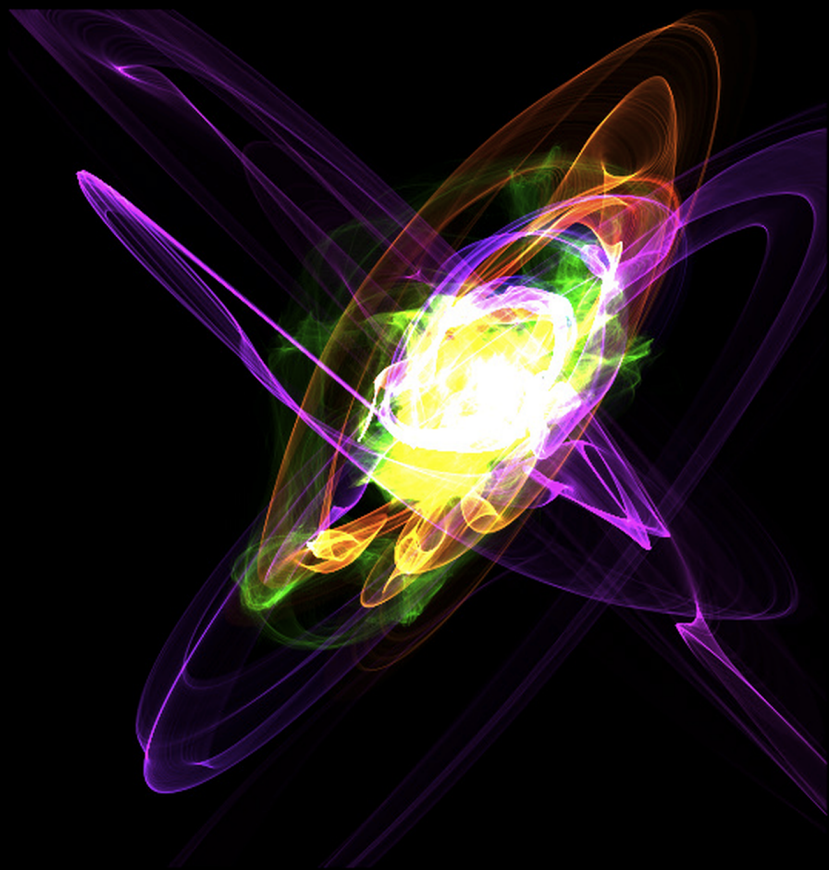


Demon Incursion



Book I of the Demon Saga

Dave Nicolette

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This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/demon-incursion>

This version was published on 2015-07-30



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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 Incursion

His uncle Timo thinks it's high time Anton grew up and started pulling his weight around the farm, but Anton prefers to live a fantasy life of sword fighting and adventure in exotic lands, far from the mundane world of potatoes and corn, where the legendary Adept wield the power of Magic and larger-than-life heroes battle bloodthirsty monsters. Trusting and naive, Anton listens raptly to the tales told by travelers at the inn in Greenvale, and believes all he hears.

Anton reads every word he can find regarding the ancient Adept and knows their lore well although he lacks their gifts. And he dabbles in Technology, although his inventions never seem to work quite the way he imagines they will. The townsfolk see him not as a talented inventor, a curious historian, or a spellbinding storyteller. They see him as lazy, or a fool, or both, and nothing but a burden to his hardworking uncle.

Such may have been the course of his life save for the arrival of a mysterious young woman very different from anyone Anton had met before. Who was she, and what was her connection with reported attacks by creatures matching the description of the mythical Demons of old? And what fate awaited humankind, when the Demons failed to live down to their reputation as mindless brutes, but proved to be something rather more formidable?

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 1

The small house was nestled so deeply in the wood that it was scarcely visible from the path. The group had long since left the main road, following ever narrower branching paths in the failing light of late afternoon in search of the place. Each smaller path was less trodden than the last, and at each turn fewer people were about from whom to ask the way. The walk to the front door looked as if none had passed that way in years, yet firelight flickered dimly through the single window in the front wall.

Lord Mallon signaled his men to dismount, and they tied their reins to the trees at the end of the walk. He then waved the men forward and led the way to the front door. Two soldiers strode on either side of him, and two more struggled to keep up as they carried a board horizontally between them. On the board, covered by a horse blanket, was a Demon trap. In the trap, its magical powers suppressed and its bulk constrained to the dimensions of the trap by Technology its captors only dimly understood, was a Demon: A creature the like of which none of these men would have believed existed a scant week earlier; a mythic creature made all too real by recent events.

The honorable Anton of Greenvale, the trap's maker, had left it with Lord Mallon in case the Demon might return after their parting. Prior to their encounter, Mallon and his men would have counted anyone a madman who spoke of Demons. Demons were, after all, only the stuff of children's tales. Parents kept children from wandering far by warning of Demons lying in wait in the wood; people donned Demon masks, sang Demon songs, and danced Demon dances at festivals, for amusement. The definition of madness, and much else, had changed in recent days.

Anton had made no guarantees that the trap would work at all, nor how long it could hold a Demon in check. Fortunately, the trap *had* worked, but they knew not how long it would serve. Now,

feeling they had lost the capacity to be astonished by anything more, they were approaching the abode of an Adept. Mallon, along with everyone else he knew, had been warned away from the Adept since childhood. They stuck with their own kind and avoided normal people, whom they called Ordinary. It was said they possessed strange powers, and were not to be trusted. And yet, here were Mallon and his men, pressed by circumstance into begging an Adept for help.

A few days earlier, it would have been unthinkable for any of these men to knock the door of an Adept in the middle of the night, in the middle of a wood, far from any hope of rescue; still less carrying a captive that might, at any moment, burst forth and kill them all. For all they knew, it was as dangerous to approach an Adept as to approach a Demon.

Of what use were the old, comfortable assumptions now? Much they had believed true all their lives had been proven false. Demons were real after all, and they were not what the old tales said they were. Perhaps the only hope for the world was that the Adept, too, were not what the old tales said they were. Anton, at least, had confidence in them; and Mallon and company had come to trust him. They had no choice. Anton had explained, even should the trap work as intended, an Adept must use magic to Dispatch the creature back to its own realm. Normal people – Ordinary people – could not destroy or dispatch a Demon by any method known; until recently, there had been no means even to contain a Demon temporarily.

They reached the threshold of the cottage. Mallon and the two soldiers on his flanks exchanged nervous glances. The Lord nodded, stepped forward, and rapped smartly on the wooden door. “Hello!” he called. “Magician! We would speak with you!”

The two men carrying the board finally caught up with Mallon and the two soldiers, and stood huffing and puffing behind them.

There was no response from within the house. Mallon rapped again, and again called.

“I hear you, fool!” boomed a voice from within the house.

Instinctively, all the men took one step backward, including Lord Mallon. "I simply choose not to reply," the voice continued, trailing off from a strong shout to a hoarse rattle.

Mallon tried again. "It is most urgent, sir! We require the services of a magician!"

They heard footsteps approaching from within, and suddenly the door was jerked wide open. Startled, Mallon and his men leaned back in unison. An man of some 60 years stood on the threshold. He was unshaven, but not in a way that suggested the intent to grow and groom a beard. His attire was modest and careworn, but not poor. He surveyed the scene before his door, struggling to maintain a stern scowl despite the men's comical reaction.

"Firstly," he growled, "who are you to 'require' anything of me?"

Mallon cleared his throat and replied, in as confident a tone as he could muster, "I am Lord Mallon of Deepwood Keep, a fiefdom that includes this wood."

The old man sniffed. "And why should I care about that? Ordinary titles mean nothing to me. The Ordinary have never done anything for me. You say you 'require' a magician; go and find one, then!" He started to close the door and Mallon stopped it with his hand. "Wait!" Then, in a quieter tone, he added, "Please. We have urgent need of a magician."

The old man furrowed his brow and poked out his lower lip. After a moment, he opened the door wide once more.

"Secondly," he said softly, but firmly, "I am no 'magician.'" At the word, "magician," the old man rolled his eyes sarcastically and mimed quotation marks with his fingers. "A magician is an entertainer who performs sleight-of-hand tricks for the gullible. Do you have an urgent need to see sleight-of-hand tricks?"

"Well, no..." Mallon began.

The old man interrupted him, saying, "Then you have no need of a magician...still less any need of me." Again the old man began to close the door, and again Mallon blocked it.

Mallon noticed the old man paused for dramatic effect after each "firstly" and "secondly." A magician he may not be, but he was

a bit of a showman nonetheless. He seemed to be stretching out the conversation, and Mallon wanted to resolve the Demon problem before the trap failed.

"I *am* sorry," said Mallon sincerely, but with a note of impatience. "I am unaccustomed to dealing with ... with ... sorcerers."

"Sorcerers, is it, now?" snapped the old man. "Have you come to my home to insult me? What will you call me next, I wonder: Wizard, perhaps, or Conjuror?"

"No, no; of course not!" Mallon explained hastily, although in fact those words had occurred to him. At the moment he could not recall the word by which magical folk referred to themselves. Although it was a common enough word, Mallon was unnerved by the old man's demeanor and his own ignorance of the extent of his mysterious powers.

Leaning forward toward Mallon, the old man whispered loudly, "Are you searching for a word?" He straightened and said, in a normal tone, "We are called Adept," the old man said.

"Ah, yes," said Mallon.

"And your sort we call Ordinary," continued the old man. "Some the more than others," he added under his breath.

"Yes, well, thank you. Um...we *do* have an urgent need."

