

Chapter 1

Black magic smells like nothing else. Worse than the oily smoke of a rancid grease fire overlaid with a tang of decayed meat. Its evil wrapped around and layered the tongue like a thick paste of ashes and motor oil. Only Sig could smell it. A good extra sense since his job was hunting evil.

Sig walked the middle of a narrow, cracked asphalt road bordered by a cornfield to the left. Cars and pickups lined both sides. A sharp steeple rose above the whitewashed wooden building on the right. Morning sun reflected from red and gold panels in the church's narrow stained glass windows.

The stench emanated from there.

Grampa Thor marched next to him, metal cane tip clacking on asphalt. "I can't believe you don't smell what's coming from the church," Sig said.

"You're the only one I know with the power to sense it," Grampa growled then grunted. "It isn't the first evil to hide within a religion."

They strode onto a warped and fractured concrete walkway that crossed the single culvert in a deep drainage ditch that resembled a grassy moat. Organ music and singing leapt in volume when the side door to the church popped open. A large woman with salt and pepper hair and pale skin bustled toward them with raised hands. "Stop. You can't come in. Unbelievers are not welcome," she trumpeted over the noise from inside.

Evil radiated from the woman—or from behind her. Every malevolence emitted a distinct sensation. Sig hadn't encountered this one before. He nodded at Grampa and began to step around her.

She sidled in front of him to block his progress and hissed, "I command you to go away." Her eyes flashed crimson before dimming back to sparkling blue. Her vocal harmonics tingled across Sig's skin.

He fingered the sword-shaped amulet hanging from the gold chain around his neck.

Grampa Thor tilted his head and squinted at her. "Ma'am, no disrespect intended but you don't know us. Why do you say we're unbelievers?"

"One of you is a wizard. No good can come from you participating in our ceremonies." Now she spoke in melodious tones that made Sig wonder if she was the angelic soprano that had soared while leading the previous hymn.

How did she know Grampa was a wizard?

Sig didn't have power like Grampa Thor. They were here hunting the dark mage, Heathcoat, who stole Sig's magic when he was a child. However, despite, or perhaps because of, his

limitations, Sig was highly sensitive to evil. Grampa called him the truffle-hound of dark magic and depended upon his senses.

A voice thundered over loudspeakers inside the church to fill the sudden silence at the end of the hymn.

"My husband is preaching now. Come back later," she growled, flashing a no-nonsense glare.

"We just want to talk to the minister"

"What about?" she demanded.

"Your picketing of soldiers' funerals," Grampa Thor replied. He had discovered that this congregation, with no prior history of malice, suddenly resurrected a practice the world condemned as evil years ago.

Her chin rose and she looked down her nose at him. "Our protests are protected by the First Amendment."

"Yes ma'am. We're not interested in stopping you. We just want to talk to the minister. We were hoping to sit in on the service and talk to him afterward."

Grampa moved to step around. She shoved. He landed fifteen feet away and rolled to his feet in a crouch. Not bad for a 194-year-old man. Martial arts training served him well.

Middle-aged women weren't that strong. The ruby glow beaming from her eyes was Sig's second clue. He glanced to see Grampa's next move.

Grampa raised the cane he used to focus magic. He said "*Rivelarsi*." The large golden-colored jewel on the head of the cane glowed. An amber beam illuminated the woman. Her shape shimmered and shifted. Something dark oozed out of her mouth stretching her jaws unnaturally wide. Sig's eyes widened. No way could her body hold that much putrid filth.

It landed on the sidewalk with a thump. Colors pulsed. It solidified, expanded, and took form—rising to tower over Sig. Scarlet eyes blended with reddish-brown, two-inch long claws on hands and feet, but clashed with the wrinkled purplish skin fading to poison green folds hanging down its back. Rustle. *Pop*. Sagging green skin flared into wings.

"It's an afreet."

Sig took Grampa's word for it. He'd studied demons and battled dark magic for almost two centuries. Sig had only been at it a few months. What he recalled from his freshman demonology class told him that afreets were among the more powerful classes of worker-bee demons.

With the amulet still held in his fingertips, Sig its name, "Aðalbrandr," the word of empowerment. His change was fast. The afreet was faster.

Through the blurred vision that accompanied Sig's transformation, he saw the demon spring and soar toward him. Its jaws gaped and claws reached.

It was a draw as to who was more surprised. Sig didn't expect so swift an attack, and the demon's eyes grew wider and brighter when the slightly larger than normal sized human it hurtled toward transformed into a nine-foot tall, 700-pound Battle Wizard, armed with a sword.

Sig barely managed to raise the blade, flat side out, between himself and the demon. Using both hands, he held off the demon's attack. It scrabbled at Sig's sides with clawed feet and hands, trying to draw near enough to rend him with its fearsomely fanged jaws.

