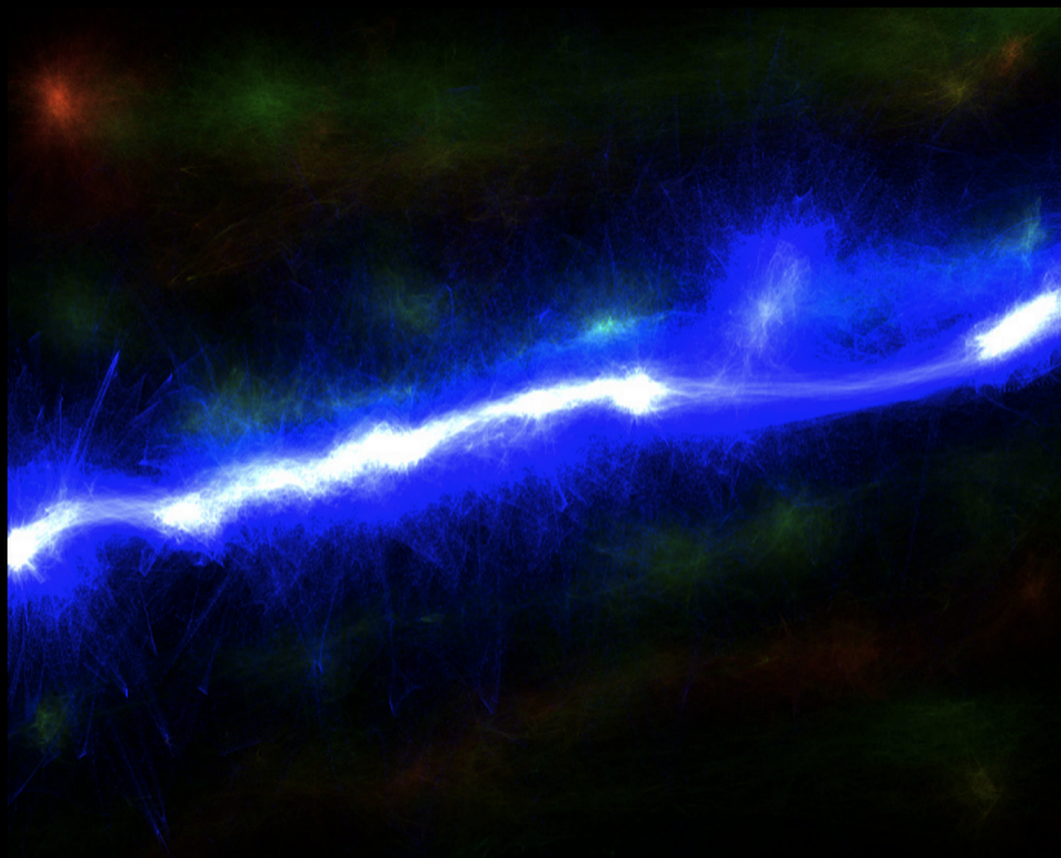


Demon Dominion



Book II of the Demon Saga

Dave Nicolette

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*To my wife Malu, without whose support and encouragement I
would probably do nothing at all.*

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Demon Dominion

The portal is open and the Demons are back. They're looking for meat and profit, and the sociopathic Adept master who leads them is looking for revenge and power. The great Adept of the past are gone and their lore forgotten. The secrets of the Demon trap are lost. The world has not recovered from the Demons' last visit, and there is no effective resistance.

People tell Brön his parents were great heroes who saved the world from the Demons before he was born, but he only wishes they were still alive and he were with them. Instead, he's been trying to stay one step ahead of the Demons ever since he was ten, and witnessed them kill everyone he knew.

Everywhere he goes, Brön finds people have accommodated themselves to the demand for human meat in one way or another, and always in a way that degrades and corrupts them. People are forgetting their own past and their own identity, and growing resigned to their fate.

And then he meets a strange girl from a faraway place who can read the inscription on his father's sword and who speaks of a Prophecy of hope - a Prophecy that names him. But who are her folk and how is it possible he could figure in their Prophecy? In the course of discovering the answer, Brön travels farther than he can imagine and learns more about the Demons than he wants to know.

They came, they ate, they conquered.

The Demon Saga follows three generations of a family thrown into the midst of a conflict spanning two worlds.

- Book I: Demon Incursion
- Book II: Demon Dominion
- Book III: Demon Rebellion

Chapter 3 (excerpt)

The day came when Fal entered Arun's hall and announced, in a disinterested tone, "Tazh has returned." Then she stepped to one side and stood still, facing forward, looking at nothing in particular.

Fal's voice had been so flat that her announcement didn't penetrate Arun's consciousness right away. His attention was only captured when he heard Ekh's manic laughter coming from the corridor. Soon Tazh entered, bent low to avoid the door frame. She was followed closely by her escorts, Ekh and Zrrt. Both their faces were twisted into the Bshaak equivalent of smiles. Fal gave no indication that she had noticed them.