"Do you, indeed?" said the old man suspiciously. "Centuries of oppression and ridicule, and now you appear on my doorstep to present me with the gift of your 'urgent need.' How quaint!"

"Indeed," Mallon agreed. "I assure you, sir, it is as strange for us as it must be for you, this meeting. Alas, we know not where else to turn."

The old man was intrigued. A group of Ordinary, wearing uniforms that suggested they were of some stature in their society, one of them calling himself a Lord, and obviously very nervous – even *frightened* – about something; this was unusual enough to pique his curiosity. "What are you up to, then?" said the old man slowly and softly, his eyes narrowed to slits. "There is every reason to distrust you."

"You are right, good sir," said Mallon, nodding. "And yet, here we are," he added, spreading his hands in a gesture of supplication.

"So it seems," sighed the old man. "Here you are, indeed. And what is the nature of this 'urgent need' you speak of? A love potion to steal a rival's wife? A spell of power to usurp another's throne? A magical flagon that remains forever full however much you drink?" At that suggestion, two of the soldiers looked at each other and smiled, nodding approvingly. The old man ignored them and continued to address their leader. "What Ordinary mission calls you to my door?"

"No ordinary mission at all, I'm afraid," said Mallon. "Extraordinary, I would say. Yes. Extraordinary."

The old man applauded slowly and rolled his eyes. "Quite the dramatic prelude," he said with an ironic tone.

Mallon sighed. "I am at a loss to think of a way to say it that doesn't sound absurd."

"Then let it sound absurd," said the old man. "Surely it will be no more so than our conversation has been thus far."

Mallon turned partway round and gestured toward the blanket-covered board. "We have captured a Demon," he said, "and we lack the means to dispose of it."

The old man neither smiled nor frowned. His eyes moved to the blanket-shrouded board, and back to Mallon. "A Demon," he said quietly.

"Yes," Mallon affirmed nervously.

"Let me see if I understand," said the old man with mock patience. "By 'demon,' do you mean a creature such as those described in ancient tales and songs?"

"Yes," said Mallon.

"A huge creature, easily thrice the height of a man."

"Indeed."

"And immensely strong, of course."

"Of course."

"A creature with a mindless hatred for human beings."

"Without a doubt," said Mallon, as the men nodded in grim agreement.

"And an insatiable appetite for extreme violence."

"Just so."

"And this immensely strong creature, easily thrice the height of a man, that has a mindless hatred of human beings and an insatiable thirst for extreme violence is now, thankfully, held securely and helplessly," the old man turned his head to one side and squinted sidelong at the board holding the Demon trap, and finished in quiet, measured tones, "beneath that small blanket."

"Well, the Demon is in a trap, and the trap is under the blanket, yes," said Mallon, holding his hands about a foot apart to illustrate the size of the trap, and then placing one hand atop the other to demonstrate how the blanket covered the trap.

The old man sighed. The Ordinary had been right to say his story sounded absurd. He turned his Adept attention to the object under the blanket. He perceived Technology with a hint of Magic, but the "flavor" and the proportions were unlike anything he had Perceived before. It felt wrong, as if it were all a fake, and his suspicion was roused. "I see that you have come here to mock me," he said abruptly, and started to close the door once again.

"No! Wait, please!" Mallon exclaimed, once again blocking the door to hold it open. "This is no farce!" he explained, speaking rapidly. "We have a Demon, but we cannot hold it indefinitely, and we cannot rid ourselves of it. Truly, our need is great! We have heard there is such a thing as a Dispatching spell, by means of which an Adept may send a Demon back to its own realm. Is this so?"

Slowly, the old man opened the door once more. "Firstly, Demons are legendary creatures. They inhabit tales from the long ago," he said, gesturing broadly as if toward the long ago, "not traps and blankets and boards. Certainly, if Demons ever existed, and if they had even half the power legend grants them, no small band of men such as yourselves could possibly have captured one."

"But, we..." Mallon began. The old man held up his hand, and Mallon stopped talking.

"Secondly, Demons are supposed to be quite large. Whatever you have there on that board is no more than a foot wide, and half as high. I suspect what you have brought me is nothing more than an old shoe or a loaf of bread, or perhaps a brick."

"Well, the trap..." Mallon began, holding his hands about a foot apart. Again the old man held up his hand, and again Mallon stopped talking.

"Thirdly," he continued, "I perceive the energy signature of Technology beneath that blanket, along with a bit of Magic – but *odd* Magic...wrong, somehow, and dim, as if one were hearing distant sounds at the end of a long tunnel. Technology is the magic of the Ordinary. I do not claim to comprehend its mysteries, but it is possible you have contrived a device that can mimic the aura of Magic in some crude way, and you want to trick me into treating this affair seriously, so that you can have a fine laugh at my expense. Foot-wide Demons in a box, indeed!" With that, he slammed the door.

Mallon pounded on the door. "But sir!" he shouted. "The trap is an object of Technology. Naturally, you would sense its energy. Within the trap is a magical creature, and hence you sense it, as well. Is that not to be expected?"

Time passed. Mallon continued to call to the old man for a while. At length he gave up, sighed, looked at the ground, and shook his head.

A veteran soldier with a scar on his cheek said, "My lord, a group of soldiers can surely enter this house at will."

"Perhaps," said Mallon, "but what might an Adept be capable of? Even if he didn't turn us into pollywogs, he would surely have little reason to help us, once we had forced our way into his home."

"Good point. Then we can wait. He's got to come out sooner or later."

The men loitered, shifting their feet for lack of anything better to do, and feeling entirely stupid. "My lord?" said one of the men holding the board.

"Yes? Is it moving, or something?"

"No, my lord, but we grow tired. May we set the board down?"

"It is not heavy, is it?"

"No, my lord, but one may grow tired of holding anything for a great length of time, even if it is not heavy."

"Granted," said Mallon. "I suppose it is safe to set it down. At least, it is probably no more dangerous to set it down than to hold it up."

They set the board on the ground gingerly and continued to stand around aimlessly, like a group of soldiers with nothing in particular to do, which is just what they were.

Eventually, the old man opened the door again. "So, you are still here," he observed.

"There is no place else for us to go," said Mallon. "Look," he continued, "why would five men spend hours walking through the wood, just to mock one old man? What sport is there in such a thing? What audience is here to share in the mirth? Squirrels and owls?"

"What sport, indeed?" asked the old man rhetorically. "Sport it is not, but Ordinary it is, and so are you lot. Who knows what nonsense you might find amusing?"

Mallon looked down, then met the old man's eyes once more. Now he recovered his station in life, and spoke less as a supplicant and more as an equal. "I understand that the Ordinary and the Adept have not always gotten along well," he said.

"Well, *there's* an understatement for you!" said the old man, idly scratching the side of his nose. Ignoring the interjection, Mallon continued, "but now there is a danger to both, and we must help each other."

"Must?" said the old man sarcastically. "Must? You mean, you are desperate for Adept help. How does that qualify as each helping the other? Why should I not leave you to deal with your own problem?" "This Demon trap," said Mallon. "It's an example of how the Ordinary can help in this matter. It can hold a Demon so that an Adept might Dispatch it."

The old man shook his head as if not quite sure whether to

take the whole situation seriously. Responding to Mallon's change of manner, he dropped his mocking tone. "The things you say are both sensical and nonsensical at the same time," he said. "Demons," he paused and shook his head in denial. "They are said to exist, or to have existed in the past, but none has been seen in many a long age. Technology that can constrain Magical energy? Unlikely, at best, I think. Surely, the like has never been seen before."

"Then see it now," said Mallon, gesturing toward the board, "and see also, a Demon. But be prepared to Dispatch it immediately, lest it run wild. It has already killed!"

The old man shook his head again, slowly. "Firstly," he said, "I admit I am curious to see what lies beneath that blanket. Its energy signatures are intriguing, even if it is only a trick. Perhaps it is an amusing novelty. Secondly, while your words do not convince, I sense that your fear is very real. It borders on mindless terror. It is difficult to believe you could falsify your emotions so thoroughly just to enact a farce, and a group of armed and trained men would not lightly give in to terror. And, as you say, it is a rather elaborate farce to play with no audience at hand to enjoy it. Owls, in particular, are quite serious by nature, and unamused by farces. Squirrels, of course, are another matter."

The old man paused as if awaiting laughter, but none of those assembled on his doorstep reacted. "So, you agree to Dispatch the Demon?" asked Mallon eagerly.

"I agree to no such thing," said the old man. "I am not yet convinced you have a Demon there, or even that Demons roam the world at all in these modern times, or, frankly, that they ever did so."

"But, you will at least have a look?"

"All right, all right," said the old man resignedly. "Bring it in and put it on the table." Leaving the door wide open, he turned and walked into the house, waving the men forward.

The men who had carried the board hurried to pick it up again and stepped forward gladly. Mallon stopped them with a gesture. "Wait," he said. "Can you Dispatch the Demon while it is yet in the

trap, or need we release it first?"

"There is no answer to such a silly question!" snapped the old man. "Firstly, the question presupposes there is such a thing as a Demon, such a thing as a Demon trap, and that both items are presently resting beneath that blanket. None of those claims has been established as fact, as far as I am concerned. Secondly, I do not know the Dispatching spell, if indeed it is a spell at all. So far as I know it is only an ancient poem. Every poem is not a spell, you know. Most of them are just poems. So it may be with this one, as well."

Mallon was not listening to the old man, except to notice that he had a habit of saying "firstly" and "secondly" with annoying frequency, but was instead thinking through the procedure for removing the Demon from its trap long enough to have the Adept Dispatch it. He pondered for a few moments, waited politely for a pause in the old man's drone, and said, "It occurs to me that the same shielding that prevents the Demon from bursting forth from the trap might also prevent your spell from penetrating. It is possible we must release the Demon before you can Dispatch it."