Grampa Thor shuffled around searching for an opening while Sig struggled to push the gnashing teeth away. Wings beat at him. Blood ran down his sides from furrows the afreet's claws gouged. Sig crouched, sprang into the air, and flipped backward—the demon still clinging. He spun 270 degrees and they landed together—Sig on top. Knees and the flat of his sword driven by his 700 pounds smashed the afreet into the ground.

It issued a sound like the loud chuff of a steam locomotive and released its hold. Sig leapt away and brought his sword up into a Kendo defensive position.

The monster sprang up and soared into the air with powerful wing thrusts.

Another hymn rang out from the choir inside.

With Sig clear, Grampa Thor wound up and hurled a fireball at the swooping afreet. It dodged and plunged toward Grampa, claws extended. He flung another fireball, and the demon jukeed away, skimming at ground level—headed toward Sig. It climbed steeply into the air to avoid his sword. Sig leapt and sliced the monster in half when it was twenty feet above the ground.

Its severed sides flopped to the ground ten feet apart. Immediately using arms, legs, and wings the two pieces began to claw toward each other. Sig pressed his left arm to his side to stem the bleeding and strode toward the demon, Grampa Thor said, "It's an afreet. Chop it into at least six pieces to send it back."

"Six?" Sig muttered, but did as instructed. When he raised his sword for the sixth cut, the demon dematerialized with a pop and a flash of darkness just as Grampa said.

Music from the church soared.

Chapter 2

Sig pivoted, searching for danger. Experience taught him never to trust the obvious when it came to demons.

Grampa walked over to join him near gouges ripped in the lawn from the afreet's claws. "Don't worry, it's gone." He made a pitching motion. "Did you notice how I threw the fireballs high to bring it lower, within your range? Just a little lesson in strategy for you."

"I'll remember that if I'm ever able to throw fireballs," Sig grumbled. With a groan, he twisted to look down at the furrows the demon had scored in his side. It looked worse than the lawn. The pain was intense although under the sheet of blood that coated his ribs only a slow trickle still oozed, and the wounds were shrinking.

His knees felt weak. He dropped to a knee, hanging his head, using his sword for support. It would be best to wait and change back after the bleeding ceased. His magic worked best within this transformed body. Returning to normal form would slow the healing and magnify the already excruciating pain.

He flinched and grimaced when Grampa Thor clapped him on the shoulder. "Let's check on the little lady."

Remembering the minister's wife, Sig's head jerked toward the walkway by the side door where the body that had housed the demon lay crumpled. As Grampa approached, she rolled onto her side and looked blearily at him.

Gramps knelt beside her to shield Sig from her eyes until he changed back. "Here let me help you up. You tripped on this broken sidewalk." He gestured at a raised fractured section near her foot.

She hesitantly reached for his hand. "Who are you? Where did you come from? Why are you at our church picnic?"

He looked over the reclining body at Sig, now standing behind her, out of sight, and shook his head. Sig took his meaning and muttered "Koma Aftur"—the words that returned him to normal form. The scene around him seemed to grow. When he changed, it still felt like the world shifted around him.

Upon hearing Sig's voice, the preacher's wife turned her head toward him. She didn't shriek. He must have changed in time.

"What? What did you say?" Her eyes widened. "That's the church. I'm not at the picnic. How did I get here?"

Grampa patted her hand as she looked around. "You must have hit your head when you fell. You might have a concussion. Maybe it's best if you rest a moment."

She lay back. "I feel so drained."

"Imagine that." Sig tried to put sympathy in his voice and flashed a half smile.

The music grew louder as the door opened again. "Grace, we need you for the next . . .," a small, wizened lady began. She gasped and clutched her chest as she took in the scene in front of her.

"What did you do to her? Get away!" She screeched into the quiet after the end of the hymn.

"They didn't do anything—I don't think." She struggled to sit up. "I must have fallen. They were here when I woke up." She frowned and shook her head.

Sig swooped forward to help her stand. More people burst out of the doorway, pushing the little, old lady aside.

"Who are you? What did you do to my wife?" growled a tall, fat man with thinning gray hair and a florid complexion.

Sig exhaled in frustration. "We were walking toward the church when she came out and tripped over your broken walkway. She hit her head. She seems disoriented. Do you have any medical personnel in your congregation who can look at her?"

A hawk-faced woman in a dark-blue-checkered dress with white collar and cuffs stepped forward. "I'm a nurse." She looked around quickly and pointed at two burly men. "You two, help her inside. Set Grace in the front pew so I can look her over."

They supported Grace as she stumbled inside. The preacher looked at the fractured sidewalk and glanced up at Sig and Grampa with a frown. "She tripped? She walks here every day. What do you mean *disoriented*?"

Grampa shrugged. "She thought she was at the church picnic."

"We haven't had a church picnic in over five years. She said we didn't have time for frivolity, we had to do the Lord's work." He stammered incredulously.

"Is it the Lord's work you do, when you picket soldiers' funerals? How long have you been doing that?"

The preacher donned a haughty expression. "We've been doing the Lord's duty for a long time. The funerals? We've picketed since . . . about six months after the last church picnic. That's when the Spirit moved my wife. She's been our driving force since then. Urging us toward our destiny."