"Well, Tazh," said Arun. "Here you are at last. I had begun to wonder."

Tazh's posture was not exactly humble, but it was noticeably less arrogant than before. These beasts were difficult to read, but it seemed to Arun that Tazh was exhausted, or perhaps unwell. It was clear that her discussion with the boss had taken a toll.

"So, Tazh, did you have a pleasant journey?" he asked with mock courtesy. Zrrt smirked and Ekh laughed briefly.

"What do *you* think?" Tazh hissed.

"What do *I* think?" Arun repeated, leaning back in his chair and folding his hands. "I think you survived, and you returned. That tells me the boss listened to my proposition without killing you, and that she sent you back to me with a reply. The question that remains is, what reply?"

"At first, she did not believe my tale," said Tazh.

Arun was anxious to hear the the boss' reply to his proposition, but he was also curious to know what had transpired. "What tale did you tell, and which part did she not believe?"

"I told her of the portal, and the previous operation here."

"She did not know of the portal?" Asked Arun, surprised.

"The facts are not widely known," Tazh explained. "There are

rumors a-plenty. Most folk lend them little credence. A passage to other worlds, that appears and disappears from time to time? This strange place with its impossible life forms, impossible atmosphere, impossible colors from an impossible single sun? The darkness of the not-light times? A world where one can leap higher than one's own height? The existence of Magic, and of creatures who have mastered its secrets? Who in their right mind would believe such things?"

"I suppose you yourself would not believe it," said Arun, "were you in your right mind." At that, Ekh burst into peals of manic laughter.

"I hope you were able to convince her," said Arun, after Ekh had settled down a bit.

"Eventually," Tazh replied quietly. "After some...discussion." She growled the last word through clenched teeth.

Ekh laughed again. Then she said, "Show him, Tazh! Let him see the evidence of your discussion!"

Tazh was hesitant. She looked downward, and seemed...humbled. Arun had looked forward to this moment, and was pleased that Tazh had experienced some pain at the hands of the boss; but he was also quite surprised at her demeanor.

Zrrt punched Tazh lightly in the arm. She tilted her head toward Arun and said, "Go on. Show him."

Reluctantly, Tazh opened the front of her tunic. Arun knew that the Bshaak normally had quite a few small, wriggling, worm-like growths on their upper torsos. He had no idea what they were; he had assumed they were parasites of some sort, but apparently the Bshaak needed them. Tazh had a handful of the growths on her torso, and many more marks or wounds where others had obviously been removed. It appeared as if they had been more-or-less torn away. Her torso was criss-crossed with scars from Bshaak claws. Arun did not fully understand this, but he knew enough to be sure the experience had been both painful and humiliating for Tazh. That pleased him.

Through all this, Fal never averted her gaze from the nothing

on which her eyes were fixed. She did not join in the laughter or taunting. She was unmoved by Tazh's wounds. She seemed uninterested in the story of Tazh's meeting with the boss. She may as well have been a statue.

"I see that the discussion was quite intense," said Arun.

Tazh closed her tunic. "I am sure that pleases you."

"I will not deny it," said Arun humorlessly. "You hurt me, and I am not sorry to see you hurt, as well. You deserve it. Yes, it pleases me. But it would please me more to learn what the boss thought of my proposition, once she got over the initial shock that all of this is real."

"She is not entirely convinced even now," said Tazh.

"Why not? Did you not show her the portal?" asked Arun.

"No," said Tazh. "One does not reveal all."

"Not even after an intense discussion?"

"Not if one wishes to be worth more alive than dead," said Tazh.

"Ah. And here you are," Arun observed. "Alive."

"Yes. Here I am."

"That seems to be a specialty of yours. Survival."

"Perhaps."

"So, if she is unconvinced, why are you here? What message have you for me, errand-runner? Let us see if you are, indeed, worth more alive than dead." Ekh laughed again.

Sounding a bit more like herself, Tazh said, "The boss wants a sample."

This was not what Arun had expected. "A sample?"

"Yes, a sample," said Tazh. "A sample of the product. Are you surprised? We are talking about meat from an alien world. Meat we claim is more delicious than anything in our world. None of that is very credible, on the face of it. Only the possibility of profit kept the boss from dismissing the story out of hand. A sample would change everything. It is an understandable request."

"Is it?" asked Arun, puzzled. "Is the meat from my world not famous in yours? Was that not the reason you came here in the first place?"

"It was...a *discreet* business," said Tazh. "For a select clientele, one might say."

Suddenly, Arun thought he understood why the Bshaak had not come in larger numbers, with more modern weaponry, and taken control of this world easily. It had not been an invasion at all. It had been a criminal act. He laughed aloud.

"Discreet," he said. "Select." He nodded and smiled. "I see. Well, that's your boss' problem then, isn't it?"

