

## On Men and Monsters

“Can I help you, citizen?”

Of all the things to startle me, it was that. A guard, dressed in red and gold, colors you could see a mile away, who was standing right next to next to the gates I was looking at (so perhaps five feet away from me), startled me.

“Gods, don’t scare people like that, mate,” I said.

“What do you want?” he asked again.

“I’ve heard that the Duke is looking for some help with… something, the notice didn’t really explain it, but I’d be willing to—“

“Wait here.” The guard, after scaring the living hell out of me, then decided he had the gall to go ahead and not only interrupt me, but just go and leave.

“Yeah, fine, I’ll do that… bastard,” I grumbled. So here I was, alone and standing in my worn leather armor in the middle of what must’ve been the most gaudy plaza I’ve ever been in. Well, I guess what technically is considered the plaza wasn’t gaudy, but the estates and houses the sat on it edges were. So many different colors made up the facades of the buildings – blues, greens, I think one even had magenta tiling for the roof. The plaza itself was rather nice, standard. Cobblestones? Check. Nice plants? Check. Large marble statue of the most important person in the kingdom of Merycel, King Arcturius? Check. Yep, this was a plaza all right.

“Mercenary.”

“Gah! Gods, stop doing that!”

“The Duke will see you now.” The guard opened the gate and, despite the rudeness of his subordinates, decided to grace the Duke with my presence.

“Now, follow me to the château,” the guard added. Château... of course it’s called a château. He’s a noble. Of course he’s going to prefer we say everything in Old Speak, the pretentious bastard. The Duke’s estate was pretty damn big, larger than the others, that much I’m certain of. You see, the other estates seemed to be just houses with only strips of grass to make the occupants think they have gardens. The Duke’s estate actually has a garden, or rather gardens, alongside the already immense household... oh, excuse me, immense château. The château itself was the closest thing to a castle a nobleman could get without pissing off the royals, with turrets at each corner of the mansion topped with the red tiles to match the roof, the stone walls a clean white, and flowers of many and, dare I say, all colors underneath each window.

The guard walked me up to the large red doors and knocked until a short, pitiful excuse for a human being – let alone a man – answered. The servant creature welcomed me in and shooed off the guard, shutting the doors and quickly ushering me through the building until we arrived at another set of large red doors. The servant said something about getting the Duke, but I was too busy thinking the Duke had some strange fascination with red doors.

“*Entrez!*” a voice called from behind the crimson portal. The servant opened the doors and pushed me in. I ended up in what I can only assume to be the most garish study I had ever laid eyes on. Gold here, gold there, everything either being made out of leather if you sat in it or wood if you didn’t. Speaking of sitting, the Duke was seated in a large leather chair in front of a roaring fireplace with a large painting of what I assumed to be himself (I hope he didn’t pay the

artist much) above it. He was bent over the desk with a quill in his left hand moving furiously back and forth as he put the finishing touches on some document.

*What a piece of work you are*, I thought to myself. I would've absolutely LOVED to say that to his face, but I kind of need this job, so best not to piss him off.

“So, you wish to speak with me about the job I posted, *monsieur*?” the Duke asked, not giving me the courtesy to even look at me while addressing me.

“Yes, I do,” I replied. The Duke didn’t reply, still writing whatever useless decree he was so intent on finishing. After waiting a several seconds more, I decided enough was enough.

“So… are we going to discuss this or-“

“Relax, *mercenaire*,” he finally replied, though he was still writing.

*Now he interrupts me… bastard.* Silence as he continued writing.

“*Je suis desolé, mercenaire*, but I had to finish that letter,” the Duke finally said. “Henri!”

The servant burst into the room at the sound of what I assumed to be his name, bowed to the Duke, took the letter from him, and left, all within the impressive span of thirty seconds.

“We can talk now?” I asked. The Duke stood up, smoothed his attire, and, for the first time since I got here, looked me in the eyes. He was expectedly thin and frail dull blue eyes, gray, slicked back hair with a pencil thin mustache and goatee of the same color, thin lips that made a scowl by default, and what looked like makeup or foundation or something like that because he seemed unusually pale. He also wore what appeared to be the finest silk attire a noble could buy here in Merycel. This guy had “Actually a Terrible Person” written all over him.