"Have you not been listening at all, fool? Look," said the old man with a sigh, "what was your name? Melon, is it?"

"Mallon."

"Whatever. Anyway, any Demon that can fit inside such a small package is surely a small danger."

"No! You must not make that assumption," Mallon entreated the old man. "The trap constrains the Demon to its own dimensions. When released, it will resume its normal size and shape. This Demon is some 12 feet tall and 6 wide. It is vicious, quick, and powerful. It has killed already."

"Still you say things that are at once sensical and nonsensical," said the old man. "Bring it inside. If indeed you have a Demon there, we don't want it loose in the wood."

"If the Demon is released inside, it will be a tight fit."

"So much the better for us, then. It will have no room to maneuver."

“That seems...sensible.” Mallon waved his men forward.

The old man, who had been joking, shook his head and snorted.

They entered the cottage, which consisted of but a single room, and gratefully deposited their burden on the table in the center of the room.

As they made their way inside, the old man asked, “Are you always this way?”

“What way?” said Mallon.

“Every time there are two options to consider, you leap to the most negative contingency.”

Mallon paused thoughtfully, then said, “There is much at stake. The Demon is extremely dangerous. It has killed several people, including some of my best men. It was very difficult to capture.” The other Ordinary nodded as Mallon spoke, their faces grim, their eyes reflecting bitter memories.

The old man was not fully convinced there was such a thing as a Demon trap, that these Ordinary had a Demon with them, or even that Demons really existed. But there was no mistaking the genuine fear in Mallon’s voice or the tension in his face, and in the faces of his men. *Something* had happened; that much was clear. But *Demons*?

He decided to play along with them just to see what sort of toy they had brought with them, and what they were really trying to do. Had they wished to kill him and rob him, they could have fallen on him at any time; they were five, they were well armed, and Magic can only go so far in an unfair fight. What, then, did they want? What was all this nonsense about?

“All right, then,” said the old man with a sigh, “let’s see what we have, here.” With that, he pulled the horse blanket off the trap. The trap itself was an unassuming box made of materials consistent with other objects of that time and place. It did not appear to be of unusual design or manufacture, except that mounted on its side was a smaller box bearing a row of three small lights along one edge. At the moment, a green light at the end of the row was lit, and the two others were dark. Two strands of cabling or wire wound round

the outside of the unit, their ends connected to the smaller box. The device made no sound and gave off no other visible light besides the small green light. The old man walked slowly around the table, examining the box quizzically.

At close range, the energy signatures from the box were even stranger than before. Of course, there was the unmagical energy signature of Technology, which he guessed emanated from the little lights. There was the peculiar distortion of the magical energy field, as if it were not just in front of him but rather some distance down a tunnel or hole, and oddly bent or folded.

And there was something else; a sort of unwholesomeness. Faint yet persistent, the unwholesomeness made the hairs on the old man's neck stand on end. Had he believed in evil, he may well have named it so. Cynical though he was, the unwholesomeness was tangible and undeniable.

Mallon's men drew back against the walls, putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the trap. Their behavior made the odd emanations from the box all the more disturbing.

"The green light indicates the trap contains a Demon," Mallon explained without being asked.

The old man sniffed. "I can sense magical energy there. The light is superfluous."

"Not to us," said Mallon. "We cannot perceive magical energy directly."

"Ah, yes," said the old man, "I forgot." Of course, he had not forgotten. He just wanted to remind them how Ordinary they were. He had to admit, though, that the little lights were a clever trick. "Well, shall we open the box and see the Demon?" he asked.

Mallon's eyes grew wide, and his men placed their hands on the hilts of their swords, shifting nervously in their places. "Wait!" Mallon said. "Do you have the Dispatching spell ready?"

"Oh, *that*," said the old man sarcastically, still not quite believing all this. Shaking his head, he walked across the room to a bookcase and looked for a volume. Finding it, he blew across the top of it and a cloud of dust arose. He opened the book and searched for a

particular page. He lay the book on the table in front of the Demon trap, open to the page whereon the Dispatching spell was printed in an ornate, archaic script. The old man reviewed the spell and recited it quietly to himself several times. Then he retrieved his staff and returned to the table, facing the front of the trap, with the book open before him. "Is everybody ready?" he asked.

"Han," said Mallon.

"Yes, my lord," replied the scarred veteran who had earlier suggested forcing their way into the house.

"In case something goes wrong, we will need to trap the Demon again."

"Yes, my lord."

"Get in position behind the trap. On my signal, open it. As soon as the Demon is out, grab the trap and reset it."

"Yes, my lord." Han got into position, hands outstretched toward the box, facing the Adept. Mallon and the other three soldiers positioned themselves on the flanks, two on a side, and drew their swords, though there was little enough room to swing them. Mallon thought of one more thing.

"Good sir," he said. "Since we may all die together here today, may we not know your name?"

The old man rolled his eyes. "I think you are over-dramatizing, but you may know my name nevertheless. It is Sarn."

"Sarn. Thank you. We are ready." Mallon nodded to Han. Han touched a control on the smaller box on the side of the trap.

In the myths and legends of the world, Demons were depicted as ruthless, bloodthirsty, tireless, and cruel creatures who saw humans mainly as a convenient food source, but they were never depicted as intelligent. Never, in legend, did Demons speak in words, cooperate in action, or act in a way that bespoke organization or planning. Whatever their fears, whatever their expectations, the last thing the six men in that room anticipated was that the Demon would demonstrate intelligence. Thus, the Demon enjoyed the element of surprise.

It was as if it had heard and understood every word they had

said, and had made a plan of action. The moment the trap opened, it roared out and charged straight for the target it perceived to present the greatest threat to its freedom. That target was not Sarn the Adept, who was to try and Dispatch the creature back to the Demon realm. It was not Mallon and the three armed and trained soldiers covering the perimeter of the room, whose swords could not kill it but could inflict pain. It was Han, the man who was to try and reset the trap.

The creature moved with surprising speed, and was on Han before anyone else could move, crushing the trap with its foot as it advanced. Han had no time to scream before he was dismembered. The Demon would not be recaptured this day.

Sarn had mere seconds to come to grips with the fact that Demons did exist, that there was one in his living room, and that they would all die in the next few moments unless he succeeded in casting a spell he had never practiced and never imagined he would need; a spell from olden times, couched in ancient words, to Dispatch a Demon back to the Demon realm. A poem imbued with the power to send a thing that could not exist back to a place that could not exist. It was a child's game become frighteningly real.

Sarn angled his staff toward the Demon and began the incantation, but faltered on the unfamiliar and archaic words. As he glanced down at the book, the Demon kicked the table over, knocking Sarn backwards and across the floor to the far wall. The splintered trap rattled to the floor at the Demon's feet. Han's blood dripping from its claws and fangs, it picked up the remains of the trap in one hand and slowly crushed it until its own black blood oozed from between its fingers. Its eyes and voice filled with hate and fury, it glared at the broken trap with a hideous sneer and intoned, in an inhumanly deep rumble, the name, "En-taun."

The Demon rose to its full height, in the process shouldering through the thatched roof of the cottage, and stepped over the house's stone front wall. Its trailing foot caught in the window through which Mallon had first seen the glow of firelight as they approached the house earlier that afternoon. The Demon kicked

through the stone wall as a man might kick away a twig on which he had caught his foot, and the heavy front door that had once slammed in their faces spun away like a leaf on the wind. Casting the shards of the broken trap aside angrily, the Demon strode into the forest and the darkness, its quest summarized in the single name it had spoken.

The men remained immobile and silent for several minutes, in the positions they were in when the Demon departed. Then there came the sound of creaking wood, and two rafters from the shattered roof fell to the floor in the middle of the room, followed by the shush of dislodged roof thatch spilling down, accompanied by an alarmed chicken that had been asleep on the roof, and finally a cloud of dust. Sarn and Mallon looked at each other. "It...it *spoke*," said Sarn incredulously. Mallon nodded dully.

"What did it say?" asked Sarn.

"I think," said Mallon, "it spoke the name of Anton."

"Anton? Who is Anton?"

"He is the inventor of the Demon trap."

"Ah," said Sarn with a nod. "An elegant invention, that."

"Indeed," Mallon agreed.

"It seems, however," Sarn observed quietly, "that the Demon did not appreciate the elegance of the trap quite as much as we."

"So it seems, yes," said Mallon.

Legends depicted the Demons as beasts incapable of speech. But the Demon had done far more than merely speak. From within the trap, it had heard and understood exactly what the men had said. According to legend, Demons were ignorant of language. It had devised a plan, and had executed the plan with precision the moment it was free of the trap. According to legend, Demons were incapable of such reasoning. It had killed a specific target, apparently to achieve a tactical goal, and then ceased killing by conscious intent to pursue a larger goal. According to legend, Demons were mindless killing machines, and one could not have acted on such a plan, or maintained focus on an abstract goal. It had not eaten what it had killed. According to legend, Demons

had an insatiable hunger for human flesh, and could not control their craving. This demon had shattered not just one myth, but practically the entire concept of what Demons were supposed to be; beginning, of course, with the basic fact of their existence. The only human conceptions of Demons that remained unchallenged were their extreme strength and their propensity for violence.

“This is not good,” said Mallon. Sarn nodded dully.

