of tea and wait. Once his dad came back he could say hello then go and feed Hodge.

He found the tea bags easily enough – Dad kept them in the fridge for some reason and there wasn't much else in there. He brewed up in a mug that said, *Beam me up, Scottie, there's no intelligent life down here.* Since there wasn't any milk either, he tried adding

a spoonful of plain yoghurt and carried the mug into the living room. He sat down on the poncy leather couch and stared gloomily into his tea. The yoghurt had been a mistake. It had separated out and was floating on the top in uneven globules. He debated whether to risk tasting it or go back and make some fresh.

He still hadn't reached any conclusion when the bathroom door opened and a young woman walked out. She had wet hair, bare legs and a towel wrapped around her.

She caught sight of Henry and screamed.

Three

The Spicemaster's labyrinth was laid out on the floor of a cellar underneath the shop. Blue was surprised by its size. She'd imagined something larger. But she supposed he knew what he was doing. Madame Cardui said he'd been practising – largely in secret – for two generations.

Blue looked around the chamber. The labyrinth spiral was picked out in small rock-crystal chunks. At the entrance there was a brass incense burner on a tripod. Beside it was a low table with a burnished copper bowl and two glass vials, one containing spice, the other a clear liquid. Near the table was one of those old-fashioned backless chairs with a leather seat. To one side there was a cupboard or possibly a wardrobe: it was difficult to tell. That was all, except for the glowglobes fixed to the rafters in the ceiling. They looked fly-blown and dim.

'What do you want me to do?' she asked.

Memnon was in the process of locking the door. He seemed even more upset now. 'Majesty, are you sure you wish no one else present? Perhaps a trusted guard ...?'

'No one,' Blue said firmly. It wasn't so much the fact she was here – what she planned wasn't illegal – as the

possibility that her questions, and their answers, should reach the ears of ... well ... anybody. She would make State secrets in this chamber. As he turned away from the door, she asked, 'What danger is there? To me, I mean.'

Spicemaster Memnon looked positively distraught. 'I may try to kill you, Majesty.'

Blue glanced at the little old man and suppressed a smile. He hardly looked strong enough to swat a fly, let alone do her harm. But she appreciated both his concern and his loyalty, so she said soberly, 'Spicemaster, I take full responsibility for anything that happens. If you try to harm me, you will be absolved from criminal proceedings, charges of treason, anything of that sort.' The look on his face told her he was far from reassured, so she added kindly, 'Why don't you tell me exactly what takes place, so I can be prepared.' She smiled. 'Defend myself. If the need arises.'

Memnon sighed. 'The ceremony is very simple, Majesty. When I am cloaked, I swallow the spice and enter the labyrinth. By the time I reach the centre, the spice will have begun to take effect. When the god manifests, you may enter the labyrinth yourself to ask your questions.'

'And when am I likely to be in danger?'

'When the god manifests.'

Well, that was straightforward enough. But the god would manifest in the Spicemaster, using his body, so it wouldn't exactly be an attack by a raging bull. If it happened at all.

To distract him, she asked, 'How do you want me to help you in the ceremony?'

'Majesty, I shall need your assistance to cloak.

Beyond that, I would require you to play a drumbeat as I enter the labyrinth.'

And that seemed straightforward as well. She held his coat for him and played a drum. Not that you'd think he needed assistance for any of that, but even simple ceremonies had their formalities.

A thought struck her and she said, 'I've never played a drum.'

'It's no more than a heartbeat,' said the Spicemaster obscurely. He looked distracted. 'Majesty, are you certain –?'

Blue said *yes* and watched his resolve finally collapse. He didn't want to, but he was going to do it.

He said quietly, 'Take this, Majesty.'

For an instant she didn't realise what was happening, then saw he was holding out a small transparent packet of orange-yellow spice, little larger than a coin.

'What's this?' she asked as her hand closed around it.

'Mutated spikenard – it may offer you some protection.' He lowered his eyes. 'Shall we begin, Majesty?'

The cupboard turned out to be a wardrobe, and the cloak hanging in it was magnificent. It was a full, floor-length garment, made from the feathers of some exotic bird that would have put a peacock to shame. Even under the dim glowglobes, the colours danced and shimmered. A cloak worthy of a god, she thought, and wondered how the twisted old Spicemaster would look wearing it.

But it was a small, rather battered, wooden hand-drum he took from the wardrobe. 'Dragonskin,' he murmured as he passed it to her.

Blue glanced down at the worn green surface. 'Did you say *dragon*skin?'

'A small piece only, Majesty. The beast was in no way harmed when it was taken.'