"Humph," Grampa muttered. "Say, do you have a person in your congregation who has dark hair with a vivid white streak through it?"

The minister's eyes moved back and forth as if he were viewing mental pictures. "There was someone like that a while back, the Reverend Heathcoat."

"The *Reverend* Heathcoat?" Sig was stunned to hear the mage that stole his magic, continually summoned demons to kill him, and plunged Grampa into a coma referred to as a *Reverend*.

"Yes, he was a traveling preacher who stopped here for a spell." The preacher chuckled. "Grace didn't like him or his ideas, at first, but I think he helped fill her with the Holy Spirit."

"I'm sure he did," Sig said "I'm sure he did." He looked meaningfully at Grampa and turned back to the preacher. "Was the *Reverend's* divinity degree spelled Sc.D., with a small "c", and was the degree from Romania?"

"Yes, that's it. A degree in the Sociology of Christian Divinity. He said the little "c" was a typo. Romania is where he studied. Do you know him?"

"Know of him. Is he still around?"

"No, he left shortly after the Holy Ghost came into Grace."

"He's big on moving spirits." Grampa said. He cocked his head and asked, "So you haven't seen him in almost five years?"

"At least."

Grampa jerked his head toward the road. "C'mon Sig, I think it's time we leave." He started to walk away.

"Take care of Grace, Preacher. I've heard that falls like that have been known to knock the spirit out of a person," Sig said before followed Grampa.

Chapter 3

Sig climbed into the passenger seat of Grampa's pickup and looked at the lines of cars parked on both sides of the narrow asphalt road. All these people lead into evil works by a demon. He sighed. "Interesting how Heathcoat's European Doctor of Science degree mutated into a degree in Christian Divinity. He has been influencing these people for over five years. Wouldn't he have to come back a few times—at least to reinforce the demon's commands?"

Grampa's half smile struggled through a sad expression. "The small minded hatred the afreet found here made this a ripe harvest field. Its life was good—no need to create havoc. Just a slight push on minds already unhappy and looking for something to blame, a little steering, a suggestion planted, and they gladly did its bidding. No this is what demons revel in. Why would it leave?"

"It's been commanding her all this time. Will it come back?"

"Not unless it's summoned again. No, you sent it back," Grampa said.

"What are we going to do about the evil that the afreet convinced these people to do?"

"Let's put it in perspective," Grampa said. "Battle Wizards were created to lead the fight against dark magic. By sending the afreet back, black magic is gone from. Your job is finished here. Whatever minor evil those simple people can manage now, without the demon's guidance, isn't our concern." Grampa put his pickup into gear and backed up.

Sig's frustration reached the boiling point. He slapped the dashboard. "We keep hitting dead ends with Heathcoat," he shouted.

Grampa stopped, put the truck into park, and took a deep breath. "A Battle Wizard exists to fight black magic. You accomplished that today. We're searching for Heathcoat to get your magic back, to make you a complete Battle Wizard. Dark mages are fonts of evil, and Heathcoat in particular, so I don't expect the two goals to ever conflict, but if they did..."

"I'd have to choose the greater good," Sig said. "And protect mankind from black magic." Sometimes he needed Grampa's wisdom to set him straight. That didn't mean he liked it.

"Until we can make Heathcoat release the demon he summoned to steal your magic, I'll supply magic and you be the warrior. He can release the demon voluntarily, or his death will release it," Grampa said. "For the life of me, I can't think of any reason to go out of our way to keep him alive."

He put the truck back in gear and accelerated between the rows of vehicles. "I promised Arthur I'd have you back to the university in time for classes on Tuesday."

"Not much of a long weekend," Sig said. "Eat a big meal and drive all day. Scout around. Kill a demon. Drive back in time for classes. And I'm no closer to getting my magic."

"Quit cher bellyaching. Hunting and killing demons is what Battle Wizards do. Get used to it. As for finding your magic, we know Heathcoat is the key and even if he isn't here now—he was here—so our source was right. We'll keep following leads until one takes us to him. Sorry about your long weekend, but you have all day tomorrow. Enjoy it enough for a long weekend's worth," Grampa said with a wink.

Sig flashed him a weak smile. He didn't want to dwell on the concept that stopping Heathcoat from summoning more supernatural beings was more important than getting his magic back. But since he sent an inordinate number of those creatures to kill Sig, it was a worthy objective. His lone comfort was that Grampa thought stopping Heathcoat might accomplish both goals.

Chapter 4

The trip from central Kansas back to Northwestern University stretched over twelve hours. Although Grampa Thor usually claimed a war chariot had been his first vehicle, Sig suspected a horse drawn buggy was more likely. Grampa was eighty-five when an acquaintance, Henry Ford, produced the Model-T. Even now, autos were still new-fangled contraptions to Grampa. He drove like it.