The soldiers began to collect the remains of Han, and of the trap. Mallon joined in the search for parts of Han, his long-time confidant and friend, and the captain of his personal guard. Sarn considered the fact that the trap had worried the Demon more than Adept magic or Ordinary weapons. It had been equally unconcerned with his spell and with the soldiers’ swords. Instead, it acted with great urgency to destroy the trap and the trap’s operator. Then it had set out to find the trap’s inventor. Had the time come when Technology would supersede Magic as the preeminent power in the world? This was a question Sarn would ponder deeply in the days to come.

Chapter 2

Anton was a bit of a laughingstock in his home town of Greenvale.

The town stood at a crossroads where travelers often stayed the night, nestled in a shallow valley in the low foothills that led westward into the mountains of Ishni. Anton loved to while away the hours at the inn, listening to travelers' tales in the pub until the wee hours of the morning. He seemed incapable of distinguishing between truthful tales and fanciful ones. He believed them all, and trusted that everyone had honorable intentions. The rest of the time he divided between daydreaming about far-away adventures, and reading and thinking about the mysterious and wonderful magical folk known as the Adept. While most normal folk feared the Adept and believed them to be the cause of the world's ills, Anton thought them miraculously gifted and special. This, despite the fact he had never met one. He simply felt they *must* be superior to the folk he encountered in everyday life; petty and ignorant as they were.

By Anton's own reckoning, this was a place, time, and life situation that left much to be desired. No adventures occurred here, and the people lived in quotidian monotony without complaint and with no apparent thought that things could be better, or even different. Therefore, he spent as little time as possible in the place where he actually was, in the hour that was actually passing, and in the role in which life actually cast him. He preferred, instead, to exist in a world crafted by his own imagination; a place, time, and person far more interesting than this village, this day, this boy.

Not that he couldn't have had a normal life there, had he wished it. Reasonably handsome, slightly taller than average, and in fine health, he would have made as good a catch as any local girl could have expected. His face, while unremarkable, was at least unmarked by the pox and otherwise undeformed by birth or circumstance. Set off by piercing blue eyes and framed by shoulder-length blond hair, it was not an unpleasant face to behold. But Anton was uninterested

in a normal life; and the things that *did* interest him were thought quite childish by his fellow townsmen.

One of the things Anton liked to do was to tinker with Technology. He designed and built things. Mostly, he designed and built things that did not do what he had intended they would do. Sometimes, his inventions shook themselves to pieces, flung themselves into ponds, or burst into flames. This provided a source of occasional entertainment for the folk of the village, who lived, after all, in a place where little else happened.

Anton was undeterred by the reaction of his fellow townsmen. He practiced swordsmanship using a poorly-made, rusty old blade he had found somewhere, since he could afford neither training nor a proper weapon to train with. To the amusement of many, he could be seen around town thrusting and slashing at imagined enemies or shadow-fighting with martial arts techniques that he apparently worked out on his own; a dancing clown. How effective his skills would be against a live enemy was an untested matter of speculation.

These activities, while harmless enough in themselves, left no time for useful work; a fact his widower uncle Timo, who had raised him these last 19 years alongside his own two sons, frequently pressed home. At 19, this ongoing non-usefulness was less amusing to Timo than it had been at 15, or 12, or 9. Anton was another mouth to feed, but made precious little practical contribution to that cause. While others his age were living responsibly, working in the fields or at the mill to support pregnant young wives, he pored over magic books, listened to tales, tinkered with his inventions, or fought imaginary battles. He made a little money running errands for the innkeeper and village merchants, but it amounted to less than the cost of his own upkeep.

Anton was on his way to the inn in hopes of hearing tales of far-away adventures one evening, some seven days before Lord Mallon made the acquaintance of Sarn, the Adept, some five before he, Anton, made the acquaintance of Lord Mallon, and two before he constructed his first Demon trap.

Having just run an errand on behalf of a local merchant, he was later than usual, and was afraid he might miss a ripping yarn if he traveled by his usual, relatively safe but relatively long route. He decided to take a shortcut through the back alleys, where brigands often lay in wait for the unwary, and where drunken fights occurred in the night. While this was somewhat dangerous, Anton was armed with his cheap sword and an ample supply of naivete. Unburdened by the weight of realistic limits on his self-confidence, this combination, despite its flaws, if bolstered with a bit of blind luck, would probably suffice for self-defense against a drunkard, a petty thief, or a stray dog.

As he passed within a couple of streets of his destination, a group of boys began taunting him and throwing rocks. They called him “town fool” and “village idiot” and “little sorcerer” and “Uncle Timo’s burden,” repeating the names they heard their parents and other adults call him. Anton turned suddenly and glared at the boys, gripping the hilt of his sword. They turned and ran away, laughing. He smiled, as well. He tended to take such taunts in good humor.

Suddenly, Anton heard unusual sounds coming from round the next corner. There seemed to be a fight going on just out of sight, but the sounds were unlike those of the typical drunken brawl. There was the metallic ring of steel on steel; there were low, animal-like growls; there was a stream of rapid speech in a strange tongue, chanted in a high voice. Suddenly there came a flash of bright, white light, followed by a strange sizzling sound and a briefly-felt, chill breeze that seemed to pull *toward* the alley. Strangest of all, this was accompanied by a shrill shriek that faded into the distance, not as if the shriek were growing less loud, but rather as if the shrieking thing were traveling away at a high rate of speed...an *impossibly* high rate of speed. The bright light and the shriek faded away together. Rushing forward and drawing his sword, he heard the sound of a body slumping into a rickety wooden fence, accompanied by a grunt, and followed by the clatter of a metallic object against the cobblestones. The grunt sounded a bit high, as if that of a child or a woman, and also held a note of

exhaustion or pain.

Anton rounded the corner into a dark alleyway in time to see a body slumped against the fence bordering the alley, but too late to see the assailant who had put it there. It was the closest thing to a real adventure he had experienced, and he was keen to see it through. He ran past the prone form to the end of the alley and peered along the connecting street in both directions, but the street was deserted. Whoever had done the deed was well away. Satisfied, though disappointed, that he would not catch the perpetrator, he returned to the body in the alley.

He knelt next to the still form to see whether the person still lived. There was only starlight to see by, and the buildings along the alley blocked most of that. He drew back the hood that covered the head, and saw the face of a young woman, not hard to look at despite its being a bit scuffed and pallid. Gingerly, he touched her cheek and found the flesh to be cold to the touch; as cold as death, he thought. Yet, she had not been long enough dead to be so cold.

He checked for a pulse and found one. The activity roused her, and she reacted as if still under attack. Cold as death, but not quite as dead as she looked, it seemed. Live enough she was, anyway, to grip his collar with one hand and raise a dagger with the other. He grabbed her wrist and found the arm held no strength. The dagger fell, and she slumped back into semi-consciousness. The fingers of her other hand, now limp, were still looped loosely through his collar. Gently, he pulled them free.

Anton decided to take her to the inn, which was quite close, and try to nurse her back to health. He picked up the dagger and stuffed it into his belt. He looked around the alley for her sword, for he remembered hearing a metallic clang at some point during the battle. He found no sword, but he did find a kind of walking stick or pole made of metal, about as long as she was tall, with a ball or knob at one end. It was artfully fashioned though not ornate. He guessed it belonged to her, and laid it atop her body, noticing briefly as he did so that the pole, though stout enough, was lighter than it appeared. He also found a pack nearby, and guessed it, too, must be

hers. He placed it atop her body as well, and then picked her up.

He carried the young woman to the rear door of the inn and kicked on the door with the toe of his boot to get someone's attention inside. One of the cooks opened it, his arms and face glistening with sweat. Hot, steamy air, noise, and firelight spilled out into the autumn night along with the aroma of food. Recognizing him, the cook turned and whistled an ear-piercing signal, a single short, rising note. "Oi, Kate! Friend of yours!"

The cook retreated into the kitchen, taking no notice of the bundle in Anton's arms. A young, slightly plump blond woman with rosy, freckled cheeks appeared in the doorway, her sleeves rolled up and her hands red and wet from washing dishes. Kate often worked at times when Anton was at the pub listening to travelers' tales, and for some reason she did not think him quite the fool that most others did. Almost, maybe, but not *quite* the fool.

"What's all this, then, Anton?" she asked with a smile and a wink, shaking water from her hands and drying them on her apron. "Since when do *you* bring drunken women to the inn; and sneaking in the back door, no less?" she asked with a laugh.

"It isn't as it appears," Anton said earnestly. "She was attacked in the street. She is injured and I think...I think she's sick, or something."

"Hmm." A twinkle in her eye, Kate made a show of seriousness as she eyed the young woman in Anton's arms. "More likely *something* than *sick*, if I know this neighborhood," she quipped with a wink. "Don't tell me *you* rescued her?" Kate asked.

"Well...not exactly," Anton admitted. The woman really needed help, and there was no time for nonsense. Besides, it wasn't Anton's way to make up tales. "I...I was too late to help her," he admitted. "Whoever attacked her was already gone when I arrived. But she is afflicted, somehow. Is there a room where she can rest?"

Kate had been around the block enough times in her short life to know she shouldn't take in this stranger, unfamiliar and oddly dressed, obviously not a local, ill with some unknown affliction, and in trouble with someone who was probably not far away and

who may well want to return to finish the job. But she had known Anton nearly all her life, and his simple kindness and naïve sincerity disarmed her now, as it always had done. He was older than her in years, yet younger in so many ways.

Kate touched the young woman's forehead, then her hand, and said, "Goodness! She's like ice. Yeah, she needs to rest a bit. We've vacant rooms. I can get you into one of them without Bund knowing. But just for the one night, mind you! And if a payin' customer needs the room, you'll be turned out, and I don't want no nonsense about it, right?"