Blue continued to stare at the drum. She couldn't imagine how you extracted a piece of skin from a dragon without harming it ... or getting yourself devoured, come to that. Perhaps he was lying. Dragons had been protected for years and the penalties for killing one were severe. But she had other things on her mind at the moment. She looked up at the Spicemaster.

'What do I do with this?'

'If Your Majesty would care to sit on the chair and –' he managed to look concerned, nervous and embarrassed all at the same time, '– place the drum between Your Majesty's knees ...' Blue did so without fuss, pushing down her skirt to make a lap. 'Now, Your Majesty, tap the drum gently: one-two.'

Blue tapped the drum with the tips of her fingers. For such a small instrument, it made an astonishingly loud, resonant note. She looked up at the Spicemaster.

'*Gently*, Majesty,' he emphasised. 'Let the dragonskin do the work.'

She tapped it again, more gently this time. The note still sounded loudly, but the Spicemaster appeared satisfied.

'Now,' he said, 'one-two, like the beat of a human heart.'

Blue reached out to stroke the dragonskin. It looked smooth, but there was a coating of very fine green hair beneath her fingers. *Tap-boom.* She looked up at the Spicemaster. *Tap-boom.*

'Perfect!' he said. 'Like that. Exactly like that and at that speed until I reach the centre of the spiral. Then slower and more softly. Do you understand?' He

blinked and added, 'Majesty.'

Blue nodded.

'Now, Majesty,' said the Spicemaster, 'if you will leave the drum on your chair for a moment and help me with the cloak ...'

She was completely unprepared for the cloak. Although bulky, it was made from feathers so she expected it to be light, but the moment she tried to take it from the hanger, it writhed and twisted like a live thing and proved so heavy she needed all her strength to hold it. Glory only knows how the Spicemaster was going to manage.

'Fight it!' he commanded urgently. 'There's no real danger, but it will try to strangle you!'

How could there be no real danger if something was trying to strangle you? And why hadn't this silly little man mentioned the damn cloak if he was so concerned with her safety? But she fought the struggling garment gamely.

'My shoulders!' shouted the Spicemaster. 'Put it on my shoulders! It will quiet down once it gets hold of me!'

If I put it on his shoulders it will crush him to the ground, Blue thought. The thing felt as if it weighed a ton. But he was wriggling into position and the cloak was now so violent it almost wrenched itself out of her hands. Suddenly it was across his shoulders. The Spicemaster staggered a little, his knees buckled, but he managed to hold himself erect. The cloak, as predicted, settled down at once.

'Thank you, Majesty,' he said.

Blue sat on the leather seat, one hand absently caressing the dragonskin. It was almost like stroking a

cat. The skin vibrated gently as if purring. But her eyes were on the Spicemaster, now at the entrance of the labyrinth. He looked magnificent in the cloak, far more magnificent than a man of his height deserved. The garment had changed him, lending him huge authority and presence. For the first time she found herself wondering if it might not, after all, have been a good idea to bring a guard with her. But she pushed the thought aside. Whatever the illusion of bulk, he was still the same frail little man underneath. She was perfectly safe.

He poured the contents of the liquid vial – was it water? – into the copper bowl, then unstoppered the second vial. At once a heady scent of nutmeg filled the air. Yet the spice wasn't nutmeg: she knew that instantly. There were citrus undertones and a heavy hint of musk that carried with it a curious note of corruption. The Spicemaster emptied the vial into the liquid and mixed the two together with a spatula. He glanced back at Blue.

'Drumbeat, please, Majesty.'

Blue jumped slightly, then tapped the drum. In one quick movement, the Spicemaster drank down the mixture in his bowl and stepped into the labyrinth.

four

If he'd been prepared to admit it, Pyrgus was afraid.

As Crown Prince, he'd never been allowed to visit Yammeth City – or anywhere else in the Cretch for that matter – and even when he'd run away, some natural caution kept him clear of the place. But he was here now; and he didn't like it.

The city wasn't at all what he'd imagined. It was cleaner, for one thing – far cleaner than the capital, which every Faerie of the Light touted as a shining example to the Realm. It was also – he hated to admit it – better laid out, although that wasn't surprising since it was a newer city. The capital was nearly two thousand years old. Yammeth City had been built no more than four hundred years ago, when the Cretch was ceded to the Faeries of the Night after the War of Partial Independence. They'd built it from scratch, with the help of demon labour, and laid it out, some said, to mimic the soulless metallic sprawls of Hael.

Maybe that was what made him nervous. Or maybe it was the level of the light.

Pyrgus was used to dark alleys. (Light's sake, he'd *lived* in one before his father's guards found him.) But this was different. Even the main streets of Yammeth were dim. And not just dim: the glowglobes in the