"Discretion is a specialty of hers," said Tazh. "But she was not involved in our earlier venture. She needs samples of the product to assure herself the proposition is real."

"Not the same boss as before, eh?"

"Bosses come and go," said Tazh, making the Bshaak equivalent of a shrug. A gleam in her eye said, *including you, twolegs*, but Arun could not interpret her expression.

"I suppose they do," said Arun. "Very well, we can do that. We can send samples of human and horse. Your favorites."

Tazh struggled to pronounce the word, but managed to ask, "What is...*horrrsh*?" Ekh laughed.

"It is the creature you call fourlegs," said Arun.

"I see," said Tazh. "Once she is satisfied that the product exists, the boss will want some measure of control over the operation."

"That is not on the table," said Arun.

"Nonetheless, she will insist on it."

"She is not in a position to insist on anything."

"She will need assurances that deliveries will be reliable. Her customers are unforgiving of mistakes."

"She will take my word for it," said Arun.

"She will not," said Tazh. "To her you are not a person, you are a creature. In fact, for all she knows you are a creature I have made up; no more than a fiction. She has no reason to trust you...or me, for that matter."

"And what reason have I to trust her, a common criminal?"

"*Common* is not a characterization she would appreciate," said Tazh.

"Irrelevant," said Arun with a dismissive wave. "You will have to convince her. It should be no trouble for you. Bring to bear your considerable charm." Ekh laughed.

Tazh made a Bshaak gesture of frustration that Arun could not interpret. She said, "Perhaps you would care to discuss the matter with her in person?" Zrrt struck her on the side of the head. Ekh laughed.

"Perhaps I would discuss it with some other boss."

"Not as simple as you might imagine."

"Again, irrelevant."

"Do you think I can communicate with any other organization? That is not feasible. I would be killed in the attempt, if not by their operatives then by our own."

"You are not the only Bshaak at my disposal," Arun reminded her.

"I am the only one who has the necessary contacts to make this happen. Those who have been in the traps are out of touch with things at home."

Arun thought for a few moments. Tazh was quite right about that. It was the one thing that made her worth more alive than dead, as far as Arun was concerned. Then he said, "Very well. She can send personnel here if she wishes to have eyes on the operation, but they will serve under the supervision of my people. They will have no control and no weapons."

"I do not expect her to accept those terms."

"And yet, those are the terms."

"You cannot stop her forces with a mere three Bshaak in your service."

"As I said before, you know not how many we are, and you need not know."

"Even so, the boss will not accept a secondary role in this."

Arun struck the table with his fists and replied angrily, "You are not here to negotiate terms! You are to convey the message and that is all."

Tazh made no reply. She appeared to be thinking it over, and perhaps anticipating another unpleasant discussion with the boss. After a moment she took a deep breath and asked, "When can we get the samples?"

"That is better," said Arun, nodding. He quickly reasoned through it. The human sample would be no problem. Arun could invite one of the Ordinary workers for a drink, bring him up here, and he would disappear. People disappeared all the time. As long as they were commoners, no one thought much of it. They would assume he had moved on to another town looking for better work, or that he had gotten drunk and fallen into the river.

The horse was another matter. Horses were valuable, and people didn't take it lightly when one was stolen. He would have to be careful. But it could be done.

"We can collect samples within the next couple of days," he said. "You may rest here until then, Tazh. You will be our guest."

"Your guest," Tazh muttered.

"What was that, Tazh?" asked Arun. "Was that a thank you?" Zrrt smirked.

"Yes. Thank you, Arun," Tazh replied with undisguised annoyance.

Arun waved an arm dismissively, and Fal immediately grasped Tazh by the arm and escorted her briskly from the hall.

Chapter 8 (excerpt)

“Dent, how can you do this?” the man protested.

“You know why, Tomas,” said Dent in a hoarse voice. “I must protect my children!”

“And what of my children? You and I grew up together, Dent.”

“Please, Tomas!” Dent pleaded. “Just get on the wagon!” he raised the emitter and aimed it more-or-less at his friend. Two Demons standing nearby sneered and growled.

“I will not!” Tomas shouted. He advanced on Dent, but made no move to strike him. He pointed at the emitter and said, “Dent, you are armed. You can kill the Demons with that weapon. And you as well, Flenn,” he added for the benefit of the other armed human there present. “Only two are present here. Their leader is away. This is our chance!”

Gema, the town’s mayor and now its jailer, said, “There is no point in resisting them. They would simply send more of their kind to kill us all. Your sacrifice gives life to others, Tomas.”

“Oh, spare me your nonsense, Gema!” Tomas snapped. “Do you honestly expect them to honor the agreement?”

“We have no alternative,” said Gema. He gestured, and one of the Demons picked up Tomas with one hand and placed him in the wagon.

“Flenn, tie him,” said Gema. The criminal who was now in Gema’s employ secured one of Tomas’ ankles to the side rail of the wagon with a short length of rope. The others on the wagon watched impassively.