"You're an angel, Kate!" said Anton as he stepped into the kitchen. The others working in the kitchen ignored them. They didn't care if one of their own occasionally sneaked a friend in from the cold. It didn't cost old Bund anything, after all, and the innkeeper was well enough off.

Kate led him through the kitchen and along a corridor, all the while chuckling, shaking her head, and muttering things like, "I've been called a lot of things, but never an angel," and, "Imagine showing up here in the dead of night with a 'sick or something' girl in his arms." She was only teasing, of course. She knew Anton well; had known him from childhood. He was not one to bring women to the inn, whether sick or not.

Presently she stopped at a door and opened it. The room was in a relatively quiet part of the inn, secluded from the din of the pub in front and the bustle of the kitchen in back. Indeed, the room was on the side of the inn next to the alley where the young woman had been attacked. That may have been the reason all the noise of the attack had gone unnoticed inside the inn. Kate held the door open and Anton carried the young woman inside and laid her on the bed. He placed her things against the wall.

Kate noticed the staff and recognized it for what it was; her eyes narrowed slightly, just for moment. What had Anton gotten himself – and her – into? Well, she had agreed to let her stay, and it would be wrong to go back on her word now. Inclining her head toward the cold hearth, Kate said, "There's firewood in the kitchen. The

poor dear is so cold. Get a fire going, and I'll bring a basin. Don't make a commotion, now. It'll be my job if Bund finds me giving away rooms!"

"Right," said Anton, quite seriously. "I understand. Thank you for taking such a risk for me, Kate." "Hmm," she replied sternly, trying to sound serious as she suppressed a smile. Kate soon returned with a basin of fresh water and a couple of towels. The young woman stirred uneasily on the bed, moaning but not fully conscious.

Kate put a hand on Anton's arm and whispered, "Good luck. I hope she's better by morning." "Me, too," said Anton, "and thanks again."

"You said that already."

"Right. G'night, then."

Kate turned to leave, but turned back to Anton and spoke in a whisper, "Hey...who is she, anyway? She's not from around here. Leastways, I haven't seen her before."

Anton shrugged. "No idea," he said.

"Well, then, who attacked her? Did you run them off? Did you see them?" Actually, Kate doubted Anton could have run anyone off who wasn't leaving already, but she didn't doubt he would have tried, if he saw someone in distress.

Anton shrugged again. "They were already gone when I found her. I heard a commotion in the alley, but by the time I arrived no one was there except her, and she wasn't talking."

Kate shook her head and smiled indulgently. "No idea who she is, and no idea who's interested in her," she said, "so, naturally, you pick her up off the street and carry her to the inn. No telling who might be looking for her, or what they might do to you if they find you with her, or with her corpse. But you go right ahead and pick her up off the street and carry her to the inn. O wise and prudent Anton!" She pressed her palms together and bowed theatrically toward him.

Anton set his jaw. "You think me a fool, like everyone else."

Kate's face softened, and she gazed directly into Anton's eyes.

Truth be told, Kate thought Anton was the most interesting person she knew, always trying to invent things, and a good storyteller. Most everyone else just dragged their sheep around the hillsides or scratched a few crops out of the dirt, and had no tales to tell or dreams to chase. Anton was a decent person, too; not so common in these crude times. But she also thought he was naive and too trusting of people, and too irresponsible to be a good provider. That was too bad. Kate sighed.

Her eyes large and moist, she stroked his cheek with one hand and said, "I think you have big dreams and a heart to match." It was as close to showing her true self to anyone as she ever came, but Anton was not astute enough to realize it. Suddenly, she slapped the same cheek playfully and said, giggling, "And sometimes a bit of a fool, as well!" Still shaking her head and muttering to herself as she went, Kate took her leave.

Anton could tell Kate meant well, but in truth he did not understand what she had just said. He closed the door as quietly as possible, tiptoed to the bedside, and tried to assess the young woman's state of health. She noticed him there, and her eyes opened. She tried to speak, but only a whisper emerged. Anton leaned closer, struggling to understand.

"I know what is wrong with me," she whispered hoarsely. "I need a medicinal tea."

"Yes, of course," said Anton. "I'll go and get you some tea straight away!" He started to rise, and the young woman grabbed his jacket and tugged at him, though she lacked the strength to pull him back down onto the bed. He sat.

"Wait!" she said dryly. "You do not know what sort of tea to bring."

"Oh," said Anton, "right. A *specific* medicinal tea."

"Listen carefully. These are the ingredients I need." She named a number of items, some commonplace and others odd. Anton recited the list back to her, got it wrong, and she repeated it. After a couple of repetitions, he finally remembered the list accurately. She told him he could obtain the items at an apothecary at a certain address

in town. He did not know of the place, but he knew the streets she named. He found it strange that he did not know this apothecary, since he had lived in the town all his life, and ran errands for many merchants. Doubly strange that the young woman knew of it, since she was not from around these parts; Anton or Kate would have seen her about, had she been local. The town was not so large that a resident would be unrecognized.

Anton hurriedly donned his coat and headed for the door. The young woman tried to call after him, "Side door! Side door!" but she could only manage an airy whisper, and did not know whether Anton had heard her.

Anton ran full speed to the designated address, and found an unmarked door on a darkened storefront. Unsure whether anyone might be inside, he knocked on the door and shouted. No one appeared. Suddenly he remembered the young woman had said, "side door." There was a narrow alley to the right of the building. He edged into it cautiously. Peering through the darkness and feeling his way along the wall, he located a smaller door. Again he knocked and shouted. After a couple of minutes, the door opened to reveal a wizened old woman just under five feet tall carrying a candle. She appeared to have been sleeping.

"Please," he said, breathless from the run. "My friend is sick."

"That's too bad," said the old woman with a note of mock sympathy. "What do you expect me to do about it?"

Still trying to catch his breath, Anton said, "She...she sent me here..."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Why here?"

"She said she needs a specific medicinal tea," he continued, now beginning to breathe normally again. "She told me the ingredients, and said that they could be obtained here."

"Hmph," said the old woman, appearing to think it over. *She*. Could it be...? At last she said, "It's late. Come back in the morning, if your friend is still feeling poorly." She turned to go back inside. "Wait!" Anton touched her shoulder and she jumped with a start as if he had struck her. Angrily she spun to face him, but she relented

when she saw the concern on his face. “She is so cold...so very cold,” he said softly.

The old woman’s brow furrowed, and she cocked her head to one side. “Cold, you say?”

“Yes,” Anton replied. “Her skin is pale, and cold as death. Her strength is fading away moment by moment.”

The old woman took a long, deep breath, and came to a decision she hoped she would not regret. To trust in strangers was often a bad idea in these times. To get involved in other people’s problems was usually an even worse idea, but she did not like the sound of the symptoms this young man was describing. She thought she recognized the symptoms. If she was right, it did not bode well for anyone that it was occurring here, in this quiet town. Yet she dared not ask probing questions of this young man, to try and validate her diagnosis. She did not know how far he could be trusted. He was Ordinary, and that in itself put her guard up. Something about his earnestness led her to take the risk. She poked her head out the door and looked up and down the alley, looking and listening carefully. She stepped outside, went to the main street, and scanned it. Satisfied, she stepped back to the side door and entered. As she passed Anton, she said brusquely, “Step inside.” Anton followed her inside and closed the door behind him.

She lit more candles from the one she was carrying, and gradually the room became dimly illuminated. “What ingredients did your friend ask for?” she asked while she worked, although she had a feeling she knew what they would be.

Anton began to recite the list of ingredients, but did not remember them all correctly. “Oh, no!” he said. “I’m getting it all mixed up. She’s going to die, and it’s my fault!”

“Don’t panic,” said the old woman calmly, but firmly. “I recognize the recipe you’re trying to recall.” Indeed, she received far more information from Anton than he realized he was giving. From the ingredients the young man named, she recognized the remedy, the affliction that required it, and the single possible cause of the affliction. She had a feeling she could guess who the “friend” was,

too, although she was not completely sure. Even so, she did not ask for a name. "I can provide the items your friend needs. Can you pay?"

"Um...yes, yes, I have money," said Anton, searching his pockets. He had with him the few coins he had earned this day from his errand-running jobs. He found the coins and held them out to the old woman. "I hope it's enough! If it isn't, I can owe you the rest. I promise to repay it."

The woman smiled slightly at Anton's promise. In this world, promises were freely given but rarely kept. She took the money and quickly counted it. It was worth nearly nothing, but she had no intention of refusing the request. It was customary to exchange something of value for remedies. *Something of value* to the buyer; that was key, and not merely coin. She had not asked for money; she had asked for payment. The old woman sensed that this boy was willing to give whatever he had to help his friend; possibly even his own life. That was a form of payment the old woman respected more than money. Besides that, if the "friend" was who she thought it was, then there was more at stake than just the one life.

"It is enough," she said simply. "Wait here." She left the room. Anton paced nervously. It seemed to him the woman was gone a long time, but in truth she returned in just a few minutes.

She handed him a small cloth bundle. "Everything your friend requires is here."

"Thank you, ma'am," said Anton sincerely. "Thank you very much indeed!"

"Wait!" said the old woman, putting a hand on Anton's shoulder. "Do you know what to do?"

"Well...not exactly, no," he admitted.

"First, make a tea of the ingredients. They are already measured out in the correct proportions. Give your friend about four cups of the stuff. She will be very cold for a couple of hours. Hold her, so that she will not become too cold. After that time, there should be an improvement in her condition." "Yes, yes, I understand," said Anton impatiently. "Thank you again, dear woman!"