Sig slept as much as he could to avoid the frustration of watching cars zip by them on the highway. Thank goodness it was a highway. On two-lane roads, he never could sleep because of horns honking behind them. He saw many one-finger salutes when drivers finally pulled around and passed. They didn't faze Grampa.

He only stopped for gas, food, and the occasional tollbooth. His bladder had the capacity of a fifty-five-gallon drum. Sometimes Sig thought he felt tears that weren't really tears welling in his eyes, before Grampa finally opted for a pit stop. Fortunately, Grampa had a nose for food. He used a seeking spell to ferret out good cooking. Meals at excellent, out-of-the way restaurants punctuated their trip.

Sig called ahead to let Professor Arthur Herman know they would be arriving at his estate in the early morning. It was just good manners. Self-interest and civic duty kept powerful wizards from surprising each other. Wizardly defensive reactions could destroy surrounding properties and the inhabitants, not to mention the damage one frightened wizard could do to another. Besides, with magic wards surrounding the estate, Grampa wasn't going to sneak up on the Professor.

Sig on the other hand, with internalized magic that didn't project outside his body, could surprise him. Startling powerful wizards simply wasn't a good idea.

They pulled through the gates of the Professor's estate well after midnight. Grampa climbed the steps to the broad front porch and jiggled the handle. Locked. He waited for Sig.

The key clicked in the lock and turned smoothly. Sig pushed it open and gestured for Grampa to enter.

Inside, Grampa jerked to a stop. "Holy crap!" He muttered.

A deep growl, like a diesel truck climbing a steep grade, followed his words.

Past Grampa's shoulder, Sig saw glowing amber coals, suspended four feet off the ground, glaring at them. His eyes adjusted to the dim moonlight reflected into the foyer and off the bared four-inch canines of what looked like a prehistoric dire wolf.

Sig grabbed Grampa's shoulder. "Wait." Then he said, "Rick, it's me and Grampa Thor."

The beast ceased snarling, turned, and padded into a room off the foyer.

Grampa looked at Sig. "How do you know that's Rick?"

"A Were at the Professor's house is probably Rick. Besides, the only other Were that size is Rick's uncle Jacob, and his coat is much redder. No matter what anyone says, they don't all look alike."

Grampa blew out a breath. "I was about to throw a fireball at it. I'm glad you stopped me. I didn't know if it was a Were or a demon wolf."

"That's why I stopped you. The Professor spent too much decorating this place for you to burn it up."

A young man built like a linebacker for the Chicago Bears walked out of the room where the wolf had gone. He stopped and bent to seal the closures on the tear-away sweat pants he always wore. His hair was the same color as the wolf's. He straightened, rubbed his amber eyes, and said, "Two people breaking and entering in the middle of the night sure wakes a fella up."

"I called the Professor to let him know we would be arriving tonight," Sig said

"Well, nobody told me. I was asleep in the parlor when you bumbled in here."

"I used a key, and we were quiet. Were you sleeping in wolf form?"

"Yeah, the carpet in there is so plush, it's really comfortable."

"No wonder you heard us. Were you *really* on the carpet or the sofa?"

Rick looked around before answering. "The sofa is comfy, but it's too small for me."

A tall, slim man in black silk pajamas and silver lounging robe walked in. He towered six inches over Grampa's six feet. "Ah, you're early. I didn't expect you for another hour or so. I assume you drove, Sig?" Professor Herman said.

"If you don't like my driving, don't ride with me," Grampa growled. "We were greeted by your watchdog." He glared at Rick.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to wake him until you were almost here. I misjudged the time. May I prepare breakfast?"

"Let's eat. It's been a couple of hours." Grampa rubbed his hands together in anticipation.

"Now you're talking," said Rick.

When Sig first moved in, he found it unusual to eat breakfast at any time of the day. Grampa and the Professor, each near or over the two-century mark although they only looked to be late middle-age, got by on only a few hours of sleep every several days, so breakfast was served whenever they felt the urge. Sig followed them into the kitchen.

Professor Herman already had a potato, spinach, cheese, and Spanish chorizo frittata ready to put in the oven. Rick juiced a dozen Moro oranges while Sig cooked up fresh tortillas on the griddle. Grampa hoisted a bottle of Sailor Jerry's spiced rum he found in the bar "to tune up the orange juice." He poured a dollop into the Professor's glass and two into his. Sig and Rick waved him off.

After everyone filled his plate and traipsed into the dining room, the Professor raised a glass. "I'd like to toast what I hope was a successful expedition since you're back so soon. What did you find?"

"As our informant alleged, it was ex-Dean Heathcoat behind the rogue church in Kansas," Sig said. "However, he summoned the demon to guide them even before he became the Dean of the Physics department here at Northwestern."

"Heathcoat didn't revisit the congregation for five years," Grampa added. "The congregation's deeds made the demon feel at home—Hell on Earth, to coin a phrase."

"What happened to the demon?" Rick asked.

"It was an afreet. Sig exorcized it with Aðalbrandr."