“That makes eight,” said Gema. “Best move out and get that load to Ishni on schedule, or we’ll have trouble.”

The wagon was drawn by one horse. One of the Demons led the horse and the other loped alongside carrying a rod-style emitter that would have required two men just to lift, let alone to aim and fire. With it, the beast could dispatch an escaped human at several

hundred yards. They set off along the east-west highway toward Ishni.

"And what of Tomas' children, Gema?" asked Dent.

"They will grow."

"You mean they will grow until they are large enough to be worth eating?"

"Have a care, Dent," Gema warned icily. Dent bit his lip, clenched his fist, and looked at the ground. Abruptly, he turned and strode away quickly.

"You disgust me," said Kate, her eyes narrowed and her lower lip trembling in anger.

"I urge you to reconsider, my dear," said Gema with a lascivious sneer.

"You could help us resist the Demons. Instead, you are in league with them."

"As I told Dent, there is no resisting the Demons," said Gema impatiently.

"We resisted them before!" Kate exclaimed. "I myself fought them on this very spot! And we prevailed!"

"Prevailed? They burned down the inn. They killed most of the folk in the town."

"The inn stands again, and the town thrives. I should say, it thrived until you invited the Demons in."

Gema spun on his heel to stand face to face with Kate. "That was then and this is now. This time they have modern weapons and equipment, and are well organized. Besides that, we have not recovered from the damage they wrought twelve years ago."

"Excuses!" Kate snapped. "We fought them with farm implements, firebrands, and the help of a couple of Adept. We fought with what we had at hand, and we can do so again. Speaking of twelve years ago, Gema, where were you while we defended our town, our world? Curled up behind a barrel in a shed somewhere? Trembling in a ditch? Hiding in a tree? *Coward!*"

Gema gave an animal-like shout and back-handed Kate hard in the face. Unprepared for the blow, she fell backward and lost

her balance. Her small daughter, Sherin, screamed “Mommy!” and ran to her. Kate bundled the girl in her arms. Her son, Bund, stood defiantly between his mother and Gema, glaring up at the man.

Flenn stepped up to stand next to Gema. He took aim at Bund with his emitter and said, “Want me to kill the little bastards, boss?”

Gema put a hand on the emitter and pushed it aside. “No.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Too bad. I’m liking this weapon. It makes a pretty splash!” Flenn laughed and backed away.

Gema meant to have Kate, and he knew her children were the only leverage he might ever have with her. After he tired of her, he would let the Demons take the children. Or Flenn, if he still wanted them.

Gema ignored the boy and squatted to face Kate where she sat on the ground. She wiped blood from her broken lip with the back of one hand, still hugging her daughter with the other.

“I suggest you give this matter serious thought, Kate,” he said quietly. “I know you dislike me, but there are more important considerations. I’m sure you understand,” he added, reaching out and stroking Sherin’s hair gently. The girl clutched her mother tightly and tried to shrink away, as small as a mouse.

When Brön and Ranger reached the east-west highway, they saw no one and heard nothing. No smoke or noise came from the direction of Greenvale to the west. Brön was encouraged. Whatever had occurred in Greenvale must now be over. Excitedly, he said, “Let’s go, Ranger!” and set off at a brisk pace - or, as brisk as he could - toward the town.

He carried his mother’s staff and his father’s Tuk sword together in both arms so they wouldn’t drag along the ground. The staff was longer than he was tall, and the sword was made for an adult to carry. The potato sack full of vegetables was a bit heavy, as well.

All that gear slowed him down, but he was determined to see aunt Kate and so pressed on with all the speed he could muster. Ranger trotted along happily beside him.

Suddenly the dog halted. He bared his teeth and growled, and his fur bristled. Brön stopped as well, but it was too late to hide. Around the bend ahead of them came a Demon. The Demon led a horse. The horse drew a flatbed wagon. The wagon carried eight people; five men and three women. Beside the wagon walked a second Demon. It carried an object Brön recognized as an emitter.

The first Demon let go of the horse's lead and took two steps toward the boy. Ranger stood between them, baring his teeth and growling a serious warning. The Demon leaned down, bared its own teeth, and let out a far more threatening growl; one that seemed to shake the very ground around them. Ranger shrank back, his ears folding back along his head and his tail between his legs, and took refuge behind Brön. The two Demons glanced at one another and made ugly noises that may have been laughter.

Momentarily, Brön was petrified with fear. But suddenly he felt an upwelling of emotion. He could not characterize the emotion; it may have been terror, anger, hatred, sadness, grief, or something unknown. Whatever it was, it carried power. The sword fell to the ground. Brön set the heel of the staff against the roadway and angled the staff toward the first Demon.