The old woman watched from her doorway until Anton had rounded the corner and was out of sight. It was strange, indeed, for one such as him to help one such as his “friend” must be. Perhaps the world was changing for the better. But with this affliction in the land, at what cost would the improvement come? Though it wasn’t a cold night, she shivered and drew her shawl tighter around her shoulders. After one last visual check of the surrounding streets, the old woman locked herself in for the night. Anton ran all the way back to the inn, slipped in through the kitchen door again, and brought the bundle to the room. The young woman remained on the bed, still semi-conscious, still cold to the touch. She whispered to him, “Mix all the ingredients in water and heat the water to boiling. Let it steep a few minutes, then bring it to me.” The effort of speaking was all she could manage; she slumped back and lay still.

Anton made the tea as quickly as he could, heating the water over the fire in the fireplace. When he thought it had steeped enough, he dipped out a ladle full and carefully carried it to the bed. “Here,” he said, lifting the young woman’s shoulders gently. He helped her hold the ladle to her lips as she drank. Swallowing, she whispered, “More,” and lay back down.

Anton made several trips to the bed, until she had drunk four large ladles of the medicinal brew. Then she lay back on the bed. At first, Anton thought she would sleep it off, but within a few minutes she began to shake. It began as a tremble, and grew to a violent shaking. He lay down next to her and held her, trying to warm her, but the shaking did not subside and she continued to feel ice cold to the touch. He became fearful that she would die of this strange, cold fever.

They remained in this state for at least two hours. Then the young woman began to warm up and the shaking subsided. Anton thought she would be well now, but instead her body temperature continued to climb. Soon, she was in a feverish sweat and was trembling again, although less violently than before. Anton moistened a towel with cool water and applied it to her forehead. He continued doing this for the next two hours, after which she began

to cool down. Anton wondered whether she would go completely cold again, but to his great relief her temperature stabilized. She fell into a deep sleep, more peaceful than her previous restless semi-consciousness had been. Though she lay on sheets moist with her own sweat, Anton did not want to disturb her now that she was finally sleeping peacefully. He left her to rest and curled up on the floor before the fire.

Anton suddenly awoke to the sound of voices in the room. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, to find the young woman and Kate standing in the room. The former looked normal; there was no sign of any fever, and her face was no longer pale. Seeing her in daylight, he noticed for the first time that her eyes were a deep green in color, such as he had never seen before. Her dark hair set off her eyes beautifully, although it had been roughly cropped rather short.

"Well, well," she said, "it seems Anton has finally awakened." So, she knew his name. Kate must have told her.

"Yes, I'm awake," he confirmed. "Good morning, all."

"As I was saying," the young woman continued, "I want a bath, and please prepare one for Anton, too. I can pay for both."

"Oh, I might draw a bath for Anton free of charge, just for the spectacle of it."

"Spectacle?" asked the young woman, amused. "Does he not bathe frequently?"

Kate laughed heartily. "Can you not tell?"

Both women laughed. "Point taken," said the visitor.

"Anton only bathes when he gets caught out in the rain, or when a bucket of water falls on his head!" The young woman smiled. "Then I suppose there's been a spell of dry weather in these parts."

"Hey, that's not so!" Anton countered. "I took a bath just...just a month ago...give or take a bit." His voice started strong, but trailed off.

Kate laughed her hearty laugh again. "Yeah. A long bit! I'll go and prepare those baths. But what are we to do about the room? The innkeeper will surely find out you're here, once he wakes up."

"I can pay for the room, as well," said the young woman.

“Register it in my name. It’s Mirina. That should square things with the innkeeper, and keep you out of trouble.” She pressed some coins into Kate’s hand.

“Will do, Mirina,” said Kate with a wink, and went about her business.

The young woman started organizing the contents of her pack. In part to break the silence, and in part to take his mind off those deep green eyes, Anton said, “Mirina is a very pretty name.”

She turned to him and smiled. “Why, thank you! I like it, too. I wish I’d thought of it sooner.” She resumed organizing her pack.

Anton was startled. “You mean, it isn’t your real name?”

“Of course not,” she said matter-of-factly, as if it were perfectly normal to use an assumed name and no further explanation were required. She tied off her pack and laid clean clothes out on the bed. She turned to Anton and noticed his bemusement. She said, “I suppose I owe you the truth, after what you did for me last night.”

“Well, that would be nice,” he agreed.

She nodded. “My name is Tanú.”

“Tanú,” Anton repeated thoughtfully. An unusual name. He had not heard such a name before.

“What’s the matter?” she asked with a small smile. “Not as pretty a name as Mirina?”

“Oh, no, it isn’t that,” said Anton. “It’s just that I’ve not heard the name before.”

She nodded. “I come from the west, from a town called Ishni. I’m traveling east.” She extended her right hand, and Anton took it. “Nice to meet you,” they both said. Anton noticed that she shook hands in the warrior’s fashion, gripping the wrist and not the hand. He liked that, and made a mental note to use the same gesture when next he met someone.

There was a knock on the door, it opened partway, and Kate’s head appeared. “Am I interrupting something?” she asked.

“Not at all,” said Tanú.

“The baths are ready,” said Kate.

“Wonderful!” exclaimed Tanú. She had lain in a pool of her own sweat, mixed with road grime, for hours as the medicinal tea had done its work. And she had the sense that a bit of her assailant’s stink had clung to her, as well. “I smell like a skunk’s nightmare. After our baths, let’s get some food. I’m starved!” She headed down the corridor.

Anton stood in the doorway of the room uncertainly. Kate said, “I don’t suppose you even know where the bathrooms are, do you, Anton?”

“What do you mean?” he said with mock indignity. “Of course I know. I’m not *that* dirty, you know!”

“Of course you’re not,” said Kate. “So, lead the way, then.” She gestured out the door.

Anton strode to the door, hesitated, and started to the left. Kate cleared her throat. Anton paused, thought for a moment, and started to the right. Kate followed and, purely by chance, felt the need to cough slightly whenever Anton started down the wrong way. Eventually, Anton found himself standing before a door bearing a picture of a man and a bathtub.

“Very good, Anton,” said Kate with a playful grin. “I see you knew the way all along. I’m sorry I doubted you.”

Anton turned the door handle and started to open the door. When he saw Kate intended to enter, he asked, “Where do you think you’re going? This is the men’s bath!”

“Don’t be silly, Anton!” she said, and brushed past him. The fairly small room had a fireplace with a roaring fire and two bathtubs nearly filled with clean water. Kate took a pail of hot water from the hearth and poured it into a tub that was already nearly full of steaming water. “This one is hot, and the other is cold,” she explained. “You wash in the hot one, and rinse in the cold one.”

“Don’t you think I know how to take a bath?” Anton asked indignantly.

Kate replaced the bucket, then retrieved soap, a washcloth, and a dry towel from a shelf, calling “No!” over her shoulder as she bustled around the room. She placed the washcloth and towel near

the hot tub, then approached Anton with a cake of soap in her hand.

"See this?" she asked, holding the soap in front of Anton's face. "It's called 'soap,'" she said, pronouncing the word 'soap' slowly and distinctly. Then she repeated it even more slowly, for good measure: "So-o-o-o-ap."

Anton snatched the soap from Kate's hand and said, "I know what it is!"

"Then use it!" said Kate sharply, with a playful gleam in her eye. Laughing, she left her friend to his bath.

Kate found Tanú quite at home in the ladies' bath. She was sprawled lazily in the hot tub, head back and eyes closed. She had already washed by the time Kate arrived with clean towels.

"It seems this isn't *your* first bath," Kate remarked casually.

"No, not my first," Tanú replied, "but unfortunately hot baths are few and far between these days. This sort of luxury is a rare treat," she added, as she flicked a cockroach off the edge of the tub, trying to launch it into the fireplace. It struck the side of the fireplace, fell to the floor, and scurried away unscathed.

"Traveling a lot, then?"

"Yes."

Kate inquired no further about Tanú's business on the road. People's affairs were their own concern, and most didn't take kindly to nosiness. Even so, some things induced curiosity. Kate noticed that the young woman had shaved herself quite thoroughly, except for her head. And even there, she wore her hair quite short. In Kate's part of the world, both men and women wore their hair long.

"Mirina, if I may ask," said Kate, "why do you shave your body, and cut your hair so short?"

Tanú shrugged. "As you surmised, I travel a lot. Most often I make camp outside of towns and villages, and I don't stay at inns. Fleas, lice, and ticks would soon make a home of my hairy parts, if I let them."

"Ah, yes," said Kate. "That makes sense."

"In fact," Tanú continued, "I need to trim my hair. Even now it is too long to be practical on the road." She reached for her dagger,

which was in her pack next to the tub.

“Wait,” said Kate. “At least let me cut it for you. I have scissors, and some skill in haircutting. You’ve downright butchered your hair!” Kate was right; Tanú’s hair had been cut carelessly, and was uneven. Apparently, she had cut it herself using her dagger, and without much regard for fashion. Though Kate had been helpful so far, and seemed nice enough, Tanú was unaccustomed to trusting a stranger with a sharp implement near her head and neck. Tanú hesitated for a moment, and relented.

“All right, then.”

Kate went to work, and within a few minutes, Tanú had a reasonably competent haircut, and quite short. “You look almost like a boy with that short hair,” said Kate.

“Indeed,” Tanú acknowledged. “That, too, can be useful on the road. A young woman traveling alone is but a target for certain types. Short hair, a hat, and boy’s clothing make for a serviceable cover, at least at a distance.”

“You are very practical-minded, I see,” said Kate.