Rick held out a fist to Sig. "Go bro. You're becoming a first class demon ass-kicker."

Sig shook his head and bumped Rick's fist. "I can't take props for all of it. Grampa helped herd this one into my sword."

"Whatever. An afreet is a badass. Maybe not Andras class but they're right below Marids, which are barely less powerful than Counts, Dukes, and Marquis Demons."

Grampa smiled at Rick. "Very good, you've been studying." He turned to the Professor. "He's a model student of your Physics of Magic School, Dean Herman."

"Rick is doing well, but his brilliance is selective. Let me clarify once again that I'm not the Dean. I'm acting in an interim capacity. Besides hiding the fact that he was a dark mage from everyone at the University, Dean Heathcoat left things in total disarray. And now they've put me in charge to straighten up his mess."

"He fooled everyone except Sig," Rick said. "He also didn't exactly leave. Sig killed him."

Sig sighed in exasperation. Rick smirked at him. "Yeah, you say you didn't kill him, but his head was disconnected from his body. You were standing there with your sword, and nobody else was nearby."

"His twin brother was."

"Ah yes, the evil twin. The one that vanished into that inter-dimensional portal where you couldn't follow? The twin you followed to Kansas this weekend?"

"You were there when the Heathcoat twin died! Why are you asking?"

"I was in another room. I'm just saying what I saw. You have to admit it's far-fetched that the Dean of the Physics Department was one of a pair of twin dark wizards masquerading as one person. I never saw the other evil twin," Rick said. "Your story is that they invoked a demon to steal your powers when you were young, killed your father, and put your Grampa in a coma."

"But..." Sig couldn't understand why Rick didn't believe it.

Rick stood up and headed for the kitchen. "Now you and Grampa Curmudgeon are searching for the fictional evil twin, the one who escaped into another dimension... another *dimension* if anyone can believe it."

Before shoving the door open, Rick rolled his eyes so fiercely Sig was concerned that he'd lose his balance, "You know, just saying it makes me think I'm *crazy*," his voice rose in volume as he stomped into the kitchen and the door swung shut.

Everyone sat uncomfortably, eyes lowered.

Cabinets slammed in the kitchen. Dishes crashed and then there was silence. Professor Herman looked toward the kitchen and started to rise. Rick walked back in carrying a cake covered with eighteen flaming candles.

With a big smile he said, "Happy birthday, Sig! I know it's later this week, but we'll be studying. I made your favorite cake, mint chocolate chip, with extra large chocolate chips and fresh spearmint. Blow it out and make a wish." Startled expressions changed into laughter.

Grampa Thor slapped the table. Professor Herman looked like he was trying hard to swallow a guffaw.

Sig shook his head, stood, grabbed Rick in a man-hug, and patted him on the back. Then he flopped back into his chair, blew out the candles, held out his plate, and said, "Serve it up. Birthday boy first."

Chapter 5

Rick dished up slabs of cake for everyone. When he finished, less than a quarter of the cake remained. Sig looked at Rick's plate. "Chocolate's bad for dogs. Aren't you afraid it's bad for werewolves too?"

"D'you know what's bad for humans?" Rick asked with a glower.

"What?"

"Two things, comparing Weres to dogs and trying to take chocolate away from this Were."

"Note to self: Weres think chocolate is meat. I'll write that in my journal tonight."

Rick looked back up at Sig. "You can write? Wonders will never cease."

The taunts could have continued, but Sig noticed Grampa Thor had finished and was now eyeing Sig's plate. He dedicated himself to removing temptation from his great grandfather's sight.



Professor Herman refilled everyone's coffee cup before he sat and addressed Grampa Thor. "I take it that your expedition was fruitless."

"Insofar as getting a lead on the remaining dark mage twin, it was a dead end, but Sig sent a meddling afreet back to Hell. I'd call it even." Grampa nodded with a tight smile at Sig.

"What next steps do you suggest, Thorval?" The Professor always used Grampa's first name, and Grampa always called him Arthur. Their friendship went back to before their collaboration to prevent the expansion of World War I.

Grampa had taught Sig that magic includes the ability to draw power from other dimensions. Access to chaotic dimensions fuels black magic, which gains strength from havoc and destruction. Black magic in turn fuels hatred, fear, and envy in a malevolent cycle that spawns more evil. The more black magic there is, the easier it is to draw on.

Battle Wizards lead the fight to prevent black magic from spiraling out of control. The-war-to-end-all-wars, an incubator of death and desolation on scale never before seen, almost tipped the balance in favor of dark magic.

Grampa shook his head in response to Professor Herman's question. "My source for finding Heathcoat dried up. A pixie owed me a favor. Once he found the Kansas church demon for me, he went into hiding."

"Couldn't you talk him into helping again?" Sig asked.

"Sending a pixie to track a demon, well...that's probably more than he owed me... and he wasn't shy about letting me know it. He said he's lucky to be alive, and he's probably right. It'll take months for him to grow his wings back. No, I don't think he'll help me now out of the kindness of his heart."