“*Oui*, we can talk, but first, introductions. I a3m Duke Monstragne. *Et Vous?*”

“Morgan. Anyway, about the job. I heard you need someone to assist the guards with... something. The notice didn’t explain much,” I replied.

“It’s best the common folk not know my affairs, you see.”

“Well, I’m more than common folk if you selected me for this job.”

“It’s not that I would’ve chosen you, considering your... attire, if you can call it that,” the Duke said, sneering at my armor.

“Well, if I had a little more coin I could fix myself up just right.”

“Ah, I see. Only in this for the coin, *oui*? ”

“Yes. I’m short on coin, you see. Been spending what I have only on food and drink. By this time next week, I’d’ve gone three days without eating.”

The Duke continued to eyeball me. He probably thought I was lying, the hypocrite, so I grabbed the sorry excuse for a coin purse hanging on my belt and showed it to him. The lump of coin in it was probably no bigger than his dick.

“See? Not much left here, and none in the bank. Just trying to make ends meet.”

“*Non, je comprend, mercenaire.* I just thought you were in this for personal wealth, not well-being.”

“Good. Now that that’s taken care of, the assignment, please?”

“Ah, *oui*, the assignment. Come here.” The Duke beckoned me over to his desk and began to shuffle through a large pile of scrolls on it. And he gets on me for being a little disheveled.

“My estate has been plagued by a dangerous trespasser as of late, *mercenaire*,” the Duke said. “He’s been sighted several times on my property in even in my *château*, appearing only at night. He has already killed some of my guards – several, *en vérité* – and I have reason to suspect he’s coming after me next.”

“Wait, just one man is causing this much trouble? How?” I asked. If this is just some crazy guy running around the Duke’s estate, nothing more nothing less, I probably wouldn’t be able to keep myself from laughing… or the job. Luckily it wasn’t. The Duke finally found what I assumed to be the scrolls he was looking for and handed them both to me with his left hand.

“How familiar are you with demons?” he asked.

“Demons? Well, I know they’re bad, but other than that…”

“Then I take it you know nothing about cambions?”

“Cambions? The hell are those?”

“A cambion is a mythical being - or at least, so we thought - a terrifying creature, one born from the flesh of man and demon. An affront against creation itself,” the Duke replied.

“What? I… wait, you mean this guy’s the offspring of human and demon?” I asked, astonished. “That’s… you sure about that?”

The Duke motioned to the scroll in my hand. “Read them.”

The first scroll was an eyewitness account of the cambion; the witness in question, a guard, claimed to have seen the cambion exiting the estate when the guard called for him to stop. The cambion did so, and when he turned around, the guard saw nothing but his sinister, glowing eyes the color of blood and with the pupils of a snake. The guard, out of sheer terror, fainted and wasn’t woken until fellow guards found him the next morning. I opened the second scroll to

reveal a crudely drawn sketch of a sullen man, with sunken cheeks, sharp eyes, a fierce scowl, and long, dark-colored hair. All around the sketch were paragraphs detailing the man behind the portrait, talking about his dangerous, violent nature, ability to both hide and kill, and his assumed demonic heritage.

“Red eyes and slit pupils are not natural in mortals,” the Duke explained. “Only one who shares the blood of a demon can exhibit such terrifying features. You can add that proof to my guards’ corpses. Now let me ask you this, *mercenaire*, is this enough *preuve* for you?”

“All right, all right, I believe you,” I said. “So this guy’s part demon, so what? I’ll find him and bring him down.”

“You are sure, *mercenaire*?” the Duke asked.

“About as much as you,” I replied. I’m guess what I said didn’t sit too well with him since he started to glare at me a little suspiciously.

“Ahem… I mean, yes, I am,” I said. The Duke was still looking at me like I was the cambion for a few more seconds before he turned back to his desk and called for the servant.