A flood of Magical energy more powerful than any the boy had previously experienced burst through him and the staff. Static electricity lifted strands of his hair as if a breeze had come up. A fire-blast less powerful than an adult Adept of average ability could produce, and yet more powerful than any Brön had ever made, burst forth from the head of the staff and struck the advancing Demon full in the chest.

It shrieked in surprise and pain, and stumbled backward into the horse, which in turn whinnied and stepped aside. The wagon turned slightly, bringing Tomas very close to the second Demon. Still off-balance, the Demon tumbled backward into a sitting position on the road. It patted its chest to put out the flames that had sprung up

there. It was clearly in great pain.

The exertion took a toll on Brön. He sank to his knees and dropped the staff. He felt dizzy and tingly all over, and feared he would lose consciousness. The Demon he had burned rapidly recovered its wits and was scrambling to its feet, completely enraged. Despite his fear, Ranger stood once again in front of his boy and barked furiously at the approaching Demon.

The moment Brön blasted the first Demon, the second stopped laughing, raised its emitter and took aim at the boy. It was standing right next to the wagon, quite close to Tomas. One of Tomas' ankles was secured to the wagon's side rail. He was otherwise free. The Demons saw no need to secure the meat any better than that. What harm could the little creatures do, after all?

The moment the Demon raised its weapon, Tomas grabbed the True blade from its belt and jabbed it upward into the Demon's throat. The only reason he could reach so high was that he was standing on the wagon. He drove the blade home, up to the hilt. He had heard the stories, so he carefully avoided touching the blade itself.

The Demon made a gurgling sound; its vocal cords sliced through, it was unable to shriek. Blood squirted from around the blade and from the creature's mouth. Reflexively, it fired the emitter three times in rapid succession. One of the shots struck its colleague in the back and blew a hole clean through its body. The Demon fell face-down with its head landing just short of the spot where Ranger stood.

Tomas was barely able to jerk the True blade from the Demon's throat as it fell. Working quickly, he cut the ropes that secured the eight passengers on the wagon. As they were freed, the people jumped from the wagon. Two of the men picked up the long emitter. One of the women rushed to Brön's side. Ranger barked at her, but soon saw that she was no threat.

They checked the bodies and found a hand emitter, two grenades, and a communication device. They could use the grenades, and a man could operate a Demon's hand emitter by holding it with two

hands, like a crossbow. The communication device might give them early warning of the approach of Demons. Tomas thought the rod emitter was more a burden than a prize, as difficult as it was for two men to carry, but the others were loathe to leave it behind. It might be propped up somehow and put to use.

Tomas looked up and down the road, then said, "We must move before others arrive here."

"Which way, Tomas?" someone asked.

"Which way do you suppose?" he replied in surprise. "Our families are in Greenvale."

"It is not safe."

"Safety is not my concern just now, Taber," said Tomas. "We have the element of surprise. They know not we have escaped, or that we are armed. When the...the 'shipment' fails to arrive at the first checkpoint, we will lose what small advantage we now enjoy."

"How can we approach unnoticed?" asked Taber. "The Demons ply this road, and they patrol the area, especially on the south side."

"Then we will travel on the north side," said another.

"How do we know the north side is clear?"

"We don't."

Chapter 21 (excerpts)

Arun spoke with Brön as if he had no idea who he was. “So, Brön, how do you come to be here?”

“You pretend to be friendly, but you are not,” said Brön bluntly. “I know who you are.”

“You do? Who am I, then?”

“Your name is well known. You are in league with the Demons. You assist them in collecting people and selling them as food.”

“Ah, I see,” said Arun. “I’m afraid you have the wrong impression of me, as do many others. All these years, I’ve been trying to protect the people of this world.”

“Protect them? You mean help them gain the safe haven of a Demon’s belly?”

“No, I mean things would be far worse had it not been for my efforts to shield the people from the full glory of the Demons’ violence.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Brön curtly.

“I can’t blame you for that,” said Arun. “These have been hard times for us. You must have seen how powerful the Demons are. Surely it is obvious, even to one as young as you, that we would have no chance against them in a direct confrontation.”

Brön did not speak, but Arun could tell he was listening. He continued, “By sacrificing a few, we assure the survival of many.”

“A few?” exclaimed Brön. “More than a few have been sent away.”

“I know it seems that way,” said Arun, “but in fact many, many more have been spared. By making it very easy for the Demons to collect a few people, we discourage them from simply taking everyone. They could, if they wished.”

Brön pointed and asked, “What is that on your head?”

“Oh, this?” Arun touched his hearing and speaking apparatus. “It is a device that enables me to hear the Demons clearly and to

speak to them in tones they can hear and comprehend.”

“Is it of human design?”

“No, it is a thing of the Demons. They gave it to me so that we could communicate more clearly. You may have one, too, if you wish.”

“If you are of such great help to people, then why do you hold me prisoner here?”

“Prisoner? You are no prisoner, Brön. The Demons brought you to me because they saw a family resemblance.” Of course they saw a resemblance. All twolegs looked the same to them. “Your parents must have told you about me.”