Arthur arched an eyebrow. "A pixie to track an afreet? I believe that raw pixie ranks near the top in afreet gastronomic pleasures. Yes, that was quite a bit to ask."

"He didn't die and he owed me for saving his entire family," Grampa said. "After I rescued them from the typhoon generated by a Marid demon to kill them, I sheltered and fed them for more than a month. Have you ever had to spend more than a day with a pixie clan? They're never silent—squawking and gossiping constantly—and they eat their weight every day. Before it was done, I was tempted to give myself up to the Marid just to get away from them."

Arthur grimaced and shuddered. Apparently, he had experience with pixies. "I feel your pain. Any other ideas?" he asked.

"I could call on Charon. He's helped in the past."

Rick reacted with surprise. "The ferryman from the river Styx? The one who takes people to the Underworld when they die?"

"One and the same. Arthur, this boy certainly seems to keep up on his studies."

"Doesn't Charon always demand payment in obolus, the coin Greeks place in the mouth of corpses so he'll take them across the river?" Rick asked.

"Obolus coins work. But I've found that he has a particular fondness for Jameson Rarest Vintage Reserve Irish Whiskey. You can learn all kinds of things if you chat with him over a fifth of Jameson."

"I remember there were problems the last time you visited with him," Arthur said with a frown.

"What does a ferryman for the newly dead know about demons on earth?" Sig asked.

Grampa Thor winked and pointed at Sig. "Good question. Not many people think to ask it. His job is to guard Hades and guide those going in. However, the way *out* of the Underworld also passes by Charon. He never sleeps and keeps his ears open. It occasionally earns him something extra. He told me rowing is a thirsty job."

"But the Professor says finding him is a problem."

"Finding him is easy. Finding him and getting back—that's the challenge." He shrugged. "But I have to try. By killing one of the Heathcoat twins, you freed me from the demon he summoned, the demon that cast me into a coma and consumed my magic. I promised you I'll do whatever it takes to find the remaining mage twin whose spell shields you from your magic."

Sig clenched his jaw so hard his teeth creaked. The inability to perform any magic outside the confines of his body was the source of constant and growing anxiety. The dark mage had summoned increasingly powerful demons and monsters to kill Sig before fleeing to disappear into another dimension. Heathcoat would be back to kill him again—and he'd succeed if Sig didn't find his powers.

He recognized the deadly irony in searching for the one that was trying to kill him. What would he do when he caught him? Not for the first time, he gave silent thanks for the powerful friends gathered here who were trying to help him.

Initially, they thought he'd grow into his magic, before they discovered that Heathcoat, former head of the Physics department at Northwestern and secretly a dark mage, had summoned a demon when Sig was a baby to block him from projecting magic.

After a pause, the Professor said, "If Heathcoat has returned to North America to exact revenge for Sig killing his brother, there are other sources we can try. What about Manabozho?"

"The Native American rabbit god? Now there's an idea," Grampa said with lifted eyebrows.

"He's protective of his territory, cunning and resourceful, if not very powerful. His Algonquian people are spread across North America, and I doubt he's happy about demons roaming his world. I'm sure we can convince him to gather information on Heathcoat's whereabouts if that information would help eradicate demons."

"I've read about him. The stories make him sound like Brer Rabbit, Bugs Bunny, and Roger Rabbit all rolled together," Rick said.

"They're all based on his legend," Professor Herman said.

"What if Heathcoat left North America?" Sig asked.

"The good thing about Manabozho is that he is related to gods throughout the world. They all breed like rabbits, or perhaps rabbits breed like them," Professor Herman said with a chuckle.

"How do you know Manabozho, and how can I contact him?" Grampa asked.

"I don't know him. I just know of him. He's peripheral to my primary interest—fighting black magic. Manabozho is neither evil, nor involved in the fight, so I haven't had reason to work with him," Professor Herman answered.

"Drat! You build up my hopes and then dash them."

"There is an Algonquian tribe in Canada. Their shamans still commune with Native American gods. Seek out a shaman. Perhaps you will find one who likes Jameson, also."

"Never trust a man who doesn't like Jameson. Alright, that's a good plan."

"Grampa, when do we start?" Sig asked.

"Whoa, young man. *We* don't start, *I* do. Finals are coming up. Your job is to ace your tests."

"And don't forget you're starting a new research assignment next week," Rick chimed in.

Sig flashed a frustrated look at Rick. "Grampa, you're not a Battle Wizard anymore." Sig held out the sword-shaped medallion hanging from the chain around his neck. "When you gave me this, before you went into your coma, you relinquished it forever. I tried to give it back. But it doesn't work for you anymore. I have the warrior part now, but not the magic. I need you and your magic to find Heathcoat and get mine back. And, since he keeps trying to kill me, I want you covering my back. I thought you needed me, too. Aren't we a team?"