“Consider yourself hired and lucky, *mercenaire*. Henri will show you to your quarters.”

“Hey… Hey! Mercenary! Get up!”

“Hrmm…? Who the hell…? What is it?” I asked, trying to quickly get myself awake.

“It’s dusk, that what it is,” the voice said. I rubbed my eyes and opened them to another red-and-gold clad guard doppelganger.

“Oh, sorry... thanks,” I replied. I exited the guard barracks, which was located to the left of the front gate if you were looking toward the plaza and set off for the château (oh greeeaaat, Duke’s Old Speak is starting to rub off on me... damn it) for the umpteenth time... actually, just the fifth time. Yep, five days here and nothing. Two more days and I’m out of here. The arrangement wasn’t too bad: just walk around the grounds at night and kill anyone with red eyes. Easy enough. Well, it would be easy if it wasn’t so damn hard to find the blasted cambion son of a bitch. Seriously, how hard is it to find a dude with glowing red eyes in this town?

So as I was walking through the gardens I glanced into the plaza and noticed something different about it: the statue of Arcturius was missing. I moved to the gate to get a closer look, though my mere presence must’ve bothered the guard stationed there.

“Hey, pal. Wasn’t there a statue of King Arcturius there just yesterday?” I asked him.

“Yes. Duke Monstragne requested it be removed,” he replied.

“What? When did this happen? Just yesterday?”

“No, he requested the governor remove it some time ago and’s been arguing with the other nobles about it for a little longer.”

“How much did he pay the governor to get it removed?” I asked.

“Heh... more than you’ll ever make, sadly.”

“So what’s up with this? Any reason for the removal?”

“Monstragne’s not a fan of the King, is all. ‘Too friendly with the commoners,’ he said. Makes Arcturius weak, he claims, a bad ruler.”

“Really? Everyone else seems to like him. Do you?” I asked.

“... I do... listen, it’s getting late. You should speak with the Duke if you hadn’t yet.”

There was a full moon that night. Torches wouldn’t be necessary when patrolling the back garden; moonlight would be more than enough. Walking for hours is surprisingly quite tiresome; if there’s one thing I’ll definitely get out of this, it’s a new respect for the guard patrols. I decided that I’d treat myself to a nice little rest sitting on a bench in the shadows of the estate’s high walls, which were adorned with spikes atop to keep any curious commoners back in their own drab reality (save for lucky sons of bitches like me... sorry, mom). Across from me was a quaint little fountain with a statue of an angel.

Now, I’m not one for fine art, never really cared, but this one made me care... though it’s mostly because it creeps me out. You see, the way it was sculpted – with such precision and detail – made it look... no, feel like a living person save for just two little things. One was the eyes, or rather the lack of normal ones. They were just... well, just blank, like outlines of eyes and not meant to actually be normal ones. The next was its smile, which seemed a little twisted, its corners twisting just a little too high to be normal, and not warm and reassuring like the priests at your local cathedral normally say. Combine all this with the left arm it has outstretched to me, it makes me feel like it is actually a person saying, “Hey, come over here! I’m not gonna hurt you! I’m on your side!”

But wait! It gets even creepier! The longer I watched its eyes, the more I felt they were watching me, which quickened my breath and tensed my muscles. *Who would’ve thought the most terrifying thing in my demon hunt would be a statue*, I thought, but that’s when Murphy’s Law kicked in. Just after that thought crossed my mind, my instincts kicked in, warning me, “Hey, good job getting scared by that statue! Now focus, cause there’s actually something else

nearby, something nasty.” Something else was watching me. I quickly looked down to grab my sword sheathed on my left hip, but stopped once I instead grabbed something that felt like a gauntlet (I guess; it wasn’t exactly midday, you know?). My hands and body now shaking violently and sweating profusely, I slowly looked up to meet two blood red eyes staring at me from of the darkness.