“They warned me about you, yes.”

Arun smiled at the choice of words. “If they *told* you of me, then you know I am your mother’s cousin. I am your uncle.”

“A mother’s cousin is not an uncle,” said Brön flatly.

“Close enough,” said Arun. “In any case, we are related by blood. We should stick together and look out for each other.”

“I have no interest in staying with you. If I am not your prisoner, then I will take my leave of you right now.” Brön reached for the sword and staff.

Arun did not stop Brön from taking his things. He said, “Brön, won’t you stay with me a while? You will see I’m not a bad person. Then perhaps you will choose to remain. I was so distraught when I heard your parents had been killed. Everyone believed you had been killed as well. Now I discover you are alive and well, and you are in a rush to go.”

Brön had started toward the door, and now he paused and half turned.

Arun continued, “What have you to lose? You would have a proper place to sleep and decent food for a change. And if you go out there, someone may well capture you and ship you off as meat. Aren’t you tired of running and hiding?”

Arun could almost *see* Brön’s mind changing. “And there’s so much I can teach you! Who is training you in Adept lore?”

“No one.”

"And how much have you learned about the nature of the Demons?"

"Enough to hate them."

"But enough to cope with them effectively?"

"Well...maybe not."

"Here you can learn their ways, their language. Would that not be useful to you?"

"I guess so."

"You carry your mother's staff."

"Yes."

"Have you shown aptitude for Magic?"

"A little, I guess."

"That is wonderful!" Arun exclaimed. "There is much I can teach you. Would you like that?"

"I guess."

"Good!"

"I...I have a dog."

"Wonderful! It will be good to have a dog about the place. A home isn't quite complete without a dog, don't you think?"

Brön nodded.

"It's settled, then! Go and fetch your dog, and I will have a room prepared for you. I'm so looking forward to getting to know you."

Brön left the room, expecting to be intercepted at every turn, but no Demon bothered him. Some glanced at him as he passed, but none made a move to touch him and none snarled at him. Perhaps this Arun was not as bad as people had said.

Brön walked apprehensively out the front door of the stone house and toward the gate. Demons were about, and a few Adept, but none made a move to stop him. He went out the gate, turned right, and headed down the road toward Ishni. He walked almost all the way to the town, and still no one stopped him. He turned left and entered the woods north of Ishni.

At that point he could have kept on walking and never returned. Twenty feet into the woods he stopped and waited. He turned and looked up and down the road and across to the town. No Demons had followed him, as far as he could tell. Perhaps Arun had told him the truth. He could stay or he could go, as he pleased.

Brön whistled once, and several seconds later Ranger came bounding through the underbrush. He jumped up and put his forepaws on Brön's legs and panted happily, his tail in motion.

"Let's go, Ranger," he said, scratching the dog behind the ears. They returned to the highway and paused there. Brön looked left, toward the east. That way lay Riverton and smaller human villages. Possibly, that way lay freedom, if they could go far enough. He looked right, toward the foothills. That way lay Arun and the Demons. Possibly, that way lay family ties and education, if Arun's offer were sincere.

They had done quite well enough on their own these past few years. Brön was confident they could remain undetected and live off the land indefinitely.

And die alone, in the middle of nowhere.

Arun had much to offer. It was tempting. But was it true? Brön was far less confident about that. And yet...

They turned right and headed back to the stone house.

Chapter 22 (excerpt)

“OK. We met our quota this week. What else have we got?” asked Dent, without much enthusiasm.

Lars said, “Cow broke the fence in the dairy paddock. Fixed.”

“Any casualties?” Kerk asked cynically.

“Nine blades of grass and a dog turd,” said Lars flatly.

“Action-filled week, it sounds like,” said Kerk.

“Yeah, why do we even bother with this?” said Samo. “If we don’t meet our quota, we’re dead. Who cares about the rest of it? Fences and all?”

“Not me,” said Lars, “and it was my fence.”

“We’re supposed to have a weekly assembly,” said Dent. “How else are we going to manage things around here?”

“Manage what things?” asked Kerk. “We’re all just waiting to be taken. Everyone knows that. What’s the point?”

“Kerk’s right,” said Lars. “Who cares about fences and paint and hay and eggs and what-not, when we’ve got no future.”

“And not not much of a *present*, either,” Samo added.

“Well, there must be *some* point,” said Dent. “Look how many came to the assembly this week.” He swept his arm across the crowd that sat across from the village committee. Around a dozen people had gathered. Dent’s eldest daughter, Sira, was at the front of the group. Normally, no one bothered to show up and the four committee members sped through the minutes.

“Well, let’s see what they want, then,” said Kerk.

Dent said, “Old business concluded. Objections?” Silence. “OK. New business?”

Sira stood and said, “I have new business.”

“The committee recognizes Sira,” said Dent, following protocols no one cared about.