"We're a team when we go into battle. Now, it's time for research to find this rabbit god. Even if I find him, he might not have information on Heathcoat. I'll contact you after I find out something. Don't worry. You'll be involved. I need your sword."

"Rick and I have your back, too, even when Thor isn't here," Professor Herman said.

Sig flashed the Professor an appreciative smile. He couldn't ask for more than an archmage wingman. "OK, I'll be ready when you are," he said to Grampa.

Chapter 6

The following morning, Sig parked his Jeep beside the old brick warehouse where Amazon warriors attending local colleges trained. The Amazons were primarily from two tribes in the upper Midwest, but welcomed any Amazon college students in the area.

Sig began working out with the Amazons when they discovered that he held a third degree Karate black belt, was a fourth Dan in Kendo, and he rode dressage at the Intermdiare level. And that was before they discovered he was a Battle Wizard.

Sig taught the Amazons the finer points of combat and they schooled him in dirty tricks. Everyone benefited. He knew it was only dumb luck and the support of friends like the Amazons that kept him alive long enough to hone his fighting skills.

Comfort is having Weres, a wizard, witches, and Amazon warriors covering your back. Their friendship would have made him feel secure if the list of demons wanting to kill him wasn't so long.

He grabbed his duffle bag and bamboo shinai practice swords from the back of the Jeep and took the stairs two at a time up to the painted steel door. He opened it to the sound of weights clanking, shouts of exertion, wooden and bamboo weapons clacking, and the smack of bodies hitting the mats and each other. The scent of an area long dedicated to exercise and sweating wafted through the door past him. It could have been any gym in the US. The fact that most of the occupants were female didn't make a difference to the sounds and smell. The visual effect was a different story.

Sig paused to take in the scene. The women tended to be six-feet and over. Most were taller than he was when he started working with them. But in his late teens, he hadn't attained his full height. In the last six months, he'd grown over an inch, passing six-feet-two.

The Amazons were trim from constant and ferocious exercise, but retained pleasant curves. His eyes swept the room, pleased to confirm again that the rumor about Amazons cutting off one breast for archery was a fallacy. The fact that it was a myth doubled his visual pleasure.

A shout broke his reverie. "Hey, stop posing like beefcake if you want to work out today. If you're only here to ogle, take it outside." It was Bella, the closest to being an even match for him with swords, and his opponent today. She couldn't yet kick his ass with a sword, but he was her bitch when it came to insults. He felt his face flush red as several of the women stopped to look and chuckle.

He ducked into the storeroom to change—the storeroom that they didn't tell him about the first time he came, when they conned him into changing in front of everyone. Since that experience, he always wore boxers over his athletic supporter, just in case.

The scent no one else noticed grew stronger as he approached the door. He opened the storeroom then stopped. Something evil approached. He cocked his head and spun, eyes slitted, senses reaching. The smell intensified.

He faced the outside door. Vibrations shuddered through the concrete floor. Whatever was coming—it was big. Activity in the room had ceased. He cleared his throat to keep from squeaking before he shouted "Battle stations" in what he hoped was a command voice. As he reached for his medallion, he muttered "Aðolbrandr."

Through the familiar blur of his change, he saw the metal door blast into the room along with the doorframe and two feet of concrete block surrounding it. Yes, the monster was huge.

He straightened up from the crouch he instinctively assumed whenever his transformation rocketed him up three feet in height. The first time it happened, his head smashed through his bedroom ceiling. All too often, nine-feet of head clearance wasn't available when he needed to assume battle form.

A bull sporting a pair of gleaming silver horns spanning five-feet advanced through the settling dust. Not quite as wide as a prizewinning Texas longhorn, they were thicker and wickedly curved like a cape buffalo. Sig didn't want to find out if they were as razor sharp as they looked.

Behind the horns, a huge hump followed. The body shape resembled an oversized American buffalo. The crest of the hump advanced and brushed more cinder blocks from the top of the bulldozed hole.

Gray, hairless skin covered the head and sides. Muscles rippled as they shoved the gigantic shape into the room. Darker gray—almost black—curly hair covered the hump and throat, before tapering off between the front legs.

The monstrosity was unlike any other bull he'd ever seen.

It could have been a gray-scale prehistoric aurochs except for the lavender glow beaming out of the eye sockets. Sig wondered where that comparison bubbled up from his brain. Too much Paleontology homework.

After sweeping the room, the glowing eyes settled on Sig.

The clatter of a few falling chunks of wall broke the quiet that followed the cacophony of the wall shattering.

Sig's glance roamed the room. The Amazons had mostly backed to the far wall. One hefted an Olympic weight bar held crosswise like a battle staff, and another lifted two twenty-pound dumbbells.

With two long strides, Sig reached a weight rack, sheathed his sword, and grabbed two forty-five pound weight discs, one in each hand.

The bull snorted, sounding like a launching mortar round. A hoof paw the ground and then it charged—horns lowered.

Sig whipped his arm across his body and flung the first weight disc like a Frisbee, followed quickly by the second. *Boing! Boing!* Both caromed off the thing's skull.