I wasn’t out for that long… at least, I don’t think I was… Anyway, when I woke up, the moon was still high in the night sky, shining down on me. I blinked a few times to make sure I wasn’t dreaming or dead (and because the moon was THAT bright), then slowly got myself up, groaning the whole time. I looked around the garden and noticed that I hadn’t been moved since I blacked out. The fountain to my right was still running, the eagle and snake still locked in their eternal conflict, and the bench to my left now completely empty. I stood back up, stretched, and took a deep breath to collect myself.

“That wasn’t supposed to happen,” I joked to myself. I then checked the rest of my body to see if I was missing anything, be it a limb or two. It wasn’t until I reached for my left hip that I noticed something did indeed vanished.

“My sword! Where the hell did my sword go?!” That’s when I began to feel that sense of dread again; I quickly looked up and across the garden to see him standing directly in front of one of the château’s back entrances. His crimson eyes still shone bright even from across the way, and now I could make out more of him and his attire. He wore what appeared to be simple plate armor over a chainmail shirt and what appeared to be commoner attire (why does he get better armor and not me?). A sword was fastened on his right hip, sheathed in a simple scabbard much like my own. A light breeze came through the garden, sending his long dark hair fluttering

alongside some odd scraps of cloth attached to his pauldrons. After several seconds of staring, he raised his left hand to reveal a familiar leather sheathe.

“Hey! That’s my sword! Give it back right now!” I called to him. The cambion did not react, instead dropping his arm back down to his side.

“Did you hear me, you son of a bitch? I need that...! Don’t make me come over there!” I threatened. Still no reaction. Actually, there was one: the cambion turned and entered the château.

“Gods damn it... He better not give me the run around in there,” I swore.

Damn cambion gave me the run around. I spent the next half an hour or so running around following his annoyingly red eyes? I thought he was one of those “likes to play with his prey” types, which was very reassuring to myself at the time. The only time I didn’t see him going around a corner was when we ended up in what looked like the basement. He was just standing there in a hallway, looking at a torch because why not? Well, that’s what I thought before he pulled it back and part of the wall slid into the ground. The cambion cast a glance at me before walking through the doorway. Any sane person would turn away and never look back at this point, but I needed my sword back, so I decided to follow.

The first thing that struck me was the smell, surprisingly. Out of all the places to smell what I could only guess was rotting corpses and copious amounts of unwashed blood, a noble’s house is the last place I’d expect. I ran down the steps as quickly as I could, eventually needing to cover my face to breathe since the odor got so strong. When I saw the end of the stairwell, I had to bend over to keep myself from vomiting; covering my face didn’t help. When I got my

bearings straight, I walked into the room... and immediately bent over to catch my vomit back in my stomach.

The stairwell led into some several meter long room that looked like a dungeon from the vampire stories my father used to tell me. Along the right wall were five sets of prison irons, all open save for one, which held the corpse of what appeared to be a guard. The body appeared to have been here for several days as the flesh has already started decomposing. Against the left wall was a table strewn with strange tools, bones, bits of flesh, and blood stains. On the back wall was something... interesting. It was new to me, but felt somewhat familiar: an altar with a statue of a demon behind it, its eyes blank, mouth in a twisted grin, and left arm outstretched towards me, or rather some basin in front of it filled with some liquid. It was red, but I couldn't tell if it was actually blood or just water affected by the light from the torches (never figured out how that fire turned red); I had no desire to find out which it was. So here I was, in some weird demon-torture-cultist dungeon in the basement of a Duke's house, wondering what in the hell I'd gotten myself into this time.

"I'm gonna need a pay raise for this," I said to myself. The thought of pay brought me back to the task at hand, though from the looks of it I'd already failed; the cambion was nowhere to be seen. This made no sense to me at the time. There was one exit to the room – the entrance – and I was standing in it the whole time. There was no way the cambion could've slipped out without me knowing it, and while I might be oblivious sometimes, I'm not most of the time.

"Gods damn it! He and his little game can go to hell," I muttered as I turned and rushed up the stairs. When I reached the top, I found myself face to face with the cambion, standing right at the exit. I stopped and waited with baited breath to see if he would do anything, but he just stood there looking at me with this pissed off look on his face.