“We’re sick of all this,” she said.

“All what?” asked Dent.

"Everything. The way we live. Hunting our neighbors. Squeezing the humanity out of ourselves. All of it."

"Oh, *that* again," said Dent.

"Yes, *that* again," Sira repeated. "And I'm not alone. All these folk are here for the same reason." There was murmured agreement and scattered calls of "That's right!" and "Yeah!"

Dent waved his hand in the air to try and restore order. After a few moments, the crowd settled down.

"We have stability and safety," said Dent.

"Do we? Do we, really?" asked Sira. "Tell me this if you know it: What is the population of Etel today?"

There was no reply.

"How about Chaam? Mahak? How many people are there?"

Still no reply.

She continued, "There are three hundred eighty two people living in Etel today. In Chaam, three hundred ninety eight. In Mahak, three hundred sixty."

"What is the point of that, girl," Dent demanded impatiently.

"I told you not to call me 'girl,' *Dent*. I am not your horse!"

Dent's second child, Mara, was secretly pleased to see the rift between her father and her older sister. Sira had always been his favorite. Mara had always loved him more, and now there was a chance he would see that and pay more attention to her. Good! Let Sira distance herself from Dent.

Sira continued, "Answer me this, esteemed members of the village committee: Have you read the village chronicle? I have. Six years ago, the population of Etel was two thousand and sixteen. The other villages were similarly populous and prosperous. We have been steadily destroying ourselves to service these monsters. Week by week, six people and two horses, eaten faster than they could reproduce. If we continue in the same way, we will soon be extinct. Is that your definition of stability and safety?"

"Very well," said Dent. "Do you have a specific proposal?"

"Yes, I have a specific proposal."

"May we hear it?"

"If you shut up." She waited a moment, glaring at her father, then continued, "I propose we join with the folk from Mahak and Chaam and rise up against the Demons. We should do it soon, while we still have enough people to make a difference." The others who had come with her nodded and murmured agreement.

There was a long pause. Sira said, "Well?"

"Oh, are you finished?" said Dent. "I was shutting up so you could explain the rest of the brilliant plan."

"That's all there is."

"Well, I think a few minor details are missing."

"Such as?"

"Such as, what weapons shall we use to overthrow the Demons? Will you use your bo staff? Maybe Lars can use his pitchfork. I can stick a Demon with my old sword and watch the wound heal over and over again. Yeah, that'll teach 'em."

A man in the crowd called out, "Or we could pack up what we can carry and head east. Take our chances in the wild lands."

"Another brilliant plan!" Dent exclaimed. "Yes, by all means. Let's rush from the frying pan into the fire."

"Have you a reason to believe conditions are worse in the east than they are right here?" asked Sira.

"Have you a reason to believe we would get more than a thousand yards before the Demons caught us?"

"No matter," said Sira. "Since you love protocol so much, Dent, here it is: The committee has before it a proposal from the people. Will you vote?"

Dent turned to the other three members of the committee. "Is there further discussion? No? Then, let's vote. All in favor of Sira's proposal?"

Samo raised his hand. When he noticed no one else had voted in favor, his face fell. "Are you joking? Kerk. Lars. Not five minutes ago you were both complaining that there's no purpose in life and no future. This is our chance to change that."

"Chance? Nah, we'd have no chance. No chance at all," said Lars. Kerk nodded.

Dent said, "All opposed?" Lars, Kerk, and Dent himself raised their hands. "The proposal is not accepted."

The folk who had gathered began to drift away in ones and twos. Sira called, "Wait! We must convince them! We are committing slow suicide. It must change!"

Mara had approached Dent and wrapped both her arms around one of his. She rested her cheek against his arm. "I believe in you, daddy," she said sweetly.

Sira strode up to Dent and said, angrily, "You are a pathetic coward! Stay here and die, then. I only wish you had the stomach to send your children away to safety, rather than keeping them here to die with you."

"We will not die, Sira!" Mara shouted. "Daddy will protect us!"

Sira shook her head and said sympathetically, "Mara, dear, you have no idea what is really happening here."

"I know who my daddy is!" Mara replied defiantly.

"You are thinking and acting like a small child. You are seventeen, Mara. Wake up! Open your eyes!"

Dent said, "I have always done my best for you children."

Sira looked at him sadly and said, "I know. I am just disappointed this is truly your best." She turned and took her leave of the two of them.

Mara hugged her daddy.

Chapter 29 (excerpt)

Nyala awoke before Brön. She heard him snoring before she opened her eyes. He was carelessly entangled in his bedroll on the other side of the fire, which was long dead. She saw no sign of the Bshaak. She stood and stretched, then wandered over to the remains of the fire, scratching herself and yawning as she walked. She pulled a chunk of cold, cooked goat meat off one of the spits, stuck it in her mouth, and wiped her fingers on the front of her shirt.