“One has to be,” replied Tanú flatly. She rose with a sigh. “I hate to get out of this hot water. It’s so relaxing! But I must eat. I’m famished.” She slipped into the cold tub and rinsed, shivering a bit. Then she stood close to the fire and toweled off.

“I’ll show you to the restaurant, then,” said Kate. “Then I’ve got to check up on Anton. I’m afraid he might drown himself, or accidentally swallow the soap, as unfamiliar as he is with baths.”

They both laughed briefly. Kate showed Tanú the way to the food, and went to fetch some clean clothes for Anton. On the way back to the men’s bath, Kate encountered one of the serving boys who worked at the inn.

“Kate, you won’t believe it. There’s a young woman in the inn, eating.”

“This may surprise you, Tom, but in fact I *do* believe it. You see, people eat at the inn. We have a restaurant.”

Tom shook his head. “No, no, that’s not what I mean. You should see how much she is eating! She has gone through more than a full

meal already, and has ordered more.”

“All right, Tom. I will see for myself shortly,” said Kate, and continued on her way. What a strange woman, this Mirina, she thought. Or whatever her real name was.

Though embarrassed by all the joking about his bathing habits, Anton really wasn’t very experienced with baths. Usually, he washed off in a stream or pond; less often by intent than by chance, having fallen in. Sometimes he would use river-bottom sand to scrub away dirt, but real soap was a luxury he rarely saw. The hot bath was a totally new experience for him. He thought this Tanú must be wealthy.

The water was hotter than he expected, and it took him some time to get himself into the water. Once there, he found it very relaxing. The soap felt strange to him. It was quite strong and irritated his skin a little, but it got him clean in a way river-bottom sand could not. After soaping up and rinsing off in the hot tub several times, he was leaning back and relaxing in the warm water when the door opened and Kate walked in.

Anton tried to conceal his nakedness with his hands, and exclaimed “Kate! I’m not finished here!” Kate grinned and walked to the fireplace, carrying a pail of water. She hung it on a hook over the fire and stoked the flames. “Stop being so silly! This is just part of the job,” she said. She had also brought a package of fresh clothes for Anton. She put them on the small table next to the rinsing tub.

“These are some of Bund’s clothes,” she said. “I know you don’t want to put your dirty things on again after you’re all clean. You can return these later.”

“Thanks,” Anton said weakly, still embarrassed that Kate was in the room.

She made a point of looking directly into Anton’s tub, just to embarrass him. He blushed deeply, and tried to cover himself with his hands. “Don’t worry,” she said with a wink, “there’s so much dirt in that water, I can’t see anything interesting at all. In fact,” she continued, “we might not be able to drain that tub. We might just have to plant flowers in it, as is.” She laughed at her own joke.

“Very funny,” said Anton dryly.

Kate picked up Anton’s dirty clothing. Holding it well out in front of her and scrunching her face as if struggling to tolerate a foul odor, she started toward the door. “Mirina has already finished her bath,” she said. “She’s in the pub now, eating like a pig. For such a thin lady, she sure has an appetite! She wants you to meet her there when you’re ready.” With that, Kate left the room.

Anton quickly climbed out of the hot tub and plunged into the rinsing tub. The shock of the cold water stunned him at first, and he exclaimed “Oh! Oh! Oh!” as the water covered him. He had forgotten that it would be cold. He got over it and thoroughly rinsed off the remaining dirt and soap. Standing by the fire, he dried himself with the towel and then dressed in the innkeeper’s clothes. They fit him well. He had to wear his own old, dirty boots, but at least Kate had brought clean garments. Anton liked the feeling of being clean, and vowed to have another bath someday, even if he didn’t need one.

The part of the inn facing the main street on the ground floor was a public pub as well as the restaurant for the inn’s guests. There Anton found Tanú eating with gusto, her cheeks smeared with grease, and several empty plates in a rough stack next to her on the table. It looked as if she had already eaten the equivalent of four full meals, and she was still going at it.

Joining her at table, Anton asked, “Do you always eat like this?”

She glanced at him, but did not speak until she had finished chewing the food already in her mouth; a task that required a full two minutes.

“If I always ate like this, I’m afraid I would be quite round and heavy,” she said cheerfully, as if everything were perfectly normal. Picking up a drumstick and gesturing with it as she spoke, she explained, “This is part of the recovery process. First there is the Cold Fever; then the Hot Sweat; then the Great Hunger, and finally the Deep Sleep. I will be back to normal by tomorrow morning...thanks to you, of course.”

“I see,” said Anton slowly, although he didn’t really. “And what then?”

Continuing to eat, Tanú shrugged. When she could speak, albeit still with an unladylike quantity of food in her mouth and a bit of chicken dangling from one side, she said, "Then I will continue on my journey." Deftly, she swept the bit of chicken into her mouth with her tongue, and continued to load food as if shoveling animal feed into a trough.

"And where are you going, on this journey of yours?"

"I toad you," said Tanú. She chewed a bit more, then continued, "Eashth."

"'East' is no destination," said Anton.

"I have business in the east," she said. "I find it is often unwise to say too much about one's business."

"I thought you said you owed me the truth," said Anton, in hopes of prying a little more information from Tanú.

She paused and met his eyes. She looked downward, then met his eyes again, as if considering whether to say more. She was surprised by her own response to Anton. Why did she react this way when she met his eyes? She knew him not. At length, she shrugged and said lightly, "I meant, the truth about my real name."

This was a strong woman, and would say no more than she chose to say. Still, Anton was very curious, so he decided to try a trick he had seen more sophisticated men use. Maybe it would work for him; after all, he had just taken a real bath. Looking her steadily in the eye, he raised one eyebrow. To his amazement, she responded to this, and relented. "All right," she said with a sigh. "Let me finish eating. When we return to the room, I will say more. But you must promise to keep what you hear in confidence."

"Of course," he said. "I so promise." He spoke calmly, but inwardly he was very excited to hear what business this mysterious young woman might have, and to what exotic eastern locales it might take her. The affair had all the hallmarks of an exciting adventure in a far-away land; just the sort of thing he had always longed for. If he could convince her to let him accompany her, she might serve as a way out of this boring village, and away from these unimaginative people who thought him only a fool.

Tanú nodded once, and resumed eating. Anton examined her while she ate. He wondered whether she was gentle or common. She interacted easily with commoners like Kate and himself, and did not condescend. Yet, seen in the light of day and after her recovery from the previous night's affliction, her complexion was clear, her eyes bright, her teeth white (and none missing, that he could see), and her hair shiny. She carried herself with the grace of a gentle, and was not prematurely gray, bent, and wrinkled from a lifetime of physical labor, as were most commoners. Her hands were strong, but not calloused or rough. And she had *some* money; at least, enough to pay for a room, food, and baths for the both of them without, apparently, giving it much thought. That sort of expenditure was unthinkable for a commoner, unless he were a merchant, and clearly she was no merchant, since she carried no goods to trade or sell. Indeed, she had no wagon, horse, or mule.

Despite all that, there were things about Tanú that seemed anything but gentle. At the moment, she was eating crudely, almost desperately, not bothering with niceties such as utensils or napkins. Her hands and face were slick with grease and speckled with bits of food. Of course, that may have been because her unusual appetite was part of the recovery process, as she had said. But then again there was her hair. It was clean, having just been washed, but it was also cut much shorter than a lady's hair, reaching just down to her neck. Clean and healthy it was, and even pretty, or potentially so; combed it was, but not styled as a lady's hair normally would be. And what lady would say of herself that she smelled like a skunk's nightmare? A real lady would pretend she smelled like roses, reality notwithstanding. At least, that is how Anton imagined a lady would behave.

At length, Tanú's eating pace slowed, and finally she was satisfied. She washed her hands in the finger bowl and dried them on a napkin, then leaned back in her chair, blew out a long breath of air, patted her belly with both hands, and said, "Ahhh!" Again, Anton wondered at this odd combination of gentle and common behavior. This uncertainty about her status lent her an air of

mystery Anton found intriguing, although he knew in the end the explanation may well be mundane, as such things often were. He also knew that he had no more experience with the gentle than he had with the Adept. His understanding of the upper classes came from reading and listening to tales at the inn. Perhaps her behavior was perfectly normal.

“Well, that’s that,” she said. She had consumed a quantity of food that seven or eight large, hungry men might consume after a day’s hard labor. Her abdomen was visibly distended. Anton was unsure how she could keep all that food down; he surely would have vomited had he attempted to eat so much. Instead, Tanú seemed quite pleased with herself. Leaning back in the chair comfortably, she belched melodically and smiled broadly.

“Let’s return to the room,” she said. “I will need to sleep most of the time between now and tomorrow morning. The Deep Sleep is the final stage of recovery from the affliction. Then, I should be ready to travel. In the meantime, I promised you some information. I hope you appreciate it, because I usually keep my affairs to myself.”

So she said; but in truth, she longed to share her thoughts with someone. Anton had had ample opportunity to harm her, had he so wished. Instead, he had helped her; even saved her life, with no thought of reward or benefit to himself. Although she barely knew him, she felt she could trust him enough to tell him a little of her experiences and plans. She wanted some feedback, if only as a sanity check, since what she was doing was so far out of the ordinary.

Standing by the fireplace in the room, Anton prompted Tanú with a “Well?”

She sat on the bed, thinking. “I’m trying to decide where to begin,” she said. “Most people would think me mad. I don’t want you to think so.”

“Go on,” said Anton. He was not following her. What purpose might she have that people would think mad? She seemed entirely sane to him. On the other hand, many people thought *him* mad, so perhaps he was a poor judge of sanity.