“Looks like you feel the same way I do,” I said, not taking my eyes off his. Now I wasn’t doing this solely because it’s what you do in stare downs, it was because his eyes changed. You heard me right. His eye CHANGED. They were now a steel gray color, the pupils were normal, and seemed to glimmer in the light of a nearby torch, which now allowed me to see the rest of his face. The sketch the Duke showed me was not far off, shockingly, though his cheeks weren’t as sullen and he had a dark beard forming. Without a word, he tossed me something, which ended up being my sword.

“About time,” I said.

“Leave this place,” the cambion said. “Now.” His voice was a little quiet, raspy, not at all what I was expecting.

“Heh, thought the cat had your tongue,” I replied. The cambion gave no response and began to go off on his own merry way, but the sound of my sword leaving its scabbard gave him something to think about.

“Not so fast,” I said. “Don’t think you’re going to get away without a fight.”

The cambion did not turn to me (why is everyone so gods-damned rude to me?) and said, “You’re making a grave mistake.”

“You’re the one who made the mistake by crossing paths with me,” I replied. “They say you’re half demon. How’s about you prove to me you are?”

“Last warning. Leave now,” the cambion said.

“Sorry, mate, but I need you dead.” At this point, I was so confident and focused I found it impossible to let any of the cambion’s attacks slip by me unnoticed... well, save for the one that followed my last line.

My head was pounding. Hard. About as hard as that time I spent an entire job's pay on some strong rum back in... you know what? That's not important. What is important is where I was: back in that damned dungeon. I didn't realize at first I was bound, shackled to the wall in the same irons the corpse guard had the pleasure of warming for me. I threw myself forward once, then twice. All right, maybe third time's the charm... nope, nothing. Maybe one more will-

“You won’t break free, you know that?” That voice... that familiar quiet, gravelly voice.

“I guess you would know,” I said. “After all, this is YOUR dungeon, I take it, cambion?” The cambion was squatting in front of me, his face merely inches away from mine.

“So... here we are. You got me right where you want me, eh?” I joked. “Am I going to suffer, or are you just going to straight up kill me to shut me up?”

“Why do you refuse to leave?” he asked.

“Still got a job to do, you know?” I replied. “Plus, saying something like that only makes curious people like me even curioser.”

“So you’re curious, is that it?” the cambion asked. “If I were to sate your curiosity, would you leave?”

“I’ll leave when I get payed. In coin, not trivia I can share at a party.”

“So that’s why you’re here... Payed by the Duke to get rid of me, I wager?”

“Look at you connecting the dots. How much you wagering?”

“Forget the coin. You need to leave. You could be killed.”

“I know. After all, I’m looking at my killer right now.”

“... Always have a snarky response, don’t you?”

“Thanks, spent some time mastering that art. Heard people love snarky bastards like myself.” At first, I thought that comment sent the cambion over the edge... well, it did, but not enough to have him outright kill me. He sighed angrily and released the irons bounding my hands. Damn things left some nice welts on my wrists. I must’ve been in them for some time.

“Look at that statue,” the cambion said.

“The demon one? What about it?” I asked.

“Does something about it strike you as odd?”

“What? Well, it’s kinda like that angel statue in the garden but...” I don’t trail off unless one of two things happens: I fall asleep, or I had a revelation or something of the sort.

“Gods... wait, are you saying... this isn’t your secret little hidey hole but... instead the Duke’s?” I asked.

“I am,” the cambion replied.

“The hell does he keep a place like this for?”

“The same reason I’ve been watching him for the past few weeks,” the cambion replied. “He’s a warlock.”

“A... what?”

“Warlock. A mage who practices demonological arts,” the cambion said.

“Oh... yeah, I guess you’d be familiar with that kind of stuff... So, wait, why’ve you been stalking the Duke for so long?”

“I heard rumors of his warlock identity, but I did not have enough evidence to prove he was indeed one. Discovering this room was nearly enough to convince me, but I still needed something. That something was this.”