Azhreth came forth from her cave, carrying two small items of Technology that Nyala did not recognize. The massive creature approached her, too close for comfort, and growled menacingly. She thought the Bshaak might have said something like ‘Nyala’ in the midst of its growling. Unnerving. It extended one arm, and in its claw was a small device of Technology. It seemed to want her to take the device.

She took it. The Bshaak began gesturing toward its own head and growling. Nyala looked at the device. It was simply a curved metallic tube shaped like a C with smooth, bulbous ends. Azhreth growled again and reached down toward Nyala. She backed up suddenly and tripped, landing in a seated position. The metallic item fell to the ground next to her.

Nyala felt foolish to be in this position with no weapon in hand. She had allowed this Bshaak to get the drop on her. This was the end! The Prophecy would not be fulfilled, and humanity would perish at the hands of these beasts. She had failed.

She braced herself for death. Azhreth reached over her, picked up the device she had dropped, and held it out to her, squatting. Nyala took the device. Her heart was racing. The shock that she was not dead was overwhelming. Azhreth growled at her again and pointed to its own head.

Brön appeared and said “Good morning, Nyala,” in the Tuk tongue. “I see you are having a nice conversation with our Bshaak

friend.” Nyala looked at Brön, then at Azhreth, then at Brön again.

To Azhreth Brön said, “Hello, Azhreth. Why is Nyala on the ground?”

Azhreth said, “Hello, Brön. Nyala sat down.”

Brön noticed the item in Nyala’s hand and said, “What’s that, Nyala?”

She turned the item over and examined it. “No idea. This thing gave it to me.”

Brön said, “Azhreth, what is that?”

“An improvement,” said Azhreth. “Here is one for you.” She gave Brön a device identical to Nyala’s.

“Thank you.”

“You are welcome.”

The two humans looked at the items in their hands. Azhreth said, “Will you not try it?”

“Of course. Um...what is it?”

“It helps you to hear the Bshaak, and speak with us.”

“Like this device?” asked Brön, touching the device fitted against his ear.

“Yes. It is an improvement.”

“How do I wear it?”

“Position the ends just behind your auditory receptors so that they rest against the bone.”

Brön positioned the device such that the C-shaped loop passed in front of his mouth. Azhreth said, “The other way.” He turned it around so that the loop went around the back of his head. He discovered the curved piece was flexible. He could adjust it to fit, and it held its shape. By feel, he discovered controls on the device to adjust the sound levels.

“How does that sound?” asked Azhreth.

“Very good,” said Brön. There was less distortion, and he believed he could hear a richer range of frequencies.

“Try the second switch,” Azhreth suggested.

Brön felt along the loop until his fingers found another switch. “Nothing happened,” he said, and immediately realized what had

happened.

“Ah, good,” said Azhreth. “Your voice sounds much more natural now.”

Nyala had observed all this, and now she put her device on as Brön had done. Azhreth said, “Can you hear well, Nyala?” and she immediately snatched the device off her head.

In Tuk she said, “What is this, Brön?”

“It is a device to help us hear and speak with the Bshaak.”

“This, then, is how they actually sound?”

“It is an approximation. In fact, we can’t hear them exactly the way they sound. Some of the sounds they make are too low.”

“Their growling is far more frightening with the device than without it.” Nyala replaced the device on her head and activated the second switch. Then she formed her hands like claws, waved them threateningly toward Brön, and growled and snarled in imitation of a Bshaak.

Azhreth cocked her head and listened. Then she said, “Brön, you must teach Nyala to speak properly. I can’t understand a word she is saying.”

“I have the same problem when she speaks my language,” said Brön.

Chapter 35 (excerpt)

Tell was almost six now, and full of energy. Even so, Zrrt carried him most of the way to the checkpoint. Now he was on his own legs, exploring the area, happily talking and singing to himself. Every stick, rock, and bug captured his interest.

He had discovered a new game recently, and he loved to play. He could control which way the bugs walked. It was fun to make them move around and form different patterns. He could make them push each other over, so that they lay on their backs with their little legs trying to run. Only they couldn't run because their legs were in the air. It was funny.

Tell was learning another new game, too. He could *pull* something from the bugs. He didn't know what the something was, but it made him feel good. Stronger. Only sometimes, if he pulled too much, the bug would die. He had to be careful. But it was a good game, because later he could *push* the something into a plant, and make it grow. Depending on the plant, it might grow a flower. Pretty. Or he could *push* into a bug, and it would run really, really fast for a while. Fun! Then it would die. Sad. Aww. Good thing there were a lot of bugs!

As Tell's primary care-giver, Zrrt was aware of Tell's new-found skills, but thought little of it. She knew Arun was a Magical one, and she was unsurprised to see that Tell was Magical, too. It didn't occur to her that Tell's new games were anything worth mentioning to Arun. How could she know that a human Adept never manifested prior to the age of eleven or twelve?