She sighed. "Very well, then. I suppose you have heard of old legends; tales of times long past." "Of course," Anton said. "Everyone has heard of such things." He tried not to sound too eager, because this was a subject that interested him deeply. Indeed, there were few of the old legends he did not know by heart, chapter and verse.

"Then, you have heard tales of the creatures called Demons."

The hairs on the back of Anton's neck stood up. *Demons!* Struggling to sound calm, he said, "Yes. They are said to be mythical creatures of ancient times." It came out sounding a little too measured and deliberate to be natural, but Tanú did not notice; she was preoccupied with the task of choosing her words carefully.

"Right," she muttered, clearly uncomfortable about what she was to tell Anton, and yet committed to fulfilling her promise to be frank with him. "Right. Mythical creatures. Yes." She turned to face Anton, who was still standing. "Why don't you have a seat here, next to me?"

Anton sat on the bed. Tanú seemed to be trying to think of what to say; more accurately, she was trying to think of how to frame the statement in a way that would not sound absurd in the context of modern times. "I hope you will not think me a fool," she began. This struck Anton as a bit odd, since most people thought *him* a fool, and no one he had ever known had cared what *he* thought of *them*. He liked the feeling. He reassured her, "Of course I wouldn't think that. Please continue."

She swallowed. "I believe that Demons were not mythical creatures, but real ones." She waited to see how Anton would react to this. She read interest in his eyes, but no negative judgment.

Anton was careful not to react too obviously. Inwardly, he was shouting *I knew it! I knew they were real!*

Encouraged, she continued, "In ancient times the Adept were able to Dispatch the Demons back to the Demon realm whence they came." At the mention of the Adept, Anton's excitement climbed. Long had he read and daydreamed of the Adept. If Tanú's journey involved them, he wanted in!

She continued: "Since that time, Demons have not bothered hu-

mankind. People have come to regard them as mythical creatures; the stuff of song and story.” Anton thought, *Yes! Yes! And I know every song and story!* He listened closely. “Recently...in the course of the past year or so...I have seen signs that the Demons have been making incursions into our world.”

Anton’s impulse was to leap to his feet and shout with excitement. He kept his composure, though, believing that Tanú would stop talking if he began to behave in such a manner. She was watching him closely to gauge his reaction. He took a deep breath, and calmly asked, “What signs have you seen?” Here Tanú felt she must tread carefully. She decided not to reveal *everything* she had seen of Demons; at least, not until she knew Anton a little better.

“There have been reports of bizarre attacks on remote farms and homes, and on travelers in remote locales. The attacks have been blamed on animals, but I doubt this is so.”

“What makes you doubt it?” asked Anton.

“I have seen some of the remains, and the marks left behind by those who did the attacks. It looks like the work of no animal I know, or know of.”

“Worse?”

“Yes. Much worse.”

Anton scratched his chin thoughtfully. “Some travelers have said that because of the bad weather this year, bears have been driven south in search of food. Bears can do frightening damage to people and property.”

Tanú looked disappointed. “That is the explanation that is most often given,” she said. She turned toward Anton and looked intently into his eyes. “I have seen the results of bear attacks, Anton. This is not the same. Not the same at all.”

“All right,” he said. “So it is not the work of bears. But if it is not bears, does that mean it must be Demons?”

“Not as such. But I have compared the marks and the victims’ remains from these attacks with the drawings and descriptions from the ancient scrolls and paintings. I have also studied the words of old songs and poems, many of which contain portions of Demon

attack stories that have become garbled in the retelling, over many generations. There is much in common between the old descriptions of Demon attacks and the evidence left behind in the more recent incidents.”

Anton had studied such materials, too. He was convinced that the Demons of yore had been quite real, and not merely metaphors for natural phenomena and human foibles, as scholars insisted. “I believe you,” he said plainly. “I do not think you mad, or a fool.”

Tanú was surprised. She had not expected anyone in this day and age to believe Demons were anything more than an old myth. But she was uncertain how to take Anton’s statement. He was an unusual sort: Courageous, honorable, intelligent, and open-hearted to be sure; those attributes he had proven amply in the brief time since he found her in the alley. But he was also impulsive, naive, careless, and given to flights of fancy. Too, he was a restless young man, dissatisfied with his life, and actively in search of an excuse to leave the town. Of course he had not said as much, but it was crystal clear nonetheless. Which of these factors led him to say he believed her about the Demons? Was his a reasoned response, or merely an impulsive one? Did he comprehend the danger, or did he merely hope for a rousing adventure in some exotic place? She could not tell. All she could manage to do at the moment was to stare at him blankly. The sleepiness was beginning to overtake her. She could feel herself becoming sluggish in her thought and speech. This was all part of her recovery, and could not be avoided.

“I think I can help you,” Anton added.

If Tanú had been surprised at Anton’s previous comment, she was doubly surprised at this one.

“Help? How do you think you can help with Demons?” she asked, unconvinced he had any real idea how dangerous a real Demon could be. A heavy yawn overcame her momentarily. “Even the strongest of the Adept can hardly cope with a single Demon,” she continued sleepily.

“Oh?” he said. “There is an old spell - the Dispatching spell. Isn’t that how the ancients got rid of the Demons the first time?”

Again Anton had surprised her. Few Ordinary were aware of old spells, or of much else about the Adept, their history, or their lore. Yet, although he was aware of the Dispatching spell, he clearly did not understand its limitations.

She sighed. "You say that as if it is a routine matter. I assure you, it is not. That spell has not been practiced in ages. Few modern-day Adept know it. Those who could find a copy in an old book or scroll would probably be unable to recite it correctly, for the language is archaic. Many do not even realize it is a true spell at all; they think it is just an old poem or song. Even if they did know it, it is an exceptionally exhausting spell to cast. I can think of perhaps three individuals who might have sufficient lifeforce and magical aptitude to cast it even once without passing out or draining their lifeforce altogether; that they could cast two or three within a short span of time is doubtful. A handful of Demons would be enough to overcome any resistance or counterattack the Adept might mount, even if they pooled their resources."

She knows of the Adept! thought Anton excitedly. He struggled to maintain his composure. "You sound as if we are already defeated," he said. "If the Adept know of this problem, surely they can begin practicing the Dispatching spell."

Tanú sighed. She snapped back to full wakefulness, as if getting a second wind. "Some individuals are aware of the problem, but the Adept as a whole are not acting cohesively to deal with it. Like everyone else in these times, most Adept dismiss the old tales of Demons as mere legend. They do not believe Demons exist, or ever existed." Her voice rose and took on an angry tone. "They use their magical abilities to light their cookstoves and to drag their brooms across the dust on their floors, not to battle man-eating trans-dimensional invaders!" The exertion spent her, and she flopped back, breathing heavily.

Anton misinterpreted her tone of voice. "I understand your feelings about the Adept," he said. "Many people are prejudiced against them. But they are wonderful folk! They have amazing and mysterious powers. They can cope with an incursion of Demons, if

only they can be informed and organized.”

Once again, Anton’s unpredictable naivete caught Tanú by surprise. How could he not have guessed the nature of her affliction of the previous night? How could he not have realized what sort of cure he had asked for at the apothecary, or what sort of person could have provided it? Perhaps she should be more cautious.

“Anton,” she said, becoming sluggish and sleepy again. “I fear you overestimate the capabilities of the Adept, not to mention their willingness to listen to a story about Demons in this day and age, or their willingness to act even if they *did* believe and understand the danger.”

“You speak from ignorance and prejudice, like everyone else around here” he said, waving away her words as he stood and strode to the far side of the room.

“No, Anton. Remember, I am not from around here. You say most Ordinary are prejudiced against Adept; I tell you, most Adept are equally prejudiced against Ordinary. They feel little connection with Ordinary society. They are unmotivated to risk their lives in defense of the very people who have oppressed them these many years. Can you understand that?”

“Well...yes, now you mention it. I hadn’t thought of it in that way.” As he replied, she yawned cavernously, and blinked to try and keep her eyes open. Despite her efforts, her lids drooped to half-staff, and she swayed as she sat on the bed.

She wanted to say more, but she was fading fast now. She knew she was about to nod off, and would sleep for many hours. The cure was sending her into the next stage of recovery, the Deep Sleep, and she could not resist it. She slid into a reclining position, and her eyes fluttered shut.

Anton was still talking. “But the Adept are not alone in this. The Ordinary can help. I have been thinking about an idea lately.” Energized by the opportunity to describe his latest Technology concept, began to pace back and forth across the room as he spoke. Gazing into his own imagination, he did not immediately notice Tanú had fallen asleep.

“Long have I studied the ancient lore. I have committed the spells to memory, although I have no power to cast them. I have reconstructed the detailed sequence of events in each Demon encounter that is recorded in the ancient scrolls and paintings. I have analyzed and interpreted poem and song fragments that deal with Demons and with their Dispatching. From all these clues, I believe I have teased out some understanding of the fundamental nature of magical energy. Based on that, I believe I can build a...” At that moment, his eyes fell upon the sleeping Tanú, and he realized he was only speaking to himself. Not that it was the first time he had done so, of course.

Anton decided it would be better to show her how he could help than to try and convince her with words alone. He went out into the town and collected certain items. Returning to their room at the inn, which would provide a quiet workplace without any chance of interruption from his uncle, he began to construct a prototype of a new invention.

He labored through the night. Tanú did not stir throughout that time. Anton nodded off in the small hours of the morning, but he slept only for a couple of hours. He was emotionally charged in anticipation of joining Tanú in her quest. The fact she had not agreed to this did not cross his mind.