The cambion took out a folded piece of paper and handed it to me.

“The hell is this?” I asked.

“Read it. Aloud.”

“... All right... Ahem... ‘To brother Armand, I understand your concern for our survival should we not be rid of this monster before the 6<sup>th</sup>, but we cannot afford to lose this opportunity. If we are to kill Arcturius, we need Asmodus to grant us his power.’ What in the world? Kill Arcturius? I know the Duke doesn’t like the King, but to go ahead and kill him? And who the in the hell is Asmodus?”

“Someone you’d find in Hell,” the cambion said. “A powerful demon lord if the Duke’s own texts are to be believed. Keep reading.”

“Right... ‘The ritual will go on as planned. Besides, the cambion has proven to be a blessing. I’ve been able to freely use my guards as sacrifices and easily pass blame on to the cambion with no consequences.’ What the hell...?”

“Continue,” the cambion said.

“Great news! As I was writing this, a mercenary accepted the job to hunt the cambion. I doubt he will stop it, but he will still be a useful sacrifice once he passes into the void. If he is able to kill the cambion, I will simply keep him here till the ritual, through one way or another. He is in dire need of coin; he will not leave till he receives payment. I will see you on the 6<sup>th</sup>, brother. Praise be to Asmodus, Monstragne.’ Wait, that son of a bitch was going to kill me?”

“Yes, he intended to,” the cambion replied.

“Gods damn it... I need to get out of here.” I tried to make a bolt for the exit, but the cambion ended up being faster, grabbing my arm so tight I’m pretty sure his grip was capable of severing limbs.

“I need your help, mercenary.

“To hell with that! I was to kill a half demon, not a demon lord...! No offense.”

“None taken,” the cambion replied, “but I still need all the help I can get. If we can kill the Duke and his friends before they start the ritual, there will be no demon lord to kill. We can stop the threat against Arcturius before it begins.”

“Too much work, not enough pay,” I said. The cambion relaxed his grip.

“Then how much coin would I need?” he asked.

“Doesn’t matter. Wouldn’t be enough,” I answered. He finally let go of my arm.

“So be it. Get out of here.”

Sometimes it’s easy to tell the difference between cowardice and wisdom. At the time, I believed running was the wisest decision I’d ever made. I was getting the hell out of this crazy demon town and back to the normal world. Oh, and before I forget, it’s also important to know the difference between intelligence and wisdom. It seemed wise to run, yes, but it was also stupid of me to not ask the date. Yep, you guessed it right. Can’t believe I hadn’t.

As I made my way to the château’s entrance, a small group of guards stopped me, asking me where I was heading. As I said before, I wasn’t acting very smart at the time, so I told them I

was straight up leaving. They told me I was not allowed to leave till the job was finished, so I just blew them off and told them, “To hell with the job! I’m leaving!” They responded by beating the shit out of me. Great job, Morgan.

Now I wasn’t unconscious, per se, but I was knocked around enough for most of what I heard or saw to be replaced with muffled sounds or blackouts. My senses finally came back to me in the back garden, where a procession of black-clad, robed figures just stared at me. Across from me I saw an altar and some strange black slab behind that. I tried to get up, though I soon realized my hands were bound. I looked behind myself and faintly saw in the corner of my eye a pillory.

“Gods damn it... Fantastic work you’ve done here, Morgan,” I cursed under my breath. I heard footsteps and looked up to see none other than the son-of-a-bitch Duke looking down at me.

“*Bonjour, mercenaire*,” he said.

“Go to hell,” I retorted. “Sounds like you have more friends there than here, anyway.” The Duke and his robed friends chuckled, no doubt because they find my insult cute rather than actually clever (it was and still is, damn it).

“Learned a little more than you should have, *avez-vous*?” the Duke said.

“That and your plans to kill Arcturius,” I added. “The hell you thinking, killing the King like that? I thought you idiotic before, but this... this is beyond stupidity.”