The giant stumbled, but momentum carried its rush forward. Sig dove out of the way, rolled to his feet, grabbed another weight disc, and unsheathed his sword.

Legs planted, the behemoth slid across the smooth concrete, slowing slightly before crashing into the wall. Muscles flexed and strained to wrench the horn tips loose from where they had

gored the concrete cinderblock wall. The fearsome head shook, stretched and twisted as if shaking out kinks, before swinging its lavender glare back to Sig.

Wide, not quite bovine hooves scraped the concrete floor and massive horns lowered in preparation for another charge.

The head snapped back up, searching for the source of the arrow that bounced off its forehead.

Standing on the raised platform that led to the office and storage room, Giselle, Sig's best friend besides Rick, already had another arrow notched in her longbow. Sig watched the tall redheaded beauty release a shaft that pierced the beast's hump. Two more arrows sprouted from the gray buffalo's side.

The giant bellowed, pushed up to balance on rear hooves, then brought forelegs crashing back to the ground. The whole building trembled and a pressure wave raced through the floor toward the office.

The concrete slab split, and the platform under Giselle pitched into the air, slinging her up and off her feet. Before the roar from the earthquake subsided, the bull hurtled at Giselle with quickness unbelievable in a beast so large.

She managed to crawl into the office as the brute slammed into the heavy steel railing on the platform, smashing it back against the outside office wall. Horns twisted and heaved upward, ripping the railing free from bolts anchored in the concrete platform.

The monster's head tossed. The railing flew across the warehouse. The bovine giant reared. Forelegs mounted the platform in pursuit of Giselle.

Sig landed astride the beast's back, sword poised to stab downward. Rearing and twisting, the beast landed on forelegs, spun in best rodeo bucking tradition, and spoiled Sig's attempt. Sig had nothing to hold onto. The next buck sent him flying into the wall.

He rose to see the massive set of horns thundering toward him. Instead of running, Sig charged, planted his hands between the horns at the crest of the forehead, and vaulted over. Aided by the lift and twist of the enormous horns, as the bull attempted to gore him, Sig soared through the air, tucking to roll when he landed.

He lunged to his feet, sword ready. His leg gave out from the searing pain of a gash from one of the horns. He dropped to that knee, and almost fell over when his knee slid sideways in blood running from his thigh. Using the sword, he pushed to his feet.

More arrows sprouted from the side of the gray ox. Two Amazons with longbows were back on the platform.

The bull swung its focus between Sig and the Amazons. An Olympic weight bar flew from the other side of the warehouse. Like a blunt forty-five pound spear, it slammed into the skull with a loud thump. An Amazon had another poised, like a javelin, preparing to throw.

The beast changed. Front hooves lengthened and split, seeming to grow claws. It had been running on knuckles. The buffalo raised upright on rear hooves, but with gorilla-like arms and torso. Sig recognized it now from pictures he had seen—the Minotaur.

It surged erect to tower over Sig, then bent to seize the weight bar in one hand. Whipping the steel bar with a sidearm motion, the Minotaur hurled it at the bow wielding Amazons on the platform.

The bar made whooshing sounds as it flew, spinning like a helicopter blade. Giselle leapt straight up, pulling her knees high. She cleared the bar. But it hit the leg of the Amazon next to her with a sickening crack. She dropped like a stone. X-rays weren't needed to know her leg was broken.

Sig sprang at the Minotaur, which slashed at him with its horn. Sig's attempt to block with Aðalbrandr clipped off several inches of the horn. But the now blunted tip bludgeoned Sig's chest, hurling him across the room. The buffalo-like head twisted as if trying to inspect the damage to his horn.

It turned to look back at Sig. An arrow pierced one of the glowing lavender eyes. Black blood like that streaming from the other arrow wounds began to run down its face. Bellowing, the Minotaur reached for the arrow. Sig picked himself up off the floor, sure his chest must have caved in. He leapt forward, and rammed his sword upward into the enormous exposed chest. The bellow changed into a cough.

Sig twisted the sword as he pulled it out and then thrust again.

The next cough sprayed black blood across the room. The Minotaur fell forward onto all fours leaving its neck exposed. Sig hacked thrice and severed the head. Body and head collapsed to the concrete floor together as Sig dropped to one knee next to it.

Aware of the remarkable recuperative powers of many monsters, Sig lurched back to his feet and began chopping on its arms and legs. Once they were severed, the Minotaur began to fade. Whatever power had been maintaining the Minotaur in this dimension was now released.

When it had completely faded from sight, Sig dropped to both knees, collapsed sideways, and rolled onto his back. He stared at the ceiling. Breathing hurt. Lying here hurt. Was it starting again? The reprieve had been too good to be true. Has Heathcoat returned to this dimension and begun sending monsters again to kill him?

A beautiful face surrounded by gleaming red curls appeared upside down over him. "Who's going to clean up this mess?" Giselle asked.