“Arcturius is weak!” The Duke shouted. “He rules by listening to the people. *Non*, that is not him ruling, that is the people ruling! Commoners do not deserve such privilege! I will not stand to see this glorious kingdom, that which our forefathers fought to create, to fall to the

ineptness of a failed king and the ignorance of its subjects. So that is why we are here, why we ask for our Lord Asmodus to come and save us.”

“Gods damn it,” I said, laughing. “This is ridiculous. You’re just some power-crazed son of a whore.”

“You think letting the common man rule is better?” the Duke asked.

“Oh, no, to hell with ruling! I couldn’t care less! You’re just insane, that’s what you are. Also, you’re planning on killing me. Not sitting well with me.”

“Alors, think of it like this,” the Duke said, looking me straight in the eyes. “You don’t need money for food when you are dead.”

“And you won’t need to worry about ruling if you are,” I said. The Duke, his smile gone, rose and said to the others, “*Laissez le rituel commence!*”

At this point I don’t really remember a lot of what happened, not because I was knocked unconscious or anything like that (which, in hindsight, those imbeciles should’ve done); I was furiously trying to free myself from my binds, only getting glimpses of what was happening to know how much time I had left. At one point some sickly green energy was coming from the cultists’ hands, who were all chanting something I couldn’t give a damn about. The next thing was the Duke standing in front of the altar, a red light emanating in front of him. The third part threw in some weird red and green markings on the large slab; in the center was a vortex of energy. My last memory was fire and a voice.

“You’re more trouble than you’re worth.”

“Couldn’t you have shown up sooner?” I asked as the cambion freed my hands.

“Are you fine?” he asked.

“Aside from the wrist welts, yeah,” I said. “Though it looks like those guys aren’t.” I was referring to the cultists, more specifically the ones who were now writhing on the ground, trying to extinguish themselves, though they weren’t making much progress.

“Is mastery of fire magic a cambion thing?” I asked.

“Not the time,” the cambion replied, drawing his sword, a flamberge. I in turn drew my sword and faced the remaining cultists.

“*Mes frères!*” the Duke shouted. “Keep them away! The ritual is nearly complete!”

“Gods damn it! Got any ideas as bright as your flames?”

“Fight to the Duke. Kill him when you get to him.”

“... Really? That’s it?”

“Simple doesn’t always mean moronic, mercenary. Let’s go!”

The cultists all drew daggers in response and charged the two of us... poor bastards. Not everyone can claim to be experts in certain fields, but when it comes to me, I can say I’m an expert in fighting. I mean, I’m a mercenary, for the gods’ sakes! I fight for a living! These sons of bitches probably all thought they could kill anyone just because they can use a letter opener. The cambion and I quickly disproved that. Any cultist that approached me was quickly struck down, whether it be through a quick pirouette to the chest or a kick to the groin, a blade to the neck, and their head to the ground. One decided to be a little more clever and use some magic against me; whoreson conjured up a fireball and threw it toward me, which I slashed at, destroying it in midair. The cultist was just as surprised as me that that worked, though that left him too shocked to defend himself. I’m pretty sure his torso and pelvis were separated. Can’t

remember for sure. The cambion was doing his fair share of work as well, cutting down his enemies just as easily as mine, though he set a few aflame (kinda envious about that).

The Duke was my next opponent at this point, who had gotten far enough through the ritual to permit the demon lord's voice to come through.

"How much longer, servant?" the demon's voice boomed from the portal.

"Not much, *seigneur*," the Duke said.

"Nah, I think it's going to be MUCH longer," I said. The Duke turned his sorry head to me, his eyes filled with rage.

"Oooh, look at you! So close yet so far! So sad," I taunted. "Well, I think it's time to end this."

"Stop him!" Asmodus shouted.

"But... the portal might collapse, *seigneur*!" the Duke retorted.

"Obey me, servant! I command you to stop the mortal! The portal will remain so long as you live."

I tightened my grip on my sword and rushed towards the Duke, ready to strike him down in one quick and painful strike (for him). Now remember, I wasn't being smart about this whole thing, so I didn't think for one second that he could counter since he was focused on the ritual. The bastard turned around and let loose a torrent of flames towards me. My charge left me with no room to dodge; I was head straight into it. And yet, I still won in the end.

You see, just before the flames even licked me, I was pushed out of the way by some force. At the time, I thought nothing of it. I went sprawling to the ground, but recovered quickly enough to turn and see the cambion aflame, the Duke unrelenting his inferno.

“NO!” I shouted just as the cambion collapsed to the ground.

I don’t really remember what happened next, but I remember how I felt. I felt hot, like my blood was boiling; every fiber of my being quivered; my grip on my sword was so tight that part of the handle’s straps actually cut into my palm (all of these hand injuries... what gives?); my eyes watered, or at least, I think they did because I don’t remember ever blinking for a second; and yet, I remember not what happened. What I do remember is the Duke’s body sprawled across the ground, my sword in one hand, covered in his blood, and his bloody head in the other.

Once I returned to my senses, I realized what happened, and concluded that it was over when the demon lord’s voice echoed one final lament as the portal collapsed. The garden was strew with blood and corpses... as it should be. I walked over to the cambion’s charred body and knelt beside it.

“I’m... I’m not good with eulogies,” I said to him. “So I guess... thanks. Thanks for your help.”

As I got up to leave, I was interrupted when I heard behind me, “You’re not going anywhere.” I turned to see the cambion stand up, shaking the char off his body. He looked completely unscathed.

“What...? But... how?”

“Demon blood gives me immunity to fire,” the cambion said.

“Well then... aren’t you lucky?” I said.

“Still snarky as ever...” the cambion said.

“Sorry. Force of habit.”

“No, no need to apologize, mercenary,” the cambion said. “Let’s get out of here. I know a decent tavern nearby. I’ll buy you a drink. My treat.”

“Yes, let’s. Oh, and thanks...”

“Thanks...?”

“I just realized I never learned your name,” I said. “Wait, we never introduced ourselves at all. Let’s get that out of the way. I’m Morgan. You, cambion?”

“Leathcine.”

If you came up to me one week ago and said I was going to be friends with a half-human, half-demon hybrid after we stopped a demon invasion and assassination plot against the King of Merycel, I would’ve punched you in the face, perhaps the groin for good measure. Even when Leathcine and I were sitting in that tavern, sharing our pasts with each other, I still found it hard to believe. Oh, speaking of pasts, Leathcine had a pretty interesting one. Turns out he’s not the child of a demon and human. You see, several years ago he was out hunting with a friend and got jumped and kidnapped by a group of warlocks living in a nearby cave. They were experimenting on people to try and create human-demon hybrids by fusing a human and demon together with magic. Leathcine was the only successful subject. Of course, successful is subjective. Sure, he’s the only cambion of his kind, but he did kill all of those warlocks in return for kidnapping him

and killing his friend. Leathcine developed a hatred for all warlocks as a result of that whole sordid affair.

“Well, while I’m glad that’s over, I still have to go back to job hunting,” I said, taking a sip of ale.

“You’re not part of a company, Morgan?” Leathcine asked.

“Nope. Don’t know any decent companies around,” I replied.

“Funny, I happen to know one,” Leathcine said. “Their leader’s a good man. He looks out for his people, treats them well, makes sure they have food to eat, that sort of thing.”

“Really? You sure?”

“I am. I’m part of it.”

“Oh, well, in that case I might as well sign up. Got room?”

“As Roheit, the company’s founder, always says, ‘We have room for the whole bloody kingdom.’”

The next morning saw our departure from the city. It was going to be a while before either of us returned. We both got our horses from the stables and saddled up. Unfortunately, Leathcine and I had to part ways at this point.

“Wish me luck with this Roheit, Leathcine,” I called out.

“You won’t need any with him, Morgan,” he replied before turning his horse and trotting down the northern.

“Leathcine!” I shouted. “Don’t forget! I’m to repay you, so don’t die out there!”

Leathcine didn’t turn to reply; he simply put his hand in the air and waved back.